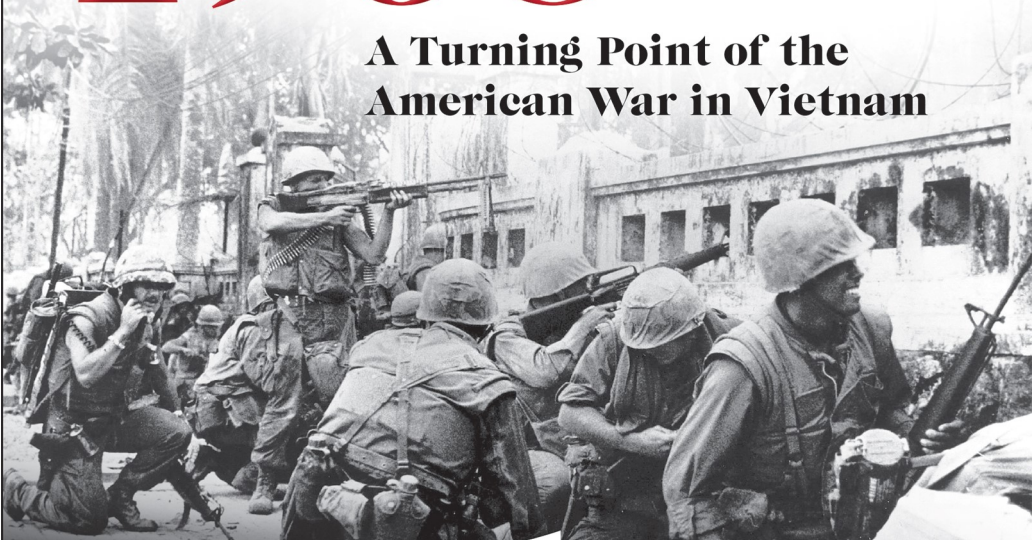


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**A Turning Point of the
American War in Vietnam**

A black and white photograph showing a group of American soldiers in combat gear, including helmets and vests, moving through a street in Hue, Vietnam. They are carrying rifles and appear to be in the middle of a military operation. The background shows damaged buildings and trees.

Mark Bowden

Author of BLACK HAWK DOWN

An Idiotic Mission

THE TASK FORCE X-Ray commander at Phu Bai still did not get it. His frame of reference for enemy encounters did not include anything like this. Sightings of even company-size elements of NVA or VC, much less battalions or whole regiments, were so rare as to be almost mythical. And hit-and-run, by small bands of dead-end VC commandos, was the message they were getting from all over the country; news had also broken about a daring and predictably futile such attack on the US embassy in the heart of Saigon. So as the day wore on, General LaHue was increasingly disappointed to learn that the two rifle companies he'd dispatched to Hue had failed to bring the city back under control.

Marines do not hesitate in combat. If the Corps has a defining philosophy, that's it. In war, when the enemy is foolish enough to show himself, marines go right at him and kill him, risks be damned. LaHue wanted his troops to move. When Captain Coolican, after things had settled down around the compound—called to request air and artillery strikes—the thing he was trained to do for his Hac Bao unit—he was told, rather stinging, that he was overreacting.

The general apparently saw no reason on earth why the more than four hundred men in that compound—reinforced now with well over three hundred fully armed US Marines accompanied by four Patton tanks and an assortment of ARVN armor, two Dusters, and two Quad-fifties, all of it being led by a certified marine lieutenant colonel—should not be able to flatten anything between them and the fucking

Citadel and rescue poor General Truong. What was needed was not more firepower, but a kick in the ass! So that's what he delivered. Gravel was instructed to do what he had been sent to do.

And he was willing, if mortified. The younger officers around him thought the order was crazy. Colonel Adkisson told him it was madness. The compound commander, a West Point graduate and a World War II combat veteran, believed his position was still in jeopardy. It was surrounded and apparently outnumbered, although no one knew for sure how many enemy soldiers were out there. He was not about to deplete its defenses to launch an attack on the Citadel.

Inside the sandbag bunker that served as a command post in the courtyard, Gravel and Adkisson, the ranking marine and army officers, had it out. Adkisson, a tall, stately looking officer with graying hair, told the marine colonel that his superiors with Task Force X-Ray had no grasp of the situation. Gravel knew this was true. No one at headquarters understood. His fight up Highway 1 had convinced him that there were a lot more enemy in the city than they imagined. But this was his first experience in combat—something he had trained for throughout his entire career—and, no doubt mindful of the toxic label of timidity under fire, he was loath to disobey a direct order, even when he considered it to be idiotic.⁵¹

Adkisson said Gravel was on his own. *His* men were going nowhere.

In their defense, the commanders at Phu Bai had gotten mixed messages. At one point, Adkisson himself had reassured them the Citadel was secure,⁵² a report that found its way into an Armed Forces Radio broadcast later that day, slightly embellished: Hue, it reported, was free of enemy activity. This both astonished and amused the Americans huddled in the encircled compound. The truth was that no one knew exactly what was going on in the city, except that there seemed to be enemy forces everywhere.

But whatever awaited outside the compound, it had backed off for the time being. When Coolican got word that the medevac choppers he requested were inbound, he recruited Major Murphy and Gunny Canley and other marines from Alpha Company, and with two tanks running interference they carried the wounded two blocks to the south bank of the Huong. They found two more ARVN tanks there, with

crews, part of the column that had failed to reach General Truong earlier in the day. The crews had locked themselves inside.

Once the marines had secured a decent perimeter, a navy Sea Knight chopper⁵³ landed, off-loading ammo and carrying away the worst of the wounded, including Doezeema. A second chopper then landed and did the same.

After the second chopper lifted off, Murphy, Coolican, Canley, Breth, and a few other officers assembled behind one of the tanks to discuss how to more permanently secure the spot, at which point there was a loud blast from across the river. They turned in time to see a large black missile bearing toward them. It happened too fast for any of them to react, but slowly enough—the velocity suggested an older weapon—for them to see the rocket approach and then flash straight through them, chest-high, hitting no one, before exploding against the wall of a building across the street and taking an impressive bite out of it. A spasm of shooting erupted, with the Americans firing across the river in the general direction of the blast and the enemy shooting back. Neither side was close enough to do much damage, and the Front troops were shooting from inside buildings and behind walls. It was more a display, or a venting. Breth and one of his men climbed to the turrets of the ARVN tanks and manned the machine guns. Both had full boxes of ammo. Breth aimed at the opposite bank and could see the gun's effect about the time his ammo ran out. He hammered on the tank hatch, assuming there was more ammo inside, but the crew still refused to open it.

Drawn by the heavy fire, two US Navy patrol boats led by Jerry Irvine, a petty officer, sped down the river from the east and raked the north bank with machine guns. This provided cover for a third chopper to land and carry off the last of the severely wounded.

It was now late afternoon. The Americans had slightly expanded their toehold in southern Hue. They owned the compound, and this small space around the southern end of Truong Tien Bridge. It included the boat ramp, and their newly established LZ. Both positions would be critically important in the days ahead. The Americans also had a vital radio relay center in a nondescript building across the street from the compound, two blocks south, that the Front in all its careful planning

had overlooked. It enabled uninterrupted and encrypted communications between General Truong in the Citadel, the compound, and Phu Bai. Marines began digging trenches and foxholes around the ramp and LZ. Tanks aimed their guns north, but there was no enemy to be seen across the river; there were just buildings and a park and the high, forbidding walls of the fortress.

Gravel had his orders to move. He was to bail out the Hac Bao platoon defending the prison, seven blocks west, and send another force across the Truong Tien Bridge and into the Citadel to help General Truong.

Gravel asked Coolican to lead the prison mission.

"Why would you want to do that?" the captain asked.

Gravel said it had to be done.

"I can guarantee you that the NVA now has the jail," Coolican told him.⁵⁴ "One of my platoon commanders [the Hac Bao unit dispatched there earlier] was on the radio with me. He told me they got hit with two attacks, that they were out of ammo, and that the NVA was getting ready to hit him again. He said after he got off with me he was going to destroy the radio. The NVA have the jail. So why would we go?"

"Because we're supposed to," said Gravel.

"Then tell me what's going to happen when I get down there and get cut off? Who is going to come and get me?"

Gravel had no answer. He appeared to Coolican to be floundering, somewhat undone by his experiences earlier that day. He had acted decisively under fire, but now he was struggling.

"Colonel," Coolican advised. "This is not a good idea."

"We have to."

"No, we do not."

"I am ordered to do it."

"Well, then, tell them you can't go, for chrissakes!" said Coolican.

Gravel tried. He got involved in a heated exchange on the phone with one of LaHue's staff officers. Any small American unit that strayed more than two blocks from the compound was in danger of being cut off and destroyed. They had no idea what kind of enemy strength there was farther out—across the bridge or inside the fortress. They knew the enemy was strong enough to have General Truong trapped and in trouble. To attempt two head-on assaults into the unknown

was crazy. Gravel's protests were passed up the chain. He received a one-word response: "Proceed."

The prison mission was simply dropped. Coolican wasn't going to do it. Captain Meadows's company, on the other hand, would attempt the other. It meant crossing the bridge and trying to enter the fortress at the southeast corner, Thuong Tu Gate.

Gravel, Meadows, and Meadows's company rolled up in trucks to the park. To those who had witnessed the massed fire on the north bank, trying to cross the bridge seemed suicidal. They had seen everything from small arms to that big black shell, likely fired from a 57-mm recoilless rifle (a WWII-era rocket launcher usually mounted on a tripod). There was at least one heavy machine gun in a pit at the north end of the bridge. The Front was not contesting the bridge's south end, but it was poised to hammer anyone or anything that tried to cross.

As hastily drawn, the plan called for two platoons of Meadows's men, about one hundred marines, to cross the bridge behind a tank, and destroy the machine-gun pit. The remainder of the company would follow in trucks as the lead platoons pushed ahead and to the left along Tran Hung Dao Street, which paralleled the river on the north side. That would take them to Thuong Tu Gate Road, which led up to the gate itself. Once inside, the same road ran straight up to Mang Ca. On the map it looked like a clean shot, less than a mile of paved road.

But the plan began to unravel before it started. The enemy had attempted to blow up the bridge's central span that morning, and failed, but the explosions had left it badly damaged. There were holes in the span that opened straight down to the water. Gravel was worried that it would no longer support a Patton. He tried to enlist the smaller ARVN tanks, but the crews refused to budge. So Golf Company would have to cross on foot.

With the massed tanks and guns providing covering fire, Meadows and his men set off at a crouched trot. The captain went with his second platoon. The bridge crowned at the center, so on the upslope they could see only sky and the top of the gray fortress's southern ramparts. High above them to their left, above the setting sun, Meadows noticed for the first time the yellow star and blue and red stripes of the giant Alliance flag. The enemy withheld fire until the bulk of both platoons had crested the midpoint, and then started shooting. Bullets pinged off

the steel superstructure and cracked against the pavement. Grenades skipped off the concrete and exploded, knocking down clusters of men. Ten of those in the lead platoon fell immediately, two of them dead; one marine was shot in the head, which appeared to just explode. The other marines kept moving.

Fred Drew and John Ligato watched this unfold from the south bank, aghast. Whose idea had it been? Fire from their distant position was nearly useless, but they blasted away.

A squad led by Barney Barnes was the first to make it all the way to the other side. These men set up a machine gun to exchange fire with the enemy bunker, but their gunner was immediately shot and killed. Another of the men, Lester Tully, got close enough to the bunker to hurl a grenade. It was an extraordinary throw, and the explosion silenced the gun.

Behind them, corpsman John Higgins encountered his first sucking chest wound. The marine he had stooped to help had a hole on the left side of his chest, which bubbled every time he breathed. Higgins rolled him over and felt for an exit wound on his back. There was none. He took out one of his C-ration packs, used the cellophane wrapper, smeared it with an antibiotic ointment, pressed it over the chest hole, and then wrapped a bandage around the man's torso as tightly as he could.⁵⁵

Leaving some of his lead platoon to hold the north end of the bridge, Meadows sent Lieutenant Mike McNeil with the remainder into buildings across the street. It was a commercial district. There was a movie theater advertising the Italian Western *Tempo di Massacro* (*Massacre Time*)—a title that struck Meadows as both macabre and apt. For a few moments, the firing stopped.

Trailing Meadows's advance, Major Murphy came across the bridge with Father Lyons and more men. Both men—the officer and the priest—were a steadying influence. They were older than the platoon and company commanders, and projected an invaluable sense of calm and confidence under fire. The group they led was under heavy fire from buildings and bunkers on the land between the river and the Citadel. Five Front soldiers in the bunker Tully had destroyed had been mangled by the blast. One was still breathing, but when a corporal who spoke Vietnamese tried to question him, he died. The wounded

and dead Americans on the bridge were lifted to a truck, and Father Lyons accompanied them back across the bridge.

Meadows pressed on west, toward the gate road. It was now late afternoon, and the sun was in their eyes. When they reached the road and turned the corner they came under heavy fire from the top of the south wall—rockets, grenades, machine guns, and small arms. The lead men tried to take cover in buildings on both sides of the road, but found the doors and windows nailed shut. Three more of Meadows's men were killed on the corner. A corporal squad leader with just ten days left on his tour, Glen Lucas,⁵⁶ lay motionless on the road. When corpsman Donald Kirkham made a move to help him, Lucas suddenly moved, waving him back. The corpsman ignored him, and then dropped, shot through the throat.⁵⁷

On one corner of the intersection there was a pharmacy, to which Meadows sent a machine-gun team. He told them to get to the roof if they could. They crossed the street, broke down the door, and managed to make their way up. But from his spot behind a tree, the captain could see that the effort was hopeless. Before the big gate was a moat, spanned by a very narrow bridge. Over the gate there was a stone tower where he could see dozens of enemy soldiers. They could rain hell on anything that approached. He saw more enemy moving across the road to the southwest. Without supporting fire, either air support or artillery, there was no way this small force could assault this enormous fortress without being slaughtered. As they exchanged fire with well-concealed targets above, the captain reported to Gravel: "We are outgunned and outmanned."

There was some initial pushback from the hard-pressed colonel, but Meadows's mind was set. He was in the middle of disaster, staring at worse. His men continued to fall. Of the one hundred he had taken across, more than half were down: seven dead and forty-five wounded. Gravel knew what Meadows said was true. He could see downed marines all along the company's path.

Meadows said on his own authority he was pulling back to the bridge. First he had to account for all of his men. He tossed his smoke grenades up the street, and this allowed for the retrieval of two downed men, Lucas and Kirkham. Several marines who had been pinned down were able to retreat to his corner. There were too many wounded and dead

to carry, so one of Meadows's enterprising marines hot-wired a flatbed truck parked on the street, and they piled men on that. Meadows and his gunnery sergeant Lou Heidel did a rapid count and found that one of the men was still missing. Gerald Kinny, an eighteen-year-old private with eight brothers and sisters back in Toledo, Iowa, was found lying on the street about fifty yards forward. Meadows ignored the heavy fire and sprinted toward him. His adrenaline pumping, with his rifle in one hand, he grabbed Kinny by the belt buckle and lifted him with one arm. Running for all he was worth, he half-dragged and half-carried him to the truck.⁵⁸ Kinny died on the way back.

From the south side of the bridge, Gravel could see that the retreat might be as bloody as the attack. There were too many downed men to carry off. He radioed Colonel Adkisson at the compound and demanded he send more trucks. None came. The army colonel had told Gravel that assaulting the bridge was folly, that his men were going to stay put, and that was that. So Gravel approached the men guarding the LZ. He asked one of the Quad-fifty drivers, army sergeant Lauver: "Can you help?"

Lauver and his crew had watched the marines being chopped down on the bridge. Their vehicle was largely unarmored, and attempting to cross looked as hopeless for them as it had for Golf Company. But there were downed men lying in the open at the far end. It would be the most difficult moment of Lauver's eighteen months in Vietnam, and he would replay it in his mind for the rest of his life. He felt there was no way he and his men would come back if they started across the bridge. He had not been ordered to do it, so it was up to him. He looked at his men and shrugged.

"Let's go," he said.

With them came a makeshift rescue convoy consisting of a six-by-six with a volunteer driver and Coolican in the passenger seat, another truck carrying Gunny Canley and Father Lyons, and several hot-wired cars.

Struggling back through clouds of yellow smoke, Meadows and his men were still in trouble. Ahead they saw the peculiar caravan of vehicles coming across the bridge. Canley and Father Lyons had pulled to a stop at the north end and returned fire. Lauver realized right away that in his haste he had made a mistake. It was possible to

fire the Quad's guns forward, over the cab, but that was like setting off a stun grenade above the driver's head. They should have backed across. Until they reached the other end he could fire only to either side, which was useless.

But once his vehicle reached the far side and turned, he began pouring rounds north. Nolan Lala, a driver on the truck behind him, manned a heavy machine gun in the back and joined in. This provided enough cover for Canley, Lyons, and others to begin carrying and dragging the downed men behind the vehicles. Meadows and his men climbed aboard. During the frantic loading—Coolican would call it a Chinese fire drill—a rocket glanced off the fender of the truck and exploded. Among those knocked down was Murphy. A small shard of shrapnel had angled up under his flak jacket and poked a hole in his chest. The chaplain was hit in the thigh and hand—a cigarette lighter in his back pocket had deflected at least part of the blast. With Private Lala and the Quad-fifty pounding away, the bleeding convoy managed to retreat from the bridge and back to the compound. Lauver's Quad-fifty was the last vehicle off.⁵⁹

As foreseen, Golf Company's attack had been a fiasco. Ten marines were killed, fifty-six wounded. Meadows had lost more than a third of his company, many of them needlessly he thought. On their way back from the bridge, the convoy picked up Dr. Doan Van Ba, an ARVN surgeon who had been hiding, and who ran out to the street to flag them down, wearing his uniform and red beret. He would provide invaluable help in the busy compound dispensary.

It occupied a noisy three rooms near the back end of the compound. Steve Bernie was a bookish twenty-eight-year-old with big glasses. He had recently graduated from The Ohio State medical school, and was now supervising controlled chaos, in a helmet that looked three sizes too big, head down, gloved hands smeared with gore. He had been wounded by shrapnel himself, standing in front of his dispensary when a mortar exploded nearby. Beneath a gauze wrap around his arm there was a bloodstain that kept getting larger, but he worked on. Until the battle started, the work he'd done was mostly limited to dealing with sniffles and stomachaches. Now it was like an emergency ward at a big city hospital in the midst of a ten-alarm emergency. Dr. James Back had come up from Phu Bai, and both young physicians were

performing emergency procedures, some major, that they had never before attempted. There were screaming marines with severed or nearly severed limbs. Every few minutes one would stop breathing amid frantic efforts to revive him.⁶⁰

From a cot in the holding area, with a wound that appeared less critical, Major Murphy shouted encouragement to the younger men. He asked for pen and paper and wrote a note to his wife. Murphy signaled to his friend Father Lyons, who had to be carried over.

At intervals, medevac choppers descended in the park. It was hard for the Sea Knight choppers to land safely. They made big targets with their wide body and twin-top rotors. The pilots would hover beyond the range of small-arms fire as the two navy gunboats swung up on the river to spray suppressing fire on the north bank. Then one would swoop in, kicking ammo out the doors and taking aboard the latest batch of wounded, sometimes without touching the ground. The exchange usually lasted only about thirty seconds, and was accompanied by gusts of bullets from enemy positions on both sides of the Huong. When it was fully dark, men on the ground used flashlights to guide the choppers in, being careful to aim them only straight up. Pointing a flashlight anywhere else made you a target. Coolican supervised much of this coming and going, moving back and forth from the LZ to the compound.⁶¹

He had stopped to check on Murphy shortly before sunset. They had served together earlier in the States, and Coolican had admired the older officer's skillful manner with those both above and below him in the ranks. He could be stern when the situation required it, but he treated even the lowliest grunts as equals. Bill Ehrhart, a corporal, kept a *Playboy* centerfold on which he had drawn a grid that served as his "short-time calendar," marking off each square as the days of his Vietnam tour counted down to March 5, 1968. When a new company captain pointed at the calendar, displayed in Ehrhart's bunker, told him it was "inappropriate," and ordered him to take it down, Murphy immediately intervened. He said, "Captain, that is *my* short-time calendar. Private Ehrhart maintains it for me." They did, in fact, share the same release date. Ehrhart appreciated the gesture. The major was all right. Small things like that built up broad affection in the ranks. Murphy had been at the fore of the fighting nearly all that day, the small

hole in his side didn't look too bad, and the major had not acted as if it were serious. Coolican joked that it might be severe enough to get him out of the war, at least temporarily, which did not cheer Murphy.

"I'm good," he told Coolican.

"We've got another chopper coming in," the captain told him. "I'm going out there now. We'll get you out of here."

"Jim, I'm a little uncomfortable here," Murphy said. "Can you roll me over?"

Coolican helped him roll over to one side. What Murphy didn't say was that when he'd sent for Father Lyons, he'd asked him to perform last rites. He'd known his wound was grave. When Coolican returned for him a short while later, the major was dead. He had bled to death internally.⁶²

Pressure still came from Phu Bai for Gravel to act. General Truong and his men had bought themselves some valuable time by retreating to concrete bunkers and tunnels and calling down an artillery strike on their own position. This had surprised the attackers, who suffered casualties and had fallen back. Scattered around the city there were still small pockets of stranded Americans, radio operators, administrators, CIA officers, and others. Some, like those at the relay center, were just blocks away from the compound, and in peril. Gravel attempted a move that night to the nearby CORDS office, but even with tanks his marines could make it only a few hundred yards before being turned back. The volume of fire made the streets impassable. Gravel was grief stricken by the loss of his friend Murphy, furious with Adkisson, and dumbfounded by the constant pressure to act against such clearly overwhelming odds. Alpha Company was down to about fifty men. Golf had been wasted. Coolican was ferrying wounded up to the LZ for every chopper that could land. The dead waited. They were stacked outside the dispensary, zippered in black body bags—Marquez, Kinny, Lucas, Kirkham, Murphy, and more—the day's grim toll. Word came back that Frank Doezeema had died in surgery.

That night, from buildings around the compound, the enemy shouted insults and threats in English.

"You die, marines!"

"Fuck you, marines!"

Sergeant Gonzalez urged Ligato to answer them.

"You know some Vietnamese," Gonzalez said. "Say something back!"

Ligato's language skills were not up to the task, so he shouted back at them in English.

"Fuck you, NVA!"

The men around him laughed.

"Good," said Gonzalez.⁶³

Inside one day, the city of Hue had fallen. No one on Saigon's side of the fight knew yet how fully. By tradition, your first encounter on the morning of Tet was supposed to be a harbinger for the entire year. If that were true, then Hue's fate in the New Year would have been sealed. Its first visitor had been death.

The American chain of command still didn't get it, even as the long and bloody day ended. Captain Meadows got the impression that General LaHue simply could not or would not believe the truth.

To the American command, such a swift and stunning coup was unimaginable. The NVA and VC were not capable of it. The Tet Offensive, a massive coordinated effort, which struck more than one hundred targets throughout South Vietnam, including most of the nation's provincial capitals, had come as a shock, but enemy gains had been quickly reversed in most places. The whole effort was just as quickly dismissed as futile by the MACV leadership. The enemy raiders had held on in most towns and cities for only a few hours, although in a number of other South Vietnamese cities—Kon Tum, Buan Ma Thuot, Phon Thiet, Can Tho, and Ben Tre—fighting would drag on for several days. In Saigon, where the story made the biggest splash, the Front had attacked high-profile targets: the headquarters for the army and navy, the Independence Palace, the US embassy, and the national radio station—from which the raiding party successfully broadcast a message from Ho before they were all killed—but in no case did the invaders make lasting gains. Although a remarkable feat of clandestine planning and coordination, and a demonstration that the enemy could reach almost anywhere in the country it wished, the Tet surprise was regarded by Westy as proof of Hanoi's weakness. Nowhere in his understanding of the war was there room for the size and quality of the force that had taken Hue. So the MACV in Saigon and General LaHue in Phu Bai simply refused to believe it had happened. Reports that contradicted this high-level understanding were dismissed as unreliable, the cries of

men facing real combat for the first time, and panicking. Against the certainties of the American command, the truth never stood a chance.

In a secret cable that night, the ever-upbeat Westy sent a summary of the crowded day to General Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Addressing Hue, he wrote: "The enemy has approximately three companies [about five hundred men] in the Hue Citadel."⁶⁴

He was off by a factor of twenty.

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