

Jan. 31, 1968: Quad 50s at Hue

by Bob Lauver



I had been in Vietnam for 15 months on the afternoon of January 30th, 1968. Since September of 1967 my time had been served as squad leader and acting section chief with Battery G, 65th Artillery, a "Quad 50" unit.

A Quad 50 is an air defense gun turret with four .50-caliber machine guns and a gunner that sits in-between them. They were deployed on the ground or mounted on trucks to protect convoys. G 65th was attached to the 1st of the 44th Artillery, a "Duster" (Twin 40mm) battalion. We had been farmed out to 3rd Marine Division for convoy escort duty up and down Highway 1 and had run Highway 9 to Khe Sanh and Lang Vei. We also provided perimeter support for firebases like Camp J.J. Carroll, Gio Linh, Con Thien, L.Z. Baldy, L.Z. Ross, L.Z. Bastogn, and others that either didn't have a name or I have forgotten what they were called.

I had spent time with the 3rd Marine Division, 101st Airborne, and the 7th and 12th Cav. attached to the Americal Division, but until the 1968 Tet Offensive in Hue, I had never supported the 1st Marine Division. After January 31st, 1968, I would never forget them.



At Fort Bliss, Texas, Quad 50 crews trained against aerial targets, but in Vietnam they provided antipersonnel firepower for perimeter defense at besieged firebases and pulled convoy escort duty for friendly forces moving along frequently ambushed highways.

It was always exciting to provide convoy escort duty through the historic Vietnamese provincial capital of Hue. There was a tendency to relax, unbutton the flak jacket, and take off the steel pot. Our gunner would climb out of the sling and sit on the back of the gun mount. We admired our surroundings as we crossed the Nguyen Hoang Bridge across the Perfume River and saw the massive stone walls of the Citadel. We particularly paid attention to the graceful young girls in their Ao Dais whom we supposed were students at the nearby University of Hue. We were looking forward to cold beer and hot chow with our comrades at the 1st Battalion of the 44th Artillery area in Phu Bai.

At about 3:30AM on the following morning, ears trained at Con Thien and Gio Linh picked up the unmistakable sounds of incoming mortars and rockets leaving their tubes. I was in the bunker by the time I woke up. As dawn was breaking, the rockets and mortar rounds had slacked off and a cry came down to "saddle-up". Two G-65th gun trucks escorted a small group of vehicles mounted with marines to the vicinity of a small village outside of Phu Bai where they were to hook us with a unit of ARVN troops. I have no idea of what the mission was, but there were streams of people running through the undergrowth away from the buildings. We did not see any action then and returned to the base compound at Phu Bai and headed for the mess hall. Before we could get any chow, word came down to hurry up and get back on the trucks. We were going to head for Hue; there was some trouble at the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) compound.

The two G-65th Quads, and I believe two 1-44 Dusters hooked up with a group of trucks that I later learned were elements of Alpha 1-1 of the 1st Marine Division. We moved north on Highway 1 toward the outskirts of Hue where we met a group of 3rd Division Marine M-48 tanks. To our left was an ARVN post engaged in a heated firefight on the hillside opposite us. We could plainly see black uniformed North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers running along the hillside from cover to cover.

The squad leader of one of the Dusters and myself requested permission to fire, however we were not allowed to fire over the ARVN base. The combined forces now started to move north toward Hue. Facing us, at the edge of a small bridge, was an ARVN tank with the commander appearing to be standing in the hatch on the front deck, but it didn't look right. We then realized that a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) had hit the tank, cut the tank commander in two, and blown the torso to the middle of the deck where it stayed.

The Marines were deployed on each side of Highway 1 with slow progress being made. We could hear the "phitt" of bullets and the sounds of firefights on each side of the column. As we progressed, we would be given targets by the marines. Our progress halted at a traffic circle in the vicinity of the An Cuu Bridge. We backed the Quad into the edge of the circle and dismounted to wait. Although there was heavy incoming fire, I took what I thought was secure cover and started to open a can of "C" rations. I heard several rounds pass uncomfortably close and turning, noticed a line of holes through my "secure cover" right above my head. The cover was nothing more than sheet metal shelving used for market day. I moved.

Incoming enemy fire intensified, and we were asked to direct fire at a multi-story building to the right side of the road. As we poured several hundred rounds into the building, there was a sudden break by several NVA soldiers across an open area to the rear of the structure. Open targets! The guns traversed to the right, cutting down the enemy until they took cover. Fighting was now house-to-house and very slow. We were still a hundred or so meters back from the MACV Compound, battles were raging all around us, and we became more and more involved in the fighting. To our left front, an RPG hit a Marine tank. A corpsman yelled for help and I jumped off the truck and ran to the tank with rounds kicking around my feet. He needed to get one of the wounded tankers to cover, so I grabbed and helped. The Marine was obviously seriously hurt, I never knew if he made it. I got back on the Quad 50 gun truck and we continued toward the Perfume River. During that day of sheer terror and pumping adrenaline, strange memories can be retained. I remember a Marine going into a building firing repeatedly and suddenly reappearing with a case of warm beer. The advance was stalled for a few minutes.

We had reached within a few blocks of the MACV compound when PFC Theodore Harris the gun loader and David (?) the driver on my gun truck, jumped down and ran to the assistance of a Marine with his leg almost blown off. As we neared the Perfume River, the command was given for us to move up to the front. We received sniper fire from a building to our right that had a very modernistic design and was some four stories high. We sprayed the entire front of the building with the .50-cals. There was glass behind the design. I believe that this was the city library. The Quads and Dusters were positioned at the base of the Nguyen Hoang Bridge and ordered to fire across the Perfume River in support of Marines from Golf Company, 2-5, 1st Marine Division, now advancing to the north side of the bridge. I remember a sequence of photographs that was later published; the first showed two orderly columns advancing onto the bridge. The next photo was of men under heavy fire running to get back to cover. The NVA had allowed the Marines to cross the length of the bridge before opening up with automatic weapons, recoilless rifles, and RPGs. Dead and injured Marines lay on the bridge.



Quads and Dusters were positioned at the base of the Nguyen Hoang Bridge and ordered to

My Quad 50 was providing cover fire from across the river when a Marine officer came up to me and asked, "Sarge, my men are getting the hell shot out of them, can you help them out?" I looked at the other guys on the truck (Harris, Davis, the gunner, and David the driver), and they looked at me and shrugged. There was never any thought to say "No", but I think that each of us told ourselves that we weren't going to make it back from this one. I said "Let's Go".

We pulled the Quad truck onto the bridge and drove toward the Citadel on the north end. This could have been a technical mistake since our guns were on the back of the truck and not facing the enemy. Why we didn't back across I don't exactly remember? It was a long bridge and driving in reverse that far under enemy fire would have been difficult to say the least. There were dead and wounded Marines along both edges of the bridge's deck. Men were using the bodies of their dead buddies as cover so they could continue to put return fire on enemy. Marines were yelling at us as we drove across to try to tell us where to direct our fire. The incoming fire was intense.

As soon as we reached the north end of the bridge, we opened up our machine guns on the buildings that ran parallel to the river. The southeast corner of the wall of the Citadel was just to our

left. As we continued sweeping fire across the buildings, I noticed movement to my left rear, glancing down I saw an NVA soldier at the corner of a sandbagged bunker holding a grenade. I yelled "grenade!" and we all jumped off the truck and took cover beneath the truck bed. I remember hiding behind the dual wheels of the truck shooting at this NVA with an old S&W .38 caliber revolver, all the while there were four perfectly good .50-caliber machineguns over my head! Theodore Harris later told me that the grenade actually went under the truck, where we were lying, instead of into the bed of the truck. Fortunately the grenade did not explode, it was a dud!



We climbed back into the truck and the gunner Davis, immediately started firing at trench lines that were in the park to our left. With all the noise of the guns, I had to beat him on the helmet and physically turn his head to bring him around to fire on the bunker. As he brought the guns around and began to fire, all the bullets went over the top of the bunker. We were too close! The gun mount could not depress down enough! We yelled at the driver to pull the truck up, which brought the guns to bear down on the bunker at point blank range. I remember the tracers going right through both walls of the

bunker and glancing off the Perfume River beyond. When we stopped firing the bunker was just a pile of sand.

During this action, I saw many Marines of Golf 2-5 perform heroic actions that remain unheralded to this day. Many Marines were cut down trying to take out the machine gun in the bunker. I remember a Marine charging the bunker with grenades only to not make it. Another Marine with an M-60 or M-16, firing from the hip, also did not make it to the bunker.

PFC Harris and I got off the truck while the driver turned the truck around. A Marine taking cover beside Harris was shot in the head and instantly killed. As the Quad truck drew even with us, we loaded the Marine in and started back across the bridge, picking up dead and wounded as we went.

That night was spent in the MACV compound under almost continual enemy fire. I did not notice until we were in the compound that I had injuries to my left leg. As a result I was medevaced to Subic Bay in the Philippines via Hospital Ship the following day. A few weeks later I returned to the G-65th and later left Vietnam after 18 months in country.



3rd Marine Division Officers inspect a Quad soon after our arrival in Dong Ha

Notes:

Both George W. Smith in The Siege at Hue, Ballantine, 1999, and Keith William Nolan in Battle For Hue TET 1968, Presidio Press, 1983, give almost identical accounts of the Quad 50 on the bridge at Hue. I will quote from Nolan: "The NVA fire was still heavy. One of the U.S. Army trucks took off from the relatively safe side of the river, stopped on the other side of the bridge, and started hosing down the enemy positions with its quad-fifties. Breth was watching from the LZ across the river, admiring the crew's bravery, when he suddenly saw two North Vietnamese break from a house. The sappers sprinted a dozen yards and hurled two satchel charges in the back. The truck and men went up in a hellish explosion. ..." For the record, there was only one Quad 50 on that bridge, the one I

have described here.

I have communicated with several survivors from Golf 2/5 over the past year, they all seem to think that there would be fewer of them alive today if it were not for this one Quad 50 from Battery G, 65th Artillery.

For the actions of January 31st, 1968, Sgt. Bob Lauver received a Silver Star and his second Purple Heart. The other 3 crew members were each awarded a Bronze Star with "V" device. In August 2002, Bob Lauver and his wife Susan, with two other Vietnam Veterans, escorted a group of four Gold Star Mothers to Vietnam. The Lauvers made numerous trips across the bridge now know as the Trang Tien Bridge, but in their hearts and memories it will always

