



# TURNING POINT



John Olson/Stars and Stripes

Marines take cover during a firefight in Hue, South Vietnam, in February 1968, the year Americans suffered the greatest number of combat deaths in the Vietnam War.

By ROBERT H. REID  
*Stars and Stripes*

For years the American brass had dreamed of finding a way to draw Viet Cong guerrillas and the North Vietnamese regulars into big head-on fights, where overwhelming U.S. firepower could decimate their ranks and force the Communists into peace talks on U.S. terms.

The generals got what they wanted in late January 1968.

As Vietnamese north and south began to celebrate their lunar New Year, or Tet, tens of thousands of Viet Cong guerrillas and North Vietnamese regulars launched their biggest offensive of the war, striking military and civilian targets — the capital Saigon, 36 provincial capitals, 64 district headquarters — from the

Mekong Delta in the south to the Demilitarized Zone in the north.

The two-month offensive was the first phase of a multistage Communist escalation of violence across South Vietnam that made 1968 the deadliest year of the conflict for the Americans.

The Tet Offensive transformed the Vietnam War — and America itself.

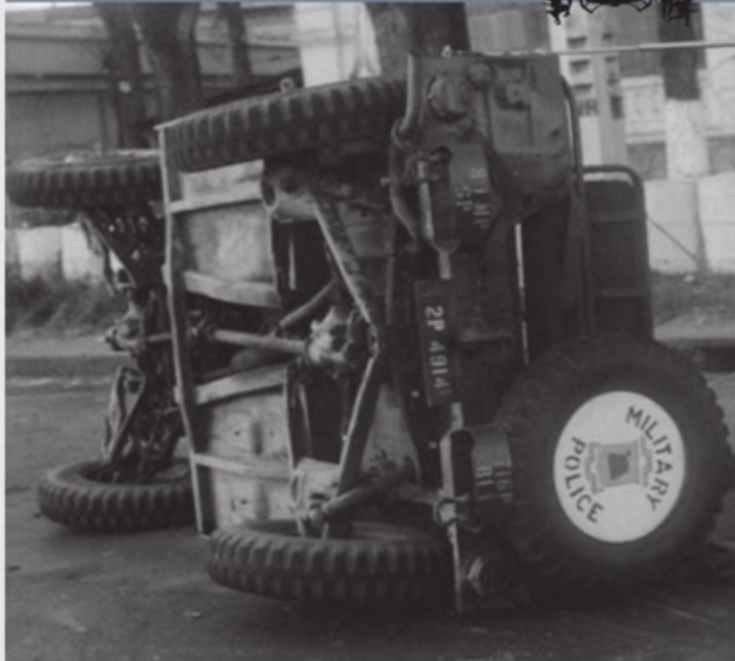
By nearly every military metric, Tet and a series of “mini-Tets” that followed were huge defeats for the Communists. They failed to hold any of their major objectives. They failed to trigger a popular uprising against U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government.

Their underground network of civilian cadres and Viet Cong irregulars was nearly destroyed, weakening Communist control in many southern areas and forcing the North Vietnamese to assume a greater burden in the fighting.

Nevertheless, Tet proved to be a decisive strategic victory for the Communists, paving the way for their final victory seven years later. Tet ripped away the façade of optimism carefully crafted by President Lyndon Johnson’s administration and destroyed Americans’ confidence in their government — never fully restored to this day.

It destroyed Johnson’s presidency, opening the door for his successor, President Richard Nixon, who himself resigned years later in the Watergate scandal.

Tet forced the U.S. political establishment to confront basic questions it had avoided throughout the country’s long descent into war — how long will it take to win in Vietnam, how much will it cost and is victory worth the price? Over time the answer became “no.”



GERARD F. FORKEN/Stars and Stripes

An overturned military police jeep lies abandoned on the streets of Saigon on Feb. 3, 1968, three days after the start of the Tet Offensive, a surprise assault on more than 100 towns and cities across South Vietnam by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers.

## In January 1968, Tet shifted the war and public opinion

BY WYATT OLSON  
Stars and Stripes

U.S. troops had been at war with North Vietnamese soldiers and guerilla fighters for almost three years as of early 1968.

It had been jungle warfare, with small U.S. and South Vietnamese units mostly conducting search-and-destroy missions, often under dense forest canopies. When the enemy did initiate attack, it quickly faded back into

the bush when faced with superior U.S. force and overwhelming firepower.

That dynamic changed overnight Jan. 30, 1968, as the divided country prepared to celebrate what many expected to be a quiet Tet, the Vietnamese name for its lunar New Year's Day.

Within days of what would be called the Tet Offensive, 80,000 Viet Cong — South Vietnamese allied with the Communist

north — and North Vietnamese soldiers had attacked more than 100 towns and cities across South Vietnam. The surprise assaults included parts of Saigon, the southern capital, as well as U.S. and South Vietnamese military bases, supply depots and airstrips.

Shaking off the surprise of such a coordinated and widespread offensive, U.S. military commanders quickly orchestrat-

## Tet Offensive begins

The unexpected Tet Offensive kicked off Jan. 30, 1968, with about 74,000 Communist troops streaming across the border into South Vietnam. Thirty-six provincial capitals, five of six autonomous cities, 64 of 242 district capitals and more than 50 hamlets were struck within 48 hours.



SOURCE: www.soma.edu

BY SONJALINE/Stars and Stripes

ed counteroffensives with about a half-million American troops deployed there.

Within weeks, most of the Communist fighters had been decimated or driven into the countryside, although a bloody fight would continue for a month in the dynastic city of Hue.

"For the Americans, this was a positive development, that the enemy wasn't running away this

time," said Gregory Daddis, an associate professor of history at Chapman University in Orange, Calif., who specializes in the Vietnam War.

Military leaders saw the rout as a turning point in the conflict, with the chance to strike a fatal blow to a weakened enemy to achieve victory.

SEE TET ON PAGE 16

At [stripes.com/vietnam50](http://stripes.com/vietnam50)

### One man's Tet

Rick Fox was 19 when he landed in Vietnam. "I fought my ass off," he said. "I'd been through some firefights, but when that Tet came, I mean, we were fighting every day."

Plus videos, photo galleries, maps and archive coverage from 1968



### Coming Tuesday

#### Shooting Hue

Stars and Stripes photographer John Olson experienced Hue firsthand.



#### Brutal battle

Americans remember the grinding, exhausting Battle of Hue as "particularly brutal."

#### Saigon embassy attack

"They're coming in!"



## Tet: Offensive in 1968 led to US withdrawal

FROM PAGE 15

"Some of them were even gleeful, saying that this was just what we wanted," said Christian Appy, a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and author of three books on the Vietnam War.

"The enemy had come out into the open where we could see them and where we could bring our enormous firepower to bear on them," he said.

The Tet Offensive was a turning point in the Vietnam War, but one that irreparably poisoned American public opinion on U.S. involvement and ushered in the steady drawdown of American combat troops. Five years later, American troops had completely withdrawn, and in 1975 North Vietnamese forces stormed into Saigon and reunited north and south.

"I think it was the watershed event of the war, everything that followed changed from what was before Tet," said James Willbanks, author of "The Tet Offensive: A Concise History" and General of the Army George C. Marshall Chair of Military History at U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in Leavenworth, Kan.

"It was the turning point by which the majority of American people finally concluded the war was either not worth the cost or was a mistake," Appy said. "And a growing number had concluded that it was immoral."

### Bankrupt hopes

The Tet Offensive arrived on the heels of a 1967 publicity blitz by President Lyndon Johnson's administration to convince an increasingly skeptical U.S. public that the Vietnam War was not the stalemate that it appeared to be. Defense and military officials painted a picture of a weakened enemy nearing collapse.

Gen. William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in South Vietnam, said during a speech at the National Press Club in November 1967 that U.S. forces had reached a point where "the end begins to come into view" and that "the enemy's hopes are bankrupt."

"Through 1967, it's hard to exaggerate how much effort the White House put into — and it even called it this — the 'success campaign,' propaganda campaign, to convince the American people that the war was going in the right direction, even when internally they weren't at all sure," Appy said.

The campaign was perhaps too convincing, given what the



JOHN OLSON/Stars and Stripes

Marines run for cover as North Vietnamese mortar and artillery fire comes down on Khe Sanh base on Jan. 25, 1968. Five days later, U.S. troops would be defending dozens of fronts with the start of the Tet Offensive.



In this photo taken by Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams, South Vietnamese National Police Chief Brig. Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan executes a Viet Cong officer with a shot to the head in Saigon on Feb. 1, 1968. The public execution was just one of many stark images on American television during the nightly news.

North Vietnamese unleashed in January 1968, a fulsome attack that underscored how far the North was from defeat. The U.S. military considered the heavy enemy casualties to be a victory, but the U.S. public focused on a determined enemy that inflicted unacceptable losses on fellow countrymen.

"For an American public that

is increasingly persuaded by that argument, when the Tet Offensive happens, there seems to be a disconnect between what they've been told and what they're seeing on the ground," Daddis, the history professor, said.

Communist fighters chose six strategic targets in downtown Saigon, among them the U.S. Embassy, the presidential palace

and the national radio station.

Media images were plentiful and stark.

"The offices and homes of the Western press corps were clustered mainly in downtown Saigon, within walking distance of the palace and U.S. Embassy," said Peter Arnett, a correspondent covering the war for The Associated Press.

"It was the turning point by which the majority of American people finally concluded the war was either not worth the cost or was a mistake. And a growing number had concluded that it was immoral."

**Christian Appy**  
history professor at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst

While the number of insurgents were too few to hold their targets for very long, the media images gave Americans a glimpse of an atrocious new breed of violence.

In Saigon on Feb. 1, Brig. Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan, chief of the national police, publicly executed a man believed to be the head of a Viet Cong assassination squad. AP photographer Eddie Adams and an NBC television crew captured on film the moment Nguyen shot the handcuffed man through the head.

American counterattacks in the Chinese district of Cholon in Saigon are believed to have killed hundreds of civilians. Scenes of terrified refugees pouring from the district were beamed around the world.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 17



## FROM PAGE 16

Westmoreland decried the media coverage as too obsessed with "gloom and doom," Arnett said.

"Speaking for my colleagues working in Saigon at that time, our intention was to report and photograph the reality of what we were seeing before our eyes every day," he said. "Our coverage was as professional as we could achieve under difficult circumstances. That our coverage was said to polarize the American public's view of the war was not our intent."

Far to the north, just 30 miles below the demilitarized zone dividing north and south, the city of Hue was overrun by almost 8,000 North Vietnamese troops. The U.S.-South Vietnamese counteroffensive to retake the city was the longest, bloodiest battle of the Vietnam War.

The enemy had dug into a massive complex called the Citadel, which was surrounded by a moat and stone ramparts, some as thick as 40 feet.

More than 200 American troops died in the 25-day battle, with 1,584 wounded; 452 South Vietnamese soldiers were killed.

After hearing reports of unprecedented destruction in South Vietnamese villages, Arnett joined a press trip Feb. 7 to the small provincial capital city of Ben Tre, which he'd visited only weeks earlier. There he saw the ruins of shacks, homes, businesses and restaurants badly damaged by U.S. artillery and airstrikes during the attempt to dislodge Viet Cong who had occupied it during the Tet Offensive. Hundreds of civilians had been killed.

Arnett interviewed a dozen military advisers in the town, who explained how the U.S. and South Vietnamese military compounds had been nearly overrun when they finally requested the heavy shelling.

An utterance by one of those advisers made it into the lead of Arnett's next AP dispatch, which in the 50 years since it was written has been often cited as the essence of America's quixotic involvement in Vietnam: "It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it."

## Strategic success

The North Vietnamese were demoralized in the wake of their failure.

"They'd convinced themselves that they had enough support in the countryside that if they raised the level of violence there, the people would rise up and join them," Willbanks said. That didn't happen.

The Viet Cong suffered particularly heavy losses.

Willbanks, who was deployed to South Vietnam in 1972, never saw any Viet Cong during his tour. "They had been wiped out in '68 and hadn't been rebuilt," he said.

But the Tet Offensive did set



Courtesy of the LBJ Presidential Library

President Lyndon B. Johnson listens to tape sent from Vietnam by his son-in-law, Capt. Charles Robb, in the Cabinet Room of the White House on July 31, 1968. Johnson lost what little stomach he had for the war after Tet, and he had announced March 31 that he would not run for re-election.

into motion developments in the U.S. that ultimately turned a failed assault into a strategic success.

Tet had deepened an ongoing internal debate within the Johnson administration between those who wanted to intensify the war — mainly military leaders — and those who wanted to de-escalate, primarily civilian advisers, said Mark Moyar, author of "Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965" and director of the Military and Diplomatic History Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Some military leaders saw a window of opportunity in the

days after Tet began when there was a "rally-around-the-flag effect" among Americans, similar to what happened after the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, he said.

"Once Johnson made it clear that he was not going to take more aggressive measures, then you saw public support tail off," he said.

Johnson lost what little stomach he'd had for the war after Tet, and it played a role in his decision to not seek a second term that fall, clearing the way for Richard Nixon's election.

"When Nixon came to office he realized that the American public would no longer support high levels of American troops or

casualties and so announced that he would slowly withdraw troops, even, of course, as he expanded the war into Cambodia and Laos and intensified the air war," Appy said.

Meeting with South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu at Midway Island in June 1968, Nixon announced that 25,000 U.S. troops would be withdrawn by the end of August and that South Vietnamese troops would eventually assume all combat responsibilities.

Before Tet, "we were there to

An unidentified Marine with a head wound in Hue city, February 1968.

John Olson/Stars and Stripes

win the war," Willbanks said. Everything after that was geared to "build the South Vietnamese forces up, turn the war over to them and depart."

"I think that weighs heavily on individual soldiers who are still being asked to fight out in the field," Daddis said. "They begin to question the rationale behind what they're being asked to do at that unit level. Why am I risking my life if we're not even going to win?"

Appy, however, is unconvinced by claims that "victory was in sight after Tet and we just didn't finish the job."

"There was never going to be a military solution to the war," he said.

"My point is victory was never going to happen in South Vietnam unless and until the government in Saigon had the support of its own people necessary to sustain it without massive American military intervention," Appy said.

Daddis said Tet remains a compelling story in large part because for some it remains this one central moment in the entire Vietnam War where they ask, "What if?"

"This is really one of the central counterfactuals that some will focus on because this seems to be the moment where the American effort really starts to unravel.

"It remains this key storyline because it seemed like victory was within our grasp, at least from a military standpoint, but was politically taken away by politicians, the media and the public that just didn't see the true victory that was there. That's a very problematic argument, but I think that's why it remains such a centerpiece of debate over what happened in Vietnam."

But war, Daddis contends, is not simply about military victories and losses.

"I'm not all that personally convinced of arguments that suggest there was a military victory but a political defeat [with Tet] because that unnaturally separates what war is," he said. "War is a much more political act than it is a military one."

olson.wyatt@stripes.com  
Twitter: @WyattOlson



VIETNAM



PHOTOS BY JOHN OLSON/Stars and Stripes

Two U.S. Marines try to help a Marine who was severely wounded in the battle for the tower guarding the Eastern Gate of the walled citadel in Hue, Vietnam, on Feb. 15, 1968.

# ‘Serious business’

**Americans remember grinding, exhausting Hue battle as ‘particularly brutal’**

By WYATT OLSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

HUE, Vietnam — As 1968 dawned, Hue in South Vietnam had largely been spared the violence of war.

As the 150-year seat of Vietnam’s final dynasty that ended in 1945, the city was venerated by Communist-led North Vietnam and by American-supported South Vietnam.

That all changed Jan. 30, 1968, when fighters from the North Vietnamese Army, or NVA, and Viet Cong — supporters to the Communist cause living in the South — seized Hue as part of the sprawling Tet Offensive, beginning what would be the bloodiest, longest battle Ameri-

cans troops would face during the Vietnam War.

On the ground, the battle was a decisive victory for American and South Vietnamese troops, with Communist forces routed after almost a month of intense fighting. But media images of dead and wounded Marines, hollow-eyed refugees and a city laid waste undermined efforts by American officials to convince the public that the enemy was demoralized and near collapse, that the end of the Vietnam War was within sight.

Within a year newly elected President Richard Nixon would set in motion plans to withdraw American troops from Vietnam,

with the goal of turning the war over to the South Vietnamese army.

“The whole city just stank of corruption and rotting and death and cordite,” said Dale Dye, a Marine Corps correspondent who fought his way through most of the 26-day battle.

“It was, I guess, the one battle that still haunts me because you saw so many things,” he said, pausing to think of the words to sum it up. “I don’t think it was because I was naive, I think it

was because it was that brutal.”

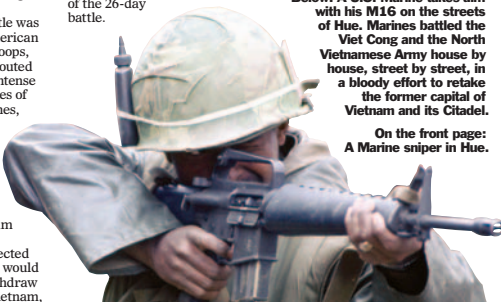
Today, Hue (pronounced “hway”) is a tourist mecca with little evidence of such a violent clash. Tourists walk through the open grounds of the sprawling imperial Citadel, where scores of buildings were destroyed and hundreds of fighters died in close-quarters combat.

As the lunar new year began in 1968, 10 battalions of Viet Cong and NVA moved to occupy Hue, divided by the wide Perfume River, with the imperial Citadel to the north of the river and the newer part of the city — filled with French colonial-style buildings — to the south.

The sole U.S. presence in Hue had been a headquarters compound of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, or MACV. Its staff advised the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN, whose headquarters were in the Citadel. There were no Marines in the city.

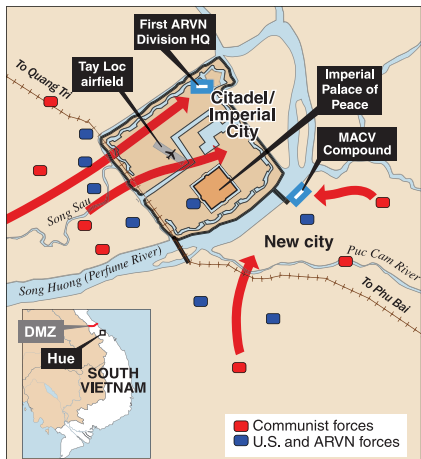
**Below: A U.S. Marine takes aim with his M16 on the streets of Hue. Marines battled the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army house by house, street by street, in a bloody effort to retake the former capital of Vietnam and its Citadel.**

**On the front page: A Marine sniper in Hue.**



CONTINUED ON PAGE 15

VIETNAM



SOURCE: warfarehistorynetwork.com

By SCHELLING/Stars and Stripes

FROM PAGE 14

“Essentially overnight the VC and NVA captured the whole city,” said James Willbanks, author of “The Tet Offensive: A Concise History” and General of the Army George C. Marshall chair of military history at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in Leavenworth, Kan.

The two compounds were surrounded.

Marines from Phu Bai Combat Base, about 8 miles south of Hue, were the first relief to be sent to help defend the MACV compound.

Dye was at Phu Bai, along with Steve Bernsten, a fellow combat correspondent, when he heard about some kind of dustup in Hue, despite the North’s announcement in late 1967 that it would observe a seven-day ceasefire for Tet.

“It became obvious on the trip up that something was wrong, because we didn’t see many people out to celebrate,” said Dye, adding that “all hell broke loose” as his convoy of Marines entered southern Hue.

“It was plunging fire at the time from enemy troops that were on high buildings on either side,” he said. “We realized

very quickly that we were in a mess here and that this was no small uprising. This was serious business.”

Bernsten also recalled heading up to Hue after hearing reports of snipers there. When the convoy he was on crossed the final canal bridge into the south side of Hue, it came under intense fire by machine guns, mortars and grenades. The convoy reached the MACV compound, and soon after, the enemy blew up the bridge.

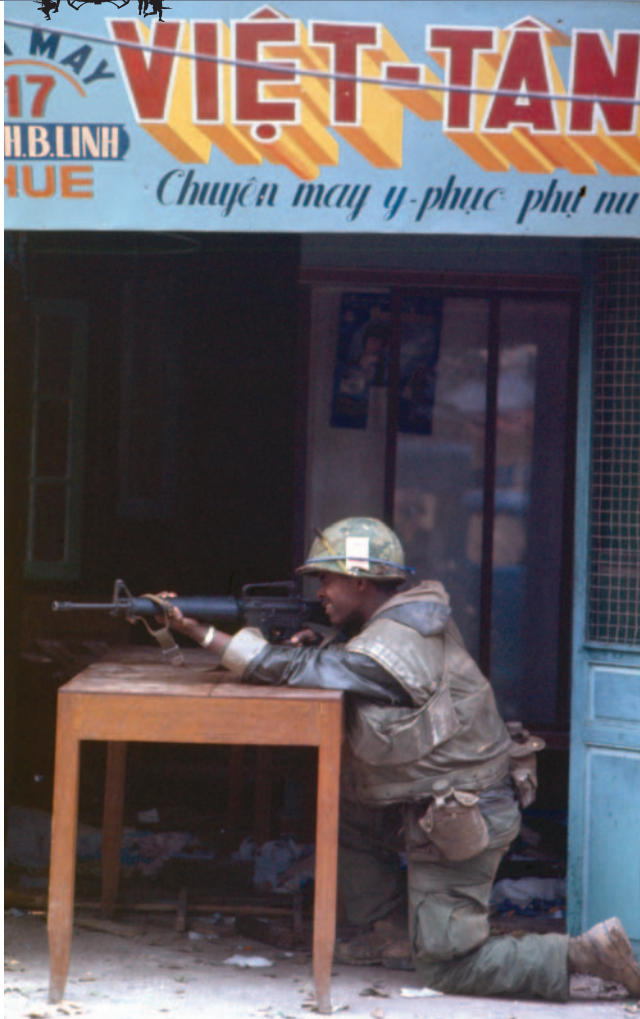
Bernsten said he was “struck and surprised” at the compound as he took in the sight of corpses in the streets around it.

The immediate and obvious problem for the Marines in Hue was that they had no training for urban fighting, Dye said.

Every round fired ricocheted off stone walls and streets, shredding into deadly pieces of shrapnel; rock fragments scattered with their own velocity. “They can kill you as much as anything else,” Dye said.

Bernsten said it was “the guys who grew up in the big cities” who took the lead in this new breed of fighting in the Vietnam War.

SEE HUE ON PAGE 16



John OLSON/Stars and Stripes

Using a kitchen table for support, a Marine takes a position in a doorway on a Hue street.

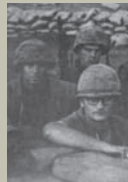
At stripes.com/vietnam50

Video: A firsthand account of Hue

The Battle of Hue was one of the hardest fought battles in the Vietnam War. Richard Prince, a Marine Corps veteran, sat down with Stars and Stripes to discuss his experiences at Hue.

From the archives: The battle of Khe Sanh

While most have heard of the Battle for Khe Sanh, an 11-week siege in early 1968 that pitted about 20,000 NVA troops against a single surrounded and cut-off U.S. Marine regiment of about 5,000 and their supporting forces, few have heard of the men of Bravo, the “ghost patrol” and subsequent Marine retaliation for the slaughter.





## Hue: Marines became obsessed with seeing Viet Cong flag lowered

### FROM PAGE 15

“They knew how to move and how to get around in the city, in city blocks, in buildings,” he said. “They pretty much took charge of leading the squads into the buildings, up the stairs.”

The Marines spent about 10 days sweeping through the south of Hue clearing the buildings along Le Loi Street, which paralleled the Perfume River. Among them were the hospital, provincial headquarters and university — all large complexes and fortified by the NVA for battle to the last man, Bertensen said.

On a second-floor hospital ward an enemy fighter who had been posing as a patient leaped out of bed firing an AK47. A nurse charged up a stairwell, firing a Kalashnikov automatic rifle as she went.

By Feb. 12, the south side of the city had largely been secured except for a few pockets.

It had been an exhausting, grinding fight, but as the Marines gained footholds in the major buildings on Le Loi, “everybody began to turn and look across the river knowing that we would have to go over and eventually attack the Citadel over there,” Dye said.

### Fight for the Citadel

The massive Citadel was a square of fortified stone walls, with each side about a mile long. Most of the wall was about 2 yards thick, but wider in some spots. Surrounding the entire thing was a moat.

Inside the Citadel was a warren of small shops and homes that had been built over many years. They surrounded the Imperial City, another walled bastion at the core of the Citadel.

“It was like a Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court,” Dye said. “We were like, ‘What the hell are we going to do with this thing?’”

Tens of thousands of laborers worked for 30 years to build the Citadel, moving millions of cubic feet of earth and rock. In less than two weeks in February 1968, almost all of the Imperial City’s 160 buildings were destroyed.

The Marines began a concerted assault on the Citadel on Feb. 13, joining South Vietnamese troops who had killed hundreds of enemy troops over 10 days while trying to retake northern and western portions of the walled stronghold.

Bertensen, who said he was “exhausted, hungry, pretty much numbed” by everything he’d seen on the south side, had the chance to go back to the Marine base camp and sit out the

chapter.

But there was a Viet Cong flag flying over the Citadel.

“That had become an obsession with the Marines — including myself — and I wanted to be there to see that when it was taken down,” he said.

Dye recalled at one point the Marines were ordered to push from north to south inside the Imperial City wall and clear all NVA.

“We organized ourselves in a line and tried to sweep southward, but people were getting shot up and we were running into ambushes and having to clear houses so that line just never really held all it could,” he said.

“That really turned into a meat grinder, because they had those walls and we were down on the streets,” Dye said. “It was brutal.”

“I guess the thing that stays with me is how close everything was,” he said. “In the jungle you tend to see fleeting shadows and you see muzzle flash, but you rarely see the bad guy. You rarely see the enemy. But that wasn’t the case in Hue. I mean, you saw those guys; you saw them put the rifle on their shoulder and shoot at you. You see them everywhere.”

CONTINUED ON PAGE 17

### Online gallery

See more photographs taken by Stars and Stripes’ John Olson at Hue and Khe Sanh in 1968.  
[stripes.com/vietnam50](http://stripes.com/vietnam50)



Marines scale the rubble of the Dong Ba gate and tower that guard the eastern outer wall of the Citadel, the ancient imperial capital’s fortress, during the battle for Hue.

JOHN OLSON/Stars and Stripes



VIETNAM

AT  
50

## FROM PAGE 16

They were in constant need of resupply of hand grenades.

"We were using every one we had, and anything else we had," Dye said.

They also needed a flow of replacements for wounded or killed Marines.

"They'd still have their airline boarding passes in their pockets," he said. "They were just being pumped up in there.

"I've never seen more shell-shocked and just plain exhausted troops anywhere in my life," Dye said. "There just never seemed to be an end to it. The more we killed, the more we found.

"When we would sweep along the walls trying to get to these gate accesses, they would dig into these holes and you just walk right up on them. I remember jumping into one hole and shooting a guy, an NVA trooper who was in that hole."

Berntsen spent his days on the Citadel front line carrying wounded and dead off the battlefield and hauling ammo.

On Feb. 18, he joined a corpsman atop one of the walls to help carry out a Marine who had been shot in the throat.

They'd gotten off the wall and around a corner, near an overturned bus, when the corpsman began an emergency tracheotomy because the Marine was choking on his blood. Berntsen spied a nearby shutter door that could be used as a stretcher, rose to get it, and the next thing he recalled was waking up in the middle of the street with shrapnel "still buried in my arm and my legs and my back." He could not get up.

He'd been hit by a B40, an armor-piercing rocket that the North Vietnamese had adapted as an anti-personnel weapon in the Citadel to use on Marines, he said.

With a dangerous loss of blood and a nearly severed arm, Berntsen was taken to an aid station, beginning a year of healing with numerous operations.

By Feb. 25, the Citadel had been recaptured. Dye recalled no "cheering or flag-raising."

"I don't remember anyone doing anything but staring around the area," he said. "It was so grinding, so exhausting, that the only high you got, really, was the fact that you were alive for the next 15 minutes."

## The aftermath

At the end of the Battle of Hue, 218 U.S. troops were dead and 1,364 were wounded. The South Vietnamese had 384 dead and 1,830 wounded.

The U.S. estimated that 1,042 enemy fighters had been killed.

The citizens of Hue, though, suffered the worst punishment. About 5,800 civilians died, with 2,800 of those executed by the Viet Cong during their short occupation. They included schoolteachers, government employees and local religious leaders and their families.

More than three-quarters of the city lay in ruin, with 116,000 refugees left in the wake.

"Dead bodies were everywhere," said Nguyen Huu Vinh, 76, who was on leave from the South Vietnamese army in his hometown of Hue when the city was occupied. Unarmed, he spent three days hiding in a tunnel until friendly forces retook the area. "There were bodies of Viet Cong, local people and soldiers from the South. No one had buried them."

Once the Viet Cong had been driven out, most of the city was without water and electricity, he said, but locals began the grim task of gathering the bodies.

Ushi Clark, who was 8 in 1968, said her mother took the family to the local Catholic church in the south part of Hue, where several thousand people hunkered down in sandbag shelters.

"It was scary," said Clark, who owns a restaurant in Danang. "That's what I remember. We played but we were still



JOHN OLSON/Stars and Stripes

**Army Maj. Aloysius McGonigal, administrators last rites to a U.S. Marine. The chaplain, who volunteered to go into Hue with the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, died a few days after this photo was taken, on Feb. 17, 1968, after being hit by enemy fire.**

scared because everyone talked about someone being killed."

"Over the 50 years, I've come to peaceful days because the family's house had been badly damaged in the battle and was barely livable.

Meanwhile, Americans who had been told they were winning the Vietnam War had watched news reports with scenes looking like "hell on earth," Willbanks said.

"When you see a tank withdrawing piled up with Marine bodies on it, that sends a message that's counterintuitive to what you've been told," he said.

Berntsen, who went on to a journalism career, did not see that Viet Cong flag come down. It does not matter to him today.

"When you see a tank withdrawing piled up with Marine bodies on it, that sends a message that's counterintuitive to what you've been told," he said.

"I never particularly hated anybody," he said. "In war, people die, and I was always grateful I wasn't one of them."

olson.wyatt@stripes.com  
Twitter: @WyattWilson

Saigon embassy attack:  
'They're coming in!'

BY WYATT OLSON  
Stars and Stripes

**I**N HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam in the walled courtyard of the U.S. Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City stands a monument with the names of the five service-members who died on the site 50 years ago during an opening salvo of the Tet Offensive. It is the only memorial in the country honoring Americans who died during the long Vietnam War.

In the early hours of Jan. 31, 1968, 19 Viet Cong pulled up in two vehicles beside what then was the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, as the capital of South Vietnam was then called.

Construction of the compound's six-story chancery, which housed the diplomatic mission, had been completed only four months earlier. The new embassy compound had been moved to a more secure site in response to a 1965 car bomb at the original one that killed 20 people and left nearly 200 injured.

About 3 a.m., the Viet Cong opened fire on the two U.S. Military Police guards — Spc. Charles Daniel and Pvt. 1st Class William Sebast — who were standing watch at the night gate. Daniel radioed his fellow MPs that they were under attack.

Allan Wendt, a 32-year-old Foreign Service officer, was asleep on a cot on the fourth floor of the chancery.

"Suddenly, the building was rocked by a loud explosion," Wendt wrote of the night in the Foreign Service Journal in 2015. "Automatic weapons fire broke out, and rockets began to thud into the building. The embassy was under attack."

The Viet Cong raiders blew a hole near the bottom of the compound's perimeter wall big enough for a man to crawl through. Daniel and Sebast shot two Viet Cong — the assault team's leaders — as they scrambled through the opening.

Daniel radioed a frantic message, "They're coming in! They're coming in!"

Moments later, he and Sebast were shot in the back and killed by two locals employed by the U.S. State Department as embassy drivers who were in fact Viet Cong — guerrilla members of the Vietnamese Communist movement.

Marine Sgt. Ronald Harper, who had been in the rear of the compound, raced to the entry of the embassy's chancery and sealed the huge teakwood doors.

The Viet Cong fired rocket-propelled grenades at the thick doors, but they withstood the blasts.

Responding to Daniel's call, MPs Sgt. Johnnie Thomas and Spc. Owen Mebust arrived by jeep at the main gate but were ambushed and killed by a Viet Cong sniper.

Marine Sgt. Rudy Soto Jr. was atop the chancery roof, armed only with a 12-gauge shotgun and a .38-

caliber revolver. The U.S. ambassador at the time did not believe the Marine Security Guard needed M-16 rifles. His shotgun jammed, and the small-caliber handgun was next to useless at that range.

The Viet Cong fired rocket-propelled grenades at the chancery walls, penetrating at several points despite construction designed to defend against such an attack.

Marine Cpl. James Marshall climbed to the roof of a small building in the compound and was firing at the Viet Cong until he was wounded by rocket shrapnel. The raiders later shot and killed him, the final American fatality in the embassy siege.

About 5 a.m., a helicopter with troopers from the 101st Airborne Division attempted to land on the chancery's rooftop helipad, but Viet Cong fire made it impossible.

A different helicopter landed long enough later to medevac a wounded Marine.

"The same chopper also offloaded two cases of M16 tracer ammunition, a move I assumed had some purpose I had not divined: There were no M16s in the building," Wendt wrote.

The quick deaths of their team leaders left the Viet Cong raiders fatter in their assault. They had with them more than 40 pounds of C4 plastic explosive that could have been used to blow open the teakwood doors, but they never moved to do so.

Instead, the fighters took defensive cover behind a half-dozen large concrete flower planters in the courtyard.

A force of MPs and Marines stormed through the front gate, overwhelming the Viet Cong still left alive. The compound was secured around 9 a.m.

By the end of the gunbattle, the corpses of 18 Viet Cong were scattered in the compound, the last man to die lying inside a concrete planter.

A plaque honoring the Americans who died — Marshall, Daniel, Mebust, Sebast and Thomas — was erected in the courtyard later that year.

The U.S. abandoned the embassy — and the plaque — in 1975 as Saigon fell to North Vietnam. Its whereabouts is unknown.

The old chancery and most of the other buildings were razed in the mid-1990s to make way for the U.S. Consulate after the two countries resumed diplomatic relations.

A replica of the plaque was subsequently dedicated. It stands beside one of the few original features left in the compound from the 1968 firefight: the planter ring where the last enemy guerrilla died.

olson.wyatt@stripes.com  
Twitter: @WyattWilson