

CHAPTER 14

The Siege of Khe Sanh

*Digging In—Opening Moves—"Incoming!"—The Fall of Khe Sanh Village
Reinforcement and Fighting Back—Round Two—The Fall of Lang Vei—The Intensifying Battle
Settling the Score—Operation Pegasus*

Digging In

By late January, U.S. planners at every level were determined to defend Khe Sanh, despite the suggested possibility of "another Dien Bien Phu."* General Westmoreland voiced numerous reasons for defending the remote outpost. It was a valuable base for monitoring North Vietnamese infiltration through Laos along the "Ho Chi Minh" and "Santa Fe" Trails.** It was also important to Westmoreland's planned invasion of Laos by which he intended physically to cut the trails. Moreover, Khe Sanh served as left flank security for the Strong Point Obstacle System, also known as the Dyemarker Project. Finally, and vitally significant when considering the unpopularity of the war to many Americans by 1968, was the psychological significance of Khe Sanh. While it had no intrinsic political importance, being neither a cultural nor economic center, to relinquish it in the face of North Vietnamese pressure would result in a major enemy propaganda victory.*** Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, and Westmoreland's immediate superior, concurred in this analysis, saying "withdrawal from any portion of Vietnam would make immediate and sensational news, not only through the Western news media, but also through the Communist capitals as a major propaganda item."¹

At Khe Sanh, the 26th Marines had the responsibility to prevent the base from falling to the sur-



Unnumbered Department of Defense (USMC) Photo

An aerial view of the Khe Sanh Combat Base looking west was taken during the siege. The runway of the airstrip can be seen below and in the top right of the picture is what appears to be a rocket pod hanging below the aircraft taking the picture.

rounding Communist forces. With three infantry battalions, an artillery battalion, and a full range of supporting units, including tank and antitank detachments, antiaircraft weapons, engineers, shore party, air control, communications, and a host of others, Colonel David E. Lownds, the 26th Marines commander, continued improving his defenses.

The Marine positions arced around the combat base from the westnorthwest to the north, forming a line of heavily fortified, mutually supporting strongpoints. Seven kilometers northwest of the combat base, Company I and Company M occupied Hill 881 South, from which Company I sortied on 20 January

* See Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of the events preceding the Battle for Khe Sanh.

** The "Santa Fe" Trail was actually part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network, entering South Vietnam from Laos northwest of Khe Sanh. See Chapter 3.

*** In his comments, General Westmoreland wrote that "the abandonment of that central terrain feature [Khe Sanh] would have made available to the enemy a route to the populated area near the coast. Our control of Khe Sanh forced the enemy to change his battle plans and to reduce the threat to the coastal areas and its population." Gen William C. Westmoreland, USA, Comments on draft, dtd 18Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).

meeting heavy Communist resistance.* Three kilometers to the east of Hill 881 South, Company K sat atop Hill 861. The 2d Battalion's main position was on Hill 558, just over a kilometer east of Company K, overlooking the Song Rao Quan valley. Further still to the east, and almost four kilometers north of the combat base, the 2d Platoon of Company A sat high atop the dominant precipice known as Hill 950 to guard the radio relay site there. At the combat base proper, the 1st Battalion and Company L, 3d Battalion defended the airstrip with the headquarters elements, and the firing batteries of the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines.

Adjacent to the combat base and just north of Route 9 was the massive bunker complex of the secretive SOG Forward Operating Base 3 (FOB-3) whose members conducted clandestine anti-infiltration operations in Laos and along the border. Outlying defensive positions further south included those of Combined Action Platoons Oscar and the 915th Regional Force Company protecting the hamlets of Khe Sanh Village as well as the small MACV advisory team at the district headquarters located there. Further to the southwest was the Lang Vei Special Forces CIDG Camp located on Route 9, nine kilometers from the combat base and only two kilometers from the border with Laos.**

In every position, the defenders continuously worked to prepare for the coming battle. Following a visit to Khe Sanh, General Cushman directed that all fighting holes have overhead cover capable of withstanding direct hits from 82mm mortars and that the ammunition supply point be reorganized to provide better protection for the ammunition stocks, much of which were outside the revetments.² Fortification material was in short supply, but the Marines used many field expedients, including damaged portions of the airstrip's steel matting and metal pallets used for air delivery of supplies. Rolls of "German tape," with its razor-like edges, were added to the multiple layers of protective barbed wire ringing the combat base and

the hill outposts in a band 25 meters wide in many places. Marines placed explosives inside rolls of barbed wire to produce boobytraps which, when activated by a tripwire or detonated on command, would send sharp shards of twisted metal flying in every direction. In some places, the defenders emplaced drums of *fougasse*, a mixture of gasoline and diesel fuel detonated by plastic explosive which produced a wall of flame certain to discourage even the most determined attacker. Still there were shortcomings in the Marine defenses. Former *Washington Post* correspondent Peter Braestrup, who served as a Marine officer during the Korean War, remembered that after he visited Khe Sanh at the end of January, 1968, "I saw on main base [that] many perimeter trenches were waist high, no more. Marines don't like to dig."^{3***}

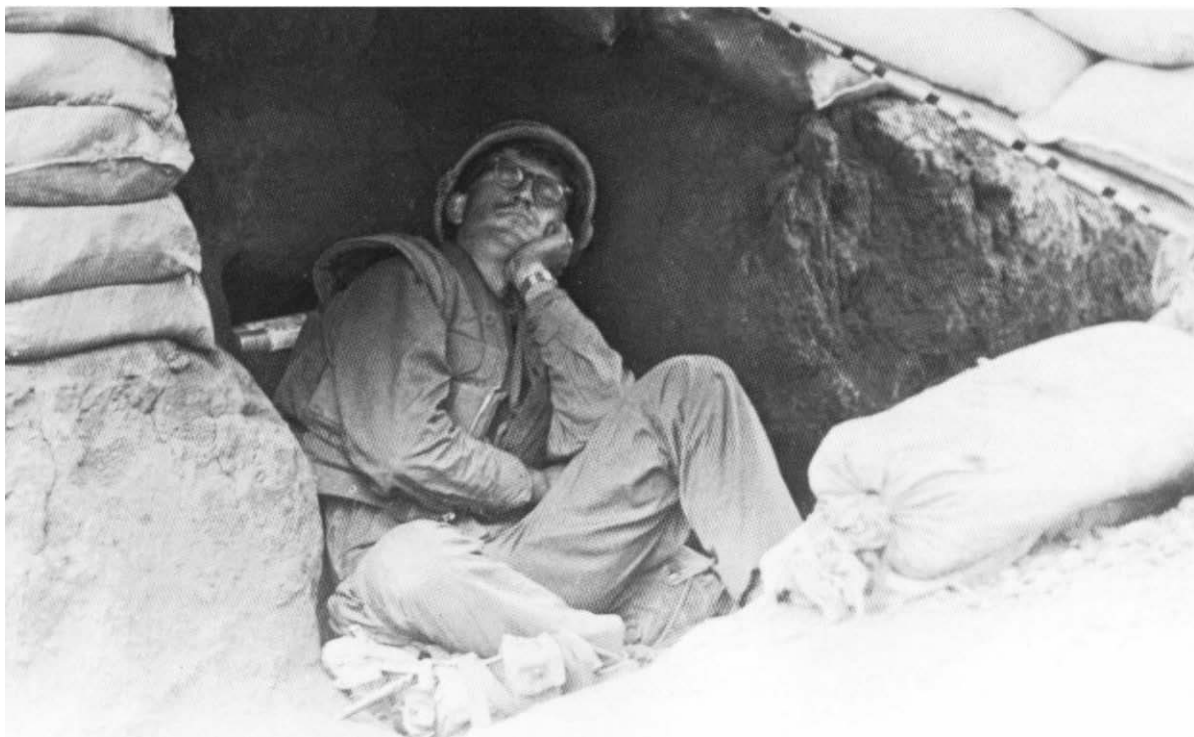
In addition to the physical preparation of the ground at Khe Sanh, higher headquarters entered the picture to assist in the defense of the combat base and its outlying positions. General Westmoreland ordered that Khe Sanh receive maximum support from Boeing B-52 Stratofortress heavy bombers and ordered the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division to prepare to deploy to I Corps Tactical Zone on 24-hour notice. General Cushman directed the 3d Marine Division to shift heavy artillery units for better support of Khe Sanh and requested that the 3d Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division be alerted for deployment to the Hue-Phu Bai area on 24-hour notice.⁴

Logistical preparations went forward at the same time. By the third week in January, Khe Sanh had at least a 30-day supply of ammunition for all of its

*A detachment of three 105mm howitzers from Battery C, 1st Battalion, 13th Marines was attached to Company I on Hill 881 South to provide additional fire support for the base. Colonel Kent O. W. Steen, who served with the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines as a young officer in 1968, wrote: "There were times when these three artillery pieces were all that could be brought to bear on attacks on the . . . main base." Col Kent O. W. Steen, Comments on draft, dtd 1Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Steen Comments; 1/13 ComdC, Feb68.

**See Chapter 4 relative to the activities and establishment of these organizations in the Khe Sanh sector.

***For discussion of Marine vulnerabilities at Khe Sanh see Chapter 4. See also LtGen Philip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), pp. 554-56; LtCol Frederick J. McEwan, Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File); and William J. O'Connor, Comments on draft, dtd 29Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter O'Connor Comments. See also the references to Marine shortcomings in building fortifications and bunkers in Chapter 1, especially with reference to comments by Major Gary E. Todd who served on the 3d Marine Division intelligence staff in 1968 and Colonel John C. Studt. Colonel Studt, who as a lieutenant colonel took over the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines at Khe Sanh in March 1968, observed that "the first thing I undertook was a total reconstruction of our defensive positions starting with the company commanders building a proper bunker with me." Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File). From another perspective, Colonel Kent O. W. Steen, an artillery officer at Khe Sanh, commented, "we did homemade bunkers not because we wanted to or didn't know better, but that there weren't enough airlift and construction resources in Vietnam to provide the materials we need once the threat was understood." Steen Comments.



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190273 while the bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190685.

Top, a Marine infantryman takes a brief nap in his covered overhead bunker, protecting him from incoming artillery and mortar rounds. Below, the photograph is an overview of the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines bunker defenses along the western perimeter of the base. The Marines had come under criticism for not "digging in."



howitzers, mortars, and small arms. Even so, Cushman declared that when aircraft became available, he intended to increase those stocks by another five days' supply.⁵

The rallier who surrendered to Captain Kenneth W. Pipes' Company B Marines on 20 January proved to be a gold mine of information.* Lieutenant La Thanh Tonc answered questions freely, providing intelligence officers detailed information concerning the North Vietnamese plan for the attack and reduction of the Khe Sanh Combat Base. Tonc claimed that the Khe Sanh campaign was the most important effort undertaken by the North Vietnamese since the U.S. became involved in the war. Their objective was to seize Quang Tri Province and force the U.S. out of South Vietnam by capturing every U.S. base between the Laotian border and Con Thien. According to La Thanh Tonc, the effort was so important that the North Vietnamese Defense Ministry controlled it directly.⁶

The enemy plan called for a major offensive effort by the North Vietnamese *325C Division*. The *5th Battalion* of the division's *95C Regiment* was to capture Hill 1015, the highest peak of Dong Tri Mountain, which would neutralize the Marine-manned nearby Hill 950. From this high ground overlooking the airfield and its approaches, Communist gunners could interdict aerial supplies and reinforcements. The *6th Battalion, 95C Regiment* was to seize Hill 861. The *4th Battalion, 95C Regiment* had orders to attack the western end of the airstrip, near where, on 2 January, the Marines had killed the North Vietnamese reconnaissance party. The *101D Regiment* was to attack the east end of the airstrip in coordination with the effort by the *4th Battalion, 95C Regiment* at the other side of the combat base. Lieutenant La Thanh Tonc told the interrogators that the North Vietnamese *29th Regiment* was in division reserve, its location unknown to him (it was, in fact, headed for Hue City and the savage battles of the Tet Offensive). The cooperative lieutenant was unable to provide specific information concerning the size, designation, location, or equipment of any NVA artillery units, but he was certain that heavy artillery and rockets would support the attacks. The offensive, he claimed would begin before Tet—only 10 days away.⁷

Opening Moves

Just after 2000 on 20 January, an eight-man Marine reconnaissance team, four kilometers west of Khe Sanh on Hill 689, reported that it was surrounded, under attack, and required artillery support. Lieutenant Colonel John A. Hennelly's 1st Battalion, 13th Marines responded. Through the night, Hennelly's gunners enclosed the reconnaissance team in a protective box of artillery fire, preventing the North Vietnamese from overrunning its position. In all, over 2,200 rounds of friendly artillery fire fell around the trapped Marines, sometimes within 20 meters of them. The technique was effective. Marines reported 25 North Vietnamese casualties, while the patrol sustained only two wounded.^{8**}

Within a few hours, however, the fight on Hill 689 would become a sideshow. Shortly after midnight, two red star cluster signalling flares soared into the darkness above Hill 861, and immediately 300 North Vietnamese fell upon Company K's lines from the northwest. Striking from attack positions within 100 meters of the crest, the enemy blasted holes in the protective wire with bangalore torpedoes and quickly advanced, supported by mortars targeting Company K's bunkers and trenches. The NVA moved up the northwest slope, keeping the crest of the hill between the combat base and their attacking units, thus curtailing the Marines' use of artillery fire in the defense.⁹

Company K, commanded by Captain Norman J. Jasper, Jr., fought back hard as enemy rifle, machine gun, and mortar fire poured into Hill 861, but the North Vietnamese penetrated the 1st Platoon's defenses and overran the company's landing zone. Moving through his company area, directing the defense of the hill, Captain Jasper was wounded three times and unable to carry on. His executive officer, First Lieutenant Jerry N. Saulsbury, took command of Company K in the middle of the fight.

^{**}Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly remembered that his artillery used eight 105mm howitzers "to keep literally a wall of fire" between the Marine patrol and the enemy. The plan had been to extract the men by helicopter, but this proved infeasible because in order to do so the artillery had to stop firing and the North Vietnamese . . . [would have] moved back in. By this time, the entire base was under attack and he recalled that he had the three howitzers firing the east end of the box cease fire and passed the word to the reconnaissance team to move east to the base. Hennelly stated the team arrived safely back about dawn, which he believed was a miracle. LtCol John A. Hennelly, Comments on draft, dtd 30Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Hennelly Comments.

*The details concerning the actual capture of Lieutenant La Thanh Tonc are contained in Chapter 4.



Photo is from the Ted Vdorick Collection

A photo of Hill 869 was taken from the trenchline of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at the Rock Quarry.

The 3d Battalion command group was still on Hill 881 South, where it had gone earlier in the day to monitor Company I's battle on Hill 881 North.* The weather had closed in during the afternoon, grounding helicopters and effectively trapping Lieutenant Colonel Harry L. Alderman and key members of the battalion staff atop Hill 881 South.

Alderman's operations officer, Major Matthew P. Caulfield, contacted Hill 861 by radio during the fight and learned that Lieutenant Saulsbury had assumed command. Caulfield knew that Saulsbury had recently been dropped from flight training and had no infantry experience. Concerned, Major Caulfield told Saulsbury to rely on the company gunnery sergeant, who was well known in the battalion as an effective and experienced combat leader. "The Gunny is dead," Saulsbury replied. When Caulfield next told Saulsbury to get advice from the company first sergeant, Saulsbury informed him that the first sergeant was in the wreck of the company command post, dying.¹⁰

Lieutenant Saulsbury turned to the task at hand, fighting Company K like a veteran combat commander. The action was close and fierce, with North Vietnamese moving through parts of the position, heaving satchel charges into bunkers. The enemy next pene-

trated the southwest side of 861's perimeter, forcing the 3d Platoon from its positions and occupying the Marines' bunkers. Sergeant Mykle E. Stahl singlehandedly counterattacked, distracting the enemy troops while other Marines recovered casualties. As he advanced up the trenchline, three North Vietnamese attempted to capture him and Stahl suffered a bayonet wound before killing two of them. When his rifle malfunctioned, another Marine killed the third man. Stahl then picked up an enemy AK-47 assault rifle and attacked a third bunker, killing three of the enemy and capturing three others. When the 3d Platoon reoccupied its positions, Stahl, although wounded three times, manned a .50-caliber machine gun and continued to fight.^{11**}

Major Caulfield ordered some of the battalion's 81mm mortars on Hill 881 South to fire in support of Hill 861, ever mindful that the NVA might also attack Hill 881 South at any time. The mortars fired 680 rounds that night, causing the tubes to become so hot that the Marines cooled them first with water, then fruit juice, and finally, by urinating on them.¹²

By 0530, the enemy onslaught had spent itself against the determined defense of Hill 861. Marine signal intelligence personnel reported hearing the

*See Chapter 4.

**For his actions, Sergeant (later Captain) Stahl received the Navy Cross.

commander of the attacking NVA unit ask for reinforcements. But it was too late for that. Company K hit the enemy with a final blast of fire, driving them off the hill.¹³

The battle for Hill 861 left 4 Company K Marines dead and 11 wounded. At daybreak, elements of the company swept the area outside their wire, finding 47 dead North Vietnamese and capturing 3 wounded. One of the prisoners claimed to belong to the *4th Battalion, 95C Regiment*, a slight conflict with Lieutenant La Thanh Ton's revelation of the previous afternoon, but, nonetheless, close enough to lend further credibility to his information.

"Incoming!"

No sooner had the North Vietnamese abandoned their attempt to take Hill 861 than they struck the Khe Sanh combat base itself. At 0530, enemy artillery, mortar, and rocket fire smothered the airstrip and its surrounding bunkers and trenches. The first round landed in the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines area, scoring a direct hit on the generator which powered its digital fire control computer, but the battalion continued to fight back with the fire direction center computing firing data manually.¹⁴

Within minutes of the opening salvo, enemy shells hit the base's ammunition supply point known as "ASP Number 1". More than 1,500 tons of ammunition began exploding, throwing fragments and unexploded rounds, some of them on fire, through the air to land in and around the Marines' fighting positions. Captain Pipes, the commanding officer of Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, moved his command post three times because the explosions continued showering his position with smoldering mortar and artillery projectiles which threatened to detonate at any moment.^{15*}

Incoming rounds smashed into the airstrip, ripping apart the steel plates and damaging helicopters. A direct hit destroyed the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines mess hall and another struck the tiny post exchange. Company D, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines lost all of its personnel records to enemy shell fire. Riot control grenades burned in the inferno at ASP Number 1,

sending choking clouds of "CS" gas rolling through the trenches and bunkers to add to the Marines' misery. Some did not have gas masks and could only cover their faces with wet towels.¹⁶

Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly's artillerymen remained at their howitzers, providing counterbattery fire. In Battery C's position, near the ASP, scores of hot, smoking shells thrown skyward by explosions, fell once more to earth. Captain William J. O'Connor, First Lieutenant William L. Eberhardt, and Sergeant Ronnie D. Whiteknight, all of Battery C, picked up between 75 and 100 of these dangerously hot projectiles and moved them away from the gun pits. Captain O'Connor recalled that one Marine driver abandoned his truck loaded with ammunition "sitting in the middle of my Battery area." At that point, Sergeant Whiteknight "rushed out of a bunker and drove the truck away from the guns and into a less dangerous area." When CS gas rolled over the gun line, Lieutenant Eberhardt and Sergeant Whiteknight brought gas masks to the cannoneers so that Battery C might continue its duel with the North Vietnamese gunners.^{17**}

At 1000, a large quantity of C-4*** and other explosives went up with a tremendous blast, rocking the entire combat base. A shock wave rolled through Khe Sanh, cracking the timbers holding up the roof of the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines command post. The battalion staff fell to the ground but the roof, after settling about one foot, held fast.¹⁸

As the enemy shells continued to fall and ASP Number 1 continued to burn, each new explosion took its toll on the Marines' ammunition supply.¹⁹ Ammunition technicians from Force Logistic Support Group-B fought the flames with fire extinguishers and shovels, but by afternoon the garrison was dangerously low on many types of ammunition. General Cushman's warning of the previous week to "tidy up" ASP Number 1 was driven home. Worse, the logistical air effort to build up ammunition stocks would have to begin again, meaning that other types of supplies would wait even longer for delivery while the priority for space on board planes continued to go to ammunition.

*Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth W. Pipes, the commander of Company B in 1968, remembered that one of the first Marines killed was his radio operator: "I found him slumped over the entrance to our bunker, as I exited to search for him." LtCol Kenneth W. Pipes, *Comments on draft*, dtd 10Mar95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Pipes Comments, 1995.

**William O'Connor, the Battery C commander, recalled that when he took over the battery, the troops had a dog mascot with the mange. O'Connor related, "despite my orders the dog was not destroyed but was cleaned up. He was smart enough to hide from me, but when we got hit . . . [on 21 January] CS rolled into the area from the exploding dump and I found myself sharing my gas mask with the dog. That dog later left for the States with one of our rotating troops and did make it back safe and sound." O'Connor Comments.

***A plastic explosive.



Photo from the David Douglas Duncan Collection, MCHC

A lone combat boot and helmet are seen among the debris where a Marine's "bootch" stood before it was destroyed when a 122mm rocket hit the nearby ammunition dump.

Nightfall brought no respite for the defenders of Khe Sanh. At 1950, the 2d Platoon, Company L, 3d Battalion reported about 35 North Vietnamese crawling toward its wire near the western end of the airstrip. The Marines opened fire with grenade launchers and light antiarmor weapons (LAAWs).^{*} When the action ended an hour later the North Vietnamese were seen dragging away casualties and 14 enemy dead remained in the wire.²⁰

The fighting and shelling of 21 January resulted in 14 Marines dead and 43 wounded. Combined with the ammunition dump explosions, the shelling destroyed a Bell UH-1 Iroquois helicopter, all of the weather monitoring equipment, most of the airstrip's night lighting system, many field telephone lines, bunkers, engineer equipment, generators, the post exchange, a mess hall, and other facilities.^{21**}

^{*}The M72 Light Antiarmor Weapon (LAAW) is a 66mm anti-tank rocket system in which a projectile is prepackaged in a disposable launcher. In Vietnam, the Marines used these weapons against enemy bunkers and as on this occasion even against infantry.

^{**}Colonel William H. Dabney, who as a captain commanded Company I on Hill 881S, recalled that as well as the main base being bombarded, "several rounds of 120mm mortars struck" Hill 881S, wounding several Marines, and that "as they were being evacuated, several more rounds struck the helicopter zone, killing the company corpsman and two other Marines and destroying a CH-34 helicopter and wounding its crew." Col William H. Dabney, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Dabney Comments.

III MAF immediately moved to replenish the ammunition lost in ASP Number 1, but the task was complicated by damage to the airstrip. With only 1,800 feet of the 3,900-foot runway open, large-capacity cargo aircraft could not land. Further, the damage to the night lighting system and poor weather added to the problem. Nonetheless, six Fairchild C-123 Provider light cargo aircraft of the 315th Air Commando Wing landed at Khe Sanh after dark on 21 January under artillery illumination, bringing in 26 tons of much needed ammunition. After midnight, a 1st Marine Aircraft Wing Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter delivered whole blood after an extremely dangerous landing on the "socked-in" airstrip.²²

The Fall of Khe Sanh Village

Almost simultaneously with the attack on the main base, the North Vietnamese launched an assault against the Regional Force troops and Combined Action Oscar units in Khe Sanh Village about 3,000 meters to the south.^{***} Early on the morning of the 21st, under cover

^{***}Marine records state that the attack on Khe Sanh Village occurred at 0630 on the morning of the 21st while Colonel Bruce B. G. Clarke, USA, who was the senior U.S. Army advisor for Huong Hoa District, in an account he wrote in April 1968, states that the NVA attack began at 0500. See 26th Mar ComdC, Jan68, and Capt Bruce Clarke, untitled account, dtd Apr68, attached to Col Bruce B. G. Clarke, Comments on draft, n.d. [Apr95] (Vietnam Comment File).

of fog, elements of the *66th Regiment, 304th North Vietnamese Division* struck the Huong Hoa District headquarters in the village complex. The mixed group of defenders included two platoons of the 915th Regional Force Company, the small four-man U.S. Army advisory group headed by Army Captain Bruce B. G. Clarke, and two Combined Action Platoons of Combined Action Company "Oscar," commanded by Marine First Lieutenant Thomas B. Stamper. The total strength of the allied force consisted of approximately 175 soldiers and Marines. Combined Action Platoon Oscar-1 (CAP O-1) consisting of 10 Marines and 1 Navy corpsman, headed by Sergeant John J. Balanco, and about an equal number of Bru tribesmen, was in the headquarters hamlet. The second Combined Action Platoon, Oscar-2 (CAP O-2), led by Sergeant Roy Harper, at about the same strength, was in a nearby hamlet about 200 yards to the west.

With Captain Clarke and Lieutenant Stamper coordinating artillery and air support from the headquarters command bunker, CAP O-1 and the RF troops stood off the initial attacks in fierce fighting.* While eventually forced to give up most of the hamlet, the two units established a final defensive perimeter in the headquarters compound. CAP O-2 also managed for that first day to stave off the NVA in their sector.

As the fog lifted about midday on the 21st, the intensity of the combat slackened somewhat. While the North Vietnamese continued to place pressure upon the defenders with mortar and RPG bombardments, they limited their infantry action to small arms fire and probes. Helicopters attempted to resupply the embattled headquarters compound, but could not land. According to Corporal Balanco, the crews managed, however, to kick out some much needed ammunition.

*Captain Clarke was on a separate advisory radio net from Lieutenant Stamper. Clarke managed to keep in radio contact with Robert Brewer, the Senior Quang Tri Province Advisor in Quang Tri City, and more importantly established radio contact with an Air Force forward air controller who called in repeated air strikes against the North Vietnamese. Lieutenant Stamper had direct radio contact with the 26th Marines and was able to call in artillery support and Marine air through the Marine radio net. Col Bruce B. G. Clarke, USA, Comments on draft, n.d. [Apr95] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Clarke Comments; Capt Bruce Clarke, untitled account, dtd Apr68, attached to Clarke Comments. According to Prados and Stubbe, Captain Clarke was out on an early morning patrol just before the enemy onslaught on the 21st, but "miraculously got back to the perimeter and under cover" to help coordinate the defense. John Prados and Ray W. Stubbe, *Valley of Decision, The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1991), p. 258.

Two relief expeditions also failed in their attempts. In the first, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines from the Khe Sanh base sent out a platoon from Company D to the village. The platoon reached Hill 476 overlooking Khe Sanh Village and could see North Vietnamese troops deploying. Receiving new orders that the relief mission was too dangerous, the platoon returned to base. The second expedition was a disaster. The U.S. Army 282d Assault Helicopter Company attempted to bring in that evening the South Vietnamese 256th Regional Force Company from Quang Tri City. Unfortunately, in a series of mishaps and misunderstandings, the aircraft came down in a landing zone near the abandoned French Fort, 2,000 meters east of Khe Sanh, the former home of FOB-3, and now a North Vietnamese stronghold. It was a near slaughter: the North Vietnamese killed over 25 of the American pilots and crew and 70 or more of the RF troops. Among the dead was the expedition leader, U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Seymoe, the deputy advisor for Quang Tri Province. According to authors John Prados and Ray Stubbe, this failed expedition "in terms of proportionate casualties and equipment losses . . . would be the worst military debacle of the entire campaign at Khe Sanh."²³

During the night of 21-22 January in Khe Sanh village, the situation remained tense but relatively quiet, except for some enemy sniper fire. During this time, the Marines and surviving Bru of CAP O-2 to the west, fought their way to the headquarters compound.** The Marines sustained several wounded but no dead. On the morning of the 22d, Sergeant Balanco, who was later awarded the Silver Star for his part in the fight, led a patrol towards the Old French Fort, hoping to find survivors of the aborted relief mission. At the bottom of the hill upon which the fort was situated, Balanco turned back, fearing he was being set up for an ambush after seeing some Vietnamese in strange uniforms. Upon approaching the western sector of the headquarters compound, Balanco and his men recovered what he claimed to be 150 weapons, including RPGs and assault rifles, many of them

**Former Navy Corpsman John R. Roberts, who served with CAP O-2, recalled that Sergeant Harper, although badly wounded, continued to coordinate the defense. Roberts wrote that most of the other Marines in the CAP were also wounded. Despite their wounds, the CAP-2 Marines decided that the only choice they had was to break out and attempt to reach CAP-1 in the headquarters compound, which they successfully did. John R. Roberts, "The Bastard Sons of Khe Sanh, the Marines of CAP, Oscar II," ms, attached to John J. Balanco, Comments on draft, dtd 15Nov94 and 5Apr95 (Vietnam Comment File).

brand new, from the bodies of the “hundreds of mutilated and mangled NVA” there.²⁴

During the late morning of 22 January, a Marine helicopter took Lieutenant Stampler back to the Khe Sanh base to consult with Colonel Lownds about the feasibility of continuing the defense in the village. According to Lownds, upon Stampler's recommendation and after “long consideration and proper evaluation of the facts,” he decided to evacuate the units.²⁵

The resulting evacuation took place under chaotic conditions including North Vietnamese shelling. Sergeant Balanco remembered, “We received an agonizing radio message . . . from an emphatic and concerned Lt. Stampler telling us to pack up.” According to Balanco, “no R.F.'s or Bru with their ‘weapons’ would be allowed on the helicopters to return to the combat base.” He recalled that six helicopter evacuation missions flew out of the village that day. As the first helicopters took off, a group of frightened Vietnamese civilians rushed to board the aircraft. Balanco fired “a few M-70 rounds” in the opposite direction, causing them to hold back so that the wounded could be taken out first.²⁶

The helicopters took out all of the American wounded including two U.S. Army sergeants from the Advisory Group. Captain Clarke also had received orders from Robert Brewer, the Senior Quang Tri Province Advisor, to evacuate the headquarters. According to Clarke, Brewer had not wanted to abandon Khe Sanh Village, but in that Colonel Lownds could not provide any further artillery support, there was no longer any choice. Clarke and one of his advisory sergeants declined to board the helicopters. They led the remnants of the 195th RF Company and several of the Bru safely to the FOB-3 compound along a secret trail.^{27*}

*There seems to be some doubt whether Colonel Lownds ordered that the RFs and the Brus not be evacuated by helicopter. According to Lownds' interview, he ordered the evacuation of the Bru CAPs and RFs, but they and Captain Clarke elected to walk out rather than board the helicopters. Col David E. Lownds inrvw, 13Mar68, pp. 22-23, in Khe Sanh: Transcriptions of Oral History, MCHC. Given the accounts on the ground by both Clarke and Sergeant Balanco, it is obvious that the RFs and the Bru would have boarded the helicopters if they had the choice. It may very well have been that Colonel Lownds' orders may have been misunderstood or that the situation on the ground may have determined the decision not to evacuate them. In any event the relations between the Army advisors and the Marine command with the exception of the CAP Oscar Marines was not very good. Colonel Clarke later wrote: “It was so bad that the Marines were eavesdropping on our radio nets . . . In this regard, I had coordinated to have my own alternate communications back to Quang Tri.” Clarke Comments.



Photo courtesy of John J. Balanco
Cpl Bruce Brown, LCpl Frank Batchman, and Sgt John J. Balanco, members of Combined Action Company Oscar who served with the Bru Montagnards in the Khe Sanh village complex, are seen at the secretive Forward Operating Base (FOB) 3, next to the Khe Sanh base, where they set up new positions with their Bru Popular Force troops.

Sergeant Balanco departed on the last helicopter to leave the headquarters compound. Just before he boarded the aircraft, two civilian Bru approached him carrying a badly burned man and asked the Marine to take him on board. At the same time, the pilot was shouting: “No one except Americans could go on the LAST CHOPPER OUT and he was departing RIGHT NOW!” Taking out his pistol and thinking to put the wounded man out of his misery, Balanco suddenly changed his mind. He returned the pistol to his holster and “screamed for everyone to move back and got him on that last chopper out.” After arriving at the Khe Sanh base, the Marines of Combined Action Company Oscar, including CAP-3 which also evacuated its hamlet located north of the headquarters, joined the RF troops and the Popular Force Bru at the southern edge of the FOB-3 compound.^{28**}

Reinforcement and Fighting Back

On 22 January, Khe Sanh Combat Base was the scene of frenetic activity. The resupply effort continued as 20 Air Force C-123 sorties delivered another

**Captain Clarke later that afternoon led a Special Forces Strike Force from FOB-3 which destroyed everything of value in the Khe Sanh Village headquarters. Clarke Comments and Balanco, “Abandoned,” p. 186.



Photo from the Abel Collection

An Air Force C-123 Provider transport is about to land just beyond the leveled ammunition dump at Khe Sanh, bringing in much-needed supplies.

130 tons of ammunition. After unloading, the empty aircraft joined the helicopters of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 362 in evacuating wounded Marines and civilian refugees. Attack aircraft of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, as well as Navy and Air Force planes, struck known and suspected Communist positions in the surrounding area. The North Vietnamese did not remain silent. Artillery, rockets, mortar, and small arms fire pounded the base and hill positions at intervals throughout the day, playing havoc with efforts to repair damage. Enemy fire hit one CH-46 helicopter as it was lifting off from the airstrip, causing it to crash within the perimeter.²⁹

At 1200 on the 22d, the 3d Marine Division ordered Lieutenant Colonel John F. Mitchell's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines to deploy to Khe Sanh.* Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell recalled that his battalion command group and two rifle companies arrived by helicopter that day. Mitchell remembered that as the helicopters landed the battalion was greeted by

"a hail of automatic weapons fire followed by mortar fire" and the unit sustained its first casualties at Khe Sanh. According to the battalion commander, there were no guides and he directed his company commanders "to disperse their companies as best they could, seek protective cover or trenches, and await further orders." Then Mitchell sought out Colonel Lownds in the 26th Marines command post. The 26th Marines commander told Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell to assemble his troops and "be prepared for immediate deployment due west" of the Khe Sanh base. At Mitchell's request, given the lateness of the hour, Colonel Lownds agreed that Mitchell could wait until the following day to deploy to his new sector.³⁰

The next morning, the battalion moved out from the combat base and spent much of the time in "clearing/reconnoitering the area west/southwest" of the combat base. Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell selected a small hill that fronted a rock quarry approximately 1,500 meters to the west southwest of the main base for his command post and main defensive area. Mitchell then sent the 1st Platoon of Company A about 500 meters outside the battalion perimeter on an

*See Chapter six for the redeployment of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines from Camp Evans.

even smaller hill to set up an outpost on a knoll west of the quarry, which he designated Alpha 1.* His priority at both sites was the building of his defensive positions starting “from scratch.” While “building materials, wire, and mines” arrived from the main base as they “became available,” the battalion first depended upon its own “ingenuity and hard work—digging—scrounging, . . . to survive the incoming.”

Over the next several days, Khe Sanh maintained a high level of activity, as helicopters and cargo aircraft flew in and out as often as the weather permitted, and Marines worked to improve their defensive positions. On 23 January, enemy antiaircraft fire became a significant threat, with NVA gunners downing a helicopter and a jet attack aircraft in a 20-minute period.³¹

Communist shelling continued, completely destroying the base post office and further damaging bunkers, trenches, and the airstrip.³² The Marines fought back, expending massive quantities of artillery and mortar ammunition in attempts to silence the enemy guns. This, however, proved to be a difficult task. The enemy gun positions were well-concealed in dense jungle, visible only when actually firing. Because these positions were usually located on the reverse slopes of hills, they were often not even visible from Marine positions. Air observers of the 3d Marine Division maintained constant patrol over the area during daylight hours, providing some of the information the Marines needed to return fire effectively.^{33**}

*Bert Mullins who served as a radioman to Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell recalled that after leaving the main base that they actually reached first the small hill which later became A-1. He remembered Mitchell “remarking that we must be on the wrong hill because it was much too small.” Bert Mullins, Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Mullins Comments. Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell stated that he ordered the establishment of the A-1 outpost because he believed that the NVA would need more than one avenue of approach to make an all-out assault on the main base and that A-1 lay “astride the west to east axis” to Khe Sanh. Moreover, he needed “as much warning as possible before the enemy would reach 1/9’s MLR [main line of resistance].” Col John F. Mitchell, Comments on draft, dtd 5Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Mitchell Comments.

**Navy Captain Bernard D. Cole, who as a lieutenant junior grade and naval gunfire officer assigned to the 26th Marines, served as an assistant target intelligence officer in the 26th Marines Fire Support Coordinating Center. He recalled that “air dropped sensors were a primary source of targeting data for us.” These sensors “were still classified . . . and we were not supposed to refer to them as an info[r]mation source . . .” Cole remembered that “we received a formatted readout from the sensors . . . [which] would indicate the sensor location and type, and the type of target (troops or vehicles) and the approximate number . . .” Capt Bernard D. Cole, USN, Comments on draft, dtd 27Oct94 and 23Jun96 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Cole Comments.

Enemy long-range artillery presented an even more difficult problem. The accepted view was that the artillerymen fired their large guns from positions on Co Roc Mountain, a precipitous cliff southwest of the combat base, across the Laotian border and outside the maximum range of the artillery pieces of the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines. One 3d Marine Division intelligence officer, Major Gary E. Todd, wrote that the reports he read stated that “NVA artillery was dug into the eastern face of Co Roc so as to be almost impossible to hit with counter-battery fire, even if we had the artillery with range.” These same sources reported that the NVA gun emplacements were in “man-made caves, completely camouflaged, and fitted out with rails similar to railroad tracks.” The North Vietnamese gunners “would roll their guns to the mouth of the cave and, with barrel protruding, fire, then roll back smoothly into the cave and restore the camouflage.” Navy Lieutenant Junior Grade Bernard D. Cole, attached to the 26th Marines as the assistant target intelligence officer, remembered that he “personally targeted Arc Light strikes (which came in flights of three B-52s) on Co Roc.” According to Cole, “The strikes would quiet down the NVA gunners for a couple of hours—from the shock . . . , but then they would resume firing.”³⁴

Captain William H. Dabney, who commanded Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines on Hill 881 South had a different perspective. According to Dabney, “Co Roc was a myth, perhaps because of the imposing look of the mountain and the romantic sounding name.” While granting that some rounds were fired from artillery at Co Roc, he argued that the more destructive NVA firing positions were located to the west of Hill 881 South. Dabney contended that being seven kilometers west of Khe Sanh and 1,500 feet higher than the Marines on the base, his company was in a better position to locate the enemy artillery positions. While not always hearing the guns being fired, he declared, “we could usually hear the rounds going over.”³⁵

He described how one of his artillery spotters, Corporal Molimao Niutoa, a native Samoan and blessed with unusually good eyesight, using powerful ships’ binoculars, found several of these enemy guns to the west. Because of the location of Hill 881 and its height, the Khe Sanh DASC often passed off aircraft with unexpended munitions to Company I. As Dabney explained, the Khe Sanh DASC “rarely could see targets of opportunity” and “we, conversely, *always* [emphasis in the original] had targets.” On one such occasion, according to the Marine captain, he just had



Photo is from the Ted Vdorick Collection

A lone Marine can be seen standing up along the trenchline of Company D, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, located in the Rock Quarry about 1,500 meters west of the main base. Note the sandbags along the trenchline.

The American flag flies over the command bunker of Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines on Hill 881 South, one of the main hill outposts. Captain William H. Dabney, the Company I commander, who had the colors raised every morning, argued that his company was in one of the best positions to locate the enemy guns.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191078



several flights of "Navy and Air Force birds handed off" to him when Corporal Niuatoa suddenly "spotted a flash and then several others." A few seconds later, the Marines on the hill heard the rounds going overhead and then saw them impacting on the main base. This time, Dabney contacted a Marine airborne forward air controller codenamed Southern Oscar flying a Cessna light single-engine fixed-wing O-1E. Turning over control of the aircraft given to him to Southern Oscar, Captain Dabney described to the airborne controller the nature of the target and relayed to him Corporal Niuatoa's directions. When Southern Oscar had one of the aircraft drop his bombs on a ridgeline and ask for an adjustment, Dabney recalled the corporal's response: "Left a click, add two ridge lines." Given these new bearings, the air controller spotted first one gun and then several others. While not sure because of enemy antiaircraft fire, Southern Oscar believed that the resulting airstrikes took out four of the guns. Dabney wanted to call in B-52 strikes on these positions, but declared that one of his everlasting frustrations was that nothing ever came of his recommendations.³⁶

*In his comments, Colonel Dabney wrote: "For what it's worth, the folks in the Khe Sanh COC [Combat Operations Center] never realized how the NVA artillery was emplaced and employed, but then, they never came up to [Hill] 881S and looked." He believed that they were unnecessarily fixated upon Co Roc. Although respecting the abilities and brilliance of Captain Mirza M. Baig, the 26th Marines Target Intelligence Officer, Dabney believed the latter too engrossed in his "technological acquisition goodies" and "forgot he had . . . eyeballs working for him." In supporting his viewpoint, Colonel Dabney asked why would the North Vietnamese employ their Russian-made 130mm guns with a 27,000 meter range from Co Roc which was only 12,000 meters from Khe Sanh and risk losing them. He observed that Hill 881 South was three to four miles off the gun target line from Co Roc, and "if we could *hear* [emphasis in the original] the rounds whistling over, they couldn't be coming from Co Roc!" Instead, he believed the main enemy guns were located about five kilometers north of Co Roc and about 15,000 meters west of Hill 881 South. Instead of emplacing them in battery positions, they placed individual guns "along the gun-target line, about 500 meters apart, since the target (Khe Sanh) was fixed, they had only to adjust each gun for range based on its location. Deflection was a constant." He concluded: "It made sense, really, to put their artillery, guns firing at extreme range . . . to the west, where they could fire down the long axis of the target. That way, 'over and shorts' still had effect on target." Dabney Comments. Captain Bernard D. Cole, USN, after reading Colonel Dabney's comments, wrote: "I do not dispute that Col Dabney was able to spot arty firing at Khe Sanh from positions other than Co Roc, but I certainly disagree that 'Co Roc was a myth.' We obviously knew about and targeted non-Co Roc arty, which we located through 'all source' intelligence—although Harry Baig regularly went out to the perimeter (without helmet or flak jacket!), our job in the FSCC was of course not observation but fire support coordination. I simply think that Col Dabney is basing his conclusion on inadequate information." Captain Cole also insisted that "If anyone called in a viable Arclight target, we would hit it . . ." Cole Comments, dtd 23Jun96.

While there may have been some question about the location of the enemy guns, there was little dispute that enemy rockets, especially the 122mm Soviet type, posed possibly an even greater threat to the Khe Sanh base. Used in great volume and difficult to suppress, the enemy gunners fired them from west of the base which offered "the long axis of the base" as a target. Given the limited range of the missiles, Hill 881 South was in a strategic position. From the hill, the Marines of Company I could observe the NVA gunners shoot off their rockets, usually in sheaves of 50 rockets firing simultaneously towards Khe Sanh. This permitted Dabney to give the main base about a 10-second warning to sound the alarm and for the Marines there to take cover. While unable to suppress the rockets when they fired because of their sheer volume, Dabney's Marines were able to take countermeasures. According to the Company I commander, the North Vietnamese regularly used the same sites over and over so he employed his mortars and 106mm Recoilless Rifles against them "at night while they were setting up sometimes producing secondary explosions." The Marines also called in air strikes against the sites, but with mixed results because of the weather.³⁷

An ominous indication of an even more extensive North Vietnamese campaign against the Marine base occurred in mid-January. On the morning of the 24th, Communist tanks overran the BV-33 Battalion, Royal Lao Army, at Ban Houaysan, an abandoned airfield on Route 9, just across the border in Laos. The appearance of NVA tanks outside North Vietnam was extremely unusual. Later the same day, an air observer reported sighting a MiG aircraft 10 to 15 miles west of Khe Sanh.

Closer to home, the 3d Platoon, Company F, 26th Marines engaged an NVA company only one kilometer north of the battalion's position on Hill 558. The Communist troops were equipped with helmets and flak jackets and used whistle signals. They were not afraid to leave their positions to maneuver, at one point sending 50 men against the Marines' flank. The Marines reported that the enemy fought tenaciously, refusing to withdraw even after "four hours of pounding" by artillery and aircraft. One North Vietnamese machine gunner remained at his post until killed by rifle fire at a range of only five meters.³⁸

In light of the major battle anticipated at Khe Sanh, General Westmoreland requested that Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, the I Corps com-



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801114

ARVN Rangers occupy a defensive trench east of the runway and actually just outside the main base. The American command wanted a Vietnamese unit to participate in Khe Sanh for "psychological" reasons as well as military.

mander, provide South Vietnamese units to participate in the defense of the combat base, citing "psychological reasons as well as military." Lam agreed, and on 27 January, Captain Hoang Pho and his ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion arrived at the combat base and took their place at the east end of the runway just forward of Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, actually outside of the base defensive perimeter. According to one source, Colonel Lownds wanted "to gain more elbow room . . . to push out the perimeter" since he had received implied criticism from his superiors about the limited extent of his defenses in this sector.³⁹ Although their unit, 318 men strong, was about 100 short of its authorization, these tough, disciplined soldiers would prove themselves time and again during the battle, earning the respect of the Marines.⁴⁰

Enemy sappers were at work, apparently preparing the way for planned ground attacks. Marines on the perimeter found barbed wire cut, but replaced to

look as if it were whole, and Claymore mines* turned around to face Marine trenches.⁴¹ Intelligence reports from higher headquarters warned Colonel Lownds to be watchful for signs of NVA tunneling. The Marines monitored seismic intrusion detectors, drove metal engineer stakes into the ground and listened to them with stethoscopes borrowed from the medical unit, and even employed divining rods. They dug a number of "countermines" in response to possible indications of tunneling, but found no enemy tunnels.⁴²

Beyond Marine positions, American aircraft opened a new era in warfare, planting unattended ground sensors near likely enemy avenues of approach and assembly areas.** These devices were extremely sensitive and could monitor sound or vibrations, transmitting their information by radio to intelligence personnel. The position of each sensor was carefully recorded, permitting the Marines to quantify unusual enemy activity. By noting the activation of a number of different sensors, intelligence personnel could estimate the size and composition of an enemy unit, as well as its direction of march and speed. The devices would play a key role in the battle.^{43***}

Round Two

By the end of January, intelligence officers painted a frightening picture of the magnitude of the North Vietnamese effort around Khe Sanh. Reacting to developments, Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division, ordered Lownds to limit patrolling to within 500 meters of friendly lines. Tompkins feared that the North Vietnamese wanted to draw the Marines out into the open, away from the protection of their bunkers, trenches, mines, and barbed wire. Patrolling, he reasoned, was unnecessary because intelligence was

*A directional anti-personnel mine emplaced above ground facing the enemy.

**According to Colonel Dabney, he observed that these sensors were planted "by black, unmarked, 'Air America' [a CIA sponsored aviation company] birds which looked to me to be B-26s." Dabney Comments.

***Colonel John F. Mitchell, who in 1968 commanded the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at Khe Sanh, commented that the 26th Marines provided him in early February with a "black box" that monitored sensors along Route 9. He observed that "it was very productive." His battalion S-2 or intelligence officer listened in on the NVA radio nets in conjunction with the sensor monitoring and "the raw intelligence gleaned . . . was put to good use throughout the siege." Mitchell Comments.

providing accurate information on enemy unit locations and activities.^{44*}

Tet Mau Chanh, by far the most significant and celebrated holiday season in Vietnamese culture, approached. During some previous holiday periods, both sides had agreed to temporary cease-fires which were observed more often in the breach. In 1968, the Tet cease-fire was scheduled for the period from 1800, 29 January until 0600, 31 January. At 1100, 29 January the command post of the 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion received a radio message in a "northern accent" stating that the NVA had an ARVN Ranger patrol in sight, but would not fire because of Tet. The voice advised the Rangers to recall their patrols until after the holidays. The ARVN unit changed radio frequencies.⁴⁵ Later that day, the 3d Marine Division notified Khe Sanh that the Tet truce was canceled. One unit history recorded that "as if to signal that they also heard the news the NVA dropped six 60mm mortar rounds into the Combat Base at precisely 311800 January."^{46**}

With the truce cancellation, the massive air campaign under Operation Niagara continued unabated. On 30 January, B-52s carried out the biggest strike of the war to that date against targets in the Khe Sanh area, dropping 1,125 tons of bombs.^{47***}

* This limitation on patrolling did not apply to all of the forces at Khe Sanh. The members of FOB-3, the Studies and Observation Group (SOG), with their attached Montagnards continued to run their clandestine operations. Navy Captain Bernard D. Cole, who served in the 26th Marines FSCC, recalled that Colonel Lownds "had a small map room separate from the main FSCC Hq. When he took proposed B-52 strikes for approval, a Special Forces captain there plotted the progress of long-range patrols into Laos." Cole Comments. Former Marine Sergeant John A. Balanco who served with CAP O-2 at FOB-3 recalled: "Black helicopters would land with no markings on them and take men dressed in civilian clothes away." He mentioned that Captain Clarke and the mixed group with him also patrolled and the CAP Oscar Marines occasionally joined them. Balanco, "Abandoned," pp. 185-91. Colonel Mitchell stated that he did not adhere to the 500-meter limit either and that "1/9 patrolled every day of the week" north, south, and west of his positions, "up to 1,200 meters or more." He mentioned that he and FOB-3 were the only commands that patrolled daily and that he and the FOB-3 commander "devised a coordinated plan for patrolling and intelligence gathering." It was his opinion "that you must have maneuverability to complement fire power and to keep your enemy having doubts about your intentions." Mitchell Comments.

** Both the North Vietnamese and the allied forces at Khe Sanh routinely monitored each others' radio nets. Colonel Mitchell with the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines commented that by monitoring the enemy nets, it was apparent that the North Vietnamese had "complete knowledge of the . . . T/O and T/E of the Marine units at Khe Sanh," including the "names of key commanders." Mitchell Comments.

*** For further discussion of Operation Niagara see Chapter 23.

The troop and logistics buildup at Khe Sanh, as well as the massive air support effort, indicated the resolve of U.S. forces to defend the base. Commanders and officials at every level, including the President, expressed concern for the situation in northwest Quang Tri Province. President Johnson, in particular, was sometimes depicted as having had a fixation with Khe Sanh. Indeed, an enduring legend of the campaign concerns an incident in which the President supposedly asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to sign a letter to the effect that they believed Khe Sanh could be defended. In truth, President Johnson asked for General Westmoreland's personal assessment of the situation, which was then circulated among the Service chiefs for comment. The Joint Chiefs of Staff unanimously endorsed Westmoreland's conclusion that Khe Sanh could and should be held.⁴⁸

Perhaps the most dramatic indication of the President's concern was his question to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle G. Wheeler, about the feasibility of using tactical nuclear weapons to resolve the battle on favorable terms. Westmoreland established a "small secret study group" to examine the consequences of what was nicknamed Operation "Fracture Jaw." The group reported that "because the region around Khe Sanh was virtually uninhabited, civilian casualties would be minimal." Although planning never proceeded beyond this stage, the President's interest in the possibility of such a drastic step underscored his perception of the seriousness of the situation at Khe Sanh.⁴⁹

Bru refugees streamed into Khe Sanh seeking evacuation from the war-ravaged area. They told the Marines that the North Vietnamese claimed they would "liberate the Khe Sanh airstrip" by 5 February. Indeed, on the night of 3-4 February, sensors northwest of Hill 881 South detected the movement of 1,500 to 2,000 people. Captain Mirza "Harry" M. Baig, Colonel Lownds' Target Intelligence Officer, initially believed the movement to be a North Vietnamese resupply effort and passed the information to fire support units for their attack. On the following night, however, the massed movement continued and further study caused Baig to change his opinion. He now thought the sensors had detected a North Vietnamese regiment in attack formation.⁵⁰

The 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, joined by four batteries of Army 175mm guns to the east, pounded the area indicated by Baig with volley after volley of artillery fire. The dreadful hammering had a telling effect. The sensors transmitted the rumble



Photo from the David Douglas Duncan Collection, MCHC

MajGen Rathvon McC. Tompkins, the CG, 3d MarDiv, is seen as a passenger with an unidentified crew member in a Marine helicopter on one of his frequent visits to the Khe Sanh base.

of impacting shells, as well as the voices of hundreds of panic-stricken men running to escape the deadly barrage.

Just to the east of the target area, the men of Captain Earle G. Breeding's Company E, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines watched the scene from a hilltop position just 500 meters northeast of Company K's strongpoint on Hill 861. Company E had occupied the hill (dubbed "861A") that morning, 5 February, because it blocked direct observation between Hill 861 and the 2d Battalion strongpoint on Hill 558. There were no sensors near Hill 861 or 861A.⁵¹

At 0300, about two hours after the Marine and Army artillerymen shelled the suspected North Vietnamese regiment, the combat base came under Communist rocket, artillery, and mortar fire. Five minutes later, Captain Breeding reported that 200 North Vietnamese were breaching the wire atop Hill 861A and Colonel Lownds immediately set a "Red Alert" for the 26th Marines.⁵²

Smoke from a B-52 massive Arclight airstrike rises in the background as photographed from FOB-3. During Operation Niagara, the Boeing Stratofortress long-range bombers based at Guam and Thailand conducted hundreds of these strikes in support of the Marines at Khe Sanh.

Photo courtesy of John J. Balanco



Intense mortar and small arms fire rained down on Company E from the attacking NVA even as the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines poured on a heavy answering barrage. Communist sappers blasted holes in the protective barbed wire through which following infantry advanced, shooting as they came. Company E, having occupied the hill only a few hours before, was not well-entrenched. Still, the Marines used every weapon they could bring to bear, including CS gas grenades, against the oncoming North Vietnamese.⁵³

The enemy troops pressed their attack vigorously, reaching and penetrating the 1st Platoon's perimeter. First Lieutenant Donald E. R. Shanley and his platoon withdrew in good order to alternate positions from which they continued the fight. Meanwhile, friendly artillery rolled back and forth over the slope upon which the North Vietnamese were attacking, seeking to cut off any following reinforcements. Aircraft joined

in, dropping their loads under radar control accomplished by the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing's Air Support Radar Team (ASRT) B of Marine Air Support Squadron (MASS) 3 at the combat base.

Shortly after the North Vietnamese penetration, at 0500, Lieutenant Shanley led his men from their fighting holes in a bold counterattack. The 1st Platoon fell upon the enemy with knives, bayonets, rifle butts, and fists. Captain Breeding later described the scene as "just like a World War II movie . . . Charlie didn't know how to cope with it . . . we just walked all over him."⁵⁴ The North Vietnamese who survived the counterattack fled the hilltop, then regrouped and attacked again, halfheartedly. The Marines quickly repulsed the discouraged enemy.

While the fight for Hill 861A cost Company E, 7 dead and 24 wounded, a company sweep at dawn revealed over a 100 enemy dead on the slope of the hill

President Lyndon B. Johnson confers with U.S. Army Gen Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Joint Chiefs concurred with Gen Westmoreland's assessment that Khe Sanh could be successfully defended

Photo Courtesy of Center of Military History

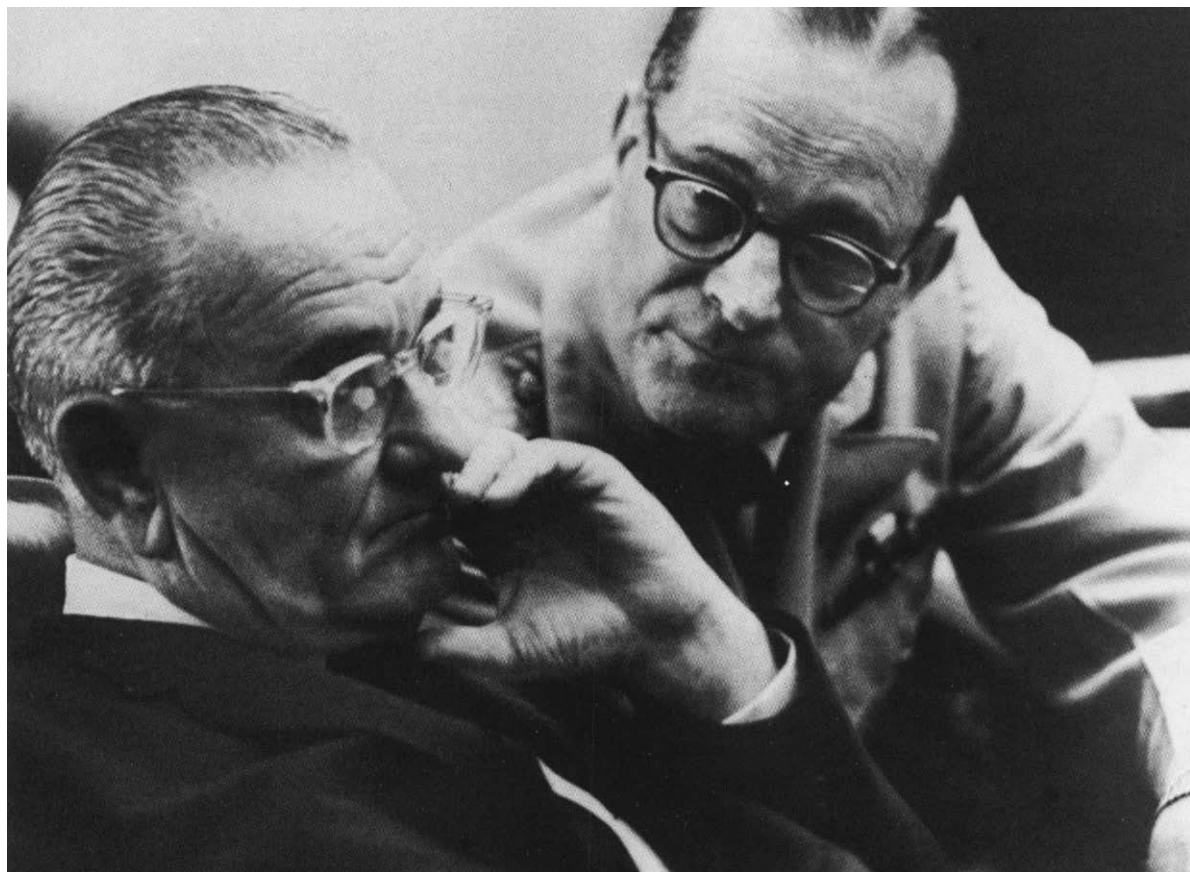




Photo from the David Douglas Duncan Collection, MCHC

A Marine sniper team on Hill 861A from Company E, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines goes into action. On the left is LCpl Albert Miranda with his Remington 700 sniper rifle, taking aim at a distant target, while his partner, in the center, LCpl David Burdwell, points out the enemy soldier to his platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Alec J. Bodenweiser, with the binoculars.

and within the perimeter. Captain Baig later speculated that the heavy and accurate artillery fire (almost 2,000 rounds from the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines alone) on and behind the assaulting Communists had prevented their reserves from joining the attack.⁵⁵

The Fall of Lang Vei

Having failed to capture first Hill 861, then its neighbor 861A, the North Vietnamese turned their attention elsewhere. Their next target was the new Lang Vei Special Forces Camp, defended by Detachment A-101, Company C, 5th Special Forces Group and four CIDG companies of Bru Montagnards.

Lang Vei was a heavily fortified position on Route 9 about two kilometers from the Laotian border from which Detachment A-101 ran patrols to monitor North Vietnamese infiltration into Quang Tri Province. About a kilometer closer to Khe Sanh was the village of Lang Vei, site of the old Special Forces

camp. Here, the survivors of the Royal Lao BV-33 Battalion, overrun by North Vietnamese tanks at Ban Houaysan a few days before, rested with thousands of civilian refugees, including their own families.⁵⁶

The many missions assigned to the 26th Marines for the Khe Sanh battle included responsibility for providing fire support for Lang Vei and for reinforcing the camp should the enemy attack it. Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly sent a 1st Battalion, 13th Marines forward observer to the camp on 6 January to register defensive fires. A month earlier, Colonel Lownds sent a company from Khe Sanh to Lang Vei to rehearse the reinforcement plan. It stayed off the road under the assumption that the enemy would set ambushes along Route 9 as part of an attack on Lang Vei. Because of the heavy jungle, the company took 19 hours to cover the nine-kilometer distance.⁵⁷

At 0030, 7 February, the North Vietnamese struck the Lang Vei camp. In the first engagement between



Both photos are from the David Douglas Duncan Collection

Top, Capt Earle G. Breeding, Commander of Company E, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, with cigar in his right hand and radio in his left, reports the successful counterattack of his company against the enemy on Hill 861A. Below, two Marines of Company E repair the unit's barbed wire after its successful defense of Hill 861A. The body of one of the attackers is in the foreground.



American troops and enemy tanks since the Korean War, 12 Soviet-built PT-76 light amphibious tanks of the 202d Armor Regiment, followed closely by infantry from the 304th Division, crashed through the chain link fence surrounding the compound and rolled through the camp shooting. The defenders destroyed a number of the tanks with 106mm recoilless rifle fire, but to no avail. In a desperate and hard-fought action, the enemy overwhelmed Detachment A-101 and the Bru CIDG companies. Survivors remained in bunkers, among them the detachment commander, Army Captain Frank Willoughby, a former Marine noncommissioned officer.⁵⁸

From his underground combat operations center (COC), Willoughby called for air and artillery support. The 1st Battalion, 13th Marines responded to Willoughby's request with repeated missions, firing the brand-new, top-secret controlled fragmentation munitions (COFRAM), colloquially known as "Fire-cracker," for the first time in combat.* Overhead, Marine and Air Force attack aircraft tried to follow Willoughby's directions in the darkness to drop their bombs on enemy concentrations in and around the camp.⁵⁹

For most of the night, Willoughby and a few other survivors remained in the COC bunker with an enemy tank on top of them, firing, while the North Vietnamese rolled countless fragmentation and gas grenades into the bunker and called to the soldiers in English to surrender. Willoughby remained in radio contact with the 5th Special Forces Group in Da Nang which requested that the 26th Marines execute

the previously arranged contingency plan for the reinforcement of Lang Vei. Colonel Lownds refused, reporting that the combat base itself was even then being heavily shelled and that he expected an enemy assault against the airstrip at any time. Further, the difficulty of moving through the difficult terrain to Lang Vei at night with enemy tanks on Route 9 made reinforcement, in the words of one Marine staff officer, "suicidal."⁶⁰

Generals Westmoreland, Cushman, and Tompkins accepted Lownds' decision. Westmoreland later wrote, "honoring the prerogative of the field commander on the scene, I declined to intervene until I could ascertain more on the situation." During the late morning of 7 February at Da Nang, General Westmoreland met with General Cushman and other senior commanders in I Corps. While the conference dealt with the situation throughout I Corps, General Westmoreland expressed his concern about the Lang Vei situation. Among the participants at the meeting were Army Colonel Jonathan F. Ladd, the commander of the 5th Special Forces Group, who had just flown from Khe Sanh to Da Nang, and Army Lieutenant Colonel

Bru civilian refugees, including many children, walk toward Ca Lu along Route 9 after the fall of Lang Vei. Not having the resources to care for them and fearing the possibility of enemy infiltrators, the Marines decided against allowing the refugees into the Khe Sanh base.

Photo from the 3d MarDiv ComdC, Feb68



* A projectile containing a number of "submunitions" or bomblets, which are ejected from the shell and spread over a wide area, each bomblet exploding like a small grenade. It is considerably more lethal than the standard high explosive projectile. This ammunition is still in use today under the name Improved Conventional Munitions (ICM). Lieutenant Colonel John A. Hennelly who commanded the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines recalled that sometime earlier an Army brigadier general and warrant officer "flew into Khe Sanh with some 105mm cofram and a hand-written set of firing tables for the new ammo." From his understanding, "it sounded like COFRAM would be good against troops in the open on terrain without much vegetation." Hennelly stated that when "things hit the fan" and the Special Forces required artillery support, he would have preferred "HE [high explosive] rounds" with variable or time fuzes. He, however, received orders to use the COFRAM, "The orders were coming from Washington, D.C. (honest to Pete)." Hennelly stated that "we fired a mission or two with Cofram but it was not the time or situation to be messing around with a new ammo. It was slowing the fire missions down." He directed that they switch back to conventional ammunition and "that's primarily what we fired although I was telling folks up-the-line we were using cofram." Hennelly Comments.

Daniel L. Baldwin, III, the northern SOG commander. Ladd strongly advocated that a relief force be sent immediately to relieve or evacuate the survivors. Lieutenant Colonel Baldwin recommended that the Special Forces troops at FOB-3 conduct a helicopter-supported evacuation of the camp. After much discussion and some recrimination, General Westmoreland ordered General Cushman to provide helicopter and fixed-wing support to Baldwin.^{61*}

By this time, however, the defenders were largely dependent upon their own efforts. Individually and sometimes in groups, the Special Forces and Bru CIDG troops broke out of the camp and most made their way to Lang Vei Village where the Royal Laotian BV-33 Battalion still remained. Special Forces personnel with the battalion in the old camp there attempted to encourage and plead with the Laotians to assist their comrades in the new camp, but the results were only a few feeble and begrudging counterattacks.

* Colonel Ladd, the 5th Special Forces Commander, in an oral history several years later described his activities and participation in the 7 February meeting. He declared that he had been at Lang Vei up to the night before the camp had been hit, and that the Special Forces there "could hear the tanks moving around." Ladd departed by helicopter to obtain anti-tank mines and assistance. According to Ladd, he talked to General Cushman at Da Nang who wanted to help him, but the people in Saigon did not believe that there were tanks there and that the Special Forces "didn't need" the mines. He then flew back over Lang Vei the following morning and saw tanks sitting on top of the base. According to his account, he then went to Khe Sanh and asked Colonel Lownds to mount a relief expedition which Lownds refused to do. Ladd then flew back to Da Nang and found General Westmoreland there. According to the Special Forces colonel, he then told Westmoreland there were three choices: "Stay there and hold; abandon the place; or the Marines reinforce." Frustrated at the meeting, Ladd declared he then called General Abrams, stating: "I just can't get Westmoreland's attention long enough to do anything. He is just putting it off." Ladd claimed that it was General Abrams who called General Norman Anderson, the Marine 1st MAW commander and ordered him to provide aircraft support for an evacuation. Col Jonathan F. Ladd, USA (ret) intvw, n.d. [1977?] (U.S. Army, Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa), pp. 22-30, attached to Clarke Comments, hereafter Ladd Intvw. The discussions at the meeting of 7 February were wide ranging and involved the situation at Da Nang as well as at Lang Vei (See Chapter Eight). Many of the participants at the meeting had very different perceptions of what occurred. General Westmoreland later wrote that he was "shocked at things that virtually begged to be done . . ." Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 342. On the other hand, both General Cushman and General Earl E. Anderson, Cushman's chief of staff, remembered no acrimony at the meeting. Cushman Intvw, Nov82, p. 29 and Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson, however, who headed the MACV Combat Operations Center, in a letter soon after the meeting, wrote about "recriminations between the Green Berets and the Marines." BGen John R. Chaisson ltr to his wife, dtd 8Feb68 (Chaisson Papers, Hoover Institute).

Shortly after 1700, under strong air cover from fixed-wing aircraft and helicopter gunships, Marine CH-46s helilifted the relief force from FOB-3 into old Lang Vei. Despite some mobbing by Laotian and some of the Vietnamese troops, the helicopters brought out most of the Americans and the most seriously wounded of the Laotians and Vietnamese troops. The rest made their way to Khe Sanh on foot. The loss of life was heavy for the Special Forces and CIDG troops at "new" Lang Vei. Almost 300 of the camp's 487 defenders were killed, wounded, or missing, including 10 Americans killed and missing, and another 13 wounded from a total of 24.⁶²

Of the debacle and its aftermath, General Cushman later said:

The base was overrun in the middle of the night, in a matter of a couple of hours. . . . The garrison had already been defeated. There was nothing one could do really, to salvage the situation. . . . it would have been a grave risk to send Marines from Khe Sanh to Lang Vei in the hours of darkness.^{63**}

The destruction of Lang Vei created a secondary problem for Colonel Lownds. More than 6,000 refugees, many of them Laotians of the BV-33 Battalion and their families, as well as a number of Vietnamese Special Forces and Bru CIDG personnel who had escaped Lang Vei alive, crowded outside the gates of the combat base. Lownds refused to admit them

** Most Marines agreed with General Cushman and would accept the statement of Navy Chaplain Ray W. Stubbe, who has written and researched extensively on the subject of Khe Sanh, that an entire NVA regiment "waited to ambush any rescue force." LCDr Ray W. Stubbe, USN, Comments on draft, dtd 23Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File). Major Gary E. Todd, who served as an intelligence officer on the 3d Marine Division staff during this period, supported this view in his comments that Bru refugees "had seen what amounted to an NVA regiment lying in ambush between KSCB [Khe Sanh Combat Base] and Lang Vei that night during the attack." Maj Gary E. Todd, Comments on draft, dtd 28Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File). One Marine exception to the contention that a relief expedition was infeasible that night was Colonel John F. Mitchell, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, at the time, the unit slated to carry out the Marine contingency plan for the relief of Lang Vei. Colonel Mitchell commented that at the end of January Colonel Lownds assigned him the Lang Vei relief mission. According to Mitchell, the plan at that time called for the battalion to make the relief overland. The battalion commander suggested to Colonel Lownds that "the only successful way to accomplish this mission, would be by Helo Assault." At that point, Lownds answered, "Hell you would lose one-half your force and helicopters during the landing." While not taking exception to Colonel Lownds projection, Mitchell replied, "Yes, but I would be there." Colonel Mitchell still contends: "In my opinion the Marines should have done the 'right thing' by sending a relief unit." Mitchell Comments, dtd 9Feb96.

because he did not have the resources to care for them and because he feared that the crowd might conceal enemy infiltrators. But neither could he allow them to remain outside the wire for fear that the enemy might use them to shield an attack on the perimeter.

On the afternoon of 7 February, General Tompkins issued guidance for dealing with the refugees in the event the NVA attempted to use them to screen an attack. First, the Marines were to use CS gas in an attempt to disperse the crowd. If that failed, they would fire over their heads. If the North Vietnamese continued to push the refugees in front of an attack, Tompkins authorized the garrison to shoot into the crowd.⁶⁴ To preclude such a disastrous occurrence, Lownds arranged to move the refugees about two kilometers from the perimeter for the night. Some were eventually processed and flown out, but most simply walked away, down Route 9 to the east.*

The Intensifying Battle

Fresh from their first major success of the Khe Sanh campaign, the Communist forces moved quickly against their next objective. During the night follow-

ing the Lang Vei battle, three companies of the 101D Regiment moved into attack positions near the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines.

About 500 meters west of the battalion's perimeter, Second Lieutenant Terence R. Roach, Jr., and Company A's 1st Platoon, occupied "Alpha 1," named after the platoon's designation. With added machine gun teams, forward observers, and corpsmen, Lieutenant Roach's reinforced platoon numbered 66 men. The outpost provided an extra measure of security for the battalion through its ability to detect and report enemy activity well forward of the lines.

The Alpha 1 outpost was a well-prepared defensive position. The hill itself was quite steep on all but the northwest slope. It was ringed by multiple layers of barbed wire on the slopes and, at the crest, a trench network which included a number of sandbagged bunkers.⁶⁵

At 0415 8 February, in heavy fog and near-total darkness, the North Vietnamese struck the outpost, laying down a heavy and accurate mortar barrage that covered the hilltop for three to four minutes. Enemy infantry followed close on the heels of the mortar fire, attacking from the northwest.

The North Vietnamese assault troops threw canvas over the outpost's protective barbed wire and rolled over it. Almost immediately, enemy soldiers swarmed into the inner perimeter. Lieutenant Roach tried to stem the breakthrough almost singlehandedly, killing several of the enemy with his rifle and attempting to rally the troops on the perimeter. While able to pull one of the badly wounded Marines to relative safety, he died in a hail of automatic weapons fire. The enemy had successfully captured half of the hilltop, while the remnants of the platoon attempted to regroup, especially in the southeastern portion of the outpost.⁶⁶

While the defenders of the Alpha 1 outpost fought desperate hand-to-hand encounters in the trenchlines, sometimes swinging entrenching tools or five-gallon water cans, the rest of the battalion endured persistent and heavy shelling, apparently intended by the NVA to prevent the dispatch of reinforcements. Nonetheless, the battalion's mortar crews braved the incoming rounds to fire in support of Alpha 1.

On the hill, about 30 Marine survivors gathered in the southern portion of the trench network and used sandbags to wall off their part of the trench from the enemy. Some of their weapons were damaged or destroyed, ammunition was scarce, and many of the men were wounded. The North Vietnamese did not rush them, but instead contented themselves with

*The situation with the refugees especially with the Bru exacerbated the already strained relationships between the Army Special Force troops and the Marine command at Khe Sanh. The Special Force units believed that the Bru who had served with them faithfully and well were being misused. Colonel Ladd stated in an interview several years later that when the Bru arrived at the Khe Sanh base they were stripped of their weapons and turned back. According to Ladd, the Marines at the base said, "they couldn't trust any gooks in their damn camp." Ladd Interv. Both Army Colonel Bruce B. G. Clarke, who had been at Khe Sanh Village and later brought his forces to FOB-3 and former Marine Sergeant John J. Balanco CAP O-2 also at FOB-3 wrote of the suspicion that they received. As a CAP Marine, Balanco identified very closely with the Bru with whom he served and stated that he felt very isolated after the CAPs were "not allowed on the base with our fighting Bru!" While at FOB-3, he noticed that the Marine tanks at Khe Sanh had their guns trained on FOB-3. Balanco, "Abandoned," pp. 185-91. Colonel Clarke noted that at FOB-3, "We often took more fire from behind than from the NVA to our front." Clarke observed that the basic difficulty at Khe Sanh was "that there was no unity of command in the AO [Area of Operations], a lack of communication and coordination and misunderstanding of the interrelated destiny that would be ours." Clarke Comments. In relationship to unity of command, Colonel Lownds was in a difficult situation. As one Marine officer, Colonel William H. Dabney, who at the time commanded Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines on Hill 881S, observed the Special Forces had their own command channels separate from the Marines and were not under Colonel Lownds' operational control. From the Marine perspective, the Special Forces including the FOB-3 troops, "were so secretive and so independent that they were impossible to coordinate as part of a larger battle. . . . Special units do not belong near a pitched battle. They only inhibit fire support and get in the way." Dabney Comments.

showering great numbers of grenades on the Marines. One survivor later recounted, "...they continued throwing 25 or 30 grenades every 4 or 5 minutes. It was unbelievable how many . . . grenades they had actually transported into battle."⁶⁷

At 0740, the commanding officer of Company A, Captain Henry J. M. Radcliffe, gathered up his 2d Platoon and went to the rescue of the outpost. The relief force fought its way to the base of the hill in 25 minutes. There, Radcliffe directed an air strike on the North Vietnamese, then led his Marines in a frontal assault which forced the enemy off the hill and directly into the fire of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. Companies B and D joined the 106mm recoilless rifles and a tank in cutting down the retreating enemy troops. By 1100, the battle was over and the charred and blasted remains of the outpost were again in Marine hands.^{68*}

Alpha 1 Marines had paid a high price. Worse than the utter destruction of their position, casualties numbered 24 dead and 27 wounded. Over 150 North Vietnamese bodies littered the hill and many more may have died. Additionally, the Marines captured much enemy equipment, including 13 machine guns, an indication that the North Vietnamese fled the battlefield in disorder.⁶⁹

Although the hill was once more under friendly control and evidence suggested that the Communist forces had suffered a defeat, Colonel Lownds ordered the outpost abandoned. Captain Radcliffe and his men withdrew to the battalion perimeter.

In the four days from 5 February through 8 February, the North Vietnamese launched three major assaults on positions in the Khe Sanh complex, succeeding only at Lang Vei. The battles for Hill 861A and the Alpha 1 outpost, though desperate and bloody for the Marines, had ended as stinging defeats for the Communist forces. The second round was over.

Apparently still smarting from heavy casualties suffered in their assaults on the outlying positions, the Communist forces tried a new approach. They stopped attempting to seize the outposts and increased their attentions to the combat base itself.

North Vietnamese trenches reached toward the eastern end of the airstrip, growing at the astonishing speed of several hundred meters in a single night.⁷⁰

One Marine recorded that, "we watched with some fascination and no small apprehension, day by day, as the trenches crept closer and closer to our perimeter."⁷¹ Some of the enemy trenchlines stretched 2,000 meters from assembly areas to within 35 meters of the Marines' perimeter.⁷²

The Marines tried a number of tactics to discourage the enemy's digging. Aircraft attacked the trenches with rockets, 2,000-pound bombs, and "napalm baths," a scheme in which they dropped a number of unfused napalm tanks on the target which were then ignited by rocket or cannon fire from following planes. Despite the Marines' best efforts, however, the digging continued apace.^{73**} At the same time, North Vietnamese gunners kept up their program of daily firing on the base, especially during periods when fog or clouds reduced visibility and hampered U.S. air operations, thereby helping to conceal the enemy guns.⁷⁴

Throughout the siege, the base remained totally dependent upon air-delivered supplies, which fact the North Vietnamese were obviously aware. Enemy anti-aircraft guns appeared in the hills surrounding the airstrip, forcing cargo aircraft to run a gauntlet of fire both on their approach to and their retirement from Khe Sanh. Aircraft attempting to land prompted an avalanche of incoming fire seemingly from every weapon, of every caliber, which the North Vietnamese could bring to bear on the airstrip. The destruction on 10 February of a Marine KC-130 dramatized on television the vulnerability of the air link to Khe Sanh.^{75***}

The incredible firepower the Marines marshalled to defend Khe Sanh scarred the countryside so that it looked, in General Tompkins words, "like pictures of the surface of the moon, in that it was cratered and pocked and blasted."⁷⁵ Aircraft and howitzers pounded the surrounding countryside with unrelenting ferocity, treating the NVA to a steady diet of attacks. A diverse and highly developed targeting system supported this process, using input from air observers, sensors, signal intelligence, agents, prisoners, ralliers, refugees, and

**Colonel Mitchell, nevertheless, claimed that his 1st Battalion, 9th Marines attained some success against the enemy's digging efforts. He stated that he ordered his Company D commander to send out units from fire team to platoon, before the fog lifted, to destroy or collapse the enemy tunnels. He also stepped up patrols to 400 meters "to ensure the beginning of tunnel activity." According to Mitchell, his intelligence officer who monitored the NVA radio nets, heard "discontinue tunneling activities in the 1/9 sector as it is non-productive." Mitchell Comments.

***See Chapter 23 for the detailed account relative to the air supply of the Marine base.

*Colonel Mitchell, the battalion commander, stated that he had wanted to launch the relief mission earlier, but did not receive permission until 0730. Mitchell also explained that he had one tank attached to his battalion, but would move the tank every night. This way the enemy would know "1/9 had a tank capability, but he wouldn't know how many." Mitchell Comments.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190852

Two Marine forward observers lying on top of a bunker train high-powered binoculars on enemy trenchlines in an attempt to locate NVA mortars. Another Marine can be seen resting inside the bunker.

special operations units, as well as information provided by the Marines manning the defenses of Khe Sanh. In one instance, the 26th Marines scheduled a special air and artillery strike in reaction to a report concerning a "force-wide meeting" of enemy commanders and their staffs in a schoolhouse on the Laotian border. Twenty minutes after the scheduled start time of the meeting, 2 Grumman A-6 Intruders and 4 McDonnell-Douglas F-4 Phantoms dropped 152 500-pound bombs followed by 8 artillery batteries firing 350 rounds into an area large enough "to take in the hangers-on and other idlers who usually congregate around large staffs."⁷⁶

Near the end of February, the intensity of enemy shelling increased even further, reaching a crescendo on the 23d, when according to an official count, 1,307 rounds of artillery, rocket, and mortar fire slammed into the base, killing 12 and wounding 51.* A chance hit on Ammunition Supply Point Number 3 caused secondary explosions which consumed over 1,600 rounds of 90mm and 106mm ammunition.⁷⁷

*Colonel Dabney doubted the accuracy of this official count, making the point that "when you are getting that many rounds, nobody is fool enough to sit around and count them." Dabney Comments. On the other hand, Captain Cole related that "the FSCC made a serious attempt to count incoming rounds—and . . . Jack Hennelly [Lieutenant Colonel John A. Hennelly, commander of the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines] was very conservative about this, so if 1,307 was too exact, it probably was not too far off the mark." Cole Comments, dtd 23Jun96.

On 25 February, Second Lieutenant Donald Jacques led the 3d Platoon, Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines through the perimeter wire of the combat base and headed south on a short-range patrol as part of the regiment's effort to gather information on enemy activity close to the base. About a kilometer south of the base, the patrol spotted three North Vietnamese near the road leading to Khe Sanh Village and gave chase. Just south of the road, the Marines ran into an ambush. A company-sized enemy unit occupying a bunker complex allowed the platoon to advance to within point-blank range before opening fire and driving the Marines to cover.⁷⁸

The platoon attempted to maneuver, but under the intense enemy fire, casualties mounted rapidly. Jacques ordered a withdrawal while the company commander, Captain Pipes, sent another platoon to assist. Second Lieutenant Peter W. Weiss led the 1st Platoon through the gaps in the perimeter wire and headed for the scene of the ambush. About 300 meters from the beleaguered 3d Platoon, Weiss and his men received enemy machine gun fire from 20 meters to their front, forcing them to the ground.^{79*}

** According to George W. Jayne, who was a fireteam leader with the 1st Platoon, his squad received the bulk of the enemy's first burst of fire, killing both the squad leader and Navy corpsman. George W. Jayne, Comments on draft, dtd 1Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A190594

Large clouds of dust and smoke obscure part of the Khe Sanh combat base after an enemy rocket and artillery bombardment. On 23 February another Marine ammunition supply point took a direct hit, which resulted in several secondary explosions

With both platoons still under extremely heavy close-range fire, the Marines at the combat base attempted to provide supporting fire from tanks, heavy machine guns, and 106mm recoilless rifles, but fog and the proximity of friendly and enemy forces hampered their efforts. To add to the confusion, the North Vietnamese entered Company B's radio net, possibly using a radio captured from one of the 3d Platoon's destroyed squads, compounding communication problems in the critical situation.⁸⁰

Several survivors from the 3d Platoon filtered back to the 1st Platoon. Lieutenant Weiss ordered his men to gather the wounded and withdraw. The 3d Platoon was a shambles. Lieutenant Jacques was severely wounded, and most of his men were either wounded, dead, or missing. The 81mm mortar forward observer, a Blackfoot Indian corporal named Gilbert Wall, threw Lieutenant Jacques over his shoulder and carried him, with his radio, back to the perimeter, adjusting mortar fire missions all the way

back. The lieutenant, however, was hit in both femoral arteries and bled to death even as Wall carried him.^{81*}

For what had started out as a platoon patrol, the casualties were staggering: 6 killed in action, 17 wounded, and 25 missing.^{82**} No enemy casualties could be confirmed. On 27 February, Colonel Lownds issued further restrictions on patrolling,

*Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth W. Pipes, who commanded Company B at Khe Sanh, observed that Lieutenant Jacques was one of his strongest platoon leaders. His platoon had occupied one of the key defensive positions at the base and Jacques' men had ambushed an NVA reconnaissance unit in late December 1967. Pipes remarked that all the leaders of this platoon including the squad leaders were killed in this action—in front and leading their men. According to Pipes, "the extent of the NVA entrenchments and fortifications were not as evident until the tragic action . . ." Pipes Comments, 1995.

**One of the Marines listed as killed in action was Sergeant Ronald L. Ridgway, who turned out to have been captured by the North Vietnamese and released in March 1973 after the Paris Agreement of January 1973.

limiting it to that which was "necessary to insure the security of . . . defensive obstacles and local security elements."⁸³

Apparently buoyed by their success against the ill-fated Marine patrol, the North Vietnamese once more tried their hands at penetrating the combat base perimeter. During the night of 28–29 February, sappers prepared the ground to the front of the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion, cutting holes in the wire, and removing mines and trip flares. Their activity went undetected until the next morning.⁸⁴

The following night at 2130, in heavy fog, a battalion of the North Vietnamese *66th Regiment, 304th Division* struck the ARVN positions. Unknown to the enemy, electronic sensors had silently heralded their impending attack and by the time the first waves of assault troops rushed the wire, two B–52 strikes, diverted from other targets, were on the way. The 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, accompanied by the Army's 175mm guns and radar-directed attack aircraft, pounded the North Vietnamese infantry with telling effect. The B–52s saturated the area to the rear of the assault waves with tons of high explosive bombs, devastating what the sensors indicated was a second enemy battalion moving forward to attack.⁸⁵

Once again, the weight of U.S. fire support wrecked the enemy's efforts. The Rangers reported that the North Vietnamese left 7 dead in the perimeter wire, but a search the following morning revealed 71 more with many bangalore torpedoes and satchel charges. Of the carnage, one account read,

... the dead were still huddled in trenches, many in the kneeling position, in three successive platoon lines, as if they had been caught in the assault position. The devastating effect of the firecracker round was apparent.⁸⁶

The only friendly casualty was a single wounded Ranger.

For the remainder of the Khe Sanh battle, the enemy concentrated most of his efforts against the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion, attacking its position seven times during March, including another battalion-sized assault on the 18th. Although North Vietnamese sappers breached the wire during one of these attacks, the Rangers repulsed every attempt, with the assistance of supporting fires from the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines and attack aircraft.⁸⁷ In addition to these assaults, the North Vietnamese employed psychological warfare against

the ARVN, using loudspeaker broadcasts enticing them to defect.^{88*}

At the beginning of March, III MAF began planning Operation Pegasus, a major effort to reopen Route 9 from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh. In the meantime, air delivered supplies remained the order of the day.^{**} The monsoon ended in March, greatly easing the weather problems which had earlier plagued air operations in the area.⁸⁹ Antiaircraft fire and incoming rounds on the airstrip, however, remained a problem. The first day of the month, mortar fire struck a C–123 as it landed, destroying the aircraft.⁹⁰ On 6 March, enemy gunners downed another C–123 about five miles east of Khe Sanh, killing 43 Marines, a sailor, and the crew of 4.^{***} Only one and a half hours later, incoming fire damaged and grounded another C–123 attempting to take off. This aircraft remained at Khe Sanh awaiting repairs, where it was hit once more on the 17th and destroyed.⁹¹ Helicopters suffered as well, with two Boeing CH–46 Sea Knights and a Bell UH–1 Iroquois falling to enemy gunners during the month.⁹²

In early March, North Vietnamese propaganda teams entered Montagnard villages, announcing that the final, major attack on Khe Sanh Combat Base would soon begin. But, by the middle of the month, the theme had changed to "Ho Chi Minh would be unhappy if they [the NVA] wasted their time on only 6,000 Marines at Khe Sanh!"⁹³ At the same time, U.S. intelligence sources reported that the North Vietnamese *325C Division* was relocating to Laos and the *304th Division* was withdrawing to the southwest.⁹⁴

*Former Marine Bert Mullins, who served with the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at Khe Sanh, observed that the NVA also employed psychological war techniques against the Americans as well. He recalled leaflets fired by North Vietnamese artillery that urged American troops to surrender. Mullins Comments.

**While supplies were adequate for very basic needs and no one starved, Navy Captain Bernard D. Cole recalled that food was in "relatively short supply during the 'siege.'" He remembered that he received just "two C–ration meals per day . . ." Cole stated that this was an "observation, not a complaint: obviously, the troops in the trenches had higher priority than those of us sitting on our butts in the relative safety of the FSCC!" Cole Comments. Colonel Kent O. W. Steen, a former artillery officer at Khe Sanh, wrote that the priority for resupply was upon ammunition and "at times, we were down to one C–Ration per day . . ." He observed that the "uncomfortable-tired-dirty-stressed souls at Khe Sanh were quite hungry for the most part." Steen comments.

***This aircraft is variously reported as either a C–123 or a C–130. Air Force records indicate the former. Nalty, *Air Power*, p. 46; 3d MarDiv COC msg to III MAF COC, dtd 7Mar68, in III MAF Khe Sanh Ops File.

Despite these indications that the battle was drawing to a close, the North Vietnamese continued pounding the Marines with artillery fire. On 22 March, over 1,000 rounds fell on the combat base and hill positions. Once again, a hit on ASP Number 1 resulted in several hours of secondary explosions and a fire which destroyed more than 900 rounds of artillery ammunition, almost 3,000 rounds of antitank ammunition, and lesser quantities of fuzes, demolition kits, and other assorted items. The enemy bombardment continued the following day with even more shells striking the Marine base.⁹⁵

The enemy had far from given up the fight. On 24 March, Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines engaged two North Vietnamese platoons for over four hours. The contact resulted in 5 Marines killed and 6 wounded, a UH-1 helicopter gunship downed, and 31 dead North Vietnamese.⁹⁶ Two days later, a small-unit patrol* from Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines encountered a North Vietnamese company entrenched on a small hill that the battalion used as a daylight observation post, about 200 meters west of its perimeter. According to the Marine forward observer with the patrol, Larry J. Seavy-Cioffi, they walked into "a well-entrenched NVA company, 15 feet from the top" Seavy-Cioffi recalled that the patrol point man spotted an enemy soldier "adjusting his helmet otherwise we would have been walking dead right into their laps." The patrol withdrew under heavy fire and called for fire support. Company B reinforced the patrol and the Marines finally retook the hill. According to Marine documents, the North Vietnamese lost 26 men and Company B suffered 3 dead and 15 wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell later wrote: "This was the closest penetration by a company size NVA to 1/9's defensive perimeter, and never happened again during the siege."⁹⁷

Settling the Score

Since the fateful patrol of 25 February, the men of Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines had a score to settle with the North Vietnamese. On 30 March, they got their chance in what one report termed "the first

planned . . . attack of a known enemy position in the battle for Khe Sanh Combat Base." Lieutenant Colonel Frederick J. McEwan, who relieved Lieutenant Colonel James B. Wilkinson as the battalion commander on 15 March, recalled that he and his operations officer, Major Charles E. Davis III, planned the attack "with careful attention to every detail." With the assistance of the battalion artillery officer and air officer, they especially laid out the projected fire support to box the enemy troops in and to prevent the NVA from reinforcing. Morning fog and low air cover, however, forestalled the effective use of air and made the attack even more dependent upon its artillery arm.⁹⁸

In the early morning hours, under cover of fog and darkness, Captain Kenneth W. Pipes led Company B through the perimeter wire and into attack positions 300 meters south of the combat base. As the company deployed for the attack in a line along the enemy's left flank, the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines began preparation fires to soften the enemy positions. By noon, the cannoneers would fire over 2,600 rounds in support of Company B.⁹⁹

At 0755, the company launched its assault behind a rolling barrage fired by nine batteries of artillery, including heavy artillery firing from near the Rockpile. The 2d Platoon under First Lieutenant John W. Dillon seized the first objective, an NVA trenchline, near the lower slopes of Hill 471. From there, the platoon laid down a base of fire while the Company B command group and the other two platoons passed through and attacked toward the second objective, an NVA bunker complex near where the earlier patrol had been ambushed.¹⁰⁰

The Marines advanced through the bunker complex with fixed bayonets, grenades, flamethrowers, and anti-tank rockets, and in the words of one account, "killing all NVA in sight."¹⁰¹ Engineers followed the infantry, setting demolition charges to destroy the larger bunkers. According to Major Davis, "the only serious glitch occurred when the NVA came up on the conduct of fire net and called for a cease-fire." Davis declared that before the battalion was able to get "the fire turned back on," enemy mortars opened up on the attacking Marines and "inflicted most of the casualties." Among the wounded was Captain Pipes, who still retained command. One Marine in the 3d Platoon, Wayne Morrison, who later was awarded the Silver Star, as was the captain, remembered that Pipes, carrying two radios with his right arm and with a wound in his left shoulder, came up behind him and said "we were going to have to attack because we were pinned down."¹⁰²

*There is some question about the size of this patrol. The official reports indicate a platoon, while both Colonel Mitchell and his radioman, Bert Mullins, state that it was a reinforced squad. Larry J. Seavy-Cioffi, who was an artillery forward observer with Company B, stated that he was on that patrol and it consisted of no more than six men, including himself. See Mitchell Comments, Mullins Comments, and Larry J. Seavy-Cioffi, Comments on draft, dtd 12Dec94 and 29Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

The initial Marine attack, nevertheless had stalled. Captain Pipes recalled that his command group had been "decimated." Among the dead was his artillery forward observer First Lieutenant Marion H. "Hank" Norman, who died in his arms and assisted in the preparation of the firing plans. Lieutenant Dillon brought up the 2d Platoon and "covered the ordered withdrawal back to the base."¹⁰³

The North Vietnamese bunker complex was a flaming ruin, but the Marines had failed to locate the remains of the men killed in the February ambush.* Casualties on both sides had been heavy. The Marines claimed to have killed 115 of the enemy and intercepted enemy messages indicating that the NVA unit, later identified as the *8th Battalion, 66th Regiment, 304th Division*, sustained grievous losses. Company B, however, had not gone unscathed: it suffered 10 dead, 100 wounded and 2 missing. One Marine artillery officer later wondered if the raid to try to bring back the bodies had been worth the additional bloodshed: "No matter whether you get the bodies back at that point or not, you still [had] left your bodies out there." He argued at that point "getting the bodies simply wasn't that important." Nevertheless, as Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, the FMFPac commander who happened to have witnessed the Company B attack, later wrote, the attack served to signal "that the siege was ended." It may not have been over as yet, but it was indicative that the Marines on the ground had started to bring the fight to the NVA and a new phase was about to begin.¹⁰⁴

On the day following Company B's raid, Operation Scotland ended, giving way to Operation Pegasus. Elements of the *101D Regiment* still remained in the area, possibly to cover the withdrawal of their comrades. Although the official enemy casualty count for Operation Scotland totalled 1,602 dead, 7 prisoners, and 2 ralliers, intelligence estimates placed the death toll in the neighborhood of 10,000 to 15,000.¹⁰⁵

The allies had applied an incredible amount of firepower upon the North Vietnamese. Tactical aircraft and B-52s flew 24,449 sorties in support of Khe Sanh, dropping 103,500 tons of ordnance. The artillerymen of the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines and the 2d Battalion, 94th Field Artillery fired 102,660 rounds of various calibers at enemy positions.¹⁰⁶

The North Vietnamese, in turn, fired 10,908 rounds of artillery, mortars, and rockets into U.S. positions in and around Khe Sanh. This fire, com-

bined with small-unit action from Operation Scotland, beginning on 1 November 1967, caused the deaths of 205 defenders of Khe Sanh. Another 1,668 fell wounded, about half of them serious enough to require evacuation.^{107*}

Operation Pegasus

While in March the garrison of the Khe Sanh Combat Base remained in the grip of strong North Vietnamese forces, the allies had already taken initial steps to lift the siege. During Operation Scotland, the defenders had endured daily pounding by enemy artillery, mortar, and rocket fire, as well as frequent probes which kept alive the threat of a massive ground assault. Route 9, the only practical overland route to Khe Sanh from the east, was impassable due to its poor state of repair and the presence of enemy units. Supplies continued to reach the combat base by air, but the massive logistical effort strained the already thinly stretched supply of transport aircraft available in Vietnam. Intelligence officers at General Tompkins' 3d Marine Division headquarters noted reports from prisoners, ralliers, and agents that the North Vietnamese were moving missiles into the DMZ and northern Quang Tri Province for use against Con Thien and Khe Sanh. It was obvious the American command could not permit this situation to continue for much longer.^{108**}

On 2 March, General Cushman met in Da Nang with his subordinate commanders and, with General Abrams present, approved the initial concept to open Route 9 and relieve Khe Sanh. The following week, in a meeting on 10 March, also at Da Nang, General Westmoreland, in turn, agreed to the concept of operations for the relief of Khe Sanh, now codenamed Operation Pegasus. Among the members of this conference was Army Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, the commander of the newly created Provi-

* U.S. casualty figures for Operation Scotland are sometimes questioned as being too low. The casualty reporting system listed only those casualties suffered by the unit (and its attachments) responsible for a given operation. Other casualties incurred in an operational area, by air crews flying in support, for instance, were usually reported by the parent unit. For example, some of the 43 men killed in the C-123 crash of 6 March are not included in Operation Scotland figures because they were members of the aircrew and others were Marines who had not yet reported to the 26th Marines.

** Prados and Stubbe quote Captain Dabney about the possible firing of a Soviet FROG (Free Rocket Over Ground) missile, but found no other evidence of the NVA employing ground to ground missiles during the Khe Sanh campaign. Prados and Stubbe, *Valley of Decision*, p. 392.

* The remains were recovered a few days later.

sional Corps or Prov Corps.* While a subordinate command of III MAF, Prov Corps included the 1st Air Cavalry Division, 101st Airborne Division, and 3d Marine Division and was responsible for all operations in northern I Corps. General Rosson assigned to Major General John J. Tolson, the commander of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, the responsibility for the detailed planning of the operation in coordination with the 3d Marine Division. Rosson also placed under the operational control of the 1st Air Cavalry Division the 1st Marines, the 11th Engineers, and a Seabee battalion.¹⁰⁹

According to the concept of operations for Pegasus, the 1st Air Cavalry Division together with the 1st Marines would deploy from positions near Hue to a new base to be specially constructed at Ca Lu, 16 kilometers east of Khe Sanh. Capitalizing on its air mobility, the Army division would advance along the axis of Route 9. Engineers would follow, repairing culverts and bridges to make the road passable to vehicles. The South Vietnamese promised an ARVN airborne task force of three battalions to participate in the operation. D-day was set for 1 April 1968.

Preparations began immediately. The 11th Engineer Battalion and Naval Mobile Construction (Seabee) Battalion 5 joined the 1st Air Cavalry Division engineers in building the base at Ca Lu, to be called "Landing Zone Stud." The project included bunkers, supply storage facilities, and an airstrip capable of handling Fairchild C-123 Provider cargo aircraft. At the same time, the 1st Air Cavalry Division completed the detailed plans for the attack westward and the 3d Marine Division scheduled a deception operation designed to divert the enemy's attention from Khe Sanh to Dong Ha. The 1st Marines at Phu Bai began "extensive retraining and rehabilitation" as a recuperative measure following its participation in the battle for Hue City.^{110**}

The 1st Air Cavalry Division began preparing the battlefield on 26 March when Lieutenant Colonel Richard W. Diller's 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry began helicopterborne reconnaissance patrols in ever-widening arcs from LZ Stud. Diller's squadron located and targeted NVA positions, and prepared landing zones by directing air strikes using delay-fuzed or "daisy cutter" bombs to blast gaping holes in the dense vegetation.¹¹¹

At 0600, 30 March, the 3d Marine Division launched the diversionary operation northeast of Dong Ha. Task Force Kilo, composed of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines; the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry; and two ARVN infantry battalions, attacked north toward the DMZ along the coastal plains near Gio Linh. Encountering light resistance, the task force reached its objectives the first day, but continued the operation through 1 April to mask the preparations for Pegasus.¹¹²

As a final step for the coming offensive, Operation Scotland at Khe Sanh came to a close on 31 March, and General Rosson at that time placed the 26th Marines under the 1st Air Cavalry for Operation Pegasus.^{***} Intelligence reports from Khe Sanh indicated that the North Vietnamese were abandoning their positions around the combat base and retiring to Laos, leaving a few units in place to cover the withdrawal. Prisoners reported that NVA units suffered from low morale as a result of heavy casualties and severe supply problems.¹¹³ The enemy, reportedly, was having "difficulty coordinating anything larger than a company operation."¹¹⁴ The allied forces poised to attack these battered North Vietnamese units numbered over 30,000 troops organized into 19 infantry battalions with a host of supporting artillery, engineer, and aviation units, making Operation Pegasus "the largest III MAF offensive of the war," up to that time.¹¹⁵

Despite the extensive preparations and high expectations, Operation Pegasus started not with a bold and powerful thrust, but with a decidedly more ponderous motion. At H-hour—0700, 1 April—foul weather grounded the helicopters of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, but the men of the 1st Marines, on foot, crossed the line of departure on time, initiating the offensive. The regiment attacked along Route 9 with the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines north of the road and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines south of it. As the infantry moved forward, the 11th Engineer Battalion opened Route 9, removing mines and obstacles from the road and repairing bridges, culverts, and bypasses. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines remained at Ca Lu, providing security for the recently completed LZ Stud.¹¹⁶

By 1300, the weather cleared, allowing Tolson's 3d Brigade to conduct the planned air assaults into landing zones along Route 9 west of the 1st Marines.

*See Chapter 13 for the establishment of Prov Corps.

**Actually outside of the 1st Marines regimental headquarters, only the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines had participated in the battle for Hue. See Chapters 9–12.

***General Rosson remembered that Major General Tompkins "suggested to me that the 26th Marines be placed under the operational control of the 1st Cavalry Division to facilitate coordination as the relieving forces approached the combat base." Gen William B. Rosson, Comments on draft, dtd 27Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File).

Despite the delay, the brigade secured its landing zones and flew in its artillery before nightfall. Throughout the area of operations, allied forces made only light contact with the North Vietnamese. In the following days, the operation continued in the pattern set on D-day, including the seemingly obligatory bad weather in the mornings, which forced delays in airmobile operations. The North Vietnamese remained elusive.¹¹⁷

The garrison at Khe Sanh joined the offensive on 4 April from the combat base when the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines sortied against Hill 471. With Company B protecting the perimeter at the rock quarry west of the combat base, the battalion moved to the line of departure at 0230, finally leaving the positions it had defended for 73 days. At 0600, the Marines attacked along the fog-shrouded Che Rien Ridge toward Hill 471, which lay two kilometers to the southeast. Following a lengthy artillery and air preparation, Company A assaulted the hill at 1500. The defenders, a reinforced platoon of the *8th Battalion, 66th NVA Regiment*, put up a spirited fight, but Company A soon overwhelmed them, securing the hill at 1600. The attack cost the battalion 10 dead and 56 wounded. The enemy left 16 dead on the objective.¹¹⁸

The North Vietnamese were not content to give up Hill 471 that easily. Shortly after the Marines overran the hill, enemy rocket fire began and by midnight, 192 rounds had fallen. At 0430, two companies of the *66th NVA Regiment* assaulted Captain Ralph H. Flagler's Company C on the eastern half of the hill. Company A, located on the western side, was masked by the crest of the hill and could not fire in support. North Vietnamese infantry swarmed up the slope firing rifles, sub-machine guns, and RPGs, while heavy machine guns pounded Company C's positions. The enemy advanced to within 20 meters of the Marine fighting holes, but Flagler's men stood fast, with the help of almost 1,000 rounds of artillery fire from the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines. By 0630, the enemy attack was spent and the North Vietnamese withdrew. At a cost of 1 Marine dead and 28 wounded, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines killed over 140 North Vietnamese and captured 5 prisoners.¹¹⁹

Other units of the Khe Sanh garrison went on the offensive as well. On 6 April, Captain Lee R. Overstreet's Company G, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines left Hill 558 in the early morning on the battalion's first long distance patrol of the Khe Sanh battle. Its mission was to determine if the enemy occupied the ridge which extended southeast from Hill 861 like a huge, stubby finger pointed at the combat base.¹²⁰

Just before noon, as the company reached the crest of the ridge, North Vietnamese concealed in camouflaged, mutually supporting bunkers opened fire, cutting down several Marines at point-blank range. Unable to advance into the heavy and accurate enemy fire, Company G suffered additional casualties as Marines tried to recover the fallen men nearest the enemy positions. Captain Overstreet called for artillery and air support, but the number of aircraft available was limited and the artillery frequently entered a "check fire" status to allow for the safe passage of planes supporting other units. Because of these fire support coordination problems, the Marines could not overcome the stiff enemy resistance atop the ridge. With six Marines missing in action, but presumed to be dead within the enemy perimeter, Captain Overstreet ordered Company G to withdraw to Hill 558 at nightfall "as a result of regimental policy to recall units to the defensive positions for the night." In addition to the 6 MIAs, Company G lost 4 killed and 47 wounded and claimed 48 NVA died in the fight.^{121*}

Elsewhere in the area, many major events took place on 6 April, giving Operation Pegasus the appearance of a three-ring circus. The 1st Battalion, 26th Marines attacked out of the combat base to the south, sending Company D against the NVA bunker complex where 25 missing members of Company B had last been seen during operations on 25 February and 30 March. Company D recovered the remains of 21 Americans.¹²² The 1st Air Cavalry Division's 3d Brigade, clearing Route 9 in the area west of the 1st Marines, encountered a strong NVA blocking position and fought a day-long battle which ended when the enemy fled, leaving 83 dead.¹²³ At noon, the men of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines became the first defenders of Khe Sanh relieved in Operation Pegasus when the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry landed at Hill 471 and assumed responsibility for its defense.¹²⁴ The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines immediately attacked westward toward Hill 689. As a climax to the many events of the day, the ARVN 84th Company, 8th Airborne Battalion landed by helicopter at the Khe Sanh Combat Base and linked up with the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion. This marked the first entry of an organized ground combat unit into the base since the Rangers themselves had arrived on 27 January.¹²⁵

The momentum of the offensive continued unabated on 7 April. The 2d Battalion, 26th Marines returned to the scene of the previous day's ambush,

*The six missing Marines were later found dead on the ridge.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191220

Top, PFC Murray C. Henderson of Company F, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines cools himself off using his helmet as a bucket on the way from Ca Lu to relieve Khe Sanh during Operation Pegasus. Below, a Marine convoy moves along Route 9 between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh. This road had been closed since the previous summer.

this time with two companies, and cleared the ridge of enemy, killing over 30. The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines continued the westward advance it had begun the previous afternoon, capturing Hill 552 with no enemy resistance. Near Khe Sanh Village, the 2d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division captured the old French fort after a three-day battle against an NVA battalion. Along Route 9, the 1st Marines conducted a few airmobile operations of its own, as the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines searched the vicinity of the highway for signs of enemy activity which might threaten the 11th Engineer Battalion's road repair project. The 3d Brigade of General Tolson's division pressed on along Route 9, still west of the 1st Marines.¹²⁶

Enemy resistance began crumbling even further as the allied force maintained pressure. Units reported finding many abandoned weapons and large numbers of North Vietnamese bodies and mass graves as enemy units withdrew toward Laos. Some organized resistance remained, however, as the Communist forces continued to conduct limited objective ground attacks and probes in some areas.¹²⁷

The much awaited linkup of U.S. forces at the Khe Sanh Combat Base proper occurred at 0800 on 8 April, when the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry entered the base along the coffee plantation road.¹²⁸ As the 3d Brigade began moving in, the 26th Marines prepared to depart the base it had defended amid so much

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191584



adversity and for so long. But the offensive did not slow down, even for this event. West of the base, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines advanced onto Hill 689 which had, for 11 weeks, dominated its position at the quarry. The enemy, although unseen, made their presence felt through steady and accurate mortar fire which killed 9 Marines and wounded 27 during the battalion's advance.¹²⁹

No enemy artillery fire fell on the combat base on 9 April, and General Rosson, commander of the recently formed Provisional Corps, Vietnam, reported to General Cushman that airdrops of supplies were no longer necessary because the airstrip was open to all types of aircraft up to and including C-130s.* In keeping with a plan to begin supplying all units in northwestern Quang Tri from LZ Stud, Operation Pegasus forces began using the ammunition at Khe Sanh in an attempt to draw down the huge stockpiles to a manageable level which III MAF could later evacuate.¹³⁰

The engineers declared Route 9 open to vehicular traffic on 11 April, ending a project involving the replacement of 9 bridges, the construction of 17 bypasses, and the repair of 14 kilometers of road. It was the first time the road was passable from Ca Lu to Khe Sanh since September 1967.¹³¹ The same day, General Rosson ordered the 1st Air Cavalry Division to make ready immediately for offensive operations in the A Shau Valley. Hours later, the division's 1st Brigade left the Khe Sanh area and the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion followed shortly afterward.¹³²

As Army units prepared to move south, the 1st and the 26th Marines continued offensive operations around Khe Sanh. With patrols reporting enemy units remaining on Hill 881 North, Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, the new commanding officer of the 26th Marines, ordered the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines to clear the hill, scene of the bitter fighting which had marked the beginning of the siege almost three

months before and "the last enemy position posing a threat to Khe Sanh."^{133**}

Unlike Company I's reconnaissance in force of 20 January which was the last time U.S. forces had been near Hill 881 North,^{***} the attack planned for Easter Sunday, 14 April, called for the entire 3d Battalion to take part. With the relief of the main base by the Army, Lieutenant Colonel John C. Studt, who had assumed command of the 3d Battalion the previous month, had consolidated his companies on Hill 881 South. Studt had expanded the area of operations to include "Pork Chop Hill," the high ground immediately to the north, which the North Vietnamese had vacated. With the order to take 881 North, the battalion commander laid on a full menu of fire support, even lining up all eight of the battalion's 106mm recoilless rifles to support the assault. In addition to the howitzers and guns emplaced at the main base and Ca Lu, the battalion also had the support of the three 105mm howitzers on Hill 881S.¹³⁴

After nightfall on the 13th, the battalion prepared to mount the attack. Shortly after midnight, under the cover of darkness, all four companies accompanied by two scout dog teams moved along routes previously secured by patrols into assault positions in the "saddle" located between Hills 881 South and North. Lieutenant Colonel Studt left one platoon of Company I together with his H&S Company on Hill 881 South. He had relieved Captain William Dabney, who had been selected for promotion to major, and placed him in command of a battalion Provisional Weapons Company and rear security on Hill 881 South.^{****} Throughout the night Marine artillery and mortar shells crashed into Hill 881 North, destroying the enemy's bunkers and trenches, as Lieutenant Colonel Studt's Marines waited for daybreak and the order to mount the final attack.¹³⁵

*Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, who relieved Colonel Lownds shortly after this order, remembered that on 13 April 1968, an Air Force C-130 was hit by "rocket shrapnel" as it came in for a landing, shredding its tires, lunging partially off the runway, hitting some equipment, and bursting into flames. Ground rescue crews saved the lives of the crews and most of the passengers. The only person who died in the crash was Felix Poilane, the French planter, who was returning to his plantation located near the fire base. According to Meyers, "while the C-130 was burning on the runway, it shut down the bulk of our airfield activity until it burned down and was finally put out with foam and bulldozed off the runway." Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on draft, dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Meyers Comments, Feb95.

**Colonel Meyers, who commanded Special Landing Force Alpha prior to his assignment to the 26th Marines, assumed command of the 26th Marines on 12 April. He remembered that on 10 April he departed the LPH *Iwo Jima* and flew to the 3d Marine Division CP at Dong Ha where he received a briefing and his orders: "Move out in the attack and retake the hills around Khe Sanh . . ." He then traveled by helicopter to LZ Stud where Major General Tolson and his staff briefed him further. After the briefing, he flew to Khe Sanh and "began walking the perimeter" with Colonel Lownds. The turnover continued during the next day and finally on the 12th, "we had a very brief change of command ceremony." Meyers Comments, Feb95.

***See Chapter 4.

****Studt not only wanted to use Dabney's experience, but also to keep him relatively safe after being in such an exposed and isolated position for so long. See LtCol John C. Studt, "Battalion in the Attack," *Marine Corps Gazette*, July 1970, pp. 39-44.



Top Photo is courtesy of Col Bruce F. Meyers (Ret) and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A416482
Top, at a change of command ceremony of the 26th Marines, Col David E. Lownds, left front, is about to turn over command of the regiment to Col Bruce F. Meyers, standing next to him. Col Lownds still has the distinctive moustache that he wore during the entire siege. Below, President Lyndon B. Johnson presents the Presidential Unit Citation Streamer to SgtMaj Agrippa W. Smith, who is holding the colors of the 26th Marines, as Col Lownds, right, who has shaven off his moustache, watches.



Finally, shortly after dawn about 0530, following closely its artillery final preparation fires, the battalion attacked with three companies abreast and the command group and one company in reserve close behind. Surging forward through an eerie and barren landscape of charred limbless trees and huge bomb craters, the Marine battalion rolled up the enemy's defenses on the southern slope of the hill. Colonel Meyers, who watched the attack with Captain Dabney from 881 South, remarked on the effective use of the supporting 106mm recoilless rifle fire. As the Marine lead elements approached a tree line in their "uphill assault . . . the 106's [on Hill 881 South] literally blew the tree line away."¹³⁶ Finally, with the crest of Hill 881 North before it, the battalion called for a massive artillery firing mission. When over 2,000 rounds of artillery fire had fallen on the objective, Company K attacked along the right flank. Captain Paul L. Snead's men rushed through the smoking debris of the NVA defenses, rooting out the defenders from the ruins of bunkers and trenches. At 1428, Company K marked Hill 881 North as friendly territory by raising a U.S. flag which a squad leader had brought along. The 3d Battalion lost 6 dead and 21 wounded. The Marines took two prisoners from the *8th Battalion, 29th Regiment, 325th NVA Division* and killed over 100 of the North Vietnamese troops. With the enemy driven from the hill, at least for the time being, the Marines began withdrawing to Hill 881 South, their mission accomplished. According to Colonel Meyers, the Marine Corps Schools at Quantico, Virginia, later used the assault on Hill 881 North "as a classic example of a Marine battalion in the attack."¹³⁷

The attack on Hill 881 North was the last battle of Operation Pegasus. At 0800, 15 April, the 3d Marine Division once again assumed responsibility for the Khe Sanh Combat Base and Operation Pegasus gave way to Operation Scotland II. The 1st Air Cavalry Division transferred its command post to Camp Evans, but left its 2d Brigade under the control of the 3d Marine Division. The 1st Marines, to this point still operating along Route 9 just west of Ca Lu, moved to Khe Sanh to assume responsibility for defense of the combat base from the 26th Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Studt recalled that his 3d Battalion, on 15 April, "was shuttled out of the 881 area by choppers . . . first to Khe Sanh than to Quang Tri [Airfield]." Even as the Marines boarded their helicopters out of the Khe Sanh sector, Company K came under enemy mortar fire. As the helicopters landed at the Quang Tri Airstrip, the 3d Marine Division band,

playing the Marine Corps Hymn, was there to greet the troops. According to the band master,

... it was the most inspiring performance of his career: chopper after chopper disgorging filth covered Marines in tattered and torn utilities, some with bandages, many carrying NVA souvenirs, but the expressions on their faces as soon as they perceived the strains of the Hymn was what moved him.

With a sense of irony, Captain Dabney many years later observed that the attacks on Hill 881 North marked the beginning and the end to the siege.¹³⁸

In Operation Pegasus, allied forces accomplished their mission of reopening Route 9 between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh at a cost of 92 Americans dead and 667 wounded, and 51 ARVN killed. The North Vietnamese lost over 1,100 killed and 13 captured. III MAF units found supply caches estimated as "exceeding the basic load for an NVA division," including 3,000 tons of rice, over 200 crew-served weapons, 12,000 rounds of large caliber ammunition, 5 wheeled vehicles, and a tank.

A cloud of controversy has surrounded the story of Khe Sanh in the years since the battle. Some of the unsettled issues remain: 1. the reasons for defending the base in the first place; 2. the importance of the roles played by the various supporting arms (particularly B-52s, as opposed to tactical aircraft and artillery); 3. the failure of the 26th Marines to reinforce Lang Vei; 4. speculation why the North Vietnamese made no attempt to cut the source of the water supply for the base, pumped from a stream north of the Khe Sanh perimeter and in the area controlled by NVA troops; 5. and finally whether Khe Sanh was an attempted replay of Dien Bien Phu or a diversion for Tet.*

*Both Lieutenant General Krulak, the former CGFMFPac, and Colonel Frederic S. Knight, the 3d Marine Division G-2 or staff intelligence officer, remarked on the failure of the North Vietnamese to cut the water supply. In his book, General Krulak argued that the fact that the North Vietnamese did not do so is an indication that the enemy may have "had no intention of undertaking an all-out assault on the base." LtGen Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight, An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Naval Institute Press: Annapolis, Md., 1984), p. 218. Colonel Knight called this failure the most "puzzling aspect of the siege. . . . They literally could have cut off our water." He observed that the air-lifting of the water would have "added an enormous logistical burden." Col Frederic S. Knight, Comments on draft, dtd 10Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File). In his comments, Colonel Steen observed that "when the hose was cut by artillery fragments or the pump was down, we were out of water and on our knees." He observed that as it was the Marines rationed their water until they left in April and "personal sanitation was at a minimum." Steen Comments. Navy Captain Bernard D. Cole also commented on the failure of the NVA to interrupt the water and as well remarked that they made no attempt to cut the land line telephone connection from Khe Sanh to MACV. Cole Comments.

Controversy aside, there is little question that the North Vietnamese committed considerable resources to the battle and that their units fought hard in what appeared to have been a major effort. The U.S. and South Vietnamese defenders of the Khe Sanh Combat Base surrounded and outnum-

bered, nevertheless, with the use of extensive supporting arms skillfully fought a difficult battle against a resolute enemy until the siege was lifted in Operation Pegasus. By any accounting, Pegasus regained the initiative for III MAF forces in northwestern Quang Tri Province.

CHAPTER 15

The Battle for Dong Ha

*Why Dong Ha?—The Fight for Dai Do, The First Day—The Continuing Fight for Dai Do
The End of the First Offensive—The Second Offensive*

Why Dong Ha?

With the commitment of large U.S. forces to the far western reaches of I Corps in Operations Scotland II around Khe Sanh and Delaware in the A Shau Valley, the North Vietnamese decided to mount a new offensive in the eastern DMZ. Perhaps hoping that the American command with its attention riveted to the west would be caught off guard, the 320th NVA Division at the end of April and early May struck in the sector just above Dong Ha. Dong Ha served not only as the command post for both the 3d Marine Division and the 9th Marines, but also remained the main logistic base for the north. It lay at the junction of Routes 1 and 9 and was the terminus of the Cua Viet River route. During the month of April, while the new Quang Tri base and Wunder Beach further

south in Quang Tri Province alleviated some of the logistic pressure on Dong Ha, nearly 63,000 tons of supplies came in by sea at the Cua Viet port facility for the 3d Marine Division and then were shipped up the Cua Viet River to Dong Ha.¹

Despite its obvious importance, Dong Ha was vulnerable to a determined enemy attack. The most immediate available troops were from the nearby 2d ARVN Regiment which had its command post in the town of Dong Ha. Marine support units rather than line infantry were at the Dong Ha base itself. Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins' only reserve was Task Force Robbie, under Colonel Clifford J. Robichaud, consisting of a rifle company, Company D, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, and an armored company, Company A, 3d Tank Battalion, reinforced by four Army vehicles including two M42 "Dusters," a pla-

An aerial photo shows the sprawling Dong Ha base and surrounding terrain. Dong Ha was the headquarters and forward base of the 3d Marine Division. The airstrip can be seen in the center of the picture.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801122



toon of Ontos, and a platoon of engineers. For the most part, even this modest force was committed elsewhere.²

Furthermore, Dong Ha lay just below where three ongoing operations converged. To the west of Route 1, the 9th Marines conducted Operation Kentucky with three battalions, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines; 1st Battalion, 4th Marines; and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. The 3d Marines, to the east of Route 1, was responsible for the Napoleon/Saline sector, also with three battalions under its operational control, the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines; the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion; and BLT 2/4. Between the two Marine regiments, the 2d ARVN Regiment with four battalions* held the area of operations along both sides of Route 1, north of the Bo Dieu River** and Dong Ha, to the Demilitarized Zone. This sector included both the A-1 and A-2 (Gio Linh) and the C-1 and C-2 Dyemarker positions, and much of the Leatherneck Square sector east of Route 1 to Jones Creek, the tributary of the Ben Hai that ran north and south, and emptied into the Cua Viet. The North Vietnamese were well aware of the unit boundaries, which only changed occasionally after some negotiations, and were not slow to make use of the allied dispositions for their own advantage.

During most of April, in both the Kentucky and Napoleon/Saline areas, the tempo of operations had slowed from the previous month. This was especially true of the Napoleon/Saline coastal sector after the Task Force Kilo offensive at the beginning of April. With only scattered actions during the rest of the month, the 3d Marines had turned much of its attention to civic action and refugee resettlement. After the initial clearing offensive north of the Cua Viet, many of the South Vietnamese farmers and fishermen attempted to return to their abandoned villages north of the waterway. As Lieutenant Colonel William Weise, the BLT 2/4 commander, remembered, "things had calmed down" but he suspected "that the enemy had shifted his major efforts westward into the ARVN area."³

For some time, through prisoner interrogations and captured enemy documents, the 3d Marine Division

staff knew that elements of the 320th NVA Division had infiltrated into the eastern DMZ sector. During the last week of April, Navy Task Force Clearwater, which was responsible for convoying and protecting the shipping on the Cua Viet, received reports of enemy intentions to interdict the waterway. Also during this period, the North Vietnamese guns north of the Demilitarized Zone increased their bombardment of allied positions and especially of the port facilities both at Dong Ha and at the mouth of the Cua Viet.⁴

On the afternoon of the 29th, the 320th initiated attacks against the ARVN 2d Regiment and against the Marines in the Kentucky area of operations. On 29 April, enemy sappers blew a culvert on Route 1 near the hamlet of An Binh, about four miles north of Dong Ha. Acting upon intelligence that North Vietnamese regulars had entered An Binh, the ARVN 2d Regiment sent in its 1st and 4th Battalions north from Dong Ha and south from C-1 to investigate the incident and trap any enemy forces between them. The ARVN units themselves, however, encountered heavy resistance "which they could not handle" and called for assistance. According to a newspaper account, Lieutenant Colonel Vu Van Giai, the 2d ARVN commander, told Major General Tompkins that "he was holding on the road but that he was worried about some new pressure that was starting to build up on his left flank." At that point, about 1415, Major General Tompkins ordered Task Force Robbie to move from C-3 with Company D, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, reinforced by Company A, 1st Tank Battalion, to assist the ARVN.⁵

At Cam Vu on Route 88, a secondary route running parallel and 3,000 meters north of Route 9, about 5,000 meters west of An Binh, the Marine task force ran into a North Vietnamese blocking force waiting for them. In a seven-hour "sharp engagement," lasting from 1600 till nearly midnight, Task Force Robbie suffered casualties of 11 dead and 22 wounded and reported killing 26 of the enemy. Four of the tanks with the task force also sustained damage. Task Force Robbie returned to its original positions at C-3. In the meantime, the two South Vietnamese battalions had disengaged and retreated to C-1. The ARVN reported killing 130 of the enemy while taking casualties of 17 dead and 47 wounded.

On the evening of 29 April, concerned about the obvious presence of North Vietnamese units on Route 1, General Tompkins alerted additional forces. He directed Colonel Milton A. Hull, the 3d Marines commander, to be prepared to send a company from the

* An ARVN battalion numbered between 200 and 400 men, less than half of the 900-man Marine battalion.

**The Cua Viet just above Dong Ha becomes the Bo Dieu. On some maps it is also shown as the Mieu Giang. Brigadier General William Weise observed that the "Bo Dieu River (a continuation of the Cam Lo and . . . Mieu Gang) flows east from Dong Ha and empties into the Cua Viet . . . (about 3 km northeast of Dong Ha) which in turn flows into the . . . Gulf of Tonkin . . ." BGen William Weise, Comments on draft, dtd 29Oct92 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191498

A Marine M48 tank and two Marines, part of Task Force Robbie, engage an enemy force near Dong Ha. Task Force Robbie was the 3d Division's small armored reserve force, called after the nickname of its commander, Col Clifford J. Robichaud.

Napoleon/Saline sector to a new defensive position near Route 1. At 1715, Marine helicopters lifted Company E, BLT 2/4 from near the hamlet of Nhi Ha in the Napoleon northwestern sector to just north of the Dong Ha bridge.* Later that night, Tompkins ordered the helicopter lift of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines from the 4th Marines Operation Lancaster II sector to C-3 to reinforce Task Force Robbie.**

On the afternoon of the 30th, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines arrived at C-3. Reinforced by four tanks from Task Force Robbie, the battalion then pushed forward towards Cam Vu. Just north of Cam Vu, about 1610, Company I of the 3d Battalion, like Task Force Robbie the previous day, came up against North Vietnamese, probably in company strength, in an L-shaped ambush. As Company I attempted to establish a defensive perimeter, the other companies of the battalion and the tanks pushed forward to assist the exposed company. With the coming of the reinforcements, the Vietnamese disengaged under cover of artillery north of

the DMZ and their own mortars.*** The Marine reports showed 41 enemy killed at a cost of 20 Marines dead and 72 wounded. Despite the severity of the clash at Cam Vu the fiercest fighting of the day occurred about 10,000 meters to the northeast, involving BLT 2/4 and units of the 320th NVA Division in the village of Dai Do, about 2,500 meters north of Dong Ha. The battle for Dong Ha had begun.⁷

The Fight for Dai Do, The First Day

Dai Do was actually a cluster of five hamlets, only one of which was actually named Dai Do, on a small peninsula carved out by the Cua Viet where it runs into the Bo Dieu. The Cua Viet rims the eastern edge while the Bo Dieu forms the southern boundary. Two unnamed small tributary streams of the larger rivers outline the northern and western reaches of the peninsula. The northernmost stream which flowed into the Cua Viet marked the boundary between the 2d ARVN Regiment and the 3d Marines. This stream separated the hamlet of Bac Vong in the Napoleon/Saline area of operations from the hamlet of Dong Huan on the northeastern lip of the peninsula. About 500 meters south of Dong Huan was the hamlet of An Loc which overlooked the Bo Dieu. Dai Do was another 500

*There is some question whether Company E actually deployed near the Dong Ha Bridge or to another smaller bridge spanning Route 1 another 5,000 meters north of the Dong Ha Bridge. Brigadier General William Weise insists that it is the latter bridge and the BLT 2/4 CAAR is in error on this matter. BGen William Weise intvw, 21Feb83 (Oral HistColl, MCHC).

**Major Gary E. Todd, who at the time had just joined the battalion as the acting operations officer alpha, remembered that only three of the companies and the battalion command group were committed to the operation. The remaining company stayed at the Rockpile under the executive officer. Maj Gary E. Todd, Comments on draft, dtd 28Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Todd Comments.

***Major Todd recalled that the intermingling of forces limited the use of air support. He observed that the North Vietnamese professionally adjusted their artillery fire and that the Marines faced an "army that was as well equipped as their government and its supporters could afford." Todd Comments.

meters to the northwest abutting the western stream, as were the two remaining adjacent hamlets Dinh To and Thuong Do to the north. Rice paddies and two cemeteries lay interspersed among the five hamlets.

Sometime during the previous days, at least four North Vietnamese battalions, two of them for certain from the *48th* and *52d NVA Regiments* of the *320th NVA Division*, had made their way without being noticed in relatively flat and open terrain, south from the DMZ through the 2d ARVN Regiment into the Dai Do peninsula complex. In a relatively short time, the enemy troops were in formidable defenses. These included a series of fortified A-frame bunkers "covered with several feet of earth, reinforced by bamboo legs, and well-camouflaged" and supplemented by trenches, and fighting holes. Lieutenant Colonel Weise recalled that the bunkers "could support the weight of an M48 tank without collapsing."⁸

All of the North Vietnamese defenses were well designed, protected by barbed wire, mutually supporting, with clear lines of fire, and took advantage of the terrain, especially the hedgerows on the perimeter of each of the hamlets. Lieutenant Colonel Weise later stated that over time, small North Vietnamese units had come into the area and used the local populace to do "most of the work with a few of their officers in there to direct the placements of the various positions." This was all done according to a very careful plan so that all the regulars had to do when they arrived on the scene were to man the positions. Weise personally believed that the only way the enemy accomplished this task was because the 2d ARVN Regiment which was responsible for the sector "was asleep at the switch."^{9*}

*Colonel Max McQuown, whose BLT 3/1 had been relieved by Weise's BLT 2/4 in the Cua Viet, observed that a Vietnamese village or hamlet, "viewed from the air . . . looks like a group of small squates delineated by dense bamboo hedgerows . . . Bamboo will bend with the wind but will not break. The toots are as strong as iron. The NVA converted these natural barriers into formidable defensive positions. They built interconnecting tunnels under each hedgerow, reinforced the rough overhead toot system and cut and camouflaged ground level fighting apertures for rifles, machine guns, and RPG's. Mottar positions were located in houses, our buildings, pig sties, or haystacks. The beauty of this defense was the NVA remained in a concealed protected position and, using the connecting tunnels, they could move to any side of a village that was being threatened and engage the enemy without exposing themselves." McQuown agreed in his comments with Weise that "villagers participated in the construction of these bastions," probably having little choice, but that he believed "some of the ARVN had to know what was going on." He declared that the lesson that his BLT learned "was to assume all villages had similar defenses" and to attack with sufficient troops "to get the job done quickly." Col Max McQuown, Comments on draft, dtd 26Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter McQuown Comments.

While the 3d Marine Division had intelligence of the *320th* moving into the eastern sectors with a vague mission of interdicting the Cua Viet, the allies had almost no inkling of the buildup in the Dai Do area. Up to this time, the 3d Marines and 2d ARVN Regiment had encountered mostly small groups in squad or platoon formations, and occasionally a company-size unit to the north, east, and west of Dai Do. The most recent actions provided some evidence that the enemy was perhaps making his main effort to the northwest.¹⁰

In the early morning of the 30th, the North Vietnamese revealed their presence in the Dai Do sector. About 0330 enemy soldiers from positions in the hamlet of An Loc on the northern bank of the Bo Dieu fired upon a Navy Task Force Clearwater river patrol boat with small arms and machine guns. The Navy craft returned the fire and turned back for the Dong Ha ramp area. Approximately a half-hour later, the NVA from the same position opened up upon a Navy LCU, this time with rocket-propelled grenades as well as rifle and machine gun fire. The Navy ship sustained several hits and casualties, one sailor dead and six wounded. This ship too returned to the Dong Ha ramp.¹¹

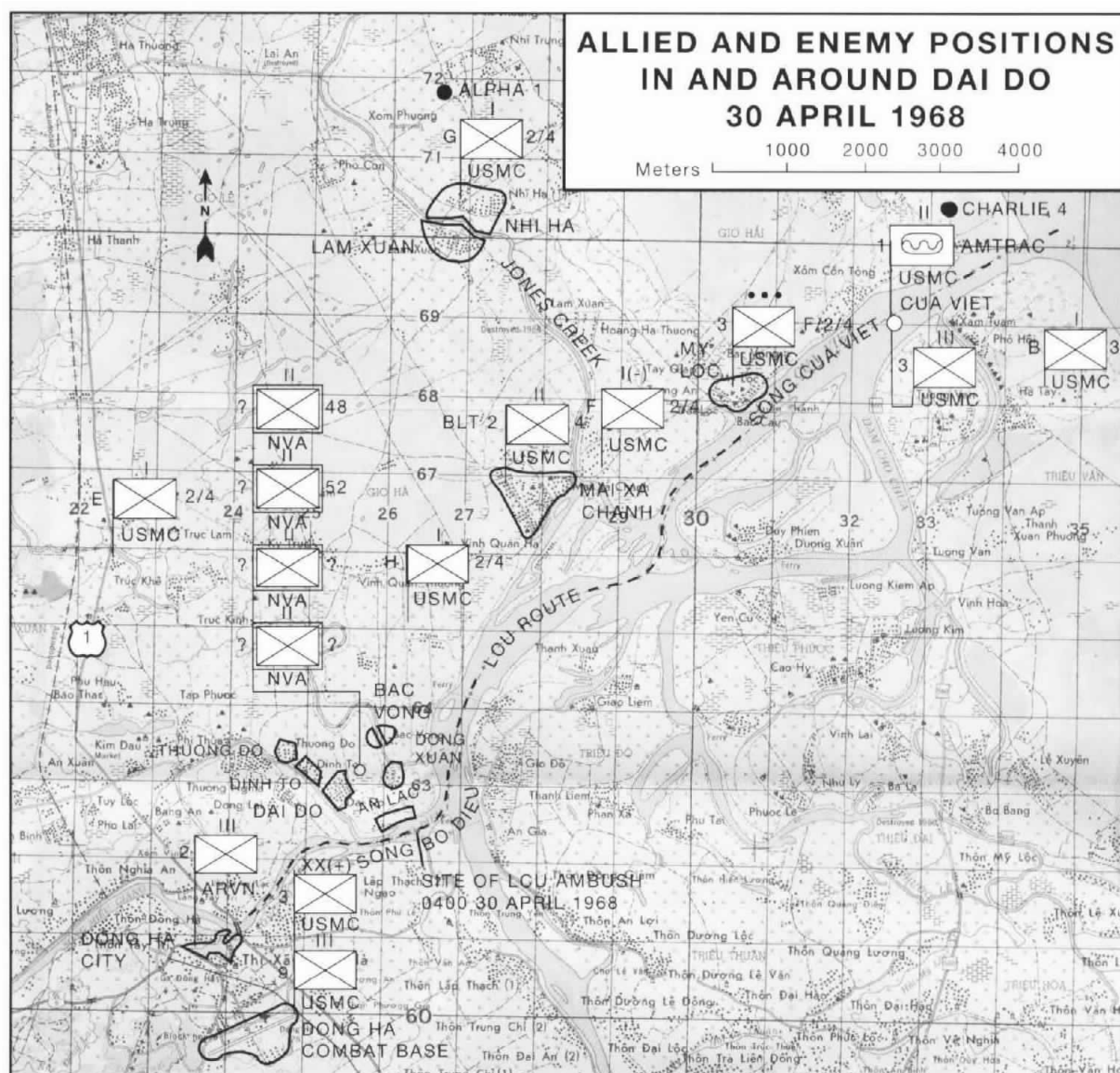
Lieutenant Colonel Weise remembered that he routinely monitored the Task Force Clearwater radio net and overheard the report relative to the last incident, the attack on the LCU. Shortly afterwards, Captain James L. Williams, the commander of Company H, radioed that one of his patrols not too far from the hamlet of Bac Vong had also seen the incident. Weise relayed the information to Colonel Hull, the 3d Marines commander. About two hours later, at daybreak, about 0600, Hull ordered Weise to investigate the incident. Since An Loc was in the 2d ARVN regimental sector, Lieutenant Colonel Weise requested Colonel Hull for a shift of boundaries, which had to be authorized by the 3d Marine Division. While waiting for the permission, Weise then alerted Captain Williams about the situation. About 0700, with the boundary shift approved, the battalion commander ordered Williams to send the platoon near Bac Vong across the adjacent stream and to "reconnoiter area from which attack occurred." At the same time, he directed Williams to "assemble remainder of Hotel [Company H] which was widely dispersed on patrol."¹²

For that matter, at this point of time, Lieutenant Colonel Weise's entire command was widely dispersed. Weise maintained his command post at Mai Xa Chanh at the southern terminus of Jones Creek, about 5,000 meters northeast of Bac Vong, collocated with his Company F. One platoon of Company F

was at My Loc on the Cua Viet, about 3,000 meters east of the company and battalion command posts. Company G was positioned another 3,000 meters to the north of the battalion command post near the hamlets of Lam Xuan and Nhi Ha on both sides of Jones Creek. The previous day, Weise had lost operational control of his Company E, now positioned on Route 1, about 5,000 meters to the west of the Napoleon sector, to the 3d Marine Division. Moreover, according to the battalion commander, he could not move Company G and the Company F platoon at My Loc from their positions without first obtaining the approval of the 3d Marine Division. This, in effect, only left him two maneuverable infantry units

to carry out the mission, Company H and the two platoons of Company F with him at Mai Xa Chanh. At the time he ordered Captain Williams to assemble his company, Lieutenant Colonel Weise also told Captain James H. Butler, the Company F commander, to mount his two platoons on amphibian tractors and to deploy from Mai Xa Chanh to Bac Vong.¹³

About 0830, as the initial platoon of Company H advanced through Bac Vong and approached the stream which had been the original boundary with the 2d ARVN Regiment, the platoon came under heavy rifle and machine gun fire as well as mortar and rocket bombardment. The enemy was well entrenched in the hamlet of Dong Huan just across the stream from Bac



Vong. It was obvious to both Captain Williams and Lieutenant Colonel Weise that it would take more than a platoon to get the North Vietnamese out of the objective area. The battalion commander directed Williams to pull his platoon back and wait for the rest of his company and the two platoons from Company F to arrive. He also reinforced Williams with the reconnaissance platoon attached to his BLT and two M48 tanks. Before the Marines could reach An Loc, they had to eliminate the NVA from Dong Huan.¹⁴

Expecting resistance from the enemy, Weise asked for permission to move Company G from Nhi Ha and the Company F platoon from My Loc to Bac Vong to support the attack. At this time, about 0900, Lieutenant Colonel Weise and a small operational group, consisting of his sergeant major, air liaison officer, and three radio operators, boarded a Navy monitor (an armored LCM 6) so that he could see and possibly control the course of events. According to Weise, the "monitor proved to be an ideal command post with good communications and significant fire power—a breech-loaded 81mm mortar, two 20mm cannons, plus .50- and .30-caliber machine guns." The Navy ship sailed up the Cua Viet from Mai Xa Chanh to a point on the river opposite Dong Huan.¹⁵

Weise's plan for the attack was to have artillery and air to prepare the objective area and then for William's Company H to cross the stream. The two M48 tanks, the reconnaissance platoon, and Company F and the amphibian tractors reinforced with two 106mm recoilless rifles were to lay down a heavy base of fire to cover the Company H attack. Once Company H was well established on the other side of the stream, Company F with the two 106s and the amphibian tractors would cross. Company F was to create a diversionary effort to draw the enemy's attention from Company H, which would then attack Dong Huan. With the securing of Dong Huan, Company F would then take Dai Do. If the situation became tenuous, Lieutenant Colonel Weise, who had received back operational control of his Company G at Nhi Ha, hoped to helilift the latter company back to the former battalion CP at Mai Xa Chanh. From there, the company with the BLT's two tanks would board an LCM-8 to reinforce the two other companies in the Dai Do sector.¹⁶

At first, the plan appeared to be working. With radio links to an aerial observer, the battalion directed helicopter gunship and fixed-wing airstrikes as well as artillery on suspected enemy positions throughout the entire five-hamlet village complex. According to the aerial observer, the airstrikes

knocked out at least three of the North Vietnamese .50-caliber machine gun positions. With the lifting of the air bombardment, Company H crossed the stream about 400 meters northwest of Bac Vong. According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise, "Captain Williams did a masterful job of moving his company . . . across open rice paddies under enemy fire," ford the stream, and then move south, literally crawling the last 1,500 meters, again in the open, to reach the assault position with relatively light casualties. As planned, the tanks, the amphibian tractors, the reconnaissance Marines, and the Marines of Company F provided covering fire for the assault company. The artillery batteries of the 12th Marines used white phosphorous and smoke shells to cloak the movement of Company H.¹⁷

With Company H in the assault positions, the two platoons of Company F on top* of the amphibian tractors crossed the stream and took positions on the right flank of Company H. While Company H was to attack Dong Huan, Captain Butler was to secure Dai Do, about 700 meters to the west of Dong Huan. About 1400, both companies launched their assaults. In a relatively short, but fierce struggle, Company H successfully fought its way into Dong Huan, but at some cost. Among the casualties was Captain Williams, wounded by a grenade about halfway through the hamlet. Williams killed his assailant with a well-placed shot from his .45-caliber service pistol. With the company commander down, First Lieutenant Alexander F. Prescott assumed command, rallied the troops, and continued the attack. By 1500, the Marines controlled Dong Huan. Company H had consolidated its positions and began evacuating its casualties.¹⁸

Captain Butler's Company F with the amphibian tractors had not fared as well. Sporadic enemy artillery from the north and enemy mortars, recoilless rifles, and machine guns from positions in Dai Do prevented the company from reaching its objective. The enemy recoilless rifles took out two of the tractors. As a field expedient, the Marines had mounted their two 106mm recoilless rifles on top of two of the tractors, "secured by sandbags." Despite the added fire power, the 106s failed to silence the enemy weapons in Dai

*Brigadier General Weise later explained that "we usually avoided riding inside the LVTP-5 Amphibian Tractor . . . because its highly volatile gasoline fuel tanks were located beneath the troop compartment. It was feared that there would be little chance of escape if the amtrac struck a land mine. Land mines were plentiful in our area." Weise, "Memories of Dai Do," Footnote 4, Footnotes, p. 3.

Do. Although one of the platoons reached the eastern edge of the hamlet, the other remained in the open in a cemetery about 300 meters to the east. At one point in the course of the afternoon, Captain Butler radioed that he only had "26 effective Marines."¹⁹

Lieutenant Colonel Weise had wanted to reinforce Company F with Company G, but these hopes were soon dashed. The company had prepared for the helilift from Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan back to the battalion CP. After the first wave of helicopters had taken out the 81mm mortar section and some of the supplies, enemy artillery and mortars bombarded the landing zone followed by a ground assault against the company positions. Left with little choice, Captain Manuel S. Vargas,* the company commander, canceled the rest of the helilift. The company beat back the enemy attack and then Vargas ordered the company to make a night march back to Mai Xa Chanh.²⁰

Earlier in the afternoon, Colonel Hull had boarded one of the Navy patrol boats, a lightly armed, 14-foot, fiberglass boat with a 35-horsepower outboard motor that the Marines called "skimmers," to have a look at the situation for himself. He first stopped at Dong Huan and discussed the fighting and evacuation of the casualties with Lieutenant Prescott and then joined Lieutenant Colonel Weise on board the "monitor." According to Weise, Hull told him that now that the "battle was joined we had to maintain pressure on the enemy to keep him off balance." Hull promised the battalion commander operational control of Company B, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, which had a platoon of LVTPs attached to it south of the Bo Dieu.²¹

First Lieutenant George C. Norris, the Company B commander, radioed Lieutenant Colonel Weise to report his availability. Weise briefed Norris on the situation and then ordered "his company to mount the amtracs, cross the river, attack and seize An Loc, the hamlet from which the enemy had earlier attacked the Navy Utility Boat." At 1625, the first of two waves of Company B landed on the northern shore of the Bo Dieu River just south of An Loc under covering fire from the weapons of Task Force Clearwater's River Assault Group boats. By 1710, the second wave was ashore, but Company B had only succeeded in establishing a rather insecure beachhead.²²

The enemy greeted the company with automatic weapons, RPGs, mortars, and heavy small arms fire,

not only from inside An Loc but also from the hamlet of Dai Do to the north, and from the hamlet of Dong Lai, about 1,000 meters to the northwest and across the second or western stream in the Dai Do sector. NVA recoilless rifles damaged several of the amphibian tractors, disabling one of the amtracs and destroying another. Despite the strong enemy resistance, in its initial assault, the company pushed through into about half of An Loc. At this point, the casualty toll forced the advance to falter. Lieutenant Norris, the company commander, was dead. A hidden enemy sniper killed the Marine lieutenant as he was being helped to the rear after being seriously wounded. According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise, who had carefully monitored the events ashore, about an hour before dark, he "ordered Bravo Company (now confused, disorganized, and with only one officer left) to halt, reorganize, form a defensive perimeter in the western half of the hamlet . . ."²³

Concerned at the same time about being able to coordinate three separate perimeters, the battalion commander also told Captain Butler of Company F to gather his unit together as best he could outside of Dai Do and withdraw to the positions held by Company H in Dong Huan. Under cover of darkness and with supporting fires provided by Company B and Company H, Company F reached Dong Huan without sustaining further casualties. In fact, Captain Butler discovered that when he had reassembled his company he had about twice the force that he thought he had. With the establishment of the two defensive perimeters at Dong Huan in the north and An Loc in the south, the fighting on the 30th was about over.

During the night of the 30th, the enemy made several probes at Dong Huan, but Companies F and H with the assistance of friendly artillery easily repulsed them. At 2330, although under artillery bombardment by enemy guns north of the DMZ, Company G to the east completed its night march to Mai Xa Chanh from Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan. Company E, however, was still under operational control of the division and remained in its defensive positions on Highway 1, northwest of the Dai Do complex. In the day's action, both the North Vietnamese and the Marine BLT including Company B from the 3d Marines had sustained heavy casualties. The Marines reported approximately 90 enemy killed while suffering losses of 16 dead and 107 wounded.²⁴

At the end of the long day, Lieutenant Colonel Weise remained frustrated. He believed that if he had Companies E and G attached to him from the very beginning that he could have seized both Dai Do and

*On December 26 1973, then Major Vargas legally changed his name from Manuel Sando Vargas to Jay R. Vargas. Col Jay R. Vargas Biographical File (Ref Sec, MCHC).

An Loc after Company H had captured Dong Huan. Moreover, he had requested additional airstrikes* and 8-inch artillery missions which were not forthcoming. He was especially disappointed that he "did not get a radar controlled 2,000 pound bomb strike by Marine A-6 Intruder aircraft." He asserted that the heavy air and artillery ordnance with delayed fuses would have "cracked some of the enemy's . . . fortifications" and "followed by napalm" would possibly have destroyed the enemy's defenses. It was obvious to Weise that his unit did not have priority for either air or artillery support. He did not blame Colonel Hull who had given him all the reserve force he had available—Company B, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines. With the piecemealing of his forces into the battle, Weise declared later "I felt 'an hour late and a dime short' throughout the fight."²⁵

From the perspective of General Tompkins at the 3d Marine Division command post, he could not be sure that the main thrust of the enemy was in the Dai Do sector. At the same time that BLT 2/4 fought in Dai Do, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines at Cam Phu, about three miles to the west, had engaged other elements of the *320th NVA Division*, the same place where Task Force Robbie had run into trouble the day before.** Along Route 1, the 2d ARVN Regiment also reported continuing contact with enemy forces. Together with the attacks on the Navy river boats, Tompkins believed the North Vietnamese poised a real threat to the entire coastal plain from Cam Phu south to Quang Tri. Still, according to Major William H. Dabney, recently promoted and a former company commander at Khe Sanh reassigned to the 3d Marine Division G-3 staff at this

time, General Tompkins entered the division FSIC (Fire Support Information Center) on the evening of the 30th and ordered the artillery commander, "to take every tube that is in range of Dai Do . . . to shift its trail so that it is pointing at the Dai Do area and . . . fire max sustained rate with every tube all night."²⁶

In an interview a few days after the initial action, a reporter quoted General Tompkins as stating, "Yes, I can tell you the exact moment when I made up my mind it was going to be a real battle—it was at 9:15 Tuesday morning (April 30)." According to the Tompkins interview, when the general looked at the map, the "situation was pretty obvious." He believed, "the whole picture adds up to one of two things—the enemy was either driving through to Dong Ha itself, or he was planning to . . . slip by one or both sides of Dong Ha, and go for the provincial capital of Quang Tri, just eight miles due south." According to Tompkins such a threat was more than the 2d ARVN Regiment could handle, "it was time to call in the Marines."²⁷

The 3d Marine Division commander only had a limited number of reserves that he could throw into the battle.*** Tompkins believed that the insertion of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines at Cam Phu contained the enemy forces to the west. He still remained concerned, however, about the capability of the ARVN to hold the center and also about the uncovering of the northern approaches to Dong Ha with the withdrawal of Company G from Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan. As Lieutenant Colonel Weise later observed, "Nhi Ha had always been a key staging area for NVA infiltrating south along 'Jones Creek'." With BLT 2/4 committed to Dai Do, only the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines remained in the Napoleon/Saline sector, safeguarding the southern banks of the Cua Viet. General Tompkins request-

*Up to this point, possibly because of the new single manager system that had just been established "fixed-wing air support required a 36-hour notice before it could be planned on. This caused problems when situations would change between the planning stage and actual execution of an operation order." According to the BLT 2/4 after action report, "as the battle of Dai Do proceeded it became less difficult to get the close air support that the BLT requested." BLT 2/4 CAAR, *Operation Napoleon*, pp. 3-4. Colonel Max McQuown, who at the time commanded BLT 3/1, observed, however, that in the 3d Marine Division, "close air support was always a crap shoot. Requesting units just never knew if the requested strike would occur." He claimed that these air support problems existed even before the advent of "Single Manager." McQuown stated that the "glaring problem was that all air support requests had to be forwarded to the 3d Division air officer instead of going directly to the DASC, . . . the agency that was supposed to coordinate and control all air." McQuown Comments.

**In fact a contemporary Army historical account of the battle gives much more emphasis on the ARVN and Cam Phu action and does not even mention the fighting in Dai Do on 30 April, but begins its description with events there on 1 May. Waldron and Beavers, "The Critical Year," pp. 57-59.

***While the 26th Marines had deployed to the Quang Tri base after Khe Sanh on 18 April, the regiment was basically recuperating from its ordeal at Khe Sanh. Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, who had just assumed command of the 26th Marines in April, recalled that the regiment was "being reequipped and obtaining replacements (the bulk of the regiment's artillery, motor transport, generators, mess equipment, virtually all of the 'heavy' TO/E gear had been shot up and/or left at Khe Sanh when we pulled out." Temporarily the regiment conducted a rice protection operation appropriately named "Operation Rice" in the area south of the Quang Tri base. Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on draft, dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File). On the other hand, Colonel Max McQuown, who commanded BLT 3/1 at the time, asserted that either his battalion or the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines were both at Ca Lu, and therefore, "there was a 'swing' battalion available to go anywhere in the division TAOR. It could have been 2/9 or BLT 3/1—it turned out to be neither." McQuown Comments.

ed a battalion of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, the Prov Corps reserve, from Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, the corps commander, to fill any gaps in the division's defenses. General Rosson remembered Tompkins telling him "that the 320th NVA Division had Dong Ha in its sights."²⁸ At 0900, 1 May, the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry arrived by helicopter in a landing zone just north of Dong Ha. Later that day, General Tompkins turned over operational control of the Army battalion to the 3d Marines to insert into the Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan area.²⁹

The Continuing Fight for Dai Do

The fighting in the Dai Do area, however, was far from over. Just before daybreak on 1 May, a reconnaissance patrol from Company B in An Loc noticed that the North Vietnamese had slipped out of the hamlet. At that point, on order of Lieutenant Colonel Weise, who had come ashore by skimmer boat, the company took over all of An Loc. At daybreak, Com-

pany H in Dong Huan noticed about 60 enemy soldiers moving across an open field rice paddy west of Dai Do and north of An Loc. Calling in supporting arms as well as employing their own rifle and automatic weapons, the Marines of both Companies H and B participated in what amounted to a "turkey shoot." Lieutenant Colonel Weise later speculated that the North Vietnamese may have been "a reinforcing unit looking for the village of Dai Do" or possibly "stragglers . . . from An Loc."³⁰

After this initial action, there was a relative lull in the fighting largely confined to the continuous artillery shelling of Dai Do, as both sides attempted to marshal and reinforce their forces. At first, Lieutenant Colonel Weise had planned to have Captain Vargas' Company G make a night landing at An Loc and then launch a predawn attack on Dai Do. The Navy landing craft that were to carry the Marine company from Mai Xa Chanh to An Loc, however, were not available. Instead Company G, reinforced by the BLT's two tanks, waited at Mai Xa Chanh until about 0830 to board two

Two Marines from BLT 2/4 survey the ruins of the hamlet of Dai Do after several days of heavy fighting. The Marine on the left is carrying three LAAW's (light antiarmor weapons) strapped to his back.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191498



LCM-6s. Lieutenant Colonel Weise, once more in his "skimmer" boat, intercepted Company G on the water. He joined Captain Vargas on the lead LCM and briefed the company commander on the situation and the revised plans. The company was to come ashore at An Loc, pass through Company B's lines, and then take the hamlet of Dai Do. Company B was to remain in reserve, while Companies F and H would provide covering fire from Dong Huan.³¹

As planned, around 1000, Company G landed at An Loc and prepared to launch its attack on Dai Do. So as not to reveal the presence of the two M48 tanks, the amphibian tractors with Company B revved up their engines and made several false starts. Marine artillery and naval gunfire continued to pound the North Vietnamese troops in Dai Do and just after the artillery fire lifted, two Marine A-4s swooped low and dropped bombs and napalm on the hamlet. Passing by the eastern flank of Company B, the Marines of Company G with the tanks between the two assault platoons and under covering smoke and white phosphorous rushed forward to cover the 500 meters of open rice paddy between them and Dai Do.

While heavy mortar and automatic weapons stopped the left flank about 200 meters short of Dai Do, the rest of the company reached the enemy's first line of bunkers. As one company officer told a newspaper reporter later: "We could have used 10 tanks. We had two and we had to send both of them to the rear with damage." The fighting in Dai Do reverted to intensive short-range fighting, with the Marines blowing holes in the enemy bunkers with satchel charges and grenades. Bypassing some of the defenses, by 1400, the company attained the northern reaches of Dai Do. Indicative of the heavy combat, Captain Vargas later related that "I started out with 123 men and by the time I got through the village I was down to 41. . . . Every trooper had a captured AK-47." The Marines also had taken several prisoners.³²

The North Vietnamese were not about to allow the Marines to stay in Dai Do and mounted a counterattack in about battalion strength from both north and west of Dai Do. Employing both well-aimed artillery from positions north of the DMZ and mortars, the enemy troops forced Company G to give ground. Also North Vietnamese troops in Dai Do who had been bypassed, especially in the southwestern part of the hamlet, opened fire on the Marines of Company G from the rear. Given the situation, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Vargas "to fall back and establish a

defensive perimeter in the eastern part of Dai Do." By 1700, Company G had established its new perimeter, called in supporting arms, and waited for resupply and reinforcements and a new enemy attack. In the process, Captain Vargas was wounded but not seriously enough to relinquish command.

While sitting in its new perimeter, Company G reported the sighting of a large number of enemy troops in the vicinity of Truc Kinh, about 3,000 meters northeast of Dai Do. At about the same time, an aerial observer spotted the troop movement at Truc Kinh and also a North Vietnamese artillery forward observation team and called in fixed-wing and helicopter gunships on both positions. According to one report, the fixed-wing sorties killed all 13 of the NVA artillery spotter team, which resulted in a reduction of the effectiveness of the enemy artillery. Lieutenant Colonel Weise remembered that "on our air net we could hear the excited pilots as they strafed, bombed, and rocketed enemy in the open in daylight, a rare sight!" BLT 2/4 now had priority for close air support, although Weise later asserted not as much as "we requested nor as quickly as we needed it."³³

At An Loc, Lieutenant Colonel Weise tried to reinforce Company G. At first, he ordered Company F to attack from Dong Huan to relieve the embattled company. Enemy artillery and automatic weapons and small arms fire stopped the attack far short of its objective. Although the North Vietnamese attempted to jam the Marine radios, the battalion by changing frequencies was able to call in supporting arms including airstrikes to provide protective cover for the second Marine company. At this point, around 1700, Weise had few reserves that he could send into the battle. Although earlier in the day, he had requested and received operational control of his Company E from the 3d Marine Division, the company had not yet arrived from its former position along Route 1. With the number of casualties that it sustained the day before, Company H in Dong Huan was not in any position for "a major effort." This left only Company B, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines at An Loc, where its parent battalion had sent in several replacements including a new company commander, executive officer, and several experienced noncommissioned officers.³⁴

About 1700, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Company B, 3d Marines into the attack. According to Weise, the plan was for the company, on top of the LVTs, to cross rapidly the 500 meters of rice paddy separating it from Dai Do, "dismount and fight its

way to link up with Golf [Company G].” It did not work. The enemy laid down a tremendous amount of both automatic and small arms fire that literally stopped the attack dead in its tracks. Both the new company commander, First Lieutenant Thomas A. Brown, and many of his key personnel were wounded. According to Weise, Company B was in very bad straits—a young, inexperienced Marine officer had assumed the command and was close to panic. At that point, Captain Vargas of Company G made radio contact with him and in a “calm, confident voice settled the excited Marine down, enabling him to gain better control of the situation.”³⁵

Fortunately, Weise’s Company E under Captain James E. Livingston, after crossing the dangerous stream* to the west, arrived at An Loc about 1730 from its former position on Route 1. With the coming of darkness, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Company B to pull back to An Loc. Both Captain Livingston and First Lieutenant Clyde W. Mutter, the commanding officer of the reconnaissance platoon, “personally led a number of small expeditions during darkness, across the fire-swept rice paddies, and helped Bravo Company successively withdraw back to An Loc with all its wounded.” By this time, Company F had rejoined Company H in Dong Huan. In its tight perimeter in the northeastern part of Dai Do, with supporting arms and light provided by flare ships, Company G repulsed several attempts of the North Vietnamese to overwhelm its positions. Casualties had been heavy for both sides on 1 May. The Marines suffered 24 dead and 44 wounded and evacuated. BLT 2/4 took 2 prisoners and reported 91 enemy dead.³⁶

With enemy probes all along his positions, Lieutenant Colonel Weise spent a long sleepless night as he prepared his plans for the next day. Worried about the ability of Company G to continue to hold out in Dai Do, after learning according to one prisoner that the North Vietnamese had at least 12 companies in Dai Do, Weise decided upon a predawn attack. Company E was to attack to the northwest from An Loc into Dai Do and link up with Company G. The two companies would then clear the hamlet. If the attack stalled, Weise planned to send in Company H. Companies F

and B would continue to secure Dong Huan and An Loc, respectively, and be prepared to reinforce.³⁷

About 0500 on 2 May, while Company G provided covering fire, Company E left its line of departure for attack positions south of Dai Do.** Heavy enemy fire caused two of the Company E platoons to hesitate, but Captain Livingston personally led his reserve platoon to regain the momentum. At the same time, Company G attacked the enemy positions in southern Dai Do from the rear. The fighting would continue for several hours at close range with the Marines using flamethrowers, white phosphorous, grenades, satchel charges, and LAAWs (light antitank assault weapons) to crack the NVA bunkers and kill the enemy troops inside them. As one Marine squad leader with Company E observed, the NVA were “in fortified positions and bunkers and not moving.”³⁸ Although wounded by grenade fragments, Captain Livingston continued to encourage and prod his men forward. By about 0930, the two companies had secured Dai Do.³⁹

About a half-hour earlier, Colonel Hull made another visit to Lieutenant Colonel Weise’s temporary command post at An Loc. Satisfied with the progress of the attack, Hull directed the BLT commander to continue “to keep the pressure on the enemy.” Weise remonstrated that his unit “had just about run out of steam.” He recommended instead reinforcement by other battalions to his north and on both his flanks. Using anvil and hammer tactics, the battalions on the north would attack south and squeeze the NVA between them and the Marines in Dai Do. At this point, however, Colonel Hull had few available resources and could only promise Weise that he would try to get the 2d ARVN to cover BLT 2/4’s western flank.⁴⁰

About noon, Colonel Hull informed the BLT 2/4 commander that an ARVN mechanized battalion would be available. Using the stream to the west of Dai Do as a boundary, the ARVN were to capture the ham-

*According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise the stream was “nearly unfordable,” being about five and a half feet deep and fairly swift running. Livingston solved the problem by having a “half dozen of his tallest Marines strip down, plant themselves in the deepest part of the stream, and pass the shorter, heavily laden Marines hand-to-hand to the shallow water.” Weise, “Memories of Dai Do,” p. 19.

**Master Gunnery Sergeant James W. Rogers, who at the time was the 1st Squad Leader, 3d Platoon, Company E, recalled that during the night of 1–2 May his squad had the mission of establishing an “ambush\listening post outside of An Loc and to remain in position until dawn.” He and his squad emplaced their position near a burial mound about 75–100 yards in front of the company perimeter. Just before daylight, they heard voices in front of them. Assured by Captain Livingston that this was not a friendly patrol, Rogers thought that they may be NVA attempting to surrender and called out to them in Vietnamese asking if they were Chieu Hoi. The NVA opened fire and the Marines responded with their M16s and a M60 machine gun. The firefight ended and the Marine squad pulled back to the company perimeter to take part in the attack. MGySgt James W. Rogers, Comments on draft, dtd 21Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

lets of Dong Lai and Thong Nghia across the stream. The Marines would attack north into the hamlets of Dinh To and Thuong Do.

Following his orders to continue the pressure, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Company H into the assault. He told First Lieutenant Prescott, the company commander, to pass through the lines of Companies E and G and seize Dinh To. Leaving the line of departure about 1300, Company H fought its way into about a third of the hamlet. At that point, the enemy counterattacked. While the company maintained its positions, Lieutenant Prescott radioed for assistance, believing that he would be overwhelmed by the next enemy attack.⁴¹

According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise, Captain Livingston in Dai Do did not wait for orders. He gathered up what remained of his company, about 30 men, and rushed forward into Dinh To. Lieutenant Prescott remembered the change in his men when they learned that Company E was on its way:

We were really desperate. Then my radio operator told me, "Captain Livingston is coming." I knew then that we would be O.K. I yelled "Echo is coming." The cry was repeated by others, "Echo is coming . . . Echo is coming." Everyone felt like I did.⁴²

For a time, both companies rallied and appeared to have gained the upper hand, but not for long. Although Lieutenant Prescott sustained a serious wound and was evacuated to the rear, Second Lieutenant Bayard V. Taylor assumed command of Company H and effectively took control. The two companies fought their way through a series of trenches until stopped by an enemy machine gun. At that juncture, the North Vietnamese mounted yet another attack. According to Lieutenant Taylor:

The enemy counterattack dwarfed the fighting that had gone before in intensity and volume. I recall seeing banana trees and the masonry walls of a hootch cut down by the [NVA] automatic weapons fire. The bushes to our front seemed to be alive with heavily camouflaged NVA soldiers.⁴³

Sergeant James W. Rogers, an acting platoon leader with Company E, remembered much the same: "NVA soldiers were all over . . . as soon as you shot one, another would pop up in his place. We were receiving a lot of machine gun fire." Rogers credited the "coolness and calmness" of the Company E commander, Captain Livingston, "who seemed to be everywhere," with keeping the Marines "from panicking."⁴⁴

About 1430, Lieutenant Colonel Weise, who had moved his forward command post to Dai Do,

ordered the two companies to disengage and return to the battalion command post. An injured Captain Livingston, unable to walk because of machine gun rounds in both his legs, insisted that he not be helped to the rear until the rest of the wounded had been evacuated. Under the cover of Marine airstrikes and supporting artillery, the two companies pulled back with all of their wounded to the relative safety of Dai Do.

By this time, Weise received the information that the ARVN mechanized battalion had occupied Dong Lai, about 500 meters to the west of Dai Do. With the approval of Colonel Hull, the Marine battalion commander worked out a plan for the Marine and ARVN battalion to advance abreast along both sides of the stream—the Marines again to move into Dinh To and the ARVN to push from Dong Lai to Thuong Nghia, a distance of some 1,000 meters to the northwest. According to Weise, "coordination and communication was difficult at best," but he had no spare officer to send as a liaison to the ARVN. Both he and his operations officer, Major George F. Warren, however, talked by radio to the U.S. Army advisor with the ARVN unit who assured them that the ARVN battalion commander understood and agreed to the plan.⁴⁵

For the attack, Weise selected Companies G and F. Although Company G was down to about 40 men, it still had four officers. Company F, which had been reinforced by the platoon at My Loc, had about 80 men. Captain Vargas' Company G was to be in the lead followed "in trace by Company F." The idea was for Company G to advance rapidly until it encountered enemy resistance and then for Company F to push through and continue the attack. Lieutenant Colonel Weise and a small command group accompanied Company G. Major Warren, the operations officer, assumed command of the perimeter formed by Companies E and H in Dai Do. Company B remained in An Loc in what had become the BLT rear sector.⁴⁶

Close to 1600, under cover of Marine air and artillery, the two companies moved into the attack. This time, Company G only met sporadic small arms fire as it pushed through Dinh To. Company F, however, became bogged down in the rice paddies east of the hamlet where it came under artillery and heavy automatic weapons fire from its northeast. Unaware that Company F was not behind it, Company G drove to the southern edge of Thuong Do. At that point, however, the company took fire from its front and

right flank. According to Weise, he told Captain Vargas to halt and for Company F to move up, only then to discover that the latter company was not where he thought it was. About the same time, about 1700, Company G came under automatic weapons fire on its left flank and left rear from across the stream, an area supposedly secured by the ARVN mechanized battalion in its armored personnel carriers (APCs). In fact, Lieutenant Colonel Weise remembered that when “we first received fire from over there, we thought it was them [the ARVN] . . . We saw a large number over there to the left and we didn’t realize that they were NVA and not ARVN that were on the move until we realized that we saw no APCs. Ten or 15 minutes we looked at those guys.”⁴⁷

BLT 2/4 was in an untenable situation. In effect, its lead companies were in unprotected perimeters with enemy troops in between them. Weise later related, “There was just one hell of a donnybrook and ‘Charlie, bar the door situation.’” The battalion commander called in artillery, “all around and top of us.” An enemy RPG round killed Weise’s Sergeant Major, John Malnar, and Weise himself was seriously wounded by an NVA AK-47 rifle. The battalion commander praised Captain Vargas, who also had sustained a minor wound, for his conduct of the battle: “He was everywhere at once . . .”⁴⁸

Company G stopped the initial enemy frontal attack and then turned around “and picked off most of the enemy” coming at it from the rear. According to Weise, “every Marine who was able to shoot, including wounded who could handle a weapon, fired and the fighting was violent and close.” Using the tactic of withdrawal by fire teams, with two able-bodied Marines dragging a wounded man, the company fought its way back to the positions held by Company F. The two companies then retreated to Dinh To where they were met by Major Warren, the operations officer, who had organized a provisional platoon supported by amphibian tractors.⁴⁹

After evacuating the most seriously wounded, including Lieutenant Colonel Weise,* by 1800, the battalion had once more consolidated its perimeter in Dai Do. With replacements and some reorganization, each company consisted of 40 men and 1 officer.

* An Associated Press photograph taken at the time shows a still feisty Lieutenant Colonel Weise with a fat cigar in his mouth lying on a litter holding his own plasma bottle in an evacuation area near Dai Do. Clipping from the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, p. 2 (Weise Folder, Dai Do).



Photo courtesy of BGen William Weise, USMC (Ret)
A seriously wounded but still feisty LtCol William Weise, with a cigar in his mouth, lies on a litter holding his own albumin serum bottle awaiting medical evacuation. In the background, Navy medical personnel and Marines attend to other wounded.

Major Warren had assumed command of the battalion from Lieutenant Colonel Weise and was in turn relieved later that night by Major Charles W. Knapp, the battalion executive officer, who had maintained the BLT rear headquarters on board the *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2). In the fighting for the Dai Do village complex on 2 May, the 3d Marines reported casualties of 40 Marines dead and 111 wounded and the killing of nearly 380 of the enemy.

The fight for Dai Do was practically over. Although there were further probes on the night of 2–3 May on the Marine lines in the hamlet of Dai Do, by daybreak there was little sign of the enemy. Aerial observers saw small groups of North Vietnamese retreating north from Thuong Do and called in airstrikes. Later that day, Lieutenant Colonel Charles V. Jarman’s 1st Battalion, 3d Marines took over from BLT 2/4 responsibility for the Dai Do sector. The 1st Battalion made a sweep through the hamlets of Dinh To and Thuong Do without incident. Companies G and H of BLT 2/4, which were temporarily under the operational control of Jarman, followed in trace and collected the Marine dead



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191447
Marines of BLT 2/4 board a "Mike" boat (landing craft, mechanized) for return to their base area in the Napoleon/Saline area of operations, after inflicting and sustaining large casualties in the Dai Do village complex.

from the previous day's fighting who could not be evacuated.* By 1935, on 3 May, Companies G and H had completed their grisly mission and began to depart the Dai Do area. Shortly after 2100, the last elements of the two companies had returned to the BLT's old command post at Mai Xa Chanh.⁵⁰

The three-day fight for the Dai Do complex had been a bloody one for both sides. From 30 April through 2 May, BLT 2/4 had sustained casualties of 81 dead and nearly 300 wounded.** Marine estimates of the number of enemy dead ranged from nearly 500 to

*Colonel Charles V. Jarman, whose 1st Battalion, 3d Marines relieved BLT 2/4, recalled that several of the Marine dead had their hands tied behind their back. It was his belief that these Marines "were captured and subsequently executed by the NVA when the battle appeared to be going against them." Col Charles V. Jarman, Comments on draft, dtd 12Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

**All of the sources basically agree about the number of Marine dead. The listing of the number of wounded, however, vary from 247 mentioned by III MAF to 297 according to Brigadier General Weise. According to General Weise, his personnel officer gave the figures of 81 KIA and 297 wounded and evacuated while he "was in the hospital ward aboard the U.S.S. *Iwo Jima*." BGen William Weise (Ret) ltr, dtd 11Mar83 to BGen Edwin H. Simmons (Ret) (Weise Folder, Dai Do).

over 600. According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise, based on the estimates and counts made by other units around Dai Do, the Marines found 600 bodies in the immediate area of the battle and another 500 to 600 in the extended battle area. Admitting that "body count figures are always suspect," Weise, nevertheless argued that even if one "cut these figures in half for inflation, you're talking about the equivalent of two enemy regiments that were decimated in that area." Lieutenant Colonel Weise later received the Navy Cross and Captains Vargas and Livingston were later awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions in the Dai Do battles.⁵¹

The End of the First Offensive

While the Dai Do sector may have been the site of the heaviest fighting during this period, the 320th NVA Division had not limited its efforts only to this area. Throughout the three-day period, from 30 April through 2 May, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines near Cam Phu continued to have sporadic contact with scattered units of the enemy division. The 2d ARVN Regiment also reported continuous action during the night of 1–2 May. Its 1st Battalion sustained 5 dead and 16 wounded in taking Dong Lai to the west of Dai Do and claimed killing 39 of the North Vietnamese.⁵²

To the northeast, the Army's 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry ran into the most intense combat outside of that in Dai Do in the Nhi Ha sector along Jones Creek. The departure of Company G from the Nhi Ha and the Lam Xuan village complexes on the night of 30 April–1 May, left the entire Jones Creek area open to the North Vietnamese. With the assignment of the Army battalion of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade to the operational control of the 3d Marines on the evening of 1 May to fill that gap, Colonel Hull ordered the commander of the 3d Battalion, Army Lieutenant Colonel William P. Snyder, to reenter the area the following morning.⁵³

About 0800 on 2 May, the battalion landed in a helicopter landing zone near Lam Xuan East (located on the eastern bank of Jones Creek and so designated to differentiate it from its neighboring hamlet with the same name located on the opposite bank about 1,000 meters to the northwest). The battalion occupied the two Lam Xuans with relative ease, and then moved on to Nhi Ha. At this juncture, the North Vietnamese sprung one of their traps. In close combat, the enemy killed 9 of the American soldiers and wounded 15.

Another four were missing. The Army battalion fell back to night positions in Lam Xuan West and called in supporting arms on the enemy in Nhi Ha.

On 3 May, while BLT 2/4 and the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines had a relatively quiet time in the Dai Do sector, the Army battalion again fought a see-saw battle with the North Vietnamese in Nhi Ha. After Marine artillery softened the enemy defenses, the 3d Battalion launched another attack into Nhi Ha. The troops recovered the bodies of the four members of the battalion reported missing the night before. About noon, the enemy struck back with the first of three counterattacks. While repulsing the attacks, the Army unit fell back to permit Marine air once more to hit the enemy defenses. The airstrikes were accurate but North Vietnamese antiaircraft guns downed one of the Chance Vaught F-8 Crusaders, killing the pilot. Although unable to take Nhi Ha and returning again to their night positions at Lam Xuan West, the Army battalion sustained relatively light casualties during the day, 1 dead and 7 wounded while accounting for 67 of the enemy.⁵⁴

The fighting at Nhi Ha the following day was a repetition of that of the 3d. Once more, Marine air and artillery bombarded the enemy in Nhi Ha. At 0936, the Army troops again attacked, but only to find themselves once more enmeshed in the North Vietnamese field fortifications and bunkers. The 3d Battalion spent another night in defensive positions in Lam Xuan West. At 0940 on the morning of 5 May, after the usual air and artillery bombardment, the 3d Battalion again moved into the attack. Encountering almost no resistance, the battalion reported at 1135, "Nhi Ha was secured." The Army soldiers found 64 North Vietnamese bodies in the hamlet, all killed by supporting arms. All told, the 3d Battalion suffered 16 dead and 33 wounded while it estimated that the North Vietnamese lost more than 200 men in the three-day struggle for Nhi Ha.⁵⁵

In the meantime, the fighting had shifted westward. After a short hiatus in the Dai Do area, on the morning of 5 May, Lieutenant Colonel Jarman's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines attacked north from Thuong Do towards Truc Kinh, a distance of 1,200 meters to the northwest. The 2d ARVN regiment was to protect the battalion's western flank. With Companies C and D in the lead and Company B following in trace, the Marine battalion reached its first objective, the hamlet of Som Soi, about 300 meters southeast of Truc Kinh, encountering only token resistance. Within a short time, however, about 1130, the Marine battalion came under

heavy fire from Truc Kinh and some scattered fire from the southeast. Calling in artillery and fixed-wing airstrikes, especially against Truc Kinh, the battalion fought its way through Som Soi.⁵⁶

At this point, about 1250 on the 5th, the North Vietnamese launched a counterattack from Truc Kinh with Company D on the eastern flank bearing the brunt of the assault. Lieutenant Colonel Jarman then ordered Company C to swing around to the right to contain the enemy attack while Company B screened the movement. This maneuver, however, exposed the battalion's western flank since the 2d ARVN Regiment's attack to the southwest had already stalled and the South Vietnamese were in no position to support the Marines. According to Jarman, an aerial observer radioed him that "500 Charlies were preparing to flank our position."⁵⁷ Colonel Hull, the 3d Marines commander, upon learning of the situation, immediately requested reinforcements. The 3d Division released Companies I and M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines to the operational control of the 3d Marines. Marine helicopters brought the two companies into a landing zone near Thuong Do. Despite the loss of one helicopter, the two 4th Marines companies quickly advanced to the northwest to provide protection for Jarman's western flank. After consolidating his positions in a defensive perimeter established by Companies I and M in a tree line, about 1,000 meters to the south of Truc Kinh, Lieutenant Colonel Jarman described the situation "relatively routine" as Marine air and artillery continued to pound the enemy.⁵⁸ About 1800, the North Vietnamese broke contact.

On the morning of the 6th, Companies C and D again reoccupied Soi Son without meeting any resistance. While Company D provided protective fire, Company C then advanced upon Truc Kinh. By 1400 that afternoon, the 1st Battalion had secured the latter hamlet. Most of the North Vietnamese had fled except for the dead from the previous fighting, and three NVA soldiers who surrendered to the Marines. In the two-day action for Truc Kinh, the Marines reported 173 of the enemy dead, captured 3 prisoners, and recovered 75 rifles and 19 crew-served weapons. The Marines sustained casualties of 15 dead and 71 wounded.

While Lieutenant Colonel Jarman's command enjoyed a relatively uneventful day on the 6th, about five miles to the northeast, the U.S. Army 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry's Nhi Ha sector again became active. The North Vietnamese ambushed the battalion's Company A which was conducting a sweep

northwest of Nhi Ha. Before the Army unit could disengage under cover of air and artillery support and return to Nhi Ha, it lost 5 men dead and 17 wounded. Company A reported another 14 soldiers missing. Two of the missing returned to the company's lines that evening, and the battalion recovered the bodies of 11 of the others. One soldier remained on the rolls as missing in action.⁵⁹

With the continuing contact with elements of the 320th by the Army battalion in the Nhi Ha area and by the ARVN 2d Regiment, whose 4th Battalion on the 6th engaged a North Vietnamese unit just east of Route 1, Major General Tompkins decided to insert the two-battalion 2d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division into the fight to exploit the situation. Earlier he had asked General Rosson for and received permission to redeploy the brigade if needed from the Scotland II area of operations near Khe Sanh into the Dong Ha sector. With few other reserves available to him, the Air Cavalry brigade provided Tompkins, not only additional troops, but a force, with sufficient helicopters, "ideally configured for operations against a retreating enemy force operating in small formations" and to "patrol large areas effectively and move forces quickly to exploit sightings and contacts."⁶⁰

At 1715 on 6 May, the first battalion of the brigade, the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, under Lieutenant Colonel C. E. Jordan, landed in a landing zone about 3,000 meters east of the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines in Truc Kinh. Temporarily, General Tompkins placed the Cavalry battalion under the operational control of Colonel Hull of the 3d Marines. From 7–8 May, the 1st Cavalry battalion made a careful sweep northwest toward the Marine battalion. At Truc Kinh, Lieutenant Colonel Jarman's Marines continued to patrol, finding a few more enemy dead and capturing three more prisoners. On the morning of the 9th, the 2d Brigade of the Air Cavalry under Army Colonel Robert N. McKinnon, with the 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, arrived and took over the sector. The 3d Marines relinquished operational control of the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, and Lieutenant Colonel Jarman's battalion returned to its former operational area south of the Cua Viet River.⁶¹

On the morning of the 9th, the 2d Brigade then began Operation Concordia Square in an area of operations carved out of that of the 2d ARVN Regiment, sandwiched between the ARVN on the west and the 3d Marines in Operation Napoleon/Saline to the east. Its heaviest action of the operation actually occurred

on that very day. About 5,000 meters southeast of Gio Linh, about 0800, a North Vietnamese force heavily engaged two companies of the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, cutting off one and preventing the other from coming to its assistance. The brigade quickly deployed units of its 2d Battalion into blocking positions north of the action and ordered the remaining two companies of the 1st Battalion to relieve the embattled companies. In the fast-moving action supported by Marine fixed-wing aircraft and helicopter gunships, enemy gunners shot down one UH-1H helicopter, the Army version of the Bell "Huey," and hit eight others. By 1300, the North Vietnamese had disengaged leaving behind an estimated 80 enemy dead. The Army troopers sustained casualties of 16 dead and 52 wounded.⁶²

Except for scattered action in Concordia Square, and one large engagement on 10 May north of Nhi Ha involving the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry, the 320th Division was no longer engaging the allied forces. In the action on the 10th, Company C, 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry in predawn darkness spotted about 300 enemy troops moving toward its positions. The company pulled back all of its night patrols and called in continuous illumination and artillery upon the NVA. The enemy answered with artillery from north of the DMZ and mortars, and then about 0600 launched a ground assault against the entire battalion front. With the support of fixed-wing aircraft, helicopter gunships, artillery, and naval gunfire, the Army troops broke the back of the enemy attack in a one-sided battle. By 1500, all enemy resistance had ended. The 3d Battalion suffered only 1 soldier dead and 16 wounded. It reported killing 159 of the enemy, took 2 prisoners, and recovered 55 rifles and 18 crew-served weapons.⁶³

After the one assault on Nhi Ha on the 10th, rather than attempting to infiltrate south to close the Cua Viet and possibly attack Dong Ha, the 320th was now breaking into small groups who were trying their best to make their way north into the Demilitarized Zone. Operation Concordia Square ended on 17 May. From 9–17 May, the 2d Air Cavalry Brigade reported enemy casualties of 349 dead while sustaining 28 killed and 117 wounded. Both the Air Cavalry Brigade and the Americal's 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry returned to their base camp at Camp Evans. The enemy offensive had petered out.⁶⁴

With what appeared to be the end of the "most awesome battle by the standards of the Vietnamese War," General Tompkins asked his operations staff to



Photo courtesy of Col Francis I. Fenton, USMC (Ret)

U.S. Army LtGen William B. Rosson, CG Prov Corps, officiates at a 3d Marine Division change of command ceremony. Standing behind Rosson is MajGen Raymond G. Davis, left, who is relieving MajGen Rathvon McC. Tompkins, right, as the commanding general of the division.

come up with a statistical summary of the action since 30 April. According to the division account, in an 18-day period, the allies killed over 2,100 of the enemy (including 221 by air). Perhaps more reliable and indicative figures were the 41 prisoners captured by the allies and the recovery of more than 500 enemy weapons including 132 crew-served weapons. The cost, however, had been high. In the fighting, the Army and Marine units under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division suffered losses of 233 killed, over 800 wounded, and 1 missing soldier from the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry. Task Force Clearwater took casualties of 15 dead and 22 wounded, while the ARVN lost 42 dead and 124 wounded. With the extensive bloodletting, Major General Tompkins "had good reason to believe . . . that the 320th NVA Division would not pose a serious threat to the allied positions along the DMZ for some time to come." General Tompkins also had received word that he was about to relinquish his command.⁶⁵

The Second Offensive

Contrary to General Tompkins' expectations, the 320th was to come south again and the results were to be much the same, but even more one-sided than the previous attempt. Within the brief interlude between the two enemy thrusts, the enemy had been relatively quiescent except for an artillery attack on the 3d Marine Division base area at Dong Ha. On 14 May, a North Vietnamese artillery barrage exploded there about 110 tons of ammunition, killing 1 Marine and wounding 15. The division's Kentucky and Napoleon/Saline sectors, however, remained relatively inactive through 21 May.⁶⁶

On 21 May, there was a sort of a musical chairs shift throughout the Marine Corps Vietnam command structure. Major General William J. Van Ryzin, the III MAF Deputy Commander, received a promotion to lieutenant general and became the Chief of Staff to the Commandant at Headquarters, Marine Corps in

Washington.* Since Major General Tompkins was the next senior Marine ranking officer in country, Lieutenant General Cushman, the III MAF commander, selected Tompkins to become his new deputy. With the concurrence of the Commandant, General Chapman, Cushman appointed Marine Major General Raymond G. Davis, the deputy commander of Prov Corps, to take Tompkins place as commander of the 3d Marine Division.

On 21 May, in a brief change of command ceremony at Dong Ha, Major General Davis, a native of Georgia and holder of the Medal of Honor from the Korean War, assumed command of the 3d Marine Division. From his former vantage point at Prov Corps, Davis had become impressed with the airmobile tactics of the 1st Air Cavalry Division during Operation Pegasus. As one Army officer remembered, the senior members of Rosson's Prov Corps staff would "take turns having dinner with him every night in the headquarters mess, giving him our ideas on mobile warfare, and during the day we flew around with him." Davis was well aware of the purposes of the attentions of the Prov Corps staff. As he declared later, he had known the Prov Corps commander for some time and when Davis arrived at Prov Corps headquarters, Rosson began "orienting me towards . . . the effectiveness of forces [an euphemism for the airmobile tactics]." Davis believed that the 3d Marine Division had become tied down to its fixed positions and too defense-minded. As he confided to Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson on Westmoreland's staff, it was his opinion that the 3d Division earlier in May at Dai Do and afterwards had "missed a great opportunity" and allowed the North Vietnamese to "get away."⁶⁷

* General Van Ryzin later recalled that he received a telephone call from General Chapman, the Commandant, who had already spoken to General Cushman. The Commandant told Van Ryzin that "I'm going to ask you to come back as my Chief of Staff. I'm going to give you exactly two hours to say yes or no." General Van Ryzin talked the matter over with General Cushman who told him that, "I was stupid if I didn't take it." Van Ryzin accepted the position. LtGen William J. Van Ryzin intvw, 2Apr75, p. 218 (Oral HistColl, MCHC). In his comments, General Van Ryzin observed that he "was still becoming acquainted with the situation [in Vietnam] when I returned to the U.S." LtGen William J. Van Ryzin, Comments on draft, n.d. [Oct94] (Vietnam Comment File).

** General Rosson years later observed: "Unhappily, a substantial portion of the 320th was able to elude us, reorganize and return in a matter of days. General Davis, who had followed the action as my Deputy, harbored the view that the 320th should have been destroyed south of the DMZ." Gen William B. Rosson, Comments on draft, dtd 27Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File).

General Davis was to have his "opportunity" almost as soon as he took over the 3d Marine Division. The 320th NVA had once more left the sanctuary of the DMZ and entered Quang Tri Province. As Davis later stated, "It was gone just nine days and came back to welcome me the night I took command" Although not expecting the enemy division to make another foray so soon after the first, this time the Marines were ready for the 320th.⁶⁸

In what the 3d Marine Division listed as the first phase of the new offensive, the North Vietnamese division moved into the Operation Kentucky Leatherneck Square sector northwest of Dong Ha halfway between Con Thien and Gio Linh. This sector had been somewhat quiet since 8 May when the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines had overrun an NVA regimental headquarters, but had sustained heavy casualties during an enemy artillery bombardment.⁶⁹ During this lull, Captain Matthew G. McTiernan assumed command of Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. He recalled that the Marine battalions during this period would shift boundaries between A-3 and Con Thien to confuse the North Vietnamese who had the tendency of working the unit boundary lines. On the morning of 22 May, his company had the mission of establishing "a series of ambushes along the old AO [area of operations] line." The company left the perimeter about 0400 that morning with his 3d Platoon in the lead. Just southwest of the A-3 Strong Point, the company encountered what it first thought was a small enemy patrol. The Marines soon realized that the enemy was in at least company strength and called for reinforcements. McTiernan then asked for air support and received helicopter gunship support "which proved too much for the NVA." According to the Marine captain, the enemy had been on the move, had no prepared positions, and were easy targets for air: "We had caught the NVA unit cold."⁷⁰

In the meantime, a Company A, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines patrol ran into another enemy force just east of Con Thien. Given the intensity of the enemy resistance supported by artillery, Colonel Richard B. Smith, the 9th Marines commander, assumed that the North Vietnamese had infiltrated possibly a battalion if not a larger force into his sector. While the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines reinforced from A-3 and the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines attacked east from Con Thien, Smith attempted to exploit the contact. He asked General Davis for and received operational control from the 4th Marines of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. Marine helicopters landed the battalion into blocking positions to

the south of the contact. At the same time, Colonel Smith ordered the helicopter lift of his 1st Battalion, 9th Marines into other blocking positions to the north.

During the next two days while the enemy sought to disengage, the 9th Marines with 12 companies attempted to place a cordon around the NVA forces. When either of the two assault battalions, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines or the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, found itself in too close to an action, "the unit involved backed off and assaulted the NVA with massive supporting arms." According to a 9th Marines account: "On one occasion, the encircled enemy attempted to escape across the trace; however, artillery . . . , gunships, fixed wing and tanks were brought to bear . . . with devastating effect." By noon on the 24th, the fight was over in the 9th Marines sector. Since the morning of the 22d, the Marines had sustained about 100 casualties, 23 dead and 75 wounded and evacuated, but had reported killing 225 of the North Vietnamese and captured 3 prisoners.⁷¹

On 25 May, the flats above Dong Ha in both the 2d ARVN regimental sector and the Napoleon/Saline area again became the centers of action. That morning Company E, BLT 2/4 encountered an NVA force in about battalion strength near Nhi Ha, while the ARVN about 2,000 meters above Dong Ha ran into a similarly sized force. Once more the Marines rapidly reinforced both over land and by helicopter-borne forces. In the Nhi Ha sector, Colonel Hull, the 3d Marines commander, ordered the helilift of Company H BLT 2/4 into blocking positions to the south while Company E attacked the hamlet from the north under a rolling barrage. In fighting that lasted all day, the two Marine companies together with supporting artillery and air reported killing 238 of the enemy. Marine casualties were also heavy, 18 dead and 33 wounded and evacuated. To the southwest, the 2d ARVN Regiment in their contact, near Thuong Nghia, just west of the former Dai Do perimeter, repulsed the enemy attack, and claimed killing 122 of the enemy.⁷²

On the 26th, concerned that the North Vietnamese 320th was again attempting to cut the Cua Viet or even strike at Dong Ha itself, General Davis attempted to cordon off the North Vietnamese units. He ordered the helilift of the 1st and 2d Battalions, 9th Marines into blocking positions west of Nhi Ha and placed the two battalions under the operational control of the 3d Marines. At the same time, he ordered Colonel Smith, the 9th Marines commander, to move the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines overland to exploit the ARVN contact near Thuong Nghia.⁷³

In the southern cordon on the 26th, the two Marine battalions, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, formed blocking positions about 3,000 meters north of Thuong Nghia. The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, in the vicinity of Truc Kinh, twice encountered resistance from North Vietnamese in entrenched defenses. In the first clash, about 1300, the battalion ran into a force of about 100 enemy troops. After first contact, the Marines pulled back "to allow heavy pounding of enemy positions by air and artillery." The battalion sustained casualties of 10 Marines dead and 12 wounded. At the same time, it captured 5 prisoners and reported killing 56 of the enemy.⁷⁴

In the second action later that afternoon, about 1630, Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines outside of Truc Kinh came under intensive small arms and automatic weapons fire. Tanks attached to the infantry attempted to reinforce the company, but became bogged down in the rice paddies. An aerial observer called in close air support so that the company could withdraw before last light. Captain McTiernan, whose Company I protected Company K's left flank, recalled that during this action, his troops "saw a long column of troops moving out of a small hamlet located 200 yards to our left front." Apparently the enemy was attempting to reinforce their units engaging Company K. With assurances that the column was NVA, Company I opened fire with devastating effect in what Captain McTiernan described "as target practice . . . In the course of ten or fifteen minutes the entire column was destroyed." Still the 3d Battalion had not gone unscathed, Company K sustained 23 wounded and reported 5 missing in action. During the same day, the ARVN about a 1,000 meters to the north of Thuong Nghia claimed to have killed 110 of the enemy while suffering casualties of 2 dead and 7 wounded.⁷⁵

On the 27th, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, reinforced by the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, took its objectives, meeting only scattered enemy resistance. In Truc Kinh, the Marines recovered the bodies of the five men from Company K reported missing the day before. Throughout the day, the Marine units in the southern cordon killed about 28 of the enemy while sustaining only four wounded. For the next two days, the Marines in the two battalions together with the ARVN maintained the cordon subjecting the North Vietnamese units between them to "massive fixed-wing and general support ordnance . . ." Finally on the 30th, enemy resistance broke and the two battalions "swept through the area," taking 18 prisoners and recovering 23

weapons. For the days of the cordon, 26–30 May, the 9th Marines reported that the two battalions killed a total of 161 of the enemy, captured 26 prisoners, and retrieved over 100 enemy weapons, including 29 crew-served weapons. Marine casualties were also heavy; 41 dead and 119 wounded. The ARVN during their participation in the southern cordon operation claimed to have killed 384 of the enemy and sustained 19 killed and 45 wounded.⁷⁶

During the same period, the 3d Marines in the northern cordon sector around Nhi Ha encircled a North Vietnamese battalion in the hamlet of Lai An, about 2,500 meters northwest of Nhi Ha. While BLT 2/4 and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines established blocking positions, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines reinforced by the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines attacked Lai An. Using 11 companies to form the cordon, the 3d Marines finally secured the hamlet on 30 May. Again the price was high. In the taking of Lai An, the Marines sustained casualties of over 20 dead and 200 wounded. From 27–30 May, the 3d Marines reported the finding of 90 bodies and the capture of 8 prisoners in the fight for Lai An.⁷⁷

The “second” battle for Dong Ha was over. Once more the 320th NVA Division had taken heavy casualties and retreated north of the DMZ. In the two phases of the second offensive, the 3d Marine Division reported killing over 770 of the enemy. Combined with the number estimated killed by the ARVN, the enemy division would have lost more than 1,000 dead from the period 22 May to the end of the month, not including the 61 prisoners captured by the allies. Allied casualties including 112 dead totaled 558.⁷⁸

Thus in the two offensives mounted by the 320th NVA Division, the North Vietnamese had lost over 3,000 troops. While American casualties had been heavy, their total of dead and wounded was about half of the reported number of North Vietnamese killed. What was even more apparent was that the second offensive was even more futile than the first. While the North Vietnamese may have sustained fewer casualties in the second offensive, they also fought much less effectively. According to the 3d Marines, the enemy troops in the later encounters showed poorer discipline and while well-equipped were less experienced and more willing to surrender. General Davis related that one captured North Vietnamese sergeant stated that of the 90 men in his company, 62 were new. One frightened enemy soldier captured near Lai An told the Marines that his unit lost 200 out of 300 men since crossing the Ben Hai River. In any event,

the 320th remained out of action in the DMZ war for the next two months.⁷⁹

In many respects, questions still remain about the intent of the enemy. Obviously, the thrust of the 320th was part of the overall NVA so-called “mini-Tet offensive” that the enemy attempted in May to initiate country-wide, a somewhat “poor man’s imitation” of the January-February Tet offensive. More than the earlier offensive, except for increased fighting in the capital city of Saigon, the North Vietnamese May offensive was largely limited to attacks by fire at allied bases and acts of terrorism in the hamlets and villages. In I Corps, while the North Vietnamese may have attempted to cut the Cua Viet, they did not or were not able this time to coordinate that attempt with attacks against the major cities of Quang Tri, Hue, and Da Nang. Moreover, the 320th apparently mistakenly fired early upon the shipping on the Cua Viet, giving away its presence and triggering the Marine response, before all of its units were in position. After once engaged, while showing tenacity, the North Vietnamese division revealed little imagination and an inability to counter the American advantages in manpower, equipment, and supporting arms.

For its part, the 3d Marine Division made several changes in the way it was fighting the DMZ war. Immediately upon taking command of the division, General Davis issued a directive to reduce the number of units manning the strongpoints. In Davis’ words, “battalion positions . . . immediately . . . [became] company positions.” For example, in the 9th Marines sector, one battalion was responsible for all the strongpoints with one company positioned at each. The other three battalions were “‘swing’ units” to reinforce a developing battle using helicopter assault and cordon tactics.⁸⁰

Some controversy has arisen over the question about the 3d Marine Division tactics in the earlier offensive. If the division had used more mobile operations and attempted to reinforce Lieutenant Colonel Weise’s BLT 2/4 at Dai Do would it have destroyed or trapped more of the 320th? This is one of the questions that may never be answered and it is of course much easier to answer with hindsight after the event. In all fairness to Major General Tompkins and his staff, his attention and that of his command had been directed towards Khe Sanh since the beginning of the year. He had inherited the barrier and Dyemarker situation from his predecessor and was under constant MACV pressure to maintain and man these defenses. Even if Dyemarker and Khe Sanh were not factors, General Tompkins at

the same time as Dai Do had good reason to believe that the attacks on Nhi Ha to the northeast and at Cam Phu to the southwest may have been the main effort of the 320th. With the beginning of the drawdown of forces from the Scotland area of operations, General Davis had more freedom of action to implement a more mobile concept in the 3d Marine Division sector, a strategy that the Marines had recommended in the DMZ area since late 1966 and early 1967. At that time, instead of the barrier, the Marines had recommended "a mobile defense by an adequate force—say one division give or take a battalion . . ." Different circumstances provided different opportunities.^{81*}

*Many of the reviewers of this chapter still had strong opinions about the differences between the earlier and later tactics of the division. Captain McTiernan, for example, wrote that, "the decisive change in tactics initiated by General Davis" was the most important factor in the defeat of the NVA offensive. Capt Matthew G. McTiernan, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan 1995] (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel Max McQuown argued that prior to Davis assuming command there were "a myriad of static defensive positions of little tactical value. These positions and the rigid control the Division exercised over every combat unit, fragmented battalions, reduced their combat capability, and

severely limited their freedom of action. Thus, after soundly defeating the NVA 'Tet' offensive the initiative passed to the NVA by default in the 3d Marine Division TAOR." McQuown Comments. On the other hand, Colonel Vaughn R. Stuart, who served on the division staff and as a regimental commander later under General Davis, observed that although members of the division "knew very well that we were not mobile, that we were not carrying the war to the enemy . . .", General Tompkins did what he could to change the status quo." He blamed Tompkins' problems, in part, on the factor that the 3d Marine Division commander could not obtain enough helicopters from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. Col Vaughn R. Stuart, Comments on draft, dtd 20Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). See the discussion in Chapter 25 on this last subject. Colonel William M. Cryan, who was the 3d Marine Division G-3 under General Davis, agreed that the division "was stymied by Dyemarker and fixed bases . . .," and credits General Davis for getting "the division moving." Col William M. Cryan, Comments on draft, 12Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel William H. Dabney, who served on the division staff under both Generals Tompkins and Davis, agreed with the statement in the text that "different circumstances provided different opportunities." He also declared that intelligence "was far from perfect the first time around, and that General Davis had the benefit of General Tompkins' experience for the second round." Dabney concluded, however, that the "*difference in style*" [emphasis in the original] between Davis and Tompkins may also have affected the outcome of Round II." Col William H. Dabney, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File).

CHAPTER 16

Khe Sanh: Final Operations and Evacuation 16 April–11 July 1968

*To Stay or Not to Stay—The “Walking Dead”—Operation Scotland II—Operation Robin
Razing Khe Sanh: Operation Charlie*

To Stay or Not to Stay

General Westmoreland originally had ordered the defense of Khe Sanh as a block to enemy infiltration along Route 9 and as a possible “jump-off point” for a planned invasion of Laos.¹ By the end of the siege, the Paris negotiations with the North Vietnamese had ended all thoughts of expanding the war into Laos. With the increased availability of additional mobile forces following the defeat of the enemy’s Tet offensive, Westmoreland faced an entirely new tactical situation. As he recorded later:

It was clear . . . that the base had outlived its usefulness. We now had the troops and helicopters to control the area, . . . and we had the logistics and a secure forward base at Ca Lu to support these operations.²

In light of these new developments, Lieutenant General Cushman, the III MAF commander, and Army Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, the Provisional Corps commander, pressed for the evacuation of Khe Sanh immediately. According to General Rosson, he had prepared a plan which General Cushman had endorsed and that he thought had the tacit approval of General Westmoreland. Rosson had proposed the immediate redeployment of the 1st Air Cavalry Division to operation Delaware, and the “progressive deployment eastward” of the 3d Marine Division units. As he recalled, he talked personally by telephone with Westmoreland and told the MACV commander that the Marine and ARVN units would remain at Khe Sanh only to ensure security for the “removal of supplies” during the proposed “inactivation of the base.” In Rosson’s opinion, “General Westmoreland understood the plan that General Cushman and I had agreed upon,” and offered no objection.³

On 15 April, this understanding, if there was such an understanding, fell apart at a commander’s conference that General Rosson hosted at his headquarters at Phu Bai. Rosson had called the meeting which originally was to include the 3d Marine Division and 1st Air Cavalry Division commanders and various staff members “to finalize the plan and issue orders.” As a courtesy, Rosson invited his immediate superior,

General Cushman, who in turn had invited General Westmoreland. The Provisional Corps commander remembered that he had just finished outlining the concept and had asked for comments when: “General Westmoreland—to Cushman’s and my own surprise and embarrassment—stated that Pegasus would not be terminated.” While permitting the greater part of the 1st Air Cavalry Division to redeploy to Operation Delaware, one brigade of the Air Cavalry and Marine and ARVN units would continue “to comb the area” using Khe Sanh as their base of operations. Any decision to curtail “these activities,” dismantle the base, or redeploy the remaining forces “would await further developments.” General Westmoreland later would say that he basically agreed with Rosson’s plan, “but not its timing.” General Rosson remained puzzled: “In essence, I either misunderstood General Westmoreland’s approval, or he had second thoughts. . . . Why he did not communicate his disagreement to us prior to the conference continues to perplex me.” In any event, while Operation Pegasus did officially end on 15 April, U.S. units would continue to operate in and around Khe Sanh, for the time being, under the operational name of Scotland II.^{4**}

**Like the meeting on 8 March (See Chapters 8 and 14) the participants had different interpretations about General Westmoreland’s demeanor at the April meeting. According to Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson, who headed the MACV Combat Operations Center, when General Westmoreland learned that General Cushman, the III MAF commander, and General Rosson, the Prov Corps commander, planned to evacuate the base, “Westy lowered the boom. He was so mad he wouldn’t stay around and talk with them. Instead he told me what he wanted and left me to push it with Rosson and Cushman.” BGen Chaisson ltr to Mrs. Chaisson, dtd 17Apr68 as quoted in Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet, The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (N.Y., N.Y.: The Free Press, 1993), p. 129. On the other hand, General Rosson wrote: “General Westmoreland certainly did not ‘lower the boom’ on me when he learned of the plan during our telephone conference. Nor did he do so during the commanders conference. While he was incisively firm in expressing himself on that occasion, he did not exhibit anger. Moreover, he remained after the conference for a short time to converse informally with various commanders, key staff officers, Cushman and myself. I frankly do not remember John’s [Chaisson] remaining to ‘push it with Rosson and Cushman.’” According to Rosson, he rather recalled “resuming the conference after General Westmoreland’s departure to forge a new course of action and revise the orders.” Gen William B. Rosson, USA, Comments on draft, dtd 29May95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Rosson Comments, May95.

The "Walking Dead"

When the 3d Marine Division once more prepared to assume control of operations at Khe Sanh with the end of Operation Pegasus, General Tompkins, the 3d Marine Division commander had sent his Assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General Jacob E. Glick, to command the forces there. General Glick several years later remembered that his orders were to "close the base down. . . . I went up with a minimum staff with instructions to just hold on, without mounting operations . . . Then the rules changed" after General Westmoreland reversed the original decision.⁵

Glick's command, not surprisingly, was designated Task Force (TF) Glick and included the 1st Marines; the 26th Marines; the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines; and the 2d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, which was operating east of Khe Sanh. The 1st Marines began relocating to Khe Sanh from Ca Lu, relieving battalions of the 26th Marines, which, in turn, started to redeploy out of the Khe Sanh sector. On 16 April, Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, the 26th Marines commander, still had one artillery and five infantry battalions under his control and was also responsible for Operation Scotland II, which had just begun. Meyers reported directly to General Glick and oversaw the relief of his battalions by those of the 1st Marines. Lieutenant Colonel John J. H. Cahill's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines remained at the base as part of TF Glick and continued offensive operations west of the combat base.⁶

At 0700 on 16 April, Captain Henry D. Banks led two reinforced platoons of Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines on a patrol southwest of the battalion's perimeter on Hill 689 and a small adjoining hill. Banks ordered the company to halt at 1000 and sent two squads to search for signs of the enemy on a nearby ridge that was covered with four-to-six-foot-high elephant grass. The squad came under small arms and mortar fire, then fell back and reported two Marines killed.* Banks deployed the company with the 1st Platoon establishing a base of fire and the 2d Platoon

attacking up the ridge against what he believed to be the enemy's left flank.⁷

First Lieutenant Michael P. Hayden led the 2d Platoon up the north end of the ridge and against the enemy position, but the North Vietnamese, firing from well-concealed bunkers, drove the Marines to the ground. In rapid succession, first Hayden and then his platoon sergeant were killed. The 2d Platoon halted in the deep grass at the fringe of the North Vietnamese bunker complex and returned fire, but with little effect.

Captain Banks ordered the 2d Platoon to fall back so that he could call for supporting arms, but word reached him that dead and wounded Marines still lay within 10 meters of the bunker complex, under the enemy's guns. The intense enemy fire continued and casualties mounted to 10 dead and 20 wounded.* Banks reported to Lieutenant Colonel Cahill that he was engaged with an estimated North Vietnamese squad in heavily fortified positions, then refused Cahill's offer of help. He again tried to evacuate casualties and withdraw, but was unable to do so. Cahill alerted Companies C and D.⁹

At noon, Banks reconsidered and asked for help. Two platoons of Captain Lawrence Himmer's Company C moved out first, with Lieutenant Colonel Cahill accompanying them. On reaching the scene of the action, Cahill found Company A on the north end of the ridge, with heavy casualties and unable to move. He ordered Himmer to attack from the south. Colonel Meyers, monitoring the radio reports from the regimental command post, asked Cahill if he needed help, but like Banks earlier, Cahill refused.^{10**}

*Colonel Meyers noted that there were problems with message transmission. Lieutenant Colonel Cahill at 1320 had informed Colonel Meyers that he was committing his two other companies to the action. Because of the necessity of the various radio relays, Meyers did not receive this message until 1543. Within two minutes of receiving this message, Meyers contacted Cahill to "request his current status and to ask if he needed any additional assistance. Cahill . . . declined the proffered additional support." Colonel Meyers also had more than the predicament of Company A on his mind. He recalled that on 16 April, "we received three direct hits of 122mm rockets which set the ASP [ammunition supply point] three on fire." Meyers observed that, "when you are the regimental commander and one of your main ammo dumps within your perimeter is hit, burning, and blowing up, it became more than a line entry in the command chronology!" Meyers Comments and Copy of Statement of Col Bruce F. Meyers to Board for Correction of Naval and Military Records, n.d. [1968], attached to Meyers Comments, hereafter Meyers Statement, Meyers Comments.

*Colonel Meyers recalled that the action actually began when a Marine fire team about 1030 or 1100 "ran into a reverse slope horse-shoe shaped NVA bunker complex." In this contact one of the members of the team was killed and two others wounded as "they crested the ridge." Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on draft, dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Meyers Comments.

Company C deployed on line and advanced up the ridge against what appeared to be the enemy's right flank. As the Marines approached the bunkers, enemy fire broke out from another hidden fortified position on their left flank. Within moments, Himmer, both platoon commanders, a platoon sergeant, and several squad leaders fell with wounds. The acting company executive officer, First Lieutenant William C. Connelly, assumed command. An artillery fire mission on the bunker complex to the company's left resulted in friendly fire impacting within 50 meters of the Marines, so the artillery forward observer ended the mission.¹¹

At 1500, Companies A and C were both in desperate straits. Casualties were high, including many unit leaders, and the Marines were nearly immobilized in the elephant grass by the intense enemy fire from two mutually supporting bunker complexes and from nearby mortars which steadily pounded the slopes of the ridge. Nearby, Company D was helping Company A to evacuate the wounded who had been able to crawl away. Cahill moved toward the LZ, suffering three wounds along the way, and ordered Captain John W. Cargile's Company D to deploy along Company A's right flank, then attack across the ridge from northwest to southeast.¹²

Heavy casualties had by now rendered Company A ineffective, and Captain Banks was concentrating on attempts to evacuate casualties as Company D began its attack. Cargile's men advanced through the grass, receiving heavy and accurate sniper fire which dropped four Marines with single shots to the head. The deep grass and the profusion of units and individuals on the hill firing weapons left Cargile's men uncertain of the enemy's exact location and dispositions. Although Company D continued to move forward, progress was painfully slow and casualties mounted.¹³

At about 1730, Banks was seriously wounded and Second Lieutenant Francis B. Lovely, Jr., assumed command of Company A. Cahill learned by radio of increasing casualties in Company D and ordered his companies to evacuate their wounded and withdraw, leaving their dead. Having assumed command of the battalion in the field only two weeks before, Cahill was not aware of General Tompkins' standing

orders emphasizing that all KIAs should be evacuated.^{14*}

It was 0300 before the last company closed on the battalion perimeter, and another hour before a casualty count reached Cahill showing 20 killed and 20 missing. The battalion continued taking musters and comparing statements of participants which soon reduced the number of missing to 15.¹⁵

At 0630 on the morning of the 17th, several Marines heard the voice of Corporal Hubert H. Hunnicutt III, calling across the valley from the ridge where the battle had taken place. Two squads moved into the valley and shouted back to him, attempting to pinpoint his location. After hearing two shots near where they thought Hunnicutt was located, the patrol no longer heard his voice.¹⁶

A few hours later, after Cahill had presented Meyers and General Glick his plan to recover the bodies on 19 April, an air observer (AO) reported seeing a live Marine about 50 meters from the enemy bunkers. Volunteers from the battalion boarded two Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters for a rescue attempt. One helicopter held a fire team and the other a body recovery detail. When the first helicopter landed atop the ridge, it crushed an enemy soldier with the tail ramp and the fire team ran out shooting. Four North Vietnamese who popped up from fighting holes fell dead immediately. Others surrounding the landing zone poured fire into the helicopter as the Marines quickly searched for the survivor. Finding only dead bodies which had been decapitated and disemboweled, the fire team ran back on board the badly shot up CH-46, which flew 1,000 meters back to Hill 689, then crash landed with about 20 hits in the engine. An AO watching the rescue attempt reported that the search party had missed the live Marine who could still be seen waving

*Several years later, General Glick declared that "the division policy on recovery of MIAs and KIAs was, to my mind, not clearly defined, because in the previous months that I had been there, there had been a general understanding that the forces should not risk additional deaths and casualties unnecessarily to recover KIAs, but that all reasonable effort should be made to recover MIAs. . . . yes, we always recovered KIAs if we could. But, it definitely was considered not right to go into high-risk areas if it was a known KIA. . . . If the person might still be alive, then it would justify to take some risks with other Marines." The general stated that Colonel Meyers of the 26th Marines "was fairly cautious about ground operations to recover people that were probably KIAs." BGen Jacob E. Glick intvw, 20 Jun and 11 Jul 89, pp. 10-11 (Oral Hist Coll, MCHC).

from a shell hole only meters from where the helicopter had landed.^{17*}

Shortly after the failed rescue attempt, an Army helicopter pilot using the call sign "Blue Max 48" volunteered to make another try. With Army helicopter gunships blasting enemy positions atop the ridge, Blue Max 48 sat down near the bunker complex and a crewman leaped out and carried the wounded Marine on board. The helicopter then delivered him directly to the field hospital. Lieutenant Colonel Cahill logically assumed that the Marine who was rescued was the same Marine, Hunnicutt, who had called across the valley earlier in the day. Only later would he learn that the rescued Marine was not Hunnicutt, but a member of Company C named Private First Class G. Panyaninac.¹⁸

Certain that no live Marines remained on the ridge, Cahill and his staff set to work once more on a plan to recover the remains of those killed in the engagement of the 16th. Attack aircraft bombed the objective through the night of 17 April and the early morning hours of the 18th. But at about 0630, 18 April, Marines on the battalion perimeter once again reported hearing Corporal Hunnicutt calling for help. Lieutenant Colonel Cahill directed that a patrol be dispatched to rescue Hunnicutt and he informed Colonel Meyers of his plans. Meyers approved, but ordered that the patrol not proceed further than 500 meters from the perimeter because the 26th Marines was scheduled to pass control of all forces in the area to the 1st Marines at 0800 and he did not wish to leave in the middle of an engagement. In the meantime, he offered to retain control of the operation until the recovery of

the Marine could be accomplished, but Brigadier General Glick, envisioning that the recovery could take a day or more, ordered that control of the operation pass at 0800, as scheduled. Twenty some years later, General Glick remembered:

I had instructions from the division to go ahead with the relief of the 26th Marines. They had been in Khe Sanh for months on end, and General Tompkins wanted them moved out. The other regiment was on the way; it was all set up to go at a certain time. There was a very questionable situation as to whether sending a patrol out was going to do anything anyway. So the decision was made to go ahead with the relief of the 26th Marines on schedule.^{19**}

In a repeat of the previous day's performance, an Army helicopter pilot agreed to attempt Hunnicutt's rescue. Corporal Hunnicutt tells the story:

About noon I guess, an Army Huey started flying around me, a spotter plane. The spotter plane dropped two red smokes on me and scared me to death. I thought they were going to blow me away. I tried to stand up and wave to them. I threw paper all over the place and waved, and one of the copters came right down on me about three times. I could see the man's face, and then finally he set down and one of the machine gunners came out and helped me into the plane.²⁰

Lieutenant Colonel Cahill met Hunnicutt at the Khe Sanh aid station. To Cahill's astonishment, Hunnicutt claimed that Captain Himmer had still been alive as late as the afternoon of the 17th. Although wounded himself, Hunnicutt had cared for the severely injured Himmer since the 16th, moving him down the ridge toward the battalion perimeter until they became separated when Hunnicutt fell into a gorge. Himmer was never seen alive again. For his courageous

*Colonel Meyers remembered the circumstances of the aborted rescue attempt somewhat differently. According to him, the helicopter landed and the fire team ran out and immediately came under fire. The helicopter also took about 20 hits in the engine and fuel compartments. At that point, the gunners on board the aircraft fired their .50-caliber machine guns to suppress the enemy fire and the "fire team reboarded and the 46 'backed out' from the touch down point and as they did, the tail ramp crushed the NVA soldier . . ." Meyers Comments. Colonel John E. Hansen, who commanded Provisional MAG 39 which controlled Marine helicopter support in Quang Tri Province, wrote that he and Major David L. Althoff, the executive officer of HMM-262, piloted the aircraft that landed with the fire team. Hansen could not see from the cockpit either the fighting or the soldier crushed by the tail ramp: "Our crew chief was in the rear of our helicopter and reporting to us on our radio internal communications system on the progress of the search . . ." Hansen recalled that as soon as the fire team returned they took off: "We were fortunate to be able to get back to Hill 689 with the aircraft still operating. The helicopter was later recovered by a heavy lift copter and returned to Quang Tri." Col John E. Hansen, Comments on draft, dtd 16Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

**According to Colonel Meyers, he was very distressed at the situation. He remembered that General Tompkins denied his request for a delay in the change of operational control between the two Marine regiments. Meyers immediately briefed the incoming 1st Marines commander Colonel Stanley S. Hughes of the situation. Colonel Hughes stated that he would initiate the recovery operation at 0630 despite the fact that he was not to assume operational control until 0800. Meyers stated that as a "control feature" he permitted the patrol to go out 500 meters at which point "they would check in with whichever regimental commander had opcon at the time they reached this checkpoint." According to Meyers, the rescue took place before the patrol ever reached the 500 meter checkpoint, so the entire subject became moot. Meyers Comments. In an earlier statement, Meyers stated that before reaching the 500 meter checkpoint, the patrol saw Hunnicutt who warned them not to approach since he believed the NVA were using him as a decoy. The patrol called in gunships which provided cover while one of the aircraft rescued him. By this time, Colonel Meyers had been relieved of responsibility for the operation and was on his way to the Quang Tri base. Meyers Statement, Meyers Comments.

attempt to save his commanding officer's life, Corporal Hunnicutt was awarded the Navy Cross.²¹

In an operation conducted on 22 April, the 1st Marines recovered all but three of the bodies.* The final casualty count totalled 38 Marines and 3 Navy corpsmen killed in action and 32 Marines wounded, almost half of them seriously. But the story did not end there. General Tompkins appointed Colonel Walter H. Cuenin to investigate the operation and its aftermath. In reviewing the report of this investigation, General Tompkins noted "inexcusable" failures in reporting to division headquarters, as well as actions which "did not reflect the urgency of the occasion." He took administrative action to correct the problems, and relieved Lieutenant Colonel Cahill of command.^{22**}

This tragic and costly incident served as a sour note on which to end the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines' gallant part in the defense of the Khe Sanh Combat Base. The aftermath of the engagement, moreover, points up the extraordinary depth of responsibility faced by a military commander. Lieutenant Colonel Cahill, though thrice wounded while doing his utmost in a difficult and confused situation, nonetheless, bore the burden for the mistakes and failures laid at the doorstep of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines.^{***}

*Bert Mullins, who served as a radioman with the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, commented: "This was a truly botched mess!" He remembered that Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines "was scheduled to recover the bodies, but that was canceled when the air officer transmitted the plan in the clear to the 26th Marines." Since the 26th Marines departed the area on 18 April, this must have occurred probably on 17 April. After that period "Bravo went open to 1st Marines and three of their companies recovered the bodies." Bert Mullins, Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

**General Tompkins also stated that Colonel Meyers "failed to display the initiative and force the situation called for." Colonel Meyers in his rebuttal defended his conduct stating that he offered assistance to the battalion commander and was told it was not needed. He did not learn about the actual seriousness of the situation until the early hours of 17 April. When he arrived at the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines CP later in the morning and discovered there were 20 Marines still missing, he immediately made plans for a rescue operation. Meyers Statement, Meyers Comments.

***Lieutenant Colonel Cahill was later promoted to Colonel and continued to serve until his retirement in 1978. Colonel Frederic S. Knight, who also served as a battalion commander in 1968, wrote that "but for the grace of God, went I and every battalion commander in the 3d Marine Division." He recognized that Major General Tompkins' policy on recovering the bodies of Marine dead was part of the deep tradition of the Marine Corps of "taking care of each other, dead or alive . . ." Nevertheless, this policy of bringing back all the KIAs "had the effect of creating Tar Babies for the commanders; they wanted to disengage to reduce casualties and seek a more advantageous tactical situation, but under that stricture they could not." He would advocate a policy of weighing "our traditions . . . against the utilitarian principle of the greatest good for the greatest number and actions taken accordingly." Col Frederic S. Knight, Comments on draft, dtd 10Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

Operation Scotland II

By this time, Operation Scotland II was in full swing. General Glick recalled that his new orders directed him now "to continue operations in . . . [the Khe Sanh] area, at least in a limited scope," rather than dismantle the base.²³ The units of the 1st Marines commanded by Colonel Stanley S. Hughes had begun to take the places of battalions of the 26th Marines. For example, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines left LZ Stud to the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines and shifted west to the hills near Khe Sanh: 558, 950, 861, and 881 South. The 2d Battalion, 1st Marines and the regimental command post set up in the combat base and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines remained along Route 9, providing security. The operation continued to grow as elements of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines arrived at Hill 689.²⁴

For the rest of April, the battalions patrolled the rugged country of the Huong Hoa District, occasionally making contact with the enemy, but for the most part finding only abandoned North Vietnamese bunkers and equipment and the remains of Communist soldiers left behind. Still, the NVA threatened to cut the road. On 19 April, a convoy of five trucks belonging to Battery B, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines ran into an enemy ambush halfway between Khe Sanh and Ca Lu. In the ensuing firefight, three Marines died and seven others suffered wounds. Only one truck continued on to Ca Lu, as the others were either damaged, pressed into service by the infantry to evacuate casualties, or left without drivers as a result of the casualties sustained in the ambush. Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. V. Hughes, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, remembered that the ambush site "was up a draw leading into the river . . . The NVA dug bunkers into the root masses of trees lining the top of the draw . . . The firing ports . . . were almost impossible to see unless you observed a muzzle flash."²⁵ The 1st Marines Commander, Colonel Stanley Hughes, responded by restricting vehicle traffic on Route 9 "to only those vehicles performing tactical missions." To help control the road, he formed a "Provisional Mechanized Company" by combining elements of the 3d Tank Battalion: the Antitank Company (—); the 3d Platoon, Company B; and the 3d Platoon, Company G.²⁶

Near the end of April, Brigadier General Carl W. Hoffman relieved General Glick. For a short time the task force was known as "TF Hoffman," but soon became known as "TF H." In the habit of pronouncing all single letters by the phonetic equivalent used on the

radio, the Marines referred to the new command as "Task Force Hotel." General Hoffman continued to maintain his CP at Khe Sanh and directed the same type of limited mobile operations as General Glick. He also instituted what he called "key hole missions" consisting of four-man deep reconnaissance patrols. Using a "touch and go" insertion system, four or five helicopters with only one carrying the team would "come in at various locations, set down, and be gone almost immediately." The same procedures would be used to extract the teams. According to Hoffman these reconnaissance probes brought back invaluable intelligence about the location of enemy forces in the sector.²⁷

The units conducting Operation Scotland II continued to draw their supplies from the logistic support unit at Khe Sanh, as had the units in Operation Pegasus, in an effort to reduce the stocks which had accumulated there during the siege. On 5 May, Khe Sanh reported a five-day level of supplies and the logistic support unit closed down. TF Hotel transferred the remaining stocks to Ca Lu by convoy and helicopter. From that time on, units in northwestern Quang Tri Province drew their supplies from Ca Lu.²⁸

The requirement to resupply from LZ Stud once again increased the level of traffic along Route 9, prompting the NVA to respond with another ambush on 14 May. A convoy enroute to the combat base from Ca Lu encountered an enemy force along Route 9 just over one kilometer from the intersection where the coffee plantation road led north into Khe Sanh. Company G, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, which was providing security for the convoy, deployed and engaged the enemy.

Nearby, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines was assembling for a helicopter lift to Hill 1015. When the ambush took place, the battalion canceled the move to Hill 1015 and went to the rescue of the convoy. The NVA fled in haste, but the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines caught up with them 1,500 meters south of the ambush site and attacked them from two sides. The North Vietnamese, in company strength, withdrew into a bunker complex, pursued by the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. The ensuing fight lasted into the following day, leaving 74 enemy dead. The Marines lost 7 killed in action and 36 wounded.²⁹

The ambush of 14 May signalled the onset of increased enemy activity in the area. While patrolling

Marine M48 tanks patrol Route 9 between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh, passing a Marine small encampment along the way. The 3d Tank Battalion formed a "Provisional Mechanized Company" to monitor road traffic in this sector.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191580



Route 9, halfway between Khe Sanh and Lang Vei on 17 May, Company H, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines spotted five enemy soldiers and gave chase. The five led the company into an ambush where an NVA company lay in bunkers firing from close range and shouting, "Die Marine!" Company H withdrew slightly, called in artillery and air strikes, then assaulted and overran the bunkers. The Marines lost 6 dead and 8 wounded in the ambush, and counted 52 dead North Vietnamese.³⁰

From 17 to 19 May, two kilometers north of Company H's engagement on Route 9, elements of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines patrolled the ridge between Hill 552 and Hill 689. A dominant terrain feature overlooking the combat base, the ridge had been occupied or patrolled by U.S. forces regularly since the early part of Operation Pegasus. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines encountered, nonetheless, several NVA units there, killing a total of 84 enemy and capturing 5 others in a three-day period.³¹

An even bigger fight was yet to come. During the night of 18–19 May, the enemy moved a battalion to within two kilometers of the combat base. At about 0400, an enemy platoon attacked Company H, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines southeast of Khe Sanh along Route 9. Assaulting from all sides with heavy small arms fire, grenades, satchel charges, and RPGs, the North Vietnamese killed three Marines and wounded three others before retiring. They left behind eight dead. Almost simultaneously, an enemy company, using 60mm mortar support, probed Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines on Hill 552. After a short fight, the Marines heard the North Vietnamese digging in. Exchanges of fire continued through the night. In the morning, the Marines assaulted the nearby enemy, driving them from their positions with 42 dead and 4 taken prisoner. Four Marines suffered wounds.³²

At 0710, 19 May, while Company I was still fighting near Hill 552, a platoon of Company F, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines and two tanks headed south from Khe Sanh along the coffee plantation road, sweeping ahead of a convoy bound for Ca Lu. About 300 meters from the road's intersection with Route 9, the Marines triggered an NVA ambush at a range of 25 meters. An enemy company, dug in, forced the Marines to take cover under a storm of automatic weapons fire, RPGs, and grenades. The Marines attempted an assault, but the enemy repulsed them, adding a heavy barrage of mortars to the Marines' discomfort. The rest of Company F, waiting at the combat base with the convoy, immediately reinforced the endangered platoon, then assaulted with the entire company. The Communists

not only threw back the Marines a second time, but even left their own positions to counterattack. This time, it was Company F's turn to hold fast, and the Marines repulsed the enemy assault. Lieutenant Colonel Billy R. Duncan, the battalion commander, recalled that by this time he had arrived at the scene with a small command group. The company commander, however, had been mortally wounded and "contact during the next hour was mixed with serious probes by both sides."³³

Company G advanced south along the road to join the fight, killing three North Vietnamese who had sneaked to the rear of Company F. After the two companies linked up, Lieutenant Colonel Duncan asked for napalm air strikes. According to Duncan, the enemy was anywhere between 35 to 50 yards distant from the Marine positions and too close for artillery support, therefore the call for napalm. While some of the Marines accidentally also were covered by napalm jelly, the fixed-wing strikes broke the enemy "will to stay and fight."³⁴ As the enemy retreated, Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines struck the NVA from the flank. With the ambush site cleared, the rest of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines went to the field and searched the area south-southwest of the combat base trying to regain contact until 22 May, but met only minor resistance. During the operation, 8 Marines died, including the commanders of Companies F and G, and 34 fell wounded. The battalion captured 3 North Vietnamese and reported killing 113, of whom 69 were found in the ambush site.³⁵

The enemy troops killed and captured by the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines were described as "clean, well dressed, and neatly groomed."³⁶ According to Lieutenant Colonel Duncan, one of the prisoners stated the enemy mission was to "stop all movement along Route 9."³⁷ This did not match the depiction of the enemy forces in the Khe Sanh area as defeated and on the run. Coupled with the extraordinary surge in North Vietnamese offensive operations, such reports prompted the 1st Marines to warn of "a high probability of a division-size attack on the Khe Sanh Combat Base or one of the outlying units."³⁸ According to a rallier, Private (who claimed to be a former Warrant Officer) Vo Manh Hung, the NVA *308th Division* had arrived in northwestern Quang Tri Province with its *88th* and *102d Regiments*. The *308th Division* was one of the five so-called "Steel Divisions" of the North Vietnamese Army which could only be committed by the Joint Military Staff. Claiming that the *308th* had been committed because "the war is going to end," Hung told intelli-

gence officers that the *304th*, *308th*, *325th*, and another unidentified division would attack Khe Sanh. The North Vietnamese, he said, would cut Route 9, bring antiaircraft guns in from Laos and overrun the combat base "as Dien Bien Phu was." Intelligence officers placed little confidence in Hung's information, rating it "F-6" (the lowest rating for reliability and likelihood of being true). Still, III MAF sent Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Lamontagne's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines to reinforce the 1st Marines for the defense of Khe Sanh against another possible major NVA effort.³⁹

For the rest of May, TF Hotel continued the original plan for Operation Scotland II, conducting offensive operations to maintain the initiative around Khe Sanh. Enemy contact was frequent and sometimes heavy, with the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines fighting a running battle which lasted for over a week.

On 24 May, Company G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines engaged an NVA company on a hill overlooking Route 9 four kilometers southeast of the combat base, the same position to which enemy ambushers had retreated after attacking the convoy 10 days before. The enemy occupied bunkers which withstood a preparation of artillery fire and air strikes. Indeed, when the fires lifted, the enemy left their bunkers and attempted to envelop the Marines. Observing a larger enemy force to the rear of the closest North Vietnamese positions, Company G fell back and called for additional air, artillery, and mortar support. At 1800, the Marines attacked once more, still under extremely heavy fire. With helicopter gunships, artillery, and mortars supporting their advance, Company G swept up the hill, reaching the high ground at 2015 that night. The enemy broke contact, leaving behind the bodies of 58 dead. In the day's fighting, Company G suffered 15 dead and 21 wounded. The following morning, an air observer reported a "ragged enemy withdrawal to the south and southeast."⁴⁰

The 2d Battalion, 3d Marines remained near the site of the 24 May engagement. Three companies spaced about 700 meters apart stretched to the northwest in a line starting from Company F, on a small finger overlooking Route 9 about a kilometer west of the NVA bunker complex. Company E was at the intersection of Route 9 and the coffee plantation road, and Company G was on a finger between the other two companies.

At 0245, 28 May, Company F Marines, using a Starlight Scope, observed enemy movement outside their perimeter, and the acting company commander, First Lieutenant James L. Jones, called for an artillery mission. Three North Vietnamese with satchel charges

suddenly leapt into one of the company's listening posts north of the perimeter and blew themselves to bits, also killing three of the four Marines at the post. Immediately, an NVA battalion charged up the slope from the north on a wide front using a very heavy volume of small arms fire and more than 40 RPG rounds. With the enemy already in the perimeter, Lieutenant Jones gave the order to employ the final protective fires.*

Noticing that the North Vietnamese were using pencil flares, apparently as signals, Lieutenant Jones fired a red pencil flare of his own, at which the NVA precipitously broke contact.** The respite was brief, however. After a momentary lapse, the assault continued with renewed fury as the enemy battalion poured machine gun and rocket fire into Company F's lines. After several minutes of fierce fighting, the enemy drove the 1st Platoon from its holes and overran the company's 60mm mortar position. Under intense fire, the 2d and 3d Platoons restored the defensive perimeter while the 1st Platoon regrouped to establish a new position on a knoll to the east of the company perimeter.⁴¹

At 0330, after the enemy gained a foothold in the Marine perimeter, their attack slackened momentarily, but as if to demonstrate coordination, 40 rounds of 130mm artillery fire from enemy guns fell on Company G. A Douglas AC-47 "Spooky" gunship, accompanied by a flareship, reported on station at 0415 to light the battlefield and fire in support of the Marines. The NVA took the planes under heavy fire with .50-caliber machine guns and resumed their attack on Company F, this time from all sides.⁴²

For two hours, the battle raged, literally within Company F's original perimeter. Again and again, the NVA regrouped and stormed the Marines, attempting to overwhelm their defenses with massive ground assaults as RPG gunners on dominant high ground to the southeast smothered Company F under an estimated 500 rounds of rocket fire. With the flareship lighting the scene, "Spooky"

*The "FPF" is a defensive tactic used to stop imminent penetration of a unit's defensive lines. It employs supporting arms firing in pre-planned locations and the unit's own riflemen and machine gunners firing along predetermined lines at the maximum rate to create what is known as "interlocking bands of grazing fire." The significance of firing the FPF lies in the fact that it is an act of near desperation, a final resort which, if unsuccessful, will give way to hand-to-hand combat within the fighting holes of the defending unit.

** Harold R. Blunk, who in 1968 was a PFC and a forward observer with Company F, commented that now-Lieutenant General James L. Jones told him in June 1996 that he fired the red flare rather than the green one because "'Green for go—Red for stop. It was that simple.'" Harold R. Blunk, Comments on draft, dtd 27Jun96 (Vietnam Comment File).

slammed machine gun fire into the enemy at the rate of 18,000 rounds per minute and Battery B, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines joined the infantry battalion's own mortar platoon in pounding the North Vietnamese.⁴³

At 0700, air observers reported that "the entire battle area was littered with NVA dead."⁴⁴ The observers directed attack aircraft against enemy reinforcements moving in from the west. A napalm strike killed 30 North Vietnamese and ended the enemy effort but, unfortunately, also resulted in napalm impacting less than 20 meters from Company F. Fanned by the wind, the fire spread, soon forcing Company F from their positions after an all-out attack by an enemy battalion had failed. When the flames died down, the Marines quickly reclaimed their positions and fired on the withdrawing enemy.⁴⁵

Only 20 minutes later, at 1150, Company E arrived to help, first sweeping the ridge to the west of Company F. After securing this area, Company E turned on the North Vietnamese RPG gunners firing from the high ground near Company F's 1st Platoon. Within two hours of their attack, Company E put the enemy to flight. Following an emergency resupply and the evacuation of casualties from both companies, Company E moved out in pursuit. The battle cost the 2d Battalion 13 dead and 44 wounded. A search of the area revealed 230 dead North Vietnamese.⁴⁶

The shelling which fell upon Company G during the battle was a reminder that the enemy still maintained artillery positions within range of Khe Sanh. All through the siege, these guns had kept firing, despite many efforts to silence them. Even afterwards, the North Vietnamese continued to pound Marine positions. General Glick, the former Task Force commander, remembered that through the period he was there: "Khe Sanh was receiving heavy shelling on a daily basis . . ." and that "all commander, service, and living facilities [at Khe Sanh] were in underground bunkers or deep trenches."⁴⁷ On 30 May, TF Hotel provided security for a convoy of four 175mm self-propelled guns and four 8-inch self-propelled howitzers from Camp Carroll to Khe Sanh. These heavy artillery weapons took up firing positions from which they could reach the Co Roc cliffs, where the enemy guns were believed to be, and fired for 48 hours in a limited duration artillery raid dubbed Operation Drumfire II. Like the previous attempts at counterfire, which used

even B-52s against Co Roc, Operation Drumfire II had no noticeable effect.^{48*}

The enemy's infantry showed that they could match the annoying persistence of their gunners. At 0400, 31 May, the North Vietnamese attacked Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines from all sides on the very ridge where the battle had taken place three days before. The enemy again coordinated their attack with 130mm artillery fire, as well as 82mm mortar fire. The ground attack, however, in no way matched the fury of the previous engagement and the NVA disengaged in the morning.⁴⁹

Only one kilometer to the north, Company B, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, moving toward Company E's engagement at 0850, ran into a North Vietnamese platoon entrenched just off Route 9. Company G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and Company E, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines fell in on the right of Company B. Attacking with all three companies abreast, supported by tanks, the Marines closed with the North Vietnamese and overran their trenches, finishing the fight hand-to-hand. They killed 42 North Vietnamese and lost 8 dead and 31 wounded. A single prisoner reported his unit to be the *102d Regiment* of the *308th Division*. Total Marine casualties for the morning's fighting were 32 dead and 99 wounded. A search revealed 136 enemy dead.⁵⁰

Operation Robin

As May ended, III MAF intelligence analysts confirmed reports that the North Vietnamese had infiltrated the *88th* and *102d Regiments* of their *308th Division* into northwestern Quang Tri Province. Further, aerial photography revealed a new enemy road under construction in the jungle south of Khe Sanh. The road entered South Vietnam from Laos and ran parallel to Route 9, but about 15 kilometers further south. When discovered, the road extended approximately 30 kilometers into South Vietnam along a path that seemed to

*Colonel Robert C. V. Hughes, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, observed that "Operation Drumfire II like most preplanned, not observed, fire missions merely caused the NVA to pull back into their tunnels and wait it out. Our 'Rules of Engagement' forbid flying aerial observers over Co Roc who could have adjusted fire missions while the enemy was actively shelling the base." Col Robert C. V. Hughes, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan95?] (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel William H. Dabney's explanation for the limited effect of Drumfire II on Co Roc was very simple: "That's not where the guns were!" Col William H. Dabney, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec 94] (Vietnam Comment File). For further information about the debate on the location of the enemy guns near Khe Sanh see the discussion in Chapter 14. See Chapter 26 for a further account of Drumfire II.

lead directly toward Hue City. A III MAF intelligence report on the road said, "agent reports have mentioned the possibility of enemy tank battalions in eastern Laos awaiting the completion of this road."⁵¹

TF Hotel planned a two-part operation in accordance with the 3d Marine Division's fresh emphasis upon mobility and firebases, under its new commander, Major General Raymond G. Davis, to counter the enemy buildup in the area.* The first phase, Operation Robin North, called for Colonel Hughes' 1st Marines to thrust south from the combat base into the mountains, engaging the newly introduced enemy forces near Route 9. In the second phase, Operation Robin South, Colonel Edward J. Miller's 4th Marines would conduct airmobile operations even further south to locate and destroy the enemy road.⁵²

Preparations for Operation Robin began at the end of May. Units garrisoning the hill positions around Khe Sanh shifted to make battalions available for the attack. Marine Aircraft Groups 36 and 39 delivered a five-day supply of ammunition to the units left around Khe Sanh so that helicopter assets could concentrate on supporting the extensive airmobile requirements of the operation. For the five days prior to D-Day, TF Hotel coordinated preparation fires which included 219 sorties of attack aircraft and 30 B-52 sorties delivering thousands of tons of bombs to blast landing zones in the jungle and to destroy enemy weapons and troop concentrations. Nine artillery batteries representing every caliber of artillery weapon in the Marine Corps fired over 10,000 rounds into the area of operations.⁵³

D-Day, 2 June, began with the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines occupying blocking positions along Route 9 immediately south of the combat base. At midday, Lieutenant Colonel Archie Van Winkle's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines conducted a helicopterborne assault into LZ Robin, a newly prepared landing zone situated in the steep hills 10 kilometers southeast of Khe Sanh. After landing, the battalion attacked north, hoping to drive the enemy into the blocking positions along Route 9. The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines flew from Ca Lu to LZ Robin and set up a defensive perimeter for the night.⁵⁴

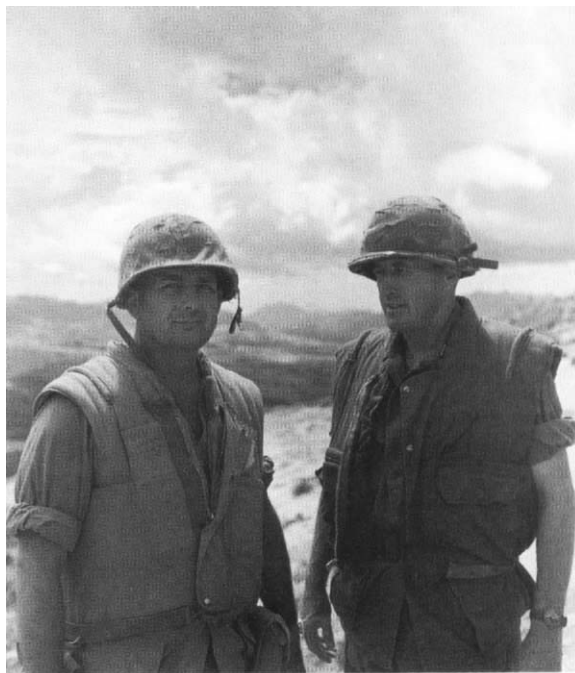
On 3 June, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines continued its attack to the north and TF Hotel fed the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines into the operation at LZ Robin. Relieved of the responsibility for defending LZ Robin, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines boarded helicopters once



12th Mar ComdC, Jan69

Top, from the air, Landing Zone Robin, located in the steep hills, is about 10 kilometers southeast of Khe Sanh. Below, LtCol Archie Van Winkle, left, with the 3d MarDiv commander, MajGen Raymond G. Davis. LtCol Van Winkle's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines opened Operation Robin with the helicopter assault onto LZ Robin in line with Gen Davis' tactical emphasis upon mobility and fire support bases.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191666



*See both Chapters 15 and 18 for discussion of the tactical concepts introduced by General Davis.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191807
Marines of Company A, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines barely can be seen as they climb up a hill through five-foot-high elephant grass near Landing Zone Robin.

again and assaulted LZ Loon, four kilometers to the west. The enemy, quiet on D-Day, greeted the Marines at LZ Loon with light small-arms, mortar, and artillery fire, delaying the helicopter lift but not seriously hampering the landings.⁵⁵

North Vietnamese interest in LZ Loon became apparent the following morning, only hours after the Marines arrived. At 0600, a company of the NVA 88th Regiment probed Company F, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. After a short engagement, the enemy withdrew at dawn, leaving 34 dead. Company F lost 2 killed and 24 wounded.⁵⁶

With both of the new landing zones secured by the 1st Marines, TF Hotel began preparing them to serve as firebases to support the 4th Marines during the second phase of the operation. The headquarters of the 4th Marines and the 1st Battalion, 12th Marines landed at LZ Robin and prepared to assume control as engineers used equipment lifted in by helicopters to construct artillery emplacements, bunkers, trenches, and barbed

wire entanglements.⁵⁷

Companies C and D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines flew into LZ Loon, freeing the 2d Battalion to join the attack north toward the blocking positions. In keeping with the airmobile character of the operation, the 2d Battalion advanced by conducting still another helicopterborne assault into LZ Crow, two kilometers northeast of LZ Loon and near the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.⁵⁸

The attack northward met its first significant resistance on 5 June, when Company C, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines engaged an enemy unit four kilometers south of Route 9. The enemy troops fought from bunkers and from trees. Company C attacked the position, supported by artillery and the battalion's 106mm recoilless rifles. In a fight which lasted into the following afternoon, the Marines overran and destroyed a North Vietnamese bunker complex which documents identified as belonging to the 304th Division, a veteran of the earlier fighting during the siege of Khe Sanh.⁵⁹

During the evening of 5 June, the 4th Marines assumed control of its own 1st Battalion, disposed between LZ Loon and LZ Robin, in preparation for the beginning of Operation Robin South the next morning. Before the Marines could strike, however, the North Vietnamese hit first. At 0600, an enemy battalion assaulted LZ Loon, supported by artillery and mortar fire.⁶⁰ Companies C and D fought back, calling for their own artillery and mortars, as well as attack aircraft and helicopter gunships. After a two-hour battle, the enemy withdrew slightly, leaving 154 dead, but kept up a galling fire with their small arms, and frequent shelling from nearby 82mm mortars and the ever-present 130mm guns. By midday, the continued shelling had rendered LZ Loon untenable.⁶¹ Helicopters lifted Company C back to LZ Robin at 1400, followed a few hours later by Company D. The last helicopter out, a CH-46, took heavy fire from a North Vietnamese .50-caliber machine gun and crashed in flames, bringing the total U.S. casualty count for the defense of the LZ to 24 dead and 37 wounded.⁶²

Despite the attack on LZ Loon, on 6 June, as scheduled, the 4th Marines launched Operation Robin South. Helicopters lifted the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines into a landing zone southeast of LZ Robin, near the eastern extension of the North Vietnamese jungle road. The battalion located the road and found it to be quite well-developed, up to 18 feet wide in places, with stone bridges, culverts, and a surface graded smooth by heavy engineering equipment. The North Vietnamese had concealed the road by bending trees over it and

tying them together to form a living archway of vegetation beneath which troops and vehicles could pass unseen from the air. Along the road, the Marines found fighting holes, living bunkers, hospitals, kitchens, and a wealth of equipment, especially tools. There were picks, shovels, wrecking bars, axes, and explosives. Captain Gary E. Todd, who commanded Company I, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines and a former division intelligence officer, observed that the road "was a virtual clone of the Ho Chi Minh Trail." According to Todd, it was "more than a road, it qualified as a type of logistics infrastructure."⁶³ Prisoners and captured documents showed that the construction of the road was the mission of the NVA *83d Engineer Battalion*. One prisoner said that the construction schedule called for the road to reach Hue by 30 July, a formidable task which would have required pushing the road through the steep jungle terrain at a rate of over one mile—as the crow flies—per day.⁶⁴

For several days, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines advanced along the road to the west, blasting apart bridges and culverts (sometimes with captured North Vietnamese explosives), cratering the road surface, and destroying the enemy facilities found along the way. Company A, 3d Engineer Battalion provided much of the technical expertise for the demolition project. The North Vietnamese avoided contact.⁶⁵

As battalions returned to Khe Sanh from participating in Operation Robin North, they freed other units to join the 4th Marines in Operation Robin South. On 11 June, helicopters landed the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines near Lang Hole, a Montagnard village south of LZ Loon said by prisoners to be the site of a major enemy supply cache. The battalion searched the area for almost a week with only light contact.⁶⁶

The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines joined its parent regiment in Operation Robin South on the morning of 14 June by conducting a helicopterborne assault onto the NVA road near the border with Laos. They advanced east along the road, toward the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, which was still moving down the road from the other end. The 2d Battalion found the western portion of the road as well developed as the rest. In one area they found a complex of over 500 bunkers and storage areas containing 400 pounds of ammonium nitrate (a crude explosive), hand tools, a welding machine, a one-and-one-half-ton truck and a complete machine shop mounted on a Russian three-ton truck. Unwilling to leave the latter prize behind, ingenious young Marine tinkers dismantled the

entire truck and machine shop, then transferred the pieces to Khe Sanh by helicopter where they reassembled it for the drive along Route 9 to the 3d Marine Division headquarters at Dong Ha.⁶⁷

One hour before dawn on 15 June, a battalion or more of the North Vietnamese *88th Regiment* struck the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines south of Lang Hole. Pressing their attack behind heavy RPG fire, the enemy infantry penetrated Company M's lines and occupied several fighting holes, setting up a machine gun in what had been the company command post. As the battle entered its third hour, the Marines counterattacked, ejecting the North Vietnamese from the perimeter. Helicopter gunships harried the enemy attack formations, helping to reduce their enthusiasm to continue the assault. Just before 0900, the North Vietnamese fired a "green star cluster"* and the attack ended. The Marines swept the area, occasionally engaging North Vietnamese troops who feigned death, then "popped up" to fire their weapons. The final tally was 219 enemy killed along with 11 prisoners, 82 weapons, and 20 radios captured. The Marines lost 16 killed and 58 wounded.⁶⁸

Despite the seemingly staggering casualties the North Vietnamese suffered on 15 June, the battle near Lang Hole appeared only to whet their appetites for fighting. The very next morning at 0215, they struck LZ Torch, a new fire support base near the jungle road which was defended by the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines since its withdrawal from LZ Loon. An enemy company fell upon the perimeter from the south and west, using mortar fire, RPGs, machine guns, and satchel charges to pave the way. Concentrating their assault on a small part of the perimeter, the enemy penetrated Company I's lines and advanced on the guns of Battery C, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines. Under the light of flares, the Marine gunners leveled the tubes of their howitzers and slammed round after round of "Beehive" ammunition** into the attacking North Vietnamese. Although the enemy reached one of Battery C's gun emplacements, the "Beehive" proved too much for them. Leaving 28 dead, they fell back at 0400. Fourteen Marines died in the assault.⁶⁹

The North Vietnamese continued their program

* A pyrotechnic signaling device.

** An artillery antipersonnel round which explodes sending thousands of tiny darts, called flechettes, toward the enemy.

of predawn attacks on 18 June, when NVA sappers crawled to within 30 feet of Company K, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines near the jungle road. Preceding their assault with a mortar preparation, the enemy sprang from their nearby positions against Company K, quickly penetrating the lines. The Marines held their ground and fought back, using artillery and air support to help repulse the attacking North Vietnamese battalion. After four hours of fighting, the Marines drove back the Communist troops. Three Douglas A-4E Skyhawks of Marine Attack Squadron 311 pounded the retreating enemy, killing many. Sporadic fighting continued through the day; the Marines engaged enemy snipers and automatic weapons emplacements left behind to cover the withdrawal. When the last resistance ended, 131 North Vietnamese lay dead in and around Company K's position. Marine casualties numbered 11 killed and 30 wounded.⁷⁰

On the day after Company K's battle along the jungle road, Operation Robin South ended and the 4th Marines returned to Khe Sanh having accomplished its mission. The Marines cratered the road in 28 places, destroyed 2 bridges and 4 culverts, and created a rock slide in one place. In addition, they reported killing 635 enemy and captured 48 NVA, an extraordinary prisoner count. Large quantities of enemy facilities were destroyed and supplies captured in the area of operations, dealing the North Vietnamese a hard blow.⁷¹

Operations Robin North and Robin South were the first multi-regiment Marine Corps operations "supported entirely by helicopter."⁷² Marine commanders were highly enthusiastic, touting the "mobile offensive concept."⁷³ One unit's official account recorded that the operations:

... confirmed that fire base techniques are well within the operational scope of the Marine Corps, both conceptually and doctrinally. . . . Experience will improve our ability to manage the fire base concept. "Robin South" gave us a running start.⁷⁴

Razing Khe Sanh: Operation Charlie

General Westmoreland departed Vietnam on 11 June, in the middle of Operation Robin South, and was relieved by General Creighton Abrams, his former deputy, as Commander USMACV. Just over a week later, on 19 June, TF Hotel began executing the 3d Marine Division plan for the evacuation

and destruction of Khe Sanh Combat Base: Operation Charlie.⁷⁵

The units returning from Operation Robin South assumed new positions to screen and support the evacuation. Along Route 9, battalions of the 4th Marines occupied key terrain from which they could control the road and protect the many convoys between Khe Sanh and Ca Lu required to move the supplies and equipment out of the combat base. The 1st Marines defended Khe Sanh and the surrounding hill positions. The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines reported to the 1st Marines at the combat base to serve as a work force to assist Company A, 1st Engineer Battalion in the physical dismantling and destruction of the facilities at Khe Sanh.⁷⁶

The plan for Operation Charlie called for the Marines to withdraw all salvageable supplies and equipment and to destroy all fortifications and anything of possible use which they could not move. They went about the task thoroughly. Convoys rolled from Khe Sanh to Ca Lu daily, heavily laden with stockpiled supplies, salvaged fortification materials, and previously stranded damaged equipment. Detachments from the 3d and 11th Engineer Battalions and the 3d Shore Party Battalion arrived with bulldozers and mechanics to help with the work. Even burned out vehicle hulks and damaged equipment were cut apart into smaller pieces, moved to secure areas, and buried to prevent their use in enemy propaganda. The same Navy Seabee unit which had toiled to repair and upgrade the airstrip months before now returned to

General Rosson observed that he was involved "directly and personally" with the decision to deactivate Khe Sanh." He remembered that after the "decision [to deactivate] had been made early in June. I discussed with General Davis the methodology and timing of the deactivation." Gen William B. Rosson, Comments on draft, dtd 27Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File). General Hoffman remarked that he received a decision from higher headquarters sometime in June "that we would abandon Khe Sanh combat base in favor of moving to a new combat base" initially called Stud. While Hoffman believed his units "were successfully conducting reconnaissance-in-force operations in any direction we wanted to," he recognized the desirability of consolidating mobile operations and shortening supply lines. MajGen Carl W. Hoffman, Comments on draft, dtd 15Dec94 and MajGen Carl W. Hoffman intvw, 14Nov68, pp. 151-53 (Oral HistColl, MCHC), hereafter Hoffman Comments and intvw. According to Army historian George L. MacGarrigle: "Westy never wanted to abandon Khe Sanh; Abrams certainly did. When Westy returned to Washington for his confirmation hearing [for his appointment as Army Chief of Staff], Abe was the "acting ComUSMACV." The agreement was, the base would not be abandoned on Westmoreland's 'watch' and I'm almost certain that MACV provided Westy with his 'cover' statement." George L. MacGarrigle, Comments on draft, dtd 5Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Both photos are from the Abel Collection

Top, Marines of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines at Khe Sanh salute their fallen comrades during a memorial service for those who gave their lives to defend the base. Below, a Marine from the battalion takes a long look at the Khe Sanh airstrip before preparing to depart



rip up the steel matting runway. Working parties destroyed over 800 bunkers and 3 miles of concertina wire, throwing the wire into the trenches and filling them with soil. They slit open the countless sandbags and emptied them, wrecked standing structures, and burned what remained to the ground. As a final step to discourage the North Vietnamese from attempting to dig through the ruins for useful material, the Marines sprinkled the area with CS powder, an irritant chemical agent.^{77*}

The enemy could not, and did not, misinterpret the activity at the combat base. Communist political officers proclaimed the U.S. withdrawal from Khe Sanh as a victory for the North Vietnamese Army. III MAF warned units at Khe Sanh that, as the withdrawal proceeded, the enemy might conduct limited offensive operations to lend credibility to their claims.^{78**}

The prophecy came true on 1 July. Three kilometers southeast of the combat base near the old French fort, the NVA began a series of light probes against Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines at 0325. The probes, accompanied by mortar fire, continued for four hours. At 0725, a NVA unit of at least company-size launched a full-scale assault on the Marine perimeter to the accompaniment of mortar fire and 130mm guns. Alerted by the probes, Company I quickly blunted the enemy attack and the North Vietnamese broke contact. Later that morning, the Marines sighted the enemy unit nearby and engaged it once more, calling in helicopter gunships and attack aircraft. The fighting con-

tinued until late afternoon, with the Marines reporting over 200 dead North Vietnamese, half of them within 100 meters of Company I's lines. Two Marines died in the engagement.⁷⁹

For the next several days, the enemy continued to step up the pressure. Occasional heavy incoming artillery and mortar fire fell on the hill positions, and small groups of North Vietnamese probed Marine perimeters attempting to cut through barbed wire barriers. There were no further attacks, however, on the scale of that of 1 July.⁸⁰

At 2000 on 5 July, the Khe Sanh Combat Base, now just a smoldering scar on the land, officially closed.⁸¹ On the following day, the 1st Marines sent their remaining rolling stock to Ca Lu by convoy. As the last trucks passed over Route 9, engineers removed and recovered the tactical bridging equipment which they had installed during Operation Pegasus. Just before midnight on 6 July, Operation Charlie ended.⁸²

The 1st Marines remained near Khe Sanh for another week, attempting to recover the remains of the Marines who died in the fighting near Hill 689. After days of seesaw battles which left 11 Marines and 89 North Vietnamese dead, the 1st Battalion finally recovered 7 bodies under cover of darkness on 11 July using small teams operating by stealth. With this accomplished, the 1st Marines boarded helicopters and flew east to Quang Tri City.⁸³

Twenty years after the battle, when asked to name the decision of which he was the most proud, General Westmoreland replied, "The decision to hold Khe Sanh."⁸⁴ It had been a controversial move in 1968, but after the commitment in men and materiel to hold it, the decision to evacuate the place was even more difficult for many to understand. In fact, there were more American casualties at Khe Sanh and its immediate vicinity after the breakout until the final evacuation of the base than during the siege.^{***} As a battle which

* Colonel Billy R. Duncan, the commander of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, wrote that at the time his unit departed Khe Sanh, "much of the steel matting was still in place. Too difficult to remove . . ." and the enemy guns were "still a daily threat." Col Billy R. Duncan, Comments on draft, dtd 15Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Major Gary E. Todd, the commander of Company I, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, observed that the dismantling required "working parties to move around exposed and 'non-tactical' in what was still very much a *tactical* situation. The more bunkers we destroyed and trenches we filled, the less protection we had against incoming artillery, a fact not wasted on an ever-watchful enemy." Maj Gary E. Todd, Comments on draft, dtd 28Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).

** General Hoffman stated he had instituted an orderly program of withdrawing his units so as not to reveal his intentions to the North Vietnamese. He blamed Correspondent John S. Carroll from the *Baltimore Sun* for breaking news confidentiality and printing a story that the Marines were abandoning Khe Sanh. According to Hoffman, the North Vietnamese increased their bombardment after the publication of the story. MACV suspended Carroll's press credentials for six months. Hoffman intvw and Comments. For the suspension of Carroll's accreditation, see also John Prados and Ray W. Stubbe, *Valley of Decision, The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991), p. 448.

*** The confusion about the number of Marine casualties in the Khe Sanh battle is one aspect of the controversy over the defense of the base. According to general Marine Corps records, the Marines sustained casualties of 205 dead from November 1967 through the end of March, the period of Operation Scotland. The casualty reporting system was based on named operations rather than on actual locale. Another 92 Marines were killed in Operation Pegasus during April, and another 308 during Operation Scotland II through 30 June. Scotland II continued through the end of the year with another 72 Marines added to the KIA list. Obviously all of the operations included a broader area than the perimeter of the Khe Sanh base itself, thus compounding the difficulty in determining an exact number of casualties. To do so, the researcher must "clarify the time span and geographical area of the so-called 'Battle of Khe Sanh.'" Jack Shulimson, Sr. Vietnam Historian, ltr to Bert Mullins, dtd 2Sep1983 (Vietnam War, Khe Sanh

captured the personal interest of many Americans, to include President Johnson, Khe Sanh became a symbol. When U.S. forces withdrew from the hills of Khe Sanh, the inevitable question arose: "Why did we defend it in the first place?" At that point in time, in January 1968, there was probably no choice unless the

U.S. was prepared to air evacuate its troops and abandon its supplies there. Whether the base should have been closed immediately after Pegasus or whether a base should have been established there at all are still subjects of debate as is the motivation of the North Vietnamese in laying siege to the base.

File, RefSec, MCHC). Former Navy Chaplain Lieutenant Commander Ray W. Stubbe, who has done extensive research in this area, has provided the following figures based on his findings: He found the number of Marines killed for Operation Scotland to be 274 as opposed to 205. He cautions, however, that there are differences between the figures given in the command chronologies and those in the after-action reports and that none of the totals really jibe. Lieutenant Commander Stubbe gives as the best total for Operation Scotland and Pegasus, not including Lang Vei, as 560, including specialized Marine, Army, and Air Force units. He gives a total of 219 KIA (Army and South Viet-

namese) for Lang Vei. Chaplain Stubbe explained that there were many reasons for the discrepancies including staff officers frequently engaged with an on-going operation, "while still attempting to write reports on a previous operation." He also observed that for most troops, "the entire period from the beginning of the siege until their departure is, for them, their 'Khe Sanh battle.' Dates of the beginnings and endings of the various operations are as artificial and abstract as the border of Laos and Vietnam! It is the difference between 'lived' battles and 'officially recorded' battles." LCdr Ray W. Stubbe, USN, Comments on draft, dtd 23Oct and 25Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).

CHAPTER 17

Mini-Tet and Its Aftermath in Southern I Corps

Going into the Go Noi—Mini-Tet and Operation Mameluke Thrust, May 1968
Operation Allen Brook Continues—Mameluke Thrust Also Continues

Going into the Go Noi

By the beginning of May 1968, both the Marines at Da Nang and the Communist forces in Quang Nam were in the midst of preparations to launch offensive operations against one another. While during April the enemy in Quang Nam had largely confined its activities to guerrilla activities, the increased number of reconnaissance Stingray sightings indicated that Communist regulars were reinfiltrating their old positions. The Marine command was especially concerned about the Go Noi Island sector, about 25 kilometers south of Da Nang, outlined by the confluence of the Ky Lam, Thu Bon, Ba Ren, and Chiem Son Rivers.

In the Go Noi, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines in April had conducted Operation Jasper Square* in the western sector with relatively limited contact. Nevertheless, the Communists had controlled the area for years. With the continued existence of both a Communist political and military command infrastructure there, the local populace maintained a strong Viet Cong orientation, making the island a relatively "safe haven" for both NVA and VC military units. III MAF knew Go Noi was home to three local Viet Cong units, the *R-20 Battalion*, *V-25 Battalion*, and *T-3 Sapper Battalion*, as well as *Group 44*, the headquarters for the enemy's operations in Quang Nam Province. It also suspected that elements of the *2d NVA Division* were trying to reenter the sector.¹

In early May, Major General Donn J. Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, ordered the 7th Marines into the Go Noi to forestall the NVA from staging a new offensive. On 4 May at 0500, Lieutenant Colonel Charles E. Mueller's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines launched a two-company "No Name Operation" into the Go Noi. Crossing Liberty Bridge at 0500, Companies E and G, supported by a platoon of tanks, attacked eastward towards the main north-south railroad tracks. On the first day of the operation, the Marines evacuated some 220 civilians, mostly old men, women, and children, out of the Go Noi to the district capital of Dai Loc.²

In the first phase of the operation, which soon became Operation Allen Brook,* the battalion encountered light although persistent resistance from enemy local force and guerrilla units. For the next few days, the 2d Battalion attacked to the east towards the main north-south railroad tracks experiencing increasing but still relatively scattered opposition to their advance. Although the terrain was flat with relatively clear fields of fire, the local units were familiar with the locale and took full advantage of the advantages offered by the fortified hamlets that dotted the Go Noi. Surrounded and interlaced by dense hedges, these hamlets were connected one to another by a series of trenches and tunnels which provided "excellent cover and concealment" for their defenders.³

While Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines relieved Company G on 7 May, Colonel Reverdy M. Hall, the 7th Marines' commander, also reinforced the 2d Battalion on the same day with Company K from the 3d Battalion. Through 8 May, the Marine companies accounted for some 88 enemy troops at a cost of 9 Marines killed and 57 wounded. On the 9th, about 1820, the sweep forces just west of the railroad tracks came under heavy small arms and machine gun fire as well as a mortar salvo outside of the hamlet of Xuan Dai (2). Taking casualties of 1 dead and 11 wounded, the infantry pulled back and called for artillery support and airstrikes. After the last air mission, the Marine companies clambered over the tracks which fronted the hamlet on the west and pushed into Xuan Dai (2). Thirty minutes after the initial action, the Marines secured the hamlet. As a result of this action, the Marine battalion reported 80 enemy killed. A Stingray patrol about 1900 observed some 200 enemy troops moving to the southwest of Xuan Dai and called in

* See Chapter 13.

** Lieutenant Colonel Mueller recalled that the operation "very quickly became operation Allen Brook" in that his two other companies "and a myriad of support was attached to my battalion." A "No Name" operation usually involved two companies with minimum support. The concept was to "reinforce quickly when significant contact was made." LtCol Charles E. Mueller, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan95] (Vietnam Comment File).



Photo is from Abel Collection

Liberty Bridge over the Ky Lam River and a collapsed bridge beside it are visible from the air. The bridge connected An Hoa and Go Noi Island to Da Nang

both artillery and another air strike which resulted in a secondary explosion.⁴

For the next four days, the Marines again met only sporadic resistance and encountered no regular NVA units. In fact, up through the 13th, the indications were that the enemy troops that the Marines had engaged to that point except for the fight for Xuan Dai were from the usual VC units known to be in the Go Noi. Even the enemy force in Xuan Dai did not appear to be an NVA tactical unit. According to recovered documents and to a prisoner captured in that fight, the enemy in Xuan Dai were from the 155th Battalion, 2d NVA Regiment. Marine intelligence officers believed the 155th to be a temporary infiltration group rather than a regular NVA battalion.⁵

Hoping to find the suspected NVA regular units from the 2d NVA Division believed to have returned to the Go Noi, the Marine command decided to reorient Allen Brook from east to west. On 13 May, General Robertson reinforced the 2d Battalion with Company I, 3d Battalion, 27th Marines. While the other three companies attached to the 2d Battalion reversed their direction, Marine helicopters lifted Company I, 27th

Marines into a landing zone in the Que Son Mountains to the south overlooking Go Noi Island. The following day Company I moved down to blocking positions near the Ba Ren River where it was joined by the other Marine companies now advancing to the west. On the 15th, at 1400, the 2d Battalion with all four Marine companies with the attached tanks arrived back at Liberty Bridge. In their reverse march, the Marines had encountered the same "harassing small arms and mortar fires and fluid guerrilla tactics" that had characterized the operation for the most part up to that time.⁶

Operation Allen Brook appeared to be at an end. At least that was what the Marines wanted the enemy to believe. At 1800, on the 15th, Marine helicopters helilifted Company E and the command group of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines out of the operational area. The commander of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Roger H. Barnard, then assumed command of the remaining forces in Allen Brook. To continue the "tactical deception," Lieutenant Colonel Barnard ordered the units still in Allen Brook to cross Liberty Bridge as if the Marines were closing out the operation. Then shortly after midnight on the 16th,



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A374442

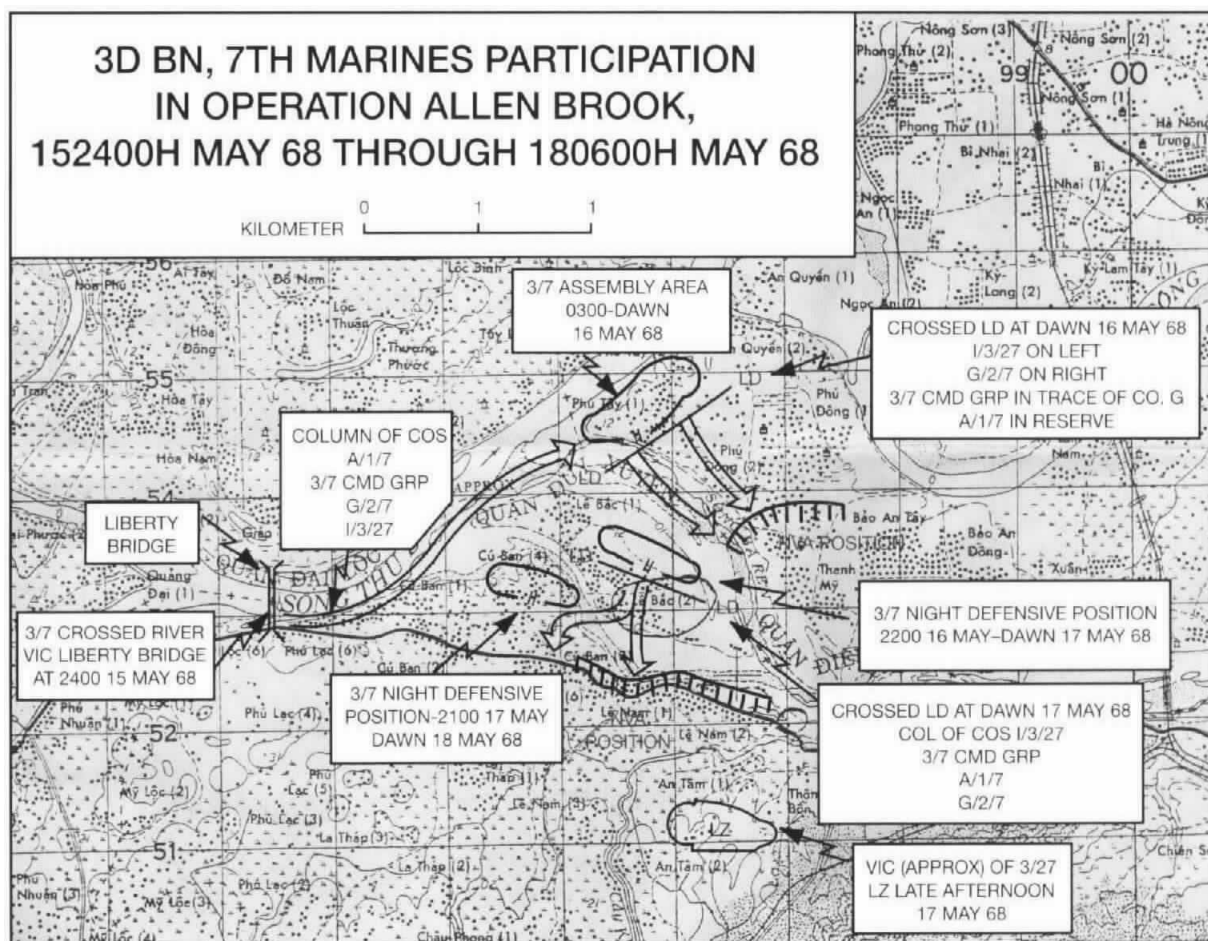
A Marine from the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines during Operation Allen Brook cautiously approaches a damaged hut. The VC dominated the hamlets in the Go Noi.

the command group of the 3d Battalion together with Companies A of the 1st Battalion and G of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, together with Company I, 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, recrossed the Thu Bon River and "moved in a single file under cover of darkness for security." Ironically, the 3d Battalion had none of its own organic companies in the operation as it reached its line of departure about 2,500 meters northeast of Liberty Bridge, just north of the objective area, a few hours prior to dawn. According to Barnard, Colonel Hall, who had monitored the radio traffic, "was beside himself with the success" of the plan to reenter the Go Noi.*

Lieutenant Colonel Barnard remembered that his objective "was a suspected NVA installation We had reason to believe they did not know we were there

. . . ." According to the battalion commander he was to attack to the south with the mission "to search for, fix, and destroy the enemy." As the Marines advanced with two companies on line and one in reserve, they were "hoping to execute a major surprise." In fact, both sides were to surprise one another. About 0900 on the morning of the 16th, the 3d Battalion encountered an NVA battalion in the hamlet of Phu Dong (2) about 4,000 meters west of Xuan Dai, the scene of the latest heaviest fighting. According to Barnard, "we hit a hornet's nest." Two of his companies came under deadly machine gun fire and the battalion commander described the situation "like being in the butts at the rifle range." The Marine battalion tried to flank the enemy position, but as Barnard recalled, "we needed more resources than we had for the situation." He recalled that even maximum supporting artillery and mortar fire failed to break the NVA defenses. Finally, extensive close air support, including over 50 air strikes, "carried the day." By early evening, the Marine infantry which had fought continuously throughout the day in the oppressive heat finally forced the NVA out of their trenches and bunkers. Afraid of encirclement, the

*Colonel Barnard credited the 7th Marines commander, Colonel Hall, with the idea of openly pulling out the 2d Battalion, and unobtrusively bringing in the 3d Battalion under cover of darkness. According to Barnard, Hall "was convinced that after a week of 2/7 stirring up the AO [Area of Operations], we could fool the enemy into believing the Marines had had enough." Col Roger H. Barnard, Comments on draft, dtd 13Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).



Map Courtesy of Col Roger H. Barnard, USMC (Ret)

enemy withdrew leaving more than 130 dead in the hamlet. Marine losses were also heavy: 25 dead and 38 wounded. One Marine, Second Lieutenant Paul F. Cobb, a platoon leader with Company A, and one Navy hospital corpsman, Robert M. Casey with Company G, were both awarded the Navy Cross posthumously for their actions in the fight for Phu Dong (2).⁸

Despite the Marine losses, Colonel Hall, the 7th Marines commander, believed that his plan had been a success. Barnard's unit had uncovered the North Vietnamese units in the Go Noi and hit them before they were able to mass their forces. Lieutenant Colonel Barnard later wrote, "when all enemy resistance ceased and the dust had settled it was clear we had . . . achieved a significant victory." The suspected NVA installation was an "NVA regimental headquarters, with attendant security and a major staging area for supplies . . ." The battalion commander remembered that the enemy supplies were so extensive, that they could not evacuate them to the rear. Marine helicopters, however, took out the casualties and the bat-

talion "received water and ammo resupply." Colonel Hall directed Barnard to continue his southward advance the next morning.⁹

After an uneventful night, in which the battalion had moved twice, it started out at dawn from a line of departure, just north of the hamlet of Le Bac (2). Advancing southward, the battalion was again in a column of companies, with Company I, 27th Marines in the lead, and Companies A and G of the 7th Marines, and the battalion command group, following in trace. Lieutenant Colonel Barnard remembered, "We were in open country, without a defined objective." If Company I made contact, Barnard planned to use Company A as a maneuver unit and Company G in reserve.¹⁰

As events turned out, the Marine battalion ran into even stronger resistance than the previous day. That morning, as Company I came upon a dry river bed with a densely wooded treeline on the northern bank bordering the hamlet of Le Nam (1), just above Route 537, the North Vietnamese sprung an ambush from elaborate defenses "of significant width." Strong enemy

gled through the tall grass, he had his artillery and air officers "calling mission after mission . . ." The situation for Company I was already desperate when Colonel Hall, the 7th Marines commander, radioed Barnard that the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines would make a helicopter assault to the south in order to relieve the pressure on his battalion.¹¹

Lieutenant Colonel Tullis J. Woodham, Jr., the commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, remembered that his unit had been on alert for Allen Brook and was to relieve the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines. In fact the 27th Marines, under Colonel Adolph G. Schwenk, Jr., was scheduled to take responsibility for the operation from the 7th Marines later that day. Early on the morning of the 17th, Lieutenant Colonel Woodham had received orders to truck

his battalion down to Liberty Bridge and then cross the bridge on foot to make the planned relief. At this point, he had only two of his companies with him, Companies K and L. His Company M was the Da Nang Air Base security company and Company I, of course, was attached to Barnard's battalion. Upon learning of the predicament of his Company I, Woodham conferred with Schwenk and agreed upon the helicopter assault. For the time being, Woodham's battalion would be under the operational control of the 7th Marines.¹²

After some unexpected delays in the arrival of the aircraft and in coordination with the air preparation of the landing zone, about 1500 on the 17th, Marine helicopters finally brought the battalion into An Tam (1) about 1,000 meters southeast of Le Nam (1). Even

Heavily sweating Marines from the Command Group of the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines assist in the evacuation of an injured Capt Robert R. Anderson, who had attempted to reach the embattled Company I. With temperatures reaching 110 to 120 degrees, heat was as much the enemy as the NVA.

Photo courtesy of Col Tullis J. Woodham, Jr. USMC (Ret)



as the battalion landed, it came under mortar and long-range weapons fire. Despite the enemy fire, the two Marine companies immediately attacked northward to link up with the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines. With extensive air and artillery support, Company K, 27th Marines broke through the enemy defenses in Le Nam (1), and finally linked up with Company I about 1930 that evening. According to Lieutenant Colonel Woodham, as darkness approached, the North Vietnamese resistance ceased and they began to withdraw from the battle area.¹³

The heavy fighting for Le Nam (1) had resulted in 39 Marines dead and 105 wounded as opposed to 81 North Vietnamese dead. Company I especially had suffered grievous losses. Of the total Marine casualties in the battle, Company I had sustained 15 killed and 50 wounded. Among the dead were Captain Thomas H. Ralph and two of his platoon leaders. The casualties of the company may have been even higher if it had not been for the heroics of Private First Class Robert C. Burke. A machine gunner with the company, he quickly took his weapon "and launched a series of one-man assaults" against the enemy emplacements. Providing covering fire, he permitted other members of Company I to come up and remove the wounded from exposed positions. He continued to advance upon the enemy and to suppress enemy fire until he fell mortally wounded. He was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously.¹⁴

During the night of 17–18 May, the two Marine battalions, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines and the 3d Battalion, 27 Marines, remained in separate positions, but in radio contact. Lieutenant Colonel Barnard had moved to a night position near Cu Ban (4), about 1,000 meters to the northwest of Le Nam (1), while Lieutenant Colonel Woodham retained his command group at An Tam (1). About 1900, Lieutenant Colonel Barnard had turned over operational control of Company I to Woodham and then began preparations to start out at dawn on the 18th for Liberty Bridge. Essentially, Operation Allen Brook was over for the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, which would leave as planned the next day and be replaced by the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines.¹⁵

By that time the 27th Marines, under Colonel Schwenk, had assumed responsibility for Operation Allen Brook which would continue in the Go Noi. On the morning of the 18th, Lieutenant Colonel Woodham began to expand his perimeter around Le Nam (1). About 0930, the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines began to take sniper fire from Le Bac (2), about 300 meters to

the north. Lieutenant Colonel Woodham immediately sent Companies K and L to clear out what he thought were a relatively few snipers. The "few snipers" turned out to be a formidable North Vietnamese force which quickly brought the Marine attack to a halt. Under an "exceedingly heavy" volume of fire, the lead elements of both Companies I and K remained isolated and unable to maneuver. Woodham called for both artillery and air, but their effectiveness was limited because of the proximity of the Marines to the enemy. Both companies, but especially Company K, sustained several casualties and the intolerable heat soon became as much a factor as the enemy bullets.¹⁶

At 1500 that afternoon, Marine helicopters brought in Company M, which had already been alerted to replace the combat-impaired Company I. As the latter company boarded the helicopters for the return trip to Da Nang, Woodham thrust the newly arrived Company M into the battle for Le Bac (2). With the reinforcements, Company K, which had taken the most casualties, was able to pull back and Lieutenant Colonel Woodham placed it in reserve. The fighting raged on until the night when the NVA withdrew. The Marine companies pulled back to Le Nam (1) and Woodham brought in air and artillery to the rear of the former NVA positions. The battalion had sustained serious casualties: 15 Marines were dead, another 35 were wounded, and 94 troops had succumbed to the heat. In and around the abandoned enemy position lay 20 dead North Vietnamese.

Operation Allen Brook would continue to focus through 27 May largely on the Cu Ban, Phu Dong, and Le Bac village complexes. Beginning with the action of the 16th, the 7th, and later the 27th Marines, were in a more or less a conventional battle against well dug-in and relatively fresh and well-trained North Vietnamese regulars. Colonel Schwenk, the 27th Marines commander, commented that while the enemy troops did not initiate any offensive actions, they fought back "tenaciously" from concealed positions within treelines and in the hamlets themselves. To offset the Marine advantage in supporting arms, the NVA would allow "the point of advancing units to pass through" and then open up on the "main body" with both intense small arms fire and mortars. At this close range, the Marine command could then make only limited use of artillery and air support.¹⁷

To counter this tactic, the 27th Marines used heavy preparatory fires from both U.S. Navy gunfire ships offshore and artillery in coordination with air strikes to blast the enemy out of their bunkers and trenches



Photo courtesy of Col Tullis J. Woodham, USMC (Ret)

LtCol Tullis J. Woodham, Jr., commander of the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, left, waits to hear about the situation in Le Bac from his operations officer, Maj Ernest T. Fitzgerald, using the radio, during Allen Brook.

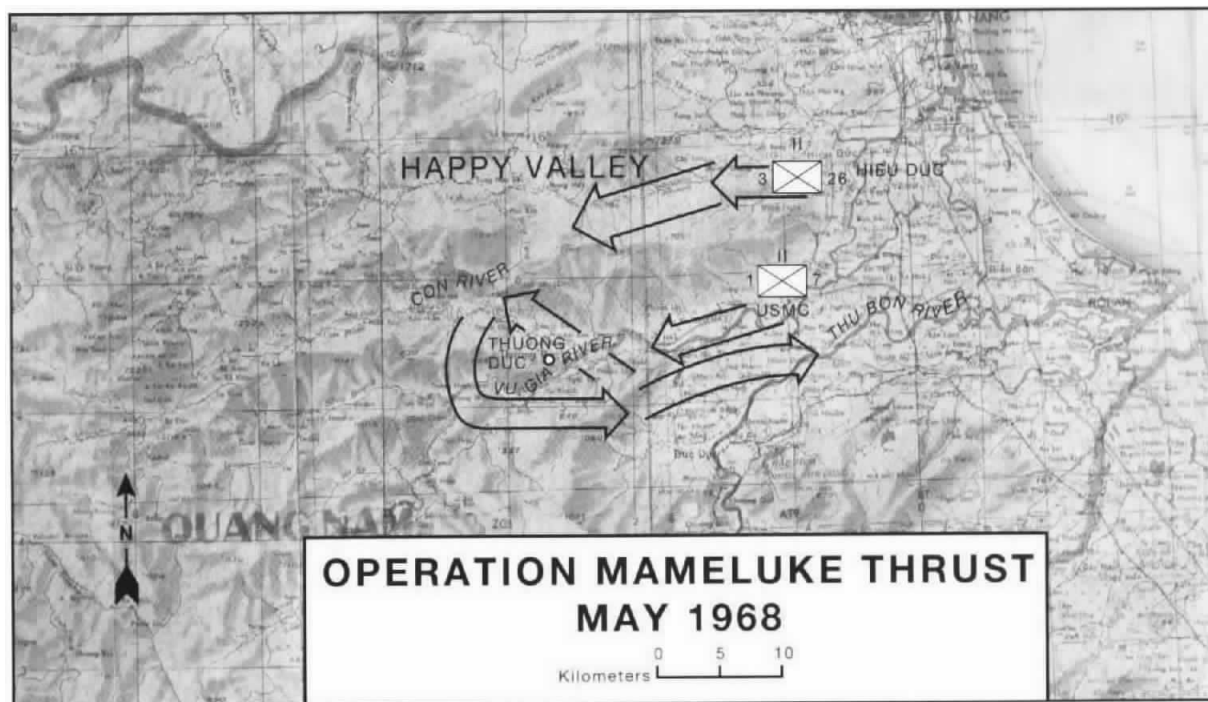
before moving into an area. If a Marine unit encountered heavy small arms fire, it was either to hold its position or move back so that supporting arms could be employed as much as possible under the circumstances. Colonel Schwenk remarked that tanks with their 90mm guns proved most effective in these circumstances, both with high explosive rounds to breach enemy fortifications and with canister rounds against troops in the open. Schwenk wrote that once he committed the tanks, "the enemy would break contact almost immediately." The tanks were also at a disadvantage, however, in that the terrain "caused . . . [them] to become channelized making them highly vulnerable to RPG fire and mines." On 24 May, two Marines from the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, Corporal Richard W. Buchanan from Company M and Private First Class Charles R. Yordy, from Company K, were later awarded the Navy Cross for their actions that day in Le Bac (1) about 800 meters northwest of Le Bac (2). The fight for Le Bac (2) lasted until the 27th and featured some of the heaviest combat of the campaign until a torrential rain storm ended the fighting. Lieutenant Colonel Donald N. Rexroad, the commander of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, remembered

that his battalion near the end of the month overran "an apparent NVA regimental command post."¹⁸

Casualties on both sides had been heavy. For the entire operation through the end of May, the Marines reported to have killed over 600 of the enemy. They themselves sustained since the beginning of the operation 138 killed, 686 wounded including 576 serious enough to be evacuated, and another 283 non-battle casualties that had to be evacuated. The number of heat-induced "non-battle casualties" had soared towards the end because of the extreme high temperatures averaging almost 110 degrees and the physical exertion expended in the firefights. In many engagements, the number of heat casualties equalled or exceeded the number of Marines killed and wounded.^{19*}

In Operation Allen Brook, the Marines believed they had broken the back of a planned enemy attack on

*The 7th Marines in its account reported only seven non-battle casualties through 17 May. It can be assumed then that the bulk of the heat casualties occurred after the 27th Marines took over the operation. For the period 4–17 May, the 7th Marines account showed that the Marine units in Allen Brook sustained 85 killed and 359 wounded, 323 of whom were evacuated in addition to the non-battle casualties. 1/7 AAR, Allen Brook.



Da Nang. Colonel Hall of the 7th Marines later wrote that his 3d Battalion's reentry into the Go Noi under cover of darkness in the early morning hours of 16 May foiled the designs of the enemy which had begun to stage its forces. Hall observed that the North Vietnamese unit engaged by his units was from the *36th Regiment, 308th NVA Division*. According to a North Vietnamese prisoner from the *2d Battalion* of that regiment, his unit had departed North Vietnam in February and only arrived in the Go Noi the night of the 15th with orders to assault allied positions north of the Thu Bon and Ky Lam Rivers. The 27th Marines would engage both the *2d* and *3d Battalions* of the *36th* during the fighting in the Cu Ban and Le Bac complex.²⁰

The appearance of the *36th Regiment* in the Go Noi was of some concern to the Marine command. III MAF and the 1st Marine Division had expected to find elements of the *2d NVA Division* which previously had used the sector during the Tet offensive. This was the first evidence that any unit of the *308th NVA Division* had ventured so far south. There were already indications that the North Vietnamese had built up their regular forces in the Da Nang sector. From 16–25 May, just to the east of the Marine units on the Go Noi, the 51st ARVN regiment, reinforced by two Ranger battalions, in a series of running battles engaged approximately two enemy battalions. While sustaining casualties of 53 dead and 144 wounded, the ARVN claimed to have killed 284 of the enemy during this period.

Mini-Tet and Operation Mameluke Thrust, May 1968

By mid-May it was apparent that the enemy buildup in the Go Noi sector was part and parcel of the long-awaited second phase of the enemy's "Tet" offensive. Outside of the flareups in the capital city of Saigon and especially in the eastern DMZ near Dong Ha* with some of the bloodiest combat of the war, the renewed fighting elsewhere was only a pale reflection of the first "Tet." Called "Mini-Tet" by the allies, this second enemy offensive largely confined itself to rocket and mortar fire and small ground probes against the major bases and attacks against the most vulnerable of the Special Forces camps near the Laotian border.

Still the enemy "Mini-Tet" could not be taken lightly. At Da Nang, in all probability it was the Marine thrust into the Go Noi that forestalled a renewed enemy ground assault on either the airfield or city itself. While enemy infantry units were unable to penetrate the Marine defenses, NVA rocketeers increased their efforts throughout I Corps. [See Chart] At Da Nang, from 5 May through 29 May, enemy rockets fell on major installations, including Marble Mountain, the main airfield, the FLC, and III MAF headquarters, on 12 separate occasions with the highest number of incidents, 4, on the first day of the attacks. In the Da Nang TAOR,

*See Chapter 15.

ENEMY EFFORTS AGAINST MAJOR III MAF BASES: MAY 1968

DANANG

DATE	TIME	INSTALLATION	TYPE ATTACK	CASUALTIES	MATERIAL DAMAGE
5 May	0120	III MAF Hq	5-122mm Rkts	4 KIA, 8 WIA	Minor
5 May	0150	Airbase	1-122mm Rkt	None	None
5 May	0200	FLC	15-122mm Rkts	3 KIA, 15 WIA	Minor
5 May	0600	FLC	5-122mm Rkts	None	None
8 May	2100	NSA Bridge Cargo Complex	4-122mm Rkts	None	None
9 May	0031	Airbase	4-122mm Rkts	None	None
9 May	0155	Airbase	5-122mm Rkts	5 WIA	1 Air Force F-101 and 1 C-130 (light), 1 crater in runway
11 May	2345	Airbase	6-140mm Rkts	None	2 EA-6A and 1 RF-4B (minor), 1 crater in runway
12 May	1758	Airbase	4-122mm Rkts	1 WIA	2 VNAF A-1 (minor)
22 May	0004	FLC	12-122mm Rkts	1 WIA	102 1/2 ton trucks and 1 supply building damaged
29 May	0140	Airbase	5-140mm Rkts	None	1 C-117 (substantial) and 1 TA-4F (limited)

MARBLE MOUNTAIN

DATE	TIME	INSTALLATION	TYPE ATTACK	CASUALTIES	MATERIAL DAMAGE
5 May	0151	Air Facility	41 Rds Mtr/Rkts	1 WIA	2 CH-53 (minor)
12 May	1905	Air Facility	20 Rds Rkts	1 KIA, 17 WIA	4 CH-53 (2 substantial, 2 minor), 3 CH-46 and 1 O-1 (minor)
20 May	0120	Air Facility	11 Rds Mtr	3 WIA	7 UH-1E (1 substantial, 1 minor, 5 limited), 4 CH-46 (limited), Control Tower (minor) and Base Operations Building (minor)
22 May	0211	Air Facility	12 Rds Mtr	4 WIA	2 CH-46 (limited), 2 UH-1E (minor)

CHU LAI

DATE	TIME	INSTALLATION	TYPE ATTACK	CASUALTIES	MATERIAL DAMAGE
5 May	0151	MAG-13 and Runway	27-122mm Rkts	None	3 F-4B (minor), 1 HAWK missile launcher and 3 missiles destroyed
8 May	1750	MATCU-67	2-122mm Rkts	1 KIA, 2 WIA	Ground Approach Radar Installation destroyed
11 May	2207	MAG-13 Ordnance Area	3-122mm Rkts	None	Minor
14 May	2317	MAG-13 Barracks Area	2-122mm Rkts	2 KIA, 15 WIA	1 Living Quarters destroyed, 5 Living Quarters and 1 Supply Building damaged
23 May	0155	MAG-13 Area	10-122mm Rkts	None	MAG-13 PX destroyed
26 May	0125	Runway	7-122mm Rkts	None	None

PHU BAI/CAMP EVANS/CAMP EAGLE

DATE	TIME	INSTALLATION	TYPE ATTACK	CASUALTIES	MATERIAL DAMAGE
5 May	0205	Camp Eagle	14-Rkts	None	None
19 May	1925	Camp Evans	12-122mm Rkts	1 KIA, 13 WIA	5 US Army helicopters destroyed, 107 helicopters and 6 fixed wing aircraft damaged
21 May	0030-0630	Camp Eagle	300 Rds 122mm Rkt/82mm Mtr, and Ground Atk	8 KIA, 20 WIA	Minor
21 May	0057	Phu Bai (Camp Hochmuth)	153-82mm Mtr	33 WIA	Minor
27 May	0250	Phu Bai Airfield	98-82mm Mtr	5 KIA, 32 WIA	5 US Army fixed wing aircraft (minor), 6 CH-46 (minor), 6 UH-1E and 3 CH-53 (limited)

QUANG TRI

DATE	TIME	INSTALLATION	TYPE ATTACK	CASUALTIES	MATERIAL DAMAGE
5 May	0310	New Quang Tri Airfield	20-122mm Rkts	None	1 CH-46 destroyed, 2 UH-34 and 1 UH-1E (limited)
17 May	0950	Old Airfield (South of Quang Tri City)	4-122mm Rkts	4 WIA	3 US Army CH-47 (substantial)



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371543

Under a covering smoke screen, Company D, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines crosses the Vu Gia River in Operation Mameluke Thrust. The battalion would follow the river into the western highlands near Thuong Duc.

the 7th Marines alone reported 77 mortar incidents as opposed to 15 in April.²¹

The whereabouts of the *2d NVA Division* also was worrisome. In their one major success during Mini-Tet, on 10–12 May 1968, elements of that North Vietnamese division had overrun the Special Forces camps at Ngog Tavak and Kham Duc in western Quang Tin Province near the Laotian border, about 60 miles southwest of Da Nang. Concerned about the buildup of enemy forces in the Go Noi and to the west near the Special Forces Camp at Thuong Duc about 35 miles closer to Da Nang than Kham Duc, General Cushman had few troops to commit to the relief of the other two Special Forces camps. Supported by both Generals Abrams and Westmoreland, Cushman ordered the evacuation of Kham Duc.*

Even before the abandonment of Ngog Tavak and Kham Duc, Cushman had planned an operation in the western highlands to include the region near Thuong Duc. On 9 May, III MAF had directed Major General Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, to conduct a spoiling attack deep into the valley region west of Da Nang, that was eventually to

be codenamed “Mameluke Thrust.” While Allen Brook in the Go Noi delayed the initiation of the new operation, the possibility that the NVA units that overran the more southerly Special Forces camp might next try to take Thuong Duc was an ever-present consideration. This was the reason for the replacement of the 7th Marines’ battalions in the Go Noi by the 27th Marines.²²

The 1st Marine Division’s mission for Operation Mameluke Thrust was to conduct “offensive operations to find, fix and destroy en[emy] forces in [the] tactical area of interest.” The NVA units believed to be located in the area of operations included the *31st Regiment*, *341st Division*, the *368B Rocket Regiment*, two unidentified battalions, the headquarters of *Military Region V*, and possibly, command elements of *Group 44*. The expected duration of the operation was 21 days.²³

On 19 May, the 1st Marine Division struck. Colonel Hall’s 7th Marines, with its own 1st Battalion, attacked west along the Song Vu Gia toward Thuong Duc. Further north, Colonel Bruce F. Meyers’ 26th Marines, which the previous day, on short notice, had deployed south to Da Nang from Quang Tri, attacked with its 3d Battalion into the hills overlooking the eastern end of the Song Lo Dong Valley—known to

* See Chapter 26 for more details about the fight and evacuation of Ngog Tavak and Kham Duc.

the Marines as "Happy Valley."* The 1st Reconnaissance Battalion placed Stingray patrols under the operational control of the two regiments to support the operation and, as the attack progressed westward, the artillerymen of Lieutenant Colonel Clayton V. Hendricks' 11th Marines moved firing batteries forward to keep up with the advance.

By the end of May, Lieutenant Colonel William S. Fagan's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines had swept the hills along both banks of the Song Vu Gia and its tributary, the Song Con, to a point four kilometers beyond Thuong Duc, and returned to their starting point at the eastern end of the valley. Lieutenant Colonel John C. Studt's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines was deep in the jungle-clad hills south of Happy Valley.** Neither unit made significant contact with the enemy, but both found large supply caches. While the much-heralded enemy "Mini-Tet" offensive appeared to have spent itself at least in the Da Nang area of operations, the 1st Division decided to keep both Operations Allen Brook and Mameluke Thrust going and carry the fight to the enemy in his former strongholds.

Operation Allen Brook Continues

During the last four days of May, the 1st Marine Division rotated fresh units into the Allen Brook area of operations. Lieutenant Colonel Frederick J. McEwan's 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, veterans of the defense of Khe Sanh, arrived on the 26th, and Lieutenant Colonel John E. Greenwood's 1st Battalion, 27th Marines relieved Lieutenant Colonel Woodham's 3d Battalion, 27th Marines two days later. As May

ended, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines departed Go Noi Island and became the 1st Marine Division reserve.²⁴

Thereafter, III MAF maintained at least two battalions in Operation Allen Brook. At the beginning of June, both the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines and the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines were involved, still under the control of the 27th Marines headquarters. The 1st Marine Division expanded the area of operations to include the 27th Marines forward command post at Liberty Bridge, as well as about 35 square kilometers of rice farming area southwest of Go Noi Island.

The regiment's orders called for an ongoing "search and clear" operation, a euphemism for the tedious process of methodically searching an area for enemy personnel, facilities, supplies, and equipment. When carried out to the degree of thoroughness which provided a measure of success, the procedure was slow and sometimes ponderous. The extreme heat encountered during Operation Allen Brook, combined with terrain that included man-high elephant grass, as well as a hostile, uncooperative local population, and frequent encounters with boobytraps and mines, made the "search and clear" mission far more challenging than its name implied.

On the morning of 1 June, a flight of nine Lockheed C-130 Hercules aircraft conducted what was accurately known as an "inferno" mission, dropping more than 31,000 gallons of fuel in 55 gallon drums with igniters attached. While the intent was to burn away a considerable portion of the island's foliage, the mission was not as successful as desired due to excessive dispersion of the fuel and a heavy thunderstorm which followed the drop.²⁵

After this disappointment, the two battalions of Marines began the process of physically searching the area for signs of the enemy. The Marines trudged steadily across the island, from west to east and then back to the west again. Short, sharp contacts resulted when enemy troops fired from well-concealed positions, causing the Marines to return fire and call for supporting arms. Upon overrunning the area from which the enemy had fired, the Marines usually found little or nothing. Occasionally, Marines detonated mines or boobytraps (referred to as "surprise firing devices" in the reporting system), often disguised as soft-drink cans, tea bags, or even "Chieu Hoi" leaflets.^{26***} At night, with the Marines in defensive positions, the enemy would

*Colonel Meyers recalled that he "received an excellent briefing from Lieutenant Colonel [Charles E.] Muellet [whose battalion, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines] . . . had operated on the western edge of the valley for three weeks." Meyers described Happy Valley as having a triple canopy, with the first layer consisting of dense Kunai grass, elephant grass, and thick vines, extending up to 20 feet. The second layer contained trees rising up to 60 feet, and the third layer consisted of large teak, mahogany, and ironwood trees which reached heights of 110 feet. Colonel Meyers stated that he knew some jungle techniques, having "done deep jungle patrols with the Gorkhas in Malaya in their campaign in 1959 . . ." Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on draft, dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Meyers Comments.

**Colonel Studt described the Happy Valley operation as "a change of pace for 3/26, operating under triple canopy, constantly on the move." He observed that enemy tactics counted "on neutralizing our normally superior supporting arms by knocking down our point elements close in to their positions." Studt stated that, rather than walk blindly into any ambush, "we used dogs extensively . . . consequently in the several months that we spent operating in Happy Valley, we never had a man ambushed, although we lost a few dogs." Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

***A leaflet distributed by hand or airdrop as part of psychological operations in support of the "Chieu Hoi" or "Open Arms" Campaign, which urged enemy troops to rally to the government of South Vietnam.

fire on listening posts from close range, or use mortars to harass the main perimeters. These activities caused additional casualties and further frustration for the Marines, who could not strike back effectively.

By 3 June, the 27th Marines had found little evidence of the enemy, causing the 1st Marine Division to determine that the "recent lack of significant contact indicates enemy forces departed Allen Brook AO."²⁷ Accordingly, the division reduced the scale of Operation Allen Brook, ordering the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines to depart Go Noi Island for operations elsewhere, and shrinking the Allen Brook AO. It would now include only that portion of Go Noi Island west of the National Railroad and a small area on the north bank of the Song Thu Bon, opposite the island.

The 27th Marines ordered the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines to move westward along Route 537 on its departure from the island, continuing the "search and clear" process along the way. Simultaneously, the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines also would move westward, on the right flank of the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines.

By mid-morning on 5 June, the two battalions were approaching their final objectives, having lost 4 killed and 26 wounded to sniper fire and mines along the way. As Company D, 26th Marines, under First Lieutenant Daniel L. McGravey, neared the hamlet of Cu Ban (3), North Vietnamese hidden in a trenchline and bunkers to the south fired on the 1st Platoon. The Marines maneuvered to one flank, attempting to envelop the enemy, and Communist mortars joined the action. At the same time, 500 meters to the east, Company B, 26th Marines, under Captain James H. Champion, also came under heavy fire and had a platoon caught in the open, unable to maneuver.

As the Marines called for mortars, artillery, and air support to assist in suppressing the enemy fire, Lieutenant Colonel Greenwood, commanding the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines, dispatched his Company C, commanded by Captain Martin T. Farmer, to assist the beleaguered 1st Battalion, 26th Marines. Company C hurried southward and made contact with the northernmost flank of Company B, 26th Marines, then swung to the west and assaulted the nearby Communist positions. Almost immediately, Captain Farmer and his second in command were wounded by mortar fire. Attacking without "a proper base of fire" and without time to "adequately reconnoiter" enemy positions, Company C, said Lieutenant Colonel Greenwood later, "lost momentum, faltered, and stopped."²⁸

Company D, 26th Marines was still heavily engaged near Cu Ban (3) and now, both Company B, 26th Marines and Company C, 27th Marines were being held down by enemy fire 500 meters east of the hamlet. The Communists, fighting from well-covered and expertly concealed positions, kept up heavy fire with rifles, machine guns, and mortars. The Marines, long accustomed to the luxury of fire superiority, found that they were unable to employ their supporting arms effectively in such close quarters without endangering friendly troops.

As casualties mounted, helicopters landed under fire to evacuate the wounded. Two Sikorsky UH-34 "Sea Horse" helicopters suffered hits in the process, but neither were lost. In mid-afternoon, with the fight still raging, Company A, 27th Marines, accompanied by three tanks, departed Liberty Bridge to join the fray. Supported by the tanks and carefully using artillery and air support, the Marines attacked and overran the enemy positions.

The Marines lost 7 killed and 55 wounded in this hard-fought, but confused, action. They found 30 North Vietnamese dead. A machine gunner with Company C, 1st Battalion, 27th Marines summed up the battle from an infantryman's perspective: "We had a bad-ass fire fight...it lasted for awhile. Then we moved on."²⁹

Although the Marines had finally made solid contact with the enemy, the plan to reduce the Operation Allen Brook commitment to a single battalion remained in effect. On 6 June, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines left the area and elements of the 1st Engineer Battalion arrived with the heavy equipment needed for the new task assigned to Operation Allen Brook forces: the virtual razing of Go Noi Island. The new mission called for the 27th Marines to "provide support and protection for [an] engineer effort to systematically eliminate all fortifications, dwellings, harbor sites, and hedgerows in [the] AO."³⁰ The first area scheduled to be cleared was Cu Ban (3).

The clearing project presented many challenges especially since Go Noi Island was thoroughly infested with well-constructed enemy field fortifications. The typical Go Noi bunker, based on a deep hole, had overhead protection constructed from rails and ties from the nearby National Railroad. Some actually included concrete. Covered with earth and camouflaged effectively, these positions were invisible from the air and only barely apparent from the ground. In some areas, farmers had worked away the ground surrounding the



Photo courtesy of Col Tullis J. Woodham, Jr. USMC (Ret)

Carrying out a program of "total destruction," Marine engineers bulldoze the hamlets in the Go Noi after the civilian population has been evacuated.

bamboo groves for so long that the groves appeared to be raised on flat mounds of hard earth. The Communists burrowed under these groves to construct hidden bunkers with firing slits at ground level. In addition to the fortifications built by the NVA and VC for their own use, the hamlets contained bunkers built by the local populace for family protection. These bunkers, also built with materials salvaged from the National Railroad, featured sloped roofs which deflected bombs and artillery projectiles. So strong were these bunkers that some were undamaged by 2,000 pound bombs detonating 50 feet away.³¹

As the engineers went about the business of destroying bunkers and filling in trenchlines, Lieutenant Colonel Greenwood provided them security and continued a program of aggressive patrolling with his four companies. Contact with the enemy remained sporadic. As before the battle at Cu Ban, the enemy contented themselves with occasional sniping, attacks on listening posts, harassing mortar fire on company night positions, and an ever-increasing number of mines and boobytraps. Marines continued to fall prey to heat, as well as to enemy action, for the daily temperature averaged 100 degrees, with humidity greater than 80 percent. In the still, thick air, heat casualties sometimes ran as high as 10 percent, causing commanders to limit troop activity to the early morning and late afternoon. While moving, the Marines did not carry excess equipment, leaving behind even their flak

jackets. To further exacerbate the Marine problems with the intense heat, the enemy contaminated the water wells in the area with oil and dead animal carcasses and the local river water was seemingly impervious to the attempts to purify it with halazone tablets.^{32*}

The battalion continued the "search and clear" routine (while the engineers gave a whole new meaning to the "clearing" aspects of the mission) without significant contact until 15 June. At 0330 that morning, behind a curtain of B-40 rockets and heavy automatic weapons fire, Communist troops fell upon Company B's night position near the National Railroad. The Marines returned fire with all organic weapons, from rifles to antitank rockets, and called for artillery fire support. In the face of Company B's tenacious defense, the North Vietnamese broke off their attack and attempted to flee, but Company B Marines pursued the broken enemy into the night, ending the engagement decisively. The next day, the Marines tallied 21 dead North Vietnamese, all victims of the abortive attack. Company B suffered only three wounded.

The 1st Marine Division ordered the area of operations extended to permit the Allen Brook forces to venture east of the National Railroad in pursuit of the enemy. Early on 19 June, an ad hoc force composed of elements of Companies B and D (under the command

*Halazone tablets were carried by the individual Marine for use in purifying locally gathered water.

of the executive officer of Company B) ran into a North Vietnamese force near the hamlet of Bac Dong Ban. One Marine platoon immediately went to ground in the face of overwhelming enemy fire. As the Marines called for air and artillery, another ad hoc company (also composed of elements of Companies B and D) moved to the rescue under the command of Company B's commanding officer, First Lieutenant Richard M. Wozar.

The North Vietnamese were thoroughly dug in, occupying a line of trenches and bunkers with their backs to the Song Ky Lam. For nine hours, the battle raged with neither side able to gain the upper hand. Finally, at 1800, the battalion command group, with Company A and a platoon from Company C, arrived and attacked from the west. Swinging northward, the reinforcements assaulted the enemy positions while Companies B and D provided a base of fire. By 1900, the Marines overwhelmed the enemy, suffering 6 dead, 19 wounded, and 12 heat casualties. By noon the next day, the Marines found 17 North Vietnamese dead.³³

The fight at Bac Dong Ban was the 1st Battalion's last major battle in Operation Allen Brook. After completing a sweep of the eastern portion of Go Noi Island, they departed the area on 23 June and in their place, the 2d Battalion, 27th Marines assumed responsibility for Operation Allen Brook. That night the North Vietnamese welcomed the fresh battalion to Go Noi Island with 60 rounds of mortar fire on Companies E, F, and H.

The 2d Battalion, tasked to continue the land clearing operations on Go Noi Island, arrived intent on carrying out a program of "total destruction." Their policy included elimination of natural assembly areas, concealing foliage, treelines, bamboo groves, hedgerows, trenchlines, fighting holes, caves, bunkers, tunnels, building structures, and any natural or man-made feature providing cover. Material which could be used to build bunkers, such as concrete blocks, beams, posts, pillars, and tree trunks, would be destroyed by crushing or burning. In the words of the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Albert W. Keller, "we were to level that island."³⁴

The 2d Battalion experienced only light enemy contact throughout its stay at Go Noi Island. The enemy appeared only in small groups, usually fleeing when sighted by the Marines. Because of the sporadic nature of enemy contact, much of the battalion's efforts centered on land clearing. In one 18-day period, the engineers completely leveled the largest forested area on Go Noi Island.³⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Keller later remarked that "by the time we destroyed and leveled that whole area . . . it looked almost like a parking lot for a major ball



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A650927
Two Marines from BLT 2/7 step gingerly through muck and water in a narrow ravine during Operation Swift Play in the Da The Mountain area south of the Go Noi. The unauthorized floppy hat worn by the Marine in the rear probably provides more protection from the elements than the helmet.

park in the United States."³⁶ As part of its land clearing effort, the battalion arranged two air-delivered herbicide missions which "were found to be quite effective."³⁷

On 16 July, the 2d Battalion, 27th Marines departed Go Noi Island, having reported killing 144 enemy at a cost of 4 Marines dead and 147 wounded. Simultaneously, the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines moved into the area and assumed responsibility for Operation Allen Brook. The character of the operation remained unchanged as the companies of the 3d Battalion alternated between patrolling and providing security for the engineers who were methodically scraping the island clean. The Communists continued to avoid significant engagements, but they did muster the temerity to fire on the aircraft which sprayed the island with herbicides on 18 July and 21 July. Meanwhile, the Marines continued to fire on small groups of enemy or on Vietnamese voices heard in the night, then searched the areas later to find an occasional body or blood trail.*

*Colonel Tullis J. Woodham, Jr., at the time the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines commander, commented that he positioned a sniper and a 106mm recoilless rifle team on the north/south railroad trestle: "The sniper would spot and kill or wound an enemy soldier. As other enemy forces would attempt to aid the dead or wounded NVA the 106 would take them under fire." Col Tullis J. Woodham, Jr., Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Photo is from the Abel Collection

Two Boeing Vertol CH-46 helicopters from HMM-165 have landed troops from the 26th Marines in a landing zone in the An Hoa basin densely covered with elephant grass. The Marines will be taking part in Operation Mameluke Thrust.

Although it appeared that the NVA battalions once thought to be based on Go Noi Island were gone, intelligence sources indicated that the Communists would soon try to reoccupy the area.³⁸ At the request of the 1st Marine Division, Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 2/7 (Seventh Fleet Special Landing Force "B") launched Operation Swift Play on 23 July 1968, only 17 hours after having embarked on board amphibious shipping at the close of Operation Eager Yankee in Thua Thien Province.

Designed to complement Operation Allen Brook, Operation Swift Play was a surprise thrust into the Da The Mountain area, six kilometers south of Go Noi Island. After landing by helicopter, BLT 2/7 swept north toward the Song Chiem Son and the Allen Brook area of operations. During the week-long sweep, the Marines of BLT 2/7 uncovered numerous enemy caches and base areas, including what appeared to be a training center, complete with lecture hall, carefully hidden in the steep, forested mountains. On 31 July, BLT 2/7 crossed the Chiem Son to Go Noi Island and relieved the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines of responsibility for Operation Allen Brook. Three days later, the 27th Marines ended its participation in the operation altogether, passing control of BLT 2/7 to the 5th Marines, which had previously exchanged its area of operations near Phu Bai with the 26th Marines.

Land-clearing operations continued until the Communists launched their long-awaited "third offensive" on 23 August. With enemy activity on Go Noi Island only minimal, the 1st Marine Division terminated Operation Allen Brook so that the forces could be employed to battle the enemy forces threatening Da Nang. Company E remained behind temporarily to escort the engineers to Liberty Bridge while the remainder of BLT 2/7 departed by helicopter. On 24 August, as Company E and the engineer convoy of trucks and earth-moving equipment headed westward the enemy harassed them with sporadic sniper fire until they cleared Go Noi Island.

Operation Allen Brook lasted three and one half months and resulted in 917 enemy killed. An additional 11 were captured, and 2 rallied to the Government of Vietnam. The III MAF units which sought to bring Go Noi Island under government control lost 170 Marines and 2 sailors killed in action and a further 1,124 wounded. Even more fell to heat, disease, snakebite, accidents, and a host of other hazards. All the while they fought, Operation Mameluke Thrust continued in the west.

Mameluke Thrust Also Continues

On 3 June, General Robertson expanded the Mameluke Thrust area of operations eastward to include the Song Thu Bon-Song Tinh Yen valley.³⁹

The western portion of this basin was the "Arizona Territory" and the area on the east bank of the river was the An Hoa sector. While the Arizona Territory, like Go Noi Island, had been tightly in the grip of the Viet Cong for many years, the Marines had managed to maintain a presence at An Hoa, even while committed to the fighting on the nearby Go Noi. While the 26th Marines took control of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, General Robertson reinforced the 7th Marines with his only reserve, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines for operations in the An Hoa basin.

In the western sector of Mameluke Thrust under the 26th Marines, on 6 June, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines established a patrol base on Hill 1235 (known locally as Tho Thenon), the dominant peak of the massif which overlooked the Da Nang-Hoi An-Dai Loc Triangle, the Arizona Territory, Happy Valley, and the valley of the Song Thu Bon. At the same time, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines established its own battalion patrol base about two kilometers to the south, atop Hill 1062.

In the 7th Marines portion of the operation, Lieutenant Colonel McEwan's 1st Battalion, 26th Marines began operations in the An Hoa area on the morning of 7 June.* It did not have to wait long for action. At 0730, while moving southwest from Liberty Bridge, Company B came under fire from a North Vietnamese force atop a low hill only 1,200 meters from the bridge. The rest of the battalion quickly joined the action. As the Marines maneuvered, the North Vietnamese poured on a heavy fire, including machine guns and RPGs. The Marines called for artillery and close air support, but the enemy doggedly held the hill for nine hours, finally melting away at day's end. Marine casualties totaled 17 killed in action and 46 wounded. They found 64 dead North Vietnamese.⁴⁰

In the mountains to the west, the enemy remained elusive, avoiding contact even at the risk of losing large caches and base areas to the Marines. On 9 June, Company L, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, under the command of Captain Jesse D. Bennett, captured a recently abandoned NVA hospital. The complex contained 125 beds, medical supplies (including U.S.-made antibiotics), a clean operating room, a sterilizing area, a kitchen, food, medical records, a system of

running water built with bamboo pipes, and 16 pounds of marijuana.^{41**}

On 11 June, acting on a prisoner's information, Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines located what turned out to be the command post of the notorious *368B Rocket Regiment*. The quantity of equipment captured there was staggering: rocket warheads, plotting boards, fire control devices, drafting tools, compasses, binoculars, hundreds of uniforms, and items of personal equipment. The entire haul totaled 18 helicopter loads.⁴²

During the second week in June, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines swept eastward, down from the mountains, then terminated participation in the operation. At the same time, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines moved northward from An Hoa to the area bounded by the Thu Bon, Ai Nghia, and La Tho Rivers known as "Dodge City," and Lieutenant Colonel Donald N. Rexroad's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines moved to An Hoa.

The action seemed to follow the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines. On 13 June, only two days after entering the Dodge City area, the battalion encountered a North Vietnamese force near the village of Ky Chau, one kilometer west of a line of ROK Marine blocking positions along the National Railroad. The Communists were cut off by the Song Ky Lam to the west and south, the ROK's to the east, and the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines attacking from the north. They resolutely defended their position using heavy machine guns, 60mm mortars, and RPGs. In a nine-hour battle, the Marines lost 3 killed and 24 wounded, killing 44 of the enemy in the process.⁴³ Late that night, as Company B lay in ambush at the junction of a trail and the railroad bed, approximately 30–50 North Vietnamese attempted to escape to the east. In the ensuing fight, 15 of the enemy died, with the Marines sustaining no casualties.

Two days later, the enemy again ran afoul of the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines. Two kilometers southeast of the 7th Marines' command post on Hill 55, a large North Vietnamese unit occupied a heavily fortified triangular-shaped position 500 meters wide, which included a trenchline and a number of bunkers. The

* Lieutenant Colonel McEwan related that Colonel Reverdy M. Hall, the commander of the 7th Marines, referred to him as the "magnet . . . [since] 1/26 always made contact with the enemy . . ." LtCol Frederick J. McEwan, Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

** Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, the commander of the 26th Marines, related that under the Geneva Agreement, the medical supplies had to be used to treat captured prisoners of war. He remembered that all the supplies had to be evacuated out by helicopter. Among the supplies were cartons of brassieres and tampons, although there was no other indication of the presence of women. According to Meyers, "the battalion surgeon practically cried when he had to give up the finely crafted East German medical instruments. He lamented to me, 'Col. Meyers, these are better medical instruments than we get!'" Meyers Comments.

Marines fought the Communists through the afternoon of 15 June and into the early evening, making liberal use of close air support and artillery. When they overran the enemy positions at 1930, the Marines reported 84 North Vietnamese dead. Their own casualties were 7 killed in action and 15 wounded.⁴⁴

The action near Hill 55 marked the end of the sweep through the Dodge City area and the focus of Operation Mameluke Thrust moved once again to the western valleys. On 14 June, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines marched out from An Hoa, leaving Company-K to guard the fire support base, and crossed the Song Yen into the Arizona Territory. Just across the river from An Hoa, Company I came under attack. A Communist mortar round killed the company commander, a platoon commander, and the company gunnery sergeant and seriously wounded the company executive officer, First Lieutenant Joseph T. Campbell. As the only officer left alive, Lieutenant Campbell refused evacuation and assumed command of the company. He directed medevac helicopters into and out of the landing zone and organized suppressive fire on the Communist positions nearby. Before he himself could be

flown out, Lieutenant Campbell succumbed to his wounds. For his heroic action, he received the Navy Cross, posthumously.⁴⁵

Northeast of Thuong Duc, another dramatic action took place the following day when Company K, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines received mortar fire while escorting a convoy. Corporal David M. Sivak volunteered to recover a machine gun abandoned during the initial contact. He crept uphill toward the weapon until a North Vietnamese soldier in a nearby fighting hole spotted him and began throwing hand grenades. Although wounded in the chest by a fragment, Sivak emptied 12 full magazines from his M16 at his tormentor.

Sivak finally reached the machine gun and continued advancing into the enemy position. The NVA soldier suddenly stuck his head out from a hidden tunnel. Deciding against running toward his comrades for fear of being shot in the back, Corporal Sivak threw the machine gun at the North Vietnamese, who then ducked back into the tunnel.

The enemy soldier looked out from the tunnel a second time and Sivak attacked with his bare hands.



Photo is from the Abel Collection

Marine Cpl David M. Sivak from the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines poses with various North Vietnamese weapons captured in a recent operation. In his hand he holds the K-Bar knife with which he killed a North Vietnamese soldier in a hand-to-hand fight.

The Communist fired his rifle, creasing Sivak's leg, and Sivak knocked the weapon from the man's hands. As the two grappled in the confines of the hole, the North Vietnamese bit the Marine savagely on the arm. Angered, Sivak bit him back, then drew his Kabar* and stabbed his opponent. The enemy soldier produced his own knife and stabbed Sivak in the back, but it was too late. The Marine had gained the upper hand. Sivak continued stabbing until he realized that the man had died.

Corporal Sivak remained in the hole until his comrades overran the hill. From captured documents, the Marines learned that the dead man was part of a nine-man North Vietnamese mortar forward observer team. Only when Sivak lost consciousness did his fellow Marines realize that he was wounded.

Corporal Sivak's adventure was not yet over. The story of his experience at the 1st Hospital Company is best told in his own words, recorded only three weeks after the incident:

I went to 1st Hospital and the doctor started checking me out for malaria and I told him that wasn't wrong and he said, "What's wrong?" . . . I said, "Well, I got stabbed in the back, I got bit in the arm, I got shrapnel in the chest, and I got shot in the leg." He couldn't believe it until he looked at it. He thought it was kinda funny. I wasn't in a mood to laugh at it. They thought I might have to get rabies shots from where I got bit in the arm, but I made out. All I had to do was get a tetanus shot. I was scared because rabies shots, you get 16 of them, they said, in the stomach. I got a weak stomach.⁴⁶

Corporal Sivak's platoon sergeant, reflecting on Sivak's harrowing experience, said only, "I think the bite was worse than the stab."⁴⁷

Retaining control of the 3d Battalion, the 26th Marines now absorbed the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, as well as Lieutenant Colonel Roger H. Barnard's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines. At 0815 on 17 June, two of Barnard's companies conducted a helicopter assault into the Hill 1235 area and began the task of patrolling in the difficult terrain of Tho Thenon. After a respite of five days for refurbishing, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines conducted a helicopter assault into the western end of Happy Valley, near the confluence of the Song Yang and the Song Iang. Meeting no opposition, the Marines turned to the now-familiar tasks of establishing a battalion patrol base and sweeping the assigned area.

On 19 June, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines moved westward from the fire support base at Hill 52, follow-

ing the Song Vu Gia toward Thuong Duc and searching the same ground covered one month before by the 3d Battalion at the beginning of the operation. It was the nature of the war that the only areas which were known to be secure were those areas physically occupied, thus, it was often necessary to retrace old steps in the search for the enemy. But this time, the Communists carefully avoided contact.

The 1st Battalion, 26th Marines continued to push through the valley, past Thuong Duc, then turned northward and followed the trace of the Song Yang to link up with the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines in Happy Valley on 27 June. The next day, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines linked up with the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines at the western edge of the Arizona Territory, southeast of Thuong Duc, then left the operation.

Southeast of An Hoa, in the Que Son area, the U.S. Army's Americal Division planned an offensive dubbed Operation Pocahontas Forest. The 1st Marine Division developed a plan to intercept Communist forces driven into the upper Song Thu Bon Valley by the Americal Division. At 1815 on 7 July, Battery A, 1st Battalion, 13th Marines established a fire support base on the west bank of the Song Thu Bon, near Nong Son, about 11 kilometers southwest of An Hoa.⁴⁸ Its mission was to provide artillery support to the Marine units which would be engaged in Operation Mameluke Thrust/Pocahontas Forest. The next morning, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines conducted a helicopter assault into a landing zone along the Khe Dienne, also just west of the Song Thu Bon, but about three kilometers upstream of the new fire support base at Nong Son.

Elsewhere, on 9 July, Mameluke Thrust began to expand once again as the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines attacked into the Dodge City area and the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines entered the Song Cu De Valley (called "Elephant Valley") to conduct the "Northern Phase" of the operation. In Elephant Valley, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines found "no signs of well-utilized trails, prepared positions, [or] camp and harbor sites of any sizeable enemy force."⁴⁹ On 19 July, the battalion secured from the operation and returned to Phu Bai.

As intelligence reports continued to indicate the enemy planned a major attack on Da Nang during late July, the 1st Marine Division redistributed forces to meet the threat.⁵⁰ On 20 July, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines shifted from its blocking position near Nong Son, back to An Hoa. Two days later, the 26th Marines, with the 1st and 3d Battalions, went north to Phu Bai,

*The Marine Corps issue combat knife.

relieving the 5th Marines in Operation Houston.

The expected Communist ground assault on Da Nang did not materialize during July. In place of it, the enemy launched the heaviest mortar and rocket attack on Da Nang since Tet. On 23 July, 143 rounds of rocket and mortar fire fell on the city and air base, killing 6 and wounding 76. The enemy fire damaged a runway, six helicopters, a Rockwell International OV-10 Bronco, and an Air Force Fairchild C-123 Provider. Recognizing the need for further protection against the rocket threat, III MAF earlier had directed the erection of a Da Nang Anti-infiltration System (DAIS) in cooperation with ARVN forces. At the beginning of July, generally following the outer trace of the Da Nang rocket belt, the 1st Marine Division had started work on the DAIS, which was to include concertina and barbed wire fencing, sensors, towers, and bunkers. By the end of the month, Marine engineers and ARVN had completed about 65 percent of the first of two increments of the planned project. Obviously, the uncompleted DAIS offered only a minor impediment to the enemy rocketeers during the month.⁵¹

The Marines attributed the enemy's failure to carry out the expected ground attacks in the city to the success of Operation Mameluke Thrust. As one unit history recorded:

Prisoners and documents continued to indicate that the enemy had a definite plan for infiltration of Da Nang city proper with sapper and related forces. . . . It appeared that *Group 44 (Quang Da Special Zone) Headquarters* endeavored to carry out such a plan . . . , but was unable to consummate the action due to interdiction of his forces prior to initiation of his offensive.⁵²

During the last week of July, Colonel Paul G. Graham's 5th Marines redeployed to An Hoa from Phu Bai and began operations in the An Hoa basin immediately. The day it arrived, the 2d Battalion moved to the field, northeast of the fire support base, and soon encountered numerous small North Vietnamese units. After these initial engagements, contact tapered off dramatically. By the end of the month, the enemy appeared to have evacuated the An Hoa area.

In the Arizona Territory, the month ended with an unusual sighting reported by a reconnaissance team. On 28 July, Stingray patrol "Scandinavia" sighted four Soviet-built PT-76 tanks and a wheeled vehicle barely 3,500 meters northwest of the An Hoa fire support base. An air observer confirmed the sighting and Scandinavia called for close air support and artillery fire on

the area, resulting in four secondary explosions.⁵³ The following morning, Teams Albrook and Scandinavia reported two vehicles, at least one of which was tracked, moving in circles about a kilometer northeast of the previous sighting. Scandinavia directed artillery and air attacks against the vehicles, but could not observe the target effectively. Later that day, an agent report told of two destroyed armored fighting vehicles in the same location as the first sighting.⁵⁴ To verify these reports, Companies D and F, 5th Marines searched the area of the sightings, but found no evidence of tanks.

August began with a significant enemy contact for Stingray patrol "Flaky Snow" in the Arizona Territory. At 0405 on 1 August, a company of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong rushed Flaky Snow's position from the north, using grenades, satchel charges, bangalore torpedoes, and RPG fire to overwhelm the Marines. The enemy withdrew immediately, having killed 5 Marines and wounded 11. To complicate matters further for Flaky Snow, the attack temporarily knocked its radio out of action, which prevented it from calling for help. The team got the radio working again at 0600, and called for the reaction force. Within 20 minutes, help arrived. The reaction force landed by helicopter, under fire from the west, to find all of the observation post's bunkers destroyed and a North Vietnamese flag flying over the position. The Flaky Snow Marines claimed to have killed seven of their attackers, but a search of the area revealed only three bodies.⁵⁵

The frequency of enemy contact continued to rise in the beginning of August. In the Arizona Territory during the first two days of the month, A Troop, 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, 1st Air Cavalry Division, under the operational control of the 5th Marines, killed 96 Communists in 30 hours.⁵⁶ The 5th Marines continued search and clear operations with Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Thompson's 1st Battalion in the Arizona Territory and Lieutenant Colonel James W. Stemple's 2d Battalion northeast of An Hoa. Lieutenant Colonel Stemple recalled that his battalion "was invested from the An Hoa combat base to Liberty Bridge, and was involved in activity with the enemy on a daily basis"⁵⁷

At 0915, on 6 August, Companies E and F engaged a North Vietnamese company near the village of Cu Ban, scene of many fights between the Communists and Operation Allen Brook forces in the previous weeks. Corporal Robert G. Fante, a squad leader assigned to Company F, maneuvered his men forward, pressing home the attack on the Communist positions.

* See Chapter 28 for further discussion of the Da Nang barrier.

Spotting a 75mm recoilless rifle, he singlehandedly assaulted the position, capturing the weapon and killing or driving off its crew members. Corporal Fante continued to lead his squad on a rampage through the enemy's defenses, clearing bunkers with hand grenades and pursuing the retreating North Vietnamese. He was leading this advance when killed by enemy fire. For his courageous acts, Corporal Fante was awarded the Navy Cross posthumously.⁵⁸

After overrunning the enemy position, the Marines found 23 North Vietnamese dead and 34 tons of rice, in addition to the recoilless rifle captured by Corporal Fante. Fante was the only Marine killed in the fight, but 21 others and 1 Navy corpsman suffered wounds.⁵⁹ An additional 46 Marines sustained injuries when an aircraft accidentally dropped a load of napalm bombs on Company F's position during the fight. Lieutenant Colonel Stemple recalled that a bomb hit the reserve platoon of Company F and just missed his command group by a few yards.⁶⁰

The two battalions continued the search and clear operations in their assigned sectors for the next nine days without significant contact. The Marines searched caves, bunkers, and dwellings, patrolled roads and rice paddies, and killed Communists one or two at a time. Casualties continued to trickle into the hospitals and aid stations in the rear as Marines fell victim to the familiar enemy formula: mines, boobytraps, and sniper fire by day; harassing mortar fire by night.

Indications that the enemy was preparing to launch his expected offensive continued to build. On 10 August, acting on intelligence reports, the 1st Marine Division issued instructions directing subordinate units to prepare to assist in the defense of the DaNang vital area. The order called for reduced "day workloads . . . to allow adequate rest [for] all hands" and a concomitant increase in night activities. The tanks sighted in the Arizona Territory a few weeks earlier now caused a flurry of interest in reviewing and updating the division's antimechanized plans.⁶¹

On 16 August, "usually reliable sources, in addition to two counter intelligence agents" disclosed that the *402d Sapper Battalion*, the *R-20 Battalion*, and possibly a regimental headquarters were located three kilometers southeast of Liberty Bridge in the village of Chau Phong.⁶² The location of such a large concentration of enemy troops less than 30 kilometers south of Da Nang was a further indication that the enemy offensive would soon begin, accompanied by the previously anticipated sapper attacks on the city proper. The 1st Marine Division acted quickly,

ordering the 5th Marines to surprise the enemy battalions at Chau Phong and to destroy them in their staging areas.

At 2300, the night of 16 August, three Marine infantry battalions silently converged on the hamlet of Chau Phong (2). Lieutenant Colonel LeRoy E. Watson's BLT 2/7, participating in Operation Swift Play in the hills south of Go Noi Island, shifted into a blocking position 1,200 meters east of the objective along a major stream. Stemple's 2d Battalion, 5th Marines sealed the west side of the objective along another stream 2,000 meters from Chau Phong. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Rufus A. Seymour, flew into An Hoa and conducted a night approach march into an assembly area near My Son (1), about five kilometers southwest of the Communist positions. H-hour was set for 0700, 17 August.⁶³

Lieutenant Colonel Ben A. Moore, Jr.'s gunners of the 2d Battalion, 11th Marines drew first blood with an artillery preparation that began at 0400 and lasted until 0700. The original plan called for the artillery barrage to be followed by a low-level air attack, also dropping smoke and CS gas on the objective area. According to Lieutenant Colonel Stemple, torrential rains after midnight, however, forced the cancellation of the air strikes until mid- and late-morning without the smoke or CS. The original plan called for his battalion to initiate a predawn "attack by fire" so as to confuse the NVA as to the direction of attack and to hold them in place. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines was then to make the main assault attacking northeast into Chau Pong (2). Stemple's troops opened fire, according to plan, but he recalled that inadvertently, elements of BLT 2/7 moved in front of Seymour's battalion and delayed the main assault. About 200 North Vietnamese, however, attempted to flee to the east at 1200, and Companies F and G, BLT 2/7 were waiting for them. Marines of these two companies reported killing 53 of the enemy while suffering only 11 men wounded. At 1500, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines finally assaulted and captured the hamlet, finding "many enemy dead, weapons, equipment, and food supplies." The enemy cache yielded significant quantities of stores, including 88 tons of rice and enough medical supplies to support 500 men.⁶⁴

During the night of 17 August, the three battalions adjusted their lines. At first light, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines moved northward across a branch line of the National Railroad to search the hamlet of Chau Phong (1). At the same time, BLT 2/7 crossed

the stream toward the hamlet, then swung northward with orders to attack and seize the hamlets of La Thap (1) and Le Nam (3), which were about 1,500 meters north of Chau Phong. At 0700, Company E, BLT 2/7 engaged a North Vietnamese company defending a low hill just northeast of Chau Phong. The enemy troops, described as "fresh" and "determined," were well-equipped, even to the point of wearing helmets and body armor.⁶⁵ The Marines returned fire and attempted to envelop the enemy, but the determined defense put up by the North Vietnamese drove them to cover. Taking up positions 600 meters away, the Marines directed artillery fire and airstrikes (the latter including CS gas) on the enemy, driving them from the hill. The North Vietnamese left 12 dead in the position, while Company E lost 6 Marines killed, and 25 wounded.⁶⁶ On Company E's left, Company G, BLT 2/7 also encountered a North Vietnamese unit which similarly impeded the battalion's attack to the north. With BLT 2/7 bogged down by these pockets of resistance, the 5th Marines modified the original plan and ordered the

2d Battalion, 5th Marines to capture the hamlets of La Thap (1) and Le Nam (3).

At 1500, as Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines approached the objective, they engaged an enemy platoon defending the hamlet of La Thap (1). The Marines advanced, returning fire, but enemy resistance increased. A five-hour shootout ensued, during which six flights of aircraft bombed the enemy, while the 2d Battalion, 11th Marines provided a heavy dose of artillery fire on the hamlet. At 2000, Company G assaulted and captured the position, killing 37 North Vietnamese and effectively ending the battle of Chau Phong. Seven Company G Marines died and 19 were wounded in the fight.⁶⁷

Operation Mameluke Thrust continued for some time. But soon after the battle for Chau Phong, the Communists launched their long-awaited offensive in the Da Nang area, diverting III MAF's energies to deal with the new threat. By this time in northern I Corps, the 3d Marine Division had launched its own offensive against the North Vietnamese Divisions in both the DMZ sector and in western Quang Tri Province.

PART IV

THE WAR CONTINUES:
OFFENSIVE AND
COUNTER-OFFENSIVE

CHAPTER 18

3d Division Takes the Offensive

*The Enemy Situation—The Offensive Takes Shape—The Eastern DMZ
The Pressure Continues—Into the Western Mountains—Southern Quang Tri and Thua Thien*

The Enemy Situation

In northern I Corps, enemy activity throughout Quang Tri Province was light and sporadic during the early days of June. With the virtual destruction of two regiments of the veteran *320th NVA Division* in the eastern sector of the DMZ in late May, enemy ground activity in the province's northeastern quadrant decreased markedly. What enemy activity there was, was generally limited to long-range rocket and artillery attacks on allied positions from within and north of the Demilitarized Zone. Although squad- and platoon-sized enemy units did engage wide-ranging allied patrols, no large North Vietnamese force attempted to attack allied installations or formations.

Further west, agent reports placed the *270th NVA Regiment* and *27th Independent Regiment* in Leatherneck Square, the area bounded by Con Thien (A-4), Gio Linh, Dong Ha, and Cam Lo. Intelligence analysts assumed that these two enemy units would not only attack allied installations in the region, but attempt to destroy the Cam Lo Refugee Resettlement Project and interdict Route 9.

Within the central portion of the province, units subordinate to the *Quang Tri Liberation Front* or *7th Front*, including elements of the *812th Regiment*, and the *808th* and *818th Separate Battalions*, although unlocated, were poised to venture out of their jungle sanctuaries on the Quang Tri-Thua Thien provincial border and launch attacks against Quang Tri City and surrounding allied bases. Forward elements of the three enemy units were known to be in the countryside surrounding the city, attempting to obtain rice and recruits.

In the western reaches of the province, centered on the Khe Sanh Plateau, the *304th NVA Division* was joined in late May by the *88th* and *102d Regiments*, *308th NVA Division*. The enemy regiments, which had arrived recently from Hanoi, were to reinforce the *304th* and launch attacks against Khe

Sanh Combat Base and Route 9, from Ca Lu west to the Laotian border. The number of enemy units located within the Demilitarized Zone area and in Quang Tri Province at the beginning of June was estimated at 36 infantry and 6 support battalions, and confirmed enemy combat strength placed at 23,100 troops.¹

The Offensive Takes Shape

Upon taking over in late May, the new 3d Marine Division commander, Major General Raymond G. Davis, found the maneuver elements of the division generally occupying fixed positions in four operational areas centered on the Demilitarized Zone from Cua Viet to Khe Sanh. In the coastal lowlands, or Napoleon-Saline area of operations, Colonel Milton A. Hull's 3d Marines and Lieutenant Colonel George F. Meyers' 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion occupied Camp Kistler at the Cua Viet's port facility. The 1st and 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, located nearby, conducted periodic sweeps of the area north and northwest of the port facility, while companies of Lieutenant Colonel Meyers' battalion occupied the C-4 strongpoint and conducted similar sweeps of the immediate area. Also under the operational control of the 3d Marines were elements of Lieutenant Colonel Michael V. Palatas' 1st Battalion, 9th Marines.

Northwest of Cua Viet, in the Kentucky area of operations, the 9th Marines under Colonel Richard B. Smith provided security for the outposts within the area of operations, from Gio Linh to Cam Lo, as well as the major lines of communications, Routes 1, 9, and 561. Under Smith's operational control was Lieutenant Colonel Francis J. Heath, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 26th Marines which secured the strongpoints at Con Thien, A-3, C-2, and C-2 bridge, all strung along Route 561, a north-south provincial road stretching from the Demilitarized Zone to Cam Lo. The regimental headquarters and 1st and 3d Battalions, 26th Marines had been deployed to Da Nang on 18 May from the Quang Tri sector to

participate in the 1st Marine Division's operation Mameluke Thrust.*

Headquartered at Camp Carroll in the Lancaster II area of operations were Colonel Edward J. Miller's 4th Marines and a battalion of the 9th Marines. The 1st and 2d Battalions, 4th Marines, the latter organized as a battalion landing team (BLT), and the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines secured combat bases at Camp Carroll, Thon Son Lam, and Ca Lu, all centered on Route 9. At Ca Lu, under the operational control of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines was Lieutenant Colonel Daniel J. Quick's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, which like the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, was organized as a battalion landing team.**

The largest of the division's four operational areas was Scotland II, which encompassed the western third of Quang Tri Province. Primary responsibility for operations within this area lay with the 3d Marine Division's Task Force Hotel, a multi-battalion task force commanded by Assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General Carl W. Hoffman. Hoffman's task force consisted of two battalions of Colonel Stanley S. Hughes' 1st Marines, and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel Jack W. Davis.

The three battalions under Brigadier General Hoffman's command were assigned the task of maintaining the defense of Khe Sanh Combat Base and the surrounding outposts on Hills 881, 861, 950, and other prominent terrain features. In addition, troops of the task force secured Route 9, the vital overland resupply route for the division's western-most fortified positions, from Landing Zone Stud and Ca Lu to Khe Sanh.

Providing artillery support for the division's ground elements were the four organic battalions of the 12th Marines under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Wilson A. Kluckman. A battery from the regiment, or another allied artillery unit under its operational control, was in position at every combat base and strongpoint, ready to support the maneuver battalions and to

respond to enemy attacks by fire on allied installations or populated areas.

With the ground elements of the division generally tied to fixed positions, the tactical effectiveness of such a disposition of forces was limited. A considerable number of troops were needed to defend these installations strung out along the Demilitarized Zone. In turn, these fixed installations presented lucrative targets for both North Vietnamese ground forces and artillery gunners. Beyond immediate allied patrol zones, large areas of Quang Tri Province virtually belonged to the enemy.

The overall tactical situation in late May, therefore, might be viewed as one of balance. On the one hand the North Vietnamese had been soundly defeated in their attempts against major Marine bases at Khe Sanh and Dong Ha. On the other, allied forces had not attempted to penetrate the enemy's large base areas nor attempted to disrupt his supply and infiltration routes deep in the mountainous jungles of western Quang Tri.

This tactical disposition of the division's forces would be turned around with General Davis' assumption of command. Buttressed by the presence of two U.S. Army divisions, which greatly strengthened troop density in northern I Corps, Davis prepared to take the war to the enemy. After reducing the number of troops at fixed positions, he placed the 3d Marine Division in a more mobile posture, characteristic of ongoing Army air cavalry and airborne operations. "The way to get it done," Davis later recalled, "was to get out of those 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."²

As Lieutenant General Rosson's deputy at Provisional Corps, Vietnam, Davis had observed first-hand the mobile operations of the 1st Air Cavalry Division. With extensive helicopter support, air cavalry troops "forgot about real estate" and applied the necessary forces directly against enemy troop dispositions.³ Drawing not only on these experiences, but also on classical amphibious concepts, and deep vertical envelopment techniques developed during the late 1950s, he devised a synthesis that combined elements of all three.⁴

Davis' concept of mobile operations was dependent upon adequate and timely helicopter support. "I was very fortunate in this," he was later to state, "that the later [and more powerful] model of the CH-46 was arriving in-country in large numbers." In addition,

*See Chapter 17 for Mameluke Thrust. Colonel John C. Studt, who commanded the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, observed that his battalion's stay at Quang Tri "was like R&R (rest and recreation) for the troops after Khe Sanh." Much of the mission around Quang Tri for the battalion involved rice protection and night security. He recalled that they had some success with "the idea of building small ambush killer teams around experienced deer hunters, i.e. if you can ambush a deer, you should be able to ambush a VC." Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

**BLT 2/4 and BLT 3/1 were the landing forces of SLFs Alpha and Bravo, respectively. Both battalions had been ashore and attached to the 3d Marine Division since late January. On 3 June, BLT 3/1 returned to the operational control of SLF Bravo. See Chapter 30.

due to his close working relationship with General Rosson, Davis had the promise of Army helicopter support if needed.

This was a fine thing about my command out there, Rosson...guaranteed me that when we'd go into these tactical operations, I never needed to look back over my shoulder a single time and wonder if I was going to be supported. I knew that they were going to give me the helicopters I would need."^{5*}

More important, however, was the creation of Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 39 at Quang Tri in April and the assignment later, initially on a temporary basis, of Assistant Wing Commander, Brigadier General Homer S. Hill, to the 3d Division headquarters. Acting as the Marine air commander for northern I Corps, General Hill, as Davis noted, "had enough authority delegated to him from the wing, where he could execute things, he could order air units to do things." Highly flexible mobile operations and the lives of individual Marines taking part in such operations would be totally dependent upon air. Without a responsive air commander on the scene, these operations, Davis continued, would be "a shambles" and Marines would suffer.⁶ With helicopter transport assured, division Marines would begin to move from relatively static positions south of the Demilitarized Zone, into the mountainous regions of Quang Tri Province in search of the enemy, his infiltration routes, and his supplies.^{**}

In addition to moving the division toward a more mobile posture, General Davis reinstituted unit integrity. As a result of the promulgation of the M series table of organization, Marine battalions were delegated the capability of self-administration. The regiment was to be "responsive to an administrative concept in which fiscal, personnel, supply and maintenance functions and transactions usually proceed directly from subordinate elements to the division."⁷ The regiment, therefore, was essentially a tactical headquarters.

Prior to the reinstitution of unit integrity, there was a constant rotation of battalions among regiments. The 4th Marines in early June, for example, controlled a battalion of the 1st Marines, two battalions of the 9th Marines, and only one of its organic battalions. Under such circumstances, one of Davis' regimental commanders termed regiments "warlords" and the battalions "roving bands of mercenaries. The regiments had little interest in the logistics, personnel, supply, and maintenance fields of the battalions."⁸ Battalions, on the other hand, "felt . . . they were commanded by strangers. Every unit has kind of a 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."⁹ Davis gradually changed that; each regiment, under normal operating circumstances, would now control its organic battalions. With the change came unit cohesion, cooperation, esprit de corps, and "a greater awareness on the part of the staff officers in the regiment and their counterparts in the battalions, about one another's capabilities and personalities."^{10***} Davis later commented that this was "the key to our success."¹¹

The most lucrative targets for the division's first mobile operation were the large enemy formations which remained to the south and west of Khe Sanh. These included remnants of the defeated *304th NVA Division* and at least two regiments of the recently infiltrated *308th NVA Division*. Elements of the two enemy divisions were concentrating their main efforts at interdicting the segment of Route 9 between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh and in constructing a new supply route from

*Colonel Vaughn R. Stuart, who assumed command of the 3d Marines in July, commented, however, that there were very few Army helicopters available to the 3d Marine Division except for command and control and the Army Sikorsky CH-54 Flying Crane. He recalled a situation when he was sent only two CH-46 helicopters and that "it took all day and all that night to get the infantry and artillery into position and ready to fire missions at first light the next morning." He wondered where the helicopter support from the Army and Provisional Corps was on that occasion. Col Vaughn R. Stuart, Comments on draft, dtd 20Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Stuart Comments.

**See Chapter 25 for further discussion of the relationship between the 3d Marine Division and the Wing over the employment of helicopters.

***Colonel Stuart, who assumed command of the 3d Marines on 15 July 68, took exception to the above statements. He wrote that the regiment "had absolute tactical authority over those organizations under its Op[erational] Con[trol], and the regimental commander with any leadership ability at all knew the full status of the subordinate units. If there were any deficiencies in supply, maintenance, or personnel, he had all of the authority necessary to get those deficiencies corrected." He also took exception to terms such as "warlord" and "roving bands of mercenaries." According to Stuart, the battalions "had missions directed by the regiments in response to missions given by the division." As regimental commander, he could not worry about such niceties concerning the personality or ability of a particular battalion commander to carry out a particular mission. During this period, his selection usually depended upon whatever "battalion was the least occupied." Stuart Comments. On the other hand, Colonel Billy R. Duncan, who commanded the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines from January to August 1968, wrote that the relationships of the attached battalions to the regiments was ". . . difficult at best." He stated that the regiments had little interest in the logistics and support elements of the battalions. Col Billy R. Duncan, Comments on draft, dtd 15Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

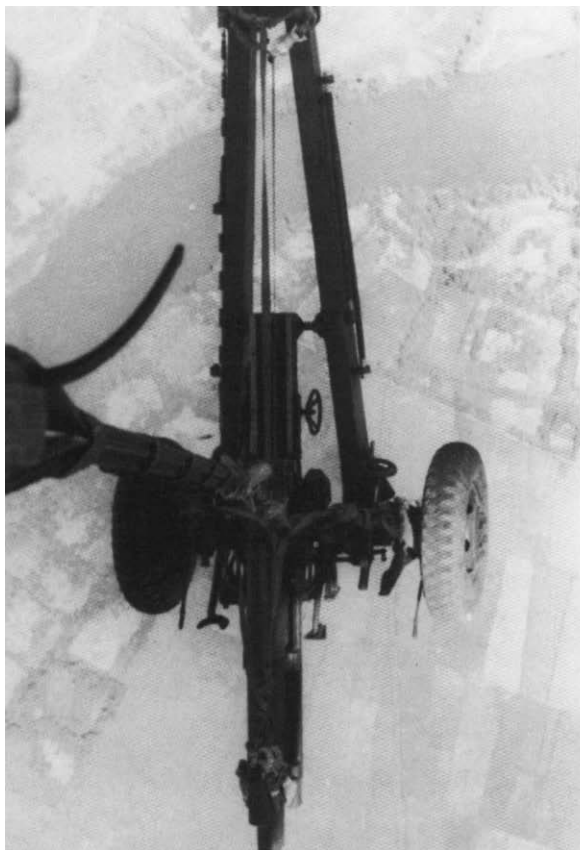


Photo courtesy of Col Roger W. Peard, USMC (Ret)
The crew chief's view through the "Hell Hole" of a Marine Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallion is of an artillery piece dangling below the helicopter. The crew chief had the responsibility to report any swinging of the load to the pilot.

Laos across the southern portion of the Vietnamese Salient, that portion of southwestern Quang Tri Province which juts into Laos.

The primary responsibility for offensive operations within the Scotland II area of operation rested with Brigadier General Hoffman's Task Force Hotel. Working closely with representatives of the 3d Division and the 1st and 4th Marines, Hoffman and his staff prepared an operations plan which called for a series of heliborne assaults far to the south and west of Route 9. During discussions leading up to the final plan, Hoffman noted that in moving into the operational area, the Marine units involved would be placing themselves beyond the maximum range of allied artillery at Khe Sanh and Ca Lu. The solution was simple; the artillery would accompany the infantry. This was not the first time artillery would be moved to forward positions to support the maneuvering elements of the division. In



Photo from the Abel Collection
Troops from the 9th Marines unload mortar ammunition from a Marine Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter on top of a mountain fire base near the Laotian border. The fire base concept enhanced the mobility of the Marine infantry in the rugged terrain.

this case, fire support bases would have to be established in the very heart of enemy-held territory.

Since these fire support bases would be constructed in mountainous, jungle-covered terrain, almost always on an easily defensible mountain peak or razorback ridgeline, the artillery would have to be inserted and extracted by helicopter. All resupply for the fire support bases and maneuver elements would likewise have to be accomplished by air. Once established in mutually supporting pairs, 8,000 meters apart with a 3,000-meter overshoot to cover enemy mortars, these fire bases would provide continuous, overlapping artillery support to infantry units operating beneath the fan. When infantry operations moved beyond the range of the 8,000-meter artillery fan, another fire support base would be established.

Initially, the construction of these forward artillery positions would prove to be a complicated and difficult

task. Often selected from the air, the sites had to meet three specific criteria in addition to satisfying the requirement that they be at specified ranges from each other to support the scheme of maneuver. The site needed to be large enough to accommodate at least one six-gun 105mm howitzer artillery battery and it had to be defensible by an infantry platoon, or in rare cases by a reinforced platoon. To meet the third criteria, the position itself had to be capable of being constructed within 24 to 36 hours.¹² Once the Marines had selected a site that met the criteria, they accomplished the initial clearing with aerial ordnance or artillery. Engineers supported by infantry either moved overland or were helilifted to the site and would then secure the area and complete the work of demolition. A small air-transportable bulldozer would be brought in to prepare berms and pits for the artillery. Finally, helicopters would transport to the fire support base the guns, battery personnel and their supplies, and the initial stock of ammunition.

Task Force Hotel initially established two fire support bases, Robin and Loon, to support the search operations south of Route 9. As in all subsequent operations of the division that involved the use of forward artillery positions, these two fire bases were positioned so that their artillery fans overlapped.

Following five days of extensive artillery preparation, which included 30 B-52 sorties, Colonel Stanley S. Hughes' 1st Marines launched the first phase of the operation on 2 June. Early that morning, the members of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines conducted heliborne assaults from their assembly areas on Hill 558 and Landing Zone Stud into Landing Zone Robin and then further south into Loon. Both landing zones, south of Route 9, were near the limit of the range of Khe Sanh-based artillery. The two battalions then swept north towards Route 9, encountering scattered but light enemy resistance.

While the 1st Marines conducted their sweep northward, four battalions under the operational control of Colonel Edward J. Miller's 4th Marines assaulted into the area and began search operations to the south and west of Robin and Loon, where they encountered stiff enemy opposition. A battalion-sized enemy ground attack on Loon coupled with heavy artillery support from guns based at Co Roc in Laos dictated that Loon be abandoned in favor of a new fire base, Torch, five kilometers to the southwest.

Despite heavy enemy resistance, not only directed against Torch, but also against the maneuvering elements, the 4th Marines destroyed sections of a newly

constructed enemy road and large quantities of equipment and supplies. With the operations' end on 18 June, the 1st and 4th Marines moved out of the area, leaving more than 650 enemy dead. Four of the six battalions committed by the *308th NVA Division* were decimated, and subsequently the division itself was dropped from the allied order of battle of enemy forces. First Lieutenant William J. Spangler, the commander of Company B, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, recalled the operation as very successful, but that the North Vietnamese "use of border sanctuaries precluded total destruction." Although the Marines patrolled up to the Laotian border and took both direct and indirect fire from NVA forces in Laos, Spangler observed, "we did not pursue them with troops or supporting arms."^{13*}

It was clear from the search operations conducted southwest of Khe Sanh that the enemy was not prepared to cope with this new form of highly mobile warfare. Artillery batteries providing a movable support fan under which the infantry could maneuver; maneuver from the high ground to the low in contrast to the older method of moving up to search the high ground. In these operations, each company of a battalion operated independently of the others in terms of mutual support. As long as they remained within the 8,000-meter artillery fan, there was no requirement that rifle companies operate together. Each company was assigned a four- to nine-kilometer-square area within which a landing zone was established to facilitate resupply and the evacuation of casualties. Patrols would then fan out from the landing zone until the company's assigned square was thoroughly searched and cleared. Once the initial square was cleared, the company was then lifted by helicopter to another area within the artillery fan and the search and clear process would begin again. This type of maneuver would continue until the entire area of operations had been given a careful and detailed search.

An alternative method developed during these operations was for a battalion to be inserted onto a heavily wooded ridgeline where an artillery fire support base would be quickly established. One company would then move out from the fire support base and seize a high knob along the ridgeline where a landing zone would be cut out of the jungle while the company's platoons searched the fingers. At the same time, a second company would pass through the first and attack along the ridgeline, seize the next hilltop,

* A detailed account of Operations Robin North and Robin South can be found in Chapter 16.

cut a landing zone, and again search down the fingers. Using this technique a battalion could search a major ridgeline thoroughly and in the process discover major enemy trail networks and supply caches. Both of these search and clear methods proved highly successful in the operations carried out southwest of Khe Sanh and would become standard for all future division operations run in the mountainous areas of Quang Tri Province.

The use of these two search methods resulted in the disclosure of the enemy's mode of logistical support. The North Vietnamese, it was discovered, relied heavily on a series of pre-positioned store sites and interconnecting trail networks to support his forces. Along a trail at intervals of about an eight-hour walk apart, Marines would find a sizeable enemy way station, composed generally of bunkers, supply caches, huts, and a hospital. Enemy porters apparently would carry supplies from large depots in Laos or North Vietnam, stopping at a way station where they would remain hidden during the day and then proceed to the next station or return for another load. In general, most enemy porters relied on guides instead of maps and used well-marked, high-speed trails. "We came to realize," noted General Davis, "that if we were able to keep Marines on these trails, even from time to time, and were able to clean out his way stations, destroy his bunkers and his supplies periodically, that we could severely limit his activity." This realization, he concluded, "was a major reason for our change in our concept of operation."¹⁴

With the end of Operations Robin North and Robin South, the 1st Marines returned to the task of providing mobile security for Khe Sanh Combat Base, the surrounding high terrain, Route 9, and supply convoys travelling the road from Landing Zone Stud to Khe Sanh. Colonel Edward J. Miller's 4th Marines, instead of returning to Camp Carroll, were helilifted to Ca Lu where a temporary regimental headquarters was established, and the regiment's battalions were assigned the task of securing vital installations along Route 9, east from Khe Sanh to Camp Carroll.

In early June the decision was made to deactivate Khe Sanh Combat Base and shift the major Marine installation in western Quang Tri eastward to Landing Zone Stud. The 3d Marine Division units were now operating well beyond the range of Khe Sanh-based artillery, and the base itself had become more of a liability than an asset since it tied down large numbers of division troops to defend it, while they might have

been better employed in mobile operations carried out on the pattern of Robin North and Robin South. Finally, the base presented a large and continuing target for North Vietnamese attacks, and was no longer considered as vital to allied defensive plans as it had under those championed by former MACV commander, General William C. Westmoreland.*

Echoing the views of General Creighton Abrams, who relieved Westmoreland in mid-June, General Cushman of III MAF, General Rosson of Prov Corps, and General Davis, the MACV press release noted:

Friendly forces must make maximum use of their superior fire power and mobility. Mobile forces, tied to no specific terrain, must be used to the utmost to attack, intercept, reinforce or take whatever action is most appropriate to meet the increased enemy threats. Therefore, we have decided to continue the mobile posture adopted in western Quang Tri Province with Operation Pegasus in April. This decision makes the operation of the base at Khe Sanh unnecessary.¹⁵

During the latter days of June as Marine engineers made steady progress in converting Landing Zone Stud into a permanent forward operating base, the 1st Marines, now under the command of Colonel Ross T. Dwyer, Jr., continued with the evacuation and destruction of Khe Sanh. The regiment also provided security for Route 9 and Fire Support Bases Shepherd and Cates, formerly known as Landing Zones Mike and Lima, respectively, and the development of Landing Zone Hawk. But the enemy, who in the past had exerted such strenuous efforts to dislodge Marine forces from the base, now appeared reluctant to let them leave. In a series of sharp engagements fought during late June and the early days of July, elements of the 1st and 4th Marines thwarted repeated enemy attempts to break the security screen around Khe Sanh and Route 9 and disrupt the orderly deactivation of the base.**

The closing of Khe Sanh marked the definite abandonment of the static defense concept against North Vietnamese Army units in western Quang Tri Province. The 3d Marine Division henceforth was committed to what General Davis termed the "mobile concept" of offensive operations. This concept, or combination of techniques, was to rely on forward artillery positions and deep vertical envelopment to carry the war to the enemy throughout the division's area of operations.

* See the discussion in Chapter 16.

** For a more detailed examination of the deactivation of Khe Sanh Combat Base, see again Chapter 16.

The Eastern DMZ

The enemy generally avoided contact with 3d Marine Division forces operating within the Lancaster II, Kentucky, and Napoleon-Saline areas of operation during the month of June. Although wide-ranging division patrols did engage small groups of enemy forces, no major engagements such as those of May took place.

Within the Napoleon-Saline area of operations, Colonel Hull's 3d Marines, with the assistance of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion and companies of the Army's 8th and 9th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, continued to patrol the northern and southern banks and tributaries of the Song Cua Viet with the mission to ensure both the uninterrupted passage of shipping and to deny the enemy access to possible rocket sites. Patrols from the 3d Marines also continued to scour the coastal region of the province to protect the ongoing rice harvest. In addition, the regiment provided security for both equipment and personnel involved in dredging operations throughout the Cua Viet river system.

Throughout the month the 3d Marines conducted numerous daily sweeps and ambushes within its area of operations, concentrating on trail networks, river crossings, and village complexes known to harbor enemy sympathizers. Although finding and destroying a large number of enemy bunkers, spider holes, and supply caches, the Marines encountered few enemy.

While avoiding direct contact with Colonel Hull's patrols, the enemy instead relied on his DMZ-based artillery to inflict casualties on friendly forces. On 19 June and again on the 21st and 24th, Camp Kistler received a total of 111 rounds of enemy artillery resulting in 10 minor casualties and the destruction of a large ammunition bunker and gasoline storage facility. Artillery and naval gunfire counter-batteries produced several secondary explosions.

On 25 June, the 3d Marines assumed responsibility for the eastern portion of Leatherneck Square. Despite the lack of enemy contact, the heliborne assault and five-day search of the area marked the first time in a year that the regiment, its three organic battalions, and direct support artillery had operated together.

To the west, in the Kentucky area, Colonel Richard B. Smith's 9th Marines continued to conduct numerous sweeps and ambushes from static positions at Con Thien, A-3, C-2, and C-3. At the same time, Colonel Smith gradually reduced the regiment's security commitment to these four positions by shifting an ever-

increasing proportion of Marines under his command to field operations. In addition, regimental forces continued to develop a viable road network and a series of landing zones within the western portion of Leatherneck Square.

While there was a sharp decrease in enemy contact and artillery, mortar, and rocket fire compared to the previous month, the few engagements which took place were sharp and deadly. Shortly after noon on 6 June, for example, a reinforced platoon from Company E, 26th Marines observed and then engaged an estimated enemy company while on patrol 1,800 meters southeast of Con Thien. Reinforced by the command group and a rifle platoon from Company H, the patrol took the enemy under fire with small arms and 81mm mortars. The result was 14 enemy killed and 25 Marine casualties, 14 killed and 11 wounded.

The same day, the 9th Marines assumed responsibility for the Lancaster II area of operations from the 4th Marines, and a regimental command group was deployed from Dong Ha to Camp Carroll. Like the Kentucky area, the Lancaster area experienced no major enemy-initiated ground action during June, although the enemy did attempt to interdict Route 9 with ambushes and land mines and took Camp Carroll and Landing Zone Stud under rocket fire, resulting in the destruction of several ammunition and gasoline dumps and the wounding of 10 Marines.

Near the end of June, Lieutenant Colonel Michael V. Palatas' 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, in conjunction with Army Special Forces and Vietnamese regional, popular, and National Police Field forces, began a deliberate cordon in the Cua Valley, southeast of Camp Carroll. During operations around Khe Sanh earlier in the year, many native Montagnards were brought to the Cam Lo area where they were resettled temporarily with a large number of Vietnamese that had been evacuated from Leatherneck Square following Operation Hickory in 1967. In early June, it was decided to resettle the Montagnards permanently in the Cua Valley near the village of Thon Duc Kinh, four kilometers southeast of Camp Carroll. Palatas' battalion was given the task of clearing the village of known Viet Cong suspects and ensuring the area was secure enough to begin construction of the resettlement camp.

On the night of 21 June, squad-sized patrols from the battalion walked into the area, secured landing zone sites, and blocked likely enemy escape routes. At dawn the following morning, a platoon was helilifted into each landing zone, completing the cordon around Thon Duc Kinh. Later in the day, Marine and



Top photo is from the Abel Collection and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371563
Top, Marines of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion help South Vietnamese villagers pack their worldly goods, even to the extent of placing a thatched roof on top of the vehicle, to be transported to a resettlement village. Below, Navy Corpsman HM-3 Forrest G. McDonald bandages a Montagnard child's head to prevent scalp sores from becoming infected, as the mother looks on.



Vietnamese forces conducted a house-to-house search of the village, arresting more than 100 Viet Cong suspects of whom half were detained. Once the village was secured, Marine engineers immediately began construction of the resettlement camp. Palatas' Marines remained in the area for a week, conducting medical and dental examinations of the refugees and participating in other civic action projects.¹⁶ Following the Thon Duc Kinh cordon, the 9th Marines passed control of the Lancaster II area of operations to Task Force Hotel and the regimental command group returned to Dong Ha and the battalions to patrol and security sweeps throughout Leatherneck Square and the remainder of the Kentucky area of operations.

The Pressure Continues

The enemy continued to remain reluctant to commit his forces to decisive combat in large numbers during July. Although the NVA's aversion may have been due to a planned, periodic pause to provide temporary respite for its combat units, it was clear this reluctance was in part due to the continuing and unrelenting pressure applied by 3d Marine Division forces during June. Enemy assembly and staging

areas, bases, supply caches, and trail networks were subjected to constant allied air, artillery, naval gunfire, and ground attacks, taxing his capacity to maintain frontline and support units at an effective combat strength. Despite the enemy's reluctance, there was no diminution of the 3d Marine Division effort in July.

On the first day of the month, a massive combined supporting arms attack was launched against enemy artillery and antiaircraft concentrations located in the Cap Mui Lay Sector of North Vietnam. The sector encompassed that region from the southern edge of the Demilitarized Zone, north some 14 kilometers to Cap Mui Lay, and extended from the South China Sea westward to a point approximately 25 kilometers inland.

Planning for the attack began on 24 March when General Davis' predecessor, Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, proposed a combined and coordinated supporting arms attack against the Cap Mui Lay Sector to destroy enemy long-range shore batteries and artillery, limit the flow of enemy supplies to the south, and relieve the artillery threat against the Dong Ha-Cua Viet area. Provisional Corps, Vietnam developed a formal plan and submitted it to III MAF,

An ammunition supply dump at Dong Ha goes up in flames after an NVA artillery bombardment.

Photo from the Abel Collection





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190381

The photo shows the power of the resulting explosions. The axle wheels of a truck that was parked at the dump are the only identifiable remains of the vehicle seen strewn among the wreckage.

which in turn submitted a modification to MACV for approval. Following a preliminary planning conference which included representatives from MACV, Seventh Air Force, Seventh Fleet, III MAF, and Prov Corps, General Creighton Abrams, the MACV commander, approved the plan on 21 June, with D-Day set for 1 July.

To ensure that the operation, codenamed Thor, would be a success, several preparatory steps were taken. As a deceptive measure, work continued on Dyemarker or "McNamara" Line positions at A-2, A-3, and Con Thien to cover the construction of several forward artillery positions. In addition, the large amount of artillery ammunition, heavy artillery, and supporting ships were moved into place by 30 June. The destruction of the Dong Ha ammunition dump by enemy artillery on 20 June also in an ironic way helped the deception. According to Marine staff officers, the blast at the dump "practically blew the 3d Marine Division headquarters off of the map" and left the division "desperately short" of artillery ammunition.¹⁷ The execution of a massive supporting arms attack so shortly after a huge loss of ammunition seemed out of place, especially since the bulk

of the artillery forces engaged in the attack would have to depend on the Dong Ha ammunition dump for supply.

Preceded by three days of target reconnaissance by both Marine and Air Force aircraft, the first phase of the operation began as scheduled with a massive bombing effort against the sector. Controlled by Seventh Air Force, 664 Marine, Navy, and Air Force attack aircraft and 114 B-52 sorties delivered more than 4,000 tons of ordnance against predetermined enemy targets during the first two days of the operation. In phases two and three, the artillery fire of 13 batteries, composed of 59 guns, was integrated with the naval gunfire support of two cruisers and six destroyers and the continuing air attacks against target lists which were continually updated by 1st Marine Aircraft Wing reconnaissance flights.

On the morning of 8 July, the artillery batteries involved in Operation Thor began withdrawing from their forward positions and by the 10th had returned to their normal support locations.¹⁸ Also on the 8th, control of the area reverted from Prov Corps, which since 1 July was under Army Lieu-

tenant General Richard G. Stilwell,* to the Seventh Air Force which would coordinate future surveillance and air attacks on reemerging targets.

Damage to the North Vietnamese combat capability in the Cap Mui Lay Sector as a result of Operation Thor was substantial: more than 500 artillery and anti-aircraft positions, numerous bunkers and storage areas, and at least two surface-to-air missile sites were destroyed. Also, allied observers detected 352 secondary explosions and 236 secondary fires, providing evidence of probable hits on ammunition and supply dumps. The operation, however, was to have a more lasting effect. Artillery fire from north of the Demilitarized Zone declined significantly following Thor, as did the frequency of anti-aircraft opposition experienced by reconnaissance aircraft at all altitudes.**

While Operation Thor was in progress, the 3d and 9th Marines, in coordination with the 2d ARVN Regiment, launched attacks against enemy troops driven south of the Demilitarized Zone by the massive air and artillery bombardment. On 2 July, Colonel Hull's 3d Marines, composed initially of the 1st and 2d Battalions, began moving from the Cua Viet into an area north of A-1, centered on Jones Creek, a tributary of both the Song Cua Viet and Song Ben Hai. Lieutenant

Colonel Charles V. Jarman's 1st Battalion, the first unit to move out, swept north along the west bank of the tributary, while providing security for the ARVN engineer effort on the Lai An road. To the east, the 2d Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Jack W. Davis, swept north toward the village of Nui Trung.

As Jarman's Marines moved northward toward the abandoned and destroyed village of Lai An on the 4th, Captain Gary D. Dockendorff's Company C came under mortar and small arms fire from an estimated enemy platoon in the village ruins.¹⁹ The remainder of the battalion immediately maneuvered to exploit the contact, preventing the enemy from withdrawing. Pressing the attack, Jarman's Marines, covered by air, artillery, naval gunfire, and the direct fire of 90mm tank guns on the flanks, advanced from position to position. "If it gets too tough," Lieutenant Colonel Jarman told one of his company commanders, "pull back and we'll pound them some more. Then we'll see how tough they are."²⁰ By the 6th, the battalion secured Lai An and reported 134 North Vietnamese dead among its ruins.

The following day, after endeavoring to regain contact with the retreating NVA, a battalion patrol encountered an enemy company occupying positions around Tai Nu, one kilometer northeast of Lai An. The NVA company, armed with an 85mm light field gun, mortars, and automatic weapons, was first taken under artillery fire and then overrun by a coordinated tank and infantry assault.²¹ In the Tai Nu action, the Marine

U.S. Army LtGen Richard G. Stilwell, left, the new CG, Prov Corps, talks with South Vietnamese BGen Ngo Quang Truong, CG, 1st ARVNDiv. Although under III MAF, Prov Corps had operational control of the two Army divisions and the 3d Marine Division in northern I Corps.

Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Center of Military History

*On 1 July, Army Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, the former Prov Corps commander, became Acting CG III MAF while General Cushman, the III MAF commander took a month leave in the United States. Major General Richard G. Stilwell, who had served a short tour as Deputy Commanding General, III MAF, Army, on 1 July assumed command of Provisional Corps, Vietnam. That same day, in a brief ceremony held at Phu Bai, he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General by Secretary of the Army Stanley R. Resor. Fifteen days later, Headquarters, XXIV Corps was activated and the personnel and equipment of Provisional Corps, Vietnam, were absorbed by the newly activated Army corps. Operational Report, Headquarters, XXIV Corps for Period Ending 31 October 1968, 15Nov68, p. 1. In contrast to Rosson, who enjoyed excellent relations with the Marine command, Stilwell's relations were somewhat more tenuous. Marine Brigadier General Earl E. Anderson, Cushman's Chief of Staff, wrote in May 1968 that Stilwell was rather "unpopular" at III MAF headquarters and predicted that when he assumed command of Prov Corps, "he's going to be a hard one to deal with after he gets his three stars." A few months later Anderson wrote that Stilwell was often "by-passing General Cushman and going directly to ComUSMACV. The boss has spoken to him about this on one or two occasions . . ." BGen E. E. Anderson ltr to MajGen Murray, dtd 17May68, and ltr to MajGen McCutcheon, dtd 9Sep68, Encls, Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). More diplomatically, General Cushman stated that Stilwell "could be abrasive . . .", but that "he was a fine combat man." Gen Robert E. Cushman, Jr., intvw, 1Nov 1982, (Oral HistColl, MCHC, Washington, D.C.), pp. 34-35.

**For a detailed account of the artillery's role in Operation Thor, see Chapter 26.



battalion reported another 42 NVA killed and 23 weapons captured, including two 82mm mortars.

Advancing on the right flank, Lieutenant Colonel Davis' 2d Battalion had swept through Nhi Trung and approached a rice paddy area, one kilometer south of the abandoned village of An My. At that point, North Vietnamese automatic weapons and rocket propelled grenades opened up on the Marines. Maneuvering around the ARVN position at A-1, the battalion, with naval gunfire support, took the enemy position. Searching the area, the Marines found over 20 NVA dead. Battalion losses were placed at three killed and two wounded, all a result of sniper fire. Lieutenant Colonel James W. Marsh's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, which had been held in reserve, moved north on the 7th and seized the area around the destroyed village of Giem Ha Trung without incident. Captain Matthew G. McTiernan, the commanding officer of Company I of the 3d Battalion, remembered that his company's specific mission in Operation Thor "was to seize and

then search a small abandoned fishing village on the coast just below the Ben Hai River." In the attack on the hamlet, he had a Navy cruiser in direct support. According to McTiernan, he had the guns of the ship "under my exclusive direction for about three to four hours." He described the effect on the troops as "truly electric" as he used the "8-inchers directly on the village" prior to the assault and then "shifted their fire to the high ground across the Ben Hai during our assault and search." His troops found no bunkers and obtained "no body counts," but the action "had a far more intangible, positive and lasting effect on the company's combat capability."²²

The 1st and 2d Battalions, 3d Marines, began withdrawing southward on the 8th, followed by the 3d Battalion on the 9th. On the evening of the 9th, as Lieutenant Colonel Davis' battalion, the last of the regiment's battalions to displace to Quang Tri to undergo rehabilitation, the 3d Marines ended their participation in Operation Napoleon-Saline and

Marines of Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines throw grenades at suspected enemy positions in the coastal sector near the DMZ. They are taking part in the infantry portion of Operation Thor to counter any NVA forces moving south to escape the air, naval gunfire, and artillery bombardment of NVA positions north of the DMZ.

Department of Defense (USMC) A191900



passed responsibility for the area of operations to the 1st Marines. The following day, the 3d Marines assumed responsibility for the Lancaster II area of operations and the regimental headquarters was deployed to Camp Carroll.

Throughout the Napoleon-Saline area of operations during the remainder of the month, Colonel Dwyer's 1st Marines continued search and sweep operations on both the northern and southern banks of the Song Cua Viet to insure the uninterrupted passage of allied shipping and to deny the enemy access to rocket positions oriented towards Dong Ha, Quang Tri, and Cua Viet. In addition, Dwyer's Marines coordinated the defense of outposts at C-4 and Oceanview, both within a kilometer of the southern boundary of the DMZ.

While contact with elements of the *138th NVA Regiment*, known to be operating in the area, was negligible, contact with the *V-51* and *C-59 Local Force* Viet Cong units was light and widespread. One of the heaviest engagements took place on the 22d when Company H, 1st Marines, while occupying a patrol base south of the Cua Viet, 10 kilometers east of Dong Ha, spotted an armed enemy platoon dressed in black pajamas, moving along the coastal sand dune east of the village of Thon My Loc. The Viet Cong platoon was taken under fire with small arms, artillery, and 81mm mortars. A sweep of the area by the Marine company revealed numerous spider holes, punji traps, a bamboo house with hot food for approximately 30 people, and 10 Viet Cong bodies.²³

The second of the two ground operations to exploit the results of Operation Thor began on 7 July when the 9th Marines began a west to east sweep of the area between Con Thien and the DMZ in the Kentucky area of operations. Unlike the violent action experienced by the 3d Marines in the Napoleon-Saline area, the 9th Marines attack met little enemy resistance. If enemy forces had been driven south of the Song Ben Hai into the Kentucky area by the massive artillery and air attack, they quickly had returned to their sanctuaries in the north. High temperatures and equally high humidity, however, posed a major hazard, and everything possible was done to ensure an adequate water supply. Heavy U.S. Army ammunition trailers hooked up to ARVN armored personnel carriers were filled with water cans, greatly reducing the need for continual helicopter water resupply.²⁴ Despite the precautions, Smith's regiment suffered numerous heat casualties.

The most significant contact during the regiment's drive northward occurred on 11 July, four

kilometers northeast of Con Thien, when elements of Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. LaMontagne's 3d Battalion discovered a reinforced NVA platoon in the open. Fixing the enemy platoon in place with small arms fire, LaMontagne's Marines, with air, artillery, and tank support, launched a coordinated air-ground attack through the area killing more than 30 enemy troops and seizing 26 weapons.

Elsewhere in the area, attacking units of the 9th Marines uncovered and destroyed numerous enemy fortifications, many of which contained ammunition and equipment. A few of the positions were lightly defended, but the majority were abandoned. One bunker system discovered by LaMontagne's Marines, 4,000 meters due north of Con Thien, spanned more than one kilometer. In addition to 242 well-constructed bunkers, the complex contained a large mess hall with hot food still on the tables. Supplies and equipment abandoned by the enemy in his flight included weapons, 935 mortar rounds, 500 pounds of explosives, 55 antitank mines, and 500 pounds of rice. LaMontagne's Marines also found 29 NVA bodies, killed by artillery and airstrikes during the advance on the complex.

After 10 months as commanding officer of the 9th Marines, Colonel Richard B. Smith was relieved on 13 July by Colonel Robert H. Barrow. A veteran of China service during World War II and the Chosin Reservoir campaign in Korea, Colonel Barrow was assigned to the division at the request of General Davis. Three days later, the regiment displaced to Landing Zone Stud in preparation for future operations under Task Force Hotel in the Lancaster II area of operations. With the move to Stud, the regiment's battalions were brought together for the first time since May 1967, "to the enthusiasm and jubilation of all hands."²⁵

As the 9th Marines departed, Colonel Dwyer's 1st Marines assumed tactical responsibility for the Kentucky area. The regiment also had operational control of newly created Task Force Mike, consisting of a command group from the 3d Tank Battalion and a company of 3d Reconnaissance Battalion Marines, and Lieutenant Colonel Francis J. Heath's 2d Battalion, 26th Marines. During the remaining days of July, Dwyer's Marines concentrated on aggressive day and night ambushes, patrols, searches, and minesweeping operations, while concurrently securing fixed installations throughout the area of operations. Although enemy contact was very light, the 1st Marines did take a number of casualties from mines and surprise firing devices.

On 23 July, Lieutenant Colonel Heath's battalion began assuming operational control of the rifle companies of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines as they were phased into the battalion's positions in preparation for a relief in lines. Company E, 26th Marines, relieved by Company G, 1st Marines, proceeded to Quang Tri Combat Base on the 24th and assumed positions along the base's defensive perimeter. Following a brief, unproductive, one-day sweep northward from Con Thien along the Kinh Mon Trail to the DMZ and southward from A-3 through Leatherneck Square, the remaining elements of Heath's battalion departed the Kentucky area of operations. On 28 July, they proceeded to Quang Tri Combat Base to prepare and train for service afloat with Seventh Fleet's Special Landing Force. The battalion, by 8 August, had embarked on board ships of Amphibious Ready Group Alpha, and the battalion, on the 13th, once operational control had been passed to the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, was redesignated Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 2/26.²⁶

Into the Western Mountains

During June, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion patrols reported increased enemy activity north of Thon Son Lam, an area that had seen little enemy activity for the previous several months. It appeared that the enemy, estimated to be of battalion strength, possibly an element of the *64th Regiment, 320th NVA Division*, was moving through the large valley to the north of the Dong Ha-Dong Ma Mountain ridgeline into the region around Thon Son Lam.²⁷

The vital allied area straddled not only Route 9, the major east-west line of communication in Quang Tri Province, but also included two major III MAF artillery positions, Camp Carroll and Thon Son Lam. Although these fire support complexes presented the enemy with inviting targets, the successful destruction of which would provide both a tactical as well as a propaganda victory, the enemy had yet to mount a strong attack upon either position. Instead, his forces had concentrated on periodically interdicting Route 9 and harassing the installations with artillery, rocket, and mortar attacks. With the Demilitarized Zone and North Vietnam less than 20 kilometers distant, the enemy threat to the area remained constant.

In mid-June, upon receipt of a warning order from General Davis, Task Force Hotel began planning an operation in the area north and northwest of Camp Carroll over which the enemy had long enjoyed con-

trol. General Davis informed Task Force Hotel, however, that the necessary forces, two Marine infantry regiments, the 3d and 9th Marines, and elements of the 2d ARVN regiment, and accompanying resources, would not be available until mid-July. On 5 July, General Davis approved the concept for the proposed operation, which "for want of a better name, we dubbed . . . 'July Action.'"²⁸

The approved scheme of maneuver was one of area saturation. Davis simultaneously placed the forces involved at various locations throughout the region—including three battalions near the DMZ—in order to "upset the enemy quickly and decisively."²⁹ The 9th Marines' zone of action would include a wide swath of piedmont from the DMZ to Route 9, west of Con Thien, while the zone assigned the 3d Marines embraced the rugged National Forest Reserve, which included Dong Ha Mountain and Mutter Ridge, a high ridgeline which generally parallels the southern boundary of the DMZ. The zone assigned the 2d ARVN Regiment lay west and northwest of the Rockpile and consisted of a maze of valleys and sheer ridgelines.

General Davis directed that the operation begin on 16 July, following a series of B-52 Arclight strikes throughout the area. However, on the 15th, MACV canceled the proposed Arclight strikes for the lack of sufficient intelligence justification.* Later in the day, Lieutenant General Stilwell, the Prov Corps commander, suggested that if the operation were postponed 24 hours, the strikes would be carried out. The promised B-52 strikes never occurred and, instead, Marine tactical air and artillery strikes carried out the preparation of the area. While air and artillery strikes were effective, General Davis noted that they "lacked the mass destructive effect and shock power of the Arclights." According to Davis, "intelligence reports indicated that the enemy was surprised and confused by the operation but due to the protection afforded by bunkers from our fires, he was not disorganized to the point where he lost his capacity to resist."³⁰

*The selection process for Arclight targets required the submission of only current, hard intelligence restricted to the proposed target nomination. The division's request for Arclights included not only specific target intelligence, but an immediate area intelligence summary. Prov Corps forwarded the request without the area intelligence summary to MACV where it was reviewed and subsequently rejected on the basis of insufficient specific target intelligence in comparison with other proposed targets. CG3dMarDiv msg to CGProvCorpsV, dtd 20Jul68, in III MAF Message File.

Shortly after dawn on the 17th, the 2d and 3d Battalions, 9th Marines assaulted two landing zones in what was commonly called Helicopter Valley, three kilometers south of the DMZ. At the same time, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines walked from the vicinity of C-2 into blocking positions south of the 2d Battalion in the area of operations most eastern sector. To the west, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines assaulted into a landing zone at the upper end of Helicopter Valley, while the 1st and 3d Battalions, 2d ARVN Regiment moved overland into blocking positions west of the Song Cam Lo valley. The remaining battalions, the 1st and 3d, of the 3d Marines, since 15 July under Lieutenant Colonel Vaughn R. Stuart, would join the operation on the 18th and 19th, respectively, with a heliborne assault into landing zones just north of Dong Ha Mountain.

As Captain Jack D. Schaeffer's Company K, 9th Marines moved from Landing Zone Sparrow north toward Mutter Ridge, it was engaged by an estimated reinforced NVA squad deployed in an extensive, well-fortified bunker system. Schaeffer's Marines immediately returned fire and moved back a sufficient distance to employ artillery and air. While four Marine A-4 Skyhawks and two F-4 Phantoms flew close support missions directed at destroying enemy automatic weapons and mortar emplacements, it became evident that the NVA unit was at least of company size. As the battalion's other forward companies moved into position for a flanking assault, Schaeffer's Marines carried the enemy complex late in the afternoon. The Marines lost 9 killed and 29 wounded while counting 38 NVA dead.

During the course of the operation, elements of Lieutenant Colonel Frederic S. Knight's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines maneuvered northward to secure the high ground in preparation for the final attack.* Moving to within one kilometer of the DMZ on the afternoon of 21 July, the battalion came under a heavy 82mm mortar attack, which caused the death of one Marine and the wounding of nine others. Within an hour of the mortar attack, First Lieutenant Arthur A. Pierce's Company F observed approximately 35 NVA, carrying two mortars, moving west on a trail paralleling the southern bound-

ary of the DMZ. The company took the enemy force under fire with mortars and artillery, and then moved to close with the NVA unit. Preceded by eight fixed-wing sorties, one of which scored a direct hit on an active 82mm mortar position, Pierce's Marines reached the trail and found over 20 NVA dead. A subsequent search of the area revealed 10 weapons, 59 packs, 41 gas masks, and a large variety of equipment, all of which were new, indicating that the enemy unit recently had infiltrated from the north or had been resupplied.

Lieutenant Pierce's company contact on the 21st prompted Colonel Barrow to request permission to enter the southern half of the DMZ if the tactical situation so dictated. The request went forward rapidly through the chain of command to MACV, which denied it to the surprise of Colonel Barrow.³¹ As he later commented:

... it ... still has not been sufficiently explained to me why at any time we seemingly arbitrarily give the enemy our half of the DMZ, particularly when we know he uses it not only as a sanctuary, but as an area from which he can launch mortar attacks against our forces.³²

Without the permission to enter the southern half of the DMZ, the regiment swung its attack to the south, "the direction which he [the enemy] was primarily oriented anyway."³³

Although the sweep south through jungle-covered hills and valleys produced little contact, the 9th Marines did discover a number of large elaborate base areas, which the enemy had been able to construct and maintain during more than a year without allied interference. One fortification, located by Lieutenant Colonel Knight's battalion, six kilometers southwest of Con Thien, was unique. Composed of 60 A-frame timbered bunkers built into the sides of bomb craters, each with an average overhead cover 10-feet-thick, the system was connected to a large command bunker by a network of interconnecting tunnels. The command bunker, capable of accommodating up to 40 personnel, featured an aperture overlooking Con Thien and C-2. Documents found in the bunker indicated that the NVA had been plotting, tallying, and reporting the traffic patterns of helicopters, tanks, and trucks entering and leaving those two positions.

In addition to fortifications, the attacking forces also uncovered tons of enemy ordnance, ranging from 122mm rockets to small arms ammunition and explosives. On the 19th, Captain Matthew G. McTiernan's Company I, 3d Marines unearthed the most significant

*Colonel Knight remembered that General Davis had "dropped in" at his headquarters and told him "Fred . . . I have decided to make you my swing battalion." Knight asked what a swing battalion was and received the answer "Whenever anyone finds the enemy, I'm going to drop you right on top of them." Col Frederic S. Knight, Comments on draft, dtd 10Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).



Photo from the Abel Collection

Capt David N. Buckner, right, and 1stLt Kenneth Tolpingrud of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines examine two captured NVA 12.7mm antiaircraft guns near the DMZ.

weapons cache on the northeast slope of Dong Ha Mountain. Dug into the side of the mountain were six large bunkers, which, upon closer inspection were found to have false floors. Beneath the flooring, McTiernan's Marines discovered two complete 75mm pack howitzers and 26 rounds of howitzer ammunition. The howitzers were believed to be the ones that had harassed Camp Carroll sporadically during the preceding months.*

A second phase of the operation followed quickly on the heels of the first. One enemy infiltration corridor within the area of operation had not been touched by the 9th Marines, 3d Marines, or the 2d ARVN Regiment: it was the upper Song Cam Lo basin. On 27 July, the 1st and 3d Battalions, 3d Marines simultaneously assaulted three landing zones, Joan, Margo, and Becky,

which subsequently were developed into fire support bases for future operations.** In addition, a permanent observation post was established on Dong Ha Mountain. During the two-battalion sweep of the river basin, "the enemy chose to avoid contact," observed Brigadier General Carl Hoffman, the Task Force Hotel commander, "and therefore we can't point at any statistics to prove the worth of this particular effort." Hoffman noted, however that "in penetrating this corridor we demonstrated our capacity to do this and we also opened another half dozen landing zones."³⁴

Colonel Barrow's 9th Marines was phased out of the operation on the 31st, followed on 3 August by the 3d Marines, now under Colonel Richard L.

*Captain McTiernan remembered that they assembled one of the pack howitzers in the enemy bunker and that "you could fire and hit Camp Carroll by simply using line of sight to elevate and traverse the gun." McTiernan Comments. Colonel Stuart recalled that the Marine Corps Commandant, General Leonard F. Chapman, directed that the 75mm pack howitzers be sent to the Marine Barracks in Washington, D.C. Stuart Comments.

**Colonel Vaughn R. Stuart, the 3d Marines commander at the time, stated that according to Marine Corps intelligence this was a major NVA infiltration route into Vietnam from Laos. Stuart remembered that General Davis told him "that if we made a sizeable contact, he would give me as many battalions as I needed . . . [and] that I was free to cross the Laotian border, provided the contact we made was sizeable. He attached one proviso to this verbal directive . . . I was to call before my first troops crossed. . . . he would not stop me from going, but he wanted to know just before I commenced to cross." Stuart Comments.



Top photo is from the Abel Collection and bottom photo is courtesy of Col Vaughn R. Stuart, USMC (Ret).
Top, members of the 9th Marines stack boxes of captured enemy mortar and artillery rounds found in an NVA base area. Below, members of a U.S. Army artillery battery at Camp Carroll pose with one of the two 75mm pack howitzers captured by Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines.



Michael, Jr., who had assumed command two days earlier. The operation was considered a success not only in terms of enemy troops and equipment destroyed, but also in providing the units involved with additional experience in the conduct of highly mobile mountain warfare. The operation, as the task force commander later wrote, "taught us that, with effort and energy properly focused on a selected location, we can prepare LZs, build FSB's, virtually anywhere. The tougher the terrain, the more vital the systematic application of resources. But we reject the notion that there are areas too difficult to conquer." Operation July Action, he continued, "also reminded the enemy that he has no safe havens. . . . Most important, perhaps, our pioneering greatly facilitates our return whenever we choose."³⁵

While the planning for operations in the Dong Ha Mountain and Mutter Ridge complex took place, Task Force Hotel looked longingly at the rugged terrain west of Landing Zone Stud in the Scotland II area of operations. The area was known to contain the base area of the *8th Battalion, 29th NVA Regiment* and was a source of a variety of nasty enemy activities. Allied fixed-wing planes and helicopters that wandered over the region often received antiaircraft fire which resulted in a number of lost aircraft. Supply convoys traveling Route 9 to Landing Zone Stud faced a constant threat of ambush as they turned south at the Rockpile. Also, with the closing of Khe Sanh and the movement of Task Force Hotel to Landing Zone Stud, the new combat base was increasingly a target for enemy rocket gunners.

General Hoffman's task force originally planned to employ a battalion of the 1st Marines, upon its departure from Khe Sanh, to land on Dong Ca Lu or Hill 715—the area's dominant feature—and search the surrounding terrain, six kilometers west of Landing Zone Stud or Vandegrift as it was to be renamed. Colonel Dwyer nominated the 1st Battalion, but by 6 July, when the 1st Marines departed Khe Sanh, the 1st Battalion remained behind to battle an enemy force on Hill 689. The battalion spent another six days in battle before it could retrieve eight Marine bodies from the forward slope of the hill.

On 9 July, the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines arrived at Landing Zone Stud and relieved the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines temporarily as the combat base's security force. The following day, Landing Zone Stud took several volleys of enemy 122mm rockets. On the 11th, Task Force Hotel assumed direct operational control of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, as no other battalion was

available, and the battalion was transported by helicopter to Hill 715.*

The first wave of Lieutenant Colonel Thomas H. Galbraith's Marines scrambled from their CH-46s, and like the two waves that followed, encountered no enemy opposition. But a helicopter in the fourth wave, while hovering a few feet above the landing zone, took several bursts of .50-caliber machine gun fire and crashed in a ball of flames. Miraculously, the CH-46's full load of troops made it to safety, and only one of the air crewman sustained injury.

Braving constant mortar and sniper fire as they swept the area, Galbraith's Marines found numerous heavily fortified enemy positions that recently had been occupied. On the 13th, as Company B moved westward down a trail, the company's point element was struck by a command detonated mine. The company immediately pulled back, set up a perimeter, and sent a squad forward to retrieve the body of one Marine and to look for another. As the squad inched forward, the enemy detonated another mine and raked the company's position with .50-caliber, mortar, and grenade fire. The following day, Company A assisted with the recovery of casualties, but it too encountered command detonated mines, resulting in four additional killed, including the company's commanding officer, Captain Henry D. Banks.** The company withdrew, and on the 15th, Galbraith's battalion was flown to Landing Zone Stud to relieve forces slated to participate in Operation July Action.³⁶

During the next 10 ten days, Colonel Edward J. Miller's 4th Marines conducted mobile defense operations to the west of Fire Support Bases Shepherd and Cates with little enemy contact. In addition, elements of the regiment secured Ca Lu, Landing Zone Stud, and Route 9 from Ca Lu north. As the division's reserve regiment, it could, if ordered, provide forces for operations anywhere within the division's area of operations.

On 25 July, Lieutenant Colonel Galbraith's battalion was ordered back to Hill 715, not only to expand

* Elements of the 4th Marines were committed to assisting the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines with the fighting on Hill 689 and securing Fire Support Bases Shepherd and Cates.

** This was the same Captain Banks, who had commanded Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, and had been seriously wounded in that company's engagement on Hill 689 near Khe Sanh on 16 April. See Chapter 16. Colonel Galbraith wrote that when he assumed command of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, Captain Banks was the battalion assistant S-3 and that the Company A commander had just been transferred: "Hank asked for the company, and I gave it to him. His death has always weighed heavily on me." Col Thomas H. Galbraith, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec68] (Vietnam Comment File).

its previous search, but also to recover the bodies of the two Marines killed on 13 July. BLT 2/4, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Louis A. Rann, simultaneously massed on Hill 679, 12 kilometers west of Stud, and began search operations to the north.

Split into two command groups of two companies each, Galbraith's battalion advanced toward Hill 715 from the south and east, under heavy enemy small arms, rocket-propelled grenade, and mortar fire. The Marines found the hill, once secured, to be heavily mined and boobytrapped. While seating an 81mm mortar baseplate, for example, Company B Marines detonated a booby-trapped antitank mine which killed one and wounded four. Continuing the search, Galbraith's Marines recovered the bodies of the two missing Marines, and at the same time discovered sizable caches of weapons, ammunition, and rice scattered throughout the hill complex, but encountered no enemy forces. While destroying the captured weapons and ammunition, the battalion prepared to

evacuate the rice for distribution to refugees in the province. On 4 August, after the completion of the search mission, Marine helicopters lifted the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines out of the area and returned the unit to Landing Zone Stud.

By the morning of 29 July, Lieutenant Colonel Rann's Marines had reached Hill 606, four kilometers north of Hill 679. Shortly before noon, Marines from Company G observed and took under fire 15 enemy troops. Later a platoon moved forward to check the area and encountered a well-concealed and well-entrenched enemy force. Four Marines were killed and nine wounded by the enemy's initial heavy burst of claymores and small arms and grenade fire. The bodies of three of the four Marines killed remained unrecovered as artillery and air pounded the bunker complex throughout the remainder of the day. The following morning, after an additional artillery mission, Company G moved forward and recovered the bodies without incident.

Landing Zone Stud has now become Vandegrift Combat Base, complete with a makeshift radio tower to control helicopter traffic. LCpl John L. Phillips, in the tower, is bringing in for a landing a resupply Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight aircraft

Photo is from the Abel Collection



On 3 August, after establishing a temporary fire support base, named Shoup, on Hill 606, Rann's battalion received the additional mission of searching the northern slope of the Khe Giang Thoan Valley, three kilometers to the northeast. The area was believed to harbor the launching sites of rockets that had harassed Thon Son Lam and the Rockpile for several months. As Company F moved down Hill 606 toward the valley the following day, it discovered seven abandoned huts. Below each, Marines found caches of arms, ammunition, and equipment, the total of which they estimated at 20 tons.³⁷

The search of the Khe Giang Thoan Valley during the next two days produced no additional weapons caches and few rocket launch sites. However, the companies involved were probed continually once they had moved into night defensive positions. In one instance, Company E Marines heard movement along their perimeter throughout the night, and awoke the following morning to find their claymores turned inward toward the company's lines. In another, Company G's lines were probed by an estimated force of 10 NVA under cover of small arms and grenade fire. The company sustained four killed and six wounded in the attack. On 6 August, Rann's battalion ended its search of the valley and was helilifted to Landing Zone Stud, now officially designated Vandegrift Combat Base.

The 3d Marine Division, during the months of June and July, slowly and methodically shifted from the defensive posture of the past to a more flexible mobile offensive posture which would characterize future division operations. It established large numbers of fire support bases and landing zones in areas that the enemy once considered havens and untouchable by allied forces. In addition, these months witnessed the reorientation of division forces from the coastal lowlands to the mountainous region of western Quang Tri Province. The remaining months of 1968 would see this move accelerated.

Southern Quang Tri and Thua Thien

While Marine operations were conducted in central and western Quang Tri Province, responsibility for the coastal lowlands, piedmont, and jungle-covered mountains south of Dong Ha and north of Hue was shared by the 3d ARVN Regiment and the U.S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division. The ARVN Regiment operated mainly in jungle canopy of enemy *Base Area 114*, southwest of Quang Tri City, while the 1st Cavalry Division's three brigades, under the command of Major

General John J. Tolson III, USA, secured the coast and piedmont from Quang Tri City south to Camp Evans. It also conducted search and clear operations in enemy *Base Areas 114* and *101*.^{38*}

During June and July, the division continued its participation in Operation Jeb Stuart III, accomplishing the two-fold mission of rice denial and offensive operations in the two enemy base areas within the division's area of operations. In the coastal plains, it conducted rice denial operations in conjunction with elements of the 1st and 3d ARVN Regiments to ensure that rice from the spring harvest was withheld from the enemy. In *Base Area 101*, west of Quang Tri City, the division's 1st Brigade initiated combat operations in search of enemy forces. At the same time, in *Base Area 114*, elements of the division's 3d Brigade and a battalion of the 3d ARVN Regiment conducted operations over rugged terrain in search of not only enemy forces, but also known headquarters and support installations.

During the middle of June, advancing elements of the 3d ARVN Regiment encountered heavy enemy resistance in the southeastern portion of *Base Area 114* as elements of the *803d NVA Regiment* defended a large cache area. The battle for the area continued with sporadic, but heavy contact through the 21st. This action resulted not only in the demolition of the enemy cache area and the capture of large quantities of ammunition, but also in the destruction of the enemy regiment's antiaircraft company and the seizure of the regiment's headquarters complex. South of the base area, elements of the cavalry division's 2d Brigade entered what appeared to be the enemy's *Tri-Thien Military Region* headquarters bunker and tunnel complex, occupied during the attack on Hue. While searching the complex, the Army troopers captured numerous maps and documents relating to the enemy's activities from the DMZ south to Da Nang. Among the maps was one which detailed the construction of a supply road from the A Shau Valley east into *Base Area 114*. Reaction to this information resulted in the destruction of several enemy trucks, construction sites, and a large portion of the road.

While elements of the ARVN regiment and the division's 2d Brigade battled the enemy's *803d Regiment* in the mountains, two other enemy regiments were on the move in the coastal lowlands, centered in the Trieu Phong area, northeast of Quang Tri City. On

* Major General Tolson was replaced on 15 July as division commander by Brigadier General Richard L. Irby.

26 June, elements of the 1st ARVN Regiment made heavy contact with the *4th Battalion, 812th NVA Regiment*, and claimed killing 128 enemy troops. The following day, in a two-day battle, elements of the Air Cavalry's 5th Armored trapped the *814th NVA Battalion* in the coastal village of Binh An, 14 kilometers northeast of Quang Tri, and reported more than 230 enemy soldiers dead and 44 prisoners taken.

At the conclusion of the spring rice harvest, the 1st Cavalry Division shifted tactical emphasis to an even more intensified campaign against the two enemy base areas. Elements of all three brigades air assaulted deep into the base areas, established new landing zones and constructed fire support bases capable of interdicting the enemy's communication routes through the A Shau Valley. Although numerous NVA complexes, arms caches, and training areas were discovered and destroyed, the enemy increasingly employed anti-aircraft fire against troop-laden helicopters to limit the mobility and flexibility of the division's ground forces operating in the jungle-covered base areas. By the end of July, the 1st Air Cavalry Division had driven several combat and support elements of the enemy's *7th Front* further west, possibly into the northern A Shau Valley, the site of a major logistical storage area.*

In central Thua Thien Province to the south, the 101st Airborne Division, under the command of Major General Olinto M. Barsanti, continued to conduct the follow-on, division-level operation, Nevada Eagle, which began in mid-May with the termination of Operation Delaware.** During June and July, the division coordinated rice denial operations in Thua Thien Province and conducted offensive operations to defeat North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces and destroy the enemy's base areas and lines of communication. The division's 1st Brigade conducted reconnaissance in force operations along Route 547, which parallels the Song Bo, west of Hue; the 2d Brigade continued reconnaissance in force operations in the coastal plains north and east of Hue and provided security and support for the rice collection effort; and the 3d Brigade, 82d Air-

borne Division, to a limited extent, secured major fire support bases astride Route 547 and conducted search and clear operations along major enemy entry and exit routes to the coastal plains.***

The division's combat operations during the summer months were characterized by infrequent enemy contact, increased boobytrap incidents, and the capture of rice caches. With the defeat of multi-battalion NVA attempts to seize and hold areas of the coastal plains in May and their retreat into mountain base camps, a tactical void was created that eventually was filled by local guerrillas and the Viet Cong infrastructure. Despite extensive reconnaissance in force operations and numerous saturation patrols and ambushes, the enemy, which had broken down into squad-sized or smaller units, chose not to engage the division's maneuver elements. When he was engaged, the contacts were of short duration and involved few casualties on both sides.

As guerrilla activity increased, so did division casualties from surprise firing devices. Of the 40 airborne troopers killed and 375 wounded during June and July, Viet Cong-emplaced boobytraps, generally hand grenades or 105mm artillery rounds with trip wire devices attached, accounted for 18 killed and 173 wounded. Despite increased friendly and few enemy casualties, the division's vigorous program of patrols and ambushes did result in the discovery and capture of numerous rice caches. Working closely with South Vietnamese Regional, Popular, and National Police Field Forces, the division's rice denial campaign resulted in the capture of more than 345 tons of rice and in impeding enemy movement through the area of operations.

During the last week of July, the division began preparations for a return to the A Shau Valley, with a logistical build-up and the construction of fire support bases. The plan called for one brigade of the division and elements of the 1st ARVN Regiment to conduct a combined helicopter and ground assault into the valley,

*On 27 June, the Department of the Army directed that the 1st Cavalry Division be redesignated the 1st Air Cavalry Division and the 101st Airborne Division redesignated the 101st Air Cavalry Division. However, the terminology was withdrawn on 26 August and the new designations established were 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) and 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), to preserve the "heritage and traditions and to enhance further long established *esprit* associated with these famous divisions." MACV ComdHist, 1968, p. 245.

**Major General Melvin Zais assumed command of the division from Major General Barsanti on 19 July 1968.

***The 3d Brigade, undergoing a reorganization from its deployment task force organization to that of a light infantry brigade, was experiencing extreme personnel turbulence. The upheaval was caused not only by the reorganization, but also by a decision by the Department of the Army to give each individual who had deployed with the brigade in February the option of returning to Fort Bragg or remaining in Vietnam with the unit. Of the 3,650 personnel who deployed from Fort Bragg, 2,513 chose to return. The training of more than 2,900 replacements therefore limited combat operations. By the end of July, the brigade was declared combat ready and began full-time operations in its assigned area.

along Route 547A. The 1st Air Cavalry Division was to conduct concurrent operations, partially as a deception, to the north and east of the valley.

South of the 101st Airborne Division's area of operations in Thua Thien Province lay that of Marine Task Force X-Ray, under the command of Brigadier General George D. Webster. On 1 June, Phase III of Operation Houston began under the control of the 5th Marines. National Route 1, from Phu Bai south to the Hai Van Pass, was successfully kept open as elements of Colonel Paul G. Graham's regiment provided security for key bridges and installations and conducted patrols and ambushes on avenues of approach to the vital highway. In addition, the regiment conducted extensive rice denial operations in the Phu Thu and Vinh Loc Districts, east and southeast of Phu Bai, in conjunction with South Vietnamese Regional and Popular Forces. During the month, the Marines captured more than 31,000 pounds of rice and returned them to government control, and relocated more than 44 tons to secure storage areas. The regiment also conducted a number of short operations in the jungle canopy south of the Phu Bai vital area, in the Phu Loc and Hai Van Pass areas of the operation, to locate and destroy enemy forces, supply caches, and base areas.

During Phase IV of Operation Houston, which began on 1 July, Task Force X-Ray assumed operational control of BLT 2/7, which on 9 July assaulted into the Vinh Loc District by helicopter and amphibian tractors, and continued the task force's vigorous rice denial campaign. A week later, the battalion landing team joined the 5th Marines and was helilifted to the Thon Mu Kham Valley, southwest of Phu Bai, where fire support bases were constructed and search operations begun. With the departure of the battalion landing team and the 5th Marines, Colonel Bruce F. Meyers' 26th Marines, assumed tactical responsibility for the Task Force X-Ray area of operations and began Phase V of Operation Houston on 25 July.*

Throughout the summer months, Marine, U.S. Army, and ARVN troops continued the relentless and successful pursuit and destruction of enemy forces in northern I Corps. From Thon Mu Kham Valley in the south to the Demilitarized Zone in the north, allied forces aggressively and repeatedly forced the North Vietnamese troops and their Viet Cong allies to withdraw deeper into their border sanctuaries, thereby delaying any enemy attempt at initiating a major offensive in the northern two provinces of South Vietnam.

* For the beginning of Operation Houston see Chapter 13.

CHAPTER 19

The Third Offensive: Da Nang

Indicators—The Storm Breaks—Counterattack—Pursuit—Typhoon Bess

Indicators

As the 1st Marine Division Operations Allen Brook and Mameluke Thrust entered their later stages in the summer of 1968, the Communists cautiously avoided decisive contact, giving rise to the theory that they were husbanding their resources for another offensive. Rumors of an impending major attack by the enemy began to take on lives their own. The expected Communist thrust was referred to variously as the “third offensive” (the Tet and the May offensives being the first and second, respectively), the “autumn offensive,” or the “summer offensive.” South Vietnamese President Thieu had warned on 10 July that “the expected Communist summer offensive against Saigon and other major cities might come in two weeks and could be the last battle, the last all-out effort by the Communists.”¹ Ironically, 10 days later, North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh seemed to have confirmed this statement when he exhorted his countrymen to “a final victory during the third offensive.”²

Marine infantry units captured prisoners, who, and documents, which, further indicated Communist intentions. By late July, III MAF intelligence officers knew enough about the enemy’s plan to be certain that Da Nang was the target of the threatened offensive. The Da Nang National Police service captured a North Vietnamese officer who revealed details of what he referred to as the “X2 Offensive.” The objective of this attack, he claimed, was to create a “favorable political situation for the North Vietnamese delegation at the Paris peace talks to commemorate the forthcoming VC holidays and to attempt to gain the support of the civilian populace.” According to his account, the Communist forces would conduct the campaign in several phases. First, Viet Cong sappers would infiltrate Da Nang disguised as ARVN troops and National Police. During a series of attacks on cities and military facilities throughout the country, these “fifth columnists” would seize control of key facilities in the city. *Group 44 Headquarters* assigned two of these Viet Cong units, *Reconnaissance Team X.2/89* and the *C.23 Recon-*

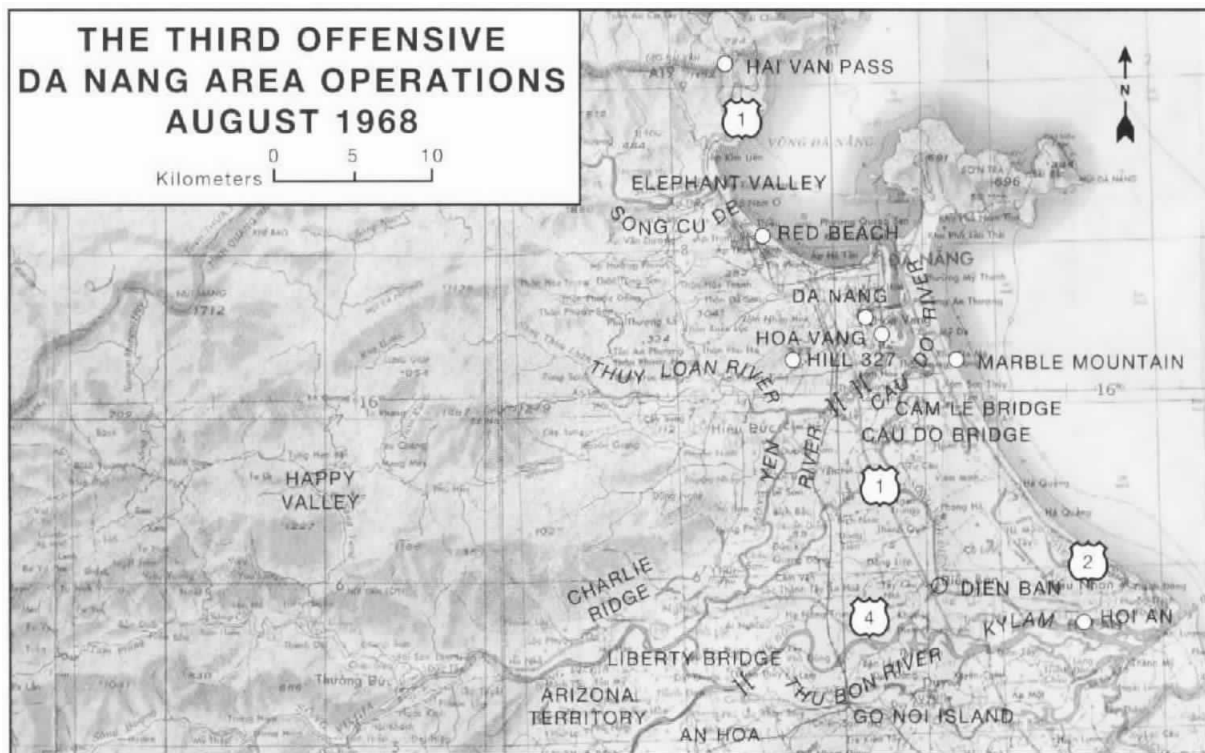
naissance Company, the tasks of assassinating South Vietnamese government officials, hanging propaganda flags, distributing propaganda leaflets, and harassing U.S. and ARVN units in Da Nang.³

While rocket and mortar batteries shelled the airbases and U.S. headquarters facilities within the city, ground units would attack from the west, south, and east (the latter across the Trinh Minh The Bridge north of Marble Mountain Air Facility). Finally, the Communists would “call upon ARVN and U.S. forces to stage military revolts and desert to the VC forces.” The prisoner claimed that the VC had collected 30 U.S. servicemen (deserters) who would assist them in fomenting an uprising.* If the attack on Da Nang and the military revolt were successful, the Communists would gather South Vietnamese intellectuals to coordinate with the National Liberation Front for the formation of local coalition governments in Da Nang and other captured areas and eventually, a national-level coalition government.⁴

The enemy appeared to be throwing everything he had into the effort against Da Nang. Enemy units scheduled to participate in the attacks in the Da Nang TAOR included the *31st*, *36th*, and *38th North Vietnamese Army Regiments*, the *R-20*, *V-25*, and *T-89 Battalions*, as well as the *368B Rocket Regiment*.** A rallier later reported that the Communist plan even included a contingency for the use of North Vietnamese tanks and aircraft to turn the tide as a last resort.⁶ Indeed, in late July, Marine reconnaissance teams and air

*Indeed, Marine reconnaissance and infantry units operating in the Da Nang TAOR during this period reported numerous sightings of Caucasians moving with enemy units. One reconnaissance team shot and wounded one of the Caucasians in an ambush, then heard the man call for help in English.

**The *38th NVA Regiment* represented no actual increase of enemy units in the Da Nang TAOR. It was basically a coordinating headquarters for several VC battalions that had operated there over the years. According to Marine intelligence sources, it was established in early May 1968 and collocated with *Group 44* “to afford greater control” during the mini-Tet and Third offensives. It consisted of the *V-25*, *R-20*, and *V-7 VC Infantry Battalions*, and the *3d* and *T-87 Sapper Battalions*. III MAF PerIntRep No. 35-68, dtd 3Sep68, p. A-47, in III MAF PerIntReps, 14Jul-31Aug68.



observers had twice sighted enemy armored fighting vehicles west of An Hoa.

Originally, intelligence estimates had set the start date for the offensive on 20 July, to coincide with the new moon when illumination would be low. Although speculative, this theory fit a pattern of increased enemy activity during the darkest nights of a given month.⁷ However, when this date passed without serious incident, intelligence officers revised their estimates to reflect the next new moon phase as the start date: 23 August 1968. In tenuous confirmation of this supposition, a prisoner revealed that the month of August was to bring the "decisive battle for revolutionary history."⁸

As III MAF developed intelligence concerning the third offensive, subordinate units prepared for the coming battle. Acting on the reports of enemy tanks and extensive Communist road-building activity southwest of Da Nang, the 1st Marine Division revised its anti-mechanized defense plan to meet the new threat.⁹ Major General Carl A. Youngdale, who had relieved Major General Robertson as division commander in June, directed his subordinate commanders to review plans for the defense of the Da Nang TAOR and to increase the readiness of their units. Anticipating that the enemy would strike during darkness, he ordered that all units maximize night activities and "reduce day workloads accordingly to allow adequate rest for all

hands."¹⁰ In the area surrounding Da Nang, Operations Allen Brook and Mameluke Thrust continued with the participating units frequently shifting their areas of operations in an effort to engage and destroy the major Communist units which would have to concentrate to conduct an offensive of the magnitude III MAF anticipated.

Just past noon on 18 August, less than a kilometer west of Marble Mountain Air Facility, a patrol from Company B, 1st Military Police Battalion apprehended a 16-year-old Vietnamese boy who confessed that he was a member of a VC platoon which was hiding nearby. The MPs cordoned off the area and, with the assistance of the South Vietnamese 106th Regional Force Company and Company C, 3d Military Police Battalion, conducted a thorough search. Several light contacts with small groups of VC resulted, leading to the discovery of weapons, ammunition, and explosives caches as well as a radio receiver.¹¹

Major General Youngdale, in a report to Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman at III MAF headquarters, noted:

... enemy activity has increased . . . there are indications that the enemy may be in the latter stages of preparation for his third offensive. As yet, however, there are no indications that the enemy is prepared to conduct a major attack within the next twenty-four hours.¹²



Photo from Abel Collection

From an observation tower in his company sector, Capt Charles S. Robb, the son-in-law of President Johnson and commander of Company I, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, points out key terrain features to the South Vietnamese Chief of the Joint General Staff, Gen Cao Van Vien, who is on an official visit to Da Nang. MajGen Carl A. Youngdale, the new commander of the 1st Marine Division, is seen directly behind Robb.

Early the following day, 19 August, a Viet Cong company attacked and overran Combined Action Platoon 2-4-3 northeast of Hoi An. At 2100 that night, 30 to 40 VC attacked recon team "Trailer Park," atop Hon Coc Mountain, south of Go Noi Island. Only the quick intervention of a Douglas AC-47 Spooky gunship, with its potent, multiple Gatling guns, saved the team from destruction.

Following a battalion-sized VC attack on Combined Action Platoon 2-3-4 during the early morning hours of 20 August, Youngdale's view of the situation changed. In a report to General Cushman that day, he estimated that the enemy could "close on principal targets in the First Division area in one night in launching his 3d phase offensive."¹³

While the 5th Marines, under Colonel Paul G. Graham, pursued Communist survivors of the Battle of Chau Phong south of Da Nang,* the 27th Marines continued final preparations for redeployment to the U.S. and the 1st Marines began arranging its move from Quang Tri Province to the Da Nang TAOR.** It was a

hectic period in the 1st Marine Division and the specter of the heralded third offensive continued to grow. General Youngdale made minor adjustments to the plan for the defense of Da Nang, reinforcing those sectors which appeared to be most in danger.¹⁴ His daily report for 21 August concluded that:

The enemy appears to have completed his preparation for his offensive. Small scale mortar attacks on Dai Loc and Thuong Duc in the last 24 hours possibly reflect last minute registration. The enemy may launch his offensive at any time . . .¹⁵

The Storm Breaks

The streams which drain the rugged mountains of central Quang Nam Province follow the slope of the land toward the South China Sea, growing in size and strength as they meet other streams. By the time they reach the flat coastal plain, the streams have become rivers which twist through the populated farmlands, branching and rejoining again in a crazy patchwork. In every area through which a river passes, the local Vietnamese give it a name, so that by the time it reaches the South China Sea, it has acquired many titles along the way. The river which flows along the southern boundary of Da Nang, separating the city from the fertile paddy region of the coastal plain, is called Song Cau Do, at least along that particular stretch. About

*See Chapter 17.

**From the beginning, the President had indicated that the deployment of the 27th Marines to Vietnam was temporary and in March he and his advisors directed that the regiment return in July. This was later delayed until September. See Chapter 27 for the deployment and redeployment of the 27th Marines. See also Chapter 13 for the initial deployment.

two kilometers south of the river, Highway 1 forks, sending each of its branches across the Song Cau Do toward Da Nang on its own bridge. The easternmost of these, called the Cam Le Bridge, after the hamlet on its northern side, led directly to the Da Nang Airbase, less than two kilometers away. Two kilometers upstream from the Cam Le Bridge, to the west, lay a combination highway bridge-railroad trestle known as the Song Cau Do Bridge.

Marines guarded these bridges, both to prevent VC saboteurs from destroying them and to prevent enemy infiltrators from crossing them with weapons and explosives for use in the city. The numerous support units stationed in Da Nang each assumed responsibility for a sector within the city and its suburbs. The 1st Tank Battalion's area included the Song Cau Do Bridge; the 1st Military Police Battalion's area included the Cam Le Bridge. For the most part, bridge security consisted of checking the identification papers and packages of civilians crossing the bridge and keeping a lookout beneath the bridge to foil sapper attacks. At random intervals, bridge sentries dropped small explosive charges into the water nearby to discourage enemy swimmers from approaching the pilings.

At the Song Cau Do and Cam Le Bridges, the duty was routine, the only excitement being the occasional detention of a Vietnamese whose identity papers were not in order. South of the river, infantry units of the 1st Marine Division formed an additional screen protecting the city from major attacks, so it seemed unlikely that the enemy, in force, would ever get as far as the bridges.

Company D, 1st Military Police Battalion was responsible for security at the Cam Le Bridge. The company command post was in a bunker at the north end of the bridge, alongside of which stood an observation tower. An old French bunker and another observation tower stood at the approach to the south end. Normally, one of Company D's platoons occupied the bunkers, towers, and several listening posts and ambush sites on both sides of the river, while the other two platoons remained in the company's rear area at the edge of the Da Nang Airbase, two kilometers to the north.

On the afternoon of 22 August, the company commander departed Da Nang for an "R&R" in Hawaii, leaving his executive officer, First Lieutenant Michael J. Kelly, in command.* Lieutenant Kelly was scheduled

to begin his own R&R in Hawaii on 28 August, but for the next six days, he would bear responsibility for the protection of the Cam Le Bridge.¹⁶ Unknown to him, during the early morning hours of 22 August, 80 Viet Cong of the *Q.91 Company, 2d District, Quang Da Special Zone*, in disguise and using forged identification papers, had individually crossed the Cam Le Bridge, then took a city bus to a safe house on Quang Tung Street to retrieve previously cached weapons and equipment and to await the hour for their attack.¹⁷

At 2130, responding to reports of movement along the Song Cau Do, Lieutenant Kelly ordered the 2d Platoon to move from its barracks to reinforce the 3d Platoon at the bridge. Within an hour, the Marines had reached the bridge and took up positions on the peninsula that curves out from the north bank to touch the span itself. At midnight, the Marines of the 1st Tank Battalion who were guarding the Song Cau Do Bridge, two kilometers to the west, spotted six people in the water and took them under fire, but because of the extreme darkness, could not determine whether the fire was effective.¹⁸

The Marines at the Cam Le Bridge did not have to wait long for their share of the action. At 0100, 23 August, Sergeant Larry K. Bucklew, the platoon sergeant of the 2d Platoon, spotted six sampans crossing the river near his position on the peninsula. The 2d Platoon opened fire, driving some of the sampans back across the river, while others pressed on, landing on the north bank.¹⁹

Before the Marines on the Cam Le Bridge could react to the firefight on the river to their west, exploding RPG rounds and mortar shells engulfed the security position on the south bank. The 1st Squad, 3d Platoon, under Lance Corporal Stephen D. Hott, was taken by surprise as Communist troops swarmed over its position. Lance Corporal Arthur Costello, manning a .50-caliber machine gun mounted in an old French bunker, tried to get his gun into action, but an enemy soldier outside the bunker held the barrel fast, and Costello could not bring it to bear.²⁰

Lance Corporal Hott, in the nearby observation tower with Private First Class Pedro L. G. Francisco, ordered Costello to disable the machine gun and withdraw. Hott then grabbed an M60 machine gun and ammunition and ran for the bridge. Costello, finding the enemy already inside his bunker, fought his way out, then paused to throw in a fragmentation grenade in hopes of "spiking" the machine gun.²¹ Making his way onto the bridge, Costello joined Lance Corporals John W. Thomas and Hylan L. Crowder running with

* Abbreviation commonly used for "Rest and Recreation." Each Marine was authorized one "R&R" during his 13-month tour of duty in Vietnam. Many sites were available throughout the Pacific area, including Hong Kong, Australia, Thailand, Japan, and Malaysia.

Hott towards the company command post on the north bank. Francisco was still on the south side, his fate unknown. The rest of the squad, dispersed in listening posts and ambush sites near the bridge's southern approaches, remained in their positions, unseen by the enemy.

Moments after the Communists struck, Lieutenant Kelly organized a counterattack from the north bank of the river. Corporal Wayne D. Brown led his squad across the bridge toward the fight, meeting Hott's squad halfway. Hott had been wounded in the head, so Brown ordered him back to the command post at the north end for treatment and, in the confusion, Hott took the machine gun with him. Unwilling to risk an attack without the machine gun, Brown organized his men for a defense of the middle of the bridge, using a sandbagged position already in place, then sent Lance Corporal John A. Eller back for the gun.

Eller returned with the gun, but with no ammunition. Brown himself went back to the north side, which was now under heavy mortar and rocket fire, and retrieved the ammunition. Finally ready to counterattack, the Marines charged across the bridge, hugging the sides for protection as Eller, leading the way, sprayed the enemy with machine gun fire. Reaching the observation tower, Eller was felled by a long burst from an enemy automatic weapon. While down, a ricochet struck him in the chest, wounding him a second time. He tossed a grenade into an enemy fighting hole, then died.^{22*}

Within one minute of Eller being hit, Brown himself and two of his men were wounded. With the machine gun lost and enemy fire mounting, Brown ordered a withdrawal to the bridge. As the Marines assumed new fighting positions near the water's edge, the enemy hit them with either tear gas or CS gas.^{**} Only one Marine in the squad had a protective mask, and the effects of the gas soon made the position untenable. The Marines withdrew further, to the sandbagged position in the middle of the bridge from which they had counterattacked. The gas, although still present, was not as strong there and the men were able to keep fighting. Brown reported the situation to Lieutenant Kelly. The lieutenant's response was, "Hang tight."

*For his courageous action, Lance Corporal Eller was posthumously decorated with the Silver Star.

**"CS" is the designation of a chemical riot control agent used in Vietnam. Its effects are similar to those caused by tear gas: burning of the eyes, throat, and mucous membranes. Although powerful, the effects are temporary, usually disappearing within minutes of the gas dissipating.

At that moment, there was little Lieutenant Kelly could do to help Corporal Brown. Enemy troops on the north bank were pressing hard against the company command post, advancing under heavy mortar, RPG, and small arms fire. The north bank observation tower, pounded by Communist shells, collapsed at 0200, burying three Marines sheltering beneath it, and immediately afterwards, the enemy used gas against the Marines on the north bank. As with Corporal Brown's squad, the Marines had no protective masks. Some withdrew to the middle of the bridge where the gas was not as strong, while others dipped their heads in the water to clear their eyes and throats, and desperately tried to hang onto their positions.²³

While Company D, 1st Military Police Battalion fought to hold the Cam Le Bridge, the third offensive erupted all over the Da Nang area. The security force at the nearby Song Cau Do Bridge, although not under ground attack, was shelled by enemy mortars. Downstream from them, toward the Cam Le Bridge, Communists continued to cross the river in sampans and the Marines on the Song Cau Do Bridge kept up steady machine gun fire into the enemy boats. Between 0245 and 0315, 19 units in the Da Nang area recorded over 300 rounds of mortar and 122mm rocket fire detonating on or near their positions. Enemy infantry attacked the 1st Tank Battalion, three company positions held by the 27th Marines, the headquarters of the 11th Marines, and three Combined Action platoons in the 7th Marines TAOR. Many other units received mortar fire. Viet Cong sappers struck the Special Forces compound two kilometers south of Marble Mountain Air Facility. Advancing under a mortar barrage, the sappers penetrated the perimeter and swept through the position with satchel charges, killing 16 Special Forces and Civilian Irregular Defense Group personnel and wounding 125 more. When finally driven off, the enemy left behind 32 dead. Later, a prisoner revealed that this enemy force was a company of the *R-20 Battalion*, reinforced by a platoon of the *Q-92 Sapper Company*. Their mission was to seize the Marble Mountain Air Facility and hold it for one day, destroying as many aircraft and facilities as possible.²⁴

The 2d and 3d Platoons of Company D, 1st Military Police Battalion were still under heavy attack at the Cam Le Bridge when the 1st Platoon left the airbase shortly after 0300 to relieve them. Moving in trucks down Highway 1, the rescuers came to a sudden stop after moving only a few hundred meters from the



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191816

In fighting for the Hoa Vang headquarters in August, Marines take cover from an unseen VC sniper. The interior of a destroyed structure can be seen with only the floor and a chair still undamaged.

airbase because a battle was raging around the Hoa Vang District headquarters, which lay along the highway, midway between Da Nang and the north end of the bridge. A company of the 402d Sapper Battalion had assaulted the district headquarters and blocked movement along Highway 1. In their initial attack, the sappers penetrated the headquarters defenses and were repulsed only after hand-to-hand fighting inside the compound with U.S. advisors, South Vietnamese National Police, and even local government officials taking part.³² The attack waned at about 0400, allowing the relief force to move into the headquarters where they left eight Marines as reinforcements before continuing toward the bridge. No sooner had the platoon started toward the bridge than the enemy sappers resumed their attack.²⁶

The 1st Platoon reached the river at 0430, just in time to meet another enemy onslaught directed against the bridge. From the airbase, a larger, combined relief force under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Joseph J. N. Gambardella, Commanding Officer, 3d Military Police Battalion, moved south toward the bridge.* This force, designated Task Force Kilo, consisted of two pla-

toons from the 3d Military Police Battalion; Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines; Company A, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion; and Ontos antitank vehicles, reinforced by a company of ARVN Rangers mounted in armored personnel carriers. Behind them, crash crews from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing followed with firefighting equipment, attempting to extinguish the fires caused by the attack on the Hoa Vang District headquarters.²⁷

At 0500, Lance Corporal Henry Lowery, leading a nine-man ambush patrol southwest of the bridge, radioed Lieutenant Kelly that he intended to attack and recapture the south end. Lowery's squad advanced to within 25 meters of the south tower, receiving only sniper fire. Two Bell UH-1 Iroquois "Huey" helicopter gunships appeared overhead and Lowery attempted to signal them to provide supporting fire on the tower. The helicopters mistakenly attacked the Marines instead of the entrenched Communists. With one man killed and two wounded, Lowery withdrew his squad to the relative safety of a nearby rice paddy to await help.²⁸

When dawn broke over Da Nang just after 0600, aircraft began attacking the Viet Cong in the bunkers at the south end of the Cam Le Bridge. The two "Hueys" were joined by a Douglas AC-47 Spooky gunship, a Douglas A-1 Skyraider, and McDonnell-Douglas F-4 Phantom jets which unsuccessfully pounded the enemy bunkers with napalm, high explosive bombs, and cannon fire.²⁹

*Colonel Gambardella, the MP battalion commander, recalled that this was the second call for assistance on the night of 22-23 August. Just before midnight, he responded to a request for assistance from the commander of the ARVN Special Forces headquarters in the center of Da Nang city which was under attack. He deployed two platoons from his battalion who cordoned off the headquarters. Four of the attackers were killed and two were captured. Col Joseph J. N. Gambardella, Comments on draft, dtd 16Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

Counterattack

The infantry unit nearest the south end of the bridge was the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines, with its command post at Duong Son, four kilometers to the southwest. At 0645, the battalion commander, Major Kenneth J. Skipper, ordered Company A, located at the battalion command post, to launch an immediate counterattack to recapture the Cam Le Bridge. Two of the company's three platoons were already detached, with one deployed to Christmas Island, 1,000 meters northeast of the bridge, and the other supporting a Combined Action platoon in the hamlet of Lo Giang (1), 1,000 meters southeast of the bridge. Further, one squad from the remaining platoon was on a patrol, leaving a total of two rifle squads available to the company. The company commander, Captain William O. Moore, reinforced these two squads with other members of the company who were present in the command post. Marines trained to operate mortars, rocket launchers, and even typewriters suddenly became riflemen again. Said Captain Moore, "we took our clerks, we took our sick, lame, and lazy, we took everybody we had and moved out."³⁰ Within five minutes of receiving the order, the small force was on the march.

Having departed without full knowledge of the enemy situation, Captain Moore tried to gather information along the way. Passing through an ARVN compound, he spoke with the U.S. Army advisors who pointed out suspected Communist positions lining both sides of Highway 1. The company continued north along the highway, stopping outside of Cam Nam, only two kilometers from the Communist positions on the south end of the bridge. While there, Captain Moore received orders from Major Skipper to detach yet another squad from his seriously depleted force to assist the platoon in Lo Giang (1), which had reported being surrounded and under attack. He sent 16 Marines to reinforce the supposedly beleaguered garrison and requested permission to proceed toward the bridge. Major Skipper, however, told him to remain in position and wait for a platoon of tanks which would support the attack.

The Marines sent to Lo Giang (1) soon radioed back that they had arrived to find the hamlet quiet, with the Combined Action Marines reporting they had not had contact with the enemy for three hours. Captain Moore, assuming that someone had "cried 'wolf,'" asked for the return of the 16 Marines, but Major Skipper denied his request.

At 1145, the tanks arrived: four 90mm gun tanks and a flame tank from Company B, 5th Tank Battalion. The Marines of Company A had never operated with tanks before. Indeed, many of those with Captain Moore had never participated as riflemen in any operation before. Nevertheless, the "company," reduced in strength once again to two ad-hoc squads, pressed forward toward the hamlet of Cam Nam on their way to the Cam Le Bridge. The road was raised above the surrounding paddies with a sharp drop down on both shoulders, so the tanks were forced to advance in column, with one infantry squad on either side. At the same time, Company D, 1st Battalion, 27th Marines prepared to attack Cam Nam from the west.

When Captain Moore and his men were less than 400 meters from Cam Nam, the enemy opened fire with RPGs, mortars, and small arms. The initial burst killed two Marines and wounded four others, but the rest continued the attack, firing and maneuvering toward the enemy, inching forward with only low paddy dikes for cover. Two hundred meters from the hamlet, an RPG hit the lead tank, causing minor damage. Captain Moore spotted the RPG and pointed it out to the tankers, who returned fire with 40 rounds of high explosive, 4 rounds of "Beehive," and 3 rounds of white phosphorous.³¹ With this, Communist troops began to run from one dwelling to another within the hamlet, the tanks cutting them down with machine gun fire and blasting with 90mm rounds any structure they entered. A machine gun fired at the Marines from within a straw hut, and the flame tank drenched the hut liberally with burning fuel. Soon, the entire hamlet was ablaze, with virtually every structure leveled. "This," related Captain Moore, "about ended our problem."³²

The Communists had blocked the highway with vehicles, which also provided cover for the enemy. Five more rounds of 90mm fire blasted away this makeshift obstacle and the tiny force again surged forward toward the Cam Le Bridge. As they passed through the burning hamlet, the company received word that a platoon from Company E, 2d Battalion, 27th Marines would soon join them. Captain Moore ordered his platoon on Christmas Island, which had already made one unsuccessful bid to recapture the bridge, to join the counterattack from the east.

The .50-caliber machine gun abandoned in the bunker the previous night had not been destroyed by Lance Corporal Costello's hand grenade and the Viet Cong now had it in action against the Marines. Even after a fearful pounding by aircraft, there was no sign

that the Communists in the old French bunker were ready to quit. The tanks led the attack toward the south end of the bridge, pumping round after round of 90mm cannon fire into the bunker and the nearby observation tower. The accurate, concentrated fire proved to be too much for the Communists, who rushed from their positions, attempting to escape. Several of them jumped into a vehicle and tried to drive away, but a tank fired into the vehicle, sending it up in flames. Other enemy soldiers leaped into the river and tried to swim to safety, but the Marines rushed to the riverbank and shot them in the water.

At 1545, nine hours after receiving the order to counterattack, Captain Moore reported to his battalion headquarters that the objective was secured, then set about reorganizing the position. Several local Popular

Marine Cpl Henry A. Casselli, holding his M16 rifle, is seen returning to the northern end of the Cam Le Bridge over the Cau Do River after helping to secure the bridge. Other Marines cross in the background. An ad hoc force from the 1st and 2d Battalions, 27th Marines and including tankers and MPs had taken part in the fighting.

Department of Defense (USMC) A191818



Force troops were found under the bridge where they had been hiding since the previous night. Beneath the tower, the Marines found the body of the gallant John Eller, and in the vicinity of the bridge, 22 enemy dead. Company A had suffered three dead and eight wounded. Captain Moore linked up with Lieutenant Kelly's military policemen on the north bank and his own platoon from Christmas Island, then sent a squad down the riverbank to the west to ferret out any Viet Cong who might be hiding there.

To the north, Lieutenant Colonel Gambardella's Task Force Kilo fought through the remnants of the enemy sapper company which had laid siege to the Hoa Vang District headquarters, reaching the north bank of the river at approximately 1900. Lieutenant Colonel Gambardella recalled that in the attack south to the Cam Le Bridge, Task Force Kilo came under heavy fire and took several casualties. In the two fights, the Marines sustained 4 killed and 12 wounded and the RVN forces with them 3 dead and 21 wounded. Among the casualties was Navy Hospitalman Allan R. Gerrish, who placed himself between a wounded Marine and enemy machine gun fire and posthumously was awarded the Navy Cross for this action. Enemy casualties in the battles for the district headquarters and the Cam Le Bridge totaled 184. ARVN Rangers took control of the area, allowing Captain Moore and his company to move to Christmas Island. Although weary from the day's hard fighting, Company A maintained 100 percent alert in their new positions.³³

Through the night of 23–24 August, there were several incidents, relatively minor as compared to the events of the previous night, indicating that the "third offensive," though seriously compromised locally, was not yet over. At 2200, a short firefight erupted at the Song Cau Do Bridge when two sampans filled with enemy troops attempted to cross the river from south to north under the cover of small arms fire and a brief mortar barrage. Return fire directed at the Communist positions resulted in 11 secondary explosions.³⁴ Between 0200 and 0400, over 100 rounds of mortar fire fell on the command post of the 5th Marines, positions held by Company M, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, and Battery H, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines.³⁵

With the situation in Da Nang restored, it remained for III MAF to pursue and destroy the escaping Communist units while at the same time remaining vigilant for another wave of attacks on the city. The heaviest fighting of the "third offensive" was yet to come.

Pursuit

At dawn on 24 August, a patrol from Company C, 1st Battalion, 27th Marines made contact with two companies of the Viet Cong V-25 *Battalion*, five kilometers south-southwest of the Cam Le Bridge in a hamlet named Qua Giang (2). The ARVN 1st Battalion, 51st Infantry, an ARVN armored cavalry unit, Company F, 2d Battalion, 27th Marines, and the 3d Platoon, Company B, 5th Tank Battalion surrounded the hamlet and directed supporting arms fire on enemy positions throughout the day and night.³⁶

On 24 August, elements of the 1st Military Police Battalion, Company A, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion and the South Vietnamese 111th Regional Force Company swept Highway 1 from the airbase to the bridge. Despite the previous sweep by Task Force Kilo, pockets of enemy resistance remained. Rooting them out, the task force counted 1 prisoner and 30 enemy dead at a cost of 6 Marines wounded.³⁷ South of Marble Mountain Air Facility, in a rare daylight attack, a dozen 122mm rockets fell in the 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion compound during mid-morning, but they caused only minor structural damage and no personnel casualties or equipment losses.³⁸

General Youngdale felt that the Communists had not yet played their full hand. On 24 August, he predicted that the enemy would continue attacking the Cam Le Bridge, Marble Mountain Air Facility, and major installations within the city. He also expressed concern that another Viet Cong sapper battalion might attempt to infiltrate Da Nang from the northwest.³⁹

On 25 August, after pounding the V-25 *Battalion* at Qua Giang (2) with supporting arms for two days and a night, the combined Marine-ARVN force entered the hamlet, finding approximately 150 North Vietnamese dead and the remnants of what appeared to be a battalion command post, complete with radios.⁴⁰ That evening, Youngdale reported to General Cushman that:

... infantry and sapper units may have aborted their attempts to penetrate Da Nang from the south and may move to the south to reposition in the vicinity of Go Noi Island. However, rocket and mortar attacks may resume.⁴¹

Acting on this analysis, General Youngdale issued orders to mount an operation which would block the withdrawal of the Communists from the Da Nang area and defeat them in detail.⁴² Named Operation Sussex Bay, it would employ elements of the 5th Marines and the 7th Marines, supported by ARVN and Republic of

Korea Marine Corps (ROKMC) units. H-hour was set for 0900, 29 August.

At 0815, 29 August, while occupying a blocking position in preparation for Operation Sussex Bay, Company M, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines made heavy contact with the enemy in the "Dodge City" area, four kilometers south of Hill 55. While maneuvering against the enemy flank, the company came under heavy fire from three sides which wounded several men. A corpsman, Hospitalman Richard L. Powell, braved the enemy fire to assist the wounded and was himself hit by machine gun fire, rendering his arm useless. Despite his wounds, Powell continued to treat the casualties, at one point advancing to assist a fallen Marine who lay within 15 meters of a Communist machine gun. Here, Powell was hit again and killed. For his selfless act, Powell posthumously received the Navy Cross.⁴³

Company D, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and Company G, 2d Battalion, 27th Marines joined the action with tanks. Assisted by aircraft and artillery, the Marines dislodged the North Vietnamese. Friendly losses totalled 2 dead and 41 wounded and the Marines reported killing 42 of the enemy.⁴⁴

While Company M fought, the other units involved in Operation Sussex Bay assumed their positions. Just east of the National Railroad, a contingent of Korean Marines established a blocking position along the Co Ca stream. To the south, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines occupied its own blocking position in the western half of Go Noi Island, along the Song Ky Lam, while the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines began a sweep of the eastern half of the island. The 3d Battalion, 7th Marines hemmed in the area of operations by establishing a defensive line two kilometers west of the railroad. Finally, two ARVN units, the 21st and 37th Ranger Battalions, attacked south along the railroad from their line of departure along the Song La Tho.

Shortly after launching their sweep, the ARVN Ranger battalions engaged a large enemy unit spread out between the hamlets of Dong Lien and Ha Nong Tay (2). The Rangers returned fire and called for fire support from the 2d Battalion, 11th Marines and ARVN artillery units. The battle resulted in over 80 North Vietnamese dead at a cost of 8 ARVN Rangers killed and 33 wounded.⁴⁵

Further south, in the Arizona Territory, Marine units participating in Operation Mameluke Thrust recorded significant contact with the enemy. An NVA platoon ambushed a platoon of Company D, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines on 29 August near the Song Tinh Yen, killing 12 Marines and wounding 18. The

Marines directed 5 airstrikes and over 700 rounds of artillery fire onto enemy positions only 200 meters away, reporting as a result 25 Communists dead.⁴⁶

General Youngdale remained convinced that the enemy intended to attack Da Nang from the west and northwest.⁴⁷ To counter this threat, he requested that a B-52 mission be diverted from a previously scheduled target to strike the valley of the Song Cu De (called Elephant Valley by the Marines), 10 kilometers northwest of the city.⁴⁸

The action, despite Youngdale's analysis, remained centered to the south, mainly in the Operation Sussex Bay area. Just after midnight on 30 August, Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines ambushed a group of approximately 30 North Vietnamese fording the Song Ky Lam in an apparent effort to reach Go Noi Island. A search of the area conducted at first light revealed 29 enemy dead. There were no Marine casualties.⁴⁹ Later that morning, the ARVN Ranger battalions swept south once again, claiming to have killed 27 Viet Cong and 4 North Vietnamese.⁵⁰

On 31 August, the units involved in Operation Sussex Bay closed the net around the escaping Communists. During the morning, both of the ARVN battalions pressed the enemy into a bend in the Song Ky Lam on the other side of which the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines waited in blocking positions. The encircled Communists fought desperately, but artillery and airstrikes flown by Marine helicopter gunships and RVNAF fixed-wing aircraft smashed them in the trap. The attack resulted in over 80 North Vietnamese dead and netted 1 prisoner at a cost of 7 ARVN Rangers killed and 45 others wounded.⁵¹

The fighting of 31 August crushed the major Communist force attempting to flee south after the failed attack on Da Nang, but small units still slipped through the net and continued to work their way toward Go Noi Island. At 2000, 31 August, Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines ambushed one of these groups, approximately 30 North Vietnamese attempting to cross the Song Ky Lam. Unlike the group engaged two nights earlier, these

Two Marines from Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines rush to a landing zone to pick up supplies left by a Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter from HMM-164, during Operation Sussex Bay near An Hoa and Go Noi Island sectors.

Photo from Abel Collection



latest prey of Company H started to cross the river in boats. Under illumination provided by the battalion's 81mm mortar platoon, the Marines sunk both boats with small arms fire.⁵²

Amid the efforts to defend Da Nang and the pursuit of the fleeing enemy by Operation Sussex Bay forces, the 1st Marine Division continued its preparations for the redeployment of the 27th Marines. As elements of Colonel Robert G. Lauffer's 1st Marines arrived at Da Nang, they took up positions in the 27th Marines sector, the first phase of an orderly turnover. By 1 September, Colonel Lauffer had two of his battalions in place and controlled two others of the 27th Marines. Those battalions, the 1st and 2d, still occupied defensive positions in the area. General Youngdale reorganized the Da Nang TAOR, extending the 1st Marines' new area of operations east to the sea, thereby relieving the 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion of the responsibility for securing the area south of the Marble Mountain Air Facility. This move allowed the amphibian tractor Marines to concentrate on their primary mission of supporting infantry units in the field.⁵³

Operation Sussex Bay continued into September, but the area of operations shifted to Go Noi Island. During the evening of 1 September, Battery E, 2d Battalion, 11th Marines moved by helicopter to the Go Noi to support an operation to be carried out by the 2d and 3d Battalions, 5th Marines. On 2 September, the 5th Marines launched its attack into the eastern half of the island. Lieutenant Colonel James W. Stemple, the commander of the 2d Battalion, remembered that the aim was "to sweep Go Noi from the railroad berm to the eastern end of the island with the two battalions advancing abreast by phase lines." Contact was light. By 5 September, the Marines had rooted out and killed only 6 North Vietnamese and 5 Viet Cong, and had suffered 5 dead and 22 wounded. Of the Marine casualties, 4 dead and 11 wounded were the direct result of enemy action, while the remainder were victims of accidents and incidents including short mortar rounds and a friendly airstrike. The last two Marines to become casualties during this phase of Operation Sussex Bay were wounded by an aroused denizen of Go Noi Island, a water buffalo who embodied the hostile attitude held by the rest of the island's population toward the Marines. The heavy rains of Typhoon Bess would force the Marines temporarily off the Go Noi.⁵⁴

Typhoon Bess

On 5 September, Typhoon Bess struck the I Corps Tactical Zone, catching many units far afield. Winds in excess of 50 knots, accompanied by heavy rain and a ceiling of less than 100 feet, grounded all aircraft for two days.⁵⁵ The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines quit Go Noi Island and marched to nearby Liberty Bridge. The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines was not as lucky, since it was, as Lieutenant Colonel Stemple recalled, "occupying positions at the very east end of the island." The battalion moved to what high ground there was along the railroad berm as Stemple "knew there would be no way we would be able to 'walk off' the island." The next day Marine Corps helicopters lifted the 2d Battalion out of the Go Noi except for Company H. This latter company was supposed to remain on the island, directly under the operational control of the 5th Marines, and then sweep back to Liberty Bridge the following morning. According to Lieutenant Colonel Stemple, he convinced Colonel Graham, the 5th Marines commander, to helilift this company out after one Marine in the company drowned in the attempt.⁵⁶ By this time ground units all over ICTZ suspended operations and moved to high ground to wait out the storm.

Even units in base areas were not safe from the typhoon's effects. Rising water flooded defensive perimeters, filling trenches and washing away bunkers. Some minefields were under a foot of water.⁵⁷ The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, scheduled to relieve the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines, halted movement, as the storm's effects threatened the fragile timetable for the 27th Marines' redeployment to the United States.⁵⁸

The civilian populace suffered as well. A III MAF intelligence report estimated that, in addition to the thousands of homes blown down or washed away by Typhoon Bess, the storm destroyed 60 percent of the rice crop and 55 percent of the stored rice. Intelligence officers speculated the flooding damaged enemy caches, bunkers, and tunnels, as well.⁵⁹

By 7 September, the storm abated and the weather improved enough that field operations could resume, although the flooding still hampered movement considerably. Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines provided security for a recovery unit of Company B, 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion attempting to retrieve two inoperative amphibian tractors abandoned by the 5th Marines on Go Noi Island during the storm. Normally, when a vehicle broke down in

the field, it was guarded until it could be repaired or recovered. To abandon a vehicle was highly unusual, but in this instance necessary, because of the flooding. When the Marines reached the vehicles on the morning of 8 September, they found both destroyed by demolition and fire, the result of enemy action.^{60*}

The Communists, hardly heard from during the typhoon, also resumed operations. At 1800, 8 September, a Stingray patrol in the mountains west of the Arizona Territory sighted 146 enemy moving through a rice paddy at the base of Charlie Ridge. The reconnaissance team called for air and artillery support, killing 25 of the Viet Cong. The following morning, an enemy burial party appeared to recover the bodies. The Stingray patrol directed an airstrike against them, as well, accounting for another 20 Viet Cong.⁶¹

The 1st Marine Division ended Operation Sussex Bay on 9 September, citing as the reason the disruption caused by the "unfavorable weather conditions which prevailed during Typhoon 'Bess'."⁶² In fact,

* Both the 2d and 3d Battalions, 5th Marines had to abandon tanks and LVTs that had accompanied the battalions into the Go Noi. The VC or NVA burned two LVTs that had been left by the 3d Battalion, but Colonel Stemple, the 2d Battalion commander, recalled that the Navy several months later provided a LCU (Landing Craft Utility) with a tank retriever and recovered all of the tanks and the two remaining LVTs. According to Stemple, "miraculously, the enemy had not discovered them and except for the water damage, they were recovered intact." Col James W. Stemple, Comments on draft, n.d. [1995] (Vietnam Comment File).

enemy activity in the Da Nang TAOR and the area to the immediate south was minimal, indicating that the combination of Operation Sussex Bay and Typhoon Bess had taken the fight out of the Communist units which had originally struck Da Nang on 23 August.

Group 44, the Communist unit which carried out the third offensive in the Da Nang TAOR, suffered heavily during the effort. According to Marine intelligence sources, *Group 44* units lost 637 killed while staging for the offensive. In the attacks of 23 August, the main effort of the offensive, III MAF estimated over 230 enemy died. The heaviest Communist casualties, however, occurred during the next two weeks, when III MAF intelligence reports listed another 1,200 enemy killed, thus bringing the total estimated enemy losses during their offensive to more than 2,000 dead.⁶³

Although not everyone in III MAF was certain at the time, the "third offensive" was over.⁶⁴ Bold in concept but unspectacular in results, the offensive did not materially affect the progress of the negotiations in Paris, nor the balance of power in the Da Nang TAOR. In fact, it signalled the end of an enemy effort begun during Tet and continued in May, whose purpose was to inflict a decisive military defeat on Free World Forces in the Republic of Vietnam. Communist losses in these offensives were staggering, forcing them to change tactics. For now, their timetable would be delayed once more.

Autumn Offensive Halted

*A New Orientation—The Eastern DMZ—Defeat of the 320th Division
Coastal Quang Tri and Thua Thien: A Shift*

A New Orientation

Combat action throughout Quang Tri Province had been intermittent during June and July. Enemy forces engaged by 3d Marine Division, U.S. Army, and ARVN forces were, by and large, elements of the 304th, 308th, and 320th NVA Divisions, and the 27th, 138th, and 270th Independent NVA Regiments. Only occasionally encountered or employed in strength, these units primarily undertook reconnaissance in force missions, shellings, ambushes, probing attacks, and assisted in the movement of arms and supplies to local force Viet Cong units and guerrillas. The aggressive air and infantry attacks had caused the enemy to keep his forces dispersed, off balance, and denied him access to many areas and avenues of approach necessary to carry out a large-scale ground attack against major population centers and allied military units and installations. By the end of July, allied forces in the north had blunted but not curtailed the forward deployment and positioning of forces for the forthcoming autumn or "Third Wave" Offensive by elements of the 320th NVA Division and the three independent regiments.

With an area of operation that encompassed more than 3,000 square kilometers, the 3d Marine Division could not continue to rely on battalion- or regimental-sized operations as it had done in the past. "In my field visits," Major General Raymond G. Davis noted, "I find that battalion level operations mentality still exists in most instances."¹ With the dispersal of enemy forces over such a large area, General Davis, in an effort to standardize operations, reemphasized the need for the employment of numerous coordinated infantry company patrols working under the protective umbrella of supporting arms. The idea was not only to increase coverage, but also to deny the enemy sanctuary and discourage him from developing extensive logistics bases and resupply caches during the coming months.²

Incorporating lessons learned during June and July as the division moved toward a more mobile posture, Davis urged his regimental and battalion commanders to reorient "their thinking and staff planning toward

infantry company operations to find and fix enemy forces within their AO's."³ Even though an operation would be planned at the regimental- and battalion-level, it was not now necessary for it to be executed by the regiment or battalion as a single unit. Companies would be given specific objectives within the area of operations and encouraged to operate independently within a particular area oriented to terrain rather than grid lines and within reinforcing distance of another company. Night operations would be emphasized.

The division commander, likewise, encouraged rifle company commanders to employ the highly successful tactics developed during the past two months. Once a company entered the area of operations, either by foot or by air, it would immediately and unobtrusively select the first of what would become a series of defensible patrol bases. Before eating or resting, Marines dug in and registered the company's defensive weapons on all possible avenues of enemy approach.

In sweeping out from the base toward a series of preselected, limited objectives, companies and platoons would move cross-country in two or more mutually supporting columns. They were to avoid well-travelled trails and draws, while remaining within supporting and reinforcing distance of the patrol base. Supporting arms would be registered at frequent intervals, normally 500 meters to the front and flanks of the column. In addition, landing zones would be cut to facilitate the evacuation of casualties and resupply. The Marine unit on the move, Davis stressed, would have "what it needs, where it needs it, and at the time it needs it."⁴ The pursuit of small groups of enemy troops, composed of fewer than five individuals would be avoided, as the North Vietnamese frequently relied on this tactic to lure the advancing unit into an ambush.

Once the advancing Marine unit established contact, massive, coordinated supporting arms fire would be employed prior to launching an assault on the enemy's position. Blocking forces, simultaneously, would be moved up or inserted to seal off all possible avenues of escape. Upon the lifting of supporting arms fire, the combined force would then conduct a method-

ical search of the area with the objective of destroying the enemy position and capturing weapons, equipment, and personnel.

While both reemphasizing time-honored infantry company operations and incorporating a number of recently learned tactics, General Davis reiterated that "any tactic which denies the enemy sanctuary—physical or psychological for rest, resupply and security—will enhance the effectiveness of future operations by the Division."⁵*

In addition to placing a greater emphasis on infantry company operations as the basis for all future division operations, Davis also stressed the importance of intelligence, specifically intelligence gathered by long-range reconnaissance patrols, which would be continuously employed throughout the division's area of responsibility. Lieutenant Colonel Donald R. Berg's 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, reinforced by the 3d Force Reconnaissance Company, would continue to maintain a large number of teams in the field at any one time.^{**} "This has meant," Davis noted, "that every indication of enemy activity from whatever means is explored by the insertion of reconnaissance teams . . . everywhere—on a continuing basis, a massive reconnaissance team effort is maintained."⁶

Reconnaissance Marines generally employed two types of long-range patrols in this massive intelligence effort. The 8- to 12-man, heavily armed Stingray patrols operated within range of friendly artillery. Their mission was to seek, fix, and destroy the enemy with all available supporting arms. These patrols would be reinforced by "Sparrow Hawk" or "Bald

Eagle" rapid-reaction forces, if the opportunity arose to destroy the entire enemy force. In the more remote areas of Quang Tri Province, beyond artillery range, "Key Hole" patrols would be used. Much smaller in size, normally composed of four to five men, and armed with only essential small arms, ammunition, and communications equipment, "Key Hole" patrols were to remain out of sight and observe. If discovered, they were to evade the enemy and attempt escape. These long-range patrols would not normally be reinforced unless artillery could be inserted; if under fire and taking casualties, the team would be extracted by helicopter.⁷ The 3d Marine Division, as Davis later stated, "never launched an operation without acquiring clear definition of the targets and objectives through intelligence confirmed by recon patrols. High mobility operations [were] too difficult and complex to come up empty or in disaster."⁸

The increased number of operations and clear weather experienced during the mid-summer months increased the ability of Marine forces to observe the enemy's movement, provide close air support, and interdict his lines of communication and logistic operations, causing him difficulties in the resupply of personnel and equipment. This, coupled with a steady increase in the loss of food, ammunition, personnel, and previously prepared forward positions, forced the North Vietnamese to reassess or alter their plans for the major offensive, slated to be launched sometime in mid-August. Despite inroads by the 3d Division, the infiltration of personnel, supplies, and equipment into Quang Tri Province continued, but at a slower pace. Division intelligence analysts, however, still considered the *320th Division* and three independent regiments to be combat ready and capable of conducting regiment or division-sized attacks on allied units, fire support bases, and installations along the Demilitarized Zone. In addition, the disposition of these four enemy units was such that a large-scale attack could come at any time.⁹

The Eastern DMZ

As August began, allied forces continued the pressure on enemy units throughout Quang Tri Province. The heaviest fighting was to take place in the north-eastern portion of the province in the Napoleon-Saline area of operation. The first significant contact occurred on 2 August when several squads of North Vietnamese attacked the forward naval gunfire observation post at Oceanview, 10 kilometers north of Cua Viet. Support-

*Colonel Thomas H. Galbraith, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines at the time, observed that actual company tactics employed by his battalion differed very much in practice than the ideal described by General Davis. Galbraith wrote that these tactics "may have been feasible in the eastern portion of Quang Tri Province, but in the mountainous jungle terrain of the western portion, particularly north of Route 9, they were virtually impossible to employ." He explained that "conditions simply would not permit companies and platoons to 'sweep out' of patrol bases in 'mutually supporting columns,' registering supporting arms and cutting LZs as they went." Col Thomas H. Galbraith, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Galbraith Comments.

**See Chapter 26 for chart showing average number of 3d Reconnaissance Battalion daily patrols for the months July–December 1968. Lieutenant Colonel Berg observed that the number of patrols varied for several reasons. For example during September and October, monsoon rains "made inserts and extraction schedules unpredictable and difficult." Other variables besides the weather included operations by other battalions and changes in enemy locations. LtCol Donald R. Berg, Comments on draft, dtd 4Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Berg Comments.

ed by Marine tanks, amphibian tractors, and naval gunfire, the defenders drove off the enemy who left eight dead. Later the same day, allied observers spotted a platoon of NVA in the same area and called in artillery and naval gunfire, resulting in two reported additional enemy killed.

On 8 August, two battalions of Lieutenant Colonel Vu Van Giai's 2d ARVN Regiment engaged elements of the *1st Battalion, 138th NVA Regiment*, two kilometers east of Gio Linh and two and one-half kilometers south of the DMZ. As the engagement intensified during the afternoon, the ARVN committed the remaining two battalions of the regiment. Despite receiving more than 150 rounds of mixed artillery and mortar fire, the ARVN battalions pressed the attack, supported by artillery and tactical airstrikes. Suffering more than 100 casualties the enemy battalion withdrew northward under the cover of darkness after the six-hour battle.

Following a week of brief, but sharp clashes around Gio Linh, Lieutenant Colonel Giai's 2d ARVN Regiment launched an attack into the southern half of the Demilitarized Zone in an effort to reestablish contact with the enemy regiment. Early on the morning of 15 August, elements of Company A, 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, with 15 LVTs and 2 tanks, rolled out of Outpost C-4 and proceeded to within one kilometer of the zone's southern boundary, turned, and proceeded back to C-4. Company A's diversion was to set the stage for the ARVN attack.

The raid into the DMZ, planned and controlled by the South Vietnamese, was to be executed by the elements of the 2d ARVN Regiment, 11th ARVN Armored Cavalry, and the 3d Marine Division's tank battalion, organized into four cross-reinforced task elements. According to the plan, the combined infantry and tank force was to attack north of the Song Cua Viet into the DMZ. The task force would then turn west, envelop the *1st Battalion, 138th NVA Regiment*, and attack south.

The combined elements of the ARVN and Marine task force departed their respective bases at 0400 on the 15th, and by dawn had moved up the beach to the northernmost point of advance without detection. The task force then turned west, moving from the beach into an area composed of abandoned rice paddies. Although a number of tracked vehicles and tanks became mired in the swampy ground, 10 tanks from Companies A and B, 3d Tank Battalion, continued to sweep northwestward toward the Song Ben Hai and then south, where they surprised the enemy "who were

eating breakfast."¹⁰ After preplanned B-52 Arclight strikes and under covering artillery and tank fire, the allied task force eventually overran the well-entrenched enemy command post, supported by its own 105mm artillery. Marine tankers, who described the day's action as a "turkey shoot," were credited with 189 killed and 70 probables out of a total of 421 reported enemy dead.¹¹ Although the Marine tank companies suffered no casualties, two tanks and a retriever were damaged by mines.

Lieutenant Colonel Giai in his report on the raid, stated the mission was only 50 percent accomplished; Lieutenant General Richard G. Stilwell, the XXIV Corps (formerly Prov Corps) commander, was less restrained in his observations about the success of the ARVN. He reported to General Creighton Abrams, the MACV commander, that the *1st Battalion, 138th NVA Regiment*, "was, . . . to have attacked south across DMZ last night; it will do no attacking for some time to come. Meanwhile, the morale of the 2d ARVN Regiment has never been higher. It was a good days work."¹²

Several days later, in Paris, Ambassador W. Averill Harriman informed North Vietnamese negotiators that South Vietnamese infantrymen had conducted a reconnaissance of a suspected North Vietnamese concentration south of the Song Ben Hai in the "South Vietnamese portion of the Demilitarized Zone. Here they encountered the 1st Battalion of the 138th North Vietnamese Army Regiment Once again, I urge that you accept my proposal for restoration of the Demilitarized Zone to its original status."¹³

For the balance of the month, the remaining elements of the *138th NVA Regiment* evaded all but minor engagements with Marine and ARVN patrols in the area. The North Vietnamese, however, continued to use the Demilitarized Zone as a base for attacks into South Vietnam, especially into the central and western portions of Quang Tri Province.

In the Kentucky area of operations, to the west, Colonel Ross T. Dwyer's 1st Marines experienced little activity other than minor squad-sized encounters during the first half of August. The exception was an encounter with 30 enemy troops by First Lieutenant Arthur A. Pierce's Company F, 9th Marines, three kilometers east of Con Thien. In the face of U.S. artillery and fixed-wing support, the enemy broke contact and Pierce's Marines began a sweep through the area. During the sweep, the Marines regained contact, but the enemy again broke and ran, and Company F moved through the area, capturing a number of weapons and packs while counting 11 enemy dead.

With enemy activity in the eastern DMZ, particularly north of Con Thien, on the rise, General Davis decided to act. In addition to sightings of enemy tanks, Marine tactical fighter pilots and aerial observers reported spotting trucks, truck parks, camouflaged revetments, storage bunkers, and trenchlines. Of special interest were repeated sightings of low, slow moving lights during hours of darkness which, it was assumed, emanated from enemy helicopters or some other vertical take-off and landing aircraft. The enemy, it was thought, "might well be using aircraft to resupply forward positions with high priority cargo such as ammunition and medical supplies or conducting medevacs after our techniques."¹⁴

Having strengthened his tactical position, but having committed all of his available forces, General Davis requested that Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 2/26 be made available to conduct a raid into the DMZ. In the event the landing team could not be committed to the incursion, Davis asked that the battalion relieve the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, so that it could initiate the raid. On 17 August, Lieutenant General Cushman approved Davis' request for BLT 2/26 to relieve the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, but stipulated that the battalion landing team would have to return to its amphibious shipping by 20 August.

Davis, however, was concerned. In a message to General Stilwell the following day, Davis noted that the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines had been alerted to deploy to the Da Nang area on 22 August. In addition, "there are other indications, that two battalions of the First Regiment will be moved prior to the first of September. These moves follow on the heels of the loss of the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines in May and the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines earlier this month." The Army's 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), over which the division had assumed operational control on 1 August, not only would not offset the loss, but also was not scheduled to be fully operational before September. "It is obvious," he concluded, "that a severe draw down on 3d Mar Div capability at this time will seriously limit my ability to maintain the present flexible, mobile posture which I feel is necessary if I am to continue the effective suppression of enemy activity in this area." He therefore recommended that the present 12 maneuver battalion strength of the division be maintained.¹⁵

In discussions with General Cushman, Stilwell reported Davis' concern. General Cushman responded that only the two battalions of the 1st Marines were to be reassigned to the 1st Marine Division. General Stil-

well immediately informed Davis of the decision: "You are advised to plan on moving the two bns of the First Marines to First Mar Div in the latter part of this month and to plan on retaining the Second Bn, Third Marines, as an organic element of Third Mar Div."¹⁶ The maneuver strength of the division would remain at 12 battalions, nine Marine and the equivalent of three Army.*

In the event of a crisis in the northern sector, Stilwell notified the 101st Airborne Division to prepare to assume Task Force X-Ray's area of operations in Thua Thien Province, which was occupied by the 1st and 3d Battalions, 26th Marines. These two battalions then could be airlifted to Quang Tri Province to reinforce the 3d Marine Division.

On 18 August, Marine helicopters brought BLT 2/26 ashore into the Mai Xa Thi area on the Song Cua Viet, relieving the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines. Following two days of vigorous day and night patrols and ambushes, the battalion returned to its amphibious shipping off Cua Viet.¹⁷

Within a hour of the last of 60 B-52 Arclight strikes on 19 August, Lieutenant Colonel John E. Poindexter's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines assaulted three landing zones in the Trung Son region of the southern DMZ, five kilometers north of Con Thien. Covered by Companies A and B, 1st Marines and a platoon of tanks from Companies A and B, 3d Tank Battalion, deployed near Hill 56, 4,000 meters to the east, Poindexter's Marines swept east for approximately four kilometers,

*The 1st Marines was to replace the 27th Marines, which regiment would return to the United States in September. In personal correspondence in September 1968, Brigadier General E. E. Anderson, the III MAF Chief of Staff, outlined the hard bargaining that occurred over the displacement of the 1st Marines. He wrote: "We've had a considerable hassle over the move of the 1st Marines . . ." He declared that General Cushman made the original decision because the 3d Division would have operational control of the 1st Brigade, 5th Mechanized Division, but that "Davis [the 3d Division commander] really complained that he just couldn't get along with eight maneuver battalions plus an SLF, but had to have a minimum of nine, plus a BLT." According to Anderson, "General Cushman stood his ground for quite some time, but then Stilwell and Davis came down and came forth with a counter-proposal . . ." According to the proposal, XXIV Corps would assume responsibility for the area between Phu Bai and Phu Loc, then controlled by the 1st Marine Division Task Force X-Ray. The III MAF commander then "reluctantly accepted the proposal . . ." III MAF and XXIV Corps, however, continued to discuss the specific details about responsibilities and command structure in the former Task Force X-Ray sector. BGen E. E. Anderson to LtGen W. J. Van Ryzin, dtd 11Sep68, Encl, Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Anderson ltr to Van Ryzin, Sep68 and Anderson Comments, Dec94.

exploiting the effects of the Arclight strikes. The battalion found many potential landing zone sites, but discovered no evidence of current or past use of the area by enemy aircraft.

As Companies G and H consolidated at several landing zones in preparation for extraction by helicopter, Poindexter's Marines suffered their only casualty during the day-long raid. While one flight of helicopters attempted to set down at one of the landing zones, a command detonated claymore rigged to an 82mm mortar round exploded, destroying one CH-46 helicopter and damaging several others. Three of the CH-46's crewmen and one of the battalion's Marines were killed, while two Marine pilots were wounded.¹⁸

Because of darkness and sporadic enemy fire, Companies E and F and the battalion command group remained in the DMZ until the following morning. At 0700 they began moving south on foot. The heat was overwhelming, making the cross-country movement slow and, as a result, helicopters eventually extracted the battalion at 1730 from landing zones five kilometers north of Con Thien.

Although the raid into the DMZ uncovered no evidence of enemy helicopter or other air activity, it did force out a large number of enemy troops from the area. Scattered by the combination of air and artillery attacks and Poindexter's heliborne assault, the fleeing enemy fell prey to other Marine blocking forces in both the Kentucky and Lancaster areas of operation. The first contacts were initiated by Company B, 1st Marines and the Army's Company A, 77th Armored Regiment near Hill 56. On the morning of the 19th, both companies, whose defensive positions had been probed continuously during the night, engaged an enemy platoon attempting to escape to the east. Supported by the platoon of tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion, which at the time was advancing toward the hill from the east, the combined Army and Marine force killed a reported 26 enemy troops.

Also on the 19th, while moving eastward through the piedmont, six kilometers southwest of Con Thien, Company M, 9th Marines intercepted an estimated reinforced enemy platoon fleeing in its direction. Company M Marines suppressed the enemy's small arms, automatic weapons, and RPG fire, and maneuvered toward the commanding terrain under an umbrella of artillery fire and fixed-wing airstrikes. A later search of the area resulted in the discovery of over 30 enemy bodies and the capture of two prisoners of war.

Sporadic contact with fleeing enemy forces continued throughout the night of the 19th and into the fol-

lowing day. As five tanks of the 3d Tank Battalion returned to Hill 56 on the morning of 20 August, with Companies G and H, 9th Marines serving as blocking forces, two enemy squads attacked the advancing Marines with small arms, rocket propelled grenades, mortars, and artillery. Responding with a similar combination of weapons, the Marines forced the two enemy units to withdraw northward, leaving their dead, all of whom were credited to the marksmanship of Marine tankers.

Less than 1,000 meters northwest of Company M's encounter on the 19th, shortly after noon on the 21st, Company I, 9th Marines began receiving sniper fire. Within a hour, the company had engaged an enemy unit of undetermined size, firing small arms and grenades at the Marines. Countering with accurate rocket, mortar, and artillery fire, the Marine company forced the enemy to break contact and withdraw to the north. In one instance during the two-hour engagement, a grenadier with an M72 (LAAW) rocket destroyed an enemy 60mm mortar emplacement. A search of the area before dark revealed a reported 14 North Vietnamese bodies and 12 weapons.

While the enemy seemed reluctant to expose his large units to combat along the eastern DMZ, he displayed no hesitation in attacking small Marine reconnaissance patrols in the Kentucky area of operations during the month. In two Leatherneck Square actions, he paid a high price for his efforts, miscalculating on the proximity of reinforcing units and the immediate availability of supporting arms.

At 1000 on 15 August, an estimated enemy company attacked a four-man reconnaissance team southeast of Con Thien near the abandoned airstrip at Nam Dong. The patrol returned fire and requested reinforcement, while simultaneously calling in preplanned artillery fires. Within minutes a platoon from Company A, 1st Marines, accompanied by three tanks, moved out of positions a kilometer away and headed south to assist. The coordinated attack, which included more than 150 rounds of 105mm artillery, 40 rounds of 4.2-inch mortar, 75 rounds from the 90mm guns of the tanks, and airstrikes by Marine UH-1E gunships accounted for several enemy dead.

In a second attack, the enemy paid an even greater price. At 1700 on 24 August, reconnaissance team "Tender Rancho" was moving north through high grass, seven kilometers southeast of Con Thien near Dao Xuyen, when the point man observed 15 khaki-clothed enemy troops cooking and talking. The team in a burst of small arms fire killed three, then another

three. Within minutes the team received a barrage of 82mm mortars and immediately formed a 360-degree security. A hour and a half after the first burst of fire, gunships arrived on station and informed the team that enemy troops surrounded them. The team later reported that 30 to 40 enemy "to the east, north and west" got up and ran when the gunships arrived.¹⁹

In immediate response to Tender Rancho's request for assistance, a Marine helicopter lift brought in a reinforced platoon from Company D, 1st Marines to help. Despite receiving .50-caliber and mortar fire in the landing zone, the Company D platoon fought through to link up with the reconnaissance team at 1930. Once consolidated, the team and reaction force received "a fire for effect" of 60 82mm mortar rounds, resulting in the death of three and wounding of eight Marines.²⁰

Moving overland from the east, additional platoons from Company D, along with Company C, reached blocking positions just north of the encircled reconnaissance team before dark. At daylight on 25 August, Marine helicopters inserted the remainder of Company D. During the insertion, however, a UH-34, while dodging enemy fire, struck a tree breaking off the tail section, killing 3 and wounding 14. With the arrival of elements of the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines and Company M, 9th Marines later in the day, the Marines effectively cordoned the area, preventing an enemy withdrawal.

During the remainder of the 25th and into the 26th, as Companies C and D, 1st Marines pushed southward toward the other blocking forces, the enemy made several determined, but unsuccessful attempts to break the cordon. Just before midnight on the 25th, Company B, 1st Marines, which anchored the western portion of the cordon, began to receive enemy artillery fire. For the next seven hours the company was subjected to an artillery attack of more than 220 rounds. The enemy fire was so inaccurate that only one Marine was wounded. By 26 August, after three days of fighting, the enemy had lost a reported 78 killed and 28 weapons captured; Marine casualties were 11 killed and 58 wounded.

With the end of the cordon in Leatherneck Square, the 1st Marines, now commanded by Colonel Robert G. Lauffer, with its 1st and 2d Battalions, was relieved of the responsibility for the Napoleon-Saline and Kentucky areas of operations. The regiment boarded trucks for Dong Ha and then flew in Air Force C-130s to Da Nang, while Navy LCUs and LSTs carried the regiment's equipment south. On 31 August, the 1st

Marines assumed the area of operations and mission formerly assigned to the 27th Marines.*

Upon the departure of the 1st Marines from Quang Tri Province, the Army's 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) assumed control of the Kentucky and Napoleon-Saline areas of operation. Composed of the 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry; 1st Battalion, 61st Infantry (Mechanized); and 1st Battalion, 77th Armored Regiment, Colonel Richard J. Glikes' brigade was reorganized at Fort Carson, Colorado in late March for movement to Vietnam.** After months of training, the brigade's main body began moving on 22 July, and by the 31st the brigade had completed the movement of personnel from Fort Carson to Da Nang and then to Quang Tri. At Da Nang, the brigade off-loaded 148 armored personnel carriers and 67 tanks which were then transshipped to Wunder Beach, southeast of Quang Tri City.

Glikes' brigade originally was to assume the area of operations then assigned to the Army's 1st Cavalry Division, and possibly a portion of the Napoleon-Saline area. But because of enemy pressure and the approaching monsoon season, the 3d Marine Division ordered a realignment of forces and changes in areas of operations. The brigade, in conjunction with the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, would assume responsibility for a reduced Kentucky and Napoleon-Saline area of operation. The remaining portion of the sector was to be given to the 2d ARVN Regiment. The 3d Marines would take over a modified Lancaster area of operation, while the 4th Marines retained responsibility for the slightly altered Scotland II area of operations. The 9th Marines, the division's "swing" regiment, would be given the responsibility for a new area of operations, southwest of Quang Tri City.

In addition, General Davis requested that the Seventh Fleet's Amphibious Ready Group 76.4, with its accompanying special landing force be held off ashore, near the entrance to the Song Cua Viet. The landing

* At Da Nang, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, which had moved south in late May to participate in operations during "Mini-Tet" in the Elephant Valley, northwest of Da Nang, rejoined its parent regiment on 7 September. The same day, the 1st Marines passed operational control of the 2d Battalion, 27th Marines to Regimental Landing Team (RLT) 27. See Chapter 19 relative to the arrival of the 1st Marines and departure of the 27th Marines at Da Nang.

** Included as part of the 24,500 additional military personnel spaces approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff for deployment to Southeast Asia in 1968, was a 4,769-man mechanized brigade (separate) requested by U.S. Army, Vietnam. The mechanized brigade was to replace the 1st Marines who, in turn, would replace RLT 27. MACV ComdHist, 1968, pp. 225-228. See also Chapter 27.

force was to be prepared to assume responsibility for the Napoleon-Saline area of operations on six-hours notice. General Cushman approved the request and asked the task force commander to place a hold on the movement of the amphibious ready group.

The shift of forces in Quang Tri Province was part of a general realignment of units then taking place in Northern I Corps Tactical Zone. In early June, MACV undertook a study to determine the feasibility and desirability of reassigning tactical responsibilities within I Corps, a continuation of the long-range force deployment planning study, "Military Posture, Northern I Corps, 1 September 1968," submitted on 31 March 1968. The March study expressed the desirability of having the two Marine divisions operate in contiguous areas, areas which included deep-water port facilities and existing Marine logistic installations. Over the next several months the proposals contained in the March study were refined, and in June the MACV study group suggested that the 1st and 3d Marine Divisions be assigned the three southern provinces of I Corps under III MAF, while the 23d Infantry (Americal) Division and 101st Airborne Division be given the northern two provinces of the corps tactical zone.^{21*}

While the proposal had a number of obvious tactical and logistical advantages, there were a number of drawbacks. First, if such a readjustment were to take place, the Army would, in all probability, create another field force that would report directly to MACV. More importantly, Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, as Commanding General, I Corps Tactical Zone, would be placed in the position of having to deal with two separate and competing commands within the zone, each of which reported directly to MACV. The proposed transplacement of Army and Marine units within I Corps, however, would be quashed for the moment by General Cushman with the support of Lieutenant General Rosson, who at the time was still Provisional Corps commander. In a message at the end of June, General Cushman observed that "Gen Rosson continues to share my views [and] . . . that current command relationships and projected troop dispositions should not be disturbed at this crucial period of the conflict However, if COMUSMACV decides to transplace . . . the earliest practical time to consider changes of this nature is late spring 1969."²² General Chapman, the Marine Corps Commandant, noted that

the Marines would acquiesce to the plan only if "CG, III MAF retains overall command of U.S. forces in ICTZ for the purpose of facilitating coordination with ARVN, CORDS and the advisory effort, and for coordinating tactical operations."²³

As a collateral result of the proposed transplacement of Army and Marine units within I Corps was the approval in early August of the exchange of the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, under the operational control of the 101st Airborne Division, with the 101st's own 3d Brigade, then operating in III Corps. Conversion, involving the formation of two new companies per battalion of the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne to a separate light infantry brigade, was to be completed before the exchange, scheduled to take place in September or October.²⁴

While Lieutenant Colonel George F. Meyers' 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, split between two positions on the Song Cua Viet and outposts at C-4 and Oceanview, continued a vigorous program of patrols and ambushes throughout the Napoleon-Saline area of operations, elements of Colonel Glikes' 1st Brigade concentrated on company and platoon patrols in Leatherneck Square, that area bounded by Con Thien, Gio Linh, Dong Ha, and Cam Lo.²⁵ On 4 September, a platoon from Company A, 61st Mechanized Infantry was sent to the relief of Company M, 9th Marines, engaged in battle with a reinforced NVA company in bunkers west of Con Thien. Joined by a reaction force from Company C, 61st Infantry, and supported by artillery and airstrikes, the combined Marine and Army force fought back. In the two-and-one-half hour battle that followed, the American units reported killing more than 20 enemy soldiers. Friendly losses were placed at 6 killed and 55 wounded, the majority as a result of enemy rocket-propelled grenade hits on armored personnel carriers. Darkness and typhoon warnings prevented further exploitation of the battle area.²⁶

Beginning late on 4 September, the rains came to Quang Tri Province and the Marine command took precautions to prepare for Typhoon Bess. First MAW units in Quang Tri either secured their helicopters or flew them to safe areas away from the storm. Other Marines sandbagged the collections of Southeast Asia huts with their tin roofs and other structures that characterized U.S. bases in the province. These preparations together with the expected heavy downpours and high winds greatly hampered military operations.

The typhoon struck the coast of northern I Corps between Da Nang and Phu Bai on the afternoon of the 5th. As the rains and wind began to subside, the

*See Chapter 13 for earlier discussion of the 31 March 1968 planning effort.



Photo from the Abel Collection

A member of the 9th Marines operating near the DMZ hunches up as best he can under his poncho to protect himself from the torrential rains that struck Quang Tri Province in September.

typhoon instead of moving on shore and dissipating, had moved back to sea and was rapidly regaining strength. During the night of the 5th and the early morning hours of the 6th, Typhoon Bess began slowly to move up the South Vietnamese coastline. At a point almost due east of Hue, the typhoon plunged ashore with heavy rains and strong winds.

Slamming into the mountains, west of Hue, late in the day, the typhoon began to dissipate and by late afternoon, Bess was relegated to a tropical storm. But as the typhoon roared across northern I Corps, Bess dropped torrents of rain, collapsing tents and bunkers, and flooding much of the low-lying areas of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. Disaster relief operations initiated by the division took priority over all other activities not directly related to combat support.

Although the torrential rains sharply curtailed both allied and enemy ground combat activity, it did not halt future planning. Due to steadily increasing enemy ground, artillery, and mortar activity along the eastern half of the DMZ, south of the Ben Hai, the 3d Marine Division again proposed a one-day raid into the zone, scheduled for 12 September. The plan called for Colonel Glikes' 1st Brigade to conduct an armored

attack to the Ben Hai, composed of three task forces: one tank heavy, one mechanized infantry heavy, and an armored cavalry force. As before, the armored attack was to exploit B-52 Arcflight strikes. To the brigade's east, Lieutenant Colonel Giai's 2d ARVN Regiment would also launch an armor attack into the Demilitarized Zone. Both forces were to withdraw to positions south of the zone before darkness.

As Glikes' forces prepared for the DMZ strike, the enemy resumed artillery, rocket, and mortar attacks on allied installations throughout Quang Tri Province, following a three-day lull brought about by Typhoon Bess. In addition, small groups of enemy began to be sighted along the DMZ. On the 8th, Companies A and C, 61st Infantry, dismounted, and Company B, 11th Infantry assaulted into three landing zones, eight kilometers northwest of Cam Lo. Meeting no resistance in the landing zones, the companies attacked to the southwest the following day, encountering only a few pockets of enemy resistance.

Shortly after noon on 11 September, Company D, 11th Infantry engaged an enemy force of unknown strength occupying bunkers near the "Market Place," four kilometers northeast of Con Thien. The company called for Marine tactical airstrikes against the enemy, followed by artillery. A platoon of tanks from the 1st Battalion, 77th Armor moved up to reinforce. At 1830 the enemy attempted to break contact, but the artillery hampered the enemy withdrawal. Fixed in position by the heavy shelling, one group of enemy raised a white flag. The American gunners ceased fire momentarily to allow the group to surrender. Instead the North Vietnamese broke and ran and the artillery barrage resumed. A later sweep of the area revealed more than 40 enemy bodies. Of seven enemy soldiers captured, one identified his unit as belonging to the 27th Independent NVA Regiment, a unit identified in frequent contacts with allied forces in the area since March.

On 10 September, General Abrams informed General Davis that the proposed allied raids into the Demilitarized Zone had been approved and that two Arcflight strikes would be provided. Preceded by the pre-planned B-52 strikes and a 55-minute artillery and naval gunfire barrage of the objective area, the attacking force moved into the DMZ on the morning of 13 September. Two 1st Brigade reinforced company-size task forces, one tank heavy and the other mechanized infantry heavy, attacked on an axis to the northeast of Con Thien. A third brigade task force, armored cavalry heavy, moved into position five kilometers west of Gio Linh. Lieutenant Colonel Giai's 2d Battalion,

with the 1st Squadron, 7th ARVN Armored Cavalry, supported by two platoons from Company A, 3d Tank Battalion, simultaneously attacked to the north and northeast of A-2 and Gio Linh.

South Vietnamese infantry troops on the right flank achieved almost immediate contact. Providing a base of fire for the advancing ARVN infantry, Marine tanks, firing 90mm canister and high-explosive rounds, led the assault, killing a reported 73 North Vietnamese troops. Contact was so close at times that Marine tankers were forced to use machine gun, as well as main gun fire, to break through the enemy's defenses and reach their objective.²⁷ Following in the wake of the tanks, and supported by helicopter gunships, the ARVN infantry claimed to have killed an additional 68 enemy and captured one NVA soldier. On the left flank, after encountering mines and antitank fire, the three Army task forces soon joined the action, accounting for another reported 35 dead enemy soldiers and seizing a large cache of mortar rounds.²⁸ The allied forces reached their northernmost objectives, turned south, and returned to their bases by late afternoon.

Demoralized and unable to defend against yet another combined ground and massive supporting arms attack, the enemy withdrew northward. The captured North Vietnamese soldier identified his unit as an element of the *138th NVA Regiment*. He further indicated that the *138th Regiment* had assumed control of the *27th Independent Regiment's* area of operations, due to the heavy casualties suffered by the regiment in recent months.²⁹

On 20 September, continuing the mission of denying the enemy freedom of action and movement throughout the Kentucky area of operations, Colonel Glikes' brigade began a series of search and clear operations in the Khe Chua Valley, eight kilometers north of Cam Lo. While elements of the 1st Battalion, 61st Infantry occupied blocking positions stretching for 2,000 meters at the head of the valley, Companies B and C, 77th Armor moved from positions at C-2 Bridge and C-4, along Route 561, and swept up the valley toward the 61st's blocking positions.³⁰ During the next three days, the units cleared the valley of small enemy units that could threaten not only nearby brigade outposts, but also Cam Lo. At the same time, the Army troops discovered and destroyed several large enemy tunnel complexes.

Heavy monsoon rains during the later part of September had swollen the Ben Bai, forcing remnants of the *320th NVA Division* and independent regiments northward across the river. Intelligence, however, indi-

cated that some groups had been trapped in the south by the rising water. Despite the weather, Companies B, C, and D, 11th Infantry moved out from C-2 and C-2 Bridge at 0400 on the morning of 26 September. In coordination with the 2d and 3d Battalions, 2d ARVN Regiment, and the 3d Marines, the companies moved to a position west of Con Thien and then attacked north across the southern boundary of the DMZ, toward the Dong Be Lao mountain complex.

During an eight-day foray into the DMZ, the attacking elements of the 11th Infantry encountered no opposition. What few engagements took place were with the enemy's rear guard, which attempted to slow the advance. Searches of numerous bunkers and other complexes indicated that the enemy had abandoned the positions only recently. In his hasty retreat the enemy left behind numerous poorly concealed booby-traps and mines, and several large caches of ammunition and equipment which were destroyed by advancing forces. From all indications what enemy troops had been in the area had withdrawn north across the Ben Hai to the relative safety of North Vietnam.³¹

The battleship *New Jersey* (BB 62), arrived on station, off the DMZ, on 29 September, and fired her first mission in support of division and ARVN troops the following day. The arrival of the *New Jersey* considerably enhanced the range and destructive power of fire support available to the division. Her nine 16-inch guns could each hurl a 2,760-pound shell to a maximum range of more than 38,000 meters, exceeding the range of a cruiser's 8-inch gun by 9,000 meters.

By the end of September enemy forces normally positioned along the eastern DMZ had withdrawn north of the Ben Hai, possibly into North Vietnam. The enemy had not been able, because of continued Army, Marine, and ARVN pressure, to initiate any portion of his planned Autumn Offensive. His attacks by fire and attempts at interdicting friendly lines of communication continued. Allied installations and tactical units in the northern portion of the province received periodic mortar, artillery, and rocket attacks. The heaviest attack occurred on 3 October when elements of the 2d ARVN Regiment received 170 rounds of 105mm artillery fire while engaged in a search and clear operation northeast of Gio Linh.

In addition, enemy sappers continued in their attempts to deny friendly forces the use of the Cua Viet. There were several instances when Navy patrol craft were hit by rocket propelled grenades, small arms, and automatic weapons fire from the banks of the river. Although the Navy continually swept the river for

mines, mining incidents along the vital waterway continued.

In October the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel George F. Meyers, maintained security of the Cua Viet waterway and conducted numerous patrols, cordons, and sweeps in the Napoleon-Saline area of operations. North of Lieutenant Colonel Meyers' battalion, elements of the 2d ARVN Regiment continued reconnaissance-in-force operations in the vicinity of A-1 and Gio Linh. To the west, in the Kentucky area of operations, Colonel Glikes' 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) emphasized offensive actions away from fixed positions, focusing on the enemy rather than terrain, employing infantry/armored task forces.

The first significant ground contact occurred on the 11th, when a brigade mechanized infantry and tank force, composed of Companies B and C, 61st Infantry and Company B, 77th Armor, engaged an estimated platoon of well-entrenched NVA troops. From heavily fortified bunkers, 2,500 meters northeast of Con Thien, the enemy effectively employed rocket propelled grenades and 60mm mortars, crippling three tanks and one armored personnel carrier (APC). Mines disabled another two tanks and one APC, killing a

total of 3 and wounding 20 brigade troops. Fighting back with 90mm tank, artillery, and small arms fire, the companies swept through the area after five hours of battle and counted 26 North Vietnamese bodies.³²

Heavy monsoon rains again fell throughout the area during mid-October, curtailing both ground and air operations. On 15 October, nevertheless, elements of the 2d ARVN Regiment engaged an estimated enemy company, four kilometers east of Gio Linh. Artillery, gunships, and Marine tactical air supported the ARVN infantrymen. One troop of the 11th ARVN Armored Cavalry moved up to reinforce, but was delayed due to the water-logged ground. Fighting continued throughout the 15th and into the next day. On the morning of 16 October, the 1st and 3d Troops, 11th Cavalry joined with the ARVN infantry, and by noon the enemy force now estimated at battalion-size was supported by artillery and mortar fire. The proximity of the opposing forces prohibited the use of airstrikes and the ARVN, like their opponent, relied heavily on accurate artillery fire. When the enemy force, thought to be an element of the 138th NVA Regiment, broke contact at the end of the day, it had suffered more than a reported 105 killed in two days of fighting, while the ARVN units sustained 5 killed.

Marines from the 3d Marine Division visiting the New Jersey (BB 62) watch as the 16-inch guns of the battleship blast North Vietnamese positions near the DMZ.

Photo from the Abel Collection



South of the ARVN encounter on the 16th, in the Napoleon-Saline area of operations, Lieutenant Colonel Meyers' battalion assumed operational control of BLT 2/26. The following day, the battalion landing team cordoned the Xuan Khanh Resettlement Hamlet, five kilometers northeast of Cua Viet, in conjunction with a sweep and search of the hamlet by elements of the Vietnamese Coastal Group 11, National Police, and the local Marine Combined Action company. While detaining no villagers, the Marines evacuated two civilians for medical treatment. Before returning to its amphibious shipping on the 19th, the BLT conducted a search and destroy mission from Oceanview to the DMZ, uncovering and destroying numerous bunkers and boobytraps.³³

Despite extended periods of torrential rains brought on by the northeast monsoon during October, both ground and aerial reconnaissance missions indicated the presence of a sizable enemy force south of the Ben Hai between Gio Linh and Con Thien. On 15 October, the 3d Marine Division set in motion yet another one-day raid into the DMZ to prevent any further enemy build-up in the area.³⁴ Weather caused the Marines to postpone the raid from 18 October until the 22d.³⁵ The scheme of maneuver called for a coordinated armored attack into the Demilitarized Zone by a 1st Brigade task force from Con Thien, Marine infantry and armor from the Napoleon-Saline area of operations, and a 2d ARVN Regiment task force from Dong Ha.

In preparation for the strike, on 21 October, Lieutenant Colonel Meyers' battalion assumed operational control of Company H, 9th Marines, which unit, LVTs transported to Outpost C-4, five kilometers northeast of Cua Viet. The following morning Company H, supported by tanks and amtracs, moved up the coast and took up blocking positions in the vicinity of Ha Loi Trung, within one kilometer of the southern boundary of the DMZ.³⁶

At 0800 on 23 October, elements of the 2d ARVN Regiment attacked on two axes into the DMZ, north of Ha Loi Trung. The main attack, led by the 1st Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment, supported by two troops of the 11th ARVN Armored Cavalry and a platoon of tanks from Company C, 3d Tank Battalion, moved across the boundary, approximately two kilometers from the coast. Three kilometers to the west, the secondary attack, led by the 2d Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment, supported by Company H, 9th Marines and a platoon of tanks from Company A, 3d Tank Battalion, was launched.

By noon, the two ARVN and Marine task forces were not only heavily engaged, but also had trapped an enemy unit of undetermined size between their positions and the sea. With artillery, U.S. Army gunships, and naval gunfire reinforcing friendly tank fire, the combined tank and infantry assault swept through the area, killing a reported 112 enemy soldiers, 63 of whom were credited to the tank crewmen of Company A. By dusk, the enemy broke contact and what remained of the North Vietnamese unit escaped further up the coast.³⁷

On the same day, attacking north from A-3 and Con Thien into the DMZ and then eastward along the Ben Hai toward the site of the Marine and ARVN action, the brigade task force, composed of three companies of the dismounted 1st Battalion, 61st Mechanized Infantry, encountered only light resistance. As the task force continued eastward during the 24th, through Kinh Mon, Tan Mon, and An Xa along an abandoned railroad, Company A engaged an enemy platoon, reporting another seven NVA killed. At 0830 the following morning, Company A reestablished contact, this time with an estimated enemy battalion in well-fortified bunkers. Minutes later, Company B took a volley of heavy small arms and mortar fire. By 1030 the engaged companies had linked up, and while Company A attacked to the northeast against the enemy's flank, Company B assaulted and overran the enemy position, capturing one 82mm mortar, two 60mm mortars, and two .50-caliber antiaircraft weapons. Both companies, later reinforced by Company B, 77th Armor, remained in contact until 1800, during which time they made maximum use of air, artillery, and naval gunfire support. As a result of the action, the Americans reported 231 enemy dead. Brigade losses were 4 killed and 24 wounded. The task force withdrew southward on the 26th and during the remainder of the month, brigade troops continued to exploit minor contacts north of A-3 and recover their destroyed and damaged tanks in the DMZ.³⁸

Despite the destruction of major elements of the *138th* and *270th* NVA Regiments, the victory was cause for concern. The reappearance of these two regiments in northeast Quang Tri Province, after suffering heavy casualties in several engagements during the past three months, not only confirmed their capacity to regroup rapidly and assimilate replacements, but also attested to both their flexibility and their maneuverability in frequently attacking and then withdrawing across the Ben Hai.

The combined ARVN, U.S. Army, and Marine attack into the Demilitarized Zone during the last week of October would be the last. Effective 2100 hours, 1 November, Saigon time, as announced by President Lyndon Johnson, the United States would cease all offensive operations against the territory of North Vietnam. The halt in no way applied to offensive operations within the Republic of Vietnam, but it did apply to offensive operations north of the Demilitarized Zone's southern boundary. The pre-November rules of engagement authorizing operations by ground forces in the DMZ south of the Provisional Military Demarcation Line were now revoked. However, General Abrams later sought authority, and gained approval from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to send squad-size patrols into the southern portion of the DMZ to "capture prisoners and obtain other positive proof that the NVA rather than the VC are operating in the southern portion of the DMZ."³⁹ What these patrols would find would be disturbing.⁴⁰

Defeat of the 320th Division

Unlike the Napoleon-Saline and Kentucky areas of operations at the beginning of August, the Lancaster II and Scotland II areas remained relatively quiet. Colonel Edward J. Miller's 4th Marines continued extensive company patrol operations throughout the central portion of the Scotland area of operations with Lieutenant Colonel Thomas H. Galbraith's 1st Battalion searching the jungle canopy 10 kilometers west of LZ Stud. The battalion also retained responsibility for security operations in the immediate area of the combat base. Lieutenant Colonel Louis A. Rann's 2d Battalion operated from Fire Support Base Cares and the 3d Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Frank L. Bourne, Jr., operated out of Fire Support Base Shepherd.

To the east, in the Lancaster area of operations, the 3d Marines, under the command of Colonel Richard L. Michael, Jr., continued to conduct search and destroy operations and to provide security for Thon Son Lam, Camp Carroll, and Route 9. Lieutenant Colonel Charles V. Jarman's 1st Battalion provided security for the Marine installation at Thon Son Lam, Khe Gio Bridge, and conducted company patrols and daily road sweeps of Route 9. The 2d Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Jack W. Davis, secured not only Thon Son Lam, but Camp Carroll, Dong Ha Mountain Observation Post, and the battalion's assigned

portion of Route 9. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William H. Bates, who, on 28 July, had replaced Lieutenant Colonel James W. Marsh, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines continued anti-infiltration operations from Fire Support Bases Margo and Joan, northwest of Camp Carroll.

To the south of the Lancaster area, lay a small area of operations in the Ba Long Valley, carved out of the east portion of the Scotland area and western portion of that assigned to the 1st Air Cavalry Division, being swept by Colonel Robert H. Barrow's 9th Marines. Originally planned as a multi-battalion sweep of the long fertile valley, which extends west from Quang Tri City to LZ Stud, the 9th Marines soon lost Lieutenant Colonel Francis X. Colleton's 1st Battalion to the defensive needs of both LZ Stud, now renamed Vandegrift Combat Base, and Ca Lu, and Lieutenant Colonel Frederic S. Knight's 2d Battalion to a competing operation in Leatherneck Square.

On 2 August, following a 48-hour delay due to a lack of helicopter transports, Company I, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines under Captain Gary E. Todd, was helilifted onto Hill 385, 12 kilometers southeast of Ca Lu. After the infantry company had established a defensive perimeter and had the artillery register supporting fires, Marine helicopters brought in the following day an engineer detachment and its equipment to begin construction of a new fire base there, Fire Support Base Holcomb. As Captain Todd later remarked, "the engineers couldn't contribute much until we established security."⁴¹ In the meantime, other helicopters had inserted Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. LaMontagne, the 3d Battalion commander, and his command group and two rifle companies into the Cua Valley, or Mai Loc area, to the north, who initiated a sweep south along Route 558 toward Holcomb and the Ba Long Valley.

The construction of Holcomb was, as Colonel Barrow recalled, a new experience for the regiment:

We went about it in a very methodical, carefully planned manner. We reconnoitered with the engineers, who would have a large hand in building it; the artillery, who would have to shoot from it; the infantry, who would have to defend it; and helicopter personnel, who, of course, would have to use it to resupply and build up the forces.⁴²

Following two days of air preparation, which included the dropping of several "daisy cutters," the Marines occupied the hill, and infantry and engineers working side by side using demolitions, chain saw, and

hand tools, cleared the site.* A bulldozer was then brought in to build ammunition berms and gun pits, later to be occupied by Battery F, 12th Marines and elements of the 1st Provisional 155mm Howitzer Battery. Captain Todd remembered that as soon as the bulldozer arrived, "the artillery position quickly began taking shape" after relatively slow progress by hand until that time.⁴³ The building of Holcomb was, Barrow concluded, "rather amusing because we almost over-killed the effort with detail planning. But it was an experience that led us into refining our techniques."⁴⁴

During the next 13 days, LaMontagne's Marines swept through the rice paddies and cornfields that dotted the valley floor and into the double-canopied jungle that covered the high ground to the north and south of the valley. LaMontagne temporarily closed Fire Support Base Holcomb as the battalion began construction of Fire Support Base Henderson, five kilometers to the southwest. The lack of contact and any evidence to indicate recent enemy activity brought the Ba Long Valley operation to a close on 16 August. The battalion then abandoned the two fire support bases and returned to Vandegrift Combat Base.

Reconnaissance patrols operating north of Route 9 in the Lancaster and Scotland areas of operation reported a dramatic upsurge in enemy activity during the first two weeks of August. In the region around Helicopter Valley, south of the DMZ, patrols sighted numerous small bands of enemy troops moving south, indicating that the area was either a much-used infiltration route or the possible site of several enemy base camps. The area further west, and north of the Rockpile, also witnessed an increase in enemy activity. A document captured by one patrol in the area indicated that elements of the *52d Regiment, 320th NVA Division* had moved into the region recently. The Khe Sanh plateau and the mountains west of Thon Son Lam and Ca Lu likewise were sites of increased enemy activity.⁴⁵ Taken together, these indicators pointed to the fact that following several abortive attempts in the coastal flatlands during the first half of the year, the division's

three infantry regiments again were moving south through the DMZ and into the mountains north and west of the Rockpile, toward prepositioned caches of equipment and supplies.⁴⁶

Colonel Michael's 3d Marines was the first to establish contact with the forward elements of the enemy division. On 4 August, while conducting a two-company sweep on the southern slope of Dong Ha Mountain, Lieutenant Colonel Davis' battalion uncovered a 20-bunker complex just north of the Cam Lo River. The following day, Davis' battalion was joined in the area by three companies of Lieutenant Colonel Bates' 3d Battalion which assaulted into landing zones near Cam Hung, five kilometers further north. During the next seven days, elements of both battalions discovered and destroyed more than 400 newly constructed bunkers and captured large quantities of enemy equipment and munitions.

On 12 August, a North Vietnamese sergeant belonging to the *7th Battalion, 64th Regiment, 320th Division* rallied to the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines at Con Thien. He informed the Marines that his regiment had crossed the DMZ in the vicinity of Bay Nha, seven kilometers west of Con Thien, and would move south along Mutter Ridge to Co Dinh within three days. From there, the enemy planned to move southeast toward Cam Lo and Route 9.⁴⁷ With the confirmation of the sergeant's information by aerial and ground intelligence, elements of Colonel Michael's regiment deployed rapidly to block the enemy.

On the 13th, Companies B, C, and D, 3d Marines assaulted into Landing Zones Amy and Mack at the western end of Mutter Ridge. Finding little activity in the area, the three companies, on the morning of the 15th, moved by helicopter to Landing Zone Dick, six kilometers further east. Lieutenant Colonel Davis' 2d Battalion simultaneously began deploying north, while Lieutenant Colonel Bates' 3d Battalion moved into blocking positions centered on the Dong Kio Mountain complex. As Davis' Marines moved north of the Cam Lo River, sporadic sniper and occasional automatic weapons fire soon turned into a full-scale engagement. The Marine companies had run headlong into two companies from the *64th's 8th Battalion* entrenched on Kho Xa, one-half kilometer north of the river. The Marines reported 43 of the enemy killed during this initial engagement.

On 16 August, in a further effort to cordon elements of the enemy regiment, the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Richard B. Twohey, who had replaced Lieutenant

*The daisy cutter was a conventional bomb, in this case a 2,000-pound bomb, with a pipe extension on its nose that caused it to detonate just above the ground, thereby clearing a large area. Major Gary E. Todd, the Company I commander, recalled that "while the experiment of using daisy cutters to help with initial tree-clearing seemed like a good idea during the planning stage, experience quickly showed otherwise." He declared that "instead of usable clearings, the first troops in were faced with jumbles of fallen and partially fallen tree trunks intertwined into veritable logjams." Maj Gary E. Todd, Comments on draft, dtd 19Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

Colonel Jarman, moved by helicopter to Hill 162, northwest of the supposed enemy position. With Twohey's Marines blocking enemy movement to the north, Bates' battalion occupying positions to the northwest, and Davis' troops pushing from the south, the forward elements of the enemy regiment could only turn east or west. If they did so, batteries of the 12th Marines located at Thon Son Lam, Camp Carroll, and C-2 could seal off the enemy's movement in either direction.

Learning that the assault by Twohey's battalion had split the *64th Regiment*, General Davis decided to commit the 9th Marines in an effort to halt any attempt by the regiment to reinforce its forward elements. Early on the morning of the 17th, Lieutenant Colonel LaMontagne's 3d Battalion helo-assaulted into Landing Zone Sparrow, nine kilometers southwest of Con Thien and the site of the battalion's 17 July engagement.* Lieutenant Colonel Colleton's 1st Battalion landed at LZ Saturn, three kilometers west of C-2, later that morning, and with elements of Company A, 3d Tank Battalion in direct support, moved west. But as Colleton's Marines left the open, rolling terrain and entered the canopy, where the tanks found it impossible to maneuver, the tank company returned to C-2.

With Colleton's battalion moving west toward the 3d Battalion, LaMontagne's Marines began a series of intense and aggressive company-size patrols throughout its assigned area of search. While on patrol near Sparrow on the morning of the 19th, Captain Richard A. O'Neil's Company M surprised and engaged a squad of North Vietnamese soldiers with small arms fire as well as artillery and airstrikes. As the enemy reinforced, swelling his ranks to two companies, LaMontagne ordered Captain Jack D. Schaeffer's Company K to join O'Neil's Marines. During Schaeffer's reinforcement of O'Neil, enemy ground fire hit and destroyed a Marine F-4 Phantom flying in support of the two companies. Both pilots ejected and were later rescued. A sweep of the battle area resulted in a reported 38 enemy bodies and miscellaneous weapons and equipment. The Marines also captured two enemy soldiers from the *7th Battalion*, *64th Regiment*.

Two days later, on the 21st, Captain Gary E. Todd's Company I, while on patrol one kilometer west of Company M's contact on the 19th, encountered an enemy unit of undetermined size. Using artillery and airstrikes to the maximum extent possible, Todd's

Marines forced the enemy to break contact leaving 14 dead behind. During a sweep of the area, the Marines of Company I discovered a large enemy complex containing 60 well-constructed bunkers, a mess area, and laundry hanging out to dry. On 23 August, helicopters returned Company I and the remainder of the battalion to Vandegrift Combat Base.

While Company I was engaged west of Lang Dong Bao Thoug on 19 August, Lieutenant Colonel Colleton's battalion assaulted into three landing zones, two kilometers further west, leap-frogging over LaMontagne's Marines. Moving toward the high ground, within one kilometer of the DMZ's southern boundary, a patrol from First Lieutenant Stephen E. Stacy's Company B encountered an enemy company armed with small arms, automatic weapons, and 60mm mortars. Within minutes an aerial observer arrived on station and called in air and artillery strikes. But as darkness fell, the patrol was unable to break contact and return to the company's main position, 600 meters away. Early the following morning, a misdirected fixed-wing airstrike resulted in the wounding of 10 other Marines, part of a relief force attempting to make its way to the patrol's position. The first patrol eventually rejoined the company, but was forced to leave its dead on the battlefield. Lieutenant Stacy's company, on the 24th, recovered the bodies of seven Marines and one Marine earlier reported as missing. The following day, Lieutenant Colonel Colleton's battalion rejoined the regiment at Vandegrift Combat Base.^{48**}

Although the 9th Marines reported 72 enemy soldiers killed in eight days, Colonel Barrow believed that the *64th NVA Regiment* lost many more. "I believe very much," he later stated, "that we killed a great many more because we had an unusual operation in which the 1st Battalion, 9th was on a narrow ridgeline and brought under heavy attack from within the DMZ and we responded with massive air, artillery, and mortar fire on forces that were observed by the AOs as being massed and large in number, and we brought great devastation on the area, on these forces." Although unable to enter the DMZ and confirm enemy casualties, Barrow believed, "that our activities in that area

** Colonel Thomas H. Galbraith, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines at the time, commented "What happened to Stacy's patrol was the kind of thing we constantly worried about. Simply getting food, water, and ammo to small units that were operating any distance from an LZ was difficult, and getting help to them in a timely manner when they were in trouble was sometimes almost impossible. Supporting arms and air were the best you could hope for, and, of course, if the weather was bad, you couldn't count on air." Galbraith Comments.

* See Chapter 18.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191909

Marines from the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines examine a LZ on Mutter Ridge as a Marine UH-1E helicopter sits nearby.

dealt that regiment a pretty severe blow, far beyond the confirmed body count.”⁴⁹

While Colonel Barrow’s 1st and 3d Battalions were heavily engaged to the north, Colonel Michael’s 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel Twohey, continued to sweep south down Mutter Ridge, finding numerous platoon- and company- sized bunker complexes. Each find led to a more sophisticated one further south. The most significant finds were an enemy supply battalion’s storage area and what appeared to be a regimental command post. The supply cache included more than 1,000 82mm mortar rounds and close to 15,000 AK-47 rounds. In the regimental complex, the Marines found numerous ammunition storage bunkers, messhalls, kitchens, several 60mm and 82mm mortar positions, and an extensive Chinese-built field phone communications system.

On 19 August, Lieutenant Colonel Twohey’s battalion continued southwest along Mutter Ridge while Lieutenant Colonel Davis’ 2d Battalion swept west through Helicopter Valley, between Dong Ha Mountain and Mutter Ridge. At the same time, Lieutenant Colonel Bates’ 3d Battalion moved four kilometers northwest of the Rockpile to the Razorback, a large

sharp ridgeline paralleling the Cam Lo River. With two companies conducting company-sized patrol operations on either side of the river, Bates’ Marines engaged numerous small enemy groups in short, but sharp encounters, and frequently came under heavy artillery and mortar fire. With the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines in place, blocking the western end of both Mutter Ridge and Helicopter Valley, Marine helicopters lifted the 1st and 2d Battalions, once they had completed their searches, to Thon Son Lam and Camp Carroll for refurbishment.

During the last week of August, the enemy was once more on the move. He not only increased his artillery and rocket attacks against Thon Son Lam and Camp Carroll, but the large number of contacts and sightings indicated he had entered the upper Cam Lo Valley, north of Thon Son Lam and northwest of Dong Ha Mountain.⁵⁰ With this information in hand, General Davis decided to insert the 1st and 2d Battalions, 9th Marines west of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines positions, into a rugged, jungle-covered, mountainous region never before entered by Marines in force.

Prior to the insertion of the two battalions, Marine aircraft dropped a large quantity of heavy ordnance to



Unlike elements of Knight's battalion, the insertion of Lieutenant Colonel Colleton's battalion into the broad Khe Giang Thoan Valley, southwest of the Rockpile, was unopposed. Once in the area of operations, the two battalions immediately moved up the ridges and secured positions on the high ground. The

As September began, Lieutenant Colonel Bates' 3d Battalion, 3d Marines found itself heavily engaged with elements of the enemy's *52d NVA Regiment*, attempting a reinforcing thrust north and northwest of the Razorback. On the 3d, the enemy shelled Captain William B. Gray's Company L with 172 rounds of 60mm and 82mm mortars and 25 rounds of 130mm artillery. Immediately following the enemy artillery preparation, two companies of NVA troops assaulted the Marine company's position. But, before the enemy had an opportunity to open fire, Ward's Marines pelted the enemy force with more than 300 hand grenades. A search of the area revealed a reported 11 enemy bodies and 19 weapons, three of which were machine guns that had been fired.

Companies B and C, 3d Marines reentered the area of operations on 3 September, and the following day began search and destroy operations west and then south along the slopes of Mutter Ridge. Four days later, after the torrential rains of Typhoon Bess had eased, the remaining two companies of the 1st Battalion were helilifted onto the ridge to assist, while Companies E and F of the 2d Battalion secured and established blocking positions on the high ground to the west. As Lieutenant Colonel Twohey's 1st Battalion Marines moved southwest, they increasingly came into contact with the forward elements of the *48th NVA Regiment* which were endeavoring to reinforce the scattered remnants of the *52d*. Late, on the 7th, First Lieutenant Richard A. Andrews' Company A encountered an enemy squad in bunkers on the southern slope of Hill 461. The company immediately formed a defensive position, but the enemy unit continually probed its lines throughout the night. A check of the area at first light revealed an assortment of miscellaneous equipment and arms, but no enemy bodies. Andrews' Marines lost three killed and an equal number of wounded during the engagement. The most significant contact began on the 8th as Company A and the rest of the battalion continued to move up Hill 461. An estimated two companies from the *48th Regiment*, from well-camouflaged bunkers, tenaciously defended themselves using 60mm and 82mm mortar and 130mm artillery supporting fires. As Twohey's Marines pressed on, the enemy counterattacked twice, first on the 10th and then on the 11th, when they attempted to employ a double envelopment of Company B. During the three-day battle, the enemy regiment lost an estimated 50 killed and numerous weapons captured.

While Twohey's battalion moved slowly through the triple canopy toward the northwest, Lieutenant Colonel Knight's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines turned its attention to two large hill masses southwest of the Rockpile, Nui Tia Pong and Nui Ba Lao.

The battalion's search of the Suoi Tien Hien Valley had not proved fruitful. There were no trails nor evidence of the enemy which had fired on the battalion from the high ground to the northeast of the valley in late August. Knight decided to split the battalion. He placed Bravo Command Group and Companies E and H on the Nui Ba Lao ridgeline and directed them to attack east. Alpha Command Group and Companies F and G were lifted out of the valley, inserted into landing zones on eastern slopes of Nui Tia Pong, and ordered to attack west up the mountain.

Both elements made contact shortly after entering their new landing zones, the most significant occurring on Nui Tia Pong. As the two rifle companies, alternating in the attack, slowly moved up the narrow ridge, punctuated with peaks and saddles, from the 200-meter level to the first prominent high ground at 800 meters, they encountered a small but determined, well-dug in enemy force. "It was difficult fighting," recalled Colonel Barrow, "there was no opportunity for maneuver because you could not attempt any sort of enveloping movement because the terrain was so precipitous. So it was a masterful use of firepower and moving straight ahead against the resistance."⁵³ While suffering few casualties of their own, the companies inflicted a damaging blow upon the defending enemy force.

Once atop Nui Tia Pong, the heavy rains associated with Typhoon Bess struck, cutting off resupply to the two companies for several days. According to Barrow:

We had units down to zero availability rations; they tightened their belts. They conserved their rations and had no problem with water, of course. It was an experience in learning how to endure the monsoon-type weather in this very inhospitable terrain, and they did it well.⁵⁴

As soon as the heavy rains ended, Companies F and G moved down off the ridge, searching the fingers and finding numerous small ordnance and ration caches. On 8 September, in an effort to increase troop density, Marine helicopters brought in Company C, 9th Marines. The pattern of search during the next several days had one company ahead, moving up the ridgeline to the west, pushing the enemy back, while the remaining two companies searched the fingers off the ridgeline and, when required, alternated with the lead company. This pattern of company search would continue as the regiment moved further north.

On 9 September, as the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines prepared to leave the Khe Giang Thoan Valley and return to Vandegrift Combat Base, Lieutenant Colonel LaMontagne's 3d Battalion assaulted into Landing Zone Winchester on Dong Tien, six kilometers north of Nui Tia Pong, and immediately developed contact to its east and west. LaMontagne's battalion easily dealt with the enemy forces on its eastern flank, killing more than an estimated 20 NVA, and then threw its weight toward the western flank. As the battalion moved further west, it encountered successive delaying actions by well-dug-in enemy platoons and companies, employing command detonated mines, mortars, and automatic weapons, the same tactics experienced by the 2d Bat-



Both photos are from the Abel Collection

Top, a covey of Boeing Vertol CH-46s carrying elements of the 4th Marines into a landing zone just south of the DMZ is viewed through the door of one of the helicopters. The outline of the helicopter's machine gun can be seen at the opening. In the bottom photo, Marines in the same operation, now on the ground, wade through a stream whose water comes up to their waists.



talion on Nui Tia Pong. Colonel Barrow later reflected, "our tactics were to employ massive firepower, air, artillery, and mortars, and 106s, and when the area was virtually devastated, move in." He observed, "always there seemed to be enough left for the infantry to have to do a little of its own fighting, but most of it resulted in counting confirmed dead."⁵⁵ In its drive west, the battalion reported killing more than 200 enemy soldiers and uncovered large caches of mortar rounds, Chinese Communist hand grenades, anti-personnel mines, and long-range rockets.

As the 2d and 3d Battalions, 9th Marines pushed westward, the 3d Marines continued in heavy contact north of the Razorback. Lieutenant Colonel Bates' 3d Battalion, with three companies on line, swept through the low ground, northwest of Mutter Ridge, against dug-in enemy troops who resisted with heavy 60mm, 82mm, and artillery fire. Although Bates' Marines reported killing more than 17 enemy, they suffered in turn 8 dead and 87 wounded, most as a result of the enemy's indirect fire.

Working in conjunction with Bates' Marines were the other two battalions of the 3d Marines on Mutter Ridge. While enemy contact was light, both battalions discovered and then destroyed numerous enemy bunkers complexes, fighting positions, and ammunition storage areas.

Replacing Bates' 3d Battalion on 13 September, Lieutenant Colonel William F. Sparks' BLT 2/26 landed at LZ Margo, two kilometers north of Landing Zone Winchester. Three days later, as the battalion's four companies pushed east and then north from the landing zone, a hill overlooking the deep, prominent bend in the Cam Lo River, the command post on Margo underwent a 158-round 82mm mortar barrage at 1520. Despite returning fire initially with machine gun and small arms and then with 81mm mortar and artillery fire in an effort to silence the enemy mortars, the command group suffered 21 killed and 135 wounded. The command post took another 64 rounds two hours later, resulting in 1 killed and 11 wounded. The following day, the command group was again bombarded with 117 mortar rounds and lost another 1 dead and 16 wounded.

The enemy's continued use of delaying tactics such as that employed against the command post of BLT 2/26 and the oftentimes tenacious defense of caches throughout the rest of the area of operations, indicated that the remnants of the three regiments of the 320th NVA Division were endeavoring to gain time in order to make their escape north of the DMZ. "It was appar-

ent," General Davis later wrote, "that the situation was ripe for the lift of two battalions into the DMZ to trap as many of these scattered units as possible."⁵⁶ Colonel Barrow noted the idea was "to move south against the enemy that was believed to be between the Ben Hai and Cam Lo."⁵⁷

On 16 September, the regimental command post of the 9th Marines displaced from Vandegrift to Landing Zone, now Fire Support Base, Winchester. From Winchester, Colonel Barrow would direct the northward deployment of additional Marine battalions and oversee the destruction of the enemy division. With the movement of the regimental command post forward, the regiment assumed operational control of BLT 2/26 and the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines.

The next morning following nine B-52 Arclight strikes on the DMZ north of the operational area, Lieutenant Colonel Colleton's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Galbraith's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines were inserted into the DMZ, within a kilometer of the Ben Hai River. "The mission which we assigned 1/9 and 1/4," Colonel Barrow recalled, "was to attack on multi-axes to the south in a most deliberate, methodical manner, searching out ridgelines, draws, looking both for the enemy and for any caches which he might have in the area. It was by no means a matter of land and move rapidly to the south. It was to be a deliberate search."⁵⁸ Meanwhile, Barrow directed Lieutenant Colonel Sparks' BLT 2/26 to attack rapidly to the north on two axes, one generally in the direction of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines and the other toward the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines.*

Pushing south toward the high ground, the two battalions captured a number of prisoners who confirmed that their units were moving north, attempting to cross the Ben Hai and escape into North Vietnam. They also indicated that they were plagued by severe food shortages, low morale, and had been seriously hurt by Arclight strikes. In addition to prisoners, both Colleton's and Galbraith's Marines, when not engaging small groups of enemy troops moving north, found a number of mass graves, containing the bodies of more

*At 1330 on 17 September, a Marine UH-1E bound for Winchester from Vandegrift, hit a tree and crashed 200 meters south of the fire support base. Among the passengers on board the aircraft were Brigadier General William C. Chip, who had replaced Brigadier General Carl W. Hoffman as Commanding General, Task Force Hotel on 22 August, and Lieutenant Colonel Frederic S. Knight, Commanding Officer, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. Although injured, both men survived the crash.

than 150 enemy soldiers, and large stores of arms, ammunition, and food.

The 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, which was operating in an area generally east of Sparks' battalion and south of Galbraith's battalion, was placed under the control of Colonel Barrow's regiment on 19 September. For the next several days, the 9th Marines controlled six battalions, two thirds of the division's infantry battalions. These six battalions were attacking in all directions and Colonel Barrow noted:

The 2d Battalion, 9th Marines . . . [was] still attacking generally to the west with part of . . . [its] forces and generally to the east with another; the 3d Battalion, 9th was attacking to the west; the 1st Battalion, 9th and 1st Battalion, 4th were attacking to the south; the 2d Battalion, 26th was attacking to the north; and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines was generally conducting heavy patrol activities in all directions. So the pattern of activity was one that would frustrate the Marine Corps School's problem directors I am sure, but the tactical situation dictated this type of maneuver.

According to Barrow, "this was all done from a very austere regimental command post in the field." He continued: "It is a great credit to my staff that they performed all of the fire control effort and the rest of the activities related to fire and maneuver in the most exemplary fashion."⁹⁹

There were indications by 23 September that the north-south push was having an effect on the scattered elements of the three enemy regiments. Instead of moving north and being trapped, the enemy forces began to reorient their attempts at escape to the east and west. Responding to this apparent shift, Colleton's battalion was directed to drive west while Galbraith's Marines pushed east.

Lieutenant Colonel Twohey's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines would continue its attack east along Mutter Ridge as Lieutenant Colonel Sparks' battalion landing team and Lieutenant Colonel Bryon T. Chen's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines attacked north.* This maneuver, coupled with an attack on 26 September by three companies of the Army's 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry and two battalions of the 2d ARVN Regiment west from C-2, was designed to cut the enemy's escape routes and destroy what remained of the three regiments.

While Colleton's Marines continued to search the 400-meter high ridgeline generally paralleling the southern boundary of the DMZ, sweep operations west

of the Rockpile came to an end. On 29 September, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, now commanded by Major Frederick E. Sisley, was helilifted to Vandegrift Combat Base, followed on 1 October, by the regimental command group and Lieutenant Colonel LaMontagne's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. With the departure of the 9th Marines from Winchester, operational control of Sparks' BLT 2/26 was passed to the 3d Marines.

The division expanded its search operations within the DMZ as the new month began. On 1 October, BLT 2/26 replaced the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines in the DMZ and was tasked with destroying a recently built road, an extension of North Vietnam Route 1022 southward into the DMZ. Discovered by Galbraith's Marines,** with the assistance of an aerial observer, in late September, the road complex generally followed the Ben Hai River before turning south, two kilometers west of Dong Ong Cay, and ending 2,000 meters north of the DMZ southern boundary. North of the river, the road was well-developed, open and easily located from the air as well as from prominent terrain features in the southern DMZ. Once it crossed the river, it was well-camouflaged and difficult to spot because of overhead cover. Built entirely by hand labor, the road was hacked out of the jungle, lined with timber, and ringed with base camps and fighting positions.

Sparks' battalion, with two companies in the attack and one in reserve, moved slowly north along the road, destroying all enemy structures as they searched for elements of the *52d Regiment* and its suspected command and control complex. Continually bombarded by artillery and mortars, the battalion's Marines fought small groups of determined and well-trained enemy soldiers in well-concealed and heavily bunkered reverse-slope defensive positions. Once friendly supporting arms were brought to bear, the enemy would withdraw, only to take up a defensive posture in yet another prepared position.

**Colonel Thomas H. Galbraith, then the commander of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, later remembered that his battalion discovered the road on about the third or fourth night after they had entered the DMZ and started to move south: "I heard motors off in the distance. Seems that I heard them for two or three nights and couldn't figure out who had trucks operating in these hills." His recollection was that he "reported hearing them to Colonel Barrow . . . and in the next day or so a helicopter came to pick me up to see if I could point out where the sounds had come from." Galbraith wrote: "I recall having been very disappointed in not being able to see anything at all—I felt like the boy who had cried 'wolf'—but as it turned out, the road was indeed there, superbly hidden by canopy and camouflage, and what I had heard was the motors of the trucks and/or heavy equipment that were being used to build it." Galbraith Comments.

*Lieutenant Colonel Chen replaced Lieutenant Colonel Jack W. Davis on 20 September as Commanding Officer, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines.

On 4 October, Company H found a 152mm artillery position, ringed with machine gun and mortar emplacements, and 12 rounds of 152mm ammunition, 1,600 meters south of the Ben Hai. To the northeast, Marines discovered two 85mm howitzer positions with accompanying antiaircraft guns. Several hundred meters from the howitzer positions, they found a partially burned Soviet, six-cylinder diesel, full-tracked prime mover, capable of towing a 152mm artillery gun, which appeared to have been hit by a 105mm howitzer round. It was suspected that the 152mm guns were removed from the area shortly after the insertion of the battalion. Not only were there signs indicating the use of tracked vehicles, but one night Sparks' Marines reported hearing heavy engine noises to the north.

The most significant enemy contact occurred on 8 October as First Lieutenant Tyrus F. Rudd's Company H approached Dong Ong Cay from the south. Despite a tenacious fight the defenders lost a reported 17 dead, while Rudd's Company suffered 2 killed and 11 wounded. During the engagement the Marines observed numerous bodies being dragged away, 11 of which were found the following morning. In a search of the hill, the Marines found another vehicle, a 12-cylinder diesel Soviet medium tracked artillery tractor with a rear winch.

BLT 2/26 continued to search the road until 16 October when it returned to the Cua Viet area by helicopter. There it participated in two short operations, the cordon of Xuan Khanh Resettlement Village and a sweep north from Oceanview to the DMZ. With the departure of Lieutenant Colonel Sparks' battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Twohey's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, which had moved into the DMZ on the 8th and was sweeping to the east and west of the BLT, assumed the mission of searching the road and destroying enemy installations in the area.

Twohey's Marines discovered more than 488 rounds of 152mm artillery ammunition, truck parks, and support camps as they moved north. By 17 October they had reached the Ben Hai, one kilometer north of Dong Ong Cay, where they found a shallow fording site built of rock and three cable bridges over the river. The rock, or "underwater bridge" was rendered unserviceable by several 8-inch howitzer missions and the cable bridges were destroyed by fixed-wing and artillery strikes. Using 422 of the captured 152mm artillery rounds, 3,000 pounds of C-4, and cratering charges placed in and along the road, Twohey's battalion, working together with a detach-

ment of engineers, destroyed major portions of the road. They also blasted holes in the canopy to make the road more visible from the air. The 1st Battalion, 3d Marines was helilifted from the DMZ on 22 October to provide security for installations along Route 9. Although both Sparks' and Twohey's Marines continually heard tracked vehicles moving north and responded with a massive artillery and air assault, the 320th NVA Division was able to remove its heavy artillery from the area.

As October began, 8,000 meters to the west, Lieutenant Colonel Colleton's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines continued to sweep westward in the DMZ. The search, however proved fruitless and on the 7th the battalion withdrew. The same day, Lieutenant Colonel Chen's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines was inserted into the DMZ, 8,000 meters further west. Unlike September, when enemy contact was heavy, Chen's Marines engaged few enemy troops, mostly logistical support personnel who seemed startled that Marines had invaded what they considered their rear area. Although numerous caches, supply trails, and rest centers were discovered, the greatest enemy soon became the weather. The rain, constant and torrential, not only caused difficulties in movement and resupply, but numerous cases of immersion foot. After 17 days in the DMZ, the battalion was helilifted to Camp Carroll and from there by foot moved to the Mai Loc area for operations with Regional and Popular Forces. By 26 October all Marine units had left the DMZ and the allies terminated the series of operations against the three regiments of the 320th NVA Division.

Thwarted in two attempts at victory in the lowlands during April and May, the enemy division, in August, chose another route which, as Colonel Barrow stated, led to a third defeat:

He had to choose some other way to attempt to do his dirty work of interdicting our roads and attacking civilian settlements. And so he chose this inhospitable area, northwest of the Rockpile, and if one will look at a map you can see that to him that it was a wise choice because, one, it was an area that made his targets quite accessible. He was only six, eight, or ten clicks away from the Rockpile. It was an area that was so rugged that he could assume that it was inaccessible to us, that we would not have the means to enter it unless we chose to do it overland and we would pay a heavy price if we did. The fact that we moved in and forced our way, if you will, onto the ridgelines on an equal footing with him and showed great determination in seeking out his supplies which were so carefully concealed, upset his plans. He had prepared this area as his battlefield . . . We couldn't have hit him at a better time. We hit him

when his forces had not yet gotten to their battlefield and we dealt his forces a blow.⁶⁰

During three months of fighting, the Marine command estimated that the *320th NVA Division* lost more than 1,500 killed as well as large numbers of individual and crew-served weapons. The Marines, in addition, destroyed hundreds of prepared positions and huge stockpiles of munitions. In contrast to the heavy losses of the enemy, Marine casualties were less than 200, many from indirect artillery and mortar fire.

When the 9th Marines left the battle with the *320th Division*, they turned their efforts toward the expanding pacification program. At 1000 on the morning of 1 October, as the regimental headquarters prepared to depart Fire Support Base Winchester, it received an order from Task Force Hotel to place a three battalion cordon that night around the Beng Son-Doc Kinh or Mai Loc village complex, a known Viet Cong haven in the Cua Valley. Throughout the day, Army helicopters made a visual reconnaissance of the area, battalions briefed down to the squad level, and the regiment carried out coordination with South Vietnamese officials and the U.S. Army district advisor. At dusk the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines and 3d Battalion, 4th Marines arrived by truck at Camp Carroll, and shortly after dark, the two battalions began their overland movement. Lieutenant Colonel Bourne's 3d Battalion travelled in a easterly direction, while Major Sisley's 2d Battalion headed south and then turned east. According to Colonel Barrow:

Their movements were sort of like the pincers of a crab, moving out into the night, getting around the village and the open side of the cordon was then to be filled in by the 3d Battalion, 9th, landing at night into two landing zones, one up near where the 3d Battalion, 4th would have the head of its column and one not too far from where the 2d Battalion, 9th would have the head of its column.⁶¹

Lieutenant Colonel LaMontagne's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines lifted out of Vandegrift and touched down in the area two hours before midnight. Within 30 minutes his lead elements made contact with Bourne's and Sisley's Marines, closing the cordon. Early the following morning, Colonel Barrow made a helicopter reconnaissance of the area: "It was a very dramatic sight to see the next morning an entire infantry regiment wrapped around this large village complex with a Marine every 5 to 10 meters in physical contact all the way around the cordon."⁶² During the next several days, the regiment tightened the cordon and completely searched the village complex.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801136
1stLt James Luker, Jr., a member of the fire support group with the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, pauses for a moment near LZ Cates in Operation Scotland to fill a canteen with water. He apparently has the water duty as three more canteens are on the rocks waiting to be filled as well.

While detaining only 40 individuals, who were later identified as prominent members of the local Viet Cong infrastructure, Barrow considered the cordon a success. "We were particularly proud of it," he stated, "because it showed the versatility of this regiment and our capability to respond rapidly, having come out of a month-long mountain jungle operation and that very same night of the same day we came out we conducted a very successful cordon operation, which was, of course, entirely different and involved operating with other forces and involved working in an area that was heavily populated."⁶³

While the 3d Marines, and later 9th Marines, were pursuing the remnants of the *320th NVA Division*, Colonel Edward J. Miller's 4th Marines continued to conduct mobile defensive operations within the Scotland area of operations. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas H. Galbraith's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines conducted extensive company patrols, searching for enemy troops, caches, and constructing landing zones for future heliborne assaults throughout August and into September. On 7 August, the battalion command group and three companies were helilifted to Hills 679 and 505 in the Huong Vinh region, approximately 10 kilometers west of Vandegrift. The Marines cut landing zones and conducted numerous patrols throughout the area without

results. On the 23d, in an effort to assist the 3d Battalion, Galbraith's Marines assaulted into the Huong Phuc region, south of Route 9, approximately 17 kilometers southwest of Vandegrift. Once again the troops, except for two short encounters with small groups of enemy soldiers as they attacked to the northwest, found little of interest. The Dong Ca Lu mountain complex west of Vandegrift, a favorite harboring site for the North Vietnamese, became the battalion's chief interest during the last days of August and first two weeks of September. Although Galbraith's Marines sighted several large groups of enemy in the area and responded with mortar, artillery, and airstrikes, no significant engagements took place.

Between these series of short operations, the battalion maintained responsibility for the defense of Vandegrift Combat Base and Ca Lu. Assigned the mission of planning a new perimeter defense, Galbraith's Marines, in coordination with the 11th Engineers, cleared fields of fire, laid defensive wire, and assisted with the placement of tanks, Ontos, M42 "Dusters", and searchlights at strategic points along the perimeter. On 17 September, the battalion was placed under the operational con-

trol of the 9th Marines and assaulted into the DMZ.

Further west, Lieutenant Colonel Louis A. Rann's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines maintained a continuous series of patrols from Fire Support Base Cates. The 2d Battalion also manned strategic hills overlooking the abandoned base at Khe Sanh. Enemy contact was light during August, consisting of small unit probes of all battalion defensive positions. September brought long periods of rain and overcast weather to the western mountains, hindering the battalion's long-range patrol effort and resulting in numerous accidents and several collapsed bunkers.

On 17 September, Rann's Marines observed enemy activity around the abandoned Khe Sanh Combat Base. Several artillery missions were called in on a possible enemy truck convoy, antiaircraft positions, and on the former helicopter revetments, but without success. Later, several patrols reported hearing and seeing an unidentified aircraft near the base, but no positive identification could be made due to heavy fog.

To the southeast of Rann's battalion, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel Frank L. Bourne, Jr., continued to defend Fire Support Base

FSB Shepherd, in this aerial view, overlooks Route 9 where two rivers, the Song Rao Quan and Da Krong come together. Unfortunately neither the road nor the rivers can be made out in this picture.

Photo from the 12th Mars ComdC, Dec68



Shepherd, overlooking Route 9 and the confluence of the Song Rao Quan and Da Krong. Bourne maintained one rifle company at the fire support base and employed the three remaining companies, on a rotating basis, in a mobile defense. According to the plan, the companies moved from patrol base to patrol base in the field every two to three days. In addition to company patrols out of Shepherd, the battalion conducted a two-company search operation in the Huong Phuc region to the southwest near Hills 549 and 587. Soon after entering the region on 21 August, Companies L and M came under heavy and continuous rocket-propelled grenade, 75mm recoilless rifle, 60mm, and 82mm mortar fire. The companies maintained a tight defensive position on Hill 549 for several days before being relieved by elements of the 1st Battalion.

Despite extended periods of inclement weather during September, Bourne's battalion continued the program of constantly patrolling its sector of the regimental area of operations. On 13 September, the battalion was split with the Bravo command group and Companies I and L displacing to Vandegrift Combat Base. The Alpha command group and Companies K and M remained on Shepherd.

Although the two remaining companies continued to send out long-range patrols, the Marines encountered only friendly Montagnards and no enemy troops during the month. However, while on patrol, north of Ra Co Ap, three kilometers west of Shepherd, elements of Company M captured two Vietnamese males, carrying a white flag. Initially thought to be North Vietnamese soldiers, they later revealed that they were ARVN officers who had been captured at Hue during the Tet Offensive in February. They reported that they had escaped from an enemy prisoner of war camp, located near the junction of Route 9 and Xe Pon, on the Laotian border, and said to have contained at least 30 American prisoners. The enemy, they noted, were in the process of taking them and others to a camp in North Vietnam.

During August and early September there were indications that the *246th Independent NVA Regiment* had reentered South Vietnam and was moving east toward Huong Hoa, south of the Khe Sanh Combat Base. In addition, the elements of the *83d Engineer Regiment* were believed to be constructing a road from Laos into the Vietnam Salient. The *1st Battalion, 66th NVA*

BGen Frank E. Garretson, right, CG, TF Hotel, accompanies MajGen Ormond R. Simpson, center, and MajGen Raymond G. Davis, left, CG 3d MarDiv. MajGen Simpson assumed command of the 1st Marine Division on 21 December 1968.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801184





Department of Defense (USMC) A192247

Marines of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines on side of hill prepare to fire LAAWs (light antiarmor weapons) at enemy positions in the valley below. The Marine with the soft hat in the background apparently is holding a M14, rather than the M16 rifle.

Regiment also had moved into an area just north of the abandoned Marine Combat Base.⁶⁴

Although Brigadier General Frank E. Garretson, who assumed command of Task Force Hotel at the end of August, had hoped to begin operations in the area during September, inclement weather forced a series of postponements. But by early October, with the completion of four fire support bases and the movement of Marine 155mm howitzers and 8-inch self-propelled guns eight kilometers west along Route 9 to Fire Support Base Stormy, and a battery of Army 175mm guns to Ca Lu, all was ready.

While the 9th Marines secured all fire support bases east of Khe Sanh and patrolled the high ground surrounding Vandegrift Combat Base, the 4th Marines, now under the command of Colonel Martin J. Sexton, began search and clear operations to the west of Khe Sanh. On 5 October, Major John E. O'Neill's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines assaulted into landing zones just south of Lang Vei (2) and Lieutenant Colonel Bourne's 3d Battalion was helilifted into the area just north of Lang Vei (1). Seizing the two objectives without enemy opposition, both battalions began to sweep east astride Route 9. The following day, Lieutenant Colonel Galbraith's 1st Battal-

ion assaulted into landing zones near Hill 503, three kilometers southwest of Huong Hoa, on the southern flank of the two attacking battalions. The battalion's mission was to interdict enemy movement along the north-south routes leading to and out of the Khe Sanh area. Simultaneously, the 3d and 4th Battalions, 2d ARVN Regiment were helilifted into landing zones seven kilometers north of Bourne's Marines and moved toward Hills 881 North and 881 South.

Galbraith's and O'Neill's battalions travelling east toward the Da Krong Valley, uncovered numerous munitions caches and grave sites while engaging several small, but isolated groups of enemy soldiers. On 16 October, the 2d Battalion, now under the command of Major William L. Kent, returned to Vandegrift Combat Base for a period of rehabilitation prior to a helicopter lift into the northwestern portion of the Scotland area of operations. Elements of Galbraith's battalion left the Khe Sanh area the same day and deployed to various fire support bases throughout the regimental area. Marines of the 1st Battalion spent the remainder of October in a normal perimeter defensive posture, manning patrols, listening and observation posts, and killer teams. Composed of artillery and 81mm mortar forward observers, a forward air con-

troller, an M60 machine gun team, grenadier, radioman, corpsman, team leader, and a sufficient number of riflemen to accomplish the assigned mission, the killer teams, which ranged in size from 14 to 22 men, operated in remote areas for a three to five-day period. Unlike long-range reconnaissance patrols, these teams were encouraged to engage enemy forces attempting to move within striking distance of regimental fire support bases.

By 10 October, Lieutenant Colonel Bourne's Marines had taken their final objectives: Hills 689, 552, and 471; and the villages of Khe Sanh and Houng Hoa. The 3d Battalion and the two ARVN Battalions then shifted the emphasis of their attacks. The 3d and 4th Battalions, 2d ARVN Regiment swept north off Hill 881 toward Lang Suat until the 19th when they returned to Dong Ha. At the same time, Bourne's battalion conducted extensive reconnaissance and search operations in the Khe Xa Bai Valley where it was believed that the enemy had stored extensive caches of ammunition, food, and weapons. After establishing Fire Support Base Gurkha, atop Hill 632, on 12 October, 3d Battalion Marines moved off the hill and into the surrounding river valley. During the last days of October, they were in the process of slowly working their way toward the summit of Dong Pa Thien, one of the highest pieces of terrain in South Vietnam. Their search failed to uncover any evidence of recent enemy activity in the area. What they did find were three to four-month old grave sites, unserviceable bunkers, and four to six-month old enemy equipment and weapons. What enemy that the Marines sighted showed no inclination to contest the battalion's forward movement.

The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel James L. Fowler, was joined during the last week of October by Major Kent's 2d Battalion which was helilifted onto Hill 665 and established Fire Support Base Alpine before sweeping north in an effort to seize a regimental objective near Lang Ho. After Kent's Marines reached the objective, they conducted extensive patrols in the area, uncovering small caches of new and used medical equipment and supplies. On 30 October, Companies F and G assaulted into landing zones west of Alpine and began a sweep to the east, encountering no enemy resistance.

The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Elliott R. Laine, Jr., who had replaced Lieutenant Colonel LaMontagne on the 24th, searched Dong Ca Lu and the hills west of Vandegrift without success. Meanwhile, Major Sisley's 2d Battal-

ion moved into the northeast portion of the Vietnam Salient on 26 October. Like Kent's Marines to the north, Laine's battalion, operating 20 kilometers southwest of Vandegrift near the Laotian border, encountered only token resistance as it searched the 10-meter-wide road running from Laos into South Vietnam. As Colonel Barrow reported: "We searched out the road, interdicted it, destroyed it, conducted extensive patrol operations, killed a few, [and] picked up some gear."⁶⁵

The 246th NVA Regiment had moved back into Laos to regroup and refit. Combined with the defeat of the 48th and 52d Regiments, 320th NVA Division, the northwestern region of I Corps was now devoid of major enemy units. This lack of sizeable enemy forces allowed the highly mobile attacking elements of the 4th and 9th Marines to cover a wide expanse of terrain in the far reaches of western and southern Quang Tri Province in a series of airborne maneuvers. The 3d Marine Division would continue to refine these highly mobile tactics during the last two months of 1968.

Coastal Quang Tri and Thua Thien: A Shift

The 1st Air Cavalry Division and the 3d ARVN Regiment, as August began, continued to conduct company and battalion-sized cordon and search and clear operations in the populated coastal plains of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. Their mission was to ferret out the Viet Cong infrastructure, destroy enemy main force units, and support the Revolutionary Development Program. Company and battalion reconnaissance-in-force operations were conducted simultaneously in enemy Base Areas 101 and 114 in the mountains, aimed at destroying the enemy's logistics and command and control facilities.

There was moderate contact as elements of the division's three brigades searched the coastal lowlands for the Viet Cong and his rice storage areas. Shortly after midnight, in the early morning hours of 16 August, enemy forces launched a mortar and ground attack against Landing Zone Nancy, nine kilometers northwest of Camp Evans. The positions of Companies D and E, 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, at Nancy, took more than 150 rounds of 82mm mortar, followed by a ground attack by 20 enemy sappers who broke through the perimeter, killing 18 soldiers and wounding another 71. Four days later, a helicopter from A Troop, 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry came under heavy automatic weapons fire while conducting a "snatch" operation in an area seven kilometers north-

east of Quang Tri City.* Three companies of the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry and two troops of the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry air assaulted into the area and eventually placed a cordon around the suspected villages, trapping the *808th VC Battalion*. Fighting over the next three days resulted in the capture of 14 prisoners, 58 weapons, and the reported deaths of 144 enemy soldiers.

During late August a gradual concentration of Communist forces was noted in the eastern portion of Base Area 101, a region known to be heavily fortified and believed to contain several battalion base areas and storage facilities. The area also lay across a major rice route and was an important link in the transportation of rice from Hai Lang District to the western mountains. On 11 September, Operation Comanche Falls-Lam Son 261 began in the base area in an effort to destroy enemy forces, caches and bunker complexes prior to the arrival of the north-east monsoon. Two battalions of the 5th and 8th Cavalry and two battalions from the 1st and 3d ARVN Regiments assaulted into landing zones along the southern boundary of the base area. One battalion of the 7th Cavalry seized landing zones in the southeast portion and a Regional Force battalion from Quang Tri secured landing zones in the north-east portion. As the latter two battalions established blocking positions and interdicted enemy trails in the piedmont, the four maneuvering battalions attacked through jungle canopy to the northeast. After 21 days of sustained combat, the combined cavalry and ARVN force had succeeded in denying the enemy his forward support base area and disrupting his lines of communication. In addition to destroying several large base camps, allied forces reported killing more than 270 NVA soldiers.

With the destruction of enemy installations in Base Area 101, the division began operations to interdict enemy movement toward the A Shau Valley and to destroy reported large supply installations west of the base area. On 2 October, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, followed by two battalions of the

1st ARVN Regiment, assaulted into landing zones southwest of the base area and began a sweep to the western limits of the division's area of operations. Although contact was light and sporadic during the remainder of the month, the combined allied force destroyed several large enemy supply installations and captured tons of ammunition.

As elements of the 1st Cavalry Division continued their search for enemy forces in the mountains and throughout the coastal plains, General Stilwell, on 26 October, alerted the division's commanding general, U.S. Army Major General George Forsythe, that his forces would be deployed to III Corps Tactical Zone. Once in place, II Field Force, Vietnam would assume operational control of the division. In a message to General Cushman, General Abrams outlined the threat in III Corps which necessitated the move. He noted:

I have directed the move on the basis of the tactical situation in South Vietnam and my continuing assessment of the enemy's capabilities throughout the country to include his capability to reinforce from out of country. I believe that a part of his problem in northern I Corps is inadequate logistic support. This may be temporary. The absence of some enemy units from northern I Corps may also be temporary. In the meantime he has steadily built his capability in III Corps and the sanctuaries in Cambodia.

As Abrams viewed the situation, the mounting enemy threat to III Corps had to be blunted and therefore he was forced to make the decision to move the 1st Cavalry Division sooner instead of later. Should a change in situation warrant it, he concluded, the division could be moved quickly back to I Corps. Although it had no bearing on his decision, Abrams saw the move as an opportunity for the 1st ARVN Division to "shoulder a bigger part of the load."⁶⁶

The advance party of the Army's cavalry division departed I Corps on 27 October. The following day the 3d Brigade was airlifted to Quan Loi and put under the operational control of the 1st Infantry Division. Combat elements of the 1st Brigade simultaneously deployed to Tay Ninh and came under the control of the 25th Infantry Division.

*"Snatch" operations were conducted in restricted areas, along waterways or roads and in populated areas. Using a UH-1H "Huey" helicopter with an infantry fire team, interpreter, and a national policeman on board and an armed OH-6A "Loach," the snatch team patrolled restricted areas looking for targets. If individuals were discovered, the team would swoop out of the sky and round them up. After interrogation by the policeman, Viet Cong suspects would be transported to detainee collection points and innocent civilians transferred to the district headquarters.

**General Earl E. Anderson, in 1968 the III MAF Chief of Staff, observed that the Marine command lost the 1st Air Cavalry Division, "just on the basis of a phone call." As early as 11 September 1968, III MAF had received a message from General Abrams, "asking us to comment on the effect upon III MAF of our furnishing an AirCav troop and an air-mobile brigade for use in III Corps, commencing 1 Dec." BGen E. E. Anderson ltr to MajGen F. E. Leek, dtd 4Nov68, encl, Anderson Comments, Dec94; Anderson ltr to Van Ryzin, Sep68; Anderson Comments, Dec94.



Photo from Abel Collection

An Army company commander from the 1st Air Cavalry Division points out terrain features to Capt William O. Moore, Jr., whose company will relieve the Army unit south of Quang Tri City. The 1st Air Cavalry Division began departing I Corps in October for III Corps.

In light of the anticipated loss of the 1st Cavalry Division, XXIV Corps ordered an adjustment in the boundary between the 3d Marine and 101st Airborne Divisions. The adjustment, scheduled to be completed on 8 November, would generally correspond to the provincial boundary between Quang Tri and Thua Thien. To fill the void, the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division would be shifted south and a brigade of the 101st Airborne Division would move north. In an attempt to make the transition as smooth as possible, the remaining elements of the cavalry division were directed to cordon the village of Thon My Chanh and eliminate the Viet Cong infrastructure from the village to the coast. On 2 November, the cordon around Thon My Chanh was established by an armored battalion task force from the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division, an armored battalion from the 101st Airborne Division, and a cavalry squadron from the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division. U.S. helicopters brought into forward landing zones maneuver elements of the 1st ARVN Regiment which began search operations throughout the area. Although enemy resistance was light, the combined Army and ARVN force discovered several food caches, containing more than 12 tons of unpolished rice. With the end of the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division's participation in the cordon on 7 November, the area was released to the 1st Brigade and the 2d Brigade deployed to Phuoc Vinh.⁶⁷

South of the 1st Cavalry Division, the 101st Airborne Division continued to conduct operations in coordination with the 1st ARVN Regiment to provide security for Hue City; interdict Routes 547 and 547A; implement the rice denial program; destroy the enemy's main force units and infrastructure; and assist in the Thua Thien Province pacification program. In late July, the division finalized plans, marshalled forces, and constructed fire support bases for a combined Army and ARVN two-brigade airmobile assault into the A Shau Valley. On 4 August, Army helicopters flew the 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry and 2d Battalion, 327th Infantry into landing zones in the vicinity of A Luoi and Ta Bat. While the 2d Battalion, 327th Infantry secured landing zones near Ta Bat, the 2d and 3d Battalions, 1st ARVN Regiment were helilifted into the valley on the 5th. The combined reconnaissance in force encountered only a few squad- and company-sized enemy units, much smaller than anticipated by intelligence sources. The enemy employed a series of delaying and harassing tactics to slow the advance. While finding no major enemy caches or installations, the maneuver forces implanted minefields and sensors at three choke points in the valley before withdrawing on the 20th.

On the heels of the A Shau Valley operation, the 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry assaulted into landing zones in the Nui Ke mountain complex southeast of Hue. Led by a North Vietnamese Army corporal who had rallied to a local Marine Combined Action platoon, the battalion moved west toward the suspected base camps of the 5th NVA Regiment. Following two weeks of heavy fighting, the 1st Battalion reported killing more than 180 enemy troops and captured numerous individual weapons and tons of munitions.

As a result of the decreasing number of engagements in August with North Vietnamese main force and Viet Cong local force units in the coastal lowlands surrounding Hue, a series of operations, or "soft cordons," were carried out to destroy the Viet Cong infrastructure in the area. These operations, targeted at Vinh Loc, Phu Vang, Huong Thuy, Phu Thu Districts, emphasized coordination with and use of local South Vietnamese forces, surprise, isolation of the battlefield, detailed search, minimum destruction of civilian property, and population control. The soft cordon normally took place in populated areas where enemy forces were suspected to be widely dispersed among the civilian population. The expectation was that the enemy forces would

attempt to escape rather than establish an organized resistance. Preparatory fires would be placed only on barren areas near landing zones and fires on other targets, such as known or suspected enemy locations, would be planned but not fired unless necessary to prevent friendly casualties. The soft cordon proved to be an effective technique for the division and local South Vietnamese authorities to find the Viet Cong and blunt its influence.

In mid-September, in an effort to prevent enemy reinforcement and recovery from the losses suffered in Phu Vang, Phu Thu, and Vinh Loc Districts, the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry and 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry assaulted into the Dong Truoi mountain complex south of Hue. For the next month, the two battalions conducted extensive company operations in search of five infantry battalions of the *4th* and *5th* NVA Regiments, known to be in the area. Although not encountered in large numbers, the enemy fled to the southwest, relieving the pressure on Da Nang, Route 1 from Phu Bai to the Hai Van Pass, and on Phu Loc District to the east.

While the division's 2d Brigade continued to conduct the series of cordon operations in the coastal plains and the 1st Brigade operated in the mountains to the south and west of Hue, the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division prepared to deploy from I Corps to III Corps. The 82d Airborne brigade was released from the operational control of the division on 4 October and, simultaneously, the division's own 3d

Brigade moved from III Corps to I Corps and returned to the operational control of the 101st.

As the division regained its 3d Brigade, its boundary was extended to the east to include the Phu Loc District and south to include the remaining portion of Thua Thien Province, with the exception of the Hai Van Pass. With the deactivation of Marine Task Force X-Ray in August and the subsequent movement of the 26th Marines south, General Abrams authorized the boundary extension.^{68*} In late October, the division's area of operations was extended north to the Thua Thien-Quang Tri boundary as the 1st Cavalry Division was alerted to deploy to III Corps.

In recalling the memory of his service, Lieutenant Colonel Galbraith, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, probably expressed the feelings of most Marine and Army officers and troops who fought in northern I Corps during this period:

Much of what stands out in my mind . . . is the totally miserable existence of the squad and fire team grunt, the guy who lived day after day in a hole he just dug, trying to do his job and at the same time stay halfway dry, opening his can of C-rations, wondering when he was going to get his next hot meal and a new pair of utility trousers to replace the ripped and torn pair he sort of had on, and remembering the hot shower he'd had a month ago when he was herded through the shower unit at Vandegrift.⁶⁹

* See also Chapter 21.