

# Reporter's Notebook: Victims of Onslaught Live in Fear, Bewilderment and Despair

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HUE, South Vietnam, May 5—The young American helicopter pilot, rescued by another helicopter after having been shot down by North Vietnamese ground fire, was badly cut and bruised and in a state of shock.

"It's a dream. It's a dream," he kept repeating incredulously. "It's not happening to me. It's happening to someone else and he's got inside me."

With his words of stunned disbelief, he could have been talking about what happened on the whole northern front this past week—an entire South Vietnamese division was put to rout, thousands of soldiers deserted and went on drunken looting sprees, and tens of thousands of civilians fled southward to escape the enemy advance, leaving Hue a city of empty streets and nervous soldiers.

A little girl was found on the road about 5 miles above Hue. Her mother's body lay nearby, blown apart by a North Vietnamese rocket. The rocket gashed and burned the child's face and arms and broke both her legs, but she lived.

When she was brought to the Hue hospital, her eyes seemed sealed shut. But two days later she was able to open them.

The hospital authorities do not know her name or where she comes from. They think she is nearly 3 years old.

She has been given an orange to try to pacify her, and she grips it in both hands desperately. But it is no pacifier.

"Di ve, di ve voi ma, di ve voi ma," she wails constantly. "I want to go home, I want to go home with my mother."

She also calls for her aunt. Maybe she is calling to the middle-aged woman—also a wounded refugee—who sits on the edge of the child's bed all day long, stroking her head and cooling her with a bamboo fan.

"I want to go home," the child cries again.

"We'll go home tomorrow," the woman says, to soothe her.

"Yes, yes. Please," whimpers the child with no name, gripping her orange.

Quangtri, a city about 40 miles north of Hue, had just fallen—a serious defeat for the South Vietnamese—but the news had not reached many people in Hue yet. At the American compound—whose offices are decorated with such signs as "It's always a good day in Hue" and "We have no problems, only interesting situations"—the music system in the dining room was softly wafting "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas."

That night, Brig. Gen. Thomas W. Bowen, a disillusioned American adviser whose advice to hold Quang-

tri had been ignored by South Vietnamese commanders, watched the evening movie—"Shaft."

Interviewed afterward in his trailer, where he was reading a book entitled "Imperial Tragedy," about the last days of the war against Japan, the general talked gloomily of the fall of Quangtri and the threat now to Hue, and said, "This hasn't been my most jolly day."

The fleeing civilians came first down Route 1 toward Hue, before the Government soldiers—when it seemed Quangtri would fall soon. The river of refugees stretched unbroken in some places for three miles or more. Silhouetted against a darkening and drizzly sky, they plodded south with their sacks and babies and animals. Piglets squealed. Chickens chattered. The people were silent.

Though frightened, the peasants seemed stoic and pragmatic. There was no panic. Some of them had been through it all many times before, and some only a few weeks ago, when they fled their homes in the first enemy push. Later they had returned to Quangtri when they mistakenly thought it was safe again.

"We tried to get away from the shells coming down on Quangtri," said a woman who was fleeing with her two children for the second time in a month, "but the shells were everywhere and we had to leave the city."

A South Vietnamese soldier who ran away on March 31, the second day of the enemy invasion, hitches a ride in our car. Asked if he is returning to fight with his unit, he says no, he is only returning to try to collect his pay. What if he gets arrested for desertion, he is asked. "I would rather go to jail than to the battlefield," he replies.

A day later, two members of the Popular Force, a kind of home guard, discussed their fright frankly as they clambered onto a bus for Hue. "We are scared of the shelling," one said. "Let the regular troops fight."

A few miles farther on, three regular soldiers fleeing from overrun Dongha, a town north of Quangtri, said they were heading for Hue to get out of the fighting. Asked why they did not stop in Quangtri to help defend that city as they retreated, one of them said: "We have already fought hard. Quangtri is not safe for us."

These three soldiers and several others commandeered a bus at riflepoint and forced many refugees off, hurling their meager belongings after them. Pots of rice and greens splattered on the road. As the bus sped to Hue, it passed a sign that reads: "Drive defensively. Your country needs you."

On the official level, there is an unreality in the lan-



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**NO ONE KNOWS HER NAME:** Girl, about 3 years of age, at hospital in Hue. She was found on the road near the body of her mother, killed by a rocket. The blast burned the girl and broke both her legs. "I want to go home," she wails.

guage used to describe the fighting — a devotion to euphemism. When a key fire-support base called Bastogne, about 15 miles west of Hue, was taken by the North Vietnamese, an American Adviser insisted: "We weren't overrun. We just withdrew."

He said the loss of Bastogne was on balance a good thing because it made the defense line for Hue tighter and more viable. He explained the actions of the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam by saying: "The ARVN had been defending Bastogne like it was some kind of national shrine. Actually, it was a pain in the butt to resupply."

The North Vietnamese had laid antitank mines on Route 1. We saw the mines and turned back toward Hue. But civilians were so desperate to get out of besieged Quang-tri that they drove their trucks through the mines, trying to dodge them. Some succeeded. Three trucks did not. Bodies vaulted through the air as the mines exploded. About 25 were killed.

Some did not die immediately—they lay on the road, bleeding and moaning—but they would die soon for there was no one to treat them. Government soldiers only 200 yards away were too occupied beating off an enemy ambush.

A few refugees miraculously survived the explosions. Truong Duc, 21 years old, only skinned his legs when he hurtled to the ground. His eyes glazed, he was unable to believe he was alive. He ran up to an army medic babbling, "I flew from the truck. I flew through the air."

The ambush was temporarily beaten off, and there was a respite in the fighting. The South Vietnamese troops scavenged through the belongings of the enemy dead. One soldier sniffed at a handkerchief he pulled out of a North Vietnamese pack and giggled.

Letters were strewn in the sand. One, from an enemy soldier's girl friend, told of the death of her father and her sadness. She added: "But I forbid you to be sad, because you are at the battlefield and that needs all your courage and zeal. Besides, you don't have the right yet to be sad for me. You are still only my boyfriend, not yet my husband."

Another North Vietnamese soldier had a letter from his brother, also a soldier. It read: "We are now ready to make a drive. We hope we can do something for the country. We leave in a few weeks for the South. This is my second time. I'll try to do better this time."

The South Vietnamese marines are the only government troops fighting well on the northern front. An American marine adviser — a huge, blond and grubbily unshaven major—led his battalion to a

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new position along Route 1. He beamed as he greeted an American newsman with a thumbs-up gesture.

"We had two contacts this morning," he chortled, "kicked the . . . out of them. We got 40 of them, lost only three ourselves. It was great! Outstanding!"

The South Vietnamese soldier long ago adopted G.I. slang for his scale of values. When something is "Number One," it is the best. "Number Ten" is the worst. But the recent defeats have added new dimensions to the low end of the scale.

"Everything Number One?" a passerby yelled to a South Vietnamese soldier standing by his truck, as other troops retreated past him. "Yeah," he replied sardonically, "Number One Thousand."

Some of the retreating troops of the Third Division shed their rank and insignia. When they reach Hue, many turn ugly, taking things from shops and stalls without paying. They are deserters now, ashamed and surly—and armed.

They curse their officers for having abandoned them at Quangtri—many officers ran away first—and to express their rage, they set fire to the central marketplace. Neither the police nor the fire department dare to intervene, and the blaze becomes a Cecil B. De Mille spectacular.

The market is just across the river from our declining hotel, the Huong Giang, and we watch it from the third floor terrace. The kitchen is closed, for it is nearly midnight, but the watchman is persuaded by a large tip to unlock the refrigerator and provide a couple of beers. Tracer bullets arc through the sky as rival gangs of deserters let off steam at each other. The television crews wake up and come out to take pictures. Sailors from the naval post next to the hotel also come out to watch the spreading blaze. Everyone seems to like a good fire.

The next morning, people are leaving Hue by the tens of thousands, fearing the enemy attack might be imminent. Because most of the market was destroyed during the night, there are no eggs or bread for breakfast at the hotel occupied almost exclusively by journalists. Much of the staff has fled, the laundry crew among them—causing a brief panic among the more fastidious newsmen.

The drivers of rented cars have also fled, so it becomes a war to cover on foot.

Transportation out of Hue becomes chaotic. For the poor, there is nothing to do but walk. But for those with some money, there is bargaining. Owners of cars are demanding 40,000 piasters [about \$100] for the 50-mile trip to Danang.

At the airport Air Vietnam

flights are booked three weeks in advance, but scalpers have bought up blocks of seats and are extorting enormous sums from panicking families.

There is also a Chinese clockmaker who will arrange boat transportation down to Danang in large but often leaky sampans — for 5,000 piasters (\$12) a head.

This city—which had been swollen by refugees to a population of over 350,000 has shrunk to maybe 50,000.

One of those still wandering the streets is a tank commander who escaped from Quangtri and now seems unable to comprehend what has happened. Asked where he was going, he said:

"I don't know. Maybe some coffee shop where there is soft music. When I was a kid, I used to sit for hours in a coffee shop listening to soft music. It was so good."

He could find no coffee shop open in Hue, nor any soft music.

At night, the city streets are eerie, and walking back from the American compound, where a newsman can telephone his story to Saigon, is a nervous experience. North Vietnamese infiltrators have reportedly slipped into town and every shadow is a lump in the throat.

South Vietnamese sentries are just as nervous, for they fire at shadows. The late walker whistles and sings and shouted "bao-chi" ("news-

man") every 30 seconds or so.

In the morning, Hue was very still. The city was nearly empty. The police and a few other civil servants were left, as were the regrouping Government troops and some civilian diehards.

The Quangtri province chief who had fled to Hue and set up a "government in exile" there fled further south to Danang and once again announced his exile administration.

The Americans' Armed Forces Vietnam Network comes on with a reversed call sign. It used to say "This is AFVN, serving the American fighting man 24 hours a day, from the delta to the DMZ." Now that the North Vietnamese have pushed their border 30 miles south the demilitarized zone the military network says simply that it serves the fighting man all day, with no reference to geography.

A professor of French at Hue University opens a conversation with a newsman at the telegraph office. His wife has taken their three children to safety in Danang, and he is waiting for her to come back before they move the last of their belongings.

"How long do you think I can stay in Hue?" he asks. "Will it be safe for five days, maybe a week? I must wire for my wife and I have not heard from her."

The newsman says he has no way of knowing when the

enemy will attack, but the distraught professor keeps asking how much time he has. Finally, he lowers his voice to a desperate whisper and asks: "Will the American troops come back? Will the marines come to help us?"

He pauses, then adds woe-fully: "If they don't Hue is finished and the country is finished."

On the street outside, a deserter tries to sell me his M-16 rifle. When I decline, he says, "No sweat, man."

At the military compound inside the old walled section of Hue known as the Citadel, there is a mammoth hospital complex for the thousands of army wounded. What will happen to them when the North Vietnamese attack, a doctor is asked. He shakes his head disconsolately. "They'll never get them out of here in time."

A young policeman on duty at one of Hue's bridges has sent his family away. But he says, "I've got my back to the wall. If I run away now, the Government might arrest and shoot me. And if I stay, maybe the other side will kill me."

It all sounds hopeless and irretrievable. But when a student friend in Hue is asked what will be his people's fate, he smiles and replies stoically: "We'll survive. That's all I know. We'll survive."