

LCpl Brian Mayer (center, looking back) hauled wounded leathernecks from fields of fire in the bloody streets of Hue. It took SSgt Joe McLaughlin nearly three decades to find him and ensure that his action in saving the lives of his fellow Marines was recognized.



Sgt Paul Thompson

## Running a Gauntlet of Fire Tet of '68, Hue City

Story by R. R. Keene

**S**taff Sergeant Joe McLaughlin was in a rage of frustration. His men were being shot up piecemeal. His dead and wounded were everywhere.

His radioman lay lifeless before the Pagoda doors near the Citadel's Thuong Tu Gate. Streaks of tracer rounds had shot out of an opening, killing him. McLaughlin knew others were wounded, but still alive. He could hear them. He wasn't sure how many were dead.

It had been like this for days: house to house. His platoon had assaulted the Citadel's southwest wall through the gate between the inner palace and outer wall. They were going through a case of grenades per man each day. Violent death was all around. Along the wall, enemy grenades had suddenly dropped,

causing his Marines to run for cover. One of them ran right into the treads of a Marine tank and was crushed.

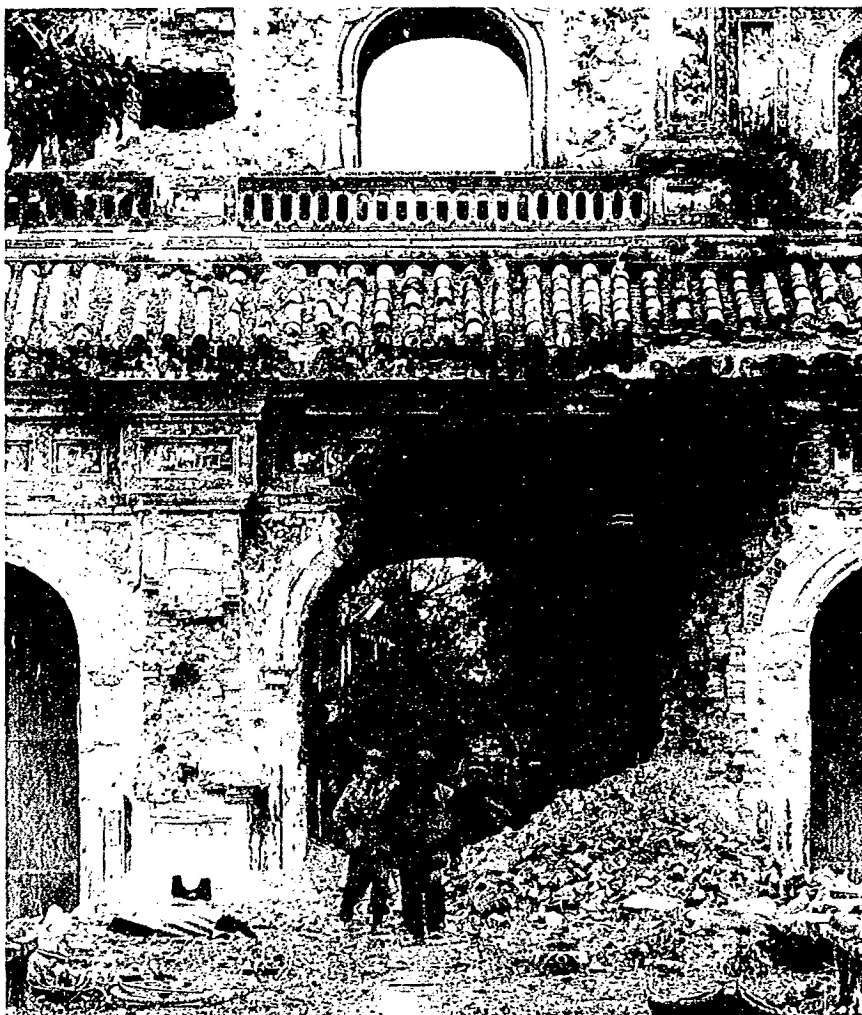
This last assault was just as vicious. They sent riflemen through an archway where bullets ricocheted from every direction. Seven or eight Marines were hit, and Communist rocket-propelled grenades slammed into nearby tracked vehicles, causing their crews to bail out through a curtain of small-arms fire. Others lay wounded, in pain, pinned down by Communist fire and begging for help. The fetid air of a dying city buzzed with bullets, rockets, explosions and shrapnel. The carnage was overwhelming, and rubble that had once been Hue City cut through McLaughlin's utility uniform, boots and skin.

"It wasn't supposed to be this way," he cursed to himself. "Hell, we all thought we were coming up for a little liberty after the fighting down by Da Nang."

McLaughlin was no recruit. He was platoon sergeant of the 1st Platoon of "Lima" Company, 3d Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment. He'd been around the Corps more than a few years: a "D.I. at P.I." and "in country" for a while, long enough to have a Bronze Star for action near Go Noi Island south of Da Nang.

However, like the sudden pelting of the monsoon rains, it had gotten very exotic in exotic Vietnam.

In the Year of the Monkey, 1968, Tet Nguyen Dan, the Vietnamese Buddhist Lunar New Year which fell on Jan. 31,



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In a month of house-to-house, pagoda-to-pagoda fighting in and around the Citadel, Marines finally forced what was left of 7,500 Communists out of the fabled 148-year-old fortress.



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saw the 2 a.m. arrival of two regiments of North Vietnamese soldiers augmented by Viet Cong forces. Approximately 7,500 combat-laden Communists entered Hue City. By dawn there was a large Viet Cong flag defiantly fluttering from the main mast of the Citadel's Palace of Peace. It was a brazen challenge, taunting U.S. Marines to come and take it down.

It was a formidable, bloody and costly gauntlet that the leathernecks had taken up. It would take a month of street-to-street, pagoda-to-pagoda fighting and cost 5,113 Communist lives and 384 South Vietnamese soldiers, killed mostly in the first week of fighting (a number of civilians estimated to be in the hundreds were also slaughtered by the Communists and buried in mass graves); 147 U.S. Marines were killed in action with 857 wounded.

Hue (pronounced "whay") was before the battle and is again today as exotic as its sounds. Set on the banks of the Song Huong, River of Perfume, it is Vietnam's third largest city. Actually, it is two cities, for Hue encompasses an impressive squared-fortress Citadel which once served as a residence for its Anamese emperors. Completed in 1820 and a major cultural shrine, its many ancient and revered structures include the imposing Palace of Peace. Its most formidable characteristic is a massive outer wall, 16 feet high and varying in thickness from 60 to more than 200 feet, surrounded by a moat. It was within the Citadel that the Communists made their stand.

It was near the southeast gate in late February that McLaughlin's platoon was paying its horrible and heavy price.

There was no liberty in Hue, and McLaughlin's first unsettling hint that things were going to go bad was after being heloed in with his platoon. The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam compound south of the Citadel was deep in rubble perforated with bullet holes. He'd spotted a Marine, who'd been a drill instructor with him at Parris Island, S.C., moving along with five or six members of 1st Bn, 1st Marines and called, "Hey! What ya' got there? A water detail?"

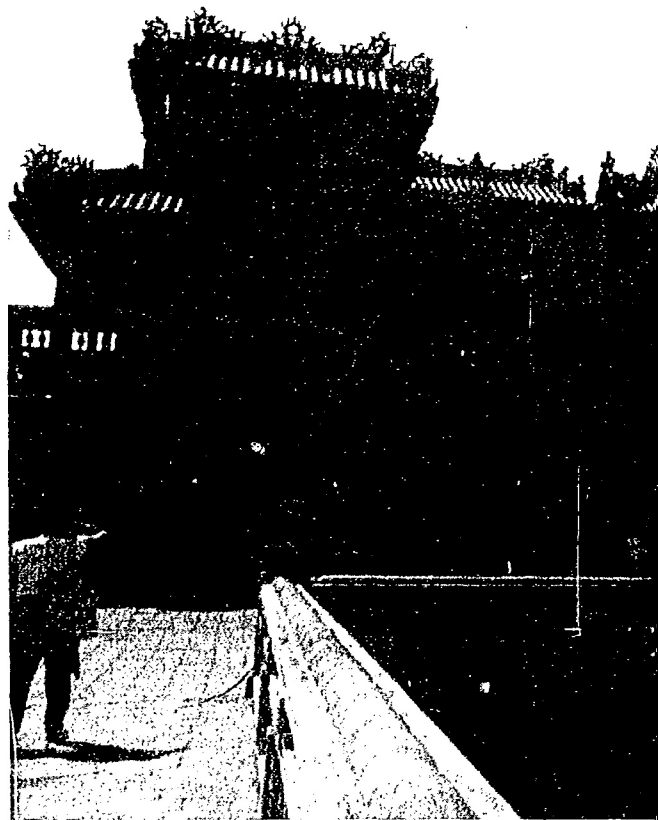
"No," came the reply. "This is all I got left."

Days later, McLaughlin was fearful for what was left of his platoon and what he could do to save those wounded and calling for help.

"Suddenly, out of nowhere came this



R. R. Keene



Above: The Citadel's Dong Ba Gate, not far from the Thuong Tu Gate, was the site of bitter fighting by members of 5th Marines. Today the Dong Ba Gate is no less imposing, but now is an opening to peaceful traffic.

Right: The Citadel is surrounded by a moat and walls varying in thickness from 60 to more than 200 feet. The wall still bears the scars of the 1968 battle, but atop the parapets onion fields abound.



R. R. Keene

The ancient Palace of Peace has been under restoration for many years and again resembles the revered structure it has been since 1820.

Below: A Communist flag once again flies over the Citadel; however, Vietnam is on much friendlier terms with Americans who regularly visit the exotic city.



R. R. Keene



R. R. Keene

guy," who, according to McLaughlin, swung around a corner and drove a mechanical mule "right into our firefight."

The mechanical mule is a two-cylinder, M-274A5 half-ton 4x4 utility vehicle. When new off the assembly line, it could hit 25 miles per hour. Its flatbed was used by Marines as a platform for a 106-mm. recoilless rifle and to haul equipment. It was not designed to be a lead or medical evacuation vehicle as the driver sat up front alone and completely exposed.

Initially, everybody watched in astonishment as the driver turned his mule toward two wounded Marines hunkered down in a ditch. As soon as the Communists behind the Palace walls realized what was happening, they loaded fresh magazines and fired AK-47 rounds at the mule driver.

Marines among the nearby houses fired back with increased intensity.

Bullets impacted and ricocheted all around the mule which bounced across the road. The driver stopped, leaped out, dashed to the wounded, helped them onto the flatbed and took off as geysers of dirt spewed up from AK-47 bullets impacting in his wake.

"Who was that guy?" McLaughlin couldn't believe his eyes. The law of probability should have been against that driver. "Impossible. There is no way anybody could have survived that fire."

The platoon sergeant didn't dwell on it. He still had to come up with a way to evacuate the rest of his wounded.

Suddenly, from around a corner, came the driver on his mule again. He was bareheaded and barreling his now-empty vehicle down the street exploding with rifle fire. Again, he stopped, jumped off the mule, loaded up the wounded, jumped back in the driver's seat and sped away.

"Incredible," said McLaughlin. "Who is this guy?" This time, McLaughlin looked hard at the man's face and burned it into his memory. "Whoever he is, he should get a medal."

Lance Corporal Brian S. Mayer, a 19-year-old, 106 crewman with Headquarters and Service Co, 1/5, already had more medals than he wanted. He'd been in country less than three months and had two Purple Hearts.

His 106-mm. Recoilless Rifle Plt had crossed the Perfume River near the University of Hue.

"If you weren't firing or cleaning your weapon, you were doing something," Mayer said. "We had extra mules, and I was told to go pick up the wounded."

"That's what I did. I didn't think I was in any danger. There was rifle fire, but you heard it all the time. You were scared, but you didn't dwell on it."

"I picked up six or eight people beside the dead," Mayer said that through it all, he was vaguely aware of bullets hitting around him. He made a total of three such trips that day.

"Two days later I went out again and picked up some more. I had a .45-caliber pistol, but driving, I didn't need it. So I handed it to someone who could use it. I guess I was sort of naive."

There were other mule drivers who were not so lucky. One missed Charlie 1/5's positions and drove into an afternoon firefight at an intersection. The Communists shot the driver out of his seat. It wasn't until long after dark that



Marines were able to recover the man's body.

Mayer's tour would soon end, too. After Hue, the Marines pursued what was left of North Vietnamese retreating out of the Citadel.

At a foot bridge too narrow for vehicles, Mayer's unit paused to assess their situation.

"I thought someone was throwing pebbles at the mules," he said. "I looked around, and it dawned on me that we were being fired on."

The small-arms fire became intense and was augmented with B-40 rocket explosions. The Marines grabbed their rifles and headed for cover. Mayer sighted down the barrel of his M16 looking for a target. He never found one.

An AK-47 round blew through his foot. He winced in pain as he spun down on his back, and another burst of rounds quickly drilled into both his thighs.

"They're using him for target practice," said one Marine nearby. Another Marine dropped down beside Mayer,

saying, "Come on. I'll take you back!"

Mayer recognized him and yelled, "You're married. Get out of here! Take a walk!"

LCpl Raymond Howard, squad leader from Alabama with D/1/5, was an 18-year-old leatherneck who wore a flak jacket that brazenly boasted: "Howard Is My Name. Trouble Is My Game." He, too, had been a mule driver in the Citadel, who unhesitatingly drove ammunition or hauled wounded wherever and whenever they told him.

Howard didn't offer to help. He ran out and scooped Mayer over his shoulder and headed for the relative safety of a shed. Mayer, in great pain, still heard the slap of bullets overhead and saw dust from rounds kicking up around him. The shed was farther than estimated. Howard was running out of energy. Wheezing, he paused to catch his breath, then again threw Mayer over his shoulder and stumbled on. Howard was barely moving when Mayer told him, "Take off. I can make it from here."

It hadn't seemed that far, but Mayer had to crawl on his elbows and couldn't feel his legs. He began to panic. "God! I'm not going to make it."

Bullets were still slapping just over his head. They slammed into a water buffalo tied to a nearby tree. Mayer, covered with blood and sweat, continued to crawl and reached the shed. Two corpsmen reached out, grabbed his flak jacket and hauled him in.

Inside were several wounded. One, PFC Jim Moore, was a friend of Mayer. He lay calmly smoking a cigarette. It was then that Mayer noticed Moore's arm was missing. Mayer looked at his own messy leg wounds and wondered what was going to happen to him?

That was nearly three decades ago. In June, at Marine Barracks, 8th & I Streets, Washington, D.C., dress-blue bedecked Marines, who were not even born when leathernecks hauled down the Communist flag and ran up the Stars and Stripes over the Citadel of Hue, marched in a precision evening parade.



The walls of the Citadel and the inner palace provided protection to both sides during the fighting. A wounded member of 2/5 was treated by a corpsman on Feb. 6, 1968.

The Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Richard I. Neal, himself a Vietnam veteran, spoke. "We are here to honor a Marine who embodies the inherent qualities of Marines around the world. One who we humbly recognize 29 years after risking his life to save the lives of his fellow Marines."

Up stepped Brian Mayer, using a cane to steady himself, but still able to stand at proper attention as the general pinned him with the Silver Star.



Courtesy of Brian S. Mayer

Above: Then-PFC Mayer with Rosemary, his future wife

Below: Nearly 30 years later, he was presented the Silver Star by Gen Richard I. Neal, ACMC. Col David G. Dotterer, CO, Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C., looked on.



Cpl J. D. Pierce

In the stands were retired Master Sergeant Joe McLaughlin and about 50 members of 3/5 who survived the battle of Hue.

McLaughlin didn't forget Mayer's face, nor his actions under that overcast Vietnamese sky and under fire. He had looked for Mayer or anyone who remembered him ever since. Finally, with the help of Mayer's former battalion commander, retired Colonel Bob Thompson, and retired Col Pat O'Toole, who followed Thompson as CO of 1/5, as well as other former Marines such as Bernie Ambrey and Dennis Freed, who was one of the men Mayer rescued, an award recommendation went to Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps.

Also on hand were their sons, Captain Timothy McLaughlin and Second Lieutenant Craig Mayer, both Marines and both engineers.

"From the first day of boot camp our drill instructors taught us never to leave our fellow Marines behind," said Mayer. I responded in a way that every Marine given the chance would have. That's what it means to be a Marine."

Hue City must seem like ancient history to the Marines in the viewing stands and on parade at 8th & I, but the lesson was well taken and passed on.



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