

**U.S. MARINES
IN VIETNAM
FIGHTING THE NORTH VIETNAMESE
1967**



U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

FIGHTING THE NORTH VIETNAMESE

1967

by

Major Gary L. Telfer, USMC

Lieutenant Colonel Lane Rogers, USMC

and

V. Keith Fleming, Jr.



HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION
HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS
WASHINGTON, D.C.

1984

**Other Volumes in the Marine Corps
Vietnam Operational Histories Series**

*U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1954-1964, The Advisory and Combat
Assistance Era, 1977*

U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1965, The Landing and the Buildup, 1978

U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1966, An Expanding War, 1982

U.S. Marines in Vietnam, January-June 1968, now in preparation

U.S. Marines in Vietnam, July-December 1968, scheduled for preparation

U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1969, now in preparation

U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1970-1971, now in preparation

U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1971-1973, now in preparation

U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1973-1975, now in preparation

Library of Congress Card No. 77-604776

PCN 190 003090 00

Foreword

This is the fourth volume in a planned 10-volume operational and chronological series covering the U.S. Marine Corps' participation in the Vietnam War. A separate topical series will complement the operational histories. This volume details the change in focus of the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), which fought in South Vietnam's northernmost corps area, I Corps. III MAF, faced with a continued threat in 1967 of North Vietnamese large unit entry across the Demilitarized Zone separating the two Vietnams, turned over the Chu Lai enclave to the U.S. Army's Task Force Oregon and shifted the bulk of its forces—and its attention—northward. Throughout the year, the 3d Marine Division fought a conventional, large-unit war against the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) near the demilitarized zone. The 1st Marine Division, concentrated in Thua Thien and Quang Nam provinces, continued both offensive and pacification operations. Its enemy ranged from small groups of Viet Cong guerrillas in hamlets and villages up to formations as large as the *2d NVA Division*. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing provided air support to both divisions, as well as Army and allied units in I Corps. The Force Logistic Command, amalgamated from all Marine logistics organizations in Vietnam, served all major Marine commands.

This volume, like its predecessors, concentrates on the ground war in I Corps and III MAF's perspective of the Vietnam War as an entity. It also covers the Marine Corps participation in the advisory effort, the operations of the two Special Landing Forces of the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet, and the services of Marines with the staff of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. There are additional chapters on supporting arms and logistics, and a discussion of the Marine role in Vietnam in relation to the overall American effort.

The nature of the war facing III MAF during 1967 forced the authors to concentrate on major operations, particularly those characterized by heavy combat. The uneven quality of the official reports submitted by combat units also played a role in selecting the materials presented in this volume. This is not meant to slight those whose combat service involved long, hot days on patrol, wearying hours of perimeter defense, and innumerable operations, named and un-named. These Marines also endured fights just as deadly as the ones against large enemy regular units. III MAF's combat successes in 1967 came from the efforts of all Americans in I Corps.

All three authors have been historians in the History and Museums Division. Major Gary L. Telfer, now a retired lieutenant colonel, has a bachelor of arts degree from Muskingum College, Ohio. He had two tours in Vietnam, first as an advisor with a Vietnamese Army artillery battalion and, three years later, with the 12th Marines. Major Telfer began this history project and produced the initial manuscript. His replacement, Lieutenant Colonel Lane Rogers, now also retired, expanded the materials into a second draft. He is a member of the class of 1953 of the U.S. Naval Academy and was an advisor with the Vietnamese Marine Corps. The third author, Dr. V. Keith Fleming, Jr., is a

former Marine officer who served as a rifle company commander in Vietnam. He prepared the comment edition and then incorporated the suggestions of the reviewers. He has bachelor of arts and master of arts degrees from the University of Alabama and a doctoral degree in American military history from Ohio State University.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "E. H. Simmons". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent "S" at the end.

E. H. SIMMONS
Brigadier General, U. S. Marine Corps, Retired
Director of Marine Corps History and Museums

Preface

U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967, like its predecessors, is largely based on the holdings of the Marine Corps Historical Center. These official files include the monthly unit command chronologies, after action reports, messages, units' daily journal files, the oral history collection, comment files, and previously classified studies prepared by members of the division. Especially useful in the latter category were Lieutenant Colonel Ralph F. Moody and Major Thomas E. Donnelly, "Introduction of North Vietnamese Regulars," and Lieutenant Colonel Ralph F. Moody, "A Higher Order of Warfare," parts IV and V of a then-projected single-volume history of the war.

The authors supplemented the above sources with research in the records of the other Services and pertinent published primary and secondary sources. Although none of the information in this history is classified, some of the documentation on which it is based still has a classified designation. More than 250 reviewers, most of whom were participants in the events described in this volume, read a comment edition of the manuscript. Their comments, where applicable, have been incorporated into the text. A list of all those who commented is included in the appendices. All ranks used in the body of the text are those held by the individuals in 1967.

The production of this volume, like its predecessors, has been a cooperative effort. All of the Vietnam historians, past and present, in the Histories Section, History and Museums Division, have reviewed the draft manuscript. Mrs. Joyce Bonnett, head archivist, and her former assistant, Mrs. Linda T. Benedict, aided our access into the records in the Archives Section. Miss Evelyn A. Englander, head librarian, and her assistant, Mrs. Patricia E. Morgan, were very helpful in obtaining needed references. The Reference Section, headed by Mr. Danny J. Crawford, and earlier by Mrs. Gabrielle M. Santelli, made its voluminous files available and answered the authors' numerous questions cheerfully and professionally. Mrs. Regina Strother, formerly with the Defense Audio-Visual Agency, but now with the History and Museums Division, graciously assisted in the photographic research. Mr. Benis M. Frank, the head of the Oral History Section, was equally helpful in making his tapes and transcripts available.

Mr. Robert E. Struder, head of the Publications Production Section, skillfully guided the manuscript through the various production phases. Mr. Struder also served as the project officer supervising the contract with the University of Maryland's Cartographic Services Laboratory, which made the maps in this volume. Mrs. Bonnie Kane and Ms. Lee Ritzman Ebinger were the cartographers, under the supervision of Mrs. Sue Gibbons and her successor, Ms. Vickie Taylor. The typesetting of the manuscript was done by Corporals Paul W. Gibson, Joseph J. Hynes, Mark J. Zigante, and Stanley W. Crowl. Mrs. Catherine A. Kerns contributed significantly to the typesetting effort, and provided considerable technical expertise on typesetting procedures. Mr. William S. Hill, the Division's graphics specialist, completed the design and layout of the book, incorporating some work completed earlier by his predecessor, Mr. Dennis W. Kirschner.

The authors give special thanks to Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, the Director of Marine Corps History and Museums, whose policies guide the Vietnam series. Four successive Deputies for Marine Corps History—Colonel Herbert M. Hart, Colonel John E. Greenwood (now editor of the *Marine Corps Gazette*), Colonel Oliver M. Whipple, Jr., and Colonel John G. Miller—have shepherded this project to its completion. Mr. Henry I. Shaw, Jr., the Chief Historian, aided all three authors by giving us the benefit of his considerable experience in writing Marine Corps History, encouragement and advice when needed, and general editorial guidance. Mr. Jack Shulimson, now the senior Vietnam historian, provided advice to all three authors and aided research through his knowledge of Vietnam-era Marine Corps records. The historians in the historical offices of the Army, Navy, and Air Force have freely exchanged information with the authors and assisted in locating documents needed to complete our research. We express our gratitude to all those who reviewed the comment edition and pointed out needed corrections. They also were generous in providing personal photographs, documents, and the insights available to participants in events. Finally, the authors are responsible for the contents of the text, including the opinions expressed and any errors in fact.

GARY L. TELFER

LANE ROGERS

V. KEITH FLEMING, JR.

Table of Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Foreword	III
Preface	V
Table of Contents	VII
Maps	X
 PART I THE DMZ IN EARLY 1967	 1
Chapter 1 The Situation at the Start of the Year	3
The Early Days	3
Command Relations	4
A Change in Strategy	6
The Plan for the Year	6
The Enemy Organization	7
Tactical Considerations	8
Chapter 2 Spring Action South of the DMZ—February-April 1967	9
Operation Prairie I Continues	9
Operation Prairie II	9
Operation Prairie III	16
Chapter 3 Combined US/ARVN Operations in the DMZ	20
Operation Prairie IV Begins	20
Attack on Con Thien	21
Into the DMZ	23
Operation Lam Son 54	25
Operation Beau Charger	25
Operation Hickory	26
Operation Prairie IV Ends	30
Chapter 4 The First Battle of Khe Sanh	31
The Early Days	31
Opening Moves of the Battle	35
Reinforcing the Hill 861 Attack	39
Attacking Hill 881S	40
The Final Objective: Hill 881N	42
End of the Battle	44
Operation Crockett	46
 PART II SPRING FIGHTING IN SOUTHERN I CORPS	 49
Chapter 5 The War in Southern I Corps	51
The Situation	51
Operation Desoto	53

Deckhouse/Desoto	57
Desoto Continued	61
Operation Union	63
Union II	68
Chapter 6 Task Force Oregon	75
 PART III CONTINUING ACTION ALONG THE DMZ	 84
Chapter 7 The Barrier—Another Approach	86
Evolution of the Concept	86
Chapter 8 Con Thien and the Summer Battles Along the DMZ	95
Why Con Thien?	95
Operation Buffalo	96
 PART IV FALL COMBAT, NORTH AND SOUTH	 105
Chapter 9 Continuing Operations Against the <i>2d NVA Division</i>	107
Raids and Rockets in Quang Nam	107
Operation Cochise	109
Operation Swift	111
Chapter 10 Fall Fighting in the North	125
Operation Kingfisher	125
Medina/Bastion Hill/Lam Son 138	139
Adjustments within the 3d Marine Division	142
 PART V SPECIAL EFFORTS	 148
Chapter 11 The Special Landing Force	150
Doctrine Versus Expedient	150
Operation Deckhouse V, 6-15 January	151
Deckhouse VI/Desoto, 16 February-3 March	153
Beacon Hill I, 20 March-1 April	155
Beaver Cage/Union I, 28 April-12 May	158
Beau Charger/Belt Tight/Hickory/Prairie IV/Cimarron, 18 May-10 June	159
Day On, Stay On—SLF Operational Tempo Increases	161
Bear Bite/Colgate/Choctaw/Maryland, 2-27 June	162
Beacon Torch/Calhoun, 18 June-2 July, 25 June-2 July	162
SLF Alpha in Bear Claw/Buffalo/Hickory II, 3-16 July	163
SLF Bravo in Beaver Track/Buffalo/Hickory II, 4-16 July	164
Bear Chain/Fremont, 20-26 July	166
Beacon Guide, 21-30 July	167
Kangaroo Kick/Fremont, 1-21 August	167
Beacon Gate/Cochise, 7-27 August	168
Belt Drive/Liberty, 27 August-5 September	169
A Change in Scenario—The 46s are Grounded	170
Beacon Point/Fremont/Ballistic Charge/Shelbyville, 1-28 September	170
Fortress Sentry/Kingfisher, 17 September-15 October	171
Bastion Hill/Medina/Liberty II/Fremont, 10-23 October	172
Formation Leader/Liberty II/Knox, 17 October-4 November	173
Granite/Kentucky II and III, 26 October-16 November	173

Badger Hunt/Foster, 13-29 November	174
Fortress Ridge, 21-24 December	175
Badger Tooth, 26 December 1967-2 January 1968	176
Ballistic Arch/Kentucky V/Osceola, 24 November-31 December	179
Chapter 12 Pacification	182
The Problem Defined	182
County Fair	185
Marine Grass-Roots-Level Participation	186
Reporting and Evaluation	194
PART VI SUPPORT AND CONCLUSION	197
Chapter 13 Supporting Arms	199
Marine Air Operations	199
Fixed-Wing Operations	201
Helicopter Operations	206
Artillery	212
Chapter 14 Logistics	224
Upgrading the Logistic System	224
Problems with the M-16 Rifle	229
Navy Support	231
Marine Corps Engineers	238
Chapter 15 Other Marine Activities	241
Marines with MACV	241
The Embassy Guard	242
The Advisors	244
I Corps Advisors	245
The Rung Sat Special Zone	246
The Marine Advisory Unit	247
Action in Binh Dinh Province	250
Action in the South	251
Chapter 16 The Situation at the End of the Year	255
Operational Aspects	255
Personnel and Logistics	257
The Outlook for Victory	257
Enemy Dispositions	258
The Changed Situation	259
NOTES	261
APPENDICES	
A. Marine Command and Staff List, January-December 1966	273
B. Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations	287
C. Chronology of Significant Events	293
D. Medal of Honor Citations, 1966	297
E. List of Reviewers	313
F. Distribution of Aircraft, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific	317
G. Distribution of Personnel, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific	319
INDEX	325

Maps

Reference Map: I Corps Tactical Zone	XI
Marine Bases in Northern I CTZ, January 1967	7
Operations Hickory, Lam Son 54, Belt Tight, and Beau Charger, 19-26 May 1967 ...	24
Khe Sanh Combat Base and Vicinity 1967	32
Area of Action, Operation Desoto, 27-30 January 1967	54
Duc Pho and Vicinity, Operation Desoto, January 1967	55
Action of 21- April 1967, Operation Union	64
The Battle of Hill 110; 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, and 1st Battalion, 3d Marines; Operation Union, 10 May 1967	66
Operation Union II, Nui Loc Son Basin, Action of 26-29 May	69
Operation Union II, Nui Loc Son Basin, Action of 30 May-2 June	71
Major MAF Operations Southern ICTZ, January-June 1967	74
Infantry Battalion Location Prior to Arrival of Task Force Oregon	76
Infantry Battalion Realignments Resulting from Deployment of Task Force Oregon as of 30 April 1967	80
The Plan for the Strong Point Obstacle System	90
Operation Buffalo Action Near Con Thien	97
The Fights at Dong Son (2) and Chau Lam (1), Operation Swift, 4 September 1967 .	112
Major Engagements, Operation Swift, 4-15 September 1967	116
Operations, Medina, Bastion Hill, and Lam Son 138, 11-15 October 1967	140
Operation Badger Tooth 26-28 December 1967	177
NVA 130mm Field Gun Threat to Marine Logistic Bases, Summer 1967	221
Rocket Attack Da Nang Airbase, 14 July 1967	223
Saigon Area 1967	243

PART I
THE DMZ IN EARLY 1967

CHAPTER 1

The Situation at the Start of the Year

*The Early Days—Command Relations—The Plan for the Year—A Change in Strategy
The Enemy Organization—Tactical Considerations*

The Early Days

The landing of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) at Da Nang on 8 March 1965 reaffirmed the United States' determination to assist the South Vietnamese government in defending itself against increasing Communist military pressure from Viet Cong (VC) forces and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Two Marine infantry battalions reinforced the Marine helicopter task unit which had supported the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) since the spring of 1962. Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 3/9 landed across the beach just north of the Da Nang Air Base from U.S. Seventh Fleet amphibious ships and the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines arrived by air from Okinawa. Additional Marine units, both ground and air, arrived during April and May, and Marine units established two more bases in the I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ) of South Vietnam at Chu Lai and Phu Bai.

On 7 May 1965 the 9th MEB disbanded when the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) absorbed its mission. First under the command of Major General William R. Collins and then Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, III MAF initially consisted of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and the 3d Marine Division. In August, the Commanding General, III MAF, became senior advisor to the Vietnamese I Corps commanding general and, as such, assumed responsibility for the Corps advisory effort. He directed all U.S. ground operations in I CTZ, as well as the security of all U.S. bases in the Corps area. By the end of March 1966, III MAF's combat power increased following the arrival of the 1st Marine Division.

The first large-scale encounter between III MAF Marines and an enemy main force unit took place in August 1965, when the 7th Marines successfully defeated the 1st VC Regiment south of Chu Lai during Operation Starlite. This battle was followed by

battalion- and regimental-size combat operations against VC and NVA units throughout I CTZ. In addition, the Special Landing Force (SLF) of the Seventh Fleet conducted amphibious operations against enemy forces in I CTZ and other areas of South Vietnam.

Behind the shield provided by these operations, smaller Marine units conducted patrols, ambushes, and sweeps to destroy local Communist forces and to secure the Vietnamese countryside. Once the Marines established security, they initiated civic action programs to aid the Vietnamese government's Revolutionary Development Program. By mid-1966, these tactics were forcing the guerrillas out of traditional strongholds, denying them sources of supply and manpower, and most importantly, seriously eroding the enemy's hold over the people.

In July the Communists reacted to III MAF's expanding control over the heavily populated, rice-rich coastal areas by thrusting the North Vietnamese 324B Division across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) into the comparatively unpopulated province of Quang Tri in northern I CTZ. Although the Marines' Operation Hastings soundly defeated this invasion attempt, the enemy tried again in September, this time with elements of two divisions. Again the Marines repulsed the invaders by conducting Operation Prairie, an effort that continued through the end of the year.

While both of the major NVA efforts suffered defeat as did all others throughout I CTZ, the Communists did succeed in relieving some of the pressure on the hard-pressed guerrilla forces in the coastal areas to the south. All signs indicated that most of the Communist forces had withdrawn across the DMZ, but Marine troop dispositions remained oriented northward in the face of the enemy's apparent willingness to invade this northern area.

As 1966 ended, III MAF's Marines found themselves fighting essentially two separate but in-

terrelated "wars." The 3d Marine Division conducted basically a conventional war along the DMZ against regular NVA formations. At the same time, the 1st Marine Division continued its combination of large unit and counter guerrilla operations south of the Hai Van Pass.

Command Relations

As the commander of III MAF, General Walt operated under a complicated web of command relations that put him virtually under two masters. Operational control of all United States forces in South Vietnam rested with General William C. Westmoreland, whose Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), was a unified command under Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, the Commander in Chief, Pacific Command (CinCPac). On the other hand, Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, who headed Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac), retained command of III MAF in the areas of administration and logistics. Further, the air war in most of North Vietnam, in which some III MAF aircraft participated, remained under the personal control of Admiral Sharp. Finally, General Walt, as the senior American officer in I Corps, served as the senior advisor to the South Vietnamese forces in the corps area. His burden would have been heavier had he

not relinquished in 1966 his responsibilities as Naval Component Commander for all American naval forces in Vietnam.

At the beginning of 1967, the 18 infantry battalions of III MAF occupied bases throughout the I CTZ. I Corps, the name commonly given to I CTZ, which consisted of the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam, stretched 225 miles from the DMZ in the north to the northern border of II CTZ in the south. Twenty-one fixed-wing and helicopter squadrons of the 1st MAW supported the allied ground forces. These units and the numerous supporting organizations gave General Walt a total of more than 70,000 troops in I CTZ.

The enemy's two major thrusts across the DMZ during the summer and fall of 1966 resulted in the shifting of some 10,000 Marines north to meet these threats. The prolonged commitment of substantial Marine forces in the north forced a realignment of operational commands within III MAF. On 10 October 1966 Major General Wood B. Kyle of the 3d Marine Division assumed control of all U.S. forces committed to Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. Brigadier General Lowell E. English established a forward command post at Dong Ha, in Quang Tri Province. At the same time, the main 3d Division command post moved from Da Nang to Phu Bai,

Senior Marine commanders pose at Da Nang with MajGen Bruno A. Hochmuth upon his arrival to assume command of 3d Marine Division. They are, from left, MajGen Louis B. Robertshaw (1st MAW), MajGen Herman Nickerson, Jr. (1st MarDiv), LtGen Louis W. Walt (III MAF), Gen Hochmuth, and MajGen Wood B. Kyle (3d MarDiv).

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A19456



north of the Hai Van Mountains which separate the two northern provinces from the rest of I CTZ. At the turn of the year, III MAF had committed 7 of its 18 battalions in this northern area.

With the 3d Division's move, the 1st Marine Division, commanded by Major General Herman Nickerson, Jr., shifted its headquarters north from Chu Lai to Da Nang, but General Nickerson left Brigadier General William A. Stiles' Task Force X-Ray, a brigade-size force of four battalions, at Chu Lai. The X-Ray force stretched between two provinces; two battalions operated in Quang Tin Province and two in Quang Ngai Province. Additionally, three battalions of Korean Marines, commanded by Brigadier General Yun Sang Kim, were in Quang Ngai Province. The command relationship with the Korean Marines was one of cooperation and coordination.

Because of the fluid, nonlinear type of warfare peculiar to the Vietnam conflict, the individual infantry battalion became the key maneuver element. Under the system of operational control, or "opcon," a battalion might operate under a task force headquarters, or even as part of a regiment other than its parent unit. For example a battalion of the 7th Marines might be attached to the 4th Marines while a battalion of the 4th Marines was a part of another command. This command situation became further confused in August of 1966 when Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac) reestablished the intra-theater unit rotation program between Marine battalions in Vietnam and Regimental Landing Team 26 (RLT-26) located on Okinawa.*

The Special Landing Force (SLF) of the Seventh Fleet complemented the strength of III MAF and all allied forces in Vietnam. Consisting of a SLF headquarters, a Marine battalion landing team, and a Marine helicopter squadron, the SLF operated from ships of the Seventh Fleet Amphibious Ready Group (ARG). The SLF could land either as an independent force or in conjunction with other units withdrawn from combat and temporarily embarked on other amphibious ships.

*RLT-26 was an element of the 5th Marine Division which activated at Camp Pendleton, California, on 1 June 1966. The rotation system permitted units to withdraw from South Vietnam and go to Okinawa for a 1- or 2-month refitting and retraining cycle.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A369912

BGen William A. Stiles (right) of Task Force X-Ray greets LtGen Victor H. Krulak at Chu Lai on 9 March during one of the latter's frequent visits to South Vietnam. Krulak, as commander of FMFPac, had administrative control over Marine units in III MAF.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189027

BGen Yun Sang Kim commanded the 2d Republic of Korea Marine Brigade in Quang Ngai Province. The Korean Marines were independent of III MAF but both Marine commands cooperated and coordinated their efforts against the common enemy.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189011
LtGen Hoang Xuam Lam, as the South Vietnamese commander of I Corps, had administrative and tactical control of the country's five northern provinces.

To support the ground elements, Major General Louis B. Robertshaw's 1st MAW deployed to five principal airfields. Wing headquarters was at Da Nang, fixed-wing squadrons were at Da Nang and Chu Lai, and helicopter squadrons were at Phu Bai, Marble Mountain east of Da Nang, and Ky Ha near Chu Lai. Additional helicopter detachments were at Dong Ha and Khe Sanh.

The ARVN I Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, shared its tactical zone of action with III MAF. At the beginning of 1967, this ARVN force consisted of the 1st and 2d Army Divisions, a Ranger group, and three temporarily assigned battalions of Vietnamese Marines, a total of 34 infantry battalions. Regional and Popular Forces, added to the ARVN regulars, brought the South Vietnamese troop total to 77,000 in the five provinces of I CTZ.*

*Regional Forces (RF) companies recruited their personnel within their respective provinces, to be used within the boundaries of the province, while Popular Forces (PF) platoons obtained their men locally for employment only as security forces at their home villages or hamlets.

The posture of the regular ARVN forces at the start of the year was as follows:

I Corps headquarters was at Da Nang.

The 1st Division headquarters was in the city of Hue. Its area of operation was the two northern provinces, Quang Tri and Thua Thien.

The 2d Division's headquarters was in Quang Ngai City. Its tactical area included the two southern provinces of Quang Tin and Quang Ngai.

The 51st Regiment, an independent unit located in the central province of Quang Nam, had the mission of pacification security.

A Ranger Group of three battalions was the corps reserve and moved throughout the I Corps area.

Although III MAF and ARVN I Corps were co-equal commands, their respective commanders recognized the need for close operational coordination in an agreement which stipulated that, while neither force would serve under the control of the other, elements of either force could be temporarily placed under the tactical direction of the other for specific operations.

The Plan for the Year

The objectives assigned these two commands by the Vietnamese Joint General Staff and MACV in the Combined Campaign Plan for 1967 were threefold:

To counter rapidly any threat of invasion across the I Corps borders;

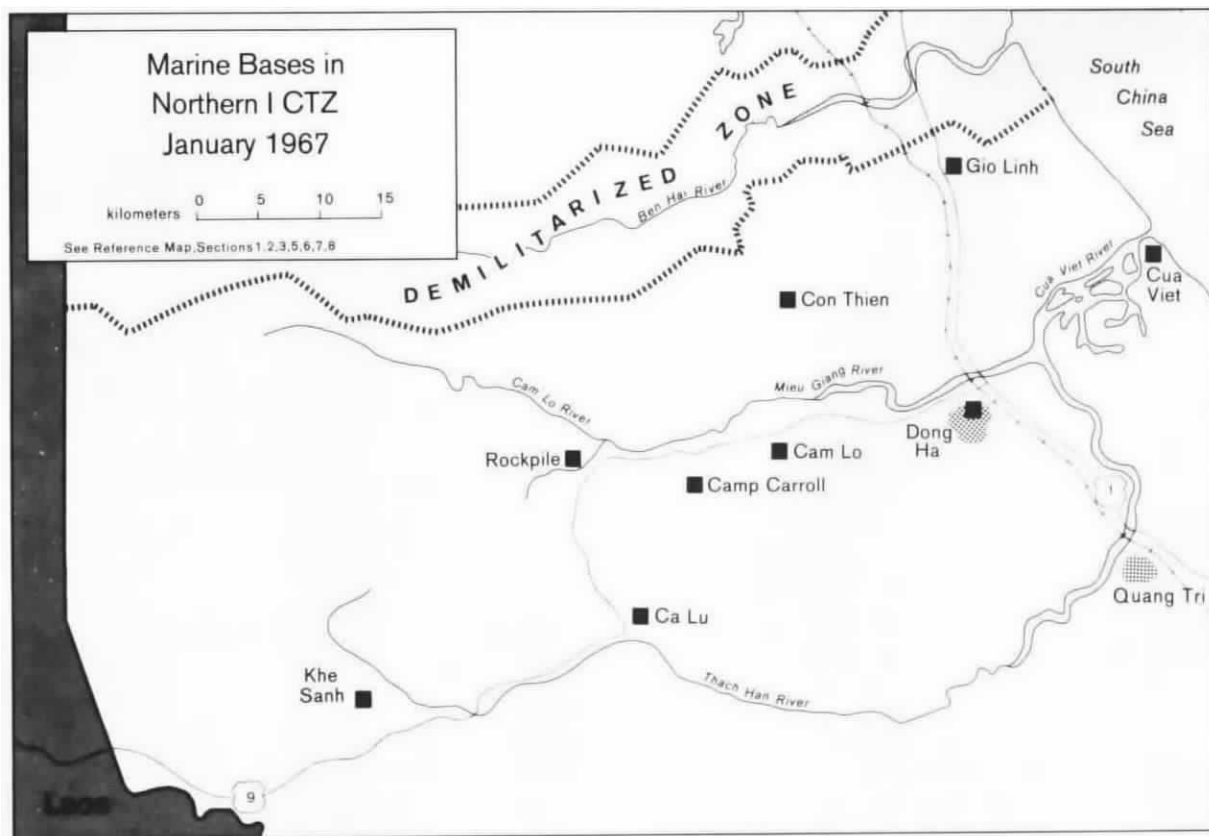
To destroy Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army units attempting to disrupt the government's expanding control over the populated areas; and,

To ensure the security of the base areas and lines of communication that were enabling the government to expand its control.

A Change in Strategy

The major change in strategy from 1966, as outlined in the 1967 Combined Campaign Plan, was the assignment of the Vietnamese armed forces to the primary role of pacification. To free the South Vietnamese Army units for pacification, American forces assumed the tactical tasks hitherto pursued by the South Vietnamese, at the same time carrying the bulk of the offensive effort against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese.

The American focus on the enemy's forces, however, was not to be at the expense of U.S.



pacification efforts. General Westmoreland, addressing a joint session of Congress in April 1967 said, "The only strategy which can defeat such an organization is one of unrelenting but discriminating military, political, and psychological pressure on his whole structure—at all levels."¹

Ironically, just when allied strategy placed increased emphasis on pacification, the Marines found themselves hard-pressed to pursue their own pacification program, initiated as early as 1965. Spread throughout the five provinces, III MAF forces simultaneously faced large-scale attacks by NVA and VC units throughout I Corps. There was a substantial increase in the tempo of guerrilla warfare, as well as the threat of a major invasion in the DMZ area by an enemy force of possibly three divisions. At the same time, III MAF's mission still included the defense of the three large base areas which contained the five principal I CTZ airfields.

The 3d Marine Division's area, along the DMZ, caused the greatest Marine concern. III MAF headquarters expected the enemy to exploit his shorter supply lines. U.S. policy, well known in North Vietnam, prohibited the pursuit of Communists into the

DMZ. Strong enemy pressure south of the DMZ possibly could gain a prestige victory, perhaps even the conquest of the two northern provinces, Quang Tri and Thua Thien. Such pressure would also divert the Marines from the pacification program which was beginning to fragment the guerrilla infrastructure further south.

The Enemy Organization

The Marines of III MAF faced a hierarchy of enemy units ranging from local, part-time guerrillas to conventional North Vietnamese Army divisions. At each level, an appropriate political headquarters controlled various subordinate units' operations. The village Communist Party chapters supervised their own squads of guerrillas. Viet Cong local force companies and battalions came under the Party committees of the province or district. Main force Viet Cong or North Vietnamese units received their orders from the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) or other major headquarters which, theoretically, were subordinate to COSVN. In practice, however, these headquarters usually took their orders directly from Hanoi.

Military Region 5 (MR-5), commanded by a North Vietnamese general officer, controlled enemy units in the northern part of South Vietnam. Two sub-regional headquarters shared the command responsibilities for this large area. The *B-3 Front* commanded Communist units in Darlac, Kontum, and Pleiku provinces. South of the DMZ, the important Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces operated under the *Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region*, which, for all practical purposes, was subordinate to North Vietnam's *Military Region 4*.

MR-5 commanded two infantry divisions that threatened the Marines in southern I Corps. The *2d NVA Division*, also known as the *620th*, and composed of two NVA regiments and the *1st Viet Cong Regiment*, operated in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin provinces. The *3d NVA Division*, also made up of two NVA and one VC regiments, worked further to the south in Binh Dinh, Quang Ngai, and Kontum provinces.

North of the DMZ were four NVA divisions, the *304th*, the *320th*, the *324B*, and the *325C*, all under the command of North Vietnam's *Military Region 4*. The *324B* suffered heavy casualties in combat with the 3d Marine Division in July and August 1966 and withdrew back across the DMZ to refit. The *325C* served as the strategic reserve for MR-4.

Tactical Considerations

As 1967 began, III MAF could not attack the NVA divisions in and north of the DMZ; American policy

prohibited such action. Many Marines disagreed with the policy, including the commander of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade on Okinawa, Brigadier General Louis Metzger, who later became the assistant commander of the 3d Division. General Metzger recently commented:

It has long been my belief that the most significant aspect of operations along the DMZ was the publicly stated United States policy that U.S. forces would not enter North Vietnam. This allowed the enemy to deploy his forces across the DMZ at the time and place of his choosing, and to withdraw to a sanctuary when it suited his convenience; to utilize his artillery against U.S. positions and bases while at the same time denying the Marines the most effective means of destroying the enemy weapons, i.e., to overrun them; [and] to free his infantry elements from guarding his artillery so that they could be employed against U.S. forces and positions south of the DMZ.³

In response to the enemy challenge in the DMZ area, MACV began working on two sets of contingency plans in the latter part of 1966. First, if necessary, General Westmoreland would shift U.S. Army units north to reinforce III MAF. In addition, he planned, at the urging of the Secretary of Defense, to build an elaborate anti-infiltration barrier system south of the DMZ to seal off the area from North Vietnamese incursions. Both actions would have a profound effect upon III MAF's operations in 1967 as it struggled to fight both a counterinsurgency war against the VC infrastructure and a conventional war against regular NVA infantry divisions.

Some principal figures in the war in I Corps discuss the situation on 3 May 1967. Those present include, from left, an unidentified Marine colonel; BGen John R. Chaisson, the senior Marine on the MACV staff; Col Archelaus L. Hamblen, USA, who commanded the Army Advisory I Corps Headquarters; Gen William C. Westmoreland, USA, the MACV commander; BGen Ngo Quang Truong, commander of the 1st ARVN Division; MajGen Hoang Xuan Lam, the I Corps commander; LtGen Lewis W. Walt, the III MAF commander; MajGen Bruno A. Hochmuth of the 3d Marine Division; and an unidentified Vietnamese colonel wearing the shoulder patch of the 1st ARVN Division.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC)801029



CHAPTER 2

Spring Action South of the DMZ—February-April 1967

Operation Prairie I Continues—Operation Prairie II—Operation Prairie III

Operation Prairie I Continues

As 1967 began, the 3d Marine Division was fighting two wars: a conventional one along the DMZ, where division confronted division, and a counter guerrilla war in the rest of Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. Although committed to both campaigns, the situation forced the division to give priority to the DMZ.

During January, the enemy avoided major ground contact with ARVN and Marine units in the DMZ area, but the NVA did maintain energetic screening and reconnaissance efforts south of the DMZ. Mortar and rocket attacks on friendly positions increased sharply, particularly during the period 8-28 January, and there was a noticeable increase in local and main force guerrilla activity throughout the month.

In January Marine units were still conducting Operation Prairie along the DMZ. Three battalions of Colonel John P. Lanigan's 3d Marines and the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines were operating from combat bases along Highway 9.* The largest of the combat bases, the nerve center for the entire area, was at Dong Ha, the command post (CP) of the 3d Marine Division (Forward), the controlling headquarters for the operation.

The intermediate position at Cam Lo was seven miles west. Four miles further west, Camp J. J. Carroll was occupied by artillery units of the 12th Marines, reinforced by U.S. Army 175mm self-propelled guns. An additional artillery position, the Rockpile, was near the base of a jagged mountain six miles west of Camp Carroll. The last and most westerly of the combat bases was Khe Sanh, only a

few miles from the Laotian border. In addition to these major positions along Highway 9, Marines were establishing two strongpoints just south of the DMZ at Con Thien and Gio Linh.

One feature of Operation Prairie was the provision of a specific "package" of aircraft for support of the 3d Marine Division. In this manner the wing increased its efficiency and decreased response time for missions within the DMZ region. The "package" contained a variety of helicopters, such as UH-1Es, CH-46s, CH-37s, and fixed-wing observation aircraft. A total of 40 helicopters and 8 O-1 observation aircraft supported the division daily. Marine air support radars (TPQ-10) provided the capability of conducting radar-controlled bombing missions during bad weather and at night.

Operation Prairie I ended on 31 January. At its height the operation involved six Marine infantry battalions. It accounted for the largest number of enemy casualties in a single Marine operation to that date: 1,397 killed and 27 captured. Marine casualties for the same period were 239 killed and 1,214 wounded.

Operation Prairie II

The mission assigned to the Marines for Operation Prairie II was essentially the same as that for Prairie I: to conduct operations in conjunction with ARVN forces, to seek out and destroy enemy forces, and to defend the area against attack. To accomplish this, Brigadier General Michael P. Ryan, assigned as Commanding General, 3d Marine Division (Forward) and Assistant Division Commander, 3d Marine Division, since February 1967, controlled a force of three infantry battalions, two reconnaissance companies, and supporting units.

The concept of operations during Operation Prairie II called for patrols and sweeps by units of various sizes, including infantry battalions. Normally, 3d Marine Division (Forward) kept one infantry

*Route 9 was a two-lane, east-west road which ran from the Laotian border to the city of Dong Ha. Only the eastern portion of the highway was paved in 1967.

battalion at a time involved in mobile operations while the remainder of its units defended the combat bases. Meeting the latter responsibility required the frequent shifting of rifle companies and their operational control. Rifle companies, as a result, often found themselves under the operational control of other battalions or even directly under the commander of the 3d Marines.

To expand artillery coverage, the 12th Marines shifted some units. The February artillery distribution was:

Khe Sanh: two 4.2-inch mortars, two 155mm, and six 105mm howitzers
 Rockpile: two 175mm guns, two 155mm guns, six 105mm howitzers
 Ba Long: six 105mm howitzers
 Ca Lu: six 105mm howitzers
 Camp Carroll: six 175mm guns, four 155mm, and six 105mm howitzers
 Cam Lo: two 155mm howitzers
 Cua Viet: six 105mm howitzers (LVTH-6)
 Gio Linh: four 175mm guns and six 105mm howitzers

The 12th Marines' firing fans covered almost all of Quang Tri Province, and stretched well north of the DMZ and several miles into Laos.

Except for mortar attacks, enemy activity during the first week of Operation Prairie II was confined to reconnaissance and screening actions, similar to activity during the last two months of Prairie I. With the bombing halt during the *Tet Nguyen Dan* truce period, 0700 8 February - 0700 12 February, enemy movement dramatically increased, both north and south of the Ben Hai River.* Of special significance was the activity immediately north of the DMZ. Aerial observation and photographic readouts revealed heavy truck and boat traffic throughout the area. There was little doubt that the NVA had taken advantage of the truce to accomplish resupply and personnel replacement.

As a result of the detection of a large concentration of enemy troops and material north of the Ben Hai River, the Marines on 25 February asked for and received permission to fire into and north of the DMZ against purely military targets.** The North

Vietnamese could no longer consider the DMZ area as a safe haven; staging and support areas and artillery positions now could be interdicted on a 24-hour basis.

The Communists reacted quickly to the sudden vulnerability of their previously safe positions. On the 27th of February, heavy enemy mortar, rocket, and artillery fire struck Con Thien and Gio Linh. The composite artillery battalion at Gio Linh bore the brunt of these attacks; on the 28th more than 400 rounds landed on the battalion's position in a 17-minute period.

The morning of the 27th, the same day the NVA began the artillery attacks, a Marine reconnaissance team 5,000 meters northwest of Cam Lo attempted to ambush what appeared to be only two enemy soldiers. The team actually engaged an enemy company which proved to be the lead element of the *812th Regiment, 324B Division*. By 1045, the reconnaissance team reported that it was surrounded by at least 100 North Vietnamese. The closest friendly force was Captain Alan H. Hartney's Company L, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines which, minus one rifle platoon but reinforced with a platoon of tanks, was patrolling north of Cam Lo. Colonel Lanigan immediately ordered Captain Hartney's force to go to the reconnaissance team's relief. Captain Hartney reported slow progress; brush 4-12 feet high blocked his route.

With the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines already involved in an operation near the Rockpile, Colonel Lanigan had few reserve forces. He turned to Lieutenant Colonel Victor Ohanesian's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, located at Camp Carroll. Most of this battalion was already on board ships prior to sailing for Okinawa after being relieved by the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. Now, however, Company G, the only intact company still ashore, would have to go to the aid of the endangered reconnaissance team.

Ironically, only a few hours previously the commanding officer of Company G, Captain Carl E. Bockewitz, had been assured by Major Robert F. Sheridan, the battalion S-3 officer, that there were no plans to send the company on an operation. The latter officer recalled:

**Tet Nguyen Dan*, or festival of the lunar new year, usually called "Tet," is the most important holiday of the Vietnamese year.

**The code name for these artillery attacks against targets in and north of the DMZ was Operation Highrise.

The morning before his unit was committed . . . Captain Bockewitz, who was on an extension of his tour, came to see me in the S-3 bunker and asked if there was any chance we would be going north of the Cam Lo River. As over half of our battalion was already on ships ready to go

to Okinawa and our in-place relief was almost completed, I told him there was no way we were going north. Only Company G, Company F (-), and a token command group were left in country. Captain Bockewitz was visibly relieved as he stated, "That's good. Last night I had a dream that if I went north of the Cam Lo I would die."¹

Despite his forebodings, Captain Bockewitz led his company from Camp Carroll and began to move overland to link up with the reconnaissance team. Bockewitz, as had Captain Hartney, also found tough going and did not reach the reconnaissance team until 2342 that night. Captain Bockewitz established a defensive position and stayed there for the night.

About the same time that Company G was leaving Camp Carroll, Captain Hartney's company, while trying to cross a stream, came under fire from a large enemy force. After a heavy firefight in which the tanks played a decisive role, the company was able to break contact and began to move toward the recon-

A Marine of Company L, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines helps a casualty to a medevac helicopter during Operation Prairie's heavy fighting on 28 February.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188455



naissance team. The tanks now proved to be a handicap; one of them threw a track. Company G could not leave it. Captain Hartney reported his dilemma and was ordered to establish a night position and evacuate his wounded.

To exploit the two enemy contacts, Colonel Lanigan decided to commit the remaining available elements of Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, which consisted of a small command group and part of Company F. On the morning of the 28th, Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian, who had operational control of all units in this action, planned to move his group overland to link up with Company G. Then the united force was to sweep east to Cam Lo. Company L was to act as a blocking force and then move back to its original position at Cam Lo after linkup. That was the plan; the North Vietnamese had other ideas.

At 0630 a vicious mortar and infantry attack stunned Company L. More than 150 82mm mortar rounds hit the company's position and NVA forces struck from three sides with heavy automatic weapons, small arms, and antitank (RPG) fire.* RPG rounds hit two tanks; one caught fire, but both tanks continued to support the company with their turret-mounted .50-caliber machine guns. By 0900 the Marines had repulsed three enemy attacks. During the attack, Captain Hartney and his artillery observer had called in artillery fire to within 30 meters of the company position.

Because of this heavy attack, Colonel Lanigan ordered Ohanesian to link up with Company L instead of Company G as originally planned. Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian's small force left Camp Carroll by truck, disembarked at Cam Lo, and forded the river. By 1030, it had reached Company L, guided at the end by the sound of enemy mortar explosions. Captain Hartney's Company L had four dead and 34 wounded.

Major Sheridan remembered that, upon arrival, the force "... attacked and secured the high ground in the area, encountering large numbers of well-equipped NVA troops. In my year in Vietnam, I had never seen this number of NVA troops in the open.

*The Soviet RPG is a 40mm recoilless, antitank grenade launcher, in many respects similar to the German World War II *Panzerfaust*. The later model RPG-7 can penetrate 9.4 inches of armor.

After securing the high ground, a [helicopter landing zone] was established to evacuate the dead and wounded. . . ."²

At the same time that the regiment ordered Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian's force to Company L's relief, Company G and the reconnaissance team received orders to move north to Hill 124 to establish blocking positions.* At approximately 1035 on the 28th, as Company G began moving up the hill, it came under fire from well-concealed positions on both flanks. The fighting was heavy, casualties mounted on both sides. Among the Marine dead was Company G's commander, Captain Bockewitz.

Second Lieutenant Richard C. Mellon, Jr., the company executive officer, assumed command while the heavy fighting continued. Company G was not able to recover its dead until late that afternoon. When the fight ended the Marines had suffered 7 more killed and 18 wounded.

To relieve the pressure on Company G, Colonel Lanigan decided to place another company under the operational control of Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian and to commit it north of Hill 124. He designated Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines as the unit to move by helicopter to Hill 162 immediately north of Company G's position. Company M completed the lift by 1430 and began to move south toward Company G. Company M encountered only light contact during the move.

By early afternoon, the remaining platoon of Company L and a section of tanks reinforced Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian's position. At 1430, Ohanesian's command group and Company F began to move toward Company G, leaving Company L and the serviceable tanks to guard the disabled tanks. First Lieutenant Richard D. Koehler, Jr.'s Company F led, followed by the command group. Major Sheridan later wrote:

We were ordered to proceed . . . knowing full well we were walking into a hornet's nest. Based on the number of enemy forces we had already encountered and the vast amounts of equipment, new weapons, and ammunition, we knew we were outmanned and outgunned. . . . We left the perimeter . . . and within 200 yards we came upon a very large radio complex. The trail was narrow and we could not disperse our troops. One could almost smell the enemy forces.³

*Hill 124 was about 2,000 meters due west of Company L's position which was approximately the same distance northwest of Cam Lo. The hill was the commanding terrain feature along the enemy's probable route of withdrawal.



Marine Corps Historical Collection
A Marine of the 3d Platoon, Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines throws a hand grenade toward North Vietnamese positions in close fighting on 1 March during Operation Prairie II north of Cam Lo.

As the last man left Company L's original position, the lead elements of the column came under automatic weapons and mortar fire. The Marines had stepped into an ambush. Company F's lead elements took cover from the growing volume of fire from the front and both flanks; enemy mortar fire walked down the length of the column. Heavy brush hid the enemy and the Marines could not establish fire superiority. At 1510, Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian ordered a withdrawal.* Sheridan described the move:

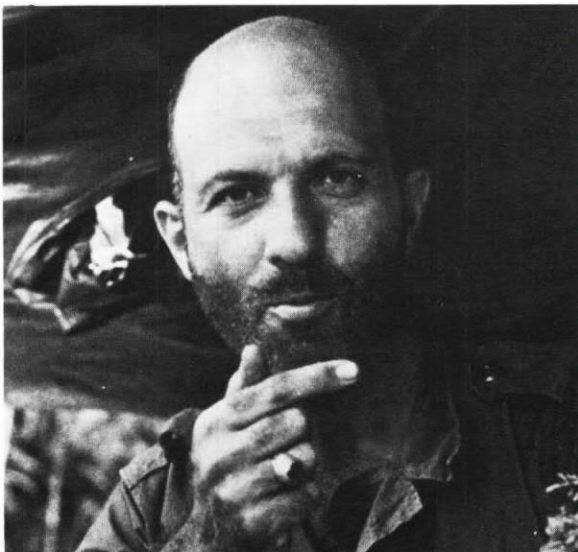
. . . all radios had been hit and casualties continued to mount. Moving the dead and wounded out of the killing zone required feats of bravery beyond comprehension. The NVA were everywhere. Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian was carrying the last of the wounded Marines towards the perimeter when an explosion mortally wounded him,

*For his actions during the closely fought engagement Private First Class James Anderson, Jr., received the Medal of Honor, posthumously. When the fight began, the thick brush beside the trail prevented the Marines from deploying. When a grenade landed in the midst of the Marines, Anderson reached out, pulled the grenade to his chest, and curled around it as it went off. See Appendix D for complete citation.

[plus] three other Marines, and myself. None of us could walk and Marines had to leave the relative safety of their holes to come get us.⁴

Although painfully wounded, Sheridan assumed command and directed the rest of the withdrawal to Company L's position and the consolidation of the perimeter. He requested emergency evacuation for the more than 100 casualties. While the Marines organized their defensive perimeter, the enemy closed to within 20 meters and attacked with small arms and grenades. The Marine tank crewmen and infantrymen returned the fire and forced the enemy to withdraw. At this time the helicopters arrived to pick up the wounded, but they were unable to land because of heavy fire in the landing zone. At 1830, the position was still being hit by intermittent mortar shelling, which by now had lasted more than three hours. Sheridan recalled:

The enemy continued to alternately shell and [attempt to] overrun our small position the remainder of the night. Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian died around midnight as it was impossible to secure a landing zone. Sergeant Major Wayne N. Hayes died about the same time of wounds suffered in hand-to-hand combat and grenade and mortar blasts. Constant artillery, night air strikes within 50 meters of our position and the courage of the Marines on the ground finally took their toll and the NVA withdrew.⁵



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189092

LtCol Victor Ohanesian, the commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, shown here in Operation Allegheny in August 1966, died early on 1 March 1967 from shrapnel wounds suffered the previous afternoon as he carried a casualty to safety.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193922

Members of Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines who had finished Operation Chinook II, rest while waiting for the helicopters that will transport them to Cam Lo Province to participate in Operation Prairie II just south of the Demilitarized Zone.

Earlier, upon learning that Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian had been wounded, Colonel Lanigan ordered his executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Earl R. "Pappy" Delong to take command of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. In addition, Lieutenant Colonel Delong received operational control of Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines which, fortuitously, was at Dong Ha after serving as escort for a "Roughrider" vehicle convoy from the south. Company F went by truck to Cam Lo where it would begin moving overland to reinforce the hard-pressed 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Delong attempted to reach his new command by helicopter but enemy fire prevented a landing. He ordered the helicopter to Cam Lo where he joined Company F for the overland march. At 0340 on 1 March, Delong arrived at the battalion's position and began reorganization and preparation for the evacuation of casualties.

The 2d Battalion remained in position the entire day. About noon it was joined by Companies G and M. The Marines searched the surrounding area and recovered a large amount of enemy equipment. Company M made several contacts with small enemy groups, but the NVA force was withdrawing. The 2d Battalion, 3d Marines could continue its interrupted embarkation for Okinawa.

Two additional battalions were brought into the area on 1 March, Major James L. Day's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Gary Wilder's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Major Day's battalion moved by helicopters to Hill 162, Company M's former location, and began to sweep north.

Meanwhile, Wilder's battalion attacked northwest from a position north of Cam Lo to try to squeeze the withdrawing enemy against the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. This maneuver restricted the Communists' escape route, thereby concentrating targets for Marine supporting arms. On 3 March, an air observer sighted three large enemy groups moving northwest toward the DMZ, carrying bodies. Massive artillery and air strikes were ordered. A followup sweep of the area by the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines revealed that the North Vietnamese had used the bomb and shell craters as mass graves for their dead; more than 200 NVA bodies were found.

All enemy forces had not withdrawn. On the morning of 7 March, the enemy made three separate mortar and rocket attacks on Camp Carroll. Between 420 and 485 rounds hit the camp, including 209 spin-stabilized 122mm rockets.

The remainder of the Prairie II operation consisted of a series of battalion sweeps between Cam Lo and Con Thien. The Marines located several mass graves; the discovery of many abandoned bodies emphasized the disorganized state of the enemy. Numerous artillery and air strikes hit the scattered enemy forces trying to avoid contact. During the last week of the operation ARVN airborne units caught up with the NVA east and southeast of Con Thien. The enemy force, estimated to have been three battalions, broke contact after losing more than 250 killed.

At 2400 on 18 March Operation Prairie II ended. Prairie II cost the NVA 694 killed and 20 captured; Marine casualties were 93 killed, 483 wounded, and, of these, approximately one-third of the Marines killed and two-thirds of the wounded were victims of mortar fire.

*This was the first use of this weapon in the DMZ area. The Chinese Communist 122mm rocket is similar to the obsolete U.S. 4.5-inch rocket used during World War II. It has a range of 5,000 meters.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189085
Maj James L. Day (right), commanding the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, briefs BGen Michael P. Ryan on 3 March on the progress of Prairie II, as Company A's commander, Capt Donald Festa (left), checks a map.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188463
Marines of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines pause on 3 March in their sweep of an area used by the North Vietnamese to bury more than 200 soldiers killed by supporting arms during Operation Prairie II.



Marine Corps Historical Collection
2dLt Jerry D. Garner of Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines orders his platoon forward during the pursuit of NVA units north of Cam Lo on 3 March.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188464

The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines encountered a wide variety of terrain conditions and enemy activity during Operation Prairie II. Excellent observation in an area of elephant grass permitted 2dLt Jerry D. Garner of Company A (above photo, left) to observe the effectiveness of an airstrike on a distant NVA unit. The following day, 3 March, an NVA soldier surrendered to the company. The final day of the operation, 18 March, found Company C moving through a bombed-out forest in hills near Cam Lo.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188525



Marine Corps Historical Collection



Operation Prairie III

Increased enemy use of supporting arms became a constant concern for the Marines during Prairie III, which started immediately after Prairie II. At the start of the operation, enemy activity centered on the Cam Lo and Gio Linh districts. Contact was moderate, generally limited to small enemy groups. Prairie II had blunted earlier NVA intentions in the area, but all indications were that the enemy's determination to challenge the Marines' presence had not diminished in spite of heavy casualties.

Anticipating renewed NVA efforts, III MAF held five infantry battalions and four artillery battalions in the area. Battalions at Dong Ha served under the operational control of the 3d Division's forward headquarters, while those at Camp Carroll and the Rockpile came under the control of the 3d Marines. Additional company-strength outposts were at the Cua Viet port facility, Gio Linh, Mai Loc, Ba Long, and Ca Lu; a two-company outpost was at Khe Sanh. The Marines conducted energetic reconnaissance throughout the area.

The increased operational tempo in the DMZ area placed a heavy strain on Dong Ha logistic facilities. Supplies for the Prairie area of operation arrived at either the Dong Ha airfield, which had been extended to handle C-130 transports, or they came north



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188524

The start of Operation Prairie III found Company C, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines moving through heavy elephant grass as the battalion searched the mountains north of Cam Lo for North Vietnamese units.

Trucks of the 9th Motor Transport Battalion move over Highway 9 from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh on 28 March. The 11th Engineer Battalion had opened the road on the 19th after months of effort that involved coping with adverse weather and enemy attacks.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



from Da Nang by LCUs (landing craft, utility) up the Cua Viet River to Dong Ha. On 18 March, a major step in easing the logistic burden occurred when an LST (landing ship, tank) ramp opened at Cua Viet. These LSTs could discharge their cargo for transshipment up the river by LCUs and LCMs (landing craft, medium). The Cua Viet facility more than tripled the daily tonnage that could be brought in by ships.

A second significant logistic event occurred on the 19th. Route 9 opened from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh, thanks to Lieutenant Colonel Ross L. Mulford's 11th Engineer Battalion. Mulford's engineers had worked on the road for months, hindered by terrible weather conditions, mines, and the NVA. The military significance of their effort was considerable, since it reduced the requirement to commit aircraft for logistic support of the Khe Sanh outpost until late summer, when enemy activity closed the road.

When Operation Prairie III started, it appeared that Marine forces continued to face elements of the 324B and the 341st NVA Divisions north of the Ben Hai River. Battalion-size elements of both enemy divisions were in Quang Tri Province, conducting extensive screening and reconnaissance missions, as well as attempting to disrupt the Revolutionary Development Program. Additionally, ARVN units reported that the 808th VC and 814th NVA Battalions were east and south of Quang Tri City.

On 20 March Lieutenant Colonel William H. Rice's Composite Artillery Battalion at Gio Linh came under attack by mortars, rockets, and artillery. The attack demonstrated the enemy's ability to employ artillery from positions north of the Ben Hai River. Although the bombardment on the 20th was the heaviest, both Gio Linh and Con Thien received almost daily attacks during the next two weeks.

Further evidence of increased enemy activity in the area occurred on 21 March. At 0200 an enemy force ambushed an ammunition resupply convoy only 300 meters south of Gio Linh. As the convoy approached the artillery position, the enemy struck with heavy small arms and mortar fire, destroying eight trucks and damaging six others. Fortunately, friendly casualties totaled only eight wounded because of the rapid reaction of both the convoy guard and the Gio Linh security company, Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines.

When Prairie III began, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines were conducting a mission in the mountains west of Cam Lo

approximately 6,000 meters north of Camp Carroll. The seven-day operation ended on the 21st having made little contact with the enemy, but discovered numerous mortar positions and rocket launching sites, which probably were the positions used in the attack against Camp Carroll on 7 March. A search of the area uncovered 125 large rockets and 3 rocket launchers. Both battalions received orders to sweep north from Cam Lo in support of Operation Beacon Hill being conducted to the east by Seventh Fleet's SLF.

For some time General Walt had been troubled by growing enemy activity in the region northeast of Dong Ha. His greatest concern was the possibility of an NVA attempt to overrun the Gio Linh artillery base. Its 175mm guns were capable of firing at positions deep in North Vietnam. To counter this threat, General Walt asked the commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (ComUSMACV) to have the SLF committed to this area.* CinCPac approved the request on 15 March. Operation Beacon Hill moved into the planning phase, with 19 March set as D-Day.

Bad weather postponed the scheduled landing from ships of the Seventh Fleet's Amphibious Ready Group until the early afternoon of the 20th. Initial operations were unopposed, but BLT 1/4 elements near Gio Linh received fire from enemy supporting arms that night. Company B made contact on the 21st, and the BLT engaged well-entrenched enemy units through the 26th. On 28 March, BLT 1/4 passed to the operational control of the 3d Marines. On 1 April Beacon Hill ended, and III MAF released the BLT to SLF control.

The contribution of Beacon Hill to the Prairie III operation, going on 10 miles to the west, can be measured, in part, by casualty figures. During 12 operational days, BLT 1/4 killed 334 NVA soldiers who otherwise would have been available for use against the battalions involved in Prairie III. Beacon Hill tied up a substantial enemy force. Marine casualties totaled 29 SLF Marines killed and 230 wounded.**

*General Westmoreland, as ComUSMACV, could not authorize the landing of the SLF; CinCPac was the authorizing command.

**Chapter 11 contains the detailed account of SLF participation in Beacon Hill/Prairie III.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188583

Members of Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines cross a stream on 19 March as the battalion conducted a seven-day search west of Cam Lo early in Operation Prairie III.

To the west of Beacon Hill, other Marines involved in Operation Prairie III experienced similar light contact during the opening phases. The two battalions under command of the 3d Marines—the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and 1st Battalion, 9th Marines—had moved from the Dong Ha/Dong Ma Mountain complex to Cam Lo on 21 March in preparation for a sweep north to Con Thien. The next morning both battalions jumped off at first light; Lieutenant Colonel Wilder's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines was on the left and Major Day's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines was on the right. They encountered light contact during the first two days, but on 24 March Day's battalion found an NVA battalion southeast of Con Thien. The enemy was in well-prepared defensive positions consisting of mutually supporting bunkers. After two hours of heavy fighting, which included concentrated air and artillery strikes, the enemy withdrew, leaving 33 bodies.*

While Major Day's 1st Battalion attacked the

Communist bunker complex, Lieutenant Colonel Wilder's battalion, on the left, engaged an NVA company. This unit was also well entrenched in camouflaged, reinforced bunkers. The enemy's light mortars were dug in below ground level, making them even more difficult to locate. Artillery, followed up by an assault by Company I, cracked the position. The NVA broke contact and withdrew, leaving behind 28 bodies, including two uniformed women.

The enemy attempted to delay the Marine advance with harassing mortar and sniper fire for the next two days. By the evening of 26 March the Communist force had broken contact and withdrawn into the DMZ.

On the 28th, the 3d Marines pulled both battalions out of the area and replaced them with Lieutenant Colonel James S. Wilson's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. Wilson's mission was to conduct night ambushes in the area immediately north of Cam Lo. There was very little contact for the first two days, but on the 30th, as Company I completed establishing platoon ambush positions, the NVA attacked the company command post and the 2d platoon's position. Company I's positions were approximately six miles northwest of Cam Lo. The Communists walked mortar fire over the position twice, then followed with a ground assault in company

*During this action Sergeant Walter K. Singleton of Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, assaulted the key enemy strong point with a machine gun. Though mortally wounded, he drove the enemy from the position. Sergeant Singleton was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously. See Appendix D for complete citation.

strength. The first assault failed when the company commander, Captain Michael P. Getlin, called in supporting arms. As the first attack started, both the 1st and 3d Platoons tried to help the command group and the 2d Platoon, but the enemy stopped the Marines with a cross-fire of automatic weapons. The NVA assaulted a second time. This time they overran the position.

With the help of UH-1E gunships, the company managed to drive off the enemy. The NVA lost 67 killed and 2 captured in both attacks, and a search of the area the following morning turned up a heavy machine gun and 12 automatic weapons. Company I's losses were heavy. Sixteen Marines died, including the company commander, executive officer, and the weapons platoon commander; 47 more were wounded, including the company first sergeant.*

Enemy activity around Quang Tri City increased during the first week of April. The NVA launched a series of mortar and ground attacks against ARVN positions in the area. On 6 April a Viet Cong unit broke into the Quang Tri provincial jail, freeing more than 200 prisoners.

In spite of this surge of enemy activity to the south, the Marines' main concerns in the Prairie area continued to be blocking major invasion attempts by the NVA and clearing an anti-infiltration trace between Gio Linh and Con Thien. The second task, in-

cluded in the development of a strongpoint system, was intended to stop large-scale infiltration in the critical area along the eastern DMZ.*

On 12 April, Major General Bruno A. Hochmuth, a lanky Texan who had assumed command of the 3d Marine Division from Major General Kyle the previous month, established a task force around Lieutenant Colonel Theodore J. Willis' 1st Battalion, 4th Marines.** Its mission was to provide security for Company C, 11th Engineer Battalion. The engineer company was to clear a 200-meter-wide strip from Gio Linh to Con Thien, a distance of 10,600 meters. Willis' task force was reinforced with a platoon of tanks, an armored amphibian tractor (LVTH-6) platoon, a platoon of M-42 track-mounted dual 40mm guns of the 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, USA, and some ARVN forces. From the onset the clearing operation proceeded under constant harassment by enemy artillery, mortars, mines, recoilless rifles, and small arms. Despite enemy activity, the Marines had completed approximately half of the strip by 19 April when Operation Prairie III ended.

Prairie III cost the enemy 252 killed, 4 captured, and 128 weapons seized. Marine losses were 56 killed and 530 wounded. The Prairie series was far from over; Prairie IV began the next day in the same place and with the same forces.

*Second Lieutenant John P. Bobo, the weapons platoon commander, later received a posthumous Medal of Honor for his actions during the encounter. See Appendix D for the complete citation.

*The trace or strong point system will be covered more fully in Chapter 8.

**At the conclusion of Operation Beacon Hill, 1 April 1967, BLT 1/4 transferred from the SLF to the 3d Marine Division.

CHAPTER 3

Combined US/ARVN Operations in the DMZ

*Operation Prairie IV Begins—Attack on Con Thien—Into the DMZ—Operation Lam Son 54
Operation Beau Charger—Operation Hickory—Operation Priarie IV Ends*

Operation Prairie IV Begins

Enemy concentrations of troops and artillery in the DMZ area dictated the reinforcement of the 3d Marine Division. Responding to the demands of the situation, MACV deployed Army Task Force Oregon to the southern two provinces of I Corps in April to allow Marine units to reinforce the northern three provinces.* As a result of the northward shift of Marine forces, Colonel Robert M. Jenkins' 9th Marines headquarters moved from Da Nang to Dong Ha during 12-16 April. At the same time, III MAF shifted the 2d Battalions of the 4th and 26th Marines from the 1st Marine Division area to the vicinity of Phu Bai.

The introduction of a second regimental headquarters into Quang Tri Province permitted the closing of the 3d Division's forward command post at Dong Ha after the conclusion of Operation Prairie III. Units operating from Dong Ha reverted to the operational control of the 9th Marines, while the 3d Marines controlled those operating from Camp Carroll.

Operation Prairie IV started on 20 April as a two-regiment search and destroy operation, covering the same area as Prairie III. The concept of employment placed the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines in the northwest portion of the area of operations. The 9th Marines, using the 1st Battalions of the 4th and 9th Marines, was to cover the vital piedmont area in and around Quang Tri City. The boundary between the two units was just west of the Cam Lo-Con Thien axis.

Initially, the operation confined all units to relatively fixed positions. Lieutenant Colonel

Wilson's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines was charged with the security of Camp Carroll and the outpost at Mai Loc. Wilder's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines held the Rockpile and placed companies at Ca Lu and Ba Long. The latter battalion was also responsible for providing security for the 11th Engineers, who kept



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188645
A UH-34D from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 163 uses a newly constructed helicopter pad on top of the Rockpile to resupply members of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Helicopters previously performed this mission by hovering with one wheel on a tiny wooden ramp. (See photograph on page 183 of the volume U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1966.)

*The deployment of Task Force Oregon into the Chu Lai area is covered in detail in Chapter 6.

Route 9 open into Khe Sanh. In the 9th Marines' area of operation, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines defended the Dong Ha combat base and provided one company for security of the Cua Viet petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL) facility. The 1st Battalion, 4th Marines protected the engineers clearing the trace between Gio Linh and Con Thien, referred to as "Ryan's Road" because of Brigadier General Michael P. Ryan's frequent visits and interest in the project. The battalion also continued to provide a company for security for the Gio Linh Composite Artillery Battalion.

Although contact with enemy infantry was light at the beginning of the operation, reconnaissance reports indicated an NVA buildup northwest of the Rockpile. Mortar, rocket, and artillery attacks continued against the Marines clearing "Ryan's Road," as well as against the Con Thien and Gio Linh outposts. Attacks on these two positions and against Lieutenant Colonel Willis' 1st Battalion, 4th Marines and the engineers became almost daily affairs, and included not only mortar and rocket fire from the southern half of the DMZ, but also medium and heavy artillery fire from a growing number of fortifications north of the Ben Hai River.

On 24 April a major battle broke out in the western DMZ near Khe Sanh, the beginning of heavy fighting which continued throughout the summer all along the demarcation line.* In conjunction with the battle being fought in the west, the enemy stepped up activity in the east. Enemy forces cut Route 9 between Cam Lo and Khe Sanh repeatedly in an effort to isolate the Marines in that area. In consort with this effort, the NVA attacked the Marine installations at Gio Linh, Camp Carroll, and Dong Ha with mortars, rockets, and artillery. The period 27-28 April was particularly savage. Approximately 850 rounds of artillery, plus 200 mortar rounds blasted Gio Linh, while more than 50 140mm rockets hit Dong Ha.

Attack on Con Thien

On 8 May, the 13th anniversary of the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the NVA tried to overrun the Marine position at Con Thien. The outpost, less than two miles from the southern boundary of the DMZ, was on a hill only 158 meters high in the middle of a red mud

plain. It afforded the best observation in the area, overlooking the DMZ to the north and west, as well as the Marine base at Dong Ha to the southeast. As a strategic terrain feature, Con Thien was important to the Communists; before the summer was over, it achieved an additional symbolic importance.

At the time of the attack, the outpost contained a small command group of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, reinforced companies A and D of the battalion, and a civilian irregular defense group (CIDG) unit. The Marines were there to provide security for the engineers, who, having completed the trace on 1 May, were busy clearing a 500-meter-wide strip around the perimeter of the outpost. At 0255, the morning of 8 May, a green flare lit the sky south of the hill, followed immediately by a savage 300-round mortar and artillery attack. Concurrently, Camp Carroll, Gio Linh, and Dong Ha also came under fire.

At Con Thien, enemy units maneuvering under cover of the barrage breached the defensive wire with bangalore torpedoes, and small elements moved inside. At approximately 0400, two NVA battalions, armed with flamethrowers, RPGs, and automatic weapons, attacked through the breach in the wire. The brunt of this assault fell on the right flank of Company D. The Marines engaged the enemy force in bitter hand-to-hand fighting. An engineer platoon moved to reinforce Company D. The situation became serious when the Marines ran out of 81mm mortar illumination rounds; artillery illumination from the nearest artillery at Gio Linh could not reach Con Thien.* A flare plane finally arrived and provided much-needed illumination until daylight.

Meanwhile, Company A sent a platoon to help Company D, as well as to protect an ammunition resupply convoy composed of an attached Army M42 "Duster," two LVTHs, and two 1/4-ton trucks. As these elements moved up to support the hard-pressed Marines of Company D, the relief vehicles came under enemy fire. The Army M42, which was the lead vehicle, stopped and burst into flames after being hit by an enemy RPG antitank projectile. A satchel charge exploded under the following LVTH. It began to burn but its crew managed to get out. The trailing LVTH, trying to get around the burning vehicles, which now included the 1/4-ton trucks,

*For a detailed account of the action at Khe Sanh see Chapter

*There is no illumination round for the 175mm gun.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193904

An amphibian tractor (LVTP-5) hit by North Vietnamese mortars on the night of 8 May at Gio Linh still burns the next morning. The other vehicle is an Army M-42 "Duster" equipped with twin 40mm automatic cannon and often used in a ground support role.

became entangled by barbed wire around its left rear sprocket. The tractor was stuck. Despite their losses, the reinforcing Marines continued to Company D's position. With these reinforcements, Company D halted the enemy penetration and sealed off the break in the wire just before daylight. By 0900, the enemy soldiers still within the perimeter were either dead or captured.¹

The recently completed brush clearance around the perimeter paid early dividends. It permitted the Marines to catch the retreating North Vietnamese in the open as they crossed the cleared strip. Tanks and LVTHs firing both conventional and "beehive" antipersonnel ammunition were particularly effective.* Supporting fires of the Composite Artillery Battalion at Gio Linh ripped into the enemy as it withdrew north to the DMZ.

The defending Marines lost 44 killed and 110 wounded, as well as two LVTHs and one 1/4-ton truck destroyed, but the hard and bloody battle cost

the enemy 197 killed and 8 captured. The Communists left behind 72 weapons, including 19 antitank weapons, 3 light machine guns, and 3 flamethrowers.*

The 8 May attack on Con Thien had been carefully rehearsed, but the enemy displayed an inherent inability to alter plans. The NVA attacked the strongest point of the defensive perimeter and continued to press the attack at this point, even when it was clear that it had encountered heavier resistance than anticipated. The enemy planners were not aware of the arrival of the two Marine companies. Company D had replaced an ARVN unit only a few days before the attack.

Following this battle, enemy activity intensified throughout the "Leatherneck Square" area.** The number and volume of artillery attacks increased greatly. More than 4,200 mortar, rocket, and artillery rounds were fired at Marine positions during the month. The enemy revealed the degree and

*This was the first instance of NVA use of flamethrowers against the Marines.

**"Leatherneck Square" was the quadrilateral between Con Thien, Gio Linh, Dong Ha, and Cam Lo.

*See Chapter 13 for discussion of "beehive ammunition."



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Maj Edward H. Boyd, the executive officer of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, shows one of the three captured flame throwers used by NVA units that attacked the base at Con Thien in the early hours of 8 May.

sophistication of its buildup in the area on 10 May by the destruction of a Douglas A-4E Skyhawk flying a radar-controlled mission near the southern boundary of the DMZ. As the plane approached its target, Marines on the ground witnessed the firing of three surface-to-air missiles (SAM) from positions north of the Ben Hai River. One of the missiles hit the A-4E; the aircraft disappeared from the controlling radar screen at Dong Ha. This was the first reported use of Communist SAMs over South Vietnam.

Into the DMZ

Enemy ground action increased. During the period 13-16 May, while clearing Route 561 from Cam Lo to Con Thien, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines made heavy contact with a large NVA force in well prepared positions just south of Con Thien. The enemy fought well and retired north of the DMZ boundary only after extreme pressure.

Once again the enemy used the unusual advantage conferred by the de facto access to the DMZ, and thus to all of South Vietnam. Marine forces still

were forbidden by U.S. policy to move beyond the southern edge of the DMZ. For some time much of the shelling, particularly that by shorter-ranged weapons, mortars, and rockets, came from the region south of the Ben Hai River. It was equally clear that the enemy was using the southern DMZ as a sanctuary from which to launch ground attacks, such as the one against Con Thien.

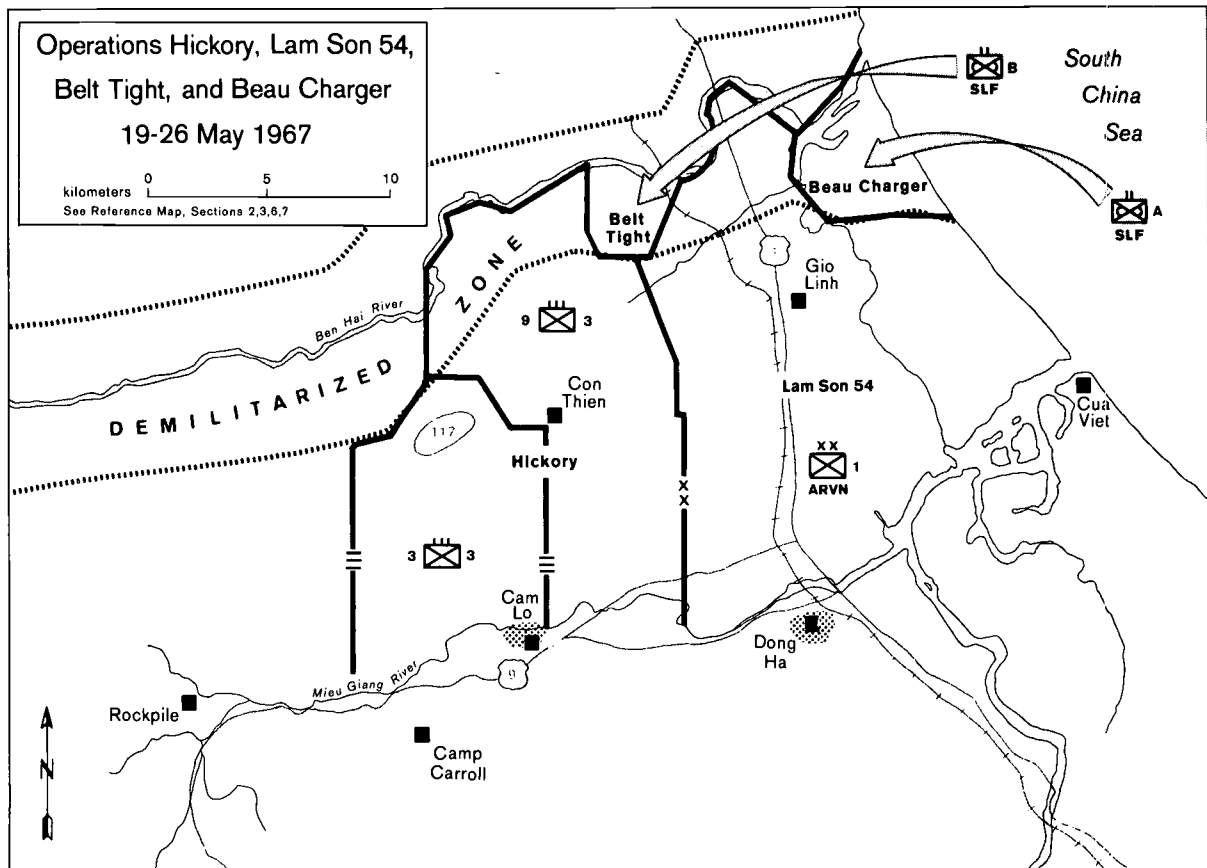
On 8 May, after the Con Thien attack, Washington changed the DMZ policy. MACV then authorized III MAF to conduct ground operations in the southern half of the DMZ, and III MAF, in conjunction with the South Vietnamese, quickly drew up plans for combined USMC/ARVN ground, amphibious, and heliborne operations in the eastern portion of the area. The basic concept called for ground attacks by the 3d Marine Division and 1st ARVN Division along parallel routes, as far north as the Ben Hai River.

Combined with the ground attack, the newly formed Special Landing Force Alpha was to conduct an amphibious landing in the southern portion of the DMZ along the coast to secure the area as far north as the south bank of the Ben Hai River*. On reaching the Ben Hai, all units were to turn around and attack south on a broad front, sweeping as far as Route 9, destroying all enemy units, installations, and supplies encountered. In addition, the plan included the development of a freefire zone which involved the evacuation by South Vietnamese National Police of some 12,000 noncombatants living within the buffer zone. Operational code names were Hickory for the 3d Marine Division units, Beau Charger and Belt Tight for the SLFs, and Lam Son 54** for the ARVN forces. The ARVN force for this operation was composed of three battalions of airborne troops and two battalions of the 1st ARVN Division. The combined operation was to start on 18 May. More fire support was allocated for this operation than for any previous operation in the 3d Division's operating area.

The available fire support included artillery, augmented by the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, two cruisers, and seven destroyers (six U.S. and one Australian), as well as by aircraft from the Seventh

*At ComUSMACV's request, CinCPac committed a second SLF to the area on 15 April. The two SLFs were identified as Alpha and Bravo. (See Chapter 11).

**Lam Son was an ancient Vietnamese cultural hero for whom all the 1st ARVN Division operations were named. LtGen Louis Metzger, comments on draft MS, [1981].



Air Force and the Seventh Fleet. The majority of the support focused on enemy concentrations and gun positions in the northern portion of the DMZ and the adjacent area to the immediate north, and, if required, as counterbattery fire against North Vietnamese shore batteries.

A buildup of Marine forces in the Prairie area preceded the operation. Lieutenant Colonel Charles R. Figard's 2d Battalion, 26th Marines arrived from Phong Dien on 15 May; the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Wendell N. Vest, came in from Okinawa on the 15th; and the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John J. Peeler, arrived from Phu Bai on the 16th.* At the beginning of the operation three battalions, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines and the 1st and 3d Battalions, 9th Marines provided augmentation from Operation Prairie IV

forces. In addition, SLF Bravo was to act as 3d Division Reserve. The same day Colonel Edward E. Hammerbeck, the new regimental commander, deployed the 9th Marines command post to a position just north of Cam Lo.

During the night of 17-18 May the NVA directed heavy mortar, rocket, and artillery attacks against all Marine positions along the DMZ. Gio Linh and Dong Ha suffered the most. From 2350 on the 17th until 0401 on the 18th, over 300 rounds hit Gio Linh, killing 1 Marine and wounding 12 others. During the attack on Dong Ha, at 0315, 150 140mm rockets killed 11 and wounded 91. One rocket scored a direct hit on the roof of the 3d Marine Division Combat Operations Center (COC), but there were no casualties. The rocket detonated prematurely upon hitting a tin roof the division recently had built a few feet above the original sandbagged but leaky roof.² Next door, the ARVN COC had no sandbag protection and suffered numerous casualties. The rockets also damaged considerable amounts of equipment, including minor fragment damage to several helicopters of Major Marvin E.

*At the request of ComUSMACV, CinCPac directed the deployment of BLT 3/4, the last element of the Pacific Command reserve, to I Corps. In a massive 42-plane Air Force and Marine airlift the BLT moved directly from Okinawa to Dong Ha. The entire lift of the 1,233-man force took exactly 31 hours.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

North Vietnamese soldiers captured in Operations Hickory and Lam Son 54 stand blindfolded outside the 9th Marines' headquarters at the Dong Ha combat base on 25 May.

Day's Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 363.* The Communist artillery attacks, nevertheless, were fortuitous for they allowed the allied forces to bombard the NVA positions in and north of the DMZ, under the guise of counterbattery fire, thereby maintaining tactical surprise for the forthcoming operation.

Operation Lam Son 54

Hickory/Lam Son 54 started on schedule. The 1st ARVN Division elements jumped off at 0500, moving in column up Route 1, into the DMZ. Surprise was complete; the ARVN units encountered no resistance as they moved to the Ben Hai and wheeled south. The two 1st ARVN Division battalions started their sweep south on the east side of Route 1, while the three airborne battalions, supported by tanks,

turned to the west and then southward abreast the advance of the 1st Division units east of the highway.

On the 19th, the airborne battalions engaged elements of the 31st and 812th NVA Regiments. From then until the 27th, when Lam Son 54 ended, ARVN units were in constant contact with the enemy. Their casualties were 22 killed and 122 wounded. The enemy suffered more substantial losses: 342 killed, 30 captured, and 51 weapons seized. Most of the casualties occurred in the area known as the "rocket belt" north of Dong Ha.

Operation Beau Charger

East of the Lam Son 54 operational area, Operation Beau Charger began at the scheduled L-hour and H-hour of 0800, 18 May. Just before and during the launching of the assault, a duel started between Navy fire support ships and NVA shore batteries. Although the NVA batteries hit no ships, 10 salvos bracketed the USS *Point Defiance* (LSD 31). After return fire silenced the shore batteries, the surface landing proceeded without further incident; there was no opposition.

*While the damage to the helicopters was minor, this and subsequent attacks disrupted helicopter operations by preventing normal maintenance. This caused the rotation of squadrons in July and the subsequent abandonment in the fall of Dong Ha as a permanent helicopter base in favor of Quang Tri. LtCol Horace A. Bruce, Comments on draft ms, 14Jul81, (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

The Beau Charger heliborne force experienced a different reception. Landing Zone Goose was a "hot" zone, and only one platoon of Company A, the assault company, managed to land. The Communists closed in and the situation was very much in doubt. At 1100 elements of Company D and the rest of Company A, reinforced with tanks, succeeded in joining up with the isolated assault platoon. The Communists withdrew only after air strikes began to hammer their positions.

On the 18th, NVA gunners ranged in on supporting Marine SLF artillery positions, knocking out two guns. Ships of the Seventh Fleet returned fire, silencing the North Vietnamese batteries. The Marines relocated their remaining guns at positions 5,800 meters further south.

Action during the rest of Beau Charger consisted of light contact and continuing artillery harassment until the operation ended on 26 May.* West of the Beau Charger operational area the 3d Marine Division was faced with a much different situation. There, the enemy had come to fight.

Operation Hickory

Adjacent to the Lam Son 54/Beau Charger operational area, 3d Marine Division units launched Operation Hickory on the morning of 18 May. Lieutenant Colonel Figard's 2d Battalion, 26th Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Peeler's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, supported by tanks and Ontos, advanced northward from positions near Con Thien.** Concurrently, Lieutenant Colonel Vest's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines moved by helicopters into a landing zone (LZ) within the DMZ near the Ben Hai River, northwest of Con Thien. The heliborne battalion was to act as a blocking force to prevent the enemy from escaping to the north, or to stop the movement of reinforcements into the area from the north.

Shortly after 1100 the lead element of Figard's 2d Battalion, 26th Marines made contact with a force which intelligence officers later determined to have been two battalions. All elements of the Marine battalion quickly became engaged in the battle; the

enemy defended from well prepared bunkers and trenches. As the battalion moved against the NVA positions, the right flank came under vicious automatic weapons and mortar fire. Casualties were heavy. Among them were Lieutenant Colonel Figard and his S-3, both of whom required evacuation. Despite the heavy enemy fire, the Navy hospital corpsmen continued their treatment of the wounded.³ By 1600, Peeler's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines had moved up on the right of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines and was also in close contact. Fighting continued until nightfall when the Marines broke contact and pulled back to evacuate casualties. During the day, enemy fire killed 5 Marines and wounded 142; 31 enemy soldiers were known to have been killed.

The 3d Marine Division already had replaced the wounded Lieutenant Colonel Figard with a new battalion commander. As soon as it learned of Figard's condition, the division immediately ordered Lieutenant Colonel William J. Masterpool, who had just joined the division staff after command of 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, to assume command of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines.

That night, 75 radar-controlled air strikes hit the NVA positions in front of the two Marine battalions. At 0500 on 19 May, heavy artillery fire fell on the enemy defenses and both battalions jumped off in the attack at 0700. During the "prep" fires several short rounds landed on Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, killing 3 and wounding 2 Marines. Within minutes, the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines again checked its advance because of savage fire from its front and right, while Peeler's battalion encountered only light small arms fire and pushed rapidly ahead to relieve the pressure on Masterpool's flank. By 1030 the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines had overrun the enemy bunker complex, accounting for 34 North Vietnamese killed and 9 wounded.

As the 3d Marine Division begins Operation Hickory on 18 May, CH-46A Sea Knight helicopters commence lifting the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines to a blocking position within the DMZ near the Ben Hai River, northwest of the important Con Thien base.

Marine Corps Historical Collection

*See Chapter 11 for the detailed operation of SLF involvement during Operation Beau Charger.

**The Ontos, or M50A1, was a lightly armored, tracked vehicle which mounted six 106mm recoilless rifles. Originally intended as an antitank vehicle, the Ontos, because of its mobility, became an all-purpose infantry support weapons system in Vietnam.





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A801287

This log and dirt bunker, part of an unoccupied enemy fortified complex found by the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines on 18 May during Operation Hickory, illustrates the type of well constructed and camouflaged North Vietnamese Army fortifications often encountered by the 3d Marine Division in the battles in and below the Demilitarized Zone.

During the rest of the morning both battalions continued to advance against negligible resistance. At 1330, Captain Robert J. Thompson's Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, on the easternmost flank of the advance, met heavy automatic weapon and mortar fire from the east. The company returned fire, but then received additional enemy fire from a tree line 60 meters to the front. Again the Marines returned fire and a tank moved up in support. It silenced the enemy with cannister fire. A squad sent forward to check out the area also came under heavy automatic weapons fire. The tank, moving to support the squad, halted after being hit by RPG rounds and began to burn. A second tank maneuvered forward to help; RPGs disabled it also. Captain Thompson, unable to use other supporting arms because of wounded Marines to his front, moved the entire company forward to retrieve the dead and wounded. After moving the wounded to the rear, the company pulled back and called in supporting arms fire on the evacuated area. The action

cost the Marines 7 killed and 12 wounded; enemy casualties were unknown.

In the meantime, Lieutenant Colonel Vest's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, after the heavy action involving the 2d Battalions, 26th and 9th Marines, swept to the southeast to block the NVA withdrawal. On 18 May the battalion made little contact, but discovered a large, abandoned, fortified position, well stocked with food and equipment. For the next two days Vest's battalion maneuvered toward the other Marine battalions which were moving north. Contact was light, but the battalion encountered intermittent mortar and artillery fire. The battalion continued to uncover large caches of rice and ammunition—over 30 tons of rice and 10 tons of ammunition—but due to the heat and distance to the landing zones much of the rice could not be moved and had to be destroyed.*

*High temperatures reduce helicopter lift capability, hence the inability to evacuate the large quantities of rice without diversion of additional helicopters from other missions.

To the southwest, Lieutenant Colonel Wilson's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, screening the western or left flank of the operation, saw little action during the first two days. Then, on 20 May, Company K, point for the battalion, made contact with what it initially estimated to be an enemy platoon deployed in mutually supporting bunkers in a draw. The enemy, at least a company, took Company K under fire. To relieve pressure on Company K, Company L maneuvered to the flank of the enemy position, but was unable to link up with Company K because of heavy enemy fire. Both companies spent the night on opposite sides of the draw with the enemy force between them, while supporting arms pounded the enemy position all night.

On the 21st, Company M moved forward and joined with K and L and the three companies were able to clear the area. The clearing operation was costly: 26 Marines were killed and 59 wounded. The Marines counted only 36 enemy bodies, but the lingering smell in the draw indicated that many others were in the destroyed fortifications.

Meanwhile, the division reserve, SLF Bravo's BLT 2/3, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel DeLong, and HMM-164, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Rodney D. McKittrick, joined Operation Hickory on the 20th. The employment of SLF Bravo involved a unique departure from the norm for amphibious operations in that the heliborne force passed to the control of the 3d Marine Division as it crossed the high water mark. This procedure ensured positive control of all supporting arms covering the battalion's approach to its inland tactical area of responsibility (TAOR).*

The squadron helilifted the battalion into the DMZ northwest of Gio Linh to block possible withdrawal routes of NVA units then engaged with ARVN airborne formations to the east. By noon all elements of the battalion were ashore and sweeping north toward the DMZ. The Marines of BLT 2/3 encountered only light resistance from small NVA units, apparently security elements for several large ordnance caches and bunker complexes. One of the bunkers was exceptionally sophisticated, constructed of steel overhead and walls. The Marines captured



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188700

Capt Troy T. Shirley, commanding Company L, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, talks to some of his men after the company sustained heavy casualties during Operation Hickory close to the Demilitarized Zone.

more than 1,000 60mm mortar rounds, as well as large quantities of small arms ammunition and medical supplies in the same complex.

After sweeping the southern bank of the Ben Hai River, De Long's battalion wheeled south and began a deliberate search in that direction. Although the battalion met no resistance, it did uncover and destroy two extensive subterranean bunker complexes filled with supplies and ordnance. On the 23d the advance halted temporarily because of the declaration of a cease-fire to be observed throughout Vietnam in honor of Buddha's birthday.

After the brief "stand down," two battalions, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines and the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, began sweeping the DMZ to the southwest toward the mountains west of Con Thien. The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines continued to move northwest as the other two battalions moved south. To the east, the remaining Hickory battalions resumed search and destroy operations in the southern half of the DMZ and "Leatherneck Square."

*The battalion's movement from the SLF shipping to its inland TAOR was called Operation Belt Tight. See Chapter 8 for a more detailed account of SLF participation in Belt Tight.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188699
PFC R. L. Crumrine, serving with the 9th Marines in Operation Hickory, bows his head in anguish after learning one of his closest friends had died fighting the North Vietnamese near the Demilitarized Zone.

Early on the morning of 25 May, Captain John J. Rozman's Company H, 26th Marines made contact with a large NVA company in a mutually supporting bunker complex near Hill 117, three miles west of Con Thien. The action was extremely close and lasted for more than an hour before Rozman's Marines managed to gain fire superiority and disengaged to evacuate their casualties. Air and artillery then hit the enemy positions. When relieved of its casualties, Company H maneuvered north of the hill mass where it met Captain John H. Flathman's Company K, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines at 1345. Both companies moved against the hill. At 1500 savage fighting developed; the Marines estimated the enemy force holding the position to be at least several companies.

When the Marines could not break through the strongly fortified position, Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool ordered them to disengage so that supporting arms could again attack the enemy

positions.* The two Marine companies again attacked but broke off the action at 1730 and established night positions north and west of the hill. Results of the day's fighting were 14 Marines killed and 92 wounded; the Marines counted 41 NVA bodies.

Marine air and artillery pounded the hill all night in preparation for the next attack, scheduled for the next day. At 0915 on the 26th, enemy automatic weapons fire forced down a UH-1E helicopter on a reconnaissance flight over the area. Among the wounded in the helicopter were Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool, his executive officer, and the commanders of Companies H and K; Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool and Captain Flathman had to be evacuated. Consequently, the battalion delayed the attack for another day to allow time for further bombardment of the hill and command adjustments. On the 27th, Companies E and F, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, under the control of Lieutenant Colonel Vest's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, moved against the objective behind covering artillery fire. They met no resistance and secured the hill by 1600. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines then passed through Companies E and F and consolidated on the ridges leading up to the higher ground west of Hill 117. In the meanwhile, Lieutenant Colonel Duncan D. Chaplin III arrived by helicopter to assume command of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, temporarily under its executive officer, Major James H. Landers.⁴

During the night, Colonel James R. Stockman, the commander of the 3d Marines, initiated heavy artillery fires from Con Thien and Gio Linh and using the 175mm guns of the Army's 2d Battalion, 94th Artillery to "literally change the face of the earth" on the enemy-held high ground. The following morning, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines continued its westward movement onto the high ground without opposition. Lieutenant Colonel Vest's men encountered only the extensive destruction of numerous fortified positions, apparently abandoned by the NVA early in the artillery attack. Colonel Stockman then ordered the battalion to move toward Con Thien.⁵

With the exception of the Hill 117 battle, contact diminished during the last days of Operation

*Operational control of Company K had passed to Colonel Masterpool's 2d Battalion, 26th Marines at 1645 on the 25th.

Hickory and the artillery operations to the east. Nevertheless, the Marines found and destroyed numerous well-fortified areas before the operation terminated on 28 May. In addition, they captured or destroyed more than 50 tons of rice and 10 tons of ordnance. Total enemy casualties for the combined Marine/ARVN operation were 789 killed (the equivalent of two NVA battalions), 37 captured, and 187 weapons taken. Of this total 447 were killed by Marines (85 in Beau Charger, 58 in Belt Tight/Hickory, and 304 in Hickory). Allied losses for the operation were by no means small; the Marines lost 142 killed and 896 wounded, while ARVN losses were 22 killed and 122 wounded.

The first large-scale allied entry into the southern half of the DMZ signified that the rules had changed. The area was no longer a guaranteed Communist sanctuary from which they could launch attacks. More immediately, the operation had upset, at least temporarily, the NVA organizational structure in the DMZ. The Marines realized that this initial search and destroy operation would not permanently deny the enemy's use of the area. Nevertheless, while total friendly control had not been established over the region, the removal of the civilian population from the area, some 11,000 people, now permitted the Marines complete freedom of use of supporting arms.

Operation Prairie IV Ends

At the end of Operation Hickory, all participating forces joined Operation Prairie IV and continued sweeps of "Leatherneck Square" and the area southwest of Con Thien. On 28 May, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines made heavy contact on Hill 174, approximately four miles southwest of Con Thien. The NVA were in bunkers, similar to the complex encountered on Hill 117. Two Companies, M and L, attacked late in the afternoon, only to be "blown off 174"⁶ by a heavy volume of fire from enemy small arms, automatic weapons, 57mm recoilless rifles, and 82mm mortars. Accounting for all personnel took much of the night. Results of this initial engagement were 2 Marines killed and 21 wounded. Known enemy casualties were 4 dead; with another 4 probably killed.

The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines called in artillery throughout the night; the North Vietnamese

responded with 82mm mortars. The following day, the 29th, Companies M and I, the latter led by Lieutenant Walter E. Deese's 1st Platoon, attacked up the hill. Despite being hit by friendly 60mm mortars, the Marines made contact with the NVA defenders around 1600. Enemy resistance remained firm; 5 more Marines died, 33 suffered wounds. This time, however, the Marines managed to hold positions on the western and northern slopes of Hill 174. The crest remained in enemy hands.

On 30 May, I and M Companies attacked again. Despite heavy supporting arms fire and the Marines' use of flame throwers and 3.5-inch rocket launchers, the enemy retained control of the hill. Another Marine died; 45 were wounded. There were seven confirmed enemy dead. The North Vietnamese, however, decided to give up the contest. Company M reached the crest of Hill 174 on 31 May, meeting no resistance.⁷

Operation Prairie IV, the last of the Prairie series of operations was over. It, like its predecessors, hurt the enemy: 505 died, 8 captured, and 150 weapons seized. Friendly losses were 164 killed and 1,240 wounded.

On 1 June, Operation Cimarron began in the same area and with the same formations. The operation lasted through 2 July, producing only light contact. The Marines discovered and destroyed several large, abandoned, fortified positions in the area southwest of Con Thien and unit sweeps located numerous enemy graves and several supply caches.

While Cimarron progressed, the land clearing project from Con Thien through Gio Linh to the high water mark on the coast reached completion by 1 July. The Marine engineers widened the previously cleared area to 600 meters for the entire 13.5 kilometers of its length. The 11th Engineer Battalion contributed more than 10,000 man hours and 4,500 tractor hours to this hazardous effort.

During the last days of Cimarron a sharp increase in enemy artillery activity, coupled with several small but intense engagements between patrols and dug-in NVA units around Con Thien, indicated that the enemy was preparing for renewed offensive operations in the area. There was to be much hole digging and sandbag filling before the summer ended.

CHAPTER 4

The First Battle of Khe Sanh

*The Early Days—Opening Moves of the Battle—Hill 861—Reinforcing the Hill 861 Attack
Attacking Hill 881S—The Final Objective: Hill 881N—End of the Battle—Operation Crockett*

The Early Days

The war in the northwestern portion of the 3d Marine Division's area of operations intensified early in 1967. During the spring the NVA gradually increased its forces around the Marine base at Khe Sanh. As the Marines maneuvered to determine the enemy's intentions, they became engaged in one of the bloodiest battles of the war.

The Khe Sanh area in western Quang Tri Province had been a major infiltration route into South Vietnam for as long as the Vietnamese had been at war. That slight but definite plateau, rising abruptly from the foothills bordering Laos and Vietnam, is dotted with hills and low mountains, providing a natural route into the two northern provinces of I Corps. The majority of the trails in the more mountainous area are concealed by tree canopies up to 60 feet in height, while those on the lower heights are hidden by dense elephant grass and bamboo thickets. Concealment from aerial observation was good and the dense undergrowth limited ground observation in most places to no more than five meters. Dong Tri Mountain is 1,015 meters high, the highest peak in the region. With Hills 861, 881 North and 881 South, it dominates the three main avenues of approach. Two trails enter from the northwest. One crosses the Laos-Vietnam border and winds southeast along the streams and valleys that join the Rao Quan River. The second approach from the northwest is a ridgeline that crosses the border to merge with Hills 881N, 881S, and 861. The third approach is Route 9 from the Laotian border through the village of Lang Vei to Khe Sanh.

American troops first arrived in the area in August 1962, when a U.S. Army Special Forces detachment established a CIDG camp at the small airfield just northeast of the village of Khe Sanh. These troops engaged in border surveillance and clandestine

operations to detect and thwart infiltration.

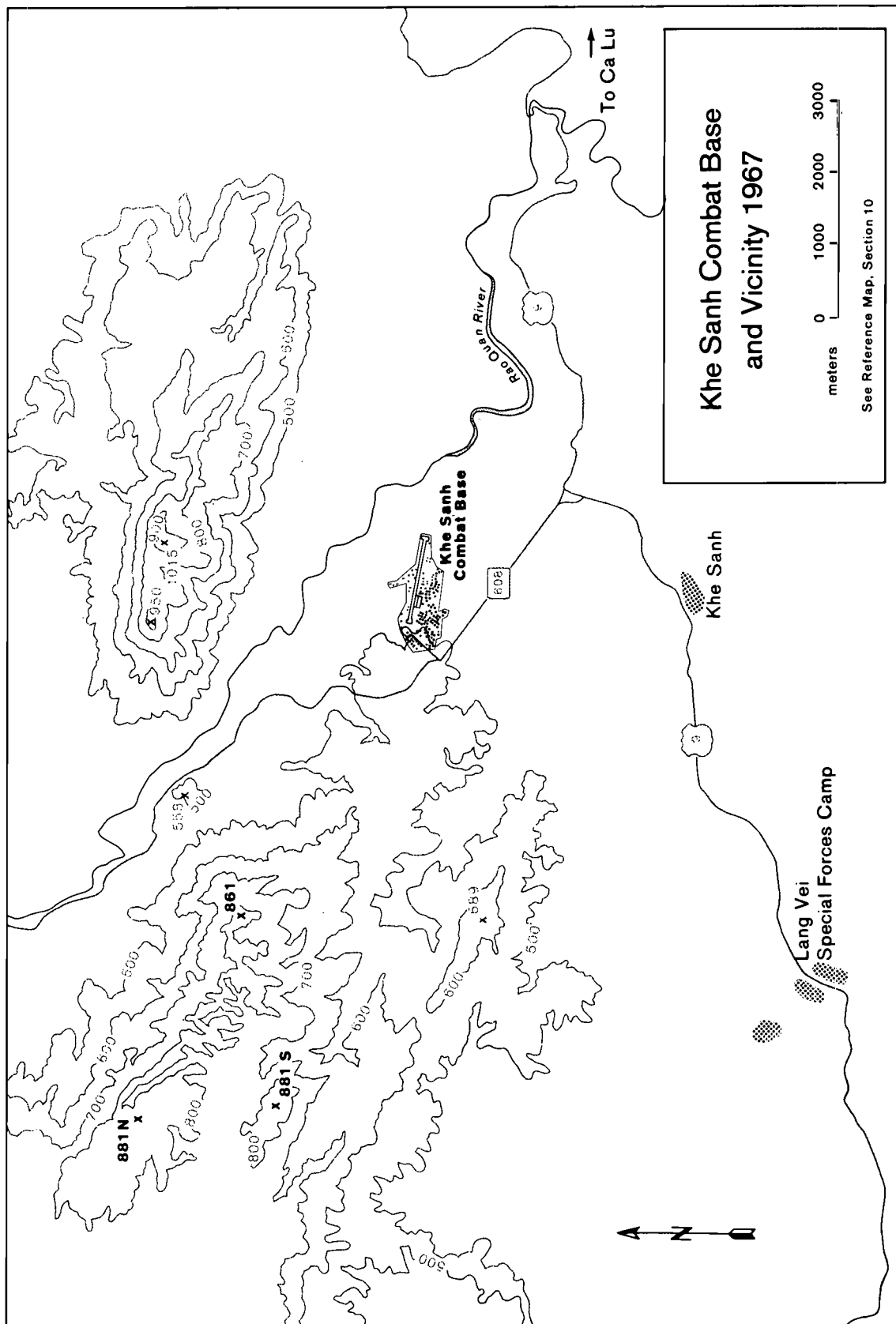
During the fall of 1966 intelligence reports noted increased enemy movement on an east-west trail network which ran into the region from Laos. As a result, III MAF ordered a battalion to be deployed to Khe Sanh as part of Operation Prairie I. Its mission was to prevent Communist occupation, as well as to provide security for a detachment from U.S. Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (Seabee) 10 which was improving the Khe Sanh airfield.

On the 29th of September, Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. Wickwire's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, reinforced by Battery B, 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, assumed the Khe Sanh mission and flew by helicopters into the position. The Marines occupied the key terrain around the airfield and began construction of defensive positions. Reconnaissance and combat patrols searched out to 6,000 meters to detect enemy buildup in the area. The battalion used the 6,000-meter range because it suspected the Communists would bring in 120mm mortars to attack the complex.*

As the logistic support for the battalion began to arrive at the airfield, the battalion command post, the reserve company, and the artillery battery set up in the immediate vicinity of the camp complex and established a perimeter defense. The Special Forces garrison and service support elements received responsibility for portions of the perimeter while the rifle companies continued to operate from company strong points. The battalion then extended the patrolling effort out to 10,000 meters and beyond, depending upon the size of the patrol.**

*The 120mm mortar's maximum range was 5,700 meters.

**During December 1966-January 1967 the Special Forces Camp was 9,000 meters west near the village of Lang Vei.



Initially, Battery B, reinforced with two 155mm howitzers and two 4.2-inch mortars, provided the battalion's only immediate artillery support. Late in October, additional artillery became available when U.S. Army 175mm guns moved into positions at Camp Carroll 13 miles to the east. While the fires of the 175s augmented the base's defensive plans, they normally fired interdiction missions and support of Marine reconnaissance units operating from the base.

Air support for the battalion came from three UH-34 helicopters assigned to Khe Sanh on a daily basis. These aircraft provided routine and emergency resupply, evacuation, troop lifts, and reconnaissance missions. Additional helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft were available on request.*

As 1967 began, the battalion experienced no significant contacts. On 31 January, Operation Prairie I ended. Wickwire's battalion could claim only 15 enemy killed during the four months it had participated in Prairie. While the casualty figures for the operation were not impressive, the battalion had established control of the Khe Sanh Plateau, and the extended airstrip provided a terminus from which III MAF could challenge the movement of enemy forces through the area.

After Operation Prairie I, III MAF reduced operations from Khe Sanh to reconnaissance efforts. As a result, when the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines moved to Okinawa on 6 February, only a single company, Company B, 9th Marines, augmented by a 45-man security platoon and Battery I, 12th Marines, remained to defend Khe Sanh Base.** The mission of Captain Michael W. Sayers' company was essentially the same as the 1st Battalion's had been: To defend the airstrip and patrol the surrounding area out to a distance of 15,000 meters. The company also maintained a 30-man force as emergency support for Marine reconnaissance patrols operating in the area.

Poor weather, primarily fog, through February hampered the activities of both Captain Sayers' com-

pany and the platoon of the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion working from the base, but reconnaissance contacts did indicate an increase in enemy activity. Five reconnaissance patrols came under attack from NVA units during this period and helicopters extracted them under fire. Then, on 25 February, a sharp contact occurred only 3,000 meters from the airstrip; the days of watchful waiting were over.

A squad patrol from the 2d Platoon, Company B, led by Sergeant Donald E. Harper, Jr., was moving up a small hill west of the airstrip when an NVA unit opened up with small arms fire, killing one Marine and wounding another. The patrol pulled back immediately and called in artillery fire. When the artillery stopped, Harper's squad again moved against the enemy position and this time made contact with about 50 North Vietnamese. Once more the Marines backed off the hill and called in artillery fire. Captain Sayers sent a second squad to reinforce Harper's patrol. The Marines assaulted the position for the third time and after heavy fighting were able to take the hill. They found only nine enemy bodies on the position, but a search of the area uncovered fire direction center equipment, an 82mm mortar, 380 82mm mortar rounds, 3 mortar base plates, 2 individual weapons, some clothing, and 10 enemy packs. Friendly losses in the action were one killed and 11 wounded.¹

Although the area remained quiet after this sharp encounter, an unfortunate incident occurred at Lang Vei on the evening of 2 March. Two USAF aircraft mistakenly bombed the village, killing 112 civilians, wounding 213, and destroying 140 buildings. The Marines immediately sent helicopters and trucks to the village to help with the evacuation of casualties. A KC-130, carrying a group of 1st Marine Aircraft Wing personnel especially organized for such events and under the command of Major William F. Morley, arrived at the airfield and flew out 53 of the wounded before weather closed the field.²

The NVA took this opportunity to hit the base with more than 90 82mm mortar rounds, killing two Marines and wounding 17, while damaging two CH-46s and two UH-1Es. Three days later, on the 5th, 14 enemy soldiers probed the airfield perimeter from the north and west. The defending Marines detected and drove them off with command-detonated claymore mines before they could do any damage.

*The number of helicopters assigned to the Khe Sanh Base increased during January to six: two CH-46s, two UH-1Es, and two UH-34s.

**Battery I replaced Battery B/13 on 26 January. Two 155mm howitzers and the two 4.2-inch mortars reinforced Battery I.

The 3d Marine Division responded to the increased enemy activity by reinforcing Khe Sanh with Captain William B. Terrill's Company E, 9th Marines on 7 March. With the addition of the second company, the Marines increased their patrols of the surrounding area, with particular emphasis given to the 861-881 hill complex northwest of the base. Reconnaissance teams there had made numerous sightings during the past few weeks. Patrols and ambushes in the area saw signs of enemy activity, but made no contact; on 16 March, however, the NVA provided the Marines with all the contact they could handle.

At 1000 on the 16th, the 1st Platoon of Company E was returning from a night ambush position on Hill 861. As the point squad, under Sergeant Donald Lord, moved past some dense bamboo bordering the trail, it came under heavy crossfire from both sides. The two remaining squads advanced to help the point element. After 15 minutes they drove the enemy away. The Marines then moved back up the hill about 100 meters to a suitable landing zone to evacuate their casualties, one killed and five wounded. Nearing the zone they came under heavy fire again; six more Marines died, four suffered wounds, and one was missing. Another firefight started and the Marines directed artillery fire against the enemy, but this time the NVA did not withdraw.

In the meantime, two squads of Second Lieutenant Gatlin J. Howell's 2d Platoon, Company B, which had been operating about 1,500 meters east of Hill 861, received orders to move to help the 1st Platoon, Company E. As they moved up they came under fire from the top of the hill. Air strikes drove the enemy from the crest; they left 11 bodies behind. Both Marine units moved to the summit and began clearing a landing zone (LZ).

By 1600 the Marines had cleared the LZ and three CH-46s were on station to evacuate the casualties. The first helicopter landed, and took off, but as the second one touched down the NVA hit the zone with mortar fire. The CH-46 made its pickup and managed to get out of the zone, but the Marines on the ground were not as lucky. Both units' corpsmen were killed; several other men were wounded. The Marines called in artillery fire on suspected enemy mortar positions, then requested the helicopter to come in to evacuate the new casualties. As the aircraft approached the zone, the NVA struck again with mortar fire. The helicopter broke away, but the exploding rounds caught the Marines who had car-

ried the wounded out to the LZ and they became casualties themselves. Captain Terrill recalled, "The platoon commander tried to move the LZ down to the reverse slope of the hill, but by this time there were not enough able-bodied men in the platoon to move all the dead and wounded."³

At 1705, a helicopter carrying the 3d squad, 2d Platoon, Company B attempted to set down in the landing zone on the reverse slope, but the CH-46 overshot the zone and crashed at the base of the hill. A second helicopter picked up the squad, but it had to return to Khe Sanh because of casualties caused by the crash. Then Captain Terrill and the 2d Platoon, Company E moved by helicopter into the LZ. The new platoon moved to the top of the hill and began to bring down the wounded. By 2100, when fog stopped helicopter operations, all but three of the wounded had been evacuated and by 1300 on the 17th all the dead and the rest of the wounded had been lifted out. The Marines attempted but failed to extract the CH-46 that had crashed, forcing Captain Terrill's unit to remain at the LZ as security for the aircraft. Another helicopter finally lifted the damaged one out by 1100 on the 18th and Terrill and his Marines, now reinforced by 1st Platoon, Company B, began a two-day sweep of the area north and west of the hill. The search was to no avail; the enemy force had departed. The action on the 16th had been costly for the Marines: they suffered 19 killed and 59 wounded, almost all of whom were from Company E. The Marines found the body of the missing man the next day. Enemy losses in the engagement were only the 11 known killed.

Immediately after this contact, reconnaissance teams operating northwest of the hill complex reported several sightings of large enemy forces moving southeast. There were several exchanges of small arms fire between Marine patrols and small enemy units, but in all cases the enemy quickly broke contact and withdrew.

Captain Sayers, responsible for the defense of the Khe Sanh perimeter, recognized the growing threat to the combat base. He expressed his concerns during one of the frequent visits to the base by Brigadier General Michael P. Ryan, the commander of 3d Marine Division (Forward). General Ryan agreed and asked what Sayers needed to defend the base. Sayers provided his "shopping list" and, as soon as the Marine engineers opened the road from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh, General Ryan sent additional firepower. Sayers gained a light section of Marine

tanks and a heavy section of Ontos. Each of the latter mounted six 106mm recoilless rifles, which, with the proper ammunition, could be devastating antipersonnel weapons. Equally deadly were two light sections of Army truck-mounted heavy weapons. One section had dual 40mm automatic cannon; the other had quad-.50 machine guns. Offsetting these gains, however, was the loss of Company E, 9th Marines, which, depleted by the fighting on 16 March, returned to Dong Ha on 27 March to rebuild.⁴

The reinforcements to the base's firepower seemed even more important in the early weeks of April when agent reports indicated two NVA regiments moving into the region northwest of Khe Sanh. These reports and earlier sightings prompted the Marines to intensify reconnaissance and patrolling in the area. In spite of these efforts, the Marines did not determine the full extent of the enemy's buildup.

Allied personnel in the Khe Sanh area numbered less than 1,000 men. Among these were the CIDG force at Lang Vei and the Marines' Combined Action Company Oscar, located between Khe Sanh Village and the combat base and within mortar range of the latter.* The Khe Sanh combat base housed Company B, 9th Marines, reinforced by an aggregation of support detachments, and a Marine reconnaissance platoon. Organic artillery support for these units came from Captain Glen Golden's Battery F, 12th Marines, which replaced Battery I on 5 April. While the allied forces were too small to be a deterrent to major enemy incursions, they did serve as an advance warning unit.

On 20 April, operational control of forces at Khe Sanh passed to the 3d Marines which had just begun Operation Prairie IV, though Khe Sanh was not included as part of the Prairie IV operational area. Rather it was a territorial appendage, attached for control purposes to the 3d Marines because that regiment was in the best position to oversee the base and reinforce it if the need arose. The time of need was imminent.

*III MAF created the Combined Action Program to increase the ability of the local Vietnamese militia units to defend their own villages. These units included Marines who lived, worked, and conducted operations with their Vietnamese counterparts. The company at Khe Sanh formed in February 1967 and was unique in that its indigenous forces were Montagnards rather than Vietnamese. A more complete coverage of the Combined Action Program is contained in Chapter 11.

Opening Moves of the Battle

On 23 April, two of Company B's platoons, the 1st and 3d, were operating from patrol bases north and east of Hill 861. Late that afternoon Captain Sayers ordered them to link up and establish a night position north of the hill in preparation for a sweep the following morning of a cave complex located to the northwest.

The morning of the 24th, Second Lieutenant Thomas G. King and 30 men from his 2d Platoon, with an 81mm mortar section, moved from the airfield to Hill 700, south of Hill 861. Their mission was to provide additional fire support for a company sweep then starting to the northwest. Once the mortars were in position, First Lieutenant Phillip H. Sauer took four men, including a forward observer (FO) to the top of Hill 861 to establish an observation post.* As the FO team entered a bamboo thicket 300 meters from the crest of the hill, it stepped into an enemy ambush. When the NVA opened fire the point man yelled, "I'm hit," and went down. Lieutenant Sauer ordered the rest of the team to pull back and then stood firing at the enemy with his pistol to cover their withdrawal. Only the forward observer managed to escape. Although the action lasted but a few minutes and appeared to be just another small unit encounter, it marked the beginning of the "First Battle of Khe Sanh," one of the bloodiest and hardest fought battles of the Vietnam War.⁵

Lieutenant King, having lost radio contact with the forward observation team but aware of the firefight on the hill, sent a squad to investigate. As the squad moved forward it came upon the FO, the lone survivor of the ambushed team. The squad, accompanied by the FO, moved back into the area of contact to recover the other four members of the team. They saw two of the bodies but were unable to get to them because of heavy enemy fire. The unit withdrew to Lieutenant King's mortar position. King directed mortar and artillery fire at the hill and then took another squad and went back to the ambush site. The enemy had gone. The Marines recovered

*First Lieutenant Sauer was the commander of the Ontos heavy section that had recently been attached to Captain Sayer's Company B. He accompanied Lieutenant King's unit to assist the forward observer.

the two bodies seen by the other squad, but after searching the area they still could not find the other two Marines.* King pulled back and threw a smoke grenade to bring in a helicopter to evacuate the two bodies. Just as the UH-34's wheels touched the ground the whole crest of Hill 861, approximately 300 meters wide, erupted with automatic weapons fire. The infantrymen took cover without casualties, but the enemy fire hit the helicopter 35 times in a matter of seconds. Two UH-1E gunships escorting the UH-34 immediately strafed the hilltop. As the enemy fire let up, King's Marines loaded the bodies aboard the helicopter, and after it took off King and his men returned to the mortar position.

While the mortars on Hill 700 and the artillery at Khe Sanh base shelled the enemy positions, Captain Sayers, who had joined King after a forced march with a security platoon, ordered his 1st and 3d Platoons to sweep southeast across Hill 861 and strike the enemy from the rear. Sayers' Marines were roughly 2,000 meters northwest of their new objective. When the two platoons turned toward their new direction of advance, five 82mm mortar rounds hit, killing one Marine and wounding several others. The Marines continued on and the point squad moved down the reverse slope of a small knoll until halted by heavy fire from its right flank.

The Marines returned fire in an attempt to gain fire superiority. Lance Corporal Dana C. Darnell disregarded the enemy fire and brought his 60mm mortar into action. Unable to set up the weapon properly, he placed the base of the tube in a helmet between his legs and steadied the mortar with his hands. The firing quickly heated the tube; another Marine kept Darnell's hands from being burned by urinating on the mortar tube to cool it. Darnell kept firing until he exhausted his immediate supply of ammunition. Ignoring the enemy fire, he several times gathered additional rounds from nearby Marines to keep up his firing.⁶

The enemy answered with its own mortars and the Marines moved back over the crest of the hill to find cover and call in helicopters to evacuate casualties. During the move, Lance Corporal Darnell dragged two wounded Marines toward cover until temporari-

ly blinded by dirt and rock fragments blown into his eyes by enemy fire. Within an hour, however, he was assisting in the care of the wounded.*

Helicopter pilots made two attempts to get the wounded out, but each time they came in the enemy hit the Marine position with mortars and automatic weapons, causing more casualties. After the second rescue attempt, the Marines received orders to move to a more secure position and dig in for the night.⁷ After expending all of their mortar ammunition on Hill 861 and in support of the 1st and 3d Platoons, the mortar section, Captain Sayers, and the security platoon on Hill 700 moved back to the base just before dark on the 24th. There, Captain Sayers, his company command group, and the 22-man 2d Platoon prepared to join the 1st and 3d Platoons by helicopter at first light on the 25th. Casualties for the first day included 12 Marines killed, 17 wounded, and 2 missing. There were five known NVA dead.

Captain Sayers' Marines had forced the North Vietnamese into the premature revelation of their plans to overrun Khe Sanh Combat Base. Their plan resembled the one they used so successfully against the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. In both cases the enemy buildup occurred over a period of about a month and included the occupation of key terrain. Before the main attack, they engaged in a prolonged supply staging activity and, just prior to the main attack, made coordinated attacks against support facilities, particularly airfields and lines of communication.

After-the-fact reconstruction by General Walt of the NVA plans for Khe Sanh indicated that the first step was the buildup of troops and supplies in the region north of the base. Step two was to be the isolation of the base by knocking out the transport helicopters based near the coast and by cutting key stretches of Route 9. Next, Camp Carroll, Con Thien, Dong Ha, Gio Linh, and Phu Bai were to be hit with supporting arms, both as a diversion and to reduce their ability to provide fire and logistic support. A diversionary attack was to be carried out against the Lang Vei Special Forces Camp to present a threat from that direction. All of these efforts were in support of the main attack from the north through the Hill 881/861 complex by regimental-

*These two bodies later were found. They had been decapitated and burned. Maj Michael W. Sayers, Comments on draft ms, 18May81. (Vietnam Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

*LCpl Darnell, killed in action two days later on the 26th, received a posthumous Navy Cross for his actions on the 24th.

size units of the *325C NVA Division**. Fortunately, the contact made by Lieutenant Sauer's FO party on the morning of the 24th and subsequent action by Company B alerted III MAF to enemy intentions.

Hill 861

The job of stopping the NVA fell to Colonel John P. Lanigan's 3d Marines. Although Lanigan was unaware of it at the time, this assignment was to be similar to one 22 years before on Okinawa which earned him the Silver Star Medal. Both involved driving a determined enemy force off a hill.

Originally, Colonel Lanigan planned that Company K, 3d Marines, would relieve Captain Sayers' Company B on 29 April, so liaison personnel were already at Khe Sanh when the action began. On the morning of the 25th, heavy fog at Khe Sanh delayed the arrival by helicopter of the remainder of Company K as well as Lieutenant Colonel Gary Wilder and his 3d Battalion, 3d Marines command group. By the time they arrived, Captain Sayers and his 2d Platoon had already departed by helicopter to join the rest of Company B.

There had been no chance for coordination between the battalion command group and Company B. Inevitably, communications proved difficult since Company B did not have the battalion's codes and radio frequencies. Captain Sayers, convinced that the enemy monitored his transmissions, relayed his coded position reports through his company's rear command post at Khe Sanh. This problem plagued the two units throughout the coming fighting.⁸

Shortly after landing at Khe Sanh, Lieutenant Colonel Wilder started his force moving north to assist Company B. By 1500, the lead elements were moving up Hill 861.

When Company K of the 3d Marines reached the slopes of Hill 861, its commander, Captain Bayliss L. Spivey, Jr., ordered his platoons to move on two axes. The 1st Platoon moved up a ridgeline, followed by the company command group. The 3d Platoon started up another ridgeline to the right. The 2d Platoon, understrength because one squad was still attached to another company, remained behind to

provide security for the battalion command group and the 60mm mortar section.

Captain Spivey had his forces in position for his attack by 1525. Artillery check fire was in effect, however. Captain Spivey requested and received permission to continue up the hill without further artillery preparatory fires.

The 1st Platoon moved upward through the heavy growth on the ridgeline. When the platoon was 300 meters from the crest, it made contact with an enemy company. The platoon found itself under heavy, grazing fire from well-fortified, expertly concealed bunkers, as well as from mortars sited on the reverse slope of the hill. The vegetation made locating the bunkers difficult. Countermortar and artillery fire were relatively ineffective in silencing the enemy mortars; the grazing fire from the enemy automatic weapons and small arms continued from the mutually supporting bunkers.

The 1st Platoon fought its way uphill for about 200 meters, but by 1730 only about 10 men remained effective. With darkness fast approaching, it was imperative for the company to get more Marines on the line. The 3d Platoon could provide no immediate assistance; its advance up the adjacent ridgeline encountered no enemy opposition but the rugged terrain slowed its movement. Captain Spivey had no option but to ask for the 2d Platoon. Aware of the gravity of the situation, the battalion assented.

The 2d Platoon moved forward and quickly became engaged in heavy fighting that continued until nightfall. Since it could not evacuate its casualties, the company spent the night in place; Captain Spivey ordered all elements to dig in. The battalion command group and 60mm mortar section, located on a small knoll only 300 meters from the hill, forced to provide its own security, also dug in for the night.⁹

Progress of Company B during the day had been equally difficult; it too had no luck evacuating its wounded. Each time a helicopter attempted to land, it met a screen of enemy small arms and mortar fire. One helicopter did get into a nearby zone around 1000 when the fog lifted, bringing in Captain Sayers and the 22 men of the 2d Platoon, but it could pick up only three wounded before being driven off by incoming mortar rounds. Slowed by numerous litter cases and sporadic enemy contact which required the seizure of each succeeding ridgeline, Company B succeeded in moving only to a point 800 meters northwest of Hill 861.

*Apparently the enemy launched all of the diversionary attacks on schedule. On 27 and 28 April, the previously mentioned Marine positions were hit by 1,200 rockets, mortar, and artillery rounds. They cut Route 9 in several places. Other enemy units attacked and severely battered the Lang Vei Special Forces Camp on 4 May. The Marines detected and subsequently thwarted only the main effort. FMFPac Ops USMC Vn, Apr67, pp. 27-28.

As a result of the heavy resistance encountered by both companies, Captain Jerrald E. Giles' Company K, 9th Marines flew in from Camp Carroll. By 1800 on the 25th, the company had arrived at Khe Sanh base; it remained there for the night.

At about 0500 on the 26th, the 3d Battalion command post (CP) shook under more than 200 82mm mortar rounds. At the same time, Khe Sanh base was the target of 100 mortar and recoilless rifle rounds, most of which, thanks to fog which obscured the enemy's aim, landed outside the perimeter. While the shelling did not cause any damage, it did confirm that the NVA were on Hill 881S. The Marines replied by hitting suspected enemy positions with artillery and air strikes; the NVA fire quickly ceased.

Captain Sayers later recalled:

... B-1/9 was close enough to the NVA recoilless rifles to see and hear their backblast in the fog. They were on the eastern slope of 881S. We directed artillery on the recoilless rifles and silenced them. We could hear the 82mm mortars but couldn't see the muzzle flashes. We directed artillery by sound. By [105mm artillery illumination rounds] and holes in the fog, we confirmed destruction of the recoilless rifles. (The fog was in layers—the hill masses were covered and the valleys were clear.)⁹

At 0800 on the 26th, Captain Giles' company moved out from the airfield toward Lieutenant Colonel Wilder's position, using the rear elements of Company B as guides. The company arrived at the battalion command post shortly after noon. Spivey's Company K had been heavily engaged on Hill 861 all morning. The enemy unit, fighting from a strongly fortified position, repulsed a second Marine attempt to take the hill, this time by the 3d Platoon. All efforts to break off contact and withdraw failed because of numerous casualties. Lieutenant Colonel Wilder ordered Captain Giles to send two platoons up the hill to help Spivey disengage and evacuate the dead and wounded. By 1400, the two companies linked up, but, despite the effective use of helicopter gunships in a close support role to suppress enemy fire, it was not until 1900 that the last Marine elements got off the hill.

In the meantime, Company B's advance also stopped. The company had been moving southwesterly to skirt Hill 861 and link up with the battalion. As the Marines turned south, they met fierce enemy resistance. The NVA troops, well-concealed in the thick underbrush, allowed the Marines to move to within five meters before opening fire, almost cut-

ting the point man in half. Four or five others, including Captain Sayers and members of the command group, received wounds. At the same time, the enemy hit the entire column with mortar fire. Casualties were heavy. With the aid of gunships and artillery, the company finally gained fire superiority and at 1200 it broke contact, pulling back to the top of a small knoll. There the company attempted to evacuate some of its wounded, but as the helicopters came into the area the infantrymen waved them off; they were helping the NVA mortars to pinpoint the Marines' position. At 1445, Captain Sayers reported to Lieutenant Colonel Wilder that he had so many casualties that he could not move.¹¹

The battalion ordered Captain Sayers to leave his dead behind and bring out his wounded. Sayers replied that he could not move, even with only the wounded. Resupply was impossible, the company had only five operational radios, powered by weak batteries. Sayers reported he would move into the fog, assume a defensive posture, and "... fight until it was over."¹² This option proved unnecessary, however.

As Sayers later recalled:

Captain Glen Golden [the commander of Battery F, 12th Marines at Khe Sanh] found me in the fog by walking artillery rounds to me. (Once in the fog I could only make an educated guess as to my exact position.) Artillery put a "ring of steel" around my defensive position that was so tight we were taking dirt from the impact. It was the most professional and accurate piece of artillery work that I have ever seen. No doubt it saved our lives.¹³

Lieutenant Colonel Wilder sent Captain Giles and his one remaining platoon to assist Sayers. It took Giles' party almost four hours to hack their way to the battered company. Under the cover of a heavy ground fog, darkness, and periodic downpours, and preceded by artillery fire from Battery I, the united force began its move toward the battalion CP, skirting the south edge of Hill 861. Progress was slow. Every man, except the point and rearguard, was burdened with stretchers and the equipment of the casualties. Sayers remembered:

We were carrying KIAs and WIAs in ponchos [borne by] four men to a litter. The heat deteriorated the bodies rapidly and they bloated fast. Almost impossible to carry in the dark, the mud, and the rain. Many times we stopped our march to retrieve a body that had fallen out of a poncho and rolled down a hill. Identification was difficult [as] KIA tags were lost. ... not until we arrived back at Khe Sanh and matched our company roster with the evacuation list was I convinced that we had not left a fellow Marine in the hills.¹⁴

The weary column arrived at a safe area south of the 3d Battalion CP at 0500 on the 27th. Helicopters soon arrived and by 0730 had evacuated all of the casualties and salvaged equipment. The remnants of Company B refused the offer of trucks to transport them back to Khe Sanh; they marched back.¹⁵

Reinforcing the Hill 861 Attack

After the fierce action of the morning of the 26th, the 3d Marine Division realized the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines did not have the strength to carry Hill 861 alone. Major General Hochmuth shifted the SLF Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Delong's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines back to its parent regiment for the Khe Sanh operation. At the time, the battalion had been conducting Operation Beacon Star, 16 miles north of Hue. Picked up in the middle of the operation at noon on 26 April, Delong's battalion flew to Phu Bai in helicopters from HMM-164¹⁶ and then to Khe Sanh by transport aircraft. By 1600, companies E, G, and H and the battalion command group had arrived at the Khe Sanh Combat Base and started moving toward Hill 861. The battalion established night positions approximately 500 meters east of Wilder's battalion.

The 27th was a day of preparation. By 1130, the 3d Battalion had completed all its medical evacuations and moved overland from Hill 861 to Khe Sanh base for replacements for its battle-depleted companies. Colonel Lanigan transferred both Companies M of the 3d Marines and 9th Marines to Wilder's battalion in relief of Companies K, 3d Marines, and B, 9th Marines, which had sustained the heaviest casualties. Company F, the remaining company of the SLF battalion, arrived and assumed the mission of regimental reserve. Battery B, 12th Marines, the SLF artillery battery, arrived at 1900 and was ready to fire by 2050. By the end of the day, Battery B and Battery F, the resident artillery unit at Khe Sanh, had established an organization that permitted them to function as an artillery group, with one battery in direct support of each battalion. The two 155mm howitzers and two 4.2-inch mortars attached to Battery F assumed the general support mission for the operation.

Artillery and air took on the job of softening up the objective area. For the better part of the 27th and 28th of April, the Khe Sanh artillery group and the Army's 175mm guns, further east, poured tons of high explosives onto Hill 861. During the two-day period, artillerymen fired more than 1,800 rounds of

observed fire and 270 of harassment and interdiction, but the preponderance of support came from the air. During this period, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing dropped 518,700 pounds of ordnance on the target area. As each flight arrived on station, the Marine and Air Force airborne forward air controllers, (FAC[A]) directed them to orbit on the top of a large holding pattern. The flights gradually worked their way downward as preceding flights dropped their ordnance and headed for home.

To destroy the solidly built and well-camouflaged bunkers, the FACs devised a new technique. Many of the bunkers were so thick that even a direct hit with a 500-pound bomb would not completely destroy them. Napalm was ineffective until the jungle growth was cleared because the jellied gasoline burned out in the treetops. Consequently, aircraft armed with 250- and 500-pound "snakeye" bombs were called in on low runs to ripple their loads, stripping the trees and heavy foliage from the hill.* With the bunkers exposed, other aircraft armed with 750-, 1,000-, and 2,000-pound bombs came in on high-angle passes to destroy the bunkers.

Late in the afternoon of the 28th, the Marine infantrymen were ready to resume the attack. The concept of operations involved a two-battalion assault; Hill 861 became Objective 1, Hill 881S was Objective 2, and Hill 881N was Objective 3. From its position south of Hill 861, Lieutenant Colonel Delong's 2d Battalion was to seize Objective 1 on 28 April. Lieutenant Colonel Wilder's 3d Battalion was to follow the 2d Battalion. After taking the first objective, Wilder's Marines were to turn west, secure the ground between Hill 861 and 881S, then assault Objective 2 from the northeast. As the 3d Battalion attacked, the 2d Battalion was to consolidate Objective 1, then move out toward Hill 881N, screening Wilder's right flank, reinforcing it if necessary. After securing Objectives 1 and 2 Delong's battalion was to seize Objective 3, Hill 881N.

After the preparatory fire lifted, the 2d Battalion assaulted Hill 861 with two companies abreast. The Marines moved up the hill against sporadic mortar fire, but met no other resistance; the NVA had withdrawn. Both assault companies dug in on the

*The "snakeye" is a 250- or 500-pound bomb with large tail fins that unfold after release to retard the descent of the bomb. For greater accuracy, it was dropped at a low altitude. The slow parabolic trajectory of the "Snakeye" gives the aircraft time to clear the blast and fragmentation pattern.

objective while the command group and the reserve company took up positions on the southern slope of the hill. A search of the objective revealed that the enemy's withdrawal had been professional; the area was well policed, with no equipment or anything of intelligence value left behind. Though the NVA withdrawal had been orderly, it had not been without cost; the strong odor of dead bodies saturated the area. Supporting arms had done a thorough job. The hill was heavily fortified with 25 bunkers and more than 400 fighting holes, all mutually supporting, but the Marines took the hill without losing a man. Bombs and artillery had stripped most of the vegetation, leaving only charred and splintered trees.

Attacking Hill 881S

After Hill 861 was secured, the 3d Battalion, composed of Companies M, 3d Marines and K and M, 9th Marines moved from Khe Sanh to take positions on the west flank of the 2d Battalion. A small hill mass, 750 meters northeast of Hill 881S, was the battalion's intermediate objective. Lieutenant Colonel Wilder planned to secure the intermediate objective the next day, as a jumping off point for the assault on Objective 2, Hill 881S.

Early in the morning of 29 April the battalion started its advance, with Company M, 9th Marines as



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Sgt R. E. Ferdeit, armed with a shotgun, keeps a wary eye out for North Vietnamese soldiers as the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines completes its preparations on 30 April for an assault on Hill 881S near Khe Sanh.

the lead element. At 1120, the point engaged an enemy platoon in a small draw. The company deployed, took the platoon under fire, and called for artillery and air support. At the same time, the second element of the battalion column, Company M, 3d Marines, passed south of the firefight, continuing the attack toward the battalion objective.

At 1915, Company M, 3d Marines secured the intermediate objective with no contact, and dug in for the night. Shortly after occupying the position, the company spotted North Vietnamese soldiers emplacing mortars on Hill 881S. The company called in artillery, and the enemy fired only four rounds before being dispersed. An hour later, the Marines spotted more North Vietnamese moving toward their perimeter. Although it was dark by then, the FO with Company M adjusted variable time (VT) fuzed artillery fire on the enemy's position.* As the rounds exploded over their heads showering the enemy with fragments, screams of the wounded could be heard. The NVA force quickly withdrew and the Marines passed the rest of the night without incident.

At first light on 30 April, while Wilder's battalion prepared to assault Hill 881S, Delong's battalion moved off Hill 861, along a ridgeline toward Hill 881N. Its mission was to clear the area on Wilder's right flank, and to secure positions for a final assault on Objective 3, Hill 881N. Company H, 3d Marines moved into the area where Company M, 9th Marines had made contact the previous day. As soon as it entered the area, the company ran into two NVA platoons in a bunker complex. After a brief, vicious firefight, the Marines backed off to evacuate casualties, 9 dead and 43 wounded, of whom helicopters evacuated 29 while artillery and air worked over the enemy positions. Later that afternoon, Company G assaulted the bunker complex and after heavy preparation fires, the Marines overran the position.

The men of Company G, like those of Company H, knew that they had been up against a tough and well-disciplined foe. Staff Sergeant Ruben Santos, platoon sergeant of the 1st Platoon, witnessed the tenacity of the defending North Vietnamese. One of

*VT fuze detonates an artillery round several meters above the ground, thus increasing the fragmentation pattern and effective kill radius. Air bursts are especially effective against troops in the open or in unprotected positions such as foxholes and open trenches.

his squads found two enemy soldiers in a bunker. The Marines threw in several hand grenades killing one man, but the other grabbed a grenade and sat on it to smother the blast. Although the explosion "blew his ass off," it did not kill him. When one of the Marines went into the bunker to clear it, the enemy soldier shot and wounded him. Sergeant Santos grabbed the Marine and tried to drag him to safety but the NVA soldier fired another burst into the Marine, killing him. Santos tried to flush the enemy soldier from the bunker by throwing in tear gas but he still would not come out. The Marines then threw fragmentation grenades in until they were sure that he was dead. Sergeant Santos later said, ". . . there was no way of getting them out . . . unless you dragged them out after they were dead."¹⁷

The Marines of the 3d Battalion learned the same lesson before the day was over. The strength and dispositions of the NVA forces on Hill 881S were unclear on the morning of the 30th. Thirty-three aircraft sorties had slammed 250 2,000-pound bombs into the positions on the evening of the 29th and over 1,300 rounds of artillery rained down on the hill during the night. At 0800, as the last rounds of the preparation fires hit, the Marines of Wilder's battalion began their assault.

The rough and broken terrain restricted the approach to the ridge; the Marines could not maneuver. The 3d Battalion jumped off in the attack against the hill from the northeast with Company M, 3d Marines in the lead, followed by Company K, 9th Marines. By 1025, the lead platoon reached the western end of the top of the hill after encountering only occasional small arms fire. A second platoon moved up and the two companies closed on the enemy. Suddenly the NVA struck back with automatic weapons in camouflaged bunkers and with accurate sniper fire from the trees. Thirty mortar rounds fell on the attacking platoons. They were stuck, unable to move forward or backwards. NVA infantrymen from bypassed bunkers and holes blocked the way back down the hill. Company K and the remaining platoon of Company M advanced into the savage firefight. "Huey" (UH-1E) gunships and attack aircraft streaked in, covering the enemy positions with ordnance as close as 50 meters from the Marines. At 1230, Lieutenant Colonel Wilder ordered both companies to disengage and pull back off the hill, but it took several hours to break contact. When they did move back down the hill, the

Marines were able to carry their wounded with them, but not their dead. The cost had been high: 43 Marines died and 109 suffered wounds. Heavy casualties rendered Company M temporarily ineffective as a fighting unit.

The cost was even greater to the enemy. Marine infantry, artillery, and air strikes killed 163. Marine aircrews flew 118 sorties and the Khe Sanh artillery group fired 1,685 rounds that day, but it had not been enough. More supporting arms preparation fire was needed before the hill could be assaulted again.

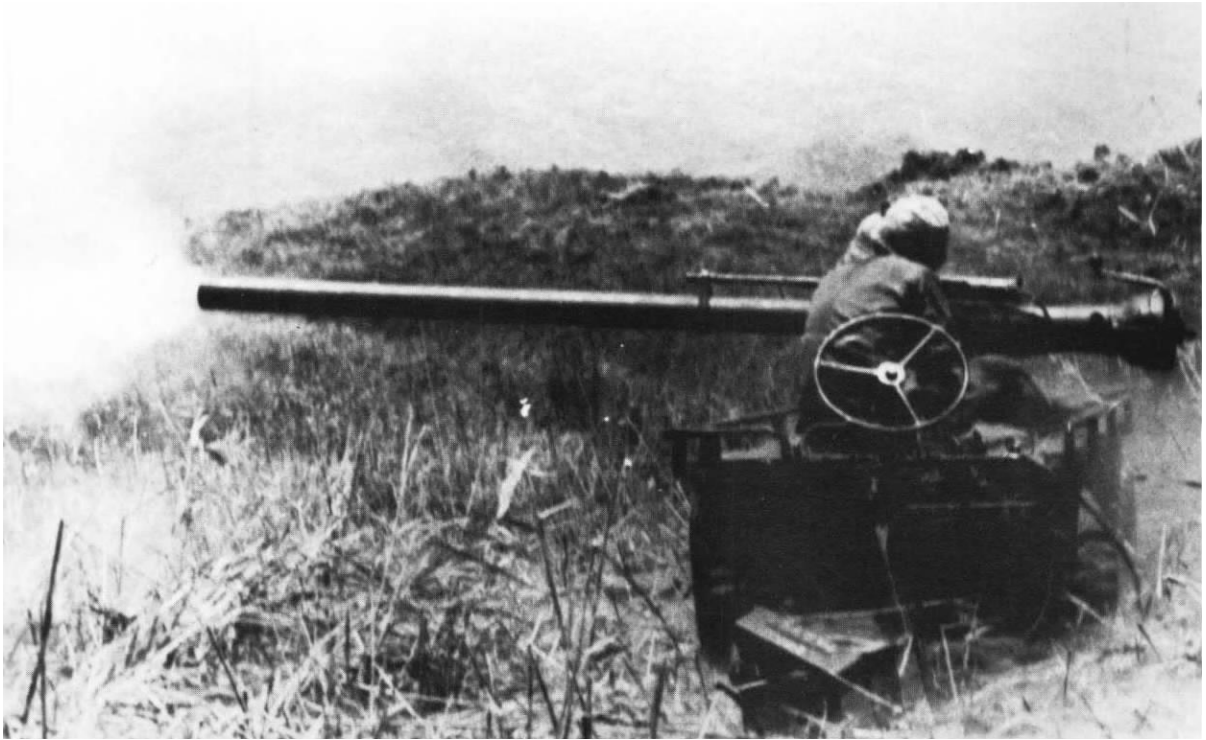
The next day the air space over Khe Sanh was stacked high with Marine aircraft; 166 sorties attacked hills 881N and 881S. Over 650,000 pounds of ordnance, including 130 2,000-pound bombs and 1,445 artillery rounds, plastered both hills. On one occasion, the constant bombardment of Hill 881S became too much for the enemy to endure. After three very heavy airstrikes, one enemy platoon ran from its bunkers. Once the NVA soldiers were in the open, they came under fire by aircraft, as well as mortar and small arms fire from Wilder's battalion. Most died before they could escape. By the end of the day close air support pilots reported 140 more enemy killed, including 81 killed by a single strike west of the battle area.

While Hill 881S was being pounded, the 3d Battalion remained on its intermediate objective north-east of 881S, reorganizing its companies. At 1200, Company M, 3d Marines relinquished position to the regimental reserve, Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines.* The depleted Company M returned to Khe Sanh and flew to Dong Ha that evening.

With the reserve committed, Major General Hochmuth transferred Company E, 9th Marines to the control of the 3d Marines and by 1910, 1 May, the company was in position at Khe Sanh. During the day both battalions brought up their "Mule"-mounted 106mm recoilless rifles to assist in the reduction of enemy bunkers and fortifications by direct fire.**

*Captain Raymond H. Bennett, who was ashore from one of the carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin on a 30-day indoctrination assignment, temporarily commanded Company M.

**The "Mule" is a small, rough terrain vehicle, primarily used for resupply. It is the standard platform and transportation for the 106mm recoilless rifle, an antitank weapon.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

The 2d Battalion, 3d Marines used its 106mm recoilless rifles to destroy North Vietnamese bunkers on Hill 881S prior to the 3d Battalion's final assault on the hill, 2 May.

The 3d Battalion was ready to go again on the morning of the 2nd, and after a final artillery preparation, the 9th Marines' Companies M and K moved out against Hill 881S. By 1420, the Marines had secured the hill, having encountered only sniper fire in the process. That evening Lieutenant Colonel Wilder established his CP on 881S and dug in for the night with two assault companies. Company F, the most recent arrival, remained behind on the intermediate objective. The Marines, at last, had the opportunity to see what they had run up against on the 30th.

The enemy had dug about 250 bunkers on the hill; after four days of heavy air strikes and artillery preparation fire, 50 remained. Wire communications connected the bunkers and they mutually supported each other with interlocking fields of fire. Two layers of logs and as much as five feet of dirt covered small bunkers, leaving only a small two-foot opening. Larger fortifications, capable of holding four men, were equipped with small storage shelves, bamboo mat floors, and a simple but effective drainage system. The largest dugouts, command posts, had two entrances and roofs covered by four to

eight layers of logs, in addition to 4 feet of dirt on top of the logs. The extent of the fortifications on 881S caught the Marines by surprise, but their discovery alerted Delong's battalion as to what to expect on Hill 881N.

The Final Objective: Hill 881N

With Hill 881S secured, the Marines turned their attention to Objective 3, Hill 881N. Since 28 April, when the battalion took Hill 861, Lieutenant Colonel Delong's Marines had been sweeping the area northwest of the hill, checking out each successive ravine and ridgeline. By the morning of 2 May the battalion was ready to move against 881N. At 1015, the action began with Company E attacking the hill from the south and Company G assaulting from the east. Company H was in a supporting position between the two units. Company G made contact almost immediately and after a brief firefight pulled back to employ artillery fire. After the artillery attack, the company moved in, but again came under automatic weapons and mortar fire. Additional Marine supporting arms silenced the enemy. Com-

pany H, moving to a position to support Company G, also came under enemy mortar attack which ceased when Company G called in fire support requests. At the same time, Company E battered its way almost to the top of the hill. Suddenly, a heavy rain squall driven by gusts up to 40 miles per hour lashed the hills. Lieutenant Colonel Delong, realizing that control was impossible and that the coordinated assault by his units could not be made, pulled the battalion back to more defensible terrain for the night.

A strong enemy counterattack, early in the morning of 3 May disrupted Marine plans to continue the assault. At 0415, Company E, in night positions on a small hill 500 meters south of Hill 881N, endured small arms and mortar fire followed by an aggressive ground attack. Two reinforced NVA companies struck the Marines' perimeter from the northeast and, after bitter hand-to-hand fighting, penetrated that portion of the defenses. The attackers either killed or wounded all Marines in this area. After penetrating the lines, the NVA units moved into a tree line in the middle of the position and reoc-

cupied some of the bunkers which the engineers had not yet destroyed.

About 10 minutes after the first attack, First Lieutenant Frank M. Izenour, Jr., whose platoon held the western half of the perimeter, received orders to take a squad to attempt to seal off the penetration. With his second squad, the lieutenant moved forward, but immediately came under fire from two machine guns which hit several of his men. Lieutenant Izenour reported that he needed reinforcements. Company commander Captain Alfred E. Lyon did not want to weaken the 1st Platoon further so he organized 11 attached engineers as a squad and sent them into the fight. Both squads took positions on the left edge of the penetration and fired into the enemy's flank. With the help of artillery, gunships, and jets, the Marines stalled the attack, but the platoon commander still did not have enough force to drive the enemy out of the penetration.¹⁸

A flareship arrived and its two-million-candlepower parachute flares practically turned night into day. From Hill 881S, the Marines of the

This well constructed, log-reinforced North Vietnamese Army bunker on Hill 881 South, its embrasure hidden among the deep shadows around the base, remained fully intact despite a bomb explosion in April that left a large crater just over 10 feet away.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800216



3d Battalion could see approximately 200 NVA soldiers moving toward Company E from the west. They quickly moved the battalion's 106mm recoilless rifles into positions and fired more than 100 rounds into the enemy's flank, breaking up the attack. Then artillery pounded the North Vietnamese force as it withdrew.

By first light, the Marines had shattered the NVA attack, but some enemy soldiers still remained inside Company E's position. At 0700, Company F reverted to the operational control of its parent unit, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. From its position on the 3d Battalion's intermediate objective, one platoon of the company flew in helicopters from HMM-164 to a landing zone next to the Company E perimeter. The reinforcing unit immediately attacked the southern edge of the penetration. In the meantime, Lieutenant Colonel Delong ordered Company H to close in on the enemy's rear from the northeast. Moving toward each other the two units finally managed to seal the breach.

Company H then began the difficult task of eliminating the NVA soldiers in the bunkers and tree line. The effort required bitter close-quarters fighting which continued until 1500 when the company reported the final bunker cleared. The NVA soldiers fought virtually to the last man. The NVA attack killed 27 Marines in the action and wounded 84, but enemy bodies covered the area. The NVA attackers left behind 137 dead, and the Marines captured three prisoners, plus a large quantity of weapons and equipment.

Interrogation of the prisoners revealed the enemy planned another attack for that night. As a result, Lieutenant Colonel Delong consolidated his companies on the southern slope of Hill 881N and established a tight perimeter defense. After dark, helicopters from HMM-164 flew in extra defensive equipment, including concertina wire, trip flares, and Claymore mines. The Marines were ready for the assault, but the attack failed to materialize. Instead an NVA unit hit the Special Forces Camp at Lang Vei 10 kilometers to the southeast.¹⁹

At 0435, 4 May, a reinforced NVA company assaulted the Lang Vei camp. The attack was to have served as a diversion for the major NVA thrust from the northwest which the Marines had preempted on 24 April. The action had a little effect on the battle taking place in the hills, but was a tactical victory for the Communists. The NVA attackers quickly overran the camp's defenses and penetrated to the heart

of the compound. There, they destroyed vital installations and killed many key personnel, including the U.S. Army Special Forces detachment commander and his executive officer. Despite artillery fire from the Marines at Khe Sanh, the attackers withdrew with only light casualties. The South Vietnamese irregulars defending Lang Vei were not as lucky; 20 died and another 39 disappeared. To counter any further threats from the southwest, the 3d Marine Division ordered Company C, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, airlifted from Phu Bai later in the afternoon of 4 May and added to the Khe Sanh reserve.

The next morning Lieutenant Colonel Delong's Marines advanced toward the final objective, Hill 881N. His three companies had spent most of 4 May reorganizing, while additional preparatory fires blasted the hill. At 1530, the battalion moved into assault positions on the southern slopes of the objective. At 0850 5 May, Companies E and F jumped off, meeting gradually increasing resistance as they advanced. Both units temporarily disengaged so that air and artillery could again work over the hill. At 1300, Company F resumed the attack while Company E established a base of fire and Company G enveloped the north. The two attack Companies, F and G, met only sniper fire and secured the objective at 1445. The Khe Sanh hill complex belonged to the Marines.

End of the Battle

For the next three days, there was little contact with NVA units. Both battalions thoroughly searched Hills 881N and 881S, while engineers destroyed the remaining enemy fortifications. Marine aircraft struck suspected enemy positions to the north and west, while platoon patrols covered the area immediately west of the two hills. Airborne observers remained on station to call in artillery and air strikes on likely avenues of escape. Air support achieved a unique first during the period. An AO sighted a lone NVA soldier waving a flag, indicating his desire to surrender. A helicopter flew in and picked up the rallier.

Observers spotted enemy troops to the northwest. The sightings indicated that the 325C NVA Division was withdrawing toward North Vietnam and Laos. On 9 May, a patrol of two platoons of Company F finally caught up with one of the evading enemy units. The patrol had just swept down the northern

finger of Hill 778, 3,200 meters northwest of Hill 881N, when it ran into sniper fire from a ridgeline to its front. The lead element deployed on line and started up the slope, only to be met pointblank by a heavy fusillade. The action remained furious for 20 minutes as the Marines tried to gain fire superiority and call in artillery fire.

Getting artillery support was not an easy matter. Company F's forward observer, Second Lieutenant Terrence M. Weber, tried feverishly to contact Khe Sanh Fire Support Control Center; apparently it was out of radio range. Finally, Weber raised another Marine unit which relayed his fire requests. About 30 minutes after the firefight started, the North Vietnamese began to disengage and withdraw. As they pulled back, artillery and gunships tore into the enemy ranks. The battalion ordered Company E, south of the engagement, to go to Company F's aid. Company E's 60mm mortar hit the right flank of the NVA unit. The battalion also sent two 81mm mortars, two 106mm recoilless rifles, and a security platoon by helicopters to Company E's position. As a result of the rapid reaction by reinforcing units and supporting arms fire, the enemy's orderly withdrawal turned into flight.²⁰

When the fighting ended, the Marines counted 31 NVA bodies in the area. A search of the position uncovered large amounts of equipment and rice as well as 203 freshly dug graves. The bitter fighting cost the Marines 24 dead and 19 wounded, most of whom became casualties in the opening minutes of the battle. Bad weather prevented a withdrawal, so Companies E and F set up a defensive perimeter and passed the night without further contact.

To the west, another encounter between a seven-man reconnaissance team from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion and an enemy company marked the last significant action of the operation. Helicopters inserted Reconnaissance Team Breaker at 1650 on 9 May. Shortly after midnight it became heavily engaged. The enemy easily could have overrun the outnumbered Marines, but they chose not to do so. Apparently they were more interested in shooting down helicopters attempting to extract the team. The heroic performance of 18-year-old Private First Class Steve D. Lopez highlighted the action. Wounded four times, twice in the head, the young Marine remained on his radio for 12 hours, calling in artillery and air strikes practically on top of

his own position. In addition, he killed several enemy soldiers at close quarters with his M-16.²¹

Helicopters made two attempts during the night to extract the team and another in the early morning; all three failed because of heavy ground fire. At 1145, they made a fourth try. After sealing off the area with fixed-wing and gunship coverage, a UH-1E landed and picked up the three survivors. Four members of the reconnaissance team and one helicopter pilot died in the action, as did a known total of seven enemy soldiers.

This action ended the First Battle for Khe Sanh, one of the finest examples of an air-ground team effort during the war. The men of the 3d Marines fought a conventional infantry battle against a well-entrenched NVA force. Although aggressive infantry assaults finally took the various objectives, much of the credit for overwhelming the enemy force belongs to the supporting arms. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing flew more than 1,100 sorties, expending over 1,900 tons of ordnance during the operation. Air attacks proved particularly effective in uncovering and destroying enemy bunkers and fortifications. While Marine air provided all the close and direct air support for the operation, 23 U.S. Air Force B-52 strikes hit enemy troop concentrations, stores, and lines of communications. Artillery also provided a large share of combat support, especially during the many periods of reduced visibility. Artillery units fired more than 25,000 rounds in support of their comrades on and around the Khe Sanh hills.

The battle was also the first major test of the M-16 rifle by the Marine Corps. Opinions of the results were mixed. The light weight of the rifle and the ability of the troops to carry more ammunition than with previous rifles were important positive factors. One Marine officer attributed the success of the final assault on Hill 881 to the M-16s used by the attacking Marines. Others, however, strongly criticized the weapon for a tendency to jam.^{22*}

The First Battle for Khe Sanh did not turn into the spectacular victory that the North Vietnamese desired. Reported enemy casualties in the action from 24 April through 11 May stood at 940 confirmed killed. The cost of stopping the Communist effort was not light; 155 Marines died and another 425 suffered wounds.

*See Chapter 14 for a discussion of the problems with the M-16 and the efforts to correct them.

Operation Crockett

With the enemy threat in the area relieved for the time being, Lieutenant General Walt began reducing forces at Khe Sanh. From 11-13 May, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines replaced the two battalions from the 3d Marines and, at 1500 on the 13th, Colonel John J. Padley, commanding officer of the 26th



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188672

The 26th Marines constantly patrolled the area around Khe Sanh after the beginning of Operation Crockett in mid-May. This patrol from Company A climbs through rugged terrain near Hill 881 North that had been blasted by several earlier air strikes.

Marines, assumed responsibility for Khe Sanh from Colonel Lanigan.*

The mission assigned to Colonel Padley's Marines was to occupy key terrain, deny enemy access into the vital areas, conduct aggressive patrolling in order to detect and destroy enemy elements within the TAOR, and provide security for the base and adjacent outposts. Colonel Padley was to support the Special Forces Camp at Lang Vei with his organic artillery, as well as to coordinate all activities of allied units operating in the area. The code name for Marine operations in the Khe Sanh TAOR was Operation Crockett.

To accomplish the mission, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Donald E. Newton, stationed one company each on Hill 881S and 861; a security detachment on Hill 950 at a radio relay site; and the remainder of the battalion at the base, acting both as base security and battalion reserve. The units at the company outposts patrolled continuously within a 4,000-meter radius of their positions. Company A, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, operating from Khe Sanh, inserted reconnaissance teams at greater ranges to provide long-range surveillance. Although numerous sightings and reports indicated that all three regiments of the 325C NVA Division were still in the tri-border region, there was only occasional contact during May.

As June began, there was a sharp increase in the number of sightings throughout the Crockett TAOR. At 0101 6 June, twenty-five 120mm mortar rounds and 102mm rockets hit the base. One hour later the radio relay site on Hill 950 came under attack from the west and northeast by an unknown number of enemy soldiers. The enemy penetrated the position, but the defending Marines quickly forced them to withdraw, leaving 10 dead, one wounded, and seven weapons. Marine losses in the action were six killed and two wounded. The next afternoon, mortar and small-arms fire hit a patrol from Company B, approximately 2,000 meters west of Hill 881S. The mortar attack immediately preceded an assault by about 40 NVA troops. The Marines

*The official designation of the unit at Khe Sanh was the 26th Marines (Forward). It consisted of one battalion and a small regimental headquarters. The other two 26th Marines battalions were in Vietnam, but under the control of other units. The regimental rear headquarters remained on Okinawa.

repulsed the enemy charge and called artillery in on the attackers. A platoon from Company A arrived by helicopter to help. By 1630, when the enemy withdrew, the two Marine units had killed 66 North Vietnamese and lost 18 of their own men. Twenty-eight Marines suffered wounds.

Two days later the enemy shot down an armed UH-1E in the same area, killing the pilot and wounding the copilot. Friendly forces rescued the copilot and two crew members, but the aircraft had to be destroyed. Due to the increasing number of enemy contacts, Lieutenant Colonel Kurt L. Hoch's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines returned to the operational control of the 26th Marines (Forward) at Khe Sanh; the battalion arrived at Khe Sanh on the 13th.

During the two weeks after the 3d Battalion's arrival, both Marine battalions had many contacts with isolated enemy forces throughout the TAOR. In the early morning of the 27th, 50 82mm mortar rounds hit the Khe Sanh base. The attack was extremely

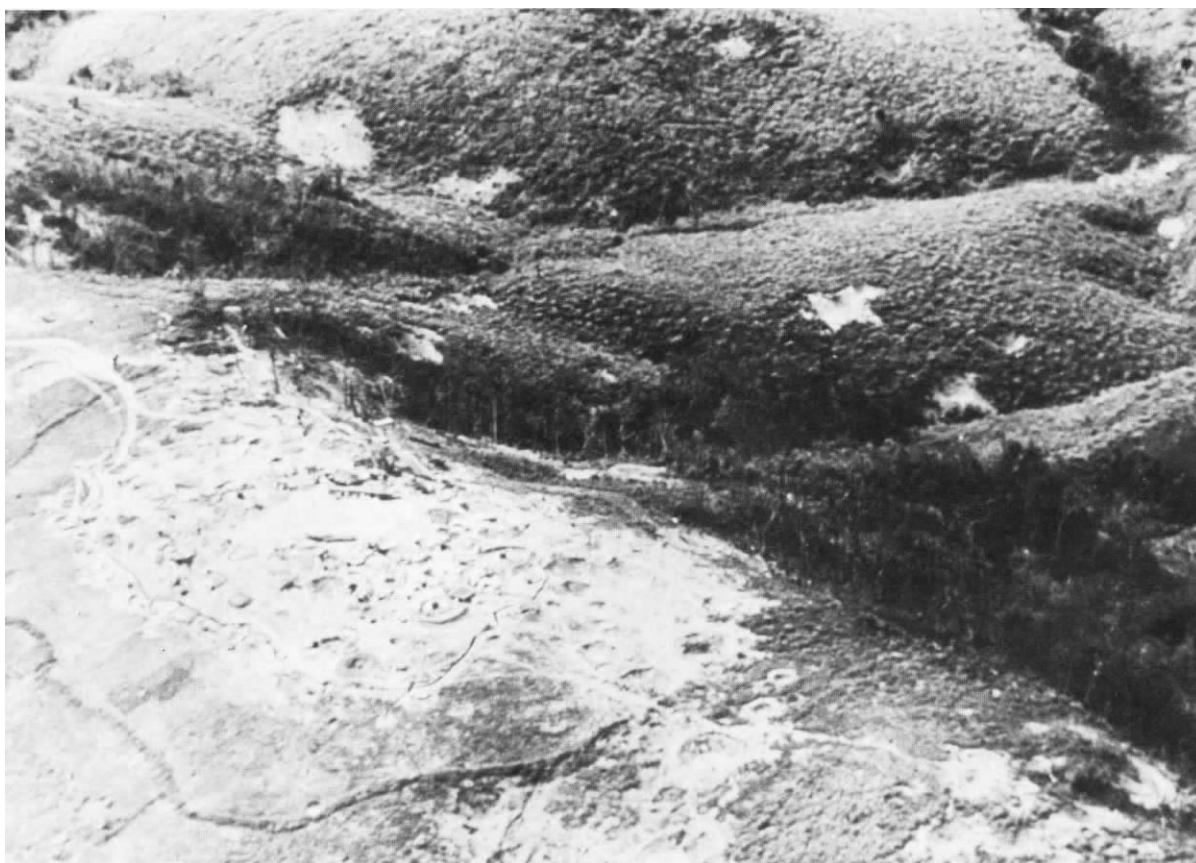
costly to the Marines; it killed nine and wounded 125. Another attack occurred at 0525 by 50 102mm rockets. Casualties resulting from the second attack totaled one killed and 14 wounded. The Marines' artillery answered both attacks with unknown results.

At 1230 on 27 June, Company I, 26th Marines, while searching for a suspected mortar position to the west of the base, ran into two NVA companies. Company L landed by helicopter to reinforce the engaged Marines. By 1900 the NVA broke contact and withdrew to the northwest leaving 35 bodies on the battlefield. This was the last significant action during June.

Operation Crockett continued as a two-battalion effort until it ended the 16th of July. During the July period of the operation there was a gradual increase in the number of sightings, but only occasional contact. Nevertheless, the Marines knew the NVA was not ready to abandon the Khe Sanh area.

Following the battles of April and May for the Khe Sanh area, shell-scarred Hill 881 South, shown here in an aerial view, became a combat base for a 26th Marines company.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189356



PART II
SPRING FIGHTING IN
SOUTHERN I CORPS

CHAPTER 5

The War in Southern I Corps

The Situation—Operation Desoto—Deckhouse/Desoto—Desoto Continued Operation Union—Union II

The Situation

The buildup of regular NVA forces along the DMZ attracted command attention, but the fighting there was only one segment of the I Corps-III MAF campaign. The 1st Marine Division, in the southern portion of the III MAF zone of operations, was fighting a three-pronged war. Marine operations of battalion size or larger extended to the outer periphery of the division's TAOR to destroy North Vietnamese units and Viet Cong main forces and base areas, while company-size and smaller counterguerrilla operations sought to protect both allied installations and the civil population. At the same time, the division provided support for the Vietnamese Government Revolutionary Development Program which was trying to neutralize the guerilla infrastructure.

The area of responsibility of Major General Herman Nickerson, Jr.'s 1st Marine Division consisted of the three southernmost provinces of I Corps: Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai. This area was important for diverse reasons. It contained a large population, was a rich rice-producing basin, and was a major source of salt.* Furthermore, the tree-covered foothills of the Annamite Mountains jutting into the coastal plain and the numerous rivers provided the enemy with natural access to the area.

Forty-three large unit operations, involving a force of at least a battalion, were conducted in southern I Corps during the first six months of 1967. In addition, thousands of small unit operations abetted the larger "sweeps." During the first three months of the year, for example, the 1st Marine Division carried out no less than 36,553 company-size operations, patrols, and ambushes in the Da Nang Tactical Area alone.

*Salt had traditionally been a medium of barter and a taxable commodity in Vietnam. Moreover, the hot climate of Vietnam makes its use a dietary necessity.

These small unit actions occasionally were hard-fought battles with the Viet Cong. One such occurred on 31 January during a patrol approximately 15 kilometers southwest of Da Nang by Company H, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, commanded by Captain Edward J. Banks. Just before noon, as the company approached the hamlet of Thuy Bo, located immediately west of the north-south railroad, it came under heavy fire from a Viet Cong main-force battalion. The latter's armament included .50-caliber and other automatic weapons which hit several Marines in the lead platoon. The casualties mounted as the enemy gunners' fire found the Marines taking shelter behind low rice paddy dikes. Evacuation of the dead and wounded proved difficult and only one helicopter managed to land and pick up some of the casualties.

Captain Banks requested air and artillery strikes on the enemy force. By 1330, he decided to ask for a quick reaction mission to bring in reinforcements. Supporting arms continued to hit the Viet Cong but did not eliminate the main-force battalion's fire. The Marines had to remain in their exposed positions the rest of the day and all night.

The following morning, the Marine company assaulted the hamlet. There was some gunfire during the assault; however, the enemy battalion had withdrawn during the night. Marine casualties numbered 5 dead and 26 wounded, most of whom were from the lead units on 31 January. One Marine later died from his wounds. The Marines estimated they had killed 101 Viet Cong soldiers.

During the next two days, local Vietnamese peasants brought 22 dead and 18 wounded villagers to the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines command post. These casualties had resulted from air, artillery, and small arms fire. After an investigation, the battalion determined that these civilian casualties were a regrettable corollary to the fighting on 31 January and 1 February.

The 1st Marines followed up the 31 January action with Operation Stone, which lasted from 10-12



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A369882

Operation Desoto occurred as the 1st Marine Division prepared to issue the M-16 rifle to its infantrymen. MajGen Herman Nickerson, Jr., used a 21 February visit to Operation Desoto to discuss the weapon with one of the few 1st Division Marines to have one.

February. Three Marine battalions participated in the operation's first phase on Go Noi Island, a 12-kilometer-long island formed by the river south of Company H's action. Phase II took place north of the river and included the Thuy Bo area. However, only a single reinforced battalion, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, conducted the remainder of the operation.

The 1st Battalion managed to establish a cordon on 19 February around elements of the Viet Cong R-20 Battalion. Beginning the following morning, the Marine battalion's companies took turns sweeping back and forth across the cordoned area. By the end of the operation on 12 February, the 1st Battalion had killed a confirmed total of 68 Viet Cong soldiers and captured 25 prisoners and 17 weapons.

Marine casualties for all of Operation Stone totaled 9 dead and 76 wounded. One Kit Carson Scout also died. The 1st Marines claimed 291 Viet Cong killed in the entire operation and listed another 112 as probably killed, plus 74 enemy captured.

While such actions established a tedious balance in the "cat-and-mouse" game of subduing local guerrillas, operations of a larger scale, responding to confirmed intelligence reports, attempted to smash larger, established Communist concentrations. Four major operations, Desoto, Deckhouse VI, Union, and Union II, produced the most significant results during January-June 1967, and are discussed in this chapter as being representative of the major unit fighting in southern I Corps during this period. Although these operations produced tangible and

significant results, it is, and was, impossible to measure the full impact of the "unsuccessful" operations, much less the small unit patrols and ambushes that encountered no enemy. "No contact" had to be considered as a potential victory in the war for area and people control.

The Vietnamese-U.S. 1967 Joint Combined Campaign Plan specified several areas of southern I Corps for allied operations in early 1967. The Thu Bon area between Da Nang and An Hoa and the rich, densely populated Que Son Valley were main areas of concern. The results of Marine and ARVN efforts in these regions for the past two years were tangible, but continued pressure was required to extend and consolidate government authority there. Pacified areas, and those undergoing pacification, required protection, as did military bases and population centers. The gradual increase of Communist capabilities made it necessary to pay higher costs for the security of these locations.* At the same time, the enemy sanctuary in the Duc Pho-Mo Duc sections of Quang Ngai, demanded immediate attention. Intelligence reports indicated that NVA units had moved north into these two districts from II Corps.

*On 27 February 1967, the enemy attacked the Da Nang air base complex with 140mm rockets, which had a range of 8,000 meters. This was the first use of the weapon in the war. To counter the increased firepower capability the Marines extended their search areas by approximately 2,500 meters. (See Chapter 6 for a more detailed account of this attack.)



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370227

A peasant family's bomb shelter provides a place for a machine gun team from the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines to set up to provide covering fire for infantrymen searching a village during Operation Arizona in June. Arizona was one of the many conducted by the 1st Marine Division to maintain control over the populated areas south of Da Nang.

Duc Pho, the southernmost district of Quang Ngai Province, had been under Communist influence for many years. The salt flats at Sa Huynh, as well as the rich and populated, fertile coastal plain, were a vital source of supply for the Viet Cong war effort. Furthermore, the Tra Cau inlet and the coast immediately to the north had long been suspected as infiltration points. Intelligence reports also indicated that the district harbored the Viet Cong political subdivision of the region. South Vietnamese Army activity in Duc Pho had been restricted to the outposting of two predominant hills, Nui Dang and Nui Dau. An ARVN battalion occupied these hilltops and controlled the area around the district capital of Duc Pho, but nothing more. As a result, the guerrillas developed extensive fortifications and supply installations throughout the countryside. Astonishing as it may seem, the Communist control over the area was so complete that many of the inhabitants had never come in contact with military forces other than the Viet Cong.

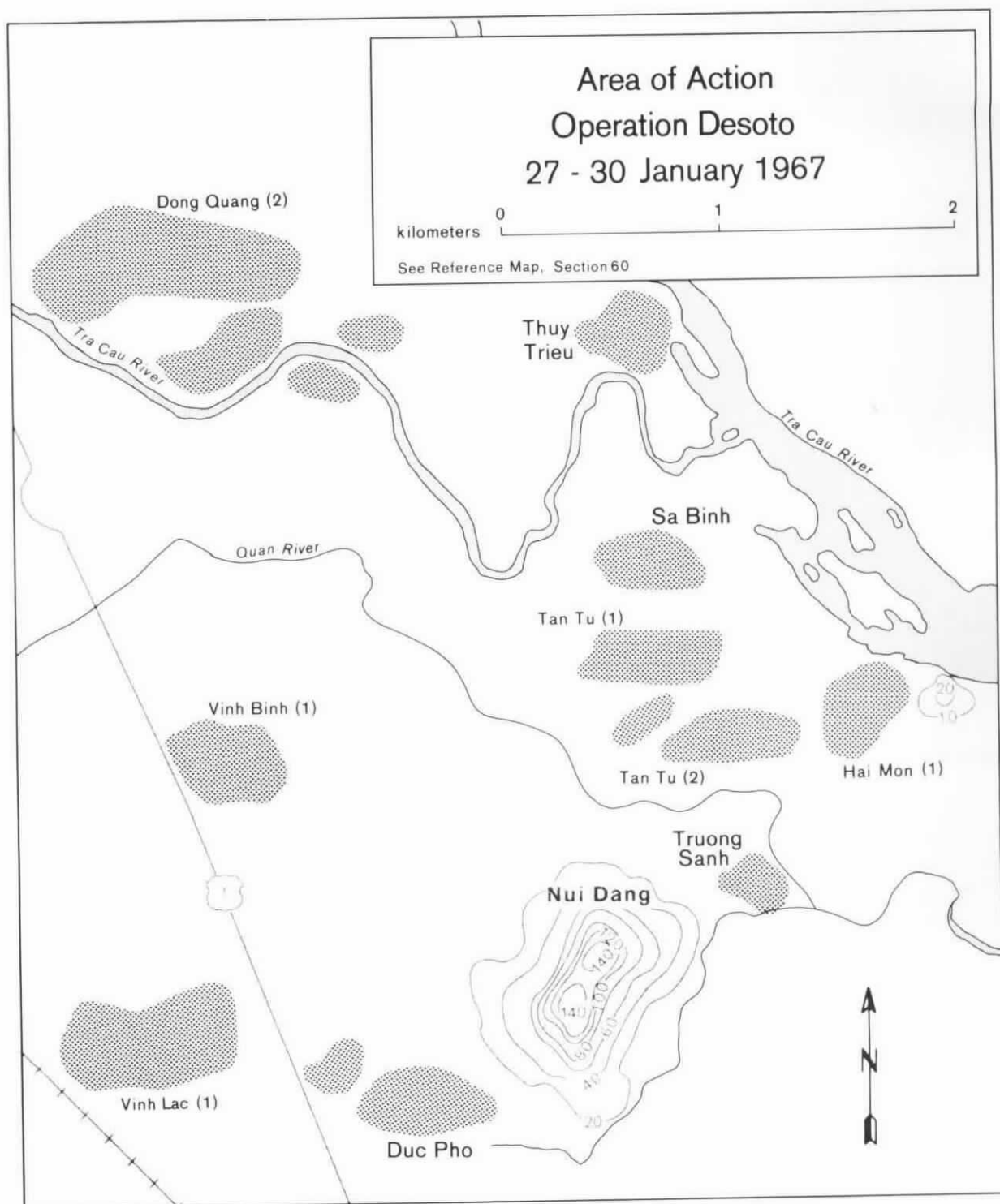
Geographically, the Duc Pho region is a predominantly flat rice paddy interspersed with numerous small streams having steep banks four to

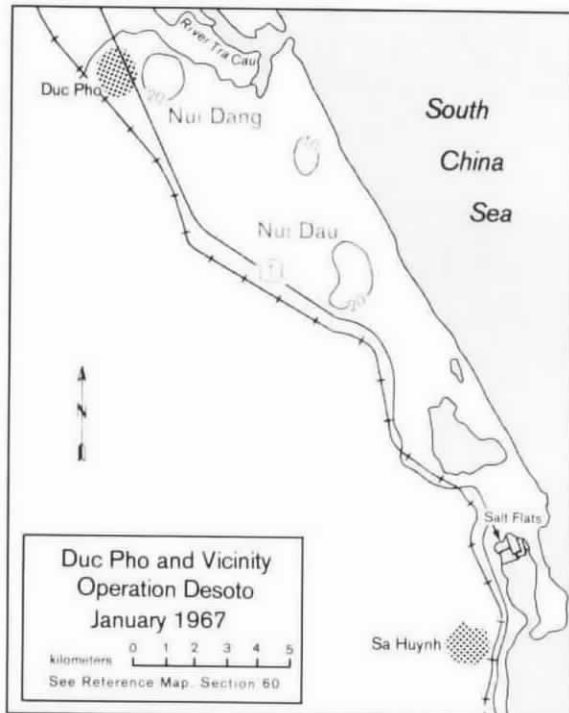
five feet high. The majority of the streams are fordable. Hedgerows border virtually all the rice paddies and cane fields and bamboo groves are scattered throughout the area.

Operation Desoto

Operation Desoto originated from the joint Vietnamese-U.S. 1967 Combined Campaign Plan in which III MAF forces were to relieve ARVN units from outpost duty so that they could be employed more effectively elsewhere in the Revolutionary Development Program. The 4th Battalion, 4th Regiment, 2d ARVN Division, stationed in Duc Pho District, was one of the units selected to concentrate on the pacification program. In turn, General Stiles' Task Force X-Ray assigned one of its battalions to relieve the ARVN battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Raymond J. O'Leary's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines received this mission.*

*LtCol O'Leary's 3d Battalion came to the operation with considerable experience in fighting both NVA and VC units. During the latter part of 1966, the battalion participated in Operation Prairie I in the DMZ and in the Dai Loc/Hill 39 TAOR west of Da Nang. Col Francis V. White, Comments on draft ms, 22Nov82 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)





The relief operation termed Desoto began on 27 January. Marine helicopters lifted Company L and four 105mm howitzers and crews of Battery I, 12th Marines to Nui Dang to relieve the Vietnamese units there. The howitzers were to provide fire support for a battalion assault the next morning. At 0800 on the 28th, Company M, followed by the rest of the battalion, made a helicopter assault into landing zones just north of the Nui Dang position. The only opposition was sniper fire, but intermittent firing continued throughout the day.

Shortly after the battalion's landing, Companies I and M moved out to secure the villages of Vinh Binh and Truong Sanh.* Sniper fire harried Company I during its advance to Vinh Binh, but by the end of the day the company had secured the village and established night positions east of it. Company M also encountered light harassing fire as it moved toward Truong Sanh, but it occupied the village without opposition. Villagers at Truong Sanh told the Marines that strong VC forces were east of the Song Quan (Quan River) in the hamlet of Tan Tu (2).

*Truong Sanh appears on maps in use in 1967 but not on the 1970 edition of the Mo Duc mapsheet. It occupied the area north east of Nui Dang and south of the Song Quan.

To exploit this information, the battalion command group, Company M, and one platoon moved east of the stream south of the hamlet. As the lead elements began to move into Tan Tu (2) they came under sniper fire, and when they tried to close with the snipers a strong VC bunker complex stopped their advance. The company called in artillery and air strikes against the positions. After the bombardment, the Marines attacked again, but stopped once more because of heavy fire from machine guns and automatic weapons to the north and northeast. The Marines directed more supporting arms fire against the Communist positions. Under its cover, Company M recovered its dead and wounded and, following orders from the battalion, withdrew across the stream and established company night positions.

Because of the sharp engagement east of the Song Quan, Lieutenant Colonel O'Leary decided to use both Companies I and M to assault the Tan Tu village complex on the 29th. During the night supporting arms blanketed the village to prepare for the attack, and at first light both companies began moving toward the objective. As they forded the Song Quan, sniper fire broke out. The enemy snipers were unusually accurate; they wounded three men from Company I almost immediately. Both companies returned the enemy fire and pushed on into the village against little resistance.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A369746
A rifleman races for the cover of a paddy dike as his 7th Marines unit draws sniper fire on 28 January, the first day of Task Force X-Ray's Operation Desoto.

By 1330, the Marines had secured Tan Tu and moved into the adjacent village of Sa Binh, still harassed by long-range sniper fire. Periodic bursts of heavy fire were the only sign of the enemy; the majority had withdrawn. The two companies searched the village and dug in for the night on a small knoll north of Sa Binh.

The next day, Company M again searched the two communities. One patrol found an enemy landmine foundry with 500 pounds of uncut metal, mine molds, and tools. After photographing the entire works for intelligence purposes, the Marines demolished the foundry.

Meanwhile, Company I had started to sweep southeast toward the village of Hai Mon. Since this area had sheltered enemy snipers on the 29th, the Marines first called in artillery and naval preparatory fires on suspected positions near the community. As the lead element advanced, they met heavy small arms fire from Hai Mon. The FAC assigned to Company I called in jets armed with napalm and 500-pound bombs, followed by attacks by two UH-1Es which hit the area with rockets and machine gun fire. One UH-1E, badly damaged by ground fire, force-landed at the battalion CP.

One of the battalion's 106mm recoilless rifles revealed the degree of fortification of the village when one of its rounds hit one of the thatched huts and revealed an oval concrete bunker. A direct hit from another 106mm round penetrated the bunker.¹

Hai Mon proved to be more difficult by the minute. The defending enemy had fortified many rice paddy dikes to create positions providing a deadly cross-fire. By 1330, Company I had taken cover in deep rice paddies west of the village. As the afternoon wore on, the situation became even worse. Enemy gunfire, including fire from heavy machine guns, raked the company from four sides. The company could not evacuate its casualties and ammunition ran low. At 1655, the battalion ordered Company I to break contact and withdraw to the west.

Withdrawal and reconsolidation were not easy. Company M fought its way up to the eastern flank of Company I and replenished the latter's ammunition, then both companies tried to disengage under the cover of air strikes, artillery, and naval gunfire.* By 2000, Company M had established a casualty collec-

*Col Francis V. White, then the 3d Battalion's S-3 officer, recalled in 1982 that, at the height of this firefight, Capt Alan L. Orr, the battalion S-4 officer, led an ammunition party to Company M's position, then to Company I, to deliver badly needed



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A369818
Enemy fire on 1 February during Operation DeSoto forced this Marine from Company I, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines to crawl to cover while another Marine elected to avoid the mud and dash forward on foot.

tion point and both companies gathered their casualties there. The Marines could not complete the medical evacuation until 2200 because some casualties had been point men caught in the open by the initial enemy fire. Marines could recover these bodies only by crawling out under cover of darkness. By then, the battalion estimated that Hai Mon was 60 percent destroyed. Supporting arms amounting to 325 5-inch naval rockets, 125 5-inch shells, 590 105mm rounds, and 50 tons of aviation ordnance had smashed the enemy fortifications.

Lieutenant Colonel O'Leary, realizing the village was highly fortified, was not content with the damage to Hai Mon and ordered more shelling to neutralize the area. Again on the 31st, the battalion directed air, naval gunfire, and artillery at all known and suspected Communist positions in and around the village.

While supporting arms pounded Hai Mon, Company M resumed the deliberate search of the Tan Tu hamlets, as Company I swept the area west of Hai Mon. To the south, Company K, operating from Nui Dau, made several small contacts, but enemy activity was light. The heaviest action of the day occurred at 2200 when the battalion command post and logistic support area came under small arms and 60mm mortar fire. Shortly thereafter, 20 VC probed the perimeter. Company L and Headquarters and

ammunition and to assist in casualty evacuation. Col Francis V. White, Comments on draft ms, 22Nov82 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

Service Company security troops stopped the attack in the outer wire of their defenses, killing two of the enemy. Marine losses were 14 wounded, eight of whom required evacuation. The battalion's 81mm mortars and supporting artillery fired on possible escape routes to catch the withdrawing enemy, but a followup search of the area turned up only two Russian-made rifles, several grenades, and some satchel charges.

During early February, the battalion remained in the new TAOR and conducted repeated search and destroy operations. On 2 February, Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Bronars relieved Lieutenant Colonel O'Leary as commanding officer of the battalion. The next day, 3 February, Companies L and M, 5th Marines, which joined the operation on 31 January, conducted a two-day sweep in the village complex southeast of Nui Dang. Although contact in the area was light, the Marines found the hamlets to be well fortified, and discovered more than 100 tons of rice which they bagged and turned over to ARVN authorities. After searching this community, the Marines again turned their attention to Hai Mon and Hill 26 east of it.

Aerial observation reports and Company I's bloody experience of the 30th indicated that most of the enemy fortifications in the village pointed west. Lieutenant Colonel Bronars decided to attack the position from the east by vertical envelopment, using Companies L and M. The morning of 5 February, artillery, naval gunfire, and air bombardment blanketed the objective area. The assault helicopters from Lieutenant Colonel Ural W. Shadrack's HMM-262 followed approach and retirement lanes which allowed the artillery at Nui Dang and the naval guns offshore to maintain suppressive fire throughout the landing.

Light machine gun fire and several rounds of 57mm recoilless rifle fire greeted the companies as they moved into the hamlets. They responded by calling in artillery and naval gunfire. At this time, Marines spotted a number of sampans carrying about 30 Viet Cong fleeing northward across the Song Tra Cau. Bronar's Company M sprayed the withdrawing force with small arms fire and fixed-wing aircraft made several strikes, destroying several of the sampans.

After seizing Hill 26 and Hai Mon, the Marines searched the area and uncovered a vast, intricate bunker and cave system. They promptly destroyed the bunkers, but the caves, particularly those on Hill

26, were so extensive that the battalion called in engineers to determine the amount of explosives needed to seal them. By the time the last cave on the hill had collapsed, the engineers had used 3,600 pounds of explosives. The well-prepared defensive positions and the skillfully laid fields of fire confirmed that the Communists had expected an attack from the west; the assault from the east caught them by surprise. Possession of the village enabled the Marines to control the southern bank of the Song Tra Cau inlet.

Desoto continued during February, consisting of frequent platoon and company sweeps and extensive patrolling and ambushing throughout the area. The battalion's area of operations expanded with each passing day. The villages of Thuy Trieu, An Trung, Dong Quang, Vinh Lac, and Thanh Lam appeared on daily situation reports, but for the Marines on the ground each one was just another "ville" that had to be seized and cleared, a dirty and often painful task.² Attrition among company grade officers was quite high, and the high tempo of daily operations had a noticeable deleterious effect on the rifle companies.³

Snipers were a constant threat and the major source of Marine casualties. The Marines countered with scout-sniper teams positioned at carefully selected vantage points; however, the teams had difficulty in locating an enemy who fired from cleverly constructed spider traps.

Throughout the month the battalion exploited reports of Viet Cong positions with artillery and naval gunfire and extensively used radar-controlled aerial bombing of suspected enemy concentrations. Surveillance reports indicated that the supporting arms attacks were very effective against the Communist sanctuaries.

Deckhouse/Desoto

While Lieutenant Colonel Bronars' battalion gradually expanded control of the Nui Dang-Nui Dau area, the Marines of Colonel Harry D. Wortman's SLF landed near Sa Huynh at the southern tip of the district. The SLF's amphibious operation area included the only area in I Corps where the Annamite Mountains extend to the coastline. It was a predominantly Communist-controlled area. The heavily forested hills concealed the supply routes leading to major enemy base areas further inland. A sheltered harbor and anchorage, and several landing beaches on the coast enhanced Sa Huynh's infiltration potential.

SLF Operation Deckhouse VI had several goals: to prevent free movement of Communist forces in the area; to conduct harbor, beach, and airfield surveys to locate a site from which to provide more economical logistic support for allied forces in southern Quang Ngai; and to provide security for the construction of a CIDG camp which would establish permanent government control in the region. Upon completion of these tasks, the SLF was to join with Bronar's battalion to continue search and destroy operations throughout the Duc Pho region.

The first phase of the operation began at 0800 16 February when the naval gunfire support ships, including the rocket ships USS *Clarion River* (LSMR 409) and USS *White River* (LSMR 536), began preparation fires. When the naval fires ended, two UH-1Es of VMO-2 directed air strikes on the primary and alternate landing zones. At 0855, the first wave of helicopters from Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth E. Huntington's HMM-363 lifted off the deck of the USS *Iwo Jima* (LPH-2) with Company A of Lieutenant Colonel Jack Westerman's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. The helicopters landed on high ground five miles inland. Two UH-1E gunships accompanying the flight suppressed a platoon-size ambush, killing 12 of an estimated 30-man VC force near the LZ.

On 20 February, operational control of the SLF passed to General Stiles' Task Force X-Ray. Lack of opposition around Sa Huynh allowed General Stiles to reorient the BLT's efforts. He ordered Westerman to begin deliberate search and destroy operations to the northeast, while elements involved in Operation Desoto moved into blocking positions south and west of Nui Dau. By the afternoon of the 25th, the BLT had passed through Lieutenant Colonel Bronar's battalion and moved into positions near Nui Dau, thus ending the first phase of Operation Deckhouse VI.

During their sweep north, Lieutenant Colonel Westerman's Marines found numerous bunkers, tunnels, caves, and supply caches; they demolished 167 fortifications, captured 20 tons of supplies, and destroyed 10 caves and 84 booby traps. In the process of defending these positions, the enemy force killed six Marines and wounded another 61. Most of the enemy casualties came from supporting arms fire called in by reconnaissance teams operating to the west; these fires killed 201 enemy soldiers.

The operation plan scheduled the second phase of Deckhouse VI to take place along the northern por-

tion of the Desoto TAOR. Intelligence reports indicated that the *38th VC Battalion* was infiltrating into the Duc Pho area from the northwest. General Stiles arranged to exploit this information by an operation involving his Task Force X-Ray, the SLF, and 2d ARVN Division units in Quang Ngai Province.

One Marine and two ARVN battalions were to be helilifted into the area northwest of Duc Pho and sweep eastward. At the same time, other 2d ARVN Division units would screen the northern flank of the operational area while elements of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines secured the southern flank from blocking positions within its TAOR. The plan ordered the SLF Marines to make an amphibious assault between the Mo Duc-Duc Pho district boundary and the Song Tra Cau, then sweep southwest to entrap any VC withdrawing from the other allied forces advancing eastward.

On the morning of 26 February, Lieutenant Colonel Peter L. Hilgartner's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines and two ARVN battalions landed northwest of Duc Pho and began sweeping northeast. They encountered only long-range sniper fire, but discovered numerous caves and bunkers, all oriented toward the east.

With the insertion of three battalions in the western portion of the area of operation, General Stiles ordered the SLF withdrawn, and by 1825 that evening the BLT completed its withdrawal. Less than 15 hours after the last elements of the BLT left the beach near Nui Dau, the SLF made another amphibious assault, 10 kilometers further north in Duc Pho District.

Following preparation of the beach area and landing zones by naval gunfire and aircraft, the helicopterborne assault elements launched from the USS *Iwo Jima* at 0830 on 27 February. Two armed UH-1Es escorted the 12 UH-34s and two CH-46s carrying the first wave of Company A into LZ Bat, 1,500 meters from the beach.

As the troop-laden helicopters from HMM-363 made their approach into LZ Bat, enemy soldiers, located in and around the landing zone, opened up with a heavy volume of small arms fire. Marine helicopter crewmen immediately returned fire with their door-mounted machine guns; the UH-1Es closed in to provide suppressive fire with rockets and machine guns.

The first wave of Company A got into LZ Bat at the cost of battle damage to eight medium



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800971

A unit of BLT 1/4 establishes a night defensive position in the middle of a broad expanse of muddy rice paddies during Operation Deckhouse VI. One of the Marines in the foreground has obtained a non-issue M1 rifle which rests against a pack on the dike.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A191134

Capt Richard F. Corcoran uses his radio to coordinate the defense of Landing Zone Bat on 27 February at the beginning of Phase II of Operation Deckhouse VI. Only one platoon and the company headquarters managed to get into the LZ; heavy enemy fire forced other units to land on the beach.

helicopters. All eight flew back to the *Iwo Jima* but three made forced landings onto the flight deck. Another three of the damaged aircraft also had to be grounded.

Company C landed by LVTs at 0837. With the beach area safe for helicopters, Company B and the remainder of Company A used the area as their LZ. As soon as they reorganized, they moved toward LZ Bat and linked up with the isolated elements of Company A. Enemy sniper fire continued, wounding seven Marines by 1200.

LZ Bat remained hazardous for aircraft all morning. At 1030, a UH-34 encountered heavy small arms fire while making an emergency medevac from the zone. Fortunately, it suffered no hits. Around noon, two other helicopters from HMM-363 were not so lucky. The squadron's after action report said:

At 1206H, two aircraft were launched for an emergency med-evac [from] Landing Zone Bat. YZ-81 received five rounds upon approach and had to wave-off. His wingman, YZ-83, then proceeded into the zone, but also encountered heavy fire on approach and, after taking three rounds, waved off. One of the rounds lodged in the co-pilot's right thigh causing moderate injury. Shrapnel from the same round hit the co-pilot's left foot and the pilot's chin, causing minor injuries. Both aircraft returned to the *USS Iwo Jima* with battle damage.⁴



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188495

An armed Navy LCU lands Marines at Blue Beach during the first day of Operation Deckhouse VI. Ships of the Seventh Fleet's Amphibious Ready Group dot the horizon.

The rest of the BLT continued to land and by mid-day the command group was controlling the operation from ashore and the two artillery batteries were set up, ready to support the battalion. Company D landed by helicopter at 1430 and the battalion began to sweep to the southwest.

The SLF remained in almost constant contact with fleeing groups of VC for two days after the landing, but by the afternoon of 1 March the contact diminished. The morning of 3 March the operation terminated. Phase II of Operation Deckhouse VI cost the enemy 76 dead; but they killed a Marine and wounded 50 others.*

For Hilgartner's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, operating inland with the ARVN battalions, the entire operation had been frustrating. Although the Marines found and destroyed numerous fortifications, they had very little enemy contact. The following excerpt from a report of 2 March typifies the battalion's encounter with the enemy during the period 26 February-3 March:

Company D while sweeping through a hamlet observed 3 VC carrying packs. One VC was dressed in black, one in white, and one in green trousers. The VC spotted the Marines and began to run in a westerly direction. Company D fired 10 rounds of small arms fire and physically pursued the VC. VC wearing green trousers was captured. The VC carried a well-stocked firstaid kit. Marines con-

tinued to pursue and captured the VC wearing white trousers. This VC was carrying a pack with assorted clothing. Marines continued to pursue third VC with negative results.^{4A}

When Deckhouse VI ended on 3 March, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, had accounted for 17 Communists killed and 11 captured. The 1st Battalion suffered two killed and 12 wounded.

Both the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines and the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines departed the Duc Pho area after Deckhouse VI. The 1st Battalion, 4th Marines reverted to SLF control while the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines returned to Chu Lai. With the departure of these units, responsibility for the Duc Pho TAOR again rested with the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines.

Desoto Continued

Operation Desoto continued through the months of March and April. The 3d Battalion conducted daily company- and platoon-size search and destroy operations while maintaining and improving the Nui Dang base camp and LSA area and positions on Nui Dau. Throughout this period, brushes with local VC were frequent. Constant pressure by the Marines forced the VC to give up attempts to defend the hamlets and resort to delaying actions, harassment, and only an occasional attack.

The most damaging enemy action during the period took place early in the morning of 24 March when an enemy force hit the battalion base camp and logistic support area with 250 mortar and recoilless rifle rounds. The first rounds landed in the

*See Chapter 8 for detailed descriptions of SLF participation in Operation Deckhouse VI.

CP/LSA part of the camp. Battery I began counter-battery fire before its gun positions came under fire. The VC quickly responded and fired 70 rounds into the artillery revetments, scoring direct hits on two of the Marine guns, killing three Marines and wounding 14 others. The artillerymen fired more than 100 rounds, silencing the enemy weapons. The effects of the Communist attack remained visible long after the action stopped. The enemy fire had hit the tactical fuel dispensing system and dumps in the LSA; 70,000 gallons of fuel burned far into the night.

A search of the area the next morning located 36 75mm recoilless rifle cannisters and several freshly dug mortar positions. All the positions showed damage from the thorough artillery counterbattery fires. Followup intelligence reports revealed that the attacking force came from the 95th VC Battalion and that they had forced local villagers to carry ammunition for the 12 recoilless rifles used in the attack.

A sequel to this incident occurred on the 27th, when the enemy attacked the destroyer USS *Ozbourne* (DD 843), lying 1,000 meters off the mouth of the Song Tra Cau, with 18 rounds of recoilless rifle fire. There was no damage to the ship and her answering fire drove off the attackers.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A369802

The strain of the constant patrolling and combat of Operation Desoto shows on the face of this Marine from Company F, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines. Company F served under the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines during some of the heaviest fighting in Desoto.

Operations in the Que Son Basin brought an increase in the base and logistics structure in the area. Here, a Marine CH-46 lands on a newly constructed helicopter platform surrounded by the sand-bagged bunkers at the fortified hilltop position of Nui Dang.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421627



The same day, Company K conducted a search and destroy operation northwest of Nui Dau, accompanied by the village chief and National Police representatives. Company G, 7th Marines, which had joined the operation on 23 March, assumed blocking positions outside the village while a plane flew over the village, broadcasting advice to the villagers to remain in their homes.* As the Marines of Company K began moving into the hamlets, they saw several VC slipping into the waters of the Dam Lam Binh and into sampans moored nearby. The Marines captured these, and found 13 more hiding in a bunker. The pilots of UH-1E helicopters supporting the operation saw more Communists camouflaged with moss in shallow swamp water. The gunships made several strafing runs to force the VC toward shore. After each pass, some of the enemy waded to shore to be captured by Company K. The aviators flushed 3 VC from the swamp in this manner and killed another 23. The number of prisoners reached 49 during the operation.

By 31 March, the battalion had swept approximately 75 percent of the assigned area of responsibility. Reconnaissance teams operating in the hills to the west and aerial observers continued to report moving enemy, which supporting arms took under fire with good results. Targets outside the TAOR, acquired through intelligence sources, suffered attacks by Marine radar-controlled air strikes and USAF B-52s. The steady pressure exerted by the Marine infantrymen in the rice paddies and hamlets began to pay dividends. The harassed local Communist forces reverted to guerrilla tactics as evidenced by an increase in their use of mines and booby traps.

The most costly mining incident during this period occurred at dusk on 5 April. As full darkness approached, Captain Robert B. Wilson began to move his Company G, 7th Marines into a night defensive position on a small hill southeast of Nui Dang. Someone in a security element tripped an antipersonnel mine devised from a 105mm round. The explosion wounded two Marines, one of whom required immediate evacuation. Unfortunately, the medevac helicopter, which had been in the area all day, had departed for Ky Ha. Instead, the pilot of a UH-1E gun ship volunteered to make the evacuation.

Captain Wilson suspected there might be additional mines hidden in the chest-high elephant grass on the hill. He advised the UH-1E pilot by radio to hover, rather than land, when picking up the casualty. The pilot hovered just above the ground and several infantrymen loaded the wounded Marine on board. As the loading occurred, a second, larger explosion disintegrated the UH-1E, causing numerous additional casualties. Other nearby Marines rushed to the scene to provide assistance only to be caught by a third explosion as large as the second.

Darkness made it difficult for Captain Wilson to get an accurate casualty count; the reported figure was 10 dead and 13 wounded. (Not until a week later did Marines recover the body of an 11th victim, a crew member of the UH-1E. The crewman's body, still strapped in its seat, lay more than 200 meters from the site of the explosion.)⁵

Company G searched the area around the three craters and found two wires leading from the hill to a cane field 500 meters away; the VC had command detonated the last two mines. Analysis of the craters from the last two explosions revealed they had been made by bombs of 250 pounds or larger.

While all the enemy's harassing actions were not as successful as the one on 5 April, Marine casualties were high. Lieutenant Commander Robert M. O'Brien's Company B, 1st Medical Battalion, operating with the Marines at Duc Pho, treated an average of 12 casualties and performed two major surgical operations a day. On one day alone, they handled 49 wounded. One of these casualties, a young Marine who was seriously wounded and under the influence of sedation, asked O'Brien if he would live. A few minutes later the chaplain arrived and, as he approached, heard the wounded man say "Chaplain, I don't need you. The doctor says I'm going to live."⁶

The return of local Viet Cong units to guerrilla tactics was not the only indication of the Marines' growing influence in the region. District officials reported that the populace, enjoying more security, became increasingly pro-Government. Indicative of growing anti-Viet Cong feeling among the people was the fact that they often volunteered information pinpointing VC locations.

Unfortunately, military success outpaced civic action progress, particularly in the resolution of the refugee problem. About 11,000 Vietnamese became refugees from the heavy combat in the Duc Pho area. Of these, local government officials considered

*Company G, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines replaced Company F, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines which had relieved Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines on 23 February.

about 7,500 as "permanent" refugees who were to be resettled on an island 10 miles off the coast. However, since there were few vessels available to move such numbers, food and housing became critical in the Desoto area of operations.⁷

Local factors complicated the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines' civic action problems. The area was the home of the vice premier of North Vietnam, a fact in which many local Vietnamese took great pride. In addition, intelligence sources gave indications the province chief was a Viet Cong sympathizer, as were many of the refugees. Despite positive efforts by the commander of the Marine battalion, including obtaining new leadership for the attached Army civil affairs platoon, the civic action aspects of Operation Desoto remained unsolved long after the operation ended.⁸

By 7 April, when Operation Desoto ended, the Marines had expanded positive military control over 43 square kilometers of the Duc Pho District and had ensured relatively safe movement in another 50 square kilometers. Revolutionary Development teams were able to work effectively, a virtual impossibility three months earlier. Desoto was a landmark in that it was an initial step toward restoration of Government control in southernmost I Corps.

Logistically, Operation Desoto had been unique. The terrain and tactical situation required that all logistical support be provided by helicopter. At the beginning of the operation, the Marines established a logistical support area at the Quang Ngai airfield, and for the first six days flew all supplies from there directly to units in the field. Thereafter, six CH-46 helicopters arrived daily from Chu Lai, to supply an LSA at Duc Pho. On 8 February, to preserve the wing's helicopters and conserve critical flight time, III MAF obtained a Navy logistical support ship which established a forward supply point providing all operational support. The ship, an LST, loaded at Chu Lai with all classes of supply and then stationed itself off the coast, only five miles from the Duc Pho LSA. Helicopters, hovering over the ship, picked up supplies as external lifts and moved them to the LSA. This technique reduced the daily helicopter requirement from six to four. The Navy further improved the system later in February by providing a helicopter refueling capability by mooring an LCU (landing craft, utility) alongside, loaded with two 10,000-gallon reinforced rubber tanks full of aviation gas. Helicopters landing on the cargo deck of the LST could have their fuel tanks filled from the

alongside LCU at the same time they reloaded for another mission to Duc Pho. A forward supply point at Quang Ngai backed up the logistic support ship. Bulk items, fuel, and ammunition arrived there by trucks from Chu Lai. A detachment of the Marines' new heavy-lift helicopters, Sikorsky CH-53D Sea Stallions from HMM-265, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William R. Beeler, lifted the bulk items to the operational area when required. The new helicopters made possible air transportation of heavy equipment such as Ontos, 155mm howitzers, and D-4 Caterpillar tractors for which there had been no previous means of aerial delivery.

Logistical problems during the operation almost equaled the operational difficulties of eliminating the Communists from the area. From 27 January when Desoto began, until 7 April when it ended and control of the area passed to elements of the U.S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), the Marines killed a reported 383 enemy soldiers. But in terms of American casualties the cost was high—76 Marines died and another 573 received wounds.

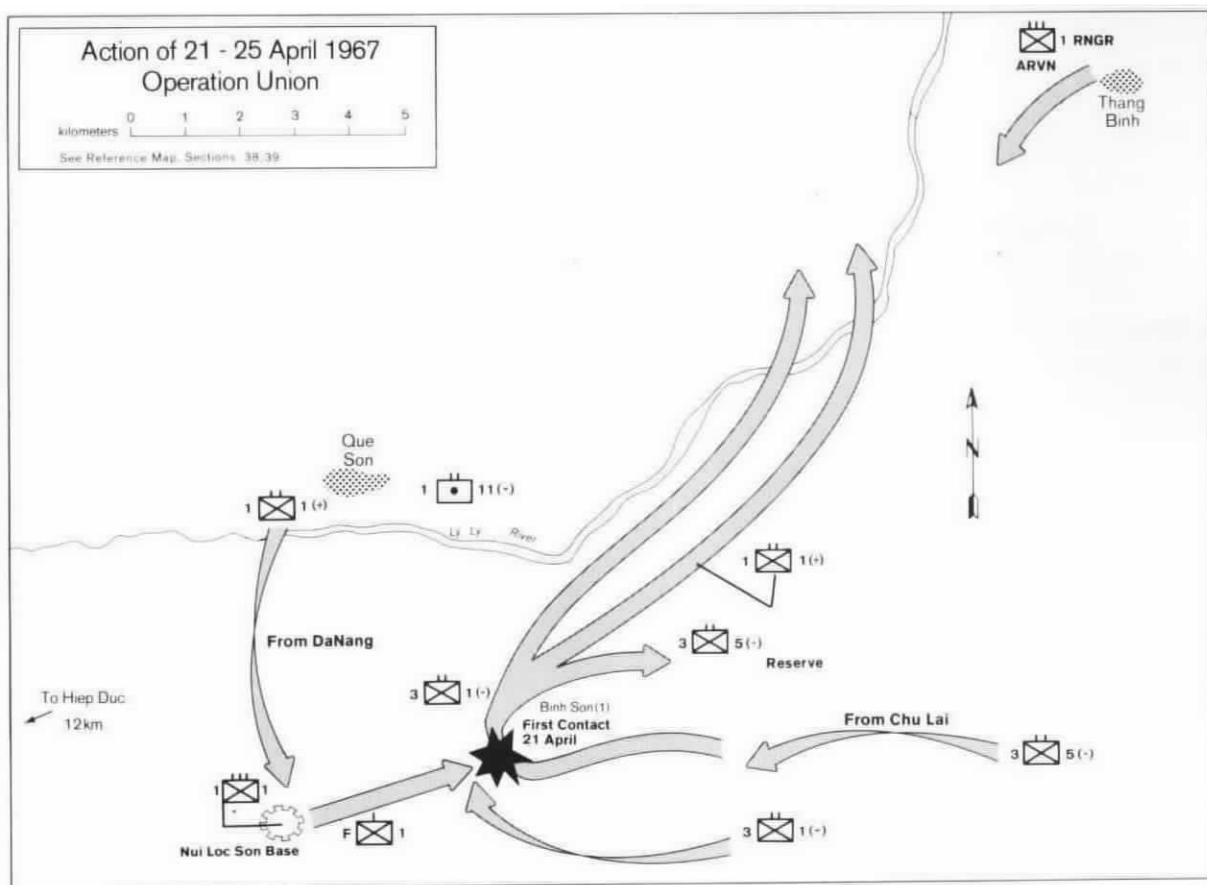
Operation Union

Operation Union, like Desoto, was an outgrowth of the 1967 Joint Combined Campaign Plan and the requirement for III MAF to replace ARVN units at isolated outposts. The hill complex of Nui Loc Son, overlooking the Que Son Valley, is 25 kilometers northwest of Tam Ky.* In 1967 it was the site of one of the ARVN manned outposts.

The Marines realized that dominance of the fertile, densely populated Que Son Basin region astride the Quang Nam-Quang Tin boundary was one of the keys to control of the five northern provinces of Vietnam. The enemy needed this agriculturally rich and populous area to support operations in the coastal lowlands. Despite a number of operations in the basin by both Marine and ARVN forces, Government control continued to be negligible.

The principal enemy force in the basin was the *2d NVA Division*. Although headquarters elements of the division appeared there in July 1966, units of its *3d* and *21st NVA Regiments* did not arrive in force until late February 1967. As the year progressed, the

*Some sources refer to this area as the Nui Loc Son Basin. The term Que Son Basin is used for consistency within this volume.



3d VC Regiment, also part of the *2d NVA Division*, joined them after moving north into the region from Quang Ngai Province.

The demand for Marine units elsewhere long denied the permanent assignment of a battalion or larger formation to the valley, and ARVN troops lacked the strength to carry the burden alone. However, the deployment of U.S. Army units to southern I Corps during April freed the 1st Marine Division for operations in this critical area.* Operation Union marked the beginning of the bitter campaign for control of the Que Son Basin.

In mid-January 1967, Captain Gene A. Deegan's Company F, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines had relieved the ARVN unit on Nui Loc Son and began operations under the direct control of Colonel Emil J. Radics' 1st Marines. By positioning Marines on this small hill mass, III MAF hoped to achieve three

goals: establish a modicum of control over VC/NVA access to this rice producing area; initiate a much needed civic action effort in a region frequented regularly by U.S. Forces; and force the *2d NVA Division* into open battle.

Company F, reinforced with an 81mm mortar section and a 106mm recoilless rifle section from the battalion and a 4.2-inch mortar battery from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, engaged small enemy units attempting to cross the valley floor. The company undertook civic action projects which generated a good relationship with the Vietnamese and produced accurate intelligence of NVA/VC activities in the area. The successful combination of small unit operations and civic action disturbed the NVA who had previously operated with impunity in the Que Son Basin. Colonel Radics described these actions as "... the planned and premeditated utilization of a Marine rifle company to create a situation."⁹ The *2d NVA Division* took the bait; in April it came out in force to fight.

The enemy's desire for a fight did not go unnoticed. As Colonel Radics recalled:

*Two battalions of the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) temporarily moved into Duc Pho pending the arrival of Task Force Oregon units which were to be assigned to I Corps to reinforce III MAF later in April. See Chapter 4 for a detailed account of the U.S. Army's arrival in I CTZ.

During early April, while making one of my twice weekly visits to Nui Loc Son, Captain Deegan advised me of increasing enemy movement in the hills to the west and south of the Que Son Basin. We deduced that, perhaps, he was at last making his move. On April 15, [the enemy] started infiltrating small units into the valley floor east of F Company's position. This buildup continued through the 16th and 17th, and on the night of April 18, Captain Deegan reported . . . that he believed the enemy [force] to be of at least two regiments in size.

My options were two. Let the enemy initiate action against F Company on Nui Loc Son and then react—or—assume the initiative and strike him first. I chose the latter option . . . The concept of a heliborne assault had been on the books and we only needed to know where the enemy would locate his major elements. . . . His option to locate east of Nui Loc Son was just what the 1st Marines wanted. This would enable the regiment to inhibit the enemy from [either] assaulting F Company's position or rapidly seeking sanctuary in the mountains to the south and east.¹⁰

The 1st Marines staff worked throughout the night of 18-19 April developing its final plan of attack. The plan provided for the following: Company F was to make contact from its outpost position, covered by supporting arms fire; elements of the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines would make a helicopter-borne assault into the operational area, followed by the 1st Battalion (-), 1st Marines; and another, as yet undesignated, battalion from Chu Lai would act as regimental reserve. Artillery from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines would move by helicopters to Que Son village for direct support. The 1st Marines command group would control the operation from the Nui Loc Son outpost.

The 1st Marines presented its plans to General Nickerson on the morning of the 19th, with the recommendation for execution that same day. General Nickerson approved the plan but delayed its execution because of another operation in progress within the division TAOR. On the afternoon of the 20th, he gave permission to begin Operation Union the following day.

Early on the morning of the 21st, Company F moved out from Nui Loc Son. By 0700, the company had several brief encounters with small NVA elements and had seen a large enemy force moving into the village of Binh Son (1) four kilometers to the northeast. At 0930 the Marine company came under heavy small arms fire and pulled back to a tree line where it called in artillery and air strikes on the enemy positions. At 1100, Captain Deegan moved his 2d and 3d Platoons against the village, while the 1st Platoon provided covering fire. The assault

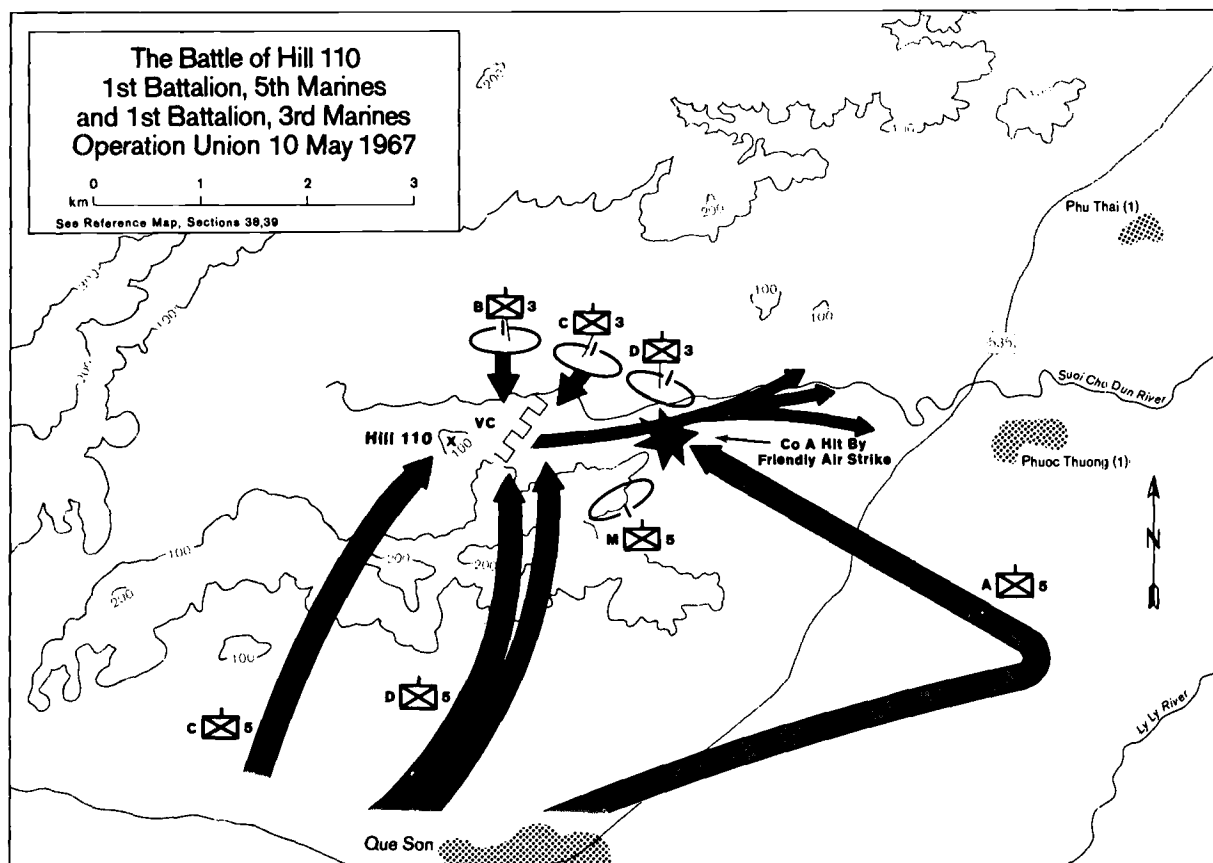
elements encountered almost no resistance as they jumped off in the attack, but as they started to enter the village they were stopped cold by heavy fire. The 1st Platoon tried to flank the enemy position, but as it moved it came under equally heavy fire. Despite repeated artillery and air strikes on the NVA positions the company was stuck, unable to maneuver because of the volume of enemy fire.

Lieutenant Colonel Hillmer F. DeAtley, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, his command group, and Companies I and M, joined the fight, entering a hotly contested landing zone 1,500 meters from the Company F action. The force fought its way to help Deegan, who, despite serious wounds, continued to direct his company until evacuated after DeAtley's battalion arrived. At 1610, the lead elements of Lieutenant Colonel Dean E. Esslinger's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines from Chu Lai began landing east of the battlefield. Esslinger's Marines moved west through scattered resistance to link up with DeAtley's Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Van D. Bell, Jr.'s 1st Battalion, 1st Marines arrived from Da Nang, landing in darkness near the 1st Marines command post at the Nui Loc Son outpost. Bell's battalion moved out immediately to join the battle.

To support the rapidly committed battalions, helicopters lifted Battery B, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines to Que Son village and a platoon of U.S. Army 175mm guns from the 3rd Battalion, 18th Field Artillery moved from Chu Lai to Tam Ky. The heaviest supporting arms fire power for the opening phase of the operation came from planes of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.

During the first day's action, the men of Company F and the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines bore the brunt of the fighting, but by dawn of the 22nd, all elements were locked in battle. The Marines drove the enemy soldiers out of their positions and maneuvered to force them northward. While withdrawing, the Communists suffered severe casualties from air strikes and artillery. Bell's and Esslinger's battalions attacked northeast, while the three-battalion ARVN 1st Ranger Group moved southwest from Thanh Binh to catch the fleeing enemy.

The pursuit continued as the infantrymen searched north and east of Nui Loc Son, but there were only scattered contacts. On the 25th, Colonel Kenneth J. Houghton's 5th Marines arrived from Chu Lai and moved into the valley, allowing the 1st Marines to be



returned to their Da Nang TAOR.* By 26 April, all elements of the 1st Marines had returned to Da Nang, with the exception of Company F which remained at the Nui Loc Son outpost.

Lieutenant Colonel Esslinger's battalion began a thorough search of the mountains south and west of the basin to find the NVA. Action was generally light, but an incident on the night of the 27th proved that the enemy remained active in the area. A Marine stepped on a mine which triggered a series of explosions throughout a landing zone. Marine casualties were one killed and 43 wounded, 35 of whom required evacuation.

On 28 April, Colonel James A. Gallo, Jr.'s new SLF Alpha, which landed by helicopters southeast of the Nui Loc Son outpost, joined Esslinger's battalion.** Both battalions met only light resistance as

they swept their respective zones. Despite the lack of contact, intelligence reports indicated that major enemy forces were still in the area.

Colonel Houghton, an experienced combat commander in two wars, responded to this information by helilifting Lieutenant Colonel Hilgartner's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines into the mountains 13 kilometers east of Hiep Duc on 1 May. Initially, the battalion encountered only light opposition, but as it swept west along the Song Chang, there was a sharp increase in the number of engagements.

On 5 May, Hilgartner's Company D came upon an enemy regimental storage site three kilometers north of Hiep Duc. The cache contained recoilless rifle rounds, shoes, 8,000 uniforms, 3 complete surgical kits, maps, and other assorted equipment.¹¹

As the two battalions of the 5th Marines continued to sweep north, Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. Wickwire's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines helilifted into the Que Son area of the basin and began a sweep northwest of Que Son village. As the operation progressed, all three battalions had brief contacts with small enemy units, but in each case the NVA withdrew.

*The 5th Marines consisted of only the regimental CP and the 1st and 3d Battalions. The 2d Battalion guarded the industrial complex at An Hoa in the Da Nang TAOR under the operational control of the Commanding General, 1st Marine Division.

**The code name for SLF Alpha's participation in the operation was Beaver Cage. See Chapter 10 for a detailed account of SLF action during Beaver Cage.

On 10 May the Marines engaged a larger and more determined Communist force. Hilgartner's Company C was moving up the southwestern slope of Hill 110, 4,000 meters north of Que Son, when it came under heavy fire from a battalion entrenched along the face of Nui Nong Ham to the southeast. The Marines took Hill 110, but when they reached the summit they found themselves still under deadly fire from a cane field below and from caves in the lower slopes of Nui Nong Ham. Captain Russell J. Caswell, the company commander, called for help.

Companies B and C of Wickwire's battalion were the nearest units to Caswell's Marines; they were northeast of Hill 110. The two companies shifted to Hilgartner's operational control. They moved to join the action but a determined enemy and heavy NVA fire halted their advance. The Marines adjusted supporting arms fire on the Communists' positions, but it was not effective; friendly and enemy forces were too close. The two companies requested reinforcements. Marine helicopters flew a platoon of Wickwire's Company A to the area. The platoon met such fierce resistance while landing that further helicopters could not land. The enemy shot down one UH-34 in the landing zone which further complicated the situation.

Hilgartner's Company A, 2,000 meters to the east, moved to help Wickwire's companies. As the company approached the battle area it also came under fire. The company commander, Captain Gerald L. McKay, quickly deployed his troops to push through the enemy positions. Just as the company began its assault, an airborne forward air controller mistakenly marked the company's position with rockets and four Marine F-4s strafed the company, killing five Marines and wounding another 24. The combination of the attack and the enemy fire halted Company A's advance.

Hilgartner's command group and Company D were on the slope of Nui Nong Ham, southeast of Hill 110. They climbed over the crest of Hill 185 to assist Company D and BLT 1/3 below them. By 1500, they had arrived at a position from which they could support by fire. The battalion's mortarmen could see the enemy in the valley below and could immediately adjust their weapons. They fired at a rapid rate; the tubes were "just about red hot."¹²

At 1530, Esslinger's Company M landed at Hilgartner's position from helicopters and Company D moved into Nui Nong Ham to join up with Captain Caswell's Company C. The two companies

quickly consolidated their position and began to provide covering fire for the Marines below. Under the cover of supporting fire from above, the BLT companies maneuvered against the NVA in the sugar cane field and on the northern slope of Nui Nong Ham. By evening the Marines drove the enemy force from its position and forced it to withdraw to the northeast. Artillery and air strikes followed the retreating North Vietnamese. Not all of the NVA escaped. The Marines found the bodies of 116 enemy soldiers the following day. Marine losses were also high: 33 died and another 135 received wounds, including the casualties from the misguided air strikes on Company A.

On 12 May, BLT 1/3 turned over its responsibilities to the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and the SLF flew by helicopters to its ships off the coast. Although the operation was over for the SLF, it was far from over for Lieutenant Colonel Bell's battalion and the two battalions of the 5th Marines. On the 12th and 13th of May, all three elements stayed in almost continual contact with enemy platoons and companies in the valley. Esslinger's battalion engaged an enemy battalion five kilometers east of Que Son the evening of the 13th. After an exchange of mortar and small arms fire, the battalion called in artillery and air strikes. As the Marines began their assault, aerial observers shifted supporting fires to block possible withdrawal. The attacking Marines met only token resistance as the assault moved through the area, but 122 Communist bodies scattered over the position attested to the ferocity of the battle.

For the next two days firefights continued and artillery missions and air strikes harried enemy units as they tried to avoid the Marines in the valley. The devastation caused by supporting arms became most apparent on the afternoon of 14 May when Bell's Company D found 68 dead enemy soldiers in one location, all killed by fragments or concussion.

The last major battle of the operation took place on 15 May, when the 5th Marines' Companies A and M found another bunker complex. Artillery and air strikes pounded the fortifications as the Marines maneuvered into assault positions. After the heavy preparation fires, the Marines attacked. They met only light resistance and secured the position quickly. They counted 22 enemy bodies in what remained of the fortifications.

The next day, Lieutenant Colonel Bell's battalion, following its orders, departed the valley and return-

ed to the Da Nang TAOR. The following morning Colonel Houghton closed down Operation Union. It had lasted for 27 days, during which time the Marines killed 865 enemy troops; including a reported 486 who were NVA regulars of the *2d NVA Division*. The Marines suffered 110 killed, 2 missing in action, and 473 wounded.

Although the number of enemy casualties was large, Colonel Houghton believed that the psychological impact of Operation Union on the population of the basin was even more important. As he stated:

The prolonged operations by the 5th Marines in the agriculturally rich Hiep Duc-Que Son-Thang Binh corridor broke the VC control of the area that had spanned almost twenty years. With the establishment of two permanent bases deep in this corridor, the fixing and subsequent destruction of hundreds of the enemy, the capture of significant quantities of supplies, equipment and weapons, the enemy loss in prestige in the eyes of the people is readily apparent. The psychological impact of Operation Union equalled or even exceeded the material damage to the Communist effort in this area of operations.¹³

Despite this optimistic opinion, enemy influence in the Que Son Basin was far from erased. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, which assumed the responsibility for the Nui Loc Son outpost and established its battalion command post on Hill 51 west of the village of Que Son, had daily skirmishes with enemy forces remaining in the area. Continuing activity substantiated reports that the *3d* and *21st NVA Regiments* were moving back into the basin. Operation Union II was the response.

Union II

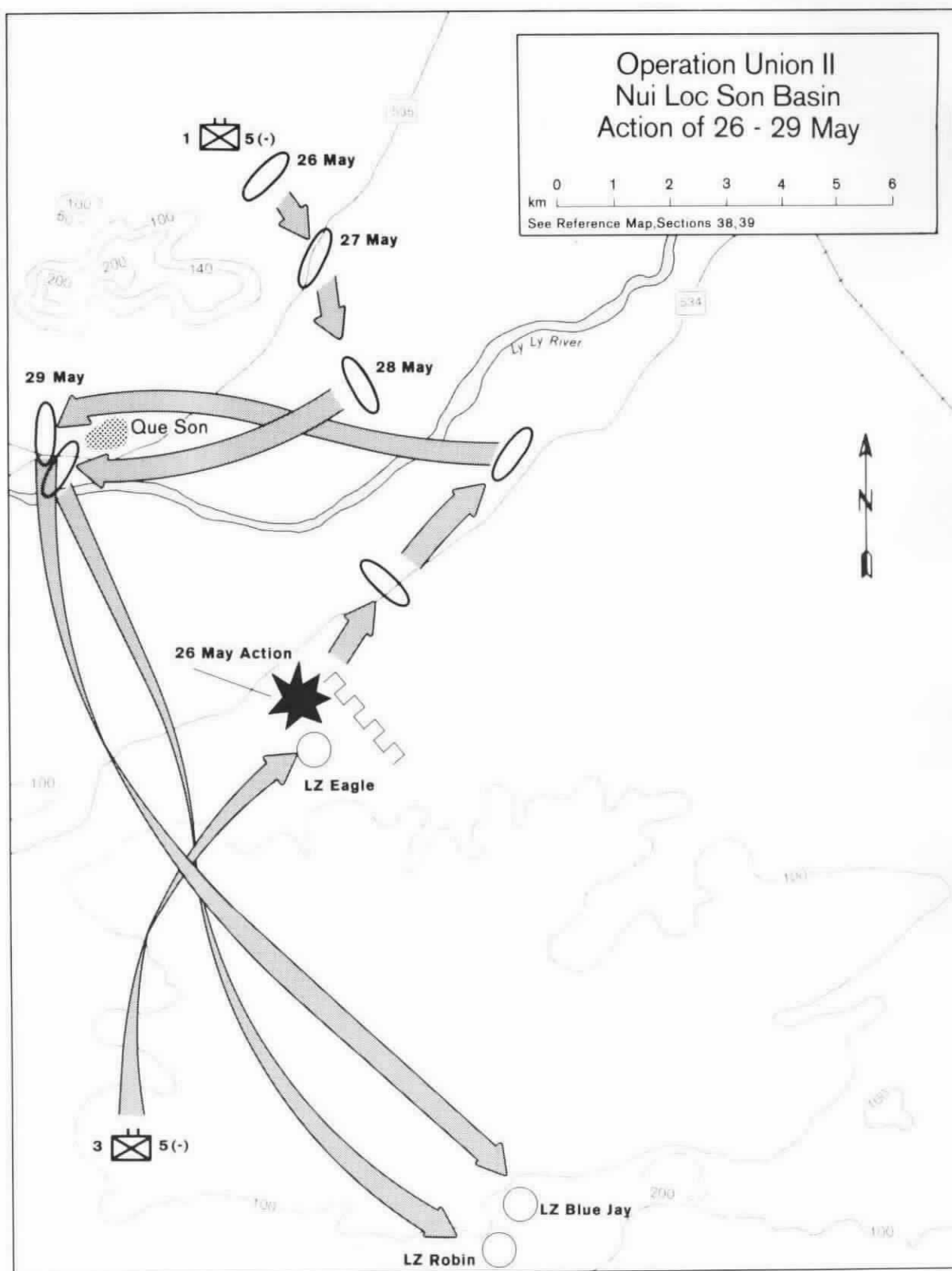
Union II, like Union I, involved coordination with the 6th ARVN Regiment and the 1st ARVN Ranger Group. The 1st and 3d Battalions, 5th Marines once again became the maneuver elements for III MAF's portion of the operation. The operation plan directed Hilgartner's 1st Battalion to establish blocking positions in the western portion of the valley. The three RVN Ranger Group battalions were to attack southwest from Thang Binh, while two units of the 6th ARVN Regiment were to attack northwest from a position near Tam Ky. Esslinger's 3d Battalion would move by helicopters into the southern portion of the basin and sweep northeast. The ARVN named their part of the operation Lien Kit 106.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370448

Shortly after landing from helicopters at the beginning of Operation Union II, this rifleman and the rest of Company L, as well as Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines attack a fortified North Vietnamese position firing upon helicopters in the landing zone.

On the morning of 26 May, Esslinger's Marines, three companies and a command group, made a heliborne assault into an area five kilometers east of Nui Loc Son outpost. Company L's first two waves experienced only sniper fire as they landed at LZ Eagle, but as Company M and the command group landed, heavy small arms and mortar fire struck the LZ. At 1134 the enemy defenders shot down a CH-46 over the LZ. As Company I landed, Companies L and M attacked north to relieve the pressure on the LZ. The attacking companies found a well-entrenched enemy force northeast of the landing zone. While artillery and air strikes pounded the NVA positions, Company I moved to the northeast to envelop the enemy's flank, and in the face of strong resistance drove through the position. Fighting continued throughout the afternoon. When the Marines finally overran the last enemy





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421853

Low rice paddy dikes provided the only available cover for these men from the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines after debarking on 26 May from helicopters of HMM-361. This photograph, taken from a helicopter, shows the barrel of the crew's M-60 machine gun.

positions at 1630, they counted 118 dead NVA soldiers scattered over the battlefield. The 3d Battalion lost 38 killed and 82 wounded, including Lieutenant Colonel Esslinger, who was wounded in the eye.

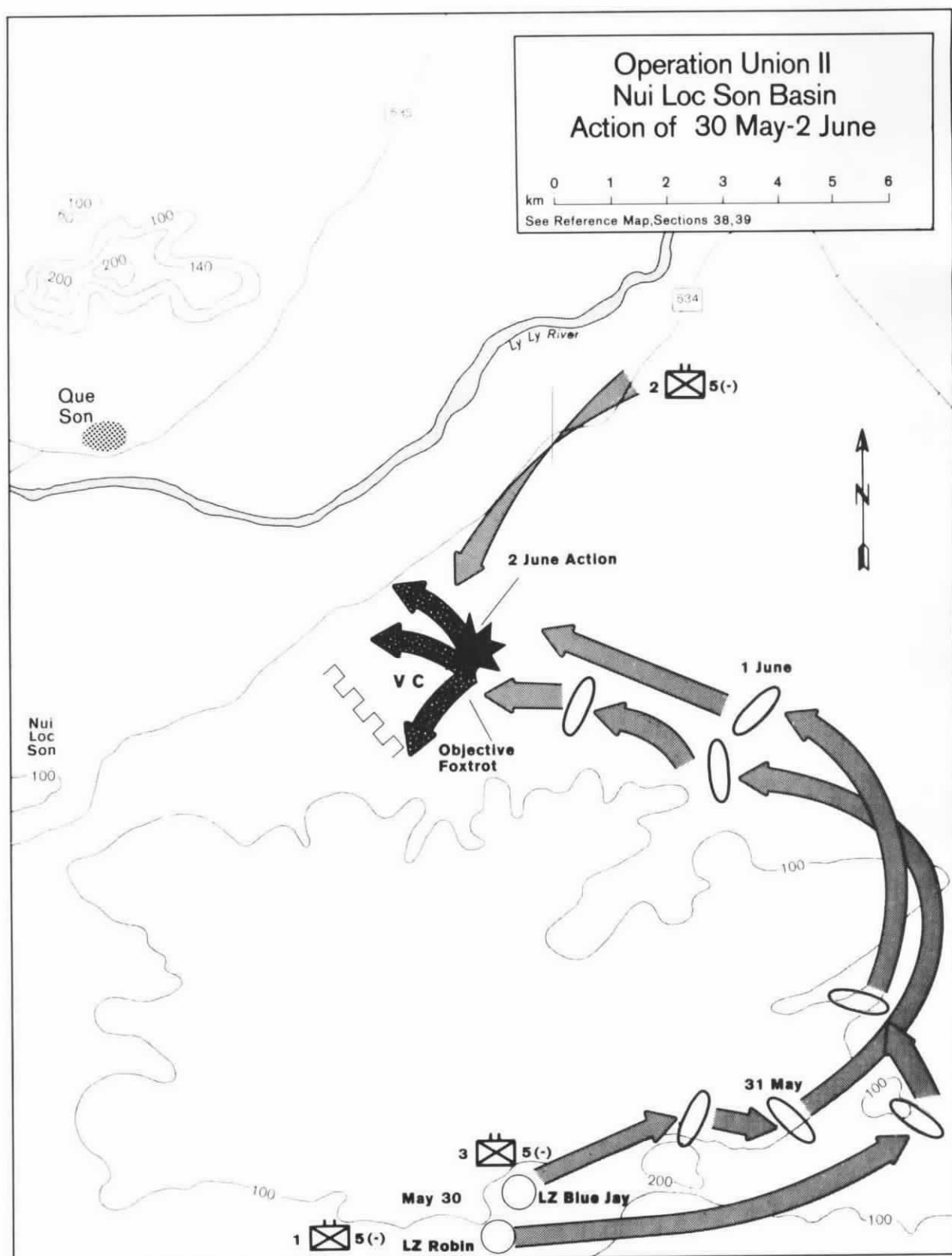
While the Marines of Esslinger's battalion engaged the enemy force, Hilgartner's Marines established blocking positions to the northwest as planned. The ARVN ranger and infantry elements closed from the northeast and southeast to box in the enemy. For the next three days, all four forces swept the area. There were only isolated exchanges of fire; once more the 3d NVA Regiment had withdrawn from the basin. Convinced that the enemy had escaped, the South Vietnamese ended their operation, but Colonel Houghton did not believe that all the NVA forces had left the Que Son region.

After analyzing available intelligence, Houghton decided to change the direction of attack toward the hills along the southern rim of the basin, southeast of the 3d Battalion's battle area of the 26th. On 30 May, he had his two battalions flown into the area by helicopter and began a sweep to the northeast. Their advance encountered only long-range sniper fire. By the afternoon of 1 June, both battalions had

reentered the basin and moved northwest generally toward the site of the original 26 May contact.

On 2 June, the Marines moved out, two battalions abreast, with the 1st Battalion on the right. Objective Foxtrot in the Vinh Huy Village complex was their destination. By 0930, the two lead companies of the 3d Battalion were under heavy fire from 200 dug-in North Vietnamese troops 1,000 meters east of the objective, and roughly 3,000 meters east of the scene of the 3d Battalion's heavy action on 26 May. By 1300, after savage fighting and extensive use of supporting arms, the Marines overran the position. As the companies consolidated and began to evacuate their casualties, a helicopter took a direct hit from a 57mm recoilless rifle, killing one Marine and wounding seven others.

While the units of the 3d Battalion, now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charles B. Webster, engaged the enemy, Hilgartner's 1st Battalion pushed forward to relieve the pressure. The battalion moved with Company D on the right and an attached company, Company F, 5th Marines, on the left. About 1130, Company D began crossing a 1,000-meter-wide rice paddy that contained a horseshoe-shaped hedgerow. The location of the



hedgerow was such that the Marines could not approach it except by crossing the open paddy. When the company was halfway across the field, well-camouflaged NVA troops in fortified positions in the horseshoe opened fire. The enemy fire swept the Marines' front and left flank, catching the left flank platoons in a crossfire. The reserve platoon tried to envelop the enemy, but heavy automatic weapons fire forced it back. The Marines consolidated their positions while artillery and air strikes softened up the enemy fortifications.

Company F, commanded by Captain James A. Graham, was in serious trouble on Company D's left. Initially, Graham's unit moved under the cover of air and artillery strikes and encountered only sniper fire. As it began crossing a large open paddy area, a Kit Carson Scout with the company started shooting at several mats of hay lying in the paddy.* The NVA had concealed themselves under the mats and the Marines killed 31 of them as the company advanced.

As the company continued across the open area, mortar and automatic weapons fire inflicted many casualties. Hardest hit was the 2d Platoon; two concealed enemy machine guns stopped it in the middle of the open field. Captain Graham quickly organized his small headquarters group into an assault unit and attacked through the 2d Platoon's position, forcing the North Vietnamese to abandon one of their guns. With some of the pressure relieved, the platoon moved some of the wounded to a more secure area. Captain Graham then tried to silence the second gun, but was unsuccessful. Wounded twice by this time and with his men's ammunition exhausted, the captain ordered his Marines to move back to friendly positions while he stayed behind to protect a wounded man who could not be moved. The last word over the radio from Captain Graham was that 25 enemy soldiers were attacking his position.**

At 1420, Lieutenant Colonel Hilgartner's CP came under heavy mortar, recoilless rifle, and RPG fire. Despite the extensive use of air and artillery by the Marines, the Communist force was too well dug-in and too big for the battalion to dislodge. Colonel Houghton, advised of the situation, asked for help. Since his 3d Battalion was already involved in heavy

*Kit Carson Scouts were former enemy soldiers used by the Marines. The program is discussed in detail in Chapter 11.

**Captain Graham received the Medal Of Honor posthumously for his action. See Appendix D for complete citation.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370265

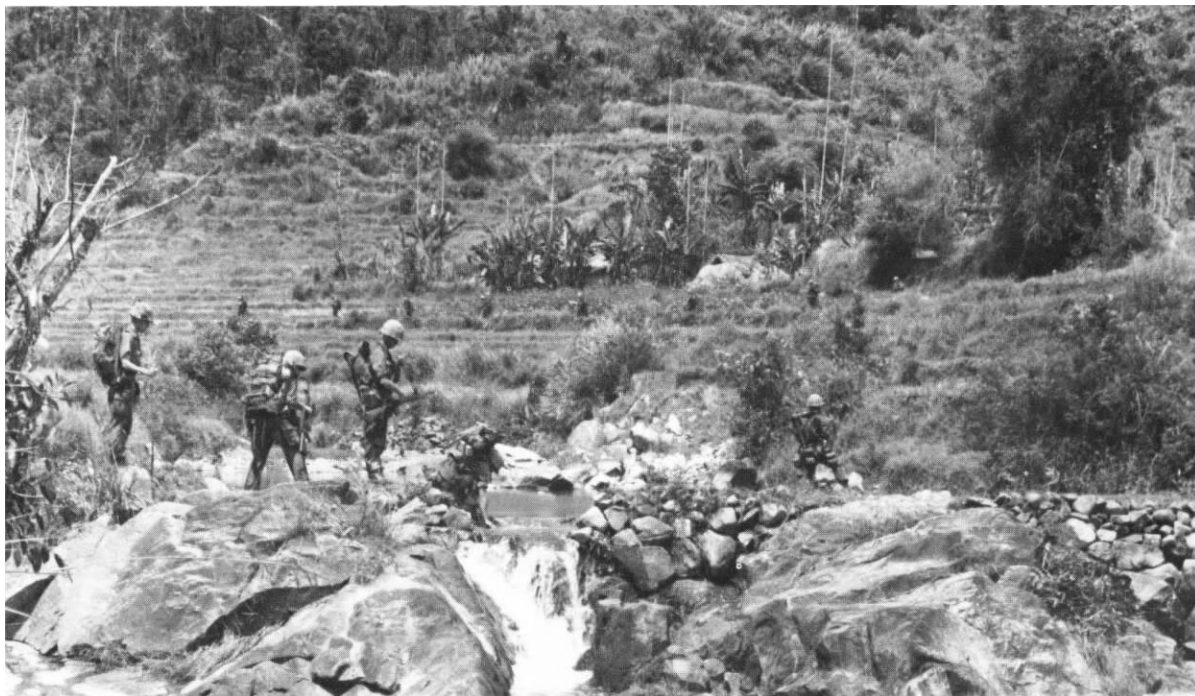
PFC George Hase of Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines reflects on the initial combat of Operation Union II when casualties sustained from North Vietnamese fire forced him to shift from ammunition carrier to assistant gunner on his machine gun team.

fighting, he asked for the commitment of the division reserve, Lieutenant Colonel Mallett C. Jackson, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. Major General Donn J. Robertson, a Navy Cross holder who had just assumed command of the division on 1 June, concurred and the 2d Battalion prepared to move out by helicopter to join in the battle.* The three companies that made up Lieutenant Colonel Jackson's force for this operation were his own Company E; Company D from the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines; and Company E, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines.**

The 5th Marines' commander paved the way for the 2d Battalion's entry into the operation by ordering 90 minutes of air and artillery preparation of the planned landing zone. He intended to insert the battalion northeast of the enemy position so it could drive south into the left flank of the NVA force. By 1900, the battalion command group and two com-

*General Nickerson, who had commanded the 1st Marine Division since September 1966, became Deputy Commanding General, III MAF, upon his relief.

**Colonel Hilgartner later described the insertion of Lieutenant Colonel Jackson's battalion as crucial. "Mal Jackson's entry into the battle saved the day for us," he remembered. Colonel Peter L. Hilgartner, Comments on draft ms, 2Jun81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370268

During the last few days of May, two Marine battalions, engaged in Operation Union II, searched the rugged mountains found along the southern rim of the Que Son Basin.

panies had landed. They were unopposed and quickly organized the position.

As night fell, one of Jackson's companies still had not arrived. Aware of the urgency of the tactical situation facing Hilgartner's battalion, and concerned about the fate of Captain Graham's company from his own battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Jackson requested permission to begin his attack without the missing company.¹⁴ Colonel Houghton concurred. Leaving a security platoon in the landing zone, Jackson maneuvered his force south against the enemy. The battalion had not gone far in the darkness before it collided with an NVA force trying to withdraw to the north. The Marines quickly drove through the Communists and continued south.

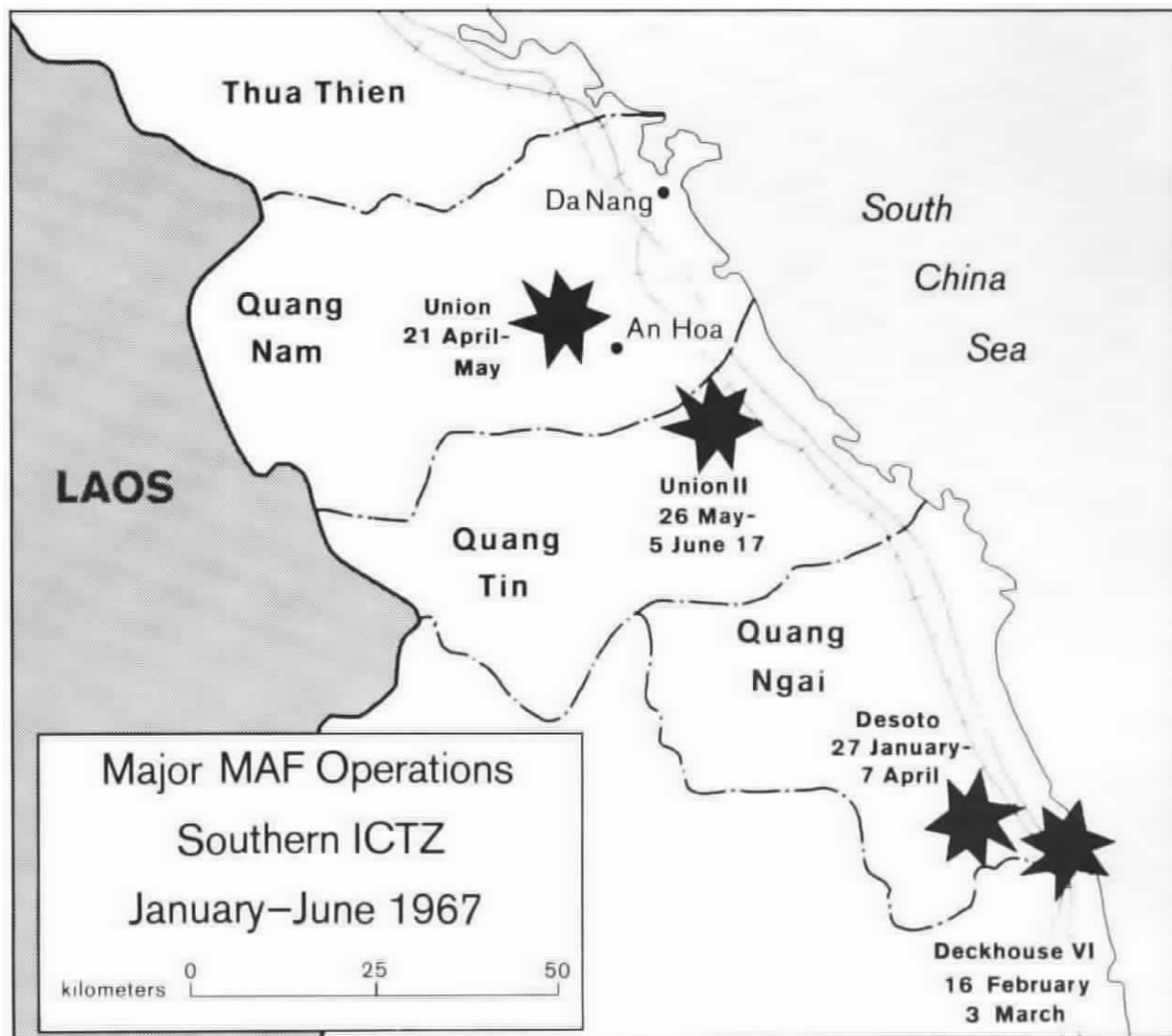
The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines suffered almost 20 casualties in this initial contact. To evacuate the wounded, the battalion's forward air controller called in a passing CH-53. The pilot landed his helicopter in the middle of the command post, not far from where Company E still engaged the enemy. As Marines completed loading the wounded, an enemy mortar round landed just to the rear of the aircraft and enemy automatic weapons took it under direct fire. The pilot quickly took off. The 2d Battalion later heard that, on its arrival at Da Nang,

ground crews counted approximately 58 holes in the helicopter.¹⁵

The sudden presence of a strong force on its northern flank caused the NVA units to disengage and make a hasty withdrawal to the southwest, but the move proved costly. Once NVA soldiers left the protection of their fortifications, they were easy targets for Marine supporting arms fire. Air strikes were devastating. On one occasion two F-4 aircraft used an unusual technique of target acquisition which proved especially effective. The first aircraft approached the area at low speed and switched on its landing and running lights. When the enemy fired at the plane, the second aircraft, following closely behind without lights, spotted the enemy and dropped napalm on the firing positions.

While supporting arms fire hastened the Communist departure from the battlefield, the 5th Marines spent the night regrouping and evacuating casualties. The following morning, all three battalions swept the battle area. The Marines counted 476 dead North Vietnamese in and around the contested rice paddy and its formidable hedgerow complex. The Marines themselves suffered 71 killed and 139 wounded in the fight.

During the sweep of the battle area, Lieutenant



Colonel Hilgartner received a radio message from one of his companies that enemy working parties were out collecting the NVA dead. The company commander asked if he should open fire. Hilgartner declined for he saw this as a chance to recover his own dead, including Captain Graham's body. For the remainder of the day there was an undeclared truce; the two sides intermingled but ignored each other as they went about collecting their dead.¹⁶

When the enemy main body withdrew, they transported their wounded on two poles lashed together, similar to the "travois" used by the American Plains Indians. The day after the undeclared truce, Hilgartner's battalion tried to follow the travois skid marks but could not catch up with the main body of the NVA force. Halts to call in helicopters to evacuate casualties caused by the enemy's rear guard hindered the Marines' progress.

The NVA force escaped.¹⁷

The action on 2 June marked the last significant battle of Union II. Total enemy casualties were 701 killed and 23 captured, a favorable ratio to 110 Marines killed (the same number as during Union I) and 241 wounded.*

Despite the heavy losses suffered during the two Union operations, throughout the summer the enemy continued to pump replacements into the region in a determined effort to regain control of the Que Son Valley. Elements of III MAF met and thwarted each Communist thrust into the area. Government control was returning to the region, and forcing the Communists to pay a big price in men and material.

*For action in both Union I and II the 5th Marines and units under its operational control received the Presidential Unit Citation.

CHAPTER 6

Task Force Oregon

The heavy fighting of early 1967 had been anticipated by the American command. Throughout the fall of the previous year, both III MAF and MACV expressed concern over the NVA buildup north of the Demilitarized Zone and along the Laotian border to the west. In a 13 September 1966 message to Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, Commander in Chief Pacific (CinCPac), General Westmoreland outlined his appreciation of the threat to I Corps:

The current enemy buildup . . . constitutes a direct threat to US/FW GVN forces in I CTZ and to the security of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. The seriousness of this threat underscores the importance and urgency of utilizing all practicable means to prevent the enemy from generating a major offensive designed to 'liberate' the provinces in question and to inflict maximum casualties on US/FW GVN forces. . . .

He continues to use the DMZ as a troop haven and as a supply head for his forces moving into northern I CTZ. . . . The size of his buildup, disposition of forces, forward stockage of supplies, AA weapons systems being deployed southward, and depth of patrols are developing an offensive as opposed to a defensive posture. By October, the weather in Laos will be clearing and the enemy may be expected once again to move personnel and supporting material in quantity through the area. . . . Utilizing traditional [infiltration] routes through the Laos panhandle, he will be able to reinforce large scale diversionary attacks further south in coordination with a main assault through the DMZ and the western flank. . . .¹

To counter the threat, the Marines established positions covering the eastern and central infiltration routes across the DMZ. They had already occupied Khe Sanh, to the west, in late 1966, and they took over the ARVN camps at Ca Lu and Ba Long, both astride natural routes leading east through the Cam Lo Valley. While the occupation of these locations did not entirely halt infiltration, they did make it more difficult, but manning the positions seriously depleted III MAF's strength as the year began.

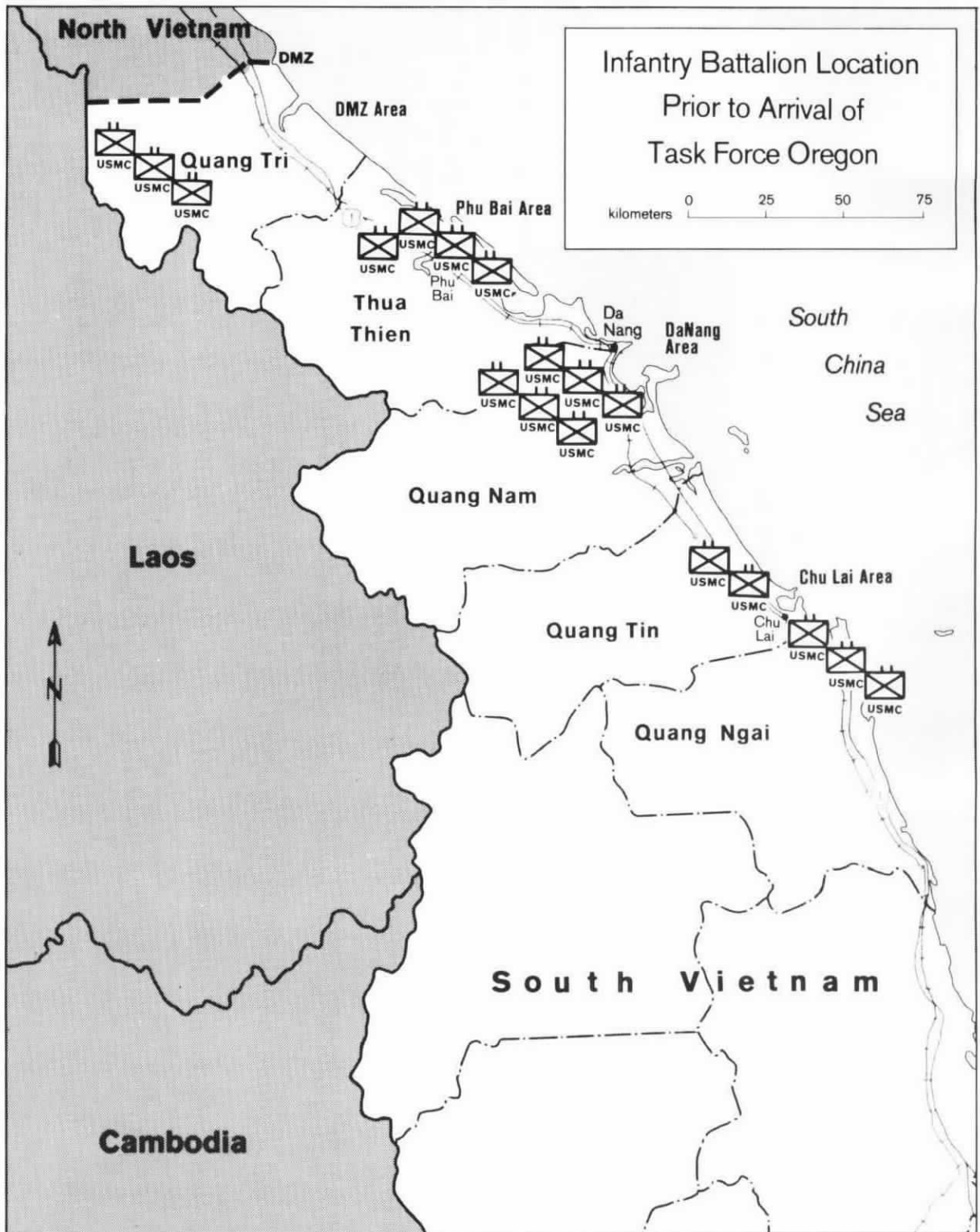
In early 1967 several developments, other than

Vietnamese domestic problems, contributed to reduced III MAF troop availability. The necessity of protecting large bases and the resulting extension of the protective TAORs around them tied down a large number of men. The requirement to relieve ARVN units for redeployment to the revolutionary development program also drained available forces. The most threatening situation was the enemy troop buildup in Quang Ngai Province. Infiltration from Laos and the influx of NVA troops and supplies into the A Shau Valley and the mountains west of Hue caused some very touchy and precise repositioning of units. As January began, most of General Walt's reserve consisted of already committed forces earmarked for oncall helicopter redeployment.

MACV Headquarters appreciated the problem facing III MAF but viewed things from a different perspective. As Brigadier General Louis Metzger, the assistant division commander of the 3d Marine Division, recalled:

On one occasion General Westmoreland told me that he knew that the 3d Marine Division was overextended, but that he was achieving a victory (words not exact but that was the meaning) in the II Corps Area, and we would just have to hold on. One really cannot fault his position as he was following the principle of war "Economy of Force;" holding with the Marines while expecting his Army elements to the south to achieve a victory. It did make it lonesome along the DMZ.²

For all practical purposes, these troop shortages reduced the allied situation in I Corps to a holding action. III MAF did not have enough troops to expand TAORs and at the same time block NVA thrusts across South Vietnam's borders. III MAF needed additional forces to regain the initiative. On 11 January, after a visit to I Corps, General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., the Commandant of the Marine Corps, commented that ". . . one Marine division/wing team reinforced or its equivalent [was needed] in I Corps in addition to those forces already there." He contended that these forces would permit



III MAF to counter enemy infiltration across the borders and regain momentum in pacifying the populated coastal areas.² At the beginning of the year these forces did not exist.

After the Tet cease-fire of 8-12 February, enemy activity intensified. The NVA initiated aggressive efforts to offset the embryonic Revolutionary Development Program, while continuing the buildup of forces in I and II Corps. The *2d NVA Division* and supporting battalions moved south from Quang Tin Province to Quang Ngai Province. This move appeared related to movement of other subordinate units at the turn of the year in preparation for a proposed dry season offensive in Quang Ngai.

As enemy activity continued to intensify, both in southern I Corps and immediately south of the DMZ, on 19 February General Westmoreland directed his Chief of Staff, Major General William B. Rosson, to develop a contingency plan for the organization and deployment of a divisional task force to the troubled northern provinces. The purpose of the proposed shift was twofold: to release Marine units for action along the DMZ and to use the new force to expand the scope of operations in southern I Corps. Westmoreland's headquarters code-named the proposed task force, "Oregon."

The Oregon plan was not the first contingency plan prepared for the reinforcement of III MAF. At the time of the first NVA thrust across the DMZ in mid-1966, MACV Headquarters developed several schemes. The Tennessee plan proposed the movement of a U.S. Army brigade to Chu Lai. Another, dubbed the South Carolina plan, was to deploy an Army brigade to the 3d Marine Division's area of operation in northern I Corps, while North Carolina would have introduced an Army brigade into southern I Corps. The latter two contingency plans included the movement of a Republic of Korea Army regiment to Chu Lai. During November 1966, General Westmoreland gave consideration to the deployment of the 9th Infantry Division to I Corps when it arrived in South Vietnam, but shelved the idea in December 1966 and the division moved into the region east of Saigon.

While General Rosson and his staff were developing the Oregon plan, events in I Corps forced the planners' hand. On 27 February, NVA forces attacked Da Nang Airbase with 140mm rockets, the first known use of large tactical rockets by the enemy in South Vietnam. The Da Nang attack preceded rocket attacks on Camp Carroll in Quang Tri Pro-

vince on 6 and 12 March and another attack on Da Nang on 15 March.* The rockets were the enemy's most economical weapon of the war. They were easily transported, usually backpacked, and required only a few personnel for installation and employment. The February Da Nang attack demonstrated the speed with which the rockets could be launched. More than 50 rockets hit the base in less than a minute.

With the introduction of rockets, the Marines expanded their protective patrolling out to a range of 9,000 meters, rather than 5,000 meters, the maximum effective range of heavy mortars which had been the primary concern before the rocket threat. The speed with which the rockets could be employed also required the Marines to deliver counterbattery fire on the rocket launching positions in a matter of two to three minutes, a factor which complicated the already complex problem of coordinating the use of air and artillery in populated areas.

Rocket attacks were not the only indication that the enemy's main target was I Corps. During the first six weeks after Tet, enemy attacks increased by approximately twice the 1966 rate. Enemy expenditures of artillery, mortar, recoilless rifle, and rocket ammunition for the month of March were 5,057 rounds, compared to 2,183 in January and 2,656 in February.

At the same time, the NVA buildup continued along the DMZ. Intelligence agencies reported that elements of another division, including fire support units, had reinforced the *324B* and *341st NVA Divisions*. Captured prisoners and documents verified the presence of the new units. Increased mortar fire and the employment of artillery and rockets confirmed the arrival of the fire support units. The seriousness of these developments was even more apparent when Marine intelligence officers learned that the NVA forces in the northern provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien were under the control of North Vietnamese Army *Military Region 4*, with headquarters in Vinh above the DMZ. The North Vietnamese considered the targeted provinces as a subregion of this command.

*The rockets employed in the attack against Camp Carroll were 102mm Communist copies of the U.S. 4.5-inch barrage rocket, with a range of 5,000 meters. The 140mm Soviet rocket used at Da Nang had a range of almost 9,000 meters.

In an 18 March message to Admiral Sharp, General Westmoreland reflected his concern over the growing threat to I Corps. He stated:

In I Corps, the situation is the most critical with respect to existing and potential force ratios. As a minimum, a division plus a regiment is required for Quang Tri Province as a containment force. The latter had been justified previously in another plan. Employment of this force in the containment role would release the units now engaged there for expansion of the Da Nang, Hue-Phu Bai, and Chu Lai TAORs as well as increase security and control along the corps' northern coastal areas. One of the most critical areas in RVN today is Quang Ngai Province. Even if a major operation were conducted in this area during 1967, the relief would be no more than temporary. A force is needed in the province to maintain continuous pressure on the enemy, to eliminate his forces and numerous base areas, and to remove his control over the large population and food reserves. The sustained employment of a division of 10 battalions is mandatory in Quang Ngai Province if desired results are to be realized. Employment of this force would provide security for the vital coastal areas facilities, opening and securing Route 1 and the railroad and, perhaps equally important, to relieve pressure on northern Binh Dinh Province.⁴

One week later, on 25 March, reconnaissance photographs verified increased infiltration of the Tri Thien subregion. They revealed five new bivouac areas and two possible way stations on infiltration routes from Base Area 606 in central Laos to western Quang Tri Province. The photographs also pinpointed new bivouac areas along infiltration routes in the northern A Shau Valley, indicating reinforcement in that region. Equally alarming, the NVA continued to hold three divisions in or near the DMZ, despite heavy casualties suffered during the Marines' recently conducted Operations Prairie II and Beacon Hill.

At the same time, enemy activity in southern Quang Nam and Quang Tin increased; the enemy made multicompartment attacks near Tam Ky. A high-ranking Communist officer, Colonel Haynh Cu, who surrendered to III MAF forces in early March, stated that the Que Son Basin would be a major objective for the forthcoming NVA summer campaign, scheduled to begin during April. He also revealed that Operation Desoto had uncovered a primary supply route which the VC believed required their control for effective operations in that region. This revelation added to the indications that Duc Pho would remain a primary enemy objective.

In a 28 March followup message to CinCPac, General Westmoreland reiterated his earlier sentiments regarding additional forces required in I Corps, but this message reflected his increased concern over the growing enemy threat. General Westmoreland stated:

Failure to provide two and one-third divisions for I Corps would result in the diversion of existing forces from other tasks to deny and defeat infiltration or invasion. Security in support of Revolutionary Development could not be increased to the desired degree in the coastal area, the major LOC's could be able to continue operating virtually unmolested throughout the key Quang Ngai Province.⁵

If this force were available, Westmoreland estimated that III MAF could make gains in 1967, especially in the restoration of the populated areas of I Corps to secure GVN control. Unfortunately, the additional forces were not available.

The first week of April confirmed the need for reinforcements as the enemy increased pressure throughout the five northern provinces. Intensified terrorism and regimental-size attacks marked the opening days of the month. On 6 April, a large enemy force broke into Quang Tri City, inflicting severe losses and permitting more than 200 VC prisoners to escape from the local jail. This was the first large-unit incursion into a provincial capital since early in 1965. The Quang Tri attack preceded an attack on an ARVN regimental headquarters 10 miles north of the city of Hue. Generals Walt and Westmoreland agreed that these incidents heralded a large-scale, coordinated enemy offensive in the two northern provinces. On 6 April, therefore, General Westmoreland decided to execute the Task Force Oregon plan.

As conceived and refined by General Rosson's staff, Operation Oregon was to be executed in three separate phases. First, an army brigade from II Corps was to move into the Duc Pho district. Two days later a second brigade from III Corps was to begin movement to Chu Lai, and at a later date a third brigade, and possibly a fourth, was to be shifted into the area. The Task Force Oregon headquarters was to be activated on the 12th, to arrive at Chu Lai no later than 20 April.

By the afternoon of the 7th, the headquarters of the 2d Brigade, 5th Cavalry, 1st Air Cavalry Division, and two battalions, arrived at Duc Pho and relieved the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines. The size and mobility of the Army force impressed the Marines.

The Marine battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel John D. Counselman, recalled, "They had so many 'choppers' that the company defensive areas of 3/7 were occupied in less than an hour. . . ."⁶

The use of the 1st Air Cavalry unit was only temporary; according to the Oregon plan it was to be replaced by the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division before the end of April. To accomplish the logistical support for this unit, MACV temporarily included the two southernmost districts of Quang Ngai Province, Duc Pho and Ba To, in the 1st Air Cavalry Division's TAOR, pending the arrival of the Task Force Oregon headquarters.

On 9 April, Brigadier General Richard T. Knowles' 196th Light Infantry Brigade of four battalions began arriving at Chu Lai. The brigade completed the move on the 14th, and the infantrymen assumed operational tasks in the Chu Lai area under the control of the 1st Marine Division. On 17 April, the brigade initiated Operation Lawrence, west of the airfield. This was the first U.S. Army operation in I Corps. Although the soldiers made no contact with the enemy during the three days of Lawrence, they gained a familiarity with their area of operation.

The task force command group activated as scheduled on 12 April. The headquarters and selected combat support and combat service support units began deploying to Chu Lai. Task Force Oregon headquarters became operational on 20 April and assumed control of all Army forces operating from Chu Lai. The task force commander was Major General William B. Rosson, the former MACV chief of staff and author of the original Oregon plan. When Colonel James G. Shanahan's 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division arrived at Duc Pho two days later, it also came under control of Task Force Oregon. Combat support for the task force consisted of four artillery battalions, an engineer battalion, and one medium and three light helicopter companies.

The arrival of the Army units allowed the Marines to concentrate in the northern three provinces of I Corps. The 7th Marines moved from Chu Lai to the Da Nang TAOR, completing the move on 13 April. The consolidation of the 1st Marine Division at Da Nang permitted the 3d Marine Division, in turn, to concentrate its regiments in the northern part of I Corps.

The shift that produced the most immediate results occurred on 25 April when the 5th Marines,



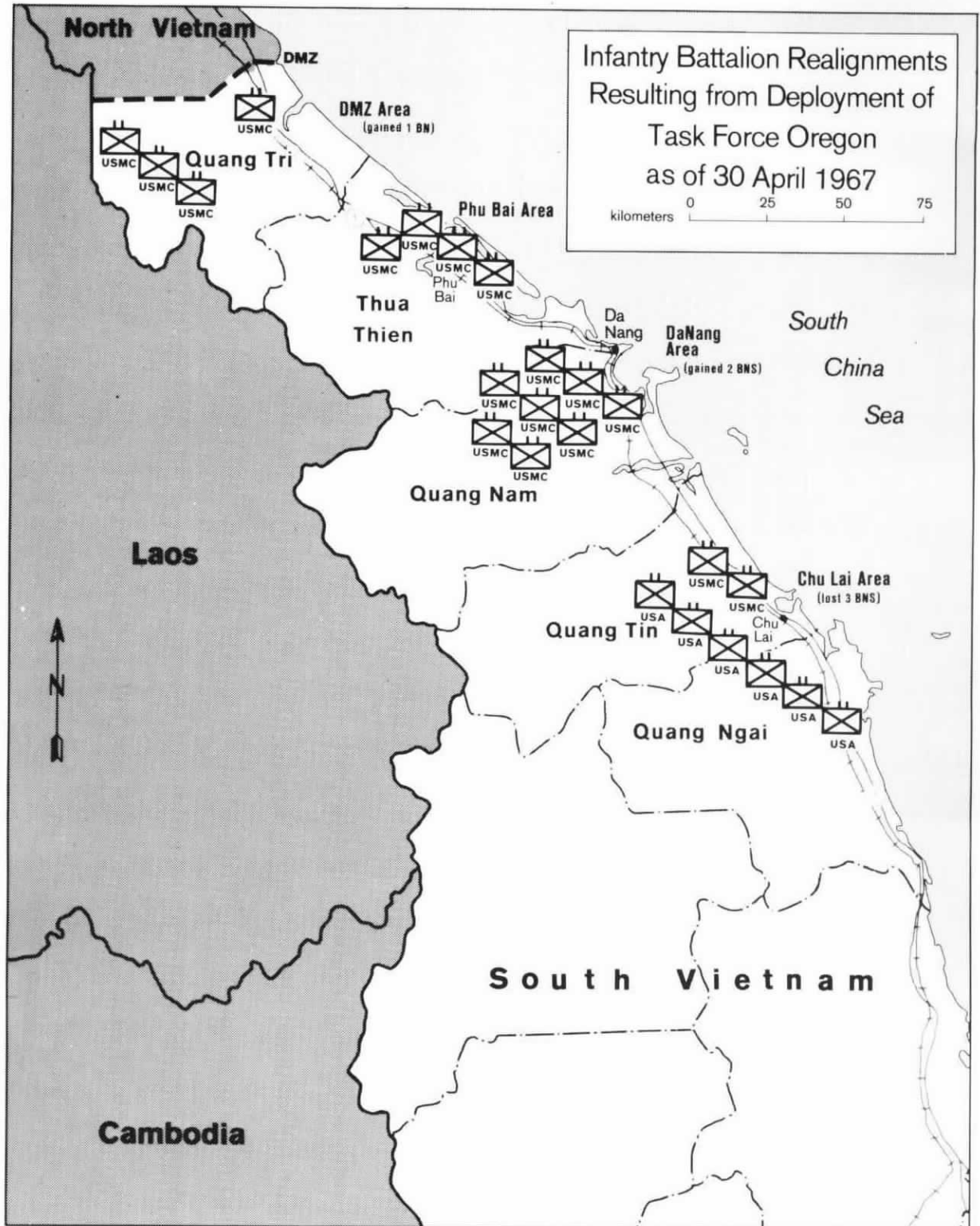
Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC 639323

A Marine amphibian tractor carries members of the Army's 196th Light Infantry Brigade on a village search on 27 April, after Task Force Oregon took control of the former Marine enclave at Chu Lai.

with two battalions, moved into the Thang Binh area and assumed responsibility for operations in the Que Son Valley. The second of the two battalions did not arrive in the valley until 1 May because of a delay in the turn-over of its portion of the Chu Lai TAOR. The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines served as a separate battalion under the direct control of the 1st Marine Division with responsibility for the security of the An Hoa industrial complex 22 miles southwest of Da Nang.

With the shifting of these forces, the Marines deactivated Task Force X-Ray at 1200 on 26 April and Task Force Oregon, under III MAF operational control, assumed responsibility for all of the Chu Lai TAOR, including the Chu Lai Base Defense Command. The turnover went smoothly. The Army units were not equipped or manned to handle postal services, an exchange system, or a clubs system. Since the Marines previously had organized those services at Chu Lai, Marine personnel remained in place until the Army units took over these functions or substituted their own systems.

Chu Lai continued to be the home of a large component of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, Force Logistic Support Group Bravo, and the 7th Communications Battalion. In addition, approximately 200 Marines assigned to combined action units also





Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC 639318

Soldiers of the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry, 196th Light Infantry Brigade search a deserted village in April as Army units gain familiarity with the Chu Lai tactical area after Task Force Oregon took responsibility for the region from the 1st Marine Division.

Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC 639319



remained in the area. Brigadier General Foster C. LaHue, the former commanding general of Task Force X-Ray, stayed at Chu Lai as the installation coordinator. The command relationship between General Rosson and General LaHue was one of mutual coordination and cooperation, under the authority of General Walt.

During the first week of May, Brigadier General Salvé H. Matheson's 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division joined Task Force Oregon. These additional battalions of the 1st Brigade permitted General Rosson to open a new offensive campaign in the important coastal region south of Quang Ngai City. On 11 May, five U.S. Army battalions began Operation Malheur in the area immediately north of what had been the Desoto TAOR. By the end of May, this extensive heliborne search and destroy operation had succeeded in killing 369 Communists and capturing 64.

Malheur II followed Malheur I and produced even better results. Experiencing almost daily contact with the Communists, the soldiers killed 488 of the enemy before the operation ended on 2 August. Both operations concentrated upon eliminating regular enemy formations in the area to reduce the pressure upon the rural populace. Once they accomplished this, the soldiers shifted their emphasis



Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC 640815

American soldiers (top) of the 2d Battalion, 35th Infantry advance toward a tree line under enemy fire near Duc Pho in May in Operation Malheur, conducted by Task Force Oregon after it assumed control of the Chu Lai area. As enemy fire increases (below), an armored personnel carrier of the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment fires in support.

Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC 640811



to eliminating the guerrilla infrastructure. During the ensuing months, the Viet Cong found it increasingly difficult to obtain support from the people in the surrounding countryside.

The introduction of Task Force Oregon was only the first step in the buildup and realignment of forces in I Corps. The second step was the temporary commitment of the CinCPac reserve, the Seventh Fleet's Amphibious Ready Group with Special Landing Forces Alpha and Bravo. In mid-May, BLT 3/4, the last major element of the Marines' Western Pacific reserve, arrived in a 42-plane shuttle at Dong Ha to participate in Operation Hickory. The 26th Marines' regimental headquarters followed from Okinawa to provide the operational control of units in the Khe Sanh area in northwestern Quang Tri Province.*

*The movement of BLT 3/4 and the 26th Marines headquarters to Vietnam ended unit rotation to Okinawa for refitting and retraining. This was a real loss to the Marine units fighting in Vietnam. LtGen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft ms, n.d. (1981), (Vietnam Comment files, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)



Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC 640809

A platoon leader of Company C, 2d Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment radios for a medevac helicopter after an encounter with an enemy unit in May's Operation Malheur.

The large number of enemy casualties in I Corps during the month of May reflected some of the impact of the sudden III MAF reinforcement. In I Corps 6,119 enemy died fighting the Americans, compared with a total of 3,723 in the other three corps areas. The surprise arrival of 12 new U.S. battalions and the reshuffle of forces already in I Corps

upset the Communists' plans. They did not find the coastal plains undefended as expected, and Hanoi demanded adherence to the plan. The ability of the allies to reinforce I Corps against the anticipated summer campaign cost the Communists a high price in troops lost and doomed North Vietnam's hopes for a resounding 1967 summer victory.

PART III
CONTINUING ACTION
ALONG THE DMZ

CHAPTER 7

The Barrier—Another Approach

Evolution of the Concept

Evolution of the Concept

The arrival of Task Force Oregon with its nine maneuver battalions vastly changed the friendly to enemy troop ratio in I Corps. The increase was intended to give III MAF much more flexibility, but this is not the way it worked out. At the time of Oregon's addition, General Westmoreland directed General Walt to begin a task which ultimately tied down as many III MAF units as TF Oregon added. The task was the construction of a barrier or strong-point obstacle system below the DMZ.

The idea of a DMZ barrier had been under discussion in Washington for months. In March of 1966, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara raised the question of a barrier with the JCS¹ which, in turn, requested the views of Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, CinCPac, on the construction of a conventional mine and wire barrier to be backed up by monitoring troops. The proposed barrier was to extend from the South China Sea across northern South Vietnam through the panhandle of Laos to Thailand.

The CinCPac staff studied the idea and in April Admiral Sharp pointed out a number of problem areas with the concept. The problems included the tremendous strain that the project would place on logistic facilities in both South Vietnam and Thailand, the enormous construction effort, and the large number of troops it would require before, during, and after completion. Admiral Sharp also expressed his opinion that the barrier would deny the advantages of maneuverability to friendly forces.

September 1966 brought another proposal, this one the result of a study conducted by a panel of scientists under the auspices of the Institute for Defense Analyses. Known as the Jason Plan, the study proposed the employment of an aviation supported barrier system across infiltration routes into South Vietnam and Laos. This barrier was to consist of two parts: one to block foot traffic and one to stop vehicles. The foot traffic barrier was to be placed along the southern edge of the DMZ, while the



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189042
Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, shown here during his visit to MAG-11 in July, believed a barrier system south of the DMZ would retard the move of NVA combat units into South Vietnam.

antivehicle system was to be built in Laos where the Communists were developing an extensive road network. The barriers were to consist of large numbers of gravel mines, button bomblets, and acoustic detectors, supported by patrol and strike aircraft.* Ground personnel, tasked to emplace detectors and plant mines would man the portion of the barrier in South Vietnam.

Admiral Sharp forwarded his response to the Jason Plan to JCS on 13 September 1966. The reply pointed out that while the establishment of an aviation supported barrier might be technically feasible, CinCPac doubted that such a barrier would impede infiltration, even initially. He maintained that "a

*Gravel mines are small mines designed to damage feet and legs. Button bomblets are small mines which make a loud report, but are not designed to injure when stepped on by a shod foot; they make a noise to be picked up by acoustic sensors.

barrier system must be tended; if not, it could be breached with ease, while the flow of men and material to the VC/NVA continued." An aerial delivered obstacle would not be expected to supplant the need for soldiers on the ground, and the time, effort and resources of men and material required to establish a ground barrier would be tremendous."²

While military leaders showed little enthusiasm for the barrier schemes, Secretary of Defense McNamara believed that the ideas had merit. On 15 September, he appointed Lieutenant General Alfred D. Starbird, USA, director of the Defense Communications Agency, to head a joint task force within the Department of Defense with the mission of devising an anti-infiltration system that would stop, or at least inhibit, the flow of men and material from North to South Vietnam. The mission envisioned wide usage of air dropped munitions and electronic sensors to establish the barrier. This directive formally established the program that was to become known as Project Practice Nine.

In October 1966, General Westmoreland suggested to Secretary McNamara, as an alternative to previous recommendations, that a conventional barrier utilizing strong points could be constructed across all of northern South Vietnam. This barrier would be augmented by selective use of air delivered munitions and sensors in Laos. Key terrain was to be organized behind the barrier, with observation posts and patrols integrated into the scheme. Reaction forces were to be emplaced to respond if the barrier was breached. General Westmoreland believed that a division, supported by an armored cavalry regiment, would be needed as the containment force. Secretary McNamara told General Westmoreland that he was receptive to the concept and requested that the idea be refined into a requirement plan. At the same time, the Secretary charged the Starbird task force with functioning as an expediting agency to obtain and deliver munitions, sensors, and equipment to support the MACV concept.

General Westmoreland ordered his staff and all involved subordinate commands to develop the plan. The burden of preparing the aviation portion fell on the Seventh Air Force; III MAF and the MACV Combat Operations Center were to provide the concept for the conduct of mobile defense and conventional barrier aspects.

General Walt ordered the 3d Marine Division to prepare the Marine portion of the concept, since any

implementation of the idea would directly affect that command. His only guidance to General Kyle, the division commander, was that he wanted the report to begin with a statement that III MAF disagreed with the barrier idea and preferred the mobile defense currently being employed.³ General Kyle, briefing Walt on the division plan, also indicated his preference for a mobile concept, stating:

A mobile defense by the size of the force envisioned for manning the barrier system (one and one-third divisions) would in itself provide an effective block to infiltration south of the DMZ, and in the process negate the necessity for construction of the barrier.⁴

After the III MAF staff reviewed General Kyle's plan, General Walt forwarded it to General Westmoreland. His covering letter made III MAF's view quite clear, stating, "... this plan was being submitted in response to a directive, and that it was the opinion of the Commanding General III MAF that such a barrier, in effect, was not going to be worth the time and the effort that would be put into it."

On 26 November, General Westmoreland forwarded the plan to the Secretary of Defense after additional refining at MACV Headquarters. As submitted, it called for a linear barrier immediately south of the DMZ, extending from the South China Sea to a point near Dong Ha Mountain, a distance of approximately 30 kilometers. This portion of the barrier was to be 600-1,000 meters wide, consisting of wire obstacles, minefields, sensors, watch towers, and a series of strong points. The line was to be backed up by an armored unit. From the west end of this linear barrier to the Laotian border there were to be a series of about 20 defile barriers, each to consist of a minefield and wire obstacles extending roughly 1,000 meters across the avenue of approach to be blocked by the barrier. Manned strong points were to occupy commanding hills and ridgelines overlooking these obstacles. The plan called for a division to man this portion of the system.

The plan also required the construction of artillery positions along Route 9 to provide fire support for the system. These positions also were to house the reaction forces needed to support the strong points. Other construction projects included in the plan were the improvement of Routes 1 and 9, expansion of the Cua Viet port facility, and the establishment of a major airfield near Hue.

After reviewing the proposal, Secretary McNamara

directed General Starbird on 19 December to prepare a procurement program to provide the materials for the linear section of the barrier. The materials were to be in South Vietnam by July 1967. Although the Secretary's memorandum did not specify an exact date for commitment of the materials, it stated that at least a part of the system should be operational by 1 November 1967. On 22 December 1966, General Starbird submitted his proposal which specified the time schedule to be followed and funding and personnel needed by 1 November.⁶

As 1967 began, MACV was preparing a new Practice Nine Requirement Plan to conform with the timetable in the Starbird proposal. On 26 January MACV completed this plan and forwarded it for review. The study provided the concepts and estimated troop and logistic requirements to support the anti-infiltration system for the eastern portion of the area as outlined in the earlier plan. The system was to consist of a series of strong points and fortified base areas. Barbed wire and minefield obstacles were to be emplaced forward of the strong points to deny the enemy likely avenues of approach and restrict movement, while sensors, detector devices, night observation devices, searchlights, and radar were to be used to locate the enemy. The strong points and base areas occupying key terrain features were to be constructed by tactical units under the supervision of engineers. The positions were to serve as both patrol and fire support bases. On-call, preplanned artillery fires were to cover the entire area, and tactical aircraft were to be available on short notice for support. Reaction forces were to be stationed behind the system in positions from which they could deploy rapidly. All civilians were to be relocated behind the system. The plan envisioned that future strong points and obstacles possibly would be extended westward to the Laotian border, but the westward expansion would be contingent upon time, forces, material, and security conditions.

The study group also cautioned that the term "barrier" should not be used, because the connotation of an impregnable defense exceeded the scope of this system, and that an effective obstacle system across northern South Vietnam would require, at a minimum, an additional force of one division and one armored cavalry regiment. The study group considered the minimum essential additional force necessary to man the eastern portion of the system to be one infantry brigade, or Marine regiment,

augmented with supply, maintenance, construction, transportation, and other support units.⁷

Despite the apparent growing interest in the strong point obstacle system (SPOS) at MACV, the Marines' opinions of the concept remained unchanged. In January, at a briefing held for Under Secretary of the Navy Robert H. B. Baldwin at the 3d Marine Division Headquarters, the briefing officer reiterated the III MAF view of the barrier concept:

To sum it all up, we're not enthusiastic over any barrier defense approach to the infiltration problem. . . . We believe that a mobile defense by an adequate force, say one division, give or take a battalion, would be a much more flexible and economical approach to the problem.⁸

III MAF was not the only command that had reservations about the idea. On 6 February, a CinCPac message to JCS admitted that the SPOS was feasible, but questioned the necessity for one. The message stated:

The level of infiltration in the area in which the obstacle system is to be installed does not justify diversion of the effort required to construct and man such a system. Moreover, there is no indication that present operations are inadequate to cope with what has been an insignificant infiltration problem in this particular area of SVN.⁹



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A369973
The 3d Marine Division staff briefed Under Secretary of the Navy Robert H. B. Baldwin, shown here visiting a refugee center in January 1967, on the III MAF view that a mobile defense of the DMZ region was better than building an extensive barrier system.

Despite opposition from concerned Marine and Navy commanders, on 8 March Secretary McNamara ordered General Starbird to procure the materials for strong points and base camps, and enough sensors and surveillance devices to service a 10-kilometer section of the obstacle system. At the same time, he directed the improvement of Route 1 and the ports at Hue and Cua Viet. He also arranged with the State Department to secure South Vietnam Government support for required land acquisition and civilian relocation.

On 17 March at III MAF headquarters, General Westmoreland met with General Walt, General Lam of the ARVN I Corps, and other GVN representatives to explain the basic concept of a strong point system in northeastern Quang Tri Province. The ARVN representatives warmly endorsed the idea and suggested that an early start should be made on the project to take advantage of the weather. They did not believe that land procurement or civilian relocation would pose any problem.

As a result, General Westmoreland ordered General Walt, in coordination with General Lam, to prepare a plan to locate, construct, organize, and occupy a SPOS. He also informed General Walt that discussion of Practice Nine with the South Vietnamese at this time should be limited to the SPOS.¹⁰

General Walt, in turn, ordered his chief, G-3 Plans Division and III MAF Practice Nine officer, Lieutenant Colonel Marvin D. Volkert, to meet with his ARVN counterpart and begin the preparation of a combined barrier plan. Walt instructed Volkert to lead the planning and to complete the total effort without divulging details of the Practice Nine plan such as equipment and forces required. By early April, although no written document was in existence nor even expected for at least 30 days, combined planning had progressed sufficiently to permit initial ground clearing between Con Thien and Gio Linh. At that time Marine spokesmen described the project as a modest effort to clear fields of fire and to install a limited obstacle system, but Lieutenant Colonel Volkert had ensured that the work would fit into the Practice Nine concept.

Although the number of Marine units involved in the initial clearing effort was small, it precipitated the basic problem that III MAF had feared would result from the barrier project: the loss of flexibility. On 19 April, a message from Westmoreland to CinCPac intensified the problem. General Westmoreland indicated that, "The mission of

establishing a strong point/obstacle system south of the DMZ initially will be given to the U.S. Marines."¹¹ General Walt expressed his concern in a 26 April message to General Westmoreland, stating that the assignment committed his entire 3d Marine Division to the Practice Nine Plan. He pointed out that ARVN participation in the anti-infiltration belt construction accelerated the anticipated reduction in his forces.

The clearing of the area between Con Thien and Gio Linh was nearing completion, opening the way for the installation of towers, wire, strong points, mines, sensors, and communications. General Walt emphasized that the manpower required to construct and man even that portion of the system would not only use up all of the division's personnel, but also would fix all available division units in place. General Walt observed that this was contrary to all previous MACV positions.

From the outset the plan had:

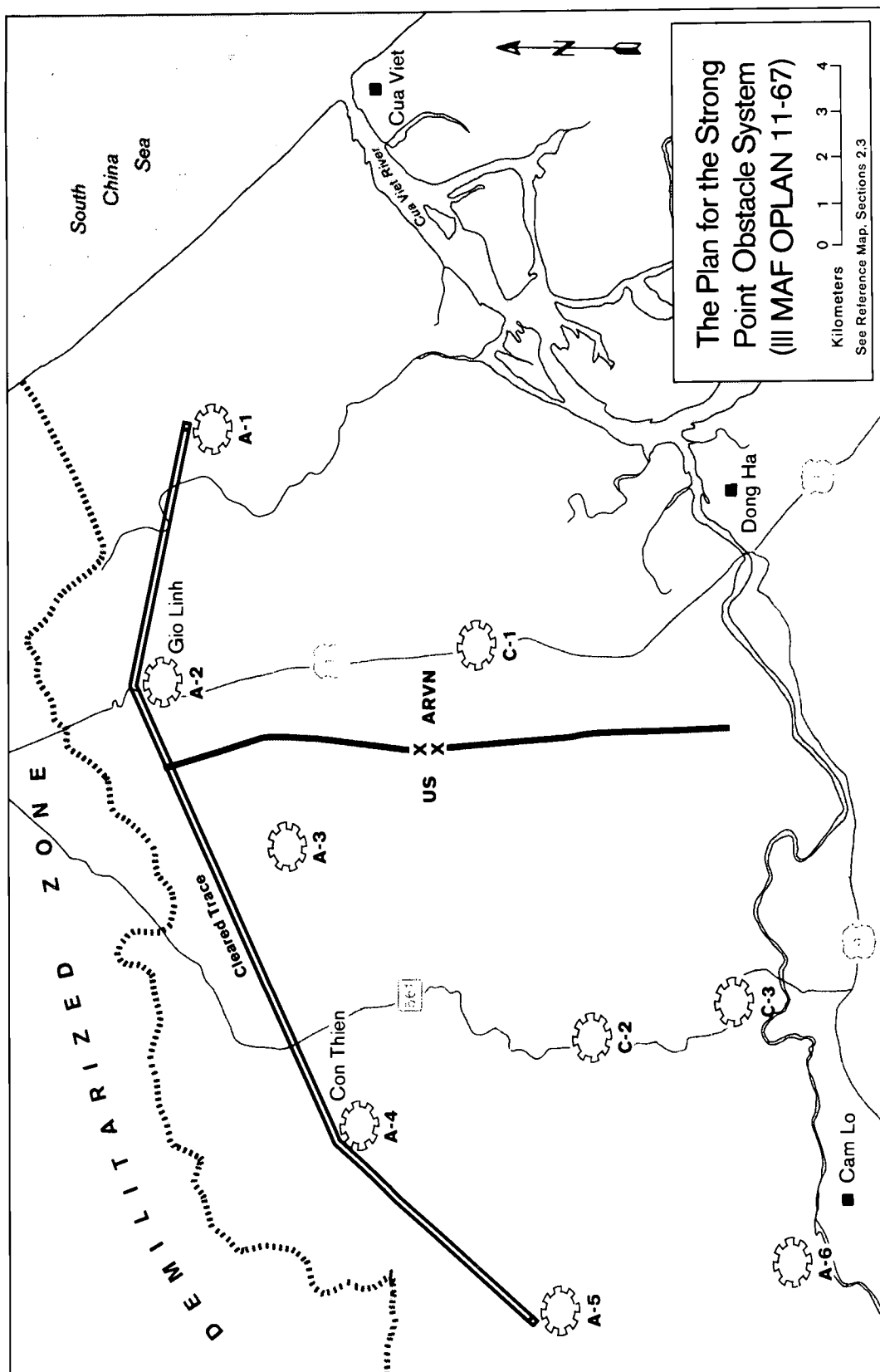
Consistently protected [the] integrity of Marine Corps forces in [the] northern portion of ICTZ (i.e., have inferred that forces now in northern Quang Tri have not unduly been tied to any of the projected barrier systems).

Recognized the requirement for significant forces over and above those now in place to construct and man whatever system is finally adopted.

General Walt contended that both of these positions remained valid, and maintained that unless he received the additional forces required to install and man the Practice Nine system, his capability to conduct offensive actions in northern I Corps would cease almost immediately.¹²

There were no additional forces available in South Vietnam at the time. The posting of the U.S. Army's Task Force Oregon to southern I Corps had reduced troop strength in the other three corps areas to a minimum. These facts, and the 1 November target date for the completion of the first portion of the SPOS, forced General Westmoreland to place the responsibility for the system's construction on III MAF, but the MACV commander did indicate that as additional forces became available he would use them to reinforce the Marines.

By 2 May the 11th Engineer Battalion had cleared a 200-meter trace between Con Thien and Gio Linh and was starting to clear a 500-meter perimeter around each position. Once the battalion completed this task it planned to widen the 200-meter trace to 600 meters and then extend it eastward beyond Gio Linh to the flood plain. While the engineers were clearing the land, at least one infantry battalion, but



normally two, provided security and screening for the engineering effort.

One of the major problems encountered by the engineers during the initial clearing of the trace was the large number of civilians living in the area. Although the government had begun the removal of the population in this region, it appeared that this would be an extremely difficult and extended task, but the inception of Operation Hickory on 18 May changed the picture completely. One of the objectives of Hickory was to clear the entire SPOS area of civilians. By 23 May, GVN authorities reported that there were 6,000 people already at the Cam Lo temporary resettlement site. By the end of Hickory, on 29 May, the population at Cam Lo had grown to over 11,000; the construction zone was virtually free of civilians.

On 18 June, III MAF published Operation Plan 11-67, outlining the SPOS concept. This plan envisioned that, in its completed form, the system would require one U.S. regiment and one ARVN regiment, disposed at six strong points and three battalion base areas. The U.S. portion of the defense was to include four company strong points and two battalion base areas. An additional U.S. battalion was to be based at Dong Ha to be employed in tactical operations in support of the defense.

The plan divided the construction and manning of the system into two phases. The first phase consisted of expansion of the trace to a 600-meter width, installation of a linear obstacle system, and clearing and construction of four strong points and three base areas. Concurrently, III MAF units would improve Routes 1, 9, and 561 and prepare a fortification materials storage site at Dong Ha. The plan set the completion date for Phase 1 as 1 November 1967.*

The Marines planned to begin Phase 2 of the plan at the end of the monsoon season. It required the construction of the final two strong points west of Con Thien and continued obstacle construction on both flanks of the Phase 1 line. III MAF anticipated that the entire system would be completed by July 1968.

Although the III MAF plan had not used the MACV code name Practice Nine, the plans were identical. A partial compromise of the classified code name Practice Nine occurred in June, and III MAF received instructions to discontinue use of the Prac-

tice Nine code name. MACV assigned the interim name Illinois City for use until 14 July when the code name Dye Marker became effective. At the same time, 14 July, the air-supported portion of the program, which was still in a conceptual stage, acquired the code name Muscle Shoals.*

Renaming of the project was not the only change to occur in June. On 1 June, Lieutenant General Walt, the burly Marine veteran from Colorado, who had led III MAF since June of 1965, relinquished his command to Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., recipient of the Navy Cross as a battalion commander on Guam during World War II. General Cushman had been deputy commander at III MAF since early in the year. The new commanding general was well aware of the problems involved in the construction of the anti-infiltration system, but, unlike his predecessor, he believed that, once completed, the system would free his forces for missions elsewhere.**

During Secretary McNamara's visit to the 3d Marine Division in July, the division briefed him on the status of Dye Marker and flew him over the construction sites. The Marines had cleared the strong points at Con Thien and Gio Linh to a 500-meter radius and had begun building bunkers in both positions. They had cleared the 600-meter-wide trace between the two strong points and extended it to the flood plain east of Gio Linh. The staff opinion was that with release of the Dye Marker materials, the division could finish Phase 1 of the system by the 1 November target date. Since the monsoon would greatly reduce trafficability in the area, the engineers made a major effort to improve Routes 1, 9, and 561 which linked the strong points to the base areas.

These accomplishments had been costly for III MAF. All of the forces used for clearing the strong point obstacle system had come from III MAF and they had not begun installation of wire and other obstacles. The amount of Marine efforts devoted to the Dye Marker project to that stage had been:

(1) Direct labor: 5,795 mandays; III MAF estimated the

*The air-supported portion of the system was the responsibility of the Seventh Air Force and this monograph does not cover it.

**General Cushman apparently was making the best of a bad situation. In his comments in 1981 on the draft of this volume, he wrote, "Your handling of the *stupid* barrier concept and operation was even handed." Gen Robert E. Cushman, Comments on draft ms, 17May81 (Vietnam Comment files, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

*The ARVN were to construct strong points A-1 and A-2 and base area C-1.

11th Engineer Battalion was applying 50 percent of its resources to Dye Marker.

(2) Equipment hours: 18,440.

(3) Equipment losses: destroyed tractors, 15; dump trucks, 2.

(4) Personnel losses: KIA 4; WIA, 77.¹³

At the same time, the construction effort was meeting increased enemy resistance, requiring more security forces. Further, Marine units still had responsibility for their respective TAORs. The 9th Marines' TAOR, for example, stretched from the sea above Cua Viet to Con Thien in the west and as far south as the newly constructed airfield at Quang Tri. "Although the 9th Marines was reinforced with at least one additional infantry battalion and often two," recalled Colonel George E. Jerue, "the additional mission of assisting in the construction of the trace precluded any rest for the combat troops involved."¹⁴

One example of the effort required was that of Lieutenant Colonel Lee R. Bendell's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines at Con Thien in late August and early September. As one company worked on construction projects within the perimeter, company-sized patrols conducted sweeps north, east, and west of Con Thien while platoon-sized patrols covered the south.

Those working within the perimeter endured over 100 rounds of incoming enemy artillery and rockets, which dictated strict flak jacket discipline. "The Marines much preferred to take their chances on patrol," recalled Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, "than be sand bag fillers and bunker construction 'experts' interrupted by incoming barrages."¹⁵

By mid-August, the enemy situation in the DMZ area was becoming critical. In a 16 August message to General Westmoreland, General Cushman stated that although he had increased his own troop strength in the area, he had received none of the forces considered as the minimum essential augmentation by the 26 January 1967 plan. The enemy threat in the DMZ had increased progressively to the degree that Marine units were fully occupied with holding back the Communists in the Con Thien-Gio Linh region. Allied forces along the trace (four battalions plus combat support and combat service support, with the effective assistance of extensive and continuous artillery, air, and naval gunfire support) were unable to defend their front and at the same time construct, man, and operate the SPOS in their rear. General Cushman concluded by stating that he required more forces in northern Quang Tri if he were to meet the 1 November target date for the

The construction of the barrier system, also called the strong point obstacle system, created severe logistics problems for III MAF. For example, the heavy timbers used in this partially completed bunker at Strong Point C-2 had to be acquired and then hauled to the site over dirt roads made almost impassable by the monsoon rains late in the year.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189849



SPOS. His only alternative, barring the arrival of reinforcements if he was to continue the project, was to shift one Task Force Oregon brigade north to free elements of the 5th Marines for deployment in Quang Tri.¹⁶

General Westmoreland responded to CG III MAF's request by ordering another Army brigade to I Corps to permit the 5th Marines to deploy further north. He also informed General Cushman that he planned to send a second brigade into the area in October. As a result, the III MAF commander informed General Westmoreland that he would use nine Marine battalions; seven committed to searching, clearing, and screening in support of the construction effort, while the other two infantry battalions and an engineer battalion would construct the obstacles and man them as the work was completed. All of these forces would be in the range of enemy artillery. Moreover, increased NVA use of proximity fuzes posed a greater threat to those troops who would have to do the work, expected to take six weeks. Because of this, General Cushman emphasized that the flow of equipment and materials would have to be timely. The general pointed out that the 3 September artillery attack on Dong Ha also had reduced his ability to proceed with the project.¹⁷

On 7 September, General Westmoreland directed III MAF to assess the cost of installing the SPOS in terms of casualties resulting from enemy fire. At the same time, he requested that the Marines submit an alternate plan to be executed between then and November should a decision be made not to proceed with the Dye Marker plan. On 10 September, III MAF presented its analysis of the casualties that could be expected if it pursued the existing plan. The Marines based this analysis on actual casualties from previous operations in support of the SPOS, with an adjustment made for the increased enemy artillery capability. They estimated the system installation time as 29 days. Total projected casualties were: 672 U.S. killed and 3,788 wounded; projected South Vietnamese casualties for the same period were 112 killed and 642 wounded.¹⁸

Three days after the submission of the casualty analysis, General Westmoreland approved III MAF's alternate plan, Operation Plan 12-67. The major change in the new plan was the cessation of obstacle construction until after completion of the strong points and base areas and stabilization of the tactical situation. Other changes outlined in the plan in-

cluded relocation of Base Area C-3 nearer to Cam Lo and the addition of a fourth base area north of the Cua Viet POL facility. One other change, not involving construction, was the provision for manning all four strong points with ARVN forces, freeing a Marine battalion for security of the new Quang Tri airfield. Operations in the western, or defile, area were to be conducted from battalion combat operating bases (COBs). This plan envisioned that the COBs would support the area between Camp Carroll and Khe Sanh. Subsequently, the Marines would establish bases in the vicinity of Lang Ru'ou and Lang Vei.¹⁹

The onset of the seasonal monsoon further complicated construction efforts. The heavy rains in September, for example, turned Route 561 between Cam Lo and Con Thien into a quagmire impassable to any type of vehicle. While CH-53 helicopters, often guided by TPQ-10 radar, attempted to ferry sufficient supplies to Con Thien, the 11th Engineer Battalion received orders to make Route 561 useable; this became the battalion's top priority. The major problem facing the engineers was the location and movement of sufficient crushed rock to build a sub-base for the road. The nearest supply was near Camp Carroll, which required hauling the rock in dump trucks more than 15 miles. "When the project was completed and the first vehicles made it to Con Thien," commented Lieutenant Colonel Willard N. Christopher of the 11th Engineer Battalion, "General Hochmuth told me that he was elated to 'get them off my back,' and congratulated the men in the battalion who had done the bulk of the work."²⁰

By mid-October General Westmoreland was expressing dissatisfaction with the rate of progress on the Dye Marker project. He realized that the heavy rains in late September and early October had required a large effort to keep the roads open, and he also appreciated that there had been some delay because construction materials had not arrived on schedule, but, despite these recognizable problems, he believed that more progress should have been made. On 22 October, he told General Cushman that, as a result of his own observations and inspections by his staff, he had concluded that quality control of the project was inadequate, that the Dye Marker system had not received the priority consistent with its operational importance, and that the project required more command emphasis and bet-

ter management.* He ordered General Cushman to take immediate steps to correct deficiencies and to institute a positive system of quality control over the entire Dye Marker project.²¹

General Cushman appointed the assistant III MAF commander, Major General Raymond L. Murray, a distinguished and highly decorated veteran of two wars, to head a permanent Dye Marker special staff. At the same time, III MAF informed all commanders concerned that the Dye Marker project had high national interest and a priority second only to emergency combat requirements. In addition, General Cushman planned to move another regiment north to provide more troops for tactical requirements. General Cushman pointed out that although all construction was incomplete, all the A and C sites, except A-3, included in his 12-67 plan were manned and engaged in anti-infiltration operations. He assured the MACV commander that the task of completing construction and improving the cases and strong points would be pursued as a matter of utmost urgency.²²

On 10 December, General Cushman reported that III MAF had made significant progress. All bunkers at sites A-4, C-2, and C-4 were complete. Engineers had completed the wire and mine emplacement at C-2, and had finished most of the other two sites. Construction had started on the combat operating base at Ca Lu and Marines were conducting tactical operations to clear the A-3 site. Vietnamese Army construction at sites A-1 and C-1 did not meet the new 1 December target date, but completion was near. Engineers had prepared Route 561 to handle a 60-ton capacity and opened it from Cam Lo to Con Thien, but delayed asphaltting the road because of weather. The new Quang Tri airfield was completely operational, substantially easing the logistic burden in the area.

By the end of the year, III MAF units finished all strong points and base areas, except A-3 and C-3.

*Lieutenant Colonel Willard N. Christopher of the 11th Engineer Battalion remembered a Saigon staff officer suggesting the bunkers be painted white, as the ones at Long Binh supposedly were. This convinced Christopher that the quality control issue basically was a matter of "cosmetics." General Metzger, however, suspected that such "nit-picking" criticisms from the MACV staff stemmed, in part, from interservice rivalry. LtCol Willard N. Christopher, Comments on draft ms, 31Jul81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.); MajGen Louis Metzger, ltr to CG, FMFPac, Subj: Debrief, dtd 22Jan68 (Archives, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

Both A-3 and C-3 were approximately 70 percent finished, as was the Ca Lu COB. The total Dye Marker effort and its associated security tasks had required 757,520 mandays and 114,519 equipment hours by 31 December. Equipment lost to enemy action during the construction effort amounted to a monetary loss of \$1,622,348.²³

By the end of the year the Marine command's opinion of the barrier concept had not changed. One Marine officer stated, "With these bastards, you'd have to build the zone all the way to India and it would take the whole Marine Corps and half the Army to guard it; even then they'd probably burrow under it." General Wallace M. Greene, Jr. the Commandant, testifying before the Senate Subcommittee on Preparedness in August 1967, declared, "From the very beginning I have been opposed to this project."²⁴

Each of the strong points in the barrier system contained bunkers designed to withstand enemy artillery and rocket fire. These South Vietnamese soldiers are adding a thick layer of dirt to the top of this bunker at Strong Point C-2 in mid-October.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189856



CHAPTER 8

Con Thien and the Summer Battles Along the DMZ

Why Con Thien?—Operation Buffalo

Why Con Thien?

The Marines along the DMZ began construction of the strong point obstacle system south of the border in the spring and fall of 1967 in compliance with orders from MACV and Washington. The system, called the "McNamara Line" by the Marines, proved to be a major burden to the 3d Marine Division. Security of the troops building the line, coupled with the demands on Marine units to fill sandbags, creosote bunker timbers, install wire, and other associated tasks, severely restricted the division's combat activities.

While the construction of the obstacle system limited III MAF's flexibility, higher headquarters expected its speedy completion to force southbound NVA regiments to move westward into the mountains, thereby complicating the enemy's logistical problems. The Marines' combined-arms fire power from strong points would then confront the anticipated enemy attacks. Smaller patrols and infiltration groups would face the challenge of the extensive obstacle system. The Communists, however, chose to attack before the system became too strong.

The enemy decided to concentrate on the Marine strong point at Con Thien, located 14 miles inland and two miles south of the DMZ. This outpost was crucial to Marine efforts in the area. It occupied what would be the northwest corner of the strong point obstacle system, which enclosed an area which became known as "Leatherneck Square." Con Thien also overlooked one of the principal enemy routes into South Vietnam. Capture of the outpost would open the way for a major enemy invasion of Quang Tri Province by 35,000 NVA troops massed north of the DMZ, a victory of immense propaganda value. Colonel Richard B. Smith, who commanded the 9th Marines, later described the outpost's importance:

Con Thien was clearly visible from the 9th Marines Headquarters on the high ground at Dong Ha 10 miles

away, so good line-of-sight communications were enjoyed. Although Con Thien was only 160 meters high, its tenants had dominant observation over the entire area. Visitors to Con Thien could look back at the vast logistics complex of Dong Ha and know instantly why the Marines had to hold the hill. If the enemy occupied it he would be looking down our throats.¹

The Communists made two offensive thrusts into the Con Thien region during the second half of 1967. Although reinforced by heavy artillery, rockets, and mortars north of the Ben Hai River in the DMZ, each thrust collapsed under a combination of Marine ground and helicopter-borne maneuvers coupled with supporting artillery, naval gunfire, and attack aircraft.

The first offensive aimed at Con Thien, the largest in terms of troops committed, occurred in July. For the first time the NVA employed extensive artillery to support its infantry, but the Marine counterattack, Operation Buffalo, beat back the enemy, netting more than 1,200 NVA dead.

The outpost at Con Thien, which this Marine patrol is approaching, occupied a low hill, but one which provided excellent observation of the surrounding area as well as the key installations at Dong Ha.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370551



The second attempt came in September. A heavy weapons attack of greater volume and duration supported a multipronged infantry assault on Con Thien, but this endeavor, too, ended in failure for the Communists.

In reviewing the enemy invasion attempts across the DMZ during 1967, analysts found the Communists used fewer troops as the year progressed, but greatly increased their attacks by fire. The enemy sanctuary in the northern half of the DMZ, protected by U.S. policy, was always available for regrouping and employment of heavy artillery. This unique situation caused considerable frustration for the allied commanders. Even so, Communist plans for a significant victory in the DMZ area remained unfulfilled at the year's end, and construction of the allied strong point obstacle system continued as planned.

Operation Buffalo

Operation Buffalo began on 2 July utilizing Lieutenant Colonel Richard J. Schening's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines in and around Con Thien. Companies A and B operated north-northeast of the strong point near a former market place on Route 561, while Company D, Headquarters and Service Company, and the battalion command group remained within the outpost perimeter. Company C was at Dong Ha at Colonel George E. Jerue's 9th Marines command post. Colonel Jerue described the origins of the operation:

The TAOR assigned to the 9th Marine Regiment was so large that the regiment could not enjoy the advantage of patrolling any particular sector on a continuing basis. As a result, an area would be swept for a few days and then it would be another week or so before the area would be swept again. Consequently, it became evident that the NVA, realizing this limitation, would move back into an area as soon as a sweep was concluded.

In an attempt to counter this NVA maneuver, it was decided to send two companies of 1/9 ("A" and "B" Cos.) into the area (1,200 yards east of Con Thien and north of the Trace) which had just been swept during the last few days in June. This is the reason the two companies were [there on 2 July].²

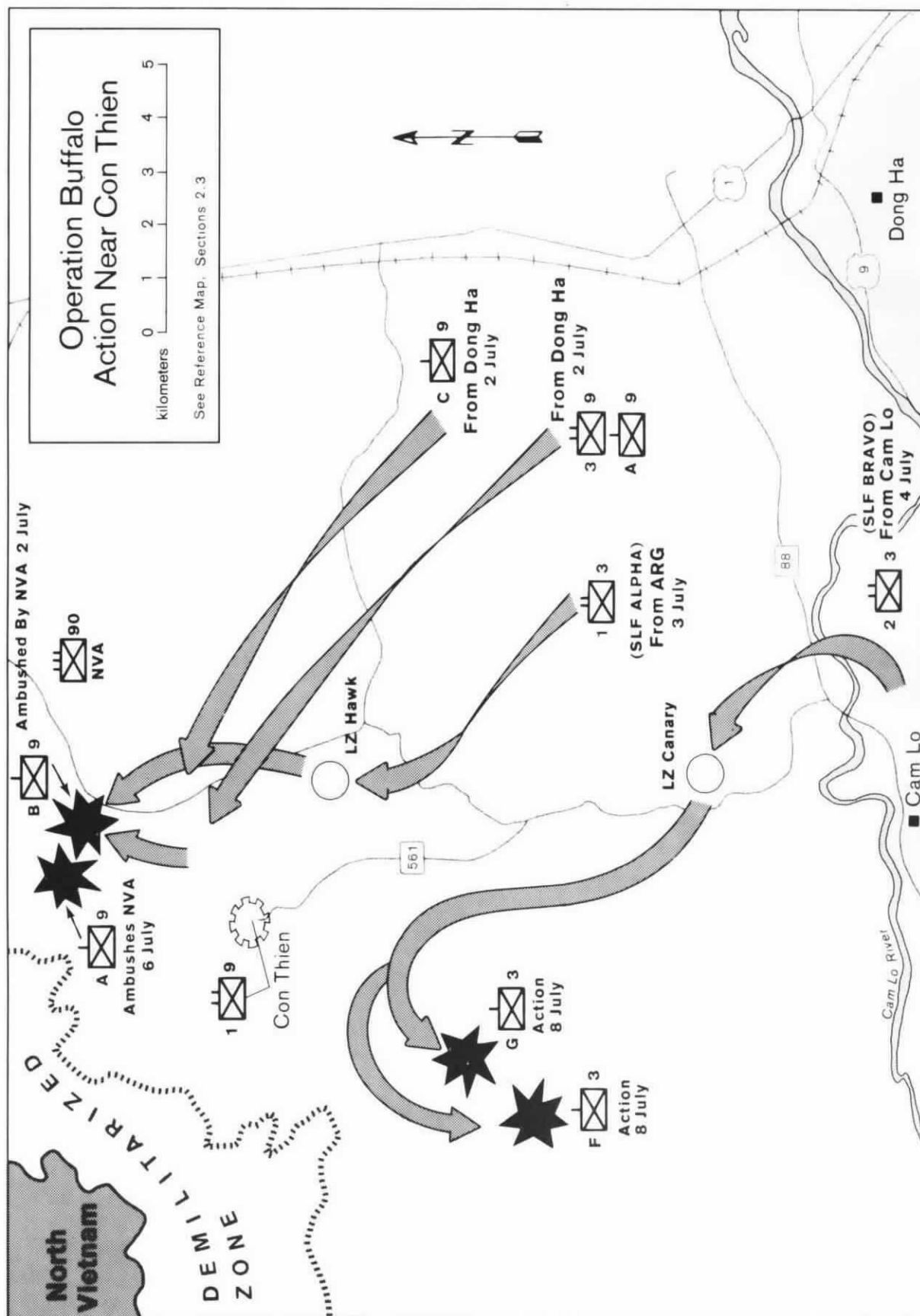
That morning, Captain Sterling K. Coates' Company B, a company which gained a reputation for finding the enemy during earlier actions at Khe Sanh, walked into the heaviest combat of its Vietnam assignment. It had moved a mile east of Con Thien the day before in company with Captain

Albert C. Slater, Jr.'s Company A to conduct a sweep north of the cleared trace. At 0800 on the 2nd, both units began moving north. Company A was on the left. Company B moved along Route 561, an old 8- to 10-foot-wide cart road bordered by waist-high hedgerows. The road led to trouble; two NVA battalions waited in prepared positions.

Company B's movement started smoothly and by 0900 the 2d Platoon had secured its first objective, a small crossroads 1,200 meters north of the trace. There was no contact. As the 3d Platoon and the command group moved up the trail, enemy sniper fire started. The 3d Platoon and Captain Coates' command group moved to the left to suppress the enemy's fire, but as they pushed north the NVA fire intensified, halting the platoon. Captain Coates directed his 2d Platoon to shift to the right in a second attempt to outflank the Communist position; at the same time he ordered the 1st Platoon forward to provide rear security for the company. The 2d Platoon tried to move, but enemy fire forced it back onto the road. The number of wounded and dead mounted as NVA fire hit the unit from the front and both flanks. To worsen matters, the enemy began pounding the Marines with artillery and mortars.

Shortly after the sweep began, Company A tripped two Claymore mines and the need for casualty evacuation delayed its movement. Afterward, Captain Slater moved his company eastward to help Company B, but could not link up because of heavy small arms fire. Soon the company had so many casualties that it was unable to fight and move simultaneously.

Company B's position deteriorated. Enemy artillery and mortar fire cut off the 3d Platoon and the command group from the 2d Platoon. The NVA troops then used flamethrowers to ignite the hedgerows on both sides of Captain Coates' unit, as well as massed artillery in close coordination with a ground attack.³ Many of the Marines, forced into the open by the flamethrowers, died under the enemy fire. The Communist artillery and mortar fire shifted to the 2d Platoon as it attacked to help the 3d Platoon and the command group. This fire killed Captain Coates, his radio operator, two platoon commanders, and the artillery forward observer. The attached forward air controller, Captain Warren O. Keneipp, Jr., took command of the company, but he soon lost radio contact with the platoons. Only the company executive officer, at the rear of the 2d





3d MarDiv ComdC, July 1967

Much of the terrain around Con Thien and the area south of the DMZ was well suited for armored vehicles. These infantrymen from Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines have teamed up with M-48 tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion during Operation Buffalo.

Platoon, managed to maintain radio contact with the battalion CP, but the heavy enemy fire kept him from influencing the situation.⁴

Down the road, the 1st Platoon also took heavy punishment as it tried to push its way up to the lead elements of the company. North Vietnamese troops swarmed against the platoon's flanks, but air support arrived and the platoon commander, Staff Sergeant Leon R. Burns, directed strikes against the enemy. Burns said later, "I asked for napalm as close as 50 yards from us, some of it came in only 20 yards away. But I'm not complaining." The air strikes disrupted the enemy assault and the 1st Platoon reached what was left of the 2d Platoon. Burns quickly established a hasty defense and began treating the wounded.⁵

The 1st Battalion command post at Con Thien heard the crackle of small-arms fire from the 0930 action, followed by a radio report that Company B had encountered a dug-in NVA unit. The first assessment of enemy strength was a platoon, then a battalion, and ultimately a multibattalion force. When the firing began to increase, Lieutenant Colonel "Spike" Schening alerted his Company C, at Dong Ha, to stand by to be helilifted into Company B's area. Since these reinforcements would not arrive for some time, Schening dispatched a rescue force composed of four tanks and a platoon from Company D. The assistant S-3, Captain Henry J. M. Radcliffe, went with the small force to take com-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192417

Moving through seven-foot-high "elephant grass" in the DMZ region could be nerve-wracking. Grass offered the superb concealment desired by an enemy lying in ambush. Close-range encounters were always a threat that required constant alertness for the slightest sign of the presence of NVA soldiers.

mand of Company B if link-up could be made. First Lieutenant Gatlin J. Howell, the battalion intelligence officer, went also because he was familiar with the area where the enemy engaged Company B.⁶ The remainder of the battalion command group remained at Con Thien.

The small rescue force moved down the cleared trace from Con Thien to the junction of Route 561 without incident, but as it turned north up the road it came under fire. A North Vietnamese unit, trying to encircle Company B, had moved south and was opposite Radcliffe's small force. Helicopter gunships and the fire from the four tanks dispersed the enemy. Company C began arriving by helicopter and Captain Radcliffe ordered the Company D platoon to secure the landing zone and evacuate casualties. As the lead elements of Company C came into the zone they met a heavy artillery barrage, which wounded 11 Marines.

Despite enemy fire, the platoon of tanks and the lead unit of Company C continued to push north toward Company B. Half a mile up the road, the advancing Marines found the 1st Platoon. Captain Radcliffe told Burns that he was the acting commanding officer and asked where was the rest of the company. Sergeant Burns replied, "Sir, this is the company, or what's left of it."⁷

After organizing the withdrawal of the 1st Platoon's wounded, Radcliffe and the relief force, accompanied by Burns, continued to push forward to Company B's furthest point of advance to recover the company's casualties. The Marines set up a hasty defense, making maximum use of the tanks' firepower, and brought the dead and wounded into the perimeter.

For Lieutenant Howell the scene had a particular impact. He had commanded Company B's 3d Platoon for more than eight months. Howell was seemingly everywhere as he searched for the wounded. Captain Radcliffe estimated that Howell and Corporal Charles A. Thompson of Company D were instrumental in the evacuation of at least 25 Marines.⁸ The Marines then loaded their casualties on the tanks. Lacking space on the vehicles for the arms and equipment of the wounded, Radcliffe ordered them destroyed to prevent capture. The rescue force found it impossible to recover all the bodies immediately; some bodies remained along the road.

The company came under heavy enemy artillery fire as it began to pull back. Two of the tanks hit mines which further slowed the withdrawal. When

the company reached the landing zone it came under devastating artillery and mortar fire again, hitting many of the wounded who awaited evacuation. Litter bearers and corpsmen became casualties as well.

Casualties increased in the landing zone, among them were the platoon commander and platoon sergeant from Company D who had been directing the defense of the zone. In the resulting confusion, someone passed the word to move the casualties back to Con Thien. A group of almost 50 started making their way back until Marines at Con Thien spotted them in the cleared trace. Lieutenant Colonel Schening sent out a rescue party, headed by his executive officer, Major Darrell C. Danielson, in a truck, jeep and ambulance. Upon reaching the wounded Marines, Major Danielson saw that many were in a state of shock; some seemed in danger of bleeding to death. Fortunately, two helicopters landed in the area and the Marines loaded the more serious casualties on board. Enemy artillery fire delayed the evacuation of the remainder but, despite the fire, Major Danielson and his party managed to get everyone into the vehicles and back to Con Thien for treatment and further evacuation.⁹

During the battle, friendly and enemy supporting arms engaged in a furious duel. In the first few hours of the engagement Marine aircraft dropped 90 tons of ordnance during 28 sorties. Artillery fired 453 missions, while Navy destroyers fired 142 5-inch rounds into enemy positions. The NVA force fired 1,065 artillery and mortar rounds during the day at Gio Linh and Con Thien; more than 700 rounds fell on Lieutenant Colonel Schening's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines alone.

Captain Slater's Company A remained heavily engaged. When the necessity of carrying the increasing numbers of wounded brought the company to a halt, Slater had his 3d Platoon establish a hasty landing zone in the rear of the company. After the first flight of medevac helicopters departed the zone, the enemy hit the 3d Platoon with mortars and assaulted the position. Slater moved his 2d Platoon and company command group to reinforce the 3d Platoon.* The enemy advanced to within 50 meters of Company A's lines before small arms and artillery

*In the confused fighting, the 1st Platoon of Company A broke through the surrounding enemy and joined Captain Radcliffe's relief force. LtCol Albert C. Slater, Comments on draft ms, 12May81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

fire broke up their attack. Enemy pressure and the remaining casualties kept Company A in the defensive position until the NVA force withdrew later in the evening.¹⁰

At 1500 Schening, at Con Thien, notified the regimental commander that all of his companies were hard pressed, that he had no more units to commit, and that the situation was critical. Colonel Jerue, commanding the 9th Marines, ordered Major Willard J. Woodring's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines to move by helicopter to Schening's assistance. Three companies and the command group of the 3d Battalion were in position north of the trace by 1800.* After landing, Major Woodring assumed operational control of Companies A and C of the 1st Battalion. The combined force made a twilight attack on the enemy's left flank, while elements of Company B and the platoon from Company D holding the landing zone pulled back to the Con Thien perimeter in expectation of an attack on the outpost. The increased pressure provided by the 3d Battalion caused the enemy to break contact.

When the worn and exhausted survivors of the morning's encounter mustered for a head count, the Marines found the total casualty figure shocking. Staff Sergeant Burns, subsequently awarded the Navy Cross, stated that only 27 Company B Marines walked out of the action. Lieutenant Colonel Schening's battalion lost 53 killed, 190 wounded, and 34 missing. Not until 5 July did the battalion complete the recovery efforts that reduced the number of missing to nine, but the number of dead increased to 84.** The battalion established no accurate count of enemy killed.¹¹

During the next three days, 3-5 July, enemy contact continued. At 0930 on the 3rd, an Air Force air observer reported more than 100 NVA soldiers ad-

vancing from positions north of Con Thien. Battery E, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines fired on them and killed 75. To the east, Major Woodring called in continuous air strikes for 12 hours to prepare for an attack the following day. The same day, 3 July, Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. Wickwire's BLT 1/3 from SLF Alpha joined the 9th Marines and tied in with Woodring's right flank. The regiment planned a drive north to recover missing bodies and push the NVA out of the Lang Son area, only 4,000 meters northeast of the Con Thien perimeter.

The attack started early the morning of the 4th. The 3d Battalion encountered heavy resistance from concealed enemy positions southwest of the site of Company B's engagement on 2 July. A prolonged fight followed, involving tanks, artillery, and close air support. By 1830 when the final Marine assault ended, Woodring's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines had lost 15 dead and 33 wounded. BLT 1/3 had 11 wounded during the same action. The same day Major Wendell O. Beard's BLT 2/3 from SLF Bravo joined the operation; the battalion landed by helicopter north of Cam Lo at LZ Canary and moved west and then northward on the western edge of the battle area toward Con Thien.

During daylight on 5 July all units northeast of Con Thien came under enemy mortar and artillery fire, but there was relatively little ground contact while completing the grim task of recovering Company B's dead. That afternoon an air observer spotted a large concentration of enemy troops 3,000 meters northeast of Con Thien. He called in artillery and tactical air strikes and reported seeing 200 dead NVA soldiers.

Following preparatory fires on the morning of 6 July, all battalions continued moving north. Major Beard's BLT 2/3 ran into an enemy force supported by mortars less than 3 kilometers south of Con Thien. In the brief engagement that followed the battalion killed 35 Communist soldiers, while suffering five killed and 25 wounded.

Northeast of the outpost, Wickwire's and Woodring's battalions advanced under intermittent NVA artillery and mortar fire. Major Woodring decided to move a reinforced company 1,500 meters to the north-northwest to cover his left flank. He chose Captain Slater's attached Company A, 9th Marines, which now included the survivors of Company C, and a detachment from 3d Reconnaissance Battalion. Slater's company moved into position without opposition and established a strong combat

*Enemy artillery quickly zeroed in on 3/9's LZs. Helicopters could not land in the LZs during later resupply missions, which caused 3/9 to go entirely without water for a day and a half. Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft ms, 9Jul81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

**The XO of 3/9, Maj John C. Studt, supervised the recovery of Company B's dead, "... a grisly task after 3 days in the hot sun ... [Most] appeared to have been left right where they fell. They were in flank security positions too close to the road to have prevented an ambush or in the [sunken] road itself which ... [offered] some cover ... [Company B] clearly had walked into a [very well executed] ambush." Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft ms, 9Jul81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Members of H&S Company, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines board a CH-46 helicopter as their battalion moved to assist hard-pressed elements of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, then fighting a North Vietnamese force north of the Con Thien combat base on 2 July.

Members of Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines move behind one of their attached tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion as it skirts a large bomb crater during Operation Buffalo. This tank-infantry combination, aided by artillery and air strikes, destroyed a North Vietnamese defensive position in heavy fighting near Con Thien on 4 July 1967.

3d MarDiv ComdC, July 1967



outpost. Slater's composite force dug concealed fighting positions and sent reconnaissance patrols north in an attempt to discover where the enemy crossed the Ben Hai River.¹²

While Slater's move was unnoticed, the same was not true for the advance of the main elements of the two battalions. As they advanced, they encountered increasingly heavy artillery fire and by 1600 they could go no further. Wickwire's battalion had lost a tank and, because of the enemy fire, pulled back without recovering it. Captain Burrell H. Landes, Jr., commanding Company B, BLT 1/3, climbed a tree to spot for air strikes and artillery fire in front of his position. An aerial observer radioed that a large enemy force was approaching his position. When Landes asked how big the force was, the reply was, "I'd hate to tell you, I'd hate to tell you." The AO had spotted a 400-man force crossing the Ben Hai River in approach march formation; it was heading directly for the two battalions. After the sightings, both battalions, less Slater's company, came under heavy, accurate artillery fire. Between 500-600 rounds hit the 3d Battalion's position and about 1,000 landed on BLT 1/3.

During the Communist bombardment, one of Slater's reconnaissance patrols also spotted the 400-man NVA force and reported it moving toward the 3d Battalion. The enemy, still in column formation, was unaware that it was heading directly into Captain Slater's concealed unit. The Marines opened fire at less than 150 meters distance. Captain Slater recalled:

When the point of the enemy column was brought under fire, the NVA alerted their unit with a bugle call . . . Their initial reaction was [one] of confusion and they scattered, some of them toward Marine lines. They quickly organized and probed at every flank of the 360 degree perimeter. Concealed prepared positions and fire discipline never allowed the NVA to determine what size of unit they were dealing with. When the enemy formed and attacked, heavy accurate artillery was walked to within 75 meters of the perimeter. The few NVA that penetrated the perimeter were killed and all lines held.¹³

Heavy enemy probes, mortar fire, and small arms fire continued through the early evening. Some NVA soldiers crept close enough to hurl hand grenades into the Marine lines. One of the attached Company C fireteam leaders, Lance Corporal James L. Stuckey, responded by picking up the grenades and throwing them back toward their source. He was wounded when the third grenade exploded as it left his hand. He continued, however, to lead his

fireteam for the rest of the night without medical assistance.¹⁴

Despite heavy Marine artillery fire that effectively boxed in Slater's position, the NVA maintained pressure on the Marines until 2200. For the rest of the night, enemy small arms and mortar fire harassed Company A, but the NVA units were withdrawing. First light revealed 154 enemy bodies strewn around Company A's perimeter; the defenders had 12 casualties. Among the wounded Marines was Lance Corporal Stuckey; only tattered flesh remained where his hand had been.*

While the attack on Company A took place, the rest of what intelligence officers later determined to have been the *90th NVA Regiment* assaulted the two Marine battalions. To add to the effect of their preparatory fires, the attacking North Vietnamese threw fuzed blocks of TNT into the Marine positions to keep the Marines down as the assaulting troops moved in. The Marines countered with supporting arms; flare ships, attack aircraft, helicopter gunships, naval gunfire, and all available artillery concentrated their fire on the attacking enemy. By 2130, the Marines had repelled the assault and the Communist forces began withdrawing to the north.

At 0520 the next morning, Major Woodring ordered Captain Slater to pull back into the battalion perimeter. The decision was most opportune; immediately after Company A cleared the night position, a 30-minute NVA artillery concentration landed within its old lines.** Company A returned to the battalion's perimeter without incident. Both battalions spent the rest of the 7th trying to determine the extent of the damage inflicted on the *90th NVA Regiment*. By 8 July the Marines raised the NVA casualty count to more than 800. Counting enemy bodies proved to be a most difficult task; the grisly carnage was beyond description. Hundreds of bodies covered the scarred battleground, some half buried, others in pieces, all surrounded by a carpet of battered equipment and ammunition. Counting enemy canteens was one method used to try to

*Corporal Stuckey received the Navy Cross for his actions on 6 July 1967.

**Colonel John C. Studt, the XO of 3/9 in July 1967, said this incident was typical of the battalion commander. "Major Woodring, a former drill instructor, a woodsman and a deerhunter, possessed that rare instinct which enabled him to frequently anticipate enemy actions." Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft ms, 9Jul81, (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

establish realistic figures. The vast area which the bodies covered further complicated the morbid undertaking. As late as the afternoon of the 8th, Captain Gerald F. Reczek's Company C, BLT 1/3 found about 200 enemy bodies more than 600 meters east of Route 561.

The scattering of bodies to the north occurred when air and artillery hit groups of North Vietnamese moving toward or away from the main battle area. The lateral scattering from the 3d Battalion's position eastward across the front of BLT 1/3 was the result of the NVA attempt to outflank Major Woodring's unit without realizing that the BLT was on line. Trying to move further east, they lost even more men to the guns of Wickwire's Marines.¹⁵ The Marines found it impossible to compute an accurate total of Communist losses to supporting arms because of the inability of allied forces to continue the count on the north side of the Ben Hai River.

The last significant engagements of Operation Buffalo took place on 8 July, southwest of Con Thien. After BLT 2/3 closed on Con Thien during its northward sweep, it had turned west, and then headed south toward the Cam Lo River. Moving south, at 1030 Captain James P. Sheehan's Company G discovered a bunker complex. When small arms fire and grenades interrupted further investigation, Sheehan wisely backed off and called in air and artillery. At 1300, Company G moved in, but some NVA soldiers continued to fight. Later that afternoon, after clearing the complex, Company G reported 39 dead Communists, 2 Marines killed, and 29 wounded, including the company commander.

At 1430 while Company G cleared the bunkers, a Company F squad patrol, located some 1,200 meters southwest of Company G, engaged another enemy force. When the Communists counterattacked, the company commander, First Lieutenant Richard D. Koehler, Jr., sent in the rest of his Marines. When 82mm mortar rounds began falling, Koehler knew he was in trouble and called in artillery and air strikes. The concentration of supporting arms cracked the enemy position, and when Company F moved in, it counted 118 enemy bodies. The Marines estimated the Communist unit to have numbered between 200 and 250. Marine losses totaled 14 killed and 43 wounded. Apparently the NVA had had enough; for the next five days BLT 2/3 encountered only mines and harassing fires.

One ominous development which accompanied the Buffalo fighting was the accurate employment of

large-caliber, long-range NVA artillery. On 7 July, enemy artillery scored a direct hit on the command bunker of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at Con Thien, killing 11, including First Lieutenant Gatlin J. Howell, the intelligence officer who had gone to the aid of Company B, 9th Marines on 2 July. Eighteen others sustained wounds; one was the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Schening.* The cause of the damage was a 152mm howitzer round, which penetrated five feet of sand bags, loose dirt, and 12x12-inch timbers.

The same day, at Dong Ha, a delay-fuzed 130mm round landed at the base of the north wall of the 9th Marines' command post, exploding six feet below the bunker floor. Luckily, there were no injuries. The NVA also scored a direct hit on the Dong Ha chapel during Catholic services, killing the chaplain's assistant. Storage areas, helicopter maintenance areas, and medical facilities were among the targets of the long-range weapons. The frequency and accuracy of the enemy fire caused Col-



Marine Corps Historical Collection

The heat during the summer battles south of the DMZ made water a precious commodity. Following a helicopter resupply mission, these two Marines use a Vietnamese technique to carry a five-gallon can of water to their squad during Operation Buffalo.

*Lieutenant Colonel Schening also suffered wounds at Cape Gloucester and Peleliu in World War II, as well as in Korea. He thus survived wounds in three wars.

onel Jerue to move his command post to a location northeast of Cam Lo. There, relative quiet prevailed for the remainder of the operation.*

Another indication of the Communist buildup along the DMZ and around Con Thien during this period was the increased employment of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). While an A-4 aircraft was attacking the NVA in front of BLT 1/3 on 6 July, the enemy launched eight SAMs from sites north of the Ben Hai River. One hit Major Ralph E. Brubaker's VMA-311 jet, causing the aircraft to crash in enemy territory. Brubaker, only slightly wounded, remained in enemy territory until picked up the next morning by an Air Force rescue helicopter.

Operation Buffalo closed on 14 July 1967. The Marines reported enemy losses as 1,290 dead and two captured. Marine losses, in contrast, totaled 159 killed and 345 wounded. The Marines found the enemy's large-scale July offensive against Con Thien a short one, but considerably more vicious than most

of the Communist operations conducted in I Corps. The most savage aspect was the heavy employment of supporting arms by both sides. Of the known enemy killed, more than 500 came from air, artillery, and naval gunfire. In addition, supporting arms destroyed 164 enemy bunkers and 15 artillery and rocket positions, and caused 46 secondary explosions. To accomplish this, Marine aviation used 1,066 tons of ordnance, Marine and Army artillery consumed more than 40,000 rounds, and ships of the U.S. Seventh Fleet fired 1,500 rounds from their 5- and 8-inch naval guns. On the other hand, enemy artillery accounted for half of the Marine casualties during the operation and posed a constant threat to the Marine logistical support installations.

The July fighting around Con Thien reaffirmed the Marines' faith in supporting arms. In spite of the appearance of SAMs and the presence of excellent, long-range Communist artillery, the Marines could prove that the latest enemy offensive had failed. Con Thien had held and at least one firstline enemy regiment was in shambles. The Buffalo victory did not breed overconfidence, but the body-strewn wasteland along the DMZ provided mute evidence of the effectiveness of III MAF's defenses. The summer was far from over; they would be challenged again.

*Colonel Joseph J. Kelly recalled in 1981 that the requirement to find room for a forward division headquarters to be reopened at Dong Ha also influenced this move. In addition, regimental staff officers knew the old French barracks housing the regimental headquarters were prominent features on maps used by the North Vietnamese. Col Joseph J. Kelly, Comments on draft ms, 29May81 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

Con Thien proved that Marines, although offense-minded, also had to know how to build sturdy bunkers to fortify their defensive positions. This Marine inspects a bunker constructed of dirt-filled ammunition boxes which collapsed after being hit by artillery.

Marine Corps Historical Collection

