

“Golf” Company at Hue

It Was Supposed to Be a “Piece a Cake”



Part I

By R. R. Keene

Now, 4½ decades later, Chuck Meadows points his walking stick across the Trang Tien Bridge that spans the River of Perfume. It is raining, probably not as heavily as in 1968, *Tet Mau Than* (Tet, year of the monkey), and perhaps a little cooler. Trucks, automobiles and mostly small motorcycles piloted by men and women hidden under rain slickers and protective helmets now move noisily en masse across what in 1968 had been the site of the Nguyen Hoang Bridge.

It is Tet 2013, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year of the snake. *Chuc Mung Nam Moi*, or “Happy New Year,” is the common greeting. Meadows, an

Left: Chuck Meadows, with former Cpl Richard Cobb, leads the 1968 members of Golf Co, 2/5 across the An Cuu Bridge in February 2013.

Top: In 1968, Golf Co leathernecks take a break on the south side of the River of Perfume: (from left) Cpl William Peterson, battalion radio operator, who also photographed some of the never-before-printed images in this story; Capt Chuck Meadows, Commanding Officer, G/2/5; GySgt Heidel; LCpl Ken Stetson, artillery forward observer, later KIA; and Cpl J. R. Collins, company radio operator. (Photo courtesy of Chuck Meadows)



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affable retired Marine colonel, stands at the southern end of the bridge and returns the greetings. He then leads his group of 35 Marines and their families traveling in Vietnam as part of Military Historical Tours across the bridge.

It isn't Meadows' first tour in Vietnam. His first was back in 1965 with 2d Battalion, Fourth Marine Regiment in Chu Lai. He returned in 1968 for a second tour as a 28-year-old captain commanding Company G, 2d Bn, 5th Marines. More recently, he's been back several times helping to lead tours of returning veterans. This one, however, is special. It is the 45th anniversary of the Tet offensive, and many of those on the tour are former members of "Golf" Co, who, on a very similar day 45 years earlier, had crossed the bridge in Hue.

Hue, which it has been called since the 15th century, is the old imperial capital of the Nguyen feudal dynasty, 1802-1905, with its Citadel and Forbidden City where only emperors, concubines and those granted access could enter. All others were put to death.

Although it is Vietnam's seat of culture, with beautifully planned tree-lined avenues, French architecture and the seat of education and higher learning, Hue also has a dark side. Visible on close scrutiny are bullet holes pockmarked on old government buildings and terrible battle bruises indenting the more than 68-foot-thick and nearly 20-foot-high Citadel wall. Back in 1968, "all others" still were being put to death.

Hue was one of the bloodiest battles of the 16-year Vietnam War. Battalions of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), two U.S. Army battalions and three understrength U.S. Marine Corps battalions took the brunt of more than 10,000 regulars of the People's Army of Vietnam, North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong and kicked their asses.

The following is what happened to Golf Co.

On 31 Jan. 1968, Marine Captain Robert E. "Bob" Laramy, an aerial observer, and his Army warrant officer pilot flew their light, single-engine Army O-1 "Bird Dog" from Phu Bai, north toward the River of Perfume. They uneventfully had flown the area around Hue almost every day that month. That morning, however, unsettling reports were coming in stating that large numbers of Communist soldiers had captured Hue.

"We came up east of the city and came down the river at a very low altitude. It was first light over the Citadel, and our radio traffic was going berserk," Laramy



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Above: Golf Co leathernecks dismount vehicles just south of Hue proper as they move north on Highway 1. They had not been hit yet by fire.

Below: Marines take cover after being hit with fire from the west. The A/1/1 company commander, Capt Gordon D. Batcheller, far right, was wounded.



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says to fellow Marines on tour with MHT. "Then we saw that thing, a Viet Cong flag, fluttering over the palace. It was an incredible sight only a few hundred feet away."

Back at Phu Bai, 10 miles southeast of Hue, the Marines of G/2/5 chowed down on breakfast. During the night, Marines had taken rocket and mortar fire at the airstrip, and there were reports that outlying Marine Combined Action Platoons and local Popular Forces, or militia, had come under well-orchestrated and heavy attacks. Still, nobody in Golf Co had heard much and had any reason to be overly concerned. There was a two-day "cease-fire" declared by both North and South Vietnam for the holiday, and although few Marines were foolish enough to believe the pause in fighting was likely to be totally observed, at least there would be,

they hoped, a couple hours of calm.

It seemed so when Meadows was called to the 1st Marines' command post and told to attach his company to Lieutenant Colonel Marcus J. Gravel's 1st Bn, 1st Marines. Golf Co received word to convoy up to Hue with elements of A/1/1, pick up the commanding general of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's 1st Division and escort him back to Phu Bai. About 160 Marines clambered into the backs of more than a half dozen 6-by cargo trucks.

"Piece a cake. We'll be back for evening chow," former Corporal Richard "Rich" Cobb recalls speculating. They were "traveling light," which in "grunt" terms means they left their packs, but loaded up with everything else, e.g., weapons, ammunition, canteens, flak jackets, rain gear, etc.

The convoy, led by LtCol Gravel's jeep,

rolled out of Phu Bai at 1030. It quickly jolted along for six miles. Meadows noticed there was no traffic on the road. There were no pedestrians or children on the sides of the road. "There [weren't] even chickens." Meadows became uneasy. "We didn't have good intelligence." And there were no good maps of Hue. Communications were poor, often just radio static.

Earlier, the company had been strung out between Phu Bai and south to the Truoi River Bridge. Although being Marines meant they were well-trained and -disciplined, it had been a while since they worked as a company, and there were lots of new guys. "At no time would I say that this company was seasoned," recalls Meadows.

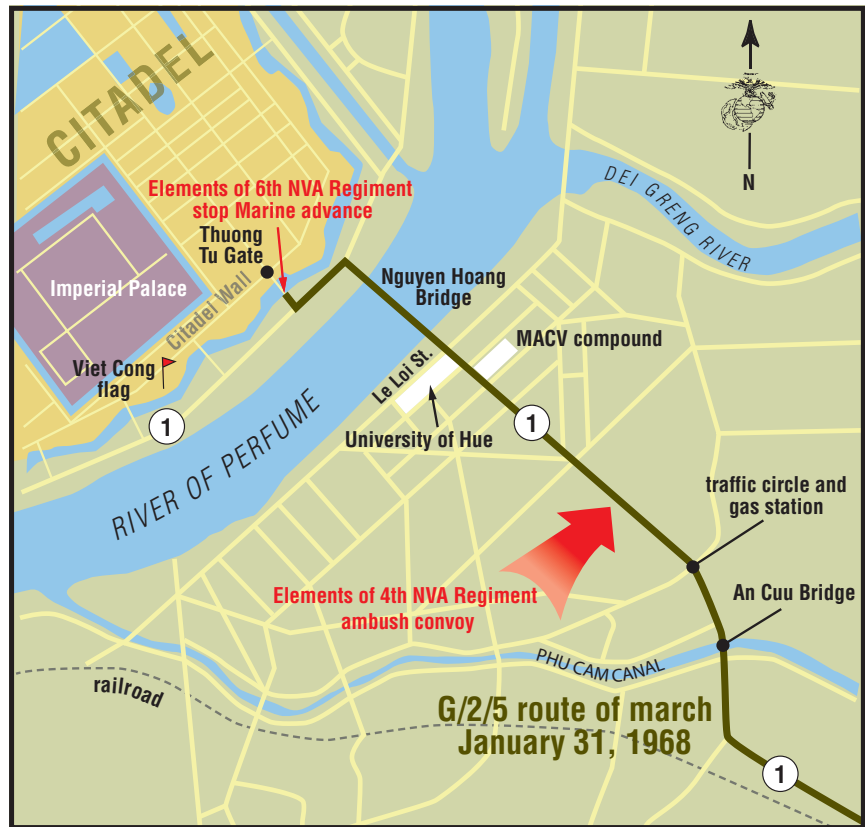
It was raining and they donned their rain gear.

They slowed measurably for a view of a destroyed ARVN M41 tank with charred crewmen. Cpl Glenn Lucas, with less than 10 days left in country, didn't like any of what he was seeing. Asked by a new private first class named Bill Tant if they would soon see enemy soldiers, Lucas replied, "You'll probably see more action than you want to."

They crossed the An Cuu Bridge over the Phu Cam Canal that outlines the Gold Coast area of southern Hue and drove through the market area that still thrives today and across a cane field that long has been built over.

It was from the southwest corner of the cane field that Meadows saw the muzzle flash of a machine gun. Everyone jumped from the vehicles and took up defensive positions. "Enemy fire from that tree line 300 yards west!" One corpsman went down immediately.

That's when they first saw them. Twenty-two-year-old Lance Corporal "Barney" Barnes, who'd been in country since



September 1967, said: "Pith helmets. We had never seen a North Vietnamese soldier. You could actually see them maneuvering, then shooting, well organized. They were there to kick our ass." Even so, the "well-organized" NVA still were only men, and Meadows noted their first mistake was not blowing the An Cuu Bridge: the Marines were in the city.

Meadows started moving his men up along Highway 1's north berm. He was without radio contact and for all intents and purposes on his own. He now says, "Each of us had our own little war. We didn't know the big picture." It had been

that way since morning chow. Five-paragraph orders had been issued, and still no one was sure what was happening. Meadows knew it was time to find out.

Today, the traffic circle still is there and so is the gas station, although it has been rebuilt. In 1968, Meadows checked it out and, there taped to the wall, was a map of Hue. It was a tourist map one normally would find at a gas station, hardly tactical and in French, but better than nothing.

Meadows noted the location of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, or MACV, compound northeast of his location, not that far actually. Although



The original Shell gas station (above left) where Meadows found a map of Hue, still was standing as late as 2008. It since has been replaced by this up-to-date station (above right) on the same traffic circle Marines passed in 1968. (Above right photo by R. R. Keene)

the firing continued, motor transport of-
ficer Second Lieutenant Jerry Nadolski
started to carefully move his trucks for-
ward. "However, we continued on foot to
the MACV compound," recalls Meadows.

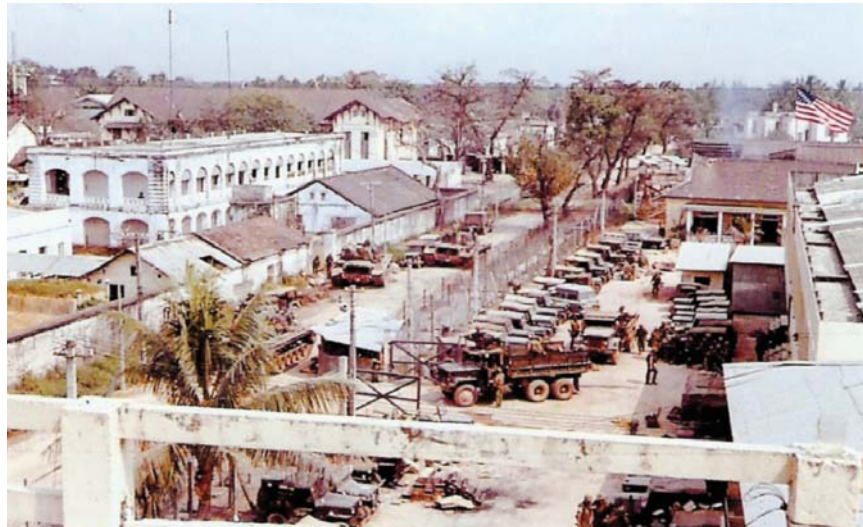
Today, the MACV compound is a home
for old (Communist) soldiers. Chuck
Meadows sees the MACV compound as
another major error made by the NVA.
"They didn't take it." Consequently, the
soldiers and Marines were able to keep
communications with their commands
and were somewhat updated on the ever-
changing, fluid situation. They soon re-
alized that the Tet offensive was a coordi-
nated assault throughout South Vietnam.

The Communists had launched a wave
of attacks on the morning of 30 Jan. These
early assaults were not met with quick
defensive countermeasures. The South
Vietnamese and their allies seemed slow
to comprehend and respond. Eventually,
more than 80,000 Communist troops were
striking more than 100 towns and cities,
including 36 of 44 provincial capitals, five
of the six autonomous cities, 72 of 245
district towns, and the southern capital
of Saigon. It was then the largest military
operation of the war.

Aside from massive Citadel walls, Hue
was defended poorly. Seven regiments
of NVA infantry and artillery came in
undetected through the hills and dense
forests to the west. They ran unchallenged
through streets with Tet revelers. They
slipped, nearly unscathed, through the
western gates of the ARVN-occupied
Citadel. They were in place waiting for an
ARVN and American response. They also
expected the populace to rise up against
the Americans and the South Vietnamese.
This, too, was a mistake.

It was approximately 1515 when the U.S.
convoy reached the MACV compound, a
hubbub of activity with lots of wounded
and lots of confusion. The consensus was
to consolidate what forces were in the
compound and hold. Meadows' original
mission, however, had not been rescinded.
Golf Co still was under orders to get to the
ARVN command post within the Citadel
and bring out the general.

LtCol Gravel could see no reason to
cross the river and enter the Citadel. He
got on the radio to the First Marine Di-
vision's Task Force X-Ray at Phu Bai and
emphatically stated his case. He was told
the orders to enter the Citadel would stand:
"Proceed." Further, there would be no air
or artillery support, partly because of the
low-ceiling weather and mainly because of
the Citadel's historic structures. There
would be no destruction or damage to
Vietnamese property.



COURTESY OF CHUCK MEADOWS

Above: The MACV compound was never taken by the NVA and flew the American flag throughout the fight. As a result, it was a rallying and staging point for Marines. It also kept communications open with commands in Phu Bai and Da Nang.



Left: Barney Barnes points out the position of the NVA machine-gun on the north side of the Nguyen Hoang Bridge to Marine veterans John Peirano and Stephen Moore.

Below: Golf Co leathernecks have just crossed the bridge to the north side of the River of Perfume.

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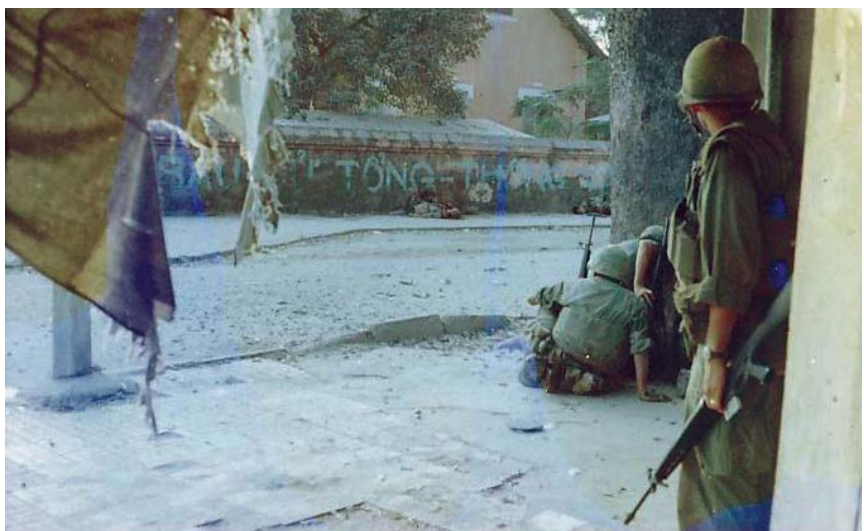
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Above: The life-size poster of a cowboy with drawn six-shooters gave Marines pause as they passed a movie theater. LCpl Ray Quist, carrying an M79 grenade launcher, barely gives it a glance.

Below: They turned the corner to the Thuong Tu Gate and took the brunt of NVA fire. Capt Meadows and others behind cover see Cpl Glenn A. Lucas and Hospitalman Donald A. Kirkham across the street, KIA.



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Golf Co leathernecks, with small arms, M60 machine guns and one 60 mm mortar, stepped out of the compound, faced right and moved two blocks up Hung Muong Street past the University of Hue, across Le Loi Street and onto the 400-meter-long bridge. Once across, they would make a left on Tran Hung Bao, head one block west parallel to the River of Perfume and then turn right to the Thuong Tu Gate that towered above a moat. It was not very far; it still is almost completely visible from the south bank of the river. It was 1630, and daylight would be gone around 1800.

Second Platoon drew the point with LCpl Barnes' squad in the lead. Barnes noticed two ARVN M41 tanks at the

bridge. Life would be easier—and perhaps longer—if he could talk them into being first across the bridge. The tank commanders' answer, roughly translated, was a firm and less than polite, "No, thank you!"

Barnes checked his people before they stepped off. "Don't get clustered," he said. "If somebody goes down, don't stop, keep going."

Crossing the river again 45 years later brings back vivid memories. Barnes remembers "like it was yesterday." Marine Larry Verlinde, accompanied this time by his grandson, 20-year-old Tyler Canfield, remembers moving out, saying: "Whoopie! We're all gonna die!" Mike Stallings says,

with honest candor, "I was scared the whole time." William DeKryger is back too, this time with his wife, Nancy, and his son Tim, an active-duty Marine major and Iraq veteran who peppers him with questions.

Halfway across, the tour group bunches up and moves with no particular pattern. In 1968, that's when the first thump of a machine gun sent green tracers of fearsome grazing fire into the bridge span, ricocheting off the beams and trusses, wounding and killing 10 Marines.

Barnes was one of the first across the bridge, and he saw the NVA machine-gun bunker off to the left. Its crew had spotted the Marine M60 machine-gun team and ripped into assistant gunner PFC Clyde Carter, killing him. Cpl Lester Tully, also a squad leader, rose up.

As Barney Barnes tells it, standing on the site where the NVA gun was, speaking rapidly, his volume increasing dramatically: "Lester, man! He ran across that bridge, threw grenades. I helped, but it was Lester!"

Tully killed five, wounded a bunch and silenced the gun. He later would be awarded the Silver Star.

It was about that time when Army Sergeant Bob Lauer showed up with an M55 quad-.50-caliber "Duster": big rounds, loud noise, heavy firepower and the street was cleared.

Lauer later said: "I saw many Marines of Golf-two-five perform heroic actions that remain unheralded to this day. Many Marines were cut down trying to take out the machine gun in the bunker. I remember a Marine charging the bunker with grenades, only to not make it. Another Marine with an M60 or M16, firing from the hip, also did not make it to the bunker."

Lauer and his three crewmen made numerous trips across the bridge picking up the dead and wounded as they went. He later was awarded the Silver Star and a second Purple Heart. His crewmen each received Bronze Stars.

According to author Eric Hammel, 2d Platoon was loading its dead and wounded onto a 6-by. Nobody knows what caused it, but there was an enormous blast that wounded nearly all the Marines near it. PFC Nolen Lala, a perpetual private with 1st Motor Transport Bn, had been driving the truck that exploded. He was not a happy driver, but he found that his truck still worked. He jumped behind the mounted .50-cal. and let loose an angry burst. He then helped to load the last of the wounded and dead, slipped the gear into reverse and under fire drove across the bridge. It was worthy of a Silver Star.

Like then, those from Co G on the MHT tour continue down the street. Cobb points to a movie theater. "It's still there," he says. "I remember being startled coming face to face with a life-size poster of a cowboy with drawn six-shooters." It was advertising, "Massacre Valley," starring Franco Nero.

A few feet more and Golf Co was looking down Thoug Tu Gate Road. "First Platoon, take the lead!" The rest took up firing positions behind buildings and on rooftops.

Cpl Lucas' squad in 1st Plt turned the corner, and there stood the massive gate behind a bridged moat. PFC Tant later would tell Hammel that he remembered looking to his left and seeing the huge Viet Cong flag Capt Laramy had reported.

They cautiously moved about 50 meters down the street. Heavily concentrated enemy fire rained down from the ramparts of the Citadel and from within the gate. There was little-to-no cover; all the Marines could do was make themselves as small as possible and try to advance. Several Marines went down on both sides of the street. PFC Tant finally was seeing the enemy. He tried like hell to open a building door or window. They'd been nailed shut! He ducked behind a tree that seemed way too small. He could hear and feel the bullets impacting the other side.

Tant saw Lucas run and saw him go down. He wanted to save his squad leader, but the bullets were everywhere. Someone yelled to the platoon commander, 2dLt Michael McNeil, "The point squad is getting shot to pieces!"

The Marine riflemen and machine-gunners on the roofs concentrated their fire on those NVA at the gate. Grenadiers launched 40 mm smoke grenades.

The corner pharmacy still is doing business all these years later, and outside, there's a tree that stands as it did during the fight. Cpl Cobb stands behind it as he did 45 years ago. It was, on both occasions, a tight fit. (Today, scars barely are visible where NVA bullets peppered and punctured the trunk.) Around the corner came Capt Meadows.

Smoke from the grenade launchers wafted in a thickening veil on the street. Meadows tossed his smoke grenades. He looked at Cobb and yelled: "Move your ass!" Cobb moved. Today, Cobb likes to tell the story about Meadows meeting his daughter years later. She told Meadows: "Thank you for saving my daddy." Meadows still likes to hear it.

The smoke initially confused the NVA. A few Marines who were pinned down were able to run back to the corner. Lt



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Above: Members of G/2/5 rested after returning from the fighting on the north side of the river.



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Left: Retired Col Chuck Meadows stands before the Thuong Tu Gate in February, which 45 years earlier was the source of heavy NVA fire that stopped the Marine advance to the Citadel.

His family received his Silver Star.

But where was PFC Kinny? Meadows saw him 50 meters forward on the right side of the street. Meadows was no hero. He was a Marine captain, married with two kids, trying to complete a hopeless mission and save his Marines. He put his rifle down and ran to Kinny. He grabbed Kinny by the belt, heaved him over his shoulder, picked up Kinny's rifle and ran for all he was worth. Cpl William Peterson, Meadows' radioman, ran out to help. Unfortunately, Gerald Kinny was dead.

Meadows wiped his glasses and considered what to do next. He now had a good idea of what was going on, and it was not good. He radioed Gravel and reported five dead with 44 wounded. His casualties, since the corpsman was shot at the An Cuu Bridge, were 35 percent. He told Gravel that he was, on his own authority, pulling back to the Nguyen Hoang Bridge.

The leathernecks of Golf Company were the first Marines to reach the Citadel. It would be another 45 years before they made it inside.

Editor's note: Stand by for the conclusion in the July issue of Leatherneck.



Leatherneck—On the Web

To see more MHT and Hue images, go to www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/hue