

At the Front Near Hue, Chess and Songs

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MYCHANH, South Vietnam, May 11 — As the locusts screeched from the tamarind trees in the heavy heat, South Vietnamese marines dozed in their hammocks, played Chinese chess or, strumming guitars, sang sentimental popular songs.

The marine position on the south bank of the gentle Mychanh River is the front line of defense for the city of Hue, about 25 miles to the south, and it is hard to reconcile this scene of apparent calm with the American prediction that the Communists will begin their final assault on Hue within a week.

The front has been fairly static for over a week, following the fall of Quangtri city, less than 15 miles to the north. Since then the North Vietnamese have been active on the other side of the Mychanh River and to the east and west of the Government defense line — moving up men and equipment and using small teams to try to blow bridges and to mine Route 1, which runs to Hue.

Something touched off enemy mines on the highway early today just a few miles south of the front line. The road was gouged by two craters, and three water buffalo lay dead on the shoulder. A marine squad with a mine detector was sweeping the area.

Bridge Was Their Target

Farther down the road toward Hue the bodies of four North Vietnamese were sprawled on the roadside—the remains of a team that had tried to blow a nearby bridge.

The closer a visitor gets to Hue the more villagers are seen

harvesting rice and vegetables — seemingly oblivious to the war just a few miles away, but ready to flee the moment it gets near enough to frighten the pigs and chickens. Closer to the front there are more South Vietnamese artillery, tanks and bunkers, with the troops digging in for the battle to come.

Route 1 is still littered with steel helmets, boots, pieces of uniforms and five-gallon gasoline cans — the spoor of the South Vietnamese Third Division, which came down the road in headlong flight last week after abandoning Quangtri.

But mostly the highway is lonely, and those who drive it toward the Mychanh front keep looking nervously across the overgrown fields on both sides — good cover for Communist rocket teams.

Fire From Across River

Despite the relaxed air and the lack of recent major contact with the enemy, the front has not been completely quiet. This morning the Communists fired ten mortar rounds from across the river, but they landed harmlessly.

The village the enemy occupies was then pounded all day by artillery placed below Mychanh. For hours flames and black smoke rose above the thick trees on the other side of the river.

There was also some action five days ago, but it was a tragic mistake. American F-4 Phantom jets unloaded a dozen bombs on a hamlet of Mychanh, killing nine South Vietnamese marines. Most of the hamlet, deserted some time before by its civilian population, was burned to the ground.

One building left standing is

a Roman Catholic high school, over whose doorway is fixed a plaster statue of the Virgin Mary. The name of the school, painted across the front in green, is Queen of Peace of Vietnam.

Church Is Command Post

After the incident the South Vietnamese Marine battalion here began using fluorescent red and orange strips to mark its positions. Two of the strips were stretched on the ground outside the battalion command post — a deserted Catholic church on a hill overlooking the river.

The American Marine adviser, Capt. Ray L. Smith, sat just inside the door, resting his feet in rubber shower slippers as he talked on the field radio with the pilots of observation planes over the area. The talk was about North Vietnamese supply columns moving in to the north and west. One observer also reported that he was calling in artillery fire on suspected tank columns.

Like South Vietnamese officers around here, Captain Smith, who is 26 years old and from Woodbridge, Va., and who speaks quite good Vietnamese, predicted that the North Vietnamese assault on Hue would be unsuccessful.

"I think it's over for them up here," he said. "I don't think they're going to take any more territory on this front. They're going to try, sure, but they've taken heavy casualties and I think they've run out of steam."

He paused for a moment and then added: "I wish the battle would begin. The weather's been good for air support. I wish it would start while the weather holds."

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