

The Terrible Carnage of Hue



ALEXANDER KANDIC

A Marine M67A2 flame tank, number F-32, of Headquarters and Service Co, 3d Tank Bn, commanded by Cpl Charles West, spews flame at a Communist position during the heavy fighting in the streets of Hue during the 1968 Tet Offensive.

By R. R. Keene

This is the conclusion of a two-part article. See Part I, "Golf Company at Hue," in the June 2013 Leatherneck.

"The stink—you had to load up so many wounded, the blood would dry on your hands. In two or three days you would smell like death itself."—A Marine at Hue, as quoted in "U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968"

There are several great hotels in Hue. With tour groups going to Vietnam, Military Historical Tours always has booked into the Huong Giang Hotel Resort and Spa, formerly the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) bachelor officers' quarters and site of the U.S. Navy's landing craft, utility (LCU) ramp during the Vietnam War.

The Huong Giang sits on the south bank of the River of Perfume. Today,

guests can sit on the veranda in the luxury for which Southeast Asia is famous, drinking aperitifs, smoking cigars and admiring the sunset behind the Citadel as the view of Trang Tien Bridge becomes bathed in changing lights, and candle-lit paper lanterns float on the water, guiding dragon-headed restaurant barges carrying diners up river.

For returning veterans of the Vietnam War, there comes a subtle realization that there is no longer that gnawing feeling of fear that accompanied them in their combat tour. Hue and Vietnam are beautiful.

But, in 1968, carnage is the word for what happened at Hue.

Company G, 2d Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, after reaching the Citadel and under heavy fire, went back across the river to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) compound. This is the further account of "Golf" Co, 2d Bn and its sister companies of 5th Marines and the street-to-street,

11-blocks-wide and eight-to-nine-blocks-deep fighting that followed the combat described in Part I of this article.

There was fighting everywhere. They had never fought house to house or building to building. According to Captain Charles L. "Chuck" Meadows, the commanding officer of Golf Co, "We were out of our element." But, then too, so were the *Bo Doi*—regulars of the North Vietnamese infantry.

Enter Lieutenant Colonel Ernest C. "Ernie" Cheatham Jr., Commanding Officer, 2/5, up from the Troi River south of Phu Bai where Communist forces had hit Marine and South Vietnamese units the night of 30-31 Jan. 1968. Cheatham was a big man: a former defensive tackle with the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Baltimore Colts in the mid-1950s, who gave up football to be a Marine. The Corps was his vocation, and he was known to be tactically smart and innovative, but he had never fought in a city.

For the Battle of Hue, he scrounged for field manuals and came up with two: “Combat in Built-Up Areas” and “Attack on a Fortified Position.” They weren’t much, but the books provided three basic rules for conducting combat in a built-up area: isolate the battlefield, seize footholds and conduct systematic clearing operations. Cheatham reshaped that advice, according to author Eric Hammel in his book “Fire in the Streets,” to “gas the enemy, blow things up and then clear out the ruins.”

He ordered up the battalion’s 106 mm recoilless rifles, every CS tear gas grenade and gas masks, composition C-4 plastique explosives, every M79 grenade and hand grenade, even obsolescent rifle grenades. Cheatham also broke out 3.5-inch rocket launchers to supplement his M72 Light Anti-Armor Weapons. He was going to need it all.

Back in the MACV compound, G/2/5 corpsman “Doc” Bruce Grant Jr. was assigned to assist with the wounded from the fighting across the river. There were many: Marines, U.S. and ARVN soldiers and civilians. Marines were hot-wiring vehicles and using them for medical evacuation. They needed all the help they could get.

Doc Grant remembers seeing a Vietnamese man wearing an ARVN uniform and the red beret of the airborne battalion. He claimed to be a doctor. Grant asked him his name, and he replied, “First Lieutenant Doan Van Ba.”

“Ba?” said Grant. “Doesn’t *ba* mean woman?”

Ba smiled and waded into the wounded, helping triage.

At 0700, 1 Feb., elements of Golf Co with two M48 Marine tanks set off toward the jail and provincial building six blocks down Le Loi Street. Word had been passed to relieve a small pocket of South Vietnamese holding out in the Thua Thien provincial prison and to liberate the nearby province administration complex.

“We didn’t get one block ... before we started getting sniper fire,” said an M79 grenadier in “U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968.”

“We got a tank ... got a block, turned right and received 57 mm recoilless which put out our tank.” The Marines went back to the MACV compound.

That night the North Vietnamese dropped the Bach Ho Railroad Bridge into the River of Perfume, but south of Hue, the bridge on Highway 1 that crossed the Phu Cam Canal still was unscathed and the American forces were streaming troops and supplies across. Two French



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Above: Leathernecks of 5th Marines muscled a 300-pound 106 mm recoilless rifle up to the second floor of the University of Hue to get a better firing position on the treasury building just down the street. Once the weapon was sighted in, they hooked up a 20-foot string lanyard and backed out of the classroom and down the hall. The back blast collapsed the classroom and tore out the walls—the treasury building withstood the round.

Below: On 6 Feb., Golf Co stormed the provincial prison, fighting its way in to take on the added problem of sorting Communist soldiers and sympathizers from criminals and political prisoners. The process started by lining everyone up against the walls.



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journalists, Catherine Leroy and Francois Mazure, joined the convoys headed into Hue. They claimed they had “wandered” into the North Vietnamese lines and were captured. Leroy talked their way out and emerged as the first newsperson to take photos of the *Bo Doi* in Hue. The story made the cover of *Life* magazine.

On 3 Feb., the South Vietnamese lifted all restrictions on fire support south of the River of Perfume. It opened the way for support from up to 8-inch howitzers, naval gunfire and, if the weather cleared,

fast-moving tactical aircraft laden with rockets, bombs and napalm.

However, the weather hadn’t cleared. A fine rain mist coated the chilled Marines and enshrouded the city in an eerie bank of fog.

Today, across and down the street from the home for old communist soldiers, previously known as the MACV compound, is the Saigon Morin, another of Hue’s great hotels. Renowned for its excellent brunch and evening steaks, it stands on the corner of Le Loi Street overlooking the Trang



Tien Bridge. The marble-colored, multi-story structure in 1968 was Hue University.

In 1968, Cheatham's battalion wanted it as the command post, but first they had to take it. Only a short distance away at the provincial headquarters, the NVA had set up a similar CP. It was close-quarters fighting with bullets, grenades and rockets fired at less than pistol range. (One Marine in a building saw a grenade come through his window. He fired his M16 so rapidly one of the rounds luckily hit the grenade and knocked it back out into the open.)

The leathernecks slowly continued down the multiple-story buildings with rooms that had to be cleared, searched and secured. They learned quickly, blowing holes in walls and throwing grenades into rooms to ensure they were cleared. The Golf Co Marines flooded into the university and remember shoving the beakers, test tubes and accoutrements of the chemistry and science labs aside to make room for the accoutrements of war. Outside, the courtyard was studded with the tubes of 81 mm and 60 mm mortars

dangerously fully elevated for targets just across the street.

Across the street, the *Bo Doi* were ticks ensconced in the treasury and post office buildings designed to withstand just about anything while providing excellent fields of fire down the streets. The Marines threw everything and then assaulted, five or six times. According to his statement in "U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968," LtCol Cheatham said, "That means mustering everybody's courage and energy up. ... You'd assault and back you'd come, drag your wounded and then muster it up again and try it again."

In the university, Golf Co Marines muscled a 300-plus-pound 106 recoilless rifle up a staircase to a classroom overlooking the treasury. The Marines would mark a target with the 106's .50-caliber tracer spotting rounds. It dawned on Staff Sergeant James Long that the 106 mm rifle's back blast was going to devastate the room and anyone dumb enough to be in it. The Marines improvised, firing the 106 mm recoilless rifle with a lanyard. And, while the round took out the NVA, its back blast took out the rear wall, collapsing the building. The leathernecks just dug out the rifle and continued the fight.

At 0700 on 4 Feb., Capt George R. "Ron" Christmas' Hotel Co crossed Ly Thuong Kiet Street and busted its way through walls into the hospital complex across from the university. Squad rushes supported by 3.5-inch rockets carried the advance and allowed a base of support to be laid down for Capt Michael P. Downs' Fox Co's assault on the treasury building.

Again, they relied on 106 mm recoilless rifles. According to Christmas, the Marines threw smoke grenades to cover the



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The University of Hue (above) on Le Loi Street saw Marines occupying the north side of the building as they moved to the fighting in 1968. Today, the same building (right) is the Hotel Saigon Morin, offering luxury rooms and restaurants.



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movement of an unprotected and completely exposed small flatbed four-wheel drive vehicle, known as a “mule,” which mounted a 106 mm rifle. Although the NVA were now wise to smoke screens, the Marines continued to pop a smoke grenade, and when the enemy opened up, the mule-mounted 106 mm would go into action.

Although fully exposed on the street, Marines went through the full drill: crank off a .50-cal. spotting round and then the 106 mm round. The blast forced the NVA to hunker down. Taking advantage of the opportunity and the dust cover, the Marines dashed across the street.

Describing the action to Marine historians, Christmas noted that once his Marines were across a street, they would focus their fire on any enemy automatic weapons that were uncovered by their crossing. Nonetheless, thick walls and steel doors kept the Marines at bay.

Major Ralph J. Salvati, 2/5’s executive officer, told Cheatham that CS gas might do the trick. He remembered a stack of CS launchers in the MACV compound. Lightweight and compact, one launcher could fire 64 CS canisters in four volleys of 16 each. It certainly was worth a try. A quick jeep ride, and the major returned with the launchers. He joined Capt Downs in an abandoned school and prepared.

Marines cleared their masks, adjusting for a tight seal and waited. Misfire. After a few adjustments, Salvati tried again and

Above: The five-story structure just near the center of the photograph stands where the treasury and post office stood in 1968. Diagonally to the right is the Hotel Saigon Morin, which in 1968 was the University of Hue. Ly Thuong Kiet Street runs in between and was the scene of some of the heaviest and costly fights in 1968.

Below: The treasury building, as seen from the second story of the University of Hue in 1968, was solidly built and withstood almost everything the Marines could fire at it. It took clouds of tear gas to force the occupants to retreat from the building.



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the launchers sent canisters into the treasury compound. The Marines launched CS until there was no more. They threw in protective fire from 81 mm mortars and 3.5-inch rocket launchers. Fox Co charged into the “huge chemical haze” and into the treasury.

In later interviews Downs said the NVA

in the treasury compound quickly left the building when the CS gas was employed. Once inside, grenades banged, rounds went off, and Marines emptied their rifles into the trapped NVA. But the treasury and also the post office were secured.

On 4 Feb., the *Bo Doi* blew the bridge over the Phu Cam Canal. It forced the



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Marines to deliver supplies via river to the LCU ramp or by helicopter.

The urban warfare continued. Capt Christmas in “U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968” described the action: “Street fighting is the dirtiest type of fighting I know.”

In 2013, the MHT group learned the five-star 16-floor Imperial Hotel in Hue is a two-minute walk from the Trang Tien Bridge up Hung Vuong Boulevard, past the Saigon Morin Hotel and old MACV compound. From the outdoor rooftop restaurant one easily can get a CH-46 view of the city and survey the site of the street-to-street fighting almost directly below.

But in 1968, it was block to block. The leathernecks stepped forward as one with G/2/5 on the right going down Le Loi Street, while a block over H/2/6 was in the middle, with F/2/5 on the far left. Elements of 1/1, augmented by headquarters types—supply and admin clerks and technicians—had the grunts’ backs.

The first objective was the large hospital complex several blocks away. There was an “inadequacy of maps.” Earlier, Meadows had confiscated a tourist map from a gas station that wasn’t tactically accurate, but it showed where things were. “That’s what you really needed,” said Meadows.

There were no spectacularly innovative tactics. *Bo Doi*, Viet Cong, ARVN soldiers, Americans and civilians were too intermingled for Marine air to bomb. Among the buildings, artillery flashes could not be spotted easily and adjusted. Tanks had very little maneuverability in the narrow streets and even narrower alleys, and, as Cheatham later noted, they drew a great deal of attention from the NVA. One tank took more than 120 hits and another went through five or six crews.

Above: A Golf Co 106 mm recoilless rifle mounted on a motorized mule prepares to send a round into enemy positions during the street fighting.

Below: LtCol Ernie Cheatham commanded 2/5 during the fighting at Hue. He was experienced and considered “brilliant” tactically, but even he had not previously fought the bitter urban warfare encountered in Hue.



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The often maligned M50 lightly armored tracked antitank vehicle with six externally mounted 106 mm recoilless rifles and whose name “Ontos” is Greek, meaning “The Thing,” had few critics at Hue, at least on the American side. It blew four-square-meter holes, or completely knocked out exterior walls and was very effective at 300 to 500 meters. Smaller than a tank and therefore less a target, its mobility made up for its lack of heavy armor most of the time. One problem was that after the rifles fired, crewmen had to jump out into the open to reload.

In “U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968,” Cheatham is quoted as passing the word: “If we even suspect the enemy are in a building, blow it down.” Capt Downs later said this marked the point where taking the city became even more serious.

On 5 Feb., Golf Co went after the main hospital building, which the NVA was using as a medical aid facility, and the *Bo Doi* took a stand. There are buildings that still are pocked with bullet holes as testimony to the 90-minute firefight where the Marines employed an M48 tank, recoilless rifles, 3.5-inch rockets, grenades, machine guns and rifle fire. By 8 p.m., the Marines occupied the hospital. In the psychiatric ward patients wandered aimlessly and there was no food for any of the sick and wounded. One Marine noticed a nun moving in his direction. He also noticed the nun was wearing boots. He fired first and found a man wearing the habit.

Two sergeants from Fox Co had two Vietnamese spread-eagled up against a wall. Capt Downs asked what happened. One of the sergeants noted that one of the prisoners was claiming to be the Hue mayor. It turned out he was the mayor and had been hiding with his bodyguard in an attic.

The next day, Golf Co assaulted the provincial prison. The leathernecks breached the stone outer walls and started at the top floor and worked their way down. The company’s first prisoner was an NVA sniper armed with a 7.62 mm SKS rifle, an M1 rifle and eight grenades. The 1st Platoon’s commander, Second Lieutenant Michael A. McNeil, put his Thompson .45-cal. submachine gun up to the prisoner’s face. Unfazed, the man jumped Sgt G. B. Zachary, trying to get his grenades. McNeil wrestled the NVA to the floor, got him in a “half nelson” and tied him tight. He still was fighting as Marines carried him away. Golf Co killed 36 NVA with only one Marine wounded.

In 1991, the Navy commissioned USS *Hue City* (CG-66), a *Ticonderoga* class guided-missile cruiser. Annually, the ship hosts a Battle of Hue memorial service attended by ship’s company and veterans of the battle. *Hue City* is the only U.S. Navy ship named for a Vietnam War battle. An American flag is encased on her quarterdeck. Here’s how it got there:

Hotel Co, with Capt Christmas, was trying to pry the defenders from the provincial headquarters which the *Bo Doi* used as a CP for the 4th NVA Regiment. The NVA were everywhere, shooting from windows and doors, from behind walls

and from well-hidden fighting holes. The Marines, using mortars and gas mixed with accurate rifle and machine-gun fire, took the building by midafternoon. They saw the frayed Viet Cong National Liberation Front flag waving over the courtyard.

In his book, "Fire in the Streets," Eric Hammel says Christmas looked at Gunnery Sergeant Frank A. Thomas and said, "We've looked at that damned North Vietnamese flag all day, and now we're going to take it down." The Marines unceremoniously hauled it down, and the gunny cut it free from the lanyard with his Ka-Bar.

Hammel goes on to note that Christmas radioed Cheatham: "We have the building, Sir. We're going to run up the American flag."

There are international protocols concerning the raising of flags. Hoisting the American flag over the city without raising the flag of South Vietnam was *verboten*. Cheatham knew the Marines had no authorization. According to author Keith Nolan in his book, "Battle for Hue: Tet 1968," Cheatham said: "We're doing the fighting, we may as well have our flag get the credit. I want those NVA guys across the river to see this."

Nobody's sure who produced the flag; some say the gunny had run back to the MACV compound and "appropriated" the large American flag waving over the compound. Anyway, it was just past 4 p.m., when Thomas and two privates first class, Walter R. Kaczmarek and Alan V. McDonald, ran up the color. CBS news and Marine photographer Sgt Bill Dickman



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Marines take one of their wounded off the roof of the University of Hue and into the school's courtyard to be treated. It was fighting from almost every compass direction and from above and below.

filmed the event as Don Webster, the CBS reporter, described it: "There was no bugler and the other Marines were too busy to salute, but not often is a flag so proudly raised."

Dickman took a photo of Thomas, McDonald, Kaczmarek and Lt Leo Myers with others holding up the NVA flag. Thomas then walked along the courtyard wall and there, not more than a yard away, was an NVA soldier in a spider hole. Thomas killed him with his shotgun. In his book, Keith Nolan records that Thomas shouted, "Check the holes!" There were half a dozen other holes, and McDonald calmly walked down the line putting perfunctory rounds into each occupant

who made no effort to surrender or looked remotely hostile.

In "Fire in the Streets," Cheatham reports to regimental headquarters: "Be advised we've taken provincial headquarters. Somehow or other, an American flag is flying over there." It is that same flag which is displayed today on the quarterdeck of USS *Hue City*.

On 7 Feb., Viet Cong sappers blew the center spans of Nguyen Hoang Bridge. However, when the provincial headquarters fell, Communist resistance south of the River of Perfume seemed to collapse and Hue became two battles: retaking of the city south of the river and the recapture of the Citadel.



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Above left: Retired MajGen Orlo K. Steele, a major during the Battle of Hue, returned 45 years later. Here, he takes time to show 20-year-old Tyler Canfield, grandson of Hue City Marine veteran Larry Verlinde, the 1968 *Life* magazine with a story and photos by French journalists Catherine Leroy and Francois Mazure.

Above right: From front to back, retired Gen Peter Pace, retired Col Chuck Meadows and retired MajGen Orlo K. Steele orient their maps and view a good portion of the battle area from atop the Imperial Hotel. In 2005, Gen Pace became the first Marine Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but in 1968, he was a second lieutenant commanding 2d Plt, G/2/5 during the latter portion of the Battle of Hue.



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Golf Co, with 1/1, had secured the northern end of the wrecked An Cuu Bridge over the Phu Cam Canal. They had come full circle since crossing into Hue 10 days earlier.

Lance Corporal Barney Barnes of Golf Co took a squad toward the bridge. When they reached the same site where Golf Co was ambushed their first day into Hue, they started taking fire. The radioman was shot. Barnes' rifle was hit. He told the wounded radioman: "Radio Captain Meadows. Let him know we're taking fire at the same spot we were ambushed the first day!"

The platoon showed up. Two Marines crossed into the fire trying to help Barnes'

squad. PFC Troy "Tony" Threet was shot in the street. Barnes remembers Threet calling: " 'Barney, I'm hit. I need a corpsman!' He was going into shock." Barnes reached him and assured him, saying, " 'We're going to get out of this,' and then he died in my arms.

"PFC John Wayne Rowden was the best shot in the company," says Barnes. "I don't know how many he killed, but it was a lot. Now, he was yelling, 'Barney, I'm hit!' and then, 'Barney, I'm hit again!'

"For whatever reason, the NVA used him as target practice," says Barnes.

"Those two Marines [PFCs Rowden and Threet] were from Corporal Lester Tully's squad and didn't have to do what they did

They'd been fighting all day to secure the flagpole at the Thua Thien provincial headquarters and haul down the Viet Cong flag and run up the "Stars and Stripes." It was against protocol and policy to run the U.S. flag up alone. But it was because of the efforts of GySgt Frank A. Thomas, at right with a shotgun, and the Marines with him that the American flag went up almost directly across the River of Perfume from the Communist flag flying over the Citadel. LtCol Cheatham had announced he wanted the NVA to see the U.S. flag.

that day, and they paid dearly. I remember telling Lester, 'I'm sorry I got your two Marines killed.' Lester replied, 'Barney, that's war.' "

That was not enough for Barnes: "I've tried to live an honorable life that would make those Marines we lost proud. I contacted their families to let them know those young Marines will never be forgotten."

And they aren't. During Tet 2013, on a day with weather remarkably similar to those days in 1968, the men of Golf Co gathered in the Catholic cathedral not far from the An Cuu Bridge. They recalled the fact that Marines killed more than 1,000 NVA and VC, while their casualties included 38 dead and 320 wounded. For the North Vietnamese, their belief in a massive uprising by the populace never happened. They did, however, purge an estimated 2,800 to 6,000 civilians and left them in mass graves.

But it is the men of Golf Co being solemnly remembered. Meadows tells them: "I can see the misty figures. I recognize many men ... in their youth ... coming from across that bridge and that street: Clyde Carter, Glen Lucas, Donald Kirkham, Gerald Kinny, Alphonzo Holmon, Horace Howard, John Winter, John Rowden, Troy Threet, Eddie Harris, James Stewart, John Lewis, Kenneth Stetson, David Warner, Terry Sutton, Albert Dandridge, Ramon Jurado, Paul Stasko, William Adams, Allan McCall, Robert Murphy, Ronald Kustaborder, Joseph Sinkewicz.

"I have come to honor your service, to be a 'presence' here on the ground where you fell, to represent all your brothers in Golf, 2/5. You are each my brother ... as I am to you," and he adds as only a Marine who has the terrible responsibility of command can, "For you gave me your trust, and for that I am eternally grateful." 

Leatherneck—On the Web

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