

U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

HIGH MOBILITY AND STANDDOWN

1969



COVER: *Men of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines wait to board the amphibious transport Paul Revere at Da Nang, during the first phase of the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam.*

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U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

HIGH MOBILITY AND STANDDOWN

1969

by

Charles R. Smith



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

1988

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Foreword

This is the sixth volume in a planned nine-volume operational and chronological series covering the Marine Corps' participation in the Vietnam War. A separate functional series will complement the operational histories. This volume details the change in United States policy for the Vietnam War. After a thorough review, President Richard M. Nixon adopted a policy of seeking to end United States military involvement in Vietnam either through negotiations or, failing that, turning the combat role over to the South Vietnamese. It was this decision that began the Vietnamization of the war in the summer of 1969 and which would soon greatly reduce and then end the Marine Corps' combat role in the war.

The Marines of III Marine Amphibious Force continued the full range of military and pacification activities within I Corps Tactical Zone during this period of transition. Until withdrawn, the 3d Marine Division, employing highly mobile tactics, successfully blunted North Vietnamese Army efforts to reintroduce troops and supplies into Quang Tri Province. The 1st Marine Division, concentrated in Quang Nam Province, continued both mobile offensive and pacification operations to protect the city of Da Nang and surrounding population centers. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing provided air support to both divisions, as well as other allied units in I Corps, while Force Logistic Command served all major Marine commands.

Although written from the perspective of III MAF and the Marine ground war in I Corps, an attempt has been made to place the Marine role in relation to the overall American effort. The volume also treats the Marine Corps' participation in the advisory effort, the operations of the Seventh Fleet Special Landing Force, and, to a lesser extent, the activities of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), 23d Infantry (Americal) Division, and 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). There are separate chapters on Marine air, artillery, surveillance, and logistics.

The nature of the war facing III MAF during 1969 forced the author to concentrate on major operations. This focus in no way slights those Marines whose combat service involved innumerable patrols, wearying hours of perimeter defense, and long days of providing logistical and administrative support for those in the field. III MAF's combat successes in 1969 came from the combined efforts of all Americans in I Corps.

The author, Charles R. Smith, has been with the History and Museums Division since July 1971. He has published several articles on military history, and is the author of *Marines in the Revolution: A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (Washington: Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, 1975). He is a graduate of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and received his master's degree in history from San Diego State University. He served in Vietnam with the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) in 1968 and 1969, first as an artilleryman and then as a historian.



E. H. SIMMONS

Brigadier General, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret.)
Director of Marine Corps History and Museums

Preface

U.S. Marines in Vietnam: High Mobility and Standdown, 1969, like its predecessors, is largely based on the holdings of the Marine Corps Historical Center. These holdings include the official unit monthly command chronologies, combat after-action reports, daily message and journal files, files and studies of HQMC staff agencies and those of the Office of the Commandant, and the Oral History, Personal Papers, and Reference Collections of the Center.

The author supplemented these above sources with research in the records of the other Services and pertinent published primary and secondary sources. Although none of the information in this history is classified, some of the documentation on which it is based still carries a restricted or classified designation. More than 200 reviewers, most of whom were participants in the events covered in this volume, read a comment edition of the manuscript. Their comments, where applicable, have been incorporated into the text. A list of those who made substantial comments is included in the appendices. All ranks used in the body of the text are those held by individuals in 1969.

Like the previous volumes in the series, the production of this volume has been a cooperative effort. Members of the Histories Section, History and Museums Division, past and present, have reviewed the draft manuscript. Mrs. Joyce Bonnett, head archivist, and her assistants, aided the author's access to the records of the division and Headquarters Marine Corps staff agencies. Miss Evelyn A. Englander, head librarian, and her assistant, Mrs. Patricia E. Morgan, were very helpful in obtaining needed reference materials, as were members of the Reference Section, headed by Mr. Danny J. Crawford. Mrs. Regina Strother, formerly with the Defense Audio-Visual Agency and now with the History and Museums Division, graciously assisted in the photographic research. Mr. Benis M. Frank, head of the Oral History Section, was equally helpful in not only making his tapes and transcripts available, but also in interviewing a number of key participants and reviewing a copy of the draft manuscript.

Mr. Robert E. Struder, head of the Publications Production Section, adeptly guided the manuscript through the various production phases and assisted the author in partially mastering the intricacies of computer publication. The typesetting of the manuscript was done by Corporal James W. Rodriguez II and Lance Corporal Javier Castro. Mrs. Catherine A. Kerns contributed significantly to the typesetting effort, developed the charts accompanying the text, and cheerfully and professionally provided considerable technical expertise on typesetting procedures. Mr. William S. Hill, the division's graphics specialist, expertly produced the maps and completed the design and layout of the volume. The index was prepared by the author and Mrs. Meredith P. Hartley with the guidance and assistance of Mr. Frank.

The author gives special thanks to Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, Director of Marine Corps History and Museums, whose policies guide the Vietnam series; to Deputy Directors for History, Colonel Oliver M. Whipple, Jr., Colonel John G. Miller, and their successor, Colonel James R. Williams, who provided continuing support and guidance; to Mr. Henry I. Shaw, Jr., Chief Historian, who aided the author by giving him the benefit of his considerable experience in writing Marine Corps history, encouragement, advice,

prodding when needed, and general editorial direction; and to Mr. Jack Shulimson, Head, Histories Section and Senior Vietnam Historian, for providing advice and guidance, and for editing the final manuscript.

The author is also indebted to his colleagues in the historical offices of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Joint Chiefs of Staff, who freely exchanged information and made pertinent documents available for examination. The author must express his gratitude also to all those who reviewed the comment edition and provided corrections, personal photographs, and the insights available only to those who took part in the events. To all these individuals and all others connected with this project, the author is indebted and truly grateful. In the end, however, it is the author alone who is responsible for the content of the text, including opinions expressed and any errors in fact.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charles R. Smith". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Charles" being more prominent and the last name "Smith" following in a similar style.

CHARLES R. SMITH

Table of Contents

Foreword	iii
Preface	v
Table of Contents	vii
Maps, Charts, and Tables	xi
 PART I THE CONTINUING WAR	 1
Chapter 1 Planning the Campaign	2
I Corps Order of Battle	2
Strategy: A Reevaluation of Priorities	8
I Corps Planning	12
Chapter 2 Mountain Warfare	15
Northern I Corps	15
Off Balance	16
From the Cua Viet, South	24
Chapter 3 The Spring Offensive Preempted	27
Strike into the Da Krong	27
A Phased Operation	28
Phase I	31
Backyard Cleanup	33
Chapter 4 The Raid into Laos	38
Across the Da Krong	38
The NVA Retaliates	39
Ambush Along 922	39
Heavy Fighting	45
Back Into Laos	47
Persistent Problems	47
Phased Retraction	48
Laos: Repercussions	51
Chapter 5 The Quang Tri Border Areas	52
No Change in Tactics	52
The DMZ Front	52
Brigade Mauls 27 th	58
The 9th Battles the 36 th	61
The Vietnam Salient	62
Apache Snow	67
Central DMZ Battles	72
Eastern Quang Tri and Thua Thien	76
 PART II SOUTHERN I CORPS BATTLEGROUND	 79
Chapter 6 Destruction of Base Area 112	80
Defense of Da Nang	80
Attack into 112	82

"A Little Urban Renewal".....	95
Americal's TAOI.....	101
Chapter 7 The Battle for Quang Nam Continues.....	103
Rockets Equal Operations.....	103
Operation Oklahoma Hills.....	103
5th Marines and the Arizona.....	116
Securing the Southern and Northern Approaches.....	121
Americal Battleground.....	125
PART III THE THIRD'S FINAL MONTHS.....	127
Chapter 8 Redeployment: The First Phase.....	128
Keystone Eagle.....	128
"A Turning Point".....	133
Chapter 9 "A Strange War Indeed".....	138
Company Patrol Operations.....	138
Idaho Canyon.....	138
"A Significant Step".....	149
Specter of Anarchy.....	154
Chapter 10 "A Difficult Phase".....	159
Maintaining a Protective Barrier.....	159
"You Shouldered Us".....	165
The Brigade Takes Over.....	170
PART IV QUANG NAM: THE YEAR'S FINAL BATTLES.....	173
Chapter 11 Go Noi and the Arizona.....	174
Vital Area Security.....	174
Pipestone Canyon: The Destruction of Go Noi Island.....	174
1st Marines: Protecting the Southern Flank.....	187
The Arizona.....	190
Chapter 12 Da Nang and the Que Son Valley.....	201
The 7th Marines.....	201
26th Marines: Protecting the Northern Flank.....	212
Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Battleground.....	215
Results.....	216
PART V SUPPORTING THE TROOPS.....	219
Chapter 13 Marine Air Operations.....	220
1st MAW Organization and Deployment.....	220
Single Management: Relations with the Seventh Air Force.....	223
Upgrading of Aviation Assets.....	226
I Corps Fixed-Wing Support.....	229
The Interdiction Campaign.....	231
Air Control.....	234
Helicopter Operations.....	236
Improving Helicopter Support.....	239
Air Defense.....	241
Accomplishments and Costs.....	241
Chapter 14 Artillery and Surveillance.....	243

Artillery Operations.....	243
Surveillance and Reconnaissance Activities.....	251
Chapter 15 Supplying III MAF.....	260
Force Logistic Command.....	260
Naval Support Activity, Da Nang.....	264
Engineer Support.....	267
Motor Transport.....	270
Medical Support.....	272
Communications.....	274
Logistics of Keystone Eagle and Keystone Cardinal.....	275
PART VI UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS.....	279
Chapter 16 Pacification.....	280
The National Perspective.....	280
Pacification Planning In I Corps.....	283
Line Unit Pacification.....	285
Civic Action.....	287
The Grass Roots Campaign.....	288
Results.....	294
Chapter 17 Special Landing Force Operations.....	297
The Strategic Reserve.....	297
Organization and Operations.....	298
The Fleet's Contingency Force.....	310
Chapter 18 The Advisory Effort and Other Activities.....	311
Marine Advisors and the Vietnamese Marine Corps.....	311
1st Air and Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (ANGLICO).....	316
U.S. Marines on the MACV Staff.....	317
Embassy Guard Marines.....	318
Chapter 19 1969: An Overview.....	319
NOTES.....	323
APPENDICES	
A. Marine Command and Staff List, January-December 1969.....	336
B. Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations.....	349
C. Chronology of Significant Events, January-December 1969.....	354
D. Medal of Honor Citations, 1969.....	358
E. List of Reviewers.....	374
F. Distribution of Personnel, Fleet Marine Force Pacific (31 January 1969)....	376
G. Distribution of Personnel, Fleet Marine Force Pacific (8 December 1969)....	381
INDEX.....	386

Maps, Charts, and Tables

Map, Reference Map, I Corps Tactical Zone.....	xii
Map, Allied Commands in I Corps, January 1969.....	4
Chart, III MAF Command Relationships.....	6
Map, Enemy Order of Battle, Northern ICTZ, January 1969.....	16
Map, 3d Marine Division Outposts and Operational Areas, January 1969.....	21
 Map, Assault into the Da Krong Valley, 22-25 January 1969.....	32
Map, 9th Marines Movement into Base Area 611.....	40
Map, Movements and Objectives of the 3d and 4th Marines, March-July 1969...	58
Map, Operation Maine Crag, 15 March-2 May 1969.....	65
Map, Operations of the 9th Marines, May-August 1969.....	73
 Map, Enemy Order of Battle, Southern ICTZ, January 1969.....	82
Map, Assault on Base Area 112.....	90
Map, Enemy Ground and Rocket Attacks Against Da Nang, February 1969.....	98
Map, 7th Marines' Operation Oklahoma Hills, 31 March-29 May 1969.....	109
Table, The MACV List: Composition of Keystone Eagle.....	135
 Map, Denial Operations of the 3d Marines, July-August 1969.....	140
Map, 3d Marine Division Operations, July-September 1969.....	144
Table, The MACV List: Composition of Keystone Cardinal.....	167
Map, Operation Pipestone Canyon: Attack on Go Noi.....	180
Map, Cordon of Tay Bang An, 15-17 July 1969.....	184
 Map, Scheme of Maneuver, 5th and 7th Marines, July-December 1969.....	192
Map, Hiep Duc Valley Counterattack, 21-26 August 1969.....	208
Map, Hiep Duc Valley Counterattack, 26-29 August 1969.....	208
Map, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing Locations, 1969.....	222
Chart, III MAF Logistic Command Relationships and Facilities, 31 March 1969...	261
 Chart, Special Landing Force Command Relationships.....	298
Chart, Strength, Arms, and Equipment of a Typical Special Landing Force.....	299
Map, Special Landing Force Operations, 1969.....	304
Chart, Marine Advisory Unit, 1969.....	312

PART I
THE CONTINUING WAR

CHAPTER 1

Planning the Campaign

I Corps Order of Battle—Strategy: A Reevaluation of Priorities—I Corps Planning

I Corps Order of Battle

Responsibility for the defense of the Republic of Vietnam's five northernmost provinces of Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai in January 1969 rested with III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF). Commanded by Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., III MAF consisted of approximately 81,000 Marines situated at positions throughout the provinces which constituted I Corps Tactical Zone (ICTZ). Major General Charles J. Quilter's 15,500-man 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW) controlled more than 500 fixed-wing and rotary aircraft from fields at Chu Lai, Da Nang, Phu Bai, and Quang Tri. Headquartered on Hill 327 southwest of Da Nang, Major General Ormond R. Simpson's 1st Marine Division, 24,000 strong, operated throughout Quang Nam Province. The 21,000-man 3d Marine Division, commanded by Major General Raymond G. Davis and controlled from Dong Ha Combat Base, was responsible for Quang Tri Province. At Da Nang, the 9,500 officers and men of Brigadier General James A. Feeley, Jr.'s Force Logistic Command (FLC) provided the wing and two Marine divisions with combat materiel and maintenance support. Scattered throughout the hundreds of villages and hamlets of the five provinces were the 1,900 officers and men of the Combined Action Program (CAP), under Colonel Edward F. Danowitz, who continued the Marines' ambitious experiment in local security, still hampered somewhat by the residual effects of the enemy's 1968 *Tet* Offensive.

In addition to Marines, III MAF controlled approximately 50,000 United States Army troops. Located in Quang Tri Province, 5,000 officers and men of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), commanded by Colonel James M. Gibson, USA, aided in preventing enemy infiltration of the coastal plains. To the south, in Thua Thien Province, the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), under Major General Melvin Zais, USA, deployed three brigades totalling 20,000 men in an arc protecting the ancient imperial capital of Hue. These two Army units, which had been shifted to I Corps in 1968, together with the 3d Marine

Division, constituted XXIV Corps, commanded by Army Lieutenant General Richard G. Stilwell.* Located at Phu Bai, Stilwell's organization was under the operational control of III MAF. Based at Chu Lai in southern I Corps, the 23,800 Army troops of Major General Charles M. Gettys' 23d Infantry (Americal) Division operated in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces under the direct control of III MAF. Also under the direct control of General Cushman, in his capacity as Senior U.S. Advisor in I Corps, were the 400 officers and men from all services of the United States Army Advisory Group (USAAG), who provided professional and technical assistance to South Vietnamese military units operating in I Corps Tactical Zone.

As a member of the III MAF staff, Mr. Charles T. Cross, the civilian deputy for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), coordinated the pacification effort in I Corps through his U.S. civilian and military representatives at the province and district level. Directly controlled by MACV, CORDS was created to integrate and direct the country-wide pacification program.

Other U.S. and allied contingents that were neither attached to nor controlled by III MAF also operated within the boundaries of I Corps. Assigned to the U.S. Army Support Command, U.S. Naval Support Activity, 3d Naval Construction Brigade, 45th Army Engineer Group, Task Force Clearwater, and the Air Force's 366th Tactical Fighter Wing were approximately 31,000 U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel. While controlled by their respective services, these support units cooperated closely with III MAF. Like the other five major allied organizations, the 7,800-man 2d Republic of Korea Marine Brigade, commanded by Brigadier General Dong Ho Lee, which protected an enclave south of Da Nang centered on Hoi An, received operational guidance from III MAF, but was under the direct authority of the commanding general

*In order to provide operational direction for the expanded United States military effort in northern I Corps during *Tet*, MACV Forward was established at Phu Bai in early February 1968. On 10 March, the command unit was redesignated Provisional Corps, Vietnam, and on 15 August again redesignated as XXIV Corps.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192828

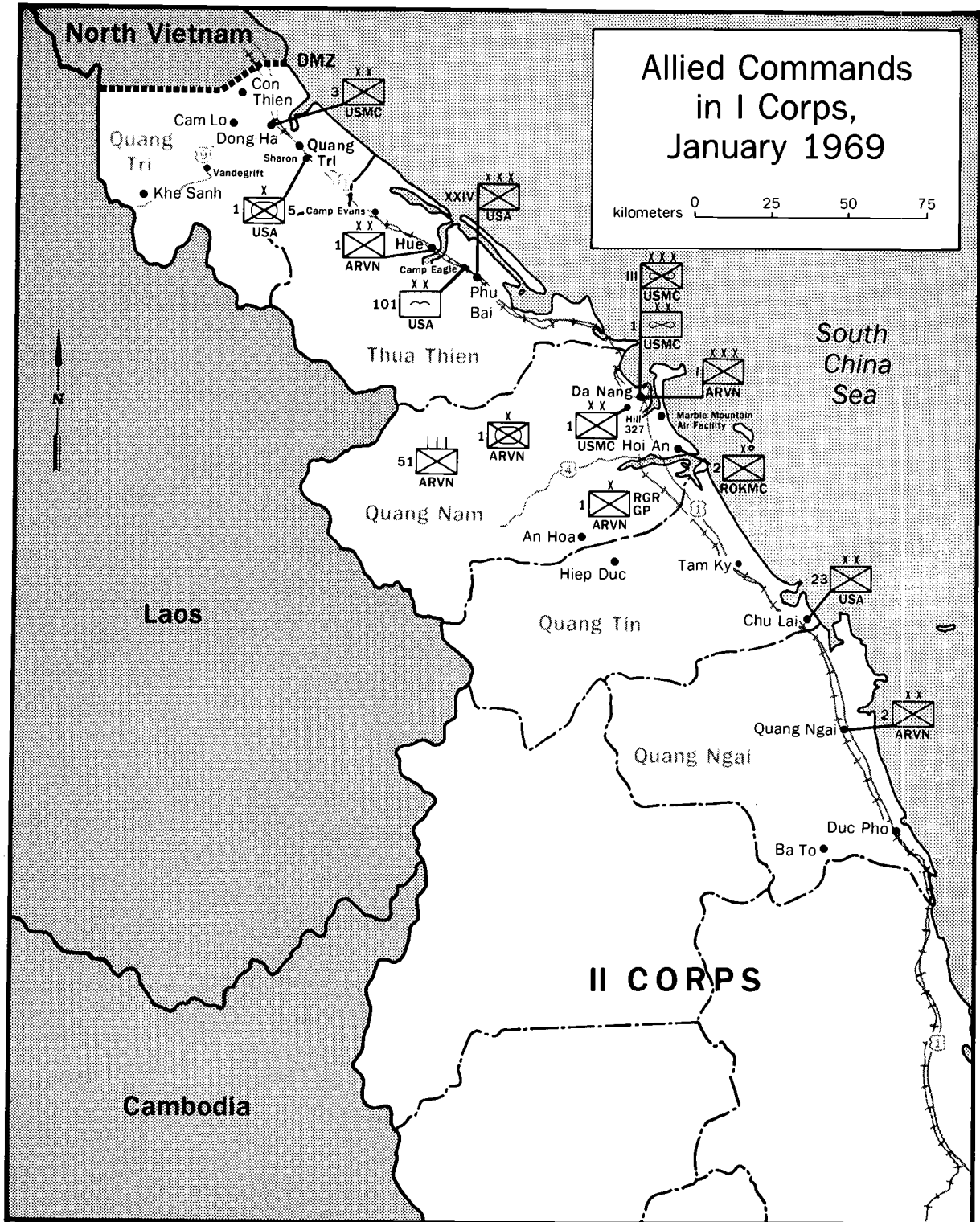
LtGen Robert E. Cushman, Jr., right, is congratulated by Gen Creighton W. Abrams, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, after being presented a Gold Star in lieu of a second Distinguished Service Medal. As Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force since June 1967, Cushman oversaw a doubling of III MAF's strength.

of Korean Forces in Vietnam, whose headquarters was in Saigon.

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and its paramilitary forces gradually were assuming a much greater share of the fighting in I Corps by 1969. Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, commanding ICTZ, controlled a force of 34,000 ARVN regulars. Headquartered at Hue, the 17 battalions of Major General Ngo Quang Truong's 1st ARVN Infantry Division pursued enemy forces in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. In southern I Corps the 2d Division's 12 infantry battalions, commanded by Brigadier

General Nguyen Van Toan, fought both enemy regulars and guerrillas throughout Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces. Between the two ARVN infantry divisions, the 51st Infantry and Armored Cavalry Regiments operated in Quang Nam Province. The 1st Ranger Group, normally stationed at Da Nang, acted as corps reserve, while the Vietnamese Air Force's 41st Tactical Wing, also located at Da Nang, provided overall air support.

Reinforcing ARVN regulars were 49,800 troops of the Regional and Popular Forces (RF and PF), and 8,500 trained members of the part-time People's Self-



Defense Force (PSDF)—a paramilitary organization recruited, trained, and stationed in local areas. Among other Vietnamese units available to combat small groups of guerrilla infiltrators and root out members of the local Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI), were the 9,000-man National Police, and the National Police Field Force with a strength of 2,500. In addition, there were 6,200 men of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG), composed of Montagnard and Nung tribesmen, Cambodians, and Vietnamese, recruited and trained by the South Vietnamese Special Forces and advised by the U.S. Army's 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), which occupied nine mountain camps rimming the lowlands. Their task was to collect intelligence on enemy activities and attempt to block enemy infiltration routes into the heavily populated coastal plains.¹

From a modern complex of air-conditioned buildings on the banks of the Song Han at Da Nang, General Cushman coordinated the activities of this diverse group of forces. Like his predecessor, Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, he functioned within a complex chain of command. III Marine Amphibious Force was under the operational control of the Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, General Creighton W. Abrams; but with respect to administrative matters affecting his Marines, General Cushman reported directly to Lieutenant General

Henry W. Buse, Jr., Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac), in Hawaii. As commanding general of III MAF, General Cushman not only directed the operations of all United States combat units in I Corps, but also provided guidance to the commander of the Korean Marine Brigade and others as I Corps Coordinator for United States and Free World Military Assistance Forces and, as Senior U.S. Advisor for I Corps, coordinated the activities of Lieutenant General Lam's ARVN units with those of his own.

General Cushman was well prepared when he assumed the post of top Leatherneck in Vietnam. A graduate of the Naval Academy (Class of 1935) and recipient of the Navy Cross as a battalion commander during the recapture of Guam, Cushman served four years on Vice President Richard M. Nixon's staff as Assistant for National Security Affairs. In addition he commanded the 3d Marine Division in 1961, and later while serving as Commanding General, Marine Corps Base, Camp Pendleton, headed both the 4th Marine Division Headquarters nucleus, and the newly organized 5th Marine Division. In April 1967, he was appointed Deputy Commander, III Marine Amphibious Force. Three months later he assumed the duty of Commanding General, III MAF, replacing Lieutenant General Walt.

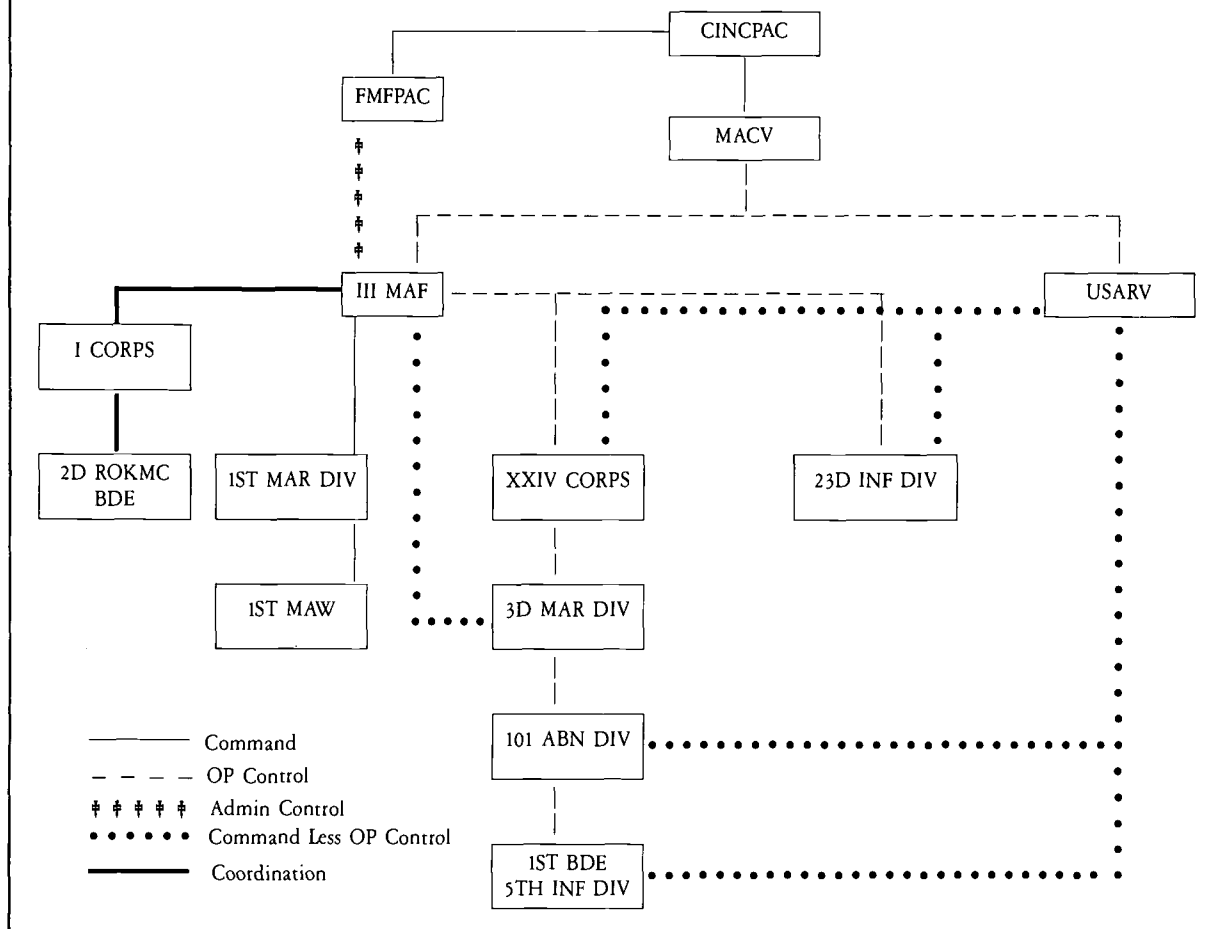
During his tenure, General Cushman managed III

LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam, left, Commanding General, I Corps; LtGen Richard G. Stilwell, USA, Commanding General, XXIV Corps; and MajGen Ngo Quang Truong, right, Commanding General, 1st ARVN Division, pose with Gen Cao Van Vien, center left, Chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff during the latter's visit to Phu Bai.

Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC649680



III MAF COMMAND RELATIONSHIPS



MAF's growth from a force of 97,000 Marine, Navy, and Army personnel to 172,000 by the beginning of 1969. His responsibilities, however, changed little. Like General Walt, Cushman was charged with the defense of I Corps Tactical Zone. Although the smallest in area and population, ICTZ was the most strategically located of the four South Vietnamese military regions due to its proximity to major enemy infiltration and supply routes, and base areas in Laos, the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and North Vietnam. Cushman would be replaced in March 1969 by Lieutenant General Herman Nickerson, Jr., a highly decorated veteran of World War II and Korea, and former commanding general of the 1st Marine Division in Vietnam from October 1966 to May 1967.

Opposing American, South Vietnamese, and Korean forces within the boundaries of I Corps, the

Demilitarized Zone, and contiguous North Vietnamese and Laotian border regions, were 123 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and 18 Viet Cong (VC) combat and support battalions composed of close to 89,000 enemy troops. According to allied intelligence estimates of early 1969, 42,700 were North Vietnamese Army regulars while 6,500 were Viet Cong main and local force unit members. In addition, there were approximately 23,500 guerrillas and 16,000 political and quasi-military cadre. Added to these known North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units were additional infantry and support battalions with an estimated strength of 30,000 troops located within striking distance of the corps tactical zone.

Five different headquarters directed enemy operations within the corps tactical zone to varying degrees: the *B-5 Front* which controlled troops along the DMZ;



Marine Corps Historical Collection

LtGen Herman Nickerson, Jr., right, relieves Gen Cushman as Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force in formal ceremonies at Da Nang on 26 March 1969. LtGen Nickerson previously served in Vietnam as Commanding General, 1st Marine Division and Deputy Commanding General, III MAF.

7th Front which directed units within Quang Tri Province; *Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region* which had charge of units in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces; troops attached to the 4th Front which operated in Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces, and the city of Da Nang; and units subordinate to *Military Region 5* which operated in Quang Ngai Province. The five political and military headquarters were thought to receive orders from the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), which in turn was subject to the directives of the Reunification Department of the North Vietnamese Lao Dong Party.*

The dramatic and massive corps-wide attack, concentrated in the northern two provinces, and resultant severe losses during the *Tet* and post-*Tet* Offensives of 1968, forced the enemy to reevaluate his military position as the new year began. As a result, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army strategy and tactics shifted from an attempt to win an immediate

victory to an attempt to win by prolonging the conflict. Large unit assaults were to be undertaken only if favorable opportunities presented themselves; small unit operations, particularly highly organized hit-and-run or sapper attacks, attacks by fire, harassment, terrorism, and sabotage would be used more extensively. The Communists hoped to inflict troop losses by cutting allied lines of communication, attacking base, rear service, and storage areas while conserving their military strength, defeating the pacification effort, and strengthening their negotiating position at Paris. Through such actions the enemy hoped to maintain an aura of strength and demonstrate to the South Vietnamese populace that its government was incapable of providing security for its people.

The differences in terrain and population north and south of Hai Van Pass, which essentially bisected the corps tactical zone, resulted in markedly different military situations by the end of 1968. In the north, with less than a third of the zone's population, the enemy tended to concentrate regular units in the uninhabited, jungle-covered mountain areas, close to border sanctuaries. The war in the north, then, was one fought between allied regular units and North Vietnamese Army regiments and divisions. It was, to draw an analogy, "like the Army fighting the Japanese in New Guinea—inhabitable jungle, mountainous terrain; the enemy being not little guys in black pajamas, but little guys in well-made uniforms and well-equipped and well-led, and certainly well-motivated."²

Faced with a smaller population base and a somewhat weaker infrastructure in the northern two provinces, and pursued at every turn by allied forces, enemy strength by year's end had dwindled to about 29 battalions from a high of 94 in mid-1968. The allied shift to a more mobile posture and the saturation of the remote mountain regions of western Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces with numerous patrols, sweeps, and ambushes resulted in the opening of vast areas of hitherto uncontested enemy strongholds, exposing havens and supply caches. Further, it allowed allied forces to exploit the advantages of the helicopter to the fullest, which permitted the massing of regimental or multi-regimental-size units anywhere within the provinces in a matter of hours. Allied operations north of the Hai Van Pass by the end of 1968 had produced a yearly total of almost 40,000 enemy casualties, forcing both North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units to withdraw in an attempt to regroup, reindoctrinate, refit, and prepare for the winter-spring

*COSVN, the North Vietnamese forward control headquarters, consisted of a few senior commanders and key staff officers organized as an extremely mobile command post. Thought to be located in Tay Ninh Province, III Corps, near the Cambodian border, COSVN, although targeted by numerous American and South Vietnamese operations, eluded capture throughout the war.

offensive scheduled to begin in the early months of 1969.

The three provinces which constituted southern I Corps posed a contrasting problem to that of the northern provinces. The large population base and stronger enemy infrastructure, built up over many years in the region south of Da Nang and around Quang Ngai, created a continuous threat to the large population centers and allied military complexes, which were, in spite of the best attempts, the targets of frequent enemy ground and rocket attacks. Population and territorial security was progressing, albeit slowly, and by the end of 1968, 69 percent of the civilian population, according to allied statistics, lived within secure villages and hamlets. As enemy strength in the north diminished and engagements became progressively rarer, the enemy was able not only to maintain current force levels in the south, but even to increase them slightly. The 42 enemy battalions in southern I Corps in mid-1968 were increased to about 54 by the end of the year.³

Taking advantage of favorable weather and the allied out-of-country bombing pause, which went into effect on 1 November, the enemy renewed efforts to build and repair strategic roads, greatly expanding resupply capabilities within the corps tactical zone and surrounding border areas. With the infusion of men and material from the north, tactical redistribution of forces, and increased determination to carry on the fight, the Communists began the new year as they had begun the previous year—seeking the overthrow of the South Vietnamese Government and the reunification of the two Vietnams under Communist domination. III MAF was ready to ensure that the enemy did not succeed.⁴

Strategy: A Reevaluation of Priorities

In 1969, the sixth year of direct United States combat operations in Southeast Asia, the basic issues of the war remained largely unchanged. The Viet Cong, supported by regular North Vietnamese troops, continued to seek control over South Vietnam by attempting to destroy the existing governmental structure and substituting in its place one of Communist domination. On the other hand, the Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, with allied assistance, sought to check the VC and NVA assaults by building a viable nation immune to Communist overthrow. To accomplish this, the South Vietnamese Government asked for and received United States economic and



Courtesy of Maj Charles D. Melson, USMC

Enemy troops assemble in preparation for battle. The Russian-designed 7.62mm automatic rifle each carries was the standard rifle of North Vietnamese Army soldiers and of guerrillas fighting in South Vietnam.

military support, particularly the manpower, mobility, and firepower of the United States Armed Forces.

In the four years prior to 1969, the United States presence grew rapidly as did its preoccupation with successful military operations. The protection and fortification of South Vietnam's political, economic, and social institutions had been, to a large extent, left to its own government, and improvement and modernization of its combat power had received little emphasis. The advisory effort of the 1950s and early 1960s had become United States direction and prosecution of the war. The realization, both in Washington and Saigon, that the enemy had the capability of launching a major offensive in 1968 led to greater emphasis on meaningful programs, leading to increased population security, a stable government, and a military strategy designed to seize the initiative. These goals, combat operations to defeat the enemy and promote security, increased effort to improve and modernize the Vietnamese Armed Forces, and emphasis on building a viable state, were to receive equal attention.⁵ The transition, then, was to turn the course away from "Americanization of the war" toward "Vietnamization of the peace."

For the enemy, too, 1969 was a year of transition. From 1965, the main thrust of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese strategy was to match the United States troop buildup and endeavor to defeat the allied forces on the battlefield, a strategy that was followed until *Tet* of 1968. The failure of the *Tet* and post-*Tet* Offensives resulted in the reformulation of strategy and tactics. North and South Vietnamese Communist leaders set forth a new, pragmatic strategy that dismissed the possibility of a total victory on the field of battle over United States and South Vietnamese Forces, seeking instead to parlay limited military victories into withdrawal of U.S. troops, establishment of a coalition government, and ultimate Communist political victory in South Vietnam. It was a strategy designed to weaken and exhaust the allies. As a captured enemy document noted: "For each additional day [U.S. troops] stay, they must sustain more casualties. For each additional day they stay, they must spend more money and lose more equipment. Each additional day they stay, the American people will adopt a stronger anti-war attitude, as there is no hope to consolidate the puppet administration and Army."⁶

Tactics, like overall strategy, were to change. North and South Vietnamese Communist leaders championed the more frequent use of small unit tactics in the form of ground attacks or attacks by fire against population centers, economic areas, and allied bases, while still maintaining the option of large unit actions. They emphasized the importance of the political aspects of the war and moved to bolster their political appeal in the South by establishing a formal governmental structure. They prepared for either protracted warfare or a ceasefire, while trying to broaden their options in South Vietnam, and enunciating their major demands at the on-going peace negotiations in Paris. The basic enemy campaign plan for South Vietnam aimed to blunt the allied security program and to foil attempts to Vietnamize the war.

With the first large commitment of United States troops to the war in 1965, U.S. strategy focused on assisting the Government of South Vietnam and its armed forces in defeating Communist subversion and aggression. This strategy stressed military operations, and advisory and financial assistance to aid in creating a secure environment, necessary for the success of national development programs. Further, efforts were made to encourage and assist the South Vietnamese in assuming greater responsibility for the development and maintenance of a free and independent nation.

Various operational concepts to support this strate-

gy were developed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CinCPac), with primary emphasis on maintaining maximum pressure against the enemy's disruptive and war-making capabilities through three interrelated undertakings. First were the destruction of the Viet Cong main and North Vietnamese Army forces in South Vietnam, forcing the NVA to withdraw, and the separation of the VC units from the population by providing a protective shield through ground, air, and naval offensive operations against the remaining enemy main force units. The second undertaking involved the establishment of a militarily secure environment within which the governmental apparatus of South Vietnam could be extended, consolidated, and sustained. This entailed accelerating offensive operations against Viet Cong guerrilla and main forces, with priority being given to the elimination or neutralization of the enemy's political and military infrastructure while simultaneously developing and improving the Republic's armed and security forces. Third was the improvement of the national development effort through a number of integrated security, political, economic, and social programs.

Although all three of these undertakings were conducted simultaneously well into 1968, priority was given to the first operational goal. Military operations designed to inflict unacceptable casualties on the enemy and thereby bring about a successful outcome to the war were stressed. A strategy of attrition, while never formally articulated, was adopted. As General William C. Westmoreland, Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, until July 1968, stated:

Our strategy in Vietnam is to secure our bases which are essential if we are to fight troops and sustain combat; to control populated and productive areas, . . . to neutralize his [the enemy's] base areas which are in the main situated . . . along international borders, . . . to force the enemy back, particularly his main forces, back to peripheral areas and to contain him there. Next to interdict infiltration. And finally to inflict maximum attrition on his ranks.⁷

In short, until mid-1968, "it was to grind down the enemy using the combined forces available in South Vietnam."⁸ The other two operational goals received relatively little in terms of effort and resources.

As allied losses declined and territorial security improved following the enemy's failed *Tet* and post-*Tet* Offensives, greater emphasis was placed on population security and improvement of South Vietnam's Armed Forces. Out of this change in operational em-

phasis evolved a balanced approach which was to become the guiding principle for all future allied operations. In September 1968, General Creighton W. Abrams, General Westmoreland's successor at MACV, advanced the "one war" concept which in essence recognized no such thing as a separate war of big units or of population and territorial security. Under this integrated strategic concept, allied forces were to carry the battle to the enemy simultaneously, in all areas of conflict, by strengthening cooperation between U.S. advisors and commanders and their South Vietnamese military and civilian counterparts. Major elements of the "one war" concept were population security, modernization and improvement of South Vietnam's Armed Forces, and combat operations, each to receive the highest priority, and each to be kept abreast of the other and moving forward with the ultimate aim of ensuring a strong and viable nation. No single element was to be allowed to overshadow the other two.

Under this concept, all allied forces were to be marshalled into a single integrated, all-out attack against the enemy's forces, organization, activities, and facilities. Working in close coordination with the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam and other governmental agencies, each element within the overall effort was to be assigned a mission and related tasks most appropriate to its particular capabilities and limitations. Emphasis was to be placed on combined operations in which Free World Military Assistance Forces and Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces would join in an effort to increase the latter's experience and confidence. In all operations, mobility and flexibility were to be stressed; as the enemy situation changed, existing plans were to be rapidly modified to counter or capitalize on the changing situation. The strategy of attrition was dead. As General Abrams pointed out to his major field commanders in mid-October:

The enemy's operational pattern is his understanding that this is just one, repeat one, war. He knows there's no such thing as a war of big battalions, a war of pacification or a war of territorial security. Friendly forces have got to recognize and understand the one war concept and carry the battle to the enemy, simultaneously, in all areas of conflict. In the employment of forces, all elements are to be brought together in a single plan—all assets brought to bear against the enemy in every area, in accordance with the way the enemy does his business All types of operations are to proceed simultaneously, aggressively, persistently and intelligently—plan solidly and execute vigorously, never letting the momentum subside.⁹

The "one war" concept embodied Abrams' long-held belief that both the multi-battalion and pacification

wars were mutually supporting aspects of the same struggle.*

As a corollary to the "one war" concept, significant emphasis was to be given to the Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC), initiated in November 1968. Recognizing that insurgency would fail if cut off from popular support, allied efforts were to be directed toward denying the enemy access to population and rice-growing centers, which in turn would deprive him of his mobility and force him to divert combat troops to logistical duties for which he would otherwise impress local laborers.

Guided by these principles, the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS), in coordination with General Abrams' MACV staff, issued two documents late in 1968 which set forth strategy for the conduct of the war in the coming year. The 1969 Pacification and Development Plan was the first attempt by the South Vietnamese Government to present in a single document the strategy, concepts, priorities, and objectives which were to guide the total pacification effort. Issued on 15 December by South Vietnamese Premier Tran Van Huong and members of the newly formed Central Pacification and Development Council (CPDC), it was to take effect with the termination of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign in February 1969. Although a unilateral plan, it was considered to be directive in nature for all allied forces. The primary objectives of the plan were to provide at least a measure of security for 90 percent of the South Vietnamese population by the end of 1969, and extend national sovereignty throughout the country by eliminating the Viet Cong Infrastructure, strengthening local government, increasing participation in self-defense forces, encouraging defection among enemy units and their supporters, assisting refugees, combating terrorism, and promoting rural economic development and rice production.

*In commenting on the "one war" concept, promulgated by General Abrams, General Westmoreland stated: "It was not Abrams that did it, it was the changed situation which he adapted to. The change was the situation, it was not the personality because, General Abrams was my deputy for over a year. He and I consulted about almost every tactical action. I considered his views in great depth because I had admiration for him and I'd known him for many years. And I do not remember a single instance where our views and the courses of action we thought were proper, differed in any way." Continuing, "there was no change in strategy. But there was a change in the situation, a profound change after the defeat of the *Tet* Offensive." (Gen William C. Westmoreland intvw, 4Apr83, pp. 7, 19 [Oral-HistColl, MCHC, Washington, D.C.])



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192540

A Marine infantryman scrambles down a steep mountain slope during a typical patrol in I Corps' rugged, jungle-covered mountainous terrain in search of North Vietnamese Army Forces, base camps, and cache sites.

The four corps and Capital Military District commanders were given primary responsibility for executing the pacification plan on the basis of province plans prepared under corps supervision and reviewed in Saigon. To focus and ensure success for the effort, intermediate goals were established. These goals, to be accomplished by 30 June 1969, were deliberately set high in order to exact maximum effort.

The second document issued was the Combined Campaign Plan (CCP) for 1969, which provided basic guidance for all Free World forces in the conduct of military operations in South Vietnam. The 1969 plan inaugurated a number of changes in annual campaign planning which strengthened the status of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff. Unlike previous campaign plans, which were prepared by MACV, the 1969 plan was prepared by the JGS with assistance from MACV. In addition, U.S. forces were for the first time listed among Free World forces instead of separately, and more significantly, the plan, once drawn up, was signed by each of the national commanders.

The basic assumptions included in the plan remained unchanged from those of 1968, except for ac-

knowledging the on-going Paris peace negotiations and assuring that allied force levels would remain stable throughout the year. Under the plan, United States and South Vietnamese troops were to continue mobile operations against enemy forces and bases, while screening population centers against attack and infiltration. The plan also directed continued extension of government control by securing major cities, towns, and military installations, and denying enemy access to important economic regions, rail and road links, and centers of government. Again emphasized were the need for population security, elimination of enemy infrastructure, development of local self-defense forces, and civic action programs, but to a much greater degree than similar programs had received in previous campaign plans.

Twelve major objectives and goals were enumerated for use in measuring progress. As compared with the 1968 plan, the 1969 campaign plan reduced and simplified the list, making it more meaningful and more reasonably attainable than were the percentile goals used in the past. The goals established for Free World forces varied: defeat Viet Cong and North Vietnamese armed forces; extend South Vietnamese Government control; modernize and raise the level of South Vietnam combat readiness; inflict maximum enemy casualties; increase the percentage of territory and population under South Vietnamese control through an expanded pacification effort; reduce the enemy's ability to conduct ground and fire attacks against military and civilian targets; destroy or neutralize enemy base areas; enhance the effectiveness of provincial security forces; secure vital lines of communication; neutralize the enemy's infrastructure; increase the number of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army deserters; and, maximize intelligence collection and counter-intelligence activities. In order to make substantial progress in achieving these goals, allied military resources were to be applied to critical areas, with economy of force being practiced in less essential areas.

In ICTZ, allied forces were to be committed primarily to offensive operations in order to destroy enemy forces throughout the tactical zone and those which might cross the Demilitarized Zone and Laotian border. Operations were also to be conducted to destroy enemy base areas, and to protect the major population centers of Hue, Da Nang, Quang Ngai, and the main lines of communications, especially Routes 1 and 9. Pacification activities would be concentrated on the populated coastal areas surrounding the major cities and extended to other populated areas along Route 1.

In essence, the 1969 country-wide Combined Campaign Plan abandoned the earlier concept of a protective shield of containment, and both emphasized and implemented the concept of area security and control, while again stressing the spirit of the offensive and relentless attack against the enemy. It recognized both the enemy's political and military threats and advocated expanded spoiling and preemptive operations against all types of enemy organizations and facilities, with particular emphasis placed on eliminating the Viet Cong Infrastructure. Further, it recognized that there was just one war and the battle was to be carried to the enemy, simultaneously, in all areas of conflict. Friendly forces were to be brought together in a single plan against the enemy in accordance with the way he operated. "The key strategic thrust," as stated in the MACV Strategic Objectives Plan approved by General Abrams early in 1969, was "to provide meaningful, continuing security for the Vietnamese people in expanding areas of increasingly effective civil authority." As envisioned by MACV and the JGS, the "one war" concept was to be forcefully implemented on all fronts in 1969. As General Abrams stated to a gathering of his major field commanders early in January:

Pacification is the "GUT" issue for the Vietnamese. This is why I think that we cannot let the momentum die down. I started off by saying that I think we have the cards. I believe that. But the artistry in this situation is going to be to play the cards at the proper time and in the proper place. We do not have so many extras that we can afford to blunder around and put forces where the enemy isn't and where the pacification effort doesn't need it. It is going to require the utmost in professional work and professional judgment during the next weeks to ensure that we play our cards in the most effective way. If we do not and we get sloppy, pacification is going to really suffer. You can't let the old steam roller get going and not feed it fuel and expect it to keep going.¹⁰

I Corps Planning

On 26 December 1968, South Vietnamese, Korean, and American commanders in I Corps Tactical Zone issued their Combined Campaign Plan for 1969. Designed to implement the objectives outlined in the nationwide campaign and pacification plans, this document was to provide basic guidance for the operations of Marines and allied forces in ICTZ throughout the coming year.

The drafters of the plan assumed that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in I Corps would continue to follow the strategy used during the campaigns of late 1968—that of concentrating men and materiel in

attacks on population centers in order to inflict a defeat on the ARVN and incite a popular uprising that would culminate in either the overthrow of the South Vietnamese Government, or its replacement by a coalition government which would include representatives of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam.

Due to a number of decisive tactical defeats, heavy casualties, and failure to gain popular support by 1969, allied planners noted:

Realizing that he cannot win a military victory, the enemy is apparently resorting to a "fighting while negotiating" strategy. In adopting such a strategy, he now hopes to gain political advantage at the conference table through continued offensive action in RVN [Republic of Vietnam]. The enemy is expected to expand his efforts to control the rural areas and strengthen his infrastructure as a base for further action.¹¹

In pursuit of this goal, the planners declared, the NVA and VC in I Corps would endeavor to "wear down and eliminate RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces] and Allied forces to the maximum extent possible and to draw friendly forces away from urban areas and thereby relieving pressure on those enemy forces attacking the urban areas."¹² In the attack on the urban population, Communists forces would continue to rely on such standard tactics as assassination, rocket and mortar attacks on vital areas and key installations, and direct assaults on isolated units, outposts, and towns. These actions were aimed, the planners noted, at demoralizing allied forces, discrediting the South Vietnamese Government, and disrupting its pacification effort.

To meet and eliminate the enemy threat, campaign planners divided the opposing force into two categories, the VC and NVA main force units often found in remote areas and local VC guerrilla units and their supporters, concentrated in and around urban population centers. They assigned a distinct yet overlapping function to each allied unit: Korean, American, and ARVN regulars were to focus on destruction of the enemy's main forces, neutralization of base and logistical areas, and prevention of infiltration of population centers. Regional and Popular, People's Self-Defense, and National Police forces were to weed out and eliminate Viet Cong local force units and infrastructure. These auxiliaries were to furnish "security for hamlets and villages and will defend the LOCs [lines of communication], political and economic centers and government installations. They will also participate in and coordinate with the ARVN regular



Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center

LtGen Robert E. Cushman, left, Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force; LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam, Commanding General, I Corps; and BGen Dong Ho Lee, right, Commander, 2d Republic of Korea Marine Brigade, sign the I Corps Combined Campaign Plan for 1969, outlining allied coordination and assistance policies for I Corps.

forces in the protection of cities and provincial and district capitals.”¹³

The major task assigned to the regular forces under the plan was to locate and “systematically neutralize” the enemy’s base areas scattered throughout the tactical zone, predominantly in the mountains adjacent to the Laotian border. Allied troops were to concentrate on those enemy command, control, and logistical facilities which “directly affect the selected RD [Revolutionary Development] priority areas, key population and economic centers, and vital communications arteries.”¹⁴ Priority was given to those enemy base areas within striking distance of Dong Ha and Quang Tri City (Base Area 101), Da Nang (Base Area 112), and Quang Ngai City (Base Area 121).^{*} For the more remote bases where complete neutralization and permanent denial was impossible, “repeated air strikes with random pattern ground operations” were to be

^{*}Each enemy base was assigned a three-digit number. The first digit represented the country in which it was located (1 for South Vietnam and 6 for Laos), while the last two digits indicated sequential position of discovery by allied troops.

used to “create insecurity, disrupt command channels, and deter stationing and movement of VC/NVA forces” within those areas.¹⁵ The drafters of the campaign plan were convinced that:

The destruction of the enemy’s command, control, and logistics facilities will contribute to his eventual defeat. The neutralization of these bases will also require the enemy to place greater demands on the people for more manpower and resources. As these demands increase, the people will become more susceptible to friendly psychological operations. This will support the objective of assisting the GVN in expanding territorial control.¹⁶

“Territorial control” or territorial security was stressed by the authors as the primary objective of all allied activity in I Corps:

The campaign to provide sustained territorial security in the countryside and concurrently to introduce political, economic and social reforms which will establish conditions favorable for further growth and stability, is just as important as anti-aggression operations. Operations to annihilate the enemy, while clearly essential to pacification, are by themselves inadequate. The people must be separated and won over from the enemy.¹⁷

Each allied unit was assigned a security function, in addition to its other allotted duties. American, Korean, and ARVN regulars, when not engaged in major operations against enemy base areas and main force units, were to "prevent enemy infiltration into the fringes of towns, cities, and areas adjacent to population" centers by constantly patrolling those areas.¹⁸ They were to reinforce territorial units under attack, furnish air and artillery support, and assist them in their campaign to eliminate local Viet Cong. Regional and Popular Force units within the tactical zone were to carry out ambushes, cordons, and patrols near inhabited areas, while the National Police and People's Self-Defense Forces were to maintain public order and conduct operations aimed at eradicating the enemy's infrastructure.

I Corps planners also sought to delineate the often conflicting responsibilities for pacification by requiring each locality to be placed into one of five general security categories: uninhabited areas, North Vietnamese Army- or Viet Cong-controlled areas, contested areas, areas being secured, and those areas considered completely secure. Uninhabited areas encompassed that territory just inside the national frontiers which did not contain officially recognized hamlets. NVA- or VC-controlled areas were regions in which the enemy was present and able to exert military and political influence. In both of these areas, allied units were to conduct only transient operations, with no intention of gaining complete and permanent control.

Closer to the main population centers were the contested areas. Selected as targets for Revolutionary Development activities, these areas were to be cleared

permanently of all organized enemy main force and guerrilla unit activity by regular forces. In areas in the process of being secured, all "organized resistance" was considered to have ceased and the government to be in the process of destroying what remained of the enemy's guerrilla network, thereby preventing its re-emergence.

Secure areas, the final category, were densely populated regions where government control was complete, or where permanent New Life Hamlets (Ap Doi Moi) were being developed. Here the population could move freely without fear of organized enemy attacks, except for occasional individual acts of terrorism or sabotage, and indirect attacks by fire. In both secure areas and areas being secured, the responsibility for defense and maintenance of public order rested with local officials and their principal security forces, the RF and PF, the PSDF, and the National Police.

The purpose of this regional organization was not only to fix responsibility for pacification, but to integrate and unify all allied activity. Combat operations, population and territorial security, and RVNAF improvement and modernization were to be equally emphasized in the "one war" concept as enumerated by the ICTZ/III MAF Combined Campaign Plan for 1969.

Against this background, the battlefields of I Corps Tactical Zone were relatively quiet during the early days of 1969. The Viet Cong's unilateral 72-hour New Year's truce ended on 2 January, but intermittent fighting took place as allied forces, who had refused to recognize the ceasefire, continued both large and small unit operations.

CHAPTER 2

Mountain Warfare

Northern I Corps—Off Balance—From the Cua Viet, South

Northern I Corps

Arrayed within the provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien as 1969 began were the following major United States headquarters and combat units: Headquarters XXIV Corps; 3d Marine Division; Task Force Hotel; 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile); 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized); XXIV Corps Artillery; and U.S. Navy Task Force Clearwater. Generally deployed along the Demilitarized Zone and Laotian border within Quang Tri Province was the 3d Marine Division, less two battalions of the 3d Marines, with the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) under its control, operating throughout the eastern portion of the province, primarily within the piedmont and coastal lowlands. Located at Vandegrift Combat Base in western Quang Tri was Task Force Hotel, which essentially functioned as 3d Marine Division Forward Headquarters. Deployed within Thua Thien Province were the three brigades of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), headquartered at Camp Eagle, south of Hue and northwest of Phu Bai. Collocated with Headquarters, XXIV Corps, at Phu Bai Combat Base was XXIV Corps Artillery, while stationed at Dong Ha was the subordinate 108th Artillery Group. The Navy's Task Force Clearwater, with the mission of river and inland waterway security, operated from a base near the mouth of the Song Cua Viet in Quang Tri Province, with river patrol groups securing the Song Cua Viet and Song Huong (Perfume River), and patrol air cushion vehicle (PACV) elements patrolling inland waterways.

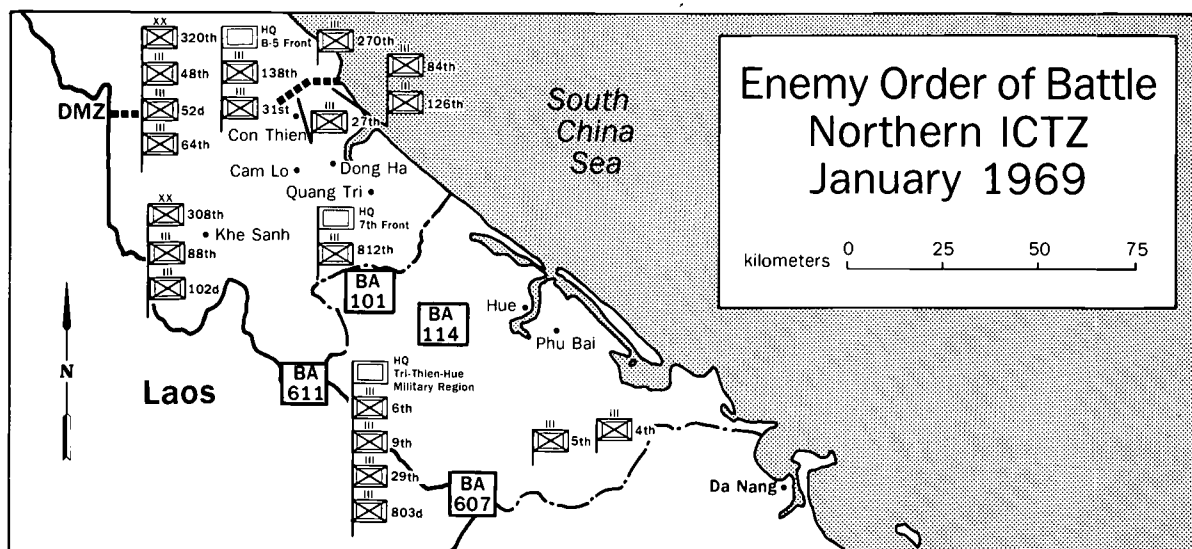
Enemy activity throughout northern I Corps was light and sporadic during the early days of January 1969. Along the Demilitarized Zone, units of the 3d Marine Division and 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) faced elements of six North Vietnamese regiments, the *138th*, *270th*, *84th*, *31st*, *27th*, and the *126th Naval Sapper*, all independent regiments of the unlocated *B-5 Front Headquarters*. Three regiments of the veteran *320th NVA Division* had withdrawn from western and central Quang Tri Province for refitting in North Vietnam following their third defeat in late 1968.¹ What enemy activity there was, was generally limited to infrequent rocket and

mortar attacks on allied positions, ground probes by squad- and platoon-size units, and attempts at interdicting the Song Cau Viet with mines. Artillery fire from within and north of the Demilitarized Zone had all but ceased in December.

Within the central portion of Quang Tri Province, units subordinate to the *7th Front*, including three battalions of the *812th Regiment*, were for the most part pulled back into jungle sanctuaries on the Quang Tri-Thua Thien provincial border for resupply and infusion of replacements. These three units were badly mauled during the 1968 *Tet* and post-*Tet* Offensives, and their forward base areas and cache sites destroyed by Marine and ARVN search and clear operations during the late summer and fall campaigns. Enemy strength at the end of January, within the Demilitarized Zone and Quang Tri Province, was estimated at 36,800, approximately 2,500 more than the December total. Of these, more than half were confirmed to be combat troops.

In Thua Thien Province the enemy situation was similar. North Vietnamese Army units, with the exception of small forward elements of the *4th* and *5th Regiments*, had been withdrawn into the A Shau Valley and Laos under constant U.S. and ARVN pressure during the previous year. These forward elements did conduct occasional attacks by fire, but were forced to confine much of their effort to attempts at rice gathering and survival in the foothills of the province. Viet Cong local force units and the Viet Cong Infrastructure remained under steady pressure from Army, ARVN, and provincial forces, and likewise devoted much of their energy toward survival and avoiding discovery. End-of-January estimates placed enemy strength within the province at 15,200, a 25-percent increase over December figures.

To the west, in the A Shau Valley and beyond, there were signs of increasing enemy activity. Roadwork was being conducted on Route 548 in the valley and on Route 922 in Laos. Vehicular traffic and troop movement was light at the beginning of the month, but soon picked up as January progressed, particularly in and around Route 922 and enemy Base Area 611 in Laos.



See Reference Map, Sections 1-27

Off Balance

While the enemy generally avoided contact in January, American and South Vietnamese forces in northern I Corps continued their efforts at keeping him off balance, striking at his traditional base areas and infiltration routes, and increasing security within populated areas. Driving deeper into the mountains and areas bordering the Demilitarized Zone, allied forces pushed and probed for evidence of infiltration and supply build-up, in order to determine the enemy's intentions in the months ahead and thwart them before they could be implemented.

Leading the effort in Quang Tri Province was the 3d Marine Division under the command of Major General Raymond G. Davis. A veteran of the Guadalcanal, Cape Gloucester, and Peleliu campaigns of World War II and Medal of Honor recipient for actions at the Chosin Reservoir during the Korean War, Davis assumed command of the division in May 1968, following a short tour as Deputy Commanding General, Provisional Corps, Vietnam.

Under Davis' leadership, the tactical disposition of the division would be turned around. No longer consigned to defensive positions, the 3d Marine Division, with helicopter support, now would assume a highly mobile posture, characteristic of Army air cavalry and airborne operations of 1968. As General Davis noted:

We had something like two dozen battalions up there all tied down (with little exception) to these fixed positions, and the situation didn't demand it. So, when the Army moved into Pegasus to relieve the Khe Sanh operation [in April 1968] they applied forces directly responsive to the enemy's dispositions and forgot about real estate—forgetting about bases, going after the enemy in key areas—this

punished the enemy most. Pegasus demonstrated the decisiveness of high mobility operations. The way to get it done was to get out of these fixed positions and get mobility, to go and destroy the enemy on our terms—not sit there and absorb the shot and shell and frequent penetrations that he was able to mount. So all this led me, as soon as I heard that I was going, it led me to do something I had never done before or since, and that is to move in prepared in the first hours to completely turn the command upside down. They were committed by battalion in fixed positions in such a way that they had very little mobility. The relief of CGs took place at eleven o'clock. At one o'clock I assembled the staff and commanders; before dark, battalion positions had become company positions. It happened just that fast.²

In addition to establishing a more mobile posture, Davis reinstituted unit integrity. For various reasons, the regiments of the division had slowly evolved into operational headquarters which might have any battalion of the division assigned. There was constant rotation; the 9th Marines, for example, might have a battalion of the 3d Marines, a battalion of 4th Marines, and only one of its own. Thus, as Colonel Robert H. Barrow, one of Davis' regimental commanders and later Commandant of the Marine Corps, noted, the individual battalions "felt . . . they were commanded by strangers. Every unit has a kind of personality of its own, often reflecting the personality of the commander, so you never got to know who did what best, or who would you give this mission to."³ Davis changed that; each regiment, under normal operating circumstances, would now control its constituent battalions. As General Davis later commented, "it was the key to our success."⁴

As battalions of the division moved from defensive operations to more aggressive operations against ele-

ments of the 320th NVA Division during the latter half of 1968, the need for helicopters grew. "I was very fortunate in this," Davis was later to state, "that the later model of the CH-46 was arriving in-country in large numbers. Whereas it would pick up a platoon, the old 46 would hardly pick up a squad."⁵ In addition, due to his close working relationship with Army Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, Provisional Corps commander, and Lieutenant General Richard G. Stilwell, his successor at XXIV Corps, Davis had the promise of Army helicopter support if needed. More important, however, was the creation of Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 39 and the subsequent assignment, initially on a temporary basis, of a Marine air commander for northern I Corps who, as General Davis stated, "had enough authority delegated to him from the wing, where he could execute things; he could order air units to do things."^{6*} With helicopter transport assured, division Marines moved from relatively static positions south of the Demilitarized Zone and along north-south Route 1 and east-west Route 9, the main lines of communication, into the mountainous regions of Quang Tri Province in search of the enemy and his supplies.

Davis' concept of mobile operations depended not only on the helicopter, but on the extensive exploitation of intelligence, specifically that gathered by small reconnaissance patrols, which he continuously employed throughout the division's area of responsibility and which supplemented both electronic and human acquired intelligence. Operating within range of friendly artillery were the heavily armed "Stingray" patrols, whose mission was to find, fix, and destroy the enemy with all available supporting arms, and rapid reinforcement, if necessary. In the more remote areas, beyond artillery range, he used "Key Hole" patrols. Much smaller in size and armed with only essential small arms and ammunition, the function of these patrols was to observe.⁷ The 3d Marine Division, Davis noted, "never launched an operation without acquiring clear definition of the targets and objectives through intelligence confirmed by recon patrols. High



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192746
MajGen Raymond G. Davis led 3d Marine Division.

mobility operations [were] too difficult and complex to come up empty or in disaster."⁸

Armed with information on probable enemy troop and supply locations provided by reconnaissance patrols and other intelligence sources, such as radio intercepts, 3d Division Marines would advance rapidly into the proposed area of operations. Forward artillery positions, or fire support bases (FSBs), defended by a minimum of infantry personnel, would be established on key terrain features. These mutually supporting bases, constructed approximately 8,000 meters apart with a 3,000-meter overshoot in order to cover enemy mortars, provided ground troops operating under the fan with continuous, overlapping artillery support. Once inserted, Marine rifle companies, and even entire battalions, would move rapidly, although methodically, and largely on foot, throughout the area to be searched. Additional fire support bases would be constructed, permitting deeper penetration of the area of operations.

The purpose of the intelligence collection effort and subsequent combat operations, if required, was to prevent the enemy from sticking his "logistics nose in-country." "The [enemy's] first order of business," as Colonel Barrow later noted, was to "move all the things of war; all of their logistics forward from the sanctuaries of North Vietnam, just across the DMZ, or from Laos." This movement would take weeks, or possibly

*Assistant Wing Commander, Brigadier General Homer S. Hill, was temporarily assigned to 3d Marine Division Headquarters for "operations requiring more than routine air support and used his normal position within the Wing to coordinate air operations on the spot." The assignment of a Marine air commander to northern I Corps "did not involve any new command structure." (Col Edwin H. Finlayson, Comments on draft ms, 25Nov86 [Vietnam 69 Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.])

months. At the appointed time, troops would quickly move in, marry up with the cached supplies, and then do battle. As General Davis believed and Barrow later stated:

We must do everything we can to find that stuff, wherever it exists and obviously destroy it. And if we miss any of it, we must attempt by vigorous patrolling, radio intercept, signal intelligence, recon team inserts, and whatever else, to find out when any troops were moving in. Maybe we hadn't found their logistics, their caches, and we didn't want to have the surprise of not finding them until after they had married up and were about to engage us some place.⁹

Thoroughly indoctrinated in the mobile concept of operations, Marines of the 3d Division at the beginning of 1969 could be found from the Laotian border to the coastal lowlands. To the west, elements of Colonel Robert H. Barrow's 9th Marines continued searching north of the Khe Sanh plateau in operations begun the year before. In the center, the 4th Marines, under Colonel William F. Goggin, patrolled the mountainous areas north of Vandegrift Combat Base and south of the Demilitarized Zone. Further east, one battalion of Colonel Michael M. Spark's 3d Marines continued to search areas south of the DMZ and north

of Route 9, while the remainder of the regiment assisted the 5th Marines in Operation Taylor Common in Quang Nam Province.

On 31 December 1968 and 1 January 1969, teams from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion were inserted west of Khe Sanh along the Laotian border, initiating Operation Dawson River West. The teams immediately secured seven landing zones, eliminating the need for preassault artillery and air strikes. On the morning of the 2d, elements of Barrow's 9th Marines and supporting artillery made simultaneous helicopter landings into the secured zones north of Route 9. The initial assaults were made by Lieutenant Colonel George W. Smith's 1st Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel George C. Fox's 2d Battalion, and Company L, 3d Battalion under First Lieutenant Raymond C. Benfatti. A battalion of the 2d ARVN Regiment assaulted south of Route 9 to the right of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines on the 4th. Fire Support Bases Geiger and Smith, occupied by batteries of Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Scoppa, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, supported the 9th, while an ARVN artillery battery at Fire Support Base Snapper supported the South Vietnamese.

Throughout the three-week operation, Barrow's Marines experienced minimal enemy contact during the

Infantrymen of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines move through waist-high elephant grass in search of enemy troops and supply areas around Khe Sanh during Dawson River West.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800506





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800503

A solitary Marine moves up a small stream near the abandoned Khe Sanh base, carefully checking out both banks for hidden North Vietnamese Army supplies and harbor sites.

search. They uncovered numerous small weapons caches, of which a great majority contained U.S. equipment, rations, and ammunition lost during and after the sieges of Lang Vei and Khe Sanh in 1968. The South Vietnamese located more recent hoards of 122mm rockets, mortars, and artillery rounds along Route 9 in the vicinity of Lang Vei. The general pattern of search during the operation was from the Lao-tian border north of Route 9, in the vicinity of Fire Support Base Argonne, south and astride Route 9; a probe into the "Vietnam Salient," that portion of South Vietnam which protrudes into Laos, near Fire Support Base Passport; and finally back toward Vandegrift Combat Base. At the close of Dawson River West, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines resecured Fire Support Bases Henderson, Tun Tavern, Cates, and Shiloh near the Ba Long Valley, southwest of Vandegrift.

While the 9th Marines accounted for few enemy casualties and limited equipment captured, Operation Dawson River West proved significant in ascertaining that no sizeable enemy concentrations or supplies existed in the Khe Sanh area or Vietnam Salient at the time. "If there was ever a piece of ground in the western part of Quang Tri that was searched out thoroughly," Barrow remembered, "that was that operation."¹⁰ In addition, the 9th Marines created a number of landing zones and fire support bases, facilitating continued operations against the NVA in western and southwestern Quang Tri Province, and providing a

springboard for the regiment's turn to the south and future push into the upper Song Da Krong Valley, southwest of Vandegrift.

East of the Dawson River area of operations, Colonel Goggin's 4th Marines continued search and clear operations in the Scotland II area, while elements of the 3d Marines' Task Force Bravo, in Operation Kentucky, conducted search and cordon operations in the vicinity of the outposts at Cam Lo, Con Thien, and Charlie-2, south of the DMZ. Scotland II, a continuation of operations initiated in November 1967 in and around Khe Sanh by the 26th Marines, was begun 15 April 1968 under the control of Task Force Glick, later redesignated Task Force Hotel and now under the command of Assistant 3d Division Commander, Brigadier General Frank E. Garretson. Employing various battalions of the division, led by the 4th Marines, and elements of the 2d ARVN Regiment in search and clear operations in an area generally bounded by Route 561, Route 9, the Demilitarized Zone, and the Lao-tian border, Marines of Task Force Hotel had, since April the previous year, accounted for nearly 4,000 enemy killed and 1,100 weapons captured.

Ground combat was light and scattered throughout January and into early February as Lieutenant Colonel George T. Sargent, Jr.'s 1st Battalion, 4th Marines conducted searches of the area surrounding Nui Tia Pong, west of Elliott Combat Base (Rockpile), and Lieutenant Colonel Joseph E. Hopkins' 2d Battalion continued extensive squad-size reconnaissance patrols

along the Demilitarized Zone, north and west of Con Thien. The 3d Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel William A. Donald, in cooperation with the Quang Tri Provisional Rifle Company, maintained patrols from Ca Lu and Vandegrift Combat Base. The searches and extensive patrolling did uncover several important enemy fighting positions and supply caches. On 10 January, two companies of Lieutenant Colonel Sargent's 1st Battalion discovered a large bunker complex northeast of Fire Support Base Neville, containing over 120 mortar rounds, miscellaneous small arms ammunition, and explosives. Company L, working in conjunction with the 2d Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment, on 23 January uncovered nearly 500 mortar rounds in multiple dumps in the vicinity of bases Charlie-1,

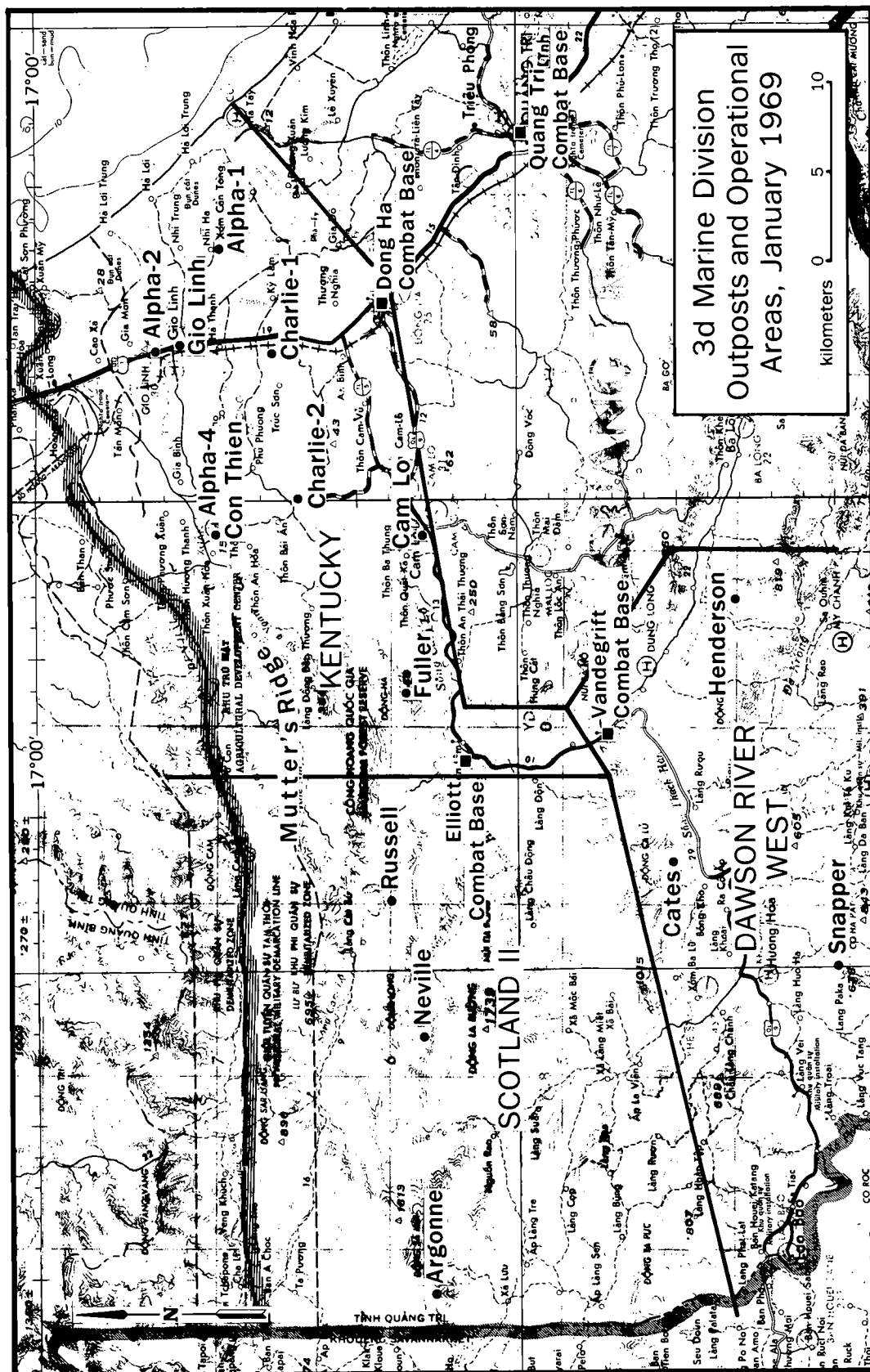
Charlie-2, and Alpha-1, northwest of Cam Lo. It appeared from the location of the caches that the NVA were prepositioning ammunition and supplies as far forward as possible along the Demilitarized Zone in order to support future offensive operations.

As a result of these and other discoveries within the Scotland area of operations, Colonel Goggin ordered Lieutenant Colonel Hopkins' 2d Battalion to conduct reconnaissance patrols within the southern half of the Demilitarized Zone, while maintaining search and clear operations immediately to the south. "Our operations north of the southern boundary of the DMZ," Hopkins noted, "were not search and destroy operations per se. There were certain political implications involved, obviously. It had to be a carefully controlled

Marines of Company B, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines pick their way among rocks as they cross one of the many streams which traversed the rugged mountainous terrain which characterized the Scotland II area of operations, south of the Demilitarized Zone.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800539





See Reference Map, Sections 1-3, 5-7

reconnaissance of the southern half of the DMZ under some specific rules of engagement which rather limited the number of personnel who might be in that area at any time."¹¹* The reconnaissance effort was to involve teams from the division's 3d Reconnaissance Battalion and a rifle squad from Companies F, G, and H; a squad being the largest unit which could be introduced into the Demilitarized Zone for any purpose. Specific targets of the reconnaissance effort were enemy forces, fortifications, and supply caches.

Operations within the DMZ began on 1 February with the insertion of three division reconnaissance teams and an equal number of squads from the 2d Battalion. Generally, the teams covered less area and were involved in more fighting than Hopkins' squads during the two-week effort. As a result, the division reaction force, designated "Sparrow Hawk," was usually sent in to reinforce the reconnaissance teams. This technique, as Lieutenant Colonel Hopkins later reported, "offered an opportunity to put a larger force of Marines in, an additional platoon, and by walking them directly south, offered the opportunity to perform a good solid reconnaissance by a good-size unit of a portion of the area."¹²

Under the watchful eyes of North Vietnamese soldiers, some of whom stood in the open on the northern bank of the Ben Hai which bisected the DMZ, Hopkins' squads covered approximately 50 percent of the 36-square-kilometer reconnaissance zone assigned. Contact was sporadic, the actions involving either transients, local guides, cache guards, or screening and reconnaissance units of no more than a squad. Although the enemy's maneuverability was lessened and a number of his large cache sites discovered and destroyed, the reconnaissance effort was unable, according to the battalion's intelligence officer, First Lieutenant Larry L. Eastland, to discern "what their future plans are, what their future plan for a short period of time is to be."¹³ Near the end of February, the enemy struck—first at Fire Support Base Neville and then at Russell, north of Vandegrift.

In the early morning hours of the 25th, Fire Support Base Neville, located northeast of the Elliott Combat Base, and defended by two platoons of Company

H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and Battery G, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, and protected by concertina wire, tanglefoot, listening posts, mines, and sensors, was assaulted by 200 highly trained and highly motivated sappers (raiders) from the *246th NVA Regiment*. "The night of the attack was pretty much of a typical night at Neville," reported Captain John E. Knight, Jr., Company H's commander, "very foggy; it looked like something right out of a horror movie with fog drifting through the trees; visibility almost nil. . . . The first indication we had that anything was out of the ordinary other than just normal movement was when a trip flare went off and evidently they were infiltrating at that point and one of their people had set off a trip flare. We H and I'd [harassing and interdiction fires] the area with the 60's and approximately a half an hour after that, at 0030 we were taken under attack by the sappers."¹⁴ After infiltrating the concertina wire barrier on the west side of the perimeter, the attacking force systematically crisscrossed that portion of the fire base occupied by the 1st platoon and Battery G's number six gun pit, tossing satchel charges which forced the defenders into bunkers which the enemy then destroyed.

In the glow of flares and burning powder, the Marines rallied and with the assistance of 60mm mortar fire, drove the attacking force from the hill. "We beat these sappers, which are supposed to be the worst thing the North Vietnamese got," noted Gunnery Sergeant John E. Timmermeyer. "We beat these people not with air, not with arty, not with any supporting arms; we beat them and we beat them bad with weapons we had in our own company . . . M-16s, or M-79s, or 60s, or frags, everything we had in the rifle company, this is what we used to beat these people with, we didn't have to have supporting arms. We did it without them."¹⁵ At dawn, Captain Knight's Marines, who lost 11 killed and 29 wounded, found 36 enemy dead and wounded, several of whom still had satchel charges and other explosives strapped to their backs and quantities of opium in their pockets.

Ten kilometers east, Fire Support Base Russell, defended by platoons of Companies E, F, and K, Mortar and H Batteries of the 12th Marines, and a detachment from the 1st Searchlight Battery, came under attack the same evening. A sudden heavy mortar barrage followed by a 200-man sapper attack by troops of the *27th NVA Regiment*, swiftly breached the base's northeast perimeter. "In the first few minutes, the 81mm mortar section and the company CP, both located on the east and southeast side were decimated."¹⁶

*Then current rules of engagement prohibited U.S. ground forces from crossing the southern boundary of the DMZ without specific orders from COMUSMACV. Every local commander, however, retained the right and responsibility for the defense of his forces. (COMUSMACV msg to CGIIIMAF, et al., dtd 20Feb69, MACV Hist-DocColl, Reel 54)



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Fire Support Base Russell occupied a mountaintop within range of the Demilitarized Zone, and because of its location was often subjected to enemy mortar and ground attacks.

Fighting was hand-to-hand as the Marines, with the help of a heavy artillery cordon, coordinated by the battalion operations officer at Vandegrift Combat Base, drove the enemy back through the perimeter. At daybreak, Marine air came on station, and consolidation began with only two officers and one staff non-commissioned officer left out of the original complement. The Marines on Russell suffered 26 killed and 77 wounded, while accounting for 25 enemy troops, most of whom were cut down inside the wire. Marine patrols pursued the enemy north toward the DMZ at dawn, and reported finding bloody uniforms and bandages, as well as several fresh grave sites along trails the enemy used in their escape.

Both fire bases were reinforced the following day, but continued to report enemy probing activity. Fire Support Base Neville remained surrounded by enemy units employing mortars from several positions for several days despite heavy air concentrations, artillery

and counter-mortar fires, and extensive patrols, and was eventually relieved of pressure by Company G which moved into the area by forced march over rugged terrain.¹⁷

The end of February found the 4th Marines engaged in base security and reaction force duties, and in patrolling the areas immediately around Fire Support Bases Neville and Russell in an attempt to severely punish the 27th and 246th NVA Regiments. On the 28th, Operation Scotland II ended with most regimental units remaining in place throughout the operational area.

Further east, two brigade-size operations were being conducted in support of the South Vietnamese Government's resettlement and pacification effort as the new year began. Centered in the Cam Lo and Con Thien areas, and along the Song Cua Viet, Operation Kentucky consisted of one Marine infantry battalion, one tank battalion, and elements of the 1st Amphib-

ian Tractor (Amtrac) Battalion, under the control of the 3d Marines' Task Force Bravo. This search, clear, and cordon operation, begun in November 1967, had at one time included all three battalions of the 3d Marines and the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), following its arrival in northern I Corps in July 1968. In December, the 1st Brigade redeployed to an area south of the Cua Viet, and the 1st and 3d Battalions, 3d Marines moved to southern I Corps where they joined elements of the 1st Marine Division in Operation Taylor Common.

The new year found Lieutenant Colonel James J. McMonagle's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines conducting pacification operations in the Mai Loc area south of Route 9, securing friendly positions along the Con Thien-Cam Lo corridor, and assisting Regional Forces around Cam Lo. Lieutenant Colonel George E. Hayward's 3d Tank Battalion continued armored combat, security patrols, and road sweeps between Quang Tri and Dong Ha Combat Bases, and in the vicinity of Con Thien, while the 1st Amtrac Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Walter W. Damewood, Jr., continued motorized patrols near the Cua Viet, not far from Mai Loc. As the month progressed and the enemy became more furtive, the battalions began a series of short platoon- and company-size reconnaissance-in-force operations, designed to expose enemy positions, infiltration routes, and supply caches. Results were disappointing; most of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong having been driven out by the intense artillery and air bombardments.

On occasion these small but frequent operations did initiate short skirmishes, and these skirmishes, combined with intelligence from captured enemy troops, pointed to Leatherneck Square as the only active area within the Kentucky area of operations.* As a result, on 18 January, the 2d ARVN Regiment, assisted by Lieutenant Colonel McMonagle's battalion and Lieutenant Colonel William A. Donald's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, with tanks attached, began a cordon and search operation northeast of Cam Lo, the local district headquarters. The Marines maintained blocking positions along the square's northern boundary, while the ARVN force swept from Gio Linh to Cam Lo, hunting for enemy troops and resettling any displaced villagers in the Cam Vu Valley. As the cordon dissolved

on the 26th, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, less Company M, rejoined its regiment, and a land-clearing operation, utilizing 20 to 30 tractors of the Army's 59th Engineer Battalion, was begun. The 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, assisted by Company M, 4th Marines; 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry's Troop A, 4th Squadron, 12th Cavalry; and later Troops B and C, 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, provided security for the engineers and conducted reinforced company-size search and destroy operations in the Con Thien, Cam Lo, and Mai Loc areas.

Task Force Bravo's control of the aggressive patrol operations within the Kentucky area continued until 18 February, when the remainder of the 3d Marines returned from southern I Corps and reassumed control of the task force, which was later deactivated. Following the return of the regiment, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines began operations in the Cam Lo and Nhi Ha areas, replacing two companies of the 2d Battalion, helilifted west into Fire Support Bases Cunningham and Erskine, overlooking the Song Da Krong, to support the 9th Marines in Operation Dewey Canyon. With the westward shift of elements of the 2d Battalion and the transfer of control of the 1st Battalion to Task Force Hotel at Vandegrift, the 3d Marines ended Operation Kentucky.

From the Cua Viet, South

South of the Cua Viet, elements of the Army's 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) and the 1st ARVN Regiment continued a combined search and clear and cordon operation (Marshall Mountain), begun on 10 December. The area of operation encompassed the political districts of Trieu Phong, Mai Linh, and Hai Lang, and Quang Tri City; and the area stretching from the coastal dunes west of Highway 1 to the jungle-canopied eastern portions of enemy Base Area 101 in southwestern Quang Tri Province. Approximately two-thirds of the province's population lived in the area, and consequently it was a key target for enemy infiltration and harassment efforts.

Friendly forces taking part in Operation Marshall Mountain were to interdict enemy movement by employing small-unit (squad and fire team) patrols and ambushes, known as "Hunter Killer" teams, and conduct detailed cordon and search operations in conjunction with the 1st ARVN Regiment, Regional and Popular Forces, Provincial Reconnaissance units, and National Police Field Forces. Capitalizing on the mobility of the 1st Brigade along the coastal plains and

*Leatherneck Square was a four-by-six-kilometer piece of cleared, flat piedmont about three kilometers east of the Vietnamese coast. Often characterized as a "parking lot" or "golf course," the area was bordered by Con Thien and Gio Linh on the north, and by Dong Ha and Cam Lo on the south.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800470

Men of the 3d Marines on board tanks of the 3d Tank Battalion sweep the Con Thien Corridor within the Kentucky Area of Operations, north of Cam Lo District Headquarters.

in the piedmont, ready reaction forces were maintained to close rapidly in the event significant numbers of enemy troops were encountered.*

During the initial stages of the operation, elements of the 1st Brigade and 1st ARVN Regiment moved into the western portion of the area of operations to clear out remaining detachments of enemy main force units which had previously withdrawn to the mountainous regions of the province. These stay-behind enemy troops attempted to maintain rice collection points, not only posing a threat to the security of villages and hamlets throughout the area, but also hampering the government's pacification efforts. The forces involved simultaneously conducted combined search and cordon operations within the three districts, and by the end of the operation on 28 February, 37 such searches and cordons had been carried out. North of the Song Cua Viet, the 1st Amtrac Battalion supported the brigade with a search and clear operation along the beach from Ha Loi to the Demilitarized Zone.

Enemy action was generally defensive, with scattered attacks by fire and widely dispersed mines and other surprise firing devices. At the termination of the

brigade operation, 568 enemy troops had been killed, 397 captured, and 307 civil defendants rounded up, many of whom were later identified as local infrastructure members. Four hundred ninety-six individual and 41 crew-served weapons were captured, along with miscellaneous arms and nearly 80 tons of rice.

In northern Thua Thien Province on 31 December, Operation Todd Forest began within the 101st Airborne Division's area of operation. In response to intelligence indicating a significant enemy presence in Base Area 101, the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry and elements of the 1st ARVN Regiment conducted combat assaults into the Nam Hoa District highlands. Subsequent reconnaissance-in-force operations met light enemy resistance as NVA and VC troops again chose not to expose their forces, and Todd Forest ended within two weeks.

In the central portion of the province, around Hue, various elements of the 101st Airborne Division continued to conduct a large-scale division-level operation, initiated 17 May 1968, in support of the South Vietnamese Government's Accelerated Pacification Campaign. The initial goal of Operation Nevada Eagle had been to clear the provincial lowlands of NVA units following the *Tet* Offensive, and then to sever the link between NVA regular units and VC local forces

*The brigade and its subordinate units were configured into three task forces: the first, infantry with a tank company attached; the second, armor with an infantry company attached; and the third, mechanized infantry with tanks attached.

in the coastal plains. A series of combat operations were grouped under Nevada Eagle, all directed at the pacification of Thua Thien Province. During the summer of 1968, combat assaults in and around Base Area 114, coupled with rice denial operations, forced the *803d NVA Regiment* to withdraw its main elements from Thua Thien. A succession of cordon and sweeps were then carried out within the province to harass and destroy local-force VC units and the infrastructure, including highly successful Vinh Loc and Phu Vang security operations. This all-out offensive against the VC included night ambushes to intercept rice gathering parties, propaganda and proselytizing teams, and blocking attempts by the Viet Cong to regroup. Phu Vang IV, conducted during December and January, was a combined cordon and search of the Phu Vang, Huong Thuy, and Phu Thu Districts by the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry; elements of the 54th ARVN Regiment; Regional Forces; and patrol units of Task Force Clearwater, which thwarted attempts by the VC to reenter the coastal area. Seventy-five of the enemy were killed and 35 infrastructure members were captured. Ambush operations in Phu Loc District, particularly in the vicinity of the Song Truoi, during January, severely restricted attempts by the *4th* and *5th NVA Regiments* and VC local forces to gain provisions, and to propagandize the area.

Just north of the Hai Van Pass, which separated northern and southern I Corps, elements of the 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry, and the 1st and 2d Battalions, 327th Infantry, initiated Platte Canyon on 6 January, a reconnaissance-in-force operation in the vicinity of the Ruong Ruong Valley. This portion of southern Thua Thien had long been considered the traditional location of the *4th NVA Regiment*. Rain and low-hanging clouds, typical of the northeast winter monsoon season, hampered initial operations, but the three battalions pushed on against moderate resistance as here too the enemy elected to disengage

and avoid decisive combat. One large staging area was located and destroyed by reconnaissance elements, along with miscellaneous enemy equipment and ammunition.

Certain signs pointed to the likelihood that an offensive effort was brewing north of the Hai Van Pass as the Vietnamese Lunar New Year season approached. The evidence was strong that major elements of the *6th* and *9th NVA Regiments* were attempting to work their way eastward through the A Shau Valley. Enemy activity in Base Area 611, straddling the border between Laos and South Vietnam, had gradually increased through the end of 1968, and continued to provide evidence that the North Vietnamese were moving personnel and supplies toward the Vietnamese border in large numbers. Then, too, the NVA were active along the DMZ, although losing materiel nearly as fast as it could be positioned forward. Also, many of the supply and ammunition caches uncovered were arranged in temporary or makeshift facilities, which suggested ready accessibility for further transport in support of offensive operations. Finally, several caches were discovered in areas recently checked and found "clean," pointing to an intensification of efforts to push ammunition and supplies forward.

Even though the enemy's forward supply areas had been disrupted, the *4th* and *5th NVA Regiments* forced out of their traditional forward operating areas, and the VC local force and infrastructure restricted along the coastal lowlands, it seemed apparent that the NVA intended an offensive of some kind in the near future. A victory, even against one or more limited objectives of minor or temporary tactical value, could have significant impact upon the civilian population, and a more far-reaching effect upon bargaining positions at the ongoing Paris Peace Talks. The enemy's jungle logistics system therefore would have to be destroyed before it could be used.¹⁸

CHAPTER 3

The Spring Offensive Preempted

Strike into the Da Krong—A Phased Operation—Phase I—Backyard Cleanup

Strike into the Da Krong

With the beginning of the new year, Vietnamese border areas again became the focal point of allied concern about enemy activity in northern I Corps. From various intelligence sources it was learned that North Vietnamese Army engineer units, inactive for several months, had reopened a number of major infiltration routes, among them Route 922 which parallels the Laotian border and then enters Vietnam south of the Song Da Krong Valley, becoming Route 548. Reports also indicated a dramatic surge in vehicular traffic; the enemy again was attempting to stick his logistics nose into South Vietnam. The number of trucks traveling south along 922 and then east on 548 doubled in early January—Marine and Air Force reconnaissance and attack aircraft at times sighted more than 1,000 trucks a day. Allied air interdiction efforts successfully closed a number of choke points on both roads, but only for short periods as enemy engineers quickly repaired the damage.

North Vietnamese determination to maintain and defend Routes 922 and 548 also was evident as the volume of antiaircraft fire increased during the same period. Friendly aircraft on armed reconnaissance, interdiction, and direct support missions reported heavy 12.7mm, 25mm, and 37mm fire with airbursts as high as 16,000 feet.¹ The only reported loss was an A-6 "Intruder" from Marine All Weather Attack Squadron (VMA(AW)) 242, which was shot down by 37mm antiaircraft over the northern A Shau Valley on the night of 17 January. The squadron conducted both visual and electronic searches, but the plane and its pilot and navigator were not found.²

Main enemy forces in the area were tentatively identified as elements of the *6th NVA Regiment*, *9th NVA Regiment*, *65th Artillery Regiment*, and the *83d Engineer Regiment*—largely support and replacement troops. Intelligence reports also noted that these units, which recently had crossed over from Base Area 611 in Laos, were stockpiling materiel, and then attempting to work their way eastward through the Da Krong and A Shau Valleys to Base Area 101 southwest of Quang Tri and Base Area 114, west of Hue.³

These recent developments in enemy activity did not go unnoticed at Dong Ha where Major General Raymond G. Davis and his staff at Headquarters, 3d Marine Division, closely monitored all pertinent intelligence information as it became available. When it looked as if the potential enemy threat might become an eventuality, General Davis requested authority from XXIV Corps to conduct an operation in the upper Song Da Krong Valley to block the threat. On 14 January, General Davis ordered Brigadier General Frank E. Garretson, Commanding General, Task Force Hotel, to prepare plans for a regimental-size search and clear operation in the Da Krong, scheduled to take place "as soon as practicable after 22 January, on order."⁴ The following day, the 9th and its supporting 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, then conducting a similar operation (Dawson River West) near the Laotian border west of Khe Sanh and north of Lang Vei, were put on alert by General Garretson, who requested that the regiment submit a detailed plan of operation for approval prior to D-Day.⁵

At this time, Colonel Barrow's 9th Marines was the division's "swing" regiment; it could be used at any time or place as the situation dictated. As such, it operated under the direct orders of General Davis even though the regiment was under the control of Task Force Hotel. "It was a strange sort of a relationship," Barrow remembered, "I was under his [Garretson's] OpCon [operational control], but most of what the relationship was, . . . was to support me with whatever Task Force Hotel and Vandegrift Combat Base could provide" in terms of supplies. "I got most of my orders, if you will, directly from General Davis."⁶

Except for information gleaned from agent reports and aerial reconnaissance photographs, little was known about the upper Song Da Krong Valley. Surrounded by high mountains broken by a number of sharp protruding ridgelines and bisected by the meandering Da Krong, the valley was located in the remote southwest corner of Quang Tri Province, 62 kilometers west of Hue and 48 kilometers southwest of Quang Tri. Several kilometers further south lay the A Shau Valley. Between the two, and dominating both, were two large hill masses: Tam Boi (Hill 1224) and Co A



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Aerial photograph of the Da Krong Valley with the Song Da Krong in the foreground, paralleling Route 922, one of the enemy's major supply routes from Laos into Vietnam.

Nong (Hill 1228), commonly known as Tiger Mountain. Co Ka Leuye, a razorback ridge 1,500 meters high and 3,500 meters long, sitting astride the Laotian border, formed the valley's western boundary. Vegetation in the area varied, consisting of head-high elephant grass mixed with brushwood west of the river, and rugged triple-canopied jungle in the eastern half of the valley. South of the river, which ran east to west and then abruptly turned north, the area was stripped of much of its natural ground cover by frequent allied air and artillery bombardment.

During the final months of the northwest winter monsoon, January to March, temperatures in the valley were generally chilly compared to the 100-degree temperatures of the lowlands, rarely rising above 71 degrees or falling below 51 degrees. Skies were overcast with light drizzle or occasional thunderstorms, but no significant rainfall was recorded. As a result, the mountains were continually shrouded in clouds while the valleys and numerous ravines were blanketed with heavy fog.

A Phased Operation

Planning for the Da Krong operation, codenamed Dawson River South, began in earnest even before the 9th Marines returned to Vandegrift Combat Base from Dawson River West. Colonel Barrow made several

visual reconnaissance flights over the objective area with his battalion commanders, staff, and the direct support artillery battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Scoppa, in order to select appropriate sites for fire support bases.⁷ In extensive discussions which followed there emerged a number of factors which would bear heavily upon the operation's concept, execution, and eventual success. Of primary importance was intelligence. The 3d Marine Division warning order stated simply: "Intelligence agencies indicate considerable enemy activity in the subject area." No concrete information was provided as to exact enemy strength, location, or composition, other than the existence of antiaircraft artillery, which Barrow noted, "was a tip-off that they were protecting something."⁸ The effect was to urge prudence. Instead of simultaneous heliborne assaults over a wide area, a phased operation requiring strong fire support base defense, extensive infantry patrols, and a reliable intelligence system designed to locate enemy antiaircraft and artillery positions was decided upon.

A second factor was time. General Davis had expressed a desire to have maximum forces available in critical areas of Quang Tri Province during *Tết*, which was to begin 17 February. Since the operation, therefore, was limited to approximately 24 days, a mini-



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Col Robert H. Barrow, Commanding Officer, 9th Marines, led the regiment in the assault into the Da Krong Valley and enemy Base Area 611 beyond.

mum force of three infantry battalions and three 105mm howitzer batteries with 155mm support would be necessary; anything less would severely restrict the regiment's ability to conduct the operation and meet Davis' *Tet* deadline. Distance and weather were likewise viewed as limiting factors. Operating 50 kilometers from the nearest Marine combat base and logistical supply point, requests for resupply, reinforcements, medical evacuations, and air support would be delayed, 45 to 60 minutes for helicopters and 30 to 45 minutes for fixed-wing aircraft. Air operations would be hindered further by weather, at best unpredictable during the final months of the northwest monsoon.⁹

What emerged after five days of discussions, briefings, and frequent liaison with all participating or supporting echelons, including Headquarters, XXIV Corps, was a phased operation involving the step-by-step deployment of three infantry battalions protect-

ed by overlapping artillery fans, all requiring a minimum of helicopter support. The first phase was to consist of getting the regiment and its direct support artillery battalion into the area of operations and establishing fire bases within eight kilometers of each other to support the scheme of maneuver. The second phase was to include extensive patrolling around the fire support bases and the alignment of forces prior to launching into the target area. The final phase was visualized as a conventional three-battalion attack into the objective area. During this critical phase the regiment would depart from the highly mobile concept of operations, so successful in the past, and make the final move overland, securing ground and permitting helicopter resupply and support over an area already cleared of enemy forces, calming fears voiced by representatives of the 1st Wing. Aircraft and troop losses due to expected heavy antiaircraft defenses in the target area therefore would be reduced.¹⁰ The 2d ARVN Regiment and the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) were to conduct supporting operations east and southeast of the Dawson River South area of operations. As in the past, a high degree of flexibility was built into the plan of operations so as to permit a refocusing of effort should either allied or enemy situations change.¹¹

The entire concept of operations required the close coordination of Marine supporting arms. Fixed-wing aircraft based at Da Nang and Chu Lai were to provide landing zone preparations and close air support. Colonel Walter Sienko's Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 39 at Quang Tri, augmented by Marine Aircraft Group 36 at Phu Bai under Colonel Bruce J. Matheson, was to furnish helicopter support. The direct air support center (DASC), collocated with the 9th Marines' fire support coordination center (FSCC) at Vandegrift, was to control all aircraft. As the operation progressed, the FSCC and a DASC subunit were to move with the regiment into the operational area. The six firing batteries (three 105mm, two provisional 155mm, and one 4.2-inch mortar) of the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines (Reinforced), were to be deployed at eight kilometer intervals throughout the area of operations. A battery of Army 175mm guns from the 1st Battalion, 83d Artillery at Fire Support Base Jack, west of Hue, was to provide long-range support.¹²

The operational plan further provided that the logistic support area (LSA) at Vandegrift be designated the primary resupply point for all classes of equipment. Quang Tri Combat Base and the 3d Brigade,

101st Airborne's Camp Evans, north of Hue, were to be used as alternate or emergency resupply points in case of bad weather, and would be stocked with an additional 6,200 rounds of 105mm, 155mm, and 4.2-inch mortar shells.¹³ Marines themselves were to carry an extra day's long-range patrol ration, plus twice the standard load of dry cell batteries and ammunition.¹⁴

Phase I

The first stage of the movement into the area of operations was to open three previously established fire support bases which stretched southward from Vandegrift. On 18 January units of Lieutenant Colonel Elliott R. Laine, Jr.'s 3d Battalion, 9th Marines resecured FSB Henderson, eight kilometers southwest of Ca Lu, in conjunction with a brief operation in the Ba Long Valley. This operation was a natural corollary to the base security mission picked up by the 9th Marines as it returned to Vandegrift from Dawson River West. On the 20th, Company L, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines reopened FSB Tun Tavern, unoccupied since early December 1968, after a team from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion checked for mines and boobytraps.

Battery D, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines occupied reconstructed artillery positions later the same day, and began shelling FSB Shiloh, another eight kilometers south.

Shortly after Marine air prepped Shiloh on the 21st, Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines occupied the fire base. Insertion of the artillery was delayed due to a fuze malfunction on one 750-pound bomb; the bomb detonated on impact instead of above ground, wiping out two previously constructed 105mm howitzer parapets, half of a third, and two ammunition berms. To repair the damage required seven hours of bulldozer work. With the reoccupation of Shiloh by two batteries of the 12th Marines, a forward LSA was established on the site and stocked with 5,000 rounds of artillery ammunition, and a 10-day supply of rations and batteries for an infantry battalion.

Shiloh turned out to be a "vacation land" for the Marines of Company A who were assigned the mission of providing security for the two artillery batteries. In addition to the normal patrols, as Lieutenant Colonel Wesley L. Fox, then a first lieutenant and com-

Infantrymen of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines relax while waiting for helicopter transport at Vandegrift Combat Base prior to jumping off on operations in the Da Krong.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192763-B



pany commander, later remembered, "a platoon a day went off of the hill to the small river at the foot . . . for swimming and fishing. Swimming and lying in the sun on the nice sand bar were great, but the real treat was the fish provided by the fishing expedition. The platoons would wind up their day at the river by throwing grenades in the deep holes and simply wading out and picking up the fish that floated to the top." Throughout the remaining days of the operation, during which the company would experience a number of heavy firefights, shortages of both water and rations, and exhaustive patrols, Fox continued, "Marines were heard to talk about the good old days back on Shiloh."¹⁵

With Henderson, Tun Tavern, and Shiloh reoccupied, the 9th Marines was now poised to launch attacks into the new area of operations. On the morning of 22 January, four companies of Lieutenant Colonel George C. Fox's 2d Battalion lifted off from Vandegrift with a two-fold mission: Companies E and H were to assault a 600-meter hilltop about eight kilometers south-southeast of Shiloh, while Companies F and G would secure a landing zone, Dallas, five kilometers beyond to the southwest. Except for scattered small arms fire the landings of Companies E and H went unopposed, and work on the fire support base, named Razor, began immediately.*

Razor was similar to other bases constructed by the 9th Marines' infantry, artillery, and engineer team during the previous eight months of mountain warfare, but technically more difficult. Trees measuring three to four feet in diameter—the largest encountered—had to be cleared, a job which posed major problems for the inexperienced Marines of Company H. According to Captain David F. Winecoff, commanding officer of the company:

We went in with . . . enough power saws and axes to do the job if we had the experienced people to work these things. But, I found out that there are very few people in Hotel Company, and we were the ax swingers, that knew how to swing an ax properly, and we immediately proceeded to bust about 50 to 60 percent of our axes . . . It was only through the cooperation of the engineers and all hands concerned in Hotel Company [that] with the power saws and

the limited amount of axes that we got . . . Fire Support Base Razor opened up in time . . . It was quite a feat.¹⁶

Winecoff's Marines cleared the trees, but the gentle slope on one side coupled with two hummocks on the flanks proved troublesome, and light bulldozers were brought in by helicopter to widen the landing zone and build gun pits and ammunition berms.

In the rapid buildup which followed, CH-46 "Sea Knight" helicopters, under the control of the wing DASC and the protective umbrella of gunships and observation aircraft, brought 1,544 Marines and 46 tons of cargo into the landing zone. By the evening of 23 January, a battery of 105mm howitzers was in place. The following day, the regimental command group displaced to Razor and occupied the gently sloping finger on the fire base's northwestern edge. The 2d Battalion, 12th Marines' command and fire control groups followed a short time later. Direction of the FDC and FSCC was then passed from Vandegrift to Razor without loss of continuity or centralized fire control. Six days after the introduction of Laine's 3d Battalion, the regiment was well into the zone of action.

On the morning of the 25th, after heavy air strikes, Laine's battalion assaulted three landing zones atop Ca Ka Va, a 1,100-meter-long razorback ridgeline, 6,000 meters south-southwest of FSB Razor. A short time later an artillery advance party and a team of engineers helilifted into the landing zones and began construction of what was to become FSB Cunningham, named for the first Marine aviator, Lieutenant Alfred A. Cunningham. From an artillery standpoint, Cunningham was ideal. Being at the center of the planned operational area and large enough to accommodate an integrated battalion position, it represented a simple solution to fire support requirements and coordination. As for the 9th Marines, its 11-kilometer artillery fan extended south and southwest almost to the limit of the area of operations.

Within the next four days the regimental command group and five artillery batteries moved into position on Cunningham. Mortar and D Batteries, the former from Vandegrift and the latter from Tun Tavern, displaced by sunset on the 25th. The 1st and 3d Provisional 155mm Howitzer Batteries helilifted in on 28 January from Ca Lu and Shiloh, respectively. When Battery E displaced from Shiloh to Cunningham the following day, the artillery movement into the Da Krong Valley was complete.

Soon after Cunningham opened, a small regimental forward logistical support area, capable of resupplying eight rifle companies with rations, water,

*The first fire support base established in the area of operations was named by Colonel Barrow in honor of General Davis. "Razor" was the nickname given Davis by Major General James M. Master, Sr., when both served on Okinawa in the early 60s: "the razor cuts to the root of problems." (Gen Raymond G. Davis, Comments on draft ms, Aug86 [Vietnam 69 Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.])



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193044

A CH-53 Sea Stallion lands supplies and ammunition at Fire Support Base Razor shortly after the mountaintop was secured by members of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines.

batteries, and small arms ammunition on a daily basis, was established. A tactical logistical group (Tac Log), used primarily in amphibious operations, also was established, enabling the supply officer to work closely with the regimental commander, the operations officer, and the air liaison officer. As Major Charles G. Bryan, the regimental S-4, noted: "The procedure permitted the establishment of realistic priorities to minimize interference with tactical operations and also to ensure maximum utilization of available helicopter assets. And it further provided for a more effective control and coordination of resupply operations." The tactical logistical group was set up "with an administrative Tac Log net from each battalion with the logistics requirements being passed through the regiment; the regiment would then pass these logistic requirements to the personnel in the rear at Vandegrift who would ensure that these supplies were promptly staged on the LSA and lifted to the field."¹⁷ This technique would prove invaluable as the regiment moved into the second phase of the operation, now called Dewey Canyon.*

Backyard Cleanup

Following the rapid movement of the regiment into the area of operations, companies of the 2d and 3d

Battalions moved out from Razor and Cunningham on the 24th and 25th, initiating Phase II. Their mission was to clear the area around the two fire support bases, secure the flanks, and then gradually move into position along the Da Krong's east-west axis, designated Phase Line Red, for Phase III. This placed the 3d Battalion on the eastern flank and the 2d Battalion on the western flank near the Laotian border. The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel George W. Smith, would be introduced into the middle once the two battalions were in place. Among the critical second phase objectives were: the seizure of the Co Ka Leuye ridgeline, assigned to Company G; the construction of FSB Erskine, four kilometers southwest of Cunningham, by Company F; and the occupation of Landing Zones Lightning and Tornado, located four kilometers northeast of Cunningham, by Company K.

Patrolling 2,000 to 3,000 meters apart, the two battalions encountered screening forces of major enemy units thought to be operating further south. Engagements with single NVA soldiers or small bands of support troops were commonplace, and the ensuing firefights short. On 25 January, one such contact led to the discovery of a sophisticated four-strand communications wire by Company M. Running from Laos into Base Area 101 to the east, the line was strung between tree-mounted porcelain insulators and well concealed by overhead cover. A five-man special Marine and Army intelligence team, which had accompanied the Marines, tapped the wire and eventually broke the

*After a majority of the regiment was deployed, and the area of operations expanded, the operational codename was changed from Dawson River South to Dewey Canyon. However, Dawson River South remained in effect for those elements of the 9th Marines still at Fire Support Bases Tun Tavern and Henderson.

NVA code, but no information was provided the 3d Battalion as it was "presumed to be of strategic rather than tactical value," noted Lieutenant Colonel Laine.¹⁸

Another significant find during the first stage of Phase II was the *88th NVA Field Hospital*. Discovered by Company F, 2d Battalion, near the Song Da Krong, the complex consisted of eight large permanent buildings capable of accommodating 150 to 160 patients. A detailed search revealed large quantities of Russian-made stainless steel surgical instruments, antibiotics, foodstuffs, and evidence that the area had been evacuated the previous day.¹⁹

Company G, under Captain Daniel A. Hitzelberger, launched its attack on Co Ka Leuye (Hill 1175) the afternoon of 31 January from LZ Dallas. After a short skirmish with a small group of NVA soldiers who sought to draw it into an ambush at sunset, the company crossed a tributary of the Da Krong and advanced 500 meters up the mountain before settling in for the night. The following morning the Marines continued their climb, roping up sheer rock cliffs and traversing slopes with grades averaging 65 to 75 degrees. As the day progressed, the weather began to deteriorate, adding yet another obstacle. Heavy rains alternated with drizzle and dense fog, reducing the hard, red Viet-

namese soil to mud, visibility to 25 meters, and the ceiling to zero. Despite weather and terrain problems, Company G continued the climb toward the objective.

As Hitzelberger's company moved up Co Ka Leuye, the two other regimental objectives were taken. Company F secured the ground for Erskine on 1 February, but was prevented from developing the fire support base by the same bad weather hampering Company G's movement. Four kilometers east of Cunningham, Company K secured a landing zone and began construction of FSB Lightning. Within hours of completion, the 1st and 2d Battalions, 2d ARVN Regiment, plus the 1st Battalion, 62d Artillery Regiment (ARVN) lifted into the fire support base just before inclement weather halted all helicopter operations.

Predictably, enemy-initiated attacks increased during this period of bad weather. On 2 February, FSB Cunningham received approximately 30 to 40 rounds from one or more enemy 122mm field guns located on or near the border. Although one of the 1st Provisional Battery's 155mm howitzers was temporarily disabled by a near hit, and the 3d Provisional Battery's fire direction center was put out of action by a direct hit, the batteries maintained uninterrupted counter-battery fire. The 2d Battalion, 12th Marines sustained

Two Marine UH-1E (Huey) helicopters touch down at the operation's main fire support and logistic base, Cunningham, bringing in additional supplies and personnel in support of the 9th Marines and artillery batteries of the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192655





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192844

Despite rugged terrain and heavy jungle growth, infantrymen of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines struggle up one of the many ridges in the area of operations.

a total of five killed and an equal number of wounded. Subsequent crater analysis and aerial sightings indicated that the enemy guns were in Laos just beyond the maximum range of the battalion's 155mm howitzers. The Army's 175 guns, located along the coast, proved inaccurate but were used to harass. Therefore the only means of delivering effective counterbattery was by air. If the guns could be visually located, they could be destroyed. However, it soon became apparent that if an aerial observer (AO) remained on station for any length of time, all enemy fire would cease. Therefore, as Barrow later noted, "counterbattery was a simple thing of always having an AO up."²⁹ The fire support base continued to receive enemy incoming throughout the operation at sporadic but frequent intervals, notably when the observers left the area, even for short periods.

By the 3d, after four days of bad weather, Colonel Barrow had to make a decision. Should present posi-

tions be held? Had the regiment overextended itself by placing Company G on Co Ka Leuye? With no relief in sight and helicopter resupply and medical evacuations halted throughout the area, Barrow instructed the 2d and 3d Battalions to pull in their companies and hold them close to areas from which they could be easily supported. The decision proved to be a wise one, since Razor and Cunningham were well-stocked with rations and small arms ammunition. Artillery ammunition, however, was in short supply. The 2d Battalion, 12th Marines had attempted to stock extra shells, but the scarcity of heavy lift helicopters (Marine CH-53s and Army CH-47s), and the weather made it impossible to achieve the initial stockage objectives. Without the reserve, artillery missions had to be reduced. For the first 10 days of February, the battalion fired 6,078 rounds, assisting only engaged units.

Except for Company G, 2d Battalion, all rifle companies assumed a modified defensive position or were quickly moving into one by 4 February: Company L was on Cunningham, while I, K, and M were close by; Company H was on Razor; Company F was on Erskine; and Company E was at LZ Dallas. On the morning of the 5th, Hitzelberger's company began retracing its steps:

As we came down off of 1175 my point element, which was from the 3d Platoon, observed three NVA off to the right; however, because of the contacts we had the previous day we decided to check out the area a little bit further. So I held the column in place and allowed the point fire team to go out to see if there was any more forces there or take the three NVA if they could. Our point then came under fire.²¹

From what Captain Hitzelberger was able to piece together, the company had been drawn into a classical U- or V-shaped enemy ambush.

The point fire team soon found itself pinned down in the midst of approximately 30 NVA troops scattered in low-lying bunkers and well-camouflaged among rocks and trees. Silhouetted against the sky if it attempted to withdraw, the team waited until the rest of the 3d Platoon was brought up. The 2d Platoon was then moved to the left, and as it started to sweep through the enemy position, came under a hail of automatic weapons and rocket propelled grenade (RPG) fire. With the 2d and 3d Platoons stopped, Hitzelberger decided to commit the 1st by swinging it further to the left and through a small ravine, flanking the enemy. By this maneuver, the 3d Platoon was able to break through and force the NVA to withdraw. The company then pushed through the ambush site to a

communications line where it consolidated its position. A cursory check of the immediate area revealed two enemy bodies and several blood trails. Five Marines were killed and 18 wounded. Among those who gave their lives during the battle was fire team leader Lance Corporal Thomas P. Noonan, Jr., of Brooklyn, New York, who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his daring rescue of a seriously wounded fellow Marine.

With 30 minutes to reorganize for fear of a second attack, there was only time enough to destroy excess equipment and rig stretchers. At 1730, after putting out a strong rear guard and plotting artillery concentrations along the proposed route, the company moved down the ridge. The pace was slow and rest breaks frequent, as half the company was either assisting the walking wounded or carrying stretchers. At 0200 the following morning, Hitzelberger decided to stop and settle in for the night even though the company was split because of a treacherous slope.

Early the next day, the company consolidated and began its trek toward a predetermined rendezvous with a relief platoon from Company E. The terrain, as before, proved to be an obstacle. "At this time the stretcher cases were moving up and down slopes in excess of 70 degrees," reported Captain Hitzelberger, "we had to use six, eight and, at times, ten men to carry a stretcher and it would take us over 30 minutes to move one stretcher case over one bad area."²² At 1400, the company paused and then began what was to be the most difficult part of its descent. During the next several hours, Marines roped the stretchers and wounded down the face of a rocky cliff without incident. At the bottom the company linked up with the relief platoon which had brought out medical supplies and the first rations the Marines had had in three days. For the next 36 hours, the company wound its way down Hill 1175 toward the river. Once on the Da Krong, Marine aircrews made a heroic effort to extract the most seriously wounded. In dense fog, two medical evacuation helicopters from HMM-161 flew south up the Da Krong, using the river as their guide. Without Huey gunships for cover, and after having been fired on from the high ground during their approach, the two CH-46 helicopters landed, picked up the casualties, and returned to Vandegrift.

On the 8th, Company G returned to LZ Dallas. The ordeal, as Lieutenant Colonel George C. Fox later noted, "was a tremendous performance in leadership and fire discipline . . . I went out and talked to those



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Capt Daniel A. Hitzelberger, right, and GySgt Charles A. Baker led the Marines of Company G off Co Ka Leuye ridgeline during an extended period of bad weather and heavy fighting when it was impossible to reinforce and resupply the company by helicopter.

young Marines as they came in; every last one of them. They were smiling and laughing. Their clothes were torn, and in some cases completely off of them, but they were ready for a fight."²³

The two ARVN battalions on FSB Lightning experienced a somewhat similar problem. As the weather closed in on 1 February the battalions' direct support artillery battery and remaining supplies were in the process of being inserted. By the time all helicopter operations halted, only one of the six 105mm howitzers and 400 rounds of ammunition had been delivered. The battalions themselves carried only the basic allowance supplied to each infantryman. With conventional resupply out of the question, it was decided to attempt a helicopter-parachute drop by directing two CH-46s from HMM-161 over the target with the assistance of the Vandegrift air support radar team (ASRT).^{*} Both drops landed within 100 meters of the ARVN position, even though the team's radar equipment was operating beyond its normal range.

From 5 to 8 February, Marine fixed-wing KC-130s made additional ASRT-controlled drops adjacent to Marine positions. Although the "Hercules" could drop greater quantities of supplies, the drops proved to be less accurate, and the percentage of loads recovered fell from 80 to 66. These initial experiences led to a

^{*}The ASRT employed a radar-course-directing central computer which consisted of a precision radar and associated computer equipment designed to accurately position aircraft without visual reference to the earth's surface.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Using a winch and cable, aircrewmen from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 242 hoist a wounded Marine through jungle canopy into a hovering CH-46.

refinement of the Vandegrift facilities and the installation of a second ASRT team at Cunningham on 26 February.²⁴ Working together, they provided extended radar coverage, increasing the accuracy of subsequent resupply drops and the regiment's counterbattery capability during periods of darkness and inclement weather.

Another innovation that paid high dividends concerned the handling of casualties in the field when poor weather conditions precluded helicopter medical evacuations. In November 1968, the regimental and three battalion surgeons had developed and fabricated a helicopter-transportable aid station, capable of providing maximum lifesaving care as field conditions would allow. One such aid station accompanied the 9th Marines to Cunningham and was placed into full operation soon after the fire support base opened. During the first week of February, when the weather would not permit helicopter evacuation of casualties, the Cunningham station proved invaluable in the number of lives saved.

Nine days of bad weather cost the regiment its momentum. They also permitted the enemy, who by this time had determined the purpose and strength of the Marine attack, to prepare and fortify his defenses. By 10 February, the weather cleared sufficiently for helicopters to move elements of the 1st Battalion from Vandegrift and Shiloh to FSB Erskine, and Battery F from Razor to Erskine. With all battalions in place, the stage was now set for the southward drive across the Da Krong.

CHAPTER 4

The Raid into Laos

*Across the Da Krong—The NVA Retaliates—Ambush Along 922—Heavy Fighting
Back Into Laos—Persistent Problems—Phased Retraction—Laos: Repercussions*

Across the Da Krong

The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines crossed the Song Da Krong early on the morning of 11 February, initiating Phase III of Operation Dewey Canyon. The 1st and 2d Battalions followed the next day. According to the concept of operations, each battalion was given a zone of action approximately five kilometers wide, and an objective about eight kilometers south southwest of the point of departure. To the east, the 3d Battalion was to attack along ridgelines 2,000 meters apart, with one company securing Hill 1228 (Tiger Mountain), and two companies taking Hill 1224 (Tam Boi). The 1st Battalion was to advance over two parallel ridgelines further west, converging on a single objective astride the Laotian border. On the regiment's western flank, the 2d Battalion was to attack through a broad valley with secondary assaults on the ridges to the east. The battalion's final objective also lay on the South Vietnamese-Laotian border.

Tactically, Colonel Barrow divided each battalion: two companies attacking along parallel ridgelines with two companies in trace. The lead company was to attack and if heavily engaged, the company in trace, or its platoons, was to act as the maneuver element, assisting the attacking company and securing a landing zone for resupply and medical evacuation, if necessary. When the situation permitted, the company in trace would assume the lead and the company in the attack would fall back. The scheme of movement, according to Barrow, "was masterfully done." "Battalion commanders went right along with [their troops], no jeeps obviously, or any of that nonsense."¹

As each battalion moved across Phase Line Red, it made strong contact. Three companies of Lieutenant Colonel George W. Smith's 1st Battalion immediately encountered a sizeable enemy force which had apparently been positioned to mount a ground attack against FSB Erskine. Assisted by well-aimed fire of five artillery batteries, the Marines forced the enemy to withdraw, leaving behind 25 killed in addition to numerous weapons, packs, and explosives. Meanwhile, further east, Company M threw back a mortar-supported ground attack by an estimated NVA pla-

toon, killing 18 while losing two Marines. After fighting a day-long series of minor skirmishes on the 13th, Company C collided with a mortar- and machine gun-reinforced enemy platoon, deployed on a hilltop in a line defense. The ensuing Marine assault forced the enemy from the hill, killing 12 NVA. That night, the Marines employed mortars and artillery to break an enemy effort to retake the hill, claiming an additional 12 NVA during the battle. Company C losses for the day were two killed and 21 wounded.

The opposition the Marines found themselves up against was determined and formidable. Enemy forces, unlike those encountered during Phase II, were well-disciplined and remained in their bunkers or fighting holes until overrun or destroyed. At night they would probe or attack Marine company positions using squads or platoons. Snipers frequently were tied in trees, and would fire at close range or wait until Marines were directly beneath and drop grenades. These suicide techniques seemed to be designed for only one purpose: to prevent or delay the Marines' advance on Route 922, and the important supply area and artillery positions which encircled it.

The enemy's tough resistance achieved little success. Employing a heavy volume of accurate artillery fire and air strikes, the three battalions advanced steadily southward. Attesting to the performance of Marine firepower, two 122mm field guns were destroyed on 15 February—one by air, the other by artillery. Marine scout-sniper teams also contributed to the success of the attack by shooting their NVA counterparts out of trees on several occasions.

Sharp clashes across the entire front marked the action on 16 and 17 February. On the left flank, Company K, 3d Battalion, moving toward an intermediate objective, was attacked from the front and rear by an unknown number of North Vietnamese troops. Using all available supporting arms to silence enemy mortar and rocket propelled grenade fire, the company killed 17 and seized a number of weapons in taking the position, while sustaining few casualties. On the 17th, while advancing along the right flank, Company G, 2d Battalion exchanged small arms and supporting fire with an enemy company in a daylong running



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800561

Riflemen of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines cross the shallow Song Da Krong below FSB Cunningham, beginning the long-awaited-for penetration of enemy Base Area 611.

battle. Thirty-nine NVA lost their lives, while the Marines counted five killed and 12 wounded.

The NVA Retaliates

In observance of *Tet*, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong unilaterally declared a weeklong truce. The allied countrywide 24-hour truce went into effect at 1800 on 16 February. But as Major Joseph B. Knotts, the regimental operations officer, commented: "out on Dewey Canyon you wouldn't know there was any."² At 0345 the following morning, an enemy sapper platoon supported by a reinforced company launched an attack on FSB Cunningham. Dressed in shorts, skull-caps, and weighted down with explosives, the NVA broke through the defensive wire and dashed toward the center of the fire support base, tossing concussion grenades and satchel charges into every open hole. Although initially caught by surprise, the Marines of Company L, securing the fire support base, quickly organized a drive to clear the base in the face of heavy enemy mortar and recoilless rifle fire.

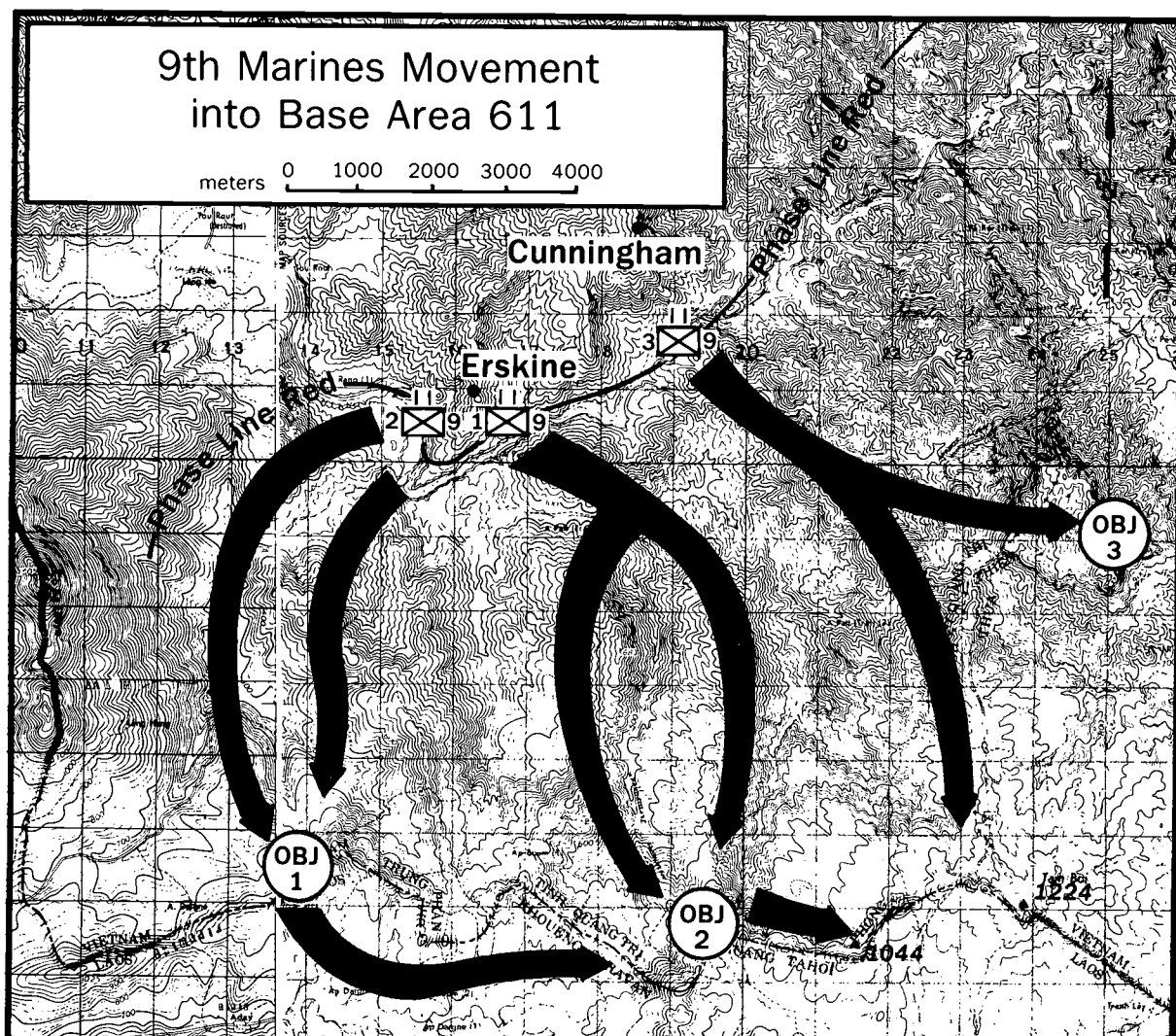
Lieutenant Colonel Scoppa's 2d Battalion, 12th Marines bore the brunt of the attack, suffering major damage within the first minutes; the battalion's fire direction center was put out of action, as was one howitzer. Within 30 minutes, however, the battalion reestablished centralized fire control and batteries continued with their missions. Throughout the night they expended 3,270 rounds on targets of opportunity, suspected assembly areas, and likely escape routes; included among the total were 147 "flechette" and

"beehive" rounds of direct fire. In support, the ARVN 105mm battery on FSB Lightning unleashed reinforcing fires totalling 340 rounds.

A sweep of the base and surrounding hillsides at first light revealed 37 NVA bodies, 13 of which were within the perimeter. A number of individual weapons, grenades, and packs were also located, the latter containing quantities of marijuana and other drugs. The use of narcotics, Second Lieutenant Milton J. Teixeira explained, "made them a lot harder to kill. Not one of the gooks we had inside the perimeter had less than three or four holes in him. Usually it took a grenade or something to stop him completely."³ Four Marines lost their lives and 46 were wounded during the three-hour defense. On the 20th, Companies E, G, and the command group of Lieutenant Colonel James J. McMonagle's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines assumed the mission of providing security for Fire Support Bases Cunningham and Erskine, relieving Companies G and L, which joined their respective battalions in the move southward.⁴

Ambush Along 922

The heaviest fighting of the Da Krong campaign took place from 18 to 22 February, the majority occurring within the sector assigned to Lieutenant Colonel Smith's 1st Battalion. On the morning of the 18th, Company A encountered stiff opposition from an enemy platoon dug into camouflaged, reinforced bunkers on a heavily forested ridgeline, five kilometers southeast of FSB Erskine. Armed with small arms



See Reference Map, Sections 16, 17

and automatic weapons, the enemy "appeared to want to hold their position at all cost."⁵ Preceded by air and artillery strikes, Company A assaulted and overran the position, counting more than 30 NVA dead. The following morning, Company C moved through Company A's lines and continued the attack against the heavily reinforced hilltop emplacement, killing an equal number of NVA. Friendly casualties resulting from the two actions were one killed and 14 wounded.

Pressing the attack through the bunker complex, Company C again made contact during the late afternoon on the 20th, engaging a large enemy force supported by small arms, grenades, and machine gun fire. Two hours later, the Marine assault, assisted by fixed-wing air strikes with napalm drops within 50 meters of the point element, carried the position, killing 71 NVA. Equipment captured included two Russian-

made 122mm field guns, and a five-ton, tracked prime mover.* Employing company rotation tactics, Company A continued the attack through Company C's forward lines and overran yet another enemy emplacement, killing another 17 NVA and seizing a two-and-one-half-ton truck and assorted artillery and antiaircraft ammunition. Marine losses sustained in the two actions were five killed and 28 wounded in Company C, and one killed and two wounded in Company A.

As the attacking forces neared the Laotian border, concern over enemy artillery attacks, protection of the regiment's right flank, and potentially lucrative ene-

*The two 122mm artillery pieces, the largest captured during the Vietnam War, subsequently were evacuated. One of the field guns is on display at the Marine Corps Air-Ground Museum, Quantico, Virginia.

my targets generated plans and requests for the tactical deployment of troops across the international boundary. After discussion at division and with XXIV Corps, Major General Davis forwarded a message to MACV requesting that the Special Operations Group (SOG) expand and redirect ground reconnaissance and exploitation operations, codenamed Prairie Fire, being carried out in the Laotian panhandle, toward Base Area 611.^{6*} MACV approved and quickly implemented the request.⁷ Reacting to the NVA artillery attack of 2 February on FSB Cunningham, Davis had initially requested that the 9th Marines be permitted to enter Laos and destroy the threat: "From the present position of the 9th Marines, a raid by a force of two battalions could be launched quickly and effectively to cut road No. 922 and moving rapidly back to the east, destroy art[illery] forces and other forces and installations which threaten us."⁸

Davis' request was put aside for a period as current rules of engagement did not permit the introduction of a large combat force into Laos for the purpose of conducting what was in essence a secondary search and destroy operation, and which could possibly be viewed as an expansion of the war. The rules did permit United States and other Free World World Forces to "maneuver, while actually engaged and in contact with enemy forces, into Laos as necessary for the preservation of the force," and employ artillery and air strikes on threatening military targets. The rules in no way prohibited commanders from taking the "necessary counteractions against VC/NVA forces in the exercise of self-defense and to defend their units against armed attacks with all means at their disposal."⁹ These exceptions provided the 9th Marines with the justification it needed.

As Barrow's troops moved further south, it became increasingly clear that the enemy was making extensive use of Route 922, either to reinforce or to withdraw his forces. "In either case, interdiction of the road was clearly essential," noted Colonel Barrow. "Efforts by B-52 arc light strikes, fixed-wing attacks, and unobserved artillery had been to no avail; he was continuing to use it. During the day the AOs were reporting fresh vehicle tracks, including tracked vehicle tracks on the road, and as our forces moved fur-

ther south, we could hear vehicles on the road. This was a pretty unacceptable situation, and it cried out for some sort of action to put a stop to it."¹⁰

By 20 February, two companies, E and H, of Lieutenant Colonel Fox's 2d Battalion were on the Laotian border. At least two additional companies were expected within the next 24 hours. As Company H sat on the ridgeline overlooking the border and Route 922 beyond, Marines watched as an enemy convoy composed of truck and tracked vehicles moved slowly in a westerly direction along the road. As Captain David F. Winecoff later reported:

The company, of course, was talking about let's get down on the road and do some ambushing. I don't think they really thought that they were going to let us go over into Laos, . . . I knew if the military had their way we'd be over there in Laos and the company was all up for it . . . With the Paris Peace Talks going on, I wasn't sure what route was going to be taken.¹¹

Winecoff reported the observations and fire missions called, but from "1,700 meters away it is difficult to zero in on movement."¹²

With the information provided by Winecoff's company, and intelligence gathered by SOG teams and 1st Radio Battalion intercepts, indicating that the enemy was evacuating its heavy artillery westward out of the reach of the 9th Marines, Lieutenant General Stilwell revived Davis' initial request. In a message to Lieutenant General Cushman on the 20th, he recommended a limited raid into the heart of enemy Base Area 611 to a maximum depth of five kilometers along a 20-kilometer front. If, however, the proposal was "beyond the realm of political acceptability," he suggested a lesser course of action which would involve the use of a Marine company as an extraction force if SOG reconnaissance teams encountered trouble. According to Stilwell, "this would multiply the number of SOG RT teams which could be deployed simultaneously."¹³ Cushman, in a message to General Abrams later the same day, passed on the suggested courses of action and noted that "while recognizing the political implications of Gen Stilwell's proposals, . . . balanced against the military value of this unique opportunity, I fully endorse both."¹⁴ The matter of an incursion into Laos was now left up to Abrams.

Events in the field, however, moved more rapidly. Company H, on the night of the 20th, again observed heavy truck traffic on Route 922. Winecoff reported the observations, and once again the company directed a number of fire missions on the targets, but with

*The mission of the Special Operations Group's Prairie Fire program provided for crossborder reconnaissance operations into the panhandle of Laos using combined US/RVN forces to locate, interdict, and destroy enemy personnel and equipment on infiltration routes into South Vietnam.

unknown results. The following afternoon, Captain Winecoff received a hand-coded message, the result of several days of planning, from Colonel Barrow directing him to set up a company ambush along Route 922 that evening, with specific instructions to be back in South Vietnam no later than 0630 the next morning.¹⁵ "Hotel Company," reported Barrow, "was in the best position; really the only position to do it,

and the job fell to them."¹⁶ Winecoff immediately requested a 24-hour postponement because of the limited time available and the condition of his men, most of whom had been on patrol since early morning. Barrow denied his request.

With no time to rehearse and little time to plan, Captain Winecoff decided to use only his 1st and 2d Platoons, as the men of the 3d were exhausted after

The advance of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines is halted temporarily by a group of North Vietnamese support troops attempting to protect their supplies and road network.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193159





Marine Corps Historical Collection

One of the 12 captured North Vietnamese Army 122mm field guns. With a range of 14 miles, it was the largest enemy artillery piece captured in Vietnam.

several tiring days of continuous patrol. At 1610, the company command group and the 1st Platoon, reinforced by mortar, forward observer, and machine gun teams, moved out for the 2d Platoon's position at the bottom of the ridge, leaving the 3d as security. Making good time over difficult terrain, they joined the 2d Platoon a little over an hour later, and the 1st passed through the 2d Platoon's position to establish the planned order of march. At 1800, after a meal and a 30-minute forward reconnaissance, the order arrived to execute and Winecoff quickly briefed the company on ambush tactics, signals, and night movement.

Shortly after dark, the company headed toward the road, 900 meters away. Staying off trails and using a creek bed and then a ridge line to minimize noise, the point element reached the small river which paralleled Route 922 at about 2030. Winecoff halted the column and sent his lead platoon commander and the chief scout, an experienced Marine sergeant, forward to find a route across the stream and to select an ambush site. As the company waited, it observed six trucks pass in front of its position; each stopping for a short period to "recon by silence."¹⁷ A tracked

vehicle mounting a spotlight also passed. "It was a very exciting moment for Hotel Company because the spotlight was scanning up and down the river and on the bluff, and it was playing over the lead elements of the company, but we were not spotted. Finally it proceeded on down the road."¹⁸

The two-man reconnaissance team returned around 2215, and after a quick brief, the company moved forward, crossing the river in column formation and then the road. About 35 meters beyond, Winecoff halted the company and set up a hasty linear ambush with the 1st Platoon on the right, and the 2d on the left, and the command group in the center. Within minutes of moving into position, the Marines heard trucks approaching from the west. They passed the word to let the vehicles proceed through the ambush site, as the claymores and flank security were not yet in place. By 0100 in the morning, the ambush was ready.

With the men of Company H about 500 meters inside Laos, Colonel Barrow informed Task Force Hotel of the move, "thinking that even that much of a minor violation might in itself provide a little bit of assurance

Marines move down one of the numerous enemy supply roads which crisscrossed the enemy base area.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



of approval." "There was a little bit of opposition to what we were doing, and much discussion," noted Barrow, "and finally approval came through that, yes, we could do what we were going to do, but the implication clearly was, you had better make it work."¹⁹

While the 9th Marines' staff obtained approval, Winecoff's men waited. The wait was not long. Less than ten minutes after setting up the ambush, a single NVA appeared, aimlessly walking along the road firing his AK47 assault rifle into the brush. Not wanting to "bag one NVA soldier," Winecoff passed the word to let this "dude" walk through the killing zone. Forty minutes later, flank security detected a single truck approaching. Again not wanting to destroy just one vehicle, Winecoff passed the order to let it through, instructing his forward listening post to visually check its contents. As it turned out, the truck carried a load of lumber.

The next half hour was tense for Winecoff's men; nothing moved, but voices could be heard 800 to 1,000 meters off to the right. "I felt," Captain Winecoff noted, "that sooner or later something was going to be coming along into the killing zone."²⁰ The company continued to wait. Meanwhile, a radio request came in from the battalion asking for a status report; they were "afraid that we'd blown it," but Winecoff assured them otherwise. At 0230, the lights of eight trucks suddenly appeared off to the east. All positions were alerted. As the trucks moved closer, stopping now and then to "recon by silence," the men of the ambush braced for action.

Three of the vehicles had already entered the killing zone when the entire column stopped. Fearing that the enemy would detect his ambush, Winecoff detonated his claymore. With a loud roar and a boiling cloud of thick, black smoke, the mine disabled the second truck, killing its three passengers. As the smoke cleared, Winecoff could see that the explosion had also set the first truck afire and forced the third off the road. Small arms and automatic weapons fire poured into the vehicles from the flanks; "everybody had been waiting a long time and the excitement was keen."²¹ Within seconds the forward observer alerted the artillery and rounds bracketed the company position.

After several minutes of unrestricted fire, Winecoff gave the signal to move forward, making sure everything within the ambush site was destroyed. Once on the other side of the road, the company was given "left face," and "we proceeded in column right back in the same direction we came, crossing the river in the exact

area, up the other side, and went about 5 to 600 meters up to a rally point where we . . . hung 'till daylight."²² Later, the company rejoined the 3d Platoon on the ridgeline where it was resupplied and the men given a rest. In addition to the three trucks destroyed, H Company counted eight NVA dead. Not a single Marine had been killed or wounded by enemy fire.

First reports of the ambush to reach the 3d Marine Division were sketchy and based largely on monitored 9th Marines radio traffic. Colonel Martin J. Sexton, 3d Division Chief of Staff, immediately recommended that only XXIV Corps and III MAF be informed of the incident and that no report would be relayed to MACV until Brigadier General Frank E. Garretson, commanding Task Force Hotel, had prepared a "spot report in compliance with directives pertaining to rules of engagement."²³ On being informed of the ambush, Brigadier General George E. Dooley, III MAF Chief of Staff, was elated: "Hit 'm hard! Good news—who knows where the border is anyway?"²⁴

About mid-afternoon on 22 February, a reply to Stilwell's and Cushman's messages of the 20th arrived at III MAF. Responding to their proposals, General Abrams stated emphatically that "all operations in connection with Base Area 611 will be with SOG forces," and that close coordination between Marine units in South Vietnam and SOG teams in Laos was authorized.²⁵ Although an apparent conflict existed between the action of Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, and General Abrams' directive, Garretson solved it by making reference to the appropriate rules of engagement permitting a local commander to exercise the right of self-defense in his report.²⁶ However, larger questions remained. With all three battalions on or just north of the border, and substantial enemy installations and lines of communication directly ahead, what future direction was Operation Dewey Canyon to take? Was the international boundary to remain a permanent barrier to the 9th Marines?

While the ambush itself was dramatic and successful, its real value, according to Colonel Barrow, lay in the leverage it provided to request a continuation of such operations in Laos. "Therefore, the next day I sent a message to higher headquarters stating why we had done what we had done, reiterating the successes achieved, and then my final paragraph made an urgent request for authority to maneuver into Laos as applied from North-South gridline 01 to the North-South [east-west] gridline 02. This generally was about a 2,000 meter extension and included all of Route 922."

Again he stated that his request was based upon the "immediate and constant" enemy threat to his troops and on intelligence which continued to place enemy troops and equipment concentrations in the area. And, noted Barrow, "I put a final comment on my message, which said, quote, 'put another way, my forces should not be here if ground interdiction of Route 922 not authorized.' " ²⁷

Lieutenant General Stilwell would not give up. Adopting Barrow's recommendations, he requested authority from MACV for "a selected advance south to the east-west 02 gridline—a distance not exceeding two kilometers from the border at any point."²⁸ Faced with a *fait accompli*, General Abrams finally approved Stilwell's request on 24 February, but placed restrictions on all public discussion of the Laotian incursion, fearing possible adverse effects on international policy.²⁹ Knowledge of the operation was also to be limited; the American ambassador in Laos, William H. Sullivan, for example, was not informed until the operation was well underway, as was Laotian Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, who when informed, "expressed understanding of the action and said the essential element was to keep the matter secret," but hoped it would be short.³⁰

Heavy Fighting

In the regiment's center, Company A, 1st Battalion, protecting the battalion's left flank, continued to reconnoiter the site of the previous day's contact, and then headed east off the ridge on the morning of 22 February. About 1,000 meters from the battalion command post near Lang Ha on the border, the 1st Platoon encountered an NVA squad in well-positioned bunkers. Under Second Lieutenant George M. Malone, Jr., the platoon quickly overran the position, killing seven while losing one Marine. "At this point," observed First Lieutenant Wesley L. Fox, "it looked like that was all the resistance we had. Everything was quiet, so I radioed up to battalion to send the water details [from Headquarters and Service and C Companies] down to the creek. We were in bad need of water. The helicopters could not get in due to weather, and the battalion was low."³¹ A 20-man detail moved down and as they started to fill canteens, they came under enemy 60mm mortar and machine gun fire. Lieutenant Fox immediately ordered the detail back, reoriented his 1st Platoon toward the south, and moved it forward, beginning the last large engagement of Operation Dewey Canyon.

Pushing through triple-canopied jungle, banana



Courtesy of LtCol Wesley L. Fox
1stLt Wesley L. Fox rests at Company A's position overlooking the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a week after the action for which he would be presented the Medal of Honor.

groves, and dense underbrush, Lieutenant Malone's platoon ran up against a reinforced NVA company in a well-prepared, well-camouflaged, and heavily fortified bunker complex. To the rear, on a high ridgeline, the enemy had emplaced RPGs, machine guns, and mortars. Fox moved up the 3d Platoon and placed it on line with the 1st. When the momentum of the assault faltered, the 2d was then committed through the center of the two attacking platoons. Even though casualties mounted, Lieutenant Fox found he could not use air and artillery support as the company was boxed in by a low ceiling, terrain, and vegetation, and so locked in combat that if he withdrew to use artillery, he would run the risk of incurring additional casualties. Momentum nevertheless had to be maintained.

As the three platoons pressed the attack, the company command group took a direct mortar hit, killing or wounding everyone except the executive officer, First Lieutenant Lee R. Herron, who was given command of the 2d Platoon. Lieutenant Fox, despite his wounds, continued to control the advance.* Finally,

*First Lieutenant Wesley Lee Fox was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions during this engagement.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192685

Infantrymen of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines move up an artillery-scarred slope toward the crest of Tiger Mountain, Hill 1228, one of the regiment's three major objectives.

Company D, which had been ordered to assist, appeared, moving through the banana groves in front of Company A's position. "They had gotten off on the wrong trail and came in behind the enemy position, and then walked into our front." "At this time," noted Lieutenant Fox, "I realized that we had already penetrated the enemy position; we had already pushed through the entire position, and all Delta Company had to do was walk down and help us carry up our wounded."³² Results included 105 NVA killed and 25 automatic weapons captured; the dead, clad in new uniforms, included several officers, all of whom were highly decorated veterans of other campaigns. Marine casualties were heavy: 11 killed and 72 wounded, 54 of whom required evacuation.

Because of Company A's daylong battle, the 1st Battalion reoriented its direction of search eastward, towards Hills 1044 and 1224 (Tam Boi). During the next four days, it moved along Route 548, just north of the border, encountering small groups of enemy personnel and discovering several minor arms caches. On 27 February, while searching the slopes of Hill 1044, Company D stumbled onto one of the largest enemy weapons and munitions caches of the war. "I was walking along the side of a road," Gunnery Ser-

geant Russell A. Latona reported, "and there was a bomb crater there and sticking out of the bomb crater I saw the footpod of a mortar bipod." Alerting the company, he ordered several men to start digging. "They dug down about four or five inches and they found boards. They lifted up the boards and they started digging a hole and this is when we found several weapons."³³ A further check of nearby bunkers and bomb craters revealed that the company had moved into the midst of an NVA supply depot, a storehouse which would eventually yield 629 rifles, 108 crew-served weapons (60 machine guns, 14 mortars, 15 recoilless rifles, and 19 antiaircraft guns), and well over 100 tons of munitions. The next two days were spent inventorying and then destroying the cache.

Meanwhile, on the left flank of the regiment's area of operations, although encountering lighter opposition, Lieutenant Colonel Laine's 3d Battalion gained substantial results. Attacking generally down the trace of Route 922 within South Vietnam, elements of the battalion uncovered numerous enemy facilities containing tons of supplies and equipment. On the 18th, Company L located an NVA cemetery containing 185 bodies, most of whom had been buried in June 1968. On the 21st, Company M found a well-camouflaged

maintenance installation, complete with six repair pits, a bulldozer, a front-end loader, several disassembled engines, and more than three hundred 50-gallon fuel drums. Pushing southward, the battalion, after securing Hill 1228 (Tiger Mountain), began a detailed search of the Tam Boi mountain complex, discovering on the 23d two spiked 122mm field guns, along with a prime mover and assorted artillery, mortar, and small arms ammunition. Further penetration of the Tam Boi complex revealed a headquarters and administrative facility composed of 11 immense tunnels. Carved into solid rock, these 150- to 250-meter-long, cross-connected tunnels contained extensive repair shops, storage facilities, and a "hospital which they had abandoned very rapidly and left one patient on the operating table to die."³⁴ All were capable of withstanding direct hits from air and artillery attacks.

With Tiger Mountain secured, Battery E, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines displaced to the top on 28 February, and established FSB Turnage, named after a former 3d Marine Division commander, General Allen H. Turnage. The fire support base, used the year before by the 1st Cavalry Division, was opened primarily to provide balanced artillery support for further operations of the 3d Battalion in the northeast corner of Thua Thien Province.

Back Into Laos

Within hours of General Abrams' approval, Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines was again instructed to move "back down onto the bloomin' Route 922." According to Captain Winecoff, the men's "morale zoomed way down because the company was extremely tired, [and] we were afraid that we were going to have to go off and leave our supplies . . . This included half a pallet of 60mm mortar ammunition, quite a few C-rations, and of course not the beer; we consumed that."³⁵ But move out they did.

The plan was for Company H, followed by Companies E and F, to move into Laos, and then drive eastward along Route 922, forcing enemy troops into the waiting sights of the 1st and 3d Battalions. In addition, intelligence indicated that the NVA were desperately trying to evacuate their remaining artillery pieces in the face of the other two battalions' push southward. In essence, the direction of the operation was now toward removing the enemy threat to the regiment's right flank.

Once again on the road, Company H, after a six-hour night march, set up another hasty ambush, and at 1100 on the 24th, engaged six unsuspecting NVA

soldiers, killing four. Moving eastward the following day, another 10 were engaged, resulting in eight killed, one 122mm field gun and two 40mm antiaircraft guns captured. Marine losses were two dead and seven wounded. Later the same day, a company patrol was ambushed by an estimated 15 enemy troops in fortified bunkers and fighting holes. Reinforced, the patrol pushed through the enemy position, killing two and capturing a second 122mm gun. Marine casualties were high: three killed and five wounded. Among those who gave their lives was Corporal William D. Morgan, who in a daring dash, directed enemy fire away from two wounded companions, assisting in their rescue. For this action, he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Company H and the battalion "jump" or field command group, continued to move eastward, flanked by Companies E and F. "The thought here," noted Colonel Fox, "was to have a force in position to launch a flank attack quickly were we hit from the rear (west) by major enemy units advancing from deeper in Laos."³⁶ Progress was rapid; too rapid for some: "I felt that if we had been moving slower and had more time to check things out, we probably would have found a heck of a lot more equipment than we did," noted Captain Winecoff.³⁷ As it was, elements of the 2d Battalion did capture over 20 tons of foodstuffs, and thousands of rounds of ammunition, while killing 48 enemy soldiers.

By 1 March, the three companies were within 1,000 meters of the South Vietnamese border, having covered over 5,000 meters in five days against light enemy resistance. Two days later, they helilifted to Vandegrift Combat Base. The battalion, while in Laos, sustained eight killed and 33 wounded, 24 of whom required evacuation. All dead were officially reported to have been killed "near Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam"; no reference was made to Laos for political reasons.

Persistent Problems

While the 9th Marines enjoyed a number of successes it also experienced two critical and persistent problems during the month-long push southward, resupply of units in the field and casualty replacement. Early in the operation it was found that resupplying rifle companies without halting their forward progress or pinpointing their positions was impossible. To make matters worse, once a company was ready to continue its advance after being resupplied, a squad or platoon often had to remain behind to secure transport nets,

water containers, and other items until retrieved. This not only reduced company strength, but unnecessarily exposed the smaller unit to attack. An effort was made to improve this situation through the use of a Helicopter Emergency Lift Pack, designed and fabricated by the 3d Shore Party Battalion. C-rations, ammunition, and other items were placed on wood pallets or bundled in discarded canvas, slung on inexpensive loop-type wire cables, and lifted into the field. Marines were then able to obtain their supplies, dispose of the packaging, and continue the advance with little or no delay.

Initially included among the items of the Emergency Lift Pack were 5-gallon plastic water bottles, which did not supply the need of Marines in the field, and were subject to leakage. Instead of increasing the number of containers, 155mm, 175mm, and 8-inch artillery canisters, each capable of holding approximately 13 gallons of water were substituted, and proved highly successful.³⁸

A number of units sustained moderately high casualties, and, as a result, lost some effectiveness in the movement southward. Although anticipated in early planning, the 9th Marines, because of transport

tation problems, due mostly to weather, was forced to shift personnel already in the field about. Success was achieved, but in most cases units had to operate for several days below the desired strength level before receiving replacements.³⁹

Phased Retraction

By the beginning of March, all the battalions of the 9th Marines had obtained their major objectives. Organized enemy resistance had virtually collapsed; most enemy troops not killed or captured had withdrawn westward, deeper into Laotian sanctuaries. There was scattered activity from small groups of enemy throughout the operational area, but it was apparent that no further significant contacts would occur.

The 9th Marines had successfully interdicted Route 922. It had captured or destroyed thousands of tons of enemy food, medical supplies, and ammunition. The equivalent of two medium artillery batteries (twelve 122mm field guns) and one light battery (four 85mm guns) had been seized, along with prime movers and munition carriers. Enemy underground headquarters, storage facilities, hospitals, and troop billeting areas, as well as his fortified positions, had

Marines inspect and inventory a portion of the tons of captured weapons and ammunition in what would be the largest haul of enemy supplies taken during the war.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800583



been overrun and a significant portion of his antiaircraft potential was located and destroyed. In short, by 1 March, with the exception of mopping up, the 9th Marines had accomplished its mission.

The original concept of operations envisioned a leapfrogging retraction from the area of operations, with each element always under a protective artillery fan—the reverse of the technique used to get the regiment into the area of operations. This movement would have required about 10 battery displacements and, since a reasonable level of artillery ammunition had to be maintained during the leapfrog maneuver, it would have entailed approximately 25 heavy lifts per howitzer battery and five heavy lifts for the mortar battery, not including normal resupply lifts. If good weather prevailed, and helicopters were abundant, the leapfrog retraction would be accomplished in seven days.

As the operation drew to a close, however, several factors dictated a reappraisal of the original retraction plan. First, the weather showed no signs of improving. Second, continuation of the operation throughout the retraction phase would require an initial 100 lifts of artillery ammunition to bring stocks up to appropriate levels. That this level of lift support would not be forthcoming was evident from the daily shortfall of normal ammunition resupply during the last week of February and the first few days of March. For example, the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines required 93 lifts on 1 March to sustain normal artillery operations of which it received 35; the battalion required 94 the following day and only two were received. Part of the discrepancy was due to marginal weather; however, a larger part was due to limited helicopter assets. Finally, the 9th Marines was scheduled to relieve the 3d Marines in the Vandegrift-Rockpile-Route 9-Cam Lo area so that the latter could join Operation Maine Crag, which had already begun.

The retraction plan originally had the 2d Battalion scheduled to lift to Vandegrift on 3 March, followed by the 1st Battalion on the 4th. After the 1st Battalion was out, Battery F and the 1st Provisional Battery, which had been covering the 1st Battalion's sector of the area of operations from FSB Erskine, would displace to Vandegrift, and Company G, 2d Battalion, would close Erskine. On 5 March, the 3d Battalion and Battery E would lift to Vandegrift, leaving one company at FSB Turnage as security for the ARVN 105mm battery remaining there. On 6 March, the 2d ARVN Regiment would retract from its area of operations un-

der cover of its battery on Turnage, and FSB Cunningham would be evacuated with all units going to Vandegrift. Finally, on 7 March, the ARVN battery and the one company from the 3d Battalion would be extracted from Turnage under the cover of fixed-wing aircraft, and the retraction of the regiment would be complete.

The first step in the retraction plan—the retrograde of the 2d Battalion—went as scheduled. Everything thereafter changed. The weather turned from marginal to bad. In addition, before clearing the area of operations, III MAF tasked the 9th Marines with linking up with and extracting SOG forces which had been operating in Laos. A third development was the discovery of additional cache sites in the eastern portion of the operational area which had to be searched.

On 8 March, the 1st Battalion, with its huge cache exploited, began to move overland to Tam Boi. In addition, FSB Erskine was evacuated, with Battery F going to Ca Lu and the 1st Provisional Battery going to Vandegrift. Two plans were then developed, designated A and B, for further operations and the extraction of the remaining forces, both of which hinged on whether or not the 1st Battalion linked up with SOG forces by 1300 on 10 March. If it did, Plan B provided for its extraction that day, followed by the displacement of all artillery on FSB Cunningham to Vandegrift before dark. Then on 11 March, Company K, 3d Battalion, would be extracted from Turnage and moved to Vandegrift under cover of fixed-wing aircraft. Plan A provided for the displacement of Mortar Battery to Tam Boi on 10 March to cover the extraction of the 1st Battalion; for the closing of Cunningham by Company K; and, finally, for the employment of Mortar Battery to cover the closing of Turnage. Eventually, the 9th Marines implemented a modified version of Plan A, which essentially followed the same scheme as the original, but which was changed frequently as weather and other factors dictated.

The weather finally broke sufficiently on 15 March to move Mortar Battery to Tam Boi, and to extract all the artillery and most of the 3d Battalion from Fire Support Base Cunningham.* Control centers established helicopter approach and retirement lanes which permitted all batteries to fire a continuous smoke and mortar suppression program until the last gun lifted

*During the movement of the 3d Battalion to Cunningham, Company M came under intense automatic weapons fire. During the firefight, Private First Class Alfred M. Wilson was killed protecting a fellow Marine from a grenade. For his heroic action, Private Wilson was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

out. During their displacement, batteries on Cunningham fired over 1,000 rounds, including 547 rounds on active missions and 389 rounds of smoke. A small rear echelon left behind was brought out two days later.

Helicopters lifted the 3d Provisional Battery from Cunningham to Dong Ha. Army CH-47 "Chinooks" carried out the move, the first time that heavy-lift Army CH-54 "Skycranes" had not been used to move the 155mm Marine howitzers. Following the departure of the 3d Provisional Battery, Battery D displaced to Vandegrift, as did the 3d Battalion (-). With all batteries except two out of the area of operations, the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines decentralized tactical control of Battery E on Turnage and Mortar Battery on Tam Boi, and moved to Vandegrift. To provide fire support for the 1st Battalion and Company I, 3d Battalion, Battery E was given the mission of direct support of those units, and tactical fire direction of Mortar Battery; the 1st Battalion FSCC was given responsi-

Artillerymen of 2d Battalion, 12th Marines load a 4.2-inch mortar round while covering the withdrawal of the remaining elements of the 9th Marines.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



bility for all fire support coordination within the operational area.

Marginal weather dominated the execution of the withdrawal plan to the finish. Company K and the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines' rear echelon on Cunningham were extracted on the 18th, and the fire support base closed. By this time, the 1st Battalion had joined with SOG forces and was also ready to be extracted, but the weather closed in again, effectively isolating the battalion and exposing it to enemy ground probes and constant mortar fire.

To have followed the planned sequence of events might have required more good weather than it appeared prudent to expect. Therefore, when the weather around Tam Boi broke on the morning of the 18th, Lieutenant Colonel George W. Smith, commanding the 1st Battalion, decided to extract whatever could be lifted out, weather permitting. As a result, Mortar Battery was extracted first, and thus it did not provide covering fires for the evacuation of FSB Turnage as planned. Instead Battery E, in conjunction with fixed-wing and helicopter gunship strikes, covered the withdrawal of the 1st Battalion under heavy enemy mortar and antiaircraft fire, and was in turn covered by fixed-wing. Operation Dewey Canyon terminated at 2000, as the last helicopter touched down at Vandegrift Combat Base.

During Dewey Canyon, supporting arms played a decisive yet somewhat muted role due to weather. Marine fixed-wing aircraft flew a total of 461 close air support missions, expending over 2,000 tons of ordnance. At the same time, Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 39 and Marine Aircraft Group 36 flew nearly 1,200 helicopter sorties, transporting a total of 9,121 troops and 1,533,597 pounds of cargo. On the ground, Lieutenant Colonel Scoppa's artillery fired approximately 134,000 rounds in support of Marine and South Vietnamese infantrymen.

Both sides suffered heavy casualties. The Marines lost 130 killed and 920 wounded, while reporting enemy casualties of 1,617 killed and five captured. Enemy equipment losses were significant: 1,223 individual weapons, 16 artillery pieces, 73 antiaircraft guns, 26 mortars, 104 machine guns, 92 trucks, over 807,000 rounds of ammunition, and more than 220,000 pounds of rice.

The final score, however, reached far beyond mere statistical results. The Marine strike into the Song Da Krong Valley disrupted the organizational apparatus of Base Area 611, effectively blocking the enemy's abil-

ity to strike out at civilian and military targets to the east. Attempts to rebuild this base and reorder disrupted supply lines would be long and arduous. In reporting to General Abrams on Dewey Canyon, General Stilwell stated:

In my possible parochial estimate, this ranks with the most significant undertakings of the Vietnam conflict in the concept and results: striking the enemy unexpectedly in time and place, destroying a NVA base area and LOC center and pre-empting a planned NVA spring offensive somewhere in ICTZ The enemy took a calculated risk in massing installations right at the border, misjudging our reach; he lost Above all though, a Marine Regiment of extraordinary cohesion, skill in mountain warfare, and plain heart made Dewey Canyon a resounding success. As an independent regimental operation, projected 50KM airline from nearest base and sustained in heavy combat seven weeks, it may be unparalleled. Without question, the 9th Marines' performance represents the very essence of professionals.⁴⁰

Laos: Repercussions

Knowledge of the Laos incursion, ordered kept under wraps by General Abrams, found its way into the press during the first week of March, causing concern in Saigon:

We have received word from III MAF that a number of correspondents have considerable knowledge of that part of Dewey Canyon that has extended into Laos. Newsmen apparently picked up bits and pieces from troopers while sitting around talking and eating. Media involved are AP, UP, NY Times, Newsweek, AFP, and the New Yorker. We have a rumor that some of the media have photos that they claim were taken in Laos; however, we cannot confirm that any newsman or photographer actually entered Laos in the Dewey Canyon area.⁴¹

Although the story was out, the official line was to say nothing on the subject, diverting press attention instead to the large amounts of enemy supplies captured.

On 8 March, however, Drummond Ayres, Jr., of the *New York Times* informed MACV that he was filing a story on Marine operations in Laos. Attempts were made to persuade Ayres to ignore the story, but it appeared in the Sunday edition of the *Times* the fol-

lowing day. While noting that Marines had "technically violated Laotian neutrality" guaranteed at Geneva in 1954, and again in 1962, the operations were carried out "to protect the flanks of Marine elements maneuvering nearby along South Vietnam's northwestern border." Concluding, Ayres reported that "Operation Dewey Canyon seems to indicate that allied commanders operating along borders may dip across lines to secure their flanks."⁴²

The subject was brought up again during the final news conference of Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird's fact-finding mission to Vietnam. Asked if American troops had been operating in Laos during the last week, Mr. Laird said:

I would not confirm that they were there now but I would certainly say that there have been operations in which it has been necessary in order to protect American fighting forces that—that border being a very indefinite border—it may have been transgressed by American forces in carrying out this responsibility.⁴³

The Secretary noted that the decision to permit operations inside Laos had been reviewed at the highest level and approved by General Abrams on the basis of the "safety of our men." He further explained that "Marines took up positions in Laos to protect their flank during a sweep of the area near the border."⁴⁴

Secretary Laird's statements acknowledging the American incursion into Laos caused embarrassment in Vientiane. The Laotian Government immediately sought to counter the Secretary's remarks by issuing a communique "clearly designed to confine the controversy to a discussion of a single incident rather than to the general implications for Laotian neutrality." Ambassador William H. Sullivan subsequently apologized to the Laotian Premier for the incident and assured him that the United States would avoid any further extension of hostilities into Laotian territory.⁴⁵ The controversy did not end. In 1970 and again in 1973, the Marine incursion into Laos during Operation Dewey Canyon came to the fore, both times in connection with Congressional hearings on Vietnam.⁴⁶

CHAPTER 5

The Quang Tri Border Areas

*No Change in Tactics—The DMZ Front—Brigade Mauls 27th—The 9th Battles the 36th
The Vietnam Salient—Apache Snow—Central DMZ Battles—Eastern Quang Tri and Thua Thien*

No Change in Tactics

Reviewing his tour as Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, shortly before his reassignment, Major General Raymond G. Davis noted, with pride, that the forces under his command were “now in a posture where we totally control Quang Tri Province.” “However,” he continued, “we cannot lower our guard or decrease our forces one iota so long as the enemy retains his total sanctuary in Laos and in and above the DMZ.”¹ On 14 April 1969, General Davis was succeeded by Major General William K. Jones, a hardened veteran of Tarawa, where he earned the Silver Star; of Saipan, where he was awarded the Navy Cross; and of Korea where he commanded the 1st Marines. Unlike Davis, Jones found it unnecessary to reorient the tactical disposition of the division. He completely agreed with General Davis’ concept of operations and “simply continued the various actions Davis had initiated.”²

Neither Davis nor Jones lowered their guard, nor that of the division. Even though the enemy had largely been forced to withdraw to nearby North Vietnam and Laos, General Davis and then General Jones continued to maintain a strong, mobile posture characterized by essentially company-size operations. As General Davis described the tactic:

A company will be put into an area two or three kilometers on a side, they'll cut an L[anding] Z[one] for resupply and medevac, and they'll work day and night activities until they've thoroughly searched out this area. By thoroughly searching out I mean: on every trail, every hill knob, every draw, every finger—total search-out of the area. Then they'd be lifted to another place.³

Relying on this tactic, the division initiated several operations in March throughout the border areas of Quang Tri Province with the aim of preempting enemy efforts to infiltrate major formations and supplies from cross-border sanctuaries or to use northern ICTZ redoubts and lines of communication to stage and move those supplies forward. The March campaign in western and northwestern Quang Tri did not develop heavy contact; rather, the actions were characterized

by skirmishes with NVA screening forces and by the seizure of numerous, and often extensive, munitions and supply caches.

The DMZ Front

Combat action along the Demilitarized Zone, from the Laotian border east to coastal Cua Viet, had remained intermittent during January and February. Enemy forces engaged by 3d Marine Division, Army, and ARVN units were, by and large, elements of three independent NVA Regiments, the 27th, 138th, and 246th, all tasked with screening the DMZ front. Only occasionally encountered or employed in strength, these units primarily undertook reconnaissance missions, shelling, ambushes, probing and sapper attacks, and assisted in the movement of arms and supplies to local force Viet Cong units and guerrillas. But by the end of February, forward elements of the three regiments had gained key terrain south of the DMZ, especially in northwestern Quang Tri Province, where the 246th NVA Regiment continued to push slowly southward.

Under the operational control of Task Force Hotel at Vandegrift Combat Base, commanded by Brigadier General Garretson until relieved by Brigadier General Robert B. Carney, Jr. at the end of March, the 4th Marines was given the mission of destroying the 246th or driving the enemy regiment back into the sanctuary of the Demilitarized Zone. Once the enemy was forced to withdraw, Colonel William F. Goggin's Marines were to secure key terrain features on the DMZ's southern edge, and then move into the southern portion of the zone. The codename assigned to the 4th Marines counterattack was Operation Purple Martin.

The first day of March found the three battalions of Colonel Goggin's regiment patrolling along a broad front, 5,000 to 10,000 meters south of the DMZ. The 3d Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel William A. Donald, continued to clear the northern portion of the area of operations, north of Fire Support Base Russell; Lieutenant Colonel Joseph E. Hopkins' 2d Battalion conducted search operations north of Fire Support Base Neville; and the 1st Battalion, under

Lieutenant Colonel George T. Sargent, Jr., cleared the northeastern portion of the area of operations, near Elliott Combat Base (Rockpile). First Lieutenant James M. Herron's Company C initiated the first significant engagement with the 246th as it attempted to reoccupy LZ Mack, north of Elliott, in preparation for the regiment's move deeper into the area.

The action began at 0430 when the company's night defensive position received four rounds of 60mm mortar fire, resulting in three casualties. Shortly after dawn the following morning, Lieutenant Herron's company began its assault. Supported by over 3,000 rounds of artillery fired by batteries of Lieutenant Colonel Eugene D. Foxworth, Jr.'s 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, two platoons first seized a small knoll north of the heavily fortified landing zone and then swept toward the summit. However, when the Marines reached the hilltop, three enemy mortars opened up, forcing the two platoons to withdraw with heavy casualties. During the assault, Company L, 3d Battalion moved up to serve as a reserve force, and overall conduct of the attack placed under the control of Lieutenant Colonel Donald, the 3d Battalion's commanding officer.

Hampered by dense fog and misting rain, and consequently a lack of air support, the two companies consolidated their defensive positions and prepared for a second attack. During the next three days, the enemy subjected Companies C and L to a continuous barrage of 60mm and 82mm mortars, sniper fire, and ground attacks, resulting in more than 15 Marine casualties. Shortly after midafternoon on the 5th, following another extensive artillery preparation, Lieutenant Herron's company again assaulted Mack. Once more two platoons were used, one to secure the small hill north of the landing zone in order to provide covering fire, and the other to move on the summit. The scheme of maneuver proved successful and the assaulting platoon reached the crest of the hill, where squad and fire teams fanned out, methodically clearing one enemy-infested bunker after another.

The enemy's determined defense of Mack characterized the type of engagement experienced by the 4th Marines throughout the area of operations: elements of the 246th were prepared to fight. Well-equipped and well-supplied, North Vietnamese troops gave up terrain only when physically dislodged.

MajGen William K. Jones, left, assumes command of the 3d Marine Division from MajGen Raymond G. Davis at Dong Ha on 14 April. Jones, like his predecessor, would continue to place major emphasis on blocking enemy infiltration and capturing supplies.

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192537
Infantrymen of the 4th Marines cross a jungle stream just south of the Demilitarized Zone in search of ever-elusive North Vietnamese Army infiltrators.

Sweeping near LZ Catapult on the 9th, Company G, 2d Battalion, engaged yet another large and determined enemy unit in battle. The landing zone, abandoned a year before, was significant as it was located 4,000 meters north of Fire Support Base Neville and dominated the extensive enemy trail network of the upper Cam Lo Valley. With intelligence information which confirmed not only North Vietnamese occupation of the general area, but their intention to hold the landing zone and surrounding terrain, Company G was given the difficult mission of resecuring Catapult.

As Company G, under the command of Captain Joseph M. Dwyer, moved slowly and cautiously from the south along a ridge toward the landing zone, sup-

ported exclusively by artillery as air was unavailable due to weather, resistance became increasingly stubborn. Entrenched enemy troops employed snipers, claymore mines, and ambushes to halt or delay the company's progress. On 10 March, Dwyer's Marines broke through the enemy's outer defenses and engaged a number of determined NVA troops in a running fire-fight which lasted throughout the day.

The next morning, as Dwyer's company continued the assault toward Catapult, the North Vietnamese launched a counterattack. Employing small arms, grenades, and RPG's, the enemy hit Company G on three sides. Fighting at close quarters, at times less than five meters, Dwyer's Marines suffered four killed and 13 wounded, including three killed and four wounded as a result of a 105mm short round. The violent fight, which lasted most of the day, finally broke the enemy's attempt to hold the landing zone. When the company completely secured Catapult on the 14th, Dwyer's Marines discovered 24 enemy bodies, all killed either by artillery or small arms fire.

While Dwyer's Marines were heavily engaged on Catapult, another sharp battle took place 12 kilometers to the east. On 13 March, Lieutenant Colonel Donald's battalion continued its push along the lengthy ridgeline from LZ Mack toward LZ Sierra. Abandoned two months earlier, Sierra was now in NVA hands, and had been used by the enemy as a mortar site in an effort to blunt the Marine assault on LZ Mack, 2,000 meters to the southeast. A dense fog hampered direct air support, forcing the battalion to rely solely on artillery and a small number of radar-controlled bomb drops. The terrain proved rugged. Punctuated by deep draws and steep hills, the ridgeline offered few avenues of approach, and as a result, every meter presented a threat of mines.

Lieutenant Colonel Donald assigned Company M, under the command of First Lieutenant Edwin C. Kelley, Jr., the task of resecuring Sierra, and First Lieutenant John P. Kiley's Company I the taking of a hill north of Sierra, commonly known as Sierra North. Companies K and L would be held in reserve. As Kelley's Marines began their advance, it soon became apparent that the landing zone was defended by a determined NVA platoon, located in well-constructed bunkers, capable of withstanding a direct hit by a 105mm artillery round. Supported by heavy covering fire emanating south of the landing zone, two of Kelley's platoons assaulted from the east through a hail of intense enemy small arms and mortar fire. Once the advance was underway, Kelley's squads and fire

teams maneuvered from bunker to bunker, destroying the stubbornly entrenched enemy troops. Company M secured Sierra by late afternoon at a cost of 10 Marines killed and 35 wounded; 23 enemy troops lay dead in the smoldering ruins.

The following morning, Kiley's Marines advanced on Sierra North in a well-executed envelopment from the south. "Two hundred meters from the objective," Lieutenant Kiley recalled, "NVA were spotted on the hill, and there proved to be 11 in number. We were moving in a column; 2d Platoon had the point, followed by the CP group, then 1st Platoon, and then 3d Platoon . . . I set up the company CP with one platoon as security, moved 2d Platoon up the hill followed by 1st."⁴ As Marines of the 2d Platoon emerged from the heavily wooded area surrounding the crest of the hill, they laid down a heavy base of fire in order to permit the 1st Platoon to attack through. The enemy, apparently expecting an attack from the north, as 10-inch claymores were found facing only in that direction, were surprised inside their bunkers.⁵

While Company I was engaged on Sierra North, elements of the *246th* attacked Captain Kelley's company position, initiating the action by downing a CH-46 medical evacuation helicopter with an RPG round. Kelley's Marines beat back the assault, and again, tubes of the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines accounted for all the supporting fires. "After their counterattack failed," reported the battalion executive officer, Major Raymond D. Walters, "what forces they had withdrew and we didn't see any more of them in that area. So it became apparent that we had cleaned them out there and we decided to go on with our primary mission which was to establish our patrol bases in the DMZ . . . Shortly after we commenced our DMZ patrols, we got an additional mission of constructing landing zones along the DMZ."⁶

On 20 March, the long-anticipated assault on abandoned Fire Support Base Argonne, to secure the regiment's western flank, began. The base, located on Hill 1308, two kilometers east of the border, offered observation into Laos and onto portions of the enemy's infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail. Planned for almost a month, the assault had been postponed due to weather and lack of helicopter support, then heavily committed to the 9th Marines in the Da Krong Valley. By the 19th, the weather cleared and aircraft became available. At 2230, Colonel Goggin decided to conduct the assault the following day.

The proposed scheme of maneuver called for a three

company advance, with one company landing on Argonne and two companies moving into the valley to the north. A reconnaissance team would be inserted prior to the assault and would guide the troop-laden helicopters into the landing zone. Goggin gave Lieutenant Colonel Sargent's 1st Battalion the task of securing Argonne, and in anticipation Sargent had moved his companies to FSB Alpine (Lang Hoan Tap), 16 kilometers to the south-southeast. With the Marines of the 1st Battalion came tons of supplies for the support of the Argonne assault and planned operations nearby. The establishment of a mini-logistical supply area on Alpine would prove an asset in the coming days by lessening the distance required for helicopter resupply lifts during periods of poor weather.

At 0930 on the 20th, after an extensive artillery and air preparation, team "Frostburg" from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion moved toward the upper landing zone on Argonne by air. As the helicopter carrying the team approached the zone, an explosion rocked the area and a volley of small arms fire ripped through the aircraft cockpit, killing the pilot and wounding the copilot. Despite his wounds, the copilot brought the helicopter in and the team jumped out, immediately forming a hasty 360 degree perimeter around the downed aircraft. Within minutes of the crash, the NVA struck. After repelling the enemy's initial charge, the team leader surveyed the situation, and requested an immediate extraction. Following the team's departure, the first transport helicopter attempted to land with Lieutenant Colonel Sargent and elements of Company D on board. The downed UH-1E ("Huey") used by the team prevented the CH-46D transport from entering the upper zone; consequently, Sargent shifted the main assault to the lower zone.

The assault troops of Captain Joe B. Green's Company D received only sporadic sniper fire upon landing in the lower zone, but as the lead elements advanced toward the upper zone, enemy small arms and automatic weapons fire emanating from a mutually supporting bunker system intensified. Like the actions on Mack, Sierra, and Catapult, the Marine thrust on Argonne consisted of destroying the enemy by employing small fire teams methodically to clear each bunker. The company directed a heavy base of small arms fire toward bunker entrances, as one or two Marines crawled to within grenade range, and then assaulted the enemy fortifications. The battle to resecure Argonne continued until dark. Green's company suffered six killed and 11 wounded in the daylong ad-

vance, while accounting for 15 NVA dead. Due to the heavy fighting on Argonne, Lieutenant Colonel Sargent cancelled the helilift of the remaining two companies into the valley north of the landing zone.

At 0815 the following morning, an enemy mortar barrage of twelve 82mm rounds fell on the battalion's command post on Argonne, killing Lieutenant Colonel Sargent; Second Lieutenant Carl R. Wilson, Jr., the battalion S-2; two enlisted Marines and wounding 12 others. Later, as a medical evacuation helicopter extracted the casualties of the first attack, 10 more rounds hit the landing zone, resulting in an additional three killed and 11 wounded. The same day, Companies A and C lifted into an area south of the landing zone and began a sweep to the north. But with Argonne under mortar siege, Colonel Goggin modified the mission of the two companies, ordering Company A, under Captain Henry W. "Buzz" Buse III, son of Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, Lieutenant General Henry W. Buse, Jr., to move west, toward the Laotian border, in search of the suspected enemy mortar sites, and Company C to Argonne's relief. On 23 March, while the remainder of the battalion conducted search operations near Argonne in an effort to locate additional enemy harbor and mortar sites, Company B swept six kilometers toward the high ground to the northeast, where it es-

tablished Fire Support Base Greene, opening the northern portion of the area of operation.

With the regiment firmly established within the area of operations and initial objectives achieved, Lieutenant Colonel Donald's 3d Battalion began reconnaissance operations within the Demilitarized Zone on 25 March. Companies I and K, deployed on hilltops south of the DMZ, overlooking major trail networks, were assigned the task. The size of reconnaissance patrols introduced within the zone were to be limited, according to the rules of engagement, to no more than a reinforced squad. Therefore, a typical 3d Battalion patrol included a squad of 14 Marines reinforced by a forward air controller, forward observer, platoon leader, corpsman, and a machine gun team.⁷ Should a patrol become involved in a heavy engagement, a "Sparrow Hawk" reaction force would be deployed to aid in the squad's extraction, and only its extraction.

According to Major Walters, "contact within the DMZ was light. We did find a considerable amount of ammunition, bunkers, complexes, and we blew them as we went. But they weren't there to defend those positions and we never really got into a good fight in the DMZ at all. A couple of times we had to call in a Sparrow [reaction force] and extract the squads, but never did we get into any serious trouble in the DMZ."⁸ Lieutenant Colonel Donald's battal-

During a lull in fighting, LCdr Frederick E. Whitaker, chaplain for the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines conducts services for Company M on a ridgeline north of Elliott Combat Base.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192846





Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center

Members of Company D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines load another 81mm mortar round as the team prepares to fire on an enemy mortar threatening the battalion near Argonne.

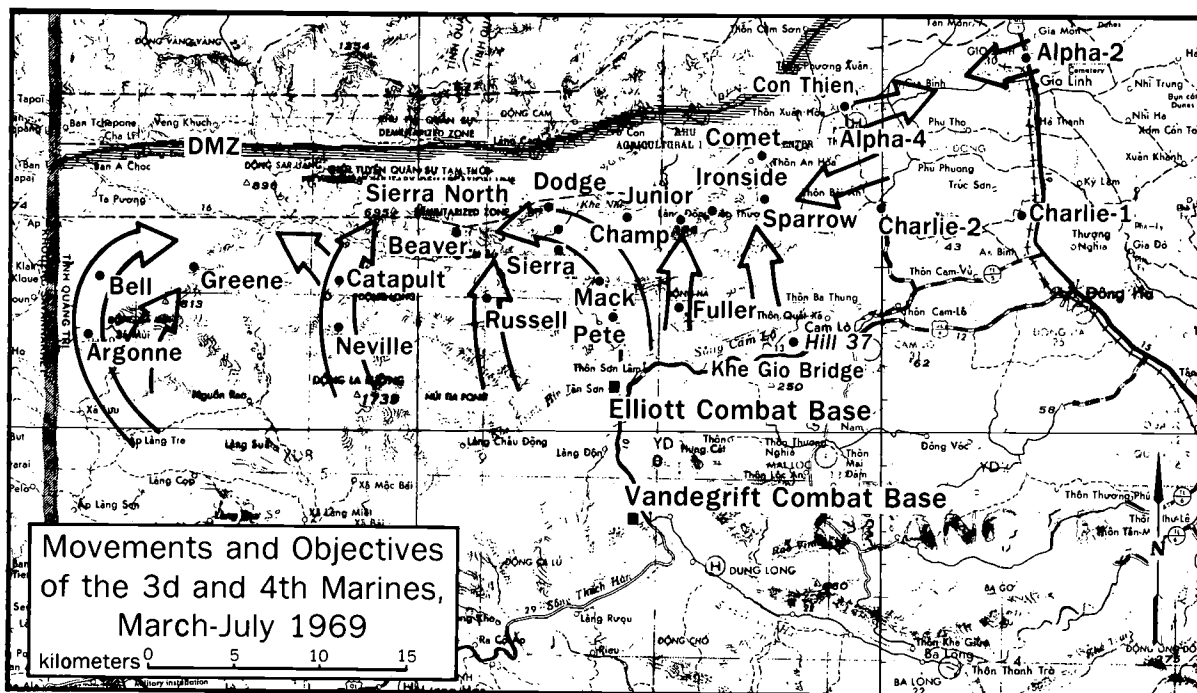
ion maintained patrols within the DMZ, as well as in the vicinity of Landing Zones Sierra and Mack, both designed to halt enemy infiltration, until the end of the operation.

Near Argonne, Captain Buse's company continued to sweep northwest toward the high ground, Hill 1154, just east of the Laotian border. After a brief firefight on the 25th, Buse's Marines pushed through a bunker system, suffering only two wounded, but an artillery short round inflicted an additional three killed and 15 wounded. With mortar fire again directed against Argonne, Buse was ordered by Lieutenant Colonel Clair E. Willcox, who had taken command of the 1st Battalion following the death of Lieutenant Colonel Sargent, to take Hill 1154 and silence the enemy tubes. On 28 March, after fighting off an NVA platoon, the Marines of Company A pushed through yet another bunker complex and captured the hill. With Hill 1154 in Marine hands, enemy activity around and harassment of the regiment's western-most fire support base rapidly decreased.

First Battalion Marines continued search operations

in the vicinity of Argonne until 3 April when the command group and the remainder of Company B moved by helicopter to Fire Support Base Greene. Company A Marines searched west and then northeast of Argonne, moving to Greene on the 7th. Companies C and D swept north from Argonne, conducting operations along the DMZ northeast of LZ Bell. The two companies maintained search operations in the area for the remainder of Purple Martin. After more than two weeks of fighting around Argonne, Willcox's battalion accomplished its mission; enemy infiltration routes were disrupted, and forces guarding the Ho Chi Minh Trail pushed back into Laos with considerable casualties.

Throughout April and into the first week of May, the number of 4th Marines engagements with screening elements of the *246th NVA Regiment* remained relatively constant. Enemy troops encountered, like the month before, were well-equipped, well-supplied, and prepared to defend key terrain. On 10 April, while searching a section of the upper Song Cam Lo Valley, two kilometers south of the DMZ, Marines of Com-



See Reference Map, Sections 1, 2, 3

pany E, 2d Battalion received fire from a well-camouflaged enemy cave complex. Advancing slowly toward the complex, set in towering cliffs bordering the river, Captain Albert H. Hill's company captured two wounded enemy soldiers, one of whom proved to be the commander of the *1st Company, 1st Battalion, 246th Regiment*. Both were extracted immediately and were of considerable intelligence value.

Captain Hill, in order to clear the cave complex, combined both psychological techniques and accepted tactics designed for assaulting a fortified position. A psychological operations team, under the battalion's intelligence officer, was brought in as was a flame section. Using a loudspeaker, the team, in the face of enemy hurled obscenities, endeavored to coax the North Vietnamese troops into surrendering. Three enemy soldiers yielded to the team's entreaties, but the remainder refused, and the company, preceded by flamethrowers, assaulted the complex. After clearing the caves, Hill's Marines began a thorough search of the labyrinth, which yielded a substantial cache of individual weapons and ammunition.

By 25 April, having accomplished their goal of pushing the NVA back into the Demilitarized Zone, Hill's company and the remainder of the 2d Battalion, were ordered south, beyond the range of enemy 82mm mortars emplaced within the DMZ. Colonel Goggin directed the 1st and 3d Battalions to do like-

wise, but still maintain their reconnaissance efforts within the zone. These positions were being held on 8 May when Operation Purple Martin came to an end.

"Our objectives," noted Major George X. McKenna, the regimental S-3, "were to search and destroy throughout our AO, to push the enemy back, clear him away from our fire support bases, and push him as far north as possible, up to the southern limits of the DMZ. This was accomplished by late April, when all of our units were within 500 meters of the DMZ, strung over 35 to 40,000 meters on an east-west axis."⁹ The battle had been hard fought. Before it yielded to the 4th Marines and withdrew into the Demilitarized Zone and westward into Laos, the *246th NVA Regiment* suffered over 347 casualties, three times that of Colonel Goggin's regiment.

Brigade Mauls 27th

With the 4th Marines heavily engaged against the *246th* to the northwest, elements of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) began a reconnaissance-in-force operation in the Khe Chua Valley, north of Dong Ha Mountain (FSB Fuller), between Charlie-3 and the Elliott Combat Base. Units of the brigade, up to mid-March, had concentrated on weeding out enemy troops in areas south of Landing Zone Sharon, and along the coastal lowlands from Cua Viet to Wunder Beach. But as elements of the

27th NVA Regiment moved south from the DMZ, west of Cam Lo, with the aim of cutting Route 9, Davis directed units of the brigade to advance westward to counter the enemy threat.

Codenamed Montana Mauler, the counter-infiltration operation called for two tank troops of the 3d Squadron, 5th Armored Cavalry, reinforced with infantry, to enter the Khe Chua Valley and attempt to engage the *27th Regiment*. Once the cavalry troops encountered enemy units, the 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry would be brought in to reinforce.

Troops A and B, 3d Squadron, 5th Armored Cavalry, each with a platoon of infantry from Company D, 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry, swept into the valley from the east on 23 March. The two cavalry troops observed small groups of enemy to the north, and raked them with tank and artillery from fire support bases within range. The troops made few additional sightings as they worked westward along separate axes, finally linking up in mid-valley early in the afternoon.

At 1000 the following morning, lead elements of the cavalry troops encountered an unknown number of NVA soldiers entrenched in bunkers, north of the valley. After an exchange of small arms, automatic weapons, RPG, and tank fire, the brigade units pulled back in order to employ artillery against the enemy force, now estimated to be a battalion in strength. A request was made to Task Force Hotel for reinforcements, which in turn ordered Company I, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, under Captain Joseph U. Arroyo, immediately airlifted into a makeshift landing zone south of the engaged Army troops. The brigade also alerted two companies of the 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry to prepare for an assault, on order, into an area north of the valley.

The enemy proved surprisingly elusive as Marine and Army units advanced slowly westward along the southern portion of the valley the following day. The two companies of the 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry conducted their planned air assault north of the valley, completing the movement by mid-afternoon. Due to the lack of significant engagements throughout the day, the brigade directed the 1st Battalion, with Arroyo's Marines attached, to sweep northward on the 26th in order to regain contact with the enemy battalion, suspected to have withdrawn further north.

At 0330, 26 March, before the sweep could be initiated, the enemy struck at the night defensive positions of the 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry with small arms, automatic weapons, mortar, and RPG fire, from the north, west, and east, inflicting few casualties. At

daybreak, the battalion observed enemy movement to the north. As Army infantry elements probed in that direction, contact was reestablished and air strikes and artillery employed periodically throughout the day on the suspected enemy positions without much success. Experiencing difficulty not only with entrenched enemy troops, but also with the oppressive heat, as temperatures approached 105 degrees, the two companies returned to their positions of the previous night and prepared to resume the attack on the 27th. Meanwhile, Arroyo's Marines advanced northwest without incident, while the two armored cavalry troops searched the area near their previous day's position, finding documents and weapons indicating the presence of the *1st Battalion, 27th NVA Regiment*.

The 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry resumed its northward advance on the 27th, with Company B assigned to secure the high ground on the right flank, supported by Company A. Arroyo's Marines received the task of seizing the high ground on the battalion's left. Shortly after beginning their sweep, Companies A and B fell in with elements of the *27th*, occupying bunkers to the companies' northeast. Air strikes were called, followed by artillery fire on terrain ahead of the line of march. Midday found the two Army infantry companies just short of their objective. Meanwhile, Company C helilifted into blocking positions near Hill 208, the enemy's main position. As Company B moved forward toward the high ground, its objective, the enemy again struck with mortar fire and a ground counter-assault from the north. Again, the Army commander called air strikes and artillery to support the fires of Company B, which repulsed the enemy assault after an hour. Shortly thereafter, Company A too came under attack. And again tactical air struck the disruptive blow. Arroyo's Marines took their objective on the left without incident. The day's heavy fighting accounted for 120 enemy soldiers killed, while friendly losses numbered 13. Company B lost all of its officers except for a forward observer, who took command of the company during the latter stages of the day's fighting.

The three companies of the 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry, supplemented by Company I, 9th Marines, resumed search operations on the 28th, encountering few enemy troops. As added reinforcement, the remaining elements of Company D, 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry helilifted into the area from FSB Sharon. Also during the day, elements of the 3d Squadron, 5th Armored Cavalry moved into the eastern portion of the Khe Chua Valley in support of Company C on the right flank, which occupied Hill 208.

The following day turned out to be one of heavy fighting with considerable losses inflicted on the enemy. While attempting to secure a position in support of the planned helicopter assault by Arroyo's Marines, troops of Company D engaged an NVA force occupying a bunker complex on the right flank. Employing small arms, riot control agents (CS gas), and air strikes, the company accounted for five NVA killed. Moving north along a ridge, west of Company D, Company A also came under heavy attack, estimated at an NVA company. Attacking from the north, the enemy used small arms and RPG fire in an attempt to outflank and isolate the company's northernmost platoon. Expertly directed small arms and helicopter gunship fire, followed by massive air strikes, met the advance. As elements of Company B reinforced Company A, all units then came under mortar attacks from the northwest. In heavy fighting, Army and Marine defenders finally broke the enemy's daylong ground and mortar assault, counting more than 30 NVA dead.

During the next four days, the 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry conducted extensive search and clear operations over the battleground, moving in an east-southeast direction, looking for bypassed enemy po-

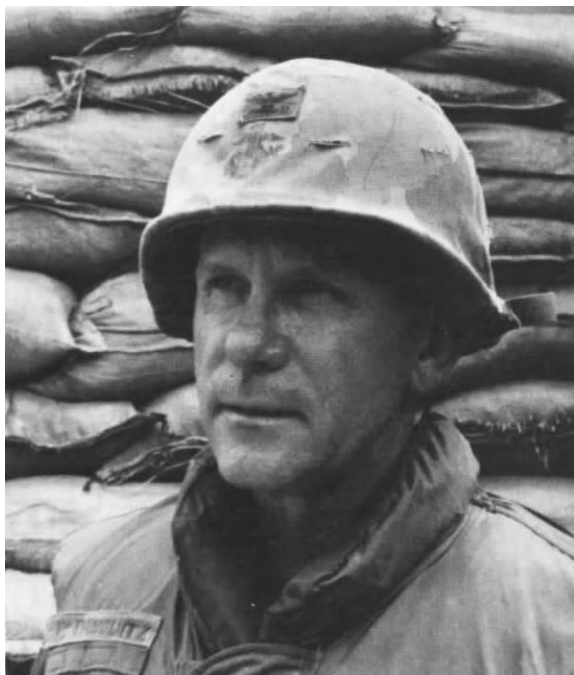
sitions and personnel. The 1st Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment, helilifted into the area of operations on the 29th, initially searched along the southern boundary of the DMZ west of Con Thien, and then joined the 11th Infantry in a sweep of the northern half of the battle area. The combined Army, Marine, and ARVN force encountered few enemy troops, and consequently, the operation was terminated on 3 April. Elements of the *27th NVA Regiment* lost close to 300 troops as a result of the short allied strike into the Khe Chua Valley.

With the end of Montana Mauler, Arroyo's Marines returned to the 9th Marines while the 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry split. Company A returned to the coastal lowlands, while Companies B and C, joined by Troop A, 4th Squadron, 12th Cavalry; and Battery B, 1st Battalion, 40th Artillery; formed Task Force 1/11 and moved south. At Ca Lu, east of Vandegrift Combat Base, the task force was joined by Task Force 3/5, composed of Troops A and B, 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry; elements of Company D, 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry; and Battery B, 5th Battalion, 4th Artillery, in a sweep of the Ba Long Valley. Beginning at the western end of the valley, the two task forces swept eastward along the Song Quang Tri, clearing Route 556, in a five-day

Crouched in elephant grass, a Marine witnesses the results of a close air support mission flown by an F-4 Phantom. From bases at Da Nang and Chu Lai, Marine Phantoms provided air support for allied ground units operating throughout the I Corps Tactical Zone.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Marine Corps Historical Collection

A veteran of the Combined Action Program, Col Edward F. Danowitz assumed command of the 9th Marines from Col Robert H. Barrow on 9 April 1969.

operation, codenamed Ellis Ravine. The operation terminated on 13 April with disappointing results: one Viet Cong killed and his weapon captured.

The 9th Battles the 36th

The central portion of the Demilitarized Zone remained the main arena in which heavy fighting took place during April, as Marine and ARVN units fought a series of heated engagements with enemy forces concentrated in the region between Con Thien and Mutter's Ridge, 14 kilometers to the southwest. Elements of the *36th NVA Regiment* apparently began infiltrating into the central DMZ region of Quang Tri Province in early April as replacement for the *27th NVA Regiment*, which had sustained severe losses during Operation Montana Mauler. Although provided guides and liaison personnel from the departing *27th*, infiltrating units of the *36th* clearly were unfamiliar with the terrain and the maneuver capabilities and disposition of allied troops in the area, a factor which ultimately was to cost the regiment the equivalent of one battalion.

With the end of Operation Dewey Canyon, Task Force Hotel gave the 9th Marines the mission of securing a number of allied installations within the 3d Division's area of operation, replacing units of the 3d

and 4th Marines, heavily engaged in western Quang Tri Province. Although still headquartered at Vandegrift Combat Base, but now under the command of Colonel Edward F. Danowitz, who replaced Colonel Barrow on 9 April, companies of the regiment were scattered from Oceanview on the coast to Fire Support Base Alpine, north of Lang Vei.

The first of a series of separate contacts with the *36th Regiment* took place about seven kilometers northwest of Cam Lo on 9 April, when, at 1030, a 1st Battalion, 9th Marines patrol, moving toward a predetermined helicopter extraction point, encountered an enemy unit estimated at 30 to 40 troops. Engaging the enemy in a day-long running firefight, the patrol killed 19 NVA, before being successfully extracted during the late evening. Two days later, on the 11th, a second patrol from Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J. Culkin's battalion detected 20 enemy soldiers, five kilometers northwest of the 9 April contact.* Artillery fire and fixed-wing air strikes claimed 16 NVA; no Marine casualties resulted from either action.

Minor skirmishes between the 9th Marines and forward elements of the *36th* continued across the central DMZ front until the 21st. At 1440, a reinforced NVA company, armed with automatic weapons, RPGs, satchel charges, and supported by mortars, struck at Company G, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, under First Lieutenant James M. Horn, eight kilometers northeast of Elliott Combat Base. Horn's company, scattered in three separate, mutually supporting night defensive positions, contained the enemy's initial thrust, then counterattacked behind supporting air and artillery fires, forcing the enemy to flee northward. Results of the night-long battle were 42 NVA killed, 3 taken prisoner, and 27 weapons captured; Company G lost eight killed and 23 wounded.

On 23 April, Captain Donald K. Shockey, Jr.'s Company E, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines encountered an enemy force in the open moving south, midway between Cam Lo and Elliott, three kilometers north of Route 9. Engaging the force with small arms and artillery fire, Shockey's Marines pursued the enemy unit, finally driving it into caves. Launching an assault against the heavily fortified position just before noon, Shockey's company seized the site after two hours of fierce combat, killing 14 NVA troops and capturing an 82mm mortar, while losing eight killed and 17 wound-

*Lieutenant Colonel Culkin relieved Lieutenant Colonel George W. Smith as commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines on 31 March.

ed. As the month closed, the 9th Marines began preparing to be relieved by elements of the 3d and 4th Marines.

One day earlier, on the 22d, two battalions of the 2d ARVN Regiment joined the 9th Marines in clearing the front; the 4th Battalion, brought in by Marine helicopters, landed 13 kilometers northwest of Cam Lo and began a sweep to the east, while the 5th Battalion, supported by Marine tanks of Company B, 3d Tank Battalion, attacked from the east. This maneuver, calculated to trap elements of the *36th Regiment* between the two battalions, achieved its first solid contact on the 27th, when an unknown-size enemy force mounted a night attack against the 4th Battalion, deployed on Hill 208, site of heavy action during Operation Montana Mauler. The ARVN battalion held its position, killing 27 enemy troops and capturing 17 weapons.

Five days of heavy combat followed, the brunt of which was borne by the 2d ARVN Regiment. Employ-

ing the combined firepower of air, artillery, and tanks of Company B and then Company A, the two Vietnamese battalions pressed the attack, killing nearly 250 enemy troops by 2 May. Action thereafter was limited largely to mopping up isolated pockets of resistance.

While there was evidence of increased North Vietnamese Army presence in crossborder areas of the Demilitarized Zone, and attempts to infiltrate troops into the central region of Quang Tri Province during March and April, the enemy launched no massive effort to contest the region. He instead withdrew his forces into DMZ sanctuaries when pressed by the 4th Marines and the combined efforts of the 2d ARVN Regiment, 9th Marines, and the Army's 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division.

The Vietnam Salient

During the 1968 siege of Khe Sanh, the North Vietnamese employed armored elements against the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei, 13 kilometers north of

Col Paul D. Lafond, Commanding Officer, 3d Marines briefs, from left, MajGen Carl A. Youngdale, Deputy Commanding General, III MAF; LtGen Henry W. Buse, Jr., Commanding General, FMFPac; MajGen Raymond G. Davis; and BGen Frank E. Garretson, Commanding General, Task Force Hotel, on search operations in the Vietnam Salient.

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center





Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center

LtCol James J. McMonagle's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, in search of North Vietnamese soldiers, patrols an enemy infiltration route littered with vehicle wreckage near Laos.

Route 926, which enters that portion of Quang Tri Province protruding southeast into Laos, commonly termed the "Vietnam Salient." Intelligence gained during early March 1969 from reconnaissance team reports and sensors indicated a sizable increase in truck and tracked vehicle activity in the area, adding credence to the possibility that again enemy support and mechanized units had entered South Vietnam. The enemy's "logistics nose" needed to be blunted once more.

North Vietnamese use of Route 616, an extension of Route 926 from Laos, for the movement and staging of supplies and infiltrating troops, was to be expected. With 9th Marines' Operation Dewey Canyon in Base Area 611 and 101st Airborne Division's Operation Massachusetts Striker in the A Shau Valley clogging the enemy's primary lines of communication to the south, he was obliged to seek an alternate route. Moreover, the area's rugged terrain and position, surrounded on three sides by Laos, offered a major advantage—security.

Terrain within the salient, while providing North Vietnamese Army support and logistical units with a margin of security, posed no major obstacle to Marines. The western area, bordering the Song Xe Pon and Laos, generally consisted of a large 'U' shaped valley, surrounded by high ground with a jungle-covered hill mass at the center. Terrain in the eastern and

northern portions of the salient, roughly south of Route 9, consisted of rugged mountains, punctuated by valleys covered with elephant grass and scrub growth. As in Operation Dewey Canyon, Marines would use the now-standard mobile concept of operations; establishing fire support bases on the high ground and then moving out under an artillery umbrella in company search operations.

Elements of the 3d Marine Division had penetrated the salient twice before. In June of 1968, a multi-regiment campaign virtually destroyed two regiments of the 308th NVA Division. Three months later, a reconnaissance-in-force conducted by the 9th Marines encountered no significant enemy force. Task Force Hotel assigned the mission of confirming the enemy's presence and again clearing the salient to Colonel Paul D. Lafond's 3d Marines, recently returned to Quang Tri Province after participating with units of the 1st Marine Division in Operation Taylor Common, southwest of Da Nang.

The scheme of maneuver for the 3d Marines' thrust into the Vietnam Salient, codenamed Maine Crag, called for the 1st and 2d Battalions to conduct helicopter assaults from FSB Snapper, four kilometers southeast of Lang Vei, to seize and establish fire support bases in the southern portion of the salient, and then fan out in company-size search and clear opera-

tions, blocking the western terminus of Route 616 at the Laotian border. Concurrently, a U.S. Army task force, under the operational control of the 3d Marines, would attack westward from the Vandegrift-Ca Lu complex along Route 9 to Lang Vei, thence southward, linking up with the Marines. Subsequently, the 3d Marines in coordination with elements of the 2d ARVN Regiment, would attack eastward along Route 616 in a deliberate search to locate and destroy enemy forces, fortifications, and supply caches. Although as initially planned, the operation was to begin with a two-battalion helicopter advance into the salient, bad weather made it necessary to launch a single battalion by foot from Route 9.¹⁰

On 10 March, in preparation, Lieutenant Colonel James J. McMonagle's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines helilifted into LZ Hawk, just south of Route 9, and began overland movement to FSB Snapper, seven kilometers to the southwest, by way of the Khe Sanh Plateau. Supported by 155mm howitzers of the 1st Provisional Howitzer Battery on FSB Cates, the battalion reached Snapper after a night's forced march. "It was a moonless night," remembered Lieutenant Colonel McMonagle, "there were quite a bit of streams that we had to cross, a heck of a lot of elephant grass which impeded movement, and the matter of maintaining direction by Foxtrot Company, who had the point on this, was a real task and it was really amazing how they were able to find this place going through elephant grass at that time of the evening, but they did."¹¹ The following morning, the battalion initiated search operations in the vicinity of the fire support base.

Operation Maine Crag officially began on the 15th, as Battery A, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines lifted into Snapper, and three companies of Lieutenant Colonel McMonagle's battalion pushed overland toward Route 616, reaching FSB Saigon, overlooking the road, the following day. On the 17th, Companies G and H continued southwest to Route 616, leaving Company F as security for Battery C, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines, which had moved from Vandegrift to Saigon.

As elements of McMonagle's battalion probed the salient they encountered few enemy troops; those they did encounter consisted primarily of solitary snipers and ambushers, who quickly disappeared into the heavy jungle growth when engaged by the battalion's point. But on the 18th, these solitary engagements produced tangible results. While in ambush positions along Route 616, Marines of Company G observed two

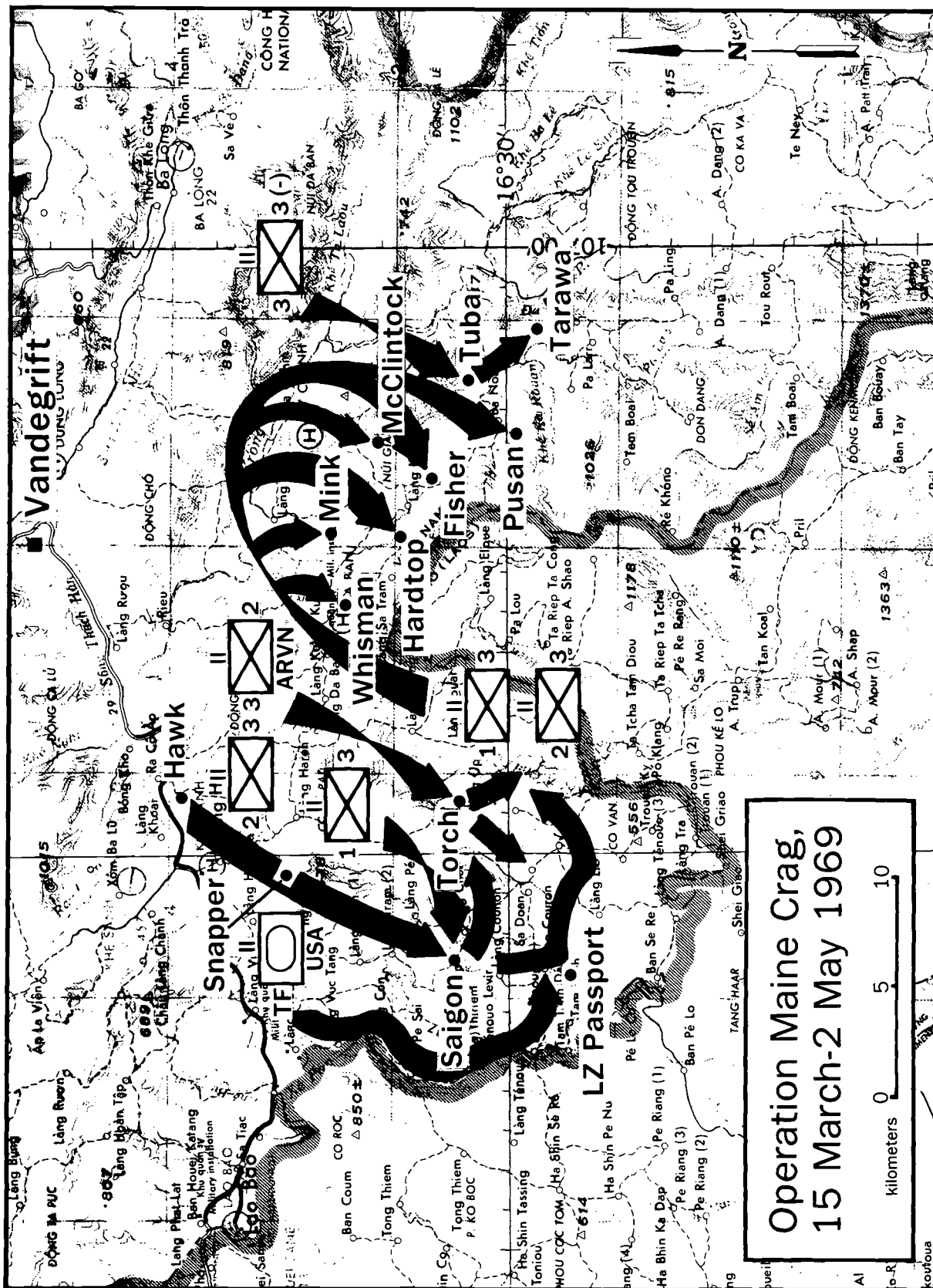
east-bound enemy trucks approach their position. Allowing the first truck, which was empty, to pass, the ambush opened fire on the second, destroying it and its cargo of 122mm rocket and mortar ammunition. The Marines then attacked the security element of the lead truck, which had halted a short distance down the road. The following morning, the enemy sent seven soldiers to check out the ambush site, and Company G ambushed them also.¹²

On the 19th, Colonel Lafond's 3d Marines assumed operational control of Task Force Remagen, under the command of Army Lieutenant Colonel Carmelo P. Milia, which consisted of Company B, 1st Battalion, 61st Mechanized Infantry; Company C, 1st Battalion, 77th Armor; Battery C, 1st Battalion, 40th Artillery (105mm self-propelled); two M42 self-propelled "Dusters" (dual-mounted 40mm cannons) from 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery (AWSP); 4.2mm mortars (self-propelled) from 1st Battalion, 77th Armor; and Army and Marine bulldozers, organized into three teams. The task force, which had advanced along Route 9 from Ca Lu to the Khe Sanh Plateau, was to turn south and establish blocking positions at the western end of Route 616 in the vicinity of the Song Xe Pon and initiate search operations, effectively screening the 3d Marines, operating to the east.

Three companies of Lieutenant Colonel John S. Kyle's 1st Battalion helilifted into FSB Saigon on the 19th, and then moved to the southwest, supported by two Ontos disguised as bulldozers, toward the Laotian border.* Concurrently, Companies G, H, and later E, continued moving eastward along Route 616, searching the draws and ridgelines and encountering a number of squad-size enemy groups in protective bunker complexes. The ensuing firefights were usually of short duration and involved few casualties. On 20 March, however, a water patrol from Company H was ambushed as it approached a stream approximately 1,000 meters north of the road, resulting in three Marines killed and 15 wounded.

Patrolling near the Phou Nhoi Hill mass, the area of the previous day's ambush, First Lieutenant William C. Helton's Company H on the 21st discovered what appeared to be an extensive staging area for approximately 150 enemy troops and a storage site containing rice and other foodstuffs. Between short firefights with security forces, the Marines of Company H eventually found a rice cache totaling over 350

*The Ontos was a lightly armored, tracked antitank vehicle armed with six coaxially-mounted 106mm recoilless rifles.



See Reference Map, Sections 10, 11



Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center
A camouflaged Russian truck used by the North Vietnamese to transport supplies from Laotian support bases into South Vietnam that was uncovered by the 3d Marines during operations in the Vietnam Salient.

tons. The significant feature of the rice find was that it was of high quality and contained in bags with Chinese markings—evidence that rice denial operations in the coastal lowlands were having the desired effect on NVA efforts to live off the land. In the same general search area, Lieutenant Helton's Marines found sizeable amounts of small arms, mortar, and RPG ammunition, and 7,000 pounds of salt, loaded in a French truck with Russian tires and American markings. The captured rice was subsequently extracted from the storage site, moved to the coastal lowlands, and distributed to refugees recently resettled within Quang Tri Province.

During the next several days, the three companies of Lieutenant Colonel McMonagle's 2d Battalion continued to search the area bordering the eastern boundary of the salient, finding additional caches of munitions and food while encountering few large groups of enemy troops. "What we had in effect working there," reported Lieutenant Colonel McMonagle, "was Echo Company on the north, . . . Hotel Company on the west, Gulf Company on the south, and

the enemy was ricocheting off of these three companies . . . Those that did manage to get through, and it was very easy for him because the vegetation was thick and there were a number of trails that couldn't be physically covered, the AO [aerial observer] was able to pick them up."¹³ After initial enemy attempts to defend the storage sites, the Marines met very little opposition as search operations progressed. Documents and prisoner interrogation confirmed the assumption that the entire area was lightly defended by service units and newly infiltrated troops.

In the first two weeks of April, the NVA launched 14 attacks-by-fire against 3d Marines and ARVN positions, employing mortars, 85mm field guns, and 122mm rockets, all fired from sanctuaries in Laos. However, by this point the principal storage sites in the area had been uncovered, and allied units began sweeping out of the salient. On 6 April, operational control of Task Force Remagen passed from the 3d Marines to Task Force Hotel at Vandegrift Combat Base, as the Army task force moved out of the salient and began operations near the Khe Sanh Plateau. "This force," noted Colonel Lafond, "was a tremendous assist to the 3d Marines and gave us an anti-tank capability that as it turned out wasn't completely necessary in that we received no tank attack from the enemy, but one can never be sure that its very presence didn't deter such an attack."¹⁴ Withdrawal operations continued as the 3d Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment helilifted to Dong Ha City on the 16th. The ARVN Battalion had made few significant enemy contacts, except for fending off an NVA attack, during its month-long search operation around FSB Torch, north of Route 616. However, "on one occasion which should be highlighted," reported Colonel Lafond, "at a time when 2/3 had temporarily moved outside the artillery fan from Saigon, ARVN artillery from Fire Support Base Torch supported the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines contacts near the rice caches. This support was superb, it was responsive, and it was fast, and it was accurate."¹⁵

Elements of the 3d Marines, instead of being extracted, moved from the salient in mid-April to an area of the lower Song Da Krong Valley, bordering on Laos. The next two weeks, as companies rotated to Cua Viet for a period of rest and resupply, the regiment swept the area encountering few enemy troops. The last days of April and first two days of May saw the battalions slowly pulled out of the area and helilifted to the central portion of Quang Tri Province, south of the DMZ, where they were positioned for Operation Virginia Ridge.

The seven-week, combined 3d Marines, Army, and ARVN thrust into the Vietnam Salient and lower Da Krong hit the enemy quite literally in the bread basket, where he did not have the wherewithal to resist effectively. In addition to losing over 600 tons of rice, 7,000 pounds each of sugar and salt, and 2,000 pounds each of powdered milk, peanut butter, and miscellaneous canned food, the enemy lost 207 soldiers, over 400 weapons, and 775,000 rounds of assorted ammunition.

Apache Snow

Despite the success of the 9th Marines in Operation Dewey Canyon and the recent accomplishments of the 3d Marines in the Vietnam Salient, reports from Bru tribesmen and North Vietnamese Army defectors (Hoi Chanhs) indicated that several regimental-size enemy units remained located in the northern portion of Base Area 611, south of the salient. It was believed that elements of the 6th and 9th NVA Infantry Regiments, the 675th Artillery Regiment, and various support units, operated within the area. In addition, aerial reconnaissance reports confirmed the belief that Route 922 was under repair, and that the NVA were again moving men and materiel into the northern A Shau Valley and then eastward into Base Area

101, located astride the Quang Tri-Thua Thien provincial boundary.

Under the overall control of Lieutenant General Richard G. Stilwell's XXIV Corps at Phu Bai, elements of the 3d Marine Division and 101st Airborne Division, in coordination with the 1st ARVN Division, were ordered to conduct operations, codenamed Apache Snow, in the northern A Shau and southern Da Krong Valleys, cutting enemy supply and infiltration routes at the Laotian border, and destroying enemy forces, base camps, and supply caches. D-Day was set for 15 May, but subsequently moved forward to the 10th.

XXIV Corps assigned the 1st and 2d Battalions, 9th Marines the task of occupying the southern Da Krong and blocking enemy escape routes into Laos along Route 922. On 3 May, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J. Culkin's 1st Battalion lifted into FSB McClintock and LZ Tarawa, replacing elements of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. From its Tarawa position, the battalion deployed one of its companies, Company D, commanded by Captain Leonard F. Chapman III, son of Marine Commandant Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., overland to reestablish Fire Support Base Razor. "Traveling the tedious and the difficult terrain," reported Colonel Edward F. Danowitz, "Delta Company was

Vietnamese Regional Force soldiers load the tons of rice captured by the 3d Marines in the Vietnam Salient onto trucks for distribution to the refugees of Quang Tri Province. The secured rice was enough to feed more than 5,000 enemy soldiers for one month.

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center



able to uncover FSB Razor, therefore eliminating the necessity for a heliborne assault, saving the requirement for supporting arms, maintaining the security and secrecy of the operation, and in effect adding to the feasibility of the landing" of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel George C. Fox, on the 7th.¹⁶ Operation Apache Snow began for the 9th Marines on the 10th, when Culkin's battalion leapfrogged south over Fox's battalion and assaulted into FSB Erskine, overlooking the upper Song Da Krong and Route 922. The lift into Erskine was not without incident, as enemy fire downed a CH-46 transport helicopter, killing seven Marines and wounding five.

During the early stages of the operation, it became apparent that large-size enemy units had yet to reconstitute within the Da Krong Valley following their defeat in Dewey Canyon two months earlier. Culkin's battalion, continuously patrolling in the vicinity of Erskine and Route 922, skirmished with several small NVA units with disappointing results, and towards the end of May swept east, initiating patrol operations near abandoned FSB Lightning. Lieutenant Colonel Fox's 2d Battalion, patrolling from FSB Razor and LZ Dallas, eight kilometers north-northeast of Erskine, encountered numerous small enemy units. On 23 May, for example, a platoon from Company F engaged five NVA, occupying a bunker complex along a stream, five kilometers west-southwest of Razor. As one Marine squad maneuvered against the concealed enemy position, the remainder of the unit massed small arms and automatic weapons fire on the bunkers. The ensuing assault accounted for four enemy killed and one prisoner. The platoon sustained no casualties during the brief encounter.

While the Da Krong remained relatively quiet, the same could not be said for the A Shau where XXIV Corps tasked four battalions of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), in coordination with elements of the 1st ARVN Division, with the destruction of enemy concentrations within the valley. On the morning of 10 May, Army and ARVN battalions helilifted into the valley and began multiple sweeps toward the Laotian border. While patrolling near the border the following day, Company B, 3d Battalion, 187th Infantry encountered an unknown size enemy force, positioned in a well-defended hut and bunker complex at the base of Hill 937 (Dong Ap Bia), three kilometers southwest of A Luoi. Over the next four days, the battalion endeavored to push through the complex toward the summit, supported by heavy volumes of artillery, mor-

tar, gunship, and tactical air fire, without much success. On 15 May, the 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry moved to assist the mired battalion. Both battalions then mounted a counterattack and pursued the enemy up the hill, meeting stubborn resistance as they pushed their way up the jungle-covered slopes. The tempo of the battle increased as the attacking force neared the crest of Hill 937, encountering fresh, well-disciplined NVA forces defending one fortified, mutually supporting bunker complex after another. As a result, elements of the 2d Battalion, 506th Infantry were committed on the 18th, followed by the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry and 2d Battalion, 3d ARVN Regiment on the 19th.

By the morning of the 20th, with all battalions in position, they joined in the final assault on the contested hill complex. Once taken, the combined Army and ARVN force then pursued the remaining enemy elements southwest down a ridgeline to the Laotian border, less than three kilometers from the crest of the hill.¹⁷ The weeklong battle cost the *9th* and *29th NVA Regiments* more than 500 killed. Testifying to fierce fighting on the hill, later termed "Hamburger Hill" by the remaining infantrymen of the 3d Battalion, 187th Infantry, was the friendly toll—44 soldiers killed and 297 wounded.

Dong Ap Bia secure, the battalions involved reoriented their search operations in an effort to destroy remnants of the two NVA regiments. Although operations throughout the A Shau continued until 7 June, the NVA avoided all but minor engagements.

With Army and ARVN forces heavily engaged in the A Shau, a platoon from Company C, 3d Engineer Battalion completed the first of three cuts of Route 922 in the Da Krong on 25 May. Two were 12 feet wide and 20 feet deep, and the third, 12 feet wide and 10 feet deep. The following day, the platoon caused two 50-meter landslides and blew a 50-meter, enemy hand-constructed revetment. With the interdiction of Route 922 complete, Culkin's battalion lifted out of the area of operations and returned to Vandegrift Combat Base on the 27th, followed by Fox's battalion. "Contact with the enemy during the initial phases of the [three-week] operation," noted Colonel Danowitz, "was light and it continued to be light, mainly against small elements, reconnaissance units or screening force for the major North Vietnamese forces, which according to the progress of the operation, indicated that they had moved into Laos as well as south into the area of the 1st ARVN, but were not to remain to stand and fight against the 9th Marines."¹⁸



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193758

Marine 105mm howitzer crews watch as an Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter hovers after landing ammunition at Fire Support Base Razor. The artillerymen were supporting the joint 101st Airborne-9th Marines attack, code-named Apache Snow, into the A Shau Valley.

The 3d Marine Division's mobile posture, involving the continuous deployment of maneuver battalions in western Quang Tri Province, succeeded in reducing the enemy threat from the west. During June, Colonel Danowitz's 9th Marines continued the effort, participating in Operations Cameron Falls and Utah Mesa. These two concurrent operations were targeted against elements of the 304th NVA Division, attempting to reestablish a presence south of Route 9.

Evidence from reconnaissance and other intelligence sources suggested that divisional troops had infiltrated into the lower Da Krong Valley, moved east along Route 616, and then north along the river. In addition, the series of rocket attacks on Vandegrift Combat Base in May signaled the start of a period of planned pressure on allied positions by the 57th NVA Regiment, 304th Division. Task Force Hotel assigned Danowitz's Marines the mission of conducting search and destroy operations in an area bordered on the north by the Song Quang Tri, on the south by the Da Krong, on the east by Fire Support Base Shepherd, and on the west by Fire Support Base Henderson; an area considered critical to the security of not only Vandegrift Combat Base, but of the Ba Long Valley, entryway from the west into the population centers of Quang Tri and Dong Ha.

Operation Cameron Falls, which began on 29 May, shifted the efforts of the 9th Marines from the southern Da Krong to the northern extremities of the mountainous river valley, south of Vandegrift. Movement into the objective area went unopposed as Lieutenant Colonel Fox's 2d Battalion occupied Fire Support Base Whisman and the 3d Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Oral R. Swigart, Jr., FSB Shepherd, below FSB Cates, on Route 9. In establishing its position on Whisman, Marines of the 2d Battalion, according to Colonel Danowitz, "rapidly and wisely selected positions for the defense of the fire support base; placing wire, fighting holes, obstacles, and of course, claymores, and tripflares in their protective defense plan. The defensive fire plan was fired and prepared prior to last light." This preparation paid off for at 0215 on the 1st, a small enemy force attempting to probe Whisman hit a listening post, causing the death of two Marines and alerting the fire base. As a result, defenders from Company G ably countered the subsequent heavy attack against the base, killing 19 of the enemy while suffering minor casualties. This attack on Whisman, remarked Colonel Danowitz, "was an unusual aspect of the operation, because never before had the enemy been able to strike within hours of the initial establishment of the fire support base.

But in this case it was attempted and very readily thwarted.”¹⁹

During the attack on Whisman, a prisoner as well as a defector were taken, both of whom acknowledged the existence of a command post of the *57th NVA Regiment* to the southwest of the fire support base. Exploiting this information, Lieutenant Colonel Fox directed Companies F and G toward the area reported to contain the enemy headquarters. But before this could be accomplished, the battalion received fresh intelligence indicating the movement of a large enemy force northeast toward Hill 824 (Dong Cho). Danowitz therefore redirected the attack toward the hill mass, with the two companies of the 2d Battalion moving to the northeast along the Da Krong, and two companies of the 3d Battalion advancing east from Shepherd. “The terrain,” reported Lieutenant Colonel Swigart, “was very rough, characterized by triple-canopy rain forest and elephant grass that ran as high as 12 feet Because of the hot weather, I guess the troops suffered more in the elephant grass than they did in the triple-canopy because down in the 12-foot-high elephant grass, there was no breeze at all, in fact there was the feeling that you couldn’t breathe properly.”²⁰

As elements of the two battalions converged on Hill

824, it became increasingly evident that the enemy was deployed around the hill in strength. Advancing to the northeast on 5 June, Company H encountered a dug-in enemy battalion on the southern banks of the Da Krong. During the initial engagement, which lasted more than 12 hours, 29 enemy troops were killed; subsequent sweeps of the area revealed additional bodies, numerous bunkers, caves, and living quarters, all of which were destroyed. As Marines of Swigart’s battalion continued to move toward the hill, they too encountered and engaged sizable enemy forces. “The enemy encountered,” noted Lieutenant Colonel Swigart, “were quite effective, they were well-armed, well-supplied, they had on new uniforms, and indications were that they were an enemy force that had been newly introduced into the area of operations.”²¹

On 11 June, elements of the 2d Battalion resecured Fire Support Base Henderson in preparation for the positioning of two batteries of the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines. The remainder of Fox’s battalion continued search operations along the Da Krong in the southwestern sector of the assigned regimental area, with little success, until the 15th, when the battalion returned to Vandegrift Combat Base.

View of Dong Ap Bia, or Hamburger Hill, after it was secured by elements of the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, which suffered more than 300 casualties in taking the hill.

Author’s Collection



Swigart's Marines continued company sweeps in the Dong Cho Mountain complex until the 18th when ordered to reorient their advance toward the western portion of the area of operations, south of Shepherd, in an effort to exploit a number of reconnaissance sightings. On the 23d, Task Force Hotel shifted operational control of the battalion to Task Force Guadalcanal in anticipation of the battalion's relief of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines.

Intelligence gained during Operation Cameron Falls, in addition to sensor reports, aerial observation, and reconnaissance patrol reports, indicated that during May and early June, elements of a second regiment of the *304th NVA Division*, the *24th*, and attached support units, had infiltrated south and east, toward the Khe Sanh Plateau. As a result, a joint task force, codenamed Guadalcanal, consisting of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines and Task Force Mustang from the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), was established, and in coordination with the 2d and 3d Battalions, 2d ARVN Regiment, directed by Task Force Hotel to drive the NVA out.

The joint Marine, Army, and ARVN effort in the Khe Sanh Plateau, codenamed Utah Mesa, began on 12 June with the helilift of Lieutenant Colonel Culkin's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines into LZ Bison and FSB Cates, and the 3d Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment into FSB Quantico, northeast of Khe Sanh. Their mission was to conduct offensive sweeps west to Khe Sanh, destroying troops and supplies, securing the division's western flank, and spoiling any enemy attempted buildup which might threaten allied installations and lines of communications. ARVN forces, although considered an integral element, operated in a separate area, generally north of the Marine and Army task force, which gradually advanced to the southwest, along an axis centered on Route 9.

On 13 June, the 2d Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment, lifted into LZ Cokawa, north of FSB Cates, and began searching to the west. Two days later, Culkin's Company D moved to LZ Horn in order to secure the flanks of Task Force Mustang, which consisted of Companies B and C, 1st Battalion, 61st Mechanized Infantry, and Company B, 1st Battalion, 77th Armor, advancing west along Route 9.

Reacting to the combined thrust, elements of the *24th Regiment* conducted a series of night attacks against allied units, the first taking place on 18th. Between 0335 and 0530, an estimated 100 NVA troops attacked Company B, 61st Infantry's night defensive

position, east of Lang Vei. Using machine gun and RPG fire, the enemy broke through the perimeter and engaged Army troops in heavy close combat. At dawn, the enemy withdrew, leaving 11 bodies inside the defensive wire and 30 outside, in addition to 12 weapons and 100 satchel charges. Company B lost 11 killed and 15 wounded as a result of the attack.

Later that morning, a squad-size reconnaissance patrol from Company C, 9th Marines, while searching an area three kilometers southeast of Khe Sanh, engaged a well-armed, well-entrenched, and well-camouflaged NVA company. The enemy initiated the ambush with a burst of .50 caliber machine gun fire, instantly killing three Marines. The squad returned fire, knocking out the machine gun position, and called for reinforcements. The enemy company then maneuvered to outflank the squad; however, the squad, having linked up with a nearby platoon, struck the enemy's right flank. The remainder of Company C joined the battle and assaulted the enemy position, driving the NVA company southward, into artillery blocking fires.

Continuing the push westward, elements of the task force were again struck on the 20th. Early that morning, the enemy, in three separate ground attacks, hit the combined position of Company B, 61st Infantry and Company D, 9th Marines. With the assistance of helicopter gunship fire, fixed-wing air strikes, and artillery, Army and Marine infantrymen repulsed the assaults, accounting for 27 NVA dead. Two days later, Marines of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines effected a relief-in-place of Culkin's battalion, which then moved to Vandegrift Combat Base, where it stood down in preparation for redeployment to Okinawa.

Throughout the remainder of the operation, the number of engagements between allied forces and elements of the *24th* remained high, as small enemy units, in an attempt to halt the advance, continued to attack friendly night defensive positions, but without success. On 24 June, two NVA platoons assailed the positions of Company K, 9th Marines, south of Route 9. "On the morning of the 24th at about 0130," reported First Lieutenant Patrick P. Oates, commanding the 1st Platoon, "our ambush, which was out about 75 meters, was hit from three different sides. They were hit mainly by chicombs [grenades] and small arms fire. This alerted the lines, everybody got on stand-to and the ambush started filtering in one by one . . . Nobody on the sector of the lines where the ambush was, opened-up until after all of the am-



Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center
Engineers accompanying the 9th Marines clear a landing zone for resupply and medical evacuation helicopters in heavily wooded terrain south of Vandegrift.

bush was in with the exception of the one Marine who was killed." At about the same time, other sections of the company's position came under fire. "After the last of the ambush came in," continued Lieutenant Oates, "1st Platoon sector started receiving heavy small arms fire, at which time we called in 60mm mortar missions which gave us outstanding support, and knocked out the depth of the attack and broke up the main attack. We had several different occasions where they came very close to the line and then the troops could hear them crawling through the elephant grass on their retreat. This firefight lasted about four and a half hours At approximately 7 a.m. we started a sweep of the area and that is when we started coming up with all the bodies and gear. Closest bodies were about 10 to 15 meters from the lines; there we found AKs and Chinese light machine guns."

On the morning of the 26th, Company K moved westward toward a series of knobs where it set-in for the night and where it was again struck. "We had a real fine perimeter that night," reported Lieutenant Oates, "and we were hit . . . by an estimated two com-

panies of NVA. This firefight lasted between two and one half and three hours and we had good support all the way around On the morning of the 27th, we did find numerous rifles and automatic weapons, and this time two flamethrowers showed up. During both of these fire fights, on the 24th and 26th, the fire discipline that we had was very good."²² As a result of both actions, the enemy lost 41 killed. In yet another attack, two enemy companies struck at Company I, 9th Marines, on FSB Tenaru, east of Lang Vei, on the 27th, losing another 22 dead. In all attacks, the enemy failed to penetrate beyond the defensive wire.

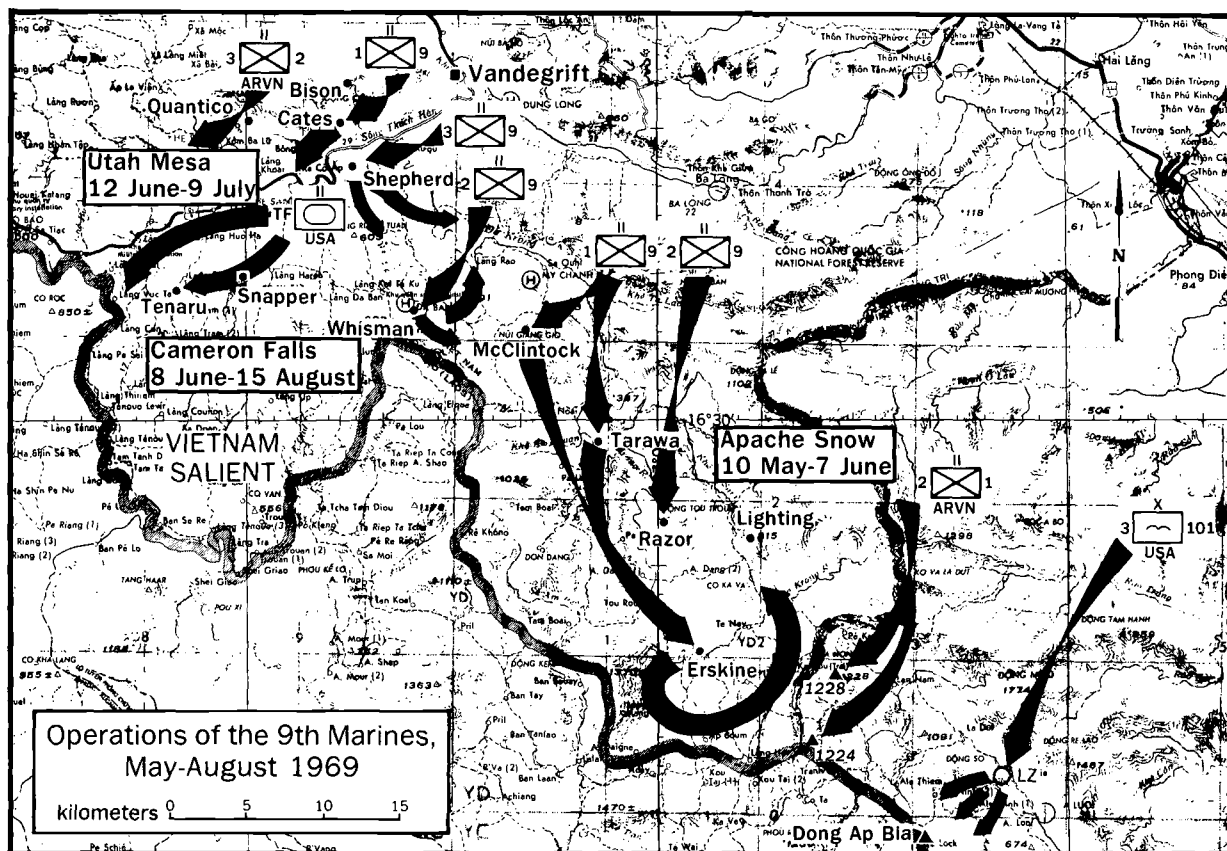
On 2 July, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, under Major Robert L. Modjeski, who had replaced Lieutenant Colonel Fox on the 22d, helilifted 14 kilometers south of Khe Sanh in order to reactivate FSB Spark and conduct sweeps of Route 926 in support of Task Force Guadalcanal. Shortly after reoccupying the base, Modjeski noted, "the NVA immediately began registering 82mm mortars on the position. Towards evening a brisk mortar exchange built up which our artillery also entered into. The battalion sustained about 40 casualties, mostly from mortar shrapnel." The following morning, Modjeski sent his maneuver companies in search of the enemy mortars, which subsequently displaced out of range.²³ With the regiment alerted for redeployment to Okinawa, the 2d and 3d Battalions were pulled out of the Khe Sanh Plateau and returned to Vandegrift Combat Base on the 6th, thus terminating Operation Utah Mesa.

When it appeared that the enemy was seeking to reestablish a strong presence in western Quang Tri Province following the Dewey Canyon defeat, the 3d Marine Division, in conjunction with Army and ARVN forces, fought back. In the four major allied strikes into the area, the North Vietnamese lost over 600 troops and a number of important supply depots. As a result of the continued pressure, the enemy units were again forced to withdraw into their Laotian sanctuaries.

Central DMZ Battles

During May and June, the central and western portions of Quang Tri Province, just south of the Demilitarized Zone and north of Route 9, were again targeted by the 3d Marine Division. The enemy, however, failed to expose his large units, favoring instead sapper and indirect fire attacks against allied installations, while holding his major forces in sanctuaries north of the DMZ.

The 36th NVA Regiment, 308th Division, which had replaced the 27th in central Quang Tri following



See Reference Map, Sections 10-12, 16, 17

the latter regiment's defeat, was itself driven back into the zone during the successful 9th Marines, ARVN, and 1st Brigade operations in March and April. But by the beginning of May, elements of the 27th and 36th again began to filter back into the central portion of the province. Colonel Lafond's 3d Marines, having successfully cleared the Vietnam Salient in Operation Maine Crag, was tasked with destroying the remnants of both regiments, and preventing any enemy attempts at interdicting Route 9 or interfering with the ongoing rice harvest.

On 2 May, Lafond's regiment began Operation Virginia Ridge, as Lieutenant Colonel John S. Kyle's 1st Battalion assaulted into LZ Sparrow, eight kilometers northwest of Cam Lo, immediately engaging small groups of NVA. The 3d Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Richard C. Schulze, secured Fire Support Bases Fuller and Pete, northeast of Elliott Combat Base, and began sweeping north toward the DMZ, while the Marines of Lieutenant Colonel McMonagle's 2d Battalion provided security for Con Thien, Charlie-2, Cam Lo Bridge, Cam Lo District Headquarters, Khe Gio Bridge, and Route 9, and furnished contingents for mine sweeps emanating from all fixed in-

stallations and roving patrols of the surrounding terrain.²⁴

By 6 May, Kyle's battalion had swept west onto Mutter's Ridge, near Landing Zones Ironsides and Junior, three kilometers from Sparrow. Four days later at 0415, Company D, in a night defensive position west of Ironsides, came under attack by an estimated NVA platoon employing RPG, grenades, and small arms fire. After 10 minutes the enemy broke contact and withdrew to the northeast, leaving eight Marines dead and 10 wounded.

Constant patrolling and company sweeps were the rule as Kyle's battalion continued westward and Schulze's 3d battalion move north, engaging small groups of enemy troops. On 16 May, a patrol from Company M, operating north of LZ Champ, received small arms and RPG fire from approximately 10 enemy troops entrenched in bunkers. The platoon-size patrol, using air, artillery, mortars, and CS gas, maneuvered up to and through the bunker complex, killing four and capturing one weapon.

During the remainder of May, the 1st Battalion, now under Lieutenant Colonel David G. Herron, who had

replaced Kyle on the 11th, turned and swept east toward LZ Comet and Alpha-4, as did the 3d Battalion. Engagements with infiltrating troops of the 27th and 36th remained light except for a number of attacks against Marine positions. Twenty NVA, employing grenades, probed the perimeter of Company C on 20 May without breaching the wire. A search at first light revealed 15 enemy bodies and a number of weapons; Company C lost three killed and eight wounded. Two days later, Company B trapped 30 NVA between the company's night position and a platoon ambush. Using 60mm mortars and small arms fire, the company routed the enemy, killing 19 and capturing two prisoners.

While Herron and Schulze's battalions advanced eastward, just south of the Demilitarized Zone, the division directed both to begin a series of reconnaissance patrols within the zone. These patrols were to collect evidence of enemy troop presence and, if possible, capture prisoners. However, the patrols experienced limited success, as it was necessary to put a company within mortar range of the zone in order to provide patrol support. The supporting companies, as a result, were subjected to numerous enemy mortar

A CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter lowers a load of supplies at a 3d Marine Division fire base. The supplies, flown out from Force Logistic Support Group Bravo at Dong Ha, included rations, water, and all types of ammunition to sustain not only the artillery battery, but ground forces operating in the surrounding terrain.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193235



attacks, sustaining losses that proved to be unacceptable. The special patrols were thus discontinued and a two- to three-kilometer patrol zone reestablished below the DMZ.

The first of several B-52 raids (Arc Lights) carried out during the operation within the 3d Marines' area of responsibility, just south of the DMZ, occurred on the night of 6-7 June. Based on continuous enemy activity over the previous several weeks, the eastern portion of Mutter's Ridge, Foxtrot Ridge, and Helicopter Valley were struck by six separate Arc Lights. Within an hour of the last bomb drop, Marines of Lieutenant Colonel McMonagle's 2d Battalion conducted heliborne assaults into a number of landing zones near Junior, in an effort to exploit the strikes and conduct bomb damage assessment (BDA). The Marines found few enemy dead, but numerous bunkers destroyed, and the concealing foliage ripped away from several known and suspected enemy redoubts. The destruction was so devastating, that it was suspected many more NVA soldiers lost their lives than were found. After exploiting the area, the 2d Battalion moved south, conducting search and clear operations north of Route 9.

In mid-June, the regiment received a number of intelligence reports from local informants indicating that a large unknown enemy unit was in the process of infiltrating from the DMZ into a portion of Leatherneck Square, southwest of Gio Linh. "It looked to us," reported Captain William J. Quigley, regimental S-2, "like an indication that he was either going to attack C-2, which at that time was in our AO, or he was after C-1 in the ARVN AO. But he was definitely coming down for something. For this operation we selected the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and because of being in close proximity to the DMZ as it was where the enemy was building up, we needed to try something unique to see if we could catch the enemy off-balance and not tip our hands."

The battalion loaded on trucks after dark on the 16th and then advanced up Route 1 in column, "brazenly heading right for the DMZ, which had never been done before, and nobody would ever think of doing a thing like this." The bold plan worked; "when the 3d Battalion was moving up Route 1 toward the DMZ, elements of the 27th Regiment and the 33d Sapper Battalion were going the other way southward." "Actually," reported Quigley, "what happened was that we passed one another; the 3d Battalion being on the road and them people coming down through the flat-

lands, heading toward Charlie-1 The timing was just one of those things, just once in a hundred that you run into, that we hit them on the way down, caught them coming down from the DMZ; he was decimated by artillery fire." "In fact," Quigley continued, "he got hurt so bad that his own sappers from the 33d Sapper Battalion, when they did reach Charlie-1, they ran into the Charlie-1 minefields. Which of course is a very unusual thing for a sapper to do. The ARVN's on their contact at Charlie-1 hung 56 of the people up in the wire. The 3d Battalion in the meantime sliced in behind them, separating them from the DMZ."²⁵

The night sweep by Schulze's Marines from Gio Linh, southwest toward Con Thien proceeded without incident. At 0930 the next morning, Company M engaged an estimated enemy company occupying hedgerows, three kilometers west of the former Marine artillery position. A half hour later, Company L, two kilometers to the south, engaged an unknown-size enemy force in fortified positions on a small hill. Both firefights raged throughout the morning until the enemy broke contact and fled southward, leaving 20 dead.

At midday, Schulze's command group, accompanied by a platoon from Company K and a section of 106mm recoilless rifles, moved westward in trace of the attacking companies. At 1400, while the group established a forward command post, two kilometers east of Company L, an estimated NVA company launched an intense mortar-supported ground attack against the Marines. The command group's security force, employing the recoilless rifles and small arms, repulsed the enemy force, killing 37 and capturing three. During the height of the action, a platoon from Company L, maneuvering from the west to reinforce the command group, engaged an NVA platoon in a bunker complex. Under the cover of air strikes, the platoon assaulted the enemy position, killing eight NVA and seizing 14 weapons.

Throughout the afternoon, aerial observers directed air strikes and artillery fires on the withdrawing enemy force. Fixed-wing strikes accounted for 57 enemy killed, while another 13 were credited to the artillery. Companies F and G, 2d Battalion, the designated division reaction companies, and Companies A and B, 3d Tank Battalion, were committed to the battle late in the afternoon, but the enemy force had fled the area, and significant contact was not reestablished. The action on the 17th resulted in 193 enemy killed, 9 prisoners taken, and 77 weapons seized. Schulze's battalion, although losing 19 killed and 28 wounded, continued



Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center
Carrying an M60, the standard automatic weapon used by American forces, a machine gunner and his assistant from the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines enter a clearing during a patrol south of the Demilitarized Zone.

search operations in the area until the 21st, when it moved to Cua Viet for a period of rehabilitation.

With the enemy limiting his activity during the remainder of Operation Virginia Ridge, which terminated on 16 July, Colonel Wilbur F. Simlik's regiment* continued search operations throughout the area of operations: the 1st Battalion centered on Alpha-4; the 2d Battalion north of Route 9 at FSB Fuller; and the 3d Battalion, after its return from Cua Viet, operating from Cam Lo.

Also operating within close proximity of the Demilitarized Zone, but west of Colonel Simlik's 3d Marines, was the 4th Marines. With the termination of Operation Purple Martin on 7 May, the 4th Marines remained in place, initiating a two-month operation, codenamed Herkimer Mountain. Continually pressured by Colonel Goggin's regiment, the bulk of

*Colonel Simlik replaced Colonel Paul D. Lafond as Commanding Officer, 3d Marines on 28 June.

enemy units operating northwest of Elliott Combat Base had been forced to withdraw northward into North Vietnamese havens, leaving behind roving bands of sapper, rocket, and reconnaissance units which attempted to disrupt Marine combat and logistical operations. As in Purple Martin, the regiment's mission remained the same, Major Charles W. Cobb, Jr., S-3 of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, noted:

Our primary mission, of course, was to conduct offensive operations north of, and occupy, Fire Support Bases Neville and Russell. And we had in the back of our minds that the real reason we were out there in this AO was to deny the enemy the use of the avenues of approach from the Laotian border through the west, down around the Lang Ho Valley and the Route that traveled from the northwest to the southeast right through the northern part of our AO and just south of the DMZ, the Cam Lo River Valley. Both of these areas had been used, based on the intelligence information we received, by the enemy over a period of years, and by occupying the areas that we did and by keeping the companies out on the move constantly, . . . I really think we kept them honest and negated their attempts, if there were any, to use these avenues of approach into the 4th Marines AO.²⁶

The operation began with the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines relieving the 2d Battalion on LZ Catapult and FSB Neville, which then moved to Cua Viet for a period of rehabilitation. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines continued to operate from FSB Russell and LZ Sierra, to the northeast, while the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, awaiting redeployment, manned installations from Vandegrift Combat Base to Hill 950 (FSB Cates), west along Route 9. Participation of the 9th Marines varied during the operation as elements were shifted to other operations throughout the divisional area of operations, and then redeployed.

Enemy activity remained at a low level as 4th and 9th Marines fought sporadic engagements with small groups of NVA. The first significant fight took place at 1610 on 10 May. While moving north from Neville, Company B, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines took small arms fire, wounding five Marines. Pressing the attack, the Marines moved onto the high ground and continued the pursuit until the enemy broke contact. Air strikes and artillery were called, but with unknown results. The following day, a local security patrol from Company K, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, near LZ Dodge on the DMZ, surprised two well-armed NVA moving toward the company's night defensive position. The enemy soldiers were taken under fire; a sweep the following morning revealed two bodies with TNT strapped to their waists.

Goggin's Marines conducted extensive and continuous patrols throughout the ever-shrinking area of operations during the remainder of May and into June. Engagements with small groups of NVA soldiers were infrequent and of a short duration, as the enemy quickly withdrew when pressed. Noteworthy incidents, however, took place, one of which Major Cobb described:

A recon insert into the DMZ, which was put in sometime around the 7th or 8th of June, ran into some problems and they had a platoon commander killed and they were surrounded during most of the night. And we received an order from regiment that the "Sparrow Hawk," which is the ready platoon that is maintained at Vandegrift Combat Base under the OP control of the 3d Marine Division and is deployable on short notice to any trouble spots, would be flown up to the LZ located in the vicinity of Bravo Company and join up with them and move into the DMZ and help extract these recon people. While the planning of this was going on, there was another recon team in heavy contact about 4,000 meters from them inside the DMZ. Originally the plan was to take out the recon inserts as they normally do by helicopter, but in the process they had two CH-46s shot down: one of the crews immediately was picked up, the other crew joined one of the recon teams and set in for the night. And it was at that point that the decision was made to not lose anymore helicopters and that we would send B Company up in there, reinforced by the "Sparrow Hawk" platoon and also a reaction force from the 3d Recon Battalion to go up and bring them out of the DMZ. There were many complications in this operation that gave us some trouble. The tremendous heat for one thing down in the valleys and draws without any breeze; the high temperatures; the steep terrain; and the jungle canopy and the growth, the brier and bramble, that resulted in the troops having to cut their way through and it seemed like an endless task to eventually get to these people and then extract them. They had to get resupplied with water and chow and the whole operation took a little better than two days before it was finally over with . . . The operation went off pretty well without losing any more people.²⁷

Month's end found Goggin's Marines fending off no enemy attack other than attacks by fire against the regiment's installations.²⁸

Eastern Quang Tri and Thua Thien

While a majority of Marine operations were conducted in central and western Quang Tri Province, responsibility for the coastal lowlands and piedmont was divided between the 2d ARVN Regiment and 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). The ARVN Regiment operated mainly in Leatherneck Square, while the 1st Brigade secured the coast from the DMZ south to the Quang Tri/Thua Thien Provincial boundary. Consisting of the 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry; 1st Battalion, 61st Infantry (Mechanized); 1st



Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center

Two 3d Division Marines escort a captured North Vietnamese Army soldier to the unit's command post where he will be questioned by division intelligence personnel in an effort to obtain information as to his unit's location, strength, morale, and objectives.

Battalion, 77th Armor; and elements of the 4th Battalion, 12th Cavalry; 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry; 1st Battalion, 40th Artillery; and the Marine 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, the brigade operated from Camp Red Devil (Dong Ha Combat Base), LZ Sharon, LZ Nancy, and Wunder Beach. In addition to periodically providing task groups to assist Marines, the brigade conducted a number of independent operations in southwestern Quang Tri Province, while securing major allied coastal installations.

During March and April, elements of the mechanized brigade conducted search and clear operations in Base Area 101, southwest of Quang Tri Combat Base. In May, following Montana Mauler and Ellis Ravine in central Quang Tri, the brigade again moved into Base Area 101, with elements also operating in the coastal lowlands near Landing Zones Nancy and Sharon. The brigade's mission was to prevent enemy forces from entering or leaving populated areas and to deny the enemy rice by destroying his rice-gathering forces. During Operation Massachusetts Bay, which be-

gan on 7 May and concluded on 18 June, elements of the brigade saw light contact, consisting of ambushes and probes, and accounted for 61 enemy killed and 50 suspects detained. With the termination of Massachusetts Bay, the brigade began the follow-up operation, Iroquois Grove, in the same area and with an identical mission.

In Thua Thien Province to the south, the 101st Airborne Division prepared to conduct the follow-on division-level operation, Kentucky Jumper, with the termination of Operation Nevada Eagle on 28 February. This operation, begun on 1 March, continued the combined 101st Airborne and 1st ARVN Division effort in support of the Republic's Accelerated Pacification Campaign in the coastal lowlands around Hue, and forays into the mountains of western Thua Thien Province in an attempt to halt infiltration from Laos. Operation Kentucky Jumper (1 March - 14 August) included the following sub-operations: Bristol Boots (25 April - 15 May) directed against elements of the 5th NVA Regiment in the Ruong Ruong Valley; Mas-

sachusetts Striker (1 March - 8 May) in the southern A Shau Valley and northern regions of Quang Nam Province; and Montgomery Rendezvous (7 June - 14 August), directed against Viet Cong forces operating in Phu Loc and Hien Doc Districts, south of Hue.

Also during this period, the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division participated in the XXIV Corps operation, Apache Snow (10 May - 7 June), in the northern A Shau Valley. In addition, the 1st Brigade joined the Americal Division in southern I Corps, assisting the division for three months in Operation Lamar Plain.

Throughout the first six months of 1969, Marine, Army, and ARVN troops continued the relentless and successful pursuit and destruction of enemy forces in northern I Corps. From the Da Krong Valley and Vietnam Salient in the west to Leatherneck Square in the east, and along the Demilitarized Zone within Quang Tri Province, troops of the 3d, 4th, and 9th Marines aggressively and repeatedly forced the enemy to withdraw into cross-border sanctuaries, thereby spoiling any attempt at a military victory in far northern I Corps.

PART II
SOUTHERN I CORPS BATTLEGROUND

CHAPTER 6

Destruction of Base Area 112

Defense of Da Nang—Attack into 112—"A Little Urban Renewal"—Americal's TAOI

Defense of Da Nang

The surge in enemy ground combat activity witnessed during the last months of 1968 in the provinces of Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai, which composed southern I Corps Tactical Zone, moderated somewhat as 1969 began. The eastern portion of Quang Nam Province, however, again produced the highest level of enemy action as NVA and VC forces subordinate to the *4th Front Headquarters* pursued a limited tactical course of ground, rocket, and mortar attacks against friendly installations, in preparation, many allied intelligence analysts thought, for a major thrust against Da Nang. In addition, the enemy persisted in attempts to control the civilian population and major rice-producing areas of the province by resorting to terrorism, intimidation, kidnappings, and the assassination of local government officials. Operating within the boundaries of Quang Nam, and subject to the *4th Front*, was the *2d NVA Division* and its subordinate regiments: the *1st Viet Cong*; *21st NVA*; *31st Independent*; *36th NVA*; *38th NVA*; *141st NVA*; *68B NVA Artillery (Rocket)*; and the *368B NVA Artillery (Rocket)*. All were thought to be located in the mountains either southwest of Da Nang, or those astride the provincial border with Quang Tin.

In the southern two provinces of I Corps, Quang Tin and Quang Ngai, regiments controlled by *Headquarters Military Region 5* and the *3d NVA Division*—the *2d Viet Cong*, *3d NVA*, *22d NVA*, *31st NVA*, and the *401st VC (Sapper)*—continued to confine their activities primarily to scattered attacks by fire, interdiction of friendly lines of communication, and the harassment of villages, hamlets, and refugee camps surrounding the cities of Tam Ky and Quang Ngai.

Facing the estimated 37,300 enemy troops in the three provinces at the beginning of 1969, were two major United States combat units: the Army's 23d Infantry (Americal) Division under the command of Major General Charles M. Gettys, and Major General Ormond R. Simpson's 1st Marine Division.

A Texan by birth, Major General Simpson entered the Marine Corps in 1936 and served in the Pacific during World War II. When the Government of



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A372782

MajGen Ormond R. Simpson, as Commanding General, 1st Marine Division, coordinated the activities of four Marine regiments in the defense of Da Nang.

Thailand requested American troops during the Lao-tian Crisis in 1962, CinCPac ordered then-Brigadier General Simpson to Southeast Asia as Commanding General, 3d Marine Expeditionary Brigade, as well as Naval Component Commander, Joint Task Force 116. Following a tour as Commanding General, Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, he assumed command of the 1st Marine Division from Major General Carl A. Youngdale on 20 December 1968.

Under Simpson, the division performed a variety of missions. The division's general task, like that of all other United States combat units, was to locate and destroy enemy forces, installations, and LOCs [lines of communication] within its assigned area of responsibility, in coordination with South Vietnamese and other allied forces. Its primary mission was the defense

of Da Nang and the more than one million South Vietnamese living within the city or nearby. As General Simpson later commented: "The 1st Marine Division was, far beyond all else, tied to the defense of the Da Nang Vital Area. This was exactly as it should have been. Da Nang was clearly a textbook example of a 'Vital Area.' Here were military headquarters, political headquarters and officials, a great seaport, a splendid airfield, a vast array of logistical support apparatus including supplies of every variety, equipment, medical establishments, to say nothing of nearly one million Vietnamese. U.S. Forces could not have operated in ICTZ without Da Nang." Therefore, the division's infantry units and supporting arms were to be "disposed to provide maximum security for the Da Nang vital area, installations and LOCs of greatest political, economic and military importance."¹

Among the secondary tasks assigned the division were to provide security for the continuing engineer effort to improve National Route 1 and logistics craft operating in inland waterways, and to assist Vietnamese forces in the pacification effort. In addition, it was to carry on surveillance, reconnaissance within its tactical area of responsibility (TAOR), and "such other places as assigned."* Elements of the division were also required to furnish support for combined action platoons, Civilian Irregular Defense Group camps, and government district headquarters. Finally, the division was to provide one reinforced battalion for deployment anywhere in South Vietnam on 12-hour notice, and two additional battalions within 24 hours.²

Stretching from above the strategic Hai Van Pass in the north to the rugged Que Son Mountains in the south, the division's TAOR encompassed approximately 1,100 square miles and included most of Quang Nam and small portions of Thua Thien and Quang Tin Provinces. From the flat sand beaches along the South China Sea and the wide bay of Da Nang, the

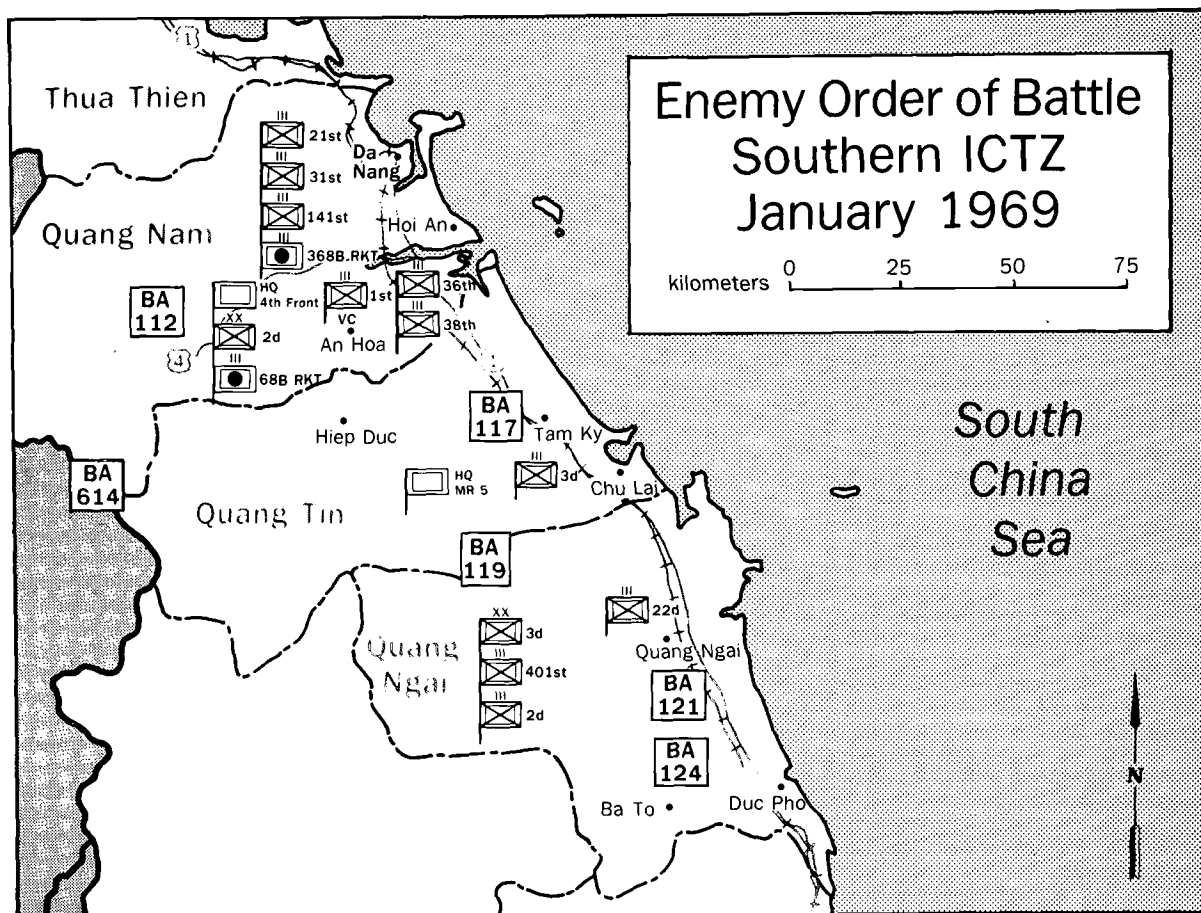
terrain rose westward into the jungle-covered mountains of the Annamite Chain and opened out to the south and southwest into the flat, treeline-broken, rice-paddy country of the An Hoa-Song Thu Bon basins, and Go Noi Island. It was heavily populated terrain which offered the enemy numerous places of defense and concealment, and the Marines a difficult chore of routing them out.

The type of warfare carried on in southern I Corps Tactical Zone was in marked contrast to that fought in northern I Corps, where, as Colonel Robert H. Barrow later noted, "anything that moved you could shoot at because he was the enemy; you did not have to separate the armed threat from the civilian population." Barrow came to appreciate "the most difficult; the most arduous; dirty; psychologically bad situation that confronted those who fought the kind of war that was necessary to fight down in the Da Nang" area. "Those Marines who went out day after day conducting, . . . combat patrols, almost knowing that somewhere on their route of movement, they were going to have some sort of surprise visited on them, either an ambush or explosive device . . . I think that is the worst kind of warfare, not being able to see the enemy. You can't shoot back at him. You are kind of helpless. It is easy to become fatalistic, as indeed a lot of our young men did."³

Centered on Da Nang, the division deployed its four infantry regiments, the 1st, 5th, 7th, and elements of the 26th Marines, in a series of radiating belts. To the north, Colonel Clyde W. Hunter's 26th Marines secured portions of the Hai Van Pass and sections of Route 1. Colonel Herbert L. Beckington's 7th Marines patrolled the scrub-covered piedmont and mountainous jungle that rose to the west. To the southwest, the 5th Marines, under the command of Colonel James B. Ord, Jr., scouted the An Hoa and Song Thu Bon basins. Included within the regiment's area of responsibility was the infamous Arizona Territory, that rice paddy-dotted, enemy-infested region set between the Song Thu Bon and Song Vu Gia. South of Da Nang and north of the area assigned the Korean Marines was Colonel Robert G. Lauffer's 1st Marines, whose area of operations included Dodge City, Go Noi Island, and portions of the coastal lowlands. A reinforced artillery regiment, the 11th Marines, provided fire support for the four infantry regiments, while the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion and 1st Tank Battalion supplemented and reinforced their efforts, as did contingents of engineer, transport, and service troops.

Like all allied forces, the 1st Marine Division coor-

*TAOR, as defined at this time, was "the area assigned to the 1st Marine Division in which the responsibility and authority for the development and maintenance of installations, control of movement, and the control of tactical operations involving troops under division control is vested in the Commanding General, 1st Marine Division. All fire and maneuver conducted within the TAOR, or the effect of which impinge upon the TAOR, must be coordinated with the Commanding General, 1st Marine Division." TAOR differed from an area of operations (AO), which was "an area where forces conduct operations during specific periods of time," and which could be an area within or outside of an existing TAOR. (Anx C, 1stMarDiv OpO 301-YR, dtd 6Feb69, in 1stMarDiv ComdC, Feb69).



See Reference Map, Sections 18-36

minated its efforts with South Vietnamese and Korean Marine forces within Quang Nam Province. The four battalions of the Republic of Korea's 2d Marine Brigade, based at Hoi An, about 27 kilometers southeast of Da Nang, defended a small TAOR stretching from the South China Sea inland to the foothills of the Que Son Mountains. South Vietnamese forces within the province were considerable. Regular ARVN forces consisted of the four-battalion 51st Regiment; the 1st Ranger Group of three battalions; and supporting armor, artillery, and service troops. Civilian Irregular Defense Groups based at Thuong Duc and at Nong Son, deep in the mountains, interdicted important enemy infiltration routes. Protecting the populated areas were Regional Force companies, Popular Force platoons, and a large contingent of the National Police Field Force.

Despite four years of bitter warfare in Quang Nam as the new year began, Marines, together with South Vietnamese and Korean units, faced an estimated force of 24 enemy infantry and support battalions. Although massing from time to time, the enemy

generally adhered to a defensive pattern established during late summer 1968, a posture of consistent refusal to engage friendly forces in a large-scale confrontation. Clearly the enemy was attempting to reconstitute and conserve his troops by holding his formations to relatively secure areas. But the enemy was to be afforded no respite, as 1st Division Marines carried the war into the areas the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese considered safe from attack.

Attack into 112

Numbered among the goals assigned III MAF by both CinCPac and MACV in 1968, was the neutralization of eight enemy base areas within ICTZ. Although not sharply defined, these eight geographic regions were known to harbor training and logistical support facilities of enemy regular and guerrilla forces. Since these areas often covered hundreds of square kilometers of mountainous hinterland and piedmont, and were criss-crossed by thousands of hidden paths, roads, and waterways, absolute neutralization was impractical, if not impossible. It was the destruction and dislocation of the enemy's logistical facilities within



Marine Corps Historical Collection

An infantryman of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines examines several captured 140mm enemy rockets, positioned on earthen firing ramps and ready for launch against Da Nang.

these areas, and the eventual degradation of his combat capabilities, to which CinCPac referred when defining "neutralization" as a condition when the areas were "no longer able to be used for their intended purpose."⁴

During 1968, III MAF conducted 21 operations in the eight enemy base areas. As a result of these operations, two base areas were "neutralized": Base Area 100 in Quang Tin Province; and Base Area 116 in Quang Nam. However, one new base area was established. Designated Base Area 112, it was located in the mountainous region of Quang Nam Province southwest of An Hoa, directly threatening the heavily populated coastal region between Da Nang and Tam Ky.

Neutralization of Base Areas 100 and 116 in mid-1968 had forced the enemy to shift his training and logistical support facilities eastward into the mountains between the Song Thu Bon and Song Cai, and beyond. Early intelligence provided by the U.S. Army Special Forces "Delta Force" confirmed the relocation.*

*Under the Military Assistance Command and the Special Forces, Project Delta was given a long-range reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering mission. Organized into a reconnaissance element and a reaction force, at full strength Project Delta would comprise about 600 men, both U.S. and South Vietnamese. The typical reconnaissance element consisted of eight road patrol teams, and 16 six-man reconnaissance teams.

On 25 October 1968, a number of Delta Force reconnaissance and road teams entered the area in order to determine the identity and location of enemy units. The Army intelligence collection effort, codenamed Operation Warbonnet, continued until 14 November when it was terminated prematurely and the Delta Force teams diverted to other areas within South Vietnam. Defectors and prisoners rounded up by Marines during Operation Meade River in November provided additional intelligence regarding unit identification.

Taken together, reconnaissance and prisoner interrogation reports provided a somewhat accurate list of enemy units and probable locations within Base Area 112. Among the units identified were the two main command elements which controlled NVA and VC activities within Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai Provinces: *Front 4 Headquarters* and *Headquarters Military Region 5*. Attached and directly subordinate to the two headquarters elements, and also located within the base area were the *21st Regiment*, *2d NVA Division*, *220th Transport Regiment*, *Q81st (Deux Xuan)* and *Q83d (Dai Loc) Local Force Battalions*, and *2d Battalion, 141st NVA Regiment*. Reinforcing the estimated 3,500 enemy troops were another 6,000 located just outside the base area in the Que Son Mountains and on Go Noi Island to the east.

Situation appraisals based on the intelligence reports, indicated that the enemy units within Base Area 112 would not defend in strength, but would withdraw their headquarters, supplies, and personnel to the west and southwest, while attempting to delay friendly forces. In addition, the III MAF appraisals expected the enemy to continue to harass allied lines of communication, make maximum use of surprise firing devices, and mount attacks by fire against allied installations, specifically An Hoa Combat Base.⁵

Desirous of eliminating the threat to Da Nang, MACV suggested that an operation be conducted against the enemy base area as a follow-up to the highly successful operation, Meade River.⁶ Preliminary discussions and planning began in late November, as Brigadier General Ross T. Dwyer, Jr., Assistant Division Commander, 1st Marine Division, noted:

There were some planning sessions between respective 1st Division staff and III MAF staff, and then we had some of our own discussions in the 1st Division. It was our view that this was something that a regiment could handle itself. The action officer level of III MAF indicated we'd have to have a task force go out there . . . We didn't think it was really warranted . . . from what they were describing to us. We argued that a reinforced regiment, beefed up out of the existing command structure that was at An Hoa at the time—then the 5th Marines—could do the job. But subsequently, it was determined, and I think at the III MAF level, that one, the task force would be formed and would conduct the operation, and that additional forces would be made available to perform the mission.⁷

III MAF passed word to the 1st Division on 1 December to form the required task force organization. "We started from absolute zero," General Dwyer remembered:

Since no task force staff and its equipment was in existence, the rapid organization of a task force headquarters was an immediate requirement. Under Major General [Carl A.] Youngdale's guidance (he was then CG, 1st Mar Div), I selected Colonel Bob Nichols, then an assistant G-3, as my Chief of Staff. He supervised and directed the formation of the task force headquarters from officers serving in the various division staff sections, from Headquarters Battalion and from the Communications Company. It was purposely designed as a small headquarters because we felt we could satellite on existing facilities at An Hoa. We had our initial meeting of the hastily assembled staff and commenced planning for the operation and for briefing General Abrams. Time was of the essence since the deadlines were short.⁸

On 4 December, the 1st Marine Division activated the temporary command, codenamed Task Force Yankee, designating General Dwyer, a World War II and Korean War veteran and former commanding of-

ficer of the 1st Marines, as its commander.* Later the same day, task force staff section heads briefed General Creighton Abrams on details of the operation at III MAF Headquarters. With no comment or question during the entire briefing, General Abrams at the conclusion turned to General Dwyer and said, "It sounds fine. Go!"⁹

Assigned to the task force were three battalions of Colonel James B. Ord's 5th Marines—Lieutenant Colonel Richard F. Daley's 1st Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel James W. Stemple's 2d Battalion, and Lieutenant Colonel Harry E. Atkinson's 3d Battalion—as were Battalion Landing Team 2/7 under Lieutenant Colonel Neil A. Nelson, and elements of the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company. A small field artillery group was formed from elements of Force Artillery, the 11th, and later the 12th Marines, consisting initially of one 8-inch, two 155mm, four 105mm, and two howtar batteries.** Operating in coordination with Task Force Yankee would be the 1st ARVN Ranger Group, consisting of the 21st, 37th, and the 39th Ranger Battalions, and one brigade of the Americal Division.

The plan for the upcoming operation, codenamed Taylor Common, hammered out two days before the formal activation of Task Force Yankee, called for units of the task force to conduct a three-phase operation to destroy enemy forces, caches, and installations in Base Area 112 and adjacent areas, and to prepare a series of fire support bases extending along likely avenues of approach to the base area from the Laotian border. During phase one, task force units were to conduct search and clear operations from Liberty Bridge to An Hoa in coordination with the 1st ARVN Ranger Group's Operation Le Loi in the An Hoa-Arizona area, in order to destroy elements of the *2d NVA Division*. A series of fire support bases would then be prepared along the approaches to 112. Penetration of the enemy base area by four Marine battalions and the establishment of bases required to support the extensive search and destroy operations would be carried out in phase two. During the final phase, task force units were to conduct reconnaissance and surveillance operations

*At this time there were two assistant division commanders of the 1st Marine Division. General Dwyer was stationed with the division, while Brigadier General Carl W. Hoffman was assigned to III MAF as Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations.

**The howtar resulted from the blending of two existing weapons: the tube of a 4.2-inch mortar mounted on the carriage of a 75mm pack howitzer. The result was a helicopter-transportable, high-trajectory weapon. With the increased evolution toward heavy-lift helicopters and more mobile artillery, the howtar was deleted from the Marine Corps' artillery inventory.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371820

Aerial photograph looks east down the runway at An Hoa Combat Base, the 1st Division's western-most logistical facility and home of Task Force Yankee, commanded by BGen Ross T. Dwyer, Jr., and the 5th Marines, under the command of Col James B. Ord, Jr.

deep into the mountains west of the Song Cai, develop fire support bases to sustain forces completing the neutralization of 112, and interdict the avenues of approach from the Laotian border. Vital to all phases of the operation would be the maintenance of a continuous reconnaissance screen to the north, south, and west of the maneuvering battalions as they progressed westward into the enemy base area.

The weather was a major consideration in the planning as the monsoon season was in full swing. Since Marines would be operating in rugged terrain far from their bases and thus dependent on helicopters, there was thought of waiting for better flying weather. As General Dwyer noted, "we couldn't have picked a worse time weatherwise for helicopter operations in Base Area 112; we were going to be weather sensitive." But, he continued, "we were at the stage where we were told to run an operation, and the climatic conditions were such they said go ahead and run it."¹⁰

With the activation of Task Force Yankee on 4 December, Nelson's Marines, four companies and the command group were released from Operation Meade River, and reembarked on board the *Tripoli* (LPH 10), where all personal gear and organizational equipment was packed for debarkation. The following day, as

operational control of the landing team passed to the 1st Marine Division and then to the 5th Marines, Companies E, F, G, H, and the command group moved by helicopter to An Hoa Combat Base. Simultaneously, the team's rear echelon moved ashore to Camp Love, the 7th Engineer Battalion's command post at Da Nang, where the battalion's administrative and logistical facilities were to be established.

Operation Taylor Common began two days later, on the morning of the 7th, with a heliborne assault by Lieutenant Colonel Nelson's Marines into the southwestern corner of the Arizona Territory, three kilometers west of the Song Thu Bon, opposite An Hoa.* The first wave of Marines from Company H experienced no contact as they landed at LZ Champagne, and were followed immediately by the remaining companies and the command group. In trace, the four companies moved northeast across swollen streams, rice paddies, and through dense treelines, conducting search and clear operations throughout the widely scattered Phu Loi village complex. The 1st ARVN Ranger

*"Arizona Territory," or simply Arizona, was the name given to the rice paddy regions of Dai Loc and Duc Duc Districts lying between the Song Vu Gia and Song Thu Bon. Origin of the term is unknown.

Group assaulted into the northeast corner of the same area on the 10th, and began search and clear operations to the southwest, eventually passing through blocking positions established by Nelson's Marines, who then swept southeastward across the Song Thu Bon to My Son, and then to An Hoa. Meanwhile, elements of Colonel Ord's 5th Marines, following their return from Meade River, conducted a thorough search of their northern area of operations, from Liberty Bridge to An Hoa.

These three operations, in conjunction with the 196th Infantry Brigade's search of the Que Son Mountains to the south, completed the initial phase by sweeping major enemy units from areas adjacent to An Hoa, Liberty Bridge, and Liberty Road, the main supply route between the two. But the operations were not without cost. Although engagements with enemy units were light and scattered during the first four days, surprise firing devices or boobytraps, usually consisting of M26 grenades rigged as antipersonnel mines, wounded eight. Friendly fire killed five and wounded an equal number of Marines. Both of these problems were to plague task force Marines throughout the operation, especially those working in the lowlands.

While search and clear operations were in progress around An Hoa, task force Marines made preparations for the move into Base Area 112. On 9 December, with no additional combat resources available from the 1st Marine Division, Task Force Yankee assumed operational control of the 1st and 3d Battalions, 3d Marines, under Colonel Michael M. Spark, from the 3d Marine Division: the 1st would join Operation Taylor Com-

mon on the 13th, and the 3d the following day. According to General Davis, the two battalions were provided to assist the 1st Marine Division in its "first 'high mobility' operation out into the hills."¹¹

Also in preparation for the assault, Task Force Yankee established a main logistical area with 10-day supply levels of rations and ammunition at An Hoa, in addition to a forward direct air support center (DASC). Located near the artillery fire support coordination center (FSCC), in order to pool "Save-a-Plane" information for the protection of aircraft, the DASC would not only control Marine fixed-wing and helicopter support, but also Air Force transport aircraft provided by the 15th Aerial Port Squadron, fire-ship (AC-47) or "Spooky," and AC-119 or "Shadow" assistance furnished by the 14th Special Operations Wing, and special mission aircraft for heavy ordnance drops by the Seventh Air Force within the area of operation. During this period of preparation, the first four fire support base sites were selected and bombarded by B-52, fixed-wing, and concentrated artillery fire with the heaviest barrages directed against the sites designated Lance and Pike. But due to the distance (eight kilometers) between Lance, the main artillery support site, and An Hoa, a temporary mobile fire support base, close to Lance and oriented southward, was opened. Its mission was to provide complementary fire support to the Nong Song Civilian Irregular Defense Group and two Mobile Strike Force companies operating along the Song Thu Bon and southern Taylor Common boundary. Battery K, 4th Battalion, 13th Marines, a self-propelled 155mm Howitzer (M109) bat-

A tank of the 1st Tank Battalion conducts a sweep of Liberty Road, the main thoroughfare between Da Nang and An Hoa, in preparation for the build-up at the combat base.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Marine Corps Historical Collection

Photograph provides an overhead view of An Hoa logistics operations center and the passenger and cargo pad beyond. The center coordinated the helicopter movement of personnel and supplies in support of combat operations in Base Area 112 and the Arizona.

tery, supported by Company L, 5th Marines, moved overland on the 10th to establish Fire Base Marne on the eastern shore of the Song Thu Bon, five kilometers from Lance.¹²

Phase two of Operation Taylor Common began on 11 December with an assault against Hill 575, the site selected for Lance. The location had been visually reconnoitered prior to preparatory fires by Zone Interpretation, Planning, Preparation, and Overfly (ZIPPO) and Fire Base Interpretation, Reconnaissance, Planning, Preparation and Overfly (FIRPPO) Teams to determine its suitability as a landing zone and subsequent development as a fire support base.* Although the preparatory fires cleared a large proportion of the vegetation from the landing zone, a few large tree trunks remained, necessitating the use of rappel techniques to land engineers and a small security force, who cleared an area large enough to accommodate a helicopter. Within two hours, division engineers created an adequate zone and the main assault element

of Lieutenant Colonel Atkinson's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines landed and established perimeter security for the engineers, who then began construction of artillery positions, ammunition and command bunkers, and further enlarged the base.

Once the security force was in position and the supporting artillery batteries in place, rifle companies of Atkinson's battalion radiated from Lance, initiating deliberate search and clear operations. The established patrol pattern resembled a clover leaf, expanding as Marines secured areas near the fire support base. This pattern of operation characterized the establishment of the next three support bases: Pike (Hill 214), opened by the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines on 13 December; Spear (Hill 558), occupied by the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines on the 15th; and Mace (Hill 375), taken by the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines on the 19th. In constructing Spear and Mace, Spark's Marines encountered problems. The initial clearing fires were insufficient and had to be augmented by 10,000-pound demolition bombs (MK121), known as "Combat Traps," dropped by Air Force C-130 aircraft manned by personnel of the 434th Air Division from Tan Son Nhut Airbase, near Saigon. Although partially successful on

*ZIPPO and FIRPPO Teams, composed of air, artillery, engineer, and infantry representatives, determined the selection and suitability of a fire support base, and the subsequent placement of guns, command bunkers, and storage areas.

Spear, the explosive force of the bombs was not strong enough to completely clear the required area on the extremely narrow ridgelines selected for Spear and Mace. Standard 500- and 1,000-pound bombs, rockets, and napalm then were used to clear away the multi-layered, 70- to 80-foot canopy, and thick secondary growth which generally covered the terrain in Base Area 112.¹³

With the establishment of four Marine battalions, under the operational control of the 3d Marines, in the eastern zone of Base Area 112, search and destroy operations against an area of reported enemy activity and concentrated installations began. During the next two weeks, Marines, in their search, found and destroyed several enemy base camps, fighting positions, hospitals, and an enemy prison camp: all of which had been vacated before the Marines arrived. Engagements were few as the enemy withdrew westward, leaving only a handful of troops to slow the advance. For many Marines, this was their first experience operating in mountainous terrain, as Lance Corporal Rick L. Wackle related:

This was completely new for me because I had never operated up in the canopied areas. It was a whole new type of warfare up there. The density of the woods, vines, jungle; it's really thick and it's nagging and tiresome to work in, and everything is against you up there Being it was so thick up there, it was very easy to walk past a village; the foliage and coverage was unbelievable; you couldn't detect anything from what was right or wrong.¹⁴

In conjunction with the search and destroy mission, Task Force Yankee mounted ground operations against Hills 1050 and 551, subsequently designated Dagger and Cutlass. Lieutenant Colonel Richard C. Schulze's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines secured the former and assisted in the establishment of a communications retransmission site. Lieutenant Colonel Richard B. Twohey's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines took the latter and began to exploit a major trail network identified near Mace. The battalions of the ARVN Ranger Group, meanwhile, continued search and clear operations in the Arizona area, relieving Lieutenant Colonel Nelson's battalion landing team, which assaulted into the northwestern portion of Go Noi Island on 17 December. Sweeping south, the battalion displaced to An Hoa Combat Base two days later, having met only light resistance. On the 23d, the 21st and 39th Ranger Battalions, operating in the piedmont west of Phu Loi, encountered and then fought an estimated NVA battalion, killing 158 and capturing 18 individual and 10 crew-served weapons.



Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center
Fire Support Base Lance was the first of many infantry and artillery positions constructed in support of Task Force Yankee operations in the enemy base area.

Near Taylor Common's southern boundary, the two Special Forces Mobile Strike companies and the Nong Song Irregular Company continued reconnaissance operations along the upper Song Thu Bon. Although these forces were relatively small, they did provide timely intelligence and proved to be an impediment to the flow of enemy supplies and troops that previously had used the area as a route into the Que Son Mountains and the flatlands beyond. Further south, the 196th Infantry Brigade continued to maintain blocking positions, as well as search operations in the Que Sons in order to prevent an enemy escape.

With the new year, Taylor Common moved into the third and final phase of operations. Combat action centered on two regions, the An Hoa basin, the scene of constant enemy activity throughout most of 1968, and Base Area 112, the high ground lying to the west and southwest.

On 1 January, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines lifted into Combat Operations Base (COB) Javelin, signaling the initiation of operations in the western zone of Base Area 112; more specifically, the penetration of the large basin between the Ong Thu slope and the Nui Gaing-Yang Brai ridgelines near the Song Cai.* Following the establishment of Javelin, the bombardment of Hill 508, future site of FSB Maxwell, began. Although

*A combat operations base was similar in character to a fire support base, but did not include artillery.

more than 177 tons of high explosives were used to clear a landing zone, the number of exposed tree trunks and the continued enemy small arms fire, prevented Marines from being inserted by air. As a result, Lieutenant Colonel Twohey's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines landed on nearby Hill 728 and attacked toward Hill 508 over Hill 401, finally securing the objective on the 15th. With the six 105mm howitzers of Battery C, 12th Marines in position on Maxwell, Spark's Marines were ready to pursue enemy forces westward, searching and clearing the remainder of 112.

Executing heliborne assaults from fire support and combat bases into selected landing zones, the infantry battalions fanned out in local search operations, upon the successful completion of which they moved still deeper into the base area: the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines conducting clearing operations south and west of Cutlass through COB Dart to COB Battle-Ax and FSB Bolo; the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel Atkinson, continuing operations through COB Broadsword toward FSB Tomahawk; and Lieutenant Colonel Twohey's 1st Battalion conducting search operations with companies advancing on

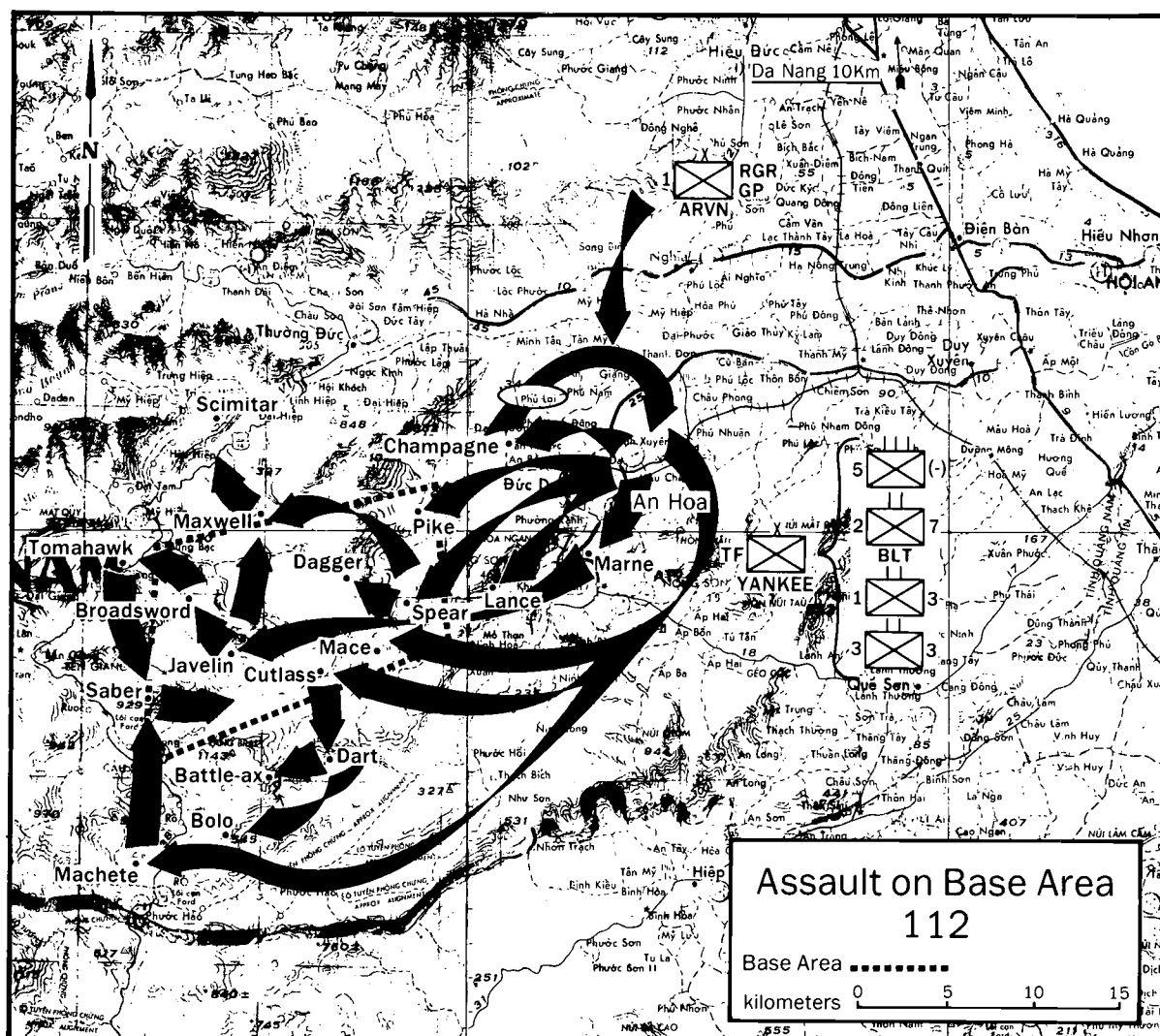
parallel axis north and west of Maxwell, and then developing COB Scimitar on Mai Guy ridgeline overlooking the confluence of the Song Cai and Song Boung. By 5 February, units of Task Force Yankee were operating along the entire length of the Song Cai within Base Area 112, while 1st Force Reconnaissance Company teams penetrated deep into the western approaches.

The four Marine battalions, radiating from the widely dispersed combat and fire support bases, developed numerous contacts with evading enemy units no larger than platoons, resulting in an undramatic, but steady, attrition of enemy troops. Beyond the generally light ground combat, they uncovered abundant evidence confirming substantial enemy strength within the base area. Patrolling units continued to locate many base camps, supply stores, weapons, and ammunition caches. On 5 January, for example, Company E, 5th Marines unearthed an arms cache containing 166 rifles and three crew-served weapons, 11 kilometers west of An Hoa near FSB Pike. A logistics complex discovered by Companies C and D, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, 10 kilometers southwest of Thuong

A Marine patrol pauses in the dense jungle undergrowth. Fighting not only the terrain but also excessive heat and humidity, Marines found the search of Base Area 112 exhausting.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





See Reference Map, Sections 31-33, 37, 38

Duc on the 22d, yielded twenty-two 122mm rockets, a thousand 82mm mortar rounds, 501 RPG rounds, 25 rifles, 17 cases of small arms ammunition, nearly 12 tons of rice, and a pen containing 65 live pigs.

It was during this period that the 3d Marines suffered a profound loss. While on visual reconnaissance south of FSB Maxwell on the 15th, an Army UH-1H helicopter received automatic weapons fire causing it to crash and burn. On board were Colonel Michael M. Spark; the regimental sergeant major, Ted E. McClintock; the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 12th Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Ernil L. Whisman; and Colonel Spark's radio operator, Lance Corporal Fredrick D. Kansik. All, including the helicopter's Army crew, were killed. Colonel Paul D. Lafond assumed command of the 3d Marines, while Lieutenant Colonel Roddey B. Moss took over the 1st Battalion, 12th Marines.

Detailed search operations within Base Area 112 continued throughout the remaining days of January and into February. On the 6th, Task Force Yankee initiated operations west of the Song Cai as the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, following a short rest at An Hoa, assaulted Hill 435, later named Machete, and began searching north-northwest along the river toward Fire Support Base Saber.

In the An Hoa basin, the new year was marked by occasional skirmishes with small enemy units moving between An Hoa and Go Noi Island, 10 kilometers to the northeast. Assigned to secure the area was Lieutenant Colonel Richard F. Daley's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. Combat patrols were the order of the day, as described by First Lieutenant Ronald E. Pruiett:

The normal way we operate is to go out and set up a company PPB [platoon patrol base] and operate out of that, sending out platoons and squad-size patrols. The normal

patrol covers an area anywhere from 500 meters to a click and a half [1,500 meters], depending on terrain and type of contact which we expect to make . . . Normally the only contact we do make is a small unit also. Normally we run into groups of maybe three, four, or five. The way contact is normally initiated, they, in most instances, initiate the contact by firing a few sniper rounds at us and then we will go ahead to commence to maneuver. Again, they are very slippery, and by the time we maneuver into the area which they are at or where we think they are at, they have already made their bird [escape].¹⁵

The most intense action to occur took place during the night of 29 January in the far western sector of Go Noi Island. At 2200, a squad ambush of Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, not a participant in Operation Taylor Common, observed approximately 300 enemy troops cross to the southern bank of the Song Ky Lam, six kilometers west of Dien Ban. The enemy unit, apparently forced south by 7th Marines Operation Linn River and ARVN Operation Hung Quang 1-03, was taken under artillery fire, while the company launched an attack to block the enemy's advance. Engaging the Marines with automatic weapons and RPG fire, the enemy attempted to escape westward, but was intercepted by Company D, 5th Marines, moving from the southwest through head-high elephant grass. Fierce firefights continued throughout the night, with Marines employing 155mm artillery fire and air strikes in support of the attack. By dawn,

LtCol Richard B. Twohey, center, Commanding Officer, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, and LtCol Ermil L. Whisman, right, Commanding Officer, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines, brief Task Force Yankee commander BGen Ross T. Dwyer on operations of the battalions.

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center



the enemy had broken into small groups and scattered. A search of the battle area turned up 72 NVA dead, while numerous drag marks and blood trails punctuated the dense growth of elephant grass. Friendly casualties resulting from the night's action were seven wounded.

On 7 February, operational control of Battalion Landing Team 2/26, under Lieutenant Colonel William F. Sparks, was shifted from the 7th to the 5th Marines and the BLT joined Operation Taylor Common. Continuing the cordon and search of Go Noi Island begun early during Operation Linn River, the team's Marines encountered sniper fire and a large number of boobytraps as they moved across their assigned area, destroying tunnel systems, bunkers, and other enemy-prepared fighting positions. Completing its short sojourn ashore, the battalion landing team returned to the amphibious assault ship, *Okinawa* (LPH 3), where after a vigorous training period, it was placed in reserve for the expected *Tet* Offensive.

During this same period, BLT 2/26 was joined in Operation Taylor Common by her sister landing team. On 10 February, by way of a vertical envelopment, codenamed Defiant Measure, Lieutenant Colonel J. W. P. Robertson's BLT 3/26 deployed to the Arizona, relieving the 1st ARVN Ranger Group. Due to the size of the team's area of operation (100 square kilometers), Robertson assigned each company a separate area in which to conduct search and destroy missions. Constant sniping at the moving companies, with five or six NVA tracking each company, characterized action during the first two weeks. Any halt in movement would result in sporadic sniper and incoming M79 grenade fire. Near the end of February, Company L made heavy contact killing 75 enemy soldiers and destroying two .50-caliber antiaircraft positions. Over the next several days, Robertson's Marines found approximately 20 rockets, mortars, and recoilless rifles in positions from which they could be fired, line-of-sight, at An Hoa Combat Base. With the close of the operation, BLT 3/26 remained in the Arizona, concentrating on the southern portion of its assigned area while being subjected to continuous daylight sniper and night mortar, RPG, and suicide-squad attacks.

By mid-February, Task Force Yankee essentially had neutralized Base Area 112 and established fire support and combat operations bases on the western approaches from the Laotian border. Upon order of the 1st Marine Division, General Dwyer, who was replaced

on the 14th by Brigadier General Samuel Jaskilka, reduced the scale of operations by ordering the withdrawal to An Hoa of all forces in 112 with the exception of two companies (L and M) of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, each with one battery of direct support artillery, located on Fire Support Bases Tomahawk and Maxwell. Due to increased enemy activity in the DMZ, the 3d Marines command group and its 3d Battalion withdrew from Base Area 112 to An Hoa Combat Base on 16 February, and redeployed immediately to Dong Ha. The 1st Battalion, 3d Marines displaced to Hill 55 the following day, and subsequently airlifted to Dong Ha after participating in a short operation in the 5th Marines' northern area of operations.

On 21 February, following three days of rehabilitation and refurbishment at An Hoa, Lieutenant Colonel Stemple's 2d Battalion, 5th Marines moved by truck to the Phu Loc (6) Refugee Hamlet, northeast of the combat base on the Song Thu Bon. There, in coordination with the 1st ARVN Ranger and local Regional Force Groups, the battalion initiated blocking operations in conjunction with the ARVN attempt to again find, fix, and destroy enemy forces, fortifications, and installations on far western Go Noi Island.



Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center
Two Marines enter a bamboo hut in one of the several enemy base camps and storage sites discovered during the thorough search of Base Area 112.

On one of many patrols carried out in the Arizona, Marines of Company D, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines search an abandoned hut for hidden enemy troops and supplies.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A372866

Marines of Company D, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines rush a fellow Marine, wounded by a boobytrapped grenade, to a waiting helicopter for evacuation to a nearby medical facility.

Limited land-clearing operations, using high explosives, medium dozers, and Rome plows, were to be conducted after the sweep of the island, but a predawn enemy attack carried out against An Hoa Combat Base during the *Tet* holidays forced their cancellation.*

Shortly after midnight on the 23d, the northeast corner of the combat base, near the ammunition storage area, was hit with enemy 82mm mortar fire. Under cover of the mortar and small arms fire, enemy troops cut and entered the base's defensive wire, and from that position, using bamboo poles, were able to lob satchel charges into one of the ammunition dumps, causing a fire which ignited the remainder. Small arms and mortar fire broke the probe, and the enemy fled to the northeast, continually engaged by "Spooky" and artillery fire. But the enemy force had done its job. In addition to the extensive loss of am-

munition, base personnel sustained numerous casualties from the night-long series of explosions which rocked the ammunition dumps. As a direct result of the enemy attack on An Hoa, and minor probes at Liberty Bridge and on other allied installations within the Da Nang Vital Area, Colonel Ord ordered Stemple's battalion to Liberty Bridge, where the battalion assumed a local security mission.

As the number of enemy-initiated ground and indirect fire attacks around An Hoa rose, so did the number experienced by the units which remained in Base Area 112. Almost nightly, Companies L and M, operating near Fire Support Bases Tomahawk and Maxwell, reported enemy ground and mortar attacks against their defensive positions. The companies requested reinforcements and General Jaskilka ordered the remainder of Atkinson's battalion redeployed to the base area in late February. But with the attacks against An Hoa and other allied units operating nearby on the increase, Jaskilka again ordered the 3d Battalion to withdraw in early March.

Planned as a one-day operation, the withdrawal of Lieutenant Colonel Atkinson's battalion became a three-day battle of disengagement. On 3 March, Com-

*Of the various types of land-clearing equipment tested in Vietnam, the standard military D7E tractor, equipped with a heavy-duty protective cab and a special tree-cutting blade manufactured by the Rome Company of Rome, Georgia, proved to be the most versatile and effective. The tractor took its name from the imposing blade attached to the front, which sheared off most vegetation six inches above the ground.

pany M, while on a sweep near Maxwell, received small arms and automatic weapons fire from an estimated entrenched enemy platoon. Three Marines were killed in the attack, two of whose bodies could not be recovered due to heavy enemy fire. Forced to maintain its position, the company requested additional air and artillery support. The following day, the Marines made another attempt to retrieve the bodies, but they were successful in recovering only one. On the 5th a third attempt was made to recover the remaining Marine body, but as the company attacked the enemy position, two more Marines were killed and their bodies left on the battlefield.

Meanwhile, operations to close Tomahawk and Maxwell began. As originally conceived, helicopters were to extract the infantry companies and two artillery batteries simultaneously from both fire bases, but low clouds and sporadic enemy mortar fire around Maxwell forced the airborne helicopter controller to concentrate all lifts on Tomahawk instead. Four 105mm and two 155mm howitzers of the 11th Marines, along with one infantry company, airlifted to An Hoa; Company L remained to provide security for a downed CH-53 helicopter. The following day, Company L lifted to An Hoa and Tomahawk closed.

On 6 March, the Marines of Company M made one last attempt to recover the bodies of their comrades. In their final drive, enemy fire proved to be too intense to warrant the risk of losing additional men, and the company withdrew. A force reconnaissance team subsequently recovered the bodies of the fallen Marines without loss.¹⁶ Carrying their wounded, the Marines of Company M advanced through the dense jungle foliage toward Maxwell, encountering sporadic enemy resistance along the way. In one instance the company's point element was taken under fire by an enemy squad, resulting in the wounding of one Marine, who required immediate evacuation. While the company maintained its position, a medical evacuation helicopter extracted the wounded Marine by hoist. Poor visibility, additional enemy contact, rugged terrain, and the slow movement due to the wounded resulted in Company M arriving at Maxwell after dark, too late to be lifted to An Hoa along with the artillery. The following day, the last of Atkinson's tired Marines lifted out through sporadic small arms fire, and the fire support base was closed. With the later extraction of all reconnaissance teams operating within the base area, Operation Taylor Common came to an end on 8 March.

Results of the three-month-long operation were im-

pressive: the destruction of enemy manpower in excess of a regiment; the capture of 206 tons of rice, 430,000 rounds of ammunition, and 1,100 weapons; and the neutralization of Base Area 112. But as General Dwyer was later to observe:

We knew when we went in—and we pushed these fire bases all the way out as far as they'd go, almost to the border—we knew we couldn't stay. And we had pretty much cleaned out the area . . . But when you have to pull out, they just filtered back in—that was, of course, the nature of the war.¹⁷

Marine casualties were 183 killed and 1,487 wounded; boobytraps killed 27 and wounded 386 Marines, while 26 Marines were killed and 103 wounded by friendly fire. The ARVN Ranger Group suffered 100 killed and 378 wounded, most occurring during operations in the Arizona and on Go Noi Island.

Despite poor flying weather and rough terrain, Marine airpower played a major role in the neutralization of Base Area 112, and the repeated security sweeps of the lowlands. The F-4 Phantom, A-4 Skyhawk, and A-6A Intruder pilots of Major General Charles J. Quilter's 1st Marine Aircraft Wing flew numerous tactical support missions in marginal weather. During the operation the Da Nang and Chu Lai-based fixed-wing aircraft flew 3,702 sorties, striking targets with 7,042 tons of bombs, killing 155 enemy troops, and destroying 624 installations.

Marine helicopters made an equally important contribution to the operation. The 10 helicopter squadrons of Colonel Warren L. MacQuarrie's Marine Aircraft Group 16 at Marble Mountain, and Colonel Bruce J. Matheson's Phu Bai-based MAG-36, flew 32,619 sorties, carried 61,995 troops, and transported 10,489 tons of supplies. Besides providing battlefield mobility to the infantry and close air support when fixed-wing aircraft were unable to attack targets due to poor visibility, the pilots of these squadrons accomplished medical evacuation, reconnaissance, resupply, and other operational and administrative missions. Army CH-54 "Crane," CH-47 "Chinook," and UH-1E "Huey" helicopters, "loaned" to the Marines by the Americal Division supplied additional support. Air support for Taylor Common was not without problems. While fixed-wing support was well-coordinated and "very timely," helicopter support oftentimes was not. Like Colonel Barrow during Operation Dewey Canyon, General Dwyer was critical: "The helicopter support I would have to judge overall mixed in performance. It ranged from outstanding, courageous, superb helicopter work, to the other end of the

spectrum where it did not arrive on time, left before it should have, [or] went to wrong zones.

"It got to a point," he continued, "that we started recording the times that they were supposed to be on hand, the times they actually arrived, by type of aircraft, so that we kept a plotted curve on them—their performance." A frustrating problem for General Dwyer and his ground commanders were lunch breaks. "It was remarkable," he commented, "when they finally did arrive, they would disappear around noon-time—at lunchtime—for a variety of reasons. It was a startling coincidence of bad radios that had to be fixed at lunchtime."¹⁸ A number of Marine pilots, both fixed-wing and helicopter, took exception to the remarks of General Dwyer. Among them was Colonel Edwin H. Finlayson, who served as the 1st Wing's operations officer at the time. "The fact of this matter is," he explained, "the helicopters as a physical characteristic ran short of fuel after about four hours' operation and had to return to Marble Mountain for fuel since the First Division at the time had not provided for any at their forward bases as the Third Division had. BGen [Henry W.] Hise [Assistant Wing Commander] investigated this complaint and arranged to move refueling facilities into more forward locations

for subsequent operations which greatly reduced the problem."¹⁹ Despite the problems and resultant criticism, Marine aviation, specifically helicopter support, significantly influenced the results on the battlefield.

"A Little Urban Renewal"

"At first light, I told my [lead] platoon to move in there and do that village a job; and take a little bit of Tecumseh Sherman into Chau Son (1)." After all the civilians, mostly women and children, were rounded up, put on amtracs, and sent to the processing center adjacent to Hill 55 before resettlement, the Marines of Company D, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines moved swiftly through Chau Son (1) destroying bunkers, fighting holes, and tunnels, and burning huts found to contain fighting gear. The actions of Company D at Chau Son (1) characterized the conduct of the other companies involved in the short cordon and search operation, codenamed Linn River.²⁰

While battalions of the 3d and 5th Marines searched the lowlands near An Hoa and Base Area 112, the 1st Marine Division gave elements of Colonel Herbert L. Beckington's 7th Marines the task of cordoning and searching an approximately 10-kilometer-square area south of Hill 55, between Route 4 and the Song Thu

Elements of Company D, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines inventory a portion of the tons of enemy food, supplies, and ammunition captured during Operation Taylor Common.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800567



Bon, in support of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign. This task was in addition to the regiment's normal missions of patrolling the Da Nang rocket belt, with emphasis on the Song Vu Gia infiltration corridor, and bridge and installation security. Except for scattered treelines and a few small hamlets, fallow rice paddies dotted the area. Long considered a haven for local guerrilla forces, the area had witnessed several allied operations: Linn River would be no different.

At midday on 27 January, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines departed Hill 65 and moved east on Route 4, accompanied by half a dozen amphibious assault vehicles. Once in the objective area, Lieutenant Colonel William F. Bethel's battalion would be joined by the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel William F. Sparks, which was to assault two separate landing zones the following day, link up with the 1st Battalion, and establish the initial cordon. Although eight Sea Knight (CH-46D) helicopters from HMM-165 did arrive on schedule, their air filters swiftly clogged with sand, and the lift portion of the operation had to be postponed. Meanwhile, Bethel's battalion arrived in the objective area, and not wishing to disclose the target and mission, moved further east and established a temporary blocking position.

The feint to the east "might have fooled some of the gooks," noted the acting commanding officer of Company B, Second Lieutenant Wyman E. Shuler III, "but it sure didn't fool all of them," as the assault elements of Lieutenant Colonel Sparks' battalion discovered the following morning. The first wave landed at LZ Owl without problem; the second, however, received heavy small arms fire as it attempted to land at LZ Hawk. Four of the six helicopters in the flight sustained heavy damage and were forced to return to Hill 55, halting the heliborne assault for three hours while Marines awaited replacement aircraft. By late afternoon on 29th, with the lifts completed, all units moved into position, establishing the initial cordon.²¹

Supported by three 105mm artillery batteries, 5-inch guns of the heavy cruiser *Newport News* (CA 148), and two platoons of tanks from the 5th Tank Battalion, the 7th and 26th Marines successively cordoned and then searched the objective area. Engagements during the remainder of the 12-day operation were light, consisting of Marines intercepting enemy troops attempting to flee the cordon. These small groups of enemy troops were sighted and then engaged by air and artillery; however, the majority of casualties resulted from mortar and sniper fire. Although 53 enemy troops were killed, the destruction of for-



Marine Corps Historical Collection

As elements of the 7th Marines look on, a South Vietnamese Air Force "Skyraider" drops its ordnance on an enemy position during Operation Linn River.

tifications and tunnel complexes carried out by the two battalions and accompanying engineer detachments overshadowed the loss of enemy personnel.

While multi-battalion operations such as Linn River and Taylor Common gathered a majority of the laurels, small-unit, counter-guerrilla operations were consistent in achieving success. When not participating in major operations far afield, elements of Beckington's 7th and Colonel Clyde W. Hunter's 26th Marines joined Colonel Robert G. Lauffer's 1st Marines in saturating the coastal lowlands and piedmont, north, west, and south of Da Nang with day and night patrols, ambushes, and company-size operations, denying the enemy the freedom of action necessary for tactical successes within the Da Nang Vital Area.*

As the new year began, elements of the three regiments launched an around-the-clock assortment of 10,600 patrols and ambushes, in coordination with 78 company-size cordon operations, during the month

*The 26th Marines, task-organized as a regimental landing team, was under operational and administrative control of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade. The regiment's in-country composition at the beginning of the year included a command group and the 1st Battalion. The remaining two battalions formed the infantry element of the Seventh Fleet's Special Landing Force.

against suspected enemy harbor sites and areas of intense combat and logistical support traffic with meager results. But the relative calm observed in January, to a degree reminiscent of the period preceding the wave of offensive thrusts of *Tet* 1968, gave way the following month to the first significant rise in enemy activity since August 1968. Attempting to counter the expanding South Vietnamese influence and to provide stronger political leverage, the Quang Nam enemy leadership again struggled to stage its combat strength in the populated piedmont and lowlands preceding the *Tet* holidays, but were once more trapped in the maze of 1st Marine Division patrols and ambushes.

Acting on locally obtained intelligence, a patrol from Company D, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, on 7 February, found an enemy base camp containing equipment and messing and billeting facilities near the Nam O Bridge on the Song Cu De, 13 kilometers northwest of Da Nang. Reporting the find, the patrol departed, leaving the site untouched. Shortly after dark, the full company returned and set up a series

Col Robert G. Lauffer, Commanding Officer, 1st Marines, maps out the movement of patrols south of Da Nang with his operations officer, Maj James K. Reilly.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



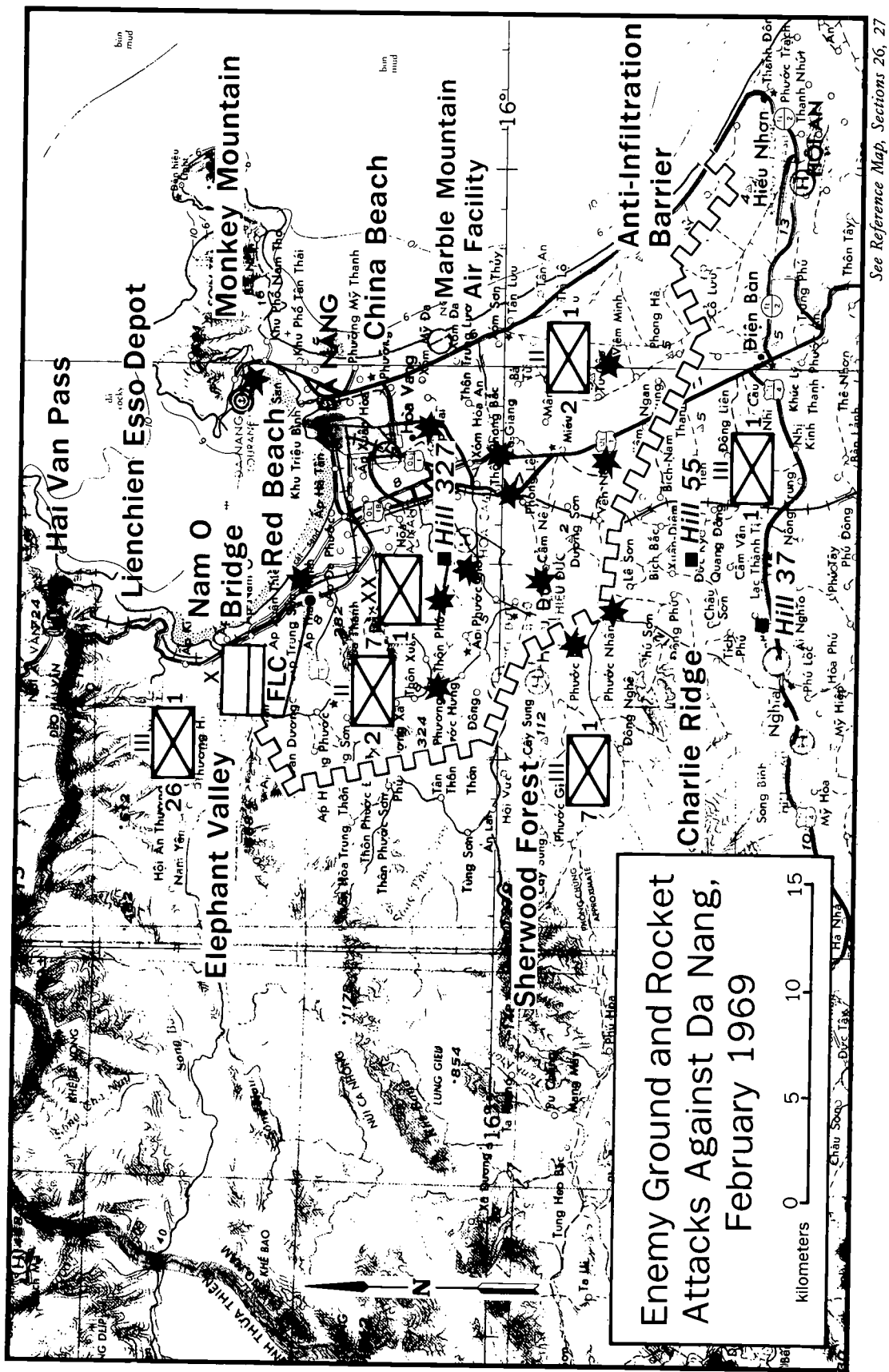
of ambushes in order to catch any enemy troops using the facility. Twenty soldiers attempting to move into the base camp activated the first trap shortly before midnight. By 0200 the following morning, Company D had surprised two additional NVA units. Of a total of 45 enemy observed and engaged, the company killed 18 and captured two prisoners.

Enemy attempts to move rockets within range of Da Nang during early February, also fell victim to the numerous Marine patrols and ambushes. On the 8th, Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines found seven complete 122mm rockets concealed along the banks of the Song Yen, 14 kilometers southwest of the city. On the same day, and two kilometers west, another 3d Battalion patrol discovered thirteen 140mm rockets, temporarily stored in a waterhole. And shortly before midnight on the 18th, a Company F, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines ambush, directing artillery on suspected enemy movement, five kilometers south of Marble Mountain, reported 21 secondary explosions, presumably enemy rockets being destroyed.

By mid-February, encounters with larger enemy units around the periphery of the Da Nang Vital Area rose. Company D, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, while patrolling 22 kilometers south-southwest of the city, located an NVA platoon occupying a bunker system. Under cover of artillery, the company assaulted the position, forcing the enemy to withdraw, leaving 16 dead. A squad was left in the area, and at dusk it ambushed another enemy platoon attempting to reoccupy the bunker complex, killing 14 more. Earlier in the day, four kilometers to the east, the 2d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment engaged an estimated enemy battalion moving north from Go Noi Island. Pinned against the Song Suoi Co Ca, the enemy lost 49 killed.

Despite the lack of strength necessary for a full-scale offensive, enemy units within range of Da Nang committed themselves to action on the morning of the 23d, the first day of *Tet*. Rocket and mortar teams were the first to strike. Attacks against the Da Nang Vital Area began with a 25-round, 122mm rocket mission directed at the Deep Water Pier and continued with sporadic attacks throughout the vital area until dawn. Principal allied losses included the destruction of an ARVN ammunition dump near III MAF Headquarters and a 450,000-gallon fuel tank near the airbase. One A-6A fixed-wing aircraft and six helicopters sustained light damage during the attacks.

In addition to a rocket and mortar attack on Logistic Support Unit-1 supply areas at An Hoa, which des-



troyed 15,000 rounds of artillery ammunition and 40,000 gallons of aviation fuel, enemy units also targeted the Chu Lai complex. The largest rocket mission of the day—fifty 122mm rockets—targeted the Da Nang Force Logistic Command and Naval Support Activity installations. Over half the rounds, however, fell into the ocean with the remaining inflicting limited damage on the LST ramp and one empty fuel tank.

As rocket and mortar teams attacked allied command and logistic facilities within the vital area, enemy sapper units attempted to disrupt major infantry command installations, while still other units moved to cut the principal approaches to the city. Like previous attempts against Da Nang, the effort was detected and repulsed, forcing the enemy to withdraw again to avoid total destruction.

Ground action south of Da Nang began shortly after midnight on the 23d, when Company K, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines and Company D, 1st Military Police Battalion detected enemy troops approaching the two Song Cau Do bridges. Attacking the yet-unassembled enemy units, the two companies killed 47 Viet Cong and captured 11, halting any enemy attempt at closing the two critical highway approaches. A short time later, an estimated 70 Viet Cong attacked the command post of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, six kilometers south of Marble Mountain. Repelled and forced to withdraw, the enemy left 17 dead and 4 wounded in the hands of the 1st Marines.

Shortly after dawn on the 23d, a Viet Cong unit was detected in a factory complex near the Hoa Vang District Headquarters, site of the heavy fighting during the abortive attempt to take Da Nang in August 1968. Marine units from the airbase forced the enemy into an isolated, bamboo-encircled cemetery after killing six and capturing two others. In a two-hour fire-fight the following day, the 21st ARVN Ranger Battalion assaulted the enemy force, then in the process of withdrawing southward, killing another 57.

After less than 12 hours of fighting, enemy units sent north to attack Da Nang were in retreat. Their efforts to escape unscathed were shattered by elements of the 1st Marines and 1st Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment, who found them 11 kilometers south of Da Nang and struck hard. Maintaining almost constant contact for three days, the ARVN and Marine troops killed 139 and captured 38 weapons.

West of Da Nang, Lieutenant Colonel Francis X. Quinn's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines intercepted and then blunted a major three-pronged thrust into the

vital area by elements of the *141st NVA Regiment*. The central and southern thrusts aimed at seizing the village of Tuy Loan and destroying nearby Cobb Bridge in order to prevent allied reinforcements from moving north along Highway 540. The northern thrust attempted to secure a route through Dai La Pass and then into the 1st Marine Division Command Post on Hill 327. Shortly after midnight on the 23d, a squad ambush from Captain Paul K. Van Riper's Company M trapped an enemy force moving east of Hill 10, killing 10 and capturing numerous weapons. Several hours later, another of Van Riper's patrols spotted 40 NVA troops in the same area and engaged them with artillery. A company search at first light the following morning revealed that the patrol had ambushed an enemy mortar company. In addition to securing two complete 82mm mortars, the enemy company's first sergeant was captured. He later indicated that a major NVA offensive was underway.

During the morning of the 23d, as elements of the *141st* continued to advance, Colonel Quinn first committed Van Riper's company and then the remainder of the battalion. The constant pressure applied by Quinn's Marines, which at times approached hand-to-hand encounters, forced the enemy to separate in small groups which, by the end of the day, congregated in three pockets along the Song Tuy Loan. The pocket east of Hill 41 was eliminated on the morning of the 24th by Captain Fred T. Fagan, Jr.'s Company K, whose Marines captured the acting regimental commander during the engagement.* Van Riper's Marines, in close fighting, reduced the second pocket centered around the village of Tuy Loan the same day. The third pocket, nestled between the An Tan ridgeline and Song Tuy Loan, proved to be more difficult. Under Captain James K. Hall, Marines of Company L, supported by artillery and air strikes, assaulted the position several times but were unable to dislodge the enemy from the thick stands of bamboo and dense growth of elephant grass that covered the area. Suffering numerous casualties, included among them Captain Hall, the company was forced to withdraw and regroup.²²

At first light on the 26th, Company M and the two effective platoons of Company L prepared to move for-

*Under interrogation, the captured regimental commander provided information which eventually led to the destruction of his own regiment, and to that of the *31st* during Operation Okla-homa Hills. (LtCol Merrill L. Bartlett, Comments on draft ms, 1Sep86 [Vietnam 69 Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.]).



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Sgt Howard J. Johnson, a member of Detachment A, Marine Air Support Squadron 3, displays a North Vietnamese Army flag captured during one of the several enemy attacks on Da Nang-area Marine and other allied positions, which began on 23 February.

ward against the enemy position. Following air strikes, which consisted of 500-pound retarded bombs ("Snake Eyes"), napalm, and artillery fire, the assault began under a blanket of riot control agent (CS gas). In a series of coordinated squad assaults, Van Riper's Marines carried a portion of the objective before stalling in the face of stiffening enemy resistance at nightfall. The following morning, again under cover of CS gas, Company M renewed the attack. Moving rapidly, Van Riper's lead platoon reached the Song Tuy Loan, cutting the objective in two while the trace platoons turned east and west, clearing the remainder of the area and hunting down surviving enemy troops. "The commanding officer was a prisoner and nearly 200 of his men were dead," noted Captain Van Riper, "remnants of the unit struggled desperately to break contact and move to the relative safety of the mountains With the collapse of resistance at An Tân Ridge,

the 141st NVA Regiment ceased to exist as an effective fighting force."²³

Two other predawn *Tet* attacks centered on major allied command complexes west of Da Nang. On the northern slope of Hill 327, security elements for Headquarters, 26th Marines and 1st Marine Division repulsed a nocturnal assault by satchel charge-equipped NVA sappers. A similar attack targeted the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines compound to the northwest. Although the sappers breached the defensive wire, 2d Battalion Marines drove the attackers back. At least 75 enemy troops were killed or captured in the two futile attempts. Reflecting the intensity of the rocket- and mortar-supported suicide raids, Marine defenders lost 18 killed and 80 wounded.

Although Marine patrols and ambushes continued to engage remnants of the enemy force through March, the attacks on the Da Nang Vital Area during *Tet*, in

essence, were met and broken on 23 February. Stranded in the Da Nang-Hoi An-Dai Loc triangle, the enemy hid, hoping to escape area saturation by Marine small units and increased employment of the deadly scout/sniper teams.* Despite the enemy's reluctance to engage 1st Division Marines, nearly 500 NVA and VC were taken out of action—a clear gauge of the continued effectiveness of the 1st Marine Division's small-unit campaign in Quang Nam Province.

Americal's TAOI

Headquartered at Chu Lai, about 45 kilometers south of Da Nang, was Major General Charles M. Gettys' Americal Division. The division's Tactical Area of Operational Interest (TAOI), one of the largest in Vietnam, encompassed all of Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces and the Que Son District of Quang Nam Province. Spanning the relatively flat coastal lowlands and mountainous central highlands, the division's area contained approximately 1.2 million South Vietnamese centered around Tam Ky and Quang Ngai cities. Sharing the TAOI was the 2d ARVN Division headquartered at Quang Ngai and numerous provincial forces.

Tactically, the three infantry brigades of the division were deployed throughout the TAOI in separate areas of operation. To the north was the Oregon area of operation; in the center, the Chu Lai; and, to the south was the Duc Pho area of operation. In addition, there were a number of areas created for specific combat operations.

Operations within the Chu Lai TAOI, as the year began, centered on small unit patrols, ambushes along infiltration routes, and security operations along major lines of communications, designed to locate and eliminate enemy forces, enhance security of friendly installations, and ensure the safety of the local population. Employment of patrols in the Chu Lai rocket belt and detailed searches of Ky Hoa Island successfully prevented attacks by fire against the airbase and the city of An Tan. In addition, a series of preemptive operations was conducted in late January and early February north of the Song Tra Khuc to deny the enemy use of the area as a base from which to launch attacks against Quang Ngai City. Encounters remained light during the first two months of the year and in

early March the Chu Lai area of operation was incorporated into that of Operation Geneva Park.

Americal Division forces conducted combat operations within the Duc Pho area of operation during the first two months of the year with emphasis on securing the heavily populated coastal plains, using saturation patrols and preemptive assaults in suspected enemy staging areas. Like those within the Chu Lai area, engagements remained light until late February when a series of joint Army-ARVN operations were launched along the coastline east of Mo Duc and into the foothills of the Nui Tam Cap Mountains, all aimed at preventing enemy troops from approaching the city of Quang Ngai. As with the other areas, in early March military actions within the Duc Pho area of operation were terminated and its area incorporated into the Iron Mountain Operational Zone.

Created in early November 1968, the Oregon area encompassed the northern portion of the Americal Division TAOI—Quang Tin Province and Que Son District of Quang Nam. Engagements were few as elements of two infantry brigades and one cavalry squadron conducted saturation patrols, reconnaissance-in-force, and rice-denial operations to locate and destroy enemy troop and supply concentrations. On 23 February, elements of the *2d NVA Division* launched simultaneous attacks on Tam Ky and against the Civilian Irregular Defense Group camp at Tien Phuoc. Americal Division forces were committed to these two areas and engaged the attacking enemy forces, turning them back before they could achieve any success. On 18 March, as part of the realignment of forces within the Americal Division TAOI, the Oregon area of operation was incorporated into the operational zone of Frederick Hill.

In addition to operations conducted within the Oregon, Chu Lai, and Duc Pho areas, four separate operations were carried out. As a complement to Operation Taylor Common conducted by Task Force Yankee against Base Area 112, elements of the 196th Infantry Brigade initiated Operation Fayette Canyon on 15 December against the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* in Antenna Valley and the Nui Mat Rang Mountains to the southeast. Operation Russell Beach was carried out on the Batangan Peninsula, in conjunction with Special Landing Force Operation Bold Mariner, to rid the area of enemy troops and to reintroduce South Vietnamese control. In support of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, Operation Hardin Falls was initiated in the Thang Binh District of Quang Tin Province in De-

*Marine two-man scout/sniper teams, observer and rifleman, were deployed along heavily traveled enemy infiltration routes. Using the standard sniper weapon, a Model 700 Remington rifle with a variable-power telescopic sight, the teams were often credited with first-round kills at distances exceeding 1,000 meters.

cember and was aimed at destroying local Viet Cong forces, rebuilding war-ravaged hamlets and villages, and reestablishing South Vietnamese control of the area. Further south, in Quang Ngai Province, Operation Vernon Lake II continued in the Song Re Valley against elements of the *3d NVA Division*, preventing

the enemy force from launching offensive operations against Quang Ngai City and the populated coastal lowlands. Due to aggressive Americal operations during the first two months of 1969, the enemy was unable to achieve a single military or political objective within the division's TAOI.