

Retreat Leaves Small Unit Of Marines Facing Enemy

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HUE, South Vietnam, May 2—Thousands of panicking South Vietnamese soldiers—most of whom did not appear to have made much contact with the advancing North Vietnamese—fled in confusion from Quangtri Province today, streaming south down Route 1 like a rabble out of control.

Commanding civilian vehicles at rifle point, feigning nonexistent injuries, carrying away C rations but not their ammunition, and hurling rocks at Western news photographers taking pictures of their flight, the Government troops of the Third Infantry Division ran from the fighting in one of the biggest retreats of the war.

No one tried to stop them; their officers were running too.

The battlefield north of Hue was thus left solely to a brigade of a few thousand South Vietnamese marines.

The Third Division had fallen back before, at the beginning

of the enemy offensive a month ago, but the commander, Brig. Gen. Vu Van Giai, had managed to scrape it together again and put it back on the line around Quangtri until yesterday.

But today, according to American advisers, virtually the entire division—about 10,000 infantrymen plus 1,000 rangers—was in rout, not even stopping at the checkpoints where military policemen were supposed to halt runaways and turn them around.

It was the force that was supposed to have defended the city of Quangtri, which was abandoned yesterday and which had been the northernmost town held by the Government.

There does not seem to be much now between the North Vietnamese and their next and more important objective,

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the city of Hue, whose residents are already packing up and fleeing farther south in large numbers.

Many of the retreating troops are not even stopping in Hue, which is about 40 miles south of Quangtri, but are continuing on, taking their rifles, artillery pieces, tanks and armored cars with them.

The province chief went on the radio tonight, appealing to the people of Hue not to panic and flee and promising that the Government would defend them. As he spoke American advisers in Hue were calling Saigon to ask for every available aircraft to evacuate the thousands of refugees from the north who have flooded the city.

Bowling down Route 1 from Quangtri, the Government soldiers, their guns bristling at anyone who tried to interfere with them, clung to the sides and roofs and hoods and trunks of every available vehicle.

With horns blaring and headlights glowing in the midday sun, they raced down the center of the road, pushing other vehicles out of the way. They used trucks and tanks and they took over big buses and three-wheeled minibuses. They stole motorcycles, riding as many as four to the bike. There were also many on foot, particularly walking wounded.

Their anger at those who watched them running seemed born of their shame. Until the Third Division can be pulled together again, it hardly exists as a fighting force.

The South Vietnamese marines, the only units that have fought well on the northern front, are still holding three bridges on Route 1 between Quangtri and Hue. They are trying to slow the enemy advance, the first bridge being about 30 miles north of Hue and the last only 20 miles away.

No one expects that they can hold the positions very long.

After those the only major defense before Hue is a large military base known as Camp Evans, or Hoa My, about 17 miles from the city. The new headquarters of the Third Division, it is packed with artillery pieces, which are constantly firing.

Rout Embarrasses Marines

At the southernmost of the bridges, at a village called Photrach, the South Vietnamese marines watched with pained faces as the army men fled. They would not talk about it, but their embarrassment was plain.

Their American advisers were not so inclined to silence. "This is really sickening," a Marine lance corporal said.

"It's unbelievable," said an American Marine major, Robert Sheridan, as he leaned on a jeep at the side of the road. "It's hard to comprehend. To stand here and watch this when you've seen the same people in your own units fight well because they have different leadership."

"You see the troops," he went on, waving his hand at the road. "But I don't blame them. Where are their officers? There's no one to tell them 'stop' and to pull them together."

The major said the Vietnamese marines in his unit were "very sad and very angry" at the army retreat. "They are embarrassed because I am standing here watching it," he added.

The Marines stopped a thousand fleeing rangers last night as they tried to cross the northernmost bridge, he related. The reason for blocking their flight, he said, was that "we couldn't tell if they were enemy." At daylight they were allowed to pass because the Marines had no authority to stop them.

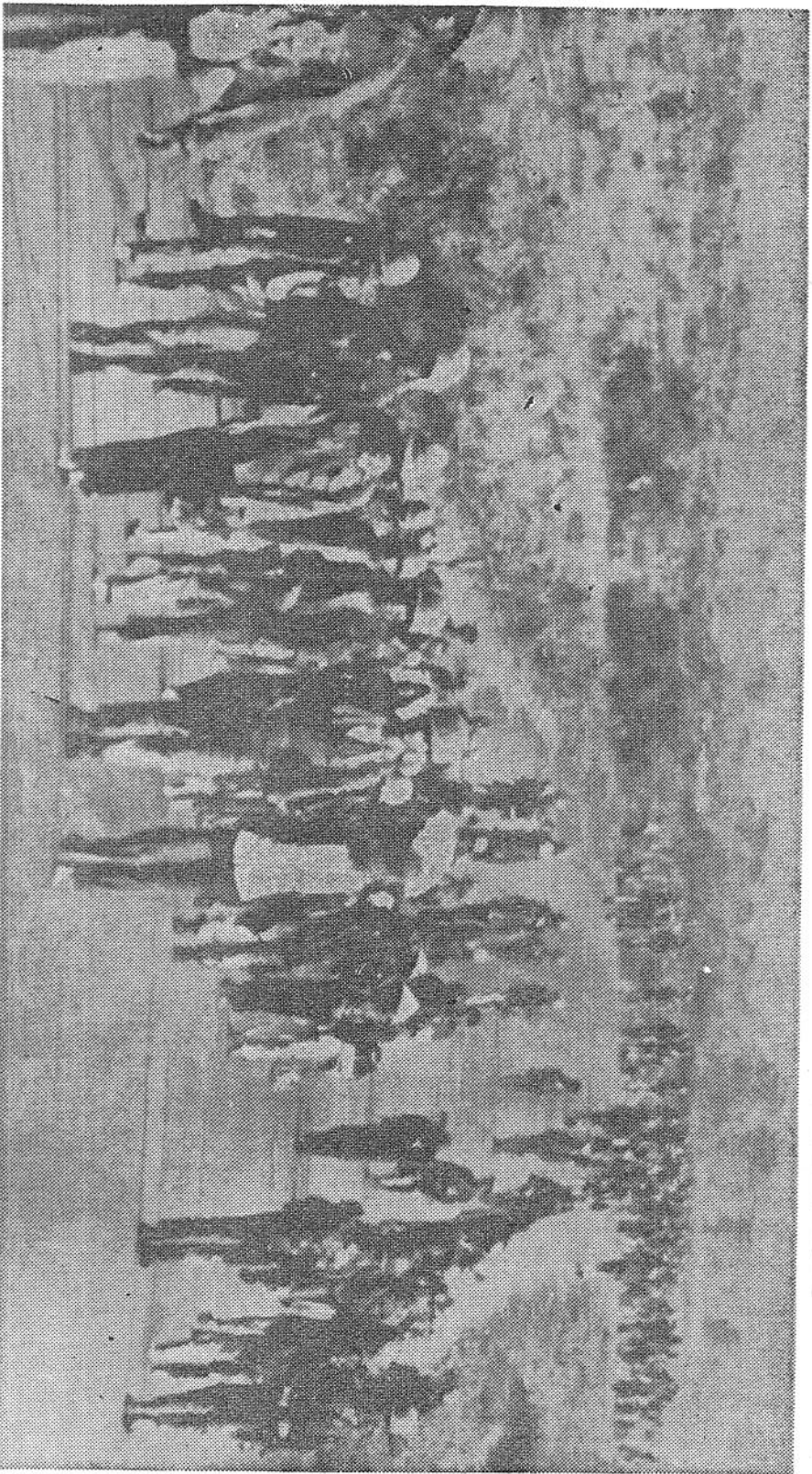
The Marines fought "a hell of a battle" at the forward bridge this morning, the major said, knocking out 18 tanks with the help of artillery and air strikes.

The major said that last night, when the Communists started moving in the area, he wanted to call in naval gunfire from American vessels standing



TRAVELING TOWARD A REFUGEE CAMP: Civilians streaming down road to Kontum in order to escape from the fighting in the Central Highlands

The New York Times/Denis Cameron



TATTERED AND MUDDY: South Vietnamese soldiers, many barefoot and some in rags, reach South Vietnamese Marine lines north of Hue after escaping from the North Vietnamese take-over of Quangtri. Many of the thousands who fled in confusion commandeered vehicles at gunpoint.

Associated Press

off the nearby coast, but that South Vietnamese officials held off the fire, apparently because they thought it might hit the retreating forces.

Many of those on foot had inexplicably thrown away their boots and were limping along barefoot. Some had bandaged their feet with rags. All were tattered and muddy. Even those who were riding had had to plod for 10 miles through the countryside during the night before they got to the first bridge held by the Marines, where transport was available.

Whether riding or walking, the fleeing men had no time for anything but their own escape.

The body of a soldier lay on the road just outside Camp Evans under the baking sun, a victim, perhaps, of a road accident. His gear lay strewn about him. The troops passed without a glance.

Commandeering a Ride

As this correspondent turned back toward Hue today with three other correspondents, an interpreter and a driver in an old Citroën, South Vietnamese soldiers waving automatic rifles and pistols forced the car to halt. Fifteen pushed in and on blanketing the roof, hood and trunks. All appeared panic-stricken.

One was a major, Nguyen Van Niem, 45, commander of an ordnance company that had fled Quangtri. Laughing with embarrassment, he said he had no idea where his company was.

Like many of the fleeing men, Major Niem said that when he left Quangtri last night he had not seen any enemy troops, nor had he seen Government troops exchanging fire with the enemy. That apparently means that the Government force fled before it was attacked on the ground, although Quangtri had been under intense shelling by heavy artillery for three days.

Major Niem said he was going to Danang, 50 miles south of Hue, to join his parent unit. He said of the retreat: "We do not feel ashamed. The enemy fought very strongly and we have to withdraw and form a new front."

As the Citroën went on toward Hue, the driver craning out the window because the windshield was blocked, the soldiers brandished their weapons and uttered threats to keep others along the way from climbing on.

The ordnance major, who has pushed his way into the car with great vigor, had developed a severe limp by the time the car reached Hue. He explained that he had been wounded by a rocket, and when he stepped out of the car he hobbled a few paces and collapsed into the arms of a military policeman, who carried him off.

Another soldier had a small neck wound that appeared to be healing nicely. Just before he got off in Hue he unwrapped his first-aid field bandage and asked that it be tied around his neck. A wounded man has a better chance of escaping shipmen back to the battlefield.

Some of the retreating troops reached Hue early enough this morning to find time for relaxation and refreshment. A mud-spattered armored personnel carrier clanked through the gate of the main hotel at 9 A.M. and parked on the grass. A dozen soldiers and their captain clambered out, smiling, climbed the three flights to the terrace restaurant overlooking the Huong River and ordered an ample breakfast of omelets and French coffee.