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Photos courtesy of Jim Soukup

Operation Hue City

Story by Keith W. Nolan

Captain Gordon D. Batcheller, Commanding Officer, Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, First Marines, pulled himself out of his cot, having been awakened by a runner. He put on his cammies, slipped a flak jacket over his massive frame, and slapped a helmet on his shaved head. He walked outside, where the sergeants of his 2nd and 3rd Platoons were directing the loading of supplies and equipment into trucks. His 1st Platoon, along with all his officers, were at division headquarters, stuck because of a helicopter mix-up during a recent move.

The time was a little past midnight on January 31, 1968, at the sprawling Marine base at Phu Bai, Republic of Vietnam. Capt Batcheller's Alpha Company had been assigned to travel north up Route One to the ancient imperial capital of Vietnam, Hue City. Hours before—as a phase of a nationwide (and soon to be world-famous) Tet Offensive—the communist North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had attacked Hue. Neither Batcheller nor his men knew the exact situation; all they had been told was that Hue was under attack and they were to reinforce the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops in the city.

At daybreak, Alpha lumbered out of their base and headed south—away from Hue—down Route One to link up with an ARVN unit before advancing to Hue. Providing front and rear security for the convoy were two U.S. Army "Dusters," trucks mounted with rapid-fire 40-mm. cannons.

In Hue, the situation was precarious. On the south side of the river that split Hue—the River of Perfumes—the entire area had been overrun except for a small contingent of

U.S. Army and Marine advisors, staff officers, and radiomen holding their own in the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) compound.

Across the Perfume River, in the Citadel section, which was surrounded by four massive walls, the NVA had captured all but a group of ARVN defending their division headquarters.

As Alpha Company traveled down the road, Capt Batcheller knew none of this. Radio communications were poor and little information had reached Marine headquarters in Phu Bai. Alpha reached the rendezvous point and came to a halt, waiting. The ARVN unit that was to meet them didn't show.

Capt Batcheller got on the radio to his battalion commander in Phu Bai, LtCol Marcus J. Gravel, and was told not to wait for the ARVN; instead to turn the convoy around, retrace their path up Route One, and relieve the besieged MACV compound on the south side of Hue. Along the way, Alpha linked up with a four-tank platoon from the 3rd Tank Battalion that had been stranded at the outbreak of the enemy offensive. The two columns linked and LtCol Edward J. Lamontagne, the Third Marine Division Embarkation Officer who had been supervising the tanks, helped Batcheller in running the convoy.

As the column reached the An Cuu

Bridge, on the southern outskirts of Hue, they ran into the first of the NVA blocking units, which had been quickly dispatched to halt the expected relief force. Snipers opened up from the buildings along the road, wounding several Marines. Capt Batcheller quickly directed return fire and ordered the convoy on, bypassing the NVA.

The company held up after crossing the An Cuu at a point before the road ran between a cluster of buildings. It reminded Batcheller of an old Western town; dirt roads and no sidewalks, with tightly packed houses. The Marines could see nothing moving. The grunts left their trucks and climbed onto the four tanks. With Batcheller taking his place on the lead tank, they hauled down on the road, pouring fire into the silent buildings as a precaution.

Suddenly, the lead tank took a direct hit from an NVA B-40 rocket. The crack and boom of another B-40 erupted and automatic weapons fire sprayed the entire column. A Navy corpsman fell dead and Batcheller's young radioman was blown off the tank, mortally wounded. Batcheller jumped from the tank and began pulling the dead and wounded to cover. He was joined by GySgt J. L. Canley—the company gunny, a huge black with a reputation for bravery—while the rest of the company crouched behind the tanks, triggering M-16 rifles, returning fire.

With the wounded under cover, Batcheller and Canley moved from position to position, directing the grunts' fire. Batcheller had taken some shrapnel and suffered a ruptured eardrum, but had no time to pay attention to his wounds.

The convoy sped out from the buildings and regrouped in a traffic circle. Sporadic mortar and automatic weapons fire was hitting the Marines from the heart of the south side up ahead, so Batcheller deployed the tanks and had them rake the area with their 90-mm. firepower. LtCol Lamontagne coordinated the two Dusters and brought their 40-mm. cannons to bear.

The Marines mounted up and continued down Route One. The road cut across an urban rice paddy, with two large buildings situated on either side of it halfway through. Small trees lined the street and a cover of leaves swept the road. The tanks started out and the Marine infantrymen trailed behind, using tanks, trees, and road bank as cover from the fire coming from the city.

The Marines poured fire at the two large buildings. Batcheller keyed his radio to call for air and artillery support, but found both North and South Vietnamese on all frequencies.

The Marines passed the two buildings—leaving a dozen dead NVA in them—and were almost out of the rice paddy when a Navy man was wounded. Batcheller, who was still behind the lead tank, bolted from his cover and grabbed the wounded man, dragging him to cover. A machine gun from one of the buildings up the road raked them with fire, killing the sailor and throwing the captain off the road and sprawling in a tangle of wire.

Batcheller looked himself over—gaping holes in his right forearm, right thigh and left knee. He thought he would bleed to death. Sporadic fire was cracking past him, so he shouted for the Marines not to try and get him. He lay off the road and glanced up through the branches of a tree, noticing the early morning overcast had burned off into a beautiful blue sky. He began to pray....

When news that Alpha was being hit hard was relayed to Phu Bai, LtCol Gravel and his Operations Officer, Maj Walter Murphy, organized a small reinforcing unit of the 1/1 command group and Golf Company, 2nd Battalion, Fifth Marines, which had been temporarily attached to Gravel's battalion. They had no time

Photo courtesy of Sgt Edward Neas



2ndLt William R. Donnelly (right) and members of his platoon headquarters took a break near the An Cuu River during the battle for Hue.

to make plans; just board the trucks and get moving.

LtCol Gravel's force reached Alpha Company in the afternoon. They found the company under GySgt Canley—who was bleeding from shrapnel wounds but still functioning—putting out fire. Gravel's jeep was pulled up in the middle of the road and the wounded were dragged behind it. Batcheller, who had lain in the ditch for two hours, was quickly evacuated with the other wounded by truck to Phu Bai.

LtCol Gravel and Maj Murphy organized their two companies and armored support, continuing toward MACV. Along the way, an NVA machine gun team in a fortified bunker opened up with intense fire, temporarily halting the Marines. The commander of Alpha's 3rd Platoon, Sgt Alfredo Gonzalez—a Mexican-American who was carrying shrapnel wounds from rescuing a wounded Marine earlier in the fight—quickly positioned his platoon along a paddy dike, directly across from the bunker. Gonzalez had his men lay down cover fire, then jumped the paddy dike and single-handedly charged the machine gun. He sloshed down in the paddy water behind an earthen dike and pulled out several hand grenades. He yanked the pins and destroyed the North Vietnamese position with several well-aimed throws.

The convoy revved up again and reached MACV by late afternoon. At that time, they were the only large, organized allied force in Hue and Marine headquarters expected them to gather information. Not realizing the magnitude of the enemy presence, orders came from Phu Bai, via radio, for Gravel to take his force across the

Perfume River and make contact with the ARVN in the Citadel.

Gravel—a brave and highly competent Marine officer—was incredulous; it would be hard enough to just hold MACV without risking his men in what he considered to be an ill-conceived foray. He tried to have the order rescinded, but to no avail; the order stood.

Gravel was a professional Marine and as much as he disagreed with the order, he was compelled to carry it out. The operation fell into disaster. After fighting to secure the main bridge across the Perfume, the Marines were ambushed by the North Vietnamese, who had dug themselves into the massive Citadel walls.

With casualties mounting—Golf Company had taken a loss of 50 Marines killed or wounded out of a complement of 150—Gravel ordered a withdrawal to the south side. Even that was a small hell. Enemy fire poured unhindered through the smoke grenades the Marines had popped, and more grunts were hit. B-40's exploded throughout the area and Maj Murphy and the battalion's Navy chaplain were hit by shrapnel as they helped carry the wounded to trucks. The Marines extracted themselves by nightfall and made it back to MACV, but Murphy died before the evacuation helicopters could get in.

LtCol Gravel sat in the MACV compound. He was crushed by the mission. His friend, Batcheller, was seriously wounded, Maj Murphy was dead, and he had lost more Marines in a mission he considered useless. He had never felt so empty, so helpless, so angry. His only consolation was that his Marines had performed with admirable courage.

OPERATION HUE CITY (cont)

The first day of the battle was over.

The North Vietnamese had been able to seize the whole of Hue on the first day because they moved with speed and daring. However, with the arrival of the Marine relief force, the NVA dug in—losing the momentum and force of their attack overnight—and went on the defense.

In the days that followed the arrival of Gravel's force, the Marine effort in Hue was developed into a full-scale operation. The 2nd Battalion, Fifth Marines, under LtCol Ernest C. Cheatham, was moved in and on February 3, Col Stanley S. Hughes, the commander of the First Marines, arrived at MACV to lead the Hue Task Force. Col Hughes, a quiet, soft-spoken but dynamic leader, held the Navy Cross for heroism earlier in his career.

Hughes assigned LtCol Cheatham's three-company battalion the task of clearing the NVA from the houses and streets on the near bank of the Perfume River. The battle in the Citadel was under ARVN control for the time being.

Gravel was ordered to take his force—which then consisted only of the two platoons of Alpha Company, some tanks and Ontos, and recoilless rifles from his H&S Company—and secure the southern fringe of the south side, around the An Cuu River.

Alpha did little but hold its own at MACV until the morning of the 4th when they were directed to attack the Joan de Arc High School, a square-shaped building only 100 yards from MACV. 2ndLt Ray Smith, a platoon leader who had been able to get away from division headquarters, took over the company from GySgt Canley.

Lt Smith led his company against the enemy-held school, positioning the men along the walls and in nearby buildings. The high-pitched cracks of AK-47 automatic rifles erupted from the school; B-40's boomed. The Marines returned in kind with M-16's and LAAW's. The smell of cordite hung in the air.

The Marines' initial assault was stalled and casualties were high. Finally, Sgt Gonzalez—who had been wounded again the day before but refused evacuation—launched a one-man attack against the North Vietnamese. The platoon commander advanced to the front of the company, gathering several LAAW's along the

way, then moved about, firing the rockets at the building, managing to knock out two B-40 positions. As he stood in a building, a B-40 flashed through the window and exploded, killing Gonzalez instantly.

Outside, Lt Smith was a powerhouse; maneuvering his two platoons and attached recoilless rifle team, running through the intense fire, urging his men on. With Smith leading a second charge against the school, the company entered the building and GySgt Canley dropped a satchel charge onto the North Vietnamese, killing several and forcing the rest to fall back.

The complex was secured and Alpha counted its casualties; three killed and 24 wounded. It was one of their worst days in Hue.

Meanwhile, while Alpha had been fighting for the school, reinforcements arrived for Gravel's battalion. Bravo Company 1/1 was trucked in along with Alpha's 1st Platoon, from division headquarters.

After running a gauntlet of fire up Route One, the newly-arrived Marines secured at MACV. The commander of the 1st Platoon, 2ndLt William R. Donnelly—a recent Annapolis graduate who was popular among his men—was ordered to take his platoon, a platoon of Bravo, and two Dusters to scout the area and recover the bodies of two Marines who had been killed.

Lt Donnelly led his men from MACV and cautiously advanced down the streets; nerves tense, fingers flexed on triggers. Close behind the platoon commander were two friends, Sgt Josef Burghardt and LCpl Edward Neas. Sgt Burghardt—Donnelly's platoon sergeant—was a Yugoslavian emigrant who held the Bronze Star and Purple Heart from a previous Vietnam tour. LCpl Neas—one of Donnelly's machine gunners—was a high school dropout from Queens who joined the Marines to see the war. Like many young Marines departing for battle, he had the eagle, globe, and anchor emblazoned on his bicep.

The platoons located the two dead Marines, sprawled in a rubble-strewn street. The North Vietnamese were still in the area and opened up with volleys of AK-47 and B-40 fire. At the first rounds, Burghardt and Neas threw themselves to the ground. One of the Dusters, directly beside them, quickly swung its cannons toward a house where sniper fire had come from and leveled it. Neas got up,

positioned his M-60 team, and began returning fire. The enemy fire increased and Donnelly formed the patrol into a hasty perimeter, then moved along the line, directing fire.

Three Marines who had tried to retrieve the two bodies were wounded and lay in the street. Donnelly dashed from his cover, picked up one of the wounded and carried him back to the perimeter. He ran out again and brought in another wounded grunt. He moved out a third time and was hit by fragments from an exploding B-40, but ignored the wound and saved the last of the casualties.

The Marines then gathered their wounded and the two dead and fought their way back to MACV.

The next morning, the 5th, Alpha and Bravo Companies launched another attack against the entrenched enemy and spent the whole day fighting for 75 yards down the road from MACV.

LCpl Neas had his machine gun team set up in one of the buildings, shooting at enemy positions across the street. His squad leader, Cpl Norris Brennan, ran into a building nearby with Sgt Burghardt and began firing from the second-floor windows. Burghardt turned away for a moment, then glanced back at Brennan. The corporal lay on the floor, helmet thrown off, blood flowing from his face. He had been firing his M-16 when an AK-47 round struck the charging handle of the rifle, driving it into his face.

Neas looked out a window and saw several Marines rush past on the street below, carrying Brennan on a door, his head swathed in bandages. The grunt bled to death and Neas—the 19-year-old kid from Queens—took over the machine gun squad.

Lt Donnelly's 1st Platoon spent the night in the building, squaring off with the enemy. All night, the Marines could see the North Vietnamese dragging away their dead and carting in equipment. In the morning, the Marines had nine NVA killed so close that their comrades couldn't get to the bodies.

Early in the morning, Sgt Burghardt took out a squad to conduct a house-to-house search for NVA snipers who had been firing on passing vehicles. The NVA were spotted in a large building and Burghardt radioed for armored support. A tank moved up and hammered the NVA position with its 90-mm. cannon and .50-caliber machine gun. Several NVA's broke from the house and

tried to escape. Burghardt shouldered his M-16 and four of the North Vietnamese fell dead in the street.

The next day, the platoon had four enemy soldiers pinned down in a house. Sgt Burghardt had his men lay down cover fire, then maneuvered through alleys and buildings, flushing two NVA's into the open and killing them. Burghardt was later wounded by shrapnel from a captured LAAW, but refused evacuation and rescued a wounded Marine.

Like GySgt Canley, Sgt Burghardt was building a reputation for courage in Hue.

By the end of the first week of the battle, enemy resistance on the south side began to show signs of crumbling, although LtCol Cheatham's battalion was still in heavy contact. With the securing of MACV and the nearby major enemy positions—including Joan de Arc—the battle broke down into a systematic house-to-house action of squad and platoon rushes, like the ones Burghardt had led. Success depended on the coordination of mortars, tanks, and recoilless rifles, good radio contact, as well as strong leadership and the valor and aggressiveness of the individual grunts.

LtCol Gravel—who was constantly out with his two companies, leading their advance—had nothing but respect for his Marines. The South Vietnamese government had been reluctant to give permission for the use of heavy weapons, and the low overcast and constant, misty rain had hampered air support. The North Vietnamese had numerical superiority, but still, the Marines—through sheer bravery—were winning.

The leadership of Gravel's lieutenants and sergeants was superb and acts of valor were commonplace: Lt Donnelly received his second wound but refused evacuation; GySgt Canley was hit again while pulling several casualties behind a wall, but was still on the line; LCpl Neas was wounded in a mortar barrage, but continued leading his squad. Scores of other Marines were wounded two or three times but declined evacuation.

The intensity of the battle waned with each day and by the end of February, it was all but over. LtCol Cheatham's 2/5 had secured their objective on the south side. The ARVN drive in the Citadel had faltered, but five companies of 1/5 and 3/5, under Maj Robert H. Thompson, had come to their aid and recaptured the walls.

In 1/1's area, the methodical at-

tacks had worn down the enemy so much that there were only small groups of stragglers. On February 28, the battalion swept down to the An Cuu River on their way out of Hue.

Lt Donnelly's 1st Platoon was in front of Alpha along the river, preparing to cross. Sgt Burghardt and LCpl Neas stood, bumping shoulders behind a low concrete wall, up a gradual slope from the river bank. Like all the others in the battalion, they were weary, dirty, and stubbled, glad to be alive. It had been a long month.

The two Marines watched as a fire team went down to secure a small bridge over which the company would leave Hue. As the team reached the far side, they were ambushed. One of the last pockets of die-hard North Vietnamese opened up with their Ak-47's. One of the Marines on the bridge crumpled, shot in the knee.

Burghardt saw a giant white flash go off in front of his face and was thrown back against a wall, helmet pushed over his eyes, crying out, "God forgive me!" He could feel no pain, but he was scared. The pain would come later. A round had hit him in the neck—chipping bone into his spinal cord—then cutting through his shoulder. A corpsman laid Burghardt down, stripped off his flak jacket, bandaged the exit wound, and administered morphine. The sergeant couldn't move his body.

Neas lay bleeding on the ground next to Burghardt. A round from the same burst had hit him in the shoulder and tumbled out from his arm.

Neas and the Marine who had been shot in the knee were loaded into a Jeep and Burghardt was laid across the back on a stretcher. They were quickly driven to the Hue Stadium and an Army helicopter made an emergency evacuation of Burghardt. Within two hours after being hit, Burghardt was on the hospital ship *Repose* in the South China Sea.

In the next few days, all enemy stragglers were mopped up and the city was officially declared secured. The Marines of 1/1, 1/5, 2/5, and 3/5 left Hue, turning it back over to the ARVN, and returned to the rice paddy and jungle war they had known before. The battle had cost the lives of 142 Marines against a total of 5,113 North Vietnamese. It had been a hard-fought victory.

Hughes received a second Navy Cross before retiring. Gravel was wounded in the operation after Hue, and in the operation after that—in the jungled hills of Khe Sanh—his

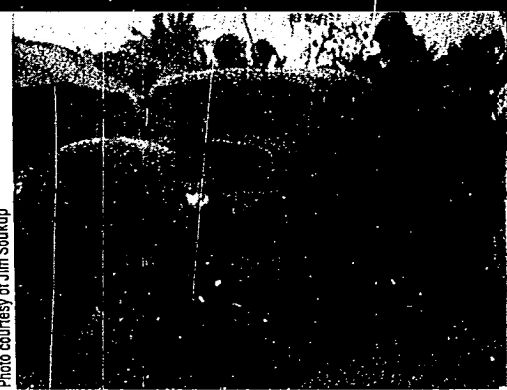


Photo courtesy of Jim Soukup

Marines of the 1st Battalion, First Marines, commandeered an enemy truck in Hue.

command helicopter was shot down. He went home in a hospital plane, severely injured. He retired as a colonel with the Legion of Merit. Lamontagne received the Silver Star before retiring as a colonel. Murphy's parents were given his Silver Star.

Batcheller was awarded the Navy Cross and is now a lieutenant colonel. Smith received a Silver Star for Hue and another Silver Star and the Purple Heart for Khe Sanh. Donnelly won the Silver Star in Hue and a third Purple Heart at Khe Sanh. Both men are now majors.

Canley rotated home with the Navy Cross and is now a sergeant major. Gonzalez was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. Burghardt retired as a staff sergeant, paralyzed from the chest down, confined to a wheel chair. He was awarded the Bronze Star. There are those who believe he deserved more. Neas, now a Reserve sergeant, returned to the field after recovering from his wounds in Hue. He was hit by shrapnel at Khe Sanh and rotated back to the United States.

Burghardt and Neas now live in the same area on the West Coast and are in close contact. The two Marines attended the 1980 Marine Corps Birthday Ball with their wives at a local Reserve Center. They were pleasantly surprised to see that the guest speaker was Col Gravel, and lost no time in introducing themselves to their former battalion commander.

Whatever speech Col Gravel had planned to give was forgotten when he approached the speaker's podium. He spent his time talking about Hue, the valor of Marines like Burghardt and Neas, and when the colonel was finished, the three Hue veterans received a well-deserved standing ovation.

