

# Hue City, Tet '68

## No Heroes. . . Just Marines

Story by Torn Bartlett  
USMC Photos

**F**ew Marines who survived the bitter, house-to-house fighting at Hue City in 1968 considered themselves "heroes." Most claim that there was a job to do, "and we got shipped north to do it."

Three understrength U.S. Marine battalions, 13 undermanned Vietnamese ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) battalions, and the Hoc Bao "Black Panther" (ARVN) Company of volunteers were to engage a superior force of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars. The enemy was hard-core: well-equipped, trained and combat-experienced.

The enemy force consisted of the 804th, K4B, and K4C Battalions commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Van. LtCol Nguyen Trong Dan commanded the 800th, 802nd and 806th Battalions. Also, the 810th Independent Battalion, and the 12th and Co Be Sapper Battalions augmented the enemy strength.

Before the battle ended 26 days later, five more enemy battalions would arrive: the 416th, 4th and 6th of the 24th NVA Regiment, and the 7th and 8th Battalions of the 90th NVA Regiment. Nearly 6,000 NVA in all.

LtCol Marc Gravel, commanding 1/1, led a reaction force from the Phu Bai Combat Base, taking "G"/2/5 with him in his dash for Hue. (Captain Charles Meadows commanded "Golf" Company.)

Capt Gordon Batcheller and his Marines of "A"/1/1 were first to meet the fire of enemy weapons and to feel the blazing heat of their lead, while enroute to the city by convoy.

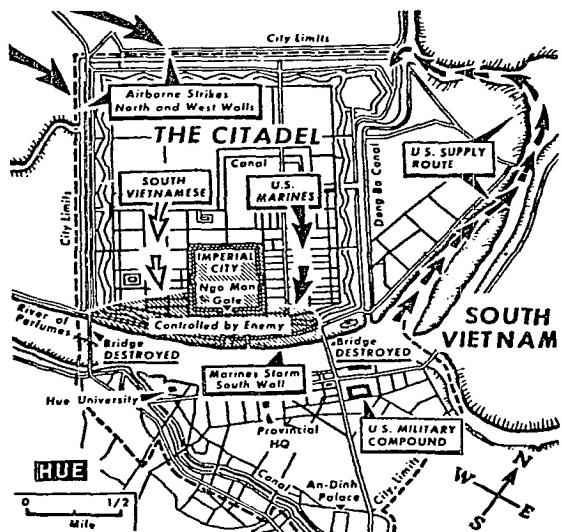
The battle had begun at 3:40 a.m., January 31, 1968.

On the morning of February 3rd, LtCol Ernest Cheatham was ordered to move from Phu Bai to Hue with reinforcements. He took Capt Mike Downs with "Foxtrot" Company and Capt Ron Christmas with "Hotel" Company. Three weeks into the battle, Capt John Niotis' "Lima" would arrive from the Da Nang

USMC Photo by Sgt W. F. Dickman



"Hotel" Company Marines of 2/5 tore down the North Vietnamese flag from the French Provincial Headquarters in Hue. GySgt Frank A. Thomas, PFC Alan McDonald and PFC Walter Kaczmarek Jr., raised the Stars and Stripes.



The battle for Hue lasted 26 days. The enemy had 1,889 killed. The Marines suffered 147 killed and 857 wounded. The fighting was street to street and house to house. (ABOVE) A machine gunner provided cover for an advancing fire team.

area, where they had been patrolling the rocket belt.

The battle for Hue lasted 26 days. The enemy incurred 1,889 killed. The Marines suffered 147 killed and 857 wounded. However, the number of wounded Marines is deceiving. Many Marines were wounded and continued fighting, or considered their wounds too minor to bother a corpsman.

Dan "Arkie" Allbritton was awarded three Purple Heart Medals for three combat wounds. It wasn't until fragments from a B-40 rocket round slashed into his leg and he realized he couldn't walk or run that he agreed to be medically evacuated. As he was helped into a helicopter, he spotted a friend and realized that they, both wounded, were the last of his squad to leave Hue. The others were dead or wounded. . . .

"There were no heroes in Hue," explained Lester Tully, a corporal 20 years ago during the battle. "There were just Marines. We were doing our job."

Tully was awarded a Silver Star for heroism and a pair of Purple Hearts.

As LtCol Gravel's reaction force attempted to cross the Nguyen Hoang Bridge over the Perfume River leading into the Citadel, an enemy machine gun opened up, cutting down 10 "Golf" Company Marines who were halfway across.

The enemy weapon was dug in on the far side of the bridge. The Marines poured fire into the machine gun position, but it had little effect,



(ABOVE LEFT) A Marine carried an old woman to safety. (ABOVE RIGHT) Recoilless rifles had many uses. When Marines popped smoke grenades to cover their advances, the enemy fired into the smoke. Marines then fired 106-mm. recoilless rifles, using the back blast to cover their movement. It worked well.

and the NVA swept the bridge with murderous accuracy. It was Cpl Lester Tully who charged forward, supported by covering fire of the other "Golf" grunts. Tully jumped alongside the enemy gun pit, killing the five NVA inside.

"I think Marines were successful at Hue because of our officers," Tully said. "Second Lieutenant Steve Hancock was my platoon commander. We were used to 'brown bars' trying to bring Quantico to a salty bunch of grunts. But Lt Hancock asked our advice; he laughed with us, and he shared our problems. He didn't *demand* respect; he *earned* it. And we'd have followed him anywhere."

"Chuck Meadows was our compa-



ny skipper. On our way to Hue, he had to read a book on street fighting! He's a good man and was a great company commander.



(ABOVE) A grunt advanced under fire. (BELOW) A wounded Marine is lowered from a roof top. Initially, "Golf" Company Marines were told, "Don't take chow. You'll be back (in Phu Bai) by 1800. . . ."



## HUE CITY, VIETNAM (cont.)

"And Barney Barnes was a squad leader, like me, and we became good friends. He wanted to be a Marine all his life. At the end of the first day in Hue, 'Golf' Company had less than 100 men who could still fight. They took second platoon and made a squad out of us.

"About our second week in Hue, Barney's squad got pinned down by machine guns, and my squad went to help. Two of my guys got killed, and Barney cried like a baby, even though he didn't know either of them."

Twenty years later, Barnes, from Alabama, and Tully, from Arkansas, still keep in contact with each other. They recently attended the 20th anniversary of the Hue City battle with other members of 2/5 in Washington, D.C.

"We're remembered for Tet 1968," Barney said, "but 'Golf' Company did a lot more. I was a grunt with 'Golf' from September 1967 to October 1968, and during my tour, we went on eight operations: Essex, Auburn, Lancaster II, Hue City, Baxter Garden, Allen Brook, Mameluke Thrust and Maui Peak.

"I believe I'm one of the few grunts in 2/5 who can say I don't have a Purple Heart," Barnes said with a smile.

The years fade away as he continued. "I remember sitting on the LZ (helicopter landing zone) in Phu Bai waiting for choppers to fly us south to An Hoa. You know the routine; 'hurry up and wait.' We had been there for some time when we were

told we were going to Hue, by truck, instead.

"We were elated! None of us wanted to go back to the booby trap capital of 'Nam, down at An Hoa. We had heard stories of how Hue was like an in-country R&R (rest and relaxation) center. They told us to stow most of our gear. We wouldn't need it because there were only a few NVA in Hue causing a civil disturbance.

"They said, 'Don't take chow. You'll be back by 1800. . . .'"

Barnes' squad was taking point as "Golf" Company formed up to cross the Nguyen Hoang Bridge. Tully's heroism knocked out the enemy machine gun, allowing the company to enter Hue.

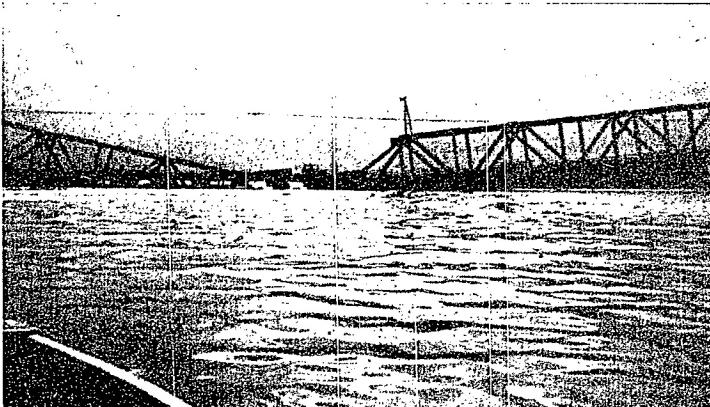
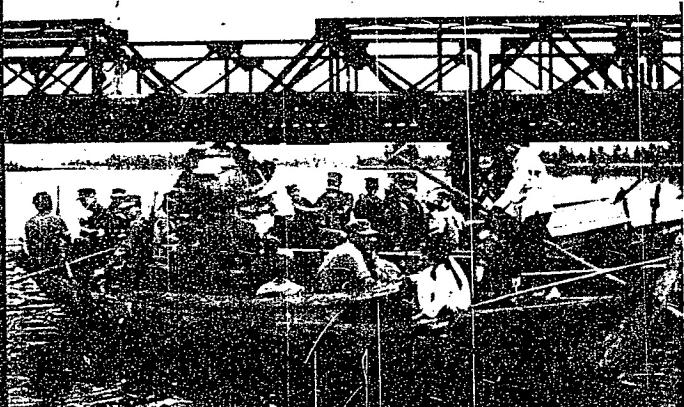
"When we started across, all hell broke loose," Barnes recalled. "The bridge was about 500 meters long. I told my squad to start running and not to stop until they reached the other side. There was so much incoming fire, you couldn't tell where it was all coming from.

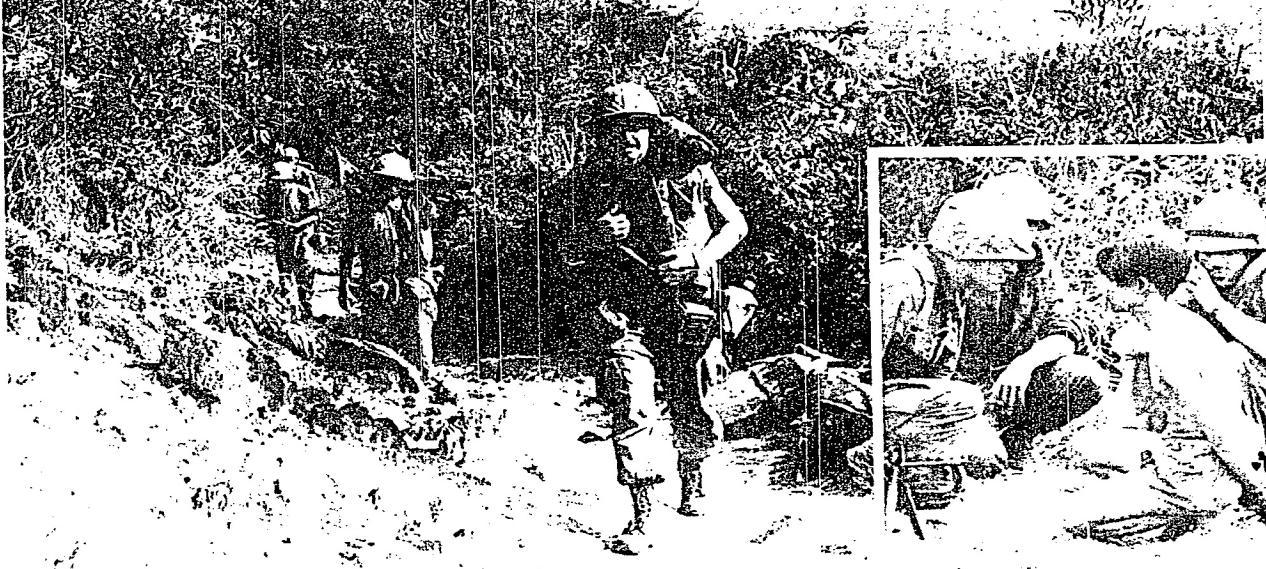
"When my guys got hit, I told the wounded to get as close to the side of the curb as they could, for protection. I took point and began running. I don't know how I got by them (the enemy machine gun). I guess they were concentrating their fire on one side of the bridge. My squad began pouring in fire, and that's when Tully made his move."

Barnes has many memories of Hue. . . .

"I remember taking the hospital and the prison. We'd been taking Hue one building at a time. In the

(BELOW LEFT) Reinforcements were ferried across the Perfume River by civilian boats. (BELOW RIGHT) The Nguyen Hoang Bridge proved costly to "Golf" Company Marines until Cpl Lester Tully knocked out an NVA machine gun nest.





hospital, we took it room by room. Once we saw a couple of Catholic nuns by a stairwell, and our platoon sergeant, SSgt Fortner, being a southern gentleman from Alabama, offered to take them to safety.

"They bowed. He bowed. And when he straightened up, he was looking into a barrel of a revolver. They weren't nuns at all. They were NVA in nun's habit!

"Luckily, the weapon jammed. They threw the weapon at him and ran like hell down the stairs. When last seen, they were running across the courtyard with their boots barely touching the ground and their nun's robes blowing in the breeze.

"It was at the prison that I saw my M-79 (grenade launcher) man, LCpl Mike Erwin, put two of three rounds into one of the guard towers, killing at least two NVA. It stands out because we were at least 300 meters away from the tower."

Barnes continued. "We had some of the finest leadership you could ever hope for in combat. 2dLt Steve Hancock and 1stLt Peter Pace kept us informed and allowed the squad leaders to be part of the decision-making process. The same applies to our platoon sergeant, Reid B. Zachary." (Zachary is presently serving as sergeant major of 1/5 attached to the Third Marine Division.)

Barnes admits he became aware of the Marine Corps early in his childhood. His next door neighbor was Major Harold George Schrier, who served as commanding officer

of the Marine Reserve unit in Birmingham, Ala.

As a first lieutenant during World War II, Schrier served with "E" 2/28 on Iwo Jima. It was his platoon which patrolled up and raised the first flag atop Mount Suribachi.

"The major was like a second father to my brother and me. I am sure he influenced me into becoming one of 'the few, the proud, the Marines.'

"But of all my memories," Barnes continued, "the one which will always remain with me is being told, 'You'll be back in Phu Bai by 1800. . . .'"

Walter Paul Kaczmarek Jr. has a memory of a historic event which he claims was never properly recorded. "But I have it in mind like an indelible print," he said.

The following is Kaczmarek's account of what *really* happened:

"It was February 6, 1968, and Gunnery Sergeant Frank Thomas, Private First Class Alan McDonald and I 'struck the colors' of the North Vietnamese Army and raised 'The Stars and Stripes' over Hue."

It was mid-afternoon when Marines smashed through the gates and walls of the capitol. GySgt Thomas and another grunt tore down the enemy flag. The gunny balanced his shotgun between his knees, unzipped his flak jacket and removed an American flag.

Before the attack had begun, LtCol Cheatham and Capt Christmas discussed raising an American flag. Ac-

(ABOVE) A 60-mm. mortar squad of "Hotel" Company, 2/5 humped over mountains near An Hoa shortly before the Hue City battle. (INSET) An NVA prisoner was questioned during the Hue City battle. It is estimated that 6,000 enemy troops were in Hue during the battle.

cording to law, no American flag was permitted to be flown above Republic of Vietnam soil unless accompanying a red and yellow government flag because "Americans were guests in the country."

"But we figured it was American Marines and not South Vietnamese soldiers who were doing the fighting and the dying," Kaczmarek explained.

Capt Christmas turned to the gunny and said, "Go for it," and Thomas ran to the flagpole. When firing broke out nearby, Kaczmarek and McDonald went to help the gunny. As the American flag was neatly secured, the Marines cheered, and more than a few grunts had tears of pride in their eyes.

Later in the day, when two American Army officers arrived to take down the American flag because it was in violation of local "ground rules," Kaczmarek locked and loaded on the two headquarters captains.

"Capt Christmas told the two Army captains that if they wanted the flag down, they'd have to take it down, but that he couldn't be responsible for the actions of his men," Kaczmarek said, smiling. The two soldiers went back to headquarters. The Marines returned to battle.

## HUE CITY, VIETNAM (cont.)

The American flag waved proudly over the capitol.

(Gunny Thomas would receive a Bronze Star and Navy Commendation Medal; PFC McDonald received a Silver Star; LCpl Kaczmarek received two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star. None of the medals were awarded for the flag-raising event.)

Cpl Scott Sampietro of Mahopac, N.Y., felt as though he was being "benched" during the battle. "I was assigned to mortars, and I wound up in the rear, with the company CP (command post). The wounded and dead were being brought back and that bothered me. I didn't feel that I was contributing."

His request for transfer to a grunt company was finally approved, and he joined "Fox" 2/5.

"I arrived in Hue with the first group of replacements," Sampietro recalled. "I'll never forget the scene: remains of one of the first convoys into the city, charred and bullet-riddled trucks, and blood stains on the street. And I'll never forget Capt Downs. He was a presence; a Marine who had an impact on all those around him."

Sampietro doesn't recall much of what happened in Hue. He doesn't recall the action which resulted in his receiving the Silver Star for heroism. He does, however, recall the pain of two Purple Hearts.

"But there was some humor, even in the heat of battle. We had a guy in 60-mortars who was kind of clumsy. We had mortar rounds in our packs, and I remember seeing him running under pretty heavy enemy fire, and as he ran, his cartridge belt began sliding further and further down un-



When Marines reached the walls of the Citadel, they were told to "hold" and permit Vietnamese (ARVN) soldiers to flush out the remainder of the defenders. When the ARVN got pinned down, Marine tanks blew a hole in the wall, and 2/5 grunts finished the job.

til it went around his hips. There he was, running as hard and as fast as he could, with this khaki belt sliding further and further down his legs. . . . The urgency of the situation made the scene almost surrealistic," Sampietro recalled.

As the battle progressed, the Marines got dirtier and dirtier. They looked like. . . well, they looked like combatant grunts: grease and grime, unshaven, and bloody. Blood that was either their own, the enemies' or a buddy's. . . .

"And when we set up next to the water (either the Phu Cam Canal or the Perfume River, he doesn't recall which), I figured I'd take a dip and clean up," Sampietro continued.

"Two things made that swim memorable. First, I swam right into a bloated pig that was floating along, and second, I got my ass chewed royally. It turned out that the area wasn't secured, and I could have gotten my head blown off!"



Col Ron Christmas (who has been selected to brigadier general) recalled that the NVA had snipers on roof tops and behind walls. In front of many walls throughout the city, spider traps (one-man fighting holes) had been dug and camouflaged.

Charles McMahon was a corporal at Hue. Originally from Philadelphia, his Marine grandfather fought at Chateau-Thierry in World War I, and his father was a Marine at Guadalcanal during World War II. Cpl McMahon was a rifleman and fire team leader in the second platoon of "Hotel" Company.

"Our officers and NCOs were superb," McMahon said. "Capt Christmas, Lt Ken Kromer and Lt Mike Lambert were always out front with us. And Gunny Thomas always looked out for our skins."

"We had some magnificent corpsmen, like 'Doc' (Gordon) Broadfoot. When I was wounded, he was the first man to reach me after the grenade knocked me down."

The recent reunion in Washington, D.C., was full of memories. J. D. Moore was attempting to locate a number of men he served with in 2/5. But especially he recalled his assistant forward observer, Ken Stetson, killed in action February 17, 1968.

"I'll pay my respects at 'The Wall' later today," Moore said.

"I feel the same way," said former Cpl C. James Lewis of Los Angeles. He was awarded a Purple Heart for wounds received during the Tet battle. "I lost some good friends in Vietnam, and the names are indelibly etched in my mind, and on 'The Wall' (The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., where the names of 58,132 American servicemen and women are etched in black marble).

"There were three kinds of Marines in Hue," Lewis stated. "The wounded, the dead and the survi-



Photo by Tom Bartlett

**Retired Col Chuck Meadows checked in former members of 2/5 during a recent reunion held in Washington, D.C. More than 20 years have passed since the battle for Hue during Tet 1968.**

vors. And when I say 'Marines,' I include the Navy personnel attached to us, chaplains and hospital corpsmen." (Navy Chaplain Richard Lyons received a Silver Star and Purple Heart at Hue.)

Former Marine Cpl Michael Moore lives in New York City. Vietnam and his service as a squad leader with "E" 2/5 were 20 years behind him. He arrived in Washington to participate in the annual Marine Corps Marathon.

"I checked into the hotel and got on the elevator with a couple of others," he recalled. "One of the guys mentioned An Hoa, and then they started talking about Hue City. I couldn't believe it. I had no idea 2/5 was having a reunion, and had I known, I probably wouldn't have come anyway. I couldn't deal with Vietnam.

"But I intended on running my first marathon for my brothers in 2/5, and the next thing I know, I'm with my brothers of 2/5!"

"Our reunion plans began in 1984 when a small group of us met for the dedication of 'The Wall,'" Jack Field explained. "We scheduled a reunion for Chicago in 1985, and 11 showed up. Last year I had a mini-reunion for 'Golf' Company, and 15 attended and stayed at my place up in New Hampshire.

"A friend of mine, a younger type, is a corporal in the Marine Corps, and he hung around us in New Hampshire. W. J. Schlesser just sat at the kitchen table, and then he began doodling. . . . This is what he wrote:

"There's a part of some men that may never show, for that part of them should they only know.

"It's said to be 'memory,' a past, so damned real; it's blood and it's tears that only he'll feel.

"There's more than respect for this quality man; a very true love that few understand.

"A chuckle, a tear, a drink and a smoke; to others, a boycott, a put-down, a joke.

"But to those who served, down in the ranks, are millions of us who owe you our thanks.

"And as I walk barefoot, through dirt and through sand, I remember you men, who have fought for this land."

"And Cpl Schlesser dedicated it to us, of 'Golf' Company," Field explained.

Jack Field, Ken Kromer, Bob Gross and Col Chuck Meadows went to work, compiling a list for the 20th reunion, to coincide with the Battle of Hue City.

"Our old battalion CO, who is now Lieutenant General Ernest Cheatman, was guest speaker during our banquet," Kromer explained. "And during our stay, we visited the Marine Corps Museum at the Washington Navy Yard. Some paid their respects to fallen comrades at 'The Wall.'

"But most of all, we renewed friendships," Kromer added. "Hardly anybody talked about combat, unless it was to remind another friend of a certain guy or a bit of humor."

Field, who had been a squad leader with "Golf" Company, later be-

came a sniper, as did Rudy Bustamante. The two made arrangements to visit the Marine Corps' Scout Sniper School at Quantico, Va.

"It was great!" Bustamante said. "GySgt Michael Latimer, one of the instructors, gave us a tour and showed us the new sniper equipment."

"They treated us like we were something special," Field agreed. (Field was awarded a Bronze Star and a pair of Purple Hearts during Tet.)

"It's hard to believe that 20 years have passed, but things change," Field continued. "The attitude concerning the war has changed. Hue City was 20 years ago, but not all of the wounds have healed."

*(To contact members of 2/5 of 1968, write: Col Chuck Meadows, 2813 John Coffee Court, Woodbridge, VA 22192. For a more complete understanding of the battle for Hue, see this month's "Books Reviewed," concerning Keith William Nolan's "Battle For Hue, Tet 1968.")*

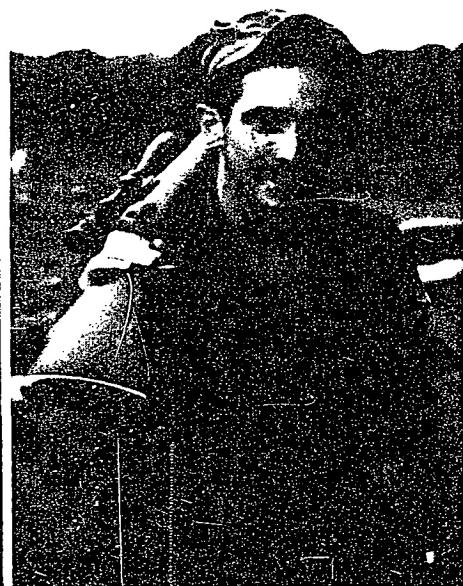


Photo by Tom Bartlett

**SgtMaj Frank A. Thomas was a gunnery sergeant when he helped raise the American flag over Hue City.**

# Hue City

## Meet The Marines



Scout sniper Jack Field



Squad Leader Cpl Elliott



Frank Koerber



Tom McLaughlin



Gibson, Koerber, Jackson and the corpsman at An Hoa



"Barney" Barnes



**John Wade, Peter Murray and Charles McMahon**



**Jack Field at An Hoa**



**"Doc" Broadfoot**



**Lt Mike Lambert and Miller**



**"Doc" Morin**



**Mike Erwin**



**Lt Ken Kromer**

