

CHAPTER 12

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

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

The Struggle in the Western Citadel

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An Estimate of the Situation and Mounting the Offensive

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371416

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A800450
A Marine sergeant from the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines sits with his weapon on the throne inside the Imperial Palace. The palace was recaptured from the North Vietnamese by South Vietnamese forces, not by the U.S. Marine battalion.

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

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

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

Closing Out Operation Hue City

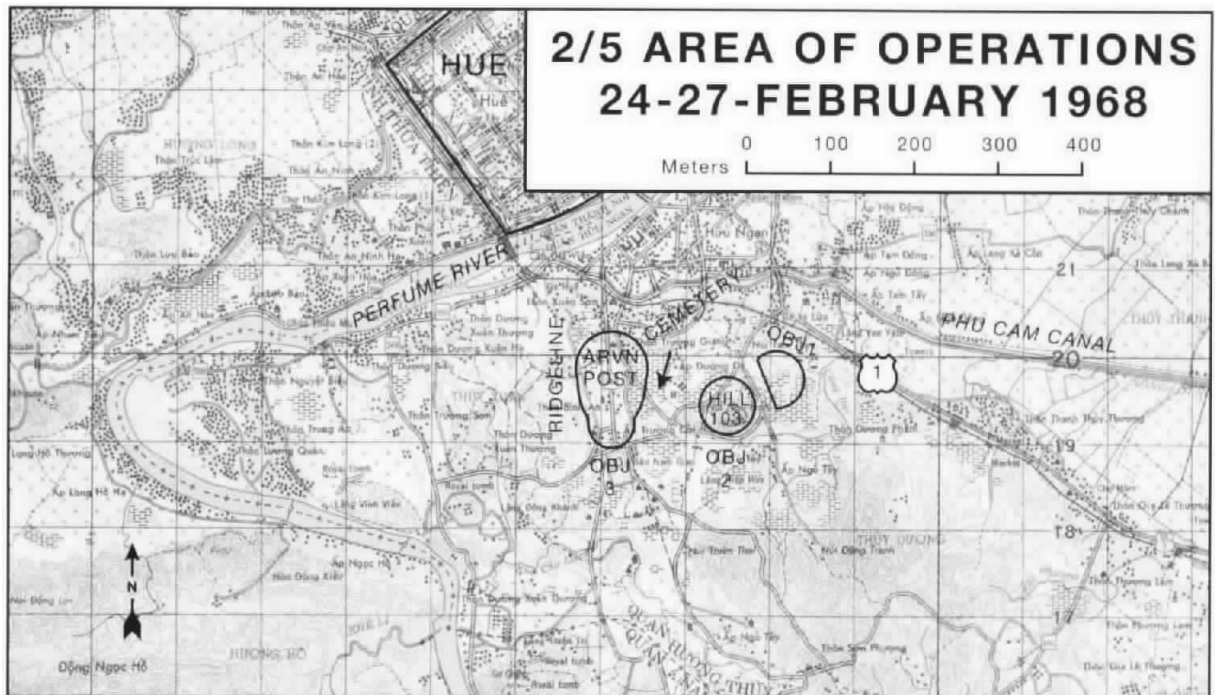
For the Marines, the operation, now officially called Hue City, lasted about another week. While the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines essentially mopped up in southern Hue,* the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, since 12 February, had conducted numerous company and platoon-size combat patrols south of the Phu Cam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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Summing Up

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

The allies remained unsure about the North Vietnamese command and control for the battle of Hue. U.S. after action reports referred to a division-size force, but never identified any particular enemy division headquarters. Lieutenant Colonel Pham Van Khoa, the South Vietnamese Thua Thien Province chief, who remained in hiding until rescued by American Marines,* accidentally overheard a conversation among some enemy officers. According to Khoa, the North Vietnamese mentioned a division taking part in the battle and the division headquarters was "in an unknown location south of the city of Hue inside a pagoda." Khoa could not remember the number of the division, but recalled that it ended with a 4. In all probability, however, Khoa confused the division headquarters with the *4th NVA Regiment*. Given the disparity of so many regiments from so many different divisions, allied intelligence officers believed that a forward headquarters of the *Tri-Thien-Hue Front* under a North Vietnamese general officer directed the NVA Hue offensive.⁵²

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

a major component of the entire Tet offensive. According to an enemy account, the North Vietnamese military command in planning the offensive took into consideration that the U.S. and South Vietnamese had concentrated their forces in the north, expecting an attack along Route 9. It viewed Hue a weak link in the allied defenses in the northern two provinces. As the North Vietnamese author wrote: "The enemy knew nothing of our strategy; by the time our forces approached the city of Hue, the enemy still had not taken any specific defensive measures."⁵³

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

*See Chapter 10.



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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





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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371127



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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 13

Post-Tet in I Corps

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

The Immediate Ramifications of the Tet Offensive

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

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

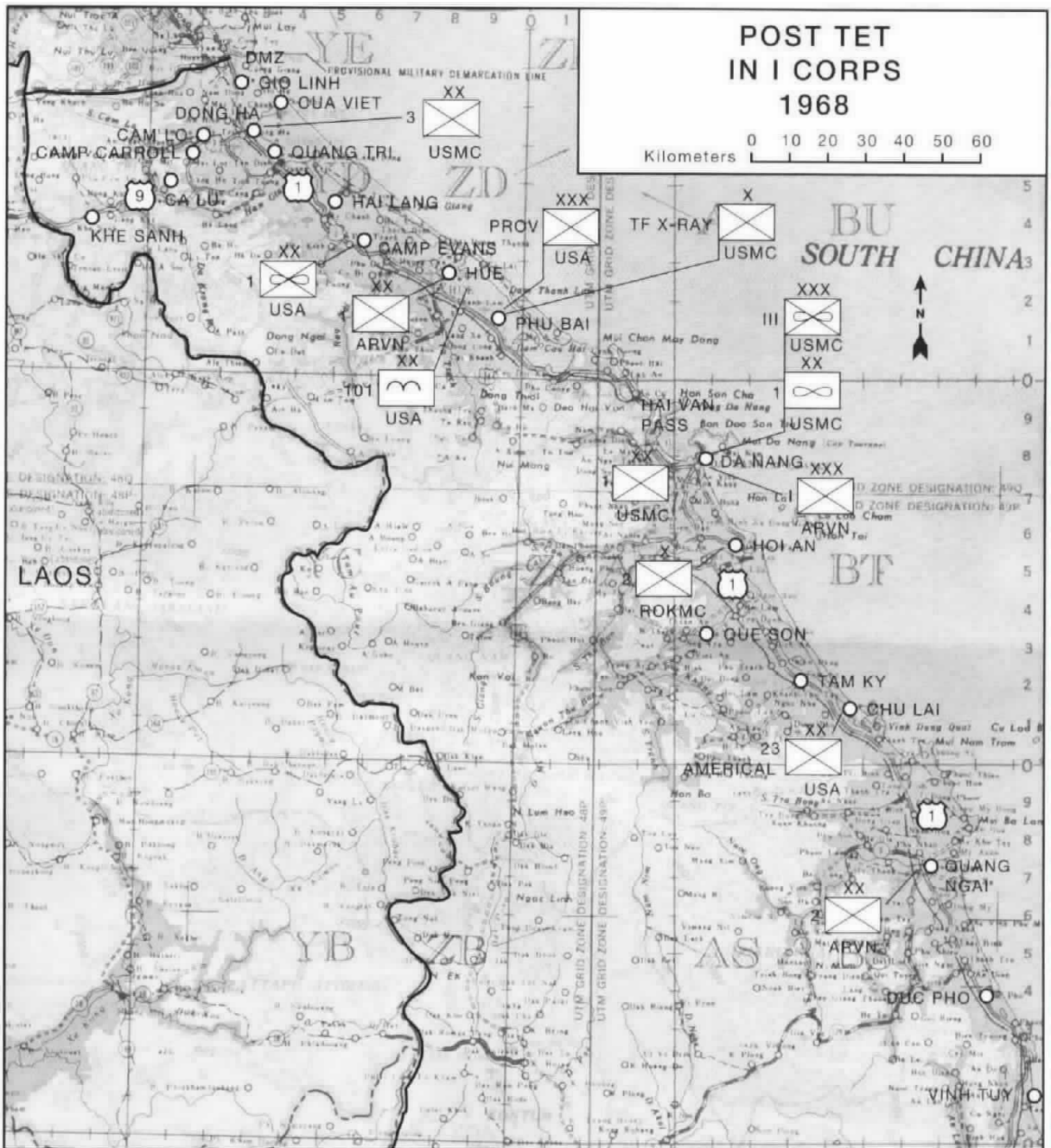
Still the tenor of the Communist communiqués was one of defiance. They all claimed the achievement of

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Readjustment in I Corps

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Abel Collection





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A708081

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Photo is from the Abel Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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



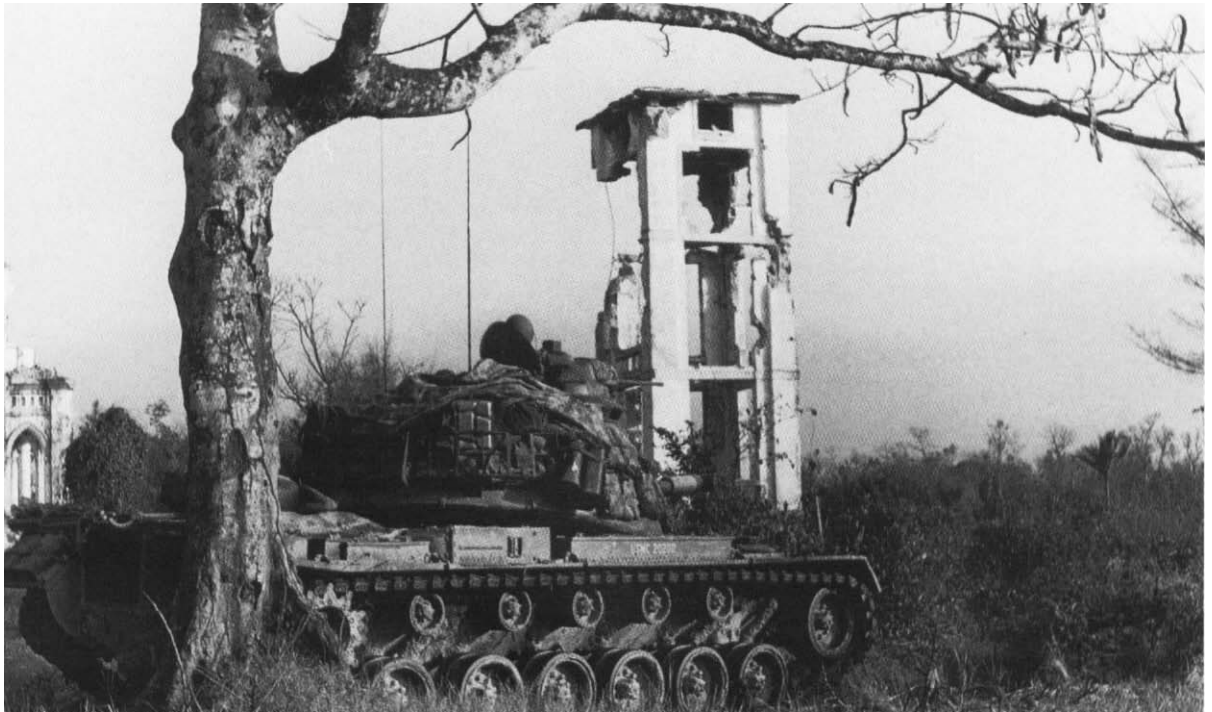


Photo is from the Abel Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Photo is from the 3d MarDiv ComdC, Feb68

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

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

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

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

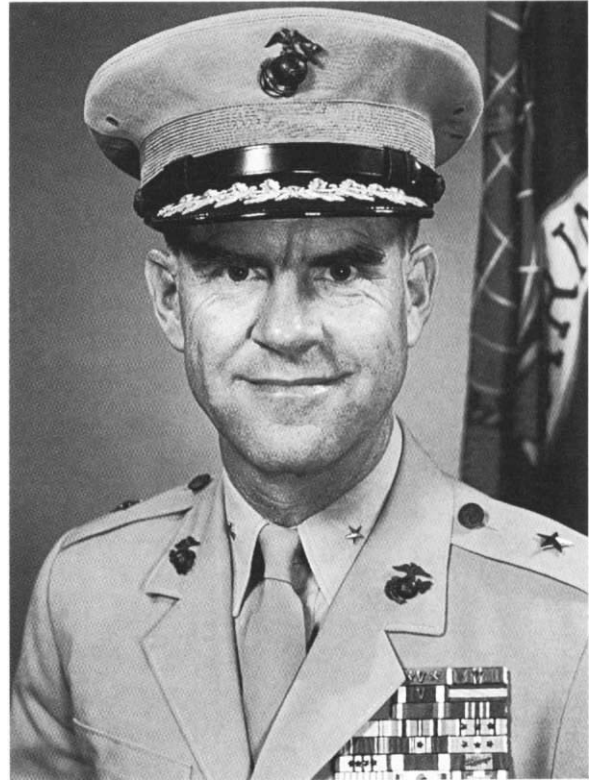
Readjustments in the U.S. I Corps Command Structure

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

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

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

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



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A419340

3d MarDiv ComdC, Jan68

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

U.S. Marine Corps



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Planning for the Future

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

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

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

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

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

March Operations in the DMZ Sector

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A194604

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Photo is from the Abel Collection
PHOTO IS FROM THE ABEL COLLECTION





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371414

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

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

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

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

March Operations in the Rest of I Corps

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*See Chapter 29 for further discussion of My Lai.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Regaining the Initiative

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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