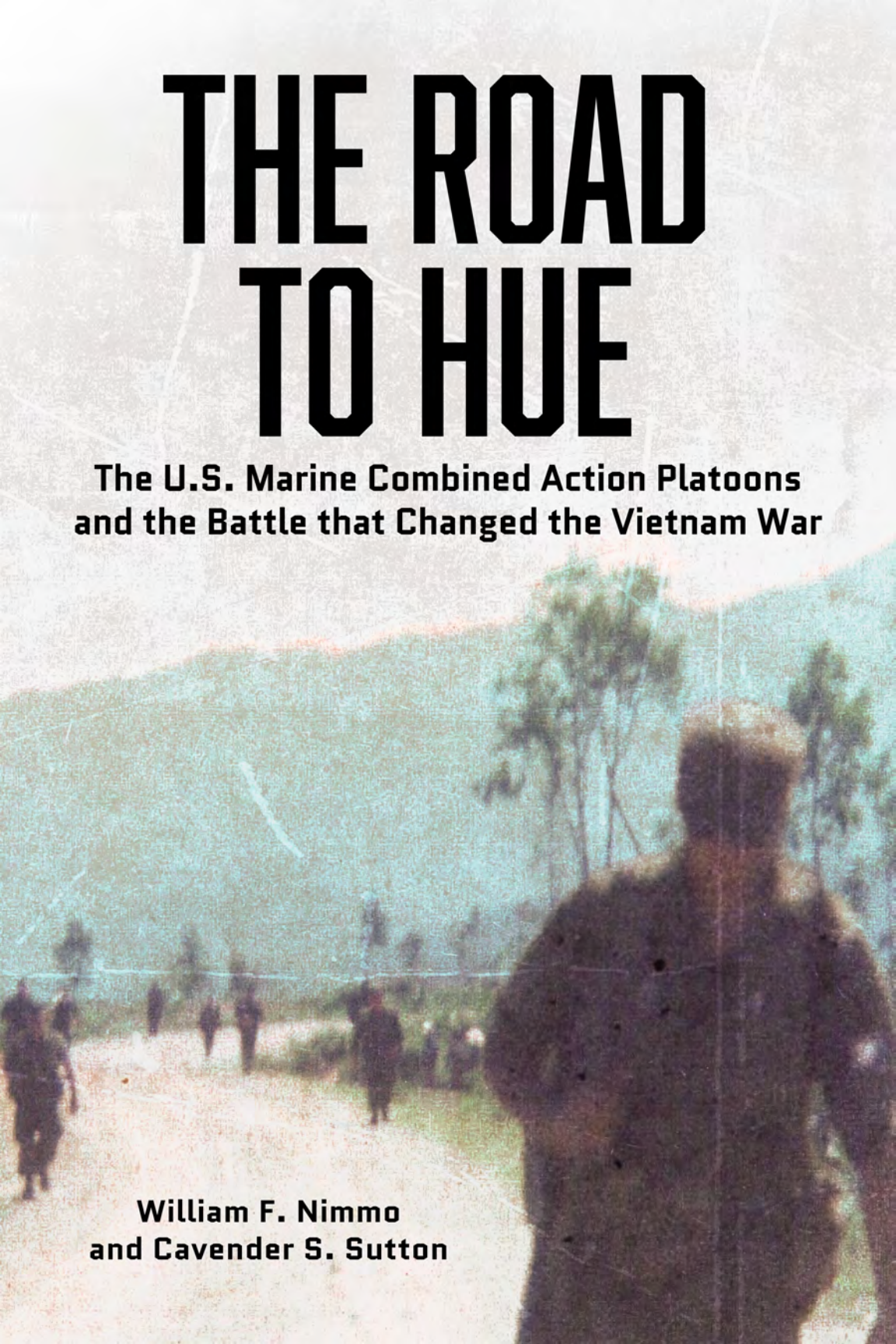


THE ROAD TO HUE

**The U.S. Marine Combined Action Platoons
and the Battle that Changed the Vietnam War**



**William F. Nimmo
and Cavender S. Sutton**

THE ROAD TO HUE

THE ROAD TO HUE

**The U.S. Marine Combined Action Platoons
and the Battle that Changed the Vietnam War**

**William F. Nimmo
and Cavender S. Sutton**

MCUP
MARINE CORPS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Quantico, VA
2026

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Nimmo, William F., author. | Sutton, Cavender S., author. | Marine Corps University (U.S.). Press, issuing body.

Title: The Road to Hue: The U.S. Marine Combined Action Platoons and the Battle that Changed the Vietnam War / William F. Nimmo and Cavender S. Sutton.

Other titles: U.S. Marine combined action platoons and the battle that changed the Vietnam War

Description: Quantico, Virginia : Marine Corps University Press, 2025. | This is a publication issued by the United States federal government or produced with federal funds. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "The battles to recapture Hue from the flood of North Vietnamese who entered and seized the city during the 1968 Tet Offensive was a defining moment for the United States in the twentieth century. The Road to Hue seeks to broaden our understanding of the Battle of Hue by concentrating instead on the story of how we got there. The battles to recapture the city are described in detail, but more important is the story of how the city of Hue was left undefended despite overwhelming evidence that an attack was about to happen"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025041705 (print) | LCCN 2025041706 (ebook) | ISBN 9798987849255 paperback | ISBN 9798987849262 epub

Subjects: LCSH: United States. Marine Corps. Combined Action Program. | Combined operations (Military science) | Counterinsurgency—Vietnam (Republic) | Hue, Battle of, Hue, Vietnam, 1968. | Vietnam War, 1961–1975.

Classification: LCC DS557.7 (print) | LCC DS557.7 (ebook) | DDC 959.704/34—dc23/eng/20250930 | SUDOC D 214.502:H 87

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025041705>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025041706>

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Marine Corps University, the U.S. Marine Corps, the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Army, the U.S. Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government. The information contained in this book was accurate at the time of printing. Every effort has been made to secure copyright permission on excerpts and artworks reproduced in this volume. Please contact the editors to rectify inadvertent errors or omissions.

MCUP makes every effort to ensure that no generative AI was used in the creation of its works. All text, tables, and figures were composed exclusively by the author and adapted by MCUP for publication.

Copyright for all works—journals and monographs—is retained by the author(s). Some works of authorship from Marine Corps University Press (MCUP) are created by U.S. government employees as part of their official duties and are now eligible for copyright protection in the United States; further, some of MCUP's works available on a publicly accessible website may be subject to copyright or other intellectual property rights owned by non-Department of Defense (DOD) parties. Regardless of whether the works are marked with a copyright notice or other indication of non-DOD ownership or interests, any use of MCUP works may subject the user to legal liability, including liability to such non-DOD owners of intellectual property or other protectable legal interests. MCUP products are published under a Creative Commons NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY - NC-ND 4.0) license.

© 2026 by William F. Nimmo and Cavender S. Sutton

Published by

Marine Corps University Press

2044 Broadway Street

Quantico, VA 22134

1st Printing, 2026

ISBN: 979-8-9878492-5-5

DOI: 10.56686/9798987849255

THIS VOLUME IS FREELY AVAILABLE AT WWW.USMCU.EDU/MCUPRESS

CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
Preface	ix
Coauthor's Note	xvii
Acknowledgments	xxiii
Select Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Terms	xxv
 Introduction	 3
Chapter 1. Combined Action Begins	19
Chapter 2. Expanding Combined Action to Da Nang, Early 1966	44
Chapter 3. Expanding the Phu Bai Tactical Area of Responsibility	71
Chapter 4. The War in Northern I Corps, June–December 1966	98
Chapter 5. Status of Combined Action, January 1967	116
Chapter 6. The Guerrilla War Intensifies	132
Chapter 7. The Summer of 1967	157
Chapter 8. Terror	189
Chapter 9. Contacts with the Viet Cong Increase	218
Chapter 10. Evidence Mounts for a Major Enemy Campaign	240
Chapter 11. The Top Command Reveals Enemy Intent	264
Chapter 12. Tet Begins	285
Chapter 13. The Attack on Hue	303
Chapter 14. Taking Back the Modern City	323
Chapter 15. The Battle to Retake the Citadel	342
Chapter 16. The Battle of Hue: A Postmortem Analysis	361
Conclusion	379
 Select Bibliography	 399
Index	403
About the Authors	409

FOREWORD

As a Marine captain in 1967, I began my tour in Vietnam advising the 1st Marine Division on organizing their command within Quang Nam Province, which included the well-known area of Da Nang. I was later given command of Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. In both of my roles in Vietnam, I came to appreciate the Marine's use of a concept known as "Combined Action." During the long history of the Corps, Marines have created a number of incident-specific units to address a unique tactical or operational need. The Combined Action Platoons (CAPs) in the Vietnam War were one of these unique Marine Corps creations. Before taking command of Company H, I first came into contact with several CAPs in Quang Nam Province. In my assigned role of repositioning troops to enhance operations in the area, I visited many of the CAP units and learned their techniques. Later, after I was reassigned to the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, I encountered several other CAPs in action when we were sent north to enter the fight for Hue and the surrounding areas. At that time, those CAPs were in regular contact with enemy forces. Their spirit and performance were admirable. I had to leave the CAPs when command ordered my unit into Hue to counter the enemy forces who had taken over the city during the Tet Offensive attacks. I was ultimately wounded and sent back to the United States to recover.

During my time in Vietnam, I learned that the CAPs were a unique creation that performed a vital role in protecting the villages that lined the roadways and other vital points in I Corps. The presence of the CAPs and their constant patrolling also prevented the Viet Cong from

FOREWORD

operating at will and gaining influence among the villagers. This function denied the enemy the support of the population. The presence of the CAPs also fostered a symbiotic relationship between them and the infantry units working throughout the area. The infantry's presence kept large bodies of Viet Cong troops in check while the CAPs provided valuable intelligence about activity in the area. *The Road to Hue* is an authoritative account of the CAPs that has never been covered. It provides a detailed history of the origin of the CAPs, delivers a thorough record of their role in Thua Thien province as the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army prepared for the Tet attacks on the Hue area, and offers a glimpse into how the CAPs lived and fought. This work should be read by all Marine officers and enlisted personnel who may be called on to organize and employ counterinsurgency methods in future confrontations.

George R. Christmas
Lieutenant General, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret)

PREFACE

The battles to recapture Hue from the flood of North Vietnamese who entered and seized the city during the 1968 Tet Offensive was a defining moment for the United States in the twentieth century. Many fine books offer blow-by-blow accounts of the efforts of U.S. Marine Corps, Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), and U.S. Army forces to recapture the city. Yet, none of these works adequately cover the period before that key battle. *The Road to Hue* seeks to broaden our understanding of the Battle of Hue by concentrating instead on the story of how we got there. The battles to recapture the city are described in detail, but more important is the story of how the city of Hue was left undefended despite overwhelming evidence that an attack was about to happen.

U.S. Marines in the Vietnam War adopted an approach that emphasized fighting the Viet Cong guerrillas at the village level.¹ They felt that this was the only approach that stood a chance of fending off the insurgency that had permeated seemingly every village and hamlet in South Vietnam by the time U.S. troops arrived in force in March 1965. The Marines were responsible for the northern sector of South Vietnam known as the I Corps Tactical Zone. They employed a strategy of first clearing all villages and hamlets of organized Viet Cong units and then using local village protection forces to hold those villages so the Viet Cong would not come back into the vacuum that their clearing

¹ The term *Viet Cong* is a colloquialism meaning “Vietnamese Communist” that originated in the 1920s to differentiate the group from Chinese Communists. While some have assigned pejorative value to the term, it is used here purely as a descriptive identifier.

PREFACE

operations created. When it became evident that the local protection forces were unable to keep the Viet Cong out on their own, the Marine Corps embedded squads of Marines alongside the village protection platoons. These became known as Combined Action Platoons (CAPs).

The Marine infantry from 1965 until the Tet Offensive of 1968 worked in an unspoken partnership with the CAPs to eradicate the Viet Cong guerrillas from I Corps' rice-growing lowland villages. *The Road to Hue* documents this partnership and the progress the two forces made before the Tet Offensive. The relationship between CAPs and line infantry became particularly important in mid-1966, when North Vietnam infiltrated large numbers of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces across the border at the demilitarized zone (DMZ). These incursions caused a major shift in the war. Several U.S. Marine and ARVN infantry battalions and support troops were sent to the DMZ. This became permanent, and with the increase in conventional warfare at the DMZ, the Marines now faced two fronts of equal importance. The situation in I Corps required the Marines to fight two different types of war, an arrangement that stretched their resources thin and complicated their pacification efforts south of the DMZ. Combined action was an attempt to mitigate those issues.

Several themes run through *The Road to Hue*. One concern is the story of how the Marine Corps fought two simultaneous wars. These efforts required commanders and their Marines to create a balanced strategy of conducting village and rural pacification operations in central and southern I Corps against the Viet Cong while fighting a conventional war in northern I Corps against the NVA, which was trying to dislodge the Marines from the northern border of South Vietnam. Another major theme is the symbiotic relationship between CAPs and the regular infantry during this time. During the war of pacification in the rural countryside, *The Road to Hue* documents the process in which CAPs fought to hold villages after the infantry had cleared them of guerrilla activity. CAP Marines were embedded into the local village forces to help them protect and secure their villages for their government, the Republic of South Vietnam. The book places particular em-

PREFACE

phasis on the CAPs that lined the main roadway south of Hue in the expanding Phu Bai enclave as the Marines moved over time toward the launch of the Tet Offensive in January 1968.

Intertwined throughout the book are discussions on the NVA's various stages of planning for the Tet Offensive. The North Vietnamese, as opposed to the southern insurgents, controlled the war and during the year 1967 developed, modified, and then executed a massive countrywide assault that they called a general offensive-general insurrection. The assault was launched with the intent of surprise at the vulnerable moment of the official beginning of the celebration by the Vietnamese of Lunar New Year 1968.

This project originally stemmed from a desire to better understand my personal experiences in Vietnam. I served in both the conventional war in northern I Corps near the DMZ as an infantry Marine in early 1967 and then as a CAP Marine from the summer of 1967 through the Tet Offensive in 1968. Many of us in the Combined Action Program believe that it was one of the most significant experiences of our lives. Lots of these men left the war behind in the late 1960s and went on to achieve a variety of educational and career goals. A surprising number of former CAP Marines went on to become law enforcement officers. When I left Vietnam in 1968, I too left it behind me. I returned home years behind my peers, and getting a college degree was the most important thing on my mind. After college, I went to law school, became a criminal prosecutor, and then spent the rest of my career as a criminal defense lawyer. I practiced law for more than 30 years. I was a jury trial lawyer, and the requirements of that type of work, along with family, consumed my entire life.

I began studying Vietnam in 2012, at a point when those memories started making me curious to understand what I had been involved in over there. My family wanted me to write down my experiences so that my children would know something of my life in the Vietnam War. My focus was narrow at first. I wanted to understand the Combined Action Program that I had been a part of back then. I read all the credible literature on the subject that I could find. The more I

PREFACE

researched, the more I realized the war's sheer complexity. My research on the CAP units accelerated when I met a fellow CAP Marine veteran named Henry A. Beaudin. He and I both were interested in learning more about our former unique unit. We met when we discovered a social media site that provided a place for CAP Marines to post photographs and discuss experiences. Henry and I ultimately formed our own social media group designated solely for the study of CAP Marine history. For several years, this provided a forum for research through presentations of what we were learning combined with the subsequent discussions of the members that the posts generated.

The early CAPs were not well documented, so Henry and I had to dig through infantry battalion and other unit command records to piece together locations and events involving each of the Combined Action units. The members of the Facebook group flooded us with their personal photographs and comments. From the combination of digging through the chronologies and materials provided by the CAP veterans, we were able to create maps as we developed a better grasp of the procedure and protocols of the CAPs from all eras of the war. I have also interviewed dozens of CAP veterans during in-person conversations, by telephone, and via email. We CAP veterans have an annual reunion that provides a great opportunity to meet Combined Action Marines from the many different times and places where CAPs operated.

The study of combined action drove me to learn more about the Vietnam War in general and how the Marines prosecuted their part in it. I became intrigued with learning more about how the war really progressed. Since the Tet Offensive was such a dramatic event and a turning point for the United States' involvement in the war, I became curious to understand just how it happened that thousands of the enemy were able to slip into Hue City and the fortified Citadel there without any opposition.

As I studied the Marine Corps' war and its execution through command records, oral histories, and interviews, I realized that the Marines made a great effort to fight the war in their own way. I came to realize that the Marine command really believed that the war could not be

PREFACE

won by sheer force alone. Winning the war, if possible, would take eliminating the guerrillas and their infrastructure and cultivating the acceptance and loyalty of the rice-farming villagers. The Marines realized that the government of South Vietnam had lost the trust of the people in the villages, and to gain that back would require a focused effort at the village level. Therefore, even as the Marines were stretched thin by the infiltration of the NVA at the DMZ, they continued to support the war in the villages. The CAPs fought that pacification war in conjunction with Marine infantry units.

The command records kept monthly by each Marine Corps battalion in Vietnam provide a detailed picture of their activities. These command chronologies document each unit's command staff, subordinate unit locations, current intelligence, details of operations, and a chronological record of significant events. Many of the battalions kept a daily record of their squad patrols, including the time the patrols left, anything that happened, and the time they returned to their base of operation. Grid coordinates accompany most entries so that their activities can be plotted and checked against the topographical maps. During my years of research, I have read and studied thousands of incidents from hundreds of command records of Marine battalions and regiments, III Marine Amphibious Force records, and the records of the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, the highest command of the Marines in Vietnam.

The Marine Corps History Division in Quantico, Virginia, and Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, provided research assistance. Texas Tech has created, from the Marine Corps History Division's Vietnam War collection, a massive online archive of Vietnam War materials that contains all Marine Corps command chronologies. The Marine Corps History Division provided several oral history interviews of Marines whom I thought key to understanding certain aspects of the war or of combined action.

Regarding the battle to recapture Hue City from the Communist forces that seized it, I had the fortunate luck to have a friend, a fellow board member on the CAP Veteran's Association, who served in the infantry during the battle and later transferred to a CAP. He served

PREFACE

in Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, during the Battle of Hue during the campaign on the southern side of the Perfume River. He arranged for me to interview several Marines, officers and enlisted, who were central in the battles to retake both the Citadel on the north side of the river and the modern city on the south side of the river. These Marines provided key information that helped corroborate the command records and daily journals of events.

Perhaps some of the most important research I did was to take two trips of a total of 40 days to explore what used to be the country of South Vietnam. This experience was invaluable, as it provided me with an intimate knowledge one can only get by physically seeing the war's important locations and terrain for themselves. I certainly had a great time, but more importantly I learned the war in a way that written works or photographs cannot teach. I visited the locations of most of the former CAPs. This took me to the Da Nang, Phu Bai, Chu Lai, and Quang Tri areas. I observed and learned the terrain in most of the CAPs' areas. Seeing the nearby mountains, ridgelines, rivers, paths, and roadways taught me to appreciate how each CAP might have operated in their own unique way. I had seen these areas in maps and photographs, but seeing them in reality added a greater understanding. I explored some CAP areas in more detail, particularly the ones discussed most in this book. While in northern I Corps, I visited Khe Sahn, the first Ho Chi Minh Trail pathway, and viewed The Rockpile and various other important or notable points along the way. I went to the former demarcation line between North and South Vietnam, the DMZ, and visited some of the old combat bases in areas such as Gio Lin and Con Thien.

I made a special effort on both trips to explore Hue City and the surrounding area. I tried to locate areas that were important to my analysis of the battle. I studied the Viet Cong and the NVA mountain base camps, the terrain along the important rivers, the routes of enemy ingress and egress to and from Hue, and the approaches from the mountains to the west where the enemy moved in for their attack. I rode these areas both by motorcycle and then by automobile using hired drivers. Within the city, much of the buildings and important

PREFACE

locations on the south side of the river still exist and are easy to locate. I walked most of these areas. I also studied the Citadel. At various points, I climbed up onto the top of the parapets and explored the massive Citadel walls the Marines had to clear when retaking the city.

South of I Corps, I traveled extensively in and around Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) and the infamous Mekong Delta, both areas of decisive importance during the war. The Mekong River runs from where it enters Vietnam near the Laotian border and spans out into several branches until it reaches the South China Sea hundreds of kilometers to the east. Because of the number of tributaries that flow out across the delta, the Mekong is referred to as the River of Nine Dragons. In many places, the river's branches replace roadways, making them important terrain for both sides during the war. I spent many days traveling around in the Mekong Delta by car, boat, and motorcycle. During this time, I stopped frequently at points of interest that included a former Viet Cong jungle base camp.

During the war, Saigon hosted the command and control centers for U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. It is a beautiful city filled with French architecture, and the old downtown is dotted with hotels that once hosted military leaders, dignitaries, news reporters, and other important war-related personnel. The actual command center for the former South Vietnamese government has been preserved and can be visited today. It is a massive building with ornate palatial gathering rooms. The lower areas house the former operation command centers. The whole area is filled with important evidence of the former wartime era.

I was fortunate to be able, in advance, to locate some of the villagers and some of the people who I had worked with during the war. Four of our unit's former houseboys came from around various parts of the country to visit and celebrate a reunion. We were treated to a large dinner at a family home that lasted until late into the night. These contacts were precious and gave me much closure about the land that I had left 50 years before. I had spent the year and a half following my 2018 trip in several classes per week, learning to speak and read Vietnamese. I wanted to be able to read and pronounce markings on maps

PREFACE

and signs, and I wanted to be able to converse with the people I knew and the people I met. As they say in Vietnamese, I learned to speak Vietnamese *mot chut* (a little bit).

William F. Nimmo
2020

COAUTHOR'S NOTE

My journey with this book began in late 2012, long before I read through the manuscript's initial drafts. After four years and two deployments to Afghanistan, my time in the U.S. Marine Corps neared its end. I was haunted by the direction that, to me, the war had begun to take. I first deployed to Afghanistan with the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, in September 2010. For seven months, our battalion endured a brutal fight for the Sangin District in northeastern Helmand Province. We lost more than two dozen Marines killed and another 200 wounded. But when we rotated out of the country in April 2011, it seemed that this sacrifice had not been in vain. The Sangin District that we left that spring was vastly different than the one we had entered the previous year. When we first arrived, Sangin was a desolate and hopeless place. The district center and surrounding marketplaces were almost deserted, with only a few dozen shops in operation. Taliban flags ringed every American base, taunting us. Many patrols could not venture more than 100 meters outside of the wire without taking contact. By the time we left, the situation had changed dramatically. There were few, if any, places we could not go. The district center and bazaar thrived, children attended school, and the people in Sangin could move about the district and live as they pleased. Most encouraging was that the Afghan Army and Police forces, who we were responsible for advising and assisting, began to show signs that they could fight and win on their own. I left Afghanistan that spring convinced we were winning, and that the Taliban's defeat, while not imminent, was but a matter of time.

COAUTHOR'S NOTES

Just a few months after returning home, I volunteered to transfer to the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, so I could go back to Afghanistan the next year. My second deployment destroyed any confidence I had in our ability to secure a lasting peace or a free Afghanistan. Between February and August 2012, I lived and patrolled in northern Helmand's Now Zad district, by then a backwater in the war. We focused most of our efforts on advising the area's Afghan Police forces, with the hope that they could prevent the Taliban's return after our departure later that year. Time was of the essence in 2012 in a way it had not been two years before. It was an election year in the United States, and the administration of U.S. president Barack H. Obama repeatedly committed to our departing the country by 2014. As soon as we arrived, however, I realized that this deadline was not feasible in Now Zad. The Afghan Army and Police forces were overstretched and poorly led. In most cases, they remained in their isolated outposts, sending a few patrols into the surrounding hills and villages each week. The police were especially worrisome. The district chief was corrupt, incompetent, and generally unwilling to heed our advice unless it brought him some personal benefit. In the field, many of his officers and noncommissioned officers were reluctant to enforce discipline or lead their troops with any sort of aggression. Our battalion's conduct did little to help matters—we were spread out over far too much space while running disjointed, seemingly random operations. Worse, the security situation and our relationship with the people deteriorated as time went on. When we left Sangin, many Afghans treated us as heroes; when we left Now Zad, they lined the streets to throw rocks at our convoy as we drove past.

Three months later, I left the Marine Corps confused and disillusioned. I no longer thought the United States' efforts in Afghanistan would—or could—succeed. Questions raced through my mind as I departed Camp Pendleton, California, and moved back home. How could the war have turned against us so quickly? More pressing, how could small bands of guerrillas in such a seemingly backward and undeveloped place as Afghanistan mount such an effective resistance against the Coalition led by the world's most militarily and economi-

COAUTHOR'S NOTES

cally powerful state? These questions motivated my academic pursuits after leaving active duty, eventually resulting in my earning a PhD in military history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

During graduate school, I began my own study of the Combined Action Program because of its similarities to my own experiences while advising the Afghan National Police. When I began the preliminary research for my dissertation, I was shocked to find that very little scholarship on the program existed. While combined action has received some (often brief) attention in numerous articles and books, to date there are only four monographs exclusively dedicated to the topic.¹ Each book makes an admirable contribution to our knowledge about the Combined Action Program, yet none examines a particular Combined Action Platoon (CAP) or set of CAPs over time.² *The Road to Hue* is the first work of historiography that does just that by placing combined action at the heart of one of the war's most critical chapters.

I met the author of this book, CAP veteran William "Bill" Nimmo, in the fall of 2020. Locked in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was struggling to gain traction on my dissertation. On a whim, I reached out to another CAP veteran, Edward F. Palm, after reading his memoir, *Tiger Papa Three*.³ Ed, who was kind enough to read and comment on early drafts of this work, put me in touch with Bill, who he claimed had mastered the source material. Palm's description was an understatement. During my first conversation with Bill, I was struck by his intimate knowledge of the Combined Action Program's history.

¹ Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1989); Al Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994); John Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014); and Ted N. Easterling, *War in the Villages: The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons in the Vietnam War* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2021).

² Bing West, *The Village* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), does examine a single CAP during an approximately two-year period. However, years of research have taught me that a CAP's experience was a distinct exception rather than the rule. Further, while West's book is a valuable source on combined action, it is more of a memoir (and therefore a valuable primary source) than a work of scholarship.

³ Edward F. Palm, *Tiger Papa Three: Memoir of a Combined Action Marine in Vietnam* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2020).

COAUTHOR'S NOTES

He seemed to know each CAP's location, chronology, and experiences. Through years of research, Bill developed a knowledge of the command chronologies and other sources used throughout this book that no other scholar on the subject can match. His knowledge is the reason *The Road to Hue* provides such a unique and intimate description of the Alpha and Hotel CAPs' experiences in the months leading up to the Tet Offensive.

During the last several years, Bill and I have developed a close working relationship. He helped me better understand the command chronologies and other necessary sources for my dissertation, and I began to help him prepare his work for publication. He was even gracious enough to invite me to the Combined Action Veterans' annual reunion in October 2021 and November 2023, where I had the opportunity to speak with fellow Marines from a different era. They embraced me as one of their own, and many have since allowed me to interview them for my own work. I would not be the scholar I am today without Bill Nimmo, and for that I will always be grateful.

Tragedy nearly struck when Bill suffered a stroke in early 2022. While he did eventually recover, his ability to complete the book had diminished. As I prepared to teach a class one afternoon in March 2022, Bill called me from his hospital bed to ask if I could help him push his book across the finish line. Given the friendship we have developed and the immense help that he has been to my own work, I jumped at the opportunity. In the three years since then, Bill and I have worked together to refine the book's scope and fortify its key discussions. In addition to editing syntax, restructuring chapters, and reformatting the text, I also incorporated some of my own research and ideas into the work. I must stress, however, that while I played a large role in helping Bill complete this book, the original idea, most of the research behind it, and the maps and images are his.

This was a challenging undertaking, especially while simultaneously writing my dissertation, completing my PhD, and beginning a new career, but *The Road to Hue* has become a true labor of love. It provides a unique account of one of the war's most fondly remembered yet widely understudied organizations. It is a vital contribution to Viet-

COAUTHOR'S NOTES

nam War and counterinsurgency historiography—one whose value has been amplified by our chaotic exit from Afghanistan in August 2021. The U.S. military and diplomatic communities' shift away from counterinsurgency and toward competition with China and Russia, while understandable, makes counterinsurgency-focused works more important than ever before. If we are to avoid another defeat like those suffered in Vietnam and Afghanistan—or, more preferably, avoid becoming entangled in such conflicts altogether—then we cannot lose sight of the painful experiences we endured while fighting similar wars in the past.

Cavender S. Sutton
Newport, Rhode Island
April 2025

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to give thanks and recognition to several people who contributed to making *The Road to Hue* a finished product. Each of them worked long and hard to transform my research and writing into a finished product. Their efforts are much appreciated.

Cavender Sutton

I would like to express special thanks for the editorial work and writing of Cavender Sutton. In February 2022, as I was getting ready to make final edits to the book for submission to Marine Corps University Press, I had a sudden stroke that damaged my ability to read and work with written materials. Cavender, then a graduate student working on his PhD at the University of North Carolina (UNC), volunteered to take over editing *The Road to Hue* so that it could be submitted to the publisher. It was my great luck that Cavender was writing his PhD dissertation on the Combined Action Program in Vietnam, making his editing work especially valuable. In addition to the immense work required due to the publisher's insistence on a consolidation of chapters, Cavender recommended revisions that I agreed were valuable additions to the work. By then I was able to review audio recordings of the manuscript and able to assist by writing additional material. Over time, Cavender transitioned into a full coauthor and his work has helped make this book a much better product. His edits and writing have transformed the work into a far greater product. Cavender has since graduated from UNC with a PhD in military history. He currently teaches in the Strategy Department at the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Edward F. Palm

Former U.S. Marine Corps major Edward F. Palm, PhD, was the initial editor on this project. He took the initial writings and edited them into a far more articulate version. Dr. Palm is the author of an early and recognized work on Combined Action entitled *Tiger Papa Three: Memoir of a Combined Action Marine in Vietnam* (2020). Major Palm served in Combined Action Platoons as an enlisted Marine in 1967, stationed in a northern area known as the Quang Tri Province. He received his PhD in English and American literature from the University of Pennsylvania. He wrote his doctorate on the historical literature of the American War in Vietnam.

Marine Corps University Press

Finally, I would like to thank Angela Anderson and her team at Marine Corps University Press (MCUP). Angela has always believed in this book. I am very grateful to her for her patience and support. Her ideas, support, and patience throughout the writing of this work have been very much appreciated.

SELECT ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS, AND TERMS

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
BLT	battalion landing team
CAC	Combined Action Company
CACO	Combined Action Company
CAG	Combined Action Group
CAP	Combined Action Platoon
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CICV	Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
DMZ	demilitarized zone
FMFPAC	Fleet Marine Force, Pacific
III MAF	III Marine Amphibious Force
JAC	Joint Action Company
LAW	light antitank weapon
LCU	landing craft utility
MAT	Mobile Advisory Team
MEDCAP	Medical Civic Action Program
medevac	medical evacuation
MP	military police
NLF	National Liberation Front
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PAT	People's Action Team
PF	Popular Forces (South Vietnam)
RD	Revolutionary Development

SELECT ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS, AND TERMS

RF	Regional Forces (South Vietnam)
R&R	rest and recuperation
SOG	Studies and Observations Group
TAOR	tactical area of responsibility
T/O	table of organization
TOC	tactical operations center
USMACV	U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

THE ROAD TO HUE

INTRODUCTION

The Attack on Hue

In the early morning hours of 31 January 1968, several thousand North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong soldiers emerged from their jungle hideouts and attacked Hue from the west, south, and east. They met scant resistance and quickly moved into the city in the predawn darkness. In the old city, located on the north bank of the Perfume River that runs through Hue on a northeast-southwest axis, at least three battalions of NVA troops supported by demolition-carrying sappers burst through the Hue Citadel's gates. Just seven minutes later, an NVA artillery battery fired a salvo of 122-millimeter rockets into the "modern" city on the river's south bank before multiple battalions of Viet Cong and NVA soldiers entered its streets virtually unopposed from different directions. As darkness gave way to a dreary, overcast dawn, much of the city had already fallen under Communist control. Certain of victory, the attackers raised a large flag that they had specially made for the operation over the Citadel's southern entrance.¹ Weeks would pass and thousands would die before it would be taken down.

But the fight for the Citadel was not over yet. Its sturdy walls provided interlocking fields of fire over all 11 entrances and excellent cover and concealment that protected defenders from all but the heaviest of

¹ Erik Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2008), 34–37. An interesting anecdote about the special nature of the flag can be found in Mark Bowden, *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017), 52–53.

INTRODUCTION

Figure I.1. Entry into the Hue Citadel



One of the 11 gates of entry into the Hue Citadel. The Citadel was built from 1805 through 1832 by the first emperors of a united Vietnam. The walls are nearly 8 meters (26 feet) high and surround approximately 6.5 square kilometers (2.5 square miles) of the old city of Hue. The Citadel was the capital of the Nguyen Dynasty, which occupied it for 143 years. Source: photo by Thuan Pham, 2020.

weapons. Moreover, Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) brigadier general Ngo Quang Truong, the South Vietnamese commander in Hue, acted quickly and decisively to organize and reposition his limited forces for a desperate defense. Any final assault would be a bloody and arduous task, yet Communist forces made repeated and costly attacks against Truong's last holdouts defending the Citadel's southeastern corner. Elsewhere, NVA and Viet Cong soldiers attempted—unsuccessfully—to root out the last pockets of South Vietnamese and U.S. resistance and prepared to repel any counterattacks. Communist soldiers embedded themselves in defensive positions throughout the Citadel. On both sides of the river, many of the city's buildings and walls were nearly impervious to rifle and machine gun fire; penetrating them and rooting out the defenders required heavy, large-caliber weapons such as recoilless rifles, artillery, and tank cannons or air strikes. Yet, during the battle's early stages, the rules of engagement prevented

INTRODUCTION

counterattacking U.S. and South Vietnamese forces from using such heavy weapons, as the South Vietnamese command wanted to protect the city's historical sites. Vicious house-to-house and street-to-street fighting ensued where allied reaction forces were forced to literally dig and blast the enemy out of their positions one room at a time. Some days, progress was measured in mere yards.²

Throughout that desperate first morning, ARVN soldiers defending Hue sent urgent requests for help. Reaction forces were on the way by daybreak the following morning, but U.S. and ARVN survivors in the city had to hold out for 30 or more hours before significant relief could arrive. Nearby U.S. Marines from the 1st and 5th Marine Regiments responded quickly, yet it took several days for them to drive the enemy out of the modern city and until 2 March for allied forces to drive the enemy out of the Citadel. The Marines were not called into the Citadel until almost two weeks into the battle when ARVN efforts to rid the old city of Communist forces had stalled. Meanwhile, members of the U.S. Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division, recently assigned to Camp Evans north of Hue, attempted to assist the beleaguered garrison in the Citadel. On their way to the city, the soldiers stayed off the roadway and moved through villages to avoid confrontation. However, they instead ran into a large enemy force defending a previously unknown command and logistics center located in a village along their route. A harrowing fight ensued where the 1st Air Cavalry soldiers took heavy casualties but managed to escape to higher ground, where they helped disrupt enemy resupply efforts by calling in air strikes from their new position.³

Although U.S. and South Vietnamese forces reacted to the attacks quickly, retaking both the Citadel and the modern city required weeks of urban combat that took a steep price in human life. In all, 631 U.S.

² The difficulties facing U.S. and South Vietnamese counterattacks during the Battle of Hue have been recounted in several prominent works of historiography. For example, see Bowden, *Hue 1968*, particularly parts 3 and 4.

³ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, 46–55; and Jack Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 168–79.

INTRODUCTION

and South Vietnamese servicemembers died—333 ARVN soldiers, 142 U.S. Marines, 68 U.S. Army soldiers, and 88 South Vietnamese Marines. An additional 3,676 were wounded—1,773 ARVN soldiers, 1,100 U.S. Marines, 453 U.S. Army soldiers, and 350 South Vietnamese Marines. Between 3,000 and 5,800 civilians were killed during the Tet attacks. Some of these civilians were caught in the crossfire, while many others fell victim to Viet Cong death squads roaming both the Citadel and the modern city looking for predesignated targets to execute.⁴ There is clear evidence of a deliberate process in which the Viet Cong systematically targeted civilians and supporters of the South Vietnamese government for imprisonment or execution.⁵ In one of the more tragic episodes of the long conflict in Vietnam, mass graves were found throughout the Hue area for years to come. Exhumed corpses showed signs that the Communists had beaten, shot, and beheaded many of their victims before tossing them into the ground. Others had been buried alive with their hands tied behind their backs and rags stuffed into their mouths.⁶

The attack on Hue was a crucial turning point in the United States' odyssey in Vietnam. It and other attacks associated with the Tet Offensive irreparably damaged U.S. support for the war. On 21 November 1967, just 10 weeks before Tet, U.S. Army general William C. Westmoreland, commander of all U.S. forces in Vietnam, addressed the nation from the Washington Press Club. "I have been observing the war in South Vietnam at close hand for almost four years," he declared. "In the past two and one-half years I have seen the progressive commitment of U.S. troops in support of the Vietnamese. I am absolutely

⁴ Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 212–16.

⁵ For an anecdotal example involving a young boy whose father, a South Vietnamese government official, was taken by NVA soldiers on the first day of the Battle of Hue and imprisoned for 12 years, see Nguyen Qui Duc, "I Was Living a Double Life," in Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Viking, 2003), 295–97.

⁶ There is no shortage of works that discuss the atrocities inflicted on Hue's civilian population during the Tet Offensive. Some examples include Alje Vennema, *The Viet Cong Massacre at Hue* (New York: Vantage Press, 1976); Don Oberdorfer, *Tet! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1984), 201–2; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 529–31; and Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945–1975* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 478–79.

INTRODUCTION

certain that whereas in 1965 the enemy was winning, today he is certainly losing.”⁷ This infamous speech was meant to assure the public that U.S. troops were close to winning the war and that there was, indeed, light at the end of the tunnel. It proved to be one of the greatest miscalculations in U.S. military history. U.S. forces had indeed made some progress in the war, but not to the extent that Westmoreland had pronounced. Whatever credibility he and the administration of U.S. president Lyndon B. Johnson had before Tet was lost after the attacks on 31 January 1968.

The impact of Tet on American public support for the war is difficult to overstate. The attack on Hue and the subsequent fight to retake it were particularly damaging. The battle was one of the most publicized and longest lasting events of the entire offensive, and it has remained a hallmark story of the war in Vietnam ever since. Graphic photographs of Marine casualties and harrowing video footage of street battles inside the Citadel flooded print and television news outlets in the United States. As millions in the United States and around the globe followed the battle in near-real time, its implications became more pronounced. Not only had a large enemy force succeeded in launching a surprise attack on one of South Vietnam’s largest cities, but the ensuing battle lasted more than a month and unleashed an unprecedented horror on the local population that much of the world could see, thanks to modern technology. Militarily, the attack on Hue—like the rest of Tet—was a failure for the Communists. But perception was reality to most outside observers. The fact that Communist forces failed in the vast majority of the Tet attacks, and that they failed to hold any of the ground gained when they did meet limited success, mattered little to civilian onlookers half a world away. To many watching nightly news coverage of the battle, it looked like the enemy possessed overwhelming strength and had effectively tricked the U.S. military.⁸ If the enemy

⁷ William C. Westmoreland, “Progress Report,” William C. Westmoreland Papers; Box 77A, Folder 5, News Release Transcription of “Progress Report” Given at the National Press Club, 21 November 1967, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, PA.

⁸ George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States in Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 232–34, 241–45.

INTRODUCTION

possessed such high levels of motivation, ingenuity, and combat power after more than a decade of U.S. military support and three years of direct involvement in combat operations, what was the point in spilling more American blood for an unstable government that consistently proved it could not stand on its own?

The United States' most revered broadcast journalist at the time, Walter L. Cronkite Jr., voiced similar concerns. He was present on the ground during the Battle of Hue and made regular television reports on his experiences. The battle's carnage had a profound impact on how he viewed and supported the war. Cronkite made his disillusionment clear during a special broadcast on 27 February 1968 when he declared, "To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion."⁹ This sober assessment marked a turning point in American support for the war. The shock of Tet and the bloodshed in Hue ripped away any illusions that Cronkite and millions of Americans possessed about the prospects of an allied victory in South Vietnam.

The public relations fiascos stemming from the Tet Offensive generated significant ramifications within the United States' military and political leadership. President Johnson announced that he would not seek a second term in office just one month after Cronkite's broadcast. As the commander in chief of the U.S. military, he had a duty to verbally respond to the Tet Offensive, yet he did nothing. He could have assured the American people that the Tet Offensive was a desperate gamble and should be regarded as such. But the president's silence left the impression, and constituted a silent admission, that Tet was a major U.S. military defeat. Johnson had actively considered finding a way to negotiate a way out of the war, but the combination of Westmoreland's declaration prior to Tet, the shock of the offensive on public morale, and the president's own silence on the matter sealed the Tet battles as

⁹ Walter Cronkite, "We Are Mired in Stalemate" (27 February 1968), in *Reporting Vietnam*, pt. 1, *American Journalism, 1959–1969* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 581–82.

INTRODUCTION

a significant political victory for the Communist forces, despite their failure to attain any tangible military success on the ground. Perception thereby became reality.¹⁰

Much of the history written about the Battle of Hue concludes that Tet illustrated a hubris-driven intelligence failure of epic proportions.¹¹ In some regards, such analyses are correct. Yet, the story behind what led to the Battle of Hue—and local commanders' knowledge of what was on the horizon in January 1968—is far more complex. The Tet Offensive required an elaborate series of enemy preparations that unfolded during several months before it began. In regard to the attack on Hue, there are comparatively few works about this months-long buildup of enemy forces and the increasing series of offensive actions that eventually culminated in the Tet Offensive. The attack on Hue was the result of this long and expansive buildup.¹²

One of the more unique and important parts of this story has escaped historical analysis thus far. No work to date describes the roll that special units of Marines, known as Combined Action Platoons (CAP), played in this crucial episode of the war.¹³ These unique units paired a Marine rifle squad with a platoon of locally raised South Vietnamese militia known as Popular Forces (PF). Combined action was the Marine Corps' answer to the demands of the localized, irregular war it confronted in Vietnam. Theoretically, the program allowed the Marines to maintain local security within important villages with a

¹⁰ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 232–34, 239–45, 248–52; and Karnow, *Vietnam*, 509–13, 545–50.

¹¹ Some prominent examples include James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), particularly chaps. 15 and 16; and Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 90.

¹² Works such as Oberdorfer, *Tet!*; Bowden, *Hue 1968*; Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*; and Hastings, *Vietnam* acknowledge preparations that the Viet Cong and NVA made to infiltrate agents into the city and other clandestine practices before the Tet Offensive began, but they make no mention of the long sequence of events—many of which involved direct combat between large Communist units and U.S. Marine Corps CAPs and infantry forces—the led up to the battle for Hue.

¹³ One such work is Bowden, *Hue 1968*. The author dedicates the first 92 pages of this excellent book to the chain of events that occurred immediately before the attack, but the CAPs' fight along the road to Hue are absent.

INTRODUCTION

minimum commitment of U.S. personnel. This book argues that the 15 CAPs posted along the road to Hue—the stretch of Highway 1 running south out of the city toward Quang Ngai province—were important players in the series of events leading to the Tet attacks at Hue. During the span of several months—particularly from the late summer of 1967 through January 1968—these platoons, known as the Alpha and Hotel CAPs, constantly spotted and engaged enemy forces as they attempted to expand their presence in the area. The CAPs' locations along the road to Hue were particularly troublesome for the massing Communist troops, who needed to venture down from their mountain hideouts to gather rice in the coastal lowlands.¹⁴ Those efforts required them to move through or near the CAPs' tactical areas of responsibility (TAOR). This book maintains that the behavior of Communist troops during this time, as well as captured documents, prisoner interrogations, and other forms of intelligence, indicates that the Marines' presence along the road to Hue complicated the enemy's efforts to stage for the impending assault on Hue.

This work presents a fresh perspective on the Combined Action Program. No previous history of combined action has examined a specific group of platoons over time.¹⁵ *The Road to Hue* presents a tactical-level analysis that primarily focuses on the Alpha and Hotel CAPs' war along Highway 1 in 1967 and early 1968. It provides an intimate view into the lives of the Marines who served in these platoons, while also demonstrating how their efforts, and those of their PF counterparts, af-

¹⁴ Douglas Pike identifies food production and procurement as an integral mission for Communist paramilitary forces during the war. See Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986), 127.

¹⁵ Bing West, *The Village* (New York: Pocket Books, 2003) is the lone exception. This must-read book provides a riveting account of a single CAP's exploits south of Chu Lai from the summer of 1966 to the autumn of 1967, but it reads more like a memoir and does not (nor does it intend to) contextualize that CAP's operations with the broader war in Vietnam. As of this writing, only three analytical monographs exist on combined action: Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1989); John Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014); and Ted N. Easterling, *War in the Villages: The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons in the Vietnam War* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2021). All provide a broad, holistic examination of the program.

INTRODUCTION

fected the environment in which they lived and fought. Yet, as this work demonstrates, there were limits to what individual CAPs could accomplish on their own. The CAP experience along the road to Hue shows that the combined action concept worked best when there was a close symbiosis between CAPs and regular infantry units operating nearby.

Historical Background

The story of the road to Hue begins in March 1965, when the first U.S. Marine battalions arrived in South Vietnam to stave off an impending collapse of the Republic of Vietnam. The Marines who arrived in Vietnam in March 1965 did not enter into a new conflict. Rather, they moved into the middle of a civil war that had gripped the country for the last decade. The decision to deploy them and other U.S. ground forces to Vietnam was the culmination of a gradual, 11-year process in which the United States—some would say awkwardly—enlarged its involvement in an increasingly precarious situation in the fledgling South Vietnamese republic.¹⁶ The process began when the 1954 Geneva Accords negotiated a ceasefire in the war between the Viet Minh—Vietnamese insurgents, a precursor to the Viet Cong—and the French.¹⁷ That conflict had immediately followed World War II when France, determined to restore its international prestige and reputation, made a determined attempt to reclaim its colony in Indochina. An eight-year quagmire followed that ended in disaster for French forces.¹⁸

Per the Geneva Accords, Vietnam was divided in two along the 17th parallel. North Vietnam fell under Communist leadership, headed by Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap, while South Vietnam was intended to host a new Western-style democracy. After a short period, a nation-wide referendum would reunify the country under a single government based on the voters' wishes. From the start, the agreement

¹⁶ Herring, *America's Longest War*, chaps. 1–4.

¹⁷ Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 74–77, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009229302>.

¹⁸ Bernard Fall, *Street without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina*, 2d ed. (Guilford, CT: Stackpole Books, 2018). For a more concise narrative, see Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 47–74.

INTRODUCTION

showed little prospects for success. To many political leaders on both sides of the 17th parallel, the opposing governments' ideological convictions on what was best for Vietnam's future were simply incompatible. South Vietnam's government was particularly troublesome. Ngo Dinh Diem, the U.S.-installed leader in Saigon, grew increasingly authoritarian as the northern leadership encouraged and gradually sponsored subversive activities within their southern neighbor. For years, the South Vietnamese populace suffered under Diem's leadership. His overbearing, autocratic style of rule stemmed from his paranoia—which later proved quite rational—of a military coup. He kept his armed forces' leadership close and used the ARVN more to safeguard against a coup than to fight the growing insurgency.¹⁹ His administration also favored Catholics and often mistreated Buddhists, who constituted a much larger segment of the South Vietnamese population. In November 1963, elements of ARVN leadership had had enough. They overthrew and killed Diem just three weeks before U.S. president John F. Kennedy's assassination. A series of coups and military juntas followed Diem's demise, further destabilizing the South Vietnamese state.²⁰

Communist insurgents took advantage of this political instability to develop a strong presence in the south. For a decade after the Geneva Accords, the National Liberation Front and its military wing, the Peoples Liberation Armed Forces, popularly referred to as the Viet Cong, steadily built up a formidable network of political and military cells in the lowland rice villages where 80 percent of the population of South Vietnam lived. While many Viet Cong operated as solo cadres or members of smaller local force units, more organized main force battalions gradually formed, trained, and became more active throughout the south.²¹ By the early 1960s, the Viet Cong had grown emboldened enough to

¹⁹ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 55–58, 60–68, 86–87; and Neil Sheehan, *A Bright and Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 141–42, 183–86.

²⁰ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 122–28; Karnow, *Vietnam*, 278–81, 304–11; and Sheehan, *A Bright and Shining Lie*, 331–35.

²¹ Warren Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big-Unit War Against the U.S., 1965–1966* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 1–20.

INTRODUCTION

launch daring attacks against government and military targets, scoring several victories and further destabilizing the South Vietnamese state.²²

The ARVN, trained by U.S. advisors and equipped with American weapons, quickly found that the Viet Cong were a tenacious enemy. ARVN forces were not totally weak or incompetent but were hamstrung by corruption. Much of the issues lay in the officer corps, where promotions and command billets were awarded based more on loyalty to political leaders than capability. The South Vietnamese government suffered from similar issues of corruption. Many officials demonstrated little motivation to win the loyalty of the population and did almost nothing to win over the rural villagers, while the Viet Cong were left free to dominate much of the countryside. All these issues came to a head in the winter of 1964–65, when many civilian and military leaders in Washington and Saigon judged that the South Vietnamese state was in free-fall. They reasoned that the only way to prevent South Vietnam's collapse was to deploy U.S. ground forces into the theatre to check Viet Cong advances. Stabilizing the military situation, they reasoned, would in turn stabilize the political environment, thereby diminishing Viet Cong influence among the population.²³ The plan seemed simple enough on paper, but U.S. servicemembers, from General Westmoreland down to the lowliest private, quickly learned that rooting out the Viet Cong and saving South Vietnam from Communism would be a bewildering task.²⁴

In response to this crisis, the first Marine infantry arrived at Da Nang on 8 March 1965. In the following months, they established separate enclaves centered on three airfields, from north to south, at Phu Bai, Da Nang, and Chu Lai. When the Marines first landed, their

²² The most infamous example of this before the United States sent ground troops to South Vietnam was the 1963 Battle of Ap Bac. See Hastings, *Vietnam*, 159–66; and Sheehan, *A Bright and Shining Lie*, book 3.

²³ The most prolific single volume on Johnson's decision for war in 1965 is H. R. McMaster, *Derelictions of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997). For a more concise narrative, see Herring, *America's Longest War*, 96–109.

²⁴ For an overview of the decision to land Marines at Da Nang and their arrival, see Jack Shulimson and Maj Charles M. Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1977), 1–15.

INTRODUCTION

mission was only to secure key military installations; they were to remain in a defensive posture. Their initial areas of responsibility were therefore quite small and included very little, if any, of the surrounding countryside.²⁵ The South Vietnamese government was reluctant to have the U.S. military venture out into the country or to conduct any offensive operations. It was a rational concern, as previous Japanese and French occupations left many Vietnamese justifiably suspicious of foreign soldiers. Viet Cong operatives capitalized on those suspicions and spread rumors that the United States was there to take over their country just as the French had done 20 years before.²⁶

The Marines did not remain on the defensive for long. The Viet Cong were simply too deeply entrenched in the countryside and seemed to grow bolder even after the arrival of U.S. troops. Despite concerns within the ARVN's leadership, many, including General Nguyen Chanh Thi, the highest-ranking ARVN official in the area, recognized that the Marines had to become more active to stem the Viet Cong advance.²⁷ As more Marines arrived in country, they were assigned to South Vietnam's five northernmost provinces in a zone that became known as the I Corps Tactical Zone. Its northern border ran along the infamous demilitarized zone (DMZ) at the 17th parallel. Da Nang, located in the middle of I Corps, was the largest airfield and the center of operations in those first months. Phu Bai, the northernmost enclave, was located approximately 96 kilometers (60 miles) north of Da Nang and just to the south of Hue. The Marine forces' third enclave at Chu Lai lay approximately 110 kilometers (68 miles) south of Da Nang, where construction began on a new airfield shortly after the Marines began to arrive in country. A steady stream of reinforcements and supplies followed the initial landings, and by the time Chu Lai was completed in early May, a force of 13,500 Marines was operating in I Corps.²⁸

²⁵ Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, chaps. 1–2.

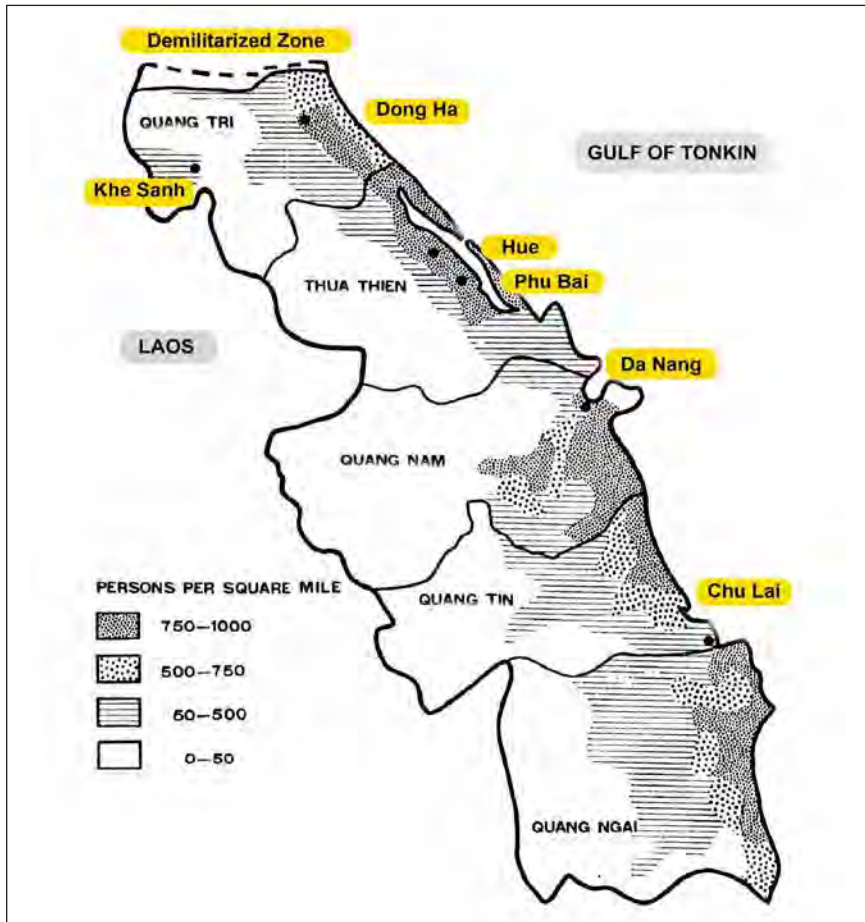
²⁶ Lewis W. Walt, interview with Martin Russ, 31 July 1976, Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, tape 6329-30A, beginning at 26:42.

²⁷ See Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Free Press, 1991), chaps. 10, 12, 17.

²⁸ Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, 23–35.

INTRODUCTION

Figure I.2. I Corps Tactical Zone



This map of the I Corps Tactical Zone shows important locations and population densities along the coast, where at least 80 percent of the population lived.

Source: Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, "Operations of the III Marine Amphibious Force in Vietnam," March–September 1965, item no. 1201001016, folder 001, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, 7.

Combined action began within this environment later that summer.

When the Marines began conducting offensive operations that spring, they took a different approach than that of their U.S. Army counterparts farther south. While the Army launched large search-and-destroy operations in South Vietnam's interior, the Marines at first preferred to concentrate their efforts within the rice-growing coastal

INTRODUCTION

lowlands, where most of the population lived. They believed that the only way to win the war against the Viet Cong was to win the war for the people.²⁹ That mission required winning superiority in the villages. South Vietnam was a land of villages and hamlets, and Marine leaders correctly reasoned that any larger victory over a Communist insurgency had to begin with a victory in the villages. Controlling South Vietnam's villages was the base on which the Viet Cong maintained their power. By the time of the Marine landings in March 1965, most villages had a Viet Cong infrastructure in place that in many cases equated to a shadow government. Resistance was met with terror, brutality, and intimidation. The population was helpless to resist or to be part of any governmental philosophy that was counter to Communism. They were highly conflicted, but most went about the business of farming and tried to stay out of politics and out of the way of the war. They paid the Viet Cong heavy taxes on the rice they raised and by having their sons pressed into service to the Viet Cong movement.

The key, some Marine leaders realized, would be to drive a wedge between the people and the Viet Cong.³⁰ Fortunately, the Marines had made a name for themselves by fighting counter guerrilla campaigns in Hispaniola and Nicaragua earlier in the twentieth century.³¹ Vietnam offered an opportunity to add another chapter to that proud tradition. So, when the Marines advanced out of their enclaves, they attempted to undermine the Viet Cong's influence among the lowland rice farming villages in I Corps by focusing many of their operations there.³²

One of the tools the Marines used throughout I Corps was the Combined Action Program. CAPs were comprised of Marine infantry squads embedded into local village PF platoons to give them strength enough to keep the Viet Cong from freely operating in their

²⁹ Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, 37–49.

³⁰ LtGen Victor H. Krulak was particularly vocal about this point. See LtGen Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the United States Marine Corps* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), chap. 12, "A New Kind of War."

³¹ Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, chaps. 7 and 9.

³² Early U.S. Marine Corps operations in I Corps are discussed in Shulimson and Jackson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, chaps. 5–9.

INTRODUCTION

villages. The Marines learned early in the war that the PFs were not strong enough to protect their villages on their own. The first four CAPs were created in August 1965 in the Phu Bai enclave, along the road to Hue.³³ The number of platoons slowly grew during the next two and a half years. By the time of the Tet Offensive in early 1968, there were 15 CAPs operating along the road, from just south of Hue City south to the end of the Phu Loc District. These platoons, the Alpha and Hotel Company CAPs, were major players in the fighting that occurred before and during the Tet Offensive.

Throughout 1967, the significance of combined action increased along the road to Hue in response to North Vietnam's escalation along the DMZ that separated North and South Vietnam. As the fighting there intensified, several Marine infantry battalions moved north to confront NVA attacks into South Vietnam.³⁴ This left the Phu Bai area lightly defended and increased the CAPs' role there. More infantry units did eventually arrive in the area just before Tet and provided well-timed assistance in dealing with increasing enemy aggression. These units' efforts would prove essential for blunting Communist attacks within and on the road leading into the city.

³³ Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 23–25.

³⁴ See Maj Gary L. Telfer, LtCol Lane Rogers, and V. Keith Fleming Jr., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1984), much of which deals with the escalation and corresponding fighting along the DMZ in 1967. This work discusses this process in more detail in chapter 5.

CHAPTER 1

COMBINED ACTION BEGINS

The Phu Bai Enclave

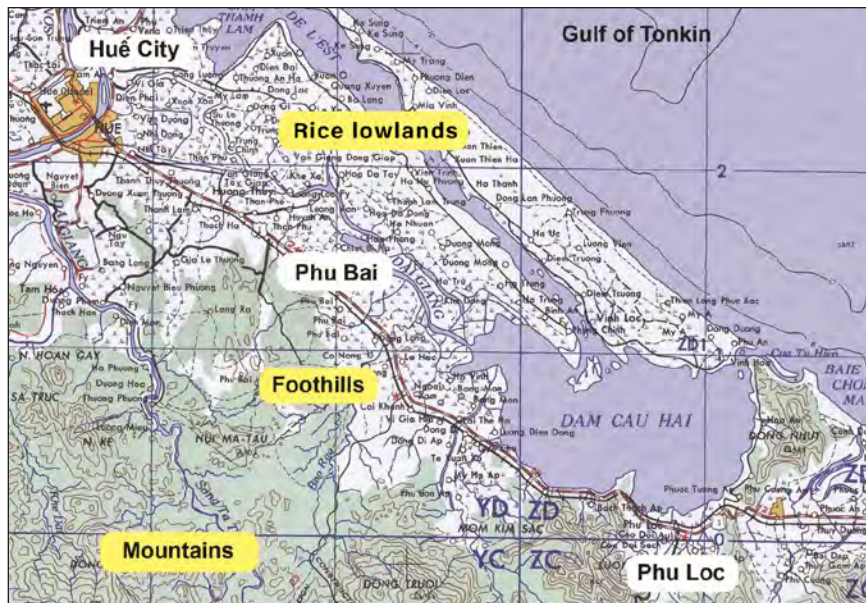
At 0830 on the morning of 14 April 1965, elements of Battalion Landing Team 3d Battalion, 4th Marines (BLT 3/4), landed at Red Beach II, north of Da Nang airfield. Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers and elements of the U.S. Marine expeditionary brigade already in the area covered the beach as the Marines splashed ashore. After crossing the beach, the first of the BLT's Marines to arrive in South Vietnam moved to a helicopter landing zone, where they boarded aircraft bound for Phu Bai.¹ By nightfall, two of the BLT's rifle companies and a section of 81-millimeter mortars were dug in at Phu Bai, protecting both the airfield and the radio relay unit stationed there.²

Meanwhile, the ships that had brought the BLT to Da Nang steamed northward up the coast toward Hue. At first light on 15 April, the ships offloaded the remainder of the BLT at an embarkation facility on the Perfume River in Hue that became known as the LCU (landing craft utility) ramp. The ramp was less than 16 kilometers (10 miles)

¹ 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, Command Chronology (ComdC), April 1965, item no. 1201045069, folder 045, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), Part 1, 1. BLT 3/4's arrival in South Vietnam is also discussed in Jack Shulimson and Maj Charles M. Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1978), 21–27.

² 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, April 1965, Section 1, 1. For an explanation of Gen William C. Westmoreland's rationale for deploying Marines to Phu Bai, see William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 125.

Figure 1.1. Map of Phu Bai and surrounding area



This map shows the relationship of Phu Bai to Hue and to the surrounding areas of rice lowlands, foothills, and mountains.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

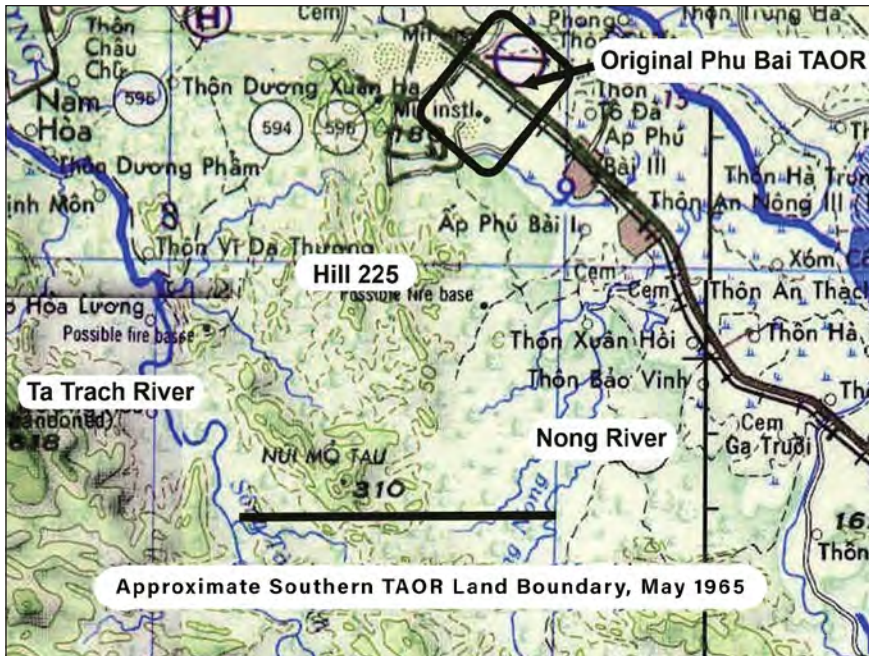
north of the Phu Bai Combat Base, located down the area’s main thoroughfare, a north-to-south two-lane paved road known as Highway 1. The Marines completed their landing on 19 April, when Company M made its way ashore. A total of 1,600 Marines from BLT 3/4 and its supporting elements were now in the Phu Bai enclave.³

Initially, the Marines’ mission was quite limited. The BLT’s tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) consisted of only 5 square kilometers (2 square miles), and its Marines were under strict orders to protect the airfield and remain on the defensive. However, these restrictions did not last long. The Marines quickly learned that defending Phu Bai required far greater freedom of movement in the airfield’s surround-

³3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, April 1965, Section 1.

COMBINED ACTION BEGINS

Figure 1.2. 3d Battalion, 4th Marines' operating area, 1965



The area south of the Phu Bai Combat Base in which the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, operated during the spring and summer of 1965. The river to the left of the diagram is the Ta Trach River, which formed the southern and western boundaries of the Marines' original TAOR. That area, bounded on the southwest and south by the Ta Trach River and on the east by the Nong River, was about 100 square kilometers (40 square miles) of rough country. The map also shows the series of ridges and hills that extended all the way to the Ta Trach River and farther south. The map cannot adequately show the vegetation, heavy brush, and then jungle that began out near the Ta Trach River and Nui Mo Tau Mountain in the center. The edge of this jungle was where the infantry focused their efforts to locate the trails out of the jungle that headed into the lowland rice-growing area near and past the highway, as outlined in red. Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

ing areas than their original orders permitted.⁴ Highway 1, on which the Phu Bai Combat Base was located, was one of the most important terrain features in the area. It ran at a slight angle from northwest

⁴ It is worth noting that the Marines of BLT 3/4 arrived at Phu Bai just as their counterparts dug in around Da Nang, who had been in country the previous month, first received permission to send patrols outside of their defenses. For that reason, BLT 3/4 did not have to remain on the defensive for long after their arrival. See Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, 27–29.

to southeast. Due south of that highway lay open, rough terrain that ranged from barren hills to thick jungle just a few kilometers to the south. This southern terrain ultimately led into the mountains and the routes from Laos. It was dangerous country.

Shortly after their arrival, General William C. Westmorland, commander of all U.S. troops in Vietnam, lifted the Marines' defensive limitations.⁵ The Marines then began day and nighttime company-size movements to the south. Although the area was mostly quiet at the time, there was also no guarantee that the situation would remain that way. The Marines had to send constant patrols deep into the hills to disrupt any Viet Cong attacks before they could begin. On 16 April, Company K ran the battalion's first such operation when it patrolled 3,000 meters south of Phu Bai's perimeter. The next day, it ventured 1,000 meters farther south and set ambushes overnight. There was sporadic enemy contact during this period, and the first Marine was killed and three were wounded when the Viet Cong attacked a squad from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion on the night of 24–25 April.⁶

Throughout the spring and summer, BLT 3/4 sent dozens of sweeps south. As their area of operations expanded, the Marines had to adjust their planning and tactics to cope with the situation. At first, the battalion used company-size patrols to sweep across the southern part of the TAOR. In June, it altered this approach, sending multiple platoon-size patrols instead. Each company was assigned a sector, which it subdivided into areas of responsibility for individual platoons. Each platoon would typically establish a patrol base on defensible terrain and send out squad-size patrols during the day.⁷ This tactic allowed the Marines to cover a larger area, a necessity in a TAOR that was already too large for a single battalion.

As the Marines patrolled the area, they found substantial evidence of Viet Cong activity. On 1 June, one company stumbled across 27 suspi-

⁵ Gen Westmoreland did so with President Lyndon B. Johnson's approval. See Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962–1967* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 2006), 208–9.

⁶ "Narrative Summary," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, April 1965, 2–3.

⁷ "Narrative," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1965, item no. 1201045070, folder 045, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, Part 2.

COMBINED ACTION BEGINS

cious abandoned huts. Several showed signs that they had been occupied within the past 24 hours and contained caches of clothing, ammunition, medicine, and spare parts for communications equipment. In another instance, a platoon from Company K destroyed five huts that contained a series of holes and tunnels.⁸ Several days later, a platoon from Company I found what appeared to be several encampments along a stream bed, one of which contained fresh blood. They also found numerous items of clothing along with three bloody ponchos, ammunition, and explosives. To the east, a patrol from Company M destroyed 16 huts that, while deserted, had caches of food and military gear inside. Bands of Viet Cong fighters also began to engage Marine patrols, usually with short bursts of small arms or mortar fire, before disappearing into the vast landscape.⁹

The Viet Cong were not the Marines' chief adversary at Phu Bai in those early days. While BLT 3/4 quickly established a formidable presence in the area, the Marines learned that they simply could not cover the entire TAOR with the personnel they had at their disposal.¹⁰ A series of villages along large stretches of the airfield's perimeter posed an especially serious problem. To the north and the east was a semicircle of thickly vegetated villages that obscured the northern and eastern approaches to the airfield's perimeter. This area, which the Marines called Zone A, provided a potential staging ground for a mortar attack or ground assault. These villages were also densely populated, a complicating factor with which the Marines at Phu Bai had yet to contend. With no reinforcements forthcoming, the Marines had to find a creative solution for securing those villages.¹¹

⁸ "Narrative," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1965, 1.

⁹ "Narrative," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1965, 2–3.

¹⁰ "Narrative," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1965, 3. For a longer discussion of the widespread "problem of space" that confronted the first Marine forces in South Vietnam, see Cavender S. Sutton, "Combined Action in Vietnam: U.S. Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Thought and Practice, 1965–1971" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2024), particularly chaps. 2 and 4.

¹¹ William F. Nimmo with Henry Beaudin, "The Creation of the Marine Corps' Combined Action Platoons: A Study in Marine Corps Ingenuity," *Marine Corps History* 4, no. 2 (Winter 2018): 47–49.

CHAPTER 1

Figure 1.3. Village scene in Thuy Phu



This photograph was taken in the village of Thuy Phu along the south fork of the Phu Bai River looking due west toward the nearby mountain.

Source: photo by Ed Matricardi, 1967.

Figure 1.4. Marketplace in Thuy Phu



A marketplace in the village of Thuy Phu. Usually, the markets opened early in the morning when all the vendors would bring their goods to sell. They tended to close in the afternoon once the buyers had gone back to their homes.

Source: photo by Ed Matricardi, 1967.

Defending Zone A

Most villages in Zone A contained a few thousand inhabitants. Some along the main highway were larger. Each village was divided into five to eight hamlets with a central marketplace. The marketplace, usually located adjacent to a river, was the center of village activity. The rivers in Zone A were not major thoroughfares, but now and then a large sampan would travel down them, oared or poled (or sometimes sailing) through the water. The semicircle of villages to the east of the Phu Bai Combat Base were all bordered by the same river, which flowed out of Hue and ran to the southeast, where it emptied into a large body of water known as Cau Hai Lagoon.¹²

Living conditions within these communities were spartan. Most did not have electricity or running water. The houses were bamboo-framed with palm hatch covering the outdoor walls and the roofs. Their floors and the yards were merely a hard-packed surface that almost seemed like flooring. Families took pride in the cleanliness of their surroundings. Except when the rains inundated the countryside, they kept their dirt yards swept clean and neat. There were generally no paved roads, only dirt roads, cart trails, and narrow footpaths. Most houses were located along vast networks of these trails and dirt roadways. Catholic churches, sometimes orphanages, and small Buddhist monasteries were common. In hamlets that lay along the rivers, men often fished to feed their families or, on the larger bodies of water, to make a living. Most of the area's villages had no restaurants, but every village had simple food shacks. It was common in most places to find an open-air covered stall where one could sit and have a bowl of duck meat soup brewed in chicken stock. The markets also had vendors who sold cigarettes, sodas, and snacks.¹³

Most Vietnamese families lived an agrarian life. They arose each morning at first light and spent their days planting rice, irrigating their

¹² For more information on the terrain around the Phu Bai combat base, particularly in Zone A, see Nimmo and Beaudin, "The Creation of the Marine Corps' Combined Action Platoons," 43–49. Nimmo also traveled extensively throughout the Phu Bai area, both during his tour of duty there and then as a researcher decades later.

¹³ Nimmo with Beaudin, "The Creation of the Marine Corps' Combined Action Platoons," 43–49.

CHAPTER 1

Figure 1.5. Vietnamese fisherman on the Phu Bai River



Vietnamese fisherman heading out for the day on one of the forks of the Phu Bai River.
Source: photo by Ed Matricardi, 1967.

fields, or harvesting and transporting their crops. There was always work to be done. Usually a family had animals, often pigs or chickens, that they raised for food and sale. Most families also had a garden and grew a variety of herbs and vegetables. Some villagers were more entrepreneurial than others. They might make various items like rice paper to sell at the marketplace. Many villages, especially those along Highway 1, were active commercial centers. The villages' close proximity to Hue, an urban area with good market outlets and a high demand for fresh food, provided a major boost to the local economy. It was easy to catch a bus and take fresh vegetables and other products into the city.¹⁴

For the Marines, these villages were key terrain features that posed a serious problem to their defenses at Phu Bai. Most hamlets were thick with a wide variety of trees, hedgerows, and bushes. The dense vegetation restricted vision into and within them. Because there was no high ground at the airfield, an outsider's view into the villages largely ceased at their edges. While any direct ground attack on the Phu Bai base from Zone A would have ended in disaster for the Viet Cong, these villages

¹⁴ Nimmo with Beaudin, "The Creation of the Marine Corps' Combined Action Platoons," 43–49.

COMBINED ACTION BEGINS

Figure 1.6. Villages in Zone A, 1965



This 1965 topographical map shows the hamlets of the four villages that were part of Zone A. The village names are shown in highlighted text. The combined population of these four villages totaled approximately 12,000. Nearly all the people living in these villages were rice farmers. Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

provided concealment for mortar teams or a ground force to get close enough to harass the airfield and damage its equipment.¹⁵ By June, BLT 3/4’s leaders had recognized the need to develop a new defensive scheme to protect both the Phu Bai airfield and the Zone A villages.¹⁶ Determining just how to secure the latter area while maintaining the airfield’s defenses and continuing to run sweeps to the south would puzzle them for weeks to come.

¹⁵ The potential for indirect fire was an issue that the Marines identified as soon as they arrived at Phu Bai. For the original mission statement for BLT 3/4 at Phu Bai, see “Organizational Data Sheet,” 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, April 1965, item no. 1201045069, folder 045, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, II-1.

¹⁶ “Narrative,” 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1965, 5–6.

One problem was that the Marines were not permitted to go into Zone A at first. Eventually, increasing Viet Cong activity in the TAOR, and the realization that the South Vietnamese forces there could not secure the area on their own, forced Marine and ARVN leadership's hands. In mid-June, the Marines received permission to send patrols into the villages around Phu Bai.¹⁷ In anticipation of these operations in Zone A, BLT 3/4's battalion commander ordered his civil affairs officer, First Lieutenant John J. Mullen, to conduct civil affairs activities in the villages. These efforts were both an attempt to gain an acceptance of the Marines' presence in the area and, equally important, to get an in-depth look into the villages. They began by conducting medical clinics in three of Zone A's four villages. These clinics were accompanied by an infantry platoon whose observations of the village and its people were just as important as the security they provided. The initial results seemed positive. Many villagers attended the clinics and seemed to enjoy their contact with the Americans, and the village elders stated that they were pleased with the Marine and Naval medical personnel's attempts to help their people.¹⁸

Beneath the surface, something did not seem quite right. Lieutenant Mullen's Marines and sailors were carrying out the civil affairs program by the book, but he was disappointed that few locals provided information on Viet Cong activity. After frank discussions with the village leaders, Mullen came to an epiphany. The village officials conveyed that, while they were grateful for the Marines' assistance, they did not feel secure enough from the Viet Cong to provide information about them. Mullen realized that local security was their underlying need, and he set about to solve the problem.¹⁹

The main issue from then on was determining how to establish local security that was both reliable and permanent. Fortunately, there were some local security forces already in place. These platoons, the Popular Forces (PF), were locally raised troops responsible for protect-

¹⁷ "Narrative Summary, 5 June," 3d Marines, ComdC, June 1965.

¹⁸ Capt John J. Mullen Jr., "Modifications to the III MAF Combined Action Program in the Republic of Vietnam," Individual Research Papers Collection, Capt John J. Mullen Jr., 1968–1969, COLL/3953, USMCHD, Quantico, VA, hereafter Mullen study, Annex C, 2–3.

¹⁹ Mullen study, Annex C, 4–5.

ing their own villages. Their presence offered a solution to the dilemma. However, the PFs lacked the training and motivation to fight off the Viet Cong on their own. They refused to patrol their villages at night, if they did so at all.²⁰ Still, the PFs' knowledge of the villages and their people—they were locals, after all—made them an attractive remedy to the security problem confronting the Marines at Phu Bai. The question, then, was how to unlock their potential. Sending Marine patrols into the PFs' areas of responsibility offered its own set of problems. Coordination would be difficult given the difference in language. There was also no way to ensure that the PFs would do their jobs after a Marine patrol departed the area. Finding a solution would require a more unconventional approach for which the Marines had not planned before arriving in Vietnam.

Mullen discussed the dilemma with his chain of command. After debating several options, they decided to integrate a Marine rifle squad into each village's PF platoon of approximately 30 soldiers.²¹ There was some historical precedent for this type of arrangement—namely in the British Army's activities in India in the nineteenth century and the Marine Corps' campaigns in the Caribbean and Central America in the early twentieth century—but this new concept called for an unprecedented level of immersion within the local population.²² Mullen's superiors liked the idea and ultimately secured permission from the ARVN I Corps commander, General Nguyen Chanh Thi, as well as from the commander of the 1st ARVN division, to enact it. The ARVN command granted the Marines operational control of six PF platoons posted throughout Zone A's villages of Thuy Long, Thuy Tan, Thuy Phu, and Loc Bon.²³

²⁰ Mullen study, Annex C, 4. Around this time, BLT 3/4's counterparts in Da Nang attempted to run a joint operation with PFs there, but the PFs refused to take part. See Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, 19–20.

²¹ Mullen study, Annex C, 5–6.

²² For more information on the influence of the British Army, see Maj Michael D. Weltsch, "The Future of the Combined Action Program" (master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 1991). For the U.S. Marine Corps campaigns in Hispaniola and Nicaragua, see Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Free Press, 1991), chaps. 7 and 9.

²³ Nimmo with Beudin, "The Creation of the Marine Corps' Combined Action Platoons," 46, 52–55; and Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, 133–34.

Next, the Marines had to fill the new units. The battalion commander ordered each of his four rifle companies to provide quality Marines to the first group that would integrate into three of Zone A's PF platoons. The 4th Marines' regimental commander also sent Lieutenant Paul R. Ek, a unique Marine officer with prior experience advising South Vietnamese troops, to train and then command these first platoons. After their initial training, the first Combined Action Marines began daytime operations with their PF counterparts in August 1965.²⁴ Up until this point, the PFs had not conducted their own patrols or made any real effort at maintaining village security, especially at night. Their inaction had allowed the Viet Cong to move through the villages unchecked each night, free to conduct rallies, tax villagers, and recruit young men to serve in their ranks.²⁵

The Marines' arrival in the villages on 1 August put an end to the PFs' passivity. As the Marines began staying in the villages full-time, they conducted patrols and other small-scale operations alongside the PF almost every day and night. In late August, Marines moved into a fourth village, expanding their presence across the breadth of Zone A. The lack of armed conflict in these early days, as well as the people's warm reception of the joint Marine-PF units, suggests that their aggressive patrolling discouraged many local Viet Cong cells from operating within those villages.²⁶

These first combined action units were called Joint Action Companies (JAC). For technical reasons, the Marines soon changed the name to Combined Action Company (CAC), although each CAC still lived and operated as a platoon.²⁷ This designation lasted until the program was formalized in 1967. At that time, the program's leaders realized

²⁴ 1stLt Paul R. Ek, interview with LtCol D. J. Hunter, 24 January 1966, transcript, item no. USMC0046, Oral History Section, USMCHD, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 7–9, hereafter Ek oral history; and "Joint Action Company," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, September 1965, item no. 1201045073, folder 045, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, Annex A, 2.

²⁵ Nimmo with Beaudin, "The Creation of the Marine Corps' Combined Action Platoons," 55.

²⁶ Initial JAC patrols are noted in "Narrative," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, August 1965, item no. 1201045072, folder 045, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 1–8; and Mullen study, Annex C, 7.

²⁷ Mullen study, Annex C, 8, 11.

that CAC sounded like Vietnamese slang for penis. They dropped the acronym CAC, and the individual units then became known as Combined Action Platoons (CAP).²⁸

During those first weeks, the Marines and PFs dedicated significant time to joint training exercises. They needed to learn to work as a team when out on patrols, so they spent much of their time on basic patrolling protocols.²⁹ In the beginning, each Marine was assigned to two or three PF soldiers to enhance the latter's training experience and foster cohesion between Marines and PFs within the platoons. According to Lieutenant Ek, the Americans and Vietnamese quickly built strong relationships. He cited one instance in which one of the PFs held up the start of his wedding so that the Marines out on patrol could attend. Ek also noted that, as time passed, the PFs acted more soldierly and carried themselves like Marines. They carried their rifles like the Marines, always wore a cover (hat) when outside of a building (an American military tradition), and one soldier even got a haircut like the Marines.³⁰ Once the immersion process was well underway, Ek turned his attention to the population. When he first arrived, he found the villagers trying to make as much money off the foreign soldiers as possible. He established a good economic relationship, convincing the villagers not to try to make outrageous profits off the Marines for snacks and sodas, while also encouraging the latter to spend money in the local economy.³¹

Population control was an important activity for the newly formed units. For example, the Marines and PFs would enter a hamlet unannounced early in the morning and have all occupants come outside their homes and present their government-issued identification (ID) cards.

²⁸ John Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 67–68. The rest of this work will use CAC and CAP interchangeably.

²⁹ Initial JAC efforts are discussed in Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 23–25; and Ted N. Easterling, *War in the Villages: The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons in the Vietnam War* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2021), 42–47.

³⁰ Ek oral history, 7–9, 27–28.

³¹ Ek oral history, 11, 22.

The ID cards were an important document—if someone were stopped without one, they had better have a good excuse not to be taken into district headquarters.³² Ek also trained the Marines and PFs to focus on the marketplaces and the rice trade. A single family was only allowed to buy a certain amount of rice per day, and on more than one occasion a Viet Cong agent (usually a woman from a neighboring village) was caught buying large amounts. Interrogations revealed that the rice was destined for the Viet Cong hiding in villages outside of Zone A.³³

The Marines also sponsored civic action projects, when a need arose, to cultivate good relationships with the villagers. Lieutenant Ek stressed that it was important to not perform civic action randomly. Each project had to address a real need, and the villagers' cooperation and assistance were essential. For example, the Marines helped dig wells deeper so that they remained reliable sources of water during times of drought. In other cases, the Marines organized community efforts to repair or rebuild bridges that had been damaged or washed away during the monsoon season. The main civic action initiative, however, was to hold open clinics at which each CAC's Navy medical corpsman offered basic medical care to villagers. Providing medical care to a people without access to hospitals or trained doctors was indeed one of the most valuable services that the CAC could provide.³⁴

It is difficult to assess who had the greater impact on the development of combined action in those early days, Lieutenant Ek or Lieutenant Mullen. Ek had a good understanding of Vietnamese culture, spoke the language, and did a wonderful job as the unit's first commander. Mullen's work in preparing the villages, his knowledge of local laws and customs, and the relationships he built with the village leaders were also invaluable. When Ek left the unit in mid-September, Mullen took command and instituted a series of changes. He sensed a growing threat to the Zone A villages and adjusted his Marines' and PFs'

³² Two early examples of this occurred on 2 and 11 September 1965. See "Close Combat," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, September 1965, 2–3.

³³ Ek oral history, 11, 25–26; and Nimmo with Beaudin, "The Creation of the Marine Corps' Combined Action Platoons," 58–59.

³⁴ Ek oral history, 12, 23–24.

operations accordingly. Mullen ordered the Marines into the villages full-time, intensified their training regimen, and increased the number of day and night operations. He also insisted that the platoons be on alert all night.³⁵ When summer gave way to autumn, his intuition would be proven correct. By the end of September, the Marine infantry and Combined Action Marines had formed a symbiotic relationship. While the Marines of BLT 3/4 concentrated on sweeping through sparsely populated areas and targeting enemy routes in and out of the jungle, the CACs concentrated on bonding with the people in their assigned villages during the day and then hunting the Viet Cong at night.³⁶ It was not long before their efforts sparked conflict with the Viet Cong.

The Enemy at Phu Bai

In 1965, the Viet Cong was a complex body with units of differing sizes, strengths, and levels of organization. Historian Warren K. Wilkins notes that the Viet Cong in the northern part of South Vietnam were structured along the lines of the Chinese National Revolutionary Army. He describes three distinct factions: the well-trained and geographically autonomous main force Viet Cong; the full-time and regionally based local force Viet Cong; and the part-time village guerrillas or militias.³⁷ This force structure is consistent with what the Marines found in the Phu Bai enclave in 1965 and early 1966, yet it took time and experience for them to develop an adequate understanding of it and its capabilities.

The most organized and well-equipped were the main force units. They wore uniforms and, as the war developed, were equipped with heavier weapons than the local force units or the guerrilla cells. More significantly, main force Viet Cong also had a strong organizational structure that allowed them to operate as large units, up to the battalion level.³⁸ Main force units existed throughout South Vietnam and were

³⁵ Mullen study, Annex C, 9.

³⁶ For example, see BLT 3/4's narrative on combat operations in September 1965 in "Close Combat," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, September 1965, enclosure 10.

³⁷ Warren Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big Unit War Against the U.S., 1965–1966* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 15.

³⁸ Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them*, 16.

generally based in the more remote, vegetated environments where they could live, train, and plan operations without interference from ARVN troops. In the Phu Bai area, the main force units were regularly referred to by the Marines as the Thua Thien Province main force. A main force battalion typically consisted of 350 soldiers, although they often operated in smaller units to assist local-force operations. For example, a battalion's soldiers would oftentimes attach to local forces when increased manpower or specialized skills, such as demolitions, were needed for a large mission.³⁹

Viet Cong local force companies and platoons operated on a more limited level. They were usually assigned to a village or a set of villages, and the quality of their equipment depended on the resources available there. Some local force companies operated in the same village and its surrounding areas for longer periods than others. Some seemed to move around, most likely due to a need determined by the Viet Cong district commander. Sometimes, the local forces provided guides to the main force units, and it was customary for a local force company to provide liaison for rice collection.⁴⁰ In the Phu Bai TAOR, these local force units usually contained between 30 and 90 soldiers. They were often broken up into smaller units, operating in groups of 5 or 10 in different hamlets within a village.⁴¹

The part-time village militias were small guerrilla cells that operated all over South Vietnam. They tended to consist of local villagers who hid their weapons during the day and conducted small-scale operations at night. Most of their activities were directed by a "cadre," the Communist Party of Vietnam's point man in a village or hamlet. The cadre coordinated propaganda efforts, recruited new fighters, and arranged for rice collection and transportation. The latter duty was of particular importance, as larger units based in the nearby mountains needed a

³⁹ Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them*, 26, 29–32.

⁴⁰ Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986), 48, 126.

⁴¹ This number is derived from multiple intelligence assessments and after-action reports that this work assesses between 1965 and early 1968. As will be seen in later chapters, local force Viet Cong near Phu Bai generally operated at the platoon level but could and did conduct company-size operations.

COMBINED ACTION BEGINS

constant supply of rice to feed their personnel. Rice was hard to grow up in the mountains, and large growing plots were hard to hide from government reconnaissance efforts. The main force units therefore could not grow their own food, so they had to get it from the lowlands. That rice had to be collected from farmers and then transported up into the mountain base camps. Before the Marines arrived, collection parties could roam the lowlands and enter villages there to take rice and taxes as they pleased. Sometimes contributions were voluntary, but there was little resistance either way.⁴²

When the first CACs began their operations, the Viet Cong's presence around Phu Bai was not large, but it constituted a threat that the Marines could not ignore. An intelligence report in October 1965 placed approximately 650 Viet Cong within 40 kilometers (25 miles) of the TAOR and concluded there were few North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars in the area. The Marines gathered information about the enemy as best they could, through a combination of several intelligence sources: "ralliers" (Viet Cong defectors), documents found by Marine patrols, and local informants.⁴³ The information they gathered provided an increasingly thorough understanding of the enemy force confronting them.

The Marines also gathered information from their fights with the Viet Cong. These engagements—often little more than short, sharp ambushes—revealed many clues, including the destination to which the ambushed unit was traveling, the type of weaponry they possessed, the type of ancillary equipment they carried, and information about their unit. Captured Viet Cong combatants were a particularly valuable source of intelligence. Many of their interrogations revealed critical information about the locations of enemy camps, the structure and size of their units, the names and home locations of their leaders, the routes they used, and their missions.

⁴² Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them*, 15–17.

⁴³ "Enemy Order of Battle," Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," October 1965, item no. 1201001017, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 17.

For example, in June 1965, a group of Marines learned that a main force Viet Cong unit of 100 soldiers, known at that time as the K41, was operating along the TAOR's periphery. They were based southwest of Phu Bai, near the village of Núi Mo Táu, a small jungle-wrapped mountain town about 900 feet above sea level. It became a known safe haven where the Viet Cong would stage incursions into the Phu Bai area of operations. Early in the morning on 4 June, a Marine infantry squad ambushed a large group of Viet Cong, killing 13 and capturing 1.⁴⁴ The captured fighter revealed that he was part of the K41. He was a member of a two-platoon patrol heading toward an area known as Gia Le (pronounced *Ya Lay*), northwest of the Phu Bai Combat Base, to purchase food for their unit.⁴⁵ His story made sense. Gia Le was a small but busy area for local commerce. The town was also located on a popular route for the Viet Cong traveling out of the mountains. Gia Le had a strong Viet Cong infrastructure and was an important way station for Viet Cong troops to cross a nearby river into friendlier territory. The intelligence gathered in this incident added to a growing database of specific details about enemy operatives in Zone A's villages. The Marines then used that information to determine where they lived using the help of the PF soldiers and sometimes the villagers.⁴⁶

Another incident the following day provided more insight into how the Viet Cong acquired ammunition and food. Two captured guerrillas from the Viet Cong local force *K-(C) 106 Company* stated that each member of their company was issued 100 rounds of ammunition and were urged to capture or steal more if needed. If any soldier could not replenish his own supply of ammunition, a specially designated Viet Cong would go to a secret cache in the mountains to get more. When collecting rice and medical supplies, the prisoners related that a Viet

⁴⁴ "Captured Documents and Equipment," 4 June 1965, in 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1965, item no. 1201045070, folder 045, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 1–2.

⁴⁵ "Interrogation Report from ARVN 1st Division," 5 June 1965, in 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1965, item no. 1201045070, folder 045, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 1–2.

⁴⁶ "After Action Report, 5 June 65—Interrogation by 1st ARVN Division," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1965, 1–2.

Cong operative would establish contact with a rice supplier in the lowlands who would deliver the rice to a pickup point. They also revealed they were moving to acquire rice at one such location in the Huong Thuy District, the Phu Bai TAOR's main district at that time, when a Marine patrol apprehended them.⁴⁷

Intelligence also revealed there were two local force platoons operating in and around the CACs' assigned villages. The first, based in the village of Thuy Phu, had 25 men and was relatively well armed. The Marines knew less about the second group, which lived in the village of Loc Bon. Both Viet Cong platoons fled their respective villages after CAC platoons moved in. While they would venture back into Loc Bon and the surrounding areas, they mostly remained camped in the jungle to the south, toward the headwaters of the Nong River.⁴⁸ It is no surprise, then, that Loc Bon soon became the epicenter of the first series of engagements between Viet Cong fighters and the CACs.

By late summer 1965, the Marines had developed a decent profile of the Viet Cong's strength and capabilities around Phu Bai. As they learned more about their enemy's composition and tactics, they expanded their operations. BLT 3/4 gradually expanded its TAOR in both directions along Highway 1 and moved deeper into the areas bordering the jungle to the south and west. The intelligence they gathered during the summer also allowed them to concentrate their efforts on interdicting routes that the Viet Cong used to acquire food, supplies, taxes, and recruits. Some operations established blocking positions along various trail networks running from the mountains out into the rice growing lowlands. Others sought to clear adjacent areas and push as many of the Viet Cong as possible out of the TAOR.⁴⁹ These efforts would not have been possible without the CACs holding Zone A to the Marines' rear and helping to keep

⁴⁷ "After Action Report, 5 June 65—Interrogation by 1st ARVN Division," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1965, 2.

⁴⁸ "Enemy Situation," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, August 1965, Annex A, Appendix 1, 3; and "Journal," 5 September 1965, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, September 1965, Appendix 2, 6.

⁴⁹ Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, 124–25. BLT 3/4's records from September–December 1965, particularly those sections titled "Close Combat" or "Narrative," illustrate this operational scheme.

the eastern approaches to the airfield secure. Events from late September on suggest that the Viet Cong had taken notice, and that they had no intention of allowing the CACs to remain in their villages unopposed.

Contact

Up until late September, there were no engagements between the CACs and Viet Cong. Although the Marines and PFs in each of the four original CAC platoons patrolled their villages every day and night, the Viet Cong avoided armed confrontations with them. That changed in late September at Loc Bon, the farthest CAC village from Phu Bai. Loc Bon was located a few to the southeast along Highway 1. The Nong River, a good-size navigable waterway, flowed from the mountains and then cut across the area directly south of the village. This river and the trails alongside it were popular ways to get from the jungle and the mountains to the lowlands. Loc Bon also possessed large rice fields, and the nearby river provided large quantities of fish for consumption or sale at the market.⁵⁰

Prior to the Marines' arrival, a Viet Cong local force platoon operated freely in the village and all its hamlets. By August, Marine patrols in and around the village had forced them into the safety of the jungle. Their base camp was about 8 kilometers (5 miles) into the mountains located due south of Loc Bon.⁵¹ The village chief requested that a CAC platoon remain in his village to keep them from coming back.⁵² Of all the original CAC TAORs, Loc Bon had the highest probability of contact, both because the Viet Cong platoon had remained active until the Marine infantry forced it out and due to the village's position as the southern boundary between Zone A and the jungles that harbored the Viet Cong.

The first clash between the Viet Cong and a CAC platoon occurred on 27 September 1965.⁵³ At dusk, a patrol from Loc Bon's CAC-4 headed out to set an ambush on one of the southern routes into the village,

⁵⁰ This is based on Nimmo's time as a CAP Marine in 1967–68 and a site survey he conducted for research decades later.

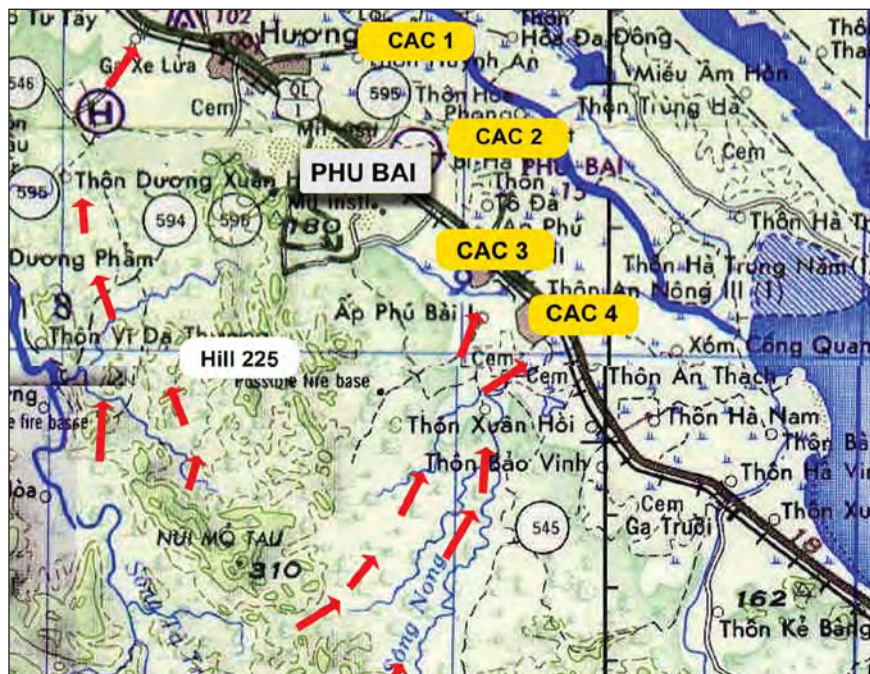
⁵¹ "Enemy Situation," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, August 1965, Annex A, Appendix 1, 3–4.

⁵² Mullen study, Annex C, 7.

⁵³ Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 25.

COMBINED ACTION BEGINS

Figure 1.7. Viet Cong routes out of jungle camps, fall 1965



This relief map shows the Viet Cong routes tracked in the fall of 1965 as coming out of the jungle camps on or near Nui Mo Tau. CACs would be placed on all known jungle routes as time progressed and as the TAOR expanded north and south along Highway 1. As the TAOR expanded more routes would become known. These routes would always exist. Traffic would rise as more enemy units based themselves in the mountain areas to the south. As the map shows, Hill 225 was in a good position for observation on enemy movements. It was always held by a Marine infantry platoon and sometimes elements of a reconnaissance unit.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo, base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

about a kilometer down the Nong River. Around 2215, the CAC patrol—a team of Marines and 15 PF soldiers were close to their ambush site when they ran head-on into a group of 15–20 Viet Cong heading down the trail in the opposite direction. Both groups opened fire and the point man, Marine corporal Edwin J. Falloon, was killed during the initial exchange. The CAC patrol acted quickly and attempted to flank the Viet Cong and pin them against the river. The Viet Cong executed a similar maneuver and both patrols passed by each other. The CAC patrol then doubled back and engaged the Viet Cong again. This time, they

gained fire superiority and the Viet Cong broke contact and withdrew toward the mountains. Nearby CAC-3 sent a reaction force to help, along with a platoon from BLT 3/4's Headquarters and Service Company with tanks in support. The reaction forces arrived too late, however, and could do little more than observe the aftermath and deter another attack.⁵⁴ When the firing ceased, two CAC Marines were wounded and two Viet Cong lay dead.⁵⁵ The fallen Viet Cong weapons—an old French MAS-49 semiautomatic rifle and a Chinese-made K-50 submachine gun—suggested that they were most likely from a local Viet Cong group and not a main force unit.⁵⁶

The CACs continued to send out patrols each night after the firefight. Lieutenant Mullen sensed that after the incident the population gained more confidence in the CACs' ability to protect and secure them from the Viet Cong. He also observed that the PF soldiers were becoming more confident. More significantly, the villagers—first the village chiefs and then the people—began to provide intelligence on a regular basis. According to Mullen, by November, 75 percent of the CAC operations were based on locally provided intelligence. The South Vietnamese National Police began to take the CACs more seriously as well and started providing information on Viet Cong activity. Mullen concluded that one of the greatest hallmarks of the program's success to that point was that village officials began living in their own homes during the night.⁵⁷

But improved relationships with the villagers did not halt Viet Cong attempts to reassert themselves in Zone A. In September and October, sightings of Viet Cong movements increased sharply, with three small clashes between the Viet Cong and CACs occurring on 8, 17, and 19 October.⁵⁸ On 19 November, CAC-3 sprung the largest

⁵⁴ Ek oral history, 66.

⁵⁵ "Close Combat," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, September 1965, 6–7.

⁵⁶ "Close Combat," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, September 1965, 6.

⁵⁷ Mullen study, Annex C, 10–11.

⁵⁸ October sightings and contacts are noted in "Intelligence Enemy Contacts," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, October 1965, item no. 1201045074, folder 045, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 1. This source cites 258 sightings in October alone, after 259 in September (see intelligence section in September's ComdC). There were only three incidents in August.

engagement to date. The platoon had been working the areas west and south of Highway 1, near the north and the south forks of the Phu Bai River. These areas were likely routes for Viet Cong patrols moving down into the lowlands from the hills. On this night, the CAC patrolled south of the river's southern fork, where they encountered a large group of at least 20 Viet Cong. The Marines and PFs fired first, killing three during the opening salvo. The startled Viet Cong returned fire, killing one Marine, Corporal Thomas O. Green. Green was the point man and had stopped the patrol when he sensed danger ahead. He moved back to discuss the situation with the patrol leader. In the meantime, the troops remaining up at the point spotted Viet Cong coming toward them and began to fire. Green, while running back up to the spot of the action, died of a gunshot wound to his chest.⁵⁹ The patrol leader called in artillery on the surviving Viet Cong as they fled south. The next day, a search revealed blood and other evidence of enemy casualties in three separate places. While sweeping the ambush zone and surrounding areas, the Marines also found a wounded Viet Cong medic hiding in a house nearby.⁶⁰

These incidents suggest that CACs 3 and 4 were obstructing the routes that the Viet Cong used to enter the area. This was an unfortunate fact of geography for the Viet Cong. There were realistically no other routes for them to take (figure 1.8). While alternate paths did exist, they were not feasible. One way to the east required them traverse difficult, mountainous terrain. Traveling along routes to the north or west took them over more open ground but carried a heightened risk of running into the more numerous and heavily armed Marine infantry platoons operating there. For the Viet Cong based in the jungle camps due south and southwest of CACs 3 and 4, the least unattractive option required them to run the gauntlet of CAC patrols around Loc Bon and Thuy Phu. In the latter village, CAC-3 patrolled the trails near the

⁵⁹ Claude Martin, interview with William F. Nimmo, October 2021 and November 2021; and Ron Casto, telephone interview with William F. Nimmo, 6 December 2021.

⁶⁰ "Enemy Incidents During the Period," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, November 1965, item no. 1201045075, folder 045, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 2.

south fork of the Phu Bai River, while CAC-4 covered those along the west side of the Nong River. Both routes were essentially the same, a myriad of pathways through bushy upcountry. As they got closer to the villages, the number of trails—and the Viet Cong's options—decreased, which provided ideal ambush sites for the CAC platoons. Additionally, the path through CAC-3's TAOR was a primary route into the rice-rich lowlands in the Phu Thu District, which was fast becoming a center of Viet Cong activity. Yet, the Viet Cong had little choice if they wanted to supply themselves and their comrades with food and promulgate their propaganda among the villagers. This dilemma for the Viet Cong based in those areas would not change as time moved on.

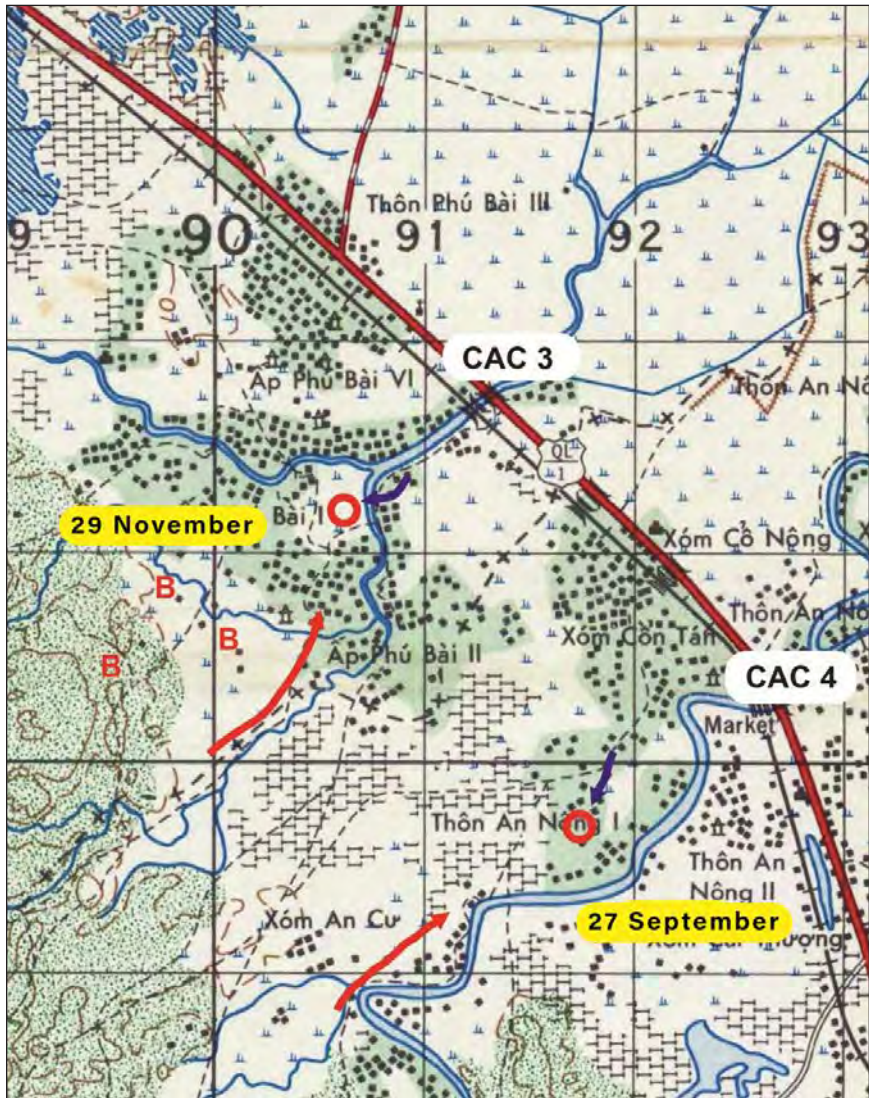
December 1965 marked the end of BLT 3/4's time as the resident battalion in the Phu Bai enclave. It turned over command to the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, on 23 December and departed Phu Bai.⁶¹ While many of the original CAC Marines were slated to leave with their assigned battalion, 35 (a majority of the company's Marine personnel) requested and were granted permission to remain with the combined action unit and continue operations.⁶² With their help, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, continued the CAC program into 1966. Combined action would not remain confined to Phu Bai. As the Marines' first year in Vietnam drew to a close, Marine leaders brought the concept south, to the much larger and more complex area of operations at Da Nang.

⁶¹ This change of command is noted in "Close Combat," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, item no. 1201045076, folder 045, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, enclosure 10, 5–6.

⁶² Mullen study, C-12.

COMBINED ACTION BEGINS

Figure 1.8. Locations of firefights, 27 September and 29 November 1965



The red circles mark the spots where the firefights with Viet Cong on 27 September and 29 November 1965 happened. Red lines mark the Viet Cong routes just prior to contact and the blue lines mark the part of travel of combined action patrols prior to the engagements. Both Viet Cong patrols were traveling out of the mountains down the primary routes into the lowlands. The red letters “B” mark the blood spots found in the area where an artillery strike had been called on the withdrawing Viet Cong. Locations of both events are noted in the record of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, for the months of September and November 1965, respectively. Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

CHAPTER 2

EXPANDING COMBINED ACTION TO DA NANG, EARLY 1966

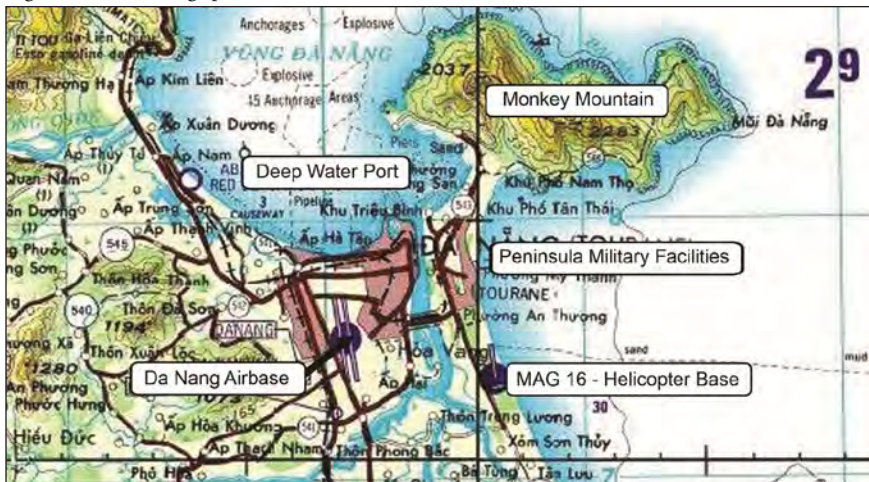
The Combined Action Program would not have reached the level of prominence that it did along the road to Hue without its development around Da Nang in early 1966. There, Marine Corps leaders, notably Major General Lewis W. Walt, the commander of all Marine forces in Vietnam, realized the program's potential as a means to hold villages with the minimum of U.S. personnel after the infantry had cleared them. In mid-February 1966, several CAPs began operations around Da Nang, marking the first time the program expanded beyond the villages around Phu Bai. The expansion of combined action would not stop at Da Nang, however. General Walt saw the program as a tool for maintaining local security throughout I Corps. In late 1965, he initiated a process that ultimately resulted in the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) gaining control of all Popular Force (PF) platoons in I Corps.¹ From there, he ordered all his subordinate commands to form Combined Action Platoons. This action marked the beginning of the widespread establishment of CAPs throughout the I Corps as a means of countering Viet Cong insurgents in the villages and holding those areas after the infantry had cleared them.

Da Nang was the largest and most complex of all the Marines' enclaves. Its airfield housed the central commands for all U.S. Marine and South Vietnamese forces in I Corps. It also encompassed a massive

¹ Gen Walt briefly discusses his belief in the potential of combined action in Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970), 105–12.

EXPANDING COMBINED ACTION TO DA NANG, EARLY 1966

Figure 2.1. Da Nang special sector



Military installations were spread throughout this area. Protecting these facilities was a main focus for the first Marines to arrive in South Vietnam. In the beginning, Marine infantry battalions remained close in and sent patrols and sweeps into the surrounding areas. As the Marines spread out went on the offensive, the special sector became safer, but there were incidents that emphasized the need for enhanced security.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

area of operations. The Da Nang enclave then consisted of all of Quang Nam Province, a sprawling region of densely populated, rice-growing villages along the coast with rigid mountains and nearly impenetrable jungles farther inland. Da Nang city and the surrounding area, known as the Da Nang Special Sector, lay at the heart of the tactical area of responsibility (TAOR). While the Marines' area of operations at Phu Bai in October 1965 covered nearly 500 square kilometers (200 square miles) with 9 villages, 62 hamlets, and an estimated population of 36,131, that in Quang Nam consisted of more than 1,000 square kilometers (395 square miles) with 54 villages, 241 hamlets, and at least 265,767 people.² It was a bewildering, complex environment that, as

²“Statistical Highlights,” Fleet Marine Force Pacific (FMFPAC), “Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam,” October 1965, item no. 1201001017, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), 18–19.

the Marines would learn, would require an unconventional approach to secure.

Much of the Quang Nam TAOR consisted of flat lowlands where the majority of the villages and the population were located. Eight to 16 kilometers (5–10 miles) inland, the lowlands gave way to a gradual rise of hills and mountains bordering the enclave to the north and to the west. The most prominent feature was the western mountains the Americans called Charlie Ridge. In between these mountains were several valleys containing trail systems that the Viet Cong used to move to and from the Quang Nam lowlands. At the southwestern edge of the TAOR was the Thuong Duc Pass, a historically well-traveled route for military forces into Quang Nam. Two additional passes, known as Happy Valley and Elephant Valley, provided convenient avenues of movement between the Quang Nam lowlands, Da Nang, and the Viet Cong's remote base camps in the mountains.

Beginning in April 1965, Marine infantry units launched a series of clearing operations throughout Da Nang's Quang Nam Province, but they soon ran into a serious issue. There existed no competent force to hold the villages after the infantry cleared them.³ This problem, and the continuing need to protect military installations such as Da Nang's large airfield, made the area a ripe environment for combined action. That may have been evident by October 1965, but it took until late February 1966 for the Marines to receive permission to take the steps required to expand the Combined Action Program south to Da Nang.⁴

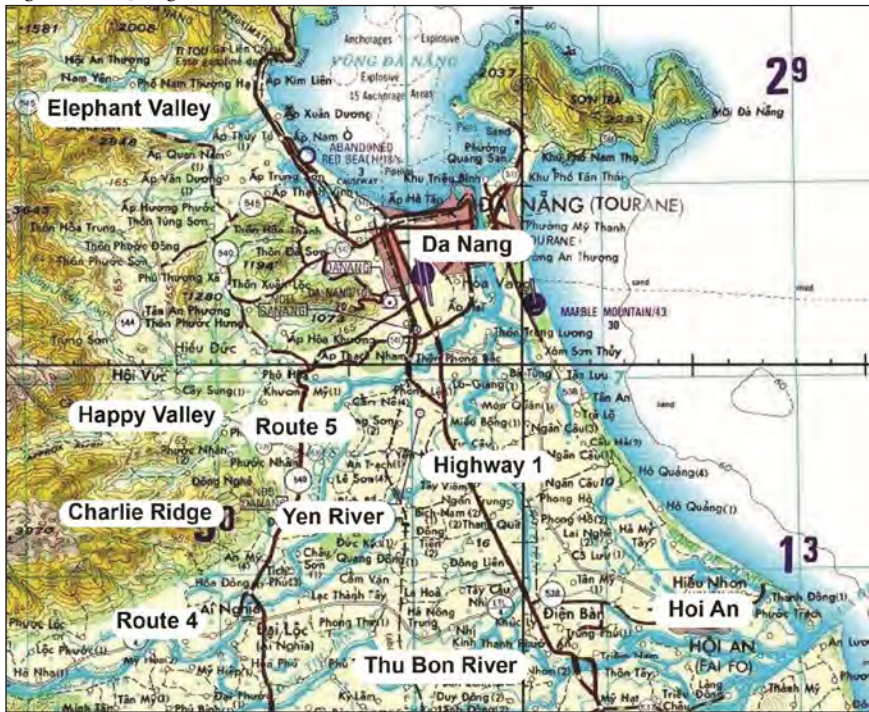
When the Marines began operations outside Da Nang, the main problem was not traffic coming from the mountains into the lowlands but the amount of Viet Cong already in the villages. They had easy access to much of the civilian population throughout Quang Nam prov-

³“Summary,” FMFPAC, “Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam,” October 1965, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 2.

⁴The first official record of a Combined Action Company at Da Nang can be found in “General Concept of Operations in the Reporting Period,” 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, Command Chronology (ComdC), February 1966, item no. 1201055037, folder 055, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, Part II.

EXPANDING COMBINED ACTION TO DA NANG, EARLY 1966

Figure 2.2. Quang Nam Province



The topography of Quang Nam Province. By early 1966, the Marines' TAOR stretched from the top of this map south to Hoi An and the Thu Bon River and from the coast to the mountains. Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

ince.⁵ Geography further complicated matters. Many of the province's numerous communities were located away from the main roadways and could be quite difficult to access.⁶ Each village contained several hamlets spread apart by a few to several hundred yards. As at Phu Bai and elsewhere, most of the villagers in Quang Nam lived in the hamlets and farmed rice nearby. The villages also tended to be thick with trees,

⁵ By May 1965, Marine intelligence developed an impressive picture of the breadth of Viet Cong forces that they confronted in Quang Nam. See "Operation Plan 202-65," 4th Marines, ComdC, May 1965, item no. 1201040073, folder 040, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, Tab A (VC Order of Battle Study) to Appendix 1 (Intelligence Estimate) to Annex D (Intelligence), 1-7.

⁶ "Operation Plan 202-65," 4th Marines, ComdC, May 1965, Appendix 2 (Tactical Study of Weather and Terrain) to Annex A (Intelligence), 2-4.

hedgerows, and a wide variety of bushes. Most houses were bamboo-framed with palm thatch covering the outdoor walls and the roofs, with a floor of hard-packed dirt, and they typically sat along networks of narrow trails or dirt roadways that ran through each hamlet.

These villages offered an ideal place for guerrillas to hide. They could not be seen from the air due to the dense tree canopies. On the ground, visibility in all directions was limited because of the houses and the dense vegetation that filled each hamlet. The people also provided concealment within which Viet Cong personnel could hide in plain sight, especially within a village whose population was intimidated by or sympathetic to them. Most hamlets and surrounding areas also had tunnel systems of varying levels of complexity that the Viet Cong used to hide arms, ammunition, explosives, and people. The rice fields outside of each village presented vast open areas that offered clear fields of fire against an approaching force.⁷ Clearing them would be a difficult undertaking.

Most of the areas outside the airbase were overrun with Viet Cong. They were in every village and hamlet, and they were organized. By the time the Marines landed in Vietnam in March 1965, the South Vietnamese government had lost nearly all control of this rural countryside. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) could do little to pacify the area or regain control. Most local village and hamlet governments ceased to exist or collaborated with the Viet Cong. District governments, usually in fortified district headquarters commanded by a military officer as district chief, were still intact, but the village governments they commanded were not.⁸

The mission to clear the area south of the Da Nang special sector fell to the 1st and 3d Battalions, 9th Marines, whose respective TAORs

⁷“Operation Plan 202-65,” 4th Marines, ComdC, May 1965, Appendix 2 (Tactical Study of Weather and Terrain) to Annex A (Intelligence), 2–4.

⁸For a brief discussion of the situation that confronted the Marines in the spring of 1965, see Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 560–63.

ran from north to south between the Yen River and the coast.⁹ At any one time in the 9th Marines' area of operations, there were two Viet Cong main force battalions, five additional main force companies, and several "special mission" units, totaling approximately 1,650 soldiers—not to mention local guerrilla cells and local force companies. Local guerrilla activity varied. Some hamlets had small cells of only 4 or 5 individuals, while other areas hosted organized companies of 120 fighters.¹⁰ There were also an estimated 600 individuals living throughout the TAOR who served as lookouts and reported to the Viet Cong about the Marines' and ARVN's activities.¹¹ While the total number of Viet Cong may not have seemed overwhelming to multiple battalions of Marine infantry, their control over the villagers made them a significant threat that could not be removed by brute force alone. They had to be carefully separated from their refuge in the villages, a process that would require patience and precision.

At first, there was little the Marines could do. As at Phu Bai, the first Marines to land at Da Nang were restricted to defending the airfield and key terrain in its vicinity. Their areas of operation only went outside the airbase to forward defensive positions to the west and northwest that sat along avenues of approach to Da Nang. They spent their first weeks in Vietnam holding the line and building up the infrastructure that would be required to sustain multiple infantry battalions along with supporting armor, artillery, fixed-wing, and rotary assets.¹²

In April, after weeks of sitting behind their defenses, the Marines received permission to conduct limited operations farther inland. They realized the extent to which the Viet Cong controlled the areas around

⁹FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," November 1965, item no. 1201001018, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 13.

¹⁰ "Intelligence," 9th Marines, ComdC (1 of 3, October 1965, item no. 1201053203, folder 053, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 3–6.

¹¹ "Order of Battle Intelligence," 9th Marines, ComdC (1 of 3), April 1966, item no. 1201053217, folder 053, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 2–5.

¹² Jack Shulimson and Maj Charles M. Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1978), 16–20. See also Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 570–71.

Da Nang during their first sorties away from the airfield.¹³ At its height, the South Vietnamese government's presence in the countryside had been tenuous, at best. By the spring of 1965, however, any semblance of control by the government in Saigon seemed a distant memory. "The rural people had seen little evidence of central authority for years, other than the tax collector," a report later noted. "The Marines found the greater threat to be in the Viet Cong[']s] penetration of the daily lives of the people through their network of terrorism, brutality, threat, and extortion," it continued. "In the region extending south from Da Nang to Chu Lai, the guerrillas had, over a period of ten years, achieved domination over the bulk of the populace, from whose resources they met most of their needs—food, recruits, money, sanctuary and information."¹⁴

During the next several months, the Marines conducted a series of operations to the north and northwest of Da Nang, as well as to the southwest. Once offensive operations got underway, Marine commanders envisioned a three-pronged approach to confronting the Viet Cong and pacifying the countryside. They would first conduct large operations to hunt down the Viet Cong's main force units. After an initial sweep through a given area, they would saturate it with patrols to clear the villages of remaining Viet Cong. Finally, they would conduct an intensive civic action campaign to show the people that the United States and the South Vietnamese government were working together to improve their lives.¹⁵ To make the latter objective a reality, in early May 1965, they appointed a commander of civil affairs, who was instructed to draw up a plan for a sustained civic action campaign around Da Nang. Once this program was initiated, almost every Marine unit had a civil affairs section involved with a myriad of civic action efforts. Yet, Marine leadership also faced pushback from their South Vietnam-

¹³ For a more personal anecdote about these initial operations, see Phillip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Picador, 2016), 68–93.

¹⁴ "Introduction," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," February 1966, item no. 1201001032, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

¹⁵ "Summary of Conclusions," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," March–September 1965 (item dated 1 March 1965), item no. 1201001016, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

ese allies. Some were afraid to let the Marines venture too far from the airbase for fear that they would have negative interactions with the population and would not handle pacification well.¹⁶ Others, including ARVN general Nguyen Chanh Thi, feared that confrontations would arise in the pacification process, resulting in civilian deaths and propaganda opportunities for the Viet Cong.¹⁷ Their reservations were understandable, but restrictions on the Marines' TAOR in the spring and early summer—even after offensive operations had begun—limited their reach into the populated regions farther away from the Da Nang Special Sector. They also hindered the Marines' ability to clear those areas of the Viet Cong threat.

The situation changed completely when the Viet Cong attacked the Da Nang airfield on 1 July 1965. The attack inflicted some casualties and damaged several aircraft.¹⁸ It also made it abundantly clear that the Marines could not remain on the defensive and expect South Vietnamese forces to secure areas around the Marines' enclaves on their own. Almost immediately the Marine TAOR spread to the south, and the Marines began operations all along the southern border of Da Nang from the coast to the mountains. On their first venture southward, the Marines found a fortified set of hamlets indicating a well-established enemy presence.¹⁹ This discovery would be a harbinger of the length, intensity, and difficulties that would define their attempts to pacify the rural countryside in Quang Nam Province. It is not certain that the Marines knew before venturing out into the countryside, especially to the south of Da Nang, the extent to which the Viet Cong dominated the area. They would quickly find out.

Pacification and Popular Forces at Da Nang

General Walt took over as the commander of the III MAF on 6 June

¹⁶ "Period II: 11 April to 6 May 1965," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," September 1965, 21.

¹⁷ Gen Lewis W. Walt, interview with Martin Russ, 31 July 1976, tape 3269-30A, Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, beginning at 26:42.

¹⁸ Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, 56–57.

¹⁹ Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, 58–65.

1965. After the attack on the airfield, he aimed to expand the Marines' multipronged strategy of large unit operations, small unit patrolling, and civic action to clear Quang Nam Province of the Viet Cong. First, beginning on 6 July, the Da Nang TAOR expanded from 658 to 891 square kilometers (254 to 344 square miles), allowing Walt to send his Marines farther out into the countryside. As the Marines pushed out, they created temporary platoon and company bases in their assigned sectors. From there, they could extensively patrol throughout the countryside and establish a semblance of permanent security there.²⁰

In numerical terms, the effort seemed to work. In October 1965, three Marine battalions conducted 1,704 patrols and ambushes in the Quang Nam TAOR. Securing the area proved a far more difficult job than expected, however, and Walt worked to reinforce Da Nang and the surrounding areas as the U.S. government in Washington, DC, ordered more American troops to Vietnam. By December, there were six Marine infantry battalions operating throughout the Quang Nam TAOR. In that month alone, the Marines performed a total of 7,444 operations of varying size in all three of their enclaves, 7,200 of which were the small-unit patrols and ambushes, a steady increase from October and November.²¹

But patrolling and fighting alone would not be enough. Marine leadership realized from the beginning that they had to enact civic action programs everywhere it was safe enough to do so.²² Holding clinics in the villages was one of the most popular methods. By the end of October, the Marines in I Corps had medically treated 91,815 people, evacuated 4,022 villagers for more serious treatment, and trained 46 local personnel to assist with medical work. They also supported local construction projects, distributed tens of thousands of pounds of food, fed refugees, distributed clothing, and set up roughly two dozen English classes.²³ The Da Nang enclave was in the center of these efforts.

²⁰ FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," March–September 1965, 44.

²¹ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," March–September 1965, 2.

²² FMFPAC's very first report on III MAF's war in Vietnam opens with this observation. See "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," March–September 1965, 2–3. See also Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, 46–48, 142–44.

²³ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," October 1965, 2.

Another of the more impactful civic action initiatives involved protecting food supplies and denying them to the Viet Cong. In September and October 1965, the Marines took advantage of the rice harvest season to conduct Operation Golden Fleece, a large-scale initiative that aimed to protect rice crops in important areas near Da Nang. By using groups of Marine infantry to patrol around large rice-producing villages, they prevented the Viet Cong from seizing the harvest for themselves. Intelligence estimated that the operation managed to protect 70 percent of the crop for the villagers' use rather than given up as a form of taxation to supply Viet Cong troops. In several cases, the villagers reciprocated by providing useful intelligence—identifying Viet Cong guerrillas and suspects, pointing out mines and booby traps, and describing the location of Viet Cong hideouts.²⁴

Initiatives like Operation Golden Fleece showed promise, but there were cracks in the Marines' operational philosophy. One of the most pressing was the issue of what to do *after* conducting these operations. In October 1965, III MAF expressed serious concerns about the clearing and holding approach. They realized that, although Marines could effectively move through these hamlets and push much of the organized Viet Cong forces out, the enemy could and often did move right back in and after the Marines left. Unless competent local forces could stay behind and maintain an effective presence, the Marines' efforts would get them nowhere. "As the operational efforts of the preceding months were continued and intensified in October, the III Marine Amphibious Force came to experience, more and more emphatically, the realities of a counterinsurgency war," III MAF concluded in October 1965.²⁵ "The Marines were feeling, with growing impact . . . that if local forces do not move in promptly behind the offensive effort, the first line forces must be diverted to provide the essential hamlet security, police, and stabilization." Like at Phu Bai, many villages in the Da Nang special sector

²⁴ "Significant Events," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," October 1965, 2. See also Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 570–71; and Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, 138–41.

²⁵ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," October 1965, 1.

already contained PF contingents, at least on paper, but they “were inadequate in numbers and in quality to do their part of the job, as the Marines did theirs.”²⁶ The report concluded that those PFs’ most pressing issue was “the quality of their performance, their questionable reliability, and the lack of authority over their actions enjoyed by III MAF.”²⁷

The PFs also lacked training and support from their government. They seemed to be ignored in the Republic of Vietnam’s defensive scheme. Motivation was another issue. Most of the country’s population was conflicted, and the PFs were no exception. Having access to their families, the Viet Cong had significant leverage over them should they become too aggressive. It is not hard to imagine, prior to the Marine intervention, that many village and hamlet officials were also compromised for the simple purpose of survival. Many PF platoon commanders were rugged and competent men who had fought in the First Indochina War (1946–54). Some had fought on the side of the French, and some had fought on the side of the Viet Minh but had broken with the Communists after the French were driven out of the country. The PF rank and file, however, were much different. Many lacked training, experience, and sometimes the will to fight.²⁸

On the surface, a lack of motivation to stand up to an oppressive and predatory organization such as the Viet Cong may seem confounding. But it is important to understand that the Republic of Vietnam was a new country created from the outside. At this time, it had existed as a nation state for barely a decade. While some individuals, particularly those with higher levels of education and those who lived and worked in the cities, may have believed in the importance of fighting Communism, that commitment often did not filter down to the rice farmers

²⁶ “Summary,” FMFPAC, “Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam,” October 1965, 2.

²⁷ “Small Unit Operations,” FMFPAC, “Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam,” October 1965, 14–15.

²⁸ Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, 19–20; Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines’ Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 23; John Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 7; and Ted N. Easterling, *War in the Villages: The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons in the Vietnam War* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2021), 40.

who constituted the vast majority of the country's people. Giving up one's life for one's country is a concept that typically must be rooted in a sense of belonging within and commitment to that country. Yet, it is nearly impossible to foster such patriotic sentiments when there is no attachment to the nation. While many Vietnamese may not have been committed to Communism, they certainly did not feel much attachment to the government in Saigon. Moreover, the war was above all a civil conflict that pitted the Vietnamese against each other. Many PF soldiers were understandably reluctant about their place within it.²⁹

Many PF soldiers also seemed to live in a hopeless situation. Even though they were expected to live and fight in their own villages, many must have felt like they were trapped in hostile territory. This was especially true in Quang Nam Province, where the Viet Cong were deeply entrenched in society and the landscape. They had near-constant access to food and recruits from the local population and could change location and disappear from a particular village at will. They freely operated at night, and there is no evidence that the 34 PF platoons in Quang Nam Province attempted to stop them before CAC platoons began operations in the area. It is likely there were unspoken agreements between local governments and the Viet Cong that, if the PFs did not patrol at night, they would be left alone. Lieutenant Paul R. Ek strongly suspected that this was the case when he was forming the original CAC platoons at Phu Bai. He believed that there was an unwritten code that the Viet Cong would let the village chief and the hamlet chiefs run the village in the daytime, but at night the PFs would not patrol or interfere with the Viet Cong's activities. The fighting between the Viet Cong and CACs in Loc Bon and Thuy Phu in late 1965 certainly

²⁹ The subject of Vietnamese nationalism during the First and Second Indochina Wars is one of the more fascinating aspects of this conflict that seems to have been misunderstood or ignored by many U.S. leaders at the time. Some of the stronger examples include Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from all Sides* (New York: Viking, 2003); Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), particularly chaps. 10 and 11; and Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Figure 2.3. Locations of two attacks, October 1965



This relief map segment shows the location of both attacks in October. The red circle on the left shows the human wave attack on Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, at their company patrol base adjacent to the Yen River. The red circle on the right shows the sapper attack location that destroyed several helicopters at the helicopter base at Marble Mountain.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

suggests that the Marines’ arrival in those villages upset that balance.³⁰ It was now up to the Marines in Quang Nam to provide a similar shock to Viet Cong operations there.

Before the Marines could act, a pair of bold Viet Cong attacks forced their hand. First, on the evening of 27–28 October, the Viet Cong launched a well-coordinated assault on a new airbase at Marble Mountain, east of Da Nang. Viet Cong commandos breached the Marines’ perimeter and destroyed 19 helicopters and damaged 21 more.³¹ An after-action assessment noted that intelligence received prior to the assault indicated the Viet Cong were planning large-scale attacks on

³⁰ 1stLt Paul R. Ek, interview with LtCol D. J. Hunter, 24 January 1966, transcript, item no. USMC0046, Oral History Section, USMCHD, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 66, hereafter Ek oral history.

³¹ “Significant Events,” FMFPAC, “Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam,” October 1965, 5–8.

military installations around Da Nang.³² Yet, the Viet Cong still managed to breach the airfield's defenses and wreak much havoc. It was clear that they were determined to escalate the fighting in Quang Nam. Three days later, they launched an even more violent attack on Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.

The attack on Company A further exposed the holes in the Marines' control over the region, particularly in the south. At that time, the company was operating south of the Da Nang special sector, on the west side of the Yen River alongside Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines (on temporary loan from Phu Bai). The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines' intelligence section's report for October acknowledged that additional Viet Cong main force units had arrived in the TAOR. Their arrival provided a morale boost for the local Viet Cong there, whose summer battles with the Marines, along with increasing supply shortages, had taken their toll. The main forces' arrival coincided with an increase in enemy activity that month, in which the Viet Cong became bolder in their willingness to mass their troops and attack Marine positions.³³

In the early morning hours of 30 October, they attacked Company A's forward base at Hill 22 in force. Just before the assault, Company A had two platoons outside the wire; 154 Marines remained inside the perimeter. At approximately 0220, the Viet Cong attacked the company's position with heavy small arms and mortar fire. The Marines requested fire support from Company M, which held nearby Hill 41, approximately two kilometers west of Company A's position.³⁴ The support was not enough, though, and by 0300 the Viet Cong had breached the perimeter. The fighting was close and intense. Despite having their lines penetrated, Company A held on. By 0320, the Marines repulsed the attack and the Viet Cong pulled back to a nearby

³² "Intelligence," 3d Marine Division, ComdC (1 of 3), October 1965, item no. 1201025033, folder 035, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 8.

³³ "Intelligence," 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, October 1965 (1 of 2), item no. 1201019166, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 7.

³⁴ "Journal," 30 October 1965, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, October 1965 (2 of 2), item no. 1201019167, folder 019, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 57.

hamlet. They continued to exchange fire with the Marines as they withdrew, eventually breaking contact for good and disappearing into the night.³⁵ When dawn broke, 16 Marines were dead and another 45 were wounded. The survivors found 47 fallen Viet Cong, 42 of whom died near or inside the perimeter.³⁶

Most clues indicated that the attacking units had come from the south, likely from across the east side of the river. A prisoner informed his captors that the attackers' rendezvous point had been in Dai Loc district, to the south, in a canyon a short distance into the mountains. Villagers living near that area, in turn, reported large numbers of Viet Cong had traveled through their villages northbound in the evening hours before the attack. The Marines also learned that the Viet Cong units that attacked Hill 22 were the Viet Cong main force *45th Battalion* along with two local force companies.³⁷ This incident was the largest attack on a Marine infantry company in the field to date. It was a clear indicator that the Viet Cong had no intentions of yielding Quang Nam without a fight. On the other side, the Marines had to determine how to regain the initiative without losing control of the populated areas they had already cleared. Like their counterparts in Phu Bai, the Marines at Da Nang would turn to locally raised troops already in place, the PFs.

Protecting the Rear

General Walt quickly realized that to make the PFs a reliable part of his defenses in I Corps, he needed more control over them. He moved to obtain that control in November, first by receiving approval to take operational command of several PF platoons around the Da Nang air-

³⁵ "Journal," 30 October 1965, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, October 1965 (2 of 2), 57–61.

³⁶ "Significant Events," 3d Marine Division, ComdC, October 1965, item no. 1201025033, folder 025, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 7.

³⁷ "Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC (2 of 2), October 1965, item no. 1201019166, folder 019, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 23–24; and "Journal Oct. 30, Narrative Events Concerning Viet Cong Attack on Hill 22," 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC (2 of 2), October 1965, 23–24.

field.³⁸ In preparation for integrating the Marines into the PF platoons, he ordered one of his battalions at Da Nang to assess the quality and capabilities of the platoons selected for combined action. The results, unfortunately, only confirmed what Walt and the Marines feared: the PF platoons could not hold recently cleared villages on their own.

In December 1965 and January 1966, elements of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, trained the PF platoons located closest to the Da Nang airbase. Their objective was to integrate Marines into the PF units, as had been done around Phu Bai the previous August.³⁹ They started by training groups of 8–15 Popular Force soldiers at various locations around Da Nang. Each individual PF was assigned a Marine “buddy” while they went through the training regimen. Marine noncommissioned officers served as the training officers, and they taught through an interpreter.⁴⁰ They taught the PFs all the essential elements of performing small-unit operations. They dedicated a considerable amount of that time to basic weapons training, which most PFs lacked. Marines taught them how to disassemble, clean, and reassemble their weapons. They practiced firing of all the weapons in a PF platoon—mostly Korean War-era U.S. weapons such as the M1 Garand rifle, the M1A1 Carbine, the Browning Automatic Rifle, the Thompson submachine gun, the .45-caliber handgun, and 12-gauge shotguns. The Marines and PFs also conducted live-fire exercises and practiced constructing defensive positions to better defend their compounds. During every 24-hour period they conducted at least one patrol during the day and night with Marines. There, they practiced patrolling techniques, hand and arm signals, proper carrying of weapons, and what actions to take when the patrol stops.⁴¹

³⁸ Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 107.

³⁹ 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, December 1965, item no. 1201057001, folder 057, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 2.

⁴⁰ Interestingly enough, this is one of the few instances in which interpreters were allocated to combined action.

⁴¹ “Popular Forces Training,” 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, January 1966, item no. 1201057002, folder 057, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, enclosures 3–6.

Initial experiences with the PFs were not encouraging. Poor weapons maintenance was endemic. Most of their firearms were serviceable but displayed no signs of regular maintenance. Fortunately, these U.S. weapons from the Korean War era were reliable enough in adverse conditions to operate without a rigorous cleaning regimen, for a time. Eventually, however, their wooden stocks and metal parts would deteriorate in Vietnam's harsh climate. Marksmanship was also lacking. Shooting well is the product of extensive training and practice, both of which the PFs lacked. Their weapons handling while on patrol also left much to be desired. Initial reports noted that PF soldiers did not carry their rifles at the ready position while patrolling with the Marines, even after they had been instructed to do so.⁴² This lax attitude toward weapons handling posed serious problems to the Marines expected to patrol alongside the PFs, for obvious reasons. Having one's rifle at the ready during a patrol, being able to accurately fire that rifle, and being able to quickly react with your weapon to a threat is key. Sometimes one must react within seconds. Discipline and readiness to react quickly could easily mean the difference between gaining fire superiority or being wiped out.

Weapons handling and maintenance were not the only problems that the Marines encountered. The Marines' reports from these early training sessions describe an organization struggling to forge a working relationship with their PF counterparts. For example, while the Marines claimed that both they and the PFs were enthusiastic about the training, many of the latter were slow learners. The average trainee had about six years of education. One report complained that while most trainees were curious, they evidenced no desire to excel. The Marines also found that after the PFs completed the training, many had higher morale but remained undisciplined. Several complained constantly of illness, even though the corpsman could find nothing wrong with them. After patrols, they slept rather than help their Marine counterparts build bunkers. One positive was an increased attention to weap-

⁴² "Popular Forces Training," 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, January 1966, enclosures 3-6.

on maintenance, although the Marines doubted this would continue after they departed the village.⁴³

The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines' uneven training experiences corroborated III MAF's fears that most PF groups lacked the discipline and reliability to defend their villages on their own. Unfortunately, there was no alternative, and General Walt continued to lobby for control over all the PFs in I Corps. His intent was to have the Marines coordinate with and support any PFs in their respective TAORs and to place Marines in selected PF platoons.⁴⁴ Between 5 and 28 January 1966, Walt exchanged a series of letters with General Thi, the ARVN commander of I Corps. These letters document the weeks of painstaking negotiations and evidence an agreement as to the importance of the role of the PFs in this segment of the Vietnam War. Both leaders danced around certain issues but eventually reached an agreement that largely gave Walt what he wanted. As a token of good faith, Walt cautioned his subordinates to avoid the term *operational control* when presenting the program to Vietnamese military personnel. He suggested using the terms like *coordination* and *cooperation* instead.⁴⁵ But the direction was clear—moving forward, General Walt and III MAF had operational command over the PFs in I Corps.

With control over the PF secured, Walt moved quickly. On 4 February, he directed his subordinate commands to establish liaisons with local officials at the province, district, and village levels to coordinate with the PFs. His order also directed the Marines to generate plans for providing material support to, and embedding Marines within, selected PF platoons. Walt stressed that the PFs were to become an import-

⁴³ "Popular Forces Training," 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, January 1966, enclosure 4.

⁴⁴ Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 107, 111–12.

⁴⁵ LtGen Lewis W. Walt to LtGen Nguyen Chanh Thi, 5 January 1966, in Maj Charles W. Driest, USMC, *Combined Action Platoons: A Possible Role in the Low-Intensity Conflict Environment* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1990), 32; LtGen Nguyen Chanh Thi to LtGen Lewis W. Walt, 28 January 1966, in Driest, *Combined Action Platoons*, 33; LtGen Nguyen Chanh Thi to subordinate ARVN commands, 28 January 1966, in Driest, *Combined Action Platoons*, 34; LtGen Lewis W. Walt to Commanding Officer, I Corps Advisory Group, 4 February 1966, in Driest, *Combined Action Platoons*, 35; and LtGen Lewis W. Walt to Commanding Officer, 3d Marine Division, 4 February 1966, in Driest, *Combined Action Platoons*, 36.

ant part of the war in I Corps, telling his Marines, “The importance of an adequate force to secure the rear areas to allow Marine/ARVN forces to move forward cannot be overstressed.”⁴⁶ While he never precisely defined what the “rear areas” were, logic would dictate that he meant not only core government and military installations but also populated zones already reached by the Marine and ARVN infantry as their clearing operations spread outward into the countryside. Quang Nam Province would be the testing ground for this new philosophy. It hosted both the nerve center of the Marines’ war effort in Vietnam and their largest and most heavily populated area of operations. The Marines could not hope to defeat the Viet Cong insurgency in such an environment without securing the populated areas within and around the Da Nang special sector, thereby freeing up the infantry to concentrate their efforts elsewhere.

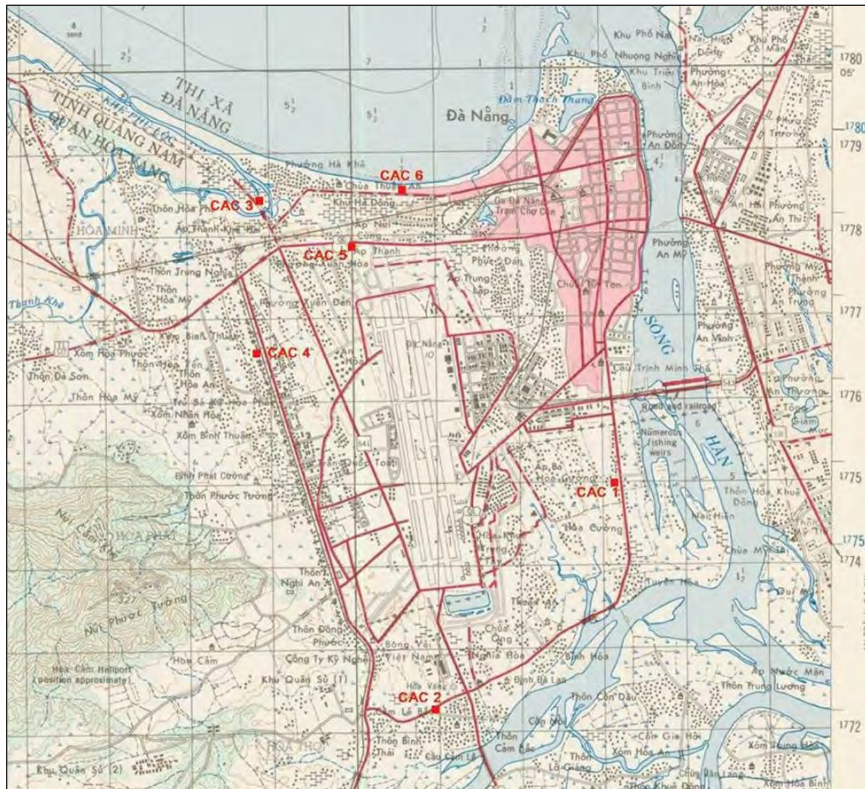
The first CACs around Da Nang served multiple purposes. Each of the initial CACs were placed along the roads and other approaches to the Da Nang airfield, in areas where PF units already existed, or were supposed to. Some platoons lived and patrolled close to the airbase and were relatively safe from Viet Cong activity. Later, the Marines established more platoons farther out, in villages that were more vulnerable to attack. The clearing and holding process in those more remote villages was neither quick nor easy. It required persistent and sustained effort to eradicate the guerrillas and their influence, as well as to keep Viet Cong forces from venturing into those rear areas after they had been cleared. To mitigate that problem, CACs posted farther out from Da Nang often supported the infantry’s clearing operations and then remained behind to hold the villages after the infantry moved on.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Commanding General, III MAF, to Commanding General, 3d Marine Division (Rein) FMF, “Popular Forces,” 4 February 1966, in Driest, *Combined Action Platoons*, Appendix A, 5.

⁴⁷ For example, in the summer of 1966 Marine battalions operating south of Da Nang used CACs to help with “county fairs,” a method for population control that chapter 4 will discuss in greater detail, after the battalion had cleared a populated area. See “Operation Order 399-66,” 5 June 1966, 3d Marine Division, ComdC, June 1966, item no. 1201026025, folder 026, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, enclosure 4, 1.

EXPANDING COMBINED ACTION TO DA NANG, EARLY 1966

Figure 2.4. Locations of first CACs around Da Nang



A map of the first CACs around Da Nang airfield.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

From the outset, combined action spread throughout the Da Nang enclave much more quickly than it had at Phu Bai. The first platoons moved into their villages in February 1966.⁴⁸ Only an event that the Marines could not control, a major political upheaval in the spring of 1966 that nearly amounted to a coup attempt against the South Vietnamese military junta, could slow the CACs’ expansion.⁴⁹ This period of unrest, known as the Buddhist Struggle Movement, froze the

⁴⁸ “General Concept of Operations in the Reporting Period,” 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, February 1966, Part II.

⁴⁹ Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 31–32; and Easterling, *War in the Villages*, 98–99.

building of CACs to the outside of Da Nang, but by May the program was moving again. By June, there were 12 CACs around the Da Nang special sector. With the infantry now concentrating their efforts farther inland, these CACs fell under the command of the 1st Military Police (MP) Battalion, which was now in charge of the airfield's security. The MPs divided the airfield CACs' eastern and western groups for easier command and control. The western CACs protected the villages around the airfield, while the eastern CACs resided on the Tien Sha Peninsula, where they helped protect all the facilities from its northern tip (Monkey Mountain) down to the helicopter and air facility north of Marble Mountain.⁵⁰ But combined action's spread in Quang Nam did not stop in Da Nang. As the Marines expanded their operations to the west and south, more CACs followed. Within a few months of the creation of the first units, several new CACs were established in areas northwest of Da Nang, along an overland supply route near the TAOR's northwestern border.⁵¹

Combined action's quick expansion in and around Da Nang was an exciting development, but what the platoons did and what they could accomplish varied from village to village. Since each infantry battalion established CACs on their own, nothing about the platoons was standardized. For example, civic action was a major component of the Marines' strategy in I Corps, but the amount of civic action that each CAC performed depended on variables that they often could not control. While nearly every battalion had a civil affairs section that generously distributed goods, provided medical services, and started building projects to improve the villages in their areas of operation, the allocation of those resources to whatever combined action units may be in the battalion's TAOR was up to the battalion commander's

⁵⁰ "CAC Chronology," Enclosure 5, 1st Military Police Battalion, ComdC, June 1966, item no. 1201010114, folder 010, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

⁵¹ FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," June 1966, item no. 1201001060, folder 001, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 4, 30–31.

EXPANDING COMBINED ACTION TO DA NANG, EARLY 1966

Figure 2.5. Locations of CACs around Da Nang, July 1966



The Da Nang airfield CACs in July 1966. This map shows the CACs that had been added by July 1966.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

discretion.⁵² Moreover, some CACs that lay in more dangerous areas had to devote most of their time to patrolling and protecting their villages.⁵³ All told, the amount of civic action that any CAC conducted typically depended on how safe the area was and what the directions were of each battalion’s command. Both variables fluctuated widely throughout Quang Nam.

⁵² Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 35.

⁵³ See Cavender S. Sutton, “Combined Action in Vietnam: U.S. Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Thought and Practice, 1965–1971” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2024), 267–74.

Some of the CACs, such as those around Da Nang airfield in June 1966, were highly civic action oriented. The 1st MP Battalion's records show that when the Marines established the CACs around the airfield, there were minimal instances of Viet Cong engagements. Minor incidents did occur on occasion, and a CAC always had to be alert and prepared, but the level of combat was nowhere near that experienced in more outlying regions. The MP battalion went so far as to designate the CACs as their civic action wing. Their decision made sense—the CACs' unique situation of being integrated with the PF forces and living in the villages provided the best means of effecting meaningful change at the local level. Marines in the airfield CACs spent much of their time building bridges, repairing, or building schools, building medical clinics, and engaging in other community enhancing construction projects. For example, in August 1966 alone, the CACs' 12 medical corpsmen provided treatment to 3,500 civilians per week. Once a week, a battalion surgeon came out to handle the more complex cases.⁵⁴

For the CACs located away from the airfield, the situation was far more volatile. These Marines had to train the village defenders and, at the same time, aggressively patrol to interdict Viet Cong activity. Some of the more remote areas in Quang Nam Province that now hosted CACs had been the scene of brutal confrontations between Viet Cong main force units, organized and effective Viet Cong local units, and the Marines. One CAC was placed in the village close to where the attack on Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, on Hill 22 had occurred in October 1965. Several more were placed along the roadways that connected the infantry TAORs inland and the Da Nang special sector to the rear (figures 2.6 and 2.7).⁵⁵ The CACs in these areas had made frequent contact with the Viet Cong. The population may have genuinely been happy about the Marines' presence, but they were highly conflicted and could not be counted on to be cooperative. Nevertheless, the com-

⁵⁴ "Annex A (Civic Action)," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam, June 1966, Enclosure 5.

⁵⁵ FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," October 1966, item no. 1201001087, folder 001, USMCHD, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 45, 48.

EXPANDING COMBINED ACTION TO DA NANG, EARLY 1966

Figure 2.6. Locations of CAPs, July 1966



The locations of CAPs established by July 1966 are marked in orange dots. By that time, Gen Lewis Walt had established approximately 22 CAPs in Da Nang enclave, which protected the Da Nang airfield and the Tien Sha peninsula to the east of the main airfield. By July, the CAPs were also extended out along the inland supply route, Route 5 (540) which heads southwest out of Da Nang. Along this route were developing Marine Corps hill bases and forward artillery positions. Keeping that route open was critical. Route 540 (5), to the south, was a two-lane dirt road, and it was swept everyday early in the morning by minesweeper teams. Convoys usually followed close behind.

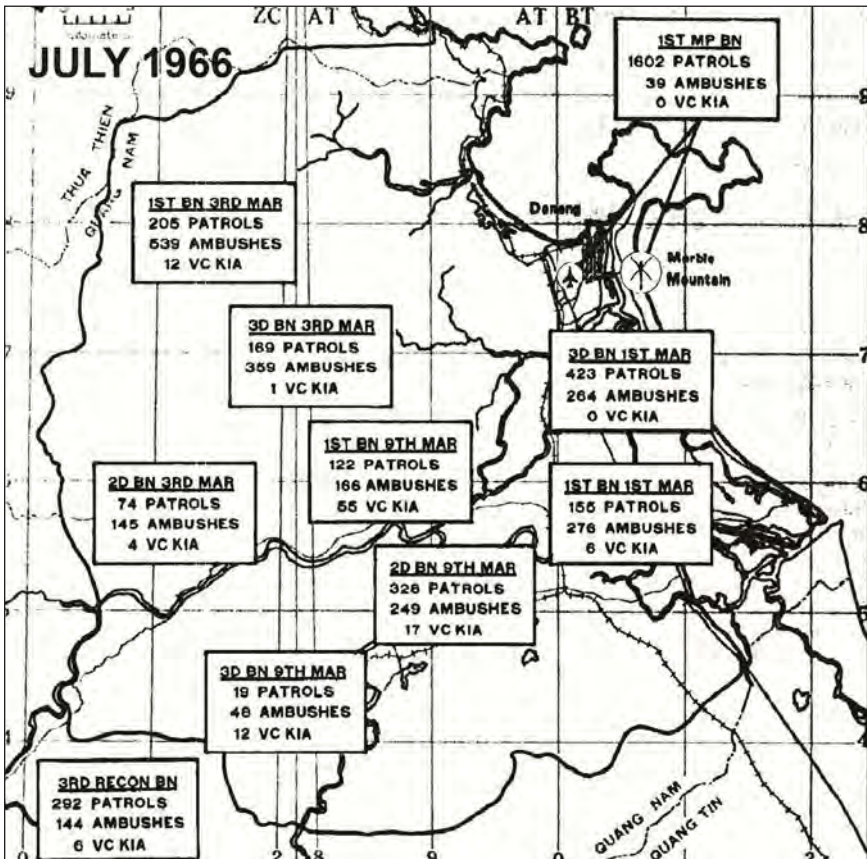
Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

combination of Marine infantry saturating the area with patrols and the CACs guarding their villages did bring some stability to the situation. Routes between the villages became safer as more and more hamlets managed to establish or reestablish functioning local governments.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," July 1966, item no. 1201001066, folder 001, USMCHD, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 16.

CHAPTER 2

Figure 2.7. Progress of ongoing clearing process, July 1966



This chart from a Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, report demonstrates the intensity of the ongoing clearing process. By July 1966, the Viet Cong main force units had been pushed out of the villages closest to Da Nang. They remained highly active along the fringes of the TAOR.

Source: Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," July 1966, item no. 1201001066, folder 001, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, 16.

Combined action completed its first year of operations in a state of flux. In a relatively short amount of time, the program had been created from scratch, imported to a new region, and then spread across a sizeable chunk of the Marines' largest area of operations in Vietnam. There were 22 CACs operating in the Da Nang TAOR by the end of July. Each of them played an important role by defending the approaches

to the airfield or the routes connecting it with the infantry battalions operating throughout the province. The program's quick expansion was promising, but it also exposed some serious problems, many of which stemmed from a lack of centralized command and control.⁵⁷

The absence of a single command for combined action meant that the program lacked unity of effort, which soon became clear in a variety of ways. For example, unlike at Phu Bai, where Lieutenants Ek and First Lieutenant John J. Mullen carefully developed methods to train combined action personnel and integrate them into the Zone A villages, the Quang Nam CACs did not have that refined of a mission. There is an indication that Mullen, who served as the company commander of the Phu Bai CACs from September 1965 to February 1966, came to Da Nang for a short time to provide advice to the newly formed CAC units there.⁵⁸ But the situation in Quang Nam was tense, and General Walt needed those cleared villages held. There was no special training for Marines assigned to the area's CACs. They received no formal instruction on Vietnamese language, culture, history, or any CAC-specific subject matter. Most of them, however, were solid infantry Marines, and many adapted well to village combat with or without formal training. When a new Marine arrived in a CAC, they often received on-the-job-training from the CAC leader and their new teammates.⁵⁹

The lack of a unified command for combined action had more significant ramifications when the program expanded again to Chu Lai in the summer of 1966. While CAC operations in that enclave are unfortunately outside the scope of this book, it must be pointed out that the Marines employed CAPs differently there than in the first two enclaves. The Chu Lai TAOR existed mainly to protect the Marines' new jet-

⁵⁷ The Marines' chronic struggle with this problem is a recurring theme in Sutton, "Combined Action in Vietnam." See chapters 4 and 5 for a more extensive discussion, as well as the problem's impact on combined action throughout all of I Corps Tactical Zone.

⁵⁸ Capt John J. Mullen, "Modifications to the III MAF Combined Action Program in the Republic of Vietnam," Individual Research Papers Collection, Capt John J. Mullen Jr., 1968–1969, COLL/3953, USMCHD, Quantico, VA, Annex C, 14.

⁵⁹ Training issues are also a recurring theme in Sutton, "Combined Action in Vietnam." See, for example, pp. 115–16, 125, 132–33, 179–83, 187, 212–13, 238–39, 248, 252–54, 276–79, 311, 343–44.

capable airfield there. The Marines generally divided the area in two. The northern area protected the airfield. The Marines created CACs on a solid foundation; those villages had had their own protection forces for some time before the Marines arrived. The TAOR's southern zone was a different story. The Marines moved into that area in response to a large amount of Viet Cong activity there. They created CACs in conjunction with the infantry's clearing operations, rather than waiting for the infantry to clear the villages first. These CACs began as quasi-clearing forces for their respective villages.⁶⁰ Their early operations were more infantry- and combat-oriented than those of the more traditional CACs around Phu Bai and Da Nang. As a result, many CAPs in the southern Chu Lai enclave—most famously the Marines sent to the village of Binh Nghia, whose exploits were immortalized in the classic book *The Village*—endured levels of combat that, to that point, had been unheard of in other CAC TAORs.⁶¹

Combined Action, therefore, needed significant reorganization if it was to expand and improve beyond what its Marines had accomplished at Phu Bai and Da Nang between August 1965 and July 1966. The program required a more clearly defined mission as well as a single guiding hand to ensure that it received adequate support and that its Marines were effectively working toward that goal. It was a serious but not insurmountable problem. However, General Walt would be slow to act, and there would be no serious attempts at reform until early 1967.⁶² Before that could happen, the Combined Action Program would have to experience more growing pains, part of which involved its expansion along the road to Hue.

⁶⁰ The expansion of combined action to Chu Lai is briefly covered in Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 32; Jack Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1982), 241–42; and Sutton, “Combined Action in Vietnam,” 192–202.

⁶¹ Bing West, *The Village* (New York: Pocket Books, 2003).

⁶² Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 38–39.

CHAPTER 3

EXPANDING THE PHU BAI TACTICAL AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY

In the spring of 1966, combined action began to expand along the road to Hue. The program's growth at Phu Bai was the result of General Lewis W. Walt's efforts to gain control of all Popular Force (PF) units throughout I Corps and his ensuing order that all of his Marines cooperate with nearby PF units and establish Combined Action Platoons (CAP) in select locations. The Marines operating around Phu Bai also heeded Walt's orders. Between March and June 1966, they created several new Combined Action Company (CAC) platoons as the Marine infantry expanded their operations both north and south along Highway 1. A pattern of CAC-infantry cooperation emerged during this time. One part was the now-familiar process of an infantry unit clearing an area, followed by a CAC moving into one or more villages there. The second involved CAPs protecting the Marine infantry's rear as they pushed into new areas. In Da Nang, "protecting the rear" typically meant defending cleared villages and roadways that ran throughout the tactical area of responsibility (TAOR). In the less-developed region of Phu Bai, however, that mission also involved interdicting Viet Cong travel along the various routes that connected their base camps in the mountains farther inland with the rice-producing villages along the coast, many of which were the targets of Marine infantry operations throughout 1966.

The Gia Le Pass

The village of Gia Le (pronounced *Yah Lay*), also known as Thuy Phuong, hosted two of the first new CAC units in the Phu Bai en-

Figure 3.1. Expansion of CAPs in the Phu Bai Tactical Zone



CAP expansion in the Phu Bai Tactical Zone, March and April 1966. A black line encircles the Phu Bai Tactical Zone or TAOR as it was during those months.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo.

clave. Gia Le sat on a well-established Viet Cong trail system that ran through the Gia Le Pass. The pass cut through a series of foothills that lay between the Ta Trach River and Thuy Phuong. The trail system there allowed for relatively easy movement from the rice-growing lowlands to the east, and the A Shau Valley and Laos to the west. The Viet Cong based on one of the nearby mountains, Nui Mo Tau, were close to the trails running through the pass and used them frequently.¹ Gia Le village also held economic and military importance. Its location on

¹ The 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, began noting heavy Viet Cong traffic along the trails running into Gia Le in January 1966. See "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, Command Chronology (ComdC), January 1966, item no. 1201020085, folder 020, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), 7–8.

the highway near Hue made it a focal point for local commercial activity, and its proximity to Highway 1 and the Ta Trach River meant that supplies could be easily purchased and then transported throughout the area.

An improved dirt roadway, Highway 546, also ran through the pass from Thuy Phuong to the Ta Trach River. It turned into a less-improved road, Highway 595, as it proceeded south toward the river. Hills bordered the pass's floor, most of which sloped up gently enough from the roadway to obscure movement along the adjacent trails. The areas closer to the Ta Trach were covered in heavy brush that transitioned to light jungle. From the Gia Le intersection north to Loi Nong and to the Phu Thu District was almost a kilometer of open rice paddies. Multiple paddy dikes allowed for travel within the fields, but the lack of cover or concealment made them very dangerous for both the Viet Cong and the Marines who operated there.²

Gia Le, unlike many other villages in the Phu Bai area, had a strong and longstanding Communist infrastructure. While there was not a local force unit in the village, there was a large, dedicated guerrilla cell that had originated there long ago. James W. Trullinger Jr.'s landmark book *Village at War* chronicles the insurgent movement within My Thuy Phuong. Trullinger discovered that in the 1920s, French colonial authorities replaced numerous village elders with their own representatives who held unchecked power over the land, which drove local farmers into poverty.³ Subsistence farmers had always operated on a thin margin, but heavy-handed French taxation made their lives even more difficult. The unfair taxation soon resulted in dissension and protest. Ultimately, dissenting individuals were arrested and sent to jail in Hue. Many of these prisoners were then introduced to the Indochinese Communist Party. When they returned home as converts, they built

² Observations by William F. Nimmo as a Marine serving in Phu Bai and later as a tourist.

³ James W. Trullinger Jr.'s work on a Vietnamese village during the war explains in detail how the coming of the "white man" resulted in a strong Communist infrastructure in Gia Le (My Thuy Phuong). See James W. Trullinger Jr., *Village at War: An Account of Revolution in Vietnam* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980), 18–30.

a powerful resistance structure to fight against French colonial rule.⁴ Decades later, the Marines engaged along the Gia Le Pass confronted the legacy of this organization.

The task of pushing into the Gia Le Pass fell to the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, which assumed control of the Phu Bai enclave on 23 December 1965. By January, the Marines were fully engaged in the process of learning their new TAOR. Almost immediately, they identified the Gia Le Pass as a highly important area in which to monitor and interdict enemy traffic.⁵ By late February, most of the fighting was concentrated in the northern portion of the pass. In the final days of that month, both the Marines and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers conducted operations around the Loi Nong villages, where the pass empties into the lowlands, and its surrounding areas north and south of the river (see figure 3.2).⁶

The Viet Cong fiercely contested the Marines for possession of Gia Le. Not all their resistance involved direct combat with the Americans. They also sought to disconnect the Marines from the people. For example, the Huong Thuy District Hospital, located in the main Gia Le hamlet, just a few hundred meters off Highway 1 on roadway 546, experienced a sudden and dramatic reduction in the amount of people attending sick call. The Marines learned that the Viet Cong had mined the road near the hospital and had warned the people not to go there for treatment. The Marines responded to these threats by coordinating with the Vietnamese to conduct a joint civic action effort the village. Beginning on 19 January 1966, two days prior to the start of the Tet holiday, they deployed several People's Action Teams (PAT) to convince Thuy Phuong's residents that the South Vietnamese government was on their side. In all, 600 members of these PATs went out into the village, and 100 remained to mingle with the population throughout the Tet holiday. The Marines followed the PAT effort by sending out a

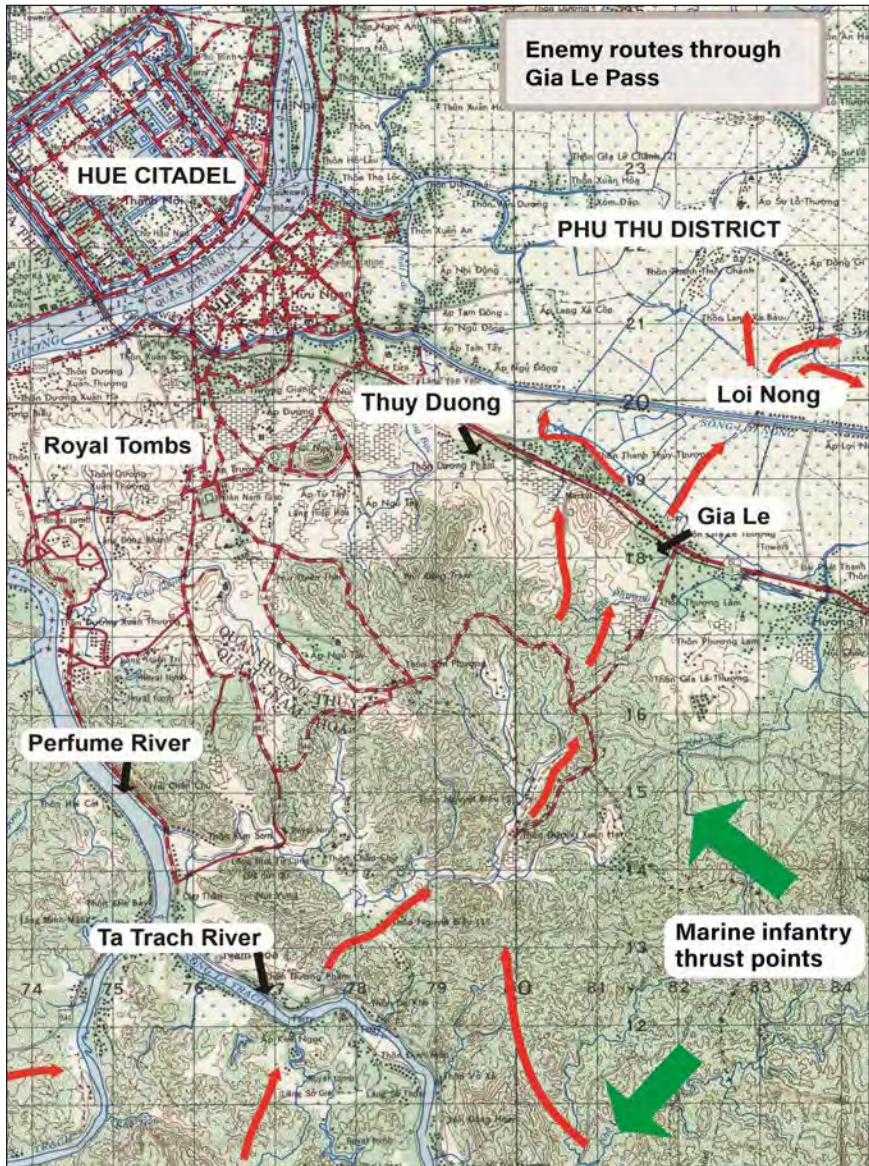
⁴Trulliger, *Village at War*, 35–46.

⁵"Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, January 1966, 13–16.

⁶"Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, February 1966, item no. 1201020086, folder 020, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 8.

EXPANDING THE PHU BAI TAOR

Figure 3.2. Viet Cong routes through Gia Le Pass



Viet Cong routes from the Ta Trach and Huu Trach Rivers through Gia Le Pass and beyond to the Loi Nong area in the Phu Thu District. The infantry thrust points on this map were two of the main directions that the Marine resident battalions had pushed during the previous months as they expanded control and clearing of the Phu Bai TAOR.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP) team to a centrally located primary school. The medical effort's objective was to convince the local population that, "If the [Viet Cong] won't let you come to us for treatment, then we will come to you!" The villagers responded positively. More than 200 people received treatment that afternoon alone.⁷

The hospital resumed its normal functions as the Marines established a firm presence there. The turning point came when the Marines created a new CAC in Gia Le Village on 6 March 1966.⁸ While the CAC had the typical mission of providing local security and assisting PF forces there, it was also expected to help get the hospital up and running again. The doctors and nurses, who lived in Hue, had refused to travel to Gia Le due to Viet Cong threats. In response, the CAC set up its headquarters right on the hospital grounds. Its leader, Sergeant John J. Cooney, was an experienced CAC Marine who had previously led CAC 2 east of Phu Bai. Cooney was 24 years old and had already served six years in the Marine Corps. He was highly respected by his commanders and his Marines. He had experienced combat while serving in one of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines' infantry companies, particularly when the battalion participated in Operation Harvest Moon in December 1965.⁹

One of the keys to a successful CAC operation was a capable leader.¹⁰ Cooney fit that profile well. He quickly took stock of the situation and made his platoon's presence known throughout the village. His Marines began by operating out of the Huong Thuy District headquarters. Cooney's plan was to first conduct patrols to reconnoiter the area to become familiar with the terrain and the pace of enemy activity.

⁷ "Civil Affairs," 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, January 1966, 30.

⁸ "Civil Affairs," 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, March 1966, item no. 1201020087, folder 020, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 34.

⁹ Sgt John Cooney, interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2019–20, hereafter Cooney interviews. His commander, then-1stLt William Blaha, corroborated his statement in William Blaha, interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2018–19, hereafter Blaha interviews. For a brief synopsis of Operation Harvest Moon, see Jack Shulimson and Maj Charles M. Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1978), chap. 7.

¹⁰ Bruce C. Allnutt, "Marine Combined Action Capabilities: The Vietnam Experience" (interim technical report, Office of Naval Research, McLean, VA, 1969).

EXPANDING THE PHU BAI TAOR

Figure 3.3. Construction of CAC compound at the Gia Le Hospital



A photograph of the original CAC compound at the Gia Le Hospital during construction. The sandbagged walls had not yet been built.

Source: photo by Col William Blaha, USMC (Ret), 1966.

He limited his platoon's initial operations to daytime reconnaissance patrols, but soon he added night patrols as well. From the outset, the Marines frequently made contact. Because the area was so hot, the battalion took the rare step of giving Cooney a second squad, making his platoon a double CAC.¹¹

After about a month, Cooney's Marines had built a well-fortified base at the hospital. The compound had four corner bunkers made of sandbags stacked around and on top of a wooden frame. Three rows of concertina wire surrounded the perimeter, and the Marines placed claymore mines just inside the wire's edge. The hospital was a two-story building with an adjacent, French-built concrete structure sitting next door. Cooney's squad used that second building as their quarters, and the second squad—detached from the battalion's Company F—used a large Marine Corps general-purpose troop tent. The Marines eventually stacked sandbags three feet high all around the tent to protect them from enemy fire and exploding shrapnel if a mortar or grenade landed inside the perimeter.¹²

¹¹ Cooney interviews.

¹² Cooney interviews.

According to Cooney, the PF in Gia Le were of a totally different breed than those at CAC 2. There were about 40 of them, and they had operated alone in the area for a long time. Their leader was a tough man known as Trung Sĩ (Vietnamese for *sergeant*) Bao. Legend had it that Bao had 30 Viet Cong kills to his credit. Cooney spoke of him in a revered tone, relating that when there was word of a Viet Cong in the village, Bao would leave with just his .45-caliber pistol and return a couple of hours later with a dead body. Cooney maintained that Bao's courage and exploits were not myths, as he had witnessed him in action on one or two occasions. Above all, Bao was an assertive leader who refused to back down from the Viet Cong threat to his village.¹³

As an experienced leader, Cooney quickly established effective methods for running patrols and fighting the Viet Cong. He stated that when they embarked on a serious patrol, they would use an entire Marine squad, with 8–10 PFs. He always had a Marine and a PF on point. Cooney opined that there was “nothing like a good ol’ country boy walking point.” A country boy, he reasoned, could read the environment and knew when things were not right. A good PF at his side was even better. Cooney recalls that a skilled PF walking point seemed to be able to sense the Viet Cong's presence. Cooney also possessed an inordinate understanding of small-unit tactics, an essential skill for any CAP leader. He initially used the textbook linear and L-shaped ambushes but said they did not work well. Cooney shifted to having his squads focus their ambushes on trail junctions. His decision paid off almost immediately. After this adjustment, Viet Cong activity in the daytime ceased almost entirely. Cooney sensed that the Viet Cong knew they could no longer roam the village uncontested during the day. Within a few days, his CAC started to make contact almost nightly.¹⁴

¹³ Cooney interviews. Information from the Marine Corps Counterintelligence Association corroborates Cooney's account of Bao's prowess as a leader and a dedicated fighter. Its assessment states that Bao was indeed a renowned fighter in the Gia Le area. He was known to have been a “regular” with the ARVN and was working with the Huong Thuy District headquarters. He was also known to be an exceptional source of intelligence. The association's report states he was also instrumental in developing “ralliers” (converts from the Viet Cong to the South Vietnamese government). See “Section 9. 1960–1967: ‘The Vietnam War’,” Marine Corps Counterintelligence Association, accessed 5 August 2025.

¹⁴ Cooney interviews.

Because Cooney's CAC worked very closely with Company F at that time, they had more access to heavier equipment. His platoon had an 81-millimeter mortar, a rarity in a CAC compound. Cooney and his Marines developed a checkpoint system to use the mortar for illumination support while on patrol. Each patrol had from four to six checkpoints, depending on its length. When a patrol reached a particular checkpoint, the radio operator would send that information back to the compound. The patrol's position was then relayed to the mortar team, who adjusted the mortar accordingly. This system ensured that, if a patrol needed illumination during a firefight or other situation, it was available almost immediately. The Marines also had artillery also on call. They plotted coordinates before each patrol, based on their planned routes. Cooney plotted each corner of the compound as well, in case of an attack.¹⁵

Cooney took pride in how skilled his platoon became at patrolling. They were experts, he said, who could go through an entire patrol without uttering a word. Communication was all done by hand and arm signals. They avoided moving on trails and instead stalked through yards and hedgerows. Each left behind any item or equipment that made any sound. Cooney's Marines never departed or returned by the same route two nights in a row.¹⁶ These protocols were a result of the platoon's extensive experience and their adaptation to the unique conditions they confronted in their village. Many CACs in the future would develop similar protocols.¹⁷ Strict adherence to these standard operating procedures meant that they minimized the risk of being ambushed and taking casualties.

As CAC commander, Cooney had an enormous responsibility. Although holding the rank of sergeant, he was really a *de facto* platoon leader. He commanded a large unit of dozens of men in what could be considered enemy territory. He also had to be a diplomat and work with

¹⁵ Cooney interviews.

¹⁶ Cooney interviews.

¹⁷ CAP Hotel 8, discussed in chapters 6–12 of this volume, is an excellent example. Several of its Marines—William Grunder, Charles Brown, and Cottrell Fox—relayed their platoon's standard operating procedures in a series of interviews with both authors.

village officials, the militia leaders, and sometimes the villagers themselves, to keep things running smoothly. Ultimately, he was the main representative of the United States in that village.¹⁸ Over the years, there would be many outstanding CAC leaders. Cooney was one of the early ones.

With Cooney's CAC 7 firmly established in Gia Le, the Marines decided to add a second platoon to the area. In April, they established CAC 8 in the village of Thuy Duong, a few kilometers up the road toward Hue (figure 3.4).¹⁹ The Marines and PFs now had a pair of permanent, mutually supporting positions that blocked the Viet Cong's routes into the Gia Le Pass. The Viet Cong, of course, took notice. Much like their response to CAC 4 blocking their traffic through Phu Loc the previous year, it was not long before they made a serious effort to push back.

One Mistake Can Be Deadly

In late March, Cooney went on rest and recuperation (R&R) for five days to his former duty station in Japan. Like any Marine, he hit the familiar bars and went on a five-day drinking binge. One of those nights, he was thrown into the brig for fighting. When he returned to Phu Bai, his captain called him into his office. Cooney thought he was in trouble for his antics in Japan. Instead, he learned that one of his squads had been wiped out while he was away. The acting patrol leader had committed the cardinal sin of taking the same trail twice. He and his Marines walked into an ambush where the Viet Cong detonated satchel charges along the trail, confusing and disorienting the patrol.²⁰

Official records do not provide much detail on the incident. They state that one Viet Cong squad opened up on the Marine patrol with automatic weapons. This initial volley was followed by the detonation of six explosive charges that had been previously set in along the trail. The record says the patrol responded quickly and returned fire as best it could. Four Marines and a Navy corpsman were killed, and four addi-

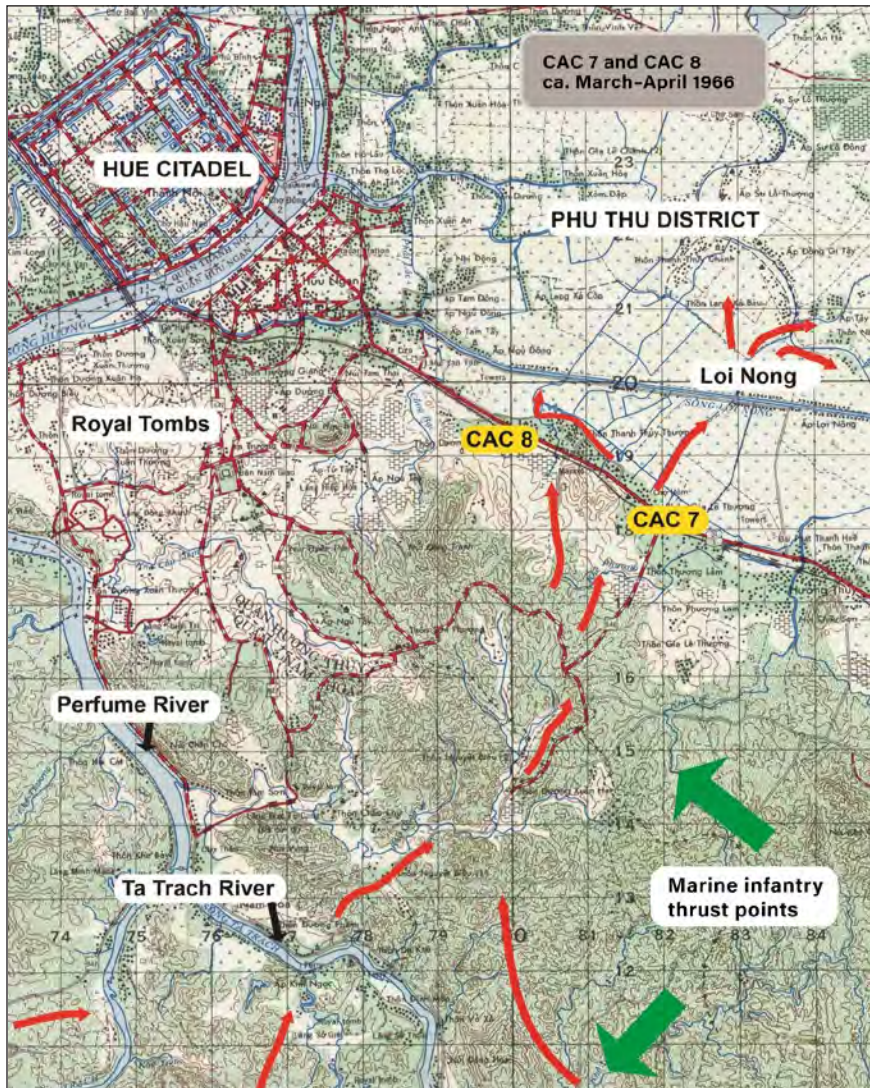
¹⁸ Cooney interviews. This was corroborated by Blaha in Blaha interviews.

¹⁹ "Civil Affairs," 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, April 1966, item no. 1201020088, folder 020, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 30.

²⁰ Cooney interviews.

EXPANDING THE PHU BAI TAOR

Figure 3.4. Locations of CACs, early 1966



CAC placement to interdict Viet Cong movement along routes to Loi Nong and the Phu Thu District.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

tional Marines were wounded. No PFs died, and only one was wounded.²¹ The Marines' records provided scant additional details on what happened. That absence of recorded information highlights a serious problem that hindered combined action in its early years. While poor record-keeping was certainly not unique to CACs at this time, the lack of an organic administrative structure was. Since the CACs fell under whatever battalion controlled their area at a given time, the manner in which CAC activities were recorded and preserved is often inconsistent. The quality and thoroughness of a given CAC's records seems to depend upon which battalion was keeping the records at the time.²²

First Lieutenant William C. Blaha, the commanding officer of CACs 1, 2, and 7, witnessed part of the engagement. That night, he was at CAC 7, sitting in his makeshift office in the concrete building next to the hospital. When the ambush began, the Marine on radio watch called him over. A flurry of activity followed. The attacked patrol first called for a reaction force, and soon a squad of Marines in a 6 x 6 truck (a.k.a. six-by) and a tank were speeding up Highway 1 toward their position. Blaha and some others met the reaction force at the intersection of the hospital road and Highway 1. Blaha was still in contact with the patrol, but verbal communication soon ceased. His radio operator instructed whoever had the patrol's radio to click once if he was still there. The radio clicked back once. Blaha later learned that it was the squad leader lying still on the trail playing dead so the nearby Viet Cong would not find and execute him.²³

After a few tense minutes, Blaha and the reaction force arrived in the general area where the fighting had taken place. The tank used its searchlight to illuminate the roadway in front of them. Soon they found the ambush site. Men were lying along the road dead and wounded. The patrol leader was among them, still alive. The Marines evacuated

²¹ "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, March 1966, 17.

²² For a more expansive discussion on the lack of combined action administration and the problems it caused, see Cavender S. Sutton, "Combined Action in Vietnam: U.S. Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Thought and Practice, 1965–1971" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2024), 239–60.

²³ Blaha interviews.

the casualties, and all but one of the wounded survived. It appeared that the Viet Cong had set an L-shaped ambush with several automatic weapons on the L's base, staring down the length of the patrol.²⁴

The survivors could not help but question whether the ambush was simply the result of sloppy leadership or something more sinister. Some Marines suspected that one or more of the PFs had betrayed them. That the PF element of the patrol managed to escape both the hail of gunfire and the explosions along the trail that followed was too convenient a coincidence to ignore.²⁵ Conversely, the patrol leader did not do himself or his Marines any favors. He had taken a very predictable route; it would have been obvious to anyone keeping a lookout where it was heading. Instead of attempting to deceive the Viet Cong by taking a more circuitous course, the CAC patrol telegraphed their intentions, which gave the Viet Cong plenty of time to prepare an ambush. Once the Marines headed up Highway 1, it would have been obvious where they were going.²⁶ The Marines never learned the truth, and because the area remained hot after the firefight, they did not have time to dwell on it further. Regardless of its causes, this March 1966 ambush was the largest loss for a single CAC unit to that point and would not be equaled along the road to Hue for some time to come.²⁷

Operation New York

CAC expansion along the road to Hue during this time was not limited to Gia Le. On 6 March 1966, the same day that CAC 7 was officially established at the Gia Le hospital, another platoon moved into the village of Loc Son, on the opposite (southeast) end of the Phu Bai TAOR. This was the first expansion southeast since one of the original four

²⁴ Blaha interviews. See also "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, March 1966, 17.

²⁵ Cooney and Blaha both admit that this was a possibility.

²⁶ Blaha interviews; and Cooney interviews.

²⁷ This is based on comparisons with records on operations at Phu Bai from August 1965 to this point, most of which are cited in chapters 1 and 2. The CACs at Da Nang experienced minimal contact until the program branched out and established platoons far from the airfield in the summer and fall of 1966. See Sutton, "Combined Action in Vietnam," 219–26.

CACs had commenced operations in Loc Bon the previous year.²⁸ Loc Son was the next village southeast on Highway 1 from Loc Bon. Embedding a platoon there was part of the Marines' plan to extend their control over the roadway and to block known routes connecting Viet Cong base camps in the mountains with villages in the lowlands. Rather than jungle-covered terrain, all the routes between CAC 3, CAC 4, and the Loc Son CAC passed through gently sloping, brushy terrain that provided a nearly endless set of trails that a patrol might take. This was especially true for the area up toward the mountains from Loc Son. Certain pathways, however, were used more than others. Experience taught the CACs how to predict and disrupt enemy movements, forcing them to become more channelized closer to Highway 1.²⁹

Blocking the routes between Loc Son and the Truoi River would be a major step toward interdicting Viet Cong traffic south of Phu Bai. Before the Marines' arrival, battalion-size units could easily move down from the mountains along the paths near Loc Son, or along the Truoi River, toward the Phu Thu District, immediately across the river from the eastern boundary of the Marines' TAOR. Phu Thu fell under ARVN control but was not very well defended. Local force Viet Cong companies were based throughout the district, and Viet Cong main force units, or elements of them, could move about the area without much interference. The Marines feared that, once inside the Phu Thu District, battalion-size Viet Cong main force units had a position from which they could attack the Phu Bai Combat Base from the northeast.³⁰

The Loc Son CAC's establishment coincided with the end of a major operation, code-named New York, that occurred north of the village. Operation New York saw the first confrontation between the

²⁸ "Civil Affairs/Military Government/Community Relations," 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, March 1966, 24.

²⁹ It is no coincidence that those areas are where most contact with Viet Cong troops occurred in early 1966. See "Close Combat," 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, February 1966, 14–16.

³⁰ Jack Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1982), 52; Commanding Officer to Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, "After Action Report, Operation New York Pho Lai Village and Phu Thu Peninsula," 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, February 1966.

Marines and a large Viet Cong main force unit in the Phu Bai enclave. Marine intelligence had known of a large Viet Cong unit lurking just outside the Phu Bai TAOR's eastern boundary for some time. By early 1966, they thought the Viet Cong were preparing an assault on the Phu Bai Combat Base. The looming attack appeared to be part of a broader threat to the two northernmost provinces in I Corps, Thua Thien (where Phu Bai was located), and Quang Tri, which included the demilitarized zone (DMZ). The U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), determined that there were 22 Communist battalions in these two provinces rather than the nine thought to be there by the Marines. General Walt had planned, based on the nine-battalion determination, to leave a single battalion to hold the Phu Bai TAOR until at least June, when a South Korean battalion would move into the area to assist. After assessing this new information, and at the urging of General William C. Westmoreland, the commander of USMACV, Walt began planning to increase troop levels around Phu Bai.³¹

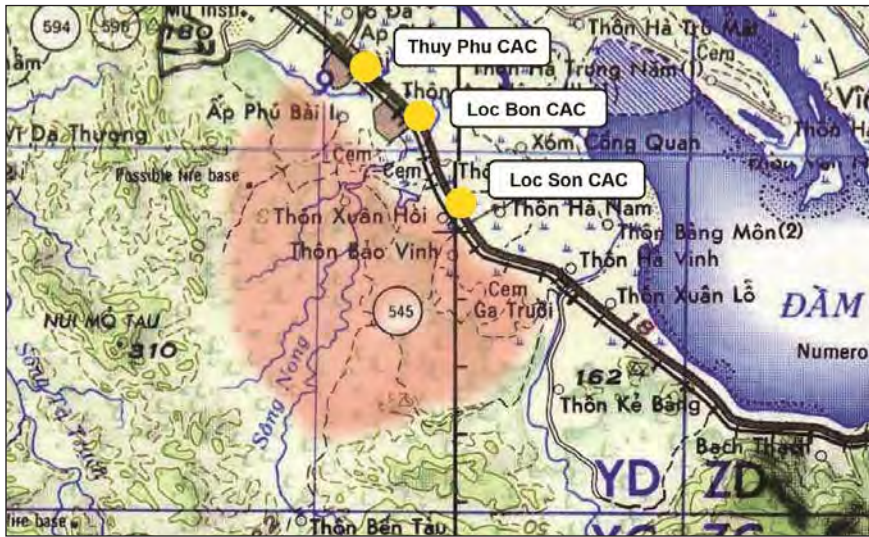
The 3d Marines helped spur Walt's decision. The regiment's intelligence report from February 1966 noted that for the first time since the Marines arrived at Phu Bai, there appeared to be a considerable enemy interest in that area. There were an increasing number of reports that the Viet Cong planned to attack the main Marine defensive positions there.³² After receiving this intelligence, the Marines decided to reinforce the Phu Bai enclave. They formed Task Unit Hotel, with the specific mission of assisting the 1st ARVN Division, spread thin and already engaged in three different operations at the time. Task Unit Hotel fell under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Robert T. Hanifin, the commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines. The 3d Marines staff also ordered two infantry companies up to Phu Bai, giving Hanifin six companies under his command. At least for the time being, Hanifin now had enough forces to simultaneously

³¹ Shulimson, *An Expanding War*, 50–51.

³² "Significant Events," 3d Marines, Command Chronology (ComdC) (1 of 2), February 1966, item no. 1201037055, folder 037, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

CHAPTER 3

Figure 3.5. Viet Cong routes into the lowlands



This relief map demonstrates the wide swath of gently sloping land that constituted the geography around the Viet Cong's routes into the lowlands through the Thuy Phu, Loc Bon, and Loc Son CACs.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

Figure 3.6. CAC Marines on patrol



The Loc Son CAC returning from a patrol toward the mountains.

Source: photo by Jim Ellison.

protect Phu Bai and dispatch three companies to assist the ARVN.³³

A rapid chain of events ensued. Task Unit Hotel was activated on 26 February and immediately went into action to assist the ARVN just north of Hue. There was intelligence that showed 100 Viet Cong in a village named Pho Lai, just northwest of Hue. Companies F and G moved into the area on the evening of 26 February, while Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, was heli-lifted into a position on the other side of Pho Lai to form a blocking position. The following day, Companies F and G swept the area but found no evidence of the Viet Cong. All Marines were back in Phu Bai at dusk. Then, the Viet Cong counterattacked. Only an hour and a half after returning from Pho Lai, Hanifin received a call from ARVN major general Nguyen Van Chuan, the commander of the 1st ARVN Division, requesting assistance. His troops and a group of PFs had located and engaged the Viet Cong main force *810th Battalion* in the Phu Thu District. Hanifin ordered a nighttime helicopter movement to relieve pressure on the ARVN forces.³⁴

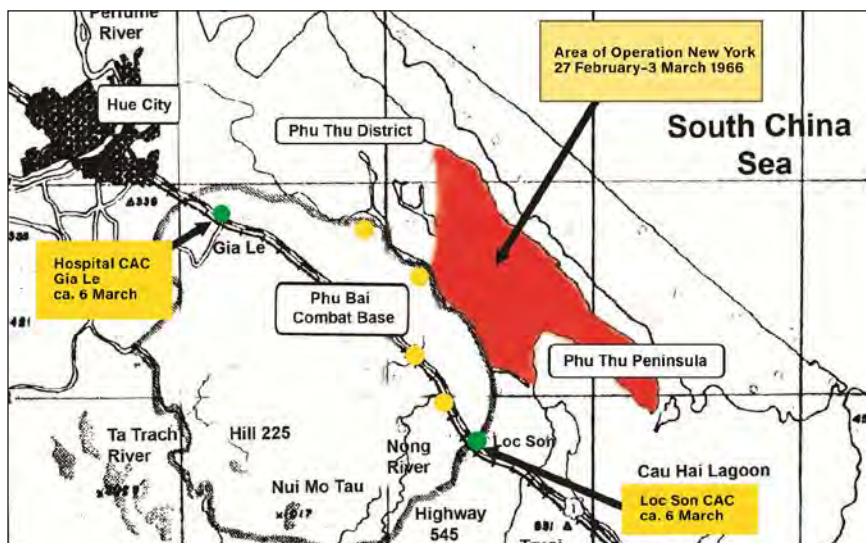
The movement began just before midnight. By 0200, all three companies, Companies F and G of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, and Company K of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, were in position. Early the next morning, they launched a search-and-clear operation into the zone southeast of the Phu Thu District. The ARVN swept the area north of the landing zone while the Marines moved into the Phu Thu peninsula with three companies abreast.³⁵ They advanced south approximately 5,000 meters and received light sniper fire. This soon developed into a fierce engagement. Some Viet Cong positions held their fire until Marines had closed within 50 meters. The Marines pushed on and continued the attack, supported by artillery and close air strikes. They

³³ Commanding Officer to Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, "After Action Report, Operation New York Pho Lai Village and Phu Thu Peninsula," 6 March 1966, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, February 1966, 2–5.

³⁴ Shulimson, *An Expanding War*, 51–56.

³⁵ "After Action Report," 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, February 1966, 1–8; and "Large Unit Operations," Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPAC), "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," February 1966, item no. 1201001032, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 20–23.

Figure 3.7. Locations of new CACs in the expanding TAOR



This map shows the location of the new CACs conforming to an expansion of the TAOR. The map also shows the area where the confrontation with a Viet Cong main-force battalion took place just outside of the Phu Bai TAOR in the adjacent Phu Thu District.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo.

penetrated the Viet Cong positions, which had been prepared in depth for a distance of 200 meters.³⁶

Meanwhile, the ARVN moved into a blocking position. The Viet Cong broke up into smaller groups to make their escape. This presented a unique opportunity that Chaun and Hanifin exploited. The two commanders worked together to position their respective troops across the peninsula. Hanifin's Task Unit Hotel created several blocking positions that prevented many of the Viet Cong from escaping. An ARVN force dug in on the bay side of the peninsula to block additional avenues of escape to the south and west. One ARVN and two PF platoons then blocked the southern portion of the peninsula. Company H, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, and a CAC held four positions to the west of the river that forms the western boundary of the Phu Thu District. They remained in the area for two days, attacking the Viet Cong as

³⁶ "Large Unit Operations," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," February 1966, 21.

they attempted to break out. The fighting gradually died out, and all units withdrew by 2 March. The Viet Cong main force *810th Battalion* was badly mauled, with 122 confirmed killed in action. Fifteen Marines were killed and 37 were wounded.³⁷

Operation New York was a significant event. It resulted from a superb joint analysis by Chaun and Hanifin to take advantage of an opportunity that might not come again for a while. Their quick reaction trapped a large group of Viet Cong in a confined, open area surrounded by water. Even if the Viet Cong moved west, they would have had to cross two rivers, where the blocking forces would have inflicted more casualties. To the east and south were large open waters with the South Vietnamese boat force of more than 200 troops waiting for them. The operation also offered a great opportunity for the Marines to get outside of their TAOR and take on a major threat.³⁸ It also showcased combined action's increased importance to Marine operations in the area, as the CACs located north of the Phu Bai Combat Base helped bolster the infantry's blocking positions west of Phu Thu. The CAC platoons along the road to Hue would perform similar functions more frequently in the months to come.

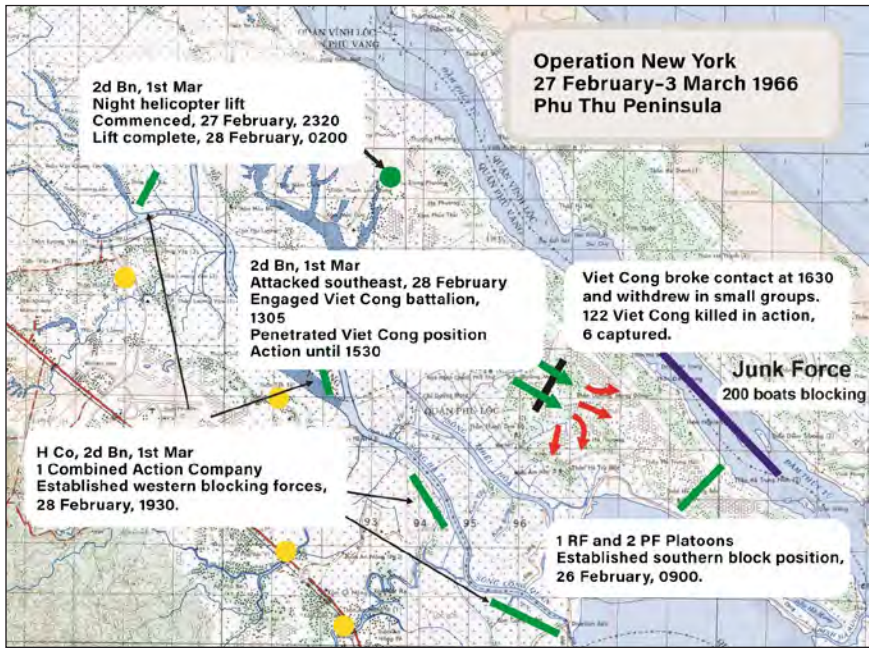
Clearing the Truoi River Area

Soon after Operation New York, the Marines expanded their TAOR into the Truoi (pronounced *Troy*) River area. This last expansion in the summer of 1966 was a very important step toward securing the Phu Bai enclave. Controlling the mouth of the Truoi River would help block the last remaining trail systems that ran from the mountains to the sanctuary of the Phu Thu District. The villages of Loc An and Loc Dien, located where Highway 1 crosses the river, were particularly valuable. Loc An lays on the northwest, or Phu Bai, side of the river, and Loc Dien sits on the southeast side. Both villages are clustered

³⁷ "Large Unit Operations," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," February 1966, 22–23.

³⁸ See Commanding Officer to Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, "After Action Report, Operation New York Pho Lai Village and Phu Thu Peninsula," 6 March 1966, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, February 1966, 2–8, especially the "Lessons Learned" subsections.

Figure 3.8. Operation New York



A map created from a drawing in the records of the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific. Positions are approximated. The new CAP at Loc Son is noted with an orange dot next to the village name. Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA. Operational data located in “Large Unit Operations,” Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, “Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam,” February 1966, item no. 1201001032, Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, 22.

around the bridge, but the hamlets of each village follow the river both upstream and downstream for a few kilometers. Both Loc An and Loc Dien were rice farming communities with large, wide fields stretching north several kilometers. Loc An was the larger producer of rice, but both villages had healthy agrarian and fishing economies.³⁹

The Truoi River is the second largest waterway in the area, second only to the Perfume River to the west. It was the main drainage for the northern side of Bach Ma Mountain and its lesser peaks. In 1966, the Truoi River was about 90 meters wide at Highway 1 and was crossed by

³⁹ William F. Nimmo, personal reflections on experiences in Phu Bai, hereafter Nimmo reflections.

a double truss bridge carrying both vehicles and railroad trains. From the bridge at Highway 1, the river courses northeast a few kilometers into a delta, where it breaks into three short branches, all of which empty into Cau Hai Lagoon. It was said to be more than 9 meters (approximately 30 feet) deep at the Highway 1 crossing. The Truoi River also formed the boundary between Loc An and Loc Dien Villages.⁴⁰

The system of brush-covered trails that followed the Truoi River into the mountains gradually sloped upward until they led into a long, jungle-covered box canyon in the Bac Ma Mountain cluster. The mountains in the canyon rose steeply on either side of the river. At the higher elevations, the jungle was triple canopy. Bach Ma Mountain sits on the east side of the river canyon. On the west side of the box canyon are two peaks, Dong Truoi and Dong Nam. These jungle-covered mountain areas continue a long way back into the interior of South Vietnam. They were almost unlimited in their potential for concealing enemy forces.⁴¹

The Viet Cong troops based back in the hills and the mountains did not have to use the route system out of this box canyon. The Truoi River west to the Loc Son village area, Route 14 (Highway 545), and even the Nong River area, with its wide gradually sloping terrain, provided hundreds of options—in the dark, in the open, or winding through brushy terrain—for enemy troops coming down into the lowlands. They were not channeled into few options until they reached closer to their target destinations in the lowlands. It was when the Viet Cong got closer to the lowlands and near Highway 1 that the Marines, both CAP and infantry, were able to intercept and ambush them as they came in for food, taxes, or operations.⁴²

In anticipation of expanding their presence into the Truoi River area, the Marines conducted two battalion-size operations there beginning on 10 May. The first was Operation Wayne, led by the 1st

⁴⁰ Nimmo reflections.

⁴¹ Nimmo reflections.

⁴² It is no coincidence that most engagements occurred in or near these areas. For example, see after action reports or "Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, May 1966; 4th Marines, ComdC, May 1966; and 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1966.

Battalion, 1st Marines. This was a two-day search-and-destroy sweep toward the foot of the mountains about 9 kilometers south on Route 14 (Roadway 545).⁴³ The operation focused on an area known as Khe Bai Da. Intelligence indicated that Khe Bai Da was the location for the Viet Cong's headquarters in Phu Loc District. Intelligence also indicated that nearby, but farther south, was the Viet Cong main force *804th Battalion*. The battalion was reported to be located on or near Bach Ma Mountain. The Viet Cong were far away but estimated to be capable of reinforcing the *804th Battalion* within 12 hours. Khe Bai Da sat at a junction of routes leading toward the rice fields. One trail out of the junction led straight east across a valley, a little more than seven kilometers to the Truoi River and its trail system (figure 3.9). The Khe Bai Da area was marked by a small jungle-covered mountain known as Hill 273. Operation Wayne's objectives were to land in the lower lands at Khe Bai Dai, search and seize Hill 273, and destroy any Viet Cong forces in the area.⁴⁴

At 0630 on 30 April 30, an aerial observation plane sighted a new well-used trail along a stream in the Khe Bai Da area. The pilot lost sight of it as it disappeared into the jungle. The trail led directly into what the Marines later discovered to be part of a Viet Cong transient staging ground.⁴⁵ On the morning of 10 May, three companies from the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, landed at an open landing zone near the foot of Hill 273. The battalion met little resistance; all the Viet Cong they fired on seemed to be undisciplined, lesser trained soldiers who quickly broke contact. Sweeping through the terrain, much of it thick jungle, the Marines found significant evidence that suggested the Viet Cong were preparing for major operations against Phu Bai, but most

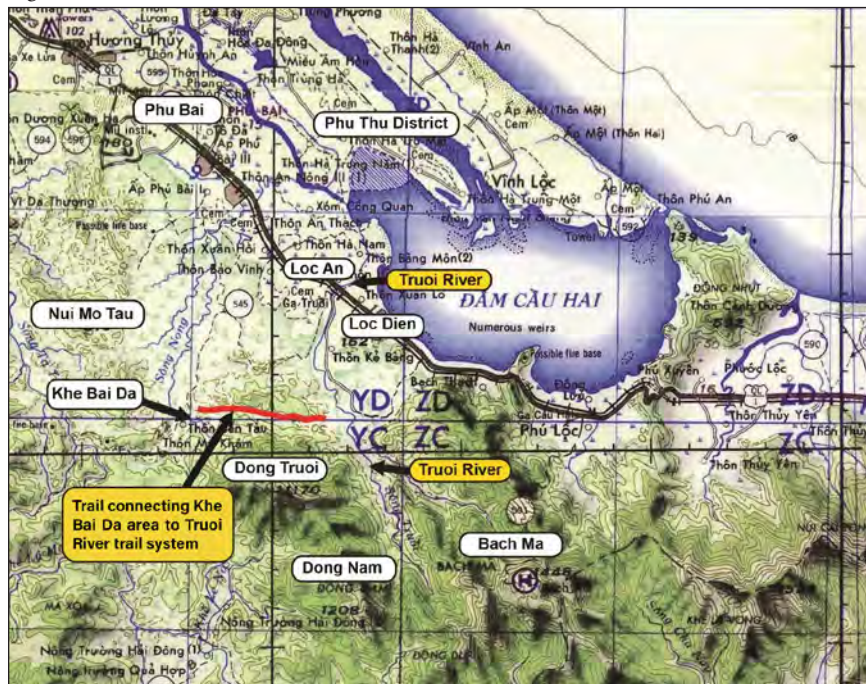
⁴³ Shulimson, *An Expanding War*, 143–45.

⁴⁴ "Intelligence, After Action Report 7-66," 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, May 1966, item no. 1201020002, folder 020, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

⁴⁵ "Air Observation Report 11-66," 4th Marines, ComdC (6 of 12), May 1966, item no. 1201041037, folder 041, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

EXPANDING THE PHU BAI TAOR

Figure 3.9. Path of the Truoi River



This map shows the Truoi River's path from the Bach Ma Mountain cluster down to the Cau Hai Lagoon. The lowland villages of Loc An and Loc Dien sit on either side of the Truoi. The larger mountains, the Bach Ma cluster, would become a base area for larger Viet Cong and ultimately NVA units. Khe Bai Da was a suspected Viet Cong district headquarters and was a target in Operation Wayne, the first clearing operation in the Truoi River area.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

of them had fled.⁴⁶ The operation ended on the evening of 12 May. The Marines encountered only sporadic resistance and managed to inflict eight casualties on the defending Viet Cong (five killed in action, three probable wounded in action). Meanwhile, 13 Marines were wounded, 11 of whom were hurt when their truck drove over a mine on the last day of the operation.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ "After Action Report 7-66, Op Wayne," 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, May 1966, item no. 1201020002, folder 020, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, intelligence section, paragraph b.

⁴⁷ "After Action Report 7-66, Op Wayne," 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, May 1966, 8; and "Sequence of Events," 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, May 1966, section 5, 2-3.

Operation Athens, the real effort to clear the Truoi River area, began three days later, on 15 May. At approximately 1230, the recently returned 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, moved by truck from its headquarters in Phu Bai to a position less than a kilometer south on Route 14 (545), near Loc Son. The battalion's four companies would each take responsibility for a different zone and saturate it with patrols for the next month. The Marines operated on both sides of the Truoi River, all the way to the foot of the mountains. Marine patrols also went through the villages of Loc An and Loc Dien, and then out several clicks toward the Phu Thu District.⁴⁸ The Marines believed that both Viet Cong main force battalions in the area, the *804th* and *810th Battalions*, used local guerrillas to gather food and intelligence. Having an entire battalion of Marines constantly patrol the Truoi River for more than a month seemed to make a distinct impact. There was not much contact, measured by typical infantry operation standards, but the level of enemy activity in the area receded, and the villagers in both Loc An and Loc Dien became more willing to provide information to the Marines.⁴⁹

Company M, which concentrated on the villages of Loc An and Loc Dien, established a strong rapport with the people. On 20 May, "a contingent of Vietnamese from Loc An . . . presented a Vietnamese flag to the second platoon of Company M. In a ceremony at 0800, 21 May 1966, a joint honor guard consisting of Popular Forces and U.S. Marines raised the flag at the [Loc An] Village Chief's office." This event was a significant sign of progress, the Marines reported, for it was "the first time in several years that this village has felt it had adequate protection to fly their flag." The village at Loc Dien, across the Truoi River to the east, also showed gratitude to the Marines. The same day as the flag-raising ceremony in Loc An, Loc Dien's village chief and elders visited Company M's headquarters and presented the Marines with 100

⁴⁸ Shulimson, *An Expanding War*, 143–44; and "Civil Affairs—Psychological Warfare Activities," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1966, item no. 1201045081, folder 045, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, section X.

⁴⁹ "Intelligence," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1966.

pounds of bananas as an expression of gratitude for their protection.⁵⁰

In an unusual gesture of appreciation, the village chief of Loc An delivered a letter to the company commander. Its contents (not corrected for spelling or grammar) are worth quoting at length:

We are the administrative groups in Loc An Village and the people of all levels, thanks very much the Marine Corps Units came here to protect our security and prevent VC [Viet Cong] to take rice, taxes, oppress people. To show our thankfulness and combination between civilian and military, we solemnly offer some local gifts.

We request and hope the Marine Corps come and stay here forever until VC stop to invade. We make in mind to combine with the Allied Forces in general and Marine Corps in special in order to fight against VC and keep our nation independent.

Sincerely,

The Village Chief of Loc An, Nguyen But⁵¹

Operation Athens officially ended on 25 June. That same day, Marines established a new CAC unit with the PF platoon in the village of Loc An. The CAC set up its base at the fortified ARVN compound on the northwest corner of the bridge where Highway 1 crosses the Truoi River. Marine commanders intended to place another CAP on the other side of the river in the village of Loc Dien, but there were not enough PFs available to make it possible at that time.⁵² This CAP at Loc An would be the last CAP established in the Phu Bai TAOR until late December, nearly five months later.⁵³ In June, there was a major

⁵⁰ "Civil Affairs—Psychological Warfare Activities," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1966, section X.

⁵¹ "Civil Affairs—Psychological Warfare Activities," 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1966, section X.

⁵² "Operations/Training," 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, June 1966 (1 of 5), item no. 1201043033, folder 043, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 12.

⁵³ FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," December 1966, item no. 1201001099, folder 001, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 60.

CHAPTER 3

change in the war in I Corps that would impact CAP expansion in Phu Bai. The enclave would be left with only one infantry battalion, which would further heighten the importance of combined action along the road to Hue.

CHAPTER 4

THE WAR IN NORTHERN I CORPS, JUNE–DECEMBER 1966

The latter half of 1966 was a time of transition in northern I Corps. Just as III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) began to feel that its Marines were making significant inroads among the people there, the war changed dramatically. In the summer, large numbers of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops infiltrated the region, particularly in the northernmost province of Quang Tri, to join the fight. That development escalated the fighting in northern I Corps and forced the Marines to reevaluate how they planned to employ their forces. By the autumn, they had no choice but to commit large numbers of Marines to the fighting along the demilitarized zone (DMZ), leaving their troops elsewhere, especially along the road to Hue, spread thin.

Searching for Progress

In June and July 1966, there were several indicators that suggested the Marines were making headway against the insurgency in I Corps. Many of them, mostly statistics and other numerical data, pointed to a steady improvement in the situation.¹ It is now well known, however, that in the Vietnam War statistics were often manipulated or were simply inaccurate. Body counts—an oft-cited example of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam's (USMACV) flawed method of gauging

¹ Gregory A. Daddis discusses at length the difficulties U.S. leadership encountered while trying to quantify success in Vietnam, as well as the flawed methods they used to gather and analyze empirical data, in *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

progress from combat operations—were exaggerated, negative events were hidden or omitted, many of the markers used to indicate success were untrustworthy, and progress reports were more optimistic than they should have been.² Many scholars claim that General William C. Westmoreland inflated statistics to his superiors and to those under his command and that his subordinate units manipulated their figures to please him.³ The Fleet Marine Force, Pacific's (FMFPAC) command chronologies are no different—some have a reputation as being just as over-optimistic, if not misleading, as those coming out of USMACV.⁴

In July 1966, FMFPAC noted “firm evidence of accelerated progress” in I Corps.⁵ It attributed that success to three “mutually supporting and simultaneous campaigns”: counter guerrilla operations, large unit operations, and pacification.⁶ FMFPAC pointed to the tactical area of responsibility's (TAOR) steady expansions as proof that Marine and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) efforts in each campaign were working. On paper, these developments were impressive. In July 1966, the Marines' TAORs expanded by more than 1,100 square kilometers (435 square miles). In the Da Nang enclave, the expansion added 22 villages and approximately 49,000 people to the Marines' areas of operations. The Chu Lai enclave saw similar growth,

² Fleet Marine Force, Pacific's (FMFPAC) monthly reports, often called “Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam” are but one example. In 1966 and 1967, each report touts successes in I Corps even though, as will soon be seen, the situation on the ground gradually deteriorated in many places as 1968 approached. These records are good sources for tracking general developments and statistical data, but their conclusions must be surveyed with a healthy degree of skepticism.

³ One of the most scathing analyses is Lewis Sorely, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), particularly chaps. 11–13 and 15. The latest major work on the war, Geoffrey Wawro's *The Vietnam War: A Military History* (New York: Basic Books, 2024), makes a similar argument throughout.

⁴ John R. Chaisson, who served as Gen Lewis W. Walt's chief of staff in 1966, offered some pointed criticism about the divide between perception and reality, and of the war's direction, after his return from Vietnam. See Headquarters, FMFPAC, “Debrief of Brigadier General John R. Chaisson, 8 November 1966,” transcript of interview, Marine Corps History Division Oral History Collection, particularly pp. 148–51.

⁵ FMFPAC, “Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam,” July 1966, item no. 1201001066, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), 3.

⁶ FMFPAC, “Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam,” July 1966, 5–6.

with five more villages and 10,600 residents falling under the TAOR there. These expansions did have some tangible benefits. By the end of July, Marine forces protected, maintained, and supported construction along approximately 325 kilometers (201 miles) of roads throughout their enclaves. They estimated that twice the number of civilian vehicles traveled the roads in July 1966 as compared to March 1965. Military traffic similarly increased between Quang Ngai and Hue from 1,300 vehicles in July 1965 to 3,400 vehicles in July 1966.⁷

Marine clearing operations, especially around Da Nang, continued at an intense pace. The clearing process was difficult and time consuming. After they pushed into an area, Marine infantry searched or patrolled the villages multiple times. Once the main force Viet Cong had been driven out and the organized local troops were killed or forced to operate outside of the village, the clearing operations changed more toward pacification.⁸ This system was effective at clearing large bodies of Viet Cong troops from a given village and preventing them from performing military and political tasks there in the daytime, but in many cases getting them to avoid a village altogether remained a difficult task. In most cases, the Marines had to place CAPs in key villages to keep them cleared.⁹

A key element of the pacification process was population control. It was important to know who everyone was within a village and to ensure that their homes did not contain hidden tunnels or caches of weapons and supplies for the Viet Cong. A popular technique for

⁷FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," July 1966, 4.

⁸Jack Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1982), 37–44.

⁹The commanding general of the 3d Marines recognized as much when conducting a major clearing operation south of Da Nang in June 1966. He ordered his Marines to create CAPs after they had cleared certain villages. See Commanding Officer to Commanding General, 3d Marine Division (Attn: G-3), "Popular Forces—Marine Corps Combined Action Company (CAC)," reports for 3 June 1966, 9 June 1966, 30 June 1966, all three documents cited in 3d Marines, ComdC, June 1966, item no. 1201037064, folder 037, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, enclosures 57, 60, 68. For a brief summary, see Cavender S. Sutton, "Combined Action in Vietnam: U.S. Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Thought and Practice, 1965–1971" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2024), 221–23.

screening a village's population was the county fair operation. First used in early 1966, a typical county fair began before dawn, when a large Marine force cordoned off a village. At sunrise, Vietnamese officials would speak to the villagers via a megaphone and assure them that they had nothing to fear. The villagers were then told to assemble to a designated area, where they would be searched and identified. They would then remain in that area while ARVN forces combed the village for Viet Cong assets—fighters, supplies, documents, tunnels, and the like. Meanwhile, teams of intelligence personnel and translators made their way through the crowd, conversing with villagers and collecting intelligence. The Marines and local officials tried to make it a festive occasion. After searching and identifying the people, they provided games, food, cultural drama, and music. Medical personnel were present to treat the sick or injured. They would often evacuate villagers, especially children, who badly needed medical attention. Marine leaders made genuine attempts to involve local leaders in each county fair. They often invited the district chief, village chief, and an ARVN officer to speak to the people about the war and the South Vietnamese government's goals.¹⁰ By the end of July 1966, the Marines and ARVN had conducted 48 county fair operations. There were 20 in July alone, compared to 7 in June.¹¹ While they were labor intensive, county fairs provided an efficient method for searching a village thoroughly, identifying the people there, and presenting a friendly image of U.S. and ARVN forces to the village.

The Marines also kept up the pressure on the battlefield. By June 1966, for the fourth straight month, they had conducted more than 10,000 counter guerrilla operations. Most of these actions were small-unit patrols and ambushes, as well as some limited company-size operations.¹² The guerrilla was at the heart of the campaign to maintain Viet Cong influence in the hamlets and villages. They were valuable troops that knew the villages and villagers well. Most of all, they were instru-

¹⁰ Shulimson, *An Expanding War*, 231–34.

¹¹ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," July 1966, 3.

¹² "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," July 1966, 3.

mental in maintaining political influence with the people, collecting taxes, recruiting young people, and spreading propaganda. With their extensive knowledge of the village populace, and the village geography, they were nearly irreplaceable.¹³ Some guerrillas, especially the leaders, were older and had fought against the French in the Viet Minh, the precursor to the Viet Cong. These local guerrillas knew all the trails, both big and small, all the shortcuts and hiding places, and they knew how to avoid the dogs barking when they traveled around at night.¹⁴ Reducing their numbers over time would have a great impact on Viet Cong capability and influence in the villages.

A more palpable sign of progress was the reestablishment of village governments. Many had been vanquished with the rise of the Viet Cong over the years. In February 1966, there were few villages in the Marines' TAORs that had viable governments. By July, village chiefs and councils were functioning in 74 villages, and that number increased to 101 by October.¹⁵ This rise in local government corresponded with Marine efforts to clear those villages of the Viet Cong and then hold them. The number of village chiefs living in their own villages also saw a steady increase from a low of 13 in February 1966 to 51 in November of 1966. One of the keys to taking back these villages was to improve the commerce among villagers there by developing marketplaces. In July, 75 village markets were under development. By October, there were 92.¹⁶

Combined action also began to grow in earnest during this time. By the end of June, the 3d Marine Division reported a total of 37 CAPs in all three enclaves, up from 20 in May.¹⁷ Their goal was to develop 10 CACs with 74 individual platoons throughout I Corps by the end

¹³ Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 118–19, 183–84.

¹⁴ Michael Lee Lanning and Dan Cragg, *Inside the VC and the NVA: The Real Story of North Vietnam's Armed Forces* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 53–61.

¹⁵ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," October 1966, item no. 1201001087, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 4.

¹⁶ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," October 1966, 4.

¹⁷ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1966, item no. 1201001060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 4.

of 1966.¹⁸ The Marines believed that the CACs were a valuable asset, and they persisted in expanding the program and developing an organizational structure for the platoons. An August 1966 briefing for the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Wallace M. Greene Jr., made clear that some of the regimental commanders in Vietnam believed in the importance of expanding combined action: “In short, we feel that we have a good foundation for the organization of a larger CAC program. With availability of Marines and equipment needed to staff larger numbers of platoons, we can make tremendous strides forward in expanding this most important program.”¹⁹ The presenters then informed General Greene that, because of the magnitude of the expansion, the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division had established a special combined action planning group. The group, then led by two officers, was tasked with organizing the new CACs and coordinating with nearby infantry units to ensure that the platoons received adequate support, particularly in terms of logistics and intelligence.²⁰ This was a logical step for expanding combined action throughout I Corps. However, building a viable command structure for the entire program and ensuring that its personnel received adequate support would be a long and difficult process.

The NVA Comes South across the DMZ

For the Marines in I Corps, the war entered a different phase in July 1966. ARVN troops captured an enemy soldier near Dong Ha who claimed to be part of an NVA regiment. This prisoner stated that two other NVA regiments had also infiltrated into northern Quang Tri Province. The Marines had first engaged the NVA during Operation Utah in March 1966—a three-day engagement in which the NVA’s *21st Regiment* suffered heavy casualties at the hands of a combined U.S. Marine–ARVN force before withdrawing.²¹ So far, that encounter had

¹⁸ “Summary,” FMFPAC, “Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam,” June 1966, 5.

¹⁹ “Summary,” FMFPAC, “Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam,” June 1966, 3.

²⁰ “Summary,” FMFPAC, “Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam,” June 1966, B-7.

²¹ Shulimson, *An Expanding War*, chap. 7.

been an anomaly. There were rumors of additional NVA infiltration for months following the incident, but no clear evidence had emerged to support those reports. The intelligence that the ARVN gained from the captured NVA soldier near Dong Ha, however, suggested that the NVA had returned in force. After analyzing an array of captured documents and interrogations of captured enemy soldiers, the Marines concluded that more than 5,000 troops of the NVA's 324th "B" Division had moved across the DMZ to conduct offensive operations in the northern Quang Tri area.²²

For obvious reasons, the Marines could not ignore the NVA's arrival. They estimated that their plan was to quietly enter South Vietnam in small groups, establish logistics bases, and then wreak havoc in northern I Corps. Marine intelligence predicted the NVA would attempt attacks on population centers in Quang Tri province, key infrastructure and isolated targets in both Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, and on U.S. and ARVN units in the coastal plains. In fact, the NVA had already penetrated deep into Quang Tri, nearly reaching south to Cam Lo. They were located in an arc 25 kilometers (15.5 miles) long and more than 6 kilometers (nearly 4 miles) wide. That arc would increase to 13.5 kilometers (more than 8.5 miles) wide.²³

Before the NVA could attack, Marine and ARVN forces launched Operation Hastings. Seven Marine infantry battalions and five ARVN infantry battalions converged on the area and launched attacks on the NVA positions. The largest combined U.S. Marine-ARVN operation to that point in the war, Operation Hastings was characterized by a "number of sharp, small unit engagements, with an occasional large encounter." The largest engagement took place on July 18, when the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, came into contact with a force of 1,000 NVA troops. There were no significant contacts after 28 July. By 31 July, it appeared that the NVA had withdrawn back across the DMZ or had

²² "Large Unit Operations," FMFPAC: "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," July 1966, item no. 1201001066, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 9.

²³ Large Unit Operations," FMFPAC: "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," July 1966, 9.

Figure 4.1. Operation Hastings



The red shaded area shows the general location of Operation Hastings.
Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo.

fled west into Laos. In all, the Marines had confirmed kills of 769 NVA soldiers and had lost 128 of their own during Operation Hastings. The ARVN, responsible for the southernmost area, killed 56 NVA and lost 21 troops. Many more Marines and ARVN had been wounded in the fighting, much of which was against a well-dug in and determined enemy force.²⁴

After Operation Hastings concluded, three Marine battalions remained at the DMZ and began Operation Prairie on 3 August. By the end of the month, the Marines had killed another 279 NVA. In September, the fighting intensified, and a fourth Marine battalion moved into the area. The Marines took this opportunity to increase their reconnaissance efforts along the DMZ. A battalion from the Special

²⁴ Large Unit Operations," FMFPAC: "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," July 1966, 9–11, quote on p. 11.

Landing Force, Battalion Landing Team 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, launched a dual heliborne and amphibious assault. The battalion landed in the northeastern sector, just south of the DMZ, and got into an intense engagement with yet another contingent of NVA troops.²⁵

As Operation Prairie dragged on, it became clear the NVA had no intention of slackening its pressure on northern I Corps. The Marines fanned out along the DMZ as best they could. On 1 October, one Marine battalion moved into an airfield near the Khe Sanh Special Forces camp. III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) was concerned that NVA troops could approach from nearby mountain passes in Laos. Establishing a presence at Khe Sanh would allow them to monitor ingress from the west and northwest, thereby making it a prime target for the NVA to attack. The battalion sent to Khe Sahn, the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, was charged with providing security for the Special Forces camp and reconnoitering the area for enemy troops entering Vietnam from Laos. They were expected to launch an assault on any large North Vietnamese force coming into the area.²⁶

With the war in I Corps shifting north, the Marines had to reorganize their TAORs. The 1st Marine Division's arrival in Vietnam in late March 1966 was a significant addition to Marine combat power in I Corps. The division's arrival in I Corps made it possible for III MAF to shift forces north to deal with NVA troops arriving from the north. In early October, the 3d Marine Division fully shifted to the north and moved its headquarters from Da Nang to Phu Bai. At the same time, the 1st Marine Division assumed command over the Da Nang enclave and oversaw operations there.²⁷ The U.S. Army would take over at Chu Lai the following April.²⁸ These moves allowed the 3d Marine Division

²⁵ Shulimson, *An Expanding War*, chap. 11.

²⁶ "Mission Assigned/Background," 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, Command Chronology (ComdC), October 1966, item no. 1201039025, folder 039, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 2.

²⁷ "Operations," 3d Marine Division, ComdC, October 1965, item no. 1201025033, folder 025, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 11.

²⁸ Maj Gary L. Telfer, LtCol Lane Rogers, and V. Keith Fleming Jr., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1984), 78–82.

to concentrate on the threat from the north. The shift north did not, however, guarantee reinforcements for Phu Bai. Due to the increased enemy threat along the DMZ, all northbound infantry battalions went to Quang Tri province, leaving Phu Bai with only one battalion.²⁹

Meanwhile, the Combined Action Program underwent a period of significant growth throughout I Corps. The goal set in August 1966 was to expand by 50 CAPs.³⁰ While the Marines did not quite meet that target, by the end of December there were a total of 58 CAPs throughout I Corps. The Da Nang enclave had 31 platoons, the Chu Lai enclave had 14, and Phu Bai had expanded to 13 units by the end of December. The combined action units had a busy year, conducting 20,103 patrols and ambushes in 1966.³¹ These were encouraging signs that the program was asserting itself as a viable foil to Viet Cong operations in and near the platoons' villages, but it would have to continue to grow in conjunction with other pacification initiatives to truly give U.S. and South Vietnamese forces the upper hand.

One such initiative was the Revolutionary Development (RD) program. In late September 1966, in what FMFPAC considered a "promising development," the ARVN commanding general of I Corps announced that he intended to move "aggressively" into RD with a large portion of his 31 infantry battalions. Revolutionary Development was another term for what the Marines had called "pacification." The Marines were skeptical but felt that, if executed properly, it could mark a major milestone in the fight to secure I Corps from Viet Cong influence.³² Their skepticism was well-reasoned. At the end

²⁹ FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," November 1966, item no. 1201001093, folder 001, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 60.

³⁰ This aimed to expand the program from 37 platoons at end of July to 73 by the end of the year. See FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," September 1966, item no. 1201001079, folder 001, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 25.

³¹ FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," December 1966, item no. 1201001099, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 60.

³² "Pacification and Civic Action," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," September 1966, item no. 1201001079, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 18–19.

of November, only four ARVN battalions were actively participating in the RD program.³³ Marine commanders doubted that the ARVN could effectively execute this program with any voluntary zeal, noting:

This was a major change in thrust, and the measure of its success will go to the heart of the training and motivation of the Vietnamese soldier, who has never been conditioned to the importance of ministering to the needs of the people. There is little likelihood that the ARVN reorientation can be accomplished without much guidance and side-by-side participation by our forces.³⁴

The South Vietnamese government's RD plan rested on the creation of "cadre teams." These teams were 59-person units trained to assist villages and hamlets to achieve greater government control. Each team was stationed semipermanently in a hamlet and remained there several months until it was under government control. The theory was to divide the team up into "household" groups to address various hamlet issues, including developing a hamlet defense and to provide weapons training. While they patrolled the hamlets and even conducted night ambushes in coordination with the Popular Forces or external security forces, they were not allowed to go more than 300 meters beyond the hamlet's outer perimeter.³⁵

The ARVN were slow to pick up their part of RD, but by January 1967 there were teams in 69 villages across I Corps, usually in the more heavily populated coastal regions. They were mostly located near Quang Ngai City, the Thu Bon River area, Hoi An, Da Nang, Hue, and Quang Tri City. The plans for 1967 called for 65 more RD teams

³³ "County Fair," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," November 1966, 28.

³⁴ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," December 1966, item no. 1201001099, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 5.

³⁵ LtGen Ngo Quang Truong, *Territorial Forces* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), 61–65.

placed mainly along the coastal plains.³⁶ This was a sound concept, and all members being native speakers dramatically increased the likelihood that an RD team could have a positive impact in each hamlet. However, the main issue lay in providing adequate security forces to protect them, which would require more ARVN assistance than could be provided at that time. The combined use of RD teams and CAC platoons in other important villages offered a potentially potent one-two punch for the counterinsurgency struggle in I Corps. It could reduce Viet Cong influence and root out its infrastructure. Even in its infancy, the RD campaign seemed to have the desired effect on the enemy. It is reasonable to surmise that North Vietnamese leaders, and quite possibly the leaders of the Viet Cong, realized how much impact the counterinsurgency operations were having. They would have had to have known that the guerrillas' influence was waning, that their main force units were not having great success in engaging the Marines, and that they were steadily losing influence with no reversal of those trends in sight.

While Revolutionary Development was a sound program conceptually, the Marine high command, and likely others, had serious doubts that the South Vietnamese government and the ARVN could be effective in securing, holding, and pacifying their own areas. On 7 January 1967, the Commandant was briefed on the RD plan during a visit to 3d Marine Division headquarters at Phu Bai. He expressed serious skepticism that the combination of the ARVN, the Regional Forces, and the Popular Forces could succeed in holding these villages for the RD teams to do their jobs. After listening and asking several questions, including where these territorial forces had been successful on their own in the past, the Commandant remarked, "Frankly I think this [to expect them to succeed without Marine Corps help] is a bunch of bullshit!"³⁷

While the North Vietnamese failed to establish large bases of operation in Quang Tri Province, they did succeed in forcing the Marines

³⁶ "Revolutionary Development," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," pt. 1 (1 January 1967), item no. 1201001106, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 25.

³⁷ Recording of Commandant of the Marine Corps briefing, 7 January 1967, U.S. Marine Corps History Division, Washington, DC.

and allied forces to permanently shift multiple battalions to northern I Corps and leave them there to confront NVA infiltrations. Their actions caused the Marines to shift approximately 10,000 troops northward in what the Marine command described as a “security, anti-infiltration, and screening” role.³⁸ The number of Marine and ARVN battalions in the northern I Corps soon grew to 17. The overall number of Marines in Vietnam also increased significantly by the end of 1966. In January 1966, there were 44,196 Marines operating in Vietnam. By year’s end, there were 70,617.³⁹

The Marines were now fighting in two distinct theaters of war—a conventional war along the DMZ and a counterguerrilla war in the enclaves. In northern I Corps, the Marines began a process of taking over and reinforcing some of the forward bases that had been occupied by the ARVN. This decision was part of a larger process to refocus ARVN efforts toward RD (pacification) and to shift the Marines into the hinterland to take defend against NVA incursion.⁴⁰ These bases were a combination of forward base camps for Marine infantry units and artillery positions that would support the infantry. The names of the bases near and along the DMZ would become legendary: Dong Ha, Camp Carroll, Gio Linh, Con Thien, the Rockpile, Cam Lo, and Cua Viet. One area—bounded by Gio Linh on the northeast corner, Con Thien at the northwest corner, Cam Lo on the southwest corner, and Dong Ha on the southeast corner—became known as Leatherneck Square.⁴¹ In 1967, it was commonly referred to as the “nastiest place on earth.”

By December 1966, some Marines sensed that large-unit Viet Cong attacks were decreasing, while guerrilla operations were on the rise. They were optimistic about this change in strategy, but that optimism would be short lived. While they were correct that the Viet

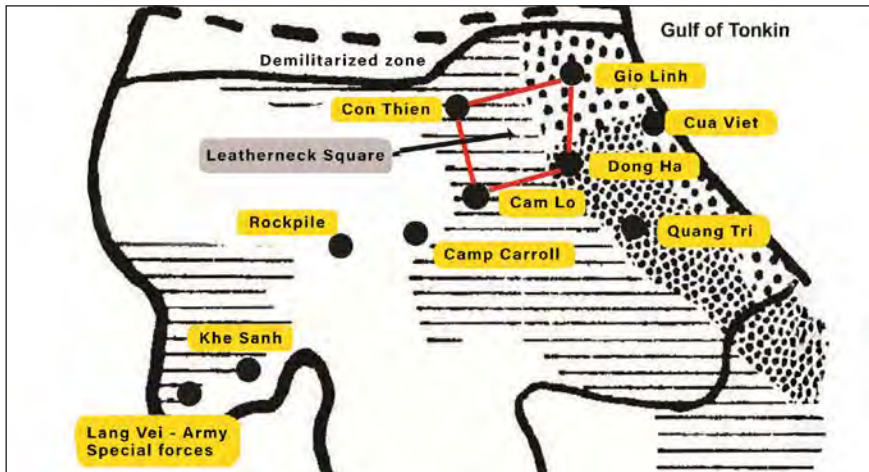
³⁸ “Summary,” FMFPAC, “Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam,” December 1966, item no. 1201001099, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 4.

³⁹ “Summary,” FMFPAC, “Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam,” December 1966, 1.

⁴⁰ “Summary,” FMFPAC, “Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam,” December 1966, 5.

⁴¹ Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *Fighting the North Vietnamese*, 22.

Figure 4.2. Marine forward bases in northern I Corps



Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo.

Cong were increasing their guerrilla operations, the North Vietnamese escalated their campaign of attacks with large units again in February 1967. A report submitted to FMFPAC summarized the situation:

In February, the enemy continued accelerated pace of operations which first appeared in December 1966. Strong action against US and ARVN forces in the hinterland, coordinated guerrilla activity against the Revolutionary Development structure, coupled with widespread mortar and rocket attacks on ARVN outposts and US bases, gave substance to the North Vietnamese premier's assertion that the current six months is to be a period of violent counter attack. This effort, although costly to the enemy, has heavily extended the US and [government of Vietnam] GVN resources in the I [Corps Tactical Zone] CTZ.⁴²

It was a sound analysis of the North's plans. North Vietnam's prime minister, Pham Van Dong, had indeed warned that the coming

⁴² "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," February 1967, item no. 1201001112, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 3.

months “would be a crucial period in the war.” The counterattacks, he continued, would aim to inflict casualties on ARVN and U.S. forces, that, the North hoped, would generate “an anti-war effect upon voters in the US elections in the fall of 1968.” The report concluded with a warning that, in hindsight, seems prophetic: “The enemy is aiming . . . at the political convictions of the United States.”⁴³

In early 1967, the NVA counterattacked while the Viet Cong stepped up their irregular operations throughout I Corps. In late April, a large NVA force attempted to destroy the Marines’ newly established base at Khe Sanh. The First Battle of Khe Sanh, also known as “the Hill Fights,” was a vicious struggle for control over three key terrain features overlooking the Marines’s base: Hills 861, 881 North, and 881 South. NVA troops had dug in and heavily fortified each of the hills. After 17 days of fighting, the Marines drove the NVA off the hills. While there is some controversy about the precise casualty figures, it is believed that the Marines lost 155 killed and 425 wounded, while the NVA lost 940 confirmed and 588 probables.⁴⁴

The war along the DMZ would continued throughout 1967 with major engagements between the Marines and the North Vietnamese regulars. The Marines held their positions, killing their enemies in large numbers.⁴⁵ But their casualties were high, too, and the fighting showed no sign of abating without a more aggressive strategy to cut off the NVA supply routes in Laos and in the southern part of North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese had no real manufacturing base for war production.⁴⁶ Most of their military supplies came into the country from Russia and China. Supplies from Russia arrived at the port of

⁴³ “Large Unit Operations,” FMFPAC, “Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam,” February 1967, 19.

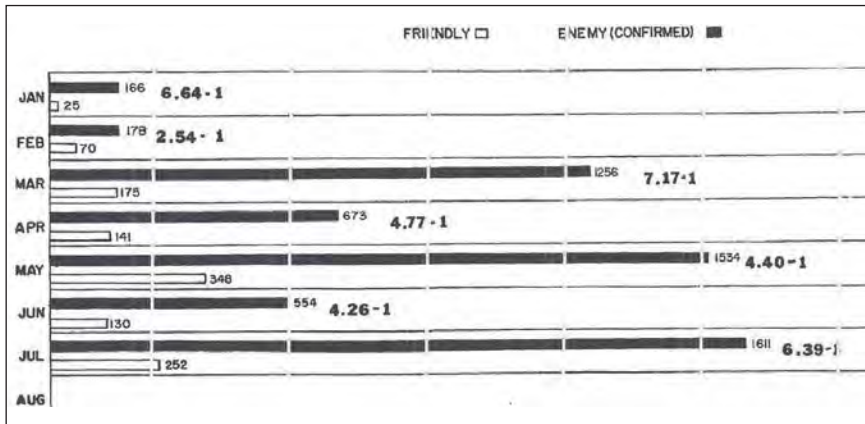
⁴⁴ “Large Unit Operations,” FMFPAC, “Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam,” May 1967, item no. 1201001132, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 11.

⁴⁵ For a comprehensive discussion of Marine Corps operations along the DMZ, see Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *Fighting the North Vietnamese*, 1967, particularly chaps. 2–4, 7–8.

⁴⁶ The U.S. Air Force, along with U.S. Navy and Marine aircraft, pursued a prolonged bombing campaign aimed at disrupting these supply lines and destroying North Vietnam’s industry, but this largely failed. See Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), chaps. 2–4.

THE WAR IN NORTHERN I CORPS, JUNE–DECEMBER 1966

Figure 4.3. Enemy and friendly casualties in northern I Corps, January–July 1967



An October 1967 3d Marine Division chart comparing enemy confirmed kills in northern I Corps in comparison to Marines killed in northern I Corps engagements, January–July 1967. Source: photo courtesy of the authors; original source unknown.

Haiphong, while those coming from China entered North Vietnam via the railroad into Ha Noi. U.S. leadership had no appetite for risking a conflict with China or Russia and therefore avoided targeting these areas.⁴⁷ The war at the DMZ had reached a stalemate.

The Perspective of the North

The North Vietnamese realized by mid-1966 that they would have to do something major to dislodge U.S. forces from the DMZ. At this time Le Duan, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, was becoming more influential than either Ho Chi Minh, the founder and president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or General Vo Nguyen Giap, the commander-in-chief of the NVA.⁴⁸ Both Ho and Giap had been instrumental in defeating the French effort to retake their former colony during the First Indochina War. Giap was a legend for his military leadership during the war against the French

⁴⁷ Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 133; and George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 174, 177–78.

⁴⁸ Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 70–83.

and was the chief architect of their defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. He can also be credited with building a large and competent army of North Vietnam between its wars with France and the United States (1954–65).⁴⁹ It appeared, however, that Ho's and Giap's time had passed and that the era of Le Duan had arrived.

Le Duan, who had been the leader of the Communist insurgency in the south, was elected by the Communist Party of Vietnam's Central Committee as the first general secretary in 1957.⁵⁰ He now operated out of Ha Noi. Ho Chi Minh was getting older and had health issues, and General Giap was losing influence. It was thought that there was an intense leadership struggle between Giap and Le Duan and that Le Duan and his philosophy prevailed.⁵¹ This rift would significantly impact the final shape of the action North Vietnam would take in the Tet Offensive of 1968.

The party officially, through a formal party resolution in January 1967, began its plans for what would become the countrywide offensive kicked off at the beginning of Tet in January 1968. It was both a high-risk move and a recognition that the North could not win a military victory against the South while the United States maintained a military presence there.⁵² The North Vietnamese government realized that the war was in a stalemate and that they would not be able to dislodge the Marines out of the DMZ or the Americans out of Vietnam by military action alone. They were highly cognizant of the upcoming U.S. presidential election scheduled for November 1968. North Vietnamese leaders reasoned that the United States also knew that the war was stalemated, especially in the DMZ area. They feared that if they did not take drastic action, the United States might increase its aggression, perhaps attacking on a wider scale, such as invading Laos and the supply chains there, or attacking the North itself.⁵³

⁴⁹ Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 51–77.

⁵⁰ For an excellent summary of Le Duan's rise to power, see Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, chap. 1.

⁵¹ Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 154–55.

⁵² Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 152–53.

⁵³ Merle L. Pribbenow, "General vo Nguyen Giap and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 Tet Offensive," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 6–12.

The Central Committee adopted Resolution 13, a secret plan to break the stalemate. It was then approved by the party plenum, a meeting of all the members, in January 1967. Resolution 13 involved a talk-fight strategy. The North Vietnamese planned to win a significant battlefield victory, which would lay the groundwork for giving them more power in negotiations. During the course of 1967, this plan would evolve significantly as the north's preparations progressed.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Pribbenow, "General vo Nguyen Giap and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 Tet Offensive," 9.

CHAPTER 5

STATUS OF COMBINED ACTION, JANUARY 1967

In early 1967, some Marine commanders continued to demonstrate that they recognized the value of the Combined Action Companies (CAC). The expansion of combined action in 1966 had shown the program's utility in pacifying the rural countryside and in providing assistance to the Marine infantry, whose resources were stretched thin by the demands of the intensifying war in northern I Corps. Fleet Marine Force, Pacific's (FMFPAC) summary of III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) operations in January 1967 touted the program's value:

Since its inception in late [19]65, the Combined Action Program in I Corps has produced a successful joining of Marine infantry personnel with Vietnamese Popular Forces [PF] into a single operational unit with mutual benefits. Based historically on similar units, such as the Garde d' Haiti or the Philippine Constabulary, the idea of blending trained military personnel into indigenous forces was a proven technique for obtaining dependable forces for stabilizing emerging countries. The growth of the project in I Corps had been slow, due to shortages of PF personnel and to the fragility of GVN [government of Vietnam] support. Nevertheless it shows promise and is accelerating steadily.¹

¹ "Combined Action Program," Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPAC), "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," January 1967, item no. 1201001106, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), 36.

With the war at the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and the guerrilla war throughout central and southern I Corps increasing in intensity, III MAF realized that it would need to depend on the Combined Action Platoons (CAP) to alleviate the pressure on the thinly spread-out Marine infantry battalions.² In early 1967, the Marine Corps took a major step forward in its ongoing effort to organize and expand the combined action concept, enlisting the help of Lieutenant Colonel William R. Corson to oversee the program's expansion. Corson's task would not be easy—it would require the creation of a totally new and unusually structured Marine Corps unit.

Reorganization and Reform

Increasing the CACs' role in the war would require a dramatic effort to both reorganize and expand the program's ranks. Fortunately, the idea had strong support from Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, commanding FMFPAC; Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, commanding III MAF; and Major General Herman Nickerson Jr., commanding the 1st Marine Division.³ Nickerson would soon become the deputy commander of III MAF and be part of the direct supervision of the Combined Action Program. General Wallace M. Greene, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, was enthusiastic and supportive of the effort and would ultimately approve the creation of the new unit. Krulak and Walt knew that they would have to produce a powerful justification to achieve their goal.⁴

The first problem that needed attention was that combined action was becoming more difficult to manage effectively. There was no parent organization to standardize and administer the CACs' operations throughout I Corps. There was no official combined action organiza-

²"Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," January 1967, 4.

³Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970), 105–7; and LtGen Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 187.

⁴Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 39; and Ted N. Easterling, *War in the Villages: The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons in the Vietnam War* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2021), 63.

tion with a reporting unit code to obtain supplies, personnel, and other resources. Personnel and supplies had to be taken out of each division's resources, which left the infantry battalions resentful and stretched even more thin than the overall circumstances of battle would have dictated. As a result, the CACs were deprived of Marines and materials that they needed to stay safe and to do their jobs properly.⁵ To mitigate these problems, the units needed to be organized with their own tables of organization and equipment.

The first attempt at reorganization occurred along geographic lines. In October 1966, responsibility for the majority of the CACs was divided between the 1st Marine Division in southern I Corps and the 3d Marine Division farther north. The move provided an opportunity to divide command of the platoons within the geographic regions where each division focused its operations. Under this reorganization, the 3d Marine Division relinquished command of the CACs in Quang Nam Province to better focus its efforts on expanding the program's presence in around Phu Bai and, later, to the north near the DMZ. The 1st Marine Division took command of the platoons in Quang Nam and retained responsibility for the CACs operating around Chu Lai Enclave.⁶ Each division also created subunits for their CACs, each of which fell under the headquarters battalion of the division. This move also marked a step toward wresting administrative and operational control of the CACs away from the resident infantry battalions. While internal resistance from battalion and regimental commanders hindered parts of the process, it did solve several problems. One advantage was that the new organization stabilized the relationship between many CAC platoons and their villages by preventing Marines assigned to a platoon from having to leave when the resident battalion left. Before this development, battalions had the power to take their Marines

⁵ Cavender S. Sutton, "Combined Action in Vietnam: U.S. Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Thought and Practice, 1965–1971" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2024), 244–46.

⁶ "Significant Events," III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), Command Chronology (ComdC), October 1966, item no. 1201003026, folder 003, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 3–4.

with them, causing a disruptive change for the villagers who had come to know those Marines.⁷

Some Marine leaders also took steps to create a specialized training system for combined action. In November 1966, the 3d Marine Division created a formal CAC school in Phu Bai. The first course began on 28 November and provided several days of training to its students. Its curriculum included an introduction to Vietnamese language and culture for Marines assigned to the program. While this was certainly a step in the right direction, it did not apply to the entire Combined Action Program. The school only held classes for the 3d Division Marines heading for CACs within the division's areas of operations and did not include students from the 1st Marine Division CACs in the Da Nang enclave or the Chu Lai enclave. It would be several more months before III MAF could enact a standardized training regimen throughout I Corps.⁸

Some leaders also attempted to spread knowledge about the Vietnamese people to all their Marines, both within and outside of combined action. The 3d Marine Division's January 1967 records reflected that all its units received lectures on "Religiously Based Customs in the Republic of Vietnam" from the division's chaplains. The assistant division chaplain also provided this one-hour lecture as a standard part of the training cycle for the CAC orientation classes which, by January, had 69 students in attendance. Another example was the Personal Response Project, which sought to help Marines become more sensitive to the Vietnamese people and their culture.⁹ Clearly, some commanders were trying to ensure that their Marines better understood and respected the Vietnamese they were serving. While they did not explicitly cite the CACs' experiences as a reason for their attempts to infuse cultural

⁷"Popular Forces Combined Action Company (CAC) Program," 1st Marine Division, ComdC, October 1966, item no. 1201014079, folder 014, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 27–28.

⁸Sutton, "Combined Action in Vietnam," 238–39, 248, 252–54. See also John Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), chap. 3.

⁹3d Marine Division, ComdC, January 1967, item no. 1201027025, folder 027, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 35.

knowledge throughout I Corps, that the effort coincided with a dramatic expansion of the CAC program cannot be overlooked.

With the first reorganization efforts complete, Generals Walt and Krulak were ready to take combined action to the next level. They agreed that the program needed a single commander to oversee any further expansion. With General Greene's support, they chose Lieutenant Colonel Corson, then the commander of the 3d Tank Battalion, to lead the CAC program in February 1967. In addition to being an experienced commander, Corson had gained prominence by engineering a successful, civic action-focused pacification program in a hamlet within his battalion's tactical area of responsibility (TAOR). In a change of command ceremony attended by General Nickerson, Corson relinquished command of the 3d Tank Battalion on 14 February 1967. He was then reassigned to III MAF as "CAC officer" and was tasked with establishing the Combined Action Program as a separate unit within III MAF. According to Corson's deputy director, Major Howard Lucas, Corson's job was "specifically" to elevate the program from the division level to the III MAF level. When General Nickerson became the deputy commander of III MAF, he served as Corson's direct supervisor as the latter worked to expand and formalize the program.¹⁰

Corson was a strong choice. He was a rare combination of warrior, scholar, and philosopher who spoke and read Mandarin. He had read Mao Zedong's writings on revolutionary warfare in both English and Chinese. He was a specialist in Asia and likely knew as much or more than anyone in the Marine Corps about Asia's history and Vietnamese culture. He had earned a master's degree in economics and business and had served as an instructor at the Naval Academy.¹¹ After fighting in World War II and Korea, Corson was assigned to various posts throughout the Far East in the late 1950s that took him to Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong, Vietnam, and elsewhere. He was even assigned

¹⁰ Maj Howard Lucas, interview with Martin Russ, 8 May 1976, Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, tape 6311 24A, beginning at 1:40 minutes, hereafter Lucas interview.

¹¹ William R. Corson, interview with Martin Russ, 7 July 1976, Marine Corps History Division Oral History Collection, Tape 6310-1B, hereafter Corson interview.

to interrogate refugees coming out of China during the Communist takeover and studied how Mao Zedong was applying his principles to securing the population. In the early 1960s, as part of the John F. Kennedy administration's focus on limited war and guerrilla warfare, Corson served at the Pentagon. He was part of the president's special group that conducted research and development on counterinsurgency warfare.¹²

Corson was not alone in understanding that directly interacting with and working for the people was critical for combating the Viet Cong insurgency. He was, however, unique in his understanding that material-based civic action—gifting goods and services to the villagers haphazardly—was not likely to win the population's loyalty.¹³ He believed that to reach the people, they had to know that the South Vietnamese government in Saigon and the Americans were on their side. Before leaving the 3d Tank Battalion, he tried to do just that by developing a civic action program in Phong Bac Hamlet, located southeast of the Da Nang airbase. There, Corson took a unique approach that focused on economic growth and self-sufficiency. With a team of volunteers, he set about teaching the Vietnamese techniques to enhance their economic viability, with the goal of furthering the village's economic, social, and political growth.¹⁴

Corson first established a fish market. He intended to use the profits netted from selling fish there to create a community fund that would support more projects. The initiative, according to 3d Tank Battalion's November 1966 report, would not only boost the hamlet's economy but also "fortify the . . . people's diet with a low-cost protein supplement." Corson pitched the project to the hamlet chief and quickly won his approval. The chief particularly liked the idea of accumulating funds for additional community projects in the future.¹⁵

¹² Corson interview. See also J. Y. Smith, "William R. Corson, 74, Author and Retired Marine Officer, Dies," *Washington Post*, 19 July 2000.

¹³ Corson interview, beginning at 29:55.

¹⁴ "Civil Affairs," 3d Tank Battalion, ComdC, November 1966, item no. 1201024102, folder 024, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 1.

¹⁵ "Civil Affairs," 3d Tank Battalion, ComdC, November 1966, 1.

There were, of course, some obstacles that would have to be overcome. For example, the river was immediately adjacent to the village but, to catch bigger fish, and to catch more of them, the villagers needed larger nets. Corson decided to expedite the process with an unorthodox method. He hired four fishermen from the village, gathered explosives, and had the fishermen circle an area with their sampans while some of Corson's Marines detonated the explosives in the water, stunning the fish. The fishermen then gathered the floating fish, took them to the market, and auctioned them off.¹⁶ The profits were then turned over to the hamlet chief who, under the provisions stipulated in a contract he signed with his people, became the holder in trust of the Phong Bac Community Fund. In its first seven days, the fishing project netted the community fund 3,635 piasters, which equaled \$45.40 USD. When the profits grew large enough, the chief purchased bigger nets so that the fishermen could continue the project without the use of explosives. The revenue would continue to go into the community fund for other projects in the future, such as a program for raising and selling pigs and chickens.¹⁷ The Marines also established a temporary aid station at the Phong Bac marketplace. It was open three times a week and treated numerous villagers.¹⁸

By December 1966, the villagers had adopted other money-making ventures. They raised and sold pigs, chickens, ducks, and rabbits and established a gardening program that provided additional produce for personal consumption and sale. They also began to coordinate these efforts as a community. That month, they began to hold farmers' meetings, 87 of whom attended the first gathering.¹⁹ In early February 1967,

¹⁶ Corson interview, tape 6310-1A. From the profits, each fisherman was paid 15 piasters per hour and 5 piasters for the use of their boats and nets. For those with a deeper interest in Corson, there are several hours of interviews with Russ in a series. They are numbered 6310, 6313, 6316, and 6338.

¹⁷ "Civil Affairs," 3d Tank Battalion, ComdC, November 1966, 1–2. Unfortunately, the battalion's records do not elaborate on what the pig and chicken programs entailed. It is reasonable to assume that, similar to that of the fish program, they aimed to increase the hamlet's food supply and commerce.

¹⁸ "Civil Affairs," 3d Tank Battalion, ComdC, November 1966, 1–2.

¹⁹ "Civil Affairs," 3d Tank Battalion, ComdC, December 1966, item no. 1201024102, folder 024, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 1.

the civic action Marines hosted a businessowner's meeting at the Phong Bac marketplace. About 25 businessowners attended and discussed the possibility of starting a Phong Bac Merchant's Association. Later that month, the group submitted paperwork to the Hoa Vang District to be formally recognized as an association. Their goal was to mutually advance the hamlet's economic and social standards.²⁰ That same month, a group of farmers started a pig-breeding program to provide a steady stock of swine for the hamlet. The community fund continued to grow and pay dividends. The third farmers' meeting also took place that month, and more than 200 villagers attended.²¹ According to the battalion's records, these civic action programs were quite successful in establishing a rapport between the Marines and the villagers of Phong Bac.

During this time, Corson also formed a special team, headed by Lieutenant Willard F. Lochridge, his civil affairs officer, that comprised of young Marines who possessed skills relevant to civic action. When assembling the team, Corson surveyed his Marines' service record books and looked for traits that would be useful to his civic action program. He sought out Marines with experience in the Boy Scouts, 4-H, and agriculture. One of the selected Marines had been a beekeeper in civilian life. Honey was expensive in Vietnam, but this particular Marine said it would be easy for the villagers to produce their own if they could acquire a stock of bees. Corson happened to have a friend who worked for Sears and Roebuck in a high-level corporate capacity, and he sent them a stock of bees for the project. One of Corson's lieutenants went to Saigon and picked up the bees, and Phong Bac entered the honey business.²²

As the economic programs improved, so did the attitudes of the villagers. A new village chief of Hoa Tho, the larger village of which Phong Bac was a part, arrived on the scene in December and took a

²⁰ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 3d Tank Battalion, ComdC, February 1967, item no. 1201024105, folder 024, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 15, 22.

²¹ "Civil Affairs," 3d Tank Battalion, ComdC, February 1967, 11.

²² Corson interview, beginning at 16:00 minutes.

hardline approach against the Viet Cong.²³ By January 1967, the security situation had improved considerably. The village chief commanded a group of 40 PF soldiers, and he had managed to gain substantial support from the people in Phong Bac. Beginning in January, Phong Bac had an influx of visitors who were interested in the market-driven, civic-action campaign there. Generals Greene, Walt, and Nickerson visited and were briefed on the project. In addition, the 3d Tank Battalion hosted a number of reporters and journalists, including a crew from CBS who ran a story on the fishing program. On 8 January 1967, the 3d Tank Battalion's civil affairs section held an elders' festival in Phong Bac Hamlet, which Generals Greene and Nickerson attended.²⁴ During another visit, General Nickerson brought along a U.S. senator, a U.S. congressional representative, a U.S. Navy admiral, a director of the Hoover Institute, a U.S. senator, an Episcopal bishop, and Donald Silkwood, a systems analyst for the U.S. assistant secretary of defense. All visitors received briefings on Corson's economic development programs, which, Corson hoped, would give influential members of the U.S. government and media a better understanding of what civil affairs programs could accomplish. Phong Bac was an example of what pacification could do if its practitioners followed the methods that Corson had adopted. His ideas certainly seemed to have boosted the South Vietnamese government's standing among the villagers there. During the Tet Holiday in February 1967, 300 South Vietnamese National flags were flown over Phong Bac.²⁵

The experiment at Phong Bac is likely one of the reasons that Corson was chosen to command the Combined Action Program. General Greene later stated that he had been aware of Corson's work, that he had visited Phong Bac, and that he was very much impressed with what Corson had accomplished. Greene believed that it was the sort of approach that should have been followed throughout I Corps. One

²³ "Civil Affairs," 3d Tank Battalion, ComdC, December 1966, 6–8.

²⁴ "Civil Affairs," 3d Tank Battalion, ComdC, January 1967, item no. 9. 1201024104, folder 024, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 9.

²⁵ "Civil Affairs," 3d Tank Battalion, ComdC, January 1967, 10–12.

thing that struck Greene was that Corson was winning the trust and the help of the people by helping them. Greene believed in what Corson was doing.²⁶

Corson's approach certainly had merit, but it had its limitations, especially in early 1967. Given the war's increasingly violent nature at the time, pacification projects like that at Phong Bac could not be implemented everywhere, especially by the infantry. That made the CACs an ideal resource for pacification, if the Marines could create enough of them. However, the Marines' thin resources and the intensifying fighting in northern I Corps simply did not leave room for the kinds of programs that Corson had conducted at Phong Bac. Had the war only been a southern insurgency, and had more resources been available, it might have been a successful way to pacify much of the countryside.²⁷ General Walt understood this problem, but he was unwilling to abandon pacification.²⁸ Given Corson's knack for implementing civic action programs and fostering good relations with the population, Walt no doubt reasoned that his influence would make the Combined Action Program a more well-rounded counterinsurgency tool.

The Corson Era

From the outset, Corson's job was not easy. He and his Marines encountered stiff resistance from other Marines, particularly those officers commanding infantry battalions.²⁹ Major Lucas, who had been an infantry company commander before joining Corson's staff, related that the CACs were a thorn in the side of many battalions. In many cases, they still had to support and protect them and provide personnel. Lucas recalled that in the early stages of developing the Combined

²⁶ Wallace M. Greene Jr., interview with Martin Russ, Oral History Collection, Marine Corps History Division, tape 6341-2A, beginning at 26:39, hereafter Greene interview.

²⁷ Krulak, *First to Fight*, chap. 13.

²⁸ Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, chaps. 3 and 4.

²⁹ For the rest of his life, Corson would complain about the lack of support he received, as well as the resistance to combined action that he encountered. See William R. Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968); and LtCol William R. Corson, USMC (Ret), interview in Al Hemmingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 49–57.

Action Program, the infantry did not understand the CACs' tactical value, nor did they understand the value of having a CAC unit in their area. Rather than embracing Combined Action, many battalion commanders seemed to feel that the CACs were a nuisance forced on them from the top.³⁰

Corson would not allow their grievances to deter his efforts, however, and he set upon his new mission with vigor. His tenure began with an extensive effort to study the Combined Action Program. Corson later claimed that he personally visited 65–70 percent of the CACs, and his team members visited most platoons regularly. Corson's staff found that the CACs had serious personnel shortages and many did not have decent "covers" (adequate shelter for sleeping) over their heads. They worked hard to get Marines out to the field to solve the logistic issues and to provide each CAC with adequate resources to build shelters, bunkers, and perimeters of concertina wire. It is also clear that Corson's teams procured their materials from wherever they could. This included brazen acts of theft and alteration of reporting-unit code records to get the job done. Captain John M. Campanelli, who worked on one team, said they were known as the "Da Nang Mafia." He estimates the amount of "midnight requisitioning"—a polite term for theft—reached into the millions of dollars.³¹

Corson granted his senior noncommissioned officer, Master Sergeant Ralph Level, full independence to support the Combined Action Program as he saw fit. Level was an ideal choice to serve as Corson's enforcer. He had joined the Marine Corps in 1941 and fought on Guadalcanal with the 1st Raider Battalion. He was known as a highly competent Marine who got things done. Corson tapped him to study the CAPs, determine their needs, and do whatever it took to ensure they received adequate support. Level rarely slept in his bunk at III MAF headquarters and instead spent his days traveling to various CACs to delivering supplies and study each platoon. According to one officer,

³⁰ Lucas interview.

³¹ Maj John Campanelli, interview with Martin Russ, Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, tape 6321-2A, beginning at 3:07, hereafter Campanelli interview.

Level was an expert in midnight requisition and would not shy away from the practice when necessary. He would often head out in a 6 x 6 truck filled with whatever he could pilfer—lumber, concertina wire and other supplies—in the morning and not come back for several days.³²

Corson also went on a marketing campaign to publicize the CACs to the American people. He felt it that if the American public knew about the program, the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), would not be able to squash it. He also hoped that publicizing the combined action concept might convince U.S. Army or Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) personnel to implement the CAC program elsewhere in Vietnam. His efforts were marginally effective in promoting the program, but he was not able to get USMACV to adopt and spread it to other parts of Vietnam.³³

Corson and General Walt also took steps to organize combined action into its own autonomous organization. On 4 May 1967, Walt sent a memorandum to General Krulak proposing that the program be formally adopted as an official entity within III MAF. On 17 July 1967, General Greene issued Force Order 3121.A, which approved the proposal and officially created the Combined Action Program. The program fell solely under the command of III MAF.³⁴ The process of change from division command to III MAF command moved in stages. Two of the most important elements of this transition involved logistics and command and control. In July 1967, III MAF approved an official table of equipment for the CAPs, and 3d Marine Division was ordered to fill the platoons' supply and equipment requests accordingly.³⁵ A similar process followed within the 1st Marine Division. As

³² Ralph Level, interview with Marin Russ, Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, tape 6317.

³³ Part of this marketing campaign occurred after Corson returned home. The following year, he retired from the Marine Corps and published, *The Betrayal*, a scathing critique of U.S. strategy that also voiced strong support for the Combined Action Program. See Corson, *The Betrayal*, particularly chap. 7.

³⁴ Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 39; and FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," July 1967, item no. 1201001145, folder 001, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 57.

³⁵ "Logistics," 3d Marine Division, ComdC (1 of 2), July 1967, item no. 1201028034, folder 028, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 25.

Corson's staff worked with III MAF and the division commands to sort out logistics, they also created a new command control structure for the CAPs. By October 1967, all elements of combined action had been placed within this framework, under the command of III MAF.³⁶ Combined action's new organizational structure had a unique configuration. The program now had a director, a deputy director, and various instructors and inspectors.³⁷

The Corson era lasted from 14 February to August 1967, when he left Vietnam. He appeared to be the perfect person for the job with his educational background, his extensive experience, and his successful pacification program at Phong Bac hamlet. He was an enthusiastic, aggressive, and effective commander but was ultimately asked to leave or was relieved of his duties and left Vietnam disillusioned and sour.³⁸ The circumstances surrounding Corson's departure are unclear. He had created enemies within III MAF, but his achievements were undeniable. By August, he had been replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Sherwood A. Brunnenmeyer, who until then had commanded the Phu Bai enclave CAPs and had earlier led an infantry company with the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines.

Captain Campanelli, who had started out on Corson's team as the officer-in-charge of CAC in June 1967, felt saddened and embarrassed at the circumstances of Corson's departure. He did not give a clear picture of the precise details but, in his opinion, Corson became a victim of what Campanelli described as a "colonels' club" at III MAF. He speculated that the colonels were waiting for an excuse to take Corson down, and that they targeted him for personal rather than professional

³⁶ FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," November 1967, item no. 1201001171, folder 001, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 26–27.

³⁷ See "Organizational Data," 6, and "Command Directory," 6, both in III Marine Amphibious Force, ComdC, October 1967, item no. 1201003075, folder 003, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive. Unfortunately, the 4th Combined Action Group's war along the DMZ is outside the scope of this work. For more information on those platoons' creation and operations, see Sutton, "Combined Action in Vietnam," 232–39, 287–92, 371–73.

³⁸ See Corson, *The Betrayal*.

reasons. In a later interview, Campanelli claimed that several “missives” criticizing some of these colonels had been discovered. The documents, authored by Corson, found their way up the chain of command, eventually reaching division and III MAF headquarters.³⁹ An interview with Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons corroborates the suggestion that Corson was indeed relieved of command against his will. Simmons recalled being told that “the first thing [Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman Jr.] did when he relieved General Walt as III MAF commander in June 1967 was to get rid of Bill Corson,” although he did not elaborate on why.⁴⁰ General Greene, the Commandant of the Marine Corps from 1964 through 1967, remarked that the last time he saw Corson (likely in June 1967), he seemed disappointed, disillusioned, and sour.⁴¹

Corson did not do himself any favors while leading combined action, but neither did many of his U.S. and South Vietnamese counterparts. In several ways, Corson was just as much at war with them as he was with the Viet Cong. Some regimental and battalion commanders in III MAF wanted to keep control of their CACs; others did not care for his unorthodox methods. There was also tension between Corson and USMACV and CORDS personnel, who Corson believed did not value the Combined Action Program and did not want it to flourish. He was also at war with the system of corruption that pervaded the United States’ material support for the government and people of South Vietnam. In many cases, South Vietnamese officials diverted goods away from their intended destinations and sold them on the black market for personal profit. What did make it out to the villages was often misappropriated by district chiefs and other officials either for personal use or sale. Corson saw this as a major crisis that the United States, in the interest of maintaining relationships with the South

³⁹ Campanelli interview, beginning at 26:23.

⁴⁰ Edwin Simmons, interview with Martin Russ, 1967, Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, tape 6335A, beginning at 30:11.

⁴¹ Greene interview, beginning at 26:39.

Vietnamese government, essentially ignored.⁴² Taking these factors into account makes Corson's aggressive and sometimes abrasive leadership style easier to understand.

As the first director of the Combined Action Program, Lieutenant Colonel Corson left behind a complicated legacy. His tenure lasted a mere six months, but he did make several important contributions to combined action. He and his staff transformed the program from a disjointed group spread across several Marine units to a more unified structure under the command of III MAF, and they took steps to fix what had been to that point an ad hoc and unreliable system to supply and support the CAPs. His methods were unorthodox, and his demeanor was sometimes abrasive, but those involved in his team felt that he was a great commander that worked hard to accomplish their goal in a short time. However, there was only so much that Corson could accomplish during his tenure. The Combined Action Program improved in 1967, but its development was far from complete when Corson departed Vietnam.⁴³

Corson's departure also coincided with the beginning of a transitional period for combined action and the war in northern I Corps. As 1967 wore on, the fighting in northern I Corps diverted much of the Marines' attention and resources away from combined action and toward the fight with the NVA along the DMZ.⁴⁴ For the rest of 1967, the CAPs and infantry battalions left to hold the rest of I Corps had

⁴² See Corson, *The Betrayal*. Published on his retirement in 1968, Corson's book is recommended reading for his detailed views on the corrupt nature of the South Vietnamese government officials and his opinion that this problem was ignored to the detriment of the war effort by the U.S. military and civilian officials.

⁴³ For example, issues with administration, recruitment, and training still needed to be worked out. Cavender S. Sutton, "To Take Some of that Fear Away: Task Cohesion and Combat Effectiveness among Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam, 1965–71," *Marine Corps History* 8, no. 2 (Winter 2022/2023): 98–100, <https://doi.org/10.35318/mch.2022080205>.

⁴⁴ Command of the combined action program was highly unstable in late 1967. The program underwent three changes in command in the three months after Corson left. First, Corson's successor was killed in action just as he took over the program. Command then passed to another lieutenant colonel, who led the program before relinquishing command to another infantry officer just as the Viet Cong and NVA were making their final preparations for the Tet Offensive. See Sutton, "Combined Action in Vietnam," 259–60; and Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 50.

STATUS OF COMBINED ACTION, JANUARY 1967

to hold the line against a renewed guerrilla war with the Viet Cong. A crucial part of that fight occurred along the road to Hue, as the Marines fought to expand and then consolidate their hold in the Phu Bai TAOR.

CHAPTER 6

THE GUERRILLA WAR INTENSIFIES

Beginning in late 1966, the Phu Bai tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) expanded again to cover a large zone from Phu Bai southeast to the Hai Van Pass, the demarcation line between the Phu Bai and Da Nang areas of operations. The long stretch of Highway 1 there carried an increasing amount of allied military traffic between the two bases and was subject to Viet Cong attacks. A nearby mountain range gave them a perfect base from which to ambush and harass convoys traveling between Da Nang and Phu Bai. To secure this vital area, the Marines pushed into the Phu Loc District that sat along Highway 1 between Phu Bai and Da Nang. As elsewhere, the Viet Cong fiercely contested the Marines' arrival. The Marines responded by establishing a new series of Combined Action Platoons (CAP) along Highway 1 to protect the road and prevent enemy forces from gathering rice in the area. The CAPs assigned to Phu Loc saw frequent combat as the war increased in intensity and as the winter, and Tet, drew nearer.

Phu Loc was not the only difficult place the Marines had to secure as the Phu Bai TAOR expanded. The Phu Thu District remained a sanctuary for Viet Cong main force troops and a key hub for rice collection. Heavy combat often erupted between the Marines and Viet Cong when the latter attempted to enter or leave Phu Thu. Both districts would be important areas leading up to and during the Tet Offensive in early 1968. While the Marines were battling Viet Cong forces for control in the Phu Loc and Phu Thu districts, North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces were beginning to move in and building strength in the vast mountainous country near Hue. To further complicate matters, the war

in northern I Corps required more of the Marines' limited manpower and resources and left the Phu Bai enclave with only one full infantry battalion and a portion of another along with several CACs to protect the area, as the rest were needed to fight the NVA near the DMZ.¹

Yet, the war's increasing ferocity in the first half of 1967 was not limited to I Corps' northern fringes. As the Viet Cong increased their guerrilla activities elsewhere, the Marines responded with increased counter guerrilla operations of their own. In January 1967, the Marines conducted a total of 20,501 small-unit operations. The average monthly total throughout 1966 had been only 11,705.² As 1967 wore on, an influx of additional American units fortified I Corps and allowed the pacification and Revolutionary Development (RD) programs to regain momentum.³ The Viet Cong correspondingly increased their efforts to disrupt the pacification programs, as they knew that allied control of the villages in the countryside would destroy any hold they had on the people.⁴ Despite their best efforts, the RD and combined action programs continued to develop in I Corps even as violence there increased.

Into the Phu Loc District

The Phu Bai enclave had not expanded since the end of June 1966. In the latter half of that year, increased NVA activity around the DMZ caused the 3d Marine Division to shift much of its resources northward. The thinly stretched division could spare only one infantry battalion to protect Phu Bai and the surrounding TAOR. In late December, as the Marines sensed a rise in Viet Cong activity there, they pushed several

¹ Maj Gary L. Telfer, LtCol Lane Rogers, and V. Keith Fleming Jr., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1984), chaps. 2–4.

² "Small Unit Counter guerrilla Operations," Fleet Marine Force Pacific (FMFPAC), "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," January 1967, item no. 1201001106, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), 17.

³ Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *Fighting the North Vietnamese*, chap. 12.

⁴ The best explanation of how the insurgents understood and fought the war at the village level can be found in Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1986), chaps. 9–10.

operations into the Phu Loc District, a large area southeast of Phu Bai that extended along Highway 1 for more than 37 kilometers (23 miles), between the Nong and Lang Co Rivers, near the highway's ascent through the Hai Van Pass.⁵ A mountainous region, marked by tall peaks and thick jungles, runs along the Phu Loc District's southern fringes, south of the highway. The most prominent group of these mountains, the Bach Ma cluster, lays just beyond the villages located along Highway 1.

One of the most important terrain features in Phu Loc was a series of bridges along the highway. A railroad, with its own bridges, paralleled the road much of the way. The numerous old French forts and concrete bunkers at various spots indicated Highway 1's longstanding importance. This road was the main supply route from the deep-water port of Da Nang and essential to the Marines' overland supply system. This vital supply route carried combat units and supplies to Phu Bai and beyond to northern I Corps. There were other locations from which supplies and troops could be brought in, but Highway 1 was the main land route for moving those resources once they arrived. Large Marine convoys with Marine infantry as guards—termed “rough-rider duty”—traveled this highway frequently. Document captured in December 1966 indicated that the area's bridges were the Viet Cong's principal targets for the coming year.⁶

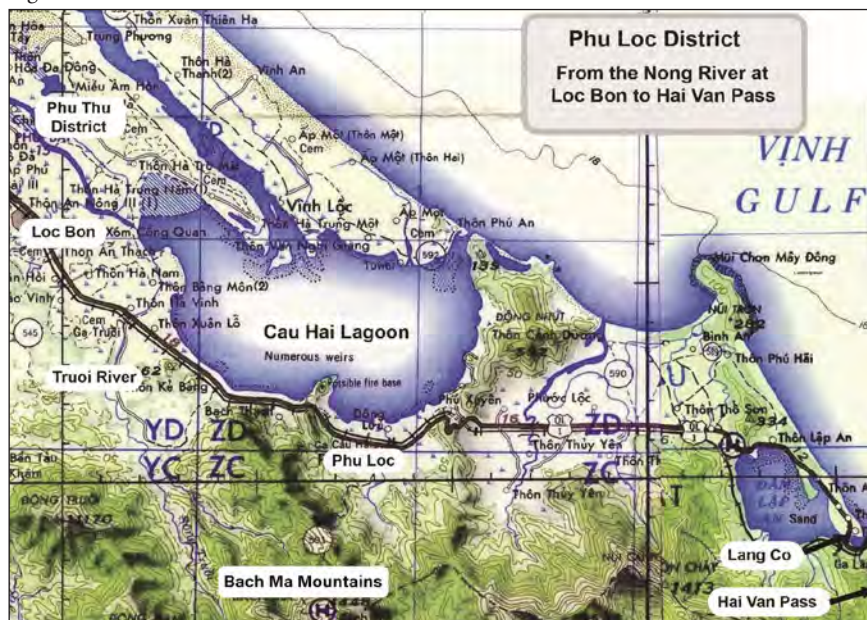
During that period, the Marines established four new CACs in Phu Loc. They placed each unit along Highway 1 near the main bridges or culverts. This eastward 20-plus-kilometer stretch of road, while headed in a general direction south toward Da Nang, ran straight, east to west, through Phu Loc. It was so straight for so long that Marines nicknamed it the “bowling alley.” The CACs were not bridge guards

⁵ “Narrative Summary,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, Command Chronology (ComdC), December 1966, item no. 1201060243, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, Part II, enclosure 1. See also “Combat Operations After Action Report,” 8 January 1967, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, January 1967, Tab D.

⁶ “S-2 Chronology, Significant Enemy Activity,” 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, December 1966, item no. 1201056058, folder 056, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

THE GUERRILLA WAR INTENSIFIES

Figure 6.1. Phu Loc District



This relief map shows the Phu Loc District. It runs from the white rectangle noting Loc Bon to just past the area on the right noted as Lang Co. The “bowling alley” is the long straight stretch of highway to the east of the rectangle noting Phu Loc.

Source: exhibit created by William Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, USMC History Division.

or road guards per se, but their physical presence, their constant patrolling, and the intelligence they gathered helped to keep the roadway open. Several bridges had South Vietnamese forces, either Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) or Popular Forces (PF), serving as bridge guards. Placed in nearby villages, the Combined Action Companies (CAC) augmented the indigenous troops’ effectiveness. The new CACs were also placed farther out than was typical for the amount of Marine infantry support in the area. With a larger TAOR and only one Marine battalion handling the Phu Bai enclave, the Phu Loc CAPs were in remote and often isolated positions.⁷

⁷ “Combat Missions Assigned,” 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, March 1967, item no. 1201061026, folder 061, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, enclosure 1, 21.

During this time, command of the Phu Bai enclave's CACs was divided between two companies. One commanded all the CACs in the northern and western half of the TAOR. That company's headquarters was located at the Huong Thuy District headquarters compound, north of the Phu Bai Combat Base. The other company commanded all the CACs in the eastern and southern half of the TAOR, including the Phu Loc District. This reorganization at Phu Bai coincided with a wider effort to standardize the identification system for all combined action units throughout I Corps. The Marines now named the units by a letter indicating what company they were in, followed by a number indicating which unit they were in the CAC company. The CACs in the Huong Thuy District were now the A (Alpha) CACs, while those in the Phu Loc District were designated the H (Hotel) CACs.⁸ The new CACs added in the southern Phu Loc District were CAC Hotel 4, CAC Hotel 5, CAC Hotel 6, and CAC Hotel 7. Soon after, the Marines created CAC Hotel 8, on the southeast side of the Truoi River, to serve as a blocking position against the trails leading to the mountains.⁹ All of these new Phu Loc CACs were in the shadow of the Bach Ma Mountain cluster, a haven for Viet Cong troops.

In the spring of 1967, the Viet Cong stepped up their attacks throughout the Phu Bai enclave. These attacks largely consisted of road- or bridge-mining, kidnappings, and assassinations. Phu Bai's resident battalion in early 1967, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, opined that the increase in incidents meant that the Viet Cong were losing control of the people.¹⁰ Intelligence gathered in early 1967 convinced the battalion's leadership that the main threat to Phu Bai and Phu Loc came from two Viet Cong main force units, the *802d* and *804th*

⁸ "Operation Order 8-66 Task Organization," 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, December 1966, item no. 1201056058, folder 056, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 1.

⁹ CAC Hotel 8 first appears in the records of the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, on 23 March 1967, when it engaged 10 Viet Cong resulting in 4 killed. See "Intelligence," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, March 1967, 37.

¹⁰ "S-2 Chronology," 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, January 1967, item no. 1201056059, folder 056, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 9; and "Comments and Conclusions," 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, January 1967, annex C, 4.

THE GUERRILLA WAR INTENSIFIES

Figure 6.2. Locations of new CACs in the Phu Bai area



This map shows a portion of the Phu Loc District from the Truoi River out to near the Hai Van Pass that was the extension of the Phu Bai enclave TAOR. The red circles show where the new CACs were placed. This Phu Loc extension was referred to as the southern or the bottom half of the TAOR.

Source: exhibit created by William Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, USMC History Division.

Battalions. Both were located within striking distance of the Phu Bai TAOR. The *804th Battalion* was reported to be heavily armed with automatic weapons and four to six 81-millimeter mortars. While the main body of the *804th Battalion* was based several kilometers south of the TAOR, elements of that unit were reported in the Phu Thu District immediately to the north of the TAOR boundary near where the Truoi River empties into the bay.¹¹ More pressing was a February intelligence report that indicated a NVA unit had entered the area.¹²

¹¹“S-2 Chronology,” 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, January 1967, C-2; “S-2 Chronology, Order of Battle,” 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, February 1967, item no. 1201056060, folder 056, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, C-1, C-2; and “Enemy Situation,” 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, February 1967, C-2.

¹²“S-2 Chronology,” 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, January 1967, C-2.

That meant trouble for the new combined action units south of Phu Bai. The Hotel CACs engaged enemy forces in Phu Loc right away.¹³ This could have been due to the Viet Cong's increased campaign of guerrilla warfare, or it could have been that the new CACs represented an imposing obstacle to their efforts to control the villages and collect rice from them. New CACs traditionally upset the Viet Cong. Before the CACs arrived, the Viet Cong could usually operate within a village without much interference. Once a CAC began its own operations there, the Viet Cong no longer had free rein. They had to move much more carefully if they wanted to recruit, proselytize their propaganda, or collect taxes. Typically, it took a few months before a new CAC developed a bond with the villagers, making them feel safe about their security and willing to provide intelligence. That initial period after a CAC's arrival was just as critical to the Viet Cong as to the Marines.

The CACs around Phu Bai shouldered a heavy portion of the region's defenses. Of the 783 patrols and 387 ambushes conducted in the Phu Bai TAOR in January 1967, the enclave's CACs conducted 310 and 307, respectively. The CACs fought eight engagements with the Viet Cong and accounted for seven confirmed enemy killed.¹⁴ In February, both CAC companies, Alpha and Hotel, continued to make frequent contact with the enemy, and fortunately no Marines were killed.¹⁵ In March, the Marines took steps to further block Viet Cong infiltration from the mountains. Phu Bai's new resident battalion, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, established platoon-size patrol bases at the two most troubled spots of Gia Le and the Truoi River.¹⁶ Both areas contained major routes out of the mountains. The battalion's records show that, in addition to several company-size operations, its Marines conducted more than 1,000 small-unit patrols that month and that CAC companies Alpha and Hotel were responsible for the vast majority of those actions. The battalion also commented that the CAC

¹³ "S-2 Chronology," 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, January 1967, annex C, 2-3.

¹⁴ "S-3 Chronology," 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, January 1967, 8; and "Combined Action Companies," 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, January 1967, D-2.

¹⁵ See "S-3 Journal," 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, February 1967, appendix 3.

¹⁶ "Combat Mission Assigned," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, March 1967, 21.

patrols were quite valuable in providing security for the villagers living around each CAC unit. They concluded that the CACs disrupted enemy movement into the villages and were a good source of information on enemy movement.¹⁷ The CACs were particularly valuable around Phu Bai because the lone infantry battalion there could not adequately patrol the TAOR on its own. With no reinforcements forthcoming, the combined action Marines and PFs out in the villages served as a crucial defensive force multiplier for the region.

The Viet Cong were, however, committing more troops to the fighting around Phu Bai. Marine and ARVN patrols began to detect large groups of Viet Cong moving throughout the area in March and April. Some of the most significant sightings occurred in the Phu Thu and the Phu Loc Districts. Marine patrols spotted two company-size units in the former and one company- and one battalion-size unit in the latter.¹⁸ They observed even larger and more frequent movements in April, reporting a total of 67 company- and 13 battalion-size units moving through the area. Thirty-six of these sightings occurred in the Phu Loc District where the new CACs were located. In the nearby Phu Vang District, intelligence confirmed the presence of the Viet Cong main force *802d Battalion*. The grid coordinates cited by the reporting unit placed them just to the east of Hue and within striking distance of the Phu Bai Combat Base and other important installations.¹⁹ While several Viet Cong units were probably spotted and reported multiple times, that does not diminish the gravity of the situation the confronted the Marines and their South Vietnamese counterparts at Phu Bai in the spring of 1967. Viet Cong forces were highly active in the TAOR, and they were concentrating large amounts of troops there. The Marines would have to figure out how to offset the Viet Cong's advantages in numbers and mobility with the resources that they and their allies had on hand.

¹⁷ "Small Unit Operations," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, March 1967, enclosure 1, 24.

¹⁸ "Significant Activity," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, March 1967, 35.

¹⁹ "Intelligence," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, item no. 1201061027, folder 061, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 37.

The Viet Cong movements portended another round of violence throughout the region. On 11 March, a large group of Viet Cong attacked the Phu Thu District headquarters, killing 36 South Vietnamese personnel. This district headquarters was less than a kilometer from the eastern boundary of CAC Alpha 1's TAOR. Intelligence suspected that a Viet Cong local force company launched the attack with assistance from the Viet Cong main force *804th Battalion*. The *804th Battalion* had been sighted in the Phu Thu District prior to the attack.²⁰

But the infusion of Viet Cong troops did not mean that they would concentrate their efforts on military targets alone. In the spring, the Viet Cong shifted to more indirect tactics: acts of terrorism, mining, and propaganda. They also attempted to disrupt the RD program.²¹ Kidnapping and assassination were the primary tactics that the Viet Cong used in March and April to send a message to all villagers, village officials, village elders, and hamlet chiefs to stop cooperating with the United States and the South Vietnamese government. News of these incidents traveled fast, and the Viet Cong grew bolder throughout the spring. On 23 March, they kidnapped six civilians from a hamlet in a Hotel CAC's TAOR, less than 1,000 meters north of the Truoi River Bridge. On 24 March, they assassinated four village elders in Gia Le, where CACs Alpha 6 and 9 were located. The victims were shot in the middle of the day near a main intersection on the highway. The next day, a 54-year-old woman was found shot in a small village just south of the Truoi River Bridge. She had been giving information to the PF soldiers. On the night of 27 March, the Viet Cong kidnapped five villagers in one of the hamlets along the Truoi River about one kilometer north of the bridge. In fact, three of the five acts of terrorism in March took place within 1,000 meters of the Truoi River Bridge.²² These incidents were no coincidence; one of the Viet Cong's main routes into

²⁰ "Enemy Activity," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, March 1967, 37.

²¹ "Revolutionary Development," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," April 1967, item no. 1201001125, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 57.

²² "Enemy Activity," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, March 1967, D; and "Terrorism," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, March 1967, 37.

the area, which hosted two important rice-collection points, passed near the bridge. Until CAC Hotel 8 arrived on the southeast side of the Truoi River in April, Viet Cong units large and small could use the route to move freely between the Bach Ma Mountain cluster and the Phu Thu District.

In April, acts of terror occurred almost exclusively in the Phu Loc District, at about the same frequency as in March. There, the Viet Cong conducted three assassinations and two kidnappings during the month. One man was killed because he had been a PF, a farmer was executed because he refused to pay the Viet Cong taxes, and a hamlet chief was threatened and wounded while escaping to CAC Hotel 5. Finally, on 23 April, five Viet Cong took a woman from her home and killed her. They left a note stating she had been executed by as an example to others who are “helping the enemy fight against the [National Liberation] front.”²³

These acts of terror suggest the Marines’ expansion into the area unnerved the Viet Cong. It was clear that the Marines and South Vietnamese government were working to expand their influence in the area. Establishing new CACs in the Phu Loc District made it more difficult for the Viet Cong to operate as they had before the Marines’ arrival. They lived mainly in the mountains, so access to the lowlands was vital for their ability to acquire rice and supplies. These new CACs presented a significant obstacle to their ability to collect rice from and exert control over the villagers in the area. Rather than attacking the CACs or their patrols directly, the Viet Cong instead chose to go after safer targets by stepping up their campaign of terrorism against the people.

Struggle in Phu Thu

Perhaps the most important piece of territory within the Phu Bai enclave at this time was the Phu Thu District. Phu Thu was a huge piece of land that abutted the Phu Bai TAOR and provided sanctuary for Viet Cong soldiers. It had a contiguous border with the Marine TAOR from

²³ “Intelligence,” 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, 41.

its northern fringes down to the Cau Hai Lagoon. Since it was outside the Marines' area of operations, U.S. units could not go there without seeking permission from the ARVN. It was so large that even if the Marines could have entered the district at will, they did not have enough forces to keep it under control. The 1st ARVN Division was technically responsible for Phu Thu, but it did not exercise much emphasis on controlling it. In its defense, the 1st ARVN was already stretched thin fighting the Viet Cong main force in other parts of I Corps.²⁴

The district was large and open, containing miles of rice fields, broken only by dozens of small islands of hamlets where those who worked the fields lived. Viet Cong local and main force units could hide and collect food there as they pleased. The hamlets, like most in the area, were densely vegetated with networks of trails. These physical barriers made aerial reconnaissance over the hamlets useless. Sentries posted on the hamlet fringes could warn of anyone coming from long distances away. While movement in the daytime from hamlet to hamlet was risky, nighttime movement was easy and relatively safe. The entire area was traditionally friendly to the Viet Cong, who could count on receiving food and assistance throughout the area, whatever route they chose to take. The few government outposts in Phu Thu were not effective in combating the situation.²⁵

Phu Thu's more flat and open terrain did not make life any easier for those who fought there. While Marines in the Phu Loc District had to contend with the steep and heavily jungled mountains nearby, those in the TAOR's northern half constantly had to move across open spaces when traveling to and from Phu Thu and guard against attacks by enemy forces based there. The ARVN's inability to control Phu Thu threatened the security of the entire lowlands south of Hue. It was a critical sanctuary for main and local force Viet Cong units because of its defensible terrain, endless rice supply, and its close proximity to Hue. The Viet Cong were determined to maintain control of this bastion, and they spent the spring of 1967 inflicting acts of terrorism against

²⁴ "Intelligence," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, 2-4.

²⁵ "Intelligence," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, 2-4.

South Vietnamese government officials and noncompliant villages, mining nearby roads, and moving troops into and through the district.²⁶

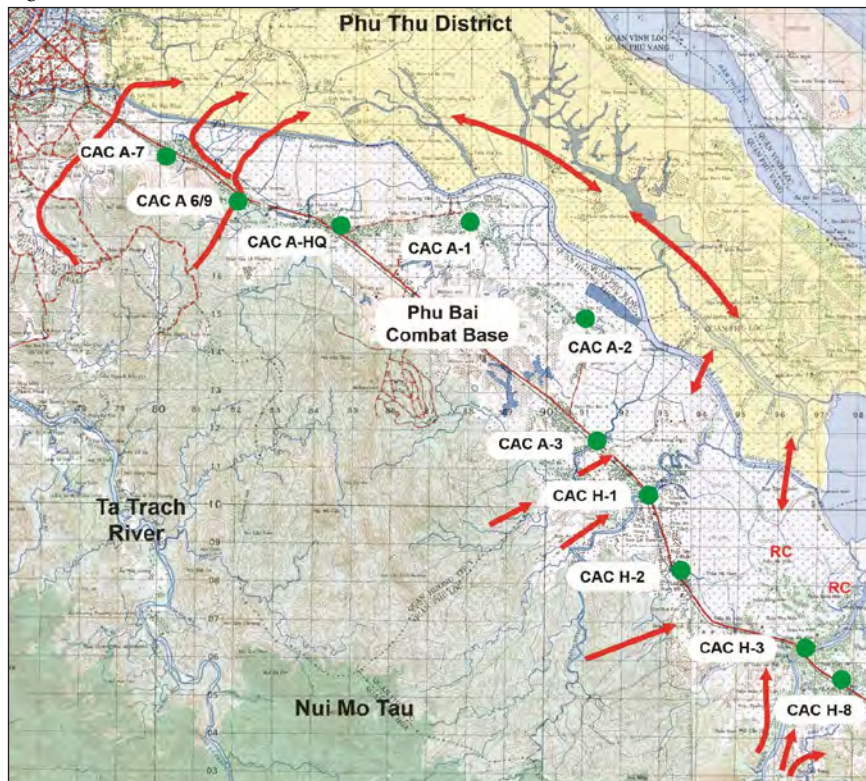
For the Viet Cong who lived in the mountains nearby, Phu Thu was a vital source of food. Growing rice was difficult in the jungle-covered mountains that based many of the main force units, so they had to import it from the lowlands. There were several trail systems that ran back and forth between those mountains and the Phu Thu District (see figure 6.3). If a Viet Cong unit could successfully run the gauntlet of Marine infantry and CAC ambush patrols, they had access to ample food and shelter once they crossed the river. The district provided a lowland sanctuary that could serve as a base of operations where large numbers of Viet Cong could hide, eat, and launch operations against Marine and ARVN forces between Hue and Phu Bai. Most CAC engagements in this area occurred against Viet Cong troops coming out of the mountains toward the lowlands.²⁷ Establishing control over the Phu Thu District, which did not occur until after the Tet Offensive, would have eliminated many problems for the Marines at Phu Bai. But in 1967, the Marines simply did not have the numbers to do so. They had to settle instead for trying to interdict Viet Cong troop movements between Phu Thu and the mountains.

As the rice harvest approached, Phu Thu became a focal point of Viet Cong activity. During the last two weeks of April, just before the harvest began, there was a distinct shift of Viet Cong units away from Phu Loc into Phu Thu. Viet Cong forces typically entered and departed Phu Thu along routes running between the CAC platoons on the Truoi River: Hotel 8 and Hotel 3, as well as Alpha 7 farther northeast toward Hue (see figure 6.3). The routes to and through the district were not single trails but rather wide pathways that provided multiple lanes for Viet Cong troops to move back and forth, sometimes over long distances. Many CAC platoons along Highway 1 operated in vil-

²⁶ "Intelligence," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, March 1967, 35; and "Intelligence," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, 39.

²⁷ "Intelligence," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, May 1967, item no. 1201061028, folder 061, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 31–34.

Figure 6.3. Locations of CACs in the Phu Thu area



This map shows the location of Phu Thu, as well as many of the Alpha and Hotel CACs along Highway 1. The red lines show the general routes of enemy movement back and forth from rice-rich Phu Thu to the mountains. The markings "RC" denote known rice collection points. Source: exhibit created by William Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, USMC History Division.

lages located on or near these routes.²⁸ As spring turned to summer, those Marines and the infantry operating nearby worked to make the Viet Cong's efforts to move personnel, food, and supplies between the mountains and lowlands more dangerous. They monitored all the trails and patrolled the villages nightly, searching for activity within them.

Many of the Marines' patrols sought to track, predict, and then attack the Viet Cong's movements. Months of operations had helped

²⁸ "Intelligence," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, 39.

the Marines learn the extensive trail systems running into and out of Phu Thu. As their familiarity with the terrain grew, their ability to set ambushes and interdict Viet Cong travel improved. But the Viet Cong were learning and reacting to their foes, as well. For example, Viet Cong units passing through the Royal Tombs, an area of majestically built emperors' tombs and a major gateway to the lowlands, changed their route in April. They ceased using the paths through Gia Le as their primary route from the Royal Tombs and instead skirted the TAOR's outer fringes along route 549 up to the Loi Nong Canal before crossing rice paddies traveling along the canal to Loi Nong village. From that point on they could move freely into the Phu Thu District.²⁹

Another important route ran from Phu Thu into a hilly region nearly 10 kilometers south of Highway 1. Here, Viet Cong troops would follow a river named the Song Thieu Hoa until it intersects with another river, the Song Cong Quan, at the border between the Phu Thu District and the Phu Bai TAOR. After crossing the river at the Song Cong Quan, the Viet Cong could travel along the coast of Dam Cau Hai, a large lagoon, and then proceed onto the trails running along the Truoi River and into the hills and mountains. Establishing CAC Hotel 8 in late March on the southeast side of the Truoi River made that route much more dangerous. The geography channelized the enemy units into CAC Hotel 8's TAOR, where the Marines and PF could block the route with patrols and ambushes.³⁰ The Viet Cong adjusted again. They began moving from the intersection of the Song Cong Quan and Song Thieu Hoa Rivers through the terrain between CACs Hotel 2 and Hotel 3 and back to the mountains west of Highway 1. The Marines called this area and its roadway crossing the "bend in the road." It would become a popular Marine infantry and CAC ambush site as more enemy units desperate for rice traveled from the mountain camps.³¹

²⁹ "Intelligence," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, 38.

³⁰ "Intelligence," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, March 1967, 35.

³¹ "Intelligence," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, 39.

By summer 1967, the characteristics that would define combined action's war at Phu Bai until the Tet Offensive had taken shape. It would center on a fight to deny Communist troops the ability to move through the TAOR at will. As the year wore on, and as the Tet Offensive approached, necessity would drive them to use most of these routes, regardless of who might be watching them. The trail systems that linked the mountains west of Phu Bai with the lowlands soon became battlegrounds as the Marines, ARVN, Viet Cong, and NVA vied for control of the terrain south of Hue.

The War in I Corps and Combined Action, June 1967

In June 1967, the war in the I Corps, where Viet Cong and NVA forces were directing their most intensive efforts, was continuing to grow. The enemy presence in I Corps had increased in number from 32,800 in January to 38,000 at the end of June. There was a clear trend developing. The number of NVA battalions had increased from 18 to 37 since June the previous year.³² The Viet Cong and the NVA were rapidly losing troops—nearly seven enemy casualty for every friendly loss. In the first six months of 1967, a FMFPAC summary stated that the Marine forces in III MAF killed 12,808 enemy fighters while suffering 1,732 killed. Other forces throughout I Corps accounted for 8,207 enemy killed during the same period.³³ The Commander in Chief, Pacific, and the commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), concluded that adding 35 percent of the number of enemy killed was a reasonable estimate of the number who died of wounds. Using that 35 percent rate in relation to the 21,015 confirmed kills would raise the total of enemy killed in the first six months of 1967 to 30,252.³⁴ While it is unclear whether this 35-percent esti-

³² "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, item no. 1201001138, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 6.

³³ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, 3.

³⁴ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, 17.

mate is part of the inflated body count concept, it is known that the enemy's losses were substantial.

The Marines calculated that by June, about 44 percent of the total enemy incidents in South Vietnam had occurred in I Corps. Approximately 45 percent of the enemy killed by June of 1967 were in I Corps, yet only 21 percent of "friendly forces" were in I Corps.³⁵ Allied units operating in I Corps needed help to meet the rise in enemy activity. Help came in April in the form of Task Force Oregon, a U.S. Army task force comprised of four brigades, which took over operations in the southern Quang Ngai Province. This augmentation helped III MAF restore the momentum to the pacification and revolutionary development efforts that had been lost during the past few months due to the increase in war at the northern border.³⁶ Meanwhile, Marine large-unit operations targeted enemy base camp areas throughout the I Corps. From January 1967 through June 1967, there were 47 operations that targeted certain known base areas.³⁷

The Marines' theory regarding the enemy's strategy was that the North Vietnamese wanted to create a crisis at the border and cause the United States to base more troops there to meet the threat. The North Vietnamese bolstered their operations along the DMZ by sending what the Marines called "frequent excursions into South Vietnam in force."³⁸ These acts caused friendly forces in I Corps, mostly U.S. Marines and ARVN troops, to send more personnel north to confront the threat. Another goal was to draw friendly forces away from what the command described as more productive missions in the densely populated lowland areas. The effect was to deplete the friendly forces and, by extension, the South Vietnamese government's power, in the rice-growing lowland areas. As part of their strategy, the enemy increased their guerrilla warfare in those lowland populated areas, hoping to take advantage of the allied troops being diverted from the lowlands.

³⁵ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, 12.

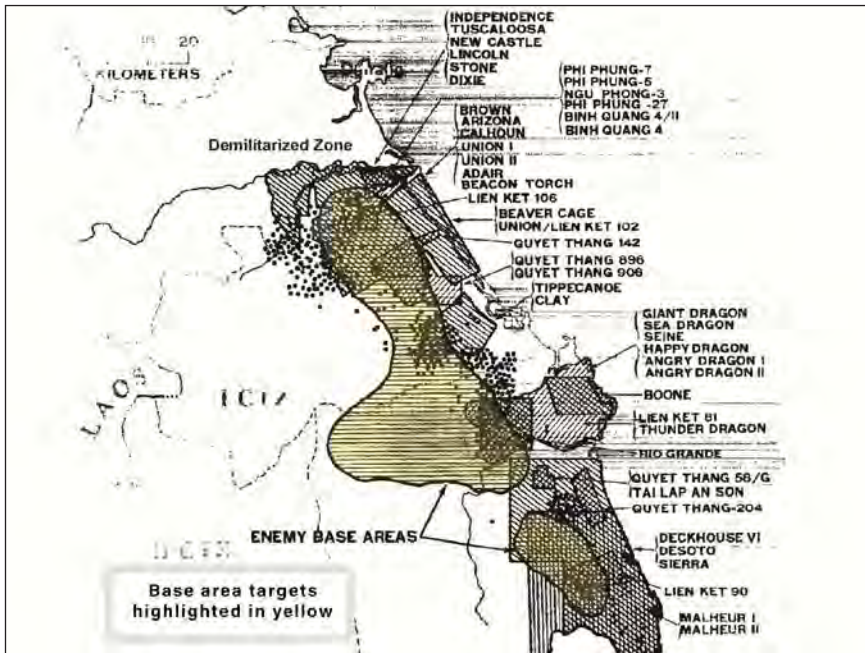
³⁶ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, 13.

³⁷ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, 15.

³⁸ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, 5.

CHAPTER 6

Figure 6.4. Operations targeting enemy base camps



This chart from the June 1967 FMFPAC records shows the targeted base areas highlighted in yellow. The chart also shows the names and general areas of the 47 base-area targeted operations. Half of the enemy killed by the Marines and Task Force X-Ray in the first six months of 1967 were in these operations designed to target enemy base camps.

Source: exhibit created by William Nimmo; base map located in "Summary," Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, item no. 1201001138, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, 15.

This increase of guerrilla warfare had begun earlier, but it continued to rise in intensity.

At the same time, Marine commanders felt that the pacification programs were successfully grinding away at the Viet Cong infrastructure. Their opinion on the enemy's strategy relied in part on a statement provided by Commissioner M. A. Rahman, an Indian national, who was part of the International Control Commission that had originally implemented the Geneva Accords and was charged with monitoring compliance. Following a trip to Hanoi, Raham reported, "The crucial matter from Hanoi's standpoint is not the volume of Commu-

nist casualties, but the survival of the guerrilla infrastructure in South Vietnam.”³⁹ Communist officials corroborated Raham’s assessment. Nguyen Van Mai, a high Viet Cong official in Phnom Penh, stated, “The National Liberation Front will entice the Americans close to the North Vietnamese border and will bleed them without mercy. In South Vietnam the pacification program will be destroyed.”⁴⁰ These concerns were well-reasoned, as the Marines in I Corps were significantly increasing their operational tempo at this time. In the month of June alone, the Marines conducted 31,394 patrols, ambushes, and company-size operations. Task Force Oregon added 6,083 to that total. A total of 669 guerrillas were killed and 59 were taken prisoner.⁴¹

The Viet Cong’s insistence on targeting RD teams further complicated matters. From January through June, they conducted an intensified campaign targeting RD programs and personnel. The program had gotten a slow start from the South Vietnamese perspective, but it was growing in 1967. However, furthering its expansion required delicate coordination between the ARVN and the South Vietnamese government. The South Vietnamese government determined priority areas to pacify, and they used both ARVN infantry and RD teams, and PF soldiers or Regional Force soldiers, to accomplish the goal. These priority areas were in the rice-growing lowlands. The infantry battalions conducted patrols and operations in the surrounding countryside to keep the Viet Cong main force and local force companies out of the area where the RD teams were located. Yet, the ARVN’s ability to devote adequate personnel and attention to the RD program was hampered by the persistent need to divert more troops north to confront the enemy build up in northern I Corps. Without infantry screening the area, the RD teams were vulnerable to attack.⁴²

³⁹ “Summary, Evolution of Enemy Strategy in ICTZ,” FMFPAC, “Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam,” June 1967, 5–10.

⁴⁰ “Summary,” FMFPAC, “Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam,” June 1967, 10.

⁴¹ “Small Unit Counter guerrilla Operations,” FMFPAC, “Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam,” June 1967, 42.

⁴² “Revolutionary Development Program,” FMFPAC, “Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam,” June 1967, 47–50.

It is unfortunate that more resources could not be allocated to the RD program. It had great potential. The people in the RD teams were young and enthusiastic. Their presence in their assigned villages could have established a strong bond with the hamlet residents that they served. They were probably the best representation to the hamlets that the South Vietnamese government was trying to better the lives of its people. That the RDs were native speakers and part of the nation they sought to build gave the program a stronger sense of legitimacy among the population. Their intimate knowledge with the country and its people would have also made it easier to ferret out the people who were Viet Cong cadres and sympathizers better than the Americans.

But the blame does not fall on the ARVN and the South Vietnamese government alone. RD was neither a top priority within USMACV or U.S. political leadership. A 1966 report titled *A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam* commissioned by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended a more pacification-focused approach.⁴³ General William C. Westmoreland, however, rejected that approach and largely continued to prioritize seeking out and destroying enemy forces.⁴⁴ There was much controversy about Westmoreland's approach, but it must be remembered that President Lyndon B. Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara wanted the war won quickly. McNamara, when confronted with the counterinsurgency or counterterrorism approach, did not contest its effectiveness. He did not fear it would not work, but that it would take too long.⁴⁵

While there had been a noticeable slippage in the pacification status of some of the RD villages, there were still some signs of progress. U.S. assistance to the RD program was reorganized, and an organization known as Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support

⁴³ *A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1966).

⁴⁴ John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 158–60; and Lewis Sorely, "To Change a War: General Harold K. Johnson and the PROVN Study," *Parameters* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 93–109.

⁴⁵ LtGen Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 195–200.

(CORDS) was established. In I Corps, CORDS teams were under the command of III MAF, which instituted clearly defined areas of authority, responsibility, and coordination. This was a major step, and by July 1967 the RD program was expanded and placed under the command of Robert W. Komer, a former national security advisor to President Johnson. Under Komer's leadership, there would be substantial progress within six months. The commanding general of I Corps added two ARVN infantry battalions to the program, making a total of 14 ARVN battalions assigned to protect RD teams in the I Corps area. As of June 1967, there were 118 RD teams with an average strength each of 54 persons.⁴⁶

The program's benefits were beginning to show in local elections held in relatively safe villages. Phase One of this election effort concluded on 11 June 1967, with the final 156 hamlets scheduled for elections. Records show that 82.4 percent of those eligible voted in 154 villages, and 78.8 percent of eligible voters voted in 547 hamlet elections. In all, 611,697 Vietnamese casted their votes for chiefs and councils.⁴⁷ Increased RD activity did not go unnoticed by the enemy. The insurgents had increasingly targeted RD teams since January 1967. In 122 incidents against RD teams, 107 RD team members had been killed, 171 wounded, and 24 missing. Of the 376 attacks in I Corps since January 1967, 66 percent occurred in or near the RD priority areas.⁴⁸

In June 1967, the Marine high command opined that combined action units were making a "notable" contribution to the III MAF counterguerrilla campaign. The number of patrols and ambushes continued to increase. In June, the CAPs conducted 5,582 patrols and ambushes.⁴⁹ By that same month, there were 75 CAPs in existence throughout I Corps. There had been 57 as of 1 January 1967. The goal for the end of the year was 114. They were behind and would not reach that goal, but there would be 79 CAPs by year's end.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, 56.

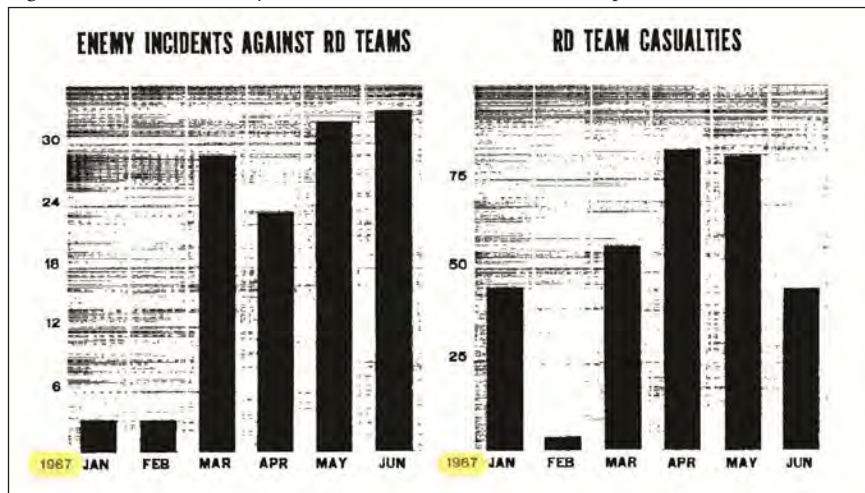
⁴⁷ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, 57.

⁴⁸ "Summary," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, 47–48.

⁴⁹ "Combined Action," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, 44.

⁵⁰ "Revolutionary Development," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, 63.

Figure 6.5. Charts of enemy incidents and RD casualties in I Corps



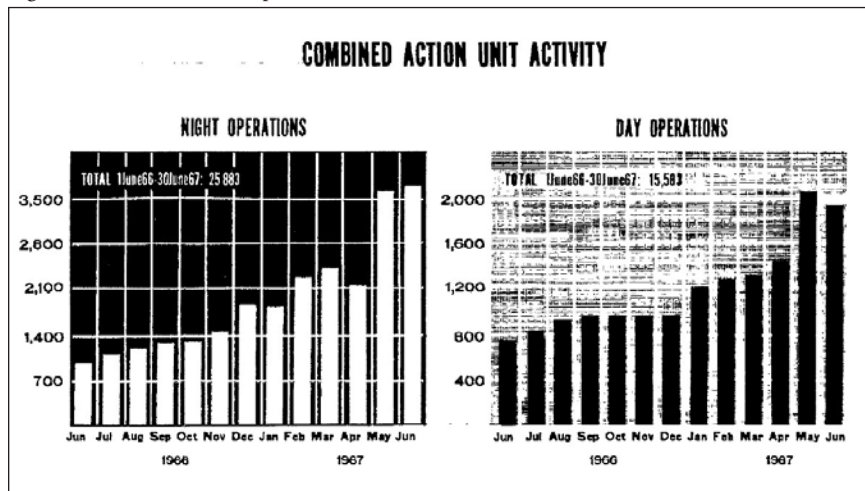
This FMFPAC chart shows the rise in enemy incidents against the RD teams in I Corps. The chart on the right shows the RD casualties.

Source: Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, item no. 1201001138, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, 49.

The year 1967 was an increasingly challenging time for the Combined Action Program and its Marines and PFs. As part of the enemy movement to destroy the pacification program, CACs, like the RD teams, became targets for the Viet Cong. For example, in the spring and early summer of 1967, four CACs, all located in the Da Nang enclave, were hit in swift early morning hour attacks by large, well-armed groups of Viet Cong. The first attack occurred on 19 April at CAC 21, located along the main supply route through the Dai Loc District at the village known as An My Ba. Records estimate that they were hit by a platoon of Viet Cong with small arms, satchel charges, and hand grenades. They destroyed three of the CAC's four bunkers. The attack lasted a half hour and resulted in two Marines killed, five Marines wounded, three PFs killed, and one PF wounded. A reaction force from Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, was dispatched to relieve the compound. Meanwhile, the CAC called artillery fire on the Viet Cong's withdrawal routes, and a flare ship was brought on station.

THE GUERRILLA WAR INTENSIFIES

Figure 6.6. Chart of CAP operations, June 1966–June 1967



This FMFPAC chart shows the rise of CAP day and night operations from June 1966 through June 1967.

Source: Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, item no. 1201001138, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

Seven Viet Cong were confirmed killed with 12 more estimated to have been killed.⁵¹

The second attack happened against CAC 22 on 13 May, also in the Dai Loc District near a village known as Tam Hoa. CAC 22 was located on a river that separated the Da Nang TAOR from the infamous Arizona Territory. The attacking force was estimated to be 100 well-equipped Viet Cong who wore helmets and launched a highly coordinated attack with supporting arms. The entire area was hit by mortar fire and possibly 57-millimeter recoilless rifle fire. The Viet Cong penetrated the CAC's perimeter in two sectors where the wire was propped up by sticks. Once inside, they threw Chicom hand grenades into the Marines' positions and tossed a satchel charge into the command bunker. The Viet Cong were eventually driven off by grenades, small arms fire, and

⁵¹ "Commander's Narrative of Significant Events," 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, item no. 1201053002, folder 053, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 5.

automatic weapons fire. A reaction force with tanks arrived from nearby to sweep the area and drive off any remaining threats. It is estimated that 20 Viet Cong were killed. Two Marines were killed, four Marines were wounded, four PFs were killed, and two PFs were wounded.⁵²

On 15 May, in the Dien Ban District, two Viet Cong main force companies attacked CAC Delta 4. The Viet Cong launched their assault at approximately 0300 hours, using Bangalore torpedoes to breach the wire. The enemy also attacked with B40 rockets, 57-millimeter recoilless rifles, and 20–30 shaped charges. The Viet Cong were able to get inside the wire but ultimately withdrew using two routes. An estimated 15 Viet Cong were killed. CAC Delta 4 suffered 4 Marines and 1 PF killed and 12 Marines and 9 PFs wounded. The Viet Cong left substantial equipment behind, including three Bangalore torpedoes, two AK-47 assault rifles, three shaped charges, several Chicom grenades, and various other pieces of military hardware. A name tag was found, identifying the unit as the *T-51st*, a company of the Viet Cong main force *V25 Battalion*.

It is important to note that at this time that the Marine infantry had made substantial progress pushing the Viet Cong main force to the periphery of the Da Nang TAOR boundaries. This main force unit had been forced south of the TAOR by the infantry's clearing operations. Unfortunately for CAC Delta 4, the *V25* resided immediately across the Hoi An River, which was the TAOR boundary. There was also a large open uninhabited space south of the CAC before the river that provided a good area from which the Viet Cong could stage an attack and then to which they could withdraw. The CAC had no protection from that southern direction.

On 6 June, CAC Bravo 4, situated in the Hieu District on the inland supply route running out of Da Nang, was hit by a Viet Cong force of more than 100 fighters wearing no shoes, no shirts, and black and white headbands. They penetrated the perimeter from the south-

⁵² "Commander's Narrative of Significant Events," 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, ComdC, May 1967, item no. 1201053003, folder 053, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, item 24.

west using satchel charges and grenades. In addition to small arms, the Viet Cong had a .30-caliber machine gun and possibly a .50-caliber machine gun. They used 30 satchel charges and 30 grenades to destroy an ammunition bunker and two main bunkers. Two Marines from a listening post on one side of the perimeter and a Marine from a listening post on another were killed outside the wire. A reaction force from an infantry unit on a hill within one kilometer was able to respond with a tank. The Viet Cong fled as the reaction force approached and withdrew to the east, toward the Ven River. Five Marines were killed, four Marines were wounded, and five PFs were wounded.⁵³

Regarding the 6 June attack on Bravo 4, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines' records noted that this attack and the two earlier attacks on the CACs at An My Ba and Tam Hoa were very similar. All were swiftly carried out by well-trained and well-prepared personnel who employed rockets, rifle grenades, and mortars before penetrating the wire and assaulting the bunkers. The report further noted that a PF who worked for a CAP was beheaded on 15 June and that two refugee villages under construction were attacked. These events confirmed to the command that the mission of the Viet Cong units, at least within their TAOR, was to harass and terrorize the CACs and the RD program in order to impede any further progress.⁵⁴ Each attack exemplified one of the fundamental tenets of Viet Cong tactics promulgated by NVA general Vo Nguyen Giap, one of the most respected generals and strategists of the Vietnam wars. He said, in part: "we strictly followed this fundamental principle of the conduct of a revolutionary war; strike to win, and strike only when success is certain; if it is not, then don't strike."⁵⁵

One of the vulnerabilities of fixed-compound CAPs was that a large and well-organized group of Viet Cong could overwhelm them. The CAPs were outnumbered in these attacks, sometimes as much as

⁵³ "Commander's Narrative of Significant Events," 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, ComdC, June 1967, item no. 1201053004, folder 053, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 5.

⁵⁴ "Intelligence," 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, ComdC, June 1967, 1–2.

⁵⁵ Warren Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big Unit War against the U.S., 1965–1966* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 22.

10 to 1 or more. The compounds where they resided often trapped the Marines and PFs inside during the nighttime. This provided the enemy a fixed target that was hard to defend with just a few Marines and some questionably reliable PF soldiers. Most CACs could only have one night watch position, which was typically manned by four Marines sharing the night from dark until dawn. In the best of circumstances, PFs also manned a position on a different side, but that was not necessarily the norm. Usually, every night a patrol of at least four to six Marines would be out of the compound and not available for its defense. It did not seem to matter much how strong the infantry's presence was in the area of any of the CAP attacks.

The Viet Cong picked their targets based on a number of factors. Their attack styles would suggest advance research and planning. Some of those CAPs attacked were on vital enemy routes. Others were on the periphery of the TAOR bounded by open and rough territory. Some were just easy targets based on their locations. The Viet Cong knew from intelligence operatives generally where the Marine infantry was operating so they could avoid them on their routes into the attack position.⁵⁶

Reaction forces, although helpful in some attacks, were unrealistic for most CAPs. If a reaction force was sent, the chances of them getting to the CAPs in time to help was slim. Artillery was a CAP's best friend, but many times the CAPs were embedded too close to the villagers' homes to get permission to fire on an advancing enemy. CAP compound designs and defenses would evolve and improve, but this would be a slow process given the scarcity of resources due to the growing war in northern I Corps. Ultimately, the CAPs would be shifted from operating out of fixed compounds to be totally mobile out in the hamlets full time. This would begin after the Tet Offensive of 1968, when the record of several more CAP attacks caused the highest echelons of command to rethink the concept.

⁵⁶ Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them*, 22–25.

CHAPTER 7

THE SUMMER OF 1967

The summer of 1967 was a critical time along the road to Hue. The Viet Cong, especially the main force battalions based in the mountains, had a problem they could not ignore: they had to eat.¹ While smaller groups of local Viet Cong could easily obtain food from nearby farms, main force units needed large amounts of rice to survive in their remote base camps up in the mountains. It was exceedingly difficult to grow their own for a variety of reasons, namely the rough terrain and the fact that they often had to relocate every few days. Because they could not grow their own, rice acquisition was critical for their survival and functionality as a military force. The monsoon season that began in early November further complicated matters. If the Viet Cong wished to stockpile enough food to sustain them through the coming winter, they had to access the lowland villages during the summer rice harvest. During the summer and fall, these main force units, and many North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops moving into the area, relied on rice requisitioned from the lowlands.² As 1968 approached and more and more main force Viet Cong and NVA troops arrived in or near the Phu Bai tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) to stage for the Tet Offensive, the need to acquire adequate supplies of food only grew.

¹ Access to rice was also a problem for the growing NVA force in South Vietnam. The Marines' official history of operations in 1967 says that III MAF's "expanding control over the heavily-populated, rice-rich coastal areas" was a reason that the NVA sent so many troops into northern I Corps in the summer of 1967. See Maj Gary L. Telfer, LtCol Lane Rogers, and V. Keith Fleming Jr., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marines Corps, 1984), 3.

² Michael Lee Lanning and Dan Craig, *Inside the VC and the NVA: The Real Story of North Vietnam's Armed Forces* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 129–33.

Obtaining rice to sustain these units staging nearby had a major impact on their operations as winter approached.

The Marines in the Phu Bai enclave worked to thwart these efforts by employing infantry, along with CAPs, to stop rice collection along the routes that they suspected the Viet Cong would take from their bases to the lowlands. Main force Viet Cong could still travel to the Phu Thu District for rice, but the Marines' efforts made the trek longer and more dangerous. This initiative succeeded in obstructing access to an important source of sustenance for the main force Viet Cong and NVA, but it caused a reciprocal increase in large units traveling along several routes, many of which passed through or near the Combined Action Platoon's (CAP) villages, to gather rice.³ The Marines' efforts to block rice collection, starting in June 1967, began a period of frequent engagements between Marine infantry units and CAPs and Viet Cong troops attempting to gather food for the coming monsoon season—and the coming offensive in early 1968.

Golden Fleece

The Viet Cong, unsurprisingly, increased their rice collection efforts during harvest time. In April 1967, intelligence revealed that the Viet Cong had planned to collect enough rice through the summer so that their stores would hold them through a series of operations set to begin in November. The harvest required most villagers to gather in the fields at the same time, making them easier to approach for Viet Cong agents seeking rice taxes. It was also a crucial time for their propaganda efforts.⁴

The Marines moved to counter the Viet Cong's rice collection plans by mounting another Golden Fleece operation. They concentrated their efforts on the rice farming villages along Highway 1 south of

³ "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 2d Marines, Command Chronology (ComdC), September 1967, item no. 1201060252, folder 060, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), 7.

⁴ "Combat Operations After Action Report, Operation Golden Fleece," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, item no. 1201061027, folder 061, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 7.

Phu Bai. The resident battalion of the Phu Bai TAOR that summer, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, sent its Company K to the villages within the target area. Once there, the company was ordered to saturate the area with patrols to deny the Viet Cong access to the people and their harvest. The Marines focused most of their attention on the villages between Phu Bai and the Truoi River, several of which hosted a Combined Action Company (CAC) (figure 7.1). Company K set its headquarters at Hotel 3's compound in Loc An, along with an 81-millimeter mortar section, which covered a gap between the artillery battery at Phu Bai and the Phu Loc District headquarters. Later, a platoon from Company I and a platoon from Company L moved south to reinforce Company K during the operation.⁵

By 28 April, all units were in place and patrolling their assigned villages. Just before the harvest began, several reports came in of Communist troops—Viet Cong *and* NVA—contacting villagers. On 29 April, 120 NVA soldiers entered a village about two kilometers south of Truoi River bridge. The village chief later said that they came to discuss the harvest and Company K's activities in the area. Another chief reported that 40 Viet Cong entered his hamlet, located about 1,000 meters north of the bridge, and demanded rice. Company K also received information that near Highway 1, close to the bridge, a group of Viet Cong conducted a class on booby traps and mines. A combined infantry and CAC patrol went to investigate, and the Viet Cong dispersed.⁶

The rice harvest commenced on 1 May and continued until 1 June. Each day, the harvest began at 0600 and ended at 1830. Approximately 8,000 Vietnamese farmers worked in the fields every day, simultaneously harvesting about 33 square kilometers. On the second day of the harvest, two villages, Thuy Phu and Loc An, gathered 10,500 kilograms of rice. By 4 May, they had collected 50,000 kilograms of rice. The Marines did more than guard the villagers as they harvested crops.

⁵ "Combat Operations After Action Report, Operation Golden Fleece," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, 5–6.

⁶ "Combat Operations After Action Report, Operation Golden Fleece," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, 6–7.

Figure 7.1. Operation Golden Fleece



The K indicates Company K, the company command post, and platoon base locations. The platoon assignments of Company K are marked following the K with the platoon numbers 1, 2, and 3. The company command post is marked as K-CP.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

They also provided other staples of civic action, namely Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP). Each day of the operation, corpsmen treated civilians for medical issues as best they could. They averaged 60 patients per day, for a total of 2,197 people treated.⁷

⁷ "Combat Operations After Action Report, Operation Golden Fleece," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, 7-8, 15.

Figure 7.2. Rice fields in Loc Son Village



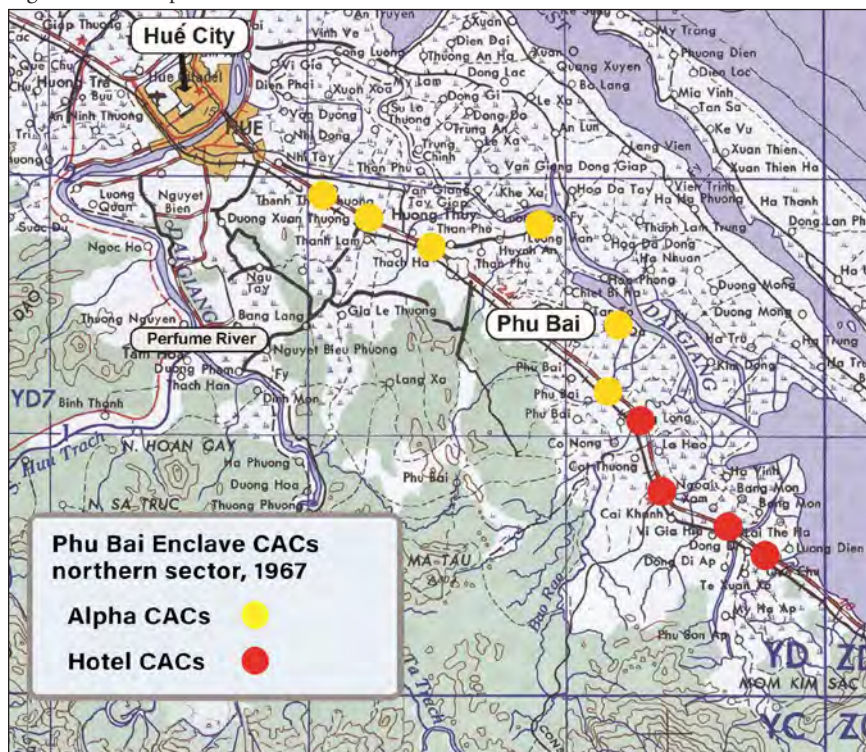
Rice fields in the TAOR of CAC Hotel 2. This photograph is taken from some distance along Highway 1 and looks west and south toward the mountains.
Source: photo by Jim Ellison, 1966.

Combined action played an important part in the operation. Company K conducted 220 daytime patrols and 342 night ambushes during that time.⁸ Combined action Marines provided guides for many of these patrols until the infantry learned the area well enough to navigate without them. The CACs then took on additional assignments to support the operation. For example, CACs Alpha 3 and Hotel 1 integrated into Company K's 2d platoon and conducted daily patrols and ambushes to buttress the Marines' security around the harvest.⁹ The operation progressed without any significant resistance from Communist troops, but a few minor engagements did occur. No Marines died during the operation, although four were wounded, and the Marines

⁸ "Combat Operations After Action Report, Operation Golden Fleece," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, 14.

⁹ "Combat Operations After Action Report, Operation Golden Fleece," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, 6.

Figure 7.3. CAC platoons in the northern Phu Bai area, summer 1967



The two companies of CAC platoons along Highway 1 in the summer of 1967.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

killed seven Viet Cong.¹⁰ When the campaign reached its end, the commander of the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, was pleased with the results. After the operation, he concluded:

Golden Fleece was essentially a denial operation, the denial of the enemy's capability to harass the Vietnamese civilians into supplying the rice, money, and material necessary to sustain Viet Cong operations. The initial task was to gain the respect and confidence of the people to be protected and to establish a

¹⁰ "Combat Operations After Action Report, Operation Golden Fleece," 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, 14.

feeling of security, as well as the actual security itself. “See and Be Seen” patrols, operations during daylight hours, frequent liaison with village and hamlet chiefs, participation in local affairs, and events, and an extensive MEDCAP program, all helped to acquire the local population’s respect.¹¹

At the end of Operation Golden Fleece, the battalion rotated out of Phu Bai. It had been the resident battalion there since the beginning of March. After a battalion-size operation into the mountains south of Highway 1 to hunt for evidence of the enemy, the Marines moved north to Khe Sanh, where they would remain throughout the harrowing battle that would rage there the following spring. They were relieved by another battalion in the same regiment, the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines.¹²

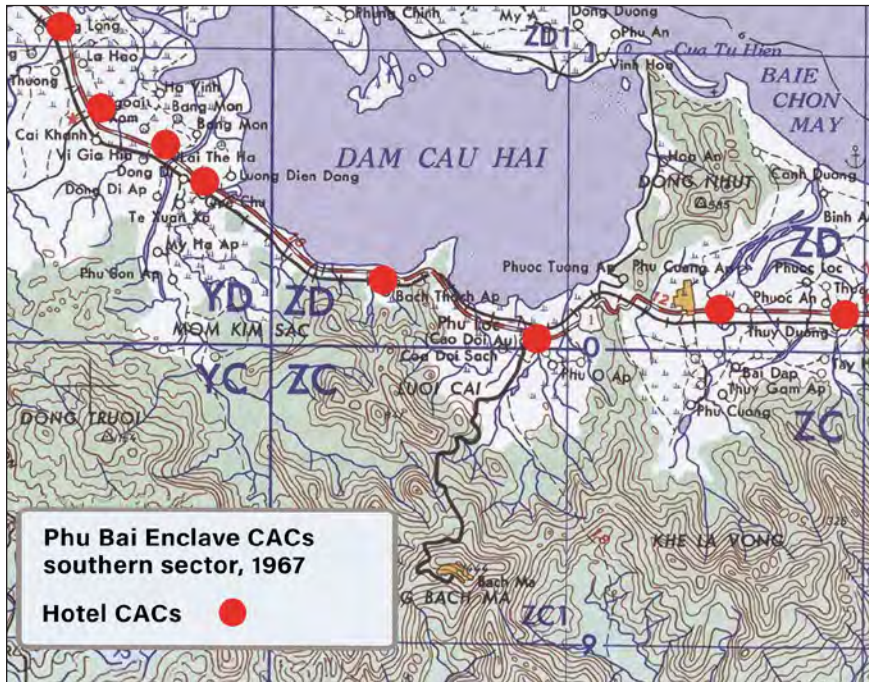
Marine infantry battalions tended to rotate to new locations periodically. This gave each battalion, especially its leadership, a greater knowledge of the whole war rather than a limited view by being in one area for a long time. A negative consequence of these frequent rotations, however, was that a resident battalion gained significant knowledge of an area when they operated there for a sustained period. It became their hometown, so to speak. Rotating battalions every few months diminished that capability. It also could complicate a CAC’s ability to work with the infantry, since battalions frequently rotated in and out of many CACs’ TAORs.¹³

¹¹ “Combat Operations After Action Report, Operation Golden Fleece,” 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, April 1967, 15.

¹² “Narrative Summary,” 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, June 1967, item no. 1201061029, folder 061, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 6–9.

¹³ One Marine who served in an Alpha CAC from 1966–67 later complained about this issue. See “Chuck Ratliff,” in Albert Hemmingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 29.

Figure 7.4. CAC platoons in the southern Phu Bai area, summer 1967



Hotel CACs in the southern sector of the Phu Bai enclave in the summer of 1967. Another platoon, CAC Hotel 9, resided at Lang Co, several kilometers to the east, or right, of this map. Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

Life in a CAC, Summer 1967¹⁴

In the summer of 1967, the CACs in the Phu Bai enclave had a table of organization (T/O) that allowed for 14 Marines, one U.S. Navy corpsman, and a platoon of 35 PF soldiers. Due to the war’s demands, they often lacked their full complement of Marines. The number of PF soldiers varied as well. As the war expanded, it was often difficult for the South Vietnamese government to recruit enough PFs. Many CACs had PF soldiers who worked the fields near their homes during the

¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, information in the following section derives from the author’s (Nimmo’s) experiences as a combined action Marine in the Phu Bai TAOR, June 1967–February 1968. For additional information on life in a CAP, see John Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), chap. 4.

day and did their duty with their platoons when ordered, generally at night. It was an evolving situation, but the majority of the Phu Bai enclave CACs were solid and had similar working arrangements between the Marines and PFs.

Most Phu Bai CACs lived in a fortified compound. By the summer of 1967, most platoons had built bunkers at least on the corners of their perimeter. They strung concertina wire around the compound to stop or slow down any attempts by enemy troops to breach its defenses. Inside the wire, most compounds had one or two hardback hooches that served as sleeping quarters and one half-length hardback mess hooch for cooking and eating. Ideally, a CAC compound would be located apart from any village housing with large, open spaces beyond the perimeter that offered clear fields of fire and space for air and artillery support.

Not all compounds were equal. Some remained a work in progress, slowed by a lack of urgency until the uptick in enemy activity made it clear that the platoons needed to make changes. In the beginning, the Marines placed CACs inside the villages, where the PFs were already located. Accommodations for the PFs was never a top priority for the South Vietnamese government, so many CACs had to set up their bases in abandoned buildings, some of which were right in the middle of residential areas. Several platoons had embedded in the buildings used by village officials and were not in a compound at all. They strung wire and built defenses as best they could, but a base like this would not be able to withstand an attack by a large force. That had not been much of a problem during the Marines' first two years at Phu Bai. In the summer of 1967, though, the situation changed. CAC platoons worked to improve their compound defenses, but there was only so much they could do before the Tet Offensive began in early 1968. Under the best defensive arrangements, CACs were vulnerable to large attacks because they were small units in a fixed location far away from reinforcements.

Most CACs divided up their Marines into teams that led the patrols with the PF soldiers. Some platoons employed three four-man teams, which rotated between duties—day patrol, night patrol, and radio or compound watch—every three days. Other CACs divided their

Marines up into two six- or seven-man teams. That required a two-day rotation and a slightly more intense schedule. During the summer of 1967, most CACs were led by a Marine sergeant. Initially, these sergeants were older, more experienced Marines with significant time in the service. As the war progressed, casualties and the individual replacement system took their toll on U.S. forces in Vietnam, so many platoons had to be led by younger Marines with less time in grade.

Theoretically, the PF sergeant, or *Trung Si*, was an equal counterpart to the CAC leader. The CAC leader and the *Trung Si* were expected to cooperate, but the planning and the execution of patrols often differed. The situation varied depending on the competence and the personality of both the Vietnamese *Trung Si* and the Marine CAC leader. But, when it was time for a patrol to go out, especially at night, the Marine team leader was in charge. Part of the CAC Marines' job was to train and advise the PFs, but the intensity of combat—most of which occurred at night—required decisive leadership that the Marines were not willing to cede to the PF. To be clear, this leadership arrangement was not intended to be an officious one; it worked best when both groups viewed their relationship as a partnership where the Marine in charge led *and* advised his counterpart.

In practice, of course, there were limits. In many cases, CAC Marines did not feel that they could tell the PFs where a patrol was going until after it left the compound. Some felt it was not necessary for them to know unless it was a special mission.¹⁵ Others were worried that any information they divulged beforehand would make its way to a Viet Cong operative who could organize an ambush.¹⁶ After all, the Vietnamese people were caught up in what was really a civil war that left many of them conflicted. Many Marines understandably thought that it was unwise to trust anyone completely.

The CACs' equipment also changed in 1967. By the summer, all of the Marines in combat units were equipped with the M16 rifle as their main weapon, but the PFs continued to receive secondhand weap-

¹⁵ Cottrell Fox, telephone interview with Cavender S. Sutton, March 2021.

¹⁶ Ed Nest, telephone interview with Cavender S. Sutton, March 2021.

ons from the Korean War and even World War II. The most common weapon in a PF platoon was the M1 carbine, a shorter-barreled semi-automatic rifle capable of holding a 30-round magazine. The squad automatic weapon for the PFs was the M1918 Browning Automatic Rifle, another vintage weapon of the previous two wars. A few of the PFs carried the M3 submachine gun, a durable weapon that was highly effective at close range—perfect for the densely vegetated hamlets. Some PFs carried the M1 Garand, the standard-issue rifle for U.S. infantry in World War II and Korea. It was accurate to very long ranges but only held an eight-round clip. When the Viet Cong received AK-47 assault rifles, the PFs were totally outmatched in terms of firepower.¹⁷

Except for the heat and humidity, life in a CAC compound could be deceptively pleasant. The hardbacked hooches were open inside, with several “racks” (canvas cots) lined up on either side of a middle aisle. Every Marine had their own space and a footlocker in which to store personal items. The Marines made this home and hung photographs on the vertical wooden supports. It was not at all uncommon to see a poster of a scantily clad popular actress hanging on the wall at the end of the hooch. The tin-roofed hardbacks could be stifling hot, but when the temperature cooled small groups of Marines would hang out inside, often sitting on their footlockers, cleaning their rifles and talking about girls, cars, music, and life back home.

In the more fortified CACs, bunkers were the most essential structures. Most bunkers were large structures with a wooden frame surrounded by thick walls of sandbags. Each had windows, normally a foot tall and two feet wide, facing outside the perimeter. They were designed so two Marines could man them during an attack and fire their rifles at shoulder height out the windows. Their sandbagged walls provided cover from mortar fire or other heavy weaponry. They could also be death traps if a satchel charge or a grenade landed inside, or if a B40 rocket hit its mark. Ideally, a compound would have sandbag bunkers on all its corners and other fighting positions or trenches every several

¹⁷ Telfer, Roger, and Fleming, *Fighting the North Vietnamese*, 52, 193, 229–31.

Figure 7.5. Local woman in CAC Alpha 1's compound



A view inside CAC Alpha 1: a corner bunker, the shower, and Ma, a local woman who helped out around the compound.

Source: photo by William F. Nimmo, summer 1967.

feet to provide a variety of places for riflemen to fend off an attack. These supplemental fighting positions added a layer of complexity to the compound's defenses because a defender could move around the perimeter and fire in any direction. Usually, all Marines and PFs had an assigned bunker or fighting position to go to when an attack began.

Most of the CACs around the Phu Bai TAOR also had some form of a rigged-up shower. Alpha 1's, for example, was a wooden-framed structure enclosed with corrugated tin and a 50-gallon open drum sitting on top. It sat next to a well to make it easier to replenish the water. Whichever team conducted the day patrol had first dibs on the shower. They would fill the drum before they left, a process that required the whole team to pass a five gallon can from the well to the Marine on top who dumped the water into the drum. The patrol would typically go out in the morning and not return for a few hours. By the time they returned, sweaty and tired, there was enough water—heated almost perfectly by the ambient heat of the tropical climate—available for the whole team.

All CACs had some form of a mess facility. Several had half-size hardbacks that functioned as a food storage and cooking area, along with a picnic-type table for the Marines to eat their meals. Sometimes the Marines also used those tables to lay out maps and discuss upcoming patrols or special missions. The CACs in both Alpha and Hotel Companies were supplied every two or three days with food and other equipment by a truck from Phu Bai that made its rounds around the TAOR. If a platoon was lucky, the supply truck could bring them fresh milk, eggs, and sometimes bacon and other fresh meats as well as large, canned rations that provided meals for several Marines at a time. The supply runs provided canned meats, canned potatoes, and different vegetables. They also kept the CACs supplied with the infamous C-rations, or C-rats, that most infantry had to eat in the field.

The level of time and effort dedicated to cooking varied from CAC to CAC. Peter Nardie of Hotel 1 recalled having a Marine named Rosie who was a talented cook. They traded patrol duties with him in exchange for his services as the platoon's full-time cook. Rosie would prepare eggs, meat, or potatoes for breakfast, fried baloney burgers for lunch, and some mix of meat, potatoes, and vegetables for dinner.¹⁸ Other CACs had similar arrangements, sometimes with Marines rotating cooking duties. Most Marines knew they could get off at least some all-night patrols if they cooked enough meals. Some CACs did not put much effort into cooking. Ed Nest at Hotel 7 ate mostly C-rations rather than cooked meals. His village did, however, have a few Vietnamese food shacks that sold cheap meals to the Marines and people traveling through the village along Highway 1.¹⁹

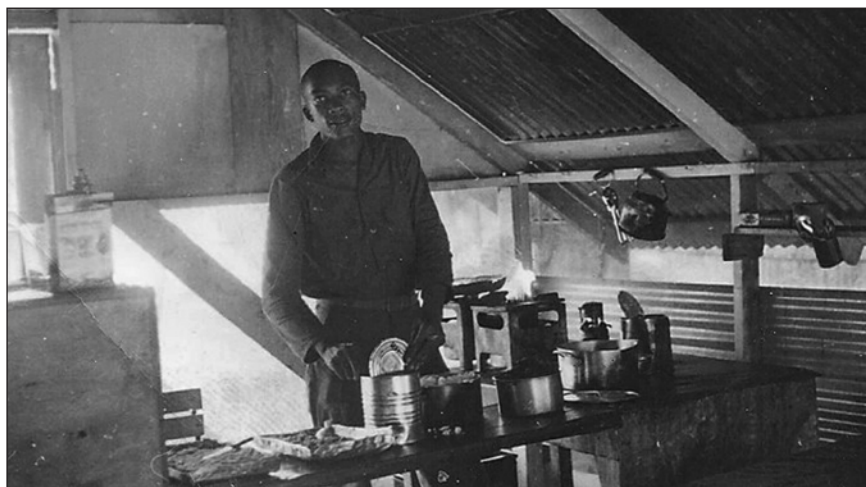
Many combined action Marines also shared meals with villagers and the PFs. The frequency of these social engagements varied. The dinners offered the Marines a chance to try a variety of local dishes, all of which were new to them.²⁰ Each meal contained a main course such

¹⁸ Pete Nardie, personal and telephone interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2018, 2019, July 2021, hereafter Nardie interviews; and Pete Nardie, telephone interview with Cavender S. Sutton, April 2021.

¹⁹ Ed Nest, telephone interview with William F. Nimmo, 2021, hereafter Nest interview.

²⁰ Southard, *Defend and Befriend*, 78–79.

Figure 7.6. Mess hooch in CAC Hotel 1's compound



Rosie, the Marine who cooked at Hotel 1, inside the mess hooch.
Source: photo by LCpl Peter Nardie, 1967.

as steamed fish with a mixture of ingredients that made for a distinctive Vietnamese taste. At Alpha 1, a local woman called “Ma” would cook meals for the platoon. She lived nearby, and her home had a large indoor space with a table that seated several people. The Marines would pay her to buy fresh meat and other things at the market, and they ate well. Ma made a good living off the Marines, but she paid them back with care and kindness.

When a new Marine joined the platoon, Ma hosted a dinner to welcome them to the unit. Along with the meal, usually based around a main dish consisting of some kind of fish, Ma would serve *ruou de* (pronounced *rue day*), a clear, locally distilled, and powerful moonshine-style rice liquor. It was traditionally drunk in shots accompanied by a toast. Three shots over the course of dinner would put one in a pleasant and slightly altered frame of mind. Villagers created the drink because the French colonial regime had regulated the alcohol industry, and the Vietnamese population coped by brewing their own distinctive rice alcohol. The meals usually culminated with the veteran CAC Marines challenging the newcomer to eat the fish’s head.

Peter Nardie had many similar experiences during his time in Hotel 1. He and the PFs often made a joint dinner, usually once a month. They would often go down to the river to catch fish. His CAC was on a good-size river and the fish were plentiful. They would canoe out to a spot and throw a grenade into the water. The concussion stunned or killed several fish. As they floated to the top, local kids would swim out to gather them. The PFs then gutted and prepared the fish. They built a wood fire, and in a large shallow pan boiled the fish together with rice. The meal fed the whole platoon.²¹

Almost every CAC Marine participated in meals like this with villagers or the PFs, often to mark a special occasion. At Hotel 8, for example, the villagers butchered a pig, roasted it, and had a celebratory dinner when the CAC killed a Viet Cong leader who had been harassing them for years.²² Because the Viet Cong could attack at almost any time, most platoons had to have a contingent of Marines and PFs stand guard around the area as the rest ate. Many villages, especially those on the main highway, also had eating shacks, such as those in Hotel 7's village, where the Marines could buy both food and drink. Nardie frequented a shack near a CAC up the road with where a friend was based. Decades after the war, he claimed that the woman who owned it made the best shrimp with garlic that he has ever had.²³

Day patrols offered another method for keeping up ties with the population. In the summer of 1967, the day patrols at Alpha 1 sauntered about, more or less freely, through the hamlets to make their presence known and interact with the people. The day patrol was an important method both to assess the situation in the village and to build relationships with the population. Alpha 1 sent out at least one patrol every day, usually in the morning, before the heat became overwhelming. The patrol walked for three or four hours to at least two different hamlets in the village. They often passed through the village

²¹ Nardie interviews.

²² Charles Brown, telephone interview with William F. Nimmo, 2021; and Charles Brown, telephone interview with Cavender S. Sutton, August 2023.

²³ Nardie interviews.

Figure 7.7. Dinner for PF soldiers and CAC Marines



A photograph of PF soldiers hosting a dinner for their Marine counterparts.

Source: photo by Tom Mosher, 1967.

marketplace along the river.²⁴ The Marines at Alpha 1 had gotten to know several people who lived or worked there, and they would often hang out for an hour or so after the patrol was complete. The marketplace was the social and trading center of the village. Since the meat or fish products would spoil quickly in the heat, it opened early. In the early mornings the market buzzed with vendors bringing in their wares to sell. By early afternoon, the market slowed down and then closed, all but for a soup shack.

The day patrol from Alpha 1 usually consisted of four Marines and six or seven PF soldiers. The patrol traveled lighter than they would at night, but they still carried their weapons and enough ammunition to sustain them in a firefight, should one occur. The village was friendly,

²⁴ Alpha 1 patrols noted in the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines' monthly S-3 journals, located in each month's command chronology.

and the patrols would wind through the endless network of trails that ran among the numerous family homes. The patrol stopped frequently and talked to the villagers who were out doing chores or minding the children. The PFs knew all the villagers, and they helped the Marines converse with the families.

Most Marines did not speak Vietnamese, so communication involved a combination of Vietnamese and English words, and hand and facial gestures. These were not deep conversations to any degree, but they were pleasant interactions. Many people would offer the patrol tea; they would usually spend 10 or 15 minutes accepting the hospitality. The patrol would then move on up the trail and continue the same pattern throughout each hamlet on the day's route. Over time, each Marine learned to recognize the villagers and would exchange greetings with them when they saw them at the marketplace or walking down the dirt roads. Even though the Marines did not speak enough Vietnamese to hold a conversation, they all learned how to greet the people properly. If they saw a middle-aged married woman walking along the road, they might say "*Chao Ba, Ba manh gioi khong?*," which simply meant, "Hello, ma'am, how are you doing?" It would not hurt to bow one's head slightly in her direction when saying the greeting. If the person was a younger single woman, one would address her the same way, but she would be called *co* (long *o* sound) rather than *ba*. Children were addressed as *em*. What the Marines would say was not technically perfect, but it was adequate to convey the greeting. The people were not sticklers for perfect Vietnamese. The gesture of a respectful greeting was far more important than technical perfection.

At Hotel 1, located on the intersection of the highway and the Nong River, day patrols were smaller. Most consisted of three Marines and three PF soldiers. These patrols were relaxed and usually concentrated on one of the village's several hamlets. In most cases, a patrol stopped at several villagers' homes along the way and drank tea. Peter Nardie remembers a unique ritual was to swirl the first cup of tea poured and throw it out onto the ground. The host then poured a second cup, which people slowly drank as they conversed. The Ma-

rines, PFs, and villagers used opportunities like this to teach each other things about their respective countries and cultures. Nardie remembers villagers, during the harvest season, using a large shallow woven pan to separate the rice from the shell. He had a good laugh when one of the women tried to teach the Marines the technique.²⁵ These were typical of CAC interactions with villagers throughout the Phu Bai enclave. Knowing and participating in the local rituals enhanced the bonding between the CAC Marines and the villagers.

Hotel 1 would sometimes receive intelligence tips during their day patrols. Usually, one or more villagers would discreetly tell the Marines about a recent sighting of Viet Cong heading across the highway, away from the mountains. These were most likely movements of Viet Cong groups heading across the CAC's TAOR to get to the Phu Thu District a few kilometers to the east. Villagers and patrols alike often sighted Viet Cong movement near the villages assigned to Hotel 1 and Alpha 3, the CAC immediately to the north.²⁶

James E. Ellison, at Hotel 2, remembers that his village of Loc Son was also safe during the day. The villagers were hospitable and interacted regularly with both the Marines and the PFs. When the Viet Cong came into the village, they typically entered from the rice fields to the east, and the villagers notified the CAC through the PFs. Most day patrols consisted of six to eight personnel, evenly split between Marines and PFs. Each patrol would visit at least one of Loc Son's five hamlets. Nighttime was different. Hotel 2 sprang numerous ambushes against groups of Viet Cong traveling down from the mountains at a spot called "the bend in the road," about 1.5 kilometers down Highway 1.²⁷ As summer turned to fall, the number of ambushes at that spot increased, likely with the Viet Cong's increased need for rice.

Making inroads with the locals could only get the Marines so far, though. In one tragic incident, Hotel 1 learned that a young woman, about 20 years old, who lived on the village's outskirts was Viet

²⁵ Nardie interviews.

²⁶ Nardie interviews.

²⁷ Jim Ellison, personal interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2018, 2019, 2020, October 2021.

Cong. Nardie and another Marine tried to convince her to leave the Viet Cong and join their side. They visited her at her parents' home several times and talked with her about the war and about why she should consider turning herself in. One day they saw her walking into the heart of the village carrying an AK-47 on her shoulder. She was evidently turning herself and her weapon in to the CAC. They were shocked, but before they could rise to meet her, several PFs intervened and beat her severely. The Marines were able to stop the beating, but it ruined any chance of her switching sides, let alone feeling welcomed if she did. She was instead taken away on a truck to Phu Bai, and they never heard from her again.²⁸

Each CAC's tactical situation varied, and not all were safe during the day. Hotel 7 certainly was not. It was located in Phu Loc District, along a less populated stretch of Highway 1. Hotel 7's TAOR included part of the bowling alley (the long, straight stretch of road southeast of Phu Bai, toward the Hai Van Pass), where the villages were spread apart more than at the other CACs. Their main hamlet, Thua Luu, was relatively safe, but venturing to the outlying villages on either side of the highway invited contact even in the daytime.²⁹

Hotel 7's day patrols were structured like other CACs' at the time. They usually contained four Marines and six PFs and were heavily armed. When they ventured out to the hamlets toward the mountains, they treaded carefully. The patrols usually mingled with the villagers and socialized like the other CACs. In addition to showing a strong presence, they also gathered information about recent enemy activity, and they studied the area for potential ambush sites. Most of the villagers were friendly and would provide intelligence. They often told the PFs about Viet Cong that had recently passed through.³⁰

Hotel 8, on the Truoi River, was another platoon that would run into trouble in the daytime. They remained alert for enemy action night and day as they patrolled through the hamlets along the river in

²⁸ Nardie interviews.

²⁹ Nest interview.

³⁰ Nest interview.

the shadow of the mountains. The villagers there were not as friendly as those elsewhere. This area would soon become a highway for Viet Cong and NVA patrols that descended from the mountains to obtain food and stage for attacks. Not all the villagers were against the Americans, but the upriver hamlets' remote location gave the Communists easy access to the people there. It was a general principle that the farther one traveled away from the highway, the greater the Viet Cong's presence.³¹

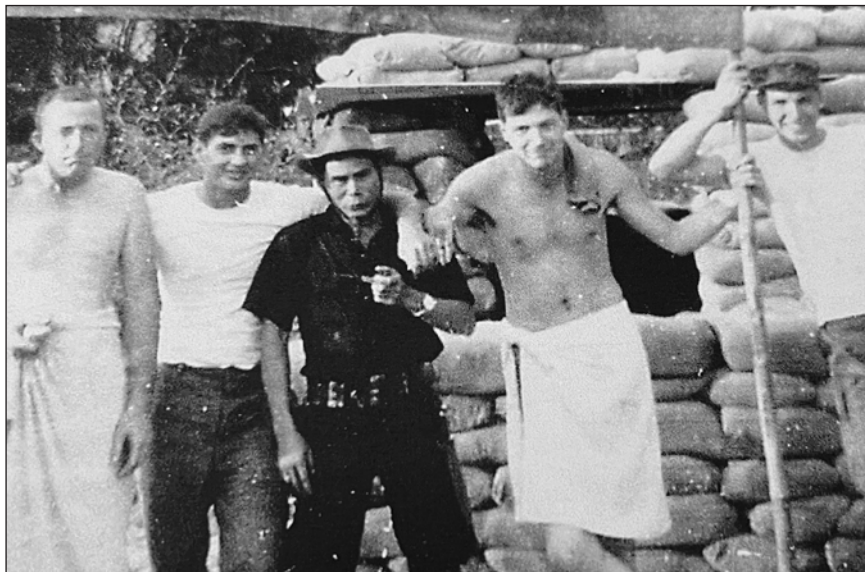
Some CACs, generally, were safe day and night. Alpha 1, north of the Phu Bai Combat Base, was a unique case. Its village sat in a bend in the Loi Nong River, north of Phu Bai, and away from any major roadway. The river practically surrounded Alpha 1 on three sides, which likely minimized Viet Cong movements through their area. The most unique thing about Alpha 1 was a nearby platoon of South Vietnamese fighters who lived and fought across the river, inside the Phu Thu District. The presence of this group of fighters basically blocked and discouraged Viet Cong from being able to attack Alpha 1. Although the Marines' official records sometimes referred to them as PF, these fighters were not typical PFs. These *Biet Kichs*, as they were known, were hardened, full-time soldiers who were believed to work directly for the province chief. Their leader, Chu Tich (pronounced *Chew Tick*, a Vietnamese word for *leader*) Chung, had a mysterious background, but he was an aggressive fighter who had no fear of the Viet Cong. He and his troops were notorious for their clashes with the Viet Cong on their side of the river.³²

The author, then a CAP Marine corporal, recalls that he and the other Marines at Alpha 1 having a special affinity for the Biet Kichs. They respected their moxie and their combat readiness. Every night,

³¹ Cottrell Fox, telephone interview with William F. Nimmo, 2019, 2020, 2021; and Cottrell Fox, telephone interview with Cavender S. Sutton, March 2021.

³² The Biet Kichs are presented in multiple ways in the U.S. Marine Corps' official records. They were called by that name until December 1966. When the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, replaced the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, as the resident battalion at Phu Bai, the former began to simply refer to them as a PF platoon. For example, see 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdCs, June–December 1966; and 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, January 1967. However, Peter Nardie, who served in a Phu Bai CAP until September 1967, confirms that the Biet Kichs were still active in the area. Nardie, telephone interview with Sutton, March 2021. William F. Nimmo also served in Alpha 1 in the summer of 1967, during which time he partook in several joint patrols with the Biet Kichs.

Figure 7.8. Chu Tick Chung pictured with CAC Alpha 1 Marines



Chu Tick Chung, center, with Sgt Underwood, left, and several Alpha 1 Marines.
Source: photo courtesy of the author, originally taken by an unknown Alpha 1 Marine.

Alpha 1 patrolled their side of the river looking for Viet Cong along the riverbanks but rarely found any. The Marines wanted combat. Their best opportunities came when Chu Tich Chung would periodically request their assistance. He had a close relationship with Alpha 1's sergeant, and they worked out an arrangement where, on certain occasions, four or five Alpha 1 Marines would join the Biet Kichs on a night patrol. That meant they had to go north, across the river, into a place that they technically were not allowed to go. The Marines agreed not to disclose these operations across the river. Normally, this arrangement did not produce any problems, but on a night in late June of 1967, one such patrol confronted a unique situation.³³

After dark, Corporal Nimmo and three other Marines made their way to a predetermined rally point on the south bank of the Loi Nong River. Chung's men were waiting for them. The joint force loaded up

³³ William F. Nimmo, personal recollections.

into the Biet Kich's sampans. The Biet Kichs used poles to silently move the boats north across the river. Once across, they moved down the riverbank toward a village named Khe Xa (pronounced *Kay Sah*) and set in along a trail intersection where Chung expected Viet Cong movement. His prediction was correct. A little while later, a group of Viet Cong moved into their ambush's kill zone. The Marines and Biet Kichs opened fire and the enemy troops scattered. The patrol waited a few minutes before getting on line to sweep the area. Once they started moving, an Alpha 1 Marine named Pete Colletti told Nimmo that he could smell a Viet Cong nearby. They soon discovered a wounded Viet Cong lying near the trail. He was hit badly and needed immediate medical attention.³⁴

The ambush had been successful, but now Alpha 1 was in a dilemma. They were not supposed to be on that side of the river. Corporal Nimmo and the other Marines did not want to leave the wounded man to die, but they could not call in a medical evacuation (medevac) into Phu Thu either. They decided to bring the Viet Cong back across the river with them. The Marines and Biet Kichs formed a litter party, picked the wounded man up, and quickly moved back to the river crossing. Once there, they loaded into the sampans and Chung's men poled them back across. When they reached the other side, they secured a landing zone and called in a medevac. A helicopter arrived a few minutes later and took the wounded Viet Cong to the hospital at Phu Bai.³⁵ Nimmo, Colletti, and the other Marines then headed back to their compound. They left it to their sergeant to explain the situation should any questions come from higher headquarters, but they never heard another thing about it.

³⁴ Nimmo, personal recollections.

³⁵ Nimmo, personal recollections. Official record of the ambush and Alpha 1's capturing the wounded Viet Cong can be found in "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, June 1967, item no. 1201060249, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 17. In that entry, the Marines reported the contact right on the southern edge of the Loi Nong River, further corroborating the story that they did not call in the contact until after they had reached that side of the river.

The CACs that were not as safe as others during the daytime maintained a much higher level of alert and carried more weapons and ammunition on their day patrols. Usually nothing happened in the day, but in some places it paid to be ready. This was especially so in the areas that had active enemy rice routes running through the TAOR. As the monsoon season approached, those areas became battlegrounds.

Rice Collection Efforts Increase

When the Marines terminated Operation Golden Fleece on 1 June 1967, they concluded that it had significantly impacted the Viet Cong. The most prominent sign, according to Marine intelligence, was that the operation seemed to have provoked a frantic rise in Viet Cong rice collection efforts. The Marines soon received reports from multiple sources, including the CACs, indicating that the Viet Cong were exerting more effort toward rice collection. They specifically increased rice taxes imposed on the villagers that had recently harvested their rice crops from the fields to the north and east of Phu Bai.³⁶ Now seemed to be the time to do so; it was much easier for the Marines to guard the rice crop as it was being harvested than after it had been distributed across the district.

Throughout the summer, recorded incidents involving both Marine infantry patrols and CAC patrols throughout the Phu Bai enclave corroborate that the Viet Cong were conducting a campaign to obtain rice. During that time, the Viet Cong did not attack or harass any Marine outposts. In most cases, they engaged the Marines only when a patrol caught them on one of the routes into the lowlands. Throughout the summer, Marine infantry and CAC units repeatedly observed and engaged Communist troops traveling along “rice routes” or near known rice collection points.³⁷ The amount of Viet Cong movement—and the numbers in which they traveled—increased from June to July. In June, there were 12 reported Viet Cong sightings, with the majority consist-

³⁶ “Intelligence,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, June 1967, item no. 1201060249, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 9.

³⁷ “Summary,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, June 1967, 5.

ing of three to five Viet Cong. Some groups were larger, however, with several of at least 10 troops and one of 30. July brought 22 sightings. Most involved small parties of two to five, but there were several much larger groups on the move that month. In one instance, a Marine patrol spotted 150 Viet Cong moving fast northbound across the river from CAC Alpha 2's TAOR into the Phu Thu District. Other patrols reported another five sightings of groups ranging from 10 to 50.³⁸ So much reported Viet Cong activity without subsequent attacks strongly indicates another purpose for their movements. The corresponding rise in demands for rice taxes from the villagers in those areas could not have been a coincidence, either. The Viet Cong's main target was food.

During this period, CACs located along the Viet Cong's most-used routes spent their nights trying to intercept enemy troops moving toward the lowland villages. Alpha 3 was one such CAC that sat at the foot of a key route into and out of the lowlands. Its assigned village of Thuy Phu was a large community with several hamlets, each named Ap Phu Bai with a number attached. Alpha 3 sat in an important location. It was one of the very first CAC units formed in August 1965 to protect the Phu Bai Combat Base's southern flank from mortar attacks. The village was also located on Highway 1, approximately 2.5 kilometers (just about a mile and a half) south of the base's entrance. It also had a popular marketplace near an intersection on the highway, an important bridge, and a strong anti-Communist village chief. Its base of operations was not in a distinct, separate compound, but in a cluster of buildings in the village center.³⁹

Several prominent routes ran out of the mountains west of the highway and through the area around Thuy Phu. East of the highway, there were flat expanses of rice fields that stretched more than a mile to the river that marked the American area of operations' eastern border. Alpha 3 had to watch both the east and west sides of their village for

³⁸ "Narrative Summary," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, July 1967, item no. 1201060250, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 5.

³⁹ Ed Matricardi, personal and telephone interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2019, July 2021, October 2021, hereafter Matricardi interviews.

enemy activity. The Viet Cong would not only come down from the mountains but also over the river from the nearby Phu Thu District on their way back inland. Most of the villagers were friendly, but Alpha 3 still had to keep its guard up. On one occasion in July 1967, for example, a patrol apprehended a woman who admitted her job was to pass info to Viet Cong based in the Phu Thu District about U.S. and South Vietnamese troops.⁴⁰

In summer 1967, enemy activity in Thuy Phu mostly consisted of Viet Cong coming in or through to obtain rice and other supplies. The village's location on the highway and its close proximity to Hue made it an ideal place for the Viet Cong to buy supplies, but the CAC stood in their way. While Marine intelligence did not detect the presence of any organized local force company there in that summer, there was still plenty of activity. Alpha 3 thought that Viet Cong rice patrols were entering the Thuy Phu's hamlets to the west via a trail system around a fork (or "crotch," as the Marines called it) in the river. The Marines figured that the Viet Cong had established contacts out in the hamlet past the crotch who would cooperate and provide what they needed. As the demand for rice grew, these Viet Cong would be forced to come deeper into the village.⁴¹

To further complicate matters, the route was not a single trail but an amalgamation of paths varying in size that gave anyone moving toward the village multiple options for travel. The river forked on the mountain (western) side of Thuy Phu, which made covering all the different paths very difficult. But the CACs' presence in key villages limited the Viet Cong's options. When approaching the lowlands, the Viet Cong could choose to avoid Thuy Phu altogether and travel instead through Loc Bon, the next village to the southeast on Highway 1. Loc Bon, however, hosted CAC Hotel 1. There was no other trail system farther to the north for several kilometers, until those running into Gia Le, north of the Phu Bai Combat Base. Viet Cong travelers could go farther to the southeast, along the Nong River, but that was

⁴⁰ "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, July 1967, 17.

⁴¹ "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, July 1967, 9.

much farther, and there was another CAC posted along that route (see figure 7.8). So, regardless of the risk, the paths through CACs Thuy Phu and Loc Bon remained a primary route of travel.⁴²

Alpha 3 worked to disrupt Viet Cong movements as best it could. Fortunately, the platoon had an excellent leader at the time, Sergeant Calvin Brown. He was known for his thorough planning and disciplined adherence to the platoon's protocols and even served as one of the instructors at the Combined Action orientation program at Phu Bai. Brown divided his Marines up into two squads of six or seven each that traded off night and day patrol duties. He also had between 30 and 40 PF troops in his CAC, depending on the time. At night, the PFs and Marines who did not go on patrol guarded the bridge and the CAC compound, respectively.⁴³

One of Brown's squad leaders was Corporal Edmund Matricardi Jr. He was 21 years old and had dropped out of college after three years to enlist in the Marine Corps. His father had served as a Marine in World War II. Matricardi recalls that Alpha 3 heard and sensed a lot of Viet Cong activity, especially out toward the hamlets to the west that led up to the mountains. He and the rest of Alpha 3 were particularly sensitive to dogs barking. At night, when no villagers were authorized to be out and about, a dog barking often meant that someone or some people were moving through the area. As an enemy patrol progressed, the dogs at each new location would bark and give a sharp listener an idea of their course and speed. The number of dogs barking gave a clue to the group's size. Conversely, the Marines learned to avoid known dogs' locations when moving at night.⁴⁴

Alpha 3's Marines knew that the Viet Cong were intimidating the villagers and taking rice. Most of their efforts occurred in the village's outer fringes, to the west of where the river forks. Their day patrols focused less on social bonding than on reconnaissance efforts in this area. They sent out at least one and sometimes two reconnaissance pa-

⁴² Matricardi interviews.

⁴³ Matricardi interviews.

⁴⁴ Matricardi interviews.

trols each day. If they heard dogs the night before, they would send a patrol to the area the next morning to see what they could discover.⁴⁵

Alpha 3's daytime patrols consisted of just two or three Marines and two or three PFs. One of the CAC's Marines spoke fluent Vietnamese, and he went out on many of the day patrols to converse with and gather information from the people. During this period, day patrols were relatively safe in Thuy Phu. The Marines could even "shoulder" their weapons as they left the village center and headed out along the river. The village's outer fringes were a different matter. Once a patrol crossed the river and moved along the crotch toward the hamlet of Ap Phu Bai 1, they brought their rifles off their shoulders and into the ready position.⁴⁶

The Marines could tell much by how the villagers acted toward them. If they were smiling and friendly, everything was likely to be okay. But if they avoided the Marines, it usually signaled that the Viet Cong had been there recently for rice, supplies, or even recruitment. Rice collection always caused tension. Matricardi believed that the Viet Cong forced villagers to help carry large quantities of rice up to their mountain camps. Later, the Marines would learn that the Viet Cong put villagers living near Loc Bon into forced labor groups that carried rice up into the hills.⁴⁷

Early July was a busy time at Thuy Phu. To counter the Viet Cong's movements, infantry units worked in the CACs' areas of operation in conjunction with one another. These ambushes were coordinated so that both the infantry and the CAC could cover different areas to maximize the chances of catching an incoming Viet Cong patrol. On the night of 2 July, for example, a company of the 26th Marines set an ambush in one of Thuy Phu's outlying hamlets, near the south fork of the river. The Marines took up positions along one of the trails the Viet Cong took to get to the village. At about 2300, the infantry patrol opened fire on a group of 15 Viet Cong moving along the trail from the direction of the mountains. They held their fire until the Viet Cong

⁴⁵ Matricardi interviews.

⁴⁶ Matricardi interviews.

⁴⁷ Matricardi interviews.

came within 15 meters (50 feet) of their position and claimed to have killed four of them. The Marines found one body on the scene, while a local woman reported the next day that several Viet Cong had carried another three dead troops into her house after the ambush.⁴⁸

On 6 July, an Alpha 3 patrol engaged a much larger group of Viet Cong. The day before, the Marines had received intelligence that an NVA major was supposed to meet with local Viet Cong officials in a hamlet between the river forks. This information, which included the specific house where the meeting would take place, was too good to pass up. Sergeant Brown planned to set an ambush to kill or capture the NVA major and the Viet Cong officials with him. He set out that night with Matricardi, five other Marines, and several PFs. It took them a long while to work their way out to the house, but remaining undetected and keeping the element of surprise was paramount. When they finally arrived, the patrol spread out to cover the house and their flanks in case of an unplanned attack from outside their perimeter.⁴⁹

The house was totally dark. It appeared as though nobody was there and nothing was happening inside. After observing the vacant house for a while, Brown got the feeling that something was not right. He decided to withdraw back toward the compound in Thuy Phu. The patrol rose to their feet slowly and headed back toward home. They headed in a direction that would take them south a bit, away from their base, before crossing the south river fork on a small foot bridge and then turning north toward Thuy Phu.⁵⁰

Matricardi was the second to last man on the patrol. In that position, especially at night, one does not know where the patrol is going, where it is, or what is going on. One can see the person to their front, and maybe another ahead of them, but that is the limit of one's vision. One's job is to move quietly, be alert, and follow the guide of the person to their front, maintaining one's distance but staying close enough to see them. He had been through this area enough to know that the

⁴⁸ "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, July 1967, 13.

⁴⁹ Matricardi interviews.

⁵⁰ Matricardi interviews.

patrol were nearing an open field. The patrol moved very slowly and quietly. Suddenly, Matricardi heard a short burst of M16 fire to his front. He first thought it was an accidental discharge, reasoning that maybe a Marine slipped and accidentally pulled his trigger. But then he heard several explosions.⁵¹

In an instant, muzzle flashes popped off all across the field. The patrol sped up and hooked left, creating an arc. Matricardi was now on the right flank of that arc. His mind was racing; time seemed to have slowed down. He was not yet certain what was happening, but when an illumination flare burst overhead, he saw a field full of Viet Cong. There were approximately 50 of them. The illumination flare hung up high in the air, swinging wildly beneath its parachute from side to side, and casting a bizarre glow across the field. It was filled with moving shadows that marked the Viet Cong's locations.⁵²

The Marines on the left opened fire with everything they had into the crowd in front of them. As the firing raged, Sergeant Brown consolidated his men into a defensive circle. Soon after they had confronted the Viet Cong to their front, another group opened fire from a tree line on their right flank. Brown fired several grenades from an M79 grenade launcher into the tree line. It seemed that he had a least two rounds in the air before the first one hit. He kept it up until the tree line fell silent. Then, another group of Viet Cong opened fire from the south, and a combination of Brown's M79 and the rest of the patrol's rifle fire quickly silenced them. Then, it was over.⁵³

A reaction force from the compound arrived shortly after the fighting ceased. Matricardi and the patrol sat there for a few minutes contemplating the situation. They dragged six bodies back to the compound. Two were females.⁵⁴ It was hard to reconstruct precisely what happened

⁵¹ Matricardi interviews.

⁵² Matricardi interviews.

⁵³ Matricardi interviews.

⁵⁴ The July command notes from the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, offer an account of the ambush. See "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, July 1967, 14. See also "Daily Sitreps," 6 July, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, July 1967; and Matricardi interviews. Note that the command chronology claimed an "estimated" 15 killed.

during the firefight. The Marines thought that some of the Viet Cong in the field headed to the tree line and started shooting from there. But it was clear that there was more than one group. The Marines went back out to the field early the next morning and found 10 distinct blood trails leading off from where the firefight had occurred.⁵⁵

Matricardi learned that the initial burst of automatic fire was not an accidental discharge. The point man on the patrol had stepped on a sleeping Viet Cong and shot him with his M16. Then his rifle jammed, so he started throwing grenades at the other Viet Cong as they scrambled to fight back. One of the Marines then set off a pop-up flare, which illuminated the dozens of other Viet Cong troops out in the field. Later, when they debriefed at the compound, the Marines reached a consensus that they had been set up and had walked into an ambush. Matricardi speculated that the Viet Cong may have had several groups spread out across the area, each positioned along potential routes the Marines might take on their way back to the compound from the target house.⁵⁶

Alpha 3's early morning ambush was not the only encounter between a CAC and a large body of Viet Cong that day. Just after 0600 on 6 July, CAC Hotel 2, in Loc Son village, about five kilometers southeast of Alpha 3, received word from the police chief that 50 Viet Cong would be moving in a northeast to southwest direction carrying rice and supplies from the Phu Thu District into the mountains.⁵⁷ That night, a patrol from Alpha 2 snuck across the river that marked the line of demarcation between their TAOR and the Phu Thu District to the north. They set up an ambush and, just before midnight, spotted a much larger group of approximately 150 Viet Cong moving across the open rice fields. They called in an artillery mission that they estimated to have killed 10.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Matricardi interviews.

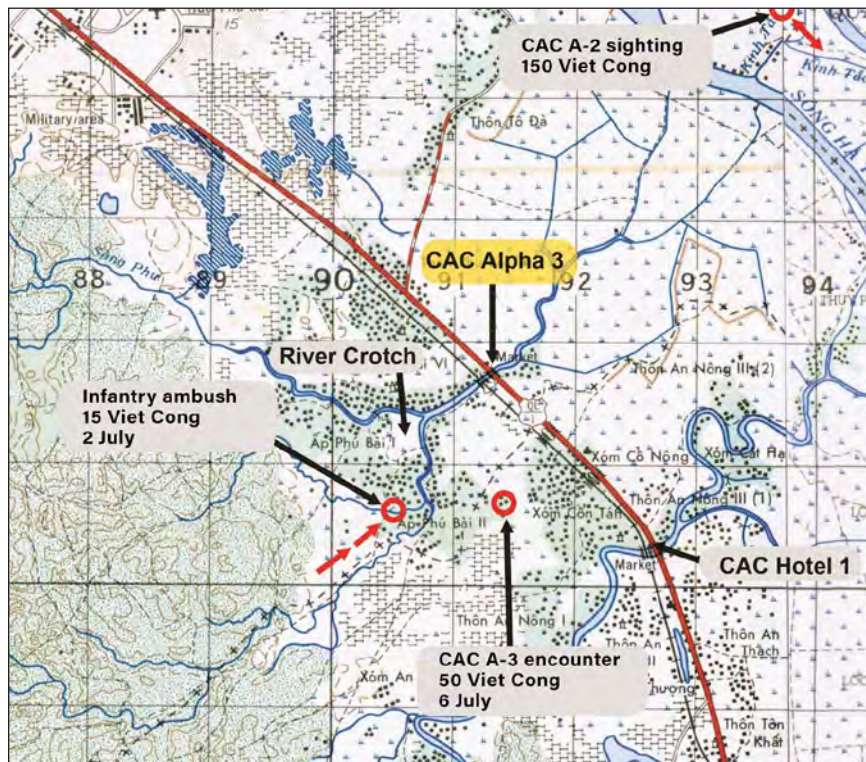
⁵⁶ Matricardi interviews.

⁵⁷ "Daily Sitreps," 6 July, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, July 1967.

⁵⁸ "Significant Events," 2 and 3 July, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, July 1967; and "Daily Sitreps," 7 July, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, July 1967.

THE SUMMER OF 1967

Figure 7.9. Locations of engagements, July 1967



Note that in the evening following the CAC Alpha 3 ambush, Alpha 2 observed an enemy force of 150 to the north.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

Both Sergeant Brown and Corporal Matricardi survived the war. Brown became a career Marine. Matricardi served two years in the Marine Corps and went back to college to complete his degree.⁵⁹

As the summer reached its end, Viet Cong troops struggled to acquire enough rice to sustain their growing forces around Phu Bai. In early August, the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, committed two compa-

³⁹ Matricardi interviews. Matricardi married his high school sweetheart and graduated from the University of Baltimore School of Law. He then practiced law in Virginia, near Washington, DC. He was a criminal prosecutor in Washington for five years before establishing a private law practice. Matricardi and his wife Maureen remained married and worked together until she died in 2007. He retired from practicing law in 2017 after 44 years.

nies to assist in an operation with the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. They raided a base camp of the Viet Cong main force *804th Battalion* in the Bach Ma Mountains. The Marines routed the Viet Cong from the camp and captured several important documents.⁶⁰ Based on the intelligence they recovered during the operation, they concluded that Communist forces were falling behind in their efforts to secure rice stores for the upcoming monsoons. Intelligence indicated that they needed to meet their collection goals by 10 August, but they had been severely impaired in this task. Eight Viet Cong defectors soon confirmed that the Viet Cong's rations were low.⁶¹

The Marines' efforts along the road to Hue in the summer of 1967 affected Viet Cong operations there. As more Communist forces arrived in the region, they needed to gather large quantities of rice both to sustain themselves during the monsoon season and during the operations that would precede the Tet Offensive. On the other side, Marine, PF, and ARVN forces worked to interdict their movements between the mountains and the rice-growing villages in the lowlands. If the intelligence they gathered was to be believed, their efforts were paying off. Time would only tell, though, the extent to which the Marines and their allies were hurting Communist efforts. Just as the fighting heated up around Phu Bai, the South Vietnamese government in Saigon held national elections that introduced a new element of terror along the road to Hue.

⁶⁰ "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, item no. 1201060251, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Doc, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 9.

⁶¹ "Combat Operations After Action Report," Operation Rush, 19 August 1967, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, item no. 1201045014, folder 045, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 2–3.

CHAPTER 8

TERROR

In August and September 1967, matters took an ugly turn along the road to Hue. Many of the most significant confrontations occurred in the Phu Loc District, where several combined action units fought to confront the uptick in Communist operations. Much of the activity was related to the Viet Cong's increased frustration in acquiring rice supplies for the approaching winter. But another factor motivated their actions as well: South Vietnam's national elections. This crucial election, scheduled for early September 1967, offered a chance for the beleaguered country to replace the military junta that had ruled in Saigon since November 1963.¹ The Viet Cong simply could not allow the elections to go unchallenged.

There were several acts of terror in July, and those types of attacks increased in August and September. These acts were scattered throughout the Phu Bai and Phu Loc areas. Evidence showed that additional enemy units had entered the area, and the Marine command opined that the corresponding increased need for rice to sustain the new troops accounted for some of the frantic rice gathering efforts seen in many areas around both Phu Bai and Phu Loc. The Marines believed that the increase in enemy-initiated activities indicated that all Viet Cong local and main force units had probably come under control of a regimental headquarters. There had indeed been a general buildup of North

¹ The 1967 national elections turned out to be tainted by depressed turnout, corruption, and accusations of fraud, the extent of which lies outside the scope of this work. For more information, see George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 195–96.

Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces in the area. This buildup had started around August, and it would later be learned that the North Vietnamese had ordered increased action on the battlefield. This late summer and fall rise in activity likely stemmed from that order.

The buildup of enemy activity during this time period should be viewed within the context of the approaching Tet attacks. The NVA units coming into the area were mostly converging in a large mountainous area known as Base Area 114. It also appears that NVA units specially trained in explosives, known as sapper units, were now in the Phu Loc area and the mountains of the Phu Loc District. The enemy's numbers would continue to grow in the area, and their aggression would continue to increase, until the major attacks began in late January 1968, just a few months away.

Terrorism Becomes Personal

August 1967 brought more acts of terror to the people of South Vietnam. That the increase in attacks coincided with the upcoming national elections, set for early September, was no coincidence. These would be the first national elections since the assassination of South Vietnam's first president, Ngo Dinh Diem, in November 1963. Since then, the country had gone through a series of military leaders until Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky established a military junta in Saigon. Both Thieu and Ky were on the ballot to be South Vietnam's president and vice president in 1967. There is debate regarding whether the elections were legitimate, but they did occur, and a large portion of the population turned out to cast their ballots. Thieu and Ky received 36 percent of the vote and won the election.² Although victorious, the fact that Thieu and Ky received well below a majority of the vote was not a good sign for their government.

² Preventing the Viet Cong and NVA from disrupting the 1967 national elections was a widespread problem in South Vietnam. For examples pertaining to I Corps, see Maj Gary L. Telfer, LtCol Lane Rogers, and V. Keith Fleming Jr., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1984), 108, 111, 130, 169, 172–73.

The Viet Cong could not allow these elections to go unchallenged. They chose to undermine the people's confidence in the South Vietnamese government and its security forces by waging a war of terror on them. The Viet Cong had always ruled by intimidation when the people would not cooperate with or support them. When they realized that their infrastructure and influence were under strain, as it was around Phu Bai, they began a widespread, targeted campaign of terror to intimidate the population into submission. The Viet Cong's shift in tactics became painfully clear with the uptick in terrorist attacks in August, when Viet Cong cells kidnapped 39 villagers and killed another 11 in the Phu Bai enclave alone.³

These acts of terror occurred throughout the region. Worse, the Viet Cong grew bolder as they attempted to terrorize the population and South Vietnamese security personnel into submission. On 3 August, the Viet Cong returned a villager they had kidnapped in late July and executed him in one of the hamlets in Combined Action Company (CAC) Alpha 3's tactical area of responsibility (TAOR). Five days later, they assassinated Thuy Dong village's police chief. The killing happened in one of the village's main hamlets, within 400 meters of the CAC compound. On the morning of 11 August, the Viet Cong kidnapped and killed the mother of one of Hotel 5's Popular Force (PF) soldiers. She lived in a hamlet that was just far enough out from the main population center that she was an easy target for a group of Viet Cong. Before dawn the following morning, an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) patrol along the highway approximately one kilometer west of Hotel 3's compound fired on 12 Viet Cong. They were trying to kidnap three farmers but released them when the patrol located and fired on them.⁴

³ "Intelligence, Summary of Enemy Activity," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, Command Chronology (ComdC), August 1967, item no. 1201060251, folder 060, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), 10.

⁴ These events are reported in "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, 15–28.

Two days later, on 13 August, again near Hotel 5, a village chief reported two kidnappings. A male and female villager were kidnapped from one location, while two male villagers and six female villagers were simultaneously kidnapped from another location nearby.⁵ Both incidents occurred around 2200 hours in hamlets toward the mountains, where it was easier to approach with less risk of running into a CAC patrol.⁶ It is possible that the Viet Cong had been watching the CAC and knew that the risk in approaching from that direction was minimal. The CAC patrol may have been sighted heading in a different direction, or a patrol was not out at that time. While the CACs were trained to throw the Viet Cong off their trail, they could not prevent the Viet Cong from knowing when they left their compound or knowing the direction they went.

The next day, three Viet Cong killed a villager in the Alpha 6 and 9 area for sympathizing with the CAC platoons.⁷ On 18 August, Hotel 1 reported that 30 Viet Cong had kidnapped a group of 14 villagers. They also relayed that the Viet Cong were taking civilians into the mountains for Communist indoctrination.⁸ A month before, the Viet Cong kidnapped another group of villagers in the same area and forced them to carry rice into the mountains.⁹ The location of the incidents was the distant hamlets of Loc Bon village. These kidnappings were in the same area where CAC Marines and PFs had recently ambushed Viet Cong rice patrols. On 19 August, six Vietnamese males in three different locations were kidnapped. These were all from hamlets out a distance on the north fork of the Phu Bai River in the operating area of Alpha 3. These were the same hamlets, among other small hamlets similarly situated, where the Viet Cong would come for their rice collections. On 19 August, 30 Viet Cong kidnapped four villagers from

⁵“Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, 18.

⁶The situation likely could have been worse. Hotel 5 had questioned a group of detainees the previous afternoon and no doubt had at least one ambush out that night. See “Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, 17.

⁷“Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, 19.

⁸“Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, 21.

⁹“Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, July 1966, item no. 1201060250, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 19.

a pagoda in an outer hamlet in the Hotel 5 area of operations. Three of the people were villagers and one was a Phu Loc District PF soldier. On 23 August, a village official told Hotel 8 that 10 Viet Cong had kidnapped a 50-year-old male civilian and had taken him to the hills to the south of the Truoi River. The man was kidnapped from the hamlet of Luong Dien Thuong. This was one of the far hamlets from the CAC area of operation, and much enemy action took place in that hamlet area as the year went on.¹⁰

The acts of Viet Cong terror and intimidation continued. On 22 August, Viet Cong fired into a group of villagers and PFs who were holding a meeting, killing three and wounding eleven. On 24 August, a group of Viet Cong threw grenades into a group of villagers.¹¹ The next day, a group of Viet Cong entered a village and, using grenades, assassinated the hamlet chief's father and his three children.¹² This incident was far from any of the CAC areas, but it was on the Ta Trach River not far from the jungle camps of Nui Mo Tau. Maintaining security there was of utmost importance for the Viet Cong, as they heavily used the area. The Marines never determined why this villager and his children were killed, but it was clearly part of a much broader campaign of terror. On 27 August, Hotel 6 reported that 30 Viet Cong had kidnapped six villagers.¹³ This happened in a hamlet a few kilometers north of the CAC. The reason was unknown but could be related to rice collection rather than revenge or preventing cooperation. On 31 August, Hotel 6 reported that 30 villagers were kidnapped somewhere in the CAC TAOR and taken to a spot that was located near the mountain trail entrances.¹⁴

Sometimes these attacks became personal to the CAC Marines that worked their villages. One such incident occurred in Hotel 3's village. Sergeant William Curtis, the CAC's leader, recalls a powerful story of Viet Cong terrorism against the people in the village and of the corrup-

¹⁰ "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, 22–23.

¹¹ "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, 22–23.

¹² "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, 25.

¹³ "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, 25–26.

¹⁴ "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, 28.

tion in the South Vietnamese government that was supposed to help stop it. The Hotel 3 compound was located in the rice-growing and fishing village of Loc An, which sits along a stretch of Highway 1 that crosses the Truoi River. The village was a critically important area located near two of the major enemy routes that connected the mountains with several rice collection points and the trails running northeast to the Phu Thu district.¹⁵

The 26-year-old Sergeant Curtis was serving his second enlistment. He had left the Marine Corps several years earlier and started college, but the Vietnam War drew him back in. He spent his first few months in Vietnam with the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, when it was the resident battalion at Phu Bai. After six months in the battalion, he volunteered for combined action. Curtis was exactly what the program's leaders were looking for in a CAC leader: someone more mature than the Marines who possessed a few months of combat experience. They assigned him to Hotel 3, where he immediately became the platoon's leader. The CAC was based in an old French fort alongside a 30-man ARVN unit that protected the bridge. Their TAOR contained the rice-growing village of Loc An. Like most CAC units along Highway 1 at this time, they spent much of the summer and fall of 1967 trying to intercept the Viet Cong rice collection efforts.¹⁶

The people in Loc An were friendly, and Curtis made sure to help them as much as he could. He stressed the importance of civic action to his Marines. On day patrols the Marines often took their medical corpsman along to treat minor ailments such as eye infections and cuts. Curtis made sure the villagers received seed, fertilizer, and farming tools. When the CAC acquired building materials such as plywood and corrugated tin, he ensured that they went to good use and were not diverted to local officials. On one occasion, the CAC replaced the school roof after a heavy rain caused it to collapse. This village, like many others

¹⁵ Details about this story were gathered across several discussions between William F. Nimmo and William Curtis via telephone interview and email correspondence, December 2020, hereafter Curtis interviews.

¹⁶ Curtis interviews.

Figure 8.1. View of CAC Hotel 3's compound



Hotel 3's compound at the northwest junction of Highway 1 and the Truoi River, where Sgt William Curtis was the leader in 1967.

Source: photo by Jim Ellison, 1966.

in the Phu Bai and Phu Loc areas, was not loyal to the Communists, and the relationships fostered by the CAC platoon convinced many people there to provide intelligence to the Marines and PF soldiers.¹⁷

Corrupt South Vietnamese government officials proved just as much of an obstacle as the Viet Cong. Every now and then, supply trucks came to the compound to deliver materials to improve the villages collectively and the villagers individually. The materials often came from the U.S. Agency for International Development and private American charities. The shipments included hand farming tools, seed, plywood, corrugated tin for roofing, and concrete. Plywood was especially valuable—"golden," according to Curtis. Various commands, including the district headquarters, knew in advance when a shipment would arrive. One day, a Marine truck arrived at the compound. Curtis and another 8 Marines and 10 PFs watched the truck's arrival. Less than a minute later, the district chief and an ARVN major pulled in with their own large truck and several PFs from the district headquarters,

¹⁷ Curtis interviews.

located several kilometers away. They walked over to Sergeant Curtis, who saluted and greeted them. The district chief then turned to his PFs and told them to load all the materials onto his truck. The materials, however, had been sent to Hotel 3 for the CAC's use for their villagers. They were not intended for the district.

Curtis knew that the district officials were attempting to steal the materials. He resolved not to allow that to happen. He told his corporal, in what he calls his "parade ground voice," to get the supplies and lock them up right away. "Everyone present knew what was going on. The District Chief was kinda-sorta, my boss," which invited trouble.

He knew that I knew he was taking gratis aid and selling it to the peasants of his district. He was a crook. The PFs were most assuredly under his command and he had massive power over their lives. They were terrified of him. In those few seconds the district chief was looking at me, and one could see the mental wheels turning. I had more real troops and we were all armed. We were real combat veterans and daily and nightly sought out the enemy. He never did. He knew that if he tried anything we would take complete control. He quickly realized he wasn't going to prevail. He was not going to get the supplies. Standing there he was losing "face." He turned and walked quickly back to his truck and they left. The PFs of Hotel 3 thought we had stood up to a very dangerous man. As I noted, this all happened rather quickly. The district chief never came back to our CAC. I never saw him again. Thinking back, it rather seems to me that corruption and double-dealing were nearly ubiquitous in the [Republic of Vietnam]. There were so many ARVN officers that thought war was a business and they were lining their own pockets.

Curtis feels that corruption like this was a major factor in the Communists eventually seizing control of the whole country.¹⁸

¹⁸ Curtis interviews.

Fortunately, Curtis had a much healthier relationship with the PF commander at Hotel 3. He developed a strong relationship with his counterpart, Trung Si Ti (*Trung Si* is Vietnamese for sergeant). Ti was older. Before the Americans arrived, he served in the French Union Forces fighting the Viet Minh, the precursors to the Viet Cong. He received multiple awards for heroism, including the Cross of Gallantry, and had the respect of both the young and the older PFs. Curtis remembers that Ti was not only a good leader but also had impressive tactical insights. Ti believed that he could not be killed and had a habit of walking home at lunch without a weapon. Curtis could not convince him to take a weapon or take a PF with him. He and Curtis were close. They shared a room next to the radio room.¹⁹

On 22 August 22, at approximately 1400 hours, Trung Si Ti went to a political gathering in a hamlet more than three kilometers north of Hotel 3's the compound. The Marines were told by highest authority not to leave the compound. The U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), did not want it to appear that the Americans were supporting a particular party or candidate in the upcoming national elections. Most of the village luminaries were sitting on a stage located in a large grave site. Twenty or 30 people were standing around watching them make speeches. Several were leaning against a low stone wall that curved around toward the stage area. They were all eating lunch and discussing the upcoming national elections set for 3 September. There was no security.²⁰ A group of five Viet Cong, who had arrived on a sampan (a small, flat-bottomed boat) from across a stream, stealthily approached the gathering and fired on the group on the stage area. Trung Si Ti was shot and killed instantly. The Viet Cong who shot him was then shot by a hamlet chief with a .38-caliber revolver. The records show that two PFs and one civilian were killed. Nine other civilians and two PFs were wounded.²¹

¹⁹ Curtis interviews.

²⁰ Curtis interviews.

²¹ "Daily Sit Reps," 22 August, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967.

Figure 8.2. Location of CAC Hotel 3's compound



This map shows the location of the Hotel 3 compound, marked by an orange circle. The red dot shows the location of the political gathering and the spot where Trung Si Ti was killed. On the map, the area looks totally open, but terrain provided plenty of cover due to the tree lines and vegetation along the waterways, allowing Viet Cong to sneak up on a group.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA. Map data from “Daily Sit Reps,” 22 August 1967, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, Command Chronology, August 1967, item no. 1201060251, folder 060, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

Hotel 3 immediately sent out a reaction force, but the damage had already been done. Ironically, the Viet Cong who was killed had recently been treated by the corpsman at Hotel 3 for an eye infection. Curtis related that the government of South Vietnam did not do anything to honor Trung Si Ti or his family. The Marines took up a collection and gave it to his wife. They attended his funeral and draped a flag of the Republic of Vietnam over his casket. As Curtis says, “It was a damn sad day.”²²

CAC Hotel 8: Truoi River Ambush

Both Hotel 3 and Hotel 8 bordered the Truoi River. Hotel 3 sat on the north side of river while Hotel 8 was on the south side, more than

²² After his time in the CAC, Curtis went on to make a 32-year career out of the Marine Corps. He retired in 1991 as a lieutenant colonel.

a kilometer down Highway 1. Together they posed an obstacle to any Communist forces traveling along either side of the Truoi River. They also posed an obstacle for Viet Cong moving on the trail system that connected the Phu Thu District with the mountains. At Hotel 3, a single bridge crossed the Truoi River carrying both the highway and the railroad (see figures 6.3 and 7.1). The railroad required a double truss bridge with a large center piling for support. The river at this point was approximately 90 meters (300 feet) wide and 9 meters (30 feet) deep, but its current was not so strong that you could not swim or oar a sampan across.²³

The Truoi River was the confluence of two smaller rivers that originated in the high country of the Bach Ma mountain cluster. The Truoi River trails offered good access routes from the mountains to the lowlands. The Viet Cong, especially larger units and headquarter elements, used the high-canopied mountain areas for basecamps. The trails down on the west side of the river, leading past Hotel 3, were better oriented for rice gathering and for getting across to the Phu Thu District. When an enemy group reached the area close to the lowlands, they had several options to fan out and move past the CAC and infantry patrols that set ambushes for them near the highway. If they got past the Marine gauntlet, they could make their way out to the rice collection points or go farther to cross the river into the Phu Thu District.²⁴

After Hotel 8 was established in the spring of 1967, Viet Cong travel along the routes to and from Phu Thu through Loc Dien and along the Truoi River trail on the southeast side of the river subsided. The CAC's presence made traveling through the area a risky venture. The trail on the Hotel 8 side of the river did not lead as easily to the Phu Thu District due to the river's location, the nearby bay, and Hotel 8's patrols. If the Viet Cong did not significantly veer to the right (east) when they reached the lowlands, they would have to travel too close to Hotel 8, which likely had a patrol out somewhere in the vicinity, wait-

²³ This is based on William F. Nimmo's recollections as a CAP Marine in this area, hereafter Nimmo recollections. See also figures 3.9, 3.10, 6.3, and 7.1.

²⁴ Nimmo recollections. See also figure 7.8.

ing for the chance to spring an ambush (see figures 7.1 and 7.4). This situation forced enemy patrols to choose between running the chance of ambush or taking boats from a safer location and crossing the bay to the Phu Thu District.²⁵

Rice collection efforts were in full swing in August, as were the Viet Cong campaigns of terror and intimidation.²⁶ Late in the month, however, their focus seemed to be on disrupting the elections and destroying friendly installations. During July and August, the rice-route CACs north and west of the Truoi River frequently made contact with enemy forces. A review of the command chronologies of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, showed patterns of activity. In August alone, Alpha 3, Hotel 2, and Hotel 3 had eight contacts that would be described as rice-collection related.²⁷ Conversely, CAC Hotel 8 was quiet during July and most of August.

Hotel 8 patrols in July and August involved covering the village by taking patrols to different areas each night. A combination of experience and intelligence indicated a higher likelihood that Viet Cong would be operating in certain areas. Unlike Hotel 3, Hotel 2, Hotel 1, and Alpha 3, Hotel 8 was not yet involved in intercepting rice-collection parties, so their patrolling methods were more varied. Some nights they would patrol north of the highway near the Cau Hai Lagoon, an access point where the Viet Cong were known to use boats to maneuver around the area. Other nights they would go due south to another series of hamlets that were strung out along the riverbanks. The farther upriver the patrols traveled, the higher the chance they would run into trouble.²⁸

²⁵ William Grunder, personal and telephone interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020; and William Grunder, telephone interview with Cavender S. Sutton, March 2021, hereafter Grunder interviews.

²⁶ The August 1967 command chronology for the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, cites numerous incidents involving rice that month. Fleet Marine Forces, Pacific (FMFPAC) also noted that the prominence of rice in the month's patrolling and fighting in "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, 4.

²⁷ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967.

²⁸ Grunder interviews; Cottrell Fox, in-person and telephone interviews with William F. Nimmo in 2019, 2020, 2021; and Cottrell Fox, telephone interview with Cavender S. Sutton, March 2021, hereafter Fox interviews.

Figure 8.3. Locations of CACs Hotel 3 and Hotel 8



A relief map showing the relationship of the Truoi River and the Bach Ma Mountain cluster to Hotel 8 and Hotel 3. The large body of water is the Cau Hai Lagoon, often referred to as “the bay.” Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

The people living in Hotel 8’s village of Loc Dien made their living in a variety of ways. Rice farming, of course, was a vital component of the community’s economic system. Fishing could also be a lucrative pursuit, thanks to the village’s location on the Truoi River and its close proximity to the Cau Hai Lagoon. The Truoi River emptied into the lagoon and provided a means for village fisherman to access the bay’s fishing grounds. Loc Dien also had a healthy market economy. Some villagers there grew vegetables to sell in the village marketplace, while others traveled to by bus to retail markets in Hue, a little more than 20 kilometers north on Highway 1.²⁹

²⁹ Grunder interviews; Fox interviews; and Brown interviews.

Loc Dien had a history of resisting the Viet Cong. In September 1965, before a CAC unit arrived there, *Life* magazine published an article about Viet Cong terror tactics. The author, Don Moser, spent two weeks interviewing villagers and hamlet officials. He described a community with a vibrant economy that had been brutally terrorized over the previous year by the Viet Cong. A group of dedicated villagers formed a corps that resisted Viet Cong terrorism as best they could, considering they had no support from their non-Communist government. A Truoi River Viet Cong local force unit camped up in the nearby mountains and periodically entered the village to terrorize, tax, and indoctrinate the villagers. At night, the village and hamlet officials holed up in a concrete building with armed guards, who stayed awake and kept watch. Some lost their lives to the Viet Cong.³⁰

Loc Dien may have been contested ground, but many of its people were eager to help the Marines who created a CAC there. Even in Hotel 8's earliest days, the Marines and PFs received good intelligence from the locals. One of their greatest allies was a village elder named Che. During the First Indochina War, he had fought against Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh, and he was now dedicated to fighting the Viet Cong. Che mentored the PF soldiers and maintained close contact with the Marines of Hotel 8, providing intelligence when he could.³¹ The CAC in turn acted on that information, sending out patrols and ambushes to disrupt Viet Cong activities in and around the village. They typically divided their unit into two squads of five or six Marines each. When they went out on a night patrol, they sent out one squad along with four or five PFs, while the rest stayed behind to defend the compound.³²

Hotel 8 also had an excellent leader, Sergeant William M. Grunder. Originally from San Jose, California, Grunder had arrived in Vietnam more than a year before as an artilleryman with the 12th Marines.

³⁰ Don Mosher, "Vietcong Terror in a Village: Eight Dedicated Men Are Marked for Death," *Life Magazine*, 3 September 1965, 28–33.

³¹ Grunder interviews.

³² Grunder interviews. This information was corroborated in Fox interviews; and Brown interviews.

After a full 13-month tour of supporting combat operations along the demilitarized zone (DMZ), he extended his time in Vietnam and volunteered for combined action. Grunder was then one of Hotel 8's first members, establishing the CAC and building its compound at its inception. He worked to cultivate relationships between villagers like Che and the PFs, who he knew were essential to the CAC's operations. On the night of 28 August 1967, for example, Grunder led a patrol based on locally provided intelligence. In a conversation with one of the trusted PFs named Phuc, he learned that the Viet Cong had been using a particular trail to reach the lagoon, where they were picked up by boats. From there, they could move northward along the shoreline and then into the Phu Thu District. Grunder decided to ambush that trail. He chose to strike where the trail crossed Highway 1 and led into some graveyards. It was a perfect spot to set up an L-shaped ambush.³³

As the sun sank over the mountains, Grunder went out with four other Marines and five PFs. Among the Marines were Corporal Cotrell Fox of Webster Grove, Missouri, and Corporal Charles Brown from Detroit, Michigan.³⁴ Among the five PFs were Phuc, who carried an M79 grenade launcher, and Thiec, another trusted PF. Most of the Marines carried M16 rifles, and one carried an M60 machine gun. Fox walked point. Almost certain that they would make contact, each member of the patrol carried several hundred rounds.³⁵

After departing the compound, they headed south along the road until they passed the first small bridge. They stayed off the trails, both as a safety precaution and to make it difficult for any observers to determine where they were headed. After passing the bridge, the patrol turned north through the village until they came to a dike next to the lagoon. They crossed the dike and headed south in the high brush along the lagoon until they came to a place known as the graveyard, where they would set their ambush. The graveyard was just northeast of Highway 1 and the railroad tracks. The railroad ran parallel to the

³³ Grunder interviews.

³⁴ Grunder interviews; Brown interviews; and Fox interviews.

³⁵ Grunder interviews; Brown interviews; and Fox interviews.

Figure 8.4. Location of ambush, 28 August 1967



This map shows the location of the ambush in relation to Hotel 8's compound and the Truoi River.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

highway, and there was a swale, an area of low ground, between the road and the railroad tracks. The graveyard had several circular grave sites, typical for this part of Vietnam. They consisted of a low wall that formed a circle about three meters in diameter. There was a gap in the wall for entry and exit. In the middle was a raised mound that was the grave. The trail passing through the graveyard wound around a large hill, Hill 162, that formed a natural barrier and channelized the route for anyone traveling out of the mountains toward the lagoon. Grunder set his ambush at a point where enemy troops coming out of the mountains along the hillside trail would have to cross the highway.

The patrol formed an L-shaped ambush among the graves. Grunder, Phuc, and another Marine positioned themselves at the short leg of the L, looking straight down the trail. The trail made a curve to the left at this point and, from their position the graveyard, they could see straight down the trail toward the highway. Grunder placed his machine gunner, Jankovics, there so he could catch the approaching Viet Cong in a straight line. The rest of the Marines and PFs positioned themselves in gravesites along the L's long leg. There was one Marine and one PF in each circular grave. They were about 45–70 meters from where the trail crossed Highway 1.³⁶

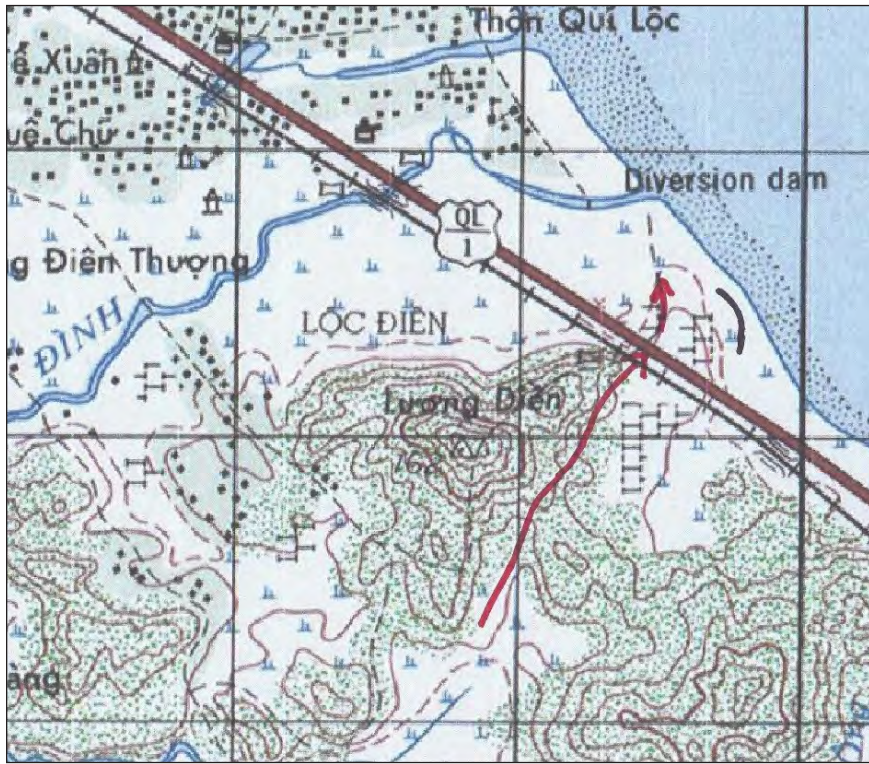
Not long after the patrol got into position, a group of dark silhouettes appeared on the trail. Brown did not even hear them coming down the trail. The next thing he knew, a group of enemy troops were literally running across the highway and right into the ambush's kill zone. It was a pitch-black night, and the Marines opened fire into the dark. Brown, positioned to the left of Fox, saw two shadows running past him when two Chicom grenades suddenly landed nearby. Fortunately, one was off target and the other was a dud. The fight was intense. There was a high volume of fire, and while the Marines did not know how many of the enemy they had run into, they could tell that it was a large group. Having inadvertently bitten off more than they could chew, the Marines called for a reaction force from the compound, more than a kilometer away. The reaction force was large and did not have to fear an ambush, so it could move quickly. Some of the enemy had gotten through the ambush to the north, and some had taken refuge in the swale. After quite a bit of firing, the patrol popped illumination flares and got on a line to sweep the kill zone up to the highway. When the patrol attempted to assault over Highway 1, the Viet Cong opened up with automatic fire. Brown dove to the ground alongside Fox as green tracers flew around them.³⁷

While Grunder's patrol continued to exchange fire with what was left of the enemy, the reaction force arrived. Tom Mosher, a Marine in

³⁶ Grunder interviews; Brown interviews; and Fox interviews.

³⁷ Grunder interviews; Brown interviews; and Fox interviews.

Figure 8.5. Map of ambush site, 28 August 1967



The red arrow marks the general route the Viet Cong took into the ambush. The black semi-circle marks the ambushers' position.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

the reaction force, had seen the patrol fire off a red popup flare when the firing had started, signaling that they needed help. He and everyone else but the cook and the old man Che grabbed their gear and moved toward the fighting. When Mosher arrived, he found Jankovics and served as his assistant gunner on the M60. Not long after Mosher arrived at his side, Jankovics took a round from a wounded enemy soldier. The bullet hit his wrist and traveled upward, shattering his elbow. He could no longer operate the machine gun, so Mosher took over.³⁸

³⁸ Tom Mosher, interview with William F. Nimmo, 2019, hereafter Mosher interview.

Not long after the reaction force arrived, the combined force began to push the Viet Cong back. As the firing died off, Grunder called a medical evacuation (medevac) in for Jankovics. A helicopter landed on Highway 1 near the site of the firefight. The rest of the CAC stayed in place until morning. At first light, they searched the area and found five dead Viet Cong on or near the railroad tracks. The CAC also found several blood trails, bandages, and other military debris going back up the trail, indicating that the surviving enemy troops had dragged their dead and wounded back up toward the mountains after breaking contact.³⁹

Hotel 8 estimated that the enemy patrol consisted of at least 20 soldiers. They were either main force Viet Cong or a combination of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars.⁴⁰ By August, there were plenty of NVA that had infiltrated down into the Hue and Phu Bai areas. Their clothing did not reveal precisely who they were—none of the recovered dead wore uniforms—but they were described as “stocky and tough looking.” They were heavily armed with modern weapons, which further suggested they were either main force Viet Cong or NVA. Their backpacks also contained large quantities of explosives.⁴¹

It is curious to note that this incident occurred shortly before Communist troops hit several installations as a prelude to the national elections that were just a few days away. Those attacks began in the early morning hours of 30 August. A series of mortar attacks struck military installations throughout the Phu Bai TAOR. The Marine aircraft group at Phu Bai received 40 rounds of mortar fire. The ARVN training center at the Phu Bai Combat Base was hit around the same time with another 30 rounds. A few kilometers to the north of the Phu Bai Combat Base, Communist attackers hit the district headquarters town of Huong Thuy especially hard. Their attack focused on a

³⁹ Mosher interview.

⁴⁰ The NVA was known to augment Viet Cong units with its own troops. See Michael Lee Lanning and Dan Cragg, *Inside the VC and the NVA: The Real Story of North Vietnam's Armed Forces* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 80–83; and Warren Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big-Unit War against the U.S., 1965–1966* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 19–20, 129–31.

⁴¹ This ambush is briefly described in “Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, 26.

Chinese Nationalist radio station, which they hit with mortars and recoilless rifles. After the mortars fell silent, the infantry attacked. The Communists breached the perimeter wire and used explosives to wreck the installation. They killed eight ARVN soldiers and four Chinese civilian workers. Eighteen more Chinese workers were wounded. The attack destroyed two buildings, bunkers, and one of the station's vehicles. The nearby CAC Alpha headquarters received several mortars and explosions outside the perimeter. The Marines later concluded that the mortar attack on the CAC Alpha headquarters was a diversion to prevent it from sending a reaction force to the aid of the radio station.⁴²

The attack may have been worse had it not been for CAC Hotel 8. The Communist force ambushed on 28 August was moving toward the Phu Thu District. It would not have been too long of a trek from there to the Chinese Nationalist radio station.⁴³ The large quantities of explosives that Hotel 8 recovered from the dead suggests that they were not a typical rice-collection party but were on their way to some to do some damage somewhere in that area. This was the first of many attacks that would engulf the Phu Bai enclave as autumn drew nearer.

Attack on CACs Alpha 6 and 9

Disrupting the elections was important, but the Communists still needed to eat. With the monsoon season approaching, they were behind in obtaining enough rice to sustain them through the winter. To make matters worse, U.S. and ARVN patrols captured several rice caches in September.⁴⁴ As the rice situation grew desperate, Viet Cong main force units in the mountains were forced to come out of the hills more frequently and in greater numbers. As they did, they took greater chances, and the CACs, along with the infantry, worked to interdict these rice-collection patrols. Countering these patrols would be the main focus for the CACs along the road to Hue for the rest of the year.

⁴² "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, 9.

⁴³ "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August 1967, 27.

⁴⁴ "Summary of Enemy Activity," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, item no. 1201060252, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 5.

As the summer of 1967 neared its end, the Viet Cong had a dilemma on their hands. Interrogations of prisoners and defectors continued to disclose that their food supply was critically low. The intelligence suggested that the Viet Cong had only accumulated enough rice to last on a day-to-day basis, certainly not enough to last through the approaching monsoon season. At the same time, reinforcements were entering the area, and they also needed food. Marine intelligence believed that a new battalion-size unit was operating in the region by late August, and that its arrival had accounted for the increased enemy activity that followed. They determined that a group of sappers trained to use explosives, such as those used against the Chinese Nationalist radio station, were operating in direct support of that new unit.⁴⁵ The attacks seemed to increase alongside their desperation for food. Throughout September, they launched 17 mortar attacks against several allied installations, mined Highway 1 at least 16 times, and destroyed a bridge.⁴⁶

The first such attack began on the morning of 1 September, when Viet Cong troops hit the Phu Bai airbase with a sustained mortar barrage. More than 90 mortar rounds fell inside the perimeter that morning, killing four U.S. servicemembers and wounding several more. The attack had come from a hill that was very close to the routes the Viet Cong used to travel into the lowlands through CAC Alpha 3's TAOR. Two other Hotel CACs took mortar fire, although less severely, in the early days leading up to and right after the elections of 3 September. Up through the date of the elections there were more harassment attacks. On the day of the elections, one of the CACs reported that six or seven mortars landed near the ballot box. There were several instances of the Viet Cong stealing identification cards from villagers, thereby preventing them from voting.⁴⁷ Throughout the rest of the month, there were several ambushes and engagements with Viet Cong units

⁴⁵ "Summary of Enemy Activity," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 5–6.

⁴⁶ "Summary of Enemy Activity," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 5; and "Close Combat," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 14–21.

⁴⁷ "Close Combat," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 14–15.

Figure 8.6. Locations of CAC Alpha 7 and CACs Alpha 6 and 9



The map shows in red arrows the enemy routes through the CAC areas, the primary routes being through Alpha 6 and 9. Note the secondary enemy route that follows the cart road along the edge of the paddyland toward Alpha 7's position. Most enemy patrols and units were heading due north to the Loi Nong hamlets, which lay on both sides of the Loi Nong River. Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

on rice routes carried out by Marine infantry units and the CACs. The number of engagements and the number of Viet Cong in each incident support the conclusion that they were desperate and willing to assume greater risk to get to the rice they needed.⁴⁸

A number of important routes ran through the Gia Le Pass. Most of the action during the recent months occurred in the southern part of the TAOR, close to the Truoi River or Phu Loc. That was the focus of the infantry support at that time.⁴⁹ In September, that changed.

⁴⁸ "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 5. There was a slight uptick in engagements with CAC platoons from the previous month—21 in August versus 23 in September. See "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, August–September 1967.

⁴⁹ "Command Posts," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 11.

Due to the war along the DMZ, the Marines' resources in the rest of I Corps were stretched, and Phu Bai needed more infantry assets that III Marine Amphibious Force could not spare to adequately cover the entire TAOR and support the small, remote units that operated out on their own. This left Gia Le an ideal place for the Viet Cong to launch a large-scale attack. The attack was launched against CACs Alpha 6 and 9 in the early morning hours of 11 September 11. A large, steep hill provided an obstacle that helped channelize the enemy into routes on the Alpha 6 and 9 side of the hill.

In the early morning hours of 11 September, the sounds of nearby fighting awoke the Marines and PFs at Alpha 7. Corporal William Nimmo, who had recently transferred to Alpha 7 from Alpha 1, remembers hearing a large volume of gunfire and explosions coming from the Gia Le Pass, near the roadway. The platoon could not raise Alpha 6 and 9 on the radio, but other radio chatter on the company's radio network indicated that the CAC was under attack. Alpha 7 went on full alert as every individual in the platoon, both Marines and PFs, grabbed their weapons and ran to the southern perimeter to see and hear what was happening. The CAC's leader, Sergeant Butch Cochran, shouted orders for everyone to get to their assigned fighting positions. Nimmo and the other team leaders ran along the perimeter making sure that everyone was in their assigned positions so the platoon could repel an attack from any direction. Two members of the platoon set up an observation post on the roof of one of the compound's buildings. The team leaders periodically walked the perimeter positions to check if everyone was maintaining watch.⁵⁰

It was a long, tense night. Inside Alpha 7's radio room, the Marines listened for news on what was happening. They were concerned not only about what had happened down the road but also that they might be attacked with a large force as well. One of the Marines kept the coffee brewing through those tense hours. Others checked the coordinates at surrounding target reference points in case they needed to call in a

⁵⁰ Nimmo was a team leader at Alpha 7 that night. Unless otherwise noted, details from this episode are his personal recollections.

fire mission. The rest remained at their positions outside, constantly scanning the countryside for movement. One of them kept another radio out by the perimeter, both to listen to what was going on down the road and to call for illumination if necessary.

At daybreak, Sergeant Cochran formed a patrol that included Corporal Nimmo's team and several others. They moved out and carefully walked down a railroad track bed toward Alpha 6 and 9. The fight was over when Alpha 7's patrol arrived, but they found a sobering scene at the embattled compound. The dead Marines had already been carried away, but Viet Cong bodies still littered the roadway. Nimmo recalls that Alpha 7 could do nothing but offer their assistance. The attack had been vicious. Five Marines were killed, and another 10 Marines and three PFs were wounded.⁵¹ This was the largest number of casualties inflicted on a Phu Bai CAC in a single attack to date. Alpha 6 and 9 were bruised, but they were not broken. The survivors rebuilt the CACs and continued to function with a new complement of Marines.⁵²

Corporal Charles Ratliff was at Alpha 6 and 9 during the attack. The large, double CAC was divided into three squads of Marines. Ratliff was one of the squad leaders and had seven or eight Marines under his command. One squad handled usually both the day and the night patrol. Usually, the night patrol had four Marines and a few PFs. Because they also were responsible for the day patrol, this was smaller in number than the night patrol. Meanwhile, the other two squads performed either maintenance duty on the compound or food duty at the makeshift chow hall. Food duty was a more important function at their CAC because of the number of Marines they had to feed. The squad assigned to maintenance was responsible for any construction in the compound and for taking positions in the three bunkers that stood at the corners of the compound. The PFs also had a watch bunker which they were responsible for at night.⁵³

⁵¹ "Close Combat," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 16–17.

⁵² Charles Ratliff, interview with William F. Nimmo, December 2021, hereafter Ratliffe interview.

⁵³ Ratliff interview.

The compound was located on Highway 1, about 100 meters east of the junction of the road up to Gia Le Pass. There were three hard-back hooches inside for sleeping quarters. Two of them housed the Marines and the other housed the PFs. There was a cement building inside the compound that served as a headquarters. The radio watch was located here, as was the CAP leader's living quarters.⁵⁴

Ratliff was sleeping in his hooch when multiple rockets hit the compound. He jumped out of his rack, as did the others, and headed toward his assigned fighting position. He was assigned to defend the back wall, which was located 3 meters (10 feet) or so from the back door of the hooch. The wall was about a meter (about four feet) tall with sandbags on top to add some height. Behind it was a wall of sandbags to form an above ground trench-like structure so that grenades or other explosives landing behind the back wall would not hit the Marines positioned there. The attackers outside of the wall position were yelling at the Marines inside through loudspeakers.

The attackers breached the wire and ran throughout the compound throwing satchel charges. Ratliff saw the attackers, all dressed in black, running in and bombing the hooches. The Marines hesitated to fire because they could not tell if any Marines were still inside. It seemed like the attack came from the front, where Highway 1 ran parallel to the compound. Beyond the highway, there was a large area of rice fields at least two kilometers across to the Loi Nong River and several kilometers long, almost as long as the eye can see. Across those rice fields was definite Viet Cong country, where they had ample space to stage an attack.⁵⁵

Ratliff stated that the attackers were not driven off, but after about 15 minutes they suddenly stopped the attack and left. He was not sure how large the attacking unit was but estimated that there could have been as many as 100 Viet Cong. He was also not sure why they attacked on that particular night, but he believed it may have been an attack of revenge for an earlier incident, about a month before, when

⁵⁴ Ratliff interview.

⁵⁵ Ratliff interview.

a CAC patrol killed a man named Le Van Le, thought to be the head of the Viet Cong in the area.⁵⁶ The 2d Battalion, 26th Marines' records show that at about 0300 the CAC received 12 direct hits with AP6-2 rockets. These were followed up with 20 satchel charges and 8 rifle grenades. While the CAC survived the attack, it destroyed all the structures in the compound, including five buildings, two bunkers, the front gate, and all radio communication. Five Marines were killed and 10 were wounded, along with 3 wounded PFs.⁵⁷

September continued to be active with enemy engagements all around the TAOR. Two days after the Alpha 6 and 9 attack, around 2100 on 13 September, 7–10 Viet Cong walked into a CAC Hotel 8 ambush. The Marines had set their ambush in a hamlet a few hundred feet east of the Troui River and about 1,000 meters south of Highway 1. The ambush was initiated by activating a claymore mine. A firefight ensued, with the Hotel 8 patrol taking in 200–300 rounds of small arms fire. Three Viet Cong were confirmed killed and three more were suspected dead. One Marine and one PF soldier sustained minor wounds.⁵⁸ The next day, near a popular ambush site called the “bend in the road” located equidistant between Hotel 2 and Hotel 3, a combined patrol from CAC Hotel 2 and a Marine infantry company fired on 12 Viet Cong coming out of the mountain trail system. The enemy dispersed, but they found one dead Viet Cong along with a rice carrying bag.⁵⁹

On 21 September, at about 2155, the Hotel 8 PF soldiers ambushed 30 Viet Cong in the same general area as the Hotel 8 ambush on 13 September. They were able to confirm one Viet Cong killed. Both enemy patrols were approaching from the mountains along the Truoi River trail system. Later that same day, at 2200, a Marine infantry patrol made contact with 15 Viet Cong carrying rice in CAP Hotel 1's area. This occurred not too far south of the highway and up one of the

⁵⁶ Ratliff interview.

⁵⁷ “Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 16.

⁵⁸ “Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 17.

⁵⁹ “Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 18.

Nong River trails toward the hills. Four Marines were wounded, four Viet Cong were presumed dead, and one Viet Cong was detained.⁶⁰

In the early hours of 25 September, again at the bend in the road, an infantry patrol from Company F, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, with CAC Hotel 2 guides, ambushed an group of Viet Cong coming out of the mountain trail system. While the Marines only found one Viet Cong body that night, a Viet Cong was found hiding near the ambush site the following morning. He was brought to Hotel 2 for interrogation, where he revealed that the Marine ambush had struck a platoon from the Viet Cong main force *804th Battalion* and killed or wounded 14 Viet Cong.⁶¹ Corporal James E. Ellison of North Dakota, a Marine from CAC Hotel 2, served as one of the guides and one of two point men for the patrol. Because the Marines had only one realistic route to the bend in the road ambush site, they used two men at point for strength and observation to spot problems.⁶²

Less than three kilometers across the fields were two isolated hamlets that were known to be rice collection points. The Viet Cong were known to come out of the mountains from one route through CAC Alpha 3 and a second route between Hotel 2 and Hotel 3 to where they terminated at the rice collection points.⁶³ They were technically in Hotel 3's TAOR, but they were far out from the Hotel 3 compound in areas thought to be dangerous areas for CAC patrols to venture. Just two hours before the patrol departed, CAC Hotel 3 had sighted two large groups of Viet Cong heading south toward the mountains. The first group sighted at 0300 consisted of approximately 110–15 Viet Cong; the second group was made up of about 100. The CAC patrol fired on the second group. Despite being outnumbered, they scattered the Viet Cong, confirmed two kills, and found four bags of rice. Both groups were heading south from the general area of the rice collection points.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 20.

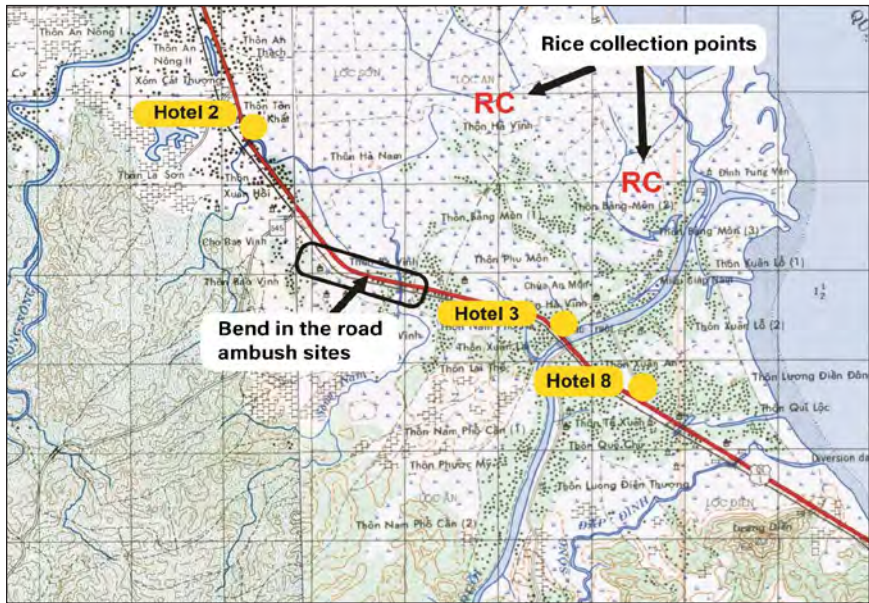
⁶¹ "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 21.

⁶² James Ellison, interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2018–21.

⁶³ "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 6.

⁶⁴ "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 21.

Figure 8.7. Locations of ambush sites



The ambush sites along the bend in the road. The Viet Cong came by various routes from the mountains. Across the road, there were several heavily used rice-collection points.
Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

Activity along the enemy's routes through Alpha 3's TAOR continued for the rest of the month. On the night of 27 September, at 2115 hours, a Company H infantry squad ambushed 40 Viet Cong moving from north to south about a 2 kilometers out from CAC Alpha 3 and the highway. The Viet Cong were coming back from the lowlands and heading toward the mountains. The squad traded fire with the Viet Cong until they drove them off, killing 17 of them. One Marine was killed and five were wounded.⁶⁵

On 27 September, at 0320, Alpha 7, a U.S. Army Special Forces team of five or six soldiers from USMACV's Studies and Observations Group (SOG), along with 35 Vietnamese-born Chinese "Nung" (pronounced *Noong*) mercenaries, ran into a force of Viet Cong while

⁶⁵ 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 22.

setting an ambush in the back of the TAOR. At about 0300, the Viet Cong launched an assault against their position, and a 40-minute fire-fight ensued. A team of three Bell UH-1 Iroquois "Huey" helicopter gunships came out as a reaction force and quickly ended the firefight. Six of the Nung mercenaries were wounded.⁶⁶ The special forces soldiers from the USMACV-SOG group in Phu Bai had gotten to know Alpha 7 earlier in September. One of their teams, presumably coming back from a mission in or near Laos, had mechanical difficulty with their helicopter and had to land in a field near the CAC.⁶⁷ Alpha 7 sent a patrol to the scene and provided security for them and their helicopter while they waited for mechanics to arrive and repair the problem. Later, the SOG soldiers reciprocated by giving the CAC a .30-caliber air-cooled machine gun and an open invitation to enjoy a beer in their air conditioned clubhouse in Phu Bai.⁶⁸

Combat such as this was but a portent of things to come.

⁶⁶ 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967, 22.

⁶⁷ Nimmo recollections. This is corroborated in 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, September 1967.

⁶⁸ Nimmo recollections.

CHAPTER 9

CONTACTS WITH THE VIET CONG INCREASE

October 1967 saw yet another marked increase in hostile activity along the road to Hue. To make matters worse, the Marines had only a single battalion, reinforced by one rifle company, available to cover Phu Bai and the surrounding area. Communist forces took advantage of the situation and launched several mortar attacks that specifically targeted bridges. Just a few months before, attacks like these seemed beyond the capabilities of local Viet Cong—a clear indication that more highly trained and specialized units of main force Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had moved into the area. Their rice collection activities were also very intense during this period. Marine and South Vietnamese forces sighted large groups of Viet Cong, many of which contained more than 50 personnel, moving into Phu Loc and surrounding districts during this time. During their sweeps, allied troops located several large rice caches, which indicated that Viet Cong and NVA forces were massing supplies for a significant operation.¹

The autumn brought ominous signs that Communist troops were planning something big. By November, the Marines posted along the road to Hue were piecing together information that portended a major offensive soon. Elsewhere, both the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam's (USMACV) J-2 Intelligence Center and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) published studies predicting a nationwide

¹ Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPAC), "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," October 1967, item no. 1201001165, folder 001, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), 12, 90.

enemy offensive, which included attacks against the cities, in January 1968. Evidence began flowing in from multiple sources that corroborated the upcoming countrywide attacks. The evidence, however, was viewed with skepticism before it was embraced by USMACV.²

NVA Buildup around Hue

By October 1967, the North Vietnamese were well on the way toward formalizing their plans for a general offensive that they believed would bring about a mass uprising throughout South Vietnam. Neither Ho Chi Minh nor General Vo Nguyen Giap were in favor of this plan, but they had been pushed aside by Le Duan. His plan called for a countrywide military assault, including attacks on the cities, that would stimulate a general insurrection against the South Vietnamese government in Saigon and the Americans who supported it.³ To prepare, the North Vietnamese General Staff ordered its troops to step up operations against U.S. and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces. Many of their subordinates may not have known at the time, but this increase in operational tempo was considered to be phase one of Le Duan's overall offensive plans.⁴

By that time, a buildup of Communist troops was well underway in Thua Thien Province. This buildup had begun in August 1967, when the total amount of Communist troops within 40 kilometers (25 miles) of the Phu Bai TAOR had increased from 2,930 to 4,305. While there had only been an estimated 2,150 enemy personnel in that space in March, III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) estimated

² Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006), 31–32.

³ Merle L. Pribbenow II, "General Vo Nguyen Giap and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 Tet Offensive," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 16–19.

⁴ Merle L. Pribbenow II, trans., *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 206–17.

that their numbers had climbed to 5,120 in October.⁵ Those numbers were based, at least in part, on an element of informed speculation by the Marines, but the overall picture they constructed was reasonably accurate. They now had to determine just what their enemy was planning to do.

The increasing numbers of Communist troops was not the only cause for concern for the Marines. Before the spring of 1967, most of the enemy battalion-size units in Thua Thien Province, and in the Phu Bai enclave in particular, were Viet Cong main force battalions rather than NVA. The main force battalions operated both north of Hue and to the city's south near the Phu Bai-Phu Loc area. During March 1967, NVA units began to shift into Thua Thien Province. The first known NVA unit to move into the area was the NVA's *6th Regiment*.⁶ This unit, with its three battalions, would later assault the Hue Citadel from the west during the Tet Offensive. In October 1967, the *6th Regiment* was believed to be located in a place known as Base Area 114. From there, the regiment's subordinate battalions—the *800th*, *802d*, and *806th Battalions*—conducted operations to the north and northwest of Hue along with the Viet Cong main force *810th Battalion*. Base Area

⁵ "Statistical Highlights, Order of Battle," FMFPAC, "Operations of the III MAF in Vietnam," March 1967, item no. 1201001118, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 66; "Statistical Highlights, Order of Battle," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," April 1967, item no. 1201001125, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 80; "Statistical Highlights, Order of Battle," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," May 1967, item no. 1201001132, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 65; "Statistical Highlights, Order of Battle," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," June 1967, item no. 1201001138, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 85; "Enemy Order of Battle," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," July 1967, item no. 1201001145, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 91; "Enemy Order of Battle," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," August 1967, item no. 1201001150, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 75; "Statistical Highlights, Order of Battle," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," September 1967, item no. 1201001156, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 79; and "Statistical Highlights, Order of Battle," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," October 1967, item no. 1201001165, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 86.

⁶ "Statistical Highlights, Order of Battle," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," March 1967, 67.

114 was a large staging ground for NVA units in Thua Thien. It was the nerve center from which the NVA managed its operations throughout the province. Base Area 114 was spread out over a large area, the majority of which was in the Nam Hoa District. It measured nearly 17 kilometers (10.5 miles) long east to west and 24 kilometers (15 miles) north to south—more than 840 square kilometers (325 square miles) in all.⁷

In August, Communist forces renamed elements of their command and control structure in I Corps. They created a new agency identified as the Tri-Thien (after Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces) Military Region Headquarters to replace what had been known as the Northern Front Headquarters. The Tri-Thien was also located in Base Area 114, east of the NVA's *6th Regiment*.⁸ Marine intelligence believed that the agency had seven support companies that traversed both Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces in support of military and political operations. The same intelligence assessments concluded that, since July, the NVA's *5th Regiment* had operated in Thua Thien Province farther west of Base Area 114, toward Laos. By October, the Viet Cong main force *804th* and *804B* (also known as the *K4B*) *Battalions* were positioned in the mountain clusters to the south of the Phu Bai and Phu Loc District.⁹ Both of these battalions were positioned close enough to quickly move in for a strike on positions in Phu Loc.¹⁰

Base Area 114 was also an excellent staging ground that lay in some of I Corps' most formidable terrain. To its west, toward Laos, the mountains become dense with jagged peaks, many of which are more than 1,000 meters high. Most of the highlands in the area, even those at lower elevations, are covered in brush or jungle vegetation. The high-

⁷ "Statistical Highlights, Order of Battle," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," October 1967, 86.

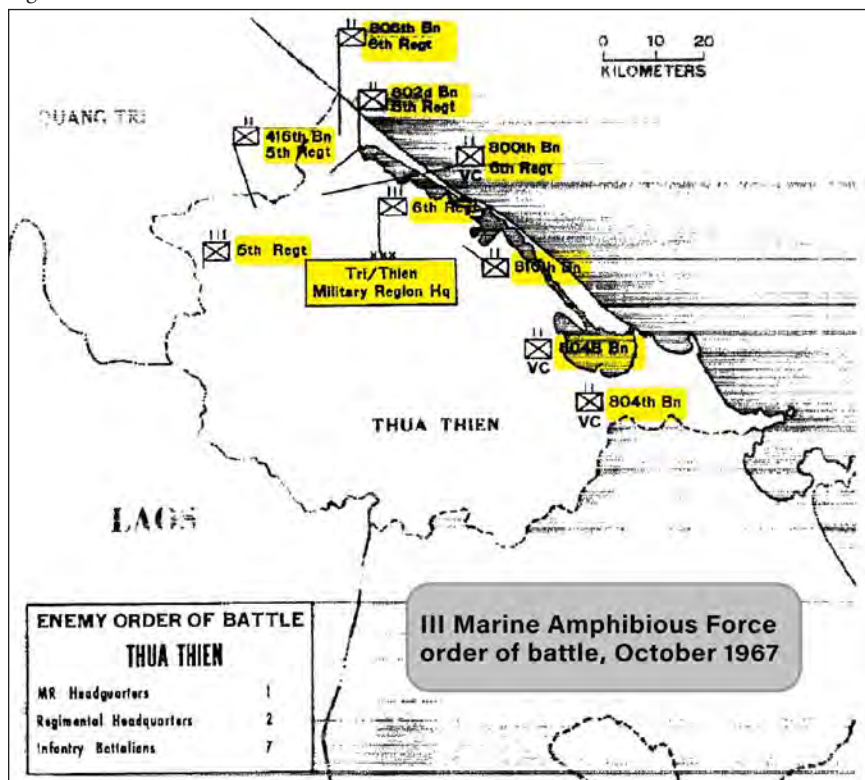
⁸ "Statistical Highlights, Order of Battle," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," August 1967, 75.

⁹ "Order of Battle," 3d Marine Division, Command Chronology (ComdC) (3 of 3), October 1967, item no. 1201029030, folder 029, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 3.

¹⁰ "Statistical Highlights, Thua Thien Province Chart," FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," October 1967, 86.

CHAPTER 9

Figure 9.1. Order of battle, October 1967



An order of battle chart for activities in the Thua Thien Province.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo.

er elevations are triple-canopy jungle. The mountains rise steeply from the rivers and valleys below. The whole area contained a network of trails for relatively easy and discreet movements.¹¹ There were multiple exit routes from Base Area 114 for enemy troops to conduct operations or movements into the lowlands around the Hue, Phu Bai, and Phu Loc areas. The valleys between the high grounds and the river courses provided a vast network of trails for units large and small to clandestinely move into areas where they desired to operate. Over time, the

¹¹ "Intelligence," 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, ComdC, October 1967, item no. 1201024012, folder 024, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, Part III, 6.

Marines gradually learned to identify many of these exits via hundreds of bits of information from sightings of enemy troops, physical wear on pathways, Cheiu Hoi intelligence, and information gathered from prisoners, informants, and villagers.

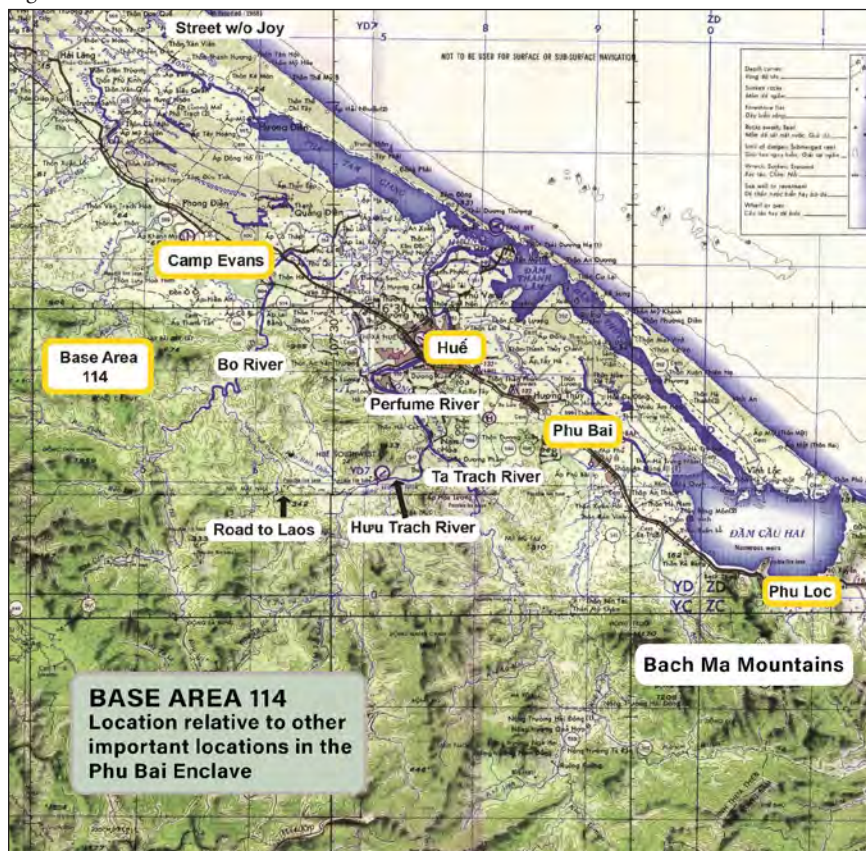
To the north, enemy forces used the breaks in the Co Bi Thanh Tan Ridge to move into the Co Bi Thanh Tan Valley. Once in the valley, they could move eastward either toward Hue or northeast to the coast, an area known since the First Indochina War as the Street Without Joy. Communist forces often used the hamlets of Co Bi and Thanh Tan as staging grounds to group up and move eastward. Their troops and supplies also traveled out from the hills to the north and east using boats on the Bo River. In November 1967, Marine reconnaissance teams conducted several missions to identify and monitor infiltration routes out of Base Area 114 into the Co Bi Thanh Tan Valley and to the east. On 9 and 10 November, a reconnaissance team explored a stretch of the Bo River about five kilometers from where it exits into the Co Bi Thanh Tan Valley. They found a few structures and bunkers as well as 17 boats. Fifteen of these boats, ranging from 4–5 meters (15–17 feet) long and made from woven materials, were sunken but attached to the shore with ropes. Not far from this location they found two longer boats sunk into the river bottom. Nearby, they also found a one-meter (four-foot)-wide trail heading east from the river directly toward Hue.¹² A few days later, they detected signs of heavy ground and sampan traffic throughout the area.¹³

Base Area 114's southern exits led to a rugged road that runs east to west from Hue's southern outskirts toward Laos. This was the only marked thoroughfare in the area. It followed several valleys through the southern portion of Base Camp 114 from near Hue west to the A Shau Valley. It was little used at the time and made a perfect route for the Viet Cong or the NVA to make an undetected southward exit from Base Area

¹² "Patrol Report of Scuba Mission in Support of Operation Neosho," 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, ComdC, November 1967, item no. 1201024013, folder 024, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

¹³ "Sequential Listings of Significant Events," 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, ComdC, November 1967, 8–10.

Figure 9.2. Location of the NVA's Base Area 114



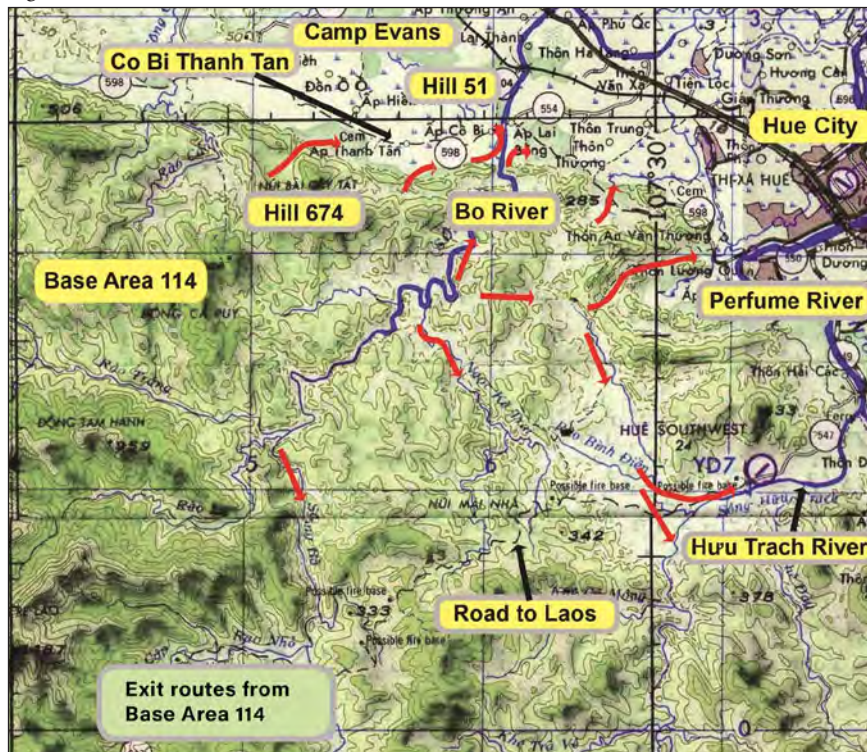
A relief map showing a broad display of the important Thua Thien Province locations relative to the NVA's Base Area 114.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

114. South of Base Area 114 were numerous spots known to be temporary base camps for both Viet Cong and NVA troops. Those eastern exits were directly west of Hue. From the immediate east on this route system, the terrain went to lower mountain and rounded hill country. From the Bo River, it is about 10 kilometers to the lower hills overlooking Hue. From that point, it is about five kilometers along the northern bank of the Perfume River to the closest edge of the Hue Citadel. These routes would be used more heavily as the Tet Offensive drew nearer.

CONTACTS WITH THE VIET CONG INCREASE

Figure 9.3. Locations of known exit routes from Base Area 114



A relief map showing some of the potential battlefields and staging areas.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

October Rice Caches

A few important changes occurred along the road to Hue in October 1967. First was a higher level of what the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, called "harassing activities." Most of these activities focused on the Phu Loc District. The Marines noted yet another rice-gathering effort and a corresponding increase in indirect, guerrilla-style attacks. Second was that, on 12 October, the Da Nang-based 1st Marine Division extended its TAOR to the Phu Loc district. The division assumed responsibility for the area from the Hai Van Pass to vertical grid line 11, located about two kilometers east of the Phu Loc District headquarters. III MAF made the change to allow the 3d Marine Division to dedicate

more attention and resources to the fighting along the DMZ. But the 1st Marine Division was spread thin, too; it could send only one company—Company G, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines—to Phu Loc. Those Marines soon established a new combat base named Phu Gia to serve as their base of operations there.¹⁴

Communist troops also continued to target Highway 1 and adjacent roads. In October, they destroyed nine bridges or culverts, mostly in the Phu Loc district. Three bridges or culverts were blown on the highway near the Phu Loc District headquarters—one near CAC Hotel 6, and another was destroyed twice near Hotel 7.¹⁵ While Marine intelligence could not determine precisely which enemy units were responsible each attack, the fact that an NVA engineer company and an NVA sabotage company were located nearby would make it logical to suspect that they were the culprits.¹⁶ Destroying bridges using explosives requires expertise and logistics that local guerrillas and local force companies usually did not have. Those units could, however, act as guides for NVA or main force sabotage teams. The 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, responded by dispersing Company F into small groups around the bridges to augment whatever local security forces were present.¹⁷

Allied patrols also found several large rice stores around the Phu Bai TAOR. Each was located within the villages but far away from the main hamlets, where they could more easily be transported outside the TAOR. These discoveries stemmed from a combined effort by the Marines and the South Vietnamese National Police to cordon and search several villages throughout the TAOR. The Marines and police found 28,900 pounds of rice throughout October, 22,400 of which were uncovered by the police. Much of the rice was seized when patrols discovered four large caches hidden in three different locations throughout the hamlets in CAC Alpha 1's TAOR and another two in Alpha 3.

¹⁴ "Narrative," 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, item no. 1201052070, folder 052, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 4.

¹⁵ "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, item no. 1201060253, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 1.

¹⁶ Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 5.

¹⁷ "Close Combat, Operations," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 13–14.

Both locations were on the far eastern edges of each CAC's TAORs, where they could be easily transported across the river to the Phu Thu district. Marines found another cache in a hamlet south of Highway 1, next to the Truoi River trail system on the west side of the river, where it could be easily transported up the mountain camp areas.¹⁸

During that month, allied forces also sighted groups of 50 or more Viet Cong on five different occasions. Each group was heading in northeasterly or northwesterly directions.¹⁹ Their locations and direction indicated that they were heading away from the mountains and toward the Phu Thu district or other rice collection points. They made no attempt to attack or engage American or South Vietnamese forces. The largest sighting occurred late at night on 3 October, when one of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines' patrols sighted approximately 175 Viet Cong heading northeast. Although the Viet Cong were not aware of the Marines' presence, the latter were unable to get into position in time to fire on them. The Viet Cong were carrying both rifles and rice baskets. From their location and direction, they could have been heading to the Phu Thu District or the rice collection points in the hamlets near the river.²⁰

There were several other sightings throughout the month. What was most significant—and disturbing—was the frequency at which allied patrols were spotting groups of 100 or more enemy troops. On 7 October, for example, an infantry patrol spotted 100 Viet Cong moving northeast down the trail system to the east of CAC Hotel 2.²¹ Additional patrols spotted two other large groups heading down the trail system between Hotel 2 and Hotel 3 in the direction of the rice collection points. Another sighting occurred west of Phu Loc District headquarters near the lagoon.²² Given their location, that last group was likely headed for boats to cross the lagoon into Phu Thu or else-

¹⁸ "Daily Sitrep," 25 October and 27 October, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967.

¹⁹ "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 5.

²⁰ "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 16.

²¹ 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 17.

²² 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 5.

where. On 19 October, villagers near Hotel 7 told PF troops that two groups of 100 Viet Cong ventured into the area to acquire food and then returned to the mountains. The group's location was consistent with a later discover in the same area of 10,000–15,000 pounds of rice and a group of uniformed main force Viet Cong with a Chinese advisor.²³ They were heading back into the mountains along the trails just south of CAC Hotel 7.

Communist troops also launched a series of mortar attacks throughout the Phu Loc District. These attacks, 17 in all, focused on areas east of the Truoi River, particularly in the Hotel 5, Hotel 6 and Hotel 7 TAORs. Hotel 6 was hit twice, first on 3 October with six rounds of 60-millimeter mortar plus some small arms fire. One PF was wounded.²⁴ Then, on 11 October, shortly before 1500, Hotel 6 received a short barrage of 82-millimeter mortar fire while another two mortar rounds struck the Nuoc Ngot bridge nearby. Later, a Hotel 6 patrol found a possible mortar position and a base camp large enough to accommodate two platoons. The fire pits were still warm.²⁵ On 7 October 7, the position of Company E, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, located in the southern area of the Phu Loc District, took 22 rounds of mortar fire. The Marines countered with 49 rounds of high-explosive ammunition and called in fixed-wing close air support that dropped ordnance into the enemy mortars' location. One Marine was killed, and four Marines, five Navy corpsmen, and five other friendlies were wounded.²⁶

On 10 October, enemy mortar teams hit the bridge Nuoc Ngot, near Hotel 6 again. This time, they harassed the bridge and its defensive positions off and on throughout the day. Six 82-millimeter mortar rounds hit the position at 1100, 2 at 1115, and 16 more at 1630.²⁷ The next day, an infantry patrol traveling along one of the Truoi River

²³ 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 21.

²⁴ 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 16.

²⁵ 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 19.

²⁶ 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 17.

²⁷ 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 13.

trails was hit with 12 82-millimeter rounds, killing one Marine.²⁸ On 19 October, seven mortar rounds hit Hotel 5. The rounds landed about 90 meters (100 yards) east of the compound.²⁹ Hotel 5 was hit again by nine 60-millimeter mortar rounds five days later. Two Marines were wounded. The Marines believed that the Viet Cong used the same firing position for both attacks.³⁰ This site was just south of Phu Loc District headquarters and on a route that would lead directly up into the mountain trails.

On 25 October, at 0720, 25 82-millimeter mortar rounds struck the Phu Loc District headquarters. Two days later, an infantry platoon from Company F, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, located at CAC Hotel 1, received five rounds of incoming 60-millimeter mortar fire that landed 50–100 meters away.³¹ Finally, on 30 October, at 0945, CAC Hotel headquarters received five rounds of 82-millimeter mortar fire. Marine mortar gunners fired 40 rounds on the suspected position and called in 20 rounds of 105-millimeter artillery. An infantry company swept the area a few hundred meters from the suspected mortar position and found medical supplies, French currency, several identification cards, one 55-gallon drum of rice, two 100-pound bags of rice, and two large vases of rice.³²

Although many of these mortar barrages were directed at the CACs or positions that the CACs were tasked with defending, the platoons emerged largely unscathed. No CAC Marines were killed by enemy fire in October, though one CAC Marine died in a friendly fire incident with Marine infantry near CAC Alpha 1. During that time, the CACs also reported 14 confirmed Viet Cong kills.³³

These mortar attacks demonstrated just how overstretched the Marine were. With only one slightly reinforced infantry battalion han-

²⁸ 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 19.

²⁹ 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 21.

³⁰ 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 23.

³¹ 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 23.

³² 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 35.

³³ "Personnel and Administration," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 3; and "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 6.

dling the TAOR, the Marines were unable to patrol effectively enough to keep enemy mortar teams from descending from the mountains to harass their positions and friendly installations. That one battalion had to cover not only the south end of the TAOR but the north and northeastern portions as well. It was too much to cover effectively, especially given the increase of enemy activity that had been occurring for the past several months.

While these attacks unfolded, Marines throughout the chain of command developed a picture of the situation in I Corps. One primary source of information were prisoners and the “ralliers” who had been persuaded to change sides. The information they provided was often quite accurate when cross-checked with information gathered from other interviews and interrogations. In addition, Marine reconnaissance units provided confirmation of locations and movements from their observations when inserted deep into enemy territory. The intelligence suggested that something big was coming in Thua Thien Province.

Intelligence gathered in October noted that three new enemy units had arrived in or near the Phu Bai TAOR. The information received from prisoners and ralliers indicated that the NVA’s *802d Battalion* had moved into the Nam Hoa District.³⁴ Two additional NVA formations, the *C-19 Engineer Company* and the *C-24 Sabotage Company*, had also arrived. According to a rallier from the *C-19 Engineer Company*, both companies were moving east from the road up to Bach Ma Mountain on 11 October 1967.³⁵ Their location would have been close by in the Bach Ma Mountain cluster and directly south of the Phu Loc District headquarters and CAP Hotel 5.

The Marines gathered information during this time that painted a disparate picture of enemy morale and capabilities. On the one hand, interrogation gathered from the Chieu Hoi and prisoners of war continued to indicate that morale among the Viet Cong was extremely low, primarily due to severe food shortages and the harsh conditions

³⁴ “Intelligence,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 5.

³⁵ 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 5.

in which they had to operate. Conversely, other reports indicated that the NVA units were adequately supplied in hard materials, that their morale was high, and that they were anxious for battle.³⁶

November 1967: Intelligence

Late November 1967 marked the beginning of the intelligence debates regarding a massive countrywide offensive to be launched across South Vietnam. A U.S. interagency intelligence estimate that month concluded that the Communists had recognized that the chances of a complete military victory had disappeared and they were instead aiming at a protracted war.³⁷ Soon thereafter, however, with intelligence flowing in from multiple sources, they reached a different conclusion. In late November, both the USMACV J-2 Intelligence Center and the CIA's Saigon Station published studies predicting a nationwide Communist offensive with attacks on South Vietnam's cities. The CIA study, according to USMACV historians, accurately predicted the offensive's phases, including the border battles and attacks on the cities in January. But higher-ranking intelligence officers, as well as the high commands at USMACV, viewed these predictions with skepticism.³⁸

By late December, a large volume of intelligence from captured documents and prisoner interrogations reinforced the belief that something big was in the works. USMACV, the U.S. embassy in Saigon, and senior U.S. officials in Washington, DC, had all come to believe that there would be a major nationwide offensive, including attacks on the cities. Nevertheless, skepticism remained.³⁹ In November and December, analysts in the Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam (CICV), began estimating much higher infiltration rates than subordinate commands were reporting. In addition to these estimates, which were admittedly based on experimental methodology, USMACV received additional reports that several NVA divisions, hitherto held in reserve in North

³⁶ 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, 6.

³⁷ Cosmas, *MACV*, 22.

³⁸ Cosmas, *MACV*, 32.

³⁹ Cosmas, *MACV*, 34.

Vietnam, had advanced to positions within striking distance of Khe Sanh. This troop movement involved 20,000 soldiers and caused much concern at all levels, including the White House. As U.S. Army colonel Charles A. Morris, a senior officer under Major General Phillip B. Davidson Jr., the chief of U.S. intelligence in Vietnam, stated, “This reshaped the whole bloody war.”⁴⁰ As signs of trouble brewed along the DMZ, many U.S. leaders, including General William C. Westmoreland and even President Lyndon B. Johnson, became fixated on Khe Sanh.⁴¹ That preoccupation would overshadow similar developments along the road to Hue and elsewhere.

Communist Troops Begin Moving into Position

By early November, numerous Communist units were shifting into the Hue and Phu Bai areas. Their movements were consistent with plans for a major attack on the entire region. In late October or early November, the *802d Battalion* of the NVA's *6th Regiment* moved from its position north of Hue, near the Street Without Joy, to the mountains south of Phu Bai and Phu Loc. The intent could not have been clearer. Intelligence gathered by the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, still the resident battalion at Phu Bai, indicated that the *802d Battalion* was building a base camp between the Ta Trach River and Dong Truoi Mountains.⁴² The *802d Battalion*'s new location was not far from Highway 1, the Truoi River, or the Nong River, and it was close to all the trail systems that led into the areas south of the Phu Bai Combat Base. Now located approximately six kilometers due south from Highway 1 and near sev-

⁴⁰ Cosmas, *MACV*, 35.

⁴¹ Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 140; Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945–1975* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 440–43; George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 22728; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983), 539–42; Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 591–95; and Neil Sheehan, *A Bright and Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 703–8, 710–12.

⁴² “Intelligence,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, November 1967, item no. 1201060254, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 5.

eral of the CACs that covered enemy traffic coming into the area, the enemy was in a good position to conduct offensive operations.

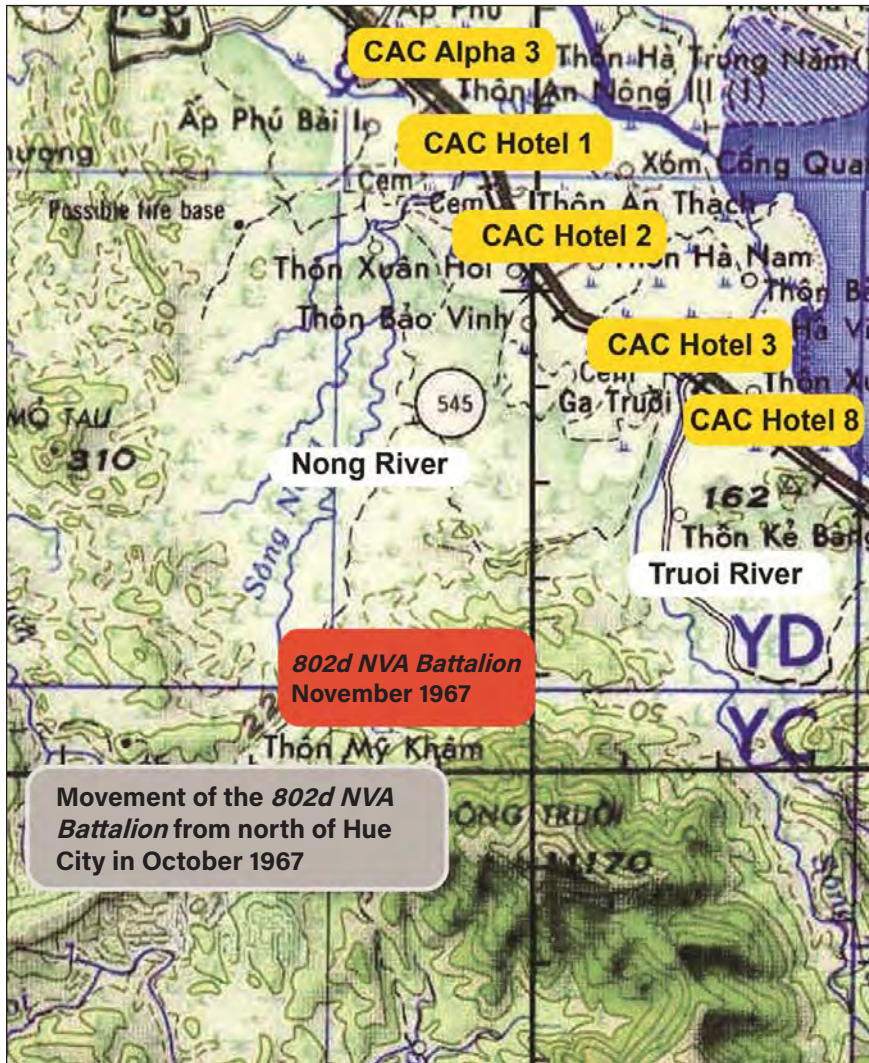
Theoretically, the *802d Battalion's* position could have meant that the NVA soldiers were joining the Viet Cong main force units, the *804th* and the *804B Battalions*, for operations in Phu Loc. But the events that followed show that this was not the case. Located about a day's march from the western approaches to Hue, they were instead part of the western prong of the attack on the Hue Citadel. They could have been placed in this position in Phu Loc as a distraction to make the Marines and the ARVN think they were concentrating on the units in the Phu Loc District, rather than attacking Hue.

The Viet Cong were also on the move in November. The 2d Battalion, 26th Marines' intelligence section noted a "significant increase" in reports of up to company-size units moving from one of the known Viet Cong strongpoints in the mountains between the Huu Trach and the Ta Trach River north into the Phu Thu District. These reports, which were quite specific, said that the Viet Cong crossed the Ta Trach, used two hamlets nearby as rallying points, and then moved along the northwest boundary of the Phu Bai TAOR into the Phu Thu District.⁴³ They followed a route that took them through a gap past the CACs and where there were few ARVN troops. In hindsight, it is clear that these movements were part of the Viet Cong's preparations for the upcoming attack on Hue. These troops would later move out from Phu Thu and take part in the assault on the "modern" city of Hue, on the south bank of the Perfume River, at the same time as the attack on the Citadel to the north.

The locations where each Viet Cong unit entered the Phu Thu district were very close to the southern and eastern approaches to Hue. It was an ideal place to stage an attack. The Phu Thu district was a vast area of rice fields that offered access to large quantities of food. It had few South Vietnamese security forces—scattered PF compounds and Regional Force outposts—but that had exercised minimal control over the area. Most significantly, Phu Thu was also outside the area where

⁴³ "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, November 1967, 6.

Figure 9.4. Location of the NVA's 802d Battalion



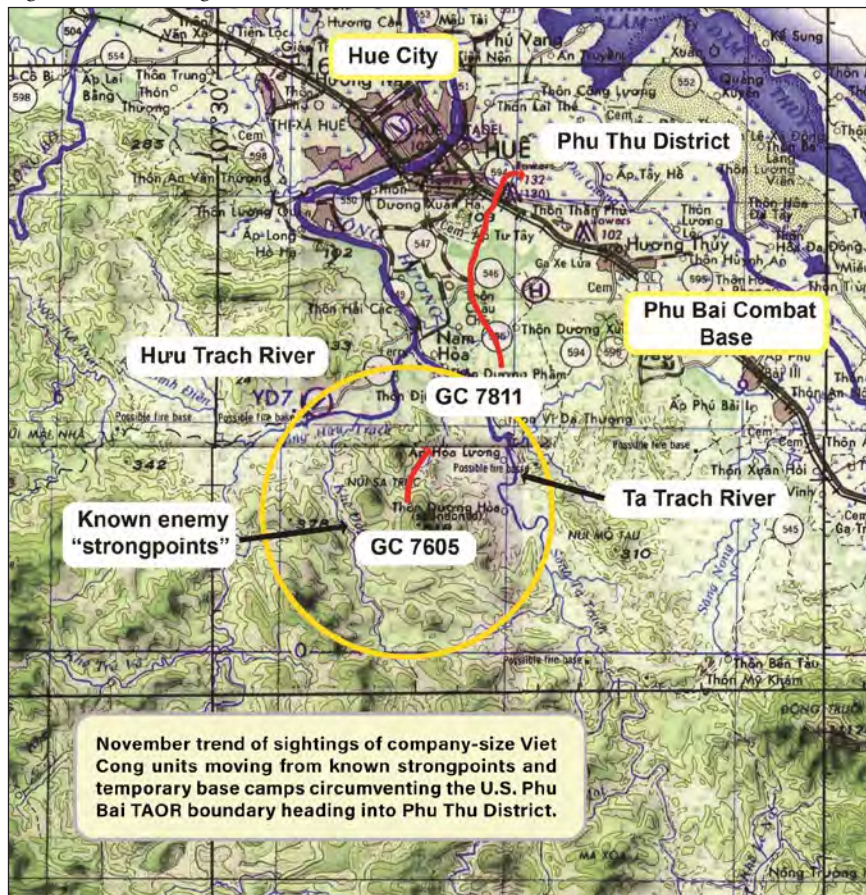
A relief map showing the area near some of the CACs and the main highway.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

U.S. forces were allowed to go without permission or coordination with South Vietnamese troops. As time moved closer to the Tet Offensive, there would be many more sightings of Viet Cong units moving into the district.

CONTACTS WITH THE VIET CONG INCREASE

Figure 9.5. Viet Cong routes to the Phu Thu District



This relief map shows the routes of the company-size units moving to the Phu Thu District from strongpoint locations and temporary base camp locations in November 1967. This route, marked in red, circumvents the CACs and goes more to the northwest through a minimally watched area. Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

Inclement weather also aided Viet Cong and NVA movements. November usually marked the beginning of the monsoon season, and November 1967 was no different. In that month alone, there were 355 millimeters (14 inches) of rainfall across 21 days of rain. Sometimes it would rain for several days at a time. These long rains and the accompanying low cloud ceiling interfered with normal combat operations

and reconnaissance efforts. The Viet Cong and NVA took advantage of the weather, using the rain as an extra layer of cover to move around the TAOR and stage their attacks.⁴⁴

Access to food remained a problem. As a result of the rice centralization program and the Marines' focus on rice denial, the growing number of Communist troops in the mountains had to venture deeper into the villages to gather enough food.⁴⁵ Marine intelligence noted that Communist forces' primary avenues of approach in early November were on the trail systems on both sides of the Truoi River. They also noted in a summary of the enemy situation at the end of November that, with the increase in the number of enemy units located around the TAOR's periphery, rice collection and taxation efforts took on a greater urgency. These developments indicated that even though the Truoi River approaches continued to be used at a high level, the Phu Loc Basin, patrolled by CACs Hotel 5, Hotel 6, and Hotel 7, and the areas around CACs Alpha 6, Alpha 7, and Alpha 9 were becoming more attractive targets for food collection.⁴⁶

There was also more contact between the Marines and Viet Cong. The November uptick was consistent with both the latter's desperate rice collection efforts and Le Duan's direction to step up operations on the battlefield. There were 50 engagements between Marines and Viet Cong in November, 21 of which were initiated by the Viet Cong.⁴⁷ November was also a violent month for CAC patrols. In several instances, CACs ambushed large groups of Viet Cong traveling out of the mountains. In most cases, the CACs fired first. On the night of 6 November, for example, two patrols from CAC Alpha 3 set up positions along a trail system and got into a heavy engagement with a force of almost 60 Viet Cong. The Marines called for illumination, and a reaction force went out to link up with the patrol. When the fighting ceased, the Ma-

⁴⁴ Seasonal rains were often a central factor in Viet Cong and NVA operational planning. See Thomas C. Thayer, *War without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), 7–12.

⁴⁵ "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, November 1967, 5.

⁴⁶ "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, November 1967, 7.

⁴⁷ "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, November 1967, 5.

rines found two dead Viet Cong and, based on blood trails, thought that another three had been killed. The Viet Cong had been driven off, but they would try again. CAC Alpha 3 ambushed another Viet Cong patrol in the same area later in the month.⁴⁸ A little earlier on that same night, CAC Hotel 2 ambushed 12–15 Viet Cong at the “bend in the road,” one of their regular spots to catch rice-gathering traffic. The Marines swept the area with no results. That same night, a Hotel 7 patrol engaged an unknown number of Viet Cong in a village at the foot of the mountain and called in artillery on the mountain trails as the enemy fled. The following day, the villagers told the PFs from Hotel 7 that 10 Viet Cong had been killed.⁴⁹ Two nights later, an infantry patrol engaged an estimated 40 Viet Cong close to Hotel 5’s village. The patrol exchanged fire with the Viet Cong and drove them off, killing at least five.⁵⁰

As November wore on, the Viet Cong’s desperation for food increasingly shaped the course of events on the road to Hue. The sharp fighting along the routes connecting the mountains with the lowlands indicated that they were getting desperate, as did intelligence provided by locals. One of the most alarming signs came on 10 November, when approximately 240 civilians from one of the hamlets on the northern fringes of Hotel 3’s TAOR that was a known rice collection point moved into Loc Son village. They reported that the Viet Cong’s aggressive demands for food made them decide to move to a more secure location.⁵¹ Some of those Viet Cong ran into CAC patrols a few days later. On 13 November, Alpha 3 ambushed 10 Viet Cong traveling to a known rice collection point, and two days later Hotel 3 fired on 6–7 Viet Cong coming down a hill next to the “bend in the road.”⁵² Late on 19 November, Hotel 8 ambushed another group of several dozen Viet Cong. The patrol, along with a reaction force from the compound came to assist, killed at least seven of the enemy, but three Marines, in-

⁴⁸ “Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, November 1967, 21.

⁴⁹ “Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, November 1967, 21.

⁵⁰ “Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, November 1967, 22.

⁵¹ “Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, November 1967, 22.

⁵² “Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, November 1967, 23.

cluding the patrol leader Sergeant William Grunder, and two PFs were wounded.⁵³ About two hours later, a team from Alpha 3 ambushed 25 Viet Cong moving down a trail system into Thuy Phu village. The Viet Cong returned fire and broke contact, leaving behind two dead and several weapons.⁵⁴

On 28 November, CAC Hotel 8 set off another ambush on a large enemy patrol—yet another group moving along trail system coming out of the Bach Ma Mountains. This ambush occurred right alongside the Truoi River. The Marines first thought that they had sprung the ambush a small group of 10 Viet Cong but were quickly surrounded when 40 additional Viet Cong joined the firefight. A reaction force from Hotel 8 joined the fray, and the two groups managed to fight their way out of the situation. The Marines searched the area later and found nine Viet Cong killed and numerous blood trails. A civilian said that the Marines had ambushed 30–40 Viet Cong that were moving ahead of a full company. The civilians also reported that the Viet Cong retreated with 10 killed and numerous wounded, 3 of which were female. Corporal Charles Brown, who took part in the ambush, recalled that the M60 machine gunner, despite being wounded in the upper shoulder, maintained cover fire as the Marines pulled back out of the ambush site. The gunner, whom the PFs called *Ha Si* (corporal) Buffalo, was awarded the Silver Star for his actions that night.⁵⁵

This marked increase in Communist troops and activity would continue on through December. Much of the fighting, especially for the CAC platoons, would continue to rage along the trail systems that crossed Highway 1 and linked the mountains with the rice-growing lowlands. Gathering rice would continue to be a driving factor behind Viet Cong and NVA activities in the coming weeks. Rice was a precious commodity for the massing Viet Cong and NVA, but their efforts to collect more had been frustrated by the Marines. The mon-

⁵³ “Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, November 1967, 25; and Charles Brown, telephone interview with William F. Nimmo, 2021, hereafter Brown interview.

⁵⁴ “Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, November 1967, 25.

⁵⁵ “Significant Events,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, November 1967, 27; and Brown interview.

CONTACTS WITH THE VIET CONG INCREASE

soons of November aggravated this problem and resulted in more risky rice collection efforts. All the while, more Communist troops arrived in the area, further aggravating the rice collection problem. With Tet approaching, the Communists would have to make do. As they got into position for the great offensive, many would launch the first of a series of pre-Tet attacks beginning in early December.

CHAPTER 10

EVIDENCE MOUNTS FOR A MAJOR ENEMY CAMPAIGN

As 1967 gave way to 1968, both Communist and Marine Corps forces moved to bolster their respective positions throughout the Phu Bai enclave. December began with an alarming series of movements by Communist troops. The Marines and South Vietnamese forces spotted several large groups of enemy troops, many numbering in the hundreds, moving throughout the countryside. III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) responded to the increased enemy presence by ordering elements of the 1st Marine Division to move north from Quang Nam Province to buttress the defenses in southern Thua Thien. Once there, the Marines took over a variety of critical positions throughout the Phu Loc District. The movement began in late December 1967 and concluded in late January 1968, just days before the Tet Offensive began.¹ The 1st Marine Division spent much of its initial time in the Phu Loc area confronting Viet Cong efforts to mine Highway 1 and destroy the bridges along that road. The Marines were distributed across the TAOR to protect this critical supply route and the surrounding terrain as well as supporting the Combined Action Platoons (CAP) operating in the area.²

¹Jack Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 83.

²“PERINTREP No. 3-68,” 1st Marine Division, Command Chronology (ComdC), January 1968, item no. 1201015037, folder 015, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), 12. From here on, the individual Combined Action Platoons will be referred to as CAPs, rather than CACs. By late 1967, the nomenclature had officially changed. As a result, the resident battalion in the Phu Bai TAOR, the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, changed to using the acronym CAP in its references to specific platoons beginning in its December 1967 command chronologies.

Much of the activity centered on the Phu Loc District, but this was not the only place where Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces increased their presence during this time. Movements near Hue and the surrounding areas also increased significantly. In January alone, there were several reported instances of large groups of Communist troops—some of which were more than 300 strong—moving toward Hue and the surrounding area. Clearly, the enemy was preparing for a substantial operation.

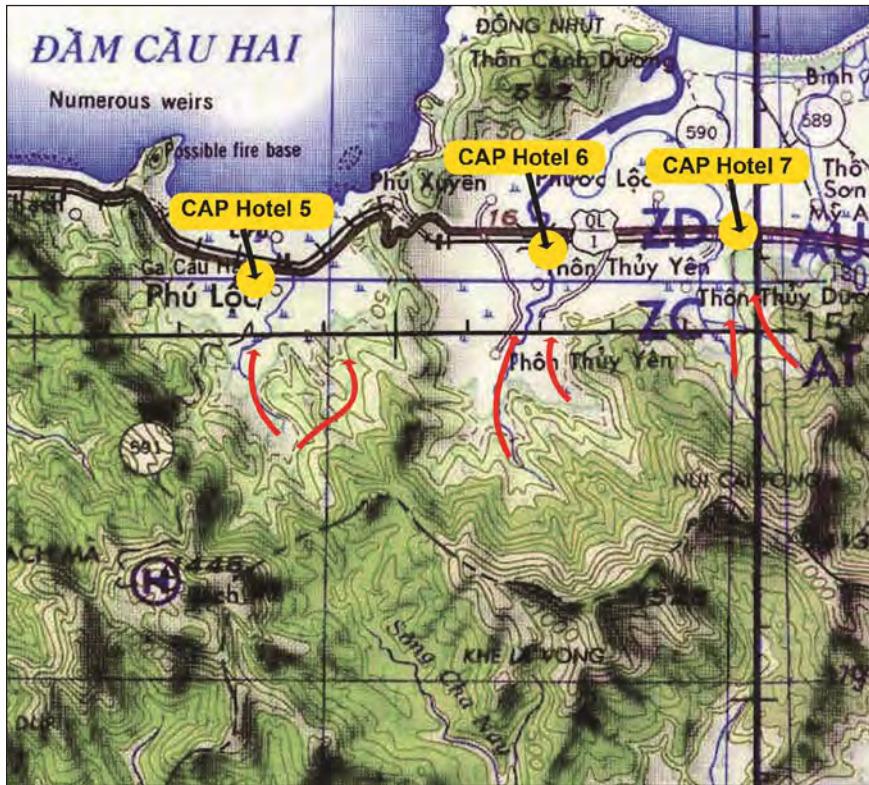
Enemy Movement in Phu Loc

In December, Communist forces focused much of their effort on the Phu Loc District. Throughout that month, there were reports of an unusually high number of enemy movements—nearly 30 involving groups of more than 50 troops around the Phu Bai and Phu Loc TAORs. Twelve of them, including several of the largest groups, were spotted in or near the Phu Loc District, within CAPs Hotel 5, Hotel 6, and Hotel 7's areas of operations. Several other incidents involved reports of between 100 and 300 Communist troops traveling along routes between the mountains and the lowland rice fields. The lowlands' vast, open spaces made it much easier for large bands to move between the mountains and fields in either direction.³

The three CAPs in the Phu Loc District all sat in the shadow of the Bach Ma Mountains. They were close to the Communists' base camps there, sat along their routes out of the mountains, and were the least protected of all the Hotel CAPs from spontaneous large-unit attacks. These platoons were also spread much farther apart than those between Phu Bai and the Truoi River. To further complicate matters, there was minimal infantry guarding the nearby exits into the lowlands. While the people in these CAPs' villages were mostly friendly, the platoons could do little about such a large influx of Communist troops. The villagers did, however, provide the CAPs with some valuable information

³ See "Daily Journal" entries, 1–30 December 1967, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, December 1967, item no. 1201060255, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

Figure 10.1. Locations of CAPs Hotel 5, Hotel 6, and Hotel 7



A relief map showing how close the three CAPS were to the mountains and the mountain trail exits and entrances. Red arrows mark generally the known routes of enemy infiltration.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

on enemy troop locations and movements when they could.⁴ Between the information provided by the villagers and what the CAPs observed on patrols, the situation looked grim. The scope and frequency of Communist movements in the area corroborated intelligence that large bodies of enemy troops were based in the nearby mountains, and that their numbers seemed to be growing.⁵ Their assertiveness when moving into Hotels 5, 6, and 7's tactical areas of responsibility (TAOR) also

⁴Ed Nest, interview with Cavender S. Sutton, March 2021.

⁵"Intelligence (Phu Bai TAOR)," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, December 1967, enclosure 1, 10.

demonstrated that several hundred enemy troops could now move into the lowlands at any time they so desired.

Signs of trouble had appeared at the very beginning of the month. Early on 1 December, a night patrol from Hotel 6 spotted between 300 and 500 Viet Cong north of Highway 1, moving away from a large rice growing village and heading south to the mountains. Greatly outnumbered, the CAP did not engage. It was too dark for the patrol to make a more detailed assessment of the group or its intentions, only that the direction in which the Viet Cong were heading would put them right on a main trail that led up into the mountains. Later that night, a few kilometers to the east, the Marines received a report of another large Viet Cong movement near a rice hamlet north of the highway. Here, the Viet Cong forced villagers to carry their rice; another source noted that a group of between 50 and 150 civilians were seen crossing the highway with the Viet Cong.⁶

Nearly every day seemed to bring a new report of a large contingent of Viet Cong or NVA troops moving through the Phu Loc area.⁷ But with limited resources, there was only so much that the Marines could do. The 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, was still the only infantry battalion guarding the Phu Bai enclave, though it did have an extra rifle company at the time. The battalion's Marines did the best they could with what they had. Besides guarding installations and providing reaction forces, they placed one company between the Dap Dinh River and the TAOR boundary just east of Phu Loc. That company would concentrate on the enemy routes into the Phu Loc District headquarters and the nearby population center of Cau Hai. The battalion placed a second company between the Dap Dinh River on the TAOR's north-eastern boundary and ordered two platoons to guard six bridges along Highway 1. Finally, on 28 December, a new Marine infantry battalion arrived to cover southern Phu Loc, which allowed the 2d Battalion,

⁶"Daily Journal," 1 December, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, December 1967.

⁷Throughout December, there were constant reports, either by Marine or ARVN patrols or from local villagers, of large numbers of Viet Cong and NVA moving in or near Phu Loc. See "Daily Journal," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, December 1967, particularly entries for 1, 4, 13, 16, 17, 22, and 26 December.

26th Marines, to shift the southernmost boundary of its area of operations a kilometer north. The battalion's command noted that the reduction of the size of its TAOR permitted a higher concentration of patrols and ambushes within a smaller area.⁸

Although still spread thin, the Marines made the most of their situation with an aggressive campaign of patrols and ambushes. Throughout December, the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, and the CAPs conducted hundreds of day patrols and an even higher number of night ambushes throughout the TAOR. Several ambushes resulted in contact, many of which occurred against bodies of Communist troops moving toward the lowlands from the mountains.⁹ Much to the Marines' frustration, these ambushes seemed to have minimal effect on the Communists' operations. By the end of December, security in the Phu Bai enclave was the worst it had been since the Marines' arrival nearly three years earlier. The battalion's intelligence section concluded that Viet Cong and NVA troops now had the capability to launch ground and mortar attacks in areas within the Phu Bai TAOR at any time and at any place of their choosing. They also discovered that the newly formed NVA's *4th Regiment* had deployed nearby. The regiment was allegedly based about 11 kilometers (6.8 miles) due south of the Phu Loc District headquarters, deep in the mountains behind Bach Ma peak.¹⁰ It would be the unit to lead the attack on southern Hue on the morning of 31 January 1968.

Operation Checkers

The year 1967 closed with the Marines scrambling to react to the evolving situation. Much of their concern focused on the demilitarized zone (DMZ), where NVA troops seemed poised for a major strike. Marine leadership decided to act before that campaign began. Beginning in mid-December, III MAF initiated a major reorganization of its forces

⁸ "Narrative Summary," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, December 1967.

⁹ "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, December 1967, enclosure 1, 3–6.

¹⁰ "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, December 1967, 10.

in I Corps in response to the growing threat to Khe Sanh and the enemy buildup around the DMZ. This reshuffle was called Operation Checkers. It aimed to shift the 3d Marine Division, most of which was already operating in the northern fringes of I Corps, to the north and turn over responsibility for Phu Bai and Thua Thien Province to the 1st Marine Division. Since the 1st Marine Division was also responsible for the large Quang Nam Province TAOR, it formed a two-regiment task force charged with protecting Phu Bai and the surrounding area and named this new organization Task Force X-Ray. It would be commanded by the division's assistant commander, Brigadier General Foster C. LaHue.¹¹

Operation Checkers was a sound decision given the situation in northern I Corps and the Marines' limited resources, but such a large reshuffling of troops and equipment would take time. The first Marines and their equipment relocated in late December, but the operation dragged on for another full month. The final movement was not completed until 29 January 1968, just two days before the Tet Offensive began in earnest. Just like any undertaking in a combat zone, Operation Checkers did not go off without unforeseen problems. Marine leaders had to respond and adjust their plans along the way, which caused unplanned shifts in the Marines' areas of responsibility. These last-minute shuffles generated a considerable amount of ambiguity among the Marine commanders on the eve of the Tet Offensive.¹²

Another problem was that the 1st Marine Division's personnel moving to Phu Bai were not familiar with the territory. Since October 1966, the division had been operating entirely to the south of Thua Thien Province, in both the Da Nang and Chu Lai enclaves, where the terrain and enemy tactics were much different.¹³ Under the best of circumstances, it takes military personnel and their commanders sig-

¹¹ "Operations Order 309-68 (Operation Checkers), 18 Dec. 1968," 1st Marine Division, ComdC, January 1968, 1-2.

¹² Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 20, 68-69.

¹³ Although not written by a member of the 1st Marine Division, Otto J. Lehrack's *No Shining Armor* gives intimate views into what life was like for Marine infantry serving in both of these areas of operations in 1965 and 1966. See Otto J. Lehrack, *No Shining Armor: The Marines at War in Vietnam: An Oral History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 16-88.

nificant time to learn the essence of a new territory. The Marines who arrived in the Phu Bai enclave had a matter of days.

The first of Operation Checkers' movements into Thua Thien province occurred when the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, moved into the Phu Loc District in late December. This move gave the Marines two full battalions to cover both Phu Bai and Phu Loc. They hoped that increasing their presence would help them deal with the rising activity in the area, keep Highway 1—a major supply route—open, and still allow Marines to cover the northern portion of the TAOR. Company A, Company B, and the battalion command group arrived at their assembly point in Phu Loc on 23 December. They immediately sent out patrols to secure the area and began to build the battalion command post on 24 December. That same day, the battalion's commander also established liaison with the commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, Phu Loc's district chief, and his U.S. senior advisor.¹⁴

On 26 December, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, assumed control of Phu Loc. The same day, Company D arrived by convoy and Company C was helo-lifted into the Phu Loc assembly point, bringing the battalion to full strength. The battalion also assumed operational control over CAPs Hotel 4, Hotel 5, Hotel 6, Hotel 7, and Hotel 9. It controlled all of the CAPs located from 915 meters (1,000 yards) east of the Truoi to the Hai Van Pass.¹⁵ All of the Alpha CAPs and Hotels 1, 2, 3, and 8 would remain under the operational control of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines.

In December 1967 and January 1968, there were many signs indicating that a major offensive was coming for Thua Thien Province that would target Phu Bai, Phu Loc, and Hue itself. However, there was still a deep skepticism among commanders at the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), that the offensive would not be as wide as claimed, or that there would be an attack on the cities

¹⁴ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, December 1967, item no. 1201048022, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 3-20 and 3-21.

¹⁵ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, December 1967, 3-22 and 3-23.

at all.¹⁶ For the Marines on the ground along the road to Hue, matters was less nuanced. Large contingents of Communist troops had been on the move during the previous month, and they would continue to maneuver around the TAOR and launch preparatory strikes in the weeks ahead.

Movement Near Base Area 114

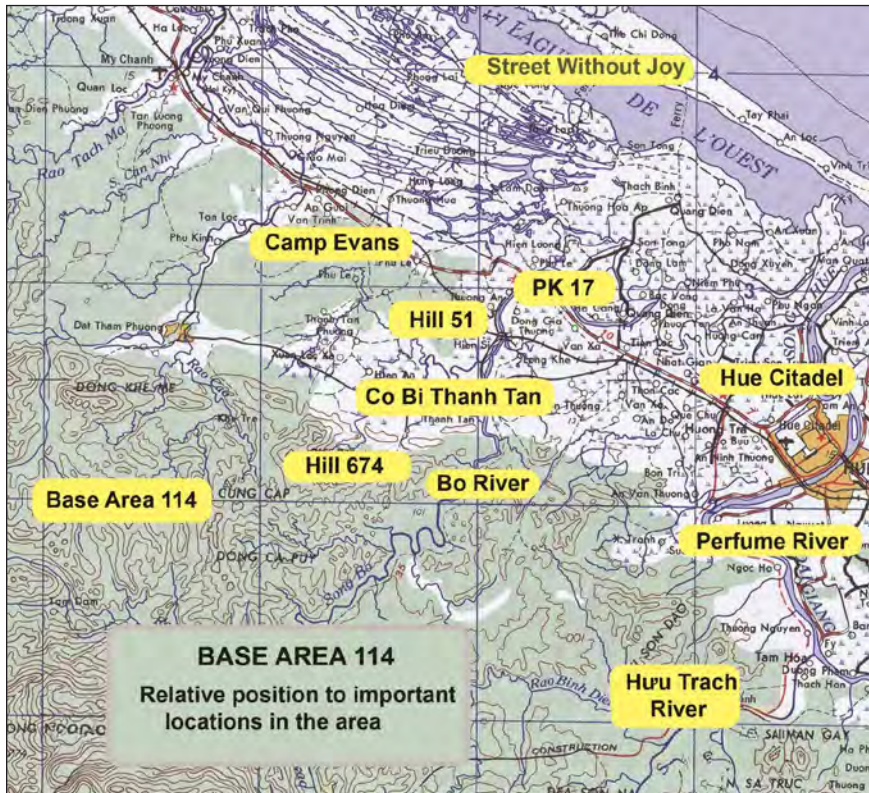
Yet another clear sign of a looming offensive was a surge of movement around Base Area 114. Its northern exits were monitored by both 3d Reconnaissance Battalion patrols and the Marine infantry based out of Camp Evans, located about 32 kilometers (20 miles) northwest of Hue on Highway 1. Marine infantry platoons also operated two outposts nearby. One outpost was on Hill 51 in the Co Bi Thanh Tan Valley, and the other sat atop Hill 674 on the Co Bi Thanh Tan Ridge. The former position also hosted an ARVN artillery battery, while the latter doubled as a radio relay station. One of the Camp Evans Marines' responsibilities was to monitor enemy traffic coming out of Base Area 114.¹⁷

From Camp Evans, the Marines could launch patrols and other operations to monitor and interdict enemy travel both to the northeast of the base heading toward the Hai Lang Forest or the Street Without Joy, a region along the coast north of Hue that had been dominated by the Communists since the First Indochina War. Marines based out of Camp Evans could also monitor Communist troops traveling east along the south edge of Co Bi Thanh Tan Valley toward Hue and the coastal plains to the north and the east of the city. Most observations of enemy movement closest to the Co Bi Thanh Tan Ridge came from Marine reconnaissance teams. During December, the Marines concentrated on gathering information on Communist units venturing out of Base Area 114 and heading eastward through the Co Bi Thanh Tan Valley. In

¹⁶ Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968–1973* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006), 30–31; and Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 16–17.

¹⁷ Both locations are first mentioned in 4th Marines, ComdC, December 1967, item no. 1201042051, folder 042, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, tab E.

Figure 10.2. Location of Camp Evans and surrounding area



This map shows the location of Camp Evans and other important locations in the area.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

December 1967 and January 1968, they reported a drastic increase in large Communist movements to the east toward the coastal plains.¹⁸

During the Christmas truce of 1967, a Marine reconnaissance patrol spotted more than 700 Viet Cong during a period of 57.5 hours. The

¹⁸ "Intelligence Section," 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, ComdC, December 1967, item number 1201024014, folder 024, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive; and "Intelligence Summary," 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, ComdC, January 1968, item number 1201024015, folder 024, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive. See also "Intelligence Section," 4th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item number 1201042052, folder 042, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 12.

Marines later reported that the troops they observed were disciplined, were well-armed, and displayed a high degree of tactical competence. On 24 December, the Marines called a fire mission on a contingent of more than 400 Viet Cong but were rebuffed because of the Christmas truce.¹⁹ Two days later, the Marines saw nearly 200 more Viet Cong. The latter group was well camouflaged with natural vegetation, wore green uniforms, carried heavy packs, and wore helmets. The reconnaissance team called for another fire mission, but its position was soon compromised. The Marines then called for extraction and withdrew without incident. They concluded that the persistent enemy traffic indicated that the hamlet they surveilled was an assembly area and may have tunnels or bunkers for protection. The team members, who had been on that ridge before, thought that the Communist troops they observed during this particular mission were the best trained and disciplined of all that they had seen. They described the Communist forces as appearing highly professional who moved and used camouflage very well.²⁰

As 1968 approached, the number of Communist units traveling in and out of Base Area 114 continued to swell.²¹ Many of the troop movements during this time were heading to the coastal plains. It is important to note that during the attack on the Hue Citadel on 31 January, one of the NVA units attacked from the northwest corner.²² Those soldiers could have approached from a staging area in the coastal plains. Around the same time, other Viet Cong troops confronted ARVN units to the east of Hue near the coast. At least one battalion-size unit provided blocking cover to the east of the Citadel. It cannot be ruled out that the units spotted during Christmas played an important role in the Tet attacks on Hue.

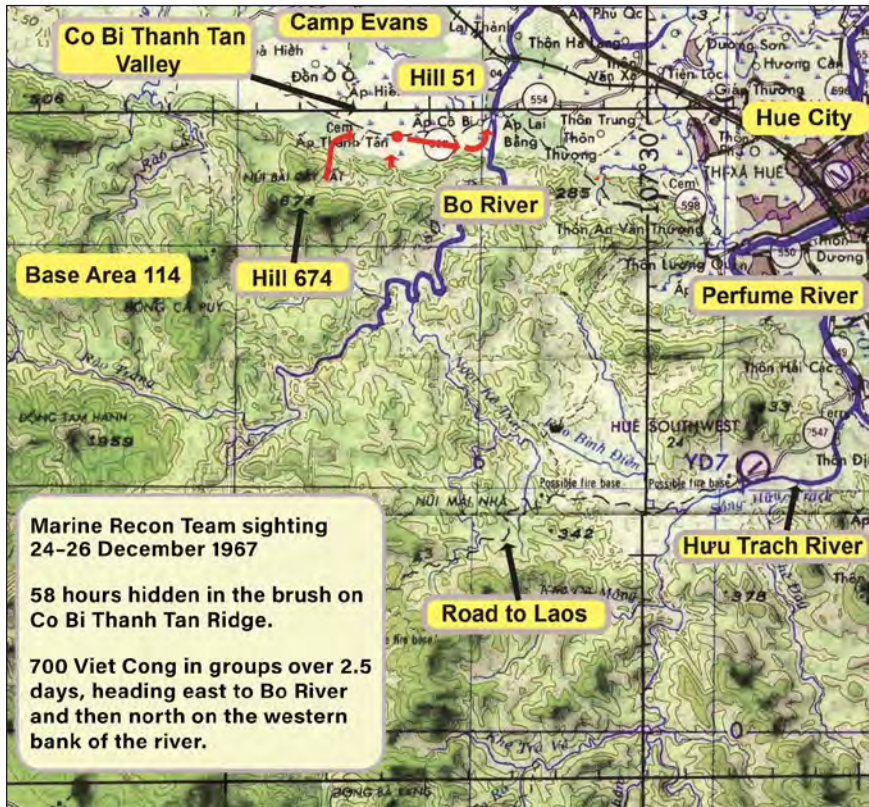
¹⁹ "List of Significant Events and Patrol Report dated 271500Dec67," 3d Reconnaissance Battalion ComdC, December 1967.

²⁰ "List of Significant Events and Patrol Report dated 271500Dec67," 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, ComdC, December 1967.

²¹ "Intelligence Summary," 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, ComdC, December 1967, 4.

²² Erik Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2008), 29, 33.

Figure 10.3. Sightings of enemy movements, December 1967



A December 1967 Marine reconnaissance team sighting of approximately 700 enemy soldiers heading out of Base Area 114 to the east.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

While Camp Evans was in a position to monitor the northwestern approaches to Hue, the Phu Bai enclave's greater "recon zone," as the Marines called it, also included the area south of Base Area 114. This region contained its own important set of routes into Hue and other areas throughout the TAOR.²³ The sparsely inhabited zone to the south and the southwest of Hue was large and mostly covered by heavy brush

²³ Maj Gary L. Telfer, LtCol Lane Rogers, and V. Keith Fleming Jr., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1984), 173-74.

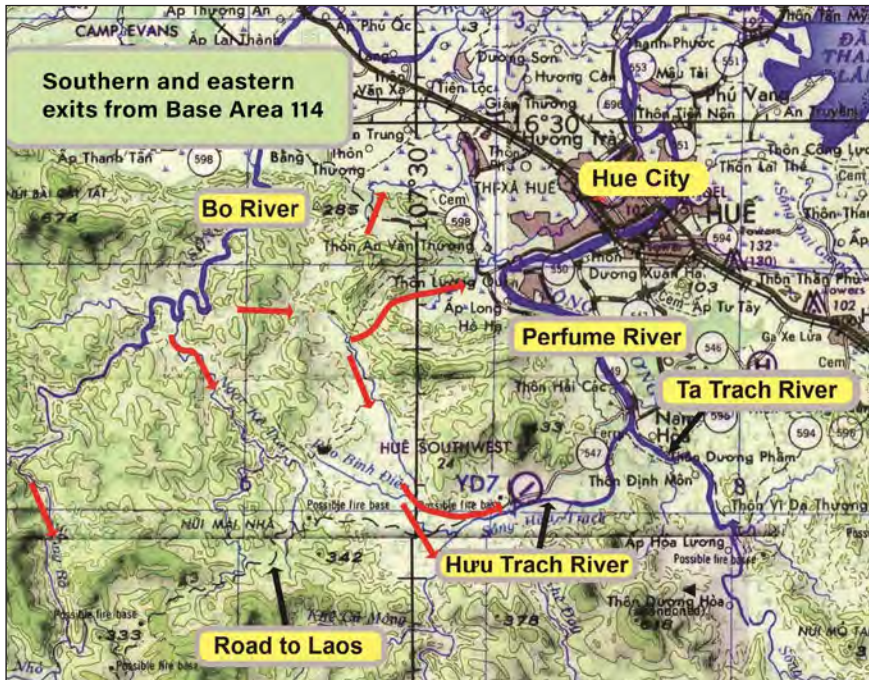
and jungle. The area was marked by the Huu Trach River and the Ta Trach River, both of which came from deep in the mountains. As they neared the city, the rivers joined to form the Huong River, known more popularly as the Perfume River. It coursed northward from there and wound through the southern and eastern borders of Hue on its way to the sea. The ground around it was not only a highway of enemy movement, but for years it had been the site of numerous Viet Cong strong points, which were both long-term guerrilla camps and areas used for shorter stays by main force Viet Cong. The whole area from west of the Ta Trach River to east of the Huu Trach River was covered by jungle or thick brush. It was heavily occupied and traveled through by the enemy during the time before Tet of 1968.

Where the Huu Trach River turns to the east, a road continues toward the west. This unnamed road, unimproved and not weather resistant at the time, ultimately ended in the A Shau Valley near Laos. It had been reconstructed for an outlying Marine artillery outpost but had been abandoned due to the difficulty of maintaining the road, which was not traveled much at the time by allied military forces. The road cut right through the southern portion of Base Area 114 and was a prime exit point for the NVA or main force Viet Cong leaving the base area to move along the Hu Trach River pathways into areas where they could stage attacks on Hue or anywhere in the Phu Bai enclave.

Just outside these southern exits from Base Area 114, in the first 10 days of January 1968 there were several sightings of NVA and Viet Cong troops moving in the direction of Hue City or in the general area of the greater Phu Bai enclave (figure 10.5). On 1 January, the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, reported 300 enemy troops, equal to a small battalion, at a location known to host Communist base camps not far from the Huu Trach River.²⁴ On 5 January, intelligence from CAC Alpha headquarters reported a Viet Cong company posted at a loca-

²⁴ "Journal Jan 01," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item number 1201024015, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 21.

Figure 10.4. Enemy exits from Base Area 114



Relief maps showing the well-known southern and eastern exits from Base Area 114 to the Hue and Phu Bai area.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

tion even closer to Hue, along the west bank of the Perfume River.²⁵ Another report had a Viet Cong company located on the bank of the Huu Trach River 3 kilometers south of the river junctions that form the Perfume River.²⁶ A few days later, an NVA battalion was spotted farther south along the Hu Trach River. Its location was far from Base Area 114, and it could have been a battalion coming in from Laos or some other temporary camp deep in the mountainous jungles that stretched to the Laotian border.²⁷

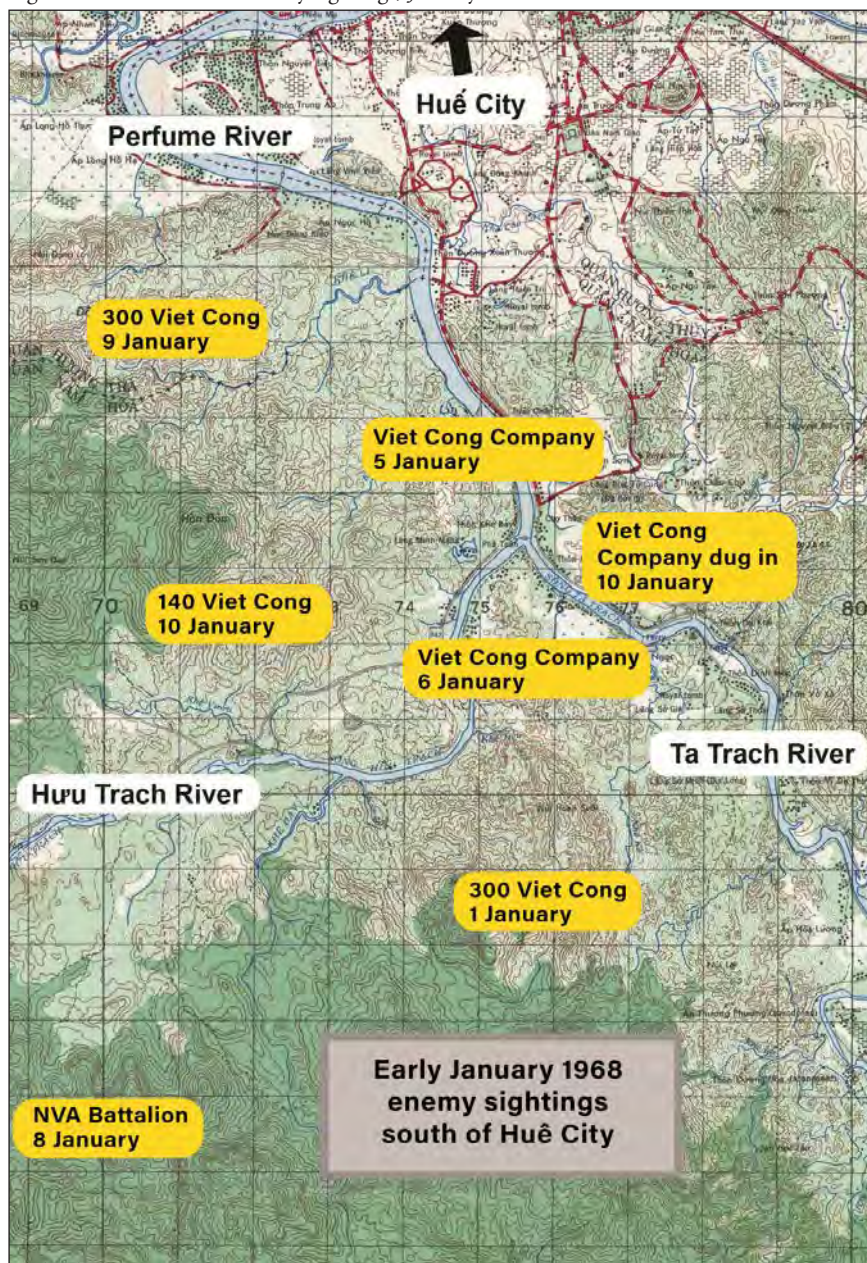
²⁵ "Journal Jan 05," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, January 1968.

²⁶ "Journal Jan 05," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, January 1968.

²⁷ "Journal Jan 08," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, January 1968.

EVIDENCE MOUNTS FOR A MAJOR ENEMY CAMPAIGN

Figure 10.5. Locations of enemy sightings, January 1968



A topographical map showing enemy units in the area near the southern exits from Base Area 114. Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

On 9 January, a Marine reconnaissance team reported a large group of 300 Viet Cong moving along a mountain trail. They were moving along the course of the Perfume River about five kilometers from where the attack against Hue would be launched a few weeks later.²⁸ On 10 January, the South Vietnamese National Police provided intelligence of one Viet Cong company numbering 140 troops at another spot in the mountains, again in a position to be involved in the attack on Hue. That same day, the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, reported evidence of a Viet Cong company dug in close to the Gia Le Pass near the Ta Trach River. This company could have moved various directions when given a command.²⁹

First Pre-Tet Attacks

The first major attack of 1968 along the road to Hue occurred on 7 January in the Phu Loc District, shortly after the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, assumed responsibility for the area. The battalion had established its command post in a provocative location on the road south of the most populated area in Phu Loc.³⁰ It was also close to the mountains and directly in the way of one of the main enemy routes down into the Phu Loc District headquarters area. CAP Hotel 5 and the district headquarters were directly north of this position. The battalion command post housed its headquarters elements along with strong fire support. This was a welcome addition to the defenses at Phu Loc, but the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, would have to quickly learn the territory it was now expected to protect. The battalion spread its companies out in various positions and initiated patrols and other activities to establish a presence in the area and gather intelligence.³¹

According to an intelligence report issued on 14 December 1967, there were two Viet Cong main force battalions, a local force company,

²⁸ "Journal Jan 09," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, January 1968.

²⁹ "Journal Jan 10," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, January 1968.

³⁰ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, December 1967, item no. 1201048022, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 3-25.

³¹ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, December 1967, 3-20.

and one unidentified engineering company operating within the battalion's new area of operations. The report concluded that those units' mission was to collect rice, interdict Highway 1 by mining bridges and roadways, control the population, and destroy the Rural Development program by conducting small-scale harassing attacks against small or isolated U.S. and ARNV positions. The Marines also expected company-size or larger attacks with heavier arms against CAP units, the Phu Bai base, and the battalion command post at Phu Loc.³²

The Marines would soon learn that the Communist presence was even larger than they thought. In early January, there was a sharp rise in their efforts to sabotage, mine, and ambush along the stretch of Highway 1 that ran through Phu Loc. The enemy succeeded in destroying several bridges, planting antipersonnel and antivehicular mines, and attacking Marine engineer and minesweeping units. In January, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, learned there were at least four Viet Cong main force or NVA battalions, one to three local force companies, an engineering company, and a sabotage company operating nearby.³³

With a local superiority in numbers, NVA and Viet Cong troops went on the offensive. On 7 January, less than two weeks after the Marine battalion assumed control of Phu Loc, the enemy launched a series of large, coordinated attacks on the Phu Loc District headquarters, CAP Hotel 5, CAP Hotel 6, and CAP Hotel 7. In the early morning hours before dawn, two enemy battalions slipped down out of the mountains unnoticed and hit these installations with mortar fire and ground attacks. CAPs Hotel 6 and Hotel 7 were totally overrun, while CAP Hotel 5 was hit hard by mortars and other supporting fire.³⁴

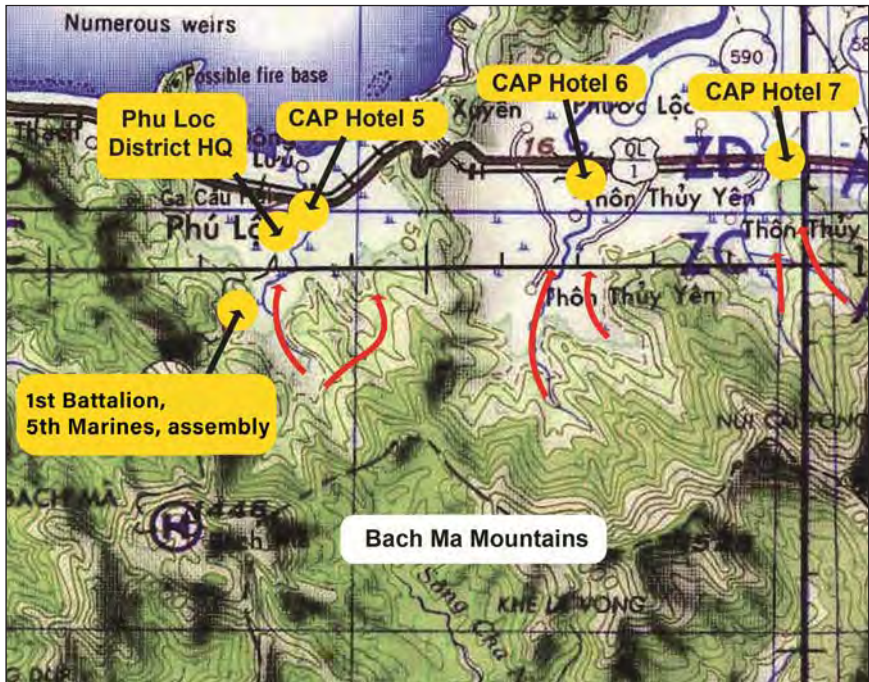
The Communists did a masterful job of isolating their targets. Shortly after the attacks began, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, com-

³² "Annex to Operation Plan 3-67 dated 14 December 1967," in "Intelligence," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, December 1967.

³³ "Narrative Summary," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201048023, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 2-3.

³⁴ "Narrative Summary," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968. Hostile actions in Phu Loc are briefly discussed in Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 102-5.

Figure 10.6. Locations of the targets of attacks, 7 January 1968



This relief map shows the position of the targets of attacks relative to the mountain routes from where the enemy attackers came.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

mand post received heavy mortar fire. While no ground attack materialized there, the enemy kept the pressure up all night with indirect fire, preventing the Marines there from dispatching a reaction force and hampering their ability to orchestrate artillery or other support for the beleaguered installations. Company D, located several kilometers to the east near Lang Co, was also hit with mortars, which prevented it from sending assistance to the beleaguered CAPs.³⁵ The battalion soon lost contact with the CAPs, and any reinforcements would not set out until after daybreak.³⁶ The CAPs were on their own.

³⁵ "Narrative Summary," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, 2-2.

³⁶ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, 3-4.

Getting overrun was a CAP Marine's greatest fear. CAPs were not manned or equipped to withstand ground attacks by large bodies of enemy troops armed with mortars and rockets. At night, with a patrol out, there may be only six to eight Marines and a small group of PF troops to defend their compound. On the night of 7 January, CAP Hotel 7 was more fortunate, as it had at least a full squad of Marines and more than 20 PFs.³⁷ Even so, this was not enough for what was about to hit them.

Corporal Ed Nest, a Hotel 7 Marine, was sleeping in one of his compound's hardback hooches when several explosions awakened him. He shot up and saw flashes all around through the hooche's screened sides. Nest jumped out of his cot, slipped on his boots, grabbed his gear, and ran outside. He was immediately confronted by an enemy sapper who threw a Chicom grenade at him. Nest dove to temporary safety behind a nearby sandbag wall just before the grenade exploded. He ran around the wall and headed to his assigned bunker at the northwest corner of the compound, where he collided with the sapper. They both fell down. As they scrambled back to their feet, Nest hit the sapper hard with the butt of his rifle. He drove the butt of his rifle into the man's jaw and heard his bones crunch as he fell to the ground disabled.³⁸

Nest ran to his fighting position and got into one of the sandbagged fighting positions next to his assigned bunker. He was the only one there. He could see sappers at the back of the compound working their way forward. Nest wanted to get to the sandbagged position on top of the bunker, where he would have a better view of his surroundings. The makeshift ladder was gone, so he went around behind the bunker in a small space between it and the rolls of concertina wire that formed the inner layer of the perimeter. With his cartridge belt and his rifle, he crawled up the backside of the bunker and got on top. From that position, he could see the sappers going through the compound from the back to the front, throwing explosives into the Marine posi-

³⁷ Ed Nest, telephone interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2020 and 2021; Ed Nest, interview with Sutton, March 2021, hereafter Nest interviews.

³⁸ Nest interviews.

tions. Nest had two magazines taped together, and he emptied both of them into a group of sappers moving in his direction.³⁹

Suddenly, an explosion blew him off the bunker and into the wire that lined the compound perimeter, knocking him unconscious. When he regained consciousness, he was hanging in the wire with his head facing north along the roadway. He lay motionless and watched the rest of the attack unfold. In the light of the burning hooches, Nest watched as a group of NVA soldiers dressed in uniforms blew a hole in another section of the wire with a Bangalore torpedo. He was afraid that his white T-shirt, whose sleeves protruded out from his sleeveless green flak jacket, would give him away. As quietly as possible, he worked at the T-shirt with his teeth to prevent the sleeves from showing. Then he waited. A group of about 20 NVA soldiers milled around on the roadway near where he lay. Many squatted in a circle engaged in friendly chatter. At one point, just on the edge of his peripheral vision, Nest saw the NVA soldiers leading away two Marine prisoners. Later, these Marines would escape their captors when a guard fell asleep.⁴⁰

Nest had one grenade with him. He pulled the pin, held the spoon, and waited. He believes that he lay there, gripping his grenade tightly, for a couple of hours until dawn broke. After the NVA left at dawn, a couple of the surviving PFs found him and helped him get out of the wire. Nest handed the grenade to one of the PFs, who threw it far away, where it exploded. Nest then walked to the front of the compound where he found several men dead and wounded. He and the other survivors pulled the wounded Marines out of the compound and dragged them down to a spot near the bridge where a medevac helicopter could land. Nest remembers a grisly scene of wounded and dead men whose bodies had been butchered by the explosions. They had no radio, and a helicopter flying overhead did not appear to see them. By this time, village traffic was beginning to come along the highway. Nest comman-

³⁹ Nest interviews.

⁴⁰ Nest interviews. The attack, the prisoners' capture, and their subsequent escape are also noted in in "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, pt. 3, 5, 20.

deered a civilian's scooter and had the civilian drive him up the road a few kilometers to a friendly artillery base. When he got to the outpost, a short distance off the main road on higher ground, he finally made radio contact with his command at Phu Bai to alert them to the situation.⁴¹

Lance Corporal Wayne Curto was another survivor of the attack on Hotel 7. Despite the terror of this attack that destroyed his platoon, he had strong feelings for the Vietnamese people and for his unique part in the war effort. Nine days later, Curto, who had been reassigned to drive the supply truck for the CAPs, hit a mine and was evacuated to Okinawa to recuperate. He stayed there for six months and then volunteered for a second tour with his old outfit. He was assigned to the same CAP village where he had been in the overrun. The Viet Cong, who had told the villagers that he had been killed, had allegedly put a bounty on his head.⁴² Years later, Curto explained his rationale for returning to his CAP:

I loved the Vietnamese people in my village, and it was an honor to serve them. I lived with them, and because I spoke their language, I had the opportunity of laughing and crying with them. Together, we celebrated births, birthdays, holidays, and deaths. I was invited to their homes to eat, as well as being an invited guest at their funerals. It was always a pleasant surprise to them when I spoke Vietnamese because so very few of us took the time to get to know them. The old ladies used to laugh when I squatted down alongside them and asked to join them in chewing some "beetle-nut."

People are surprised when I tell them that I wouldn't trade any of my days in Vietnam, not even the one on the night of the attack. Collectively, the days of my tours in Vietnam and the time I spent in Okinawa were some of the best of my life. Like I tell everyone, "I just had a few bad days."⁴³

⁴¹ Nest interviews.

⁴² Wayne Curto, email correspondence, telephone interviews, and personal interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2019, 2020, and 2021, hereafter Curto interviews.

⁴³ Curto interviews. Curto also provided the authors with writings about his personal experiences, from which this quote is taken.

Corporal Nest and Lance Corporal Curto were the only two Marines to suffer wounds not serious enough to be evacuated after the 7 January attack. Seven of the CAP's Marines were killed.⁴⁴

CAPs Hotel 5 and Hotel 6 were also hit in similar attacks. Like Hotel 7, Hotel 6 was nearly totally destroyed. Between the attacks on the Phu Loc District headquarters and the attacks on the CAPS, the command files recorded that 18 Marines were killed and 61 Marines were wounded in action that night.⁴⁵ Matters would have been even worse at Hotel 6 had it not been for the platoon's leader, Staff Sergeant Claude H. Dorris. Despite being wounded in both legs early in the attack, Dorris constantly moved throughout the compound, rallying his Marines and Popular Force (PF) troops, directing their fire, and even rendering first aid to a child. Against incredible odds, Dorris rallied and led his platoon's survivors until an incoming rocket struck and killed him. He and two other Marines from Hotel 6, John C. Calhoun and Robert C. Rusher, were awarded the Navy Cross for their actions that night, all three being awarded posthumously.⁴⁶

Hotel 5 fared better. The platoon's compound took heavy mortar fire but did not suffer a ground attack like Hotel 6 and Hotel 7. One of the Marines at Hotel 5, John Bartgen, was in his platoon's bunkhouse when the first mortar rounds hit near the compound. He grabbed his rifle, vest, and all his magazines and headed to his assigned bunker. As he ran to his position, enemy troops started throwing grenades over the wire, and he was hit with shrapnel in the leg and hand. Bartgen wrapped a T-shirt around his leg and continued to defend his position. Incoming fire knocked out their primary radio, so two other Marines ran to the French-built concrete tower at the north end of the perimeter to retrieve the other one. Bartgen and the rest of Hotel 5 spent the rest of the night taking cover, defending their positions, and preparing

⁴⁴ Curto interviews; and Nest interviews. The attack is noted in "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, pt. 3, 4–5.

⁴⁵ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968.

⁴⁶ SSgt Dorris's Navy Cross citation is available at "Claude Hesson Dorris," Hall of Valor, *Military Times*, n.d.

for a ground assault, but one never came. The attack on Hotel 5 had been a diversion; later into the night, enemy sappers blew up the bridge near their compound and then left. Communist troops also destroyed the bridges near Hotel 6 and Hotel 7 that night, but they did not spare the CAPs protecting them.⁴⁷

Bartgen had feared for days in advance that they would be attacked. The Communists had become a constant nuisance in the nearby hamlets. The locals alerted Hotel 5 several times that Viet Cong had either entered the village recently or threatened to do so soon. During that time, the CAP only sent out a small listening post toward the village, in the direction that the enemy usually approached, to observe and warn the compound of any impending attack. The compound's position near the village also complicated matters. The CAP could not call artillery close to or into the hamlet because they feared civilian casualties.⁴⁸

The Communists' bold attacks on 7 January were a significant turning point in the events leading up to the Tet Offensive. These marked yet another escalation of Communist activity in Phu Loc. In all, 18 Marines died and 84 were wounded in the attacks, along with an unrecorded number of PF casualties.⁴⁹ After the attack, teams of Viet Cong and NVA troops made a concerted effort to disrupt traffic along Highway 1, particularly supply convoys coming from Da Nang, and to wreak havoc throughout the Phu Loc District. There were 23 enemy-initiated incidents from 8–12 January, mainly hit-and-run mortar attacks targeting the roads and bridges, the CAPs, convoys, and the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines' assembly area. Each mortar attacks typically consisted of between three and six rounds, enough to be dangerous and to keep everyone nervous and on the alert. Many patrols, both from the Marine infantry and the CAPs, frequently took small arms fire. Communist troops also set mines to disrupt traffic on Highway 1. These efforts were not enough to stop the flow of supplies and resourc-

⁴⁷ John Bartgen, telephone interview with William F. Nimmo, 2021, hereafter Bartgen interview.

⁴⁸ Bartgen interview.

⁴⁹ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, 2-4–2-5.

es moving between Da Nang and Phu Bai, but they posed a considerable threat to a crucial supply line.⁵⁰

Fortunately for the battalion and the CAPs, a second phase of Operation Checkers sent additional Marines into the heavily contested battleground at Phu Loc. On 9 January, Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, commanded by Captain George R. Christmas, arrived from the Da Nang TAOR to assist its sister battalion.⁵¹ The company's arrival allowed the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, to reposition to cover the entire Phu Loc TAOR, with the bulk of its force concentrated at the bridges and near the CAPs. The battalion commander placed his Marines in positions from which they could aggressively patrol and set night ambushes along Highway 1. Their mission was to keep the highway open and to protect key installations and infrastructure from the massing enemy forces.⁵²

This decentralization of forces substantially fortified the Phu Loc area. It also increased the cooperation between the Marine infantry and CAP at a crucial time. Company H, for example, broke up into platoons and dispersed across several locations from which the Marines could interdict Viet Cong and NVA movement with patrols and ambushes. Lance Corporal Charles McMahon and his platoon were placed with CAP Hotel 5 for several days. They helped defend the CAP's perimeter and conducted patrols and ambushes out of their temporary base of operations. The compound was well positioned with clear fields of fire and plenty of trenches and sandbagged fighting positions.⁵³ The Marines also had artillery on call, which they could call in quickly and accurately when they spotted the flash of a mortar up in the hills or a mass of enemy troops. The Marines at Hotel 5 now had more support than ever before, leading one survivor of the 7 January attack to tell McMahon "I wish they would hit us tonight."⁵⁴

⁵⁰ "Narrative Summary," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, 2-2.

⁵¹ "Embarkation, Advance Party," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC (1 of 2), January 1968, item no. 1201048097, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 20.

⁵² "Frag Order 1-68, 12 Jan 68," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, 2.

⁵³ Charles McMahon, telephone interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021, hereafter McMahon interviews.

⁵⁴ McMahon interviews.

As Operation Checkers progressed, command over the Phu Bai TAOR changed hands for the first time in seven months. The remainder of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, arrived between 9 and 13 January. On 15 January, the 5th Marine Regiment relieved the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, and assumed command of the Phu Bai TAOR. This battalion had been the resident battalion in Phu Bai since June 1967. Now it was heading north to reinforce the defenses at Khe Sanh.⁵⁵ While the new battalion, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, was to take the place of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, as the defender of the northern half of the TAOR, it ended up assuming control of a larger area than was originally planned—one that covered both the Phu Bai and Phu Loc areas.⁵⁶ With the departure of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, and Tet drawing near, the Marines along the road to Hue were once again stretched thin even as enemy forces were substantially increasing their offensive activities.

⁵⁵ "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201060256, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 6.

⁵⁶ "Operation Order 2-86 19 January 1968," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC (2 of 2), January 1968, item no. 1201048098, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

CHAPTER 11

THE TOP COMMAND REVEALS ENEMY INTENT

In mid-January 1968, III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) circulated a report that predicted that Communist forces were planning major attacks on the area around Hue. The document surmised that Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces would seek to sever the northern portion of South Vietnam from the rest of the country.¹ The chain of events that unfolded along the road to Hue in January 1968 certainly seemed to support those predictions. The Viet Cong were especially active in Phu Loc. Their obvious buildup and offensive actions there may have been intended as a distraction for the surprise attack on Hue. Conversely, those actions' unprecedented scope and ferocity also suggest that disrupting the stretch of Highway 1 that ran through the district was one of their chief objectives as the Tet Offensive drew nearer.

III MAF based its declaration on an incontrovertible stream of intelligence. In the final weeks before Tet, various elements of U.S. and South Vietnamese forces and many civilians saw or came into direct contact with large groups of Viet Cong and NVA troops moving throughout Thua Thien Province. In most cases, the enemy tried to avoid confrontations with U.S. and South Vietnamese forces as they moved weapons, supplies, and contingents of troops around the area to stage for the looming attack. The Marines on the ground interpreted

¹ "Analysis of Enemy Situation in ICTZ," Periodic Intelligence Report no. 2-68 [III Marine Amphibious Force], 7 January 1968, item no. 1201003095, folder 003, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), 2-3.

these developments as signs that something big was about to happen. They did what they could to prepare their defenses, frustrate Communist movements, and defend the road to Hue.

Preparations in Phu Loc

On 22 January, after receiving III MAF's intelligence report, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, issued a warning to his subordinate commanders to expect a large-scale attack in their area of operations just before or immediately after the Tet holiday.² The outgoing 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, issued similar warnings as it prepared to leave Phu Bai and head north.³ The commander of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, predicted a pattern of limited attacks against the CAPs and other isolated units in the Phu Loc tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) followed by a major offensive across the entire province. He felt that the principal targets in Phu Loc were the Lang Co bridge, the Truoi River bridge, the district headquarters, the Phu Gia Fire Support Base, and his battalion assembly area. Expecting a repeat of 7 January, he stressed that any position not receiving a ground attack could expect to be hit by mortar or recoilless rifle fire.⁴

The battalion commander's assessment proved prophetic. Fortunately, Operation Checkers brought him help just in time. The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, supported the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines' Phu Loc defenses with a "mobile holding position," as it was called, at the Truoi River and a two-company maneuver force at the Cao Doi Peninsula.⁵ From the Cao Doi Peninsula, the maneuver forces could respond either to the west toward the Truoi River or to the east out toward Phu Loc District headquarters, as well as to the Combined Action Platoons (CAP) and other isolated positions toward Lang Co. The Marines' pa-

² "Operations Plan 2-68, 22 Jan. 1968, Situation, Assumptions," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, Command Chronology (ComdC), January 1968, item no. 1201048023, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

³ "Significant Trends during the Period," 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201060256, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 11.

⁴ "Operation Plan 2-68," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, 2.

⁵ "Operation Plan 2-68," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, 1-2.

trols and ambushes along Highway 1 largely focused on protecting its bridges and culverts, as damaging or destroying them was the surest way to disrupt traffic. The battalion command also developed a system of “designated holding positions,” essentially a dispersed network of small, fortified outposts that could send help to nearby Marines when enemy forces struck. They intended to disperse their Marines into more positions than enemy troops could simultaneously attack, as they had done on 7 January. When an attack came, Marines not under a direct ground assault or pinned down by indirect fire would maneuver against, cut off, and destroy the enemy force.⁶

It was a solid plan. The questions that remained were whether it could be implemented in time and if it would be enough. By the middle of January, the situation in Phu Loc looked grim. Intelligence reports indicated that there were several large Communist units in the mountains directly above and south of the district. Two NVA battalions, an NVA regimental command group, two Viet Cong main force battalions, and two sapper companies were poised to strike.⁷ The Marines at Phu Loc would have to be proactive, not only in preparing their defenses but also by working to detect enemy movements and, if possible, spoil a major attack before it could materialize.

In hindsight, it is clear why the NVA and Viet Cong concentrated so many troops around Phu Loc in January 1968. An important stretch of Highway 1 that connected Da Nang with Phu Bai, not to mention the entire 3d Marine Division north of Hue in Quang Tri province, ran through Phu Loc. In January alone, several convoys of between 50 and 150 trucks traveled through the district. Much of the traffic was moving north in support of Operation Checkers. Maintaining control of Highway 1 was critical to the operation’s success. The Marines and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers themselves could be airlifted, but much of their equipment and supplies needed to move via ground

⁶“Situation, Execution,” “Operation Plan 2-68,” 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, 2–3.

⁷“Sequential Listing of Significant Events,” 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201046154, folder 046, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, pt. 3, 2.

Phu Loc was an ideal place to attack. It was the gateway for anyone traveling north out of the Hai Van Pass from Da Nang to Hue. The district's remote location and its geography—with its open spaces, one main highway running south to north, multiple chokepoints like bridges and culverts, and its proximity to staging areas in the mountains nearby—made it a textbook place to attempt to cut off the northern provinces from those to the south.⁹ The Lang Co and Truoi River bridges were prime targets for Viet Cong and NVA troops seeking to disrupt traffic along the highway. Both were large structures that would have been difficult for the engineers to replace quickly. The Lang Co bridge was in a particularly critical location. If either bridge had been destroyed, convoys from Da Nang would not have been able to drive to Phu Bai.

Squads from both the 5th Marines and the CAPs constantly patrolled the areas around Phu Loc to preempt any major attack there. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, assigned a specific area of operations to each infantry company. Each CAP then fell under one of those companies. Companies C and D focused on the east side of the Phu Loc TAOR. Company C based two of its platoons at the Lang Co bridge. Company D covered the Phu Gia ARVN artillery outpost nearby. Companies B and A operated near the Phu Loc District headquarters out to CAP Hotel 6 and farther out to CAP Hotel 7's former location in Thua Luu Village. Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, reinforced the Truoi River bridge and the surrounding areas near Hotel 4. Despite the Marines' best efforts, totally restricting enemy movement remained a challenge. Even with reinforcements, there was much ground to cover, and Communist troops were adept at moving about the countryside and employing its terrain to avoid Marine patrols.¹⁰

Corporal Charles McMahon, a rifleman with Company H, was one of the Marines assigned to the Truoi River bridge. His platoon stayed in a compound situated at the junction of the river and the highway. The compound had a group of ARVN bridge guards as well as CAP Hotel

⁹ "Intelligence," 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, pt. 3, 2–3.

¹⁰ "Frag Order 1-68," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, tab A to enclosure 1, 1–3.

3's Marines and PF soldiers. McMahon and his comrades ran patrols around the area during the day and protected the bridge at night. One squad guarded the Phu Bai side of the bridge and another defended the Phu Loc side. The platoon's remaining squad often went up the Truoi river to set an ambush two or three kilometers out from the bridge.¹¹

McMahon had not expected his unit's sudden transfer to Phu Loc. Since his arrival in Vietnam in November 1967, the company had operated in the An Hoa area of Quang Nam Province, southwest of Da Nang. The order to pack up and move out came suddenly and without explanation. McMahon had no idea what was going on, just that his unit were moving north. The closest thing to intelligence that his platoon received was its staff sergeant's declaration, "You aren't going to be dealing anymore with these rice paddy daddies where they take a couple of shots at you and then run off. You are going to be dealing with hardcore troops. And when they attack you, it generally means they outnumber you." That staff sergeant would later take command of the company during the Battle of Hue after every officer had been wounded.¹²

For the rest of the month, Communist troops mounted a series of harassing attacks throughout Phu Loc and repeatedly tried to blow up Highway 1's bridges and culverts. The Marines sent out ambushes each night, some of which engaged sabotage units coming out of the mountains to plant explosives on the bridges or the highway.¹³ The amount of enemy activity kept the Marines in the Phu Loc corridor on a heightened state of alert most of the time. Day patrols may have been slightly relaxed before, but not any longer. Every patrol that went out was heavily armed and expected contact.

As Operation Checkers neared its end, two full battalions of Marines were in position across the Phu Bai TAOR. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, guarded the Phu Loc District while the 2d Battalion, 5th Ma-

¹¹ Charles McMahon, telephone interview with William F. Nimmo, 2019; and Charles McMahon, telephone interview with Cavender S. Sutton, November 2021, hereafter McMahon interviews.

¹² McMahon interviews.

¹³ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, pt. 3, 5–27.

rines, spread out around the Phu Bai Combat Base and the northern fringes of Phu Loc. They were also expecting to receive a third battalion soon that would further augment their defense throughout the Phu Bai TAOR.¹⁴ Elements of that battalion, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, would not arrive until the final days—in some cases hours—before the Tet Offensive began.¹⁵

As Tet drew closer, the trail systems along the Truoi River appeared to be the most likely avenues of approach for a major attack. Intelligence continued to filter in about large enemy groupings nearby. On 18 January, CAP Hotel 3 passed along a report that a senior ARVN commander had learned that two NVA companies, each estimated at 200 troops, were camped out along a path between Phu Loc and the mountains. The same day, local civilians, likely woodcutters, encountered large numbers of Viet Cong and NVA encamped south of Hotel 8, up on the slope of the mountain leading to Bach Ma peak. The Viet Cong and NVA told the workers to leave and stay away. Their positions were only about 5 kilometers from the highway and from CAP Hotel 8's compound. Four days later, a villager told several Hotel 3 Marines that another 500 Viet Cong were headed toward their position to attack Hotel 3 and Hotel 8. The villager also reported the Viet Cong were bringing 82-millimeter mortars, that they would hit Hotel 3 from both north and south, and that Hotel 8 would be mortared and then attacked from the south.¹⁶

One Hotel 8 Marine, Corporal Charles Brown, noted a general feeling of foreboding during this time. His captain had warned the Marines that NVA troops were pouring into the area. Brown recalled that on several patrols, they detected signs that there were indeed large numbers of enemy troops nearby. Hotel 8 made little contact with them during this time, but the Marines knew that small battles were

¹⁴ "Narrative Summary," 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, pt. 2, 1.

¹⁵ "Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201020031, folder 020, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, enclosure 1, pt. 2, 6.

¹⁶ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, item no. 1201062075, folder 062, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 22-6.

raging nearby nearly every day, especially out to the east toward Phu Loc and Lang Co. Brown knew an attack was coming, not because of any specific intelligence but rather from an acute, menacing feeling he had based on all his experience there and the signs of movement that filtered in every day. As Tet drew nearer, that feeling grew. By the time Tet arrived, Hotel 8's Marines had shortened the distance that their patrols traveled from their base and kept all personnel close to the compound. They still sent patrols out, both day and night, but the night patrols only went out a few hundred meters rather than the long excursions up the river that had been the norm.¹⁷

The signs of what was to come only got worse. On the afternoon of 20 January, frightened villagers confronted a combined patrol of CAP Hotel 6 and a squad from the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, as they patrolled north of the highway. The villagers told them that 50 Communist troops were lurking just to the north. Later, another group of villagers corroborated the enemy force's location and added that they had a pair of mortars. The people also warned there were 50 troops per mortar tube—double what the original report had estimated—and that around 200 Viet Cong planned to attack Hotel 6 shortly after midnight.¹⁸

The next day, Phu Loc District headquarters received reports that the Viet Cong would attack and take “at all cost” Phu Loc and the units along Highway 1 between then and the Tet ceasefire. The Viet Cong's activity certainly suggested that there was merit to that warning. It seemed that they were attempting to cut Highway 1, not just to sever the link between Da Nang and Phu Bai but also to isolate the Marine and South Vietnamese troops in Phu Loc. Worse, because the Marines could not be everywhere at once, the scope of Viet Cong attacks proved too much for them to counter. A series of events on 21 January illustrated the problem. That morning, a road-sweeping patrol found that a bridge span nearby had been removed.¹⁹ On the same day, a fire destroyed a bridge guarded by PF soldiers just east of the Phu Loc

¹⁷ Charles Brown, telephone interview with William F. Nimmo, 2020 and 2021.

¹⁸ “Daily Journal,” Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 20-3, 20-4.

¹⁹ “Daily Journal,” Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 21-2.

District headquarters. While the PFs involved said it was an accident, the Marines noted the fire had been started on both ends, and ruled it was sabotage.²⁰ Finally, that night, a Viet Cong local force company operating just east of Hotel 6 managed to dig three trenches, three feet wide and four feet deep, across Highway 1.²¹

The activities of the Communist troops in and around Phu Loc also suggested that they were preparing for some sort of major combat action. On 21 January, Hotel 1 received a report that a sizable force of Viet Cong were building bunkers a few kilometers up the Nong River, toward the lowlands.²² That same day, an intelligence agent reported to the PF that 500 Viet Cong were planning to attack Hotel 9 and the Lang Co bridge in the Phu Loc District sometime between then and the Tet holiday.²³ The next day, a squad from Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, patrolling near Hotel 6 spotted people leaving their village in a hurry. When the Marines searched one of the houses, they found a small stockpile of medical supplies.²⁴ Later that evening, at 2155, a squad from Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, positioned between CAP Hotel 2, and CAP Hotel 3, received approximately 500 rounds of small arms fire and 25 rounds of 82-millimeter mortar fire. The firing lasted approximately 40 minutes. The Marines fired back with 30 rounds of illumination and 10 rounds of 105-millimeter high explosive artillery.²⁵ After the attack, the villagers reported that the Marine firing broke up what was a possible attack on the hamlet.²⁶ About an hour after the attack, another Company G squad located near the Nong River fired on and sank a boat that was floating toward the highway bridge.²⁷ The boat appeared to be empty of people.

Enemy activity only increased from there. Late in the evening on 23 January, a large Communist force attacked an ARVN outpost in Vinh

²⁰ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 21-5, 22-2.

²¹ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 21-3.

²² "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 22-6.

²³ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 22-6.

²⁴ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 23-5.

²⁵ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 24-1.

²⁶ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 24-2.

²⁷ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 24-1.

Ha, near Phu Loc but in the Phu Thu District outside the U.S. TAOR. Patrol boats responded, and “Spooky,” the Douglas AC-47 propeller-driven two-engine aircraft mounted with gatlin guns that could cover every square inch of an area the size of a football field, came on station to help repel the assault.²⁸ The next day, locals reported that 300 Viet Cong were moving to attack the Lang Co bridge.²⁹ This report was corroborated by an agent’s report to CAP Hotel 9 that the NVA had moved into nearby Loc Tho and had set up at regimental headquarters on a small mountain named Nui Da Kep.³⁰

The next day, 25 January, brought no reprieve. The 5th Marines reported that Viet Cong were moving from Vinh Loc and from the Phu Thu District via boats across Cau Hai Lagoon to scattered infiltration points. They were moving in groups of 30–50 troops through the Cau Hai hamlet to pick up supplies before moving into the mountains.³¹ Later in the day, a Navy medical corpsman at Hotel 3 saw a man looking at the CAP’s position with binoculars. The corpsman called for the man to come and then chased him down. He was knocked down from behind and shot by a passing Viet Cong. The corpsman kept his wits and shot at the Viet Cong with his .45-caliber handgun, but the enemy escaped.³² Later that evening, at 2345, a CAP Alpha 3 squad observed 80 enemy troops moving into structures along the north fork of the Phu Bai River, about 1 kilometer from its patrol base. The patrol moved to respond and initiated a fierce firefight. The enemy force eventually withdrew. Alpha 3 searched the area but found nothing but drag marks and blood trails. Two hours later, early on 26 January, the Viet Cong launched a mortar strike against a Marine artillery battery near the Phu Bai Combat Base. They fired a quick barrage of 30 mortar rounds against the battery before withdrawing. The battery returned fire at the mortar flashes until the incoming fire ceased.³³

²⁸ “Daily Journal,” Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 24-2.

²⁹ “Daily Journal,” Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 24-3.

³⁰ “Daily Journal,” Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 24-4.

³¹ “Daily Journal,” Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 25-4.

³² “Daily Journal,” Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 25-5.

³³ “Daily Journal,” Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 26-1.

As Communist movements increased in the area, so too did the specificity of the information that the Marines and their allies received about their intentions. On the evening of 27 January, for example, an unknown number of Viet Cong entered one of the villages just south of Phu Loc District headquarters and ordered the people to have food ready for collection within the days following Tet. They claimed that the NVA were planning to hit allied positions along Highway 1 within a few days.³⁴ Shortly thereafter, at 2330, the 5th Marines received information that two NVA companies and one reinforced Viet Cong local force company would move into the vicinity of the Highway 1-Truoi River intersection to attack friendly units located there. The attack was to occur on 27 or 28 January.³⁵ Then, on 29 January, a village official and several other villagers told CAP Hotel 2 that a NVA company had set up camp less than 1000 yards away, up toward the mountains from the highway.³⁶ That same night, two more patrols from the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, reported large enemy movements. Both sightings were farther out east heading toward the village of Thua Luu. One patrol saw 50 people moving along Highway 1. Because large numbers of civilians were traveling to celebrate Tet, the Marines had been instructed not to open fire unless they could confirm their targets had weapons. In this case, the Marines could not, so they held their fire.³⁷ Each of the 25 people spotted by the second patrol were carrying large backpacks. The patrol thought they may have been carrying rice back up toward the base of the mountain, so they called in artillery. When they searched the area, they found two packs full of rice with bullet holes in them.³⁸ On 30 January, the day before Tet, 10 Viet Cong killed an ARVN sergeant in his home in broad daylight. It was a bold action that took place a few kilometers north of Hotel 8. Howev-

³⁴ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 27-5.

³⁵ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 27-5, 27-6.

³⁶ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 29-4.

³⁷ "Sequential List of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, 3-24.

³⁸ "Sequential List of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, 3-25.

THE TOP COMMAND REVEALS ENEMY INTENT

Figure 11.2. Captured enemy ordnance



LCpl Lance Murphy points to bullet mark in a 57-millimeter recoilless rifle round that was found in an enemy backpack. On the ground next to Murphy is one of the containers in which the shells were packaged.

Source: photo courtesy of Lance Murphy, 1968.

er, the assassination was not the Viet Cong's only objective. They also passed out pamphlets and raised the Viet Cong flag as an unmistakable signal to the villagers.³⁹

As the sun dipped behind the Bach Ma Mountains on the evening of 30 January, Phu Loc was all but under siege. Although Viet Cong and NVA forces had mostly limited their offensive actions to

³⁹ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 30-3.

small-scale hit-and-run attacks, their efforts did much to frustrate the Marines tasked with defending the district. By remaining dispersed and launching their attacks throughout the region, often hitting several targets simultaneously or in quick succession, the Communist troops managed to keep the Marines off balance, despite the fact that they now had their largest concentration of force in the Phu Bai TAOR of the entire war. Viet Cong and NVA activities provided incontrovertible evidence that the enemy was about to launch a major operation. Farther north, intelligence and Communist activity also revealed that Phu Loc was not the only area in jeopardy.

Mounting Evidence of an Attack on Hue

While the Phu Loc District was a hive of activity throughout January, the area closer to Phu Bai itself, where Highway 1 ran parallel to the Phu Thu District, was more stable. Nevertheless, signs of an impending attack still emerged in the final weeks before Tet. During its final days as the resident battalion at Phu Bai, the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, recorded just a few incidents where Marines engaged the Viet Cong. Day patrols and night ambushes from both the infantry and the CAPs still went out regularly, but there were few contacts of any significance.⁴⁰ The same held true after elements of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, replaced the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, on 16 January.⁴¹ Later in the month, the Marines noted that although Communist forces had clearly established a strong presence nearby, their daylight attacks against convoys and static positions and efforts to mine the highway had depreciated considerably by 25 January. It seemed that the enemy was forgoing contact in order to screen their activities and mask the transfer of several units to the west of the Marines' area of operations.⁴²

Displacing west involved moving troops closer to the city of Hue. The units moving west of the Phu Loc area of operations were consis-

⁴⁰ "Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, December 1967, pt. 2, 6.

⁴¹ "Narrative Summary," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968 (1 of 2), item no. 1201048097, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, pt. 2, 2, 14–16.

⁴² "Intelligence," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, pt. 2, 3.

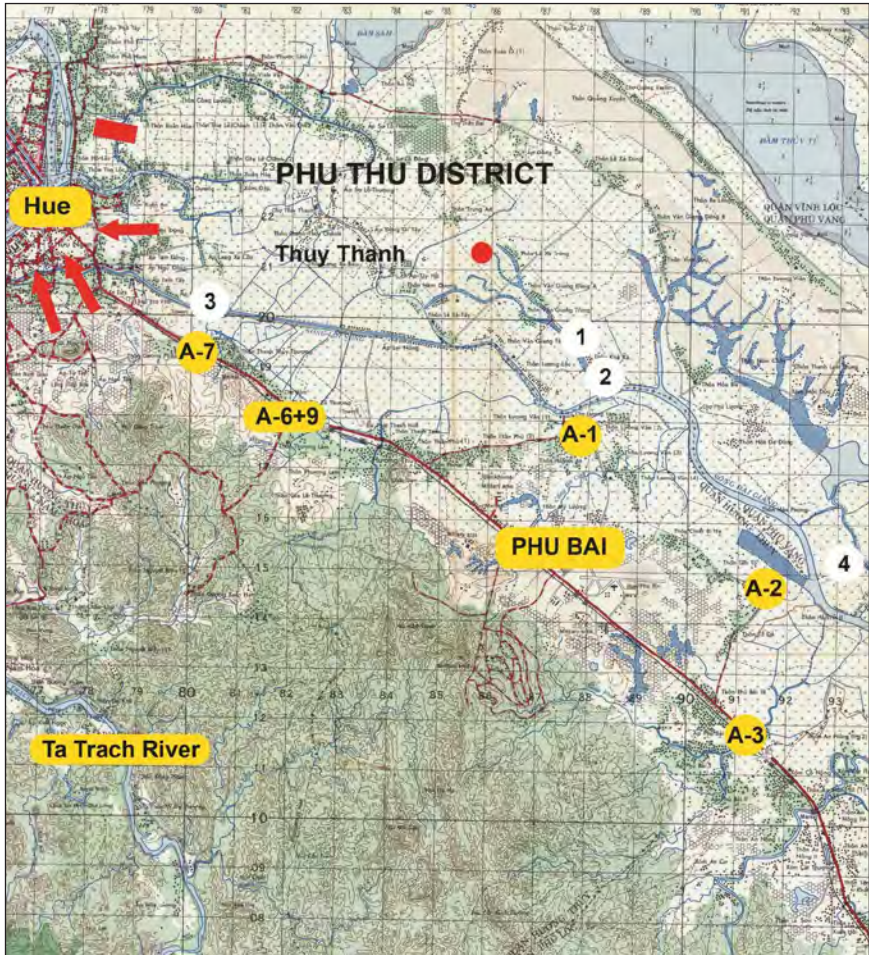
tent with others heading toward staging points elsewhere for the attack on Hue. There were several unusually visible movements in Phu Thu during January that suggested that Communist troops were staging for an attack on the city from the east. The Phu Thu District, in particular the portion closest to Hue, was where one of the major elements of the attack's southern prong originated. The NVA's *4th Regiment* commanded this southern prong of the attack. At some point in January, the regiment moved from its original position south of Phu Loc in the Bach Ma Mountains into a village known as Thuy Thanh to stage for the assault.⁴³

Most incidents in Phu Thu throughout January occurred either close to Thuy Thanh or on known routes connecting the two locations. The Alpha CAPs, posted around the Phu Bai Combat Base and along Highway 1 between the base and the southern outskirts of Hue, posed a significant obstacle for any Communist forces trying to move between the mountains and Thuy Phu. All of the Alpha CAPs' areas of operations bordered the river that separated Thuy Phu from the rest of the Phu Bai TAOR in some way. These platoons guarded the eastern approaches to Phu Bai and a critical stretch of Highway 1 between Phu Bai and the southern outskirts of Hue (figure 11.3). On any given day, a constant stream of military traffic coursed up and down this stretch of the highway. Like the Hotel CAPs farther south, these platoons were responsible for protecting the road and allowing that traffic to proceed unimpeded.

The Alpha CAPs along the highway were in a difficult spot. They were situated between what was essentially two enemy safe havens, the Phu Thu District to the east and north and the mountains to the west. Several trail systems connecting the two ran through the CAPs' TAORs, especially those to the northwest of Phu Bai. Although Phu Thu was a safe haven for Viet Cong and NVA troops, they rarely crossed the river to attack the Alpha CAPs or other U.S. and South Vietnamese positions—with one exception.

⁴³ "Narrative Summary, Enemy," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201062077, folder 062, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

Figure 11.3. Phu Thu District, January 1968



This map shows the Phu Thu District in relation to the January 1968 sightings and the known attack prongs against the southern city of Hue at Tet. The red arrows show the Hue southern prong attack thrusts. The red bar without the arrow shows the enemy blocking force, positioned to stop ARVN units trying to respond to the attacks on Hue. The red dot shows the approximate location of the NVA's 4th Regiment, which commanded the attacks on the southern city. The gold circles show the Alpha CAP locations in the area. The numbers in white circles show the sightings in the area in January. Item 1 shows the 5 January sighting of 70 Viet Cong. Item 2 shows the 9 January sighting of 200 Viet Cong. Item 3 shows the location of the CAP Alpha 7 ambush of the 50 main force Viet Cong carrying weapons and ammunition across the river. Item 4 shows the events involving CAP Alpha 2 and its confrontation across the river on 11 January.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

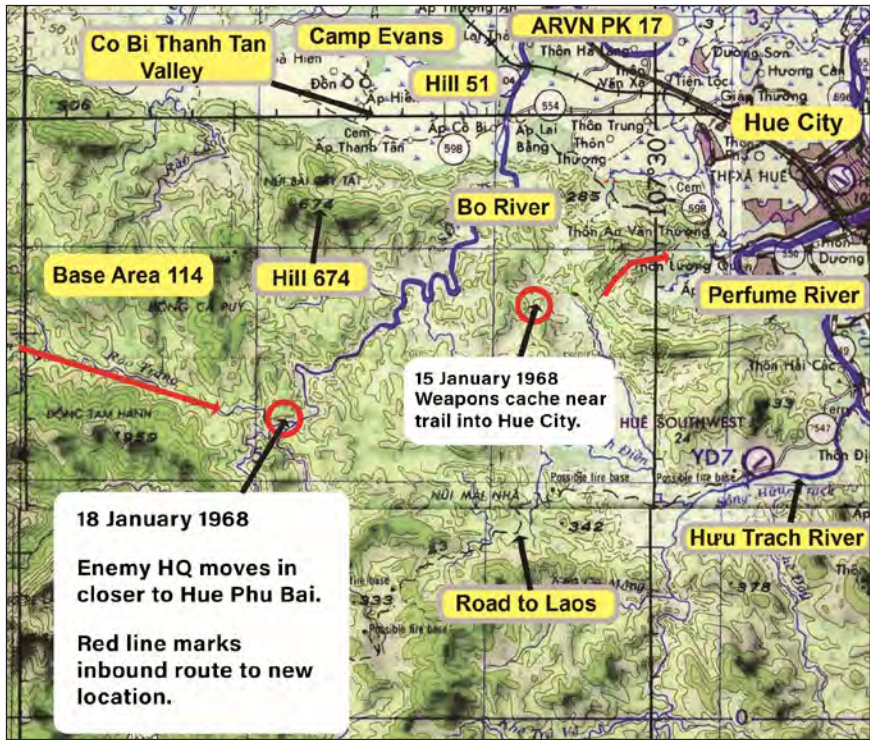
Prior to January 1968, CAP Alpha 6-9 had borne the brunt of most of the Communists' offensive actions against the Alpha CAPs. It was a double CAP comprised of two platoons in a single location. Its presence along a well-traveled trail system that connected the Phu Thu District with the Communist strongholds in the mountains, and its proximity to a key river crossing along that route, made it a frequent target of Viet Cong aggression. Unlike the other Alpha CAPs' TAORs, no part of the area around Alpha 6-9 was safe, and many of the villagers were ambivalent toward the platoon. It was a notoriously dangerous place for a CAP Marine to be. "When I first arrived at Alpha 6-9, [the sergeant] asked me who I'd pissed off," quipped a Marine who joined the CAP in the spring of 1967. "Of all the CACs, Alpha 6-9 saw the most action."⁴⁴ With the infantry's focus on Phu Loc and Operation Checkers in flux until the very end of January 1968, Alpha 6-9's Marines and PFs were left to guard the village, the routes running through it, and the nearby river crossing alone.

As Tet approached in early 1968, Communist troops began to stir up trouble around the other Alpha CAPs' villages. Alpha 1 reported the first incident on 5 January, when approximately 70 Viet Cong moved into a hamlet known as Khe Xa, only 1.5 kilometers away from their CAP's base. The incident was likely reported to the CAP by the independent PF platoon in whose TAOR it occurred. Four days later, on 9 January, villagers from Khe Xa reported that another group of 200 Viet Cong had passed through on the eastern side of the hamlet on a route that would take them out to the Thuy Thanh area.⁴⁵ It was a moderately safe route that ran through the Phu Thu District from the southeast. Both of these groups were no more than a few hours' march from the southern and southeastern boundaries of Hue. There were minimal, if any, allied forces in their path to discover or impede their advance.

⁴⁴ Chuck Ratliff, interview in Al Hemmingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 29.

⁴⁵ "Daily Journal," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201060256, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 9 January 1968.

Figure 11.4. Seizure of enemy weapons cache, 15 January 1968



A relief map showing the location of the 15 January 1968 seizure of large weapons cache near a trail into Hue City. The map also shows the intercepted relocation of the enemy headquarters on 18 January.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

Late in the morning on 11 January, a large force attacked a CAP Alpha 2 patrol as it maneuvered along the Phu Bai airfield's eastern flank. The 2d Battalion, 26th Marines' records documented that the previous evening at about 2115, Alpha 2 also called in a fire mission on a position across the river after spotting suspicious lights there. The target was in an area of large open rice fields known for heavy Viet Cong travel. The following morning, Alpha 2 sent out a patrol across the river into the Phu Thu District. At about 1130, a large group of 50–100 NVA soldiers wearing green uniforms and NVA pith helmets ambushed the patrol. Pinned down, the Marines called in artillery and

also received air support from a team of Bell UH-1 Iroquois “Huey” helicopter gunships. Jet fighter-bombers from Da Nang arrived on scene soon after and napalmed the enemy positions. A sparrowhawk, the Marine infantry battalion’s reaction force, later extracted the patrol members. Two Marines were killed in the incident. Around 1900 that evening, Alpha 2 reported that all their villagers were leaving. Worse was that all of the PFs abandoned their posts, leaving just seven Marines at the Alpha 2 compound. The Marine infantry at Phu Bai sent out a full squad to reinforce their position.⁴⁶ III MAF’s record of the event noted that after the appearance of a strong reaction force, the Marines were permitted a relatively free withdrawal. III MAF reasoned it was probable presence of other enemy units in the general area and that the enemy did not desire to initiate a major engagement at that time and place.⁴⁷

In another unusual event in the early morning hours of 11 January, an ambush patrol from Alpha 7 caught what was thought to be a group of 50 main force Viet Cong jogging across a wide paddy dike with their rifles slung on their shoulders. Each man had a backpack. The group was headed north toward the Loi Nong River and across into the Phu Thu District. Alpha 7 had just set an ambush along a trail junction where the dikes of a wide rice paddy out about 500 meters to the river. Lance Corporal Dusty Bills remembers that the ambush team heard voices coming down the trail. The Marines held still and watched. The large group moved quickly down the trail and turned right at the intersection—the ambush’s kill zone—onto a dike trail that ran across a rice paddy. When the group had gotten some distance out onto the dikes, the CAP team opened fire.⁴⁸

When the firing started, Marines back at Alpha 7’s compound, an old French railroad station, sprang into action. The patrol leader, Lance Corporal Lance Murphy, informed the acting CAP leader, Corporal William Nimmo, of the situation over the radio. He spoke rapidly and said

⁴⁶ “Daily Journal,” 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, 10–11 January.

⁴⁷ “General Enemy Situation, Thua Thien Province,” Periodic Intelligence Report no. 2-68 [III MAF], 7 January 1968, item no. 1201003095, folder 003, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

⁴⁸ Dusty Bills, interview with William F. Nimmo, 2021, hereafter Bills interview.

that 50 enemy troops had just double-timed through his ambush site.⁴⁹ The CAP quickly mustered a reaction force and headed out at a run to the ambush site. When the Marines arrived, they spread out, got low to the ground, and took positions along the tree line bordering the rice fields. The firing had stopped. Nimmo found the patrol leader and asked him what had happened. As Murphy described the ambush, a machine gun opened up on their position from the riverbank nearly 500 meters across the rice paddies. There was a canal that bordered the rice paddy dike trail; the enemy must have jumped into it when the firing started and then worked their way to the safety of the riverbank. Nimmo called in a fire mission. After one adjustment, he ordered the battery to fire for effect. Explosions clapped and flashed through the darkness, engulfing the target in clouds of orange smoke. The machine gun stopped firing. The Marines then shored up their perimeter and set in for the night.

Bills later said that the ambush had set in along a trail junction and had been there only 15–20 minutes when he heard “yakking.” He had never heard loud talking in a setting like this before—both NVA and Viet Cong troops were notoriously well-disciplined—and raised up slightly to see if he could see anything. He saw men rapidly coming down the trail, and he ducked back down. From where he was sitting, next to Murphy, he watched the NVA hurry down the trail. One after another, they ran out onto a trail atop the rice paddy dike. All had their rifles slung and were carrying backpacks. One group was carrying a recoilless rifle. After the fight, the Marines searched one of the captured backpacks and found two 57-millimeter recoilless rounds packaged in their original cardboard cylindrical containers.⁵⁰

At sunrise, the Marines of Alpha 7 searched the ambush site, working their way along the dike trail out to the riverbank. They found several trails of blood, a backpack, and a cloth insignia indicating that at least some of the ambushed troops were NVA antitank personnel. The Marines could not be sure whether the rest were NVA or main force

⁴⁹ One of this work’s authors, William F. Nimmo, was Alpha 7’s acting CAP leader that night. Unless otherwise noted, the following information comes from his recollections.

⁵⁰ Bills interview.

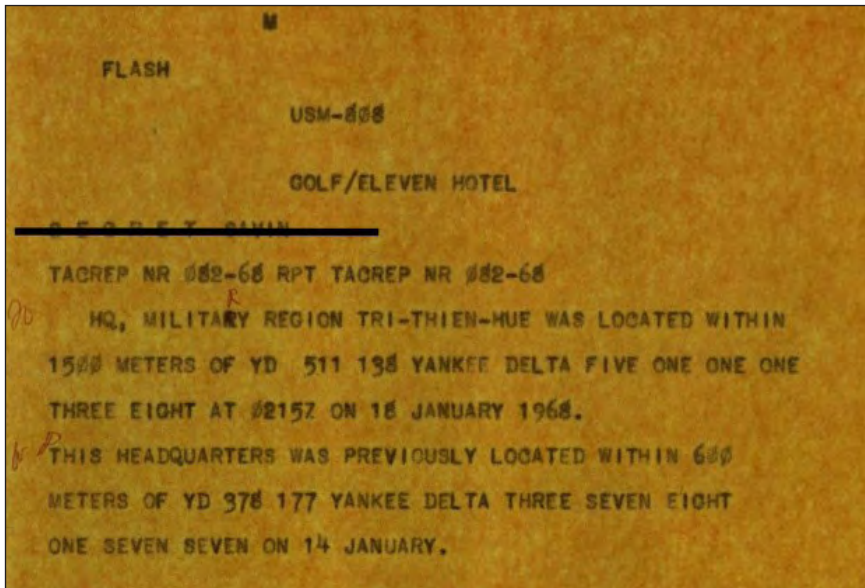
Viet Cong but concluded that they were probably Viet Cong due to their dress. At the very least, they had one or more NVA advisors with them. The group either could have been a transport unit making trips to stage equipment and ammunition, or they could have been an actual attacking force heading for a hamlet where they could hunker down in a friendly environment until the day of the actual planned attack on Hue. Regardless of their mission, after they crossed the river, they would have been only two kilometers west of southern Hue.

In the days that followed Alpha 7's engagement, more signs of an impending operation emerged around Hue. On 15 January, an ARVN airborne battalion patrol discovered and seized a large cache of weapons and ammunition in a position directly west of Hue City, in the hills near a small road running from the Bo River and Base Area 114 directly toward the Hue Citadel. The ARVN soldiers found a large haul: nearly 100 pounds of medicine, six 60-millimeter mortar tubes and 500 rounds, more than 100 individual weapons including 20 Browning automatic rifles and 17 light machine guns, 100 antitank mines, four B40 rocket-propelled grenade rounds, and an additional "truckload" of mixed small arms ammunition.⁵¹ The cache was enough to equip a sizable force for an offensive action. Its location so close to Hue certainly suggested that it was placed to support an attack on the city. Three days later, a communications unit intercepted radio messages indicating that the headquarters of the enemy's Tri-Thien-Hue military region had relocated closer to the city. Just four days before, the headquarters had been positioned well outside the known western boundary of Base Area 114.⁵² In four days, the enemy had moved more than 13 kilometers down the course of the Rao Trang River to the junction of three rivers that form the Bo River. This new location was near the southwestern edge of Base Area 114 near the junction of three rivers, much closer to Hue (figure 11.5).

⁵¹ "Daily Journal," 15 January, Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, item no. 1201062075, folder 062, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

⁵² "Enemy Situation," 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, tab A, pt. 1, 8–10.

Figure 11.5. Radio signal evidence, January 1968



A photograph of the radio signal evidence that shows the grid coordinates and the changes of location of the Tri–Thien–Hue Military Front Headquarters.

Source: photo courtesy of the author. Original source unknown.

As January 1968 drew to a close, the die had been cast. To those on the ground along the road to Hue, it no longer looked like a Communist offensive may loom on the horizon—the wheels were already in motion. Later assertions that “there was little evidence of enemy activity in the Hue sector” or that the allies did not know that large bodies of Communist troops were moving toward Hue prior to their attack simply do not match what the Marines, PFs, and ARVN troops were facing along the road to Hue in the final days before Tet.⁵³ While it is true that, quite inexplicably, key leaders at the top of both the Marines’ and ARVN’s chain of command did not expect an attack on the city and were caught off-guard when it began, there was ample evidence that an attack loomed.

⁵³ The U.S. Marine Corps’ official history of the Vietnam War makes this case in Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 165–66.

CHAPTER 12

TET BEGINS

In the early morning hours of 31 January 1968, a violent flood washed over Thua Thien Province. A large combined force of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong troops launched coordinated attacks along the road to Hue and against the city itself. South of Hue, it appeared that the Communists' goal was to overwhelm Highway 1 and sever the region's supply route from Da Nang. The Marines focused their defenses on critical spots where the attackers could cause the most disruption along the highway. In addition to repelling ground assaults, the Marines and South Vietnamese forces had to contend with indirect fire from the mountains, which provided clear lines of sight for the NVA and Viet Cong troops there along with numerous egress routes.

The assault on Hue has long been the focal point of analysis for the Tet battles in Thua Thien Province, but what happened farther south was just as crucial. The Tet Offensive initiated a month of intense combat throughout the province, particularly within the Phu Loc District. At first, the situation was so bleak that the infantry absorbed each of Phu Loc's Combined Action Platoons (CAP), which would spend the ensuing weeks attached to a rifle company. While the combat's intensity fell somewhat after the first few days, large groups of Communist troops remained in the area and continued to launch attacks along the road to Hue for another month.¹ In spite of their efforts, they nev-

¹ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, Command Chronology (ComdC), January 1968, item no. 1201048023, folder 048, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), pt. 3.

er fully overwhelmed the Marines' defenses, and the road to Hue remained open.

Tet Attacks on Phu Loc District

By the end of January, the 5th Marines, now reinforced with the recently arrived 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, were prepared to defend the Phu Loc District and the Phu Bai Combat Base from a ground assault. They could not stop large units from traveling down out of the mountains, but they were ready to fight them when they attacked. The fight would not be easy, however. Communist forces entered the battle with the largest concentration of troops ever assembled in Thua Thien. The rough terrain offered both advantages and disadvantages for the attackers. The steep, jungle-covered mountains offered cover and concealment along their avenues of approach to the lowlands and offered numerous positions along the edge of the mountains from which they could fire their mortars at targets below. Fortunately for the Marines, many of the firing positions were easy to identify because they had to be cleared out of the dense growth so that the jungle canopy would not block the outgoing rounds' trajectory. However, while the Marines' counterbattery measures were effective after the shooting started, they could do little to prevent the opening salvos against their positions.²

Early in the evening on 30 January, Marines and allied forces began to detect movement in and around the tactical area of responsibility (TAOR). Much of the initial movement happened on the downslope of the mountains, right above Phu Loc.³ Later that evening, only a few hours before the Tet Offensive began in earnest, a Marine reconnaissance team codenamed "Pearl Chest" ambushed a group of well-equipped NVA and Viet Cong troops heading toward the lowlands. The Marines had spent the last several days observing a trail system that ran directly to the Phu Loc District headquarters. The troops they am-

² "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, pt. 3, 26.

³ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, item no. 1201062075, folder 062, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 30-5.

bushed were carrying two 122-millimeter rocket launcher tubes and two .50-caliber machine guns broken down for transport, in addition to an assortment of explosives and small arms. When the enemy entered the reconnaissance team's kill zone, the Marines opened up with claymores, grenades, small arms, automatic weapons fire, and CS tear gas. The deluge of firepower killed about 20 of the enemy, but the surviving troops soon surrounded the Marines. The reconnaissance team only managed to survive because it summoned fire support from artillery, gunships, and a flare ship. Company B, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, also moved out to reinforce the team. With an inordinate amount of fire raining down on them and an additional company of Marines approaching, the Communist force fled back into the mountains. The reconnaissance team broke contact and exfiltrated at approximately 0230 on 31 January. Company B turned back toward its former position.⁴ In all likelihood, Pearl Chest had routed the first wave of a much larger force that was moving into position to attack the Phu Loc District.

Not long after Pearl Chest terminated its engagement in the hills above Phu Loc, the Tet Offensive erupted along the road to Hue. There were three main theaters of action that morning. Communist attackers hit the Phu Bai Combat base with mortars and rockets, while ground troops poured into the Hue Citadel, north of the Perfume River, and the "modern" part of the city to the river's south. Phu Loc also hosted a series of sharp engagements. Just after 0330, Communist troops hit targets in all three locations almost simultaneously. Mortar and rocket fire struck the Phu Bai Combat Base off and on all morning, along with other targets on Highway 1 from Gia Le to Thuy Phu. At Gia Le, the Marines' compound received a mortar barrage that set several buildings on fire. After what seemed like a brief attempt by the enemy to breach their wire, the Marines forced the attackers back.⁵

⁴"Patrol Report," 1 February, 1st Force Reconnaissance Company, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201013199, folder 013, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

⁵"Journal," 31 January, Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 1–2.

Phu Loc was not as lucky. The attacking force that struck there approached along the Truoi River and attacked CAP Hotel 8, callsign “Reappoint 8.” The attackers started by hitting them and nearby Marine positions with indirect fire before launching a company-size force against Reappoint 8’s compound.⁶ Although there were infantry platoons nearby, Hotel 8’s 12 Marines and 15 or 16 Popular Force (PF) soldiers stood alone that night. The CAP was in a strong defensive position with an array of fortified bunkers and fighting positions and surrounded by concertina wire, but the small force there was no match for attackers armed with mortars, rockets, and satchel charges.⁷ The Communists’ objective at Hotel 8 was likely the bridges nearby, as destroying them would effectively cut Highway 1. Viet Cong and NVA troops attacked at all three bridges at the same time that they launched their assault against Hotel 8.⁸

The 3d Platoon from Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, led by Second Lieutenant Mike Lambert, defended the two bridges south of Hotel 8. The undermanned platoon had just arrived at the bridges two days before. Lambert posted one of his squads at the southernmost bridge, and took the rest of his unit—a mere 10 Marines—to the bridge closest to Hotel 8’s compound. He oversaw things at the north bridge while his most experienced noncommissioned officer, Sergeant McDonald, commanded the south bridge. Both squads were reinforced with a two-man machine gun team. Lambert had an M50 Ontos tank destroyer present at his position as well.⁹

Lambert positioned his Marines at various spots on both the roadway bridge and the railroad bridge that paralleled each other about 75 meters apart. He set up his command post with his radio operator in a large fighting hole on the outboard side of an old cylindrical French bunker next to the railroad bridge. Another Marine manned a sand-

⁶ “Daily Journal,” Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 31–6.

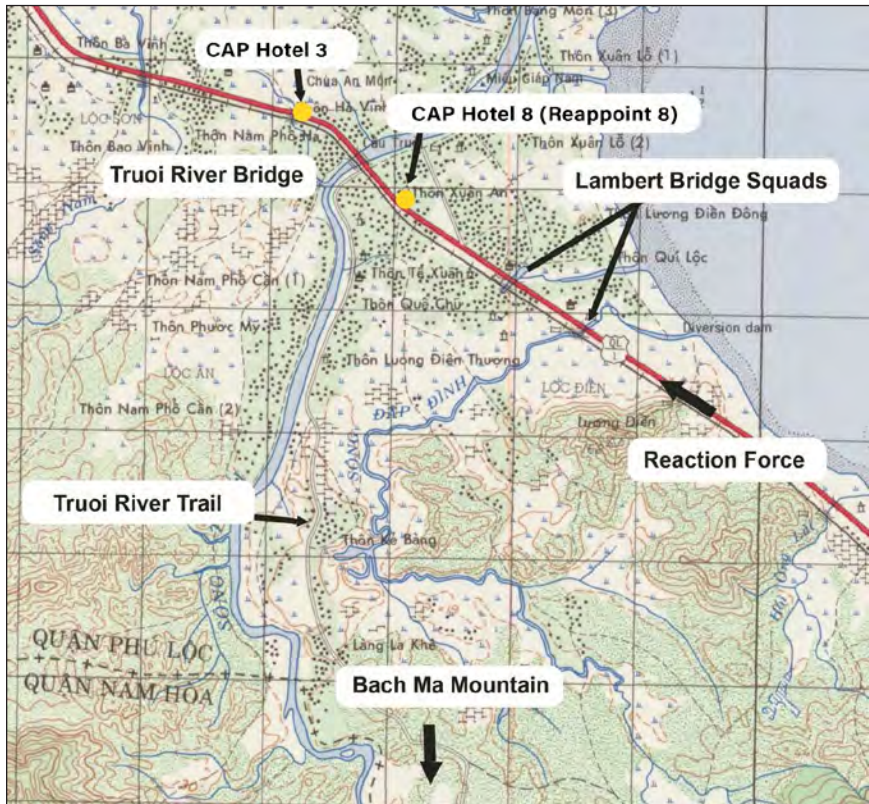
⁷ William Grunder, telephone interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020; and William Grunder, telephone interview with Cavender S. Sutton, March 2021, hereafter Grunder interviews.

⁸ “Daily Journal,” Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 31–9.

⁹ Mike Lambert, interview with William F. Nimmo, 2020, hereafter Lambert interview.

TET BEGINS

Figure 12.1. Locations of CAP Hotel 8 and bridge guard squads



This topographical map shows the position of CAP Hotel 8 and the bridge guard squads at the time of the attack.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

bagged fighting position atop the French bunker. When the attack began, mortars fell among the Marines. Lambert soon realized that the fire was coming from a position in a trough between the railroad and the highway, about halfway between his position and that of McDonald’s squad. Lambert called the battalion for support, and soon he was directing his own mortar fire onto the enemy position, walking the rounds back and forth along the trough. The incoming fire quickly ceased.¹⁰

¹⁰ Lambert interview.

Just as the incoming mortars subsided, heavy machine gun and small arms fire hit his position from the northwest. Lambert called for 105-millimeter artillery and walked the high explosive rounds through the area from which the enemy fire was coming as well as to the other side of the highway between his position and Hotel 8's compound. The artillery fire stopped the ground attack against the bridges in its tracks. After the firing ceased, Lambert checked all of his positions, brought up more ammunition, and took stock of the situation. His platoon had survived the fight mostly unscathed, except for the Marine that manned the fighting position on top of the bunker. A mortar round had landed directly on top of his position during the fray, killing him instantly. Lambert could do nothing more except return to his fighting position and watch the line alongside his Marines until daybreak.¹¹

At Hotel 8, Corporal Cottrell Fox had been the acting CAP leader up until that night. The CAP's usual leader, Sergeant William M. Grunder, had returned from leave in the United States earlier that day. Grunder received the leave period as a reward for extending his tour in Vietnam. Around 0400, Fox and his good friend Corporal Charles E. Brown were sleeping when a Marine came to the door and announced that he had just heard a gunshot nearby. They quickly shifted into action. Fox remembers that he had been sleeping fully dressed with his boots on and his gear and rifle, including bandoliers of extra magazines, within reach. The shot turned out to be an enemy soldier taking out the PF that was standing watch in the northeast bunker. Suddenly, the night erupted with incoming mortar fire.¹²

The Marines and PFs rushed to their positions in trenches and bunkers around the compound. After the 7 January attacks against Hotel 5, Hotel 6, and Hotel 7, where many Marines and PFs had been killed or wounded by rockets and satchel charges while manning sandbagged bunkers, the platoons began to dig trenches. Enemy sappers—soldiers specially trained to be lead attacks and get through the heavy layers of

¹¹ Lambert interview.

¹² Cottrell Fox, telephone interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2019, 2020, 2021; and Cottrell Fox, telephone interview with Cavender S. Sutton, March 2021, hereafter Fox interviews.

concertina wire—soon breached the perimeter.¹³ Grunder sprang into action. He instructed Fox to coordinate the defense on the north end of the compound while he headed to the south end, where many of the PFs were located. Rockets were flying everywhere through the compound as the defenders rushed to their positions. The enemy also used tear gas early on during the attack, which caused some disorientation, while the sappers, dressed only in loin cloths, went running through the compound throwing explosive charges activated by mechanical fuses. More attackers approached and entered the compound from all sides. Some entered by cutting the wire while others laid bamboo mats over it.¹⁴

Corporal Brown had gotten to bunker number four, his assigned defensive position, quickly. In an exception to his normal routine, he had taken off his boots and utility jacket before going to sleep to ease the discomfort caused by a tropical skin condition. When the attack began, Brown ran to his bunker in bare feet and with no shirt but with all of his combat gear. Bunker four was located on slightly higher ground right on the edge of the highway, which gave him a good position to view the attacks coming from outside the perimeter as well as the enemy running around throughout the compound. From his vantage point, it seemed that the tear gas was causing disorientation among not only the Marines and the PFs but also the attackers. Brown later concluded that the gas actually benefited the CAP by slowing and confusing the attackers.¹⁵

However, the gas also complicated things for the defending Marines and PFs. Corporal Fox had to order his contingent of defenders to move back into the center of the compound around the radio bunker and a newly built bunker that the Marines sarcastically called the “Abortion.” Fox made a sound decision. His Marines had no protection against the gas, and they also had to protect the radio bunker which was now the key to their defense. Fox and three others made their stand

¹³ Fox interviews.

¹⁴ Grunder interviews.

¹⁵ Charles Brown, interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2020, 2021; and Charles Brown, telephone interview with Cavender S. Sutton, August 2023.

at the Abortion. A Marine named Earl Grissom fired out the door on the north side and while Fox covered the south. Enemy troops hurled grenades, blocks of TNT, and satchel charges at them. Fortunately, Fox and Grissom had a case of grenades to keep the attackers at bay. Grissom kept up a withering volume of fire toward the underside of one of the hooches where enemy troops were crawling to get into position. A satchel charge then went off and knocked him unconscious. Fox thought Grissom was dead, so he grabbed Grissom's rifle because his had been damaged. Grissom later regained consciousness, found another weapon, and continued to defend the Abortion with Fox.¹⁶

In the radio bunker, Sergeant Grunder began calling in artillery. He had been an artilleryman before joining the CAPs and was especially good at calling for fire. With Corporal Brown adjusting the fire on the attackers outside the wire, Grunder called in large quantities of high explosive rounds around the perimeter. Brown's adjustments were effective, but the situation around bunker four remained dire.¹⁷ Brown was defending the bunker with two PF soldiers, but both were curled up on the floor crying. Until another Marine arrived at the bunker, Brown was the only one there to fight off the attack. He covered several directions at once, firing at any target that moved in the compound while also firing toward the graveyard to the north, the area across highway, and the railroad tracks to the west. Brown was afraid to stay in the bunker but also afraid to leave it and move out into the open. He compromised with himself by moving constantly between the fighting positions on the outside of the bunker and ducking inside when incoming fire forced him there.¹⁸

Brown could see the Marines around the center of the compound near the radio bunker and the Abortion and could yell to them and hear their replies. When Grunder began calling in the artillery barrages, they called to Brown to adjust fire. Grunder was calling in high-explosive fire on targets outside the compound along the road, the

¹⁶ Fox interviews.

¹⁷ Grunder interviews.

¹⁸ Brown interviews.

railroad tracks, and beyond the village. Brown could not get out into the open enough to see precisely where the rounds were landing, but he could tell by the explosions' flashes that they were hitting much too far out to the west. He yelled to bring the artillery closer. He and Grunder walked the fire closer and closer to the compound.¹⁹

Those bunkers, often notorious death traps, ended up saving the Marines and PFs of Hotel 8. When the artillery fire landing outside the perimeter failed to break the attack, Grunder called in a variable time fuse strike on the compound itself. A variable time fuse round explodes 15 meters above the ground, covering the ground below with shrapnel and killing or wounding anyone in blast radius. As Grunder walked the rounds onto the compound, the defenders all got into the bunkers for safety. Then, a barrage of variable time fuse artillery burst over their heads, finally stopping the fighting within the perimeter. The enemy who survived the bombardment withdrew from the compound, trying to carry their dead and wounded back with them. But, although the artillery stopped the attack inside the perimeter, it did not stop the enemy from continuing their attack from the outside. The fighting continued for some time, with rockets, heavy small arms and automatic weapons fire, and mortar rounds continuing to hit the compound. By ejecting the attackers from the perimeter, however, Hotel 8 managed to regroup and hold its defenses until the Communists broke contact.²⁰

Miraculously, CAP Hotel 8 had survived. Most of the Marines defending the compound fought through the night even after being wounded. Shrapnel from an enemy grenade had hit Fox. The grenade bounced off of his head as he was running to get more ammunition during the attack, and though he ran as fast as he could he could not escape the explosion. Shrapnel hit him on the backside, but he continued to run back with the ammunition. Later on, he was wounded in the arm by a round from an AK-47 assault rifle.²¹ Another AK-47 round struck Brown in the leg. He was hit while fighting outside of bunker

¹⁹ Brown interviews.

²⁰ Brown interviews.

²¹ Fox interviews.

four, near the low wall that served as a fighting position. The round crippled his leg and caused him to fall to the ground and drop his rifle. Brown crawled into the bunker, patched himself up as best he could, and fought on. Another Marine who was at the bunker with him ran out and retrieved Brown's M16 rifle. Brown had trouble moving but was able to stand with limited motion and changed positions using the bunker walls, both in and outside, as support. At one point, while he was firing out of the bunker toward the graveyard in the north, a ball of fire came in straight at him. It was a B40 rocket-propelled grenade round that struck the sandbag parapet on the bunker's roof but fortunately missed him.²² Shrapnel also hit Grunder in the arm, but it did not stop him from leading his men and manning his radio throughout the assault.²³

Corporal Brown was awarded the Navy Cross holding bunker four alone for much of the attack. Corporal Fox was awarded the Silver Star for his role in orchestrating the platoon's defenses while under withering fire. Sergeant Grunder received the Bronze Star. His return to Hotel 8 earlier that day been providential. His leadership held the platoon together, and his bold decision to call artillery fire directly on the compound saved many lives and turned the tide of the battle that morning. Hotel 8 had two Marines killed, eight Marines and one Navy corpsman wounded, and a number of PF casualties, but the unit managed to hold its position until reinforcements arrived.²⁴

Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, Enters the Fight

Until early January, Captain George R. Christmas's Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, had operated in the An Hoa area, south of Da Nang. When Christmas realized that his battalion would be moving north to Phu Bai as part of Operation Checkers, he volunteered to lead

²² Brown interviews.

²³ Grunder interviews.

²⁴ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201062077, folder 062, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 01-3. Task Force X-Ray did not record the number of PF casualties.

his company north as the advance element to assist the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, in its fight to hold the Phu Loc District. Things were getting hotter in Phu Loc, and the Marines already there needed help, he later explained. On 9 January, the company boarded a Lockheed C-130 Hercules cargo plane and flew north to Phu Bai. The unit was shorthanded, as Christmas had only two and a half platoons on hand: Lieutenant Lambert's 3d Platoon, 1st Platoon, commanded by a Lieutenant Myers, and a squad from Lieutenant Kromer's 2d Platoon. The rest of Kromer's platoon was then on convoy duty.²⁵

The morning after their arrival, the Marines of Company H boarded a truck convoy and traveled down Highway 1 to the Phu Loc District. The convoy dropped them off at the Truoi River, far short of their destination. Shortly after arriving at the river, a motorized patrol happened by, and the Marines caught a ride to a hamlet named Thon Bat Son. While most of his Marines set up a defensive perimeter there, Christmas traveled to the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, command post several kilometers away, south of Phu Loc near the base of the Bach Ma Mountain cluster. The battalion commander assigned Company H an area from the south side of the Truoi River bridge southeast along Highway 1 to Thon Bat Son. Their mission was simple: keep the road open.²⁶

Christmas deployed his Marines along the highway in a manner that he hoped would make it seem like there was a whole battalion holding the sector rather than just two and a half platoons. Until Tet began, he sent out patrols on both sides of the highway every day and night. Most patrols, especially the night ambushes, stayed close to the road, but some ventured farther out to search and clear the high ground. On the eve of Tet, Christmas had Lambert's platoon guarding the two bridges south of the Truoi River, while he and his headquarters component and the weapons platoon covered the area near Thon Bat

²⁵ MajGen George R. Christmas, USMC (Ret), interview with William F. Nimmo, July 2019 and 2021, hereafter Christmas interviews.

²⁶ Christmas interviews. The arrival of Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, is noted in "Journal," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968 (1 of 2), item no. 1201048097, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, entry made at 1000 on 13 January 1968.

Son. Myers' platoon, meanwhile, worked the area between Lambert's bridges and Christmas's headquarters.²⁷

When the attacks on the bridges began on 31 January, Christmas organized a reaction force and moved up the highway toward the sounds of the fighting.²⁸ He tried to make sense of the situation by listening to radio reports as the fighting raged in the distance. Realizing that something big was underway, Christmas pulled in his ambushes and directed 1st Platoon, located between him and 3d Platoon, to do the same and meet his element on the highway. Christmas formed up his Marines and led them down the road toward the bridge. The Marines marched in silence through the darkness, staggered in a tactical column with several meters of space between each man. They soon linked up the Marines of 1st Platoon, who fell into their column as it continued toward the bridges. While they were anxious to help their fellow Marines, they had to be careful not to be ambushed themselves. Both Viet Cong and NVA troops were known to hit reaction forces who moved too quickly or carelessly to assist other Marines in jeopardy.²⁹

Christmas had about 100 Marines in his reaction force. A fire-fight still raged when they arrived at 3d Platoon's position. The reaction force fired on the attackers as they approached, helping to quell any resistance still jeopardizing the two bridges. Lambert's Marines looked as though they had had a rough time. Christmas left some Marines to assist them; his mission, after all, was to keep the highway open, and that meant protecting the bridges. Years later, Lambert fondly remembered the captain arriving at his position and asking him, "Are you all right, Tiger?" to which Lambert could only respond, "It's been a long night." Christmas looked at the platoon commander, smiled, and said, "We'll take it from here."³⁰

From his position at the bridges, Christmas could see that Hotel 8 was still under attack. He told most of his Marines to saddle

²⁷ Christmas interviews.

²⁸ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 31–6.

²⁹ Christmas interviews.

³⁰ Lambert interview.

up and follow him to the beleaguered platoon. Dawn was starting to break as they approached the compound. As they closed with Hotel 8's position, the Marines could see that enemy troops were still outside the compound along the roadway and likely off to the side along the railroad tracks. When they got close enough, they attacked the enemy positions in front of Hotel 8's compound. Enemy troops began to withdraw southwest into the village and toward the Truoi River, less than a kilometer away. Christmas dispatched some Marines to check on the CAP and assist, while he and the rest of his Marines pursued the withdrawing attackers.³¹

In a strong display of organization, the Marines had spread out enough to cover the area being attacked but remained close enough together to keep a strong fighting strength. Christmas could not see his troops advancing, but he maintained radio contact with all of his elements and directed movement from his position. The enemy were withdrawing, but it was no rout. The Marines were still making heavy contact but pushed forward slowly. The terrain aided the enemy's delaying actions and slowed the Marines' advance. The area was thick with hedgerows, tropical vegetation, trees, and houses, mixed with open areas of small paddies or gardens. Vision was often limited, and there were plenty of places for the enemy to find cover, fire at the Marines, and then withdraw to another position.³²

By this time, Christmas had established radio contact with the commander of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Ernest C. Cheatham Jr., located several kilometers to the south on the highway at the railroad tunnel on Cao Doi Peninsula. The colonel had Companies E and F on standby in the Cao Doi to respond if a situation like this occurred. He ordered Company F to join Company H. Company F took a position on one of the flanks of Company H and augmented the latter's effort to push the enemy to the river and destroy

³¹ Christmas interviews; and "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 31-7.

³² Christmas interviews; and "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 31-7.

them. Christmas sensed that they were closing in and would wreak serious damage on the remaining enemy forces that had attacked the CAP and the bridges. He maneuvered his Marines to put the enemy into a cauldron where they could be destroyed. Cheatham, knowing the terrain well by the detailed topographical maps, sent Company E to establish a blocking position on high ground farther upstream along the Truoi River and the Truoi River trail. He positioned them so they could catch the enemy as they were squeezed by Companies H and F to withdraw up the river toward their base camps or to temporary sanctuaries in the mountains. The river's course and the trail would cause the fleeing enemy to move close to Company E's blocking position.

The Marines had their prey trapped and their withdrawal blocked. However, before they could make their final push, Christmas got a call from an angry Cheatham, who ordered him to withdraw and head back to Highway 1. Cheatham had received orders to move his Marines back to Phu Bai. They did not understand the reasoning for the withdrawal, but the Marines did as they were ordered. Company F withdrew first, moving up to the highway and taking up positions across the Truoi River bridge near the ARVN compound there. Soon after, they boarded trucks and moved north to the Phu Bai Combat Base.³³

Company H covered Company F's withdrawal and then moved back to the highway. The Marines stayed the night on the south side of the Truoi River bridge, positioned around an old railroad station not too far south of the bridge. The following morning, they moved across the Truoi River and, like Company F the previous day, moved by convoy to Phu Bai. The Marines did not know it at the time, but the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, was on its way to Hue to fight the Viet Cong and NVA troops who had overrun the city on the south side of the Perfume River. Despite the critical situation in the Phu Loc District, Task Force X-Ray was under pressure to commit all available forces to retake Hue.³⁴

³³ Christmas interviews; and "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 31–8. Mark Bowden briefly describes Company F's role in this event in *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017), 177–79.

³⁴ Christmas interviews.

Phu Loc remained under the Marines' control after the heroic stand of CAP Hotel 8. While Viet Cong commanders committed fewer troops to Phu Loc, those who remained in the area were stubborn, bold, and continued to try to disrupt the supply line on Highway 1. In some cases, enemy forces occupied areas they would have never dared to occupy before. The Marines did not have enough troops to conduct large sweeps, as they would have preferred, but they successfully defended the area as best they could. Most importantly, they kept the road open.³⁵

Hotel 8 was not the only position to repel an attack on 31 January. Several of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines' positions in Phu Loc received mortar fire in the early morning hours. Marines in CAPs and infantry units along Highway 1, especially from the Truoi River bridge toward Phu Bai, reported numerous instances of enemy movement near the bridges and the CAP compounds responsible for keeping the main supply route open.³⁶ Later in the morning, at around 1000, Combined Action Company Hotel Headquarters relayed information that villagers had approached some of its Marines and reported that a large number of Communist soldiers had dug in on the Hotel 3 side of the Truoi River. They had established a presence in all of the hamlets in Loc An Village, where they told many of the people of their intent to attack and overrun positions along the Truoi River at midnight. Many of the villagers fled the area.³⁷

The attacking Viet Cong and NVA seemed to be moving in numbers that were unprecedented along the road to Hue. For example, CAP Hotel 1 learned later in the morning that 60 enemy troops had kidnapped villagers and taken them to a location to a village farther south on the Nong River. The CAP was powerless to stop them; there

³⁵ As early as 1 February, the 1st Motor Transport Battalion managed to send convoys toward Hue. That would not have been possible without keeping the stretch of Highway 1 south of the city open. See 1st Motor Transport Battalion, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201010198, folder 010, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, pts. 2 and 3, 1.

³⁶ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 31-7.

³⁷ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 31-6.

were simply too many enemy troops in the area.³⁸ Just after noon, Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, learned that a company-size enemy force armed with mortars and rockets had moved into a nearby village during the night. A PF patrol ventured close to the village and saw people fleeing. They then turned back and said they would not go back without Marines. Company A consolidated two of its units to sweep the area and form a blocking position just a couple of kilometers south of CAP Hotel 6 and Highway 1.³⁹ Later in the afternoon, the newly arrived Company D, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, observed 40 of the enemy, most of whom had weapons, moving about in CAP Alpha 3's TAOR and digging in. Roughly 75 percent had weapons; some were armed with heavy machine guns.⁴⁰ As the sun began to sink behind the mountains, the Marines received another report of a large enemy force of 150 were moving into CAP Hotel 2's area of operations, possibly to stage for another big attack that night.⁴¹

That assumption proved accurate. The morning of 1 February saw more attacks in the early hours. A vicious ground assault hit CAP Hotel 5 shortly after 0200. The Marines there held on only after calling in variable time fuse artillery on their own position, as Sergeant Grunder had done to save Hotel 8. Mortars also fell on the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, command post at around the same time. The Marines returned fire with their own mortars to silence the attack, but it was not until 0630 that the battalion's Company B could send a platoon to help Hotel 5. The platoon reached the beleaguered CAP a short time later. At 0800, the Marines reported that the Phu Loc District headquarters and CAP Hotel 5 were still in friendly hands.⁴² The attackers were more successful at Hotel 6, where a large force managed to destroy the bridge at Nuoc Ngot during the night. The battalion's Company A dis-

³⁸ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 31-5.

³⁹ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 31-6.

⁴⁰ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 31-7.

⁴¹ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 31-9.

⁴² "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, February 1968, 01-2 and 01-4; and "Sequential Lists of Significant Events, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201048024, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, pt. 3, 1–2.

patched a platoon-size reaction force after learning that a position near the bridge that had been guarded by the PFs was in enemy hands.⁴³

Viet Cong troops even launched rocket and mortar fire into the Phu Loc village. Between 45 and 50 mortar rounds fell on Company B's position at Phu Loc District headquarters, as heavy small-arms fire hissed and cracked around their defenses. Battalion headquarters sent out a reaction force to block the attackers from withdrawing to the south. This was too late, however, as another position observed a large enemy force moving south back toward the mountains. The Marines fired mortars at the retreating enemy until they began running dangerously low on ammunition and had to withdraw.⁴⁴

By noon on 1 February, matters in Phu Loc had stabilized somewhat. With the situation temporarily under control, the Marines caught their breath and tried to regroup. The CAPs had been hit particularly hard, so the 5th Marines decided to temporarily reassign them to its infantry units throughout the TAOR. They "chopped" command of Hotel 6 and Hotel 9 to the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. Hotel 6 moved with Company A, Hotel 9 latched on to Company C, and Hotel 4 moved to the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, command post. Some of the CAPs' villagers did not want to remain without them. On 1 February, many of the villagers who lived in CAP Hotel 4's TAOR evacuated in boats and sat offshore to wait things out.⁴⁵

The hostilities would continue in the Phu Loc District for some time to come. While the intensity lessened after the first few days, fighting continued on throughout the month of February. As the Marines dug in their heels at Phu Loc, it became more and more clear that a far more serious situation had developed to the north at Hue, where thousands of Viet Cong and NVA soldiers had taken control of the city. The Marines of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, were quickly pulled from Phu Loc to move north and participate in what would soon be known

⁴³ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, February 1968, 01-4.

⁴⁴ "Narrative Summary," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201048024, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, pt. 2, 2.

⁴⁵ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, February 1968, 01-8.

as Operation Hue City. Meanwhile, the task of protecting the Phu Bai and Phu Loc areas along Highway 1—namely defending the bridges and small installations and keeping the road open—fell to Company D, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines; Company E, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines; and the entirety of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. Company D covered four bridges from south of Hue down to the Truoi River. Company E defended the Truoi River bridge and surrounding areas as well as the two bridges previously manned by Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. Meanwhile, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, remained in the Phu Loc District all the way to Hai Van Pass.⁴⁶ The Marines who remained along the road to Hue faced continuous attacks for the rest of February.⁴⁷ Some, including all the Marines of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, would be called north to enter the battle for the city.⁴⁸ While the street fighting in Hue was certainly the most prominent part of the Tet battles in Thua Thien Province, the defenders' actions along the road leading to the city were just as critical.

⁴⁶ Several frag orders in the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines' records from February 1968 mention the importance of protecting the bridges. See 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, tab C.

⁴⁷ See "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201020032, folder 020, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, pt. 3.

⁴⁸ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, pt. 3, 11–13.

CHAPTER 13

THE ATTACK ON HUE

Attack on the Citadel

There were many attacks launched throughout South Vietnam in the early morning hours of 31 January 1968, but one of the boldest and most successful fell on Hue. The city was divided into two general areas: the older city of Hue to the north, surrounded by a massive walled fortress known as the Citadel, and the modern city to the south across the Perfume River. About 80 percent of the 140,000 residents of Hue lived either inside the Citadel or around its perimeter. The modern city was where much of the business and governmental operations were conducted. This concentration was the natural result of urban sprawl that swept over the city during the twentieth century. The city's two parts were connected by a stately and impressive six-span steel girder-style bridge, built in the late nineteenth century, that carried Highway 1 across the river.¹

The Hue Citadel was a fortress built in the early nineteenth century. The Nguyen Dynasty's first emperor, Gia Long, ordered its construction in 1802. Its design was inspired by the works of Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, the renowned French military architect of the late seventeenth century. The fortress was roughly laid out as a square with each of its legs measuring more than 2.5 kilometers (1.6 miles). Inside the Citadel, in addition to thousands of homes and businesses, was a small walled compound known as the Imperial Palace. Sometimes the

¹George W. Smith, *The Siege at Hue* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999), 7.

Imperial Palace is called the Inner City, the Forbidden City, or the Purple City. Designed after the imperial palace in Beijing, China, it was the emperor's residence and the place where he could conduct imperial business and ceremonies.² Both the Imperial Palace and the larger Citadel were Vietnamese treasures. Hue was not only a geographically important city—it was part of the soul of Vietnam.

Above all, the Citadel was designed for defense. Its sturdy walls and surrounding moat were formidable obstacles for any ground force attempting to enter the city. The outer walls were nearly 8 meters (26 feet) high. Its 11 entrances were gated and strong—each gate was a fortress by itself. At each gate, moats and the bridges helped channelize access, especially for large groups of attackers. The gates themselves were also formidable structures. Once closed, locked, and barred, the wooden doors at each gate would require significant force to open.³

On top of the outer walls were large flat earthen areas where defending forces could fire on attackers and move from gate to gate. Huge ramparts were placed along the outer walls and provided space for almost any number of troops and equipment to observe enemy movements and defend against attack. They also allowed groups of defenders to move to other gates and other positions while remaining behind cover. The surrounding walls provided firing positions for defenders to engage any troops trying to scale the walls or breach the gates. Bastions, areas where the walls protruded out at nearly 90-degree angles to create interlocking fields of fire, also flanked each gate. Each bastion was positioned so that defending troops could fire into an enemy's flanks as they tried to cross the bridges or moats in front of the gates.

Around 0340 on the morning of 31 January 1968, at least three heavily armed NVA battalions, reinforced with commandos and support units, stormed out of the hills and mountains west of Hue City. They crossed over the moats surrounding the Citadel and burst through the lightly defended western gates. Accounts differ on their precise

² Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 46–49.

³ Mark Bowden, *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017), 3–5, 42.

THE ATTACK ON HUE

Figure 13.1. Entry into the Hue Citadel



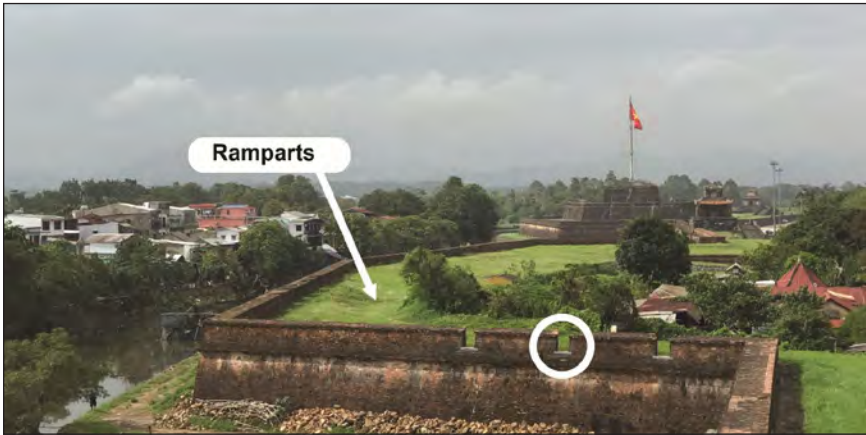
A good example of one of the 11 entry gates into the Hue Citadel. The fortified gate housing can be seen in the middle right of the photograph. To enter any of the gates, a narrow bridge must be crossed to avoid crossing in the moats. This channelizes attackers so that they can be fired on by Citadel defenders. The walls to each side of the gate structure are designed for a defending force to be able to fire down on attackers coming across the bridge or moats or moving on the thin strip of land next to the walls. The fighting positions have narrow slits for firing as seen in the far wall of the photograph. This image represents historical reconstruction. Source: photo by Thuan Pham, October 2020.

manner of entry, but it is clear that the Communists had numerous agents on the inside who killed many of the small number of guards placed at the gates. Once the attackers arrived at the gates, sappers blew open any doors not already opened with shaped explosive charges.⁴

It was not long before streams of NVA and Viet Cong flooded through the gates and fanned out across the Citadel, securing nearly everything within the walls. The initial attacking forces, likely augmented by additional local units, were the same forces that had been lurking in and operating around Base Area 114 since the previous year:

⁴ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 104–7; and Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 449–50.

Figure 13.2. Interior of the Hue Citadel



This photograph shows the interior of the Citadel. The ramparts are the large, flat, grassy areas designed for troops to gather and maneuver. From the ramparts, defenders could observe and defend against attacking forces. The large white circle shows one of the slitted parapets. These are fighting positions providing the ability to aim at the gate entry areas, the bridges, the moat areas, or any of the grounds next to the wall all the way to the opposite wall. The ramparts pictured are similar to those that surround most of the interior of the Citadel wall.

Source: photo by Thuan Pham, October 2020. Markings added by William F. Nimmo.

the NVA's *6th Regiment* with its three infantry battalions—the *800th*, *802d*, and *806th Battalions*—reinforced with supporting arms and accompanied by a large number of sappers. The *800th Battalion* and the *802d Battalion* made the initial entry through the western gates, while the *806th Battalion* moved along the northwest corner, near An Hoa Village, to block any rescue forces coming down Highway 1 from the north. It is believed that sapper elements of the *806th Battalion* scaled the wall on the northern side to open the two northside gates, the An Hoa Gate and the Hau Gate, so that troops of the *800th Battalion* could flood inside.⁵

After penetrating the walls, the enemy's first objective was to neutralize the small ARVN presence. NVA troops moved to seize control of the Tay Loc military airfield and the 1st ARVN Division headquarters, both of which were located in the northern sectors of the Citadel. The

⁵ Eric Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles for Quang Tri City and Hue* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2008), 34.

Tay Loc airfield, to the northwest, was an especially critical area where the ARVN housed observation craft and helicopters used to transport the Hac Bao, the division's reaction force who had earned a reputation as aggressive, fierce warriors. The attackers' other early objective was to seize control of the walled Imperial City located in the southern portion of the Citadel (figure 13.3).⁶

There was nothing more than a token defense for the Citadel. General Ngo Quang Truong, the commander of the ARVN's 1st Division, had only a few hundred troops on hand when the attack began, including 60 men from the Hac Bao, a small ordnance company at the airfield, the headquarters group, and a 36-man reconnaissance platoon. Due to it being the Tet holiday, Truong had released at least 15 percent of his troops for holiday leave. Any American advisors to these and other South Vietnamese units were billeted across the Perfume River in what was known as the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), compound. Most had left the Citadel on the evening of 30 January, the eve of Tet.⁷

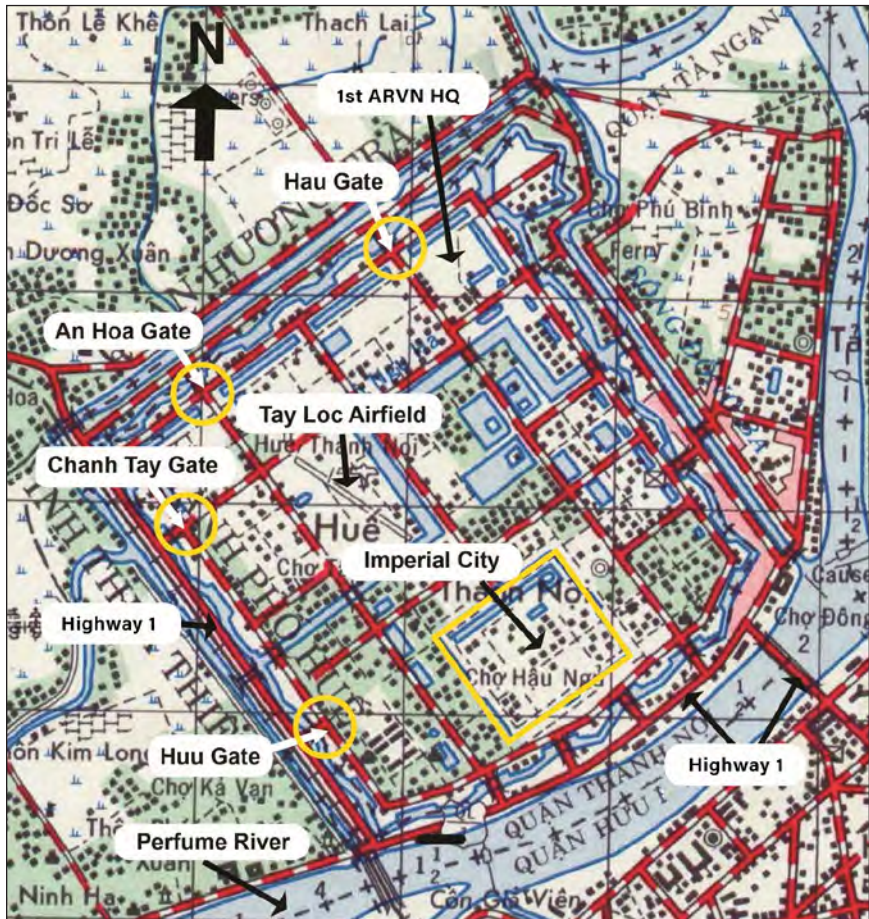
NVA forces managed to slip out of their mountain hideouts and get through the gates and into the main areas of the Citadel with almost no resistance. The Communists had numerous agents, some of whom lived in or near the city, who provided intelligence before the attack began, served as guides to the attackers, and even killed guards posted at the targeted entry gates.⁸ The Tet holiday also made infiltration easier. Communist agents could approach the city dressed as civilians coming home for the holiday while carrying bags and luggage that hid weapons and ammunition without raising suspicion. Moreover, Hue was called an "open city" for a reason. It was also a hub of commercial activity where many people regularly came and went as they pleased. Tet's significance made an already open city even busier. The observation of Tet begins many days before the actual day of the Lunar New Year. It was not unusual to see throngs of civilians coming into Hue from all over

⁶ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles for Quang Tri City and Hue*, 36.

⁷ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles for Quang Tri City and Hue*, 36.

⁸ Mark Bowen's work is a prominent example. See Bowen, *Hue 1968*, pt. 1.

Figure 13.3. Map of the Hue Citadel



This map shows an aerial view of the Hue Citadel. The yellow circles show the western gates and the northern gates where the enemy first made entry. The map also shows the initial goals of the enemy forces: the Tay Loc Airfield, the 1st ARVN Division headquarters, and the Imperial City. The Imperial City is marked with a yellow rectangle.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

to visit their relatives and begin the holiday celebration. Large numbers of Americans also moved through the city, mostly traveling on convoys along Highway 1, which ran through Hue. The U.S. troops in the area doubled and tripled during this time, with many convoys of personnel and supplies moving through Hue to TAORs farther to the north. The

sheer volume of human movement in and out of the city created an environment of confusion and sometimes chaos.⁹

Once inside, groups of attackers headed for the 1st ARVN Division headquarters, known as the Mang Ca compound, and attempted to overrun it. Their first attempts failed, which bought the defenders precious time. General Truong quickly took command of the situation as best he could. Once he realized what was happening, he called for reinforcements, but outside support was blocked by enemy units, and it would take substantial time for the first reinforcements to reach the Citadel. One of his first decisions was to consolidate his troops in one location. That meant ordering the Hac Bao and the ordnance personnel to abandon the airfield area and move to the Mang Ca compound.¹⁰ This was a smart move. Had the Hac Bao and the ordnance unit defenders been destroyed at the airfield, Truong's headquarters would have likely fallen as well. The Hac Bao's commander, First Lieutenant Tran Ngoc Hue, knew the city well and led the group through the back streets and alleys he used to play in as a child. Along the way, they picked up dozens of ARVN soldiers who were home with their families, accumulating to a force of about 150 to help defend the Mang Ca compound.¹¹

Despite being outnumbered and mostly surrounded, General Truong and his soldiers managed to hold on until help arrived. The rest of the Citadel, however, was occupied by NVA and Viet Cong forces. Pushing them out would not be easy. Most of the buildings inside the Citadel, businesses and residences alike, were of masonry, either blocks or concrete, construction. Many homes had fortified sandbag bunkers inside to protect their families from an attack. This provided the opportunity for the NVA to prepare a formidable defensive system in a network of sturdy, protected structures.¹²

⁹ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 12.

¹⁰ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 111–12; and Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles for Quang Tri City and Hue*, 33.

¹¹ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles for Quang Tri City and Hue*, 37; and Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 25.

¹² Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 119, 184.

Outside the Citadel, Communist troops set up blocking positions around the area to impede any ARVN troops' attempts to reenter the city and assist its defenders. Help arrived the following day, 1 February, around noon, when Hac Bao troops guided a task force of ARVN airborne, battered by earlier attempts to fight through to the city, into the Citadel through an unguarded gate to the northeast near the 1st ARVN Division compound. The first of General Truong's own battalions finally made it there by that afternoon, having been carried upriver by landing craft and entering the Citadel through the northeast gate as well.¹³

For the time being, the rest of the Citadel was a Communist fortress. The enemy troops, able to come and go as they pleased, fanned out across the area. Nearby, to the northwest, NVA troops also established a well-fortified command and supply center in a pair of hamlets, Que Chu and La Chu. It was staffed and protected by a NVA regiment which, during the next several days, funneled a steady stream of troops and ammunition into the city. Civilians, in turn, replenished the stockpiles at La Chu by carrying supplies out of the mountains each night. U.S. forces would not discover this command and supply center until a battalion of U.S. Army cavalry troopers stumbled upon the NVA defenses on 3 February.¹⁴ It would take several more days of hard fighting to clear out La Chu and stop the resupply of men and equipment flowing into the city.

Serious questions remain as to why the Citadel's defenses were not better prepared. General Truong had several battalions at his disposal to defend it. One was just a short distance away in a training center near the bank of the Perfume River. There were two other battalions of airborne infantry and one of armored cavalry at PK-17, an ARVN installation 17 kilometers northwest of the city on Highway 1. While the airborne were not under his direct command, with permission he would have been able to move one of those battalions into the area. Truong had maintained that Hue would be spared any attack, so he

¹³ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles for Quang Tri City and Hue*, 43–44.

¹⁴ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles for Quang Tri City and Hu*, 48.

refused to reinforce the Citadel with additional combat troops. Even on the last day before Tet, when he came to realize an attack against the city was likely, he said that he believed the enemy did not have units large enough to make a major attack on the Citadel. Only a few guards were posted at its gates.¹⁵

Some Communist units began their Tet Offensive a day early near Da Nang and in other regions farther south. There was confusion and miscommunication about when the Lunar New Year began. It not until 30 January, after learning about the premature attacks in other parts of the country, that General Truong became uneasy about the truce that had been called for the upcoming holiday. At USMACV headquarters, General William C. Westmoreland was not fooled. When he received reports of the abortive attacks, he called off the truce in I Corps. Westmoreland had fought against the truce from the outset, but his Vietnamese counterparts would not agree. The false start on 30 January seemed to confirm his suspicions.¹⁶ Task Force X-Ray's records show that they received the cancellation notice at 0325 that day, about 24 hours before the main attacks began.¹⁷

It was too little, too late. There was simply no plan in place to protect Hue when the attack began early on 31 January. U.S. Army captain George W. Smith, assigned as a liaison to the 1st ARVN Division, certainly did not know of one. His assignment was part of a program intended to cultivate better public relations and better press coverage in the United States of the ARVN's efforts.¹⁸ He was stationed in Hue from mid-January through the entire Tet Offensive. In his role as the information officer, he had several close contacts with General Truong and later wrote that, based on his conversations with him, no plan was

¹⁵ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 19–20.

¹⁶ Westmoreland later argued, albeit with the gift of hindsight, that he had seen the Tet Offensive coming. See William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 312–23.

¹⁷ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, Command Chronology (ComdC), 13–31 January, item no. 1201062075, folder 062, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), 30-3.

¹⁸ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 6.

in effect to reinforce the city's defenses because he did not expect an attack. Truong believed that Hue would be spared due to its historical and cultural significance that even the North Vietnamese revered.¹⁹ Smith contended that the Citadel could have been reinforced with ease from either the north or the south. "The truth was," he wrote, "that no plan was in force for such relief because no attack was expected."²⁰

It was only just before the attack began that General Truong thought that Hue could be targeted. According to Smith, the general had an uneasy feeling on the morning of 30 January. Rather than celebrating the holiday, Truong went back to his office, called his staff together, and studied the situation. He read the reports about a string of attacks that had occurred during the night. Truong and his staff also went over local intelligence reports from the past few weeks. The more they talked and reviewed the documents that day, the more Truong was convinced that an attack was planned for Hue. The question then became how large the assault could be. According to Smith, the officers concluded that the enemy did not have sufficient forces to attack the city. The general checked with higher headquarters to be sure and was informed that they had no information of large enemy troop concentrations in the area.²¹ It was a baffling misreading of the situation, given all that had happened outside the city over the previous weeks.

Further complicating matters was that Truong had already released 15 percent of his troops in the Citadel and in units around the countryside for the Tet Holiday. However, he was more prepared than his counterparts around the rest of the country who had released 50 percent of their troops. Many of the soldiers in Truong's units at the Citadel lived in Hue and went to their homes to celebrate. The general canceled all leave in hopes of calling back those that had gone home. But they lived on both sides of the Perfume River, and Truong had no real means of communicating with them.²²

¹⁹ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 18.

²⁰ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 11.

²¹ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 19–20.

²² Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, 31–32.

At the last minute, Truong moved to prepare his defenses. By nightfall on 30 January, he sent 60 of his 120-man Hac Bao reaction force across the river to the southern city to protect the province headquarters. He also distributed some troops to protect the gates. Knowing that any attack would likely come from the west, Truong also sent his 36-man reconnaissance platoon several kilometers out in that direction to a place that he knew an attacking force would likely travel past. The reconnaissance platoon, accompanied by an Australian advisor, set in along the north bank of the Perfume River, along a known route from Base Area 114. Around midnight, they reported seeing two battalions, and possibly more, moving past their position and heading toward the Citadel. This was most likely the NVA's 800th and the 802d Battalions moving toward the western gates. Truong recalled the reconnaissance platoon back into the Citadel.²³ He needed every soldier he could get.

There is no record of General Truong alerting the Marines in Phu Bai or the U.S. Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division, based at Camp Evans, of this significant piece of evidence that an attack was imminent. Perhaps he was overcome by the need to strengthen his own position. By midnight, Truong may have run out of any viable options except to dedicate all available personnel to defending the Tay Loc airfield and his headquarters at the Mang Ca compound. Even more perplexing is that there is also no evidence of Truong alerting the USMACV advisors across the river of this predicament. Captain Smith, who was billeted at the USMACV compound on the night of the attacks, says that some of his fellow advisors knew that Truong had put his troops on 100-percent alert but that none seemed aware there was anything significant afoot.²⁴ U.S. Army historian Eric Villard similarly notes that, for an unknown reason, soldiers posted at the USMACV compound did not get the news that the truce had been canceled.²⁵ Smith went to bed that

²³ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles for Quang Tri City and Hue*, 32–33.

²⁴ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 30–31.

²⁵ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles for Quang Tri City and Hue*, 32. Task Force X-Ray's records also do not note any warning of an impending attack on 30 January, despite the large number of incident reports that flooded in that night. See "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 30-1–30-5.

night without any concern. Most of the people at the compound, except for the guards and a group of Australian advisors who stayed up drinking and playing cards, were asleep and undressed when the assault began.²⁶

The final minutes of 30 January brought one last chance to sound the alarm. A group of South Vietnamese Regional Force (RF) soldiers guarding the An Hoa Bridge at the northwest corner of the Citadel fired on what they thought was a group of enemy soldiers heading toward the north wall. There was no return fire, so the RFs thought their targets may have been figments of their imagination.²⁷ In reality, they had fired on and missed a group of sappers assigned to scale the north wall and open the gate a short distance to the east. Later, during the attack, the NVA's *806th Battalion* chased off the same RF soldiers and occupied that northwest corner by themselves.²⁸

The Modern City Falls

The attack on the modern city came just as swiftly and very close in time to the attack on the Citadel. There were several prime targets for the attacking force, all of which were located along the blocks adjacent to the Perfume River's south bank. These targets included Hue University, a large hospital complex, the Thua Thien Province administration complex, the provincial prison, the treasury building, the main post office, the public health complex, police facilities, a large power plant, and other governmental facilities. None were very far from the small but fortified USMACV compound that housed Captain Smith and other advisors to the 1st ARVN Division.²⁹ Farther to the south was the U.S. consulate, the consulate residence, the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) office, police stations, and the police headquarters. Many people who worked in the area also lived there. Much of the business in Hue was conducted here in the

²⁶ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 34.

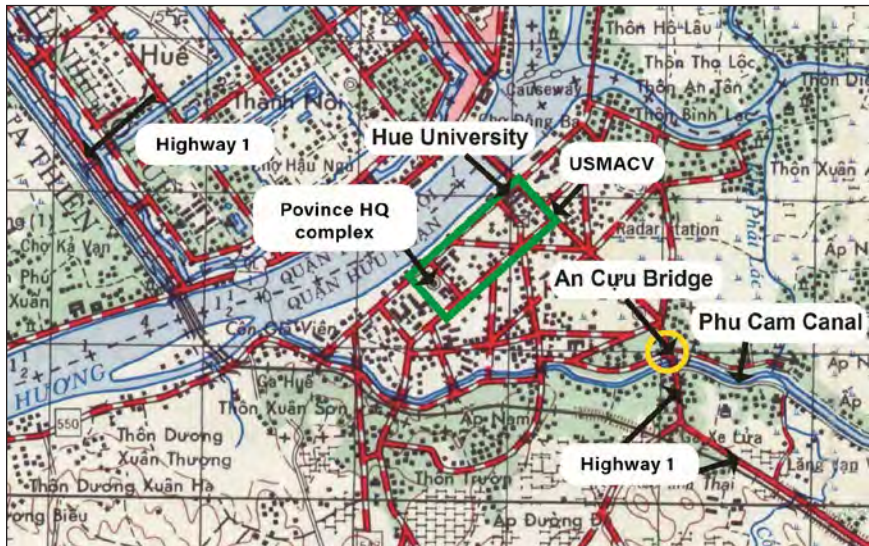
²⁷ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles for Quang Tri City and Hue*, 33.

²⁸ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 106–7.

²⁹ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 9–10.

THE ATTACK ON HUE

Figure 13.4. Map of the southern (modern) city of Hue



This topographical map shows Hue on the south bank of the Perfume (Huong) River. The green rectangle shows the main area of domination by the enemy forces, including where Hue University, the treasury, the post office, the hospital complex, the Thua Thien Province headquarters, and the province prison were located.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

modern (southern) city. Due to its triangular shape on a map, the area that constituted the southern city was also referred to as “the triangle.”³⁰

As the attack on the Citadel began to unfold, a large force of NVA and Viet Cong main force battalions, along with sappers and local Viet Cong units, descended on the modern city. They quickly took over several target buildings and government complexes. These buildings were built with masonry, and some were multistoried structures. As in the Citadel, Communist troops dug in and prepared to fight to the death against any attempts to dislodge them. They spread throughout most of the target buildings and positioned themselves wherever they could fire on any counterattacking force.³¹

³⁰ Jack Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 164–68.

³¹ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 92–125.

The initial attacking force consisted of at least three infantry battalions and one sapper group. Two attacked from the direct south, and one attacked from a position in the east. These units were not composed solely of NVA regulars. Some were Viet Cong main force battalions, some were amalgams of NVA and Viet Cong main force units, but all were under the command of the NVA's *4th Regiment*. Local Viet Cong units were also involved.³² Some of the Viet Cong main force units would have been generally familiar with the terrain, but they would have needed guides to show them through the area to avoid early detection by running into a local village protection force. Historically, for years local Viet Cong provided guide service to main force and other units that were not familiar with the territory.³³

A fourth enemy unit, the Viet Cong main force *810th Battalion*, positioned itself a short distance downriver to screen and block any ARVN units coming from the coast to the Citadel. That battalion later moved closer into the Triangle.³⁴ The *804th Battalion*, the *K4B*, and the *4th Regiment's* headquarters had been positioned in the mountains south of Phu Loc District in early January. The *804th Battalion* and the *K4B* had been operating in the Phu Bai and Phu Loc areas for a long time. The *4th Regiment* had just arrived in the Phu Loc area in December, probably to assume command of the invading force. The *4th Regiment* appears to have put together battalions on an ad hoc basis for the purpose of executing the attack on the modern city. By the time the Tet attacks began, the *4th Regiment* had been tracked from the mountains to a position east of Hue in the village of Thuy Thanh. Thuy Thanh was in the Phu Thu District, near where many sightings of enemy activity had occurred in January.³⁵

³² Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 168.

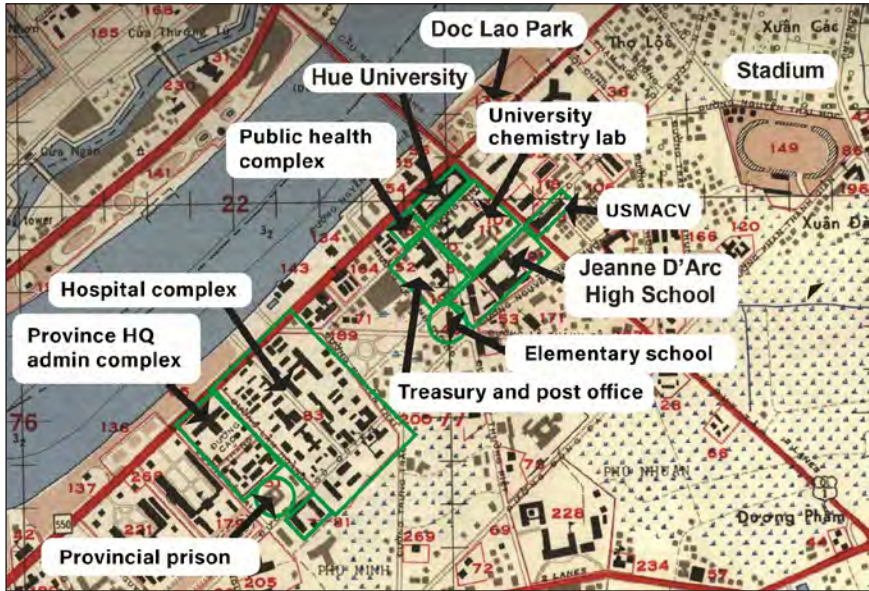
³³ Michael Lee Lanning and Dan Cragg, *Inside the VC and the NVA: The Real Story of North Vietnam's Armed Forces* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 174; and Hastings, *Vietnam*, 449.

³⁴ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles for Quang Tri City and Hue*, 44.

³⁵ "Narrative Summary, Enemy," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201062077, folder 062, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

THE ATTACK ON HUE

Figure 13.5. Locations of buildings occupied by the attacking forces



This detailed map of the modern city shows the locations of buildings that the attacking forces occupied on the morning of 31 January 1968. The green rectangles separate the buildings and the building complexes that became the objectives of the U.S. Marine response to retake the area.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo.

After the battle, Marine intelligence personnel did their best they could to determine how each Viet Cong or NVA unit entered the city. They determined that attackers from the south moved through the area of the Royal Tombs and directly into the modern city.³⁶ Some of them would have come from the area to the south of the ferry crossing between the junction of the Huu Trach and Ta Trach rivers. There were several small bridges across the Phu Cam Canal along the southern border of the city that attackers coming from the south likely crossed on their path to the downtown buildings of the southern city. There had also been some indications of unit movement from the mountains of the Phu Loc district to staging areas near Hue. Most of the

³⁶“Combat Operations After Action Report, Intelligence,” Task Force X-Ray, Operation Hue City After Action Report, 31 January–2 March 1968, item no. 1201062076, folder 062, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

intelligence indicated that one main force battalion and at least two local companies displaced west from the battalion's area of operations toward the city.³⁷ Based on timing and the direction of their movements, it is likely that these units were involved in the attack on Hue.

The southern attackers were not as well coordinated as those who struck the Citadel. At least one unit was delayed until later in the morning. Nonetheless, they managed to enter the city unimpeded by any South Vietnamese forces and occupied several targets quickly. The attacks on the USMACV compound, while fierce, were not successful, and by the morning USMACV was still in American hands. Rescue forces fought their way there by the afternoon to secure it permanently. The small Hac Bao force sent to protect the Thua Thien Province Complex held out for a while but were ultimately slaughtered by an overwhelming force. Viet Cong and NVA troops took over and fortified all the buildings in the complex.³⁸ They also occupied the provincial prison and freed the prisoners to fight alongside them.³⁹

It is unknown precisely how many Viet Cong and NVA troops made it into the city. Task Force X-Ray's after-action reports noted evidence of several different units having been involved but could make no definitive estimate of a total number or a breakdown of how many entered the city in the initial assault and how many arrived later as reinforcements. Some historians cite 11,000 as a realistic estimate of the total number of both Viet Cong and NVA troops involved.⁴⁰ Task Force X-Ray estimated that more than 3,000 enemy troops were involved in the attacks on the modern city, which, in hindsight, seems low.⁴¹

³⁷ "Enemy Movements and Locations," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201048023, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 2-3.

³⁸ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 134, 155-57.

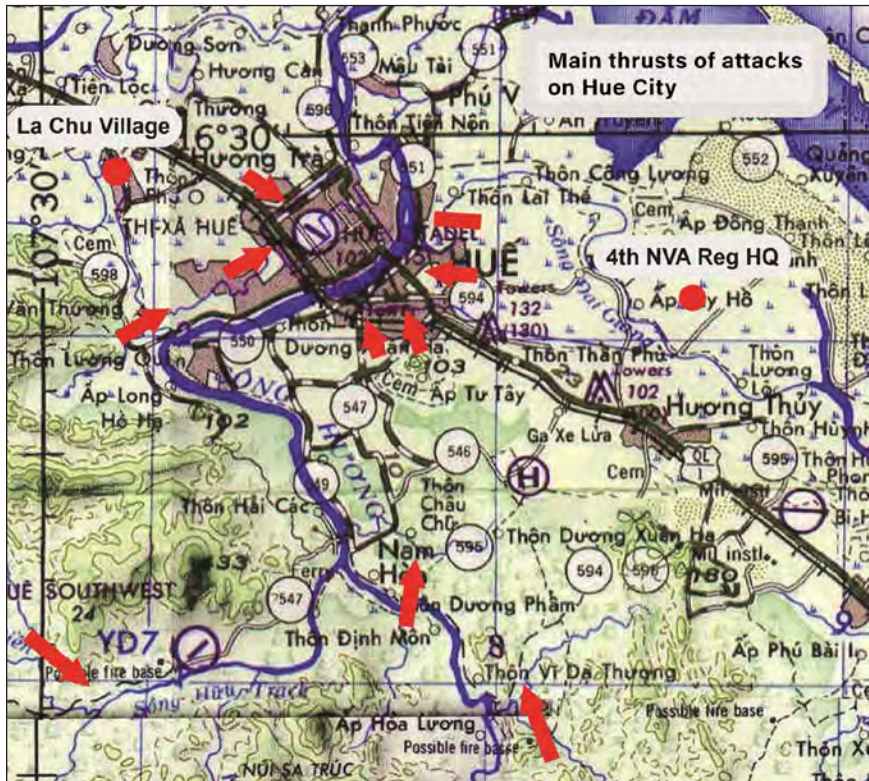
³⁹ Hastings, *Vietnam*, 450.

⁴⁰ Max Hastings estimates at least 10,000 in *Vietnam*, 453. Mark Bowden frequently states throughout his book, *Hue 1968*, that the number was at least 10,000.

⁴¹ "Intelligence," Task Force X-Ray, Operation Hue City After Action Report, 20 March 1968, 8. According to historian George C. Herring, the number of Viet Cong/NVA killed in action was as high as 5,000. See George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 4th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 231.

THE ATTACK ON HUE

Figure 13.6. Directions taken by the attacking forces



This relief map shows the directions of the prongs of the attacking forces. The red bar shows the Viet Cong main force *810th Battalion's* blocking position. The red arrows farther out from the city show the likely routes of attackers heading from their staging areas toward the city. Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

Retribution

During their attack on Hue, the NVA and the Viet Cong did not just seize the city—they also attacked the civilians there in a brutal campaign of retribution.⁴² Throughout both the Citadel and the southern city, anyone who worked in any capacity perceived as anti-Communist or sympathetic to the South Vietnamese or the Americans was a target. While the NVA regulars attacked the ARVN soldiers, the

⁴² Herring, *America's Longest War*, 231–32.

National Liberation Front (NLF), through Viet Cong agents and civilian cadres, carried out the retribution efforts. Some historians believe that many of the people who carried out the retribution efforts were dissatisfied Buddhists who had left the city after the Buddhist Struggle Movement had been put down in the late spring of 1966. They had now come back and were part of groups searching out, holding kangaroo trials for, and executing those identified as targets.⁴³

Historical studies and personal observations combine to provide a compelling account of this operation of terror. The Viet Cong had scouted out Hue as much as months earlier and compiled lists and documentations of those who were to be tried and eliminated. Historian Eric Hammel writes that the NVA and Viet Cong forces had identified 314 preplanned objectives, both military and civilian. Many of these “objectives” were civilian targets deserving of retribution. Hammel terms the groups “spearhead companies” who came in advance of the attacks to bring in weapons, ammunition, and to locate some of the preplanned targets.⁴⁴ Historian Mark Bowden takes this story a step further, writing that the forces targeting the civilians had a typewritten, single-spaced list of the civilian targets complete with locator information.⁴⁵

The killings that followed can only be described as a calculated campaign of reprisal and terror. The death squads that perpetrated them had free run of at least the western and southern parts of the Citadel for a period as the ARVNs tried to defend the Tay Loc airfield and the 1st ARVN Division headquarters. They had a week or two to find their targets and handle them accordingly.⁴⁶ Many were taken outside the Citadel to Gia Hoi, a large island immediately adjacent to the east wall of the Citadel where the Communists had established a “liberation government.” This area had no military presence, and the Viet Cong were free to operate for three weeks as they pleased. Reports

⁴³ Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 159–60.

⁴⁴ Eric Hammel, *Fire in the Streets: The Battle for Hue, Tet 1968* (Pacifica, CA: Pacifica Military History, 1991), 29.

⁴⁵ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 99.

⁴⁶ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 299–303.

indicate that numerous captured targets were taken to Gia Hoi, where they were tried, found guilty, and executed.⁴⁷

Gia Hoi was a newer residential area, and many middle-class Hue citizens had recently moved there. Following the cessation of hostilities at the Citadel, Captain Smith witnessed the excavation of hundreds of people executed there. He had been called by a colleague to witness the discovery of mass graves in an area of Gia Hoi known as the Strawberry Patch. He relates that he witnessed hundreds of bodies being exhumed by relatives and friends of the victims. Many, he said, had their arms bound behind their backs with wire, and others appeared to have been buried alive.⁴⁸

Phu Cam, a large residential area and the center of the Catholic population at Hue, met a similar fate. As in the Citadel, civilian cadres and their death squads roamed throughout the Phu Cam area seeking out those complicit with the government. Many of these Catholics moved South from North Vietnam when the North began to persecute landowners, entrepreneurs, and Catholics after the 1954 partition. The land reform campaigns in the mid-1950s were brutal persecutions by a certain group of North Vietnamese who found and tried villagers and others for their crimes against the people. During the campaign, villagers were often forced to testify against their friends in various kangaroo courts, leading to innumerable convictions. Once convicted, they were executed on the spot. Catholics also were common targets, probably because of the shared bonds of faith and religious practices participated more heavily in the government of South Vietnam. Many held positions of trust and significance and therefore were targets of the NLF and the North Vietnamese government.

After the Tet attacks on Hue ended, thousands of people searched for their family members. Mass graves were uncovered throughout the Hue area for years to come. Exhumed corpses showed they had been beaten, shot, and beheaded. Reports showed that more than half had been buried alive with their hands tied behind their backs. Groups of

⁴⁷ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 81–85.

⁴⁸ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 180; and Hastings, *Vietnam*, 478–79.

bodies were found tied up in groups of around a dozen, with their eyes open, and rags stuffed in their mouths. When the dust on the event settled, several thousand civilians had been slaughtered between those in the Citadel and those on the southern side of the city.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Sources on this attack and executions of the civilians are found in a number of books. Some of the important sources include Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*; Bowden, *Hue 1968*; Ham-mel, *Fire in the Streets*; Smith, *The Siege at Hue*; and Alje Vennema, *The Viet Cong Massacre at Hue* (New York: Vantage Press, 1976).

CHAPTER 14

TAKING BACK THE MODERN CITY

The United States forcefully responded to the Communist attack on Hue, but only after an initial period of confusion over what exactly was happening. The scope of violence that washed over Thua Thien Province on the morning of 31 January 1968 was unprecedented. At the same time the twin assaults on Hue were unfolding, other Communist troops struck the Phu Bai Combat Base with rockets and mortars. Allied units all along Highway 1 from the Truoi River to Hai Van Pass were sporadically and sometimes heavily engaged with enemy units. In hindsight, it should have been clear that there was trouble in Hue from the outset. At 0345 on 31 January, the Hue tactical operations center (TOC) line went dead.¹ The TOC's communications were back in working order by 0415, when troops there reported taking small arms, rocket, and mortar fire. At 0445, Task Force X-Ray checked in with the TOC, which reported that it was still under attack with small arms and possibly rockets and mortars. The TOC requested illumination. In reality, the situation was much worse than anyone realized—Hue was not just under attack but was being overrun. Around 0800, an aerial reconnaissance plane spotted the North Vietnamese flag flying over the main flagpole at the front of the Citadel, where it faces the Perfume River.²

¹ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, Command Chronology (ComdC), 13–31 January 1968, item no. 1201062075, folder no. 062, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), 31-1.

² "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 31-2.

To greatly complicate matters, the Tet Offensive began at a time when units new to the Phu Bai tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) were still moving in from the Quang Tri area of operations. The Marines now had to plan a large counterattack while simultaneously holding their TAORs in the area and shifting new battalions into a highly kinetic situation. But the Marines were undeterred and moved quickly. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, were ordered to assume responsibility for the Phu Bai TAOR and replace the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, which would focus on the Phu Loc District along with the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, moved to Phu Bai from Quang Tri, where it had been conducting combat operations.

The original plan was for Task Force X-Ray to be in command of Camp Evans and the 1st Marine Regiment to be positioned there.³ Task Force X-Ray had arrived in the area on 13 January and assumed official command two days later.⁴ In a significant change of plans, the U.S. Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division selected Camp Evans as a new base of operations for several air cavalry units. This surprise move, announced with just a few days' notice, significantly altered the ability of the U.S. forces to monitor enemy troop movements out of Base Area 114. The camp was selected by the commander of the 1st Air Cavalry Division on 21 January, and by the following day an advance party had arrived. The 1st Marines (without any of its battalions) was already in the process of moving its regimental headquarter to Camp Evans. Then, in a hurried response to the enemy threats in the northern I Corps, on 25 January General William C. Westmoreland sent three brigades of the 1st Air Cavalry Division to Camp Evans. The advance party of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, moved to Phu Bai that same day to coordinate the relief of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. The following day, Company C from the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, moved to Phu Bai and replaced one company of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. On 27 January,

³"Operation Order 301-68, 12 January 1968," 1st Marine Division, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201015037, folder 015, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 3.

⁴"Organization and Operation," 1st Marine Division, ComdC, January 1968, enclosure 1.

Company D moved to Phu Bai, and the next day it took over the security of certain bridge sites in the upper section of the Phu Bai TAOR. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines command group moved to Phu Bai on 29 January and relieved the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, of command of the TAOR at 1200 the following day.⁵ This shift of new U.S. soldiers and Marines into the area, and the subsequent reshuffling of TAORs, further contributed to the confusion of events and reactions as the Tet attacks started a few days later.

First Reinforcements

Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, was the last of the battalion's companies to arrive during Operation Checkers, and it constituted the first wave of reinforcements to move into Hue. The company had just reached Phu Bai the evening before the Tet Offensive began. On the morning of 31 January, the unit was understrength; only three quarters of its Marines were at Phu Bai, and the only officers on hand were the company commander, Captain Gordon D. Batcheller, and his executive officer. Two platoon commanders and 40 Marines had not yet arrived. The company was designated the battalion's reaction force. Unfortunately, trouble started before the company could assemble all of its Marines, and it were sent out that morning on a confusing, open-ended mission that ultimately put it in the fight for Hue.⁶

It was a confusing, hurried morning for Company A. The battalion command group put the company on standby just after 0500. An hour later, the Marines boarded trucks and moved out—not toward the city, but south toward the Truoi River, where the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, was fighting off the early morning assault on Phu Loc. Two hours later, as the Marines approached the river, an order came in for them to turn around and head north to Combined Action Platoon (CAP) Alpha headquarters, north of Phu Bai, to investigate North Vietnamese Army

⁵“Sequential Listing of Significant Events,” 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201020031, folder 020, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 1-III-1, 1-III -2.

⁶Eric Hammel, *Fire in the Streets: The Battle for Hue, Tet 1968* (Pacifica, CA: Pacifica Military History, 1991), 61–62.

(NVA) activity there. At 0830, the company's orders changed again. This time it was to proceed to the Hue landing craft utility (LCU) ramp and investigate reports that the city was under attack.⁷ The Marines had no more information about what was going on, nor did they know the size or location of the forces that they would encounter in Hue.

As Company A approached the southern edges of Hue, it linked up with four Marine tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion. The tanks had set out earlier that morning to board a transport at the LCU ramp that would take them north to Dong Ha. Just outside the city, however, they came across the burned-out hulks of several Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) tanks that had been destroyed when the attack on the city began. Sensing that the LCU ramp was now unreachable without support, the tanks' commander had decided to return to Phu Bai for orders when he spotted Company A approaching. After a brief discussion with Captain Batcheller, the tank commander agreed to support the company's movement into the city.⁸

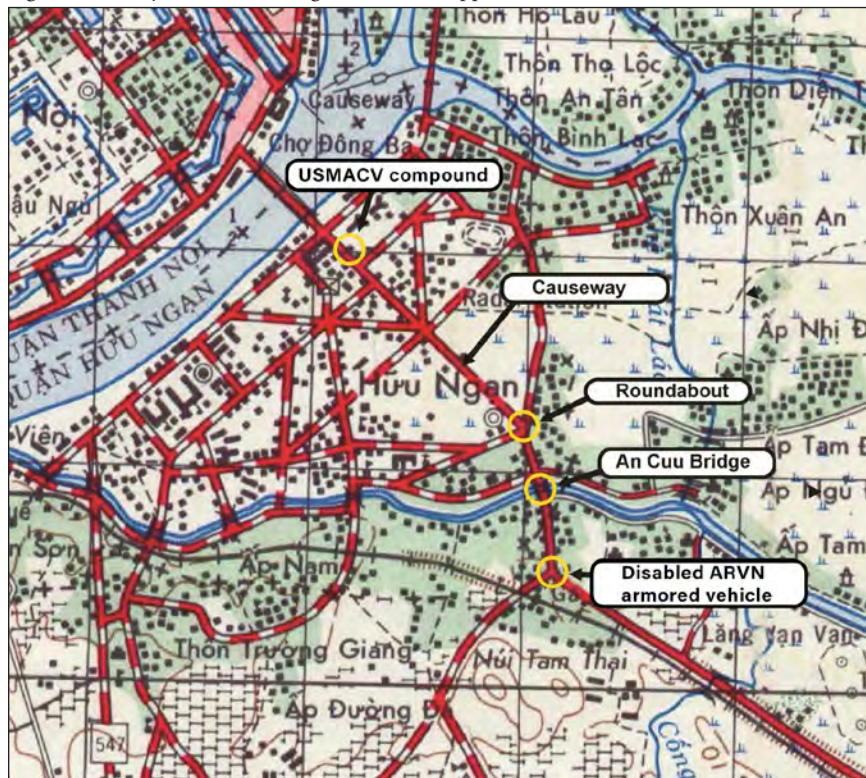
The combined force began their journey to the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), compound. The remaining distance to their objective was relatively short but daunting. Just past the destroyed ARVN vehicles, Highway 1 made a sharp right turn to cross the An Cuu Bridge, about nine kilometers from Phu Bai and a few hundred meters from the southern outskirts of Hue. Past the An Cuu Bridge was a residential area and a traffic roundabout. Following the roundabout was a 500-meter-long open causeway that crossed fields of rice on both sides. The causeway ran across a raised mound of earth about a meter above the fields. On the far side, the causeway ran into another road lined with buildings. Then, there was yet another 500 meters to travel through city streets to the USMACV compound (figure 14.1). When the reaction force crossed over the An Cuu Bridge, all hell broke loose.

⁷ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, January 1968, III A-4. See also Mark Bowden, *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017), 126–30.

⁸ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 130; and Jack Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 171.

TAKING BACK THE MODERN CITY

Figure 14.1. Key landmarks along the southern approach to Hue



The highway marker shows Highway 1 as it makes a sharp right turn, crosses the An Cuu Bridge, runs along the causeway, and passes the USMACV compound before crossing the Perfume River.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

The approaching Marines had no idea that enemy forces had fortified the southern city and were awaiting a counterattack. Small arms fire raked the convoy as the Marines advanced. Luckily, the enemy troops awaiting them had not organized a larger force to hold the area. Company A and its attached tanks continued to press north against withering fire.⁹

It took until midafternoon for the reaction force to reach to the USMACV compound. Captain Batcheller was wounded while lead-

⁹ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 131.

ing his Marines into the city. With the company commander down, Gunnery Sergeant John L. Canley took command and led the Marines deeper into the city. Resistance stiffened as they moved along the roadway toward the USMACV compound.¹⁰ Eventually, the reaction force was augmented by Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, which was directed to link up with and assist Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, after being temporarily assigned to the 1st Marines at 1020. Company G, along with the commander of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Marcus J. Gravel, managed to reach Company A, evacuate the wounded back to Phu Bai, and ultimately reach the USMACV compound.¹¹

When the Marines arrived, they found a desperate, confused situation. The USMACV compound had been under siege for hours, and several of its occupants had been wounded or killed while holding off the Communist onslaught. Gravel had no intelligence on the situation in Hue. Each communication with Task Force X-Ray's command post back at Phu Bai only added to his frustration, as General Foster C. LaHue was convinced that the city had been infiltrated by a small force and made repeated demands for Gravel and his Marines to clear them out quickly.¹² It was an impossible order, but Gravel attempted to organize things at the compound and clear out the surrounding buildings as best he could. It would take several days, dozens of casualties, and several botched offensives for commanders outside of Hue to get an idea of just how bad things were inside the city.

A Suicidal Attack Order

Confusion also reigned about the situation across the river in the Citadel. What happened next was a tragic consequence of that confusion. General LaHue ordered Lieutenant Colonel Gravel to attack across the multispanded truss bridge that crossed the Perfume River and to relieve pressure on General Ngo Quang Truong's headquarters, which

¹⁰ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 130–40.

¹¹ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events, 1st Marines, ComdC, January 1968, III A-4.

¹² Shulimson et. al., *The Defining Year*, 172.

was surrounded and running low on ammunition.¹³ After a heated argument with LaHue's headquarters about the futility of the assignment, Gravel ordered Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, under the command of Captain Charles L. Meadows, to move out.¹⁴

General LaHue and his staff back at Phu Bai did not fully understand the situation in Hue or the suicidal nature of the assignment they had ordered. Meadow's force would not only have to cross the long open spans of the bridge but also have to maneuver down the main street that paralleled the river to the fortified Thuong Tu gate in order to reach the friendly forces inside. The Marines would then have to cross a narrow bridge over a moat to enter one of the Citadel's gates. They could not even see the other side until they crossed the high crest in the middle of the bridge. Marine tanks could not accompany them because they were too heavy to cross the bridge, which had been significantly weakened by an explosion when enemy troops attempted to destroy it. ARVN mechanized units refused to go across. Worse, the Marines crossing the bridge were not allowed to use heavy firepower for fear of damaging the historical Citadel. Task Force X-Ray had added the condition that Gravel was not to destroy or even damage Vietnamese property, especially the historic Citadel structures. Gravel was therefore expected to attack across unfavorable terrain without air or artillery support.¹⁵ It was an impossible mission.

Nevertheless, Meadows followed his orders and led his Marines forward. It was a disaster. The company attacked across the bridge under heavy fire and lost dozens of Marines in the process. The NVA and Viet Cong were dug in and seemed to have soldiers posted in every building on the north side of the river. They poured rifle and machine gun fire into the ranks of the attacking Marines from more positions than the Marines could hope to suppress. As darkness approached, Meadows decided to withdraw back across the river. The company made it back, but with significant casualties. They linked up with oth-

¹³ Shulimson et. al., *The Defining Year*, 173–74.

¹⁴ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 141–42; and Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 81–82.

¹⁵ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 82–83.

er Marines, fell back toward the USMACV compound, and set up a defensive perimeter nearby.¹⁶ As darkness fell, Marine commanders assessed the situation. Meadows reported that he had lost nearly a third of his Marines in the assault across the river, and Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, had its own share of casualties as well. On that first day, the two Marine companies in Hue had suffered 10 Marines killed and approximately 56 wounded. They had little to show for the day's sacrifices. Worse, their commanders at Phu Bai still did not realize the gravity of the situation.¹⁷

Reorganizing the Marines

On the morning of 1 February, higher headquarters began to piece together a plan to clear the city. ARVN lieutenant general Lam Quang Thi and Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, commander of III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), agreed that the 1st ARVN Division would be responsible for clearing the Citadel and that Task Force X-Ray would clear the southern city. With that agreement, Task Force X-Ray moved more Marine units into the city.¹⁸ In the morning hours of 1 February, the Marines had only two battered rifle companies in Hue, Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, and Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel Gravel's command. Neither General LaHue nor his superiors had a clear idea of what was happening in the city.¹⁹

The second day of battle began with another impractical order to attack. At first light on the morning of 1 February, LaHue ordered Gravel to advance to the provincial headquarters and the prison and to secure the southern approaches to the two complexes. That was, of course, far easier said than done. Gravel's Marines immediately met heavy resistance and could not advance. Nearly the entire southern

¹⁶ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 145–50.

¹⁷ Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 174.

¹⁸ "Organization and Operations," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201062077, folder 062, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, enclosure 1.

¹⁹ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 184–85.

part of the city was under enemy occupation, and moving anywhere outside the USMACV compound's perimeter and a few other small areas was virtually impossible without fighting one's way from house to house.²⁰ Back at Phu Bai, La Hue told a group of reporters that U.S. forces controlled the south side of the city.²¹

With another advance stopped cold, the Marines returned to the USMACV compound. It was now clear that the city blocks surrounding the compound needed to be cleared before the Marines could advance any farther. That would be a slow and difficult undertaking. It was an attacker's nightmare—a dense, urban landscape where it was hard to know what was secure and what was not. General La Hue seemed to have been getting pressure from higher headquarters, who wanted the prison and its 2,000 prisoners secured as soon as possible. Late in the afternoon, General Cushman voiced his concern to LaHue's headquarters about the prison. Fortunately, his message also conveyed that he would send reinforcements to the city.²²

The Marines spent the next several days clearing each building around the USMACV compound. Although they gradually secured many of the surrounding city blocks, "secure" was a relative term in Hue, since enemy troops were still entrenched in fortified positions nearby from which they could regroup and counterattack against the relatively small U.S. force in the Southern City. While Gravel's Marines fought to retake the areas around the USMACV compound, he and his superiors attempted to consolidate their forces and plan an operation to clear the main downtown area.²³ However, that could not happen until additional Marine infantry companies arrived to bolster Gravel's beleaguered force.

Fortunately, elements of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, soon arrived. Late in the day on 1 February, the battalion's Company F reached the USMACV compound to help to retake the city.²⁴ Captain George

²⁰ "Operations," 1st Marines, ComdC, January 1968, section 2, pt. 3, II C-2.

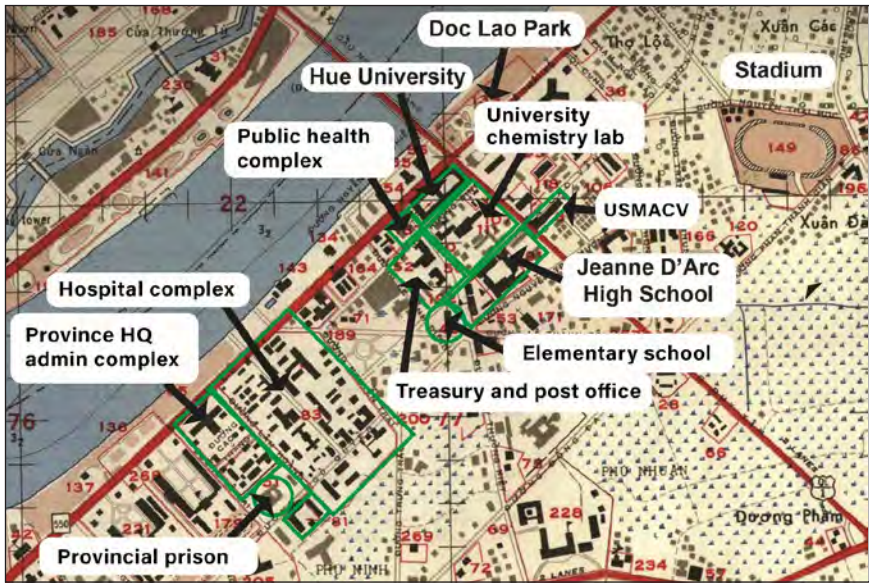
²¹ Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 175.

²² "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 1-7.

²³ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 135–39.

²⁴ "Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, 1-8.

Figure 14.2. Map of the downtown area of the southern city



This map shows that segment of the “downtown” of the southern city and the areas where the enemy had infiltrated the main buildings along Lei Loi Street from the university west down to the province headquarters complex and the prison. The green rectangles show the location of each of the buildings or building complexes that would be the scene of a series of major battles to retake those buildings and kill or drive out the enemy.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

R. Christmas’s Company H arrived the next afternoon to further augment the Marines’ counterattacking force. The reinforcements arrived at a crucial point in the battle. Contact remained moderate to heavy, but now that they had a sizable force, the Marines were able to establish a strong foothold in southern Hue that they could use to retake the city, house by house and street by street.²⁵

Retaking the Southern City

Retaking the Southern City was a slow and bloody process. Captain Christmas and the Marines of Company H had to confront the nightmarish depth and complexity of the enemy defenses head-on. Due to

²⁵ “Operations,” 1st Marines, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201018342, folder 018, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, pt. 2, section C, 3.

the way that the NVA and Viet Cong had set up in all the buildings in the city from the main bridge at Highway 1 west to the provincial administrative headquarters complex, it appeared that the enemy anticipated an ARVN convoy of tanks and armored personnel carriers to come straight west on Lei Lo Street (the street that borders the river) to rescue the provincial headquarters. Communist troops had set up strongpoints down the street with interlocking fields of fire. The Marines decided to place rifle companies to the north and south of these positions and proceed to clear the defensive line block by block, building by building, and room by room. The entire force would have to cross north-south running streets; full companies would have to cover one another as they crossed each one. The Southern City's buildings, many of which were two or more stories high, provided countless fighting positions from which hundreds of NVA battled the Marines as they advanced into their sights.²⁶

Initially, the Marines were forbidden from using heavy weaponry in the operation. This was a Vietnamese attempt to save the character of the city. However, the commanders on the ground soon realized that this was an unacceptable restriction and obtained permission to bring in tanks, artillery, M50 Ontos tank destroyers, recoilless rifles, and larger mortars. The Marines would have to punch holes in sides of the buildings to get effective fire inside. It appears that some of the commanders had already been stretching the limits of the rules against heavy weaponry.²⁷ If they had not, many more Marines would have died or been severely wounded.

Captain Christmas set up his command post at the Hue University.²⁸ The campus included a three-story building that occupied an entire block with a large open courtyard. Christmas's command post occupied one of the upper stories of a university building from which

²⁶ Ron Christmas, telephone interviews and correspondence with William F. Nimmo, 2019 and 2021, hereafter Christmas interviews.

²⁷ Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 180–83.

²⁸ Christmas interviews.

he and his Marines had a commanding view of the surrounding area.²⁹ The university complex then served as the springboard for the next stage of the Marine counteroffensive, to be spearheaded by the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines.

The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Ernest C. Cheatham, a former professional football player and expert tactician, wanted to launch an operation to take the public health complex, the treasury building, and the post office without delay.³⁰ According to Captain Christmas, Cheatham was worried that delaying further attacks would allow enemy forces time to regroup and launch their own counterattack against the USMACV compound. Cheatham was aware that the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, would likely not be in place on the line of departure at the scheduled time early on 4 February, since that battalion was busy trying to gain a foothold in the Jeanne d'Arc school, which was occupied by a large enemy force that would be difficult to neutralize without heavy casualties. Cheatham was willing to attempt an assault without the battalion's help, but the move was risky. All three of his objectives sat in a row directly across the positions held by his troops. Those Marines, who were used to fighting in rice fields, rural villages, and jungled mountains, had never been trained for urban warfare. The assault would be a high-stakes test of their ability to adapt.³¹

Wanting to deny enemy troops a respite, and suspecting that assistance from the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, would not arrive on time, Cheatham decided to act immediately. He ordered his Companies H and F to begin their assaults across the first street on the afternoon of 3 February. Company H's target was the public health complex, while Company F moved to seize the treasury building, immediately to the south of the public health complex. The attack did not get off to a promising start. Company F received intense automatic, small arms, and B40 rocket fire from their front and heavy automatic weapons fire

²⁹ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201048100, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 9–10, 12.

³⁰ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 207–13.

³¹ Christmas interviews.

from the left flank, in addition to incoming mortar fire. The two tanks supporting the company were both knocked out by rocket fire. The Marines fought back ferociously, but their high volume of fire could not break the enemy defenses on its own. They realized that they could not advance and, as night fell, moved back to their original position to regroup and prepare for the next day's assault.³²

Company H fared better. The Marines received heavy automatic and small arms fire as well as several B-40 rockets from their objective. However, they managed to sustain their advance, the company's 1st Platoon reached the target by sundown.³³ That night, Captain Christmas moved the company back across the street to a better defensive position, where the Marines prepared for the next morning's assault. Meanwhile, Company G moved into the Hue University complex and took up positions along the southwest corner to support the forthcoming assaults. That company would remain in reserve because of the tremendous casualties it had already received in the attempt to cross the bridge.³⁴

The next morning, Company H began their assault on the public health complex. The Marines received intense automatic rifle and machine gun fire from the Le Loi School building as well as sniper fire from two other locations. Company G, from its position on the southeast corner of Hue University, provided suppressive fire with rockets, machine guns, and small arms. Company F moved to assist Company H cross the street. Once Company H was across, Company F called in 81-millimeter mortar fire directly onto the school building.³⁵

In a moment that saved the day, a creative lance corporal brought up a "mechanical mule," a half-ton 4 x 4 utility vehicle, mounted with a 106-millimeter recoilless rifle. The NVA had learned a trick that the Marines used to cross open areas—throwing out a smoke grenade to obscure the enemy's vision before advancing—and had adapted ac-

³² Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 180; and Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 269–73.

³³ "Close Combat," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, 9–10.

³⁴ Christmas interviews.

³⁵ "Close Combat," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, 10.

cordingly. The enemy had one machine gun down past the end of the block that suppressed the Marines as they attempted to cross the street. This enterprising lance corporal solved the problem by volunteering to drive his mule-mounted recoilless rifle into the street and fire a round near the enemy position, which created a huge smokescreen.³⁶ His plan worked, and all of Company H made it across the street.

Once across, the Marines secured the buildings in the public health complex. They cleared each building one by one while Company G provided suppressing fire from across the street at other targets that threatened their advance. Christmas's Marines secured the public health complex that evening. In one building, they rescued 175 civilians, including 2 Americans.³⁷ Meanwhile, Company F attacked the treasury building. It was a difficult assault, especially after the Marines received small arms fire from their left flank. However, the company managed to return enough fire for one of its squads to successfully assault the position. When the rest of the company surged forward, the Marines received fire from a bunker inside of a building at their objective. As they closed with the bunker, one individual came out and surrendered. The Marines tried to convince the others to do the same, but they refused. When the enemy opened the door to fire on the Marines, a Marine fired an M72 light antitank weapon (LAW) into the bunker, which caused secondary explosions that ended enemy resistance for the day.³⁸

As Company H consolidated its newly won positions in the public health and treasury buildings, Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, joined it on line. The Marines now had a formidable clearing force of four companies with which to continue their push through the Southern City. The provincial headquarters would be their next objective.³⁹ The following morning, 5 February, Companies G and H seized their next two objectives, the Hue Sports Club and the Hue University Li-

³⁶ Christmas interviews.

³⁷ "Close Combat," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, 10–11.

³⁸ "Close Combat," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, 11.

³⁹ 1st Marines, ComdC, February 1968, pt. 2, section C, 3.

brary, respectively. Both objectives were located along Le Loi Street and the Perfume River. Once they had taken their objectives, both companies headed southwest toward the hospital. The Marines divided up the hospital, with each company responsible for a different sector of the large multibuilding complex. As they began moving toward the hospital, the defending NVA opened up with everything they had, including mortars, rockets, and small arms. The Marines requested artillery fire and assaulted the enemy positions under the cover of the ensuing bombardment.⁴⁰ The Marines slowly worked their way through the hospital complex, calling in artillery and 81-millimeter mortars on enemy strongpoints as they encountered them. Company G supported the advance by providing suppressing fire so that Company H could continue its assault into a building and gain a foothold within the complex. Once inside, the Marines used a combination of rockets, grenades, and small arms to knock out each NVA bunker.⁴¹

The Marines' day was not over yet. Late in the afternoon, Company H fought its way into a key position for the NVA's defenses in the hospital complex. The building was encircled by bunkers on three sides. The Marines methodically worked their way toward it, using fire and maneuver to close with each bunker before killing its inhabitants with grenades. The NVA who tried to flee were cut down by small arms fire and the .50-caliber machine gun mounted on a tank that supported the attack. The assault on the hospital complex wound down as the sun began to set. A platoon from Company F entered the final uncleared building. After killing five NVA soldiers holed up inside, they found and rescued the provincial chief and the mayor of Hue, along with his bodyguard.⁴²

The Marines ceased their attack at dusk. They had completed the day's assault on the hospital complex with relatively few casualties. They had been warned that Viet Cong troops inside the hospital complex might be posing as hospital patients, and in fact some were. One of Christmas's Marines encountered a "nun" wearing a black habit. The

⁴⁰ "Close Combat," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, 12.

⁴¹ "Close Combat," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, 12.

⁴² "Close Combat," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, 13.

person turned out to be a Viet Cong soldier who attempted to kill the Marine. The Viet Cong's weapon misfired, and the Marine survived.⁴³ Early the following morning, Companies H and G moved out to seize the remainder of the hospital complex. They again met stiff resistance, but now that they were already inside the complex, the going was a bit easier. The Marines moved around the flanks where they could, eventually getting into positions from which they could employ CS gas to flush out the defenders. They cleared the rest of the complex, again with light casualties, and prepared for their next assault.⁴⁴

With the hospital complex secured, the Marines could turn their attention to the provincial administration complex and the prison. The night before their assault on that area, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham briefed his company commanders. It was going to be a brutal fight. The provincial administration complex was one of the sturdiest enemy strongpoints. Because of the buildings' locations, and the streets and alleys from which the assault would be launched, the attack would be channelized. The leading Marine elements would have to cross an open street and then move across 35–45 meters (40–50 yards) of open courtyard.⁴⁵

Taking the objective proved to be as difficult as they had anticipated. After five hours, the Marines still did not have a foothold in the provincial headquarters. Heavy enemy fire from machine guns, automatic rifles, and recoilless rifles poured into their positions. The Marines returned fire and called for support. Tanks, 106-millimeter recoilless rifle teams, and Ontos tank destroyers moved in to break the defenses. The defenders damaged one tank with B40 rockets, but the attack pressed on. The Marines fired a combination of 81-millimeter mortars and CS gas that temporarily silenced the enemy weapons. At this point, Captain Christmas ordered his Marines to advance under the cover of tear gas and smoke. One of the Marines was killed on a stairway and two others were wounded, but the attack continued and the Marines

⁴³ Christmas interviews.

⁴⁴ "Close Combat," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, 12–13.

⁴⁵ Christmas interviews.

cleared the building room by room.⁴⁶ Altogether, four Marines were killed and nine more were wounded in the assault. With Company H's first objective taken, Company F attacked from the south. The Marines took fire from several firing points in the prison. The company halted and called in an 81-millimeter mortar mission on the enemy positions. After the mortar barrage suppressed the prison's defenders, the Marines assaulted the position, killing 15 of the enemy and suffering 5 of their own wounded.⁴⁷

At 1603, Christmas informed Cheatham that they had taken the provincial headquarters building and were going to raise the American flag over it. Cheatham told Christmas that they were not authorized to do so, but that he could proceed regardless. Christmas gave his company gunnery sergeant the go-ahead to take the NVA flag down and raise the Stars and Stripes. "We have looked at that damn NVA flag all day and now we are going to take it down!" Christmas barked to his Marines, "Let's go!" The sight of the American flag flying on top of the building brought tears to his eyes. From their positions in the building and in the courtyard, the Marines of Company H began to cheer. Christmas set up his command post on the second floor of the building, where he could easily monitor his platoons. Enemy resistance began to wane. Even as the fighting continued the following day, a flood of refugees, eventually numbering several hundred, began surrendering to the Marines.⁴⁸

The Marines were now ordered to push westward, through the power plant and to the Phu Cam Canal. Once at the canal, they would reverse direction and proceed to clearing the area to the north along the canal over to the An Cuu Bridge.⁴⁹ During the next few days, the Marines cleared the rest of southern Hue to the Phu Cam Canal. The enemy were now concentrated across the canal and still poised to attack. On 10 February, Christmas was ordered to clear a route over the

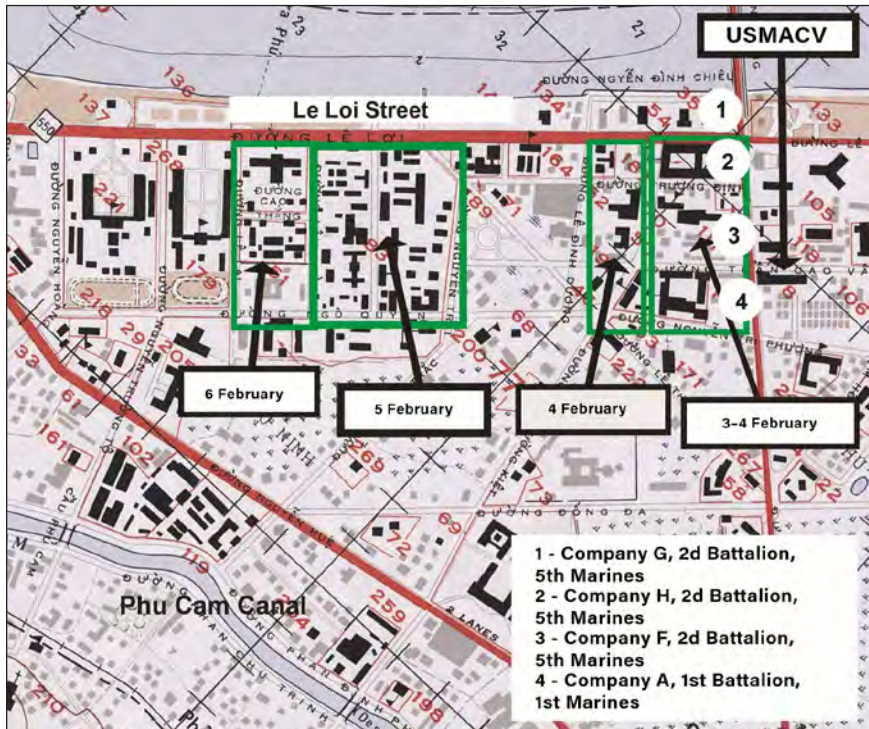
⁴⁶ Christmas interviews.

⁴⁷ "Close Combat," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, 14.

⁴⁸ Christmas interviews.

⁴⁹ Christmas interviews.

Figure 14.3. Map of the Marine advance, 3–6 February 1968



This map shows the initial placement of Marine advance from the commencement of the effort on 3–4 February to the end of the taking of the province headquarters and the prison. Four infantry companies lined up from north to south, from Hue University on Le Loi Street to the south end of the block, shown by the green rectangle for 3–4 February. Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, was at the northernmost position between the river and Le Loi Street; Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, was positioned from Le Loi Street to the first block south; Company F, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, was positioned in the block to the south of Company H; and then Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, would proceed through the southernmost block where Jeanne d’Arc High School was located. Before the attack on 4 February, Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, was moved to the university to serve as the battalion reserve.

Source: Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

Phu Cam Canal so that the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, called up from fighting in the Phu Loc District, could enter Hue and join the battle. The entry of the battalion into the city would mark the next and equally brutal phase of the battle for Hue. Once in the city, the battalion would move across the river, fight its way into the Citadel, and help

clear the NVA forces inside.⁵⁰ The ARVN forces in Hue had fought valiantly to this point, but they had been unable to clear the Citadel. Finishing that job was the last, and most daunting, obstacle to ridding Hue of NVA and Viet Cong occupation.

Unfortunately, Captain Christmas did not see the end of the battle. He was wounded on 13 February, as his company overran an enemy base camp situated west of Hue's railroad yard. Other officers were also wounded by fragments from an intense mortar barrage. Christmas was evacuated to the United States and did not return to the war. He was later awarded the Navy Cross for his heroism in the battle. Christmas made a career out of the Marine Corps and retired as a lieutenant general in 1996 after 34 years of service.⁵¹ He was one of many casualties suffered by the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, in the fight for Hue. In all, the battalion reported losing 61 Marines killed in action and 421 wounded in February 1968.⁵² With the southern city cleared, the battalion's role in the battle ended. Across the river, however, the Citadel remained in enemy hands. The fight was not yet over.

⁵⁰ Christmas interviews; and "Narrative Summary," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201062077, folder 062, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, pt. 2, enclosure 1.

⁵¹ Christmas interviews.

⁵² "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, 2.

CHAPTER 15

THE BATTLE TO RETAKE THE CITADEL

From the opening moments of the Battle of Hue, the situation inside the Citadel had been grim, yet hope was never completely lost. Although North Vietnamese Army (NVA) battalions had been able to enter the Citadel at will, General Ngo Quang Truong and his small band of Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops managed to hold them off until reinforcements arrived. Truong's force could not protect the entire Citadel, but they could prevent their position from being overrun. Moreover, Truong did not lose contact with other ARVN troops outside the city. He called for reinforcements quickly, and several ARVN units pushed toward the Citadel to join the battle and begin the weeks-long struggle to drive out the enemy. While the effort to recapture the Southern City was mostly fought by U.S. Marines, the fight for the Citadel remained a South Vietnamese fight until their counterattacks stalled 11 days into the battle.¹

The first reinforcements made it into the Citadel on the evening of 31 January 1968. When the battle began, they had been located at PK17, an ARVN checkpoint on Highway 1 about 17 kilometers northwest of Hue. Like the U.S. Marines, the ARVN paratroopers' movement into the city had been stalled by stubborn enemy resistance, but they eventually succeeded in breaking through on the afternoon of 31 January. Elements of the Hac Bao reaction force came out to meet them and led them through a back area to the northeastern gate, where

¹Jack Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 167–68, 171, 192.

they entered.² Around 1500 the following afternoon, one of General Truong's battalions from the ARVN's 1st Division, the 1st Battalion, 3d Regiment, arrived in the Citadel. Two other battalions of the regiment were stalled by enemy forces outside of the Citadel walls. Later in afternoon of 1 February, U.S. Marine helicopters lifted half of another ARVN battalion into the Citadel. However, worsening weather and the approaching night diminished visibility enough to prevent them from bringing in the rest of the soldiers.³ By 7 February, the remaining battalions of the 3d Regiment had joined the effort. The South Vietnamese now had two ARVN airborne battalions, five battalions of ARVN infantry, the Hac Bao, and one additional infantry company engaged in the battle. However, there was little progress in taking back the Citadel. The NVA still controlled about 60 percent of the area, were dug in deep, and had received reinforcements of well-equipped NVA from the west.⁴

The Citadel defenders were hampered by the Communists' unfettered ability to bring in resupplies of fresh troops, ammunition, and equipment from their command center in the village of La Chu. Near the time the offensive began, a battalion of the NVA's *5th Regiment* along with a Viet Cong local force company moved into La Chu and the nearby hamlet of Que Chu and set up a command and control center that would feed reinforcements and supplies into the Citadel throughout the battle. After NVA troops secured the area, civilian laborers moved supplies from the hills to the west to La Chu under the guidance of Viet Cong cadres. Ultimately, the size of the NVA force in these hamlets rose to regimental size. The historian Erik Villard notes that the South Vietnamese government had regarded La Chu as a model of pacification and that the U.S. government had invested significant funds to support the project. Ironically, the NVA set up their

² Erik Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 2008), 42–43.

³ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, 45; and Mark Bowden, *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017), 184.

⁴ Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 192.

headquarters in the building originally designed to protect the villagers from them.⁵ Before any counteroffensive in Hue could fully succeed, allied troops would have to locate and neutralize that assembly point.

Discovery of the NVA Command and Resupply Center

For the first week of the battle for Hue, both sides maintained an open supply line into the city, the Marines from the south along Highway 1 and the Communists from the west. Viet Cong and NVA troops tried and failed to sever the Marines' supply line into along the road to Hue when Tet began. Now it was the Americans' turn. In the battle's early stages, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces had neither the numbers nor the intelligence to make a similar attempt on the Communists. That began to change on 3 February, when a battalion from the U.S. Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division unknowingly stumbled into the linchpin to the Communists' offensive. As the soldiers advanced on the city from the north, they discovered a NVA command and resupply center in La Chu, to the northwest of Hue.⁶

The day before, General Robert E. Cushman had sought permission from General William C. Westmoreland to use the 1st Air Cavalry Division to block the NVA's potential egress and resupply routes leading in and out of the city. Three air cavalry brigades had moved into the former Marine outpost at Camp Evans just a week before on 25 January. This position was about 32 kilometers (20 miles) northwest of Hue on Highway 1. When the attack began, an air assault to the Citadel walls had been ruled out because the ground fire would be too intense and the air cavalry's artillery at Camp Evans was too far away to support the effort. It was clear that any force trying to land in the area outside the walls, especially the west walls of the Citadel, would have met disastrous consequences.⁷ The offensive created serious logistic issues that further strained the air cavalry's efforts to join the battle.

⁵ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, 34–36.

⁶ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 226–37.

⁷ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, 48.

Supply convoys could not reach them from Phu Bai anymore because the main supply route went through the area bordering the southwest walls of the Citadel, where enemy forces were dug in.⁸ The air cavalry battalion would have to approach Hue on foot.

The air cavalry soldiers first moved to PK17 by helicopter before beginning their trek toward the battle raging in Hue. Their mission was to seal off the city from the west and north with their right flank on the Perfume River.⁹ The task fell to the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Richard S. Sweet. Problems confronted the soldiers as soon as they stepped off. When they set out for PK17, they had not received their backpacks, and there was no artillery to protect them when and if they ran into trouble. The weather, overcast skies with low clouds, limited their ability to call for air support. But the situation was dire, and the South Vietnamese and American troops fighting in the city could not wait for these issues to be resolved, so the battalion moved out.¹⁰

Lieutenant Colonel Sweet made the sensible (and fortuitous) decision not to invite an ambush by moving straight down Highway 1. He instead maneuvered his troops to the west of the highway and through the countryside, which would take him through rice farming hamlets. Neither he nor his superiors knew at that time that La Chu, which lay along Sweet's planned route, was full of NVA who had prepared strong fortifications. Sweet's soldiers ran into those defenses and were stopped cold for two days, during which time they had to fight for their survival.¹¹ In the middle of the second night, they made a daring escape to the west and then maneuvered closer to the Perfume River. They then moved toward a hill where an ARVN outpost was located. The

⁸ "Organization and Operations, 7 February Summary," Task Force X-Ray, Command Chronology (ComdC), February 1968, item no. 1201062077, folder 062, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive).

⁹ Shulimson et al. *The Defining Year*, 192.

¹⁰ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, 48.

¹¹ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, 48; and Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 230–37.

soldiers safely made it to outpost, where they could observe and direct fire on enemy troops carrying supplies into the Citadel. The air cavalry command surmised that the ensuing artillery and air strikes on the supply and troop reinforcement routes effectively stopped resupply, at least during the daytime hours.¹² They could not reach the city to assist inside the Citadel, but their disruption of the western approaches and the supply route there had a significant impact on the battle.

By 10 February, the ARVN had stabilized the situation inside the Citadel, but their efforts to rid it of enemy forces had stalled. The ARVN's 1st Division was widely considered to be the best of the South Vietnamese army units and was highly regarded by the Americans who fought alongside its soldiers. The ARVN fought bravely against a deeply entrenched enemy, but after two weeks their counterattack had run out of steam.¹³ The higher command decided to send both South Vietnamese and U.S. Marine reinforcements to help finish the job. The U.S. Marines were ordered to clear the southeastern sector of the Citadel, while the Vietnamese Marines would clear out the southwestern sector.¹⁴

Enter the U.S. Marines

The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, began moving from its tactical area of responsibility in Phu Loc toward the Hue Citadel on 11 February. The Marines moved in segments from various locations throughout Phu Loc to Phu Bai and then to the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, compound in Hue. From there, they moved across the Perfume River and into the Hue Citadel. The command group, along with Companies B and C, arrived in northern Hue via the LCU ramp late on 12 February.¹⁵

¹² Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, 50–53.

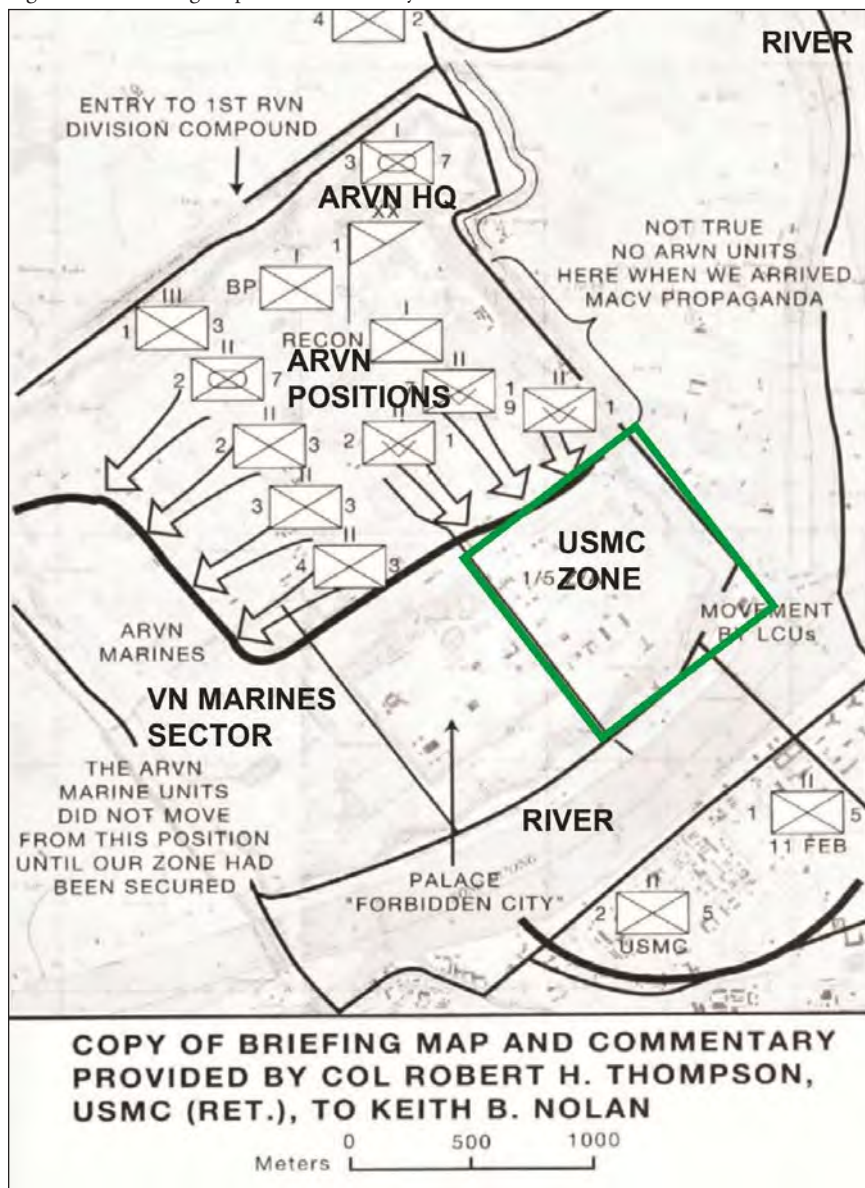
¹³ George W. Smith, *The Siege at Hue* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999), 165–66; and Geoffrey Wawro, *The Vietnam War: A Military History* (New York: Basic Books, 2024), 273–74, 277.

¹⁴ Shulimson et al, *The Defining Year*, 192–94.

¹⁵ “Sequential List of Significant Events,” 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201048024, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 3-12.

THE BATTLE TO RETAKE THE CITADEL

Figure 15.1. Briefing map with commentary



A copy of Maj Robert H. Thompson's briefing map. Note the notations on the right indicating Thompson's feeling that they had been deceived as to the presence of ARVN troops that supposedly had been present to protect the Marine starting line of Phase Line Green.

Source: markings added by William F. Nimmo.

Transportation to the Citadel involved a complicated process. Helicopters were the preferred and most expedient method of transport, but a combination of hostile ground fire and inclement weather diminished the battalion's capacity to move by air. Movement to the city by truck was easy enough, but getting into the Citadel was a different matter. After spending a night in Hue University, most of the battalion's Marines boarded landing craft utilities (LCUs) that transported them upriver and then entered the Citadel from the North.¹⁶ By 13 February, Companies A, B, and C were all in position at the Mang Ca compound. Company D was temporarily deployed on the southern side of the river. The battalion's mission was simple: to fight on line and drive the enemy out from the several blocks between them and the southern wall. Companies A and C would move up to a street code-named Phase Line Green (actually named Mai Thuc Loan) and form a line where, ideally, they would push forward toward the south. Company B, with slightly fewer Marines in its ranks at the time, would be held in reserve. The goal was to drive the Communists out of the whole southeastern sector and reach the southern front wall of the Citadel.¹⁷

Beginning at Phase Line Green, the southeastern sector consisted of seven city blocks of masonry, one- and two-story residential and retail buildings. It was an area of about one square kilometer in which the buildings were all very close together. On the west side of the sector, the boundary line was the east wall of the inner Imperial City. In all, the Imperial City was 600 meters long on each side, and the walls were as high as 4 meters and nearly 2 meters thick. The block next to the inner-city wall had more open area, some of it park-like, than did the other blocks to the east. This left a force moving through there more vulnerable to fire from the NVA occupying the Imperial City. If this did not present difficulty enough, the Marines were also forbidden from using the type of firepower that could breach many of the NVA defenses.¹⁸

¹⁶ Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 198–99.

¹⁷ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 401–2; and Nicholas Warr, *Phase Line Green: The Battle for Hue, 1968* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 90–91.

¹⁸ Warr, *Phase Line Green*, 96.

THE BATTLE TO RETAKE THE CITADEL

Figure 15.2. Locations of Phase Lines Green, Black, and Orange



This drawing shows the location of Dong Ba Gate and the Marine approach from the Mang Ca compound.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo.

The Citadel's formidable walls lined the east flank of the south-easter sectors. These fortifications, while not as tall as the outer wall, provided an advantageous position from which to observe and inhibit movement on the streets below. Shanties dotted the flat high ground, and the vegetation was lush and heavy. The whole of the landscape made for a perfect environment from which the enemy could fight a modern war with rockets, mortars, machine guns, and rifles. Each house was a separate defensive position and each block a formidable bastion.¹⁹

The initial push across Phase Line Green proved disastrous for the Marines of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. The plan was to reach the

¹⁹ "Commander's Analysis," Task Force X-Ray, Operation Hue City After Action Report, 31 January–2 March 1968, item no. 1201062076, folder 062, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 12.

starting line, the street before Phase Line Green, and in a coordinated effort move to and across Phase Line Green. The Marines would then clear the buildings on the other side of Phase Line Green and prepare to cross the next street, known as Phase Line Black. But they ran into problems as soon as they stepped off. Their ability to respond to withering enemy fire was hampered by General Truong's order that prohibited the use of heavy weapons. Truong meant well; he wanted to protect the city's character. However, the restriction impeded the Marines' ability to take their objective and minimize friendly casualties because they could not simply blast their targets with tanks, recoilless rifles, and artillery before sending in the infantry.²⁰ Truong eventually lifted the restrictions, but not soon enough to save a number of Marine and ARVN casualties.

Miscommunications and spotty situational awareness compounded the morning's problems. Before moving out, the battalion commander, Major Robert H. Thompson, had been told that South Vietnamese troops were holding positions along Phase Line Green. Much to Thompson's dismay, this turned out to be untrue.²¹ The South Vietnamese unit had departed earlier, leaving the area unprotected. The Marines originally planned to proceed in columns down a main street toward their target area. When they got close to Phase Line Green, each company would break off from the main column and maneuver to their assigned positions. The first company in the column was Company A, followed by Company C, and with Company B following in reserve. Company A was responsible for the battalion's eastern flank, which included the area from the Citadel's inner wall to the Dong Ba Gate, along with the first block out from the gate area. Meanwhile, Company C's three platoons would each take one of the remaining three blocks down to the wall block next to the inner Imperial City wall.²²

²⁰ Warr, *Phase Line Green*, 91–93. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines' first attempt to cross Phase Line Green is discussed in Warr, *Phase Line Green*, 98–120. General LaHue supported the restrictions at first. See Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 219.

²¹ Nicholas Warr, interview and correspondence with William F. Nimmo, November and December 2020, hereafter Warr interviews.

²² Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 199–200.

Shortly after the battalion stepped off, Company A was supposed to meet an ARVN unit at the street before Phase Line Green to receive intelligence about the enemy forces on the other side. But the ARVN unit never showed, so the Marines had to proceed without any knowledge of the enemy forces or their locations.²³ When they neared Phase Line Green, Company A turned left (east) and headed to its starting position next to the wall. Almost immediately, the Marines fell under a rain of fire and grenades from the Citadel's interior wall. To make matters worse, an incoming rocket seriously weakened the company's command group. Two Marines were killed in the episode, and another 30 were wounded.²⁴ Company A was already understrength when it arrived at the Citadel, and now it was further weakened. Command of the company now fell to an inexperienced second lieutenant. Major Thompson prudently called up Company B to replace it on line.²⁵

When they finally received the signal to move forward, officers such as Second Lieutenant Nicholas Warr, a platoon leader in Company C, moved their Marines out on line. They met stiff resistance right away. The NVA in the buildings and atop the Citadel Walls had well-prepared interlocking fields of fire that swept across Phase Line Green and down the road leading from the Dong Ba Gate. In the ensuing firefight, Warr's platoon attempted to cross the street three times. Each attempt failed and only produced more casualties. The NVA across the street held their fire and stayed out of sight until the Marines moved into the open. When the Marines attempted to cross, the NVA opened fire. Company C expected help from Company B, now on its left flank. But Company B ran into similar problems trying to neutralize the fire coming from the Dong Ba Gate and could not support Company C's advance.²⁶

The battalion's first day of combat in the Citadel could not have gone much worse. Company C took so many casualties that Warr's platoon, after its three attempts to cross Phase Line Green, was literally dis-

²³ Warr interviews.

²⁴ "Combat Action Operations Report," Task Force X-Ray, Operation Hue City After Action Report, 41.

²⁵ Warr, *Phase Line Green*, 103–4.

²⁶ Warr, *Phase Line Green*, 105–18.

banded, and the remaining Marines were parceled out to other platoons. According to Warr, on that single day, his platoon lost 5 killed and 24 wounded badly enough to require medical evacuation.²⁷ At the end of that day, it was clear that without heavy fire support, and without neutralizing the Dong Ba Gate, the Marines could not advance any farther.

Fortunately, the battalion's circumstances soon changed. The first development was the arrival of much needed reinforcements. On 14 February, Company D, which had been assisting the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, on the southern side of the river, rejoined the battalion. It now fell to these Marines to take the Dong Ba Gate. Captain Myron C. Harrington Jr., the company commander, started out that morning with only around 100 Marines.²⁸ Both Companies A and B had been badly beaten up in their attempts to take the gate. Prior to their assault, they had not fully realized just how powerful a position the gate was. Taking it without support from heavier firepower would be impossible.

The second development was the introduction of heavy fire support within the Citadel. The Marines' disastrous attempts to breach Phase Line Green seemed enough to convince General Truong and General Foster C. LaHue to lift their restrictions on fire support. The next morning, U.S. Navy cruisers and destroyers sitting offshore and Marine artillery batteries at Phu Bai and Gia Le launched fire missions into the city.²⁹ That was also the first day when cloud ceilings were high enough to permit fixed-wing air strikes. As air, artillery, and naval assets pounded targets in front of them, the Marines rested and reorganized before attempting to advance again. Yet, another round of attacks still failed to dislodge the enemy despite the heavy support. It took another day of artillery, naval gunfire, and air strikes on the east wall tower before the Marine infantry finally seized the structure on 16 February.³⁰

²⁷ Warr interviews.

²⁸ Myron Harrington, interviews and correspondence with William F. Nimmo, 2020 and 2021, hereafter Harrington interviews.

²⁹ Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 199–200.

³⁰ "Organization and Operations," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201062077, folder 062, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, entries for 14–16 February 1968.

THE BATTLE TO RETAKE THE CITADEL

Figure 15.3. Dong Ba Gate, 2020



This photograph from 2020 shows the historically reconstructed gate. The enemy in the tower and in the low concrete wall along the top of the gate were able to lay massive machine gun fire straight down the street, which was known to the Marines as Phase Line Green.

Source: Photo by Thuan Pham, October 2020. Exhibit created by William F. Nimmo.

Assault on the Dong Ba Gate

The Dong Ba Gate had proven especially difficult to crack. When Captain Harrington began his mission to secure it, the tower atop the gate and the surrounding area had been heavily damaged. Part of it still stood, however, and the rubble offered plenty of fighting positions for the Communist defenders. Harrington and his two platoons, responsible for that section of the wall and for the first block to its west, began working their way toward Mai Thuc Loan Street (Phase Line Green), on which the massive gate structure was located. They worked their

way toward the street by moving through the buildings, many of which were vacant, that lined the block between them and Mai Thuc Loan.³¹

As soon as the attack began, Harrington lost contact with one of his platoons when its radio was destroyed by gunfire. He sent out two runners to their last known position to find them, but they did not return. Fortunately, Company D had a Marine tank in support. The tank pulled up and parked on the side street next to the building that served as Harrington's command post. Part of the tank's profile protected them in the building, making it easier for Captain Harrington to go about his business. With the tank suppressing targets in the tower, Harrington made his move.³²

First, he attempted to flank the gate. Harrington told one of his sergeants and eight Marines to hook around to the north, where there was a natural stairway up onto high ground. Once in position, they were on an equal elevation to the rampart directly north of the Dong Ba Gate. They moved toward the tower from the north while the tank continued to fire its .50-caliber machine gun into the tower. Harrington called artillery directly on the tower as his Marines advanced, being careful to cease the fire when they got close. When the artillery fire stopped, he switched to his company's 60-millimeter mortars and the battalion's 81-millimeter mortars, both of which could be controlled more easily and were firing from more favorable angles.³³

The infusion of fire support allowed the Marines to finally close with the tower, but progress was still slow. It took them three or four hours to get into a position for a final assault. As enemy fire from the tower lessened, Harrington's second platoon moved across Phase Line Green to positions on the south side of the gate. Those Marines then moved up onto the high ground to the north and, with the squad that took the position earlier, assaulted the NVA remaining in the tower.³⁴ By the end of the day on 16 February, Company D held the gate.

³¹ Harrington interviews.

³² Harrington interviews.

³³ Harrington interviews.

³⁴ Harrington interviews.

A counterattack in early the next morning briefly drove the Marines back, but Harrington led a counterattack of his own that quickly recaptured the gate for good. After days of fighting, the Dong Ba Gate was permanently in the Marines' possession. Company D had lost 6 Marines killed and 35 wounded.³⁵

Company D's fight was not over yet. After taking the gate, it proceeded south along the same track as Companies B and C to drive several blocks to the south wall. The company's new mission was to clear the east wall and the adjacent block and then proceed south in conjunction with the other companies on the three blocks to their west. Company D's progress was again slow and marked by heavy combat. Harrington initially remained on high ground and proceeded south with one of his platoons. By this time, his third platoon had been returned to his command, and together the company's three platoons moved south. One platoon was on the high ground (the rampart apron area) along the wall while the other two platoons were in the block below, moving from one building to the next, clearing every room and space in their way. The Marines now had the use of artillery, but instead of simply leveling the entire area, they chose their targets depending on which building showed the highest concentrations of enemy troops.³⁶

The NVA made one of their final stands in the southeast sector, where they were dug in with plenty of troops who contested every inch of territory. As Harrington moved his Marines on the high ground, they were met with fire from several directions. The most troublesome enemy firing positions were located within the three-story buildings outside the Citadel across the moat in the area known as Gia Hoi Island. Snipers lodged themselves in these structures and shot at the Marines as they moved forward. Several fire missions were called to silence those positions.³⁷

³⁵ Harrington interviews. See also Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 432–41; and Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 200–1.

³⁶ Harrington interviews.

³⁷ Harrington interviews; and Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 210–11.

The high ground was characterized by open fields with dug-in fighting holes, rows of crude shanties along the rim of the rampart near the street, and heavy vegetation and trees near the street below. This provided countless spots from which to fire on the Marines. Harrington's Marines shot one sniper lodged in a tree not too far south of the gate. The captain moved back and forth from the high ground to the buildings below to coordinate his company's progress and the supporting fires being called in on the buildings.³⁸ The rest of the Marines along Phase Line Green finally made some real progress after the Dong Ba Gate had been neutralized and secured. A particularly significant advance occurred when one squad managed to cross the street at night. This was strictly a volunteer mission, but it worked. Apparently the NVA had moved back a bit, and this allowed the Marines to make a significant advance forward.³⁹

The Marines pushed on. Between their own mortars, artillery from Phu Bai, tanks, and Ontos tank destroyers, they now had almost unlimited fire support. This infusion of supporting fires tipped the battle in the Marines' favor, but progress nevertheless remained slow. At the end of the day on 16 February, the battalion reported making steady progress as Companies B, C, and D attacked to the southeast. The Marines reported engaging the enemy at extremely close ranges and receiving heavy volumes of small arms fire, automatic weapons fire, grenades, and rockets in return. Once they had consolidated into their defensive positions for the night, they reported 7 Marines killed, 47 more wounded and evacuated, and 63 confirmed NVA killed.⁴⁰ The following day, the Marines made more progress in another push to the south. All units reported heavy contact with the enemy. The heaviest firing came from the palace walls on the Marines' far right flank. The battalion reported using its organic weapons, 105-millimeter recoilless rifles, 90-millimeter tank fire, and artillery to suppress the enemy and

³⁸ Harrington interviews.

³⁹ Warr, *Phase Line Green*, 176–80.

⁴⁰ "Combat Action Operations Report," Task Force X-Ray, Operation Hue City After Action Report, 47.

enable the Marines to continue their advance. That day, 17 February, 12 Marines were killed, 45 were wounded and evacuated, and 15 sustained minor wounds, while 26 NVA were confirmed killed.⁴¹

Clearing the southeastern sector of the Citadel was laborious and costly in casualties. Enemy forces contested every square inch of territory, ingeniously using the urban terrain and the buildings' strong masonry to delay the Marines' advance. The remaining NVA in this southeastern sector were making a last stand. Fighting hard to last man, they were not going to simply give up or retreat. The battalion's right flank was also problematic, as it abutted the west wall of the sacred inner city. The battalion dedicated an entire platoon to confront this issue. There was a lot of open space in this area, and the NVA gunners behind the forbidden city wall fired intensely at Marines.

Enter the Vietnamese Marines

The South Vietnamese Marines entered the fray with two battalions on 14 February. Their force of 700 was responsible for tackling the Citadel's southwestern sector. On their first day in the battle, they lost 9 dead and 24 wounded. By 16 February, they had recaptured some ground but were only able to move 365 meters (400 yards) ahead. That evening, an American forward observer, hidden with a small team in a place they called "the Alamo," intercepted a radio transmission indicating that the NVA were preparing a battalion-size enemy attack through a western gate. Artillery from several sources was called in on the narrow bridge outside the gate and on the surrounding area. The area was pounded for 10 minutes by a combination of naval gunfire from a destroyer offshore and from the 155-millimeter howitzers near Phu Bai. The attack was stopped, and the forward observer team learned that a high ranking NVA officer had been killed. Later that night, they intercepted another transmission from the new commander of NVA forces in the Citadel. He requested to withdraw troops from the Citadel but was denied.⁴²

⁴¹ "Combat Action Operations Report," Task Force X-Ray, Operation Hue City After Action Report, 49.

⁴² Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 204–5.

The advance of the Vietnamese Marines into the Citadel was just as difficult and bloody as that of the U.S. Marines. The former encountered the same problems in their sector that the latter had confronted at the Dong Ba Gate and also had to contend with an enemy force that made excellent use of the Citadel's defensive works and urban terrain. Further complicating matters was the division of the Citadel's interior into sections by canals. One could only cross each canal by narrow bridges. To get well into the southwest sector, the Vietnamese Marines had to cross a bridge. The NVA had machine guns and other weapons zeroed in on these bridges, causing the Vietnamese Marines to stall temporarily. The two gates on the west, the northernmost Chanh Tay gate and the southernmost Huu gate, were heavily protected by the NVA. These two gates were vital to the NVA for bringing in more troops and supplies and for withdrawal, should the time come.⁴³

While the U.S. and Vietnamese Marines advanced through the city's interior, the U.S. Army was approaching from the outside. It would not be long before they would be in a position to stop all NVA fleeing to the west. On the morning of 21 February 21, the Army's air cavalry attacked the NVA command and resupply hamlets of Que Chu and La Chu with three battalions. The battle took the better part of the day, and the attacking soldiers estimated that an entire enemy regiment defended the hamlets. While they killed 89 of the enemy, the air cavalry force lost 4 killed and 77 wounded. One captured enemy soldier said that there were more than 1,000 soldiers in those two hamlets when the attack began. While the U.S. soldiers had to mop up afterwards, the enemy had abandoned their supply and command center quickly.⁴⁴

Back inside the city, the battle appeared to be nearing its end, but the NVA continued to resist for several more days. At least now, both for the ARVN and for the U.S. Marines, fire support was almost unlimited. Commanders from all three forces demanded that all resources and assets be used to end the siege. Over the next several days, the Ma-

⁴³ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, 60–61.

⁴⁴ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, 72–73.

rines pushed forward southward until the last remaining North Vietnamese soldier had been killed or driven out of their sector.

The overall command of the project and the documenting oversight was the Marine Corps' Task Force Xray. In its after-action report, it compiled daily entries of all the Marine units involved in Operation Hue City. A review of these for each day reveals that all the companies involved—Companies A (which was in reserve for part of the time) B, C, and D—were inching forward slowly with what was mostly described in each day's summary as "heavy action." Reviewing those records and correlating them to the positions of each unit showed not only the actions of each unit but the unique circumstances of their relative positions in the sector. Those entries show an engaged and stubborn enemy. The NVA sustained substantial casualties, as did the Marines. Usually, the number of enemy killed were far in excess of Marines killed or wounded, but the figures reveal a high price for that 1-kilometer piece of ground.⁴⁵

The fighting in Hue remained heavy, and each Marine platoon was getting smaller and smaller every day. By the end of the operation, there were only a few officers left. A division message stated that, of the 10 platoons in the Citadel battalion, three were commanded by lieutenants, one by a gunnery sergeant, two by staff sergeants, two by sergeants, and two by corporals.⁴⁶

General Truong bolstered up the Marine effort by placing his reconnaissance unit on the Marine left flank by the wall of the Imperial Forbidden City. He also ordered one of his battalions to drive straight south in the center toward the Forbidden City. Despite this assistance, the going was still slow and very dangerous. On 21 February, Company L of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines arrived in the city and went to the Citadel to join the battle.⁴⁷ The Marines were a welcome sight, and they immediately began taking pressure off of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines.

⁴⁵ "Combat Operations Report," Task Force X-Ray, Operation Hue City After Action Report, 47–55.

⁴⁶ Col Richard D. Camp Jr., USMC (Ret), *Death in the Imperial City: U.S. Marines Battle for Hue, 31 January to 2 March 1968* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps History Division, 2018), 62.

⁴⁷ Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 208.

The focus now was the southern wall and the southeast corner. The southeast corner had a unique shape, and the enemy had made a strong stand there. Once the resistance was wiped out in that area, the job would be much closer to being finished.⁴⁸ After a series of air strikes on the south wall at about 1300 on 22 February, a platoon from Company A secured the southeast corner of the wall and raised the American flag. Task Force X-Ray reported that the final objective was secured. Company B was withdrawn by helicopter and flown to Phu Bai for some rest and recuperation.⁴⁹

On 24 February, with the wall secured, the Marines stood back while a unit from the ARVN's 1st Division had the honor of tearing down the enemy flag and proudly running up the flag of the Republic of South Vietnam. The Hac Bao were then turned loose on the inner Imperial City. They broke through the main entrance, killed the remaining NVA, and secured the area. On 26 February 26, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, moved out of the Citadel into positions on the south side of the Perfume River.⁵⁰

Captain Harrington's Company D was hit especially hard. Out of the 89 Marines with which Harrington had first approached the Dong Ba Gate, only 39 remained standing at the end. When they departed the Citadel, the Marines calmly walked in column down the street and out through the Thuong Tu gate, the main entrance to the Citadel.⁵¹ The battle was over for them.

⁴⁸ "Combat Operations Report," Task Force X-Ray, Operation Hue City After Action Report, 56.

⁴⁹ "Combat Operations Report," Task Force X-Ray, Operation Hue City After Action Report, 58.

⁵⁰ "Combat Operations Report," Task Force X-Ray, Operation Hue City After Action Report, 65.

⁵¹ Harrington interviews.

CHAPTER 16

THE BATTLE OF HUE

A POSTMORTEM ANALYSIS

There were few allied preparations to defend the Citadel or the main approaches to Hue, even after the abortive Tet attacks on 30 January 1968. That low state of readiness largely stemmed from the judgments and decisions made by General Ngo Quang Truong. His headquarters, after all, was inside the Citadel, and his soldiers were responsible for defending the city. But that does not fully explain the series of events that unfolded in January–February 1968.

The U.S. commanders who had troops posted north and south of Hue were unaware of how inadequate the city's defenses were at the time. Their lack of awareness had deadly consequences. The allies' efforts to retake both the Citadel and the modern city succeeded, but it came at a high price in human life. The U.S. Marines lost 142 killed and 1,100 wounded in retaking both the southern city and their sector of the Citadel. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) suffered worse, losing 333 soldiers killed and another 1,773 wounded. The Vietnamese Marines lost 88 killed and 350 wounded. The U.S. Army suffered 68 soldiers killed as well. In total, 637 allied troops were killed and 3,676 were wounded. The city's civilian population was also devastated, with estimates of between 3,000 and 5,800 killed during the battle. Some died in the crossfire, while others were executed by the Communist death squads that roamed the residential areas while the fighting raged on elsewhere. It is unknown how many Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops died, but estimates range from

2,500 to 5,000.¹ Even after the battle inside the city officially ended on 2 March, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces had to launch additional operations in the surrounding countryside to hunt down and push out any remaining threats to the area.²

Besides its cultural and historical significance, Hue was important to the allied effort because the main supply route that ran from Da Nang and Phu Bai to Dong Ha, Highway 1, passed through both the Citadel and the modern city. All convoys had but one route through Hue—they traversed the surface streets across the Trung Tien Bridge and around the south and west sides of the Citadel (figure 16.1). Approximately 37 convoys traveled along this route in January 1968 alone.³ It was a vital link in the supply chain for the war effort in northern I Corps. There was no alternate ground route. Convoys and supplies moving along this route stopped when Communist forces attacked Hue and did not resume for several weeks.

As with nearly everything else dealing with the United States' role in the Vietnam War, historians have excoriated General William C. Westmoreland for dismissing the threat to Hue and instead fixating on Khe Sanh.⁴ Some of these criticisms have merit—Westmoreland, after all, dismissed the initial reports coming out of the city that explained just how bad things were, and he was indeed convinced that the Battle of Khe Sanh (21 January–9 July 1968) was a pivotal fight that his forces could not afford to lose. However, this explanation is inadequate

¹ "Combat Action Operations Report, Execution," Task Force X-Ray, Operation Hue City After Action Report, 31 January–2 March 1968, item no. 1201062076, folder 062, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), 71.

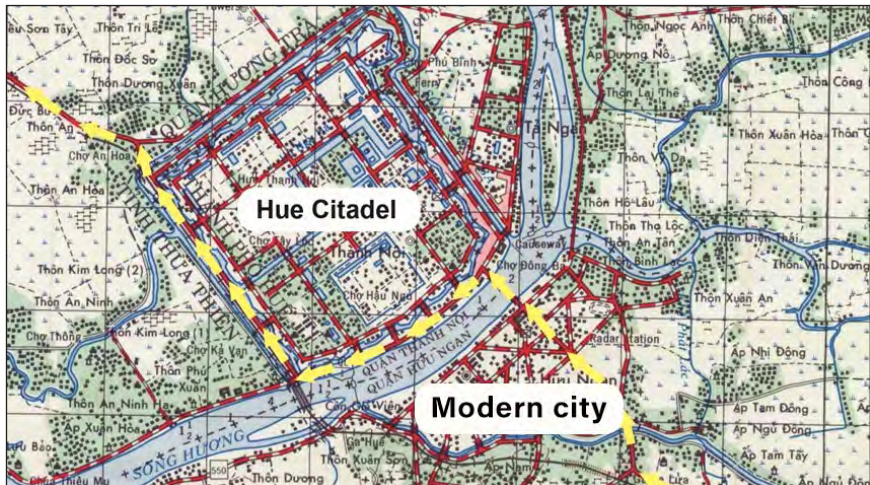
² Jack Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 249–50.

³ "Narrative Summary," 3d Motor Transport Battalion, Command Chronology (ComdC), January 1968, item no. 1201023161, folder 023, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 4.

⁴ Some prominent examples include Mark Bowden, *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017), 90, 197, 220–21; George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 229; and Lewis Sorely, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 168–72, 178, 181.

THE BATTLE OF HUE

Figure 16.1. Location of convoy route through Hue City



A topographical map showing convoy route through Hue City on Highway 1 from the south of the city to north of the city.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of “Vietnam Map Collection,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

by itself. Westmoreland understood the type of war he confronted far more than his critics give him credit for.⁵ He was convinced that larger, “big unit” battles on South Vietnam’s frontiers were precursors to assaults on populated areas like Hue and the lowland villages that surrounded it.⁶

Moreover, the Westmoreland thesis does not absolve the allied commanders who controlled the U.S. Marine and South Vietnamese forces along the road to Hue. Westmoreland was not a perfect com-

⁵ The idea that Westmoreland was a myopic commander who either could not or would not understand a nonconventional enemy—like that put forth in John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Sorely, *Westmoreland*—simply do not hold up. In fact, Westmoreland read Mao Zedong’s works on guerrilla warfare and even introduced counterinsurgency to the U.S. Military Academy’s curriculum when he was superintendent there (1960–63). See Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2, 28–30.

⁶ James J. Wirtz offers a similar counterargument in *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 106–11, 193. Westmoreland made a similar justification for his actions after the war in *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 314–19.

mander, but he was no micromanager; he generally allowed his corps commanders to run the war in their assigned sectors as they saw fit.⁷ Commanders such as General Truong, General Foster C. LaHue, and General Robert E. Cushman, as well as many of their subordinates, deserve scrutiny as well. In the weeks—and in some cases months—preceding Tet, intelligence reports circulated through several levels of III Marine Amphibious Force's (III MAF) chain of command warning that large contingents of Communist forces were moving into and launching attacks throughout Thua Thien Province to set conditions for a large offensive in the area.⁸ Prior to Tet, Viet Cong and NVA forces typically shied away from assaulting large, well-fortified positions held by U.S. forces, with some exceptions.⁹ With a greatly increased Marine presence in the Thua Thien countryside, the lightly-defended city such as Hue was an inviting target. The chain of events that culminated in the capture of Hue began long before 31 January 1968. Allied commanders were therefore correct to reinforce and stiffen their defenses in Phu Loc. That stretch of Highway 1 remained critical during the battle to retake the city.

Poor Communication Impacted Readiness

By mid-January, it was clear that major attacks would soon happen in Thua Thien Province. Yet, General Truong made a conscious decision not to bolster the defenses of either the Citadel or the modern city. The rest of the province and northern I Corps were well prepared for the attack.¹⁰ Hue was the only significant target in I Corps that was not. Captain George W. Smith, the U.S. Army information officer assigned to cover the ARVN's 1st Division, had several close contacts with Gen-

⁷ Daddis, *Westmoreland's War*, 114–18.

⁸ Refer back to chaps. 9–11 of this work.

⁹ The battles raging along the demilitarized zone (DMZ), namely the siege at Khe Sanh, are the most glaring exceptions to this statement. However, operations like that were very much the exception rather than the rule. Moreover, during Tet, Communist forces aimed to instigate a popular uprising by targeting South Vietnamese, not American, military forces and soft targets such as population centers and government facilities. See Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 152–54.

¹⁰ Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 83.

eral Truong. According to Smith, Truong believed that Hue would be spared due to its historical and cultural significance and that the North Vietnamese too viewed Hue with reverence. Smith lamented that the Citadel could have been reinforced with ease from either the north or the south. He later wrote, "The truth was that no plan was in force for such relief because no attack was expected."¹¹

It was only on the day before the offensive began that General Truong began to think that Hue would be attacked. Smith claimed that on the morning of 30 January, the eve of the Tet holiday, the general had an uneasy feeling. Rather than celebrating the holiday, Truong went back to his office, called his staff together, and reviewed the situation. He read the reports of the attacks that had occurred in the middle of the night throughout various parts of the country—the abortive Tet attacks that were launched early due to confusion and miscommunication among Viet Cong and NVA commanders. Smith relates that Truong and his staff also went over the local intelligence reports of the past few weeks. The more they talked, the more Truong became convinced that Hue was in jeopardy. The question then became how large the attack might be. Smith wrote that Truong's staff believed the enemy did not have sufficient forces to attack the city. The general checked with higher headquarters, who inexplicably replied that they had no information on large enemy troop concentrations in the area.¹²

It is unclear what intelligence reports Truong, his staff, and their superiors had been reading, but there was plenty of evidence that several large units were not only concentrated in the area but were sighted moving near the city. That information, gathered by the Alpha and Hotel CAPs, their South Vietnamese counterparts, and the Marine infantry who spent the final days before Tet spreading out along the road to Hue to augment their defenses, appears throughout the Marines' reports and records during that time. That intelligence, showing large numbers NVA and Viet Cong main force troops in the area, was read-

¹¹ George W. Smith, *The Siege at Hue* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999), 11.

¹² Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 19–20. Bowden discusses Truong's last-minute preparations in *Hue 1968*, 88–90.

ily available. Why that information did not influence Truong's actions before 30 January remains an open question.

But the blame does not totally fall on Truong. At least some Marines recognized that the pattern of enemy movement spelled trouble. A III MAF intelligence report dated 15 January 1968 predicted that the Phu Loc District would be subject to a series of smaller attacks and that, at some point around the Tet holiday, a major assault would occur across the entire Hue-Phu Bai area. The Marines believed that Communist troops were trying to cut off Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces from the rest of South Vietnam.¹³ Records of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, also conveyed the impression that a major assault would take place just before or just after the Tet holiday.¹⁴ Allied commanders may not have anticipated precisely how large a force would attack the city, but recent events had shown that the enemy could muster up a sizable attack whenever it so desired. The 7 January attack on Phu Loc, just two weeks before the Tet Offensive began, provided a stark example: two battalions of main force Viet Cong and NVA came out of the mountains, attacked CAP Hotel 5 at the Phu Loc District headquarters, overran CAPs Hotel 6 and Hotel 7, and harassed nearby infantry Marines with indirect fire. General Truong was not only aware of this attack, but his own Hac Bao, the division reaction force, had participated in rescuing the Phu Loc District headquarters. Additionally, Truong had already been informed of a planned attack for 31 January against Quang Tri City while attending a meeting there on 24 January. In response, the general and his staff formulated their own defensive plans for that city, but they did not consider Hue.¹⁵

The 5th Marine Regiment managed to get a bead on the Communist buildup in the area in the short period between its assumption of

¹³ G-2 Section, III Marine Amphibious Force, "PERINTREP 2-68," 15 January 1968, item no. 1201003095, folder 003, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

¹⁴ "Enemy, Weather, and Terrain," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201048023, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, pt. 2, 1-3.

¹⁵ Erik Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 2008), 12.

THE BATTLE OF HUE

Figure 16.2. Huu Gate, 2020



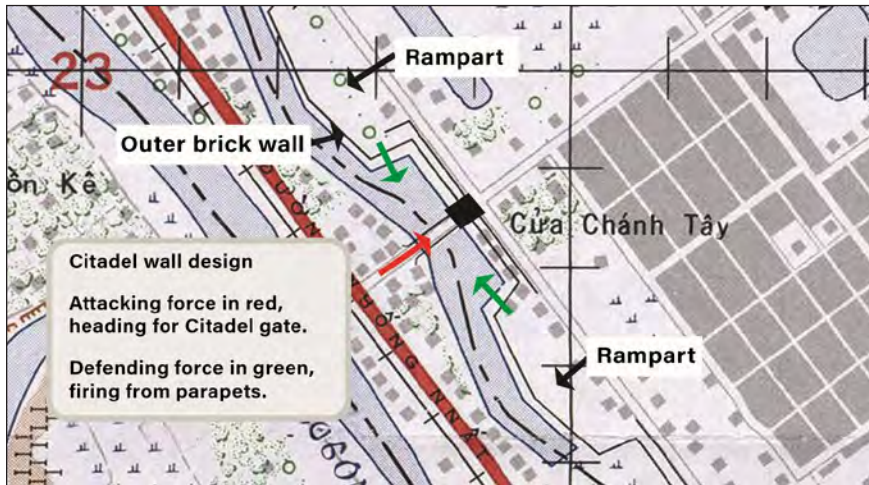
The Huu Gate that the NVA used to funnel reinforcements and supplies into the Citadel. It sits on the western edge of the city. The view is from where defending troops would be able to observe and fire down on any attackers coming across the bridge or the moat to enter the gate. Source: photo by Thuan Pham, 2020.

command at Phu Bai and the beginning of the Tet Offensive. A report dated 18 January warned that the enemy was capable of attacking installations throughout the Hue-Phu Bai area. The Marines noted that a full NVA regiment and two Viet Cong main force battalions were active in the region and seemed to be preparing for a major operation. They also acknowledged that Phu Loc could be attacked by yet another reinforced NVA regiment.¹⁶ When combining the intelligence of large troop movements into the area with those of large caches of food, medicine, weapons, and other supplies, such as a large weapons cache discovered by ARVN paratroopers right outside the city, signs pointed to an impending assault. Captain Smith even discussed the weapons cache, which contained enough weapons and ammunition to equip several units, with General Truong.¹⁷ Its location so close to Hue certainly suggested that the city could be the target.

¹⁶ "(Intelligence) to Operation Order 301-68," 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201046154, folder 046, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, annex B, 1-15.

¹⁷ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 20.

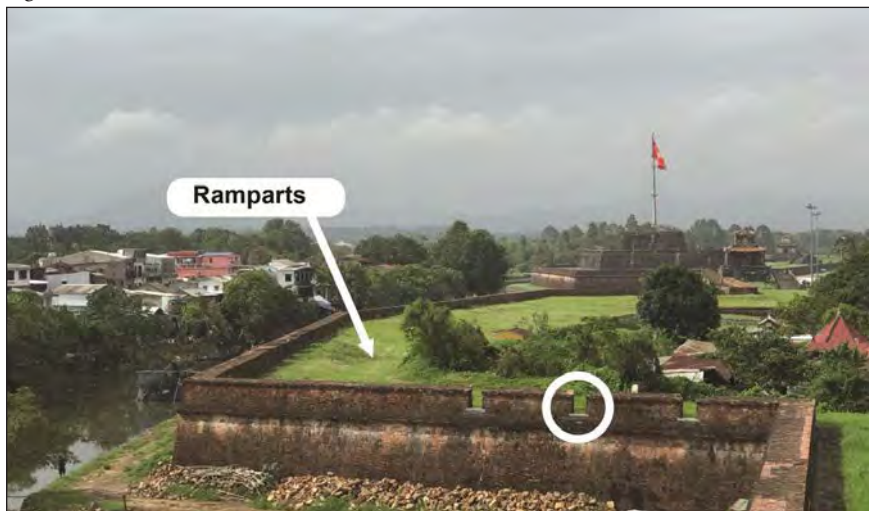
Figure 16.3. Plan view of wall design



This shows how defending forces (green arrows) standing at the slitted parapets will have a clear field of fire on the outside of the gate structure and any advancing enemy coming across the bridge or over the moats.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo.

Figure 16.4. Citadel wall, 2020



This shows a typical protruding wall adjacent to a gate with the slitted parapets for the defending force to fire down on an enemy. It also shows the flat, wide ramparts to the house-defending troops and their support systems. The way the Citadel is constructed allowed troops to move easily, including with smaller vehicles around the gates to other rampart and gate areas where an advancing enemy was discovered.

Source: photo by Thuan Pham, October 2020; exhibit created by William F. Nimmo.

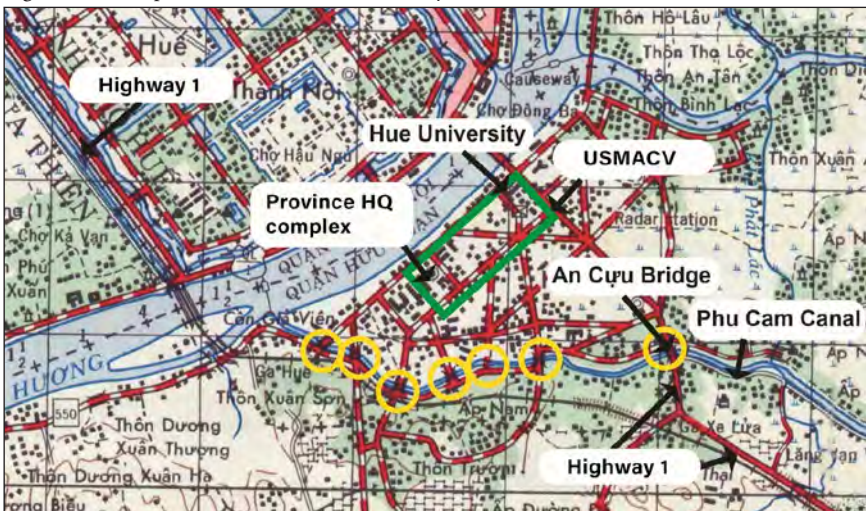
THE BATTLE OF HUE

Figure 16.5. Huu Gate, 2020



The Huu Gate from inside the city.
Source: photo by Thuan Pham, October 2020.

Figure 16.6. Map of the southern (modern) city of Hue



This map shows the southern, or modern, city, also called the triangle. The yellow circles show the several small bridges across the Phu Cam Canal that Communist troops crossed while entering the city.

Source: exhibit created by William F. Nimmo; base map courtesy of "Vietnam Map Collection," Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

Yet, the city remained undefended. A common argument is that allied military leaders, especially the Americans, had conditioned themselves to believe that the war was going their way. Throughout 1967, writes Edwin E. Moise, the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), “came to be dominated by a spirit of compulsive optimism, a belief that the enemy was fading away. This led to serious underestimates of enemy strength.”¹⁸ Mark Bowden offers a similar explanation, arguing that “None of the clues had registered a big alarm, because they did not fit the narrative.”¹⁹ Allied commanders simply believed that neither the NVA nor the Viet Cong possessed the capabilities to seize an entire city like Hue.

However, local commanders outside of Hue and their troops were very much aware of a large enemy buildup, and intelligence reports at various levels of command warned of an impending attack. A more likely explanation, then, is that many of the failures to defend the city stemmed from poor communication among allied forces. It is unclear how much of the intelligence gathered during the past two months had been shared between various levels in the chain of command, or to what extent it was synthesized with other information gathered throughout I Corps. The question also remains why General Truong informed neither his USMACV advisors nor General LaHue at Task Force X-Ray of the two enemy battalions seen moving toward the west walls of the Citadel at roughly 2200 on 30 January, just a few hours before the attack began. Nor did he relay this important information to his chief advisor, U.S. Army colonel George O. Adkisson, at the USMACV compound across the river. That a two-battalion attack force—or more—was en route to the city was invaluable information that no key decision makers outside Truong knew in the last hours before the attack. Moreover, it would have suggested the possibility that other attacking forces were elsewhere; it would have raised a general alert in and around the city; and it would have provided crucial intelligence to Task Force X-Ray

¹⁸ Edwin Moise, *The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), 4.

¹⁹ Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 90.

when that command dispatched a reaction force.²⁰ In short, the failure to dispense intelligence likely amplified the shock that higher commanders felt when they first learned about the offensive, which may explain their intransigence in the battle's early days.

Dispensing that information would also have likely lessened the blow on the ground when the attack came. It almost certainly would have spurred the USMACV compound to go on alert and prepare for an attack. However, that is not to say that the U.S. personnel there were not without blame. According to Smith, the advisors at the compound, including their commanding officer, Colonel Adkisson, knew that Truong had placed his troops on 100-percent alert, but Adkisson did not know that General Westmoreland had also ordered the same alert for all U.S. forces. Granted, Adkisson was new to the job, having recently replaced a cigar-chomping, hell-raising colonel who had a good relationship with General Truong. Nevertheless, after learning that Truong's troops were on full alert, those in the USMACV compound took no extra security precautions.²¹

Confusion Caused by U.S. Troop Realignments

Operation Checkers also undermined the defenses around Hue. It was a necessary move, but the sudden redeployment of so many U.S. Marine and Army units created a chaotic atmosphere in the final weeks before Tet. When the offensive began, "Task Force X-Ray was a work in progress," writes Mark Bowden, "far from a well-oiled war-fighting machine. LaHue's initial operation was also less than ideal."²² While some aspects of General LaHue's performance during Tet certainly warrant criticism, two factors that he could not control added to the confusion that immersed U.S. forces in Thua Thien Province at the end of January 1968: the 1st Air Cavalry Division's last-minute rede-

²⁰ Task Force X-Ray's journal for the morning of 31 January makes no mention of receiving information like this from Truong's headquarters. See "Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, January 1968, pt. 4, 31 January, 1-11.

²¹ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 31-34.

²² Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 128.

ployment to Camp Evans and Task Force X-Ray's unintentionally poor timing in assuming command at Phu Bai.

There was a great disparity between the planning for and execution of Operation Checkers. The 1st Air Cavalry Division's arrival added an unexpected layer of complication to Task Force X-Ray's mission in Thua Thien.²³ The initial plan called for the 1st Marine Division to replace the 3d Marine Division and take over an area bounded at the north by the Huong River, a zone that included Hue to a point that ran from the north bank of the Huu Trach River to the Laotian border.²⁴ This meant that the southern "modern" city of Hue fell under Task Force X-Ray's jurisdiction. The final written order for Operation Checkers, however, included several changes that shifted and expanded Task Force X-Ray's responsibilities. The 12 January order had Task Force X-Ray assuming responsibility for not only the Phu Bai enclave but also Camp Evans and its surrounding area of operations. The order also designated that one of X-Ray's subordinate units, the 1st Marine Regiment, was to prepare reaction plans for the province headquarters located in southern Hue.²⁵ It left the defense of the Citadel and the rest of the city north of the river to the South Vietnamese. On 9 January, the 1st Marine Regiment began a phased movement from Quang Tri Province to Camp Evans. Eleven days later, the regiment established its new command post at Camp Evans and assumed command of the one Marine battalion (1st Battalion, 9th Marines) operating there.²⁶

That arrangement, however, was short-lived. Task Force X-Ray did not maintain command of Camp Evans for long. Nor did those Marines assume responsibility for the zone that included southern Hue. Instead, a last-minute order redirected them to Phu Bai, where they would take over the area of operations south of Hue. Their zone ended

²³ Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006), 39.

²⁴ "Messages," 1st Marine Division, ComdC, December 1967, item no. 1201015036, folder 015, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 67.

²⁵ "Operations Order 309-68 (Operation Checkers) 18 December 1968," 1st Marine Division, ComdC, January 1968, 1-2.

²⁶ "Operations," 1st Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201018340, folder 018, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, pt. 2, section C.

at the Phu Cam Canal, which was generally known as the city's southern boundary.²⁷ That eleventh-hour redirection increased the chaos and resulted in a critical change to Task Force X-Ray's mission.

As it turned out, a well-intentioned but belated decision to send more reinforcements to Thua Thien led to yet another audible in the Marines' plans. Weeks before, General Westmoreland had decided to move the 1st Air Cavalry Division north for an operation codenamed York. He wanted the air cavalry to attack NVA bases near the Laotian border and push them back into Laos. However, with the rising threat to Khe Sanh and his feeling that a major offensive would take place before the Tet holiday, Westmoreland decided to cancel Operation York but still move the division north to reinforce the Marines. Time was of the essence. On 12 January, he met with General Cushman at Da Nang to discuss the plan. The next day, Westmoreland officially canceled Operation York but proceeded to send the 1st Air Cavalry Division north.²⁸

Four days later, the 1st Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division began its redeployment. Westmoreland had concerns about the logistical situation there but felt the risk was necessary. He was especially worried about the road between Da Nang and Hue.²⁹ On 21 January, the commanding general of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, Major General John J. Tolson, moved his command group to a large open graveyard northeast of the Phu Bai combat base. The following day, he conducted an aerial survey between Quang Tri City and Hue and spotted Camp Evans. Thinking it was an ideal location for his division headquarters and a logistics base, he asked permission from III MAF to take over the camp. His request was accepted, and an advance party arrived the next day. The air cavalry officially assumed command of Camp Evans on 25 January.³⁰

²⁷ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events and Daily Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, 13–31 January 1968, item no. 1201062075, folder 062, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 15-2.

²⁸ Cosmas, *MACV*, 37–39. Westmoreland briefly describes York in *A Soldier Reports*, 314, 318.

²⁹ Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 108.

³⁰ Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 109–10.

As Westmoreland had feared, the 1st Air Cavalry Division did indeed have major logistical problems moving into Camp Evans. It is likely that the division was not ready to devote its full attention to the enemy traffic or the circumstances of the potential for an attack on nearby Hue. The move to Camp Evans was a major operation, and it did not go smoothly. Much of the division's equipment and supplies were still in transit when the Tet Holiday began. Long convoys were consequently stranded in Phu Bai when the NVA assaulted Hue on 31 January. Communist forces severed the route completely when they seized the city. It would take weeks before it reopened. This partly explains why the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, which began its participation in Operation Hue City on 3 February and encountered the Communist base at La Chu, had to move into the battle without artillery support. The unit struggled to obtain enough fuel for their helicopters, which inhibited their ability to airlift artillery and sufficient ammunition where and when needed.³¹ The 1st Air Cavalry Division therefore entered the region unprepared to blunt the upcoming offensive.

Task Force X-Ray encountered issues of its own when moving into Phu Bai. The first elements of the task force arrived on 13 January, just 18 days before the Tet Offensive began.³² That was hardly enough time for the Marines to familiarize themselves with the area, analyze the available intelligence, appraise the defenses, and to build relationships with other units, especially General Truong and his 1st Division. Moreover, X-Ray's tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) changed at the last minute. It only assumed command of the area to the south of Hue, which excluded Camp Evans and canceled the directive to develop reaction plans for the provincial headquarters within the city.

The Marines of Task Force X-Ray also struggled to move sufficient supplies to support operations along the road to Hue. To put matters into perspective, Operation Checkers expanded the Marines' presence at Phu Bai and the surrounding areas threefold—from a single infantry battalion to three—inside of a month. These circumstances forced

³¹ Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, 47.

³² "Organization and Operation," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, January 1968, enclosure 1.

the task force's staff to prioritize building a functional command and control apparatus at Phu Bai, which likely generated a sense of tunnel vision that may explain General LaHue's poor understanding of the situation that confronted him at Tet. One staff officer admitted that they "didn't know the magnitude" of what they faced when they arrived at Phu Bai. According to Colonel Robert D. Bohn, the commander of the 5th Marines, "The [X-Ray staff] officers were so preoccupied with just getting the logistics of being a headquarters that they had no time to really refine their combat operations capability."³³

Fortunately, the experienced and well-led 5th Marines understood the situation more clearly. Colonel Bohn had traveled to Phu Bai a month in advance to confer with his colleagues in the 3d Marine Division and to learn about his new TAOR. When his regiment moved to Phu Bai and Phu Loc, he ordered a thorough study of the area and all aspects of the situation there. On 18 January, Bohn issued a 73-page report detailing all aspects of their mission, including an analysis of the area and its people. In the report, Bohn wrote that, while outside of his regiment's area of responsibility, the city of Hue was important from for historical, cultural, religious, and political reasons and that protection of its southern and eastern approaches should be a priority.³⁴

The 1st Marine Regiment's ordeal was a different matter. When the 1st Air Cavalry Division usurped their mission at Camp Evans, the regiment had to relocate again. The Marines stayed at Camp Evans to provide security for the air cavalry's arrival from 25–27 January before turning the camp over to General Tolson's soldiers. Meanwhile, the 3d Marine Reconnaissance Battalion briefed Tolson's staff on enemy activity in the area before making its departure.³⁵ The battalion's report for January 1968 noted a substantial increase in enemy activity over the previous months—one can only assume that this information was con-

³³ Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 110–11.

³⁴ "Operation Order 301-68," 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, annex B, appendix 1, 4.

³⁵ "Sequential Listings of Significant Events," 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201024015, folder 024, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, pt. 3, 1-2.

veyed to Camp Evans's new inhabitants.³⁶ The 1st Marine Regiment completed its relocation and opened its command post at Phu Bai on 28 January, just three days before the Tet Offensive began.³⁷

When the 1st Marines command staff completed its latest movement, only one of the regiment's battalions had arrived at Phu Bai. The advance party of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, moved to Phu Bai on 25 January to coordinate relief of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. The next day, the first of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines' four rifle companies arrived to relieve the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, so it could reinforce the Phu Loc District. However, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, did not complete its move to Phu Bai until 30 January. The Marines had minimal time to acclimate themselves to their new area of operations; the battalion formally took command of Phu Bai at noon on 30 January, only 15 hours before the Tet Offensive began.³⁸ Their final company to arrive, Captain Gordon D. Batcheller's Company A, reached Phu Bai later that evening. Batcheller's company would eventually be the first Marine reaction force sent into the Battle of Hue.³⁹ The Marines went into the city the next morning without a clue as to what was happening.⁴⁰

In the hurried atmosphere that accompanied its moving into a new area and a new situation, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, likely missed an important sign of the upcoming attack. The battalion received a report on the evening of 30 January that a Viet Cong battalion had been spotted on the near side of the Ta Trach River. The enemy's location suggested that they were heading through the Royal Tombs area toward southern Hue. This information was rated C-2 (probably true from a usually reliable source). Yet, there is no record of it being sent to or received by Task Force X-Ray.⁴¹

³⁶ "Intelligence Summary," 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, ComdC, January 1968.

³⁷ "Operations," 1st Marines, ComdC, January 1968, pt. 2, section C, 3.

³⁸ "Narrative Summary," 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201020031, folder 020, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, pt. 2, 2.

³⁹ Eric Hammel, *Fire in the Streets: The Battle for Huu, Tet 1968* (Pacifica, CA: Pacifica Military History, 1991), 61–62.

⁴⁰ "List of Sequential Events," 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, January 1968, 1-III-1.

⁴¹ "Daily Journal," 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, ComdC, January 1968, 126.

In defense of both the 1st Air Cavalry Division's General Tolson and Task Force X-Ray's General LaHue, their orders did not specify that either were responsible for analyzing Hue's defenses. Each general, it seems, was justifiably focused on moving his troops and supplies into place. It is likely that both subconsciously relied on General Truong to orchestrate the defense of the Citadel and the rest of Hue. They would have had reason to feel confident in Truong's skills and judgment; he had a strong reputation for a reason. Yet, neither American commander was in his respective role long enough before the attack to establish enough of a rapport with General Truong to realize that he had no defensive plans for the Citadel or the southern city.

They probably also relied on their superiors, Generals Westmoreland, Cushman, and Quang Thi Lam, the South Vietnamese commander of I Corps, to inform them of an impending threat to Hue. The absence of any expressed concern about the city or its defenses may not have caused either of them to think about the issue outside their own areas of responsibility—neither of which included the city itself. In any case, Westmoreland and Cushman were focused on the very real and present threat to Khe Sanh and the DMZ, a threat they would have been foolish to ignore, given the vulnerable American presence there.⁴² The siege of Khe Sanh had just begun on 20 January and was a dominating issue between then and the beginning of Tet on 31 January.

Conversely, Generals Cushman and Lam were responsible for all of I Corps. They seem to have, understandably, trusted that local commanders like Generals LaHue and Truong had the situation well in hand. Likewise, La Hue probably trusted that his area of responsibility was properly defended by the 5th Marines under Colonel Bohn, just as the 1st Air Cavalry Division was confident that Camp Evans was well defended because it had three brigades there with which to

⁴² Gregory A. Daddis raises a fair point by highlighting the fact that no one in USMACV seemed to have asked if Khe Sanh should have been held. See Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 18–19. However, that point became moot once the base was surrounded and besieged. Within the parameters of this book, it also still does not absolve officers further down the chain of command for what happened at Hue.

defend against any attacks. Or so it thought. In reality, there was a perfect storm of circumstances that caused Hue's inadequate defenses to go unnoticed at multiple echelons of command. Between Task Force X-Ray's dealing with its own issues and the 1st Air Cavalry Division's focus on organizing its base of operations at Camp Evans, no U.S. commander assessed the adequacy of the defense of Hue, nor were any of them expected to. The confusion that accompanied Operation Checkers' redeployments added more clout to the situation.

It stands to reason that if the U.S. commanders had realized just how vulnerable Hue was, they would have tried to rectify that situation. But the relationship between them and their Vietnamese counterparts was somewhat delicate. General Westmoreland had set the policy that the South Vietnamese were to be recognized as running their own country and that the Americans were advisors to them, not their commanders. "Advice" and "close cooperation" were the key phrases at all levels when coordinating matters with South Vietnamese commanders.⁴³ Building those relationships, however, took time, and time ran out well before the commanders of Task Force X-Ray or the 1st Air Cavalry Division could develop a close relationship with General Truong.

⁴³ Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962–1967* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 2006), 24, 219, 278, 286–90.

CONCLUSION

Many years after the end of the Vietnam War, General Robert E. Cushman claimed, “We were 100% ready” for Tet and that “the enemy’s skill at infiltration got them into Hue.” When asked to clarify how the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong managed to get what was essentially a division-size force into the city, Cushman stated that “a lot of them just walked in in civilian [clothing] . . . the nights are dark and the swamps are deep, you know. They were very good at that infiltration.”¹ But that is not what unfolded before the battle began, or when the city fell.² Communist forces spent weeks maneuvering large units of NVA and Viet Cong main force troops around the area to stage for the offensive. These movements did not go undetected. The Alpha and Hotel Combined Action Platoons (CAP) posted along the road to Hue, alongside their South Vietnamese allies and later a growing number of Marine infantry companies, observed, received intelligence on, and in many cases engaged Communist troop movements between the mountains and the coastal lowlands.

¹ Gen Robert E. Cushman Jr., USMC (Ret), interview with Benis M. Frank, head, Oral History Section, and Vietnam writers as noted, 1 November 1982, Marine Corps Oral History Program, Marine Corps Historical Center, Washington, DC, 16–17.

² Part 1 of Mark Bowden, *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017), 1–92, discusses the painstaking preparations that Communist forces made within the city. However, in the vast majority of cases, the plainclothes infiltrators, to paraphrase Cushman’s characterization, that Bowden describes worked as scouts, spies, political organizers, or guides to large, uniformed groups of NVA and Viet Cong troops. As chapters 9–13 of this book show, the vast majority of troops who assaulted Hue staged outside the city and entered en masse early on 31 January.

CONCLUSION

Beginning in August 1965, CAP Marines and PFs established a continuous presence within several villages along the road to Hue. During the next two and a half years, they gradually expanded their presence along Highway 1, eventually having 16 platoons posted in villages between Phu Loc and Hue's southern outskirts by the end of 1967.³ Their presence and constant patrolling, in conjunction with other allied forces, denied the Viet Cong easy access to the villages. They also complicated and in many cases hindered their efforts to acquire rice from those villages and the surrounding areas.

There were signs of an impending attack before the Tet Offensive began, in part because of what the CAPs did and observed along the road to Hue. As early as October 1967, some Marine intelligence personnel predicted that the Viet Cong's behavior, namely their rice collection efforts and attacks against infrastructure and allied patrols, portended a large offensive in the Phu Bai enclave.⁴ As Tet 1968 drew nearer, their activities became more frequent, more aggressive, and involved larger numbers of troops. Beginning in November 1967, allied patrols and civilians alike were reporting company- and even battalion-size contingents of enemy troops moving between the mountains and lowland villages. Starting in early January, Communist troops launched large attacks against several targets along the road to Hue, particularly in Phu Loc. They targeted CAPs and other smaller, isolated South Vietnamese posts and even some Marine infantry forces.⁵ All the while, those incidents generated intelligence that filtered into reports at mul-

³ Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPAC), "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," November 1967, item no. 1201001171, folder 001, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection (hereafter USMCHD Vietnam War Docs), Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX (hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive), 29.

⁴ "Intelligence," 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, October 1967, item no. 1201060253, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

⁵ The large, coordinated attack on 7 January 1968 was their most extensive pre-Tet effort there. See Jack Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 102–5; and "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201048023, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 3–4.

CONCLUSION

multiple echelons of III MAF's chain of command. Some of them stressed the likelihood of a coming offensive, but a combination of factors hampered allied forces' preparations.⁶

When the offensive began, the Alpha and Hotel CAPs helped keep the road to Hue open. The stretch of Highway 1 running south out of Hue, first to Phu Bai, and then to Phu Loc and Da Nang, remained crucial during the battle for the city. Most of the reinforcements who entered Thua Thien from the south just before and after Tet and took part in the battle, did so along Highway 1.⁷ Without the CAPs, augmented by Marine infantry companies, the road likely would have been severed by dawn on 31 January. As increasing numbers of Marine infantry moved north into the city, the CAPs provided vital assistance that helped keep the road open.⁸

The sequence of events along the road to Hue reveals several things about the combined action concept. The Alpha and Hotel CAPs demonstrated they could build a strong presence within their assigned villages, gather intelligence, and hold their positions against attack, in some

⁶ For example, the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, predicted a large offensive as it left Phu Bai in December 1967 in "Significant Trends during the Period," 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201060256, folder 060, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 11. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, made a similar prediction shortly after taking over in Phu Loc in "Operations Plan 2-68, 22 January 1968, Situation, Assumptions," 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201048023, folder 048, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive. III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) predicted a large offensive in a report dated 7 January in "Analysis of Enemy Situation in ICTZ," Periodic Intelligence Report # 2-68 [III MAF], 7 January 1968, item no. 1201003095, folder 003, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 2-3. Refer back to chapter 11 of this work for a more detailed discussion.

⁷ At least 10 resupply and troop transport convoys of varying size moved along this section of road to deliver troops and supplies to Phu Loc, Phu Bai, and Hue in February 1968 alone. See "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Motor Transport Battalion, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201010198, folder 010, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, pt. 3, 1.

⁸ Task Force X-Ray's journal indicated numerous instances of CAPs performing important tasks in or near their villages while the battle raged inside the city. See "Journal," Task Force X-Ray, ComdC, February 1968, item no. 1201062077, folder 062, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, pt. 4, tab A. FMFPAC credited Combined Action Company H with helping keep Phu Loc secure in February. See FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," February 1968, item no. 1201001192, folder 001, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 48.

CONCLUSION

cases against overwhelming odds. The story along the road to Hue also demonstrated a dramatic transformation in the platoons' capabilities. By the Tet Offensive in early 1968, many CAPs there had evolved from simple village protection forces designed to obstruct local Viet Cong activity to lethal teams that were capable of going toe-to-toe with heavily armed groups of enemy troops. The situation required them to bring along fewer PFs, mostly by weeding out the less motivated or incompetent.⁹ By the Tet Offensive, these platoons had become less trainers of the PFs and more specialists in stealth, observation, and combat.

The Legacy of the Battle of Hue

The Battle of Hue had lasting ramifications for the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. While the Tet Offensive's scope and ferocity shocked the American public, the attack on Hue was its most prominent, longest lasting, and arguably most symbolic chapter. Not only had several thousand enemy troops managed to overrun a major South Vietnamese city, but the horrific battle that was waged to dislodge them lasted more than a month. To the untrained eye, it looked like the Communists had displayed an overwhelming show of strength that made the U.S. military effort in Vietnam seem futile.

The battle further changed the American people's already souring perception of the war because its carnage was widely viewed back in the United States. On a daily basis, Americans at home saw graphic television footage of the battle and read accounts of its carnage in newspapers. These accounts not inaccurately depicted tenacious Viet Cong and NVA troops repeatedly stopping or slowing the best efforts of U.S. and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces to dislodge them. That the city's terrain, marked by thousands of sturdily built structures, heavily favored the defender and was an environment in which U.S. and ARVN troops were not at all used to fighting was lost on the American public. Instead, images of close-quarter street fighting in which U.S. Marines were forced to literally blast the enemy out of

⁹Ed Nest, William Grunder, Charlie Brown, and Cottrell Fox all described this necessity in their interviews with the authors.

CONCLUSION

their positions one at a time and could only advance yard by yard while suffering heavy casualties depicted a hopeless situation in Vietnam.¹⁰

A number of important events followed soon after the Tet Offensive. Roughly one month after Walter Cronkite's famous broadcast that proclaimed, "To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion," President Lyndon B. Johnson announced that he would not seek a second term in office.¹¹ His silence and his subsequent withdrawal from the 1968 U.S. presidential election constituted a powerful admission and left the impression and that Tet was a major American defeat. His and General William C. Westmoreland's progress offensive in late 1967 made the events of early 1968 seem incomprehensible. Johnson had been contemplating how to find a way to negotiate an exit from the war, but the combination of what was said prior to and after Tet, the shock of the offensive, and his decision to forgo reelection sealed the fate of the U.S. effort in South Vietnam.¹²

One will never know what could have happened had the United States attempted to stay the course. One thing that is certain, however, is that the United States and South Vietnam could not have prevailed without many more years of bloodshed, especially if the North Vietnamese supply chain remained open, which it largely did.¹³ In order to stop the enemy's flow of supplies, the United States would have had to move into the southern corner of Laos, near Tchepone (a.k.a. Xepon), with substantial troops and cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Some U.S. military leaders long dreamed of such an operation, but it never came to fruition.¹⁴ A move into Laos would have been difficult and likely would have done little to mollify public opinion back in the United

¹⁰ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1973*, 4th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 241; and Bowden, *Hue 1968*, 519–20.

¹¹ Walter Cronkite, "We Are Mired in Stalemate" (27 February 1968), in *Reporting Vietnam*, pt. 1, *American Journalism, 1959–1969* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 581–82.

¹² Herring, *America's Longest War*, 219–21, 242–43, 248–52.

¹³ Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 184, 227; and Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945–1975* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 573–74.

¹⁴ William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 150, 193, 204, 227, 271–72.

CONCLUSION

States. After Tet, the American people were largely done with the war and demanded a way out.¹⁵ The ARVN did eventually attempt such an operation in 1972 with U.S. air support, but the mission failed.¹⁶ The last U.S. troops departed South Vietnam the following year.

In June 1968, General Westmoreland relinquished command of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV). His replacement, General Creighton W. Abrams Jr., was a respected commander. Abrams embraced the concept of pacification, but he was left with an American public and political arena that was indifferent to the war effort at best and hostile to it at worst. He also had to contend with the still-inept South Vietnamese government to make the needed changes in both its political and military structures to make pacification a true success nationwide. Overall, pacification remained a violent and often inconclusive process.¹⁷ While Abrams certainly had the best intentions as USMACV commander, his appointment to that post was too little and too late to implement any effective counterinsurgency program.¹⁸

Abrams also had to contend with the mass withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from South Vietnam. This long process began in July 1969 and was to be completed by November 1972. During this period, the South Vietnamese infantry forces would assume more and more responsibility for fighting the enemy—a process that Abrams dubbed “Vietnamization.” With U.S. forces beginning their withdrawal just a year into his tenure, the writing was on the wall. In many cases, the South Vietnamese made admirable efforts to take the lead in defending their country. In 1968, President Nguyen Van Thieu attempted to boost Vietnamization by enacting a general mobilization and creating a self-defense corps. Under the latter program, all adult Vietnamese citizens, male and female, received weapons and training, at least in theory.

¹⁵ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 241–45.

¹⁶ Hastings, *Vietnam*, 573–83.

¹⁷ One of the strongest works on pacification after Tet is Martin G. Clemis, *The Control War: The Struggle for South Vietnam, 1968–1975* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), particularly chaps. 5–7.

¹⁸ The best analysis of the war during Abrams's tenure is in Gregory A. Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Around this time, the U.S. Army finally embraced a system similar to the Marine Corps' CAP program by creating Mobile Advisory Teams (MAT) composed of five American advisors. MAT teams moved into nearly every district to advise local PF units and the districts' Regional Forces.¹⁹ The Viet Cong were becoming less of a problem as the war progressed, but the South Vietnamese would one day need to fight the North Vietnamese, who were emboldened by the withdrawal over time of the U.S. forces.

Whether the South Vietnamese were ready or not, the United States left the war. The Marines in I Corps were some of the first ground troops to withdraw. The 3d Marine Division, which had been a mainstay of the battles in the northern part of South Vietnam since U.S. troops first arrived there years before, completed its withdrawal in November 1969. The 1st Marine Division gradually pulled back toward Da Nang and left in June 1971. CAPs played an important role in the final chapter of the Marines' war. Many CAPs held roads and other important locations outside of Da Nang until the last platoons disbanded in May 1971.²⁰

As the United States withdrew its troops, its diplomats attempted to negotiate an honorable exit. A compromise was reached in which the United States turned the war over to the South Vietnamese but continued to provide air support. When the North Vietnamese tried to advance with tanks and other mechanized equipment that would have easily plowed through the South Vietnamese forces, U.S. airpower interceded.²¹ The South Vietnamese did fairly well until 1974. President Johnson's successor, Richard M. Nixon, launched another bombing campaign against North Vietnam in late 1972 and pledged that support would continue after the last Americans left. But the Watergate

¹⁹ Charles R. Smith, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: High Mobility and Standdown, 1969* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1988), 289–90.

²⁰ Cavender S. Sutton, "Combined Action in Vietnam: U.S. Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Thought and Practice, 1965–1971" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2024), 371, 374–76.

²¹ Michael Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 152–58; and Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 191–94.

CONCLUSION

scandal and the subsequent threat of impeachment forced his resignation on 8 August 1974. After Nixon left office, his successor, President Gerald R. Ford Jr., and Congress had no appetite to uphold that promise. When North Vietnam made a large push to take over South Vietnam in the spring of 1975, no U.S. aircraft came to the ARVN's rescue, and the NVA simply rolled down the coast. Hue fell on 22 March. Da Nang followed on 2 April. Just four weeks later, on 30 April, the NVA captured Saigon and ended the war.²² After three decades, the struggle for Vietnam's future was over.

Combined Action after Tet

For the most part, the Tet Offensive failed to incite a popular insurrection against the South Vietnamese government, as Communist leaders had hoped.²³ That certainly did not happen in CAP villages. In many cases, the CAPs remained in place and continued to operate for three more years after Tet. The program actually expanded and made significant changes during that time. By the end of 1969, there were CAPs in 114 villages throughout I Corps—30 more platoons covering 30 more villages than in January 1968.²⁴ The Marines also placed CAP units more strategically—not just to protect roads and bases but also in areas where they could deny rice gathering to Communist forces.²⁵

The CAPs also drastically changed how they lived and patrolled on a daily basis. The program had always aimed to integrate Marines into Popular Force (PF) platoons in their own environment. Many of the CAPs therefore moved into already existing PF compounds or into an abandoned building near the PFs' base in a village. Early on, compound security was not a major concern. That changed over time, however. As

²² Herring, *America's Longest War*, 331–40.

²³ Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 160.

²⁴ FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," December 1969, item no. 1201002058, folder 002, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 23–24.

²⁵ FMFPAC described rice denial as a key part of its counterinsurgency efforts. See FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," December 1969, 36; and FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," November 1969, item no. 1201002053, folder 002, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 2.

CONCLUSION

the war grew more intense, Marines fortified their CAP compounds as best they could, mostly by building and improving bunkers and trenches along their perimeters and clearing wide fields of fire that allowed for better visibility and for them to call for artillery if necessary.²⁶

By the end of 1967, it had become apparent that this system which locked the CAPs into fixed positions made them highly vulnerable to being overrun by large enemy forces. There were several attacks against combined action units throughout I Corps in 1967. These attacks usually consisted of large numbers of Viet Cong, ranging from 50 to 200, armed with mortars, rockets, satchel charges, and sometimes recoilless rifles. A large-enough force with supporting arms could overwhelm a compound manned by only a few Marines and some PF soldiers. A fixed compound also gave the Viet Cong an opportunity to study the CAP location over time, figure out the best routes to attack and withdraw, and provide a fixed location for target spotting for their attack mortars.²⁷

A pattern of attacks on CAP compounds began to develop in early 1967 and seemed to accelerate as the year progressed.²⁸ The Marines sometimes suspected betrayal by one or more of the PFs. In a few cases, it was almost certain that PFs had set up the CAP for an attack.²⁹ There was a significant rise in the number of attacks against CAPs and their compounds around and after South Vietnam's national elections in September 1967. From 1 November 1967 through 31 January 1968, 49 percent of enemy attacks in I Corps were against CAPs. In hindsight, it is clear that this period of attacks against the CAPs coincided with the buildup for the Tet Offensive.³⁰ Because the CAPs were small,

²⁶ Ron Casto, interview with Cavender S. Sutton, July 2022.

²⁷ In most cases, the Viet Cong were very thorough planners. See Michael Lee Lanning and Dan Cragg, *Inside the VC and NVA: The Real Story of North Vietnam's Armed Forces* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 179–82; and Warren Wilkins, *Grab Them by Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big Unit War against the U.S., 1965–1966* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 21–25.

²⁸ Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, an imprint of Bloomsbury, 1989), 56–57; and Sutton, "Combined Action in Vietnam," 285–92.

²⁹ Charles Brown related in an August 2023 interview with Cavender S. Sutton that he believes some of his CAP's claymores were sabotaged before Tet.

³⁰ Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 617–21.

CONCLUSION

isolated units, a reaction force usually could not reach a beleaguered platoon in time to do any good. The CAPs had access to artillery support, but they often could not use it because some of the platoons lived too close to villagers' homes.

Around the time of the Tet Offensive, some Marines were trying to determine how to reinforce the compounds' defenses. Following the Tet attacks, they decided to transition from fixed to mobile CAPs. Historian Jack Shulimson credits the original idea to Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Keller, commander of 3d Combined Action Group (CAG) at Phu Bai, who had advocated a transition away from the compound concept since the fall of 1967. Keller had been in a position to see the series of attacks on the CAPs in the Phu Bai and Phu Loc areas. He reasoned that the mobile concept would increase the Marines' safety, but it may also have been a tactical move to stave off abandoning the program.³¹ After Tet, enthusiasm for the war was not very high, and with U.S. leaders clearly looking for a way out of the war, resources on the ground were going to be precious.

The shift to the mobile concept began in mid-1968. At first, individual CAPs in the 3d CAG, which was responsible for all the CAPs in the Hue, Phu Bai, and Phu Loc areas, made the transition. It rapidly gained favor and became an official policy later that fall. It would take more than a year for most of the CAPs to become mobile.³² The records show that, of the 36 CAPs in the Da Nang enclave in November 1968, 6 were mobile and 30 were still in their compounds. By October 1969, 35 had gone mobile, leaving only a single compound CAP.³³

The mobile CAPs stayed out, in and around their villages, full time. The idea was for the CAP members to establish themselves in a variety of day positions that became known as their "day spots" or "day havens." Abandoned buildings, villagers' homes, and sometimes even a road junction worked as a day position. The concept evolved over

³¹ Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 622.

³² Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 622; and Sutton, "Combined Action in Vietnam," 314–15.

³³ These figures were determined by reviewing each of the 2d Combined Action Group command records from November 1968 through October 1969.

CONCLUSION

time. For example, mobile CAP Marines quickly learned not to use the same day position twice in a row. Most CAPs developed several. This not only kept the enemy on their toes but also meant that the CAP had more contact with villagers in more hamlets.³⁴

When they arrived at a day haven, the Marines set up a defensive position and used the time to clean their gear, wash up, and get some sleep. Most of the mobile CAPs ran a day patrol, but it was typically smaller and less extensive than those run by the compound CAPs. Being in a neighborhood also gave the Marines the opportunity to socialize with the villagers in whichever hamlet they were in that day. Over time, they could get to know many of the people.³⁵

The Marines in the mobile CAPs carried heavy loads. Because they were always on the move, they had to bring everything essential with them. The Marines' seabags, filled with personal gear unneeded in the field, were stored at the Combined Action Company's (now abbreviated as CACO) headquarters. Since they spent most of their time out in the elements, CAP Marines carried their rain gear, personal hygiene items, and enough C rations to eat until the next supply run. A helicopter usually delivered food and ammunition every few days. That made mobile CAP Marines naturally bulky, and bulk is not conducive to silent movement. Sometimes they had two M60 machine guns and two M79 grenade launchers. With 12 Marines, that made for a formidable force. But it also added the need to carry extra ammunition for each weapon. A platoon generally carried 1,100–1,200 rounds for each machine gun. They also had two radios, which were heavy and required extra batteries.³⁶

The mobile concept called for a platoon's PF soldiers to meet up with the Marines at a predetermined spot during the day before heading out together at dusk. Each night, the CAP set up an ambush at a position known only to the Marine squad leader and to whomever he chose to disclose that information. The idea was to keep the enemy from

³⁴ Ed Ryan, interview with Cavender S. Sutton, January 2023.

³⁵ Don Eiferd, interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2017–20, hereafter Eiferd interviews.

³⁶ Eiferd interviews.

CONCLUSION

knowing the location in advance. Otherwise, the enemy could attack the platoon while it was en route to the position or hit it with mortars once it got there.³⁷ The mobile CAPs' effectiveness—and survival—depended on preventing the Viet Cong or NVA from knowing exactly where they were headed each night.

How a platoon executed its night activities depended almost solely on the CAP leader's discretion. Most leaders made the most of that freedom to determine how their platoon would operate each night. A good tactician would understand the area they were in and the enemy situation there. That situation could be totally different depending on where the CAP was located. How a mobile CAP operated at night was also governed by the number of Marines and PFs they had on hand. Those numbers varied greatly. There were times when some CAPs had a large number of Marines, ideally 12–14. But there were other times where the numbers were down to six or eight. This was a common complaint from the CAP Marines of the post-Tet era.³⁸ Usually, a mobile CAP's Marines were divided into two sections, the Alpha and Bravo teams.

Don Eiferd, from Columbus, Ohio, was a sharp CAP leader. His platoon operated along a river near an area called An Hoa, approximately 30 kilometers southwest of Da Nang. The CAP's tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) was located directly across a wide river from a dangerous Viet Cong stronghold known as the Arizona Territory. Their village, Duc Duc, was a resettlement area for residents who had been evacuated from the Arizona Territory. The river had a sandbar that allowed frequent Viet Cong crossings into Duc Duc. The CAP knew the routes that the Viet Cong used and worked to keep them out of the village.³⁹

At dark, when the PFs arrived, the entire platoon would set out for the night's mission. The PFs were sent out by the district and rotated assignment to the Duc Duc CAP. The Alpha and Bravo teams sepa-

³⁷ Eiferd interviews.

³⁸ Eiferd interviews; and "Skip Freeman," in Al Hemmingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 104.

³⁹ Don Eiferd provided numerous details about his CAP and their patrolling protocols in Eiferd interviews.

CONCLUSION

rated, and both set ambushes relatively close to one another so that they had broad coverage of the routes they wanted to cover. Each team further broke up and set their own smaller ambushes close together to cover a wider area.⁴⁰

Other CAPs operated in a different manner. Some would leave their day haven with all the Marines and PFs and head to what they called a “night spot.” That night spot would be set in an advantageous position and would form either an ambush or a defensive perimeter. The CAP kept its extra gear there, while an ambush team would go out to hunt for Viet Cong.⁴¹ It was not uncommon for additional smaller groups of two or three Marines or PFs to operate as a “killer team,” separating from the platoon and either roaming the area or preparing a small ambush nearby.⁴² Another common habit was to conduct a long patrol of several checkpoints to throw off anyone following the platoon before it set into its night position.⁴³ Whatever the technique a CAP used, the purpose was also to prevent the enemy from knowing where it was going and where it was setting in for the night. The less time the enemy had to figure out where the Marines were going to be, the less time they had to plan an attack.

One CAP Marine who served in 1969 recalls his platoon taking a unique approach in an area called Tam Hoa. The CAP had 16 Marines and at least 20 PFs. They didn’t seem to care so much whether they were noticed or not, but they were a sizable group divided up into two sections. They had two M60 machine guns and two M79 grenade launchers. They would patrol along the north bank of the Vu Gia (Vu Yah) river, which formed the northern border of the Arizona Territory. Once they had patrolled through several checkpoints, they would rotate and line up, almost in a sweep-type formation, and set into small ambush groups along routes that the Viet Cong liked to use. It should

⁴⁰ Eiferd interviews.

⁴¹ CAP Marine Jack Estes followed this protocol in the spring and summer of 1969, although, it must be noted, that was at the behest of a controversial CAP leader. See Jack Estes, *In a Field of Innocence* (Portland, OR: Breitenbush, 1987), particularly pp. 234–58.

⁴² Henry Beaudin, interview with William F. Nimmo, 2019, hereafter Beaudin interview.

⁴³ Eiferd interviews.

CONCLUSION

be remembered that the CAP's goal was not always to chalk up enemy kills, but rather to discourage the enemy from entering the CAP area in the first place.⁴⁴

In the daytime, this CAP would set up a day haven somewhere along the roadway in the village. The road was a busy route that paralleled the river. There were several shops and buildings in the village center, and the CAP would use one of those for their day haven. In the daytime, they would send small patrols out to the north of the village just to keep an eye on what was going on out there. That northern part of their operating area, though close to a dangerous area known as Charlie Ridge, was not an area of heavy enemy activity at this time in the war.⁴⁵

In the beginning, there had often been little or no notice of when a CAP would become mobile. That required the Marines to learn and adjust on the fly. U.S. Navy corpsman Herb Smith remembered that on one day in late November 1968, his CAP was suddenly ordered to pack up and go mobile. The Seabees (U.S. Navy construction battalions) arrived soon after, tore down the bunkers, and bulldozed the compound flat. This CAP had been Hotel 3, located on the north side of the Truoi River. Just before the Tet Offensive, they had moved their compound out from the riverside up the highway a half a kilometer or so. This put them directly in the path of an enemy rice collection route from the mountains to several hamlets to the north, toward the boundary with the Phu Thu District.⁴⁶

The CAP set up a day position in an abandoned building along a road in the main part of the village. This roadway, which ran north along the river, was one of the most-traveled streets in the village. Unlike later mobile CAPs, they used this building and only one other site as their day havens. Being on this particular street gave them a lot of good contact with the villagers. At night, they would go out as a whole

⁴⁴ Beaudin interview.

⁴⁵ Beaudin interview.

⁴⁶ Herb Smith, telephone interviews with William F. Nimmo, 2020 and 2021; and Herb Smith, telephone interview with Sutton, November 2021, hereafter Smith interviews.

CONCLUSION

unit to a spot where they could ambush the Viet Cong near rice collection points. Sometimes they would split up into two units and prepare their ambushes close to one another. The rice collection hamlets near the river toward the Phu Thu District remained perfect spots to locate Viet Cong activity, even after the Tet Offensive.⁴⁷

The transition to mobile CAPs also brought changes in the methods of CAP placement. CAPs used to be located only along main highways and around base areas, but after Tet they were moved to cover more villages away from the main highways. In the area from the Phu Bai base to and around the city of Hue, mobile CAPs were placed in hamlets and villages in areas where the Viet Cong used to collect rice. These CAPs moved into the Phu Thu District, the Phu Vang District, and the Huong Tra District. The Marines sent other CAPs into several villages around the west and north of Hue, which put them in the path of the enemy coming out of the mountains. Pacification was being ramped up so that Hue would be more secure and rice denial would be more effective. Locating CAPs in some of the hamlets east of Hue interfered with some usual spots where the Viet Cong taxed and collected rice. The Marines also worked to prevent the Phu Thu District from being the enemy sanctuary that it once was.⁴⁸ As the CAPs in Da Nang went mobile, they Marines placed the platoons in areas where they felt there would be a better use of their interdiction potential.⁴⁹ The same occurred with the Chu Lai area in the Quang Ngai Province after Tet.⁵⁰

The shift to mobile also changed CAP recruiting practices. At some point in 1969, the Combined Action Program began taking its new Marines straight from training in the United States. No longer would the new CAP members usually serve a stint in the infantry first. While

⁴⁷ Smith interviews.

⁴⁸ For example, see 3d Combined Action Group, ComdC, October 1969, item no. 1201036098, folder 036, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

⁴⁹ Rice was a big part of 2d CAG's operations in June 1969. See 2d Combined Action Group, ComdC, June 1969, item no. 1201022067, folder 022, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

⁵⁰ "Sequential Listing of Significant Events," 1st Combined Action Group, ComdC, June 1969, item no. 1201016103, folder 016, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, pt. 3.

CONCLUSION

this seems counterintuitive, it worked well. All Marines are trained to be riflemen, and once they are trained in infantry skills they are ready to step forward. By this time, the Combined Action Program had an official school in Da Nang, and its curriculum covered all the basics that were necessary to enter a platoon. The school offered lessons taught both in the classroom and in the field. Marines without combat infantry experience would be ready as long as they were put into a unit where they could be further nurtured by the unit's experienced Marines.⁵¹

All of these changes happened as the Combined Action Program reached its peak. By the end of 1968, there were four battalion-like CAGs throughout I Corps. A lieutenant colonel commanded a CAG, with each group being assigned to a geographic area. The 1st CAG oversaw all CAGs within the Chu Lai enclave, which encompassed Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces. The 2d CAG was responsible for the Da Nang enclave in Quang Nam Province. The 3d CAG operated in the Phu Bai enclave in Thua Thien Province. Finally, the 4th CAG oversaw the program's northernmost area of operations in Quang Tri Province. Each CAG included several CACOs, each of which oversaw several individual CAPs. In April 1969, there were 20 CACOs, 111 CAPs, and five mobile training teams.⁵² By the fall of 1969, the number of CAPs had risen to its peak of 114. In that year alone, the platoons conducted 149,000 day patrols and night ambushes.⁵³ They also had a wider presence than ever before. In 1970–71, in some areas along Highway 1, south of Da Nang toward Hoi An, where in earlier years there had been just a few CAPs, there were now several CAPs, and all their areas of operation were interconnected.

⁵¹ "Organization and Function," Fact Sheet [Combined Action Force, III MAF], 11 January–31 March 1970, item no. 1201061098, folder 061, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 3–4.

⁵² FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," April 1969, item no. 1201002033, folder 002, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, iii.

⁵³ "Combined Action Force Statistics," Fact Sheet [Combined Action Force, III MAF], enclosure 8.

CONCLUSION

Combined action also reached its peak during a crucial time for the South Vietnamese. After Tet 1968, President Thieu seemed well aware of the reality of the situation. He issued a nationwide order to mobilize the population. Everyone of age, regardless of gender, became part of the war effort. Villagers were given weapons and made to be a part of village protection groups. The Republic of Vietnam also expanded the PFs in an attempt to compensate for the looming departure of the U.S. troops.⁵⁴ It was a time of crisis that required drastic action.

The U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam impacted the CAP program significantly. The deactivation process started in April 1970; by August, all the CAPs in the Dong Ha, Phu Bai, and Chu Lai enclaves had been disbanded. The only CAP unit remaining was the 2d CAG in the Da Nang enclave. This was also the last remaining bastion of U.S. Marines in South Vietnam.⁵⁵ The 2d CAG actually expanded in 1970 before it too was deactivated in May 1971.⁵⁶ Its CAPs guarded supply routes and watched for enemy infiltration into Quang Nam Province until the 1st Marine Division could leave the country. These last CAPs were laid out like a quilt work that covered much more area around Da Nang than before. In many cases, their TAORs bordered one another to cover the entire territory. The formal end of the Combined Action Program came on 11 May 1971, when the 2d CAG was deactivated. All remaining CAP personnel were transferred elsewhere or sent home to the United States.⁵⁷ The last remaining body of Marines in Vietnam, the 1st Marine Division, left one month later.

⁵⁴ Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 284–85; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 258; and Clemis, *The Control War*, 193–94.

⁵⁵ FMFPAC, "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam," August 1970, item no. 1201002069, folder 002, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, iii.

⁵⁶ 2d Combined Action Group, ComdC, 1–11 May 1971, item no. 1201022104, folder 022, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

⁵⁷ Graham A. Cosmas and LtCol Terrence P. Murray, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Vietnamization and Redeployment, 1970–1971* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1986), 245.

CONCLUSION

The CAPs served the Marine Corps well in Vietnam.⁵⁸ Their presence often supported the infantry's and other units' attempts at pacification in the rural countryside. Perhaps it was a perfect match of people, the CAP Marines and the Vietnamese farming villagers. In many cases, CAP Marines learned that Vietnamese farmers were much like the rural farmers across the United States. They got up early, worked hard, raised their children, and had similar moral values. They seemed to believe in a natural harmony of the universe. They meshed well with the Marines who they came to know through the Marine presence in the villages.

The Marines were similar. They got up early, worked hard, cared about their families and friends, and had good basic values. They respected all the villagers—the elders, the men, the women, and the children. Had the Marines spoke the language fluently, countless deep friendships likely would have formed. Many Vietnamese seemed to recognize the value of the CAPs. There was great disappointment among South Vietnamese leaders when the CAPs deactivated. CAP Marine Charles McMahon recalls a story told by Lieutenant Colonel William R. Corson that illustrates that affinity. At a CAP unit veterans association reunion after the war, Corson told McMahon that a South Vietnamese general once asked him, “What part of America do these CAP Marines come from?” The general thought that the CAP Marines were so unique that they must be from a particular tribe or region in the United States.⁵⁹

The Marines who served in the CAPs almost universally describe the experience as one of the most significant periods in their lives. They felt that they were not only serving in a privileged position but also serving the true purpose of their country in helping to protect the people of South Vietnam from a brutal Communist insurgency. Long after the war, most CAP veterans continued to express what an honor it was to protect “their” village. That village and the war were personal

⁵⁸ The central argument to Ted N. Easterling, *War in the Villages: The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons in the Vietnam War* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2021), is that the program was a valid counterinsurgency concept.

⁵⁹ Charles McMahon, interview with William F. Nimmo, 2019.

CONCLUSION

for them.⁶⁰ Today, a unit like the CAPs might be part of a special operations group.⁶¹ During the Vietnam War, however, they were just a bunch of high school-educated Marines, mostly infantry, who simply went out and did their job. The Marines were ordinary young Americans called on to perform an extraordinary mission.

In total, approximately 500 CAP Marines were killed in action in Vietnam.⁶² At any one time, only a small percentage of Marines served in CAP. For example, on 31 March 1970, there were 2,000 Marines and Navy Corpsmen serving in CAPs.⁶³ And while the number of enemy kills were not necessarily the measure of a CAP's success, the CAPs were primarily combat units who generated a lot of them. They were night fighters whose stated mission was to destroy the Viet Cong infrastructure and to deny the enemy access to the villages and to the villagers. Through their relentless system of night patrols and ambushes, they recorded more than 5,331 enemy killed in the nearly six years of their existence as a Marine Corps combat unit.⁶⁴

The Combined Action Platoons' counterinsurgency model may never again have application for the U.S. military. It was unique to the time, the land, and the particular situation. It is, however, a good model for those involved in counterinsurgency planning to study for future situations. This work has attempted to paint the program as it really was and not as the myths, legends, and sentimental anecdotes

⁶⁰ This is a central theme in Cavender S. Sutton, "'To Take Some of that Fear Away': Task Cohesion and Combat Effectiveness among Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam, 1965–71," *Marine Corps History* 8, no. 2 (Winter 2022/2023): 90–105, <https://doi.org/10.35318/mch.2022080205>.

⁶¹ In the words of John Nagl, CAPs were "something of a poor man's Special Forces A-Team." See Nagl's review of John Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), in *American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (June 2015): 1072.

⁶² This estimate is based on a list of 468 killed in action (KIA), created by a former CAP Marine Rick Schelberg and augmented by members of the CAP Unit Veterans Association in 2021. The records of KIAs are incomplete in 1966 and early 1967 when the CAC was not an official unit and CAC Marines served under individual battalions. See "U.S. Marines Combined Action Platoons (CAC/CAP)," Capmarine.com.

⁶³ Fact Sheet [Combined Action Force, III MAF], 11 January–31 March 1970.

⁶⁴ "Combined Action Force Statistics," Fact Sheet [Combined Action Force, III MAF], 11 January–31 March 1970, enclosure 8.

CONCLUSION

that have grown and become distorted over time have depicted them. Combined Action was not, as some have implied, a “peace corps with rifles.”⁶⁵ Many CAPs were serious Marine Corps combat units that protected the villages of rural Vietnam, hoping that the South Vietnamese government would someday become worthy of its people’s loyalty. Unfortunately, time was not on their side.

⁶⁵ Wayne Hickman, telephone interview with Cavender S. Sutton, July 2022.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Appy, Chrisian G. *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides*. New York: Viking, 2003.
- Asselin, Pierre. *Vietnam's American War: A History*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Bowden, Mark. *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017.
- Caputo, Philip. *A Rumor of War*. New York: Picador, 2016.
- Clemis, Martin G. *The Control War: The Struggle for South Vietnam, 1968–1975*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018.
- Clodfelter, Mark. *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006.
- Clodfelter, Michael. *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772–1991*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1995.
- Corson, William R. *The Betrayal*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1968.
- Cosmas, Graham A. *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962–1967*. Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006.
- . *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*. Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 2006.
- Daddis, Gregory A. *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- . *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- . *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Driest, Maj Charles W. *Combined Action Platoons: A Possible Role in the Low-Intensity Conflict Environment*. Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1989.
- Easterling, Ted N. *War in the Villages: The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons in the Vietnam War*. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2021.
- Fall, Bernard B. *Street without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina*. 2d ed. Guilford, CT: Stackpole Books, 2018.
- Goscha, Christopher. *Vietnam: A New History*. New York: Basic Books, 2016.
- Hammel, Eric. *Fire in the Streets: The Battle for Hue, Tet 1968*. Pacifica, CA: Pacifica Military History, 1991.
- Hastings, Max. *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945–1975*. New York: Harper Collins, 2018.
- Hemmingway, Al. *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994.
- Herring, George C. *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*. 4th ed. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002.
- Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. New York: Viking Press, 1983.
- Krulak, LtGen Victor H. *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984.
- Lanning, Michael Lee, and Dan Cragg. *Inside the VC and the NVA: The Real Story of North Vietnam's Armed Forces*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008.
- Lehrack, Otto J. *No Shining Armor: The Marines at War in Vietnam: An Oral History*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992.
- McMaster, H. R. *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1997.
- Millett, Allan R. *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps*. New York: Free Press, 1991.
- Moïse, Edwin E. *The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017.
- Nagl, John A. *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Nimmo, William F., and Henry Beudin. "The Creation of the Marine Corps' Combined Action Platoons: A Study in Marine Corps Ingenuity." *Marine Corps History* 4, no. 2 (Winter 2018): 42–65.
- Nguyen, Lien-Hang T. *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.
- Oberdorfer, Don. *Tet!: The Turning Point in the Vietnam War*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1984.
- Peterson, Michael E. *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam*. New York: Praeger, 1989.
- Pike, Douglas. *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam*. Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986.
- Pribbenow, Merle L., II. "General vo Nguyen Giap and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 Tet Offensive." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 1–33.
- , trans. *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002.
- Sheehan, Neil. *A Bright and Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. New York: Vintage, 1988.
- Shulimson, Jack. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966*. Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1982.
- Shulimson, Jack, and Maj Charles M. Johnson. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965*. Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1978.
- Shulimson, Jack, LtCol Leonard A. Blasiol, Charles R. Smith, and Capt David A. Dawson. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968*. Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997.
- Smith, George W. *The Siege at Hue*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999.
- Sorely, Lewis. *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999.
- . *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.
- Southard, John. *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Sutton, Cavender S. "Combined Action in Vietnam: U.S. Marine Corps Counter-insurgency Thought and Practice, 1965–1971." PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2024.
- . " 'To Take Some of that Fear Away': Task Cohesion and Combat Effectiveness among Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam, 1965–71." *Marine Corps History* 8, no. 2 (Winter 2022/2023): 90–105. <https://doi.org/10.35318/mch.2022080205>.
- Teffler, Maj Gary L., LtCol Lane Rogers, and V. Keith Fleming Jr. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967*. Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1984.
- Trulliger, James W, Jr. *Village at War: An Account of Revolution in Vietnam*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980.
- Vennema, Alje. *The Viet Cong Massacre at Hue*. New York: Vantage Press, 1976.
- Villard, Erik. *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*. Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2008.
- Walt, Lewis W. *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970.
- Warr, Nicholas. *Phase Line Green: The Battle for Hue, 1968*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997.
- Wawro, Geoffrey. *The Vietnam War: A Military History*. New York: Basic Books, 2024.
- Weltsch, Maj Michael D. "The Future of the Combined Action Program." Master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 1991.
- West, Bing. *The Village*. New York: Pocket Books, 2003.
- Westmoreland, William C. *A Soldier Reports*. New York: Doubleday, 1976.
- Wiest, Andrew. *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN*. New York: New York University Press, 2008.
- Wilkins, Warren. *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big-Unit War against the U.S., 1965–1966*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011.
- Wirtz, James J. *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013.

INDEX

- A Shau Valley, 72, 223, 251
- Abrams, Creighton W., Jr., 384
- Adkisson, George O., 370–71
- An Cuu Bridge, 326, 339
- Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units
 - 1st Division, 29, 85–87, 142, 306–11, 314, 320, 330, 343, 346
 - airborne battalions, 283, 310, 343, 360, 364, 374
- Army, U.S., units
 - 1st Air Cavalry Division, 5, 313, 324, 344–46, 358, 371–78
 - 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, 345, 374
- Athens, Operation, 94–95
- Bach Ma Mountain, 90–92, 134–36, 141, 188, 199, 230, 238, 241, 244, 270, 275–77, 295
- Base Area 114, 190, 220–25, 247–52, 283, 305, 313, 324
- Batcheller, Gordon D., 325–27, 376
- Biet Kichs, 176–78
- Blaha, William C., 82–83
- Bo River, 223–24, 283
- Bohn, Robert D., 375–77
- Brown, Calvin, 182–87
- Brown, Charles E., 203–5, 238, 270–71, 290–94
- Cam Lo, 104, 110
- Camp Carroll, 110
- Camp Evans, 5, 247, 250, 313, 324, 344, 372–78
- Canley, John L., 238
- Cao Doi Peninsula, 265, 297
- Cau Hai, 243, 273
- Cau Hai Lagoon, 25, 91, 142, 145, 200–1, 273
- Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 218, 231
- Charlie Ridge, 46, 392
- Cheatham, Ernest C., Jr., 297–98, 334, 338–39
- Checkers, Operation, 244–47, 262–63, 265–66, 269, 279, 294, 325, 371–74, 378
- Chieu Hoi, 230
- Christmas, George R., 262, 294–98, 332–41
- Christmas truce, 248–49
- Chu Lai, 13–14, 50, 69–70, 99, 106–7, 118–19, 245, 393–95
- Civic action, 32, 50–53, 64–66, 74, 120–25, 160, 194
- Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), 127–29, 150–51, 314
- Co Bi Thanh Tan Valley, 223, 247
- Combined Action Groups, 388, 394–95
- Combined Action Company/Platoon (CAC/CAP) units
 - Alpha 1, 140, 168, 170–72, 176–78, 211, 226, 229, 279
 - Alpha 2, 180, 186, 280–81
 - Alpha 3, 161, 174, 180–86, 191–92, 200, 209, 215–16, 226, 236–38, 273, 300
 - Alpha 6, 140, 192, 208–14, 236, 279
 - Alpha 7, 143, 211–12, 216–17, 236, 281–83

INDEX

- Alpha 9, 140, 192, 208–14, 236, 279
- Hotel 1, 161, 169–74, 181, 192, 200, 214, 229, 272, 299
- Hotel 2, 145, 174, 186, 200, 214–15, 227, 237, 272, 274, 300
- Hotel 3, 143, 145, 159, 191–200, 214–15, 227, 237, 270–73, 299, 392
- Hotel 4, 136, 246, 268, 301
- Hotel 5, 136, 141, 191–93, 228–30, 236–37, 241, 246, 254–55, 260–62, 290, 300, 366
- Hotel 6, 136, 193, 226, 228, 236, 241–43, 246, 255, 260–61, 268, 271–72, 290, 300–1, 366
- Hotel 7, 136, 169, 171, 175, 226, 228, 236–37, 241, 246, 255–61, 268, 290, 366
- Hotel 8, 136, 141–45, 171, 175, 193, 198–204, 207–8, 214, 237–38, 270–71, 274, 288–90, 293–300
- Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam (CICV), 231
- Con Thien, 110
- Cooney, John J., 76–80
- Corson, William R., 117, 120–30, 396
- counterinsurgency, 53, 121, 125, 150, 384, 397
- county fair operations, 101
- Cronkite, Walter L., Jr., 8, 383
- Cua Viet, 110
- Curtis, William, 193–98
- Curto, Wayne, 259–60
- Cushman, Robert E., Jr., 129, 330–31, 344, 364, 373, 377, 379
- Da Nang, 13–14, 19, 42, 44–53, 56–59, 62–71, 99–100, 106–8, 119–21, 126, 132–34, 152–54, 225, 245, 261–62, 266–71, 281, 285, 294, 311, 362, 373, 381, 385–90, 393–95
- Dap Dinh River, 243
- demilitarized zone (DMZ), 14, 17, 85, 98, 103–7, 110–14, 117–18, 130, 133, 147, 203, 211, 226, 232, 244–45, 377
- Diem, Ngo Dinh, 12, 190
- Dong Ba Gate, 350–60
- Dong Ha, 103–4, 110, 326, 362, 395
- Dong Truoi (mountain), 91, 232
- Dorris, Claude H., 260
- Duc Duc (village), 390
- Ek, Paul R., 30–32, 55, 69
- Ellison, James E., 174, 215
- Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPAC), 99, 107, 111, 116–17, 146
- Fox, Cottrell, 203–5, 290–94
- Geneva Accords, 11–12, 148
- Gia Hoi Island, 320–21, 355
- Gia Le (village), 36, 71–80, 83, 138–40, 145, 181, 210–13, 254, 287, 352
- Giap, Vo Nguyen, 11, 113–14, 155, 219
- Gio Linh, 110
- Golden Fleece, Operation, 53, 158–63, 179
- Gravel, Marcus J., 328–31
- Greene, Wallace M., Jr., 103, 117, 120, 124–29
- Grunder, William M., 202–7, 238, 290–94, 300
- Hac Bao (ARVN reaction force), 307–10, 313, 318, 342–43, 360, 366
- Hai Van Pass, 132, 134, 175, 225, 246, 268, 302, 323
- Hanifin, Robert T., 85–89
- Harrington, Myron C., Jr., 352–56, 360
- Hastings, Operation, 104–5
- Ho Chi Minh, 11, 113–14, 202, 219, 383
- Huong River, 251, 372
- Huong Thuy District, 37, 74, 76, 136, 207
- Imperial City (Hue), 307, 348, 350, 360
- infiltration tactics, 98, 103–4, 138, 207, 223, 231, 273, 307, 328, 379, 395
- Johnson, Lyndon B., 7–8, 150–51, 232, 383, 385
- Joint Action Company (JAC), 30
- Keller, Robert J., 388
- Khe Sanh, 106, 112, 163, 232, 245, 263, 362, 373, 377

INDEX

- Krulak, Victor H., 117, 120, 127
 Ky, Nguyen Cao, 190
- La Chu, 310, 343–45, 358, 374
 LaHue, Foster C., 245, 328–31, 352, 364, 370–71, 375–77
 Lambert, Mike, 288–90, 295–96
 landing craft utility (LCU), 19, 326, 346
 Lang Co River, 134, 256, 265, 268, 271–73
 Le Duan, 113–14, 219, 236
 Le Loi Street, 335, 337
 Leatherneck Square, 110
 light antitank weapon (LAW), 336
 Loc An (village), 89–91, 94–95, 159, 194, 299
 Loc Bon (village), 29, 37–38, 41, 55, 84, 181–83, 192
 Loc Dien (village), 89–95, 199, 201–2
 Loc Son (village), 83–84, 91, 94, 174, 186, 237
 Loi Nong (village), 73–74, 145
 Loi Nong River, 176–77, 213, 281
- Mai Thuc Loan Street, 348, 353–54
 Mang Ca compound, 309, 313, 348
 Mao Zedong, 120–21
 Marble Mountain, 56, 64
 Marine Corps, U.S. units
 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, 57, 66, 92, 270, 286–87, 300, 302, 324–25, 328, 330, 334–36, 376
 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, 106
 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, 246, 254–55, 261–62, 265, 268–74, 295, 299–302, 324, 340, 346, 349, 359–60, 366
 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, 372
 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, 106
 1st Marine Division, 106, 117–19, 127, 225–26, 240, 245, 372, 385, 394
 1st Military Police Battalion, 64–66
 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, 42, 74–76, 85–88
 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, 188
 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, 262–63, 265, 268, 272, 276, 288, 294, 297–98, 301–2, 324–25, 328–31, 334, 341, 352, 376
 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, 226
 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, 136
 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, 163, 187, 194, 200, 214–15, 225–29, 232–33, 243–46, 251, 254, 263, 265, 276, 280
 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, 87
 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, 19, 57, 94, 104
 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, 359
 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, 152, 155
 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, 59–61, 128
 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, 138, 159, 162
 3d Marine Division, 102–3, 106, 109, 118–19, 127, 133, 225, 245, 266, 372, 375, 385
 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, 22, 247
 3d Tank Battalion, 120–24, 326
 III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), 44, 51–54, 61, 98, 106, 116–20, 126–30, 146–47, 151, 211, 219, 225, 240, 244, 264–65, 281, 330, 364, 366, 373, 381
- Matricardi, Edmund, Jr., 182–87
 Meadows, Charles L., 329–30
 Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP), 76, 160, 163
 medical evacuation (medevac), 178, 207, 258
 Mobile Advisory Team (MAT), 385
 Mullen, John J., 28–29, 32–33, 40, 69
- National Liberation Front (NLF), 12, 141, 149, 320–21. *See also* Viet Cong
 naval gunfire support, 352, 357
 Nest, Ed, 169, 257–58, 260
 New York, Operation, 83–89
 Nickerson, Herman, Jr., 117, 120, 124
 Nimmo, William F., 177–78, 211–12, 281–82
 Nixon, Richard M., 385–86
 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units
 4th Regiment, 244, 277, 316
 5th Regiment, 221, 343
 6th Regiment, 220–21, 232, 306
 21st Regiment, 103

INDEX

- 324th "B" Division, 104
- 800th Battalion, 220, 306, 313
- 802d Battalion, 220, 230, 232–33, 306, 313
- 806th Battalion, 220, 306, 314
- People's Action Team (PAT), 74
- People's Army of Vietnam. *See* North Vietnamese Army
- Perfume River, 3, 19, 90, 224, 233, 251–54, 298, 303, 307, 310–14, 323, 328, 337, 345–46, 360
- Phase Line Green, 348–56
- Phong Bac (hamlet), 121–25, 128
- Phu Bai River, 41–42, 192, 273
- Phu Cam Canal, 317, 339–40, 373
- Phu Loc District, 17, 80, 92, 132–43, 159, 175, 189–90, 193, 195, 210, 218–22, 225–33, 236, 240–46, 254–55, 260–79, 285–88, 295, 298–302, 316–17, 324–25, 340, 346, 364–67, 375–76, 380–81, 388
- Popular Forces (South Vietnam) (PF), 9–10, 16–17, 28–32, 36–41, 44, 54–55, 58–62, 66, 71, 76–80–83, 87–88, 95, 116, 124, 135, 139–41, 145, 149, 152–56, 164–76, 182–84, 188, 191–97, 202–5, 211–14, 228, 233, 237–38, 257–61, 269–72, 279–81, 284, 288–94, 300–1, 380–82, 385–91, 395
- Prairie, Operation, 105–6
- Quang Nam Province, 45–47, 51–52, 55–58, 62–66, 69, 118, 240, 245, 269, 394–95
- Quang Tri Province, 85, 98, 103–4, 107–9, 221, 266, 324, 366, 372–73, 394
- Que Chu (hamlet), 310, 343, 358
- Regional Forces (South Vietnam) (RF), 109, 149, 314
- rest and recuperation (R&R), 80, 360
- Revolutionary Development (RD), 107–10, 133, 140, 147, 149–52, 155
- Royal Tombs, 145, 317, 376
- sapper, 3, 190, 209, 257–58, 261, 266, 290–91, 305–6, 314–16
- Smith, George W., 311–14, 321, 364–67, 371
- South Vietnamese national elections, 188–91, 197, 200, 209, 387
- Studies and Observations Group (SOG), 216–17
- Sweet, Richard S., 345
- Ta Trach River, 72–73, 193, 232–33, 251, 254, 317, 376
- table of organization (T/O), 164
- tactical operations center (TOC), 323
- Task Force Oregon, 147, 149
- Task Force X-Ray, 245, 298, 311, 318, 323–24, 328–30, 360, 370–78
- Task Unit Hotel, 85–88
- Thi, Nguyen Chanh, 14, 29, 51, 61
- Thieu, Nguyen Van, 190, 384, 395
- Thompson, Robert H., 350–51
- Thua Thien Province, 34, 85, 104, 219–21, 230, 240, 245–46, 264, 285–86, 302, 314, 318, 323, 364–66, 371–73, 394
- Thuong Duc Pass, 46
- Thuy Long (village), 29
- Thuy Phu (village), 29, 37, 41, 55, 71–74, 159, 180–84, 238, 277, 287
- Thuy Tan (village), 29
- Tien Sha Peninsula, 64
- Tolson, John J., 373, 375, 377
- Truoi River, 84, 89–95, 136–45, 159, 175, 193–94, 198–202, 210, 214, 227–28, 232, 236–38, 241, 265, 268–70, 274, 288, 295–99, 302, 323–25, 392
- Truong, Ngo Quang, 4, 307–13, 328, 342–43, 350–52, 359, 361, 364–67, 370–71, 374, 377–78
- U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), 85, 98–99, 127–29, 146, 150, 197, 216–19, 231, 246, 307, 311–14, 318, 326–31, 334, 370–71, 384
- Viet Cong units
 - 45th Battalion, 58
 - 802d Battalion, 136, 139
 - 804B Battalion, 221, 233

INDEX

- 804th Battalion, 92, 94, 136–37, 140,
188, 215, 221, 233, 316
- 810th Battalion, 87, 89, 220, 316
- V25 Battalion, 154
- Vietnamese Marine Corps (South Vietnam),
6, 346, 357–61
- Vietnamization, 384
- Walt, Lewis W., 44, 51–52, 58–61, 69–71,
85, 117, 120, 124–29
- Wayne, Operation, 91–92
- Westmoreland, William C., 6–8, 13, 85, 99,
150, 232, 311, 324, 344, 362–63, 371–
74, 377–78. 383–84
- Yen River, 49, 57
- Zone A (Phu Bai defensive sector), 23, 25–
32, 36–41, 69

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Bill Nimmo with Lt Nguyen, Vietnam, 1967.
Source: photo courtesy of the author.

William F. Nimmo had a long career as a criminal trial lawyer. He graduated from Loyola Law School in Los Angeles, California. He was a Combined Action Marine leader near Hue City during the Tet attacks in 1968.

Cavender S. Sutton enlisted in the Marine Corps after high school. After deploying to Afghanistan twice, he left the Marine Corps to pursue a PhD in military history. He is now an assistant professor of strategy at the U.S. Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama.