

PART IV
FALL COMBAT, NORTH AND SOUTH

CHAPTER 9

Continuing Operations Against the *2d NVA Division*

Raids and Rockets in Quang Nam—Operation Cochise
Operation Swift—A Busy Calm Before the Storm

Raids and Rockets in Quang Nam

During June allied units intensified operations against elements of the *2d NVA Division* and Viet Cong units in the southern three provinces of I Corps. The enemy continued to pump replacements into the region in a determined effort to regain control of the area, particularly the Que Son Basin. The allied forces, in greater numbers and with increased firepower, thwarted each Communist move as it developed. As a result of continuing enemy defeats, the pacification program began to show positive results as demonstrated by its expansion into virgin territory.

As July began, the 1st and 7th Marines, both from the 1st Marine Division, which Major General Donn J. Robertson still commanded, were operating in the densely populated area around Da Nang. Two battalions of the 5th Marines continued operations

against elements of the *2d NVA Division* in the Que Son Basin, while the other battalion of the 5th Marines, the 2d, provided security for the An Hoa industrial complex and Nong Son coal mine, southwest of Da Nang.

Further south, the nine U.S. Army battalions of Task Force Oregon, now commanded by Major General Richard T. Knowles, USA, continued their operations in southern I CTZ. Four of the Army battalions operated in and around Chu Lai, while the remainder of the force expanded allied control over the populated coastal plain of Quang Ngai Province. The Korean Marine Brigade of three battalions remained in its TAOR south of Chu Lai.

The combined efforts of these units forced NVA and VC main force units to pull out of the populated regions and move back into the mountains. Despite this setback, the enemy tenaciously maintained a

Two battalions of the 5th Marines, the 1st and 3d, remained in the Que Son Basin after the arrival at Chu Lai of Army units of Task Force Oregon. Marines of the 3d Battalion maneuver under fire on 21 July while in contact with units of the 2d NVA Division.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370216



presence in the three provinces by cutting lines of communication and attacking allied installations by fire. The Communists targeted Revolutionary Development teams and isolated units for their main efforts. These tactics enabled the enemy to limit force commitments and still gain moral and propaganda victories while, at the same time, reconstituting regular units. Communist actions in Quang Nam Province during July 1967 provide an excellent example of this *modus operandi*.

The Communists chose the relatively isolated Marine outpost at Nong Son, the site of the only producing coal mine in South Vietnam, as their first target. First Lieutenant James B. Scuras' Company F, 5th Marines provided security for the mine. The company manned two positions near the mine itself and a third, with an attached 81mm mortar section and two 4.2-inch mortars, on top of the hill overlooking the mine. The enemy chose the mortar position as his objective.

At 2327 on 3 July, a Marine listening post outside the upper position reported, "I have movement to my front," and within seconds, "They're all around me," and then, "We've been overrun."¹ Next, the main position came under mortar attack. One of the first rounds blew up the 4.2-inch mortar ammunition dump. Immediately following their mortar barrage, enemy sappers moved into the position, throwing grenades and satchel charges into the Marine bunkers. Simultaneously, other enemy units made a mortar attack on the Marine artillery positions at An Hoa to neutralize their support of the Nong Son outpost. The Marines of Captain John Pipta's Battery E, 2d Battalion, 11th Marines, however, immediately began firing in support of the Company F Marines.

By the time Pipta's first artillery barrage landed around the edge of the position, the enemy assault had already faltered. The attackers had not caught all of the Marines in their bunkers. Private First Class Melvin E. Newlin, an 18-year-old machine gunner from Wellsville, Ohio, and four other Marines had been manning a perimeter position when the attack started. Although the initial attack killed his four companions and wounded him, Newlin kept his machine gun in action. He fought off two additional attempts to overrun his position before a grenade wounded him again and knocked him unconscious.

With Newlin temporarily silenced, the Viet Cong moved into the center of the outpost and destroyed both 4.2-inch mortars. As the enemy prepared to attack the Marines on the other side of the perimeter,

Newlin regained consciousness, remanned his machine gun, and opened fire. His fire caused the VC to break off their assault of the remaining Marine bunkers and once again they attacked him. Newlin withstood two additional enemy attempts to silence his gun before he died.*

When the attack started, Lieutenant Scuras took two squads and moved to relieve the 1st Platoon in the upper outpost. Arriving at the top of the hill at about midnight, the reinforcements, with the assistance of the surviving defenders, drove the enemy out of the position. As the VC withdrew from the hill, the Marines remanned their 81mm mortars and brought them to bear on the retreating force. In addition, they called in artillery on suspected escape routes.

At approximately 0100, the battalion's Company E arrived at Nong Son and assumed responsibility for the two lower positions. The remaining elements of Company F then moved to the top of the hill to reconsolidate their position and evacuate the casualties. The attack had killed 13 Marines and wounded 43.

For the Viet Cong, the attack on the position was expensive. They did not overrun the entire outpost as they hoped, and the loss of 44 of their members made the effort very costly, but they succeeded in destroying the two heavy mortars in the position.²

The Communists executed two other attacks to influence the people in Quang Nam Province. Both mutually supporting actions took place on the night of 14 July. The first attack occurred in the town of Hoi An at 2300 when an enemy force hit the U.S. advisors' compound with mortar fire. At the same time, two platoons of VC, dressed in ARVN uniforms, attacked the nearby provincial jail. The enemy force broke into the jail and released 1,196 military and political prisoners. During the confused fighting that followed, the ARVN recaptured 206 prisoners and killed 30, but 960 escaped. Only 5 of the Viet Cong died in the attack; ARVN units wounded another 29. The return of almost 1,000 cadre to the VC ranks increased their capacity to oppose the September elections, but the psychological blow caused by the untimely "liberation" had an equally severe impact.

The Communists chose their other target equally well: the Da Nang Airbase, center of American

*For his actions Private First Class Newlin received a posthumous Medal of Honor. (See Appendix D for his citation.)

presence in the northern provinces. The home of Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF), Marine, and U.S. Air Force tactical squadrons, the Da Nang Airbase stood as an undisputed symbol of U.S. and GVN strength. The Communists were aware that an attack on Da Nang would be more difficult than their earlier attempts to strike the base. Since the first rocket attack on the base in February, the Marines had intensified their defensive efforts, instituting as many as 800 daily patrols and ambushes. Allied aircraft conducted overflights of the rocket belt itself to detect any movement in the area, and artillery fired more than 2,000 rounds every 24 hours to interdict likely avenues of approach to the rocket belt.

Despite these impressive Marine countermeasures, the Communists were confident they could attack the base successfully. The reason was their new 122mm rocket, a weapon which they had not used south of the DMZ. This rocket was a high trajectory weapon, capable of being emplaced virtually anywhere. A trained crew could prepare a 122mm rocket for firing in less than 30 minutes. Its range of 12,000 meters, 2,000 meters greater than that of the 140mm rocket, allowed emplacement beyond what the Marines had established as the rocket belt.

During the night of 14 July, enemy rocket units moved out of "Happy Valley," southwest of Da Nang, and established six firing positions, divided into two clusters of three positions each. Each firing position contained six individual launcher sites. Shortly after midnight the enemy fired their rockets at the airfield; within five minutes 50 projectiles hit the base.

Marines responded swiftly to the first volley. Almost instantly, a number of friendly units reported the firing and three minutes after the enemy launched the rockets an Air Force plane attacked one of the sites. At the same time, artillery units plotted the launch site locations and commenced firing at both the sites and the probable escape routes. This rapid reply by supporting arms was exemplary, but it was only a countermeasure and not a solution to the problem of defending the Da Nang complex against the new, long-range threat. In the attack, the rockets destroyed 10 aircraft, 13 barracks, and a bomb dump, and damaged 40 more aircraft. Eight Americans died and another 176 suffered wounds.

The Communists had not only succeeded in destroying a large quantity of material, but the resulting fires provided visible evidence of a suc-

cessful attack to the 300,000 people living around Da Nang. That the VC carried out the attack successfully, while the Marines and ARVN forces had been actively trying to prevent it, vastly increased its propaganda value.

The 14 July attack forced immediate adjustments of III MAF's defense of the airfield. III MAF extended the rocket belt to include the space between two radii of 12,000 and 8,000 meters, the maximum ranges from which the VC could launch both 140mm and 122mm rockets. The new belt also included the most likely areas of penetration by enemy launching units. The Marines established a centralized control system for all aspects of the counter-rocket effort and increased their patrols and overflights. They also instituted a waterway control plan which included an 1800-0600 movement curfew on all streams within the belt. Deep reconnaissance patrols along the enemy's approach routes outside the belt increased by 40 percent. In addition, the 1st Marine Division developed an elaborate psychological operations (PsyOps) campaign to counter the threat, including the offer of 10,000-piastre rewards for information on rockets, location of caches, and routes used to bring rockets into the Da Nang area. On a day-to-day basis, the division allocated more than 90 percent of its PsyOps assets to this program.³

For the Marines operating in the rocket belt the war was particularly frustrating. Each patrol contended with the probability of encountering mines and booby traps. So called secure areas were never entirely free from these threats. Over 50 percent of the division's casualties during the first half of 1967 resulted from explosive devices encountered while patrolling in these dangerous though densely populated areas. There was no easy solution, and in spite of the Marines' efforts rocket attacks continued.

Operation Cochise

While the Communist rocket gunners were annoying the Da Nang TAOR, intelligence agencies reported that the *3d NVA Regiment* had moved into northern Quang Tin Province during late July. Intelligence also indicated the headquarters of the *1st VC Regiment* also had moved from Quang Ngai Province to a new location east of Hiep Duc in the Que Son Basin. Reacting to these reports, on 9 August General Robertson reactivated Task Force X-Ray, again under the command of his assistant division

commander, Brigadier General Foster C. LaHue. General LaHue received orders to strike the enemy wherever possible within the Que Son Basin and surrounding hills, with emphasis on the Hiep Duc area which intelligence officers believed contained the *2d NVA Division's* headquarters and logistic base. For this operation, code named Cochise, General LaHue's Task Force X-Ray controlled the 1st and 3d Battalions of Colonel Stanley Davis' 5th Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Alfred I. Thomas' BLT 1/3 from SLF Alpha.

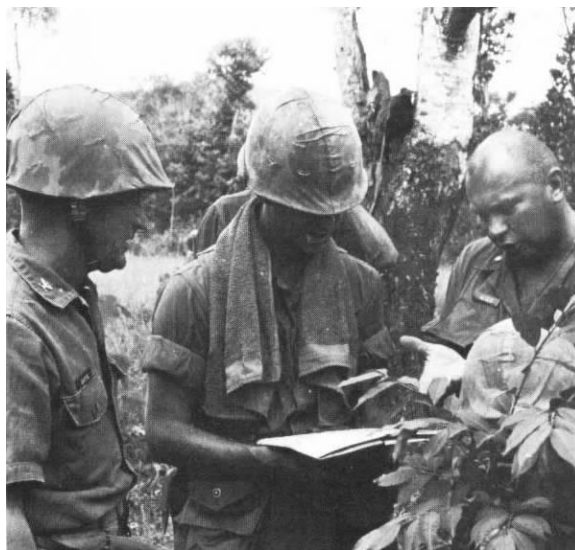
General LaHue's concept of operations for Cochise consisted of three phases. The first phase involved the insertion of the two 5th Marines battalions south of Nui Loc Son outpost between the tactical elements of the *2d NVA Division* and its suspected logistic base. The two battalions were to drive east toward friendly blocking positions and eliminate Communist tactical forces in the vicinity of the logistic installations. Phase II called for a helilift of two battalions into the suspected enemy base area, and the third phase a two-battalion sweep from the Hiep Duc region northeast to Que Son.

South of the Cochise area of operation the 2d ARVN Division was about to conduct companion operation Lien Ket 112; its concept resembled Cochise. Two ranger battalions were to be helilifted into landing zones southeast of Hiep Duc and sweep eastward, while three battalions of the 6th ARVN Regiment occupied blocking positions west of Tam Ky. Both operations began early on the morning of 11 August.

The ARVN rangers made the first significant contact. On the morning of the 12th, three battalions of the *21st NVA Regiment* attacked the rangers. Heavy fighting continued throughout the day and by 1700 the rangers reported heavy casualties. Dangerously low on ammunition, with darkness approaching, and with no sign of a letup on the part of the enemy, the rangers requested an emergency resupply. At 1730, a CH-46 from HMM-165, accompanied by two UH-1E gunships from VMO-6 arrived overhead with the badly needed ammunition. The gunships scouted the intended landing zone and reported that the CH-46 could not land in the contested zone. The pilot, Captain Jack H. McCracken, well aware of what would happen to the rangers without ammunition decided to try to deliver his cargo anyway. He ordered his crew chief, Corporal James E. Bauer, to stack the ammunition on the rear ramp. Captain McCracken nosed over his helicopter and raced for the

landing zone. McCracken then hovered 30 feet over the zone, and Corporal Bauer lowered the ramp and most of the ammunition dropped into the zone. While repeated enemy small arms hits shook the helicopter, Corporal Bauer kicked out the rest of the ammunition. As the last box dropped, enemy bullets severely damaged the helicopter, but McCracken's resupply permitted the rangers to continue the battle⁴. At 2300, the NVA units finally pulled back, leaving 197 bodies behind. The ranger losses also had been heavy, 81 killed and 153 wounded.

During the next three days, there were numerous encounters with small VC elements. On the night of 16 August, enemy units twice attempted to infiltrate BLT 1/3's night positions, but turned back in the face of small arms and artillery fire, leaving 36 bodies behind. The next morning, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph A. Nelson, commanding officer of VMO-6, in a UH-1E gunship, was escorting resupply helicopters when he sighted more than 50 VC in the open. The VMO-6 commander expended all of his ordnance in the process of fixing the enemy group in place. He then directed a fixed-wing mission against the target. Meanwhile, a company of Lieutenant Colonel Charles B. Webster's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines moved into assault positions under cover of the air strike. After Webster's attack,



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370348
Col Stanley Davis, commanding the 5th Marines, and the regimental operations officer, Maj Richard J. Alger (right), confer in the field on 16 August with LtCol Charles B. Webster of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines during Cochise in the key Que Son Basin.

a sweep of the area located 40 VC bodies. Total Marine casualties totaled only three wounded.

On the afternoon of the 18th, the first phase of Operation Cochise ended and Task Force X-Ray withdrew Webster's battalion. The next morning helicopters lifted the remaining two battalions into the Hiep Duc area for Phase II. Though the Marines anticipated a sizable enemy force in this region, there was little contact and the operation turned into a bush-beating effort. The final phase of Cochise began on the 25th and continued until 28 August. Enemy contact during the last three days consisted of sniper fire and booby traps.

Final casualty results for Cochise included 156 enemy killed and 13 captured. Marine casualties were light in comparison, 10 killed and 93 wounded. Vietnamese Operation Lien Kit 112 accounted for 206 NVA killed, 12 prisoners, and 42 weapons seized. ARVN losses were more severe than Marine casualties during Cochise, 83 killed, 174 wounded, and 3 missing.

Although these operations forced a major portion of the 2d NVA Division to withdraw, III MAF had no illusions of the enemy abandoning the densely populated, rice-bearing lands of the Que Son Basin. Cochise and Lien Ket 112 had been tactical victories, but the 2d NVA Division had suffered only a reverse, not a defeat.

Operation Swift

As September neared, the Communists faced an increasing loss of control of the population in the coastal region south of Da Nang. The 2d NVA Division again moved into the Que Son Basin.

The Marines anticipated that the Communists would try to increase their strength in this area during this period, since it corresponded with the time of the South Vietnamese national elections, as well as preparations for the fall rice harvest. At the beginning of September, intelligence sources reported that elements of all three regiments of the NVA division had moved into the area. There were increasing indications that these enemy units planned offensive actions to disrupt the elections in Que Son District. The Marines responded with numerous small unit operations to screen the district polling places. Operation Swift was the outgrowth of one of the election day screening sweeps near Dong Son (1) village, eight miles to the southwest of Thang Binh along Route 534.

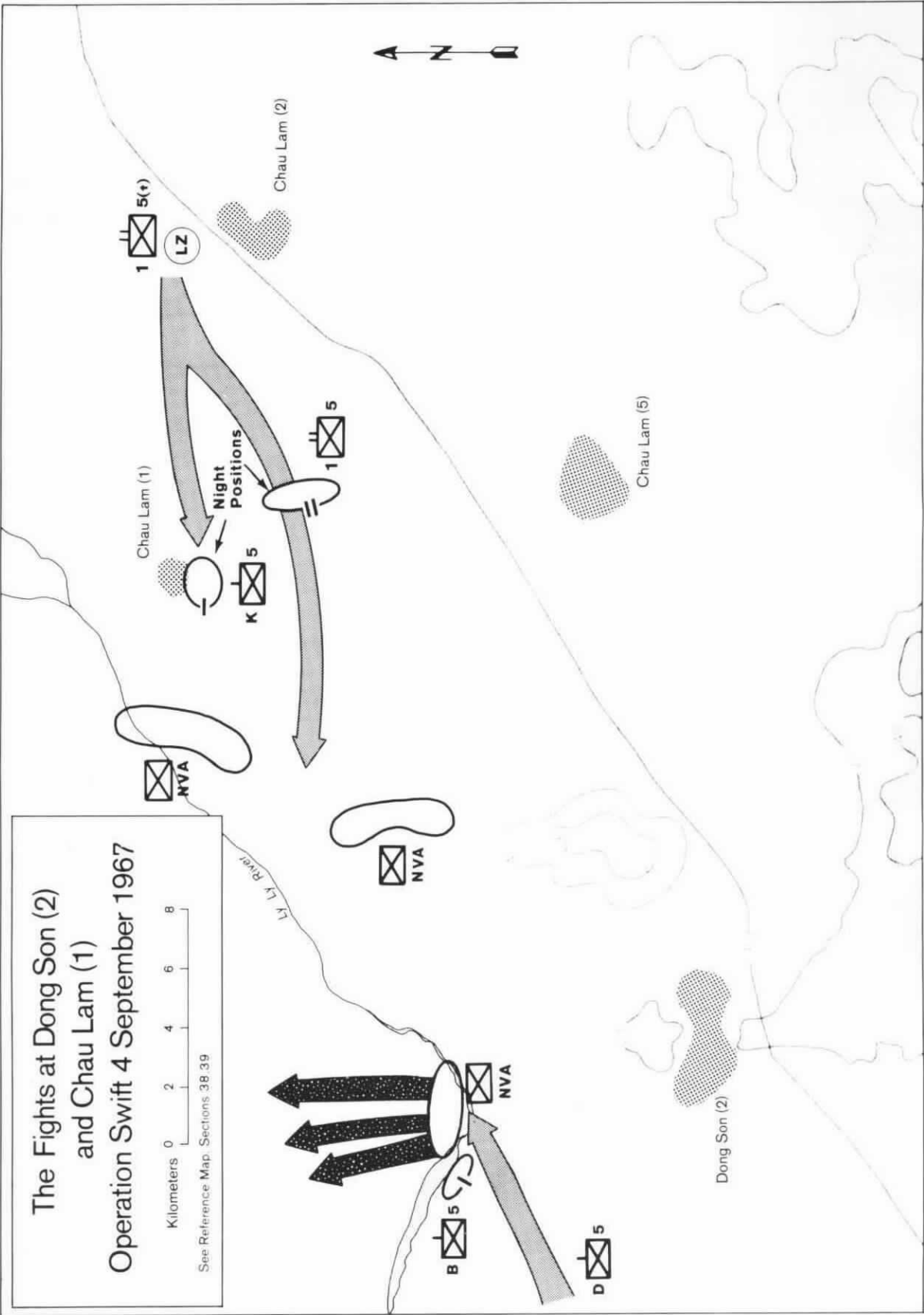


Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370355

The second phase of Operation Cochise brought little enemy contact since the elements of the 2d NVA Division had withdrawn from the Que Son Basin. This Marine moves down a narrow trail through thick vegetation as Company D, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines searches for the elusive North Vietnamese.

The operation began when the enemy attacked Captain Robert F. Morgan's Company D, 5th Marines just before dawn on 4 September. The action unfolded slowly. At 0430, the enemy force struck the Marine company with small arms fire and mortar rounds from positions 100 meters northwest and west of the company perimeter. The Marines returned fire and recalled the company outposts. Help arrived in the form of an armed UH-1E, but when the Marines marked their position with a strobe light, the NVA soldiers saw it too. As soon as the light began flashing, the enemy hit the position with even more accurate small arms and mortar fire.

A short time later, Marines discovered enemy infiltrators inside the western segment of the company perimeter. Captain Morgan organized a force to drive the NVA out and by 0620 reestablished the perimeter. As it reorganized, more NVA automatic weapons hit Company D, killing Captain Morgan. The executive officer, First Lieutenant William P. Vacca, called for air strikes, some within 50 meters of



the company lines. The enemy pulled back. As the fire let up, Vacca completed the perimeter reorganization and requested helicopter evacuation for his casualties. At the same time, he reported that he faced at least an enemy company and needed help. His battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Peter L. Hilgartner, responded by ordering Captain Thomas D. Reese, Jr.'s Company B, then 4,000 meters to the west and near the battalion CP on Hill 51, to move overland to Vacca's position.

Company B arrived in the vicinity of the battle by 0820, and within the hour it came under fire from another enemy force, apparently a company, entrenched in the town of Dong Son (1). Captain Reese asked for a tear gas drop on the dug-in NVA, and "Hueys" from VMO-2 obliged by dropping 400 pounds of the agent on the enemy lines. The Communists broke and ran north toward the Ly Ly River. Company B attacked, killing 26 of the enemy, and secured the eastern end of Dong Son (1). While Company B fought in the east end of town, HMM-363 helicopters arrived over the battle area to pick up Company D's casualties. The NVA force greeted the aircraft with heavy fire and decoy smoke signals. They hit two UH-34s and shot one down over Company D. They also shot down one of VMO-2's UH-1Es, piloted by Major David L. Ross, who managed to land in the Company D perimeter. Ross changed his "Deadlock" radio call sign to "Deadlock on the deck" and continued to help direct air strikes on the enemy. He also provided ammunition and machine guns from his aircraft to help in the defense of the perimeter.⁵

At 0925, Lieutenant Colonel Webster's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, based at the regimental command post seven miles east of Que Son, received orders to prepare two companies for a helilift to the Dong Son area for attachment to Hilgartner's battalion. By 1245 both of the 3d Battalion companies, K and M, and Hilgartner's 1st Battalion command group had landed four kilometers east-northeast of Dong Son (1) and were preparing to move toward Companies B and D. Meanwhile, Company B found another enemy pocket in the west end of Dong Son (1). After an air strike, the company moved in and cleared the west end; they killed nine more Communists in this action. Fighting in the town diminished as Companies B and D consolidated their positions in the western edge of the village; Hilgartner's force was less fortunate.

At 1430, Hilgartner's Companies K and M were

advancing in column. Company K, accompanied by Lieutenant Colonel Hilgartner's command group, led the movement. "We were alerted to the impending conflict," said Hilgartner, "when one of our scouts brought in a Chinese-made, magazine-fed, light machine gun which was found teetering back and forth on a large rock." Hilgartner radioed this information to Major Richard J. Alger, the regimental operations officer. Alger replied that he had just received an intelligence report that a large enemy force was in the area.⁶

These two events gave Hilgartner time to begin to change his tactical formation from a column to two companies on line. He ordered Company M to move up on Company K's right. As Company M advanced, both companies came under intense fire from a large NVA force in what the Marines later found to be an L-shaped, entrenched position.⁷

Company M's 1st Platoon was crossing a rice paddy about 1430 when it first came under heavy fire from an estimated enemy company. First Lieutenant John D. Murray, commanding Company M, sent his 2d Platoon to assist the 1st Platoon. While crossing a small knoll near the village of Chau Lam (1), the 2d Platoon ran head-on into still another entrenched NVA company. The 1st Platoon's commander, Second Lieutenant Edward L. Blecksmith, ordered his Marines to pull back to the top of the knoll. While the 2d Platoon fought the by now attacking North Vietnamese, Lieutenant Murray ordered the remainder of the company to move onto the knoll with the 1st Platoon and set up a perimeter. The enemy quickly encircled Company M and pounded it with more than 200 mortar rounds, as well as extremely heavy automatic weapons fire. Murray requested a tear gas drop on the enemy positions to help the 2d Platoon disengage. While the gas did slow up the Communist assaults, it did not help the many Marines who had lost or discarded their gas masks during the action.

As the gas lifted, the NVA renewed their attack and, on at least one occasion, succeeded in penetrating the 2d Platoon's lines. Sergeant Lawrence D. Peters, a squad leader, stood up to point out NVA positions until hit in the leg. Despite his wound, he led his men until they drove the enemy from the position. Sergeant Peters died later that evening from a fragment wound.*

*Sergeant Peters received a posthumous Medal of Honor for his actions. See Appendix D for the citation.

The enemy attacks separated Hilgartner's two companies; each had to fight independently. Captain Joseph R. Tenny, commanding Company K, fought and maneuvered his company against the enemy in a firefight that lasted until nightfall. Finally, he had to back off and set up night positions with Hilgartner's command group.

As darkness fell over the Que Son Valley, the Marines called for air strikes. Captain Robert J. Fitzsimmons and his aerial observer, First Lieutenant Robert H. Whitlow, arrived over the battlefield in a Cessna O-1 Bird Dog to control the strike.* Napalm and 500-pound bombs exploded as close as 50 meters to Company M's lines. To the west, Marine artillery from Que Son fired in support of Companies B and D. Early in the evening the fighting reached a crescendo when the North Vietnamese opened up against the attacking planes with heavy machine guns. Marine A-6A Intruders, directed by Whitlow, attacked the main cluster of enemy anti-aircraft positions on Hill 63. After silencing these guns, the A-6As struck at Communist mortars within 60 meters of Company K. By 2000 the one-sided air-ground duel was over. Although scattered action continued on the ground, the destruction of the NVA anti-aircraft positions signaled the end of major fighting. Corporal Joseph E. Fuller, a Company M squad leader, was one of many infantrymen who recognized the value of Marine close air support during the night of 4 September. Referring to the strikes, Fuller later commented, "I'd like to thank the FAC that called it in . . . I think that is what really saved us."⁸

Marine artillery fire from Que Son and Thang Binh continued to pound the North Vietnamese after the heaviest fighting subsided. Under the cover of artillery fire, UH-34 helicopters from Lieutenant Colonel Robert Lewis, Jr.'s HMM-363 delivered supplies and evacuated casualties. At 0100, Captain Francis M. Burke's Company I, 5th Marines fought its way to Hilgartner's positions. After its arrival, the enemy backed off and the rest of the night passed quietly.

While these events took place, Lieutenant Colonel Webster's 3d Battalion Command Group and Company D, 1st Marines received orders to join Com-

panies B and D to the west. Early on 5 September, Webster's force reached the two companies, at which time he assumed operational control.

The same morning, 5 September, Hilgartner's troops searched the battle area and reported 130 dead NVA soldiers and 37 captured weapons. Marine casualties were 54 killed and 104 wounded; among those killed was the 3d Battalion's chaplain, Lieutenant Vincent R. Capadonno, USNR. During Company M's heavy fighting, Chaplain Capadonno made repeated trips out of the perimeter to help 2d Platoon casualties. Wounded twice, he refused medical aid, continuing to help wounded until killed by the enemy. Lieutenant Capadonno received a posthumous Medal of Honor for his gallantry; he was the first Navy chaplain killed in action in Vietnam.*

Although the NVA broke contact with the Marines, they did not leave the basin area. The 5th Marines commander, Colonel Davis, ordered his 1st and 3d Battalions to sweep toward the foothills bordering the southern edge of the basin. The morning of the 6th, the two battalion command groups exchanged operational control of their respective companies and the 5th Marines continued the attack to the southeast. At 1515 that afternoon Hilgartner's companies ran into two battalions of the *1st VC Regiment* near Vinh Huy (3). Lead elements of the Marine battalion came under fire from snipers and as the Marines continued to advance, heavy automatic weapons fire stopped the lead platoon, the 3d Platoon of Company B, in an open rice paddy. Captain Reese sent his 2d Platoon around to the right of the stalemated platoon to provide covering fire so that it could withdraw, but the 2d Platoon also came under extremely heavy and accurate fire which stopped its advance. The Marines took cover behind some graves and a hedgerow and once more tried to establish a base of fire to cover the 3d Platoon's withdrawal. Again, enemy fire superiority prevailed. Reese then sent the 1st Platoon further to the right in still another attempt to outflank the NVA. As the 1st Platoon moved, it found itself outflanked and almost surrounded. Forced to pull back almost immediately, the platoon had to leave some of its dead behind, but managed to bring out all of the wounded. While the North Vietnamese concentrated on the 1st Platoon, there was a lull in the firing in front

*The O-1 observation aircraft were not part of VMO-2 at this time. Instead they had their own officer-in-charge who functioned directly under MAG-16. Colonel Philip M. Crosswait, comments on draft ms, 14Jul81 (Vietnam comment files, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

*See Appendix D for Chaplain Capadonno's citation.

of the 3d Platoon, so at last, it managed to pull back from the exposed paddy.

Next, the NVA hit the 2d Platoon position with a frontal assault, as well as an envelopment of the right flank. Lance Corporal Lonnie R. Henshaw recalled:

We looked up and saw many NVA in full uniforms, packs, and cartridge belts running across the rice paddy at us. We started shooting and we could see them falling, but they didn't stop and more and more of them kept coming. Nothing could stop them, it was like they were doped up.⁹

The platoon commander, First Lieutenant John E. Brackeen, seeing the enemy's flanking attempt, ordered the platoon to fall back 50 meters to a trench line and set up a new perimeter. The NVA closed quickly and the enemy attack turned into a grenade duel. One landed in the trench near Lieutenant Brackeen and some of his men. The platoon guide, Sergeant Rodney M. Davis, seeing the danger to his lieutenant and the others, jumped on the grenade, taking the full impact of the explosion with his body. For thus giving his life, Sergeant Davis received the Medal of Honor.*

By now the enemy, in strength, was so close that Lieutenant Brackeen realized he could not hold the position much longer. He requested tear gas to cover the withdrawal of what was left of the platoon to the battalion perimeter. The tear gas worked and the Marines moved back to the battalion position with their wounded, but not their dead.

After the gas attack to support Brackeen's withdrawal, enemy fire slackened, but as the gas dissipated the NVA renewed their assault. Artillery fire from Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Hunter, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 11th Marines landed within 50 meters of the Marine lines, while air strikes hit as close as 100 meters from the position. The NVA assaults stopped; however, as night fell the battalion came under heavy mortar and rocket fire. NVA soldiers, crawling as close as 15 meters to the perimeter, began lobbing grenades into the lines, while others attempted to slip through the defenses. The battalion's S-3, Major Charles H. Black, checking a sector of Company D's lines, discovered some of the infiltrators. Major Black killed several of them as he rallied nearby Marines to drive out the others. The enemy attacked until about 0200, at which time they withdrew, leaving behind 61 bodies. The Marines had lost 35 killed and 92 wounded in the action.

Northeast of the 1st Battalion action, the 3d Battalion also became heavily engaged on the afternoon of 6 September. By 1400, Lieutenant Colonel Webster's Marines had seized Hill 48, without meeting significant resistance. Webster then ordered Captain Francis M. Burke's Company I to seize Hill 43, 1,100 meters southeast of Hill 48. When Burke's company was about 200 meters from the base of the hill, the lead elements saw two camouflaged NVA soldiers and opened fire on them. Automatic weapons fire erupted from the left front, but initial Communist resistance was light and the lead platoon continued to push through. Resistance began to stiffen and Captain Burke ordered his other two platoons up on either flank of the lead platoon. All three platoons continued to push on. At 1630, heavy machine gun fire hit Burke's left platoon. The advance stopped. Burke ordered the other two platoons to shift over to help the stalled platoon, but they also became heavily engaged. Finally the company managed to consolidate its position. Lieutenant Colonel Webster ordered Company K to go to Burke's assistance. By the time that Company K had fought its way to Burke's position, Company I had many casualties, some of whom were still forward of the company front. With the arrival of the second company, the Marines recovered most of their casualties and established a better perimeter.

While the Marines consolidated their position, a UH-1E gunship from Lieutenant Colonel Philip M. Crosswait's VMO-2 reported a large number of NVA immediately south of the perimeter. The pilot cut short his report, saying that the enemy was, "... swarming all over the top of this hill and I've got to get to work."¹⁰ The gunship killed 23 NVA before it had to break off the attack to rearm and refuel.

Between 1900 and 2300, Companies I and K repulsed two determined NVA assaults. Heavy machine guns supported both attacks and the second broke into the Marine positions before the Marines threw it back after furious hand-to-hand fighting. At 2300, Lieutenant Murray's Company M, the battalion reserve, joined Companies I and K. The enemy pressed the position until just after midnight when the Marines used tear gas to drive them off. Only a few mortar rounds interrupted the rest of the night. Dawn revealed 88 enemy bodies around the position. Webster's losses were 34 killed and 109 wounded.

At first light on 7 September, both battalions began searching the enemy dead for items of in-

*See Appendix D for Sergeant Davis' citation.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370399

Operation Swift's objective was to destroy elements of the 2d NVA Division and deny the enemy access to the food derived from the basin's extensive rice paddies, such as these being crossed by Marines with the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines on 7 September.

telligence value. They found a map which revealed the defensive positions of a battalion of the 1st VC Regiment. It pinpointed company and command post locations, as well as mortar positions and ammunition storage sites. This information triggered an attack to the east by Hilgartner's battalion. Supporting arms blasted the plotted enemy positions and then the infantry swept through them. As the operation progressed, on the 9th, the 1st Battalion Marines found 91 cases of small arms ammunition, 27 cases of mortar rounds, hundreds of hand grenades, and 6 cases of 75mm recoilless rifle rounds as well as a vast assortment of loose ordnance. The Marines saved samples for intelligence purposes, and blew the rest in place.*

At this time, General Robertson again activated Task Force X-Ray under the command of Brigadier General LaHue. X-Ray now included the U.S. Army's 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Peter P. Petro, USA. Simultaneously, the Vietnamese started their companion Operation Lien Ket 116.

*Lieutenant Colonel William K. Rocky arrived by helicopter around noon that day, 7 September 1967, and assumed command of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines from Lieutenant Colonel Webster. Colonel William K. Rocky, Comments on draft ms, 28Jul81 (Vietnam Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

There were two more significant encounters during the last days of Operation Swift. The first occurred on 10 September during a patrol northeast of Hill 43 by Captain Gene W. Bowers' Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines.*

Early in the afternoon, Company H searched a small village and found it empty except for a few women and children. The Marines noted, however, that the enemy had fortified the village with bunkers, interlocking trenches, and barbed wire.

Upon completion of its search of the village, Company H continued its patrol. After moving another 1,500 meters, the company established a defensive position on a small hill at about 1400 and requested resupply by helicopter. To provide additional security, Captain Bowers ordered Second Lieutenant Allan J. Herman's 3d Platoon to patrol around the hill in a circle with about a one-mile radius. The 3d Platoon departed the perimeter and a heavy rain began falling.

The patrol route took the 3d Platoon back to the small village which Company H had recently searched. In the interim, however, a reinforced North Vietnamese company had slipped back and reoc-

*Captain Bowers' company served under the operational control of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines at this time.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370397

LCpl Patrick J. Ferguson, who had received a superficial gunshot wound in the left side in June, takes a breather on 7 September during Operation Swift. LCpl Ferguson, who is carrying an AN/PRC-47 radio, was part of a forward air control team attached to the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines for the operation.

cupied the well-constructed defensive positions. Herman's platoon reached the vicinity of the village around 1430 and began crossing the rice paddies around it. The North Vietnamese company remained quiet until the lead squad of Marines was about to enter the village, then opened up with sudden, intense, automatic weapons fire, including .50-caliber machine guns, and virtually eliminated lead Marine squad. The heavy fire, supplemented by 60mm mortars, gave the North Vietnamese fire superiority over the rest of the Marine platoon and it could not move. The platoon was soon leaderless; Lieutenant Herman died trying to rescue a wounded Marine in the rice paddy.

Company H had just received its supplies by helicopter when Captain Bowers heard the sound of automatic weapons and mortars from the direction of the village. Since he could not contact the 3d Platoon by radio, Captain Bowers left a small contingent to guard the supplies and quickly moved the rest of his company toward the sound of the firing. Enroute, Bowers made radio contact with a wounded

corporal from the 3d Platoon who described the situation, including the death of Lieutenant Herman.

Captain Bowers sent the 2d Platoon around to the left where it could provide a base of fire as well as cover by fire the enemy escape route from the rear of the village. The company headquarters and the 1st Platoon continued toward the 3d Platoon and attempted to gain fire superiority over the NVA unit. "Mortar and artillery fire," wrote Bowers, "was brought to bear on the enemy . . . with fire landing within 50 meters of friendly positions. Helicopter gunships arrived to rocket and strafe the NVA [positions] while artillery sealed the rear of the village."¹¹

Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, which the battalion commander sent to assist Company H, arrived on the scene and joined the fight. After several air strikes by fixed-wing aircraft armed with 250-pound bombs, two A-4 aircraft dropped tear gas on the enemy. The two rifle companies then made a successful, coordinated assault on the village. Only a few NVA soldiers escaped out the other side of the village.

After the assault, the Marines searched the village and counted 40 dead NVA soldiers above ground. Others, Bowers reported, probably lay buried in the bunkers and trenches collapsed by the artillery and air strikes.

Nine Marines died in the action, six of them in the rice paddies just in front of the enemy fortifications. "[They] were found," noted Bowers in 1981, "with their M-16 rifles broken down in an attempt to remove cartridges jammed in the chambers. They had powder-burned bullet holes in their heads."¹²

The second engagement at the end of Operation Swift started at 0330 the morning of 12 September. Two NVA companies attacked Captain Burke's Company I patrol base. Burke's Marines repulsed the attack, but as the enemy withdrew they bumped into one of Captain Tenney's Company K platoon outposts and received a further battering. NVA losses were 35 killed and four captured.

During the same period, an ARVN ranger group operating north of the Swift AO during Operation Lien Ket 116 had two sizable contacts. The morning of 10 September, the 37th Ranger Battalion came under heavy mortar attack, followed by a ground assault by a NVA battalion. When the enemy finally withdrew, the rangers had lost 13 killed, 33 wounded, and 9 missing, but the NVA left 70 bodies behind.

Elements of two enemy battalions hit the rangers again at 1700 on the 13th. The enemy closed to grenade range and heavy action continued until about 1900. That night, more ARVN units arrived in the area in helicopters to help the rangers. Both the 1st and 3d Battalions, 5th Marines debarked from helicopters in a secure LZ northeast of the engaged ranger group. The Marine battalions attacked south-southeast to relieve the pressure on the rangers, and by dawn, the NVA broke contact leaving 49 bodies on the battlefield. The rangers suffered 69 wounded and 15 killed in the engagement. This action was the last sizable encounter of both Swift and Lien Ket 116.

Operation Swift ended on 15 September. Once more allied forces had driven the *2d NVA Division* from the basin. The enemy's 1967 dry season offensive in the southern part of I Corps had failed. By the end of September allied commands regarded the *1st VC* and *3d NVA Regiments* unfit for combat. More than 4,000 enemy troops reportedly died between 21 April, when Union I began, and the last day of September. A prime reason for this turn of events was the sudden arrival of a large U.S. Army force in Southern I Corps, which allowed III MAF units to operate in the Que Son Basin on a permanent basis, thereby breaking the Communist stranglehold on the area.

Operation Swift's heavy, sustained combat created personnel accounting problems which were unusual in the kind of war most of the 1st Marine Division fought in 1967. The 5th Marines and the division encountered many difficulties during Swift with casualty reporting, recovery, evacuation, and disposition of the dead, as well as with what Colonel William R. Earney termed "the big No-No," missing in action. "They [5th Marines] could tell you," commented Colonel Earney, "where the enemy was and their body count [of enemy dead] but not a comprehensive report as to what their own condition was."¹³ The task of answering many of the personnel questions fell to the division staff, including, according to Colonel Earney, determining which morgue held the corpse of Medal of Honor recipient Capadonno before his brother arrived in South Vietnam to view the body.¹⁴

Other allied activity, both north and south of the Que Son Basin, also hurt Communist formations in I Corps. The enemy, buffeted between the allied forces in the basin and those in contiguous areas, lost the initiative. To the north, Colonel Herbert E. Ing's

1st Marines continued to prod the VC around Hoi An. Operation Pike, conducted in early August, was one of the more significant operations in this area. Two Marine battalions, Lieutenant Colonel George E. Petro's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Webster's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines executed a box and sweep maneuver that accounted for 100 enemy dead and four captured. South of the basin, General Knowles' Task Force Oregon conducted Operation Benton in the hills west of Chu Lai during the latter part of August. Army troops made a helicopter assault of a suspected enemy base camp and then drove south and east, encountering enemy platoons and companies. When Benton ended, on 1 September, Task Force Oregon reported 397 NVA soldiers killed and nine captured.

Much further south, between Quang Ngai and Duc Pho, Task Force Oregon's Operation Malheur series, lasting from 11 May through 2 August, produced a total of 857 enemy troops killed. A more important result was the opening of Route 1 from the border of II Corps to Dong Ha, the last section of this vital artery to be cleared in I Corps.

Hood River followed Malheur II in a locale 25 miles south of Quang Ngai City. Hood River occurred in conjunction with the Korean Marine Brigade's Dragon Head V and the 2d ARVN Division's Lien Ket 110. The soldiers on Hood River claimed credit for 78 enemy dead and 45 prisoners. Army casualties were only three killed.

All of these operations maintained constant pressure on the *2d NVA Division*. Continual use of the search and destroy process in the basin and adjacent areas from April through August by the 5th Marines, the Special Landing Force, and ARVN units forced the enemy to move south. As the Communists tried to regroup in the hills west of Chu Lai, Task Force Oregon pushed them back to the Que Son Basin to face the Marine and ARVN Swift-Lien Ket 116 operations. Once more the enemy withdrew, this time trying to escape to the hills near Tam Ky. There four U.S. Army battalions were on hand to meet the remnants of the *2d NVA Division* during Operation Wheeler. Task Force Oregon became the Americal Division on 22 September and by the end of that month the soldiers of the Army division had killed an additional 442 Communists. Once more they drove the NVA units back into the basin. A new opponent was waiting for the North Vietnamese division.

A Busy Calm Before the Storm

Increased September activity in I Corps once more caused General Westmoreland to send reinforcements north. On 4 October, Colonel James D. McKenna's 3d Brigade, 1st U.S. Cavalry Division, having been transferred to III MAF and, in turn, to the Americal Division, began Operation Wallowa in the Que Son Basin. With the arrival of this brigade, the Americal Division took over responsibility for the entire basin and the 5th Marines moved to Hoi An, relieving Colonel Ing's 1st Marines there. Operational control of the 1st Marines shifted from the 1st to 3d Marine Division and Colonel Ing then moved his headquarters and two battalions to the northern provinces of I Corps.¹⁵

Most operations in southern I Corps during the last three months of 1967 reflected the enemy's desire to avoid casualties, but even in this the enemy was unsuccessful. The Americal Division, now commanded by Major General Samuel W. Koster, USA, continued to harry the *2d NVA Division* in the Que Son Valley as the Communists frantically tried to collect rice and supplies there. During October, the Army units, engaged in Operation Wheeler and Wallowa, were in almost constant contact with small NVA units. By the end of the month Operation Wheeler had reported 498 enemy killed, while Wallowa recorded another 675 NVA dead.

During November, the Americal Division combined Operations Wheeler and Wallowa as Operation Wheeler/Wallowa and a force of seven U.S. Army battalions, more than twice the number previously available, deployed in the area. The army battalions systematically pursued NVA elements as they tried to escape to the mountains in the west. Ancillary operations such as the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines' Essex in "Antenna Valley," six miles south of An Hoa, drove the enemy back against the Army units in the basin.

There were two main engagements with NVA forces in Antenna Valley during Operation Essex.* Both involved company-sized attacks on fortified villages which the North Vietnamese chose to defend. Lieutenant Colonel George C. McNaughton, commander of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, described these fortified villages in his after-action report:

In each instance, the village had a wire fence around the perimeter . . . consisting of three to six strands of cattle fence with woven wire running up and down through the horizontal strands. The wire fence line was either concealed in bamboo tree lines or camouflaged with bamboo and shrubs. Behind these perimeter fences, the enemy had dug a communication trench . . . that was four to six feet deep with firing positions and deep caves for protection against artillery and air attack. Some of these caves were fifteen feet deep. Spider holes, caves, and bunkers were found in depth through the village. Fortifications were carefully located to achieve an interlocking and mutually supporting series of defensive positions. Both [villages] were located such that attacking infantry had to cross stream barriers [to reach] the defensive positions. As attacking troops emerged from the stream beds, they found themselves to be within close range (50-150 meters) of the enemy perimeter defenses with open rice paddy in between. [Both villages were] situated on the sides of the valley adjacent to high ground such that the enemy had ready routes of egress into the mountains.¹⁶

Both Marine attacks took place during afternoon hours and the enemy force successfully defended its positions into the night. In each case, however, the NVA defenders withdrew from the fortified positions under cover of darkness in spite of continuous artillery fire in and behind the village. "In summary," wrote McNaughton, "when Marine units attacked the villages in the afternoon, the enemy defended with vigor. When Marine units delayed an attack until dawn and conducted heavy preparation by air and artillery, the NVA units made their escape."¹⁷

Company H, commanded by Captain Gene W. Bowers, conducted one of the fortified village assaults. Bowers used tactics similar to those that had succeeded so well in a similar situation during Operation Swift.

Company H had landed by helicopter in Antenna Valley earlier in the day, as had the rest of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines.* The company then proceeded toward its assigned objective, the village of Ap Bon (2) in the northeast portion of the valley. As it approached the objective, Company H made heavy contact with a large enemy force within the village.

Captain Bowers ordered Second Lieutenant Duane V. Sherin to maneuver his 2d Platoon to the left of the village and then envelop the enemy. The platoon, however, ran into more NVA soldiers in the

*In Operation Mississippi in Antenna Valley during the fall of 1966, the Marines evacuated more than 2,000 refugees. Less than 600 civilians remained in the entire valley in 1967.

*Company F, according to the original plan, was not scheduled to participate in Operation Essex. It was to remain in the battalion's primary TAOR as a rapid reaction force.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189790

The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines boards helicopters in November for Operation Essex in Antenna Valley, six miles south of An Hoa. Essex drove the 2d NVA Division back into the Que Son Basin where the Americal Division was conducting Wheeler/Wallowa.

heavy brush west of the village, sustained two Marines killed and several wounded, and then, on Bowers' orders, withdrew with its casualties back to the company. Upon its arrival at the company position, Bowers directed the 2d Platoon to move to the company's right flank and establish a base of fire for an assault on the village by the 1st and 3d Platoons. The assault began after air and artillery strikes on Ap Bon(2). Bowers recalled the subsequent action:

The assault was well-coordinated and executed, maintaining continuous fire superiority over the enemy until the assault line reached the bamboo hedgerow on the periphery of the village. Eight taut strands of U.S. [-type] barbed wire were unexpectedly encountered woven among the bamboo stalks. As the Marines fought to break through the barrier, .50 caliber machine guns from 800 meters on the right flank and 800 meters on the left flank commenced enfilading, grazing fire down the line of barbed wire, as 60mm, 82mm, and 4.2-inch mortar rounds began impacting in the paddy before the village. One platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Robert W. Miller, Jr., was killed and both platoon sergeants were severely wounded. The assault faltered and the Marines took cover, protected by small inter-paddy dikes.¹⁸

The fighting developed into an exchange of rifle fire and grenades as reported air strikes hit the village. Some bombs and napalm fell within 50 meters of the exposed Marines in the paddies. Captain Bowers requested reinforcements and Captain

Edward J. "Buck" Byer, Jr.'s Company F arrived about 1600. With Company H acting as a base of fire on the village, Company F made an assault which the North Vietnamese repulsed.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189791

Marine UH-34Ds land the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines in abandoned rice paddies in Antenna Valley at the beginning of Operation Essex. Few civilians remained in the area after the evacuation of the valley in the fall of 1966 by Marines in Operation Mississippi.

At dusk, both companies moved back about 70 meters, carrying all wounded Marines and equipment, and established night defensive positions. The North Vietnamese maintained pressure on the two companies until almost dawn despite flares and machine gun fire from AC-130s, which fired on targets within 10 meters of the Marines. Around 0430, the North Vietnamese slipped away.

At dawn, the two Marine companies advanced and searched the village without resistance. There were no enemy bodies. All bunkers and trenches had collapsed under the intensive artillery and air strikes. The Marine companies had suffered 53 serious casualties, including 16 dead, in the fighting of Ap Bon (2).

The following days involved pursuit of small groups of fleeing NVA soldiers. On 10 November, the 2d Battalion captured an NVA aspirant (officer cadet) who claimed to have been in Ap Bon (2) on 6 November. He said the village had contained a division headquarters battalion. A direct bomb hit on the command post bunker killed the battalion commander; 60 enlisted men died in the fighting and many were severely wounded. Operation Essex ended a few days later, on the 17th.

By the end of December, cumulative reports for



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370661
A member of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines' 81mm Mortar Platoon, chilled and wet from the monsoon rains, takes a rest during Operation Pitt in December. Pitt was one of several operations late in the year which the 1st Marine Division conducted to protect the Da Nang air base from enemy rocket attacks.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371053
LCpl C. M. Wolfe, clad in a rain suit as protection from the cold monsoon rains in December, takes a message over an AN/PRC-25 radio. He and other members of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines on Operation Pitt have fashioned a "hooch" from ponchos as protection from the weather. Air mattresses in the shelter keep the Marines out of the mud.

Wheeler/Wallowa cited 3,188 enemy killed, 87 captured, and 743 weapons seized, while U.S. Army units listed their own losses as 258 killed and 1,190 wounded. As 1967 ended there could be little question that control of the Que Son Basin was returning to the South Vietnamese Government.

North of the Que Son Valley, in the 1st Marine Division's Quang Nam Province zone of action, the level of enemy contacts dropped during this period. Fifth Marines units executed Operations Onslow and Essex, while elements of the 7th Marines conducted Knox, Foster, Pitt, Citrus, and Auburn. All of these operations were designed to keep the enemy out of the Da Nang rocket belt. The most significant of these was Foster and a companion SLF operation, Badger Hunt.*

Foster/Badger Hunt followed two savage Viet Cong attacks against the district headquarters and refugee settlement at Duc Duc and Dai Loc, 15 miles southwest of Da Nang. The attacks killed 34 civilians, wounded 42, and another 51 were reported missing. In addition, the enemy destroyed 559 houses and left 625 families homeless.

*See Chapter 10 for the SLF participation in Badger Hunt.

The Marines retaliated with Operation Foster, conducted by Lieutenant Colonel Roger H. Barnard's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines and Operation Badger Hunt utilizing SLF Bravo's BLT 2/3, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Henry English. Both were coordinated search and destroy endeavors in the river complex of the Dai Loc District and in the flatlands and foothills west of the An Hoa industrial complex. Intelligence reports placed the Viet Cong R-20 and V-25 Battalions and the Q-13 Company in these areas.

The operation began at 0900 on 13 November. BLT 2/3 landed by helicopter west of An Hoa, and two hours later Barnard's Marines landed northwest of the complex near Dai Loc. Initially there were numerous contacts with small groups of VC trying to escape. The Marines uncovered many VC bunkers and logistic areas. With the exception of one company-size fight on 29 November, the enemy concentrated on escaping. Marine reconnaissance and air observers sighted numerous fleeing enemy groups; artillery and air strikes directed against these groups caused the majority of enemy casualties inflicted during Foster. For the Marine infantry units, the operation was more successful in terms of

The rotor wash from a medevac helicopter, not to mention the proximity of the aircraft itself, forces men of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines to duck during Operation Foster, one of the operations protecting the Da Nang air base complex from enemy rocket attacks.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371016





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370659

Patrols in the rugged interior of South Vietnam could encounter dangers other than enemy soldiers. Three men of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, wearing unorthodox uniforms, proudly display the hide of a tiger they killed during a five-day patrol. They are, from left, LCpl James Ortega, LCpl Thomas L. Little, and Sgt James L. Griffith.

destruction of enemy supplies and installations than enemy killed. The Marines destroyed 6,000 enemy buildings, bunkers, tunnels, and shelters and uncovered rice caches totaling 87 tons. By the end of the operation, 30 November, reported enemy casualties totaled 125 killed and eight captured. More important than the personnel losses inflicted on the enemy, the Marines evacuated more than 11,500 refugees from the Communist-dominated area.

The loss of a large, readily available labor and manpower pool annoyed the local Communist leaders. Previously, the enemy, following the Communist guerrilla dictum that the good will of the people must be preserved, had been very selective in targeting acts of terror. During December, as the Marines challenged their hold on the populace, Communist terror attacks increased, demonstrating that the "liberating" Communists were not really

concerned about popular good will. Distrust of the Communists spread in the refugee communities. Intended to force the refugees to abandon their Government-sponsored settlements, the terror raids caused grave doubts about the promises made by the Viet Cong.

The refugees from western Quang Nam Province, like those from the Que Son Basin and the coastal plains of Quang Ngai Province, demonstrated a desire not to be incorporated in the Communist system. Would they rally to the South Vietnamese Government and be loyal citizens? The next step was the implementation of the pacification program to win the support of the mass of displaced, confused, and often apathetic residents of Vietnam's food-producing regions. In I Corps it was III MAF's job to provide the physical security for the Vietnamese Government's pacification efforts. It would prove to be a tough, unrewarding, tedious assignment.

CHAPTER 10

Fall Fighting in the North

*Operation Kingfisher—Medina/Bastion Hill/Lam Son 138
Adjustments Within the 3d Marine Division*

Operation Kingfisher

After the conclusion of Operation Buffalo, III MAF ordered a sweep of the southern half of the DMZ. The Marines intended for the operation, Hickory II, to destroy enemy fortifications, mortar, and artillery positions in the southern portion of the buffer zone. The concept resembled that employed during Operation Hickory, the Marines' initial entry into the area on 18 May.

During Hickory II, two Marine battalions, one from SLF Alpha, attacked north to the Ben Hai River, wheeled about, and swept southward to the Cam Lo River. BLT 2/3 of SLF Bravo screened the inland left flank, while to the east three ARVN battalions and an armored personnel carrier troop advanced up Route 1 to the Ben Hai, then turned and attacked southward. On the coast east of the ARVN thrust, Lieutenant Colonel Albert R. Bowman II's 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion drove northward through the coastal sand dunes from Cua Viet. There was little resistance. The sharpest action occurred on 15 July, when Bowman's battalion engaged an enemy unit four miles east of Gio Linh, killing 25. Marine casualties, when the operation ended on 16 July, were four killed and 90 wounded. Total NVA losses totaled 39 killed and 19 weapons captured.

At the close of Hickory II, the two SLF battalions, upon release by III MAF, returned to a ready status off the coast of I Corps, but the remaining five battalions which comprised the 3d and 9th Marines began a new operation in the same general area. Called Operation Kingfisher, its mission, as in previous operations along the DMZ, was to block NVA entry into Quang Tri Province. From the 16th through the 27th there were only minor contacts.

On 28 July the 3d Marine Division sent Lieutenant Colonel William D. Kent's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, reinforced with a platoon of tanks, three Ontos, three LVTEs, and engineers, on a spoiling at-

tack into the DMZ. The main body, including the tracked vehicles, moved north on Provincial Route 606 with Companies E and G providing security on the flanks. Company F remained in a landing zone south of Con Thien, ready to board helicopters and exploit any heavy contact with the enemy.

There was no contact; the armored column moved north without incident. The terrain, however, restricted the tracked vehicles to the road and thick vegetation made movement difficult for the flanking companies. Further, the terrain canalized the column into a relatively narrow "V" of land bounded by the Ben Hai River on the west and north and a tributary stream to the east. The reinforced battalion would have to return by the same route by which it entered the DMZ.* The North Vietnamese were already moving units into previously prepared positions covering Route 606.

The North Vietnamese did not molest the Marines in their night defensive positions near the Ben Hai River. The following morning, the 2d Battalion scouted the objective area and destroyed several small abandoned fortification complexes.

Late in the morning the battalion began its movement south out of the DMZ. It would move in a column led by Company E and followed by Command Group A, H&S Company, Command Group B, and Companies F, H, and G. An airborne forward air controller circled overhead; he would soon be busy.

Company E began moving south at 1000; at 1115 the enemy detonated a 250-lb bomb buried in the road, wounding five Marines. Nearby, engineers found a similar bomb, rigged as a command-detonated mine, and destroyed it.

Upon the second explosion, North Vietnamese soldiers near the road opened fire on the column with machine guns, rifles, and 60mm and 82mm

*Major Willard H. Woodring, commanding the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, raised these objections at a division briefing prior to the operation. Colonel John C. Studt, Comments on draft ms, 9Jul81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)



3d MarDiv ComdC, July 1967

The 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, supported by tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion, moves through the open terrain south of the Ben Hai River in Operation Hickory II in July.

An armored column, composed of tanks, Ontos, amphibian tractors, and infantrymen from the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines moves unopposed toward the Ben Hai River inside the Demilitarized Zone on 28 July. NVA units, however, already were moving in behind the column and it would have to fight its way south to safety the following day.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A191240



mortars, initiating a running battle that did not end until dark. The NVA units, using heavy fire from prepared positions combined with the maneuver of other units, quickly fragmented the armored column into roughly company-sized segments. Each isolated segment fought its own way through the gauntlet of fire.

The tracked vehicles became more of a liability than a tactical asset. They were restricted to the road because the thick brush provided excellent cover for NVA soldiers armed with antitank weapons. Instead of providing support to the infantry Marines, the tracked vehicles required infantry protection. Using them as ambulances to transport the wounded further reduced the vehicles' ability to fight.

Tracked vehicles suffered all along the column. An RPG round penetrated both sides of an LVTE moving with Company E. Another RPG explosion disabled the turret of a tank with Company F, wounding three crewmen. When Company H brought up an Ontos to suppress NVA fire that was holding up its movement, an RPG gunner hit the vehicle and wounded three crewmen. A second Ontos came forward, beat down the enemy fire with its machine gun, and permitted the company to move again.

The infantry's primary fire support came from the airborne controllers, one of whom was on station throughout the day. The controller maintained contact with air representatives with each company and with the battalion air liaison officer. The airborne forward air controller directed fixed-wing air strikes whenever needed. The Marine infantrymen needed them often.

The North Vietnamese units knew the danger from American supporting arms and attempted to stay close to the Marine column. Company F had hardly cleared its night defensive position when it realized an NVA unit had immediately occupied the position. At another point, Marine engineers with Company E spotted a 12.7mm antiaircraft machine gun just off the road. They attacked, killed seven NVA soldiers, and destroyed the weapon and its ammunition. At the rear of the column, Company G had problems with enemy units following in its trace and maneuvering back and forth across the road. Company G killed 12 and wounded 10 of these soldiers; an attached scout-sniper team killed another 15. Shortly afterward, an enemy assault from the flank almost cut the company in two, but the attack failed.

Shortly after Company F took its place in the col-

umn, it received instructions to establish a helicopter landing zone for evacuating casualties from Company E and H&S Company. When the tanks carrying the dead and wounded reached the zone, the enemy opened up with RPGs, machine guns, and 60mm and 82mm mortars. The mortar fire walked across the entire landing zone. In addition to the earlier casualties, the Marines now had another seven men killed and 31 more Marines and Navy corpsmen wounded.

A gap then developed between the rear of H&S Company and Company F. The latter company loaded the casualties in the zone on the tanks and attacked to close the gap. It did so at the cost of a further two dead and 12 wounded by NVA mortar fire. The company resumed its fight south.

Late in the afternoon, Company E and Command Group A managed to break through the enemy to safety. They left behind, however, two Company E squads which could not move because of intense enemy automatic weapons and rifle fire that killed two and wounded nine Marines. Company E and the command group continued on until they linked up at 1830 with Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines which had moved up from Con Thien.

By this time the other companies of the 2d Battalion were no longer able to continue south; there were too many casualties to move. At 1930, Company H drew back and established a defensive position on high ground at the edge of the clearing through which Route 606 passed at that point. Joining Company H were Company F, two other squads from Company E, two squads from Company G, plus H&S Company. It was an all-infantry force; the tracked vehicles, carrying some of the wounded, had broken through to join the lead elements at the position of Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines.

Company G's movement came to an end about the same time. It could no longer both fight and transport its wounded. By 2100, the company was in a defensive position for the night.

The two isolated squads from Company E found themselves rescued early in the evening. Lieutenant Colonel Kent had taken operational control of Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines and accompanied that unit back to the two squads. They accomplished the mission by 1930 and Company M moved into a good defensive position for the night. To the south, the bulk of Company E organized its defenses and called in medevac helicopters for the casualties.

The remainder of the night was relatively quiet;

the NVA units were pulling back. Company G and Company F both heard much shouting west of their respective positions and called in artillery missions. The final event of the fight occurred at 0330 when an NVA soldier crept up to Company F's perimeter and killed one Marine and wounded three with a burst of automatic weapons fire. Other Marines opened fire and the NVA soldier withdrew.

The following morning, the 30th, helicopters evacuated all casualties located at Company G's position. Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Kent moved north to link up with the rest of the 2d Battalion. The Marines evacuated the remainder of the casualties by 0900 and all units were out of the DMZ by 1150 behind a screen provided by the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines.

The gauntlet had been costly for Lieutenant Colonel Kent's 2d Battalion. Twenty-three Marines died and the wounded totaled 251, of whom 191 required evacuation. There were 32 confirmed NVA dead but the battalion estimated another 175 probably died.

While the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines' battle quickly entered the division's folklore as "2/9's armored thrust into the DMZ,"¹ an earlier and relatively minor action on Route 9 had a more lasting impact on the tactical situation in northern I Corps. It led to

an end to vehicle convoys to Khe Sanh; thereafter, the base relied upon aerial resupply.

III MAF supplied Khe Sanh at the time by aircraft and "Rough Rider" vehicle convoys from Dong Ha. One of the largest of the convoys, composed of over 85 vehicles and several U.S. Army 175mm guns,² departed Dong Ha on 21 July. Part of its route passed through the TAOR of Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Needham's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. This gave the battalion the responsibility for securing that portion of Route 9.

Lieutenant Colonel Needham ordered his Company M to send a platoon out that morning to sweep Route 9 from Ca Lu west to the boundary between the regimental TAORs of the 3d and 26th Marines. The convoy departed Dong Ha at about the same time as the 2d Platoon, Company M began its check of the road.

The 2d Platoon searched Route 9 without incident for about five kilometers. Then the point surprised an NVA soldier urinating beside the road.³ The point opened fire; other NVA soldiers answered with rifle fire from high ground north of the road and from a tree line south of it. The whole platoon quickly became engaged with what the platoon commander first believed was an NVA platoon. He soon changed his estimate to an NVA battalion.

Infantrymen of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines move into the safety of the perimeter of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines on 30 July after a running battle the previous day with NVA units that fought to fragment the column and destroy the reinforced Marine battalion piecemeal as it came back south from the Ben Hai River and out of the DMZ.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189064



The 3d Battalion, 3d Marines ordered the platoon to disengage but the unit could not do so. The battalion staff at Ca Lu worked quickly to coordinate air and artillery support and alerted the rest of Company M to prepare to move to the 2d Platoon's rescue. In the midst of this activity, the Rough Rider convoy's arrival at Ca Lu created some confusion.⁴ The battalion requested and received permission to halt the convoy immediately since there was only one place between Ca Lu and the 2d Platoon's position where the convoy could be turned around.⁵

Company M moved toward the firefight with two U.S. Army vehicles in support. One of these mounted dual 40mm cannon, the other carried a quad-.50 machine gun. As the force neared the 2d Platoon, the enemy fired approximately 200 rounds from 82mm mortars at the road. Enemy riflemen opened fire from the high ground north of the road.

Under the cover of fixed-wing aircraft strikes on the high ground and heavy fire from the two Army vehicles, Company M reached its 2d Platoon and the Marines disengaged. Two tanks came up from Ca Lu and provided additional fire against the tree line to the south. The combined force then returned to Ca Lu.

The Rough Rider convoy could not continue to Khe Sanh until the road was secure. The division ordered it to turn around and return to Camp Carroll.

At noon the following day, the 22d, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, using its own Company L and Companies A and C of the 9th Marines, moved against the enemy positions north of Route 9. There was only scattered contact with the enemy; however, the Marines found ample evidence the previous day's action had prevented a major ambush of the Rough Rider convoy to Khe Sanh. They found 150 well-camouflaged fighting holes in the area where the 2d Platoon had engaged the enemy. The North Vietnamese obviously had constructed the fighting holes for a horseshoe-shaped ambush whose killing zone was the open road. Nearby was a large, abandoned NVA base camp containing another 200 fighting holes and 25 two- and four-man log bunkers camouflaged with dirt and elephant grass. The camp also contained several huts, some for sleeping and others for cooking.

The following day Company K, 3d Marines, supported by tanks and Army M42 "Dusters" (the latter mounting dual 40mm cannon), joined the operation and attacked Hill 216 north of, and overlooking the

NVA ambush site on Route 9. Company K ran into heavy machine gun fire from a bunker complex on the hill's east slope which killed one Marine and wounded two. The company called in an artillery mission and the supporting tracked vehicles opened fire on the enemy. Company K then pulled back to allow fixed-wing aircraft plenty of room to bomb the bunkers. At the completion of the strike, Company K attacked, but the NVA unit had gone. The Marines continued to the crest of Hill 216.

Later that afternoon, fixed-wing aircraft bombed Hill 247, located west of Hill 216 and which also overlooked Route 9. Following the air strike, Company L, 3d Marines moved west on Route 9 and linked up with Company B, 26th Marines which had cleared the road from the western edge of the 26th Marines' TAOR.

During its move, Company L uncovered 30 Chinese-made anti-personnel mines buried along approximately 2,000 meters of the southern margin of Route 9. The enemy had rigged the mines with trip wires to catch the Marines and soldiers from the Rough Rider convoy as they sought cover from the planned ambush.

With Route 9 cleared, the Rough Rider convoy, minus any 175mm guns, completed the trip to Khe Sanh on the 25th. The whole episode, however, changed the thinking about resupply for Khe Sanh. There was one more large convoy to Khe Sanh and a few to the Lang Vei Special Forces camp, but these ended in early August. There were no other convoys to Khe Sanh until Operation Pegasus opened Route 9 at the end of the "siege" of Khe Sanh in 1968.*

For the next few weeks only scattered, small-scale fighting took place. Intelligence analysts reported the probability of a major enemy offensive in the region. They reported a large buildup of supplies north of the DMZ, and estimated at least five Communist battalions were preparing for offensive operations. Sighting reports of vehicles north of the Ben Hai increased substantially, including, for the first time, reports of armored vehicles there.

The first outburst of renewed NVA ground activity in the Kingfisher area happened in the southwestern portion of the TAOR on the morning of 21 August. A North Vietnamese battalion am-

*Robert Pisor's *The End of the Line: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (New York: 1982), p. 94 says the convoy with the 175mm guns had "... run into 'one horrendous ambush' and turned back. ..." The NVA's planned ambush literally might have been "horrendous" except for one NVA soldier's bladder discomfort.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193261

CH-53 helicopters bring 105mm howitzers of Battery I, 12th Marines to Hill 881 South near Khe Sanh on 3 August following intelligence reports of an NVA buildup nearby.

bushed a small Marine convoy traveling south on Route 9 from the Rockpile to Ca Lu. In the first moments of the attack, enemy antitank rockets hit and put out of action two Marine trucks and two Army track-mounted, dual 40mm guns of the 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery. The security force with the convoy returned fire and radioed for air and artillery support. Company L of Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Needham's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines came down from the Rockpile, and a reinforced platoon from Company M moved up from Ca Lu. These maneuvers trapped the ambushers. The action lasted for more than six hours as the Marine units, supported by air and artillery, converged on the NVA battalion. As night fell the enemy broke contact and fled to the west. Confirmed Communist losses were light, but 3 Marines and 3 Army artillerymen died, with another 35 wounded.

The North Vietnamese tried again on 7 September at almost the same location, but again the enemy commander miscalculated the location of Marine forces, their ability to maneuver, and the speed with which the Marines could bring supporting arms to bear. The NVA ambushed a convoy at 1010, and again Marine units converged on the site from the north and south. This time the battle continued for more than eight hours. The Marines killed 92 of the enemy before the fight ended at dusk. American casualties in this encounter totaled five killed and 56 wounded.

Additional indications that the Communists remained determined to achieve a victory at Con Thien became evident during late August. To gain maximum propaganda effect, the North Vietnamese timed their new offensive to coincide with the South Vietnamese elections scheduled for 3 September. As the date for the elections approached, the NVA fired an increasing volume of artillery and rockets across the DMZ at Cua Viet, Gio Linh, and Con Thien. On 26 August these hit Dong Ha in three separate attacks; 150 rocket and artillery rounds destroyed two helicopters and damaged 24 others.

The most effective and spectacular of these attacks took place on election day. Forty-one artillery rounds slammed into Dong Ha base that morning, destroying the ammunition storage area and bulk fuel farm and damaged 17 helicopters of Major Horace A. Bruce's HMM-361. Damage control teams fought the fire and explosions for four hours before they controlled the situation. Miraculously, no one died, but 77 suffered wounds, one seriously. Spectators as far away as Phu Bai could see the billowing smoke cloud that rose over the base. Because of this and similar attacks, III MAF moved the logistics base in 1968 from Dong Ha to Quang Tri, beyond the range of the enemy's 130mm guns.⁷

The attack on 3 September ended the use of Dong Ha as a permanent helicopter squadron base facility. HMM-361 personnel flew back to the Marble Mountain facility that day in the CH-53s of HMM-463. All



3d MarDiv ComdC, August 1967

Firemen contain the fire at the Dong Ha combat base following a rocket attack on 26 August, just a week before NVA artillery destroyed the fuel facility.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A355576

A burned-out Marine cargo truck sits in the middle of the rubble of the ammunition storage area at Dong Ha after the 3 September artillery attack.

Marines fight to save the fuel storage area at Dong Ha after a rocket attack on 26 August. Some are trying to put out the fire while others cool down the remaining fuel bladders.

3d MarDiv ComdC, August 1967



of HMM-361's aircraft caught on the ground suffered damage from blast, shrapnel, or both and the CH-53s had to lift them to Marble Mountain. Until III MAF readied a new field at Quang Tri, helicopter support for the DMZ area came from squadrons at Marble Mountain and Phu Bai.⁸

Brigadier General Metzger had good reasons for vividly remembering these attacks. He recalled:

When one of the attacks hit Dong Ha I was in a UH-1E on the pad getting ready to take off. The pilot lifted off the ground and turned to the south, thereby flying right through the barrage of "incoming." We felt the "bird" shudder and knew we were hit. After a futile attempt to spot the enemy firing batteries, we finally landed at Camp Evans and examined the plane. There was a hole about 15 inches in diameter in the tail. We were fortunate!⁹

Con Thien was the primary NVA artillery target. During September, the North Vietnamese subjected the Marines there to one of the heaviest shellings of the war. The hill itself, known to local missionaries as "The Hill of Angels," was only big enough to accommodate a reinforced battalion. Almost daily Con Thien's defenders could expect at least 200 rounds of enemy artillery fire, and on 25 September more than 1,200 shells rained down upon the position. The completed "Dye Marker" bunkers at Con Thien provided some cover as the NVA artillery and rocket attacks escalated.¹⁰

Under cover of the artillery and rocket attacks, enemy ground activity increased. The NVA's main thrust was to the south and southeast of Con Thien. Since the beginning of Operation Kingfisher, the 9th Marines had been operating in that area with a force varying between three and six battalions. The level of combat was light, but enemy resistance began to stiffen at the end of August.

On 4 September, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines met strong opposition. At 1100 that morning, the battalion's Company I, commanded by Captain Richard K. Young, engaged an enemy force 1,500 meters south of Con Thien. The company pressed the enemy unit, but by 1400 its advance halted because of the volume of enemy fire. Company M and the battalion command group moved to the left of Company I and, after extensive artillery preparatory fires, struck the NVA flank. Moving slowly, with two tanks in support, Company M pushed through the Communist position, relieving the pressure on Company I. The maneuver trapped a group of enemy soldiers between the two Marine units, and Company I assaulted and overran



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421910
Artillerymen from the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines load their 105mm howitzer at Con Thien for counterbattery fire against North Vietnamese Army units. In the background are some of the bunkers in which Marines took refuge during the frequent enemy artillery fire against the Marine combat base.

the entrapped NVA force. The count of the enemy casualties at the end of the fight was 38 killed and one captured. As Bendell's units returned to their perimeters near Con Thien,¹¹ they endured harassing fires from NVA mortar and artillery. Six Marines died and 47 suffered wounds in the day's action.

Three days later, Company I of Lieutenant Colonel Harry L. Alderman's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines* found the enemy again three miles south of Con Thien. The fight lasted for five hours and resembled the battle of the 4th, except this time Marine tanks reinforced the infantrymen. Fifty-one NVA died in this encounter; so did 14 Marines.

On 10 September, Alderman's Marines engaged what seemed to be the entire 812th NVA Regiment. The fight began in the early evening four miles southwest of Con Thien. In this instance the patrolling Marines spoiled a major enemy attack in the making. The battalion's command chronology reflects the intensity of this four-hour battle:

*3/26 participated in Operation Kingfisher from 7-11 September.

1615H—Co M and Co K received estimated 60 rounds of 140mm rockets followed by a coordinated attack by NVA (reportedly) wearing USMC flak jackets and helmets.

1630H—Co I and Co L came under attack by NVA wearing USMC equipment and supported by mortars.

1637H—Co K and Co M were hit by 12 140mm rockets followed by 12 more at 1645H.

1655H—Co I and Co L came under an extremely heavy assault from the north and west sides of their perimeter by an estimated NVA battalion. Fixed-wing air, which was on station, began making strikes immediately, and napalm consistently fell 50 to 75 meters from the friendly lines. The flame tank and gun took direct hits from RPGs fired from approximately 75 meters. The flame tank was destroyed and burned the remainder of the night, and the gun tank was rendered useless and rolled into a draw. . . . The crews of both tanks withdrew into the perimeter.

1700H—The tank supporting Co K fired on 100 NVA in front of their lines with unknown results.

From 1705H to 1754H—Each company reported numerous sightings of NVA in various sized units maneuvering around both defensive perimeters.

1825H—The [battalion] CP received heavy incoming mortar fire and the NVA appeared to be massing for an attack.

1825H—M-1 [1st Platoon, Company M] was pinned down in a bomb crater 70 meters west of the CP.

1900H—Co M pulled back towards the CP to consolidate the lines and was forced to abandon a disabled tank.

1905H—An emergency resupply was attempted to Co I and Co L and although suppressive fires were delivered, the enemy fire was too intense and the helicopter could not land.

1905H—A flareship arrived on station. Co K and Co M had formed perimeter around the CP and were boxed in with well aimed artillery.

2030H—The enemy ground attack ceased although 60mm mortar [rounds] were still being received by Co I and Co L.

The next morning the companies searched the battlefield for casualties and abandoned equipment, and evacuated all casualties by 1000. The Marines recovered a large quantity of enemy material, including cartridge belts, packs, ammunition, and weapons; 140 enemy bodies lay scattered throughout the area. The 3d Battalion's losses totaled 34 killed and 192 wounded. Alderman called it ". . . the hardest fighting [the battalion] encountered since arriving in Vietnam."¹²

Following this fight, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines moved to near Phu Bai to refit. As its replacement in the DMZ area, the division pulled Lieutenant Colonel James W. Hammond, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 4th Marines off an operation near Camp Evans and sent it north. Hammond later wrote:

We stopped overnight at Cam Lo and then went north

to take the place of [the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines] which had been mortared [severely] in their position northwest of Con Thien. We then became the roving battalion outside Con Thien . . . the battalion moved every day but still was shelled as much, if not more than Con Thien. The difference was that we had to dig new holes in every position . . . we were hit pretty hard during our month-plus along the DMZ.¹³

Both sides shed more blood around Con Thien before the month ended. At 0325 on the 13th, a North Vietnamese company attacked the north-northeast sector of the perimeter of the outpost. Even though artillery, mortars, and heavy machine guns supported the attacking force, the Communists failed to penetrate the wire. They gave up and withdrew after a heavy pounding from the Marines' supporting arms.

Following the attack of the 13th, Colonel Richard B. Smith,* the new commanding officer of the 9th Marines, moved two battalions to a position behind Con Thien from which they could react if the enemy attacked in force. Lieutenant Colonel John J. Peeler's** 2d Battalion, 9th Marines occupied the area southeast of Con Thien while Lieutenant Colonel James W. Hammond, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 4th Marines moved to the southwest of the hill.¹⁴ At the same time, Colonel Smith ordered the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, now commanded by Major Gorton C. Cook, to move inside the main perimeter. The anticipated assault did not materialize; instead the NVA bombarded all three battalions with savage artillery and mortar attacks for the next seven days.

With the passing of the immediate threat to Con Thien, the Marines there went on the offensive. On 21 September, Hammond's battalion started a search and destroy operation 1,800 meters east of Con Thien. The battalion front, Companies E and F, moved out on line. Movement was cautious but steady, but maintaining alignment proved difficult in terraced terrain broken up by hedgerows. The command group and Companies G and H had to stop, waiting for the rear elements to clear their previous position.

*Colonel Smith, an experienced combat commander and veteran of two wars, assumed command of the 9th Marines from Colonel Jerue on 13 September, the day of the attack on the outpost.

**Lieutenant Colonel Peeler had the distinction of serving twice as the commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines during 1967, from 1 January to 4 July and 13 September - 28 October. He assumed command in September after enemy mortar fragments severely wounded Lieutenant Colonel William D. Kent near Con Thien.



3d MarDiv ComdC, October 1967

Company K, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines moves off a thickly-wooded hill during a patrol near Camp Evans. The battalion moved to the base to refit after heavy fighting with the 812th NVA Regiment four miles southwest of Con Thien on 10 September.

As the lead elements advanced, maintaining visual contact became impossible in the thick underbrush. At 0750, Company E encountered fire from snipers. Then, when the company pushed forward, it came under heavy automatic weapons fire from the front and left, which killed one Marine and wounded four. The tempo of the battle increased; the Communists opened up with mortars. The Marines, now close to the NVA force, heard shouted orders and directions for a mortar crew, and the two sides soon became involved in a deadly grenade duel.* The battalion could not call in artillery because of the close contact, and Company F was in no position to help. Company E slowly withdrew to a position which offered better cover and established a landing zone to evacuate casualties.

Shortly after the beginning of the engagement, Lieutenant Colonel Hammond ordered Company G to envelop the left flank of the NVA position, but 150 meters of open ground faced the assaulting troops. The company advanced to within 30 meters of the objective, but withdrew in the face of nearby

NVA small arms, automatic weapons, and mortar fire. Meanwhile, Companies E and F linked up and covered Company G by fire as it disengaged.

The battle turned into a stalemate. The battalion needed tanks, but after 96 hours of rain the approaches to the area were impassable. At dusk the fighting died down and the Marines pulled back to the main battalion perimeter. The NVA force had killed 16 Marines and wounded 118; 15 of the bodies remained on the battlefield until 10 October when the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines went back and picked up its dead in a later operation in the same area.¹⁵ The battalion could not determine the total Communist casualties but reported at least 39 NVA soldiers killed.* Intelligence officers later identified the enemy force as part of the *90th NVA Regiment*. After the action of the 21st, the enemy withdrew across the Ben Hai River.

The persistent enemy attacks during September appeared to be a desperate bid for a military victory, with its attendant propaganda value, before the fall



3d MarDiv ComdC, September 1967

A CH-53 delivers supplies destined for the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines to the muddy landing zone of the Con Thien combat base in September 1967.

*Lance Corporal Jedh C. Barker received a posthumous Medal of Honor for his actions in this battle. See Appendix D for his citation.

*Colonel Hammond remembered in 1981 that Major General Hochmuth said that G-2 put the number of enemy casualties at 350. Colonel James W. Hammond, Jr., Comments on draft ms, 18May81 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

monsoon hit. Failing in attacks from three different directions, the NVA resorted to a massive attack by fire against Con Thien. During the period 19-27 September, more than 3,000 mortar, artillery, and rocket rounds blasted the position.

The Americans retaliated by massing one of the greatest concentrations of firepower in support of a single division in the history of the Vietnam war. III MAF artillery units fired 12,577 rounds at known and suspected enemy positions in the region, while ships of the Seventh Fleet fired 6,148 rounds at the same area. Marine and Air Force fighter pilots flew more than 5,200 close air support sorties and B-52 bombers of the Strategic Air Command dropped tons of ordnance on the enemy in and north of the DMZ. The Con Thien garrison applauded the results; North Vietnamese pressure on the outpost subsided as September drew to a close.

Although enemy activity gradually diminished at Con Thien; defense of the base remained a continuing ordeal. Marine searching and patrolling activity discovered a multitude of bunker and trench complexes around the hill mass, most of which were about 1,500 meters from the main perimeter. The Marines destroyed the bunkers, but often during subsequent patrols they found them rebuilt again. During early October the Marines continued to find bunkers, but by then these were usually unoccupied.

Experiences of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines during October typify the trend of activity around Con Thien during the fall. On 4 October the battalion, still under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Hammond, conducted a sweep southwest of Con Thien in conjunction with Lieutenant Colonel Henry English's BLT 2/3 from SLF Bravo. Leaving the line of departure at 0645, the battalion had found three NVA shelters by 0830. An hour later and 1,000 meters further, the Marines found several more ambush sites and 16 bunkers. Shortly after that, Company H came upon 13 more bunkers while skirting the southwest side of the Con Thien slope. Similarly, Company G found abandoned mortar positions, loose 82mm mortar rounds, and powder-charge increments. Just before 1500, the unmistakable odor of decaying human flesh led the Marines to the partially covered graves of 20 North Vietnamese. Backtracking, Company G discovered fresh enemy footprints around the previously destroyed bunkers. Tension heightened. The three companies moved back to the perimeter west of Con Thien, but while pulling back Company G heard movement and call-

ed in artillery to cover their return march. The Marines observed no NVA casualties, but had no doubt the Communists were still active.

Several days later the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines relieved BLT 2/3 as the defense force for the recently built bridge north of Strongpoint C-2.* The construction of the bridge had permitted the reopening of the vital road to Con Thien which the heavy September rains washed out. The battalion defended the bridge** because the 3d Marine Division was concerned that if the enemy destroyed it, they would cut the only supply line to Con Thien.¹⁶

The defense of the bridge was no easy task for Lieutenant Colonel Hammond's battalion. Since its move north from Camp Evans on 11 September, the constant combat around Con Thien had worn the battalion down from a "foxhole strength" of 952 to about 462. The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines had great difficulty in manning all the defensive positions prepared by the departed full-strength BLT-2/3.¹⁷

The defensive position around the bridge was divided into quadrants by virtue of the road, which ran roughly north and south, and the stream, which ran east and west. Company G had the northwest quadrant; Company H was on the same side of the road but across the stream in the southwest quadrant. Company F was in the northeast; Company E in the southeast. The battalion command group set up beside the stream in Company G's area and near the center of the position.

At 0125 on 14 October, 25 artillery rounds, rockets, and 135-150 mortar rounds hit Company H. An ambush squad posted in front of the company reported an enemy force moving toward it, and immediately took the advancing enemy under fire. The Marine squad leader notified his company that he had three casualties and that the enemy seriously outnumbered his squad. The company commander, Captain Arthur P. Brill, Jr., ordered the squad to pull back and, at the same time, called for night defensive fires to block the avenues of approach to his position. The battalion requested flare ships to illuminate the area. Using starlight scopes, sniper teams watched the enemy as they massed only 50

*BLT 2/3 phased out of Operation Kingfisher to resume its duties with the Special Landing Force.

**In 1981, Lieutenant General Metzger described the defense of this bridge as an "... illustration of how our forces were tied to defending terrain and not free to operate." Lieutenant General Louis Metzger, Comments on draft ms, n.d. (1981) (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

meters in front of the company. The snipers and two tanks attached to the company opened fire, forcing the North Vietnamese to start their assault prematurely. The rest of the company held fire until the NVA troops reached a clearing 20 meters from the wire. Of the entire attacking unit, only two NVA soldiers reached the wire and Marines killed both as they tried to breach that obstacle.

The enemy withdrew, leaving bodies behind, but they were far from finished. At 0230, enemy mortars shelled Company G. Direct hits by RPGs destroyed a machine gun emplacement and several backup positions on the primary avenue of approach into the company position.* The NVA force attacked through this break, overran the company command post, and killed the company commander, Captain Jack W. Phillips, and his forward observer. Three platoon leaders, two of whom had just arrived in Vietnam that morning, also died. The battalion sent its S-3A, Captain James W. McCarter, Jr., to replace Phillips, but enemy fire killed him before he reached Company G.¹⁹ During the confused, hand-to-hand combat some of the North Vietnamese fought their way within grenade range of the battalion command post in the center of the position.

In the command post, although wounded by a grenade, Sergeant Paul H. Foster, a member of the fire support coordination center, continued to direct mortar and artillery fire upon the enemy. Another grenade landed among a group of six Marines. Sergeant Foster threw his flak jacket over the grenade and jumped on top of the jacket. The grenade blast mortally wounded him, but this action saved his fellow Marines.** Before the melee ended, the North Vietnamese killed or wounded the entire forward air control team.²⁰ The enemy also killed the battalion medical chief, and wounded the fire support coordinator, headquarters commandant, and battalion sergeant major.²¹

Lieutenant Colonel Hammond moved what was left of his command group to a better location within Company H's position. He ordered Company F to move to Company G's right flank and

counterattack to push the NVA forces out of the perimeter. Illumination and automatic weapons fire from "Puff," the AC-47 requested at the beginning of the fight and which arrived about 0330, aided the counterattack. By 0430, the enemy began retreating out of the position, pursued by Company E.

The next morning the battalion reconsolidated and evacuated casualties. Twenty-one dead, including five officers, and 23 wounded were the night's toll. The NVA lost at least 24 killed. That afternoon, Lieutenant General Cushman and Major General Hochmuth visited the bridge site. They granted a request from Lieutenant Colonel Hammond that the new bridge be named Bastard's Bridge* to honor the 21 Marines of the 2d Battalion who gave their lives in its defense. At 1400, Hammond's battalion turned over the bridge to Lieutenant Colonel Needham's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and then moved to Dong Ha where it assumed the mission of regimental reserve after 42 days of close combat.²¹

The last major action of Kingfisher took place during a 9th Marines operation on 25-28 October. By this time Hammond's battalion (minus Company G which was attached to the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines), had moved to Cam Lo to take part in the operation. The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines was at Con Thien and Needham's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines was at C-2 Bridge.²³ The regimental frag order directed Hammond's Marines to sweep north on the west side of Route 561 while the other two battalions provided blocking forces.

The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines began its sweep at 0600 on the 25th. Lieutenant Colonel Hammond planned to move his understrength battalion all day to reach the objective before dark. There was no enemy contact but heavy brush slowed the move. As darkness approached, the battalion was still about 1,000 meters from the objective. Hammond decided to halt the battalion and request additional ammunition before darkness.

Hammond's decision was prudent, given the nature of the enemy in the DMZ region and the re-

*Lieutenant Colonel James E. Murphy commented in 1981 that the NVA force used tear gas in their attack. "Company G got the brunt of it and it lasted only for a few minutes but [the gas] greatly added to the confusion." Lieutenant Colonel James E. Murphy, Comments on draft ms, 6Aug81 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

**Sergeant Foster subsequently received a posthumous Medal of Honor. See Appendix D for Sergeant Foster's citation.

*The nickname "Magnificent Bastards" has been claimed by the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines for many years. Tradition traces the nickname to World War II; however, the Marine Corps Historical Center has no evidence to substantiate the claim. It appears likely that the battalion borrowed the phrase from the book, *The Magnificent Bastards* by Lucy Herndon Crockett (New York: 1953) which is a fictionalized account of Marines in the South Pacific in World War II.

cent combat losses that reduced his entire battalion to just over 400 men. Additional ammunition could partially compensate for the loss of firepower resulting from personnel shortages and the absence of Company G. He controlled, at the time, a "battalion" only a little larger than a standard reinforced rifle company. The resupply helicopters would give away the battalion's location, of course, but he took the risk that his command could receive its additional ammunition and move on to the objective before the enemy responded.

Helicopters were in short supply at this time, following the grounding of all CH-46s after a series of accidents. III MAF by necessity reserved the available helicopters for meeting emergency requests from units in the field. Hammond ordered an "emergency resupply" of ammunition.

Lieutenant Colonel Hammond took a calculated risk and lost. The resupply helicopters did not bring everything he ordered but, worse, also delivered significant quantities and types of ammunition that the battalion had not ordered, including three pallets of tactical wire. There was more material than the battalion could use or move. Hammond's Marines would have to spend the night in place and try to get the excess ammunition flown out the next morning. Unfortunately, the helicopters had revealed the Marines' position to the enemy.

The North Vietnamese hit the battalion's perimeter about 2330 with 10 rocket rounds.* The battalion executive officer, Major John J. Lawendowski, died and Lieutenant Colonel Hammond and two others required evacuation for wounds. Lieutenant Colonel Frankie E. Allgood, the newly promoted executive officer of HMM-363, landed his UH-34D at the battalion command post and flew the casualties to Dong Ha. Captain Arthur P. Brill, Jr., who had moved up the previous day from commanding Company H to be the battalion operations officer, took command of the battalion.

Upon learning that Hammond and Lawendowski were casualties, Colonel Richard B. Smith, commanding the 9th Marines, decided to send an officer to take temporary command of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. The obvious choice was right at hand. Lieutenant Colonel John C. Studt, the regimental operations officer, knew the details of the current

operation; he had drafted the regimental frag order implementing the division's directive for the operation.²⁴ Colonel Smith sent Studt to the Dong Ha airfield to catch a helicopter to the 2d Battalion.

Lieutenant Colonel Studt reached the airfield shortly after medical personnel removed the 2d Battalion's casualties from Lieutenant Colonel Allgood's helicopter. Studt explained his mission and the two officers discussed the chances of succeeding in reaching the 2d Battalion safely. Having had great difficulty in evacuating the four casualties, Allgood advised Studt that he wasn't sure he could make it into the battalion's position. He also pointed out that fog was increasing throughout the whole area. Both officers decided, however, that the situation required that the flight be attempted. Studt climbed into the passenger compartment of the helicopter, which, he noted, still had fresh blood on the floor.²⁵ Allgood lifted off from the airfield and managed to land the UH-34D inside the battalion perimeter around 0300 on the 26th.

Studt immediately climbed into Captain Brill's foxhole to get an appraisal of the 2d Battalion's situation. The first thing that struck Studt were the gaps in the battalion staff. Each time Studt asked about a key staff position, Brill reported that the respective officer was either a casualty in some hospital or a new officer was filling the position.²⁶ The battalion had been ground down during a month and a half of heavy fighting.

Company G, released back to the 2d Battalion's control, arrived at the defensive perimeter the following morning. The additional strength was welcome since Lieutenant Colonel Studt had learned he would have to leave one company behind to guard the pile of excess ammunition. Due to other commitments, the regiment reported, there were no helicopters available to move it. "I could not help but note," wrote Studt, "that this short-sighted policy resulted in [III MAF] providing a number of helicopters for emergency medevacs, which might not have been necessary had they been a little more flexible and appreciative of the tactical situation on this operation."²⁷

Leaving Company F to guard the ammunition, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines moved toward its objective and occupied it by 1300. Shortly afterward, enemy 60mm mortars hit the battalion as it organized its defenses. One hour later, the NVA struck with a heavy mortar barrage, followed by small arms fire from the west and northwest. The Marines began

*The official reports describe these as rockets, however, Colonel Hammond believes they were actually artillery rounds. Colonel James W. Hammond, Jr., Comments on draft ms, 18May81 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

taking casualties and requested a helicopter medevac.

In an effort to pick up some of the casualties, Captain Ronald D. Bennett of HMM-363 attempted to land his UH-34D within the 2d Battalion's perimeter. Those on the ground waved him off because of intense enemy fire. As Captain Bennett pulled away, enemy fire hit the rear of the helicopter, separating the tail pylon. The aircraft crashed, rolled and began burning about 150 meters outside the Marine lines. Bennett and a gunner, Corporal Edward Clem, died in the crash. Second Lieutenant Vernon J. Sharpless and Lance Corporal Howard J. Cones, both seriously injured, managed to crawl from the burning wreckage.

A second helicopter from HMM-363, piloted by Captain Frank T. Grassi, tried to land to pick up the survivors but could not. Enemy fire hit Grassi in the leg and arm, damaged the helicopter, and slightly wounded one of the gunners and a Navy hospital corpsman. The aircraft limped away as far as Strong Point C-2 where it made a forced landing.

Captain James E. Murphy, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines' air liaison officer, who had been calling in air strikes in front of Company E, saw Bennett's helicopter go down. With his radio still on his back, Murphy crawled out to the downed helicopter, moving past NVA soldiers in his path. He found the two survivors near the burning helicopter. The three Marines were surrounded and there was no way Murphy could get them back to Marine lines. Fortunately, the enemy soldiers in the area either did not know the three men were there or simply did not care. Captain Murphy could hear NVA soldiers nearby and see some movement, however, and called in air strikes within 50 meters of the crashed helicopter with the aid of an airborne observer in an O-1C aircraft overhead. The latter eventually managed to direct a Marine A-4 attack aircraft to deliver a line of smoke so that a UH-1 helicopter could land and rescue the three Marines.²⁸

The rescue helicopter was a UH-1C from the U.S. Army's 190th Helicopter Assault Company whose pilot volunteered to make the pickup. Enemy fire hit the aircraft twice during the rescue and the pilot suffered a minor wound in the arm. The UH-1C also managed to reach Strong Point C-2 where it, too, made a forced landing.

Lieutenant Colonel Studt's observation during his short period of command convinced him of the need for reinforcements. At his request, the 9th Marines

ordered the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines at C-2 Bridge to send two companies and a small command group to the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines' position.²⁹

Company F still occupied its exposed position and Studt decided to move it within the battalion perimeter. He directed the company to have its attached engineers blow up the excess ammunition, but they were unable to do so.* After several hours of fruitless attempts by the engineers, Studt told the company to leave the ammunition and join the rest of the battalion. The battalion had direct observation of the ammunition pile and would cover it by fire.³⁰

Company F reached the perimeter near dusk. The two companies from the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines arrived at about the same time.³¹ With these reinforcements, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines was ready for any NVA attacks that evening. Studt recounted the night's subsequent events:

From before dusk . . . until almost 0200 in the morning, we were under almost continuous attacks by both direct and indirect fire, and our perimeter was hit again and again by ground attacks. . . . The wounded were being accumulated in the vicinity of my CP, which consisted of foxholes, and their suffering was a cause of anguish. After several attempts to medevac them by helicopter were aborted due to intense enemy fire, we came up with the plan that on signal every man on the perimeter would open fire on known or suspected enemy positions . . . for a few minutes with an intense volume of fire. During this brief period, a volunteer pilot . . . succeeded in zipping in to the zone and removing our emergency medevacs. The [trick] . . . probably would not have worked again.³²

The ground attacks ceased around 0200 in the morning of the 27th, but the Marines heard enemy movement for the rest of the night as the North Vietnamese removed their dead and wounded. Dawn revealed 19 enemy bodies within or in sight of the Marine positions. Lieutenant Colonel Studt decided not to send anyone to sweep the area since any movement still drew enemy artillery and mortar fire.³³

The enemy completed its departure by dawn. The Marines soon did likewise; on orders from the 9th Marines, the battalion made a tactical withdrawal. Still harrassed by enemy rocket and mortar fire and carrying the remainder of its dead and wounded, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines moved by echelon to

*The reason for the failure to detonate the ammunition is not clear from the records. Studt himself wrote in 1981 that he never knew the reason. Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft ms, 9Jul81 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

Strong Point C-2 and then to Cam Lo.³⁴ During the period 25-27 October, eight 2d Battalion Marines died and 45 suffered wounds giving the battalion an effective strength of around 300 Marines. Known NVA casualties were the 19 bodies counted by the battalion on 27 October.

The battalion moved back to Dong Ha on the 28th and resumed its role as the regimental reserve. Lieutenant Colonel William Wiese took command of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Studt returned to his duties at the 9th Marines' command post.* That day a message from Lieutenant General Cushman arrived, the last line of which read "2/4 has met and beaten the best the enemy had to offer. Well done."³⁵

Kingfisher listed 1,117 enemy killed and five captured; Marine casualties totaled 340 killed and 1,461 wounded. General Westmoreland described the operation as a "crushing defeat" of the enemy.

The Con Thien area remained a grim place. The constant danger of artillery, rocket, and mortar fire, and massed infantry assaults, and the depressing drizzle and mud from which there was no escape, combined to make it miserable for the Marines there. Neuropsychiatric or "shell shock" casualties, relatively unheard of elsewhere in South Vietnam, were not unusual. Duty on and around the drab hill mass was referred to by all Marines as their "Turn in the Barrel," or "the Meatgrinder."³⁶

Medina/Bastion Hill/Lam Son 138

On 5 October, in conjunction with the arrival of a fourth U.S. Army brigade in southern I Corps, Colonel Herbert E. Ing, Jr.'s 1st Marines, consisting of two battalions, came under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division and moved north from the Da Nang TAOR to the southern part of Quang Tri Province. On the 11th, the regiment, reinforced by SLF Alpha, started Operation Medina in the rugged hills of the Hai Lang National Forest.** The operation was part of III MAF's comprehensive program to

*Studt had hoped to retain command but Colonel Smith was more interested in keeping him as the regimental operations officer. "Unfortunately," wrote Smith, "I extolled [Studt's] virtues so much to General Tompkins that he was grabbed later to take over a battalion at Khe Sanh where he distinguished himself." Colonel Richard B. Smith, Comments on draft ms, 21May81 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

**SLF Alpha's (BLT 1/3) move to its Medina blocking positions had the code-name Operation Bastion Hill.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189393
Marines and journalists wait on 2 October in the safety of a trench beside Con Thien's landing zone until the arrival and touchdown of the helicopter that will take them from the base back to Dong Ha.

destroy enemy base areas previously left alone because of lack of forces. The Hai Lang forest area south of Quang Tri was the enemy's Base Area 101, the support area for the 5th and 6th NVA Regiments. Northeast of the Medina AO, two ARVN airborne battalions conducted Operation Lam Son 138.

Medina started as Lieutenant Colonel Albert F. Belbusti's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Archie Van Winkle's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines made a helicopter assault landing in the forest. After landing they cleared the area around LZ Dove and then swept in a northeasterly direction while BLT 1/3 blocked to the east. At 0330 on the 11th, Company C of BLT 1/3 came under mortar and small arms fire, followed by a ground assault. The company drove off the attackers and the fighting subsided.

The next day both of the 1st Marines' battalions continued searching to the southwest, while BLT 1/3 remained in its blocking positions. At 1515, Company C, 1st Marines was moving through thick jungle when the point element engaged 10 NVA soldiers. The exchange of fire wounded several Marines. Company C pulled back to a small clearing



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421900

Operation Medina begins early on 11 October as two battalions of the 1st Marines make a helicopter assault into Landing Zone Dove in a III MAF drive to clear enemy base areas in the thick Hai Lang forest, located approximately 12 miles south of Quang Tri City.



3d MarDiv ComdC, October 1967

An air observer with the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines directs an air strike early in Operation Medina on enemy positions located on an adjacent ridgeline.

and established a perimeter before calling in helicopters to pick up wounded. Just after the evacuation was completed, three NVA companies attacked Company C from two sides. The firefight continued as darkness fell; hand grenades figured heavily in the exchange. The battle surged back and forth across the small clearing. At the height of the struggle a grenade landed in the company command post. Corporal William T. Perkins, Jr., a combat photographer attached to the company, yelled, "Grenade!" and threw himself on the deadly missile. The explosion killed him.*

Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti reinforced Company C with Company D and the two companies drove off the attacking NVA force. Dawn on the 13th revealed 40 enemy dead around the Marines' position. The enemy attack had killed eight Marines and wounded 39.

After these two fights, the enemy avoided further contact; Medina turned into a search for small groups of North Vietnamese in the nearly impenetrable forests. The 1st Marines did find a number of base camps, but the enemy had evacuated the sites. The Marines captured more than

*Corporal Perkins received a posthumous Medal of Honor, becoming the first Marine combat photographer to receive the nation's highest award. See Appendix D for Corporal Perkins' citation.

four tons of rice, 16 weapons, and a quantity of small arms ammunition.

The enemy's efforts to elude the sweeping Marine units resulted in the largest action of the companion Operation Lam Son 138. On the morning of 20 October, the *416th NVA Battalion*, a subordinate unit of the *5th NVA Regiment* collided with one of the ARVN airborne companies involved in Operation Lam Son 138. The airborne company held and, after reinforcement, killed 197 North Vietnamese in the day-long battle.

Operation Medina ended on the 20th. The SLF battalion transferred to Colonel William L. Dick's 4th Marines, which was conducting Operation Fremont to the south. The 1st Marines stayed in the former Medina area and started Operation Osceola the same day. Osceola was an unspectacular, but systematic, search for enemy forces in the Hai Lang forest.

Adjustments Within the 3d Marine Division

A new series of operations began in November. Only Osceola continued from October. The 3d



3d MarDiv ComdC, October 1967

A Marine with the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines places explosives before blowing a helicopter landing zone in the Hai Lang forest during Operation Medina.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193856

An LVTP-5 carries members of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, operating as infantrymen, on a sweep of the shoreline north of the Cua Viet River in September. The battalion continued these patrols in November and December in Operation Napoleon.

Marine Division split the Kingfisher TAOR in two: Kentucky, embracing the region including Gio Linh, Con Thien, Cam Lo, and Dong Ha came under the control of Colonel Richard B. Smith's 9th Marines; and Lancaster, to the west, covered Camp Carroll, the Rockpile, and Ca Lu under Colonel Joseph E. LoPrete's 3d Marines. The division renamed Operation Ardmore at Khe Sanh to Scotland and continued it as a one-battalion operation under the control of Colonel David E. Lownds' 26th Marines. On the coast, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion conducted Operation Napoleon north of the Cua Viet River. In Thua Thien Province, Colonel William L. Dick's 4th Marines continued to cover approaches to Hue City west of Route 1 as Operation Neosho replaced Fremont. The 3d Marine Division had tactical responsibility for all territory west of Highway 1 in the northern two provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien, while the 1st ARVN Division was responsible for all terrain east of the road except for the Napoleon operational area north of the Cua Viet River.

Artillery support for all of these operations came from Colonel Edwin S. Schick, Jr.'s 12th Marines. Composed of five Marine artillery battalions, three Army artillery battalions, and two Marine separate

batteries, it was the largest artillery regiment in the history of the Marine Corps. The reinforced regiment's 220 weapons³⁷ were located throughout the division TAOR. Each infantry regiment could call upon a direct support battalion of 105mm howitzers. In addition, the artillery regiment's medium 155mm howitzers and guns, and heavy 8-inch howitzers and 175mm guns, provided reinforcing or general support fires.

While the new operations were beginning, the division headquarters at Phu Bai prepared for a visit from Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey on 1 November. After the stop at the division command post, the Vice President flew over the division's area of operations. Upon his return to Da Nang, he presented the Presidential Unit Citation to the 3d Marine Division for "extraordinary heroism and outstanding performance of duty in action against North Vietnamese and insurgent Communist forces in the Republic of Vietnam from 8 March 1965 to 15 September 1967."

After pinning the streamer on the division colors, the Vice President warmly congratulated the division commander, Major General Hochmuth. This was the last official ceremony that the general attended.

Major General Hochmuth died on 14 November when his UH-1E exploded and crashed five miles northwest of Hue.

Colonel William L. Dick, commanding the 4th Marines at Phu Bai, learned of the crash around 1400 on 14 November. Since he had a helicopter sitting on a pad at his headquarters, Dick, accompanied by his operations officer, Major James D. Beans, and the regimental sergeant major, quickly reached the crash scene. Colonel Dick described the rescue attempt:

After several passes, I spotted the Huey upside down in a rice paddy filled to the brim by the heavy rains which had been falling for several weeks. . . . I directed the helicopter pilot to land on the paddy dike nearest the crash site from where the three of us walked through about 200 yards of paddy water until we reached the wreckage. There were flames on the water's surface around the aircraft. While the sergeant major attempted to extinguish these, Major Beans and I commenced diving beneath the surface, groping through the water for possible survivors. We had no idea just how long it had been since the crash had occurred. This was a difficult task, as you can imagine, since the water was full of silt, not to mention leeches, and impossible to see through. The three of us were joined by a Vietnamese farmer who refused to identify himself and could be distinguished only by a small gold crucifix around

A machine gun team from Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines pauses during its movement in November in Operation Lancaster in the 9th Marines' portion of the former Operation Kingfisher area. The team wears its ammunition bandolier-style.

3d MarDiv ComdC, November 1967





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A190235

MajGen Bruno A. Hochmuth, the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division, wearing a rainsuit as protection from the monsoon, sits in a UH-1E helicopter prior to a routine inspection of the divisional area on 7 November, one week prior to his death.

his neck. The four of us, after getting rid of the aviation fuel flames, repeatedly went below the surface into the helicopter cabin and by touch, finally found the bodies, one by one, of the six who had died in the crash. The helicopter had turned upside down just before impact which made the situation even more difficult. The last body recovered was General Hochmuth. I found him in the rear seat of the helicopter, the spot where he usually traveled when visiting the various command posts.³⁸

Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, a veteran of more than 32 years' Marine service and holder of the Navy Cross as a battalion commander at Saipan, received immediate orders as General Hochmuth's replacement. Brigadier General Louis Metzger, the assistant division commander, assumed command until General Tompkins arrived from the United States on 28 November.

One of General Tompkins' first steps after his arrival was to discuss the overall situation with his division operations officer, Colonel James R. Stockman, who had commanded an 81mm mortar platoon under Tompkins on Saipan. "Tell me," said Tompkins, "about the operational folklore in the division's area of operations." Stockman replied with, among other things, descriptions of the enemy and the terrain and the frustrations of fighting under the



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189947

MajGen Rathvon McC. Tompkins inspects an honor guard on 28 November during the ceremony at Da Nang in which he assumed command of the 3d Marine Division after MajGen Hochmuth's death.

restrictions imposed by MACV and Washington. Stockman recalled that Tompkins disliked the system which considered infantry battalions as interchangeable parts to be shifted from one regimental headquarters to another, depending upon the tactical situation. Tompkins accepted it, however, as "temporary operational folklore," which he would have to live with. "He faced," wrote Stockman, "a worsening operational situation in the late part of 1967 with as much fortitude and optimism as humanly possible."³⁹

During November and December, the most significant activity in the 3d Marine Division's zone of action was small unit fighting near the strong-point obstacle system around Con Thien and Gio Linh. In November, platoon and company-size NVA units operated from well camouflaged bunkers in the area, trying to ambush Marine patrols and to hinder the system's construction. The Marines countered with attacks that drove the NVA units out of their positions on four different occasions during November, killing 65 Communists. In addition, Marine patrols found and destroyed three extensive



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189948
Company G, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines engages an NVA unit on 3 December during the portion of Operation Kentucky conducted to prevent enemy interference with the construction of Strongpoint A-3 of the barrier system south of the DMZ. The 3d Marine Division originally planned to call this protective effort Operation Newton but decided on 28 November to consider it as simply part of Kentucky.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189997
A patrol from Company F, 9th Marines, part of the screening effort during the construction of Strongpoint A-3, moves out carefully after finding fresh enemy footprints and bunkers on 22 December.

bunker systems. On 29 November, three Marine battalions and two ARVN battalions began clearing operations within the Kentucky TAOR between Con Thien and Gio Linh, the planned site of Strong Point A-3 of the proposed barrier plan, or "McNamara wall." The Marine units swept south of Con Thien eastward to Site A-3, while the ARVN units moved from near Gio Linh westward to clear a road to the strong point location. The following day, Lieutenant Colonel William M. Cryan's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines found a North Vietnamese company in bunkers two and one-half miles northeast of Con Thien. The battalion maneuvered to envelop the enemy and overran the position by 1800, killing 41 defenders. Marine casualties totaled 15 killed and 53 wounded requiring evacuation.

Although the Marine and ARVN units continued screening operations north of A-3 during December, the largest engagement during the month took place southeast of Gio Linh in the Napoleon area of operation. Lieutenant Colonel Edward R. Toner's 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion and Company F, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines were protecting the movement of building materials to Strongpoint C-4 on the coast, two kilometers north of the Cua Viet River. Company F, under the operational control of the tractor battalion, occupied Strongpoint C-4. Platoon and

squad patrols routinely operated 2,000 meters north of C-4 as forward security for both the strongpoint and the battalion's position at Cua Viet port facility.

Early in the afternoon of the 10th, two squads patrolled near the fishing village of Ha Loi Tay. Their operational area was a sea of sand dunes, interrupted by a strip of scrub pine growth and hedgerows dotting the coastline. As they approached a break in the coastal tree line south of the village, sniper fire surprised them. The Marines fired back, killing eight North Vietnamese. The enemy fire killed one Marine and wounded three in this brief encounter.

As the Marines checked the area, they discovered 20-25 NVA soldiers, some wearing American helmets and flak jackets. The Marines opened fire and called for reinforcements. The company commander, First Lieutenant Michael H. Gavlick, radioed the situation to the battalion CP, and then took a platoon and the third squad of the engaged platoon forward to join the battle.

Contact continued throughout the afternoon. Before dark, Lieutenant Colonel Toner ordered two provisional rifle platoons from his Company B and two LVTH-6s to go to the scene of contact to assist. As darkness settled, Lieutenant Gavlick drew his composite force into a tight perimeter. At 0630 on the 11th, the composite unit moved out under a light drizzle toward the area of the previous day's action. At 0800, lead elements spotted 40 of the enemy trying to move south across the break in the tree line. The Marines observed 11 NVA soldiers digging a mortar position and another 15 moving behind a sand dune to the north. While the Marines took these enemy under fire with artillery and the LVTH-6s, Lieutenant Colonel Toner moved his Company A, organized as an infantry unit, and his command group to Strong Point C-4. At the same time, the U.S. advisor with the ARVN battalion occupying Strong Point A-1, 2,500 meters across the sand dunes west of the contact, asked if his battalion could help. Toner asked the ARVN battalion to move a unit into a blocking position southwest of the action. The NVA force had moved around to the west of the Marines and were now attacking from the south. The advisor informed Toner that an ARVN company would move to the desired blocking position. Fifteen of the enemy had already attacked the Marines and, although driven off, had fired 10 RPG antitank rounds. One of these rounds hit a LVTH-6 on the bow, but the round glanced off without

damaging the tractor. The LVTH-6 destroyed the antitank gunners' position with direct 105mm howitzer fire.

The number of enemy troops involved in the battle increased. A 30-minute firefight began; Gavlick's composite company took heavy small arms fire from three sides, then the Communists began hitting the Marines with mortars. Throughout the action, the two LVTH-6s maneuvered back and forth to engage the enemy, often firing at ranges between 50 to 150 meters. The remaining four LVTH-6s at Cua Viet and a detachment of 4.2-inch mortars at C-4 added their fire to the battle.

As the Marines tightened their perimeter, the NVA made a second assault. Fifty-five of the enemy attacked from the north, 12 more came in from the northeast, and 20 others from the south. Again, mortar fire supported their assault. The Marines responded with artillery, and used naval gunfire to hold back enemy reinforcements. The Communist assault failed, but individual soldiers continued to pop up around the perimeter. One audacious NVA mortar crew, protected by infantry, went into action on an exposed sand dune only 90 meters from the Marine perimeter. They fired six rounds before machine guns and direct fire from one of the LVTH-6s killed them.



3d MarDiv ComdC, December 1967

PFC F. N. Bunton carries a small Christmas tree on his pack while on Operation Kentucky with Company C, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines in December.

By this time, the ARVN company had crossed the sand dunes and was moving into its blocking position. As it entered the position, the company spotted a mortar crew that had been giving the Marines trouble from the southwest. After a brief fire fight the enemy mortar crew ran away to the north, leaving two bodies behind. After this, the fighting dwindled to sniper fire.

Lieutenant Colonel Toner ordered Company A to sweep the area north of C-4 and clear it of any remaining NVA soldiers. At the same time, he ordered Lieutenant Gavlick to withdraw his composite company to C-4. Artillery and naval gunfire continued to shell the tree line north of the battle position. As Lieutenant Gavlick's force moved south, they found a supply dump bordered by communications wire strung waist high from trees as a guide. The site contained many full storage bins, dug into the sand dunes next to the trail. Live vegetation

camouflaged their trap-door entrances. The Marines destroyed the bins as they discovered them, after which they returned to Stongpoint C-4. The day-long battle resulted in 54 enemy known killed, while the composite Marine unit suffered 20 wounded.

As the year came to a close, all of the operations which had started in November remained in progress. Although contact was light, there were signs of renewed enemy activity in the Scotland TAOR. Intelligence officers reported at least two NVA divisions, the 325C and 304th, moving into the Khe Sanh region. Because of these reports, General Tompkins strengthened Khe Sanh with an additional battalion during December and prepared to deploy more reinforcements on short notice. The year 1967 ended as it had begun; a major invasion of northern Quang Tri Province appeared to be the enemy's next move.

PART V
SPECIAL EFFORTS

CHAPTER 11

The Special Landing Force

Doctrine Versus Expedient—Forming a Second SLF—Continuing Operations Throughout the Year

Doctrine Versus Expedient

In 1967 the Seventh Fleet's Special Landing Force (SLF) was the Pacific Command's strategic reserve for all of Southeast Asia, as well as Vietnam. The SLF contained a Marine command element of approximately the same organization as an infantry regimental staff; a Marine battalion landing team, consisting of a Marine infantry battalion reinforced by artillery, a small logistics support unit, and other elements to support independent operation; and a Marine helicopter squadron. The Marine SLF commander reported directly to the Navy amphibious commander. Although under the overall operational control of the Seventh Fleet, the SLF was readily available for MACV use in Vietnam.

SLF operations in 1967 concentrated in I Corps. The reasons for this change in practice were not entirely the result of a national level strategy for the conduct of the war. Without considering the Communists' strategy, there were sufficient conflicting interests within the many command levels of the U.S. Armed Forces to cause diverse opinions of the most appropriate use of this unique striking force.

Opinions were divided even within the Marine Corps. In III MAF, Marine division and wing commanders wanted to control their own battalions and squadrons which were siphoned off to man the SLF. Continuing reappraisals of required troop strength to "do the job" in I Corps amplified this desire. MACV and III MAF did not want troops floating off the coast when they could be "in country" and, most probably, in contact. However, the personnel in the SLF did not count against the "in-country" authorized troop strength ceilings and, as one operations officer noted, the SLF at least served as a source of emergency reinforcements following commitment of a division's reserve.¹ Other Marine commanders, primarily those outside Vietnam, such as Brigadier General Louis Metzger of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade on Okinawa, advocated a close adherence to approved amphibious doctrine.

General Metzger later wrote, "As Commanding General, 9th MAB, and at the direction of CG, FMFPac, Lieutenant General Krulak, I was precise in following the established amphibious operational command relationships and logistic support. It was a constant struggle, particularly with the Wing and Division commanders."²

Compounding the problem was the Seventh Fleet's position, reinforced by approved doctrine, that the Navy-Marine amphibious capability provided by the Amphibious Ready Group/Special Landing Force organization added great flexibility to the allied strategic options, as well as the Vietnamese tactical situation. U.S. Air Force considerations entered into the controversy because of air space control requirements. A final, but certainly not overriding, consideration in the III MAF stance was the Marine Corps' situation in I Corps. If additional MACV, in this case U.S. Army, troops could be released to go into lower I Corps, the 1st Marine Division would be able to move north to cover Da Nang, thereby allowing the 3d Marine Division to concentrate in northern I Corps. This would permit the 1st and 2d ARVN Divisions to devote their energies to pacification. These moves, however, could occur only if the Marine divisions could accomplish their mission without the SLF battalion. In January of 1967, all of the ramifications of this complex situation were not in evidence, but two basic questions were starting to form. What Marine formations would provide the SLF with its landing forces and where should it be used?

The Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) gained an additional landing ship, tank (LST) in January 1967, bringing the ARG ship total to five. The other ships in the group were: an amphibious assault ship (LPH), a dock landing ship (LSD), an attack transport (APA), and an amphibious transport dock (LPD).

Early in 1967, the Joint Chiefs of Staff made two significant decisions. They authorized the formation

of a second SLF and directed CinCPac to commit both SLFs to extended operations in Vietnam. Neither of these decisions were restrictive as far as the location of SLF landings, but the provision of the required logistic support provided a major reason why SLF operations became a purely I Corps function.

Under the heading of "Logistic Support for the Special Landing Force" in April, FMFPac's report of Marine operations in Vietnam revealed a major reason for concentrating SLF operations in I Corps; the support structure dictated operational location. The report stated:

With the decision by the Joint Chiefs of Staff . . . to commit the SLFs to extended operations in Vietnam, the normal logistic support procedure required some changes. The CG, III MAF now provides logistic support when the SLF operates in areas contiguous to III MAF logistic installations. When operating in areas isolated from established logistic support areas, ground units of the SLF utilize their own resources, with stocks reconstituted as practicable from the Force Logistic Command. While operating from the LPH, aviation units of the SLF will be supported by the LPH but, when operating ashore in the III MAF area of operations, support by the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing will augment that positioned by 9th MAB aboard ship. If the operations ashore extend beyond 15 days, support of helicopters will become the responsibility of CG, III MAF. When the SLF operates ashore in locations other than I CTZ (after 15 days), CG, III MAF will provide only aeronautical spares and special support equipment. All other logistic support responsibilities will remain with CG, 9th MAB [on Okinawa].*

A final determinant for SLF commitments which received due consideration was the Communist plan for 1967. As the year opened with the sour memory of an uneasy and far from inviolate 48-hour New Year's truce, there were continuing indications of enemy buildups and unit movements in and north of the DMZ. As events proved, the Marine occupation of the bases at Con Thien and remote, but vital, Khe Sanh alarmed the Communists, but at this early stage of the year there were no clear indications of Communist intentions in northern I Corps. Elsewhere in the corps area, the enemy obviously would continue to exert as much pressure as possible

*"When the 9th MAB assumed responsibility for Marine aviation and ground units in the Western Pacific which were not in Vietnam, it became an important part of SLF operations. . . . The Brigade's aviation component, MAG-15, became a composite MAG consisting of helicopters, KC-130s, and fixed-wing attack and fighter aircraft, and, as such, was one of the largest air groups we have ever had." Col David O. Takala, Comments on draft ms, 2Jun81 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

on allied units in order to immobilize or at least distract them. The year 1967 tested the validity of the SLF concept as the Communists forced the expedient of long and often unrewarding SLF commitments on the Marine commanders in I Corps.

Operation Deckhouse V

6 - 15 January 1967

The first SLF operation of 1967, Deckhouse V, was significant for two reasons. It was a sizable, combined U.S. Marine and Vietnamese Marine amphibious operation. More ominously, for the proponents of the SLF concept, it was the last SLF landing to take place beyond the boundaries of I Corps.

The ARG, under Captain John D. Westervelt, USN, with Colonel Harry D. Wortman's SLF embarked, steamed south to the coast of Kien Hoa Province in IV Corps for the landing. Deckhouse V was the only SLF operation for Major James L. Day's BLT 1/9 and it marked the end of SLF duty for Lieutenant Colonel Marshall B. Armstrong's HMM-362.

D-day for Deckhouse V was 6 January. Both BLT 1/9 and elements of Vietnamese Marine Brigade Force Bravo, primarily consisting of the 3d and 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalions, enjoyed support throughout the operation from HMM-362's mixed force of UH-34 and CH-46 helicopters operating from the USS *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2). The combined seaborne and heliborne force assaulted an area of suspected Viet Cong concentrations on the coast between the Co Chien and Ham Luong reaches of the Mekong River. Lasting until 15 January, the operation produced unspectacular results. The combined force killed only 21 Viet Cong, destroyed two small arms workshops, and captured 44 weapons and 42 tons of rice. Seven U.S. Marines died and one Vietnamese Marine died accidentally.

Some participants attributed Deckhouse V's failure to information leaks. The Marines encountered only local force VC in the operational area, but prisoners stated that larger VC units had been there before the landings. Someone told Captain Westervelt—he did not hear it himself—that a Philippine radio station broadcast the news when the ARG departed Subic Bay that the Marines were headed for the Mekong Delta.³

Many other difficulties marred the execution of the combined operation. Communications were bad, rough seas interfered, planning was hurried, and on D plus 1 the 4th Battalion VNMC endured a



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A191246

Two men of BLT 1/9 look out over some of the flooded rice paddies that hampered mobility in Vietnam's Delta region during Operation Deckhouse V in January 1967.

near record-breaking ship-to-shore landing-craft move of 23 miles, rivaled only by some of the U.S. shore-to-shore operations in the Pacific during World War II. Captain Westervelt recalled these difficulties:

The Navy aspects of the Deckhouse V landings were formidable. Normal operating depths of water for the LPH, LPD and other deep draft ships in the Amphibious Ready Group were about 8 to 10 miles to seaward off the coastal areas of Kien Hoa between the Co Chien and Ham Loung Rivers. The 8-inch gun cruiser *Canberra* had a fire support station some eight miles, as I recall, from the impact areas for her pre-assault bombardment. Water depths adequate for LST and rocket ship passage over the shallow bar into positions for the assault landings obtained only at high tide. Because an early morning landing time was required for the Marine assault forces in the LVTs vehicles, this meant that, to protect the surprise features of the landings, the LSTs and rocket ships had to proceed over the bar late in the preceding evening at high tide to be in position by dawn. . . .

The long distance off-shore required by the principal ARG ships plus the fact that some landing beaches were well upstream from the seaward beaches accounted for the long boat rides (up to 23 miles) required for some of the troops.

The seas were very rough on the original D-Day (4 Jan) and again on 5 Jan, so the actual D-Day on 6 Jan was 2

days late. However, even on the 6th it was not possible to load the [Vietnamese Marines] from the *Henrico* into LCM6's alongside, so *Henrico*, *Thomaston* and *Vancouver* returned to Vung Tau, transferred *Henrico*'s troops to the LPD and LSD so loading could take place in the well decks. The [Vietnamese Marines] actually landed on the 7th.^{4*}

The operation encountered problems at an even higher level. Amphibious doctrine called for the amphibious task force commander to control all aircraft in the amphibious operations area. Normally, these aircraft would come from the Navy and Marine Corps. The location of Deckhouse V created special circumstances, however, that dictated that all air support come from the Seventh Air Force. As Brigadier General John R. Chaisson later recalled, the commander of Seventh Air Force, Major General William W. Momyer, agreed with Navy control of aircraft in a traditional amphibious assault against a hostile shore. In the Mekong Delta, however, with the Air Force air control system already in place, General Momyer saw no valid reason to change the existing system just because an amphibious force

*See Chapter 12 for the U.S. Marine advisors' accounts of the VNMC participation in Deckhouse V.

temporarily was operating in the area. General Westmoreland backed the Navy in this argument in this case but all future SLF operations were to be in the I Corps area where such complicated command relationships could be avoided.⁵

Deckhouse VI/Desoto

16 February - 3 March 1967

During late January the two main components of the SLF changed. Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth E. Huntington's HMM-363 relieved HMM-362 and Lieutenant Colonel Jack Westerman's BLT 1/4 replaced BLT 1/9. Sailing from the Philippines, the newly constituted SLF arrived off the coast of Vietnam on the 14th of February.

While the SLF underwent its transition, significant changes occurred in I Corps. To release more ARVN troops for pacification work, U.S. Marine Task Force X-Ray, commanded by Brigadier General William A. Stiles, relieved Vietnamese troops of combat duties in southern Quang Ngai Province in January. General Stiles promptly initiated Operation Desoto, a search and destroy operation directed against known Communist strongholds in the region. To augment Desoto, the SLF received orders to operate in an area south of Task Force X-Ray's AO. The SLF operation was Deckhouse VI. As in Deckhouse V, Colonel Wortman commanded the SLF and Captain Westervelt, the ARG.⁶

The mission assigned to the SLF ground element, BLT 1/4, called for it to disrupt enemy movement in the Sa Huynh salt flats, search northward in the Nui Dau area, and, finally, link up with the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, then operating around Nui Dau in Operation Desoto.

At 0800 on 16 February, two rocket-firing landing ships started the naval gunfire preparation for the Deckhouse VI landings. Fifty-five minutes later, the first wave of HMM-363's helicopters lifted off the deck of the *Iwo Jima* and headed inland with the assault company, Company A. Company C landed in LVTs near Tach By and helicopters ferried the rest of the battalion inland. The landings were unopposed.

Brigadier General Louis Metzger, the commanding general of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade based on Okinawa, was there to observe this landing and commented later on the assault phase. He wrote:

Because of the insistence of MACV a NOTAM [Notice to Airmen] was published several days before each amphibious operation, I suppose to protect any commercial air in the area. It didn't take a very effective intelligence system for the Viet Cong and/or NVA to know just where and when a landing was going to take place. Secondly, I was concerned that even though this landing was taking place in a populated area, the amphibious force carried out routine naval gunfire and air strikes. . . . Civilian casualties did result. Following the operation, I discussed the matter with Commander 7th Fleet [Admiral John H. Hyland] and he supported my position. At least as long as I was CG 9th MAB the NGF and Air Strikes in future landings in populated areas were on call.⁷

Captain Westervelt later commented on a number of problems encountered during the assault landing in Deckhouse VI. He wrote:

Deckhouse VI was treated as a regular assault landing complete with heavy pre-assault fires for the boat landings. In retrospect, because of the U.S. Army forces operating just to the south and west and U.S. Marines operating to the north and west of the assault area, the pre-assault fires should have been "on call." There were weather problems at Deckhouse VI when heavy fog and rain obscured the landing zones on D-Day and caused a one-day postponement. Surface landings could have been carried out. The cruiser firing pre-assault fires commenced fire in spite of D-Day cancellation and probably gave some indication to any VC in the area that something unusual might be scheduled. However, this was improbable because the area was normally frequented by gunfire support destroyers.

The population of the villages just south of Sa Huynh congregated on the eastern face of a ridge, which sloped up from the boat landing area, to watch the Marine landing show. Originally, the pre-assault fires had included this area, but this had been changed on the advice of a representative from the Province Chief's staff on board the flagship. He pointed with a dirty finger to the ridge and forced out his interpretation of "Friend" in English. We took him at his word and put those particular fires "on call."⁸

The opening phase of Deckhouse VI was uneventful. The SLF planners had suspected this would be the case. True to form, local Communist units concentrated on delaying and harassing tactics. The BLT confirmed the Communist presence in the area by destroying 167 fortifications and capturing 20 tons of assorted supplies during the 32 days of Phase I. Though there never were any major contacts, the BLT claimed 201 VC killed during this period; only six Marines died. Unfortunately, on 25 February, the HMM-363 commander, Lieutenant Colonel Huntington, and his copilot received wounds during a troop lift; the squadron executive officer, Major Marvin E. Day, assumed command on the 28th and continued in command for the duration of



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A191174

Heavy monsoon rains flooded the wide expanse of rice paddies through which these Marines are wading during Operation Deckhouse VI near the coast in February 1967.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A191131

A member of Company A, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines hits the deck as his unit comes under fire in Landing Zone Bat during Deckhouse VI, the SLF's companion piece to Operation Desoto in February.

Deckhouse VI. Phase I ended on 26 February when the SLF Commander, Colonel Wortman, ordered a tactical withdrawal of the SLF from the Sa Huynh area to its ships to prepare for Phase II.

Only 14 and one-half hours after the last element of the battalion left the Sa Huynh salt flats, the SLF landed again, this time 10 kilometers north of Sa Huynh. Phase II of Deckhouse VI, by now integrated as part of the combined 7th Marines and ARVN Operation Desoto, started at 0830 on 27 February.

As the SLF helicopters approached LZ Bat, five miles inland from the beach, they met heavy fire

which hit eight of the 14 helicopters in the assault lift, and put six out of action. All other loaded helicopters diverted to the beach area while supporting Marine aircraft strafed and rocketed the VC defenders. Fortunately for the isolated Marines of the assault element, the Communists pulled out and that afternoon the rest of the battalion linked up with its first wave. By dark the BLT had consolidated near LZ Bat and began preparations for the next day's search and destroy operation.

Other than the opposed landing at LZ Bat, Phase

Infantrymen from BLT 1/4 rush a wounded Marine to a waiting CH-34D helicopter from HMM-363 for a flight to the amphibious ship USS Iwo Jima on 23 February 1967 during Operation Deckhouse VI.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188499



II action almost repeated Phase I. Occasional contact and intermittent sniper fire marked the only enemy reactions. In the six days required to accomplish the second phase, the battalion killed 78 more VC, destroyed 145 fortifications, and captured an additional five tons of supplies. Similarly, as in Phase I, the price totaled six more Marines dead. Deckhouse VI concluded on 3 March and the SLF promptly sailed for the Philippines; it returned to Vietnam, however, long before the month ended.

Beacon Hill I

20 March - 1 April 1967

In the spring of 1967, III MAF faced a growing Communist capability to overrun the Marine base at Gio Linh and its appealing prize of four 175mm guns. Units of the 3d Marine Division committed to Operation Prairie remained thinly spread over an extremely large area. Still more unsettling, intelligence sources reported five NVA infantry battalions in or near the eastern portion of the DMZ.

In response to this threat, the SLF, offshore since 14 March, went into action once more on the 20th.* Lieutenant Colonel Westerman's BLT 1/4, and HMM-363 commanded by newly-promoted Lieutenant Colonel Day, the former squadron executive officer, landed on the coast north of the Cua Viet. Operation Beacon Hill had begun.

*The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing reinforced HMM-363 with a detachment of UH-1Es and CH-53s.

A Navy hospital corpsman with Company D, 4th Marines treats a wounded Marine under fire in Operation Beacon Hill north of Cua Viet in March.

3d MarDiv ComdC, March 1967



3d MarDiv ComdC, March 1967

An unshaven Marine rifleman carefully removes enemy equipment from a bunker in the North Vietnamese defense line destroyed in Operation Beacon Hill by BLT 1/4 on 26 March after an intense two-day preliminary bombardment by air and artillery.

Contact was light until 21 March when the BLT engaged about 80 NVA troops, killing 14. The next day the battalion made contact again between Gio Linh and Con Thien. After a stiff fight the enemy, apparently a company, withdrew leaving 43 bodies behind. Progress during both days was slow because the NVA laced their positions with connecting tunnels which required detailed search.

On the 26th, after a two-day air and artillery preparation, the BLT broke through two well-prepared defensive trench lines. Again, the Marines encountered interconnecting tunnels. Finding the tunnels required care because the enemy had concealed them skillfully among the hedgerows. As the battalion cracked the position, the Communists again withdrew. Only sniper fire and minor rear guard actions slowed the advancing Marines. On 28 March, BLT 1/4 shifted to the operational control of the 3d Marines and occupied a blocking position 1,300 meters south of the Con Thien perimeter in support of a 3d Marines attack. This was the last phase of Beacon Hill and the operation ended on 1 April.

Beacon Hill results appeared promising. Although BLT 1/4 had suffered 29 Marines killed and 230 wounded, it reported 334 NVA dead even though the Communists had fought from positions which were difficult to identify, much less exploit.

With the end of Beacon Hill, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines transferred from the SLF to the 3d Marine Division. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines,



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188496

LCpl Claude Tucker stands guard while the commanders of the two Special Landing Forces, Col Henry D. Wortman (center) of SLF Bravo and Col James A. Gallo of SLF Alpha look over a suspected Viet Cong on the first day of Operation Deckhouse VI.

commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Wendell N. Vest, a regular line battalion scheduled for rehabilitation on Okinawa, started loading on board the empty ships of the ARG shipping on 2 April. The transports sailed on the 5th.

While this exchange of units, ships, and roles took place, Marines on Okinawa were implementing the twin SLF concept. HMM-363 and the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines joined SLF Alpha (Task Group 79.4) and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and HMM-164 became part of SLF Bravo (Task Group 79.5) battalion. Task Group 79.5 had operated as the single SLF since 1965, but during the transitional period of March-April 1967, TG 79.5, now designated SLF Bravo, went through a standdown phase. Neither of the SLFs were in an offshore ready position during early April 1967. SLF Alpha, on board the ARG ships which sailed on 10 April, arrived on station near the DMZ on the 18th. The ships carrying SLF Bravo followed shortly thereafter, sailing on 17 April.⁹

Beacon Star

22 April - 12 May 1967

Beacon Star was the first operation for newly

designated SLF Bravo. As Navy Captain Richard L. Cochrane's ARG steamed toward northern I CTZ, Colonel Wortman, the SLF commander since September 1966, experienced normal prelanding doubts and anxieties. One reassuring factor was that both of his major subordinate units were I Corps veterans. The helicopter squadron, HMM-164, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Rodney D. McKittrick, had been in Vietnam since February 1966, and Lieutenant Colonel Earl R. Delong's BLT 2/3 originally arrived "in country" in May of 1965. Additional confidence stemmed from the fact that the BLT had just come from a one-month rehabilitation period on Okinawa. It was at full strength and all equipment was ready for combat.

The target area for Beacon Star was a major VC stronghold and supply area along the border of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. The small O Lau River is the natural terrain feature which delineates the provincial borders in the coastal region. The center of the Beacon Star amphibious objective area (AOA) was 27 kilometers northwest of Hue, on the edge of what French soldiers called "*La Rue Sans Joie*," or "The Street Without Joy." The



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193880

Col James A. Gallo briefs senior Marines on 7 May on SLF Alpha's progress in Operation Beacon Star near the border of Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. Prominent among the officers present are (seated, left) LtGen Victor H. Krulak and MajGen Robert E. Cushman, Jr. MajGen Herman Nickerson, Jr. and BGen Foster C. Lahue stand at left.

AOA was known for its heavy concentration of Communists; intelligence officers reported two battalions of the 6th Regiment and two main force battalions, the 810th and the 814th, were operating in the region.

The Beacon Star scheme of maneuver consisted of a waterborne and heliborne BLT landing on the coast. The battalion was to move inland, generally following the O Lau River, while, at the same time, gradually expanding its TAOR in a southwesterly direction.

Bad weather and poor visibility delayed operations on D-day, 22 April, but the first heliborne company landed at 0809. It met no opposition.* Beacon Star progressed according to plan; enemy resistance was minimal. On D plus four the battalion launched a combined helicopter and overland assault in the southwestern portion of the expanded TAOR to attack an estimated 250 VC spotted in the target area. Unfortunately, the BLT was not able to capitalize on this intelligence.

Urgent orders from the Commander Task Group 79.5 interrupted Beacon Star. The Phase I casualties, one killed and 10 wounded, would seem insignificant in the face of what happened in the next 24

hours. The new SLF Bravo was about to undergo its first real combat test. On 26 April, the name Khe Sanh was just another place name to many of Lieutenant Colonel Delong's Marines; by mid-March those who survived would never forget it.

While Phase I of Beacon Star proceeded, the Marines of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines discovered strong Communist formations in the hills west of Khe Sanh, 43 miles from the Beacon Star area. Realizing that one battalion could not carry the hill mass, the 3d Marine Division commander, Major General Hochmuth, ordered BLT 2/3 to break off operations in the original Beacon Star AOA and proceed to Khe Sanh.

The tactical move to Khe Sanh was a transportation triumph. At 1200 on the 26th, the division placed BLT 2/3, in the field and in contact with the enemy, under the operational control of the 3d Marines. By 1400, three of the BLT's companies and the command group were at Khe Sanh, and by 1600 the BLT effected a link-up with elements of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines northwest of the Khe Sanh perimeter. The BLT moved by helicopter from the Beacon Star AOA to Phu Bai, and from Phu Bai to Khe Sanh by Marine and U.S. Air Force KC-130 and C-130 Hercules transports. The total elapsed time from receipt of the warning order until the link-up near Khe Sanh totaled less than seven hours.

The second phase of Beacon Star is more commonly known as "The Khe Sanh Hill Fights" or the "First

*BLT 2/3 suffered approximately 60 heat casualties within about a three-hour period after landing. Colonel Rodney D. McKittrick later cited such incidents as part of the justification for the placing of an acclimatization room in the new *Tawara* class LHAs. Colonel Rodney D. McKittrick, Comments on draft ms, n.d. (1981) (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

Battle of Khe Sanh.”* The BLT’s casualties during the period 27 April-12 May gave evidence of the violence of the fighting for the Khe Sanh hills. During these weeks the BLT lost 71 killed and 349 wounded, more than a fourth of its strength. Of the 78 Navy corpsmen assigned to the BLT, five died and 15 suffered wounds.

The fighting at Khe Sanh tapered off in May and SLF Bravo’s BLT 2/3 transferred from the 3d Marines’ operational control back to the SLF. The return to ARG ships started on 10 May and finished on the 12th, signaling the official end of Beacon Star.

Beaver Cage/Union I

28 April - 12 May 1967

The other special landing force, SLF Alpha, formed on Okinawa on 1 March 1967 under the command of Colonel James A. Gallo, Jr. The new SLF contained BLT 1/3, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. “Pete” Wickwire, and HMM-263, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Edward K. Kirby. Both the helicopter squadron and the battalion

*For a detailed account of the bitter contest for Hills 558, 861, 881 North, and 881 South, see Chapter 4.

A 60mm mortar crew with Company A, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines fires against a North Vietnamese Army unit on 20 May during Operation Beau Charger, the SLF’s portion of Operation Hickory which cleared the southern portion of the DMZ.

3d MarDiv ComdC, May 1967



3d MarDiv ComdC, May 1967

2dLt John V. Francis, wearing no shirt under his armored vest because of the intense heat encountered in Operation Beaver Cage, takes a short break on 12 May as BLT 1/3 concludes its initial SLF operation.

had just finished rehabilitation periods on Okinawa and were at full strength. Departing from Okinawa on 10 April, the ARG, with SLF Alpha embarked, headed for Vietnam and made its first landing on the 28th.

The target for the first SLF Alpha landing, Operation Beaver Cage, was the rich and populous Que Son Valley, 25 miles south of Da Nang, important to the Communists as a source of both food and manpower. Beaver Cage started at 0700 28 April as the first heliborne elements of BLT 1/3 touched down. For the next four days heat caused more casualties than the enemy as operations continued against negligible opposition.

Moving to a more promising operational area five miles to the north, the BLT made its first significant contact on 2 May. An enemy force, at least a platoon, attacked Company C as it dug in for the night. After dark, USAF AC-47 “Puff the Dragon” gunships and “Spooky” flare planes, Marine artillery, and the BLT’s own supporting arms pounded the suspected Communist positions. The enemy fled.

The next morning the battalion resumed its sweeping operations. The enemy did not react until 5 May. That night the VC struck back, hitting the BLT headquarters and support elements with mortar and small arms fire as they evacuated a landing zone. The Headquarters and Service Company troops and



the attached Marines of 4.2-inch Mortar Battery, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines, repulsed the Communists. Despite the intensity of the attack and reduced visibility caused by oncoming darkness, Lieutenant Colonel Kirby's helicopters successfully extracted 200 men and more than 1 and one-half tons of ammunition without loss.

To the north, while BLT 1/3 conducted Beaver Cage, the 5th Marines engaged in Operation Union I. On 9 May the Beaver Cage scheme of maneuver reoriented to include an eastward sweep toward the coast coordinated with the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines on the BLT's right. In this manner the final stage of Beaver Cage became a part of the Union I plan, although the BLT designed its maneuver to place it in position for an amphibious withdrawal.* During the last week of the operation, 6-12 May, the BLT endured continuous mortar attacks and sniper fire.

On 10 May, as the eastward sweep continued, Companies B and C engaged in a day-long action with a sizable VC force. After much maneuvering, air strikes, mortar missions, and the insertion of a 40-man Sparrow Hawk unit, the VC broke off the action, but only after the BLT killed 86 enemy soldiers. Beaver Cage/Union I ended for the SLF Alpha units on 12 May as they returned to their respective ships.

The first operation for SLF Alpha had been a costly venture, but all units had demonstrated their fighting qualities. Battalion casualties totaled 55 Marines killed and 151 wounded, but in 16 days of continuous operations the BLT claimed 181 enemy dead and a bag of 66 prisoners. The next test of SLF Alpha was only five days away.

Beau Charger/Belt Tight/Hickory

PrairieIV/Cimarron

18 May - 10 June 1967

Because of the Communist rocket and artillery buildup in the DMZ during the spring of 1967, General Westmoreland issued a directive authorizing the entry of forces into the DMZ buffer zone south of the Ben Hai River, actually South Vietnamese territory. The authorization triggered planning for a series of simultaneous operations to be conducted in the new maneuver area, one by ARVN forces and three by the U.S. Marines. The code names for these operations were Hickory for 3d

Marine Division units, Beau Charger for SLF Alpha, Belt Tight for SLF Bravo, and Lam Son 54 for the South Vietnamese task force.* The overall concept envisioned the movement of SLF Bravo into the Hickory Operation by means of Operation Belt Tight, while SLF Alpha was to operate east of the Hickory/Lam Son 54 operational areas under the aegis of Beau Charger. The Beau Charger/Belt Tight/Hickory plan was unique in that it called for the employment of both SLFs in the same operational area at the same time.

The opening scheme of maneuver called for the movement of three separate assault forces to the Ben Hai River where they were to face about and drive south on roughly parallel axes, destroying all enemy units and installations in their paths. The plan included the establishment of a free-fire zone which would require the evacuation of more than 10,000 noncombatants from the buffer zone, a monumental task assigned to the Vietnamese National Police.

D-day for Beau Charger, SLF Alpha's show, was 18 May. Fifteen UH-34s of Lieutenant Colonel Kirby's HMM-263 lifted from the flight deck of the USS *Okinawa* (LPH-3) and headed inland, each loaded with five Marines from the assault element, Company A, BLT 1/3. L-hour was 0800. The landing zone, Goose, was less than six kilometers from the North Vietnamese boundary of the DMZ, and almost within small arms range of the north bank of the Ben Hai River.

The SLF planners studied aerial photographs of the terrain before the operation, but conducted no prelanding overflights to preserve secrecy. For the same reason, they requested no air and naval gunfire preparations of the LZ. Intelligence sources had reported the presence of many enemy antiaircraft machine guns in the area.

Flying lead, Kirby led his 34s toward the potentially dangerous zone, flying at altitudes of less than 50 feet to reduce the enemy gunners' effectiveness. A maximum speed approach, about 80 knots, lack of prominent landmarks, and the tenseness of the situation made navigation difficult at best. Kirby landed at the north end of the zone, but as he did machine gun fire ripped into his helicopter. The enemy bullets wrecked the helicopter's radio and wounded the copilot, crew chief, gunner, and three infantrymen. Another infantryman, killed, fell out of the helicopter. The wounded gunner returned fire

*See Chapter 3 for the 5th Marines' account of Union I.

*The non-SLF operations appeared in Chapter 1.

and, as Kirby later related, “. . . saved [our] bacon.”¹⁰

Kirby managed to get the helicopter back in the air, but without a radio he had no contact with the rest of his flight or with the *Okinawa*. Four other UH-34s in the assault wave and two escorting UH-1Es suffered damage from enemy fire, but the entire wave unloaded its troops. As soon as Kirby got his crippled helicopter back to the *Okinawa*, he briefed the SLF commander, Colonel Gallo, on the bad situation at LZ Goose. Colonel Gallo ordered the cancellation of all further lifts to Goose and the substitution of the alternate LZ, Owl, 800 meters south of Goose. The assault element of Company A at Goose was very much alone and in trouble.

Second Lieutenant Dwight G. Faylor's 2d Platoon, Company A spread over 800 yards at LZ Goose. A well-organized enemy force pressed his thinly held position from the northwest. The BLT naval gunfire liaison officer, Ensign John W. McCormick, vainly tried to call in naval gunfire. The ships denied his requests; no one was certain of the exact location of friendly positions and in many cases the enemy was too close to use naval guns without endangering the Marines. Rescue was on the way, but the Marines at Goose were in desperate straits.

While the abortive assault at LZ Goose was taking place, Company D landed in LVTs at Green Beach, 900 meters southeast of LZ Owl. This landing was unopposed. By 0855, the remainder of Company A had landed at Owl. Overland reinforcements arrived at Owl in the form of one platoon from Company D and a section of tanks. At 0930 the lead elements of Company B began landing. The force at Owl then moved out to rescue the beleaguered platoon at LZ Goose.

By 1100 the rescue force had regained contact with Faylor's platoon, but the enemy showed no signs of breaking off the engagement. Company B joined the fighting at Goose and the tempo of battle increased. Stymied by a tenaciously held trenchline, the Company A Marines tried another avenue of attack. Moving against the Communist position under the cover of a tree line, the Marines engaged enemy soldiers in furious hand-to-hand fighting. Company A's advance bogged down again and the infantrymen called in close air support to crack the tough position. Eleven jets blasted the entrenched Communists and finally both Companies A and B, supported by tanks, moved forward. As the fighting

died down, the Marines counted 67 Communist bodies.

Belt Tight started on 20 May. The initial mission of SLF Bravo was to land in the northeastern corner of the 3d Division's Hickory operational area and conduct search and destroy operations within a designated TAOR.* At 0714 on the 20th, Companies F and H with a BLT 2/3 command group started landing at LZ Parrot. Companies E and G followed with another command group landing at LZ Mockingbird at 0850. The initial enemy reaction was deceptive; the Marines encountered only light resistance.

The general trace of SLF Bravo's sweep in its TAOR was in a southerly direction. The Hickory planners wanted the SLF to dislodge enemy units in the area, thereby driving them into 3d Division units moving up from the south. Neither the 3d Marine Division nor SLF Bravo ever determined how many enemy troops Belt Tight displaced, but the SLF experienced four days of close combat during the operation, certainly an indication that its presence had a spoiling effect on enemy intentions. Throughout the Belt Tight period, BLT 2/3 encountered well-trained enemy troops who fought with skill and determination. The enemy's soundly constructed positions and excellent weapons employ-

*A description of 3d Marine Division participation in Operation Hickory appears in Chapter 1.

Two riflemen from BLT 1/3 pass carefully through a Vietnamese village while on Operation Beaver Cage.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371988



ment caused severe problems for the battalion as it fought its way south. During one of the many mortar attacks, Lieutenant Colonel Delong, the BLT commander, aggravated an old back injury which necessitated his evacuation. His experienced executive officer, Major Wendell O. Beard, a former Amphibious Warfare School instructor who joined the battalion in February, took command.

Belt Tight ended at 1559, 23 May 1967. At this time BLT 2/3 shifted to the operational control of the 9th Marines which assigned the BLT a new area of operations as part of Operation Hickory, representing a continuation of the Belt Tight sweep. Until Hickory ended at midnight on the 28th, the battalion continued its deliberate sweep operations. The highlight of this period was a sharp engagement between Company E, commanded by Captain Stuart R. Vaughan, and a determined NVA force defending the village of Xuan Hai. The battle started on the afternoon of the 24th and did not end until the Marines completed a detailed sweep of the village ruins at 2155 on the following day. The enemy force had built 40 defensive bunkers in and around the town. Company E destroyed them and counted 27 dead NVA soldiers on the site. SLF casualties were light during the nine days of Belt Tight/Hickory, considering the fact that the battalion was either in contact or under artillery attack during most of the period. SLF Bravo had 17 Marines killed and 152 wounded. North Vietnamese losses totaled a confirmed 58 killed and one prisoner taken by the Marines.

When Hickory finished on 28 May, BLT 2/3 remained in the field, still under the operational control of the 9th Marines. During the next three days the battalion participated in Operation Prairie IV which ended on the 31st. The BLT's assignment involved primarily a security operation in relief of both the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines and the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. BLT 2/3 protected artillery positions immediately north of the Cam Lo Bridge, the bridge itself, and provided route security for both truck convoys and engineer units on Route 561 from north of the Cam Lo Bridge to Con Thien, an air distance of slightly over 10 kilometers.

Although the Prairie IV assignment was of short duration, the end of the operation did not eliminate the security requirements for Route 561 and nearby positions. As a consequence, SLF Bravo, still under operational control of the 9th Marines, retained its Prairie IV mission as part of a new 3d Division plan,

Operation Cimarron. Cimarron lasted from 1 June until 2 July, though SLF Bravo's involvement lasted only through 10 June.

The SLF participation in Cimarron succeeded, in the sense that there was no local enemy activity. The enemy stayed away, the road remained open, and Con Thien maintained its defensive integrity. The BLT spent 9-10 June reorganizing and moving back to Dong Ha combat base. Reembarkation on the 11th marked the end of the longest SLF combat deployment ashore since its formation, 23 days of continuous operations. The shipboard respite would be short; SLF Bravo would land again in only a week's time.

Day On, Stay On—SLF Operational Tempo Increases

The spring and early summer of 1967 challenged the flexibility of the SLF concept in I Corps. Variations ranged from SLF Bravo's April "fire brigade" action at Khe Sanh during Operation Beacon Star to dull, but necessary, "housekeeping" duties assigned to BLT 2/3 during its 10 days with Operation Cimarron. As the year progressed, SLF operational commitments increased, not only in frequency, but also in days ashore. During the first four months of 1967, the average number of days of monthly combat commitment for a SLF was only 12.* SLF Alpha's Operation Beaver Cage landing in April signaled a drastic increase in operational tempo. The May combat-day average jumped to 16 and one-half days per BLT, while June operations resulted in a new high of 22 days for SLF Alpha and 24 for SLF Bravo.

The remainder of the year reflected a much heavier reliance on the SLFs. Average commitments remained above the 20-days-per-month figure. Not only did the number of combat days increase, but the number of individual operations involving the SLFs more than doubled.

The reasons for the increase in tempo were not related to a single cause. The forthcoming Vietnamese National elections, continuing Communist unit moves in northern I Corps, and offensive sweeps to protect Marine fire support bases were only some of the factors which demanded SLF participation.

*SLF Bravo provided the basis for this computation because of SLF Alpha's late entry into RVN, in April 1967. SLF Bravo's combat days by month in early 1967 were: January, 10; February, 13; March, 15; and April, 10.

Even though many of the SLF operations were inconclusive, their harried staffs deserve tribute. In spite of the stepped-up operational tempo of 1967, the SLF planners kept abreast of the often confusing, and always demanding, I Corps tactical situation.

Bear Bite/Colgate/Choctaw/Maryland

2 - 5 June, 7 - 11 June,

12 - 23 June, 23 - 27 June 1967

Bear Bite, a conventional LVT and helicopter assault, was the first of SLF Alpha's June operations. It targeted the Viet Cong operating along the coast 40 kilometers southeast of the DMZ in the "The Street Without Joy" region. Starting at 0730 on 2 June, BLT 1/3 spent the next 72 hours probing and destroying unoccupied enemy positions. Enemy snipers and a troublesome Marine tank stuck in a paddy were the only hindrances to the operation. There were no SLF casualties, but the Marines killed only two of the enemy and picked up nine suspects. On 5 June the BLT returned to the 4th Marines' perimeter by helicopter.

Two days later, the battalion moved out again on the uneventful Operation Colgate. During the intervening day the new SLF Alpha commander, Colonel John A. Conway, assumed command. The subsequent Operation Choctaw, southwest of the Bear Bite AOA, involved 11 days of tedious sweeps west of Route 1 along the Thac Ma River. About as productive as Bear Bite, Choctaw netted only 15 more detainees and nine enemy killed. Nineteen Marines suffered wounds. At 1300 on 23 June the last elements of the battalion returned from the field to the 4th Marines' Camp Evans, 23 kilometers northwest of Hue.

When it started Operation Maryland on 25 June, BLT 1/3 moved by helicopters into the same general area where it had been for Colgate. The battalion's zone of action included the southwestern edge of the grave-covered Maryland area. Elements of a VC battalion operated in the region. The Marine battalion did not find them, but ARVN units advancing from the north encountered what probably were two VC companies. The ARVN units killed 114 Communists. In its own zone, the BLT killed seven Communists, took 35 prisoners, and salvaged almost nine tons of rice at the cost of three Marines wounded. By mid-morning on the 27th, the BLT departed the area in helicopters as Maryland ended after four weeks of probing graves and tunnels. On 28 June,

HMM-362, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nick J. Kapetan, relieved HMM-263 as the SLF Alpha helicopter squadron, and the next day the BLT reembarked.¹¹

June was a trying time for SLF Alpha. Four separate operations, none of which achieved significant results, could only be called "good experience." For the Marines of the SLF, the loss of three men and the wounding of 51 others served as a terse reminder of the price of experience. The SLF Alpha BLT now had six operations to its credit, and, since its first landing on 28 April, it had killed 307 Communists.

Beacon Torch/Calhoun

18 June - 2 July, 25 June - 2 July 1967

Operation Beacon Torch placed SLF Bravo south of Da Nang in the coastal region near the Quang Nam and Quang Tin provincial border. A conventional search and destroy operation, Beacon Torch covered an enemy-controlled area east of the Troung Giang River and southeast of the city of Hoi An.

A companion operation, Calhoun, targeted against the "Pagoda Valley" west of the Beacon Torch AOA, started on 25 June. The area received this name because of the many small pagodas on the valley floor. III MAF suspected "Pagoda Valley" of being a Communist forward logistic base. In essence, BLT 2/3 phased into Calhoun and, when Calhoun ended, it withdrew as originally planned in Beacon Torch.

Beacon Torch started at 0630 on 18 June as assault elements of Company F, followed by Command Group Alpha landed in what the helicopter pilots thought was LZ Cardinal. Actually, the heliborne troops landed 2,000 meters south of Cardinal. Company H landed at what the pilots believed was LZ Wren. It, too, landed in the wrong place and 2,000 meters south of its planned starting position.

While the first heliborne companies untangled their LZ problems, Company G landed on Red Beach, followed by the 2d Platoon (Reinforced), Company A, 3d Tank Battalion. Once the squadron resolved the LZ location problems, it lifted Company E into the correct LZ Cardinal.

Company H made the first contact at 0930. Light encounters continued throughout the day until 1540 when Company H engaged about 100 enemy troops. In the ensuing firefight, 43 of Company H's Marines succumbed to nonbattle causes; most were heat casualties. The enemy killed five Marines and wounded 14 while the Communists left 23 bodies

behind. The enemy disengaged at sunset.

The BLT moved out again on the 19th. Small actions flared up throughout the day and the advancing Marines began discovering hidden enemy food stocks.

After another quiet night, the BLT renewed sweep operations at 0845 on the 20th when Company E crossed the Troung Giang River. That afternoon, Company H had great difficulty fording the Troung Giang, but by late afternoon the battalion began moving westward again. Scattered contact continued west of the river for the next three days. The highlight of this period was Company E's discovery of three tons of rice and two tons of potatoes early on the morning of the 24th. At 0600, 25 June, Operation Beacon Torch phased into Operation Calhoun.

By 1300, 25 June Company E had discovered another 1,000 pounds rice and at 1600 Company G uncovered a two-ton cache. The rice hunt continued and on the 26th the Marines bagged and helilifted another 7,600 pounds to the ARVN-controlled town of Dien Ban, nine kilometers west of Hoi An. The largest single find of the operation was a five-ton cache discovered by Company F on the morning of the 27th. Complementing this discovery, Company G, assisted by ARVN troops, rounded up and evacuated 84 stray cattle.

Minor skirmishes and the detention of scattered suspects continued until Calhoun ended at 1200, 1 July. Reverting to the Beacon Torch plan, the BLT began its retraction. As the last units returned to their respective ships, Beacon Torch ended at 1300, 2 July.

Beacon Torch/Calhoun hurt the Communists in central I Corps. The BLT captured more than 40 tons of rice and other food stocks, over 31 of which they evacuated for ARVN use. The rest they destroyed in place. The BLT's casualty ratio was favorable. Eighty-six enemy died in contrast to only 13 SLF Marines. The BLT suffered 123 nonbattle casualties.

Beacon Torch/Calhoun, however, had no lasting impact, as emphasized by the fact that the departing Marines sighted enemy troops near the beach area during the retraction. The Communists could not afford to lose control of the population and immediately reoccupied the area to repair the damage caused by the operation.

SLF Alpha in Bear Claw/Buffalo/Hickory II

3 - 16 July 1967

The first two days of July, SLF Alpha on board the

ships of TG 76.4, prepared for Operation Bear Claw, a proposed landing in eastern Quang Tri Province. The SLF cancelled Bear Claw at 0100 on the 3rd when it received orders alerting BLT 1/3 for immediate employment in the 9th Marines TAOR at Con Thien. The 9th Marines was in trouble.

Lieutenant Colonel Richard J. "Spike" Schening's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines provided the security of the Con Thien perimeter. Two of the battalion's companies, A and B, on patrol a mile and a half northeast of Con Thien, had discovered a large NVA force, at least two battalions of the *90th NVA Regiment*. The initial contact took place as the Marine companies were trying to link up. In this awkward situation, the North Vietnamese managed to punish each company separately. Additionally, the Communists hit the Marines with massed artillery fire from north of the DMZ. Casualties mounted on both sides as the battle intensified. Company B lost most of its officers; the company commander, his FO, the FAC, and two platoon commanders were casualties.*

Responding to this serious situation, Lieutenant Colonel Schening committed Company C, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, reinforced by tanks. The action intensified as the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines arrived from Dong Ha to help regain control of the situation. At this stage, III MAF requested SLF Alpha. Similarly, SLF Bravo, also at sea, went on alert. The mission assigned to SLF Alpha during Operation Buffalo, the name given the continuing engagement with the *90th NVA Regiment*, was to tie in to the right flank of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines and sweep the battle area to recover 1st Battalion, 9th Marines' casualties.

The original 0100 warning order for SLF Alpha preceded a regimental briefing at 0700 which set L-hour at 1030. After much frenzied action on the part of the SLF, the launch took place on schedule. Throughout the late morning of 3 July, Lieutenant Colonel Kapetan's HMM-362 flew BLT 1/3 into the zone of action, supplemented by CH-46s from SLF Bravo's HMM-164.¹² Unfortunately, the lead assault elements of the BLT landed 2,500 meters south of the designated landing zone, a mile southeast of Con Thien. Readjusting the battalion cost valuable time. The first physical contact with the right flank of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines occurred at 1315. By the time all of BLT 1/3 had moved into the cor-

*See Chapter 5 for additional description of this action.

rect positions, however, the level of fighting had waned, and only Communist gunners remained active. The night of 3-4 July was relatively quiet, as was the next day. The 5th opened with an early morning enemy mortar attack against Companies A and C. Exchanges of artillery and mortar fire punctuated most of the day. The battalion continued its sweep operation. On the 6th, enemy rockets knocked out a Marine tank. The fighting around the disabled tank became so savage that the BLT did not reach the burnt-out hulk until 1000 on the 7th of July. The Marines recovered the bodies of the crew early the next morning.

At 1330, 8 July, the BLT received orders to make an immediate withdrawal. This was a challenging operation even under ideal circumstances. Wickwire's battalion faced a dangerous situation. There were five complications: it was daylight; the battalion was in contact; the withdrawal would occur over 600 meters of open ground; two of the attached tanks were crippled; and the battalion had just received resupplies and had no organic transport to move the vital, though cumbersome, material. A sixth factor added to the BLT's problems. Just as the withdrawal began, the Communists opened up with small arms, mortars, and artillery. In spite of these difficulties, the battalion carried out this complex maneuver with only light casualties.

The next four days of Buffalo involved patrolling the Con Thien perimeter. Buffalo ended on the morning of 14 July. The Marines of BLT 1/3 had recovered the bodies of 11 fellow Marines from the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, but their efforts were costly; the BLT's price was eight killed and 179 wounded. Operation Buffalo produced a total of 424 verified North Vietnamese dead for the BLT.

While Buffalo neared its terminal phase, COMUSMACV directed that a followup sweep be conducted of the area south of the DMZ and east of Con Thien. In response, III MAF initiated Operation Hickory II. The plan called for SLF Alpha's BLT 1/3 to move out from its final Buffalo positions with the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines on the BLT's right. The combined force would sweep southward in a search and destroy operation. Three other battalions were to block north and south of the operational area. All Hickory II battalions came under the operational control of the 9th Marines, with the exception of SLF Bravo which served the 3d Marines as a blocking force on the western edge of the sweep zone.

The evening of the first day of Hickory II, BLT 1/3

received orders to move to a phase line approximately 15,000 meters south of its position by 1700 the next day. As a consequence, though the deployed battalion formations remained prepared to engage the enemy, the required speed of advance prevented the battalion from making a detailed search of its zone of action. During Hickory II, BLT 1/3 experienced no enemy contact, and the net result was the capture of 17 suspects. There were no friendly casualties. The operation ended at 1600 on 16 July and the next day SLF Alpha returned to the TG 79.4 ships.

SLF Bravo in Beaver Track/Buffalo/Hickory II

4 - 16 July 1967

When SLF Alpha joined Buffalo on 3 July, SLF Bravo went on standby, and it entered the Buffalo area on 4 July on Operation Beaver Track. At 0640, Major Wendell O. Beard,* the BLT 2/3 commander, and Company H loaded in Lieutenant Colonel Rodney D. McKittrick's Ch-46s and flew off the USS *Tripoli* (LPH 10); destination: Cam Lo. McKittrick's HMM-164 ferried the rest of the battalion to an assembly area north of Cam Lo where the BLT prepared for employment as directed by the 3d Marine Division. At 1300, BLT 2/3, under operational control of its parent regiment, gained the 1st Platoon of Company A, 3d Tank Battalion. The battalion spent the afternoon moving into position in preparation for impending search and destroy operations.

The Beaver Track operation order directed the battalion to move out at 0700 on 5 July and attack northward on a four-kilometer front to a point just south of the southern limit of the DMZ. There, the battalion was to turn and move roughly three kilometers west. During Phase II, a return sweep, the battalion was to maneuver south to the Cam Lo River from its DMZ position, following an axis parallel to but west of the Phase I axis of advance. Friendly units had occupied the area as recently as two days before the start of Beaver Track, but intelligence sources reported that elements of the 29th NVA Regiment were making a reconnaissance of the region.

At 0700, 5 July, Major Beard's troops moved out. As in many similar operations, nothing happened at

*Major Beard's nickname was "Moose," a reference to his size. LtGen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft ms, n.d. (1981) (Comment files, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)



Courtesy of Mrs. Wendell O. Beard

Company H, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines boards CH-46A helicopters from HMM-164 for a flight from the USS Tripoli to Cam Lo on 4 July as SLF Bravo begins Operation Beaver Track, a subsidiary of the 3d Marine Division's Operation Buffalo south of the DMZ.

first. The Marines discovered and demolished abandoned bunkers as the day progressed. By midafternoon, Company E was enduring desultory sniper fire, but no contact developed. That night remained quiet.

The enemy made the first move at 0535 on 6 July with a probe of Company E's perimeter. The Marines met the attack with skillful, coordinated machine gun and artillery fire. The Communists broke off the engagement, leaving 14 bodies behind plus abandoned weapons and equipment. Shortly after the beginning of the fight along the Company E perimeter, 40 NVA mortar rounds hit the BLT command group and Company G, located about four kilometers south of the DMZ. Return fires temporarily silenced the Communist gunners, but at 0800 a Company H patrol less than three kilometers to the northeast also came under mortar fire. Supporting tanks and artillery again silenced the enemy, but not before RPG rounds hit two of the supporting Marine tanks.

At 0930, the enemy struck a Company F patrol with a command-detonated claymore-type mine, and half an hour later, Company G, operating east of Company F, also encountered enemy claymores. A brief flurry of action occurred when the tank pla-

toon commander, 2d Lieutenant Edward P. B. O'Neil, spotted NVA troops in the vicinity of the destroyed town of Nha An Hoa. The tankers' 90mm guns and heavy machine guns accounted for 16 of them. The remainder of the 6th of July reverted to duels between Communist mortars and U. S. artillery.

As the sweep continued on the 7th, the SLF Bravo Marines confronted increasing numbers of enemy bunkers, all deserted, but many showing signs of recent use. The search for the elusive 29th NVA Regiment continued.

July 8th was a day filled with the curious whims of combat. At 0800 a patrol from Company H found a completely stripped UH-34D surrounded with assorted NVA equipment. While these Marines examined their disquieting prize, another Company H patrol was busily engaged destroying captured enemy equipment. Someone or something triggered an unknown explosive device which killed eight Marines. A Company G patrol tripped a "Bouncing Betty"* at 1030; two more Marines died and another received wounds. The tempo of action picked up an

*A "Bouncing Betty" mine, projected upward by a small charge, explodes its main charge at waist level.



Courtesy of Mrs. Wendell O. Beard

A division of CH-46A helicopters from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 164 carries elements of BLT 2/3 to shore from the USS Tripoli during Operation Beaver Track.

hour and a half later when Company G engaged in a sharp action in one of the many Communist bunker complexes. Air and artillery smashed the enemy position. The Company G Marines found 35 NVA bodies in the wreckage after the bombardment.

The fortunes of war smiled on the BLT that afternoon. As the battalion patrol actions continued, Company F executed a classic example of fire and maneuver. One squad, immobilized by enemy automatic weapons fire coming from a well-developed position, became a pivot for the rest of the company. The Marines fixed the Communists in their dug-in positions and called in supporting arms. The Marines counted 73 NVA bodies in the followup sweep and captured three 82mm mortars.

During the following days, the BLT Marines discovered and destroyed more bunkers, fighting positions, and shelters, but the Communists chose not to fight. Meanwhile, at sea on board the USS *Tripoli*, Lieutenant Colonel McKittrick's HMM-164 turned over its SLF assignment on 12 July to HMM-265, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William R. Beeler.

To capitalize on the results of Operation Buffalo, which had paralleled Beaver Track, ComUSMACV ordered that another sweep be made south of the Ben Hai River to destroy enemy weapons positions in the southern half of the DMZ. Known as Operation Hickory II, the plan was similar in concept to the 13-battalion Hickory I sweep conducted in the same area during May. Hickory II was smaller in scale; it employed seven maneuver battalions and four block-

ing battalions.** Since BLT 2/3 was already located northwest of Cam Lo, it became a blocking battalion on the western edge of the zone of action.

SLF Bravo received the Hickory II operation order on the morning of 13 July. At 0700 the next morning the battalion moved out, securing designated objectives en route to its final blocking position. At 1000, the battalion commander, Major Beard, became a casualty and his executive officer, Major John H. Broujos, took over the battalion. By 1230 the battalion reached the blocking positions and searched the surrounding terrain. During BLT 2/3's brief two-day involvement in Hickory II, Communist antipersonnel devices were the most serious threat. Grenades rigged as booby traps killed two Marines and wounded 13. Other than mortar fire, the 2d Battalion had no contact with the enemy during Hickory II.

The BLT reconstituted at 0600 on 16 July as Hickory II ended. Reembarkation began immediately. SLF Bravo's participation in the Beaver Track/ Buffalo/Hickory II operations produced an impressive, verified kill ratio. Sixteen SLF Bravo Marines gave their lives, while the battalion killed 148 NVA soldiers.

Bear Chain/Fremont

20 - 26 July 1967

At sea on 17 July 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Emil W. Herich assumed command of BLT 2/3, relieving

**See Chapter 6 for the account of other III MAF units' participation in Hickory II.

Major Broujos, who reverted to battalion executive officer. Lieutenant Colonel Herich had only a brief "shakedown;" SLF Bravo landed again on the 20th. The operation, Bear Chain, targeted the coastal region between Quang Tri City and the city of Hue. The mission was to attack the exposed seaward flank of the *806th VC Battalion* and to destroy it, or at least drive it westward toward ARVN forces engaged in Operation Lam Son 87.

Southwest of the Bear Chain operational area, the 4th Marines was conducting a search and destroy operation named Fremont. As Bear Chain progressed, it phased into Fremont. At 1400 on 21 July, BLT 2/3 switched to the operational control of the 4th Marines for the rest of the operation.

Bear Chain/Fremont produced the desired results. The enemy reacted as the Bear Chain planners had hoped. Communist units moved west toward Route 1, directly into the Lam Son 87 ARVN forces. In the following battle the South Vietnamese troops distinguished themselves. They held their positions with determination and 252 Viet Cong died. A secondary gain of Bear Chain/Fremont was the capture of an extremely large rice stock.

Late the afternoon of 24 July, BLT 2/3 Marines, searching the village of Don Que, less than a kilometer east of Route 555, captured a VC suspect, the only male found in Don Que. Company F received sniper fire from the village just before they captured the suspect. A search of the town turned up enormous quantities of rice. Villagers stated that the Viet Cong had told them to harvest their rice and be ready for the VC rice collectors who would arrive "within a few days." The final tally of rice was over 37 tons. The Marines bagged it and flew it out in HMM-265's helicopters.

The BLT Marines had helped maul the *806th VC Battalion* and confiscated its rice supply. Its purposes achieved, the Bear Chain portion of the operation ended on 26 July and SLF Bravo went back to sea. Nine Marines and two corpsmen died on the operation.

Beacon Guide

21 - 30 July 1967

SLF Alpha's BLT 1/3 held a change of command at sea on 16 July, the day after it returned from Hickory II. Lieutenant Colonel Alfred I. Thomas took over from Lieutenant Colonel Wickwire. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas' first operation was Beacon Guide. Starting with a helicopter and surface



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189132
LtCol Alfred I. Thomas, the new commander of BLT 1/3, checks a fire plan diagram drawn on the back of a cardboard C-rations case by one of his staff officers during Operation Beacon Guide below the DMZ.

assault, Beacon Guide was a search and destroy operation in the coastal region 18 miles southeast of Hue. The BLT's sweep was part of III MAF's continuing plan to maintain pressure on Viet Cong units in coastal I Corps. Beacon Guide was uneventful from its start on 21 July. Tangible results were negligible, and SLF Alpha reembarked on the afternoon of 30 July.

Kangaroo Kick/Fremont

1 - 3 August, 3 - 21 August 1967

August was a month of aggravating frustration for SLF Bravo and its new commander Colonel James G. Dionisopoulos.* Twenty-one operational days resulted in the death of only three enemy, while the SLF lost three killed and 44 wounded.

Operation Kangaroo Kick, 1-3 August, was another search and destroy sweep over the now familiar sand dunes, graves, and rice paddies of the Viet Cong sanctuary region along the O Lau River,

*Colonel Dionisopoulos replaced Colonel Wortman as the SLF Bravo commander as of 1 August. Colonel Wortman had served as the SLF commander since 1 September 1966.

midway between Hue and Quang Tri. They had operated there on Operation Beacon Star in April-May and again in July on Bear Chain. Kangaroo Kick, almost a carbon copy of the two previous operations along the O Lau, precipitated the standard VC reaction; they fled, only to return after the BLT departed.

At 0800, 3 August, BLT 2/3 shifted to the 4th Marines' operational control and rejoined Operation Fremont. Operation Fremont assumed almost marathon proportions; it did not end until 31 October. The BLT's mission during its second tour under the 4th Marines required relieving the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines of its many and complicated duties, including providing security for Camp Evans, Hill 51, and Hill 674; interdicting enemy lines of communications in the nearby Co Bi-Thanh Tan Valley; detaching one rifle company to the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines for operational use by that battalion; providing security for road sweeps between the 4th Marines' perimeter and Route 1; providing one company for "Sparrow Hawk" rapid reaction missions; and being prepared to provide one company for "rough rider" truck convoys between Phu Bai and Dong Ha.

Respite from the Camp Evans routine came on 16 August. The BLT, actually only Company F and Command Group Alpha reinforced by Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, conducted a daylong sweep. The operation took place in the My Chanh area north of the O Lau River, the scene of recently completed Operation Kangaroo Kick. The sweep was in conjunction with ARVN units operation in the same area.

BLT 2/3 lost one Marine killed and six wounded during the day's sweep. Unfortunately, a supporting tank returning to the 4th Marines command post ran over a mine, believed to have been made from a dud 500-pound bomb. The blast killed four Marines and wounded five. Later that afternoon a tank retriever hit another mine six kilometers west of the disabled tank. The explosion wounded another six Marines. Tank problems continued; while trying to destroy the tank lost on the 16th, an engineer tripped still another exploding device; one more Marine died. The engineers finally destroyed the tank by 1530.*

*The term exploding device refers to all enemy jury-rigged mines. The devices ranged from trip-wired grenades to pressure-detonated, re-fused dud bombs.

Another variation of the multiple duties shared by the BLT occurred on 18 August. Company F moved to Quang Tri to occupy the airfield there and to provide a show of force. At 0930 19 August, Lieutenant Colonel Herich received authorization to start reembarkation. The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines relieved BLT 2/3 of its Camp Evans duties and the SLF gladly went back to sea. III MAF released BLT 2/3 to CTG 79.5 at 1600 22 August.

The BLT commander, Lieutenant Colonel Herich, commenting on Kangaroo Kick and the 16 August Fremont sweep, expressed the growing frustration with operations along the O Lau:

Operation Kangaroo Kick was . . . in an area generally controlled by the enemy. Although this operation proved successful in completing the assigned mission, as in the past, the entire area . . . was reoccupied by the enemy as evidenced by his presence during the S&D [search and destroy] operation conducted by this BLT on 16 August 1967 on Operation Fremont.¹³

Beacon Gate/Cochise

7-11 August 1967, 11-27 August 1967

At 0700 on 7 August, SLF Alpha started Operation Beacon Gate by landing southeast of Hoi An along the coastal boundary of Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces. Intelligence reports fixed elements of the *V25 Local Force Battalion* and other

A radioman from BLT 1/3 pauses in Operation Beacon Gate to look over a cow and a calf in a shed during a routine search of a Vietnamese village.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A650000



smaller VC units in the battalion's operational area. During the five-day southerly sweep, the Marines endured continuous sniper fire. The infantrymen made extensive use of armed UH-1E helicopters to suppress the snipers. Operation Beacon Gate ended on 11 August at 0800; the Marines killed only 12 enemy soldiers.

The same day, SLF Alpha shifted to the operational control of Task Force X-Ray of the 1st Marine Division for the start of Operation Cochise. BLT 1/3 made a heliborne assault from the Beacon Gate AOA into a landing zone approximately seven miles east of Que Son. There the battalion occupied blocking positions to support elements of the 5th Marines which were attacking to the east.

On 16 August, BLT 1/3 started search and destroy operations, also in an easterly direction, in conjunction with the 5th Marines. The BLT made heavy contact with an enemy force late on the 16th, but the enemy broke off the engagement during the night. The rest of the first phase of Cochise consisted of sweep operations, still to the east, with contact limited to sniper fire.

Phase II of Cochise began on 19 August. BLT 1/3 transferred to the operational control of the 5th Marines. Enemy contact, as in Phase I, was negligible, but the Marines uncovered several rice caches and an ammunition dump. Phase III opened on 25 August. The BLT continued search and destroy operations northeast from Hiep Duc to Que Son. It encountered only snipers. When the battalion arrived at Que Son on 27 August Cochise ended. The next day the BLT moved by helicopters to Chu Lai where it began reembarkation. Beacon Gate/Cochise produced good results for SLF Alpha; the BLT claimed 59 VC/NVA killed and 65 detained at a cost of nine Marines dead and 51 wounded.

Belt Drive/Liberty

27 August - 5 September, 1 - 4 September 1967

Major Beard returned from hospitalization and reassumed command of BLT 2/3 on 23 August, replacing Lieutenant Colonel Herich. The same day, Major Gregory A. Corliss and his CH-46A squadron, HMM-262, landed on board the USS *Tripoli* to relieve the departing SLF helicopter squadron, HMM-265. Four days later, SLF Bravo was in action again. At 0545, 27 August, HMM-262 lifted the first elements of Company H from the *Tripoli* back to the familiar terrain of eastern Quang Tri Province.

The Belt Drive operation's objective area was the

densely vegetated high ground on both sides of the small Nhung River, less than nine kilometers south of Quang Tri City. The operation involved a spoiling attack against Communist units that could have interfered with the voting in Quang Tri City during the impending national elections. Small unit actions flared up during the next five days as the battalion encountered minor enemy formations, but no contact involved any determined enemy resistance.

The battalion commander, Major Beard, reported two interesting enemy reactions:

The use of demolitions by the enemy when attacking a defensive position . . . is a tactic with which the battalion had not yet been confronted. It is believed that it was definitely designed to simulate mortar fire in order to keep the defenders down deep in their positions. The exploding charges were almost immediately followed by three or four probers armed with automatic weapons who sought to penetrate the perimeter.

During this operation . . . the enemy failed to . . . leave a clean battlefield after an engagement. This situation is by all means contrary to their principle of battle and the first time in which the BLT was able to capture weapons and equipment without an immediate physical pursuit. Enemy KIAs, one WIA, and weapons . . . lay undisturbed overnight in killing zones and were easily recovered at first light on the morning following the encounter. On one occasion, two enemy KIAs and one weapon were recovered almost two days later by a patrol which swept an area in which an air strike had been run. These instances are reflections of the combat discipline and training of the enemy which the BLT engaged in its operating area.¹⁴

At 0800 1 September, the BLT once more shifted to the 4th Marines' operational control, this time to participate in Operation Liberty while holding Belt Drive in abeyance. The Liberty operation order assigned BLT 2/3 to sweep operations in the Hai Lang District of Quang Tri Province. The battalion was to assist the 4th Marines in blocking enemy approaches to Route 1, as well as Quang Tri City. Liberty simply was a minor reorientation of Belt Drive, with the provision of a command structure change.

At midnight 4 September, SLF participation in Liberty ended and Belt Drive resumed immediately. The last operational day, 5 September, involved moving the battalion and its supporting units out of the TAOR. By 2000, SLF Bravo had completed reembarkation.

Four dead Marines and 59 wounded represented the price of Belt Drive and Liberty, but 19 Communists died. The BLT Marines captured one dazed, wounded NVA soldier on the morning of 1 September. Unfortunately the BLT did not fully ex-

ploit his knowledge and mistakenly evacuated him to Camp Evans rather than to the *Tripoli*. What he knew of enemy locations might have changed the outcome of Belt Drive.

Trouble of a different nature developed during Belt Drive, trouble which caused serious problems not only for the SLFs, but for all Marine activities in I Corps. On 31 August, during a medical evacuation, the lead helicopter, a CH-46A, disintegrated in flight while en route to the *Tripoli*. The crew and their passenger died. The next day, another CH-46A experienced a similar failure at Marble Mountain Air Facility. These two similar accidents forced III MAF to restrict CH-46A missions to emergency categories. For all practical purposes, they were "down." In a matter of hours, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing lost 50 percent of its helicopter capability, and the LPHs became little more than troop transports.

A Change In Scenario — The 46s are Grounded

The grounding of the CH-46As was a severe blow to the SLFs. SLF Bravo's CH-46A Squadron, HMM-262, was "down." SLF Alpha fared better, since HMM-362 was a UH-34D squadron. However, MAG-16 recalled HMM-362, though another UH-34D squadron, HMM-163, replaced it only 4 days later. The USS *Tripoli*, the amphibious assault ship carrying SLF Bravo's helicopters, temporarily withdrew from ARG duties to ferry faulty helicopters to Okinawa for modification. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing rescheduled all planned squadron rotations. Emergency requests prompted shipment of 10 CH-53s and 23 more UH-34Ds from west coast U. S. ports, but they would not arrive until October. On 31 August 1967, III MAF had 150 available transport helicopters, and the SLF could muster 39 more. The next day, as the result of the grounding order, III MAF counted only 23 CH-53s and 73 UH-34Ds, while SLF Alpha could provide another 17 UH-34s. Five squadrons of CH-46As could operate under extreme emergency conditions.

Initially, SLF operations suffered from the helicopter strength reduction. Both landing forces, by necessity, operated as conventional ground units until resolution of helicopter allocations. SLF Bravo spent the rest of the year relying upon interim support from HMM-463's CH-53s operating from Marble Mountain. A detachment from HMM-262 remained on board the *Tripoli* to provide emergency CH-46A support for SLF Bravo. This detachment, known as the "Poor Devils," remained with SLF

Bravo until the end of the year, though the rest of the squadron left in mid-October.

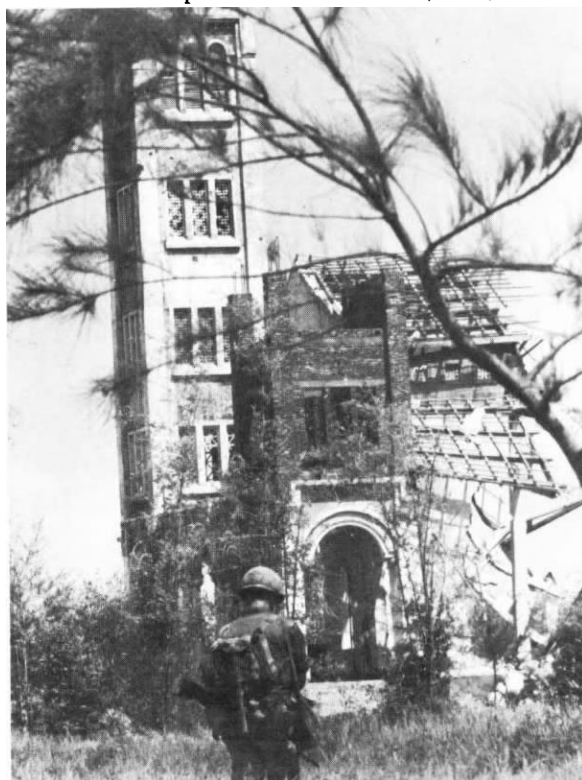
Necessarily, SLF operations reflected the reduced flexibility and lift capability. To provide better support for a landing force ashore, a new trend developed. The SLF BLTs would land, conduct a preliminary operation, and then shift to the operational control of a Marine regiment operating in the same area. Though this represented a reasonable solution under the circumstances, during the fall of 1967 SLF BLTs found themselves assigned to missions ranging from fortification construction to road security, a far cry from the stoutly defended SLF tenets of early 1967.

Beacon Point/Fremont/Ballistic Charge/Shelbyville 1 - 9 September 1967, 16 - 28 September 1967

On 1 September SLF Alpha landed in Thua Thien Province on Operation Beacon Point for a southerly sweep of the by-now all too familiar "Street Without Joy." Snipers and surprise firing devices were the only resistance encountered. At 1800 on 4 September, Lieutenant Colonel Kapetan's HMM-362 detached from the SLF and reverted to MAG-16 control. For-

A ruined church dominates the skyline as infantrymen of Company D, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines move through a area of the coastal plain known to both the French and the Americans as the "Street Without Joy" in the quiet Operation Beacon Point.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189242



unately, the lack of enemy activity did not subject the BLT to the full impact of the loss of its assigned helicopters. The most tangible result of Beacon Point was the evacuation or destruction of more than 35 tons of Viet Cong rice. After the BLT marched to an assembly area near Camp Evans on 5 September, Operation Beacon Point concluded at 0600 on the 6th.

Later that morning BLT 1/3 phased into Operation Fremont, again under the operational control of the 4th Marines. Elements of the battalion trucked to their blocking and screening positions south of Quang Tri. As during Beacon Point, snipers were the only active enemy troops.

A solution to SLF Alpha's helicopter needs occurred on 8 September. Lieutenant Colonel Walter C. Kelly's HMM-163, UH-34D equipped, reported on board the USS *Okinawa* just in time to prepare for the following day's extraction. SLF Alpha dropped out of Fremont on 9 September.

One week later, on the 16th, BLT 1/3 landed again. Operation Ballistic Charge involved a simultaneous heliborne and surface assault of an objective area four miles southeast of Dai Loc. The operation consisted of a rapid sweep to the north followed by a detailed search and destroy sweep to the south along the track of the first northward move. Again, opposition consisted of Communist snipers, but during Ballistic Charge the battalion did detain 55 suspects and three confirmed prisoners.

When Ballistic Charge ended on the 22nd, BLT 1/3 shifted to the operational control of the 1st Marines for Operation Shelbyville. BLT 1/3's involvement started with a heliborne assault from the Ballistic Charge AOA to a landing zone four miles southeast of Dai Loc, close to the original Ballistic Charge objective area. While the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines occupied blocking positions to the east, and the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines blocked to the south, Lieutenant Colonel Alfred I. Thomas' BLT 1/3 swept the operational area in an easterly direction. Sniper fire was the only enemy response.

On 25 September, the BLT reversed its axis of advance and, after a night movement, crossed the railroad tracks paralleling Route 1 on the morning of the 26th. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines was on the BLT's left during the advance. Late that afternoon, Company B had a brief firefight with an enemy company, but friendly artillery fire put a quick end to the engagement for SLF Bravo. Subsequent action remained limited to sniper fire. On the 28th the BLT

marched out of the operating area to the Liberty Bridge, and then moved by trucks to Da Nang where it reembarked. CTG 79.4 assumed operational control of SLF Alpha at 1715, 28 September.

September was not a spectacular month for SLF Alpha. Twenty-two operational days resulted in 26 Communists killed, 3 prisoners, and 108 detainees. To achieve this, eight Marines gave their lives and another 97 sustained wounds.

Fortress Sentry/Kingfisher

17 - 25 September 1967,

27 September - 15 October 1967

On 16 July 1967, the 9th Marines initiated Operation Kingfisher near Con Thien. This lengthy operation employed a force varying from three to six battalions. As Kingfisher progressed, a new enemy threat developed to the east in the I Corps coastal region. Identified NVA and VC units were operating between the coast and Dong Ha on the northern side of the Cua Viet River. To neutralize these Communist formations, III MAF planned to land SLF Bravo in this by-now familiar operational area for Operation Fortress Sentry. Previously, Operations Beacon Hill and Beau Charger swept the same locale.

A significant operational change occurred following the untimely grounding of the CH-46s; SLF Bravo had to land by surface means. III MAF directed the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion to supplement the ARG landing craft.

Poor visibility, rough seas, and generally bad weather hampered BLT 2/3's 17 September landing on the dunes bordering the "Street Without Joy." As usual, there was no resistance on the beach and only light contact as the battalion took its initial objectives. As the battalion moved north-northeast toward the DMZ, the 1st ARVN Division screened its left flank. Land mines damaged some amphibian tractors as the BLT moved inland, but contact remained light.

On 23 September about 100 NVA soldiers attacked the battalion, but it broke up the probe with the assistance of helicopter gunships. On the morning of the 24th, the Marines engaged another enemy force near the village of An My, three miles east of Gio Linh. Prisoners revealed that the Communists had expected an attack from the south or southwest and the appearance of the BLT east of their position had been a complete surprise.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189273

A Navy landing craft, utility (LCU) brings elements of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines from the USS Tripoli to the beach on 17 September for Operation Fortress Sentry, the day before the battalion phased into the 3d Marine Division's Operation Kingfisher.

The next morning at 0800 Fortress Sentry terminated and BLT 2/3 phased into Operation Kingfisher to the west.* SLF participation involved extensive sweep operations which resulted in only minor contact. On 10 October Lieutenant Colonel Henry Englisch relieved Major Beard as the BLT Commander. SLF Bravo phased out of Kingfisher on 15 October.

Bastion Hill/Medina/Liberty II/Fremont

10 - 19 October 1967, 19 - 23 October 1967

SLF Alpha, on board the ships of TG 79.4, engaged in an extensive rehabilitation effort, while SLF Bravo participated in Operation Kingfisher during the first nine days of October.

On 10 October, the 1st Marines, having displaced from Da Nang to Quang Tri Province, initiated Operation Medina in the rugged hills of the Hai Lang Forest south of Quang Tri City. Medina was part of a comprehensive plan to eliminate enemy base areas. The Hai Lang Forest contained the Communist's Base Area 101, and elements of the 5th and 6th NVA Regiments operated in and around the region.

SLF Alpha's mission in Medina was to serve as a blocking force for the 1st Marines on the eastern edge of the operational area. BLT 1/3 made its helicopter move to assigned blocking positions on the 10th under the operational code name Bastion Hill. The landing met no opposition. Except for one

sharp action between Company C and a company of North Vietnamese regulars early on the morning 11 October, the battalion's contact with the enemy during Medina involved scattered firefights, incoming mortar rounds, and many grenade mines and booby traps.

A major action related to Medina took place north of the SLF sector the day after the operation officially ended. There, the 6th NVA Regiment, moving eastward away from the SLF's former location, ran into the ARVN units participating in Operation Lam Son 138, an adjunct to Operation Medina. By the end of the day-long battle which followed, the ARVN reported 197 NVA troops killed.

Immediately after Medina, BLT 1/3 moved south to new blocking positions west of Route 1 and the railroad between Hai Lang and Phong Dien to participate in Operation Liberty II/Fremont. Upon joining Liberty II/Fremont, operational control of BLT 1/3 passed from the 1st Marines to the 4th Marines. This operation sought to prevent the Communists from disrupting the South Vietnamese National Assembly elections. BLT 1/3 activity during the next five days involved squad and fire team patrols and encounters with the enemy. Liberty/Fremont ended on 23 October, and 1/3 moved by trucks to Camp Evans to prepare for its next operation, Granite, which was only three days away. One of the most appreciated preparations was the issue of an extra poncho and poncho liner to the SLF Marines. The cold winter rains had come to I Corps.

Neither Medina nor Liberty II/Fremont produced

*Chapter 8 covers Kingfisher in detail.

any telling results, at least in the opinion of SLF Alpha. Two weeks in the field that accounted for only 9 confirmed enemy dead, 7 prisoners, and 11 suspects, while attrition gnawed at the battalion's rolls during both operations. The casualties totaled 10 Marines dead and 50 others wounded, 38 of whom required evacuation.

Formation Leader/Liberty II/Knox

17 - 18 October, 18 - 24 October,

24 October - 4 November 1967

Only two days after leaving Operation Kingfisher, Lieutenant Colonel English's BLT 2/3 began Operation Formation Leader in support of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines. Envisioned as an area control operation, Formation Leader focused on the stabilization of coastal Thua Thien Province east of Route 1, specifically Vin Loc and Phu Loc Districts. Because of the impending Vietnamese National Assembly elections, intelligence officers presumed that the Communists would concentrate disruptive efforts against these populated districts.

The Communists did not respond. BLT 2/3's greatest problems during Formation Leader were nontactical. Because of the grounding of the CH-46s, all troop lifts from the USS *Tripoli* relied upon CH-53s from Lieutenant Colonel Joseph L. Sadowski's HMH-463, operating from Marble Mountain. The lifts were entirely satisfactory, but realining the BLT's serial assignment tables for the larger helicopters gave Major Douglas W. Lemon's battalion S-3 office a good prelanding workout. Additionally, high seas and bad weather slowed the landing of attached heavy vehicles at Hue. In fact, some remained on board for the duration of the operation.

There were no enemy contacts on the 17th and at 1000 on the 18th, BLT 2/3 shifted to the 3d Marine Division's operational control. Formation Leader terminated and a new operation, Liberty II, started, but SLF Bravo's mission and operational area remained the same. The enemy still did not respond. The most significant incident was the sighting and subsequent artillery attack on an enemy squad late on the 21st. Sadly, the next day five Marines on a trash-burning detail suffered wounds from the explosion of a grenade apparently dumped in the trash. Liberty II ended at 0800 on the 24th and Operation Knox started.

Shifted to the operational control of the 7th Marines, the BLT moved by truck to a new assembly

area 11 kilometers east of Phu Loc. There, it began sweep operations under the direction of the 7th Marines, and during the next 13 days the battalion experienced 12 enemy contacts, mostly mortar fire. The Marines killed two enemy soldiers, but Knox had a debilitating effect on BLT 2/3. Two Marines died in accidents and, of the 78 nonfatal casualties, only 15 were the result of enemy action. Fungus infections claimed 33 victims. Knox ended at 1000 on 4 November; however, bad weather prevented reembarkation. Instead all elements of the BLT moved to the Da Nang Force Logistic Command facility.

Granite/Kentucky II and III

26 October - 4 November, 6 - 16 November 1967

On 26 October, Operation Granite began for SLF Alpha with an early morning helicopterborne assault into the Hai Lang Forest. Granite was a two-battalion search and destroy operation in the region of Communist Base Area 114. The two assault battalions, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, and SLF Alpha's BLT 1/3, conducted Granite under the operational control of the 4th Marines.

The first day of Granite was uneventful for the Marines of BLT 1/3, but during the next nine days the enemy "continuously harassed the BLT . . . staying within a few hundred meters . . .," and "night probes were made with a consistency not normally experienced. . . ."¹⁵

By the afternoon of the 30th some of the BLT Marines began to believe that Granite was a jinxed operation; supporting arms mistakes were becoming costly. A friendly air strike, short of target, wounded two Marines on the morning of the 29th. At dusk a short 60mm mortar round wounded another Marine, and just after midnight a short artillery round wounded still another BLT Marine. Fortunately, this was the last Granite casualty inflicted by friendly forces.

BLT 1/3 never did find the enemy base area in the Hai Lang Forest, but it had no doubt of the presence of enemy troops there. When the battalion finished its sweep of the rugged terrain on 4 November, its journals revealed that it had called in 59 fixed-wing sorties and 652 artillery fire missions during the last 10 days. The battalion captured five AK-47s and killed 17 Communists. The tangled vegetation of the Hai Lang hid the rest of the story. All of the BLT returned to Camp Evans before dark on 4 November. Granite ended with three Marines dead and 24 wounded.

The SLF Alpha battalion did not stay at Camp Evans after Operation Granite. Just before noon on 6 November, the division shifted BLT 1/3 to the 9th Marines' operational control. The BLT spent the rest of the day moving west to Cam Lo where it joined Operation Kentucky as the 3d Division reserve. Kentucky began on 1 November, the day after Operation Kingfisher ended. The Kentucky area of responsibility, including Con Thien and Cam Lo, was nothing more than the eastern portion of the old Kingfisher TAOR. Kentucky was the assigned TAOR of the 9th Marines while Lancaster, to the west, was the 3d Marines' responsibility.

BLT 1/3 celebrated the 192nd birthday of the Marine Corps with an early morning move from Cam Lo north to attack positions less than two kilometers east of Con Thien. With the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines—comprised of only two companies and a command group—on its right, BLT 1/3 jumped off on Phase II of Kentucky the next morning. The BLT's mission involved making a sweep from east to west around the northern face of the Con Thien base. The 9th Marines conceived the operation as a spoiling attack to disrupt suspected Communist concentrations around Con Thien.

The Kentucky planners were right. At 0830 on the 11th, Company D hit an enemy platoon from the east, the blind side of the well-dug-in and concealed Communist position. The Marines forced the surprised NVA to fight; seven died. That afternoon Company D hit another dug-in enemy unit. This one suffered a similar fate; six more NVA soldiers died. One survivor, a squad leader, told his captors that his battalion had been in the Con Thien area for about a month. Apparently, Kentucky, with excellent timing, upset Communist plans for Con Thien.

The SLF battalion's combat commitment to the opening phases of Kentucky ended the morning of 12 November. The battalion marched back to Position C-3, a base area in the strong point/obstacle system, and then moved on to Dong Ha by truck. BLT 1/3 remained at Dong Ha, again as 3d Marine Division reserve, from 12 November until released by the 9th Marines at 0900 on the 16th, at which time the BLT started reembarkation. SLF Alpha, however, would see Kentucky again.

While the BLT phased out of Kentucky, III MAF provided some relief for the loss of mobility caused by the grounding of CH-46s. On 15 November, Lieutenant Colonel Daniel M. Wilson's HMM-361

flew its UH-34Ds out to the USS *Iwo Jima* to become the new SLF Alpha helicopter squadron. The reliable 34's were a welcome addition, especially since circumstances forced the BLT to rely on other sources for helicopter support during all of Kentucky II and III.

Badger Hunt/Foster

13 - 29 November 1967

In Quang Nam Province, north of the concluded Beaver Cage area of operation, enemy contact during the fall of 1967 had been relatively light. The 1st Marine Division committed units of the 5th and 7th Marines to spoiling operations to prevent infiltration of the Da Nang rocket belt. In November SLF Bravo participated in Operation Badger Hunt as a continuation of the spoiling tactics. The division conceived Badger Hunt as an amphibious operation to support the 7th Marines' Operation Foster which two spectacular VC raids triggered. On 2 November and again on the 8th, the Viet Cong raided the district headquarters and refugee settlements at Hieu Duc and Dai Loc, approximately 15 miles south of Da Nang. The VC killed 22 civilians, wounded another 42, and destroyed or damaged 559 houses.

To rid the area of the Communist raiders, both operations focused on the river complex of Dai Loc District and the flat lands and foothills west of the Thu Bon River. SLF Bravo, under its new commander, Colonel Maynard W. Schmidt, and consisting of BLT 2/3, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Englisch, and a detachment of HMM-262, started Badger Hunt by landing at An Hoa. The 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Roger H. Barnard, began Operation Foster west of Dai Loc and north of the Thu Bon River.

There was little contact during either operation, with the exception of one company-sized engagement on the 29th. The Communists evaded both sweeps, heading for the hills to the west. The enemy suffered some casualties as reconnaissance teams and air observers called in air strikes and artillery fire on fleeing enemy groups. The final tally for Badger Hunt and Foster totaled 125 Communists killed and eight captured. Marines losses added up to 25 killed and 136 wounded. The most significant accomplishment of both operations, other than driving the enemy out of the area, was the destruction of most of the enemy's supporting installations in the region. The Marines destroyed over 6,000 bunkers, tunnels,

and shelters and captured 87 tons of rice. Badger Hunt ended on 29 November.

Fortress Ridge

21 - 24 December 1967

On 1 November 1967, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Max McQuown, learned it would be the new SLF Bravo BLT, in relief of the BLT 1/3. McQuown's battalion passed to the command of SLF Bravo on 1 December and the same day embarked for the Special Landing Force Camp at Subic Bay in the Philippine Islands for intensive training and equipment rehabilitation. On the 17th, the SLF sailed again, destination: I Corps.

Fortress Ridge involved seaborne and heliborne landings on the beach area of Gio Linh District, seven kilometers south of the DMZ. After seizing four separate objectives, each company was to conduct search and destroy operations in adjacent areas. Intelligence sources reported one battalion of the 803d NVA Regiment, an unidentified main force battalion, and the K400 Local Force Company near the beach. The operation started on the morning of 21 December as BLT 3/1's Company M, commanded by Captain Raymond A. Thomas, landed in LVTs on Red Beach. Half an hour later, Company L landed on the north bank of the Cua Viet River, almost five kilometers to the southwest. HMM-262 took Companies I and K into two zones in the sand dunes four kilometers inland from Company M.

Nothing happened during the morning, but at 1324 hours Captain Lawrence R. Moran's Company I received small arms and mortar fire on the south side of the village of Ha Loi Tay. A heavy firefight ensued between Company I and Communist forces. Information from Company I indicated that they had met a sizable, well-entrenched enemy force. Accordingly, the battalion mounted Company M on LVTs and moved it north on the beach side of the Gulf of Tonkin, where it could support Company I. When Company M arrived in the dune area north of Giem Ha Trung village, the Communists started shelling it with mortars. Rocket and artillery fire from Communists guns north of the Demilitarized Zone hit both companies. Darkness came early and Company I and the Communists broke contact. Company I established a defensive position to the west of Ha Loi Tay. Company M set up a perimeter defense in the area where it stopped that afternoon.¹⁶



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A190226
Rain-soaked Marines of the Special Landing Force board a Navy medium landing craft (LCM-6) for the return trip to their assigned ships after an operation.

Events of the 21st indicated that the Communists were in force behind the beach, north of the day's area of operation. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown requested permission from the SLF to conduct search and destroy operations 1,000 meters north of Objective 1 and 1,000 meters inland from the beach. The SLF approved the plan, and shortly after 0800 on the 22nd, Company M moved through the Communist positions that had opposed Company I. The latter company remained in position to support the advance of Company M.¹⁷ By 0900 Company M discovered the first positive result of Fortress Ridge: three NVA bodies. Both Companies I and M continued moving northward for the rest of the day, finding quantities of enemy arms and equipment in abandoned positions. Company K, north of Objective 3, had no contact. At dusk, Company L, four kilometers southwest of Companies I and M, came under small arms fire from across the Cua Viet, the last enemy action of the day. After a quiet night, the battalion resumed search and destroy sweeps on the 23rd. The day remained uneventful. Company I found the major portion of the day's harvest of duds and enemy ordnance.

Fortress Ridge concluded on the morning of the 24th. By 1100 all units were back on board ship for a contemplative Christmas Eve. In its first operation in its new role, SLF Bravo lost 10 shipmates and had another 27 wounded, but the Marines, however, had



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371075

Company I, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines continues to move northward with the rest of the battalion on 23 December as Operation Fortress Ridge along the coast draws to a close.

counted 10 dead VC soldiers and observed enough enemy equipment on the battlefield to know they had hurt the Communists. In his after action report, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown summarized the results of 21-24 December, writing, "Operation Fortress Ridge provided the confidence and experience needed for a newly formed BLT to perform as a professional combat unit."

Badger Tooth

26 December 1967 - 2 January 1968

Special Landing Force Bravo's last commitment in 1967 was Operation Badger Tooth. The original plan called for the BLT to land one company by LVT to seize Landing Zone Finch, slightly more than three kilometers inland from the beach on the southern Quang Tri Province border. The rest of the battalion would follow by helicopter. The proposed objective area was on the extreme western side of the "Street Without Joy," and this time intelligence estimates placed as many as 1,700 enemy troops in the area of operation.¹⁸

The BLT commander, Lieutenant Colonel Max McQuown, described the plans for the operation:

The scheme of maneuver called for a river crossing over the Song O Lau River once all the BLT Task Organization had landed from ARG shipping. After the river crossing the BLT was to conduct search and destroy operations through 14 towns and villages on a route running southwest from LZ Finch terminating at the town of Ap

Phouc Phu, 11 kilometers from LZ Finch. Initial fire support for the operation would be organic 81mm mortars, available on-call air support, and naval gunfire support. Once the BLT had closed on the first intermediate objective, Thon Phu Kinh, 105mm howitzers from a platoon of the 3rd Battalion, 12th Marines and a battery from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines would provide artillery support.¹⁹

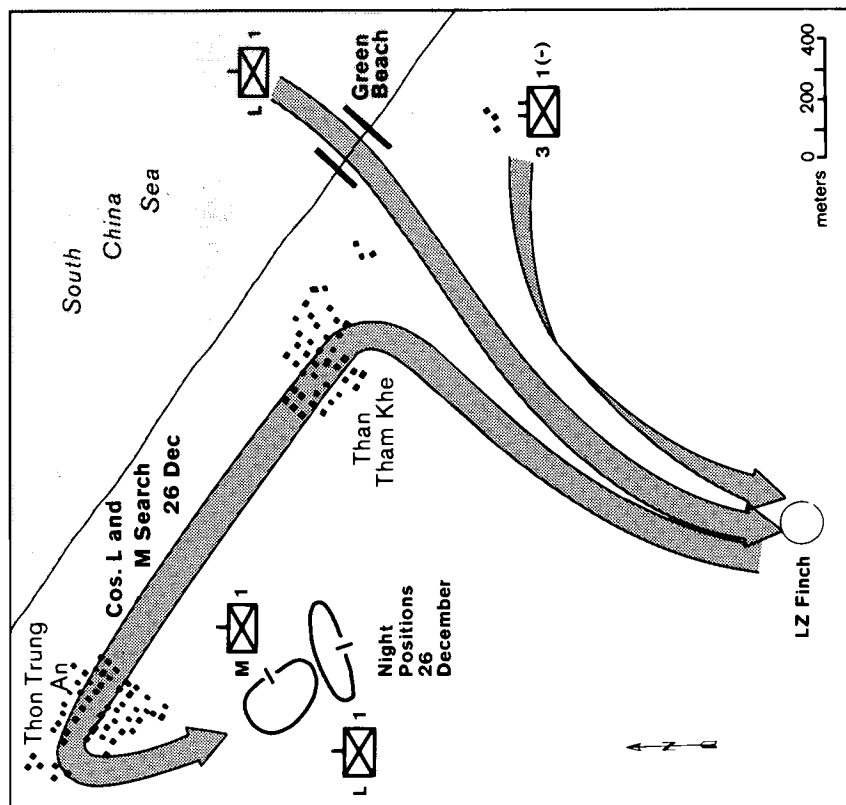
Information relayed to the SLF by a U.S. Army liaison officer with nearby ARVN units changed the Badger Tooth plan. After the seizure of LZ Finch, the SLF directed the BLT to search new objectives consisting of the coastal villages of Thom Tham Khe and Tho Trung An. Intelligence officers suspected enemy forces hid there after evading ARVN operations to the north and west. Once the BLT cleared the two villages, the SLF would continue with the originally planned sweep to the southwest.

Badger Tooth started as Company L in LVTs landed over Green Beach at 1100 on 26 December and proceeded to LZ Finch. The operation continued as scheduled against very light opposition. Major David L. Althoff's "Poor Devils" from HMM-262 landed the last elements of the battalion at Finch by 1415. Two hours later Company K suffered the first casualty of Badger Tooth when automatic weapons fire west of the LZ wounded a Marine.

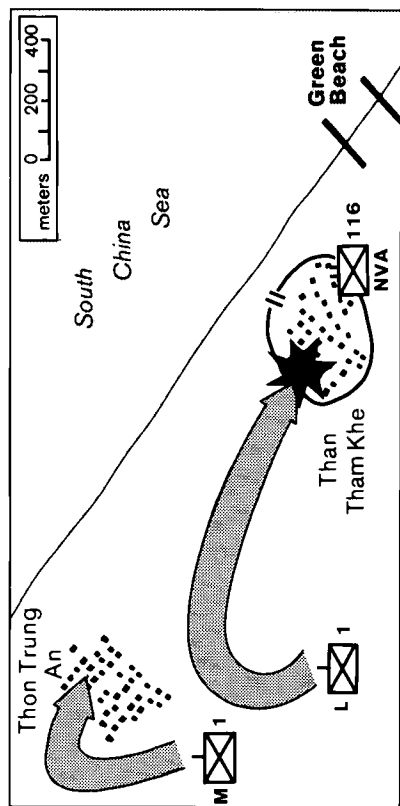
The SLF commander, Colonel Schmidt, accompanied by the U.S. Army liaison officer to ARVN forces in the area, arrived at the battalion command post with orders for the BLT to change direction and

Operation Badger Tooth 26-28 December 1967

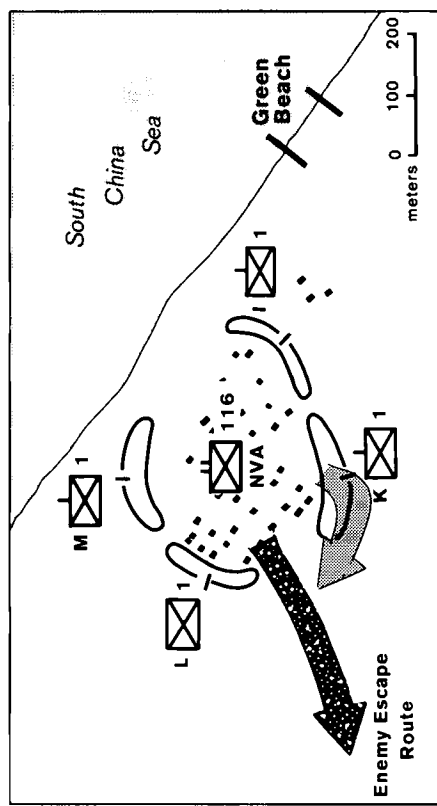
- 1 - 26 December
- 2 - 27 December
- 3 - Thon Tham Khe Night of 27-28 December



1



2



3

sweep the coastal villages of Tham Khe and Trung An. Company L received the mission of sweeping Tham Khe, with Company M in support. After moving to the edge of the village in LVTs, Company L advanced northwest into the built-up area. By 1822 Company L had cleared the first village and was well into Trung An. Both towns were clean; the Marines killed only three Viet Cong and detained four. The infantrymen found no evidence of the presence of Communist formations. By 1940, both Companies L and M had tied in for the night north and west of Tham Khe. The night was quiet.

At 0700 on the 27th, both companies moved out on another sweep of the two villages. Company M moved north on a line parallel to Trung An so it could begin its sweep of the village from north to south. Company L, with the mission to sweep Tham Ke, initially moved out to the northeast. Leading elements of Company L were almost into the south of Trung An when Company L's commander realized that his leading platoon had not turned south toward Tham Ke. Company L reversed direction immediately and started toward Tham Ke.

Just as the leading platoon of Company L approached the edge of the village, a concealed enemy force opened up with a devastating volume of fire

from machine guns, rifles, RPGs, and mortars. The company immediately suffered many casualties and Captain Thomas S. Hubbel decided to pull his company back and regroup for another attack. He requested supporting arms fires on Tham Ke while his company prepared for its new assault. After two air strikes, followed by naval gunfire, Company L assaulted the village. The enemy again met the Marines with withering defensive fires, killing Captain Hubbel and his battalion "tac-net" radio operator. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown lost communications with the company for a short period until the acting company executive officer assumed command of Company L.

During the period without radio contact with Company L, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown ordered Company M to move east and south and join the fight on the left flank of Company L. Company M reached its attack position and immediately came under heavy enemy fire. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown realized at this time that the two companies were up against a major enemy force in well-prepared defensive positions. The search of Tham Ke the previous day had been inadequate.

Lieutenant Colonel McQuown ordered Company I to move to the south of Tham Ke. He then re-

Marines of BLT 3/1 take cover as they fight to enter the village of Tham Khe on 27 December after their first search of the village the previous day failed to detect the presence of the elaborate but well-camouflaged positions of the 116th NVA Battalion.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A190208



quested that the SLF land the tank platoon from the ARG ships. Next, he instructed Company K to take the pressure off Companies L and M by attacking the south end of Tham Ke. After prepping the area with 81mm mortar fire, Company K attacked against fierce resistance.

Company K made no progress until the arrival of two Marine tanks at the company's position. Unfortunately, the two tanks had sustained water damage to their communications equipment during the landing and could not communicate with the infantrymen except by voice.* This reduced their effectiveness; however, the tankers did knock out some enemy bunkers by direct fire from their 90mm guns. The inability to coordinate the tanks' fire with its own assault kept the company from making more than a limited penetration into the village complex. It did, however, gain a foothold in the village amid the enemy defenses.

Companies K, L, and M continued their battle as night fell, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown expected the enemy would use the darkness to cover their escape. To counteract this, he moved Company I to the right flank of Company K where it could maintain control over the eastern, or beach side, of Tham Ke. Company M, to the north, could cover part of the beach side of the village by fire. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown also moved elements of both Companies L and K to the west of Tham Ke. Even though the extent of the area involved precluded a link-up of these elements, McQuown anticipated that his unit dispositions would block the enemy within the confines of the village. Such was not the case.

The following morning, the 28th, Company K, already in the southern edges of Tham Ke, and Company I renewed their assault on the village. They quickly subdued the initial heavy enemy small arms fire and secured the village by noon. McQuown's Marines spent the afternoon in a detailed search of Tham Ke. He recalled:

This search revealed a village that was literally a defensive bastion. It was prepared for all-around defense in depth with a network of underground tunnels you could

stand up in, running the full length of the village. Connecting tunnels ran east and west. This tunnel system supported ground level bunkers for machine guns, RPG's, and small arms around the entire perimeter of the village. Thus the NVA were able to defend, reinforce, or withdraw in any direction. All defensive preparation had been artfully camouflaged with growing vegetation. Residents of Tham Ke, questioned after the fight, disclosed that the NVA had been preparing the defense of this village for one year.²⁰

The search turned up numerous machine guns, RPGs, AK-47 rifles, and thousands of rounds of ammunition which clearly indicated that a major NVA force had defended the village, not local Viet Cong. A dying NVA soldier confirmed it; the enemy force had been the *116th NVA Battalion*. The Marines also learned that ARVN forces operating northwest of Tham Ke had found over 100 bodies from the *116th NVA Battalion* abandoned in the sand dunes. The enemy force apparently had evacuated its casualties through the gap between L and K Companies during the night.

At 1800 on the 31st, a New Year's truce went into effect and SLF Bravo prepared to return to its ships; the New Year's stand-down cancelled any further thoughts of attacking inland. Bad weather and rough seas slowed back-loading, but by 1130, 2 January the BLT had left the "Street Without Joy." In the sharp fighting at Tham Khe, the Marines suffered 48 killed and 86 wounded; 31 enemy soldiers were known dead. Tham Khe was a bitter experience for the Marines of BLT 3/1, but Badger Tooth was a poignant tactical lesson which would be remembered in the clouded future of 1968.

Ballistic Arch/Kentucky V/Osceola

24 - 27 November, 27 November - 29 December,
30 December—continuing 1968

Eight days after leaving Cam Lo, SLF Alpha landed again. While at sea, BLT 1/3's commanders changed, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas turned over his command to recently promoted Lieutenant Colonel Richard W. Goodale. The 24 November landing, Ballistic Arch, was a helicopter and surface assault of Viet Cong-dominated villages on the northern coast of Quang Tri Province, only seven kilometers south of the southern DMZ boundary.

Ballistic Arch aimed at Communist sympathizers reported in and around the hamlet of Mai Xa Thi. The operation was a "walk through" for most of the battalion, but the opening minutes were tense for the crews of the LVTP-5s of the 4th Platoon, Com-

*Of the five tanks assigned to the BLT, only these two participated in this action. One tank was under repair at Da Nang; a second would not start and had to be left aboard ship. None appear to have been properly waterproofed for landing. The third tank reportedly "submerged" during the landing and the other two, though operable, "received water damage on landing." BLT 3/1 AAR, Operation Badger Tooth, dtd. 16Jan68, p. 15 (Archives, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A190211
Company I, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines rests on the beach on 28 December 1977 after it and Company K completed their assault through the village of Tham Khe and eliminated the rear guard of the 116th NVA Battalion, which had covered the withdrawal of the bulk of the enemy battalion during the night.

pany A, 5th Amphibian Tractor Battalion and the embarked Marines of the BLT's Company A.

Poor information on surf conditions presented the amphibian tractors with a serious problem. As they approached the beach, they started to take on more sea water than their pumps could handle; at times it was knee deep in the tractors. Two Marines, riding on top of a tractor washed overboard, but fortunately others rescued them. At last the vehicles grounded and climbed the dunes of the Quang Tri coast. There were no losses.

The expected contact did not materialize. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Goodale summarized the apparently poor intelligence which triggered Ballistic Arch, saying, "no fighting holes, bunkers, or fortifications of any kind were uncovered during the operation . . . The area appeared to be quite pacified and the indigenous personnel were very friendly."²¹ Ballistic Arch ended at noon on 27 November, and BLT 1/3 immediately came under the 9th Marines' operational control.

The BLT again phased back into the continuing Kentucky Operation. Its only active participation, however, was a sweep during the period 28-30 November. On 2 December the battalion moved back to the A-3 Strongpoint to provide security and engineer support for its construction. The Marines made a concerted effort to complete construction. By

Rice paddy mud provides the only resistance to BLT 1/3 Marines after poor intelligence caused Operation Ballistic Arch to take place in a thoroughly pacified area of Vietnam.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189961



the time of the departure of BLT 1/3 on 29 December, the Marines had completed the defensive wire and minefield and almost finished the bunker complex.

Enemy contact during the stay at A-3 was very light. The battalion experienced small enemy probes until 11 December when supporting arms broke up a platoon-size Communist attack. Enemy ground action dropped off appreciably afterward. Enemy artillery, mortar, and rocket fire were the main deter-

rent to the Marines' engineering effort at A-3. From 2 December until the 29th, 578 rounds landed on the position. Phase V of Kentucky concluded on 29 December. BLT 1/3 made a combined tactical foot and motor march back to Quang Tri Airfield complex. The last two days of December passed as the BLT prepared to relieve the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, then involved in Operation Osceola. The end of the year brought no slowing of the planned tempo of SLF operations.

CHAPTER 12

Pacification

The Problem Defined—County Fair Marine Grass-Roots-Level Participation—Reporting and Evaluation

The Problem Defined

Military commanders in Vietnam realized that operations against Communist main force units, alone, could not win the war. These operations could only provide a shield of security behind which the South Vietnamese Government and its allies could implement a Revolutionary Development or pacification program, a program aimed solely at winning the support of the people.

Pacification is a relatively simple concept; the process and means of accomplishment are extremely complex. Because of differing interpretations and frequent interchanges of the terms “pacification,” “revolutionary development,” and “nation

building,” ComUSMACV issued a memorandum, “Clarification of Terms,” which listed the following definitions:

Pacification is the military, political, economic, and social process of establishing or reestablishing local government responsive to and involving the participation of the people. It includes the provision of sustained, credible territorial security, the destruction of the enemy's underground government, and the initiation of economic and social activity capable of self-sustenance and expansion. The economic element of pacification includes the opening of roads and waterways and maintenance of lines of communication important to economic and military activity.

Revolutionary development, the leading edge of

An infantryman from Company D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines demonstrates the need for a viable pacification program by holding up an empty bulgur wheat sack found in a North Vietnamese Army unit's bunker destroyed by the battalion on 26 March 1967.

3d MarDiv ComdC, March 1967



pacification, is the formalized Government of Vietnam program, under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Revolutionary Development, in specified hamlets generally within RD campaign areas. It includes the local security for these hamlets and the political, economic, and social activities at that level.

Nation building is the economic, political, and social activity having an impact nationwide and/or in urban centers. It is related to pacification in that it builds on the results of pacification and contributes to the establishment of a viable economic and social community.¹

Since the beginning of United States involvement in Vietnam, security for the rural population remained the basic requirement for pacification, and how best to provide this security was the subject of continuing debate between American and Vietnamese officials. The military side contended that the problem was a fundamental military issue, that physical security of the contested area must be established before starting any developmental programs; civil officials, on the other hand, viewed the problem as a political issue, stating that political, economic, and social developmental projects would make greater inroads on Communist influence and therefore should have greater priority. The contrasting views led to the initiation of programs which often resulted in duplication, as well as confusion on the part of the Vietnamese offices charged with implementing and administering them. To help already overloaded local administrators, MACV dispatched more American advisors to the provinces, but, unfortunately, in many cases their presence actually retarded pacification progress. Zealous advisors often stifled local initiative.

At the same time, MACV experienced equally perplexing problems. While MACV perceived that security was the first prerequisite for a successful program, it had difficulty implementing a sound, balanced management system. As in the civilian programs, military civic action concepts evolved by trial and error.

The Vietnamese had experimented with pacification programs since 1954. Based on past experience, a new program emerged late in 1965. The Vietnamese adopted the concept of the armed propaganda cadre as the basis for the national program. The civil side of the program began slowly in 1966, primarily because of the shortage of trained cadre, but the Vietnamese Government provided enthusiastic direction and the prospects for success were optimistic.

In February 1966, the Honolulu Conference align-

ed many of the diverse American and Vietnamese opinions and actions. Top-level U.S. and Vietnamese policy makers agreed to consider the civilian aspects of the war as important as the military effort. This summit changed the system of priorities and caused the initiation of additional programs and provision of more of the requisites needed to wage what many called the "other war." Perhaps the most significant outcome of the conference was President Johnson's decision that only one person would direct United States pacification efforts in Vietnam. This led to the establishment of the Office of Civil Operations (OCO) in late autumn 1966. This new organization brought the various U.S. civilian pacification programs under the control of a senior official who, in turn, reported directly to the deputy ambassador.

The South Vietnamese Government assigned the overall responsibility for the Vietnamese side of the national pacification plan, the Revolutionary Development Program, to Major General Nguyen Duc Thang, who headed the newly created Ministry of Revolutionary Development. A reorganization of the Vietnamese war cabinet on 12 July 1966 gave Thang direct supervision over the Ministries of Revolutionary Development, Agriculture, Public Works, and Interior. At this juncture, Thang gained authority to direct coordination and integration of civil/military Revolutionary Development activities at all echelons of the government.

The main operational element for the civil aspects of Revolutionary Development was the 59-man Revolutionary Development cadre team. The government recruited these teams from within each district, trained them at the National Cadre Training School at Vung Tau, and returned them to their provinces for assignment to a district chief for work in one of his hamlets. Their first task involved the security and defense of their assigned hamlets. Once they established security they started working with the people to create a better way of life within the hamlet.

In September, to ensure military assistance for the program, the South Vietnamese appointed General Thang to the position of assistant for territorial affairs and pacification to the Chief, Joint General Staff. Major functions of his position included development of policies and concepts for military activities in support of revolutionary development and supervision of the employment, maneuver, and training of regional and popular forces. The primary

Revolutionary Development role of the military forces required achieving a level of security which would permit the accomplishment of civil activities and subsequent nation building. The 1967 Combined Campaign Plan assigned the primary mission of supporting the Revolutionary Development program to ARVN forces, thus, by the end of 1966, the South Vietnamese Government had taken major steps to consolidate its pacification programs.*

As the Vietnamese reorganized, the Americans also continued to reform their own programs. The Office of Civil Operations (OCO) confidently reported that it had integrated the pacification effort with military operations and was making significant progress in implementing the various programs. One of the most important OCO contributions was the appointment of four regional directors, one for each corps area. These four men had full authority over all American civilians in their respective regions and reported directly to the director of OCO; previously there had been no central management of the various pacification programs. During the spring of 1967, the United States realized that it needed a stronger organization and placed all of the various components of the American pacification effort, both civilian and military, under a single manager, ComUSMACV. The name of the new organization was Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS).

On 23 May, MACV Directive 10-12 implemented CORDS. Ambassador Robert Komer became General Westmoreland's deputy for CORDS with full responsibility for the entire program. The directive specifically charged the ambassador with "supervising the formulation and execution of all plans, policies and programs, military and civilian, which support the GVN's revolutionary development program and related programs." In addition, the directive provided for the integration and consolidation of all OCO and revolutionary development support activities at all levels: nation, corps, province, and district. The OCO regional director became the deputy for CORDS to each corps commander, while the senior provincial and district advisors became CORDS representatives at those levels. Accommodation of this extensive program proved to be a simple matter in I Corps, chiefly because the I Corps Coordinating Council had performed a very similar function for 20 months.

dinating Council had performed a very similar function for 20 months.

By early August 1965, Marine civic action had expanded to the point that coordination with other United States agencies in I Corps became imperative for the effective support of the Vietnamese pacification program. General Walt ordered the creation of the I Corps Joint Coordinating Council. The council drew its members from all major U.S. and Vietnamese agencies in I CTZ, including representatives from both Marine and ARVN military staffs. When the council met on 30 August 1965, it was the first working regional council of its kind in South Vietnam. This organizational step preceded the formation of subcommittees for public health, education, roads, refugees, distribution, and police. Although the Joint Coordinating Council had no directive-making authority or material resources of its own, the influence of its members made it the most effective group for carrying out the total pacification program in I Corps.* By the fall of 1966, the success of the council encouraged and assisted the formation of other joint coordinating councils (JCC). These JCCs were independent of the corps-level council, but had similar staffs and missions. As 1967 began, growing Vietnamese participation in council activities and sponsored programs indicated the value of the JCC approach.

During 1965 III MAF created a fifth general staff section, G-5, to coordinate all civic action programs. The Marines established G-5/S-5 sections in every Marine division, regiment, and battalion serving in Vietnam. At the same time, to prevent overlap of projects, III MAF assigned responsibility for the coordination of civic action in particular geographical areas to specific units. This enabled them to coordinate all programs within their areas with local government officials. By the end of 1966, these two steps formed a sound base for both the III MAF and Vietnamese pacification programs.

Following the formation of CORDS, many of the functions of the III MAF G-5 section shifted to the CORDS representatives at III MAF Headquarters. Such a shift inevitably caused some friction between the two offices. Among them was the tendency of

*For a detailed description of the Revolutionary Development Program during 1966 and the development of the Combined Campaign for 1967, see Shulimson, *U. S. Marines in Vietnam, 1966*.

*Vice Admiral Thomas R. Weschler wrote that General Walt's leadership was the key element that molded the various agencies into a team dedicated to a successful pacification campaign. Vice Admiral Thomas R. Weschler, Comments on draft ms, 18Jun81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

the CORDS staff to report through their own channels directly to Saigon, bypassing III MAF. Despite daily meetings, the G-5 section believed that much information from the CORDS system was not reaching the G-5. "As CORDS took on more of the responsibility for pacification from the G-5," wrote Colonel James L. Black, who served as III MAF G-5, "coordination among the [III MAF] G-3, G-2, and G-5 became almost non-existent." III MAF sharply reduced the size of the G-5 section and it almost integrated into the CORDS staff. However, in spite of being the smallest staff section in III MAF, G-5 remained charged with major requirements to support the pacification effort.²

The G-5 officer found a number of obstacles in his path. Even though the Army's 29th Civil Affairs Company supported III MAF, the growth of CORDS blurred the command relationship between III MAF and the company. Further, Colonel Black did not believe the company's task organization properly reflected its mission. Another limiting factor was the lack of understanding of civil affairs among Marines assigned to G-5/S-5 staffs at all command levels. Few had been school trained in their duties and had to learn on-the-job. Those with formal school training had to learn to shift their thinking from theoretical, classroom concepts to the practical situation at hand. The learning process slowed progress in the III MAF civil affairs effort.

The importance placed upon civic action required the III MAF G-5 to submit a daily civic action report to FMFPac headquarters. The report included such topics as the amount of lumber, clothing, garbage, and other material distributed to the Vietnamese people during the last 24 hours. This classified report could not be delayed, not even by heavy message traffic during peak operational periods. "If this report did not reach FMFPac within 24 hours," wrote Colonel Black, "you would receive a 'nasty' phone call [from Hawaii]." The reports problem ended, according to Colonel Black, in the spring of 1968.³

County Fair

Throughout 1967, the Marines concentrated on the basics of pacification development. In accordance with the Honolulu Declaration of 1966, the Marines directed much of their effort at the expansion and refinement of the pacification program they had initiated earlier. For their programs to succeed, the Marines needed to provide secure conditions in which the Vietnamese people could live and in

which all levels of legal government could function without enemy interference. To this end, the Marines' main objective was the isolation of the VC from the people, both physically and economically. Golden Fleece operations, in which Marines provided security during rice harvests, had proven successful in protecting the villagers' rice crops since September 1965; however, they occurred only during the two or three yearly harvest seasons. On the other hand, the war on the VC infrastructure was a daily affair.

The source of the enemy's strength was the local guerilla organization which operated in 5- to 10-man cells within each hamlet. Each cell acted as a clandestine *de facto* government which worked to foster Communist influence, while simultaneously undermining the influence of local officials and the central government. If the local population was not sympathetic to the Communist cause, the guerillas resorted to intimidation and terror to control inhabitants. Each guerrilla acted as an agent between the people and the VC main force units which needed food, recruits, and intelligence. Simply stated, pacification involved eliminating the agents and thus reducing the large Communist units to the status of conventional forces groping around in hostile territory. Furthermore, with the destruction of the guerrilla infrastructure, the seeds of RVN influence could fall on neutral, if not completely fertile, ground.

The Marines recognized these realities during the early stages of the campaign and devised several techniques to combat the guerrillas. One of the most successful, initiated in 1966, was the County Fair concept. Basically, County Fairs involved elaborate cordon and search operations conducted by combined ARVN and Marine forces. Since the South Vietnamese government needed to know who belonged where, the ARVN handled the population control aspects, as well as the actual searching of the targeted village, while the Marines usually remained in the background, providing tactical "muscle."

Once the combined commanders selected an operational area, Marine units moved in at night and established a cordon around the designated village to prevent the VC, if any, from escaping or gaining reinforcements. At dawn, ARVN troops entered the village, rounded up the inhabitants, apologized for the inconvenience, and announced that they intended to search the hamlet. While district and village leaders mingled with the people explaining what was



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370115

Vietnamese peasant women hold out their straw hats for the mixture of ham and rice prepared by the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines during a "County Fair" operation in May.

happening, other officials checked identification cards and took a census.

The allies tried to make the experience as pleasant as possible. They set up a temporary dispensary to provide the villagers with free medical and dental care. They fed the people, including providing candy and other delights for the children. Entertainment featured movies, live presentations, and band concerts which helped to cover the serious business of uprooting the Communists. These organized amusements provided the name "County Fair."

While the distractions continued in the assembly area, South Vietnamese troops systematically combed the village. Often the guerrillas slipped into tunnels or spider holes at the first sign of approaching troops, but if the troops discovered the underground hiding place they literally smoked out the VC. On some operations, the searchers used portable blowers, called "Mighty Mites," to saturate the shafts with tear gas and smoke.* If the guerrillas chose to run away, they encountered the Marine cordon around the village.

While these operations proved successful, County Fairs were not an end in themselves. When Marine

and ARVN units left the area, they took with them the security essential to the survival of pro-government villages. Even if the allies eradicated the existing VC infrastructure, their departure created a vacuum into which other guerrilla cadre could filter. During a survey conducted by Marine civil affairs personnel in the Chu Lai area, most civilians interviewed stated that they appreciated the medical care, the clothing, the new schools, and all of the other benefits, but what they really wanted was protection from the Viet Cong. Revolutionary Development teams and Popular Forces could only partially remedy the situation because of their limited training and armament. The Marines realized these facts, but they also recognized the unexploited potential which the popular forces offered: total familiarity with local conditions, loyalties, needs, and every physical characteristic of their home villages. Marine recognition of this potential, and efforts to develop it, produced one of the most productive innovations in I Corps, the Combined Action Program.

Marine Grass-Roots-Level Participation

The birth of the Combined Action Program occurred in the summer of 1965 in Lieutenant Colonel William W. Taylor's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines as a means of controlling the population around the Phu

*The term Mighty Mite should not be confused with the similar nickname for a light vehicle used as a jeep by Marine units in the 1960s.

Bai combat base. The battalion civil affairs officer, Captain John J. Mullen, Jr., provided the original inspiration. Understanding the Vietnamese culture, Mullen realized that the militia troops living in the villages were the key to local security. Rural Vietnamese had an orientation toward families, ancestors, and hamlets; they were not strong nationalists. Most farmers spent their entire lives within a 10-mile radius of their hamlets. PFs usually performed poorly if moved to another district, but in defense of their own homes they could be tough. In the war with the VC, motivation alone could not overcome superior firepower and experience. Mullen believed the Marines could add the necessary ingredients and, given proper leadership and firepower, the PFs not only could, but would stand up to the VC.

Lieutenant Colonel Taylor agreed with Mullen's idea and, on 3 August 1965, he sent four squads of Marines to work with six platoons of PFs in the three villages northwest of his perimeter. First Lieutenant Paul R. Ek, who spoke Vietnamese, became the company commander and a PF lieutenant worked as his executive officer. Under this leadership, the program got underway.

Lieutenant Ek's success with combined action prompted III MAF to expand the program. General Walt, a strong advocate of the pacification program, approved of the results at Phu Bai and, in January 1966, decided to initiate similar programs at Da Nang and Chu Lai.* General Walt's initiating order stated:

1. . . . the Commanding General, I Corps has concurred in III MAF proposal to expand the Marine-Popular Force program throughout all Marine enclaves and has published instructions to subordinates throughout I Corps.

2. Action will be taken immediately to establish liaison through Province, District, and down to village/hamlet as required to take operational control of Popular Force units within a zone of action in accordance with reference (b). In each case ensure that local officials thoroughly understand the program and have been apprised of General Thi's letter. Specifically, presentations will include that Marine forces intend to establish communications to Popular Force units, provide supporting arms, reserve forces, and plan to place Marines with selected Popular Force Platoons. Where possible Popular Force units in proximity to each other will

be organized into Combined Action Companies.* In discussions, stress the mutual benefits of the program in that Marines can profit from Popular Forces knowledge of area, language, and people while the Popular Force will receive valuable training and will be provided additional security. Of primary importance is the fact that this relationship will provide a basis for better understanding and building of mutual respect between our forces. In presenting the program to RVN officials, avoid the use of the terms "operational control" by substituting "cooperation or coordination."

3. Insure a thorough indoctrination on the overall aims of programs to all concerned. These are to improve the effectiveness and prestige of the Popular Forces with a view to increasing recruitment to build up this critically understrength force. The importance of the Popular Forces to provide security for rear areas, which will allow Marine/ARVN combat forces to move forward, cannot be overstressed. At every opportunity when dealing with GVN officials, highlight the Popular Force problem and assess the adequacy of the program at local levels to improve this force.

4. Upon receipt of this letter, report:

- a. Location of Popular Force units in area of operation.
- b. Assigned mission of each unit.
- c. Commander.
- d. Personnel present for duty.
- e. Amount and condition of equipment.
- f. Uniform requirements.
- g. Plans for implementing program.

5. After the initial report submit summary of operations conducted and evaluation of the program on a weekly basis.³

By January 1966, there were seven combined action platoons in existence; by July, 38; and by the beginning of 1967 the number had risen to 57. III MAF planned still more.

While it was important to have the support of III MAF command levels for combined action, the success or failure of the venture ultimately rested on the shoulders of 19- and 20-year-old Marines. Combined Action units needed a special Marine; a man without the necessary motivation, understanding, and compassion could do more harm than good. All Marines in the original program were volunteers with at least four months' combat experience, a favorable recommendation from their commanding officer, no record of disciplinary action, and, all important, no discernible racial prejudices. These men were the

*Captain Mullen, who replaced Lieutenant Ek upon the latter's rotation in September 1965, and several members of the original company assisted and advised in the establishment of the second unit. Lieutenant Colonel John J. Mullen, Jr., Comments on drafts, 21May81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

*The name of these units soon changed to Combined Action Platoons (CAPs). The Marines found that the acronym "CAC" was, under certain pronunciations, a vulgarity in the Vietnamese language.

foundation upon which the Marine side of the program was built.

By mid-1967, III MAF had compiled statistics which illustrated the dedication of Marines in the Combined Action Program. The average Marine participant had a 75-percent chance of being wounded once during his tour and a 30-percent chance of being hit a second time. The ultimate statistic, those who would die, was just under 12 percent. Despite these grim mathematical reminders, over 60 percent of the Marines volunteered for at least one six-month extension to their normal 12-month tours in Vietnam. The high extension rate was a strong indication to their leaders that the Combined Action Program had a better than average chance of success.

The basic operating unit of the program, the combined action platoon (CAP), consisted of a 14-man Marine squad and a Navy corpsman, integrated into a nominal 35-man Popular Forces platoon. The ideal scenario following establishment of a combined action unit was as follows:

Initially, there was only one objective, around-the-clock security of their assigned hamlet. The first days were the most dangerous, the period when unit cohesiveness and proficiency were most questionable. The Marines first had to teach the PFs to defend themselves. The Marines provided the knowledge of tactics and weaponry while the PFs contributed their knowledge of the terrain and local conditions. In the field the Marine squad leader, normally a sergeant, usually controlled the unit; but during the daily routine, cooperation replaced command. As the PFs' confidence and skill grew, CAP patrolling became more aggressive. Continuous sharing of experience gained through daily, side-by-side participation in training and patrolling created truly effective, integrated platoons and a new degree of reliable hamlet security. As the strength of the CAP grew, the peoples' willingness to accept the unit also increased. Then, and only then, could lasting social action within the hamlets become a reality.

Time worked paradoxically for the CAP Marines. To ensure their own survival, they had to quickly transform the CAP into a cohesive defense force, but the opposite was the case in their dealings with the people. The Vietnamese, possessing a wariness of outsiders typical of peasant societies, would not let the Marines force their way into the existing social structure of the hamlet. Acceptance took time. Usually the breakthrough in acquiring community



3d MarDiv ComdC, June 1967

This Marine, though wearing starched, pressed trousers and shined boots for the visiting photographer, wields a hoe alongside a Popular Forces militiaman to demonstrate the importance of cooperative effort in the Combined Action Program.

acceptance came from the hamlet children. Since the CAP compound was a natural gathering place for the naturally curious and uninhibited children, they accepted the Marines and, in turn, gained the friendship of the Americans. In most cases, hamlet children became the most significant factor in bridging the cultural gap. As parents began to know and understand the Marines through their own children, empathy could develop which aided the establishment of common purposes.

This approach was not without its pitfalls, as Navy Chaplain Vincent T. Capadonno, a former missionary on Taiwan, pointed out in a series of lectures to Marine units at Chu Lai in the summer of 1966. Young American males, he said, love to play with children—for about 15 minutes. Then they tire of the children and start pushing them away, sometimes having to get rough before the children realize the game is over. Further, in Vietnamese peasant society, where infant and child mortality were high, children, though loved by their parents, had little social standing. Among the Vietnamese, social standing was a matter of age, with the elderly having the highest, most respected status. The American cultural emphasis on youth could lead young Marines to concentrate on young Vietnamese and ig-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189582

Popular Forces militiamen and Marines work together to improve village defenses by building a traffic control gate over a bridge near the combined action platoon's position.

nore the village elders, a situation that could create resentment within the village power structure.⁶

In areas of strong Communist influence, the development of a close relationship was even more difficult. The Marines had to counter VC propaganda which pictured them as blood-thirsty mercenaries who burned, raped, and pillaged, but participants managed to overcome these obstacles when their actions disproved the Communists' claims. They had to live, work, and eat with the people, respect their customs, and treat them as equals. The CAP corpsmen also helped to narrow the gap by providing rudimentary but vital medical assistance. Most importantly, the Marines' approach had to demonstrate that they genuinely cared about the well-being of the villagers.

Once the people accepted the Marines, true civic action could start, but again the Americans could not take charge. For civic action to be effective, it had to reflect what the people sincerely wanted, as well as what they were willing to support. Once everyone determined these needs, only the imagination and initiative of the Marines and the villagers limited the extent of the program. The range of projects accomplished by Marines, PFs, and citizens working together ranged from school construction to animal husbandry. Many desired civic action projects exceeded the material resources available to the CAPs, but they could turn to the vast inventories of

agencies as USAID and CARE. Local Marine commands also helped by providing the hamlets available construction material, machinery, tools, and clothing.

When they demonstrated military proficiency and gained popular support, the CAPs could apply greater pressure on the VC. By denying the guerrillas access to the hamlets, the defense force curtailed the Communists' logistic and manpower sources. The CAPs also established antiguerrilla intelligence nets in their immediate areas. When the people realized that to help the CAPs was to help themselves, they provided the Marines information on VC movements, storage areas, and the locations of mines and booby traps.* Armed with this intelligence, the CAPs managed to inflict heavier casualties on the Viet Cong, driving them further from the mainstream of hamlet life.

The CAPs also attempted to erode Communist strength through persuasion. They aimed this effort primarily at the relatives of the local guerrillas. The Marines entreated the resident families of known VC to ask their kin to give up the VC cause, pointing out that sooner or later the CAPs would find and possibly kill them. This approach not only ac-

*The Marines rarely, if ever, patrolled without the PFs, because the Vietnamese, being more familiar with the area, could spot mines and booby traps more readily than the Americans.

celerated enemy defections, but it also reinforced the permanency of the CAP program in the minds of the peasants.

All of these activities contributed to the growth of the villagers' belief in their own government and their allies. Perhaps the most important factor in promoting confidence in the program was the fact that the Viet Cong had not regained control of any area in which a CAP had established security. The presence of a successful CAP in a village complex prohibited further use of that village by the VC.

Not all CAP units succeeded, especially during the period of rapid expansion of the program. Lieutenant Colonel Max McQuown, the commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, was not favorably impressed with either of the two units in his battalion TAOR. He described the problems of these units:

Few of the Marines assigned to these two CAP units had prior ground combat experience. . . . [They] were an admixture out of combat service support units. The leaders and the Marines under them . . . lacked skills in scouting and patrolling, mines and booby traps, map reading, observed fire procedures, basic infantry tactics, and VC tactics and techniques. Further, they had scant knowledge of the Vietnamese language and were unfamiliar with the social and religious customs of the people they were living with.

With respect to their PF counterparts, *not one* PF was a

resident of either village . . . all the eligible resident males, who should have been members of the PF platoons, were gone! They had been drafted into the ARVN, joined the VC, or deserted the village to keep from [serving in either the ARVN or VC]. The strength of each PF platoon in these villages never exceeded 20 men. . . .

Marine [and PF] members of the CAP platoon . . . kept themselves aloof from the villagers they were supposed to be helping. . . .

There was *no* record of either CAP unit capturing a VC, let alone destroying the VC infrastructure in these villages. In fact, the VC operated with impunity around these villages unless elements of 3/1 were in the area. . . .

[The chiefs of the two villages], both many times wounded [and] ardent anti-communist leaders, chose to deal directly with [the battalion S-2 and S-5 sections] with respect to VC activity and civic action programs. Both chiefs were instrumental in initiating 3/1 action against VC operating in and around their villages. Neither chief had faith that the CAP units would accomplish anything.⁷

The existence of similar problems among a number of CAP units, which were traceable to rapid expansion of the program, was apparent to III MAF headquarters. To enhance the program's effectiveness, General Cushman, the new III MAF commander, established a provisional combined action group (CAG) headquarters at Da Nang. The primary purpose of this provisional CAG was to oversee training and support of the combined action units. A month later, III MAF formed two more

A large South Vietnamese flag flies over the bunkers and barbed wire protecting the gate leading into the headquarters of Combined Action Platoon 3-1 in August 1967.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189537



CAGs to direct activities in the Phu Bai and Chu Lai areas.

During July, III MAF revised control and support of the CAP Marines by removing them from the command of the Marine division responsible for their area. The new chain of command linked the CAPs through their companies and groups directly to III MAF. Under the revised system, supervisory authority rested with the deputy commanding general of III MAF, Major General Herman Nickerson, Jr., via his Combined Action Program Staff. This command revision occurred following the relocation of Marine tactical units after the arrival of the Army's Task Force Oregon at Chu Lai.

The CAP program continued to grow during 1967. By July there were 75 CAPs and by the end of the year, 79 operated under 14 company headquarters.

The increasing success of the Combined Action Program demonstrated the results achievable. Pacification involved not changing, but rather, reinforcing the villagers' own aspirations. The successful CAP Marines understood this and, because of it, achieved one of the basic goals of the entire pacification effort, the unification of interest between the South Vietnamese villager and the individual Marine. For the process to work in the Marine TAORs, III MAF needed the same identity of interest between the Marines in the regular units and the local populace. Marines in companies and battalions had to realize that their mission was the protection of the people, while the Vietnamese peasants had to learn to overcome their fear of Americans.

The Marine Corps attempted to solve this problem with its Personal Response Project, a program designed to help the individual Marine to understand the South Vietnamese. III MAF initiated the project in July 1966, but it remained in a data collecting stage until early in 1967. The first steps of the program consisted of making several surveys of Marines throughout I Corps to establish a representative sample of Marine attitudes toward the Vietnamese people. At the same time, III MAF chaplains conducted lectures and discussions to acquaint the Marines with the basic features of Vietnamese culture and civilization. III MAF distributed a *Platoon Leader's Personal Response Notebook* to all small unit commanders as an instruction guide for Marines under their command.

In February 1967, the 3d Marine Division established a Personal Response Council and a Per-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189650
Cpl Gary W. Armstrong fires his M-60 machine gun toward a Viet Cong sniper's position while on a combat patrol with a combined action unit on 9 May.

sonal Response Contact Team. The council and team started a variety of programs directed toward improving Marine-Vietnamese relationships, essentially through eliminating any negative attitudes held by the Marines.⁸ By the end of May, both the 1st Marine Division and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing had similar programs.

The Headquarters, Marine Corps statement of the purpose and objectives of the Marine Corps Personal Response Project was:

The Personal Response Project is a systematic effort toward attitudinal improvement in intercultural relations. By discovering the ways in which people of another culture relate their religious and ethical value systems to daily life the project develops effective anticipation of acculturative problems. Such anticipation and understanding is one of the keys to the elimination of offensive behavioral patterns toward indigenous citizens. It is expected that appropriate mutual assistance between Marines and the citizenry will be a by-product of increased understanding and contributory to the elimination of local guerrilla forces in an insurgency environment.

The objectives of the Personal Response Project are to: assist military personnel to respond to the predisposition of indigenous citizens to act in concert with their social, religious, and cultural value systems; identify the expression of these value systems and the motivation implicit in them; and recognize that the lives, relationships, and ac-

tions of indigenous citizens are of the same importance as those of all other human beings.⁹

Despite the heavy language, the approach seemed helpful. By the end of 1967, the Personal Response Project had become one of the anchors of III MAF's civic action program. Lieutenant Colonel Donald L. Evans, the III MAF assistant G-5 at the time the project started, stated that he considered the Personal Response Project as important as psychological operations and the Combined Action Program.¹⁰

The Marines realized that any effective pacification plan must have both a political and a psychological impact. They found that civic action and psychological operations had to be mutually supporting and to obtain a maximum benefit, required close coordination with Vietnamese officials. To this end, the County Fair and Combined Action Programs proved most effective. Other joint psychological operations involved relocation of refugees from VC controlled areas and the support of tactical operations with armed propaganda teams' presentations, leaflet drops, audio-visual productions, combat loudspeaker performances, and movie festivals. Vietnamese Cultural Drama Teams served in Marine operational areas to entertain local peasants; these teams presented short dramas and songs weaving in appropriate political points.

The most significant psychological effort was the *Chieu Hoi* (Open Arms) Program. This was the government's campaign to win over the Viet Cong. The government provided them with assistance for a new start by teaching them a trade to use when returning to their homes. Ralliers (*hoi chanhs*) often provided valuable information, especially regarding the location of troops and equipment caches, but more importantly, III MAF believed this program provided still another avenue for achieving pacification. Consequently, III MAF accelerated planning to support the *Chieu Hoi* Program. Planned support included the building of new *Chieu Hoi* centers to increase the handling capability of the returnees. During 1967, the *Chieu Hoi* Program accommodated 2,539 ralliers in I Corps.

In July 1966, the Marines used *hoi chanhs* for the first time during a County Fair operation. The *hoi chanhs* addressed small groups of villagers to describe the Viet Cong methods and intentions, as well as the benefits of the Government's Revolutionary Development Program. The success of *hoi chanh* employment rapidly became apparent; for ex-

ample, in two months' time one rallier identified more than 30 VC.

Achieving the full potential of the ralliers demanded rigid screening and orientation. Six participated in combat operations on a trial basis in October 1966. The *hoi chanhs*' intimate knowledge of the terrain, their familiarity with local people, and their knowledge of the VC *modus operandi* proved invaluable to the tactical units. When General Nickerson, then commanding the 1st Marine Division, learned of the success of the trial, he ordered that all qualified returnees join field units as soon as possible. General Nickerson also originated the new collective name for the *hoi chanhs*; he called them Kit Carson Scouts, after the famous guide of the western frontier. At the end of 1966, 19 scouts served in the 1st Marine Division program.

In February 1967, General Walt ordered the program adopted throughout III MAF. A newly established Kit Carson Training Center standardized scout training, and by the end of December 132 scouts served with Marine units in I Corps. During the year 1967, scouts killed 58 Viet Cong, captured 37, and seized 82 weapons. Equally important to the Marines operating with them was the scouts' discovery of 145 mines and explosive devices.

Among other civic action programs employed by the Marines during 1967, public health and educa-

Pham Duoc, a veteran of five months as a Kit Carson Scout, points on a map to likely Viet Cong hiding places to LCpl R. D. Kilmer and Cpl P. F. Collins, while fellow Scout Ho Quyet (center) watches.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189519





3d MarDiv ComdC, May 1967

2dLt Edward F. McCourt, Jr. (left), SSgt Roy C. Sharp, and He-Xung, an interpreter/translator, train Kit Carson Scouts on the M-16 at the training center at Phu Bai.

tion continued to be keystones of the effort. Of the two, medical assistance produced the most immediate results. Almost every unit conducted medical and dental civic action projects (MedCAPs and DentCAPs) for their humanitarian value. As an adjunct to MedCAPs, Navy medical personnel distributed medical supplies to the Vietnamese and Vietnamese medical workers.

The Public Health Program bridged the gap between pure medical assistance and self-help projects. These efforts operated under the aegis of CORDS and the supervision of the Public Health Committee of I Corps' JCC. A general sanitation campaign included trash removal, inoculations, preventive medicine, pest control, and water purification.

Just as good health was a prerequisite to the villagers' general well being, education was mandatory for economic and social growth. Medical assistance, particularly the MedCAP efforts, produced immediate, tangible results; conversely the III MAF civil education program offered few short-term advantages, but the Marines could not ignore the requirement for education and its long-range impact. During 1967, the Marines expanded the school building project they started during the spring of 1966. They coordinated this program through the Education Committee of I Corps JCC to determine the hamlets that wanted to participate. Each participating hamlet provided an adequate school site, agreed to provide labor for its construction, arranged for a teacher, and paid the teacher's salary. In return, the Marines agreed to provide construction

materials, technical advice, and heavy equipment. Each application required coordination with the local government and CORDS officials to ensure compatibility with overall national school construction plans.

Even more widespread than the school building programs were those of providing school supplies. Most of the refugee village schools needed every type of school supply. Elementary school kits from the Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere (CARE) were the most popular item distributed to individual students. Classroom supply kits, also from CARE, went to those students who needed only replacements. By the end of 1967, almost every school-age child in I Corps had received, at one time or another, one of the CARE kits.

These humanitarian programs were very difficult to accomplish in actual practice. Committing a battalion to an operation outside its TAOR or transferring it to another area could often disrupt the continuity of the pacification effort within a village. Vietnamese teachers were understandably reluctant to risk their lives by working in newly-built schools in contested villages. In addition, as Lieutenant Colonel McQuown of the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines pointed out, some projects required a 48-hour day to complete. "The Vietnamese people," he wrote, "labored from dawn to darkness just to farm and raise enough food to subsist. At the end of the working day they were too tired to be interested in a lecture on the necessity of screening or covering a toilet that had been open for 3,000 years. . . ."¹¹ In spite of



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370042
Lt Thomas E. Bunnell, a Navy physician assigned to the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, gives a shot to a Vietnamese child during a medical civic action patrol (Medcap) to a village five miles northeast of Chu Lai.

these and other obstacles, the Marines persisted in their pacification efforts.

Reporting and Evaluation

As 1967 began, the Marines in I Corps used two measurement systems to evaluate progress in the various pacification programs. III MAF in-

dependently developed one system. On the other hand, MACV used the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) on a country-wide basis to evaluate all areas where Government authority existed.

In February 1966, the Marines introduced an index system to measure and record a broad range of essential indicators of pacification status. The index related civic action and Revolutionary Development programs in the TAORs and, at the same time, tied in Marine Corps combat operations to both programs. Essentially, the system equated progress in pacification with the progress of the war, and included indicators of improvement which required action by military organizations. The system included five basic general indicators of progress:

1. Destruction of enemy military units
2. Destruction of enemy infrastructure
3. Establishment of local security by the Vietnamese
4. Establishment of local government by the Vietnamese
5. Status of New Life Development Programs

The village served as the basic measurement unit in this assessment since it consisted of a clearly defined area for applying uniform standards for comparative purposes. The evaluator determined the level of pacification progress in each village based on five general indicators which, in turn, subdivided into subordinate elements. The subordinate elements carried various weights, so that a village that fully satisfied all elements of each indicator received 100 points. For the subdivision and specific weights of the system, see table this page.

Pacification Progress Indices			
1. Destruction of Organized VC Military Forces		4. Establishment of Local Government	
a. VC local/main force units destroyed or driven out	15	a. Village chief and council elected and functioning	4
b. GVN/FW/MAF capable of defending the area	5	b. Village chief lives and sleeps in the village	3
	20	c. Hamlet chiefs and councils elected and functioning	4
2. Destruction of VC Infrastructure		d. Hamlet chief lives and sleeps in the hamlet	4
a. Census completed	2	e. Psyops and public information services established	3
b. VC infrastructure discovered and destroyed or neutralized	8	f. Village statutes enacted	1
c. GVN intelligence network established	5	g. Village social and administrative organization completed	1
d. Census grievance teams completed interviewing each family	2		20
e. Principal grievances proceed	3	5. Completion of Initial New Life Hamlet Programs	
	20	a. Necessary public health works, required to meet initial needs of populace, completed	4
3. Establishment of Local Security		b. Necessary educational requirements, to satisfy initial needs, have been met	4
a. Defense plans completed	2	c. Necessary agricultural works completed	4
b. Defense construction completed	3	d. Adequate ground transportation into and out of the area has been established	4
c. Local defense forces trained and in place	12	e. Necessary markets established	4
d. Communications established with supporting unit	3		20
	20	Maximum points	100

Each component of the system depended on the others, thus the evaluation could not reflect a great achievement in the category "Establishment of Local Government" until the village made large advances in the category "Destruction of Enemy Units." A high score in "Completion of Initial New Life Hamlet Programs" was possible only if it represented gains in security and the establishment of local apparatus in the village. A score of 60 points for a village indicated that government had established firm influence. A "pacified" village was one which attained the grade of 80 points. The system proved to be highly successful and, with minor refinements, became the basic technique used by the Marines to assess pacification progress. At the end of 1967, it remained the standard system.

The Hamlet Evaluation System, devised by the Department of Defense in conjunction with the U.S. Mission Council, Vietnam, appeared in December 1966. Patterned after the Marine evaluation system, it differed in several important areas:

The HES system focused on the hamlet level, while the Marine system graded villages.

HES presented the results of its hamlet evaluation in letter form, while the Marine project rated the village by numerical percentage.

Several HES elements required subjective evaluation, while the Marine system was basically objective.

HES evaluated all areas in which Government authority was present, while the Marines' system rated only those villages in which III MAF influence was present.

HES utilized the advisory structure for its information while the Marine system used the military structure.¹²

HES, like the Marine system, operated on a monthly reporting cycle. The heart of the system was the Hamlet Evaluation Worksheet (HEW), which each district advisor prepared for each of his district's hamlets possessing some degree of Government control. The advisor analyzed each hamlet's pacification status in terms of six general categories:

1. VC military activities
2. VC political and subversive activities
3. Security (friendly capabilities)
4. Administrative and political activities
5. Health, education, and welfare
6. Economic development

Each of the six categories received a rating indicator, from A (best) through E. The advisor also completed a multiple-choice list of 14 questions about the hamlet's problems during the month. Despite the basic differences between the Marines' System and the HES, the systems proved compatible as well as complementary.

Neither system was flawless, however. Both required a great deal of work to compile statistics that were not always meaningful. As Colonel Black, the III MAF G-5 noted, the fact a village chief slept in his village was misleading. "If the chief did," wrote Black, "the usual assumption was made that pacification was really in progress. [However, the] chief could be VC and sleep in the village and the village or hamlet could be under VC control." Nevertheless, III MAF considered the village report the better indicator of pacified areas.¹³

PART VI
SUPPORT AND CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 13

Supporting Arms

Marine Air Operations—Fixed-Wing Operations—Helicopter Operations—Artillery

Marine Air Operations

At the start of 1967, Major General Louis B. Robertshaw's 1st Marine Aircraft Wing consisted of three fixed-wing groups, MAGs-11, -12, and -13, and two helicopter groups, MAGs-16 and -36. One fixed-wing group, MAG-11, operated from Da Nang, while the other two were at Chu Lai. The two helicopter groups operated from different bases also; MAG-36 was at Ky Ha, and MAG-16 split between Marble Mountain and Phu Bai. Wing headquarters, services, command, and control functions came from units of Marine Wing Headquarters Group 1 (MWHG-1) at Da Nang.

General Robertshaw, as III MAF's air component commander, exercised operational control of these units through his staff and by means of the Marine

air command and control system. The key unit in this system, the tactical air direction center (TADC), was at wing headquarters in Da Nang.* This agency monitored the employment of all wing aircraft and allocated resources to specific missions. TADC exercised control through two subordinate organizations, the tactical air operations center (TAOC) and the direct air support centers (DASCs).

*The senior agency in the Marine air command and control system normally is the Tactical Air Command Center (TACC). Since the Seventh Air Force had a TACC in Saigon, the 1st MAF center used "TADC" as provided for in doctrine. Lieutenant General Keith B. McCutcheon, "Marine Aviation in Vietnam, 1962-1970," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, May 1971, p. 138.

Sunlight reflects from a .50 caliber machine gun sticking from the side of a CH-46A helicopter as it heads out on a late afternoon mission to a unit southwest of An Hoa.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421675



The TADC, manned by Marine Air Control Squadron 7 (MACS-7), was the main control center for both anti-air warfare and air traffic control. Plotters wrote information from the unit's various radars on vertical display boards from which controllers maintained positive air traffic control, as well as target area air space control. In June, wing control capabilities significantly increased when MACS-4 arrived to replace MACS-7. The new unit brought with it a new semi-automated, computer-oriented TAOC which comprised part of the Marine Tactical Data System (MTDS). This TAOC permitted the wing to handle more than 200 aircraft tracks at the same time. When the complete MTDS became operational on Monkey Mountain on the Tiensha Peninsula northeast of Da Nang in July, it provided a link with the Navy Tactical Data System of the Seventh Fleet for instant exchange of air defense data with ships operating in the Gulf of Tonkin. Future plans for the MTDS included a connection with the Air Force Tactical Data System for passing air defense and air control data instantly from Thailand to Da Nang and naval units in the Tonkin Gulf.

While the TAOC, collocated with the MTDS and a Hawk missile battery on Monkey Mountain, served as the hub of wing control and air defense, the DASCs were the main centers of support for ground units. At the beginning of 1967, three DASCs were in operation; one at each of the division headquarters and one at the 3d Marine Division (Forward) Command Post at Dong Ha. Marine Air Support Squadrons (MASS) 2 and 3 provided the DASCs. Requests for air support, both attack and helicopter, passed through battalion and regimental air liaison officers to the DASC at division headquarters; requests from AOs and FACs went directly to DASC.

The support squadrons also contained the air support radar teams (ASRTs). During 1967, there were five ASRTs in operation. Located at Chu Lai, Da Nang, Phu Bai, and Dong Ha (two), each team used TPQ-10 radar to control aircraft in direct support missions during low visibility conditions. TPQ-10s had a 50-mile range, thus the Marine radar coverage included almost all of I Corps.

Although their mission was not tactical in nature, the Marine air traffic control units (MATCUs) were vital to the conduct of effective air operations. At all Marine airfields, the MATCUs provided terminal traffic control, including landing instructions and



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189984
Men from Marine Air Traffic Control Unit 62, a subordinate unit of MAG-12, operate at the Khe Sanh airstrip from expeditionary equipment they have sandbagged against NVA artillery and rockets.

ground-controlled approach data during periods of low visibility.

Until the activation of Marine Air Control Group 18 on 1 September 1967, the units operating the Marine air command and control system were part of Marine Wing Headquarters Group 1. With one headquarters squadron, two air support squadrons, two air control squadrons, and two anti-aircraft missile battalions on 1 July 1967, the group was one of the largest known to Marine aviation. Its personnel served throughout I Corps, including Chu Lai, Phu Bai, Dong Ha, Marble Mountain, Monkey Mountain, and the Hai Van Pass.¹

Throughout 1967 the 1st MAW operated under the provisions of MACV Aviation Directive 95-4 of 25 June 1966. This directive gave the commander of the Seventh Air Force, in his capacity as Deputy Commander USMACV (Air), the "coordinating authority" for tactical air support in South Vietnam, but not actual operational control of Marine air. The system allowed 1st MAW to meet all of III MAF's air support requirements while making its excess sortie capability available to Seventh Air Force for supporting other U.S. and allied forces.

A Memorandum of Agreement between III MAF and Seventh Air Force guided 1st MAW's air defense operations during 1967. Both services recognized the

necessity of a unified air defense system in the event of a North Vietnamese air attack on South Vietnam. The agreement gave the Air Force overall air defense responsibility, including naming an air defense commander. The 1st MAW designated which of its forces would participate in air defense and granted the Air Force certain authority over those forces, including the scrambling of alert aircraft, designation of targets, declaration of Hawk missile control status, and firing orders.

Marine commanders were essentially satisfied with the adequacy of these documents. In actual practice, 1st MAW controlled all air operations in support of ground units in I Corps while making available 25 to 30 sorties per day to the Seventh Air Force.² This system remained in effect until the advent of "single management" in early 1968.

Fixed-Wing Operations

In the absence of enemy aircraft over South Vietnam, the day-to-day mission of the 1st MAW fighter and fighter attack squadrons became close air support (CAS).³ By long-established doctrinal definition, these air strikes were against targets so close to friendly forces that each mission required integration with the fire and maneuver plans of the ground combat element. For better coordination and to reduce the possibility of friendly casualties, a forward air controller (FAC) with the supported unit or an airborne forward air controller (FAC[A]) controlled these strikes.

There were two basic categories of CAS mission, preplanned and immediate. A preplanned strike was the culmination of a complex process. For example, a Marine battalion commander with the mission of taking a specified objective normally would submit a request for strike aircraft through his air liaison officer the day before the operation began. From the battalion this request passed through the DASC at division and eventually to the wing TADC at Da Nang. There, the TADC assimilated all requests and assigned missions to one of the three fixed-wing groups, depending on the nature of the target and aircraft type desired for the mission.

As soon as the TADC passed the mission to a MAG, the group operations officers compared the orders with aircraft availability within the group and assigned a schedule to each squadron for the following day. Each mission passed by TADC through group received a mission number, a time on target

(TOT), and a prescribed ordnance load;* the squadron scheduling officer merely assigned pilots and aircraft.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421815

A Marine forward air controller in a small O-1 observation aircraft checks a target after directing an air strike on the position by fixed-wing attack aircraft.

At the appropriate time, the aircraft took off and headed for the target. Once airborne, the flight leader contacted TADC to confirm that his flight was airborne and proceeding on schedule. Usually the TADC simply cleared the leader for his original mission, but if a target of higher priority developed, the TADC could divert the flight. In this case, before entering the new operating area, the leader contacted the responsible DASC, which cleared the flight to a local controller. Normally this was a division air liaison officer (ALO) or a Marine or Air Force FAC(A) flying over the area of the infantry unit to be supported.

FAC(A)s in either light observation planes or UH-1E helicopters controlled most CAS missions in I

*Colonel John M. Verdi pointed out that this system did not relieve the squadron commander of his responsibilities. The squadron commander had to carefully supervise the weight and balance of the prescribed load on the aircraft to avoid unnecessary danger to the crew and aircraft during takeoff and combat maneuvering. Col John M. Verdi, Comments on draft ms, 4Jun81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.), hereafter Verdi Comments.

Corps. During these missions, the airborne controller monitored the ground unit's VHF radio net and directed the attacking aircraft over his UHF radio. When a flight arrived on station, the FAC informed the pilots* of the target description, elevation, attack heading, direction of pull-out, number of passes desired, and the number and type of bombs to be dropped on each pass. He also relayed the direction and distance to the nearest friendly units. The FAC then marked the target with a white phosphorous rocket or a smoke grenade. Once certain that the pilots had identified the correct target, the controller cleared the jet for an approach with the phrase "cleared hot." Thus instructed, the flight leader would make the first pass on the marked target, followed closely by his wingman. Throughout the strike, the ALO or FAC would relay corrections to the attack planes, often directing them to new targets as the Communist troops maneuvered or fled.

While preplanned missions required approximately 20 hours from time of request to time of delivery, the wing could respond much more quickly if necessary. This response was an "immediate mission." If an emergency developed, the TADC or DASCs diverted airborne flights to another target, and briefed them en route to the new target. The TADC also could launch aircraft from one of three "hot pads." Each of the three fixed-wing groups maintained four planes on an around-the-clock alert for this type of emergency. Two of the planes at each group were on primary alert, and the other two served as a backup in case of another emergency. The time lapse between notification to launch and until the on-call aircraft became airborne normally was just under 10 minutes. As soon as a flight of alert aircraft became airborne, another flight replaced it on the pad.

Another important aspect of Marine fixed-wing operations was deep air support. These strikes did not take place in the immediate vicinity of friendly forces and, therefore, did not require integration with the ground maneuver plan. Deep air support missions helped isolate the battlefield by destroying enemy reinforcements, support troops, and logistic

resources. If a FAC(A) was available in the objective area, he controlled the strikes, but his services were not mandatory because the distance from the target to friendly forces eliminated the chance of accidental bombing. However, pilots of strike aircraft often preferred to work with a FAC(A) on such missions because of the latter's greater familiarity with targets and enemy defenses in the area.⁴

The aircraft most frequently selected for close support missions was the Douglas A-4E Skyhawk. Colonel Jay W. Hubbard's MAG-12 included four A-4 squadrons. The A-4E was a small, highly maneuverable, attack jet capable of extremely accurate bombing. The Skyhawk could deliver a variety of ordnance including bombs, rockets, napalm, smoke, and 20mm cannon fire. The most significant performance limitation of the A-4 was the size of its payload, roughly 3,000 pounds.*

The McDonnell F-4B Phantom II was a more versatile aircraft. Four F-4 squadrons operated in Vietnam during 1967, one assigned to Colonel Franklin C. Thomas, Jr.'s MAG-11, at Da Nang and three with Colonel Douglas D. Petty, Jr.'s MAG-13. Designed to perform the primary air-to-air mission and modified to perform a secondary air-to-ground mission, the F-4 was one of the fastest interceptors in the world, yet it could carry as many as twenty-four 500-pound bombs for ground support.⁵

Lieutenant Colonel John M. Verdi commented, however, that this was a theoretical figure that did not reflect the realities of combat. He wrote recently:

... the F-4 *could* be loaded with as many as 24 Mk-82 bombs ... But (1) *not* an F-4B (unless one elected to go with 2,000 pounds less than full internal fuel so as to comply with max gross weight), and (2) *not* if the target was anywhere further away than the end of the runway. I daresay somebody might have hauled such a load in combat (to get his picture taken), but in the real tactical world the choices came down to TANK-3-6-3-TANK ([as did VMFA-] 122 and most USAF units) and 3-3-TANK-3-3 (most Navy units). Of course, Brand X [squadrons] did it 6-3-TANK-3-6, which (1) overloaded the airplane, (2) cracked the wing spars, and (3) gave the crew an unmanageable rolling moment in event of failure of one of those outboard MERs (multiple ejection racks) to release or jettison (something [the Air Force] found out when *they* tried it, which is why they went back to TANK-3-6-3-TANK.)⁶

*Colonel John M. Verdi noted that such in-the-clear radio transmissions also informed enemy monitors of the particulars of the mission. This was true of all radio transmissions, ground or air, without voice encryption devices, especially during this period when radio frequencies and call signs did not change on a daily basis. Verdi Comments.

*As is common with aircraft, the A-4's practical payload varied from as much as 5,000 pounds in the winter monsoon to as little as 2,000 pounds in the heat of summer, assuming a center-line external tank. Verdi comments.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A26453

A large ordnance load and multiple bomb racks made the A-4 Skyhawk, shown here in the A-4F version entering production in 1967, a mainstay for close air support missions.

Two other types of Marine aircraft available for ground support operations during 1967 were the Ling-Temco-Vought F-8E Crusader and the Grumman A6-A Intruder. One squadron of each type served under MAG-11 at Da Nang.

The Crusader carried internally mounted 20mm cannon and was the only Marine aircraft in Vietnam configured to carry more than one 2,000-pound bomb until the arrival of the A-6A. Because the F-8Es were originally designed as a high performance fighter, the Marines phased out these planes and replaced them with F-4s.⁷

The morning of 1 April, VMA(AW)-533, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Williams P. Brown, arrived at Chu Lai to become MAG-12's first A-6 squadron.* The A-6A was the only operational U.S. aircraft that had a self-contained all-weather bombing capability using a moving target indicator.⁸ It flew extensive interdiction missions during the monsoon season, not only in South Vietnam, but also in Laos and North Vietnam. The Intruder could carry a heavy bomb load to a target 400 miles away, drop its ordnance, and return to base, even during severe monsoon conditions.

The increase in heavy ground action in northern I Corps during the early months of 1967 brought demands for many more close and direct air support missions in that region. The heavy fighting at Khe Sanh in late April and early May provided a classic

example of integrated employment of modern, fixed-wing aviation in support of ground maneuver elements. In the two weeks of bitter fighting for Hills 881 North and South, the 1st MAW flew more than 1,000 sorties for Marine infantry units. The defeat of the enemy on this critical terrain was the product of skillful and closely coordinated air-ground action.

As the enemy continued to focus on northern Quang Tri Province, Marine aviation, from 2 June under the command of Major General Norman J. Anderson, increased the tempo of attack operations there. Primary targets were enemy artillery and rocket sites, a major threat to allied units and installations along the DMZ. By July, intelligence officers had identified approximately 130 sites, including weapons as large as 152mm gun-howitzers. The heaviest raids against these positions occurred during and after the battle for Con Thien, when Marine aircraft participated in joint operations called Headshed, Neutralize, and Eradicate. These operations received the acronym SLAM, for searching, locating, annihilating, and monitoring. This concept used the entire spectrum of supporting fire: B-52s, tactical air, artillery, and naval gunfire. Elements of the Seventh Air Force, Strategic Air Command, Seventh Fleet, Vietnamese Air Force, Marine and Army artillery, and 1st MAW concentrated on destroying the enemy fire support positions. By the end of the year, the effort destroyed less than 40 of the NVA weapons.

While the majority of the 1st MAW's out-of-

*Lieutenant Colonel Howard Wolf's VMA(AW)-242, also flying the A-6A and part of MAG-11, had arrived in Vietnam on 1 November 1966.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A422400-B

General purpose bombs hang from the wings of an A-6A Intruder from VMA(AW)-242 and an F-4B Phantom II from VMFA-542 enroute on a scheduled mission in Vietnam.

country missions were in the DMZ area, Marine pilots also participated in strikes against North Vietnam. These strikes involved the six areas of North Vietnam which planners called "route packages." Route Package I was immediately north of the DMZ; Route Package VI lay in the extreme north of the country. Bombing of the southern portion of Route Package I, codenamed "Tally Ho" and under the control of Seventh Air Force, began in July 1966. By the winter of 1967, Tally Ho missions ceased as a separate entity; strikes in the area thereafter fell within the overall interdiction campaign.⁹

The Seventh Air Force's retaliatory Rolling Thunder raids, initiated in March 1965, expanded to include high intensity interdiction missions during 1967. On 18 May 1967, VMA(AW)-242 participated in the first Rolling Thunder strike in Route Package VI (Hanoi/Haiphong).¹⁰ The other A-6A squadron, VMA(AW)-533, kept just as active. The sophisticated electronic equipment and superb all-weather capability of the Intruder made it an ideal aircraft for attacks against attractive, but heavily defended, North Vietnamese targets.

Because of the A-6's all-weather capability, 1st MAF reduced the enemy's antiaircraft effectiveness by flying most Marine Rolling Thunder missions at night and as single-aircraft missions.¹¹ During the strikes, the attack pilots relied upon assistance from their fellow Marines from VMCF-1. EF-10Bs and EA-6As of VMCF-1, the same basic aircraft as the A-6As, carried equipment for electronic countermeasure

missions; they carried no ordnance.¹² During the raids, the EF-10Bs or EA-6s orbited beyond North Vietnamese surface-to-air missile range and jammed the enemy's fire control radar while the attacking Intruders made their target runs. Because of their lighter equipment load, the EA-6As could remain on station longer than the attack aircraft, an ideal situation for superior electronic countermeasure raid protection. Prime targets for Rolling Thunder missions were bridges, fuel facilities, rolling stock, airfields, missile sites, and supply lines.*

In addition to close and deep air support missions, Marine fixed-wing squadrons conducted a variety of less dramatic, but equally important, tasks such as landing zone (LZ) preparation. These operations illustrated the then prevalent Marine Corps concept that the helicopter was a mode of transportation, not an attack aircraft. The 1st Wing provided fixed-wing support for helicopter assaults of contested landing zones. Prior to and during these landings, Marine attack aircraft would strike the objective area to clear obstacles and neutralize possible antiaircraft threats. As the troop-carrying helicopters entered the zone, the covering jet pilots would shift their attacks to terrain around the LZ from which the enemy could op-

*After the NVA's deployment of missiles in the DMZ area in April, electronic countermeasure EA-6As and older EF-10B Sky Knights remained airborne over the area to counter this threat. Their effectiveness limited Marine aircraft losses to only two missile kills during 1967.



3d MarDiv ComdC, September 1967

Cargo parachutes stream from the rear of one of VMGR-152's KC-130s bringing supplies to the Khe Sanh combat base in September 1967 after enemy activity closed the only road leading to the base.

pose the landing. These strikes not only protected the helicopters, but also shielded the first infantry waves during the critical, early phase of the landing.

Other Marine fixed-wing pilots contributed immeasurably to the overall air effort, even though they never fired a shot or dropped a bomb. Some flew the C-117Ds assigned to the headquarters of the aircraft groups. These C-117D missions varied from routine logistics support to dropping flares over friendly forces at night. Another group of transport pilots came from VMGR-152. The squadron's Lockheed KC-130 Hercules provided extensive and varied support for both III MAF and 1st MAF. Though VMGR-152's home base remained at MCAS Futema, Okinawa, the squadron maintained a detachment of at least four planes on a rotational basis at Da Nang. The Marine transport's 30,000- to 35,000-pound cargo load, depending on mission range, served many varied logistic requirements. The 130s flew diversified missions such as in-flight refueling of jets, paradropping of bulk lots of ammunition and supplies, flare drops, and even service as airborne DASCs; as well as for daily, routine shipments of hundreds of passengers and tons of

cargo. Such varied missions required great flying skill, especially those into Khe Sanh and Dong Ha. Flying into Khe Sanh under visual flight rules and into Dong Ha with its dust and short runway were routine but far from dull missions for VMGR-152 pilots.¹³

VMCJ-1's version of the Phantom II, the RF-4B, equipped with cameras in the nose, performed a variety of photo-reconnaissance missions for 1st MAF. These aircraft also contributed directly to the defense of Da Nang, as described by one of the squadron's commanders, Major Edgar J. Love:

... after the second rocket attack on Da Nang, 14 July 1967, the RF-4B played a major role in helping to keep the VC from launching rockets within the 12,000 meter ring [around the base]. Through use of its sensors, the RF-4B was able to [monitor] a fairly large area on a daily basis from about 5 miles north of Da Nang to about 20 miles south and from the sea on the east to some 30 miles inland. When it was determined that the various [enemy] teams transporting rockets were converging into a central area, harassing fires or air strikes (including B-52s) were directed into these areas. It was a coordinated effort of reconnaissance patrols, artillery, air strikes, and airborne reconnaissance. As a side light, Major Richard W. Hawthorne and Captain Richard R. Kane, while flying one

The sun rises beneath the nose of a venerable C-117 at the Ky Ha airfield at the Chu Lai combat base in February. This particular aircraft had logged over 15,000 hours in the air and still performed reliably.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421604





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421998
Cpl William H. Mielke (top) and LCpl Phillip J. Orlando of Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron 36 repair the AD20-8 engine of their squadron's C-117D at Phu Bai on 30 December.

of these many reconnaissance flights, crashed in September 1967 and were declared missing.*¹⁴

Helicopter Operations

The Vietnam War was the first conflict in history to involve large-scale employment of helicopter forces. This "Cavalry of the Sky" provided the allies with the advantages of mobility and staying power which negated much of the advantage held by an already elusive enemy. To the infantryman the helicopter was more than a tactical expedient; it was a part of his life. Helicopters carried him into battle, provided him with life and fire support, and rushed him to the hospital if he were sick or wounded.

At the beginning of 1967, MAGs-16 and -36 and the SLF had a total of 11 helicopter squadrons operating in South Vietnamese air space. Of these, eight were transport squadrons flying either the Sikorsky UH-34D, a Vietnam veteran since early 1962, or the relatively new and larger Boeing-Vertol CH-46A. The other three squadrons were observation squadrons equipped with the highly

maneuverable, single-engined Bell UH-1E.*

The Marines used helicopters for five basic missions: tactical airlift of troops, insertion and extraction of reconnaissance teams, supply, downed aircraft recovery, and search and rescue. The helicopter groups frequently supported more than a dozen major ground operations during a given month. The 1st MAW maintained direct control of the helicopter groups, issuing orders to them on the basis of the ground units' daily needs. The air request and allotment chain of command was basically the same as for fixed-wing squadrons. While the daily schedule covered routine missions, many unforeseeable situations occurred, such as medical evacuations, emergency extractions, and downed aircraft. To deal with these contingencies, the squadrons kept a section of helicopters on strip alert, normally either one UH-34 or CH-46 transport and one armed UH-1E to fly "chase."

"Medevac" and emergency extractions were especially critical because lives depended on the quick and effective response of the helicopter crews. Most of these missions occurred when friendly forces were in close contact with the enemy; in such cases, ground fire in the landing zone was almost a certainty. Even with the jet and armed helicopter escort, rescue helicopters rarely departed the landing zone without sustaining hits from enemy fire. These flights usually took place over extremely rugged terrain, which gave the pilots problems in even finding the landing zone. MAG-16 and -36 squadrons flew these missions daily. The skill and courage of the helicopter crews were the major factors enabling nearly 99 percent of the wounded evacuees to survive.¹⁵

A major factor in the success of these missions was the presence of UH-1E "gunships." Assigned to the observation squadrons (VMOs), the UH-1Es functioned in a number of roles. The armed version, or gunship, carried four fuselage-mounted, electrically fired M-60 machine guns and two 19-round rocket packs. Gunships flew escort and close air support missions and also served as command and control

*The Marine Corps later administratively declared both officers legally dead. The determination occurred on 28 November 1978 for Hawthorne and 26 February 1980 for Kane.

*VMO squadrons each rated 12 light helicopters in 1965 and the Marine Corps had obtained UH-1Es based on this figure. The scarcity of suitable fixed-wing observation planes resulted in further procurement, so that by 1967 UH-1Es were the only aircraft assigned to the three VMOs in Vietnam. By December of that year, each squadron had between 21 and 27 UH-1Es available. This interim measure continued until the arrival of the long-awaited OV-10 in 1968.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421708

A Navy flight deck crewman on the USS Okinawa (LPH 3) signals the pilot of a Marine UH-1E that he is cleared for take off in support of Operation Beau Charger, Special Landing Force Alpha's assist to Operation Hickory against NVA forces below the DMZ.

"birds" for airborne forward air controllers as well as senior ground commanders. Each division commander had a permanently assigned helicopter; regimental and battalion commanders used others on an "as available" basis.

In the FAC(A) mode, one rocket pack carried white phosphorous marking rockets, the other contained high explosive missiles. In a clean, unarmed configuration, appropriately referred to as a "slick," the aircraft could carry seven to nine fully equipped troops. "Slicks" also performed administrative and transport missions such as VIP flights.

An incident occurred in southern Quang Ngai Province in late 1967 which demonstrated both the firepower of the armed UH-1E and the tenacity, skill, and courage of Marine gunship crews. On 19 August, Captain Stephen W. Pless, a VMO-6 gunship pilot, was flying chase for an emergency medevac mission when he heard over the radio net of another emergency situation. Pless learned that four U.S. Army soldiers were stranded on a beach north of Duc Pho and were about to be overwhelmed by a large Viet Cong force. Breaking off from his original mission, the Huey pilot flew to the scene. On arrival, Pless saw about 50 VC in the open; some were bayoneting and beating the Americans. He swept in

1stLt Jack H. McCracken, a helicopter pilot with HMM-165, escaped serious injury during a resupply mission in Quang Ngai province when the .30-caliber round he holds smashed into his cockpit and lodged in the hard rubber heel of his left boot.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A423001





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A422068

The terror of a helicopter medevac flight under fire shows on the faces of a wounded Marine, Cpl Larry R. Miklos (center) and an unidentified Navy hospital corpsman as they watch an enemy machine gun shooting toward their helicopter on 1 September.

on the VC, killing and wounding many and driving the survivors back into a treeline. He made his rocket and machine gun attacks at such low levels that fragments from his own ordnance pelted the gunship. Though still under heavy small arms fire, Pless landed his gunship between the Communists in the treeline and the wounded soldiers. His two enlisted crewmen, Gunnery Sergeant Leroy N. Poulson and Lance Corporal John G. Phelps, leaped out of the helicopter and raced through enemy fire to help the wounded men.

Captain Rupert E. Fairfield, Jr., the co-pilot, killed three of the nearest VC with a burst from a M-60 machine gun, then ran to help Poulson and Phelps drag the soldiers to the aircraft. Captain Pless hovered his UH-1E and sent streams of machine gun fire into the Viet Cong positions in the treeline. Under cover of his fire, the three crewmen pulled the wounded soldiers into the helicopter. Pless headed the dangerously overloaded aircraft out to sea. Four times the helicopter settled into the water. Each time Captain Pless skipped it back into the air. While the crew threw out all unnecessary gear to lighten the craft, Pless jettisoned the rocket pods. Gradually, the UH-1E gained altitude and limped back to the 1st Hospital Company's landing pad at Chu Lai. In addition to rescuing the Americans, the crew received credit for killing a confirmed total of 20 VC and

probably killed another 38. Fairfield, Poulson, and Phelps each received the Navy Cross; Captain Pless

The Da Nang press center provides the location for this photograph taken during a news conference on 26 August following the dramatic flight that earned VMO-6's Capt Stephen W. Pless (second from left) his Medal of Honor. Others of the UH-1E crew, LCpl John G. Phelps, Capt Rupert E. Fairfield, Jr., and GySgt Leroy N. Poulson, received the Navy Cross.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189212





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370412

A smoke grenade marks the landing zone as a member of a helicopter support team brings in a CH-34D with supplies for the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines in Operation Shelby.

received the Medal of Honor, the first awarded to a member of the 1st MAW for action in Vietnam.*

While the armed helicopters participated in many dramatic exploits, the yeoman's share of the workload fell to the transport helicopters, the UH-34s and the CH-46s. In March of 1966, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing's tactical/logistical airlift capability significantly increased with the arrival of the CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter. It could carry a four-man crew and 17-20 combat-loaded troops, or 4,000 pounds of cargo, in contrast to the five to seven troops, or 1,500-pound lift capacity of the aging UH-34. The twin-engined, tandem-rotor transport had a retractable tail ramp, a 115-mile combat radius, and a top speed of about 145 knots. The Sea Knight was the only Marine helicopter in

Vietnam armed with two .50-caliber machine guns.*

The arrival of another aircraft in 1967 further improved Marine helicopter capabilities. On 8 January, a four-plane detachment of CH-53A Sea Stallions from HMH-463 joined MAG-16 at Marble Mountain. They were the first increment of a phased replacement of the obsolescent CH-37s. By the end of the year, 36 of the big CH-53s operated in I Corps. These twin-turbine, single-rotor assault transports could carry an impressive internal cargo of 8,000 pounds, but more significantly the "53A" had a six-ton external lift capability which permitted battlefield salvage of disabled UH-34Ds and CH-46s. By the end of 1967, Marine Sea Stallions had retrieved more than 120 damaged aircraft which avoided

*In addition to the Medal of Honor, Captain Pless, who flew over 700 combat missions in two tours in Vietnam, earned the Silver Star Medal, the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Bronze Star Medal, 32 Air Medals, the Navy Commendation Medal, the Korean Order of Military Merit, and the Purple Heart. After returning to the U.S., this colorful Marine aviator died in a tragic motorcycle crash at Pensacola, Florida, in 1969. See Appendix D for Captain Pless' Medal of Honor citation.

*Major General Norman J. Anderson has cautioned that there was a greater complexity behind this simple statement about two .50-caliber machine guns on helicopters. "This became standard, replacing the .30-caliber," he wrote, "only after extensive experience proved the need for the range and impact of the heavier weapon. Issues such as this, and there were many in the ordnance and engineering areas, were important and should not be [overlooked] or you create the impression that aviation sailed through the war without problems." MajGen Norman J. Anderson, Comments on draft ms, 10Jul81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370575

Infantrymen lean forward against the rotor wash and rush forward to unload supplies from a CH-46A Sea Knight helicopter in the 1st Marine Division's Operation Citrus.

destroying them in place. Troop lift and ambulance capabilities also increased with the Sea Stallions' arrival; normal loads were 37 combat troops or 24 litters. Fully loaded, the aircraft could accomplish missions at ranges up to 200 miles at a comfortable cruise speed of 120 knots.

The arrival of the "Super Bird," as the Marines quickly nicknamed the CH-53, was providential. In September III MAF grounded all CH-46s following several unexplained crashes. An on-site investigation, conducted by a joint Naval Air Systems Command/Boeing Vertol accident investigation team, revealed that structural failures were occurring in the area of the after pylon.* The team recommended structural and systems modifications to reinforce the rear rotor mount, as well as the installation of an indicator to detect excessive strain on critical parts of the aircraft.

*Lieutenant General Louis Metzger, a former assistant division commander of the 3d Marine Division, recently wrote his recollections of the grounding of the CH-46s: "Several CH-46s had gone down in flight before this. One was observed by an assistant air officer of the 3d Marine Division, a major [who was an] aviator. He had described seeing the tail fly off a CH-46 in flight. However, it is believed that [because of] a desire to accord the lost crew members the honor of dying in combat rather than in an accident, this observation was ignored. It wasn't until the accidents occurred as stated in the text, that the CH-46s were grounded. LtGen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft ms, n.d. (1981) (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

The entire modification program, requiring approximately 1,000 man-hours per aircraft, occurred in three phases: (1) disassembly of the aircraft, (2) incorporation of the modifications, and (3)

Aviation personnel at Dong Ha on 16 January look over one of the huge CH-53s from HMH-463 only eight days after the first detachment of four of the new helicopters arrived in South Vietnam for service with MAG-16 at the air facility at Marble Mountain.

3d MarDiv ComdC, January 1967





3d MarDiv ComdC, December 1967

A CH-53, the Marine Corps' largest and most powerful helicopter, retrieves a UH-34 downed in a mission to the Con Thien combat base in December.

reassembly and flight tests. Marines performed phases one and three; Boeing Vertol personnel completed phase two. Okinawa served as the principal modification site because it was the nearest secure Marine base which could provide both adequate facilities and skilled civilian workers. The program modified 80 aircraft at MCAF Futema, Okinawa, while the remaining 25 aircraft, already undergoing normal overhaul in Japan, received their modifications there.

The Marines of HMM-262, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Gregory A. Corliss, detached from the SLF to perform the Marine portion of the work. On 11 October, the Marines unloaded 40 CH-46s at Futema, and disassembly began immediately. Five days later, 114 Boeing Vertol specialists began phase two. By the end of December, the program had modified 89 aircraft and began phasing them back to the squadrons. The remaining 16 aircraft completed the modification program in February 1968.

Until the 46s returned, III MAF lost approximately half its tactical/logistic airlift capability and had to find replacement helicopters. As soon as the Marine Corps learned the seriousness of the CH-46s' defect, it rushed 23 UH-34s from the United States by cargo planes. They arrived on 15 October and immediately entered battle, often flown by pilots from the downed CH-46 squadrons. Ten additional CH-53s

entered the wing's inventory to further augment the lift capability in Vietnam. Finally, 31 U.S. Army UH-1Ds of the 190th Aviation Company joined General Anderson's forces at Phu Bai until the Sea Knights returned to flight status.¹⁶

The shifting of additional ground forces into the northern two provinces of I Corps during the fall of 1967 increased the tempo of helicopter operations. During this period, the two main areas of enemy activity were the DMZ and the Que Son Basin south of Da Nang, but as combat to the north intensified, MAG-36 at Chu Lai found itself further and further from the scene of Marine ground operations. As a result, General Anderson ordered MAG-36 to Phu Bai where it could better support 3d Marine Division operations. The first squadron, VMO-6, relocated on 4 October and 11 days later Colonel Frank E. Wilson displaced his group headquarters from Ky Ha to Phu Bai. The next day, Colonel Wilson took over VMO-3, HMM-164, HMM-362, and MATCUs-62 and -68 from Colonel Edwin O. Reed's MAG-16. At the same time, HMM-265, a MAG-36 CH-46 squadron at Marble Mountain, passed to Colonel Reed's command. On 30 October, another UH-34

A CH-46A from HMM-164 lands on 2 March 1967 to pick up infantrymen from the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines engaged in Operation Prairie II north of Cam Lo, while an escort helicopter circles overhead.

3d MarDiv ComdC, March 1967





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189791

CH-34Ds, the mainstay of transport helicopter operations following grounding of the CH-46s for structural problems, land infantrymen in a dry paddy for Operation Essex.

squadron, HMM-163, joined MAG-36 from the USS *Okinawa* (LPH 3) and moved to the new airfield at Quang Tri.* By the end of the month, MAG-36 occupied its new home; only HMM-165 remained at Ky Ha, until space became available at Phu Bai in November. The relocation of MAG-36 proved to be

*Before joining the SLF, HMM-163 had been at Phu Bai as part of MAG-16. LtCol Horace A. Bruce, Comments on draft ms, 14Jul81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

A CH-46A takes off after bringing supplies to an infantry unit on a hill top somewhere in Vietnam.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370584



a wise decision, as events of early 1968 demonstrated.

Operational statistics indicate the sharply increased scale of Marine helicopter squadrons' efforts in Vietnam during 1967. The sorties rate increased by more than 20 percent over that of 1966. In 1967, 1st MAW helicopters flew 510,595 sorties, carrying 628,486 personnel and 70,651 tons of cargo.

Artillery

In January of 1967, the Marines had the entire family of Marine Corps artillery—light, medium, and heavy—in I Corps. The method of employment of these weapons differed little from World War II and Korea: direct support of a specific unit or general support of divisional units.

Division-level light artillery, the 4.2-inch mortar or the 107mm M30 mortar and the 105mm M101A1 howitzer, provided direct support of infantry units. Division Medium artillery, the 155mm M114A1 howitzer (towed) and the 155mm M109 self-propelled (SP) howitzer, were the general support weapons.* Force artillery elements attached to the

*The Marine Corps replaced 155mm M114A1s in the Marine divisional artillery regiments with the 155mm M109/SP just before the the Vietnam conflict. As the need for more artillery developed, the Marine Corps shipped the old towed weapons to Vietnam and formed provisional batteries. Personnel and required equipment came from artillery battalions already there. Ironically, the older M114A1 enhanced the overall mobility of the divisional 155mm capability. The heavy tracked M109/SP was essentially roadbound and served in a "fortress artillery" role, while the lighter M114A1 could move both by helicopter and truck.

Marine Artillery Capabilities

Marine Artillery Capabilities											
WEAPONS	RANGE (meters)	WEIGHT (pounds)	SUSTAINED RATE OF FIRE PER MINUTE	PRIME MOVER	EFFECTIVE AREA OF BURST: METERS, ONE ROUND		AMMUNITION				FINAL PROTECTIVE FIRE
					DEPTH	WIDTH	TYPES AVAILABLE	FUZES AVAILABLE	WEIGHT OF FUZED HE PROJO		
105mm How Towed M101A1	11,000	4,980	3	Helo 2 1/2-ton truck	20	30			Q,D Ti VT CP	(pounds) 33	200
155mm How Towed M114A1	14,600	12,950	1	Helo 5-ton truck	30	50		HE L HE Illum WP Smoke RAP Gas Nuclear	Q,D Ti VT CP	95	300
155mm How (SP) M109A1	14,600	53,060	1	SP							
8" How (SP) M110	16,800	58,500	0.5	SP	30	80		HE Spot Gas Nuclear	Q,D Ti VT CP	200	N/A
155mm Gun (SP) M53	23,500	96,000	0.5	SP	30	50			Q,D VT	95	N/A
107mm Mort M30	5,656	671	15-20	Helo 3/4-ton truck	30	30		Illum WP Gas	Q,D Ti VT	26	200



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421672

A maintenance team from HMM-165 rigs a hoist sling to a CH-46A sitting in a mountain stream northwest of Chu Lai on 12 May. Enemy ground fire had set the aircraft on fire and the pilot, Capt James F. Pleva, force-landed in the stream, dousing the flames.

artillery regiments provided increased range and delivery capabilities.¹⁷ Force artillery included the 155mm M53 self-propelled gun and the 8-inch M55 self-propelled howitzer. The Marine Corps replaced the M55 during the year with the new M110 self-propelled model.

Although the basic techniques of artillery employment in Vietnam differed little from those used elsewhere, local circumstances required certain refinements. Probably the most difficult problem facing Marine artillerymen and the infantry they supported was the need to minimize civilian casualties and property destruction, while still furnishing adequate fire support. Strongly worded MACV directives, further amplified by instructions from III MAF and the divisions, enjoined restraint and careful fire planning. These required careful selection of helicopter landing zones and scheduling artillery and air strikes with the goal of keeping both Marine and civilian casualties at the lowest possible level, especially in heavily populated areas such as those around Da Nang. Firing into populated areas, using reconnaissance by fire, and planning harassment and interdiction fires presented significant problems. The Marine artillerymen continually balanced the possible tactical advantages against the danger to long-term pacification goals. When

Marine units planned operations in coordination with Vietnamese province and district chiefs, a liaison officer from the Marines or a Marine or Army advisor stayed at the district headquarters to coor-

An unidentified Marine helicopter crewman smokes a cigarette beside his M-60 machine gun mount during a quiet flight in a CH-53A in December 1967.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370848



