



Story and photos by Sgt Paul L. Thompson, USMC

The history of the Corps overflows with accounts of hard-fought battles in which Marines struggled for every foot of ground they took. Perhaps the taking of Hue City was not the biggest campaign ever fought but the victory has earned its place along with other valiant engagements recorded in the Corps' history books.

To single out any one battalion, company, or man would be unfair. Each man, fire team and platoon fought the same, room-to-room, house-to-house, street-to-street war. In some cases, it was a duel between individuals. A fast trigger finger often meant the difference between who lived or died. Sometimes

there were only seconds to fire when the enemy moved past a window or turned down an alley. And then you hoped that the next time you passed a window or ran down an alley, the enemy would not be waiting for you.

The city of Hue is not built like the typical Asian town. It is the old imperial capital of Vietnam, a mixture of Vietnamese and French, and for the most part it was built like a French city. It is actually two cities, separated by the Perfume River, so-called because of the sweet smell emanating from the river during the summer months. South of the river was the city's French colony. The north side of the city holds the Imperial Citadel, where the rulers of Vietnam held court around the turn of the century.



Below: A group of Marines wait for the word to go into action during the battle for Hue in Vietnam in early 1968.



The battle on the south side of the river can best be described as a company-size scrap. It was between the men of “Hotel” Company, 2nd Bn, 5th Marines, and the NVA troops holding the Vietnamese Hue Provincial Headquarters on Lei Loy Street, along the riverfront.

The 2/5 Marines began by working their way out of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) compound and into the Hue University area, little more than 100 yards away. A couple of days later 1st Bn, 5th Marines, and 1st Bn, 1st Marines, came into the city, along with elements of other units. These units formed the Marines’ main fighting force in the city.

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The enemy fought like a highly trained professional with his defense laid out in depth. Any Marine who helped to take the city will tell you the NVA is a very tough enemy. As the Marines awaited the word to move forward, one young private first class, Louis Denny, was informed he would remain in the rear. He would not take part in the attack on the headquarters. He had already been wounded twice that day.

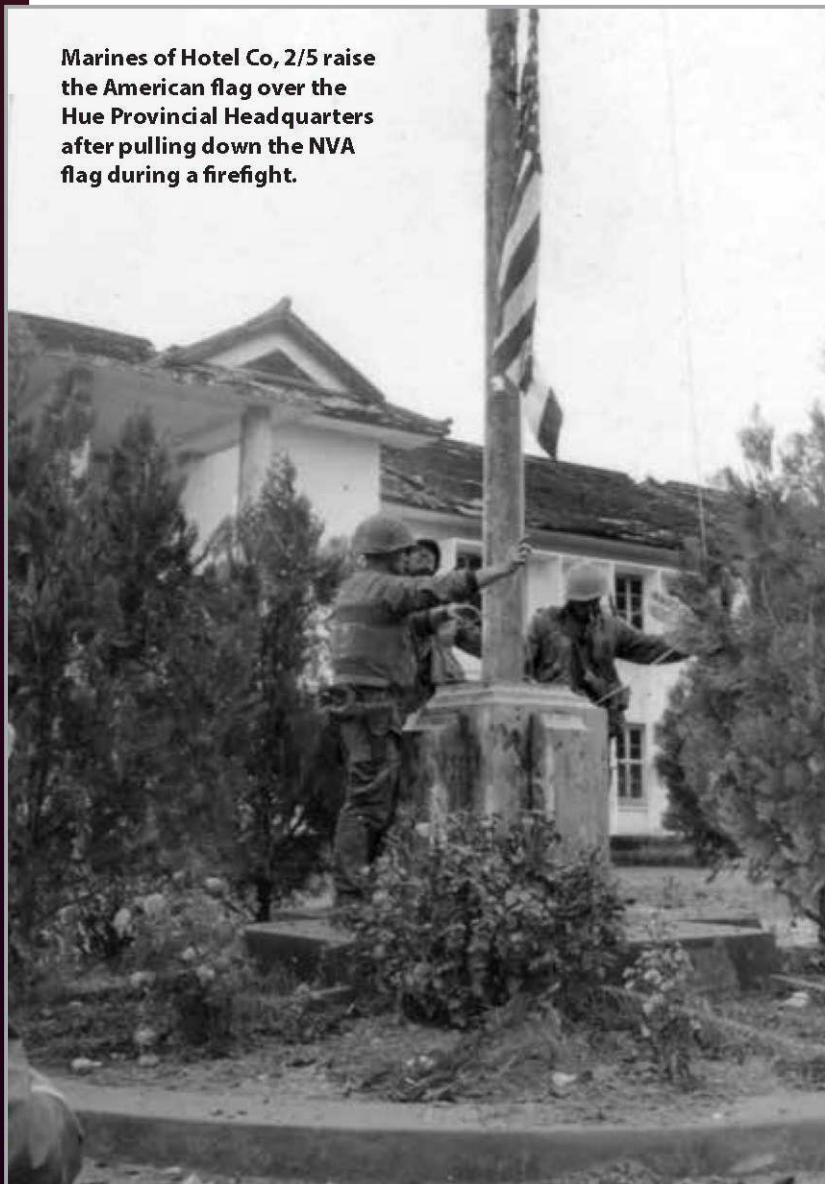
Before the communists seized Hue, the city had barely felt the sting of the war. Now, most of the old homes, large stately structures, are scarred and bullet riddled. Some are little more than rubble. The Hue University, a modern college, was gutted by the fighting there. The Palace itself felt little of the damage, but the walls of the Citadel, which make up a good part of the city, resemble ancient ruins.

The enemy, mostly North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops, came into the city on Jan. 31, 1968, during what was supposed to be a Lunar New Year truce. They captured major portions of the city, and by the next day were almost in complete control. That same day the men of the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, entered the city and joined the battle.

"The first time I got hit," said the young Marine, "was with grenade frags, I think." He wore a large field dressing on his neck to cover the wound. Even after PFC Denny was hit, he remained with his platoon; he didn't want to leave. Denny added, "Later in the day, I was on the line again when an NVA sniper put a bullet in my helmet." Pulling off his helmet, he showed the bullet hole and a large, ugly-looking red streak across the top of his forehead where the bullet had creased his

building and began fighting room to room. As the building was being secured, the Hotel Company gunny, Gunnery Sergeant Frank Thomas, and a number of Marines from the company began pulling the North Vietnamese flag off the flagpole outside the building. Seconds later the "Stars and Stripes" were raised. GySgt Thomas said, "I had been carrying that flag for a couple of days, just waiting to run it up in front of this building."

Marines of Hotel Co, 2/5 raise the American flag over the Hue Provincial Headquarters after pulling down the NVA flag during a firefight.



While the gunny was still securing the rope, rounds began zipping in close to the flagpole and the Marines around it. The gunny yelled, "Take cover!" His words were unnecessary. The Marines around him were already looking for a place a little less in the open.

One Marine, looking for some cover, yelled to the others, "Look out, there are snipers dug in along the wall!" Only a few feet from the flagpole a cement wall formed the courtyard in front of the building. Along it, on the inside, were dug a number of sniper holes. Within seconds the Marines were walking toward the holes, firing their M16s as they went.

Minutes later six NVA, dead or dying, lay in the courtyard, their weapons stacked near their

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bodies. A voice screamed, "There's another one over here! Help me!" Two Marines started toward the hole, again firing their M16s from the hip. As they fired, two hands came out of the hole. One of the enemy had chosen to surrender, rather than meet the same fate as the others. He was pulled by his outstretched hands from his fighting hole and taken near the flagpole to be searched. As two Marines searched him, more enemy fire was directed at the courtyard. They tied up their prisoner and dragged him to a safe place, then took cover.

The building, for the most part, was then secured and the rest of the company began to move in. The

Marines coming in were warned not to step in front of any of the windows. It soon became clear that the NVA had used the buildings as one of their main strongpoints and also as a headquarters. When they were forced to retreat, they left behind not only vast amounts of food and ammunition, but also their personal gear.

As the NVA packs, weapons, and field gear were collected, First Lieutenant Bill Moore, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines S-2, (Intelligence Officer) began going through the captured equipment. Lt Moore stated that, "When any enemy begins to leave his weapons and personal gear behind, he is on the run, and nothing can stop him." He added, "This is one of

skull. With a smile, he added, "The NVA are damn good shots. I had heard someplace that they were not good marksmen. Well, I'm here to tell you different!"

As the Marines waited to take the building, an Ontos drove up and began pouring rounds into the building from its six 106 mm recoilless rifles. After the third round the NVA fired back with a small rocket, much like the ammo from the Corps' 3.5 rocket launcher. The Ontos was put out of action; its crew was pulled to safety. Two of the crewmen had to be evacuated because of wounds.

Then, through a hole in a nearby wall, the Marines started their push. Against heavy fire they made their way into the



Above: A mechanical mule was used during the fighting to haul ammo and chow and to evacuate wounded Marines from danger areas.



Marines and Vietnamese soldiers pick their way back through the rubble of Hue after securing the Imperial City in a bitter house-to-house battle.



Cpl Richard R. Pfendler of Lima Co, 3/5, sits in the city's rubble while waiting for another push to start.

"These young Marines fighting in the city are better equipped and better trained than the NVA. Oh, the NVA is a good trooper, make no mistake, he's damn good, but he still doesn't hold a candle to any Marine." MGySgt Jenaro Lucero

the biggest hauls we have made to date. I think we have him just about where we want him now."

The captured gear was loaded on a truck and sent back to battalion headquarters. The building was secured, and the fight moved up the street, again room by painful room, house by house.

In another part of the city, another battle was going on at the same time. A battle of radio watches, map changes and hours upon hours without sleep. At 1st Bn, 1st Marines regimental headquarters, located in the mess hall of the MACV Compound, a rather large master gunnery sergeant, with a very sinister looking mustache, spends his time keeping the headquarters running smoothly. His name is Master Gunnery Sergeant Jenaro Lucero. He has only been in Vietnam a few months—this time. This is his third tour in Vietnam and his

second time as the operations chief of a regiment. Ask him why he spends so much time in Vietnam, he will smile and say, "This is it, it's where a Marine belongs. It's what I have been trained to do all my life. I am just paying back the investment the Marine Corps has made in me."

When asked about the fighting in the city, Lucero said, "The Marine Corps is kicking the NVA where it hurts the most. It's only a matter of days now before he is done for." Then he added, "These young Marines fighting in the city are better equipped and better trained than the NVA. Oh, the NVA is a good trooper, make no mistake, he's damn good, but he still doesn't hold a candle to any Marine. Besides that, he's up against the two best regiments in the Corps, the 1st and the 5th." MGySgt Lucero might be a little prejudiced. Every man likes to think his unit is the best. And there is a soft spot in Lucero's heart for the 5th, with which he served in the Korean War as an automatic rifleman.

A little while later, dressed in his helmet and flak jacket and with an M16 under his arm, Lucero started to leave. "I just thought I'd kind of check with some of my troopers and see how they are doing," he told us. When his job can spare him, Top Lucero spends as much time as he can in the companies and platoons with the junior enlisted men.

In another section of Hue, a jeep came around a corner with its tires screaming. It slid to a stop. The driver looked huge; he was badly in need of a shave, a shower and some sleep, but not necessarily in that order. Sitting on a tire with an M16 rifle laid over the jeep's canvas top, was another Marine, smaller than the first. Their job was hauling wounded from the fighting back to the battalion aid station. The Marines

were Sergeant Roland Garnsey, smaller of the two, and PFC Ken Schatra, the driver. Both were with Fox Co, 2nd Bn, 5th Marines. Their job of hauling wounded and bringing supplies up to the company was a dangerous task. Sgt Garnsey said, "As the platoons move forward, there are always a few snipers left behind. That's one of the reasons we don't pay much attention to the speed limits around here. We get to where we're going and back as quickly as we can."

PFC Schatra added, "When I first started driving this jeep, I didn't know the city at all, but I learned in a big hurry." He explained that a wrong turn could end in disaster. Schatra doesn't like fighting in a city. "I'd much rather be in the rice paddies or the bush any day of the week," he stated.

As the two jeep-driving Marines took a break, their company commander, Captain Michael Downs, came over

Leatherneck Writer and Photographer Reflects on His Experiences During the Battle of Hue City

Sergeant Paul L. Thompson was a *Leatherneck* combat correspondent when he covered the Battle of Hue City for the magazine. We recently spoke with him about that assignment and asked him for his thoughts about it now that more than 50 years have passed.

Book after book has now been published on Vietnam, the history of the country, the war and the many mistakes made. The one mistake that stands out for me is the fact that General Westmoreland and others believed Hue City was not a problem and could be dealt with quickly. It was believed by higher authority that no more than 2,000 communist soldiers were in the city. The Marines learned they were facing five times that number of enemy troops. Higher authority refused to believe the Marines with their boots on the ground. The Marines who were sent to Hue were experienced and very capable in the jungle. Marine commanders were reading textbooks on "Combat in Built Up Areas" as they were on their way to Hue City. The first Marines who arrived there were in for a shock. The difference between combat in the jungle and combat in a city is so very different. However, Marines learned quickly, sometimes by the mistakes they made.

I had a choice when the Tet Offensive began. I could have gone to Khe Sanh or Hue. I picked Hue because the Marine Corps had not fought in a city since Marines captured Seoul during the Korean War. On the fourth or

fifth day of battle I asked a medevac pilot if I could ride into Hue City with his helicopter. At first, he said no! I explained why I wanted to go to Hue City. He said if I wanted to go, I had to understand that it was a one-way trip. I could not change my mind. The helicopter was going in to pick up wounded. He could not bring me back out and leave a wounded Marine. I agreed. He grinned and said I was crazy. I made the trip in, the helicopter did a combat drop into the landing area, I burst out of the door as wounded Marines were being loaded. Within seconds that helicopter was on its way out. The rest of the month I was in Hue."

Another note about Hue ... in a book I just read about Hue, the Imperial Throne Room was mentioned. It said that every North Vietnamese trooper who entered the Throne Room sat on that throne, and many had their photos taken. So, when I did, near the end of the battle, I was not the first to sit there and have my photo taken. The National Archives has that photo. For a long time, they offered a nice, framed copy of the photo, or a mouse pad, or coffee cups with that photo on it. I bought copies of the coffee mugs for my children. The photo is also used in the Marine Corps' official history of Hue City. The photo caption with that publication says the Marine in the photo was a member of the 5th Marines. I was not a member of that great organization ... just *Leatherneck* magazine.



Leatherneck combat correspondent Sgt Paul L. Thompson sits on a throne in the palace in the old city of Hue in 1968.

and sat in the jeep, trying to keep out of the ever-present rain. He took off his helmet and rubbed the dark red line made by the band in the helmet.

"My company is doing one hell of a job," he commented. Not all of the men in his company had come into the city with combat experience. Some had just joined the company and this was their first battle. "I don't think I'll ever get over the way these men act under fire. This is their first time and they go about it like hard, seasoned troops. An officer could ask no more from his men than I have received."

But the captain's few moments of rest ended when one of his two radio operators handed him the handset to a PRC-25 radio. The captain listened for a few seconds then handed the set back. He replaced his helmet on his head and told the other radio operator, the one in contact with his platoons, "Platoon commanders up!" There was another room-to-room, house-to-house street to be taken by the men of Fox Company 2/5.

Across the Perfume River, Marines of 1/5 were fighting for the moats and walls of the Imperial City. And, if it were possible, the fighting on the north side of the river was more

of the Citadel wall, which surrounded the inner city and the moated and walled palace.

The men of 1/5 fought elements of the 802nd, 804th and the K-4B NVA main force battalions, all well-trained and well-led troops. Staff Sergeant James Monroe was given the job of securing a vantage point, a tower, on the wall itself.

Monroe said, "We started about 3:30 in the morning and were told that we had two buildings to secure before we would be able to reach the tower." He went on to say that they met no opposition at all in either of the two buildings or in the tower itself. "I guess we sort of caught the NVA napping, which was a great help." He added that as soon as first light came so did NVA sniper fire along with a couple of rockets. "We did a little shooting of our own," said Monroe. "We got 15 of them by body count from up in the tower." After that one vantage point was taken, the NVA's position along

the wall began to crumble little by little.

The Marine Corps was not the only unit fighting on the north side of the river. The South Vietnamese Army was also doing its share. One unit, a reconnaissance company of the

South Vietnamese Army's First Division, was attached to 1/5. With them was an advisor, Warrant Officer Terry J. Egan of the Australian Army. Egan said of the two units, "Between my 'mates' and the Marines, the bloody NVA have their hands full. We've been teaching old Charlie a thing or two." The 1/5 Marines' battalion command post was guarded, in part, by the ARVN Recon Company. And when they were not busy guarding the command post, WO Egan and his "mates" were busy scouting the streets in which both units were working. They also had the job of clearing tunnels the NVA had dug in the area, a job which is just about as dirty as any you can find.

In the next few days, the fighting was mostly one-sided. The NVA could no longer hold the Citadel. As the Marines made their final push, they came to within a hundred yards of the palace wall. And then, with the help of a tank commanded by Sgt Roy H. Jones of "Alpha" Co, 1st Tanks, a hole was punched in the palace wall. The Marine unit along the wall was "Lima" Co, 3/5, attached for the operation to 1/5. As they watched the wall from their positions, the ARVN forces were allowed to pass through. The honor of taking the

palace was given to them. They were led in by the famous Hoc Bao, or Black Panther Company. The 2nd Bn, 3rd ARVN Regiment, followed. The Hoc Bao streamed up to the hole in the wall and, as the first man passed through, a cheer went up from both Marines and the Vietnamese. The battle, except for a few scattered enemy, was over. It had lasted, for all practical purposes, for 25 days. Enemy losses had numbered in the thousands.

The battle for Hue is now a part of Marine Corps history. And for the men who fought there, no other words are more fitting than the traditional, "Well Done!" 🇺🇸

The battalion commander of 1/5 is Maj R.H. Thompson. His hours were long, and he carried great responsibility that goes with the command. Maj Thompson is called "The Old Man" by his troops and they use the term with respect.



Maj R.H. Thompson commanded 1/5 when the battalion drove elements of the North Vietnamese 802nd, 804th and K-4B NVA main forces from the Imperial City of Hue.

difficult than that on the south. The homes on the river's south side are closer together. So are the streets, providing more places for the enemy to hide.

The battalion commander of 1/5 is Maj R.H. Thompson. His hours were long, and he carried great responsibility that goes with the command. Major Thompson is called "The Old Man" by his troops and they use the term with respect. On the other side of the river, the men of 1/5 were fighting for every foot of ground they took, and Maj Thompson was the man who decided when and where the men in his battalion would strike next. The 1/5 Marines already had taken part

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