

U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

HIGH MOBILITY AND STANDDOWN

1969



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

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U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

HIGH MOBILITY AND STANDDOWN

1969

by

Charles R. Smith



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

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Foreword

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

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 Until withdrawn, the 3d Marine Division, employing highly mobile tactics, successfully blunted North Vietnamese Army efforts to reintroduce troops and supplies into Quang Tri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

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

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

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



E. H. SIMMONS

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

Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charles R. Smith". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Charles" being the most prominent.

CHARLES R. SMITH

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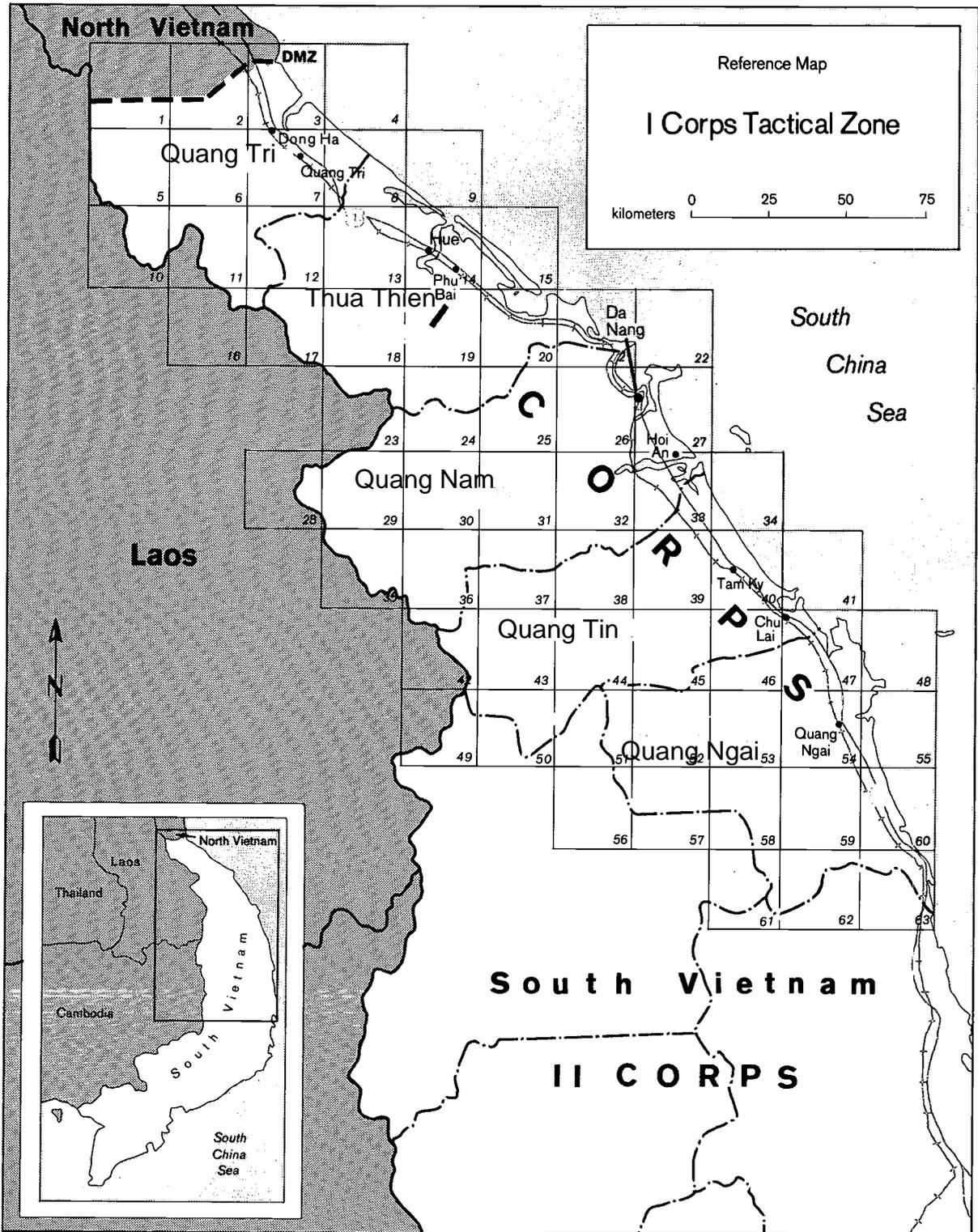
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PART I
THE CONTINUING WAR

CHAPTER 1

Planning the Campaign

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

I Corps Order of Battle

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

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

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

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

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

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



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192828

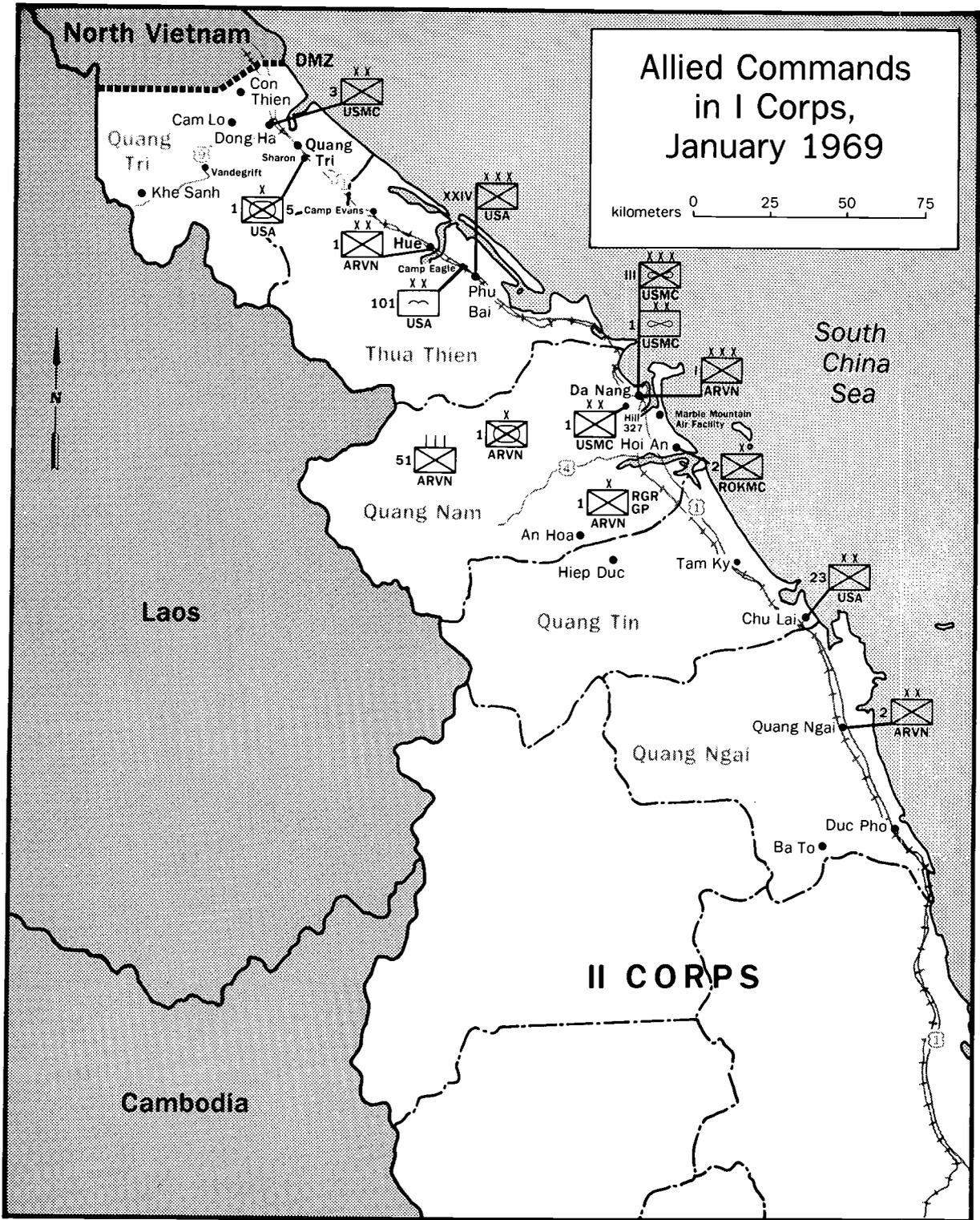
LtGen Robert E. Cushman, Jr., right, is congratulated by Gen Creighton W. Abrams, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, after being presented a Gold Star in lieu of a second Distinguished Service Medal. As Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force since June 1967, Cushman oversaw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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

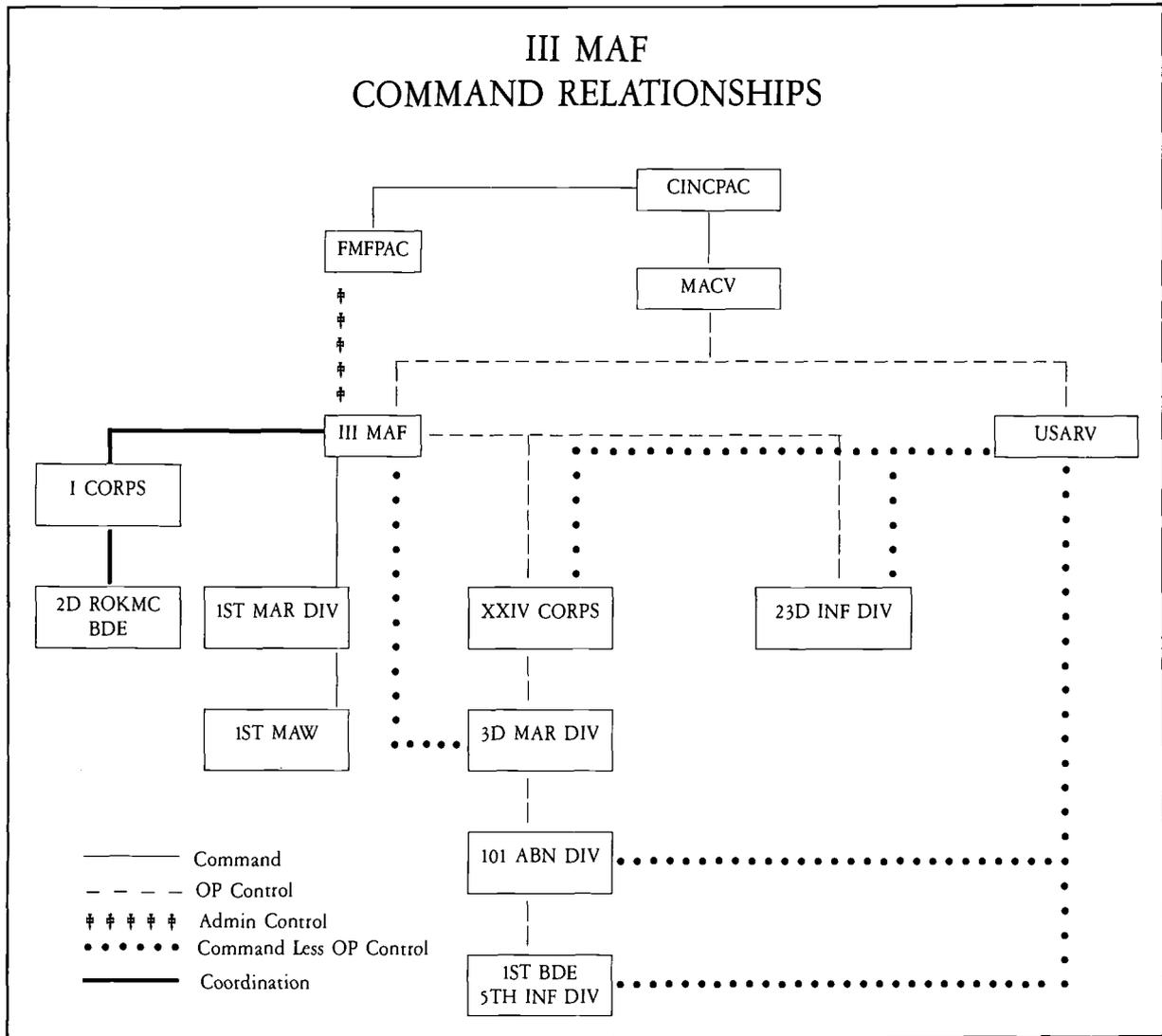
General Cushman was well prepared when he assumed the post of top Leatherneck in Vietnam. A graduate of the Naval Academy (Class of 1935) and recipient of the Navy Cross as a battalion commander during the recapture of Guam, Cushman served four years on Vice President Richard M. Nixon's staff as Assistant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

During his tenure, General Cushman managed III

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

Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC649680





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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

offensive scheduled to begin in the early months of 1969.

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

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

Strategy: A Reevaluation of Priorities

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Various operational concepts to support this strate-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

wars were mutually supporting aspects of the same struggle.*

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

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

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



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192540

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I Corps Planning

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2

Mountain Warfare

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

Northern I Corps

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

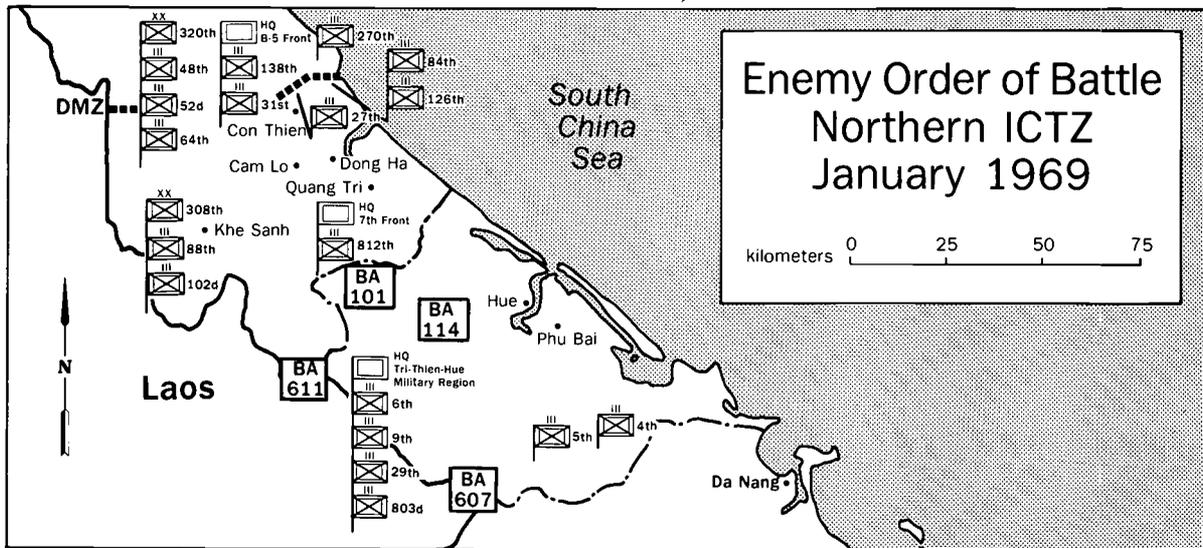
Enemy activity throughout northern I Corps was light and sporadic during the early days of January 1969. Along the Demilitarized Zone, units of the 3d Marine Division and 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) faced elements of six North Vietnamese regiments, the *138th*, *270th*, *84th*, *31st*,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

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

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

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

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



See Reference Map, Sections 1-27

Off Balance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800506





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800503

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800539



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From the Cua Viet, South

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

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



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800470

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 3

The Spring Offensive Preempted

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

Strike into the Da Krong

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

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

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

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

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

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



Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

A Phased Operation

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

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

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



Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Phase I

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

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

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

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

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

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192763-B



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

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

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

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

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

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

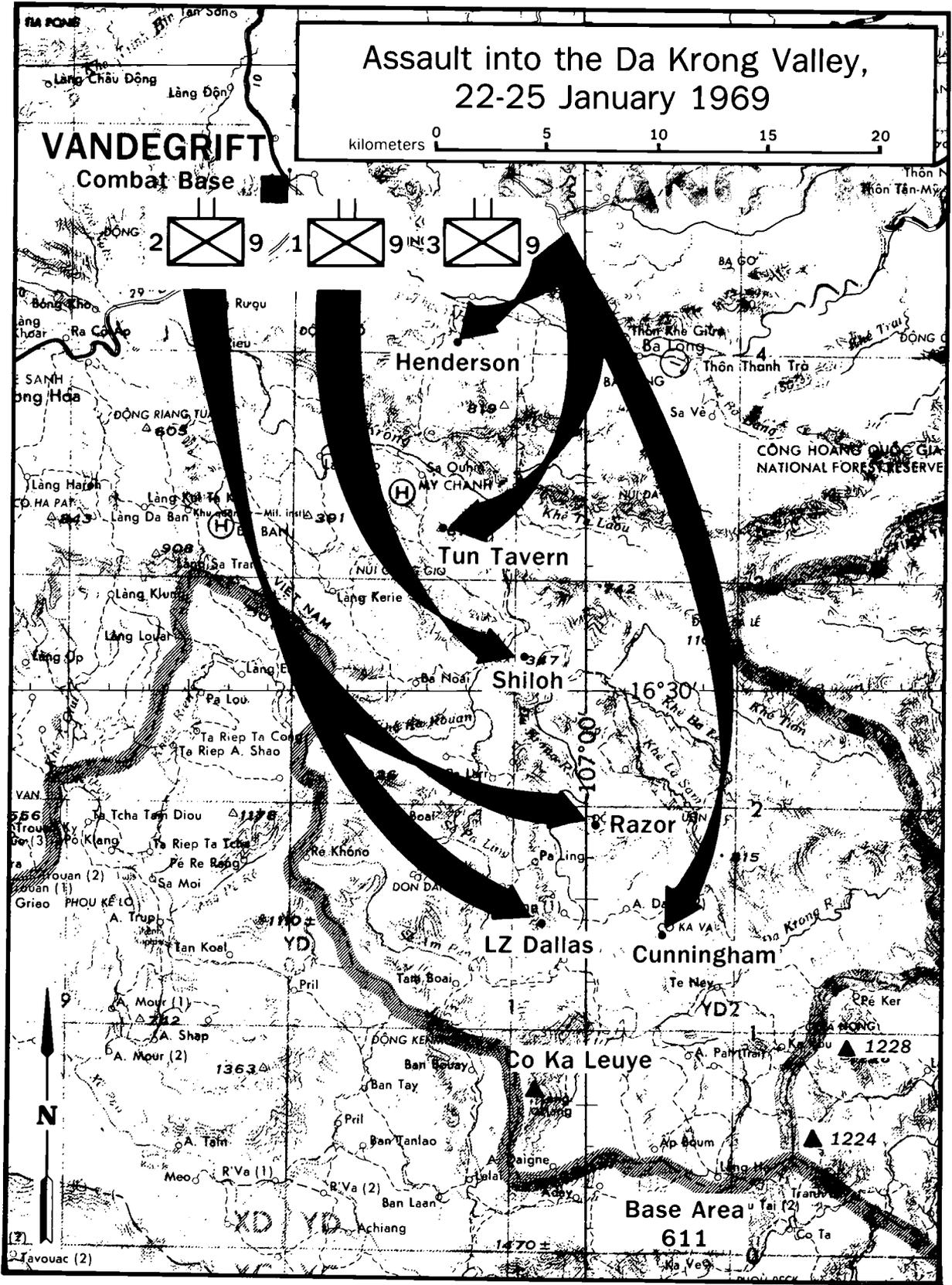
Winecoff's Marines cleared the trees, but the gentle slope on one side coupled with two hummocks on the flanks proved troublesome, and light bulldozers were brought in by helicopter to widen the landing zone and build gun pits and ammunition berms.

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

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

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

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





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193044

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

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

Backyard Cleanup

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192655





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192844

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

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

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



Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 4

The Raid into Laos

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

Across the Da Krong

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800561

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

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

The NVA Retaliates

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

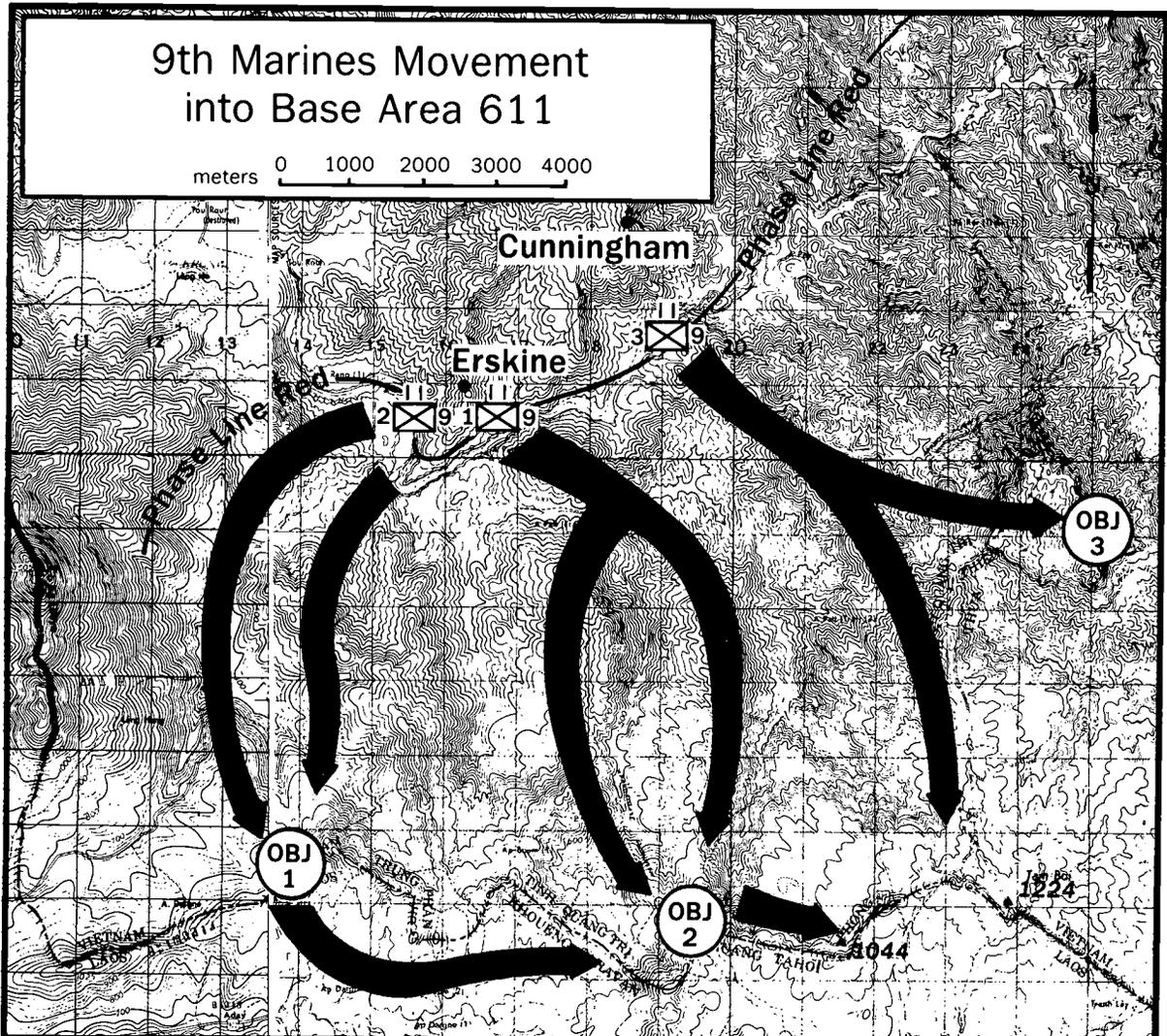
Lieutenant Colonel Scoppa's 2d Battalion, 12th Marines bore the brunt of the attack, suffering major damage within the first minutes; the battalion's fire direction center was put out of action, as was one howitzer. Within 30 minutes, however, the battalion reestablished centralized fire control and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

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

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

Ambush Along 922

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



See Reference Map, Sections 16, 17

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193159





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marine Corps Historical Collection



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Heavy Fighting

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

Pushing through triple-canopied jungle, banana



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

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

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

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



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192685

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Back Into Laos

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

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

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

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

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

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

Persistent Problems

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

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

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

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

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

Phased Retraction

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

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

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

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800583



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marine Corps Historical Collection



bility for all fire support coordination within the operational area.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Laos: Repercussions

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

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

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

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

lowing day. While noting that Marines had "technically violated Laotian neutrality" guaranteed at Geneva in 1954, and again in 1962, the operations were carried out "to protect the flanks of Marine elements maneuvering nearby along South Vietnam's northwestern border." Concluding, Ayres reported that "Operation Dewey Canyon seems to indicate that allied commanders operating along borders may dip across lines to secure their flanks."⁴³

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 5

The Quang Tri Border Areas

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

No Change in Tactics

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

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

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

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

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

The DMZ Front

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The proposed scheme of maneuver called for a three

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192846





Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center

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

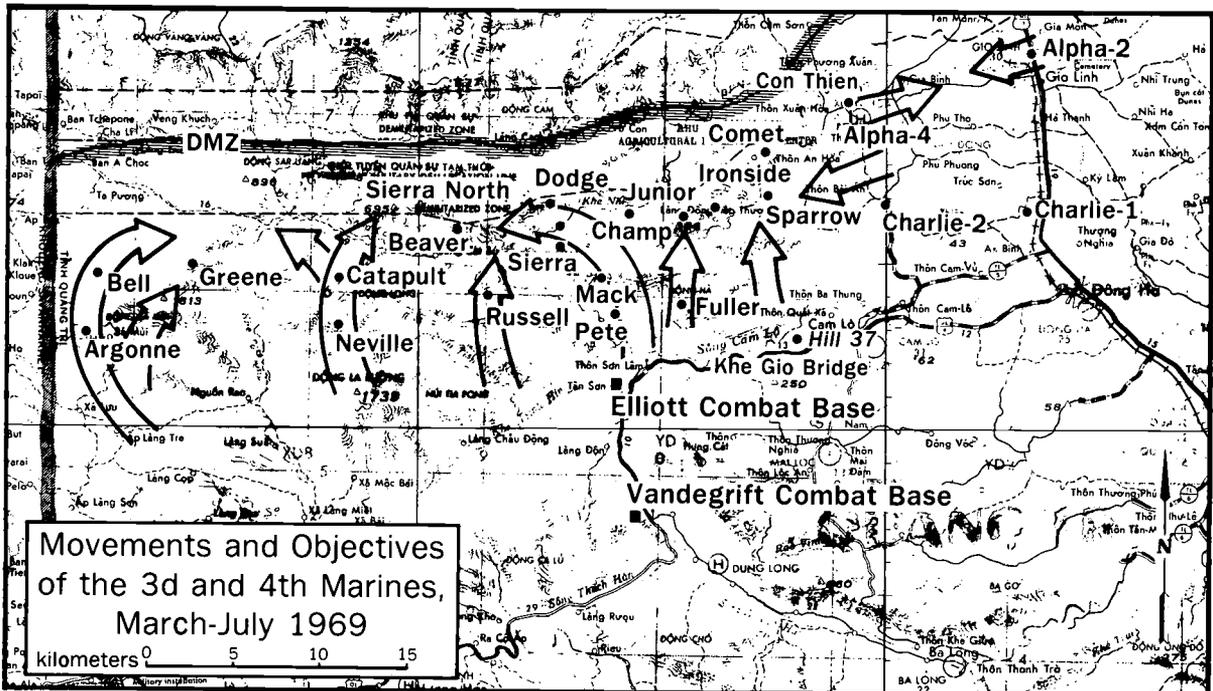
ion maintained patrols within the DMZ, as well as in the vicinity of Landing Zones Sierra and Mack, both designed to halt enemy infiltration, until the end of the operation.

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

First Battalion Marines continued search operations

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

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



See Reference Map, Sections 1, 2, 3

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

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

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

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

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

Brigade Mauls 27th

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

The 9th Battles the 36th

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Vietnam Salient

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

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

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center





Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

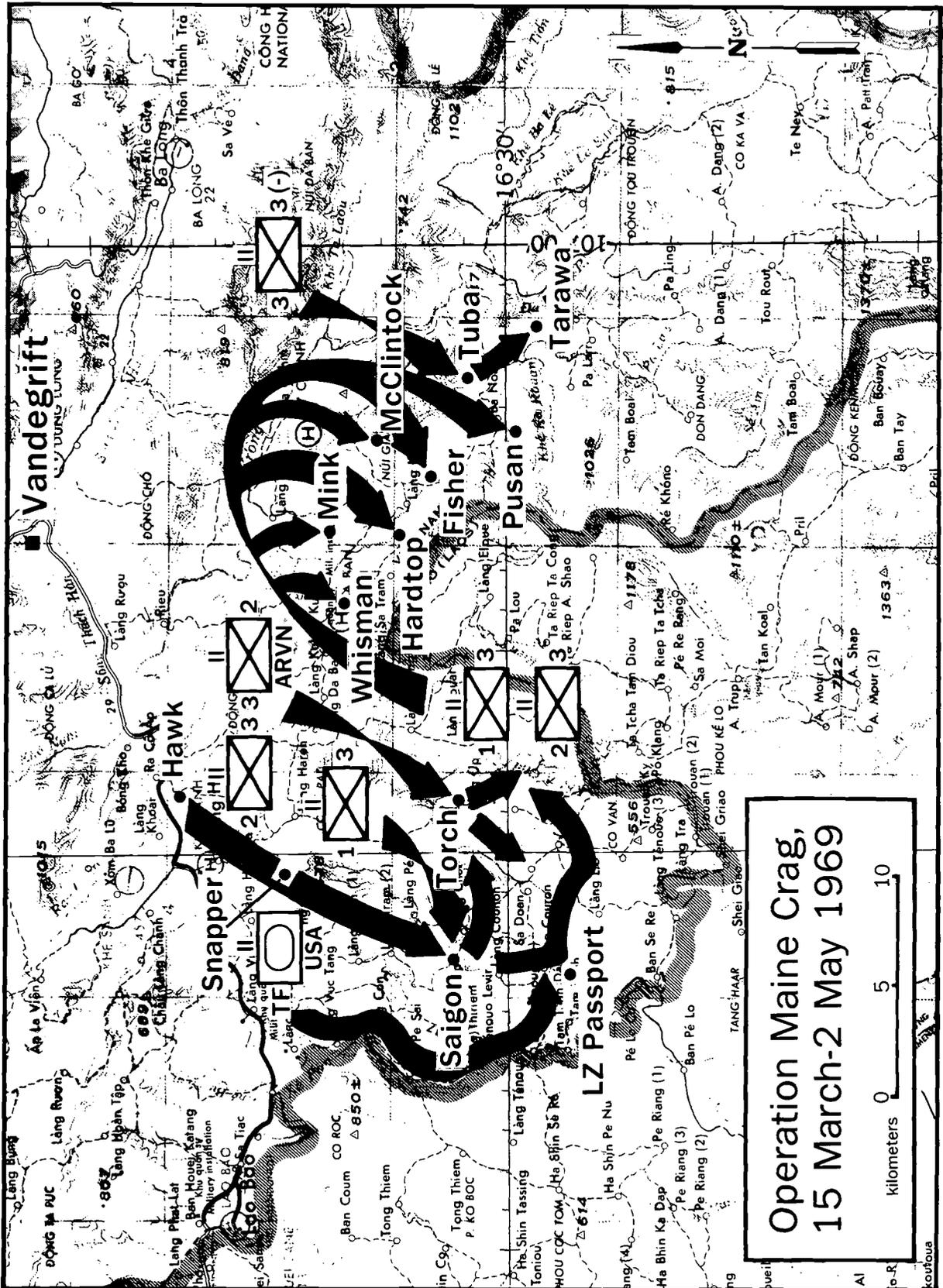
east-bound enemy trucks approach their position. Allowing the first truck, which was empty, to pass, the ambush opened fire on the second, destroying it and its cargo of 122mm rocket and mortar ammunition. The Marines then attacked the security element of the lead truck, which had halted a short distance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

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

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

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

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



See Reference Map, Sections 10, 11



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Apache Snow

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

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

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

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

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

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193758

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

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

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

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

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

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

As elements of the two battalions converged on Hill

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

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

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

Author’s Collection



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

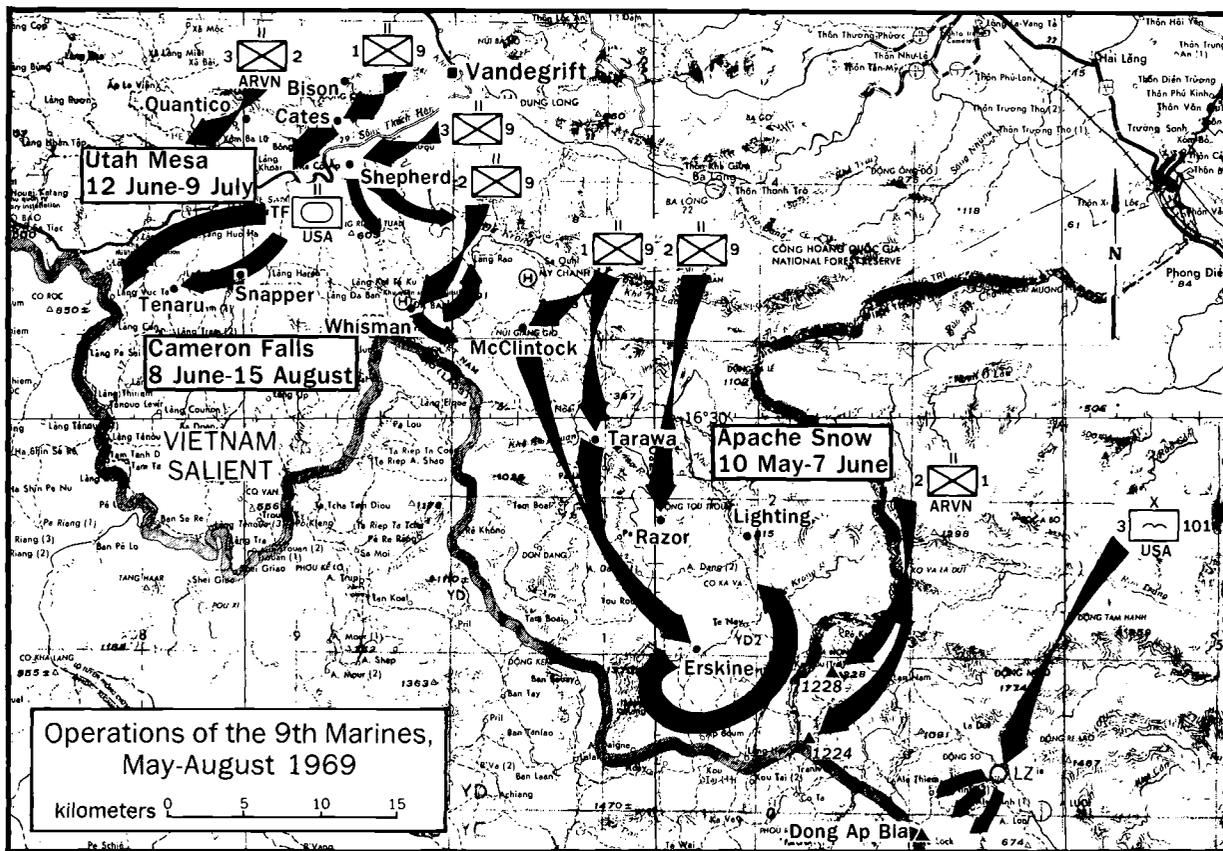
On 2 July, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, under Major Robert L. Modjeski, who had replaced Lieutenant Colonel Fox on the 22d, helilifted 14 kilometers south of Khe Sanh in order to reactivate FSB Spark and conduct sweeps of Route 926 in support of Task Force Guadalcanal. Shortly after reoccupying the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

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

Central DMZ Battles

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

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



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

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

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

stallations and roving patrols of the surrounding terrain.²⁴

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

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

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

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

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

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

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193235



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eastern Quang Tri and Thua Thien

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



Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PART II
SOUTHERN I CORPS BATTLEGROUND

CHAPTER 6

Destruction of Base Area 112

Defense of Da Nang – Attack into 112 – “A Little Urban Renewal” – Americal’s TAOI

Defense of Da Nang

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

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

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

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



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A372782
MajGen Ormond R. Simpson, as Commanding General, 1st Marine Division, coordinated the activities of four Marine regiments in the defense of Da Nang.

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

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

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

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

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

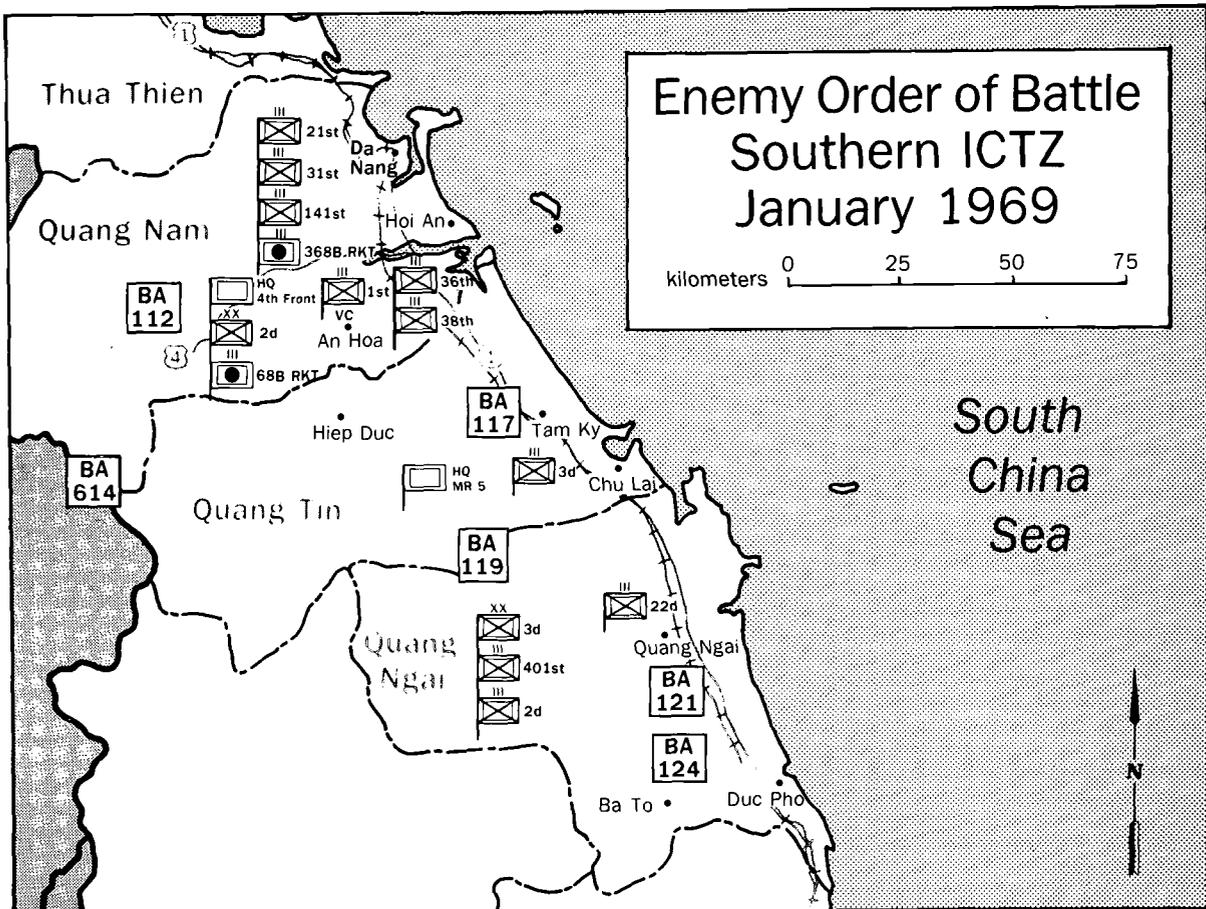
terrain rose westward into the jungle-covered mountains of the Annamite Chain and opened out to the south and southwest into the flat, treeline-broken, rice-paddy country of the An Hoa-Song Thu Bon basins, and Go Noi Island. It was heavily populated terrain which offered the enemy numerous places of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

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

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

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

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



See Reference Map, Sections 18-36

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

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

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

Attack into 112

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



Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371820

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

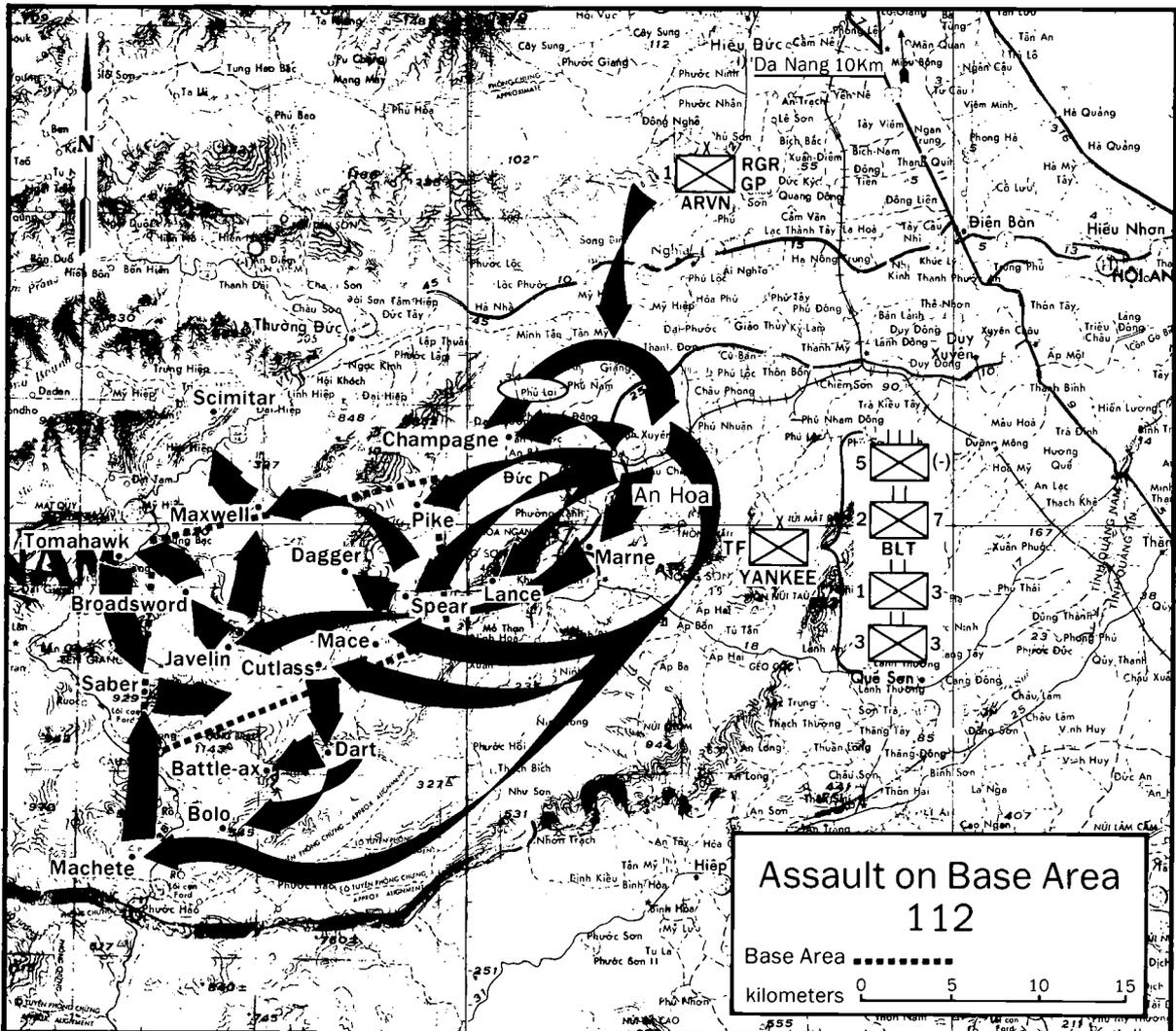
parallel axis north and west of Maxwell, and then developing COB Scimitar on Mai Guy ridgeline overlooking the confluence of the Song Cai and Song Boung. By 5 February, units of Task Force Yankee were operating along the entire length of the Song Cai within Base Area 112, while 1st Force Reconnaissance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

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

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

Marine Corps Historical Collection





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A372866

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A Little Urban Renewal"

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

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

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

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800567



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

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

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

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



Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marine Corps Historical Collection



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

Americal's TAOI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Battle for Quang Nam Continues

*Rockets Equal Operations—5th Marines and the Arizona—Securing the Southern and Northern Approaches
Americal Battleground—Operation Oklahoma Hills*

Rockets Equal Operations

As it was standing operating procedure (SOP), both of FMFPac and III MAF, that there be a five-day overlap of commanding generals, Generals Youngdale and Simpson did a lot of talking before the formal change of command. Rather prophetically, General Youngdale told his replacement as Commanding General, 1st Marine Division, that the biggest concern he would have to face when rockets fell on the Da Nang Vital Area, was answering the inevitable question posed by III MAF: "What the hell are you doing about it?" "Well," as General Simpson later recounted, "of course they knew what we were doing about it because we had an SOP which they clearly understood, and we always mounted an operation."¹

The 122mm rocket was an excellent weapon. Using the designated mount and sight from a surveyed position, it was the equivalent of light to medium tube artillery. By 1969, noted General Simpson, "the NVA were firing the 122mm from crossed bamboo sticks. This was adequate for them since the density of the Da Nang complex was such that, for any rocket that got over the surrounding hill mass, a complete 'miss' was next to impossible."²

The psychological damage, and to a minor extent, the physical damage, that rockets could inflict on Da Nang was of major concern. Defense of the Republic's second-largest city and surrounding allied military installations from attack, either by rocket artillery or infantry, was the division's main task. The immediate, and most obvious, response to a rocket attack was counterbattery fire, tapping any number of the division's 178 artillery tubes. But, to prevent the rockets from being launched, daily patrols, numbering 500 or more, were sent out to search the "rocket belt": the great arc, anchored at Hai Van Pass in the north and Marble Mountain in the south with Da Nang at its center, whose maximum and minimum limits corresponded to the maximum and minimum range of an enemy 122mm rocket. In addition, Americal Division IOH observation helicopters swept the area twice daily in search of possible launching sites. A third response was to prevent the rockets and their

crews reaching sites from which an attack could be launched: to move out into the hinterlands and not only sever the enemy's infiltration routes and supply lines, but also destroy his materiel caches and base camps. So mount operations Simpson did.³

Operation Oklahoma Hills

The large mountainous region west of Da Nang, encompassing such well-known areas as Charlie Ridge and Happy Valley, had long been suspected as a region that not only harbored enemy troops, but major base camps and infiltration routes, all of which posed a direct and ever-present threat to the Da Nang Vital Area. Considerable information on those routes had accumulated since October 1968, when the last major Marine operations in the area, Mameluke Thrust and Maui Peak, ended. Defectors and prisoners of war captured during Operation Taylor Common and subsequent operations around Da Nang and throughout the An Hoi basin during *Tet* provided additional information. One such prisoner, the senior captain and temporary commander of the *141st Regiment*, captured by Lieutenant Colonel Quinn's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines during the heavy fighting around Hill 41 on 23 February, furnished intelligence on the major base camps and infiltration routes leading toward Da Nang and An Hoa. During his extensive interrogation, he related that the major supply routes for the *141st NVA Regiment*, and in all probability the *31st Infantry* and *368B Artillery Regiments*, originated far to the west in the Ai Yen area, 20 kilometers east of the Laotian border, and could be traced east along Route 614. At the point where the road divided west of the Song Con, one supply route continued east along 614 into Happy Valley, while the other route began at the meeting of the Song Con and Route 614 and followed the river south to its intersection with the Song Yang at An Dien, eight kilometers northeast of Thuong Duc, and then east to the Song Vu Gia. From there supplies and men were either diverted to Base Area 112 and then into the northern Arizona or north onto Charlie Ridge and into Happy Valley. From the terminus of Route 614 in Happy Valley, the enemy shifted supplies and men to units operating near the Song



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371933

A 2d Battalion, 7th Marines patrol on Charlie Ridge carefully maneuvers through triple-canopied jungle, typical of the terrain found throughout the area of operations.

Tuy Loan, or to other units located in the northeast Charlie Ridge-Sherwood Forest-Worth Ridge area, overlooking Da Nang.⁴

Enemy infiltration and supply routes described by other prisoners of war and ralliers were of a general nature, but two common areas continued to emerge—Charlie Ridge and Happy Valley. Both regions contained not only major enemy supply routes, but also suspected base camps and storage facilities at the terminus of those routes. Both were to become prime targets for the Marines of the 1st Division. As Colonel Robert L. Nichols, who replaced Colonel Beckington as Commanding Officer of the 7th Marines on 7 February noted: “This terrain mass has provided a haven for the enemy in which he could assemble his forces and then institute his infiltration tactic into the Da Nang Vital Area. Of particular concern in recent months has been his tactic of using this infiltration approach to launch rockets into the Da Nang Vital Area.”⁵ Once Task Force Yankee had neutralized Base Area 112 and secured the southern flank of the Thuong Duc corridor as a result of Operation Taylor Common, clearing the hills west of Da Nang and securing both the western approaches to the vital area and northern flank of the Thuong Duc corridor was the next logical step.⁶

First Division Marines would find it difficult operating within the region. Both Charlie Ridge and Worth Ridge were high, narrow ranges, cut by numerous

steep-sided valleys, ravines, and gorges, and covered by multi-canopied jungle, and dense undergrowth. Movement throughout Happy Valley, blanketed by dense underbush and elephant grass seven to ten feet high, likewise would be arduous. The irregular terrain and density of vegetation would thus make foot movement a necessity, but yet impede it. Supporting arms would have to be used sparingly because of the dense overhead cover, and helicopter operations, especially medical evacuations, would have to be restricted due to the lack of suitable landing zones. Although terrain often favored the enemy, in this case, both Marine and NVA soldier would be on equal footing, as Colonel James B. Ord, Jr., noted:

The enemy always has the advantage, as I see it, of operating in the jungle, in the canopy. You only get a point to point contact. You cannot maneuver on a broad front, so you are on a parity with him as far as the infantry is concerned. Since your observation is limited and your fields of fire are limited, it is difficult to make use of supporting arms in which we have a distinct advantage. And the enemy can always break contact and he can always evade. And so this being the case, we are just about equal; we have no advantage.⁷

The initial concept of operations, as outlined by General Simpson, called for two battalions of Nichols' 7th Marines to be helilifted into the southwestern and northwestern portions of the area of operations, one battalion to attack northwest from Hill 52 along Route

4, and the other to attack south from R.C. Ba Na, Hill 467, overlooking Happy Valley. A third battalion was to attack west along the axis of Worth Ridge and Charlie Ridge, placing pressure on the enemy from all directions. As the 7th Marines began planning for the operation, a number of potential problems arose. A landing on R.C. Ba Na, followed by a sweep south from the ridge onto Charlie Ridge would be hazardous and time-consuming due to the rough terrain. In addition, the third battalion would find it difficult to conduct effective search and destroy operations over the broad expanse of terrain formed by Charlie and Worth Ridges. In light of these two problems, Colonel Nichols and his staff presented a revised concept of operations to General Simpson on 27 March, calling for two battalions to attack west along the axis of Worth and Charlie Ridges instead of landing a battalion on R.C. Ba Na. Nichols predicated the revised concept on the assumptions that R.C. Ba Na would act as an effective barrier to north-south movement of enemy troops and that at least two battalions would be necessary to ensure adequate coverage of the two main ridgelines. General Simpson approved the modification to the initial concept, and Nichols proceeded to develop the detailed scheme of maneuver and fire support plan to sustain it.

The final plan of attack into Happy Valley and the surrounding terrain, codenamed Oklahoma Hills, called for the 7th Marines, reinforced, in coordination with the 51st ARVN Regiment, to conduct the phased movement of three battalions into the area of operations, establishing fire support bases and landing zones, and conducting reconnaissance-in-force operations, destroying all enemy forces, caches, and installations. Simultaneously, reconnaissance elements were to conduct screening operations to the north and west, as well as within the area of operations. A fourth Marine battalion would conduct screening operations south of Charlie Ridge, astride Route 4 and the Song Vu Gia, to prevent enemy troops from crossing into the Arizona area and vice versa, while a fifth Marine battalion would be available on two hours' notice as a reaction and exploitation force if needed.

Preparatory operations directly in support of Oklahoma Hills began on 21 March with the advance of Lieutenant Colonel John A. Dowd's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines west from Fire Support Base Rawhide (Hill 65) along Route 4. Assigned the mission of securing the route between Hill 65 and Hill 52, a distance of 10 kilometers, Dowd's Marines also were to establish

a major fire support base, later named Mustang, at the latter site. Early on the morning of the 24th, Company C seized the hill and began local security patrols. The following day, a platoon from Company B and a platoon of engineers from Company C, 1st Engineer Battalion, began sweeping Route 4 of mines and upgrading the roadbed. By noon on the 26th, Hill 52 was secure and the 10-kilometer stretch of Route 4 between Hills 65 and 52 was clear and ready to support the heavy logistical traffic necessary to sustain Mustang. Engineer work on gun positions began on 28 March and by the 30th, Mustang was ready to receive Battery K, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines, and a platoon of 8-inch howitzers.

It also would be necessary to relieve the 2d and 3d Battalions, 7th Marines of their normal responsibility of patrolling the rocket belt west of Da Nang. On the 29th, the 26th Marines assumed responsibility for the area controlled by the two battalions, as Colonel Nichols ordered a number of final preparations for the operation. Among them was the establishment of an automatic retransmission site on R.C. Ba Na to provide adequate communications throughout the area of operations. The 2d Battalion, 7th Marines initially provided a security element for the relay station, but as the operation progressed, and various battalions phased out, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines followed by the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines provided this support.

Shortly after sunset on 30 March, Lieutenant Colonel Neil A. Nelson's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines departed Hill 10 (FSB Stallion), and began moving on foot into the area of operations. Concurrently, the 3d Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel James O. Allison, who had relieved Lieutenant Colonel Quinn on the 23d, initiated a similar advance to the west from Hill 41. "This was a very unique move," recalled Captain Paul K. Van Riper, Company M's commanding officer, "in that we took the whole company well up into the jungled mountains during the nighttime. We moved out at 2000 and by early the next morning we were up under the canopy and the NVA forces in the area had no idea that we had moved this far and of our present location." As both battalions pushed westward, "searching out base areas, looking for caches, fortifications, any enemy that we could locate and destroying all of the same," Operation Oklahoma Hills began.⁸

Events moved smoothly on the morning of the operation's first day, with all landing zone preparations, delivered by tubes of the 11th Marines, the *Mullinmix* (DD 994), and later *Newport News* (CA 148), com-



Marine Corps Historical Collection

MajGen Ormond R. Simpson, center left, discusses movement by foot into the area of operations by 2d Battalion, 7th Marines with its commanding officer, LtCol Neil A. Nelson.

pleted on schedule. The lift by HMM-165 helicopters of the 2d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment into LZ Hawk (three kilometers northeast of the Thuong Duc CIDG Camp), and the 3d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment into LZ Eagle (three kilometers northwest of Thuong Duc), began at 1100 and was accomplished without incident within an hour. The following morning, Lieutenant Colonel Edward W. Snelling's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines (BLT 3/26) assaulted, along with a 4.2-inch mortar battery from 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, into LZ Robin, overlooking Happy Valley. These landings, coupled with the overland movement of the 2d and 3d Battalions, 7th Marines on the night of the 30th, completed the introduction of all major allied units into the area of operations.

Confronted with the ever-present problem of helicopter availability, Colonel Nichols deliberately decided to establish fire support bases initially around the periphery, instead of throughout the objective area. Additional bases would be established as the maneuver battalions moved beyond the range of their artillery support, and on prominent terrain features in anticipation of future operations in the area.⁹

Once established, Nelson and Allison's battalions

attacked to the west along Worth and Charlie Ridges, while the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines and the two 51st ARVN Battalions attacked to the southeast and northeast into the high ground. Movement was slow, and as Colonel Nichols related, "very tiring on the troops; the progress was so slow that it became very apparent that there was not a real benefit to be obtained in attempting to maneuver in any basic skirmish-attack formations through the thick jungle canopy. Accordingly, it became the standard practice to restrict movement to the trail networks." Once on the trails, it also became apparent that not more than a platoon could maneuver with any degree of efficiency. Thus, noted Colonel Nichols, "it became the general practice to . . . establish a temporary company base camp and then maneuver with platoons from that company base camp, largely restricting the maneuver to trail networks." Only when searching a specific target area did Marines move "cross-compartment, through the virgin jungle."¹⁰

The capture on 1 April of an enemy soldier and the rallying of another was to have an immediate effect upon the five maneuver battalions. In widely separated engagements, a reconnaissance insert detained

a master sergeant from the *8th Company, 2d Battalion, 141st NVA Regiment*, and Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines captured a warrant officer from the *18th Company* of the *31st NVA Regiment*. Both enemy soldiers identified specific sites within the area of operations where their regimental base camps were located; the master sergeant being most definite in locating his base camp during a helicopter reconnaissance flight. This firm and timely information posed two alternative courses of action: the attacking units could continue their present movement toward the central high ground, conducting a thorough search of draws and ravines within their areas of responsibility; or the maneuvering battalions could advance rapidly toward the base camps, bypassing other suspected camps and caches, in order to quickly exploit the specific intelligence, trapping enemy troops in the camps or, at least, preventing them from evacuating materiel. Colonel Nichols decided to pursue the latter course and directed Lieutenant Colonel Allison and Snelling's battalions to close as rapidly as possible on the area believed to contain the base camp of the *141st Regiment*. Concurrently, he initiated planning for a second phase of the operation in order that all units might reverse their direction of advance, and conduct detailed searches of the areas bypassed.

After completing FSB Rattlesnake (Hill 749), two kilometers southwest of Robin, Snelling's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines moved as quickly as terrain and vegetation would permit up the long ridgeline towards Hill 1166 and the base camp of the *141st*. As Company I, with L in trace, swept up the ridge using the enemy's trail network, small groups of NVA soldiers repeatedly attempted to slow the Marines' advance without success.

To the northeast, Allison's battalion accelerated its movement to the west along Charlie Ridge in an effort to reach the enemy base camp while it was still occupied. At the same time, Nelson's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines reached the western extreme of its 105mm howitzer coverage from FSB Stallion, and was forced to halt and begin construction of FSB Buckskin (Hill 502) to support its move further west.

By late afternoon on 7 April, Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines reached its intermediate objective, Hill 1062, with Company L a kilometer behind. Simultaneously, Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines reached its objective, Hill 1166, with Company L not far to the rear. The forward elements of both battalions continued to close on the deep ravine below both objectives, believed to contain the base camp of the *141st*. At first light on the 8th, it appeared that

LtCol Edward W. Snelling's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines boards a Marine CH-46 helicopter, as elements of the Special Landing Force were called upon to support operations ashore.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A374209





Courtesy of Col Fred T. Fagan, Jr.

A Kit Carson Scout pauses at the entrance to a tunnel within the base camp of the 141st NVA Regiment, that led to an extensive underground medical facility.

Snelling's Marines were in the best position to close rapidly on the main objective. Consequently, Lieutenant Colonel Snelling assumed operational control of Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, and led the battalion on a coordinated attack on the enemy base area.

As Company L moved down the ravine, its lead element uncovered the first of what were to be many enemy base camps. Advancing into the camp area, subsequently identified as the *Q-79 Dispensary*, they observed and engaged approximately 20 North Vietnamese soldiers attempting to flee to the southwest. The camp, like those later discovered, was "cleverly put together," Colonel Nichols noted:

It was not uncommon to go into a bunker which was reinforced with logs, eight to 15 inches of earth, another layer of logs, well-covered, . . . and find in turn a trap door and a subterranean space below that, dug into the earth, providing additional individual protection. These generally would accommodate anywhere from four to ten enemy soldiers, and in some instances tunnel complexes connecting these, running very extensively throughout the camp. Very careful preparations were made to ensure that cook houses were well-camouflaged and that smoke conduits to abort any evidence

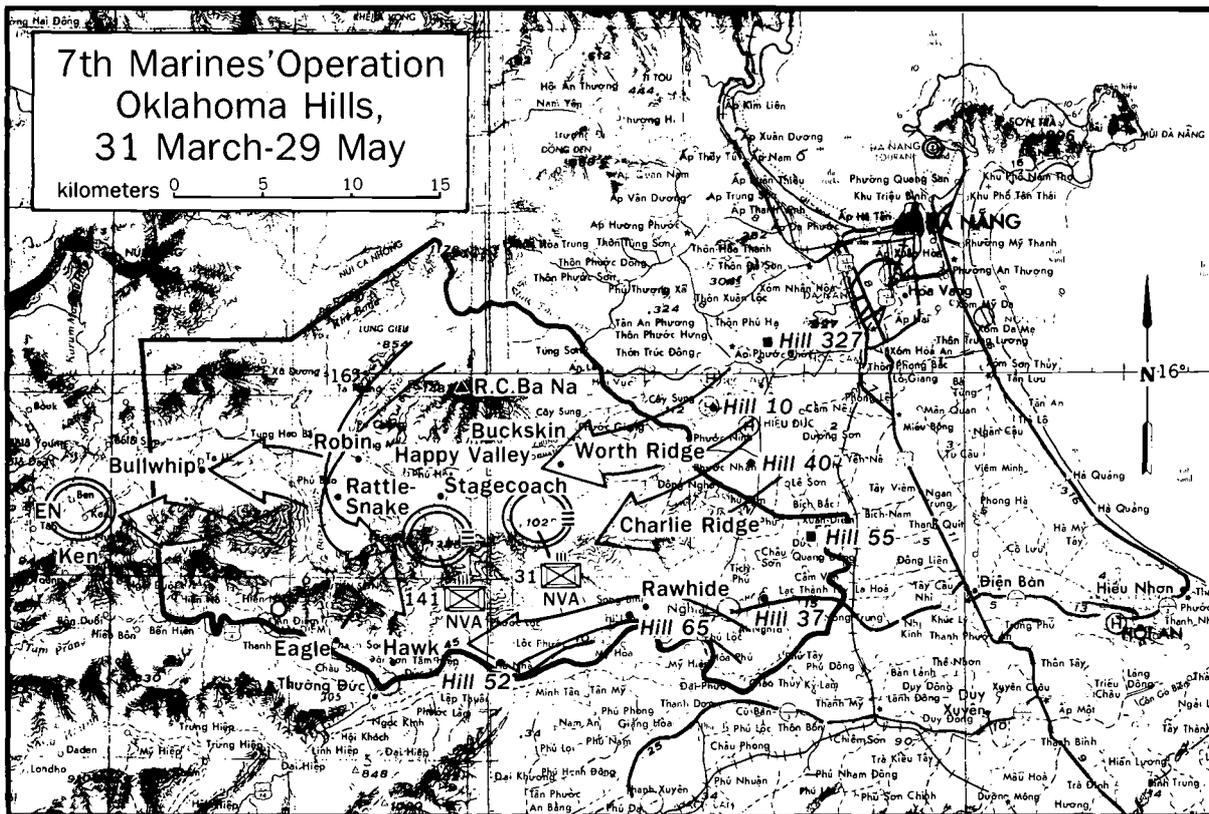
of smoke from coming up through the jungle had been laid throughout."¹¹

The following day, Companies I and L, on line with squads in column, swept deeper into the complex from the north and west, while Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines remained above, on Hill 943, prepared to block any enemy escape to the south. Movement during the next several days was exceedingly slow due to numerous skirmishes with small bands of enemy soldiers, the oppressive heat, rugged terrain, and the number of separate camps to be searched.

While Lieutenant Colonels Allison and Snelling's battalions combed the base camp of the *141st*, Lieutenant Colonel Nelson's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines continued to search the valley floor north of Worth Ridge. Once completed, Nelson's Marines then moved up the ridge toward Hill 745, into an area suspected to harbor the base camp of the *31st Regiment*, as revealed in the interrogation of the warrant officer captured on 1 April. On the 11th, Company E discovered the base camp, approximately four kilometers southwest of FSB Buckskin. As the lead platoon entered, it received a burst of machine gun fire as the residents departed. Initial reports indicated the camp to be the largest yet discovered, containing well in excess of 200 structures.

The next several days represented a period of relative stability in the movement of all major units, each having essentially reached its final objective. The 2d Battalion, 7th Marines continued its search of the *31st NVA* base camp, engaging small pockets of tenacious defenders. Lieutenant Colonel Allison's battalion occupied Hills 1235 and 1062 and conducted local patrols which produced no significant results, and Snelling's Marines continued to sweep through the base camp of the *141st Regiment*, discovering a massive network of interconnected enemy facilities. By 15 April, engagements with enemy forces remaining within the areas assigned to the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines and 3d Battalion, 26th Marines had evaporated, while the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines encountered a number of small groups of enemy contesting its advance.

Materially supporting the operation throughout this period, as Marines worked deep under the canopy, proved to be a challenge. Tiny holes were cut in the jungle into which skillful Marine helicopter pilots lowered supplies and extracted those in need of medical attention. On at least one occasion, the pilots brought a surprise—ice cream and beer packed in large styrofoam containers, previously used to ship aviation ordnance. "You can imagine," Colonel Nichols report-



See Reference Map, Sections 25-27

ed, "the shouts of joy from some weary Marines who received this surprise."¹²

On 19 April, Nichols directed Nelson's Marines to withdraw to Hills 785 and 502 (FSB Buckskin) in preparation for a helilift out of the area of operations, since the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines was to rejoin the Special Landing Force, and a battalion would be needed to cover that portion of the vacated Da Nang TAOR. With the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines' withdrawal, coordination was made with the 51st ARVN Regiment in order that a relief in place might be conducted between Nelson's battalion and a battalion of that regiment. Two days later, in a combined effort involving Marine and Vietnamese helicopters, Nelson's Marines and Battery H, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines withdrew and were replaced by the 1st Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment and a supporting 105mm howitzer battery. The ARVN battalion assumed a mission similar to that of 2d Battalion, 7th Marines; one company protecting the battery on Buckskin, while the remainder of the battalion patrolled the surrounding terrain.

On the southern edge of the area of operations, Dowd's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines maintained patrols along the Song Vu Gia, and provided security for the

fire support bases on Hills 52 and 65, while securing Route 4, ensuring its viability as a main supply route. Major emphasis continued to be placed on interdicting enemy movement between Charlie Ridge and the northern Arizona area. Among the assigned tasks was the setting of daily ambushes at known river crossings. This tactic produced results on the night of 13 April when a platoon from Company B, set in along the northern bank of the river, observed 30 NVA soldiers entering the water from the opposite bank. The platoon withheld its fire until the enemy had almost crossed before releasing a heavy volume of small arms and machine gun fire, catching 14 NVA soldiers in the water.

With the relief of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines by 1st Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment, Operation Oklahoma Hills shifted into a second phase. Instead of the specific objectives which characterized phase one, battalions were now given general zones and ordered to conduct coordinated and systematic searches to destroy enemy forces, uncover caches and installations, and at the same time construct helicopter landing zones and a series of mutually supporting fire bases.

In anticipation of phase two, Colonel Nichols directed Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines to move the

four kilometers eastward from Hill 1062 to Hill 866 on foot, and there construct FSB Longhorn. Arriving at midday on 20 April, the company began local search operations in the nearby draws and ravines while providing security and assistance for the engineers constructing the base. On the 25th, with Longhorn completed but unoccupied, Company L rejoined the battalion in a general sweep to the east.

Lieutenant Colonel Allison's Marines, during the second phase of Operation Oklahoma Hills, conducted a detailed and methodical search of their assigned zone from west to east, retracing their original move along Charlie Ridge. While Company L searched areas near FSB Longhorn, Companies I and M moved from Hill 1235, three kilometers to the southeast, searching ravines as they progressed on foot. On 24 April, Company I helilifted four kilometers further to the northeast, to Hill 722, and Company M and the battalion command group moved by helicopter an equal distance, but further north. Spaced two kilometers apart, both units began a thorough search of the new areas. The following day, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines released Company K which rejoined its battalion. Engagements with enemy forces within the zone assigned to Allison's battalion were almost nonexistent during the second phase of the operation.

The 3d Battalion, 26th Marines continued search operations within its primary objective area assigned during the first phase of Operation Oklahoma Hills; it being necessary for the battalion to ensure that all base camps in the vicinity of the 141st were discovered and destroyed. With the release of Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, Company M, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines concentrated on conducting combat patrols in the draws and ravines near FSB Rattlesnake, while Company K conducted extensive patrol and search operations from Hill 1066. Contact with small groups of enemy troops remained sporadic, consisting of harassing sniper and mortar fire within the North Vietnamese camp complex. Toward the end of April, the battalion made preparation to withdraw, and on 2 May Companies K and L, with their supporting artillery, Battery C, 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, lifted out of the area of operations. The following day, a platoon from Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines moved into Rattlesnake and then pushed southwest toward Hill 1166 to secure a landing zone for the remainder of the company. Four tubes from Battery G, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines lifted from Mustang to Rattlesnake to provide 3d Battalion, 7th Marines with



Marine Corps Historical Collection
Infantrymen of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines move cautiously across a small enemy bridge through an area containing the base camp of the 31st NVA Regiment.

direct artillery support, and by nightfall, as the remaining company of Lieutenant Colonel Snelling's command withdrew, the area was turned over to Allison's Marines.

The area assigned to Lieutenant Colonel Dowd's battalion witnessed considerable troop realignment and enemy activity during the second phase of Oklahoma Hills. In standby reserve since the operation began, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas E. Bulger's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines was called upon to conduct a search and clear operation south of Camp Muir (Hill 55), an area void of friendly forces since the end of March. The operation, which began on 26 April, was the first step for the battalion in assuming responsibility for the eastern portion of 1st Battalion, 7th Marines' area, enabling Dowd's Marines to move west and begin further work on Route 4. In addition, the 4th Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment, operating above Thuong Duc in an area northwest of Dowd's battalion, withdrew on 1 May, leaving a void on the western flank.

In coordination with the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines,

or alone, Lieutenant Colonel Dowd's men conducted numerous ambushes in the low ground at the base of Charlie Ridge and along the Song Vu Gia in the continuing effort to prevent the north-south movement of enemy forces. Early on the afternoon of 21 April, intelligence sources reported the movement of enemy troops south of the Song Vu Gia, in the Arizona. The mission of the concentrated enemy force was unknown, but suspected to be an attack on friendly forces and outposts north of the river, or to sever Route 4 between Mustang and Hill 65.

After assembling and assessing the intelligence reports, First Lieutenant William L. Culp, the battalion S-2, alerted the patrols and ambushes established by Companies B, C, and D of possible enemy movement south of the river. Shortly after dark on the 21st, patrols from Captain Joseph M. A. Romero's Company C reported sighting a number of North Vietnamese troops on the southern bank of the river, who appeared to be moving from west to east. Company B, under Captain James W. Huffman, Jr., and elements of Company D, led by Captain Brian J. Fagan, located

in heavy hedgerows skirting the water's edge, were alerted, but instructed not to fire due to the lack of information concerning the location of the enemy's main forces. At 1945, the 2d Squad, 2d Platoon, Company B observed seven NVA soldiers on a sandbar directly opposite its ambush site, located near Ban Tan (1). Approximately 1,000 meters in length and 200 meters in width, the sandbar was 3,000 meters east of the earlier sighting by Romero's company. Based on the information provided by Company C, Huffman instructed his Marines to withhold their fire, even if the small group should attempt to cross the river, while preparing to interdict the sandbar with organic and supporting arms. A second squad, located in the same area, moved to reinforce the already positioned ambush, and Huffman's 3d platoon, located 600 meters to the west, was ordered to set up a 106mm recoilless rifle and a .30-caliber machine gun so as to direct enfilade fire along the sandbar in front of the two squads. Direct and general support artillery batteries plotted fires to the south and southwest on other possible crossing sites, and along avenues of approach and es-

Despite an oftentimes abundance of rations, Marines frequently foraged off the land, as in this case where a group of Marines prepare to roast and eat several snakes.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371941

A 1st Battalion, 7th Marines machine gunner and his assistant, in the continuing effort to secure Route 4 to Thuong Duc, assault a hut from which they had received enemy fire.

cape. In addition, the companies alerted a reconnaissance team located south of the river to the situation and instructed it to keep the area under observation.

At 2025, Huffman's ambush lost sight of the original seven, but continued to wait. About 30 minutes later, a large enemy force, divided into several groups of 40 or more, suddenly emerged from the underbrush along the southern bank of the river and took up positions on the sandbar previously occupied by the seven. Carrying small boats, the NVA force moved to the water's edge and began crossing. Using starlight scopes, Huffman's Marines watched as the NVA placed 17 boats into the water; each contained three to five troops guided by two or three wading soldiers. An additional group of 25 brought up the rear.

As the craft approached the center of the river, Huffman called for illumination and as they passed mid-stream, Company B opened up with all the organic and supporting arms at its command. During the ensuing ambush, elements of Companies C and D moved to the flanks and rear of Huffman's company in order to assist if necessary.

Caught completely by surprise, the enemy scattered. The 25 composing the rear guard continued to cross,

while others broke and ran for cover, dragging the dead and wounded. Huffman's Marines caught the troops in the river with small arms and 81mm mortar fire, while the preplanned artillery barrage cut down those running south. At the height of the ambush, Company B reported 150 to 200 troops attempting to cross, and of that number, 57 were later found floating in the water or scattered along the opposite shore. Unfortunately, illumination was not continuous throughout the night, and the enemy was successful in removing a majority of the dead and wounded.

In order to exploit the ambush and ensure the integrity of Route 4, Huffman requested tanks and LVTs. During the remaining hours of darkness, Romero and Fagan's companies advanced to relieve Huffman's Marines, who began preparation for a river crossing at first light the following morning. Artillery fire continued throughout the night, while the tanks, when they arrived, were placed along the northern shore, their tubes directed at the opposite bank.

Shortly after dawn, Marine fixed-wing aircraft struck the treeline south of the sandbar, and at 0930 Company B boarded the LVTs and, under cover of supporting arms, crossed the river and began a sweep of the

southern shore. Once on the opposite shore, Huffman's men found 14 more bodies, clad in new uniforms and equipment. Although Marines of Company B counted less than 100 bodies, they estimated that the actual number of enemy killed was much higher. Two Marines received minor wounds during the successful blocking ambush on the Song Vu Gia.

The large enemy crossing of the Vu Gia on the night of the 21st confirmed numerous intelligence reports received during April, indicating a strong enemy presence south of the river, in the northern Arizona area. During this period, reconnaissance teams and 1st Battalion patrols made 14 separate sightings. Reacting to the threat against Mustang, Hill 65, and Route 4, the battalion planned a quick thrust south of the river into the Arizona to find and destroy the enemy forces. On the 29th, the 5th Marines granted the 7th Marines a seven-kilometer-wide by two-kilometer-deep area of operations extension into the northern Arizona, south of the Song Vu Gia.

That night, Huffman and Fagan's companies and the battalion command group crossed the river opposite the village of My Hoa and, at first light, began to attack east-southeast when Company B, on the right flank, became heavily engaged. The remaining attack force immediately swung to the northwest toward the river, assaulting into an estimated two NVA compa-

nies. Fighting was fierce as the enemy directed heavy small arms and mortar fire at Dowd's advancing Marines. After again reaching the river, the two companies turned left and continued the attack to the southwest along the shore. Company A, deployed along the northern bank of the Song Vu Gia as a reserve force, maintained its assigned blocking positions. Both Companies B and D continued their attack throughout the day and into the next, fighting through a series of hedgerows and treelines, supported by artillery, air, and CS gas.

On the morning of 1 May, heavy enemy small arms and automatic weapons fire drove off helicopters attempting to resupply the two companies, forcing Company A to resupply the companies by LVT. The resupply complete, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, then operating to the northeast of Liberty Bridge, moved overland by truck and amphibious vehicles, made a river crossing, and established blocking positions to the west of Dowd's Marines, near the village of Minh Tan.

While Bulger's Marines moved toward the Song Vu Gia, elements of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines resumed the attack to the west, meeting heavy resistance from each enemy-infested treeline, and succeeded in covering only 200 meters. By late afternoon, the 3d Battalion had crossed the river and turned east, attacking toward Lieutenant Colonel Dowd's battalion.

Capt James W. Huffman, Jr., takes time to enjoy a bath. The "tub" was one of several boats captured by his Marines, who caught close to 200 enemy troops crossing the Song Vu Gia.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



Darkness found the two battalions one kilometer apart.

During the night, the two battalions made preparations for the next day's attack. The mutually agreed upon plan called for Dowd's Marines to hold their position, while Bulger's Marines drove to the east. Once the 3d Battalion closed with the 1st, Dowd's battalion was to turn about and both battalions were to attack to the east-northeast, destroying enemy forces suspected to be east of Dowd's position.

At 0600 on 2 May, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines began its drive to the east toward the 1st Battalion. The attack proceeded as planned without contact, and Bulger's Marines closed with Dowd's about midday. Both battalions then began a methodical drive to the east-northeast, prepping each successive treeline with artillery as they moved. Both battalions reached the southern bank of the Song Vu Gia by late afternoon, and by dark had crossed the river without incident. The four-day, two-battalion incursion into the northern Arizona cost the North Vietnamese at least 60 killed, and the Marines nine dead and 60 wounded.

On 3 May, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines began operations along Route 4 to the west of Hill 52. To facilitate the move, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines assumed responsibility for the eastern portion of the 1st Battalion's TAOR, enabling Dowd's battalion to shift its attention west toward Thuong Duc. Concurrently, the 1st Engineer Battalion began the long-awaited improvement of Route 4 from Hill 52 to Thuong Duc, while elements of the 7th Engineer Battalion began reconstruction of the bridge at the CIDG Camp. Lieutenant Colonel Dowd's battalion assumed responsibility for the security of both engineer efforts; Company C was to occupy the high ground north of Route 4 and Thuong Duc, while Company A deployed along Route 4 to provide close security. The remainder of the battalion continued to provide security for FSB Mustang and Route 4 east to Hill 65. Dowd's Marines maintained these general deployments until 9 May, by which time both Route 4 and Thuong Duc Bridge had been upgraded and were in use by the local Vietnamese. On 9th, the 1st Battalion shifted companies to the east, relieving the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, which returned to the operational control of the 1st Marines the following day. With the departure of Bulger's Marines, Dowd's battalion reassumed its originally assigned mission of providing blocking forces along the Song Vu Gia and security for FSB Mustang and Route 4.

Phase three of Oklahoma Hills found one ARVN

battalion, 1st Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment, and one Marine battalion, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, the only units remaining within the area encompassing Charlie and Worth Ridges. While the South Vietnamese conducted operations in the northeastern portion of the area of operations, around Hills 785 and 502 (FSB Buckskin), the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines continued searching the remainder of the high ground. The concept of maneuver during the third phase was for Lieutenant Colonel Allison's battalion to conduct widespread operations throughout the area in order to establish contact with the enemy, believed to have reentered. Consequently, when Company K returned after a period of rehabilitation on 3 May, it lifted onto Hill 1166, within striking distance of the *141st Regiment's* base camp. The following day, Company L joined K around Hill 1166 and began patrolling the high ground to the east, while Company K advanced southeast into the enemy complex. The remainder of the battalion provided security for the direct support artillery battery at Rattlesnake.

Reconnaissance teams operating along the western and northwestern periphery of the area of operations reported not only an increase in the number of enemy sighted, but also an increase in the number of small engagements. This rise in enemy activity during early May provided the catalyst for inserting Company I along the Song Tan Khong, west of Happy Valley on the 6th. Lieutenant Colonel Allison directed the company to land at LZ Dry Gulch, conduct a reconnaissance-in-force, and then advance south to the high ground, providing security for the construction of FSB Bullwhip, designed to project a 7th Marines presence further west. In a similar move three days later, Company L helilifted from Hill 1166 to Rattlesnake, relieving Company M, which assaulted into the northern portion of the area of operations, eight kilometers north of Rattlesnake, and began to search north of Happy Valley. This move, like that of Company I, was in direct response to the recent reconnaissance reports indicating an enemy presence in the area.

Events in the Da Nang TAOR again dictated the loss of another unit from the operation due to the need for increased security in the area then patrolled by the 26th Marines. On the morning of 12 May, Company I pulled out of Bullwhip, where it had operated for six days, and returned to Hill 10, ten kilometers southeast of Da Nang. To replace Company I, Allison shifted a platoon from Company L to the western fire support base from Rattlesnake.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

A Marine with the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, grenade launcher in hand, pauses for a rest outside a partially destroyed temple in the village of Ban Tân (1), south of Route 4.

The period between 12 and 20 May was one of relative stability as Company M continued to conduct reconnaissance-in-force operations north of Happy Valley, while Companies K and L searched the base camp of the 141st and surrounding hills. At the same time, the 7th Marines began preparations for yet another shift westward, specifically, an assault into the Ken Valley. The valley, southwest of Bullwhip, had long been mentioned in prisoner interrogations as a main arms and ammunition storage facility. Prisoners reported making trips to the area to pick up 140mm and 122mm rockets, which would eventually be launched at Da Nang. With the establishment of a widespread system of fire support bases during Oklahoma Hills, an assault into the Ken Valley was now possible.

Between 18 and 20 May planning proceeded for the operation; coordination was carried out with the 51st ARVN Regiment and arrangements made for the use of the regiment's reconnaissance company. Attached to the company would be a Vietnamese-speaking Marine officer, an artillery forward observer team, and a helicopter support team from the 3d Battalion. Companies L and M plus the battalion command group were to make the assault. On 20 May, Company K as-

sumed responsibility for securing both Rattlesnake and Bullwhip, and a provisional battery of four 105mm howitzers helilifted into the westernmost fire support base.

At 0930 on the 21st, Company L boarded CH-53s at Rattlesnake, and then assaulted into the valley. Following the company into the objective area were the 51st ARVN Reconnaissance Company and Company M. From the several landing zones, Company L began reconnaissance-in-force operations to the northeast, while the ARVN reconnaissance company advanced to the southeast and Company M conducted search operations to the southwest. Over the next five days, the three companies conducted a thorough search of the valley with little contact. Evidence of enemy presence in the area proved scarce, and the companies engaged NVA troops only on two occasions with minor results; they discovered no supply facilities or caches. As a result, on 25 May, all units withdrew by helicopter.

With the completion of operations in the Ken Valley, Lieutenant Colonel Allison's battalion command group and Companies K and L lifted to Hill 785 to assist the 2d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment in the

final destruction of the *31st NVA Regiment* base camp. The effort continued until the withdrawal of the ARVN battalion on the 26th, and that of the two Marine companies on the 28th. Company M, following operations in the Ken, returned to Rattlesnake and began the destruction of the fire support base. Battery G, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines withdrew from Rattlesnake on the 28th, followed by Company M the next day. With the evacuation of all units, Operation Oklahoma Hills came to an end.

Although the enemy had avoided major confrontation, Marines of the 7th and 26th Regiments, in coordination with troops of the 51st ARVN Regiment, drove him from his base camps, destroying the sanctity of Charlie Ridge and inflicting a total of 596 casualties. "Had he chosen to fight," noted Colonel Nichols, "hold his position and defend, . . . he could have done so and levied a very severe price on us in our efforts to take it."¹³ "The relatively low level of enemy initiated attacks from the southwest against the Da Nang Vital Area" since the end of May, continued Colonel Nichols, "must in part be attributed to the disruptive effect of Operation Oklahoma Hills." As the city and its military installations would continue to be of prime importance, he suggested that "similar operations be conducted into this area periodically in the future."¹⁴

Operations in the rough terrain and heavy vegetation took its toll on the Marines. Forty-four lost their lives and another 439 received wounds requiring medical evacuation. The number of nonbattle casualties reported, a figure usually forgotten, was high during Operation Oklahoma Hills, exceeding the number of those wounded in action. A total of 456 nonbattle injuries occurred, most, if not all, attributable to the rugged, often slippery terrain and thick jungle vegetation. These injuries consisted of broken bones, sprains, and lacerations, of which a majority were sustained during the first two weeks of the operation as units maneuvered into the area and began construction of the needed fire support bases; 93 percent of the casualties returned to duty within six weeks.

5th Marines and the Arizona

With the termination of Operation Taylor Common and the passing of direct control of Task Force Yankee, under Brigadier General Samuel Jaskilka, to the 1st Marine Division on 8 March, Colonel Ord's 5th Marines returned to the Arizona and An Hoa basin and normal operations designed to provide security for allied military installations and the South Vietnamese

industrial complex, the pacification effort, and the approaching rice harvest. In the eastern portion of Duc Duc and western section of Duy Xuyen Districts, Lieutenant Colonel Richard F. Daley's 1st Battalion continued operations begun during Taylor Common, concentrating its efforts on protecting Liberty Bridge and the nearby Seabee battalion compound, and securing Liberty Road between the bridge and An Hoa Combat Base. Daley's Marines, in seemingly endless patrols, ambushes, and sweeps along the road and near the bridge, endeavored to blunt the enemy's attempts at counteracting the growing allied presence in the area. In mid-March it was learned that the primary target of the enemy effort would be Liberty Bridge, at that time well on its way toward completion. At approximately 0245, under cover of mortar and rocket fire, an estimated battalion of NVA launched a coordinated attack against the bridge and then against 1st Battalion, 5th Marines and Battery D, 2d Battalion, 11th Marines positions at Phu Lac (6), south of the bridge.

Using flamethrowers, satchel charges, bangalore torpedoes, and AK47 fire, the enemy penetrated both the infantry and battery positions, methodically destroying most above-ground structures and inflicting a number of casualties.¹⁵ A reaction force, hastily organized, halted further enemy penetration and prevented a link-up of the attacking forces within the perimeter. Confused and disorganized, the enemy then attempted to withdraw and were destroyed, as Captain Wayne A. Babb, commanding officer of Battery D, later noted:

The reaction group, growing in strength and without the previous uncertainty and confusion caused by the violent enemy assault, was everywhere, emphasizing the destruction of enemy in ammunition bunkers. The battalion command post to the east had effectively contained the enemy forces located there and had further canalized them into the mess hall complex. Here, the remaining enemy within the battalion command were destroyed.¹⁶

Lieutenant Colonel Daley's Marines killed over 75 of the enemy attackers, while sustaining 16 casualties.¹⁷

As with Liberty Bridge, the enemy maintained constant pressure against An Hoa Combat Base, defended by elements of Lieutenant Colonel Harry E. Atkinson's 3d Battalion, primarily employing attacks by fire rather than attempting an all-out infantry attack. During the month, the base received some 430 rounds of mixed rocket, mortar, and recoilless rifle fire, far more than reported during any month since III MAF established the position in April 1966. The enemy effort achieved little effect other than harassment,



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Aerial view of strategic Liberty Bridge under reconstruction by Seabees of the 3d Naval Construction Brigade shows, in the center, the temporary vehicle ferry, and to the left, guarding the bridge's southern approach, the 5th Marines' compound at Phu Lac (6).

as his gunnery was not distinguished by a marked degree of accuracy.

Throughout the remainder of the 5th Marines area of operations, east of An Hoa in the Phu Nhuans, the 2d Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel James W. Stemple until 14 March when relieved by Lieutenant Colonel James H. Higgins, continued land-clearing operations. Employing T18 bulldozers and an Eimco tractor with an attached Rome plow, engineers with the battalion concentrated on clearing treelines, trenches, bunkers, and fortifications, in an effort to reduce the number of enemy harboring sites. Although engagements with enemy units were few, Higgins' Marines discovered and disarmed numerous surprise firing devices before they could do their damage. Later in the month, the battalion crossed the Song Thu Bon into the Arizona and began search and clear operations to the west.

In response to intelligence information garnered from captured documents exhorting enemy units to step up the campaign to replenish diminished rice stocks, the 5th Marines initiated Operation Muskogee Meadow on 7 April, a combined search and clear and rice-denial operation in the fertile An Hoa basin. Expanding upon techniques developed during the Golden Fleece operations of 1966, the Marines coordinated their search and clear efforts with the rice harvest,

cooperating closely with district officials involved, in this instance with those of Duc Duc and Duy Xuyen.

While division reconnaissance teams maintained a screen along the southern and western approaches into the area, Colonel William J. Zaro's three battalions ranged across the basin's lowlands.* The Marines of Lieutenant Colonel Daley's battalion were given the task of providing security for the Vietnamese rice harvesters of Duy Xuyen District, and transporting the rice, once harvested. The 2d Battalion performed a similar task within the Arizona, while the 3d Battalion secured the rice harvest of Phu Nhuan and Thu Don Districts, south of the Song Thu Bon. Generally, both NVA and VC forces avoided Zaro's Marines; however, during a sweep of the Arizona, three of Lieutenant Colonel Higgins' companies engaged a large enemy force on the 13th, five kilometers north of An Hoa.

Company E, advancing toward blocking positions established by Companies G and H, flushed an estimated company of NVA out of hiding sites on the morning of the 13th and pushed it toward Company H. Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, then engaged in Operation Oklahoma Hills, supported the

*A Texan by birth and former Chief of Staff, Task Force Yankee, Colonel William J. Zaro replaced Colonel Ord as Commanding Officer, 5th Marines on 23 March 1969.

action from positions across the Song Vu Gia to the north, as did elements of the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines. All three of Higgins' companies remained engaged until darkness, when units of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines and 3d Battalion, 1st Marines ambushed the enemy company attempting to cross the river, killing 14 troops. At daybreak on the 14th, Company E closed the trap, encountering only sporadic resistance. Results of the combined 1st, 5th, and 7th Marines engagement were over 100 NVA killed and a considerable number of weapons captured, including seven individual rifles, a 12.7mm antiaircraft machine gun, and a short-range rocket launcher.¹⁸

Operation Muskogee Meadow ended on the 20th with the successful conclusion of the rice harvest, which added in excess of 171 tons to South Vietnamese storage bins. In comparing the two district harvests, security operations were more successful in Duy Xuyen than in Duc Duc. Under the watchful eyes of Zaro's Marines, Vietnamese farmers harvested 271,150 pounds in Duy Xuyen District against only 67,600 pounds in Duc Duc; unharvested rice was napalmed to prevent it falling into enemy hands.¹⁹ The reason for the wide variance in harvested rice between the two districts, was due, as Colonel Zaro noted, to Duc Duc District officials, whose "planning began late, and the Duc Duc plans were neither well-thought-out nor well-executed," nor were they coordinated with 5th Marine units.²⁰ Despite the shortfall, both allied and South Vietnamese officials considered the harvest operations highly successful.

Combat action by Marines of Colonel Zaro's regiment in the An Hoa basin during May centered on the increased use of small unit patrols and ambushes along that well-used and preferred approach to Da Nang. With the end of Operation Muskogee Meadow, the regiment retained responsibility for a majority of the basin, including the Arizona, west and north of An Hoa Combat Base, across the Song Thu Bon. Deploying companies independently, Zaro saturated the area with platoon- and squad-size patrols and cordons. In one such cordon on 2 May, Company B, 1st Battalion and Company M, 3d Battalion joined in a well-concealed and skillfully executed night movement on the La Thap village complex, south of Liberty Bridge. Approaching the village from all directions, the company caught the La Trap Village guerrilla force, killing 36 of the enemy and capturing 14 prisoners and 18 weapons.

A sharp rise in the tempo of enemy activity in the Arizona during the first week of May, coupled with in-

formation gleaned from various intelligence sources suggested that one NVA battalion and elements of an undetermined number of other enemy units were using the northeastern portion of the area as a staging point for attacks on Marine installations both north and east of the Song Vu Gia. This intelligence information was to force an immediate shift from independent small unit operations to a regimentally controlled, five-company operation.

Following a careful review of the intelligence estimates, Colonel Zaro directed that a plan of attack into the northern Arizona be formulated. Drafted by Lieutenant Colonel Higgins, the scheme to destroy enemy troops in the area called for three of his companies to sweep from southwest Arizona into blocking positions established by two companies of 1st Battalion in the northeast Arizona. The sweeping companies would then turn north and attack toward the Song Vu Gia where elements of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines and 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, in blocking positions on the north bank of the river, would cut off the enemy's escape.

All units involved in the operation moved to their attack positions prior to first light on 9 May. Designated to attack east and then north, Companies E, F, and H, accompanied by the battalion command group and a heavy section of tanks took up positions just north of the Song Thu Bon, following a deceptive move to the east as if to vacate the central and western portions of the Arizona. Also on the night of 8 May, Companies A and D began their night advance from the battalion command post at Liberty Bridge to prearranged blocking positions. By 0200 on the morning of the 9th, Company D had established a three-platoon block on Football Island, with Company A to the north, forming a two-company block in eastern Arizona.

At 0645, a tower lookout at Liberty Bridge spotted approximately 200 enemy troops moving to the north, apparently flushed out by the maneuvering companies. Within an hour, the enemy force had grown in size and split into two groups of about 200 each, one moving to the northeast and the other to the northwest. Subsequently, both groups broke into smaller units which were joined by additional enemy forces.

Preceded by alternating artillery fires and napalm drops by F-4 Phantoms, Companies E, F, and H began their attack shortly after dawn. As each company took a series of objectives, supporting arms fire was shifted from one to another with the intention of

softening the new objective and inflicting heavy casualties on the retreating enemy troops. As the intensity of the operation increased, Colonel Zaro, with a hastily assembled command group, moved to a vantage point near Liberty Bridge in order to better control the commitment of other units of the regiment.²¹ During the day's battle, the carefully coordinated Marine ground assault and air attack not only surprised the enemy, but also sent him reeling into the guns of one Marine unit after another, as First Lieutenant Victor V. Ashford reported:

As the friendly elements began their push, the cowpokes [air controllers] virtually took over completely all coordination of supporting arms. They called in continuous artillery barrages in front of the friendly elements while they were on the move, and at the same time the cowpokes were running continuous air strikes to the north, pushing the enemy into a disorganized retreat toward our ground units. Information from POWs indicated that the enemy communications structure broke down quickly under the hundreds of tons of ordnance dropped on them and this apparently resulted in a chaotic and a completely disorganized enemy withdrawal in all directions As the enemy broke down into groups of five to twenty, the cowpokes kept all friendly elements advised of their movements, resulting in what must be called a "turkey shoot" as the day wore on.²²

By 1800, Companies E, F, and H, with the assistance

of Companies G and K, brought in during the day by amphibian vehicles and helicopters from Liberty Bridge, had established a cordon anchored on the southern bank of the Song Vu Gia, encompassing the My Hoa village complex.

On the morning of the 10th, following an evening during which the enemy probed but did not penetrate the positions of all four companies on the cordon, the companies renewed the assault by sweeping through the cordon and destroying or capturing the remaining enemy troops. Again, air observers played a key role as forward air controller Ashford noted:

Throughout the day on numerous occasions, the cowpokes became airborne platoon commanders as small units assaulted enemy-held treelines and heavily dug-in machine gun bunkers. They were passing on tactically sound information concerning the positioning and type of fire maneuver best to be employed against a variety of enemy objectives, based on their excellent observation capabilities. This undoubtedly lessened the number of friendly casualties and increased the number of enemy killed.²³

The area was again saturated with small unit patrols on the 11th, as elements of both battalions searched out the remaining pockets of enemy resistance and directed supporting arms fire toward their destruction. The heaviest fighting of the day occurred when Com-

Infantrymen of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines guard local rice-gatherers in the continuing effort aimed at preventing the twice-yearly harvest from falling into enemy hands.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A374230





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A374224

Preceded by tanks, riflemen of Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines push toward an enemy-infested treeline during the battalion's sweep and block of southwestern Arizona.

pany H sent a platoon-size patrol to the southeast in order to link up with a platoon from Company D, which had secured a disabled tank. At 0930, the patrol made contact with an enemy force located in mutually supporting bunkers encompassed within a treeline. Artillery and mortars were called for as the platoon closed on the enemy position. The ensuing firefight, which lasted throughout the day, was fought at close range as Marines, sometimes fighting hand-to-hand, moved from bunker to bunker until the position was neutralized and enemy fire finally silenced.

By the 12th, enemy resistance had diminished sufficiently for the 5th Marines to return the assembled units to their parent organizations, where they again took part in independent small unit operations. Later intelligence indicated that a planned enemy attack on Marine positions at Hill 65 was aborted because of the heavy losses the enemy suffered in northeastern Arizona. Lieutenant Colonel Higgins' 2d Battalion, 5th Marines was awarded a Meritorious Unit Citation for its outstanding performance in the action, which resulted in over 230 enemy casualties.

The first half of May saw allied installations within the 5th Marines area of operation again come under

enemy indirect fire attacks. While An Hoa Combat Base experienced a number of rocket and mortar attacks, resulting in only minor damage and light casualties, on the night of 11-12 May, enemy sappers attacked the eastern portion of the base's defense perimeter. Fourteen enemy troops penetrated the outer wire, but were killed before moving further. Marine snipers equipped with night observation devices or starlight scopes had been moved into the area soon after the sappers were discovered cutting their way through the wire. According to Colonel Zaro, "they were 'dead ducks' when they reached the final strands, having been under observation the entire time. Much was learned about their wire penetration techniques and the value of the starlight scope was enhanced." Night observation was improved to such an extent that during a subsequent use, Colonel Zaro noted, "a number of Marines were observed enjoying the coolness of the water in the base's water supply tower. They were much surprised that they were detected on such a dark night and subsequently apprehended."²⁴

During the same night, sappers using small arms, automatic weapons, grenades, rockets, and flame-throwers also attacked Liberty Bridge. Marines met the

attack with a strong counterattack, resulting in 12 enemy killed and numerous weapons captured.

With 5th Marines successes in the Arizona, and at An Hoa and Liberty Bridge, the enemy shifted tactics, concentrating his effort instead on an intensified mine and boobytrap campaign throughout the area of operations, particularly in western Go Noi and Phu Nhuan along Liberty Road. Despite the effort, all 5th Marines units continued their aggressive search and destroy operations within the basin.

Securing the Southern and Northern Approaches

As Operation Taylor Common ended, units involved resumed their conventional posture; each regiment returning to its regimental area, and each battalion to its distinct battalion area. "We had, in the Division," reported General Simpson, "what I called a 'blue line' syndrome and—blue meaning our own boundaries—every battalion had an area and every battalion was committed." As a result, there was no division, nor regimental reserve upon which to draw. Boundaries had become so fixed, that, as Simpson observed, "a battalion would begin to think that their piece of ground was the whole war as far as they were

concerned. If the enemy was in that area, they were engaged, but if he was in somebody else's area, that wasn't any of their business." This situation had to be corrected, and, due to the urging of its commanding officer, the 1st Marines would be the "guinea pigs."²⁵

Under Colonel Charles S. Robertson, a troop commander during World War II and Korea, who had replaced Colonel Lauffer on 24 February, the mission of the 1st Marines had changed little since the beginning of the year. Emphasis continued to be placed on company- and platoon-size combat patrols and ambushes, security of allied lines of communications, and small search and destroy operations, all aimed at the destruction of enemy forces and the support of the pacification and hamlet upgrading programs so as to secure the southern approaches into the Da Nang Vital Area. During February, the regiment conducted nine cordon, block, and search operations, four of which were joint 1st Marine and ARVN ventures conducted on the Man Quan Peninsula, near the villages of An Tu (1), An Tra (1), Bich Nam (2), Giang Dong, and Tanh Hanh, south of Da Nang. In addition, Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. Glasgow's 2d Battalion initiated a land-clearing operation within its area of

Employing a variety of supporting arms, including 106mm recoilless rifles, here directed by SgtMaj Clifford M. Burks, the 5th Marines crushed the enemy's attempt at Hill 65.

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operation. With the cooperation of the Hoa Nam District Headquarters, Glasgow's Marines assisted the civilian population of Tra Khe and Tra Lo in their move to the new resettlement village of Xuan Tre, and then began, and successfully completed, a clearing operation of the vacated area with the intent of turning the previously contested village complex into a "free fire zone," denying the enemy yet another primary infiltration route.

With little enemy activity in the 1st Marines area of operations, Colonel Robertson put the experimental realignment of forces into effect in early March. On the 12th, Lieutenant Colonel Alphonse A. Laporte, Jr.'s 1st Battalion assumed responsibility of the 3d Battalion's TAOR, relieving the 3d to become a reserve force, thus providing increased flexibility within the entire regimental area of operation. The realignment resulted from a number of factors, as Robertson noted:

Lieutenant Colonel Hal Glasgow had initiated a platoon reinforced training program in 2/1; I had observed serious deficiencies in the performance of small units, reflecting training requirements; and, Colonel Adolph G. Schwenk, Div G-3, had informed me that the 1st Marines would be required to furnish one battalion for Oklahoma Hills. Further conferences with Colonel Schwenk also revealed that the 27th Marines, while occupying present 1st Marines TAOR had utilized only two battalions and retained a reserve. All of these facts, and the results achieved by Lieutenant Colonel Glasgow's modest training program, led to the presentation and General Simpson's approval of the plan for a mobile battalion in the 1st Marines.²⁶

The designation of the 3d, under Lieutenant Colonel Thomas E. Bulger, as the mobile battalion, now made it unnecessary to shift units from one command to another, forming a composite fighting unit when special operations were to be conducted. It also provided a reserve battalion which could swiftly respond to regimental orders. Additionally, the mobile battalion was to carry out a concentrated two-month training program, rotating all rifle companies through a series of courses with appropriate support weapons attached. Ideally, at the end of eight weeks, the mobile battalion would have not only conducted several effective operations, but also would have accomplished progressive unit training in subjects vital to its assigned mission. Assignment as the mobile battalion would alternate among the three battalions of the regiment every eighth week.

Strings were attached. The mobile battalion could not be committed without General Simpson's knowledge, and he would also be free to move it from one regimental area to another. Eventually, Simpson ex-

panded the realignment to include all regiments within the division, and as he noted, "we became considerably more fluid and the [regimental and battalion] boundaries didn't make that much difference."²⁷

On 3 April, Lieutenant Colonel Bulger's 3d Battalion was put to the test, when Colonel Robertson ordered the battalion to conduct a detailed search of northern Dodge City, centering on Phong Nhat, an area within the Korean Marine TAOR. After Company D, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, established blocking positions on the northern bank of the Song La Tho, Company K moved by foot and established another block along the north-south railroad berm, south of the river. Companies I and L, with the battalion command group, assaulted by CH-46s east of the berm and began searching south to north, then east to west, finally reassembling with Company K near the railroad berm.

To this point, the enemy proved elusive, and Bulger decided to resweep the area. Utilizing maximum deception, Company K swept west and then north out of Dodge City, while Companies I and L counterswept to the east. This maneuver caught the enemy force, later identified as comprising elements of the *Q-82d Local Force Battalion* and *36th NVA Regiment*, unawares. Company L engaged the combined VC and NVA force, not expecting another search, as Company I and the battalion command group maneuvered north across the Song La Tho, flanking and then destroying over 70 troops. As Robertson later noted, intelligence largely obtained from a captured NVA captain "revealed that 3/1 had chanced upon a conference of VC local force commanders and had succeeded in destroying the local VC leadership. The captured NVA captain had been sent to Quang Nam to reorganize and reestablish the VC Infrastructure."²⁸

On the 9th, while the remainder of Bulger's battalion returned to its normal area of operations, Company K remained behind in an area just to the east of Dodge City. As Company K secured its positions by sending out numerous small patrols, remnants of the shattered enemy force responded with ever-increasing amounts of RPG and sniper fire. Preceded by air and artillery bombardments, the full company swept back into Dodge City, through a region peppered with hedgerows and treelines. Sweeping and then countersweeping, the company counted over 30 dead, most of whom had been killed by air or artillery. On the 12th, Company L relieved Company K for the mop-up. During the nine-day sojourn in Dodge City, the battalion accounted for 119 enemy killed and the



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LCpl Robert Redd, a fire-team leader with 3d Platoon, Company L, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, temporarily occupies an enemy spider hole while on one of the numerous daily patrols launched south of Da Nang.

capture of numerous weapons, foodstuffs, and miscellaneous documents, including a sketch plan of attack on the command post of the 3d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment and enemy codes. The local ARVN commander, noted Lieutenant Colonel Bulger, "was so enthused over the results of this battle that he awarded 30 Vietnamese medals to members of 3/1."²⁹

During the remainder of the month, while regimental combat patrols and ambushes from company- and platoon-size bases continued to be emphasized, a number of hamlet cordon and searches were carried out in coordination with South Vietnamese units in order to capture or destroy enemy infrastructure members. On 22 April, Company H, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, in conjunction with the Provincial Reconnaissance Unit from Hoi An, cordoned the village of Viem Tay (1), capturing 12 suspects, seven of whom were later confirmed as infrastructure members. Again on the 28th, Company H and elements of the newly formed 34th Regional Force Battalion and a platoon of National Police Field Forces converged on Ngan Cau (2), discovering over 4,000 pounds of rice and detaining 17 suspects, most of whom were identified as members of the village enemy infrastructure.

In addition to patrols, ambushes, cordons, and searches, land-clearing efforts continued throughout the regimental area of responsibility in an effort to remove enemy harbor sites and neutralize concentrations of surprise firing devices. Focusing on "No Name Island," which had been used as a staging area for sap-

per attacks on allied positions, Lieutenant Colonel Glasgow's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines expended several hundred bangalore torpedoes in clearing treelines beneath which the battalion found spider and individual fighting holes. Likewise, battalion Marines cleared the vacated areas once known as Cam Le (1) and Cam Le (2) of numerous surprise firing devices. Once reclaimed, the area was to be made available for refugee resettlement.

While the regiment's mission remained unchanged in May, the enemy organized a major effort against 1st Marines installations. In the early morning hours of 12 May, an estimated enemy company, supported by 82mm mortars, B40 rockets, and automatic weapons, attacked the 2d Battalion command post at Cau Ha, five kilometers east of Highway 1. The battalion rallied to a quick defense, returning fire with organic weapons, mortars, direct artillery fire, and gunships. At dawn, 19 NVA soldiers lay dead around the perimeter, in addition to an assortment of individual weapons, equipment, and ordnance.

On the same night, only 10 minutes after the 2d Battalion came under attack, the command post of Lieutenant Colonel Wendell P. Morgenthaler, Jr.'s 1st Battalion (also the regimental command post), astride the railroad between the Son Yen and Song Bau Xau, came under a mortar and RPG-supported ground attack directed at the positions of Battery D, 11th Marines. Bolstered by direct support artillery, combined with that of OV-10s, Huey gunships, and "Spooky" airships, Morgenthaler's Marines repelled the enemy assault with minor casualties.³⁰ In addition to leaving over 30 dead and three wounded, the enemy abandoned a large number of individual weapons, B40 rocket launchers, ordnance, miscellaneous equipment, and documents.

As a result of the early morning attacks, and also information indicating that an enemy force of two companies had moved into Quang Chau, northeast of the regimental command post, three companies of Bulger's 3d Battalion, moving under cover of darkness, launched an attack at first light. Crossing the "Anderson Trail," Bulger's Marines searched from south to north, as far as Quang Chau, when Company I met resistance from an unknown size enemy force entrenched in a treeline bordering the village. Companies K and L moved to the west side of the village, while two companies of the 59th Regional Force Battalion closed the cordon to the north and east. Tanks and amtracs provided additional support throughout



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Elements of the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, supported by a tank from Company C, 1st Tank Battalion, take up positions in preparation for the assault on an enemy-held treeline.

the day and into the evening, pounding the cornered enemy force and finally forcing it to withdraw from the area, leaving over 150 dead.

Operations, carried out with and in coordination with ARVN forces, also continued in efforts to pacify hamlets and destroy the Viet Cong Infrastructure. On 8 May, Company F, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, with two companies of the 4th Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment, established a cordon of Viem Dong hamlet, resulting in the detention of seven suspects. On the 23d, Company G, 2d Battalion, with a platoon of National Police Field Forces, conducted a cordon and detailed search of Viem Tay (1), between Highway 1 and the Song Vinh Dien, detaining six Viet Cong suspects. Land-clearing operations likewise were carried out, particularly in the Cam Ne area, resulting in the destruction of enemy bunkers, fighting holes, trenches, and runnels, and the clearing of 967,000 square meters.

The 1st Marines successfully carried out all operations within its TAOR despite the ever-present threat of mines and boobytraps. "In fact," Colonel Robertson noted, "the bulk of casualties resulted from the abundance of surprise firing devices," instead of engagements with enemy forces. As a result of a seminar conducted by General Simpson on the subject, a directive dealing with the threat was developed and implemented by all 1st Marines patrols. Scouts would henceforth be provided sticks or metal rods with which

to probe suspected areas. Upon detonation of a surprise firing device the patrol would freeze in place so as not to detonate additional devices. Marines not wounded, after posting security, would then probe the area of the explosion in search of other boobytraps, provide emergency treatment and evacuation of the wounded, and then proceed with their mission.³¹

While Colonel Robertson's 1st Marines covered the south and southeastern approaches into the Da Nang Vital Area, to the northwest of Da Nang, the 1st Battalion of Colonel Ray N. Joens' 26th Marines, continued small unit patrols and ambushes aimed at preventing enemy rice gathering operations and infiltration into the villages of Kim Lien and Quan Nam. Along Highway 1, and throughout the Hai Van Pass, the extensive patrolling of Company B prevented NVA units from delaying or halting allied convoys on the main north-south line of communication.*

On 1 April, Lieutenant Colonel George C. Kliefoth's battalion was reinforced to become BLT 1/26, but remained in its defensive positions along the

*Throughout most of March, BLT 2/26 was controlled by the 5th Marines, participating in Operation Taylor Common, Eager Pursuit I, and Eager Pursuit II, and search and clear operations on Go Noi Island. On 29 March, the battalion landing team assumed responsibility for the 2d and 3d Battalions, 7th Marines area of responsibility, relieving the two battalions for Operation Oklahoma Hills. On the 31st, BLT 3/26, following Bold Mariner and Defiant Measure, joined Oklahoma Hills.

northwestern portion of the Da Nang perimeter until 25 April when it loaded on board ships of the fleet's amphibious ready group. During the month, the 1st Battalion assisted in the rice harvest, and cordon operations in the Nam O village area. Also on the 1st, Battalion Landing Team 2/26 lost its attachments and became 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, but continued to occupy former 7th Marines areas of responsibility west of Da Nang. On 25 April, Lieutenant Colonel George M. Edmondson, Jr.'s battalion moved into the area formerly occupied by the 1st Battalion.

The 1st of May found the 26th Marines with operational control of the 2d Battalion and the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, reinforced by Company M, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines. Occupying a TAOR formerly assigned to three infantry battalions, the regiment continued to conduct extensive patrols and night ambushes in an attempt to halt enemy infiltration. The regiment remained in this posture until the 29th, when Operation Oklahoma Hills was terminated, resulting in the return of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines to its parent regiment, and the realignment of the regimental areas of operation.

Americal Battleground

With the end of Operations Fayette Canyon, Hardin Falls, and Vernon Lake II on 28 February, the Americal Division moved into a short period of force and boundary realignment throughout southern Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai Provinces.* Previously, the Americal and 2d ARVN Divisions had operated in separate areas in which they had unilateral responsibility. After 18 March, as a result of the realignment, "combined planning, combined operations, and combined responsibility" was, as Major General Charles M. Gettys noted, "the rule throughout the TAOI. It is expected that this concept will give ARVN greater responsibility . . . and will upgrade the operational capability of the 2d ARVN Division through constant operation with U.S. units and more ready access to Americal combat support and combat service support assets."³²

*In February, the division was reorganized under the infantry division MTOE to standardize it along the same lines as the 1st, 4th, and 25th Infantry Divisions. The division had evolved from Task Force Oregon which was composed of the 11th, 196th, and 198th Infantry Brigades, deployed to Vietnam as separate units. They were organized into the 23d Infantry (Americal) Division on 25 September 1967. The reorganization under standard MTOE reduced the combat service elements of the division, which were redistributed to other units within USARV.

Tactically organized, the Division's Tactical Area of Operational Interest (TAOI) was divided into combined operational zones. Within the northern sector, the 196th Infantry Brigade shared an operational zone with the 5th ARVN Regiment. In the center sector, the 198th Infantry Brigade operated with the 6th ARVN Regiment, while south of Quang Ngai City, the 11th Infantry Brigade cooperated with the 4th ARVN Regiment in its operational zone. The division cavalry squadron, 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, occupied a large zone in the northern sector along the coastal plain. With the creation of the four operational zones, the Oregon, Duc Pho, and Chu Lai areas of operation were discontinued.

During the 12-day realignment period, the only major division operation to continue was Russell Beach. Initiated in January in an effort to cleanse the Batangan Peninsula, the combined Army, Marine, and ARVN force maintained a constant series of search and security operations. With the building of new roads and hamlets, and following a careful screening to eliminate elements of the local infrastructure, the population was moved back onto the peninsula in April along with South Vietnamese governmental authority. Allied security operations were maintained throughout the remainder of April and into May to protect the newly established village and hamlets and prevent the reintroduction of Viet Cong units into the area.

Following the realignment, three new operations were initiated simultaneously within the combined Americal and 2d ARVN Division area of interest on 18 March. Within the northern sector, the 196th Infantry Brigade, 5th ARVN Regiment, and elements of the 1st Cavalry began Operation Frederick Hill designed to secure population centers in the coastal plain and to destroy enemy troop concentrations, base camps, and infiltration routes in the adjacent mountains. Engagements were few as Cavalry and ARVN troops began operations against enemy staging areas, notably Pineapple Forest and Barrier Island, in the coastal lowlands and would remain so. In the mountains to the west, the 196th Brigade and elements of the 5th ARVN Regiment launched two successive preemptive strikes. The first against Antenna Valley and the surrounding mountain ranges was designed to neutralize the *1st Viet Cong Regiment*, and the second, launched on 25 April, was against elements of the 2d NVA Division believed to be harbored within Base Area 117 in the Ba Su Mountains. Fighting was light throughout both areas searched.

In the center sector, the 198th Infantry Brigade and 6th ARVN Regiment launched operation Geneva Park in order to secure major lines of communication and to locate and destroy enemy forces attempting to attack Quang Ngai and Chu Lai. In addition to small unit patrols, ambushes, and roving sweep teams, a number of preemptive strikes were launched against suspected enemy concentrations in the Nui Ne Mountains, along the Song Tra Khuc, and on all approaches to the Batangan Peninsula. As in the northern sector, skirmishes were few as enemy forces avoided engagement with Americal and ARVN troops.

Operation Iron Mountain, conducted by the 11th Infantry Brigade and 4th ARVN Regiment, was initiated in the southern sector, and was designed to protect coastal population centers and to destroy enemy units operating in the western mountains before attacks against population centers could be launched. To accomplish this mission, three large-scale pre-

emptive operations were carried out against Base Area 121, mountainous areas northeast of Duc Pho, the Song Ve Valley, and bordering Nui Hoat Mountains. All three operations accomplished their mission, and prevented the enemy from massing in order to attack major coastal population centers during the spring.

Despite the enemy's continued capability to surface for harassing attacks within southern I Corps Tactical Zone, troops of the 1st Marine and Americal Divisions, and their ARVN counterparts, continued to operate along enemy lines of communication and within his staging and assembly areas, scoring substantial gains against Viet Cong and North Vietnamese efforts to attack major population centers. Small unit counter-guerrilla actions, focusing on approaches to the coastal lowlands, denied the enemy access to rice and other supplies, sorely needed by forces occupying the sparsely populated hinterlands. Within southern I Corps, the enemy's capacity to initiate large-scale offensive operations during the spring deteriorated substantially.

PART III
THE THIRD'S FINAL MONTHS

Redeployment: The First Phase

Keystone Eagle — “A Turning Point”

Keystone Eagle

Post-hostilities planning by MACV began shortly after the seven-nation Manila Summit Conference of October 1966. The communique released at the close of the conference contained the conditions under which it was envisaged that Free World forces could be withdrawn from South Vietnam: “allied forces . . . shall be withdrawn, after close consultation, as the other side withdraws its force to the north, ceases infiltration, and the level of violence thus subsides, those forces will be withdrawn as soon as possible and not later than six months after the above conditions have been fulfilled.”¹ Although the communique stipulated that the withdrawal of forces would take place not later than six months after the necessary conditions had been met, it did not specify a length of time during which the conditions would be assessed and numerous preparatory actions accompanying a major withdrawal of U.S. forces would be accomplished; nor did it address the question of a residual U.S. presence.

With the announcement of a number of bombing halts and the initiation of discussions with the North Vietnamese in Paris in May 1968, the development of detailed plans for the withdrawal of U.S. and allied forces was given increased emphasis. In addition to general planning based on the Manila Communique, a number of plans, identified as T-Day, were developed to support specific withdrawal alternatives. Once the essential conditions for a cessation of hostilities had been met, either as a result of formal agreements at the Paris negotiations, informal mutual understandings, or the enemy’s unilateral withdrawal from South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, U.S. and allied forces would be phased down and then withdrawn over a six- or twelve-month period, depending upon the progressive expansion and modernization of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces. Two major considerations would determine the sequence of redeployment: those units slated to reconstitute the Pacific Theater’s reserve would be withdrawn first; and, the phasing out of the remaining units would be governed by the objective of maintaining a balanced force posture. In addition, the alternative plans specified that the withdrawals could be suspended at any stage should the situation change, and that the residual force would vary from

a military advisory assistance group to a group with a combat force of two divisions.

While both MACV and I Corps Combined Campaign Plans for 1969 assumed that there would be no major increase in United States force strengths in Vietnam “beyond those provided in existing programs,” neither addressed the question of troop withdrawals during the year.² However, the changing political environment would point up the possibility that selected U.S. forces might be withdrawn from South Vietnam prior to the cessation of hostilities and not under the terms of the Manila Communique.

In January 1969, a new administration took office committed to finding a solution to the nagging question of Vietnam. In order to maintain public support, as well as carry on the war in the face of imminent Congressional cuts in defense appropriations, the administration had to reduce substantially or end American involvement in Vietnam. Ideally, President Richard M. Nixon hoped to achieve a negotiated settlement and the mutual and simultaneous withdrawal of all outside forces from South Vietnam. Failing this, the option remained for the orderly, progressive withdrawal of American forces and their replacement by South Vietnamese troops. Proceeding with ongoing efforts toward a negotiated mutual withdrawal, the administration also began consideration of unilateral United States force reductions should the negotiations fail.

The idea of withdrawing American combat forces and replacing them with South Vietnamese troops was not new. The intent of the RVNAF improvement and modernization program, launched by President Lyndon B. Johnson in mid-1968, was that the South Vietnamese would eventually relieve U.S. and allied forces of the combat role. In his New Year’s address, President Thieu also raised the prospect.³ In Washington, the possible replacement of American troops by South Vietnamese was seriously considered at a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) in late January. Again taken up at a February meeting of the NSC, it was proposed that Vietnamese forces replace U.S. troops as soon as possible, but faced with the possibility of yet another enemy offensive similar to the one launched during *Tet* 1968, the administration chose



Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC649484

President Richard M. Nixon, accompanied by Melvin R. Laird, center, Secretary of Defense, and Gen Earle G. Wheeler, USA, right, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, visits the Department of Defense for an orientation briefing shortly after taking office in January 1969.

to postpone action until after Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's visit to Vietnam in March.

Among the purposes of the Secretary's visit was not only to observe the situation, but to inform both U.S. military commanders and South Vietnamese officials of the new administration's desire that a greater share of the fighting be assumed by the RVNAF. Assured by both General Abrams and President Thieu that the Republic's armed forces were improving, Laird returned to Washington convinced that the United States could prepare to replace American combat troops with Vietnamese. Accordingly, he recommended that plans be drawn up for the redeployment of not only 50,000 to 70,000 troops from South Vietnam in 1969, but of additional forces the following year. As the Secretary's plane took off on the return flight to Washington, General Abrams ruefully remarked that he "certainly had not come to Saigon to help us win the war."⁴ Based on the Secretary's recommendation, MACV began planning for a tentative force

reduction of 50,000, or two divisions, during the latter half of 1969.

In March meetings of the National Security Council, the question of Vietnam again arose. With regard to the withdrawal of U.S. forces, it was the consensus of those involved that the combat effectiveness of the RVNAF had been improved to such a degree as to justify the initiation of redeployment planning; the actual decision would be delayed until mid-year. At the direction of the President, the Secretary of Defense was given the responsibility for overall planning which was to cover all aspects of United States involvement and would be grounded on the following assumptions: a starting date of 1 July 1969; continuation of current NVA and VC force levels; use of current projections of South Vietnamese force levels; maintenance of the current level of allied military operations, except for drops resulting from the phased withdrawal of American and other allied forces not fully compensated for by the South Vietnamese; and, the equipping and

training of South Vietnamese forces which would be assigned the highest national priority. Based on these assumptions, timetables were drawn up for the transfer of the United States combat role and the restriction of the American effort to combat support and advisory missions, with alternative completion dates of 31 December 1970, 30 June 1971, 31 December 1971, and 31 December 1972. As was done with all force-level planning, input was sought from MACV, CinCPac, and other concerned agencies within the Federal Government.

Although there was neither official announcement nor comment that a troop reduction was under consideration, public speculation had become so prevalent by mid-March, that the President was forced to dampen it. On the 14th, he publicly stated that there was "no prospect for a reduction of American forces in the foreseeable future," listing three factors upon which any decision to reduce the American troop commitment would have to be based: the ability of the South Vietnamese to defend themselves; the level of hostilities imposed by the enemy; and, the progress of the Paris talks. A month later, Mr. Nixon said he saw "good prospects that American forces can be reduced," but noted that "we have no plans to reduce our forces until there is more progress on one or all of the three fronts that I have mentioned."⁵

Speaking to the nation on 14 May, the President gave his assessment of the Vietnam situation. While reiterating his call for a phased mutual withdrawal based upon a negotiated settlement, he did indicate that a unilateral reduction of American forces might be possible. He noted that General Abrams had informed him of the excellent progress made in training South Vietnamese forces, and that, "apart from any developments that may occur in the negotiations in Paris, the time is approaching when South Vietnamese forces will be able to take over some of the fighting fronts now being manned by Americans."⁶

In late May, an initial plan for the phased withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam was submitted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense. Calling for the transfer of the U.S. combat and support roles to the South Vietnamese to the maximum extent possible, the plan provided timetables for a total reduction of 244,000 personnel from the current authorization of 549,000, leaving approximately 306,000 in South Vietnam. For reductions to be carried out during the latter half of 1969, the plan provided four alternatives: 50,000 (two divisions, one Marine,

one Army, plus limited support); 50,000 (one Marine division plus support); 100,000 (three divisions, one Marine, two Army, plus limited support); and, 100,000 (two divisions, one Marine, one Army, plus support). In order to avoid the redeployment of a major combat unit from I Corps, where the enemy threat was still considered greatest, a fifth alternative involving a countrywide cut of 50,000 was suggested.

Should any forces be withdrawn during 1969, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that the first alternative be adopted. In addition they urged that any reduction be in two increments, with a pause between to assess the results. The Joint Chiefs also favored the reconstitution of the Pacific reserve, in favor of the redeployment of combat forces to the United States and their subsequent demobilization, and opposed any reduction in 1969 of out-of-country forces supporting the war.

The Secretary of Defense forwarded the JCS proposals to the President in early June, recommending an initial withdrawal of 20,000 to 25,000 troops beginning in July with the total reduction for the year limited to 50,000. Composition of the initial redeployment was to be determined by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in coordination with CinCPac, MACV, and the South Vietnamese. The President made no immediate decision, but took the plans to Midway where he was scheduled to meet with President Thieu on the 8th to assess the progress of the war.

Troop reduction planning by MACV was carried out concurrently with that of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. A number of conditions, suggested by planners in Saigon, would bear directly on the feasibility of any reductions: pacification to continue to make definable progress; improvement in the performance of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces to continue to achieve programmed goals; enemy troop strength in or near South Vietnam not to exceed present levels; no new weapon systems to be introduced into South Vietnam or be capable of reaching the Republic; infiltration rates from North Vietnam to remain constant, as was enemy logistical support; and, current levels of B-52 sorties, tactical air, helicopter, and nondivisional artillery support were to be maintained. By mid-April, MACV planners produced a tentative plan, with the concurrence of III MAF, specifically suggesting the redeployment of the 9th U.S. Infantry and 3d Marine Divisions. The divisions were selected because they were both considered "first-rate" combat units and as such would make the reduction credible to both the enemy and

U.S. and South Vietnamese publics. The 3d, according to General Abrams, was selected "because it could go to Okinawa; because it would be leaving the area to the 1st ARVN Division, recognized by all as the strongest and best ARVN division; and finally, because northern I Corps has one of the best security environments in the country for the people." As for the 9th Infantry Division, it was picked because "the war there [in the Delta] has been largely fought by the Vietnamese and has been going well for several months."⁷

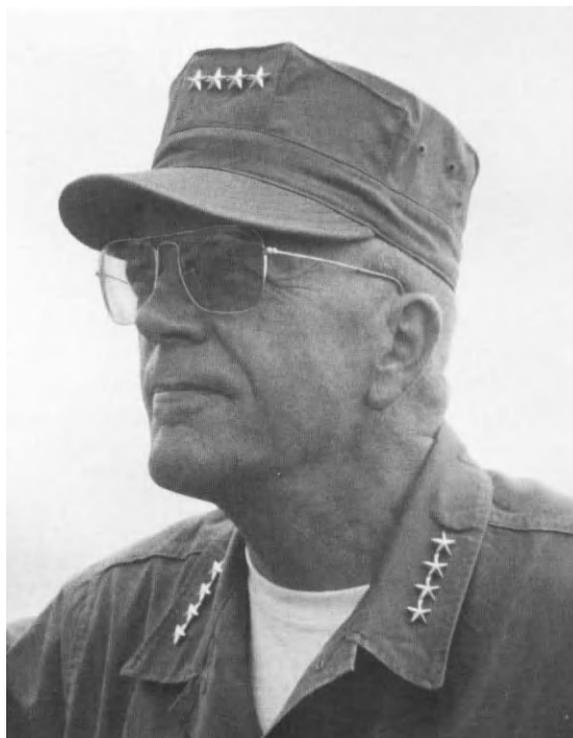
Although MACV planners suggested alternatives, in every case the first unit deployed out-of-country would be the 3d Marine Division, reinforced, combat-loaded on board amphibious shipping destined for Okinawa, where it would constitute the most readily available strategic reserve.⁸ The plan provided for the redeployment of the division in the following phases:

Phase	Unit	Date of Deployment	Strength
1	RLT	1 July 1969	7,132
2	RLT	1 August 1969	6,803
3	RLT	1 September 1969	6,823
4	SvcBn (-)	15 September 1969	916
5	MarDiv(-)	30 September 1969	574
		Total Strength	22,248

The MACV proposal, however, did not reflect the desire of Lieutenant General Herman Nickerson, Jr., Commanding General, III MAF, nor that of Lieutenant General Henry W. Buse, Jr., Commanding General, FMFPac, that it embody the relocation of a typical Marine air-ground team. As General Buse later noted:

The initial troop lists on all this super-duper planning for withdrawal, didn't have any Marine air in it. The initial guidelines were that no air would come out-of-country and no heavy artillery. We took up the cudgel, and first of all we had to have helicopters go out; they were not even in it at all. Secondly, in order to reconstitute the Strategic Reserve we wanted air with our package that came out. So we had it actually put in there, and we didn't get too much opposition.⁹

In addition to air, Nickerson and Buse suggested other modifications. In order to support the division, once on Okinawa, a full-strength service battalion would have to be created from the 9th Provisional Service Battalion, with the augmentation of approximately 150 men from Force Logistic Command at Da Nang. Also, as the mount-out blocks of supplies carried by each regimental landing team were low or nonexistent, both Nickerson and Buse recommended that current operating stocks be used to replenish the 30-day blocks. General Abrams approved both suggested



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A419099
As a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, lobbied for the maintenance of the Marine air-ground team during initial planning for redeployment.

modifications.¹⁰ The question as to whether Marine air would accompany the 3d Division remained unresolved for the moment.

The MACV proposal gained quick approval from Admiral John S. McCain, Jr., following which both CincPac and MACV representatives journeyed to Washington where they presented it to the Secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff. During the briefing of the Joint Chiefs, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., again pointed out the fact that although Marine helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft were not organic to the 3d Division, as in the Army, they were essential if the division was to be used in reconstituting the Pacific reserve. In addition, Marine air would be necessary from a training standpoint. The MACV plan was given tentative approval by the Joint Chiefs; however, it was suggested that one helicopter group and two jet fighter squadrons, together with supporting detachments, be included in the final troop list, in case the division was to be deployed elsewhere within the Pacific Command.¹¹

With debate raging in Congress over troop withdrawals, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird expressed concern that "political realities may force a decision on troop withdrawals sooner than anticipated."¹² By 5 June, after extensive discussion of a number of additional alternatives, and incorporating Army Chief of Staff General William Westmoreland's suggestion that the complete removal of the 3d Division was dangerous, in that an attack by the NVA would escalate the war, and recommendation that the division be withdrawn in increments, a plan for the two-phased pull-out of the division was approved. Phase one was to include one 3d Marine Division regimental landing team with air and support units, and two brigades of the 9th Infantry Division, while phase two would encompass the remaining two landing teams and their support units, both air and logistics.¹³

On 8 June, President Nixon and South Vietnamese

President Thieu met on Midway Island. Thieu, initially opposed to any proposed plans for a large American withdrawal from Vietnam in 1969, as it would signal the beginning of an irreversible policy, was persuaded to accept the immediate redeployment of approximately 25,000 men. In a brief statement following the meeting, both Nixon and Thieu noted that further troop withdrawals in the months ahead would be based on the three previously stated variables, periodically assessed: the level of North Vietnamese infiltration and enemy battlefield activity; the ability of South Vietnam to carry the burden of fighting its own war; and, progress at the Paris peace negotiations.¹⁴ With the decision to begin unilateral redeployment, a number of conferences were held at CinCPac Headquarters in order to plan the actual movement of men and materiel.

The initial redeployment, codenamed Keystone Ea-

President Richard M. Nixon welcomes South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu to Midway Island in the Pacific where they discussed and decided upon the withdrawal of 25,000 American combat forces and their replacement by South Vietnamese units.

Department of Defense Photo (USN) K74369



gle, would involve the incremental deployment of a 3d Marine Division regimental landing team: one-third to be pulled out on 15 July and the remaining two-thirds by 31 August. A problem soon developed. The number of men in the RLT, its direct support elements, and the two air squadrons, did not meet the 8,388 spaces finally allotted by MACV. As a result, III MAF was forced to "add-on" another 1,294 men from a wide variety of engineer, headquarters, and logistical support units to meet the MACV allocation. By mid-June all was ready.¹⁵

"A Turning Point"

III MAF selected Colonel Edward F. Danowitz's 9th Marines as the first regimental landing team to redeploy. "We drew out the 9th Marines," recalled Major General William K. Jones, "because they were the Swing/Ready regiment; the regiment that was sort of a Division reserve, or not occupying a fire support base. The 4th and the 3d Regiments were occupying [positions] so we drew back the 9th Marines and they started the process, a battalion at a time."¹⁶ The regiment's supporting artillery, the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, would accompany it, as would small engineer, motor transport, reconnaissance, shore party, headquarters, medical, and logistical detachments. III MAF also designated the 3d Anti-Tank Battalion; the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion; Company C, 3d Tank Battalion; and the 1st Searchlight Battery for withdrawal.

The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing would relinquish one jet and one helicopter squadron, in addition to the 1st Light Antiaircraft Missile Battalion and Marine Air Traffic Control Unit 68 (MATCU-68). Lieutenant Colonel Edwin C. Paige, Jr.'s Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 115 (VMFA-115), with its 15 F4Bs ("Phantoms"), would be deployed to the Marine Corps Air Station, Iwakuni, Japan, while Lieutenant Colonel Thomas E. Raines' Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 165 (HMM-165), with its 14 CH-46s, would accompany the 9th Marines to Okinawa.

"On the 14th of June," noted Colonel Danowitz, "I was apprised about 1000 by General Jones that it would be the regiment that would be moved out. I knew that someone was going out of the division, but certainly not the regiment until that time."¹⁷ The following day, III MAF Operational Plan 182-69 was issued which prescribed procedures for the withdrawal of units during continuing hostilities. Under the plan, each redeploying unit would cease combat operations, move to a designated base camp well before the actual date of departure, and prepare men and equipment

for sea and air transportation out of country. Although its mission and area of operations would be assumed by other organizations according to prearranged plans, each redeploying unit was to "retain sufficient combat ability for security and self-defense."¹⁸

While Marine units were to leave Vietnam as "balanced combat units," fully organized and equipped, they would rarely leave with the same men who had served with them in combat. Instead, with each redeployment, a system of personnel transfers, nicknamed "Mixmaster," was put into effect. In this process, the departing unit would be manned with Marines from all III MAF units who had completed more than one tour in Vietnam and were nearing the end of their current one-year tour, or were nearing the completion of their first tour. Those Marines with the most months left in-country would be transferred to units not designated to redeploy. Those units whose final destination was the United States were to undergo "Mixmastering" to a greater extent than the 9th Marines, which experienced little shift in personnel. "We endeavored," as General Buse later stated, "to avoid any mixmaster approach in this move; that is, any extensive intra-III MAF personnel shuffles. There will be some exceptions, but in the main, all units and detachments are redeploying with their on board personnel in order to minimize confusion and to retain unit integrity for contingency readiness."¹⁹

The troop and equipment movements of Keystone Eagle began on 15 June when the *Iredell County* (LST 839) departed Vietnam for Okinawa with the first increment of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion's equipment, accompanied by a nucleus of maintenance and headquarters personnel. The shipment, which General Buse characterized as "jumping the gun," included 14 LVTP-5s and three forklifts.²⁰ On the 23d, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, following its participation in Operation Utah Mesa, stood down at Vandegrift Combat Base. On 12 July, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J. Culkin's battalion moved by truck to Quang Tri and then by C-130s to Da Nang.

At Da Nang's Deep Water Pier, two days later, with the *Paul Revere* (LPA 248) standing by, Lieutenant General Nickerson thanked the officers and men of the 1st Battalion for their performance and dedication. "But," as General Nickerson noted, "this day goes beyond honoring the officers and men of the 9th Marines. It represents a turning point . . . when victories on the battlefield and progress in the pacification struggle now permit the GVN/ARVN to say to their



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800469

The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines waits to board the amphibious transport Paul Revere at Da Nang, initiating the first phase of the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam.

LtGen Herman Nickerson, Jr., left, and LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam, right, talk with 1stSgt James L. Langford of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines prior to the battalion's departure.

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center



The MACV List: Composition of Keystone Eagle

Unit	Strength	Departure Date	Destination
1st Bn, 9th Mar.....	1,166	14 Jul.....	Okinawa
Co B (Rein), 3d Med Bn.....	42	15 Jul.....	Okinawa
Co A-C (Rein), 3d Motor Trans Bn.....	167	13 Jul.....	Okinawa
Co D (Rein), 11th Engr Bn.....	175	15 Jul.....	Okinawa
3d Anti-Tank Bn (C).....	19	29 Jun.....	Okinawa
Co C (C) (Rein), 3d Tank Bn.....	74	13 Jul.....	Okinawa
Co C (Rein), 3d Shore Party Bn.....	144	15 Jul.....	Okinawa
Det, 3d Dental Co.....	1	13 Jul.....	Okinawa
1st AmTrac Bn.....	135	13 Jul.....	Okinawa
1st Armed Amphib Co.....	42	15 Jul.....	Okinawa
Hq Btry, Fld Arty Gp.....	24	15 Jul.....	Okinawa
Btry D, 2d Bn, 12th Mar.....	139	13 Jul.....	Okinawa
107 Btry, 2d Bn, 12th Mar.....	84	19 Jul.....	Okinawa
Co C, 11th Engr Bn.....	180	13 Jul.....	Okinawa
1st Search Light Btry.....	116	14 Jul.....	Okinawa
Det, Mar Air Traffic Control Unit.....	23	15 Jul.....	Okinawa
2d Bn, 9th Mar.....	1,166	1 Aug.....	Okinawa
Hq Co (-), 9th Mar.....	234	1 Aug.....	Okinawa
Co C (Rein), 3d Engr Bn.....	257	30 Jul.....	Okinawa
Det, Hq Btry, 12th Mar.....	21	31 Jul.....	Okinawa
Btry E, 2d Bn, 12th Mar.....	139	31 Jul.....	Okinawa
Hq Btry, 2d Bn, 12th Mar.....	161	31 Jul.....	Okinawa
3d Bn, 9th Mar.....	1,166	13 Aug.....	Okinawa
Btry F, 2d Bn, 12th Mar.....	139	13 Aug.....	Okinawa
Btry L, 4th Bn, 12th Mar.....	112	13 Aug.....	Okinawa
Det, Hq Bn, 3d Mar Div.....	354	5 Aug.....	Okinawa
Co C (Rein), 3d Recon Bn.....	120	13 Aug.....	Okinawa
Det, Force Log Comd.....	150	12 Aug.....	Okinawa
Det, Hq Co, 9th Mar.....	20	13 Aug.....	Okinawa
Co A (Rein), 9th Motor Trans Bn.....	130	14 Aug.....	Okinawa
1st Light AA Missile Bn.....	661	16 Aug.....	Okinawa
Mar Atk Sqdn 334.....	388	30 Aug.....	Japan
Med Helo Sqdn 165.....	279	14 Aug.....	Okinawa

American friends, 'We can do more. We ask you to do less.' " With the conclusion of General Nickerson's remarks, the battalion, by company, boarded the *Paul Revere*, and then sailed for Okinawa.²¹

On 6 July, Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Modjeski's 2d Battalion concluded its participation in Operation Utah Mesa, and moved by air to Vandegrift, where it stood down in preparation for redeployment. The battalion then moved to Quang Tri Combat Base, where on 25 July, tribute was again paid to the men of the 9th Marines. Following remarks by General Jones, the honored guests, General Creighton Abrams, Lieutenant General Nickerson, Lieutenant General Mel-

vin Zais, and Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, watched as representative Marine, Army, Navy, and ARVN forces massed colors as they passed in review. Colonel Danowitz, the regiment's commanding officer, invited Colonel Robert H. Barrow, who had commanded the regiment during Operation Dewey Canyon, to join him in this final honor.²²

During the last two days of July, the battalion moved to Da Nang, and on the first day of August, accompanied by the regimental headquarters and colors of the 9th Marines, departed Vietnam. Lieutenant Colonel Donald E. Wood's 3d Battalion followed on the 13th. With the standdown and departure of the



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Personnel of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 334 board C-130 transport aircraft at Chu Lai, destined for Iwakuni, Japan, where they would join Marine Aircraft Group 15.

9th Marines, Task Force Hotel was disbanded and the area of operations formerly occupied by the regiment, as well as its missions, divided between the 3d and 4th Marines which were placed under the direct operational control of the division.

The loss of one-third of the division's combat power resulted not only in a tactical realignment of forces, but in a series of administrative moves designed to consolidate the remaining units and to provide for greater efficiency and control. The 3d Marines extended its area of operations westward to include Elliott Combat Base. The area assigned the 4th Marines now included Fire Support Bases Russell and Cates, Hill 950, Vandegrift Combat Base, and the Ba Long Valley. The 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) continued to maintain control of the coastal lowlands, while the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) extended its boundary northward into Quang Tri Province to include all of enemy Base Area 101. The division designated the extreme western portion of its area of operations a reconnaissance zone, and in early August, Detachment B-52 (Project Delta) began surveillance operations in the area. In order to increase unit integrity and control, the rear echelons of the 3d and 4th Marines and various combat support and service

support units, which had long been maintained at Quang Tri Combat Base, moved to Dong Ha and Vandegrift Combat Bases.

The jet aviation redeployment of Keystone Eagle posed a problem. Lieutenant Colonel Paige's VMFA-115, with its F4Bs, was originally selected for withdrawal, but subsequently replaced by Lieutenant Colonel John R. Braddon's VMFA-334, with its 13 F4Js. The problem revolved around the use of the two aircraft. Both Headquarters Marine Corps and the Navy were concerned about the high usage, attrition, and cost of the F4J, equipped with the Westinghouse AWG-10 pulse Doppler radar (data link) fire control weapons system. Both recommended the maximum utilization of the F4J in an air-to-air role in Japan, instead of air-to-ground, more suited to the F4B and combat in Vietnam. In addition, as the F4J required special support equipment, readily available in Japan, it was suggested that instead of splitting resources between Vietnam and Iwakuni, the F4J be based at a single site, Japan, thus enhancing Marine Aircraft Group 15's air-to-air commitment with the improved weapons system.²³

On 13 August, VMFA-334's equipment left Chu Lai by sea, followed by its personnel and avionics van on

the 30th by air. On 24 August, Lieutenant Colonel Braddon led the command echelon of 13 F4Js from Vietnam to Naha, Okinawa, with a refueling stop at Naval Air Station, Cubi Point, Philippines. All 13 Phantoms arrived at Iwakuni, Japan, on the 27th. In a move unrelated to redeployment, but bearing upon the Marine Corps and Navy's desire to replace all F4Js in Vietnam, Lieutenant Colonel Ralph J. Sorensen's VMFA-232 (F4J) turned over its slot in MAG-13 at Chu Lai to Lieutenant Colonel John K. Cochran's VMFA-122 (F4B) in early September.

Meanwhile, in mid-August, Lieutenant Colonel Raines' HMM-165 embarked its 14 CH-46 "Sea Knight" helicopters on board the former carrier, now amphibious assault ship, *Valley Forge* (LPH 8), for

shipment to Okinawa. During the same period, the 1st Light Antiaircraft Missile Battalion, under Major Edward L. House, Jr., boarded the *Belle Grove* (LSD 2), *Tortuga* (LSD 26), and *Tulare* (LKA 112) at Da Nang, ultimately destined for Twentynine Palms, California.

By the end of August, all units of III MAF scheduled for Keystone Eagle had left Vietnam. The 3d Marine Division now consisted of the 3d and 4th Marines with the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) under its operational control. The strength of III MAF was reduced by 8,388 to 72,355. With the addition of 14,000 Army troops from the 1st and 2d Brigades, 9th Infantry Division, and 2,000 reservists and Navy personnel, the goal of 25,000 out-of-country by 31 August was met.

CHAPTER 9

'A Strange War Indeed'

Company Patrol Operations—Idaho Canyon—"A Significant Step"—Specter of Anarchy

Company Patrol Operations

With the standdown and redeployment of the 9th Marines Regimental Landing Team, Major General William K. Jones' 3d Marine Division, composed of Colonel Wilbur F. Simlik's 3d Marines and the 4th Marines under Colonel William F. Goggin, embarked upon the final four months of combat operations in Quang Tri Province. Despite the loss of one regiment and the resultant shrinkage of the division's tactical area of responsibility, its mission changed little. As stated in a revised letter of instruction, issued in July, the 3d Marine Division, in cooperation and coordination with the 1st and 2d Regiments, 1st ARVN Division, was to:

Conduct offensive operations to destroy NVA/VC main forces, VCLF [Viet Cong Local Forces], and VCI [Viet Cong Infrastructure] within AO, and to interdict enemy LOCs [Lines of Communications] and neutralize enemy base areas within AO; conducts surveillance and interdiction of DMZ and Laotian border; assists GVN forces in the defense of Dong Ha and Quang Tri cities; provides support for the Pacification Development Plan, other civil activities, and the GVN resources control and denial program within the AO; be prepared to provide forces in support of CIDG and resettlement areas within the AO; be prepared to assume 101st Airborne Division (AM) task as Corps Reserve on order.¹

Tactically, the division moved away from the large multi-battalion search and destroy operations in the Khe Sanh Plateau, Song Da Krong Valley, and other areas of far-western Quang Tri Province, characteristic of its operations during the first six months of 1969. In attempting to maintain its mobile posture, the division began to concentrate instead on company search, patrol, and ambush operations that would still provide protection for all lines of communication within the area of operations and for virtually 100 percent of the population without tying down an excessive number of companies from any one unit to fixed positions. With fewer troops to practice "much economy of force" throughout the province, noted Colonel Robert H. Barrow, former commanding officer of the 9th Marines, and III MAF Deputy G-3, "Charlie is going to be able to stick his logistics nose in country with less chance we will find it."² And that he did.

As a result of the numerous beatings inflicted on

the NVA during the first six months, enemy activity of battalion-size or larger throughout the province decreased markedly in mid-summer, and company-size ground and indirect fire attacks became more common. Of approximately 30 battalions available, only elements of the 9th, 24th, 27th, and 31st Infantry, and the 84th Artillery (Rocket) Regiments remained consistently active. These units, in conjunction with minor elements of the 7th Front, not only continued selective attacks by fire over a wide front in eastern and central Quang Tri, favoring such targets as Vandegrift Combat Base, Elliott Combat Base, Route 9 strongpoints, and the Alpha and Charlie outposts south of the DMZ, but also increased infiltration of men and supplies with the aim of interdicting Route 9. In an effort to halt these attempts, the 3d Marines continued Operation Virginia Ridge and launched Operation Idaho Canyon.

Idaho Canyon

The first day of July found Colonel Simlik's 3d Marines engaged in Operation Virginia Ridge. Enemy activity within the area of operations, south of the DMZ, was relatively light, consisting of sporadic rocket attacks against Marine installations at Alpha-4 and Charlie-2, north of Cam Lo, point and sniper contacts, and attempts at interdicting Routes 9 and 561 with mines and other surprise firing devices. Countering the enemy, Lieutenant Colonel David G. Herron's 1st Battalion continued search and destroy operations in the vicinity of Mutter's Ridge and Helicopter Valley, north of Fire Support Base Fuller, while the 2d Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel James J. McMonagle, generally deployed to the southwest, provided security for Khe Gio Bridge, Route 9, and conducted extensive search and destroy operations within the northern portion of the Mai Loc TAOR to the south. Lieutenant Colonel Richard C. Schulze's 3d Battalion occupied and provided security for fixed positions along Route 561, from Alpha-4 to the Cam Lo District Headquarters on Route 9, conducted search and destroy operations west of 561, and deployed Company L for one week along Song Rao Vinh, south of Route 9.

Although Simlik's Marines caught an ever-increasing number of enemy troops, small groups of



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193197

Infantrymen of Company B, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines patrol the hills surrounding Khe Gia Bridge and Route 9, the vital road linking Dong Ha with Vandegrift Combat Base.

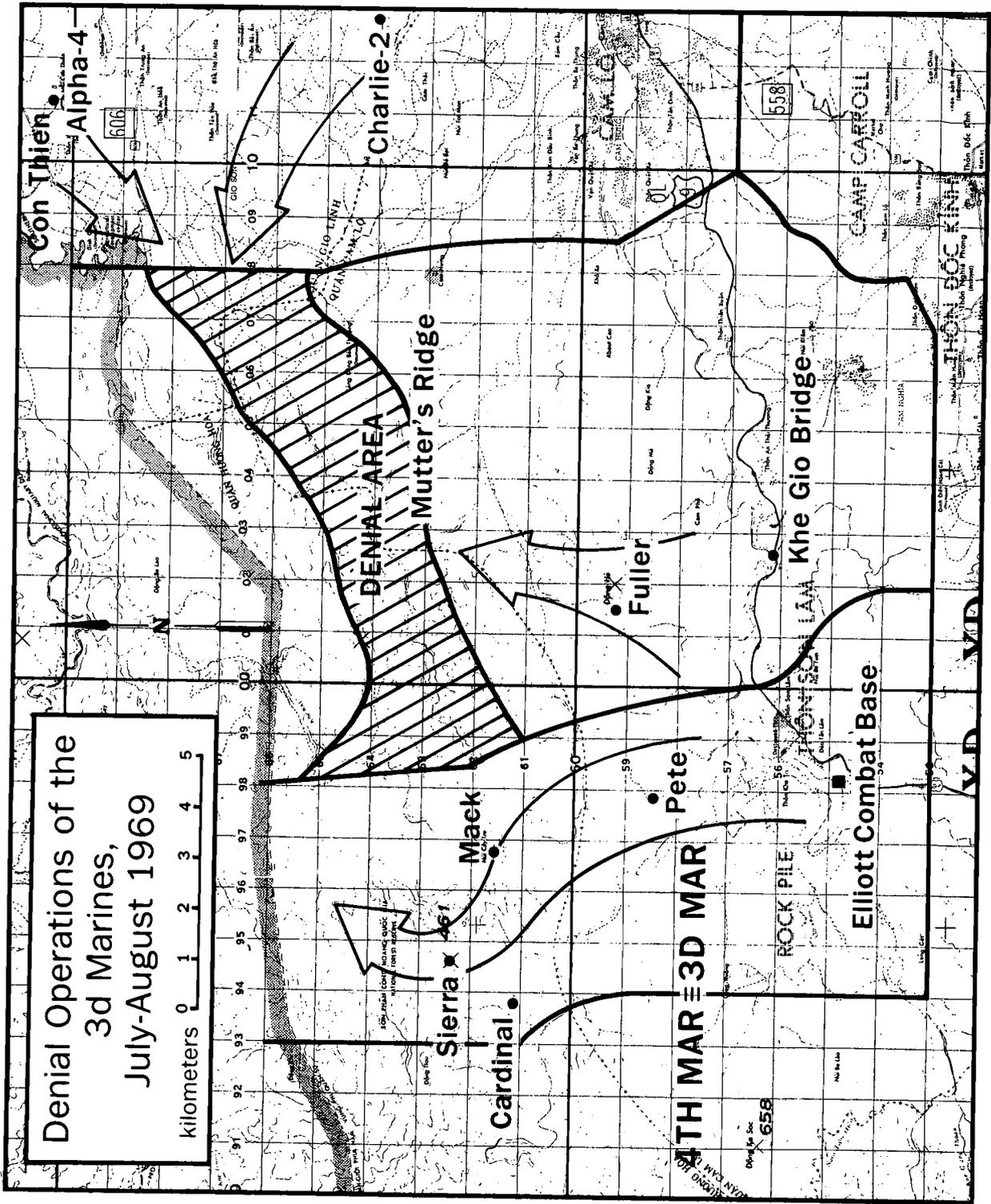
NVA continued to infiltrate the DMZ and move south. Aggressive 1st Battalion patrols north of Fuller, in the Mutter's Ridge-Helicopter Valley area, however, discouraged any attempt to bring in larger units. When engagements did take place, hit-and-run and attacks by fire remained the enemy's main tactic. In order to limit this small but steady stream of infiltrators, the 3d Marines adopted a new technique, the Denial Stingray Concept.

Under the concept, the regiment established a denial zone centered on Mutter's Ridge, three kilometers south of the DMZ. Seismic intrusion devices then were implanted along known infiltration routes, and beginning on 7 July, CS gas crystals dropped along streams, in valleys, and on any possible redoubt area within the zone: an average of three gas drops were made per day. The enemy, upon encountering the gas, would, it was thought, be forced to use well-known infiltration trails, along which the sensor devices were planted. As the seismic instruments were activated, massive air and artillery fires would be brought to bear. To detect infiltration through or around the denial zone, squad-size "hunter-killer" or Stingray patrols, possessing the capability of operating in the field for four days without resupply and of directing air and

artillery, would be deployed, one per 1,000-meter square, south of the zone.

Simlik's Marines employed the denial technique for approximately two weeks, beginning 9 July. Although there were no sensor activations indicating enemy attempts at infiltration within the zone, Lieutenant Colonel Herron kept Captain James M. McAdams' Company A and Captain Gary E. Carlson's Company C continually engaged in checking the zone for any signs of enemy activity, and in measuring the persistency of the gas. With the discovery, on 22 July, that the air-delivered gas was lightly persistent CS1 instead of the requested, more persistent CS2 crystals, it became imperative that the denial zone and the area north, between it and the DMZ, be physically searched by Marines on foot to determine if an enemy build-up had taken place. Consequently, the following day, Colonel Simlik ordered the two companies to move north, through the zone, toward the DMZ. This shift resulted in a number of significant engagements, during which the companies killed a total of 43 NVA troops.

Moving west toward Mutter's Ridge at dusk on the 26th, McAdams' 2d Platoon observed five enemy soldiers approaching its position through the thick stands of elephant grass which covered the region. The pla-



toon halted its advance, and took the five under fire with small arms and grenades, driving them into a ravine approximately 100 meters southwest of its position. Moving in squad blocking forces, the platoon commander then directed 60mm mortar fire on the enemy position. The platoon maintained its positions throughout the night in an effort to halt any enemy attempt at escape.

The following morning, as the 2d Platoon resumed its southwestward advance toward the 1st Platoon, it engaged an enemy force of undetermined strength. Batteries of Lieutenant Colonel Morgan W. West's 1st Battalion, 12th Marines fired missions to the north, blocking possible escape routes, while fixed-wing aircraft strafed the enemy position, "blowing bodies apart."³ By noon, the 1st Platoon had killed five and the 2d three; the dead were clean shaven, with close haircuts, and dressed in fresh green uniforms, indicating recent infiltration from the North. Preceded by two additional flights of fixed-wing, both platoons then pushed north in pursuit. During the next two days, McAdams' company searched a six kilometer-square area bordering the DMZ, counting 40 NVA killed—17 by small arms, 10 by air, and 13 by artillery.

Having successfully searched the denial zone and the area lying between it and the DMZ, the two companies then reoriented their advance toward the southeast in order to serve as a mobile blocking force for a combined search and destroy operation through the Cam Hung Valley. At month's end, Lieutenant Colonel Herron's 1st Battalion remained split; two companies saturated the northern portion of the area of operations with patrols and ambushes, while two companies provided security for FSB Fuller, Khe Gio Bridge, Route 9, and Seabee road construction crews.

With the end of Operation Virginia Ridge on 16 July, Simlik's 3d Marines moved immediately into Operation Idaho Canyon. Although the concept remained essentially the same as that of Virginia Ridge, a number of changes were made within the area of operations. Due to the redeployment of the 9th Marines and the assumption of its area of operations by the 4th Marines, an extension of the regiment's western boundary took place. The expanded area of operations resulted in the minor realignment of the regiment's three battalions: while the 1st Battalion continued its role in the Denial Stingray Concept, the 2d Battalion began search and destroy operations north of Elliott Combat Base, and Lieutenant Colonel Schulze's 3d



Marine Corps Historical Collection
The point man with a rifle squad from the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines carefully moves through the jungle while on patrol south of the Demilitarized Zone.

Battalion continued operations west of Charlie-2 along Route 561.

Enemy activity within the eastern third of the area of operations at the beginning of Operation Idaho Canyon was generally small in scale and brief in duration, consisting of encounters with NVA reconnaissance teams of two to three men. In the latter part of July, NVA soldiers became more daring, launching strong attacks against elements of Lieutenant Colonel Schulze's 3d Battalion, operating in the Cam Hung. On 25 July, while searching four kilometers west of Charlie-2 for a reported large enemy force, First Lieutenant Terry L. Engle's Company I received fifteen 60mm mortar rounds, RPG, and small arms fire from a treeline north of its position. Engle's Marines countered with small arms while batteries of the 12th Marines shelled and then three fixed-wing flights raked the area with napalm, 750-pound, and Snakeye

bombs. Coordinating with Company C, 1st Battalion to the west and Company K, supported by Company A, 3d Tank Battalion, to the north, Engle moved his platoons out in a systematic search of the area following the brief but fierce exchange. "The whole area," reported Lieutenant Engle, "reeked of burning flesh and the stink of dead. We could find only small bits of flesh and guts laying in all the trees," grim testimony to the ferocity of the air attack. As the company moved through the area, hindered somewhat by "still burning timber and napalm," the Marines counted 20 NVA dead, possibly more, killed by air; large amounts of mortar ammunition; and two complete 60mm mortars.⁴

The following morning, as Company I swept west and then east toward Charlie-2, Captain Paul B. Goodwin's Company K, supported by tanks, moved south, encountering heavy 82mm mortar fire on the 27th, and strong enemy resistance the following night. Shortly after midnight, while occupying sites south of the destroyed village of Gio Son, a platoon from Goodwin's company ambushed a small group of NVA moving down a trail, killing six and capturing two AK47 assault rifles. Two hours later, in presumed retaliation for the beating two days before by Engle's company, 35 to 40 NVA attacked the night defensive position of Goodwin's company. Concentrating their heaviest fire on the tanks, the attackers hit three, killing an equal number of Marines while wounding six. Goodwin's Marines repulsed the attack with strong machine gun and small arms fire, suffering few additional casualties. A search of the perimeter the following morning revealed numerous blood trails and drag marks, but only two enemy dead.

On 28 July, the 3d Marines assumed operational control of the 1st Brigade's 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry, supported by Company C, 1st Battalion, 77th Armor. In addition to providing security for Con Thien and Route 561, elements of the two Army battalions moved west, conducting search and destroy operations in the northern reaches of the Cam Hung Valley. As the infantry progressed, searching within one to two kilometers of the DMZ, the number of engagements with increasingly larger groups of NVA infiltrators rose. On 7 August, while Company D, 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry searched through an extensive bunker complex, 1,000 meters south of the zone's southern boundary, an estimated two enemy companies attacked. Although the intensity of combat varied throughout the day, a number of sharp exchanges of small arms and automatic weapons fire did take place, resulting

in a total of 56 NVA killed and 26 weapons captured. Three Army infantrymen lost their lives and 13 received wounds in the daylong engagement.

With the beginning of a new month, the enemy shifted his effort away from the eastern portion of the Idaho Canyon area of operations to the western third. While enemy rockets and mortars intermittently pounded Con Thien and Charlie-2, and as elements of Lieutenant Colonels Herron's and Schulze's battalions continued their aggressive patrols, Marines of Lieutenant Colonel William S. Daniels' 2d Battalion engaged an ever-increasing number of fresh, energetic NVA troops.*

Operating northwest of Elliott Combat Base, Daniels' battalion centered its attention on Mutter's Ridge: Company H operated south of the ridge; Company E moved to the northwest; Company F searched to the northeast; while Company G provided security for Elliott. Each company in the field established a primary patrol base and then sent out squad-size patrols, ensuring maximum coverage of the area to be searched. Enemy activity during July had been extremely light as the NVA avoided contact and appeared to be skirting the battalion's area of operation; all was to change in August.

On the 7th, Captain Shawn W. Leach's Company F, while moving onto high ground two kilometers east of LZ Mack, atop Nui Oay Tre, encountered an estimated two companies of NVA in fortified positions. Aided by fixed-wing and artillery, Captain Leach ordered his 1st and 2d Platoons to seize the terrain. But with each heavily fought Marine gain, the enemy counterattacked with at least a reinforced platoon, forcing both Marine platoons to again withdraw. Although additional artillery and air strikes softened the enemy position, Leach's Marines could not make headway due to shortages of ammunition, high casualties, and a napalm-ignited brush fire which eventually drove the 2d Platoon into a heavily wooded area devoid of landing zones for the evacuation of wounded and resupply. Prior to dusk, a platoon from Company A, 1st Battalion helilifted into a landing zone several kilometers to the rear of Company F to reinforce the company's advance the following morning.

Company F resumed the attack on 8 August, meeting unexpectedly light resistance. By dusk, Leach's Marines seized the high ground, counting 46 NVA dead

*Lieutenant Colonel William S. Daniels replaced Lieutenant Colonel James J. McMonagle as Commanding Officer, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines on 2 August.



Marine Corps Historical Collection
A Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 262 crew chief and Navy corpsman aid a wounded rifleman, who within minutes would be flown to a division medical facility or Navy hospital ship offshore.

and capturing 10 weapons. Documents found on the battlefield indicated that the NVA were members of the *1st* and *3d* Battalions, *9th* NVA Regiment, *304th* NVA Division, units new to the area of operations.

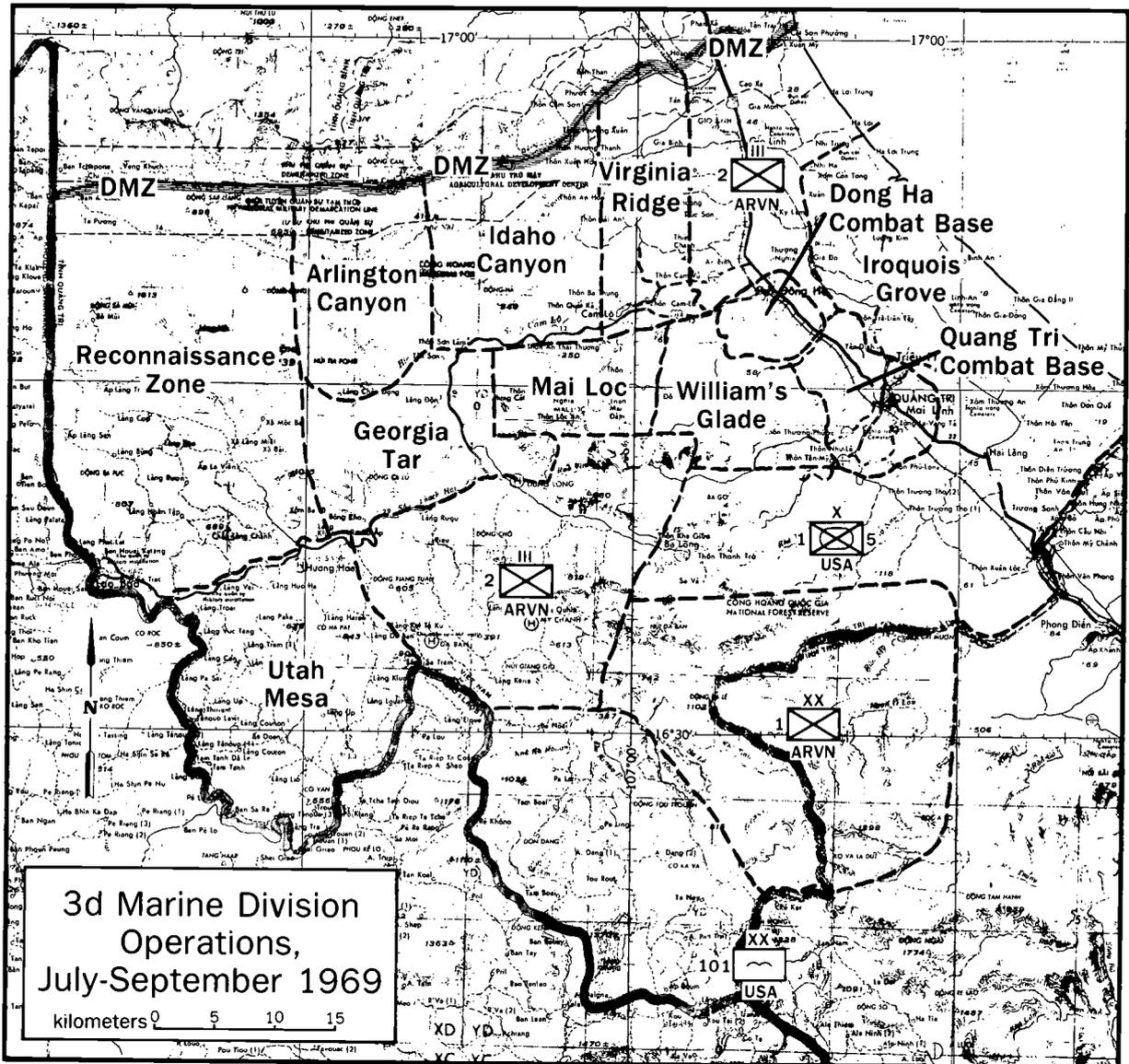
Two days later, while in night defensive positions northwest of LZ Sierra, a second reinforced company of the *9th* Regiment attacked the battalion's 81mm Mortar Platoon and 3d Platoon of Captain Paul J. Sinnott's Company E with grenades, satchel charges, and small arms fire. All communication with the platoons was lost for approximately an hour, forcing Batteries A and B, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines at Elliott to cease fire. Although the enemy company penetrated that portion of the perimeter manned by the mortar platoon, Sinnott's Marines staged a vicious fight, finally reestablishing their lines at sunrise. Within the perimeter lay 13 Marine dead and 58 wounded along with 17 NVA bodies.

Meanwhile, less than 1,000 meters to the southwest, other elements of the *9th* hit Sinnott's 1st Platoon with a heavy ground and mortar attack from the west. The platoon returned fire, held its position with the assistance of accurate artillery and air strikes, and, accounted for 19 NVA dead. During the firefight, the platoon reported observing women removing enemy wounded from the battlefield. The 1st Platoon suffered six killed and 17 wounded in the predawn attack.

Soon after sunrise on the 10th, Lieutenant Colonel Daniels ordered Company A, 1st Battalion to link up with the three beleaguered platoons. But a number of problems were to delay the consolidation. Medical evacuation helicopters, given priority over those to be used in the troop lift, suffered a number of mechanical difficulties forcing them to return to Vandegrift. At the same time, accompanying Huey gunships repeatedly ran out of fuel and left station prior to the arrival of backup medical evacuation helicopters, again prolonging the evacuation of casualties. The shifting of landing zones due to incoming mortar rounds and the aircrafts' need to refuel delayed the lifts another six hours. It was not until late afternoon that Company A arrived in the objective area. During the interval, Sinnott consolidated his 1st and 2d Platoons, and with the arrival of Company A, the company, with the remnants of the 3d and Mortar Platoons, established a night defensive position in preparation for a coordinated attack the following morning.

Before an assault could be launched, the division ordered the battalion to withdraw. Under cover of darkness, the battalion moved south, leaving Company A to ensure the evacuation of the dead. The following morning, helicopters extracted Sinnott's company, lifting it to Cua Viet for a period of rest, reorganization, and subsequent security duty under the operational control of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). The remainder of Daniels' battalion continued moving south on foot. Several days later, it shifted its operations to the eastern portion of the Idaho Canyon area, west of Cam Lo.

As a result of the attacks on Companies E and F and the increased enemy activity in the western sector of Idaho Canyon, Colonel Simlik issued an order which prevented any but platoon-size day patrols within the area three kilometers south of the DMZ, and also ordered that within five kilometers of the zone, company night defensive positions would be established after dark with all platoons physically consolidated. There were no size requirements placed on



See Reference Map, Sections 1-8, 10-13, 16-18

movement south of the five-kilometer line. Simlik's orders later were incorporated into a division regulation which also directed all companies to move at least 1,000 meters per day and prohibited independent platoon operations. The forced movement of 1,000 meters was not well received by Marines in the field, as First Lieutenant Engle noted: "this got to be quite tiring. I believed it helped a few times, but many times it put my company in jeopardy, because I was starting to form a routine . . . I felt it was stupid tactics, but this came all the way from the top."⁵

In mid-August, Lieutenant Colonel Schulze's battalion moved north and west of Charlie-2, its security mission at the outpost having been assumed by elements

of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). On the 11th, prior to the move, while sweeping west of the base, Company K engaged a small group of NVA. The enemy immediately broke contact. Continuing its sweep, the company, a short time later, surprised two NVA sapper platoons in the process of constructing bunkers. While artillery, gunships, and fixed-wing aircraft strafed the area, Captain Paul B. Goodwin's Marines fought the enemy sappers with mortar and small arms. A reaction force, consisting of one platoon from Company I with tanks, moved out from Charlie-2 and linked up with Goodwin's Marines, as elements of Company M secured blocking positions. The combined force assaulted and then searched the

enemy redoubt, the battle raging throughout most of the day. Goodwin's Marines eventually found 19 enemy dead and large stocks of enemy equipment, while suffering 23 wounded in the engagement.

Following the brief but heavy fighting west of Charlie-2, Schulze's battalion shifted its operations into the western portion of the Idaho Canyon area on the 13th, replacing Lieutenant Colonel Daniels' battalion. The 3d Battalion, in addition to being ordered to conduct search and destroy operations in the area of Mutter's Ridge, assumed responsibility for securing Elliott Combat Base and Route 9. Daniels' battalion, once again consolidated, moved into the southeastern portion of the area of operations and provided security for the Cam Lo District Headquarters, Charlie-3 Bridge, engineer construction crews on Route 558 south of Cam Lo, and portions of Route 9. The 1st Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Herron, remained in the center third of the area of operations conducting search and destroy operations east of Mutter's Ridge and Helicopter Valley, while providing security for Khe Gio Bridge, Fire Support Base Fuller, and its portion of Route 9. The 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry, along with the northeastern portion of the area of operations centered on Con Thien, was returned to the Army's 1st Brigade.

Few engagements took place throughout the area of operations following the mid-August shift in battalions. Although Herron's Marines sighted large groups of enemy infiltrators west of Dong Ha Mountain (Fire Support Base Fuller), and artillery and fixed-wing strikes were called, subsequent searches revealed comparatively few bodies in view of the numbers reported. As a result, Colonel Simlik increased the number of patrols and ambushes north of Fuller in order to lessen the possibility of enemy troops filtering down to interdict Route 9.

While Daniels' Marines engaged few enemy troops once they left Mutter's Ridge and moved east, 3d Battalion Marines under Lieutenant Colonel Ernest E. Evans, Jr., who had replaced Schulze on the 20th, were not as lucky. On the 22d, Company L, operating near LZ Sierra, 1,200 meters west of the 2d Battalion's encounter earlier in the month, came upon two reinforced NVA platoons occupying well-constructed, camouflaged bunkers situated in extremely steep, heavily vegetated terrain. Although one platoon of First Lieutenant James A. Burns' company was pinned down for a short time by two enemy .30-caliber machine guns, AK47s, and grenades, aggressive at-

tacks by the remainder of the company, aided by air and artillery, enabled the platoon to withdraw with few casualties. The next day, following air and artillery fires, the company swept through the extensive complex, destroying the enemy redoubt along with 10 troops and an equal number of weapons.

Toward the end of the month the level of enemy activity again rose in the western two-thirds of the area of operations. On the 28th, Captain Gerald H. Sampson's Company B, 1st Battalion began a five-day-long series of engagements, resulting in 13 enemy killed. The first occurred approximately two kilometers north of Fuller when a reinforced NVA sapper platoon probed the company's night position. A vicious grenade, RPG, and small arms battle then ensued, during which the Marines of Company B repulsed the attack at a cost of three casualties—among them Captain Sampson. Three days later and 700 meters further north, Marines manning the perimeter observed seven to 10 NVA moving toward the company's night position, preparing again to attack. The Marines took the enemy under small arms fire, killing three and capturing their weapons. As the company swept north near the crest of Mutter's Ridge on the 1st of September, four more enemy troops were caught by Marine sharpshooters.

As Company B and the remainder of the regiment settled into night defensive positions on 2 September, Typhoon Diane swept ashore with 50-knot winds, wreaking havoc throughout the province. Despite little warning, the companies weathered the two-day storm. As First Lieutenant Terry Engle, Commanding Officer, Company I, 3d Battalion, later reported: "Somebody had failed to inform us that a typhoon was on the way Being ill prepared and not having any time to set up good hootches or dig real good holes, I suffered some casualties, mainly eight cases of trenchfoot, and felt I was going to suffer a lot more because of the cold, the rain, and the people standing in the water all night long The weather also hurt the NVA quite a bit, so I didn't worry about being attacked, at least during the typhoon."⁶

Installations, however, suffered most; roofs were blown off buildings, tents leveled, and there was extensive water damage to supplies and equipment. Fortunately, casualties were few throughout the regimental area: one Marine was seriously injured in a bunker collapse, and one killed when a watchtower at Cua Viet in which he was standing toppled to the ground.

After the short hiatus caused by Diane, enemy activity around LZ Sierra and LZ Mack in the western



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Despite rough terrain and suffocating temperatures, men of Company H, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines were required by division order to cover 1,000 meters per day while on patrol.

third of the Idaho Canyon area of operations again increased, although incidents were generally small in scale and brief. On the morning of 5 September, as First Lieutenant Engle's Company I occupied a night position near LZ Mack, company Marines detected movement beyond the perimeter. One NVA, thought to be point for a larger unit, was taken under fire. The call then went out, "we have movement on the lines," and Engle's Marines immediately went to 100 percent alert, donning their flak jackets, helmets, and manning the perimeter. Engle then called artillery, 61mm mortar, and three flights of fixed-wing within 400 meters of the company's position. The 3d Platoon then swept the area, finding three wounded enemy soldiers, two of whom were evacuated. During later interrogation of one of the prisoners, it was learned that he was part of four 10-man teams from the *1st Company, 1st Battalion, 9th NVA Regiment* who were under orders to attack and overrun Company I. The prisoners, whose ages ranged from 14 to 16, had spent one month training in Quang Binh Province, North Vietnam, and one month in combat below the DMZ. He also stated that morale in his unit was low due to the lack of food and supplies, destroyed by American air strikes, and that few of his comrades were willing to fight because they had received no mail from home in months. As later events would show, the prisoner spoke only for himself.

Another pause occurred between 8 and 11 September due to a ceasefire agreement, in observance of Ho Chi Minh's death on 3 September. A division order directed companies in the field to continue to move at least 1,000 meters per day, maintain a "defensive attitude," and not to call for artillery or air unless engaged. With his company on Mutter's Ridge, First Lieutenant Engle felt the order unjustified due to the "dangerous" location. His fears for the safety of his men proved accurate for on the 10th, as Company I swept through a site below LZ Sierra where several enemy troops had been observed, his 1st Platoon unknowingly walked into a typical "U"-shaped ambush, initiated by command detonated mines, small arms, and automatic weapons fire. Returning fire, Engle's Marines withdrew and called for artillery, but due to the truce, they were informed they would be limited to two rounds per gun, after three adjustments to register on target. Huey gunships, although under similar truce restraints, pounded the area with rockets, killing six NVA. Sweeping the ambush site, Engle's troops found an extensive complex of fighting holes and one additional NVA, all of which they des-

troyed. Company I then moved east, "that continual click, . . . to get out of the area," off Mutter's Ridge and south to Elliott Combat Base, where the Marines received beer, got haircuts and shaves, and relieved Company L on the base perimeter.⁷

Three days later, as Company L moved towards Mutter's Ridge to replace Company I, a scout dog alerted to enemy troops ahead, and First Lieutenant James A. Burns ordered a machine gun brought to the front. An unknown size NVA force then opened fire with small arms, RPGs, and grenades. The point platoon immediately withdrew after taking a number of casualties, including the company's commanding officer, Lieutenant Burns, and artillery, 81mm mortars, and a fixed-wing C-47 "Spooky" gunship was called on the enemy position. A sweep the following morning revealed eight enemy killed and numerous weapons scattered about the ambush site. Later the same day, Company L, now under Captain William D. Wester, moved south to LZ Bird where it joined Company M, and picked up a section of 81mm mortars for whom the company was to provide security.⁸

Meanwhile, a reinforced NVA platoon waylaid First Lieutenant Richmond D. O'Neill's Company K, while it moved toward LZ Sierra from Mack on the 15th, with claymore mines hung in trees, .30-caliber machine guns, grenade, RPG, and small arms fire. Initial casualties among O'Neill's Marines were two killed and 11 wounded. Forty-five minutes after the first firefight, the company began receiving 60mm enemy mortar fire which lasted approximately four hours, adding two more killed and 25 wounded. Lieutenant O'Neill then pulled his Marines back and allowed artillery, mortars, gunships, and fixed-wing to pound the ambush site and suspected enemy mortar positions. The Marines of Company K, in a sweep of the area, found eight NVA bodies, most killed by air.⁹

Shortly after midnight two days later, on Hill 154, adjacent to LZ Bird, a reinforced NVA company firing RPGs, small arms, and throwing grenades struck at Company L, now under the command of First Lieutenant Richard C. Hoffman. After two hours of vicious fighting, the enemy penetrated the 2d Platoon's lines, but soon were pushed back. Although Hoffman's Marines reestablished the perimeter, they continued to receive a heavy volume of RPG and machine gun fire from the northeast, despite the accurate support of five batteries of the 12th Marines, two "Spookys," and three flights of gunships. The assault and subsequent attack by fire lasted until first light when Hoffman sent out patrols to clear the field. As



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800600

Swollen by heavy monsoon rains, one of the many streams in the zone near Mutter's Ridge is forded by the men of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines during Operation Idaho Canyon.

the company's executive officer, First Lieutenant James P. Rigoulot, reported:

The whole area was littered with chicombs [grenades], pieces of flesh, skin; we found a leg down the trail. There were quite a few of them out there. One machine gun hole had 13 gooks stacked up in front of it; the nearest one was about ten feet away. That one machine gun probably saved us from being overrun; they were right on us. The area was literally infested with them all over the place. We had numerous sightings from our position on the high ground; we could see them crossing rivers and milling around the area below.¹⁰

Hoffman's men killed a total of 41, while suffering 13 dead and 23 wounded.

At 0805 the following morning, a "Bald Eagle" reaction force, Captain David M. Jordan's Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, helilifted from Vandegrift Combat Base into LZ Cardinal, southwest of Sierra. Moving out of the landing zone and then along a ridgeline to the southeast toward the beleaguered company near LZ Bird, Jordan's point element spotted and then took two enemy troops under fire. Once engaged, the NVA blew a claymore mine, forcing the rest of the company to withdraw a short distance, set up a 360-degree perimeter defense, and lay down a heavy base of fire in support of the marooned point. Gain-

ing immediate fire superiority, Jordan ordered a squad to bring the 11-man point element, nine of whom were casualties, back into the company position. Gunships and artillery strafed and bombarded the suspected enemy position and a helicopter arrived to evacuate the dead and wounded.

The exchange continued throughout the day as Jordan's Marines countered the hail of enemy grenades, heavy automatic weapons, and accurate sniper fire. Late in the afternoon, before the company could again move, enemy mortar rounds began impacting on the company's position, killing four more Marines. At dusk, another medical evacuation helicopter removed the second group of casualties, after which the company settled in for the night without the requested ammunition resupply, denied by the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. With a "Spooky" gunship on station and artillery on call, Jordan's Marines spent an "extremely quiet" night; not a shot was fired. It was so quiet that Jordan figured the 3d Marines "wrote us off the books; they thought they had lost another Marine company up there" on Mutter's Ridge.¹¹

The following morning, the company swept unopposed through the evacuated enemy position, finding nine bodies, numerous arms, and a large quantity

of equipment. As Captain Jordan later reported, "the enemy had a tremendous amount of Marine 782 gear [packs, cartridge belts], or at least U.S. issue-type, whether it came from Marine units is unknown. But they had so many Marine-type haversacks that they were using them for sandbags. They would fill the haversacks with dirt and were using these for sandbags around their positions." Not wanting to retrace its previous route of advance, Company I moved southeast along the ridgeline and then onto Hill 154, from where it lifted to Vandegrift. During their two-day sojourn with the 3d Marines, Jordan's Marines suffered nine killed and 38 wounded.¹²

After the heavy ground attack on the 17th, First Lieutenant Hoffman's company and a 63-man reaction platoon from Company H, 2d Battalion, moved off Hill 154 and onto a small hill, 300 meters southeast of LZ Bird, overlooking the Song Cam Lo. Early on the morning of the 19th, Hoffman's Marines awoke to the sound of explosions, signaling yet another attack. Shortly after 0400, an estimated NVA platoon hit the company with a heavy volume of grenades and RPG rounds; the enemy employed no small arms. Although Hoffman requested artillery, there was no illumination to adjust the rounds; "they hit all over the place." The company, even though heavily engaged for more than an hour, took no casualties in the attack. However, later that morning, after observing and then killing three NVA crossing the river below, the company took two RPG rounds, one of which detonated a friendly mortar round, killing one Marine and wounding eight. These nine proved to be the last casualties the company took. That night the company moved to LZ Pete, linked up with Company M, and the next morning, lifted out of the area of operations. "When we left LZ Pete," the executive officer reported, "we lifted out with a fighting strength, counting attachments, of 92 people, and we walked in [on 13 August] with 156."¹³

Although a majority of the activity within the area of operations centered around Landing Zones Sierra and Mack during the last weeks of Idaho Canyon, the 1st and 2d Battalions persisted in their pursuit of the NVA. Working north of Fire Support Base Fuller, Lieutenant Colonel Herron's 1st Battalion continued to conduct aggressive search and destroy operations east of Mutter's Ridge and Helicopter Valley, meeting light enemy resistance. Lieutenant Colonel Daniels' 2d Battalion, occupying the easternmost portion of the area of operations, saturated the Cam Lo District with

patrols and ambushes, and like the 1st Battalion, it too had little contact. Both battalions continued their efforts until mid-September when the regiment alerted Daniels' battalion and then directed it to relieve the 3d Battalion at Elliott Combat Base and on Mutter's Ridge on the 19th. But before the shift could take place, the division ordered the 3d Marines to cease all offensive operations and to stand down in preparation for redeployment from Vietnam.

During the 68-day operation, a marked change occurred in the character and tactics of the enemy. At the outset, the NVA operated in small units, concentrating on ambushes, stand-off attacks by fire, and minelaying along roads, all under the cover of darkness. By the 23d day, 7 August, Colonel Simlik's Marines faced well-equipped, well-trained enemy units of battalion size, later determined to be the three battalions of the *9th NVA Regiment*. Surprise, use of heavy firepower, and a violent determination to maintain contact now characterized enemy initiated attacks. Engagements, previously terminated at sunrise, continued into daylight, where the enemy would be most vulnerable to Marine supporting arms. To counter the effects of these tactical changes, the 3d Marines employed deliberate, careful, and methodical search and destroy techniques, coupled with the intelligent use of artillery and air power, which left the NVA only three options: move to a new position, thereby exposing troops; remain in position and fight; or attack. And as the final totals, 563 enemy killed and 201 weapons captured, indicated, the 3d Marines proved ready and eager to meet the NVA in whichever course of action the enemy chose.

"A Significant Step"

The standdown of the 3d Marines signaled the beginning of the second phase of redeployment. In the midst of the first United States troop withdrawal from South Vietnam, consideration was given to further troop reductions. At Midway in early June, President Nixon had suggested that a decision on future withdrawals would be made in August or shortly thereafter. Others recommended an accelerated withdrawal. Writing in the summer issue of *Foreign Affairs*, former Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford proposed the withdrawal of 100,000 troops by the end of the year and all ground combat troops by the end of December 1970.¹⁴ On 19 June, in commenting on Clifford's proposal, President Nixon stated: "We have started to withdraw forces. We will withdraw more. Another decision will be made in August." Refusing to indicate

a specific number, the President did note that “as far as how many will be withdrawn by the end of the year, or the end of next year, I would hope that we could beat Mr. Clifford’s timetable.”¹⁵

As a result of the President’s comments at the June news conference, planning for additional troop reductions began at all levels. MACV was to assess progress and submit a proposal on further reductions together with a detailed troop list by 10 August in preparation for a presidential announcement on the subject around the 15th, and withdrawal in September. Both MACV and the Joint Chiefs of Staff assumed that the second withdrawal would be 25,000, although the President and Secretary of Defense Laird had expressed a desire that the total reduction for the year was to exceed the Clifford figure of 100,000.

On 30 July, President Nixon paid an unscheduled visit to South Vietnam during the course of a trip to the Pacific and then to Europe. There he talked with both President Thieu and General Abrams not only

Two riflemen of Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines pause for a rest and cigarette during a heavy thunderstorm while on patrol just below Mutter’s Ridge.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800598



about the current situation, but also about further United States troop reductions.¹⁶ In Abrams’ conversations with Nixon, the general noted that while a second withdrawal of 25,000 was feasible, considering the improvements made by the RVNAF, he was opposed to a larger figure. Nevertheless, the President returned to Washington convinced that the next reduction could be more than 25,000 combat troops, with headquarters and support forces making up the difference.

Early in August, MACV and CinCPac submitted their assessments of the initial troop withdrawal and their views on future reductions. Both recommended a maximum reduction of 25,000. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, likewise, recommended a withdrawal of 25,000 which could begin in late September and be completed by the end of November, barring a significant change in the enemy situation. They could not recommend a higher figure due to current enemy disposition throughout South Vietnam and status of the RVNAF, still overly dependent on extensive American support.

Unwilling to limit the reduction to 25,000, both the President and Secretary Laird asked the Joint Chiefs to reconsider their recommendations and to propose an alternative that would reduce the troop ceiling well below that of 499,500 proposed by MACV. What emerged at the end of August was a revised Phase II package that reduced the Vietnam authorization to 484,000 by 15 December. Of the 40,500 spaces included, 9,500 would not be filled, meaning an actual reduction of 31,000. In submitting the revised package to the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned that such a reduction without substantial decline in the enemy threat placed not only the remaining troops, but the Government of South Vietnam at serious risk and was without justification on military grounds.

Planning for redeployment went hand-in-hand with that of Vietnamization. On 25 August, the Joint Chiefs submitted the final Vietnamization, or T-Day plan to the Secretary of Defense, completing the exercise begun with the preparation of the initial plan in May. In addition to the objectives set forth in the initial plan, the final plan included a number of military guidelines: emphasis was to be placed on combined military operations, protection of populated areas, pacification, and improvement of the RVNAF in accordance with the “one war” concept; combined United States-South Vietnamese operations would

continue out of necessity and in order to improve the effectiveness of the RVNAF; as feasible, as United States units and then South Vietnamese were withdrawn from selected areas, Regional and Popular Forces and then internal security forces were to assume responsibility; American residual forces were not only to furnish the South Vietnamese with combat and service support, but to relieve South Vietnamese forces of responsibility for pacification and be prepared for emergency reinforcement; as combat responsibility progressively was transferred to the RVNAF, U.S. forces would be redeployed; and current programs whose goal was to expand South Vietnamese forces would be continued. Incorporating the timetables included in the initial plan, the Joint Chiefs proposed a reduction of 264,000 in 18 months and 282,000 in 42 months. As in the initial plan, they concluded that Vietnamization should proceed on a "cut-and-try" basis, with periodic assessments of the situation determining the pace.

By early September, President Nixon had reviewed both the final plan for Vietnamization and Phase II redeployment recommendations. On the 12th, he met with his political and military advisers and informed them that he had accepted the Joint Chiefs of Staff revised redeployment package and that he would announce it formally on the 16th. As to the final plan for Vietnamizing the war, the President made no decision, but he did specify that any further troops withdrawals would be based on full consideration of the three previously set-forth criteria. By postponing a decision, the President in effect adopted the Joint Chiefs' "cut-and-try" approach to redeployment.¹⁷

In a televised statement on the night of the 16th, the President announced that "after careful consideration with my senior civilian and military advisers and in full consultation with the Government of Vietnam, I have decided to reduce the authorized troop ceiling in Vietnam to 484,000 by December 15." Under the newly authorized ceiling, he noted, a minimum of 60,000 troops would be withdrawn by mid-December. It was, he concluded, "a significant step" in which "both sides turned their faces toward peace rather than toward conflict and war."¹⁸ With the President's announcement, movement planning within the Pacific Command got underway.

Planning by FMFPac and III MAF for Phase II, code-named Keystone Cardinal, of the division's redeployment had been carried out simultaneously with the deployment of the 9th Marines and was completed

with the departure of the last elements of the regimental landing team. The timing and composition of the Marine contingent of the 31,000-man reduction, however, remained unresolved until the President's announcement, despite the fact that only two choices existed: Colonel Simlik's 3d Marines or Colonel Goggin's 4th Marines. Once FMFPac and III MAF had made the decision, it remained closely held, as Colonel Simlik later remembered:

We were in the ridiculous situation of the Division commander being forbidden to tell the Regimental commander that his regiment would be deployed out of Vietnam. But there were rumors, and I let the Division staff know that I knew that my regiment would be moving. There were some comic-opera exchanges. I guess the administration, Washington that is, was afraid the press would break the news before the event took place. But the press was not fooled. I recall reporters coming to my CP and saying, "Well, what is your reaction about the withdrawal?" And I had not been informed, officially, and I had to play it awfully dumb. And of course rumors got down to the troops, and this had an impact upon the fighting morale of the troops because nobody, of course, wanted to be the last man killed. And I'm convinced the enemy had some wind of it, too, because during that time they staged a couple of vicious local attacks against our patrols.¹⁹

With the president's announcement on the 16th, III MAF ordered the 3d Marines and its direct support elements (1st Battalion, 12th Marines; Company B, 3d Engineer Battalion; Company B, 11th Engineer Battalion; Company C, 3d Medical Battalion; Company B, 3d Motor Transport Battalion; Company B, 9th Motor Transport Battalion; Company A, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion; Company A, 3d Shore Party Battalion; and the 3d Bridge Company), making up the regimental landing team, to stand down in preparation for redeployment on 1 October to the United States.

On 20 September, elements of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines lifted out of the field to Vandegrift Combat Base, and then moved by truck to Quang Tri Combat Base. "It was not an ordinary withdrawal from lines," noted Colonel Simlik, "no unit came on-line to relieve us. Other on-line units extended their lines in order to fill the large gap when we pulled out. And it was a large gap."²⁰ During the next two days, the remaining elements of the regiment and its support units withdrew from combat and moved to either Dong Ha or Quang Tri Combat Bases, where, because of the weather, they found themselves "hip high in mud."²¹

As elements of the 3d Marines withdrew, the 4th Marines shifted east, occupying Elliott Combat Base and Fire Support Base Fuller, and the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) moved west, closing

the gap. A large portion of the 4th Marines area of operations was then redesignated a reconnaissance zone, and Fire Support Bases Russell, Cates, Shepherd, and Hill 950 leveled. After a short period, Vandegrift Combat Base, too, would be closed, as both the 1st ARVN Division and the 101st Airborne Division, which was to assume the mission of screening the western portion of Quang Tri Province, rejected the offer of occupying the vacated Marine bases, wishing instead to build new ones, as Major General William K. Jones later recalled:

We started closing back on Vandegrift. That meant closing down fire support bases, and it became obvious that the last one we wanted to close was Fuller because that was defending Vandegrift from the north there, of course, and Cates which was a brand new one that we'd built that overlooked Khe Sanh that was controlling Route 9 coming from west to east. At that stage of the game, the 101st Airborne was directed to take over. They were to have a screening mission in front of the 1st ARVN Division which was to take over the 3d Division headquarters at Dong Ha and the whole

area that we were vacating in Quang Tri. So, the 101st took a look and they decided they didn't want to keep any of our fire support bases. I don't understand why because they opened up some new ones and they weren't as good. It didn't make sense, but it was just one of those things. So we had to close down these bases.²²

Although preparations for the regimental landing team's redeployment went well, despite the limited time available, a number of problems arose. During the few days at Quang Tri and Dong Ha before either being flown to Da Nang for departure or transferred to another Marine unit under the "Mixmaster" program, 3d Marines tempers flared. "Marines who had fought a common enemy just a few days earlier, now fought each other." "I'm convinced," Colonel Simlik later recounted, "that part of the problem was caused by a group of journalists who came up while we were on-line and asked to interview troops I later learned that they asked a number of racially inflammatory questions. They segregated some black Marines,

President Nixon and South Vietnamese President Thieu, accompanied by, from left, Special Advisor Henry Kissinger, Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, and American Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, descend the steps of Independence Palace during the American president's unannounced visit to Saigon in July, when troop withdrawals were again discussed.

Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC651157





Department of Defense Photo (USA) C55922

Discussing the planned withdrawals, Gen Earle G. Wheeler, left, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Gen Creighton W. Abrams, center; and Adm John S. McCain, Commander in Chief, Pacific, meet at MACV Headquarters in Long Binh, outside of Saigon.

for instance, and asked, 'Isn't it true that you've done more than your share?' and this sort of thing. This eventually planted seeds of discontent which erupted in violence in the rear areas," resulting in the murder of one Marine.²³

With Simlik's ability to control the regiment "lessening rapidly in the fast moving events," the division requested that the troops be moved "out of the explosive environment as quickly as possible." Although FMFPac complied with the requested change in movement schedules, many continued to question the underlying reason. In answer, Colonel Raymond C. Damm, chief of the division's Redeployment Planning Group said that he "thought the Marine Corps could ill afford a racially inspired riot in the middle of a redeployment that the world was watching." With that response, all questioning ceased.²⁴

One of the most aggravating problems proved to be passing Department of Agriculture inspection. All gear, all equipment, and all vehicles being returned to the United States had to be spotless, so as to prevent the introduction of any foreign insect or plant disease. But with "the mud of Vietnam, with vehicles that had been in combat only a few days before, this was a very difficult task to accomplish." As a result, Marine engineers quickly set up hosing-down facilities at the Cua Viet embarkation point where all equipment was scrubbed before being loaded on board ship. It "was one of those little things which you don't ordinarily think of that gave us headaches," noted Colonel Simlik, "but it created all sorts of scheduling problems and initially slowed down our operations quite a bit."²⁵

Five days prior to the embarkation of the equipment and troops, III MAF informed the regiment that President Nixon was interested in journeying to the Marine Corps Air Station at El Toro to welcome the 3d Marines. As Colonel Simlik later recounted:

We wiped the mud from our boots, and took 150 Marines eligible for rotation to the States down to the airbase at Da Nang. The word was that when we disembarked from the airplane at El Toro we were to be in starched utilities, bright new helmet covers, and spit-shined boots. FLC [Force Logistic Command] somehow rounded up the gear for us, and for three days we practiced getting on and off a 707 airplane so we would look sharp for the President We brought 150 from Dong Ha to Da Nang, and pared this down to 135, a 707 load When we landed at Okinawa, the first stop on the way back, we confounded the air controllers by staging a dress rehearsal. And so we flew back to the States, changing into new uniforms 15 minutes from El Toro. Of course, the President was not there; [Under] Secretary [of the Navy] John Warner was It was a strange war indeed.²⁶

Colonel Simlik, having not completed his tour, flew back to the 3d Marine Division and the mud of Dong Ha.

On 1 October, the rest of the 3d Marines departed Dong Ha for Da Nang where, on the 5th, they boarded the *Washburn* (LKA 108), *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2), and the *Bexar* (LPA 237). The majority of the regimental landing team's support elements remained behind, being scheduled to depart from Cua Viet. The following day, as the amphibious ships departed Da Nang Harbor, III MAF passed command of the 3d Marines to the 5th Marine Amphibious Brigade, Camp Pendleton, California. Of the 3d Marine Division's infan-

try regiments in Quang Tri Province, only the 4th Marines remained.

Specter of Anarchy

The incident of violence which erupted among the Marines of Colonel Simlik's regiment was symptomatic of the gradual deterioration of discipline and unrest affecting all the Armed Services. By late 1969, riots and acts of sabotage had occurred at a number of military bases and on board ship; officers and enlisted men alike had refused assignment to Vietnam; small groups of troops had refused to fight; drug abuse and minor defiance of regulations had become commonplace; and officers and noncommissioned officers had faced the threat of assassination ("fragging") by their own men. In addition, an ever-increasing number of servicemen had joined radical groups whose aims included ending the war and revolutionizing the Services, and militant blacks had set themselves apart by the use of "Black Power" symbols, and had actively challenged authority citing alleged discrimination as the basis of their discontent.

These problems facing the military resulted not only from the carrying over of the divisions and tensions then existing within American society, but from the nature of the Vietnam War itself. Unlike other conflicts, active combat in Vietnam was not continuous, resulting, as the war progressed, in increasing periods of boredom and restlessness. This boredom and restlessness oftentimes manifested itself in excessive drinking, drug abuse, and violence, especially among those troops occupying secure rear areas. Length of assignment, frequent personnel turnover, and inadequate training also had an affect, as did the prospect of redeployment. Men found it increasingly difficult to maintain a sense of purpose in a war that was unsupported at home and coming to an end without decisive results.

For III MAF Marines in 1969, the most disruptive and difficult to understand problem was that of violence among their ranks, violence toward officers and NCOs and violence among white and black Marines. "This war has produced one form of felony that no other war has ever had; more despicable and inexplicable thing [than] in any wars that I have ever seen," noted Colonel Robert H. Barrow. "And that is the felonious attack of one Marine against another, very often with a hand grenade." During World War II and Korea, he recalled, "you always heard these stories about somebody allegedly said that if so-and-so didn't

do such-and-such in the next battle, he would get it in the back. I don't think this ever happened. I don't think anyone ever recalls some officer or some NCO being killed in combat by his own troops intentionally. In Vietnam, yes. We had several of these."²⁷

The number of "fraggings," the attempted murder of an officer or NCO by an enlisted man, often by means of an M26 fragmentation grenade, increased dramatically in 1969. During the first five months of the year, the 3d Marine Division reported 15 such incidents.²⁸ Similar incidents also occurred in the 1st Division, 1st Aircraft Wing, and Force Logistic Command.* Of the 15 fraggings which took place in the 3d Marine Division, most occurred in secure rear areas such as Vandegrift and Quang Tri Combat Bases, and were committed by enlisted men against NCOs and junior officers. Motives varied from drug disputes and racial hatred to the desire to rid the unit of a particularly aggressive commander.

Of the 3d Marine Division incidents, the most indicative was that of the murder of First Lieutenant Robert Timothy Rohweller, Commanding Officer, Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines on 21 April. As Lieutenant Colonel Elliott R. Laine, Jr., commanding the battalion, recalled:

[Lieutenant Rohweller] was a mustang and, as a matter of fact, had a previous tour in Vietnam as a sergeant in Recon. He was a hardcharger and widely recognized as a superior leader As it happened, there were six Marines in the rear who didn't care to go forward and the 1stSgt was apparently unable to force them to do so. This continued for several days until Lt Rohweller left FSB Vandegrift for the company rear. Upon confronting the recalcitrant six, . . . the six conspired to kill the Lt by fragging him. Apparently aware that the confrontation was not finally resolved, Lt Rohweller was wary enough that he went to chow that evening with his .45 stuck in the waistband of his cammies, under his shirt, and later to the club, similarly armed. A frag grenade was acquired and two of the six . . . went to the hut where the Lt was sleeping The fragging itself involved one of the six [who] . . . rolled the grenade into the hootch Though he was quickly evacuated by jeep, [Lieutenant Rohweller] died within an hour or so.²⁹

The company executive officer immediately held a formation and the accused were apprehended. Of the six Marines involved, four were charged with the murder and of the four, one was granted immunity in exchange for his testimony against the others. The re-

*Records are nonexistent or incomplete as to the number of fraggings which took place in 1969 among the Marine units of III Marine Amphibious Force.

maining three were tried by courts-martial and two convicted and one found not guilty.

Procedures to deal with the apprehension and conviction of the perpetrators varied. Whether out of fear or friendship, Marines hesitated to turn in their peers, despite appeals which pointed out that it was "against their family upbringing, against their religion, against their concept of America and fair play, and of the Marine tradition." Initially, each individual commander had his own "pet idea" of what should be done, ranging from an immediate response to any intimidation, no matter how minor, to looking the other way. But by mid-1969, Major General William K. Jones, Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, felt that the problem had grown to such an extent that a formal response was necessary, even demanded. "Basically," he recalled "it was that you just don't put up with this stuff and you go after these guys and you don't allow them to utilize the technique of intimidation to hide behind and to terrorize their fellow Marines."³⁰

In July, Jones issued a set of procedures to deal with the apprehension of individuals involved in acts of violence against Marines of the command. Under the procedures, any fragging or other act of violence would be met with a swift, massive reaction which was to be thorough, serious, and determined in detecting and apprehending violators. Military police or an infantry reaction force immediately would isolate the area of the incident. Commanders would assemble their men and conduct a roll call, so as to determine who was missing and who was in that area that should not be. All sergeants and below would then be ordered to their living quarters and directed to stay there until called for, while teams led by an officer searched the incident site and each tent or hut. Meanwhile, an interrogation area would be set up where Criminal Investigation Division personnel, assisted by the unit legal officer, would question each Marine about the incident privately, assuring him of the commanding general's promise to protect those who would identify the guilty and testify. This process would continue until

Marines of Headquarters and Service Company and Maintenance Company, Logistic Support Group Bravo meet in an intramural football game at Dong Ha. An active intramural sports program was one of many means used to defuse rising tensions in rear areas.

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center



all suspects had been identified and arrested. All leave and personnel rotations were to be postponed until the process was complete.³¹ In addition to the SOP, Jones also ordered all division clubs closed by 2130 and imposed a 2200 curfew; the Military Police Company to be carried overstrength; the creation of an intramural athletic program; and institution of regularly-held commander's conferences on the subject.³²

These changes had an effect, as did the redeployment of the division to Okinawa, later in the year. Jones' SOP would be used as a basis for developing Operation Freeze, instituted by III MAF the following year. The operation and its associated measures produced not only a decline in the number of fraggings, but a rise in the number of cases solved.

Equally troubling to Marine commanders was the problem of racial tension. Since the integration of the Services in the late 1940s and early 1950s, all military specialties were open to Marines of all races; formal discrimination in promotions and assignments was forbidden; and the command structure, on-base housing, and recreational facilities were completely desegregated. While white and black Marines lived and worked together in integrated units, *de facto* segregation remained. On and off duty, Marines resegregated themselves. In dining facilities, recreational areas, and clubs, Marines tended to break up into small groups along racial lines. In spite of the formal abolition of discrimination in duty assignments, black Marines tended not to be assigned to the more highly technical military specialties because of educational and social disadvantages, and possibly prejudice. In liberty areas near Marine bases, there were facilities which catered exclusively to one race or the other, as did a majority of off-base private rental housing.

By the late 1960s, after years of civil rights agitation and progress, a large proportion of blacks entering the Marine Corps were unwilling to accept these remaining vestiges of real or perceived discrimination and prejudice. Imbued with a feeling of racial pride, they requested "soul" food in the messhalls and "soul" music in the clubs, wore "Afro" haircuts, and used "Black Power" salutes. A small minority, however, aggressively challenged the chain of command by attempting to form an alternative power structure and actively created or intensified racial grievances. These groups of militants also singled out whites and non-conforming blacks for retribution. Typically, quarrels broke out in enlisted men's clubs and culminated in groups of blacks roaming the base attacking white Marines. In retaliation, whites assaulted blacks.

Such outbreaks of racial violence by late 1968 were common to most major Marine bases throughout the world. In October, III MAF experienced a series of incidents with racial overtones, varying in degree of violence from large-scale riots to individual fights, muggings, and robberies. In response to the serious situation, General Cushman established a system of committees to monitor and recommend appropriate action on racial tensions, the rising number of incidents, and to serve as focal points for problems in race relations. The I Corps Tactical Zone Watch Committee, composed of representatives of each major subordinate and component command, was to meet to discuss incidents and the proposed responses. Subordinate command committees were to receive, discuss, and take action on reports received from "Action Committees," composed of junior officers and NCOs of varying ranks and races. The local action committees were to advise the command on race relations, serve as a focal point for the collection of information bearing on racial activities, and act as a sounding board for possible injustice and prejudice.³³

The III MAF committee structure remained in effect throughout 1969. Although meeting regularly, the local action committees soon seemed to degenerate into debating platforms for militants or into general "gripe" sessions on nonracial issues. As a result, the local committee system was revamped in 1970 to deal almost exclusively with race relations and not with "gripes," which could better be handled through the normal chain of command.

In an effort to deal with the problem Corps-wide, General Chapman, on 2 September, issued ALMAR 65, a directive to all Marines on "Race Relations and Instances of Racial Violence within the Marine Corps." Prefacing his remarks with the admonition that acts of violence between Marines "cannot be tolerated, and must stop," the Commandant declared:

It is now and has long been our policy in the Marine Corps that discrimination in any form is not tolerated. It has similarly been our policy that a fighting organization such as ours must have a solid foundation of firm, impartial discipline. It is in the context of these two basic policies that we must take measures to dispel the racial problems that currently exist.

Chapman instructed all Marine commanders to make "positive and overt efforts to eradicate every trace of discrimination, whether intentional or not." He directed them to identify the "causes of friction, rather than the symptoms," to discuss them frankly and openly, and to eliminate them wherever possible. Chapman

urged all officers and NCOs, in their roles as leaders and instructors, to combat racial strife and ensure that every Marine understands that the Marine Corps "guarantees equal rights, equal opportunity, and equal protection, without regard to race, and will continue to do so." In what was to become the most controversial portion of the directive, the Commandant instructed commanders to permit the wearing of the "Afro/Natural haircut provided it conforms with current Marine Corps regulations." In addition, he forbade any "actions, signs, symbols, gestures, and words which are contrary to tradition" to be used during formations or in rendering military courtesies to the flag, the national anthem, or individuals. However, he declared that "individual signs between groups or individuals will be accepted for what they are—gestures of recognition and unity; in this connection, it is the Marine Corps policy that, while such actions are to be discouraged, they are nevertheless expressions of individual belief and are not, in themselves, prohibited."³⁴ Chapman's sanctioning of "Afro" haircuts and "Black Power" salutes was to draw immediate criticism from many Marines who viewed the approval as divisive and constituted the granting of special privileges to a minority.³⁵

In addition to ALMAR 65, Headquarters Marine Corps established the Equal Opportunities Branch to deal with minority group problems affecting the entire Corps and began a concerted drive to recruit more black officers.³⁶ Although progress in resolving racial conflicts was slow in 1969, III MAF's committee system and ALMAR 65 established the basic framework upon which the Corps could build in the area of race relations into the 1970s.

Next to fraggings and racial tension, the rapidly increasing use of drugs troubled Marine commanders. In 1967, MACV identified 1,713 military personnel who possessed or used illegal drugs out of a total troop strength of 468,000. The problem at that time was considered minor; "there is no epidemic of marijuana use," reported III MAF.³⁷ By 1969, the opposite was true; drug abuse among American troops had reached crisis proportions. As Colonel Peter J. Mulroney, Commanding Officer, 12th Marines, told a group of his peers at FMFPac Headquarters in July 1969, the use of drugs, especially marijuana, "is more widespread than anyone would care to admit. Every one of my battalions has investigations going on all the time. It is almost impossible to keep somebody that wants to get marijuana from getting it. [It is] sold

at every roadside ville and peddled by all the civilians."³⁸ Unit commanders conservatively estimated that half their men were involved with drugs.

Among III MAF Marines, marijuana was the most prevalent narcotic, followed by illegally obtained stimulants and barbiturates. Heroin use remained rare. Marines from all racial, social, economic, and education levels used drugs in about equal proportions. Troops in the field commonly avoided drugs, while among those in rear areas and support units drug use at times raged out of control. "To keep it out of the boonies is easy enough," noted Colonel Barrow, "I don't know who the hell is going to bring it to them unless the helicopter drivers get into the business of pushing. But in the rear is the real problem. It is kind of very easy to come by. The rear produces a certain amount of boredom; it's a way of looking for excitement, or they think so."³⁹

In an effort to deal with the problem, III MAF, like other Vietnam commands, relied heavily on troop education. Commanders were to impress upon the individual Marine the moral evils, legal consequences, and physical hazards of drug use. When education failed, as it often did, III MAF resorted to the strict enforcement of Naval Regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice which prohibited the possession and use of narcotics. "There is no need to talk about if it is a drug, habit forming, or injurious to the health," noted Colonel Mulroney, "these are medical considerations that most people, and I am one of them, are not qualified to talk about The way it has to be attacked, I feel, is that there is a military regulation that prohibits the possession and use; . . . that has to be enforced."⁴⁰

Commanders and noncommissioned officers routinely searched vehicles as well as troop living quarters and work areas. Strict controls were placed on the movement of personnel in rear areas and increased emphasis was placed on troop supervision; "you have to have the officers, staff NCOs, and the sergeants constantly checking, knowing what their men are doing, and supervising them, so that there is a constant fear that somebody is looking over your shoulder when you go to pull out that marijuana cigarette."⁴¹ Whenever possible, pushers and users were arrested and prosecuted. Finding the offenders, however, proved difficult. Peer pressure, threats, and "misplaced loyalty" hampered the collection of evidence and successful prosecution. Some young officers and staff NCOs excused drug use during off-duty hours by Marines needed in the unit. Those caught received courts-martial or were

recommended for an administrative discharge. The administrative discharge would come into ever-increasing use during the early 1970s, not only to rid the Service of drug users, but those that did not meet the Marine Corps' performance and disciplinary standards.

In spite of drug use, racial tension and violence, and

occasional fraggings, III MAF and its subordinate commands remained unaffected in the accomplishment of its varied combat missions during 1969. Nevertheless, these problems did draw the command attention necessary to deal effectively with a number of social and personnel issues that previously had been ignored.

CHAPTER 10

'A Difficult Phase'

Maintaining a Protective Barrier—“You Shouldered Us”—The Brigade Takes Over

Maintaining a Protective Barrier

The last regiment to be redeployed as part of the incremental withdrawal of the 3d Marine Division was the 4th Marines. Its final months of combat before standing down, like those of the 3d, were characterized by the launching of numerous company sweeps and patrols aimed at blunting the introduction of enemy personnel and equipment.

The first day of July found Colonel William F. Goggin's regiment engaged in the last phases of Operation Herkimer Mountain in an area of operations generally extending from the Demilitarized Zone south to Route 9, and from Vandegrift Combat Base west to the Khe Sanh Plateau. Lieutenant Colonel Clair E. Willcox's 1st Battalion, with three companies of the 3d Battalion under its operational control, had responsibility for securing Vandegrift and patrolling the rocket belt to the west. Assigned the mission of securing Fire Support Base Russell and the surrounding terrain, a 60-square-kilometer area northwest of Elliott Combat Base, was the 2d Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel William C. Britt. Lieutenant Colonel James W. Wood's 3d Battalion, with the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines attached for a short period, secured a portion of Vandegrift, Elliott Combat Base, Fire Support Base Cates, and a number of other Marine outposts stretching west along Route 9.

On the 3d, Wood's battalion, less the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, which began the process of standing down for redeployment, ended its participation in Herkimer Mountain and simultaneously began Operation Arlington Canyon. Its new area of operations centered on Nui Tia Pong and the contiguous valleys, nine kilometers northwest of Vandegrift. With a dual mission of locating and destroying enemy caches and rocket sites in the area, Company I conducted a heliborne assault into LZ Uranus on the 3d; followed by the battalion command group on the 7th; Company M's assault into LZ Cougar, six kilometers to the northwest, on the 8th; and the helilift of Company K into LZ Scotch on the 10th. Company L and Company D, 1st Battalion, walked into the area of operations from Vandegrift.

Enemy activity in the area proved to be “disappoint-

ingly slow”; sightings and any resultant engagements were light, being limited to small NVA patrols and reconnaissance teams of two to four soldiers. During extensive search operations centered on Uranus, Wood's five companies did discover a multitude of enemy bunker complexes and small ammunition caches, all of which indicated a lack of recent enemy activity.

With the area around Nui Tia Pong well-patrolled, Colonel Goggin ordered the 2d Battalion to replace the 3d, which he then directed to move south. Wood's command group had already displaced to Fire Support Base Cates, and Company D, 1st Battalion to Cua Viet, when the remaining four companies moved out of the Arlington Canyon area of operations and into that of Georgia Tar on the 23d. Previously occupied by the soon-to-be-redeployed 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, the new area of operations included Fire Support Base Cates, Hill 950, and a majority of Rocket Valley, east of Vandegrift. Once the battalion joined the new operation, Company K was assigned to the defense and improvement of Cates and Hill 950, while Companies I, L, and M moved north into the rocket belt and began an extensive sweep to the south.

Meanwhile, Colonel Goggin alerted Lieutenant Colonel Willcox's 1st Battalion on the 8th to be prepared to move to the Cua Viet In-Country R&R Center the following day. The move of Company D from the Arlington Canyon area of operation and the remainder of the battalion from Vandegrift to Cua Viet went without incident. There the battalion enjoyed two days of rest and rehabilitation before joining elements of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Brigade in Operation William's Glade. The joint Army and Marine operation, designed to “sweep the backyard,” was to take place in an area generally south of Dong Ha, west of Quang Tri, and east of Mai Loc.

On 12 July, Willcox's battalion began a sweep south from Dong Ha Combat Base, while elements of Task Force 1-61 (1st Battalion, 61st Infantry) established blocking positions east of Fire Support Base Angel and conducted reconnaissance-in-force operations to the west of the fire base. At the same time, Task Force 1-11 (1st Battalion, 11th Infantry) set up a second blocking position southwest of Dong Ha Combat Base, while

Troop A, 4th Squadron, 12th Cavalry completed the circle by establishing positions near LZ Pedro, west of Quang Tri.¹ Four days later, Willcox's battalion swept through the lines of Task Force 1-61, swinging southwest, searching the high ground between the Song Thach Han and Route 557. The terrain, consisting of small rolling hills and valleys, bisected by dry streambeds and covered with six-foot-high savannah grass proved to be no obstacle, but the hot and humid weather did, resulting in a large number of heat casualties. Although a couple of NVA were sighted and one caught in a daylight ambush, enemy activity was all but nonexistent.

Once Willcox's Marines completed their southward sweep, company-size patrols were organized for operations in the hills, north of the Ba Long Valley and south of FSB Angel. The battalion patrolled the area, with no sightings or contact, until the 22d when it returned to Vandegrift and joined Operation Georgia Tar. Elements of Task Force 1-61 continued William's Glade until the 26th, when the operation was merged with that of the brigade's primary operation, Iroquois Grove.

Men of Company D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines prepare to fire an 81mm mortar in support of company-sized patrols operating in the vicinity of Vandegrift Combat Base.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800622



reaction force. The following day, Lieutenant Colonel Wood's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines joined the operation, securing Cates and Hill 950 with one company, sending two companies on patrol into the rocket belt, and one across Route 9, to the south.

Although both battalions made use of extensive patrol operations, ambushes, and hunter-killer teams, Colonel Goggin instituted a number of precautions in response to the violent enemy attacks experienced by elements of Colonel Simlik's 3d Marines. These precautions required that all companies move at least 1,000 meters a day; that all move into night defensive positions under the cover of darkness; that all platoons be located at the company patrol base during hours of darkness; and, that there be no independent platoon operations.

Enemy activity throughout the large area of operations, however, proved to be very light during the remainder of July and into August, as reported by the battalion's operations officer, Captain Henry W. Buse III:

The enemy employed small groups of recon-type forces to simply harass us in our movement. We found out that whenever we left, pulled a company out of the rocket belt, which lay west of VCB [Vandegrift Combat Base], the enemy would rocket VCB, so consequently we tried to keep a rifle company maneuvering in that area at all times. The majority of contacts that we made, the sightings that were made, were made by reconnaissance units rather than by the infantry companies working on the ground.²

This lack of significant enemy activity and the dramatic decrease in the number of rocket attacks and mining incidents suggested to Captain Buse and others that the enemy was avoiding the area by moving south along the Khe Sanh Valley and then east through the lower Da Krong.

On 26 August, the two battalions switched primary missions and area of operations. During the day, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph A. MacInnis' 1st Battalion command group moved from Vandegrift to Cates.* The following morning, three companies of the battalion conducted a vertical assault onto the high ground, three kilometers north of Hill 950 and began a sweep of the rocket belt. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Colonel Wood's 3d Battalion assumed control of Vandegrift, Ca Lu, and that portion of the Georgia Tar area of operations contiguous to the installations. In addition to the defense and improvement of the two facilities, the battalion was to provide security for road sweeps

*On 5 August, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph A. MacInnis relieved Lieutenant Colonel Willcox as Commanding Officer, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines.

and Seabee road repair crews, while maintaining one rifle company as a reaction force and another as a reserve for the operations of "Project Delta" being conducted within the division's reconnaissance zone to the west.**

Enemy activity throughout the Georgia Tar area of operations continued at the same low level into the month of September. Although there were signs of heavy trail use and a number of bunker sites discovered indicating recent occupation, the NVA limited themselves to small-unit patrols, instead of massing for a direct confrontation with sweep elements of MacInnis' or Wood's battalions.

Towards the middle of the month, another major shift in regimental units took place. On the 11th, Lieutenant Colonel Wood's battalion, minus one rifle company, returned to the Arlington Canyon area of operations, west of the Rockpile and south of the DMZ. At the same time, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel Donald J. Garrett, who had replaced Lieutenant Colonel Britt on the 5th, helilifted out of Arlington Canyon and was given the responsibility of securing Vandegrift and Ca Lu, and of providing rifle companies for the regimental reaction and reserve forces, in addition to the search and destroy operations conducted around both installations. To accomplish these varied missions, rifle companies of both the 1st and 3d Battalions were assigned for varying lengths of time to the battalion.

With the standdown of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines on the 21st, Colonel Goggin ordered Garrett's Marines pulled out of Georgia Tar after only 10 days, and directed them to secure Elliott Combat Base, Khe Ghia Bridge, Fire Support Base Fuller, and conduct sweeps of a truncated area of operations, north of Elliott. As Garrett's battalion moved east, the 1st Battalion assumed control of the entire Georgia Tar area of operations, and with it the varying security missions.

As the division prepared for Phase II redeployment in late September, continued occupation of the

**"Project Delta," composed of Detachment B-52, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), 81st Airborne Ranger Battalion (-), two platoons, 281st Army Helicopter Company, and attached Air Force liaison and Army air relay personnel, was under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division from 4 August to 1 October. Assigned to the division's reconnaissance zone during this period, the 19 reconnaissance and 17 road runner teams, 6 Ranger companies, and 4 bomb damage assessment platoons were directed to locate and destroy enemy forces, caches, infiltration routes, and lines of communication in western Quang Tri Province. (Det B-52, 5th SpForGp, 1stSpFor AAR 3-69 [Operation Trojan Horse], n.d., in 3dMarDiv ComdC, Aug69)



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 192539

With full packs, infantrymen of Company B, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines cross a stream while on search operations in the mountainous jungles west of Elliott Combat Base.

western fire support bases appeared infeasible, and Goggin directed MacInnis' Marines to destroy and then close Cates, Shepherd, and the observation post atop Hill 950. In addition, they were to prepare for the future evacuation of Vandegrift and Ca Lu.

The slow and deliberate shift east of the 4th Marines brought with it the termination of Operation Georgia Tar on the 25th. During two months of sweeping the rocket belt and securing major western outposts, the regiment only accounted for 40 enemy dead and 15 weapons captured, while losing one killed and 23 wounded. "Overall," as Captain Buse later summarized, "Georgia Tar was relatively successful, in that it was designed to keep the enemy away from VCB, and to keep him, of course, out of that area of operations. And, he did stay away, for the most part, from the Cates area, and he very rarely bothered VCB."³ With the close of Georgia Tar, the 4th Marines continued Operation Idaho Canyon and Arlington Canyon.

While participants and reports alike characterized enemy activity within the Georgia Tar area of operations as insignificant, the same term could not be applied to the actions of NVA troops operating within the area of Arlington Canyon, to the north. Captured documents, agent reports, and strategically placed sensor strings indicated that elements of four enemy battalions, the *3d Battalion, 246th Independent*

Regiment; 3d Battalion, 9th NVA Regiment; 1st Battalion, 84th Artillery (Rocket) Regiment; and an unnumbered battalion of the 24th Independent Regiment, were using the area's extensive trail network to move men and supplies further south in order to support a buildup in the central portion of the province. While avoiding a massive, direct attack, screening and reconnaissance elements of these four battalions did not hesitate to protect their parent units, installations, or infiltration routes by employing indirect fire attacks and small unit probes against advancing 4th Marines patrols.⁴

The original task assigned Marines involved in Arlington Canyon was to halt the enemy's numerous rocket attacks against fire support bases and other major allied installations throughout the central and western portions of the division's area of responsibility. But, as the operation progressed, this mission was expanded by the need to locate and destroy enemy units known to be operating in, or moving through, the area to the southeast. To accomplish these two missions, Lieutenant Colonel Britt's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, which had replaced Lieutenant Colonel Wood's 3d Battalion in the area on 24 July, employed extensive patrols and ambushes. With one company assigned to secure and improve the defensive works of Fire Support Base Russell, Britt's remaining three companies moved out into the surrounding, heavily-

jungled, mountainous terrain. Division orders, however, prohibited offensive patrols within three kilometers of the DMZ, thus limiting operations of the three companies to the upper Cam Lo River Valley, immediately north of Russell. A second limitation imposed by division was that each rifle company move its command post and all platoons the standard one kilometer per day. This forced movement in mountainous terrain not only taxed the companies, reported the battalion's operation officer, Major James J. O'Meara, but "in order to make that click [1,000 meters] they would not effectively search any area. It became sort of a road race; you must make your click."⁵

Despite these limitations, the overburdened companies established a total of 360 ambushes and ran 270 patrols during the month of August. Contact was made on 12 different occasions, most of which resulted from sighting small groups of four to six NVA soldiers. Two, involving larger units, were significant. The first took place as Captain Harry C. Baxter, Jr.'s Company E secured its night defensive position atop Hill 715, five kilometers west of Russell, on 12 August. Shortly after midnight, two NVA sapper squads attacked that portion of the perimeter manned by Baxter's 3d Platoon. Firing AK47s and throwing satchel charges, the sappers killed two and wounded five Marines before withdrawing. Later, as a CH-46 helicopter attempted to land and evacuate the casualties, it came under heavy small arms fire, and the sappers again attempted to penetrate the perimeter. Baxter called for mortar fire and adjusted it on the enemy's position, forcing the sappers to withdraw a second time. After the completion of a second medical evacuation, "Spooky" gunships circled the perimeter, pounding the remnants of the enemy sapper squads. Baxter's Marines made a complete search of the area at first light, finding three NVA bodies and a large cache of hand grenades and satchel charges.

A week later, as Captain Francis Zavacki's Company H advanced from Dong Tiou, four kilometers northeast of Russell, towards LZ Sierra, his 1st Platoon walked into an "L"-shaped enemy ambush, initiated by claymores, grenades, and followed with small arms fire. The enemy killed three Marines outright and seriously wounded eight more. The platoon returned fire with small arms and called upon artillery and 81mm mortars for additional support. Zavacki's 3d Platoon then maneuvered toward the 1st to render assistance and evacuate the casualties to a nearby landing zone, secured by the 2d Platoon. Under pressure, the NVA

withdrew and began a mortar attack which artillery fire and fixed-wing strikes quickly suppressed. In a subsequent search of the area, the Marines found three enemy bodies.

Lieutenant Colonel Britt's, later Lieutenant Colonel Garrett's, Marines continued search and destroy operations in the 60-square-kilometer Arlington Canyon area, conducting numerous day and night squad- and platoon-size patrols and ambushes, with mixed results until 12 September, when replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Wood's 3d Battalion. On that date, Wood's command group and one rifle company displaced to Russell as two companies helilifted into the surrounding terrain: Company M into the northwest quadrant and Company K into the southern half, west of Elliott. During the next 10 days, the rifle companies, operating from patrol bases, showed little result. Offensive operations in the Arlington Canyon area of operations ceased on the 20th, when Wood directed the command group and Companies K and M to return to Vandegrift. The company on Russell remained one more day in order to begin the destruction of the fire support base, but an accidental fire, which later spread to exposed artillery ordnance, forced the premature evacuation of the hill before the mission could be completed.

The battalion command group, following its move to Vandegrift, immediately lifted to Cam Lo village, where it established a command post at the district headquarters. Companies I and K then trucked into a new, unnamed area of operations astride Route 9, which stretched from the Vinh Dai Rock Crusher to the Khe Gio Bridge, where Company K was to provide security for the command group, Cam Lo District Headquarters, and the tactically important Charlie-3 Bridge at Cam Lo; Company I was to conduct search and destroy operations north of Route 9 and west of the village. On the 22d, however, Lieutenant Colonel Wood ordered Company I temporarily into the Arlington Canyon area of operations in order to examine the damage to Russell, recover missing equipment, and complete the destruction of the fire support base, a mission which the company accomplished the following day by the blowing of all remaining structures and much of the excess ammunition. With the leveling of Fire Support Base Russell, Operation Arlington Canyon came to an end. During nearly three months of searching the rough mountainous terrain northwest of Elliott, the 2d and 3d Battalions, 4th Marines gained meager results, accounting for only 23 enemy

killed and eight weapons captured, while sustaining 10 killed and 28 wounded. The operation, according to Major James J. O'Meara, was a success, "in that the area we were assigned, . . . was thoroughly covered by 2/4, even though the rifle companies had to make that magic click a day."⁶

During the last week of September, the 4th Marines assumed control of the 3d Marines' tactical area of responsibility (Idaho Canyon), as the last elements of Colonel Simlik's regiment moved to Dong Ha in preparation for redeployment to the United States. In doing so, the 4th Marines took the responsibility of securing major installations while closing others. It was, as Colonel Gilbert R. Hershey, who had replaced Colonel Goggin on 10 August, later remembered, "one of the most difficult phases that a regiment can go through . . . picking up the brass and policing everything else that people had left for five years while you were trying to maintain a tactical posture."⁷

Tactically, Colonel Hershey positioned his three battalions strategically throughout the now diminished regimental area of operations. Lieutenant Colonel MacInnis' 1st Battalion, earlier responsible for an area of operations west of Vandegrift, on 20 September, was directed to defend the combat base and dismantle Cates, Shepherd, and the outpost atop Hill 950. The 3d Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel James W. Wood, after closing Operation Arlington Canyon, relieved the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines of its responsibilities at Cam Lo, and was also given the task of leveling Fire Support Base Russell. On the 28th, the battalion again transferred its command post and two rifle companies, this time from Cam Lo to Dong Ha. Company M provided security for a portion of the combat base's perimeter, while Company I secured the northern bank of the Cua Viet River. The battalion's vacated area near Cam Lo later passed to the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division. Lieutenant Colonel Garrett's 2d Battalion moved, following the announced plan for the withdrawal of the 3d Marines from Vietnam, to Elliott Combat Base, where it assumed responsibility for 3d Battalion, 3d Marines area and a portion of the 1st Battalion's, including Fire Support Base Fuller and Khe Gio Bridge.

At the close of the month, enemy activity throughout the regiment's new area of operations again centered on Landing Zones Sierra and Mack, near Mutter's Ridge. There were indications that the *9th NVA Regiment*, which had engaged the 3d Marines over the past several months, was continuing to infiltrate person-

nel and equipment along the Song Cam Lo in an effort to cut Route 9. Elements of Lieutenant Colonel Garrett's battalion sighted units of the elusive enemy regiment on nine different occasions, but made contact only once.

On 20 September, First Lieutenant William H. Stubblefield's Company G and a sister company helilifted into an area just north of the Song Cam Lo, near LZ Pete, in order to secure the northern approaches to Elliott Combat Base and at the same time bar enemy infiltrators from moving toward the southeast. Six days later, while the companies occupied a night defensive position on LZ Dixie Pete, 1,000 meters north of Pete, four sensor devices registered movement outside the companies' perimeter. An ambush, not far away, then reported sighting three figures moving across their front and tossed several hand grenades in the direction of the movement, which soon ceased. "I figured," noted Lieutenant Stubblefield, "OK, it stopped; whatever was causing it was gone or maybe the [sensor] batteries wore out or something. I wasn't sure how these things operated or if they were reliable at all. At that time, I said, OK, if anything desperate happens, wake me up."⁸

Two hours later, Stubblefield awoke to the crackle of enemy small arms and automatic weapons fire, followed by a heavy 60mm and 82mm mortar barrage. He called for artillery on a series of preplanned targets, but batteries delayed firing for over an hour due to the loss of original grid coordinates. Meanwhile, Stubblefield's Marines countered with heavy fire of their own, finally halting the attack and forcing the enemy sappers to withdraw. Shortly after sunrise, fixed-wing aircraft came on station and pummelled the enemy's escape routes, subsequently spotting over 11 bodies beyond the wire. A later ground search of the surrounding area revealed numerous grenades, spent shell casings, and fresh blood trails, but no bodies.⁹

The attack on Company G, in which two Marines lost their lives and 59 received wounds, proved to be one of the last enemy-initiated assaults on elements of the 3d Marine Division prior to the implementation of the final phase of Keystone Cardinal. Division intelligence analysts suspected that the enemy intended to pull his major forces back into North Vietnam in order to exploit and then fill the vacuum which he thought might occur with the division's departure and its replacement by the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) and elements of the 1st ARVN Division. Statistics kept of enemy activity during October

and November would partially support this assumption, for enemy attacks of all kinds carried out within the division's area of operations during the redeployment of the 4th Marines fell by more than 50 percent in comparison to previous months. The enemy had indeed withdrawn, but whether he was preparing for a future offensive or allowing the last elements of the 3d Marine Division to withdraw undisturbed, was not then known.

"You Shouldered Us"

The beginning of its final month in Vietnam found Colonel Hershey's 4th Marines fully operational with three battalions positioned in the north central portion, south of the Demilitarized Zone, of Quang Tri Province. But as the month progressed, each battalion would be withdrawn from combat, moved to Quang Tri Combat Base where each was to assemble with the remaining support elements of the battalion landing team, and then embark on board amphibious shipping for Okinawa. Lieutenant Colonel MacInnis' 1st Battalion, which had been assigned the task of defending Vandegrift and Ca Lu, and securing Route 9 from the combat base north 3,000 meters to the boundary between the 1st and 2d Battalions, was the first to stand down.

On 5 October, MacInnis' battalion disengaged from combat, stood down from its tactical commitments,

and displaced to Quang Tri Combat Base in order to prepare for redeployment to Okinawa. Company D, however, remained behind. Assigned to the operational control of the 2d Battalion, the company was to provide security for the 2d Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment so that the ARVN battalion could devote all of its time to the dismantling and salvaging of material from Vandegrift to be used in the construction of a new combat base at Camp Carroll. The company secured Vandegrift until relieved by a platoon from Company G on the 10th, and then it rejoined the battalion at Quang Tri. On 22 October, MacInnis' battalion boarded the *Dubuque* (LPD 8) and *Vancouver* (LPD 2) at Cua Viet, while the remainder of the battalion landing team, made up of elements of the 3d Engineer Battalion; 3d Tank Battalion; 3d Battalion, 12th Marines; 3d Bridge Company; 3d Motor Transport Battalion; and detachments of Headquarters Battalion, 3d Marine Division, and Headquarters Battery, 12th Marines, embarked on board six landing ships. By the end of the month, the landing team had arrived in Okinawa and settled into garrison duty.

The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Donald J. Garrett, continued its primary missions of defending Elliott Combat Base, Fire Support Base Fuller, Khe Gio Bridge on Route 9, and conducting offensive operations north to the

A CH-46 helicopter inserts the men of Company G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines at Pete in preparation for a two-company search and block of the ridges north of the landing zone.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193489



DMZ. In order to assist Garrett's battalion in accomplishing these missions, Colonel Hershey assigned Companies L and K, 3d Battalion, and Company D, 1st Battalion to the battalion for short periods of time. With these three additional companies, the 2d Battalion continued to conduct aggressive operations to within 1,000 meters of the Demilitarized Zone's southern boundary, uncovering numerous North Vietnamese graves and a large number of small weapons and ammunition caches. It was during this period that the regiment experienced its last engagement.

On the night of 9 October, Second Lieutenant Danny G. Dennison's 3d Platoon, Company L, stationed atop a hill three kilometers northeast of Elliott overlooking the Song Cam Lo, received a heavy barrage of 82mm mortars followed by a surprise ground attack by two reinforced platoons of NVA infantry and sappers. As Lieutenant Dennison later recalled:

The enemy at first seemed to have moved up with two two-man [teams] using AKs, to set up more or less a security force. Three men moved up to the main part of the wire throwing Chicoms and satchel charges, and then to the left of the CP [command post], a 10-man engineer team moved up also employing satchel charges and Chicoms. By watching the way the enemy was moving it seemed apparent that they had been more or less spotting our position for a week or so because they hit every key position we had.¹⁰

Soon after the first bursts of enemy grenades and satchel charges, a number of Dennison's machine gun and "blooper" (M79 grenade launcher) positions were put out of action, the wire penetrated, and the platoon's ammunition dump destroyed. With the help of a reaction force from Khe Gio Bridge, two kilometers away, "the men began moving up to set up a defensive perimeter, and grenades were used to force the enemy from the defensive wire, back out into the bush where we could get small arms fire on them." The enemy broke contact at sunrise after taking an hour of heavy artillery, mortar, and "Spooky" gunship fire on their position. A head count revealed that Dennison lost eight men killed and 17 wounded, and a search of the battlefield disclosed 10 enemy bodies.¹¹

On 22 October, Garrett's battalion disengaged from combat and displaced to Quang Tri Combat Base to prepare for embarkation to Okinawa. Company G, reinforced with a platoon from Company H, remained at Elliott Combat Base under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division in order to police and then destroy the base's fortifications, a task completed on the 25th. Company G then moved to Quang Tri, rejoined the battalion, and prepared for embarkation.

Company K, under the operational control of the 2d Battalion, returned to its parent unit, but Company L remained on Fire Support Base Fuller, under 3d Marine Division's control, until relieved by elements of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division on 5 November. Garrett's battalion, following two weeks of training, inspections, and cleaning equipment, joined the remainder of the battalion landing team and sailed for Okinawa on 6 November.

The first days of October found Lieutenant Colonel Wood's 3d Battalion, the last slated to leave, conducting offensive operations out of Dong Ha Combat Base. Company I occupied and defended a sector of the base's perimeter, while Company M operated in a separate area north of the Song Cua Viet. Company M's area of operations, established by the division, and its aggressive small-unit patrol activities and company-size search and destroy operations proved vital in keeping the river free from enemy activity. The Cua Viet was of primary interest to the regiment and division for two reasons: first, the river was the main supply route for all logistical materiel supporting the division, and second, it provided an avenue of departure for half the Marines redeploying to Okinawa. The remainder of the battalion, Companies K and L, were under the operational control of the 2d Battalion as the month began.

On 5 October, the battalion assumed complete responsibility for the defense of Dong Ha Combat Base, while at the same time continuing its security mission along the north bank of the Cua Viet. The battalion maintained this tactical posture through 22 October when Company K rejoined the battalion, and its operational control transferred from the 4th Marines to the 3d Marine Division. A month later, Wood's Marines disengaged from combat operations and began preparations for redeployment. At the same time, Company L, which had secured Fuller, under the operational control of the division since 22 October, rejoined the battalion.

Two days after terminating combat operations, Lieutenant Colonel Wood and his command group flew to Da Nang in order to participate in departure ceremonies for the division. Gathering before the Da Nang City Hall on the banks of the Song Han, a large number of dignitaries spoke of the 3d Marine Division's contributions to the war effort and the people of I Corps, principal among them Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, Commanding General, I Corps Tactical Zone. During his speech, General Lam recalled:

I still remember that memorable date of the 8th March 1965, at which I had the honor to welcome the forward elements of the 3d Marine Division landing on the beaches of Da Nang and marking the arrival of the first large scale ground combat units of U.S. Armed Forces to South Vietnam. Today, five years and more than 120 operations later, the 3d Marine Division is completing its process of redeployment, and in a few moments its last elements will embark for a journey back to the U.S., leaving behind in the memory of the South Vietnamese people the resounding echoes of a splendid combat record, with glorious names of successful operations such as Starlite, Khe Sanh, Golden Fleece, Scotland, Lancaster, Napoleon Saline, Dewey Canyon and countless others.

Concluding his remarks, General Lam noted that while gallant Marines had fallen, they had not died in vain:

You have shouldered us at the critical moment we needed you most, and now we are entirely capable of assuming the burden of this war and nothing can deter us from achieving all our cherished goals; that of defeating the Communists and bringing peace to South Vietnam. You will depart from South Vietnam, but you will leave behind a strong and prosperous nation.¹²

Among the other speakers were Lieutenant General Herman Nickerson, Jr., Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force; Major General William K.

Jones, Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, who delivered his remarks in Vietnamese; General William B. Rosson, Deputy Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam; and Mr. Nguyen Xuan, Chairman of the Citizens Council of Da Nang. Following the presentation of traditional Vietnamese leis, made of yellow and red cloth, the ceremony concluded, and Major General Jones and his principal staff officers left. At Da Nang Airfield, Jones and his staff boarded awaiting aircraft; the last to board was Division Sergeant Major Clyde M. Long, carrying the division colors. The 3d Division was on its way to Okinawa and new headquarters at Camp Courtney.¹³

On 20 November, the final division battalion landing team, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, along with the remaining elements of the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion; 3d Medical Battalion; 11th Engineer Battalion; 3d Dental Company; 4th Battalion, 12th Marines; Company C, 9th Motor Transport Battalion; and Headquarters Battalion, 3d Marine Division; moved by truck to Quang Tri Combat Base from where they flew to Da Nang and then embarked on board the *Tripoli* (LPH 10). Four days later, the battalion landing team arrived on Okinawa, after more than four years of combat service in South Vietnam.

The MACV List: Composition of Keystone Cardinal

Unit	Strength	Departure		Unit	Strength	Departure	
		Date	Destination			Date	Destination
1st Bn, 3d Mar	1,166	6 Oct	CONUS	Det, 7 Comm Bn	193	6 Oct	CONUS
Co B, 3d Engr Bn	159	2 Oct	CONUS	Co B, 9th MT Bn	91	2 Oct	CONUS
Co C, 3d Med Bn	24	2 Oct	CONUS				
1st Bn, 12th Mar	662	2 Oct	CONUS	Det 1st Bn, 4th Mar	118	7 Oct	CONUS
3d Bridge Co (-)	102	4 Oct	CONUS	Det 2d Bn, 4th Mar	118	6 Oct	CONUS
				Det 3d Bn, 4th Mar	118	6 Oct	CONUS
2d Bn, 3d Mar	1,166	6 Oct	CONUS	Det Hq Co, 4th Mar	100	6 Oct	CONUS
Hq Co (-), 3d Mar	230	7 Oct	CONUS	Det, 1st SSCT	4	6 Oct	CONUS
Det 3d Bn, 12th Mar	91	6 Oct	CONUS				
Det Hq Btry, 12th Mar	61	6 Oct	CONUS	Det, Hq III MAF	70	30 Sep	CONUS
Det Hq Bn, 3d Mar Div	436	6 Oct	CONUS	OOCNE	724	30 Sep	CONUS
				OOCNE	14	6 Oct	CONUS
Det, 11th Engr Bn	622	4 Oct	CONUS	1st Bn, 4th Mar	1,048	22 Oct	Okinawa
3d Bn, 3d Mar	1,166	7 Oct	CONUS	Det Hq Bn, 3d Mar Div	200	22 Oct	Okinawa
Det 4th Bn, 12th Mar	150	6 Oct	CONUS				
Det Hq Co, 3d Mar	24	6 Oct	CONUS	7th Comm Bn (-)	190	20 Oct	Okinawa
Co B, 3d MT Bn	68	4 Oct	CONUS	Btry G, 3d Bn, 12th Mar	133	23 Oct	Okinawa
				3d Engr Bn (-)	341	23 Oct	Okinawa
Co B, 3d SP Bn	84	2 Oct	CONUS	3d MT Bn (-)	41	20 Oct	Okinawa
Det, FLC	400	6 Oct	CONUS	3d Tk Bn (-)	345	23 Oct	Okinawa
Co A, 3d Recon Bn	143	4 Oct	CONUS				

Unit	Strength	Departure		Unit	Strength	Departure	
		Date	Destination			Date	Destination
Plt, 3d Bridge Co	21	20 Oct	Okinawa	H Btry, 3d Bn, 12th Mar	110	27 Nov	Okinawa
Hq Btry (-), 12th Mar	100	20 Oct	Okinawa	7th ITT	11	24 Nov	Okinawa
2d Bn, 4th Mar (-)	1,048	9 Nov	Okinawa	HMM-265	249	7 Oct	CONUS
Hq Bn (-), 3d Mar Div	308	9 Nov	Okinawa	OOCNE	123	6 Oct	CONUS
Hq Co (-), 4th Mar	130	6 Nov	Okinawa	Det, VMO-6	8	6 Oct	CONUS
3d Bn, 12th Mar (-)	328	5 Nov	Okinawa	Det, HMM-164	8	6 Oct	CONUS
K Btry, 4th Bn, 12 Mar	100	10 Nov	Okinawa	Det, MABS-36	89	6 Oct	CONUS
17th ITT	11	5 Nov	Okinawa	Det, H&MS-36	164	6 Oct	CONUS
11th IT	6	5 Nov	Okinawa	Det, MABS-11	20	6 Oct	CONUS
9th IT	6	5 Nov	Okinawa	Det, MABS-12	20	6 Oct	CONUS
Det Hq Btry, 12th Mar	83	9 Nov	Okinawa	Det, MABS-13	20	6 Oct	CONUS
9th MT Bn	88	4 Nov	Okinawa	Det, MABS-16	22	6 Oct	CONUS
Co B, 3d Tk Bn	140	6 Nov	Okinawa	VMA-533	304	7 Oct	CONUS
3d SP Bn (-)	228	10 Nov	Okinawa	Det, H&MS-12	69	7 Oct	Japan
1st SSCT (-)	6	8 Nov	Okinawa	HMM-164	258	20 Oct	Okinawa
15th CIT	16	3 Nov	Okinawa	VMO-6 (-)	234	22 Oct	Okinawa
3d Bn, 4th Mar	1,048	20 Nov	Okinawa	Det, VMO-6	32	22 Oct	Okinawa
Det Hq Bn, 3d Mar Div	200	24 Nov	Okinawa	HMH-462	233	20 Oct	Okinawa
Det Hq Co, 4th Mar	24	20 Nov	Okinawa	1st MAW Hq (Rear)	353	3 Nov	Japan
3d Recon Bn	309	24 Nov	Okinawa	H&MS-36 (-)	324	7 Nov	Okinawa
3d Med Bn (-)	86	24 Nov	Okinawa	MABS-36 (-)	318	23 Nov	Okinawa
11th Engr Bn (-)	103	21 Nov	Okinawa	MASS-2 (-)	123	23 Nov	Japan
3d Dental Co	3	24 Nov	Okinawa	Det, H&HS-18	18	3 Nov	Japan
4th Bn, 12th Mar (-)	152	19 Nov	Okinawa	Det, MASS-2	39	8 Nov	Okinawa
Co C, 9th MT Bn	83	22 Nov	Okinawa	Det, MABS-36	87	23 Nov	Japan

Note: All CONUS destinations refer to Camp Pendleton, California.

The departure of the 3d Marine Division brought with it a shift in Marine air assets committed to Quang Tri Province. As the division's area of operations shrank and the 3d and 4th Marines pulled back and then stood down, Colonel Owen V. Gallentine's Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 39 did the same. On 23 September, the wing directed the air group to shift its units from Quang Tri Combat Base to Phu Bai. Four days later, Major Richard W. Carr's Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 161 began its move, followed on the 30th by Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 262, commanded by Major Donald J. Meskan. Both helicopter squadrons continued to support 3d Marine Division units through 15 October, when operational control of both passed to Marine Aircraft Group 36 at Phu Bai.

Marine Observation Squadron 6, under Lieutenant Colonel Albert K. Charlton, stood down on 2 October

in preparation for redeployment to Okinawa. On the 8th, the squadron's 18 OV-10A aircraft left Quang Tri on a four-leg trip to Marine Corps Air Facility, Fute-ma, while the squadron's remaining aircraft, 11 UH-1E helicopters, and pilots moved to Phu Bai to await amphibious shipping and at the same time assist HML-367. Twelve days later, the squadron loaded its personnel and helicopters on board the *Cleveland* (LPD 7), and departed for Okinawa the following day. Of the remaining two air group units, Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron 39, commanded by Major Joseph F. Golden, was reduced to cadre strength and moved to Phu Bai, and Marine Air Traffic Control Unit 62 transferred to Marine Aircraft Group 13 at Chu Lai.*

Phase II withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Vietnam proceeded without interruption. Joining the

*For redeployment of other 1st Marine Aircraft Wing units during Phase II of Keystone Cardinal, see Chapter 13.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A1933636

Marine engineers using heavy bulldozers level and then bury accumulated debris at Vandegrift Combat Base during the standdown and withdrawal of the 4th Marines.

18,500 Marines of the 3d Division and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing were 14,000 Army personnel, including the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, and 2,600 members of the Air Force and 5,400 Navy personnel. By mid-December, American strength in Vietnam stood at 472,442—well below the goal of 484,000.

On the evening of 3 November, President Nixon reported to the American people on his administration's efforts to end the Vietnam war. Recapitulating the unsuccessful American peace initiatives and noting that 60,000 troops would be withdrawn by mid-December, the President turned to future U.S. action:

We have adopted a plan which we have worked out in cooperation with the South Vietnamese for the complete withdrawal of all U.S. combat ground forces on an orderly scheduled timetable. This withdrawal will be made from strength and not from weakness. As South Vietnamese forces become stronger, the rate of American withdrawal can become greater.

A specific timetable was not mentioned, as it would remove any incentive for the enemy to negotiate: "They would simply wait until our forces had withdrawn and then move in." The timing, he said, was flexible and would depend on the three factors previously mentioned—progress at the Paris talks, the level of enemy activity, and the improvement of the RVNAF.

He warned the North Vietnamese not to misinterpret American intentions:

Hanoi could make no greater mistake than to assume that an increase in violence will be to its advantage. If I conclude that increased enemy action jeopardizes our remaining forces in Vietnam, I shall not hesitate to take strong and effective measures to deal with the situation.

Concluding his remarks, the President said the United States had two choices in ending the war: "an immediate, precipitate withdrawal of all Americans from Vietnam without regard to the effects of that action"; or, persistence in the search for "a just peace through a negotiated settlement if possible," and continued implementation of the Vietnamization plan. Because of his belief that an immediate withdrawal would widen the war, he stated that he would proceed on the path of negotiation and orderly withdrawal.¹⁴

During November the President's chief military advisers undertook a review of the military situation in Vietnam and consideration of a number of redeployment plans in preparation for the presidential decision on further troop reductions expected to come in mid-December. At the end of the month, they submitted their conclusions to the Secretary of Defense. Recognizing that the enemy retained the capability of launching a significant, yet unsustainable, offen-

sive, especially against III Corps and northern I Corps, they noted that continued progress was being made in pacification and Vietnamization, albeit at varying rates. Informing the Secretary that they had considered two alternatives—a 50,000 reduction by mid-March or April 1970, or a reduction of 100,000 by mid-July—they counseled against any decision at that time, based on military grounds. They believed that a troop reduction during the first months of 1970 would burden allied capabilities in meeting the enemy threat, especially during the *Tết* holiday period. Nevertheless, they recognized that “other considerations” might necessitate a withdrawal, and therefore recommended a reduction of 35,000. However, should the enemy escalate military operations, they strongly suggested that any announced troop withdrawal be cancelled or, if necessary, reversed, and that a prompt air and naval campaign against North Vietnam be launched.

With other than military considerations apparently influencing his decision, President Nixon, on 15 December, announced that 50,000 more troops would be withdrawn by 15 April 1970. Although acknowledging that enemy infiltration had increased substantially, he noted that it had not reached a point where “our military leaders believe the enemy has developed the capability to mount a major offensive.” There would be risks, but they would be risks taken in search of peace. The President again cautioned Hanoi against misinterpreting U.S. actions by repeating his November warning that he would not hesitate to take strong and effective measures against any increased enemy activity that threatened the remaining American forces in Vietnam.¹⁵ With the President’s announced withdrawal of an additional 50,000 troops, planning began as to the composition of the force to be withdrawn.*

The Brigade Takes Over

At 1500 on 22 October, operational control of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) passed from the 3d Marine Division to XXIV Corps at Phu Bai. With the departure of the division, the brigade became the senior allied combat unit in the northernmost region of I Corps Tactical Zone. In assuming this role, the brigade took on the responsibilities of defending Quang Tri Combat Base, and in conjunc-

tion with elements of the 1st ARVN Division, Dong Ha Combat Base, and of securing a limited tactical area composed of the eastern and central portions of Quang Tri Province. Should the brigade prove incapable of accomplishing its assigned mission in the face of a major enemy offensive, it, like the division before it, could call upon an infantry regiment of the 1st Marine Division, a two-battalion brigade of the Americal Division, an infantry or airborne brigade of the Army’s I Field Force, or elements of the special landing force for reinforcement, depending on the severity of the situation.¹⁶

The 1st Brigade, since the end of June, had concentrated a majority of its efforts in the eastern portion of the province, an area extending east from Dong Ha and Quang Tri to the Gulf of Tonkin, and south from the 2d ARVN Regiment’s area of operations on the DMZ to the provincial boundary. Organized into three task forces, Task Force 1/11 Infantry, Task Force 1/61 Infantry (Mechanized), and Task Force 1/77 Armor, the brigade began Operation Iroquois Grove on 19 June. Conducted within the brigade’s normal area of operations, Iroquois Grove was designed to protect the civilian population and the rice crop, and also to assist the South Vietnamese in their Accelerated Pacification Program. While a majority of the brigade conducted search and clear operations, saturation ambushes, and patrols in conjunction and coordination with provincial and district forces, individual task forces were spun-off to assist or work with Marine units in two separate operations, Utah Mesa and William’s Glade. Iroquois Grove ended on 25 September with enemy losses put at 134 killed, while the brigade lost 13 dead and 130 wounded.

During the month between the end of Iroquois Grove and the beginning of Fulton Square on 22 October, the 1st Brigade conducted a series of search and clear, reconnaissance-in-force, pacification, and rice denial operations in the eastern portion of the province. In addition, it conducted defensive operations to cover the withdrawal of the 3d Marine Division and progressively absorbed portions of the vacated Marine areas of operations.

On the 22d, the brigade launched its first combat operation under the control of XXIV Corps into an area composed of Trieu Phong, Hai Lang, Gio Linh, Cam Lo, and Mai Linh Districts in the lowlands. Operation Fulton Square was highlighted by heavy contact with elements of the *27th NVA Regiment* in the vicinity of LZ Sparrow during November, and as a result, the 101st Airborne Division and ARVN deployed units

*For a detailed discussion of the 15 April 1970 reduction see Graham A. Cosmas and LtCol Terrence P. Murray, USMC, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Vietnamization and Redeployment, 1970-1971*, (Washington: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, USMC, 1986).

to assist. Enemy activity soon subsided, changing from frequent mortar and heavy ground attacks to sporadic engagements, and the operation terminated on 18 January 1970 with 384 enemy killed.

To the south, in Thua Thien Province, the 101st Airborne Division, which was also to take over a portion of the vacated 3d Marine Division area of operations, continued combined actions with the 1st ARVN Division to defeat NVA and VC main forces and infrastructure, interdict the A Shau Valley, and assist Vietnamese forces in assuming greater responsibility for combat and pacification operations within the province. On 17 August, the division launched the umbrella operation, Richland Square, a continuation of Kentucky Jumper with the 3d Brigade conducting reconnaissance-in-force in the A Shau Valley (Operation Louisiana Lee). The division's 2d Brigade continued local patrol and security missions along Route 1 (Operation Clairborne Chute), and on 18 August,

the 1st Brigade began Operation Cumberland Thunder in conjunction with the 3d Regiment, 1st ARVN Division, to locate and destroy elements of the 5th NVA Regiment, known to be operating in the southern portion of the Province.

During the last week of September, XXIV Corps issued plans for the repositioning of forces due to the deployment of the 3d Marine Division. By the 21st, 101st Airborne Division Operation Plan 10-69 (Republic Square) was approved, calling for the withdrawal of all forces from the A Shau Valley; the positioning of a control headquarters and two maneuver battalions to screen the final move of the Marine division; and the concentration of division forces in the coastal and piedmont areas of the province. In order to implement Republic Square, Operations Richland Square, Cumberland Thunder, Clairborne Chute, and Louisiana Lee were brought to an end and work began of the back-hauling of personnel, supplies, and

Greeting MajGen William K. Jones, right, shortly after the division's arrival on Okinawa were, from left, BGen Robert H. Barrow, Commanding General, MCB, Camp Butler; MajGen Robert B. Smith, Deputy Commanding General, U.S. Army, Ryukyu Islands; and BGen Robert B. Carney, Jr., Commanding General, 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



equipment from the westernmost portion of the division area of operations. In addition, a number of boundary modifications among the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division; 1st ARVN Division; and 101st Airborne Division were made. These changes included larger areas of responsibility for the 2d ARVN Regiment and reconnaissance elements of the 101st Airborne Division in Quang Tri Province.

Operation Republic Square, begun on 29 September, was characterized by extensive airmobile, reconnaissance-in-force, and search and ambush operations to destroy enemy forces within the division's area of operations; interdiction of enemy infiltration routes and base camps; the capture or elimination of the local Viet Cong Infrastructure; disruption of enemy supply routes from the rice producing lowlands to mountain base camps; and support for the Accelerated Pacification Program within the province. During the operation, which ended on 6 December, the 1st and 2d Brigades concentrated on the coastal and piedmont areas near Hue, while the 3d Brigade deployed

to Quang Tri Province, northwest of the now closed Vandegrift Combat Base, initiating operations (Norton Falls) to screen the withdrawal of the 4th Marines.

As the year drew to a close in northern I Corps Tactical Zone, the enemy generally avoided major contact with allied forces, concentrating his efforts instead on rice collection and undermining government pacification efforts in the heavily populated lowlands near the old imperial city of Hue. In the western portions of both Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces, now devoid of all but reconnaissance forces, he slowly began to rebuild the large base areas along the Vietnamese-Laotian border, destroyed earlier in the year. The year, however, had witnessed the defeat of NVA and VC forces at every turn, frustrating their attempts to terrorize and victimize the inhabitants of the two provinces, and denying the rice, supplies, and personnel so vital to their survival. The redeployment of the 3d Marine Division was testimony not only to this defeat, but to the great strides made in the pacification and Vietnamization of northern I Corps.

PART IV
QUANG NAM: THE YEAR'S
FINAL BATTLES

CHAPTER 11

Go Noi and the Arizona

*Vital Area Security—Pipestone Canyon: The Destruction of Go Noi Island
1st Marines: Protecting the Southern Flank—The Arizona*

Vital Area Security

In conformity with III MAF's corps-wide strategy for 1969, the 1st Marine Division, during the last six months of the year, continued to concentrate its efforts on keeping the enemy away from the city of Da Nang and its heavily populated environs. Its infantry units and supporting arms were disposed to provide maximum security for the Da Nang Vital Area and other important political and economic sites, military installations, and lines of communication. Simultaneously, the division directed its offensive operations against enemy forces and base areas which posed the most immediate threat to these centers or to allied military installations.

At midyear, Major General Ormond R. Simpson continued the general scheme, adopted earlier, for deploying his four infantry regiments. Supported and reinforced by artillery batteries of the 11th Marines, the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st Tank Battalion, and strong contingents of engineers, transportation, and service troops, the 1st, 5th, 7th, and 26th Marines were positioned in a series of concentric circles centered on Da Nang. Although not directly involved in the defense of the city itself, the division's responsibility began just outside the Da Nang Vital Area and radiated in all directions. To the north and northwest the 26th Marines patrolled the rocket belt, and spread out to the west and southwest was the 7th Marines. Elements of the 1st Marines were deployed to the southwest, south, and southeast of the city, while further to the southwest, the 5th Marines operated in a TAOR encompassing An Hoa Combat Base and major enemy infiltration routes along the Song Thu Bon and Song Vu Gia, and throughout the region between the two rivers, the Arizona.

From the outskirts of Da Nang to the remote mountain valleys, small detachments of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong regulars and guerrillas continued to move throughout the division's TAOR, despite the series of successful major allied operations and constant counter guerrilla patrols conducted during the first half of the year. Likewise, enemy rocket, mortar, and ground assault teams persisted in attacks against al-

lied installations and population centers, while planting mines and boobytraps, gathering food and tribute, and maintaining an unrelenting campaign of terrorism against the civilian population. Division military operations, from the squad ambush and platoon patrol to multi-battalion sweeps, during the latter half of 1969, aimed at the complete destruction of this endless cycle of harassment by elements of 21 enemy infantry and support battalions known to infest Quang Nam Province.

Pipestone Canyon: The Destruction of Go Noi Island

For a number of years, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army had used the Dodge City and Go Noi Island areas, south of Da Nang, as haven sites and staging areas for attacks into the coastal lowlands between Hoi An and Vietnam's second largest city. In response, the allies conducted a series of operations to rid both areas of enemy troops; the last two were Operation Allen Brook in May and Operation Meade River in December 1968. A classic example of a deliberately executed cordon and search, the 1st Marines' Meade River and its ARVN counterpart, accounted for over 1,200 enemy killed or captured, 72 of whom were identified as members of the local Viet Cong Infrastructure.

Although previous operations in the area produced significant results, the enemy stuck to the accepted technique of withdrawing his forces when pressed and then reintroducing them into their original operating areas once friendly forces shifted to a new zone of action. During the first five months of 1969, the 1st Marines saturated the fringes of the region with company-size and small-unit patrols with notable success, but these maneuvers, while effective in curtailing the enemy's free passage northward, lacked the scope necessary to produce a lasting effect on enemy forces using the area. Ridding the area of enemy troops was to become the major task of the 1st Marines during the final six months of 1969.

The contiguous areas of Dodge City and Go Noi Island, located approximately 10 to 20 kilometers south of Da Nang and 6 to 20 kilometers west of Hoi

An, constituted the western portion of Dien Ban and the eastern half of Dai Loc Districts, and included 19 villages or portions thereof. The combined area was bordered on the west by the south fork of the Song Vu Gia; on the north by the Song Ai Nghia, Song Lo Tho, and Song Thanh Quit; on the east by Route 1; and on the south by the Song Thu Bon, Song Ba Ren, and Song Chiem Son. Although bisected by the one- to two-meter-high, north-south railroad berm, the area consisted of semi-open, flat terrain, covered by numerous rice fields and grave mounds bounded by hedgerows, brush, and expanses of elephant grass.

Intelligence agencies estimated that Dodge City and Go Noi Island harbored seven to nine enemy battalions with a maximum strength of 2,500 troops, in addition to 200 to 500 local force Viet Cong and hamlet guerrillas. The enemy's main battle units were tentatively identified as the *36th NVA Regiment*, consisting of three battalions, and *District II Da Nang* forces made up of the *T-89th Sapper*, *D-3 Sapper*, *T-3 Sapper*, and *R-20th Battalions*, and elements of the disbanded *38th NVA Regiment*. Although battered, these enemy units still were considered capable of sniping, harassing, and attacking in mass, and then retreating to well-constructed camouflaged defensive positions in Dodge City, Go Noi Island, and the Que Son Mountains beyond. The time had come to rid, once and for all, Dodge City and Go Noi Island of enemy forces.

In mid-May, General Simpson called Colonel Charles S. Robertson, Commanding Officer, 1st Marines, and his operations officer, Major James K. Reilly, to Headquarters, 1st Marine Division for a briefing on the concept, mission, and forces of a planned operation in Dodge City and Go Noi Island. The operation, codenamed Pipestone Canyon, explained Colonel James B. Ord, Jr., Division Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, was designed primarily to deny the North Vietnamese and main force Viet Cong safe haven in the two areas and to open Route 4 from Dai Loc to Dien Ban, closed to civilian and military traffic for several years. It was, he noted, the "natural sequel" to Operations Taylor Common and Oklahoma Hills. To accomplish the mission would require a sizeable amount of infantry, heavily reinforced with artillery, naval gunfire, and air. It would also require a land-clearing effort, which "we had never really been able to do." Specifically, as Colonel Ord pointed out, a combined Marine, Korean, and ARVN force amounting to 10 infantry battalions supported by a large artillery,

naval gunfire, and armor force and including a Provisional Land-Clearing Company, composed of personnel and equipment from the 7th and 9th Marine Engineer Battalions and the Army's 687th Land-Clearing Company, would be task organized and placed under the control of the 1st Marines. This would ensure enough troop density and supporting arms, he noted, "to really clear it out."¹

On the 16th, General Simpson and his staff presented the concept of operations to Lieutenant General Herman Nickerson, Commanding General, III MAF, who approved the mission and forces, authorized direct liaison with Korean and ARVN units involved, and ordered execution on or about 27 May. Following approval, detailed and coordinate planning began.²

During the month, 1st Marine staff planning progressed in secret. As the operation was to be multiphased, only those with a need to know were informed, and then only concerning the phase in which they would participate. When it came time to inform the Korean forces, Colonel Robertson and his staff visited the 2d Brigade, Republic of Korea Marine Corps Headquarters at Hoi An and briefed Brigadier General Dong Ho Lee, initiating a period of coordinated planning between the two Marine staffs. The ARVN forces, to be led by Colonel Thien, commanding officer of the Quang Da Special Zone (QDSZ), a loosely formed, division-level organization tasked to defend Da Nang, were not to be brought into the planning until 48 hours prior to their participation so as to forestall disclosure.

On 24 May, Colonel Robertson approved and directed publication of 1st Marines Operation Order 001-69 (Pipestone Canyon), selecting the 26th as D-Day. Beginning at 0600, two battalions would attack eastward: Special Landing Force Alpha (1st Battalion, 26th Marines) from Hill 37 toward Dodge City, and, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines from Liberty Bridge toward western Go Noi Island. The attack, aimed at forcing the enemy into both areas and at the same time deceiving him as to allied intentions, would conclude with the establishment of blocking positions on the western edge of the area of operations. During the second phase, scheduled to begin five days later, five battalions (1st and 2d Battalions, 1st Marines; 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion; and the 1st and 4th Battalions, 51st ARVN Regiment) were to attack southward through Dodge City, coordinating with the 1st and 2d Battalions, 2d Korean Marine Corps Brigade, occupying positions on the area of operation's eastern flank. When



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Company B, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, supported by tanks, sweeps and countersweeps scrub-covered Dodge City in preparation for the attack on Go Noi Island to the south.

the battalions reached the Song Ky Lam, engineering work would begin on upgrading and then eventually opening Route 4 from the railroad berm east to Route 1. At the same time, the Provisional Land-Clearing Company would be formed and staged at Liberty Bridge and one battalion would be lifted from the area of operation to provide security for the attack east across the island. In phase III, while blocks were maintained along the north bank of the Song Ky Lam, the railroad berm on Go Noi, and engineering efforts continued on Route 4, three battalions were to attack across the eastern portion of the island, followed by land-clearing operations, denying the enemy access and use of the area for staging and infiltration. Should circumstances warrant, Colonel Robertson retained the option of ordering additional phases.³

On Monday the 26th, Lieutenant Colonel George C. Kliefoth's 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, under the operational control of the 7th Marines, and Lieutenant Colonel Harry E. Atkinson's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines launched eastward, moving over ground pummeled by artillery fires of the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines and 8-inch guns of the *Newport News* (CA 148). Except for surprise firing devices, the Marines discovering fewer than were tripped, the two battalions generally met

very light resistance during the advance. But as they drew closer to Dodge City and Go Noi Island, enemy activity picked up, the companies reporting an ever-increasing number of engagements, enemy killed, and weapons and equipment discovered or captured. By 30 May, both battalions had reached their blocking positions just west of the railroad berm and begun to dig-in in preparation for phase II. To this point, Kliefoth's and Atkinson's Marines had killed a total of 16 enemy troops, but the price was high: 10 dead and more than 100 wounded, all as a result of mines and boobytraps.

Following a 24-hour ceasefire in honor of Buddha's birthday, control of Operation Pipestone Canyon was passed to the 1st Marines and the five attacking battalions began to move toward the line of departure, the Song La Tho, on the morning of the 31st. South of the river, artillery and naval gunfire, designed to detonate expected heavy concentrations of surprise firing devices as well as prevent enemy interference with the attack, began. With the forward shift of the 1st Marines' command post to Phong Luc (3), and the exchange of liaison personnel among U.S., ARVN, and Korean units, all five battalions crossed the Song La Tho in rapid succession. Sandwiched between the

ARVN Ranger battalion in the west and two battalions of the 51st ARVN Regiment in the east, Lieutenant Colonel Wendell P. Morgenthaler's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. Glasgow's 2d Battalion moved cautiously into Dodge City. Soon after crossing the river, both battalions reported locating numerous recently occupied, well-constructed bunker and tunnel complexes, and areas peppered with mines and boobytraps; devices which would become all too familiar as the Marines moved further south. Activity, however, was light, as enemy troops fled south and west into the sights of the blocking forces. Meanwhile, the 1st and 4th Battalions, 51st Regiment, on the eastern flank in companion Operation Vu Ninh 05, busied themselves screening civilians with the help of teams composed of Quang Nam Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU), National Police Field Forces, and counterintelligence personnel assigned to the 1st Marines. The Korean Marine battalions, south of Go Noi, experienced no initial enemy activity.

Sweeping south toward the island, the battalions generally moved out in the early morning, taking advantage of the coolest part of the day. As Lieutenant Colonel Morgenthaler explained: "at times it would

reach temperatures of approximately 115 degrees and with the gear we were carrying, we figured that by moving out early in the morning, we would negate any heat casualties, and at that time the troops would be extremely fresh and more observant."⁴ The pace was slow as every bunker and tunnel complex was searched, and every hedgerow, paddy dike, grave mound, and riverbank probed for surprise firing devices and caches. As each battalion closed on the first of several successive phase lines, a small force would be positioned along the line while the remainder began a detailed and deliberate countersearch of the area just covered and naval gunfire pounded deeper targets. In addition to the forward attack and countersweep tactics, a large number of independent patrols and ambushes were deployed every evening.

Movement became more difficult as the advancing battalions neared the second phase line. Not only did both ARVN and Marines encounter a large band of mines set across their paths, but enemy activity picked up. On 2 June, as Company G moved south in mid-morning, it received a number of 60mm mortar rounds followed by bursts of AK47 fire from a group of enemy troops occupying a small bunker complex. Supported by a section of tanks, elements of the com-

Three artillerymen of the 11th Marines provide 105mm howitzer support for the joint Marine, ARVN, and Korean search of enemy-infested Dodge City and Go Noi Island.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



pany maneuvered forward, pounding the enemy position. Sweeping through the complex, the Marines discovered seven killed and one wounded, in addition to a number of weapons and propaganda leaflets. Later that same day, both the ARVN Ranger battalion and western blocking forces reported increasing activity in their zones of action as enemy troops tried to escape west, but were forced instead to move south across the Song Ky Lam onto Go Noi.

Two days later, after an early morning artillery preparation by the tubes of 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, Morgenthaler's and Glasgow's battalions again moved south. Meanwhile, the two battalions of the 51st ARVN Regiment remained in their initial positions and continued civic action and screening operations in order to identify members of the local Viet Cong Infrastructure. The Korean Marines, having yet to engage any enemy troops, initiated several local company-size search and block operations south of Go Noi. By 5 June, elements of the 1st Marines reached the Song Ky Lam, separating Dodge City and the island. During the next three days, the remaining attack forces closed on the river and then counterswept, while observing wing aircraft dropped 1,000- and 2,000-pound bombs on eastern Go Noi Island. Before the air bombardment ceased, nearly 750,000 pounds of ordnance had been dropped.

With the sweep through Dodge City complete, Company A, 1st Engineer Battalion, with security provided by the 39th ARVN Ranger Battalion, began upgrading Route 4. Simultaneously, the advancing forces began repositioning themselves for the third phase. The 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, which had occupied blocking positions west of Dodge City, withdrew from the operation and helilifted to its amphibious shipping in the South China Sea. In addition, Morgenthaler's battalion, less Company D, moved by air to Liberty Bridge where it took command of tanks and tracked vehicles and began an advance overland toward Go Noi Island.

On 10 June, the third phase of Operation Pipestone Canyon began. General Simpson, Colonel Charles E. Walker, interim commander of the 1st Marines in the absence of Colonel Robertson, who was on emergency leave, and their tactical command group staffs were atop Hill 119, just south of Go Noi. Observation was excellent. Morgenthaler's battalion could be seen advancing from Liberty Bridge. Colonel Atkinson's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines could be seen occupying blocking positions along the railroad berm, and the posi-

tions of the Korean Marines, south of eastern Go Noi, were also in view. Although they were dug in and could not be observed from 119, the ARVN forces were in position north of the island. As the command groups watched, wing attack and fighter aircraft strafed selected landing zones and surrounding areas. Finally, the fighter aircraft moved out and the attack aircraft, flying 200 feet above ground, laid down a thick stream of smoke, dividing the island. As scheduled, 22 troop-loaded CH-46s appeared and headed for two landing zones on the southern banks of eastern Go Noi. Minutes later, the combined force of Glasgow's men and Korean Marines alighted from the helicopters, formed up, and began a sweep to the north. That afternoon, Morgenthaler's armored column passed through Atkinson's lines on the railroad berm, picked up Company D, and joined in the coordinated attack.

Again advancing by numbered phase lines, the three battalions reached phase line II on 11 June. At this line, the 1st Korean Marine Battalion encountered several bunker complexes and a large number of rice and equipment caches. The brigade's liaison officer informed Colonel Walker that the battalion wished to search the area, and it was agreed that Morgenthaler's and Glasgow's battalions would continue north while the Koreans carried out the search. The decision proved to be correct, for in each of the numerous tunnels and bunkers searched, the Koreans discovered enemy troops or substantial caches of rice, weapons, and equipment. The 1st and 2d Battalions, 1st Marines also added to these totals, uncovering many discarded weapons, large rice caches, and an increasing number of dead enemy troops, killed by the heavy air and artillery bombardment.

Squeezed between the blocking forces and the advancing Marines, the enemy scattered, breaking into smaller and smaller groups, hoping to be bypassed and thus able to make their escape south into the Que Son Mountains. Some did escape, but many were found and either captured or destroyed, if they resisted. Those captured were troops unable to move—the wounded and the starving. Ironically, a number of these undernourished North Vietnamese soldiers were discovered within a short distance of substantial caches; all were unaware of the existence of the concealed food.

On 13 June, the Provisional Land-Clearing Company assembled at Liberty Bridge. An armored column was dispatched with a platoon from Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines to provide security for the 10 Marine Eimco (M64) tractors and nine Army D7E



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Col Charles E. Walker, acting Commanding Officer, 1st Marines, discusses tactics with his battalion commanders in preparation for crossing one of the many phase lines that marked the advance southward.

Caterpillars. At midday, as the column moved out across country toward Go Noi Island, one of the tanks hit a mine, resulting in the wounding of two Marines and causing a temporary halt in the column's pace. After resuming the advance, a second mine disabled yet another tank and the column halted. Additional security was requested and the combined infantry, tank, and tractor column dug in for the night to make repairs. The following morning, the land-clearing unit resumed its eastward march.⁵

On Go Noi Island, the two battalions of the 1st Marines reached the Song Ky Lam and turned, beginning countersweep operations. At the same time, the Korean Marine battalion established company-size areas and began a series of detailed searches. Colonel Walker notified Lieutenant Colonel Atkinson that his battalion, then in blocking positions along the railroad berm, would no longer be needed and that the participation of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines would terminate on 15 June, as land-clearing operations would soon get underway. Just north of the island, the 1st and 4th ARVN battalions moved from their blocking positions along the Song Ky Lam and initiated countersearch operations in Dodge City and areas west of Route 1.

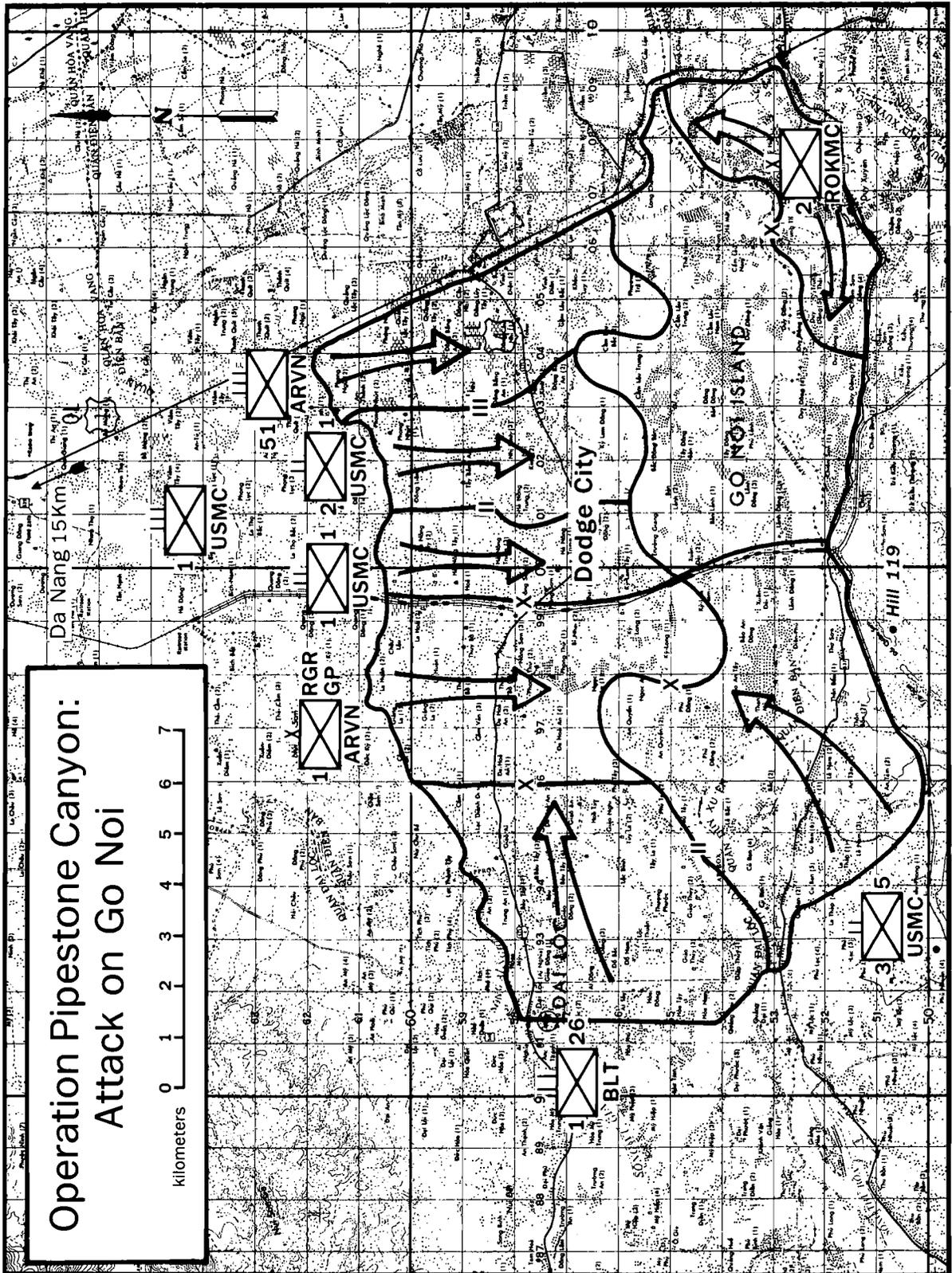
Twenty days into the operation, Atkinson's battalion ceased its participation in Pipestone Canyon; Morgenthaler's battalion, in turn, assumed responsibility for the railroad berm and an area 500 meters west,

while at the same time continuing to provide security for the land-clearing company, which was beginning the complete destruction of all vegetation and the filling and leveling of all enemy installations on eastern Go Noi. Clearing 250 acres at a time to a depth of six inches, the blades of the combined company eventually would leave behind over 8,000 dirt-brown and flat acres. The enemy, as a result, lost a long-used, major elephant grass- and bamboo-covered, bunker-saturated haven and staging area.⁶

With the clearing effort well underway, the countersweep of eastern Go Noi and adjacent islands nearly complete, and enemy activity decreasing by the day, Colonel Robertson, having reassumed command on the 14th, decided to begin company-size search and clear operations in the western portion of the island. At first light on the 19th, Morgenthaler's Company C, later joined by Company B, moved out from the railroad berm, searching in a westerly direction toward Bao An Dong. A homemade mine was tripped, then another, and another; western Go Noi was saturated with surprise firing devices. Evidence of this was borne out over the next several days as Morgenthaler's Marines continued the search from Bao An Tay to An Quyen, in the northwest corner, taking additional casualties. Solutions to the recurring problem of mines and boobytraps consisted of bombarding the areas with artillery fire, peppering with bombs and napalm, conducting all movement mounted on tanks or tracked vehicles, and continually stressing the threat, ensuring that the troops maintained maximum dispersion while moving. These solutions, however, did not eliminate the threat and casualties continued to mount. The only way to avoid the surprise firing devices, Colonel Morgenthaler later noted, was to "avoid the area which meant avoiding the mission We did *not* stay inside our compounds like the Korean Marines in order to avoid casualties."⁷

The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines' sweep of western Go Noi continued until the 21st, when the battalion returned to its base at Dong Son (2). With the departure of Morgenthaler's Marines, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines assumed security for the land-clearing company and responsibility for most of the island, except for the area assigned the Korean Marines. Now it was Glasgow's battalion's turn to work western Go Noi.

Operating with three companies, Lieutenant Colonel Glasgow was determined to find and destroy the remaining enemy hiding on Go Noi. Conducting search and clear operations day after day, Marines of



See Reference Map, Sections 26, 27, 32, 33

the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines encountered numerous surprise firing devices, but flushed out few troops. The continuing problem of boobytraps and mines not only took its toll in casualties, but also on the morale of those left behind. Company G's Commanding Officer, Captain Frank H. Adams, observed the effects. Losing 59 men killed and wounded to boobytraps out of a casualty total of 70, his company neared the breaking point during its sweep of western Go Noi, as he later recounted:

When you do encounter boobytraps and you continue to trip them, it gets to the point where each individual within that unit—regardless of the leadership that you have—it gets to the point where the troops say: "They put them out there, we have got to sweep it, ultimately I'm going to hit that son-of-a-bitch that they put out there. I don't know who is going to hit it tomorrow, but one of these days I'm going to hit one myself." When you get to that point as a troop leader, as a squad leader, as a platoon leader, as a platoon sergeant, and a company commander . . . you're lost When a trooper feels he is going to get it, you have had the weenie.

So we went back in [after taking several boobytrap casualties], . . . sat down, got the company together, put the security out, and we got together for about a 15-minute talk. That is what I had planned, but I kind of choked up on them, so I only made it three and a half to four minutes. After talking to them, explaining to them, that these are the things of war that we have to encounter—that we will

encounter—the things we have to take—you don't enjoy it, you don't like it, but these are the things you do encounter. Then we said the Lord's Prayer, prayed for those that we had lost, and passed the word . . . that all of us are going back, . . . that we have the same sweeps tomorrow that we had today, and we are going to find every boobytrap out there without tripping it. Troop morale raised, . . . we jumped off into the operation the next day and continued to march, and continued to sweep.⁸

While Glasgow's Marines swept western Go Noi, elements of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines were reintroduced into the Pipestone Canyon area of operations on the 27th. Conducting a short search and clear operation in northern Dodge City, they turned up additional enemy equipment and dead, killed by air and artillery, but encountered only those few enemy troops who had remained behind. The ARVN forces, adjacent to Morgenthaler's Marines, made no contact and continued the process of screening the civilian population in search of infrastructure members as they moved south.

By the end of June, the entire tempo of the operation slowed. Few enemy troops were found, and those who were were either the wounded or those missed in the initial sweeps. As the land-clearing effort on eastern Go Noi neared completion, security for the unit passed from Glasgow's battalion to the Korean

Several Marines help a wounded comrade to a waiting medical evacuation helicopter. Surprise firing devices accounted for a number of casualties during Operation Pipestone.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



Marines for a short period. In addition, elements of the 1st Engineer Battalion officially opened Route 4 from the railroad berm to Dien Ban, meeting a major goal of the province's yearly pacification plan and of the operation. During the month-long effort, the engineers had not only constructed a road capable of accommodating two-way traffic, but a series of large culverts also, and cleared an average of 500 meters on either side of the thoroughfare, totaling more than 6,000,000 square meters.

As a result of a number of coordinating meetings held earlier in the month, General Simpson determined that eastern Go Noi would be permanently occupied. With the help of the land-clearing company, work began on two combat bases—the first to be occupied by the 3d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment, and the second by the Korean Brigade's 1st Battalion. He also decided that once the bases' initial defenses were completed, western Go Noi would be cleared and at least one U.S. Marine company would be tasked to patrol the area. He hoped, as a consequence, that the island would never again be returned to enemy hands, unless the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were willing to commit the major forces required and accept the heavy casualties that would result from such an attempt.

The opening days of July saw the operation enter its second month with the third phase still in progress. In the Dodge City area, elements of the 51st ARVN Regiment continued to patrol and screen. Morgenthaler's Marines, having completed their search and clear operation, returned to the regiment's western area where they secured the Cau Do and Ha Dong railroad bridges. On Go Noi, Glasgow's battalion pursued search operations in the western portion of the island, while again providing security for the land-clearing effort. Across the railroad berm, the 3d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment and the Korean Marines continued building their combat bases and conducting company-size clearing operations.

On the 6th, Colonel Robertson decided to reduce the effort on western Go Noi to a rifle company, which was to provide security for the Provisional Land-Clearing Company, and, as a consequence, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, less one company, withdrew and returned to its permanent base at Phong Luc (2) for rehabilitation. Company E, which had spent several days at "Stack Arms," the division's in-country rest and recreation center south of Da Nang, returned to Go

Noi, and resumed patrol and ambush activities. Two days later, another realignment took place; the 4th Battalion replaced the 1st Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment in southwestern Dodge City, and the 37th Rangers withdrew. With a reduction in size of the operation, Colonel Robertson decided to close his forward headquarters and return the command group to Duong Son (2).

Weather reports received on the 8th indicated that Typhoon Tess would come ashore near Da Nang on the 10th. Go Noi Island, especially the western portion, had been inundated during a similar storm in October 1968, and it was decided to withdraw the land-clearing company and its security force from the island until the typhoon passed. The move took place the following day. Just prior to reaching the high ground along Route 1, where the forces would wait out the storm, the rear of the column came under heavy small arms fire. Two Marine engineers were killed and an equal number wounded before the fighting ended.

Activity throughout the Pipestone Canyon area of operation ground to a halt as Typhoon Tess brought heavy rains to Quang Nam Province for the next two days. By the 12th, the weather cleared and Company E, with tracked vehicles and tanks attached, moved from Route 1 back across Go Noi to await the bulldozers. During the move, one of the tanks accompanying Company E detonated a land mine which resulted in a ruptured gas tank and the severe burning of 12 Marines. The 7th Engineers, instead of following, decided it would place the tractors on low-bed trucks and drive them around to Liberty Bridge to conserve the dozers' engines and tracks. That afternoon, the forces to continue the land-clearing were back on western Go Noi and operations began the following morning.

Meanwhile, an increasing number of intelligence reports concerning enemy presence in eastern Dodge City, east of the Song Suoi Co Ca, convinced Colonel Robertson that the area required additional attention. Arrangements were made on 14 July for a battalion-size heliborne assault into four landing zones surrounding the former village of Tay Bang An, the area suspected of harboring a company-size sapper unit. In preparation for the assault, assisted later by armor, Colonel Glasgow requested that Company H relieve Company E as security for the land-clearing operation, and that Company D, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines join



Marine Corps Historical Collection

A Marine engineer levels enemy fortifications on Go Noi Island in preparation for the reintroduction of a stable population and the return of the land to rice production.

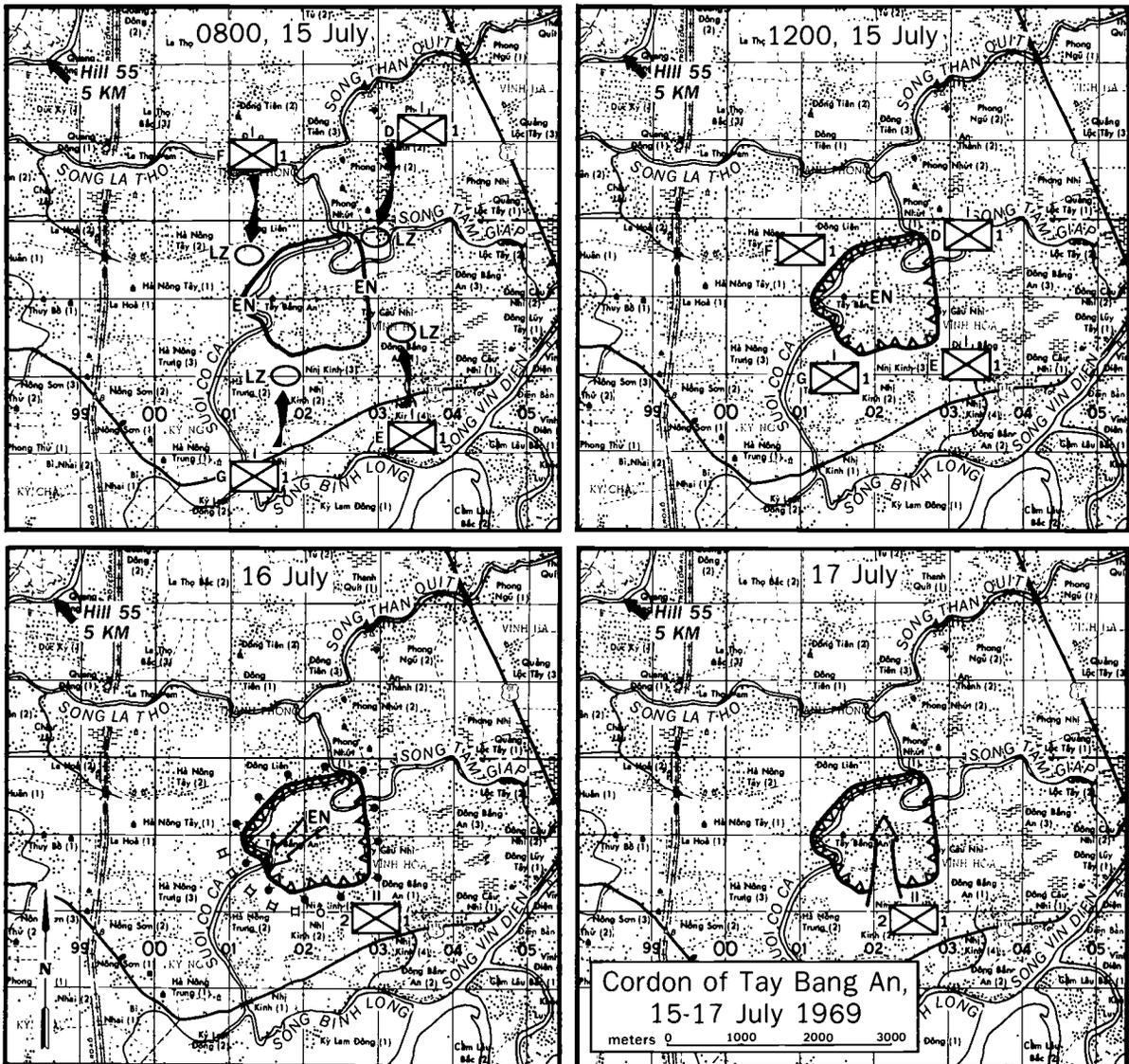
his battalion in order to provide a four-rifle-company operation.

Early on the morning of the 15th, the lift went off as planned, but as troop-laden CH-46s approached the four landing zones, all began receiving enemy small arms fire. Seven of the helicopters were hit and one eventually forced to land near a Korean Marine compound on Route 1. Although all zones were hot, two insertions were carried out as planned, but two others were shifted to alternate sites, forcing an hour's delay in closing the cordon around the abandoned village. Once on the ground, aerial observers circling above reported sighting 30 to 50 enemy troops inside the area to which Glasgow's Marines were moving from all directions. By 0830, Company D had captured one Viet Cong and was engaging a small pocket of enemy troops in its sector; Company G had detained a male who later was classified as a Viet Cong; and Company E had detonated a boobytrap, causing several casualties, and reported taking several bursts of small arms fire from its front. Company F met the heaviest resistance. As it closed on its cordon positions, the company received a large volume of automatic weapons and RPG fire from enemy-occupied bunkers on the west side of the Suoi Co Ca, killing two Marines and wounding seven. Eventually pushing through the complex, the assaulting platoons captured one NVA, counted four enemy bodies, and spotted seven more soldiers withdraw across the river. Meanwhile, a platoon of tanks and tracked vehicles made its way down Route 1, then turned west onto the recently up-

graded Route 4, and joined Glasgow's Marines in the cordoned area.

Throughout the 16th, as the Marines tightened the cordon and established defensive positions, the entrapped enemy sappers conducted several probes in a vain attempt to discover a vulnerable area in the battalion's lines. Following these initial attempts, the enemy initiated a breakthrough which Company G successfully repelled. Late in the day, it was decided to slightly shift the cordon, under cover of darkness, to the north along the Song Tam Giap into an area where Company D had captured several enemy troops the day before. After tightening the cordon and conducting a number of searches on the morning of the 17th, the area proved to be devoid of enemy troops and Colonel Glasgow reported the search complete, the battalion having killed 20 and captured 14. Later in the day, the battalion helilifted out of the area and returned to its base at Phong Luc.⁹

With the level of operations slowing on Go Noi Island as the enemy avoided contact, but again picking up in Dodge City, Colonel Robertson initiated planning for an additional phase. Robertson met with Colonel Thuc, Commanding Officer, 51st ARVN Regiment, and together they agreed to conduct a search of Dodge City south of Route 4, where it was suspected the enemy was hiding. Following approval by General Simpson, Colonel Robertson ordered the operation scheduled for 21 July and assigned the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and 4th Battalion, 51st ARVN



See Reference Map, Sections 26, 27

At 0800 on 15 July, four companies of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines establish landing zones near Tay Bang An, five kilometers southeast of Hill 55. By noon, the cordon of the village is complete, trapping a company-size enemy sapper unit. On the 16th, the enemy unit attempts to break through the battalion's lines, fortified with mines, tanks, and mortars. The battalion completes the search of the area on the 17th, having found no survivors.

Regiment the task. A realignment of forces within the 1st Marines' normal area of responsibility, however, was necessary before Morgenthaler's Marines could be released for the operation. The 1st Marines, as a result, assumed control of 1st Battalion, 26th Marines and assigned it control of the regiment's western area of operations. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas P. Ganey's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines extended its lines to cover the remainder of the area of responsibility as Lieutenant Colonel Glasgow's battalion prepared to join Operation Durham Peak.

At midnight on 20 July, following the completion of land-clearing operations on western Go Noi, the third phase of Pipestone Canyon came to a close. In nearly three months, the combined force logged 734 enemy killed, 382 weapons captured, and 55 prisoners taken. Marine casualties were 57 killed and 394 seriously wounded.

Pipestone Canyon's fourth phase began with the move of Morgenthaler's Marines into an area of southern Dodge City, south of Route 4 and west of the railroad berm on the 21st. While two companies

occupied blocking positions along the southern bank of the Song Ky Lam, the remainder of the battalion began search and destroy operations in the assigned area. Although no engagements with enemy forces took place during the three-day operation, the Marines continually encountered mines and boobytraps. In one mine incident, occurring on the 23d, a Marine from Company C detonated a "daisy chain," composed of three dud artillery rounds set as antipersonnel mines, resulting in the severe wounding of six men. At midday on the 24th, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines closed the short search of southern Dodge City, and again returned to its base at Phong Luc.

As July ended, Company L began moving patrol forces onto western Go Noi in relief of Company I, which returned to Ha Dong Bridge, northwest of Hill 55. Like Marines of the 1st Battalion operating in southern Dodge City several days before, Company L encountered a high number of surprise firing devices. On the 25th, an LVT carrying a squad from the company onto the island detonated a small antipersonnel mine, damaging the vehicle. After temporary repairs were made, the LVT moved out again, striking yet another mine, thought to be a 250-pound bomb, which killed three and severely wounded seven other squad members. Most, if not all, of the surprise firing devices encountered on western Go Noi were fabricated from discarded or dud American ordnance, such as grenades, mortar and artillery rounds, bombs, or cans filled with the explosive C-4. On the average, 60 percent of all devices were defused and 40 percent detonated; that 40 percent continued to inflict a majority of all Marine casualties.

Company M, under Captain Donald J. Robinson II, relieved Company L on western Go Noi at the beginning of August, continuing the cycle of patrol and short cordon and search operations. Throughout the rest of the island, the 3d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment conducted similar operations in the central third, while elements of the 2d Republic of Korean Marine Corps Brigade operated in the eastern third. To the north, other Korean Marines drove through eastern Dodge City, while the 4th Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment searched the central portion. On 6 August, Lieutenant Colonel Ganey's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines began a search and clear operation in Dodge City. After some difficulty, caused by an LVT throwing a track, the battalion initiated an attack with Company L on the left flank, Company I on the right, the battalion command group in the center, and Company K pro-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A374597
A radioman with the 1st Marines takes a break while on one of the numerous patrols that swept and then reswept both Dodge City and Go Noi Island.

viding rear security. Few engagements occurred as Ganey's Marines swept north from Route 4, between the railroad berm and the Suoi Co Ca and, as a result, the battalion returned to Duong Son (2) on the 9th.

During the remainder of the month, Robinson's Marines continued sweep operations in western Go Noi, as other elements of the regiment periodically returned to Dodge City to conduct short search operations in conjunction with their Korean and ARVN counterparts. Again, no significant engagements took place. This respite allowed companies opportunity to train in all elements of offensive and defensive combat and use all available supporting arms in the process.¹⁰ In addition, efforts were made to keep Route 4 open to traffic despite repeated enemy attempts to mine the road and destroy major culverts. Also during August, the Provisional Land-Clearing Company, after a period of maintenance, returned to southwestern Dodge City. Plowing a total of 2,594,000 square meters in one week, the company leveled a suspected enemy staging area bounded on the north by

Route 4, on the west by the Phong Thu hamlet complex, on the south by the Song Ky Lam, and on the east by the north-south railroad berm, before returning to the 7th Engineer Battalion's permanent base.

Major enemy activity throughout the Pipestone area of operations had all but ceased by the beginning of September. Although Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops avoided encounters with friendly forces, they did continue to concentrate their limited available resources on harassing allied units by continuing to lay surprise firing devices. But as the month passed, aerial sightings of small groups of enemy soldiers north of Route 4 increased, signaling the presence of an unknown size force in that area of Dodge City. These sightings prompted the commitment of three of Morgenthaler's four companies to the area in late September. At 1120 on the 25th, Companies C and D helilifted into two separate landing zones, approximately 1,000 meters south of the Song La Tho. Simultaneously, Company A and the battalion command group, reinforced by a section each of tanks and amphibian tractors, crossed Route 4 and advanced north, blocking enemy attempts to escape southward. Morgenthaler's Marines encountered few enemy troops during the operation, although numerous bunkers, small caches, and extensive mine fields were discovered and destroyed as the battalion's effort shifted east. On the 29th, after only four days in the area, the companies withdrew and returned to Phong Luc.

Heavy rains fell as the month of October began, turning the area into a quagmire. By the 5th, the rising flood waters of the Song Ky Lam inundated western Go Noi forcing Company L, which had replaced Company M, to withdraw by air and return to Hill 37. The rains also forced the withdrawal of the 2d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment from Dodge City. Five days later, as flood waters subsided and the units returned to the field, the fourth phase of Pipestone Canyon came to an end and the final phase began.

Pipestone Canyon's fifth phase, like the fourth, was characterized by a number of separate search and clear operations. On the 11th, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines again returned to Dodge City, initiating operations in the La Tho Bac, Dong Tien, and Duc Ky hamlet complex, north of the Song La Tho. Although Morgenthaler's battalion detained a number of Vietnamese as suspected members of the local Viet Cong Infrastructure, no combat engagements took place and the operation terminated two days later.

By far the most significant of the series of searches conducted by the 1st Marines within the Pipestone

Canyon area during the latter stages of the operation was the multi-battalion cordon and search of the La Huan and Giang La hamlet complex, located in northwestern Dodge City. Based on intelligence reports which indicated that elements of the *Q-82d Battalion* and a large number of infrastructure members had moved into the area, planning for the cordon began. Shortly after sunrise on the 18th, Morgenthaler's battalion, composed of Companies A, B, and C, in addition to two platoons from Company G, assaulted two landing zones, just south of the Song La Tho, following an artillery and air bombardment of the zones and nearby railroad berm. Simultaneously, elements of the 3d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment moved into blocking positions along the northern bank of the river, between the berm and the Song Ai Nghia. To the southeast, elements of the ARVN regiment's 2d Battalion took up positions extending from the hamlet of La Moa (1) south to Route 4. To the west, three of Ganey's four companies, plus Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, moved into positions stretching along Route 4, then north along Route 1-D to the Song Ai Nghia, south of Hill 55. Once all were in place, Morgenthaler's Marines, supplemented by 50 men of the National Police Field Force from Dien Ban District, attacked westward. By late afternoon, the cordon was set and civilians began their exodus of the area, filing across "Golden Gate Bridge" on the Song Ai Nghia toward the collection point at the base of Hill 55. By noon the following day, district Phoenix and intelligence personnel had processed 813 civilians, of which 19 were identified as Viet Cong and 50 classified as Infrastructure members.* Meanwhile, Morgenthaler's battalion conducted a thorough search of the hamlet complex, destroying every bunker and other enemy installations, while police field forces burned every house on order of the province chief. Battalion Marines completed the search on the 21st. The residents of the La Huan and Giang La complex eventually were resettled in the village of Bich Bac, two kilometers northeast of Hill 55.

A day before the completion of the La Huan-Giang La search, the 1st Marines conducted yet another company-size reconnaissance-in-force on western Go Noi Island. At 0630 on 20 October, control of Com-

*The secret Phoenix, or Phung Hoang, program was carried out by Vietnamese police and intelligence agencies under the advice and supervision of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Its objective was the "neutralization" of the Viet Cong Infrastructure, Communist clandestine government, and political movement members by death or capture.

pany C passed from the 1st Battalion to the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, and the company helilifted to the island, where it patrolled for the next week. Although the Marines encountered and sighted a number of small groups of enemy troops, most were observed south of Go Noi, outside the area of operations, and thus could not be engaged. On the 27th, Company C ended its search of the western portion of the island and returned to control of the 1st Battalion. Eleven days later, Operation Pipestone Canyon was brought to a close.

During the 164-day operation, each of the inter-related objectives was met. All major Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units were driven out of Dodge City and Go Noi Island. Route 4 was not only upgraded, but opened to traffic from Dien Ban west to the railroad berm, permitting access to western Quang Nam Province. Land-clearing operations had transformed Go Noi Island from a heavily vegetated tract to a barren waste, free of treelines and other cover long used by the enemy to conceal his movement across the island. And, through a series of combined cordon and search operations, the ranks of the local Viet Cong Infrastructure were depleted, especially in Dodge City. In the accomplishment of these goals, 852 enemy soldiers were killed, 58 taken prisoner, and 410 weapons, along with large quantities of equipment, ordnance, and foodstuffs, captured. The successes achieved during the operation were not, however, attained without friendly losses. A total of 71 troops, Marines and Navy Corpsmen, died, while 498 others were wounded, most by surprise firing devices, and evacuated, and 108 received minor wounds.

1st Marines: Protecting the Southern Flank

Although heavily committed to Operation Pipestone Canyon throughout the latter half of the year, the 1st Marines retained responsibility for the regimental TAOR. As the 1st and 2d Battalions moved into Dodge City at the end of May, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas E. Bulger's 3d Battalion, reinforced by Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, took the burden of patrolling the remainder of the regiment's assigned area.

Throughout the fertile-rice-paddy- and sand-dune-dotted region, roughly stretching from the Song Yen to the South China Sea, south of Da Nang, Bulger's Marines fanned out in company- and platoon-size combat patrols, hoping to engage elements of the *R-20th* and *Q-82d Local Force Battalions*, known to be operating in the area. The enemy, however, proved to

be illusive as they attempted to avoid Bulger's ever-present maze of small-unit, counter guerrilla operations.

Although enemy activity throughout Quang Nam Province remained relatively high during the month of June, the majority of action within the 1st Marines' TAOR consisted of attacks directed against 3d Battalion patrols, command posts, and bridge security elements. The largest of these occurred shortly after midnight on the 7th, when approximately 70 North Vietnamese troops moved against a platoon of Company K, positioned near No Name Island within the Tre Khe hamlet complex, six kilometers east of Route 1. Under heavy enemy 60mm mortar, CS-gas, RPG, grenade, and small arms fire, the platoon held its position and returned fire, while calling in artillery missions and directing "Spooky" gunship support. As a result of the attack, the enemy lost over half his force.

Towards the end of the month, as emphasis shifted from the multi-battalion search to the land-clearing effort in the Pipestone Canyon area of operations, the 1st Battalion returned to the regimental area and assumed responsibility for the western sector, including security for the Cau Do and Ha Dong Bridges. Bulger's Marines, as a consequence, were given the eastern sector and security of the Tu Cau Bridge. This arrangement continued until 20 July, when 1st Battalion, 26th Marines replaced Bulger's Marines, who then shifted operations to the regiment's western zone. The following day, as the 5th Marines assumed control of the 2d Battalion in preparation for an assault into the Que Son Mountains, Morgenthaler's battalion was assigned the mission of regimental or mobile reserve and returned to Pipestone Canyon. Little changed during this period with respect to enemy tactics as both Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops, heavily battered on Go Noi Island and in Dodge City, avoided other regimental cordon and search operations, patrols, and ambushes.

During the month of August, the 1st Marines, when not engaged in Pipestone Canyon, continued aggressive patrol and ambush operations, placing heavy emphasis on clearing the Song Yen within the rocket belt and assisting the 5th Marines in Operation Durham Peak. In addition, the regiment carried out cordon and search operations in the hamlets of An Thanh (1), Viem Tay (1), An Tra (1), Bo Mung (2), Tan Luu, and La Huan (2), all designated for upgrading under the Accelerated Pacification Campaign. At mid-month, a major shift in forces involved in the counter guerrilla campaign near Da Nang and the surrounding



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Infantrymen of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, responsible for the security of Tu Cau Bridge, south of Da Nang, conduct a daily patrol through one of the surrounding villages.

coastal lowlands occurred. Following successful operations against enemy forces in the Arizona Area, the 7th Marines redeployed to a new area of operations, encompassing the Que Song District of Quang Tin Province. This redeployment, along with the concurrent repositioning of the 5th Marines, 26th Marines, and Vietnamese forces, who assumed a larger role in the pacification and counterinsurgency effort closer to Da Nang, resulted in the expansion of the 1st Marines' area of responsibility.

While retaining control of the eastern, that area generally east of Route 1 between Marble Mountain and Hoi An, and southern (Dodge City and Go Noi Island) sectors, a portion of the regiment's northern zone was transferred to the 26th Marines and its western boundary expanded into an area previously occupied by the 1st and 3d Battalions, 7th Marines. The regimental command post, as a result, shifted southwestward from Dong Son (2) to Camp Muir (Hill 55), and at the same time Colonel Herbert L. Wilkerson assumed command of the regiment, replacing Colonel Robertson, who was promoted to brigadier general and given the position of assistant division commander.

Within the expanded area of responsibility, the 1st

Marines was committed to a wide range of interrelated activities, including Operation Pipestone Canyon, during September and October. Despite monsoon rains during the first two weeks of October, the regiment launched vigorous patrol, ambush, and cordon and search operations, with increased emphasis placed on combined operations with elements of the 51st ARVN Regiment and local Regional Force units in support of the pacification effort, defense of the Da Nang Vital Area, and security of the rocket belt. In addition, the 1st Marines concentrated its rice denial efforts during the beginning of harvest season in the heavily cultivated area flanking the Song Cau Bien, south of Nui Kim Son, and the rich rice-producing regions flanking the Song Yen, north of Hill 55. The regiment directed a special effort to denying the enemy rice grown east of Hill 22 in the Bo Ben and Duyen Son areas, where the rice fields were declared as belonging to the Viet Cong by the Hieu Duc District Chief.

As elections generally coincided with the rice harvest, Wilkerson tasked his Marines with assisting provincial forces in providing polling place security for the provincial elections on 28 September and hamlet elections a month later. Extensive patrols and ambush-

es were run near polling sites the day before each election. On election day, Marine security operations shifted at least 500 meters from the sites, while Regional and Popular Forces provided close-in protection. In addition, a platoon with two CH-46 and two AH-1G helicopters stood by to provide immediate reaction to any terrorist incident which might threaten the security of elections within the 1st Marines' TAOR.

During the final two months of the year, the 1st Marines, in addition to its normal responsibilities of defending the Da Nang Vital Area, securing the rocket belt, protecting allied installations and lines of communication, and participating in the rice denial effort, focused much of its attention on the support of the Accelerated Pacification Program through the Infantry Company Intensive Pacification Program (ICIPP), later renamed the Combined Unit Pacification Program (CUPP). Loosely based on the Combined Action Program (CAP), the ICIPP, or CUPP concept called for an entire Marine rifle company to merge with Regional and Popular Force platoons into a combined Marine-Vietnamese pacification effort. One Marine rifle squad and one Vietnamese platoon would work

together to pacify one specific area, with their combined efforts augmented by provincial forces, including Census Grievance Teams, National Police Field Forces, Provincial Reconnaissance Units, and Revolutionary Development Cadre Teams, when available. When the area was considered pacified, and when a sufficient number of People's Self-Defense Forces had been trained and armed, the Marines would be withdrawn and sent to other targeted areas.

On 7 November, the regiment assumed direct operational control of Captain Donald J. Robinson's Company M and assigned it to the Combined Unit Pacification Program. As early as the 3d, selected officers and NCOs began an intensive two-week training course conducted by the 2d Combined Action Group at Da Nang in order to prepare themselves for duty with Regional and Popular Forces. Training completed, the first unit, composed of one platoon from Company M and one platoon from the 759th Regional Force Company, along with a Revolutionary Development Team, moved into Chau Son Hamlet, two kilometers southwest of Hill 55 on the 9th. The following day, the regiment dispatched a second unit to Binh

A Marine from Company M, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines stands watch with two members of the local Popular Forces. The joint Marine-Popular Force unit was tasked with providing security for the village of Binh Boc as part of the Combined Unit Pacification Program.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



Bac Hamlet, a kilometer northeast of the regiment's command post, and on the 30th, a third moved into Le Son (1) Hamlet, five kilometers to the northeast. During December, the 1st Marines installed five additional combined platoons in hamlets designated by the South Vietnamese Government for pacification status upgrading, as the program continued to show promise.

In late December, to supplement the usual ground patrols and ambushes, the 1st Marines instituted a new system of helicopter-borne combat patrols, codenamed Kingfisher. These patrols, the latest variant in a long series of quick-reaction infantry-helicopter combinations, were intended to seek out the enemy and initiate contact rather than exploit engagements or assist ground units already under fire. As Colonel Wilkerson noted, they were "an offensive weapon that goes out and hunt[s] them They actually invite trouble."¹¹

The initial Kingfisher patrol was to consist of one rifle platoon loaded on board three Boeing CH-46D Sea Knight helicopters which would then fly over the regimental TAOR accompanied by two Bell AH-1G Cobra gunships and a North American OV-10A Bronco carrying an aerial observer. In the air at first light, the patrol was to search the terrain for targets of opportunity, attacking enemy formations, destroying enemy installations, and detaining persons acting in such a manner as to warrant suspicion. If the Marines found enemy troops, the Cobras would provide close support and the aerial observer would call for fixed-wing air strikes and artillery if necessary. Kingfisher operations required careful coordination once in the air. Each patrol included a UH-1E Huey command helicopter. This aircraft carried the company commander, a regimental staff officer, both in radio contact with the 1st Marines' command post, and the air commander. These officers mutually would decide when and where to land the troops. Each time a Kingfisher patrol went out, the battalions would be informed as to which areas within their TAORs were likely targets to be investigated, so that the battalion's own patrols could avoid them. This same information was to be supplied the artillery, which then would suspend all fire in those areas unless called upon to support the patrol.

The regiment's first patrol, composed of a platoon from Captain Jimmie L. Adkins' Company H, lifted off at 0645 on 26 December with 10 targets of primary interest throughout the TAOR. The patrol landed on a target in the Ngan Cau area, three kilometers east

of Route 1, to establish a block for the rest of the company. As no engagement ensued, Kingfisher I spent but 35 minutes on the ground. The patrol later assaulted a target in the area of Dong Lien, between the Song La Tho and Suoi Co Ca, following an air bombardment by Cobra gunships. Although the patrol initially encountered small arms fire, there was no ground action and the patrol took off 55 minutes later—this being the first time a platoon-size unit entered Dodge City alone. After the Dong Lien landing, the patrol then secured, returned to base, and key personnel assembled at the regimental command post for a debrief and critique of the initial operation. Although Kingfisher I engaged no enemy troops, 1st Marines and Marine Aircraft Group 16 participants expressed enthusiasm about the concept, suggesting that additional trials be conducted in order to refine a number of command and control techniques. Kingfisher patrols would, during 1970, become a valued tactic for the regiment and division, especially against small enemy units operating in the rocket belt. In augmenting the regiment's tactical arsenal, the patrols would aid the 1st Marines in successfully inflicting significant losses and reducing the enemy's freedom of movement within its assigned area of responsibility.

Despite the institution of several tactical innovations during the year, the frustrating war south of Da Nang had changed little over the years, as the 1st Battalion's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Godfrey S. Delcuze, noted:

The war had moved on except for sporadic, murderous local force mining. Brave men died "pacifying" old men, women, and children who refused to be pacified. Too heavy infantry armed, equipped, and supplied to engage [Viet Cong] main force units, slogged through paddies and scrub brush past farm folk who mined trails from time to time. They—the peasants—wreaked their havoc from time to time with M16 bounding mines from fields U.S. forces had laid. Our only identifiable "military" service was a two-day lay out ambush. The ambush netted one enemy "soldier." He came walking down a trail with an M16 bounding mine in each hand. We shot him in the gut. He was a 12-year old boy.¹²

The Arizona

Southwest and west of the 1st Marines' TAOR, the 5th Marines continued to defend the large broad plain dominated by the confluence of two major rivers, the Song Vu Gia and Song Thu Bon. Commanded by Colonel William J. Zaro, the regiment began the latter half of the year with Lieutenant Colonel William E. Riley, Jr.'s 1st Battalion operating in the Arizona area; Lieutenant Colonel James H. Higgins' 2d Bat-

talion, deployed from the Arizona action, protecting Liberty Bridge and Road and conducting patrols in the surrounding terrain; and Lieutenant Colonel Harry E. Atkinson's 3d Battalion participating in Operation Pipestone Canyon under the operational control of the 1st Marines.

The pattern of battalion activities varied according to region. In the Arizona, between the Song Vu Gia and Song Thu Bon, the 1st Battalion defended no fixed positions, but continually moved in company-size formations from place to place, patrolling, setting up night ambushes, searching for food and supply caches, and frequently conducting multi-company sweeps with ARVN forces in this long-time enemy stronghold. Companies of Higgins' 2d Battalion not only manned the strategic outpost of Liberty Bridge and other strongpoints, and cooperated with Vietnamese forces to secure Routes 540 (Liberty Road) and 537, but also launched company-size sweeps of the surrounding terrain. Although temporarily assigned to the 1st Marines, the 3d Battalion normally operated in the regiment's eastern area, centered on the Phu Loc Valley and northern tier of the Que Son Mountains, where it saturated the countryside with patrols, ambushes, and occasional multi-company sweeps.

Enemy activity throughout the 5th Marines' area of responsibility, although light during the last week of May and the first days of June, increased sharply both in frequency and intensity as the month progressed with coordinated attacks by fire against An Hoa Combat Base and units in the field. In the early morning hours of 7 June, the enemy subjected An Hoa to a company-size sapper attack, supported by small arms fire, grenades, RPGs, B40 rockets, and approximately 10 rounds from 82mm mortars. Concentrating the attack in two sectors, the enemy broke through the defensive wire, but were driven back and forced to retreat under heavy volumes of Marine small arms, automatic weapons, 81mm mortar, and artillery fire. The action cost elements of the *3d NVA Sapper Battalion* 19 dead and two captured. The captured sappers, according to Colonel Zaro, grateful for their treatment, demonstrated and revealed many of their infiltration techniques.¹³

At approximately the same time, but six kilometers to the west, near the heavily fortified hamlet of An Bang (2) in the Arizona, an unknown-size enemy unit, subsequently identified as an element of the *90th NVA Regiment*, attacked the night defensive position of Lieutenant Colonel Riley's 1st Battalion command

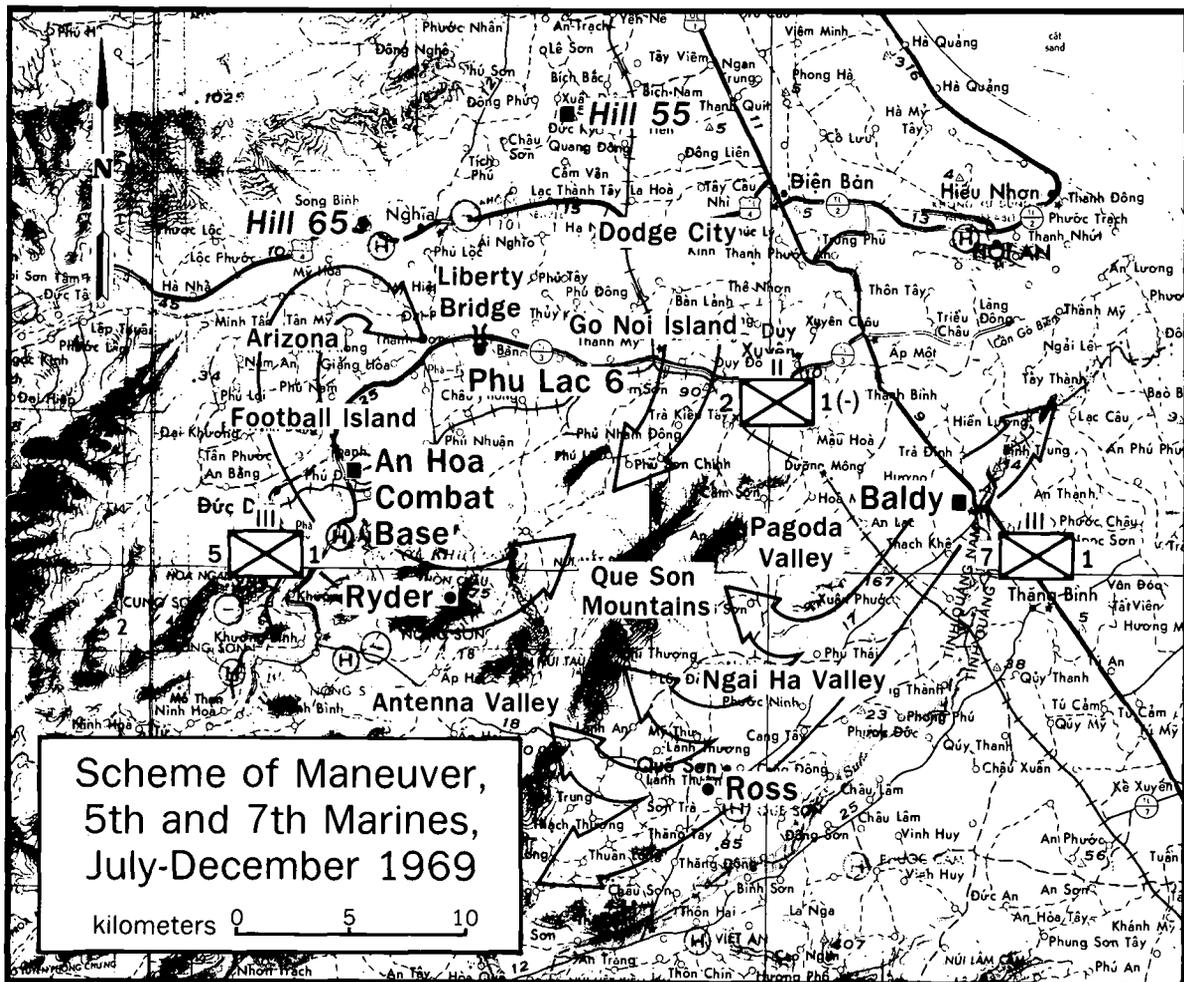


Marine Corps Historical Collection
Marines of Company B, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines cross a rice paddy dike while on patrol in the Arizona in search of remnants of the 90th NVA Regiment.

group and Company A. Over the next 10 days, in a series of battles reminiscent of those fought by the 7th Marines along the Song Vu Gia a month before, Riley's Marines would batter the enemy regiment, finally forcing it to withdraw to the Ong Thu Slope in Base Area 112 to recover.

The attack began shortly after midnight, as the grenade-throwing enemy force, supported by mortars and heavy automatic and small arms fire, came at Riley's Marines from three directions. Employing organic weapons, artillery, and "Spooky" gunship support, the Marines broke the enemy ground attack. A search of the battlefield at first light revealed 11 enemy bodies and three wounded soldiers, who had taken refuge along a rice paddy dike. Throughout most of the next day, the enemy harassed the command group and Company A with mortar and recoilless rifle fire, which Riley's Marines were unable to silence. Late in the afternoon, further east, Company B executed a hasty ambush of 25 NVA troops, resulting in 19 enemy, but no friendly, casualties.

On the morning of the 8th, elements of the *90th Regiment* again attempted to drive Riley's battalion out of the Arizona. Shortly before sunrise, the enemy



See Reference Map, Sections 31-33, 37-39

struck at the command group and Company A, and again the aggressive attack was broken with the assistance of accurate artillery and air support. Later in the day, as the battalion command post attempted to relocate, lead elements of Captain Philip H. Torrey's Company A, acting as security for the move, came under very heavy .30- and .50-caliber machine gun fire. A hasty perimeter was set up while fixed-wing aircraft and artillery peppered the suspected enemy weapons site. With the lifting of supporting arms fire, Company A moved out in the attack, but again came under heavy automatic weapons fire, this time supported by 60mm mortars. In spite of the fire, a platoon of the company was able to establish a toehold on the southern flank of the enemy's perimeter, and batter his positions with machine gun, small arms, and hand-held rocket fire for 90 minutes before being ordered to withdraw because of continued resistance and impending darkness. Once contact was broken, air and

artillery moved in and pounded the enemy position throughout the night.

Following a heavy air, artillery, and mortar bombardment the next morning, the attack resumed. Reinforced by a platoon from Company C, Company A seized and secured the enemy position despite continued resistance. A detailed search of the complex, believed to be the site of the NVA battalion's command post defended by two well-entrenched infantry companies supported by at least one heavy weapons company, revealed 80 enemy bodies.

While Company A continued searching the enemy position, Company B, under Captain Gene E. Castagnetti, moving to assist, came under intensive fire. Sizing up the situation, Castagnetti ordered two of his platoons into the assault, with the remainder of the company providing cover fire for the advance. Expertly maneuvering across 300 meters of fire-swept rice paddies, the two platoons stormed the enemy position,

killing another 75 NVA troops, including the battalion commander, and capturing over 50 small arms weapons and one 12.7mm antiaircraft gun.¹⁴ During the next four days, the battalion command group and Company C again came under a series of large-scale enemy attacks. Although supported by a seemingly endless supply of ordnance, in the form of B40 rockets, RPGs, 82mm and 60mm mortars, recoilless rifles, and heavy machine guns, Riley's Marines forced the North Vietnamese to sacrifice heavily. As a result of these engagements, the enemy lost another 71 troops, among them a company commander, and numerous individual and crew-served weapons.

After the beating on 12 June, enemy activity subsided throughout the Arizona for the next several days as elements of the *90th Regiment* consciously avoided encounters with Riley's patrols. Shortly after midnight on the 17th, they again struck in force. Supported by mortars, B40 rockets, and RPGs, two companies assaulted the battalion's night defensive position from the north and west. Relying on heavy concentrations of artillery, 81mm mortar, and "Spooky" gunship fire, which at times fell within yards of the perimeter, 1st Battalion Marines again beat back the attack in bitter fighting, which lasted over five hours. At midmorning, a sweep of the battlefield found 32 enemy dead, two wounded, and a large quantity of weapons and miscellaneous equipment. Losing over 300 troops in 10 days, major elements of the *90th NVA Regiment* withdrew into Base Area 112, and activity throughout the southern Arizona subsided.

While Lieutenant Colonel Riley's battalion fought the *90th Regiment* in the Arizona and Lieutenant Colonel Higgins' 2d Battalion secured Liberty Bridge and Road (North), Lieutenant Colonel Atkinson's 3d Battalion ended its participation in Operation Pipestone Canyon and began an unnamed, 13-day, search and clear operation in the Phu Loc Valley, aimed at catching enemy troops driven south by the 1st Marines. On 15 June, two companies of Atkinson's Marines crossed the Song Chiem Son from Go Noi and moved up the valley on foot. There they were joined the following day by the command group and the rest of the battalion, which air assaulted into the area. The battalion then searched the rugged, mountainous terrain, south of Alligator Lake, until the 28th, finding only empty base camps, caves, fighting positions, and encountering few enemy troops. On the 28th, Atkinson's Marines withdrew from the valley and flew to An Hoa where they assumed security duty for the base and Liberty Road (South).

During the first week of July, the 5th Marines initiated a cordon and search operation, Forsyth Grove, with the 1st and 2d Battalions, 5th Marines and 1st Battalion, 7th Marines. Conducted in a two-kilometer-square area of the northern Arizona, the objective was successfully cordoned on the south when Riley's Marines moved under cover of darkness into their assigned blocking positions from the southern Arizona. Similarly, the 2d Battalion covertly completed a crossing of the Song Thu Bon and occupied blocking positions to the east. Before sunrise on the 1st, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines forded the Song Vu Gia and closed the trap. Although the combined Marine force encountered token resistance during the search, the 5th Marines reported that the local Viet Cong again were "denied the use and exploitation of a natural sanctuary."¹⁴

Following the close of the three-day operation in the northern Arizona, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines remained in the area and continued offensive patrol operations while Lieutenant Colonel Higgins' Marines returned to Phu Lac (6) and reassumed security for Liberty Bridge and Road (North), and the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines recrossed the Song Vu Gia. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel John M. Terry, Jr., continued its assigned tasks of defending An Hoa Combat Base, securing the southern portion of Liberty Road, and conducting patrols within the regiment's southern area of operations, southeast of the combat base.

On 18 July, a shift among the regiment's three battalions occurred in preparation for the 5th Marines' last multi-battalion operation of the year on the southern fringe of its area of operations. In order to free the 2d Battalion, two of Lieutenant Colonel Riley's companies moved from the Arizona to Phu Lac (6). At the same time, the remainder of the 1st Battalion airlifted to An Hoa Combat Base, there relieving Lieutenant Colonel Terry's 3d Battalion. Joining the two battalions would be Lieutenant Colonel Glasgow's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines. Site of the 5th Marines-controlled operation was to be a 20-kilometer-square area encompassing Antenna Valley, Phu Loc Valley, and the Que Son Mountains, location of the enemy's old Base Area 116, approximately 10 kilometers southeast of An Hoa Combat Base.

Protruding like spikes into the Quang Nam lowlands, the Que Son Mountains range in height to over 900 meters. Covered with single-canopy jungle and thick underbrush, the chain is punctuated by narrow ridges which drop off into deep ravines. Along

the chain's entire base runs a natural corridor from Antenna Valley in the southwest to Phu Loc Valley in the northeast; the corridor then opens onto Go Noi Island and the Dodge City area, the broad plain south of Da Nang. Scattered along the ridges and in the ravines of the chain were suspected enemy base camps, hospitals, fighting positions, storage areas, and an extensive trail network. Although no enemy force was known to have actually occupied the area since the departure of the *1st VC Regiment* in March, intelligence sources suspected that the elusive headquarters and service elements of *Front 4* and the *36th NVA Regiment* had moved into the region, having been driven out of Dodge City and off Go Noi Island by the 1st Marines during the first month of Operation Pipestone Canyon.

In preparation for the attack and search of the Que Son Mountains, codenamed Durham Peak, two 105mm howitzer batteries of the 11th Marines moved from An Hoa Combat Base on the 19th and established a temporary fire support base on the southern edge of Go Noi Island. As a deceptive measure, they trained their guns northward. Offshore stood the *Boston* (CAG 1), her six 8-inch 55s at the ready. The following morning, Batteries B and F shifted their

tubes 180 degrees, and with the guns of the *Boston*, unleashed a barrage against preselected targets throughout the operational area. Simultaneously, the 37th Battalion, 1st ARVN Ranger Group assaulted into a previously prepared fire support base and several landing zones in the upper reaches of Antenna Valley, establishing positions aimed at blocking enemy escape routes out of the valley. Later in the day, Lieutenant Colonel Terry's 3d Battalion joined the ARVN Rangers in the area of operations and set up blocking positions to the west and southwest. Both assaults went unopposed, the day being marred only by the crash of a MAG-16 CH-46 helicopter in which several Rangers were killed. The following day, Lieutenant Colonel Glasgow's 2d Battalion helilifted into three landing zones in the Phu Loc Valley and established positions astride known enemy escape routes from the Que Son Mountains to the north and northeast. Elements of the Americal Division's 196th Brigade set up blocking positions to the east and southeast, in the Que Son Valley, completing the circle. Lieutenant Colonel Higgins' 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, designated regimental reserve, remained at Phu Lac (6).

As company patrols moved out from their initial landing zones, they discovered extensive bunker com-

Elements of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines find the terrain difficult during search operations for the elusive headquarters of Front 4 thought to be in the Que Son Mountains.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A372128



plexes, caves, hootches, supply caches, and numerous NVA graves. Most bunkers and hootches, however, showed damage as a result of B-52 bombing raids (Arc Lights), carried out in the Que Son Mountains prior to the operation. Enemy resistance was light, stemming primarily from small groups attempting to evade ARVN and Marine forces. But as the Marines moved to higher ground, specifically toward Nui Mat Rang and Nui Da Beo, activity intensified as enemy troops employed an ever-increasing number of sniper teams and ambushes.

On 25 July, as Marines of Company H, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines moved up a narrow, well-used trail toward the top of Nui Mat Rang (Hill 845), they came under heavy sniper fire from a rock ledge, 100 meters above. Responding with small arms, and rocket and machine gun fire from an orbiting Rockwell OV-10A (Bronco), the company forced the snipers to withdraw. The following morning, the company's 3d platoon moved back to the area of the previous day's encounter, and was ambushed by an estimated company of NVA soldiers. As Second Lieutenant Robert A. Lavery, of the 1st Platoon, later reported:

They had set up foxholes and positions off to one side of the trail As the point man came up they shot him. They couldn't see much of the killing zone because of the heavy vegetation, but the field of fire was cleared so low that they originally shot everybody in the legs that came into it. As people would come into it to assist a wounded person, . . . they would get shot in the legs. Then once they were down, they had one sniper that would either shoot them in the head or the back.¹⁶

As a result of the tactic, NVA sharpshooters killed six and wounded 16 without, it was thought, losing a man.

Efforts to extract the embattled platoon proved difficult as communications had broken down, causing confusion as to the platoon's exact location. Air and artillery were called in on what was thought to be the enemy's position, but, as it was later determined, the air strikes and artillery rounds impacted more than 1,000 meters to the southwest. In addition, a medical evacuation helicopter, endeavoring to bring out the dead and wounded, was shot down, compelling reinforcements which otherwise would have been sent to assist the 3d Platoon, to be diverted away in order to establish security for the downed CH-46. Despite these unfortunate events, reinforcements eventually reached the embattled unit and the platoon, with its casualties, returned to the company's position

near the summit of Hill 845, where a jungle penetrator extracted the wounded.

As the month drew to a close, both Terry's and Glasgow's Marines continued to push deeper into the mountains, following the extensive enemy trail network instead of moving cross-country through the thick jungle terrain. "The NVA travel the trails," noted Lieutenant Lavery, and "everything they have is along the trails. If we are going to find them or any of their gear, it is going to be along the trails, not on cross-country sweeps."¹⁷ Lavery's observation proved correct: discoveries of bunkers, caves, and hidden encampments along the trails increased with elevation, as did the number of brief firefights with small groups of enemy troops, employing a wide range of delaying tactics. Simultaneously, enemy sightings by elements of the Americal's 196th Light Infantry Brigade and 5th ARVN Regiment, providing flank security in the Que Son lowlands, increased as a result of the Marines' push to the southeast. It was Colonel Zaro's belief that the blocks by these units were ineffective and permitted groups of enemy to escape to the south and east.¹⁸

Operating along the ridgelines and among the draws of the Que Son's created a number of problems for the two Marine battalions, chief among them, resupply. The rugged terrain, high winds, and small landing zones atop mountain peaks forced many Marine helicopter pilots to cancel direct landings and concentrate instead on resupply drops, which they often lost, forcing both Terry's and Glasgow's Marines to exist for extended periods on Long Range rations and to obtain water from local streams. The lack of purified water and adequate supplies of malaria pills produced an abnormally high incidence of the disease and related fevers in the Marines participating in the operation.¹⁹

On 31 July, Colonel Zaro committed Lieutenant Colonel James H. Higgins' 2d Battalion, 5th Marines to Durham Peak, which immediately established blocking positions near Hill 848 in the center of the area of operations. Three days later, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines relieved its sister battalion in place, continuing patrols in the Que Son highlands in search of enemy units and base camps.

By the end of the first week of August, the ground had been covered and encounters had dwindled to a few short, sporadic, but fierce, hit-and-run attacks. Based on all available intelligence, the enemy remaining in the area consisted largely of the sick and wounded—the able-bodied having fragmented into



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Members of the 106mm Recoilless Rifle Platoon, Headquarters and Service Company, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines fire at an enemy target from a position on Hill 848.

small groups and fled into the lowlands. On the 7th, the withdrawal began with the return of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and a battery of the 11th Marines to their bases in the Quang Nam lowlands. The next day, the 1st ARVN Ranger Group began its withdrawal to An Hoa Combat Base, followed by the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines and elements of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines on the 12th. The final phase of the measured withdrawal took place on the 13th, when the remaining batteries of 2d Battalion, 11th Marines and companies of 3d Battalion, 5th Marines helilifted from the Que Son Mountains to the regimental combat base at An Hoa.

With the termination of Durham Peak, the 5th Marines returned to a changed area of operation brought about by the southward shift of the 7th Marines. Of particular significance was the assumption of responsibility for the Thuong Duc Valley, north of the Song Vu Gia, including the outpost at Hill 65 and the southern slope of Charlie Ridge. On 14 August, elements of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines relieved the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines on Hill 65, while the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines moved into the southern Arizona two days later.

Under the leadership of the new regimental commander, Colonel Noble L. Beck, who relieved Colonel Zaro on the 16th, the three battalions of the 5th Marines concentrated on a variety of missions within their respective areas of operation. At Liberty Bridge, Lieutenant Colonel Riley's 1st Battalion continued defensive operations in areas adjacent to the vital river

crossing, while providing security patrols for truck convoys along Liberty Road, north of An Hoa Combat Base. To the northwest, the 2d Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Higgins, relieved on the 24th by Lieutenant Colonel James T. Bowen, confined its operations to company-size patrols and participation in the district pacification program, north of the Song Vu Gia, within the villages surrounding Hill 65. Lieutenant Colonel Terry's 3d Battalion, operating within the Arizona, initially concentrated its efforts on destroying NVA and guerrilla havens and on interdicting enemy movement throughout the Phu Loi and Nam An village complexes, south of the Song Vu Gia and east of the Finger Lakes, and then in areas of central and southern Arizona.

Contact within the regimental area was unusually light during the remainder of August, but with the new month, enemy activity intensified, most notably within the boundaries of the Arizona. Operating in terrain characterized by low hills, numerous tree lines, and rice paddies, Lieutenant Colonel Terry's Marines, first independently and then in conjunction with elements of the 1st ARVN Ranger Group, experienced a number of sharp, violent clashes with units of the reintroduced *90th NVA Regiment*, while continually being subjected to a large volume of harassing small arms, mortar, and rocket fire. On 11 September, while Company I moved across an open rice paddy toward a tree line between the villages of Ham Tay (1) and Ben Dau (3), near the Song Thu Bon, approximately 30 enemy troops took the company under heavy au-

tomatic weapons, rocket grenade, and mortar fire. Almost simultaneously, the battalion's S-3, Major Martin J. Dahlquist, stepped on a well-concealed enemy mine, that shattered his leg and slightly wounded two other Marines. Although periodic sniper fire hampered helicopter operations, the medical evacuation was accomplished without damage to aircraft or loss of additional personnel.²⁰

The Marines of Company I quickly returned fire, and called for air strikes, interspersed with artillery. Following a shift of artillery fire onto likely escape routes, Captain William M. Kay ordered a frontal assault and simultaneous flank envelopment. Kay's Marines moved rapidly through the enemy position, searching tree lines, bunkers, and spider holes, finding 12 NVA bodies and 16 weapons, including a Soviet carriage-mounted, heavy machine gun. Later in the day and early the next morning, Captain Kay's company again came under intense mortar and small arms fire, resulting in an additional 18 casualties. Two days later, the company, in addition to the rest of the battalion, withdrew from the Arizona and moved by air

to Phu Lac (6), where it assumed responsibility for the security of Liberty Bridge and Liberty Road. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, in turn, helilifted into the Arizona.

Towards the end of September, all three battalions began rice denial and destruction operations within their respective areas of responsibility. Working in conjunction with ARVN and district forces, designated 5th Marine units were to protect Vietnamese farmers during the fall rice harvest, assist in the removal of the crop to secure storage areas, and aid in the destruction of enemy-controlled fields identified by district officials. In addition, on 27-28 September, 5th Marine units provided security for elections to the Quang Nam Lower House of Representatives through screening operations, extensive patrols, and ambushes, while regional, provincial, and National Police forces provided close-in security. During the two days of election security operations, there was no attempt by the enemy to disrupt the voting within the 5th Marines area of operations.

Conditions during the month of October within the

Navy Corpsman Anthony Fodale checks the pulse of one of four wounded North Vietnamese Army soldiers found in an abandoned hospital complex by elements of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines while on a patrol 11 kilometers east of An Hoa Combat Base.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A372184



regiment's area of responsibility could only be characterized by one word—wet. The northeast monsoon dumped a total of 40 inches of rain, raising river and stream levels as much as eight feet above normal. Flood conditions made movement in the lowlands difficult if not impossible. As a result, the 1st Battalion, now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Joseph K. Griffis, Jr., pulled out of the Arizona and moved to An Hoa where it conducted defensive patrol operations in and around the combat base, cordon and search operations with Combined Action Company 29 and Duc Duc District forces near the villages of Mau Chanh (2) and Thu Bon (5), and company patrols near Tick Lake, southeast of An Hoa. On the 18th, Griffis' Marines returned to the rain-soaked Arizona and resumed search and rice denial operations begun the previous month.

To the north in the high ground, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines continued, despite the monsoon, search and destroy operations in the Thuong Duc Valley and security patrols along Route 4. The scene was different at Liberty Bridge. The Song Thu Bon quickly rose to 17 feet above normal, covering the bridge with six feet of water and forcing Lieutenant Colonel Terry's battalion to higher ground. Flood waters rose so rapidly on the night of 5 October that a security platoon and a four-man watchtower guard were cut off and had to be rescued by lifeline and helicopter. As a result of flood conditions and subsequent bridge and road damage, truck convoys were halted and resupply of An Hoa Combat Base carried out by Marine helicopters and Air Force C-130 transports. The river subsided enough for Terry's battalion to return to normal security positions, and for elements of the 7th Engineer Battalion to begin repair of the bridge's southern approach on the 13th. By 21 October, with temporary repairs completed, "Rough Rider" truck convoys again moved down Liberty Road toward An Hoa Combat Base. The regiment reported no injuries as a result of bunker, fighting position, and other field emplacement cave-ins.²¹

Following the two weeks of heavy monsoon rains, enemy activity within the regimental area of operations progressively increased, notably within northern Arizona. Situated north of An Hoa, west of Dai Loc, and south of Hill 65, between the Song Vu Gia and Song Thu Bon, this small triangular area had long been a region of intense enemy activity as it sat astride major east-west infiltration routes. In addition, intelligence sources reported that local guerrillas of the

Q83d Battalion, recently resupplied with ammunition from Base Area 112, were about to attack across the Song Vu Gia into heavily populated Dai Loc District. Consequently, plans for a multi-battalion search and clear operation were drawn up, to be put into effect at the end of the month.

Early on the morning of the 30th, Lieutenant Colonel Griffis' Companies A and D moved out of the southern Arizona and established two blocking positions paralleling a stream which ran from My Hoa (3) to Phu Long (1) in northern Arizona. Simultaneously, Company I, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines crossed the Song Thu Bon by LVTs near "Football Island," secured a landing zone for elements of 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, and then moved into blocking positions near the eastern tip of the Arizona. With the insertion of Lieutenant Colonel Bowen's command group, Companies G and H, and the establishment of an additional block by Regional Force Company 369 along the Song Thu Bon, aggressive search operations began in the loosely cordoned area.²²

Concentrating on squad-size patrols, the combined force searched the paddy-dotted area, discovering numerous bunkers, food caches, dud rounds, and boobytraps. With the exception of two clashes with 10 to

Members of the 2d Platoon, Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines ford a monsoon-swollen stream while searching the Arizona during operations in November.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



15 enemy troops, engagements consisted of numerous encounters with small units of three to four rice-gatherers. After 10 days of successful small-unit engagements, during which the combined force accounted for more than 100 enemy troops killed, elements of Lieutenant Colonel Bowen's battalion withdrew to the Thuong Duc Valley, and Lieutenant Colonel Terry's Marines moved out of their blocking position, back across the Song Thu Bon and resumed operations near Liberty Bridge; Lieutenant Colonel Griffis' Marines returned to their normal area of responsibility in southern Arizona.

Late on 17 November, operations within northern Arizona began anew with the reinsertion of two companies of the 2d Battalion in the guise of resupplying the 1st Battalion. Under cover of darkness, Lieutenant Colonel Bowen's Marines then moved into the attack, while both Griffis' and Terry's Marines entered the area and reoccupied their original blocking positions. Three days of maneuvering followed during which the three battalions pushed a large number of enemy troops onto Football Island in the Song Thu Bon. An intensive search of the island followed on the heels of massed, pre-planned, time-on-target artillery fire by the 11th Marines.* Forced into an ever smaller area, approximately 40 enemy troops attempted to escape the island on the night of 20 November, but were ambushed by Griffis' blocking forces, who killed 18 and captured a large quantity of arms and foodstuffs. With the ambush of the remnants of the *Q83 Battalion*, operations in northern Arizona ceased and all regimental units, with the exception of the 1st and 3d Battalions which exchanged areas of responsibility, returned to their normal operational areas.

Throughout the final month of the year, the 5th Marines continued aggressive search operations throughout the An Hoa basin aimed at blocking enemy infiltration and destroying his sources of food. North of the Song Vu Gia, 1st Battalion Marines, in conjunction with Regional Force Company 193, concentrated on small-unit patrols in the Thuong Duc Valley and company-size operations in the thick canopy and steep hills of Charlie Ridge, while supplementing An Hoa base defenses. The 2d Battalion carried out similar operations in the Arizona. Until relieved on 23 December by the 3d Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Bowen's Marines, in close coordination with

elements of the 51st ARVN Regiment, employed company- and platoon-size patrols and night ambushes in an effort to counter small groups of enemy moving through the region on food-gathering missions. The combined effort, which would last into the new year, achieved limited gains due to the highly successful operation carried out in November.

During the first two weeks of December, 3d Battalion Marines under Lieutenant Colonel Johan S. Gestson, who relieved Lieutenant Colonel Terry on the 9th, continued to provide security for Liberty Bridge and Liberty Road, while conducting patrols and ambushes throughout the expanse of the regiment's eastern area of operations. On the 16th, the battalion displaced to An Hoa in preparation for the transfer of its area of responsibility to the 2d Battalion. While at the combat base, the regiment received intelligence reports indicating that enemy forces in the Que Son Mountains were preparing to attack the base. As a result, Colonel Beck ordered a preemptive strike, directing Lieutenant Colonel Gestson to split his force into two provisional battalions: Command Group Alpha, consisting of Companies I, K, and M; and Command Group Bravo, composed of Companies L, E, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, and C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. Group Alpha, commanded by Gestson, jumped off on 17 December for a five-day search and clear operation in the northern Que Sons, while Group Bravo, commanded by the battalion's executive officer, Major Denver T. Dale III, assumed complete responsibility for the security of Liberty Bridge, Liberty Road, and the regiment's eastern area of operations.

On 23 December, following several days of very little activity in the Que Sons, Command Group Alpha helilifted into the Arizona, relieving the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines of responsibility for the area. The next day, Colonel Beck deactivated both command groups and ordered Lieutenant Colonel Bowen's Marines to assume control of the eastern area of operations. Throughout the remainder of the month, Gestson's Marines conducted extensive patrols and rice denial operations within the Arizona, employing a denial technique, codenamed "Operation Butterfly," pioneered earlier.** Split into 10-man teams and equipped with detonation cord, elements of the battalion helilifted into areas containing enemy controlled

*Time-on-target denotes the method of firing on a target in which various artillery units so time their fire as to assure all projectiles reach the target simultaneously.

**For a detailed discussion of Operation Butterfly, see Colonel Noble L. Beck, "Rice Krispies Nipped in the Bud," *Marine Corps Gazette*, May70, p. 50.

seedling beds. With the “det” cord and gasoline, Gestson’s battalion destroyed the seedlings before they could be transplanted into paddies—maximizing destruction in a minimum amount of time. Utilizing this technique, the battalion and the regiment destroyed 760 rice seedlings beds, averaging 400 meters square: potentially enough rice to supply a company-size unit

for months. This rice denial technique, combined with extensive patrols and night ambushes and the rotation of battalions into the Arizona at approximately one-month intervals, would continue to aid the 5th Marines in inflicting significant losses and reducing the enemy’s freedom of movement throughout the An Hoa basin during the coming year.