

The 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam and the Seizure of Hue

Raymond R. Lau

The embassy driver met me just outside the open barn-like structure that served as the Danang air terminal building, and he drove me to temporary quarters in Danang, where I would stay until my flight to Hue the next day. It was 29 January 1968.

Editor's Note: Following the conclusion of his tour as a CORDS advisor,^a Capt. Ray Lau would leave the Marine Corps in 1969 and eventually join CIA as an operations officer. He would serve through a varied and full career.

The story of the communist seizure of Hue on 31 January 1968 and its recapture by US Marines and South Vietnamese forces weeks later has been compellingly told in several books, most recently in Mark Bowden's work, Hue, 1968: A Turning Point in the Vietnam War. Bowden details many individual experiences in the battle, but he makes no mention of those engaged in the CIA pacification effort who lived in embassy housing in the city. Ray Lau's is the story of some of them.



Author's note: I wrote this for myself in 1998, some 30 years after the event. In my mind, the events seem

a. CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support) was established in 1967 within MACV to oversee CIA-sponsored pacification programs throughout Vietnam. See Thomas L. Ahern, *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998), 241–78. Available at https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/3_CIA_AND_RURAL_PACIFICATION.pdf

clear, though undoubtedly many of the details have been blurred by time. The timeline is based on an outline of the events I wrote on 7 February 1968, the day Marines found me and walked me back to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) Compound, ending my eight days behind enemy lines.

Preface

I was nearing the end of a long flight on a Continental Airlines 707. The aircraft was packed with soldiers and Marines going to Vietnam, some for the first time, some returning. Throughout the long flight the attendants laughed, joked, and chatted with the men. Outside the window, I could see wisps of smoke rising from the hamlets, and the numerous circular grave sites that dotted the landscape. Morning was breaking and you could almost feel the hot, humid, sultry air through the double paned windows of the aircraft.

Welcome back to Vietnam! It seemed like I'd never left. Soon we were on the tarmac and everyone was wandering off to their respective units. The embassy driver met me just outside the open barn-like structure that served as the terminal building, and he drove me to temporary quarters in Danang, where I would stay

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until my flight to Hue the next day. It was 29 January 1968.

That night I rested after the flight, but I was eager to get back to Hue and unpack. It had been a great month of home leave, spending Christmas at home and seeing old friends, especially rekindling a romance with a former girlfriend. I had extended my tour in Vietnam for six months—which came with a month’s home leave back in the United States. My arrival marked the start of the extension. If it was anything like my first 13 months, it would be uneventful. I hadn’t even been shot at during those months, and there were no close calls. I was not sure whether I was cheated out of that experience or grateful for not having gone through it. The most danger I experienced was a rocket attack on the Danang Airbase in early 1967.

Since April 1967, I had been detailed to CORDS in Hue as an advisor to the Revolutionary Development Cadre teams in Thua Thien Province. The Revolutionary Development Cadre teams were paramilitary civic action teams established to “win the hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese by providing armed protection and reconstruction projects for rural villages.^a

Hue was the ancient imperial capital of Vietnam and the seat of Vietnamese culture and history. The general belief was that both sides recognized that and had spared the city

a. I was responsible for evaluating, reporting on, and supporting multiple paramilitary teams in the province. I also had advisory responsibilities in finance, administration, logistics, medical facilities, recruitment, and training.

from the fighting. This assumption was to prove wrong!^b

On the way to the airport the next day, the sprawling Danang Airbase was in a state of pandemonium. We ran into roadblocks at almost every turn. The rumor was that sappers^c had penetrated the perimeter and there was scattered fighting to ferret them out. The driver took a long, circuitous route to the airport, and we did not arrive at the Air America office until about 10:00 a.m. At one checkpoint, the body of what was identified as a Vietcong sapper lay next to the road. Other than that, the airbase looked normal. It would be a few more hours before I could board a plane for Hue.

Our flight to Hue would be aboard a Pilatus Porter, a Swiss-made single engine STOL (short take-off and landing) aircraft that could fly into and out of postage stamp-sized airfields. As a demonstration of its STOL capability, it would often take off from the parking apron, almost leaping into the air after a short roll out. Unknown to me at the time, I would log many more hours in the Porter in the years ahead. I joked with Jack L., our air-ops person in Danang, that I wanted to get back to Hue where it was safe. By early afternoon I was on my way.

b. As it turned out Hue was a key target not only in the 1968 Tet campaign but again in the Spring 1972 North Vietnamese offensive, when a large NVA force took part of the city but was again driven it. The NVA would seize the city with relative ease in March 1975. (See cover image.)

c. Sappers, often on suicide missions, carried explosives into barbed wire and other defenses to make openings for following attacking infantry.

After the short, half-hour flight, we landed at the small dirt airfield located in the northwest corner of the Citadel (the ancient fortress within and around which the city of Hue had formed). I was met there by Jim H., a young, former Special Forces member now with CORDS. We’d gotten to be good friends in the short time we had known each other. He was easy to laugh, and we “hung out” together.

We rode back into town in the jeep chatting about what had happened during the past month, stopping at CORDS provincial headquarters before going to the house we were both staying in. At the US compound I met Tom Gompertz, a young FSO (Foreign Service officer) assigned to Hue. He was the quintessential all-American boy, clean-cut, good looking, with a ready smile that suggested he was always in on a joke. I’d known Tom since coming to Hue. We’d played soccer against the Nung guards and talked together often. Tom welcomed me back and said something about getting together soon. That was the last time I saw Tom until I identified his body some 10 days later. (I visited his gravesite in 2002, finally “getting together” 35 years later.)^d

That night after dinner, Jim and I chatted in the living room as we loaded the magazines of the “Swedish-K” submachineguns that Jim had just picked up that day. It was like a new toy. We admired the weapon because of its simple uncluttered design, the green metal body with its folding

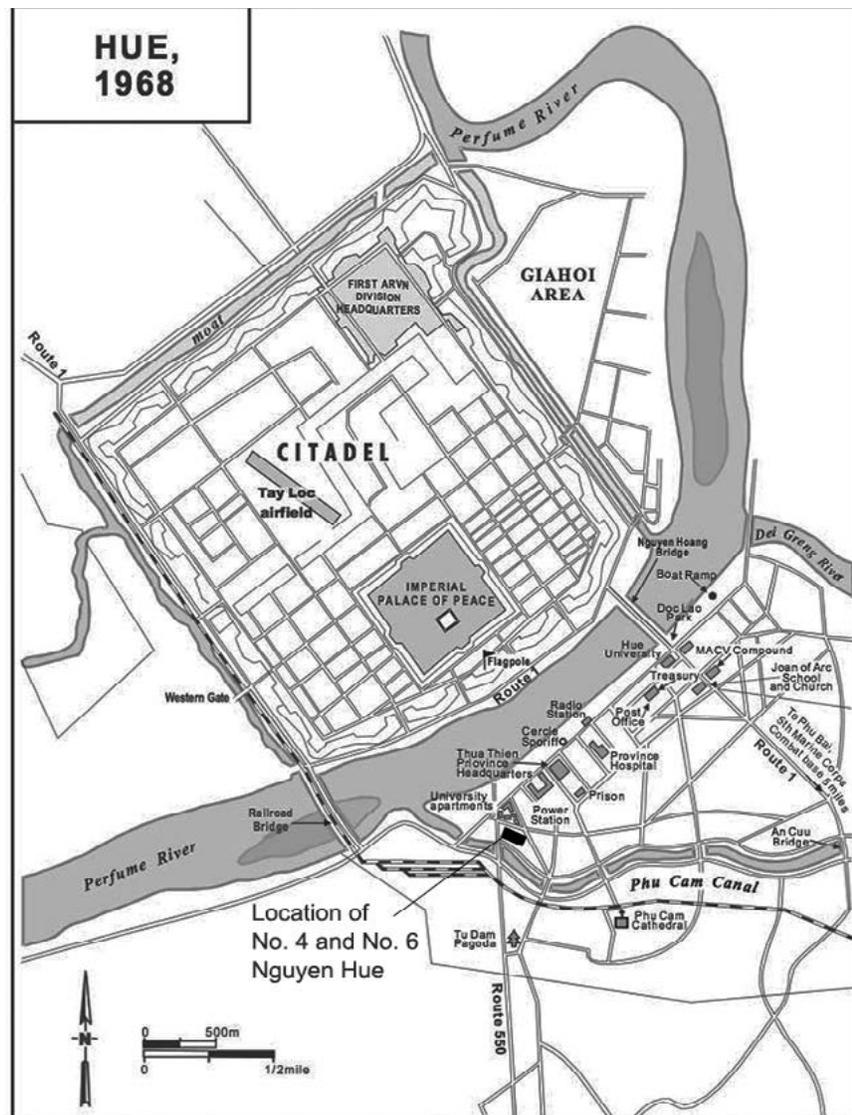
d. Tom’s name can be found in *American Statecraft: The Story of the U.S. Foreign Service* in its memorial pages, which list several diplomats killed in Vietnam.

radios, as we could hear the sounds of the firefight move west toward the Provincial Reconnaissance Unit (PRU) camp located at a stately old French colonial compound called *Gerard*. We were cautiously monitoring the fighting, but we were not alarmed. I started to heat some water on an electric hotplate to make instant oatmeal.

Initially we received conflicting reports about whether *Gerard* was under attack, but soon we got confirmation that it was indeed under heavy attack. We continued to hear the sounds of small arms fire and the “*krump*” of grenades and exploding mortar rounds coming from the two locations. The fighting was intensifying rapidly.

At about 7:00 a.m., Bob Hubbard, another Marine captain detailed to CORDS, and Howard Vaughn, a Marine sergeant serving as an advisor to the PRU, arrived by jeep at our house. They, too, had been monitoring the fighting and preparing to evacuate to the MACV compound about a mile away. Hubbard first wanted to go to the house of the Police Special Branch (PSB) advisor, located at No. 9 Phan Dinh Phung, to check on several people living there (Gene W., Dave H., and John C.).

Hubbard said they had not had any radio contact with them that morning. Hubbard and Jim left through our backyard toward the Phu Cam Canal, near where the other house was located. The sky was brightening, but the day was gray and overcast. A light mist shrouded the streets, and there was a slight chill in the air. Howard and I went out to the front of the house to see if we could detect any activity. We did not have long to wait.



Map: US Army Combat Studies Institute

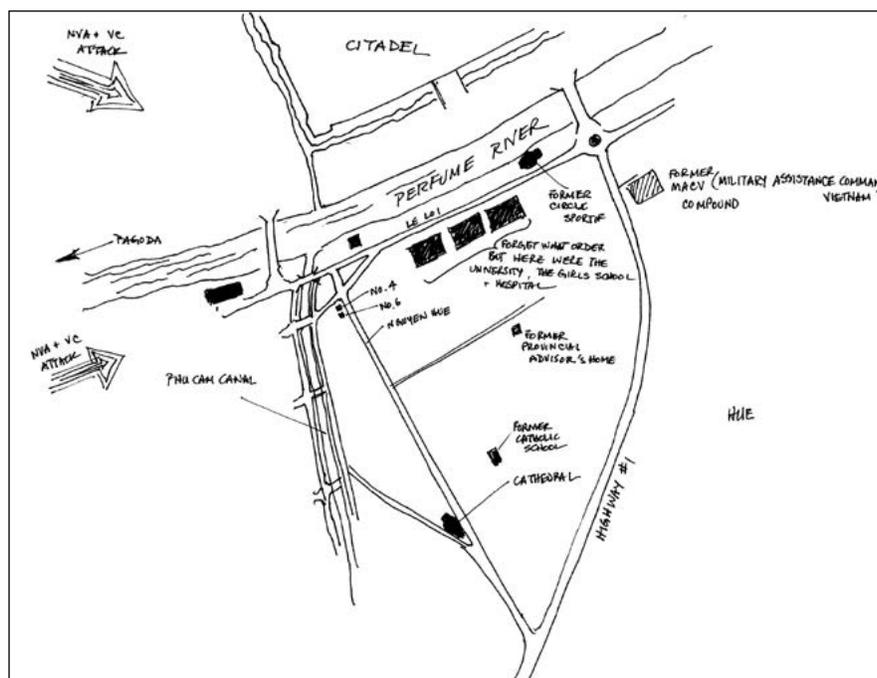
We were standing by our gate posts, when Sergeant Vaughn said he could see enemy soldiers running down Le Loi Street toward the Provincial Headquarters about 70 yards away. The soldiers were dressed in green uniforms, trousers rolled up above the knee, and each carried a rucksack and a weapon.

I looked out and could see small figures, crouched low and moving across my front about 100 yards

away. It seemed like an endless stream of people running down the street. Vaughn said he was going to mark them with fire and let loose a short burst from his M-16.

At Home, Under Fire

Almost immediately, his volley was answered with automatic fire. Chips of stone flew off the gatepost and Vaughn wheeled away from the post and fell to the ground. He spit up some blood, but otherwise there



Detail Map: Hand drawn by Raymond Lau.

wasn't a lot of bleeding, so I could not tell how seriously he was wounded. He said he had taken one bullet under his left arm. He was coughing up blood, meaning the bullet had punctured a lung. I bent over him, but I still did not know the seriousness of his wounds. At that moment, a couple of mortar rounds struck the roof and showered us with shards of broken tile. I asked Vaughn if he could move into the house. He pushed himself up and stumbled, hunched over, into the house and fell, sprawling on the living room floor. I stayed outside for a couple of minutes more, watching the NVA stream down the street, waiting to see if they turned up the street toward our house.^a

a. Throughout my account I mix the term VC (Vietcong) and NVA (North Vietnamese Army), though technically the VC were the local communist fighters, while the NVA were main-line army. During much of the fighting, it was difficult to differentiate

Things were getting more serious by the minute, yet how serious it was to become would not be known until later. Bob E., who had been inside the house, went out to one of the jeeps to monitor radio transmissions. The radios we had in our jeeps were squawking with a steady stream of English. This was a certain giveaway that Americans were nearby.

A few minutes later, or so it seemed, about 7:30 a.m., Hubbard and Jim returned. They asked if I thought we could make a run for the MACV compound. I told them that a lot of enemy troops had already moved down toward the compound, and I did not think we could make it, besides, I said, Vaughn was seriously wounded. Hubbard went over to check on him and moved him into one of the side bedrooms. Jim and

between the two. In reality it did not make any difference.

Hubbard took up positions in that bedroom, checking on our wounded comrade and trying to establish radio contact with MACV. I was across the living room in the other bedroom, watching the front door and a window on my side of the house.

A few minutes later, I could see about a half dozen Vietcong emerge from the adjacent house, No. 4 Nguyen Hue. They crossed in front of our house and walked off to the right and out of sight. (I had lived at No. 4 for some 8 months, the last several months with Foreign Service officer Kermit J. (Tom) Krause. Just before I left on home leave, I was told that I would move to No. 6 Nguyen Hue. I was a little upset about the move at the time. No. 4 held fond memories for me. In the end, that move probably saved my life because I was to learn later that during the fighting both Tom and the person who had moved in, Jeffrey S. Lundstedt, were captured by the NVA and executed in the bathroom.^b

Tom's story was especially sad. He was in his 60s and had served in the army through WWII and the Korean War. In WWII he was captured by the Italians. In Korea, he was captured by the North Koreans. This time the North Vietnamese were not so kind, and Tom did not make it. As with Tom Gompertz, I would identify Tom K.'s body about 10 days later.) A few minutes later, at about 8:30 a.m., I saw a grenade coming from somewhere to my right, out of my line of

b. Tom and Jeffrey were among four Foreign Service officers listed as killed during the Tet offensive. (American Foreign Service Association Memorial Plaque List available at <http://www.afsa.org/afsa-memorial-plaque-list>)

Several minutes went by, and I saw two to four VC parade a group of prisoners past our house, their hands above their heads. I recognized several people as members of IVS (International Voluntary Services).

sight, and land on the seat of one of the jeeps parked outside our door. A second later, the jeep was engulfed in flames as the grenade touched off the gas tank. The second jeep soon met the same fate. So much for using the jeeps to escape.

I don't know what happened to Bob E. In the confusion of the moment, I frankly did not even think of him, as my attention was focused on our rapidly deteriorating situation. Several minutes went by, and I saw two to four VC parade a group of prisoners past our house, their hands above their heads. I recognized several people as members of IVS (International Voluntary Services^a), though I did not know their names. Also among the group were two of our Nung guards. (I don't know what happened to the IVS people, either. I recall that one of the Nung guards I saw that morning was reportedly later killed by the NVA.)

Around 9:30 a.m. (times here are fuzzied in memory), an enemy soldier entered the house. He walked slowly and stealthily in, toward the right-side bedroom where Bob Hubbard and Jim were. I was squatting

down, pressed up against the door jam, hidden somewhat by a couch, watching the scene unfold. I looked over at Hubbard, who was watching the enemy approach. When the VC was about 10 feet from him, Hubbard stood up, and they both started firing on full automatic. It was like the movies, where chips of wood were flying off the door around Hubbard, but Hubbard's bullets found their mark, and the VC wheeled, staggered a couple feet and collapsed at our front entrance.

Somehow during this violent exchange, one of the French doors to the bedroom in which Hubbard was standing swung away from the wall, obscuring his view of the front door from that room. Hubbard came away without a scratch. Engaging the enemy at a distance is one thing, but a shootout at 10 feet was another thing. My adrenaline was pumping.

About 30 minutes passed before two NVA would approach. I was surprised that our little firefight had not attracted more attention right after it happened—not that I was eager. The lead NVA glanced down at the body at the door and continued to enter the house slowly. The second NVA knelt down to examine the body more carefully. You could see the NVA were used to jungle fighting, their training and experience not having prepared them for urban combat. I don't think either side was trained for urban warfare. The defender, in this case, us,

always has the advantage of surprise.^b This was certainly the case here, for I was crouched at the entryway to the left-side bedroom, watching the enemy enter. When he was about 10 to 12 feet away, I stood up, braced my back against the doorway, and opened fire on full automatic. I was so nervous that my first rounds hit the floor, but I walked the bullets up the enemy's leg to his body. He turned and collapsed. I raised my Swedish-K further and shot the other NVA soldier kneeling at the main doorway and he went down right there.

Right after shooting the two, I thought of the fate that brought our lives together. I did not know them, nor did they know me, yet we confronted each other, and the outcome was death for them and life for me. Under different circumstances, had I been born in North Vietnam or they in the United States, we could have been good friends. These were the first men that I'd killed. I said a quick prayer for them with the hope they would find peace in another world. And I thought about how easy physically it was to kill a person, but it is the psychological aspect that is more difficult.

Another 10 minutes or so went by, and the front doorway was rocked by an explosion from an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) fired from across the street. The blast blew a hole in the wall, to the left of the front doorway. All I could remember

a. According to an unpublished history of the non-governmental organization IVS, three workers were indeed captured in Hue. One was released within three months, two were held for five years. See: Winburn T. Thomas, "The Vietnam Story of International Voluntary Services," unpublished manuscript prepared for AID, June 1972 (http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNABI170.pdf) and Bill Holder, "A Death in Vietnam" in *WESLEYAN*, 20 January 2008 (http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNABI170.pdf).

b. Once the North Vietnamese and VC occupied the lightly defended city, they would build complex defensive works throughout it, which Marines would later fight through at tremendous cost of lives and wounded. See Mark Bowden, *Hue, 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017).

was a cloud of red brick dust and the blast picking me up and throwing me about 10 feet back into the bedroom. I was a bit shaken but unscathed as I quickly got up and crawled back into position at the doorway to the bedroom. I could now look out to the street through the open doorway and the hole blown through the wall, but I was feeling very vulnerable, having to divide my attention between the front door and the windows of the left-side bedroom, which had been blown open by the explosion.

I judged my position to be too untenable, so I scurried across the living room to join the others. Hubbard was crouched near the window opening out to the street. Jim H. was just inside the doorway I had just come through. Sergeant Vaughn was lying semiconscious in the center of the room. His wounds were very serious, and we did not know whether he would survive. I took up a position at the doorway, on the opposite side from Jim.

I looked into the living room at the three VC bodies. I could see that a piece of the wall above where the RPG round had hit had come down and crashed on top of one of the bodies. If the fellow was not dead before, the piece of the wall surely finished him.

Hubbard continued to try to establish radio contact on the PRC-25: “Waverly, Waver, Waverly Waver.” (Throughout this ordeal, thoughts would cross my mind that seemed incongruous with the situation.) I can recall looking at the PRC-25 and marveling how the one we had was brand new, not a scratch on it, and I thought that there were operating Marine units with battered, worn-out

We quickly followed with a pact that we would not surrender and would fight to the death.

PRC-25s that could have put ours to better use, especially since we weren’t getting through to anyone anyway. At one point, we could hear communications between units we could not identify. I thought it was the Air Cav because they referred to someone as “pony soldier,” but we could not raise anyone. Unknown to us at the time, MACV had been under attack since 4:00 a.m. and had changed frequencies and call signs.

It was about this time, 10:00 a.m., that the NVA made a concerted effort to dislodge us. Several NVA ran and took cover just outside our front gate. I thought I saw one carrying a satchel charge (high explosives) and could only think of the death and destruction such charges made to the Marine CAP unit outside of Hue. A blast rocked the other side of the building. I could see one NVA soldier hiding behind the gate post—the very same post Vaughn was leaning against when he was wounded. I could see only a part of the soldier’s head, so I aimed my Swedish-K at him and let loose a burst of fire. He screamed and went running down the street holding his head.

Hell, It could be our last “drink.”

We looked out again and could see an NVA soldier scurry across the street with an RPG and a couple seconds later a second NVA followed carrying two rockets. I think the same thought ran through each of our minds then, “Oh shit, here it comes.” I think it was then that Hubbard grabbed the bottle of Drambuie off the mantel, took a swig, and passed it around. Hell, it could be our last drink, so we each took a swallow.

We quickly followed with a pact that we would not surrender and would fight to the death. I was not sure I liked that last promise, but we had to remain united. A couple of moments later, our house was rocked by the explosion as another RPG rocket hit. They had aimed at the other side of the house and again we were safe. I recall looking over at the windows and noticing that the plastic sheets we had used in the windows instead of glass were shredded, but that probably saved us from injuries from flying glass. Good idea, I’ll have to remember that.

Just as suddenly as the attack began, things went quiet. We could hear the sound of helicopters outside, and I saw a Huey (UH-1E helicopter) at treetop level, firing into the tree line. We were certain that this was the counterattack we were waiting for, and the battle would soon be over. For the next half hour, things were deathly quiet. Suddenly just outside our door, we could hear one of the wounded NVA moaning and crying. We were concerned that his cries would bring others, so Jim grabbed a gun, crawled outside and fired a couple of rounds into him. Jim returned and said that he had taken care of him, but it wasn’t more than a couple minutes later that the wounded man began moaning and crying again. We looked at each other, and Jim again went outside and rolled two grenades outside the front door. KRUMP! KRUMP! We were sure we had heard the last of him, but soon, the cries began again. “Forget it,” Jim said, “He’s not real.”

It had been a long quiet period and with the sight of the Hueys

By now, it was obvious we could not stay in the house.

earlier, we were certain that things were drawing to a close. This seemed to match the enemy's approach of attacking during the night and early morning, then withdrawing during daylight. I don't think any of us thought the NVA would hold Hue through daylight. However, we would wait until friendly troops could mop up and move through our area before we came out. Around 11:00 a.m., I saw a group of soldiers walking down the street. I thought they were friendly forces, probably ARVN, because they had on green uniforms like the ARVN wore and the lead individual was wearing a steel helmet. Right about then, we took another rocket on our house. I thought it was a case of mistaken identity, and told the others in the room, that I would identify ourselves. I called out "Hoa ky, Hoa ky" (American, American). Almost immediately, I was answered by a burst of automatic fire. I dropped to the floor, hugging the tile, as bullets ripped through the brick wall, not more than 8 inches above my head, and I could see splinters of wood fly off the headboard of the bed.

Jim, who had been squatting against the wall on the other side of the doorway, whispered, "I'm hit!" I thought he meant he had a superficial wound and did not give it much thought, until I saw him lean away from the wall and it was covered in blood. Still Jim seemed all right and not seriously wounded. We were to find out later that two rounds had gone through his right upper arm and penetrated his back and lodged inside his right lung.

Still thinking we were victims of mistaken identity, I called out

again, "Hoa ky, hoa ky." This again was answered by grenades and more small arms fire. It seemed as if the NVA were now in the other bedroom, as one grenade rolled into our room. Bob Hubbard dived for it and threw it back outside into the living room where it exploded. A second grenade rolled and stopped at the door frame, about 3 feet from me. I plastered myself against the wall, as the grenade exploded with a deafening blast. Except for a single small fragment of shrapnel on my left arm, I was not injured. I could smell a familiar odor, for a minute uncertain what it was, but soon realized it was tear gas from the stash of tear gas grenades we had left on the dining room table. Apparently the explosions had ruptured some of those grenades and the smoke was wafting into our room.

Reminiscent of the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Jim whispered, "Any more good ideas?" He quickly added, "Friendly or not, we're not going to take this." Produced two fragmentation grenades, Jim pulled the pins and nodded to me. I did not need further direction, I extended my Swedish-K into the doorway and sprayed a full magazine of bullets into the other room. As soon as I emptied the magazine, I pulled back and motioned to Jim, who rolled the two grenades into the other room. Two loud explosions in the next room, and the house became quiet again.

Farewell to No. 6

By now, it was obvious we could not stay in the house. I was closest to the back door and nervously I pushed it open, fully expecting the NVA to be on the other side. I was "scared

shitless," but I couldn't ask someone else to do this, since I was there, closest to the door. I thought of the case of frag grenades just on the other side of the door and thought to recover them. As I inched the door open, I was surprised to find that there was no one there, and the route to the rear of the house was clear. I went to the back bathroom and came back to motion everyone to escape through the rear window. Bob Hubbard helped Sergeant Vaughn through the window and out to one of the back houses.

I think these were old servants quarters, but they were empty now. We took the last room in the row. Here we joined up with Bob E. and four of our Nung guards. Bob Hubbard hid Vaughn under a concrete table, affording him good protection. The rest of us took up positions to cover the windows and doorways. We listened as the enemy moved through the main building and systematically blew up the house.

We stayed in this room for about an hour. We had no illusions that we could hold this position, but we had no idea where to move without stumbling into more NVA, so we stayed put. At about 12 noon, a rifle muzzle appeared outside our door. A shot came through the door—the bullet striking Vaughn, this time blowing off his pinkie finger and breaking his leg. Hubbard, yanked the door open and fired, killing three NVA. Hubbard pulled back, yelling that he was out of ammunition. I went to the door, ready to fire, but noticed the three NVA lying outside the room and no one else. I spied a grenade and extra magazines for an AK-47 on one of the bodies, and I stooped to take them. The grenade was knotted to his belt and I was trying to undo

the knot. Looking up, back at the main house, I made eye contact with an NVA soldier standing there in the bathroom window we had come through not that long ago. I think he was an NVA officer because he was wearing a tan pith helmet and seem to be in authority. We looked at each other for several seconds, and then I got up and casually walked around to the back of the building. I am convinced that he took me for a local VC because I was in civilian clothes and carrying an AK-47.

At the back of the building I linked up again with Hubbard and Vaughn. I motioned that I was going over the wall to check out the next compound. I rolled over the wall and ran to the nearest cover, which turned out to be a water shed. As I entered, I saw a body in the water trough. No sooner than I had gotten over that shock than the body rose up. The apparition, a Vietnamese also in hiding, scared the pants off of me, but I motioned him to be quiet, pushed him back down toward the water, and stepped out of the shed.

The only other place was a closet-like room with a small water trough. I went over to it. It looked like a way to climb up to the attic crawl space, where I thought we could hide. I waved to Hubbard to follow, and the two of us hoisted Vaughn up the wall and pushed him up. He let out a muffled scream, and then we heard a thud and moan. It soon became apparent that what I thought was an attic was only the other side of the wall and we had just dropped Sergeant Vaughn over the wall. Hubbard climbed over, and I quickly followed. On the other side there was another water trough. I knelt on the rim, facing a window

It was increasingly clear that Jim's wound was not minor. He had lost quite a bit of blood and was weakening.

and door. Sergeant Vaughn was lying on the floor. Hubbard had taken up a position looking out another window in a small room.

A Chance to Regroup in a New Sanctuary

This was our first chance to regroup. During the last skirmish, everyone scattered, and now only Hubbard, Vaughn, and I were together. We did not know where Jim and Bob E. had gone, nor did we know where our Nung guards went. I do not remember how long we stayed there. We could hear some activity around us, but we could not see anything. Sometime later that afternoon, I saw a Vietnamese outside our building. He wandered about for a while, and then came to the door and peered through the crack, straight at me. I was still squatting on the water trough, with a weapon cradled in my arms. I stared back but did not move. I was certain he saw me, but I wasn't certain whether he would report our presence. Luck was with us and nothing ever came of this incident.

As night fell, I moved into the small room with Hubbard. He had already moved Vaughn and slid him under the bed in the room. Hubbard faced out the small openings to the back, while I sat in the doorway looking out the window. We had made it through day one. It seemed like forever.

Sometime during that first night, I suddenly heard voices coming from directly in front of me, and in the faint light coming in the window I could see two figures. I think they were a man and a woman. I do not know how or when they came into

our building, but they were suddenly there, not more than 4 feet away. I called to them in my limited Vietnamese, saying that I was a friend and not to be afraid, all the while slowly moving toward them, hand over hand. By the time I reached the window, they were gone. I never found out who they were or how they got in and out without my hearing anything. The rest of the night and the next day were uneventful, and Hubbard and I kept our same positions. Vaughn continued to fade in and out of consciousness. We had no idea how long he would last.

On the second night, 1 February 1968, Hubbard noticed two figures moving outside. By their movements, we could tell they were Jim and Bob E. We called to them in a whisper and guided them into our building through a back door. They soon joined us and told us they had taken refuge in the main building of this compound. They said they had hidden in a closet, while just outside their door, less than 5 feet away, NVA soldiers gathered and chatted in the dark. This night, they decided to sneak past the NVA soldiers to escape. They were doing that when we called to them.

Hubbard, Jim, and Bob E. sat on the bed. Vaughn was lying under the bed, and I sat across from them on a bag of rice. Vaughn, now twice wounded, was still alive, but getting weaker, slipping in and out of consciousness. We shared a bar of brown sugar and an apple that I had taken from the worship altar and water from our water source.

By the third day (2 February), we were wondering when US forces would recapture Hue. Where were they?

It was increasingly clear that Jim's wound was not minor. He had lost quite a bit of blood and was weakening. Hubbard rolled Jim on his wounded side to drain blood from his good lung and gave him water. But Jim was tough and by the next day, he had recuperated much of his strength, but he was getting increasingly concerned about his wounds—that he might lose his right arm to gangrene. We were fortunate to have some food and a ready source of water. The room was small, about 4 feet by 6 feet, but being together kept our spirits up.

Throughout the next few days, we saw no other people. We only heard sporadic firing nearby. Frequently we would hear a loud gun go off, followed by automatic fire. The firing would build in intensity and then gradually taper off. I wasn't sure if it was antiaircraft fire or other defensive fires. Often this firing sequence was preceded by a whippoorwill-like birdcall, to the point that I thought it might be a signal. Then again, I thought to myself that perhaps I'd been watching too many war movies where people would use birdcalls as recognition signals. To this day, I do not know if there was any significance to the birdcall, or if it actually was a birdcall.

Sergeant Vaughn was steadily getting weaker. He lay under the bed, not making a sound. We knew we could not move him, and the best bet was that friendly forces would recapture this part of the city and we would be able to medevac him. We were still confident that US forces would win this area back. It was just a matter of time before they would,

though whether it would be in time to save Sergeant Vaughn was more in question. Thinking back, I cannot recall if he was conscious at any time during the last two days we were in the room. If we had to move quickly, we decided we would hide Sergeant Vaughn under the bed. If we tried to move him, he certainly would not survive.

By the third day (2 February), we were wondering when US forces would recapture Hue. Where were they? Jim was getting increasingly anxious about his wounds, thinking he would lose his arm. We were becoming desperate. We were ginning up crazy plans for escape. One plan had us find the aluminum wrapper from a cigarette pack to fashion a mirror to signal friendly aircraft. Another plan had me pretend to be a VC and march the others at gunpoint toward a checkpoint and then rush the guards and blast our way through. We realized that the chances for success were slim to none.

Amidst this reverie, we heard a commotion outside our door. We quickly bolted the door and listened as a number of NVA soldiers entered our building and interrogated a local Vietnamese, just outside our room. There was a lot of yelling, screaming, crying and an occasional shot. It was confusion. The best we could make out, was that the NVA found Sergeant Vaughn's blood-stained clothes (which we had stripped off him when we first came into the building.) The only barrier between us and the NVA was a 7 foot high concrete wall—open at the top, and a flimsy wood and tin door held shut by a small bolt lock. We knew it was a simple matter

for the NVA to kick down our door or throw a grenade over the wall. We made hand signs, as to who would do what.

We quieted our breathing and the sweat was streaming off our faces. Suddenly someone tried our door. It was obvious the door was locked from the inside and we were certain someone would kick the door in. We readied ourselves to blast our way out. We waited for what seemed like forever, but nothing happened, and just as suddenly, the NVA left. We all let out a huge sigh of relief. We could never figure out what brought them to our house and why they suddenly left, but we were grateful to have avoided a firefight in such close quarters.

The relief of that close call was still with us the next morning. Someone had found a can of sweetened evaporated milk, and we were trying to figure out how to open it, when we heard footsteps. This was about 11:00 a.m. A number of NVA marched into the house, straight to our door and kicked it open. Hubbard rushed to the door and sprayed the room with his Swedish-K. After a couple seconds, he pulled back, saying he was out of ammo. I jumped into the doorway with an AK-47 and fired one round. I thought that I had placed the AK on full automatic, but much to my surprise, it was on semiautomatic. I stood there white knuckled, and only one round came out. I quickly realized my mistake and pulled the trigger in rapid succession. The NVA soldiers who barged in were lying on the floor, but we did not wait around to see who else was there, so we bolted out the door.

Another Escape

We ran to the corner of the compound and climbed over, through what I believe was the Montagnard Center. It wasn't until later that we learned that an NVA Regiment had made it their headquarters. We skirted the compound and climbed over another wall, and into a garage.

It was then that I realized that, in the heat of the firefight, we had left Sergeant Vaughn behind. A couple of us were ready to go back, but after a brief discussion, we figured we would never be able to get him out alive and that his best chance was to remain hidden under the bed in the house. (We were convinced the NVA couldn't hold the city much longer and our side would recapture the city soon.) We weren't even sure he was still alive. He had not made a sound for the last couple of days. To this day, I am haunted by the question of whether we did the right thing.

We left the garage and slowly made our way, half submerged down a water filled canal. We quietly passed a woman cooking in her backyard. I can remember thinking that she could not have not noticed us or she purposely avoided looking at us. I also remember looking down at my Rolex watch which was caked with mud and thinking that if I get out, I will write to Rolex and tell them how my watch continued to keep time, despite the mud and grime of the past few days. I was sure they would print my story or maybe give me a new Rolex. Dream on.

The canal came up to a rusted barbed wire fence. On the other side was a road and our way out. We broke a hole through the fence and slithered through, I ended up at a

The next couple of days were uneventful. The family brought me food twice a day, and I occupied myself doing isometric exercises to keep from cramping up.

culvert in the road. I quickly slid into it. As I crawled forward, I could see mosquitoes on the water, and thought to myself, "Oh shit, after all this, now I am going to get bitten and die of malaria."

Separated and Alone

But that thought was quickly pushed from my mind, as the culvert narrowed and I found my nose under water. I quickly turned over on my back so my nose would be out of the water, as I squeezed out the other end. Good thing I was all of about 125 lbs and could get through. Being exposed on the side of the road, I ran forward, hid in a ditch, and waited for the others. Unknown to me, they had decided they would never get through the culvert, ran across the road and pushed south toward the Phu Cam district, expecting me to catch up.

I, however, got turned around and found myself headed back toward the city. I recognized a compound just down the road from our house. It was the city's public works department. The roads were empty, though I could still hear gunfire in the distance. As soon as I heard a break in the shooting, I pushed up and ran across the road into the compound, and climbed up into an empty concrete water tower. There I felt I was safe and could dry off. I was soaked from crawling through the canal and I was shivering as the temperatures dropped. I stripped off my clothes and laid them out to dry, just sitting in the dry water tower in my underwear. No sooner did I strip down,

than it started to rain, so reluctantly I put my wet clothes back on.

I was cold, miserable and hungry, so I decided to approach the Vietnamese in the compound. I had no better ideas. I jumped down and started to run but thought better of it, so slowed to a walk and walked across the compound to a Vietnamese woman.

Taken Under Wing

Using my scant Vietnamese, I explained that I was an American and that I wanted to know what the situation was. The woman ushered me into her house and told me that the NVA had overrun all of Hue and Phu Bai.^a She gave me some rice mixed with some red sauce and I wolfed it down. I never found out what the red sauce was, but at the time, it tasted great. I wasn't sure what I would do, but I wanted to get out of the wet clothes, so I asked for something dry to wear. They gave me a white shirt and a pair of blue schoolboy trousers and a pair of shower shoes. Nervously they took my clothes and buried them in the yard but not until I retrieved my wallet and dog tags. As I started to leave, they told me I could not leave the compound, that the NVA were everywhere, and I would be killed or captured for sure. Instead, they led me to a small pen that, best I could tell, was an old pig sty. They motioned to me to hide there.

The pig sty was low, and I could not stand up, so I sat leaning against

a.They actually had not taken Phu Bai.

“Hey Marines, Captain Lau, US Embassy. I’m coming out.” A voice called back, “Come on out. We’ve been looking for you.”

a wooden side. The next couple of days were uneventful. The family brought me food twice a day, and I occupied myself doing isometric exercises to keep from cramping up. At other times, I looked for things to keep me occupied. Once I found some wire and spent time sewing the buttons back on my shirt. On the second day, the husband came over to me and handed me a rusty knife blade. He explained that during the night the NVA had come to him and asked if they could cut through to the next compound, through where I was hiding. Wanting to give me something to defend myself, he gave me a knife. I took one look and thought it would be useless. It was rusted and dull, and I couldn’t even use it to cut my own throat, if it came to that. But I thanked him nonetheless.

Sitting in the pig sty, I continued to hear sporadic gunfire throughout the city, along with the staccato of automatic fire. Increasingly I could hear artillery rounds going overhead, which I assumed were from the huge Marine base at Phu Bai. By the second day, my existence was turning into routine. I was trying to keep myself entertained when an artillery shell exploded less than 30 feet from me. All I could remember was that everything turned to slow motion and I could see the fireball, and the billowing cloud of red brick dust move toward me. The force knocked me over, and all I could think was, “Oh crap, it’s going to break my leg!”

The walls of the pig sty and the overhead corrugated roofing collapsed on top of me, as I pushed off the ground and back into an upright

sitting position, only to see another fireball, almost at precisely the same spot, and another wave of red brick dust knocked me over again. As I pushed back upright again, I checked myself and noticed that I was still in one piece—no broken leg. I did have a small wound on my head, probably from the falling roof and timbers, but the building fell in such a way as to create a small lean-to, very much like a 1950s nuclear bomb shelter—and I was lying in this lean to. I checked around and noticed gouges in the cinder blocks next to me. I did not recall seeing them before the blasts, but I couldn’t say for sure that they were caused by the blasts. If the latter, that I survived was a miracle. As it was, it was a miracle anyway.

That day, for the first time, the Vietnamese family did not bring any food to me, and I fashioned a drinking cup from a discarded C-ration tin and caught rain water dripping from the corrugated roofing for drinking water. I would simply collect the water, allow for sediment to settle to the bottom of the tin and sip the “clean” water off the top. It worked well, especially since the weather cooperated with light drizzle all day. It wasn’t until the next day, when someone from the Vietnamese family came around looking for some roofing material, that they realized I had not died in the explosions. When I waved, the person blanched and looked as if he’d seen a ghost and scurried away. He soon returned with a bandage and some food, which was greatly welcomed. Later that day, they brought me food again.

I continued to “live” in my makeshift shelter. My only concern now was the threat of rats, and I wrapped the mosquito net the family had given me tightly around my body to ward off any rat attacks, as well as to keep warm. No rats came. They were probably too smart to venture out in this fighting. I only mention it because it reflects my state of mind—that I may survive the fighting, but something else would do me in, like malaria or rats, or something else.

“The Marines Are Here!”

On 7 February, the firefights grew in intensity and I could hear American English spoken on the other side of the wall. The voices were those of Marines, and I would hear, “Don’t worry, the Marines are here!” “US Marines!” and other such phrases, occasionally punctuated with gunfire. A lot sounded like so much bravado, but to me it was a welcome sound that gave me hope. It was now only a matter of minutes, I thought.

It turned out to be a couple hours before the Marines came through the hole in the wall made by the two artillery shells. Now my concern was how do I come out without being mistaken for a VC and get shot. I got out my dog tags and my military ID and held them in my hand. When I could actually see them, I called, “Hey Marines, Captain Lau, US Embassy. I’m coming out.” A voice called back, “Come on out. We’ve been looking for you.” Holding my military ID card and my dog tags, I crawled out of my shelter, and introduced myself to Capt. J. T. Irons of the Marine Interrogation Translation Team, resplendent in his handlebar mustache. He was ugly, but a most beautiful sight.

Shortly thereafter, Captain Irons escorted me back to the MACV compound. I must have been quite a sight—an 8-day growth on my face, a white shirt and blue school boy trousers, shower shoes. The guard at the MACV compound called out to us, as we entered, “Hey, he can’t go in there!!” Capt. Irons yelled back, “He’s okay. He’s a Marine captain.” We continued walking, and soon I was greeted by my chief, Billy M. He greeted me with a big smile and a pat on the back. It was great to see him.

That day, several others were to make it back to friendly lines. Dave H. and John C. walked in. They had a similar harrowing story to tell, but that’s their story. I also learned that Jim H. had made it down to Phu Bai and had been medevaced to the United States. Bob E. made his way to the Voice of America station just south of Hue and took refuge there. He was safe and would later be taken out of the area. Sadly, Bob Hubbard

All told, 10 people from the embassy team in Hue were killed during or as a result of the fighting in Hue: They will all be remembered.

was killed about three days earlier, crossing the bridge to Phu Cam District. He had been shot at close range and likely died instantly.

Over the next couple of days, I identified the bodies of Tom Gompertz, Tom K., and Jeff L. as their bodies were brought in. A Marine was driving one of the USAID Ford Scouts and would come screeching around the corner to the MACV compound, horn blaring, and I would go down to ID the bodies. I got to dread the wail of the horn, since I knew it meant more bodies. But, I thought it was the least I could do to help get their remains back to their families. I would have wanted them to do that for me, if the roles were reversed.

For the next month or more, we tracked others who were missing, and

I brought back the bodies of Sergeant Vaughn and a USAID officer, Steve Miller. (I found the sergeant’s body in a ditch outside the building where we were hiding. I looked, but I did not see any more wounds than those he had suffered that first day.) All told, 10 people from the embassy team in Hue were killed during or as a result of the fighting in Hue: Bob Hubbard, Howard Vaughn, Tom Gompertz, Tom Krause, Jeffery Lundstedt, Steve Miller, and others. Gene W. was captured and ended up as a POW in North Vietnam for seven years, almost all of it in isolation. Other colleagues of the day not named in this story, Tom R. and Sol G., were captured and died along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Steve H.’s body was identified six years later. They will all be remembered.



Readings

In addition to Mark Bowden’s *Hue 1968*, works on Tet and the battle for Hue include:

Villard, Erik. *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri and Hue*, US Army Center for Military History, 2008.

Shumlinson, Jack. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968*, History and Museums Division, Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 1997.

James Wirz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Cornell University Press, 1991, 1994)

For insights into the roles of Marine advisors see Andrew R. Finlayson, USMC (Ret.), *Marine Advisors with the Vietnamese Provincial Reconnaissance Units, 1966–1970* (History Division, USMC, 2009). A portion of Lau’s story appeared in Finlayson’s monograph.

Ray Lau’s recommendations: For a more chronologically ordered account of the Marine’s fighting in Hue, Eric Hammel’s book, *Fire in Streets: The Battle for Hue, Tet 1968* (Contemporary Books, 1991, and Casement Reprint, 2018).

It is a good book. For an especially moving account of what the civilian population of Hue endured during the Tet Offensive, read Nha Ca's book, *Mourning Headband for Hue: An Account for the Battle for Hue, Vietnam 1968* (Indiana University Press, 2014—translated by Olga Dror). As brutal as the fighting was for the Marines, the horrors of being caught in the crossfire for the civilian population was worse.



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