



Happier days
Eight broadcasters with American Forces Vietnam Network's Detachment 5 playfully pose for a photograph in front of their Hue TV station in 1967. The five standing on the right were attacked in their quarters during the 1968 Tet Offensive. They are, starting at far right, James DiBernardo, Courtney Niles, John Anderson, Harry Ettmueller and Don Gouin.

THE LAST STAND OF DETACHMENT 5

A small band of military broadcasters in Hue fought gallantly against the Tet onslaught

By Rick Fredericksen



Left standing
The American Forces TV station was in a compound that also housed a Vietnamese broadcasting operation. The building survived the Tet attacks.



Quiet moment
Sgt. 1st Class Don Gouin takes a break outside Detachment 5's TV trailer, which housed a transmitter and small news studio.



Left in ruins
The sleeping quarters of the American broadcasters was the scene of a five-day standoff culminating in a 16-hour final assault.



Air time
Spec. 4 John Bagwell works the dials in the 1st Cavalry Division's radio studio in An Khe. A few weeks later he was transferred to Hue.

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ntroducing television to South Vietnam's northernmost provinces was doomed from the start. For the pioneers assigned to build the American Forces Vietnam Network's most remote broadcast facility, there was trouble even before they arrived: While still in Saigon, an AFVN engineer was badly injured in a grenade attack and evacuated out of the country.

On May 15, 1967, AFVN officially opened its newest upcountry affiliate, designated Detachment 5, in Hue, South Vietnam's third largest city. The Viet Cong answered defiantly with a mortar attack. Six weeks later, the TV tower collapsed when a fuel truck backed into a guy wire, knocking Channel 11 off the air for five weeks. The inauspicious beginning of the Hue TV station foreshadowed the detachment's tragic demise in a Communist assault, which would seal a poignant place for AFVN in broadcasting history.

By the time of the Tet holiday celebrating the Lunar New Year in January 1968, a staff of six men was operating the expanding broadcast facility. Two others had just arrived from the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) to help begin the detachment's new radio service. Spec. 5 Steven Stroub and Spec. 4 John Bagwell, who had been working at the 1st Air Cav's own radio station at An Khe in the central part of the country, were reassigned to AFVN, assuring that American radio would be there for the troops when the division moved to Camp Evans, just northwest of Hue.

On the night of Jan. 30, 1968, Hue was placed on full alert by Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, which oversaw military operations throughout South Vietnam. Broadcast engineer Army Spec. 5 Harry Ettmueller, one of only two survivors of the attack still living, remembers the ominous signs. "With all my contacts, they kept telling me you don't want to be here for Tet," he said. "You need to be on R&R. Don't be here."

That night Hue's original AFVN television station signed off for the last time. The final two programs would have been ABC's *Combat* and *The Fugitive*, according to a published TV schedule.

The station's eight-man team of military broadcasters and a visiting civilian engineer, Courtney Niles, an Army veteran employed by NBC International, worked out of Hue's "broadcast center." The compound, at No. 3 Dong Da St., housed not only AFVN's facilities but also the city's Vietnamese television station. It was the former residence of the U.S. consul.

The Americans were sleeping in their billet, a villa one street over at No. 6 Tran Duc St., when "all hell broke loose" in the pre-dawn hours of Jan. 31, recalls Bagwell, the other remaining survivor. "We had a pretty good view

from our back door," he said. "We could actually see the attack going on."

In the hours, days and weeks that followed, Hue would become an iconic flashpoint of the countrywide Tet Offensive staged by the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong guerillas, who took control of large sections of the city.

Enemy gunners targeted the television station on the first night. A mortar shell penetrated the roof of AFVN's maintenance shed at the Dong Da compound.

From the detachment's billet, the officer in charge, Marine Lt. James DiBernardo, called the local MACV headquarters in Hue on the house telephone, Bagwell said. "They told us to stay put. Fighting, they thought, was all over the city. Sometime the next day the line was cut. We were on our own at that point."

A protracted siege at the villa started with sniper fire. "We could see them out there every now and then probing," said Ettmueller, who carried an M14 rifle. The others were armed with a hodgepodge of weapons that required different ammunition, which was available only in limited quantities.

In addition to Ettmueller's M14, the defenders had a collection of old M1 carbines, a couple of M16 rifles, a .45-caliber pistol, a 12-gauge shotgun, a heavy M60 machine gun and six hand grenades. The detachment was never issued its M79 grenade launcher, Ettmueller recalls. "The supply officer in Saigon thought that we didn't need it because we were in the city."

The men took up positions inside the house to secure the entry points. They had C rations, drinking water and even a transoceanic radio that was their link to the outside world as they listened to AFVN radio broadcasting from Saigon. Bagwell was guarding the window in the bedroom where he slept. "We eluded them for a couple of days and actually thought that we would eventually be rescued," he said.

After several days, an American helicopter flew over. "As far as they knew, the whole city had been taken," Ettmueller said. "They came buzzing over, and the door gunner fired down on us." The stunned men escaped the friendly fire.

With no warning, an enemy soldier appeared in front of Bagwell's window and fired an AK-47 rifle. "He's just a kid, probably 10, 11, 12 years old," Bagwell thought. "I could hear one of the bullets go by my right ear, and a second later another bullet went past my left ear and the kid was shaking." Poor marksmanship saved Bagwell. "When he shot at me I realized I've got to kill this kid or he's going to kill me, so I shot him and he fell in front of the window."

TOP: LEFT, RON TURNER; RIGHT, DON GOUIN; INSETS: U.S. NAVY; BOTTOM: JOHN BAGWELL



Street fight
Marine riflemen and tank crews watch for North Vietnamese Army troops in Hue on Feb. 4, 1968.

As the radio played, Bagwell heard an AFVN newscast. “Someone they were interviewing, I think it was [MACV commander Gen. William] Westmoreland, said, ‘Oh yes, we knew that this was going to happen in Hue.’ We looked at each other and thought, ‘We wish you’d told us.’”

In the fourth day of the standoff, the billet lost power, and the men moved among flickering candles while hostile soldiers outside surrounded them and gathered for a mass attack. A salvo of three or four rocket-propelled grenades signaled the start of the assault. “One B40 [rocket] went right through the window,” Ettmueller said, “and blew the back wall apart, crashed down on top of me, crashed down on top of Tom Young,” a Marine sergeant and the station’s newscaster. The other men in the villa “had to pull us out from underneath the debris,” Ettmueller added.

The ensuing brawl was chaotic and brutal. One attacker, carrying a satchel with explosives, tried to get inside, but one of the broadcasters shot him. The resulting explosion splattered the parked AFVN pickup truck. Army Sgt. 1st Class John Anderson, the noncommissioned officer in charge, was shot in the chest.

Anderson, Marine Cpl. John Deering and Army Sgt. 1st Class Don Gouin were armed with carbines dating from World War II. “Every time they fired those [carbines], the magazines fell out,” Ettmueller grumbled.

The most potent weapon the Americans possessed, the M60 machine gun, was capable of firing several hundred rounds per minute, but had not been properly maintained. The gun jammed after firing just two rounds and was promptly discarded. Ettmueller picked apart the M60’s belted-ammunition and saved the rounds,

which could be used in his M14, and took up a shielding position at the back of the house.

“They were coming up and trying to throw grenades in the window,” he said. “I killed four, possibly five. I nailed them in the back of the house with my M14. I had it on rock ‘n’ roll [fully automatic].” After daylight, Ettmueller discovered a dud enemy grenade on the floor between his legs.

The 16-hour assault had extended the punishing stalemate into a fifth day. Injuries were mounting for the beleaguered AFVN crew, and supplies of food and water were now exhausted.

Ettmueller described the final moments: “They were shooting RPGs into the building. The house was on fire. It was falling down around our ears.” The Americans had no choice but to flee and try to make it to the MACV compound a mile away.

Niles knew his way around Hue and took the lead out the front door. Bagwell emptied his last magazine as the enemy was clamoring into the back of the house and followed Niles. As they fled, Niles was shot in the leg, and then mortally wounded, leaving Bagwell alive, but lost.

Ettmueller and the others had split off in the opposite direction with NVA soldiers in hot pursuit. The Americans scampered across a rice paddy but could not get through a fence and were trapped next to the U.S. Information Service library, which had been gutted by fire. “We were firing back, but the problem was we were hemmed in on three sides,” Ettmueller said, reliving the final desperation. “They were maybe 20 feet away, throwing grenades; automatic weapons fire. I got shot in the leg. The adrenalin was pumping.”

Young was killed in a burst of automatic weapons fire, and Stroub was hit in the upper left arm, where a broken bone pierced his skin.

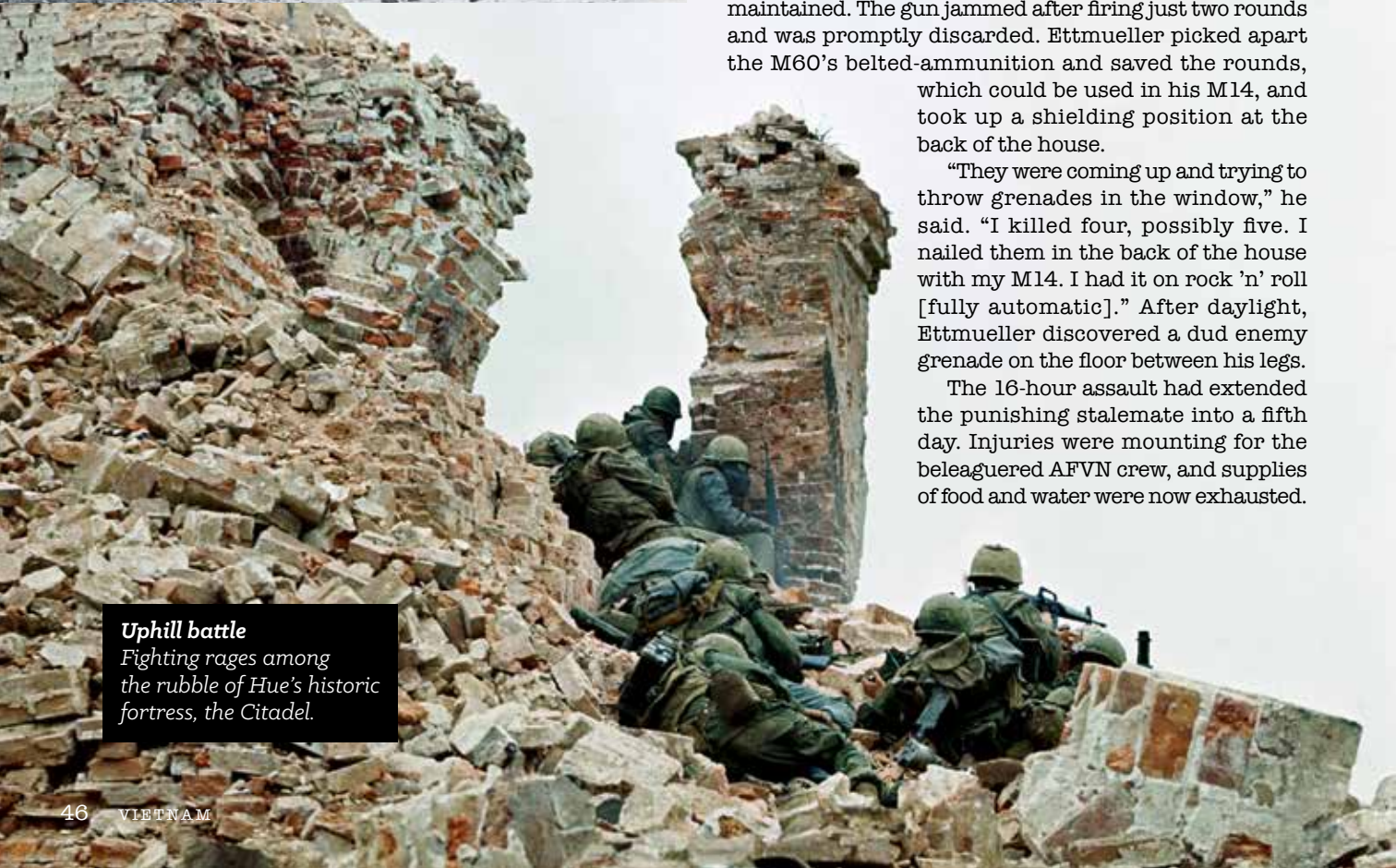
The trapped and wounded men became captives. “They tied us up with comms [communications] wire,” Ettmueller said, “and as they started to lead us out he [Stroub] started to falter and that’s when they turned around and shot him right in front of me. I’ll never forget that. There was no mercy.”

Officer in charge DiBernardo had hidden in a pile of trash, but for some unknown reason he left his hiding place, Ettmueller said. “If he’d stayed there they would never have found him. All of a sudden they bring DiBernardo out; they took his glasses off, dropped ‘em on the ground and stepped on ‘em. I laughed, I couldn’t help it.”

As the five survivors were marched away to become prisoners, they witnessed some of the first executions of noncombatants in Hue. “They made us look,” Ettmueller said. “They had these people on their knees, hands tied behind their back with their head[s] down. They were shooting people in the back of the head, Vietnamese civilians. Five people, bang, bang, bang.”

Meanwhile, Bagwell was ducking fire and running between houses as he tried to get away. “I felt there was this Plexiglas surrounding me” he recalled. “There was something keeping the bullets from reaching me.” One shot got through, however, hitting him in the foot. “I’d probably gone a good eight city blocks. I don’t know where I am. I said a prayer, and I looked up and here was this Catholic church that was literally not there 30 seconds before. I mean, it just appeared from nowhere.”

Bagwell knocked on the door and a priest let him in but insisted, “I’m not going to hide you in your uniform.” They went to the backyard and buried Bagwell’s rifle and fatigues. He put on typical Vietnamese civilian clothing and suddenly was in a cathedral with about 100 refugees.



Uphill battle
Fighting rages among the rubble of Hue’s historic fortress, the Citadel.

Detachment 5 Roster

(Highest achieved ranks are shown)

Killed in action

Thomas Young, sergeant, Marine Corps, announcer; Hot Springs, Arkansas

Courtney Niles, Army veteran, TV engineer for NBC International; Detroit, Michigan

Executed

Steven Stroub, specialist 5, Army, broadcast specialist; Austin, Minnesota

POWs

John Deering, gunnery sergeant, Marine Corps, program director; Nashville, Tennessee; deceased

Donat “Don” Gouin, master sergeant, Army, chief engineer; Central Falls, Rhode Island; deceased

James DiBernardo, major, Marine Corps, officer in charge; Fulton, New York; deceased

John Anderson, master sergeant, Army, noncommissioned officer in charge; Torrey, New York; deceased

Harry Ettmueller, sergeant first class, Army, TV engineer; Pleasantville, New Jersey

Escaped

John Bagwell, specialist 5, Army, radio announcer; Ardmore, Oklahoma

Many had been wounded.

The priest disguised the American soldier as one of the Vietnamese casualties by wrapping gauze around Bagwell’s head to cover his face and hair. “The only thing showing was just my eyes,” he remembered and described what happened next. “The door swung open and the North Vietnamese came in and started looking, probably for me.” As they walked down the hall, one stopped and pointed his rifle 2 inches from Bagwell’s nose. “I was staring up the barrel of an AK-47, closed my eyes and thought I’d die, but he didn’t recognize me as being American. He bought it.”

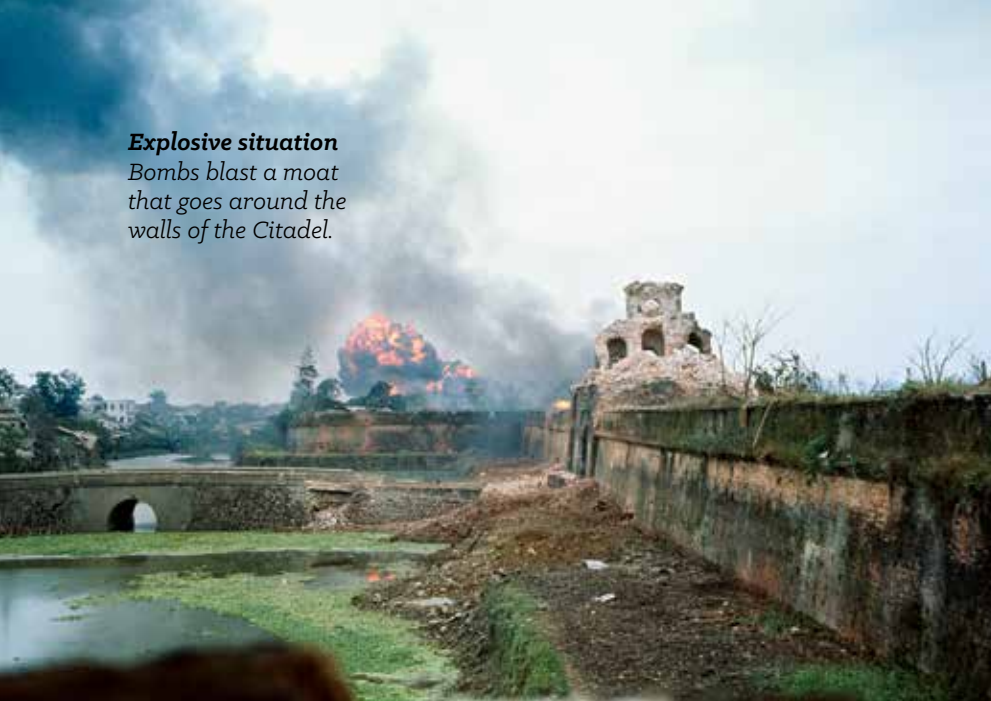
Bagwell was human contraband, and the priest isolated him in the steeple. “I was laying there and all of a sudden we started getting shelled,” he remembered. In disbelief, Bagwell realized, “It was the Americans. Someone had instructed the Americans that the North Vietnamese were hiding in the church.” At nightfall, he was told to leave. The priest pointed toward a light far into the distance—an American outpost.

Bagwell motivated himself with hope: “I want to get

LEFT ABOVE: AP PHOTO; BELOW: BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES

Explosive situation

Bombs blast a moat that goes around the walls of the Citadel.



Brothers in arms
Marines assist a wounded comrade in a Hue courtyard after a Viet Cong attack.



Out of the fight
One Marine pulls another off the crumbled Citadel wall to get medical care.

married. I want to have kids. I want to get out of this.” He slipped out of the church and was slogging through rice paddies when danger appeared overhead. “An American helicopter started shining a light on me. I would stop, and I would move, and they would move their light.” That cat-and-mouse pursuit continued for more than an hour. “I thought, I’ve made it this far, and the Americans are going to kill me thinking I’m a Vietnamese.” The chopper moved on.

Wounded and cold, Bagwell crawled to a ravine and waited across from a U.S. Army unit until morning came.

“The sun comes up, I sneezed, and these guys have no idea who I am” he said. “So I pulled off my white shirt and kind of waved it in the air, jumped up and said, ‘For God’s sake, please don’t shoot.’” They fired a warning shot and challenged whether he really was an American. “With this Okie [Oklahoma] accent you can’t tell? I’m John Bagwell.” The soldiers said they thought he was dead and had been looking for his body.

On the seventh day after the Tet Offensive slammed into Hue, the gritty disc jockey was finally safe. Spec. 5 Mike Larson, who worked with him at the 1st Air Cav’s public affairs office, saw Bagwell lying on a cot at Camp Evans right after the ordeal. “I think he was probably a little shell-shocked, as you can imagine,” Larson said. “We were soldiers. We carried a weapon, but pretty much did our shooting with cameras.”

Bagwell said he counted a dozen times when he should have been killed. His good fortune continued in the days after his escape. A nurse told him his leg would have to be amputated because of his untreated foot injury, but it healed. Months later, Bagwell learned from a friend that on the night he left for Saigon, his tent was shelled and the soldier who took his bunk died instantly. “God has allowed me to live for some strange reason.”

Back home in Ardmore, Oklahoma, Bagwell discovered that his mother had saved a *Newsweek* magazine with an article about a Vietnamese priest executed in Hue for

hiding an American. “I’m pretty sure that would have been him and they were referring to me,” Bagwell presumed. “I could have been a prisoner of war easily.”

Ettmueller and the other four survivors of Detachment 5 were POWs for five years, starting with a harsh, barefoot march up the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They endured the squalor and abuse that was common for Americans held in North Vietnam’s most infamous prisons. Ettmueller came home with nightmares and what he called war souvenirs: “Every now and then a piece of shrapnel will pop out of my leg.”

Deering, the detachment’s program director, survived months in solitary confinement by constructing the perfect radio station entirely in his mind, according to his biography at macoi.net. He then equipped it, staffed it and managed it. The imaginary project became the POW’s obsession and helped him overcome the despair of brutal Communist confinement.

Anderson, the NCO in charge at the station, conducted a similar mental exercise in solitary. “He built a radio station from the ground up, laying the bricks, fitting the windows, even installing the wiring and equipment,” according to a story written by the Army public affairs office at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. After the POWs were released with a group freed in March 1973, Anderson finally achieved his vision when he became operations manager for a bona fide radio station in Niagara Falls, New York.

Fifty years after the ghastly standoff at AFVN, both of the remaining survivors are more than 70 years old, and some pleasant memories of Vietnam emerge. Ettmueller recalls using a 16 mm projector to show movies on a wall for the kids in Hue: “They liked *Combat* and *Batman*.” Ettmueller returned to Hue in 2017 but could not find the place where three broadcasters were killed, five taken prisoner, and only one escaped. He has gone back to college to study history.

Bagwell talked about his DJ days when he was a

popular radio personality with the 1st Air Cav at An Khe and listeners knew him by his on-air moniker “The Scrawny Thing.” He chuckled, “I weighed 108 pounds.” Bagwell said he has told his story hundreds of times at veterans ceremonies, churches and schools. “Quite honestly, disc jockeys are not supposed to be fired on. I’ve relived it, and I’m grateful every day.”

For a half-century, the harrowing account of this band of broadcasters at No. 6 Tran Duc St. has received only limited exposure in the literary world and none on the big screen. Bagwell would like to correct that. He wants to get together with Ettmueller and work on a manuscript.

Ten years ago, Detachment 5 was inducted into the Army Public Affairs’ Hall of Fame at Fort Meade, Maryland. A photograph shows some of the men in

battle gear standing in front of the Hue television station. The broadcasters are in good company; other inductees include General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, who started the Army’s first bureau of information, and Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Sgt. Bill Mauldin.

In 2017, the U.S. military’s worldwide broadcasting service, now known as the American Forces Network honored Detachment 5 in an article commemorating AFN’s 75th anniversary. News manager Mike Roberts wrote, “AFVN Detachment 5 remains the only unit in AFN history to take one hundred percent casualties.”

Rick Fredericksen was a Marine newsman at American Forces Vietnam Network in 1969-70. His new e-book is Broadcasters: Untold Chaos.

Epilogue

There is conflicting information on whether the defenders of American Forces Vietnam Network Detachment 5 sabotaged the facility to keep a functioning TV station from falling into enemy hands. Engineer Harry Ettmueller says he is not aware of it, but announcer Thomas Young’s biography at macoi.net claims “they disabled the radio and TV equipment just before a series of RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] struck.”

When AFVN personnel came to recover the broadcasting van later, they found the TV trailer inoperable: The power line was sheared off, several shots had been fired into the antenna cable and camera adjustments were turned out of alignment.

The AFVN operation in Hue was ill-equipped. The men had insufficient weaponry and no field radio at their barracks, according to Ettmueller. “We got very lit-

tle support from Saigon. Nobody wanted to come up there because they were afraid.” An after-action report written by AFVN’s Capt. R.W. Johnson reads, “Due to the profile of the quarter’s area and the surrounding terrain, it appears to be an impossible area to defend against the number of troops and fire power of the enemy.”

If the broadcasters had held out just a little longer they would have

been rescued. A U.S. patrol with a military photographer arrived at the TV station less than two hours after the Americans fled, and the cameraman told Bagwell “the bodies [of the Americans] were still warm, the house was still smoking.” Waiting for help was not an option, Bagwell said. “They [the North Vietnamese troops] were coming in the back door as I physically went out the front door.”
—Rick Fredericksen