



AFN'S DEFENDERS OF DET. 5

- Sgt. 1st Class John T. Anderson, USA
- Spc. John F. Bagwell, USA
- Staff Sgt. John A. Deering, USMC
- SP5 Harry L. Ettmueller, USA
- 1st Lt. James V. Di Bernardo, USMC
- Mr. Courtney Niles, Jr.
- Sgt 1st Class Donat J. Gouin, USA
- SP5 Steven J. Stroub, USA
- Sgt. Thomas F. Young, USMC

First Man Out

by Mike Roberts
AFN-BC Television Division

Armed Forces Vietnam Network Detachment 5 met its end in 1968 with its nine defenders bloodied from an all-night battle. Courtney Niles had fought fiercely to save it, but with the building in flames it was time to escape. "Everybody keep watch," he told them, "and gather up all the grenades you can."

Since May of 1967, the Det. 5 transmitter at Hue had been in the perfect spot to boom AFVN TV across 2,000 square miles of South Vietnam's I Corps near the communist north. But the old colonial house where the men of Channel 11 lived was nobody's idea of a good place for a fight. There were no perimeter walls or defensive positions. It had no field radio, just a solitary phone line even the dullest enemy could be counted-on to cut. The nearest actual fortification was the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) headquarters a mile away.



Above: The Det 5 "Alamo" after the fight. (Official U.S. Navy photo, 12 February 1968)

pair of M79 grenade launchers but had none. Instead of two M60 machine guns they had one, and it was rendered inoperable by issues of maintenance and training. The broadcasters were isolated and under-gunned.

Enemy mortar fire began Wednesday, 31 January, and over the next four days the savage brawl that became the Battle of Hue rumbled to a citywide crescendo. Det. 5's doors and windows were blasted away. Gunfire disabled the only vehicle in which they might escape. They were tear-gassed, but had no masks. Explosions collapsed the roof and taxed their nerve.

It was Niles who tried to set a practical tone amid the jarring din. "That was a satchel charge," he matter-of-factly told one anxious man, "and you might as well get used to them. You'll get over it." But all knew their only hope was to make it, somehow, to the MACV compound.

The decisive assault on the Det. 5 Alamo began Sunday. Niles motioned everyone to their posts as relentless adversaries darted past holes in the building's walls. The judgment of this older, decorated veteran carried weight even though he wasn't in command. Army SP4 John Bagwell traded frantic shots with an NVA soldier perfectly framed in a window and put him down. Another American pulled the trigger on an enemy storming across a pile



Above: The AFVN Det 5 billet, former residence of the U.S. Consul in Hue, where the fight took place. (Undated photo by Det 5 member Donat "Don" Gouin, from afnvets.net)

The Army had been issuing the M16 for the past three years, but the Soldiers and Marines of Det. 5 were given older M1 carbines, some of which were nonfunctional. There were only two magazines apiece. They were authorized a

of debris into the middle of the defenders, but the hammer just fell with a click. Niles dropped the attacker with six shots from his carbine.

Daybreak Monday capped sixteen hours of non-stop fighting. The food and water was gone, the ammo nearly so, and fresh NVA reinforcements were within spitting distance. When a volley of RPGs set the place on fire there was nothing to do but leave. They just had to pick the moment. And somebody had to go first.

That's when Niles told the men of Det. 5 to gather their grenades. "I'm going to make a run," he said. "Whoever wants to can follow me." Then he was out the door, headed to the left where he dropped prone in a shallow ravine.

He certainly had to know he'd be an easier target in his white shirt, the only one not wearing an olive drab uniform. Courtney Niles had served ten years in the Army, but now at 36 he was out. His job as a civilian contract engineer with NBC was what had brought him to Hue and the fight of his life.

SP4 Bagwell lingered just a moment to see whether the others were coming, then rushed out to join Niles in the ravine, firing his last 18 rounds as he ran.

He was horrified at what he found. "I think I'm going into shock," Niles said. The engineer's white shirt was splashed with red and there was blood gushing from a bullet hole in his leg. Bagwell took off his belt, cinched it above the wound, and worried. He'd only arrived at Det. 5 two days before the siege and didn't know the area. All he had going for him besides prayer were Niles' rifle and sense of direction.



Above: Marines of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, move through a devastated Hue in February, 1968. (Photo from National Archives)

Niles also brought tenacity. "We've got to move quickly," he said, asking Bagwell to help him to his feet. The soldier kept Niles upright as they darted and lurched toward safety. The civilian kept Bagwell on course. When they reached a street guarded by communist troops, he was insistent: MACV lay beyond, they had to cross.

"Ready?" asked Niles. Bagwell nodded, and the men hurried into the open where two bullets found their marks. Bagwell was hit in the foot but that sensation was no match for adrenaline and fear. He kept moving. Niles took a round to the head, dropped and was still.

Combat is notoriously fickle. It was only by following Niles out the door and to the left that Bagwell escaped the encirclement and ultimately got to leave Vietnam a month later. Those who exited to the right were set on a path toward tragedy. Sergeant Thomas Young, USMC, died at age 21 in a torrent of small arms fire. His name is on Panel 37E, Row 16 of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. The others were cornered and captured. Two Marines and three Soldiers were marched up the Ho Chi



Above Left: Sgt Thomas Young, USMC, died in a hail of gunfire attempting to reach the MAC-V compound.
Above Right: SP5 Steven Stroub was executed in front of his friends. (Photos used by permission of Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund)

Minh trail into five years of brutal confinement. The fourth soldier, Army SP5 Steven Stroub, was led into the street and executed in front of

his friends. He was 20. He is also on Panel 37E, second from the right in Row 45.

AFVN Detachment 5 remains the only unit in AFN history to take one hundred percent casualties. When the commander of Det. 2 in Da Nang surveyed the destruction at Hue a month later, he reported that the station had been established in “an impossible area to defend.”

In 1968, Courtney Niles was posthumously awarded the Republic of Vietnam’s Psychological Warfare Medal, 1st Class. In 2007, he and his Det. 5 colleagues were enshrined in the U.S. Army Public Affairs Hall of Fame.

The name of no civilian appears on The Wall, not even one who fought bravely beside his AFVN brothers like the soldier he once was. But like those of all the gallant men from the lost detachment, the name of Courtney Niles is etched with deep reverence in the memory of AFN.



Above: Courtney Niles, third from right in white shirt, with AFVN personnel in Hue. This photo hangs in the U.S. Army Public Affairs Hall of Fame.