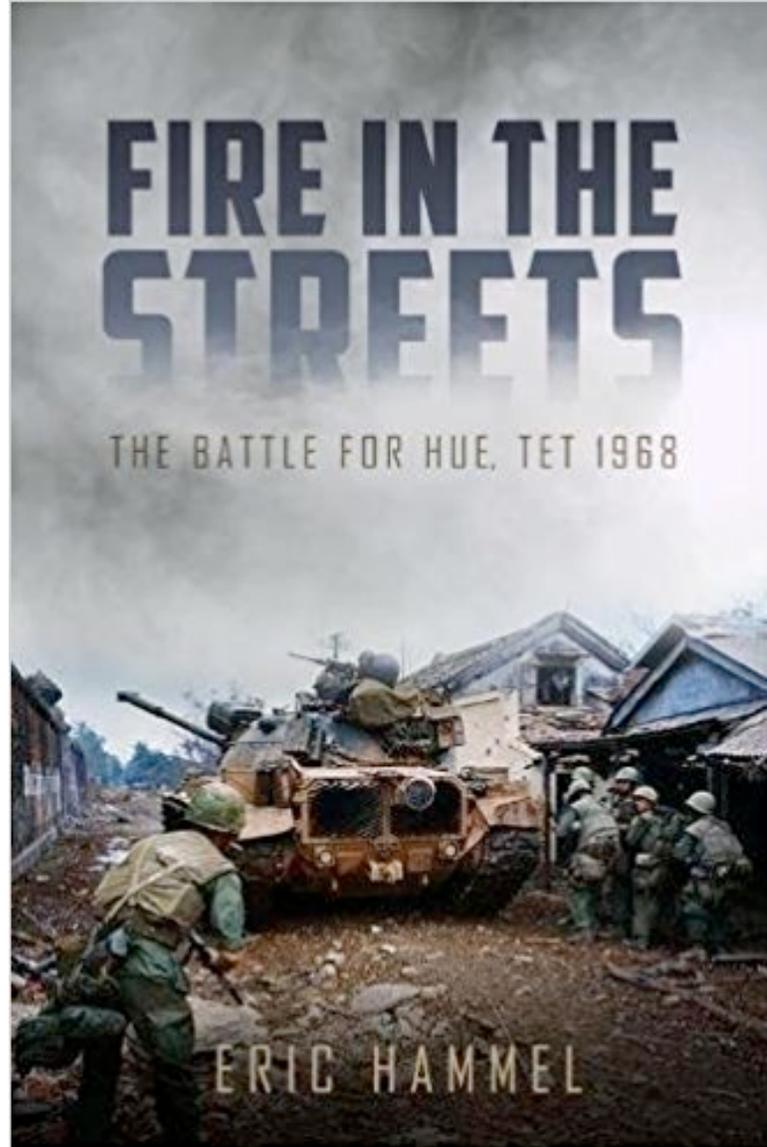


ABSTRACT: FIRE IN THE STREETS: THE BATTLE OF HUE, TET 1968, BY ERIC HAMMEL



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SOURCE: Eric Hammel, “Fire in the Streets: The Battle for Hue, Tet 1968” (Casemate; Reprint edition, January 11, 2018) pp. 276

Introduction by CATCOM Editor: Captain Bob Laramy, USMC, served as an aerial observer with the 220th Aviation Company “Catkillers” during his shortened tour. Captain Laramy and others, on any given day, bravely contributed their individual skills in combat to protect ground components of numerous supported units. On that fateful day, 22 February 1968, his pilot, WO Terance M “Terry” Bozarth, gave his life in heroic performance of his duty. Bob Laramy, equally in harms way in the back seat, successfully brought their aircraft to a controlled crash on the ground but suffered injuries and severe burns that resulted in subsequent evacuation from the theater of operation. Accounts of such bravery under fire, and expertly recorded by Eric Hammel, are found throughout his renowned works. We are indeed honored to share this incident-specific abstract at the Catkillers.org web site.

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BENCHMARK 15

To a Marine rifleman fighting his way toward the Citadel's eastern corner, the preparations by the two A-4 pilots would have seemed inordinately relaxed and unhurried. While orbiting, Major Latall and Major Van Es checked and set their gunsights and arming switches for a low-level bombing run. Then, as they awaited clearance into the target area, they continued to orbit and listen to the strike channel to monitor a mission that was in progress; an Army O-1 spotter plane was directing two other Marine A-4s against a target beside the Citadel. The exchanges between the O-1 and the A-4 pilots revealed that the ragged cloud cover began only 1,000 feet above the ground and that the margin was rapidly deteriorating. Latall and Van Es also learned that the other flight—the third strike of the afternoon—had received hostile fire during its run on the target.

Hue-Phu Bai contacted Latall and Van Es and discussed the need to divert Helborne 513 to another target. The minimum ceiling and visibility standards for an "emergency" mission—a 1,000-foot ceiling with a three-mile visibility—had been breached. Major Latall and Major Van Es decided, however, that they would hit Hue if they could get someone to guide them onto a target right away, before the weather deteriorated further. Latall radioed Hue-Phu Bai with the offer and suggested they make the mission "mandatory" to skirt the weather minimums. At 1500, Hue-Phu Bai warned him that Helborne 513 was about to be assigned a close-support mission that was mandatory in precedence—an unheard-of level.

With weather restrictions effectively lifted, the A-4 pilots joined up, extended their speed brakes, throttled back, and, on instruments, began their descent over the South China Sea. The pilots had no clear idea where they were going to belly through the clouds. While the jets were descending, they were turned over to Benchmark 15, an O-1 flown by an Army pilot and manned by a Marine aerial observer, Captain Bob Laramy.

The A-4s completed their letdown over the water and found the bottom of the overcast at a mere 400 feet. They commenced a turn to port and slowed down as much as they could, as they turned back toward Hue. They were over the city before either jet pilot actually saw Benchmark 15 for the first time. The dark-green O-1 was barely visible, and, to A-4 pilots flying along at 350 knots, it appeared to be standing still one mile ahead and to the right. Just an instant after Major Latall first saw the O-1, Captain Laramy radioed that he could see the A-4s.

As Laramy was describing the target, Latall pulled back off Van Es's wing, but not as far back as he would have liked. The A-4s were painted light gray, just about the same color as the clouds they were skipping through. If Latall had let Van Es get too far ahead, he would have lost sight of him.

Latall was impressed with Laramy's target description. Benchmark 15 sounded like a good, sharp controller, an important bonus in the dark, closed-in sky over Hue. Bob Laramy *was* a sharp controller. In addition, he had been over Hue every day since January 31, mostly to no avail because of the weather.

Captain Laramy said he would mark the target with green smoke, an imperative in that weather. The Army O-1, the only one available to guide Helborne 513, was fitted out as a medevac bird; it had none of the smoke rockets the spotter planes usually carried. To deliver a green-smoke *grenade*, Captain Laramy had to ask the pilot to fly low and slow over the target, an extremely hazardous enterprise. It was then that Laramy learned that the pilot was making his combat debut;

this was his very first mission over Vietnam. The pilot was game for the effort, but his inexperience severely complicated a really tricky situation.

The jets' final approach to the target was scary. Flying too low and too slowly with very heavy ordnance loads, both pilots were acutely aware of the many high radio towers that dotted Hue. They could see none of them clearly and had no real sense of the positions of the towers relative to their flight paths. A broad column of oily smoke from an LCU burning in the river, towering dust clouds from heavy-artillery detonations, and rain impeded visibility and competed for attention. There were even reports that helicopters were in the air nearby.

Benchmark 15 commenced his marking run over the target—the section of the Citadel's southeast wall directly in front of Major Bob Thompson's 1/5. As the green smoke billowed up, both pilots reported from their loose orbit that they could see it—and another green-smoke source. Neither of the jet pilots had any idea which was the one marking their target. Clearly, the NVA were monitoring the tactical-air frequency, for only they could have set off the second green-smoke grenade. No problem. Captain Laramy knew which was the right marker, and he talked the A-4s into their target.

Major Van Es made a dummy run to confirm that he knew where the target was, and Major Latall followed. It was worth the extra risk. Neither pilot knew precisely how close to fellow Marines they would be dropping their bombs, but they knew it would be close. There was no margin for error.

Captain Laramy confirmed that the A-4s were on target. The NVA on the ground also confirmed—by firing several machine guns at the Marine jets.

The jet pilots had the option of dropping everything they were carrying on one run, but Van Es and Latall knew they were going to be the last flight of the day; the weather ensured that. Latall and Van Es decided to drop two bombs per run, to be sure the Marines on the ground would get the full benefit of the mission.

They went in at 100 feet, in dead level runs at 350 knots. Latall lost sight of Van Es during the first run, but the leader's first drop was superb. As he pulled off the target, Van Es radioed that the run had been "hot," meaning that he had released ordnance and that he had taken fire. Benchmark 15 gave Latall a slight correction so a broader area could be covered. Latall saw tracers coming at him, and he heard the *thumk-thumk* as several rounds struck his airplane. Despite the distractions, Latall made a perfect drop. Major Bob Thompson later reported in a letter of commendation that the first four napalm canisters had detonated only fifty meters in front of the battalion front line. Thompson had felt their heat.

On the next run, Major Van Es put a pair of 300-pound Snakeeyes right on the target. Latall turned in to do the same. By then, the black smoke from the napalm and familiar landmarks made finding the target a snap. The overcast was lower—200 feet—and the NVA machine guns fired again. Latall continued toward the target, taking care that the O-1 was not in his way. He glanced down and was shocked to note that, in jet-jock terms, he was eyeball-to-eyeball with thousands of people—fleeing civilians carrying their valuables on their backs. At the release point, Latall again saw and felt rounds impacting his A-4. He pulled up slightly after releasing his bombs so he could check the jet's flight controls. Everything was running fine, but there were holes in the fuselage near his feet and cockpit pressurization had been lost. Latall also determined that his navigation equipment had been shot out.

On the way back to the target, Latall passed Benchmark 15. The O-1 was to his left, flying straight and level, going in the same direction. However, as Latall was returning downwind to position himself for another bombing run, his earphones rang with the warning, "Benchmark One

Five! Pull up! Pull up!" Fearing that he was somehow on a collision course with the O-1, Latall pushed his airplane's nose down and dropped to only fifty feet. But the frantic call was repeated. By then Latall knew that he was nowhere near the O-1. It dawned on Latall that Captain Laramy had not described his last hits on the target.

Latall throttled back as much as he dared, to get a better look around. Over his left shoulder he saw the O-1 staggering from left rear to right rear. There was no smoke or flame, but Latall could clearly see orange fluid streaming from the O-1's nose. It was obvious that Benchmark 15 was going to crash or crash-land. Major Van Es broadcast that Helborne 513 was available for a rescue combat air patrol—that is, ready to orbit over the O-1 until a rescue helicopter could get there.

By then, both A-4s had used more than their allotted fuel for the mission. Any further flying over Hue would endanger their return to Chu Lai. Nevertheless, the A-4 pilots decided to stay longer. The O-1 broke out of its glide toward the Perfume River. Its nose pitched up, and the airplane fell to earth.

As the O-1 fell, Latall once again came in over the target. He did not feel he could drop bombs blindly, however, so he turned off his master armament switch and made a dummy run. If nothing else, the dummy run would put NVA heads down, thus affording the infantry some small respite.

Latall was coming off the dummy run when someone called on the radio to report that a ground rescue party was on the way to the crash scene. Helborne 513 was directed to drop the remaining bombs on the target and head home.

The A-4 pilots ignored these instructions and radioed that they were remaining over Hue. They made several more dummy runs over the target and passes over the O-1, discouraging both NVA movement against 1/5 and any enemy efforts to get to the downed spotter plane. Before the A-4s could drop any more bombs, Hue-Phu Bai firmly ordered them to fly home because the weather was nearly solid from the ground to 20,000 feet. Latall happened to catch sight of Van Es at the last minute, and he joined on the lead A-4, which was important because of Latall's nonfunctioning navigation equipment. They climbed out on instruments. On the way home, Latall notified Van Es that fuel was leaking from a hole in Van Es's main fuel cell.

Though both arrived with very little fuel, the A-4s made it back to Chu Lai without further difficulty. Major Van Es's bomber had been hit in the main fuel cell, port wingtip, and port landing-gear door; Latall's had sustained hits from the aft section of the nose on back to the rudder and elevator. Calls from Chu Lai that evening revealed that the Army O-1 pilot had been shot and killed as Major Latall was making his second hot pass. Captain Bob Laramy, a Marine infantry officer, had received rudimentary pilot training. He tried to fly the airplane, but the controls had failed and the O-1 had crashed. Captain Laramy walked into an ARVN position, but he had been critically burned in the crash and, eventually, was medically retired. The next day, Major John Van Es and Major Ray Latall heard that they had been credited with killing seventy-three NVA within 150 meters of the Citadel wall.

Editor, Catkillers.org: Copies of this work are available in popular versions at most major booksellers, including Barnes and Noble and Amazon below:

<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/fire-in-the-streets-eric-hammel/1026785242> - Fire in the Streets: The Battle for Hue, Tet 1968

<https://www.amazon.com/Fire-Streets-Battle-Hue-1968/dp/1612005896/> - Fire in the Streets: The Battle for Hue, Tet 1968