

Quangtri: Not a Real City

Quangtri is a small and somewhat scruffy town, a city in name only, with no strategic value. It has considerable psychological importance because it is the capital of South Vietnam's northernmost province.

If the North Vietnamese forces were to take and hold it they would, in effect, have carved off an entire province, with all that means in morale and political stability in Saigon.

The seizure of Quangtri could also open the way to Hue, a city 32 miles to the south, which also has no strategic value, but has far greater psychological importance because it is one of South Vietnam's principal cities and the former imperial capital of Vietnam. As the old capital of a once united Vietnam, Hue thus has great symbolic value in the eyes of the Vietnamese.

Quangtri is in relatively flat rice paddy terrain on the narrow coastal plain of central Vietnam about 20 miles south of the demilitarized zone, bordered on the west by the foothills of the Annamite Mountains and on the east by the South China Sea.

The population of the town was estimated at 40,000 before the inhabitants fled over the last few days. The town is wet and dreary during the monsoon months and hot and dusty in the dry season.

The countryside around Quangtri has always been an area of heavy Communist influence. Route 1, the coastal highway that passes through Quangtri, was nicknamed the Street Without Joy by the French Army during the first Indochina war because of the repeated ambushes of French convoys moving along the road.

There are no natural defenses within the immediate vicinity of Quangtri because of the flat terrain. What natural defenses the town does have are further out, a river, the Cua Viet, about eight miles to the north and the foothills of the Annamites, which begin to rise from the plain about 12 miles to the west.

Both of these outlying natural defenses are reported to have been breached.

North Vietnamese amphibious tanks and infantry are reported to have crossed the Cua Viet defense line and the last two major fortified positions on the edge of the foothills, Camps Carroll and Mailoc, which the United States Marine Corps won dearly in fierce fighting with the North Vietnamese in 1966, fell on Sunday.

A smaller artillery camp, Fire Base Anne, about eight miles southwest of Quangtri is reported to have fallen.

There are again no natural defenses, with the exception of a couple of fairly narrow rivers, along the coastal plain south from Quangtri to Hue. And Hue can similarly be outflanked on the west if the North Vietnamese seize the foothills there.

NYT

4-5-72