

The Battle for Hue, 1968  
by  
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On 8 March, 1965, elements of the U.S. 9<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Force came ashore in Vietnam at Da Nang, ostensibly to provide security for the U.S. air base there. A month later, President Lyndon Johnson authorized the use of U.S. ground troops for offensive combat operations in Vietnam. These events marked a significant change in U.S. involvement in the ongoing war between the South Vietnamese government and their Communist foes. Heretofore, U.S. forces had been supporting the South Vietnamese with advisors and air support, but with the arrival of the Marines, a massive U.S. buildup ensued that resulted in 184,300 American troops in Vietnam by the end of 1965. This number would rapidly increase until there were over 319,000 troops incountry by the end of 1967.<sup>1</sup>

Eventually U.S. ground troops were deployed in all four corps tactical zones and actively conducted combat operations against the Viet Cong (VC) and their North Vietnamese counterparts, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN -- also known as the North Vietnamese Army or NVA). The first major battle between U.S. forces and PAVN troops occurred in November 1965 in the battle of the Ia Drang valley. Over the next two years, U.S. forces conducted many large-scale search and destroy operations such as Masher/White Wing, Attleboro, Cedar Falls, and Junction City. These operations were designed to find and destroy the enemy forces in a war of attrition. However, by the end of 1967, the war in Vietnam had degenerated into a bloody stalemate. U.S. and South Vietnamese operations had inflicted high casualties and disrupted Communist operations, but the North Vietnamese continued to infiltrate troops into South Vietnam.

Nevertheless, General William Westmoreland, Commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, was very optimistic that progress was being made; on 21 November 1967, he appeared before the National Press Club in Washington and asserted, "We have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view. I am absolutely certain that, whereas in 1965 the enemy was winning, today he is certainly losing. The enemy's hopes are bankrupt."<sup>2</sup> Events in 1968 would prove him wrong.

The plan for the 1968 Tet Offensive was born in the summer of 1967. Frustrated with the stalemate on the battlefield and concerned with the aggressive American tactics during the previous year, Communist leaders in Hanoi decided to launch a general offensive to strike a decisive blow against the South Vietnamese and their U.S. allies. This campaign was designed to break the stalemate and achieve three objectives: provoke a general uprising among the people in the South, shatter the South Vietnamese armed forces, and convince the Americans that the war was unwinnable. The offensive would target the previously untouched South Vietnamese urban centers. The Communists prepared for the coming offensive by a massive buildup of troops and equipment in the south. At the same time they launched a series of diversionary attacks against remote outposts designed to lure the U.S. forces into the countryside away from the population areas. In the fall of 1967, the plan went into effect with Communist attacks in the areas south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating Vietnam's two sections and along South Vietnam's western border in the Central Highlands. The main effort of this preliminary phase of the offensive began on 21 January 1968 at Khe Sanh in northwestern South Vietnam, where two PAVN divisions lay siege to the Marine base

there. Believing that the Communists were trying to achieve another Dien Bien Phu; President Johnson declared that Khe Sanh would be held at all costs.<sup>3</sup>

With all eyes on Khe Sanh, the Communists launched the main offensive itself in the early morning hours of January 31, 1968, when 84,000 North Vietnamese and VC troops, taking advantage of the Tet (lunar New Year) ceasefire then in effect, mounted simultaneous assaults on 36 of 44 provincial capitals, 5 of the 6 autonomous cities, including Saigon and Hue, 64 of 242 district capitals, and 50 hamlets. Many of the South Vietnamese troops were on holiday leave, so the Communist forces initially enjoyed widespread success. Within days, however, all of the attacks in the smaller towns and hamlets were turned back. Heavy fighting continued for a while in Kontum and Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands, in Can Tho and Ben Tre in the Mekong Delta, and in Saigon itself.

The longest and bloodiest battle of the Tet Offensive occurred in Hue, the most venerated place in Vietnam. The city, which is located astride Highway 1, ten kilometers west of the coast and a hundred kilometers south of the DMZ, was the capital of Thua Thien Province and South Vietnam's third largest city, with a wartime population of 140,000. Hue was the old imperial capital and served as the cultural and intellectual center of Vietnam. It had been treated almost as an open city by the VC and North Vietnamese and thus had remained remarkably free of war. Although there had been sporadic mortar and rocket attacks in the area, Hue, itself, had been relatively peaceful and secure prior to Tet in 1968. Nevertheless, the city was on one of the main land supply routes for the Allied troops occupying positions along the DMZ to the north, and

it also served as a major unloading point for waterborne supplies that were brought inland via the river from Da Nang on the coast.

Hue was really two cities divided by the Song Huong, or River of Perfume, which flowed through the city from the southwest to the northeast on its way to the South China Sea ten kilometers to the east. Two-thirds of the city's population lived north of the river within the walls of the Old City, or Citadel, a picturesque place of gardens, pagodas, moats, and intricate stone buildings. Just outside the walls of the Citadel to the east was the densely populated district of Gia Hoi.

The Citadel was an imposing fortress, begun in 1802 by Emperor Gia Long with the aid of the French and modeled on Peking's Forbidden City. Once the residence of the Annamese emperors who had ruled the central portion of present-day Vietnam, the Citadel covered three square miles and really included three concentric cities and a labyrinth of readily defensible positions. It was protected by an outer wall 30-feet high and up to 40 feet thick which formed a square about 2,700 yards on each side. Three sides were straight, while the fourth was rounded slightly to follow the curve of the river. The three walls not bordering the river were encircled by a zigzag moat that was 90 feet wide at many points and up to 12 feet deep. Many areas of the wall were honeycombed with bunkers and tunnels that had been constructed by the Japanese when they occupied the city in World War II.

The Citadel included block after block of row houses, parks, villas, shops, various buildings, and an airstrip. Within the Citadel was another enclave, the Imperial Palace compound, where the emperors had held court until 1883, when the French returned to take control of Vietnam. Located at the south end of the Citadel, the palace was

essentially a square with 20-foot high walls that measured seven hundred meters per side. The Citadel and the Imperial Palace were a “camera-toting tourist’s dream,” but they would prove to be “a rifle-toting infantryman’s nightmare.”<sup>4</sup>

South of the river and linked to the Citadel by the six-span Nguyen Hoang Bridge, over which Route 1 passed, lay the modern part of the city, which was about half the size of the Citadel and in which resided about a third of the city’s population. The southern half of Hue contained the hospital, the provincial prison, the Catholic cathedral and many of the city’s modern structures, to include government administrative buildings, the U.S. Consulate, Hue University, the city’s high school, and the newer residential districts.

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division was headquartered in Hue, but most of its troops were spread out along Highway 1, from Hue north toward the DMZ. The division headquarters was located at the northwest corner of the Citadel in a fortified compound protected by 6-to-8-foot high walls, topped by barbed wire. The closest South Vietnamese unit was the 3<sup>rd</sup> ARVN Regiment with three battalions which was located five miles northwest of Hue. A fourth ARVN battalion was operating some miles southwest of the city. The only combat element in the city was the division’s Hac Bao Company, known as the “Black Panthers,” an elite all-volunteer unit that served as the division reconnaissance and rapid reaction force. Security within the city itself was primarily the responsibility of the National Police.

The only U.S. military presence in Hue when the battle began was the MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) compound, which housed 200 U.S. Army, U.S. Marine Corps, and Australian officers and men who served as advisers to the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division. They maintained a lightly fortified compound on the eastern edge of the

modern part of the city south of the river about a block and a half south of the Nguyen Hoang Bridge.

The nearest U.S. combat base was at Phu Bai, eight miles south along Route 1. Phu Bai was a major Marine Corps command post and support facility that was the home of Task Force X-Ray, which had been established as a forward headquarters of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division. The task force, commanded by Brigadier General Foster C. "Frosty" LaHue, Assistant Commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, was made up of two Marine regimental headquarters and three battalions -- the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment with two battalions and the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, with one battalion. Most of these troops, including Brigadier General LaHue, had only recently arrived in the Phu Bai area, having been displaced from Da Nang, and they were still getting acquainted with the area of operations when the Communists launched their attack on Hue.

In addition to the U.S. Marines, there were also U.S. Army units in the area. Two brigades of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division were scattered over a wide area from Phu Bai in the south to LZ (Landing Zone) Jane just south of Quang Tri in the north. The 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division had recently been attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry and had just arrived at Camp Evans (located north along Highway 1 between Hue and Quang Tri), coming north from its previous area of operations.

Opposing the allied forces in the Hue region were 8,000 Communist troops, a total of ten battalions, including two PAVN regiments of three battalions and one battalion each respectively. These were highly trained North Vietnamese regular army units that had come south either across the DMZ or more likely, down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They were armed with AK-47 assault rifles, RPD machineguns, and B-40 rocket

propelled grenade launchers. In addition, the PAVN had 107mm, 122mm, and 140mm free-flight rockets, 82mm and 120mm mortars, recoilless rifles, and heavy machineguns. The North Vietnamese units were joined by six Viet Cong main force battalions, including the 12<sup>th</sup> and Hue City Sapper Battalions.<sup>5</sup> A typical mainforce VC infantry battalion consisted of 300-600 veteran, skilled fighters. The VC soldiers were armed similar to the PAVN with the exception that they did not have some of the heavier weapons.<sup>6</sup> During the course of the battle for Hue, the total Communist force in and around the city would grow to 20 battalions when three additional infantry regiments were dispatched to the Hue area from the Khe Sanh battlefield.

Before the Tet Offensive began, the Communists had prepared extensive plans for the attack on Hue, which would be directed by General Tran Van Quang, commander of the B4 or Tri Thien-Hue Front. The plan called for a division- size assault on the city, while other forces cut off access to the city to preclude allied reinforcements. Quang and his senior commanders believed that once the city's population realized the superiority of the Communist troops, the people would immediately rise up to join forces with the VC and PAVN against the Americans and the South Vietnamese, driving them out of Hue. Possessing very detailed information on civil and military installations within the city, the Communist planners had divided the city into four tactical areas and prepared a list of 196 targets within the city. They planned to use more than 5,000 soldiers to take the city in one swift blow.

Communist documents captured during and after the Tet offensive indicate that enemy troops received intensive training in the technique of city street fighting before the offensive began.<sup>7</sup> Extremely adept at fighting in the jungles and rice paddies, the PAVN

and VC troops required additional training to prepare for the special requirements of fighting in urban areas. This training, focusing on both individual and unit tasks, included offensive tactics, techniques, and procedures to assist in taking the city and defensive measures to help the Communists hold the city once they had seized it.

While the assault troops trained for the battle to come, VC intelligence officers prepared a list of “cruel tyrants and reactionary elements” to be rounded up during the early hours of the attack.<sup>8</sup> This list included most South Vietnamese officials, military officers, politicians, American civilians and other foreigners. After capture, these individuals were to be evacuated to the jungle outside the city where they would be punished for their crimes against the Vietnamese people.

The enemy had carefully selected the time for the attack. Because of the Tet holiday, the ARVN defenders would be at reduced strength. In addition, bad weather that traditionally accompanied the northeast monsoon season would hamper aerial resupply operations and impede close air support, which would otherwise have given the allied forces in Hue a considerable advantage.

The city’s defense hinged in large part on the leadership of Brigadier General Ngo Quang Truong, commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division, regarded by many U.S. advisers as one of the best senior commanders in the South Vietnamese armed forces.<sup>9</sup> A 1954 graduate of the Dalat Military Academy, he had won his position through ability and combat leadership and not because of political influence or bribery, as was the case with many of his ARVN peers.

On the morning of 30 January, the beginning of the Tet holiday, Truong received reports of enemy attacks on Da Nang, Nha Trang, and other South Vietnamese

installations during the previous night. Sensing that something was up, he gathered his division staff at the headquarters compound and put them and his remaining troops on full alert. Unfortunately, over half of his division was on holiday leave and out of the city. Believing that the Communists would not attack the “open” city directly, Truong positioned the forces left on duty around the city to defend outside the urban area.

Therefore, when the Communist attack came, the only regular ARVN troops in the city were from the Hac Bao “Black Panther” reconnaissance company, which was guarding the airstrip at the northeastern corner of the Citadel.

Unknown to Truong as he made his preparations for whatever was to come, there was clear indication that there would be a direct attack on his city. On the same day that the South Vietnamese commander put his staff on alert, a U.S. Army radio intercept unit at Phu Bai overheard Communist orders calling for an imminent assault on Hue. Following standard procedure, the intercept unit forwarded the message through normal channels. Making its way through several command layers, the intercept and associated intelligence analysis did not make it to the Hue defenders until the city was already under attack.<sup>10</sup>

Even as the intelligence report made its way slowly through channels, the Viet Cong had already infiltrated the city. Wearing civilian garb, Communist troops had mingled with the throngs of people who had come to Hue for the Tet holiday. They had easily transported their weapons and ammunition into the city in wagons, truck beds, and other hiding places. In the early morning hours of 31 January, these soldiers took up initial positions within the city and prepared to link up with the PAVN and VC assault troops. At 0340 hours, the Communists launched a rocket and mortar barrage from the

mountains to the west on both old and new sectors of the city. Following this barrage, the assault troops began their attack. The VC infiltrators had donned their uniforms, met their comrades at the gates and led them in the attack on key installations in the city.

The PAVN 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment, with two battalions of infantry and the 12<sup>th</sup> VC Sapper Battalion, launched the main attack from the southwest and moved quickly across the Perfume River into the Citadel toward the ARVN 1<sup>st</sup> Division headquarters in the northeastern corner. The 800<sup>th</sup> and 802<sup>nd</sup> Battalions of the 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment rapidly overran most of the Citadel, but Truong and his staff held the attackers off at the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division compound, while the Hac Bao Company managed to hold its position at the eastern end of the airfield. On several occasions, the 802<sup>nd</sup> Battalion came close to penetrating the division compound, so Brigadier General Truong ordered the Black Panthers to withdraw from the airfield to the compound to help thicken his defenses there. By daylight on 31 January, the PAVN 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment held the entire Citadel, including the Imperial Palace. The only exception was the 1<sup>st</sup> Division compound, which remained in South Vietnamese hands; the PAVN 802<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had breached the ARVN defenses on several occasions during the night, but each time, they were hurled back by the Black Panthers.

The story was not much better for the Americans south of the river in the new city. It could have been worse, but the North Vietnamese made a tactical error when they launched their initial attack on the MACV compound. Rather than attack immediately on the heels of the rocket and mortar barrage, they waited for approximately five minutes. This gave the defenders within the compound an opportunity to mount a quick defense. The PAVN 804<sup>th</sup> Battalion twice assaulted the MACV compound, but the attackers were

repelled each time by quickly assembled defenders armed with individual weapons. One U.S. soldier manned an exposed machine gun position atop a 20-foot wooden tower; his fire stopped the first rush of North Vietnamese sappers who tried to advance to the compound walls to set satchel charges, but he was killed by a B-40 rocket. The PAVN troops then stormed the compound gates where they were met by a group of Marines manning a bunker. The Marines held off the attackers for a brief period, but eventually the PAVN took out the defenders with several B-40 rockets. This action slowed the North Vietnamese attack and gave the Americans and their Australian comrades additional time to organize their defenses. After an intense firefight, the Communists failed to take the compound, so they tried to reduce it with mortars and automatic weapons fire from overlooking buildings. The defenders went to ground and waited for reinforcements.

While the battle raged around the MACV compound, two VC battalions took over the Thua Thien Province headquarters, police station, and other government buildings south of the river. At the same time, the PAVN 810<sup>th</sup> Battalion occupied blocking positions on the southern edge of the city to prevent reinforcement from that direction. By dawn, the North Vietnamese 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment controlled all of Hue south of the river except the MACV Compound.

Thus in very short order, the Communists had seized control of virtually all of Hue. When the sun came up on the morning of January 31, nearly everyone in the city could see the gold-starred, blue-and-red National Liberation Front flag flying high over the Citadel. This was clear that the Communists now controlled Hue. While the PAVN and VC assault troops roamed the streets freely and consolidated their gains, political

officers began a reign of terror by rounding up the South Vietnamese and foreigners on the special lists. VC officers marched through the Citadel, reading out the names on the lists through loudspeakers and telling them to report to a local school. Those that did not report were hunted down.<sup>11</sup> The detainees were never seen alive again; their fate was not apparent until after the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces recaptured the Citadel and nearly 3,000 civilians were found massacred and buried in mass graves.

As the battle erupted at Hue, other Communist forces had struck in cities and towns from the DMZ to the Ca Mau Peninsula in the south and Allied forces had their hands full all over the country. The northern provinces were no exception, and it would prove difficult to assemble sufficient uncommitted combat power to oust the Communists from Hue. Additionally, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces had been moved to the west to support the action in and around Khe Sanh, thus reducing the number of troops available in the entire northern region. This situation would have a major impact on the conduct of operations to retake Hue from the Communists.

General Truong, who only had a tenuous hold on his own headquarters compound, ordered his 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, reinforced with two airborne battalions and an armored cavalry troop, to fight its way into the Citadel from their positions northwest of the city. En route these forces encountered intense small arms and automatic weapons fire as they neared the Citadel. They fought their way through the resistance and reached Truong's headquarters late in the afternoon.

As Truong tried to consolidate his forces, another call for reinforcements went out from the surrounded MACV compound. This plea for assistance was almost lost in all the confusion caused by the simultaneous attacks going on all over I Corps. Lieutenant

General Hoang Xuan Lam, commander of the South Vietnamese forces in I Corps, and Lieutenant General Robert Cushman, III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) commander, were not sure what exactly was happening inside the city. The enemy strength and the scope of the Communist attack was less than clear during the early hours of the battle, but the allied commanders realized that reinforcements would be needed to eject the Communists from Hue. Accordingly, Cushman ordered TF X-Ray to send reinforcements into Hue to relieve the besieged MACV compound.

While both ARVN and U.S. commanders tried to assess the situation and made preparations to move reinforcements to Hue, the North Vietnamese quickly established additional blocking positions to prevent those reinforcements from reaching the beleaguered defenders. The PAVN 806<sup>th</sup> Battalion blocked Highway 1 northwest of Hue, while the PAVN 804<sup>th</sup> and K4B Battalions took up positions in southern Hue. At the same time, the 810<sup>th</sup> Battalion dug in along Highway 1 south of Hue.

Responding to III MAF orders, Brigadier General LaHue, commander of Task Force X-Ray, dispatched Company A, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Marines (A/1/1), to move up Route 1 from Phu Bai by truck to relieve the surrounded U.S. advisers. The initial report of the attack on Truong's headquarters and the MACV compound had not caused any great alarm at LaHue's headquarters. The task force commander, having received no reliable intelligence to the contrary, believed that only a small enemy force had penetrated Hue as part of a local diversionary attack; little did he know that almost a full enemy division had seized the city. He therefore sent only one company to deal with the situation. LaHue later wrote that "Initial deployment of force was made with limited information."<sup>12</sup>

Not knowing exactly what to expect when they reached the city, the Marines from A/1/1 headed north as ordered, joining up with four M-48 tanks from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tank Battalion en route. The convoy ran into sniper fire and had to stop several times to clear buildings along the route of march. When the convoy crossed the bridge that spanned the Phu Cam canal into the southern part of the city, the Marines were immediately caught in a withering cross-fire from enemy automatic weapons and B-40 rockets that seemed to come from every direction. They advanced slowly against intense enemy resistance, but became pinned down between the river and the canal, just short of the MACV compound they had been sent to relieve. During the fight, the company commander, Captain Gordon D. Batcheller, was wounded, as were a number of his Marines.

With his Company A pinned down, Lieutenant Colonel Marcus J. Gravel, the battalion commander of 1/1 Marines, organized a hasty reaction force: himself, his operations officer, some others from his battalion command group, and Company G, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines (G/2/5), a unit from another battalion that had just arrived in Phu Bai earlier that day. Gravel had never met Captain Charles L. Meadows, the Company G commander, until that day, and he later said that the only planning he had time to accomplish was to issue the order: "Get on the trucks, men."<sup>13</sup>

With little information other than that their fellow Marines were pinned down, the relief force moved up the highway, reinforced with two self-propelled twin-40mm guns. The force met little resistance along the way and linked up with A/1/1<sup>st</sup> Marines, now being led by a wounded gunnery sergeant. With the aid of the four tanks and the 40mm self-propelled guns, the combined force fought its way to the MACV compound,

breaking through to the beleaguered defenders at about 1515 hours. The cost, however, was high: 10 Marines were killed and 30 were wounded.

Having linked up with the defenders of the MACV compound, Gravel received new orders from LaHue, directing him to cross the Perfume River with his battalion and break through to the ARVN 1<sup>st</sup> Division headquarters in the Citadel. Gravel protested that his "battalion" consisted of only two companies, one of which was in pretty bad shape, and that part of his force would have to be left behind to assist with the defense of the MACV compound. Nevertheless, LaHue, who still had not realized the full extent of the enemy situation in Hue, radioed back that Gravel was to "go anyway."<sup>14</sup> Sending Gravel's battered force to contend with the much stronger PAVN and VC north of the river would ultimately result in failure.

Leaving Company A behind to help with the defense of the MACV compound, Gravel took Company G, reinforced with three of the original M-48 tanks and several others from the ARVN 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Squadron, and moved out to comply with LaHue's orders. Leaving the tanks on the southern bank to support by fire, Gravel and his Marines attempted to cross the Nguyen Hoang bridge leading into the Citadel. As the infantry started across the bridge, they were met with a hail of fire from a machine gun position at the north end of the bridge. Ten Marines went down. Lance Corporal Lester A. Tully, who later received the Silver Star for his action, rushed forward and took out the machine gun nest with a grenade. Two platoons followed Tully, made it over the bridge, and turned left, paralleling the river along the Citadel's southeast wall. They immediately came under heavy fire from AK-47 rifles, heavy automatic weapons, B-40 rockets, and recoilless rifles from the walls of the Citadel.

As mortar shells and rockets exploded around them, the Marines tried to push forward but were soon pinned down by the increasing volume of enemy fire. Gravel determined that his force was greatly outnumbered and decided to withdraw. However, even that proved very difficult. According to Gravel, the enemy was well dug-in and “firing from virtually every building in Hue city” north of the river.<sup>15</sup> Gravel called for vehicle support to assist in evacuating his wounded, but none was available. Eventually, the Marines commandeered some abandoned Vietnamese civilian vehicles and used them as makeshift ambulances. After two hours of intense fighting, the company was able to pull back to the bridge. By 2000 hours, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had established a defensive position near the MACV compound along a stretch of riverbank that included a park (which they rapidly transformed into a helicopter landing zone). The attempt by the Marines to force their way across the bridge had been costly. Among the casualties was Major Walter D. Murphy, the S-3 Operations Officer of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, who later died from his wounds. Captain Meadows, commander of Company G, lost one third of his unit killed or wounded “going across that one bridge and then getting back across the bridge.”<sup>16</sup>

At Phu Bai, despite detailed reports from Lieutenant Colonel Gravel, Brigadier General LaHue and his intelligence officers still did not have a good appreciation of what was happening in Hue. He later explained, “Early intelligence did not reveal the quantity of enemy involved that we subsequently found were committed to Hue.”<sup>17</sup> The intelligence picture in Saigon was just as confused; General William Westmoreland, Commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam, cabled General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, that the “enemy has approximately three

companies in the Hue Citadel and Marines have sent a battalion into the area to clear them out.”<sup>18</sup> This repeated gross underestimation of enemy strength in Hue resulted in insufficient forces being allocated for retaking the city.

With Brigadier General Truong and the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division fully occupied in the Citadel north of the river, Lieutenant General Lam and General Cushman discussed how to divide responsibility for the effort to retake Hue. They eventually agreed that ARVN forces would be responsible for clearing Communist forces from the Citadel and the rest of Hue north of the river, while Task Force X-Ray would assume responsibility for the southern part of the city. This situation resulted in what would be, in effect, two separate and distinct battles that would rage in Hue, one south of the river and one north of the river.

In retaking Hue, Lam and Cushman were confronted with a unique problem. The ancient capital was almost sacred to the Vietnamese people, particularly so to the Buddhists. The destruction of the city would result in political repercussions that neither the United States nor the government of South Vietnam could afford. Cushman later recalled, “I wasn’t about to open up on the old palace and all the historical buildings there.”<sup>19</sup> As a result, limitations were imposed on the use of artillery and close air support to minimize collateral damage. Eventually these restrictions were lifted when it was realized that both artillery and close air support would be necessary to dislodge the enemy from the city. However, the initial rules of engagement played a key role in the difficulties incurred in the early days of the battle.

Having divided up the city, Cushman, with General Westmoreland’s concurrence, began to make arrangements to send reinforcements into the Hue area in an attempt to

seal off the enemy inside the city from outside support. On February 2, the U.S. Army 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division's 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade entered the battle with the mission of blocking the enemy approaches into the city from the north and west. The brigade helicoptered the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 12<sup>th</sup> Cavalry (2/12 Cav), into a landing zone about 10 kilometers northwest of Hue on Highway 1. By February 4, the cavalry troopers had moved cross country from the LZ and established a blocking position on a hill overlooking a valley about six kilometers west of Hue. This position provided excellent observation of the main enemy routes into and out of Hue.

During the same period, the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry (5/7 Cav) conducted search and clear operations along enemy routes west of Hue. On 7 February, they made contact with an entrenched North Vietnamese force and tried for the next 24 hours to expel the communists. However, the enemy held their position and stymied the Cavalry advance with heavy volumes of automatic weapons and mortar fire. On 9 February, Headquarters 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, ordered 5/7 Cav to fix the PAVN in place, while directing 2/12 Cav to attack northward from its position. The latter ran into heavy resistance near the village of Thong Bon Ti, but continued to fight its way toward 5/7 Cav's position. For the next ten days, the two cavalry battalions fought with the entrenched communists, who held their positions against repeated assaults. Despite the inability of the cavalry troopers to expel the North Vietnamese, this action at least partially blocked the enemy's movement and inhibited their participation in the battle raging in Hue.

For almost three weeks, the U.S. cavalry units tried to hold off the reinforcement of Hue by North Vietnamese troops from the PAVN 24<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, and 99<sup>th</sup> Regiments. They

were reinforced on 19 February, when the 2nd Battalion, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry (2/501<sup>st</sup>) was attached to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, from the U.S. Army's 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. The battalion was subsequently ordered to seal access to the city from the south. Also on that day, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry (1/7 Cav), relieved from its base defense mission at Camp Evans, deployed south to the Hue area. While these U.S. Army units saw plenty of heavy action in these outlying areas and contributed greatly to the eventual allied victory at Hue, the fighting inside the city was to remain largely in the hands of South Vietnamese troops and U.S. Marines.

As allied reinforcements began their movement to the area, the ARVN and Marines began making preparations for counterattacks in their assigned areas. Making their tasks more difficult was the weather, which took a turn for the worse on 2 February, when the temperature fell into the 50's (F) and the low clouds opened up with a cold drenching rain.

As the rain fell, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel's "bobtailed" 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Marines, was ordered to attack to seize the Thua Thien Province headquarters building and prison, a distance of six blocks west of the MACV compound. At 0700, Gravel launched a two-company assault supported by tanks to take his assigned objectives, but the Marines immediately ran into trouble. An M-79 gunner from Company G recalled: "We didn't get a block away [from the MACV compound] when we started getting sniper fire. We got a tank...went a block, turned right and received 57mm recoilless which put out our tank;" the attack was "stopped cold" and the battalion fell back to its original position near the MACV compound.<sup>20</sup>

By this time, Brigadier General LaHue had finally realized that he and his intelligence officers had vastly underrated the strength of the Communists south of the river. Accordingly, he called in Colonel Stanley S. Hughes, new commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Regiment, and gave him overall tactical control of U.S. forces in the southern part of the city. Assuming control of the battle, Hughes promised Gravel reinforcements and gave him the general mission to conduct “sweep and clear operations...to destroy enemy forces, protect U.S. Nationals and restore that [southern] portion of the city to U.S. control.”<sup>21</sup> In response, Gravel ordered Company F, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines (F/2/5), which had been placed under his operational control when it arrived the previous day, to relieve a MACV communications facility near the U.S. consulate, which was surrounded by a VC force. The Marines launched their attack, fighting most of the afternoon, but failed to reach the U.S. Army signal troops, losing three Marines killed and 13 wounded in the process. At that point, Gravel’s troops established night defensive positions; during the night, Gravel made plans to renew the attack the next morning.

The next day, the Marines made some headway and brought in further reinforcements. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion finally relieved the MACV radio facility in the late morning hours and after an intense three-hour fight, reached the Hue University campus. During the night, the Communist sappers had dropped the railroad bridge across the Perfume river west of the city, but they left untouched the bridge across the Phu Cam Canal. At 1100 hours, Company H, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines (H/2/5), commanded by Captain Ronald G. Christmas, crossed the bridge over the canal in a convoy, accompanied by Army trucks equipped with quad .50-caliber machine guns and two ONTOS, which were tracked vehicles armed with six 106mm recoilless rifles. As the

convoy neared the MACV compound, it came under intense enemy heavy machine gun and rocket fire. The Marines responded rapidly, and in the ensuing confusion, the convoy exchanged fire with another Marine unit already in the city. As one Marine in the convoy remembered, “our guys happened to be out on the right side of the road and of course nobody knew that. First thing you know everybody began shooting at our own men...out of pure fright and frenzy.”<sup>22</sup> Luckily, neither of the Marine units took any casualties. Company H joined Lieutenant Colonel Gravel where the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had established a position near the MACV compound. The PAVN and VC gunners continued to pour machine gun and rocket fire into the position, and by day’s end, the Marines at that location had sustained two dead and 34 wounded.

On the afternoon of 2 February, Colonel Hughes decided to move his command group into Hue, where he could more directly control the battle. Accompanying Hughes in the convoy that departed for the city was Lieutenant Colonel Ernest C. Cheatham, commander of 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines, who had been sitting frustrated in Phu Bai while three of his units – F, G, and H companies – fought in Hue under Lieutenant Colonel Gravel’s control. Hughes quickly established his command post in the MACV compound. The forces at his disposal included Cheatham’s three companies from 2/5 Marines and Gravel’s depleted battalion consisting of Company A, 1/1 Marines and a provisional company consisting of one platoon of Company B, 1/1, and several dozen cooks and clerks who had been sent to the front lines to fight.<sup>23</sup>

Hughes wasted no time in taking control of the situation. He directed Gravel to anchor the left flank with his one-and-a-half-company battalion to keep the main supply route open. Then he ordered Cheatham and his three companies to assume responsibility

for the attack south from the university toward the provincial headquarters, telling him to “attack through the city and clean the NVA out.” When Cheatham hesitated, waiting for additional guidance, the regimental commander who, like everyone else going into Hue, had only the sketchiest information, gruffly stated, “if you’re looking for any more, you aren’t going to get it. Move out!”<sup>24</sup>

Cheatham devised a plan that called for his battalion to move west along the river from the MACV compound. He would attack with Companies F and H in the lead and Company G in reserve. Although the plan was simple, execution proved extremely difficult. From the MACV compound to the confluence of the Perfume River and the Phu Cam Canal was almost 11 blocks, each of which had been transformed by the enemy into a fortress that would have to be cleared building by building, room by room.

The Marines began their attack toward the treasury building and post office, but they made very slow progress, not having yet devised workable tactics to deal with the demands of the urban terrain. As the Marines, supported by tanks, tried to advance, the communists hit them with a withering array of mortar, rocket, machine gun, and small arms fire from prepared positions in the buildings. According to Cheatham, his Marines tried to take the treasury and postal buildings five or six different times. He later recalled, “You’d assault and back you’d come, drag your wounded and then muster it [the energy and courage] up again and try it again.”<sup>25</sup>

The Marines just did not have enough men to deal with the enemy entrenched in the buildings. The frontage for a company was about one block, and with two companies forward, this left an exposed left flank, subject to enemy automatic weapons and rocket

fire. By the evening of 3 February, the Marines had made little progress and were taking increasing casualties as they fought back and forth over the same ground.

The following morning, Colonel Hughes met with his two battalion commanders. Hughes ordered Cheatham to continue the attack. He told Gravel to continue to secure Cheatham's left flank with his battalion, which now had only one company left after the previous day's casualties. As Gravel ordered his Marines into position to screen Cheatham's attack, they first had to secure the Joan of Arc School and Church. They immediately ran into heavy contact with the enemy and were forced to fight house-to-house. Eventually they secured the school, but continued to take effective fire from PAVN and VC gunners in the church. Reluctantly, Gravel gave the order to fire upon the church and the Marines pounded the building with mortars and 106mm recoilless rifle fire, eventually killing or driving off the enemy. In the ruins of the church, the Marines found two European priests, one French and one Belgian, who were livid that the Marines had fired on the church. Gravel was sorry for the destruction, but felt that he had had no choice in the matter.<sup>26</sup>

With Gravel's Marines moving into position to screen his left flank to the Phu Cam Canal, Cheatham launched his attack at 0700 on 4 February. It took 24 hours of bitter fighting just to reach the treasury building. Attacking the rear of the building after blasting holes through adjacent courtyard walls with 106mm recoilless rifle fire, the Marines finally took the facility, but only after it had been plastered with 90mm tank rounds, 106mm recoilless rifles, 81mm mortars, and finally CS gas.

In the rapidly deteriorating weather, the Marines found themselves in a room by room, building by building struggle to clear an eleven by nine block area just south of the

river. This effort rapidly turned into a nightmare. Fighting in such close quarters against an entrenched enemy was decidedly different from what the Marines had been trained to do. Accustomed to fighting in the sparsely populated countryside of I Corps, nothing in their training had prepared them for the type of warfare demanded by this urban setting.<sup>27</sup> Captain Christmas later remembered his apprehension as his unit prepared to enter the battle for Hue: “I could feel a know developing in my stomach. Not so much from fear – though a helluva lot of fear was there – but because we were new to this type of situation. We were accustomed to jungles and open rice fields, and now we would be fighting in a city, like it was Europe during World War II. One of the beautiful things about the marines is that they adapt quickly, but we were going to take a number of casualties learning some basic lessons in this experience.”<sup>28</sup>

It was savage work -- house-to-house fighting through city streets – of a type largely unseen by Americans since World War II. Ground gained in the fighting was to be measured in inches and each city block cost dearly, as every alley, street corner, window and garden had to be paid for in blood. Correspondents who moved forward with the Marines reported the fighting as the most intense they had ever seen in South Vietnam.

The combat was relentless. Small groups of Marines moved doggedly from house to house, assaulting enemy positions with whatever supporting fire was available, blowing holes in walls with rocket launchers or recoilless rifles, then sending fire teams and squads into the breach. Each structure had to be cleared room by room using M-16 rifles and grenades. Taking advantage of Hue’s numerous courtyards and walled estates,

the PAVN and VC ambushed the Marines every step of the way. Having had no training in urban fighting, the Marines had to work out the tactics and techniques on the spot.

One of the practical problems that the Marines encountered early was the lack of sufficiently detailed maps. Originally their only references were standard 1:50,000-scale tactical maps that showed little of the city detail. One company commander later remarked, "You have to raid the local Texaco station to get your street map. That's really what you need."<sup>29</sup> Eventually, Cheatham and Gravel secured the necessary maps and numbered the government and municipal buildings and prominent city features. This permitted them to coordinate their efforts more closely.

Making the problem even more difficult was the initial prohibition on using artillery support and close air support. The Marines had a vast arsenal of heavy weapons at their disposal: 105mm, 155mm, and eight-inch howitzers, helicopter gunships, close air support from fighter-bombers, and naval gunfire from destroyers and cruisers with five-inch, six-inch, and eight-inch guns standing just offshore. However, because of the initial rules of engagement that sought to limit damage to the city, these resources were not available to the Marines at the beginning of the battle.

Even after Lieutenant General Lam lifted the ban on the use of fire support south of the river on 3 February, the Marines could not depend on air support or artillery because of the close quarters and the low-lying cloud cover. Colonel Gravel later explained part of the difficulty: "Artillery in an area like that is not terribly effective because you can't observe it well enough. You lose the rounds in the buildings in the street... and you have a difficult time with perspective."<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the poor weather, which also greatly limited close air support, had a negative impact on the utility

of artillery because the rounds had to be adjusted by sound when the flashes were swallowed by the low clouds and fog.

The Marines had other firepower at their disposal. They used tanks to support their advance, but found they were unwieldy in close quarters and drew antitank fire nearly every time they advanced. The Marines were much more enthusiastic about the ONTOS with its six 106mm recoilless rifles, which were used very effectively in the direct fire mode to suppress enemy positions and to blow holes in the buildings so the Marines could advance.<sup>31</sup> Despite their preference for the 106mm recoilless rifle, the Marines made use of every weapon at their disposal in order to dislodge the PAVN and VC troops.

Progress was slow, methodical, and costly. On 5 February, there was a particularly bloody battle when Captain Christmas' H/2/5 Marines took the Thua Thien province capitol building. Using two tanks and 106mm recoilless rifles mounted on Mechanical Mules (a flat-bedded, self-propelled carrier about the size of a jeep), the Marines advanced against intense automatic weapons fire, rockets, and mortars. Responding with their own mortars and CS gas, the Marines finally overwhelmed the defenders in mid-afternoon.

The province headquarters had assumed a symbolic importance to both sides. A National Liberation Front flag had flown from the flagpole in front of the headquarters since the initial Communist takeover of the city. As a CBS television crew filmed the event, the Marines tore down the enemy ensign and raised the Stars and Stripes. This was a politically sensitive situation; the Marines should have turned over the provincial headquarters building to the ARVN and continued the fight, but Captain Christmas told

his gunnery sergeant, "We've been looking at that damn North Vietnamese flag all day, and now we're going to take it down."<sup>32</sup> To Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham, this proved to be the turning point of the battle for Hue. He later said, "When we took the province headquarters, we broke their back. That was a rough one."<sup>33</sup>

The provincial headquarters had served as the command post of the PAVN 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment. With its loss, the integrity of the North Vietnamese defenses south of the river began to falter. However, the fighting was far from over. Despite the rapid adaptation of the Marines to street fighting, it was not until 11 February that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines, reached the confluence of the river and the canal. Two days later, the Marines crossed into the western suburbs of Hue, aiming to link up with troopers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, who were moving in toward the city. By 14 February, most of the city south of the river was in American hands, but mopping up operations would take another 12 days as rockets and mortar rounds continued to fall and isolated snipers harassed Marine patrols. Control of that sector of the city was returned to the South Vietnamese government. It had been very costly for the Marines, who sustained 38 dead and 320 wounded. It had been even more costly for the Communists; the bodies of over a thousand VC and PAVN soldiers were strewn about the city south of the river.<sup>34</sup>

While the Marines had fought for the southern part of the city, the battle north of the river had continued to rage. Despite the efforts of the U.S. units trying to seal off Hue from outside reinforcement, Communist troops and supplies made it into the city from the west and north, and even on boats coming down the river. On 1 February, the 2<sup>nd</sup> ARVN Airborne Battalion and the 7<sup>th</sup> ARVN Cavalry had recaptured the Tay Loc airfield inside

the Citadel, but only after suffering heavy casualties (including the death of the cavalry squadron commander) and losing twelve armored personnel carriers. Later that day, U.S. Marine helicopters brought part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> ARVN Regiment, from Dong Ha into the Citadel. Once on the ground, the ARVN attempted to advance, but were not able to make much headway in rooting out the North Vietnamese. By 4 February, the ARVN advance north of the river had effectively stalled among the houses, alleys, and narrow streets adjacent to the Citadel wall to the northwest and southwest, leaving the Communists still in possession of the Imperial Palace and most of the surrounding area.

On the night of 6-7 February, the PAVN counterattacked and forced the ARVN troops to pull back to the Tay Loc airfield. At the same time, the North Vietnamese rushed additional reinforcements into the city. General Truong responded by redeploying his forces, ordering the 3<sup>rd</sup> ARVN Regiment to move into the Citadel to take up positions around the division headquarters compound. By the evening of 7 February, Truong's forces inside the Citadel included four airborne battalions, the Black Panther company, two armored cavalry squadrons, the 3<sup>rd</sup> ARVN Regiment, the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion from the 2<sup>nd</sup> ARVN Regiment, and a company from the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Regiment.

Despite the ARVN buildup inside the Citadel, Truong's troops still failed to make any headway against the dug-in North Vietnamese, who had burrowed deeply into the walls and tightly packed buildings. All the time, the PAVN and VC seemed to be getting stronger as reinforcements made it into the city. With his troops stalled, an embarrassed and frustrated Truong was forced into appealing to III MAF for help. On 10 February, General Cushman sent a message to General LaHue directing him to move a Marine battalion to the Citadel. LaHue ordered Major Robert Thompson's 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup>

Marines, to prepare for movement to Hue. On 11 February, helicopters lifted two platoons of Company B into the ARVN HQ complex (the third platoon from the unit was forced to turn back when their pilot was wounded by ground fire). Twenty-four hours later, Company A, with five tanks attached, plus the missing platoon from Company B, made the journey by landing craft across the river from the MACV compound, along the moat to the east of the Citadel and through a breach in the northeast wall. The next day Company C joined the rest of the battalion. Once inside the Citadel, the Marines were ordered to relieve the 1<sup>st</sup> Vietnamese Airborne Task Force in the southeastern section of the Citadel. At the same time, two battalions of Vietnamese Marines moved into the southwest corner of the Citadel with orders to sweep west. This buildup of allied forces inside the Citadel put intense pressure on the Communist forces, but they stood their ground and redoubled efforts to hold their positions.

The following day, after conferring with President Nguyen Van Thieu, Lieutenant General Lam authorized allied forces to use whatever weapons were necessary to dislodge the enemy from the Citadel. Only the Imperial Palace remained off limits for artillery and close air support.

The mission of the 1/5 Marines was to advance down the east wall of the Citadel toward the river, with the Imperial Palace on their right. At 0815 on 13 February, Company A moved out under a bone-chilling rain, following the wall toward a distinctive archway tower. As they neared the tower, North Vietnamese troops opened up on them with automatic weapons and rockets from concealed positions that they had dug into the base of the tower. The thick masonry of the construction protected the enemy defenders from all the fire being brought to bear on them. Within minutes, several Marines lay

dying and 30 more were wounded, including Captain John J. Bowe, Jr., the company commander. These troops, fresh from operations in Phu Loc, just north of the Hai Van Pass, were unfamiliar with both the situation and city fighting; finding themselves “surrounded by houses, gardens, stores, buildings two and three stories high, and paved roads littered with abandoned vehicles, the riflemen felt out of their element.”<sup>35</sup>

Under heavy enemy fire, the Marine advance stalled; in the first assault on the south wall, the Marines lost 15 killed and 40 wounded. Major Thompson pulled Company A back and replaced them with Company C, flanked by Company B. Once again, the Marines were raked by heavy small arms, machine gun, and rocket fire that seemed to come from every direction, but they managed to inch forward, using airstrikes, naval gunfire, and artillery support. The fighting proved even more savage than the battle for the south bank. That night Major Thompson requested artillery fire to help soften up the area for the next day’s attack. At 0800 on 14 May, Thompson renewed the attack, but his Marines made little headway against the entrenched North Vietnamese and VC. It was not until the next day when Captain Myron C. Harrington’s Company D, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines (D/1/5) was inserted into the battle by boat that the wall tower was finally taken, but only after six more Marines were killed and more than 50 wounded. That night, the PAVN retook the tower for a brief period, but Captain Harrington personally led the counterattack to take it back.

On the morning of 16 February, Major Thompson’s Marines continued their push southeast along the Citadel wall. From that point until 22 February, the battle seesawed back and forth while much of the Citadel was pounded to rubble by close air support, artillery, and heavy weapons fire. The bitter hand-to-hand fighting went on relentlessly.

The Marines were operating in a defender's paradise – row after row of single story, thick-walled masonry houses jammed close together up against a solid wall riddled with spiderholes and other enemy fighting positions. The Marines discovered that the North Vietnamese units in the Citadel employed “better city-fighting tactics, improved the already formidable defenses, dug trenches, built roadblocks and conducted counterattacks to regain redoubts which were important to...[their] defensive scheme.”<sup>36</sup> The young Marines charged into the buildings, throwing grenades before them, clearing one room at a time. It was a battle fought meter by meter; each enemy strongpoint had to be reduced with close quarter fighting. No sooner had one position been taken than the North Vietnamese opened up from another.

M-48 tanks and ONTOS were available, but these tracked vehicles found it extremely difficult to maneuver in the narrow streets and tight alleys of the Citadel. At first, the 90mm tank guns were ineffective against the concrete and stone houses; the shells often ricocheted off the thick walls back toward the Marines. The Marine tankers then switched to concrete-piercing fused shells that “resulted in excellent penetration and walls were breached with two to four rounds.”<sup>37</sup> Then the tanks proved invaluable in assisting the infantry assault. One Marine rifleman later stated: “If it had not been for the tanks, we could not have pushed through that section of the city. They [the North Vietnamese] seemed to have bunkers everywhere.”<sup>38</sup>

As a result of the intense fighting, Hue was being reduced to rubble, block by block. By the end of the battle, estimates tallied ten thousand houses either totally destroyed or damaged, roughly 40 percent of the city.<sup>39</sup> Many of the dead and wounded were trapped in the rubble homes and courtyards. Enemy troops killed by the Marines

and South Vietnamese troops lay where they had fallen. One of the MACV advisers later wrote: "...The bodies, bloated and vermin infested, attracted rats and stray dogs. So, because of public health concerns, details were formed to bury the bodies as quickly as possible."<sup>40</sup> For those who fought in Hue, the stench and horrors of the corpses and the rats would never be forgotten.

By 17 February, 1/5<sup>th</sup> Marines had suffered 47 killed and 240 wounded in just five days of fighting. Constantly under fire for the whole time, the Leathernecks, numb with fatigue, kept up the fight despite having slept only in three to four-hour snatches during the battle and most not even stopping to eat. The fighting was so intense that the medics and doctors had a very difficult time keeping up with the casualties. To take the place of the mounting casualties, Marine replacements were brought in during the battle, but many of them were killed or wounded before their squad leaders could even learn their names. Some replacements arrived in Hue directly upon their completion of infantry training at Camp Pendleton, California. The rapid rate of attrition was evident in that there were Marine KIAs found still wearing their stateside fatigues and boots.<sup>41</sup>

On 18 February, with what was left of his battalion completely exhausted and nearly out of ammunition, Major Thompson chose to rest his troops in preparation for a renewal of the attack. They needed time to clean their weapons, stock up on ammunition, tend the walking wounded, and gird themselves for the next round of bitter fighting. The following morning, Thompson and his Marines resumed the attack toward the Imperial Palace. They inched forward, paying dearly for every bit of ground taken. After 24 more hours of bitter fighting, they secured the wall on 19 February, but had virtually spent themselves in doing so.

As the U.S. Marines had fought their way slowly toward the Imperial Palace, the Vietnamese Marine task force entered the battle. At 0900 on the 14<sup>th</sup>, the South Vietnamese launched their attack from an area south of the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division headquarters compound to the west. They were then to make a left turning movement to take the southwest sector of the Citadel, but did not get that far because they immediately ran into heavy resistance from strong enemy forces as they engaged in heavy house-to-house fighting. During the next two days, the South Vietnamese advanced less than 400 meters. To the north of the Vietnamese Marines, the 3<sup>rd</sup> ARVN Infantry Regiment in the northwest sector of the Citadel was having problems of its own and making little progress. On the 14<sup>th</sup>, the enemy forces broke out of their salient west of the Tay Loc airfield and cut off the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> ARVN Regiment in the western corner of the Citadel. It would take two days for the ARVN to break the encirclement, and then only after bitter fighting.

It was later learned that the enemy was having his own problems. On the night of 14 February, a U.S. Marine forward observer with ARVN troops inside the Citadel, monitoring enemy radio frequencies, learned that the PAVN were planning a battalion-size attack by reinforcements through the west gate of the Citadel. The forward observer called in Marine 155mm howitzers and all available naval gunfire on preplanned targets around the west gate and the moat bridge leading to it. The forward observer reported that he had heard "screaming on the radio" monitoring the PAVN net.<sup>42</sup> Later, it was confirmed by additional radio intercepts that the artillery and naval gunfire had caught the North Vietnamese battalion coming across the moat bridge, killing a high-ranking North Vietnamese officer and a large number of the fresh troops.

Shortly after this incident, U.S. intelligence determined that the PAVN and VC were staging out of a base camp 18 kilometers west of the city and that reinforcements from that area were entering the Citadel using the west gate. Additionally, a new enemy battalion had been identified west of the city and a new regimental headquarters two kilometers north of the city with at least one battalion. Acting on this intelligence, elements of the U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, were ordered to launch coordinated assaults on the city from their blocking positions to the west. On 21 February, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry troopers attacked and were able to move up to seal off the western wall of the Citadel, thus depriving the North Vietnamese of incoming supplies and reinforcements and precipitating a rapid deterioration of the enemy's strength inside the Citadel. The North Vietnamese were now fighting a rear guard action, but they still fought for every inch of ground and continued to throw replacements into the fight.

As elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav advanced toward Hue from the west and action continued in the Citadel, fire support coordination became a major concern. On 21 February, Brigadier General Oscar E. Davis, one of the two Assistant Division Commanders for the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav, flew into the Citadel to take overall control of the situation in order to serve as the area's fire support coordinator. He colocated his headquarters with General Truong in the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division headquarters compound.

For the final assault on the Imperial Palace itself, a fresh unit, Captain John D. Niotis's Company L, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines, was brought in. By 22 February, the Communists held only the southwestern corner of the Citadel. Niotis led his Marines along the wall to breach the outer perimeter of the palace. Once inside, they were faced

by devastating fire from the entrenched Communists. Niotis ordered his Marines to pull back so plans could be made for another approach.

While the Marines prepared for the next assault on the Imperial City, it was decided that it was politically expedient to have the Palace liberated by the South Vietnamese.<sup>43</sup> On the night of 23-24 February, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> ARVN Regiment, launched a surprise attack westward along the wall in the southeastern section of the Citadel. The North Vietnamese were caught off guard by the attack, but quickly recovered. A savage battle ensued, but the South Vietnamese pressed the attack. The Communists, deprived of their supply centers to the west by the link-up between the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry and 2/5<sup>th</sup> Marines, fell back. Included in the ground gained by the South Vietnamese attack was the plot upon which stood the Citadel flagpole. At dawn on the 24<sup>th</sup>, the South Vietnamese flag replaced the Viet Cong banner that had flown from the Citadel flagpole for 25 days. Later that day, the ARVN 1<sup>st</sup> Division reached the outer walls of the Citadel, where it linked up with elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division. The last Communist positions were quickly overrun by the allied forces or were abandoned by VC and North Vietnamese troops, who fled westward to sanctuaries in Laos.

On March 2, 1968, the battle for Hue was officially declared over. It had been a bitter ordeal. The relief of Hue was the longest sustained infantry battle the war had seen to that point. The losses had been high. In the 26 days of combat, the ARVN lost 384 killed and more than 1,800 wounded, plus 30 missing in action. The U.S. Marines suffered 147 dead and 857 wounded. The U.S. Army suffered 74 dead and 507 wounded. The allies claimed over 5,000 Communists killed in the city and an estimated 3,000 killed in the fighting in the surrounding area.

Although the U.S. command had tried to limit damage to the city by relying on extremely accurate 8-inch howitzers and naval gunfire, the house-to-house fighting took its toll and much of the once beautiful city lay in rubble. In the 25 days of fighting to retake Hue, 40 percent of the city was destroyed, and 116,000 civilians were made homeless (out of a pre-Tet population of 140,000).<sup>44</sup> Aside from this battle damage, the civilian population suffered terrible losses from the communist attackers: some 5,800 were reported killed or missing. After the battle was over, South Vietnamese authorities discovered that Viet Cong death squads had systematically eliminated South Vietnamese government leaders and employees. Nearly 3,000 corpses were found in mass graves – most shot, bludgeoned to death, or buried alive, almost all with their hands tied behind their backs.<sup>45</sup> The victims included soldiers, civil servants, merchants, clergymen, schoolteachers, intellectuals, and foreigners. It was estimated that many of the other missing South Vietnamese were murdered by the VC and PAVN during the battle or as they withdrew from the Citadel.

The fighting had been intense and bloody, but in the end the allies had ejected the Communists and recaptured the city. The battle of Hue is a textbook study of the difficulties involved in combat in an urban area. There are a number of factors that played a key role in the conduct of the battle and are worthy of particular note; they include intelligence, command and control, training, rules of engagement, medical support, and population control.

Intelligence, or the lack thereof, had a major impact on the course of the battle for Hue. The intelligence system completely failed to anticipate that an attack on Hue was imminent. Even when there were attack indicators, they were not provided to the

commanders on the ground who could have best used the warning. Once the attack was launched, the intelligence systems failed to provide an adequate appreciation for enemy strength and intentions in Hue. This greatly inhibited the effectiveness of the allied response, especially in the early days of the battle when both the ARVN and Marines were unclear as to how many enemy units were in the city. This resulted in a piecemeal approach that saw units thrown into battle against vastly superior numbers.

Command and control was also a crucial factor. The division of labor between the ARVN, Marine, and Army forces resulted in a lack of coordination and unity of effort that inhibited the attempt to retake the city. This can be seen even before the battle began. When a radio intercept indicated that an attack on Hue was impending, it was the convoluted command channels that led to a sluggish response and the failure of the Hue defenders to be alerted in time.<sup>46</sup> Until Brigadier General Davis was placed in overall charge on 21 February, the various allied forces had acted in isolation of each other. The Marines took their orders from Task Force X-Ray, the ARVN obeyed the commands of General Truong, and the U.S. Army troops to the west, largely ignorant of what the Marines and ARVN forces were doing inside the city, operated on their own. The result was three separate battles that raged simultaneously with no overall commander coordinating allied efforts. By the time that Brigadier General Davis was given overall control, the battle was effectively over. As one Marine later remarked, General Davis "...didn't have anything to coordinate, but he had the name."<sup>47</sup>

The lack of an overall hands-on commander meant that there was no general battle plan for retaking Hue, no one to set priorities, no one to deconflict the requests for artillery and close air support, and no one person to accept the responsibility if things

went wrong. Also, there was no overall system to ensure an equitable distribution of logistical resupply. The Marines and Army scrambled to take care of their own, and the ARVN got next to nothing. It was a command arrangement that almost guaranteed difficulty in achieving any meaningful unity of effort.

The command and control situation caused problems in other areas as well. With no single commander orchestrating the battle, it was difficult to coordinate the isolation of the city from outside reinforcement as the Marines and South Vietnamese tried to clear the city. This permitted the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong to rush replacements in to take the place of the troops they lost during the intense fighting. Thus, they were able to replenish their ranks even as the fighting intensified and after they began to take increasing numbers of casualties. When the elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division effectively sealed the city from the northwest on 21 February, it had a decisive impact on the battle inside the city. Perhaps this could have been achieved earlier had there been a single commander to better synchronize the efforts of the units outside the city with those fighting inside the city.

The command and control situation additionally had the potential for increased fratricide because of the lack of coordination between the battles north of the river and those south of the river. The piecemeal insertion of forces also contributed to the potential of fratricide, as can be seen in the incident on 3 February.

Training played a key role in the conduct of the battle for Hue, particularly on the part of the Marines from TF X-Ray. The struggle for the city was made even more difficult by the fact that the allies were unprepared for the type of fighting required during combat in a built-up area like Hue. The Marines who played such a crucial role in

the retaking of the city were accustomed to fighting an enemy in jungle or open terrain away from populated areas of any significance. They had no training for urban warfare and essentially had to develop their own tactics, techniques, and procedures as they went along. The first three days of the battle had been a bloody learning process as the Marines went through what was in effect on-the-job training in house-to-house fighting.

Not having any previous experience with fighting in a city, the Marines had to learn by trial and error. The tactics that they had used so effectively in previous operations in I Corps had little application inside the city. The Marines had to devise ways to defeat the entrenched enemy who used the myriad of buildings, walls, and towers so effectively.<sup>48</sup> Different techniques were tried. One of the best utilized an eight-man team. Four riflemen covered the exits while two men rushed the building with grenades and two other riflemen provided covering fire. The team would rotate the responsibilities among the eight men and move on to the next building. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham, commander of 2/5 Marines, later described the tactics used: "We hope to kill them inside or flush them out the back for the four men watching the exits. Then, taking the next building, two other men rush the front. It sounds simple but the timing has to be just as good as a football play."<sup>49</sup>

The Marines learned quickly that more heavy weapons were needed. Tactics of fire and maneuver would not work in street fighting without the threat of heavy weapons. Objectives often could be reached only by going through buildings. Tanks, 106mm recoilless rifles, and 3.5-inch rocket launchers proved essential in the house-to-house fighting. The rocket launchers, called "bazookas" in WW II, were easily the more portable and, according to some Marines, the most effective.<sup>50</sup> The 106mm recoilless

rifles were also extremely effective. They were used in three ways. The gun could be employed singularly, either mounted on jeeps or mules or carted around by hand (even though it weighed over 400 pounds dismounted). Or, it could be used in a unit of six on the ONTOS tracked vehicles. The Marines used these weapons to create holes in compound walls and the sides of buildings, through which they would rush. They were also extremely useful for providing suppressive fire and as counter-sniper weapons.

Tear gas was used as an effective weapon to chase enemy troops from their bunkers and spider holes. The Marines had tried using smoke grenades on the treasury building south of the river, but what little smoke they produced was quickly dispersed by the breeze coming off the river. One Marine officer suggested using an E8 tear gas launcher, which he had seen stacked against the wall of an ARVN compound adjacent to the MACV compound. The launcher, about 2 feet high, could hurl as many as sixty-four 35mm tear gas projectiles up to 250 meters in four 5-second bursts of 16 each. Unlike the grenades, the E8 could flood an entire area so that every room and bunker would be permeated by the gas. The Marines used the CS dispenser very successfully throughout the remainder of the battle, and one company commander credited this approach with limiting his casualties during the fighting.<sup>51</sup>

In the early days of the battle when the Marines were trying to work out ways to deal with the entrenched enemy in the city, they had to do it largely without the artillery and close air support that they were so accustomed to using. The rules of engagement initially agreed upon by the allied senior commanders limited the use of artillery and close air support to minimize the damage to the historic and symbolic city. This made it extremely difficult during the early days of the battle for the Marines to dig the North

Vietnamese out of their prepared positions inside the city. These restrictions, which the Marines generally obeyed, were later abandoned when the allies argued successfully that adhering to that standing order was causing unacceptable casualties. Nicholas Warr, who had served as a platoon leader in C Company, 1/5 Marines, during the battle for Hue later wrote, "...These damnable rules of engagement ... prevented American fighting men from using the only tactical assets that gave us an advantage during firefights – that of our vastly superior firepower represented by air strikes, artillery and naval gunfire – these orders continued to remain in force and hinder, wound and kill 1/5 Marines until the fourth day of fighting inside the Citadel of Hue."<sup>52</sup>

Because of the initial restrictions on artillery and air strikes and the fact that most of the available artillery from Phu Bai was directed at interdicting enemy escape routes to the rear and not on the city itself, the Marines had to use their own mortars for close-in fire support, using them as a "hammer" on top of the buildings. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham later observed, "If you put enough [mortar] rounds on the top of a building, pretty soon the roof falls in."<sup>53</sup> The mortars also proved useful against enemy soldiers fleeing from buildings being assaulted by the Marines. By pre-registering on both the objective building and the street to that building's rear, the Marines were able to inflict heavy casualties by shifting fire from the objective to the rear street as they pushed the enemy soldiers out the building.<sup>54</sup>

The intensity of the bitter fighting resulted in a tremendous amount of casualties. Because the bad weather inhibited medical evacuation by helicopter, it soon became apparent that there was a need for forward medical facilities. The 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Regiment established the regimental aid station at the MACV compound with eight doctors in

attendance. This facility provided emergency care and coordinated all medical evacuation. Each of the forward battalions had its own aid station. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham, commander of 2/5 Marines, later lauded this highly responsive medical support, declaring that it was “a throwback to World War II. [I] had my doctor...one block behind the frontline treating the people right there.”<sup>55</sup> The Marines used trucks, mechanical mules, and any available transportation to carry the wounded back to the aid stations. From there, Marine and Army helicopters were used for further evacuation, often times flying with a 100-foot ceiling. In the battle for Hue, if a Marine reached an aid station alive, his chances of survival were close to 99 percent.<sup>56</sup>

Due to the heavy fighting in the city, population control quickly became a problem. In urban warfare, the people are often caught in the middle between the two opposing forces. Hue was no exception. The initial attack provided the first trickle of civilians seeking refuge in the relative safety of the MACV compound. The trickle would become a flood over the next weeks, creating a logistical and security nightmare for the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces in Hue, as the refugee problem reached staggering proportions. Every turn in the fighting flushed out hundreds of Vietnamese civilians of every age. Whole families were able to survive the shelling and street warfare by taking refuge in small bunkers they had constructed in their homes. Out of the rubble came old men, women, and children, waving pieces of white cloth attached to sticks. Something had to be done about this growing flood of refugees and displaced persons as the battle continued to rage.

A U.S. Army major from the MACV advisory team was placed in charge of coordinating the effort to manage the refugee situation. Temporary housing was found at

a complex near the MACV compound and at Hue University, where the number of refugees swelled to 22,000. Another 40,000 displaced persons were in the Citadel area across the river. Most of the refugees were innocent civilians, but some were enemy soldiers or sympathizers – and many were ARVN troops trapped at home on leave for the Tet holidays. All of these ARVN soldiers who were fit for duty were put to use helping the Marines and MACV advisors with the refugees.

In addition to dealing with shelter for the refugees, U.S. and South Vietnamese officials had to restore city services, including water and power; eliminate health hazards, including burying the dead; and secure food. With the assistance of the local Catholic hierarchy and American resources and personnel, the South Vietnamese government officials tried to restore order and normalcy in the city. By the end of February, a full-time refugee administrator was in place and the local government slowly began to function once more.

In conclusion, the battle of Hue is worthy of study when considering the complexities and requirements for urban operations. It was a bloody affair that resulted in a severe casualty toll, largely because of the aforementioned reasons, not the least of which were intelligence failures and lack of centralized command and control. It was only through the valor of the individual Marines and soldiers, both American and South Vietnamese, that they prevailed against a determined enemy under combat conditions in an urban environment that far exceeded anything that any of the allies had previously experienced. However, the victory at Hue proved irrelevant in the long run. Despite the overwhelming tactical victory achieved by the allies in the city and on the other battlefields throughout South Vietnam, the Tet Offensive proved to be a strategic defeat

for the United States. U.S. public opinion, affected in large part by the media coverage of the early days of the offensive, began to shift away from support for the war.<sup>57</sup> On 31 March 1968, the full impact of the Tet offensive was demonstrated when President Lyndon Baines Johnson announced a halt of all bombing of North Vietnam above the 20<sup>th</sup> parallel and gave notice that he would not seek reelection to a second term in the White House. Thus, the Communists won a great strategic victory. However, in doing so, they lost an estimated 30,000 fighters and the Viet Cong would never recover. Nevertheless, the Tet Offensive resulted in a sea change in U.S. policy in Vietnam and the United States soon began its long disengagement from the war.

Despite the outcome of the war, the battle of Hue remains a classic study in urban warfare that clearly demonstrates not only the rigors and demands of fighting in a built-up area, but also the valor and fortitude demanded of the soldiers who are to fight in such situations. The Marines and South Vietnamese soldiers retook the city from the Communists and paid for the effort in blood; many of the lessons they learned the hard way are just as valid for urban fighting today as they were in 1968.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. military troop strength reached its peak of 543,300 in April, 1969.
- <sup>2</sup> Spencer Tucker, *Vietnam* (London: UCL Press, 1999), 136.
- <sup>3</sup> The Viet Minh defeated the French forces in a decisive battle at Dien Bien Phu on 7 May 1954 after a two-month siege. The French subsequently withdrew from Vietnam.
- <sup>4</sup> Edward F. Murphy, *Semper Fi Vietnam: From Da Nang to the DMZ, Marine Corps Campaigns, 1965-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1997), 189.
- <sup>5</sup> The Viet Cong, or as it was more properly known, the People's liberation Armed Forces (PLAF), included regular forces, called main force VC, full-time guerrillas, and a part-time self-defense militia. The main force VC battalions were organized, trained, and equipped similarly to the PAVN battalions.
- <sup>6</sup> Pham Van Son. *Tet - 1968* (Salisbury, NC: 1980), 458.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 459.
- <sup>8</sup> Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (New York: Avon, 1972), 225.
- <sup>9</sup> George W. Smith, *The Siege at Hue* (New York: Ballentine Books, 2000), 17; Keith W. Nolan, *Battle for Hue* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1983), 3.
- <sup>10</sup> James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 98.
- <sup>11</sup> Pham, 272-276.
- <sup>12</sup> Jack Shulimson, Leonard A. Blasiol, Charles R. Smith and David A. Dawson. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1997), 171.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> Westmoreland message to Wheeler, dated 31 Jan 68, Westmoreland Messages, Westmoreland Papers, Center of Military History, quoted in Shulimson, et al., 174.
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted in Shulimson, et al., 176.
- <sup>20</sup> Shulimson, et al., 176.
- <sup>21</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Marines (Rein), 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division (Rein) Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY), dated 20 Mar 1968, 11 (hereafter referred to as 1<sup>st</sup> Marines AAR).
- <sup>22</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Marines AAR, 13; Marine quoted in Shulimson, et al, 176.
- <sup>23</sup> Murphy, 198-199.
- <sup>24</sup> Quoted in Shulimson, et al, 179-180.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.
- <sup>27</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Marines AAR, 79.
- <sup>28</sup> Quoted in Stanley Karnow. *Vietnam, A History* (New York: Penguin Book, 1997), 545.
- <sup>29</sup> Quoted in Shulimson, et al, 185.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

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- <sup>32</sup> Quoted in Murphy, 206; Nolan, 77-9.
- <sup>33</sup> Smith, 161.
- <sup>34</sup> Shulimson, 191.
- <sup>35</sup> Murphy, 209.
- <sup>36</sup> Quoted in Shulimson, et al, 201.
- <sup>37</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Marines AAR, 80.
- <sup>38</sup> Quoted in Shulimson, et al., 202.
- <sup>39</sup> Nolan, 183.
- <sup>40</sup> Smith, 162.
- <sup>41</sup> Murphy, 213.
- <sup>42</sup> Shulimson, et al, 204-205.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 211; Nolan, 172.
- <sup>44</sup> Shulimson, et al., 219.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.
- <sup>46</sup> Wirtz, 98.
- <sup>47</sup> Quoted in Shulimson, et al, 223.
- <sup>48</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Marines AAR, 79.
- <sup>49</sup> Quoted in Smith, 141-142.
- <sup>50</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Marines AAR, 81.
- <sup>51</sup> Capt. G. R. Christmas, "A Company Commander Reflects on Operations Hue City," in *The Marines in Vietnam 1954-1973, An Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, ed. Edwin H. Simmons, et al (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1974), 162.
- <sup>52</sup> Nicholas Warr, *Phase Line Green: the Battle for Hue, 1968* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 124.
- <sup>53</sup> Quoted in Shulimson, et al, 188.
- <sup>54</sup> Christmas, 161-162.
- <sup>55</sup> Shulimson, et al, 219.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>57</sup> There are indications that public opinion had already begun to shift by the end of 1967, but the Tet Offensive certainly accelerated this shift.

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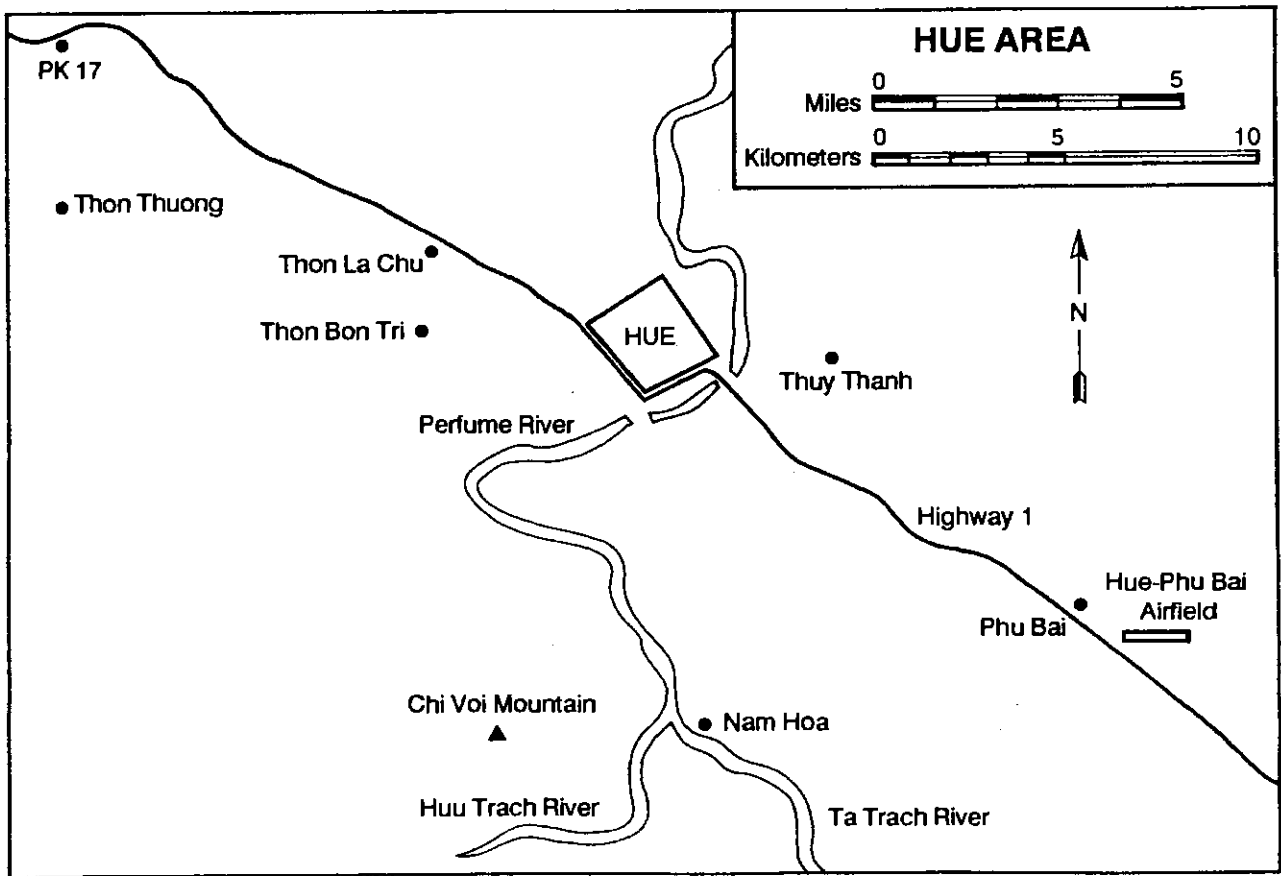
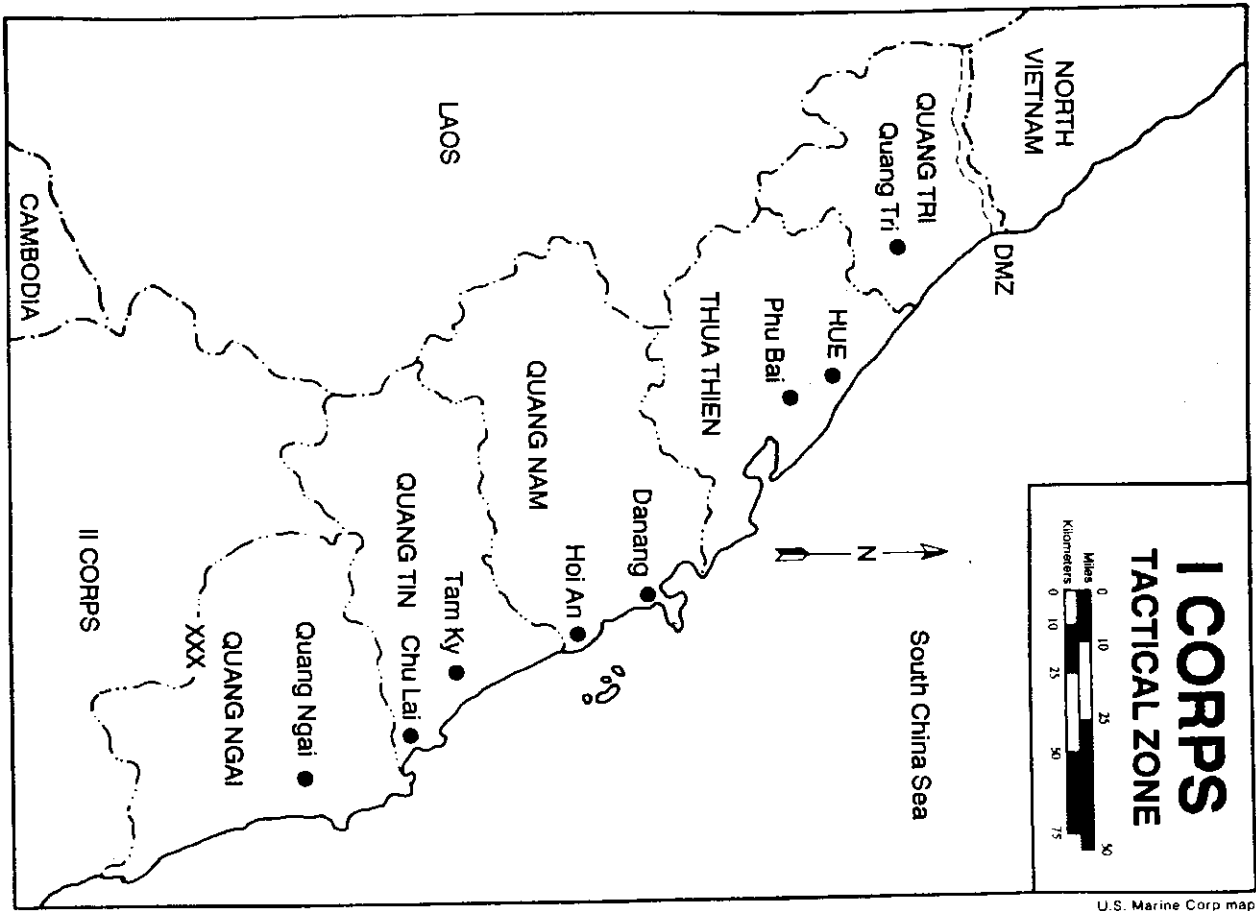
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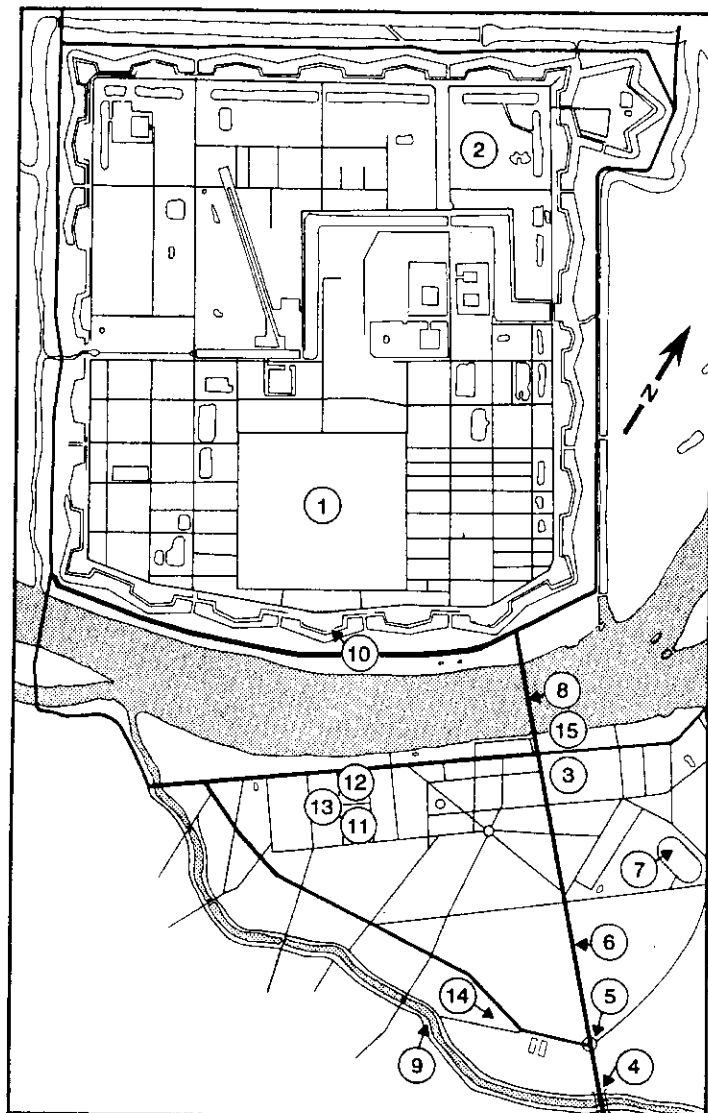
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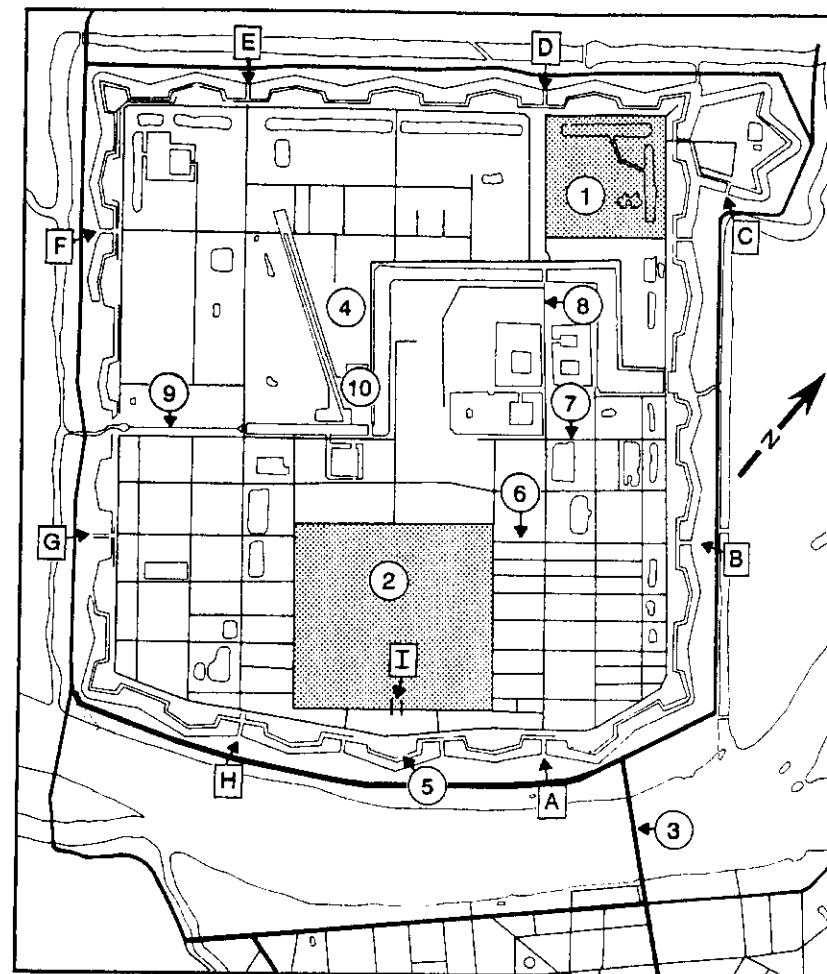
SOURCE FOR MAPS: Eric Hammel, Fire In The Streets (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1991), pp. xiv, xv, xvi.



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### HUE

- |                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| 1. Imperial Palace      | 9. Phu Cam Canal                        |
| 2. 1st ARVN Division CP | 10. Citadel Flagpole                    |
| 3. MACV Compound        | 11. Thua Thien Provincial Prison        |
| 4. An Cuu Bridge        | 12. Thua Thien Provincial Admin. Center |
| 5. Traffic Circle       | 13. Hue Municipal Power Station         |
| 6. Cane Field Causeway  | 14. Hue Cathedral                       |
| 7. Tu Do Stadium        | 15. Doc Lao Park                        |
| 8. Nauven Haana Bridge  |   |



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### THE CITADEL

- |                                      |                    |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. 1st ARVN Division CP Compound     | A. Thuong Tu Gate  |
| 2. Imperial Palace                   | B. Dong Ba Gate    |
| 3. Nguyen Hoang Bridge               | C. Trung Dinh Gate |
| 4. Tay Loc Airfield                  | D. Hau Gate        |
| 5. Citadel Flagpole                  | E. An Hoa Gate     |
| 6. Mai Thuc Loan Street              | F. Chanh Tay Gate  |
| 7. Tinh Tam Street                   | G. Huu Gate        |
| 8. Dinh Bo Linh Street               | H. Nha Do Gate     |
| 9. Thuy Quan Canal                   | I. Ngo Mon Gate    |
| 10. 1st ARVN Ordnance Company Armory |                    |

