
THE
1968 TET OFFENSIVE BATTLES
OF
QUANG TRI CITY AND HUE



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by

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CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
Foreword	v
The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue	1
The 1st Cavalry Division Moves North	8
The Assault on Quang Tri City	12
Enter the Cavalry	19
Target: Hue	25
A City Besieged: 31 January–1 February	34
Thon La Chu: 2–10 February	46
The Fight for the Triangle and the Citadel: 2–10 February	56
West of Hue: 11–20 February	61
Stalemate in the Citadel: 11–20 February	66
The Final Push: 20–25 February	70
Aftermath	78

MAPS

1. I Corps Tactical Zone	3
2. The Battle of Quang Tri City: Original Allied Situation, 31 January 1968	15
3. The Battle of Quang Tri City: Enemy Attack, 31 January 1968	16
4. The Battle of Quang Tri City: 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div Counterattack, 31 January 1968	20
5. The Battle of Hue: Enemy Attack, 30–31 January 1968	35
6. The Battle of Hue: Friendly Situation, 31 January–2 February 1968	41
7. The Battle of Hue: Friendly Situation, 2–10 February 1968	49
8. The Battle of Hue: Enemy Situation, 11–20 February 1968	62
9. The Battle of Hue: Friendly Situation, 11–20 February 1968	63
10. The Battle of Hue: Friendly Situation, 21–25 February 1968	71

ILLUSTRATIONS

Quang Tri City	9
Hue Citadel	26

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FOREWORD

This monograph focuses on the battles of Quang Tri City and Hue that took place during the 1968 Tet offensive. The offensive itself, an all-out effort by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces to overrun the major cities of South Vietnam, marked the turning point of the Vietnam War. Although the attacks were costly failures in military terms, they set the United States on a path of disengagement from the war that ultimately led to the fall of Saigon some seven years later.

The battles for the two northernmost provincial capitals in South Vietnam, Quang Tri City and Hue, are particularly worth examining because the enemy regarded them as key objectives, second only to Saigon, the national capital. To a large extent, the success or failure of the offensive depended on what happened there. The battles tell us much about how the enemy prepared for the offensive, why he achieved a high degree of surprise and initial success, and why his attacks ultimately failed. The battle for Quang Tri City, a textbook example of a vertical envelopment, resulted in a quick allied victory. The fight for Hue turned into a slow, grinding campaign of attrition that lasted nearly a month before the enemy was finally defeated. Together, they offer instruction on the strengths and limitations of airmobile warfare and a primer on urban fighting in a counterinsurgency environment, subjects that continue to be a major Army interest throughout the world.

Since this monograph is an extract from a larger work in progress, we would like to hear from you: your comments, favorable or critical, and your recommendations about additional approaches or sources to consider. The Vietnam War continues to be our country's most controversial war, and the lessons from that largely unconventional conflict continue to inform our approach to the demands of the Global War on Terror today. Please send all comments to Erik.Villard@hqda.army.mil.

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THE 1968 TET OFFENSIVE BATTLES OF QUANG TRI CITY AND HUE

In early 1968, General William C. Westmoreland saw signs of hope and progress in a stubborn war that was approaching its third year of combat. The allied military machine had never been stronger. As commander of the joint headquarters known as the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), Westmoreland had nearly half a million American soldiers, marines, airmen, sailors, and coast guardsmen under his command, along with nearly 60,000 combat troops from South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Thailand, collectively known as the Free World Military Assistance Forces (FWMAF). The South Vietnamese government fielded another 685,000 military personnel, about half of whom were soldiers in its regular army. In addition to the most modern and sophisticated army in the world, Westmoreland had the might of the U.S. Seventh Air Force stationed in South Vietnam, Thailand, and Guam at his disposal and could draw on assets from the powerful and carrier-rich U.S. Seventh Fleet on station in the South China Sea. Given that strength, the general believed that with enough time—perhaps a year or two—he could reduce the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese armed forces in the country to a point where only a small number of American troops would be needed to protect South Vietnam.¹

Although the enemy remained a formidable threat, fielding some 280,000 full- and part-time fighters operating in units as large as a division, Westmoreland believed that the allies had finally won the upper hand and were now steadily eroding the Communist fighting strength and political underground. He and his commanders would accelerate the effort to block enemy infiltration through Laos and Cambodia. They would also increase the number of operations designed to hinder the enemy's access to rice and other resources in the South that were needed to prolong the war. The allies would continue their systematic destruction of Communist base areas inside South Vietnam, further depleting the enemy's stores and eliminating locations used to rest and restore Communist forces. As a consequence, MACV projections for 1968 predicated that the pacification effort would make significant gains. Westmoreland looked forward to the coming year with a cautious but determined sense of optimism.²

¹ Headquarters, United States Army Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), "Command History, 1968" (Saigon, Vietnam: Military History Branch, Office of the Secretary, MACV, 1969), p. 224, U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH), Washington, D.C. (hereinafter cited as MACV History, date).

² Combined Campaign Plan 1968, AB 143, MACV, 11 Nov 67, pp. 13–14, A-2, copy in CMH.

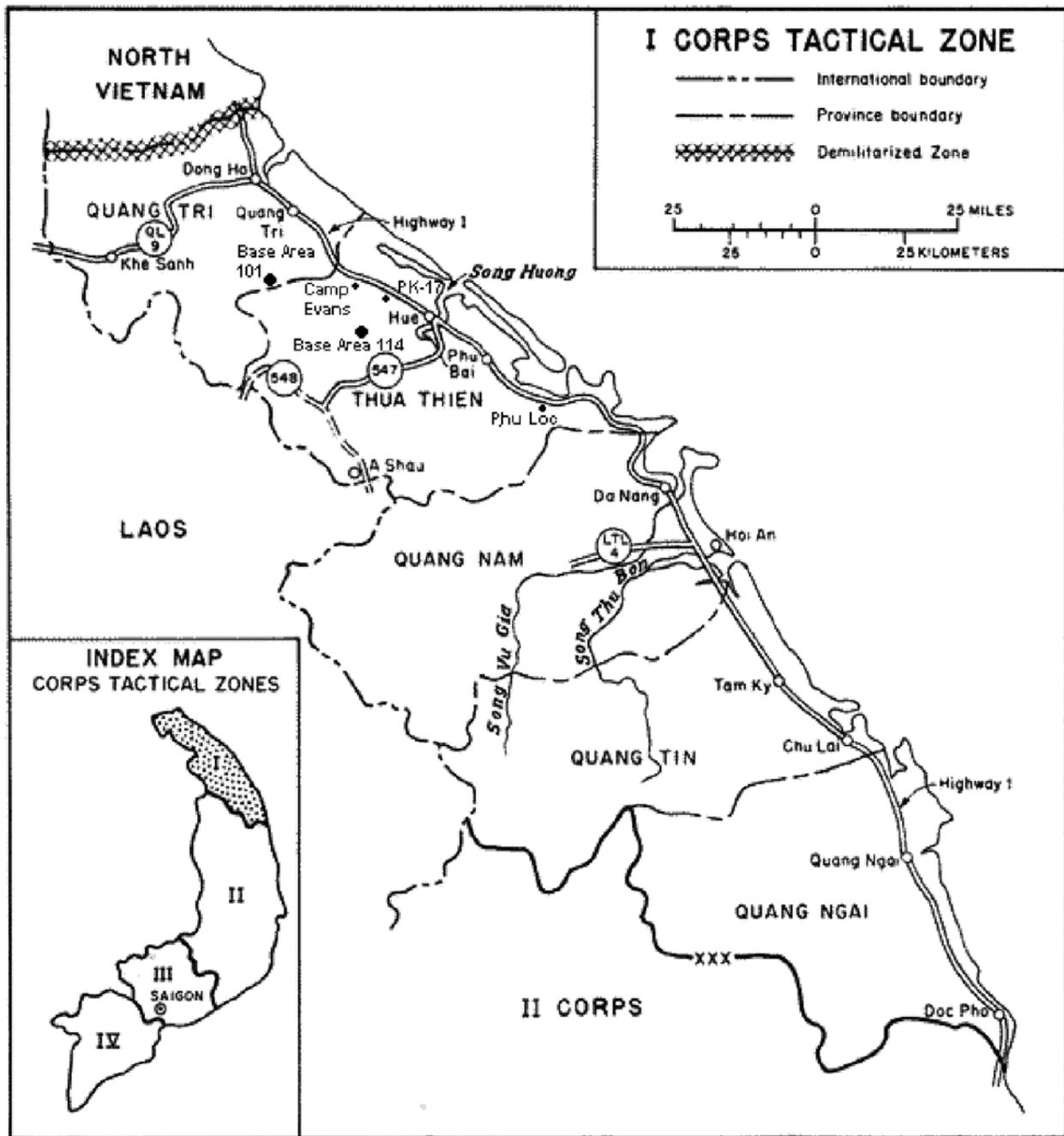
Despite those positive trends, the general remained deeply concerned about the situation in the two northernmost provinces of I Corps, which made up one of four South Vietnamese military zones into which the country had been divided for the purposes of administrative and operational planning. The provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien that made up northern I Corps were particularly vulnerable because of their proximity to North Vietnam. Taking advantage of supply lines that were short compared to the rest of South Vietnam, the Communists could easily mass troops and equipment in one of several base areas in northern I Corps or just across the border in Laos or North Vietnam. When allied intelligence noted a buildup of enemy forces near the Demilitarized Zone in late December 1967, particularly around the Marine combat base at Khe Sanh in northwestern Quang Tri Province, Westmoreland suspected that the North Vietnamese were preparing a blow against the overstretched allied forces guarding the sector.

Although the Communists were unlikely to conquer the two provinces outright, they could achieve a devastating political victory if they were able to overrun one or more of the firebases that shielded the Demilitarized Zone. Further, the infiltration of division-size enemy forces into the coastal lowlands, where most of the population lived, would cause havoc. Westmoreland, who had been generally satisfied with allied progress in 1967 elsewhere in the country and who had recently blunted major enemy attacks in III Corps at Loc Ninh and in II Corps at Dak To, was determined to frustrate the enemy's designs and keep the momentum of the war on his side.³

Northern I Corps presented a compact battlefield, with the two provinces covering an area approximately 130 kilometers north to south and roughly 65 kilometers east to west. (*Map 1*) Steep and densely forested mountains, rising in some places to over 2,400 meters, dominated the western part of the sector. Descending toward the sea, the sharp peaks gave way to rolling hills intersected by river valleys, which in turn opened to a narrow coastal plain ten to fifteen kilometers wide and protected from the sea by sand dunes. The lowlands, where most of the approximately 800,000 people in northern I Corps lived, featured intensively farmed rice fields that were capable of producing two crops each year, one in September and a second, larger one in March. Between these harvests was the northeast or winter monsoon; at higher elevations, the northeast monsoon produced heavy rains, temperatures as low as the mid-fifties on the Fahrenheit scale, and a persistent, drizzling fog known as *crachin* that could limit visibility to only a few hundred meters. During the rest of the year, when the southwest monsoon was in effect, the weather in the piedmont and coastal plain regions was typically hot and dry.

The main route of communication in the lowlands of northern I Corps was Highway 1, a two-lane paved road that ran parallel to the South China Sea an average of some ten kilometers inland.

³ After-Action Report (AAR), Quang Tri Province Sen Adv, Adv Team 3, 28 Mar 68, VC/NVA Tet Offensive Attack in Quang Tri Province, p. 2, box 30, AARs, Asst CofS, J-3, MACV, Record Group (RG) 472, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, D.C.



MAP 1

Along its route could be found the three most important urban centers in the region. First was Dong Ha, a small town twelve kilometers south of the Demilitarized Zone that was within the range of the Soviet-designed 130-mm. guns on the North Vietnamese side of the border.⁴ The town was strategically important because it controlled the only vehicle bridge over the Mieu Giang, a major

⁴ Jack Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1997), p. 33.

river that began in the foothills and flowed into the Cua Viet River channel just east of Dong Ha before emptying into the South China Sea. Dong Ha served as a vital logistics hub for the region because shallow-draft cargo vessels could navigate upriver to the town from embarkation points on the coast. Connecting Dong Ha to the interior was Highway 9, a branch of Highway 1 that passed through Khe Sanh before reaching the Laotian border. Enemy activity in the summer of 1967 had severed the road approximately twenty-five kilometers west of Dong Ha, necessitating Marine air supply drops for Khe Sanh.

The second town of strategic importance was Quang Tri City, a provincial capital of some 12,000 people that lay fifteen kilometers south of Dong Ha. Located on the Thach Han River, a waterway that flowed down the foothills to the provincial capital before turning north to connect with the Mieu Giang, the city represented a second strategic choke point in the event of an invasion from the north.

The third significant urban center was Hue, the provincial capital of Thua Thien Province and the former imperial capital of Vietnam. The picturesque city of some 140,000 people, located fifty kilometers south of Quang Tri City, was an important religious and intellectual center for the Vietnamese people, in addition to being the third largest city in the country after Saigon and Da Nang. Like the two cities to the north, Hue was located on a major waterway, in this case, the Huong or Perfume River, which ran from the western foothills to the sea. This location made Hue a third strategic choke point in northern I Corps, as well as a site where supplies could be ferried in from the coast by rivercraft. All three cities had airfields capable of accommodating aircraft as large as the U.S. Air Force C-130 Hercules, the mainstay allied transportation aircraft.

The South Vietnamese assigned their best army unit, the 1st Infantry Division, to defend northern I Corps. Two of its regiments were positioned in Quang Tri Province—the 2d Regiment just below the Demilitarized Zone near the trace of Highway 1 and the 1st Regiment farther south in the vicinity of Quang Tri City—while the 3d Regiment was based in Thua Thien Province in the districts surrounding Hue, where the division maintained its headquarters. Also in Thua Thien Province near the imperial capital were two troops of the South Vietnamese 7th Armored Cavalry, as well as two battalions of the South Vietnamese 1st Airborne Task Force, part of the strategic reserve of the South Vietnamese Army. The third battalion of the task force and a third troop of cavalry were in Quang Tri Province near its provincial capital. The South Vietnamese 37th Ranger Battalion was helping to defend the Marine combat base of Khe Sanh. Finally, South Vietnamese paramilitary forces in the two northernmost provinces included 41 Regional Forces companies with a total authorized strength of 4,900 soldiers and 244 Popular Forces platoons with a total authorized strength of 8,500 troops, armed mostly with M1 carbines and a smattering of light machine guns and 60-mm. mortars.⁵

⁵ Trip Rpt, Military Assistance Command Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (MACCORDS)-RE, 2 Mar 68, I Corps Tactical Zone #II, p. 2; Rpt, Senior Adv, Thua Thien Prov, 5 Dec 67, sub: Province Report, p. 5; both in Revolutionary Development (RD) files, CMH.

The primary American combat unit in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces was the 3d Marine Division, an outfit of 24,000 headquartered at Dong Ha with five infantry regiments, one artillery regiment, and supporting units. Most of the division, with the exception of the 4th Marines near Hue in Thua Thien Province, was positioned in a series of company-size strong points and battalion-size combat bases in northern Quang Tri Province to defend against a potential North Vietnamese thrust across the Demilitarized Zone. This barrier was known officially as the Strong Point Obstacle System but more commonly as the McNamara Line, named for Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, who had been an early proponent of its construction. The McNamara Line employed thousands of acoustic and motion sensors (some dropped into Laos to monitor the Ho Chi Minh Trail) to give the allies data about enemy infiltration. The 3d Marine Division and the 1st Marine Division in southern I Corps came under the authority of the III Marine Amphibious Force, a corps-level headquarters commanded by Lt. Gen. Robert E. Cushman that was based at Da Nang in Quang Nam Province.

In Quang Tri Province, the III Marine Amphibious Force also had operational control over the U.S. Army 108th Artillery Group, which included a battalion of 105-mm. self-propelled howitzers (eighteen tubes), a battalion of M42 “Duster” tracked vehicles armed with twin 40-mm. antiaircraft cannon that were useful for convoy and base defense, and two battalions of 175-mm. guns (twelve tubes in each battalion), whose guns fired a 147-pound projectile nearly thirty-two kilometers. From their artillery bases along Highway 9, the 175-mm. guns could hit targets throughout much of Quang Tri Province and even into the North Vietnamese sector of the Demilitarized Zone. Furthermore, the III Marine Amphibious Force could draw upon air power from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing based in southern I Corps and U.S. Air Force B-52s flying from Guam and Thailand, as well as naval gunfire support from destroyers and cruisers attached to the Seventh Fleet in the South China Sea.

The Communists maintained a higher concentration of units in northern South Vietnam than anywhere else in the country, including some of the best regiments and divisions in their army. A corps-level headquarters known as the *B4*, or *Tri-Thua-Thien Front*, hidden deep in Base Area 114 some thirty kilometers southwest of Hue, commanded the Communist forces in Thua Thien Province and in the lower half of Quang Tri Province. The upper half of that province came under the authority of the *B5 Front*, which also controlled the southernmost region of North Vietnam from its headquarters near the Demilitarized Zone. Between them, these two commands had approximately 30,000 regular troops and 20,000 guerrillas. With much less need than the allies to defend fixed installations or wide swaths of territory, enemy commanders could achieve local superiority by massing troops at the time and place of their choosing.⁶

⁶ Intel Rpt no. 2-68, 7-13 Jan 68, Third Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), 14 Jan 68, p. A1-7, Historians files, CMH.

Enemy forces in Quang Tri Province included thirteen infantry regiments belonging to five different North Vietnamese divisions, plus an assortment of Viet Cong main force battalions and local force companies. The *90th Regiment, 324B People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) Division*, was somewhere in the eastern Demilitarized Zone while the *803d Regiment* from the same division was near the Marine combat base at Dong Ha. The *320th PAVN Division* and the *27th Independent Battalion* were in the vicinity of Cam Lo, fifteen kilometers to the west, and most of the *304th* and *325C PAVN Divisions* lurked near Khe Sanh in northwestern Quang Tri Province. The *270th PAVN Regiment* was southwest of Dong Ha, perhaps no more than a day's march from Quang Tri City. The *10th Sapper Battalion*, the *5th PAVN Regiment*, and the *812th Regiment, 324B PAVN Division*, were known to operate from Base Area 101, a heavily wooded region fifteen kilometers southwest of Quang Tri City.⁷

The enemy was less numerous in Thua Thien Province but still strong enough to mount division-size attacks. The *6th PAVN Regiment* and the *12th Sapper Battalion* operated from Base Area 114 in the mountains southwest of Hue. Inside the city itself and in nearby villages lived several hundred spies and saboteurs belonging to the *Hue City Sapper Unit*. Three Viet Cong local force companies also operated within a few kilometers of the provincial capital. The *4th PAVN Regiment* and two local force companies operated in the region between Phu Bai and Phu Loc, twenty kilometers to the southeast of Hue. The *54th PAVN Artillery Regiment*, armed with long-range 122-mm. rockets, was thought to be somewhere in the province, although the current location of the unit was unknown.⁸

As early as November 1967, General Westmoreland had planned to move the 1st Cavalry Division into northern I Corps to counter the growing North Vietnamese presence in Quang Tri Province. He originally expected to conduct an operation named YORK I at the boundary of the II and I Corps zones near the Laotian border but shelved the project in early January 1968 when allied intelligence noted signs of an imminent offensive in northern I Corps. Most disturbing was the fact that at least two North Vietnamese divisions appeared to be closing around Khe Sanh. Given these warnings, Westmoreland ordered the commander of the 1st Cavalry Division, Maj. Gen. John J. Tolson, to begin moving the 1st and 3d Brigades of his division—the first from Binh Dinh Province in northern II Corps and the second from the Que Son Valley in southern I Corps—into a series of firebases along a fifty-kilometer stretch of Highway 1 between Quang Tri City and Hue. Tolson would also receive operational control over the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division,

⁷ Operational Report—Lessons Learned (ORLL), 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, 17 Mar 68, p. 3, box 2, ORLLs, 1966–1971, U.S. Army, Vietnam (USARV) Cmd Historian, RG 472, NARA; AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, 2 Jul 68, p. 3, box 10, Hist Background Files, 14th Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NARA; AAR, VC/NVA Tet Offensive Attack in Quang Tri Province, Adv Team 3, p. 2.

⁸ Tong Ho Trinh, *Huong Tien Cong va Noi Day Tet Mau Than o Tri-Thien-Hue (nam 1968)* [*The 1968 Tet Offensive and Uprising in the Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*] (Hanoi: Vien Lich Su Quan Su Viet Nam [Vietnamese Institute for Military History], 1968), p. 53 (hereafter cited as *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*).

currently located northwest of Saigon in III Corps, to compensate for the absence of his division's 2d Brigade. That force was to remain in northern II Corps to carry on with Operation PERSHING, a search-and-destroy effort aimed at the *3d PAVN Division* in eastern Binh Dinh Province. General Tolson would use the three brigades at his disposal to carry out Operation JEB STUART, an airmobile operation aimed at Base Areas 101 and 114 near Quang Tri City and Hue, respectively, where the enemy was most likely to be massing troops and supplies for an offensive against the coastal cities in northern I Corps.⁹

The movement of the 1st Cavalry Division into Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces would give General Westmoreland some much-needed flexibility in that threatened region. As the Army brigades moved into position, several battalions from the 3d Marine Division would shift north to reinforce the belt of firebases along Highway 9 just south of the Demilitarized Zone. Westmoreland guessed the enemy would attempt to overrun one or more of those outposts next, and he wanted the marines to have sufficient reserves on hand to counter any attack.

A second benefit to having the three Army brigades in northeastern I Corps was their abundance of helicopters. The 450 or so aircraft attached to the cavalry and airborne units gave the force long-range striking power never before seen in that area. By contrast, the 3d Marine Division had only about a quarter of that number of helicopters at its disposal. Of those, few were gunships or armed scout helicopters.¹⁰

Westmoreland expected the airmobility of the 1st Cavalry Division to come as a rude shock to the enemy in Base Areas 101 and 114 because the two Communist supply and training areas had so far functioned outside the reach of allied ground forces. Once those sanctuaries were crippled, the three brigades, along with U.S. Marine units, would mount a series of raids designated YORK II in April that would penetrate the A Shau Valley. This wild and remote area in the southwestern corner of Thua Thien Province had become a vast logistical center for the enemy. South Vietnamese units would also cross into Laos for a week or so to sweep Base Areas 607 and 611 on the other side of the border that fed into the A Shau. In May and June, the 1st Cavalry Division would mount a third and a fourth phase of YORK in other parts of western I Corps to destroy Communist sanctuaries along the Laotian border and, if Westmoreland received approval from Washington, to pave the way for an allied incursion into Laos, code-named EL PASO, to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail at the beginning of the next dry season in October.¹¹ If all went according to plan, the YORK operations would "significantly impair" the enemy's ability to support the *2d* and *3d PAVN Divisions* and, thus, accelerate pacification along the central coast. By reducing or eliminating many long-

⁹ Interv, Capt J. W. A. Whitehorne with Maj Gen John J. Tolson, 24 Jun 68, Vietnam Interview Transcribed (VNIT) 207, CMH.

¹⁰ Maj Gary L. Telfer, et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1984), p. 318.

¹¹ Shulimson, *The Defining Year, 1968*, p. 16; Msg, Commander, United States, MACV (COMUSMACV), 321 to Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), 8 Jan 68, Westmoreland Message files, CMH.

standing Communist bases in I Corps, the operations would also force the Communists to develop “lengthier, more arduous infiltration routes” that would further expose this logistical pipeline to allied air power.¹²

THE 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION MOVES NORTH

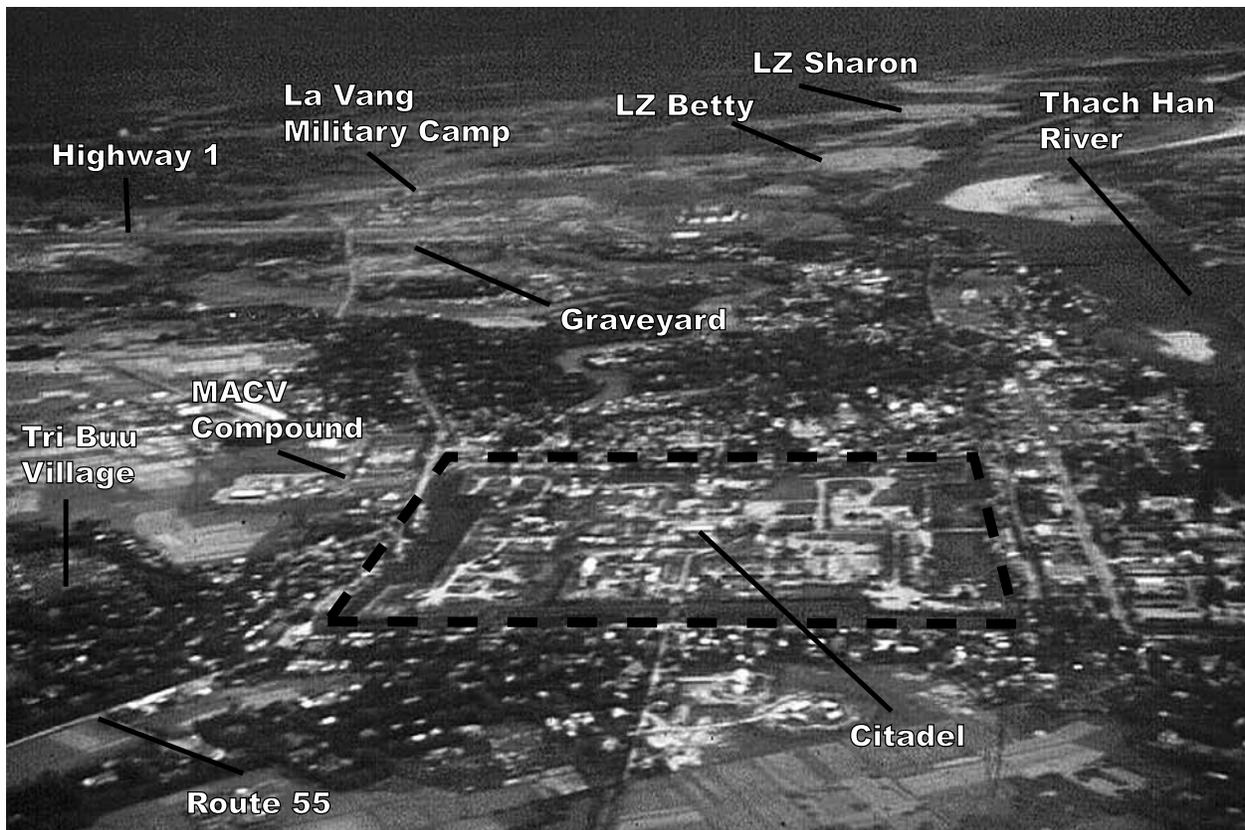
On 17 January 1968, the forward headquarters of the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, and the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, landed by helicopter ten kilometers southwest of Quang Tri City at a former Marine firebase the cavalrymen had dubbed Landing Zone JANE. Over the next two weeks, the remainder of the 1st Brigade made the journey from Binh Dinh Province to its new hunting grounds near Quang Tri City by air and by ship. The brigade, commanded by Col. Donald V. Rattan, had the mission of disrupting Base Area 101 in the Hai Lang National Forest west of the provincial capital. Colonel Rattan intended to establish several firebases deep inside the enemy zone from which he could mount frequent patrols.¹³ The 1st Brigade also had orders to interdict the Ba Long Valley, a corridor that began around fifteen kilometers east of Khe Sanh and ended at Base Area 101 that the Communists used to funnel supplies from Laos into southern Quang Tri and northern Thua Thien Provinces. On 23 January, Colonel Rattan got permission from the 3d Marine Division to establish his headquarters at Landing Zone BETTY, a Marine encampment seven kilometers south of Quang Tri City and just east of the Han River, which flowed out of the Ba Long Valley. After setting up his new command post and putting the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, into Landing Zone SHARON, a firebase immediately south of Landing Zone BETTY, Colonel Rattan sent the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, to construct Landing Zone ANNE in the heart of Base Area 101 and the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, to build Landing Zone SUZIE in the Ba Long Valley.

Meanwhile, the headquarters of the 1st Cavalry Division and the 3d Brigade began moving into position to the south of the 1st Brigade. On 21 January, the day Operation JEB STUART officially commenced, General Tolson and his command group landed four kilometers southeast of Hue in a massive graveyard the general christened Landing Zone EL PASO. Wanting to position his 3d Brigade farther north, Tolson conducted a quick helicopter survey of the terrain between Quang Tri City and Hue the next day and obtained permission from III Marine Amphibious Force to transfer his division headquarters, his forward logistical units, and most of the 3d Brigade to Camp Evans, a base located halfway between Quang Tri City and Hue on the west side of Highway 1 that had once housed a regiment from the 3d Marine Division.¹⁴

¹² Msg, COMUSMACV 204 to CINCPAC, 6 Jan 68, Westmoreland Message files, CMH.

¹³ Unless otherwise noted, the following section is based on ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div; AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div.

¹⁴ Interv, Whitehorse with Tolson, 24 Jun 68.



QUANG TRI CITY, LOOKING SOUTH

The commander of the 3d Brigade, Col. Hubert S. Campbell, and an advance party from the unit arrived at Camp Evans later on 22 January. Over the next ten days, the rest of the brigade shifted north from the Que Son Valley in southeastern I Corps, where it had participated in Operation WHEELER/WALLOWA against the *2d PAVN Division* on the border of Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces. The redeployment was marred by an incident on 26 January when North Vietnamese gunners fired a salvo of sixty 122-mm. rockets at the Quang Tri City airfield, where the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, was spending the night, killing the battalion commander and two other men.

Once the 3d Brigade began assembling at Camp Evans, Colonel Campbell set about improving its defenses because it was only ten kilometers from Base Area 114 and, therefore, likely to be attacked once the enemy learned that an airmobile force was stationed there. On 27 January, as the work got underway, General Tolson arrived with his headquarters from Landing Zone EL PASO. Meanwhile, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, established Landing Zone JACK six kilometers southwest of Camp Evans to support operations in Base Area 114 and to act as a forward screen for the brigade encampment.¹⁵

¹⁵ AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, 11 Apr 68, p. 1, box 10, Historians Background files, 14th Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NARA.

As the 1st and 3d Brigades moved into the corridor along Highway 1 between Quang Tri City and Hue, the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, commanded by Col. John H. Cushman, redeployed from Cu Chi in III Corps, northwest of Saigon, to Landing Zone EL PASO. The brigade completed its move via C-130 transport aircraft through the Phu Bai and Quang Tri City airfields between 23 and 29 January. After establishing a headquarters at Landing Zone EL PASO, which continued to serve as the 1st Cavalry Division's rear logistical area, Colonel Cushman sent the 1st Battalion, 502d Infantry, to Landing Zone BETTY on 27 January to beef up Colonel Rattan's 1st Brigade. Rattan used the paratroopers to protect his brigade headquarters, freeing his cavalry units to commence search-and-destroy missions. Cushman's two remaining units, the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry, and the 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry, remained at Landing Zone EL PASO for its defense. Once American patrols had time to sweep the surrounding countryside and verify that no enemy units were nearby, Cushman moved the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry, to Landing Zone JANE on 30 January to assist Colonel Rattan's 1st Brigade in operations against Base Area 101.

To control the growing number of units in northern I Corps, General Westmoreland decided on 26 January to establish a temporary corps-level headquarters known as MACV Forward that would work in close coordination with the headquarters of III Marine Amphibious Force. Staffed by personnel from the main MACV headquarters and from U.S. Army, Vietnam (USARV), headquarters at Long Binh and commanded by his deputy, General Creighton W. Abrams, the new organization would take operational control over all American forces in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces when it became functional in mid-February. Westmoreland expected MACV Forward to evolve by March of that year into a more permanent and robust headquarters to be known as the Provisional Corps, Vietnam, but his first concern was to get the headquarters up and running before the enemy could launch the expected offensive. The MACV commander believed that the III Marine Amphibious Force headquarters was already overburdened—it administered an array of advisory and pacification programs and managed the war in the five northernmost provinces and, thus, was not equipped to take on new responsibilities. By putting the burden of tactical command on MACV Forward and General Abrams, Westmoreland could reduce the load on the marines while also preserving for himself a high degree of control over the coming fight in northern I Corps. Not surprisingly, General Cushman and his subordinates were unhappy with this new arrangement because it implied that Westmoreland lacked confidence in III Marine Amphibious Force, a motive the MACV commander steadfastly denied. As it happened, Cushman and Abrams went on to develop an effective working relationship, but many Marine commanders found it hard to forgive Westmoreland for the perceived slight.¹⁶

¹⁶ Msg, COMUSMACV 1233 to CINCPAC, 26 Jan 68; Msg, COMUSMACV 1011 to CJCS, 22 Jan 68, sub: Visit to Washington by Richard E. Cavazos, LTC Inf, USA, both in Westmoreland Message files, CMH.

Given the warning signs of an enemy offensive, a threat magnified on 20 and 21 January when North Vietnamese forces attacked the Khe Sanh combat base, the neighboring district headquarters, and Marine outposts on two key hills overlooking the base, Westmoreland lobbied President Nguyen Van Thieu to curtail or cancel the traditional Tet holiday cease-fire. After some negotiation, Thieu agreed to reduce the cease-fire period from forty-eight to thirty-six hours in most of the country and to cancel it entirely for Quang Tri Province. Furthermore, the allied bombing effort against the North Vietnamese panhandle, the region just north of the Demilitarized Zone, would continue without interruption because in the past, the enemy had used the holiday pause to move men and supplies into South Vietnam and Laos without fear of molestation.¹⁷

As an additional measure to protect Quang Tri Province, General Westmoreland urged the headquarters of III Marine Amphibious Force and the Seventh Fleet to develop, as rapidly as possible, a plan for an amphibious feint against the North Vietnamese panhandle. Although a full-scale amphibious landing, code-named DURANGO CITY, was already in the planning stage, that operation would not be ready for at least another year—and its accomplishment was based on the assumption that Westmoreland could get White House approval for a limited invasion of the North. What the MACV commander wanted in the short term was a demonstration in the South China Sea that was credible enough to force the North Vietnamese to redeploy some of their forces from the Demilitarized Zone to the coastal panhandle. Westmoreland asked that the feint be organized by 1 February “or as soon thereafter as weather permits. . . .”¹⁸

Events quickly rendered that plan moot. Before Westmoreland could follow through with his diversion, the enemy unleashed the first wave of the Tet Offensive, an ambitious effort to topple the South Vietnamese state by simultaneously attacking thousands of government facilities across the width and breadth of the country. After prematurely attacking nine cities along the central coast on the night of 29–30 January, an error that resulted from disparities between the calendars used in the southern and northern halves of Vietnam, the Communists launched their major assault the next night, 30–31 January, hitting 27 of South Vietnam’s 44 provincial capitals, 5 of 6 autonomous cities, 58 of 245 district towns, and a host of smaller targets. The enemy expected this general offensive to inspire a popular uprising that would disintegrate the authority of the state and open the way for a coalition government dominated by the Viet Cong. Once in power, the Viet Cong would demand the withdrawal of the United States and all Free World Military Forces, paving the way for the country’s reunification with the North and its total subordination to Ho Chi Minh’s Lao Dong (People’s Worker) Party.

¹⁷ Msg, COMUSMACV 1307 to Cmdr 7th Air Force, 28 Jan 68, sub: Tet ceasefire, Westmoreland Message files, CMH.

¹⁸ Msg, COMUSMACV 1167 to CJCS, 24 Jan 68, Westmoreland Message files, CMH.

THE ASSAULT ON QUANG TRI CITY

The capital of Quang Tri Province, Quang Tri City, was important to President Thieu's government less for what it was—a small market town of modest economic influence—than for what it represented as a symbol of government authority. Located just thirty kilometers from the Demilitarized Zone, Quang Tri City was arguably the most vulnerable provincial capital in South Vietnam. The loss of the city would be a political embarrassment to Thieu's government and would weaken the legitimacy of his rule, particularly if the Communists established a rival government there to administer the territory they controlled in Quang Tri Province. The question was not, therefore, whether the Communists would attack Quang Tri City but when.

A counterintelligence coup engineered by the senior U.S. adviser for Quang Tri Province, Robert B. Brewer, yielded important clues about when and how the attack would come. In late September, Brewer cultivated an enemy spy as a double agent; the next month, this agent gave the adviser and his staff a document detailing the objectives of an upcoming winter-spring offensive. Because Brewer was not entirely convinced that his source could be trusted, he drew up a list of indicators that would affirm the accuracy of the document. Throughout December and January, allied intelligence confirmed many of the items on Brewer's list, among them, the execution of reconnaissance missions led by high-ranking Communist officers and strong indications that the enemy was stockpiling supplies in forward areas.

Convinced that the agent's document was true, Brewer called a meeting of senior allied commanders on 24 January. Present at the gathering were the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division, Maj. Gen. Rathvon "Tommy" McC. Tompkins; the commander of the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, Colonel Rattan; the commander of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division, Brig. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong; and the Quang Tri Province Chief, Lt. Col. Nguyen Am. Brewer predicted that a major enemy attack would be launched on 31 January at 0100, aimed primarily at the seats of government power and secondarily at allied military bases in Quang Tri Province. The assembled officers were skeptical but agreed to formulate three different plans to deal with such an attack if it occurred. At Brewer's suggestion, Colonel Am also convinced his superiors in Saigon to send an airborne battalion from the strategic reserve to defend the provincial capital during the Tet holiday period.¹⁹

Warning signs of just such an attack multiplied as the Tet holiday drew near. In the last week of January, rural people from districts to the west began streaming into Quang Tri City with stories of North Vietnamese soldiers laden with supplies moving into their villages and hamlets. Allied intelligence confirmed the movement of enemy troops from north to south and from west to east, headed in the general direction of Quang Tri City, and informants reported

¹⁹ Ltr, Robert B. Brewer to Eric M. Hammel, 14 Nov 86, pp. 1–2, Historians files, CMH.

that the enemy planned to take and occupy the provincial capital in the near future. On 28 January, the South Vietnamese commander of I Corps, Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, visited the city and declared a state of emergency. The province chief, Colonel Am, instituted martial law, imposed a nighttime curfew, and ordered weapons distributed to civil servants and militiamen. He instructed all regular and paramilitary forces in the subdistricts to pull back to their local headquarters and prepare for an attack. Tension increased on 30 January when Communist forces attacked nine cities in southern I Corps and II Corps, and General Westmoreland and the head of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, Gen. Cao Van Vien, canceled the Tet truce everywhere in South Vietnam.²⁰

The North Vietnamese were indeed coming. The Communist plan called for a platoon from the *10th Sapper Battalion* to infiltrate the city dressed as civilians on the evening of 30 January. Meanwhile, the *K4 Battalion* from the *812th Regiment, 324th PAVN Division*, and the *814th Main Force Battalion* would march through the darkened countryside toward the capital, navigating past a series of sand dunes, rice fields, and small streams. Along the way, the two main force battalions would be required to pass through several Catholic hamlets. In the interest of fostering good relations with the people and to preserve as much speed and secrecy as possible, the Communists had orders not to harm any churches, priests, or parishioners. Two hours after midnight, the sappers would emerge from hiding to destroy key government and military installations at the same time that the *K4 Battalion* assaulted the capital from the east and the *814th Main Force Battalion* attacked from the northeast. An enemy 122-mm. rocket battalion, probably from the *54th Artillery Regiment*, would provide supporting fire for the attack.

Meanwhile, the *808th Main Force Battalion* would position itself north of the capital to block allied reinforcements coming down Highway 1. Although the *808th* and the *814th Battalions* were designated as Viet Cong units, they were mostly filled with North Vietnamese soldiers. As for the remainder of the *812th Regiment*, the *K6 Battalion* would interdict Highway 1 south of the city and attack the La Vang Thuong complex, headquarters of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Regiment, 1st Division, while the *K5 Battalion* would remain in reserve in the village of Hai Lang eight kilometers southeast of the city. From that position next to Highway 1, the *K5 Battalion* could also block allied reinforcements based in Thua Thien Province from reaching Quang Tri City. Several kilometers to the southwest, on the other side of the highway, commandos from the *10th Sapper Battalion* would attack Landing Zone JANE to keep the American forces there preoccupied. Once the Communists had taken control of Quang Tri City, the *814th Battalion* would enter the capital,

²⁰ Pham Van Son, ed., *The Viet Cong Tet Offensive* (Saigon: Printing and Publishing Center, A.G./Joint General Staff, Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces), pp. 297–98; Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Intel Info Cable, 2 Feb 68, sub: This Is a Situation Report on 1 February Prepared by CAS, Based on the Personal Observation of a CAS Official in the Province, p. 2, box 240 [1 of 2], NSF-Vietnam Country Files, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library (LBJL), Austin, Texas.

enabling the entire *812th Regiment* to deploy in a crescent formation south of the city to block allied counterattacks from the direction of Hue and Phu Bai.²¹

The Communists knew that the capital would not fall easily. In the weeks before Tet, the enemy had attempted to lure some of the allied forces from the coastal lowlands to the mountains by threatening several of the Marine combat bases along Highway 9 in the western part of the province. Although the U.S. Marines had indeed shifted some troops to reinforce the position at Khe Sanh, the arrival of the 1st Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division in eastern Quang Tri Province in late January came as a shock to the enemy. With little time to adjust and although the odds of success had diminished, the Communists decided to press ahead with their original plan.²²

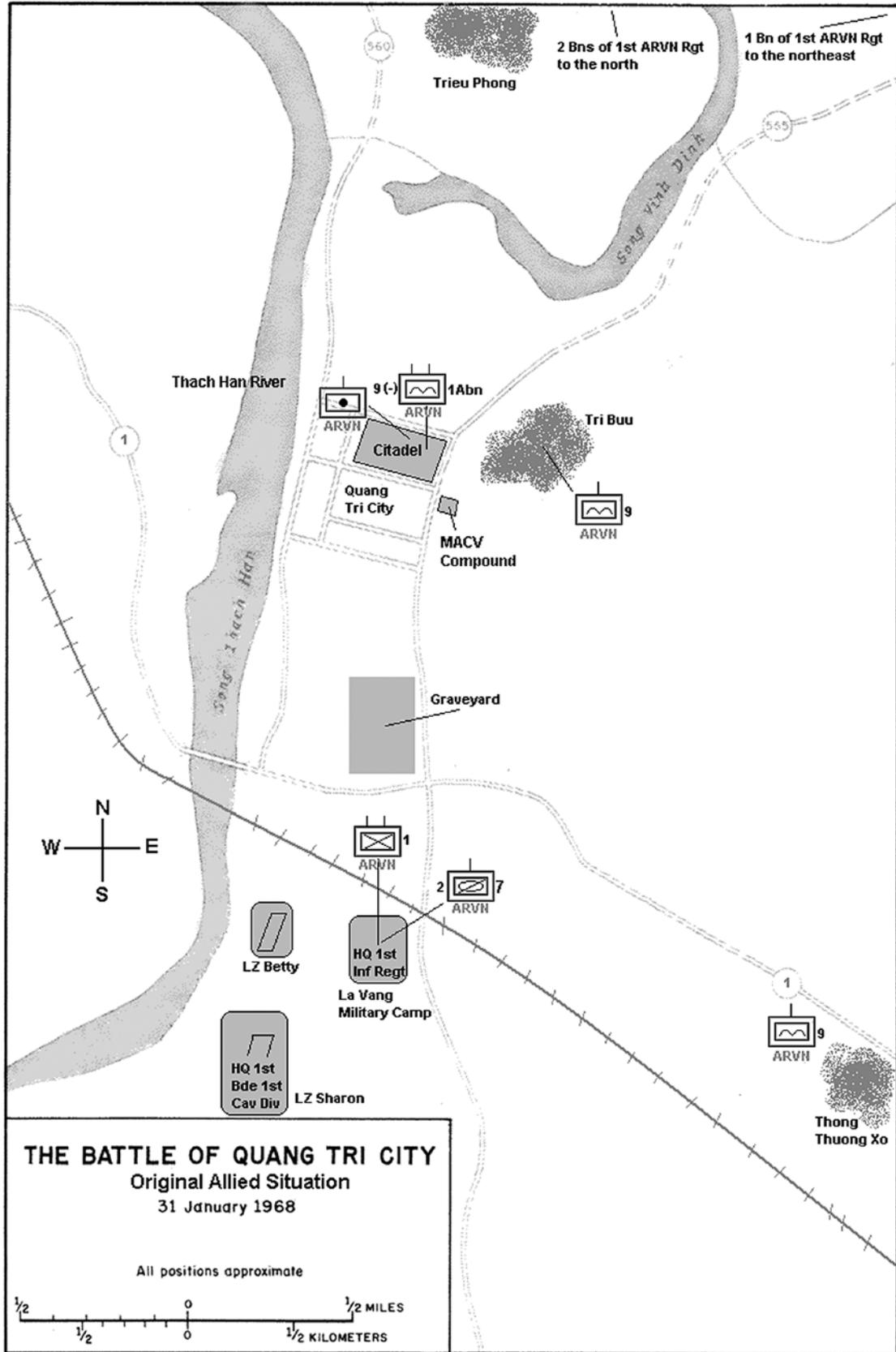
On the eve of Tet, the allied forces stationed near Quang Tri City were alert and expectant. (*Map 2*) Unlike the situation in many other South Vietnamese cities on that festive evening, the government units here were fully manned because their commanders had canceled holiday leave well in advance. Two infantry battalions from the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Regiment were positioned several kilometers north and northwest of the city in a series of pacified hamlets while a third infantry battalion was northeast of the capital near Route 555, a small road that led to the coast. As for the defenses of the city itself, in its northeastern corner stood the Citadel, a squat nineteenth-century fortress built of stone that housed the headquarters of the South Vietnamese 9th Airborne Battalion, a battery of 105-mm. howitzers, and two companies of paratroopers. An American advisory compound lay a short distance to the east on the other side of the Citadel's water-filled moat. Small groups of National Policemen and Popular Force soldiers stood guard in front of government buildings and public facilities around the city. The broad Thach Han River flowed along the western edge of the capital, making an attack from that direction nearly impossible. Protecting against an assault from the south was the La Vang Thuong military complex, which housed a battalion from the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry and the South Vietnamese 2d Troop, 7th Cavalry, equipped with M113 armored personnel carriers. Immediately to the southwest of La Vang were Landing Zones BETTY and SHARON, where the headquarters and support units of the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, were located. A company of South Vietnamese paratroopers bivouacked in the village of Tri Buu on the eastern outskirts of the capital, and a second company from the 9th Airborne Battalion patrolled Highway 1 to the southeast.

The enemy attack began at 0200 on 31 January when a platoon from the *10th Sapper Battalion* emerged from hiding carrying satchel charges, ladders, and rocket-propelled grenades.²³ (*See Map 3.*) Counting on surprise to make up for their small numbers, the sappers

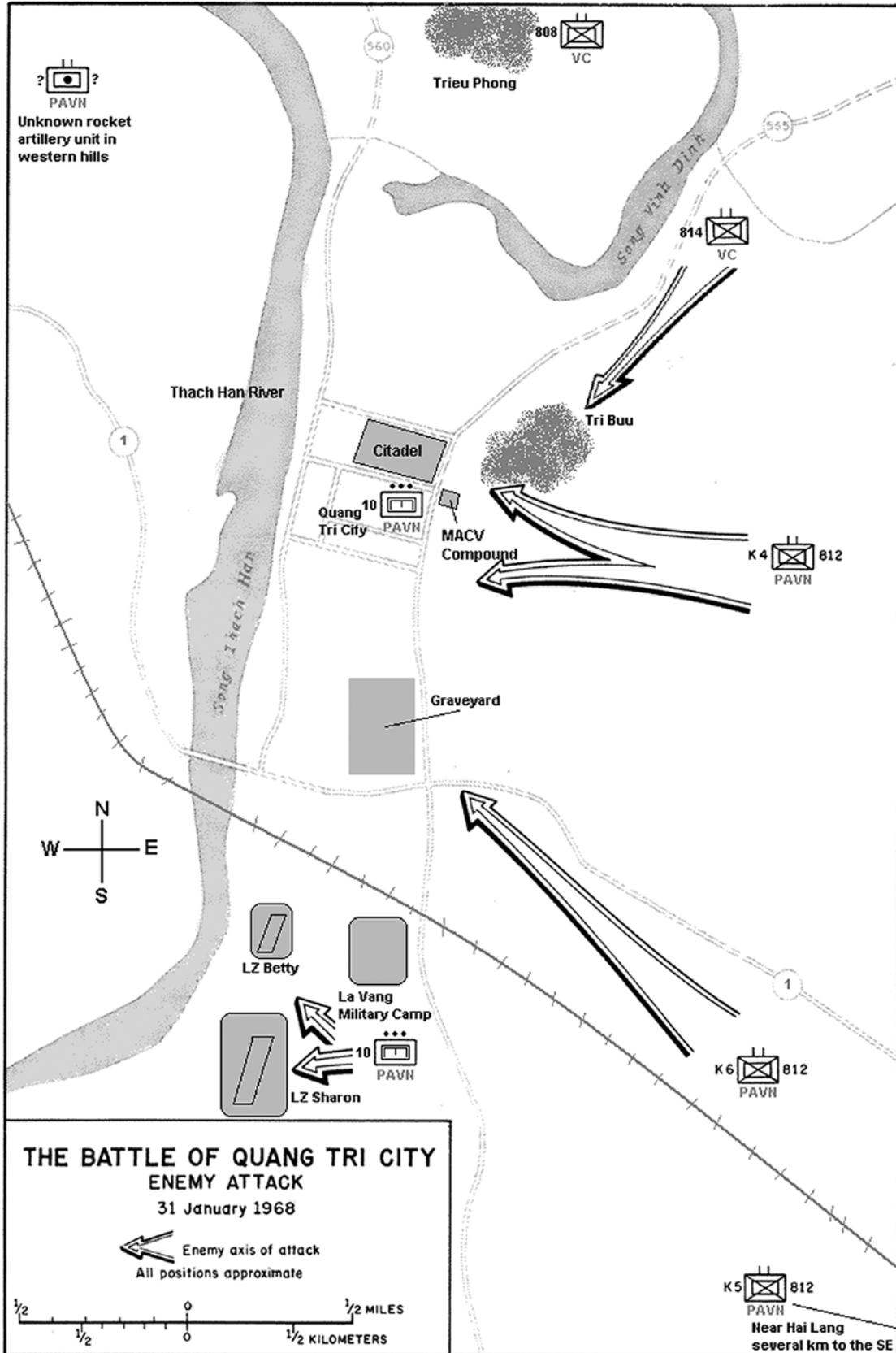
²¹ Combined Document Exploitation Center (CDEC) Bulletin, No. 13906, 2 Jul 68, p. 1, Historians files, CMH; Rpt, 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, 12 Feb 68, sub: An Analysis of Current Capabilities of the 812th Regiment, 324B Division, p. 1, box 12, Hist Background Files, 14th Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NARA.

²² Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 25.

²³ AAR, Opn JEB STUART I, 1st Cav Div, incl 5, p. 2.



MAP 2



MAP 3

dashed toward a handful of preselected targets that included the main police station, a fuel dump, and the Citadel. The Viet Cong saboteurs expected to strike quickly, then hang on long enough for the main infantry assault to begin, at which point the sappers could either slip away in the chaos or link up with the attacking Communist troops. As it happened, however, the *812th Regiment* and the *814th Battalion* were at least two hours behind schedule and still several kilometers from the city. Rain-swollen streams had slowed the units, and their officers were confused in the unfamiliar terrain.

The delay was fatal for the sappers. City policemen and Regional Force soldiers driving trucks equipped with machine guns prevented the commandos from destroying their targets, then killed or captured most of them before they could get away. The premature raid gave the city notice that a second and larger attack was imminent.²⁴

That warning was reinforced at 0345 when sappers attempted to penetrate Landing Zone JANE, ten kilometers to the south. As troops from the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry, fought off the enemy commandos, killing fourteen, allied units around Quang Tri City prepared for action.²⁵

At 0400, several hours behind schedule, the *814th Battalion* entered the village of Tri Buu on the eastern outskirts of the provincial capital. The South Vietnamese airborne company spending the night there did not detect the approach of the battalion until the last moment, partially because heavy fog blanketed the ground and at least some of the enemy soldiers wore South Vietnamese Army uniforms. Finally, the sentries noticed that the unfamiliar soldiers wore rubber-tire sandals instead of boots, a clue that revealed their true identity. The guards barked a warning and a close-range firefight ensued. Outnumbered and taking heavy casualties, the paratroopers fell back to Quang Tri City, fighting every step of the way.

The *814th Battalion* came hot on their heels. As the paratroopers withdrew into the city, the enemy unit headed for the eastern wall of the Citadel. It reached its target around 0420 but was confounded by the wide moat and the thick stone walls. Twenty minutes later, a pair of heavy weapons companies from the *812th Regiment* opened fire on the Citadel from a low ridge two kilometers east of the capital with 82-mm. mortars and 75-mm. recoilless rifles. Beneath the protective barrage, the *814th Battalion* began searching for a way to climb or get past the walls, but well-aimed defensive fire prevented this approach. Two kilometers to the north, across a tributary of the Thach Han, the *808th Battalion* joined the assault by attacking the Trieu Phong district headquarters and firing on the capital with machine guns and mortars. The assault against the district headquarters proved to be halfhearted, however, and the supporting fire against the city was mostly

²⁴ CIA Intel Info Cable, 2 Feb 68, sub: Situation Report on Quang Tri Province as of 0700 on 1 February, pp. 3–4, box 240 [1 of 2], NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; Son, *The Viet Cong Tet Offensive*, p. 299.

²⁵ AAR, Offensive Operations 22 Jan–10 Mar 68, 2d Bde, 101st Abn Div, 18 Mar 68, p. 4, box 10, Historians Background files, 14th Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NARA.

ineffective. For the moment, at least, the enemy assault on the northern part of the city appeared to be in trouble.²⁶

The enemy attack against the southern part of Quang Tri City, which also began two hours behind schedule, was at first more successful than the northern thrust. At 0420, just as the *814th Battalion* began its assault on the Citadel, the *K4 Battalion* of the *812th PAVN Regiment* skirted the lower edge of Tri Buu Village then swarmed into the mostly deserted streets of Quang Tri City. Once the *K4 Battalion* had assembled in the center of town, it turned north toward the Citadel with the intention of destroying the artillery battery inside, overrunning the sector headquarters, and seizing a prison that held a number of Communist soldiers. A combined force of South Vietnamese irregulars and National Policemen slowed the enemy's advance, however, forcing a fight for every block and street corner. Adding to the difficulties of the *K4 Battalion*, the general uprising it had been told to expect never materialized. Most residents hid in their homes instead of offering to help the North Vietnamese, thus depriving the enemy of guidance and material support.

Meanwhile, the heavy weapons company from the *K6 Battalion* opened fire on the La Vang Thong complex with mortars and recoilless rifles to keep its defenders ducking for cover instead of preparing a counterattack. The remainder of the *K6 Battalion* crossed Highway 1 and established a blocking position in a cemetery that lay between La Vang and the city. The South Vietnamese troops called for air-dropped flares to illuminate the enemy's position, but clouds and fog kept allied aircraft grounded the entire night.

As daybreak neared, the Communist assault lost momentum. The *K4 Battalion* had become bogged down in the heart of the city; the *814th Battalion* failed to gain entry to the Citadel and was thrown back time and again by a combination of Popular Forces soldiers, paratroopers, and regulars from the 1st Infantry Regiment. At 0630, the badly mauled *814th* withdrew to the Catholic village of Tri Buu on the outskirts of the city. As the terrified parishioners took shelter in their homes, North Vietnamese soldiers mounted heavy machine guns on the roof of the tallest church and began firing at various targets in the city, including the American advisory compound and an administrative building that supported the pacification program.²⁷

Shortly after dawn, the commander of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Regiment, Lt. Col. Nguyen Huu Hanh, ordered the forces under his command to recapture the city. Around 0730, the three battalions from the 1st Infantry Regiment that were guarding a series of pacified villages north of Quang Tri City began marching toward the capital. Along the way, they collided with the *808th Battalion*, which was acting as a blocking force near the village of Trieu Phong. The South Vietnamese troops had no choice but to stop and fight. South of the city, several mechanized pla-

²⁶ Son, *The Viet Cong Tet Offensive*, p. 299; AAR, Battle of Quang Tri, 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, 1 Apr 68, p. 3, incl to ORLL, 1 Nov 67-31 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div.

²⁷ Son, *The Viet Cong Tet Offensive*, p. 300.

toons of M113 armored personnel carriers transporting infantry rolled out of the La Vang complex at 0600 with orders to reach the capital. They proceeded slowly, staying to the east of Highway 1 to avoid an ambush, and at first met only limited resistance.

That situation changed at 0900 when the mechanized column entered the large cemetery on the southern outskirts of the capital. Three companies from the *K6 Battalion* that had been lying in wait opened fire on the South Vietnamese troops as they rolled up Highway 1. The North Vietnamese soldiers had taken the time to dig fighting holes next to the protective bulk of tombstones, which gave them both excellent cover and concealment. The South Vietnamese relief column came to a halt, knowing that it would take crippling losses if it attempted to run the enemy gauntlet. Enemy rocket-propelled grenades shot out from the tombstones at regular intervals while the gunners on the armored personnel carriers used their .50-caliber machine guns to blast away at the North Vietnamese soldiers and the monuments that shielded them. Infantry on both sides maneuvered for position in the cemetery, crawling or sprinting from one grave marker to the next in an effort to gain an advantage over their opponents. The commander of the 1st Infantry Regiment, Colonel Hanh, fed more troops into the firefight, but the *K6 Battalion* rebuffed each attempt by the government troops to outflank its position. When Colonel Hanh assessed the situation at midday, it appeared unlikely that his mechanized troopers south of the city or his three infantry battalions to the north would reach the embattled capital any time soon.²⁸

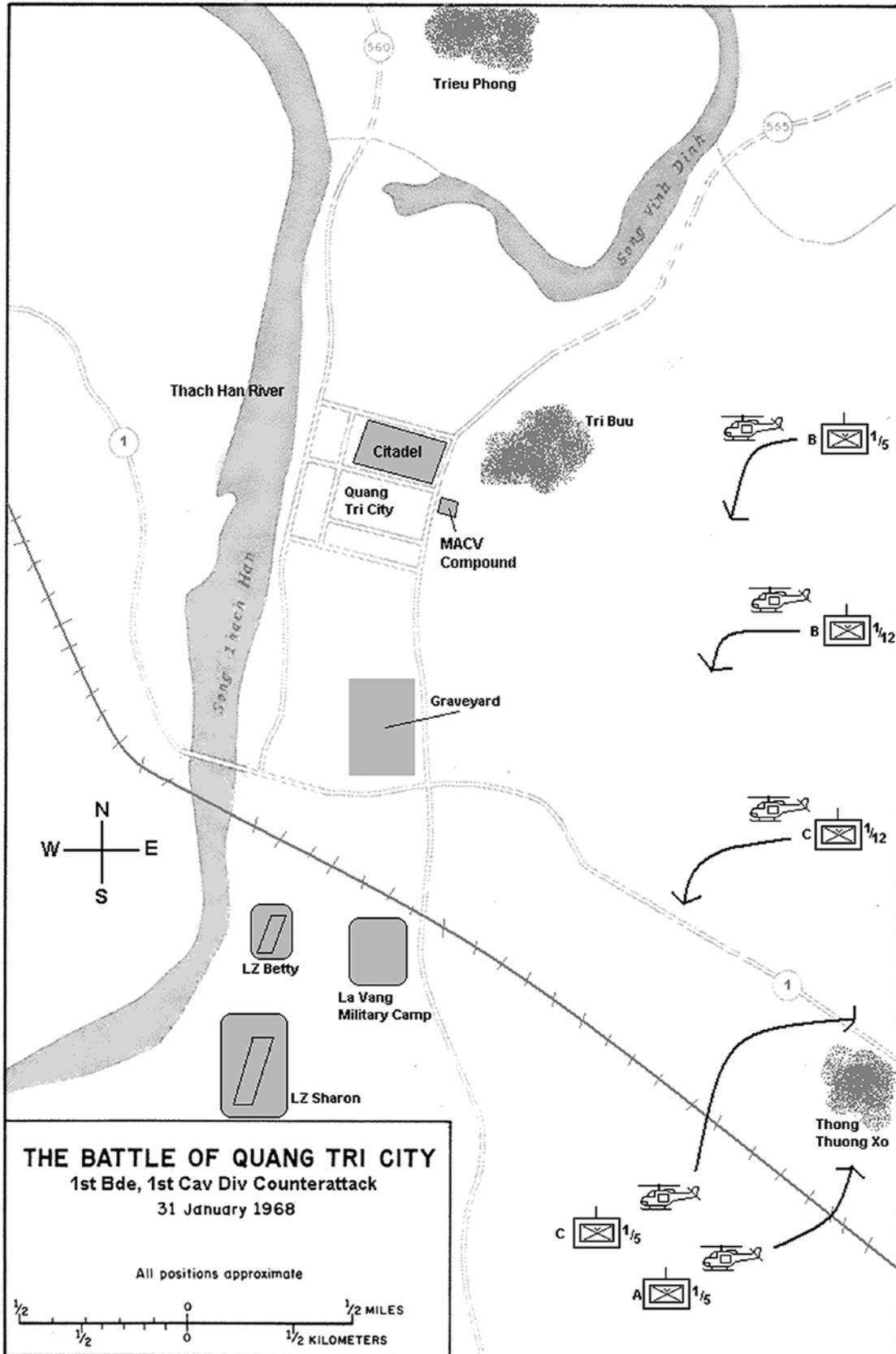
ENTER THE CAVALRY

Around noon on 31 January, the province adviser, Mr. Brewer, met with the commander of the 1st Cavalry Division's 1st Brigade, Colonel Rattan, and the senior adviser to the 1st Infantry Regiment, Lt. Col. George M. Font, at Rattan's headquarters to discuss the situation in Quang Tri City. The province adviser painted a grim picture. The *K4 Battalion* controlled much of the city, and the *K6 Battalion* was entrenched in a ring around the southern half of the capital. In Brewer's opinion, the province chief, Colonel Am, had been ineffective throughout the crisis. Worse still, no South Vietnamese reinforcements were likely to reach the city for several days because of widespread attacks taking place elsewhere in I Corps.²⁹

After the briefing, Colonel Rattan asked permission from the division commander, General Tolson, to use part of the 1st Brigade to relieve the city. With the early-morning fog and clouds now finally receding enough to permit his helicopters to fly, Rattan proposed inserting several infantry companies behind the Communists on the eastern outskirts of the capital. (*See Map 4.*) Caught between the cavalymen and the South Vietnamese defenders in the city and with their

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ CIA Intel Info Cable, sub: This Is a Situation Report in Quang Tri Province as of 0400 Hours on 3 February, 3 Feb 68, p. 7, box 240 [1 of 2], NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL.



MAP 4

supply lines cut, the enemy would have little choice but to withdraw. The colonel spoke quickly and confidently, having developed his plan with Mr. Brewer's help several days earlier after the senior province adviser had warned that an attack was coming on 31 January. Now, with the attack unfolding just as Brewer had forecast, Rattan was ready to go.

With Tolson's approval, Colonel Rattan immediately issued orders to his four battalions. The 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, was to remain in the northern part of Base Area 101 to protect several recently established firebases. The 1st Battalion, 502d Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, would continue defending Landing Zones BETTY and SHARON, which had received sporadic mortar and rocket fire since the attack began. Elements of the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, and the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, would carry out the aerial envelopment that Rattan had described to Tolson. Supporting the effort would be seven U.S. artillery batteries firing from nearby 1st Brigade landing zones, as well as gunships and helicopters from the division's 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry.³⁰

At approximately 1600, Companies B and C from the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, landed by helicopter at separate insertion points approximately two kilometers east of the capital as gunships flew low and fast over the area searching for North Vietnamese troops. As Rattan had planned, his cavalrymen touched down in the enemy's rear support area, just behind a line of positions held by what turned out to be the heavy weapons company from the *K4 Battalion*. The sudden appearance of the two American rifle companies surprised the North Vietnamese soldiers, but they fought back resolutely with machine guns, mortars, and recoilless rifles. According to 1st Lt. William A. Paris, the executive officer and then-acting commander of Company B, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, the enemy attacked his unit ferociously and would have overrun part of it had not a pair of U.S. fighter-bombers delivered a timely and well-aimed strike. Despite the enemy's willingness to fight, however, not all of the North Vietnamese troops reacted effectively. From either inexperience or panic, some of the enemy mortar crews forgot to extract the shipping plugs from their 82-mm. rounds before firing them. As a result, many of the shells failed to explode on impact. As a whole, however, the North Vietnamese troops fought with discipline and kept most of their heavy weapons out of American hands. The enemy broke contact a few hours before midnight, leaving behind sixty-three dead.³¹

Shortly after the two companies from the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, engaged the rear elements of the *K4 Battalion*, Companies A and C from the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, descended by helicopter on the village of Thong Thuong Xo, about four kilometers southeast of Quang Tri City. Enemy troops in the area shot down a scout helicopter as it buzzed overhead, but prowling gunships quickly suppressed the ground fire and made the landing possible. According to the commander of Company C, Capt. Daniel C. Terry, he and his fellow soldiers knew very little about

³⁰ AAR, Battle of Quang Tri, 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, p. 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5; Interv, author with William A. Paris, 11 Apr 05, Historians files, CMH.

the tactical situation when they stepped off their aircraft. His unit had been on a mission near the Laotian border when it had received orders to fly back to Quang Tri City immediately and engage an enemy force that was besieging the capital. Despite the minimal time he had been given to prepare for the assault, Terry was confident in his company's fighting ability and hoped that the speed with which Rattan's far-flung brigade joined the battle would come as a rude shock to an enemy that had never seen the 1st Cavalry Division in action.³²

Company A established a blocking position near Highway 1 while Company C searched the area north of the village. Company C soon made contact with dug-in enemy soldiers, and by 1840, the entire company was engaged with what turned out to be the heavy weapons company from the *K6 Battalion*. The sudden appearance of an American unit to their rear spread uncertainty among the North Vietnamese, many of whom abandoned their fighting positions, along with several hundred 82-mm. mortar rounds. Once they had been flushed into the open, enemy soldiers fell by the dozens to allied artillery and gunships. The North Vietnamese soldiers apparently had little experience fighting helicopters; most chose to feign death as an aircraft approached instead of opening fire, making them easy targets for the American pilots. The heavy weapons company from the *K6 Battalion* eventually broke contact but not before suffering crippling losses.³³

As the troops from the 1st Brigade landed in the enemy's support zone, South Vietnamese troops from the 1st Infantry Regiment and the 9th Airborne Battalion organized a series of counterattacks along the eastern and southern edges of the capital. After U.S. Air Force fighter-bombers pummeled the *814th Battalion* that was sheltering in Tri Buu on the eastern edge of the city, a battalion from the 1st Infantry Regiment assaulted the village at 1330. Mercifully, only a few civilians were left in Tri Buu. Earlier that day, the Communists had herded all the women, children, and old men into a group and then told them to organize a demonstration in the city to protest the allied bombing of Tri Buu. Predictably, the villagers had fled to whatever safety they could find once they left the village. As for the able-bodied men, civil servants, and captured soldiers in Tri Buu, the Communists chained them to objects near their heavy weapons in the vain hope of discouraging allied air strikes. Unable to seek shelter, many were killed in the subsequent fighting. Heavy pressure from the South Vietnamese soldiers forced the *814th Battalion* to abandon the village later that night. The retreating unit left behind at least one hundred dead. More than 80 percent of the village, including its largest church, which had been at the center of the fighting, lay in ruins.³⁴

South of the city, in midafternoon, the commander of the 1st Infantry Regiment, Colonel Hanh, sent a full infantry battalion to reinforce the mechanized column fighting the *K6 Battalion* in

³² Interv, author with Daniel C. Terry, 23 Mar 05, Historians files, CMH.

³³ Rpt, Battle of Quang Tri, 14th Mil Hist Det, pp. 5–6; Rpt, 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, sub: An Analysis of Current Capabilities of the 812th Regiment, 324B Division, p. 4.

³⁴ Son, *The Viet Cong Tet Offensive*, p. 300.

the cemetery. The North Vietnamese unit finally broke under this pressure and retreated southeast shortly before dusk, leaving behind 153 bodies and eleven crew-served weapons.³⁵

As night approached, the enemy began withdrawing from Quang Tri City. The *K4 Battalion* split up into platoon- and squad-size groups in an effort to better evade allied ground patrols and newly arrived AC-47 “Spooky” gunships—converted World War II-era transport aircraft armed with three side-firing 7.62-mm. miniguns, each capable of pouring out six thousand rounds a minute. Some North Vietnamese shed their uniforms and tried to pose as refugees while others hid among civilian groups who were fleeing the destruction in the city. In one case, a platoon leader from Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, 1st Lt. Steven Velcrum, recalled seeing three people run out of a church, two dressed as nuns and one as a priest, obviously intent on fleeing the battle that raged around them. An instant later, a fellow soldier gunned them down. Lieutenant Velcrum’s shock and outrage quickly disappeared when he realized that all three of those fleeing were North Vietnamese soldiers. Allied troops killed or captured several dozen enemy troops who were attempting to slip away from the city, but most escaped.³⁶

As of noon on 1 February, few if any North Vietnamese troops remained in Quang Tri City who were not either prisoners of war or too badly wounded to flee. The *K4* and *K6 Battalions* were dispersed in small groups throughout the countryside south and east of the capital, doing their best to avoid contact but not always succeeding. In one of the more significant actions that day, a company from the 1st Battalion, 502d Infantry, supported by helicopter gunships, engaged a large enemy force just south of the La Vang complex near a cathedral on Highway 1. In the resulting four-hour battle, the paratroopers killed seventy-six North Vietnamese and captured many weapons, including two .51-caliber machine guns. In a second major firefight that afternoon, South Vietnamese paratroopers and cavalrymen wiped out a regimental command post just east of the La Vang complex. The regimental commander was killed and his chief of staff was captured, as was an array of cryptographic equipment and codes. According to Mr. Brewer, the last entry in the Communists’ logbook read: “Help. Being attacked by American Airborne. Give idea.”³⁷

Over the next ten days, the allies progressively widened their search arc around Quang Tri City, looking for the retreating *812th Regiment* and the *814th Battalion*. They mostly encountered small groups of enemy soldiers who fled on sight; but more than once, the allies ran into North Vietnamese units that chose to stand and fight. On 2 February, two companies from the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, found at least a company of enemy troops six kilometers east of the city and, with the help of artillery, killed at least eighty-three in the ensuing firefight.³⁸ On 4 February,

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Interv, author with Steven Velcrum, 26 Apr 05, Historians files, CMH.

³⁷ CIA Intel Info Cable, sub: This Is a Situation Report in Quang Tri Province as of 0400 Hours on 3 February, p. 4; Ltr, Brewer to Hammel, 14 Nov 86, p. 3.

³⁸ Rpt, 1st Bn, 12th Cav, 1st Cav Div, sub: Report of the 1st Bn, 12th Cav’s Participation in the Battle of Quang Tri City, [1968], p. 2, box 12, Hist Background Files, 14th Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NARA.

the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry, discovered the *K5 Battalion* and elements of the *10th Sapper Battalion* dug in near the village of Hai Lang, eight kilometers southeast of Quang Tri City. The *K5 Battalion*, designated as the reserve force for the attack on the provincial capital, had remained near Hai Lang throughout the battle and done little more than harass the local district headquarters with ground probes and mortar fire. In the ensuing firefight, the U.S. paratroopers killed at least 108 of the enemy with the help of artillery and helicopters at a cost of 5 dead and 42 wounded.

Later that night, soldiers from the *K5 Battalion* and local guerrillas once again attacked the district headquarters in Hai Lang Village, their strongest effort yet, but Popular Forces soldiers drove them off with the help of artillery. The North Vietnamese unit withdrew east toward the coast the following morning. Also, on 5 February, two battalions of the 1st Infantry Regiment and a South Vietnamese cavalry troop fought a day-long battle with the *808th Battalion* near the village of Trieu Phong, several kilometers north of the capital. By their estimates, the South Vietnamese killed as many as two hundred enemy soldiers and forced the battalion to withdraw to the north, where it broke up into small groups that could better hide from allied patrols.³⁹

By the end of the first week of February, the danger to Quang Tri City had apparently passed for the moment. Apart from occasional mortar or rocket attacks against the 1st Brigade landing zones, the enemy seemed unable or unwilling to renew the offensive against the provincial capital. Even so, security around Quang Tri City was weak through the end of February. The *812th Regiment* remained at large somewhere southeast of the city while elements of the *808th* and *814th Battalions* continued to menace the government-controlled settlements north and northeast of the capital. Most of the government forces, both regular troops and paramilitary units, remained near the various district headquarters and the capital and could not provide rural security. On a more encouraging note, the Regional and Popular Forces units had taken very few losses during the offensive, and most of the villages and farming projects had escaped serious damage. The pacification program was set to resume quickly once the South Vietnamese regular and territorial units defending the cities returned to the countryside.⁴⁰

Although the defenders of Quang Tri City had been hard-pressed in the initial hours of battle, they had held out long enough for Colonel Rattan's 1st Brigade to fall upon the rear of the *K4* and *K6 Battalions* and fatally disrupt the enemy's assault. From all appearances, the North Vietnamese had not counted on the 1st Brigade adjusting to events so rapidly, nor had their troops been prepared to deal with the swarms of armed helicopters that constantly prowled overhead. Under intense pressure from the ground and the air, the support units of the *K4* and *K6 Battalions* eventually broke and fled, leaving the frontline units no choice but to retreat from the capital. Between 31

³⁹ Periodic Intel Rpt no. 2-68, 1-29 Feb 68, 1st Cav Div, p. 9, Historians files, CMH; Rpt, 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, sub: An Analysis of Current Capabilities of the 812th Regiment, 324B Division, pp. 2-3.

⁴⁰ Trip Rpt, MACCORDS-RE, 2 Mar 68, I Corps Tactical Zone #II, pp. 1, 3, 5, Historians files, CMH.

January and 6 February, the allies killed an estimated 914 Communists and captured another 86 in and around Quang Tri City.⁴¹ In light of those losses, the possibility that the enemy would be ready to attack the city again in the near future seemed unlikely.

The rapid defeat of the regiment-size enemy force that assaulted Quang Tri City proved to be one of the most decisive victories the allies secured during the Tet offensive. Mopping-up operations aside, the main phase of combat was over less than twenty-four hours after it had begun. The *812th Regiment* was so badly mauled that it avoided contact for the next several weeks, which came as a relief to the allies, who already had their hands full elsewhere in northern I Corps. The Communists' swift defeat preserved an important symbol of South Vietnamese national pride and permitted the allies to devote more resources to other battles in the region, especially to the titanic struggle for Hue.

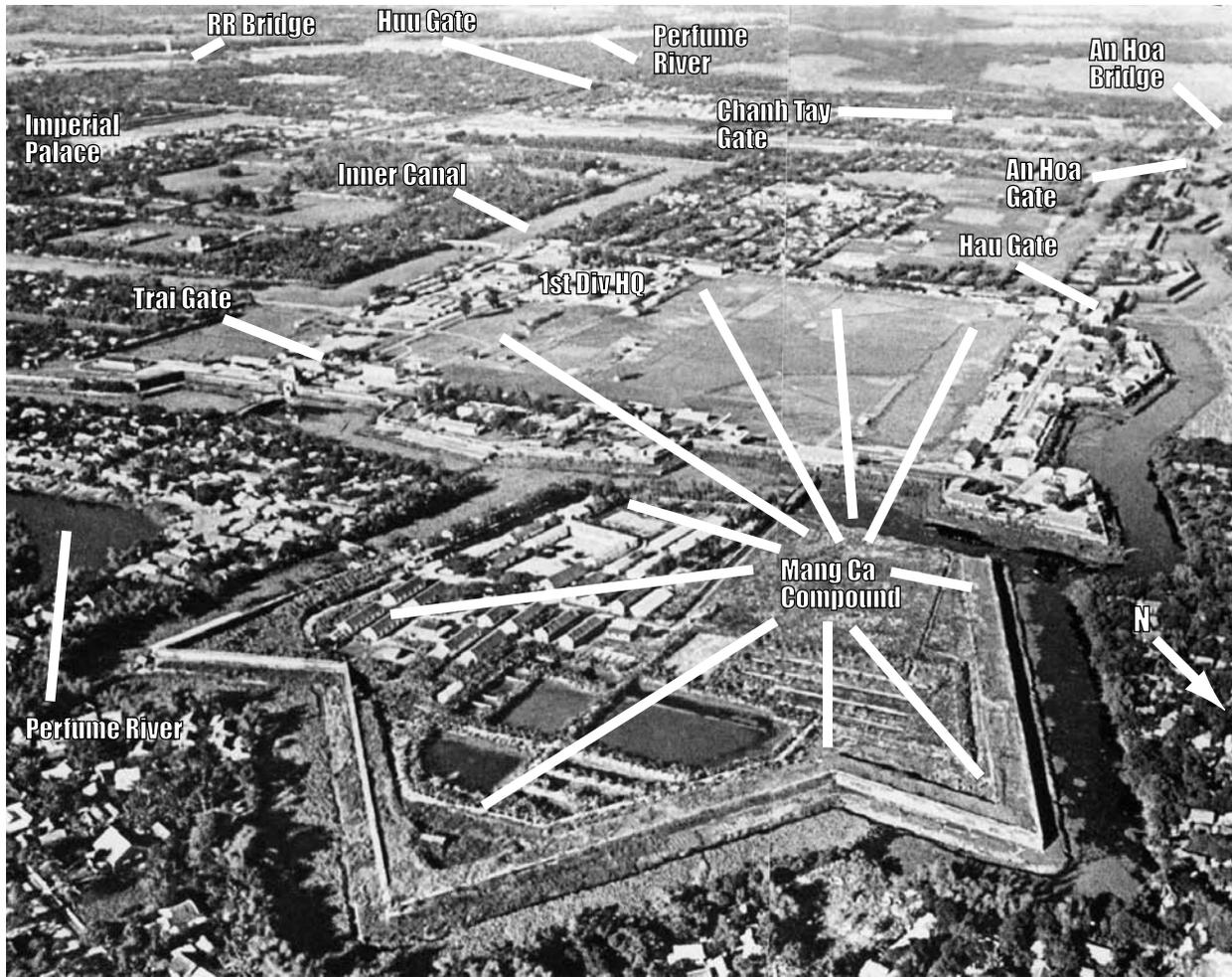
TARGET: HUE

The former imperial capital of Vietnam had so far escaped the worst ravages of war. From time to time, the enemy mortared the city, and saboteurs from the *Hue City Sapper Unit* occasionally committed acts of terrorism, but a large enemy force had never appeared at the gates of Hue. Nonetheless, considering the city's cultural and intellectual importance to the Vietnamese people—as well as its political status as the capital of Thua Thien Province—it was only a matter of time before the Communists tried to make it their prize.

Befitting the royal prerogative of an imperial city, the residents of Hue enjoyed a tradition of civic independence that dated back several hundred years. The Buddhist monks who dominated the religious and political life of Hue viewed the struggle between North and South with aloof disdain. Few felt any attachment to the government in Saigon. Indeed, the monks were fundamentally at odds with President Thieu; they demanded an immediate end to the war and a program of national reconciliation that would give the Communists a prominent role in a new coalition government. Their political views sometimes went beyond mere words. In the spring of 1966, the monks had engineered a popular revolt in Hue and other cities to protest the succession of generals who had ruled since 1963 and to demand free national elections and a negotiated end to the war. South Vietnamese troops quickly crushed the uprisings in other cities, prompting the Buddhist leaders to end the protest movement before Hue was affected. The city had been stable since that time, with few indications that politics or even the war would disturb the calm.⁴²

⁴¹ Rpt, Battle of Quang Tri, 14th Mil Hist Det, pp. 5, 7.

⁴² Unless otherwise noted, the following section is based on the following documents: AAR, NVA/VC Tet Offensive: Hue, Adv Team 3, 1st Inf Div, 30 Mar 68, box 30, AARs, Asst CofS, J-3, MACV; AAR, Enemy's Tet Offensive, III MAF, 3 Aug 68, box 30, AARs, Asst CofS, J-3, MACV; Historical Study 2-68, "Operation Hue City," 31st Mil Hist Det, Aug 68, box 11, AARs, Asst CofS, J-3, MACV; AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div; AAR, The Battle of Hue, 45th Mil Hist Det, 19 Mar 68, box 14, Historians Background files, 45th Mil Hist Det, USARV, all in RG 472, NARA. See also "The Rebirth of Hue," Vietnam Feature Service TCB-037, pp. 4-5, Historians files, CMH.



HUE CITADEL, LOOKING SOUTHWEST

According to Buddhist legend, Hue had sprung to life as a lotus flower blossoming from a puddle of mud. In more prosaic terms, the city sat on a bend of the Perfume (Hoang) River seven kilometers southwest of the South China Sea and was divided by the river into two sections. On the north bank stood the Citadel, a six-square-kilometer fortress constructed in the first two decades of the nineteenth century at the behest of the royal family. Modeled after the Forbidden City in Beijing, the Vauban-style fortress was built in the shape of a diamond, with its four corners pointing to the cardinal directions of the compass. Stone walls up to eight meters high and several meters thick encircled the city, as did a wide moat filled with water. The Perfume River ran a parallel course a short distance from the southeastern wall, offering extra protection from that quarter. Ten gates pierced the massive city walls. Four of the portals, made of elaborately carved stone, were on the southeastern side, and the remaining walls had two gates apiece. A shallow canal cut through the heart of the Citadel, winding a crooked course from the middle of the southwestern wall to the middle of the northeastern wall. A pair of culverts connected the interior city canal with the canals outside. In more peaceful times, boats traveled from the Perfume River into the city, but now, barbed wire blocked both culverts. The

southeastern section of the city contained the Imperial Palace, a walled and moat-ringed compound covering nearly a square kilometer that had been home to the royal family between 1802 and 1945.

South of the Perfume River lay the newer section of the city, a bustling residential and business community that contained numerous public buildings, including the prestigious Hue University, the province headquarters and its associated jail, the main hospital, and the treasury. Southern Hue, half the size of the Citadel, was also known as the Triangle; this irregular shape was bounded on the south by the Phu Cam Canal, on the east by a stream known as the Phat Lac, and on the north-west by the Perfume River.⁴³ A pair of bridges linked the modern city to the Citadel. The Nguyen Hoang Bridge, built to transport vehicles and pedestrians using Highway 1, spanned the Perfume River near the eastern corner of the Citadel. Fifteen hundred meters to its southwest was the Bach Ho Railroad Bridge. The other bridge of military importance in southern Hue was the An Cuu Bridge, a modest arch on Highway 1 that conveyed traffic across the Phu Cam Canal.

Despite Hue's size and importance, the city had relatively few defenders within its limits. On the eve of Tet, the greater metropolitan area contained fewer than a thousand South Vietnamese troops on active duty. Some of the garrison was on leave to celebrate Tet, either at their homes in the city or elsewhere in neighboring districts. The headquarters of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division, commanded by General Truong, made its home in the Mang Ca compound, a minifortress that occupied the northern corner of the Citadel. Apart from the headquarters staff and a handful of support units, the only combat units in the Citadel were the division's 36-man Reconnaissance Platoon and its reaction force, the elite Hac Bao (Black Panther) Company. Three kilometers southwest of the Citadel, on the north bank of the Perfume River, was the Van Thanh divisional training center and a two-gun detachment of 105-mm. howitzers.⁴⁴ Two kilometers south of the Perfume River and just west of Highway 1 was the Tam Thai military camp, headquarters of the South Vietnamese 7th Cavalry and home to a troop of M41 light tanks. About two kilometers to its southwest was an engineer battalion camp. Inside the Triangle was a military training facility for Montagnard hill tribesmen, the Le Loi transportation camp, and an ordnance depot, all of which were lightly guarded. Finally, a handful of Regional Forces companies and Popular Forces platoons were scattered throughout the villages and hamlets that surrounded the city.

The American presence in the city was minimal, with only about two hundred troops on assignment there at any given time. Approximately one hundred U.S. Army advisers and administrative personnel, as well as a few Marine guards, were headquartered in a lightly defended compound a block and a half south of the Perfume River on the east side of Highway 1, just across from the university. A rotating group of staff personnel from the compound was stationed at General

⁴³ "The Rebirth of Hue," Vietnam Feature Service TCB-037, p. 7. In the language of the Cham people who lived in that region of central Vietnam, Hue meant "lily."

⁴⁴ AAR, NVA/VC Tet Offensive: Hue, Adv Team 3, p. 9.

Truong's headquarters day and night. Other advisers were in the countryside accompanying South Vietnamese units. A small group of Army technicians manned a radar station a few hundred meters to the east of the advisory compound. Several dozen Army technical specialists and military intelligence personnel were billeted in the Huong Giang Hotel several blocks to the west. Finally, a small detachment of U.S. Navy personnel was stationed at a boat ramp just north of the advisory compound.

General Truong had a sense of unease as the Tet holiday began on 29 January. Although his intelligence staff did not think the enemy had the capability or the intention of launching a major attack against Hue, the general was painfully aware of the city's vulnerability. His division was tough and battle tested but stretched uncomfortably thin throughout I Corps. Two battalions of the 3d Infantry Regiment were west of Hue, one on a routine sweep mission and the other undergoing training at the Van Thanh center, while the remaining two battalions of the regiment were searching for the enemy near the coast southeast of Hue. The 1st Regiment was stationed near Quang Tri City fifty kilometers to the northwest, and the 2d Regiment was another twelve kilometers farther up Highway 1 near Dong Ha.⁴⁵ Under corps command but available to Truong upon his request were two battalions of the South Vietnamese 1st Airborne Task Force and a troop of armored personnel carriers from the South Vietnamese 7th Armored Cavalry at a former French outpost on Highway 1 named PK-17, seventeen kilometers northwest of Hue.

If an emergency arose, Truong could ask for help from the American units to the north and south of Hue. The Marine combat base at Phu Bai, eleven kilometers to the south on Highway 1, included Task Force X-RAY, a brigade-size component of the 1st Marine Division built around the 1st and 5th Marines. The 1st and 3d Brigades, 1st Cavalry Division, and the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, operated out of a series of firebases and landing zones between Phu Bai and Quang Tri City. The nearest U.S. Army unit to Hue was the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, which began operating from Camp Evans, twenty-seven kilometers northwest of Hue, on 26 January.

Both the Marine and the airmobile units operating near Hue were in a state of flux as the Tet holiday began. The 1st Cavalry Division was in the midst of relocating from Binh Dinh Province in II Corps to Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces in I Corps. By the last week of January, most of its combat units had arrived, but many of the division's logistical components were still in transit. When the headquarters of the 3d Brigade arrived at Camp Evans, which was little more than a muddy patch of ground formerly occupied by elements of the 3d Marine Division, it discovered that the site held no stocks of ammunition or fuel. Supplies would remain tight for the next week as the overworked helicopters of the 1st Cavalry Division tried to build up a reserve of materiel,

⁴⁵ George W. Smith, *The Siege at Hue* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), pp. 13-14.

forcing the soldiers of the 3d Brigade to rely mostly on the supplies they carried with them on their trucks and on their backs.⁴⁶

As the 1st Cavalry Division moved into the area, the 3d Marine Division was in the process of shifting north from Quang Nam and Thua Thien Provinces to Quang Tri Province. At the same time, the 1st Marine Division was redistributing its forces in the corridor between Phu Bai and Da Nang. The overall redeployment of the Marine forces, known as Operation CHECKERS, was about three-quarters completed when the Tet holiday began. Task Force X-RAY, the Marine force closest to Hue and, thus, the one mostly likely to come to its defense, was still in the process of establishing lines of communication and orienting its officers and men to their new environment.⁴⁷ If the city came under attack, the handful of South Vietnamese defenders inside would be on their own during the critical first hours of battle.

General Truong knew that at least two North Vietnamese regiments, two sapper battalions, and an assortment of Viet Cong local forces were based in Thua Thien Province. The headquarters of the *6th PAVN Regiment* and two of its battalions were thought to be in Base Area 114, thirty kilometers southwest of Hue, while the third battalion from the regiment was approximately thirty-five kilometers northwest of the city, operating on the coastal flats. The *Hue City Sapper Unit* and the *12th Sapper Battalion* also made their homes in Base Area 114. Several local force companies operated in the districts surrounding Hue. The *804th Battalion* of the newly created *4th PAVN Regiment* was reported to be near Phu Loc, thirty kilometers southeast of the city. A second unit from the regiment, the *810th Battalion*, and several local force companies roamed the coastal plain north and east of Hue.

Unknown to Truong and allied intelligence, the enemy had recently shifted several more regiments and support units from Quang Tri Province to the vicinity of Hue. Among the new arrivals was the *7th Battalion* of the *29th Regiment, 325C PAVN Division*, a unit that until recently had been laying siege to Khe Sanh. Also new to Thua Thien Province was the *5th PAVN Regiment*, a three-battalion unit that normally operated from Base Area 101 near Quang Tri City. Other reinforcements included an artillery battalion armed with 122-mm. rockets, two sapper battalions, two 82-mm. mortar companies, two 75-mm. recoilless rifle companies, two 12.7-mm. heavy machine gun companies, and a special unit equipped with fifty RPG7 (also known as B41) rocket-propelled grenade launchers that had greater penetrating power than the older and more common RPG2 (B40) weapon. By the eve of Tet, the enemy had quietly assembled a strike force near Hue equivalent to at least fourteen battalions.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Charles A. Krohn, *The Lost Battalion: Controversy and Casualties in the Battle of Hue* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993), p. 52.

⁴⁷ AAR, Tet Offensive, 1st Mar Div, 25 May 68, p. 14, Historians files, CMH.

⁴⁸ Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, pp. 21–22.

The Communists created a special logistical and administrative zone known as the *Hue City Front* to manage the upcoming battle. The new combat headquarters, staffed by high-ranking officials from the *Tri-Thien-Hue Front*, local party members, and military officers from the units involved in the attack, had authority over the city and the three districts that surrounded it. The enemy also created a rear services group that would keep supplies moving into the battle area from the mountains, with much of the labor coming from civilians who would be impressed for duty once the offensive began.⁴⁹

The enemy spent much of December 1967 and January 1968 preparing the battlefield. Communist agents used patient and discrete observation, as well as human informants, to obtain up-to-date tactical intelligence about the military facilities in Hue. From those reports, the Communists concluded that a quick capture of the city was possible because Hue was “nearly unprotected” and the soldiers defending it “had a weak morale and a poor combat capability.”⁵⁰ Meanwhile, guerrillas made regular night excursions through the villages around Hue to make the local dogs bark, thus desensitizing the inhabitants to their canine alarms. Enemy scouts drew detailed maps of the routes the attacking units were to take and spent many hours observing the routines of South Vietnamese soldiers. North Vietnamese logisticians stockpiled supplies in mountain camps to the west and south of Hue, and the enemy established aid stations and hospitals staffed by both military and civilian personnel.

To draw allied attention away from these preparations, Communist troops in the Phu Loc region southwest of Hue initiated a series of small diversionary attacks that began on 7 January and lasted for twenty days. As the month drew to a close, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong political officers briefed the troops attached to the *Hue City Front* on the mission they were about to perform. They exhorted the men to do their utmost, explaining that such opportunities came only once in a thousand years. If all went as planned, they predicted that the war would be over in the near future. The political officers claimed that the allied soldiers defending the city were dispirited and that most of the inhabitants of Hue, aside from a few thousand reactionaries with close ties to the government, would welcome the Communist forces as liberators. Buoyed by these pronouncements, some of the North Vietnamese soldiers resolved to wear their best uniforms on the day of the attack so that they would be ready to march through the city streets to a chorus of cheering crowds once the city had fallen.⁵¹

The *Hue City Front* used the forces at its disposal to organize a northern wing and a southern wing to attack Hue from several directions simultaneously. The enemy’s primary objective was to capture the Citadel, especially the Mang Ca compound in its northern corner. The southern

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 13, 23.

⁵⁰ DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027541968, sub: After Action Report, 16 Sep 68, pp. 4, 6.

⁵¹ Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, pp. i, 19, 22–23, 28.

wing began moving into position on 28 January, forty-eight hours earlier than the northern wing, because it had a longer distance to march and more difficult terrain to cross. The *804th Battalion, 4th Regiment*, began marching from Phu Loc to a mountain camp twenty kilometers south of Hue where the majority of the southern wing was gathered. Also on 28 January, the *810th Battalion, 4th Regiment*, and the *2d Sapper Battalion* began marching toward the city from locations along the coast east of Hue.

On the afternoon of 29 January, the main body of the southern wing, the *804th Battalion*, the *1st Sapper Battalion*, the *815th* and *818th Battalions* of the *5th Regiment*, the southern wing command group, and various supporting units descended from their mountain staging area and headed for the Ta Trach River, which stood between the attacking force and Hue. The Communist troops intended to use a ferry station ten kilometers south of the city to cross the river. The lead elements of the southern wing, the *1st Sapper Battalion* and part of the *804th Battalion*, arrived two hours ahead of schedule, which meant that they reached the crossing well before the sun had set. An allied aircraft spotted the enemy troops and reported their position. Artillery shells began raining down near the ferry landing and fighter-bombers soon joined the attack, which killed at least twelve Communists and scattered the rest. The allied bombardment lasted intermittently from 1730 until 0330 the next day, forcing the entire southern wing to postpone the ferry crossing.⁵² Curiously, the allies did not send ground forces to investigate the incident, and no evidence exists that it generated much concern in any of the allied headquarters. The enemy crossed the river without incident on the evening of 30 January, but the delay meant that only the *1st* and *2d Sapper Battalions* and an 82-mm. mortar company would be in their forward positions when the offensive began at 0330.⁵³

Another problem emerged in the early morning hours of 30 January, when Communist forces in more than a dozen cities in southern I Corps and II Corps launched their Tet attacks prematurely. These strikes gave the allies warning that more attacks were probably soon to come. At 0945 on 30 January, President Thieu canceled the Tet cease-fire everywhere in South Vietnam and ordered all troops on leave to rejoin their units. As other commanders discovered for themselves, General Truong had trouble getting word to those of his troops who were celebrating Tet at home with their families and knew that several days would pass before all reported for duty. He ordered his headquarters staff, most of whom lived in southern Hue, to remain at the Mang Ca compound that night. From the limited resources on hand, General Truong sent three platoons from the Hac Bao Company to guard the provincial headquarters, the power station, and the prison on the south bank of the Perfume River. He split up two more platoons to reinforce security at the various gates

⁵² DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027656768, 22 Jul 68, sub: After Action Report, pp. 2-3, box 45, DoD Intel Info Reports, MACV J-2, RG 472, NARA.

⁵³ Ibid.

leading into the Citadel. His remaining platoon, made up of the most experienced soldiers, took up position at the centrally located Tay Loc Airfield to act as a rapid-reaction force. For some reason, news of the canceled cease-fire never reached the MACV advisory compound. Although the senior adviser, Col. George O. Adkisson, had decided on his own to post a few extra guards and only days earlier had run a practice drill simulating a sapper attack, he had received no orders that evening to use special measures to protect the compound.⁵⁴

Even as General Truong's headquarters began to buzz with activity on the morning of 30 January as the reports of enemy attacks elsewhere in the country rolled in, dozens of men from the *Hue City Sapper Unit* entered Hue masquerading as peasants and, in some cases, dressed as women. If the policemen monitoring the holiday crowds noticed anything unusual, they apparently took no action. Later that evening, the sappers retrieved the weapons and uniforms they had smuggled into the city and waited at their assigned positions for the signal to attack. Viet Cong agents throughout Hue, having spent weeks secretly preparing bunkers, food supplies, and weapons caches for the North Vietnamese units coming into the city, strained their ears for the sound of mortars and rockets that would announce the start of the offensive.⁵⁵

Although the infiltrating sappers did not trigger a public alarm, at least one American, an Army officer with the 149th Military Intelligence Group, Maj. Robert B. Annenberg, came to feel that something was amiss when he arrived in the city on the afternoon of 30 January. A specialist in human agent intelligence who had recently spent several months living in Hue, Annenberg had an innate feel for the mood of the city. Most shops closed earlier than usual that evening, and the one establishment that never closed, the local bordello, was shuttered and dark. The streets were strangely deserted, and Annenberg saw almost no one celebrating Tet in the usual manner, with firecrackers, balloons, and decorations. Annenberg found the silence in the city unnerving. The unusually somber mood prompted the major to wonder whether the local population knew something that he did not.⁵⁶

The mood in the city was subdued, but the same could not be said for the 1st Division headquarters in the Citadel. The general and his staff were frenetically trying to determine if an attack against Hue was imminent. Knowing that the easiest way for the enemy to travel from Base Area 114 to the city in the dark was to follow the course of the Perfume River, General Truong had dispatched his reconnaissance platoon and an Australian Army adviser that afternoon to scout the river's northern bank. After marching southwest approximately four kilometers, the team concealed itself in some bushes near the river and waited.

⁵⁴ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, p. 20; Ltr, Robert B. Annenberg, 23 Feb 89, sub: Vietnam Reminiscences: The Battle of Tet, p. 4, Historians files, CMH; AAR, The Battle of Hue, 45th Mil Hist Det, p. 2.

⁵⁵ Rpt, 101st Abn Div, 29 Dec 68, sub: Special Intelligence Study no. 33-68 (Hue Tet Offensive, 31 January 1968), p. 4, Historians files, CMH.

⁵⁶ Lt Col Robert B. Annenberg (U.S. Army, ret.), "Intelligence Team Under Siege," *Vietnam* (February 2001): 35-36.

That evening, the northern wing of the enemy attack force began moving toward Hue from base camps in the western hills. A Viet Cong company armed with 82-mm. mortars and 57-mm. recoilless rifles veered north and took up a position near the PK-17 outpost. Its orders were to shell the South Vietnamese airborne and armored units stationed there once the offensive began. Two kilometers to the northwest, an engineer unit moved within sight of its target, the An Lo Bridge that spanned the Bo River. As it did, the *806th Battalion*, one company from the *800th Battalion*, and a handpicked sapper platoon of forty men, all from the *6th Regiment*, quietly occupied a forward staging area in a graveyard two kilometers northwest of the Citadel. Around that time, the *802d Battalion* from the *6th Regiment*, the remainder of the *800th Battalion*, the *12th Sapper Battalion*, and several heavy weapons companies marched down from the mountains to a spot on the Perfume River several kilometers west of Hue before turning toward the Citadel.⁵⁷

At 2200, Regional Forces troops stationed in a village a few hundred meters north of the An Hoa Bridge observed what appeared to be enemy figures moving past them in the dark. The territorial soldiers opened fire and radioed a warning to General Truong's headquarters. South Vietnamese troops in the Citadel fired flares over the village to help the Regional Forces troops there assess the situation. The enemy force, which happened to be the forty sappers and an infantry company from the *800th Battalion* that had been waiting in the graveyard northwest of An Hoa, did not return fire but crept away before they could be illuminated by the descending flares. The sappers' mission was to scale the Citadel's wall near the Mang Ca compound, open and hold the Hau and An Hoa Gates, and assist the infantry company with its attack on General Truong's headquarters. The enemy troops could not afford to engage in a firefight at this point, and they succeeded in sneaking away without raising further alarms. After a few minutes, the Regional Forces soldiers stopped shooting, and some began to wonder whether they had seen enemy troops or had been firing at shadows.⁵⁸

The 1st Division headquarters soon received a second warning. Shortly before midnight, the reconnaissance team hiding in the bushes on the north bank of the Perfume River saw a long column of North Vietnamese soldiers emerge from the darkness. The allied platoon stayed out of sight as the *800th*, *802d*, and *12th Sapper Battalions* marched past its position, heading west along the river toward the city. In hushed tones, the patrol commander reported by radio what he had seen.⁵⁹ General Truong immediately dispatched a light observation airplane from the Tay Loc Airfield to look for the enemy force. Flying through overcast skies, the aircraft returned two hours later, its pilot having seen nothing out of the ordinary. That news was of little comfort to Truong, who assumed that an attack was imminent. He radioed for his scout team to return to the Citadel, then reviewed his security arrangements one more time, painfully aware of how few troops guarded the city.

⁵⁷ DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027541968, 16 Sep 68, sub: After Action Report, pp. 14-17.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-20.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

A CITY BESIEGED: 31 JANUARY–1 FEBRUARY

At 0333, a signal flare burst over Hue. Viet Cong saboteurs in the old city cut the telephone lines leading into General Truong's headquarters. A few seconds later, four sappers dressed as South Vietnamese soldiers approached the sentries inside the closed Chanh Tay Gate, having earlier gained entry to the city through a culvert in the southeastern wall with help from a pair of agents inside Hue.⁶⁰ The sappers killed the guards before they had a chance to sound an alarm, then used explosives to blow open the door. As the smoke cleared, the *800th Battalion* and several teams from the *12th Sapper Battalion* hiding just outside the Citadel rushed through the gate and headed northwest toward the airfield through the quiet and deserted streets. (Map 5) The *802d Battalion* and a heavy weapons company had some trouble crossing the canal outside the southeastern wall but entered shortly thereafter.⁶¹ The *806th Battalion*, which was firmly dug into a cemetery along Highway 1 near the western corner of the Citadel, dispatched a group of soldiers to capture the An Hoa Bridge. The enemy troops drove off the Regional Forces detachment guarding the bridge, giving the *806th Battalion* a line of communication with the other Communist troops in the Citadel. Meanwhile, the team of thirty sappers who had scaled the northwestern wall overpowered the guards standing watch at the An Hoa and Hau Gates, then opened their doors to the infantry company waiting outside. The combined force of North Vietnamese soldiers then headed for the Mang Ca compound with the goal of neutralizing General Truong's headquarters before it had time to organize the city's defenders.⁶²

At 0340, ten minutes behind schedule, elements of the *164th PAVN Artillery Regiment* fired a barrage of 122-mm. rockets into the southern half of the city from firing positions in the southwestern hills. It was the first time that such weapons had been used in Thua Thien Province, and their appearance came as a terrifying shock to the citizens of Hue. The six-foot-tall rockets, each armed with a fourteen-pound warhead, were powerful but inaccurate, more useful for spreading terror than for reducing enemy strong points. For the latter role, North Vietnamese soldiers closer to the city used 82-mm. mortars and 75-mm. recoilless rifles to soften up selected targets, particularly the Mang Ca compound, which received more than 130 mortar rounds in the opening minutes of the battle.⁶³

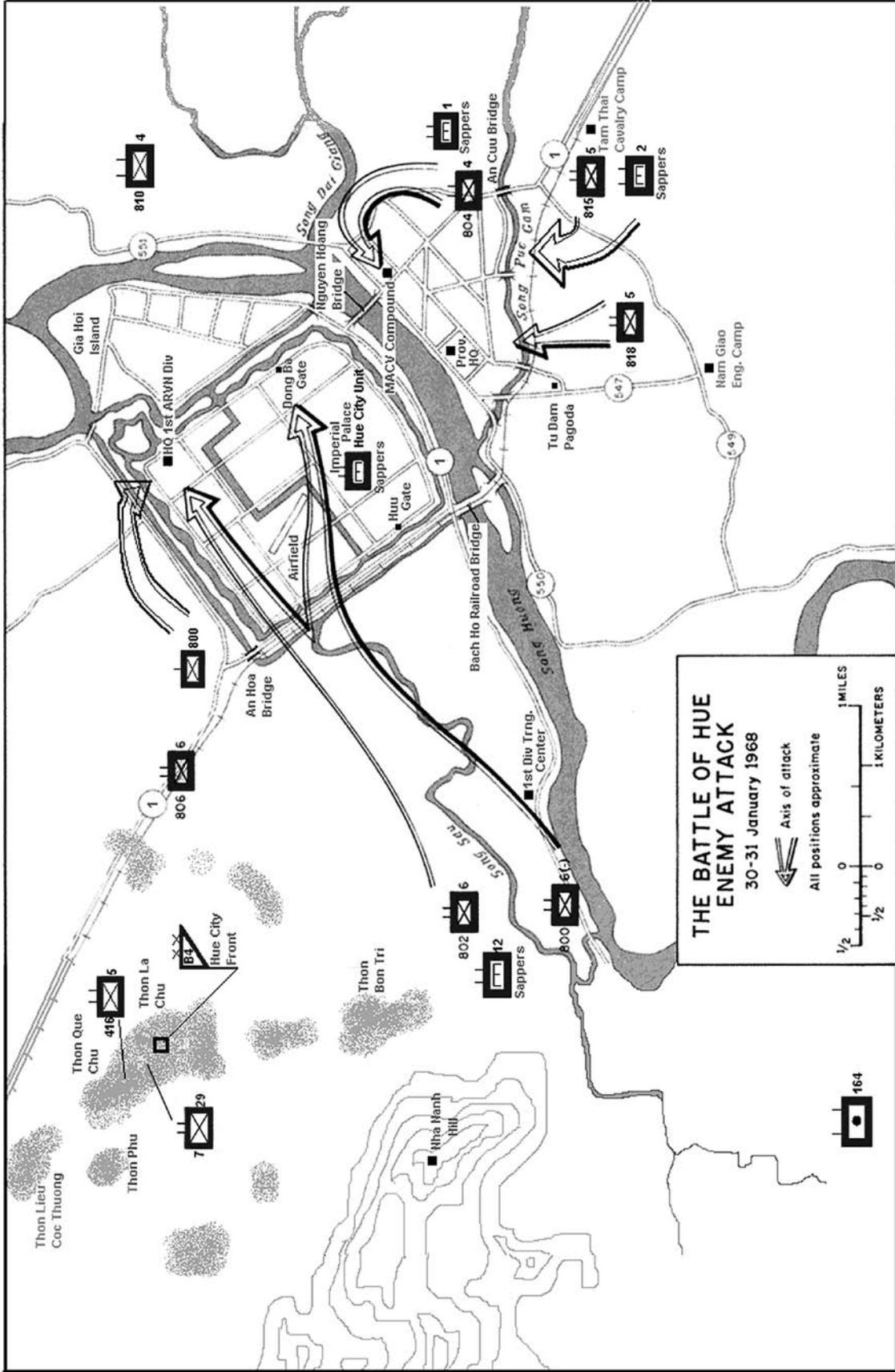
As the attack on the Citadel began, the *416th Battalion*, *5th PAVN Regiment*, as well as a local force company and a recoilless rifle company, swarmed into the villages of Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu, which were sequestered in a large island of trees approximately four kilometers west of the city. Thon La Chu, a prosperous agricultural settlement that the government regarded as a model of

⁶⁰ Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 29.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.



MAP 5

pacification, had recently received a large sum of American money for construction projects. The South Vietnamese official in charge of the project, who later proved to be a Viet Cong agent with a degree in engineering, had used the money to build a three-story bunker of concrete and steel, ostensibly as a bomb shelter for local villagers. As the enemy had intended all along, the command group of the *Hue City Front* used the building to set up its headquarters after chasing off a local self-defense platoon. Meanwhile, the *416th Battalion* began fortifying the twin villages with spider holes, slit trenches, and camouflaged fighting positions. The enemy also took advantage of the many sturdy hedgerows that divided the family plots. As those preparations got underway, civilian laborers began moving supplies from the western hills to Thon La Chu under the direction of Viet Cong cadre.⁶⁴

Back in the Citadel, the enemy assault troops snaked through the quiet city streets in search of their targets. At 0400, the *800th Battalion* reached its first objective, the small Tay Loc Airfield in the center of the old city. The airfield was defended by fifty men from the Hac Bao Company and some ordnance troops who occupied positions around the hangers and the armory at the southeastern corner of the runway. Armed with a stockpile of M72 antitank rockets, the South Vietnamese killed at least thirty Communists and prevented the *800th Battalion* from overrunning the lower portion of the runway. A short time later, the *802d Battalion* marched past the northern edge of the airfield and headed for the 1st Division compound. Unfamiliar with the city, the battalion became lost for a time but eventually found its way, aided by the light of allied flares and with directions from local inhabitants.

The *802d Battalion* charged across an open parade ground that stood in front of the Mang Ca compound, then went to ground when it reached the outer fence and the barbed wire that protected the facility. The two hundred or so defenders inside the compound, most of whom were staff and support personnel, fought back from bunkers and makeshift positions in various buildings. When enemy troops penetrated the compound in an area that housed a medical company, an ad hoc force of clerks and doctors expelled them in a flurry of hand-to-hand fighting.

Around 0440, as the fight for the airfield and the Mang Ca compound continued, enemy sappers captured the Huu Gate on the southwestern wall. The command group of the *6th PAVN Regiment* passed through its arch, and the enemy troops barred the gate. With their arrival, the last of the enemy assault group had entered the Citadel. Aside from the failure of sapper teams to destroy the Bach Ho and Nguyen Hoang Bridges—Regional Forces soldiers had ambushed them en route to the targets—the enemy plan was unfolding as expected.⁶⁵

General Truong knew that his headquarters was likely to fall unless he obtained reinforcements in the next couple of hours. If the Communists drove his small band of troops from the compound, which was nearly the last allied foothold left in the city, the task of recapturing the

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

⁶⁵ "The Rebirth of Hue," Vietnam Feature Service TCB-037, pp. 10–11; CDEC Bulletin no. 16250, 6 Sep 68, pp. 1–2.

Citadel would become infinitely harder. Aware that time was running out, Truong instructed the Hac Bao soldiers at the airfield to return to his headquarters at once, then ordered all four battalions of the 3d Regiment in the countryside around Hue to return to the Citadel. Truong also instructed two armored units—the 3d Troop, 7th Cavalry, stationed at PK-17, and the tank-equipped 1st Troop, 7th Cavalry, at the Tam Thai camp southeast of the Triangle—to proceed to the 1st Division headquarters. Finally, General Truong obtained permission from the South Vietnamese corps commander, General Lam, to take control of the 1st Airborne Task Force. Although the South Vietnamese 9th Airborne Battalion was still caught up in the battle for Quang Tri City, the 2d and 7th Airborne Battalions were at PK-17 and could hasten to the Citadel on short notice.

The armored troop at Tam Thai was first to respond to General Truong's order. Shortly after 0430, a column of M41 light tanks and M113 armored personnel carriers roared out of the compound and headed up Highway 1. Shortly after the column crossed over the An Cuu Bridge, however, soldiers from the *1st Sapper Battalion* and the *818th Battalion*, hiding in and around buildings near the road, opened fire at close range with rocket-propelled grenades, heavy machine guns, and at least four 75-mm. recoilless rifles. The devastating ambush destroyed several vehicles and threw the 1st Troop, 7th Cavalry, into confusion. Several M41 crews abandoned their undamaged tanks when they found their escape route blocked by burning hulks. Later, the regimental commander led a few tanks through the roadblock and continued on to Hue, but the rest of the company, or what was left of it, remained in camp.⁶⁶

The Hac Bao soldiers defending the Tay Loc Airfield had better luck getting to the 1st Division compound. The street-savvy fighters made their way to General Truong's headquarters along back alleys to avoid roving bands of North Vietnamese, many of whom appeared to be lost. Along the way, the platoon picked up dozens of soldiers who had been at home with their families when the attack began. The augmented force of about 150 men sneaked into the Mang Ca compound shortly after 0700, just in time to repulse another major assault from the *802d Battalion*.

Meanwhile, the reconnaissance platoon, having made its way back into the city, was putting up a valiant defense at the Imperial Palace. The platoon was desperately outnumbered, however, and eventually had to retreat to the 1st Division compound. Before long, General Truong's headquarters and the southeastern corner of the airfield were the only areas of the Citadel not in enemy hands. As if to symbolize that fact, at 0800, Communist soldiers raised a massive red-and-blue Viet Cong banner with a yellow star in its center on the flagpole above the Southern Gate, the entrance that led into the Imperial Palace.⁶⁷

Minutes after the first rockets slammed into the Citadel, the enemy began its attack against the southern and less well-defended part of Hue. First into action was a reinforced company from

⁶⁶ Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 34.

⁶⁷ DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027541968, 16 Sep 68, sub: After Action Report, pp. 34-35.

the *2d Sapper Battalion*, which had orders to destroy the U.S. advisory compound. The facility, a collection of two- and three-story buildings surrounded by fences and barbed wire, was equipped with a handful of bunkers and six .30-caliber machine guns. The senior adviser, Colonel Adkisson, had tried for six months to upgrade its defenses with 106-mm. recoilless rifles, .50-caliber heavy machine guns, and 81-mm. mortars; but the weapons—formally authorized in September 1967—had never been delivered. Approximately 130 U.S. Army advisers and several Marine guards were in the complex that morning.⁶⁸

Coming up Highway 1, the Viet Cong sapper company sprayed the compound with small-arms and machine-gun fire as a squad of comrades headed for the main gate. Several alert defenders, particularly one adviser manning an M60 machine gun in a nearby tower, decimated the squad before it reached its target. Temporarily stymied, the enemy peppered the compound with rocket-propelled grenades and mortars before launching a second attack against its southwest corner. A few North Vietnamese troops got as far as the outer fence but died in a hail of bullets before they could cut their way through. Around 0500, a reinforced company from the *1st Sapper Battalion* attacked the compound from the east, but its defenders broke up the assault before the enemy soldiers reached the fence. After that failure, the enemy left snipers behind to harass the compound, then moved on to other objectives.⁶⁹

Just east of the advisory compound, a heavy weapons team from the *2d Sapper Battalion* attempted to destroy the radar station. Firing at long range, the men missed their target. Fortunately for the handful of U.S. technical personnel who were trapped inside the radar building, the enemy took no further action against the facility even though a platoon of infantry could have seized the site in a matter of minutes.⁷⁰

Shortly before dawn, the *804th Battalion* reached the eastern outskirts of the Triangle, three hours behind schedule. Some elements of the battalion had been delayed by South Vietnamese paramilitary troops while others had gotten lost. With the city finally in sight, the three companies that made up the *804th Battalion* headed off in different directions. One company occupied a six-way intersection on Highway 1 a few blocks southeast of the advisory compound to prevent allied mechanized forces from entering the Triangle. The company also helped a group of sappers seize the treasury building, the post office, and a radio station a few blocks to the north. The second company from the *804th Battalion* seized the An Cuu Bridge while the third company stormed a smaller bridge over the canal a short distance to the west.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Interv, Maj Lamar F. Peyton, 45th Mil Hist Det, with Col George O. Adkisson, 11 Mar 68, VNIT 201, CMH; DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027656768, 22 Jul 68, sub: After Action Report, p. 5.

⁶⁹ DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027656768, 22 Jul 68, sub: After Action Report, p. 5.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 4–5; Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 33.

Apart from some troops belonging to the *2d Sapper Battalion*, the enemy's left wing was late getting into position. A company each from the *815th* and *818th Battalions* entered the western edge of the Triangle around 0450, eighty minutes behind schedule. The *815th Battalion* had been delayed because South Vietnamese paramilitaries had ambushed the battalion at a river crossing three kilometers south of the city. The main body of the *818th Battalion* had left camp later than planned and had gotten lost on its way to the city. After battling Regional Forces troops who were guarding a series of four bridges over the canal, some of the North Vietnamese troops crossed into the city and headed for a list of targets that included the Montagnard military school, the Civilian Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) center, the Le Lai transportation camp, the provincial administration complex and prison, and the Thua Thien capitol and legislative building. Other Communist troops split off and attacked the railroad station and a police headquarters facility near the Bach Ho Railroad Bridge at the western tip of the Triangle. Enemy troops also seized the Tu Dam Pagoda, just south of the canal, which they soon converted to the main command post for the southern wing.⁷²

Despite the late arrival of the *815th* and *818th Battalions*, the North Vietnamese conquered most of southern Hue in short order. Among their prizes was the CORDS office, where they captured the American senior province adviser, Philip W. Manhard, and a huge trove of secret documents describing the confidential informant program in Thua Thien.⁷³ The enemy faced only scattered resistance. South Vietnamese policemen at a local station several blocks south of the advisory compound put up a stubborn fight before finally being overwhelmed. A small group of Americans who took refuge inside the Huang Giang Hotel used their personal weapons and a light machine gun to drive away enemy soldiers who tried to enter the building; after a while, the North Vietnamese either forgot about or ignored them. Troops at the South Vietnamese engineer camp beat back a two-platoon force from the *1st Sapper Battalion* and the *818th Battalion*. The original attack force had been closer to company size, but South Vietnamese territorial soldiers had whittled down the group before it reached the engineer compound.⁷⁴ Two Catholic neighborhoods that lay just south of the Phu Cam Canal also gave the enemy some modest trouble; in one of them, several hundred civilians armed with rifles and pistols sniped at a company from the *818th Battalion* that was passing through their community.⁷⁵

Nonetheless, the southern wing of the attack force accomplished most of its objectives in the first few hours of battle. When morning came, bringing a rolling fog that limited allied air operations, the only areas in the Triangle still under allied control were the prison, which was stubbornly

⁷² DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027656768, 22 Jul 68, sub: After Action Report, p. 3; Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, pp. 32–34.

⁷³ Manhard was taken to a POW camp in North Vietnam and eventually released in 1973. Annenberg, "Intelligence Team Under Siege," pp. 41–42.

⁷⁴ AAR, The Battle of Hue, 45th Mil Hist Det, incl 7, p. 4; Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 35.

⁷⁵ DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027656768, 22 Jul 68, sub: After Action Report, p. 4.

defended by a Hac Bao platoon; the Le Loi transportation camp; the Huang Giang Hotel; the advisory compound; the radar station near the stadium; and the Navy loading dock by the Nguyen Hoang Bridge.

Apart from a few stubborn pockets of allied resistance, the main problem the Communists faced was one of communication. During the first twenty-four hours of battle, the command group of the southern wing and the headquarters of the *4th* and *5th PAVN Regiments* were largely out of touch with one another and with their subordinate units. A number of enemy units had gotten lost upon entering the city, and their runners were unsure about where to deliver their messages. Furthermore, the enemy's radio capability was fairly limited and apparently did little to sort out the confusion. Lack of communication was a problem that would persist for several days.⁷⁶

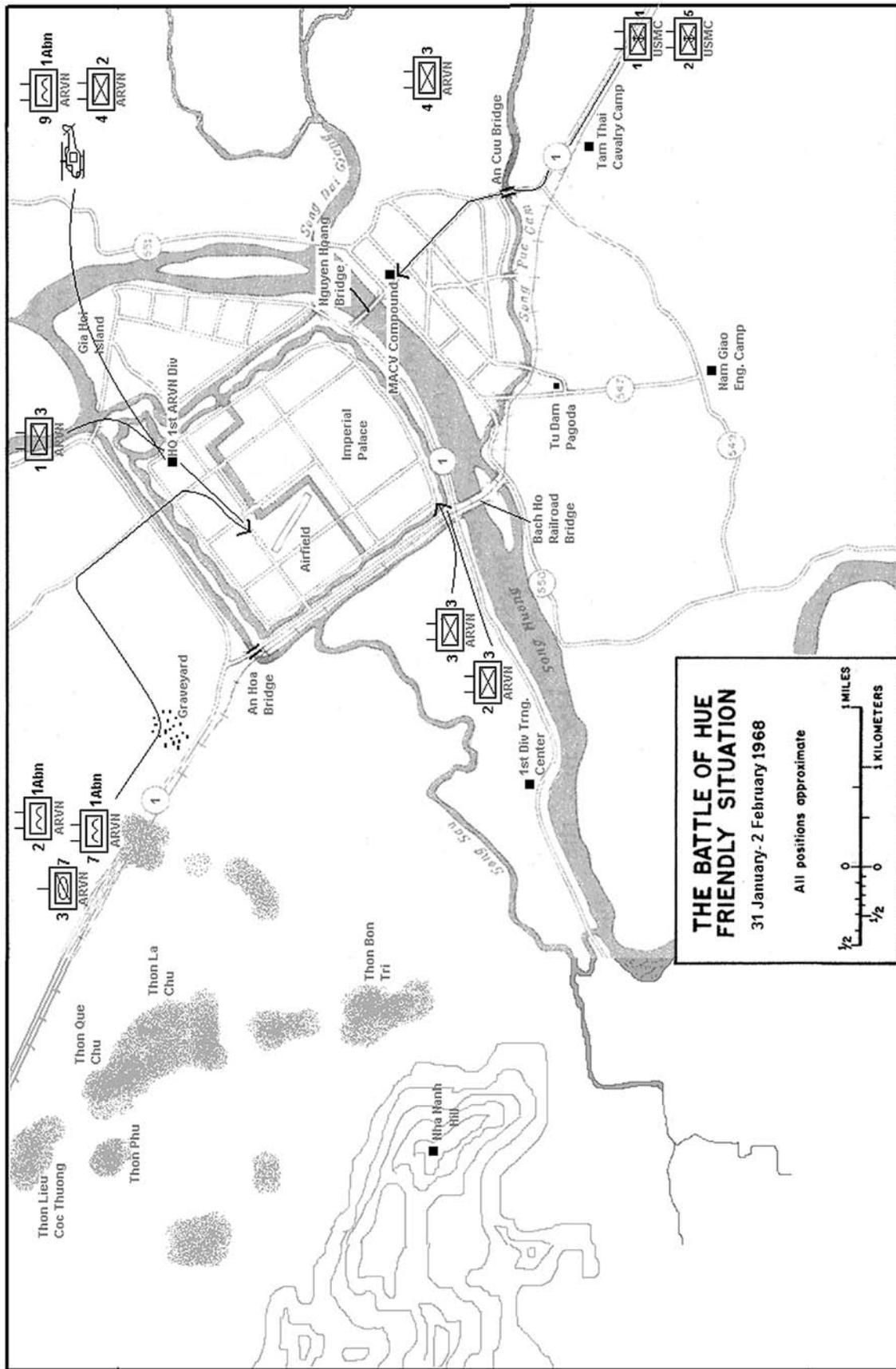
When the first enemy shots rang out that morning, Colonel Adkisson radioed the Marine headquarters at Phu Bai for help. The commander of Task Force X-RAY, Brig. Gen. Foster C. LaHue, agreed to send a reduced company to reinforce the advisory compound. He had little else to spare. All of his outposts from the Hai Van Pass to Phu Bai were under attack, and many of the roads connecting them were impassable because of ambushes or mines. Furthermore, General LaHue did not then recognize the extent of the crisis in Hue; several days would pass before he and other American commanders outside the city understood the monumental scope of the enemy effort there. As a result, the marines sent to reinforce Hue would be venturing into the unknown.⁷⁷

At 0830, a reduced company from the 3d Marine Division boarded trucks at Phu Bai and, along with two U.S. Army trucks armed with quad .50-caliber machine guns, headed north toward Hue. (*Map 6*) Three kilometers south of the city, the company encountered four Marine M48 tanks and their crews pulled up on the side of the road. The tanks, destined for the Navy loading dock in Hue, had stopped when their crews came upon recently destroyed South Vietnamese tanks and learned by radio that Hue was under attack. The tankers had considered going back to Phu Bai; but after a quick conference, they agreed to join the task force as it continued up Highway 1.

As the task force closed in on the city, Communist snipers opened fire on the marines from dilapidated buildings and thatched huts that lined either side of the highway. The column drove on, spraying each suspected sniper position with a hail of bullets as it passed. When the convoy reached the An Cuu Bridge, the Americans saw wrecked and smoldering South Vietnamese tanks on the far side, victims from the armored task force that had tried to reach the Citadel earlier that morning. The marines anxiously scanned the surrounding area as the column rolled on.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 4–6.

⁷⁷ Unless otherwise noted, the following section is based on Historical Study 2-68, Operation HUE CITY, 31st Mil Hist Det, Aug 68, Historians files, CMH; AAR, The Battle of Hue, 45th Mil Hist Det; AAR, NVA/VC Tet Offensive: Hue, 1st Inf Div Adv Det, Adv Team 3.



MAP 6

Moments after the convoy crossed the bridge, soldiers of the *804th Battalion* hiding in nearby buildings and foxholes opened fire on the marines with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades. Undeterred by the heavy fire, the convoy continued to inch forward until it reached an exposed section of road some five hundred meters long that formed a raised causeway with open fields to either side. Anything crossing that section of road would be a conspicuous target. Fearing his men would be butchered in the back of the trucks before they reached the advisory compound, still nearly a kilometer away, the company commander halted the convoy near some houses that could provide cover, then radioed Phu Bai for more help.

A second Marine company left the base at 1030 and joined up with the convoy a short time later. Just before noon, three South Vietnamese M41 tanks from the 1st Troop, 7th Cavalry, that had been ambushed earlier in the day roared up Highway 1 and joined the fray. Even with those reinforcements, the marines, now nearly three hundred strong, fought for another four hours to cross the last stretch of open highway and make their way into the advisory compound. Clearly, the enemy in Hue was much stronger and more determined than anyone at Task Force X-RAY headquarters had suspected.

Knowing that General Truong's headquarters was in peril, General LaHue ordered the Marine task force to cross the river and relieve the pressure on the 1st Division commander. The Nguyen Hoang Bridge near the Navy landing dock was still intact because a water sapper team that was supposed to have destroyed it had instead blundered into an allied patrol. Even so, the bridge was not strong enough to support the weight of M48 tanks. The smaller South Vietnamese M41 tanks were able to cross, but their crews refused to take them over the bridge because a rocket-propelled grenade had struck a tank and killed their regimental commander only a short time earlier.

Instead, the allied tanks stayed on the southern bank of the river and provided covering fire while two platoons of marines sprinted across. Enemy machine guns and recoilless rifles mounted on the walls of the Citadel opened fire on the Americans, killing or wounding several men. Once the marines reached the narrow strip of buildings that lay between the river and the Citadel, they discovered that most of them were occupied by North Vietnamese troops. The enemy also occupied hundreds of fighting positions that Japanese soldiers had dug into the thick stone walls during World War II, rendering their occupants nearly impervious to all but the luckiest rifle round or tank shell. Realizing that their small group had no chance of reaching General Truong's headquarters, the marines fought their way back across the bridge, losing nearly a third of their men to death or injury in the process. Meanwhile, a force of Army advisers secured a helicopter landing site near the Navy loading dock a few blocks north of the advisory compound to enable aircraft to bring in more supplies and evacuate the most seriously wounded. That evening, the marines and U.S. Army advisers spent a mostly sleepless night in the com-

pound while General LaHue and the III Marine Amphibious Force headquarters tried to piece together the situation in Hue.⁷⁸

The marines from Task Force X-RAY were just one of many allied units trying to reach General Truong and his staff on 31 January. Shortly after 0900, the South Vietnamese 3d Troop, 7th Cavalry, and the South Vietnamese 7th Airborne Battalion joined up at PK-17 and proceeded southeast on Highway 1. Around noon, as the mechanized column neared a graveyard about four hundred meters from the Citadel, soldiers from the *806th Battalion* who had concealed themselves in foxholes next to headstones opened fire with rocket-propelled grenades and automatic weapons. The initial fusillade from the *806th Battalion* destroyed two of the twelve M113 armored personnel carriers and brought the column to a halt. The unit had orders to delay the allied advance as long as possible. Even if the column eventually broke through, it would find that North Vietnamese engineers had already destroyed the An Hoa Bridge.⁷⁹

The commander of the South Vietnamese task force reviewed his options. His troops were beyond friendly artillery range and the worsening weather ruled out the use of air strikes; but he was under orders to reach General Truong's headquarters as quickly as possible. With the élan typical of paratroopers, the 7th Airborne Battalion opted for a frontal assault. While the remaining armored personnel carriers provided covering fire with their machine guns, the South Vietnamese soldiers charged through the graveyard and into a withering crossfire that thinned their ranks. Almost half of the paratroopers fell dead or wounded before the rest were forced to hunker down in the middle of the cemetery, unable to advance or retreat. The South Vietnamese commander radioed I Corps headquarters for reinforcements. Later in the afternoon, the 2d Airborne Battalion arrived in a truck convoy from PK-17 and executed a flanking attack. The maneuver relieved some of the pressure on the 7th Airborne Battalion but failed to dislodge the North Vietnamese battalion.

The exchange of gunfire tapered off as darkness crept over the cemetery. The South Vietnamese soldiers spent a cold and miserable night shivering among the headstones; but when they awoke the next morning, 1 February, they discovered that the *806th Battalion* had abandoned the cemetery and pulled back into the Citadel.

Around noon, several Hac Bao soldiers met up with the battered task force to lead it on a cross-country path that swung north of the city to a gate near the Mang Ca compound. The South Vietnamese estimated that more than two hundred North Vietnamese soldiers had perished in the previous day's action. Although that number was probably exaggerated, the Communists had not gotten off lightly. Unknown to the paratroopers, the headlong assault the previous day by the 2d and 7th Airborne Battalions had forced the commander of the *806th Battalion* to recall some of

⁷⁸ Son, *The Viet-Cong Tet Offensive*, pp. 1-2.

⁷⁹ DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027541968, 16 Sep 68, sub: After Action Report, p. 40.

his troops who were supposed to overrun a village outside the northern corner of the Citadel then attack the 1st Division headquarters from the rear. Their pressure against the *806th Battalion* may have helped General Truong preserve his foothold in the Citadel.⁸⁰

Meanwhile, on 31 January, the four battalions of the South Vietnamese 3d Regiment that had been operating in the countryside had similar difficulty reaching General Truong's headquarters. Three kilometers northeast of the Triangle, the 1st Battalion, less one company that remained behind to guard an artillery site near the coast, ran into the better part of the *810th Battalion*, which had been deployed as a blocking force outside the city. Only a few weeks earlier, the South Vietnamese soldiers had traded their obsolete M1 carbines for M16 rifles, which gave the government troops not only more firepower but also more confidence. Even though the numerically superior enemy force maneuvered aggressively against the 1st Battalion, the South Vietnamese troops held steady with help from U.S. Marine air strikes and artillery.

The next day, as the unit began to run low on ammunition despite daring resupply runs by a U.S. Marine helicopter, the unit broke contact and marched to a government-controlled town on the coast. As it did, the *810th Battalion* abandoned its blocking position and moved into the northeastern corner of the Triangle.

On the morning of 31 January, the South Vietnamese 4th Battalion, 3d Regiment, was about fifteen hundred meters east of the Triangle when it received General Truong's call for help. As the battalion neared the city, it ran into a blocking force from the *2d Sapper Battalion* and a company from the *810th Battalion*. The government troops tried to fight their way through but lacked the strength or the firepower to do so. Four days would pass before the South Vietnamese were at last able to punch a hole in the enemy's line and reach the MACV compound. Also on 31 January, the 2d and 3d Battalions, 3d Regiment, were both southwest of Hue when they got word of the enemy offensive. The two battalions marched back to the city without encountering a blocking force and reached the southern corner of the Citadel late that evening. Seeing that North Vietnamese troops held its walls and gates, the South Vietnamese soldiers camped in a nearby field and began preparing to assault Hue the next day.⁸¹

On 1 February, the weather in Thua Thien Province took a turn for the worse. A chill gripped the area, dense fog blanketed the landscape, and the cloud ceiling dropped to a mere three hundred feet. The sudden winter snap was but a preview of things to come. For the rest of the month, temperatures hovered in the low fifties and rarely exceeded the mid-sixties. Virtually every day brought rain and fog, making flight operations difficult if not impossible. The bad weather not only restricted the availability of air strikes but also hampered efforts to supply units in the field. Even

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 42.

⁸¹ Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, pp. 33, 35; Interv, Peyton with Capt Gary A. Webb, Adviser to South Vietnamese 1st Bn, 3d Inf, 11 Mar 68, VNIT 201.

when breaks in the weather permitted air operations, allied pilots found that flying anywhere near Hue was extremely dangerous. The enemy had placed dozens of anti-aircraft machine guns on the upper floors of houses, then had torn out small sections of roofing to permit the weapons to fire. Because the barrels remained entirely inside the houses, pilots had difficulty seeing the muzzle blasts and, thus, locating the guns.⁸² Without the tremendous advantages accrued to the allies by air power, ejecting the enemy from Hue would prove especially costly and time consuming.

As the sky dawned gray and drizzly on 1 February, the South Vietnamese troops in the Citadel began the arduous process of reclaiming the city. Supported by armored personnel carriers and Hac Bao soldiers, the 2d and 7th Airborne Battalions pushed southwest from the 1st Division compound and broke through to the Tay Loc Airfield. The enemy had destroyed all the aircraft and most of the buildings, but a group of South Vietnamese ordnance troops had refused to yield one corner of the facility. Later in the afternoon, the 1st Battalion, 3d Regiment—the unit that had retreated to the coast after being attacked by the *810th Battalion*—arrived by boat at General Truong's headquarters. Just before dusk, U.S. Marine CH-46 helicopters braved the poor weather to bring two companies from the South Vietnamese 4th Battalion, 2d Regiment, based in Dong Ha, to the Citadel. Deteriorating conditions and the coming of night grounded the helicopters before they could transport the rest of the battalion.⁸³

Meanwhile, the marines at the advisory compound and at Phu Bai began working on a plan to recapture southern Hue. Early on 1 February, General LaHue ordered the senior Marine commander at the advisory compound to clear the enemy from the south bank of the Perfume River. To accomplish this mission, the marines had only two depleted companies, four M48 tanks, a U.S. Army truck with a quad .50-caliber machine gun, and help from a pair of South Vietnamese M41 tanks. Bad weather ruled out any meaningful support from artillery or air strikes.

One of the marines' first priorities was to relieve the South Vietnamese soldiers still holding out at the provincial administration and prison complex six blocks to the west. When the Americans set out for their objective, however, soldiers from the *815th Battalion* that were dug in to surrounding buildings stopped them only half a block from the advisory compound. Settling for more limited gains, the marines tried to clear several Hue University buildings a block to the north. Gaining control of the tall buildings would increase the security at the helicopter landing zone just up the road and the Navy landing dock beside it.

The university complex turned out to be firmly held by North Vietnamese, and the marines made virtually no headway that morning. By noon on 1 February, the two Marine companies had been reduced to about half of their original fighting strength. That afternoon, the senior Marine commander at the advisory compound, Lt. Col. Marcus J. Gravel of the 1st Battalion,

⁸² Ltr, Annenberg, sub: Vietnam Reminiscences: The Battle of Tet, p. 7.

⁸³ DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027541968, 16 Sep 68, sub: After Action Report, pp. 38, 41.

1st Marines, loaded the most badly wounded soldiers onto trucks and sent the convoy speeding back to Phu Bai. When it reached the base, an unwashed lieutenant fresh from the battle briefed General LaHue on the task force's predicament. The general, only now just beginning to appreciate the size of the Communist attack force, promised to send more reinforcements as soon as possible.

Late that afternoon, a company from the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, based at Phu Bai, landed by helicopter at the advisory compound. Some of the newly arrived marines fought for several hours to reach the group of U.S. Army signal troops who were holding out at the nearby radar station. The signal technicians eventually made a successful dash to safety. That evening, General LaHue's headquarters recommended that the Hue task force organize a night assault to reach the province headquarters and prison. Colonel Gravel convinced his superiors to rescind the order when he explained the extremely unfavorable tactical situation that his men faced.

Later that night, enemy sappers destroyed the Bach Ho Railroad Bridge on the Perfume River. Significantly, a twenty-man sapper team that was to have destroyed the An Cuu Bridge in the opening hours of the offensive failed to do so after Regional Forces troops decimated the group on its way to the target. That stroke of fate preserved a window of opportunity for the allies. With many of the Communist units out of touch with one another and with the regimental command groups only dimly aware of events in the city, the southern wing headquarters at Tu Dam Pagoda apparently did not realize that the span was intact. As long as the bridge remained standing, road convoys from Phu Bai could reach the Marine task force in the Triangle.⁸⁴

THON LA CHU: 2–10 FEBRUARY

When General Lam and General Cushman gathered for a meeting in Da Nang on the night of 1 February, they agreed that the South Vietnamese would be responsible for clearing the Citadel while the marines did the same for southern Hue. They also agreed that they would limit damage to the historic city to the extent possible. To pressure the enemy from the west, the presumed direction of Communist supply lines, Cushman received permission from General Westmoreland to use the 1st Cavalry Division. The commander of the division, General Tolson, in turn relayed the mission to the commander of the 3d Brigade, Colonel Campbell.

Circumstances forced Campbell to proceed with caution. An air assault against the western wall of the Citadel was out of the question because the ground fire around Hue was too intense and the brigade's artillery batteries at Camp Evans were too far away to support such a maneuver.⁸⁵ Campbell knew that North Vietnamese troops lay thick around the city, but he had no specific intel-

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 40; Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 33.

⁸⁵ Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, 24 June 68, p. 4; Krohn, *The Lost Battalion*, p. 73.

ligence on their strength and disposition. A visual inspection by air suggested that the enemy was everywhere; a helicopter pilot and assault platoon leader with the 229th Aviation Battalion, Capt. Ken E. Hamburger, later recalled seeing Viet Cong flags flying from villages all along Highway 1 between PK-17 and Hue when he passed over the area. Campbell would not risk dropping an infantry battalion or two in the midst of a superior enemy force. Further, no matter where he put his soldiers, Campbell knew that keeping them supplied by helicopter would be difficult because of bad weather and the abundance of North Vietnamese antiaircraft guns.⁸⁶

Among his other problems, Campbell worried that he might not get enough food, fuel, and ammunition to support his operations. The enemy occupation of Hue had cut the ground link between the 1st Cavalry Division and its supply base at Phu Bai. Fortunately for the Americans, the road from the Marine logistical base at Dong Ha to Camp Evans remained usable. Popular Forces soldiers guarding several key bridges along the length of this road had stymied enemy efforts to destroy them. Knowing that all available South Vietnamese reinforcements were going either to Quang Tri City or to Hue, General Tolson immediately reinforced those bridges with some of his own troops.⁸⁷ Even though the road remained open, the division had trouble finding spare trucks; ten days would pass before General Tolson found enough to organize a regular supply run between Dong Ha and Camp Evans. In the interim, Campbell could call on airdropped supplies, but bad weather and a shortage of tactical airlift support promised to restrict the tonnage delivered from the sky. With those logistical problems in mind, Colonel Campbell began planning for the relief of the city.⁸⁸

On 2 February, General Tolson ordered his division's reconnaissance element, the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, to scout the area west and northwest of Hue. The roving OH-13 and UH-1 helicopters glimpsed scattered groups of North Vietnamese soldiers, but most quickly ducked out of sight. In one of the few contacts that afternoon, enemy fire brought down a scout helicopter three kilometers west of the Citadel. As gunships raked the surrounding area, killing fifteen of the enemy, a Marine CH-46 swooped in and rescued the downed crew. Elsewhere, the cavalry helicopters killed an additional twenty Communists in a series of fleeting contacts. The scouts, however, could not get a fix on the location or identity of any North Vietnamese units expected to be lurking near the city. As a result, Colonel Campbell had only a dim idea of what his troops might encounter as they tried to seal off the western approaches to Hue.⁸⁹

Because of the shortage of aviation fuel and helicopters at Camp Evans, Campbell had no choice but to deploy his brigade in stages. That afternoon, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, boarded helicopters under overcast skies and flew to PK-17. The soldiers left their packs behind—the gear

⁸⁶ Interv, author with Ken E. Hamburger, 13 Apr 05, Historians files, CMH.

⁸⁷ Interv, Whitehorse with Tolson, p. 4.

⁸⁸ AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, tab V, p. 2.

⁸⁹ ORLL, 1 Feb-30 Apr 68, 1st Cav Div, 13 Jun 68, p. 9, box 2, ORLLs, 1966-1971, USARV Cmd Historian, RG 472, NARA.

was to be transported later—in order to fit more men in each aircraft. All the soldiers in the battalion made it to the South Vietnamese Army post, a large circular compound dotted with tin shacks and several bunkers and surrounded by a strand of barbed wire. Thickening clouds prevented the helicopters from returning with the men's packs, which contained, among other items, their rubber-coated nylon ponchos and sweaters. Both were sorely missed as a cold rain began to fall. After eating a meal of cold rations, the troops spent a miserable night in a mud-covered field near PK-17.⁹⁰

On the morning of 3 February, the four hundred cavalymen of the 2d Battalion assembled to hear their commander, Lt. Col. Richard S. Sweet, issue their marching orders. Sweet decided to take a circuitous route to Hue by going south, then east rather than marching straight down Highway 1, which the enemy had probably blocked with mines and ambushes. He was concerned that the battery of 105-mm. guns normally attached to his battalion had not yet arrived at PK-17—bad weather and a shortage of CH-47 helicopters were to blame—but if luck prevailed, his men would reach the walls of Hue before darkness fell.⁹¹

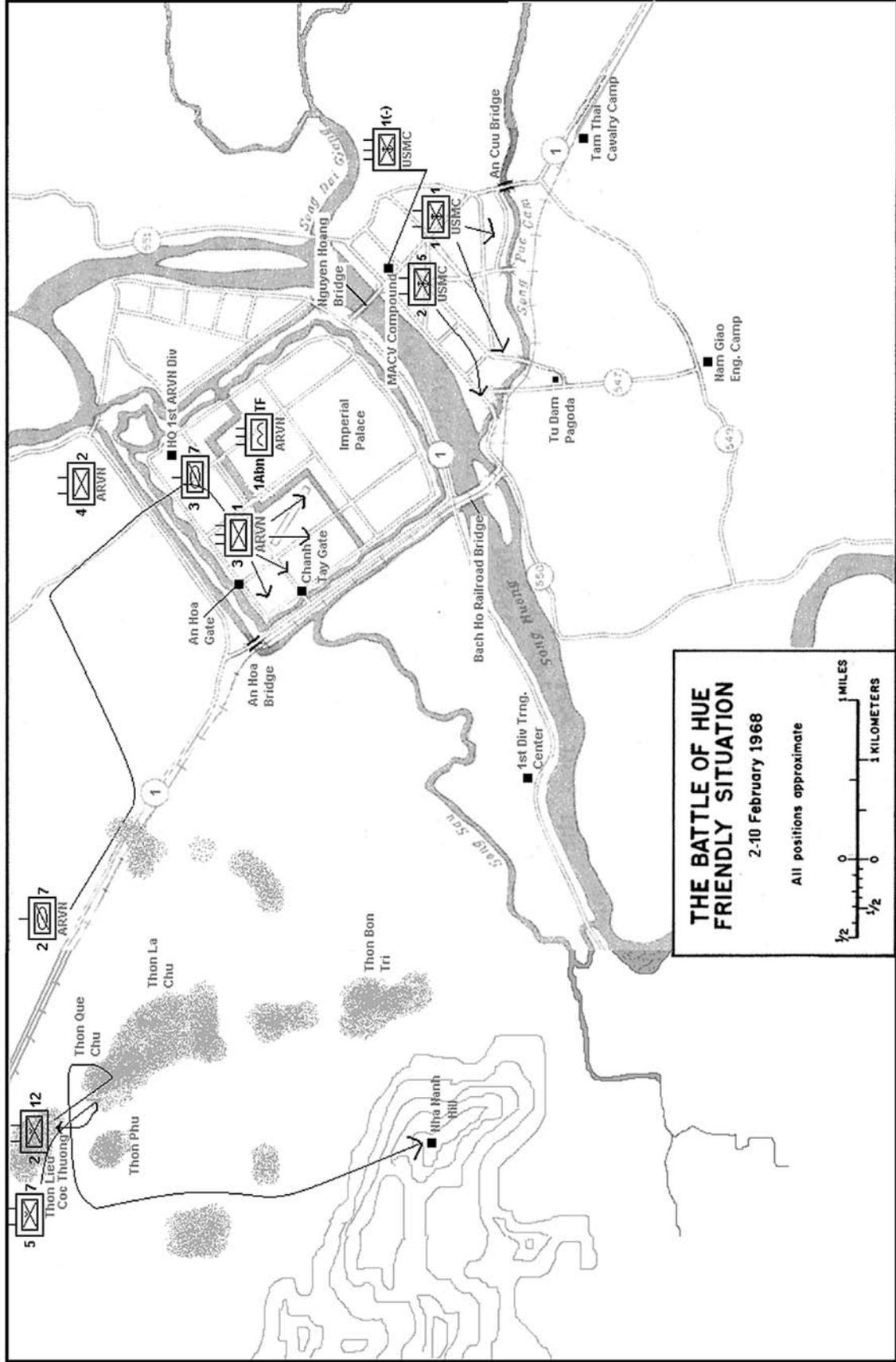
Setting out at 0700, the battalion marched south for about fifteen hundred meters, then turned southeast toward Hue, keeping Highway 1 on its left flank. (*Map 7*) For the next several hours, it saw no signs of the enemy apart from a solitary sniper who fired a few rounds before disappearing. At 0945, when Colonel Sweet's men were about four kilometers northwest of the Citadel, they reached a tiny hamlet called Thon Lieu Coc Thuong. As the Americans entered the hamlet, its inhabitants fled to a large island of trees two hundred meters to the southeast. Inside the hamlet, the battalion found freshly dug trenches and foxholes, as well as hundreds of little paper North Vietnamese flags.⁹² The enemy, it appeared, was now close at hand.

As the battalion searched the hamlet, snipers began firing at the Americans from the woods to the south where the villagers had fled. Consulting his map, Colonel Sweet saw that the island of trees sheltered the villages of Thon Que Chu and, to its south, Thon La Chu. The colonel called for an artillery strike from two South Vietnamese 105-mm. howitzers at PK-17. Without interpreters on hand to adjust the fire, however, the shelling proved to be ineffectual. Although the low cloud ceiling ruled out any close air support missions from the U.S. Air Force, brigade headquarters sent gunship and aerial rocket artillery helicopters to soften up the enemy position. The aircraft worked over Thon Que Chu for about an hour until one pilot mistakenly fired on the 2d Battalion, killing one soldier and wounding four. Colonel Sweet called off the helicopters. The preparatory bombardment had done little harm to the enemy, but General Tolson demanded that Sweet take Thon Que Chu without further delay. Colonel Sweet strongly recommended

⁹⁰ After-Action Interview (AAI), Hue, 2-5 Feb 68, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, 1 May 68, p. 3, box 30, AARs, 1965-1971, USARV Cmd Historian, RG 472, NARA.

⁹¹ Krohn, *The Lost Battalion*, p. 61.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 71.



waiting until the artillery battery attached to his battalion became operational at PK-17, but Tolson overruled him. Out of options, the colonel decided to take Thon Que Chu with a frontal assault.⁹³

In a scene reminiscent of a World War I infantry assault, around 150 troops from the unit charged across the open field separating them from Thon Que Chu, with the remainder of the battalion providing cover fire. North Vietnamese bullets and mortar fragments quickly took their toll on the advancing men, who had no cover other than a small cemetery in the middle of the field. Colonel Sweet fed more platoons into the attack, and helicopter scout ships reappeared to strafe the enemy positions. The attacking troops reached the tree line shortly after noon and drove the enemy deeper into Thon Que Chu. Nine soldiers had been killed, most from sniper rounds to the head, and another forty-eight had been wounded in the assault.⁹⁴

Once inside the woods, the Americans discovered an elaborate network of trenches and camouflaged bunkers. Clearly, the enemy had expended considerable time and energy fortifying the village. The thick hedgerows of bamboo and palm trees that divided the family holdings also offered formidable natural defenses. Bespeaking the prosperity of the village, some of its houses were sturdy stone-and-tile structures that were strong enough to deflect bullets or shell fragments. In midafternoon, the rest of the battalion crossed the open field and entered Thon Que Chu. With only a few hours of daylight left, Colonel Sweet decided to establish a night defense position and resume his advance the next morning.⁹⁵

The wisdom of Colonel Sweet's decision to stay put was proved when the North Vietnamese counterattacked his battalion only a short time after the troops had finished scooping out foxholes in the sandy soil and setting up mortar pits. Small-arms and machine-gun fire poured in from all directions, and Sweet soon realized that his men were surrounded by a much larger enemy force. The cavalrymen spent the rest of the day locked in a prolonged firefight with a better-armed North Vietnamese force equipped with 82-mm. mortars, 75-mm. recoilless rifles, and .51-caliber heavy machine guns, weapons typically associated with a regiment-size formation. The 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, repelled several strong probes and cleared out a number of snipers that crept into the village. The volume of enemy fire became so intense at times that it was nearly impossible for the cavalrymen to raise their heads above the rim of their foxholes for more than a second or two. One machine gunner, Sp4c. Steven M. Johnson, relied on his ammo bearer to spot targets for him by using a hand mirror. When the firefight finally died down, Johnson retrieved the C-rations he had stored around the lip of his foxhole only to find all of them so shredded by bullets and filled with mortar fragments as to be inedible.⁹⁶

⁹³ AAR, Hue, 2-5 Feb 68, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, p. 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹⁶ Interv, author with Steven M. Johnson, 27 Apr 05, Historians files, CMH.

Later that day, several helicopters were able to touch down in a small clearing inside the village long enough to evacuate the dead and the most seriously wounded Americans. When the battalion began to run low on ammunition, the unit's logistics officer, Maj. William I. Scudder, scrounged up an assortment of bullets and grenades from a Marine ordnance disposal site and convinced a few brave helicopter pilots to deliver the goods to Thon Que Chu. Without those shipments, the 2d Battalion would have run out of ammunition during the night.

At this point, Colonel Sweet still did not know the size or identity of the enemy force besieging him. As it happened, Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu harbored the headquarters of the *Hue City Front*, as well as the *416th Battalion* of the *5th PAVN Regiment* and all three battalions of the *29th Regiment, 325C Division*, the latter having just arrived after a forced march from Khe Sanh.⁹⁷ Colonel Sweet surmised that he had stumbled on a major staging area for reinforcements and supplies going into Hue, and he knew the enemy would make great sacrifices to preserve it.⁹⁸

Earlier that afternoon, around the time that the 2d Battalion was fighting its way into Thon Que Chu, Colonel Campbell and his 3d Brigade headquarters moved from Camp Evans to PK-17. General Tolson also flew down from his headquarters at Camp Evans to the South Vietnamese outpost to monitor the progress of Colonel Sweet's troops. Clearly, the 2d Battalion was in grave danger. Unless the unit received sustained artillery or air support, it might not survive the next determined assault. To Campbell's great relief, a convoy from Camp Evans arrived at PK-17 shortly before 1800, carrying ammunition for a pair of U.S. 105-mm. guns that had arrived earlier in the day. The artillery liaison officer with the 2d Battalion made sure that every shell counted, and Colonel Sweet's men, their spirits and their defensive power greatly improved, held their own throughout the night.

The 2d Battalion faced renewed enemy pressure on the morning of 4 February. Shortly after 0700, the chatter of North Vietnamese assault rifles and machine guns began in earnest once again as dozens of 82-mm. rounds and 122-mm. rockets began crashing into Thon Que Chu. Enemy troops crawled forward through the underbrush to locate an opening in the line, but Colonel Sweet plugged every gap that emerged with his meager reserves. Much of the killing took place at ranges of less than twenty meters. The 3d Brigade headquarters sent a rocket-armed helicopter to assist the 2d Battalion, but ground fire brought the aircraft down before it reached Thon Que Chu. Finding no weak spots in the American line, the North Vietnamese ended their attack fifteen minutes later. Though brief, the morning firefight cost the 2d Battalion another eleven killed and fifty-one wounded.⁹⁹

As the medics did what they could for the injured, Colonel Sweet reviewed the state of his battalion. He knew that his unit would be overrun if it remained in Thon Que Chu. Only about two

⁹⁷ Shelby L. Stanton, *The 1st Cav in Vietnam: Anatomy of a Division* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1987), p. 120; AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, tab G, p. 1; Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 32.

⁹⁸ Krohn, *The Lost Battalion*, p. 141.

⁹⁹ AAR, Hue, 2-5 Feb 68, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, p. 5; Krohn, *The Lost Battalion*, p. 100.

hundred men were still able to fight, most had gotten less than six hours of sleep over the last two days, and they were almost out of water. His closest source of help, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, was just then arriving at PK-17 and would take at least another twenty-four hours to reach Thon Que Chu. Even though the battalion logistics officer, Major Scudder, had loaded a medevac helicopter going into the village with ammunition and used a drawn pistol to warn away a senior officer who tried to unload the aircraft, supplies remained low because firefights flared up at regular intervals throughout the day.¹⁰⁰

Late in the afternoon, Colonel Sweet discussed the situation with his company commanders. After considering his options, he decided that the 2d Battalion would break free of the encirclement that evening. Despite the unit's predicament, Sweet was unwilling to take it back to PK-17 without first having accomplished its mission. He considered moving his men to another settlement fifteen hundred meters to the east but abandoned the idea after the observation aircraft he sent to investigate the hamlet barely avoided getting shot down by North Vietnamese anti-aircraft guns stationed there. Resolving to take action that the enemy probably least expected, the colonel decided to move his battalion deeper into enemy-held territory, to a small hill called Nha Nhan that rose from the plain several kilometers southwest of Thon Que Chu. Although his depleted unit had only limited offensive ability at this point, Sweet knew that the top of the hill would be an ideal spot to observe Communist troops as they moved into Hue and to direct air, artillery, and naval strikes down on them. After Colonel Campbell approved the plan, Colonel Sweet decided that the battalion would move out at 2000. He reasoned that the area would be completely dark and the enemy, with any luck, would be preoccupied with cooking food and repairing equipment.

That afternoon, the 2d Battalion prepared for its escape. The battalion's excess equipment went into a pile that engineers then rigged with explosives, timed to detonate later that night. A pair of Hueys flew into Thon Que Chu to evacuate several dozen wounded soldiers, but the helicopters did not have enough room to take the bodies of the eleven dead. Colonel Sweet ordered them to be buried in the sand so that they could be retrieved at a later date.

As darkness fell, the troopers quietly formed two columns, using tape and pieces of clothing to secure items that might make noise as they marched. Shortly after 2000, the battalion sneaked northwest toward a gap in the enemy line that appeared to be around seventy-five meters wide. The North Vietnamese sentries to either side did not see the Americans as they slipped away. After reaching the graveyard that stood between Thon Que Chu and Thon Lieu Coc Thuong, the battalion formed a single file, sent scouts out ahead, and began marching south. A few minutes later, the scouts froze when they heard the unmistakable sound of a machine-gun bolt being drawn. The unseen North Vietnamese troops manning the weapon were merely cleaning it, how-

¹⁰⁰ Krohn, *The Lost Battalion*, p. 100.

ever, and failed to notice the crouching Americans only a few meters away. The scouts quietly backtracked and led the battalion in a wide arc around the machine-gun nest without provoking further incident.

Approximately thirty minutes later, as the troops crossed a stream that lay southwest of Thon La Chu, they heard a massive explosion in the distance as several pounds of plastic explosives turned their excess equipment into an expanding ball of flame. At that prearranged signal, the 105-mm. guns at PK-17 began lobbing high-explosive and white phosphorous shells into Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu to cover the escape of the 2d Battalion. The heavy cruiser *Northampton* and the destroyer *Lofberg* also joined the bombardment and, over the next few hours, fired hundreds of rounds from their 8-inch and 5-inch naval guns. Meanwhile, Colonel Sweet and his men trudged through the night, every soldier concentrating on following the man in front of him; most of the men were staggering from exhaustion, and many suffered from minor wounds. As the battalion passed near several enemy-held settlements, Communist lookouts stationed there—apparently believing that the column was a line of North Vietnamese soldiers headed for the Citadel—shined flashlights for them to use as navigation beacons. A forward observer from the 1st Battalion, 77th Artillery, 1st Lt. John Toler, who was attached to Colonel Sweet's unit, recalled that at one point, a large group of North Vietnamese soldiers who were headed for the city actually crossed right in front of the American column, which remained quiet and motionless until the danger had passed.¹⁰¹

When the battalion finally reached Nha Nhan shortly after dawn, its men wearily climbed to the top of the ridge, which held an outpost manned by a South Vietnamese platoon. With the panorama of Hue spread out below them—looking deceptively peaceful apart from some rising columns of smoke and the occasional white-orange flash of a distant explosion—the Americans set up camp and snatched some much needed rest.

As soon as Colonel Sweet's men began to direct artillery and naval gunfire strikes on targets they observed on the plain below, the enemy stopped trying to move men and supplies into Hue during daylight hours. To discourage the enemy from approaching the hill at night, the division sent the 2d Battalion a .50-caliber machine gun and a searchlight. Although the North Vietnamese made no effort to assault Nha Nhan, they did try to cut off Colonel Sweet's supply channel by shooting at the helicopters that delivered food, water, and ammunition. A sniper from Company B, 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, Sp4c. Carl T. Johnson, recalled that the heavy enemy fire either seriously damaged or shot down at least four helicopters. To reduce their vulnerability to anti-aircraft fire, the UH-1 helicopters avoided landing on the hill whenever possible, instead swooping low over the summit and having their crews kick out supply crates as the aircraft roared past.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Interv, author with John Toler, 12 Apr 05, Historians files, CMH.

¹⁰² Interv, author with Carl Johnson, 19 Apr 05, Historians files, CMH.

Campbell was doing everything he could to get more of his brigade into the fight. Back at Camp Evans on 5 February, two companies from the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, boarded helicopters and flew to PK-17. After they arrived at their destination, the paratroopers established a new base, Landing Zone SALLY, a few hundred meters away from the South Vietnamese outpost to protect its vital landing strip. The arrival of the paratroopers permitted the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, commanded by Lt. Col. James B. Vaught, which had been guarding the outpost, to begin its march toward Thon Trung, a village four kilometers to the south thought to be the location of enemy mortar and rocket crews who had been shelling Camp Evans.¹⁰³

As the two lead companies from the battalion approached the village around 1030, they began to receive small-arms and mortar fire. At the same time, enemy machine gunners fifteen hundred meters to the southeast riddled a command-and-control helicopter that was flying a mission on behalf of the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry. The stricken aircraft crash-landed in enemy-held territory. A short time later, a second helicopter swooped in to rescue the downed crew and passengers; but the Americans still needed to recover the damaged aircraft. The 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, turned away from its original mission and spent the rest of the day trying to reach the wreckage; but enemy resistance prevented the men from reclaiming the helicopter.

The battalion resumed its advance the next day, 6 February. After a brief skirmish, it secured the downed helicopter, then returned to Thon Trung. The battalion overran the village and found a cache of enemy supplies so large that the men took the rest of the day to dispose of it. The 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, spent the night in the village and resumed its march to Thon Que Chu the next morning.¹⁰⁴

Around 1100, as the lead company entered a small hamlet midway between Thon Trung and Thon Lieu Coc Thuong, a helicopter landed and unloaded supplies. On taking off, the aircraft made a slow turn over Thon Que Chu, apparently oblivious to the danger below. The woods immediately erupted with machine-gun and small-arms fire, and the heavily damaged helicopter made a crash landing on the other side of Thon Lieu Coc Thuong. Colonel Vaught, who had planned to attack Thon Que Chu from his present position later that day, instead turned his battalion east to the crash site. After waiting for a quick artillery and naval gunfire barrage to soften up Thon Lieu Coc Thuong, Vaught's troops stormed the village. There, they discovered dozens of uncompleted fighting positions and extensive communication wire but no Communists. Emerging from the other side of the village, the soldiers secured the downed helicopter and rescued its crew while gunships suppressed a smattering of enemy machine-gun and mortar fire that came from Thon Que Chu.¹⁰⁵ With evening fast approaching, Vaught decided to stay put for the night and begin converting the village to a forward base of operations.

¹⁰³ AAR, Battalion Attack, 5th Bn, 7th Cav, 14th Mil Hist Det, 4 May 68, pp. 2-3, box 30, AARs, 1965-1971, USARV Cmd Historian, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

¹⁰⁵ Rpt, Operation HUE CITY, 31st Mil Hist Det, Aug 68, p. 32, Historians files, CMH.

The colonel opted for a two-company probe of Thon Que Chu the next morning. One company crossed the open field quickly; but the unit in its right flank, some three hundred meters away, encountered heavy enemy fire and stopped fifty meters short of the woods. Vaught sent two platoons from another company to help and called in some fifteen hundred rounds of artillery from PK-17, but several hours of intense fighting took place before the pinned company managed to extract itself. American losses totaled two killed and seven wounded. Seeing that Thon Que Chu was extremely well defended and probably could not be taken by a single battalion, Colonel Vaught ordered the men from the first company to pull back to Thon Lieu Coc Thuong for the night.¹⁰⁶

Hearing from Vaught that a frontal assault was all but impossible, Colonel Campbell began looking for another way in. On 9 February, the 3d Brigade commander instructed Colonel Sweet's battalion on Nha Nhan to probe Thon La Chu from the south. As the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, moved out that morning, accompanied by the South Vietnamese platoon from the hill outpost, the men encountered a squad of well-camouflaged snipers and at least one spotter at the base of the hill. North Vietnamese bullets and mortar fragments killed two Americans and wounded twelve others before a team of cavalrymen outflanked the enemy, killing at least three of the sharpshooters. More trouble lay ahead. As the unit was crossing a rice field that led to the village of Thon Bon Tri, a small wooded settlement fifteen hundred meters south of Thon La Chu, a battalion or more of North Vietnamese opened fire from the tree line. The Americans quickly lost another two men killed and ten wounded. Unable to advance and with darkness fast approaching, Colonel Sweet decided to pull his unit back to the woods at the foot of Nha Nhan for the night.¹⁰⁷

Evidence was mounting that Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu were defended by a regiment or more of disciplined and well-equipped North Vietnamese soldiers. Colonel Campbell needed to get more of his brigade into the fight, but he still did not have enough aviation fuel, spare parts, and artillery shells, despite yeoman efforts by the U.S. Air Force to ease the shortfall. Transport aircraft kept food, fuel, and ammunition flowing into Camp Evans using pathfinders on the ground and radar control teams for guidance because the cloud ceiling rarely exceeded three hundred feet and was often much lower. At times, visibility was so poor that observers at the camp never saw the transport planes but only the parachuted supplies when they emerged through the low-hanging clouds. Between 4 and 8 February alone, U.S. Air Force C-130s flew thirty-four missions and delivered nearly 1 million pounds of supplies. Even so, Campbell needed regular truck convoys to resume between Camp Evans and the Marine base at Dong Ha before he could bring the full weight of the 3d Brigade to bear.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ AAR, Battalion Attack, 5th Bn, 7th Cav, 14th Mil Hist Det, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰⁷ AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, tab C, p. 3; Daily Jnl, S-2/3, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, 9 Feb 68, pp. 1-3, box 5, Daily Jnl, Asst CofS, S-3, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, Cav Units, USARV, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁰⁸ Interv, Whitehorse with Tolson, 24 Jun 68, p. 5; AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, tab AE, p. 1.

THE FIGHT FOR THE TRIANGLE AND THE CITADEL: 2–10 FEBRUARY

As troops from the 1st Cavalry Division began closing in on the Citadel from the west, the marines in southern Hue continued their block-by-block struggle. At 1100 on 2 February, a truck convoy from Phu Bai delivered another company of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, to the advisory compound. Also in the convoy were two M50 Ontos carriers, squat, tracked vehicles that carried six 106-mm. recoilless rifles capable of blowing apart concrete walls and fortified enemy positions. They went into action that afternoon when the marines tried to seize the university buildings just northwest of the advisory compound. The unarmed vehicles were vulnerable to enemy fire, however, and had difficulty getting a clear shot because the narrow streets restricted their lines of sight. When darkness began to fall three hours later, the weary marines called off the attack and pulled back to the compound.

The allies suffered a setback that evening when the *815th Battalion* finally overran the provincial headquarters and prison. The enemy soldiers got inside when a South Vietnamese turncoat pointed out a weak spot in the building's defense. Once in control of the prison, the North Vietnamese released approximately 2,500 inmates, including 350 Communist agents and sympathizers, and pressed them into service as manual laborers and stretcher bearers.¹⁰⁹

The situation in the Triangle improved only slightly for the allies on 3 February. The commander of the 1st Marines, Col. Stanley S. Hughes, and his staff arrived at the advisory compound that morning to take charge of the battle. With grim determination, his marines repeatedly assaulted the public health facility, the post office, and the treasury office a few blocks west of the advisory compound; but the enemy hardly budged. Well protected by heavy concrete walls, the North Vietnamese had excellent fields of fire and a seemingly inexhaustible supply of small-arms ammunition and rocket grenades. When night came, the front line was mostly where it had been at the start of the day.

On 4 February, the marines at last began to make some small gains. That morning, a second company from the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, moved by truck convoy from Phu Bai to the advisory compound. Around the same time, the four Marine companies that had seen action the previous day renewed their push to the west. Using a combination of M72 antitank weapons, 3.5-inch rocket launchers, 106-mm. recoilless rifles, and tear gas, the marines succeeded in recapturing several blocks by day's end.

Even so, the *815th* and *818th Battalions*, along with elements of the *2d Sapper Battalion*, still controlled the western part of the Triangle. The *810th Battalion* occupied its northern corner. The *804th Battalion* and the *1st Sapper Battalion* had set up a defensive line near Highway 1 on the south side of the Phu Cam Canal. Early that evening, a sapper platoon finally managed to

¹⁰⁹ Rpt, Special Intelligence Study no. 33-68, 101st Abn Div, p. 4; DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027656768, 22 Jul 68, sub: After Action Report, p. 6.

destroy the An Cuu Bridge, severing the ground link between Hue and Phu Bai. Until the span was repaired, the Americans in southern Hue would have to rely on helicopters and rivercraft for all their logistical needs.¹¹⁰

The next day, 5 February, the Marine task force continued to make slow but steady progress. It secured the main hospital building at 1630 and reclaimed another block or two along the waterfront. The expanding Marine foothold allowed Navy landing craft to dock at the ramp for the first time since the battle began, although not without attracting a heavy volume of fire from North Vietnamese soldiers who manned the southeastern wall of the Citadel.¹¹¹

On 6 February, the marines turned their attention to the provincial headquarters and the prison. Using tear gas to incapacitate the North Vietnamese soldiers, who had few if any protective masks, they captured both facilities in a fierce battle that lasted until midafternoon. From the documents and materials they captured, the marines deduced that the provincial administration building had recently served as the headquarters of the *5th PAVN Regiment*. The tired but elated marines hauled down a Viet Cong banner that had flown from a flagpole in the courtyard and raised the stars and stripes while a CBS film crew captured the event.¹¹²

When the marines resumed their westward attack on 7 February, they made comparatively rapid progress, and the Communists left behind an ever-increasing number of weapons and bodies. The most dramatic action of the morning came when sappers destroyed the Nguyen Hoang Bridge to prevent the Americans from crossing the river and attacking the southeastern wall of the Citadel. With that act, the enemy tacitly admitted defeat on the south bank of the river. Worn down by more than a week of incessant combat and effectively cut off from their comrades on the other side of the river, the *815th* and *2d Sapper Battalions* moved to the southern side of the Phu Cam Canal, where the *818th Battalion* was already in place.¹¹³ The *804th Battalion* and the *1st Sapper Battalion* remained south of the canal near the An Cuu Bridge while the *810th Battalion* began preparing to sneak west across the Perfume River by raft and boat to Gia Hoi Island.¹¹⁴

The marines spent the next several days rounding up enemy stragglers from the Triangle. On 10 February, a battalion from the 327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, flew from III Corps to Phu Bai. The unit relieved several Marine companies in the area, which General LaHue then sent to Hue. The first of these reinforcements had to dismount from their trucks at the ruined An Cuu Bridge and move across it by foot. When engineers finished building a pontoon bridge next to the ruined span four days later, truck convoys were once again able to move freely between Phu Bai and Hue.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ CDEC Bulletin no. 16250, 6 Sep 68, p. 2.

¹¹¹ Rpt, Operation HUE CITY, 31st Mil Hist Det, p. 29.

¹¹² Ibid., pp. 189–90.

¹¹³ DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027448568, 29 May 68, sub: Attack on Hue City, p. 8, Historians files, CMH; DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027656768, 22 Jul 68, sub: After Action Report, p. 8.

¹¹⁴ Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 41.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 35.

While General LaHue's marines were busy retaking the Triangle, the South Vietnamese forces under General Truong were slowly expanding their foothold in the Citadel. On 2 February, helicopters brought the remainder of the South Vietnamese 4th Battalion, 2d Regiment, as well as a company from the 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment, to the 1st Division compound. Once assembled, the infantrymen began clawing their way through the ruined and enemy-infested streets toward the southeastern wall. Meanwhile, the depleted 2d and 7th Airborne Battalions and some armored personnel carriers pushed west and recaptured the Tay Loc Airfield, rescuing the group of ordnance soldiers who had held out defiantly in its southeastern corner since the opening hours of the offensive. Around the time the paratroopers secured the airfield, Marine helicopters brought the South Vietnamese 9th Airborne Battalion from Quang Tri City to the Mang Ca compound. By nightfall, the government forces had regained control over most of the Citadel's northwestern quarter.¹¹⁶

The next day, 3 February, the 1st Airborne Task Force attacked into the neighborhoods west of the Tay Loc Airfield. Despite a day of furious fighting that claimed several hundred Communist lives, the enemy's skillful use of the urban terrain for protection prevented the paratroopers from making significant progress. Over the preceding four days, the North Vietnamese had transformed hundreds of buildings, many of them constructed of stone and masonry thick enough to withstand small-arms fire, into a series of defensive lines and interconnected strong points. In addition, most of the homes already featured foxholes and bunkers, built by their inhabitants to escape the occasional mortar barrages that hit the city. North Vietnamese troops also occupied dug-in positions on the Citadel walls, which gave them a commanding view of nearby streets and excellent observation points from which to direct their mortar fire.

Despite those obstacles, the allied situation improved somewhat on 4 February. In the eastern part of the city, General Truong's infantry pushed the enemy back to a line that was roughly half-way across the Citadel. In the northwestern sector, a South Vietnamese infantry battalion recaptured the An Hoa Gate. The paratroopers also made some small gains to the west of the airfield. On the south bank of the Perfume River, the 4th Battalion, 3d Regiment, now down to 170 men, finally broke through the *810th Battalion* east of the Triangle and made its way to the advisory compound.¹¹⁷

The South Vietnamese used 5 February to reposition their forces and consolidate their gains in the Citadel. Although the enemy had lost nearly seven hundred men according to South Vietnamese estimates, the *6th Regiment* showed no signs of cracking. General Truong moved the paratroopers from the Tay Loc Airfield to the eastern sector of the city, where the enemy was particularly strong. The airborne task force replaced the 4th Battalion, 2d Regiment, which moved to the airfield, then advanced toward the southwestern wall. On its right flank, the 1st Battalion, 3d Regiment, pushed

¹¹⁶ AAR, The Battle of Hue, 45th Mil Hist Det, p. 6.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 6; Rpt, Operation HUE CITY, 31st Mil Hist Det, p. 22.

toward the Chanh Tay Gate and the western corner of the Citadel. Meanwhile, the 4th Battalion, 3d Regiment, which was camped on the south bank of the river, crossed the still-intact Nguyen Hoang Bridge and assaulted the Thuong Tu Gate near the eastern corner of the old city. When seven successive attempts to breach the gate failed, the battalion joined the South Vietnamese 2d and 3d Battalions, 3d Regiment, camped outside the walls near the southern corner of the Citadel. That evening, General Truong arranged for boats to transport all three units to the Mang Ca compound as quickly as possible.¹¹⁸

The government forces had some reason to hope early on 6 February. The 1st Battalion, 3d Regiment, cleared the enemy from the western corner of the Citadel while the 4th Battalion, 2d Regiment, pushed to within a few blocks of the southwestern wall. For a brief time, the South Vietnamese seemed to be on the verge of cutting the *6th Regiment* in two, separating the North Vietnamese in the eastern part of the city from those who held the southwestern wall and its gates. That hope proved to be fleeting. Late that evening, several hundred North Vietnamese reinforcements—probably a battalion or more of the *29th Infantry Regiment* from Thon La Chu—scaled the southwestern wall with grappling hooks and ferociously counterattacked the 4th Battalion, 2d Regiment. Caught off guard, the South Vietnamese unit fell back all the way to the Tay Loc Airfield. A break in the clouds gave South Vietnamese aircraft the chance to drop 500-pound bombs on the part of the southwestern wall where the enemy could be observed clambering over; but despite several accurate strikes, Communist reinforcements continued to flow into the Citadel.¹¹⁹

General Truong received additional troops of his own the next day. On 7 February, U.S. Navy landing craft transported the 2d, 3d, and 4th Battalions of the South Vietnamese 3d Regiment from the southern corner of the Citadel to the 1st Division headquarters. Later in the evening, a South Vietnamese infantry company from the 1st Regiment and the South Vietnamese 2d Troop, 7th Cavalry, equipped with fifteen M113 armored personnel carriers, arrived from Quang Tri City. To avoid ambushes similar to the one the *806th Battalion* had sprung in the cemetery, the task force turned off Highway 1 a few kilometers north of the city, traveled east cross-country, and swung around the rear of the Mang Ca compound through the Trai Gate. The column took special pains to evade the enemy because the armored personnel carriers had used up all their machine-gun ammunition during the battle for Quang Tri City. After replenishing its supplies, the cavalry troop went into action near the airfield. The unit it relieved, the 3d Troop, 7th Cavalry, had at this point only three armored personnel carriers still in working order. The battered 3d Troop withdrew to the Mang Ca compound to refit and to provide security for the headquarters.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Rpt, Operation HUE CITY, 31st Mil Hist Det, p. 27.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

¹²⁰ Ibid., pp. 30, 32.

Taking stock of the situation that evening, General Truong had on hand his entire 3d Regiment, a battalion from the 2d Regiment, two companies from the 1st Regiment, three paratrooper battalions from the 1st Airborne Task Force, two armored cavalry squadrons, and his elite Hac Bao company. His force, however, was less formidable than it seemed at first glance. Combat had reduced some of the battalions to fewer than two hundred effective soldiers. Food and ammunition were running low. Exhaustion and a steady stream of casualties were sapping morale. The South Vietnamese units had few heavy weapons, such as mortars and recoilless rifles, with which to dislodge the enemy from the stone buildings and the thick hedgerows common to the old city. The consistently bad weather prevented all but the bravest or most foolhardy pilots from flying air support missions. Although General Truong estimated that the Communists in the Citadel had lost nearly twelve hundred men killed since the start of the offensive, a steady stream of North Vietnamese replacements and supplies continued to flow over the southwestern wall and through the Huu Gate. Until he received more troops or substantially more artillery and air support, Truong knew that progress was bound to be slow.¹²¹

Unknown to the allies, the Communists tried to use their own air power to support the attack on Hue. On 7 February, the North Vietnamese sent four Soviet-made IL-14 medium-transport aircraft racing toward Hue from an airfield near Hanoi. The air crews had not been informed, however, that flying weather over Thua Thien Province was terrible. Two of the aircraft carrying explosives, antitank ammunition, and field telephone cables managed to find an opening in the cloud layer about ten kilometers north of Hue. They dropped their cargoes in a large lagoon for local forces to retrieve. One of the aircraft returned safely; but the other, flying through dense fog, crashed into a mountain, losing all on board. Meanwhile, the other two IL-14s, which had been modified to drop bombs, had orders to bomb General Truong's headquarters. Neither flight crew could find the city in the fog, however, and both aircraft returned to North Vietnam without dropping their bombs. They tried again five days later, but once again, bad weather prevented them from locating the Mang Ca compound. The two aircraft radioed that they were scrubbing the mission, then headed out to sea to jettison their bombs. A short time later, their transmissions went dead and they were never heard from again.¹²²

Back on the ground in the Citadel, the next several days brought few changes to the tactical situation. General Truong tried to regain the initiative on 8 February by sending the 2d, 3d, and 4th Battalions of the 3d Regiment to seize the southwestern wall. North Vietnamese soldiers stubbornly clung to a line of buildings at the base of the wall, preventing the government soldiers from accomplishing their task. One of their specific targets, a bunker south of the Chanh Tay Gate

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 32.

¹²² Nguyen Trong Thuan, ed., *Lich Su Su Doan Khong Quan 371 [History of the 371st Air Force Division]*, (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan [Vietnamese People's Army Publishing House], 1997), pp. 124–27.

that appeared to house a regimental headquarters, proved to be an especially tough assignment. The South Vietnamese attacked the position repeatedly, sometimes getting close enough to engage with enemy in hand-to-hand combat, but the North Vietnamese troops continued to pour out a steady volume of rocket-propelled grenade and machine-gun fire that blunted each assault. The heavy volume of fire indicated that the Communist supply lines were still in good order, although on occasion, the enemy resorted to using captured weapons. At one point, for example, North Vietnamese soldiers fired off a number of 2.75-inch rockets they had captured from the Tay Loc Airfield by using their shipping tubes as improvised launchers.¹²³

General Truong was encouraged to hear on 9 February that the headquarters of the South Vietnamese Marine Battle Group A and one battalion had arrived at Phu Bai from III Corps. The task force, a three-battalion group with some light artillery that had recently helped defeat the Viet Cong offensive in Saigon, had come north to relieve the battered 1st Airborne Task Force in the Citadel. President Thieu wanted the paratroop force, a de facto “palace guard” that represented the core of his strategic reserve force, to return to Saigon at once to be rested and restored. The Vietnamese Marine commander had instructions from his superiors to wait until his entire task force had assembled at Phu Bai before leaving for Hue; thus, the South Vietnamese marines did not move into the Citadel until the afternoon of 12 February. In the interim, the battle for the old city settled into a bloody stalemate and General LaHue’s frustration with the slow pace of operations mounted.¹²⁴

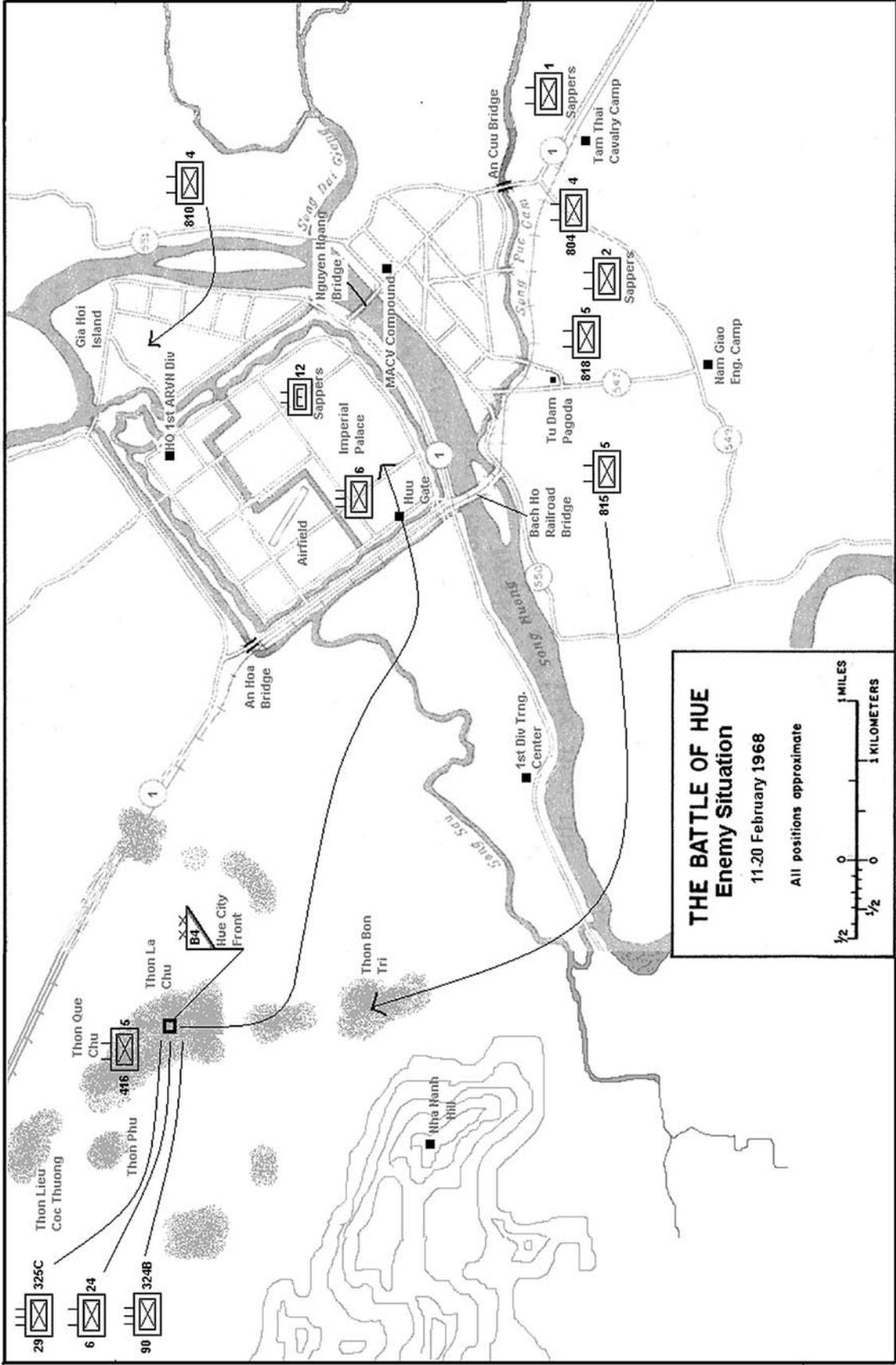
WEST OF HUE: 11–20 FEBRUARY

West of the Citadel, on top of Nha Nhan Hill, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, continued to face a nearly intractable problem. Colonel Sweet wanted to get moving against the North Vietnamese positions in the valley below, but he had only the vaguest idea of their strength and dispositions. (*See Maps 8 and 9.*) Shortly before midnight on 11 February, Colonel Sweet sent a squad of volunteers down the hill and into the woods surrounding Thon Bon Tri to assess the enemy’s position. Using a starlight night-vision scope, the group discovered that the North Vietnamese had built an elaborate trench just inside the tree line. The scouts also observed a second trench studded with bunkers a short distance behind the first. When the squad returned to the summit of Nha Nhan and described what it had seen, Colonel Sweet realized that a daylight frontal attack against such a position would be suicidal. After Sweet explained the situation to his superior, Colonel Campbell decided to keep the 2d Battalion on top of Nha Nhan rather than send it in a futile attack against Thon Bon Tri.¹²⁵

¹²³ Interv, Peyton with Webb, 11 Mar 68.

¹²⁴ AAR, The Battle of Hue, 45th Mil Hist Det, p. 7.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 6.



Even though the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, was temporarily out of the picture, Campbell decided to make another effort against Thon Que Chu with the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry. On the morning of 12 February, a massive artillery bombardment and dozens of shells from the 8-inch guns of the *Northampton* pummeled the objective area. Even so, when Vaught's battalion stepped out of Thon Lie Coc Thuong shortly past noon, a chatter of machine-gun and small-arms fire greeted the Americans from the far tree line. Two of the cavalry companies reached the edge of the woods, only to retreat a short time later when they began taking heavy casualties from a torrent of enemy grenades and captured U.S. Claymores. The Americans lost five killed and thirty-four wounded in the assault. Later that day, U.S. Air Force F-111 aircraft flying at high altitudes and using radar guidance paid some misery back to the North Vietnamese by dropping sixteen tons of bombs and five tons of napalm on Thon La Chu. Spectacular as the strike was, however, the cavalrymen knew that it was no substitute for low-level, precision bombing, the kind necessary to destroy the hardened bunkers that dotted the settlement.¹²⁶

Colonel Campbell decided to forgo new assaults against Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu until the weather had cleared and he had more infantry at his disposal. To that end, General Tolson gave Campbell command of the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, which began moving south from Camp Evans to PK-17 on 12 February. The enemy still had the ability to move men and supplies between Thon La Chu and the Citadel; for example, the *815th Battalion, 5th Regiment*, crossed the Perfume River and occupied Thon Bon Tri on 13 February, and the same night, the *9th Battalion, 29th Regiment*, moved from Thon La Chu into the old city. Nonetheless, Campbell was now in a better position to cut the enemy's supply line between Thon La Chu and the western hills. On 15 February, a company from the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, discovered a North Vietnamese force of equal size, possibly a rear-service element, when it swept through the village of Thon Trung. After artillery and aerial rocket helicopters softened up the North Vietnamese position, two companies from the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, flew in by helicopter to join the assault. The three American companies killed at least fifty-eight Communists and drove the rest from the village. Slowly, the cordon was closing around Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu.¹²⁷

On 15 February, Westmoreland's deputy, General Abrams, assumed command of MACV Forward, which had become operational at Phu Bai three days earlier. Despite his public statements to the contrary, Westmoreland harbored doubts that III Marine Amphibious Force could handle the growing complexity of the war in the northern two provinces and was relieved to have Abrams on the scene. The MACV commander softened the blow to Marine pride by explaining

¹²⁶ AAI, Battalion Attack, 5th Bn, 7th Cav, 14th Mil Hist Det, p. 4.

¹²⁷ AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, incl 1, p. 3; Daily Jnl, S-2/3, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, 14 Feb 68, p. 1; Rpt, Operation HUE CITY, 31st Mil Hist Det, pp. 39-40; Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, pp. 39-40.

that the new headquarters was only a temporary expedient as he set out to elevate III Marine Amphibious Force to field-army level, one that would include a subordinate Army corps. For the present, however, MACV Forward exercised tactical authority over all American combat units north of the Hai Van Pass, giving Westmoreland a high degree of control over the fighting in northern I Corps.¹²⁸

When Abrams met with Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, General Lam, and General Cushman on the afternoon of 16 February, he declared that their first priority should be to close down the enemy supply route west of the Citadel.¹²⁹ Allied intelligence suggested that at least three new battalions and a regimental headquarters from western Quang Tri Province had come down from the hills and entered the battlefield in the last few days. The longer the enemy held Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu, Abrams argued, the longer the battle in the Citadel would go on. The others concurred. Colonel Campbell's 3d Brigade would, therefore, get the lion's share of whatever extra resources Abrams could squeeze out of his command.¹³⁰

Fortunately for Campbell, the logistics situation was finally beginning to improve. On 15 February, the number of daily supply convoys shuttling between Dong Ha and Camp Evans increased from one to three. Four days later, the colonel obtained control over another infantry battalion, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, from the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, which gave him a total of four battalions he could use against the enemy west of Hue.¹³¹

Although the weather still had not improved by 20 February, Colonel Campbell believed that he had enough manpower at last to seize Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu. He also hoped that the constant rain of allied bombs and shells had taken a toll on their defenders. Over the last week alone, approximately 10,000 artillery shells, 27 tons of bombs delivered by air strikes, and 490 naval gunfire rounds had crashed down on the villages.¹³²

On 20 February, Campbell moved his battalions into their attack position. The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, was airlifted from Camp Evans to Landing Zone SALLY, the small landing zone next to PK-17, then marched to a jump-off point just west of Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu. On its right flank was the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, which had spent the morning clearing the village of Thon Trung for a second time after an enemy company had moved back in. Meanwhile, in the hamlet of Thon Lieu Coc Thuong, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, prepared for its fourth assault against the far woods. During the preceding week, the battalion had held a series of training exercises to teach the soldiers how to use demolitions, including satchel charges and bangalore

¹²⁸ Msg, COMUSMACV 1233 to CINCPAC, 26 Jan 68; Msg, COMUSMACV 1011 to CJCS, 22 Jan 68, sub: Visit to Washington by Richard E. Cavazos, LTC Inf, USA, both in Westmoreland Message files, CMH; Gen William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1976), p. 345.

¹²⁹ ORLL, 1 Feb-30 Apr 68, XXIV Prov Corps, Vietnam, 4 Jun 68, p. 2, box 67, ORLLs, 1966-1971, USARV Cmd Historian, RG 472, NARA.

¹³⁰ AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, tab V, p. 2.

¹³¹ AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, incl 1, p. 3.

¹³² AAR Battalion Attack, 5th Bn, 7th Cav, 14th Mil Hist Det, p. 5.

torpedoes, to dislodge the enemy from bunkers and hedgerows. Colonel Campbell also loaned the battalion a pair of M42 Dusters, whose 40-mm. cannon could provide rapid and accurate supporting fire against fortified positions. Finally, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, sent two companies into the valley to circle around the northwest side of Thon Bon Tri and attack it from the rear. Now with sufficient manpower and artillery at his disposal for a coordinated and sustained attack, Colonel Campbell resolved to take Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu early the next morning.¹³³

STALEMATE IN THE CITADEL: 11–20 FEBRUARY

On 10 February, the commander of the 1st Marines, Colonel Hughes, declared that major enemy resistance had ended in southern Hue. He immediately earmarked several fresh companies of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, to help retake the Citadel. One of the units had arrived in southern Hue just that day, and the others would make the trip from Phu Bai within the next twenty-four hours. The 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry, from the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, flew from Bien Hoa to Phu Bai to take over the sector formerly occupied by the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. To support his troops, Colonel Hughes could call on four 155-mm. howitzers that were based at Landing Zone EL PASO, a battery of 105-mm. howitzers in southern Hue, and a pair of 4.2-inch mortars in the Hue stadium a short distance east of the advisory compound. The latter weapons were capable of firing tear-gas canisters, as well as high-explosive rounds. The South Vietnamese high command had prohibited Hughes from firing on targets inside the Citadel because such strikes would pose a great risk to both civilians and the historic architecture of Hue. The success of the Marine effort, therefore, depended largely on the bravery and skill of a few hundred riflemen.¹³⁴

On 11 February, a day after South Vietnamese troops swept the last surviving Communists from the neighborhoods around the Tay Loc Airfield, U.S. helicopters began landing there with the Vietnamese Marine task force and six 105-mm. guns transported from Phu Bai. A reduced company from the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, was also airlifted from Phu Bai to the Mang Ca compound. The weather turned nasty in the afternoon, however, and only the headquarters and one company of the Vietnamese Marine task force made it into the city before clouds and rain grounded the helicopters. Two days would pass before the skies cleared enough for the airlift to resume. Later on the same day, a second company from the 1st Battalion and five Marine tanks traveled by landing craft from southern Hue to the 1st Division headquarters.

On 13 February, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, Maj. Robert H. Thompson; his staff; and a reinforced company boarded a landing craft on the south bank of the Perfume River

¹³³ AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, tab E, p. 2.

¹³⁴ Shulimson, *The Defining Year, 1968*, p. 194.

and traveled to the Mang Ca compound. Enemy snipers and mortar crews did their best to hit the vessels, each dangerously laden with fuel and ammunition, but the boats reached their destination safely. Once at the 1st Division compound, Thompson had a meeting with General Truong. The major proposed that his marines relieve the South Vietnamese paratroopers in the eastern half of the Citadel, then attack toward the southeastern wall the following morning.

General Truong, relieved to see American troops in the Citadel at last, agreed to the plan. But what Truong either did not know or failed to tell Major Thompson was that the South Vietnamese 1st Airborne Task Force had already pulled out of its sector and departed for Saigon. Accordingly, when three companies of Thompson's battalion moved toward their jump-off line in the eastern quarter of the city on the morning of 13 February, the two units that were leading the way collided with an equally large force of North Vietnamese troops who had quietly reclaimed several residential blocks that had been under control of the South Vietnamese paratroopers. Company A sustained thirty-five casualties in the first few minutes of contact, including its company commander, who was badly wounded.

Thompson moved quickly to stabilize the front line and get his marines moving forward. He withdrew the crippled company and replaced it with the one in reserve. With the help of two M48 tanks, the two Marine companies at the front advanced about three hundred meters before they were halted by heavy enemy fire coming from an archway tower at the Dong Ba Gate. The North Vietnamese had dug fighting positions in the massive stone portal that were impervious to anything less than a direct hit by artillery or tank fire. Major Thompson called off the attack until he could coordinate heavier supporting fire.

On the morning of 14 February, an array of 155-mm. and 8-inch howitzers and 5- and 8-inch naval guns pounded the Dong Ba Gate. A break in the weather gave U.S. Air Force fighter-bombers an opportunity to plaster the target with napalm and rockets. Despite the tremendous weight of ordnance that fell on the tower, the North Vietnamese refused to abandon it. The marines gained some ground on their right flank, coming nearly to the edge of the Imperial Palace, but could make no headway that day against the Dong Ba Gate. Thompson called off the effort just before dark. Around that same time, the fourth company of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, boarded landing craft in southern Hue and traveled to the Citadel. Major Thompson decided to send the fresh unit against the Dong Ba Gate the following morning.

On the other side of the city, the South Vietnamese marines were having an equally hard time retaking the four square city blocks to the southwest of the Imperial Palace. On 13 February, Navy landing craft brought the remainder of the Vietnamese Marine Battle Group A from southern Hue into the Citadel to join the forward element from the group that was already there. The battle group replaced the weary South Vietnamese 3d Regiment, which moved from the southwest sector to the northwest part of the Citadel.

The Vietnamese marines attacked the next morning, heading southwest toward the Perfume River with the Imperial Palace on their left flank. The marines advanced only four hundred meters during the next two days, partly because the enemy had turned every house into a stronghold and dotted every yard with fighting pits and partly because the marines lacked heavy weapons, particularly the 106-mm. recoilless rifles that were proving so useful to the Americans.

Meanwhile, the 3d Regiment discovered that the North Vietnamese troops who had been forced into the western corner of the Citadel near the An Hoa Bridge were still full of fight. On 14 February, an enemy counterattack drove a wedge through the regiment and isolated one of its battalions. It took the 3d Regiment two days to rescue the unit and clear out the remaining pockets of enemy resistance in the northwestern sector. Once that mission had been accomplished, the South Vietnamese 3d Regiment joined the Vietnamese Marine task force—now bolstered by a third battalion from Saigon—in the southwestern sector as the final push to the Perfume River got underway.¹³⁵

Thompson's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, continued to grind ahead in the eastern sector of the city. On 15 February, after a round of artillery, naval gunfire, and air strikes collapsed part of the tower that rose above the Dong Ba Gate, the fourth company of Thompson's battalion assaulted the ruined structure with the help of several tanks and Ontos carriers. Because the enemy still had a plentiful supply of rocket-propelled grenades, the vehicles had to exercise great caution, especially the unarmed Ontos carriers, which lacked protection even against rifle fire. To reduce their vulnerability, the vehicles would emerge from cover only long enough to fire off a single round before dashing back behind a protective wall or building.

The enemy troops who had dug themselves into the rubble showed no signs of wavering, despite the terrific bombardment they had endured. Six hours of close-range fighting between American and North Vietnamese soldiers tore apart what had once been an elegant, tree-lined neighborhood. Finally, a platoon from Company D won a toehold at the base of the tower. Thompson threw in his reserves, and the Americans soon overran the entire structure. During the night, a platoon of North Vietnamese soldiers reoccupied part of the Dong Ba Gate, but the marines drove them off once they had been discovered.

On 16 February, Major Thompson's battalion made slow but steady progress toward the southeastern wall. Most of the time, the marines were under fire from three directions at once: North Vietnamese snipers brought flanking fire on the marines from the taller buildings on Gia Hoi Island to the east and from the walls of the Imperial Palace to the west. Thompson used artillery, naval gunfire, and an occasional air strike to suppress the enemy on the outer wall but could do nothing about the snipers in the Imperial Palace because the royal residence was a no-fire zone. Despite the harassing fire from left and right, the marines slogged ahead.

¹³⁵ AAR, NVA/VC Tet Offensive: Hue, 1st Inf Div Adv Det, Adv Team 3, p. 11.

By this point in the battle, the Americans had become skillful street fighters and could distinguish which structures on a block were keys to breaking the enemy's front line. Supported by mortars, tanks, and Ontos carriers and sometimes using riot-control agents that required them to wear gas masks, the marines darted forward in small groups to clear each room and building one at a time. The North Vietnamese were equally adept at urban combat and often mounted ferocious counterattacks to regain buildings that were important to their defensive scheme. The enemy soldiers used every house, hedgerow, and ditch to their advantage and knew the layout of the neighborhood far better than the Americans did. Hour by hour, Thompson's marines kept moving forward but only slowly and at great cost. The marines could see the southeastern wall only a few blocks from their position, but the ground between was a nightmare of crumbled masonry, pock-marked buildings, and craters that gave the enemy excellent defensive positions.¹³⁶

The North Vietnamese were determined to make the inevitable allied victory as costly and time-consuming as possible. Although the enemy controlled only about one-third of the Citadel at that stage, new supplies and reinforcements arrived from the west every night. Several days earlier, the *6th Battalion, 24th Regiment, 304th Division*, originally located near Khe Sanh, reached the Citadel after following a route that took it through Base Area 101, Base Area 114, and Thon La Chu. The *7th Battalion, 90th Regiment, 324B Division*, was due to arrive a few days later after a forced march from the Demilitarized Zone. Even the death of the senior North Vietnamese commander in the Citadel by an artillery strike on 16 February did nothing to shake the enemy's resolve. When the officer who succeeded him relayed the news of his predecessor's death to the *Hue City Front* headquarters in Thon La Chu and recommended a withdrawal from the Citadel—a conversation intercepted by South Vietnamese radio operators—he was told to keep fighting. At this stage in the battle, even when its outcome was all but determined, the enemy sustained the fight to gain the maximum political and psychological benefits from occupying the third-largest city in South Vietnam.¹³⁷

The enemy's determination was confirmed on 16 February, when the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, operating south of Quang Tri City, discovered that North Vietnamese units in northwestern Quang Tri Province were coming south to reinforce the Hue battlefield. That day, two companies from the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, tangled with part of the *803d Regiment, 324B Division*, about twenty kilometers northeast of Hue. The 1st Brigade soldiers killed twenty-nine North Vietnamese before the enemy broke contact the following day. On the evening of 18 February, troops from the *803d Regiment* attacked a second company from the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, in roughly the

¹³⁶ AAR, The Battle of Hue, Adv Teams 3 and 4, p. 8, box 1, Organizational History, 101st Abn Div, USARV Cmd Historian, RG 472, NARA.

¹³⁷ AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, p. 4, and tab G, p. 1, and incl 5, p. 5; Rpt, Special Intelligence Study no. 33-68, 101st Abn Div, p. 2.

same area. When morning came, the Americans, who had lost four dead, found eight enemy bodies and evidence that many others had been dragged away.¹³⁸

The clash with the *803d Regiment* came as a surprise to Rattan's 1st Brigade because its last known location had been the eastern Demilitarized Zone, more than seventy kilometers to the north. The unit's sudden appearance near Hue suggested that the enemy had diverted troops from the *B5 Front* to prolong the battle for the Citadel. Indeed, the *B5 Front* had sent the *803d Regiment* marching south to Hue with orders to punch through the Mang Ca compound from the north and open a second front against the allies in the Citadel. After running afoul of the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, nearly twenty kilometers short of its target, the *B5 Front* decided that the *803d Regiment* could probably not reach Hue without taking unacceptable casualties and, thus, rescinded its orders.¹³⁹

On 17 February, General Abrams met with General Westmoreland and General Cushman at MACV Forward headquarters at Phu Bai to discuss the situation in Hue. Allied intelligence indicated that a second wave of attacks was likely to hit the country within the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours, with Hue being one of the primary targets. All three generals were concerned because several of the North Vietnamese regiments in I Corps had yet to join the offensive and the presence of the *803d Regiment* north of Hue indicated that the enemy was prepared to move troops from as far away as Khe Sanh to fight for the imperial capital. On the advice of Abrams and Cushman, General Westmoreland decided to reinforce Task Force X-RAY with the 2d Battalion, 327th Infantry, from the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, which was then stationed north of Saigon in III Corps. Commanded by Col. John W. Collins III, the headquarters and two battalions from the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, reinforced by the 2d Battalion, 505th Infantry, 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, which was already in the Phu Bai area, would secure the area south and southeast of Hue to allow the marines operating there to reinforce Major Thompson's effort in the Citadel.¹⁴⁰

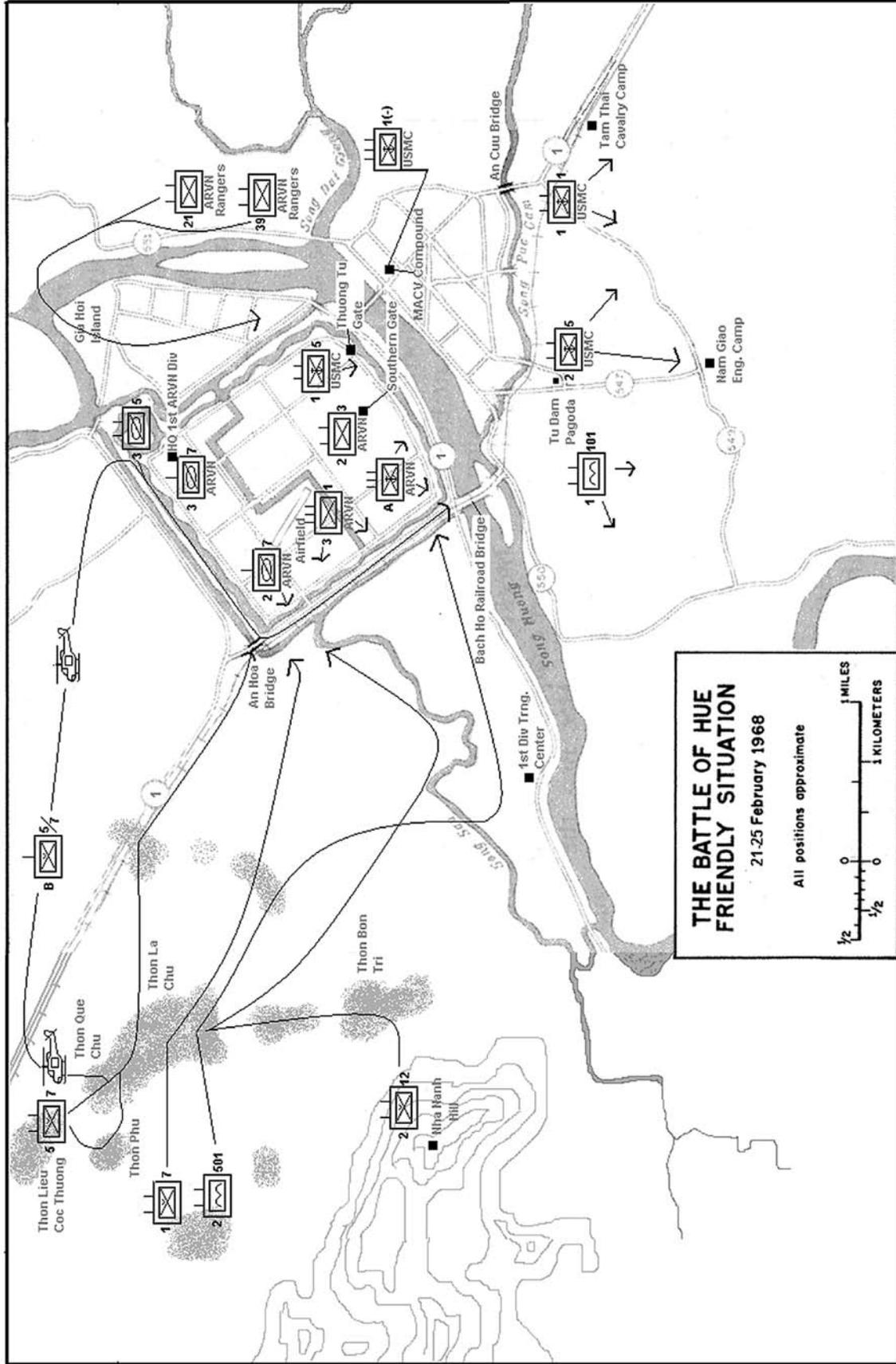
THE FINAL PUSH: 20–25 FEBRUARY

On the afternoon of 20 February, Major Thompson hatched a plan to break the enemy's last line of defense. (*Map 10*) He gathered his company commanders for a meeting, and all agreed that daylight frontal attacks had cost the battalion dearly. Thompson then asked the commanders if they would be willing to carry out a night attack. Although they were uneasy about leading their men through the treacherous ruins of the neighborhood in nearly pitch-black conditions, they agreed to try. The major gave the job to Company A, the unit that had suffered terrible casualties a week

¹³⁸ AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, tab E, p. 1.

¹³⁹ Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 41.

¹⁴⁰ AAR, Hue City, 1st Bde, 101st Abn Div, 23 Mar 68, pp. 1–2, box 4, AARs, 1965–1971, USARV Cmd Historian, RG 472, NARA.



MAP 10

earlier while taking over from the South Vietnamese paratroopers in the eastern half of the city. The company was now well rested and eager to prove itself. Thompson's plan called for a platoon of volunteers from Company A to sneak into enemy territory that night. The rest of the battalion would follow at dawn.

At 0300 on 21 February, three small groups of marines crept into no-man's land. Each headed for a building that had proven vital to the enemy's defense. To the marines' surprise, they found all three buildings virtually undefended. The Communists, it appeared, quietly pulled back from their frontline positions after dark each night to get some rest. When the enemy came walking back from the direction of the southeastern wall just before first light, the marines shot more than a dozen North Vietnamese soldiers before the enemy realized that its front line was threatened. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, moved forward to consolidate the gain, and by the end of the day, the American troops had pressed to within one hundred meters of the southeastern wall.

Earlier that day, the South Vietnamese 21st and the 39th Ranger Battalions that made up part of the I Corps reserve force arrived by truck convoy in southern Hue. They spent the day clearing the eastern bank of the Perfume River to enable allied rivercraft to travel more safely from the coast to the Navy landing dock. The rangers encountered few enemy soldiers but discovered extensive trench lines along the river, indicating that a large force had once operated there. According to local villagers, the Communists had forced the terrified residents to dig the trenches even though they wanted nothing more than to hide and close their ears to the sounds of battle echoing across the river.¹⁴¹

To the west of Hue, Colonel Campbell's 3d Brigade engineered a breakthrough of its own around the time that Thompson's 1st Battalion began its final push to the wall. Shortly before dawn on 21 February, Campbell launched a three-battalion attack against Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu after a brief but intense artillery bombardment and naval gunfire strike. The 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, hit the same spot in the wood line that it had briefly penetrated on three earlier occasions. The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, assaulted Thon La Chu from the west, as did the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, on its right flank. The enemy responded with small arms, machine guns, and mortars; but all three battalions reached the tree line with minimal casualties. Applying the lessons they had learned from earlier attempts to storm the woods, the Americans used smoke canisters to obscure the enemy's vision and 40-mm. cannon fire from the M42 Dusters to destroy individual strong points. Low-flying scout helicopters also made themselves useful by spraying enemy bunkers from the rear and trenches from above, increasing their own vulnerability. Putting their newly learned demolitions expertise to use, the soldiers of the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry,

¹⁴¹ Interv, Maj Peyton with Maj Jack D. Woodall, Senior Adviser to South Vietnamese 1st Ranger Group; Capt Donald S. Roe, Senior Adviser to South Vietnamese 21st Ranger Bn; and Capt Kenneth R. Johnston, Senior Adviser to the South Vietnamese 39th Ranger Bn, 11 Mar 68, VNIT 201.

destroyed several bunkers at the edge of the tree line that had caused them great trouble in the past with ten-pound shaped charges mounted on poles. When the three battalions breached the outer line and plunged into Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu, they came to grips with a regiment or more of North Vietnamese soldiers in a swirling, close-range battle that lasted most of the day.

Knowing that they had the enemy on the back foot, the Americans kept up the pressure as they hunted the North Vietnamese soldiers among the hedgerows and palm trees. The Communists apparently made the decision to abandon the villages around 1700 when they lost control of their main command and supply bunkers. The North Vietnamese troops gradually began to slip away toward Hue, using the growing darkness and a creeping blanket of fog to obscure their retreat. Three of the American battalions pursued the fleeing enemy while the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, remained in Thon La Chu to search the area for stragglers and documents. In the fighting that day, the enemy had lost eighty-nine killed and two captured. Friendly casualties resulted in four killed and seventy-seven wounded.¹⁴² One prisoner later told his interrogators that the village had contained almost a thousand North Vietnamese regulars at the time of the attack. Although some of the enemy units, such as the *416th Battalion*, *5th Regiment*, had been in the village since the start of the battle, other units, such as the *7th Battalion* and the regimental headquarters of the *90th Regiment*, *324B Division*, had arrived in Thon La Chu only a few days before after a forced march from Khe Sanh.¹⁴³

On the morning of 21 February, around the same time that Campbell's battalions struck Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu, two companies of the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, maneuvered around Thon Bon Tri and attacked it from the northwest. Colonel Sweet's men encountered only light resistance because most of the North Vietnamese soldiers were in the southern part of the village, manning the trenches that faced Nha Nhan. Capitalizing on the surprise they had achieved, the two cavalry companies charged into the village and hit the enemy from behind. The North Vietnamese fought back stubbornly for most of the day; but once darkness began to set in, they withdrew in the direction of Hue. Colonel Sweet resolved to pursue them at first light.

On the morning of 22 February, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, remained in Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu to mop up pockets of resistance while the remaining units under 3d Brigade control began marching toward the Citadel. They advanced along parallel tracks, with the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, following the course of Highway 1; the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, searching the central route; and the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, sweeping the area to the south. At first, the three battalions encountered only a smattering of North Vietnamese soldiers, most of whom appeared to have been cut off from their units. In midmorning, however, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, came

¹⁴² Periodic Intel Rpt no. 2-68, 1-29 Feb 68, 1st Cav Div, p. 12.

¹⁴³ Rpt, Battle of Hue, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, 1st Cav Div, p. 8, Historians files, CMH; AAR, Battalion Attack, 5th Bn, 7th Cav, 14th Mil Hist Det, p. 6; Trinh, *Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 40.

under heavy fire from an estimated company-size force of North Vietnamese who occupied the hamlet of Thon An, approximately one kilometer from the An Hoa Bridge. Colonel Vaught called in helicopter gunships and artillery while the pair of Dusters attached to his unit systematically leveled any structure that appeared to serve as a strong point. The supporting fire continued throughout the day, but the Communist troops did not abandon their positions. With darkness approaching, Vaught decided to call off the attack until the next morning.

Meanwhile, several kilometers to the south, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, made contact with another force of well-organized North Vietnamese soldiers just before noon. Several companies of enemy troops armed with mortars, machine guns, recoilless rifles, and rocket-propelled grenades were strongly entrenched along the south side of the Sau Canal, a deep waterway that ran toward the Citadel perpendicular to the Perfume River. As the firefight grew, the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, positioned about a kilometer to the north, began moving toward the canal. As the paratroopers passed through a small hamlet along the way, they were shocked and angered to discover the bodies of at least thirty civilians apparently murdered by the retreating Communists. Many of those slain had been bound and shot, and others had been dismembered. In a cold rage, the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, moved onto the left flank of the cavalrymen and attacked the North Vietnamese troops defending the canal. Despite the Americans' best efforts, however, the enemy held firm until darkness forced the U.S. battalions to call off the attack.¹⁴⁴

By 22 February, the area of the Citadel still controlled by the enemy had shrunk to the grounds of the Imperial Palace and the southwestern corner of the old city. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, encountered only sporadic resistance in the southeastern quarter when it resumed its advance that morning. After the unit had secured a portion of the wall, a Marine lance corporal named James Avella produced a small American flag and flew it above the parapet on a damaged telephone pole. Later that afternoon, a fresh company from the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, overran the nearby Thuong Tu Gate in a swift and well-executed assault. This accomplishment gave the marines a direct ground connection to southern Hue via a footbridge over the damaged Nguyen Hoang Bridge and brought them to within a few hundred meters of the Southern Gate, the main entrance to the Imperial Palace.

Meanwhile, in the southwestern sector, the enemy was rapidly running out of time and space. The North Vietnamese troops bottled up there tried to relieve some of the pressure on their perimeter by launching a sudden counterattack against the Vietnamese marines. The maneuver came as no surprise to the government troops, who broke up the assault with a well-timed artillery barrage that killed approximately 150 Communist soldiers. To the east, South Vietnamese soldiers forced their way into the Imperial Palace and began clearing out the snipers who had long resided there. General Lam approved the use of air strikes to hasten the effort, but U.S. Air Force controllers

¹⁴⁴ AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, incl 1, p. 4; Rpt, The Battle of Hue, 14th Mil Hist Det, 10 Mar 68, p. 6, found in tab C, AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div.

scrubbed the mission after enemy ground fire brought down the light observation plane that was to have directed the A-4 Skyhawk fighter-bombers.

East of the Citadel, the 21st and the 39th Ranger Battalions boarded junks on the far side of the Perfume River and traveled to Gia Hoi Island, where the Communist provisional government had been headquartered since the start of the offensive. The rangers observed careful fire discipline as they swept the island because thousands of local residents came out of hiding and ran through their ranks to escape the battle. The toughest fight of the day centered on a pagoda that contained a North Vietnamese battalion headquarters. Enemy resistance on the island fell off precipitously after the rangers took the position. With only the Huu Gate on the lower southwestern wall still in North Vietnamese hands and with allied troops closing in from all sides, the *Hue City Front* ordered its troops to abandon the Citadel and withdraw to the west.¹⁴⁵

American forces cleaned up the remnants of enemy forces still at large north of the Citadel on 23 February. That morning, one company from the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, boarded helicopters and flew to the Hue docks near the Mang Ca compound, where it joined a platoon of armored personnel carriers from Troop A, 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, on loan from the 9th Infantry Division. The greater part of the 5th Cavalry had just arrived in the Phu Bai-Hue region after redeploying from Long Khanh Province to northern I Corps by sea. The mechanized task force swept along the northwestern wall toward the An Hoa Bridge, flushing out a number of enemy soldiers who had taken refuge in the grasses and weeds. Meanwhile, two kilometers to the northwest, the remainder of the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, resumed its advance toward Thon An. The cavalymen fought their way into the enemy-occupied hamlet and found beneath its shattered remains a honeycomb of tunnels with bunkers capable of withstanding all but the heaviest bombardment. The troopers spent the rest of the day searching the ruins for survivors and combing through the adjacent cemetery, where the *806th Battalion* had ambushed the South Vietnamese 7th Airborne Battalion on 31 January.¹⁴⁶

On 23 February, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, and the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, resumed their battle with the enemy force that was dug into the south side of the Sau Canal. The Communists occupied a rectangular slice of land between the canal and the Perfume River that was approximately fifteen hundred meters wide and less than a kilometer deep. The area contained several small hamlets and an unidentified number of civilians, which forced the allies to restrict their use of artillery. Whenever possible, forward observers brought howitzer fire down on the North Vietnamese bunkers and trenches that lined the canal, but sometimes those positions were too close to the American lines for safety. Based on the intensity of enemy fire, the Communists appeared to have large reserves of ammunition for their machine guns, recoilless rifles, and mortars. The Sau Canal

¹⁴⁵ DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027541968, 16 Sep 68, sub: After Action Report, p. 47; Rpt, The Battle of Hue, 14th Mil Hist Det, p. 10; Interv, Peyton with Woodall, Roe, and Johnston, 11 Mar 68.

¹⁴⁶ AAR, Battalion Attack, 5th Bn, 7th Cav, 14th Mil Hist Det, p. 7.

also presented a formidable physical barrier to any attack the Americans might contemplate. For the moment, at least, Campbell's two battalions could do little more than keep the enemy bottled up and continue to search for a weak spot in the North Vietnamese defenses.

The battle in the Citadel came to a symbolic end just before dawn on 24 February when South Vietnamese soldiers recaptured the Southern Gate and hauled down the massive Viet Cong flag that had flown over it since the start of the battle. In midmorning, the Hac Bao Company and an infantry battalion from the 3d Regiment made a final sweep of the Imperial Palace and overcame the few North Vietnamese soldiers inside who were still capable of resisting. Meanwhile, the South Vietnamese Marine task force retook most of the southwestern wall. By nightfall, only the extreme southwestern corner of the Citadel remained in enemy hands.

That same morning, west of the Citadel, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, tried to fight its way across the Sau Canal and through several layers of North Vietnamese trenches and bunkers. The cavalrymen had little room to maneuver on the congested battlefield and frequently met enemy fire from several directions at once. Colonel Sweet decided to pull his men back across the canal to enable artillery and mortars to further soften up the Communist positions. He resumed the attack later that day with support from the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, but achieved no better results. The nearly fanatical resistance faced by the Americans was probably the result of the withdrawal of the remaining North Vietnamese troops from the Citadel. Like water rushing out of a bucket through a hole in its underside, the North Vietnamese forces drained out of the Citadel directly into the Sau enclave. This position gave the enemy greater incentive to hold the line at the edge of the canal and significantly increased the number of soldiers available to defend it.

Also on 24 February, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, rejoined its detached company and the armored cavalry platoon from the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, near the western corner of the Citadel. The combined force then swept toward the Bach Ho Railroad Bridge along the southwestern face of the Citadel, where a few North Vietnamese still held out in a narrow band of trees between the moat and the wall.

At the same time, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, finished its work in Thon La Chu and headed east toward Highway 1. After clearing out several pockets of resistance along the way, with the help of helicopter gunships and artillery, the battalion made camp in a graveyard about a kilometer from the Citadel. That night, groups of enemy troops were seen marching away from Hue to the north and to the west. Forward observers called in artillery strikes all night long, killing an unknown number of the retreating Communists. A machine gunner in Company A, 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, Sp4c. George J. Patterson Jr., recalled finding thousands of enemy footprints the next day that reminded him of the markings left by a cattle stampede.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, incl 1, p. 5; Rpt, The Battle of Hue, 14th Mil Hist Det, p. 7; Rpt, The History of the Second Battalion, Twelfth Cavalry, for the Year 1968, p. 13, box 1, Organizational History, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, 1st Cav Div, Cav

The allies crushed the last organized enemy resistance in the Citadel on 25 February. At 0300, the Vietnamese marines attacked toward the southern corner and wiped out the few enemy troops remaining there. Just east of the old city, the two South Vietnamese ranger battalions on Gia Hoi finished their sweep of the island. The three-day operation netted hundreds of Communist cadre, many of whom were university students. According to local residents, those students had played a key role in rounding up government officials and intellectuals the enemy regarded as threats to their new regime.¹⁴⁸

The 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, now reduced to an effective strength of 260 men, assaulted the Sau enclave shortly before noon on 25 February only to discover that most of the enemy troops had slipped away during the night. Colonel Sweet's men found an abandoned regimental field hospital and many fresh graves near the canal with many piles of discarded equipment heaped nearby. They discovered bloodstained boats at the site that suggested how the North Vietnamese had transported some of their dead and wounded from southern Hue. A local Vietnamese woman said that up to one thousand wounded enemy soldiers, covered in leaves to camouflage them from air observation, had until recently been lying in a field next to her village. According to her, the Communists had evacuated their wounded, as well as the rest of their troops and equipment, to the other side of the river.¹⁴⁹

On 26 February, President Thieu flew from Saigon to Hue to congratulate General Truong and his men. Although the battle of Hue had come to a close, much work remained to be done in its aftermath. U.S. Army and Marine units began pushing out from the city to search for retreating enemy units and any equipment or documents they may have left behind. The Army units had comparatively little luck in their sectors. When the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, and the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, swept either side of Highway 1 on their way back to PK-17, they spotted just a single platoon of North Vietnamese that artillery and gunships eliminated in short order. Two battalions of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, likewise found few traces of the enemy when they swept the area southeast of Hue.¹⁵⁰

The enemy was slower to withdraw from the U.S. Marine sector south of Hue. On 24 February, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, discovered several hundred enemy soldiers dug into a ridgeline some fifteen hundred meters from the South Vietnamese engineer compound that had been under siege since the start of the battle. The marines called in air strikes, artillery, and naval guns, but clearing the hill and rescuing the engineers still took three days. The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, moved northeast toward the coast a few days later, where it discovered miles of

Units, USARV, RG 472, NARA; Rpt, The Battle of Hue, 14th Mil Hist Det, p. 11; Interv, author with George Patterson Jr., 22 Mar 05, Historians files, CMH.

¹⁴⁸ Rpt, The Battle of Hue, 45th Mil Hist Det, incl 9, p. 2.

¹⁴⁹ Rpt, History of the Second Battalion, Twelfth Cavalry, for the Year 1968, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, 1st Cav Div, p. 13.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 14.

trenches built by the Communists to transport men and supplies from the countryside into Hue during the battle.¹⁵¹

AFTERMATH

The month-long struggle for Hue, the longest battle of the Tet Offensive, generated more casualties than any other single engagement of the war to that date. A total of 142 U.S. marines were killed in the fighting for Hue and another 1,100 or so were wounded. The South Vietnamese Army lost 333 men killed and 1,773 wounded in the operation and the Vietnamese marines another 88 killed and 350 wounded. The 1st Cavalry Division reported losses of 68 killed and 453 wounded while the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, listed its casualties as 6 dead and 56 wounded. Allied estimates of the number of enemy killed ranged from between 2,500 to 5,000.¹⁵²

The U.S. marines, particularly those who arrived early in the battle, fought heroically under adverse conditions. The moment they arrived in Hue, they went on the offensive, even though they faced a numerically superior and well-entrenched enemy. Two understrength Marine battalions managed to recapture southern Hue almost by themselves. A third Marine battalion played a disproportionately large role in the fighting for the Citadel. The Marine units remained combat effective even after taking heavy casualties and advanced relentlessly in the face of combat circumstances that strongly favored the enemy.

By most standards, the South Vietnamese armed forces had performed well during the battle. The Hac Bao Company, the 3d Regiment of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division, and the paratroopers of the South Vietnamese 1st Airborne task force fought with exceptional skill and valor. The South Vietnamese had fewer heavy weapons, such as recoilless rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers, because they tended to rely on artillery and air strikes for supporting fire. Despite the fact that they were outgunned by the enemy at the company and battalion level, the government troops not only held their own but eventually overcame a sizable force of North Vietnamese regulars in prolonged, close-range battle. The 1st Division's command-and-control system also proved to be excellent.¹⁵³

Although General Truong performed brilliantly during the crisis, the same could not be said for other high-ranking South Vietnamese officials. According to American advisers, the city police chief, Maj. Doan Cong Lap, reputed to be one of the most corrupt officials in Hue, acted in a

¹⁵¹ Rpt, Briefing Notes: 1968 Tet Offensive, 101st Abn Div, p. 6, box 1, Organizational History, 101st Abn Div, USARV, RG 472, NARA; AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, incl 1, p. 6; Shulimson, *The Defining Year, 1968*, p. 213.

¹⁵² Shulimson, *The Defining Year, 1968*, p. 213.

¹⁵³ Memo, Col Jack T. Pink, Sec Jnt Staff, MACV, for George D. Jacobson, Mission Coordinator, Am Emb, 31 Mar 68, sub: Updates of TET Offensive Evaluations, incl 1, p. 1, Historians files, CMH; Memo, Brig Gen Harris W. Hollis, Dir of Opns, MACV, for Army Chief of Staff, 25 Mar 68, sub: Performance of ARVN During Battle of Hue, p. 8, Historians files, CMH.

cowardly and incompetent manner throughout the battle.¹⁵⁴ A widely circulated rumor in the city claimed that the mayor, Lt. Col. Pham Van Khoa, who was also the province chief, had known about the offensive forty-eight hours in advance. The mayor, who was found hiding in the rafters of the hospital six days after the offensive began, initially insisted that the attack had caught him by surprise but later explained that he had wanted the Communists to enter the city so that they could be trapped and destroyed.¹⁵⁵ The U.S. Army intelligence officer who had developed a strong sense of foreboding just before the attack, Major Annenberg, later heard from a reliable source that Colonel Khoa had called a secret briefing on 30 January to inform his political and business associates that a ground attack would take place the next day. According to the source, the chief had urged all those at the meeting to gather up their families, collect an ample supply of food and water, and find a safe place to hide.¹⁵⁶ The South Vietnamese government sacked Khoa in the middle of March for his poor performance.¹⁵⁷

The battle of Hue proved to be the enemy's most successful operation of the Tet Offensive. The equivalent of two infantry divisions, mostly disciplined and well-equipped North Vietnamese regulars, had been maneuvered to the very doorstep of Hue without tipping off the allies.¹⁵⁸ More impressive still, the North Vietnamese had brought along a full complement of heavy weapons, including .51-caliber antiaircraft machine guns, 57-mm. and 75-mm. recoilless rifles, and 82-mm. mortars. The enemy supply system had functioned well for most of the battle, and the forces in Hue never seemed to run short of food or ammunition.¹⁵⁹ The Communist units were so well armed, in fact, that the *4th Regiment* did not bother touching any of the two thousand allied weapons stored inside an ordnance compound captured by the unit in southern Hue on the first day of the battle.¹⁶⁰

The Communists had also gained political prestige by establishing a revolutionary government in one of South Vietnam's largest and most culturally important cities. In fact, Hue turned out to be the only city that came under any sort of Communist administration during the Tet Offensive. When American troops captured the Viet Cong mayor of Hue at the end of the battle, they discovered that he was the city's former police chief, who had lost his job after the 1966 Buddhist uprising.¹⁶¹

Despite their accomplishments, the Communists paid a dear price for their nearly month-long occupation of Hue. The *4th*, *5th*, and *6th Regiments* took heavy losses, with some battalions

¹⁵⁴ Memo, Robert W. Komer, deputy commander for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support to Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, 29 Mar 68, sub: Performance of GVN Officials during Tet Offensive, Historians files, CMH.

¹⁵⁵ Robert Shaplen, "Letter from Saigon," *New Yorker*, 23 Mar 68, pp. 122-23.

¹⁵⁶ Ltr, Annenberg, sub: Vietnam Reminiscences: The Battle of Tet, p. 9.

¹⁵⁷ Rpt, The Battle of Hue, 45th Mil Hist Det, incl 7, p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ AAR, The Battle of Hue, Adv Teams 3 and 4, p. 11.

¹⁵⁹ AAR, Tet Offensive, 1st Mar Div, p. 50.

¹⁶⁰ AAR, The Battle of Hue, 45th Mil Hist Det, incl 7, p. 4.

¹⁶¹ AAR, Battle of Hue, 1st Inf Div Adv Det, Adv Team 3, incl 9, p. 3; Combined Military Interrogation Center (CMIC) Rpt no. 6027448568, 29 May 68, sub: Attack on Hue City, pp. 4-6.

reduced to approximately one hundred men out of an original force of nearly four hundred. Other units that arrived later in the battle were only marginally better off. The North Vietnamese would need several months to rest and reconstitute their units before they were once again combat ready. The battering the Communists took in Hue also exacted a psychological toll. According to captured documents, many soldiers in the *6th Regiment* became reluctant to operate in the lowlands in the weeks and months following Tet.¹⁶²

The enemy also experienced severe command-and-control problems during the battle. A high percentage of units lost their way during the initial phase of the offensive, which prevented the Communists from bringing their full weight to bear on critical targets, such as the 1st Division headquarters. The enemy also failed to destroy the two most important bridges in the city, the Nguyen Hoang and An Cuu Bridges, in the critical opening hours of the offensive. That error permitted the allies to move men and supplies into the city when they were most needed. The inability of the North Vietnamese to overrun the 1st Division headquarters and the advisory compound gave the allies key footholds in the city that they were then able to use to counterattack.¹⁶³

The other conspicuous failure of the North Vietnamese was their inability to organize a general uprising. Before the battle, the Communists had recognized that their “armed forces alone would fail to win.”¹⁶⁴ They had counted on tens of thousands of citizens flooding the streets and taking over government buildings to demand an immediate end to the war and a policy of national reconciliation with the North. When the shooting started, however, few civilians offered to help the enemy with food, information, or labor.¹⁶⁵ The Communists had no more success trying to co-opt Buddhist leaders who had spoken out against the government and the war in the past. Although many sympathized with the Communists’ call for national independence, unification, and reconciliation and a handful of prominent monks took positions in the revolutionary government, most refused to help the enemy during the battle.¹⁶⁶ Communist political officers and armed propaganda teams had almost no success convincing South Vietnamese fighters to switch sides. Aside from a few paramilitary soldiers, who may have changed allegiance rather than face certain death, the morale and loyalty of the government troops held firm. Indeed, anti-Communist sentiment hardened among all segments of Hue society, including the formerly neutral-leaning Buddhist monks, as a result of the enemy attack and the murderous policy of the revolutionary Viet Cong government.¹⁶⁷

Any reckoning of the battle’s cost cannot ignore the price paid by the citizens of Hue. Approximately 75 percent of the houses in Hue were damaged or destroyed in the fighting. By the

¹⁶² CDEC Bulletin no. 15873, 27 Aug 68, sub: 6th NVA Regt, Tri-Thien-Hue MR, p. 2, box 41, CDEC Bulletins, Asst CofS, J-2, MACV, RG 472, NARA.

¹⁶³ DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027541968, 16 Sep 68, sub: After Action Report, pp. 12, 50.

¹⁶⁴ DoD Intel Rpt no. 6027448568, 29 May 68, sub: Attack on Hue City, p. 5.

¹⁶⁵ AAR, Enemy’s Tet Offensive, III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), p. 50.

¹⁶⁶ AAR, Tet Offensive, 1st Mar Div, p. 51; Telg, Saigon 20357 to State, 24 Feb 68, sub: Situation in Hue, p. 2.

¹⁶⁷ “The Rebirth of Hue,” Vietnam Feature Service TCB-037, pp. 2, 6.

second week of February, at least 5,000 refugees were housed in the main Catholic Church in the Triangle and another 17,000 were at the university. The same situation was repeated throughout the Citadel; by the end of the battle, some 115,000 people were left temporarily homeless.¹⁶⁸ Food quickly ran short throughout the city, although enough remained available to prevent widespread starvation. The infrastructure of Hue also sustained tremendous damage. The electricity and the water supply went out of service in the Triangle on the first day of the attack, for example, and limited power was not restored until 9 February. Even then, another four weeks would pass until water service was restored.

The most significant cost of all was the more than 4,000 confirmed civilian deaths that occurred during the 25-day battle. Approximately 1,200 of those fatalities came as a result of errant bombs and bullets, but the remaining citizens perished at the hands of Communist cadres who had orders to execute a long list of government officials and sympathizers. After the battle, the allies discovered mass graves containing the bodies of approximately 3,000 civilians. Some had their hands and feet tied, and many showed signs of having been shot at close range. At least 600 had been buried alive. The Communists also abducted several thousand other people to serve as porters during the battle; most were never seen again. The North Vietnamese never publicly admitted to killing more than a small number of civilians, blaming most of the deaths on the allies or on collateral damage from the battle. A captured document from April 1968, however, revealed the “elimination” of nearly 3,000 “tyrants and puppet administrative personnel.” Not all Communist officials were pleased that the executions had taken place. According to one captured document, some cadres in Thua Thien Province believed that the mass killings were inconsistent with Viet Cong policy.¹⁶⁹

One of the great ironies of the battle was that the North Vietnamese may have been their own worst enemy at the outset of the offensive. In late 1967, Communist troops laid siege to the Khe Sanh combat base in a deliberate effort to draw allied forces into the backcountry of Quang Tri Province, but the strategic feint backfired. The growing danger to the Marine base so alarmed Westmoreland that he rushed the 1st Cavalry Division to northern I Corps a full month ahead of schedule. Instead of sending it out to Khe Sanh, he put the division in the coastal lowlands, where it could respond quickly to an enemy attack on Quang Tri City and Hue. The North Vietnamese should hardly have been surprised. The helicopter-rich division needed secure bases and a huge flow of supplies that were unavailable in the Khe Sanh region because of its remoteness and high level of enemy activity. Furthermore, the abundance of helicopters in the 1st Cavalry Division required the unit to be stationed in the hinterlands in order to operate there.

¹⁶⁸ AAR, The Battle of Hue, 45th Mil Hist Det, incl 8, p. 1; “The Rebirth of Hue,” Vietnam Feature Service TCB-037, pp. 1, 3.

¹⁶⁹ CMIC no. 6027448568, 29 May 68, sub: Attack on Hue City, pp. 6, 9; Quoted words in CDEC Bulletin no. 11791, 26 Apr 68, p. 2, box 154, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; “The Rebirth of Hue,” Vietnam Feature Service TCB-037, p. 2.

As it happened, the cavalry division arrived just in time to save Quang Tri City and help the U.S. marines and the South Vietnamese drive the enemy from Hue. This miscalculation cost the North Vietnamese dearly, robbing them of their best chance for an outright military victory in the Tet campaign. For the allies, the fortuitous timing of the 1st Cavalry Division's arrival in northern I Corps probably made the crucial difference; without the speed and striking power of the division, the outcome at Quang Tri City and Hue would certainly have been far more in doubt.

The Communists' defeat in northern I Corps mirrored their lack of success elsewhere during Tet. Although they achieved a high degree of tactical surprise and some notable accomplishments, such as breaking into the compound of the U.S. embassy in Saigon, North Vietnamese forces were unable to hold onto their gains for more than a day or two in most places. The popular uprising the Communists had envisioned never materialized, leaving their forces isolated in the cities and vulnerable to allied counterattacks. MACV intelligence estimated that as many as 45,000 of the 84,000 enemy soldiers who participated in the offensive may have perished in the course of the battle. The Communists mounted a second, smaller offensive in early May that also came to disaster, but this attack affected Saigon more so than northern I Corps. Attesting to the soundness of the enemy's defeat at Quang Tri City and Hue during Tet of 1968, another four years would pass, at a time when most of the American forces had withdrawn from the country, before the North Vietnamese would try to take these cities once again.