

## **The Battle of Quang Tri City during the 1968 Tet Offensive**

In mid-January 1968, the senior American commander in South Vietnam who presided over the joint headquarters known as the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), General William C. Westmoreland, was particularly concerned about the situation in northern I Corps. The provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien that made up the region were particularly vulnerable because of their proximity to North Vietnam. Taking advantage of supply lines that were short compared to the rest of South Vietnam, the Communists could easily mass troops and equipment in one of several base areas in northern I Corps or just across the border in Laos. When allied intelligence noted a build-up of enemy forces near the Demilitarized Zone in late December 1967, Westmoreland suspected that the North Vietnamese were preparing a blow against the overstretched Marine and South Vietnamese forces guarding the sector.

Although the Communists were unlikely to conquer the two northern provinces, they could achieve a devastating political victory if they were able to overrun one or more of the firebases that shielded the Demilitarized Zone. The enemy could also sow havoc if they infiltrated a large force into the coastal lowlands where most of the population lived. Westmoreland, who had been generally satisfied with allied progress in 1967 elsewhere in the country, and who had recently blunted major enemy attacks in III Corps at Loc Ninh and in II Corps at Dak To, was determined to frustrate the enemy's designs once

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more and to keep the momentum of the war on his side.<sup>1</sup>

Northern I Corps presented a compact battlefield, with the two provinces covering an area approximately 130 miles north to south and roughly 65 kilometers east to west. Steep and densely forested mountains, rising in some places to over 2,400 meters, dominated the western part of the sector. Descending towards the sea, the sharp peaks gave way to rolling hills intersected by river valleys, which in turn opened on to a narrow coastal plain ten to fifteen kilometers in width protected from the sea by sand dunes. The lowlands, where most of the approximately 800,000 people in northern I Corps lived, featured intensively farmed rice fields that were capable of producing two crops each year, one in September and a second, much larger one in March. Between these harvests came the northeast or winter monsoon that produced at the lower elevations heavy rains, temperatures as low as the upper forties on the Fahrenheit scale, and often a persistent, drizzling fog known as *crachin* that could limit visibility to only a few hundred meters. During the rest of the year, the time of the southwest monsoon, the weather in the piedmont and coastal plain regions was typically hot and dry.

The main route of communication in northern I Corps was Highway 1, a two-lane paved road connecting the lowlands that ran parallel to the South China Sea some ten kilometers inland. Along its route could be found the three most important urban centers in the region. First was Dong Ha, a small town twelve kilometers south of the Demilitarized Zone and within the range of the Soviet-designed 130-mm. guns on the

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<sup>1</sup>AAR, Opn VC/NVA Tet Offensive Attack in Quang Tri Province, Quang Tri Province Sen Adv, Adv Team 4, 9 Apr 68, p. 2, box 30, AARs, Asst CofS, J-3, MACV, RG 472, NARA.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History  
North Vietnamese side of the border that contained the base camp of the 3d Marine Division.<sup>2</sup> The town was strategically important because it controlled the only vehicle bridge over the Mieu Giang, a major river that began in the foothills and then connected to the Cua Viet River channel just east of Dong Ha before emptying into the South China Sea. Dong Ha served as important logistics hub for the region because shallow-draft cargo vessels could navigate upriver from embarkation points on the coast. Connecting Dong Ha to the interior was Highway 9, a branch of Highway 1 that ran west from the town to the Laotian border. Enemy activity in the summer of 1967 had severed the road near its half-way point, making it necessary to supply the Marine base at Khe Sanh in western Quang Tri Province by air.

The second urban center in the northern provinces was the Quang Tri City, a provincial capital of some 12,000 people located some fifteen kilometers south of Dong Ha. Like its neighbor, Quang Tri City was located on the Thach Han River that connected to the Cua Viet waterway, making the provincial capital a second strategic choke point in the event on an invasion from the north.

The third and final city was Hue, the provincial capital of Thua Thien Province and the former imperial capital of Vietnam. The metropolis of some 140,000 people, located fifty kilometers south of Quang Tri City, was an important religious and intellectual center for the Vietnamese people in addition to being the third largest city in the country after Saigon and Da Nang. Like the two cities to the north, Hue was located on a river

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<sup>2</sup>Jack Shumlinson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1997), p. 33.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History that ran to the sea, making it a third strategic choke point as well as a place where supplies could be ferried in from the coast by river craft. Additionally, all three cities had airfields capable of accommodating aircraft as large as the U.S. Air Force C-130 Hercules, the mainstay allied transportation aircraft.

The South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division, widely recognized as the best unit in their army, defended northern I Corps. Two of its regiments were in Quang Tri ProvinceB the 2d Regiment just below the Demilitarized Zone near the trace of Highway 1 and the 1st Regiment farther south in the vicinity of Quang Tri CityB while the 3d Regiment was in Thua Thien Province, south of Hue where the division maintained its headquarters. Also in Thua Thien Province near the imperial capital were two troops of the South Vietnamese 7th Armored Cavalry Squadron as well as two battalions of the South Vietnamese 1st Airborne Task Force, the strategic reserve of the South Vietnamese Army. The third battalion of the task force and a third troop of armored cavalry was in Quang Tri Province near the provincial capital. The South Vietnamese 37th Ranger Battalion was at the Marine combat base of Khe Sanh. Finally, South Vietnamese paramilitary forces in the two northern provinces included 41 Regional Force companies and 244 Popular Force platoons, armed mostly with M1 carbines and a smattering of light machine guns and 60-mm. mortars.<sup>3</sup>

The primary American unit in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces was the 3d Marine Division, a 24,000 man strong outfit headquartered at Dong Ha with five infantry

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<sup>3</sup>Trip Rpt, MACCORDS-RE, 2 Mar 68, I Corps Tactical Zone #II, p. 2, Historians files, CMH; Rpt, Senior Adv, Thua Thien Prov, 5 Dec 57, sub: Province Report, p. 5, Historians files, CMH.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History

regiments, one artillery regiment, and supporting units. Most of the division, with the exception of the 4th Marines near Hue in Thua Thien Province, was positioned in a series of company-size strongpoints and battalion-size combat bases in northern Quang Tri Province to defend against a potential Northern Vietnamese thrust across the Demilitarized Zone. Known officially as the Strong Point Obstacle System but more commonly as the McNamara Line after the Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, this barrier also employed thousands of acoustic and motion sensors (some dropped into Laos to monitor the Ho Chi Minh Trail) to give the allies data about enemy infiltration. The 3d Marine Division as well as the 1st Marine Division in southern I Corps came under the authority of the III Marine Amphibious Force, a corps-level headquarters commanded by Lt. Gen. Robert E. Cushman that was based at Da Nang in Quang Nam Province. In Quang Tri Province, the III Marine Amphibious Force had operational control over the U.S. Army 108th Artillery Group, which included a battalion of 105-mm. guns (18 tubes), a battalion of M42 Duster tracked vehicles armed with twin 40-mm. anti-aircraft cannon that were useful for convoy and base defense, and two battalions of 175-mm. guns (12 tubes in each battalion, whose guns fired a 147-lb. projectile nearly 20 miles. From their artillery bases along Highway 9, the 175-mm. guns could hit targets throughout much of Quang Tri Province and even into the North Vietnamese sector of the Demilitarized Zone. The III Marine Amphibious Force could also draw upon air power from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing based in southern I Corps and U.S. Air Force B-52s flying from Guam and Thailand as well as naval gunfire support from destroyers and cruisers attached to the 7th Fleet in the South China Sea.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History

Enemy forces in Quang Tri Province included thirteen infantry regiments belonging to five different North Vietnamese divisions plus an assortment of Viet Cong main force battalions and local force companies. The *90th Regiment* of the *324B PAVN Division* was somewhere in the eastern Demilitarized Zone while the *803d Regiment* from the same division was near the Marine combat base at Dong Ha. The *320th PAVN Division* and the *27th Independent Battalion* were in the vicinity of Cam Lo, fifteen kilometers to the west, and the better part of the *304th and 325C PAVN Divisions* were lurking near in western Quang Tri Province near Khe Sanh. The *270th PAVN Regiment* was southwest of Dong Ha and perhaps no more than a day=s march from Quang Tri City. The *10th Sapper Battalion*, the *5th PAVN Regiment*, and the *812th Regiment, 324B PAVN Division* were known to operate from Base Area 101, a heavily wooded region fifteen kilometers southwest of Quang Tri City.<sup>4</sup>

The enemy was less numerous in Thua Thien Province but still strong enough to mount division-size attacks if he chose. The *6th PAVN Regiment*, the *12th Sapper Battalion*, and the *Tri-Thua-Thien Front* headquarters operated from Base Area 114 thirty kilometers southwest of Hue. Inside the city itself and in nearby villages lived several hundred spies and saboteurs belonging to the *Hue City Municipal Unit*. Three Viet Cong local force companies operated within a few kilometers of the provincial capital. The *4th PAVN Regiment* and two local force companies operated in the region between Phu Bai and Phu Loc, twenty kilometers to the southeast of Hue. The *54th*

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<sup>4</sup>ORLL, 1 Nov 67-31 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, 17 Mar 68, p. 3, ORLLS, Cmd Hist, USARV, RG 472, NARA; AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, 2 Jul 68, p. 3, box 10, Hist Background Files, 14th Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NARA; AAR, Opn VC/NVA Tet Offensive in Quang Tri Province, Advisory Team 4, p. 2.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History  
*PAVN Artillery Regiment* was thought to be somewhere in the province although its current location was unknown.<sup>5</sup>

As early as November 1967, General Westmoreland had planned to move the 1st Cavalry Division into northern I Corps to counter the North Vietnamese threat. He originally expected to conduct an operation named YORK I at the boundary of the II and I Corps zones near the Laotian border but shelved the project in early January 1968 when allied intelligence noted signs of an imminent offensive in northern I Corps. Most disturbing of these, at least two North Vietnamese divisions appeared to be closing around Khe Sanh. Given these warnings, Westmoreland instead ordered the commander of the 1st Cavalry Division, Maj. Gen. John J. Tolson, to begin moving the 1st and 3d Brigades of his division, the first from northern II Corps and the second from southern I Corps, into a series of firebases along a fifty-kilometer stretch of Highway 1 between Quang Tri City and Hue in northeastern I Corps. Tolson would also receive operational control over the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, currently located northwest of Saigon in III Corps, to make up for the division's 2d Brigade which was to remain in northern II Corps to carry on with Operation PERSHING, a search and destroy effort aimed at the *3d PAVN Division* in eastern Binh Dinh Province. General Tolson would use the three brigades at his disposal to commence Operation JEB STUART, an airmobile search and destroy mission aimed at Base Areas 101 and 114 near Quang Tri City and Hue, respectively, where the enemy was most likely to be

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<sup>5</sup>Tong Ho Trinh, *Huong Tien Cong va Noi Day Tet Mau Than o Tri-Thien-Hue (nam 1968)* [*The 1968 Tet Offensive and Uprising in the Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*] tran. Robert J. Destatte and Merle L. Pribbenow (Hanoi: Vietnamese Institute for Military History), p . 53.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History  
massing his troops and supplies for an offensive against the coastal cities in northern I  
Corps.<sup>6</sup>

The movement of the 1st Cavalry Division into Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces would give General Westmoreland some much-needed flexibility in that threatened region. As the army brigades moved into position, several marine battalions would shift north to reinforce the belt of firebases along Highway 9 just south of the Demilitarized Zone. Westmoreland guessed the enemy would attempt to overrun one or more of those outposts next and he wanted the marines to have sufficient reserves on hand to counter any attack.

A second benefit to having the three Army brigades in northeastern I Corps was their abundance of helicopters. The 450 or so aircraft attached to the cavalry and airborne units gave them a long-range striking power never before seen in that area. By contrast, the 3d Marine Division had barely more than a quarter that number of helicopters at its disposal. Of those, few were gunships or armed scout helicopters.<sup>7</sup>

Westmoreland counted on the airmobile brigades to disrupt Base Areas 101 and 114, two Communist staging and training areas that had so far functioned outside the reach of allied ground forces. Once those sanctuaries were crippled, the three brigades along with U.S. Marine units, would mount a series of raids named YORK II into the A Shau Valley, a wild and remote area in the southwestern corner of Thua Thien

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<sup>6</sup>Interv, Capt J.W.A. Whitehorne with Maj Gen John J. Tolson, 24 Jun 68, p. 1, CMH.

<sup>7</sup>Maj. Gary L. Telfer, et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1984), p. 318.



Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History Province, at the beginning of April to destroy an even larger number of supply dumps hidden there. South Vietnamese units would also cross the Laotian border for a week or so to sweep Base Areas 607 and 611 that fed into the A Shau. In May and June, the 1st Cavalry Division would mount a third and fourth phase of YORK in other parts of western I Corps to destroy Communist sanctuaries along the Laotian border and, if Westmoreland got approval from Washington, to pave the way for an allied incursion into Laos, code-named EL PASO, to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail at the beginning of the next dry season in October.<sup>8</sup> If all went according to plan, the YORK operations would significantly impair the enemy's ability to support the 2d and 3d PAVN Divisions and thus accelerate pacification along the central coast. By reducing or eliminating many long-standing Communist bases in I Corps, the operations would also force the Communists to develop a lengthier, more arduous infiltration routes that would further expose this logistical pipeline to allied air power.<sup>9</sup>

### **The 1st Cavalry Division Moves North**

On 17 January 1968 the forward headquarters of the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, accompanied by the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, landed by helicopter at Landing Zone JANE, a firebase ten kilometers southwest of Quang Tri City that had once belonged to the 3d Marine Division. Over the next two weeks the remainder of the 1st

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<sup>8</sup>Jack Shulimson, et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1997), p. 16; Msg, COMUSMACV 321 to CINCPAC to CJCS (Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff), 8 Jan 68, Westmoreland Message Files, CMH.

<sup>9</sup>Msg, COMUSMACV 204 to CINCPAC, 6 Jan 68, Westmoreland Message Files, CMH.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History

Brigade shifted north from Binh Dinh Province by air and by ship. The brigade, commanded by Col. Donald V. Rattan, had the mission of disrupting Base Area 101 in the Hai Lang National Forest west of Quang Tri City. He intended to do this by establishing several firebases deep inside the enemy zone from which he could mount aggressive patrols.<sup>10</sup> The 1st Brigade also had orders to interdict the Ba Long Valley, a corridor that began around fifteen kilometers east of Khe Sanh and ended at Base Area 101 that the Communists used to funnel supplies from Laos into southern Quang Tri and northern Thua Thien Provinces. On 23 January Colonel Rattan got permission from the 3d Marine Division to establish his headquarters at Landing Zone BETTY, a Marine encampment seven kilometers south of Quang Tri City and just east of the Han River that flowed out of the Ba Long Valley. After setting up his new command post and putting the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, into Landing Zone SHARON, a firebase immediately south of Landing Zone BETTY, Colonel Rattan sent the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, to construct LANDING ZONE ANNE in the heart of Base Area 101 and the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, to build LANDING ZONE SUZIE in the Ba Long Valley.

Meanwhile, the headquarters of the 1st Cavalry Division, and the 3d Brigade, began moving into position to the south of the 1st Brigade. On 21 January, the day Operation JEB STUART officially commenced, General Tolson and his command group landed four kilometers southeast of Hue in a massive graveyard that he christened Landing Zone EL PASO. Hoping to position the 3d Brigade farther north, he conducted a quick

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<sup>10</sup>Unless otherwise noted the following section is based on ORLL, 1 Nov-31 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, 17 Mar 68, Historians files, CMH; AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, 2 Jul 68, Historians files, CMH.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History ariel survey of the terrain between Quang Tri City and Hue the next day and obtained permission from III Marine Amphibious Force to put his division headquarters, his forward logistical units, and most of the 3d Brigade at Camp Evans, a base located halfway between Quang Tri City and Hue on the west side of Highway 1 that had formerly housed a regiment from the 3d Marine Division.<sup>11</sup>

The commander of the 3d Brigade, Col. Hubert S. Campbell, and an advance party arrived at Camp Evans later that day, the twenty-second of January, and over the next ten days the rest of the brigade shifted north from the Que Son Valley in southeastern I Corps where it had participated in Operation WALLOWA against the *2d PAVN Division* on the border of Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces. The redeployment was marred by an incident on 26 January when North Vietnamese gunners fired a salvo of sixty 122-mm. rockets at the Quang Tri City airfield where the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, was spending the night, killing the battalion commander and two other men.

Once the 3d Brigade began assembling at Camp Evans, Colonel Campbell set about improving its defenses because it was only ten kilometers from Base Area 114 and therefore likely to be attacked once the enemy learned that an airmobile force was stationed there. As the fortification work got underway and General Tolson arrived with his headquarters from Landing Zone EL PASO on the twenty-seventh, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, established LANDING ZONE JACK six kilometers southwest of Camp Evans to support operations in Base Area 114 and to act as a forward screen for the brigade

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<sup>11</sup>Interv, Capt J.W.A. Whitehorne with Maj Gen John J. Tolson, 24 Jun 68, p. 2, CMH.

encampment.<sup>12</sup>

As the 1st and 3d Brigades moved into the corridor along Highway 1 between Quang Tri City and Hue, the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, commanded by Col. John H. Cushman, redeployed from Cu Chi in III Corps, northwest of Saigon, to Landing Zone EL PASO just south of Hue. The brigade completed its move via C-130 transport aircraft through the Phu Bai and Quang Tri City airfields between 23 and 29 January. After establishing a headquarters at LANDING ZONE EL PASO, which also contained the 1st Cavalry Division rear logistical area, Colonel Cushman sent the 1st Battalion, 502d Infantry, to LANDING ZONE BETTY on 27 January to join Colonel Rattan=s 1st Brigade. With most of his unit out on search and destroy missions, Rattan decided to keep the paratroopers at Landing Zone BETTY and Landing Zone SHARON to protect the brigade headquarters and rear area. Meanwhile, back at LANDING ZONE EL PASO, the 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry, patrolled the western approaches to the landing zone while the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry, swept the area to the east. Over the next several days the brigade encountered no signs of the enemy. With Landing Zone EL PASO apparently secure, the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry, moved to Landing Zone JANE on 30 January to assist Colonel Rattan=s 1st Brigade in operations against Base Area 101.

To control the growing number of U.S. Army units in northern I Corps, General Westmoreland decided on 26 January to establish a temporary corps-level headquarters known as MACV Forward. Jointly staffed by Army and Marine personnel and commanded by his deputy, General Creighton W. Abrams, the new organization

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<sup>12</sup>AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, 11 Apr 68, p. 1, Historians files, CMH.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History would be subordinate to III Marine Amphibious Force. Westmoreland expected MACV Forward to evolve by March of that year into a more permanent and robust headquarters, to be known as the Provisional Corps, Vietnam, but his first concern was to get the headquarters up and running before the enemy could launch his expected offensive. The MACV commander felt that the III Marine Amphibious Force headquarters was already overburdenedB it administered an array of advisory and pacification programs as well as managed the war in the five northernmost provincesB and was thus not equipped to take on new responsibilities. By putting the newly-arrived U.S. Army units under the operational control of MACV Forward and General Abrams, Westmoreland could reduce the load on the marines while also preserving for himself a high degree of control over the coming fight in northern I Corps.<sup>13</sup>

Given the warning signs of an enemy offensive, a threat magnified on 20 and 21 January when North Vietnamese forces attacked the Khe Sanh combat base, the neighboring district headquarters, and Marine outposts on two key hills overlooking the base, Westmoreland lobbied President Nguyen Van Thieu to curtail or cancel the traditional Tet holiday cease-fire. After some negotiation, Thieu agreed to reduce the cease-fire period from forty-eight to thirty-six hours in most of the country and to cancel it entirely for Quang Tri Province. Furthermore, the allied bombing effort against the North Vietnamese panhandle, the region just north of the Demilitarized Zone, would continue without interruption because the enemy in the past had always used the

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<sup>13</sup>Msg, COMUSMACV 1233 to CINCPAC, 26 Jan 68; Msg, COMUSMACV 1011 to CJCS, sub: Visit to Washington by Richard E. Cabazos, LTC Inf, USA, 22 Jan 68, both in Westmoreland Message Files, CMH.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History  
holiday pause to move men and supplies into South Vietnam and Laos without fear of  
molestation.<sup>14</sup>

As an additional measure to protect Quang Tri Province, General Westmoreland urged the headquarters of III Marine Amphibious Force and the 7th Fleet to develop as rapidly as possible a plan for an amphibious feint against the North Vietnamese panhandle. Although a full-scale amphibious landing, code-named DURANGO CITY, was already in the planning stage, that operation would not be ready for at least another year (and that was assuming Westmoreland could get the White House to approve a limited invasion of the North). What the MACV commander wanted in the short-term was a demonstration in the South China Sea that was credible enough to force the North Vietnamese to redeploy some of their forces from the Demilitarized Zone to the coastal panhandle. Westmoreland asked that the feint be organized by 1 February Aor as soon thereafter as weather permits...@<sup>15</sup>

When the Tet holiday began on 29 January, the Army combat units were settled in northern I Corps, but much of the logistical tail needed to sustain them was still in transit from other parts of the country or in disarray from the move. The cavalrymen and paratroopers had just begun to explore the local terrain and to coordinate operations with their Marine counterparts when the enemy unleashed the Tet Offensive across the length and breadth of South Vietnam.

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<sup>14</sup>Msg, COMUSMACV 1307 to Cmdr 7th Air Force, sub: Tet ceasefire, 28 Jan 68, Westmoreland Message Files, CMH.

<sup>15</sup>Msg, COMUSMACV 1167 to CJCS, 24 Jan 68, Westmoreland Message Files, CMH.

### **The Assault on Quang Tri City**

The capital of Quang Tri Province, Quang Tri City, was important to President Thieu's government less for what it was—a small market town of modest economic influence—than for what it represented. As the country's northernmost provincial capital, located just thirty kilometers from the Demilitarized Zone, Quang Tri City was a symbol of South Vietnamese national pride and resolve. Its proximity to the border also made the capital particularly vulnerable. The loss of Quang Tri City would be a political embarrassment to Thieu's government and would weaken the legitimacy of his rule, particularly if the Communists established a rival government there on South Vietnamese soil. The question was not, therefore, whether the Communists would attack Quang Tri City, but rather when.

A counterintelligence coup engineered by the senior adviser for Quang Tri Province, Mr. Robert B. Brewer, yielded important clues as to when and how the attack would come. In late September, Brewer cultivated an enemy spy into a double agent, who the next month gave the adviser and his staff a document which detailed the goals and objectives of an upcoming Winter-Spring offensive. While Brewer was not entirely convinced that his source could be trusted, he drew up a list of indicators that would test the accuracy of the document. Throughout December and January allied intelligence confirmed many of the items of Brewer's list, such as reconnaissance missions being carried out by high-ranking Communist officers and the enemy stockpiling supplies in forward areas.

The senior province adviser became so convinced that the document was true that he called a meeting of senior allied commanders on 24 January. Present at the gathering was the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division, Maj. Gen. Rathvon ATommy@ McC. Tompkins; the commander of the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, Colonel Rattan; the commander of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division, Brig. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong; and the Quang Tri Province Chief, Lt. Col. Nguyen Am. Mr. Brewer predicted that a large enemy attack would be launched on 31 January, at 0100, aimed primarily at the seats of government power and secondarily at allied military bases in Quang Tri Province. The assembled officers were slightly incredulous but agreed to formulate three different plans to deal with such an attack if it occurred. At Brewer=s suggestion, Colonel Am also convinced his superiors in Saigon to send an airborne battalion from the strategic reserve to defend the provincial capital during the Tet holiday period.<sup>16</sup>

Warning signs of just such an attack multiplied as the Tet holiday drew near. In the last week of January rural people from districts to the west began streaming into Quang Tri City with stories of North Vietnamese soldiers laden with supplies moving into their villages and hamlets. Allied intelligence confirmed the movement of enemy troops from north to south and from west to east, headed in the general direction of Quang Tri City, and informants reported that the enemy planned to take and occupy the provincial capital in the near future. On 28 January, the South Vietnamese commander of I Corps, Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, visited the city and declared a state of emergency. The

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<sup>16</sup>Ltr, Robert B. Brewer to author Eric M. Hammel, 14 Nov 86, pp. 1-2, historian files, CMH.



Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History province chief, Colonel Am, instituted martial law, imposed a nighttime curfew, and ordered weapons distributed to civil servants and militiamen. He instructed all regular and paramilitary forces in the sub-districts to pull back to their local headquarters and prepare for an attack. Tension increased on 30 January when Communist forces attacked nine cities in southern I Corps and in II Corps, and General Westmoreland and the head of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, Gen. Cao Van Vien, canceled the Tet truce everywhere in South Vietnam.<sup>17</sup>

The North Vietnamese were indeed coming. The Communist plan called for a platoon from the *10th Sapper Battalion* to infiltrate the city on the evening of 30 January and destroy key government and military installations two hours after midnight just as the *K4 Battalion* from the *812th Regiment, 324th PAVN Division*, assaulted the capital from the east and the *814th Main Force Battalion* from the northeast. On their way to the capital, as they navigated over land that featured a combination of sand dunes, rice fields, and small streams, the battalions would be required to pass through several Catholic hamlets. In the interest of fostering good relations with the people, as well as to preserve as much speed and secrecy as possible, the Communists had orders not to harm any churches, priests, or parishioners.

Meanwhile, the *808th Main Force Battalion* would position itself north of the capital to block allied reinforcements coming down Highway 1. Both the *808th* and *814th*

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<sup>17</sup>Pham Van Son (ed), *The Viet Cong Tet Offensive* (Saigon: Printing and Publishing Center, A.G./Joint General Staff, Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces), pp. 297-298; CIA Intel Info Cable, sub: This is a Situation Report on 1 February Prepared by CAS, Based on the Personal Observation of a CAS official in the Province, 2 Feb 68, p. 2, box 240 [1 of 2], NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJ Library.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History  
*Battalions*, although designated as Viet Cong units, were mostly filled with North Vietnamese soldiers. As for the remainder of the *812th Regiment*, the *K6 Battalion* would interdict Highway 1 south of the city and attack the La Vang complex, headquarters of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Regiment, while the *K5 Battalion* would remain in reserve in the village of Hai Lang eight kilometers southeast of the city. From that position next to Highway 1, the *K5 Battalion* could also block allied reinforcements in Thua Thien Province from reaching Quang Tri City. An enemy 122-mm. rocket battalion would provide supporting fire for the attack and troops from the *10th Sapper Battalion* would attack the American landing zones south of the capital. After twenty-four hours, the *K4 Battalion* would withdraw from Quang Tri City and be replaced by the *K6 Battalion*. Once the Communists gained the upper hand, the *814th Battalion* would enter the capital so the entire *812th Regiment* could deploy in a crescent formation south of the city to block allied counterattacks from the direction of Hue and Phu Bai.<sup>18</sup>

The Communist knew that Quang Tri City, home to the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Regiment and only twelve kilometers from the U.S. Marine combat base at Dong Ha, would not fall easily. In the weeks before Tet, the enemy had hoped to lure some of the allied forces in the coastal lowlands away toward the mountains by threatening the marine combat bases along Highway 9 in the western part of the province. While the U.S. Marines had indeed shifted some troops to reinforce their

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<sup>18</sup>CDEC Bulletin, No. 13906, 2 Jul 68, p. 1, Historians files, CMH; Rpt, 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, sub: An Analysis of current capabilities of the 812th Regiment, 324B Division, 12 Feb 68, p. 1, box 12, 14th Mil Hist Div, RG 472, NARA.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History position at Khe Sanh, the arrival of the 1st Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division in eastern Quang Tri Province in late January came as an unexpected shock to the enemy. With little time to adjust, the Communists decided to press ahead with their original plan even though the odds of its success had clearly diminished.<sup>19</sup>

On the eve of Tet, the allied forces near Quang Tri City were on high alert. Unlike in most other places, the South Vietnamese units were also at full strength because their commanders had canceled holiday leave and prevented anyone from going home. Two infantry battalions from the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Regiment were positioned several kilometers north and northwest of the city in a series of Revolutionary Development hamlets while a third infantry battalion was northeast of the capital near Route 555, a small road that led to the coast. In the northeastern corner of the city was a squat stone nineteenth-century fortress called the Citadel that contained the headquarters of the South Vietnamese 9th Airborne Battalion, a battery of 105-mm. guns, and two paratroop companies. An American advisory compound stood nearby. Small groups of National Policemen and Popular Force soldiers stood guard in front of government buildings and public facilities. The broad Thach Han River flowed along the western edge of the city, making an attack from that direction nearly impossible. Protecting the southern approaches to the capital was the La Vang Thuong military complex, which contained the headquarters of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Regiment, commanded by Lt. Col. Nguyen Huu Hanh; an infantry battalion; and a troop

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<sup>19</sup>*Huong Tien Cong va Noi Day Tet Mau Than o Tri-Thien-Hue (nam 1968)* [The 1968 Tet Offensive and Uprising in the Tri-Thien-Hue Theater] (Hanoi: Ministry of Defense, 2001) tran. Robert J. Destatte and Merle L. Pribbenow, 2001, p. 25.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History  
of M113 armored personnel carriers. Immediately to the southwest of La Vang were Landing Zones BETTY and SHARON, which contained the headquarters and the support units of the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division. A company of South Vietnamese paratroopers bivouacked in the village of Tri Buu on the eastern outskirts of the capital and a second company from the 9th Airborne Battalion patrolled Highway 1 to the southeast.

At 0200 on 31 January, a platoon from the *10th Sapper Battalion*, having infiltrated the city earlier that night dressed in civilian clothes, emerged from its hiding places carrying satchel charges, ladders, and rocket propelled grenades.<sup>20</sup> As the sappers dashed toward their targets, which included the main police station, a fuel dump, and the military facilities housed in the Citadel, they expected that their efforts would pave the way for the main infantry assault set to begin in only a few minutes. At that moment, however, the *812th Regiment* and the *814th Battalion* were at least two hours behind schedule and still several kilometers from the city. Rain swollen streams had slowed the units, and their officers had become confused in the unfamiliar terrain.

The delay proved to be fatal for the sappers. Regional Force soldiers mounted on trucks that were equipped with machine-guns and city policemen killed or captured most of them before they had a chance to complete their missions. The premature raid gave the city notice that a second and larger attack was imminent.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>AAR, Opn JEB STUART I, 1st Cav Div, 2 Jul 68, incl. 5 [Press Briefing for Tet Offensive], p. 2, box 12, 14th Mil Hist Div, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>21</sup>CIA Intel Info Cable, sub: Situation Report on Quang Tri Province as of 0700 on 1 February, 2 Feb 68, pp. 3-4, Historians files, CMH; Pham Van Son (ed), *The Viet Cong Tet Offensive* (Saigon: Printing and Publishing

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History

That warning was reinforced at 0345 when sappers attempted to penetrate Landing Zone JANE, ten kilometers to the south. As troops from the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry, fought off the enemy commandos, killing fourteen, allied units around Quang Tri City prepared for action.<sup>22</sup>

At 0400, several hours behind schedule, the *814th Battalion* entered the village of Tri Buu on the eastern outskirts of the provincial capital. The South Vietnamese airborne company spending the night there only noticed the Viet Cong soldiers at the last moment: heavy fog blanketed the ground that morning, and according to paratroopers who survived the battle the enemy wore South Vietnamese army uniforms. After one or more sentries noticed that the unfamiliar soldiers wore rubber tire sandals instead of boots, which gave away their true identity, the guards barked a warning and a close-range firefight ensued. The outnumbered paratroopers fell back to Quang Tri City after taking heavy casualties but continued to fight every step of the way.

The *814th Battalion* came hot on their heels, reaching the eastern wall of the Citadel at 0420. Twenty minutes later, a pair of heavy weapons companies from the *812th Regiment* spread out on a low ridge two kilometers east of the capital opened fire with 82-mm. mortars and 75-mm. recoilless rifles. Under that protective barrage, the *814th Battalion* began searching for a way to climb or get through the thick stone walls but well-aimed defensive fire kept the enemy at bay. Across a tributary of the Thach Han River two kilometers to the north, the *808th Battalion* attacked the Trieu Phong district

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Center, A.G./Joint General Staff, Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces), p. 299.

<sup>22</sup>AAR, Opn Offensive Operations 22 Jan-10 Mar 68, 2d Bde, 101st Abn Div, 18 Mar 68, p. 4, [fill].

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History headquarters and fired on the Citadel with machine guns and mortars. The ground assault proved to be half-hearted, however, and the fire against the Citadel mostly ineffective. For the moment, at least, the enemy assault on the northern part of the city appeared to be floundering.<sup>23</sup>

The enemy attacks against the southern part of Quang Tri City, also two hours behind schedule, were at first more successful than the northern thrust. At 0420, just as the *814th Battalion* began its assault against the Citadel, the *K4 Battalion* of the *812th PAVN Regiment* skirted the lower edge of Tri Buu Village and then swarmed into the mostly deserted streets of the town.

An hour later, and some two kilometers south of the *K4 Battalion*, the heavy weapons company from the *K6 Battalion* opened fire on the La Vang complex with mortars and recoilless rifles. While the heavy weapons company remained in place on the north side of Highway 1 some three kilometers southeast of the city, the remainder of the battalion charged forward and established a blocking position in a cemetery situated between La Vang and the city. The South Vietnamese troops called for air-dropped flares to illuminate the enemy's position but poor weather in the region had grounded all aircraft that night.

Meanwhile, the Communists inside the city were facing mounting problems. Once the *K4 Battalion* had assembled in the center of town, it turned north toward the Citadel with the intention of destroying the artillery battery inside, overrunning the sector

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<sup>23</sup>Pham Van Son (ed.) *The Viet Cong Tet Offensive (1968)* p. 299; AAR, Opn Battle of Quang Tri, 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, 1 Apr 68, p. 3, [fill].

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History headquarters, and seizing a prison that held a number of Communists soldiers. A combined force of South Vietnamese irregulars and National Policemen slowed the enemy's advance, however, making him fight for every block and street corner. Adding to the difficulties of the *K4 Battalion*, the general uprising that it had been told to expect never materialized. Most residents hid in their homes instead of offering to help to the North Vietnamese, thus depriving the enemy of guidance and material support. As the *K4 Battalion* bogged down in the heart of the city, the *814th Battalion* pressed its assault on the Citadel, but a combination of Popular Force soldiers and regulars from the 1st Infantry Regiment threw the enemy back time and again. At 0630, the badly mauled *814th* withdrew to the Catholic village of Tri Buu on the outskirts of the city. As the terrified parishioners took shelter in their homes, North Vietnamese soldiers mounted heavy machine guns on the roof of the tallest church and began firing at various targets in the city, including the American advisory compound and an administrative building for the pacification program.<sup>24</sup>

Once the sun had risen above the horizon Colonel Hanh ordered his forces to recapture the city. At 0730, the three battalions from the 1st Infantry Regiment that were north of Quang Tri City began marching towards the capital. Along the way, they collided with the *808th Battalion* near the village of Trieu Phong and called a temporary halt while they dealt with the Viet Cong unit. South of the city, several platoons of South Vietnamese M113 armored personnel carriers carrying infantry rolled out of the La Vang complex at 0600 with orders to reach the capital. They proceeded slowly, staying to the

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<sup>24</sup>Pham Van Son (ed.) *The Viet Cong Tet Offensive (1968)*, p. 300.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History  
east of Highway 1 to avoid an ambush, and at first met only limited resistance.

That changed at 0900 as the mechanized column entered a cemetery on the outskirts of the capital. The South Vietnamese suddenly came under fire from an element of the *K6 Battalion* that had been waiting to ambush allied forces coming north on Highway 1. Even though the North Vietnamese were surprised by the appearance of the mechanized column at their backs, they fought back fiercely from their fighting holes scattered amongst the tombstones. Unable to dislodge the enemy, the South Vietnamese relief force came to a halt short of the capital. The commander of the 1st Infantry Regiment, Colonel Hanh, committed more troops to the firefight, but the *K6 Battalion* rebuffed each attempt to outflank its position. When Colonel Hanh surveyed the situation at midday, it appeared unlikely that his mechanized column south of the city or his three battalions to the north were going to reach the embattled capital any time soon.<sup>25</sup>

### **Rattan=s Brigade to the Rescue**

Around noon on 31 January, the province adviser, Mr. Brewer, met with the commander of the 1st Cavalry Division=s 1st Brigade, Colonel Rattan, and the senior adviser to the 1st Infantry Regiment, Lt. Col. George M. Font, at Rattan=s headquarters to discuss the situation in Quang Tri City. The province adviser painted a grim picture. The *K4 Battalion* controlled much the city, and the *K6 Battalion* was entrenched in a ring around the southern half of the capital. In Brewer=s opinion, the province chief, Colonel

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<sup>25</sup>Son, p. 300.



Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History  
Am, had responded ineffectively to the crisis. Worse still, the city could expect no South Vietnamese reinforcements for at least several days because of widespread enemy attacks taking place elsewhere in I Corps.<sup>26</sup>

After the briefing, Colonel Rattan asked permission from the division commander, General Tolson, to use part of the 1st Brigade to relieve the city. With the weather sufficiently improved to permit his helicopters to fly, Rattan proposed to envelop the enemy from the air by inserting several infantry companies behind the Communists on the eastern outskirts of the capital. Caught between the cavalymen and the South Vietnamese defenders in the city, and with their supply lines cut, the enemy would soon be forced to withdraw. Whether or not Rattan mentioned it to General Tolson during the meeting, the colonel had actually developed the plan, drawing on Mr. Brewer=s extensive knowledge of the local terrain, several days earlier when the senior adviser had predicted that an enemy attack would take place on the thirty-first. Now, with the attack unfolding just as Brewer had forecast, Rattan was ready to go.

Tolson agreed to the maneuver and Rattan immediately issued orders to his four battalions. The 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, was to remain in the northern part of Base Area 101 to protect several recently established firebases. The 1st Battalion, 502d Infantry, would continue defending LANDING ZONES BETTY and SHARON, which had received sporadic mortar and rocket fire. The two remaining battalions under Colonel Rattan=s command were to move by helicopter into the enemy=s rear area to disrupt

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<sup>26</sup>CIA Intel Info Cable, sub: This is a Situation Report in Quang Tri Province as of 0400 Hours on 3 February, 3 Feb 68, p. 7, Historians files, CMH.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History  
the North Vietnamese support units and to sever their link with the Communist troops fighting in and around the city. Supporting the effort would be seven U.S. artillery batteries firing from nearby 1st Brigade landing zones as well as gunships and helicopters armed with 2.75-inch rockets from the division=s 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry.<sup>27</sup>

At approximately 1600, B and C Companies from the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, landed by helicopter at widely-spaced insertion points approximately two kilometers east of the capital. As Rattan had planned, his cavalrymen touched down just behind a line of positions held by the heavy weapons company from the *K4 Battalion*. The sudden appearance of the American infantry accompanied by gunships and rocket-armed UH-1 helicopters threw the North Vietnamese soldiers into confusion but they fought back with machine guns, mortars, and recoilless rifles. According to the executive officer of B Company, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, Capt. Bill Paris, the enemy attacked ferociously and would have overrun part of his company had it not been for a well-aimed strike by a pair of U.S. fighter-bombers. Not all the enemy reacted effectively. Resulting from inexperience or caused by panic, some of the enemy mortar crews forgot to extract the shipping plugs from their 82-mm. rounds before firing them at the cavalrymen; consequently, many failed to explode upon impact. The enemy broke contact a few hours before midnight, leaving behind sixty-three dead.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>AAR, Opn Battle of Quang Tri, 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup>AAR, Opn Battle of Quang Tri, 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, pp. 4-5; Interv, author with Bill Paris, 11 Apr 05, Historians files, CMH.

Shortly after the two companies from the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, engaged the rear elements of the *K4 Battalion*, A and C Companies from the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, disembarked from a fleet of helicopters near the village of Thong Thuong Xo, about four kilometers southeast of Quang Tri City. The enemy had contested the landing and shot down a scout helicopter, but prowling gunships had quickly killed or suppressed the North Vietnamese soldiers in the vicinity and made the landing possible. According to the executive officer of C Company, Capt. Dan Terry, he and his fellow soldiers knew very little about the tactical situation when they stepped off their aircraft. His unit had been on a mission near the Laotian border when it had gotten orders to fly back to Quang Tri City immediately and engage an enemy force that was besieging the capital. Despite the minimal time given to prepare for the assault, Terry was confident in his company=s fighting ability and hoped that the speed with which Rattan=s far-flung brigade joined the battle would come as a rude shock to the enemy.<sup>29</sup>

As A Company established a blocking position near Highway 1, C Company searched the area north of the village. Before long the unit began to encounter groups of enemy soldiers and by 1840 the entire company was heavily engaged with what turned out to be the heavy weapons company from the *K6 Battalion*. The sudden appearance of an American unit to their rear spread uncertainty among the North Vietnamese, many of whom abandoned their fighting positions along with several hundred 82-mm. mortar rounds. Once in the open, dozens of the enemy fell prey to allied artillery and gunships. The North Vietnamese soldiers apparently had little

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<sup>29</sup>Interv, author with Dan Terry, 23 Mar 05, Historians files, CMH.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History  
experience fighting helicopters because most chose to feign death as an aircraft  
approached instead of opening fire, making them easy targets for the American pilots.  
As a result of their poor tactics, the enemy managed to shoot down only three aircraft  
while suffering heavy losses.<sup>30</sup>

As the troops from the 1st Brigade landed in the enemy=s support zone, South  
Vietnamese troops from the 1st Infantry Regiment and the 9th Airborne Battalion  
organized a series of counterattacks along the eastern and southern edges of the  
capital. After U.S. Air Force fighter-bombers pummeled the *814th Battalion* sheltering in  
Tri Buu on the eastern edge of the city, a battalion from the 1st Infantry Regiment  
assaulted the village at 1330. Fortunately there were relatively few civilians left in Tri  
Buu. Earlier that day, the Communists had herded all the women, children, and old men  
into a group and then told them to organize a demonstration in the city to protest the  
destruction of Tri Buu. Predictably, the villagers had fled to safety as best they could  
once they had left the village. As for the able-bodied men, civil servants, and captured  
soldiers in Tri Buu, the Viet Cong chained them to objects near their heavy weapons in  
the vain hope of discouraging allied air strikes. Unable to seek shelter, many were killed  
in the subsequent fighting.

Heavy pressure from the South Vietnamese soldiers forced the *814th Battalion* to  
abandon the village later that night, leaving behind at least 100 dead. More than eighty  
percent of the village, including the largest church that had been at the center of the

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<sup>30</sup>Rpt, ABattle of Quang Tri@, 14th Mil Hist Det, 1 Apr 68, pp. 5-6, Historians files, CMH; Rpt, 1st Bde, 1st  
Cav Div, sub: An Analysis of current capabilities of the 812th Regiment, 324B Division, 12 Feb 68, p. 4, box 12,  
14th Mil Hist Div, RG 472, NARA.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History  
fighting, lay in ruins. South of the city, in mid-afternoon, the commander of the 1st Infantry Regiment, Colonel Hanh, sent a full infantry battalion to reinforce the mechanized column fighting the *K6 Battalion* in the cemetery. The North Vietnamese finally broke under this pressure and retreated at shortly before dusk, leaving behind 153 bodies and 11 crew-served weapons.<sup>31</sup>

At dusk the enemy began withdrawing from Quang Tri City. The *K4 Battalion* split up into platoon and squad-size groups so better to evade allied ground patrols and newly-arrived AC-47 ASpooky@ gunships overhead. Some North Vietnamese shed their uniforms and tried to pose as refugees while others hid among civilian groups who were fleeing the destruction in the city. In one case, a platoon leader from C Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, Lt. Steve Voelker, recalled seeing three people run out of a church, two dressed as nuns and one as a priest, obviously intent of fleeing the battle that raged around them. An instant later a fellow soldier gunned them down. Lieutenant Voelker=s shock and outrage quickly disappeared when he realized upon closer inspection that all three had been North Vietnamese soldiers. Allied troops killed or captured several dozen enemy troops who were attempting to withdraw from the area, but most escaped to the east and to the south.<sup>32</sup>

By noon on 1 February, the last North Vietnamese troops had fled Quang Tri City with allied ground patrols and aircraft in close pursuit. In one of the larger actions that day, a company from the 1st Battalion, 502d Infantry, supported by helicopter gunships

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<sup>31</sup>Pham Van Son (ed.) *The Viet Cong Tet Offensive (1968)*, p. 300.

<sup>32</sup>Interv, author with Steve Velcrum, 26 Apr 05, Historians files, CMH.

Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History engaged a large enemy force just south of the La Vang complex near a large cathedral on Highway 1. In the resulting four-hour battle the paratroopers killed seventy-six North Vietnamese and captured many weapons, including two .50-caliber machine guns. In a second major firefight that afternoon, South Vietnamese paratroopers and cavalrymen wiped out a regimental command post just east of the La Vang complex. The regimental commander was killed and his chief of staff was captured along with an array of cryptographic equipment and codes. According to Mr. Brewer, the last entry in the Communist=s logbook read AHelp. Being attacked by American Airborne. Give idea.@<sup>33</sup>

Over the next ten days, the allies widened their search arc around Quang Tri City looking for the enemy. Most of the Communists they spotted were retreating from the area in small groups, but on several occasions the allies ran into North Vietnamese units that chose to stand and fight. On 2 February, two companies from the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, found a large enemy force six kilometers east of the city and, with the help of artillery, killed at least eighty-three in the ensuing firefight.<sup>34</sup> On 4 February, the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry, discovered the *K5 Battalion* and elements of the *10th Sapper Battalion* dug in near the village of Hai Lang, eight kilometers southeast of Quang Tri City. The *K5 Battalion*, designated as the reserve force for the attack on the provincial capital, had remained near Hai Lang throughout the battle and done little more than harass the local district headquarters with ground probes and mortar fire. In

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<sup>33</sup>CIA Intel Info Cable, sub: This is a Situation Report in Quang Tri Province as of 0400 Hours on 3 February, 3 Feb 68, p. 4, box 240 [1 of 2], NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJ Library; Ltr, Robert B. Brewer to author Eric M. Hammel, 14 Nov 86, p. 3, Historian files, CMH.

<sup>34</sup>Rpt, 1st Bn, 12th Cav, 1st Cav Div, sub: Report of the 1st Bn, 12th Cav=s Participation in the Battle of

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the ensuing firefight, the U.S. paratroopers killed at least 108 of the enemy with the help of artillery and helicopters at the cost of 5 dead and 42 wounded.

Later that night, soldiers from the *K5 Battalion* and local guerrillas once again attacked the district headquarters in Hai Lang Village, their strongest effort yet, but Popular Force soldiers drove them off with the help of artillery. The following morning the North Vietnamese unit withdrew east toward the coast. Also, on 5 February, two battalions of the 1st Infantry Regiment and a South Vietnamese cavalry troop fought a daylong battle with the *808th Battalion* near the village of Trieu Phong several kilometers north of the capital. By their estimates the South Vietnamese killed as many as 200 enemy soldiers and forced the battalion to withdraw to the north, where it broke up into small groups that could better hide from allied patrols.<sup>35</sup>

By the end of the first week of February, the immediate danger to Quang Tri City had passed. Apart from occasional mortar or rocket attacks against the 1st Brigade landing zones, the enemy seemed unable or unwilling to renew his offensive against the provincial capital. The allies could count themselves fortunate and perhaps a little lucky as well. For the first twenty-four hours, the fate of the city had hung in the balance. Had the *K4* and *814th Battalions* been on schedule and coordinated their attacks with those of the *10th Sapper Battalion*, the enemy might conceivably have taken the Citadel and with it the entire capital. Once entrenched, the North Vietnamese would have been

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Quang Tri City, [1968], p. 2, box 12, 14th Mil Hist Div, RG 472, NARA.

<sup>35</sup>Periodic Intel Rpt no. 2-68, 1-29 Feb 68, 1st Cav Div, n.d., p. 9, Historians files, CMH; Rpt, 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, sub: An Analysis of current capabilities of the 812th Regiment, 324B Division, 12 Feb 68, pp. 2-3, box 12, 14th Mil Hist Div, RG 472, NARA.

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extremely difficult to dislodge without causing heavy civilian casualties and extensive damage to Quang Tri City. As it happened, the South Vietnamese defenders in the capital held out long enough for Colonel Rattan=s 1st Brigade to descend on the rear of *K4* and *K6 Battalions* just east of the city. The Communist had obviously not counted on the 1st Brigade being able to adjust to events so rapidly nor had their troops been prepared to deal with the swarms of armed helicopters that appeared over the battlefield. Under intense pressure from the ground and from the air, the support units of the *K4* and *K6 Battalions* soon broke and fled, leaving the front line units no choice but to retreat from the capital. Between 31 January and 6 February, the allies killed an estimated 914 Communists and captured another eighty-six in and around Quang Tri City.<sup>36</sup> In light of those losses, it seemed unlikely that the enemy would be ready to attack the city again in the near future.

Even though the enemy had failed to capture the provincial capital, security around Quang Tri City remained poor through the end of February. The *812th Regiment* remained at large somewhere southeast of the city, while elements of the *808th* and *814th Battalions* continued to menace the government-controlled settlements north and northeast of the capital. Most of the government forces, both regular troops and paramilitary units, remained near the various district headquarters and the capital and so could not provide rural security. On a more encouraging note, the territorial Regional and Popular Force units were in good shape, having taken very few losses during the offensive, and most of the pacification villages and farming projects had escaped

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<sup>36</sup>Rpt, ABattle of Quang Tri@, 14th Mil Hist Det, 1 Apr 68, pp. 5, 7.



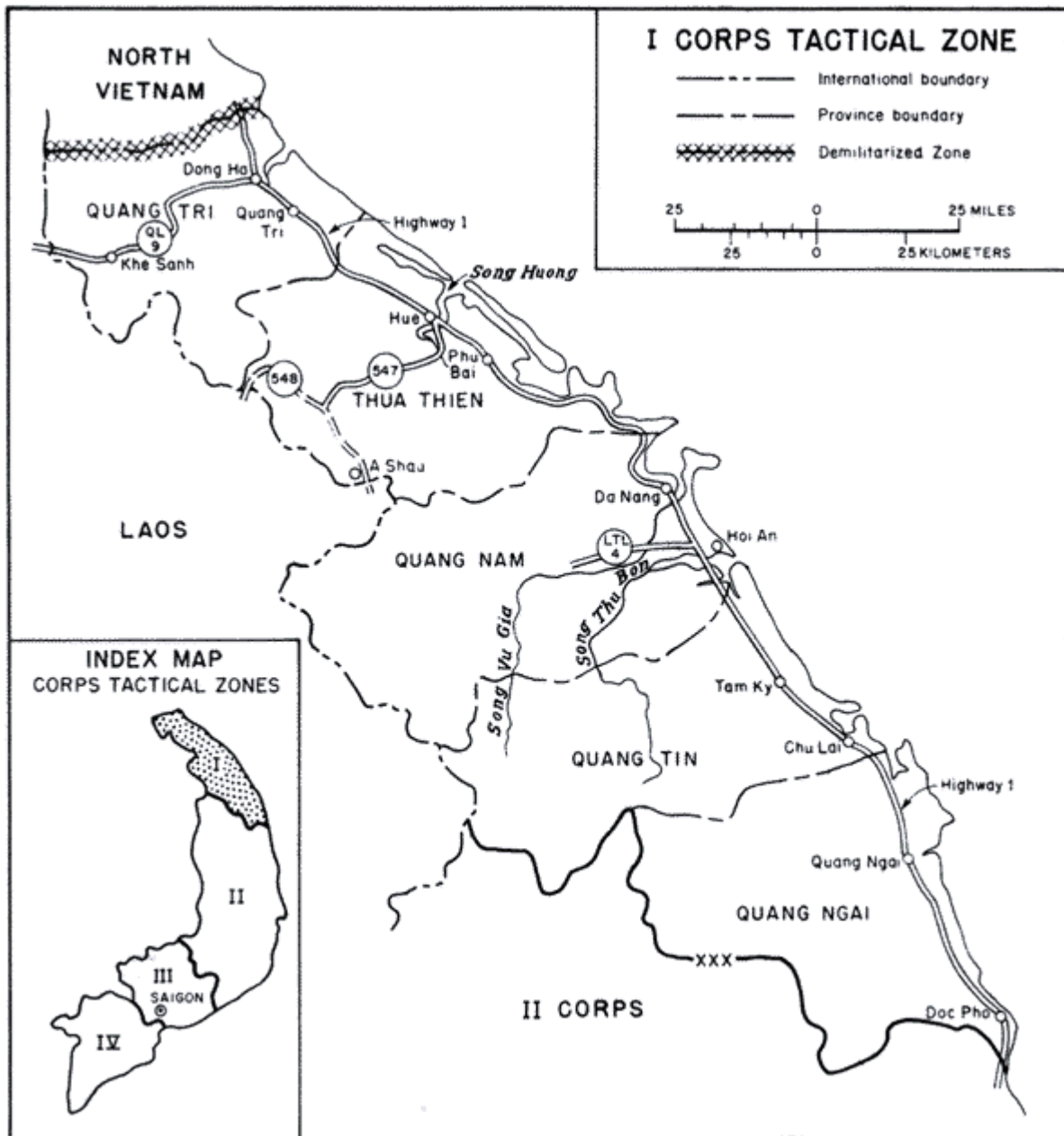
Dr. Erik B. Villard, U.S. Army Center of Military History  
serious damage. The prospects for salvaging the pacification program seemed good once the South Vietnamese regular army units defending Quang Tri City returned to the countryside.<sup>37</sup>

The rapid defeat of the regimental-size enemy force that assaulted Quang Tri City proved to be one of the most decisive victories the allies secured during the Tet Offensive. Despite some mopping up operations that took place after the battle, it was effectively over less than twenty-four hours after it had begun. The *812th Regiment* was so badly mauled that it avoided contact for the next several weeks, even when it could have played a useful role in the ongoing battle for Hue in neighboring Thua Thien Province. Had the enemy taken Quang Tri City they could have caused extensive damage to the nearby 1st Brigade camps at LANDING ZONES BETTY and SHARON, especially if they had captured working South Vietnamese artillery pieces in the Citadel. Losing the capital would also mean that road traffic on Highway 1 would have been cut between the allied forces near the Demilitarized Zone and those to the south in Thua Thien Province. Conversely, the enemy's swift defeat preserved an important symbol of South Vietnamese national pride and permitted the allies to devote more resources to other battles in northern I Corps, most especially to the titanic struggle for Hue.

### Map 1

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<sup>37</sup>Trip Rpt, MACCORDS-RE, 2 Mar 68, I Corps Tactical Zone #II, pp. 1, 3, 5, Historians files, CMH.

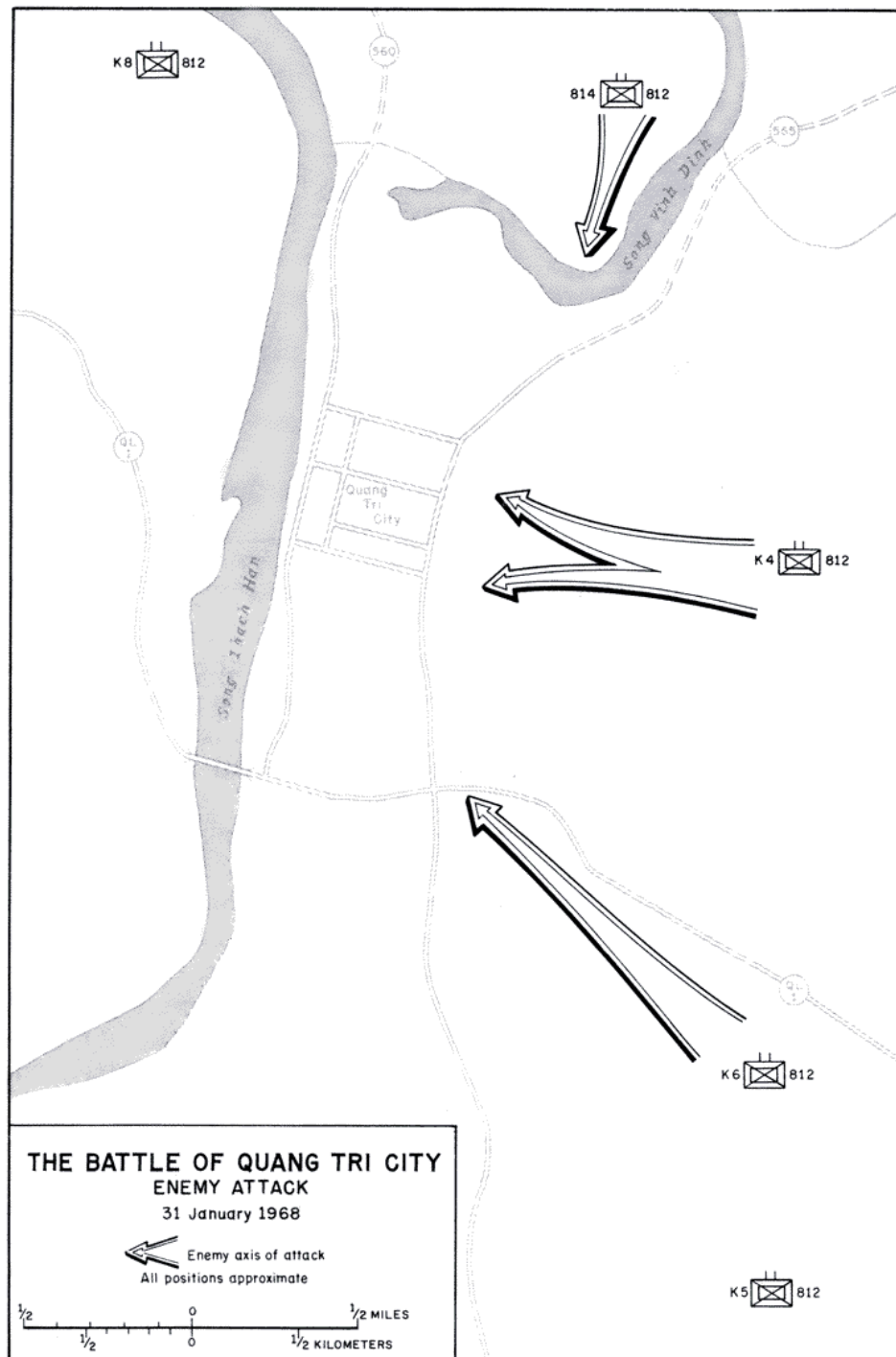


Northern I Corps



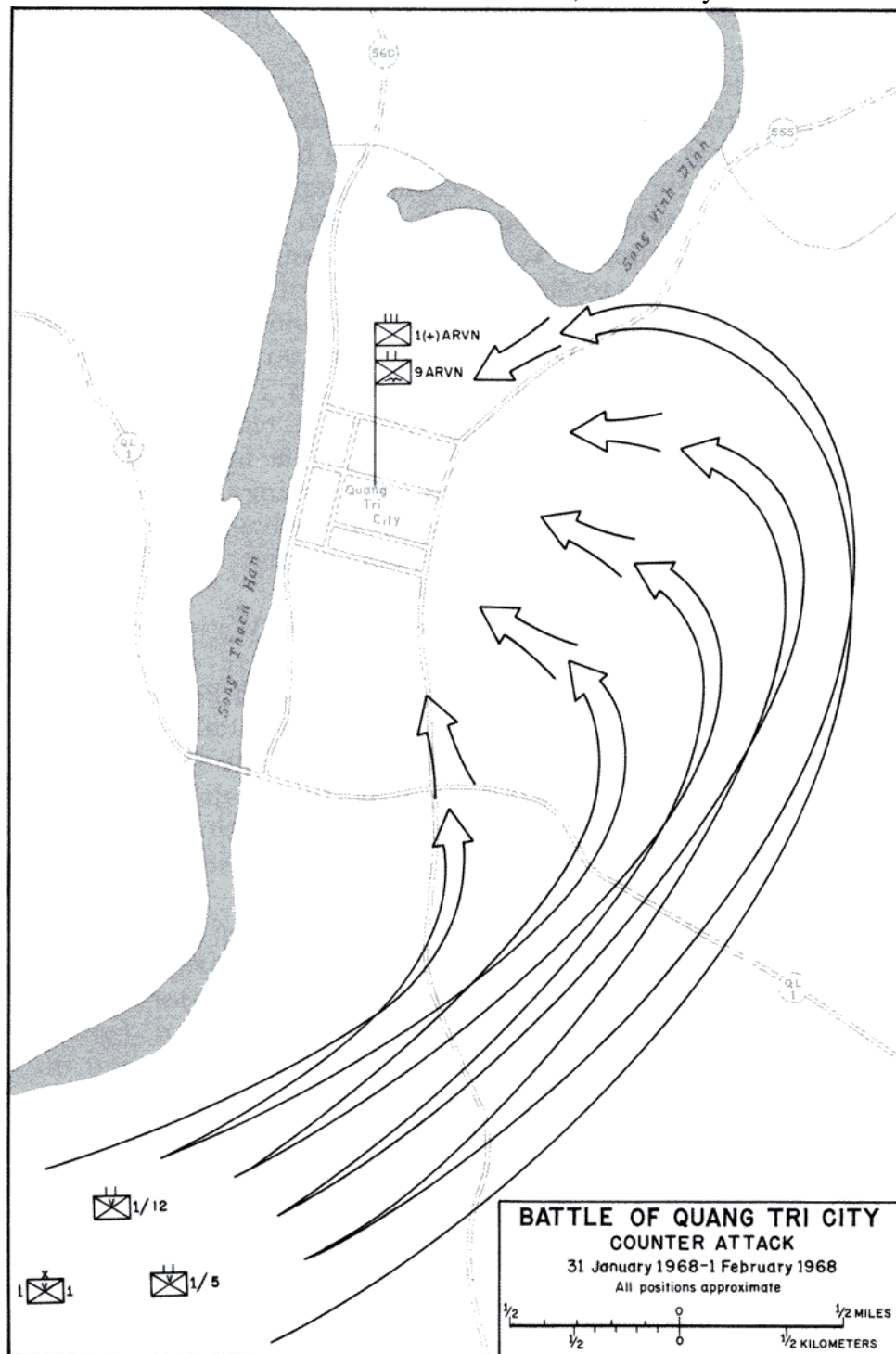
### Quang Tri City and surrounding area

### Map 3



**Enemy Attack, 31 January 1968**

**Map 4**



**1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division Counterattack, 31 January 1968**

**Picture 1**



**Quang Tri City, Looking South**

**Picture 2**





**Landing Zone BETTY**