

# U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

## THE DEFINING YEAR

### 1968



*COVER: Marine infantry advance cautiously under support of the 90mm gun of a M48 tank in street fighting in Hue. Even with the tank support, the Marines found the enemy resistance difficult to overcome in the first days of the operation.*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190400

# U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM THE DEFINING YEAR

1968

by

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and

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# Foreword

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This is the last volume, although published out of chronological sequence, in the nine-volume operational history series covering the Marine Corps' participation in the Vietnam War. A separate functional series complements the operational histories. This book is the capstone volume of the entire series in that 1968, as the title indicates, was the defining year of the war. While originally designed to be two volumes, it was decided that unity and cohesion required one book.

The year 1968 was the year of the Tet Offensive including Khe Sanh and Hue City. These were momentous events in the course of the war and they occurred in the first three months of the year. This book, however, documents that 1968 was more than just the Tet Offensive. The bloodiest month of the war for the U.S. forces was not January nor February 1968, but May 1968 when the Communists launched what was called their "Mini-Tet" offensive. This was followed by a second "Mini-Tet" offensive during the late summer which also was repulsed at heavy cost to both sides. By the end of the year, the U.S. forces in South Vietnam's I Corps, under the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), had regained the offensive. By December, enemy-initiated attacks had fallen to their lowest level in two years. Still, there was no talk of victory. The Communist forces remained a formidable foe and a limit had been drawn on the level of American participation in the war.

Although largely written from the perspective of III MAF and the ground war in I Corps, the volume also treats the activities of Marines with the Seventh Fleet Special Landing Force, activities of Marine advisors to South Vietnamese forces, and other Marine involvement in the war. Separate chapters cover Marine aviation and the single manager controversy, artillery, logistics, manpower, and pacification.

Like most of the volumes in this series, this has been a cumulative history. Lieutenant Colonel Leonard A. Blasiol researched and wrote the initial drafts of the chapters on Khe Sanh as well as Chapters 17, 19, and 21 and the account of Operation Thor in Chapter 26. Mr. Charles R. Smith researched and drafted Chapters 16, 18, 20, and 22. Captain David A. Dawson researched and wrote Chapter 27. Dr. Jack Shulimson researched and wrote the remaining chapters, edited and revised the entire text, and incorporated the comments of the various reviewers.

Dr. Shulimson heads the History Writing Unit and is a graduate of the University of Buffalo, now the State University of New York at Buffalo. He earned his master's degree in history at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan and his doctorate from the University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland in American studies. Mr. Smith is a senior historian in the Division and served in Vietnam as an artilleryman and then as a historian with the U.S. Army. He is a graduate of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and received his master's degree in history from San Diego State University. Lieutenant Colonel Blasiol is an experienced artilleryman and a graduate of Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, with a degree in history, and of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College. Captain Dawson is an infantry officer now stationed at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He holds a bachelor of arts degree in history from Cornell University, Ithaca, New York and a master's degree in history from Kansas State University, Lawrence, Kansas.



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



# Preface

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*U.S. Marines in Vietnam, The Defining Year, 1968* like the preceding volumes in this series is largely based upon the holdings of the Marine Corps Historical Center. These include the official unit command chronologies, after-action reports, message and journal files, various staff studies, oral histories, personal papers, and reference collections. In addition, the authors have used the holdings of the other Services and pertinent published primary and secondary sources. Most importantly, nearly 230 reviewers, most of whom were participants in the events, read draft chapters and made substantive comments. They are listed by name in a separate appendix. While some classified sources have been used, none of the material in the text contains any classified information.

To a large extent, the measurement of this war relied not upon territory occupied, but upon casualties inflicted upon the enemy. In enumerating enemy casualties, the authors are not making any statement upon the reliability or accuracy of these numbers. These are merely the figures provided by the reporting units. They are important in that the U.S. military and national leadership depended in part upon the comparative casualty yardstick to report and evaluate progress in the war.

In any project this large and that involved so many people, the authors are in debt to several of their associates, past and present, in the History and Museums Division. While it is not possible to list everyone, we would be most negligent if we did not thank the following. First, Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, Director Emeritus, provided the vision and backing for the entire series, insisting upon readability and accuracy. Colonel Michael F. Monigan, Acting Director, gave the impetus for final completion of the project. Chief Historian Benis M. Frank, and his predecessor, Henry I. Shaw, Jr., furnished editorial guidance and encouragement. Ms. Wanda J. Renfrow of the Histories Section and Mr. Robert E. Struder, Head of Editing and Design, read the entire manuscript together with Mr. Frank and prevented several minor errors and some embarrassments. Mrs. Cathy A. Kerns, of the Editing and Design Section, typed the photograph captions and the Medal of Honor Appendix. Both Mrs. Kerns and Ms. Renfrow painstakingly inserted the multitudinous entries for the index, carefully checking the index against the text. Finally, Ms. Renfrow patiently and ably made the numerous revisions in the organization of the index. Mr. William S. Hill provided technical direction for both the maps and insertion of the photographs. Ms. Evelyn A. Englander of the library was most helpful in obtaining publications. The Archives staff (under the direction of Fred J. Graboske and his predecessor, Ms. Joyce Bonnett), especially Ms. Joyce M. Hudson and Ms. Amy C. Cohen, cheerfully made their resources available, as did Art Curator John T. Dyer, Jr. The Reference Section under Danny J. Crawford was always most cooperative, especially Ms. Lena M. Kaljot, who assisted in the duplication of most of the photographs. A special thanks goes to Lieutenant Colonel Leon Craig, Jr., Head of the Support Branch; his administrative officer, First Lieutenant Mark R. Schroeder; and his enlisted Marines, especially Staff Sergeant Myrna A. Thomas and Corporal Juan E. Johnson, who assisted in that last push for publication.

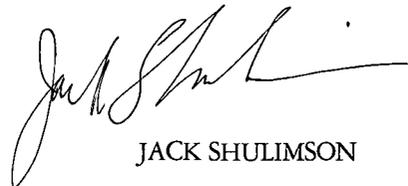
Both Mr. Struder and Mr. Hill adroitly handled the liaison with the Typography and Design Division of the U.S. Government Printing Office in the layout of the book. Mr. Struder deftly and professionally assisted in the reading of page proofs and Mr. Hill meticulously monitored the preparation of charts and maps. The authors also appreciate the efforts of Mr. Nicholas M. Freda and Mr. Lee Nance of the Typography

and Design Division, Mr. Freda for his careful layout of text and Mr. Nance for the final preparation of all maps and charts.

Finally, the authors want to acknowledge the contributions of former members of the Histories Section who reviewed and commented on several chapters, including Lieutenant Colonels Lane Rogers and Gary D. Solis, Majors George R. Dunham, Charles D. Melson, and Edward F. Wells, and Dr. V. Keith Fleming, Jr.

Special mention and most heartfelt thanks go to various interns who have assisted with the preparation of this volume. Naval Academy Midshipman Third Class Thomas Moninger, who prepared the Chronology of Events, and Maderia School students Ms. Jaime Koepsell and Ms. Sylvia Bunyasi who drafted the initial Command and Staff list. Marine Sergeant Neil A. Peterson, a student at the Citadel, sketched over half of the draft maps used in this volume. James E. Cypher, a senior at Loyola University, in New Orleans, assisted in the tedious but most important final editing of the index. Finally, there was Peter M. Yarbo, who as a student at Johns Hopkins, for over a year, once a week, took the early morning train from Baltimore to Washington, to assist with the project. Peter prepared several of the charts in the appendices, but even more significantly, he did almost all of the photographic research, saw that the photos were duplicated, and made the initial selection of photographs, organizing them by chapter. This book could never have been published at this time without his specific assistance and that of the other interns.

The authors are also indebted to Dr. Douglas Pike, who opened up his Indochina Archives, then located at the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, for their examination. Mr. Robert J. Destatte, Defense Prisoner of War and Missing Personnel Office, U.S. Department of Defense, provided a translation of several published Vietnamese documents. Finally our thanks to those who contributed comments on the draft and to our colleagues in the other Defense historical offices, who assisted with their advice and comments. In the end, however, the authors alone assume sole responsibility for the content of the text, including opinions expressed and any errors in fact.



JACK SHULIMSON

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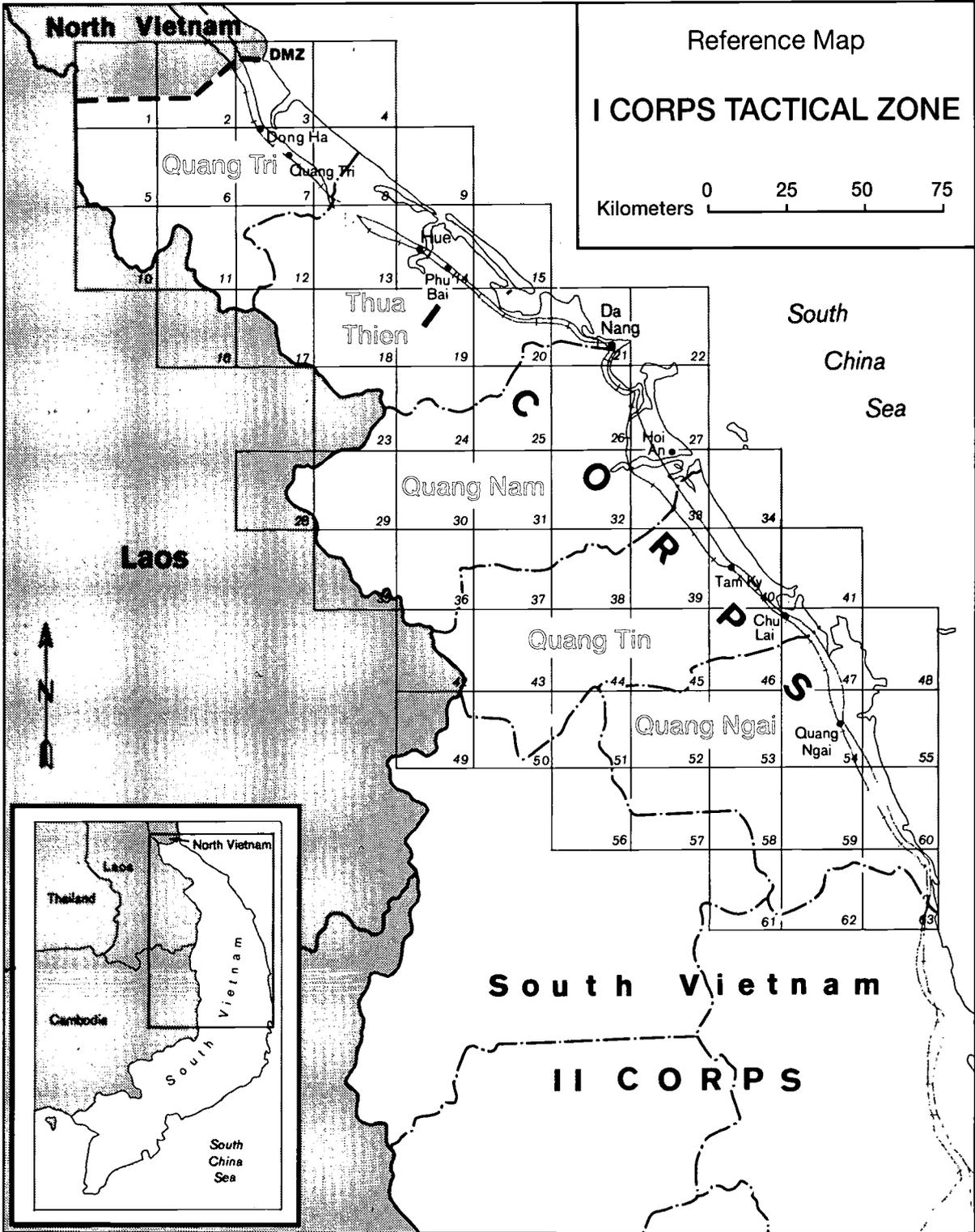
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PART I  
PRE-TET 1968

## CHAPTER 1

# A Puzzling War

*III MAF January 1968—MACV and Command Arrangements—South Vietnam and I Corps  
The Enemy—Focus on the North—MACV Vis-à-Vis Marines—An Ambivalent Outlook*

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### *III MAF January 1968*

After more than two and a half years since the commitment of major U.S. combat forces to the war in Vietnam, the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) entered 1968 with portents of a possible climax to the conflict. American intelligence indicated a buildup of enemy forces throughout South Vietnam and especially in the northern border region. Regiments from three North Vietnamese Army (NVA) divisions massed in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) dividing the two Vietnams and in Laos near the isolated Marine base at Khe Sanh. To counter this threat, the American command prepared to reinforce the Marines in I Corps Tactical Zone (ICTZ), the five northern provinces in South Vietnam. Although 1967 ended and 1968 began with the usual holiday truces between the opposing forces (more honored in the breach than in the observance), the Marines girded themselves for future heavy fighting.

With its headquarters at the sprawling and centrally located Da Nang base, III MAF at the beginning of January 1968 numbered more than 100,000 Marines, sailors, and soldiers. Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., Naval Academy Class of 1935 and Commanding General, III MAF, since the previous June, had under his command two reinforced Marine divisions, the 1st and 3d; a U.S. Army division, the Americal; the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW); and the Force Logistic Command. Supplementing these units and temporarily attached to III MAF were the nearly 3,000 Marines of the Seventh Fleet's two special landing forces (SLFs). Part of the U.S. Pacific Command's strategic reserve, the SLFs each consisted of a Marine battalion landing team (BLT), a battalion reinforced by supporting elements and a helicopter squadron. In addition, the III MAF commander had "coordinating authority" over the four-battalion Republic of Korea (ROK) 2d Marine Brigade (meaning orders to the Koreans took the form of requests). Including the ROK Marines, General Cushman had available 40 infantry battalions and 23 Marine aircraft squadrons in



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192347  
*Marine LtGen Robert E. Cushman, Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force, returns a salute during a ceremony at Da Nang. By January 1968, III MAF, the senior U.S. command in I Corps, the five northern provinces of South Vietnam, equalled a field army in size.*

the III MAF area of operations, extending some 220 miles from the DMZ in the north to the border with II Corps Tactical Zone in the south.<sup>1</sup>

The 53-year-old Cushman, commanding nearly a field army in size, had multiple responsibilities which had grown apace with the expansion of III MAF from the original Marine contingent, the 5,000-man 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB), which had landed at Da Nang in March 1965. As the senior U.S. general officer in I Corps, General Cushman wore several "hats." As well as Commanding General, III MAF, he was both the U.S. I Corps "Area Coordinator" and "Senior Advisor." In one capacity or another he was responsible for all U.S. forces in the northern five provinces.<sup>2</sup>

Well respected in the Corps, with a reputation for intelligence and political adroitness, General Cushman brought a broad background in both military and national affairs to his duties at III MAF. The native Minnesotan, a battalion commander in World War II, was awarded the Navy Cross for heroism at Guam. Following the war, he served as an instructor at the Marine

Corps Schools at Quantico, Virginia, and then headed the Amphibious Warfare Branch, Office of Naval Research, in Washington. After two years with the Central Intelligence Agency and a promotion to colonel, General Cushman joined the staff of the Commander in Chief, U.S. Naval Forces, Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean Fleet, in London, and then returned to the United States as a member of the faculty of the Armed Forces Staff College. In 1956, he commanded an infantry regiment, the 2d Marines, at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and the following year became the assistant for national security affairs to then-Vice President Richard M. Nixon.

Following promotion to general officer rank and a tour with the 3d Marine Division on Okinawa as assistant division and then division commander, General Cushman returned to Washington in 1962 where he filled the positions of assistant chief of staff for intelligence and then for operations at Headquarters, Marine Corps. In 1964, he became commander of Marine Corps Base, Camp Pendleton, California, where in June 1966 he formed the 5th Marine Division to meet the increasing manpower demands caused by the Vietnam War. Arriving in Vietnam in April 1967 as Deputy Commander, III MAF, General Cushman on 1 June 1967 relieved Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt

*Army Gen William C. Westmoreland, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, visits a Marine battalion command post south of Da Nang. Gen Westmoreland is the senior U.S. military commander in South Vietnam.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371378



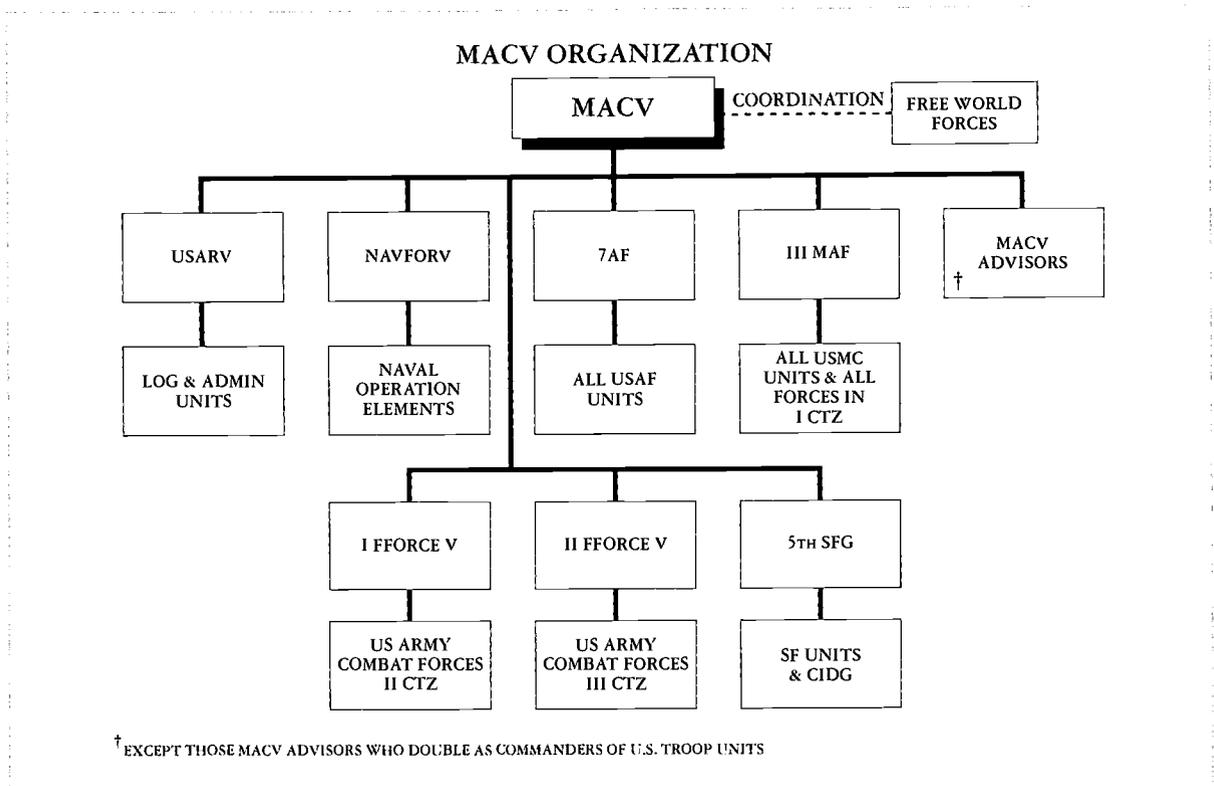
as commanding general. Cushman's diverse experience would serve him in good stead to face the complications of command in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup>

### *MACV and Command Arrangements*

As the war expanded, command arrangements, like the U.S. commitment, evolved over time without a master plan. Having originated in January 1962 as a small advisory organization, the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), in January 1968 totaled nearly 500,000 and, by that time, had taken over from the South Vietnamese much of the large-unit war. Army General William C. Westmoreland, who became Commander, USMACV, in June 1964, had presided over the buildup and commitment of U.S. troops to battle. A ramrod-straight West Pointer, and, indeed, former Superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy, Westmoreland had full responsibility for the conduct of the war in the south and for all U.S. forces based there. He, however, exercised this authority through the U.S. chain of command reaching back to Washington. MACV, itself, was a unified command directly subordinate to the U.S. Pacific Command in Honolulu, Hawaii. The Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CinCPac), Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, gave Westmoreland a relatively free hand over ground and air operations in the south, but retained personal direction of the air campaign over most of North Vietnam.<sup>4\*</sup>

The control of U.S. air activity and forces in Southeast Asia was a complicated affair. While General Westmoreland directed the bombing in Route Package 1, the southern sector of North Vietnam above the DMZ, he shared authority with the U.S. Ambassador to Laos for the "Steel Tiger/Tiger Hound" air operations over that country. The Seventh Air Force provided air support for MACV from airfields both in the Republic of Vietnam and from Thailand. The 46,000 Seventh Air Force personnel in South Vietnam came under the operational control of General Westmoreland, while the Thailand units were under U.S. Air Forces, Pacific, which in turn reported to Admiral Sharp. General William W. "Spike" Momyer, the Commanding General, Seventh Air Force, was also the MACV Deputy Commander for Air and had overall responsibility for the air defense of South Vietnam and

\*U.S. Air Force Historian Wayne Thompson observed that "Washington often dealt directly with Westmoreland and cut out Sharp." Dr. Wayne Thompson, Air Force History Support Office, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 23Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File)



air support for Army and allied forces. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, however, remained directly under III MAF and flew close air support for Marine and allied units in I Corps.<sup>5</sup>

In South Vietnam, General Westmoreland controlled his tactical ground forces through three regional commands, roughly corresponding with the corps areas of the Republic of Vietnam. III MAF was in the north in I Corps; the U.S. Army's I Field Force, Vietnam, was in II Corps, consisting of the central highlands and central coastal provinces of South Vietnam; and the Army's II Field Force, Vietnam, operated both in III Corps, centered around the capital city of Saigon, and IV Corps, which included the populous Mekong Delta. All told, MACV ground combat forces, including Marines and "Free World" troops from Korea, Australia, and Thailand consisted of 11 divisions and 14 separate brigades and task forces adding up to 118 maneuver battalions counting both infantry and tank units. Some 60 Army artillery battalions, two heavily reinforced Marine artillery regiments, a 500-man New Zealand artillery battalion, 11 Marine helicopter squadrons, and 96 Army aviation companies supported these maneuver units.<sup>6</sup>

The Navy and the Army divided the logistic support for U.S. and allied troops in Vietnam. General

Westmoreland retained direct command of the Army component, the U.S. Army, Vietnam, and had operational control of the naval, U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam. The latter, through its 22,000-man Naval Support Activity, Da Nang, which included the 3d Naval Construction Brigade, furnished heavy engineering and common item supplies for all U.S. and Korean forces in I Corps. U.S. Army, Vietnam, through its subordinate engineer and logistic commands, had the responsibility for the remaining corps areas. Looking back several years later, General Westmoreland observed that by the "beginning of '68 we had our logistic structure finished: ports and airfields were basically completed . . ."<sup>7</sup>

The various U.S. service components in South Vietnam complicated and occasionally blurred the command arrangements within MACV. For example, under the operational control of MACV, General Cushman also reported directly through Marine channels to the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, Lieutenant General Victor H. "Brute" Krulak. Krulak retained administrative command and overall responsibility for the readiness, training, and logistic support of all Marine forces in the Pacific. Although not in the operational chain of command, General Krulak was not one to deny General

Cushman the benefit of his advice.\* The other service components also had divisions of authority. General Momyer's Seventh Air Force reported not only administratively to U.S. Air Forces, Pacific, but operationally to that command for the "Rolling Thunder" air campaign over North Vietnam. Moreover, the question of control of Marine fixed-wing air remained a matter of contention between Generals Momyer and Cushman, with General Westmoreland often acting as mediator.<sup>8</sup>

Rear Admiral Kenneth L. Veth, Commander, U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam, also had multiple responsibilities and mixed channels of command. While under the operational control of MACV, he reported administratively through the Seventh Fleet chain of command to the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Fleet. In addition to his logistic responsibilities, Admiral Veth directed the coastal and maritime anti-infiltration campaign and was the overall commander of the Navy's segment of the Mobile Riverine Force operating with an Army brigade in the Mekong Delta. In this divided jurisdiction, both the senior Army commander and Admiral Veth permitted the flotilla and brigade commanders flexibility in making local command arrangements.<sup>9</sup>

Obfuscating the command lines even further were MACV relations with external U.S. commands, the U.S. Embassy in South Vietnam, and the South Vietnamese themselves. For naval gunfire support and use of the Marine Special Landing Forces on board the ships of the Navy Amphibious Ready Groups, General Westmoreland had to coordinate with the Seventh Fleet through CinCPac channels. In addition to the amphibious forces, MACV also coordinated through the same Navy channels the carrier aircraft of Seventh Fleet Task Force 77 to supplement the Seventh Air Force and Marine air support of ground forces in South Vietnam. Another chain of command existed with the

Strategic Air Command in order to process requests for the use of Boeing B-52 Stratofortresses in bombing missions over the south.<sup>10</sup>

General Westmoreland had a unique relationship with the U.S. Embassy. In April of 1967 he had taken over from the Embassy responsibility for the U.S. pacification assistance program. The newly created Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) agency became part of MACV and its head, the outspoken former presidential advisor, Robert J. Komer, served as Deputy ComUSMACV for CORDS under Westmoreland. Yet the MACV commander shared overall policy formulation in South Vietnam with the U.S. Ambassador, Ellsworth Bunker, a distinguished career diplomat. Ambassador Bunker chaired and General Westmoreland was a member of the Mission Council, the central U.S. policy and coordinating body within the country. Westmoreland and the Ambassador worked in harmony. The MACV commander later wrote: "My military colleagues and I gained a staunch supporter in Ellsworth Bunker. Although his military experience was limited to artillery ROTC at Yale University 50 years before, he understood the application of power."<sup>11\*\*</sup>

The U.S. relationship with the South Vietnamese military was a delicate one. General Westmoreland did not have command of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces and, indeed, rejected the idea of a combined U.S./RVN command headquarters. He believed it important that the South Vietnamese knew "that I recognized that they were running their own country, that I was no pro-consul or high commissioner."<sup>12</sup> In his opinion, his role as senior U.S. advisor to the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff gave him "defacto control over the scope of operations."<sup>13</sup> The watchwords were close consultation and coordination. As one historian observed, the command arrangements for the Vietnam War "were not the best they could have been, but they did work."<sup>14</sup>

\*The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., in Washington also had his perceptions on the conduct of the war. In his comments on the draft of this chapter, General Greene wrote that he was in daily communication with General Krulak in Hawaii. The latter "kept me fully informed and enabled me to efficiently do business with the Joint Chiefs . . . and with the White House and other echelons." According to Greene, he did not believe the other Chiefs were kept "fully informed by Gen Westmoreland" and that he [Greene] personally "briefed the Vice President regularly—once a week—privately at the White House—at his request—since he was not kept properly informed by the Pres[ident] or the White House staff!" General Greene believed that General Westmoreland "objected to my liaison with General Krulak," but never made an issue of the matter. Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Comments on draft Ms, dtd 11Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Greene Comments, 1994.

\*\*Army historian Graham A. Cosmas observed that the CORDS relationship with MACV was more complex than it appeared on chain of command charts: "The CORDS organization was a part of the MACV staff, although in practice it functioned with a high degree of autonomy." Cosmas also noted that when MACV was established in 1962, the State Department and Department of Defense "informally agreed that on policy matters the Ambassador in SVN was '*primus inter pares*' [first among equals], and this remained the case in 1968. Bunker was head of the US country team, and ComUSMACV while as a field commander nominally independent of him, in practice deferred to Bunker on political and policy matters." Dr. Graham A. Cosmas, CMH, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 23Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

### *South Vietnam and I Corps*

Beginning with the French-Viet Minh struggle following World War II, Vietnam had been at war for more than 20 years except for a brief respite during the mid-1950s. After the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva Accords in 1954 resulted in the breakup of what had been French Indochina and divided Vietnam at the 17th Parallel. The Viet Minh leader, Ho Chi Minh, established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under the rule of the Communist Lao Dong Party in the north. South of the 17th Parallel, Ngo Dinh Diem, a strong anti-Communist Vietnamese nationalist, became the first president of the Republic of Vietnam, displacing Bao Dai, the former Vietnamese Emperor under the French.

Through the 1950s and into 1960, Diem consolidated his power in the south against what many considered insurmountable odds. He defeated various sectarian armies, suppressed his political enemies, and created a seemingly viable government. Assisted initially by French and American military advisory groups, Diem strengthened his armed forces to meet any armed thrust from the north. South Vietnam appeared to represent a force for stability against what American policy makers perceived as a Communist drive for domination of Southeast Asia.

These relatively halcyon days were soon over. By the early 1960s, Diem and his regime were under heavy pressure in both the political and military arenas. Frustrated by Diem's refusal to hold joint elections as called for by the Geneva Accords that would have unified the two Vietnams, the North Vietnamese began as early as 1959 the sub-rosa campaign to bring down the southern government. By 1961, the South Vietnamese were fully engaged in counter-guerrilla operations against the Viet Cong (VC), a deprecatory name given to the southern Communists. With the introduction of U.S. helicopter units and the expansion of the American advisory effort in 1962, the South Vietnamese started to make measurable gains against the Communist forces. Surviving an aborted coup by a group of "Young Turk" officers in 1960, Diem progressively alienated important segments of South Vietnamese society. In 1963, South Vietnamese Buddhists, led by their clergy, took to the streets in increasingly violent demonstrations against restrictive measures of the Catholic-dominated Diem government. By November, the South Vietnamese military, with American knowledge if not consent, threw over



Photo courtesy of Col Edwin S. Schick, USMC (Ret)  
*South Vietnamese Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, wearing his aviator's scarf, is seen greeting Marine officers on a visit to I Corps. President Nguyen Van Thieu, a South Vietnamese Army general, eventually overshadowed the more flamboyant Ky in the inner circles of the Vietnamese military who ran the nation.*

Diem. South Vietnamese officers killed the deposed president the day after the coup.

The period after the death of Diem was one of turmoil and disintegration. Military leaders and politicians jockeyed for position with one leader emerging and then another. Simultaneously, the Communists reinforced their forces in the south with regular units from the north. The war was going badly and South Vietnam appeared ripe for the plucking.

It was not until 1965 that the situation stabilized. The infusion of U.S. troops staved off defeat at the hands of the North Vietnamese. In June, the South Vietnamese military ended the political chaos by assuming full control of the reins of government. A military council, headed by Army General Nguyen Van Thieu and Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, directed South Vietnamese affairs for the next few years.

By the end of 1967, the South Vietnamese government had established a constitutional claim to legitimacy. Overcoming renewed Buddhist agitation in the spring of 1966, the ruling military council held elections for a constitutional convention in September 1966. Following the promulgation of the new constitution, the South Vietnamese, in September 1967, elected Thieu and Ky, heading a military slate of candidates, as President and Vice-President respectively of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).<sup>15</sup>

The South Vietnamese military establishment was still the dominant factor in South Vietnam. By January 1968, government decrees, although not yet imple-

mented, called for partial mobilization, reduction of student deferments, and increased draft calls. The Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (RVNAF) totaled more than 620,000 men. These included a small Air Force of 15,000 men, a Navy of nearly 18,000, an even smaller Marine Corps of 8,000, nearly 300,000 in the Army, and another 291,000 in the local militia, the Regional and Popular Forces (RFs and PFs). Nominally, all of the service military commanders reported directly to the Chief of the Joint General Staff, General Cao Van Vien, who also commanded the Army. In fact, however, the actual control of the military remained with the coalition of senior generals centered around President Thieu who formed the military council that had run the country since 1965.<sup>16</sup>

Deployed and recruited generally along regional lines, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) consisted of 10 infantry divisions, two separate regiments, an airborne division, armor and ranger commands, a Special Forces group, and supporting elements. If desertion rates were indicative of efficiency and morale, the ARVN had made vast strides in 1967 with almost a 30 percent reduction from the previous year. Part of this dramatic improvement, however, probably reflected that American forces had largely taken over the large-unit war while the ARVN concentrated on pacification. With the exception of the Marines and airborne, who made up the South Vietnamese general reserve, the ARVN units normally confined themselves to operations in their assigned corps tactical zones.<sup>17</sup>

The corps tactical zones of South Vietnam were more than military subdivisions; they were also regional and political entities. None loomed larger in importance than the northernmost corps area, ICTZ. With its military value enhanced by geographic, economic, and cultural considerations, as well as the significant buildup of enemy forces in the DMZ and Khe Sanh sectors, I Corps had become the focus of the war. In fact one Marine commander, Lieutenant General Krulak, maintained: "... the bulk of the war is in the I Corps Tactical Zone."<sup>18</sup>

If the map of Vietnam resembles the traditional peasant carrying pole with a rice basket on either end, the Red River Delta in the north and the Mekong in the south, I Corps lay about in the upper middle of the shaft. With a total of 10,800 square miles and less than 3,000,000 of the 16,500,000 inhabitants of South Vietnam, I Corps was the second smallest of the Corps tactical zones in area and the smallest in population. Although no wider than 75 miles at any one point and

35 miles at its narrowest, I Corps contained three distinct regions: the rugged Annamite chain in the west with some peaks over 6,000 feet, a piedmont area of densely vegetated hills interlaced by river valleys, and the coastal lowlands. The central southern coastal lowlands below Da Nang consist of some of the richest farm lands and densest concentration of population in all of Vietnam. Influenced by the northeast or winter monsoon (lasting from October to February), the weather in this sector, one of the wettest in all of South Vietnam, permits two annual growing seasons. The two major cities in I Corps, Hue, the old imperial Vietnamese capital and major agricultural market center, and Da Nang, an important seaport, added to the economic worth of the region. Despite its limited size, ICTZ was indeed a valuable prize.<sup>19</sup>

Part of what had been Annam in Indochina, I Corps had a distinctive regional cast. With their cultural center at Hue, the Annamites traditionally looked down upon both the Tonkinese from the north and the southerners from Saigon and the Mekong Delta. The Buddhist agitation against Diem had begun in I Corps and, in 1966, the Buddhist "revolt" against the central government again broke out in Da Nang and Hue after the removal of the popular I Corps commander, General Nguyen Chanh Thi. After the suppression of the 1966 "Struggle Movement," I Corps was politically quiescent. Thi's eventual successor, General Hoang Xuan Lam, having neither the ambition nor the charisma of his predecessor, exercised his power cautiously.<sup>20</sup>

As in the rest of South Vietnam, the political and civilian apparatus in I Corps were intertwined, but distinct from one another. General Lam, as I Corps commander, appointed the five province chiefs, usually military officers, who in turn selected the district chiefs, again usually military officers. The province and district chiefs administered their respective domains and also controlled the local militia, the Regional and Popular Forces. Regional Forces operated under the province chief while Popular Forces usually confined their activities to a particular district. Under another chain of command, General Lam had control of the regular military forces in I Corps. These consisted of two divisions, the 1st and 2d; an independent regiment, the 51st; and two airborne battalions from the general reserve; totaling some 34,000 troops. Including the Regional and Popular forces, the South Vietnamese mustered some 80,000 men under arms in I Corps Tactical Zone.<sup>21</sup>

Vulnerable to direct attack and infiltration through the DMZ from North Vietnam to the north and from



Abel Collection Photo

*South Vietnamese LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam, Commanding General of I Corps, center, is shown in conversation with U.S. Marine Corps Commandant Gen Leonard F. Chapman, left, and the III MAF commander, LtGen Robert E. Cushman, outside of the I Corps Headquarters located in Da Nang.*

Laos to the west, I Corps, by January 1968, resembled an armed camp with a quarter of a million U.S., South Vietnamese, and allied troops deployed within its borders. The 3d Marine Division and 1st ARVN Division were responsible for the northern two provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien. Similarly, the U.S. Army's Americal Division and the ARVN 2d Division operated in the two southern provinces of Quang Tin and Quang Ngai. The 1st Marine Division and the 51st ARVN Regiment provided the protection for the central province of Quang Nam which contained I Corps headquarters at Da Nang, the Da Nang Airbase, the Quang Da Special Sector, and more than 35 percent of the I Corps population.<sup>22</sup>

The relationship between the American and South Vietnamese commands in I Corps paralleled the arrangement at the national level. As Senior Advisor, General Cushman had a direct channel to General Lam. The Marine general later related that he had a rapport with General Lam, whom he considered an excellent administrative and political leader and "a good general considering his resources. . ." but no "Julius Caesar or . . . Napoleon."<sup>23</sup> As with General Westmoreland and General Vien, the emphasis was on advice and close coordination. To facilitate this coordination, each of the American and South Vietnamese units had its specific tactical area of responsibility, where its commander had a relatively free rein. Moreover, in accordance with the combined 1967 plan

worked out by the MACV and Republic of Vietnam Joint General Staff, the Vietnamese units were taking an increased proportion of the pacification and revolutionary development mission. Still the ARVN and American units had to operate together. The following excerpt from a 3d Marine Division report exemplifies the working relations between the American and South Vietnamese units in general, and the 3d Marine Division and 1st ARVN Division in particular:

The basic concept underlying command relations between the division and RVNAF has been one of cooperation and coordination in the conduct of operations. . . . As a matter of practice, decisions regarding multi-battalion combined Marine/ARVN operations are made by personal liaison between CG 3d Marine Division and CG 1st ARVN Division.

After the two commanders approved a basic concept of operation:

the required staff liaison is accomplished and plans are finalized. When practicable, co-located command posts are established to facilitate coordination, cooperation, mutual assistance, and decision making.

The report concluded:

The 1st ARVN Division is an aggressive, well-led fighting force. Its commander is responsive to the desirability of combined/coordinated operations and invariably produces required forces. Numerous operations have instilled a sense of mutual respect and confidence between 1st ARVN Division and Marine personnel.<sup>24</sup>



The North Vietnamese masked their direct control through a web of cover organizations. In 1960, the Communists announced the formation of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF), a so-called coalition of "democratic forces" to lead the struggle against the South Vietnamese government and give the appearance of a popular uprising. Even within the Communist apparatus in the south, the North Vietnamese went to extraordinary lengths to conceal their participation. In late 1961, the Communists changed the name of their party in the south from the Lao Dong (Worker's Party) to the People's Revolutionary Party. Shortly afterward, they created the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) to coordinate both the political and military aspects of the war in the south. Under COSVN, a myriad of interlocking regional, provincial, and district committees tightly controlled the Viet Cong political infrastructure and military forces down to the hamlet and village level. Yet, COSVN, itself, reported directly to the Politburo of the Lao Dong Party of North Vietnam through the Reunification Department with its headquarters in Hanoi.<sup>26</sup>

The extent of North Vietnamese involvement and control of the war was more obvious in northern South Vietnam than elsewhere. Very early, the Communists separated the two northern provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien from their *Military Region (MR) V*, which roughly corresponded to I and II Corps. *MR Tri-Thien-Hue*, as the new region was named, came directly under the North Vietnamese high command rather than COSVN. All told, "three ill-defined military headquarters" in what had been part of *MR V* reported directly through North Vietnamese channels. In addition to *Tri-Thien-Hue*, there were the *B-3 Front*, which controlled military operations in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, and the *DMZ Front*, which apparently had command of all units in the DMZ sector and at Khe Sanh. Despite denials and elaborate attempts by the North Vietnamese to cover troop movements through constantly changing unit designations, American intelligence in 1967 identified seven North Vietnamese Army divisions within South Vietnam, five of these divisions in I and II Corps.<sup>27</sup>

By the end of the year MACV held in its order of battle of enemy forces some 216,000 troops. These included some 51,000 North Vietnamese regulars, 60,000 Viet Cong main and local forces, and about 70,000 full-time guerrillas. About 35,000 administrative troops rounded out the total. The MACV esti-

mate, however, omitted certain categories such as VC "self-defense" forces and other irregulars and some 70,000 political cadre. Although extensive disagreement existed within the U.S. intelligence community over these exclusions and the total strength of the enemy, the numbers of regulars and full-time guerrillas were largely accepted.<sup>28</sup> As General Westmoreland later explained: "Intelligence is at best an imprecise science: it is not like counting beans; it is more like estimating cockroaches. . . ."<sup>29</sup> More open to question was the MACV claim that the total enemy strength had diminished.<sup>30</sup>

From an American perspective, the Communists had suffered only defeats since the U.S. intervention in the war in 1965. American units in extensive operations ranging the length and breath of South Vietnam had taken a large toll of enemy forces. The allies turned back with heavy Communist losses every thrust the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) made from the Ia Drang Valley in the Central Highlands during 1965 to the hills around Khe Sanh in the spring of 1967. For the year 1967 alone, MACV estimated the number of enemy killed in battle as more than 88,000.<sup>31</sup>

The Communist view of the situation remains obscure. In late summer 1967, the North Vietnamese Defense Minister and architect of the Dien Bien Phu victory, General Vo Nguyen Giap, wrote: ". . . the situation has never been as favorable as it is now. The armed forces and people have stood up to fight the enemy and are achieving one great victory after another."<sup>32</sup> Yet, apparently there was divided opinion among the North Vietnamese leadership as to the best course of action. There were the advocates of a reversion to guerrilla warfare and a protracted war while others argued in favor of taking the offensive against the allies and especially the Americans on all fronts. Because of the extraordinary secretiveness and paranoia within the higher reaches of both the Lao Dong Party and the North Vietnamese government, neither the extent of these differences nor even the makeup of the opposing factions was obvious. Much of the speculation centered around Giap whom various authorities identified with one or the other of the cliques or with neither. What is known is that in June 1967 the politburo of the party met to assess the sit-

\* Commenting on the MACV perception of the Communist forces, General Krulak, the former FMFPac commander, recently wrote: "our strategic intelligence was uniformly poor." LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 31Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).

uation and to resolve the issues. At this meeting in which Giap apparently played a large role, the party called for "a decisive blow" to "force the U.S. to accept military defeat."<sup>33</sup>

Within a few months, the Communist forces launched the first phase of their 1967–68 Winter-Spring Campaign. In a reverse of their usual tactics, the North Vietnamese mounted mass assaults lasting over a period of several days instead of attempting to disengage quickly. During September and early October, the Marine outpost at Con Thien in the eastern DMZ sector came under both infantry attack and artillery bombardment. Firing from positions north of the 17th Parallel, enemy gunners employed artillery pieces up to 152 millimeters. Repulsed at Con Thien, the North Vietnamese then tried to overrun the district capital of Loc Ninh near the Cambodian border in Binh Long Province north of Saigon along Route 13.

Again forced to pull back after several days of fighting and suffering extensive losses, the enemy then struck in the Central Highlands at Dak To near the junction of the Cambodian, Laotian, and South Vietnamese borders. After 22 days of bloody combat in November, the North Vietnamese forces withdrew after once more taking staggering casualties.<sup>34</sup>

By the end of December, 1967, the enemy appeared to be ready to make a fresh assault in northwestern South Vietnam at Khe Sanh. Following a period of relative calm since the battles earlier that spring near this isolated Marine base, American intelligence picked up reports of North Vietnamese troop movements in the sector. Although experiencing only limited combat activity at Khe Sanh in December, one Marine company commander declared that he could "smell" the enemy out there.<sup>35</sup>

To MACV, the North Vietnamese strategy appeared clear. It was an attempt to draw the allied forces into remote areas where the enemy had the advantage and then move to a "mobile War of Decision."<sup>36</sup> To Lieutenant General Krulak at FMFPac, the enemy's intent was also apparent. Quoting General Giap, he later wrote: "The primary emphasis [is] to draw American units into remote areas and thereby facilitate control of the population of the lowlands." According to Krulak, the people were the final objective.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Focus on the North*

The increasing pressure by the North Vietnamese Army in late 1967 continued the pattern

of large-unit operations in the border regions of South Vietnam that had characterized the war, especially in the north, since 1966. With the first incursion of enemy regulars in the summer of that year, III MAF shifted forces north. Forced to fill the gap left in southern I Corps, MACV in April 1967 reinforced the Marines in I Corps with the Army's Task Force Oregon, which later became the Americal Division. After this northward deployment, the DMZ sector and Khe Sanh became the focus of allied concern.<sup>38</sup>

Given the emphasis on the northern battlefield, the Marines at the direction of General Westmoreland in April 1967 began the erection of the strong point obstacle system (SPOS) along the DMZ to prevent North Vietnamese infiltration. Dubbed the "McNamara Line," after the U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, this so-called "barrier" was to consist of three parts: (1) a linear-manned obstacle system in the eastern DMZ sector extending some 34 kilometers to the sea and consisting of barbed wire, a 600-meter-wide cleared trace, minefields, and electronic and acoustic sensors; (2) a series of strong points to the Laotian border built along obvious avenues of approach from the north with Khe Sanh as the western anchor; and (3) in Laos, the seeding of suspected infiltration routes with sensors monitored and supported by aircraft. Strong enemy opposition and shortages of men and material slowed the progress of the SPOS. By mid-September the 3d Marine Division had only completed the clearing of the trace from Con Thien to Gio Linh, a distance of 13 kilometers. Faced with mounting casualties, General Westmoreland approved a modification to his original plans. In essence, the division was to halt all construction of the trace until "after the tactical situation had stabilized," and continue only with the work on the strong points and base areas. By the end of 1967, the Marines had completed work on the four strong points and all but two of the base areas. In the western sector of the barrier, only the base at Khe Sanh existed.<sup>39</sup>

With the 3d Marine Division tied down in fixed positions along the eastern DMZ and at Khe Sanh, manpower considerations became an overriding concern for both III MAF and MACV. Earlier in the year, during the spring, General Westmoreland had requested an increase in his authorized strength. Asking for a minimum of 80,000 more men (his optimum figure being nearly 200,000), he planned to reinforce the Marines in I Corps with at least two

Army divisions. Fearful that these new numbers would necessitate a call-up of the Reserves, Washington in the summer of 1967 cut Westmoreland's request nearly in half and established a new authorized force ceiling of 525,000 men for July 1968. This represented an increase of less than 46,000 personnel. MACV was hard pressed to reinforce I Corps at all.<sup>40\*</sup>

As the war intensified throughout Vietnam in late 1967 General Westmoreland persuaded President Lyndon B. Johnson to establish earlier arrival dates for units already scheduled to deploy to Vietnam. The deployment of the 101st Airborne Division and the 11th Infantry Brigade in December provided General Westmoreland some room for maneuver. Keeping the 101st and the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) as a general country-wide reserve, he attached the 11th Brigade to the Americal Division in southern I Corps. III MAF began to shuffle its units north to reinforce both Khe Sanh and the DMZ sectors.<sup>41</sup>

### *MACV Vis-à-Vis Marine*

While reinforcing the Marines in I Corps with Army units and concentrating his forces in the north, General Westmoreland had growing doubts about the ability of the Marine command to handle the developing situation. Since 1965, senior Marine generals conducted a "sotto voce" debate with MACV over the direction of the American combat effort. Both Generals Krulak and Greene criticized the MACV emphasis upon the large-unit major war, which they believed failed to provide for population security and, moreover, involved the U.S. in a war of attrition, which in their opinion, favored the Communists. They voiced their concerns directly to General Westmoreland and through the command channels open to them.

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\* The question of the total number of American troops required to wage the war in South Vietnam was a continually sensitive issue in Washington, especially since larger numbers probably involved the call-up of Reserve units. General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., the Marine Corps Commandant, recalled that sometime in the late 1965 or early 1966 time-frame he advocated "that a major increase be made in the number of U.S. troops" in South Vietnam. According to an estimate that his staff made at the time, it would take approximately 595,000 American troops five years to conclude a successful end to the war. According to the analysis, "the number of men of military age becoming available each year" in North Vietnam as contrasted to the Communist casualty rate would permit the North Vietnamese "to continue the war indefinitely" at the then-level of American troop commitment. Greene Comments, 1994. For further discussion of manpower constraints upon Marine forces see Chapter 27.

Although differing in minor details, the two Marine generals in essence advocated increased pressure upon North Vietnam and basically an "ink blot" strategy in South Vietnam. Both Marine generals recommended in the north the targeting of air strikes against North Vietnamese heavy production facilities and transportation hubs and a blockade of the North Vietnamese major ports including Haiphong. Greene and Krulak emphasized for the south a combined U.S.-South Vietnamese campaign in targeted areas to eradicate the Communist infrastructure in the countryside and replace it with one loyal to the South Vietnamese government. This pacification campaign would consist of a centralized combined allied command structure employing military action together with civic action, and the enhancement of the local South Vietnamese militia forces and government structure. The concept was that initial success would provide the momentum, much as a spreading inkblot, for the linking together of the pacified sectors. While not neglecting the enemy's main forces, both viewed this war as secondary. As General Krulak stated: "The real war is among the people" and not in the hinterlands. He would engage the Communist regulars for the most part only "when a clear opportunity exists to engage the VC Main Force or North Vietnamese units on terms favorable to ourselves."<sup>42</sup>

While the two Marine generals received a hearing of their views, they enjoyed little success in influencing the MACV strategy or overall U.S. policy toward North Vietnam. According to General Greene, the Joint Chiefs were interested in his proposal for a coastal pacification campaign but "Westmoreland wasn't and being CG MACV his views of the 'big picture,' the 'broad arrow' prevailed." In November 1965, General Krulak wrote directly to Secretary McNamara, whom he knew from his days as special assistant for counterinsurgency to the Joint Chiefs during the Kennedy administration, hinting at some divergence between the Marine "saturation formula" and the Army "maneuver formula." While allowing that both techniques were sound and maneuver had its place in the sparsely inhabited highlands, he pointedly observed that in the heavily populated area south of Da Nang you "cannot shoot everything that moves." He then continued: "We have to separate the enemy from the people." According to the Marine general, the Defense Secretary told him that the "ink blot" theory was "a good idea but too slow." Both Generals Greene and Krulak would continue to offer

their counter-view to the MACV perspective, but with little effect either in Washington or Saigon.<sup>43</sup>

In Vietnam, from the very inception of its responsibility for I Corps, III MAF, the Marine command, first under General Walt and then by General Cushman, had placed a great deal of emphasis on the small-unit war in the villages. The Marines had developed several new pacification programs to win over the people in the hamlets to the government cause. These included: a vigorous civic action effort to meet the needs of the local villagers, cordon and search "County Fair" operations with psychological warfare overtones in the hamlets, coordination of pacification through the I Corps Joint Coordinating Council (ICJCC), and perhaps most significant, the Combined Action Program. This latter program involved the assignment of a squad of Marines to a Vietnamese Popular Forces platoon. The premise was that this integration of the Vietnamese militia with the Marines would create a bond of understanding and mutual interest with the local populace. The Marines maintained that with the villagers on their side, they could, as General Cushman stated, "break the connection between the guerrillas and the infrastructure, and the enemy main forces . . ."<sup>44</sup>

Despite the III MAF efforts, General Westmoreland and his staff continued to perceive the principal mission of the U.S. troops to be the defeat of the enemy main forces. The U.S.-South Vietnamese 1967 Combined Plan basically reflected the MACV concept: the South Vietnamese now had responsibility for pacification while the U.S. forces were to conduct the large-unit war. General Krulak, the FMF-Pac commander, expressed the Marine displeasure in July 1967, declaring: "We have seen what we sincerely believe to be a maldeployment of forces, a misapplication of power . . ."<sup>45</sup> Years later the Marine general wrote that these differences between the Marines and Westmoreland over pacification went "to the heart of the war."<sup>46</sup>

Despite their differences, the dispute between the Marines and MACV never came to a head. Although the 1967 Combined Plan called for the Americans to take over most of the war against the enemy's conventional forces, there was "no clear-cut division of responsibility" with the ARVN in this area or in pacification.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, III MAF still operated under its 6 March 1966 Letter of Instruction which gave the Marine command a broad all-inclusive mission to carry out operations "in support

of and in coordination with CG I ARVN Corps and in other areas of RVN as directed by ComUSMACV in order to defeat the VC/NVA and extend GVN control over all of South Vietnam."<sup>48</sup> Rather than directly challenge the authority of the Marine commanders, General Westmoreland preferred to issue "orders for specific projects that as time passed would gradually get the Marines out of their beachheads."<sup>49</sup> While continuing the "discussion" with MACV over pacification, General Cushman also wanted no controversies. He remembered, "I soon figured out how Westy [General Westmoreland] liked to operate and tried to operate the same way, and get on with the war and not cause a lot of friction for no good reason."<sup>50</sup>

In spite of the efforts of both Westmoreland and Cushman to keep relations on an even keel, substantive differences continued to exist, and not only over pacification. The "McNamara Line" was a constant irritant. General Cushman recalled that he:

really got in a fit with some of the engineer colonels that would come roaring up from Saigon to see how the fence was doing and . . . I'd say "Well it's doing fine, go up and take a look," which they did. Always had a few people around, but we just weren't going out getting everybody killed building that stupid fence.<sup>51</sup>

In what appeared to be an inconsistency, MACV, on the one hand, criticized III MAF for lack of mobile operations in the rest of I Corps, while, on the other, placed a Marine division in fixed positions along the DMZ and at Khe Sanh. Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, the soft-spoken but blunt commander of the 3d Marine Division, voiced the opinion of most Marines when he later called the entire barrier effort "absurd." He pointed out that the original design was to stop infiltration, but by the time actual construction began, the North Vietnamese were in strength in the DMZ "supported by first class artillery." Tompkins caustically observed, "it was perfectly obvious that if there would be an incursion, it would be by NVA divisions and not by sneaky-peekies coming through at night."<sup>52</sup>

Unhappy about the Marine defensive measures in northern I Corps, General Westmoreland believed that General Cushman and his staff "were unduly complacent."<sup>53</sup> Westmoreland may have had some justification about the Marine defenses. Major General Raymond L. Murray, Cushman's deputy and a highly decorated veteran of both World War II and Korea, remarked that the Marines were an offensive organization, and "often

we don't do well in organizing defenses." Murray commented that "in many units, the concept of a defensive position seemed to be a big long trench and just put a bunch of Marines there and shoot at any thing that came along rather than truly organizing the defense in some depth."<sup>54\*</sup>

Logistics was another area where the Marines and MACV had their problems. The Marine experience with the M16 rifle was a case in point. In December 1967, Marine inspectors found 75 percent of 8,413 rifles in the 3d Marine Division with pitted chambers, which could result in misfirings. Marine logisticians planned an extensive replacement of these M16s with ones equipped with chromed chambers. Another logistic complicating factor was the temporary closing in December of the two LST ports in the north, Tan My in Thua Thien Province and Dong Ha in Quang Tri Province, because of bad weather and silting in the shipping channels. If MACV was to reinforce the Marines with further Army units, General Westmoreland had obvious reasons for concern. Still, the Marines believed that MACV put undue logistic burdens upon them. At the end of the year, III MAF and FMFPac protested a MACV requirement for a reduction in the level of stockpiled supplies. General Murray called such peacetime accounting economies in Vietnam part of a "balance sheet war." Although acknowledging that these procedures "may have saved on waste," Murray maintained they also "took an awful lot of time and effort that a military man felt would be better spent in other ways."<sup>55</sup>

A myriad of elements compounded the difficulties in the relationship between MACV and III MAF, not the least of which were personality traits and service considerations. As General Tompkins observed, some Army and Marine rivalry was natur-

al, "it's the dog and cat business . . . nothing Machiavellian or anything else."<sup>56</sup> Army generals spoke about Marines using unimaginative tactics, either putting their heads down and charging or sitting tight on "top of Semper Fidelis."<sup>57</sup> Marines replied that they trained from the same manuals as the Army and employed basically the same infantry tactics of fire and maneuver.<sup>58</sup> For their part, many Marines believed that their performance in Vietnam would determine the survival of their Corps. General Krulak remarked that the war would not last forever and "as soon as it is over, and perhaps before, the Marines are going to be faced with the same problems that has faced us after every conflict . . . self-defense." The Marines would require "a fund of irrefutable facts which portray our combat effectiveness, our competence, and most of all our readiness to fight when the whistle blows."<sup>59</sup>

General Westmoreland hardly endeared himself to the Marines when inadvertently he became involved in the succession for the Commandancy of the Marine Corps. Both Generals Krulak and Walt, the former III MAF commander, were leading candidates to succeed General Greene. A newspaper account in late November 1967 carried the story that General Westmoreland supported General Walt and had recommended him to the President. General Westmoreland later wrote that in making out General Walt's fitness or efficiency report in 1966, he had observed "that General Walt was fully qualified to be Commandant of the Marine Corps," and that this was not meant to be an endorsement of Walt's candidacy.<sup>60</sup> With the selection of Lieutenant General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., then Chief of Staff at Headquarters Marine Corps, as the new Commandant, the furor soon blew over.

In more germane matters relating to the war, the differing personalities and styles of Generals Westmoreland and Cushman impacted upon the MACV-III MAF command relations. A large bulky man, the bespectacled Cushman offered a sharp contrast to the rigid military bearing of Westmoreland, who appeared to be "standing at attention while on the tennis court."<sup>61</sup> The MACV commander insisted on detailed plans of operations with no loose ends. On the other hand, General Cushman maintained an informal staff structure, confiding in few persons and relying largely on his chief of staff, Brigadier General Earl E. Anderson. Although concerned about the enemy buildup in the north, reinforcing Khe Sanh in December with another battalion, Cushman was

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\*Other Marine officers also commented about Marine deficiencies relative to digging bunkers. Colonel John C. Studt recalled that when he was operations officer of the 9th Marines General Westmoreland was unhappy "with inadequate Marine bunkers" and directed that the Marines send representatives to the U.S. Army's 1st Division "to learn how to construct bunkers. As humiliating as this was for Marines, Gen Westmoreland was absolutely right: Marines didn't have a clue how to construct good bunkers. We taught hasty field fortification and that was it." Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File). Major Gary E. Todd, who served on the 3d Marine Division staff, observed that field fortifications "seemed to end up with as much of the thing above ground as below, filling sandbags with soil to raise walls and parapets." Maj Gary E. Todd, Comments on draft chapters, dtd 28Oct and ?Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Todd Comments.



Abel Collection Photo

*LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Pacific, left, visits with Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Commandant of the Marine Corps, in the Commandant's office in Washington, D.C., in May 1968. LtGen Krulak had a strong influence in the development of Marine pacification concepts and had been a leading candidate, together with Gen Chapman and LtGen Lewis W. Walt, for the Commandancy.*

confident that he had the situation under control. General Westmoreland, however, worried about what he perceived as the Marine command's "lack of followup in supervision," its employment of helicopters, and its generalship. By January 1968, the MACV commander seriously considered making a change in the command relations in the north.<sup>62\*</sup>

### *An Ambivalent Outlook*

Despite the signs of an enemy buildup and concerns about the Marine command, General Westmoreland just earlier had voiced his optimism about the course of the war. Called back to Washington in mid-November 1967, ostensibly for consultation,

\*General Anderson mentioned that since his arrival in December 1967, he "participated in every conference or meeting held by General Cushman during my tenure in Da Nang. Our relationship could not have been closer . . ." Anderson allowed that on the III MAF staff there were some weak links in that "General Cushman was one prone to accept the personnel sent to him by higher headquarters without complaining, so consequently certain senior staff members had to fill this void." Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Another III MAF staff officer described General Cushman as a "perceptive gentleman [who] was content to soldier without comment as long as Westy [Westmoreland] didn't try to maneuver subordinate units in ICTZ (as he did in other Corps areas) and left Marine air under Marine control." LtCol John F. J. Kelly, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 13Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

but more to shore up public support for the administration's Vietnam policy, he assured his audiences that the end was in view and that the "ranks of the Vietcong are thinning steadily."<sup>63</sup> Reflecting this same optimism in his directives, Westmoreland advised his subordinate commanders that the situation was "conducive to initiating an all-out offensive on all fronts: political, military, economic, and psychological."<sup>64</sup>

In drawing up plans for 1968 operations, the MACV staff accentuated this emphasis on the offensive. The 1968 Combined Plan with the Vietnamese continued to assign to the U.S. units the primary mission of destroying the NVA and VC main forces. American planners called for a three-pronged campaign: large-unit operations to keep the enemy off balance, destruction of the enemy base areas, and expanded "territorial security." General Westmoreland and his staff expected to launch "multi-brigade offensives" against enemy strongholds "not previously invaded." American contingency planning included possible operations in such enemy sanctuaries as Cambodia, Laos, and even an amphibious operation north of the Demilitarized Zone.<sup>65</sup>

Notwithstanding the flurry of contingency planning, General Westmoreland realized that administra-

tion policy would confine his operations within the borders of South Vietnam. His Northeast Monsoon Campaign Plan for the period October 1967-March 1968 centered around the 1st Cavalry Division. He wanted to use the division as a "theater exploitation force" in areas where the weather favored helicopter-borne tactics. His original concept delineated a four-phased campaign. The 1st Cavalry was to conduct the first three phases in III Corps and then, as the weather improved, move north to I Corps. The objective in I Corps was the enemy's Do Xa base in western Quang Ngai and Quang Tin Provinces and the suspected headquarters of *Military Region V*. This fourth phase was given the code name "York."<sup>66</sup>

By the end of the year, with one eye on the growing enemy strength in the north, the MACV staff modified the York plans. York, itself, was to be a four-phased operation. As part of a larger task force, the 1st Cavalry Division was to penetrate the western Do Xa in York I. Completing that phase of the operation, the division was then to be inserted into the A Shau Valley in western Thua Thien Province and the site of a former U.S. Special Forces Camp overrun by the NVA in the spring of 1966. Following York II, the 1st Cavalry, in Phase III, was to conduct operations further north in western Quang Tri Province and sweep to the Laotian border. In the fourth phase, the Army division would return to the Do Xa. III MAF was to be responsible for the planning of York II and III and General Murray, the III MAF deputy commander, was to command the A Shau Valley operation. General Westmoreland later wrote that the purpose of the York campaign was to set the "stage for the invasion of Laos that I hoped a new administration in Washington would approve."<sup>67</sup>

While planning for offensive actions in 1968, III MAF and MACV had to counter the enemy threat in the northern border regions. As early as October, General Westmoreland reinforced the Marines with a brigade from the 1st Cavalry in the Que Son sector south of Da Nang which permitted General Cushman to move one regiment, the 1st Marines, from the Da Nang area to Quang Tri Province. The arrival of the Army's 11th Infantry Brigade in December allowed a further realignment of III MAF units. General Cushman began to implement this repositioning of forces in Operation Checkers which called for the deployment of the entire 3d Marine Division to either the DMZ front or Khe Sanh. The 1st Marine Division was to shift what was in essence a two-regiment task force under the assistant division commander to Phu Bai in Thua

Thien Province and cover the western approaches to Hue City.<sup>68</sup>

By the end of 1967, Operation Checkers was in full swing. The Americal Division began to take over from the Korean Brigade the TAOR (tactical area of operational responsibility) south of Chu Lai. In turn, the first Korean battalions moved to the Hoi An sector south of Da Nang, relieving units of the 5th Marines. On 20 December, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines deployed north of the strategic Hai Van Pass to the Phu Loc area of Thua Thien Province. All plans were complete. The 1st Marine Division was to activate Task Force X-Ray in early January and the remainder of the 5th Marines was to go to Phu Bai. At that time, the 3d Marine Division was then to transfer its command post (CP) from Phu Bai to Dong Ha in the eastern DMZ. Later in the month, the 1st Marines at Quang Tri was to return to its parent division by taking over from the 4th Marines the CoBi/Than Tan Sector at Camp Evans in Thua Thien Province. The 4th Marines would then rejoin the 3d Division along the DMZ. Thus as 1968 approached, III MAF was in a state of flux as units began to displace.<sup>69</sup>

The signs of progress in I Corps were mixed. Action had flared up in early December throughout the Corps area. On the 5th, the enemy overran a district headquarters in Quang Ngai Province. Along the DMZ, the North Vietnamese launched a series of company-strength attacks on Marine positions in the northeast sector above the Cua Viet River. The 1st Marine Division at Da Nang in its southern TAOR engaged strong enemy forces while the Americal Division units and the attached brigade from the 1st Cavalry Division encountered resistance from the *2d NVA Division* in the important Que Son Valley along the border of Quang Tin and Quang Nam Provinces. By the end of the month, the NVA and VC took a more defensive stance toward the American units and turned on the ARVN and local forces in hit-and-run actions. Although sustaining heavy casualties in these attacks, the enemy "was successful in penetrating and damaging several positions."<sup>70</sup>

Despite the heavy fighting in December, various indicators pointed to some success in the village war in I Corps. After a dropoff in pacification measurements during the first half of 1967, there was a marked increase in the figures for the rest of the year. In December, approximately 75 percent of the village chiefs were living in their home villages as opposed to 50 percent in January 1967. Other categories—the conducting of village censuses, establishment of

defense plans, and functioning of local governments—showed similar, if less dramatic, improvement. According to Marine Corps criteria, 55 percent of the population in I Corps in December lived in secure areas, ranging from a high of 80 percent in the Phu Bai sectors to a low of 34 percent at Duc Pho. The Marines credited several factors for this upsurge, not the least of which was the insertion of Army units in southern I Corps to take up the slack left by the departure of the Marines for the northern battle sector. Yet III MAF believed that its innovative pacification techniques accounted for much of the progress.<sup>71</sup>

With the coming of the Christmas and New Year season, the war continued on its ambivalent course. The holiday truce periods symbolized the cross-currents of the conflict. Giving vague hints of peace, the Communists agreed to a 24-hour truce over Christmas and a slightly longer, 36 hours, respite over the New Year's celebration. Taking advantage of the cease-fires and the halt in U.S. air operations, the North Vietnamese moved supplies to their forward units. Over Christmas, American air observers spotted some 600–800 vehicles and boats hauling and landing military provisions and equipment in southern North Vietnam. MACV reported 118 enemy violations—40 of them major—over Christmas, and 170—63 major—during the New Year's truce period. The New Year's violations resulted in 29 allied soldiers dead and 128 wounded, with two South Vietnamese troops listed as missing in action. In turn, the allies killed 117 of the enemy. The American command called both standdowns a “hoax” and recommended that any cease-fire for the Vietnamese Tet or lunar new year be as short as possible.<sup>72\*</sup>

U.S. leaders worried over the Communist intentions for the new year. In a departure from the optimistic public rhetoric of his administration about the war, President Johnson privately warned the Australian Cabinet in late December of “dark days ahead.”<sup>73</sup> Much evidence indicated that the enemy was on the move. American intelligence reported two North Vietnamese divisions near Khe Sanh and a third along the eastern

DMZ. Further south, prisoner interrogations revealed the possible presence of a new enemy regiment in Thua Thien Province. American commanders believed Hue was a major enemy objective although the 1st ARVN Division could not “credit the enemy with ‘the intent’ nor the ‘capability’ to launch a division-size attack” against the city.<sup>74</sup> At Da Nang, III MAF received information that the *2d NVA Division* was shifting its area of operations to Quang Nam Province.<sup>75</sup> Captured enemy documents spoke of major offensives throughout South Vietnam. One in particular observed “that the opportunity for a general offensive and general uprising is within reach . . . ,” and directed the coordination of military attacks “with the uprisings of the local population to take over towns and cities.”<sup>76</sup>

By January 1968, a sense of foreboding and uncertainty dominated much American thinking about the situation in Vietnam and the course of the war.<sup>77</sup> According to all allied reports, Communist forces had taken horrendous casualties during the past few months, causing one senior U.S. Army general to wonder if the North Vietnamese military command was aware of these losses.<sup>78</sup> Yet, all the signs pointed to a major enemy offensive in the very near future. Although captured enemy documents spoke of assaults on the cities and towns, General Westmoreland believed the enemy's more logical targets to be the DMZ and Khe Sanh, while staging diversionary attacks elsewhere. He thought the Communist objectives to be the seizure of the two northern provinces of South Vietnam and to make Khe Sanh the American Dien Bien Phu.<sup>79\*\*</sup>

While planning their own offensive moves, MACV and III MAF prepared for a NVA push in the north. General Cushman reinforced Khe Sanh and in Operation Checkers began to deploy his forces toward the northern border.

\*Major Gary E. Todd, who served as an intelligence officer on the 3d Marine Division staff, commented that the “the last shot fired before the ‘cease fire’ took effect was like a starter's pistol to the North Vietnamese, crouched down and tensed to explode into a sprint” to resupply their forces in the south. Todd Comments.

\*\*Army Lieutenant General Philip B. Davidson, the MACV intelligence officer, commented that General Westmoreland stated his expectation of the coming enemy offensive “in broad terms as a result of series of war games conducted by and at MACV headquarters. It was considered as nothing more than a ‘probable course of enemy action’ . . . .” Davidson contends that the MACV commander was open “to consideration of other possible forms of the enemy offensive right up to the initiation of the Tet offensive.” Davidson observed also that General Cushman “concurred” with the MACV expectations. LtGen Philip B. Davidson, Jr. (USA), Comments on draft chapter, dtd 25Oct68 (Vietnam Comment File).

## CHAPTER 2

# The 3d Marine Division and the Barrier

### *The 3d Marine Division in the DMZ—The Barrier*

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#### *The 3d Marine Division in the DMZ*

The war in the north was largely the responsibility of the 3d Marine Division. Since the summer of 1966, the division had parried several successive North Vietnamese Army thrusts in Quang Tri Province, both in the northeast and in the west near the Marine base at Khe Sanh. Commanding one of the largest divisions in Marine Corps history, Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins had more than 24,000 men under him organized into five infantry regiments, one artillery regiment, and supporting elements. U.S. Army artillery units and Navy logistic forces, including Seabees, supplemented the Marines. Two of the regiments of the 1st ARVN Division also reinforced the 3d Division. The division's forward command post was at Dong Ha some eight miles below the Demilitarized Zone. Although one regiment, the 4th Marines, remained in Thua Thien protecting the western approaches to Hue, the bulk of the 3d Division was in Quang Tri Province, mainly facing north, to counter the expected enemy onslaught.

Quang Tri Province contains some 1,800 square miles, extending about 45 miles north and south and 40 miles east and west. Its rugged interior rises to the west with jungled canopied peaks reaching heights of 1,700 meters near the Laotian border. Eastern Quang Tri is characterized by a narrow coastal plain and a piedmont sector of rolling hills. In the north, the Ben Hai River marked the boundary with North Vietnam. The six-mile-wide Demilitarized Zone followed the trace of the river for 30 miles inland and then went in a straight line to the Laotian border. Despite some relaxation of the U.S. rules of engagement in the DMZ south of the Ben Hai, both the Demilitarized Zone and Laos offered a sanctuary for the North Vietnamese Army to mass its forces and position its artillery.

These terrain and political considerations largely determined the enemy's avenues of approach and the 3d Marine Division dispositions in the DMZ sector. The North Vietnamese made their base areas

in the Demilitarized Zone and Laos and tried to infiltrate their forces into the river valleys and coastal plain to cut the allied lines of communications. Route 1, the main north and south highway, connected the Marine bases of Dong Ha and Quang Tri in the north to Phu Bai and Da Nang further south. The Cua Viet River provided the division its chief logistic artery, running from the Cua Viet Facility at its mouth to Dong Ha. Little more than a mountain path in its western reaches, Route 9 linked Dong Ha with Khe Sanh. Since August 1967, however the North Vietnamese had successfully severed Route 9 west of the Marine outpost at Ca Lu, isolating the Marines at Khe Sanh and permitting resupply only by air.

East of Khe Sanh, the 3d Division was strung out in a series of outposts and bases that allowed protection for Route 9, the important Cam Lo River Valley which extended to Dong Ha, and the coastal plain. The most significant of these were: Ca Lu, 10 miles east of Khe Sanh; the Rockpile, a sheer 700-foot outcropping, eight miles further north; followed by Camp Carroll, 10 miles to the east; and then the heralded "Leatherneck Square," the quadrilateral outlined by Cam Lo, Con Thien, Gio Linh, and Dong Ha.

For purposes of delineation and control, the division divided this extensive area into a series of regimental and battalion operational areas with designated code names. For example, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion in Operation Napoleon was responsible for keeping open the Cua Viet waterway. Further north, the 9th Marines, in Operation Kentucky, manned the defenses in the Leatherneck Square sector. In Operation Lancaster, the 3d Marines screened the area from Cam Lo to Ca Lu. Scotland was the code name for the 26th Marines operations at Khe Sanh. To the south, the 1st Marines in Operation Osceola guarded the approaches to the provincial capital and the secondary Marine base near Quang Tri City. The 1st ARVN Division was responsible for the sector east of Route 1 and south of Dong Ha. With its command post at Dong Ha, the 12th Marines, the artillery regiment, supported all of these operations

from firing positions at Dong Ha, Camp Carroll, Gio Linh, Khe Sanh, and Quang Tri.\*

By the end of 1967, the DMZ front symbolized the frustrations of the American war in Vietnam. The bloody battle for the outlying hills surrounding Khe Sanh in April and later the struggle for Con Thien highlighted the fighting for the year. As casualty figures mounted on both sides senior commanders voiced their concern. At the height of the fierce contest for Con Thien, General Krulak observed that in September the Marines had suffered 956 casualties and for the year nearly 5,000 dead and wounded in the DMZ alone. Both General Krulak and Admiral Sharp concluded that such a rate could not be sustained and that "the operational benefits now being achieved in the area . . . are not consistent with the losses incurred."<sup>1</sup>

As early as July, General Krulak had warned about the disadvantages of waging the war in the DMZ sector. He told American commanders that they must face "the brutal facts" that the Marines were "under the enemy's guns." Krulak believed the enemy's purpose was:

... to get us as near to his weapons and to his forces as possible, drench us with high angle fire weapons, engage us in close and violent combat, accept willingly a substantial loss of life for the opportunity to kill a lesser number of our men, and to withdraw into his North Vietnam sanctuary to refurbish.<sup>2</sup>

In a message on 23 September, General Krulak outlined to General Cushman the limited options on the northern front available to the Marine command. III MAF could withdraw its forces to defensive positions further south, out of the range of the North Vietnamese artillery north of the Ben Hai. Krulak rejected this move, although tactically sound, as carrying "too large a price." The enemy could claim a propaganda victory, and moreover it meant abandoning the barrier and strongpoint obstacle system. He noted "whatever criticism may have been directed at the concept before, it is now an official U.S./GVN endeavor, and to back away from it now could not conceivably be identified with progress in the war." Another alternative was to invade North Vietnam, which also was not feasible, because of logistic and political ramifications. Krulak believed the only

remaining viable choices were the reinforcement of the 3d Division in Quang Tri and the intensification of American air and artillery bombardment of the enemy in and immediately north of the DMZ.<sup>3</sup>

General Krulak's message more or less reflected the thinking of both General Westmoreland at MACV and General Cushman at III MAF of the situation in the north. None of the American commanders seriously considered the abandonment of the U.S. positions north of Dong Ha or Route 9. General Westmoreland established a small group in his headquarters to examine the possibility of an amphibious landing in conjunction with an overland sally through the DMZ into North Vietnam. These deliberations, however, went no further than the planning stage.<sup>4</sup> Thus, left with rather a Hobson's choice, Westmoreland and Cushman elected their only remaining courses of action. General Westmoreland in early October reinforced III MAF with a brigade from the 1st Cavalry Division, which permitted General Cushman to redeploy the 1st Marines from Da Nang to Quang Tri City. At the same time, III MAF received the bulk of available B-52 strikes and naval gunfire support. By 12 October, General Westmoreland reported to Admiral Sharp that "our successful application of firepower through B-52 strikes, tactical air, and extensive artillery fires has caused the enemy to suffer heavy casualties which coupled with increasing flood conditions to his rear renders his massed posture in the vicinity of Con Thien no longer tenable."<sup>5</sup>

Although the action in the DMZ sector abated somewhat during October and November, the situation was again tense by the end of the year. Just before Thanksgiving 1967, General Krulak alerted General Cushman that the enemy was once more moving men and material into the Demilitarized Zone, improving his artillery, and "preparing the battlefield."<sup>6</sup> At MACV Headquarters, General Westmoreland expressed his concern in early December about the enemy buildup. He disagreed with President Thieu's assessment that the North Vietnamese were creating "a diversionary effort" in the DMZ to mask their real objective, the Central Highlands. Westmoreland believed that the next enemy move would be in the northern two provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces.<sup>7</sup> On 16 December, he once more directed that I Corps for the next 30 days receive priority of the B-52 Arclight strikes. At the same time, he ordered the immediate preparation of contingency plans to reinforce III MAF with Army troops and the development of logistic facilities to accommodate those forces.<sup>8</sup>

\*Lieutenant General Louis Metzger noted that the operational names had little significance for the Marines who were there: "It was all one big battle. For most of us, one so-called operation looked just like another." LtGen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 17Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Metzger Comments.

At III MAF Headquarters, General Cushman also made his adjustments to reinforce the northern battlefield. In late December, he implemented Operation Checkers which would eventually result in the 1st Marine Division taking over responsibility for all operations in Thua Thien Province so that General Tompkins's 3d Division could concentrate its full resources in the DMZ and Khe Sanh sector. By January 1968, elements of the 1st Division's 5th Marines had deployed into the former 3d Division TAOR south of Phu Bai. Both divisions had established timetables for the phased placement of their regiments and battalions into new operating areas. In sort of hop, skip, and jump movements, hence the name Checkers, the units were to displace one another. For example, the 4th Marines was to assume control of Operation Lancaster in the central DMZ from the 3d Marines. In turn, the 3d Marines was to go to Quang Tri and relieve the 1st Marines. The 1st Marines then was to replace the 4th Marines at Camp Evans in Thua Thien Province and return to the operational control of the 1st Division. Both the 9th Marines and the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion would continue with their respective operations, Kentucky and Napoleon. The 2d ARVN Regiment would stay tied in with the 9th Marines on the right and take over more of the strongpoints of the barrier system. On 15 January, General Tompkins planned to transfer his command post from Phu Bai to Dong Ha.<sup>9</sup>

General Tompkins was relatively new to the Vietnam War. He assumed command of the 3d Division in November after the unexpected death of his predecessor, Major General Bruno A. Hochmuth, in a helicopter crash. Holder of the Navy Cross, Silver Star, and Bronze Star, General Tompkins was a veteran of the island campaigns of Guadalcanal, Tarawa, and Saipan in World War II. He had the 5th Marines in Korea after the signing of the armistice and oversaw the implementation of its terms in his sector. During the Dominican crisis of April–May 1965, he commanded the Marine forces ashore. While Commanding General, Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina, he received his orders to Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

Regarded in Marine Corps circles as one of its best tacticians, General Tompkins was thought the ideal candidate to take charge of the DMZ War. Vietnam was to be a unique experience for him. Colonel James R. Stockman, his operations officer who had served with him on Saipan, recalled that when General Tompkins arrived he asked one question: "Tell me about the

operational folklore in the division's area of operations." According to Stockman, he told the general that from his point of view it "was a bad war, highly inhibited by MACV restrictions . . . [and] political considerations emanating from Washington."<sup>11</sup>

General Tompkins soon became well acquainted with the "operational folklore" of the 3d Marine Division. He learned quickly that a regiment may have responsibility for a sector but have none of its battalions under its command. For example, the 9th Marines in the five-battalion Operation Kentucky only had one of its original battalions, the 2d Battalion with only two of four companies, participating in the operation. The other four battalions came from the 1st Marines, 3d Marines, and 4th Marines. According to Colonel Stockman, General Tompkins "caught on fast to the term 'opcon' [operational control]" which permitted the interchange of battalions from regiment to regiment without the relinquishment of administrative responsibility.<sup>12\*</sup>

This tasking of units, as one Marine historical analyst, Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, observed, "demonstrated the interchangeable nature of Marine battalions and gave the division commander great flexibility."<sup>15</sup> Yet this flexibility had a price. Command lines were somewhat blurred and tactical integrity was more difficult to maintain. Simmons noted "One regimental commander estimated that it took about two weeks of working with a new battalion to iron out problems of procedures and communications."<sup>14\*\*</sup>

Two other aspects of the "operational folklore" of the 3d Marine Division impinged upon General Tompkins as 1967 drew to a close. One was Khe Sanh and the other was the strongpoint system or barrier. Although ordered to reinforce Khe Sanh with a battalion in December by both Generals Westmoreland and Cush-

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\*Colonel Vaughn R. Stuart, who served both as executive officer and later commander of the 3d Marines, commented that General Hochmuth believed that regiments were "capable of controlling any number of battalions." The regimental headquarters would be located "in the important areas . . . and the principal tactic was in the shifting of the maneuver battalions to various regiments as the situation dictated." Col Vaughn R. Stuart, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 20Dec1994 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*Lieutenant General Metzger, the 3d Marine Division assistant division commander in January 1968, remarked that General Tompkins wanted to bring "the tangle of battalions and regiments into some sort of order; to the extent possible, aligning the battalions with their parent regiments." Metzger believed that Tompkins "was faced with nearly an impossible situation, fighting the battle with an inadequate force for the assigned missions." Metzger Comments.



Abel Collection Photo

*LtGen Robert E. Cushman, left, CG III MAF, pins the Distinguished Service Medal on MajGen Rathvon McC. Tompkins at an award ceremony at Da Nang. Gen Tompkins, who served as CG 3d MarDiv, and later as Gen Cushman's deputy, was very much involved in the building of the barrier and its problems.*

man, General Tompkins was more concerned about the situation he confronted in the DMZ sector.\* In 1976, he wrote that he still did not understand why the North Vietnamese “did not contain” the base at Khe Sanh “and sideslip the rest of their formations” towards the coast and more lucrative targets.<sup>15</sup>

The barrier or “McNamara Wall” was the other feature of the war in the north that overrode most other considerations confronting the 3d Marine Division. It determined both the disposition and the tactics of the division along the DMZ. According to Colonel Stockman, both Khe Sanh and the barrier had become “sacrosanct” by the end of the year and that the latter “could not even be discussed, much less argued, when I was G-3 . . . .” Stockman claimed that the barrier “became an objective in itself, causing field commanders to be committed to an unattainable act of juggling real tactical considerations and [barrier] requirements.”<sup>16</sup>

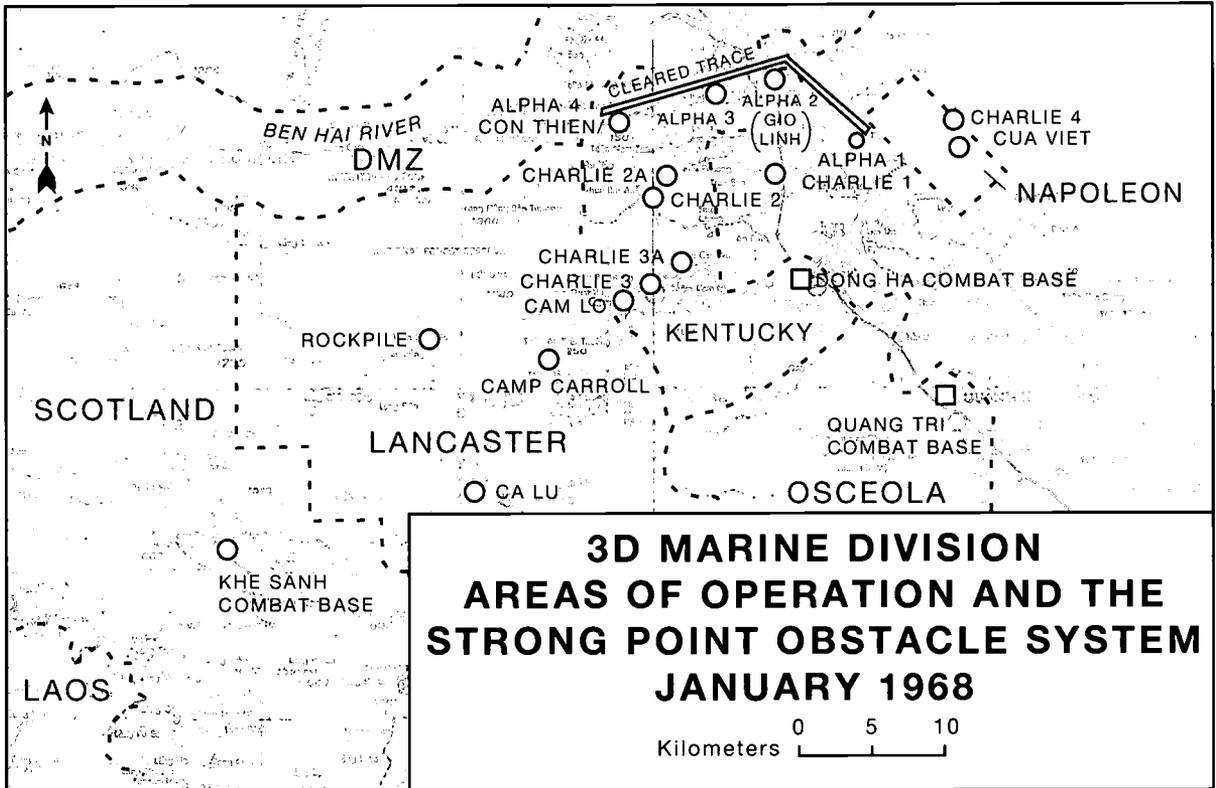
\*General Metzger observed that General Westmoreland did not give a direct order to General Tompkins to reinforce Khe Sanh. Although the MACV commander “became perilously close” to violating the chain of command “on his many visits with comments and suggestions . . . .,” he never “bypassed III MAF.” Metzger Comments.

### *The Barrier*

Although credited to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, the concept of a defensive “barrier” between the two Vietnams had many authors. As early as the late 1950s, President Diem asked his senior U.S. Army military advisor, Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams, to assist in building “a series of strongpoints (concrete) each to hold an infantry squad, across from the sea to Laos just below the DMZ.”<sup>17</sup> A few years later, in the fall of 1961, General Maxwell Taylor, President Kennedy’s Special Military Representative, on a visit to South Vietnam, directed Brigadier General Edward F. Lansdale, the Air Force counterinsurgency expert who accompanied him on the trip, “to do a study of fortifying the DMZ.”<sup>18</sup> In early 1965, before the commitment of major U.S. units to the Vietnam War, Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson, proposed sending a “multinational four-division force . . . to man defensive positions south of the DMZ and to overwatch the Laotian border area to the west, thereby impeding the movement of enemy forces from the north.”<sup>19</sup>

The Defense Department, however, only began to give serious consideration to a DMZ barrier in the spring of 1966 when Secretary of Defense McNamara raised the question with the Joint Chiefs. He then directed the establishment of a special study group to examine the technical feasibility of such a plan. Sponsored by the Institute of Defense Analysis, 67 scientists participated in the study and released their findings, known as the Jason Report, on 30 August 1966. The report concluded that a unmanned air-supported barrier could be established in a year’s time. This barrier was to consist of two parts—one aimed at individuals on foot and the other against vehicles. The former was to be along the southern edge of the DMZ while the latter was to extend into Laos. Both parts were to contain gravel mines (small mines with the purpose of crippling legs and feet on detonation), button bomblets (mines designed only to make a loud noise which could be picked up by an acoustic sensor) and both acoustic and seismic detectors (sensitive to sound and ground vibrations). Patrol and strike aircraft were to monitor and support the ground barrier.

Although many of the military had serious reservations, especially CinCPac, Admiral Sharp, Secretary McNamara believed the proposal had merit. He appointed Army Lieutenant General Alfred Starbird to head a joint task force within the Defense Department



to study the possibilities of implementing the Jason Report recommendations. The Starbird task force was to devise an anti-infiltration system based on air-dropped munitions and electronic sensors that would slow, if not stop, the flow of men and material from the north into the south. This entire planning effort was to have the code name "Practice Nine."

General Westmoreland had mixed feelings about the barrier proposal. He was well aware of the disadvantages of any barrier. In a message to General Starbird, he observed that the North Vietnamese, "will be able to harass a fixed barrier at selected times and places both during and after the construction phase . . . The enemy will make full use of the 'bait and trap' technique in attempts to lure friendly elements into prepared ambushes." Westmoreland concluded with an analysis of the North Vietnamese: "Our enemy is self-confident, determined, ingenious and uses terrain and weather to his advantage. His solutions to problems are usually elemental, simple and practical from his view point." Despite these doubts about a barrier, he himself, was thinking of building a "strongpoint obstacle system" that would "channel the enemy into well-defined corridors where we might bring air and artillery to bear and then hit him with mobile ground

reserves." He saw the Starbird project as an opportunity to institute his own concept.<sup>20</sup>

On 3 October 1966, the MACV commander ordered his own staff to come up with a study of the various defensive options in the DMZ sector and report back to him in six days. In its preliminary findings, the MACV planning group recommended a mobile defense behind a barrier system. The MACV planners suggested a linear barrier extending from Dong Ha Mountain to the sea. This linear barrier would consist of a 1,000-meter wide "trace" with barbed wire, minefields, remote sensor devices, bunkers, watch towers at periodic intervals, all tied together with an extensive communications network. The original scheme called for an ARVN armored cavalry regiment to man, screen, and provide depth to the defense. III MAF would be prepared to provide reinforcements or blocking forces as the situation might demand. West of the trace, the plan would have a strongpoint defense centered around strategic defiles in the mountainous terrain. The western strongpoint system would consist of 20 outposts manned by a Republic of Korea division and reinforced by artillery and air. This preliminary plan would go through several transitions, but would be the basis of all subsequent discussion and planning efforts.

The day after receiving his briefing, 11 October 1966, General Westmoreland met with Secretary McNamara in Vietnam. He recommended his alternative to the Washington plan. The Secretary, after flying over the DMZ, was receptive to the Westmoreland proposal. He directed that MACV should continue with its planning effort and at the same time charged General Starbird's Washington group with the production and delivery of the munitions and sensors to support these measures. Planning would also continue on the development of air-delivered munitions and sensors in Laos to augment the anti-infiltration system to be constructed in South Vietnam. The Seventh Air Force would be responsible for the aviation aspects while III MAF together with the MACV Combat Operations Center were to draw up the designs for the barrier and strongpoints within South Vietnam.

Despite their wishes, the Marine command would be at the center of the barrier developments. Very early, Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, then III MAF commander, made known his unhappiness with the barrier concept. It was his belief and that of his commanders that if he had the additional forces projected by the barrier planners, "a far better job of sealing the DMZ could be accomplished without the barrier itself." It was the Marine position that a barrier defense "should free Marine forces for operations elsewhere *not freeze* such forces in a barrier watching defensive role." With their objections overruled, the Marine commanders had no choice but to comply with their directives.<sup>21</sup>

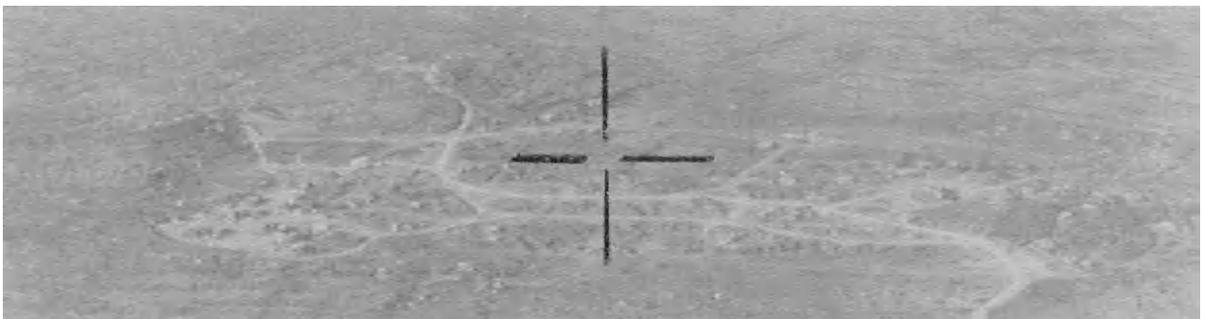
III MAF submitted its formal operational plan for the barrier at the end of December 1966 and MACV incorporated the Marine concepts, with some modifications, in its Practice 9 Requirements Plan of 26 January 1967. The Marine plan had established a deadline of 1 August 1967 for the construction and manning by an ARVN regiment of the eastern portion of the barrier.

III MAF would have started work on a road network and the dredging of the Cua Viet to support the project. A Korean division was to assume responsibility for the area west of Dong Ha Mountain on 1 August 1967 as well, and the 3d Marine Division would then be free of the barrier defense. MACV, in its changes, pushed back the final completion date of the eastern section to 1 November and postponed the entry of additional forces into the western defile area until November. The original plan had called for a deadline of 1 November for the building of the western strongpoints, which MACV changed to read, "the remainder of the system in this area will be completed subsequent to 1 November 1967." Marines, however, were to construct a strongpoint at their Khe Sanh base. MACV did make some cosmetic revisions in wording: anti-infiltration system was substituted for barrier, since the latter had the connotation of an impregnable defense. More importantly, MACV requested an additional division and regiment specifically earmarked for the strongpoint system in the Demilitarized Zone, to supplement its forces already in Vietnam.<sup>22</sup>

Despite not acting upon Westmoreland's request for additional units for the barrier, which became caught up in the Washington review of overall MACV manpower needs during the spring of 1967, Secretary McNamara approved in early March the basic MACV strongpoint proposal. He authorized General Starbird to procure the necessary material to build and equip the strongpoints and base camps for a 10-kilometer "trace" in the eastern DMZ. The Secretary also ordered work to begin on the improvements of Route 1 and the ports near Hue and on the Cua Viet. At the same time, the State Department arranged with the South Vietnamese Government to discuss the necessary land purchases and the resettlement of the civilian population in the area of the trace.

*In aerial photograph, Strongpoint A-4 at Con Thien is marked by the cross hairs. Less than 160 meters high and located two miles south of the DMZ, Con Thien still dominated the surrounding flat terrain.*

Photo from 12th Mar ComdC, Jan69



General Westmoreland soon passed his directives on to III MAF. He ordered General Walt to prepare a plan in coordination with the South Vietnamese I Corps commander, General Lam, for the Strongpoint Obstacle System. The Marine command was to confine its discussions with the South Vietnamese only to the eastern sector. No mention was to be made of the western strongpoint defile or of the air-supported system in Laos. Even with the lack of a formal plan, Marine engineers in early April began clearing the terrain between Gio Linh and Con Thien under the guise of clearing fields of fire and building modest field fortifications.

By mid-April, the barrier for III MAF had become a reality, and not to the liking of senior Marine commanders. On 19 April, General Westmoreland told General Walt that "the mission of establishing a strongpoint/obstacle system south of the DMZ initially will be given to the U.S. Marines."<sup>23</sup> In his reply, General Walt protested that this order assigned his entire 3d Marine Division to the barrier. In effect, the division would be confined to fixed positions and to the construction and the manning of the strongpoint system. The III MAF commander argued that unless he received reinforcements in the north he would not be able to conduct offensive operations there. General Westmoreland had no additional forces to give him, but indicated that he would reinforce the Marines as troops and units became available. General Krulak, the FMFPac commander, was quick to point out to the Commandant, General Greene, "that we are already embarked on a form of Practice Nine." He observed that the reinforcement of Army troops in Task Force Oregon at Chu Lai had "been counterbalanced by MACV assigning III MAF the barrier mission." Krulak asked General Greene "to demonstrate at the Joint Chiefs and the Department of Defense levels" that Marine resources were going into the strongpoint system "with only a presumptive basis for assuming we will be compensated."<sup>24</sup>

Notwithstanding this unified front on the part of the Marine Corps, III MAF, again, had little alternative but to continue with its planning and building of the strongpoint system. In May, during Operation Hickory, the 3d Division moved some 11,000 civilians from the construction sites to a resettlement village at Cam Lo. The 11th Engineer Battalion cleared the terrain while one or two infantry battalions provided the security. On 18 June, III MAF finally published its operation plan which outlined the eastern strongpoint obstacle system. According to the plan, a cleared trace would extend from a strongpoint (A-5), some six kilo-

meters west of Con Thien, for over 25 kilometers to its eastern terminus at another strongpoint (A-1),\* some six kilometers east of Gio Linh. The "trace" would be supported by six company strongpoints, labeled A-1 through A-6. Gio Linh was Strongpoint A-2 and Con Thien was Strongpoint A-4. Behind the strongpoints were to be three battalion base areas, designated C-1 through C-3. An ARVN regiment was to man Strongpoints A-1 and A-2 and Base Area C-3. A Marine regiment was to be responsible for the strongpoints and base areas west of Route 1.

The plan called for the work to be completed in two phases. In Phase 1, a 600 meter-wide trace was to be built from Con Thien to Strongpoint A-1. Four of the strongpoints, A-1 through A-4, as well as all of the base areas were to be finished by 1 November 1967, the deadline for Phase 1. III MAF, at the same time, would improve the road network to include Routes 9, 1, and 561. The latter road was to connect Con Thien to its combat support bases and Route 9. The 3d Marine Division base at Dong Ha was to be the logistics center of the entire effort. It was hoped that by the onset of the monsoon season that the barrier obstacle system of mines, radars, towers, barbed wire, and sensors, would be in place along that part of the trace from Con Thien to Gio Linh. In the second phase, at the end of the monsoon season, III MAF would finish the construction of the two strongpoints west of Con Thien and complete the extension of the trace and its obstacle system from Strongpoint A-1 to A-5. The entire project would be over by July 1968.<sup>25</sup>

The III MAF barrier plan proved to be overly optimistic. By the end of July 1967, Marine engineer and construction units had accumulated an impressive set of statistics pertaining to the number of man and equipment hours devoted to the project, yet progress was relatively slow. The 11th Engineer Battalion committed nearly 50 percent of its total resources to the construction of the trace at a loss of 15 tractors and two dump trucks. As Marine units extended their efforts, North Vietnamese resistance increased. The same infantry battalions that were assigned to construction projects also had security missions. More than one bat-

\*General Metzger wrote that the original Dyemarker plan did not contain the A-1 strongpoint: "It was only after the 3d Marine Division emphatically pointed out the area in which A-1 was finally located was the 'rocket belt' from which the enemy, after crossing the Ben Hai River, set up rockets and fired them into the Dong Ha Base. It was essential that this terrain be denied the enemy, thus A-1." Metzger emphasized the need for tactical plans to be developed by those who are closest to the situation. Metzger Comments.

talion commander complained about the strain on his men to build the barrier at the same time they fought the war. Brigadier General Louis Metzger, the 3d Marine Division Assistant Division Commander (ADC), several years later wrote that the "Marines required to do the construction work were exhausted from protracted combat and the so-called security missions were in fact heavy combat."<sup>26</sup>

The Marine command began to view Dyemarker, the new codename for Practice Nine, as an albatross around its neck. Originally, although not happy with the barrier concept, General Krulak in June 1967 thought that it might be feasible to extend the trace from the sea some 25 kilometers inland and deny the enemy "a direct north-south route into the populous areas."<sup>27</sup> General Cushman, who had assumed command of III MAF in June, also thought that the completion of the strongpoint obstacle system would free his forces along the DMZ for operations elsewhere.<sup>28</sup> By the end of July, both men had second thoughts. In messages to the III MAF commander and to General Greene, the FMFPac commander voiced his concerns. Krulak radioed Cushman: "I am fearful, that, unless we call a halt, that MACV is going to nibble us to death in the Dyemarker project." He stated that he understood Cushman's problems: "You must get as much of the job done as possible in advance of the monsoon and you need help to do it."<sup>29</sup> In his message to General Greene, General Krulak remarked on the slow progress and the high costs of the barrier program. He reminded both men that the original barrier concept called for specific forces to take over the barrier, and he now feared that MACV was hedging on this support.<sup>30</sup>

These considerations started to come to a head in August. III MAF briefed General Greene on the Dyemarker situation during the Commandant's visit to Vietnam in the early part of the month. The III MAF briefers observed that the original MACV concept called for a minimum of 7,691 additional men including an infantry brigade, construction battalions, truck companies, and other support units to reinforce the Marines in Dyemarker. None of these units had yet been forthcoming. The III MAF staff ended its presentation with the observation that the "Enemy activity in northern Quang Tri . . . greatly exceeded that assumed . . .," yet the Marines were under directives "to accomplish the tasks within available force levels."<sup>31</sup>

On 16 August, General Cushman appealed directly to General Westmoreland. He made much the same argument that he had in the briefing for General Greene. The III MAF commander reiterated that he

had not received any of the additional forces supposedly specified for the Dyemarker project. He emphasized that the buildup of enemy forces in the DMZ made the original estimate of minimum forces for the barrier now hopelessly out of date. Cushman then explained that the seven battalions that he had up in the north "cannot accomplish that task up forward and at the same time construct, man, and operate and defend the Strongpoint/Obstacle System . . . to their rear." He remarked that the only way "to get on with the job," was to shift an Army brigade from Chu Lai to Da Nang, and then move a Marine regiment from the Da Nang TAOR to the DMZ sector. General Cushman then asked General Westmoreland to consider this latter alternative.<sup>32</sup> Cushman received assurances that he could deploy his forces as he saw fit, and on 30 August directed his 1st Marine Division to prepare plans for the movement of two battalions north to the DMZ. He explained to the division commander, Major General Donn J. Robertson, "everyone has to strain during Dyemarker."<sup>33</sup>

At this point, the North Vietnamese took matters into their own hands. In early September, they began an artillery bombardment of Marine positions along the strongpoint system and Marine rear areas from positions above the DMZ. On 3 September, more than 40 rounds of mixed caliber shells struck the overcrowded Dong Ha base. An ammunition storage area and the bulk fuel farm went up in flames. The Marine helicopter squadron at the Dong Ha Airfield sustained damage to 17 of its aircraft, already in short supply. From as far away as 50 miles, Marine pilots aloft could see billowing smoke rising over Dong Ha. Considering the extent of the explosions and fires, Marine casualties were relatively light—no one killed and 77 wounded, and only one man seriously. The impact upon Marine logistics in the north and upon the III MAF capability to continue the Dyemarker project was another matter. In a message to General Westmoreland, General Cushman laid out the implications of the losses of material as a result of the attack on 3 September, and continuing with the barrier under the guns of the enemy. He observed that the destruction of the Dong Ha ammunition supply point "had a direct impact on my ability to proceed with Dyemarker." The III MAF commander then remarked that "We are rapidly approaching the time when a decision must be made as to . . . installation of the Strongpoint Obstacle System." Cushman related again the effort that his forces had been making despite shortages in material for Dyemarker and without the promised troop reinforcements for the project.

Both the ports of Cua Viet and Dong Ha as well as the troops working on Dyemarker were under the "same fan of guns" that had blown up the ammunition dump. According to the barrier plan, nine Marine infantry battalions and the 11th Engineer Battalion were committed to the project. Seven of the nine infantry battalions provided a protective screen while the engineers and remaining infantry units installed the obstacle system and completed the strongpoints. General Cushman estimated that this work would take another six weeks. During that time, troops putting in the obstacle system would be in the open and vulnerable to enemy fire. Cushman stated that he was ready to implement this part of the plan if certain minimum requirements were met. He wanted more artillery, air, and naval gunfire support, as well as a higher proportion of B-52 Arlight strikes. III MAF also needed additional supply, trucking, and engineering units.<sup>34</sup>

Concerned about the increasing enemy strength and the progress of the barrier, General Westmoreland met with General Cushman on 7 September to make his own appraisal of the situation. After listening to the III MAF commander, Westmoreland asked Cushman to estimate the cost in both casualties and in material of continuing the emplacement of the obstacle system within the trace. Obviously expecting that the price tag would be too high, the MACV commander also ordered the Marine general to begin preparation of an alternative plan, based on the assumption of "no continuous obstacle . . . along present trace." III MAF's estimates of the consequences of adhering to the schedule of installing the obstacles caused the inevitable revision of the entire project. The Marine staff projected more than 700 men killed and at least 4,000 wounded, including both U.S. and ARVN troops, if the present course of action were to be followed. On 13 September 1967, General Westmoreland approved a new III MAF barrier plan.<sup>35</sup>

The new Marine barrier plan postponed all work for the time being on the trace and emphasized instead the construction of the strongpoints and the base areas. Strongpoints A-5 and A-6 were eliminated while a new base area, C-4, was added just north of the Cua Viet. The ARVN was to construct the easternmost strongpoint, A-1, while the 3d Division was to remain responsible for the other strongpoints and the base areas. The plan called for the 2d ARVN Regiment to man all of the strongpoints eventually, while the Marines provided a mobile reserve force. In the western defile system, the Marine division would establish seven combat operating bases including Khe Sanh, Ca

Lu, the Rockpile, and Camp Carroll. These four operating bases as well as all of the eastern strongpoints were to be completed by 1 November. As far as the trace was concerned, the plan only read that the Marines were to install "the anti-infiltration system in such manner as to provide the option of further development of the obstacle system . . ." <sup>36</sup>

The enemy and nature were to combine to frustrate the new Marine time schedule. Through September and early October, North Vietnamese artillery, occasionally reinforced by ground forces, in effect, laid siege to the Marines at Con Thien. NVA artillerymen maintained an average of 200 rounds per day on the Marine strongpoint. On 25 September, more than 1,200 shells fell upon Con Thien. In a 10-day period, 18-27 September, the enemy gunners fired more than 3,000 rounds of mortars, artillery, and rockets at the embattled forward positions. Even as the enemy guns blasted away at the Marines, some of the heaviest rains in years fell on northern I Corps resulting in wide-range flooding. Swollen streams and rivers rose above

*Portrait photograph of MajGen Raymond L. Murray, a highly decorated veteran of both World War II and the Korean War, who in early 1968 served as Deputy CG III MAF. Gen Cushman, CG III MAF, placed Gen Murray in charge of the barrier project.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A414537





Photo courtesy of Col Lee R. Bendell, USMC (Ret)

*Into 1968, Gen Westmoreland continued to show command interest in completing the barrier. He is seen here, left, with LtGen Cushman, CG III MAF, center, and Marine BGen John R. Chaisson, who headed the MACV Combat Operations Center, visiting Marine Base Area C-2.*

their banks and the onrushing waters washed away bunkers and trenches and made a quagmire of much of the barrier area. Although the enemy artillery was relatively silent in mid-October, the building of the strongpoints and base areas was at a standstill. In late October, after a period of benign neglect during the struggle for Con Thien and the monsoon rains, MACV again put on the pressure to continue with the strongpoint system. The assistant division commander, General Metzger, much later observed that there was a constantly "changing emphasis" on the Dye-marker project. There would be high interest followed by periods of low interest "with no materials available and response, direction, and guidance from higher headquarters either slow or non-existent." Metzger noted that "Those on the lower levels of the military hierarchy became very expert at reading the indicators" of both high and low interest.<sup>37</sup>

Aware of the difficult circumstances under which the Marines on the DMZ labored, General Westmore-

land still believed that General Cushman and his staff should have had better control of the situation. On 22 October, he radioed Cushman that he was unhappy with the "quality control" maintained by III MAF over the construction of the Dye-marker facilities. The MACV commander stated that the project had "not been accorded a priority consistent with its operational importance." He noted that he was "on record with higher headquarters to meet a fixed time schedule." He realized that the schedule could be adjusted but "any slippage . . . must be supported by factors recognized as being beyond our control . . ." Westmoreland then directed General Cushman "to take immediate steps to correct deficiencies in the construction of the strongpoints and to institute a positive system of quality control over construction and installation of the entire Dye-marker system." The strongly worded message concluded with a reaffirmation that "Project Dye-marker is an operational necessity second only to combat emergency."<sup>38</sup>

General Cushman, in turn, was to relay this new emphasis on the barrier to his subordinate commanders. In transmitting the MACV message to Major General Hochmuth, then the Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, Cushman remarked the "screws are being tightened." He then told Hochmuth: "This was not unpredictable and I am well aware of the factors involved . . . Nevertheless we must give this our closest personal attention and insure that we are taking all possible action within our capabilities and resources."<sup>39</sup>

The III MAF commander's first action was to appoint a completely separate staff under his deputy commander, Major General Raymond L. Murray, to oversee the entire barrier effort. General Murray's Dye-marker staff reevaluated the efforts relative to the barrier and came up with yet another plan. In this new version of Dye-marker, the drafters reinstated Strongpoint A-5 and eliminated any hedging about the installation of the obstacle system along the trace. This latter feature was to be an integral component of the eastern sector of the barrier. Except for Strongpoint A-5, emphasis remained on completion of all of the eastern strongpoints by the end of the year. According to the new schedule of completion, the 2d ARVN Regiment would take over four of the strongpoints in 1968. The Marines would remain responsible for manning Strongpoint A-5 and the combat operating bases, except for C-1. In the western defile system, the plan called for construction to begin only at the Ca Lu combat operating base during the monsoon season.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the elaborations of his staff on the barrier concept, General Murray had serious reservations about the entire project. He later revealed that he never really obtained a handle on the situation. Much of the Dye-marker material had been siphoned off by various commands for their own purposes. Many of the original timbers for the bunkers were green and untreated and began to rot under the pervasive dampness of the monsoon period. The Marines had much the same problem relative to the enormous number of sandbags required for the bunkers, and their rotting caused a "constant replacement problem." General Murray was able to obtain promises from General Starbird's group in Washington of new timbers and of replacement items, but his troubles continued. The III MAF deputy commander partially blamed some of his problems on his own lack of authority. He believed that the Dye-marker staff should not have been separate from the III MAF staff. Murray stated he was not in a position "to directly order anybody to do anything with relation to Dye-marker." As one of the most decorated Marine com-

manders during World War II and Korea, Murray instinctively "sympathized with the division commander whose primary mission was the tactical handling of his troops . . . rather than build the damn line that nobody believed in, in the first place." The seizure of the site for Strongpoint A-3 in early December confirmed Murray's doubts about Dye-marker: "How in the hell were you going to build this thing when you had to fight people off, while you were building it."<sup>41</sup>

Notwithstanding the handicaps under which they worked, the Marines had made significant progress by the end of the year. The 11th Engineer Battalion, under wretched weather and physical conditions, resurfaced Route 561 with rock and partially sealed it with asphalt. The battalion also worked on the laying of the subbase for Route 566. Route 561 connected Route 9 with Con Thien while 566 was to run parallel to the trace and link the strongpoints. Assisted by the engineers and Navy Seabees, the Marine infantry had built 167 bunkers with another 234 ready, except for overhead cover.\* More than 67,000 meters of tactical wire had been laid and 120,000 meters of minefields emplaced. Strongpoint A-1 in the ARVN sector was finished as was the combat operating base C-2, south of Con Thien. The remaining positions in the eastern strongpoint area were about 80 percent completed. In the western defile system, the work at the Ca Lu strongpoint had proceeded with little difficulty with nearly 70 percent of the bunkers and material in place. With the expected arrival of additional supplies in the near future, the Marines expected to finish in February the installation of the obstacle system along the trace. The cost of these gains was dear. Not including the lives lost and the men wounded in trying to build Dye-marker, Marines spent 757,520 man-days and 114,519 equipment-hours. More than \$1,622,348 worth of equipment had been lost to enemy action in establishing the barrier up to this point in time.<sup>42</sup>

The bickering, nevertheless, over the strongpoint system continued. Engineer inspectors from the MACV Dye-marker staff made several visits while the

\*One Marine battalion commander, Colonel John F. Mitchell, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, which occupied Con Thien in the fall of 1967, remembered that he had a detachment of engineers "under my protection and operational control" for the building of Dye-marker. According to Mitchell, the engineer detachment worked "during daylight hours, mostly, in the open with heavy equipment . . . and showed enormous courage setting an example for all of us." Mitchell stated that the detachment suffered a higher percentage of casualties than his infantry Marines. Col John F. Mitchell, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 5Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

work progressed and made several criticisms ranging from the size to the color of the bunkers. During two trips to the DMZ sector in December, General Westmoreland expressed his dissatisfaction. He was particularly unhappy about the fortifications at Con Thien. Westmoreland observed that the bunkers there were built to house a 900-man Marine battalion rather than the 400-man Vietnamese battalion which was scheduled to take over the positions in the spring. Venting his frustrations in his personal journal, he wrote:

I have had no end of problems with the strongpoint obstacle system. The reason seems to be that the Marines have had little experience in construction of fortifications and therefore lack the know-how to establish them in the way I had visualized. I thus have been remiss in taking for granted that they had the background; hopefully it is not too late to get the project on a solid track.<sup>43</sup>

In a formal message to General Cushman, the MACV commander laid out in detail what he wanted relative to the barrier. He stated at the outset that a strongpoint was "to be virtually an impregnable defensive position." Westmoreland noted that it was to be emplaced so that an ARVN battalion with supporting arms could withstand an attack by an enemy division. He wanted the primary defense to be based on "two-man fighting bunkers, that are hardened, mutually supporting, [and] protected by a dense field of defensive wire and mines." Radars, sensors, night observation devices, and searchlights would complement the defenses. General Westmoreland finally reminded the III MAF commander that he could consult *Army Field Manuals* 7-11 and 7-20 for further guidance on preparing defensive positions.<sup>44</sup>

The Marine command, on the other hand, viewed the MACV staff and General Westmoreland's criticisms as unjustified. Marine generals saw the barrier largely as an impediment to fighting the war. Building the fortifications for the strongpoints was a case in point. The 3d Division looked at the bunkers as living areas able to withstand "a certain amount of enemy attention."<sup>45</sup> The actual fighting positions were outside the bunkers themselves. General Murray recalled that when General Westmoreland visited the positions, he called them foxholes and directed the building of covered emplacements for the fighting positions and bunkers with loopholes for rifles and automatic weapons. The Seabees then built for the Marines a half dozen of the new types of bunkers which the MACV commander personally inspected. Murray remembered that Westmoreland spent most of the visit discussing the comparative virtues of a sloping front as compared

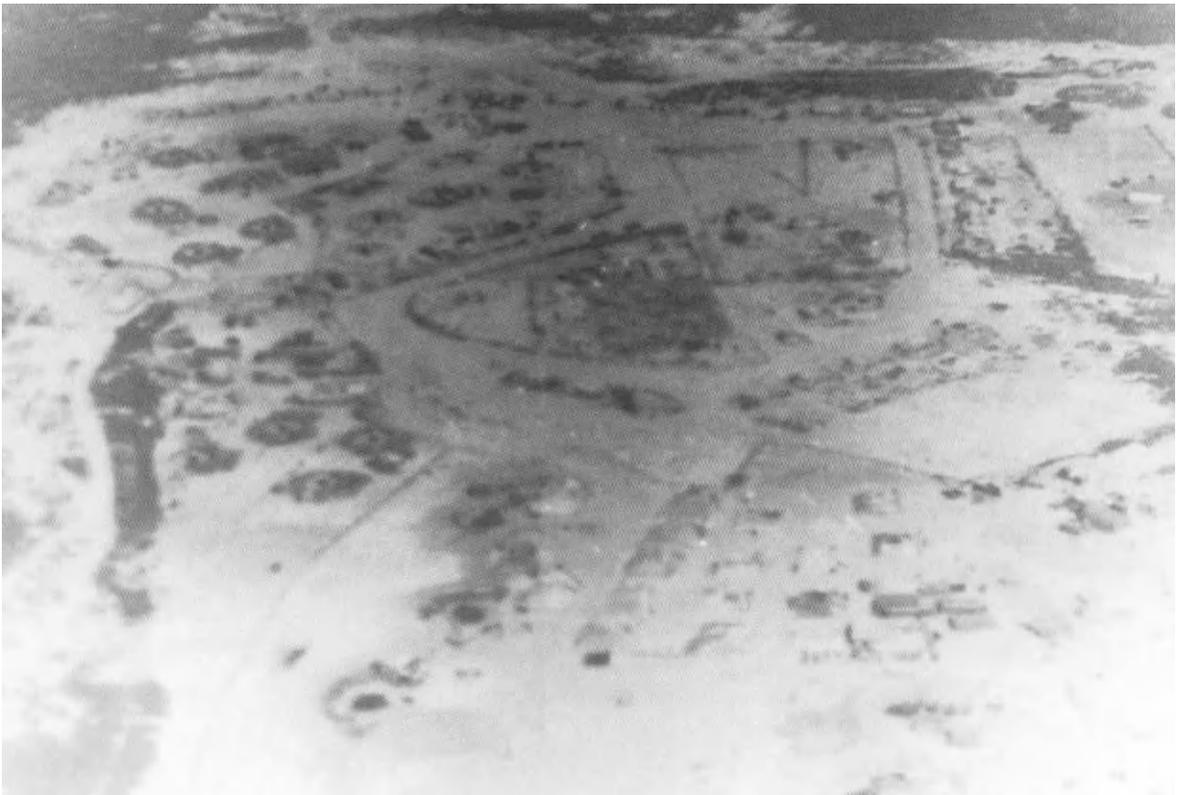
with those of a solid front. According to Murray, he later often wondered why a MACV commander was concerned with "such trifles."<sup>46</sup>

The 3d Division ADC, Brigadier General Metzger, laid much of the difficulties with the barrier directly at the feet of MACV. He remarked on the changing plans "verbally and informally, by General Westmoreland and seemingly on the whim of various staff officers." Several years later, Metzger remembered that the MACV commander constantly altered requirements. At Con Thien, "the 'bursting layer' on top of the bunkers was originally required to stop a mortar shell, that was soon increased to stop a 105mm shell." The Marine general personally suspected that the "Army would not be unhappy if the Marine Corps did not accomplish a first class job on Dyemarker, and is 'nit-picking' with the hope of establishing a background of 'Marine Corps incompetence.'" He believed that "at least some of the problems with MACV Headquarters are motivated by such a feeling."<sup>47</sup>

Thus as 1968 began, the 3d Marine Division, under heavy pressure from higher headquarters, continued with its efforts to complete the strongpoint system according to the new guidelines. The division, on 31 December 1967, issued a detailed operational order, complete with overlays, charts, deadlines, and bunker designs. Based on the III MAF Dyemarker order of November 1967, the 3d Division directive specified the missions for each of the individual units. The 9th Marines had responsibility for most of the eastern strongpoint system. Its tactical area included all of the proposed strongpoints except for A-1 in the ARVN sector and A-5, a site not yet selected. With support of the engineers, the regiment was to complete construction of the strongpoint at Con Thien and the three combat operating bases, C-2, C-3, and C-3A, strung along Route 566. To the west, the 3d Marines was to start on Strongpoint A-5 when so instructed and to finish the strongpoint at Ca Lu in the western defile system. The 2d ARVN Regiment sector contained the easternmost strongpoint, A-1, and the C-1 Combat Operating Base. On the coast, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion was responsible for the C-4 Combat Operating Base.<sup>48</sup> This emphasis from above had limited impact on the actual units, except for the issuance of additional directives. On 22 January, the 9th Marines published its operational order on the barrier.<sup>49</sup> At the troop level, Dyemarker remained, nevertheless, only a vague concept except for the building of the bunkers. The Marine infantrymen's concern was the ability to defend themselves



Top illustration is Department of Defense (USMC) photo A801126 and bottom is from 12th Mar ComdC, Jan69  
*Aerial views take in Strongpoint A-1, Gio Linh, top, and Base Area C-3, bottom. Marine BGen Louis Metzger, the 3d MarDiv assistant division commander, noted the triangular shape of A-1 and compared C-3 to "an octagonal French Fort."*



from their positions including bunkers, fighting holes, trench lines, wire, and minefields against the enemy with as few men as possible.<sup>50</sup>

Bunkers and fighting holes were still subjects of discussion among MACV, III MAF, and the ARVN 1st Division. General Metzger observed that the ARVN-built bunkers varied greatly from the Marine. He compared the A-1 Strongpoint on the coast to "an immigrants' wagon train deployed in concentric circles to fight off an Indian attack." According to Metzger, C-1 looked like "an octagonal French Fort," and he described the Gio Linh strongpoint as "basically triangular in shape." The ARVN, he maintained, insisted that the bunkers "were not only for living, but also for fighting."<sup>51</sup> By 14 January 1968, the MACV staff and ARVN staff members together with General Murray had worked out an agreement on the organization of the defenses. The ARVN accepted the concept of three-man fighting bunkers as opposed to 14-man living bunkers for primary defense. These fighting bunkers would be mutually supporting and connected by communication trenches. U.S. Seabees and engineers would prepare small prefabricated concrete fighting bunkers as soon as possible. Strongpoint A-1 would be redesigned and the engineers would install new fighting bunkers at Strongpoints A-2 at Gio Linh and A-3.<sup>52</sup>

Work on the bunkers, minefields, and wire emplacements continued until the end of the month when "tactical requirements took precedence over Dye-marker."<sup>53</sup> Earlier, on 20 January 1968, General Cushman and General Westmoreland agreed to suspend the installation of the linear obstacle system along the trace "pending clarification of the enemy situation in Quang Tri Province."<sup>54</sup> For all practical purposes this was to end the command emphasis on the barrier. As General Cushman later admitted, he "just quit" building what he termed the "fence," and "Tet came along and people had something else to think about."<sup>55</sup> Yet, as General Tompkins concluded:

Dyemarker was a bete noire that influenced almost everything we did and they wouldn't let us off the hook . . . . The 3d Division was responsible for Dyemarker and if we were responsible for Dyemarker . . . then we had to have Carroll, we had to have Ca Lu, we had to have Con Thien, we had to have Khe Sanh. These are all part of this bloody thing . . . it had a great deal to do with the 3d Division being tied to static posts.<sup>56\*</sup>

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\* General Earl E. Anderson, who in 1968 was the III MAF Chief of Staff as a brigadier general, commented that he and General Cushman agreed with the opinion expressed by General Tompkins that Dye-marker influenced the entire tactical situation for the 3d Marine Division. Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

## CHAPTER 3

# The War in the Eastern DMZ in Early and Mid-January

*The NVA in the DMZ Sector—Operation Napoleon—Kentucky Operations and the Barrier  
Operation Lancaster and Heavy Fighting in Mid-January*

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### *The NVA in the DMZ Sector*

As 1968 began, III MAF looked for the enemy to renew his initiative in the north. According to Marine intelligence, elements of nine North Vietnamese regiments belonging to three different divisions were in or below the Demilitarized Zone. These regiments operated either under their parent divisions or directly under the *DMZ Front Headquarters*. In 1967, the North Vietnamese had created this relatively new command, separate from the *Tri Thien Hue Military Region*, to coordinate NVA operations in and just south of the DMZ. All told, the *Front* controlled some 21,000 troops including divisions, regiments, and separate battalions and companies. In its annual report, MACV observed that the establishment of the North Vietnamese *DMZ Front Headquarters* "was a significant strategic move by the enemy." The North Vietnamese had succeeded in tying down a large allied force in the border area and were in position to mount a major offensive in northern Quang Tri Province.<sup>1</sup>

In its December 1967 enemy order of battle, III MAF identified elements of three regiments of the *324B NVA Division*—the *812th*, the *803d*, and *90th*—and two of the regiments of the *325C NVA Division*—the *29th* and *95th*—operating south of the Demilitarized Zone. The Marines believed the headquarters of the *325C Division* and the *95th Regiment* to be five to ten miles northwest of Khe Sanh. The *29th NVA* regimental headquarters and two battalions remained in the southern sector of the DMZ about 20 miles north of Khe Sanh, but with one battalion, the *8th*, located only five miles north of the Marine base.<sup>2</sup>

In the eastern DMZ, FMFPac intelligence officers placed the *324B Division Headquarters* five miles north of the Ben Hai River. The *812th NVA Regiment*, with all three of its battalions, was in the southern DMZ below the river, about five miles north of Camp Carroll. Both the *803d* and *90th* regimental headquarters were supposed to be collocated just above the Ben Hai.

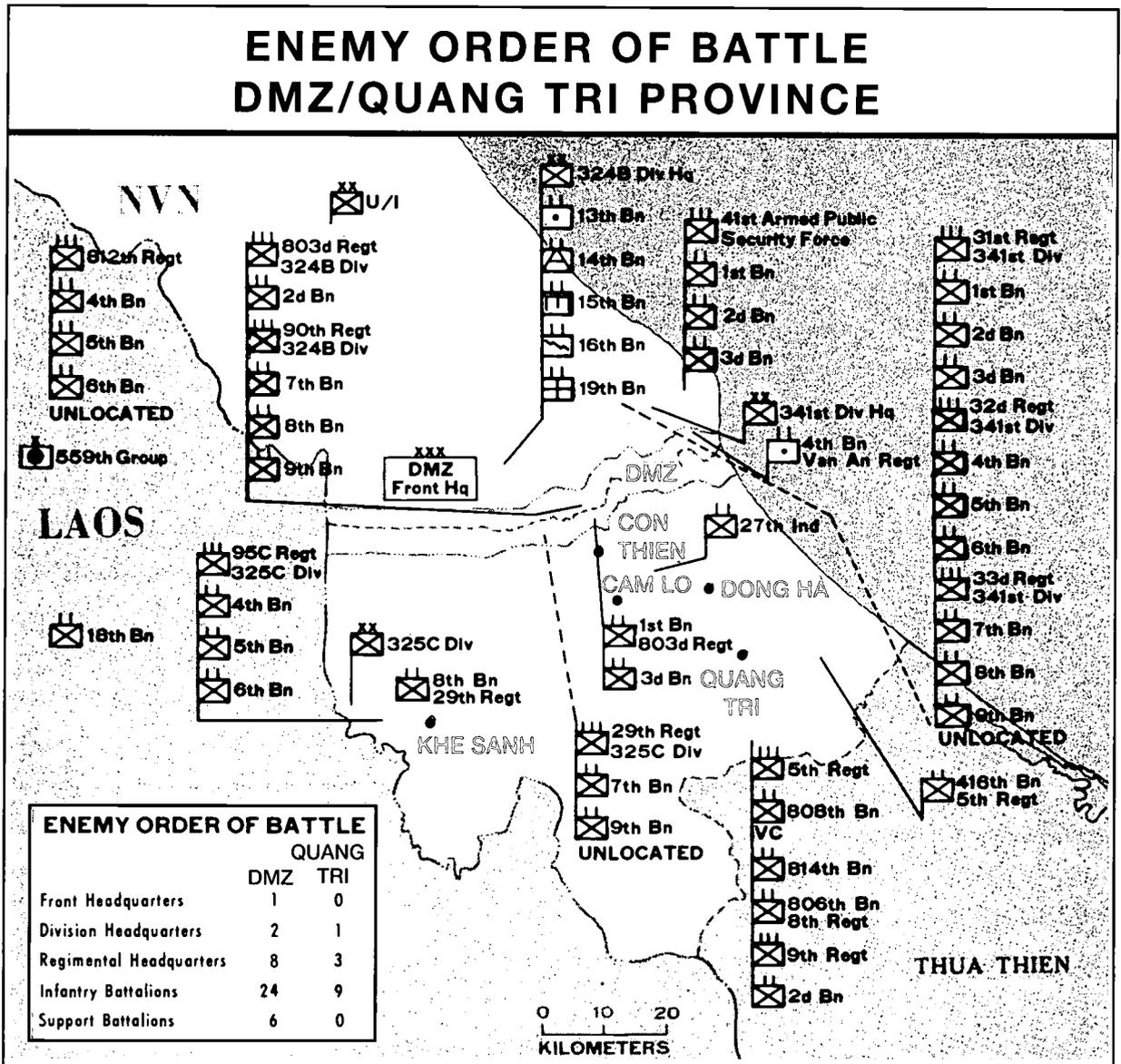
According to the FMFPac order of battle, which differed in some details from the III MAF, the *803d* had only one battalion with the regimental headquarters. Contrary to being above the DMZ as III MAF showed in its monthly report, FMFPac indicated the other two battalions, the *1st* and the *3d*, operated inside South Vietnam—the *1st*, north of Con Thien, and the *3d*, near the flat, coastal area east of Gio Linh despite its lack of cover and concealment.<sup>3</sup>

The *90th NVA Regiment* also posed problems for the Marine intelligence community. FMFPac in its December summary displayed all three battalions, the *7th*, the *8th*, and the *9th*, together with the regimental headquarters above the Ben Hai in the DMZ north of Con Thien. III MAF, however, had evidence that two battalions of the *90th* had departed the regimental area, using elephants as pack animals, and moved west into Laos. The enemy units then entered South Vietnam south of Khe Sanh and traveled northeast. Following the *Mientay*, "The Road to the West," in this case actually the road to the east, one 600-man battalion ended up about five miles southwest of Quang Tri City. According to agent reports, the other battalion, about 400 men, infiltrated south into Thua Thien Province. To confuse matters even more, this intelligence indicated that the *90th* was now under the operational control of the *312th NVA Division* rather than the *324B Division*. This appeared to be unlikely, however, since the *312th* had not been in the DMZ region since 1966 and no other reports made reference to this division.<sup>4\*</sup>

In addition to the *324B* and the *325C Divisions*, FMFPac intelligence officers reported another division, the *341st NVA*, located in the Vinh Linh District of southern North Vietnam and obviously prepared to reinforce the enemy forces in the DMZ and in Quang

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\*Major Gary E. Todd, who served as an intelligence officer on the 3d Marine Division staff, commented that the North Vietnamese changed their unit designations "to frustrate our intelligence collection efforts against them, much like a criminal uses aliases to elude police." Maj Gary E. Todd, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 28Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Todd Comments.



Map from *Marine Operations in Vietnam, Dec 67*

Tri Province. The FMFPac order of battle also held another 5,000 enemy troops operating in southern Quang Tri that could be brought up to support the enemy forces in the DMZ sector. These included the 5th and 9th NVA Regiments, as well as elements of the 6th and the 27th Independent Battalions.<sup>5</sup>

While building up their infantry strength in the DMZ sector, the North Vietnamese maintained a credible artillery threat to the allied forces in the north. With some 100 artillery pieces, rockets, and mortars ranging from 60mm mortars to 152mm field guns, the North Vietnamese had all of the major Marine bases in the central and eastern DMZ well within their artillery fan. Their Soviet-built

130mm field guns with a range of over 27,000 meters easily reached Dong Ha, about 15 kilometers south of the Ben Hai.<sup>6</sup>

Dependent upon a relatively rudimentary supply system, however, the enemy failed to sustain a high rate of fire, seldom reaching a level of 1,000 rounds per day. From April through December 1967, NVA American-made 105mm howitzers and 81mm/82mm mortars accounted for the largest amount of enemy artillery expenditure. Over 13,000 of the mortar shells and slightly more than 5,000 105mm rounds impacted in or near American defensive positions, mostly around Con Thien or Gio Linh. These latter two allied bases were the only ones that were within the range of

the 105s. Although concerned about the enemy 130mm field guns, Major General Raymond L. Murray, the III MAF deputy commander recalled, “. . . they were an annoyance far more than an effective weapon. I don't think we lost very many people from them, and certainly we lost no territory as a result of them but it was a constant annoyance. . . .” During the April-December period, the North Vietnamese fired fewer than 500 rounds from the big guns at allied targets in the south. Brigadier General Louis Metzger, a former artillery officer and the 3d Marine Division assistant division commander, observed that the enemy artillery followed certain patterns. Usually his bombardments occurred around 0600, at noon, and at 1700 with relatively little shelling at night. Whenever enemy use of the heavier calibers lessened, his employment of mortars rose. Metzger gave the North Vietnamese gunners generally only fair grades. Despite their employment of forward observers, the North Vietnamese artillerymen's readjustment fires on American positions were often inaccurate. Yet, Metzger conceded that the enemy gunners and rocketeers had little difficulty in targeting Dong Ha when they wanted.<sup>7\*</sup>

Notwithstanding that the North Vietnamese artillery units operated on a logistic margin, Marine commanders could hardly dismiss the danger they posed to the American defenses in the DMZ sector. Mortars and artillery rounds caused more than 70 percent of the allied dead and wounded in the north. For example, from 3–10 December, enemy shelling

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\*Major Gary E. Todd elaborated in his comments somewhat further on the effectiveness of the North Vietnamese artillery. While acknowledging that the volume of artillery fire was light compared to other wars, he emphasized that “this situation was different from other wars and this fire went beyond what we would call H&I [harassing and interdiction] fire.” He observed that the North Vietnamese guns often fired on Dong Ha, for example, “when aircraft were landing or taxiing to take off. By preregistering their fires on the airstrip their first rounds might give them the bonus of one of our aircraft, along with passengers and crew.” He noted, nevertheless, that the North Vietnamese gunners were selective in their firing so as not to give away their positions. Todd wrote that the North Vietnamese usually had a logical reason for their bombardment of Dong Ha—to keep voters away from the polls during an election or knowing that a few rounds at the Dong Ha base may explode an ammunition dump. According to Todd, “At any rate, the NVA artillery attack represented clever and cost-effective use of their assets.” Todd Comments. Colonel Edwin S. Schick, Jr., who commanded the 12th Marines in 1968, remarked that the North Vietnamese gunners had the benefit of the excellent military maps they had appropriated from the French and that “any point that they wanted to hit, they could.” Col Edwin S. Schick, Jr., Taped Comments on draft chapter, n.d. [1994] (Vietnam Comment File).

resulted in 124 Marine casualties from 727 rounds that fell in or around the Marine defenses. Although the artillery fire from the north diminished towards the end of the month, the NVA could increase the pressure whenever it elected to do so.<sup>8</sup>

With the guns massed into two major groupings, the North Vietnamese artillery belt extended westward some 15 kilometers from the Cap Mui Lay coastal region to a finger lake area just above the Ben Hai River. The belt contained about 130 interconnected artillery sites with each site capable of holding one to four guns. Reinforcing their artillery with a sizable antiaircraft concentration including nine SAM-2 (surface-to-air missile) sites and a mix of heavy machine guns and antiaircraft guns up to 57mm, the North Vietnamese impeded American air strikes against the gun positions and hampered air observation for effective counter-battery target acquisition.<sup>9</sup>

Both Generals Westmoreland and Metzger confessed at different times that American commanders lacked the detailed accurate information to determine the damage U.S. air and artillery inflicted upon the enemy defenses in the DMZ. Several years later, General Metzger observed that the American estimates on the number of enemy guns in the DMZ were derived from the III MAF enemy order of battle. According to Metzger, all the order of battle officer did was to take “all the identified enemy units known to be in a certain area and multiplies the weapons known to be in those battalions, regiments, and divisions. The actual numbers can be significantly greater or smaller.” Metzger claimed that the North Vietnamese moved their artillery pieces almost nightly from position to position, playing a kind of “moving shell game” with American intelligence officers, gunners, and aviators. At best, the North Vietnamese offered only fleeting targets for the U.S. forces. On 6 January, the 9th Marines reported that the NVA had constructed three new artillery positions north of the DMZ, each consisting of two guns and supported by an antiaircraft unit.<sup>10</sup>

While building up their infantry and combat arms in the north, the North Vietnamese also strengthened their logistic network and combat support capability. According to Marine intelligence estimates, the North Vietnamese had “demonstrated a remarkable degree of ingenuity” in overcoming U.S. air efforts to interdict their lines of communication. They quickly repaired roads and built pontoon or cable bridges to replace those damaged by American bombs. Major roads remained open to through truck traffic, but

were subject to delays because of the numerous bypasses, fords, ferries, and damage caused by the bombing. As a result, the enemy often substituted bicycles and porters for trucks. A man on a bicycle could transport about 500 pounds while porters could carry some 50 to 60 pounds.\* The NVA supplemented its human pack carriers with mules, horses, and even elephants. A horse or mule could bear about 150 to 300 pounds while an elephant could take about 1,000 pounds on its back. An animal-drawn bull cart could hold up to 1,500 pounds. These alternate modes of transportation were slower, but more maneuverable than motor vehicles. Nevertheless, where and when they had the opportunity, the North Vietnamese continued to rely on both trucks and shipping to bring their supplies into the DMZ sector.<sup>11</sup>

The enemy lines of communication in the North Vietnamese panhandle from Dong Hoi south to the DMZ consisted of 16 interconnecting roads, five waterways, the national railroad, and an extensive trail network. At Dong Hoi, North Vietnamese stevedores unloaded the cargo of seagoing vessels for transfer either to river craft or trucks for transshipment south. The enemy then impressed ships of 800 tons or less, or fishing junks, to ply the deeper waters and occasionally the open sea. Small shallow-draft canoe-like craft called pirogues with attached outboard motors were used on the more restricted inland water passages, such as the Ben Hai and the Ben Xe Rivers. Although the railroad was not functioning, its railbed served as a roadway for foot and bicycle traffic. The main north-south road arteries, Routes 101, 102, 103, and 1A, connected the three main North Vietnamese base areas in and above the

DMZ to one another and to the infiltration corridors further south.<sup>12</sup>

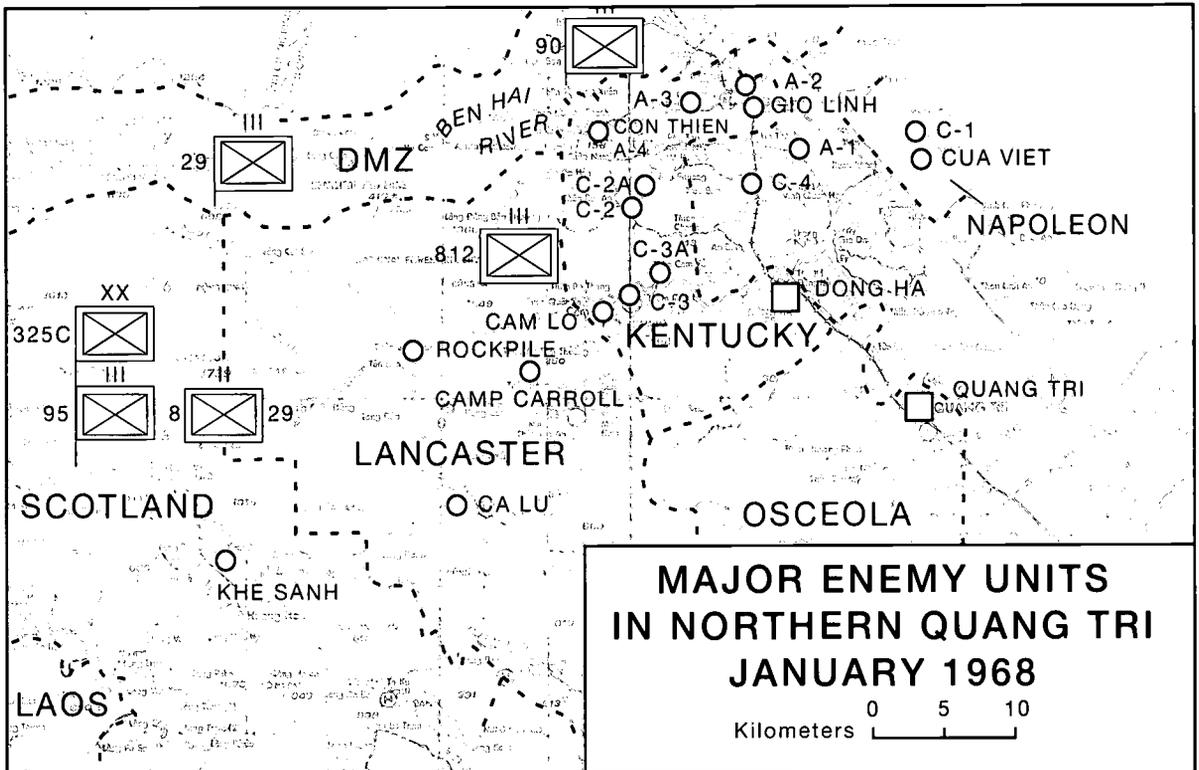
The northernmost base area, Base Area (BA) 510, 40 kilometers southeast of Dong Hoi, contained some 19 installations, including general storage areas, a warehouse, a POL (petroleum, oils, and lubricants) facility, and an ordnance depot. Located near the junction of Routes 101 and 103, which run southeast and southwest, respectively, towards the DMZ, the jungle-canopied base provided a relatively safe harbor for both troops and supplies destined for the forces further south. The largest of the base areas, BA 511, some 100 kilometers in area and at one point only 10 kilometers southeast of BA 510, extended to the northern edge of the DMZ. Its confines accommodated three bivouac areas, six troop-staging areas, and logistic storage depots. Lying astride the junction of Routes 101 and 1A, the base area served as the gateway for the North Vietnamese units moving south to attack the positions in the eastern DMZ sector.<sup>13</sup>

The North Vietnamese also moved supplies and troops from both Base Areas 510 and 511 to the westernmost base area, BA 512, situated in the DMZ where North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and Laos all joined together. This base area included a large staging complex consisting of both underground shelters and surface structures. Moreover, with Route 103 traversing its lower sector, BA 512 was a major transshipment point for both men and equipment prior to infiltration into the south. As 1967 ended, III MAF received disturbing intelligence that NVA units coming down the "Santa Fe Trail," the eastern branch of the "Ho Chi Minh" Trail in Laos that paralleled the South Vietnamese-Laotian Border, were entering the Khe Sanh sector rather than skirting it as they had in the past. In both the eastern and western rims of the DMZ sector, the enemy appeared to be on the move.<sup>14</sup>

At the end of the year, American commanders and intelligence officers attempted to assess the enemy intentions. Although the North Vietnamese Army had suffered heavy casualties in the DMZ sector, some 10,000 dead according to Marine sources, and had obviously been hurt, it was still a formidable adversary. General Westmoreland recognized the obvious advantages that the situation provided the enemy. He later remarked that the proximity of I Corps to North Vietnam was "always frightening to me." Indeed, he declared that "it was more frightening to me than it was to . . . [Lieutenant General Robert E.] Cushman," the III MAF commanding general.<sup>15</sup>

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\*The notion that a man either on a bicycle or walking a bicycle could move a load of 500 pounds may very well be hyperbole. Colonel Frederic S. Knight, a member of the 3d Marine Division staff, recalled a conversation that he had with news columnist Joseph Alsop: "he talked and I listened." According to Knight, Alsop presented the case of the bicycle and the 500-pound load. The Marine officer recalled he told Alsop that "such an assertion was unmitigated nonsense; add a 120-pound man to the 500-pound load and the weight of the bicycle itself and you get an unmanageable vehicle. I doubt it could be ridden, and if it could, it would have to be down a gently sloping very smooth paved road. Imagine pushing it up rutted muddy mountainous jungle trails and trying to brake that load on the way down. And if the bicycle fell over, how would one man ever restore equilibrium." Knight remembered that Alsop "did not address my objection beyond saying that he was privy to certain recondite research that indicated it was possible." Knight concluded, however, that this "datum go into the folklore category." Col Frederic S. Knight, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 10Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File)



Marine commanders and staffs, nevertheless, shared some of Westmoreland's concerns. At the beginning of the year, the headquarters of the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific in Hawaii prepared a 92-page "Estimate of the Enemy Situation, DMZ Area, Vietnam, 1 January 1968." In this detailed study, the FMFPac intelligence staff outlined both the perceived NVA strengths and weaknesses, the options available to the NVA commanders, and their most likely courses of action.<sup>16</sup>

According to the FMFPac staff, the North Vietnamese Army was "one of the best in Southeast Asia . . ." The NVA adapted well to the DMZ situation where they knew the exact location of the American positions and were generally more familiar with the terrain than the Marines. Although limited for the most part to movement by foot, the North Vietnamese soldier also gained a singular leverage from this apparent liability. As the Marine report noted, "This is certainly a slow mode, but due to this circumstance he [the NVA soldier] is restricted only from those areas which are virtually impassable to foot movement." Acknowledging the relative high morale and dedication of the North Vietnamese Army, the FMFPac staff writers observed that one of the enemy's major attributes was that he viewed "the present conflict as one which has existed for two generations, and he has no

great expectations that it will end soon, thus all of his actions are tempered by patience."<sup>17</sup>

The enemy, nevertheless, had obvious vulnerabilities. His troops lacked technical and mechanical training and experience. North Vietnam's "archaic logistical support system" depended upon a large reservoir of manpower and the NVA "continually revealed an inability to exploit any tactical opportunity calling for the rapid deployment of units and material." Moreover, the lack of modern communications often prevented senior NVA commanders from influencing decisions at critical moments once the battle was joined, handicapped by their limited capability to coordinate and control their units in rapidly changing situations. Prisoner interrogation also revealed that the high morale of the NVA soldier deteriorated "the longer he remains below the Ben Hai River."<sup>18</sup>

Balancing the assets and debits of the NVA forces in the north, the FMFPac staff officers then evaluated the most likely stratagem that the enemy would adopt in the DMZ sector. According to the Marine analysis, the North Vietnamese had various feasible alternatives, the most likely being:

1. a division-strength attack into northeastern Quang Tri to "establish temporary control of selected areas . . . ;
2. conduct multi-battalion or regimental-size attacks against "multiple" allied targets between Highway 9 and

the DMZ using forces both in eastern Quang Tri and near Khe Sanh. Might attempt "to hold Khe Sanh at least temporarily . . . because of its remoteness . . . ;

3. continue the present "pattern of harassing friendly forces with hit and run attacks, interdiction of lines of communication with battalion-size forces . . . ;

4. continue the present pattern and also fortify areas and ambush sites in Quang Tri to trap friendly forces and "dissipate our efforts and to inflict heavy personnel casualties and equipment losses on friendly forces . . . ;

5. withdraw all forces north of the Ben Hai and strengthen defenses.<sup>19</sup>

Given these choices, the FMFPac report concluded that the North Vietnamese would probably elect a combination of options 1 and 2, while at "the same time harass friendly forces with hit and run attacks, mining, and interdiction of lines of communications." Despite the NVA's recent reverses in the DMZ, the FMFPac staff members believed that the North Vietnamese leadership, "imbued with a Dien Bien Phu mentality," wanted to inflict a series of tactical defeats and heavy casualties among U.S. forces that would demoralize the American "home front" and make continued U.S. participation in the war politically untenable. On 13 January, General Cushman, the III MAF commander, radioed General Westmoreland, "An immediate enemy threat to III MAF forces is poised west of Khe Sanh. Additional heavy enemy concentrations are indicated in the A Shau Valley as well as in

and north of the DMZ." At this point, both MACV and the Marine command perceived northern I Corps as the most likely setting for any major enemy push.<sup>20</sup>

### *Operation Napoleon*

Along the DMZ, much of the war was indistinguishable from the preceding year. Work on the barrier continued and the same politically based rules of engagement applied to the DMZ. U.S. ground forces could not cross the Ben Hai River, but were allowed to conduct operations in the Demilitarized Zone south of the demarcation line and return fire across the line. Artillery, naval gunfire, and air missions were permitted against valid targets in the north. MACV insisted, however, that the Marine command notify it of every action against the North Vietnamese under these ground rules. Marine units remained in the identical sectors, each with its designated operational name, that they had manned in December.<sup>21</sup>

In the DMZ, the 3d Marine Division maintained three distinct tactical areas designated by operational codenames, Napoleon, Kentucky, and Lancaster. Lieutenant Colonel Edward R. Toner's 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion was responsible for the Napoleon Area of Operations, extending some three miles above and two miles below the Cua Viet waterway and two miles inland from the coast. The battalion's mission was to safeguard the vital Cua Viet Port Facility and

*Navy LSTs (landing ship, tank) and smaller seagoing vessels could be unloaded at the Cua Viet Port Facility in the DMZ Sector, and transhipped to the main Marine base upriver at Dong Ha.*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801124



companion logistic support facility as well as protect the river supply route to Dong Ha.

With the establishment at the mouth of the Cua Viet of an LST (landing ship, tank) ramp in March 1967, ships' cargoes could be unloaded onto LCUs (landing craft, utility) and LCMs (landing craft, mechanized) for the trip upriver to Dong Ha. As Marine forces and facilities expanded in northern Quang Tri, the Cua Viet supply channel became even more crucial to the Marine command. By the end of the year, the Navy Cua Viet Port Facility could accommodate two LSTs, three LCUs, and three LCMs, and move 940 short tons daily through to Dong Ha.<sup>22</sup>

The 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion had transferred from the Da Nang TAOR to its new command post at the Cua Viet Port Facility at the end of April 1967 to provide general support for the 3d Marine Division. At the same time, the commanding officer of the amphibian tractor battalion became the Cua Viet installation coordinator and responsible for both the defense and administration of the Cua Viet area. In November, the 3d Marine Division divided Operation Kingfisher, the codename for the division campaign in the DMZ eastern sector, into the three operations of Lancaster, Kentucky, and Napoleon. In Operation Napoleon, Lieutenant Colonel Toner remained responsible for roughly the same area that the "Amtrackers" had been operating all along.<sup>23</sup>

The battalion had the additional duty to construct the C-4 Combat Operating Base, about 2,000 meters north of the Cua Viet, and to assist the adjoining ARVN 2d Regiment to build the A-1 Strong Point, another 3,000 meters to the northwest. The A-1 and C-4 positions marked the eastern terminus of the barrier. While helping with the work on the barrier in December, Toner's Marines on the 11th engaged in some of the heaviest fighting of the month. In the sand dunes and scrub pine growth near the fishing village of Ha Loi Toi just north of C-4, the battalion in a day-long battle killed 54 of the enemy at a cost of 20 wounded Marines. Five days later the Cua Viet Facility came under artillery and rocket attack which resulted in 5 Marines killed and 31 wounded. Through the end of 1967, according to Marine statistics, Operation Napoleon accounted for 87 enemy dead and the capture of 2 prisoners at a loss of 10 Marine dead and 48 wounded and evacuated.<sup>24</sup>

In January 1968, Lieutenant Colonel Toner's battalion consisted of his Headquarters and Support Company, Companies A and B, and an attached infantry company, Company C, from the 1st Battalion, 3d

Marines. A platoon of six LVTH-6s (an amphibian tractor with a turret-mounted 105mm howitzer) from the 1st Armored Amphibian Company, attached to the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, provided artillery support. A mortar section of three 4.2 mortars from the 12th Marines reinforced the fires of the howitzers.<sup>25\*</sup>

With its flat sandy coastal plain and the Cua Viet waterway, the Napoleon area of operations was ideal terrain for Toner's battalion. The battalion commander had at his disposal 64 troop-carrying LVTP-5s (landing vehicle tracked, personnel), 6 command and control tractors, 4 LVTEs (landing vehicle tracked, engineer) used for mine clearing, and 2 LVTR-1s (landing vehicle tracked, retriever) for repair purposes. These lightly armored amphibian tractors afforded mobility both on land and water. Within minutes, the Marines could reinforce any trouble spot within the TAOR.<sup>26</sup>

Early January was a relatively quiet period for the amtrac Marines. They busied themselves with civic action in the nearby fishing village of Gia Hai, working on C-4, and building revetments for the tractors. Marine Sergeant Ron Asher with the attached Company C, 3d Marines at C-4 wrote his mother in December 1967 that he spent most of his "'down time' from patrols filling sandbags, and getting the amtracs and tanks dug in."<sup>27</sup>

During a visit to the battalion on Christmas Day, General Westmoreland had expressed his dissatisfaction about the lack of protection for the amphibian vehicles. In relaying this concern to Lieutenant Colonel Toner, the 3d Division commander, General Tompkins, suggested that the battalion use steel revetments combined with oil drums and ammunition boxes filled with sand to safeguard the LVTs.<sup>28</sup>

It was not until mid-month that the North Vietnamese made any serious attempt to probe anew the Marine positions in Napoleon. On 14 January, a Marine patrol, about 2,500 meters south of the Cua Viet near the coast, came across a design drawn in the sand, consisting of four circles with a huge arrow in the

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\* A later successor to Lieutenant Colonel Toner as battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Walter W. Damewood, observed that the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion in 1968 "had to be one of the most unique Marine battalions of the time in terms of personnel and equipment structure." He noted that in addition to its normal complement of personnel and equipment, the battalion had attached to it: Marine combat engineers, Marine infantry and tanks, and reconnaissance elements as well as Army armored personnel, and South Vietnamese Popular Force troops. He noted that the members of the battalion became known as "Am Grunts" because of the infantry role and mission assigned to them. LtCol Walter W. Damewood, Jr., Comments on draft chapter, dtd 31Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Top photo from 12th Mar ComdC, Jan69; bottom photo courtesy of Ron Asher  
*Combat Base Area C-4 appears in the top photo, while the bottom picture displays a typical bunker at C-4 in January 1968. The 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion in Operation Napoleon had the main responsibility for the construction of C-4 as well as the protection of the Cua Viet sector.*



center pointing northwest towards the battalion command post. Making the obvious conclusion that this was a crude aiming stake for enemy mortars, the Marines changed the direction of the arrow so that any rounds fired from that site would fall into the sea. That same night, about 1,000 meters to the southwest, a Marine squad ambush from Company B, 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, just outside the village of Tuong Van Tuong, saw nearly 50 enemy troops moving on line towards them from the southeast. The Marine squad leader immediately called for artillery support. Within two minutes, the 105mms on the LVTH-6s dropped more than 100 rounds upon the advancing enemy. The NVA soldiers regrouped twice, but "broke each time under fire." A Marine looking through his starlight scope observed a number of enemy troops fall, but when two reinforced Marine platoons from Company B checked the area the following morning there were no bodies. Throughout the DMZ sector, the enemy appeared once more attempting to infiltrate into and behind the allied positions.<sup>29</sup>

#### *Kentucky Operations and the Barrier*

Aligned along both sides of Route 1, the 2d ARVN Regiment filled in the gap between the Napoleon and Kentucky area of operations. Part of the highly rated 1st ARVN Division, the regiment occupied in December both the A-1 and A-2 Strong Points of the barrier and the C-1 base area. Major Vu Van Giai, the regimental commander, whom the Marines described as "an impressive officer with a good command of English," established his command post at C-1, located just west of the railroad and Route 1, about 6,000 meters south of Gio Linh. Giai kept one battalion at the C-1 base and deployed two battalions forward, one at A-1, near the destroyed fishing village of An My, about 2,000 meters below the DMZ, and the other at A-2, just above Gio Linh. On 3 January, Giai moved his reserve battalion, the 2d Battalion, 2d ARVN, from below Gio Linh to new positions north of the Cua Viet in the vicinity of Dong Ha. As a result of this relocation, the regiment and the 9th Marines in Operation Kentucky readjusted their boundaries. Nominally, the A-2 stronghold at Gio Linh, although manned by the ARVN, remained in the 9th Marines TAOR. According to the barrier plan, the ARVN eventually were to take over also the A-3 Strong Point, located halfway between Gio Linh and Con Thien, when it was finished.<sup>30</sup>

Until that time, however, the defense and building of the barrier lay with the 9th Marines in Kentucky. Encompassing "Leatherneck Square," the approximately six-by-eight-mile area, outlined by Gio Linh and Dong Ha on the east and Con Thien and Cam Lo on the west, the 9th Marines area of operations included three of the five strong points of the "Trace" and two of the combat operating bases of the barrier, C-2 and C-3. The terrain in Kentucky varied from low-lying hills interspersed by woods and rice paddies in the northern sector to the cultivated Cam Lo River Valley in the south extending from Cam Lo to Dong Ha. Route 1 connected Gio Linh to Dong Ha and Route 561 extended from Con Thien to Cam Lo. Route 605 in the north linked the strong points along the trace to one another while Route 9, south of the Cam Lo River, ran from Dong Ha into Laos. All of these lines of communication, except for Route 1, required extensive engineer roadwork, including paving, widening, and resurfacing, to meet the logistical requirements of the barrier effort.

Although Operation Kentucky officially began on 1 November 1967, the 9th Marines was no stranger in its area of operations. The regiment remained responsible for the same ground and positions that it held during the previous operation, Kingfisher. For all practical purposes, the change of designation only served to provide a convenient dividing line to measure with the body-count yardstick the relative progress of the DMZ campaign. The identical concept of operations continued in effect: the 9th Marines was to hold on to Leatherneck Square, protect Dong Ha, build the barrier, and throw back any North Vietnamese forces attempting to infiltrate into the I Corps coastal plain.<sup>31</sup>

In January 1968, Colonel Richard B. Smith, who had assumed command of the regiment the previous September, controlled from his command post at Dong Ha four infantry battalions and part of another, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. Except for the two companies of the 2d Battalion, all of the other battalions belonged administratively to other regiments, the 1st, 3d, and 4th Marines. The 2d Battalion, 1st Marines defended the A-4 Strong Point at Con Thien; the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines worked on the fortifications of the A-3 Strong Point with three companies; the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines screened A-3 from positions on Hill 28, north of the trace; and the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines occupied the C-2 and C-2A combat operating bases on Route 561. Further south, the two companies of the 9th Marines protected the Cam Lo Bridge where Route 561 crossed the Cam Lo River and the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines artillery positions on Cam Lo Hill, the C-3

combat operating base. The remaining rifle company of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, Company M, attached to the 12th Marines, guarded the provisional Marine artillery battalion situated at the Gio Linh fire support base, south of the ARVN in the A-2 Strong Point.<sup>32</sup>

A sea-going Marine during World War II and an infantry company commander during the Korean War, Colonel Smith had definite ideas about the war in the DMZ. He later observed that the Marines were "sitting in defensive positions up there playing strictly defensive combat . . . ." Smith believed that the troops required training in defensive warfare. He claimed that was an unpopular viewpoint since "Marines are always supposed to be in an assault over a beach, but this just isn't the name of the game out there." The emphasis was on good defensive positions and clear lines of fire.<sup>33\*</sup>

With the command interest in the barrier at the beginning of the year, the strong points and combat operating bases in the 9th Marines sector took on even more importance. Anchoring the western segment of the cleared trace, the A-4 Strong Point at Con Thien continued to play a major role in the regiment's defensive plan.\*\* Located less than two miles south of the DMZ, Con Thien, although less than 160 meters high, dominated the surrounding terrain. Colonel Smith observed that if the enemy had held the position, "he would be looking down our throats" at Dong Ha.<sup>34</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Evan L. Parker, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 1st Marines had taken over the responsibility of the Con Thien defense in mid-December. A 1st

Marine Division unit, the battalion quickly learned the differences between the DMZ war and the pacification campaign further south. In contrast to the lightly armed and elusive VC guerrillas in the south, the North Vietnamese here often stood their ground, supported by heavy machine guns, mortars, and artillery. By the time the battalion occupied Con Thien, it had accommodated to the DMZ environment.<sup>35</sup>

The Marines of the 2d Battalion in December worked feverishly on the A-4 Strong Point defenses. During the Christmas truce period the battalion added 11 bunkers and dug a new trench along the forward slope. The troops then sandbagged the bunkers with a "burster layer" in the roofs, usually consisting of air-field matting "to burst delayed fuse rounds." They then covered the positions with rubberized tarps to keep the water out. By the end of the year, all of the new bunkers had been sandbagged and wired in with the new razor-sharp German-type barbed wire. Protected by a minefield to its front, surrounded by wire, and supported by air, artillery, and tanks, the 2d Battalion lay relatively secure in its defenses at the exposed Con Thien outpost.<sup>36</sup>

As the new year began, the Con Thien Marines enjoyed a small reprieve from the shooting war. Both sides more or less adhered to the terms of the shaky holiday truce, despite a small enemy probe of a Marine listening post on the perimeter. According to a Marine reporter, on New Year's Day, a Marine forward artillery observer at Con Thien looking through his binoculars at enemy forward positions across the Ben Hai suddenly spotted a large NVA flag with its single star emblazoned on a bright red background waving "in the breeze atop a rather crude flagpole . . . ." Other Marines, mostly young infantrymen, crowded around to take their turn to see for what most of them was their first tangible symbol of the enemy.\*\*\* Secure in their conviction that the Marines would adhere to the cease-fire, the NVA deliberately taunted the American troops. Impatiently the Marine gunners waited the few hours for the

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\*There is dispute among some officers who served with the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines attached to the 9th Marines, whether there were standing operating procedures relating to restrictions on patrolling. A former company executive officer recalled that there were definite limitations on how far platoons and companies could move from their parent unit, 250 yards for platoons and 500 yards for companies. On the other hand, a former battalion commander and company commander with the 3d Battalion recalled no such limitations. The author found no listing of such restrictions in the 9th Marines Command Chronology for January 1968. The consensus seems to be that if there were such restrictions they were not always enforced and perhaps not even known. For the various viewpoints see Chambers Intvw and Maj Justice M. Chambers, Jr., Comments on draft chapter, dtd 17Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File); LtCol Otto Lehrack, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 29Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File); and Col Robert C. Needham, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Needham Comments.

\*\*Lieutenant General Metzger observed that Con Thien and Gio Linh had been French forts, which indicated very early that both sites were recognized as key terrain. LtGen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 17Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Metzger Comments.

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\*\*\*According to Lieutenant Colonel Otto Lehrack, who was a company commander with the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, it was not so unusual to see a NVA flag north of the Ben Hai River "just about any time you were on the cliffs near Gio Linh." He does concede, however, that the truce period may have been the only time that the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines may have had an opportunity to see the North Vietnamese banner. LtCol Otto Lehrack, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 29Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Lehrack Comments. See also Otto J. Lehrack, *No Shining Armor, The Marines at War in Vietnam, An Oral History* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992), pp. 211-12.



Top photo courtesy of Col Joseph L. Sadowski, USMC (Ret), and bottom photo courtesy of Col Lee R. Bendell, USMC (Ret) *The Marine base at Con Thien (A-4) is seen at top, with Marines constructing bunkers at A-4 in photograph at bottom. Col Lee R. Bendell, whose 3d Battalion, 4th Marines served at Con Thien in 1967, observed that NVA artillery fire "necessitated overhead protection."*





fired three M79 grenade rounds and later checked the area "with negative results." Later that night, about 2100, a Marine squad from Company F on the northeastern perimeter picked up enemy movement on its radar scope and called in a mortar mission. A Marine platoon patrol that went out to investigate the results of the action "blundered into [a] friendly minefield" and sustained three casualties, one dead and two wounded.<sup>40</sup>

A few days after this incident, the night of 14 January, Con Thien Marines heard an explosion in the minefield directly to the north of their defenses. The Marines fired illumination and saw a wounded NVA soldier lying in the minefield and other North Vietnamese troops withdrawing. A Marine squad equipped with a starlight scope then attempted to recover the wounded man. By the time it reached the area, the Marines found no one there. Shortly afterward, a Marine outpost sighted about four to five NVA entering the battalion's perimeter apparently to retrieve their injured comrade. Another mine went off. Lieutenant Colonel Duncan sent a platoon out to check for any enemy casualties. About 0120 on the morning of the 15th, the Marine patrol as it neared the minefield "heard whistling and a great deal of noise," evidence of a large enemy force nearby. Both sides withdrew under covering fires. The NVA used recoilless rifles, small arms, and 60mm mortars to make good their retreat while Marine artillery and mortars targeted the enemy escape routes. Two Marines received minor wounds. About 1000 that morning a Marine patrol returned to the area where the enemy was last seen and found a pick, a wrench, a poncho "with fragmentation holes and large blood stains."<sup>41</sup>

For the Marines of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines in January, their tour at Con Thien, like the units before them, was their "time in the barrel." As Lieutenant Colonel Duncan many years later recalled, the North Vietnamese artillery destroyed much of the northwest minefield protecting the Marine outpost "as well as the forward trenches and bunkers in that area. Casualties were mounting. The hospital bunkers exceeded capacity with wounded on stretchers." The battalion commander remembered that one of the chaplains "broke under stress and attempted suicide."<sup>42</sup>

Route 561, running north and south, was the lifeline for Con Thien. To keep this road open, General Metzger remembered that Marine engineers in 1967 "straightened out the route by cutting a 'jog' in the road that went to a by-then deserted village which reduced the length to Con Thien and simplified security." Despite this improvement, other complications arose. According

to Metzger, once the torrential rains came the water washed out the road. It took the engineers an extended time to obtain sufficient rock until they could build "a suitable roadbed" to carry the heavy traffic.<sup>43</sup>

The Marines also established two combat operating bases, C-2 and C-2A, to protect Route 561. About 2,000 meters southeast of Con Thien, the C-2A base overlooked a bridge spanning a stream which intersected the road there. The Marines nicknamed the area the "Washout," because in heavy rainstorms, the waters flooded the low-lying ground. Another 3,000 meters to the southeast was the C-2 base which contained both artillery and infantry fixed positions. The terrain along Route 561 between Con Thien and Cam Lo consisted of low-rolling hills, numerous gullies, and waist-high brush. From both the C-2A and C-2 bases Marine patrols ventured forth "to keep the NVA off the road."<sup>44</sup>

In January 1968, Lieutenant Colonel Edwin A. Deptula's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines occupied both the C-2 and C-2A positions, having just relieved the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines in the sector. Lieutenant Colonel Deptula established his command post at C-2 with Companies A and B. His executive officer, Major John I. Hopkins, formed a second command group and with Companies C and D held C-2A. Throughout the first weeks of the month, the battalion ran numerous squad- and platoon-sized combat patrols out of both C-2 and C-2A for distances of 1,500 meters from each of the bases and from Route 561. Actually the most significant action in the battalion's area of operations involved another unit. On 10 January, a small patrol from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion came across three NVA in a palm-covered harbor site, about 3,000 meters east of C-2. The reconnaissance Marines killed two of the enemy, took one prisoner, and captured all three of their weapons.<sup>45</sup>

As part of the barrier system, the central effort at C-2 in early January was the completion of the bunker defenses. Several support units, including engineers, artillery, and tank and antitank detachments, shared the base area with the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. Although the engineers ran daily mine sweeps along Route 561 to Con Thien to keep the road open, they, as all the tenant units, assisted with the construction effort. On 10 January, a "Dyemarker" (barrier) team visited the C-2 site to inspect the defenses. According to the 1st Battalion's monthly chronology, "None of the bunkers could be considered complete. Maximum effort was later directed at bunker completion in keeping with the tactical situation."<sup>46</sup>



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190200 and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190197. *Marine engineers with a bulldozer are building ammunition storage bunkers at Combat Base Area C-4, top, and a Marine platoon from the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines is seen at work building a bunker emplacement at C-4 with sandbags for overhead cover in January, bottom.*



Colonel Smith, the regimental commander, later explained some of the handicaps that the Marine units worked under in getting the work on the barrier completed. Few of the units had “backhoes” to assist in digging foxholes or bunker foundations. He observed that the machines could “do in two hours what it takes a whole battalion to do in two days.” Despite scarcity of equipment, Smith also partially blamed Marine training for not teaching the troops “proper bunkering procedures—sandbagging.” He compared sandbagging technique to laying out bricks “with headers and stretchers.” The regimental commander remarked that he saw more wasted effort with the sandbags “because the man doesn’t know what he is doing and the NCO supervising him doesn’t know any more about it than he does so the wall gets to be six-feet high and collapses . . . and there goes three days’ work gone to Hell.” Overcoming the limitations imposed by its own inexperience in constructing bunkers and the lack of heavy earth-moving equipment, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines would complete 47 of the scheduled 81 bunkers in the C–2 base site by the end of the month.<sup>47</sup>

South of Deptula’s 1st Battalion in Kentucky were a small command group and two companies of Lieutenant Colonel William M. Cryan’s 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. In December, just before Christmas, the 2d Battalion had moved from positions north of A–3 in Operation Kentucky to Camp Carroll in the 3d Marines’ Lancaster area of operations. A few days later, Lieutenant Colonel Cryan detached his Companies F and G and placed them under his executive officer, Major Dennis J. Murphy. While Cryan and the rest of the battalion remained at Camp Carroll, Murphy and his command returned to the Kentucky area of operations and relieved the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines at Cam Lo. Company F occupied the C–3 Cam Lo artillery position, 1,000 meters above the Cam Lo River on Route 561, while Company G protected the Cam Le Bridge (C–3A) on Route 9 at the river.<sup>48</sup>

In the Cam Lo sector, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines patrolled Route 561 to keep the main supply route open to Con Thien and the farming villages above the river. At the C–3 base, Company F, together with supporting artillery and engineers, worked on the improvement of the Dyemarker defenses. On 15 January, the Marines at C–3 completed the bunker requirements on schedule. During this period, the Marine patrols encountered few enemy troops. In fact, during the first two or three weeks of the month, the enemy limited his activity to a mining incident on Route 561

on 2 January and to infiltrating the hamlets above the Cam Lo River at night. In these nocturnal visits, Viet Cong guerrillas recruited or kidnapped villagers and demanded food and other supplies. During the first two weeks of January, one Popular Force unit west of the hamlet of An My on three separate occasions ambushed VC troops trying to enter the village, killing at least three of the enemy. By the end of the third week, the 2d Battalion reported, however, “it was clear that there was a large amount of movement in and out of these villages, particularly to the east.” In their patrolling of the hilly brush terrain in the Cam Lo northern area of operations, 2d Battalion Marines by mid-January made contact with more and more North Vietnamese regulars coming down.<sup>49</sup>

To the northeast of the 2d Battalion at C–3 and C–3A, Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Needham’s 3d Battalion, 3d Marines concentrated on finishing the last of the strong points along the “Trace,” A–3, in the 9th Marines sector. In November, Marine engineers, later reinforced by a Seabee battalion, had begun work on the strong point. Designed according to ARVN specifications, A–3 was to consist of 30 18 x 32 foot bunkers, heavily timbered and sandbagged and covered by dirt. These were to sleep up to 18 ARVN troops on three-tiered wooden bunks. By Christmas, the Seabees and engineers had completed the raising of the timbers of the bunkers and departed, “leaving to the infantry the task of finishing the sandbagging.” Up to this point, the Special Landing Force (SLF) Alpha battalion, BLT 1/3, had been attached to the 9th Marines and assigned to the A–3 position. At the end of December, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines with three companies moved from the Cam Lo sector to the A–3 position and relieved the SLF battalion, which was to join the 1st Marines at Quang Tri.<sup>50\*</sup>

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\*General Metzger commented that A–3 was a special situation: “first we had to fight to clear the ground of the enemy. Then as Christmas approached General Westmoreland suggested we withdraw until after Christmas and abandon the positions so there would be no casualties during the holidays.’ We resisted to the maximum, pointing out that the enemy would occupy the position in our absence . . . the casualties in retaking the position would far exceed those which we might sustain in completing the position. In order to avoid abandoning the partially completed position we guaranteed that it would be completed before Christmas. A–3 was given the highest priority. Bunker material was flown in by helicopter and maximum effort was expended which was completed well before Christmas.” Metzger Comments. Colonel Robert C. Needham, who commanded the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines at the time, remembered “the stringing of defensive wire and emplacing AP mines around the perimeter was, for all intents and purposes, completed when 3/3 relieved SLF ‘A’ (1/3) at A–3.” Needham Comments.

Although the Seabees with their heavy equipment had left, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines had much work to do at A-3. The rains had come during December and the only fill for the sandbags was "sticky mud." A-3 still required defensive wire and some 30,000 mines to be laid. The battalion supported by engineers dug four-man fighting holes. Using mechanical ditchdiggers, the Marines and engineers trenched around the entire position. By 12 January, the 3d Battalion had erected an observation tower and nearly completed the entire project. According to Colonel Smith, the A-3 Strong Point "was a model for this sort of installation. This is the only one in the AO that had a plan to begin with. The others 'just grew' under half a dozen different commanders."<sup>51\*</sup>

Although subject to enemy artillery, the 3d Battalion took very few casualties at the A-3 Strong Point because of NVA shelling. The battalion's Company M protecting the American gun positions south of Gio Linh, on the other hand, sustained three killed and two wounded on 9 January as a result of enemy mortar fire. These were more casualties than Lieutenant Colonel Needham's remaining companies suffered at the hands of the enemy for the entire month.<sup>52</sup>

The 3d Battalion, 3d Marines did come under fire from an unexpected source in January. In his monthly chronology, the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Needham, reported: "On 13 separate occasions a total of 54 friendly artillery rounds were received in or near the inner perimeter of A-3 and Hill 28 [just to the north of A-3]." On 5 January, for example, a white phosphorous shell landed inside the 3d Battalion's perimeter. The 9th Marines and the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines investigated the matter which resulted in the relief of the battery commander. Six days later, the battalion was on the receiving end of six 105 rounds within its wire, followed on the 13th by 24 rounds. At the same time, a short round fell on Hill 28 and killed two Marines and wounded six others. Other "friendly fire" incidents occurred on 15 and 19 January. In its monthly report, the artillery battalion, the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, made no mention of the mishaps but remarked, "considerable difficulty was experienced with computer hot lines to the firing batteries due to the unreliability of radio relay." It then contained the statement that staff visits

\*Lieutenant Colonel Otto Lehrack, who commanded a company in the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, wrote that the battalion's operations officer, Major Raymond F. Findlay, "who designed and supervised the system" deserved the credit for A-3. Lehrack Comments.

to liaison officers and forward observers "have resulted in better communications on the conduct of fire nets." Lieutenant Colonel Needham, a former artillery officer himself, remembered several years later that "the situation got top-level attention and quick resolution when I finally told [the 9th Marines] that I refused any further support from the 12th Marines, and prefer no artillery to what I was getting." In his monthly report, he wrote that "corrective action appears to have been initiated and a definite improvement in this regard has been made during the latter part of the month."<sup>53\*\*</sup>

Just north of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Lee R. Bendell's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines screened the approaches to the A-3 Strong Point. On 26-27 December, Bendell's battalion deployed from C-2 and relieved the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines on Hill 28, a slight rise about 600 meters north of A-3 and just forward of the trace. Bendell expanded his battalion's perimeter and moved his companies off the top of the hill to new positions lower down. Marine engineers bulldozed the growth and trees immediately to the west, which provided the battalion better observation of the surrounding terrain and improved fields of fire. Low rolling hills with secondary scrub and thick brush, broken by flat, wet rice paddies of 75 to 150 meters, lay to the north and east. Wide rice paddies also were interspersed with the woods to the west. To the south, the Marines had a clear line of sight to the A-3 Strong Point and the trace which marked the battalion's southern boundary. The northern boundary extended to the southern edge of the Demilitarized Zone, less than 1,000 meters from Hill 28.<sup>54</sup>

Close to the DMZ and with elements of the 90th NVA Regiment believed to be in his sector, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell insisted on alertness. He deployed his battalion into a three-company perimeter, leaving one company in reserve. Bendell used the reserve company for night ambushes and listening posts (LP) and as a reaction force during the day. According to the battalion commander, he maintained four to six ambushes

\*\*Colonel Needham observed in his comments that it was obvious to him "that the friendly fire we received was due to basic breakdowns at the firing battery/FDC [fire direction center] levels." Needham Comments. Lieutenant General Louis Metzger believed that the problem was that the main division headquarters was still at Phu Bai in early January 1968 and the "need for fire control elements was at Dong Ha." He believed the situation was alleviated when the division later in the month moved the main headquarters elements to Dong Ha. Metzger Comments.



Photo courtesy of Col Robert C. Needham, USMC (Ret)

*Col Richard B. Smith, second from left, the 9th Marines commander, is seen visiting Strongpoint A-3 in January 1968 and in conversation with LtCol Robert C. Needham, to the right of Col Smith, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines commander, and two of his officers: Maj Raymond F. Findlay, Jr., the 3d Battalion operations officer, is to the left of Col Smith, and Captain Robert R. Beers, the commander of Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, is to the right of LtCol Needham.*

and LPs on any particular night. During the day, the battalion patrolled constantly, with as many as two companies out at a time.

Lieutenant Colonel Bendell reinforced the infantry companies with four 106mm recoilless rifles, two .50-caliber machine guns, and six of the battalion's 81mm mortars. He had left the two remaining mortars back in the base camp so that the extra men from the 81mm mortar platoon could "... hump... additional ammo, if we had to move out."<sup>55</sup> The 2d Battalion, 12th Marines provided direct artillery support and the 1st MAW, close air support.

The "Thundering Third," as the battalion called itself, was no stranger to the DMZ war. It had been at Con Thien in July through early September 1967 during some of the heaviest fighting and bombardment around that strong point. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, who had assumed command that July, remembered that the battalion "had actively patrolled the surrounding area" that summer and helped establish strong points at C-2, C-3, Cam Lo Bridge, and the "Washout," and also deployed a detachment to Gio Linh.<sup>56</sup>

Soon after the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines arrived on Hill 28, it again found itself engaged with the enemy. On the morning of 30 December, Company M, commanded by Captain Raymond W. Kalm, Jr., on patrol to the southwest of the battalion perimeter came across six empty NVA bunkers facing east, about 2,000 meters from Hill 28. After destroying the enemy bunkers, the company advanced toward the northwest. About 1330 that afternoon near a small stream about 1,500 meters west of Hill 28, the Marines ran into an enemy rear guard of about 4 to 10 men. In the resulting exchange of fire, Company M sustained casualties of one killed and four wounded. Captain Kalm called in artillery and 81mm mortar missions. After the skirmish the Marines found the body of one North Vietnamese soldier.<sup>57</sup>

On the following morning, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell sent out Captain John L. Prichard's Company I into roughly the same area that Company M had met the NVA. Prichard's company moved out from Hill 28 in platoon columns. As Bendell explained, this formation discouraged the troops from stringing



Photo courtesy of Col John D. Carr, USMC (Ret)

*LtCol Lee R. Bendell, the commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, center, poses with the company commanders of the "Thundering Third." From left are Capt John L. Prichard (Company I), Capt John D. Carr (Company L), Bendell, Capt Raymond W. Kalm, Jr. (Company M), and Capt Edward O. Leroy (Company K)*

out and permitted the company commander "to deploy fire power immediately to the front." Following a trail near the destroyed village of Xuan Hai where the DMZ boundary made a northward hump on the map, 1,800 meters northwest of Hill 28, Prichard's point, Staff Sergeant C. L. Colley, spotted four to five North Vietnamese troops to his front. The company commander ordered two platoons forward to a slight rise in the ground and brought his third platoon in behind the CP (command post) group to protect the rear. In the initial exchange, the North Vietnamese had the advantage, but the Marine company soon had the upper hand. Moving rapidly back and forth across the Marine line, Prichard and his officers and NCOs rallied their troops and "India Company rather shortly gained fire superiority."<sup>58</sup>

At that point, around noon, the Marines observed a second group of NVA maneuvering to reinforce the

first. The company brought the reinforcements under 60mm mortar and small-arms fire and forced the enemy to lie low. A half-hour later, the Marines, themselves, came under heavy enemy 82mm-mortar bombardment from their right flank, generally to the northeast. By this time, it was apparent that the enemy was in "strong bunkered positions all across the front and right front of India Company."<sup>59</sup>

Despite marginal flying conditions because of 500- to 1,000-foot cloud ceilings and reduced visibility, an aerial observer (AO) arrived over the scene. Giving his call sign "Smitty Tango," the AO made radio contact with Prichard and adjusted the company's 60mm counter-mortar fire. The Marine mortars knocked out one of the enemy tubes and "caused the others to cease fire." With this success to his credit, the AO pulled off and the company called in an artillery mission, hitting the enemy positions with mixed caliber rounds. The Marine shelling "threw [NVA] bodies in the air as

India [Company I] walked 155mm [fire] towards friendly lines."<sup>60</sup>

The Marine company sustained four wounded and had begun to take fire from its right front. One of the wounded was one of the company's snipers who had moved too far forward and lay exposed to enemy fire. A corpsman attempted to rescue the man, but was hit himself and forced to turn back. With his gunnery sergeant laying down a base of fire, Captain Prichard rushed forward and carried back the seriously wounded Marine to the company positions. A Marine helicopter from HMM-163, in a medical evacuation (MedEvac) mission, flew the wounded out from an improvised landing zone just to the company's rear in a defilade area.<sup>61</sup>

Although the enemy attempted to jam the Marine radio net, "Smitty Tango" remained in communication with Captain Prichard and Second Lieutenant Albert B. Doyle, the company's attached forward artillery observer. At 1350, the AO checked the artillery fire and called in two Marine "Huey" (Bell UH-1E helicopter) gunships from Marine Observation Squadron (VMO) 6 that had covered the landing of the evacuation helicopter. The gunships made several passes at the enemy mortar positions in open bomb craters near the Marine positions. When the air arrived, several NVA soldiers "actually [were] standing up in their holes, only a 100 to 150 meters away from India Company and firing both at the AO and the aircraft as they conducted strikes upon them." As the lead Huey, piloted by Major Curtis D. McRaney, came in on its first run, its guns jammed. According to McRaney's copilot, Major David L. Steele, "one of the NVA must have noticed this because he stepped out of his hole and began firing at us with his automatic weapon on our next pass." This was a mistake. As Steele observed, "on successive passes . . . we were able to cover the crater area with rockets and machine gun fire, killing most of the enemy." The AO reported that he saw the North Vietnamese "dragging eight bodies into a tunnel."<sup>62</sup>

After the air strikes, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, who had been monitoring the radio traffic, decided to pull India Company back to Hill 28. By this time, the North Vietnamese had brought up further reinforcements and Bendell believed, "There was no need to assault the [NVA] position." According to Bendell, Marine supporting arms, both artillery and gunships, would have "a real desired effect upon the enemy . . ."<sup>63</sup>

As Company I broke contact and started to withdraw, the troops saw a large NVA unit, apparently

dressed in Marine uniforms,\* closing in. The Huey gunships then laid down extensive covering fire and then the artillery took over. By 1530, the company had returned to Hill 28. Colonel Smith, the 9th Marines commander, personally greeted "the men of the Hungry I" with a deserved "well done." The company, while sustaining casualties of only four wounded, had accounted for 27 enemy dead, not including the eight NVA taken out by the helicopters, or the unknown number of enemy killed by the artillery. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell recommended Captain Prichard for the Navy Cross; he received the Silver Star.<sup>64</sup>

For the next few days, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines had a relatively uneventful time in their forward position. In the early morning hours of 6 January, however, a listening post heard movement just outside the battalion's perimeter. The Marines opened fire with both small arms and M79 grenade launchers. One of the defenders saw something fall, but an attempt to check the area drew enemy fire. In daylight hours, the Marines found no evidence of any enemy bodies. It was apparent to the battalion, however, that its quiet period was over.<sup>65</sup>

On the following day, 7 January, the Marines on Hill 28 began to take sniper rounds from an enemy-held ridgeline about 800 meters to their front and situated just to the south of the DMZ boundary. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell ordered Captain John D. Carr, the commanding officer of Company L, to flush out the sniper who had already wounded one Marine. Carr sent out that morning two six-man teams from his 1st Platoon. The two teams approached the enemy-held ridge from both flanks and then linked up into a squad-size patrol. As the squad moved over the ridgeline, enemy AK-47s and machine guns opened up. Positioned in well-entrenched defenses dug out of the numerous American-made bomb craters pocketing the side of the ridge, the NVA gunners killed one Marine and wounded another. Unable to advance or withdraw, the Marines took what cover they could and returned the fire. In radio contact with the squad and aware of its plight, Captain Carr ordered the remainder of the 1st Platoon to reinforce the entrapped Marines.

\*Major Gary E. Todd, a former 3d Marine Division intelligence officer, wrote that he doubted that the NVA were dressed in Marine uniforms: "there were several instances when Marines mistook NVA for other Marines, due to the similarity of uniforms. They [the NVA] wore utilities of almost the identical color to ours, and often wore Russian-style steel helmets, frequently with a camouflage net . . . We, of course, had cloth camouflage covers on our helmets. . . . From a distance . . . the helmets were hard to distinguish." Todd Comments.

Although the platoon reached the embattled squad about 1530 that afternoon, it too found itself in an untenable position. The North Vietnamese had good clear fields of fire and also had brought up reinforcements. Employing M79 grenade launchers, hand grenades, and rifles, the 1st Platoon fought off the NVA and called for further assistance.<sup>66</sup>

Captain Carr then led the rest of Company L to the base of the ridge and flanked the enemy positions. Although unable to link up with its 1st Platoon on the forward slope, the company laid down a base of fire and Carr called in artillery to prevent the enemy from making any further reinforcements. Despite a slight drizzle and a low-lying cloud cover, the company commander made radio contact with an aerial observer who was able to adjust the supporting arms including the company's 60mm mortars. With the increased fire support, the 1st Platoon managed to hold out but with evening fast approaching the situation remained serious.<sup>67</sup>

At this point, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell ordered Captain Carr to have the 1st Platoon "to break contact and pull back across the ridgeline." To cover the platoon's withdrawal, the aerial observer called in air strikes and artillery within 100 meters of the Marines. The battalion commander also deployed two platoons of Company K to high ground about 1,000 meters west of Company L. Despite these protective measures, the enemy took a heavy toll of the Marines of the 1st Platoon as they disengaged and rejoined the rest of the company. Since its first elements made contact with the enemy, Company L sustained casualties of 6 dead and 36 wounded, 28 of whom required evacuation. Captain Carr asked for a MedEvac helicopter to take out the worst of the wounded.<sup>68</sup>

As the Marines waited, a CH-46D Boeing Vertol "Sea Knight" helicopter from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 164 (HMM-164), piloted by Captain Richard G. Sousa, took off from Phu Bai to carry out the evacuation mission. Because of the rain and heavy winds, Sousa flew low to the ground. As the helicopter approached the improvised landing zone, the Company L Marines fired illumination flares to guide the pilot "out of the darkness." Tracers from NVA machine guns made the situation literally "touch and go." After the aircraft landed, the enlisted crewmen immediately jumped out and helped the infantry load their casualties on board. The helicopter then lifted off, still under fire and unable to use its M60 machine guns because the North Vietnamese were too close to the Marine company.<sup>69</sup>

With the safe evacuation of most of its wounded and under cover of supporting arms, Company L made its way to Company K's forward positions without taking any further casualties. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell explained that he had placed Company K's two platoons on the high ground for psychological reasons as much as for tactical: "If you can pass through friendly lines when you are half-way back, it's a big morale boost to the troops, and also covers the rear of the force returning to the battalion perimeter." On the whole, Bendell praised Carr's handling of a difficult situation: "We committed early, the company commander made good time up there, and was able effectively to employ his supporting arms." Otherwise, the battalion commander believed "this one platoon would have been cut off and destroyed." As it was, in the confusion of the evacuation of the dead and wounded, the Marine company left a body of a 1st Platoon Marine on the ridgeline.<sup>70</sup>

On the following day, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell sent Company L out to recover the missing Marine. Bendell ordered Captain Carr to delay the mission until noon because of the continuing rain and low ceiling. The battalion commander wanted an aerial observer overhead to cover the Marine company. As Company L advanced toward its previous day's position, the AO spotted the body of the Marine and about 12 NVA in the vicinity. The North Vietnamese had dragged the dead man into the DMZ. Believing "that the body was being used as a bait for a trap," Bendell recalled the Marine company to Hill 28 and then saturated the area with artillery and air.<sup>71</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Bendell then decided upon a new tactic. He and his staff worked out plans for a three-company operation, supported by air and artillery, into the Demilitarized Zone to bring back the body. Instead of approaching the objective straight on, the battalion would leave one company in blocking positions on high ground northwest of Hill 28, south of the DMZ. The other two companies were first to move northeast, then wheel due north into the DMZ, and then advance in a southwesterly direction, coming upon the enemy from the rear and the flanks.<sup>72</sup>

After a preliminary artillery bombardment and ground-controlled TPQ radar air strikes all along the eastern DMZ front so as not to give away the route of march, at 0500 on 11 January, the battalion moved out as Lieutenant Colonel Bendell remembered, "with strict radio silence."<sup>73</sup> As planned, Captain Carr's Company L occupied the ridgeline to the northwest. Under the cover of darkness and fog, the two attack

companies, Companies K and M, with Company K in the lead, and Bendell's command group sandwiched between the two companies, advanced in a northeasterly direction toward the DMZ. After about 1500 meters, the battalion veered north and penetrated 500 meters into the southern half of the Demilitarized Zone. Once in the DMZ, according to plan, the two companies swung in a southwesterly direction along parallel paths, separated by a fallow rice paddy. Company M, with the battalion command group, remained still somewhat behind Company K, protecting both the battalion rear and left flank. With the lifting of the morning haze about 0900, the first of a trio of 3d Marine Division aerial observers arrived overhead. At about the same time, Captain Edward O. Leroy's Company K came across the first of several NVA bunkers near the abandoned and largely destroyed village of An Xa. Employing both artillery and air support, the company easily overcame scattered enemy resistance. At one point, Captain Kalm, the Company M commander, saw what appeared to be, at first blush, three bushes, but turned out to be well-camouflaged NVA soldiers, maneuvering to the rear of his company column. He directed machine gun fire in that direction "and then started calling artillery fire and the three bushes were seen to disappear over the hill to our rear."<sup>74</sup>

For the next three hours, the two Marine companies remained in the DMZ. In and around An Xa, Company K blew up some 25 bunkers and captured about 10 weapons including one machine gun, a rocket-propelled grenade launcher (RPG), and several AK-47s and other rifles. The Marines also confiscated or destroyed cooking utensils, pieces of uniform and equipment, food, and documents that identified the North Vietnamese unit in the sector as the *2d Company, 7th Battalion, 90th NVA Regiment*. In their haste, the NVA troops left cooked rice still in the pot and still warm. Further to the south, Company M protected Company K's exposed southern flank and recovered without incident the body of the missing Marine from Company L. By afternoon on the 11th, both companies had passed through Company L's blocking positions and returned to the battalion CP on Hill 28. The Marines sustained only two casualties, both wounded, and only one of whom had to be evacuated. According to Marine accounts, they killed at least 15 NVA and probably inflicted more casualties with artillery and air.<sup>75</sup>

According to Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, by "achieving surprise . . . moving during darkness," he

and his operations officer, Major Richard K. Young, believed the sweep of the southern DMZ was a successful demonstration of coordination between the infantry on the ground and supporting arms. On two occasions, the aerial observers called in air strikes on NVA troops in the open attempting to flank the Marine companies. Young, who stayed behind at the battalion combat operations center (COC) on Hill 28, later stated: ". . . we were able to have artillery on 30 seconds before air got there and then we could run air strikes and then turn on the artillery . . . [we] had some type of fire on the enemy almost the entire duration of the operation." The operations officer remembered: "Several times when artillery wasn't getting there fast enough, the company commander would jump on the battalion tac [tactical radio net] and get in touch with myself back at the COC." Young would then "get 81mm fire out there to fill the void in artillery or get with my artillery liaison officer or my forward air controller and get this continuous fire while the troops were advancing along the bunker complex." Shortly after the return of the battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell briefed the 3d Marine Division staff and the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., who was on a visit to Vietnam, at the Dong Ha headquarters on the successful completion of the operation.<sup>76</sup>

With the termination of the DMZ sweep, the sojourn of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines on Hill 28 was about over. The completion of the A-3 Strong Point reduced the need for a forward battalion to protect the approaches. On 12 January, Bendell's battalion began its move to a new position along the trace near the abandoned village of An Phu and closer to Con Thien.\* For the 9th Marines in Operation Kentucky, the strongpoint system was about as complete as it was ever going to be. Still, as Lieutenant Colonel Bendell several years later observed: "there was evidence of an NVA build up throughout the DMZ sector."<sup>77</sup>

#### *Operation Lancaster and Heavy Fighting in Mid-January*

By mid-January, the North Vietnamese began to intensify their efforts to cut Route 9 especially along

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\* Lieutenant Colonel Lehrack who was with the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines at this time noted that even with the reduced need for a forward battalion and after the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines departed Hill 28, his battalion placed two companies on the hill and kept them there for several months. Lehrack Comments.



Top photo courtesy of Col Gorton C. Cook, USMC (Ret) and bottom is from the 12th Mar ComdC, Dec68. *Route 9 is seen looking south from a Marine outpost located on the northern end of the Rockpile, top, and an aerial photograph shows the Marine base at Ca Lu, bottom. In January 1968, Ca Lu for the Marines was the western terminus of Route 9 since the road was cut between there and the Marine base at Khe Sanh. LtCol Gorton C. Cook's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines manned both the Rockpile and Ca Lu posts.*



the tenuous supply route to Ca Lu. Since November 1967, Colonel Joseph E. Lo Prete's 3d Marines had conducted Operation Lancaster protecting the western flank of the 9th Marines in Kentucky. The Lancaster area of operations contained the key Marine bases of Camp Carroll, an important artillery position, the Rockpile, and Ca Lu. The Rockpile, a 700-foot sheer cliff outcropping, dominated the nearby terrain. Perched on its top, Marine observers had a clear view of the most likely approaches into the Cam Lo River Valley and of Route 9, the two most strategic east-west arteries in the DMZ sector. About 12,000 meters below the Rockpile and part of the Dyemarker system was Ca Lu, in effect the southern terminal of Route 9 since the North Vietnamese had effectively cut the road between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh, about 20,000 meters to the west. An obvious way station for any relief effort of Khe Sanh, Ca Lu, at the junction of the Quang Tri River and Route 9, also provided the Marines an outpost to warn of enemy infiltration into the Lancaster area from the west, southwest, and from the Ba Long Valley to the southeast. Similar to much of the terrain in the DMZ area, the Lancaster area of operations consisted of rolling hills rising into jungle-covered mountains of 700–800 feet with tree canopies reaching up to heights of 20 to 60 feet. Fifteen-foot elephant grass and dense brush vegetation restricted movement even in the relatively low regions.

Like Colonel Smith and the 9th Marines, Colonel Lo Prete was tied to his base areas. With only two infantry battalions, and one of those battalions having only two companies, the 3d Marines commander had to make do with limited resources and manpower. Lo Prete maintained his command post at Camp Carroll which was also the home for Lieutenant Colonel William M. Cryan's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. Cryan with only his Companies E and H under his operational control kept Company H at Carroll and positioned Company E about 3,000 meters southeast of Camp Carroll where it protected a main supply route. Lo Prete assigned his other battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Gorton C. Cook's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, the responsibility for the defense of both Ca Lu and the Rockpile area. Cook and three of his companies remained in the Thon Son Lam sector just below the Rockpile while he placed his Company L at Ca Lu. An article in the battalion newsletter at the time noted that the sector was "pretty quiet now except for some sporadic ambushes between here and our company-sized outpost at Ca Lu."<sup>78</sup>

Artillery and tanks reinforced the infantry in Lancaster. Three 105mm howitzer batteries and one 155mm howitzer battery all under the 1st Battalion, 12th Marines at Carroll provided direct support to the infantry battalions. An ad hoc battery of mixed caliber guns, Battery W, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines, was with Company L at Ca Lu. Company B, 3d Tank Battalion maintained two platoons of M48 medium gun tanks and one heavy section of M67A2 flame tanks at Carroll. For the most part, the tanks bolstered the defenses at Camp Carroll and furnished protection for road convoys to Ca Lu. An attached U.S. Army artillery unit, Battery C, 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery (Automatic Weapons, Self Propelled) also augmented the Marine fire power. The Army M42s or "dusters" armed with twin 40mm antiaircraft guns employed as machine guns gave added protection to Marine convoys and to the Marine fixed defenses.<sup>79</sup>

The Marines worried most about their relatively exposed position at Ca Lu. There, the isolated garrison numbered about 625 Army, Navy, and Marine personnel including the Marine infantry company. Navy Seabees and Marine engineers had nearly completed the permanent facilities required for the Dyemarker project. While not directly attacking the Marine outpost, the North Vietnamese had mined Route 9 occasionally in December and ambushed one Marine convoy on a return trip from Ca Lu to the Rockpile. Despite a relative lull during the first two weeks of January, Marine intelligence indicated that North Vietnamese forces were on the move.<sup>80</sup>

A division "Stingray" reconnaissance team operating in the general area of the Ca Lu base soon confirmed the presence of enemy troops in the general area.\* On 12 January, about 1415 in the afternoon, Reconnaissance Team 2C3, using the codename "Blue Plate" and operating in the mountains about 4,000 meters southwest of Ca Lu below the Quang Tri River, radioed back that it was being followed by five NVA "wearing black pjs and carrying automatic weapons." The "Blue Plate" Marines fired upon the enemy but missed. For a time all was quiet and the Marines continued upon their way. About two hours later, the Marines came back on the air to report that they were surrounded by about 30 North Vietnamese troops armed with AK-47s. Marine gunships appeared overhead and provided covering fire while

\*Stingray patrols usually consisted of a small Marine reconnaissance unit, usually squad-size, which called artillery and air on targets of opportunity.

another helicopter extracted the Marine team. The reconnaissance Marines sustained only one casualty, one wounded man.<sup>81</sup>

The incident on the 12th was only a harbinger of what was to come. On the following day, the North Vietnamese sprang an ambush on an engineer convoy bringing Dyemarker supplies and equipment to Ca Lu. Under an overcast sky and a slight drizzle, about 1120 on the morning of the 13th, the 20-vehicle convoy departed the Rockpile area. Marine artillery had already fired 15-minute preparation fires at suspected ambush sites. With two tanks in the lead, the convoy consisted of 10 six by six trucks interspersed with two more tanks in the center of the column, four "low boy" tractor trailers, and two of the Army "dusters" bringing up the rear. The vehicles carried about 200 men including engineers, drivers, the M42 crews, support personnel, and Company I, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines.<sup>82</sup>

About 1150, approximately 3,000 meters above the Ca Lu, enemy gunners took the convoy under fire with rocket-propelled grenades, small-arms fire, and mortars. At the same time, the NVA ambushers detonated a command mine which set two trucks on fire, one a "low boy" and the other carrying 81mm mortar ammunition. The truck with the mortars exploded which forced the rear section of the convoy to come to a complete halt. The infantry from Company I hastily dismounted from their trucks to engage the enemy, only for many of the troops to trigger several "surprise firing devices" and mines skillfully hidden along both sides of the road.

Lieutenant Colonel Cook recalled several years later that before the convoy had started out he and his sergeant major had moved to an outpost on a hill top just west of Route 9. From there, he remained in radio contact with both his command post and the convoy and could observe the vehicles as they moved south toward Ca Lu. When he saw the convoy stopped after the initial burst of fire, he directed "the lead element to continue on to Ca Lu and return with reinforcements." He then joined the stalled troops. According to Cook, from the site of the ambush, he "called and directed artillery fire through his COC [Combat Operations Center] on enemy escape and reinforcing routes both east and west of Route 9."

In the meantime, Company L, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines boarded at Ca Lu the lead trucks to relieve the embattled column. At the ambush site, about 1215, an aerial observer using the call sign "American Beauty" arrived overhead to assist in calling in supporting fires.

The leaden skies precluded the use of Marine fixed-wing jets, but two helicopter gunships strafed the enemy firing positions. Marine artillery fired over 700 rounds including 54 155mm howitzer shells in support of the convoy after the initial contact.

With the arrival of Company L and the continuing artillery bombardment, the Marines disengaged under occasional enemy sniper fire and completed the trip to Ca Lu, arriving there about 1510. The convoy made the return trip to the Rockpile area late that afternoon without incident. The costs, however, had been high. American dead and wounded totaled 19 killed and over 70 wounded. Most of the casualties were sustained by Company I in the first moments of the ambush. The Marines accounted for 10 enemy dead and captured one prisoner. Marine intelligence officers estimated that a North Vietnamese company participated in the attack.\*

For a time after the ambush, the 3d Marines' attention shifted once more to the north and east in that area between Camp Carroll and the Rockpile above Route 9. Shortly after 0800 on the morning of 16 January, a 3d Reconnaissance Battalion "Stingray" team there found itself surrounded by about 40 North Vietnamese on high ground about 2,000 meters north of the Cam Lo River. According to the team, the enemy were obviously NVA regulars, wearing green utilities and helmets impressed with a yellow lightning bolt design, and armed with AK-47 rifles and two machine guns. The 3d Marines immediately sent a reaction platoon from Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines to assist the encircled team. Lifted into a helicopter landing zone about a 1,000 meters east of the reconnaissance team, the 2d Battalion reaction platoon came under machine gun fire. The platoon returned the fire and called in air and artillery. After the artillery and air strike silenced the enemy guns, the infantry platoon joined up with the reconnaissance team. By this time, the North Vietnamese troops had disappeared, leaving six dead behind. At 1340 that afternoon, Marine helicopters

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\*Colonel Robert C. Needham commented that this ambush was very similar to one that 3/3 had run into in the same area in August and September 1967. Needham Comments. A survivor of the ambush who visited Vietnam in 1994 wrote in a veteran's newsletter that on the road to Ca Lu he reached "the 13 January 1968 ambush site . . . In my mind's eye I could see the first cloud of black smoke [when] the ambush was sprung, and I smelled the odor of gunpowder in the air." Before leaving, he and his companion planted some flowers in memory of the men killed there. Phil Quinones, "Vietnam—Tour '94," *Comwire, Vietnam*, Oct 1994, v. 4, No. 1, pp. 3-4, Encl to Todd Comments.

extracted both groups of Marines to Camp Carroll. The units sustained one Navy corpsman killed and four Marines wounded. It was obvious that the enemy was becoming much more aggressive all along Route 9 and the DMZ in general.<sup>83</sup>

After a few brief quiet days, the DMZ war in the western Kentucky sector also flared up. After leaving Hill 28 and uncovering an enemy base area, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines took up its new positions at An Dinh between A-3 and Con Thien to investigate recent probes at the latter base. The battalion immediately began patrolling its area of operations. On the 17th, Bendell planned to send out a two-company patrol the next morning near an abandoned hamlet just north of the trace about two miles northeast of Con Thien. Company M was to be the blocking force while Company L was to be the sweeping force.<sup>84</sup>

The evening of the 17th, Captain John D. Carr, the Company L commander, held a meeting of his platoon commanders. Second Lieutenant Kenneth L. Christy, who headed the 3d Platoon, remembered that Carr briefed them on the next day's planned patrol. According to Christy, he noticed that the route of advance "took us through a bombed out ville that we all referred to as the 'Meat Market,'" because it was "Charlies' area—and almost everytime we went there either us or them, somebody got hammered." Christy's platoon had run a patrol in that area very recently, but there had been "no sign of Charlie or Charlie decided not to engage." Captain Carr assigned the point position to his 1st Platoon. Lieutenant Christy argued ("to the degree that a second lieutenant argues with a captain") that his platoon knew the area and should have the point. Captain Carr, however, stated that the 3d Platoon needed a break and he wanted to give one of the other platoons the point experience.<sup>85</sup>

As planned, with the 1st Platoon on point, followed by the 2d Platoon with the command group, and the 3d Platoon bringing up the rear, Company L departed the battalion lines at An Dien in pre-dawn darkness. Suddenly the NVA about 0945 from well-camouflaged bunkers and spider holes near the "Meat Market" sprang their ambush on the Marine company. The 1st Platoon on the point engaged what it thought was a NVA platoon only to find itself divided into separate groups, with the forward element cut off from the rest of the company. Captain Carr brought up the 2d Platoon and his command group and joined the rear element of the 1st Platoon, in a large B-52 bomb crater.<sup>86</sup>

In the company rear, Lieutenant Christy recalled that when the ambush occurred, "it sounded like a few sporadic gun shots and then all hell broke loose." The men of his platoon hit the ground "facing outward as we usually did." Christy took cover in a 105mm shell crater with his platoon sergeant and radio man. At that point, Captain Carr ordered the 3d Platoon commander to join him, about 180 meters to the platoon's front. Under heavy automatic fire, the 3d Platoon joined Carr in a series of rushes taking shelter in shell and bomb craters along the way. Miraculously, the platoon had made the dash without sustaining any casualties. According to Christy, "we closed off the backside of what was the company perimeter."<sup>87</sup>

As Company L more or less consolidated its position, the North Vietnamese continued to direct automatic weapons fire from all sides, mortars, and even large caliber artillery upon the embattled Marines. More urgently, the enemy was using the cutoff squad-size remnant of the 1st Platoon, about 100 meters in front of the rest of the company, as "bait" in a "NVA killing zone." Lieutenant Christy remembered Captain Carr told him that there were "dead and wounded up front and needed 3d Plat [platoon] to go up there and collect them up so we could get the wounded and dead med-evaced and the hell out of the area."<sup>88</sup>

By this time, the North Vietnamese fires had somewhat diminished. Captain Carr and a forward artillery observer who was with the cutoff troops, Sergeant Michael J. Madden, called in supporting U.S. artillery. Sergeant Madden also made radio contact with an air observer in a Huey who brought in helicopter gunships to keep the enemy at bay. Under this protective cover, Lieutenant Christy took one of his squads and joined by Captain Carr reached the 1st Platoon group. Christy then deployed his men and crawled forward to another crater where Sergeant Madden, although wounded, was still calling in artillery strikes. There were four other wounded men with Madden. Christy remembered Captain Carr covering him with a shotgun while he went forward again to reach some Marine bodies, including that of the 1st Platoon commander, some 50 meters to the front. With the supporting artillery fires, the 3d Platoon squad brought back the wounded and dead of the 1st Platoon. According to Lieutenant Christy, he admonished some of his men for being too gentle and that the bodies were not going to be hurt: "Lets get these people policed up and get out of here before Charlie starts firing us up again."<sup>89</sup>

In the meanwhile, upon hearing of the Company L predicament, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, the battal-

ion commander, replaced Company M with another unit in the blocking position and then with a skeleton command group accompanied Company M to relieve Company L. After the linkup, the two companies overran at least three enemy mortar positions and several machine guns and individual fighting holes. With continuing helicopter gunship support and covering artillery, Marine helicopters evacuated the most seriously wounded. The two companies then "crossed the trace in good order," late that afternoon carrying their remaining casualties. In the action, the two companies sustained casualties of 9 dead and 22 wounded including Captain Carr who was evacuated by helicopter. According to the 9th Marines, the enemy sustained over 100 casualties.<sup>90\*</sup>

By 20 January, a new phase of the war was about to begin. Colonel Lo Prete and his 3d Marines staff were about to close out the Lancaster operation and

take over the Osceola area in the Quang Tri sector from the 1st Marines. The 1st Marines in turn was to relieve the 4th Marines in the Camp Evans sector. Colonel William Dick, the 4th Marines commander, was then to assume control of the units in Lancaster. For the most part, this phase of Operation Checkers was a case of regimental musical chairs and had little effect on the battalions in the various sectors. Both the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines and the two companies of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines were to remain in Lancaster, now called Operation Lancaster II.

According to the usual body-count measurements of the war, the 3d Marines in Operation Lancaster I accounted for 46 enemy dead at a cost of 22 Marines killed and 140 wounded. In comparison, during the same period, the 9th Marines in Operation Kentucky sustained 90 dead and over 800 wounded while killing nearly 700 of the enemy. Still the indications were that the North Vietnamese were raising the ante throughout the DMZ sector including Khe Sanh. Near the coast, on 20 January, enemy gunners fired at two Navy craft on the Cua Viet River forcing the Naval Support Activity, Cua Viet temporarily to close that important waterway, the main supply channel to the Marine base at Dong Ha. At the same time, the 3d Marines observed that a large enemy force, probably the *29th NVA Regiment* had moved into the area north of the Quang Tri River and west of Ca Lu. Just as significant, another regiment had replaced the *90th NVA Regiment* in the Lancaster northern area of operations. The *90th NVA* had then shifted to the southwest and had possibly entered the "Scotland" or Khe Sanh area of operations. Perhaps the big enemy offensive in the north was about to begin.<sup>91</sup>

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\*For this action on the 18th, Captain John Carr, the Company L Commander, was awarded the Silver Star and Purple Heart; Captain Raymond W. Kalm, Jr., the Company M commander, received the Bronze Star with V; Sergeant Michael J. Madden also received the Bronze Star with V; and one of the helicopter pilots received the Distinguished Flying Cross. On 25 March 1994 at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, Colonel Kenneth L. Christy, Jr., was awarded the Navy Cross for his heroism on 18 January 1968, more than 26 years after the event. Sergeant Madden, who credited Christy for saving his life and the others with him, had submitted an award recommendation. Somehow the paperwork got lost and Madden in 1988 was surprised to learn that Christy had not received any medal for his actions that day. Madden then launched a one-man successful campaign to rectify the situation. The Navy Cross is second only to the Medal of Honor in awards for heroism in the Marine Corps. Bendell Comments; Col Kenneth L. Christy, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 8Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File); Colonel Kenneth L. Christy, Jr., Biographical File, Reference Sec, MCHC.

## CHAPTER 4

# Khe Sanh: Building Up

*The Battlefield—The Early Days—Protecting the Investment—The Isolation of Khe Sanh  
The Decision to Hold—The Stage is Set—Sortie to Hill 881 North—The Enemy Plan Unfolds*

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### *The Battlefield*

The village of Khe Sanh, composed of nine hamlets and also the capital of Huong Hoa District, once sat astride National Route 9 in the extreme north-western corner of South Vietnam. According to a census, 10,195 civilians lived in the district, mostly clustered within four miles of the village.\* Khe Sanh controlled road movement from nearby Laos into northern Quang Tri Province and was the terminus of a number of trail networks which crossed the Laotian border further to the north and wound their way through the valleys and along the rivers to intersect the highway in the vicinity of the village. National Route 9 was actually little more than a wide trail in places, yet it was a key feature of the area because it provided a means of movement between nearby Laos and the coastal region. Between Khe Sanh and Dong Ha, Route 9 ran for 63 kilometers, crossing 36 crumbling old bridges along the way. Most of them, relics of the French colonial era, could be bypassed and often were, due to their deteriorated condition.<sup>1</sup>

The terrain of the Huong Hoa District is characterized by steep, jungle-covered mountains separated by plunging valleys. Mountain peaks tower over the hamlets along Route 9, rising from 200 meters to 600 meters above the elevation of the highway. Streams flow through many of the valleys, emptying into one of two rivers. The Song Rao Quan drains the region to the north, flowing southeast to join other rivers which continue to the sea. West of Khe Sanh, the Xe Pon, or Tchepone, flows east across the Laotian panhandle to a point 15 kilometers from the village, where it turns south forming a part of the international border between South Vietnam and Laos.

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\* Former Navy chaplain Ray W. Stubbe, a noted authority on Khe Sanh and its environs, observed that this census did not include the approximately 12,000 Montagnard tribesmen who lived in "some half dozen villes" in the immediate Khe Sanh area. LCdr Ray W. Stubbe, ChC, USN, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 23Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Stubbe Comments.

There are two types of rain forest in the area. The primary growth is found at higher elevations where some trees reach 90 feet in height, forming a canopy beneath which other trees, some up to 60 feet high, form a second canopy. The dense canopies reduce the light at ground level to the point that growth there is limited to seedlings, flowers, and climbing plants. Because of the sparse ground cover, the jungle can be penetrated on foot with little difficulty.<sup>2</sup>

The secondary rain forest is located at lower elevations where the ground has first been cleared, then later left for the jungle to reclaim. Here, the trees are smaller, allowing more light to penetrate to ground level. The resulting thick growth of bamboo, elephant grass, and climbing plants limits foot travel considerably.<sup>3</sup>

The weather in the region varies through the course of a year. It is warm in the summer, although cooler than at the lower elevations near the coast, while in the winter, it is sometimes oppressively cold and damp. Annual rainfall exceeding 80 inches, much of it occurring during the winter monsoon, feeds the rain forests and contributes to the discomfort caused by the cold temperatures. A thick, milk-colored fog known in Indochina as *crachin*\*\* occurs frequently in the winter months, reducing visibility considerably.

During the war, a Montagnard tribe, the Bru, lived near Khe Sanh, although the people in the village

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\*\*A weather condition which occurs in the highland regions of Southeast Asia for periods of three to five days at a time between October and April. It is described as: "A persistent low-level stratus phenomenon accompanied by prolonged precipitations which greatly affects military operations. Clouds are generally 3,000 to 5,000 feet thick with ceiling under 1,000 feet and frequently below 500 feet. Visibility is . . . generally below 2 miles and frequently below 1/2 mile." Asst Chief of Staff, G-2, memo to Asst Chief of Staff, G-3, dtd 4Jul67, Subj: Planning Conference, in 3d MarDiv ComdC, Jul67. Colonel Frederic S. Knight, who served as the 3d Marine Division G-2 or intelligence officer in 1968, noted that the word comes from the French verb, *cracher*, which means to spit: "A friend said the true meaning of the word is best described as 'that which blows back into your face when you spit into the wind.'" Col Frederic S. Knight, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 10Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Knight Comments.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190186

*A typical Bru village south of Khe Sanh has simple houses built on stilts to be above the ground and with grass roofs for protection from the elements. One of the aboriginal tribes who inhabited the Vietnamese highlands and whom the French called Montagnards, the Bru had been resettled largely along Route 9 near Khe Sanh by the South Vietnamese government.*

itself were ethnic Vietnamese.\* A simple honest people without even a written language, the Bru cared little for the authority of the national government or for the political upheavals of the war, preferring to remain neutral, or at most, to sympathize half-heartedly with whichever side controlled their village at any particular moment. While their original territory covered most of the district, as well as equally large areas in Laos and North Vietnam, the South Vietnamese government resettled most of the Bru of Huong Hoa District along Route 9 to prevent the enemy from recruiting among them.

In addition to the Bru and Vietnamese, a few French coffee planters and American missionaries inhabited the area in the vicinity of Khe Sanh. Some of the Bru were employed by the former and a few even received a rudimentary education from the latter.

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\*The Montagnard (a French word meaning "mountaineer") tribes were not Vietnamese by descent or culture, but rather, an aboriginal people who inhabited the highlands. Unworldly, poor, and apolitical, the Montagnards were often viewed by the Vietnamese as a lesser people and sometimes were treated with contempt. Colonel Knight wrote that the Vietnamese name for the tribesmen was *Moi* which meant savage. He explained that the term Montagnard came into use "at the insistence of Ngo Dinh Diem who deplored the common Vietnamese usage . . ." Knight Comments. Chaplain Stubbe noted the sharp contrast between the houses in Khe Sanh Village made of concrete and wood where the ethnic Vietnamese lived and the homes of the Bru made of bamboo with grass roofs and on stilts in the surrounding "villes". Stubbe Comments.

### *The Early Days*

The history of Marines at Khe Sanh predates their involvement in the Vietnam War by three decades. Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, who served as the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific during the war, remembered that while stationed in China in 1937, his battalion commander, Major Howard N. Stent, visited the area to hunt tiger. Like many visitors to Khe Sanh, Major Stent was impressed with its beauty, and returned to China with stories of the tall, green mountains, waterfalls, abundant game, and the peaceful Bru tribespeople.<sup>4</sup>

In August 1962, MACV established a Special Forces CIDG camp at an old abandoned French fort, about two kilometers east of the village of Khe Sanh and just below Route 9, for border surveillance and anti-infiltration operations.\*\* In November 1964, the Special Forces team moved from the French fort to a light-duty airstrip, built by French forces in 1949 on the Xom Cham Plateau, above Route 9 and about two kilometers north of their former base. This new site, which eventually became the Khe Sanh base, had sev-

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\*\*CIDG is an acronym for Civilian Irregular Defense Group. The CIDG consisted of local militia, armed, trained, advised, and, in fact, led by U.S. and South Vietnamese Special Forces personnel. Such camps were scattered throughout the country. This French fort site was later referred to by the American forces at Khe Sanh as the "old French Fort."

eral advantages. Militarily, it was on relatively level ground and offered good fields of fire in all directions. The terrain provided both good drainage and stable soil, mostly consisting of "laterite clay or weathered iron/aluminum rock." It also contained a "few basalt outcroppings, at what was later called the 'Rock Quarry.'" At their new camp, the Special Forces and CIDG personnel built a number of bunkers which the Marines later at Khe Sanh would refer to, erroneously, as "old French bunkers."<sup>5</sup>

Earlier, in the spring of 1964, Major Alfred M. Gray, later the 29th Commandant of the Marine Corps, arrived in the Khe Sanh sector with a signal intelligence detachment and an infantry platoon and established a radio monitoring site atop Dong Voi Mep, better known to the Marines as Tiger Tooth Mountain, north of the CIDG camp. The composite force, designated Marine Detachment, Advisory Team 1, was "the first actual Marine ground unit to conduct independent operations in the Republic of Vietnam." After its position had been compromised in July, the team redeployed to Da Nang.<sup>6\*</sup>

In 1966, III MAF carried out two battalion-sized operations near Khe Sanh to search for North Vietnamese units reported by Special Forces personnel. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines arrived in April and established a camp around the airstrip from which to conduct Operation Virginia. After searching the mountains around the CIDG camp for a week without finding a trace of the enemy, the battalion marched back to the coast along Route 9, becoming the first "major force" to accomplish this feat in at least eight years.<sup>7</sup>

In late September 1966, Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. Wickwire's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines arrived at Khe Sanh as part of Operation Prairie, beginning 22 months of continuous Marine presence in the area. The monsoon was upon Khe Sanh by this time, and the Marines experienced temperatures as low as 40 degrees and winds which gusted to 45 knots. The bad weather caused the airstrip to close frequently and when aircraft could not land at the combat base, some types of supplies reached dangerously low levels. After four months of vigorous patrolling, the Marines found little in the way of enemy forces, claiming only 15 dead North Vietnamese.<sup>8</sup>

\* The Marines would later establish in late 1966 a radio relay station on Hill 950, about 3,500 meters north of Khe Sanh and 9,000 meters southeast of Tiger Mountain. Prados and Stubbe, *Valley of Decision*, p. 128. See also Stubbe Comments.

During Operation Prairie, the Special Forces personnel relocated their CIDG camp to the village of Lang Vei on Route 9 between Khe Sanh and the Laotian border. A detachment known as Forward Operating Base 3 (FOB-3),\*\* first located in Khe Sanh village, moved to the old French fort, and then, in the latter part of 1967, deployed to newly built quarters adjoining the Khe Sanh combat base. A small MACV advisory team remained at the district headquarters in Khe Sanh village.<sup>9</sup>

In February 1967, III MAF had established Combined Action Platoon O to work with the Bru in the area. "CAP Oscar," as it was called, was the only unit in the Combined Action program to work with a Montagnard tribe. The CAP headquarters was in Khe Sanh village from where they patrolled the surrounding Bru hamlets.<sup>10</sup>

By this time, February 1967, the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines had departed for Okinawa, but Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines took the battalion's place to protect a detachment of Seabees from Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 10 which was assigned to extend and improve the airstrip. The company patrolled the hills and valleys for any sign of Communist forces. Within a month, increased contact led the 3d Marine Division to reinforce Khe Sanh with a second company and in late March the Marines became engaged with a powerful enemy force. The 3d Marine Division assigned control of the forces at Khe Sanh to the 3d Marines on 20 April 1967. Within a matter of days, the Marines encountered strong North Vietnamese forces in fortified positions on the hills to the north of the Khe Sanh Combat Base, prompting the commanding officer of the 3d Marines, Colonel John P. Lanigan, to deploy his 2d and 3d Battalions to the area. The ensuing battles to eject the North Vietnamese from the commanding terrain overlooking the combat base became known as the "Hill Battles" and lasted until 11 May. In some of the most vicious fighting of the war, Marines wrested control of Hills 861, 881 North, and 881 South from the enemy.<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

The fighting in the First Battle of Khe Sanh was savage and costly for both sides. Marine casualties

\*\*FOB-3 was an element of the Studies and Observation Group (SOG), which trained Nung, Muong, and Bru Montagnards for clandestine operations against Communist forces along infiltration routes.

\*\*\*For detailed accounts of the Hill Battles, see Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1967*, Chapter 4 and Prados and Stubbe, *Valley of Decision*, pp. 83-105.

numbered 155 killed and 425 wounded, while the North Vietnamese left nearly 1,000 dead on the battlefield. When the battle ended, the Marines held the hills which overlooked the combat base, thus hampering Communist observation and fire on the vital airstrip through which supplies and replacements flowed.<sup>11</sup>

### *Protecting the Investment*

Immediately following the Hill Battles, III MAF reduced the force at Khe Sanh to a single battalion. The 3d Marines departed the area, giving way to Lieutenant Colonel Donald E. Newton's 1st Battalion, 26th Marines. Overall control of operations around Khe Sanh passed to Colonel John J. Padley, commanding officer of the 26th Marines.

Lieutenant Colonel Newton's Marines maintained company outposts on some of the commanding hills and conducted patrols in the surrounding jungle as part of Operation Crockett. As enemy contacts and sightings increased, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines deployed to Khe Sanh, giving Colonel Padley the capability, if necessary, to meet another major North Vietnamese effort like that encountered during the Hill Battles.

Supplies reached the Marines at Khe Sanh either by air or by vehicle convoys from the 3d Marine Division base at Dong Ha. The trip along Route 9 took the convoys through territory which was far from secure, and they traveled well-armed and protected, usually accompanied by an infantry unit and often by armored vehicles.

On 21 July, an infantry unit sweeping ahead of an 85-vehicle convoy trying to bring 175mm guns to reinforce the Marine base encountered strong enemy forces along the highway. While the Marine infantry engaged the North Vietnamese, the convoy, which included besides the 175s, "trucks loaded with ammunition and C-4 explosives, claymores, mines, and other ordnance," returned to Camp Carroll. The ambush threat was too great to risk the guns.<sup>12\*</sup>

While the Marines would continue some road convoys into Khe Sanh in the fall, it soon became clear that

for all practical purposes Route 9 was closed.\*\* Since the runway was closed for repairs to damage caused by the constant landing of heavily laden transport aircraft, the Marines had to depend on helicopters and parachutes to maintain their logistic lifeline.

### *The Isolation of Khe Sanh*

With their successful interdiction of Route 9, the Communist forces isolated Khe Sanh from the rest of the ICTZ. Fortunately for the Marines, while the weather remained clear, air resupply could provide for the needs of the combat base. With the onset of the monsoon and the *crachin*, however, low cloud ceilings and limited visibility would severely limit flights to Khe Sanh. III MAF was familiar with this problem. As early as 1966, III MAF staff members conducted a wargame of the defense of Quang Tri Province in which they failed to defend Khe Sanh. During the exercise, when General Westmoreland expressed his dismay at this decision,\*\* III MAF planners had responded that they considered Khe Sanh too difficult to support, citing the ease with which the enemy could cut Route 9 and the problems with air resupply during the monsoon. Now the game had become real. In July 1967, before the combination of enemy action and monsoon rains ended the convoys, the logisticians of the 3d Marine Division recommended planning for the air delivery of supplies to the combat base whenever the weather permitted. The airstrip remained closed to all but light aircraft and helicopters throughout September while the Seabees peeled up the old steel matting, and laid a new sub-grade of crushed rock.<sup>13\*\*\*\*</sup>

\*Lieutenant Colonel Frederick J. McEwan, who in 1967 was the S-4 or logistics officer for the 26th Marines, remembered an occasion when the North Vietnamese blew a bridge over the Roa Quan River. He, with the regimental commander and engineer together with a rifle company, made a reconnaissance on the practicality of repairing the span: "A search was made for alternate crossing points to no avail. Major damage was done to the bridge. There were strong indications of the enemy's presence. It was not the time to build a bridge over the Roa Quan River on Route 9 leading to Khe Sanh." LtCol Frederick J. McEwan, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter McEwan Comments.

\*\*As former *Washington Post* reporter Peter Braestrup commented, "Westmoreland always wanted to hold Khe Sanh as a base for U.S. operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail." Peter Braestrup, Comments on draft chapter, n.d. [Dec94-Jan95] (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*\*Lieutenant Colonel McEwan remembered that obtaining the crushed rock was not a simple matter. He recalled that it was not until "a sergeant found a hill mass that had rock" which later naturally became known as the "Rock Quarry." McEwan Comments.

\*One authority on the battle for Khe Sanh, Chaplain Stubbe, commented that he was not sure why the guns were sent in the first place. His supposition was that they would be used to support FOB-3 operations in Laos. He was certain, however, that the guns would have made excellent targets for the North Vietnamese when they attacked the base. Stubbe Comments.

In October, the monsoon struck with a vengeance, pouring 30 inches of rain on ICTZ. Khe Sanh did not escape the deluge. The hill positions were especially hard hit. Unlike the Xom Cham plateau, the surrounding hills and mountains did not have soil suitable for construction, and the rain pointed up this weakness. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel James B. Wilkinson, described some of the damage:

...when the first torrential rains of the season hit [Hill] 861 the results were disastrous. The trenchline which encircled the hill washed away completely on one side of the position and caved in on another side. Some bunkers collapsed, while others were so weakened they had to be completely rebuilt.<sup>14\*</sup>

The Marines kept busy repairing damage and improving their positions. New bunkers on Hill 861 stood almost completely above ground, and the new trenchline included a drainage system jury-rigged from discarded 55-gallon drums. Space on board resupply helicopters was critical, and priority for construction materials went to the airfield project, leaving little or no room for imported fortification materials. Logging details searched the nearby jungle for suitable wood, but many trees were so filled with steel fragments from the earlier Hill Battles that the engineers' chain saws could not cut them.<sup>15</sup>

October brought more than the monsoon. That month, the North Vietnamese 325C Division, which had taken part in the earlier "Hill Battles," appeared again in the enemy order of battle for Khe Sanh.<sup>16</sup> On 31 October, Operation Ardmore ended with Operation Scotland beginning the next day. Little more than a renaming of the continuing mission of defending Khe Sanh and using it as a base for offensive action against Communist infiltration, Operation Scotland became the responsibility of the 26th Marines.

November began clear and sunny at Khe Sanh, but by the 10th, the *crachin* returned. Seabees continued work on the airfield, improving it to the point that it was suitable for use by medium-sized cargo aircraft, such as the Fairchild C-123 Provider, but more work was necessary before it could safely handle the heavy Lockheed C-130 Hercules aircraft.<sup>17</sup>

Anxious to find alternate methods to support the units on the hill outposts, should bad weather or enemy fire prevent helicopter resupply, the 26th



Photo courtesy of Col Robert W. Lewis, USMC (Ret)  
*An aerial view of the Khe Sanh Combat Base facing northwest (note north arrow at top of photo) was taken in November 1967 at 10,000 feet, with the airstrip seen in the center of the photo. By this time, medium-sized fixed-wing transport aircraft could land on the airstrip, but the road supply network had been cut.*

Marines studied the route from the combat base to Hill 881 South. Representatives from the 3d Motor Transport Battalion, the 3d Antitank Battalion, and the 3d Engineer Battalion examined the route and determined that it would require extensive engineer preparation before it could accommodate vehicle convoys.<sup>18</sup>

The 3d Marine Division assigned the 26th Marines to prepare a contingency plan for the relief, if needed, of the Lang Vei Special Forces CIDG Camp.\*\* The new commanding officer of the 26th Marines, Colonel David E. Lownds, ordered his 1st Battalion to find an overland route from the combat base to the CIDG

\*\*There were actually two Lang Vei Special Forces Camps. The first one had been overrun in May 1967 while the Marine command was engaged in the Hill Fights. The American command decided to relocate the camp a few hundred meters to the southwest. Lieutenant General Louis Metzger, in 1967 a brigadier general and the 3d Marine Division assistant division commander, commented that "Westmoreland was specially interested in this camp . . . and had the Seabees completely rebuild that camp with heavy concrete bunkers . . . so strong . . . [that it could withstand] a tank on top of it without crushing it in." The new camp was finished in the fall of 1967. LtGen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft, dtd 17Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File). See also Prados and Stubbe, *Valley of Decision*, pp. 188-189. Army Colonel Bruce B. G. Clarke observed that the contingency plan also called for the relief of the district advisors in Khe Sanh village. Col Bruce B. G. Clarke, USA, Comments on draft chapter, n.d. [Apr95] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Clarke Comments.

\*Lieutenant Colonel Harper L. Bohr commented that the rain in September resulted in "the collapse of some newly completed bunkers resulting in the deaths of several Marines." LtCol Harper L. Bohr, Jr., Comments on draft chapter, dtd 2Nov1994 (Vietnam Comment File).



Photo courtesy of Col Robert W. Lewis, USMC (Ret)

*Aerial view of Hill 881 South in November 1967, reveals the strategic outpost northwest of Khe Sanh. The Khe Sanh base can be seen in the background.*

camp which could be used by a company-sized relief force. Captain John W. Raymond led Company A into the jungle to find such a route, avoiding well-used trails to reduce the risk of ambush. The straight-line distance was less than nine kilometers, but only after 19 hours of struggling through the treacherous terrain, did the Marines reach the CIDG camp, proving that it could be done, but demonstrating that it could not be done quickly or easily. The 26th Marines attempted no further efforts to locate cross-country routes to Lang Vei.

On 9 November, III MAF moved to increase the intelligence collection capability at Khe Sanh by deploying a detachment from the 1st Radio Battalion\* under now Lieutenant Colonel Gray to the combat base. The detachment moved to Hill 881 South and

established an electronic listening post, much as Gray's other unit had done four years earlier.<sup>19</sup>

The *crachin* so hampered air operations at Khe Sanh during November that on the 18th, Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson passed the word to his men to prepare for the possibility of reducing rations to two meals per day.<sup>20</sup> The same weather problems affected direct air support bombing missions. To improve the accuracy of bombing near Khe Sanh during periods of heavy fog or low clouds, the Marines installed a radar reflector atop Hill 881 South which, in theory, would serve as a navigation aid to attack aircraft supporting the combat base. The reflector did not work, however, as it was incompatible with the radar systems on board the Grumman A-6A Intruder attack aircraft which were designed to carry out bombing missions in conditions of restricted visibility.<sup>21</sup>

Enemy activity increased dramatically during December. The 3d Marine Division's intelligence offi-

\*Radio battalions are Marine Corps electronic warfare units capable of conducting signal intelligence activities, mainly intercepts.

cers identified two North Vietnamese units between Khe Sanh and Ca Lu: the *8th Battalion, 29th Regiment* and the *95C Regiment*. Around the combat base, Marine patrols sighted new bunkers near Hill 881 North as well as North Vietnamese carrying supplies and heavy weapons. Sniper fire increased around Hill 881 South and the enemy attempted probes against Hills 861 and 950. Intelligence sources reported that both the *304th Division* and the *325C Division* of the North Vietnamese Army were near Khe Sanh and another enemy unit, the *320th Division*, was east of the combat base, near Camp Carroll and Cam Lo. Perhaps the most revealing indicator of increased enemy activity was the rise in North Vietnamese truck traffic along the nearby Ho Chi Minh Trail network from a monthly average of 480 vehicles in the fall to more than 6,000 in December.<sup>22</sup>

With only one battalion at Khe Sanh to protect the combat base and its vital airstrip, as well as the surrounding hills, the 26th Marines' defenses were stretched thin. The III MAF staff, with many sources of intelligence available, recognized the significance of the enemy buildup, prompting Lieutenant General Cushman to call Major General Tompkins on 13 December to direct that another battalion be sent to Khe Sanh. Major General Tompkins, fearing that northeastern Quang Tri was much more vulnerable, argued the point and recorded later that he was "not at all excited about the idea."<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, within five hours, Lieutenant Colonel Harry L. Alderman's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines touched down at Khe Sanh's recently refurbished airstrip.\*

The 3d Battalion conducted a four-day sweep of a ridge line west of the combat base, then settled into new positions. Companies I and K occupied Hills 881 South and 861, respectively, and Company L joined the 1st Battalion at the combat base proper as Colonel Lownds juggled the units among his defensive positions.

Taking advantage of his increased troop strength to conduct battalion-sized operations once again, Colonel Lownds sent the 1st Battalion north of the combat base to search the Rao Quan River Valley during the last three days of December. As on the 3d Battalion's expedition the previous week, the 1st Battalion encoun-

tered only light contact, but found ominous signs of freshly built bunkers and small caches of supplies.<sup>24\*\*</sup>

The increased enemy activity noted during December continued. Early in the evening of 2 January, a listening post established by Company L, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines near the west end of the airstrip reported several persons 60 meters to their immediate front. The company commander dispatched a squad to reinforce the listening post. The Marines challenged the unidentified men but received no reply. At the Marines' second attempt to challenge, the intruders opened fire on the listening post. Marines all along the nearby perimeter returned fire. The firing died down, which saw one Marine slightly wounded, and the squad sent to reinforce the listening post searched the area to the immediate front, but found nothing in the dark. At first light, a patrol searched the area again and found five enemy dead. Using a scout dog, they followed the trail of a sixth man, believed wounded, but did not find him.<sup>25</sup>

The 26th Marines' intelligence officer, Captain Harper L. Bohr, Jr., examined the bodies of the five enemy and came to the conclusion that one of them was Chinese, because the man "was just too big and too non-Vietnamese looking." He sent photographs and a medical description to the 3d Marine Division in hopes of receiving confirmation of his supposition. Captain Bohr determined that at least some of the dead were officers, and a legend later grew that one of them was a regimental commander.<sup>26\*\*\*</sup> At any rate, it appeared to the Marines that the enemy had indeed been reconnoitering the perimeter, further fueling speculation that a major North Vietnamese attack was in the making.

Colonel Lownds continued to seek information concerning the enemy. Infantry companies scoured the nearby jungle while small reconnaissance teams established observation posts on more remote hilltops and watched for signs of movement. The Marines continued to employ the latest technology to augment their troop patrol effort, including sensors, signal intelli-

\*Colonel Frederic S. Knight of the 3d Marine Division G-2, or intelligence staff, recalled that there was the need for a smaller scale map of the Khe Sanh sector to show more detail, one on a scale of 1:10,000, as opposed to the 1:50,000 standard maps. There was none available, but Knight finally found a Seabee, who "laboriously drew on what I would call butcher's paper the tactical map displayed in Colonel Lownds' bunker during the entire siege." Knight Comments.

\*\*Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth W. Pipes, who as a captain commanded Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, commented that his company was the anvil for this operation and that one of his platoons ambushed an enemy reconnaissance unit, killing two or three North Vietnamese soldiers. He remembered some maps and that the enemy gear and weapons were helilifted out. LtCol Kenneth W. Pipes, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 10Mar95 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*\*Captain Bohr later wrote that this claim could not be substantiated. See Maj Harper L. Bohr, Jr., Comments on "The Battle for Khe Sanh," 18Dec68 (Khe Sanh Monograph Comment File).

gence, infrared aerial photo reconnaissance, and a relatively new device formally known as the XM-3 airborne personnel detector (APD), but popularly called the "People Sniffer." The XM-3 was the size of a suitcase, able to be mounted in a Huey helicopter, and designed to measure "ammonia emanations from the skin." While no one technique was sufficient in itself, in tandem, they provided the U.S. command sufficient evidence that the enemy was in the Khe Sanh sector in strength.<sup>27\*</sup> For the Marines at Khe Sanh, increased patrol contact indicated an enemy counter-reconnaissance screen in action.

### *The Decision to Hold*

On 6 January, General Westmoreland initiated Operation Niagara, a two-part plan to find enemy units around Khe Sanh and to eliminate them with superior firepower. The first part of the operation, Niagara I, called for intelligence officers to mount a "comprehensive intelligence collection effort" to locate and identify enemy units. In Niagara II, aircraft, including Boeing B-52 Stratofortresses of the 4133d Bomb Wing in Guam and the 4258th Strategic Wing in Thailand, were to saturate target areas with bombs.<sup>28</sup> Major General George Keegan, Seventh Air Force G-2, moved quickly to establish an integrated intelligence collection and analysis effort that would compile and record information from all sources. He went so far as to bring eight French generals, some of whom were survivors of Dien Bien Phu, to Vietnam as experts on Communist siege tactics.<sup>29\*\*</sup>

In the U.S. capital, the Johnson administration focused almost obsessively on the Khe Sanh situation with the President himself poring over detailed maps of the area. On 11 January, General Earle G. Wheeler,

\*Chaplain Stubbe recalled that the "People Sniffers" were bringing back hundreds of contacts. He remembered in the 26th Marines command post, "the map with the little red dots on the plastic overlay, and everyone wondering if this might not be an error—the detections of the ammonia from the urine of packs of monkeys." Stubbe also observed that the Marines also realized that radio pattern analysis could err when the NVA put out false transmitters, "broadcasting as though they were a Hq thus drawing airstrikes on a lone transmitter in the hills rather than a NVA Hq . . ." Notwithstanding these flaws, Stubbe contended eventually "together and coordinated, the intelligence was of great significance." Stubbe Comments.

\*\*Accomplished without the knowledge of the American Ambassador, this allegedly agitated the Director of the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office, Saigon. See W. Scott Thompson and Col Donald D. Frizzell, USAF, eds., *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak, and Co., 1977), p. 183.



Photo C8543-7 from LBJ Library Collection

*The situation at Khe Sanh has intense high level interest as President Lyndon B. Johnson, right, is seen here studying a map of Khe Sanh with Presidential Assistant Walt W. Rostow, left, and CIA Director Richard Helms.*

USA, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sent General Westmoreland a message in which he noted that there had been "discussion around town in very high non-military quarters" concerning the enemy's intentions at Khe Sanh. He outlined the two divergent views which were food for thought among the highly placed, but unnamed, individuals who were concerned about the coming battle. One view held that Khe Sanh must be defended because it afforded an opportunity to draw large enemy forces to battle, then to destroy them with a combination of superior firepower and a counterthrust into Laos. The other view strongly counseled abandoning Khe Sanh because "the enemy [was] building toward a Dien Bien Phu."<sup>30</sup>

On a superficial level, the situation at Khe Sanh began to have a certain resemblance to Dien Bien Phu, 14 years earlier.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Both were remote outposts organized

\*\*\*In November 1953, the French occupied and fortified the village of Dien Bien Phu in northwest Tonkin. The Viet Minh besieged the outpost, capturing it in May 1954 after a dramatic battle involving great loss of life on both sides. The fall of Dien Bien Phu was the final straw which broke the back of French colonialism in Indochina, leading to the 1954 Geneva Accords and the partitioning of the Associated States of French Indochina into autonomous countries. In both his comments and his book, Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, who was CGFMFPac in 1968, took strong exception to the Dien Bien Phu analogy. He observed that militarily the differences far outweighed the similarities. He emphasized the vast advantages in both fire and the overall tactical situation that the Americans possessed at Khe Sanh over the French at Dien Bien Phu. LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 31Oct1994 and *First to Fight*, pp. 215-16.

around small airstrips in the highlands. They were each served by a single light-duty road which, in both cases, was cut by the enemy, and were forced to rely upon air delivered supplies. In early 1954 the *crachin* restricted flying at Dien Bien Phu as it did at Khe Sanh in early 1968.

The Dien Bien Phu analogy mentioned in General Wheeler's message dated back to at least January 1967, well before it was touted and dissected in Washington's "very high non-military quarters." Even before the First Battle of Khe Sanh, the 3d Marine Division staff prepared an informal document entitled "Khe Sanh Area Report." The report analyzed the terrain and situation which the French had encountered at Dien Bien Phu, comparing them to the terrain and possible enemy action at Khe Sanh.<sup>31</sup>

MACV also made its comparison between the two events, but after the enemy buildup. General Westmoreland ordered his command historian, Colonel Reamer W. Argo, Jr., USA, to prepare a study on the siege of Dien Bien Phu and other "classic sieges" to determine how Khe Sanh fit into the historical precedent. With his study not completed until early February, Colonel Argo presented to the MACV staff the rather bleak conclusion that Khe Sanh was following "the pattern of previous sieges" in which the advantage lay with the besieging forces rather than the defense. In his diary, Westmoreland characterized the entire presentation "fraught with gloom."<sup>32</sup>

Despite the chilling effect of Colonel Argo's study upon his staff, General Westmoreland was determined that Khe Sanh could be held because the Marines

there had advantages which the French had lacked at Dien Bien Phu. First, they controlled the hills which dominated Khe Sanh, whereas the French had left the commanding heights around Dien Bien Phu to the enemy in the mistaken belief that artillery could not possibly be moved onto them through the rugged terrain. Further, the French were strangled by lack of sufficient air transport and delivery capability to meet resupply needs. At Khe Sanh, the airstrip could now handle the large C-130 cargo aircraft and, even when weather or enemy fire precluded landing, modern U.S. air delivery methods could ensure that the base remained supplied. Probably most significant, though, was the advantage in firepower which the Marines enjoyed. The French had supported Dien Bien Phu with a few World War II-era aircraft flying from distant bases to reach the battlefield at extreme range, thereby reducing their payload and "loiter time" over the target area. The Marines at Khe Sanh could expect massive and overwhelming fire support from modern, high-performance jet attack aircraft and Boeing B-52 Stratofortresses with their precision, high-altitude, heavy bombardment capability. Marine artillery units at the combat base and on the hill positions, as well as 175mm guns based at Camp Carroll, could provide continuous all weather firepower.<sup>33</sup>

All of the American commanders on the scene had no doubt about their ability to hold the base. Lieutenant General Cushman, the III MAF commander, spoke for all of his Marine commanders when he later stated, "I had complete confidence in my Marines. Of course they were outnumbered, but we had beautiful

*U.S. Army artillerymen from the Third Section, Battery C, 2d Battalion, 94th Artillery Regiment at Camp Carroll are seen firing a 175mm gun in support of the Marines at Khe Sanh. The M107 175mm gun fired a 147-pound projectile and had a maximum range of nearly 20 miles.*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801357



air and artillery support." He remarked that while weather was a factor the forecasts were that the weather would improve rather than deteriorate. As he concluded, "I was concerned but not worried about the battle." While General Westmoreland, the MACV commander had less confidence in the defensive measures taken by the Marines at the base, he later wrote that his decision to hold Khe Sanh, "was to my mind militarily sound and strategically rewarding."<sup>34</sup>

Even while General Westmoreland ticked off the reasons why Khe Sanh could be defended, the bigger question was: why should it be defended? General Westmoreland later wrote:

Khe Sanh could serve as a patrol base for blocking enemy infiltration from Laos along Route 9; a base for SOG operations to harass the enemy in Laos; an airstrip for reconnaissance planes surveying the Ho Chi Minh Trail; a western anchor for defenses south of the DMZ; and an eventual jump-off point for ground operations to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>35</sup>

General Westmoreland's proposal for a ground operation against the Ho Chi Minh Trail took the form of a planned invasion of Laos, codenamed Operation El Paso. Although planning for the operation continued through January, MACV did not intend to execute it until fall or winter, after the northeast monsoon had passed. General Westmoreland said he wanted the plan to be ready in time for the November 1968 presidential elections "so that we would have a military plan that could take advantage of a possible change in national policy."<sup>36</sup>

In addition to these reasons for defending Khe Sanh, General Westmoreland pointed to tactical considerations, noting that "had we not taken a stand in that remote area, our forces would have inevitably been required to fight in the more populous coastal areas where the application of firepower would have been hampered in order to protect civilians."<sup>37</sup>

Lieutenant General Cushman was "in complete agreement" with the decision to hold Khe Sanh, pointing out that, although the combat base did not really deter infiltration, it was "a complete block to invasion and motorized supply." He further felt that it was necessary to retain bases like Khe Sanh because they allowed him to conduct mobile operations in the enemy's base areas at a time when III MAF did not have enough troops effectively to cover all of the territory near the DMZ.<sup>38</sup>

Even General Krulak, who in 1966 had opposed the idea of large unit operations near Khe Sanh, now agreed with General Westmoreland, saying that while

"to withdraw would save lives that would otherwise be lost. . . nobody ever won anything by backing away."<sup>39</sup> Although agreeing with the need to defend Khe Sanh once engaged, Krulak continued to insist that the Marines never should have been there in the first place. He quoted General Giap as wanting to stretch "the Marines as taut as a bow string and draw them away from the populated areas."<sup>40</sup> While the North Vietnamese continued to place pressure on the Marines at Khe Sanh, General Krulak doubted that General Giap would engage the Americans on their terms. For Krulak, "Khe Sanh was an unsound blow in the air."<sup>41</sup>

The intentions of the North Vietnamese at Khe Sanh still are a subject of debate. In contrast to General Krulak, Army Brigadier General Philip B. Davidson, the MACV intelligence officer or J-2, later argued that General Giap meant for "Khe Sanh to be Phase III, the culmination of the Great Offensive, Great Uprising." Davidson maintained that the North Vietnamese planned to overwhelm the American base with two to four divisions and end "the war with a stunning military victory."<sup>42</sup>

In one of their recapitulations of the Khe Sanh experience in 1969, the North Vietnamese appeared to agree in part with elements of General Krulak's analysis of their designs and also those of General Davidson and General Westmoreland. The North Vietnamese authors stated that the mission of the overall general offensive including Khe Sanh "was to draw the enemy out [into remote areas], pin him down, and destroy much of his men and means of conducting war." Specifically, the Khe Sanh-Route 9 campaign portion of the overall offensive had several aims, including the destruction of "an important portion of the enemy's strength, primarily the American." The North Vietnamese wanted to draw the U.S. forces "out Route 9, the further the better," and then "tie them down." The campaign called for close coordination with other North Vietnamese and Viet Cong commands throughout South Vietnam, especially with *Military Region Tri-Thien-Hue*. According to the North Vietnamese study, the destruction of "enemy strength and coordination with other battlefields [military regions] are the most fundamental [and] important." The plan directed that North Vietnamese commanders "focus mainly on striking the enemy outside his fortifications," but "to strike the enemy in his fortifications when necessary and assured of probable victory." In effect, the North Vietnamese would take Khe Sanh if they could, but there were limits to the price they were willing to pay.

Their main objectives were to kill American troops and to isolate them in the remote mountain border region of western Quang Tri Province.<sup>43</sup>

### *The Stage is Set*

On 10 January, Colonel Lownds closed a regimental staff meeting with the warning that he expected an enemy attack within 10 days.<sup>44</sup> The Marines continued the unending process of “digging in” with the objective of providing every fighting position and important facility with overhead protection. Over the next few days, patrols continued to engage the enemy. Units reported that enemy sappers had cut the perimeter wire in some places, but had carefully replaced it to hide the cuts.

Lieutenant General Cushman wired Major General Tompkins on 13 January to expect an attack on Khe Sanh to begin on the 18th. To meet the threat, III MAF, he said, would give Khe Sanh priority on B-52 sorties, effective 16 January. Further, General Cushman requested that two U.S. Army brigades be placed on 24-hour

alert for redeployment to ICTZ.<sup>45</sup> The same day Colonel Lownds ordered that all personnel within the Khe Sanh Combat Base, starting on 15 January, would wear helmets and flak jackets and carry weapons at all times.<sup>46</sup>

On the afternoon of 14 January, Second Lieutenant Randall D. Yearly led a reconnaissance patrol back towards friendly lines on Hill 881 South after four days in the jungle. As the patrol moved down the south slope of Hill 881 North, one kilometer from their destination, the North Vietnamese caught them in an ambush. In the opening shots of the fight, an RPG round killed Lieutenant Yearly and Corporal Richard J. Healy. The six remaining men in the patrol, heavily outgunned and all but two wounded, withdrew, leaving the bodies behind. Nearby, under heavy fire, helicopters extracted the survivors. A platoon from Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines searched the area later and recovered the bodies.<sup>47</sup>

Far to the south, as part of Operation Checkers, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines occupied new positions at

*Marines at Khe Sanh, wearing their flak jackets, fill sandbags to reinforce bunkers from incoming artillery rounds. The Marines later came under criticism that they left too many positions vulnerable to the enemy bombardment.*

Photo from 3d MarDiv ComdC, Feb68



Phu Bai, freeing the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines to redeploy to Dong Ha. On 15 January, while the latter battalion moved into its new quarters at Dong Ha, Major General Tompkins became concerned about the increase in enemy probes against Khe Sanh. Deciding that Colonel Lownds "didn't have enough people," he sent a message to III MAF advising that he intended to reinforce Khe Sanh. General Cushman concurred and at 1730, the 3d Marine Division contacted the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines and notified the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Francis J. Heath, Jr., that his destination was changed to Khe Sanh.<sup>48</sup>

At 0715 the following day, Heath's Marines began flying into Khe Sanh on board fixed-wing transport aircraft and for the first time since arriving in Vietnam, the 26th Marines was together as a regiment.<sup>49</sup> While the rest of the battalion occupied an assembly area near the western edge of the airstrip, Company F marched three kilometers north to Hill 558. Overlooking the Song Rao Quan at a point where its valley opens toward the combat base, Hill 558 was a good position from which to control movement along the river. Company F reported that the hill was clear of the enemy and on 17 January, the rest of the battalion moved forward and established a three-infantry company strongpoint.

While the 2d Battalion was redeploying, General Cushman inspected the defenses of Khe Sanh. Following the visit, he told General Tompkins that he thought the combat base needed a better patrolling plan, more seismic intrusion detectors, and additional work on the fortifications. Of particular concern to General Cushman was the ammunition storage area which, he advised General Tompkins, needed "tidying up." A large quantity of the base's ammunition was stored outside the revetments, making it vulnerable to enemy fire. Within a week, this last warning would appear a prophecy.<sup>50\*</sup>

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\* Army Lieutenant General Philip B. Davidson, the former MACV J-2, wrote that on 20 January 1968 he visited the Khe Sanh base with his counterpart on the III MAF staff to talk with Colonel Lownds about the enemy buildup. While there, he noted the "tents, fuel ammunition dumps, and command post—all above ground and unprotected . . ." In reporting his discussion and what he saw to General Westmoreland, the latter became agitated about the "description of the unprotected installations at Khe Sanh and the general lack of preparation to withstand heavy concentrations of artillery and mortar fire . . ." Davidson recalled that Westmoreland turned to his deputy, General Creighton W. Abrams, and said, "Abe, you're going to have to go up there and take over." According to Davidson, this was the prelude to the establishment of MACV (Forward). See Chapter 6 for further discussion relative to MACV (Forward). LtGen Philip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), pp. 554-56.

The Marines at Khe Sanh were well aware of their vulnerabilities. What had been a one-battalion outpost in early December had now expanded to three battalions. With Route 9 closed, U.S. aircraft could keep the Marines supplied with adequate ammunition and rations, but could only bring in limited heavy equipment and fortification material. Lieutenant Colonel Frederick J. McEwan, the 26th Marines S-4, years later remembered that the artillery battalion's bulldozer "was one of the most valuable and overcommitted heavy equipment items." According to McEwan, "it dug gun emplacements, ammo revetments, other berms, . . . tank hull defilade positions, and was used extensively and dangerously maintaining the land sanitation fill."<sup>51</sup>

In an attempt to disperse the ammunition, Lieutenant Colonel McEwan provided for three storage areas. He placed the main ammunition dump on the east end of the combat base, just off the runway and dug in with revetments, but it was filled to capacity. Another ammunition dump was located on the western end of the airstrip near the artillery battalion, and a third closer to the central area of the combat base. As an expedient for further dispersion, he force fed as much ammunition as feasible to the combat units. Still, as Captain William J. O'Connor, commander of Battery C, 1st Battalion, 13th Marines at Khe Sanh, recalled that he personally was "very concerned . . . that the ammo dump was located between my area and the air strip." It was obvious to him that its location would place his battery and the air strip "in jeopardy" and the target of enemy guns. O'Connor insisted that his men dig spider holes outside the gun emplacements and that they wear their helmets and flak jackets.<sup>52</sup>

On 18 January, the 26th Marines reported another sudden heavy increase in enemy sightings and activity. That afternoon, a reconnaissance team made contact with the enemy on Hill 881 North, suffering two casualties and immobilizing the team. The 3d Platoon of Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, moved out from a patrol base nearby and rescued the team without incident. The reconnaissance Marines, however, lost a radio and a manual encryption device\*\* during the firefight.

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\*\* Called a "shackle sheet" by the Marines, this was simply a small printed page containing letters and numbers arranged in random fashion with a key used to arrange them in a rudimentary code. It was used to encrypt certain information, such as friendly positions, for transmission over the radio.

Captain William H. Dabney's Company I received orders to search for the missing radio and codes. At dawn on 19 January, the 1st Platoon, commanded by Second Lieutenant Harry F. Fromme, departed Hill 881 South for the scene of the ambush. At 1200, while moving along a finger which led northeast up to the crest of Hill 881 North, the platoon engaged a North Vietnamese unit in defensive bunkers. Fromme and the platoon had patrolled the hill before and noticed that the trail had been altered, which alerted them to possible danger.<sup>53</sup>

Lieutenant Fromme called for mortar fire and artillery as he led his platoon through the thick vegetation, attempting to maneuver against the North Vietnamese. When three Marines fell with wounds, Private First Class Leonard E. Newton stood erect in the high kunai grass and fired his M60 machine gun from the shoulder, providing covering fire for others who attempted to rescue them. Even after the wounded Marines were carried to safety, Newton continued to stand, engaging North Vietnamese positions until he was killed in action.<sup>54\*</sup>

Fromme's Marines broke contact and returned to Hill 881 South with total casualties of one killed and three wounded. Eight North Vietnamese were confirmed dead. The platoon did not find the missing radio nor the code sheet.<sup>55</sup>

Captain Dabney, having a premonition that "something was about to happen," requested and received permission to conduct a reconnaissance-in-force to Hill 881 North with his entire company on the next day. Marine helicopters brought in two platoons and a command group from Company M, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines to Hill 881 South to help man the perimeter during Company I's absence.<sup>56</sup>

Elsewhere around Khe Sanh, sightings of the enemy continued unabated. Reconnaissance patrols reported groups of as many as 35 North Vietnamese at a time and listening posts detected enemy troops moving near Marine positions.<sup>57</sup> It seemed that Captain Dabney's guess was correct: "something was about to happen."

### *Sortie to Hill 881 North*

Company I departed at 0500, 20 January, moving through dense fog into the valley which separated

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\*For his courageous act, Private First Class Newton received the Silver Star, posthumously. Lieutenant Fromme remembered that Newton, who was right next to him, was killed in the "first few minutes of the fire fight." The platoon's radioman "tried repeatedly to pull him down." Harry F. Fromme, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 27Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Fromme Comments.

Hill 881 South from its neighbor to the north. Dabney split his company into two columns which moved along parallel fingers about 500 meters apart. On the left, Lieutenant Fromme and his 1st Platoon led the way, followed by the company command group and Second Lieutenant Michael H. Thomas' 2d Platoon. In the column on the right marched Second Lieutenant Thomas D. Brindley's 3d Platoon and the six Marines remaining from Company B, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion who had participated in the patrol of 18 January.<sup>58</sup>

At 0900, the fog lifted as the Marines crossed the narrow valley floor and began the climb up Hill 881 North. As during the first part of their journey, the two columns traveled along parallel fingers. Near the crest, four small hills formed a line perpendicular to Company I's advance.

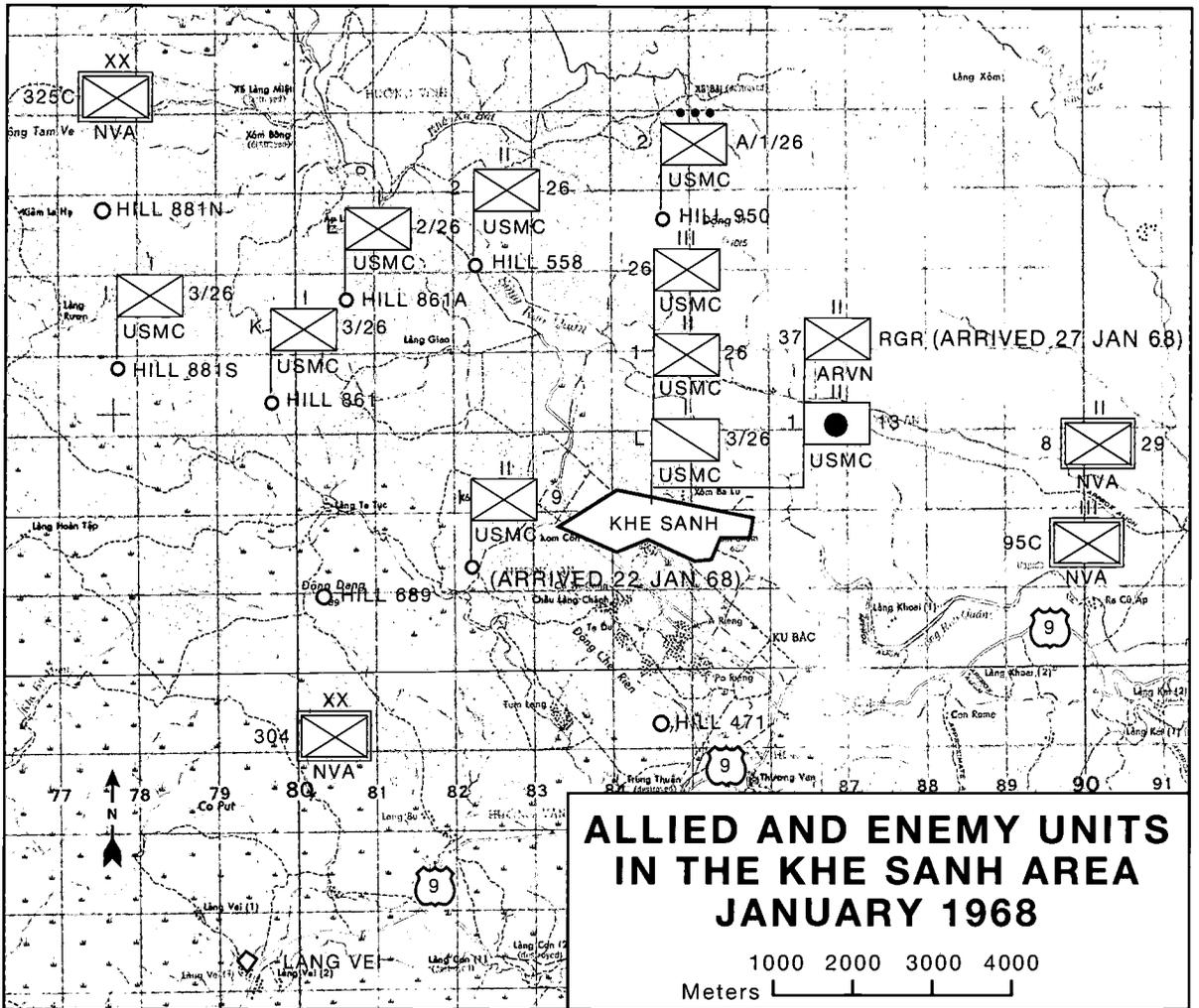
Thirty minutes into Company I's ascent, the enemy opened fire from positions on one of the small hills, forcing the 3d Platoon to the ground. The other column surged forward on the left in an attempt to flank the North Vietnamese, but was almost immediately stopped by heavy fire from another enemy strongpoint which caused several casualties. The company "dug in" and called for fire support. Enemy gunners shot down a Sikorsky UH-34 Sea Horse helicopter from Marine Aircraft Group 36 attempting to pick up Company I's wounded, but the crew escaped injury.<sup>59\*\*</sup>

As Marine artillery fire fell on the enemy, the 3d Platoon, joined by the reconnaissance team, advanced once again, assaulting and overrunning the nearest NVA positions, then continued to the top of the hill. Lieutenant Brindley charged to the crest of Hill 881 North at the head of his platoon, only to fall to a sniper's bullet, mortally wounded.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> With the 3d Platoon now atop the hill but low on ammunition, suffering numerous casualties, and under heavy machine gun fire, Dabney committed his reserve. The 1st Platoon held fast and supported by fire, while the 2d Platoon and command group

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\*\*Lieutenant Fromme remembered that "one of the more daring moments happened after the chopper was hit. It 'slid' off the left side of the finger and down some 50 meters to the draw below." Fromme stated that his platoon sergeant took one of his squads to rescue the crew of the helicopter: "For me, it was 30 minutes of nerves. Still, directing suppressing fire on the hill Brindley's then Thomas' platoons were trying to take. I wonder to this day why the NVA on our finger did not attack at this moment." Fromme Comments.

\*\*\*Lieutenant Brindley received the Navy Cross, posthumously, for the action on Hill 881 North.



withdrew to the south, crossed to the finger on the right then turned north again to reinforce the beleaguered 3d Platoon. Captain Dabney remembered that at one time he called in an air strike that “dropped napalm 100 meters from 3d Platoon to end a counterattack.”<sup>60</sup>

When the 2d Platoon reached the crest, Lieutenant Thomas learned that some Marines from the 3d Platoon and the reconnaissance team were missing. Some had fallen, wounded, during the attack, while others had pursued the fleeing enemy only to be wounded and cut off from the company forward of the hilltop position. Thomas immediately organized a rescue effort, recovering six of the injured Marines under murderous enemy fire. Wounded himself while carrying out the sixth man, Thomas refused evacuation and returned to search for the last two. Moving under fire to rescue the Marines, he

was killed in action.<sup>61\*</sup>

During the battle, the commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Harry L. Alderman, flew to Hill 881 South with his command group to find the two platoons of Company M and the other Marines left atop the hill pouring recoilless rifle and mortar fire into the North Vietnamese on Hill 881 North as Company I fought at close quarters. Alderman asked Lownds for reinforcements to help clear enemy resistance from Hill 881 North and consolidate the new position. Lownds denied the request, ordering Company I to break contact immediately and return to Hill 881 South. His reasons would become known soon enough.

Using air strikes and artillery to cover its withdrawal, Company I backed down the face of Hill 881

\* Lieutenant Thomas received the Navy Cross, posthumously, for the action on Hill 881 North.

North and returned to Hill 881 South at 1800. The company lost 7 killed and 35 wounded. While withdrawing, it estimated at least 100 dead North Vietnamese on the face of the hill.<sup>62\*</sup>

### *The Enemy Plan Unfolds*

While Company I battled what appeared to be a Communist battalion for Hill 881 North, a rather bizarre and fortuitous event took place at the combat base: the disclosure of the enemy plan for the attack on Khe Sanh. At 1400 on 20 January the 2d Platoon, Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines reported that a North Vietnamese soldier was waving a white flag near its position on the northeastern perimeter of the combat base. The company commander, Captain Kenneth W. Pipes, took a fire team approximately 500 meters outside the lines where the Communist soldier

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\* Army Colonel Bruce B. G. Clarke commented that on the 20th as well, the Army advisors at the district headquarters led a small force and patrolled an area to the south of the Khe Shan base, but withdrew to make way for a B-52 strike. Clarke Comments.

willingly surrendered. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel James B. Wilkinson, questioned the prisoner immediately after his capture and was "impressed by his eagerness to talk."<sup>63</sup>

The rallier,\*\* as he turned out to be, was Lieutenant La Thanh Tonc, the commanding officer of the *14th Antiaircraft Company, 95C Regiment, 325C Division*. He freely provided detailed information on the enemy's dispositions and plan of attack for Khe Sanh, including the fact that the North Vietnamese would attack Hill 861 that very night. Coming as it did on the heels of Company I's encounter with the enemy on nearby Hill 881 North, the information was plausible. Colonel Lownds dispatched an officer courier to 3d Marine Division headquarters with the information. The combat base and the hill positions were as ready as possible under the circumstances. There was nothing left to do but wait.<sup>64</sup>

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\*\*The term "rallier" was applied to North Vietnamese or Viet Cong who availed themselves of the "Chieu Hoi" ("Open Arms") program to defect to the Government of South Vietnam.

## CHAPTER 5

# The 3d Division War in Southern Quang Tri and Northern Thua Thien, Operations Osceola and Neosho

*Protecting the Quang Tri Base, Operation Osceola, 1–20 January 1968*  
*Operation Neosho and Operations in the CoBi-Thanh Tan, 1–20 January 1968—Operation Checkers*

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### *Protecting The Quang Tri Base, Operation Osceola, 1–20 January 1968*

Faced with the buildup of the North Vietnamese forces opposing them at the end of 1967, General Tompkins and the 3d Marine Division staff prepared for the forward deployment of the remaining division units in Operation Checkers from Thua Thien Province to Quang Tri, including the movement of the division command post from Phu Bai to Dong Ha. In turn, the 1st Marines in southern Quang Tri was to take over the 4th Marines TAOR in Thua Thien and then eventually revert to the control of the 1st Marine Division.

The 1st Marines had moved north from Da Nang in early October 1967 to reinforce the 3d Marine Division and conduct Operation Medina. Medina was a multi-battalion operation designed to clear the Hai Lang National Forest, located south and west of Quang Tri City and containing the enemy *Base Area 101*. *Base Area 101*, in the far southwestern reaches of the forest, extended down to and beyond the Quang Tri and Thua Thien provincial border, and was home to the *5th* and *9th* NVA Regiments. After offering resistance in a few heavy skirmishes during the first phase of the operation, enemy forces eluded the Marines for the rest of the operation.\* In the nearly impenetrable jungle terrain, the 1st Marines uncovered some enemy base camps and storage areas but no sign of NVA or VC troops. After confiscating more than four tons of enemy rice and miscellaneous weapons and ammunition, the Marines ended Operation Medina on 20 October and immediately began Osceola.<sup>1</sup>

In Osceola, the 1st Marines with two battalions, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, remained in the same objective area, but also

became responsible for the newly established Quang Tri base, near the city of Quang Tri. Out of North Vietnamese heavy artillery range, the Quang Tri base served as a backup to the main logistic base at Dong Ha and provided a new air facility for the Marine forces in the north. On 25 October, the first KC-130 transport aircraft landed at the Quang Tri Airfield.<sup>2</sup>

In command of the 1st Marines since July 1967, Colonel Herbert E. Ing, Jr., an experienced and decorated combat officer, viewed his Osceola mission differently than that of Medina. At the beginning of Osceola, American intelligence warned that the North Vietnamese were reorganizing for an offensive against Quang Tri City. Colonel Ing believed, however, that Operation Medina and ARVN supporting operations had thwarted any such plan. As a native Long Islander and former enlisted Marine who shrewdly selected his options, he took practical steps to safeguard the Quang Tri base and to cut down on his own casualties. Concentrating on defending the airbase rather than fruitless searches for enemy units in the jungle, Ing initiated a pacification campaign and organized an innovative anti-mine program.<sup>3</sup>

During Osceola, the 1st Marines only once engaged an enemy main force unit, the VC *808th Battalion*, at the edge of the Hai Lang National Forest near the Giang River, about four to five miles south of the Quang Tri base. The *808th* and the *416th VC Battalions* apparently alternated moving into the Quang Tri coastal region to disrupt the South Vietnamese government apparatus there. The VC employed at least three hamlets in the central portion of the Osceola operating area, Nhu Le, Nhan Bieu, and Thuong Phuoc, all on or near the Thach Han River, as way stations for their units travelling to and from the base areas into the populated coastal plain. Colonel Ing considered that securing or at least neutralizing these hamlets was absolutely vital to the success of his mission.<sup>4</sup>

Sustaining most of his casualties from mines and occasional sniper rounds, Colonel Ing, on 27 November 1967, established an infantry cordon around Nhu

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\*Colonel Gordon D. Batcheller, who as a captain commanded Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, observed that in the initial contact in Medina, the enemy more than held its own: "They were fast and agile and we were slow and clumsy. Terrain, vegetation, insufficient helo support had something to do with it." Col Gordon D. Batcheller, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 10Dec1994 (Vietnam Comment File).

Le and Thuong Phuoc. Believing Nhu Le as the focal point of the VC mining effort, Ing decided to install a permanent company patrol base in the hamlet, which resulted in a dramatic drop in mining and enemy incidents. On 15 December, however, the VC, using Nhan Bieu as a staging and harbor area, mortared the Quang Tri Airfield. The Marines then occupied that hamlet.<sup>5</sup>

Ing, earlier, had initiated Operation Minefind. In the first phase, the 1st Marines commander assigned a Marine infantry company, reinforced by several engineer mine detector teams, to a 1,000-meter area. While the infantry provided security, the mine detector teams would sweep the sector. During the second phase of Operation Minefind, Ing inaugurated an incentive program that appealed both to the Marines and the local civilian population. The regiment rewarded any Marine that uncovered a mine with four days rest and recreation (R&R) within country and placed no restrictions on the number of times that a Marine could receive such a reward. Using a full-fledged advertising campaign, including aerial broadcasts, dropping and passing out leaflets, and passing the word by mouth during Marine Med CAP (Medical Civilian Assistance Program) visits to the local hamlets, the 1st Marines promised money payments for all turned-in explosive devices.

This program soon gained positive results. In November, the 1st Marines reported that its "Mine Awards" strategy brought in 251 pieces of ordnance as compared to some 50 items before the regiment initiated the program. By the end of the year, Marines found over 300 explosive devices themselves and local civilians turned in another 370. Yet, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines soon discovered that at least in one hamlet, Thon Nai Bieu (2), the local children "experienced a prosperous business in exchanging grenades for reward money." The youngsters obtained grenades and other ammunition from the South Vietnamese Popular Force (PF) troops in the village and then brought them to the Marines and claimed their reward. Lieutenant Colonel William Weise, the battalion commander, quickly established liaison with the village chief and the practice became less flagrant.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the obvious potential for fraudulent claims, the program still saved lives. During the Christmas truce, for example, a nine-year-old boy approached the PFs in Thon Nai Bieu (2) where the 2d Battalion's Company G had set up defensive positions. Through an interpreter, he told the company commander, First Lieutenant Richard L. Harshman, that the VC had planted boobytraps. The boy then led the Marines to

the site where the troops uncovered a Chinese grenade and two antitank mines. In this case, Lieutenant Colonel Weise gladly presented the boy with a cash "Christmas gift."<sup>7</sup>

With two battalions assigned to him for Osceola, Colonel Ing had divided the area of operations into northern and southern sectors, largely demarcated by the Thach Han River. The northern battalion provided protection to the airfield while the southern battalion secured the avenues of approach. Ing used small reconnaissance teams to patrol the further reaches of the Osceola area under the protective cover of the attached artillery from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines. Occasionally the southern battalion would make a sortie into *Base Area 101* or into the Ba Long Valley, usually with only limited success.

During late December and early January there was a reshuffling of infantry battalions in the Osceola operating area. In the southern sector, Lieutenant Colonel Marcus J. Gravel's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines shortly before Christmas reverted to its parent regiment's control after a few months' stint at Con Thien. It relieved the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Evan L. Parker, Jr., which took over the Con Thien outpost. Shortly before New Year's Day, the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel Richard W. Goodale, formerly the SLF (Special Landing Force) battalion Alpha of the Seventh Fleet, left the operational control of the 9th Marines and came under the 1st Marines. At noon on 1 January, Lieutenant Colonel Goodale assumed command of the Osceola northern sector and responsibility for the security of the Quang Tri Airfield from Lieutenant Colonel Weise. Early on the morning of 2 January, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines transferred to the direct control of the 3d Marine Division in preparation for becoming the new battalion landing team (BLT) of SLF Alpha.<sup>8</sup>

This succession of units caused a minor disruption of operations, especially in the northern sector. With its pending departure, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines evacuated Nhan Bieu on 30 December. On 5 January, however, the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines reestablished a company-size patrol base near Nhan Bieu and the neighboring hamlet of An Don. The Company A commander, Captain David Hancock, formed a provisional rifle company consisting of his 2d and 3d Platoons reinforced by a South Vietnamese Popular Forces (PF) platoon from Mai Linh District. Hancock, together with an improvised command group, the battalion civil affairs officer, and an artillery forward observer team, linked up with the PFs and two South



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801101

*An aerial view in June 1968 shows a much more built-up Quang Tri base and airfield than that seen in January during Operation Osceola. The Thach Han River can be seen in the background and Route 1 and a secondary road in the foreground.*

Vietnamese Armed Propaganda Teams at the Quang Tri bridge spanning the Thach Han River on Route 1. By 1830, the combined force had established its base area and constructed its night defensive positions. The company was to conduct “extensive operations in this area to destroy guerrilla forces and the local infrastructure.”<sup>9</sup>

On this same date, the battalion’s Company B, under Captain Thomas A. Scheib, in its sector about 2,000 meters to the west of Nhan Bieu, came under heavy machine gun fire. The Marines returned the fire and killed at least one of the enemy. In the search for the enemy weapon, the Americans found the VC body, some miscellaneous clothing, and an AK-47 rifle. During the survey of the enemy effects, one Marine tripped a wire and detonated an attached

block of TNT. The explosion resulted in one seriously wounded Marine, who was evacuated by helicopter to Quang Tri.<sup>10</sup>

The continued occupation of Nhan Bieu and Nhu Le appeared to stabilize the situation for Lieutenant Colonel Goodale in his base defense mission. Together with the South Vietnamese village chiefs and district officials, the Marines instituted an extensive civil affairs and psychological operations campaign, which according to the 1st Marines, “showed every sign of being a success.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet, areas of ambiguity continued to exist. On the night of 10 January, Captain Hancock staked out two ambushes near Nhan Bieu. About 2315, one of them reported movement and requested illumination. The Marines saw six shadowy figures enter a tree line.

About then, the other Marine outpost received incoming small arms fire and someone threw a grenade into their positions. The Marines responded with their own salvo, including M-79 rounds. In the confusion and darkness, the enemy broke contact and slipped away. The next morning, the Nhan Bieu hamlet chief notified Captain Hancock that the VC had murdered a villager during the night. A subsequent investigation disclosed that the 60-year old man may have died as a result of "friendly fire." Many questions still remained: What was he doing in the woods during the night and why did the village chief blame the killing on the enemy? There probably were no good answers.<sup>12</sup>

While maintaining a presence in the hamlets, Lieutenant Colonel Goodale attempted to keep the enemy off balance with an occasional excursion into the foothills and numerous river valleys in his western sector. In one typical such operation on 14 January, Goodale launched a two-company "hammer and anvil" assault against a suspected enemy main force battalion in the area. At 0730, the battalion command group together with Company D, "the anvil," occupied the hamlet of Ai Tu about 2,000 meters west of the airfield. Company D then moved another 2,000 meters further west and settled into a blocking position in the high ground along a secondary road, Route 604, leading off Route 1, and south of the Vinh Phuoc River. The "hammer" company, Company B, located 2,000 meters south, then advanced along a stream bed to the north, hoping to smash any Viet Cong or NVA against Company D.

Shortly after beginning its advance, Company B encountered small arms fire, about 30 rounds, from its front. The Marines responded with their M-16s and 60mm mortars. After progressing another 2,000 meters without resistance, the company again engaged the VC, in this instance calling upon artillery support. At the same time, about 0900, the Viet Cong hit a Company D position with about 20 rounds. Fifteen minutes later, members of a Marine Combined Action Platoon (CAP), attached to Company B for the operation, saw seven North Vietnamese soldiers in the open, carrying weapons and packs, attempting to flank the advancing Marines. The CAP warned Company B and called artillery down upon the enemy troops. Company B received some sniper fire from its rear, but otherwise met no further opposition. By noon, the two Marine companies had linked together. The casualty scoreboard was about even: the Marines sustained one wounded man from Company B and found no enemy bodies.<sup>13</sup>

The reconnaissance Marines attached to the 1st Marines and the southern battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, played much the same "cat and mouse" game with the NVA and VC, occasionally with more success. On 2 January, Gravel conducted a two-company operation about three to five miles southwest of Quang Tri City just north of the Thach Han River. Acting on intelligence that a NVA battalion commander, a Captain Minh Chau of the *4th Quyet Tien Battalion*, had established his command post in Thuong Phuoc on the northern bank of the river, the Marine battalion secured the hamlet. A search for the NVA command group proved fruitless, but the battalion, based on its intelligence information, uncovered an NVA "harbor" site in the hills about three miles west of Thuong Phuoc. The site contained a kitchen and a personnel bunker large enough to accommodate nine persons. After destroying the enemy site, the Marines returned to their base area. During the operation, a Company C patrol near a bend in the river saw 13 enemy troops in green uniforms and took them under both rifle and artillery fire, killing at least one. In his January report, the battalion intelligence officer noted that during the day the battalion sighted some 57 enemy at ranges of 500 meters or more and brought them under artillery fire. The battalion claimed killing 10 of the enemy, although these figures are not confirmed in the regimental account.<sup>14</sup>

Two days later, on 4 January, a reconnaissance team from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion at 1415 engaged about 12 NVA in about the same area where the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines' operation on 14 January took place. The team killed two of the enemy, recovered two AK-47 rifles, a pistol, a pair of binoculars, a wallet containing 5,500 piasters, and miscellaneous papers, rice, and clothing.<sup>15</sup>

On the 14th, another team from the 3d Force Reconnaissance Company, perched on the high ground overlooking the Thach Han River, saw about 30 NVA "with full equipment, helmets, and heavy packs" and one .50-caliber machine gun moving south towards the river. The Marines called an airstrike on the enemy, but were unable to observe the results. These NVA may have been from the same North Vietnamese units that were attempting to evade the two 1st Battalion, 3d Marines companies to the north.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the operation, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel's 1st Battalion continued to see daily enemy troop movement in small groups of two to eight in the rolling hills south of its combat base at Lang Va, north along the Thach Han River, and across the river in the



Marines saw another 10 NVA in the open and took them under mortar, grenades, and small arms fire. The result was another dead enemy. Company C apparently intercepted an enemy force either trying to enter Hai Le or more likely, trying to reach the river for operations closer to Quang Tri City.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the sudden flurry of activity, Operation Osceola for the 1st Marines was drawing to a close. The operation officially terminated at midnight on the 20th.<sup>20</sup> For the entire operation, the 1st Marines reported killing 76 enemy troops, 21 of them during January, at a cost of 17 dead Marines and 199 wounded. In addition, the Marines took prisoner one VC and three NVA. From 1 to 20 January, the Marines sustained casualties of 26 wounded and no dead as compared to 7 dead and 70 wounded during December. The December figures were somewhat skewed by the mortar attack on the airfield which accounted for 1 of the dead and 40 of the wounded. Despite the relatively few enemy dead, Colonel Ing considered the operation a success. He pointed to his "Operation Minefind" which accumulated 377 explosive devices uncovered by Marines and another 370 pieces of ordnance brought in by civilians. Ing believed that this program together with the occupation of key hamlets and constant patrolling rendered "a most effective enemy weapon virtually ineffective and drastically reduced the number of Marine casualties incurred as a result of mines." Most significantly, with the one exception of the mortar attack on the airfield, the 1st Marines protected the increasingly important Quang Tri base with its growing logistic facilities from enemy attack. Although enemy units in the Quang Tri sector were on the move, they seemed deliberately to avoid Marine patrols and positions.<sup>21</sup>

*Operation Neosho and Operations in the  
CoBi-Thanh Tan, 1–20 January 1968*

Further south, in the CoBi-Thanh Tan sector of northern Thua Thien Province, during January, the remaining 3d Marine Division regiment, the 4th Marines at Camp Evans, was winding up Operation Neosho. Like Osceola and the DMZ codenamed operations, Neosho was a permanent area of operations rather than a tactical campaign with short-term objectives. Marine units had been operating in the CoBi-Thanh Tan since the spring of 1966 and the 4th Marines had established its command post at Camp Evans in December of that year. In 1967, the regiment continued to run operations in the region,

changing the name designation from time to time for the usual reporting and record-keeping purposes. On 1 November 1967, Operation Fremont became Operation Neosho with the same units and in the same area of operations.<sup>22</sup>

The area of operations stretched from the My Chanh River south to the river Bo, a distance of some 14 miles. From west to east, from the fringes of the enemy *Base Area 114* to Route 1, the sector consisted of 17 miles of jungled mountainous and hilly terrain. East of the Marine operating area lay the infamous "Street Without Joy," a coastal strip of interlocking hamlets extending 20 miles north and south.\* Since the days of the French War against the Viet Minh, the "Street" had been a Communist bastion. The enemy had long used the CoBi-Thanh Tan Valley, the opening of which was located seven miles south of the Phong Dien district capital, Phong Dien City, as the avenue of approach from their mountain base area into the "Street Without Joy." From Camp Evans near Route 1, three miles south of Phong Dien, the 4th Marines could sortie into the valley to impede the movement of NVA and VC regulars into the coastal lowlands. The regiment also maintained manned outposts on two pieces of strategic ground. These were Hill 51, about 4,000 meters north of the valley opening, and Hill 674, about 2,000 meters south of the valley. From Hill 674, which dominated the surrounding peaks, the Marines had established a radio relay station to ensure adequate voice communication within the operating area.

On 1 November 1967, at the start of Operation Neosho, Colonel William L. Dick, the 4th Marines commander, a veteran of four World War II campaigns including Iwo Jima, had three infantry battalions and one artillery battery under his operational control. At Camp Evans, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines provided security for the regimental command post, the artillery battalion, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, and supporting forces. The two remaining infantry battalions, BLT 1/3, the SLF Alpha battalion, and the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, were conducting a subsidiary operation to Neosho, Operation Granite, south of CoBi-Thanh Tan, and west of Hill 674.<sup>23</sup>

In Granite, the Marines encountered their stiffest opposition during Operation Neosho in 1967. With its 1st Battalion under its command together with the

\* "The Street Without Joy" also refers to that portion of Route 1 from Quang Tri to Hue as well as the coastal strip. See Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Company, 4th edition, 1965), pp. 144–47.



Photo from 12th Mar ComdC, Jan69

*An aerial view of Camp Evans (in and below the cross hairs) in the CoBi-Thanh Tan sector was taken a year after Operation Neosho. Like the Quang Tri Base, Evans had expanded during the period, but one can see Route 1 in the foreground and the main road network.*

attached SLF battalion, the 4th Marines attempted to penetrate the NVA Base Area 114. According to allied intelligence, the base area contained both the headquarters of the 6th NVA Regiment and the Tri Thien Hue Front. Operating in the inhospitable approaches to the enemy base area from 25 October through 6 November 1967, the Marine units brushed up against two battalions of the 6th NVA Regiment, the 800th and 802d. In scattered, but hard-fought skirmishes, the Marines took casualties of 25 killed and more than 80 wounded while accounting for approximately 20 NVA dead and recovering 7 enemy weapons. According to the regimental report, "the enemy employed delaying tactics utilizing the terrain and vegetation to his advantage." Sergeant Ron Asher with Company C, BLT 1/3 remembered that the "last few nights were bad. Not only wet and leeches, but constant harassing and probing at very close ranges."<sup>24</sup>

After the close of Operation Granite, the 4th Marines had a reduced number of battalions available to it for Neosho. The SLF battalion deployed to Quang Tri Province and transferred to the operational control of the 9th Marines. After a three-company

sweep south of the Bo River back into the CoBi-Thanh Tan, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines and a command group of the 4th Marines conducted Operation Cove from 18 through 21 November in the Phu Loc sector south of Phu Bai. Upon its return from Phu Bai to Camp Evans on 22 November, the 1st Battalion immediately departed for Dong Ha where it also came under the 9th Marines. At the same time, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines arrived at Camp Evans and relieved the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines for the defense of the base and manning the outposts on Hills 51 and 674. The 3d Battalion then in conjunction with the ARVN returned to the CoBi-Thanh Tan where it conducted small-unit patrols and company-size sweeps. On 13 December, the battalion rejoined its parent regiment at Khe Sanh to counter the enemy buildup there. Neosho now consisted of the 4th Marines headquarters, detachments from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, the artillery battalion, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, and only one infantry battalion, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the relatively low casualty figures on both sides recorded in Operation Neosho through the end of

December, both General Tompkins, the 3d Marine Division commander, and Colonel Dick remained concerned about enemy intentions in both the CoBi-Thanh Tan corridor and in the coastal region of northern Thua Thien Province, especially in the "Street Without Joy" sector. The total of 24 enemy dead in Neosho at a cost of 4 Marines killed and 66 wounded reflected neither the casualties in Operation Granite nor the SLF Bravo operation Badger Tooth. Badger Tooth took place in the "Street" from 26–28 December in and near the coastal hamlet of Thom Tham Khe just north of the Quang Tri-Thua Thien border. In the operation, the SLF battalion, BLT 3/1, suffered 48 dead and 86 wounded while inflicting only 30 casualties on the enemy.\* To the southwest in Neosho, furthermore, Marine reconnaissance patrols continued to report the heavy movement of enemy forces eastward through the CoBi-Thanh Tan. One battalion of the NVA 6th Regiment, the 802d Battalion, had supposedly departed the valley for the Phu Loc District south of Phu Bai. The other battalions of the regiment remained in the CoBi-Thanh Tan either to screen the approaches to *Base Area 114* or to move into the coastal lowlands when the opportunity presented itself.<sup>26</sup>

At the end of December 1967, General Tompkins provided General Cushman, the III MAF commander, his thoughts about the situation in the CoBi-Thanh Tan and the "Street Without Joy" sectors. He recommended that Cushman obtain the authorization for another SLF operation in the Badger Tooth area to "upset long range plans of *Tri Thien Hue* forces in the coastal area and along routes to their vital base area 114." According to Tompkins' plan, the SLF battalion would land around 6 January 1968 in the former Badger Tooth amphibious operational area (AOA) and stay about five days there. The BLT then would come under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division and

4th Marines and move into the CoBi-Thanh Tan corridor. It would remain in the valley for another nine days to disrupt the continuing infiltration of the NVA regulars into the coastal lowlands. Tompkins mentioned some 27 sightings in the past month of enemy troop movements in the CoBi-Thanh Tan, some consisting of forces as large as 150 to 450 men.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the obvious increase of enemy activity in the CoBi-Thanh Tan, neither III MAF nor the Seventh Fleet had the capability of reinforcing the 4th Marines there at the beginning of the year. SLF Alpha was in the midst of an exchange of units while BLT 3/1, the SLF Bravo battalion, had taken heavy casualties in the Badger Tooth operation and needed time to recuperate. With the buildup of enemy forces along the DMZ and near Khe Sanh, General Cushman had few units to spare for operations in the CoBi-Thanh Tan.

At the beginning of 1968, Colonel Dick, the 4th Marines commander, had little choice but to continue the same mode of operations in Neosho that he had used since the departure of the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines to Khe Sanh. He later credited the 15th Interrogation and Translation Team (ITT), headed by Staff Sergeant Dennis R. Johnson, which had a small facility at Camp Evans, for providing much needed intelligence through a network of village chiefs.<sup>28</sup>

The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel John F. Mitchell, continued to man outposts on Hills 51 and 674, provide company-size reaction forces when needed, and conduct sweeps along Route 1 and "saturation patrolling and ambushing in known avenues of approach within 5,000 meters of the Camp Evans perimeter." Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell remembered that he received "detailed briefings" from Colonel Dick and the 4th Marines staff on the situation and terrain. The battalion worked with the village chiefs to improve security in the sector. Mitchell assigned one of his companies to work directly with the local militia force, a Regional Force company. The RFs would raid suspected VC hamlets, while the Marines made up the blocking force. While the technique often resulted in prisoners and captured documents, Mitchell later admitted that to be truly successful it required "longevity, stability, continuity, and prior training of Marine personnel," conditions which "did not exist at this time of the war."<sup>29</sup>

The 4th Marines relied heavily on the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion detachments for the deeper insertions to monitor enemy movement, especially in the CoBi-Thanh Tan corridor. Although the reconnais-

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\*Colonel John F. Mitchell, who as a lieutenant colonel commanded the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at the time, remembered that his Company A was supposed to link up with BLT 3/1 in Badger Tooth at a river crossing about 10 kilometers from the SLF landing site. Helicopters lifted the Marine company into its objective area, but the SLF unit had to abort its part of the mission after the fire fight in Thom Tham Khe. With the permission of Colonel Dick, Mitchell took a reinforced platoon from his Company D and mounted tracked vehicles provided by an ARVN armored unit and "blitzed 9,000 meters into the sand dunes." With this support, Company A was able to disengage from a VC force and return to Camp Evans. According to Mitchell, Colonel Dick called this operation "Rommel's War." Col John F. Mitchell, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 5Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File). See also Col William L. Dick, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 1Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Dick Comments.

sance Marines enjoyed some success in calling in artillery and air to disrupt the infiltration of the North Vietnamese regulars, the enemy had begun to take effective countermeasures. The worst incident occurred on 2 January 1968. That day about 0900, under cover of a slight drizzle and morning fog, a Marine helicopter inserted an eight-man patrol from Company A, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion on a hill near the CoBi-Thanh Tan ridgeline, about 8,000 meters southeast of Camp Evans. The hill offered in good weather an excellent view of the valley and Route 554, which served the NVA as a natural infiltration route into the coastal region. The specific missions of the patrol were to determine the nature of enemy activity in the area, call in artillery and air on targets of opportunity, and, if possible, take a prisoner.<sup>30</sup>

The patrol maintained its outpost on an outcropping of the hill. In the belief that the two-foot-high elephant grass on the knoll concealed their presence, the Marines failed to lay out claymore mines, but did deploy in a circular defensive perimeter. In an eight-hour period, the Marines only saw enemy movement on two occasions. In the first, about an hour after arriving at their outpost, they sighted one enemy soldier, who filled his canteen at a nearby stream, and then continued on in a southwest direction. About five hours later, five more North Vietnamese soldiers came into view along the same route as the first. Well-camouflaged with brush, the "enemy appeared to fall down and disappear from view."<sup>31</sup>

For another two hours, the Marines observed no enemy activity. As evening came on, about 1715, the patrol unexpectedly came under attack. Under cover of a grenade barrage and heavy machine gun fire, about 10 to 15 enemy soldiers rushed the Marine positions. Completely taken by surprise, the Americans responded with their own automatic weapons and grenades, "but initial casualties reduced effective return fire." Still, the Marines saw three enemy soldiers felled by their counterfire. The patrol called in an "on call" artillery mission, but was unable to determine its effectiveness.<sup>32</sup>

Of the eight men in the defensive perimeter on the hill, only two survived. Marine Private First Class James P. Brown recalled that "things happened so fast—the enemy was all around us." The other survivor, the patrol radioman, Marine Private First Class James S. Underdue, remembered that he rolled over to attend to the wounds of a downed comrade when a bullet grazed his temple. His sudden movement probably saved his life. At that point, the patrol leader, a corpo-

ral, yelled for the remaining men to get out the best they could. As Underdue moved away, a grenade blast killed the corporal. Underdue and Brown both took refuge in a bomb crater about 200 meters down the hill. From the crater, they saw U.S. helicopters circling overhead. According to Underdue, they tried to attract the attention of the pilots by waving a green undershirt but that action failed to do so: "One chopper landed briefly and we thought they had spotted us. But they took off again. I suppose the canopy was too thick." Shortly afterward a Marine air observer reported that he saw the bodies of six Marines on the hill.<sup>33</sup>

After the departure of the helicopter, Underdue and Brown took off in the direction of Camp Evans. Although without a compass, the sound of American artillery provided a bearing for the two Marines. The artillery bombardment soon intensified and the two men "burrowed a hole and settled down to wait." Brown recalled, "several times I thought I heard people approaching us but it was shrapnel whistling through the undergrowth." They waited for the artillery to stop and then continued on. Private First Class Underdue remembered, "the most we stopped for was a minute to catch our breath. We had no water and hadn't eaten in two days."<sup>34</sup>

The morning of the following day, 3 January, the two men crossed an open paddy and then saw what they believed to be "a column of troops" on the crest of a nearby hill. The hill was actually Hill 51 manned by Marines of Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. About the same time Underdue and Brown spotted the Marines on the hill, a lookout from Company B on the outpost sighted them and "reported two unidentified personnel." The company commander, Captain Robert T. Bruner, then sent out a patrol to determine if they were VC or friendly. For a short period, the survivors and the Marine patrol played a "cat and mouse game." Forging a small stream, Underdue and Brown suddenly came face-to-face with the point man of the Company B patrol. According to Brown, "for a moment it looked as if he were going to open up on us. They seemed just as nervous and scared as we were." Within 40 minutes, the two reconnaissance Marines were back at Camp Evans.<sup>35</sup>

At this point, Colonel Dick ordered Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell, the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, to recover the bodies and equipment of the ill-fated reconnaissance patrol. In turn, Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell directed Captain Francis L. Shafer, Jr., the Company D commander, maintaining a patrol base near Route 554, about 7,000

meters west of Hill 51, to carry out the mission. Reinforced by an engineer team and a forward air control team, two Company D platoons on 4 January boarded Marine CH-46s to accomplish the grisly task. Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell himself boarded the command helicopter, accompanied the mission, and picked the landing zone. While one platoon went into a landing zone near where the reconnaissance team was overrun, the other remained airborne ready to assist the second platoon if necessary. The first platoon found all six bodies and most of the equipment undisturbed by the enemy. Two M-16s and two radios were missing. Loading the dead men and their gear on the helicopters, the Company D Marines returned to their patrol base while the CH-46s took the bodies and equipment back for identification and examination.<sup>36</sup>

While the Company D Marines encountered no enemy troops, they found ample evidence that the attack on the reconnaissance Marines was not a chance encounter. From the fresh shell craters near the site, it was obvious the enemy had used mortars to support the infantry. The failure of the reconnaissance Marines to move from their initial "insertion point" permitted the enemy time "to adequately prepare for the attack." After interviewing the survivors, the Marine debriefer concluded that the enemy force that so carefully planned the ambush was "the most highly trained unit yet encountered by Recon teams on the CoBi-Thanh Tan Ridge." He believed that the effectiveness of previous Marine reconnaissance patrols in the sector and the calling in of artillery on enemy units moving in the valley "prompted this enemy counter-reconnaissance action."<sup>37</sup>

Despite the disastrous results of the reconnaissance patrol of 2 January, the 4th Marines continued to monitor and inflict as much punishment as it could upon the enemy units infiltrating into the coastal region. On 7 January, a Marine aerial observer directed fixed-wing and artillery strikes against enemy bunkers and troops in the CoBi-Thanh Tan, about 2,000 meters southeast of Hill 51 resulting in a secondary explosion. The following day, Company A, under the command of Captain Henry J. M. Radcliffe, thwarted an attempt of the Communists to interdict Route 1, about 5,000 meters east of Hill 51. After studying available intelligence and previous mining incidents with Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell and the battalion intelligence officer, Radcliffe had established a squad ambush in a known enemy infiltration route into the Marine area of operations. Close to midnight, the VC triggered the ambush. The Marines killed five

of the enemy, took two prisoners, and captured two 150-pound bombs that the VC were transporting for use as "surprise explosive devices on Route 1 in the vicinity of Camp Evans."<sup>38</sup>

For the next week and a half, the Marine operations in Neosho followed the same pattern. For example, on 15 January, an aerial observer controlled both airstrikes and artillery in the eastern edge of the CoBi-Thanh Tan on an enemy-held fortified hamlet on the west bank of the Bo River. The bombardment resulted in two secondary explosions, the death of seven enemy troops, and the destruction of five bunkers. Four days later, 19 January, about 4,000 meters south of Hill 51, a Company C squad in an ambush site observed about 36 North Vietnamese moving along Route 554. The squad leader reported the sighting to his company commander on Hill 51, Captain John W. Craigle. Craigle dispatched two more squads to intercept the NVA. An aerial observer in a fixed-wing spotter aircraft arrived overhead and called an artillery mission on the enemy. The two Marine squads then "deployed on line" and "swept the area." After a brief firefight, the North Vietnamese "broke contact and moved south into the mountains." The enemy left behind six bodies, one AK-47 and several documents. The documents confirmed the Communist supply routes in the CoBi-Thanh Tan. Finally, on the following day, 20 January, Marines captured an NVA sergeant and two VC officials, who "pinpointed Viet Cong and NVA supply routes, methods and times of resupply, enemy movement and other important tactical information of Viet Cong and NVA activity in the CoBi-Thanh Tan Valley."<sup>39</sup>

The 4th Marines was about to close out Operation Neosho. Through 20 January, the regiment accounted for 53 enemy dead during the month at a cost of 4 Marines killed and 34 wounded. The total results for Neosho, not including the figures for Operations Granite or Badger Tooth, were 77 enemy dead, 9 prisoners, and 10 captured weapons. Marines sustained a total of 12 dead and 100 wounded. Although the 4th Marines somewhat hampered the enemy infiltration through the CoBi-Thanh Tan, the regiment was hardly in a position to prevent it.\* According to Colonel Dick, the regimental commander, "We were fighting on their [NVA] terms . . . , [and the] enemy was willing to pay the price."<sup>40</sup>

\*Colonel Dick several years later remembered that although he did not know the specific numbers of enemy moving through the valley, they were very large. He wrote: "Groups of several hundred [NVA or VC] were repeatedly sighted" by one regimental outpost alone. Dick Comments.

*Operation Checkers*

By this time, Operation Checkers in the 3d Marine Division was in full swing. On 15 January, Major General Tompkins turned over the responsibility of the Phu Bai TAOR to the 1st Marine Division Task Force X-Ray and moved his command post to Dong Ha. He left behind at Phu Bai newly arrived Brigadier General Jacob E. Glick, the former commander of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade (MAB) on Okinawa, who had just replaced Brigadier General Lewis Metzger as the assistant division commander. At Phu Bai, Glick had command of the 3d Division rear headquarters and support units, which he was to move to the Quang Tri base at the beginning of February.

With the implementation of Operation Checkers, the Marine regiments in the division began playing a version of musical chairs. The 4th Marines in Operation Neosho in Thua Thien Province was to take over Operation Lancaster in the central DMZ sector from the 3d Marines. In turn, the 3d Marines was to accept responsibility for the Osceola area. The 1st Marines was then to move its command post to Camp Evans and undertake operations in the Neosho sector.<sup>41</sup>

Since the beginning of the month, the three regiments had made preparations for the forthcoming move. For example, on 6 January, the 1st Marines commander, Colonel Ing, issued his order relative to the transplacement of tactical areas. From 6–20 January, armed “rough rider” truck convoys ferried his headquarters staff sections and attached detachments from the 1st Tank Battalion, 1st Engineer Battalion, the 1st Shore Party Battalion, 1st Medical Battalion, the 1st Motor Transport Battalion, and the 1st Battalion, 11th

Marines the approximate 20 miles to Camp Evans. Battery A and the Mortar Battery from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines also made the move. At 0940 on 20 January, the 1st Marines opened its new command post and assumed operational control of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at Evans. At the same time, Colonel Ing turned over to Colonel Joseph E. Lo Prete of the 3d Marines the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, which both remained in the Osceola area of operations. At Camp Carroll, Colonel Dick, the 4th Marines commander, took control of the 2d and 3d Battalions, 9th Marines and began Operation Lancaster II.<sup>42\*</sup>

Events once more altered plans as MACV and III MAF shifted units and rushed reinforcements to meet the perceived threat to Marine positions along the DMZ and to Khe Sanh. The resulting reshuffling of units would make the original Checkers plan almost unrecognizable. In northern Thua Thien Province and southern Quang Tri Provinces, the Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division would establish a new area of operations and in effect provide the filler between the 1st and 3d Marine Divisions. In central and southern I Corps, both the 1st Marine Division and the U.S. Army Americal Division attempted to fill the gaps with diminishing manpower resources.

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\*While the command chronologies of the 1st and 4th Marines denote that the 1st Marines assumed command of the Neosho sector on 20 January, both Colonels Dick and Mitchell remembered that Colonel Dick was still at Camp Evans on 22 January when the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines deployed to Khe Sanh. 1st Mar ComdC, Jan68; 4th Mar ComdC, Jan68; Dick Comments; Mitchell Comments. See Chapters 6 and 14 relative to the deployment of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines to Khe Sanh.

## CHAPTER 6

# Heavy Fighting and Redeployment: The War in Central and Southern I Corps, January 1968

*A Time of Transition—The Da Nang TAOR—Operation Auburn: Searching the Go Noi—A Busy Night at Da Nang—Continuing Heavy Fighting and Increasing Uncertainty—Phu Loc Operations  
The Formation and Deployment of Task Force X-Ray—The Cavalry Arrives  
The Changed Situation in the North*

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### *A Time of Transition*

In January 1968, Army and Marine units in central and southern I Corps under III MAF attempted to continue operations as best they could in their old sectors while at the same time moving into new tactical areas to counter enemy buildups. As the 3d Marine Division planned to displace from Phu Bai to Dong Ha, the 1st Marine Division began to implement its segment of Operation Checkers. One battalion of the 5th Marines at Da Nang, the 1st Battalion, in December had moved north from positions in the Dai Loc Corridor south of Da Nang in Quang Nam Province to Phu Loc in Thua Thien Province. In the meantime, the 2d Korean Marine Brigade had started its displacement from Cap Batangan in northern Quang Ngai Province, 17 miles south of Chu Lai, to positions north of Hoi An in the Da Nang area of operations.

The U.S. Army's 23d Division, also known as the Americal Division, had the responsibility for the 100-mile expanse of southern I Corps extending from the Hoi An River in Quang Nam Province to the border with II Corps at Sa Huyen in Quang Ngai Province. Formed in Vietnam at Chu Lai from the U.S. Army's Task Force Oregon in September 1967, the division held three primary operating areas: Duc Pho in the south, Chu Lai in the center, and the Que Son Valley in the north. Assuming the command of the division in September, Major General Samuel B. Koster, USA, maintained a rather informal command relationship with General Cushman. Several years later, Koster remembered that he would visit the III MAF commander at Da Nang once a week "to tell him what we were doing." Although nominally under the operational control of the Marine command, the Army division commander stated, "I got the distinct feeling that [I was] to work my TAOR as I saw fit." General Cushman later asserted that he treated the Army division the same as he did Marine

units, but admitted that General Westmoreland would not "let me move his Army divisions without there being a plan that he'd okayed."<sup>1\*</sup>

Command relations between the Korean Marine Brigade and the U.S. forces under General Cushman in I Corps were more complicated yet. Neither the III MAF commander nor his division commanders had operational control of the Koreans. The phrase "operational guidance" supposedly defined the relationship between the Korean brigade and III MAF, but, according to Cushman, the term "meant absolutely nothing . . . They [the Koreans] didn't do a thing unless they felt like it." Major General Koster recalled that the Korean Brigade, while assigned to the Batangan Peninsula in the Americal Division area of operations, built large "solid compounds," but "seldom launched 'big operations.'" When the Korean Marines began their deployment to Da Nang, Brigadier General Kim Yun Sang, the Korean commander, agreed that the first battalion to arrive would receive "operational direction" from the U.S. 5th Marines until the rest of the brigade completed the move. Yet, Major General Donn J. Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, later observed that he "had no command control" over the Koreans and was "not sure how much the MAF commander had." According to Robertson, the Koreans operated very cautiously and he suspected that they were under orders through their own chain of command "to keep casualties down."<sup>2</sup>

Although III MAF command arrangements with the South Vietnamese in I Corps were also complex, they were less awkward. As senior U.S. advisor in I Corps, General Cushman had more influence with General Lam, the South Vietnamese I Corps comman-

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\*General Earl E. Anderson, who was the III MAF Chief of Staff at this time, emphasized that General Westmoreland, for example, "directed Cushman not to move the 3d Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division without his support." Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371163

*A Korean Marine lies in position with his M16 with fixed bayonet at the ready during a combined operation with U.S. forces. III MAF exercised an unsure command relationship with the 2d Korean Marine Brigade, which had moved up in January from the Chu Lai area to Hoi An in the Da Nang sector.*

der, than he had with the Koreans. Despite not having operational control of South Vietnamese units, the Marines under the guise of coordination and cooperation since 1965 had devised several informal working agreements with local units. As Cushman later declared: "General Lam and I got along well both personally and socially . . . we went through some battles together and that made for mutual respect."<sup>3</sup>

In the extensive and heavily populated Da Nang area of operations, the III MAF elaborate civic action and pacification campaign made for a very close relationship with the South Vietnamese units in the sector. The South Vietnamese Quang Da Special Zone command shared the Da Nang TAOR with the 1st Marine Division. Colonel Nguyen Duy Hinh, the Quang Da Special Zone commander, controlled both the 51st ARVN Regiment and the 59th Regional Force (RF) Battalion. While American advisors had doubts about the commanding officer of the 59th RF Battalion, they rated both Colonel Hinh and Colonel Truong Tan Thuc, the commanding officer of the 51st, very highly. U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel W. Ray Bradley, the senior advisor to the 51st, considered "Thuc as the most effective commander he had ever known." Bradley credited Thuc with "turning around" the 51st and responsible for much of the progress in the South Vietnamese Revolutionary Development Program in the Da Nang area. According to Marine pacification standards, government forces controlled only 40 out of 112 villages in the TAOR but over 61 percent of the population.<sup>4</sup>

The Americal Division relations with the ARVN 2d Division in the southern two provinces of I Corps, Quang Tin and Quang Ngai, were more distant. As Major General Koster, the Americal Division commander, noted, the 2d ARVN Division "seldom worked with us—occasionally they would be brought in as a blocking [force]." Although General Cushman observed that Colonel Nguyen Van Toan, the acting division commander, was not as able a commander as General Truong of the 1st Division, Toan "was adequate." The III MAF commander suggested that Toan's talents were more political than military.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most unique connection between III MAF and the South Vietnamese authorities was the Combined Action Program (CAP). The program consisted of the attachment of the equivalent of a Marine infantry squad and its corpsman to a South Vietnamese Popular Forces platoon in a local hamlet or village. At the end of 1967, III MAF had 27 officers, 1,079 enlisted Marines, and 94 Navy corpsmen assigned to these units. They were organized into 3 Combined Action groups, 14 companies, and 79 platoons. Except for six in northern Quang Tri Province, the remaining 73 Combined Action platoons were located in the other four provinces of I Corps.\*

Since the summer of 1967, the Combined Action Program came directly under III MAF rather than the individual divisions. As Director of the Combined Action Program, Lieutenant Colonel Byron F. Brady reported directly to Major General Raymond L. Murray, the Deputy Commander, III MAF. Brady coordinated and loosely controlled each of the three Combined Action groups. He made liaison with the various Army, Korean, and Marine commanders for "fire support, reaction forces, patrols, and ambushes." At the group and company level, the Combined Action Program largely consisted of administrative and logistic support. The heart of the program, however, was the individual Combined Action platoon, usually headed by a U.S. Marine sergeant and a Vietnamese Popular Forces platoon commander. Nominally, the Marine sergeant was the advisor to the Vietnamese leader. In actuality, they often shared command responsibility, depending upon the personal relationship between the two. Operationally, the platoon came under the South Vietnamese district chief, but relied heavily on the U.S. or allied infantry battalion in its sector for fire support and reinforce-

\*See Chapter 29 for a more detailed account of the Combined Action Program.



Photo courtesy of Igor Bobrowsky

*Marines and South Vietnamese Regional Force troops of Combined Action Platoon D-1 patrol near the hamlet of Thanh Quit south of Da Nang. These platoons were the cutting edge of the Combined Action Program, which integrated a Marine squad with South Vietnamese militia (Popular or Regional Forces) in the surrounding villages and hamlets.*

ment. In many respects, these semi-isolated CAPs were the frontline of the Marine war in the villages and hamlets, the target of nearly 40 percent of the enemy attacks in I Corps in November and December 1967. They were among the first to indicate an enemy buildup in the Da Nang and Phu Loc sectors.<sup>6</sup>

By the end of 1967, the allies in I Corps had developed a rather sophisticated analysis apparatus for the collection and processing of local intelligence. The core of this collection effort was the District Operations and Intelligence Center (DOIC). Each center consisted of representatives from the South Vietnamese district-level government structure including the ARVN district S-2 officer, National Police, and Revolutionary Development cadre. A U.S. MACV/III MAF liaison team provided technical expertise. The establishment of 14 such centers since August permitted the analysis and supposedly rapid dissemination of time-sensitive intelligence to those South Vietnamese and allied civilian agencies and military units and agencies able to take action. For example, in November 1967, the Dien Ban center provided information to the National Police that led to the arrest of

64 members of the VC Hoi An infrastructure and the capture of significant enemy planning documents.<sup>7\*</sup>

From various sources, III MAF received reports in December 1967 that the enemy was massing his forces in I Corps. There was the buildup of enemy forces at Khe Sanh and the eastern DMZ. In the CoBi-Thanh Tan region the 4th Marines and South Vietnamese sources reported the southeastward movement of elements of the 6th NVA Regiment and the appearance of a new regiment, the 4th NVA, in the Phu Loc sector south of Phu Bai. Of even more concern to the 1st Marine Division and the Americal Division was the forward deployment of the 2d NVA Division north into

\*Lieutenant Colonel Oliver W. van den Berg, Jr., who commanded the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines at Da Nang in November 1967, remembered that a sniper team attached to his Company A "killed a VC courier and his armed escort at 700 meters." According to van den Berg, the courier carried a large bag of documents "which included a pay roster and many other documents." Lieutenant Colonel van den Berg wrote that all of this was turned over to intelligence personnel and may have been the source of information for the National Police arrest of the 64 members of the VC Hoi An infrastructure. LtCol Oliver W. van den Berg, Jr., Comments on draft, dtd 12Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

both the Que Son Valley and the Da Nang TAOR. Allied commanders also learned that the North Vietnamese established a new headquarters in the Quang Da Special Zone in Quang Nam Province called *Group 44*. Commanded by North Vietnamese Army Senior Colonel Vo Thu, the former commander of the *3d NVA Division*, *Group 44* located its headquarters in the mountains of Dai Loc District, about 24 miles southwest of Da Nang. According to a captured enemy officer, the new command was a subordinate or forward headquarters of *Military Region 5* and now controlled all independent enemy regiments, battalions, and separate units in the Quang Nam sector.<sup>8</sup>

Since September 1967, III MAF suspected that the enemy planned a large-scale offensive in the Da Nang area. At that time, according to U.S. intelligence officers, "a very reliable source" reported detailed enemy plans for Quang Nam Province with "Da Nang as the ultimate object." The appearance of new units including the enemy *31st NVA Regiment* in southwestern Quang Nam and the establishment of *Group 44* tended to corroborate the first report. In early December, the allies uncovered further evidence that the *2d NVA Division* was about to escalate its operations in the Que Son sector and reinforce the independent units and local forces in Quang Nam Province.<sup>9</sup>

On 5 December, helicopters and troops of the U.S. 3d Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division under the operational control of the Americal Division in Operation Wheeler/Wallowa killed 17 North Vietnamese troops in a skirmish on a ridgeline north of the town of Que Son. In an examination of the enemy bodies, the Americans discovered four were dressed in American camouflaged fatigues while the remaining dead wore North Vietnamese uniforms. Four of the North Vietnamese were officers, including the political officer of the *2d NVA Division*. Among the various documents strewn about were several notebooks and various American maps. In a notebook marked "Absolutely Secret," American intelligence analysts found a plan for a division-size assault against American fire bases in the Que Son Valley, complete with sketches of the targeted sites. The general attack would involve all three regiments of the *2d NVA* and would be coordinated with smaller diversionary attacks against district capitals controlled by *Group 44*. The diversions included a rocket bombardment of the large Da Nang Airbase.<sup>10</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel John F. J. Kelly, a member of the III MAF staff, recalled that all of this intelligence began to fit a pattern. According to Kelly, the



Photo courtesy of LtCol John F. J. Kelly, USMC (Ret) *LtCol John F. J. Kelly is pictured with a captured NVA 122mm rocket launcher which had a range of about 12,000 meters. According to LtCol Kelly, this was the first 122mm launcher captured by Marine forces, a direct result of Operation Claxon in December 1967 to lure enemy units into a premature attack on Da Nang.*

Marine command had "very precise information of his [the enemy] plans in the Da Nang TAOR" and called several commanders' conferences to determine how best to deflect the Communist intents. According to the enemy documents recovered by the 1st Cavalry Division brigade, the enemy was to begin his offensive on 23 December. Lieutenant Colonel Kelly later related that III MAF hoped to confound the enemy by triggering his attack prematurely. In an operation codenamed Claxon, the Marines set off explosive charges throughout the Da Nang TAOR that they wanted the VC forces to mistake for the signal to start the offensive. The enemy refused to take the bait, however, and the *2d NVA Division*, on the 23d, also failed to attack the 3d Brigade's fire bases in the Wheeler/Wallowa sector. In the Que Son Valley, American intelligence officers concluded that the loss of the documents may have caused the NVA to believe their plans were compromised and to postpone, if not cancel, the attacks against the Army's 3d Brigade. At Da Nang, however, III MAF still expected some sort of offensive against the populated centers in the TAOR.<sup>11\*</sup>

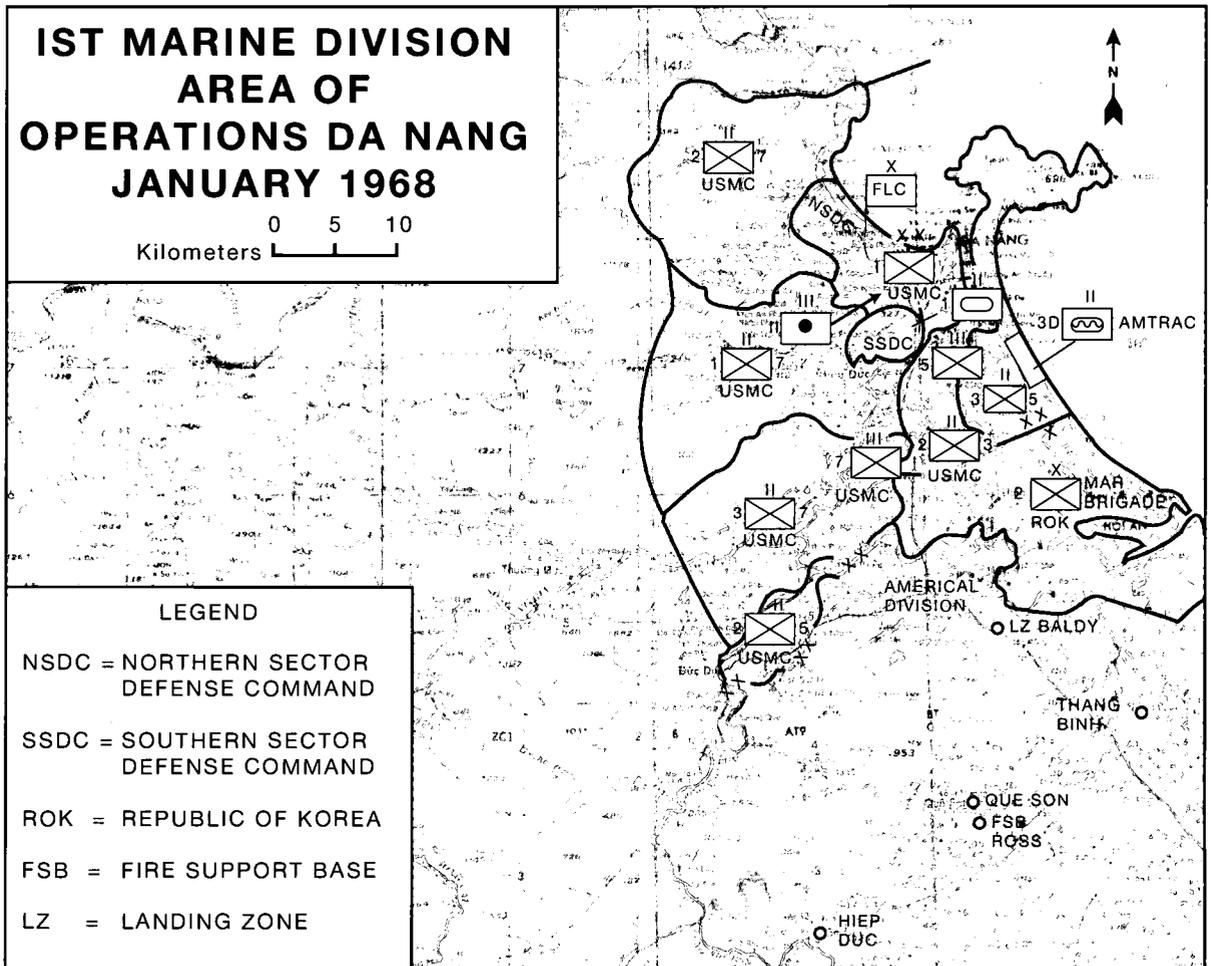
\*Lieutenant Colonel Kelly observed that although the attack failed to materialize, some enemy rocket troops failed to get the word and "tried to rush forward to firing sites . . ." They were intercepted by Marines and "the first enemy 122mm launcher was captured." LtCol John F. J. Kelly, Comments on draft, dtd 13Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

*The Da Nang TAOR*

In January 1968 at Da Nang, the 1st Marine Division commander, Major General Donn J. Robertson, had only two of his three infantry regiments, the 5th and 7th Marines, under his operational control. A tall, courtly officer who had a varied Marine Corps career ranging from an infantry battalion commander on Iwo Jima, where he earned the Navy Cross, to Deputy for Fiscal Matters at Marine Corps Headquarters, General Robertson took over the division the previous June. Now, with the pending additional responsibility for the Phu Bai sector and the anticipated departure of the 5th Marines from Da Nang to Phu Bai, Robertson assumed an even more onerous burden. The previous record of the Korean brigade provided little promise that it would fill the holes in the Da Nang defenses when the 5th Marines relocated to Phu Bai. Thus, at Da Nang, the division entered the new year with an

expanding mission and diminishing forces with the probability of encountering an even stronger enemy.<sup>12</sup>

The Da Nang tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) stretched from the Hai Van Pass in the north to the Quang Nam-Quang Tin border to the south. From east to west the TAOR extended from the coast to the Annamite Mountain chain. Consisting of 1,048 square miles, the area contained a population of some 812,000 persons, not including the city of Da Nang. Several large waterways, the Cau Do, the Vinh Dien, the Yen, the Thu Bon, the Thanh Quit, the Ky Lam, the Dien Ban among them, traversed the coastal plain south of Da Nang and spilled into the South China Sea, often changing their name along the way. With the resulting rich soil deposits, the Da Nang region was one of the major rice producing areas in South Vietnam, second only to the Mekong Delta.





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801132

*An aerial view of the Marble Mountain Air Facility and base on Tiensha Peninsula across the river from the main airbase at Da Nang, which can be seen vaguely in the background to the right. Marble Mountain was home to the helicopters of Marine aircraft group based there.*

In order to secure the approaches to the city and the nearby Da Nang Airbase, the 1st Marine Division had divided the sector into several defensive zones and tactical areas of operation. The city itself, the Da Nang Airbase, and the Marble Mountain helicopter facility on the Tiensha Peninsula across the Han River from Da Nang and the main air base constituted the Da Nang Vital Area. In the immediate area west of the city and the airbase, the Marines had established two defensive command sectors, the northern and southern. Under the operational control of the 11th Marines, the division artillery regiment, the Northern Sector Defense Command (NSDC), composed of

troops from various headquarters and support units, encompassed the division command post on Hill 327 (called Division Ridge), the northern artillery cantonment, and the Force Logistic Command on Red Beach. Bounded by the Cu De River on the north and the Southern Sector Defense Command (SSDC) on the south, a distance of some 10 kilometers, the northern sector command in cooperation with its tenant units manned the fixed defenses and ran patrols in the surrounding paddies, scrub brush, and low-lying hills to the west. Similarly, the Southern Sector Defense Command, under the operational control of the 1st Tank Battalion, covered the southern and southwestern

approaches to the Da Nang Airbase and protected the vital bridges across the Cau Do and Tuy Loan Rivers, south of the airbase.\*

The two Marine infantry regiments, the 5th and 7th Marines, and the 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion were responsible for the protection of the regions south of the Cau Do and north of the Cu De Rivers. On the division left, or most eastern sector, the amphibian tractor battalion patrolled the sand flats along the coast south of the Marble Mountain facility. South and west of the "amtrackers" and north of the Thanh Quit River, the 5th Marines with two battalions, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, maintained its area of operations. With the north-south railroad track serving as the boundary between the two regiments, the 7th Marines with all three of its battalions provided the shield in the western and northern reaches of the division area of operations. The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, under the direct control of the division, operated in the An Hoa sector, located in the southwest corner of the division TAOR south of the Thu Bon River. To the east of the 7th Marines and south of the 5th Marines, the Korean Marine Brigade began its deployment into the Dai Loc corridor between the Thanh Quit and the Ky Lam.

With the introduction of enemy long-range 140mm and 122mm rockets in February and June respectively of the previous year against the Da Nang base, the Marine division took several countermeasures. It established a rocket belt that extended 8,000 to 12,000 meters out from the Da Nang Vital Area, the effective range of the enemy rockets. Within this circumference, the 11th Marines instituted a central control system which included the coverage by two artillery firing batteries of each part of the Da Nang TAOR and the strategic placement of artillery observation posts in the rocket belt. The infantry intensified its patrols and allied aircraft increased their observation flights into and over the approaches towards the most likely rocket-firing positions. At the same time, the Marines imposed an 1800 to 0600 daily curfew on river and other

waterway traffic in the rocket belt area. Division psychological operations teams, moreover, developed an extensive campaign among the local villagers including money awards for information on the enemy rockets.<sup>13\*\*</sup>

Despite all these efforts, the NVA rocket threat remained real. Unlike tube artillery, the rockets did not require a great deal of maintenance and they could be man-packed through the difficult terrain of western Quang Nam. Rocket launchers were considerably smaller than howitzers of a comparable caliber, and were thus much easier to conceal from U.S. air observers or reconnaissance patrols. Although mortars shared with rockets these traits of ease of maintenance, transportation, and concealment, the rockets had much greater range: the 122mm rocket could fire 12,000 meters, while the 140mm variety had a range of 8,900 meters. The 120mm mortar, on the other hand, could fire only 5,700 meters. Well-trained crews could assemble, aim, and launch their rockets in less than 30 minutes. In one attack on the Da Nang airfield, six enemy rocket teams fired 50 rounds within five minutes. With a few glaring exceptions, most of the enemy rocket attacks resulted in relatively little damage and few casualties. As Major General Raymond L. Murray, the deputy III MAF commander, observed, however, "it [the enemy rocket capability] was constantly on everyone's mind . . . ." With a relatively minor investment in men and

\*Lieutenant Colonel Vincent J. Gentile, who commanded the 1st Tank Battalion at the time, recalled that most of his tank units were under the operational control of various infantry units. As commander of the Southern Sector, he controlled "a group of support unit headquarters elements south of Da Nang." As he remembered, "my impression is that we had more alerts than significant enemy activity in the SSDC." LtCol Vincent J. Gentile, Comments on draft, dtd 25Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\* Colonel John F. Barr, who served with the 11th Marines and the 1st Field Artillery Group in 1967-68, observed that "rockets are still the least expensive and most effective indirect fire weapon that a non-industrial society can use." He stated that to counter the threat, the 1st Marine Division established "an ad hoc 'Rocket investigation Team,'" to gather intelligence on enemy rocket tactics. This team consisted of a representative of the G-2 or intelligence section, an artillery officer, a demolition man, a photographer, and a security team provided by the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion. At first light, after a rocket was launched, the team would embark in a helicopter and would locate the firing site from the air using coordinates provided by the 11th Marines. The team would then land and "explore the site in detail." It would blow any rockets left behind in place and take back any intelligence it was able to garner about rocket tactics and firing sites. By various countermeasures, the Marines reduced the amount of time that the enemy gunners had to mount their attack. Colonel Barr commented that by late 1967, "every gun in the 11th Marine Regiment, when not engaged in firing was pointed at a possible rocket firing site . . . . The idea was to get as many rounds in the air as soon as possible in order to disrupt rocket firing in progress." Using a combination of visual sightings and sound azimuths, the Marine gunners would try to identify "approximate site locations through map triangulation." Col John F. Barr, Comments on draft, dtd 26Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).

equipment, the NVA could keep an entire Marine division occupied.<sup>14\*</sup>

For the most part, the 1st Marine Division war in the Da Nang TAOR was a small-unit war. The nature of the war and the terrain in the area were such that the most effective form of military action was usually the small-unit patrol or ambush, carried out by a squad or fire team. As a consequence, in 1967, more than 50 percent of division casualties resulted from enemy mines and boobytraps, officially called surprise firing devices (SFD). General Robertson, the division commander, called it a "vicious" type of combat which inflicted the most cruel type of wounds, ranging from blindness to multiple loss of limbs. The enemy exploited anything on hand to make these devices, from discarded ration cans to spent artillery shells, "any time they could get powder, they used it." Operating against an unknown and often unseen enemy in an unfamiliar environment among largely a hostile or at best neutral rural populace, the Marines of the 1st Division fought an unspectacular and difficult war. As Lieutenant General Cushman, the III MAF commander, commented, the Marines at Da Nang "had a lot of slogging to do, a lot of patrolling to do . . . And their casualties from mines were considerable as a result."<sup>15</sup>

Through 1967, the enemy in the Da Nang area of operations consisted for the most part of the VC infrastructure and the local guerrillas in the surrounding villages and hamlets. There was no clear distinction between friend and foe. The innocent appearing farmer in his field, or his wife or child for that matter, could easily be a VC agent or even terrorist. According to Marine estimates at the beginning of 1968, enemy irregular or local force strength in the Da Nang area was about 17,500, but only 4,000 of this number were "full-time guerrillas." The remaining members of the irregular classification belonged to either Communist local "Self-Defense or Secret Self-Defense forces." For the Marine on patrol, however, it made little difference if the enemy who shot or threw a grenade at him was a full-time guerrilla or belonged to the local defense forces. Too often the results were the same.<sup>16</sup>

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\*Colonel William J. Davis, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines at this time, observed that the 122mm rocket was most accurate when fired with a tripod and launcher, but that the VC had fired both weapons without tripod or launcher by leaning them against inclined dirt banks, facing the airbase, and then set off. Col W. J. Davis, *Tet Marine, An Autobiography* (San Diego, CA, 1987), pp. 42-48, Encl to Col William J. Davis, Comments on draft, dtd 2Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Davis, *Tet Marine*.

### *Operation Auburn: Searching the Go Noi*

The appearance of the North Vietnamese units near Da Nang and the formation of *Group 44* added another dimension to the danger that the enemy posed to the airbase and the city of Da Nang. Marine intelligence suspected and later confirmed that the North Vietnamese *31st Regiment*, also known as the *Red River Regiment*, with all three battalions, had moved in December into the Dai Loc sector in the southwestern reaches of the Da Nang TAOR. Although the *2d NVA Division* with its three regiments continued to challenge the U.S. 1st Air Cavalry's 3d Brigade in the Que Son Valley, it had the potential to move north through the Que Sons to reinforce the enemy forces in the Da Nang area of operations. The *NVA 368B Artillery Regiment*, consisting of four independent battalions and five independent companies, armed with the 122mm and 140mm rockets, presumably operating from secret bases in "Happy Valley," some 15 miles southwest of Da Nang, in the far western confines of the division operating area, remained a constant irritant to the Marine defenders. Even with the greater strength of the Communist forces around Da Nang, General Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, later maintained: "Ours was a small war, and divisions aren't small, even NVA divisions, but I never had the feeling that we were going to get pushed around or pushed out."<sup>17\*\*</sup>

At the same time, however, the VC local force battalions in the Da Nang area also became more active. Two enemy local battalions, the *V-25th* and the *R-20th*, had long operated in the Da Nang area. In fact, the *R-20* or *Doc Lap Battalion*, as early as September, 1965, launched one of the first enemy attacks against a Marine battalion command post on Hill 22 near the Yen River. By December 1967, agent reports located both battalions on the so-called Go Noi Island, about 25 kilometers south of the airbase near the demarcation between the Marine division and the Americal Division. According to Marine intelligence officers, the enemy in the Da Nang sector during early 1968 would continue to harass the South Vietnamese Revolutionary Development program in the Da Nang

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\*\*Brigadier General Paul G. Graham, who was the 1st Marine Division operations officer or G-3 during this period, reiterated in his comments that the war around Da Nang "was strictly a guerrilla war" and that enemy activity "was invariably hit and run tactics by small ambush or rocket firing units." BGen Paul G. Graham, Comments on draft, dtd 20Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Graham Comments.

sector, would conduct attacks by fire including rockets at U.S. and South Vietnamese major installations, and possibly would strike against isolated friendly forces and installations.<sup>18</sup>

In order to preempt any such concentration of the enemy local and main force units, the 5th Marines at the end of December initiated a spoiling action, code-named Operation Auburn, on Go Noi Island. Located 10 kilometers inland from the South China Sea, the Go Noi is not a true island, but is simply an area bounded on all sides by rivers. Irregularly shaped by the meandering of the Ky Lam, the Thu Bon, the Ba Ren, the Dien Ban, and the Cau Lau rivers, the "island" is 12 kilometers long and 4 kilometers wide with generally flat terrain that gradually slopes upward towards the western end. A few streams and canals cut across the low-lying land and the remains of the wrecked National Railroad tracks (known to the Marines as the "B&O") bisected the island. A number of small hamlets and villages dotted the area, mostly inhabited by women and children, the men having gone to war, either for the government or for the Communists. Hedges and bamboo thickets literally formed walls around these rural communities. The terrain between the hamlets varied, and included untended rice paddies overgrown with vegetation, open sandy areas, high elephant grass, and cemeteries with tall grave mounds. Most of the hamlets contained "a network of drainage ditches" to carry off the surplus waters. These ditches, as one Marine battalion commander observed, "provided superb, ready-made fighting trenches," for any VC "fighting a maneuver defense." With rules of engagement that limited the use of supporting arms in populated areas, any Marine penetration of the Go Noi "presented commanders with extremely difficult decisions."<sup>19</sup>

The preparations to move into the Go Noi began on Christmas Day, 1967. At that time, Colonel Robert D. Bohn, the 5th Marines commander, issued his "Frag Order" detailing the participating units and the concept of operations for Auburn. The Marine initial forces were to consist of four infantry companies, two from the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, one from the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, and one from the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines. Another company from the 3d Battalion was to be in reserve. Lieutenant Colonel William K. Rockey, the commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, would command the forces in the field and assume operational control of the other infantry companies. The 11th Marines provided general artillery support with one battalion, the 2d Bat-

talion, 11th Marines in direct support. Marine helicopters from MAG-16 would bring the assault forces into the landing zones and Marine helicopter gunships and fixed-wing aircraft from both Da Nang and Chu Lai would fly landing-zone-preparation and close air support missions.<sup>20</sup>

Auburn was to be part of a larger operation involving both the ARVN Quang Da Special Zone command and the Americal Division. The Marine units were to establish blocking positions along the abandoned railroad track. After the Marines were in position, three ARVN battalions starting from Route 1 would then attack from east to west along Route 537, pushing any enemy units into the Marines. Further south, the 1st Air Cavalry's 3d Brigade in Operation Wheeler/Wallowa would position two companies from its 1st Battalion, 7th Infantry to close any avenue of escape in that direction and also to prevent the enemy from reinforcing his forces in the Go Noi. Operation Auburn was slated to begin at 0900 on 28 December when Marine helicopters were to bring Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines into Landing Zone Hawk, an abandoned dried-up rice paddy, just east of the railroad and about a 1,000 meters south of the Ky Lam River.<sup>21</sup>

After an hour landing zone preparation bombardment by both Marine air and artillery, at 0904, four minutes later than the designated "L-Hour," the first wave of MAG-16 helicopters dropped down into Landing Zone Hawk. The troops of the lead assault company, Company E, 3d Marines, commanded by Australian Army Captain Ian J. Cahill, an eight-year veteran and an exchange officer serving with the Marines, referred to themselves as the "Diggers" after the popular nickname for Australian soldiers. Greeted by desultory enemy rifle and automatic weapons fire, the "Diggers" of Company E quickly secured the landing zone but failed to silence the enemy snipers and gunners. At 0940, the forward elements of the company attempted to advance toward its first objective, a deserted hamlet in the Bao An Dong village complex, just to the southwest of LZ Hawk. Forced to pull back in the face of heavy Communist small arms fire, Captain Cahill called for an airstrike. Following the strike, succeeding waves of Marine CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters brought in the remaining elements of Company E and Company I, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, and Lieutenant Colonel Rockey's command group into the landing zone. According to Lieutenant Colonel Rockey, the enemy fire forced the Marines to move the landing zone progressively westward, "with each helicopter wave landing a little farther west than the last wave."<sup>22</sup>



Abel Collection Photos

*Marines from Company I, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines take part in Operation Auburn in the Go Noi Island sector south of Da Nang. In the top photo, PFC Richard C. Spaniel, wearing "In God We Trust" on his helmet, peers cautiously through thick brush for signs of enemy troops. Below, two other Marines from Company I watch an airstrike on enemy positions to their front in the same operation.*



With both Marine companies and the battalion command group in the landing zone by 1130, the Marines again tried to take their first two objectives. Company I secured its objective, an abandoned hamlet to the immediate front without encountering any serious resistance. In the second objective, the same hamlet Cahill's Company E had tried to take earlier, the Marine company was again in trouble. The seemingly innocent empty "ville" was in actuality heavily fortified with interconnecting trenches and fighting holes that provided the Communists with fixed fields of fire. In a sudden ambush, the enemy killed five Marines of Company E and wounded another nine. As the "Diggers" literally dug in and fought for their lives, Lieutenant Colonel Rockey ordered Company I to move to the flank of Company E. Taking advantage of the cover afforded by the tall elephant grass that had overgrown the uncultivated paddy field and five-foot-high burial mounds,\* other Communist troops prevented the Company I Marines from reaching the embattled company.<sup>23</sup>

At this point, with both of his forward companies unable to maneuver, Lieutenant Colonel Rockey asked for his reserve or "Bald Eagle" company, Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines. Concurrently, he again called for both artillery and fixed-wing support. During the day, Marine fixed-wing and helicopter gunship aircraft flew close to 50 missions in support of the Marine battalion. Many of the 11th Marines artillery rounds fell dangerously close to the Company E positions, with shell fragments wounding several Marines. According to the battalion commander, "this was a calculated risk dictated by the situation." Lieutenant Colonel Rockey was more disturbed about the numerous "check fires" placed on the artillery whenever an aircraft left the runway at Da Nang and maintained until the plane returned. He later wrote in his after action report: "unnecessary check fires imposed on direct support artillery on D-Day was and is a matter of great concern. Vitally required fire

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\*Lieutenant Colonel Gene W. Bowers, who at the time served as the S-3 or operations officers of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, remarked that these "graves were much bigger and higher than traditional Vietnamese graves, as they had to be built up to accommodate the very high water table." He remembered that the enemy troops "had dug into the graves, evicting the previous occupants, and converted them into mutually supporting bunkers which were seemingly impervious to horizontal small arms fire." LtCol Gene W. Bowers, Comments on draft, dtd 30May95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Bowers Comments.

support was needlessly withheld from the Battalion because of this imposition."<sup>24</sup>

At 1530, CH-46s from HMM-265 brought in Company M into Landing Zone Hawk. As in the arrival of the other two companies, enemy gunners took the hovering aircraft and disembarking troops under fire. Company M Marine Private First Class Jesse T. Lucero, on the lead helicopter, recalled that as he jumped out an enemy sniper round struck his helmet: "I got a little dizzy and sagged, but another Marine helped me up and I ran across the rice paddy as fast as my feet could carry me." The lead elements then cleared a treeline and secured the landing zone. Together with the battalion command group, Company M moved forward to relieve Company E.<sup>25</sup>

In the hamlet, after the initial shock of combat, and with the support of air and artillery, the Marines of Company E held their own. Able to get in closer and more accurately than both fixed-wing aircraft and the artillery, UH-1E gunships from VMO-2 provided several strafing runs that prevented the enemy troops from overrunning the company's positions.\*\* For example, one Huey aircraft spent five hours in support of the Marine infantrymen. Its machine gunner, Lance Corporal Stephen R. Parsons, earned the nickname of "Sureshot." Credited with killing 15 enemy, Parsons later stated, "I knew I got at least seven." The aircraft itself sustained four hits and Parsons was wounded in the face. An enemy .30-caliber bullet had "entered his left cheek and exited at the roof of his mouth without breaking a tooth." About 1700, an air observer counted in front of the Company E positions 32 NVA dead, mostly clad "in green utilities."<sup>26</sup>

About an hour later, under covering fire from the other two Marine companies, Company E pulled back a few hundred meters to the positions of Company M. Collocated with the battalion command group just forward of Landing Zone Hawk, both Companies E and M established their night defenses. Only about 200 meters separated the two companies from Company I. Unable to reach its dead, Company E in its withdrawal had left the bodies of nine Marines in the hamlet. All told, the

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\*\*Lieutenant Colonel Bowers recalled after talking with Captain Cahill on the radio about the graveyard bunkers: "I instructed the gunships to shoot their door-mounted machine guns straight down into the grave mounds to achieve penetration." He credits this tactic with reducing the effectiveness of the enemy fire. Bowers Comments.

3d Battalion sustained casualties of 19 dead and 25 wounded.<sup>27</sup>

Not sure about the size and composition of the enemy forces, Colonel Bohn, the 5th Marines commander, that night secured permission to expand the operation. He obtained operational control from General Robertson of a command group from the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. Bohn ordered Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. McNaughton, the battalion commander of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, to resume command of his Companies E and G, which were already in helicopter staging areas for Operation Auburn, and reinforce the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines in LZ Hawk. At the same time, Bohn and a 5th Marines command group would also move to LZ Hawk to assume overall direction of the now two-battalion Operation Auburn.<sup>28</sup>

Marine intelligence officers believed that a North Vietnamese Battalion had reinforced the local VC battalions in the Go Noi. A III MAF intelligence estimate showed the battalion, possibly the 190th NVA, also known as the 311th NVA or *Quang Da Battalion*, had infiltrated into central I Corps from North Vietnam the previous April and was equipped with crew-served weapons.<sup>29</sup>

According to the Marine plan, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines with two of its companies was to land in LZ Hawk on the morning of 29 December, followed by the 5th Marines command group. In the meantime, the three companies already in Auburn would secure Objective 1, the abandoned hamlet that Company I had seized the previous day before moving to assist Company E. After the 3d Battalion had accomplished its mission and provided flank protection, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines would attack towards the Bao An Dong hamlet where Company E, 3d Marines had engaged the enemy on the first day.<sup>30</sup>

The operation on the 29th went much as planned with relatively light resistance from the enemy. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines seized its objective without opposition. After its arrival in Landing Zone Hawk, shortly after 1000, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines advanced with its Company E in the lead and Company G on the right flank and slightly in trace. An enemy rear guard of about 20 men in well-camouflaged fighting holes fought the Marines at the edge of the hamlet, but immediately disengaged 10 minutes later after Marine air and artillery pounded the enemy positions. In his account of Operation Auburn, the 2d Battalion commander observed that

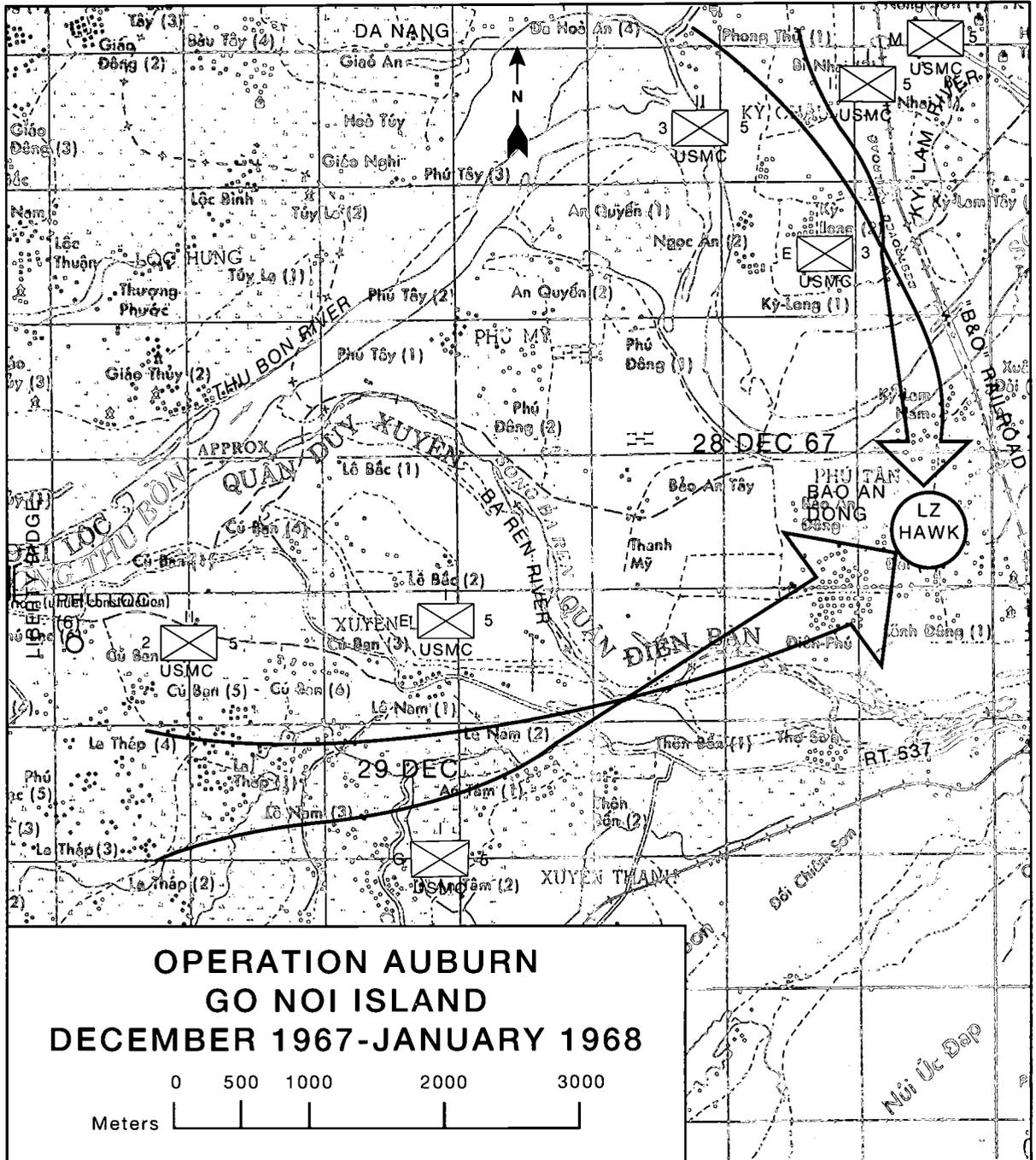
“realizing that fortified villages would be encountered, artillery and fixed wing air strikes were used to the maximum. Key to the success of the supporting arms was the unit commanders’ ability to move under the outstanding coverage provided.”<sup>31</sup>

Shortly after noon, the two Marine companies began their search of the hamlet. They detained two suspicious Vietnamese clad in the usual black pajamas and recovered the bodies of the nine Marines killed in the earlier fighting. About 1330, as the battalion command group approached, VC snipers once more opened up on the American troops, wounding one Marine. The Marines returned the fire and searched the suspected area, but the enemy had departed. After another reconnaissance of the hamlet with no further evidence of the enemy, the battalion returned to Landing Zone Hawk. The results of the day’s action for the battalion were two VC suspects and an estimated six enemy dead, at a cost of two Marine wounded and evacuated.<sup>32\*</sup>

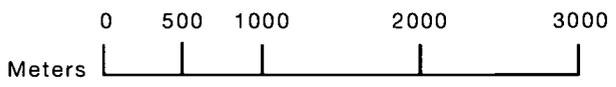
At this juncture, Colonel Bohn expected the operation to come to an end. The South Vietnamese had encountered few enemy forces in their sector and wanted to release their units. General Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, had already informed III MAF and the 5th Marines commanders that he intended “to terminate” Auburn at noon on the 30th “barring any unforeseen developments.” New information, however, caused Robertson to change his mind. About 1000 on the 30th, he radioed Colonel Bohn, “Operation Auburn will continue on reduced scale until further notice.” General Robertson declared that “intelligence indicates continuing enemy presence in northwest Auburn AO [area of operations].” The mes-

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\* Colonel Rockey, the 3d Battalion commander, recalled that he a few days later received a message about an article in the *Washington Star* newspaper on 31 December 1967 about the operation in the Go Noi. The reporter described the desolation of the hamlets destroyed by air and supporting arms. The article mentioned “little fires were still burning” and Marines yelling at old women and children coming out of their shelters. It quoted one Marine saying “we should have killed them all.” The article does admit, however, that the Marines had “temporarily driven out the enemy including one Main Force VC and one North Vietnamese battalion, but not certain what else they had accomplished.” According to Colonel Rockey, the message originated in Washington and that he had about 30 minutes to get an answer back to headquarters about the accuracy of the article: “Mind you, this was in the middle of the night, in the field, during actual action against the enemy.” Col William K. Rockey, Comments on draft, dtd 4Mar95 and attached msg, n.d., reference to 31Dec67, *Washington Star*. Lieutenant Colonel Bowers recalled that the search of the hamlet uncovered an underground storage area containing medical supplies, rifles, and rice. Bowers Comments.



**OPERATION AUBURN  
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sage did not reveal whether the suspected enemy was the *190th Battalion* or another enemy force. Colonel Bohn in his implementing order only stated "high order intelligence indicates very important enemy unit between Liberty Bridge\* and present Auburn AO."<sup>33</sup>

Despite the indication of new intelligence, the remainder of the operation was to be a fruitless search for the phantom unit. On the 31st, both Lieutenant Colonel McNaughton, the 2d Battalion commander, and Colonel Bohn, the regimental commander, returned to their respective command posts leaving Lieutenant Colonel Rockey, the 3d Battalion commander, solely responsible for the operation. Rockey retained both the 2d Battalion's Company E and G, as well as Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and Company M of his own battalion in the next phase of the operation. For the next four days, the four companies encountered only scattered sniper fire and grenades as they extended the Auburn area of operations to the west. By 3 January 1968, the battalion reached the hamlet of Phu Loc 6, about 7,500 meters west of the "B&O," and just south of Liberty Bridge. Companies E and G, 5th Marines reverted to 2d Battalion control and Company E, 3d Marines departed Auburn for its original area of operations. At 1725 on that date, Lieutenant Colonel Rockey closed out the operation and his forward command group and Company M clambered on board trucks for the return trip to the battalion command post.<sup>34</sup>

For the entire operation, the two Marine battalions sustained casualties of 23 killed in action and over 60 wounded and, according to Marine body count, killed 37 of the enemy. With the exception of four of the Marines and five of the enemy, the deaths in Auburn occurred on the first day of the operation. The action on the 28th also accounted for nearly half of the Marine wounded. In the remaining six days of the operation, enemy snipers, a casually thrown grenade, and the ever-present "surprise firing device" were responsible for the remaining Marine casualties.<sup>35</sup>

Although Lieutenant Colonel Rockey's battalion in the extended phase of Operation Auburn met no significant enemy force, he observed "large enemy forces could evade our search and destroy efforts, concealed in the vast expanses of elephant grass in some cases reaching 12 feet in height." Rockey

believed that given the abundant "luxuriant natural cover and concealment" available to the enemy and the extensive area covered, the Marines required a larger force to conduct the operation. No allied order of battle in early 1968 showed the *190th NVA Battalion* in the Da Nang area of operations. Intelligence would indicate that the *Group 44* headquarters later moved into Go Noi Island. This may have been the basis for the information of the "very important enemy unit" that caused the continuation of the operation. In any event, the available evidence pointed to elements of the *V-25th* and the *R-20th* VC battalions being the only units engaged in Auburn.\*\* Colonel Bohn several years later complained about the nature of intelligence available to the Marines: "The major frustration was too much general intelligence and no good tactical timely intelligence."<sup>36</sup>

### *A Busy Night at Da Nang*

As Operation Auburn drew to a close, *Group 44* prepared another surprise for the Marines at Da Nang. On the night of 2-3 January 1968, in an obviously coordinated series of ground and fire attacks, the VC struck at 7th Marines positions north of the Thu Bon, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines command post at An Hoa, and at Combined Action units and South Vietnamese District headquarters throughout the Da Nang area of operations. The Communists capped off their assaults with an early morning rocket barrage of the Da Nang airfield.

The enemy began the night's events about 2200 with several sniping and harassing fire incidents on Marine outposts throughout the Da Nang area of operations. About a half-hour later, some 15 Communist troops attacked the 7th Marines command post on Hill 55, the low-lying but dominant piece of terrain south of Da Nang, with automatic weapons, rifle fire, and antitank rocket propelled grenades (RPGs). They knocked out a security tower and wounded two Marines. The defending troops responded with small

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\*\*Lieutenant Colonel Bowers believed, however, that the Marines engaged an NVA unit rather than the VC *R-20 Battalion*. He felt that the tactics, uniforms, and "unusually fierce tenacity" were indicative of the NVA. According to Bowers, the designation was made the *R-20*, "by default, simply because we couldn't prove that any other unit was present." Bowers Comments. An Army historian, George L. MacGarrigle, suggested that perhaps the *190th NVA Battalion* "was the security force for *Front 44* [*Group 44*] also known as *Front 4*." George L. MacGarrigle, Historian, CMH, Comments on draft, dtd 5Dec94 (Vietnam Comment Files).

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\*The bridge across the Ky Lam River connecting the An Hoa combat base to the 7th Marines area of operations.

arms and 4.2-inch and 81mm mortars. Under illumination provided by a C-117 flareship, a small Marine reaction force tried to locate the attackers, but they had made good their escape.<sup>37</sup>

After a brief uneventful interlude, about 6,000 meters to the northwest of Hill 55, Communist gunners at 0045 3 January mortared the Hieu Duc District headquarters and the U.S. advisory compound located there. They then shelled the nearby 1st Battalion, 7th Marines command post on Hill 10. A Marine lookout in an observation tower spotted the mortar muzzle flashes and immediately radioed the coordinates to Battery G, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, also on Hill 10 and collocated with the infantry battalion command post. Although about 40 enemy rounds impacted near the Marine battery positions, all guns remained "up and firing." The Marine 105mm howitzers responded with counter-mortar fires reinforced by 81mm mortars and 106mm recoilless rifles and silenced the VC weapons.<sup>38</sup>

Fifteen minutes later, about 0100, U.S. advisors at the MACV compound at Hieu Duc reported that about 20 sappers armed with grenades and satchel charges had penetrated the perimeter. Lieutenant Colonel William J. Davis, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines commander whose area of operations included all of Hieu Duc District, remembered that the district's U.S. Army liaison officer radioed: "The VC are throughout our position; request assistance posthaste."<sup>39</sup> Davis ordered an infantry platoon accompanied by two supporting M48 tanks from the 1st Tank Battalion to go to the assistance of the advisors at the district headquarters, about 500 meters east of Hill 10. The tanks had barely departed the hill when an enemy rocket team, laying in ambush, fired nine RPG rounds into the two vehicles. Although still mobile and able to use their 90mm cannons and .50 caliber machine guns, both tanks sustained damage, one a jammed turret, and casualties. Four of the eight Marine crewmen were wounded. Covered by the infantry, the two vehicles pulled back to their former positions and another M48 lumbered forward. While also hit by an RPG round, the third tank followed by part of the Marine infantry platoon smashed through the enemy ambush site, killing one of the enemy gunners. The relief force reached the MACV compound at 0325 and the enemy, estimated at company size, began to disengage. After the breaking of the "siege," the Americans discovered four enemy dead on the defensive wire. There were no casualties among the U.S. advisors. The part of the reaction

force that stayed behind in the ambush site was, however, not as fortunate. Enemy gunners mortared its positions which resulted in seven Marines wounded and one killed. Again counter-mortar fire quieted the enemy tubes.<sup>40</sup>

The Communists were up to more mischief. Turning their attention from Hieu Duc and the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, in the next hour, they hit several Combined Action platoon hamlets, the Dien Ban District headquarters, an outpost near the Ba Ren River, and the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines command post at An Hoa. The enemy limited most of these attacks to small-arms harassing fire and mortars. At An Hoa, the enemy fired eight satchel charges from a "tube-like device" near the airfield there. Two of the charges detonated in the air and the other six failed to explode. In somewhat of an understatement, the battalion commander observed in his monthly report, "Although ingenious, the crude mortars proved to have a high dud rate." More serious was the VC assault on the Combined Action Platoon S-1 located in the coastal village of Phuoc Trach, east of Hoi An. After first mortaring the platoon, an unknown number of enemy overran the compound. They destroyed the communication and ammunition bunkers. By the time a relief force consisting of three neighboring Popular Force platoons arrived on the scene after daybreak, the enemy had long gone. Casualties among the Marine and PF troops in the hamlet were heavy. All of the 14 Marines assigned to the Combined Action unit were either dead or wounded. The PFs sustained 19 killed and 12 wounded. Communist losses, if any, were unknown.<sup>41\*</sup>

The Communist raiders were not finished for the night. About 0400, a Marine sentry from the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, manning a tower on Hill 10, noticed large flashes about 3,000 meters to the east near the Yen River and immediately sounded the rocket attack alarm. Within a 10-minute time span, nearly 50 122mm enemy rockets impacted on the main airbase. Responding almost immediately to the attack, a Marine M48 tank on Hill 43 in the Southern Defense Sector took the suspected launching site under fire. An Air Force Douglas AC-47 "Spooky" transport equipped with 7.62mm miniguns and floodlights "also opened up immediately and hit area while enemy

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\*The record shows that four Marines were killed in the action at Phuoc Trach, five wounded, and five listed as missing. Although not specifically mentioned in the report, it is assumed that the five missing Marines were killed and their bodies later recovered.



Photo is courtesy of Col John F. Barr, USMC (Ret) MajGen Donn J. Robertson, CG, 1st MarDiv, is escorted by LtCol John F. Barr, the operations officer of the 11th Marines, the artillery regiment at Da Nang, as they visit one of the firing sites uncovered by Marines the morning after the rocket bombardment of the base. LtCol Barr is holding a M1 Carbine, "a non-T/O weapon," "that he took as" "an added precaution . . . for a dawn landing at the site."

was launching rockets." Marine 81mm mortars reinforced the M48's 90mm gun and 105mm howitzers from the 11th Marines delivered 620 rounds within two minutes on the enemy firing positions. Still the enemy rockets destroyed three American aircraft, one Marine F-4B and two Air Force prop-driven planes, and damaged 17 other aircraft. Due to cratering, the airbase had to close 3,000 feet of its east runway and 1,000 feet of the west runway until repairs could be made. Despite the barrage, casualties were low, only four Air Force personnel sustained minor wounds.<sup>42</sup>

The next morning, a reaction force from Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines uncovered about three large firing sites and found a total of 21 unfired 122mm rockets and 1 140mm rocket. Near the western bank of the Yen, the Marines came across "four enemy bodies clad in khaki and black uniforms." Marine intelligence officers later determined that the enemy rocketeers fired their missiles from three distinct battery positions "and a total of 18 individual rocket sites." It was obvious that the attack on the airbase was a major coordinated effort, probably carried out by elements of the NVA 368B Artillery Regiment, possibly reinforced by a new enemy unit in the sector, the 1st Battalion, 68th Artillery Regiment. During the night, in addition to the rocket attack, Group 44 units had initiated some 25 actions by fire often followed by an infantry ground assault in seven of the nine districts of Quang Nam Province.<sup>43</sup>

### *Continuing Heavy Fighting and Increasing Uncertainty*

Despite all of the ado in the Da Nang sector including the rocket attack on the airbase, the main enemy thrust on the night of 2-3 January was further south in the Que Son Valley. Even with the compromise of his plans in December, North Vietnamese Army Major General Chu Huy Man, the commander of the enemy *Military Region 5* or *B-1 Front*, decided to proceed with the offensive against the 1st Air Cavalry 3d Brigade fire bases in the Wheeler/Wallowa operating area.\* Man apparently received "explicit instructions from Hanoi" to send the entire *2d NVA Division* against the U.S. brigade's defenses in the Que Son sector. Having deferred the onset of the campaign, the enemy apparently hoped that they had lulled the Americans into a false sense of complacency. Furthermore, they obviously thought the *Group 44* activity at Da Nang on the night of 2-3 January would draw the American command's attention away from the Que Son Valley into the mistaken belief that the *2d NVA Division* had moved north and was about to attack the Marine base at Da Nang. The North Vietnamese commanders might have had another motivation, as well: "the helicopter killing zone in the valley's upper reaches was too tempting to abandon."<sup>44</sup>

Despite release to the news media by MACV about the capture of the North Vietnamese document, General Koster, the Americal Division commander, was not all that sure that the North Vietnamese had abandoned their original plan. With the *NVA 2d Division* maintaining radio silence with the beginning of the new year, Koster became even more suspicious about the enemy's intentions. On 2 January, he ordered Colonel Hubert S. Campbell, the commanding officer of the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, who maintained his command post at Fire Base Ross near the town of Que Son, to search a few of the enemy attack assembly areas depicted on the NVA map.<sup>45</sup>

That afternoon, Company C, 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry encountered a large enemy force in a rice paddy about 5,000 meters southwest of Fire Base Ross. Company A, 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry reinforced Company C and 3d Brigade helicopter gunships provided air support for both companies. In the ensuing four and a half-hour fire fight that lasted

\* Army historian George L. MacGarrigle believed that by Ter 1968, Man most likely was a lieutenant general, but observed that "it's difficult to determine what rank senior enemy generals held at any given time." MacGarrigle Comments.

until near dark when the enemy withdrew, the Cavalry troopers sustained casualties of three dead and five wounded and evacuated. They killed 39 North Vietnamese with the armed helicopters accounting for most of the enemy losses. The American troops also recovered several enemy weapons left behind by the retreating NVA and took two wounded prisoners. Under interrogation, the two captives related that they had recently infiltrated into their new sector through the mountains to the northwest together with about 1,000 other North Vietnamese troops. They stated that they had recently passed a rocket firing position with six 122mm rocket launchers and observed numerous antiaircraft emplacements. Upon learning this intelligence, Colonel Campbell placed his entire 3d Brigade on full alert.<sup>46</sup>

In the early hours of 3 January, shortly after the initial assaults in the Da Nang area, the NVA 2d Division struck, under the cover of darkness, four of the 3d Brigade's fire bases: Ross, Leslie, Colt, and Baldy. At Baldy, located about 15,000 meters northeast of Ross near Route 1, and Colt, about 10,000 meters east of Ross, the enemy limited himself to mortar attacks. The NVA division reserved its main efforts for Ross and Leslie, throwing the 3d and 21st Regiments against the two firebases. At Leslie, about 5,000 meters to the southwest of Ross, enemy infantry followed closely upon the initial mortar and rocket barrage. Although the North Vietnamese initially broke through the bunker line, the 1st Cavalry defenders threw back the enemy with heavy losses. At Ross, an even larger North Vietnamese force used "human wave" tactics. The men of the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, however, on Ross, were ready. According to one account, Captain Charles A. Krohn, the battalion intelligence officer, had made an analysis of past NVA attacks and found a pattern. The NVA depended on the preparatory mortars and rockets to keep the defenders under cover with their heads down while enemy sappers cut the wire and cleared away obstacles. Krohn suggested that the 2d Battalion troopers attempt during the shelling to keep their eyes on the perimeter irrespective of the shelling and continue firing. Even with the implementation of the intelligence officer's recommendations, the defense of Ross was a near thing. At one point, 3d Brigade artillerymen on Ross lowered their guns and fired canister rounds directly into the attackers. By 0530, the fighting at Ross was over and the NVA withdrew, defeated. At both perimeters, the 1st Cavalry troopers counted a total of 331 NVA

dead at a cost of 18 Americans KIA, 137 evacuated and wounded, and 3 missing in action.<sup>47</sup>

Further south, in the Que Son Valley, near Hiep Duc, an undermanned 1st VC Regiment, the remaining infantry regiment of the 2d NVA Division, hit a firebase of the Americal Division's 196th Light Infantry Brigade. Poorly coordinated with its forces badly dispersed, the enemy attack soon faltered. Colonel Louis Gelling, the 196th commander, formed the brigade into two task forces and rapidly took the initiative. By 9 January, the 196th had accounted for over 400 of the enemy.<sup>48</sup>

Although the 1st Cavalry troops on Leslie had repulsed the ground assault on their positions, the North Vietnamese continued to maintain pressure on the American fire base. NVA antiaircraft units had occupied the high ground overlooking Leslie and their guns made any resupply of the base an extremely hazardous venture. Colonel Campbell, the 3d Brigade commander, later recalled that Leslie "was not resupplied for a period of about nine days because of the ring of 12.7mm's [enemy antiair machine guns] around it." During what amounted to the siege of Fire Base Leslie, enemy gunners shot down 7 1st Air Cavalry helicopters and damaged 26 more seriously enough to put them temporarily out of commission.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the deteriorating weather which limited both fixed-wing and helicopter support, the 196th and the 3d Brigade carried the fight to the enemy. With preregistered points based on key terrain earmarked on the captured enemy map, Colonel Campbell's artillery placed heavy fires on suspected enemy positions. Preplanned B-52 strikes flying high above the clouds also rained down a devastating amount of explosives upon presumed NVA concentration areas. With this support, occasionally reinforced by Marine and Air Force tactical fixed-wing aircraft and Army gunships when the weather permitted, the Army infantry attempted to outmaneuver and close with the enemy. Gelling's 196th engaged in several night company-size fire fights, often in a driving rain storm. Both the 3d Brigade and the 196th took a heavy toll of the 2d NVA Division in the Que Son Valley. By the time the fighting ended in mid-January, the Army brigades had killed more than a 1,000 enemy at a cost of about 100 American lives. Although still remaining in the field, the 2d NVA suffered losses that impaired its future effectiveness.<sup>50</sup>

### *Phu Loc Operations*

While the Army units turned back the *2d NVA Division* offensive in the Que Son Valley, North Vietnamese units in Phu Loc District, north of Da Nang and the Hai Van Pass, initiated a series of broad-based assaults on allied units in that sector. Their special targets were the Marine Combined Action units, especially CAPs H (Hotel) 5, 6, and 7, protecting Route 1, as it wended its way through the mountains between Da Nang and Phu Loc District Town. The enemy obviously realized that cutting Route 1 here where it was vulnerable reduced the capability of the allied forces to reinforce and resupply their forces to the north.\*

To safeguard this important north-south link between Da Nang and Marine forces in Thua Thien Province, III MAF had reinforced the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines at Phu Bai with the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Oliver W. van den Berg. On 26 December, while remaining under the operational control of the 5th Marines at Da Nang, Lieutenant Colonel van den Berg officially assumed from the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines at Phu Bai responsibility for the Phu Loc TAOR extending from Hai Van Pass in the south to the Truoi River to the northwest. Route 1 bisected the area of operations southeast to northwest. The terrain consisted of a narrow coastal lowland east of Route 1, a high, jungled piedmont south and west of Route 1, and the Annamite Mountain Range to the west. Bach Ma Mountain rising above 1,400 meters in height and located about 8,000 meters south of Phu Loc District Town dominated the western and southern area of operations. A large inland bay, Dam Cau Hai, rimmed the northern edge of the battalion's sector. Most of the population was confined to a few fishing villages along the coast and farming communities that lay on either side of Route 1 and in the small river valleys in the district.

Lieutenant Colonel van den Berg established his command post just south of the town of Phu Loc. Of the battalion's four infantry companies, three deployed in or around the battalion assembly area. The fourth,

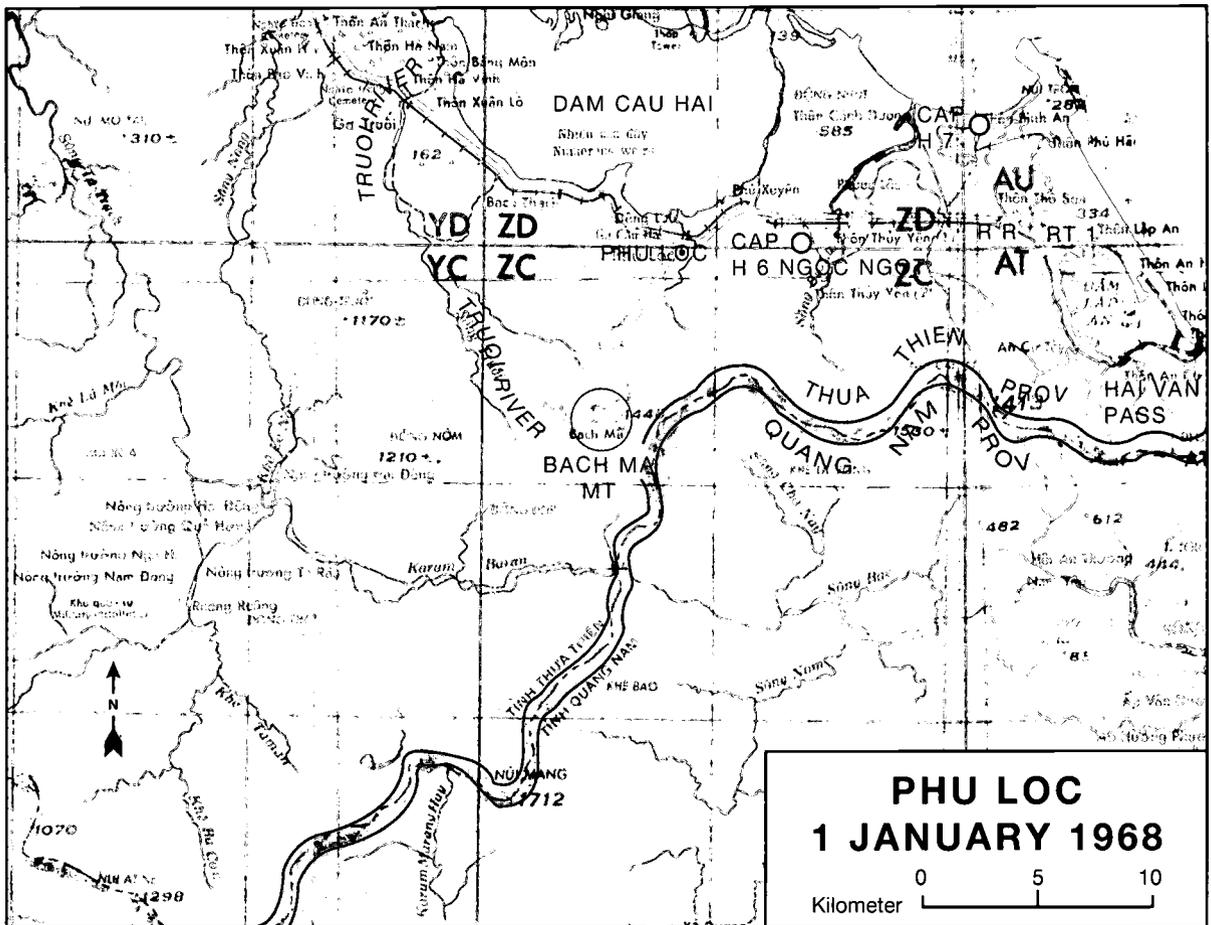
Company D, established its base area about 15,000 meters to the east of the rest of the battalion and about 10,000 meters north of the Hai Van Pass. The 1st Division attached two artillery batteries from the 11th Marines to Lieutenant Colonel van den Berg's command. Battery D, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines with its 105mm howitzers provided direct support for the infantry from positions within the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines assembly area. A 155mm howitzer battery, Battery L, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines, split into two-gun sections, one section at the battalion assembly area and the second with Company D, north of the Hai Van Pass. From both locations, the Marine infantry battalion and its supporting artillery were in position to cover the Combined Action platoons and Route 1 in the sector.<sup>51\*\*</sup>

While the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines relocated north of the Hai Van Pass, North Vietnamese units had augmented the *VC 804th* and *K.4B Main Force Battalions* and VC local force units that traditionally operated in the Phu Loc region. In early December, the Marines received reports of a new *4th NVA Regiment*. On 13 December, a North Vietnamese soldier defected to the South Vietnamese and gave his unit as the *1st Battalion, 4th NVA Regiment*, recently changed from the *4th Battalion, 9th NVA Regiment*. The "rallier" stated that his redesignated unit had arrived in the Phu Loc forward area near Bach Ma Mountain in late November. This together with other prisoner reports of a *2d Battalion, 4th NVA Regiment* in southern Thua Thien Province confirmed the presence of the new enemy regiment. Furthermore, other intelligence sources identified a new VC Battalion, the *802d*, located east of the recently arrived *4th NVA*, along the Thua Thien-Quang Nam Boundary.<sup>52</sup>

This relatively rapid buildup of enemy forces in the Phu Loc sector obviously pointed to some enemy initiative in the very near future. A Combined Action Marine, James Duguid, assigned to CAP Hotel 6 in the hamlet of Nuoc Ngot just off Route 1, and about

\*Colonel Robert J. Keller, who at the time commanded the 3d Combined Action Group which included the Phu Loc Combined Action units, observed that in late December 1967 and early January 1968: "In Phu Loc, the NVA was moving from the mountains to the coast and CAPs, stretched along Route # 1, providing nightly ambushes, represented obstacles that had to be dealt with . . ." Col Robert J. Keller, Comments on draft, dtd 2Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Keller Comments.

\*\*Lieutenant Colonel Oliver W. van den Berg, Jr., several years later commented that the Combined Action platoons "were often placed in untenable positions." To provide a military presence and a sense of security, the Combined Action units were usually in a village perimeter and intermingled with the local population. Lieutenant Colonel van den Berg, Jr., observed that the options open to him "seemed to be to let the Marine/CAPs be overrun or accept civilian casualties." He, nevertheless, employed "off-set registration techniques" that with a few or even one "firing adjustment, fire for effect missions could be called or directed" from his command post to support the Combined Action units. LtCol Oliver W. van den Berg, Jr., Comments on draft, dtd 12Dec94 (Vietnam Comment file).



6,000 meters east of the town of Phu Loc, recalled several years later that in November or December 1967 while on patrol he stumbled upon what was in effect “a relief map made on the ground.” The “map” consisted of “rocks, sticks, and pieces of bamboo and leaves” depicting the Marine base at Phu Bai, Route 1, and all of the Combined Action platoons in “Hotel” Company. Duguid remembered that a rock denoted Phu Loc headquarters and little sticks signified Marine and South Vietnamese defensive bunkers. He passed this information up the chain of command, but received no reaction to the intelligence. Concurrently, however, the defector from the *4th NVA Regiment* provided supporting testimony about enemy intentions. He related that the enemy *Tri-Thien Military Region* had ordered all units under its command to carry out a major campaign before Tet: “The VC would attack like lightning and occupy a few ARVN bases and [then] will use the (Tet) cease-fire period for resupply of food.” III MAF intelligence officers gave credence to such a stratagem as in accordance with a North Vietnamese resolution to sever Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces from South

Vietnam. The North Vietnamese rallier declared that the first phase of the enemy campaign in the Phu Loc area would include the destruction of bridges on Route 1 “to paralyze the supply route” followed by a “coordinated attack against the Phu Loc sub-sector using both infantry and sapper units.”<sup>53\*</sup>

By the beginning of the year, the enemy forces in Phu Loc had opened their first phase of the offensive. From 23 December through 6 January, enemy guerrillas and sappers launched a series of attacks against allied convoys and bridges along Highway 1 from the Hai Van Pass to the bridge over the Truoi River. For example on 4 January near Company D positions, Marine engineers discovered three destroyed culvert bridges. Not satisfied with blowing the bridges, the enemy sappers had “booby-trapped” the surrounding

\* Colonel Robert J. Keller remembered that in late December 1967 or early January 1968 one of the Combined Action Platoons in his sector, CAP Hotel 4, located just south of the Truoi River Bridge “killed up to eleven NVA officers in an ambush in what appeared to be a pre-troop movement scouting mission.” Keller Comments.

area with grenades and cement-type mines. The engineers deactivated the "surprise firing devices" without incurring any casualties. In a minesweep mission the same morning on Route 1 further south, just above the Hai Van Pass, the Marine engineers were less fortunate. A Marine truck detonated a 40-pound cement-type mine which seriously wounded six Marines and badly damaged the vehicle. That night, Marines of Company D received reports that a group of 20 VC had the assignment to emplace mines near their sector. A Marine patrol failed to uncover any enemy, but an 81mm mortar fire mission resulted in a secondary explosion.<sup>54</sup>

About 1030 the following morning, 5 January, near the truck mining incident of the previous day, another engineer sweep team, with a squad from Company D for security, triggered a VC ambush. An estimated 25-man enemy force attacked the Marines with grenades and automatic weapons. Two of the grenades landed in the rear of a Marine truck. The driver accelerated but enemy machine gun fire killed him and the truck ran off a steep incline. The remaining Marines regrouped and forced the enemy to break contact. The Company D commander immediately sent two squads supported by two Ontos to reinforce the sweep team. The following morning, on a bridge close to the ambush site, one of the Ontos struck a mine destroying the vehicle and killing the driver and wounding another Marine. About 1300, 6 January, just west of the bridge, one of the Company D squads, searching for an enemy sniper, came across what appeared to be another mine. As the squad stopped in a small clearing to investigate the object, two VC fired some 20 rifle rounds at the Americans, killing another Marine. The rest of the squad maneuvered through some heavy vegetation to reach the enemy positions, but by that time the VC had disappeared. In the three incidents on 5–6 January, the Marines sustained total casualties of 3 dead and 20 wounded, 17 seriously enough to be evacuated.<sup>55</sup>

To the west, near Phu Loc, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines conducted two company sweeps without incident, one by Company A to the south of the battalion assembly area, and the other by Company C to the north and east of the assembly area. On the night of 6 January, however, a Company A listening post, about 5,000 meters south of Phu Loc, spotted about four VC attempting to infiltrate the company's perimeter. The Marines fired 60 rounds and the enemy troops fled.<sup>56</sup>

Through this period, the Combined Action platoons positioned along Route 1 sensed that the enemy was preparing for a large push. Already, the VC had

initiated some 30 incidents, mostly minor contacts of various sorts, in the local hamlets or along the highway. As Thomas Krusewski, a former CAP Marine in Hotel 6, several years later observed, "[the] atmosphere around you was tense. We began to have troop movement around [us]." The Combined Action Marines noted motorcycle tracks in the woods which implied that the enemy was paying off the local hamlet chiefs in return for the cooperation of the villagers. Krusewski remarked one "did not need to be a PhD to figure it [the situation] out." The VC were about to attack; the only remaining questions were where and when.<sup>57</sup>

In the early morning hours of 7 January the Communist forces struck. They hit the Phu Loc District headquarters, the command post of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines south of Phu Loc, the Company D base position north of the Hai Van Pass, and three of the Combined Action compounds between Phu Loc and the Hai Van Pass. Although limiting their attacks on the Marine units to attacks by fire, the enemy penetrated the Phu Loc District headquarters and the nearby Hotel 5 Combined Action compound. The Communist troops overran the other two Combined Action platoons, Hotel 6 and 7, located approximately 6 and 14 kilometers respectively east of Phu Loc.<sup>58</sup>

At Hotel 6 in the hamlet of Ngoc Ngot during the night of 6–7 January, Corporal Arliss Willhite remembered that the Marines and PFs had just returned from a large sweep operation along Route 1 with CAP Hotel 7. Following the suggestion of one of the Marine squad leaders, the CAP commander decided against putting out the usual listening posts. The CAP Marines, however, posted a small security force including four Marines at a nearby bridge on Route 1. In the compound itself, another four Marines stood watch. At about 0330 on 7 January, over 150 enemy troops dashed into the compound from two different directions, flinging satchel charges and grenades, and firing automatic weapons. From his vantage point near the bridge on Route 1 where he was in charge of the security group there, Lance Corporal Frank Lopez later described the attack: "All of a sudden hell broke loose, mortars are coming in and rockets and everything." The enemy assault force had placed blankets and mats over the concertina wire surrounding the compound and "just hopped over with sappers and automatic weapons." According to Lopez, "it looked like ants coming over a hill or just coming through the wire towards the compound, yelling, screaming, everyone was just yelling and getting hit." By this time, Lopez and his group were also under attack from about 40

VC and too busy defending themselves and the bridge to observe the fight in Ngoc Ngot.<sup>59</sup>

In the compound itself, pandemonium reigned. Corporal Willhite recollected that the VC were in the compound so fast some Marines and several of the PFs panicked: "Some of them just went out and crawled under hootches and stuff, they forgot their rifles."\* On the other hand, several Marines and a few of the Popular Force troops fought off the enemy as best they could. Willhite remembered that as he ran out of his "hootch" with his rifle, enemy soldiers ignored him, concentrating instead upon the communication and ammunition bunkers. Reaching a site with a clear field of fire of the ammunition bunker, Willhite and a mixed group of Marines and PFs attempted to stem the tide. Both he and Krusewski credited one Popular Force member, armed with a Browning automatic rifle, for providing the necessary firepower to hold off the enemy from reaching their positions. Within 25 to 30 minutes, nevertheless, the Communist attackers had nearly destroyed the entire compound. Krusewski later wondered "why they didn't kill everybody, I don't know, they just turned around and left when the sun started coming up." Equally puzzled, Willhite, nearly 20 years later still spoke in disbelief, "It was like a miracle, sun came up, church bells rang. They just picked up their stuff and walked away."<sup>60</sup>

The detail led by Lance Corporal Lopez had withstood the enemy assault in their sector and the bridge still stood. It was the only one of four bridges between Phu Loc and CAP Hotel 7 on Route 1 that remained intact. Seeing the Communist troops withdrawing from the compound, the four Marines returned to Ngoc Ngot and began to attend to the wounded and bury the dead.<sup>61</sup>

Of the more than 40 troops, both Marines and South Vietnamese, in the Hotel 6 compound the night before, only about seven escaped relatively unscathed. The Marines sustained casualties of 5 dead and 16 wounded, 12 of whom had to be evacuated. Among the dead was the Navy corpsman. It would not be until 0900 that a Marine platoon from Company D, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines arrived and called

in a helicopter to take out the most seriously wounded. As Corporal Willhite later remarked, the CAP Marines could not depend on supporting infantry and artillery. When the enemy attacks, "they know all about your supporting units, and they tie them up . . . they usually always get you."<sup>62</sup>

In this particular instance, the corporal was absolutely correct. In the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines command post, the battalion received a radio message at 0335 about the attack on the Phu Loc District headquarters. At the same time the Combined Action Group headquarters reported that it had lost radio communication with CAPs Hotel 6 and 7 and that Hotel 5 at Phu Loc was under attack. Less than five minutes later, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines assembly area south of Phu Loc came under an 82mm mortar barrage and recoilless rifle fire. Among the wounded was the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel van den Berg.\*\* Major Harold J. McMullen, the battalion executive officer, temporarily assumed command.<sup>63</sup>

About an hour after the attack on the battalion command post, Communist gunners also took the Company D base area under mortar and recoilless rifle fire. At 0530, the Company D commander sent a reaction force to Hotel 6 and 7, but enemy mortar rounds forced the Marines to turn back. Waiting until daylight to avoid a possible enemy ambush, Major McMullen sent a platoon-sized relief force from Company B to the assistance of the district headquarters and the CAP platoons. As the Company B platoon entered the Phu Loc District compound at 0700, they saw the VC attempting to disengage and took them under fire, killing seven of the enemy. At the headquarters, the combined force of ARVN and U.S. advisors accounted for about 50 of the enemy. An hour later the Marine platoon reached Hotel 5 where the enemy had already departed. The Marines there sustained casualties of one dead and five wounded. At about the same time, 0800, another platoon from Company D arrived at Hotel 7 which had been overrun. The CAP Marines there suffered casualties of seven dead and four wounded. One hour later the Company D platoon arrived at Hotel 6. All told on the morning of 7 January in the Phu Loc sector, the allies sustained casualties of 18 Marines killed and 84 wounded, 4 U.S. Army advisors wounded, and an unspecified number of South Vietnamese regular troops and PFs killed and wounded, while

\*In his comments, Willhite believed the reason that some of the Marines panicked was because the VC were into the compound so quickly. He recalled "hearing 'incoming!' then almost immediately 'They're in the compound.' They were at the doors of our hootches." Willhite claimed the reason that he got out with his gear, "because I always tied my backdoor shut with com-wire at night to keep it from being blown open by the wind." Arliss Willhite, Comments on draft, dtd 28Sep94 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*Lieutenant Colonel van den Berg commented that "due to the lack of reaction time and space, I am not aware of any close defensive fires called by/for any CAP." van den Berg Comments.

inflicting upon the enemy an estimated 80 dead. U.S. and South Vietnamese intelligence officers later identified two enemy battalions as taking part in the coordinated attack, the NVA 1st Battalion, 9th Regiment, probably attached to the new 4th NVA Regiment, and the VC K4B Battalion.<sup>64</sup>

After the events of the 7th, the enemy units in the Phu Loc area limited their efforts for the most part to intermittent mortar and harassing attacks by fire on both the Combined Action units and the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. The most serious incident occurred on 12 January when an enemy mortar attack on a 1st Battalion, 5th Marines defensive position south of Phu Loc resulted in 6 Marines killed and 11 wounded. At the same time, the NVA and VC units continued their interdiction of Route 1 with minor ambushes of convoys and blowing up bridges and culverts. Between 7–15 January, the enemy had detonated 10 bridges, knocked out 4 culverts, and cut the highway in 3 places. Marine engineers and Navy Seabees repaired most of the damage within three days. On the 15th, however, one bridge was still out, but “bypassable.”<sup>65</sup>

#### *The Formation and Deployment of Task Force X-Ray*

By mid-January, the 1st Marine Division had established its Task Force X-Ray headquarters at Phu Bai and the deployment of U.S. forces from southern I Corps and Da Nang to the northern battlefield in Operation Checkers had begun in earnest. Initially as part of the Operation Checkers planning in November 1967, the III MAF staff considered sending individual 1st Marine Division units north and placing them under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division. At that point, Major General Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, recommended instead that the 1st Division merely extend its area of operations into Thua Thien. General Cushman concurred and on 4 December 1967 General Robertson activated the Task Force X-Ray planning staff, under his assistant division commander, Brigadier General Foster “Frosty” C. LaHue, to carry out the new mission.<sup>66</sup>

After a brief period of consultation between the 3d Marine Division and the Task Force X-Ray staffs, on 18 December, General Robertson’s headquarters issued its operational order outlining the transfer of responsibilities. The concept called for Task Force X-Ray to move its headquarters to Phu Bai and take over the 3d Marine Division command post there.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A413469  
BGen Foster C. LaHue, here in an official portrait, was the assistant division commander of the 1st Marine Division in January 1968 and also assumed the additional duty of CG, TF X-Ray, in command of the 1st Marine Division forces at Phu Bai.

General LaHue would assume operational control of both the 1st and 5th Marines. The 1st Marines with two battalions would deploy to Camp Evans while the 5th Marines with three battalions would relocate to the Phu Bai and Phu Loc sectors. Thus, the 1st Marines would conduct operations in northern Thua Thien while the 5th Marines would bear the same responsibility in the southern half of the province.<sup>67</sup>

This redeployment would be carried out in a series of “incremental jumps.” In an exchange of messages and a conference at III MAF headquarters on 21 December, Task Force X-Ray and 1st and 3d Marine Division staff officers worked out a timetable and agreement on the boundaries between the two divisions. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines in its move to Phu Loc was the vanguard of Task Force X-Ray.<sup>68</sup>

On 11 January, the 1st Marine Division ordered the activation of Task Force X-Ray at Phu Bai. The new command initially was to consist of the 5th Marines regimental headquarters and two of its

infantry battalions, the 1st and 2d. While the 1st Battalion was to remain in the Phu Loc area, the 2d Battalion was to relieve the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines at Phu Bai, which would then revert to the operational control of the 3d Division. The Huong or Perfume River was to be the demarcation line between the 3d and 1st Marine Divisions.<sup>69</sup>

Beginning on the 11th, helicopters, fixed-wing transports, and Navy LCUs transported the Task Force headquarters and the 5th Marines headquarters elements from Da Nang to Phu Bai. Two days earlier, the advance echelon of the 5th Marines had arrived at the new base. From 13–15 January, Air Force transports flew the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines directly from the small airfield at An Hoa south of Da Nang to the Phu Bai airfield. At noon on 13 January, Brigadier General LaHue announced from his new command post at Phu Bai the activation of Task Force X-Ray for operations.<sup>70</sup>

For the most part the shift of forces north had gone without incident. Colonel Robert D. Bohn, the 5th Marines commander, several years later recalled that he had known about the proposed redeployment for over a month and had made preparations. Even before the transfer of his 1st Battalion to Phu Loc, he had visited the sector and talked to friends of his serving on the 3d Marine Division staff at Phu Bai. Colonel Bohn mentioned that perhaps it may not have been proper for a regimental commander to do this on his own, but on the other hand, claimed “it was good . . . informal staff coordination.” He recalled very few problems with the actual move.<sup>71</sup>

Still any such large transplacement of forces results in some inconveniences and difficulties for the troops involved. This was to prove no exception. One Marine staff sergeant assigned to the Task Force X-Ray photo imagery section remembered that after his arrival at Phu Bai there were “empty hootches” but no supplies and material. The members of the section had “to scrounge” plywood just to make frames to hold their maps and photographs. On a more personal note, he observed that he had not been paid since December and the headquarters had lost his pay and health records. Although the 5th Marines had a mess hall, Colonel Bohn recollected that the troops had no fresh food and were eating C-Rations. He protested once he learned that helicopters were being used to bring in china for the general’s mess and the situation was soon rectified: “It was an inevitable consequence of

displacing a hell of a lot more troops up north than they had before.”<sup>72\*</sup>

Staff problems were almost inherent in the situation. As one staff officer later admitted that when the Task Force X-Ray staff arrived at Phu Bai they “didn’t know the magnitude” of the situation that they faced. Although the staff was supposed to be a tactical rather than an administrative headquarters, Colonel Bohn observed that its officers were “so preoccupied with just getting the logistics of being a headquarters that they had no time to really refine their combat operations capability.” The fact that the staff was temporary and task organized presented difficulties. As Lieutenant Colonel James C. Hecker, the G-1 officer responsible for personnel affairs, noted, it “introduces into the system austerity . . . austerity in staffing of the unit; the management of the unit; and the economic employment of the material resources of the unit.” Colonel Bohn remarked that the fact that the staff was temporary and thrown together was hardly conducive to smooth operations.<sup>73</sup>

Still Task Force X-Ray was operational. On 12 January it issued its first operational order and laid out its concept of operations. The order itself differed little from the original order published by the 1st Marine Division in December. It detailed, however, the task organization and units assigned. The 1st Marines was slated to be attached with its 1st and 2d Battalions “on or about 24 January 1968.” At the end of the month, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines was to join its parent regiment at Phu Bai. In essence, Task Force X-Ray was to be responsible eventually for all of Thua Thien Province and General LaHue was to coordinate with Brigadier General Ngo Quang Truong of the 1st ARVN Division.<sup>74</sup>

In Thua Thien Province, Marine commanders shared responsibility for operations with the 1st ARVN Division. U.S. advisors rated General Truong, the division commander and former commander of the Vietnamese Airborne, as “top notch” and General Cushman described Truong as the one Vietnamese commander who “stood out” above the rest. Truong maintained his division headquarters in Hue but kept only one of his infantry regiments, the 3d, in Thua Thien Province. Lieutenant Colonel Phan Ba Hoa, the regimental commander, was also held in high esteem

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\*Brigadier General Paul G. Graham, who was 1st Marine Division G-3 or operations officer at the time, doubted the story about helicopters bringing in the china for the general’s mess: “I am certain I would have heard about such an aberration.” Graham Comments.

by his American advisors who described him as a "highly competent tactician and administrator." Hoa positioned two of his battalions and a mobile task group at PK 17, so named because it was located near a road marker on Route 1, 17 kilometers north of Hue. He also retained one battalion and the division headquarters near the city. In addition to these forces, General Truong had under his control two airborne battalions from the General Reserve, one at PK 17 and the other near Hue. The arrival of the General Reserve battalions was part of a new impetus on the part of General Westmoreland and the Vietnamese Joint General Staff to reinforce the northern border areas and provinces.<sup>75</sup>

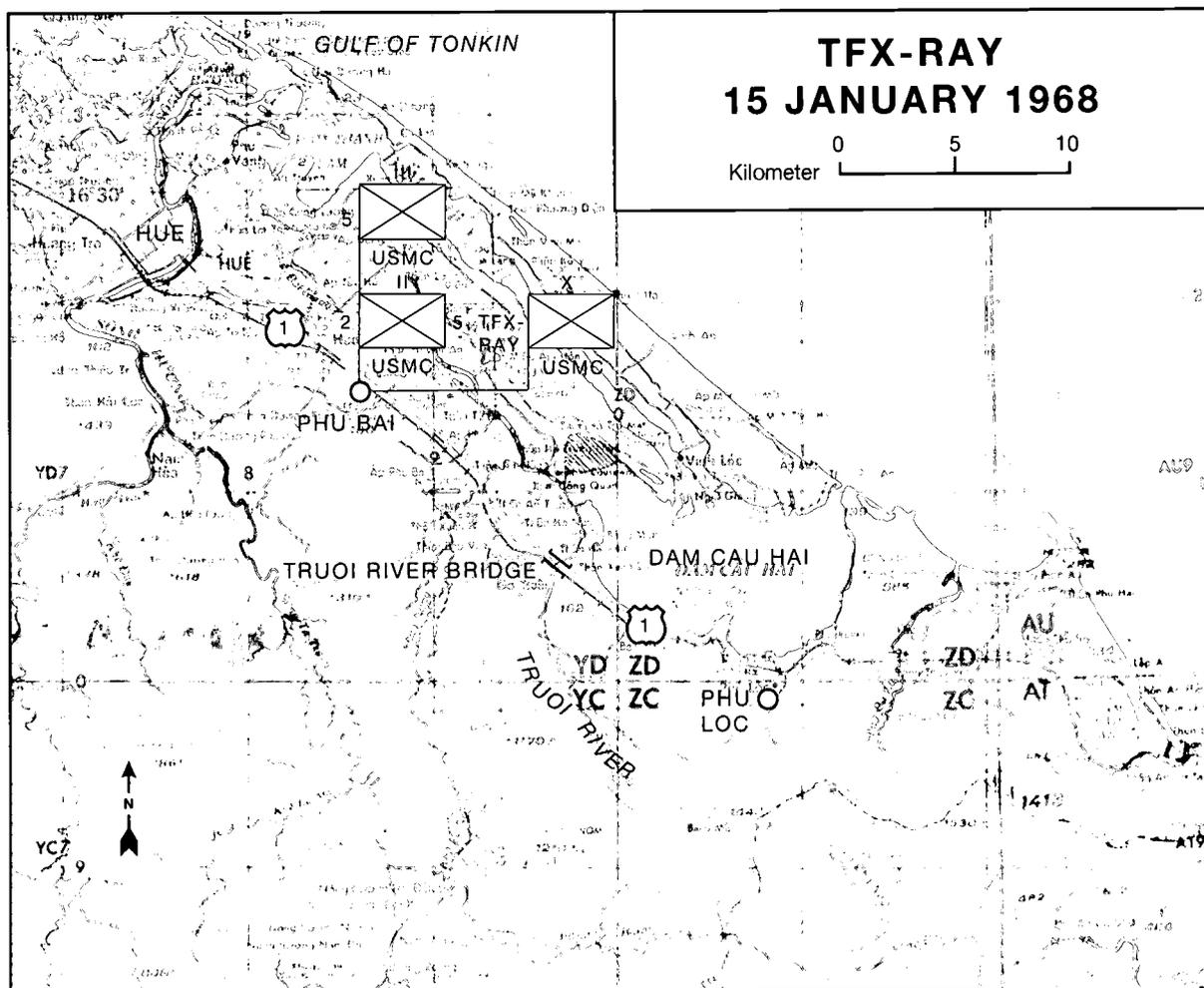
### *The Cavalry Arrives*

In Saigon at MACV headquarters, General Westmoreland had been concerned for some time about the enemy intentions in the northern two provinces. While much of his attention remained riveted on Khe Sanh, the MACV commander also worried about the enemy buildup in the A Shau Valley about 30 miles southwest of Hue near the Laotian Border. Since the fall of the Special Forces camp there in the spring of 1966, the North Vietnamese had used the valley as one of their main base areas and infiltration terminals into South Vietnam. During the summer of 1967, the 4th Marines in Operation Cumberland supported by engineers improved Highway 547 and established a firebase about 20 miles southwest of Hue. From there, U.S. Army 175mm guns fired into the valley. At the onset of the fall-winter monsoon season in September, the Marines abandoned the firebase because of the demands of the DMZ front on Marine manpower and washed-out roads which seriously hampered resupply. Aerial photographic intelligence soon revealed that the North Vietnamese started their own road project in the A Shau. Lieutenant General Cushman jokingly recalled: "Lo and behold, they [the NVA] started building their share of the rural development here, and apparently, they're coming to meet the road we had built." The U.S. immediately started an air bombing interdiction campaign in the A Shau. Cushman remembered "some guy came up with a chemical or something that was supposed to turn dirt into mud. It actually worked to some extent, we really plastered the A Shau Valley with that." According to the III MAF general, the bombing did slow up the NVA in the valley.<sup>76</sup>

About this time in early December, General Westmoreland decided to modify the plans for the York operations involving the 1st Air Cavalry Division.\* While York I was to take place in February in the enemy's Do Xa base area in the I and II Corps Tactical Zone border region, MACV planned, as the weather improved, to insert in April a joint task force of the 1st Cavalry and III MAF units into the A Shau. On 16 December, Westmoreland visited General Cushman at Da Nang to discuss accommodations for the 1st Cavalry if the Army division was to reinforce the Marines in the next few months. According to the MACV commander, he believed the enemy would make his next major effort in I Corps and that III MAF should accelerate its York logistic preparations to prepare for an early deployment of the 1st Cavalry Division. He directed Cushman to host a conference to include representatives from MACV, the Army division, and III MAF to plan the necessary construction of helicopter and port facilities to be completed by mid-January. At the same time, Westmoreland met with Major General John J. Tolson, the 1st Air Cavalry Division commander, and alerted him about a possible early deployment to I Corps.<sup>77</sup>

While planning for the York I and II operations continued into January, General Westmoreland and his staff began to place a higher priority on the reinforcement of northern I Corps. As reports indicated the buildup of forces at Khe Sanh and the DMZ, the MACV commander made his decision to send the 1st Cavalry Division north of the Hai Van Pass. On 10 January, he canceled the York operation in the Do Xa sector. Two days later he met with General Cushman at Da Nang to discuss the various contingency plans. Westmoreland then ordered that the 1st Cavalry send two brigades north to Thua Thien Province. These were the 1st Brigade from the 1st Cavalry and the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, temporarily attached to the 1st Cavalry Division. The Cavalry's 2d Brigade remained in II Corps while the 3d Brigade stayed for the time being in the Wheeler/Wallowa area in the Que Sons. In fact, on 13 January, General Westmoreland told Cushman not "to direct movement" of the 3d Brigade to northern I Corps without his specific approval. Two days later, he cabled Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, CinCPac, and Army General Earle G. Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, that the 3d Brigade would join the division at Phu Bai at a later date. On

\*See Chapter 1 for discussion of the planning for the York operations.



17 January, the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division began its deployment to Phu Bai.<sup>78</sup>

On that same date, General Westmoreland explained to a gathering of his senior field commanders the reasons for the reinforcement of III MAF north of the Hai Van Pass. He believed that the NVA was about to move against Khe Sanh and also against allied forces in the coastal areas of southern Quang Tri and northern Thua Thien Provinces from Base Area 101. As he had earlier observed to Admiral Sharp and General Wheeler, "the odds are 60-40 that the enemy will launch his planned campaign prior to Tet." He told the assembled officers that he realized the tenuous logistic situation, but that the risk had to be accepted. He was especially worried about the lack of a deep-water port and the vulnerability of Route 1 between Da Nang and Hue. He believed that it would take about another regiment to secure the highway.<sup>79</sup>

General Westmoreland was also concerned about command relations, especially in control of air.

MACV and III MAF staff officers had already started to address this problem in the initial planning for York II in the A Shau and for an air offensive in support of the Marine base at Khe Sanh, codenamed Operation Niagara. The questions still remained unresolved, however, with deep doctrinal differences between the Marines of III MAF and Seventh Air Force officers representing MACV. Although the MACV air directive called for the Marine wing, operating under III MAF control, to support Marine units and the Seventh Air Force to provide support for Army units, Westmoreland was not sure that the system would work with the 1st Air Cavalry Division deployed north of the Hai Van Pass.<sup>80</sup>

On 19 January, General Westmoreland visited General Cushman and Major General Norman J. Anderson, the commander of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, at Da Nang. The MACV commander brought up the issue of air support for the Cavalry Division in its new area of operations. According to Westmore-

land, he told Cushman and Anderson that he believed “we had to move toward a single management arrangement.”\* After a rather heated discussion, Westmoreland left the issue open, but told the Marine commanders that he expected them “to take care of the 1st Cavalry Division.” What he did not tell them was that he had already sent a message to Admiral Sharp recommending a change in air control procedures. In any event, at the meeting, the MACV commander directed General Cushman to detach the 1st Cavalry’s 3d Brigade from the Americal Division to rejoin its parent command.<sup>81</sup>

The 1st Air Cavalry Division quickly established an area of operations in southern Quang Tri and northern Thua Thien Provinces. The division established its command post on 20 January in a sector about five kilometers north of Phu Bai, designated Landing Zone El Paso, that included a Vietnamese civilian cemetery. Major General Tolson, who had been on leave in the United States at the time the order came to displace, arrived at El Paso the following day. With his 1st Brigade battalions located both at El Paso and Landing Zone Jane about 10 kilometers southwest of Quang Tri City and other reinforcing units expected soon, he immediately began to look for a new home for the division. As Tolson later stated, he needed “to get the division out of the graveyard.”<sup>82</sup>

Given his immediate mission to protect Quang Tri City from the south and southwest and to be prepared to launch an attack into the enemy *Base Areas 101* and *114*, he took an exploratory reconnaissance flight over his new area of operations. During this flight, on 22 January, he noticed the Marine base at Camp Evans and two possible landing sites just south of Quang Tri City that he believed better suited for base areas than the locations his units now occupied. After his return, he met with General Cushman at Da Nang. He asked the III MAF commander for permission to take over Camp Evans from the Marines and also for the two sites in Quang Tri. Cushman granted him the request for Evans but told him that he would have to coordinate with the 3d Marine Division for the other two areas.<sup>83</sup>

On 22 January, the 1st Cavalry started its operation Jeb Stuart in its new area of operations. Just south of Landing Zone Jane, the 1st Brigade’s Company C, 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry engaged a large enemy force. In an obviously mismatched fire fight, the Cavalry troop-

ers, supported by their gunships, killed 52 of the North Vietnamese at a cost of one slightly wounded American soldier. Eventually the 1st Brigade moved into the two new Quang Tri sites, redesignated Landing Zones Sharon and Betty, that General Tolson originally wanted. The 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne then assumed responsibility for Landing Zone Jane while General Tolson established his headquarters at Camp Evans together with the Cavalry’s 3d Brigade. As one Marine staff officer later remarked there was “a full Army division operating where two reduced Marine regiments had been operating.”<sup>84</sup>

### *The Changed Situation in the North*

The arrival of the 1st Cavalry Division altered the Marine Checkers plan. This especially applied to the 1st Marines which just had moved from Quang Tri and relieved the 4th Marines at Camp Evans. The enemy attack on Khe Sanh at the time had an equal impact on the plans. On 22 January, the 1st Marines received orders to detach the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines which was attached to the regiment for a helicopter lift to Khe Sanh. This would leave Colonel Stanley S. Hughes, who relieved Colonel Herbert Ing two days earlier at Evans, with no infantry battalions for Operation Neosho II in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan sector or for security of the base camp. With the concurrence of the Seventh Fleet and MACV, General Cushman inserted the SLF Alpha battalion, BLT 2/4, into Camp Evans. Beginning on 22 January, the SLF helicopter squadron HMM-361 lifted three companies of BLT 2/4 from its amphibious shipping offshore to Camp Evans and then, in turn, flew the companies of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines to Khe Sanh. At the same time, the Marine helicopters flew 380 civilian refugees out of Khe Sanh to Camp Evans. On the 23d, the 1st Marines in a “rough rider” convoy trucked the civilians to a refugee relocation center in Cam Lo. By the afternoon of the 23d, the relief and transplacement of the 1st Battalion was complete. The 1st Marines assumed operational control of BLT 2/4 which assumed responsibility for Neosho II operations.<sup>85\*\*</sup>

It was obvious to all concerned that the Neosho operation was to be of short duration. Although Colonel Hughes on 23 January issued an operational order for Neosho II, he soon received a message that the 1st Cavalry was to assume responsibility for

\*See Chapters 23 and 24 for the extended discussion of the Single Manager issue.

\*\*See Chapter 5 for description of Neosho I in Camp Evans and Co Bi-Thanh Tan area and Chapters 4 and 14 for Marine operations at Khe Sanh.

Camp Evans. Colonel Hughes was to close out Operation Neosho on the 24th, and begin redeployment to Phu Bai. He was to assume operational control of his 1st and 2d Battalions and responsibility of the Phu Bai Vital Area from the 5th Marines. BLT 2/4 would then reembark for another operation with the 3d Marine Division.<sup>86\*</sup>

On 25 January, the 1st Marines, which had remained attached to the 3d Marine Division, reverted to its parent division and came under the control of Task Force X-Ray. The first elements of the 1st Air Cavalry Division arrived at Camp Evans and formally took over the base two days later. From 25–28 January in a series of phased deployments, Colonel Hughes moved his headquarters and the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines rear elements from Camp Evans to Phu Bai, as well as the artillery battalion, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines. At 0830 on the 28th, Hughes opened his new command post at the latter base. On 30 January, the headquarters and Companies A and B of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines began arriving at Phu Bai from Quang Tri and returned to parent control. The 2d Battalion, 1st Marines infantry companies were still at Con Thien but preparing also to move. Colonel Bohn, the 5th Marines commander, recalled that at this time he visited Hughes and that the 1st Marines commander “was sitting in a hooch . . . [with] one bunk in there and one chair.” Bohn asked “Where the hell’s your CP?” and Hughes replied “This is it.” Colonel Hughes stated that he did not yet have a specific mission and he had under him only “one battalion with two companies.”<sup>87</sup>

In contrast, however, after the 5th Marines had arrived at Phu Bai, the regiment had more than enough to keep itself occupied. Since 15 January, Colonel Bohn had responsibility for securing Highway 1 from the Hai Van Pass to Phu Bai. He was also to provide reaction forces for all the Combined Action platoons and for any key populated areas in the sector. For the most part, until the end of the month, the enemy confined his activity to attacks and probes on Route 1 and Marine strongpoints in the Phu Loc sector.<sup>88</sup>

Through 29 January, Colonel Bohn kept his 1st Battalion positioned at Phu Loc and made the 2d Bat-

talion responsible for the Phu Bai Vital Area. Originally, Bohn expected to use his 3d Battalion as his maneuver battalion, but this changed with the arrival of the 1st Cavalry Division in northern I Corps. With the Army taking over Camp Evans, however, and the 1st Marines moving from there to Phu Bai, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines remained in the Da Nang TAOR. The regimental commander then decided to use the 2d Battalion as a maneuver battalion when it was relieved at Phu Bai by the companies of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. On 29 January, Lieutenant Colonel Ernest C. Cheatham, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines commander, began the displacement of his battalion and two of his companies into the Phu Loc sector.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, on the eve of Tet 1968, Task Force X-Ray consisted of two infantry regimental headquarters with a total of three infantry battalions between them. Also under Task Force X-Ray and providing artillery support was the 1st Field Artillery Group (1st FAG) consisting of the 1st and 2d Battalions, 11th Marines and several separate batteries. Brigadier General LaHue, the task force commander, also shared the Phu Bai base with rear echelons of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, Force Logistic Support Group Alpha, the rear headquarters and echelons of the 3d Marine Division, and the Seabees. As one of LaHue’s staff officers, Lieutenant Colonel Arthur J. Poillon, observed, the arrival of the 1st Air Cavalry Division had made the original Checkers plan “unrecognizable” and the Marines “found themselves reacting to these Army movements . . .”<sup>90</sup>

The establishment of the 1st Air Cavalry Division area of operations between the 1st and 3d Marine Divisions also concerned General Westmoreland. Already lacking confidence in Marine generalship, he decided to establish a new forward headquarters at Phu Bai to control the war in the northern two provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien. At first he considered placing an Army Corps headquarters at Phu Bai, but rejected this concept in the belief that it would cause too much inter-Service dissension. On 26 January, he met with General Vien and President Thieu about the establishment of both a Joint General Staff and MACV Forward headquarters at Phu Bai. Army General Creighton W. Abrams, as Deputy MACV, would represent Westmoreland while General Lam, the I Corps Commander, would be the personal representative of the Joint General Staff. At the same time, he notified Admiral Sharp about his intentions and sent General Abrams to Phu Bai to discuss the proposed new command arrangements with General Cushman, the III MAF commander.<sup>91</sup>

\*Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, who in 1968 commanded SLF Alpha (TG 79.4), commented that operational control of BLT 2/4 was returned to him at noon on 26 January and that “we had all elements of BLT 2/4 back aboard our shipping in five hours and fifteen minutes.” Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on draft, dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File).

Although both General Cushman at Da Nang and General Krulak in Hawaii had their suspicions about Westmoreland's motivations, they accepted the changes with good grace. The two Marine generals acknowledged the validity of the MACV commander's desire to have his forward headquarters in place, under his deputy, in the northern sector, where, he believed the decisive battle of the war was about to

begin. On the 27th, General Westmoreland ordered an advance echelon of the new headquarters under Army Major General Willard Pearson to Phu Bai. With the forward deployment of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, III MAF prepared to counter the expected enemy offensive in the north.<sup>92\*</sup>

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\*The outbreak of the Tet offensive delayed the formal establishment of the MACV Forward headquarters until 12 February. See Chapter 11

PART II  
THE TET OFFENSIVE

## CHAPTER 7

# The Enemy Offensive in the DMZ and Southern Quang Tri, 20 January–8 February

*The Cua Viet is Threatened—Adjustment of Forces in Southern Quang Tri Province  
Heavy Fighting Along the DMZ—A Lull in Leatherneck Square—The Cua Viet Continues to Heat Up  
The Battle For Quang Tri City—Tet Aftermath Along the DMZ*

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### *The Cua Viet is Threatened*

Beginning on 20 January, the North Vietnamese intensified their efforts in the north from Khe Sanh to the Cua Viet. While most public and media attention was focused upon the Khe Sanh base, the Marine command could not ignore its northern logistical lifeline from the Cua Viet Port Facility to Dong Ha along the Cua Viet River channel. From Dong Ha, Route 9 connected the isolated Marine bases at Cam Lo, Camp Carroll, the Rockpile, and Ca Lu. The continued presence of large North Vietnamese forces along the eastern DMZ as well as the buildup of forces in the west around Khe Sanh limited the ability of the 3d Marine Division to concentrate its forces in any one area. Even with the arrival of the addi-

tional Army forces in the north, the division was still spread out from its Quang Tri base in the south, to Khe Sanh in the west, and to the Cua Viet in the east.

Almost simultaneously with attacks on Khe Sanh, the North Vietnamese appeared to be making a determined attempt to halt the river traffic on the Cua Viet. On 20 January, enemy gunners positioned on the northern bank of the river forced the temporary closing of the Cua Viet. Up to this point, Lieutenant Colonel Edward R. Toner's 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion with an infantry company, Company C, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, attached to his command in Operation Napoleon, largely had responsibility for the security of the river. The battalion was becoming more and more hard pressed to carry out this mission.<sup>1</sup>

*Marine forklifts unload Navy landing craft at the Dong Ha ramp. With the Cua Viet too shallow for large-draft vessels, the Navy used both LCMs (landing craft, mechanized) and LCUs (landing craft, utility) to ply the river between the Cua Viet Facility and Dong Ha to bring in supplies to Marines in the DMZ sector.*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191332

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191332





Only the previous morning, 19 January, a platoon from Company C, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, patrolling the sand dunes along the coast north of the A-1 Strongpoint, and about 5,000 meters above the Cua Viet, ran into a company from the enemy *K-400 Main Force Battalion*. Corporal Ronald R. Asher, the acting weapons platoon sergeant, remembered that he and two of his machine gun teams accompanied the platoon. According to Asher, the "lead squad walked into the NVA positions" and that "within seconds the sound of AK's, M16s, . . . and the unmistakable cough of one of my guns was earth shattering." For a few chaotic hours, the platoon took cover as best it could and attempted to recover its casualties. Corporal Asher recalled that he and another squad leader assumed control of the platoon as both the platoon leader and sergeant were incapacitated.<sup>2</sup>

By late afternoon, Lieutenant Colonel Toner had reinforced the platoon with the rest of Company C supported by tanks and LVTs. Both sides used rifles, automatic weapons, grenades, mortars, and artillery fire in a hard-fought engagement that lasted much of the day. Enemy artillery from north of the Demilitarized Zone fired some 70 130mm rounds into the Marine positions. Still the enemy supporting arms were no match for the firepower that the Americans threw into the battle including air, naval gunfire, conventional artillery, and tank direct fire. By 1500, both sides had disengaged. The Marines losses were 3 dead and 33 wounded, 31 of whom had to be evacuated. According to Marine accounts, they killed 23 of the enemy and recovered six weapons including two light machine guns.<sup>3</sup>

On the following day, the 20th, the enemy not only fired at two Navy craft, but earlier that morning also engaged a South Vietnamese Navy Coastal Patrol Force junk on patrol in the Cua Viet. The 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, conducting a two-company operation nearby in conjunction with the 2d ARVN Regiment, ran up against an even stronger enemy force, approximately a battalion in size, than it had the previous day. This time the battalion had established blocking positions just northwest of the hamlet of My Loc on the northern bank of the Cua Viet. Starting as a small platoon action, the action soon evolved into a fullscale battle employing all supporting arms. The enemy subjected the Marines to an artillery bombardment of about 50 130mm rounds that lasted for about a half hour to cover its withdrawal that afternoon. According to

Marine officers, the North Vietnamese artillery used forward observers to adjust its fire. Two of the LVTs in the course of the battle sustained damage, one detonated an explosive device and the other was struck by three rocket propelled grenades. The Marine tractor battalion in this fray suffered casualties of 13 dead and 48 wounded and reported a bodycount of 20 dead North Vietnamese. In the same fighting, the ARVN claimed to have killed an additional 20 and captured 2 prisoners.<sup>4</sup>

The situation on the Cua Viet was becoming untenable. In the early morning hours of 21 January around 0200, a Company C, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines outpost spotted an enemy platoon attempting to dig in along the sand dunes very near the scene of the fighting on the 19th. The Marines called in artillery throughout the night and at 0930 Marine fixed-wing aircraft flew three attack sorties against the enemy troops. According to the Marine account, the enemy wore "green uniforms similar to those of previous contact . . ." The NVA then withdrew to the north under Marine rifle fire and grenades, but left nine bodies behind. About an hour later, a Navy landing craft (LCM) on the Cua Viet triggered another mine which exploded behind it. The vessel remained afloat, but the explosion knocked out both of its engines. Another LCM which came out to tow the helpless craft back to port came under fire from the northern bank. After all the LCMs had returned safely to the Cua Viet Port Facility, the naval commander of the base announced "All USN river traffic secured."<sup>5</sup>

While the river traffic once again resumed the following day, 22 January was almost a repeat of the 21st. In the early morning hours of the 22d, an American naval gun spotter assigned to the 2d ARVN Regiment A-1 outpost observed about 300 to 500 North Vietnamese troops through his starlight scope moving south in the same general area where Company C had its previous clashes with the enemy. Pulling back a Company C ambush patrol, the American command threw in the entire spectrum of supporting arms including 105mm howitzers, 8-inch guns, Marine fixed-wing TPQ (radar-controlled) aircraft strikes, and an AC-130 "Spooky" minigun strafing run. A later ARVN battle damage assessment of the evidence, including blood stains, freshly dug graves, abandoned web equipment and documents, suggested that the enemy may have sustained as many as 100 casualties. Further south, however, on the Cua Viet the Navy reported another mining inci-

dent. This time, a Navy LCU struck two mines and had to be towed back to port. Again the Cua Viet Facility commander closed the river until the next day when a Navy and Marine underwater demolition team from Dong Ha would sweep the river.<sup>6</sup>

This last was too much for General Cushman at III MAF. He radioed Major General Tompkins, the 3d Marine Division commander, that the "interruption to Cua Viet LOC [line of communications] unacceptable." The III MAF commander observed that command detonated mines and ground fire against shipping on the Cua Viet could only be undertaken from the river banks. He ordered Tompkins to clear banks "at once" and to coordinate his actions with the 1st ARVN Division. Cushman advised the 3d Marine Division commander that he might want to use SLF Bravo, specifically BLT 3/1, for this purpose in the sector for a few days.<sup>7</sup>

The employment of BLT 3/1 in the coastal sector of the DMZ was not a new idea. As early as 5 January 1968, General Cushman had notified the 3d Division commander of an SLF operation to be called Badger Catch/Saline to be carried out in the Cua Viet area from 7 February through 22 February. Tompkins was to insure coordination with the local ARVN commander. On 15 January, Vice Admiral William F. Bringle, the commander of the Seventh Fleet, issued for planning purposes an initiating directive for Operation Badger Catch. He mentioned only that the operation would take place in Quang Tri Province and at a date "to be determined dependent upon tactical situation."<sup>8</sup>

Two days later, on 17 January, General Cushman appeared to change the original mission for the SLF in northern Quang Tri. In a message to General Tompkins, Cushman suggested that the latter should carry out coordinated preemptive attacks in conjunction with the 1st ARVN Division in the general DMZ area. He remarked that he intended "to assign elements of SLF Bravo . . . your opcon on request for immediate employment in support of these operations." The closing of the Cua Viet, however, apparently caused the III MAF commander once more to change his mind. In a later message on 22 January, Cushman told Tompkins to use the SLF in the Cua Viet for a few days. Later that day, General Cushman informed General Westmoreland, the MACV commander, that BLT 3/1 would make an amphibious landing in the Cua Viet sector on the 23d and assist in the clearing of the river. After the completion of that mission, the battalion would then go to Camp Carroll

to take part in the planned preemptive offensive to destroy enemy forces that posed a threat to the Camp Carroll and Rockpile sites.<sup>9</sup>

At a planning session at the 3d Marine Division headquarters on 23 January, SLF and division staff officers first selected 0800 the next morning as the time for the landing. With the continued enemy harassment of allied shipping in the Cua Viet channel, General Tompkins and the amphibious commanders decided, however, to push forward H-hour to the early evening of the 23d. Around 1900, Lieutenant Colonel Max McQuown's BLT 3/1 started coming ashore and by 2130 McQuown had established his command post temporarily at Blue Beach, on the northern bank of the mouth of the Cua Viet.<sup>10</sup>

Operation Badger Catch was part of a concerted effort that General Tompkins had started at noon on the 23d to make the Cua Viet reasonably safe for LCU and LCM traffic. At that time, he placed armed guards on all boats, provided continuous HU-1E gunship cover, and placed division "Sparrow Hawk" infantry squads on call for immediate insertion into the region. The mission of the BLT was to eliminate all enemy forces in the immediate vicinity of the northern bank of the Cua Viet and to prevent any new North Vietnamese forces from entering this area. Its area of operations extended some 3,000 to 4,000 meters above the Cua Viet and about 5,000 to 7,000 meters inland. The 1st ARVN Division was to clear the area south of the river and provide blocking positions for McQuown's battalion to the west.<sup>11</sup>

The clearing of the Cua Viet proved to be a harder nut to crack than the planners at III MAF and the 3d Marine Division first contemplated. As an indicator of what was to follow, on the morning of the 24th, the North Vietnamese used a command detonated mine to sink a Navy LCM in the river channel. At that point, General Cushman asked the Navy Amphibious Ready Group commander for the SLF Bravo helicopter squadron, HMM-165, to lift elements of BLT 3/1 to an island in the river channel that the North Vietnamese were using as a firing and command site to disrupt the boat traffic on the Cua Viet.\* Although Badger Catch was to last

\* At this point, Operation Badger Catch was an SLF operation and the SLF battalion and squadron still came under the Navy amphibious ready group commander. Until the amphibious commander officially gave up control of his forces ashore to III MAF or his representative, he still nominally retained control of the SLF units.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190277

*Marines of BLT 3/1 of the Seventh Fleet's Special Landing Force (SLF) Bravo go into action in the Cua Viet sector after being brought ashore by helicopters of HMM-165, the SLF helicopter squadron. In the top photo, Marines move inland after arriving in the landing zone, while a Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight hovers overhead and prepares to return to the ships of the amphibious ready group offshore. Below, Marines of the BLT in their new area of operations move through a Vietnamese village with its thatched-roof huts.*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190435



only a few days, BLT 3/1 would remain in the Cua Viet sector with the same mission for over a month. For Lieutenant Colonel McQuown and his battalion it was a time to vindicate themselves after their somewhat uneven performance in their first SLF operation, Badger Tooth, at the end of December.<sup>12\*</sup>

*Adjustment of Forces in  
Southern Quang Tri Province*

Changes were occurring elsewhere in the 3d Marine Division area of operations as well during this period. As part of the Checkers plan to concentrate the 3d Marine Division in Quang Tri Province, Colonel Joseph E. Lo Prete's 3d Marines took over the Operation Osceola sector centered around the relatively new Quang Tri complex from the 1st Marines. The 1st Marines moved to Camp Evans and the 4th Marines assumed responsibility for the Lancaster area at Camp Carroll. At 0930 on the morning of 20 January, Colonel Lo Prete moved into his new command post at La Vang, about 4,000 meters below Quang Tri City and south of the Thach Han River, and immediately began Operation Osceola II with the same forces that were in Osceola I.<sup>13</sup>

For all practical purposes, the mission and concept of operations for Osceola II were the same as those for Osceola I. The 3d Marines was to protect the Quang Tri base from enemy attack and to prevent NVA units from *Base Area 101* in the far reaches of the Hai Lang Forest Preserve from reaching the coast. Lieutenant Colonel Richard W. Goodale's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, located at Ai Tu, above the Thach Han and about 3,000 meters northwest of Quang Tri City, was responsible for the defense of the northern sector which included the airfield and the approaches to the base from the west. Collocated at La Vang with the 3d Marines was Lieutenant Colonel Marcus J. Gravel's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. Gravel's battalion covered the southern and southwestern approaches into the Quang Tri coastal region. The 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, with two 105mm batteries, one at Ai Tu and the other at La Vang, and one provisional 155mm howitzer battery, also at La

Vang, provided the artillery support. Company C, 3d Tank Battalion, and an Army "Duster" battery, Battery A, 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, equipped with M42s armed with twin 40mm antiaircraft guns were also at La Vang under the operational control of the 3d Marines and ready to assist the infantry. Elements of the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion screened the approaches to the west.<sup>14</sup>

With only two battalions available to him, Lo Prete barely had sufficient forces to protect the immediate Quang Tri base area let alone carry out mobile operations in the extensive southwestern area of operations toward *Base Area 101*. Although the 1st ARVN Regiment maintained forces to the east and north of the Marine regiment, the North Vietnamese had already infiltrated at least two battalions of the *812th NVA Regiment* into the coastal region east of Route 1 and Quang Tri City. The *NVA Quyet Thaing Artillery Regiment* equipped with 82mm mortars and rockets was deployed to the southwest and west of the Marines. To the west, Marine reconnaissance "Stingray" patrols made continual sightings of small groups of enemy soldiers moving eastward towards the coast.<sup>15</sup>

For the most part, the enemy largely bypassed the Marine positions and confined his attacks on the Marine base areas and the Quang Tri airfield to harassing sniper fire, occasional mortar shelling, and rocket bombardment. On two occasions, 24 and 31 January, enemy 122mm rockets and 60mm and 82mm mortar rounds hit the Quang Tri airfield but caused relatively little damage. Through January, the Marines sustained casualties of 2 dead and 32 wounded and killed 8 of the enemy and took 1 prisoner. They also recovered six weapons.<sup>16</sup>

With the North Vietnamese attacks on Khe Sanh and the Cua Viet, both Generals Westmoreland and Cushman recognized the need for additional forces in Quang Tri Province. Westmoreland's decision to reinforce Marine forces in the north with the 1st Air Cavalry Division provided General Cushman, the III MAF commander, with additional options.\*\* On 22 January, after a conference with both General Westmoreland, and the MACV deputy commander, General Creighton W. Abrams, Cushman outlined his plans for the Army division. He planned to assign Major General John J. Tolson, the 1st Cavalry Commander, an extensive area of operations that would

\* Colonel Max McQuown wrote that in contrast to Operation Badger Tooth, Operation Badger Catch was the "proper, profitable use of a potent fighting force. Initially, BLT 3/1 operated within an Amphibious Objective Area with all elements of the BLT ashore or on-call." Most importantly, he had "firm intelligence about the enemy in the area." Col Max McQuown, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\* See Chapter 6 for further discussion about the deployment of the 1st Air Cavalry Division to I Corps.

include the enemy *Base Area 114* in northern Thua Thien Province, and *Base Area 101* in southern Quang Tri Province. The division command post with one brigade would be located at the former Marine base at Camp Evans. This brigade would be responsible for operations to clear out *Base Area 114*. While part of the same operation, Operation Jeb Stuart under the command of General Tolson, the second brigade upon its arrival would deploy to Quang Tri. It would relieve the 3d Marines of its responsibility south of the Thach Han and take over the La Vang base area.<sup>17</sup>

On 22 January, the 1st Air Cavalry's 1st Brigade, under the command of Army Colonel Donald V. Rattan, deployed from Landing Zone El Paso near Phu Bai and established a new fire base at Landing Zone Jane, about 10,000 meters south of Quang Tri City. Three days later, the 1st Brigade, four battalions strong, moved from Jane to Landing Zone Betty, just below the 3d Marines headquarters. One Marine, Corporal William Ehrhart, with the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, recalled the day the Cavalry arrived:

One morning, army helicopters, mostly Hueys, . . . just kept coming and coming and coming, dropping down and disgorging soldiers like insects depositing eggs, then flying off to be replaced by still more helicopters. All day long they came. I had never seen so many helicopters before. I had never even imagined that so many helicopters existed.<sup>18</sup>

With the arrival of the Army brigade, Operation Osceola II became a one-infantry battalion operation under the 3d Marines and responsible only for the protection of the Quang Tri airfield and its immediate environs. Colonel Lo Prete moved his command post from La Vang to Ai Tu west of the airfield. On 27 January, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines reverted to the control of its parent regiment and joined the 1st Marines at Phu Bai.<sup>19</sup>

### *Heavy Fighting Along the DMZ*

There had also been a readjustment of forces in the central DMZ front. On 20 January, the 4th Marines, under Colonel William L. Dick, had taken over the Lancaster area of operations from the 3d Marines. Outside of a slight change of name, Lancaster II retained the same forces and mission as the old operation. Colonel Dick and his staff moved into the 3d Marines' old command post at Camp Carroll and assumed operational control of the two battalions

already in Lancaster, the 2d and the 3d, of the 9th Marines.\* Artillery batteries under the operational control of the 1st Battalion, 12th Marines directly supported the infantry base areas in Lancaster: Camp Carroll, Thon Son Lam or Rockpile area, and Ca Lu. Like Colonel Lo Prete before him, Colonel Dick's main task was to keep Route 9 open in an area characterized by rolling hills, an occasional ravine, overgrown brush, streams, and dry streambeds. Still Route 9 was the main land logistic lifeline for the Marine outposts in the DMZ sector.<sup>20</sup>

With the move of the 4th Marines to Camp Carroll, the regiment's "tempo of action picked up immediately." Upon the first night of the arrival of the regimental headquarters and staff, North Vietnamese gunners fired some 30 140mm rockets into Camp Carroll reinforced by 15 rounds of 85mm artillery fire. Although causing relatively little damage, these turned out to be the first shots in a determined attempt by the North Vietnamese to isolate Camp Carroll and cut Route 9.<sup>21</sup>

Four days later, 24 January 1968, elements of the *320th NVA Division*, an elite unit and veteran of the 1954 Dien Bien Phu campaign and newly arrived in the DMZ sector, initiated the enemy campaign in earnest with an ambush of a Marine "Rough Rider" convoy. The convoy was on a routine artillery resupply mission from Dong Ha to Camp Carroll. It consisted of three trucks and a jeep armed with quad .50-caliber machine guns. Around 1330 that afternoon, when the trucks were about to turn into the Camp Carroll access road, about 3,000 meters above the Marine base, the North Vietnamese sprang their ambush.<sup>22</sup>

The enemy soldiers opened up with small arms, mortars, machine guns, and recoilless rifles, immediately immobilizing all four vehicles. Using their weapons, including the quad .50, to defend themselves, and taking what cover they could, the Marines with the convoy called for assistance. The 4th Marines sent a reaction force from Camp Carroll, consisting of a platoon from Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines; two tanks, one a flame tank, from Company B, 3d Tank Battalion; and two Army M42 Dusters from Battery C, 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery. The North Vietnamese, however, were waiting for the reaction column. An enemy gunner fired on the lead tank, stopping it with a recoilless rifle round and killing the

\* Actually it was a battalion and a half, as the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines only had two companies in Lancaster. The other two companies were under the command of the battalion executive officer in the neighboring 9th Marines Kentucky area of operations. See Chapter 3.

reaction force commander, Captain Daniel W. Kent, who was also the tank company commander. Again the Marines fought back and called for support. When two UH-1E gunships appeared overhead, about 1830, the North Vietnamese troops broke contact and disappeared. A second relief column of two more dusters and two trucks armed with quad .50s arrived from Dong Ha and assisted with the evacuation of the dead and wounded. The Marines suffered casualties of 8 men dead and 44 wounded. They killed about three of the enemy. Not only did the vehicles of the original convoy require extensive repairs, but two of the dusters and the one tank hit by the RPG round also sustained damage.

General Tompkins, the 3d Marine Division commander, could not tolerate this situation. It appeared that the North Vietnamese at will could cut Route 9 and thus, in effect, deny access to Camp Carroll and the other Marine bases in Operation Lancaster. Upon learning about the ambush, he transferred Lieutenant Colonel Lee R. Bendell's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines from the Kentucky area of operations to the Lancaster one and returned the battalion to its parent regimental control. The battalion was to clear the ambush site and then sweep Route 9.<sup>23</sup>

On the afternoon of 24 January, Marine helicopters brought Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, the battalion commander, a skeleton battalion command group, and Company M to Camp Carroll. At 1900, Bendell and his small headquarters group accompanied Company M under Captain Raymond W. Kalm to the ambush site to assist in the evacuation of casualties. Upon learning that the second relief force had already brought in the wounded and some of the bodies, the Marine company established night positions on a ridgeline, about 1500 meters south of and overlooking Route 9 and also screening "the NVA from Camp Carroll."<sup>24</sup> The next morning the company would begin its reconnaissance of the battalion's planned objective area.<sup>25</sup>

At 0630, on the 25th, the company departed its nighttime positions. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell advised Captain Kalm to occupy a small hill just north of Route 9, about 2,000 meters south of the Cam Lo River. After sending his 3d Platoon under Second Lieutenant John S. Leffen, to occupy the strategic height, the Marine captain led the rest of the company to the ambush site of the previous day, about 1,000 meters to the west.\*

\*Major John S. Leffen, then the platoon commander, remembered some of the events somewhat differently. He recalled moving to the hill north of Route 9 the previous evening. Maj John S. Leffen, Jr., Comments on draft, n.d. (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Leffen Comments.

The company recovered four of the Marine dead from the earlier action and then began a sweep from west to east on Route 9. About 0915, the lead platoon had no sooner passed by the damaged vehicles still strewn along the side of the road when it came under automatic weapons fire.\*\* With the assistance of Leffen's platoon left on the hill, the company obtained fire superiority. Lance Corporal Jack L. Patton, a machine gunner with the 3d Platoon, sighted the enemy gun. Patton later laconically stated, "my gun returned fire and we killed the enemy." In that action, the Marines sustained casualties of two dead and two wounded and killed three of the enemy. They also recovered the NVA light machine gun.<sup>26\*\*\*</sup>

Company M then established a defensive perimeter on the hill and waited for the rest of the battalion to join it. By mid-afternoon, both Companies I and L as well as the rest of the battalion command group had arrived. Although not suffering any more killed, the battalion sustained 17 more wounded from random mortar fire from nearby enemy gunners. That night the battalion "established a three-company, tied-in perimeter" across both sides of Route 9.<sup>27</sup>

At about 0230 on 26 January, Colonel Dick, the 4th Marines commander, radioed Lieutenant Colonel Bendell that he had received intelligence of large North Vietnamese forces operating just north of the Cam Lo River. The regimental commander wanted the 3d Battalion to secure Route 9 from the Khe Gia Bridge, about 5,000 meters west of the battalion's present position, east to Cam Lo, a distance of about 9,000 meters. Two companies were to deploy north of the river, while the remaining company cleared the road. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell suggested instead that "the mission of securing the road was best performed along the road and south of the Cam Lo River." The regiment, however, insisted that the battalion carry out the mission as originally ordered.<sup>28</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Bendell then prepared his plans and started to carry out his new orders. Companies I and L were to cross the Cam Lo and operate

\*\*Colonel Bendell recalled that "one Marine managed to start the abandoned tank and pulled all the convoy vehicles back toward Cam Lo." Col Lee R. Bendell, Comments on draft, n.d. [Nov94] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Bendell Comments.

\*\*\*Major Leffen, the 3d Platoon commander, recalled that the captured enemy weapon was a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) rather than a light machine gun. Leffen Comments.



on the northern banks of the river while Company M secured Route 9, south of the river. The enemy, however, forced the Marines to change the original concept of the mission. At 0845 on the morning of the 26th, a Company M patrol discovered that the enemy had blown a bridge on Route 9 over a small streambed, just below the hill, now dubbed "Mike's Hill" after Company M, where the company had established its night defensive position. The patrol reported that the road was "impassable without engineer improvement." Just as Company I was about to cross the river, the regimental commander changed his order about operating on both banks of the Cam Lo.\* Colonel Dick directed the battalion to "continue to secure Route 9, to deny enemy access to bridges and culverts, and to patrol and ambush 375 meters north and south of Route 9, occupying the high ground on either side of the route as necessary." In effect, the battalion was to secure that portion of Route 9 that extended from the opening to Camp Carroll eastward to the destroyed bridge.<sup>29</sup>

During the rest of the morning and afternoon of the 26th, the three companies patrolled the approximately 2,000 meters of Route 9, encountering little resistance except for the occasional sniper and mortar bombardment. Throughout the day, however, the battalion recovered enemy equipment, including pieces of clothing and web gear, ammunition, grenades, and even antipersonnel mines and spotted small groups of enemy soldiers. By nightfall, concerned about the perimeter of the previous night on relatively low terrain, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell ordered the battalion to form three separate company defensive perimeters "on favorable high ground on both sides of Route 9, including Company M on Mike's Hill."<sup>30</sup>

After returning to its hill for the night, Company M also established several small ambush sites. The 3d Platoon commander, Second Lieutenant John S. Leffen, sent out an ambush squad and established a fire team listening post at the bottom of the hill. According to Leffen, both the squad and fire team as they arrived at their designated positions reported there were North Vietnamese soldiers all around them. Lieutenant Leffen pulled back the listening post, but

left the ambush squad where it was because of its "tactical importance."<sup>31</sup>

During the night of 26–27 January, North Vietnamese soldiers attempted to infiltrate the Marine positions through a streambed to the west of Mike's Hill and gullies and other streambeds to the north and east.\*\* On Mike's Hill, Lieutenant Leffen remembered that about 0500 on the morning of the 27th, "we heard what sounded like 'wall to wall' NVA all around our positions." He remarked on the poor noise discipline of the enemy troops. Although the Marines could not hear the sound of the movements of the NVA soldiers, "What gave them away was their constant talking." A Marine mortarman, Frank Craven,\*\* with Company M several years later recalled, "They were at the bottom of the hill and we were at the middle of the hill . . . They didn't know it and we didn't know it until . . . we butted heads." According to Craven, "we heard some noise and then it was automatic machine gun fire from then on. It was terrible."<sup>32</sup>

The fight for Mike's Hill would last through the entire afternoon and spread to Route 9 and involve all three companies of the 3d Battalion. On the hill, itself, the battle turned into a wild melee. Clambering up three slopes of the hill, the North Vietnamese employed mortars, rocket propelled grenades, and automatic weapons to cover their advance. The Marines responded in kind. Lieutenant Leffen remembered "when we ran out of bullets we threw grenades and misdelivered .50 cal rounds in a variable and alternating fashion to keep the NVA honest until the helos could bring us more ammunition."<sup>33</sup> From an enlisted man's perspective, Frank Craven recalled that it was "every man for himself. You still work as a team somewhat . . . but as far as a coordinated formal thing, all that gets wiped away. The thicker the battle the more informal and it was very thick." Craven particularly remembered one machine gunner at the top of the hill that kept the enemy back: "He just kept that area sprayed."<sup>34</sup>

From a nearby hill to the east of Company M, Company L fired 60mm mortars and rifle rounds into an exposed enemy flank. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, from his temporary command post on

\*Colonel William L. Dick explained in his comments that once the bridge was blown, "a change in plans was obviously required" and required a "rapid reevaluation." Col William L. Dick, Comments on draft, dtd 1Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Dick Comments.

\*\*Colonel Bendell commented that the enemy had moved into attack positions under cover of darkness and that "it appeared their principle attack was along the road where the battalion perimeter had been located the night earlier." Bendell Comments.

\*\*\*Frank Craven later legally changed his name to Abdullah Hassan.



Top photo is from the John S. Leffen Collection and the bottom is courtesy of Col Lee R. Bendell, USMC (Ret) *The fight for Mike's Hill, named after Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, would be the pivotal battle in the opening up of Route 9 to Camp Carroll in January 1968. In the top photo, the smoke from a Boeing B-52 Arclight strike on North Vietnamese positions can be seen from a Company M position on Mike's Hill. Each of the B-52 Stratofortresses could hold 27 tons of ordnance. Below, Mike's Hill after the battle has much of its foliage destroyed. Route 9 can be seen in the foreground and the Cam Lo River in the background.*



Mike's Hill, then ordered Captain John L. McLaughlin, the Company L commander, to maneuver his company down to Route 9 and relieve a Company M squad surrounded by North Vietnamese troops at an ambush site near the destroyed bridge. By noon, after overcoming determined pockets of enemy resistance with the assistance of 81mm mortars and coordinated small arms fire from a Company M squad on Mike's Hill, Company L reached the bridge and relieved the embattled Marines there. In the process, the company took some casualties, but killed 23 of the enemy and captured 3 prisoners.

With the arrival of Company L at the bridge and Mike's Hill now secure, the battalion commander directed Captain John L. Prichard, the Company I commander, to advance eastward along Route 9 from his positions toward Company L, a distance of some 1,000 meters. Because of the nature of the terrain in the sector, open ground interspersed with hedgerows and heavy brush, Bendell called artillery fire upon enemy firing positions north of the Cam Lo River to cover Company I's open left flank.\* About 200 meters west of the bridge, a well-camouflaged and dug-in NVA company using streambeds and dense vegetation as cover stopped Company I. Failing to overcome the enemy resistance with repeated frontal assaults, Captain Prichard asked for reinforcements. He ordered up his reserve platoon from his old position and Lieutenant Colonel Bendell directed Company L to send one platoon to Prichard. By 1400, with the support of Huey gunships, the two companies had linked up and began the mop up. For the most part, the battle for Mike's Hill was over.<sup>35</sup>

About that time, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell received a radio message from Colonel Dick that Major General Tompkins, the 3d Division commander, wanted the battalion to return to Camp Carroll. Concerned that the NVA were still in force north of the river, Bendell failed to see the tactical advantage of "re-seizing terrain fought for earlier" and recommended the battalion stay and mop up the area.<sup>36</sup> After first ruling against Bendell, Colonel Dick and General Tompkins decided to permit the battalion to continue

with the road-securing mission for another day.\*\* By 1700 on the 27th, "vehicles were able to move without harassment along Route 9 from both directions to the destroyed bridge . . ." <sup>37</sup>

After evacuating the casualties, which included the Company I commander, Captain Prichard, who later died of his wounds, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell formed his battalion into two companies. He placed Company I under the operational control of Company M and attached one of Company M's platoons to Company L. According to the battalion commander, instead of having "three short-strength companies," he now had two "full-strength" ones. During the day, the battalion had killed more than 130 of the enemy, captured 6 prisoners, and recovered 3 57mm recoilless rifles, 2 60mm mortars, 35 AK-47s, and extensive ammunition and equipment. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, however, had paid a heavy price: 21 men dead and 62 men wounded.<sup>38</sup>

On the 28th, the now two ad hoc companies continued their patrolling of Route 9 with relatively little incident. About 1430, a Company L patrol happened upon a tunnel. Its entrance was three feet in diameter and it extended about eight feet underground. Five other tunnels, running east to west, intersected with the first one. In these tunnels were several North Vietnamese bodies, some lying on makeshift litters. The Marines buried the bodies and destroyed the tunnels.\*\*\* After completing this grisly task, the battalion received orders once more to return to Camp Carroll. Marine helicopters flew Company L to Camp Carroll, while the revamped Company M returned to the base on foot. Once the Marines were a safe distance away, Air Force B-52s in an Arflight mission carpet bombed suspected enemy avenues of retreat and firing positions north of the Cam Lo River.<sup>39\*\*\*\*</sup>

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\*\*Colonel Dick later wrote, "it was manifest that the battalion couldn't remain in the area indefinitely and there was no available unit for relief. In any event the position would have to be uncovered . . . when the CG stated his wish for 3/4 to withdraw I certainly wasn't going to 'rule' against him but did demur to the extent that Lee [Bendell] was on the ground and in a better position to make a reasonable estimate of the situation, and could be brought in the following day. Which is what happened." Dick Comments.

\*\*\*These bodies were included in the figures of North Vietnamese dead listed above for the action of 27 January.

\*\*\*\*Major Leffen remembered that an aerial observer "spoke directly to me indicating we were 'in a lot of trouble.' He . . . could see a column of 3's headed south toward our position as far as he could see. We were then told to be five clicks south of the hill by 1700." He wrote that the B-52s struck exactly at that time and "we could see pieces of the enemy in the trees following the arflight." Leffen Comments

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\*Colonel Bendell recalled that he directed his operations officer and his artillery liaison officer "to 'seal off' the battle area by artillery fires all along the Cam Lo River at the suspected crossing points. This apparently prevented reinforcements and even made retreat hazardous for those south of the river." Bendell Comments.



Both photos are courtesy of Col Lee R. Bendell, USMC (Ret)

*At top a well-camouflaged NVA foxhole was used during the fighting for Route 9. These fighting positions were often interconnected by a complex tunnel network. Below, the first Marine convoy arrives at Camp Carroll after the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines reopened Route 9.*



The following day, 29 January, the battalion reinforced by tanks and Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines returned to the destroyed bridge on Route 9. The mission was to provide security for an engineer unit building a bypass for the bridge and to open the road for vehicular traffic. Company L this time occupied Mike's Hill, while Company M and the tanks patrolled Route 9 west to the Khe Gia Bridge. Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines remained with the engineers at the downed span. For the most part, the road-clearing mission was uneventful. Enemy gunners once mortared Mike's Hill which resulted in two wounded Marines from Company L. On the road patrol, a nervous Marine mistakenly shot and wounded a second Marine, whom the first thought to be an enemy soldier. The infantry-tank patrol also came across 30 enemy bodies and several weapons just north of Route 9. At the damaged bridge site, Company H took two wounded North Vietnamese soldiers prisoners. At 1530 that afternoon, the engineers completed the work on the bypass and "a huge Dong Ha convoy began moving through the bridge point, enroute to Camp Carroll." Route 9 was once more open.

With the completion of opening Route 9, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines returned to Camp Carroll, but remained under the operational control of the 4th Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell sent a personal message to the officers and men of his command, thanking them for their efforts: "You may all take pride in a good job, well done." The following day, the battalion received a message from General Westmoreland, the MACV commander, complimenting "the officers and men of 3/4 for the aggressive attack against the enemy's *64th Regiment* . . . This action undoubtedly pre-empted enemy attack against Camp Carroll."<sup>40</sup>

Despite the hard-won accomplishment of reopening Route 9, the identification of the *64th NVA Regiment* had ominous undertones for the Marine command. Intelligence officers were now sure that a new enemy division, the *320th NVA*, had replaced the *324B NVA Division* in the western Demilitarized Zone. The new division consisted of the *48th* and *56th NVA Regiments* in addition to the *64th*.<sup>\*</sup> All the prison-

ers captured by the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines were from the *64th*, and most were recent draftees. This new enemy regiment had crossed the Ben Hai about 10 days previously, apparently with the mission of cutting Route 9 and isolating Camp Carroll and the other bases in the Lancaster area. There was no doubt that there would be another attempt.<sup>41</sup>

### *A Lull in Leatherneck Square*

For Colonel Richard B. Smith's 9th Marines in Leatherneck Square, things had been relatively quiet. Because of the uncertainties of enemy intentions in the DMZ, on 20 January, General Westmoreland had agreed to a III MAF request to suspend work on the barrier until the situation clarified. The 9th Marines continued to be responsible for the defense of the A-3 and A-4 (Con Thien) Strongpoints just below the cleared trace, and their supporting combat bases. On the 21st, enemy gunners fired upon the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, then still under the 9th Marines in positions about six kilometers northeast of Con Thien, with about 300 rounds of mixed caliber artillery and mortar rounds. The battalion sustained 10 casualties, all wounded. Until the end of the month, there were several small actions, but no major attempt of the North Vietnamese units to penetrate in strength the Marine defenses.<sup>42</sup>

For the most part, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines at Con Thien bore the brunt of whatever enemy activity there was, largely continuing mortar and artillery bombardment. Having already lost one commander to enemy mortars, the 2d Battalion earlier had hopes that in Operation Checkers, it would leave Con Thien and rejoin its parent regiment, the 1st Marines. Major General Tompkins, the 3d Marine Division commander, however, told General Cushman that "with present enemy threat . . . the relief of 2/1 at Con Thien is postponed until after Tet."<sup>43</sup>

The small hill, only 160 meters high, but less than two miles south of the Demilitarized Zone, remained a key terrain feature for the Marines and a favorite target for North Vietnamese gunners and small infantry probes. Shortly after noon on 22 January, the enemy bombarded the Marine strongpoint with 100 rounds of 82mm mortar, followed by 130 rounds of 152mm shells from guns within North Vietnam. The battalion sustained 2 men killed and 16 wounded. One-half hour later, about 1,000 meters north of the base, Companies F and G encountered a North Vietnamese infantry company. The enemy unit withdrew under

<sup>\*</sup>There is a minor question whether the *64th NVA* was involved in the fighting for Route 9 from 24-29 January. According to the 3d Marine Division's after-action report for Lancaster II, dated over a year after the action, the *64th* was in reserve, while the other two regiments attacked Route 9. It claims that prisoners captured in the action "substantiated this intelligence." Yet, all the contemporary documents refer only to the *64th* identified in this fighting. If the *64th* was in reserve, it appears contradictory that the prisoners captured by the Marines would be from that regiment.

cover of 60mm mortar fire. In the firefight, the Marines sustained casualties of two men dead and eight wounded and killed three of the NVA. The following night the enemy hit the Marine base again, but with much less force. At 2300, 40 82mm and 20 60mm mortar rounds together with 10 rounds of 152mm artillery shells landed within the Con Thien perimeter. This time the Marines sustained six wounded but no dead.<sup>44</sup>

On 29 January, the battalion demonstrated the value of maintaining the Con Thien outpost despite the continuing harassment. About 0125, a Marine forward observer there looking through his starlight scope discovered a North Vietnamese convoy moving on a secondary road, about a 1,000 meters in the DMZ north of the Ben Hai River, and called in air and artillery missions. The observer then saw the enemy at a site, just below the Ben Hai, launch four to five SAMs (surface-to-air missiles) at the American aircraft. He then ran a radar-controlled (TPQ) mission on the SAM site. After the firing and bombing missions, the Marine outpost reported a "total of nine secondary explosions including a huge fireball, and one secondary fire for area of convoy and suspected SAM sites."<sup>45</sup>

While the enemy activity in the Kentucky area of operations remained relatively low, General Tompkins did not want to deplete his defenses in the sector. The division and 9th Marines continued to receive reports of enemy movement around Marine positions in the operation. News about the arrival of the *320th NVA Division* on the DMZ reinforced the unease that the Marine commanders had about the overall situation on the northern front.<sup>46</sup>

The transfer of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines to the Lancaster area of operations and the unexpected assignment of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines to Khe Sanh forced General Tompkins again to look to the Special Landing Force, this time SLF Alpha with BLT 2/4, for reinforcement. Earlier, on 22 January, BLT 2/4, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William Weise, had relieved the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at Camp Evans and had come under the operational control of the 1st Marines. With the takeover of Evans by the 1st Cavalry Division and the movement of the 1st Marines to Phu Bai, the BLT was once again free.\* With the concurrence of the Seventh Fleet, Generals Cushman and Tompkins agreed to assign Weise's BLT the area of operations northeast of Con Thien, just vacated by the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines.<sup>47</sup>

On 26 January, BLT 2/4 reembarked from Camp Evans to SLF Alpha amphibious shipping and the following day, in Operation Fortress Attack, deployed to the Kentucky area of operations. Shortly after 0900 on the 27th, the SLF helicopter squadron, HMM-361, landed the first wave of the battalion in a landing zone near the combat operating base, C-2, on Route 561. By 1900, the entire BLT was ashore and the 9th Marines assumed operational control of the battalion from the Navy. According to plan, most of the supporting elements of the BLT including the Ontos and the amtrac platoons were detached and placed under other division commands. The following day the battalion moved from the C-2 base to its assigned new area of operations near Con Thien.<sup>48</sup>

On 31 January, General Tompkins would shift forces once more. He divided the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines into two command groups, each with two companies. The 3d Division commander sent Command Group A with Companies F and G attached to Camp Carroll and placed it under the operational control of the 4th Marines. Command Group B, under Lieutenant Colonel Weise's executive officer, remained with the 9th Marines in the Kentucky area of operations. As Tompkins explained to General Cushman, he believed that the "enemy will aim a major effort to overrun Camp Carroll, Thon Son Lam [the Rockpile area], and Ca Lu." According to the 3d Division commander, the "*320th Division* is admirably positioned" for such an attack which "offers enemy greatest return [and] more profitable for him than similar major effort against hardened positions" of the barrier strongpoints in the Kentucky area of operations. General Cushman agreed.<sup>49</sup>

### *The Cua Viet Continues to Heat Up*

To the east of the Kentucky area of operations, the North Vietnamese continued their effort to close the Cua Viet River channel. Following the sinking of the LCM on 24 January by a command detonated mine, the next morning NVA gunners struck again. From positions in the hamlet of My Loc on the northern bank of the river they fired rifle propelled grenades and recoilless rifles at a Navy convoy of two LCMs and a LCU (landing craft, utility). Both the two LCMs took hits and returned to the Cua Viet Port Facility. The LCU continued on to Dong Ha. The action resulted in five Americans wounded, four Navy crewmen and a Marine from Company K, BLT 3/1. In their return fire at the enemy positions, the Navy gun crews inadver-

\*See Chapter six for operations in Thua Thien Province.

tently struck Company K trying to clear the northern bank in Operation Badger Catch.<sup>50</sup>

Since coming ashore on the evening of 23 January, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown's BLT 3/1 began its mission of attempting to clear the hamlets north of the river. The terrain in the Badger Catch area of operations consisted largely of sand dunes and sandy barren soil extending some 5,000 meters inland to a tributary of the Ben Hai River. This stream, unnamed on the maps but called Jones Creek by the Marines, ran south from the DMZ into the Cua Viet. Bordering both Jones Creek and especially the Cua Viet were extensive paddy areas that supported rice farming. The rice growers lived in hamlets on the banks of the Cua Viet or the adjacent area just above it. Because of the war, many of these hamlets were now abandoned and others were used as refugee centers.

According to agent reports, the enemy force in the Cua Viet sector numbered about 1,200 men, consisting of three North Vietnamese companies and three Viet Cong companies, two main force and one local force. On the 24th, the BLT had secured its first objective, a refugee resettlement village on the river about a 1,000 meters east of My Loc without incident. It also had searched two hamlets to the north, Ha Loc and Ha Loi, again without meeting any resistance. In a separate operation on an island in the river, Company L had little success in locating any of the enemy forces that might have been responsible for the sinking of the LCM that day.<sup>51</sup>

On the 25th, the battalion encountered much stiffer resistance. Even the previous day, it had come under small arms and mortar fire from My Loc, one of the battalion's prime objectives. At dawn, and without preparatory fires, Captain John E. Regal, the Company K commander, ordered his company into an attack on the hamlet along a narrow front. He deployed one platoon to the right to form blocking positions north of the city. While attempting to maneuver around the hamlet, the blocking platoon came under heavy machine gun and small arms fire. With this platoon caught in a deadly cross fire from the hamlet, Regal sent in reinforcements including tanks attached to him for the operation. Even with the tanks in support, Company K had difficulty in pulling out its casualties from the initial action. The tanks exchanged fire with enemy antitank gunners armed with RPGs. Although the tanks sustained five hits, all escaped relatively unscathed. It was about this time, the enemy gunners in My Loc opened up on the Navy convoy. About 1000, the company had

succeeded in bringing out its dead and wounded, six killed and nine wounded.<sup>52</sup>

By this time, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown and Captain Regal had learned from nearby ARVN units that a NVA battalion was in My Loc. They decided to pull Company K back and bring in air strikes and supporting arms. From 1030 to 1430, Marine, Air Force, and Navy jets flew four close air support missions against My Loc. Then under covering artillery fire, about 1500, Company K once more moved upon the hamlet, this time meeting almost no resistance except a few occasional sniper rounds. In My Loc, the company recovered an RPG-7 rocket launcher and the bodies of 20 North Vietnamese soldiers. The Marines also captured one prisoner. Later that evening, the company came under artillery fire from firing positions north of the DMZ, but sustained no casualties. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown selected My Loc for his command post and also for the battalion's main combat base because of the hamlet's "strategic location relative to river traffic."<sup>53</sup>

For the time being, the Marine occupation of My Loc appeared to confound the enemy gunners. For the next few days, the enemy was unable to interfere with the American shipping on the Cua Viet. General Tompkins and the commander of the Cua Viet Naval Support Activity also implemented increased security arrangements that may also have contributed to the safe passage of the Navy craft. The Naval Support Activity provided Navy crews with PRC-25 radios that permitted them to communicate with Marine air observers flying overhead and with helicopter gunships. Moreover, the two commanders agreed upon check points along the river where boats could "report their location in relation to any enemy activity." This permitted the 3d Marine Division "to react to any contact with artillery, naval gunfire, air, when available, and ground forces in the form of USMC and/or ARVN Sparrow Hawk reaction forces." Finally, the two commanders concurred upon the assignment of two Navy patrol boats on the river carrying armed Marines, two National policemen, and an interpreter to stop and search "indigenous water craft."<sup>54</sup>

Despite the limited reprieve for the Cua Viet shipping, the enemy still posed a real threat to the 3d Marine Division river lifeline. The fighting for My Loc revealed that the *NVA 803d Regiment*, part of the *324B Division*, had shifted from positions in the Kentucky and Lancaster operational areas to the northern coastal plain east of Route 1. Skirting the 2d ARVN Regiment's positions at the A-1 Strongpoint and the C-1



Both photos are from the Abel Collection

*Top, a Marine from Company K, BLT 3/1 carrying a M79 grenade launcher runs gingerly through an NVA-held hamlet during Operation Badger Catch. During the same operation, below, a 60mm mortar team from the BLT casually prepares to fire its weapon in support of the infantry.*



Combat Base, at least one battalion of the regiment had infiltrated between the C-4 Combat Base manned by Company C, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines and the Cua Viet River. With the obvious mission to interrupt the flow of supplies along the river to Dong Ha, the *3d Battalion, 803d Regiment* occupied those hamlets fronting on the river and a few just above.<sup>55</sup>

For the most part, the enemy troops built rather formidable fortifications in these hamlets. As in My Loc, their first line of defense was on the edge of the hamlet or village. They constructed these defenses in depth with bunkers, fighting holes, interconnecting tunnels, and trench lines often extending into the center of the hamlet. The North Vietnamese soldiers usually converted the villagers' "family type bomb shelters" into fortified bunkers for their own use. From the nature of the defenses and the skill with which they used them as reflected in My Loc, the enemy intended to hold their positions unless forced out by overwhelming strength.<sup>56</sup>

For BLT 3/1 the taking of My Loc was only the beginning of the attempt to clear the enemy out of the Cua Viet sector. Several small hamlets, while not on the river, but just above it, provided cover for the units of the *803d*. On the following day, 26 January, another company of Lieutenant Colonel McQuown's command, Company I, encountered much the same, if not even more tenacious resistance, in the hamlet of Lam Xuan as Company K in My Loc.

On the morning of the 26th, while Company K continued to secure My Loc, Captain Lawrence R. Moran's Company I covered the northern flank. After a few enemy probes and calling an air strike on Lam Xuan, about 1500 meters to the northwest, Moran's company, that afternoon, advanced upon the latter hamlet. Attacking from east to west, Company I at first met hardly any opposition. The enemy troops allowed the Marines to move into the first tree line of the hamlet before opening up. Firing from well-concealed positions, especially scrub brush immediately to the rear of the Marines, the enemy, according to the battalion's report, "inflicted moderate casualties and . . . [caused] the attack to bog down."<sup>57</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel McQuown immediately sent in his attached tanks and an attached Ontos platoon to assist the beleaguered company. Even with the tanks and the Ontos, the latter equipped with 106mm recoilless rifles, Moran had difficulty in disengaging. Under covering artillery fire, smoke shells, and close air strikes, it took the Marine company more than five hours to extract all of its casualties from Lam Xuan.

With night coming on, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown decided to pull back Company I and concentrate the rest of his forces rather than continue the attack. In this first fight for Lam Xuan, Company I suffered 8 dead and 41 wounded. The Marines claimed to have killed 17 of the enemy and taken 2 prisoners.

The first phase of Operation Badger Catch was over. At 1400 on the 27th, the amphibious ready group commander relinquished command of the forces ashore to the 3d Marine Division. In turn, General Tompkins gave operational control of BLT 3/1 to Lieutenant Colonel Toner, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion commander and senior to Lieutenant Colonel McQuown. The 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion remained responsible for Operation Napoleon and the BLT operation became Operation Saline. For Lieutenant Colonel McQuown, outside of new reporting procedures, his task remained the same.<sup>58</sup>

On the 27th, the battalion consolidated its positions before continuing with the attack. Lieutenant Colonel Toner provided the battalion with five more tanks, the ones detached from the SLF Alpha battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Weise's BLT 2/4. At 1955 that evening, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown informed the amtrac battalion commander that he planned to attack Lam Xuan the following morning.

During the night and early morning hours of 28 January, two Marine fixed-wing aircraft carried out radar-controlled bombstrikes on Lam Xuan. This was followed shortly after 0800 by naval gunfire missions by Navy ships in the South China Sea. Then, supported by two tank platoons and the Ontos platoon, Captain Edward S. Hempel's Company L took its turn against the Lam Xuan defenses. Despite the display of U.S. supporting arms, the North Vietnamese unit in Lam Xuan remained undaunted and relatively unscathed. It had constructed its bunkers and trenchlines with overhead covers which were, as Lieutenant Colonel McQuown observed, "only subject to damage from direct hits."<sup>59</sup>

As the tanks moved up into the attack positions, enemy mines disabled three of them. Another fell into a deep bomb crater full of water and became submerged. Still with the direct fire support of the tanks and the recoilless rifle fire of the Ontos, Company L, attacking from east to west, made slow but deliberate progress. As the enemy resistance stiffened, Captain Hempel pulled his men back about noon, so that Marine supporting arms could work over the area once more. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown then reinforced Company L with Captain Regal's Company K. The

two Marine companies advanced on line. Company M also established a platoon blocking position north of Lam Xuan. At dusk, under cover of North Vietnamese guns from north of the DMZ, the NVA troops tried to withdraw. With a flare plane overhead, the Marines continued to press the attack against the enemy. Most of the NVA in the hamlet, nevertheless, managed to make good their retreat, leaving a rear guard to hold off the Marines. About 2100, Companies K and L consolidated their positions in Lam Xuan. The following morning the Marines continued with their mopping up. At 1445 the afternoon of the 29th, the two companies reported that Lam Xuan was "completely secured." The Marines, however, once more paid a price in casualties: 8 dead and 41 wounded. They had killed 69 of the enemy and captured 2 prisoners.<sup>60</sup>

The war still continued to have its surreal qualities. While the fighting expanded all along the DMZ, the allies still prepared for the usual annual Tet truce. According to MACV directives, the truce period was supposed to extend for 36 hours beginning at 1800 on 29 January. In the DMZ sector, BLT 3/1's fight for Lam Xuan made the implementation of the truce very unlikely. Major General Tompkins recalled that 30 minutes before the prospective cease-fire he received a telephone call from General Cushman, "that exempted the 3d MarDiv . . . from any such foolishness. It was to be 'business as usual' for northern I Corps." An entry in the BLT 3/1 journal read, "29[January]1800H— Received information that the 'Tet cease-fire' will not go into effect." Captain Regal, whose company still remained in Lam Xuan, remembered that he took no chances, cease-fire or no cease-fire. At 1800, his company remained on alert and a few minutes later "we again received the inevitable 40 rounds of incoming." Five minutes after the bombardment the message arrived "to disregard all previous traffic regarding the 'cease-fire;' it would not apply to the northern provinces."<sup>61</sup>

On the day of Tet, 31 January 1968, while Company K remained in Lam Xuan, BLT 3/1 was once more engaged in a struggle for another of the hamlets on the northern bank of the Cua Viet, Mai Xa Thi. Strategically located where Jones Creek emptied into the Cua Viet, the hamlet spread over both banks of the smaller waterway. This time, Captain Raymond A. Thomas' Company M spearheaded the assault against the hamlet. Under cover of darkness, Thomas' company moved out of My Loc into attack positions just southwest of Mai Xa Thi. To the north, Captain Regal sent one of his platoons from Lam Xuan towards Mai Xa Thi,

about 2,000 meters to the south. The plan was for the Company K platoon to make a diversionary attack by fire, while Company M made the main assault from the opposite direction.<sup>62</sup>

The Marines achieved surprise and the plan seemed to be working. About 0700, the Company K platoon opened fire from its positions north of the hamlet. About 15 minutes later, under cover of supporting artillery and morning fog, Company M moved through a tree line, into an old graveyard, and then across a rice paddy into the hamlet. The North Vietnamese soon recovered from their initial shock and fought back with RPGs, .50-caliber machine guns, and mortars from covered positions within Mai Xa Thi. The enemy even employed artillery in the Demilitarized Zone against the Marines in the hamlet. With his right platoon heavily engaged, Captain Thomas attempted to call in a close air strike, but the fog had not lifted and the sky remained overcast.<sup>63</sup>

At this point, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown decided to reinforce Thomas. He sent Company I up the Cua Viet in LVTs to take over Thomas' left flank. At the same time, a platoon of LVTH-6s, amphibian tractors equipped with 105mm howitzers, arrived to provide direct artillery support. Even with the reinforcements, the Marines only made slight progress as the enemy continued to resist. From positions across Jones Creek, enemy gunners fired rocket-propelled grenades into the Marine flank. Marine artillery fire soon subdued the North Vietnamese gunners, but the Marine advance remained stalled. While Company I took over his left flank, Captain Thomas and the remaining three platoons had joined the right flank platoon. Frustrated in their attempts to force the enemy out of their well dug-in positions, the Marines needed assistance. About 1500, the two Marine companies received word to pull back as the reduced cloud cover now permitted an air strike. The bombing missions proved somewhat of a disappointment because "of haze and many duds."<sup>64</sup>

About 1600, Companies I and M returned to the attack. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown now sent in Company L to follow in trace the first two companies. While still resisting, the enemy began to give way. At 1900, the three companies reported that they were making better progress. A flare plane arrived overhead and the Marines continued to press forward under illumination. By 2130, the Marines had secured about 80 percent of the hamlet and radioed back that "sniper fire continues, but organized resistance has ceased." The following day,



The top photo is from the Abel Collection; bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190420. *Marines of BLT 3/1 also sustained casualties during the fighting. At top, four Marines from Company K carry one of their wounded comrades to relative safety. Below, Navy Corpsman HM3 Edward F. Darewski, also with Company K, provides a wounded Marine an intravenous solution.*





Photo is from the Abel Collection  
*A BLT 3/1 platoon leader directs his men to attack enemy positions during Operation Badger Catch, as the enemy offered heavy resistance to Marine efforts to clear the hamlets near the Cua Viet.*

the three companies occupied all of the hamlet. In the fighting, the BLT sustained 12 dead and 46 wounded. They killed 44 of the enemy and captured 2 North Vietnamese soldiers.<sup>65</sup>

From prisoner interrogation, the battalion later learned that Mai Xa Thi had been the command post of the 3d Battalion, 803d NVA Regiment. As Lieutenant Colonel McQuown observed, that despite all of the sophisticated intelligence sources, "BLT 3/1 was not able to ascertain when the enemy occupied a given area." He therefore worked on the assumption that "all areas that could be occupied by the enemy" were defended by the enemy. According to McQuown, "This practice consumed time and resources but prevented the kind of surprise encounters which had been costly on previous operations."<sup>66</sup>

Thus for the Marines along the DMZ front, Tet had little meaning. It was the same dogged fighting that they had encountered for the last two to three weeks. There was no truce, but also there was no sudden thrust through the DMZ or attack on Khe Sanh that the allies half-expected. The only significant new enemy initiatives in this period were the attempts to cut Route 9 and more importantly, the Cua Viet supply line.

### *The Battle For Quang Tri City*

While along the DMZ, 31 January was just another day in the war, the same was not true for the allied forces near Quang Tri City. In the early morning hours of 31 January, all of the military installations near the city came under either enemy rocket and mortar attack, or both. This included the 3d Marines base area in Operation Osceola II at Ai Tu, the 1st Air Cavalry's 1st Brigade's LZ Betty, and the 1st ARVN Regiment command post near La Vang east of Route 1. Simultaneously with the bombardment of the military base areas, the 812th NVA Regiment launched a ground attack against Quang Tri City.

The 1st ARVN Regiment, not noted for its aggressiveness, withstood the shock of the North Vietnamese assault against the city. U.S. military advisors considered the 1st the weakest of the three regiments of the 1st ARVN Division. Only a few months previous, a 3d Marine Division message contained the observation that while Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Huu Hanh, the commanding officer of the regiment, had a "mediocre reputation," he was "not incompetent." The advisors blamed the "present passive" role of the regiment in support of the "Revolutionary Development" program of tending "to adversely effect regiment and Hanh."<sup>67</sup>

It was, nevertheless, because of its participation in Revolutionary Development, that the 1st ARVN was in position to counter the thrust of the North Vietnamese attack. Two of the battalions, the 2d and 3d, were conducting security missions relatively close to Quang Tri City and could be called back into the city at very short notice. Hanh had stationed his 1st Battalion, together with the regimental armored personnel carrier (APC) squadron, at a military installation in the western suburbs of Quang Tri. Just to the northeast of the city, in the Catholic hamlet of Tri Buu, Hanh placed the 9th Airborne Battalion that had been sent north from Saigon and put under his operational control. In the city itself, Regional Force troops and combat police supplemented the regular forces. Because of these dispositions, the 1st ARVN Regiment could readily concentrate its forces and those of the local militia.<sup>68</sup>

The South Vietnamese had some inkling that the city was in some danger. Given the unsettled situation in the north, on 28 January, General Lam, the I Corps commander, flew to Quang Tri City and consulted with Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Am, the

Quang Tri Province Chief and former commander of the 1st ARVN Regiment. They decided to place the city “in a state of emergency” and also imposed martial law. Am also provided weapons to various cadre and government civil servants. At the same time, elements of the *812th NVA Regiment*, which had formerly been operating in the DMZ sector, infiltrated into the hamlets and countryside surrounding Quang Tri City. According to a South Vietnamese account, the arrival of the enemy troops sent “thousands of local people panicking toward the city.” By now the entire city was alert.<sup>69</sup>

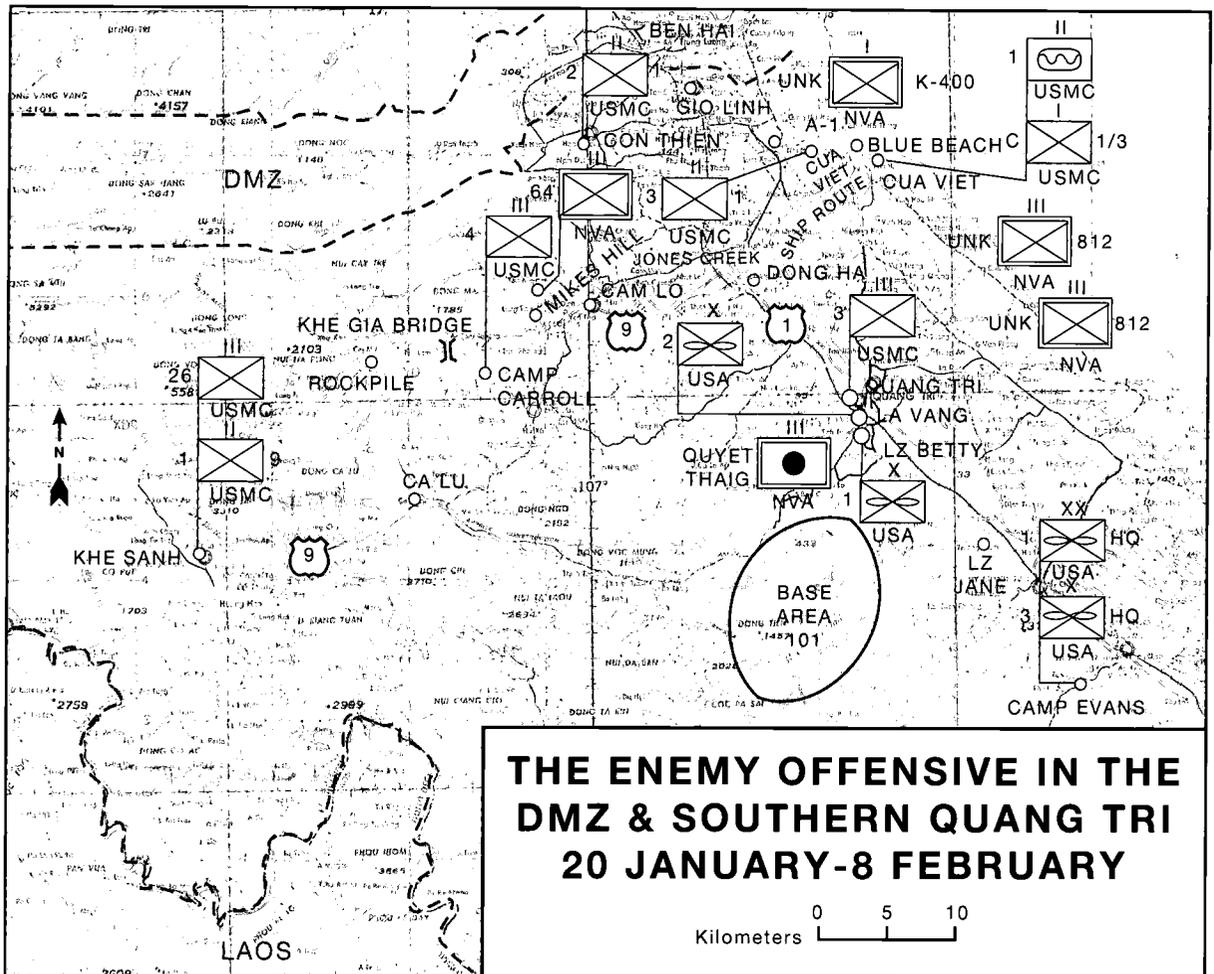
The enemy failed to carry out his plan. Sappers were supposed to infiltrate into the heart of the city on the night of 30–31 January and create a diversion. Once the sappers struck, the *812th* was to launch its attack under cover of a mortar and rocket barrage. The plan went awry for the North Vietnamese, however, almost from the beginning. A platoon from the *10th Sapper Battalion* reached its objectives around 0200 on the 31st, but soon found itself isolated and easily rounded up by local police and militia. The *812th* with five battalions under its



Both photos are from the Abel Collection

*Top, after heavy fighting in the Cua Viet area, Marines from BLT 3/1 examine an enemy fighting hole with one Marine actually in the enemy position. Below, Marines from the BLT interrogate a frightened NVA prisoner captured in the fighting*





control was more than two hours late in getting started. Rain-swollen streams and the unfamiliarity of the North Vietnamese with the terrain accounted in part for the delay.<sup>70</sup>

Unexpected resistance by the South Vietnamese forces also played a role. At Tri Buu, for example, the *814th VC Main Force Battalion*, attached to the *812th NVA Regiment*, encountered the 9th Airborne Battalion. Apparently the VC tried to take the South Vietnamese troops off guard by donning ARVN paratroop uniforms. The ruse failed when one of the 9th Airborne sentries observed that the "impostors had worn rubber sandals rather than the genuine jungle boots." Despite the uncovering of the Viet Cong, the 9th Airborne at Tri Buu was heavily outnumbered and had little choice but to fall back into Quang Tri City. By daybreak, the *812th* had penetrated the city at several points, but the South Vietnamese had repulsed an attack on the Quang Tri Citadel and the jail. The issue was still in doubt at noon.

At about this time, the civilian director of the CORDS organization in Quang Tri Province, Robert Brewer, and the senior U.S. Army advisor to the 1st ARVN visited Colonel Donald V. Rattan, the 1st Brigade commander, in his command post at LZ Betty. They told Rattan that the situation inside the city "was still highly tenuous." Brewer believed that at least an enemy battalion was in the city and that the ARVN "were badly in need of assistance." The North Vietnamese appeared to be reinforcing from the east "and had established fire support positions on [the] eastern and southern fringes of the city." Colonel Rattan agreed to provide a relief force from his command.<sup>71</sup>

Given the disposition of U.S. and South Vietnamese forces in the sector, Rattan had the only forces available that could reinforce Quang Tri City. West of the city at the Quang Tri Airfield at Ai Tu, Colonel Lo Prete's 3d Marines in Operation Osceola II consisted of only one infantry battalion, some artillery, and a makeshift

infantry company composed of rear elements of the 3d Marine Division headquarters and support troops.\* Of these forces, Lo Prete kept two companies of his infantry battalion deployed to the west, out to mortar and sniper range, to screen the vital area. Two companies remained in reserve and the 500-man ad hoc company guarded the perimeter. Lo Prete had no men to spare for the defense of Quang Tri City which was an ARVN responsibility.<sup>72\*\*</sup>

Rattan also could only send a limited force to relieve the ARVN in Quang Tri City. Like the 3d Marines, Colonel Rattan had no responsibility for the defense of the city. Looking to the eventual relief of Khe Sanh and to cleaning out the enemy *Base Area 101*, three of the four battalions attached to the 1st Brigade were oriented to the west and southwest of LZ Betty. With the 1st Battalion of the 8th Cavalry providing the only security for the Cavalry fire bases in the northern reaches of *Base Area 101* and the 1st Battalion, 502d Airborne Infantry committed to base security at LZ Betty, Rattan had only two battalions, the 1st of the 12th and 1st of the 5th, "free to maneuver against the attacking enemy" in Quang Tri City.<sup>73</sup>

After consulting with Brewer and his Army advisor colleague and determining the most likely enemy infiltration and support positions, Colonel Rattan selected his landing assault areas. He wanted to destroy the enemy supporting mortar and rocket positions and then block the North Vietnamese from either reinforcing or withdrawing their infantry units in the city. At 1345, the brigade commander ordered the air assaults "as soon as possible with priority on lift assigned" to the 1st of the 12th. The 1st of the 5th would follow. At the same time, he alerted the 1st Squadron of the 9th Cavalry to fly "armed reconnaissance missions at tree top level" using both gunships and H-13 Aerial Rocket Artillery helicopters.<sup>74</sup>

Within two hours, by 1555, the 1st Cavalry helicopters had landed five companies, three from the 1st

of the 5th and two from the 1st of the 12th, into landing zones east of Quang Tri. In the two central landing zones, straddling the rear support positions of the enemy *K-4 Battalion, 812th Regiment*, Companies B and C of the 1st of the 12th encountered resistance from the very beginning. In fighting that lasted until 2000 that night, the "surprised and confused enemy" employed machine guns, mortars, and recoilless rifles against the American soldiers. Between them, the two Air Cavalry companies accounted for over 60 of the enemy left on the battlefield. Already heavily engaged inside the city with the ARVN troops and now in its rear by the two companies of the 1st of the 12th, the *K-4 Battalion* for all practical purposes was "rendered ineffective."<sup>75</sup>

To the north, Company B, 1st of the 5th, attached to the 1st of the 12th for this operation, arrived in a relatively calm landing zone northeast of Tri Buu. Army Captain Michael Nawrosky, the Company B commander, remembered that the "little people [the ARVN] were in pretty good contact that night." Although the Company B position remained quiet for the most part, on two occasions enemy soldiers retreating from Quang Tri and Tri Buu skirted the company's perimeter. In both cases, according to Nawrosky, "we engaged with mortar, 79s, and machine guns, but had negative assessment that night." When the company searched the area the following morning, Nawrosky related, "there were no dead; this is VC and NVA tactics in moving them out." Later that day, Company B joined the other two companies of the 1st of the 5th Cavalry in their landing zones southeast of Quang Tri City between the railroad and Route 1.<sup>76</sup>

Like the two companies of the 1st of the 12th, Companies A and C of the 1st of the 5th on the afternoon of the 31st met relatively large enemy forces near the village of Thong Thuong Xa just south of Route 1. They established blocking positions behind the *K-6 Battalion, 812th Regiment* which had attacked Quang Tri from the southeast. Similar to their sister battalion, the *K-4*, the *K-6* found itself "wedged between the ARVN forces and the cavalymen." The 1st Brigade's scout gunships and aerial rocket artillery (ARA) helicopters "created pandemonium in the *K-6 Battalion* rear." According to the brigade's account, the NVA soldiers "were obviously completely unfamiliar with Air Cavalry techniques of warfare." The ARA helicopters and gunships "experienced unusual success against the enemy troops." Rather than firing at the approaching helicopters, the NVA

\* Lieutenant Colonel Karl J. Fontenot, the commanding officer of the 3d Tank Battalion, remembered that "we organized a provisional rifle company from the tank battalion, H & S Company, supplemented by about 70 men by other division elements and this went to Quang Tri." LtCol Karl J. Fontenot, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec 94] (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\* Colonel Vaughn R. Stuart, who was executive officer of the 3d Marines in 1968, recalled that the Marine battalion at the Quang Tri Air Field "functioned closely with the First Brigade of the 1st Air Cav after it displaced to the outskirts of Quang Tri City." As he remembered, the Marine battalion was under the "op con" of the 1st Brigade for the short period the Brigade was there. Col Vaughn R. Stuart, Comments on draft, dtd 20Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

“would attempt to play ‘dead.’” The brigade only lost three aircraft to enemy gunfire.<sup>77</sup>

By the morning of 1 February, it was obvious that the North Vietnamese had given up on the attempt to take Quang Tri City. In the city itself, ARVN and local South Vietnamese militia and police mopped up. Outside the city, the Communists initiated a half-hearted anti-government march against Quang Tri by the residents of Tri Buu. The South Vietnamese police quickly dispersed the demonstration and by that evening, with support of U.S. fixed-wing air support, ARVN forces retook Tri Buu. For the most part, the North Vietnamese were now only interested in getting out the best they could. During the night, many of the NVA units broke down into small groups to make good their retreat. Some North Vietnamese soldiers tried to escape by mingling among the thousands of refugees now leaving the city. Captain Nawrosky told of his company finding at least two North Vietnamese soldiers who “had donned civilian clothing over their own uniforms . . . they’d thrown their weapons away and they tried to get out wearing civilian clothes.”<sup>78</sup>

While the mopping up or pursuit phase continued for several more days, most of the major contacts were over by 1 February. In the most significant action of the day, Company A, 1st Battalion, 502d Airborne Regiment, newly inserted into the operation and supported by ARA and gunship helicopters, killed over 75 of the enemy near a large cathedral about 5,000 meters south of Quang Tri City. According to American records, the North Vietnamese lost over 900 men killed, 553 by the ARVN, and 86 captured, as well as substantial weapons and equipment, in their aborted attempt to take Quang Tri City. The allies took substantial casualties as well, but much less in comparison to the North Vietnamese.\* The outcome may very well have been different and caused even more complications for III MAF if the Cavalry’s 1st Brigade had not been in position to have come to the assistance of the South Vietnamese. Still the unexpected tenacious resistance by the poorly regarded and outnumbered 1st ARVN Regiment and the local militia provided the opportunity for the Cavalry to come to the rescue.<sup>79</sup>

\*The after-action reports and the Vietnamese accounts do not provide specific American and allied casualties. Department of the Army records show, however, that for all of Operation Jeb Stuart, not just for the battle of Quang Tri City, through 10 February, U.S. casualties were 58 KIA and 303 wounded as opposed to 855 enemy dead. Dept of the Army, Operational Summary/Brief, dtd 11Feb68 (CMH Working Papers).

### *Tet Aftermath Along the DMZ*

On the DMZ front, the North Vietnamese continued to place pressure on the Marine units, but to a somewhat lesser extent than before Tet. Along the coast, above the Cua Viet, the 803d continued its efforts to cut that vital waterway. BLT 3/1 in Operation Saline remained the frontline battalion. Of all the battalion’s units, Captain John Regal’s Company K in the hamlet of Lam Xuan was the most vulnerable and exposed to an enemy attack. Having stayed in Lam Xuan since finally securing the hamlet on 29 January and having observed increased enemy activity, Regal believed “that something was up.” On the afternoon of 1 February, he requested and received permission from his battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown, to move to new night positions, about 300 meters east of Lam Xuan.<sup>80</sup>

Waiting until darkness so that it could not be easily detected, the company shifted to new fighting positions. Later that night, Regal received intelligence that added weight to his opinion that his company had been targeted by the enemy. An enemy officer captured in the fighting for Mai Xa Thi on the 31st told his captors that the 803d planned a battalion-size attack against one of the Marine companies. Regal had no doubts that the company was his.

Company K had only a short wait until the fireworks began. At about 0245 on 2 February, about 100 82mm mortar rounds followed by a similar number of 130mm artillery rounds fell into the company’s former positions in Lam Xuan. According to Regal, “Lam Xuan was sparkling like a Christmas tree . . . Fortunately for us we weren’t there.” With additional light provided by a flare ship over Gio Linh that lit up the entire Cua Viet area, the Marines then spotted the enemy infantry. Captain Regal later wrote: “There they were; from my position, I could see the enemy walking from right to left in single file. They were just outside a hedgerow, east of the hamlet, no more than 100 meters from our line.” As the forward elements of the North Vietnamese unit approached the Marine positions, they appeared confused as officers tried to regroup their men. Regal believed that the enemy “must have been going to sweep through the area into which we had moved after they found we had abandoned the village and just stumbled into our lines.”

Regal called for an illumination round which completely exposed the enemy troops in front of the Marine lines. He then gave the signal to fire. For the next few hours until sunrise, the outnumbered Marines of Com-

pany K supported by Navy gunfire, mortars, and artillery repulsed repeated assaults by the NVA battalion. These attacks, however, lacked coordination and consisted for the most part, as described by Captain Regal, of sporadic rushes by small groups of NVA "in a fanatic attempt to penetrate our lines." They all failed.<sup>81</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel McQuown sent forward some LVTs with additional ammunition for the company, but North Vietnamese artillery forced the amtracs to hold up. The battalion commander then ordered Company M with two tanks to reinforce the embattled Marines of Company K whose ammunition was now running low. Arriving at daybreak and with the two tanks as a spearhead, Company M, supported by Company K, launched the counterattack against the NVA. Like the previous actions in Lam Xuan, the fighting "was from hedgerow to hedgerow driving the remainder of the NVA to the northwest through the area covered by NGF [naval gunfire]." With supporting fires from three artillery batteries, the tanks, and a destroyer offshore, the battalion reported at 1445 that afternoon while continuing to meet resistance, "most of hamlet area has been secured. Large numbers of NVA bodies and amounts of equipment are being found throughout the area." The two companies continued their search and collected the enemy weapons and equipment found upon the battlefield. At nightfall, the Marines then pulled out of the hamlet once more, establishing their night positions in Mai Xa Thi to the south. They left behind them, however, the North Vietnamese dead and Lieutenant Colonel McQuown called in "interdicting artillery and fire" on the known trail from the north leading to Lam Xuan. As the battalion commander later explained, he anticipated that the NVA "would attempt to recover the bodies." The American supporting fires "continued through the night until dawn . . ."<sup>82</sup>

In the third battle for Lam Xuan, the Marines killed 141 of the enemy and captured 7 prisoners at a cost of 8 Marines dead and 37 wounded. The morning of 4 February, Companies I and K returned to Lam Xuan but the NVA had departed. Of the enemy dead, the Marines found only nine bodies in the hamlet which the NVA had not dragged away. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown recalled that those corpses "left behind were still in the makeshift litters that were being used to carry them off." As Captain Regal later observed, "We had not seen the last of the *803d*."<sup>83</sup>

Further to the west in Operation Kentucky, Tet for the 9th Marines was quieter than usual. Even so, on 31 January, Combined Action Marines assigned to hamlets

in the Cam Lo sector reported large concentrations of enemy troops in their vicinity. Receiving further intelligence that the enemy might attack the Cam Lo District headquarters, south of the Cam Lo River, Colonel Smith, the 9th Marines commander, ordered Lieutenant Colonel William M. Cryan, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines commander, to reinforce the Combined Action Company P (Papa) headquarters located there and one of the Combined Action platoons, "Papa" 1, in one of the nearby hamlets on Route 9. Cryan sent an infantry platoon with a detachment of Army M42 Dusters to the Cam Lo District headquarters compound and dispatched an infantry squad to CAP Papa 1.<sup>84</sup>

The Communist forces struck at 0215 the morning of 2 February with mortar and recoilless rifle bombardment of both the district headquarters and CAP Papa 1 compounds. At the district headquarters, the enemy also launched a three-sided ground assault. In the first fusillade, a recoilless round killed the senior U.S. advisor, Army Major James C. Payne. Army Captain Raymond E. McMacken, his deputy, then assumed command of the headquarters compound. McMacken called in artillery "to box the headquarters in." According to the Army captain, the Marine defenders "just stacked them up on the wire."\* He recalled that "five Marines rushed across the compound and took over a machine gun bunker. They got a .30 [caliber] machine gun into action to kill 15 NVA on the wires in front of them." An enemy RPG gunner, however, took out the machine gun bunker, wounding all five of the Marines inside. One of the Combined Action Marines, Lance Corporal Lawrence M. Eades, the company clerk of CACO Papa, suddenly found himself a machine gunner. According to Eades, "When we were hit, I grabbed my M16 and a M60 machine gun and ran to my position on the northwest side of the perimeter." McMacken credited Eades with killing over 20 of the enemy.<sup>85</sup>

With the supporting arms including the dual 40mm antiaircraft guns mounted on the Army M42 Dusters, the Cam Lo compound successfully held out against the attackers. In fact, the enemy troops only succeeded in getting through the first of the three belts of wire around the headquarters compound. By

\*Colonel Richard B. Smith recalled that before he took over the 9th Marines he was the division inspector. He stated that he was "a great believer in wire. . . . Much of my effort was to get the CAP's wired in and I mean *heavily* wired. The enemy didn't expect this and attackers would get hung up before realizing what was there." Col Richard B. Smith, Comments on draft, dtd 19Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Smith Comments.

0615, a reaction force from the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, including a reinforced Marine platoon and another detachment of Army Dusters, arrived on the scene. Later they were joined by another reaction force from Dong Ha. The Marine infantry intercepted the enemy attacking force attempting to recross the Cam Lo River north of the compound. According to the 9th Marines, the Americans killed 111 of the Communist troops, probably from the *27th Independent Battalion* and the *VC Cam Lo Local Force Company*, and rounded up 23 prisoners.\* The U.S. forces sustained casualties of 3 dead, two Marines and the U.S. Army senior advisor, and 18 Marines wounded.

From a III MAF perspective, Colonel Franklin L. Smith described the defense of the Cam Lo District headquarters as a "hot little action," but successful, "largely through the determination of the CAP unit." Colonel Richard B. Smith, the 9th Marines commander, had a dissenting view. He believed that the establishment of the Combined Action units in the DMZ, where the people were relatively unsympathetic to the government, "a waste of time." According to the 9th Marines commander, he continually had to divert line infantry units from their main mission of defending the strongpoints against the NVA to come to the rescue of the CAPs. He saw the Cam Lo action in that context.<sup>86\*\*</sup>

For the most part, for the next few days, the 9th Marines units except for the occasional bombardment of Con Thien had a sort of reprieve along the barrier. This ended on 7 February with an enemy ambush of Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Shortly after 1230, Company K's 3d Platoon, patrolling below the main supply route between A-3 and A-2 just west of Route 1, triggered the trap. Using small arms,

\*Although the 9th Marines took several prisoners, the regiment's situation and intelligence reports did not cite the specific units that carried out the attack on Cam Lo. On the other hand, the intelligence section of the regimental command chronology shows only the above two units operating in the Cam Lo sector. An article in the III MAF newspaper claims three North Vietnamese battalions participated in the attack. 9th Mar ComdC, Feb68; Clipping "Cam Lo—Hub of the DMZ," *Sea Tiger*, n.d. [Feb68], Encl, Bendell Comments. Colonel Smith recalled that the 9th Marines claimed 130 enemy and 40 prisoners but would not dispute the figures in the text: "I have never seen a body count report that I agreed with." Smith Comments.

\*\*In his comments, Colonel Smith further stated that outside of the Marines assigned to the CAP, the defenders "could not find any CAP people to man their guns. The position was saved by the Marines inside." He recalled that the senior "Army advisor . . . had called on me the day before for this support. He knew from his intelligence sources that he was going to be hit." Smith Comments.

machine guns, and grenades in a sudden outburst of fire, the North Vietnamese killed nine Marines including the platoon commander and wounded another seven. With the death of the Marine officer, "confusion set in." Captain Donald R. Frank, the Company K commander, with his 1st and 2d Platoons, about 500 meters to the north, moved to reinforce the 3d.<sup>87</sup>

The NVA had expected the Marines to do just that and had set up another ambush slightly to the north of the first. As the 2d Platoon tried to maneuver, a hidden machine gun opened up, followed by small arms fire and then grenades. The platoon suffered 18 dead and 10 wounded in the first five minutes of the action including the platoon commander and two radio operators. In the meantime, the 1st Platoon attempted to relieve the 3d Platoon and succeeded in bringing out some of the wounded and the able bodied. After the helicopter evacuation of the most serious casualties, the 1st and 3d joined the 2d Platoon in its shrinking perimeter.

At the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines combat operations center at A-3, Lieutenant Colonel James W. Marsh, the battalion commander, and Major Raymond F. Findlay, Jr., the battalion operations officer, monitored the radio. Upon being briefed on the situation by Captain Frank, Major Findlay replied "Okay, hang on. We're on our way." He sent Company L to set up blocking positions and alerted Company M. The battalion then called for an air observer to assist in bringing in supporting arms. Flying over the ambush site, the observer, using the codename "Southern Comfort," reported: "I've never seen such a concentration of NVA." Remarking on an extensive NVA bunker system and interconnected trenches, Southern Comfort estimated the size of the enemy force to be between 200 to 400 men. According to Jeff "TJ" Kelly,<sup>\*\*\*</sup> then a corporal, who was handling the communications with Southern Comfort, the "AO was running gunships on the NVA, but it was in the center of the bunker complex, not close to Kilo [Company K] where it was most needed. he could not get it closer because Kilo and the NVA were mixed together."<sup>88</sup>

By late afternoon, Company L had established blocking positions to the southwest and engaged a number of enemy trying to reach the hamlet of Phu Tho, about 2,000 meters below A-3. Company M, accompanied by Major Findlay, had reached Company

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>According to the unofficial historian of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, Kelly's full name was Thomas Jeffrey Kelly and in Vietnam went by the nickname TJ. He now prefers to be called Jeff. LtCol Otto Lehrack, Comments on draft, dtd 29Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).

K, dug in about 150 meters southwest of the original contact. Corporal Kelly, who had become the radioman for Company M, remembered that “Kilo’s platoons: first, second, weapons and what was left of third were strung out in a tactical withdrawal.” Major Findlay consulted with Captain Frank. According to Corporal Kelly, the Company K commander “want[ed] to go back in . . . we have people in there.” With heavy rain and low cloud ceiling precluding any more air support and well-entrenched enemy, Findlay decided against an immediate assault: “We’re going to pull back . . . Come first light we’re going to get some more firepower in here and go after them.”

During the night, Company L returned to A-3 while Companies K and M established a two-company defensive perimeter west of Route 1 near Gio Linh. The 12th Marines provided heavy supporting fires around the two exposed companies. Corporal Kelly remembered that it was a wet “miserable night . . . [and] rain swirled into the hole chilling us . . .” At the end of the long and comparatively uneventful night, the Marines prepared to renew the attack. A detachment of tanks from Gio Linh joined the two companies and the Marine artillery opened up with their preparatory fires upon the enemy entrenchments.

Under cover of the Marine artillery bombardment followed by Huey gunship strafing runs, on the morning of 8 February, the two Marine companies crossed Route 1 into a small woods that contained the NVA entrenchments. As Kelly observed: “It was all grunts now.” The NVA suddenly began to panic and bolt. Corporal Kelly later described the Marine attack:

Now Kilo was the grim reaper, killing anything that moved as they assaulted through the North Vietnamese trenches and bunkers in a tactic so simple and direct I was amazed by its effectiveness. Their firepower was a wave of destruction surging before them, overwhelming the enemy. It was over quickly.<sup>89</sup>

Other members of the battalion remembered the events of that morning less melodramatically. Captain Otto J. Lehrack, the commanding officer of Company I, later wrote that his recollection was that Company K “did launch an assault, supported by tanks from Gio Linh, but by that time there wasn’t much of an enemy force left and it was pretty much of a walk.” According to Lehrack, the company sergeant of Company K, Gunnery Sergeant Jimmie C. Clark, later told him: “What NVA was left in the holes were chained to their guns . . . so they couldn’t get up and run.” Clark went on to state: “We went in and retrieved our own and brought our own people out. . . . We were pretty

beat and torn up, but we had to do it.”<sup>90</sup>

During the two-day fight, casualties were heavy for both sides. The Marines claimed to have killed 139 of the enemy, but sustained a total of 30 Marine dead and 35 wounded. Some of the wounded were from the previous two ambushes and perilously survived the night among the North Vietnamese. One American survivor related that an English-speaking North Vietnamese soldier called out “Corpsman, I’m hit,” and then shot the Navy medic when he came to assist. Another Navy corpsman, Hospital Corpsman 3d Class, Alan B. Simms, who remained unscathed, hid and tended four wounded Marines, saving their lives. At least four of the North Vietnamese soldiers blew themselves up with grenades rather than surrender. After helicopters evacuated the American wounded from an improvised landing zone, the Marine infantry loaded the American dead and North Vietnamese gear upon the tanks. According to Kelly:

It was absolutely quiet except for the groans of the loaders and the sounds made by the bodies of the dead being dragged to the tanks. They were stacked four high—one on his back, the next on his stomach—the heads and arms placed between the legs of the body underneath to lock in the stack and prevent it from toppling. . . . The tank crews watched in horror.

The tanks returned the bodies to Gio Linh and the infantry returned to A-3.<sup>91</sup>

Once more, the war along the DMZ for another brief period went into one of its customary lulls. Contrary to General Tompkin’s expectations that the North Vietnamese would make their major effort in the Camp Carroll/Rockpile/Ca Lu sector, the 4th Marines in Lancaster had few flareups of any significant action. The enemy made no significant attempt to cut Route 9 after the fighting for “Mike’s Hill.” Outside of an artillery bombardment on Camp Carroll on 2 February, and an attack on a truck convoy a week later, the Lancaster sector remained quiet during the first two weeks of February. While maintaining pressure all along the DMZ front, the NVA largely limited their Tet offensive in the north to the disruption of the Cua Viet supply line, which apparently was intertwined with the attack on Quang Tri City. As captured enemy documents later indicated, North Vietnamese commanders attributed their failure to take Quang Tri City to their inexperience with the coordination of large forces that involved two major commands: *The DMZ Front* and the *Tri Thien Hue Front*.<sup>92</sup> This failure of coordination characterized the entire enemy Tet offensive and was especially true of the enemy attacks in the Da Nang area further south.

## CHAPTER 8

# The Tet Offensive at Da Nang

*Allied Dispositions—The Enemy Plans His Offensive—The Attack—The Fighting Continues  
A Brief Lull and Renewed Fighting*

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### *Allied Dispositions*

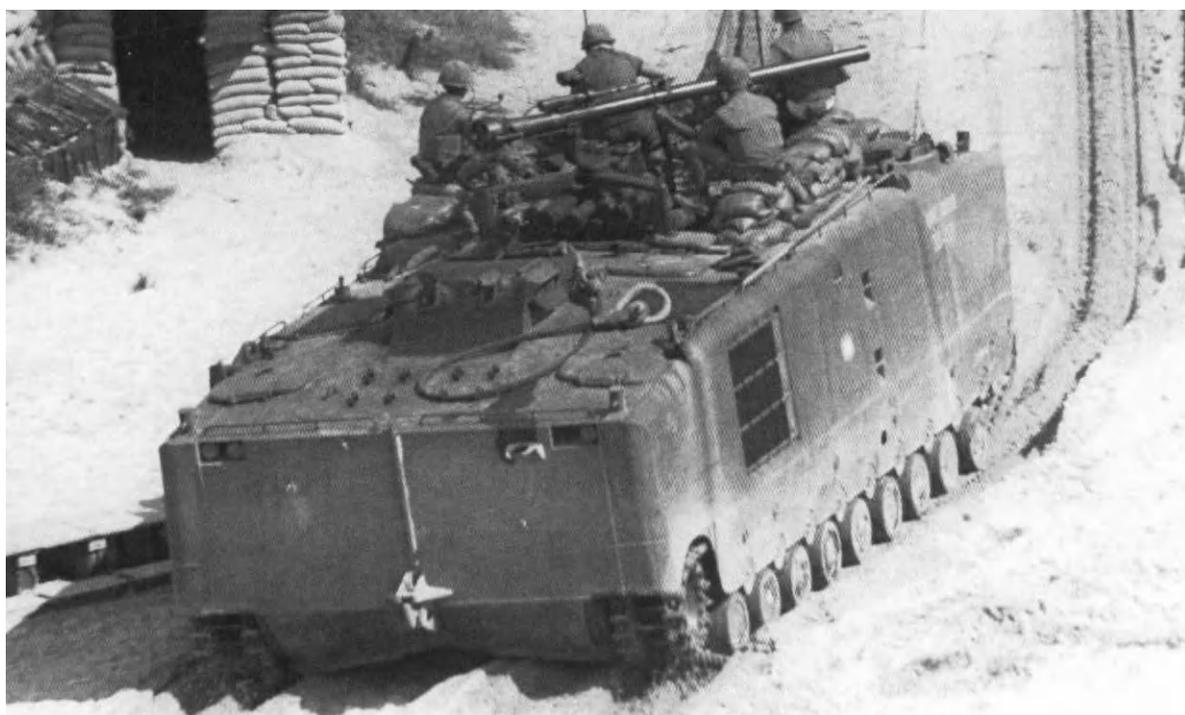
By the time of Tet, Operation Checkers had ended and at Da Nang the situation was precarious. With the departure of the 5th Marines, there was only one Marine infantry regimental headquarters in the extensive Da Nang tactical area of operations. Colonel Ross R. Miner's 7th Marines with all three of its battalions had the responsibility for the northern, western, and southwestern sectors. The 2d Battalion was in the north, the 1st Battalion was in the center, and the 3d Battalion was in the south. With the departure of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines in mid-January for Phu Bai, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines extended its area of operations to include An Hoa to the south. Colonel Miner attached two additional companies to the 3d Battal-

ion—Company L, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines and Company H, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines—to cover its extended area.<sup>1</sup>

A conglomeration of Marine support units, ARVN, Korean Marines, and two Marine infantry battalions attempted to secure the remaining area. In the Da Nang Vital Area, the artillery regiment, the 11th Marines, continued to oversee the Northern Sector Defense Command and the 1st Tank Battalion, the Southern Sector Defense Command. In both these sectors support troops doubled as infantry, manning fixed defensive positions and conducting patrols. Major General Donn J. Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commanding general, kept under his direct control the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. Located between the Cau Do and Thanh Quit

*A U.S. Marine amphibian tractor from the 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion transports Korean Marines during a sweep operation near Hoi An. The tractor is armed with a 106mm recoilless rifle.*

Photo is from the Abel Collection



Rivers and on either side of Route 1, the two battalions provided the last line of defense before the so-called "Vital Area." The most eastern of the battalions, the 2d, shared its area with the 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion, which was responsible for the coastal sand flats south of Marble Mountain. Below the Marine battalions, the Korean Marine Brigade secured the Hoi An sector and the southeastern approaches above the Ky Lam River to the Da Nang base. Behind the Marine and Korean lines, the 51st ARVN Regiment deployed in support of the South Vietnamese Revolutionary Development program. With both fixed-wing and helicopter gunships and more than 120 artillery pieces ranging from 4.2-inch mortars to 175mm guns, General Robertson was confident that he could counter any threat that the enemy posed to Da Nang despite the thinness of his manned defenses.<sup>2</sup>

In the Da Nang sector, the tempo of operations had picked up during the last weeks of January. The Korean Marines, while not finding any sizeable forces, continued to encounter small enemy units and boobytraps which took their toll. In the 7th Marines sector, the Marines described the same type of activity as well as increased enemy infiltration. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines reported "a definite increase of enemy harassment" and the movement of sizeable enemy units into the Go Noi Island area. Lieutenant Colonel William K. Rockey, the 3d Battalion commander, commented on the "increasing frequency and ferocity" of enemy contacts. He remembered that because of the number of casualties his battalion sustained, "it was necessary to employ administrative personnel on patrols" with "clerks, cooks, and drivers" on line. In one operation near Dien Ban, the 51st ARVN Regiment sustained losses of 40 men killed, 6 missing, and 140 wounded while accounting for about 80 enemy dead and 13 prisoners. As Igor Bobrowsky, a former Combined Action member of Delta 2 near the village of Thanh Quit, recalled this period: "It wasn't that something happened . . . It was just that the intensity of what was going on kept on increasing, increasing, increasing."<sup>3</sup>

While activity in the Army's Americal Division areas of operations in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin was somewhat diminished, there was enough enemy in northern and central I Corps to cause concern for both the American and South Vietnamese commands. On 27 January, General Westmoreland announced a cease-fire to be observed by allied forces for 36 hours beginning at 1800 on 29 January in honor of the Tet holidays. Although authorizing the cease-fire, he warned all American commanders to be unusually alert

because of "enemy increased capabilities." At 1700 on 29 January, Westmoreland canceled the truce in the DMZ and the entire I Corps sector.<sup>4\*</sup>

Major General Robertson remembered that "the Cease-fire was to be in effect . . . and the regimental commanders reported intense fire from the enemy and requested authority to continue artillery fire, if necessary . . ." Robertson granted the request and then "about 1840 we got the word from III MAF that the cease-fire had been called off."<sup>5</sup>

### *The Enemy Plans His Offensive*

For some time, the American forces had been aware that the enemy was about to launch some type of major offensive. General Westmoreland was convinced that this big push would come either just before or right after Tet—but not during the holidays and probably at Khe Sanh and in the DMZ sector. At Da Nang, III MAF knew that the Communists were on the move. Marine and Army reconnaissance flights using infrared technology and XM-3 "People Sniffer" airborne personnel detectors (APD) mounted on Huey helicopters indicated strong enemy concentrations in the hills near Hieu Duc west of the 7th Marines. Lieutenant Colonel William J. Davis, the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, recalled that his unit began to take fewer casualties from surprise firing devices or boobytraps and began to suspect that enemy troops unfamiliar with the terrain might be attempting to move into his sector. Davis notified the division headquarters of his findings. According to Davis, a few hours later, General Robertson called a division briefing for all battalion commanders. At the briefing, the division G-2 or intelligence officer, told the assembled officers that "they are finally going to come out and fight. We don't know why, but we know they are!" He later confided to Davis, "Bill, your phone call was right on the money! I called all the regiments and battalions and the same was happening to them."<sup>6</sup>

On the evening of 28 January, just west of Hieu Duc, a Marine squad from Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines ambushed a three-man Viet Cong reconnaissance patrol. The Marines killed two of the enemy and wounded the third. The Marines evacuated the

\* Lieutenant Colonel John F. J. Kelly, who was an intelligence officer on the III MAF staff, commented that General Westmoreland canceled the truce at "the request of LtGen Cushman, who also requested that the announcement be held until six hours before the scheduled beginning of the truce so as not to tip III MAF's hand." LtCol John F. J. Kelly, Comments on draft, dtd 13Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

survivor to the Naval Support Activity hospital where he died of his wounds. Before his death, however, the Vietnamese identified himself as Major Nguyen Van Lam, the commanding officer of the *R-20 Doc Lap Battalion*. From the recovery of Lam's notebook and a detailed sketch map of Hill 10, the location of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines' command post, the *R-20* commander was obviously on an exploration mission to discover any vulnerability in the Marine battalion's defenses.<sup>7\*</sup>

From other sources, the Marine command learned of other ominous measures taken by the Communist forces in the Da Nang sector. According to intelligence reports, on 15 January, *Group 44*, the forward headquarters of Communist *Military Region 5*, moved from the hills in western Quang Nam, to an advance position on Go Noi Island. On 29 January, Marine intelligence officers received a reliable report that the *2d NVA Division* also had established its command post in western Go Noi. According to Marine Chief Warrant Officer Stuart N. Duncan, assigned to the 5th Counterintelligence Team, a Combined Action unit in the northern Da Nang area, a few days before Tet, killed a VC who tried to hide in a tunnel. The CAPs found several documents on the body and in the tunnel which the man obviously had used as his base of operations. In his last report, the Communist agent wrote, "I have been discovered and mission not yet completed." From the details of the other recovered documents, the VC obviously were making an extensive reconnaissance of the Da Nang area. His notes contained descriptions of military structures, distances, weapons, and other information that would be of value to an attacking force.<sup>8</sup>

Additional intelligence tended to confirm the enemy was about to initiate something big. The ARVN 51st Regiment operating in the southern sector of the Da Nang area of operations came across evidence including documents pointing to a buildup of Communist strength together with probes of allied defenses. On 29 January, a local vil-

lage chief told the security officer of the Naval Support Activity at Camp Tiensha that about 300 VC would attack the Marble Mountain transmitter that night. That same day, the 1st Marine Division notified III MAF that "usually reliable sources" told of staging areas south of Da Nang for an impending attack. Finally, according to Marine intelligence officers, another "very reliable source" flatly stated "that the time of attack throughout *MR (Military Region) 5* would be" at 0130 and no later than 0200 on 30 January.<sup>9</sup>

The Communist forces throughout South Vietnam were about to strike. In I Corps, the allies learned from a defector that the enemy planned an attack against Quang Ngai City. According to this former member of the *VC 401st Regimental Security Guard*, local Communist cadre stated that "the war had lasted too long and the Front had to seek a good opportunity to stage a great offensive that would bring the war to an early end." Further, the South Vietnamese National Police reported that Viet Cong local leaders from Quang Tin, Quang Nam, and Quang Ngai Provinces met in a base area in the hills of northern Quang Ngai to plan attacks on Chu Lai and on Quang Ngai City.<sup>10</sup>

While the Communists concentrated their forces for the large offensive, many of these units suffered from too many rapid replacements and in some cases from poor morale. As the defector from the *401st* later revealed, his unit lacked "weapons, experienced soldiers, and transportation manpower." He personally believed the plans were impractical and deserted at the first chance he had. Another Communist soldier, who infiltrated from North Vietnam after receiving a year's training as a radioman in Hanoi, was thrust into one of the attacking battalions south of Da Nang so hastily that he never learned the name of his unit let alone those of his officers. Two members of a VC engineering company, also in the Da Nang area, later recounted that nearly 80 percent of their unit was from North Vietnam. The Communists obviously were bringing the local VC main force units up to strength, even if to do so they had to bring in replacements from the north. For example, while the enemy *R-20th* attempted to maintain a full complement of 400 men through the recruitment or impressment of local villagers and infiltration of North Vietnamese "volunteers," intelligence sources rated the unit only "marginally effective."<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the Da Nang area of operations, the enemy began to move into attack positions. In addition

\* Colonel Davis, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines commander, wrote that, according to the interrogation of another prisoner, Major Lam, if he had not been killed would have become an advisor to the *31st NVA Regiment*, also known as the *3d NVA Regiment*, for terrain and operations. Another prisoner claimed that Lam was the chief of staff for the NVA regiment. Col W. J. Davis, *Tet Marine, An Autobiography* (San Diego, CA, 1987), pp. 117-18, Encl to Col William J. Davis, Comments on draft, dtd 2Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Davis, *Tet Marine*.

to the *R-20 VC Battalion*, south of Da Nang, the *1st VC* and *3d NVA Regiments*\* both part of the *2d NVA Division* started to deploy toward Go Noi Island. Elements of the *368B NVA Rocket Artillery Regiment* were in firing positions to the west and northwest of the 7th Marines. Other units included the *402d Sapper Battalion*, the *V-25th VC Battalion*, and other VC local forces. A warning order and plan prepared by the Communist Da Nang City Committee called for a preliminary attack on the city by sappers and VC troops. The attack force would consist of two groups, one to move by land and the other by water to knock out the bridge separating the city from Tiensha Peninsula and to capture the I Corps headquarters. This would be followed by a rocket barrage and an assault by the main force units on allied military units and installations. Within the city itself, VC cadre were to force the "inhabitants into the street for demonstrations . . . and prepare the people for continuing political struggle against the government as well as kill GVN and ARVN cadre."<sup>12</sup>

Before the Communist forces launched their attack, the commanders prepared to read to their troops a directive supposedly prepared two weeks earlier by the Presidium of the Central Committee of the National Liberation Front. The Front announced that the 1968 Tet greeting of "Chairman Ho [Chi Minh] is actually a combat order for our entire Army and population." The soldiers and cadre of the "South Vietnam Liberation Army" were to move forward in the attack:

The call for assault to achieve independence and liberty has sounded;

The Truong Son and the Mekong River are moving.

You comrades should act as heroes of Vietnam and with the spirit and pride of combatants of the Liberation Army.

The Victory will be with us.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Attack*

By evening on the 29th, the 1st Marine Division at Da Nang was on a 100-percent alert. During the day, the division had positioned 11 reconnaissance "Stingray" patrols along likely enemy avenues of

approach. At 1600, one of the Stingray units, using the codename "Saddle Bag," situated in the mountains just south of a bend in the Thu Bon River below An Hoa, about 20 miles southwest of the Da Nang base, reported observing about 75 enemy soldiers wearing helmets and some carrying mortars. The 11th Marines fired an artillery mission with unknown results. About 50 minutes later, another recon team, "Air Hose," about 2,000 meters to the northeast of "Saddle Bag," saw more than 50 enemy troops moving eastward. The artillery fired another salvo, which caused a large secondary explosion. At 1920, in the same general area, still another Stingray patrol, "Sailfish," radioed that about 200 Communist troops, some carrying 40mm rocket launchers, passed its positions. Again the artillery responded with "excellent effect on target." Because of an air observer on station, the Marine gunners checked their fire. At that point, three fixed-wing aircraft and four helicopter gunships then bombed and strafed the enemy column. Darkness prevented "Sailfish" from observing the number of casualties that the artillery and air inflicted upon the enemy.<sup>14\*\*</sup>

At Da Nang, the Marines remained tense. One experienced Marine noncommissioned officer, serving in his third war, First Sergeant Jack W. Jaunal of the Headquarters and Service (nicknamed "Heat and Steam") Company, 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion, located below Marble Mountain, recorded his impressions. He remembered that before midnight "the alert sounded, and it was all hands to the wire [manning defensive positions]." Although Jaunal's sector remained relatively quiet, he recalled that "we could see flashes of other areas being hit" and heard mortars and rockets: "The Marine helicopter strip [Marble Mountain] two miles to our north got hit . . . Also Da Nang Airfield got it."<sup>15</sup>

Major General Raymond L. Murray, the III MAF deputy commander, remembered that he heard a "hell of a lot of racket" and "woke up . . . [to] the airfield at Da Nang . . . being rocketed." At first, the general and

\* There is some confusion, probably deliberate on the part of the North Vietnamese, on the designation of the regiments, especially the *3d* of the *2d NVA Division*. According to Marine records the *3d NVA* was also known as the *31st NVA Regiment*. There was also an independent *31st NVA Regiment* that also infiltrated into the western Da Nang TAOR. Although an attempt has been made to use *3d NVA* when referring to the regiment that was part of the *2d NVA Division*, the records do not always differentiate between the two. FMFPac, MarOpsV, Feb-May68.

\*\* Colonel Broman C. Scinemetz, who as a lieutenant colonel, commanded the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, related that "in preparation for the Tet stand-down the 1st Recon Battalion deployed the largest number patrols ever at one time. These covered the mountainous remote zone west of the Americal Division extending along a line northward up to and including that high ground west of Task Force X-Ray. The collective impact of these patrols, operating in either the Sting Ray—or intelligence gathering—mode, significantly lessened the enemy effectiveness in the 1st Marine Division TAOR during the Tet offensive." Col Broman C. Scinemetz, Comments on draft, dtd 2Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

his steward confused the rockets with the traditional fireworks shot off in honor of Tet. Soon reports came in that the base was under attack and a Marine helicopter flew the general from his quarters to III MAF headquarters." According to Murray, ". . . from then on until Tet was over, there were just constant attacks."<sup>16</sup>

The 1st Marine Division commander, Major General Robertson later compared the enemy activity that night to a "10-ring circus." In the Da Nang sector, during the early morning hours of 30 January, Communist gunners took under mortar and rocket fire 15 different allied units and installations. On the ground, several enemy infantry and sapper units of varying size probed and attacked various Marine and allied defenses throughout the TAOR. Shortly after midnight, Marine sentries from the 1st MP Battalion, posted near the main I Corps Bridge connecting Da Nang to the Tien-sha Peninsula, spotted two swimmers near the span. They fired, killing one of the enemy underwater demolition team, while the other member surrendered to the Marines. About 0100, a Marine platoon from Company G, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, positioned near the Route 1 Bridge crossing the Cu De River north of Da Nang, saw another two enemy on a raft with a wooden box. Again, the Marines killed the VC and once more foiled an apparent enemy demolition effort. Two and a half hours later, on the other side of the main Da Nang Bridge, Armed Forces police noticed two VC in the water and several sampans approaching. The MPs shot one of the swimmers, took the other man prisoner, and drove off the boats with a fusillade of bullets. Once more the enemy failed to cut the main lines of communication into Da Nang.<sup>17</sup>

About 0230, the enemy struck the perimeters of the Da Nang base itself. In the Southern Sector Defense Command, just north of the Cau Do River and west of Route 1, an enemy 12- or 15-man sapper squad blew a hole in the defensive wire of the joint perimeter of the 7th Engineer and 7th Communications Battalion. The enemy troops attacked a Marine bunker and ran through the Communications Support Company area throwing grenades and satchel charges in the living quarters. The only Marine casualties were two men who failed to vacate their "hootches" in time.



Abel Collection

*The Da Nang Airbase comes under VC/NVA rocket attack on the night of 29–30 January 1968. Flares light up the sky, top, as raging fires caused by the rockets burn out of control on the ground, illuminating parked aircraft on the airfield, bottom.*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190366



\*General Earl E. Anderson, who as a brigadier general was the III MAF Chief of Staff, recalled that General Murray at this time was living at the beach house. Because of security concerns after the Tet attack, General Murray moved into the bachelor officer quarters with him. They each had a bedroom and bath and shared a sitting room. Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

Manning defensive positions, the Marine communicators and engineers repelled the attacking force, killing four of the VC. Enemy gunners then replied with a mortar barrage, which resulted in two Marine dead and two wounded.<sup>18</sup>

A half-hour after the assault on the 7th Communication Battalion, the enemy hit even closer to the Marine command nerve center at Da Nang. Another enemy sapper squad, about the same size as the one that carried out the earlier attack, penetrated the 1st Marine Division Subsector Bravo combat operations center and communications facility on Hill 200, less than 1,000 meters from the main command post on "Division Ridge" (Hill 327). Employing small arms fire, satchel charges, rocket propelled grenades, and bangalore torpedoes, the enemy troops thrust through blown gaps in the Marine wire. The communications bunker bore the brunt of the enemy attack where the sappers destroyed both the bunker and the equipment inside and "put the division tactical net off the air until 0400." Headquarters Marines quickly manned their defenses and called in artillery illumination and a fire mission. The Northern Sector Defense Command rapidly assembled its reaction company and deployed one platoon to the division command post. Two other platoons took up positions around nearby hills 244 and 200. In the assault, the Communists killed four Marines and wounded another seven before withdrawing. At first light, a Marine reaction force found enemy blood trails. Major General Robertson later praised the Security and Communications platoons of the 1st Marine Division Headquarters Battalion for their efforts in the defense. He pointed to the rapid reaction of the Security Platoon in reinforcing the perimeter and providing a mobile reserve and "the off-duty personnel from the bunker and staff sections for their provision of security of the immediate bunker area."<sup>19</sup>

At 0330, about one hour after the sapper attack on the Marine command post, enemy forces launched an assault against General Lam's I Corps headquarters. Under cover of darkness, elements of the *VC R-20th* and *V-25th Battalions* had crossed the Cau Do River and penetrated the Hoa Vang village complex. With covering fire provided by 81mm and 82mm mortars, about a reinforced company reached the I Corps headquarters compound actually located within the city of Da Nang just outside the northern perimeter of the main airbase. The enemy attacked the compound from two directions, from the south and the east. From the south, about a dozen of the enemy used boards to cross the outer wire and ladders and boards to clamber over

the compound wall into the courtyard below. An alert ARVN sentry took the VC under fire near the flagpole. Four ARVN armored personnel carriers reinforced by a reconnaissance squad maneuvered to contain the attackers. A conglomeration of internal security forces threw back the enemy force from the east that tried to use similar tactics to get inside the compound from that direction.<sup>20</sup>

Colonel Nguyen Duy Hinh, who was acting Chief of Staff, I Corps, at the time, remembered that he had earlier that night received a call from the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff alerting the command to expect "an increased surge of activities" by enemy forces. After informing General Lam and issuing instructions to subordinate units to be on special alert, Colonel Hinh returned to his quarters about 500 meters from the main headquarters building. About 0330, the colonel woke up to the sound of battle. From his bedroom window, he could see tracers lighting up the nighttime sky. He quickly picked up the phone and called General Lam and told him that the headquarters was under enemy attack. An incredulous I Corps commander gave the equivalent reply in Vietnamese to "baloney! baloney!," but, nevertheless, hurriedly dressed and prepared to depart for his headquarters, which was some distance from his house.<sup>21</sup>

The fighting within the compound continued until daylight. After their breaching of the outer defenses, the enemy squad fired B-40 rockets at the headquarters building, but then fought a delaying action, waiting for reinforcements. These reinforcements never came. The bulk of the enemy attack force remained in Hoa Vang Village bogged down in a firefight with local PF and Regional Force troops reinforced by a Combined Action platoon, E-3. Viet Cong gunners from Hoa Vang, nevertheless, maintained an intermittent mortar bombardment upon the I Corps tactical operations center. Shortly after 0445, General Lam ordered the 4th ARVN Cavalry Regiment, a Ranger battalion, and a detachment of National Police to augment the South Vietnamese militia units in Hoa Vang and the headquarters personnel forces in the compound.<sup>22</sup>

III MAF also sent reinforcements. Lieutenant Colonel Twyman R. Hill's 1st MP Battalion operated directly under III MAF and was responsible for the "close-in defense" of the Da Nang Airbase, the two bridges between Tiensha Peninsula and the main airbase, and the Naval Hospital on the Tiensha Peninsula. The MP commander remembered that he received a telephone call at 0345 on the 30th from Colonel Thomas L. Randall, the III MAF G-3, who asked him

“to send three platoons to blocking positions south of I Corps headquarters.” With one of his companies on the Tiensha Peninsula and the other three protecting the main airbase perimeter, Hill argued that he could not spare three platoons. He and Randall agreed that they would deploy one of the battalion’s two reserve provisional Quick Reaction platoons composed of headquarters personnel. This platoon under First Lieutenant John E. Manning departed the airbase about 0415 and arrived in the blocking positions about 0515.<sup>23\*</sup>

About a half-hour later, the 1st Division learned that the enemy squad in the headquarters compound had disengaged and took its casualties with it. In this fighting, which had lasted about three hours, the South Vietnamese defenders sustained casualties of three dead, seven wounded, and two damaged armored vehicles. The skirmishing south of the headquarters near Hoa Vang, however, continued. Mortars and recoilless rifle rounds continued to land inside the headquarters compound from enemy firing positions in Hoa Vang. General Lam arrived at the headquarters compound shortly after dawn. After a quick appraisal of the situation, the I Corps commander turned to the senior U.S. advisor at the I Corps Tactical Operations Center, Army Major P. S. Milantoni. According to *Washington Post* correspondent Don Oberdorfer, Lam pointed with his swagger stick to the enemy’s firing positions on the large map in the room and said: “Milantoni, bomb here. Use big bombs.” The U.S. major remonstrated that the site was relatively close to the compound, but Lam insisted that the air strikes be flown. Milantoni relayed the request to the air support center. The Air Force watch officer on duty protested, “that’s too close, you’ll never get a clearance for it.” Major Milantoni replied, “General Lam just gave it.”<sup>24</sup>

Shortly afterwards, Marine fixed-wing aircraft and helicopter gunships blasted the enemy in Hoa Vang. This apparently broke the back of the VC resistance. Under pressure from the Vietnamese relief forces and the Marine MP platoon, the enemy retreated with the allies in full chase. In the initial fighting for Hoa Vang, the South Vietnamese and Americans accounted for 25 enemy dead. In the pursuit, which amounted to a rout, the VC lost nearly 100 dead. In the attack on the I Corps headquarters and in the defense of Hoa Vang vil-

lage the allies sustained losses of nine dead and several wounded. Among the casualties were two Marines killed, including Lieutenant Manning, and six wounded from the 1st MP Battalion.<sup>25</sup>

The rockets and mortar bombardment of Da Nang also took a toll of Marine lives and inflicted greater material damage upon the Da Nang base and especially upon the airfield and aircraft. In scattered and intermittent attacks beginning before 0200 and lasting about one-half hour, enemy gunners fired both mortars and rockets that landed near positions of Marine artillery, antiair missiles, and the Force Logistic Command. Battery A, 1st Light Antiaircraft (LAAM) Missile Battalion armed with HAWK (Homing All the Way Killer) surface-to-air missiles, in the mountainous Hai Van Pass sector north of Da Nang, reported about 0140 coming under 82mm mortar fire. About 20 minutes later the missile battery sighted enemy rocket firing sites and two minutes later radioed that 12 rockets of undetermined size landed in and around its area. One of the rockets damaged one of the missile launchers and wounded three of the Marines. At about the same time, approximately 15 enemy 122mm rockets struck an artillery complex in the 11th Marines Northern Sector Defense Command which included a detachment from the 1st Armored Amphibian Company, the 155mm Gun and 8-inch Gun Batteries, as well as Batteries H, 3d Battalion and M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines. The artillerymen sustained two wounded and some equipment damage, but escaped relatively unscathed. Other enemy rocketeers took the Marine Force Logistic Command compound near Red Beach under fire. Approximately at 0200, about four of the 122mm rockets fell in or near the compound, one landing near the 1st Air Cavalry air pad temporarily located there, damaging four of the helicopters, but resulting in no Marine or Army casualties.<sup>26</sup>

After a lull of about an hour to an hour and a half, the enemy gunners renewed their assault on the airbase and also included the helicopter air facility at Marble Mountain. About 0330, perhaps to divert Marine attention from the ground assault on I Corps headquarters and the city of Da Nang, enemy mortars opened up on Marble Mountain. Approximately 16 rounds impacted in the MAG-16 sector and another four in the Army aviation company area. About the same time, from their firing positions on the western fringes of the Da Nang TAOR, NVA rocketeers let go with a fusillade of 122mm rockets aimed at the main airbase. Some 36 of the large missiles landed on the main base, including the airfield. Fifteen minutes later,

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\*In his comments, Colonel Hill stated that he deployed only one of his reserve platoons. The battalion’s monthly report, however, indicates that both platoons may have eventually moved into the blocking positions south of the I Corps headquarters. Col Twyman R. Hill, Comments on draft, dtd 29Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File) and 1st MP ComdC, Jan68.



Photo from Abel Collection

*Firefighters from Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 11 battle flames engulfing two Grumman A-6 Intruder aircraft from Marine all-weather attack squadron VMA-242(AW).*

the enemy gunners followed with another 29 rockets, mostly aimed at the southern end of the airbase. Considering the amount of ordnance that the enemy expended, casualties were relatively small. The rocket attacks resulted in the deaths of 3 Marines and the wounding of another 11. Material and equipment losses, however, were much more extensive. The rockets destroyed five aircraft, nine items of ground equipment, two vehicles, and one warehouse outright. Fourteen aircraft, six pieces of ground support equipment, five buildings, and another two vehicles sustained damage of one sort or another.\* Lieutenant Colonel William K. Rockey, the commander of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, later wrote: "The rocket trails of approximately 10 to 20 missiles as they rose into the

air to arc over our positions to strike the Da Nang Airbase was vividly clear to all." He observed that the "rocket launching position was located directly south" of his command group, "an estimated distance of more than 3,000 meters."<sup>27</sup>

The Marine response to the bombardments was rapid. Immediately the 11th Marines artillery units "initiated counter-rocket fires" at suspected avenues of approach. As various outposts reported their sightings to the Division FSCC, the artillerymen then shifted these fires to actual sites. On the ground, at least one Marine unit prevented a rocket attack. A patrol from Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, operating below the battalion's command post on Hill 10, saw about 10 North Vietnamese soldiers just south of the Tuy Loan River preparing positions. The Marines called in artillery and mortar missions. Although the enemy troops fled, the Marines found five unexpended 122mm rockets on the site. Later that night, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines reported 15 secondary explosions from Marine counter-mortar artillery fire. In the

\* Colonel Robert W. Lewis, who as a lieutenant colonel commanded VMCJ-1 at Da Nang at the time, remembered that the "rocket damage at Da Nang consisted almost entirely of aircraft damage. The rockets were accurate and landed on the MAG-11 flight line." Col Robert W. Lewis, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Lewis Comments.

morning, the infantrymen discovered blood trails and three NVA bodies in the vicinity of the explosions.\*

Colonel Franklin L. Smith, of the III MAF operations staff, remembered that information about the attacks that night came into the headquarters "in dribs and driblets." As he later explained, however, it soon became apparent "that a general offensive was underway." In the Da Nang area of operations, outside of attacks by fire on the Marine base and outlying positions, and the two ground assaults on Marine command and communications positions, the Communist infantry units largely concentrated on the South Vietnamese units. In the Hai Van Pass area in the north, North Vietnamese regulars attempted to cut Route 1. To the south of the airbase, other enemy main force units attacked the District Town of Dien Ban and the provincial capital of Quang Nam, Hoi An, on Route 4. At 0230 on the 30th at Dien Ban, elements of the *R-20th* and *V-25th* struck the sub-sector headquarters defended by the 15th Popular Forces Platoon and the 708 Regional Forces Company. Entering the town from the southwest, the VC fired about 70 rocket propelled grenades at the local forces, but never penetrated the defender's perimeter. About two-and-a-half hours later, the enemy units "ceased fire and withdrew." The Vietnamese militia suffered 1 PF killed and 10 wounded. According to the U.S. Advisory Group at Da Nang, the PFs and RFs accounted for eight dead VC and captured one wounded enemy soldier. In the town itself, 10 innocent people, caught in the crossfire, sustained wounds, but no civilians died as a result of the battle.<sup>28</sup>

About 5,000 meters to the east, in Hoi An, however, Communist forces gained somewhat the upper hand. Beginning their attack about 0300, about one-half hour after Dien Ban had been hit, two companies of the *V-25th Battalion* used the noise of firecrackers set off and general firing by Tet celebrants to cover their approach. One of the companies captured a German missionary hospital in the city and the other hit

the rear base of the 51st ARVN Regiment, the Chi Long Camp, garrisoned by the ARVN 102d Engineer Battalion. Surprised by the initial assault, the engineers fell back, giving up half the camp to the Communist attackers. Bringing up two artillery platoons, the South Vietnamese gunners lowered their pieces and fired pointblank at the VC. By daybreak, the engineers held their own and the situation in Hoi An was at a stalemate.<sup>29</sup>

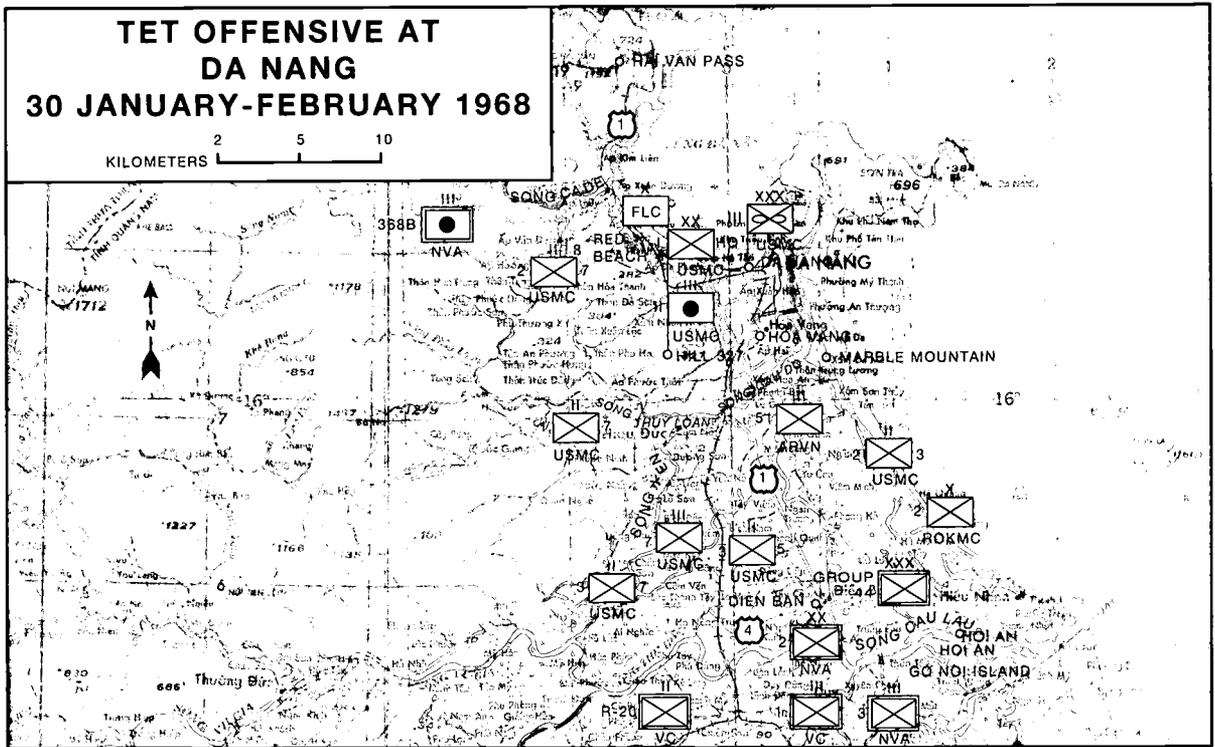
The Korean Marine Brigade deployed six companies around the city and the South Vietnamese 51st Regiment prepared a reaction force. In addition, the 1st Marine Division alerted one company to participate in the relief of Hoi An, if needed. According to Communist documents, captured later, the two VC assault companies were to pull out at first light, but became bogged down in the city. The struggle for Hoi An would continue into the following day.

Still by daybreak on 30 January, the intentions of the Communists were not entirely clear. While the enemy attacks were widespread in the Da Nang area of operations, the intensity of enemy operations in other areas of Vietnam varied. For the most part, the Communist offensive appeared to be limited to its *Military Region 5*. Even here, the assaults were largely confined to the Da Nang area in I Corps and to five provincial capitals in II Corps. In II Corps, the enemy struck the cities of Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, Ban Me Thuot, Kontum, and Pleiku. According to some sources, the Communist high command had scheduled a full nation-wide assault on the night of 29–30 January, but postponed it for one day. Whether *Military Region 5* never received the word, or failed to notify some of its subordinate units is still open to conjecture. Indeed, the Communist leaders may even have had other ulterior motives. At MACV headquarters, at 0700 on 30 January, Brigadier General Philip B. Davidson, the J-2 or MACV intelligence officer, briefed General Westmoreland and predicted "this is going to happen in the rest of the country tonight or tomorrow morning." He was right.<sup>30</sup>

### *The Fighting Continues*

Outside of the Da Nang and Hoi An sectors, most of I Corps remained relatively quiet during the night and early morning hours of 29–30 January. At 0600, however, about nine kilometers north of Tam Ky in Quang Tin Province, about 100 people gathered for an antiwar demonstration. A Popular Forces platoon attempted to disperse the crowd. According to an ini-

\*Igor Bobrowsky, a former Combined Action Marine in CAP Delta 2, located near the Thanh Quit River bridge on Route 1 south of Da Nang, remembered that an enemy team fired from a "spot probably within a click of our positions . . . . We took them under fire . . . and cheered when one time, after just getting off/possibly two rockets, they were lit up by a chopper that had apparently been hovering in the dark waiting for them. A number of other choppers/airplanes/ then immediately blasted and raked over the whole area. We added as much machine gun and automatic fire into the mix as we could pump out." Igor Bobrowsky, Comments on draft, dtd 26Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Bobrowsky Comments.



tial advisory report, "an unknown number of grenades were thrown by unidentified persons, killing 20 demonstrators." The report failed to state whether the unidentified grenade throwers were PF troops or members of the crowd. The South Vietnamese militia detained 30 people from the group, 15 men and 15 women, all of whom under interrogation admitted to being Viet Cong cadre. About three and a half hours later in the same vicinity, about 200–300 VC Main Force troops attacked a village in the sector. Elements from the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry then engaged the enemy force which broke and fled. Joined by Company C, 7th Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment from the Americal Division, the U.S. Army troops eventually killed 36 of the enemy, detained another 18, and recovered 11 weapons.<sup>31</sup>

At Da Nang, on the 30th, the fighting did not subside with the coming of daylight. Elements of the VC R-20th and local force units which participated in the attack on Hoa Vang and I Corps headquarters attempted to escape the dragnet of Marine and ARVN forces. While the 1st MP Battalion supported by the 1st Tank Battalion established blocking positions north of the Cau Do River, the ARVN 3d Battalion, 51st Regiment swept the sector south of the river. Caught east of the Cam La Bridge and Route 1, on a small island formed by the convergence of the Cau Do, a small trib-

utary of the river, and the Vien Dien River, the VC turned to fight. A Combined Action platoon at 0830 saw a number of VC attempting to swim across the Cau Do to the island.<sup>32</sup>

By this time, General Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, had taken measures to bolster the ARVN south of the Cau Dau. He ordered the 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion to form a blocking position on the southeastern bank of the Vien Dien River. First Sergeant Jaunal of the tractor battalion's H&S Company remembered that he received a telephone call that morning "that a few miles from our area the infantry had some VC or NVA trapped on an island and our Amtracs and Marines were to act as a blocking force."<sup>33</sup>

Simultaneously, the division ordered the helilift of a company from the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines to reinforce the ARVN and the Combined Action Marines. By 0925 Lieutenant Colonel Rockey, the battalion commander, had formed a "jump battalion command group" and had his Company I, under Captain Henry Kolakowski, Jr., reinforced by mortars, at the battalion landing zone where four Marine CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters awaited them. Within a few minutes the helicopters were airborne and then landed in a flat paddy just south of the island and near the Combined Action unit which had taken three casualties. Marine

rifleman John L. Gundersen in the 1st Platoon of Company I remembered that as soon as he and his squad alighted they came under heavy automatic and small arms fire from the island.\* The Marines took what cover they could behind a dirt berm and returned the fire. Within a few minutes the enemy weapons were silent. The company then searched the immediate area at first without encountering any resistance, sweeping first to the west and then retracing their route. As they once more entered the paddy where they started, the Marines again came under heavy fire, including mortars, from the enemy-held island.<sup>34</sup>

With the increasing intensity of fire from the island and reports that South Vietnamese forces had observed some 250 people dressed in black pajamas moving toward the west, the Marine command decided upon a combined operation with the ARVN to mount an assault on the enemy forces there.\*\* Company I was to cross over the tributary to the island using a nearby footbridge while the ARVN assaulted from the west and protected the Marine left flank. Marine air and supporting arms were to soften up the enemy positions before the attack. As the infantry waited and the artillery fires lifted, the first Marine McDonnell Douglas F4B Phantoms came in and made "a spotting run," then strafed the enemy positions, and dropped high explosives and napalm. Marine John Gundersen recalled that the

... concussion from each bomb shaking my face and eyeballs. The explosions blurred my vision momentarily. Small pieces of shrapnel were falling on us with some larger pieces buzzing over our head. . . . I couldn't imagine anyone escaping such a pounding.<sup>35</sup>

After the air bombardment, sometime between noon and 1300, Company I rushed over the footbridge, some 50 meters away. Captain Kolakowski dropped off his 3d Platoon to guard the northern entrance of the bridge while the other two platoons continued the attack on the objective, the hamlet of Lo Giang 2 on the island. The Marine assault on the

hamlet soon bogged down as the troops followed a path that led to the village gate. An enemy sniper killed the point man on the lead platoon and then the Marines came under heavy fire. According to John Gundersen, his squad then took the point and went through the gate. They had orders to turn west until they reached a tree line and then hold fast. Gundersen remembered as they ran "seeing numerous one and two-man fighting holes on the edge of the tree-line." When they reached the tree line, only his fireteam was there: "We did a quick ammo check discovering we were very low on rounds having only two grenades and two magazines of ammo between us. Luckily, we met no resistance before being ordered back to the rest of the platoon to dig in."<sup>36</sup>

By this time it was late afternoon and daylight had begun to fade. The first two platoons of Company I had established a perimeter in the southeast sector of the hamlet while the 3d Platoon remained at the northern end of the footbridge. Gundersen recalled that they had been resupplied and that they had dug their defensive holes along a small path that curved around and led to the river. The Marine rifleman wondered why they established their position there on the low ground and isolated from the rest of the hamlet. At dusk, however, Captain Kolakowski ordered them to leave their vulnerable defenses and silently move up to the top of the slope and again dig in.<sup>37</sup>

Under cover of darkness the enemy struck. The Marines had called for C-130 "Spooky" flareships to light up the area, but one of the lumbering aircraft had run out of flares and departed before its relief appeared overhead. The enemy took advantage of this approximately 30-minute period of pitch blackness to mass a force before the 3d Platoon guarding the bridge escape route. About the same time, the enemy infiltrated into the lines of the other two platoons in the hamlet. Marine John Gundersen recalled hearing someone inside the perimeter whistling. He was about to tell them to be quiet "when a wall of tracers ripped through my position from the north." This continued for a few minutes when he heard another set of whistles very much resembling "various bird calls." This time enemy fire came from the west and then from another direction with still another whistle. By this time, the relief flareship was overhead and dropped illumination canisters. In the eerie light given off by the flares, the Marines "could see the enemy massing in front of us" and called in artillery and mortar support. Gundersen later wrote: "To escape the artillery which was right on target,

\*Lieutenant Colonel Gene W. Bowers, the battalion operations officer, recalled the situation somewhat less dramatically, writing that the landing "was uneventful except for some long range sniping from the island." LtCol Gene W. Bowers, Comments on draft, dtd 30May95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Bowers Comments.

\*\*Lieutenant Colonel Bowers commented that the 250 people in black pajamas were "identified by close passes by UH-1E gunships to be villagers, mostly women and children, who were fleeing the fighting in their village. They collected in a huddled group on the northernmost peninsula of the island at the rivers' convergence. They remained there unmolested throughout the action." Bowers Comments.

they rushed towards us." He recalled that some broke through, but "became trapped between us and the 2d Platoon."<sup>38</sup>

In the meantime, Lieutenant Colonel Rockey and his small command group had established the battalion command post just below the island on the southern bank of the tributary to coordinate the operation and its supporting fires. Initially the command group consisted of the battalion commander; his operations officer, Captain Gene W. Bowers; the assistant operations officer, Captain Lee C. Gound; and "artillery and mortar F.O.'s, helicopter support team, radio operators, and a few strap hangers who came along for the ride." The first disappointment was the failure of the ARVN forces to support the Marine attack. Although, as Captain Bowers recalled, he heard some outgoing firing from our left flank, but "never saw any ARVNs move forward in the paddy." Bowers sent a senior liaison staff NCO "to find their headquarters to make contact . . . but he came back, saying the ARVNs were in the defensive mode, no one spoke English, and they ignored him." Lieutenant Colonel Rockey during the interim ordered a section of 106mm Recoilless Rifles, mounted on small flatbed four-wheeled drive vehicles, called Mechanical Mules, to reinforce the temporary command group from the 3d Battalion's combat base, some 9,000 meters to the south. The Mule-mounted 106s, however, did not arrive until after dark.<sup>39</sup>

For the command group, the first crisis occurred when the enemy struck the 3d Platoon at the foot-bridge, causing several casualties. Among the dead was the platoon leader. Captain Bowers remembered talking to a wounded lance corporal who called the situation desperate and "pled for immediate reinforcements . . ." With the permission of Lieutenant Colonel Rockey, Bowers hastily formed a provisional platoon of about 30 men and placed it under the command of his assistant, Captain Gound. According to Bowers, he pressed all the available men in the CP into the platoon including mortarmen, radiomen, recoilless rifle men, and even a chaplain's assistant. He told Gound to take his makeshift force and attack across the bridge and relieve the embattled 3d Platoon.<sup>40</sup>

According to Bowers, when Gound's troops departed, the only people left in the CP were Lieutenant Colonel Rockey and himself. The battalion commander "carried the Division Tactical net radio and monitored the artillery nets." Bowers carried the battalion tactical net radio, monitoring the forward air controller net as well as the company's tactical net. When the provisional platoon arrived at the 3d Platoon's position,

Captain Gound radioed Bowers and asked for 81mm support against enemy troops he could see to his front. Bowers ran to where the mortars were guarded by one mortarmen who told the Marine captain that "he was a new replacement ammo humper, who had no idea how to aim and fire the mortar." Captain Bowers told the man to help him break out the ammunition and then for about half an hour, the two "provided overhead free gun, dead reckoning, zero charge fire support to Captain Gound's platoon," while the latter "adjusted the fire by saying . . . 'a little right,' a little closer,' and so forth." This broke the enemy attempt to overrun the Marines at the bridge.<sup>41</sup>

With the support of artillery, air, and mortars, together with their individual weapons and claymore mines, the Marines of Company I broke the back of the enemy attack. According to Gundersen with the 1st Platoon, "the sounds of the arty, the rockets, the mortars, the grenades combined with the eerie swaying of the illumination on their parachutes created a hellish vision. Never before, or since have I been in such an acute state of fear." The fight, however, had gone out of the VC who began to disperse into small groups and tried to make their escape off the island. Captain Bowers recalled that under the light of the flares, the Marines reported "what they described as 'hundreds' . . . of heads of swimmers attempting to escape across the river to the east." On the other bank of the river, however, the small task force from the 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion blocked their way. The amtrac troops rounded up in the water about 105 detainees fleeing the island.<sup>42</sup>

On the morning of the 31st, the Marines of Company I, now reinforced by the ARVN and the AmTrac Marines, surveyed the results of the fighting and continued to mop up the remnants of the enemy force. At dawn, near the positions of the 1st Platoon, John Gundersen remembered "bodies of the enemy soldiers were strewn about not more than 15 meters in front of our perimeter, swelling in depth in front of the machine gun to as much as six deep. I was awed by the sight of all those bodies." He observed that the VC never realized that the Marines had moved from the fighting holes in the lower path and they "spent the whole night and their lives attacking those holes." Captain Bowers related that another "60 or so dead enemy were counted in front of Gound's position." Company I and the small command group remained in the sector until about 1500 on the 31st and then returned to their original combat camp to the south. According to Marine sources, the heavy action on this small island

resulted in 102 VC killed, 88 prisoners of war, 13 VC suspects, and 70 laborers. Apparently the enemy forces were a mixed group from several different units interspersed together. Allied intelligence officers identified members from the *V-25th*, *R-20th*, *C-130th Battalions*, and the *Q-15th* and *Q-16th Local Force Companies*. The Marines failed to determine whether this mixed force had a specific mission or consisted of remnants from units that had participated in the earlier attack on the I Corps headquarters.<sup>43</sup>

The rest of the enemy efforts in the Da Nang area and TAOR were about as haphazard and relatively ineffective as the fight on the unnamed island. In the northeast, near the Force Logistic Command sector, villagers from Nam O just south of the strategic Nam O Bridge, told Popular Force troops, members of the *Q-4 Combined Action platoon*, that the VC planned to attack the CAP compound. At 0735, enemy gunners fired two rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) at the compound tower and a VC infantry platoon opened up upon the Combined Action unit. The RPGs missed the apertures in the tower and fell to the ground. After a brief firefight, the VC troops withdrew taking any casualties with them. In a sweep of the area, the defenders found ammunition clips and bloodstains. Local villagers told the Marines that at least one VC had been killed in the brief skirmish. Two Marines sustained wounds.<sup>44</sup>

The most serious ground attack against a Marine unit occurred in the western portion of the Da Nang TAOR just below the Tuy Loan and Cau Do Rivers near the eastern bank of the Yen River. About 0745, approximately two companies or a reinforced company from the *31st NVA Regiment* ambushed a Marine platoon from Company G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. At this point, Company G was under the operational control of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, which had the responsibility of protecting the western approaches to the Marine base. As the Marine platoon patrolled along the banks of the Yen, a heavy machine gun suddenly opened up. Firing from well-concealed and dug-in firing positions, the enemy machine gunners and infantry took a heavy toll of the Marines. With the enemy too close to call in artillery or fixed-wing air, the Marines radioed for reinforcements. A second platoon from Company G arrived at the site and attempted to maneuver to the NVA flank. The enemy then attacked forcing the Marine platoons to fall back to more defensive positions. By 1100, Marine helicopters evacuated the most seriously wounded and brought in the rest of

Company G into blocking positions on the western bank of the Yen.<sup>45</sup>

The Marines now counterattacked supported by artillery and Marine gunships and fixed-wing air. The North Vietnamese fought a delaying action as they began to withdraw. Later that afternoon, the 1st Marine Division helilifted a "Bald Eagle" reaction force from Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines east of the river in an attempt to close the circle around the NVA. Linking up, under artillery and air cover, the two Marine companies continued their advance until forced to halt because of darkness and then took up night defensive positions. Shortly after 1800, an air observer reported seeing 25–30 enemy troops in trenchlines, bunkers, and fighting holes. In the morning when searching the battle area, the Marines would find "ample evidence of enemy casualties, but only two enemy bodies . . . ." Total Marine casualties of this incident on the 30th were 10 Marines killed and 15 wounded. Most of the dead and wounded were from the platoon of Company G that fell victim to the enemy ambush.

The attack on the western perimeter was probably the most serious thrust against Marine positions on the day and evening of 30 January. Throughout the day, however, Marine units throughout the TAOR reported incidents. A Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines squad patrol in its regular area of operations just east of the confluence of the Thanh Quit and Vinh Dien River came under attack from an estimated squad of enemy. A detachment of four LVTs from the 3d AmTrac Battalion quickly arrived, but the enemy had already departed. The Marine squad sustained casualties of one man killed and one nonbattle casualty. Apparently one Marine at the death of his comrade became so distraught that he was unable to function.<sup>46</sup>

In Da Nang City itself, about 1050 in the morning, approximately 500 people gathered at a Buddhist pagoda and attempted to hold a march. The National Police arrested 25 of the crowd and quickly dispersed the would-be demonstrators. This demonstration may have been planned to coincide with an attack on the city which never developed.<sup>47</sup>

South of the Hai Van Pass, in the northern portion of the Da Nang TAOR, in the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines sector, the North Vietnamese were able to close Route 1 temporarily, but failed to penetrate allied defenses. At 0915, a squad from Company G, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines providing road security for a Marine engineer mine-sweeping team on Route 1 just below the pass, encountered a small enemy sapper detachment. Reinforced by another squad, the

Company G Marines killed three of the enemy troops and captured two. The two North Vietnamese prisoners identified themselves as members of the *H-2 Engineering Company*, part of the *2d Sapper Battalion*. According to the enemy soldiers, their mission was to mine and interdict allied traffic in the Hai Van Pass area. Their weapons included AK-47s and B-40 Rockets. Despite the Marine patrolling, NVA sappers, probably from the *2d Sapper Battalion*, blew three bridges and one culvert over Route 1 in the pass area. An entry in the 1st Marine Division Journal for 30 January read "Rt # 1 from Hai Van Pass to Phu Loc closed as a result of enemy action."<sup>48</sup>

On the night of the 30th, elements of a battalion of the *NVA 4th Regiment* attacked an ARVN outpost at the foot of the Hai Van Pass. The South Vietnamese quickly rushed the newly arrived 5th ARVN Ranger Battalion into the area north of Da Nang City. Supported by U.S. artillery and air, the South Vietnamese successfully contained the Communist units in the Nam O and Lien Chien regions. This fighting would continue in a desultory fashion throughout the night.<sup>49</sup>

South of Da Nang, in Hoi An, on the 30th, the South Koreans, reinforced by elements of the ARVN 51st Regiment, tried to tighten the loop and began preparations to retake the city. At 0730, the South Koreans reported about 200 to 300 enemy troops still in Hoi An. An American advisor within the MACV compound reported at 1145 that the VC were digging in the engineer compound and that "numerous boats in river loaded with Charlie." After calling in helicopter gunships, the Korean Marines, at 1320, reached the old MACV compound and linked up with U.S. advisors there. The VC continued to hold the hospital, however, and part of the engineer compound. Although the Koreans and the ARVN surrounded most of the city, the Communist troops still were able to keep their southern flank open.<sup>50</sup>

The Korean Marines sent three companies to close the southern link and then moved forward into the attack. By dark the Koreans had captured the hospital and were in position to relieve the engineer compound. The Koreans kept one company at the MACV compound for security and prepared for a sweep to clear out the city in the morning. During the night, enemy resistance dwindled to sniper fire on the Marine positions. Colonel Franklin Smith, from the III MAF perspective, suggested later that a reluctance upon the part of the South Korean Marine Brigade commander to cause undue damage and to avoid civilian casualties lay behind the slowness and deliberateness of the Kore-

an advance. According to U.S. advisors and to South Vietnamese sources, the fight for Hoi An resulted in allied casualties of 58 killed, 103 wounded in action, 21 missing in action, and 14 weapons lost. The allies claimed they killed 343 of the enemy and detained 195 prisoners. Of the prisoners, the South Vietnamese identified 6 as military, 109 as workers, and the remaining 80 as VC cadre.

Throughout the Da Nang TAOR, the intensity of activity increased during the night. From 1800 to 2400 on the 30th, the 1st Marine Division reported to III MAF over 30 incidents ranging from sightings of large enemy forces, to mortar attacks, and a few infantry assaults. At the same time, the 1st Division had sent out several reconnaissance elements which began to pay dividends. At 1835, Recon team "Ice Bound," positioned in the mountains about eight miles northwest of Da Nang observed an enemy rocket unit prepare a firing position for their missiles. After calling in artillery which resulted in three secondary explosions, the reconnaissance Marines reported seven enemy killed. The enemy launched no rockets from this site.<sup>51</sup>

Another reconnaissance patrol, Recon Team "Rummage," about 30 kilometers south of Da Nang in the Que Son Mountains below An Hoa, had even more spectacular results. About 1900, it spotted a column of about 40 NVA at the head of even a larger column moving east along a trail. The North Vietnamese soldiers wore flak jackets and helmets and carried a machine gun, and a small rocket detachment with six 122mm rockets. "Rummage" soon determined that the total number of North Vietnamese troops approximated 500 or more men, moving in two columns. The lead column consisted of about 100 to 150 men, followed by the main body. The main body advanced in column maintaining about three to four feet space between each man. Instead of calling artillery fire immediately, the reconnaissance Marines arranged with Battery K, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines and a detachment of the 3d 155mm Gun Battery at An Hoa for an "artillery ambush."<sup>52</sup>

After counting 500 men pass their position, Rummage sprung the trap. Landing in large bursts, about 50 to 75 artillery rounds fell on the lead column. Rummage reported about 50 NVA dead with another 100 "probable." Immediately after the artillery shelling, a C-47 Spooky arrived on station and worked over the same area with its Gatling guns. Rummage radioed back that Spooky caught about 50 NVA crossing a stream and the recon Marines could

observe "rounds hitting all around them [the NVA]." Spooky then called in Marine fixed-wing attack aircraft which dropped napalm with "outstanding coverage of target." Darkness prevented any accurate bomb assessment, but the "Rummage" Marines could observe enemy movement when illumination was available. According to the team leader, "We never saw the end of the main body . . . [but] when we stopped the count, there were NVA still in column of 4's as far as we could see with our M49 [rifle spotting scope]."

Later intelligence and interrogation reports of prisoners of war would indicate that the unit that "Rummage" had intercepted was probably a battalion of the *2d NVA Division*. Apparently the division was slow in moving into the Da Nang area and was not in position to support the local forces in the earlier phase of the enemy offensive. According to Marine intelligence sources, Rummage may well "have rendered a reinforced battalion combat ineffective, forcing the enemy to modify his plans at a critical time." In a message to III MAF, General Robertson observed: "Never have so few done so much to so many."

By this time, the Communist Tet offensive was in full bloom, not only at Da Nang, but throughout Vietnam. In the early morning hours of 31 January, Communist forces assaulted provincial and district capitals extending from the Mekong Delta in the south to Quang Tri City in the north. In Thua Thien Province in I Corps, two North Vietnamese regiments held most of Hue City and the Marine base at Phu Bai came under mortar and rocket barrages. Along Route 1 between Phu Bai and Da Nang, VC and NVA main force units on the 31st made some 18 attacks on bridges, Marine company positions in the Phu Loc area, and several of the Combined Action platoons. Elsewhere in I Corps, below Da Nang, around 0400 on 31 January, elements of the *70th VC Battalion* and the *21st NVA Regiment* struck Tam Ky, defended by the ARVN 6th Regiment and an artillery battalion. At daybreak, the South Vietnamese troops counterattacked. According to the South Vietnamese official history, the enemy retreated in disorder leaving on the battlefield, "hundreds of bodies and 31 wounded who were captured." Another 38 of the enemy surrendered.<sup>53</sup>

Much the same occurred at Quang Ngai City in the most southern of the I Corps provinces. At 0400 on the 31st, supported by local guerrilla forces, the *VC 401st Main Force Regiment* struck the city and airfield and initially achieved surprise, but failed to

exploit its advantage. By that night, with the enemy command and control structure shattered, the fight was over.\* The VC lost about 500 killed and some 300 weapons. For its part, the 2d ARVN Division sustained casualties of 56 killed, 138 wounded, and one man missing. The ARVN also lost 43 weapons.<sup>54</sup>

At the American base at Chu Lai, the Communists limited their attacks to mortar and rockets although rumors circulated that the NVA were about to launch a ground assault on the base. While the Americal Division maintained a 100 percent alert, enemy gunners, nevertheless, in the early morning hours successfully launched their rockets and mortars. One 122mm rocket exploded a bomb dump and caused extensive damage. Colonel Dean Wilker, the MAG-12 commander, later recalled that the resulting blast of the bomb dump "caved in one of my hangars and damaged the others."<sup>55</sup> The two Marine aircraft groups at Chu Lai, MAG-12 and MAG-13, sustained 3 fixed-wing aircraft destroyed and 23 damaged, 4 of them substantially. There was no further ground assault.<sup>56</sup>

In the extensive Da Nang TAOR, the early morning hours of 31 January were almost a repeat of the events of the 30th. Enemy gunners fired rockets at both the Da Nang Airbase and this time also included the Marble Mountain helicopter facility on Tiensha Peninsula. No rockets fell on the main airbase but Marble Mountain sustained some damage. The enemy rocket troops fired in two bursts, one at 0342, followed by a second barrage three hours later. About the same time as the rocket attacks on the Da Nang base and Marble Mountain, enemy mortars bombarded the command post of the 7th Marines on Hill 55 south of Da Nang and forward infantry positions. These included Hills 65 and 52 manned by companies of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines in the southwestern part of the TAOR and Hill 41 defended by Company D, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines in the central western sector. The mortar attacks resulted in only five wounded and none killed among the Marine defenders. Counter-mortar fire quickly silenced the enemy tubes. The Marine staff speculated that the enemy launched the mortar attacks largely as a cover for the rocket attacks against Marble Mountain. Even at Marble Mountain the damage was relatively contained. The Marines lost 1 helicopter and sustained damage to 29 others. Two

\* A U.S. Army historian, George L. MacGarrigle, observed that the attack on Quang Ngai City failed because the commander of the *401st* "was unable to coordinate the action." George L. MacGarrigle, Historian, CMH, Comments on draft, dtd 5Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

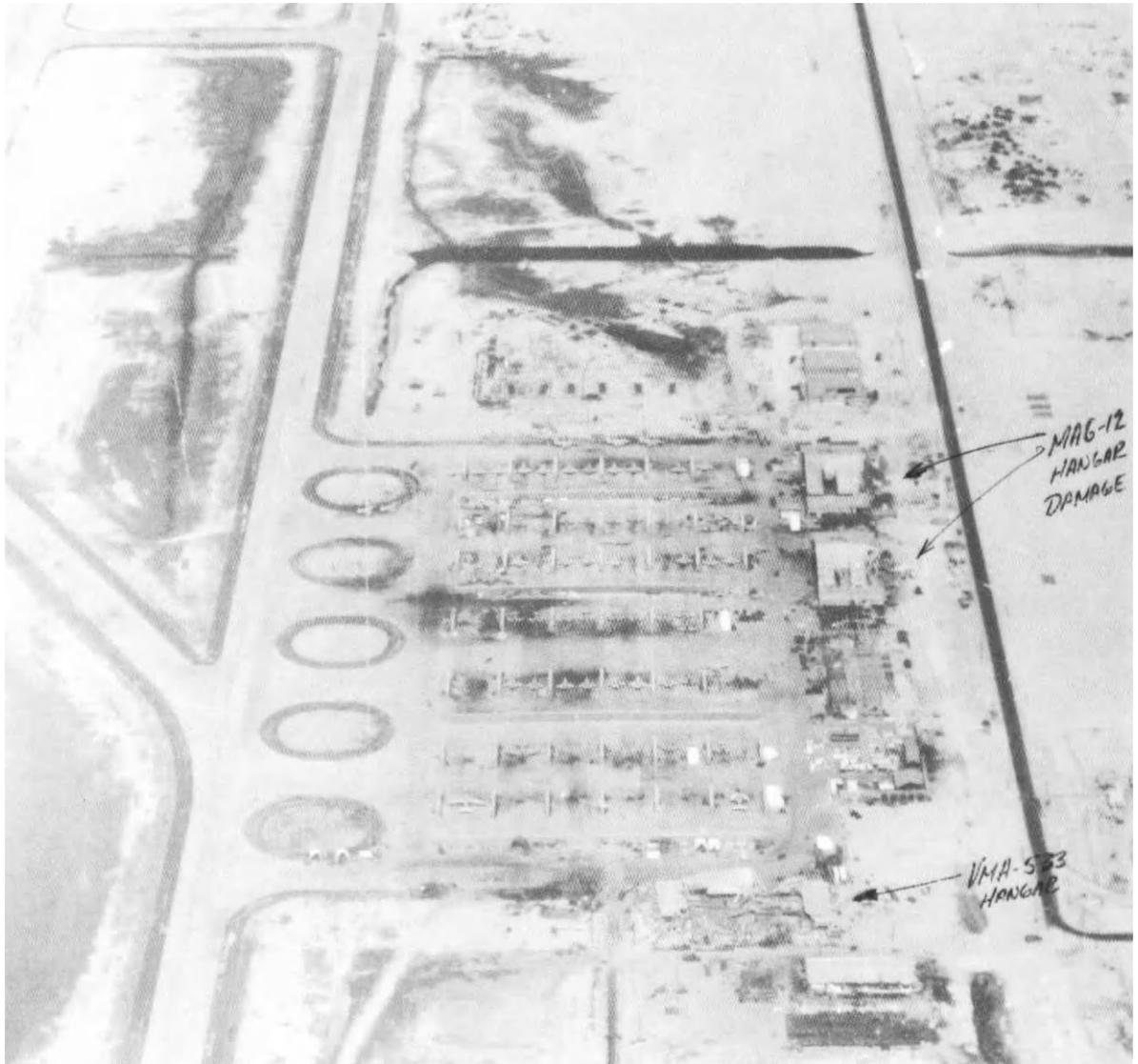


Photo courtesy of Col Robert W. Lewis, USMC (Ret)

*Chu Lai airfield is seen in an aerial view after the rocket attack. Note arrows pointing out damage to aircraft hangars at the base.*

attached U.S. Army personnel were wounded.<sup>57</sup>

During the day and evening of the 31st, the VC and NVA infantry units pressed the offensive on the ground. In the northern sector of Da Nang, NVA or VC main force troops entered Nam O once again and killed the hamlet chief.\* Combined Action platoon

\*Mike McDonnell, who was the Northern Sector Defense Command "watch officer", recalled that he tried to warn the "CAPs . . . that there was a battalion of NVA in their ville; we could not raise them, the NVA went into assault and we had to call artillery on their position . . ." He remembered that time as "when the world turned upside down." Mike McDonnell, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

Q-4 there continued to hold out. At about 0740, a crowd of 400 Vietnamese civilians made up mostly of women and children and carrying NVA and VC flags approached the Combined Action compound. The Marines and Popular Force troops fired at armed members of the crowd who appeared to be directing the march. The crowd scattered only to gather on the fringes of the Da Nang base near the Force Logistic Compound near Red Beach. Again the crowd dispersed and this time did not recongregate. In the meantime, the VC harassed with sniper fire both CAP Q-4 and the nearby Nam O bridge security detachment from the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines.<sup>58</sup>



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190390  
*A bandaged VC, wounded in the fighting for Nam O, waits for evacuation. The prisoner talked freely to his captors while he received medical attention.*

The Da Nang Northern Sector Defense Command dispatched a provisional company to assist the Combined Action Marines as well as the security detachment. The provisional company linked up with two South Vietnamese Ranger companies that were operating in the area to contain the battalion from the *4th NVA Regiment* which had slipped through the Hai Van Pass the night before. With part of the force establishing blocking positions north of the hamlet, the rest of the provisional company and South Vietnamese Rangers moved through Nam O. By the afternoon of the 31st, the Marines and Rangers had completed their sweep. They collected some 200 people that they detained for further questioning. Some of the VC in the hamlet fled south, but encountered a platoon from Company E, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines coming up to reinforce the allied forces in the Nam O region. In the resulting engagement, the Marines of Company E killed about 13 VC. The enemy unit was from the *Q-55th Local Force Company*, which normally operated in the area. A prisoner captured in Nam O identified a North Vietnamese battalion, probably from the *4th*

*NVA Regiment*, operating below the Hai Van Pass with the “mission to form civilians for demonstrations.”<sup>59</sup>

According to a South Vietnamese account, the ARVN Rangers killed 150 of the enemy and captured another 18 in the battle for Nam O and in other fighting below the pass through 31 January. ARVN intelligence officers speculated that the battalion from the *4th NVA Regiment* was supposed to have spearheaded the attack on the city of Da Nang the previous day, but arrived too late to influence the battle.<sup>60</sup>

In other sectors of the Da Nang TAOR, the Communists also maintained the pressure on the allied forces. For the most part, the VC and NVA limited their attacks on the Marines to mortar bombardments and harassing small arms fire. Although agent reports and other intelligence indicated continued enemy assaults north of the Cau Do River against Hoa Vang and Da Nang City, most of these came to naught. The 1st MP Battalion completed three sweeps of the airbase perimeter and the areas just southeast, southwest, and just north of the airbase without incident. The battalion's Company B, however, in an operation with a Combined Action platoon in two hamlets on the Tien-sha Peninsula or Da Nang East, surprised a VC force in two hamlets north of Marble Mountain. The Marines and Popular Force troops killed 22 of the enemy and took another 23 prisoner.<sup>61</sup>

There were two serious incidents in the 7th Marines sector. In the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines area of operations, about 2,000 meters west of Hill 55 on the other side of a bend in the Yen River, a squad from Company L at 1145 ran into what eventually turned out to be a fairly large-sized enemy unit. Reinforced by the remainder of Company L and two platoons from Company M together with two tanks and a LVT, the Marines engaged the NVA. Company L, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines set up blocking positions on the east bank of the Yen. Able to establish clear fields of fire in the rice paddy where the heaviest firefight occurred, the enemy prevented the 7th Marines elements from closing with them. After dark, both sides withdrew, the Marines to night defensive positions and the NVA to the west. In the engagement, the Marines lost 5 killed and 12 wounded. They counted 34 enemy dead. Noting the new web gear and weapons with the North Vietnamese bodies left on the battlefield, Marine intelligence officers believed the North Vietnamese unit to be from the *31st NVA Regiment*.<sup>62</sup>

About 5,000 meters to the northwest, later that night, a squad from Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines encountered an enemy force possibly from the

same NVA regiment. The Marine squad was about to establish a night ambush site when an enemy force of about 100 fired upon them. Two other squad patrols from Company C in the vicinity quickly joined the first squad. Another platoon from the Marine company also reinforced the engaged troops about an hour later. Finally the enemy broke contact at 2000 and disappeared. The Marines took the worst in this uneven battle. Initially surprised, the first squad sustained heavy casualties. All told, the Marines lost 12 killed and 6 wounded. They later found three enemy bodies at the site. The dead enemy troops were wearing black pajamas under their green utilities. According to a Marine report, "it was evident that the enemy was prepared to masquerade as Vietnamese civilians in the process of infiltrating the TAOR and that he was attempting to infiltrate his forces in small units."<sup>63</sup>

The greatest danger to the TAOR at this juncture, however, was from the south in that area defended by the Korean Marine Brigade and the 51st ARVN Regiment. Although the Koreans and ARVN in a combined operation finally cleared Hoi An, enemy units to the west, south, and north of that city continued to press the attack. At 0920, enemy forces attacked the district towns of Dien Ban, just above the Ky Lam River, and Duy Xuyen below the river. At Dien Bien, the 51st ARVN reinforced by Korean Marines contained the attack. At Duy Xuyen, however, the Communist troops overran the town, forcing the district chief to flee and take refuge with the Koreans. Americal Division artillery operating in the Que Son sector took the Communist forces under fire, but did not shell Duy Xuyen town because of the civilian population there. The III MAF Command Center later that evening radioed MACV in Saigon: "Although the enemy has suffered heavy losses within his local and main force VC units during the past two days, he still possesses a formidable threat utilizing NVA troops poised on the periphery of the Da Nang TAOR."<sup>64</sup>

While the Communist forces continued to harass allied positions on the night of 31 January–1 February 1968, the intensity of combat did not match that of the previous two nights. Still enemy gunners just before 0100 launched 12 122mm rockets aimed at the Da Nang base and blew up two ammunition dumps, one for napalm and the other for flares. While making for a loud and colorful pyrotechnical display, the explosions caused no casualties and no damage to any of the aircraft. There were no other rocket attacks that night.<sup>65</sup>

Again during the day of 1 February, the number of incidents between allied and Communist forces fell from those of the two previous days. Enemy gunners, however, continued to be active and shot down a Marine CH-46 attempting to insert a reconnaissance team into a landing zone in the hill mass in the western sector of Da Nang below the Tuy Loan River. The helicopter burned upon crashing, but the crew and most of the patrol were able to get out. While Marine fixed-wing aircraft flew strike missions against the enemy gun emplacements, another helicopter evacuated the survivors. Of the 13-man Recon team, dubbed "Dublin City," one was dead, nine were injured, and three escaped unscathed. According to Marine pilot reports, the enemy had approximately 250 men in the area equipped with automatic weapons, including at least one .50-caliber-type machine gun. After the fixed-wing aircraft and evacuation helicopter cleared the area, the 11th Marines saturated the area with artillery fire.<sup>66</sup>

#### *A Brief Lull and Renewed Fighting*

On 1 February, General Robertson began to refine his defensive dispositions at Da Nang so as to counter any further incursions on the part of the NVA regulars and the VC main force units pressing on the Marine TAOR. Robertson wanted to "canalize enemy movements in order to develop lucrative targets which could be exploited." Given also the enemy rocket threat, he still needed to maintain extensive patrols in the so-called Rocket Belt. The 1st Marine Division commander decided then to move Company M, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines from its fairly remote position on Hill 52 in the far western reaches of the Vu Gia River Valley above the An Hoa Basin to the more centrally located Hill 65. Because of the location of Hill 65, just above Route 4 about 4,000 meters west of the district town of Dai Loc, and below Charlie Ridge, where the VC had heavy machine gun emplacements which precluded any helicopter lift, the Marine company had to make the move on foot. The company arrived at its dispositions at 0100 the following morning. A contingent of South Vietnamese Nung mercenaries from the Special Forces CIDG Camp at Thuong Duc took over the defense of Hill 52 from Company M.<sup>67</sup>

Still the Marine command believed the new positions of Company M not only covered the approaches to Dai Loc, but provided the division with another reserve force. Further to the east Company G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, at the battalion's command post

about 500 meters north of Dien Ban town, remained as the division mobile reserve mounted in LVTs and supported by tanks. It also served to block "one of the principal avenues of approach to Da Nang from the south." The only other Marine reserves available to the division were the provisional companies of the Northern and Southern Defense Commands.

For the next few days, there was a relative lull in the Da Nang sector, at least as compared to the last two days of January. There were still ominous signs and actions that the enemy push on Da Nang was not over. Although most of the enemy activity was restricted to small-unit contacts, on the night of 2–3 February, enemy gunners again rocketed the Da Nang base. From firing positions southwest of the base, 28 122mm missiles fell on the airfield, destroying one aircraft and damaging six others. Marine counter-rocket fire from the 11th Marines and 1st Tank Battalion resulted in five secondary explosions.<sup>68</sup>

While from 1–5 February, the enemy ground assaults on Marine positions appeared to diminish, Marine spotters in the tower on Hill 55 reported the constant movement of small groups of enemy troops in the western portion of the Korean Marine area of operations. Marine commanders and staff officers could only speculate that the enemy was probably infiltrating north in small groups to "predetermined rallying points" for a further assault either on the city or on the base. Other disturbing intelligence tended to confirm this analysis. On 2 February, the Marines received a report that the *2d NVA Division* had moved its headquarters four miles north, to a position above Route 4, from its previous location on Go Noi Island. Two days later, Marine intelligence officers learned that the *21st NVA Regiment* was in the Go Noi area. Finally there were rumors that the other two regiments of the *2d Division*, the *1st VC* and the *3d NVA*, had infiltrated even further north. In fact, elements of both regiments had reached jump-off points just south of the Cau Do River. As Lieutenant Colonel John F. J. Kelly, an intelligence officer on the III MAF staff, remembered, III MAF had expected the *2d NVA Division* to have participated in the attack on the 30th and 31st, "and it was waited on with bated breath, we knew that it was coming."<sup>69</sup>

The Marines did not have a long wait. On the night of 5–6 February, the Communist forces began the second phase of its Da Nang offensive. At 2000 on the night of the 5th, a Marine platoon ambush from Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines intercepted about 60 North Vietnamese troops about 4,000

meters south of the Tuy Loan River in the western sector of the area of operations moving northeast toward the river and the base with mortars and automatic weapons. Calling artillery upon the enemy troops, the Marines then swept through the area and recovered about 17 60mm mortar rounds. They later found four enemy dead. While the Marines successfully thwarted this attempt, between 0100 and 0500 on the morning of the 6th, enemy gunners mortared or rocketed all of the command posts, fire bases, and company combat bases in the 7th Marines sector. In the attack, the enemy gunners fired 122mm rockets at Marine artillery positions at An Hoa, Hill 55, and Hill 10. Twenty rockets fell on Hill 10, manned by Battery G, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines which resulted in 23 casualties, including two dead. The remaining rocket attacks were ineffective. Two of the mortar attacks hit the 1st Air Cavalry Division helipad near the Force Logistic Command area in the Red Beach sector. These destroyed two of the Army helicopters and damaged eight others. The mortar rounds killed one U.S. soldier and wounded two.<sup>70</sup>

On the ground in the 7th Marines sector, North Vietnamese units hit several of the Combined Action platoons, especially in the 3d and 1st Battalion areas. One of the major attacks was against CAP B-3 in the hamlet of Duong Lam (1) just below the Tuy Loan River. Shortly after 0100 on the 6th, enemy gunners opened up on the hamlet with intermittent mortar rounds and small-arms fire. About an hour later, North Vietnamese troops who had infiltrated Duong Lam rushed the CAP compound. While successfully beating back the enemy onslaught, the Combined Action leader called for help. At 0240, a squad from the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, supported by two tanks from the 1st Tank Battalion, moved to assist the embattled CAP unit. The reaction force itself came under automatic weapons fire and enemy rocket-propelled grenades disabled the two tanks. About 0330, two more Marine tanks from the district town of Hieu Duc arrived at the northern fringes of the hamlet. The armored force pushed through the hamlet and encountered only occasional small-arms fire. Joining up with the squad from the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines and some newly arrived ARVN troops, the tanks then relieved the Combined Action garrison. The combined force then swept the general area where they found two enemy bodies and took three prisoners. According to the prisoner accounts, they were from the *3d Battalion*, *31st NVA Regiment* and confirmed that "... Da Nang itself was the ultimate objective."<sup>71</sup>

The heaviest action occurred in the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines and 4th Battalion, 51st ARVN sectors along Route 1. Corporal Igor Bobrowsky with CAP D-2 located near the Thanh Quit Bridge along Route 1 remembered being besieged in his compound by North Vietnamese regulars. As he recalled suddenly the enemy was there and forced his Marines and PFs to take refuge in the compound together with many local villagers: "We were running out of ammunition and everything else, so that was a big fear." According to Bobrowsky, the NVA suddenly disappeared as quickly as they had appeared. He later conjectured that "what saved us from being . . . taken out totally was the fact that they had bigger fish to fry, they were headed to Da Nang."<sup>72\*</sup>

The bigger fish was the 4th Battalion, 51st ARVN Battalion base camp about 5,000 meters north on Route 1 above the Thanh Quit River. At about 0300, two North Vietnamese battalions struck the ARVN compound. Two LVTH-6s from the Marine 1st Armored Amphibian Company attached to the 11th Marines responded to a call from the U.S. Army advisor attached to the ARVN unit. Firing 290 105mm shells, the tractor artillery reportedly killed about 80 of the enemy attackers caught in the open.<sup>73</sup>

About 0900, Lieutenant Colonel William K. Rockey, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines commander, ordered a small command group and two companies, Company M of his battalion and Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines attached to his command, to the relief of the ARVN camp. Accompanied by tanks and LVTs, Company F maneuvered to the north of the ARVN base. Company M advanced toward a hamlet to the south of the ARVN. Both Marine companies encountered heavy small-arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades as they approached their objectives. The Marine companies then pulled back and called in artillery and air. Lieutenant Colonel Rockey then directed Company G of the 3d Marines, also attached to him, to move up along the banks of the Bau Xau River toward a blocking position southwest of the ARVN base "to seal up" any escape route in that direction. As Company G

began its redeployment along the river route it ran into enemy forces attempting to retreat in that direction. Rockey then ordered a platoon from his Company K to reinforce Company G. By the end of the day, the elements of the four Marine companies had established their night positions. During the day's fighting, Rockey's battalion killed 107 of the enemy and took two prisoners. His Marines sustained casualties of 11 killed and 53 wounded.<sup>74\*\*</sup>

The fighting continued during the night and into the next day. From their night positions, Company G observers saw large numbers of North Vietnamese approaching them from the north. The Marine company called in mortar and artillery fire. Battery F, 2d Battalion, 11th Marines alone shot off some 1,200 rounds. Even in the face of the artillery, the North Vietnamese continued their advance upon the Marine positions. Company G repulsed a number of probes throughout the night until the enemy broke contact at dawn. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines together with Companies F and G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines then began methodically to eliminate pockets of enemy resistance in the general area. In one contact about 1645, Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines met a force of 100 enemy troops. The Marines and VC in the ensuing firefight fought at a range as close as five meters from one another with the Marines achieving the upper hand. According to the Marine after-action report, Lieutenant Colonel Rockey's battalion and the attached two companies from the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines accounted for more than 320 enemy dead in less than 36 hours.

By this time, Major General Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, was worried about the ability to contain the enemy offensive south of Da Nang. The VC R-20 and V-25th Battalions had struck again at Hoi An, engaging both the Korean Marine Brigade and the 1st and 2d Battalions of the ARVN 51st Regiment. North Vietnamese battalions from the 2d NVA Division had eluded the Korean and ARVN defenses in the southern sector and had penetrated the defensive perimeter of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and 3d Battalion, 5th Marines just below the main base. While the Marine battalions successfully kept these initial assaults on the night of 5-6 February in check, General Robertson was not

\*Igor Bobrowsky commented on the "audacity (stupidity) of the NVA at the start of their push, when—as in our area, they moved in such numbers, openly and in the broad daylight that until they began to fire on us our only thought was that they must be an allied unit that strayed into our area." He added that although the NVA main group moved out they left "a blocking force behind to keep the CAP under fire . . ." He believed these troops "were deliberately left in place to serve as stepping stones along the line of retreat—in the event of a withdrawal." Bobrowsky Comments.

\*\*Igor Bobrowsky with CAP D-2 remembered that Company M was "ambushed in the streets near the north end of Thanh Quit . . . A good number of M Company that survived the ambush got down to us, along with some of their dead and a lot of wounded." Bobrowsky Comments.



Photo is from the Abel Collection

*Marines from Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines move through tall grass in a hamlet on their way to relieve an embattled ARVN base camp near the Thanh Quit River.*

sure how much longer they could. The fighting during the preceding week had drawn down the strength of the ARVN and the two Marine battalions and the enemy division still had uncommitted units that it could throw into the fray. General Robertson shared these concerns with General Cushman, the III MAF commander.<sup>75</sup>

On 7 February, this request led to a strange confrontation, if there was a confrontation, between General Westmoreland and General Cushman. On the previous night as well as attacking at Da Nang, North Vietnamese troops overran the Special Forces Camp at Lang Vei, south of Khe Sanh.\* Believing that III MAF should have relieved the camp and fearing that the enemy was about to launch the much-heralded attack on Khe Sanh itself, the MACV commander called for a special meeting on the morning of 7 February of the senior U.S. commanders in I Corps. At the meeting itself, he became even more upset as he learned about the situation at Da Nang. As he later confided, “the VC were getting closer and closer to Da Nang Airbase. There was an absence of initiative by the CG III MAF, in dealing forcefully with the situation.”<sup>76</sup>

According to General Westmoreland’s account, he acted rather abruptly and made his displeasure known. Shocked at what he considered things left undone, he ordered “in exasperation” Major General Robertson of the 1st Marine Division and Major General Samuel Koster of the Americal Division from the room. The MACV commander told the two generals “to return only when they had worked out a viable plan for closely coordinated offensive action against the enemy threatening the airfield.”<sup>77</sup>

Apparently, however, although conscious of Westmoreland’s sense of urgency about the tactical situation at Da Nang, the Marine commanders were unaware of Westmoreland’s unhappiness about the arrangements. According to both Generals Cushman and Robertson the meeting was not acrimonious. General Robertson remembered that he briefed the MACV commander on the enemy and stated that he needed more troops. Westmoreland then turned to Major General Koster and merely said: “Sam, you let Robby have two, three, or even four battalions if he needs them.” The MACV commander then dismissed Koster and Robertson from the meeting “to go out and work out the details.” General Cushman later commented that he did not normally order the movement of Army units until he and General Westmoreland “got together and agreed

\*For the overrunning of Lang Vei see chapter 14.

upon a plan." His view was that the purpose of the meeting was to obtain Westmoreland's approval for the reinforcement of Da Nang by the Americal Division.<sup>78\*</sup>

Despite the mixed perceptions about the meeting, the various parties quickly worked out a plan of action. Colonel Smith of the III MAF staff, who sat in on the conference between Generals Koster and Robertson, remembered that after studying the situation map, the conferees "came to the conclusion that the best way of stopping this attack was to interpose an equally strong force between the 2d NVA Division and the Da Nang Vital Area." The idea was to stop the enemy division from entering the Vital Area rather "than pushing him from the south and in effect pushing him" into the sector. The planners decided to send a two-battalion Army task force from the Americal Division into the northern sector of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines near Route 1 south of the Cau Do.<sup>79</sup>

The afternoon of 7 February, General Cushman issued the orders for the movement of the Army units to Da Nang. Major General Koster was to deploy one battalion immediately and to send the task force command group and remaining battalion the following day. Upon arrival at Da Nang, the Army units were to be under the operational control of the 1st Marine Division. The mission of the Americal task force was to "block enemy movement to the north, deny enemy access to the Da Nang Vital Area, and destroy enemy forces."<sup>80</sup>

According to plan, late in the afternoon of 7 February, Marine helicopters brought the lead Army battalion, the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, 196th Light Infantry Brigade, commanded by Army Lieutenant Colonel William J. Baxley, into a landing zone near the hamlet of Duong Son (1) just off the old railroad

tracks, about 2,000 meters south of the Cau Do. The Army troops quickly moved into night positions and encountered only harassing sniper fire or an occasional mortar round.<sup>81</sup>

The night of 7–8 was relatively uneventful throughout the Da Nang TAOR until about 0345. At that time, enemy mortar rounds fell into the CAP E–4 compound in Lo Giang (1) hamlet, about 2,000 meters northeast of Duong Son (1). While beginning with the mortar bombardment, the enemy soon escalated the fighting. By daylight, enemy ground forces surrounded the CAP hamlet.

At that point, to ease the pressure on the CAPs, General Robertson about 0700 deployed the Army battalion to Lo Giang (5), about 1,000 meters north of Lo Giang (1), just below the Cau Do. The Army troops soon found themselves engaged with another enemy battalion. The 1st Marine Division commander then reinforced the Army unit with two Marine companies, Company G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and Company I, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines. This fighting continued to rage until late afternoon.

In the meantime, CAP E–4 continued to hold out against overwhelming odds. A small Combined Action headquarters detachment of 15 men from Hoa Vang also attempted to reinforce the embattled CAP, but never reached Lo Giang (1). Only 1 of the original 15 men survived. By mid-afternoon CAP E–4 was nearly out of ammunition. At 1550, under cover of helicopter gunships and fixed-wing aircraft, Marine helicopters successfully evacuated the Combined Action platoon out of Lo Giang (1). In Lo Giang (5), the action lasted for another hour and a half, when the NVA/VC forces tried to break contact. In that fighting, the soldiers and Marines killed over 150 of the enemy.

By that evening, Army Task Force Miracle, under Army Colonel Louis Gelling, the commander of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, had been established in the Da Nang area of operations. Gelling, the task force headquarters, and the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, under the command of U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Lyman H. Hammond, Jr., had arrived from Chu Lai that afternoon. Establishing his command post near Duong Son, Colonel Gelling assumed operational control of the 1st of the 6th near Lo Giang (5) and placed the 2d of the 1st in blocking positions below Lo Giang (1). During the following day, while the 1st of the 6th mopped up in its area, the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry attacked north. The latter battalion ran into a North Vietnamese battalion and engaged it in a nine-hour battle. Pulling back its assault elements, the Army unit saturated the

\*General Westmoreland commented that he was "critical of Cushman's lack of initiative in responding to an immediate tactical situation," not of the command arrangements. He assumed that Cushman "appreciated that the Americal Division was under his tactical command." Gen William C. Westmoreland, USA, Comments on draft, dtd 18Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).

Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson, the head of the MACV Combat Operations Center, who also attended the meeting, wrote to his wife about "recriminations" at the meeting, but these related to the Lang Vei situation. BGen John R. Chaisson, ltr to wife, dtd 8Feb68 (Chaisson Papers, Hoover Institute). Cushman related that he was "criticized because I didn't send the whole outfit from Khe Sanh down there [Lang Vei], but I decided . . . that it wasn't the thing to do." Cushman Intvw, Nov82, p. 31. General Earl E. Anderson, the III MAF Chief of Staff, also attended the meeting and agreed "that it was not acrimonious." Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). See also Chapter 14.

area with artillery. They later found 46 enemy bodies and took a wounded man prisoner. Intelligence indicated that the enemy unit in the southern hamlet was from the *3d Battalion, 31st NVA Regiment*, and the units in Lo Giang (5) were from the *1st VC Regiment*. In the meantime, that day, on the eastern flank of the Army units, on the east bank of the Vinh Dinh River, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines encountered two companies from the *1st VC Regiment* and killed about 90 of the enemy.

The enemy offensive in the Da Nang sector had spent itself. During the next few days, Task Force Miracle conducted sweeps in its sector and encountered relatively little resistance. Both the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines to the east of the Army task force, and the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines to the south, also reported relatively little enemy activity in their sectors. Only the 7th Marines to the west experienced an increase in incidents as North Vietnamese regulars and the VC main force troops moved through the western TAOR to return to their mountain strongholds in *Base Area 114* and through Charlie Ridge into "Happy Valley."<sup>82\*</sup>

To the south, in the Korean sector, the ROK Marines with the assistance of the ARVN again drove Communist forces out of the Hoi An environs. According to an enemy NCO from the *31st NVA Regiment* captured in the fighting, the mission of his unit was to "attack Hoi An, five times if necessary, and set up a liberation government." Hoi An still remained in friendly hands. In the Que Son Valley on 9 February, the Americal Division engaged elements of the *21st NVA Regiment*, the only regiment of the *2d NVA Division* that had not been in the Da Nang sector. The *21st* was also in retreat.<sup>83</sup>

According to Marine intelligence reports, on 9 February, the *2d NVA Division* moved its headquarters back to the Go Noi from its more forward positions. The following day, the same sources indicated that both the *1st VC* and the *3d NVA Regiments* had also withdrawn to the Go Noi. On 11 February, General Cushman observed the *2d NVA Division* "appeared to be withdrawing from contact southward" and ordered his subordinate commanders to continue to press the attack. He, nevertheless, released TF Miracle from the operational control of the 1st Marine Division and returned it to its parent command. The task force headquarters and its two battalions returned to Chu Lai

the following day. The battle for Da Nang was largely over. Despite limited attacks later in the month, these were largely, as a report stated, "an attempt to maintain the facade of an offensive."<sup>84</sup>

During the Da Nang Tet offensive, both sides experienced heavy casualties, but the Communist forces proved to be no match for the allied forces. According to III MAF figures, from 29 January through 14 February at Da Nang, Marines sustained 124 killed and more than 480 wounded. Army forces in the Da Nang area including the troops from Task Force Miracle suffered 18 dead and 59 wounded. South Vietnamese and Korean casualties probably equalled or slightly exceeded the American. U.S. estimates of enemy casualties ranged between 1,200 and 1,400 dead. Colonel Smith believed that the *1st VC Regiment* alone lost about 600 men. The *2d NVA Division* still remained intact, but obviously was not about to renew the offensive.<sup>85</sup>

From almost every account, the Communist attack in the Da Nang TAOR was very inept. Despite the thinness of the Marine lines and the ability of both the NVA and VC to infiltrate, the enemy never capitalized on these advantages. According to a VC after-action report early in the offensive, the writer complained that the "commander did not know . . . [the] situation accurately . . . and that orders were not strictly obeyed." In a 1st Marine Division analyses, the author commented that the *2d NVA Division's* approach was "along a single axis of advance so that his eventual target was easily identifiable." Moreover, once the NVA units arrived south of Da Nang they "made no further attempts at maneuver even while being hunted by Marine and Army units, and when engaged, seldom maneuvered, except to withdraw." General Robertson, the 1st Division commander, observed that the delay of the *2d NVA Division* into the picture may have been because the Communist forces "got their signals mixed . . ." The VC were supposed to be inside "when the NVA division came marching down main street. You get your timing off and you've got problems." Another possible explanation was that the Da Nang attack may have been a secondary assault—to cause as much damage as possible and divert allied forces from the almost successful effort of the Communist forces to capture the city of Hue.<sup>86\*\*</sup>

\*Igor Bobrowsky with CAP D-2 remembered the "retreating NVA/VC were certainly more pathetic on the way back out to their lairs than they were coming in on us. At the same time though, they were . . . somehow scarier—because they were so clearly desperate in trying to get away, like small packs of cornered rats looking for holes to scurry through in a burning building." Bobrowsky Comments.

\*\*Brigadier General Paul G. Graham who was the 1st Marine Division Operations Officer (G-3) at the time disagreed with the last statement, writing "Hue had no military value to the NVA/VC. Da Nang was the prize—for success in that endeavor could have had a serious effect on the Allied efforts in the III MAF area." BGen Paul G. Graham, Comments on draft, dtd 20Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

## CHAPTER 9

# The Struggle for Hue—The Battle Begins

*The Two Faces of Hue—The NVA Attack—Redeployment at Phu Bai and Marines Go to Hue*

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### *The Two Faces of Hue*

As the former imperial capital, Hue was for most Vietnamese the cultural center of the country. With an equal disdain for both northerners and southerners, the religious and intellectual elite of the city held themselves aloof from active participation in the war. Instead they advocated local autonomy and traditional Vietnamese social values that led to a distrust of the central Saigon government and its American allies as well as Communism. In both the 1963 Buddhist uprising and the 1966 "Struggle Movement," the monks from the Hue pagodas and students and professors at Hue University provided the informal leadership against the successive Saigon regimes.

Despite the city's reputation for dissidence, the Communists failed to take advantage of the Hue protest movements. Both the South Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong troops for the most part refrained from any show of force in the immediate vicinity or in the city itself. With a sort of unspoken truce in effect, Hue afforded both sides a certain respite from the war.\* With a wartime population of about 140,000 persons, Hue retained much of its prewar ambience. Divided by the Huong or Perfume River, the city emitted a sense of both its colonial and imperial pasts. It was, in effect, two cities.

North of the river, the three-square-mile Citadel with its ramparts and high towers gave the appearance of a medieval walled town. Built by the Emperor Gia Linh in the early nineteenth century, it contained the former imperial palace with its large gilt and dragon-decorated throne room. Within the Citadel walls lay formal gardens and parks, private residences, market places, pagodas, and moats filled with lotus flowers. Buddhist bells and gongs as well as the chant of prayers resounded through its streets.

South of the river lay the modern city. Delineated by the Perfume River and the Phu Cam Canal into a rough triangle, southern Hue was about half the size of the

Citadel. The university, the stadium, government administrative buildings, the hospital, the provincial prison, and various radio stations were all in the new city. Attractive Vietnamese schoolgirls dressed in the traditional *Ao Dai* bicycled or walked along stately Le Loi Boulevard, paralleling the riverfront. The *Cercle-Sportif* with its veranda overlooking the Perfume River evoked memories of the former French colonial administration.

In January 1968 as the Tet season approached, however, a certain uneasiness lay over the city. The cancellation of the Tet truce and the enemy attacks on Da Nang and elsewhere in southern I Corps dampened the usual festive mood of the holiday season. On 30 January, Brigadier General Ngo Quang Truong, the commanding general of the 1st ARVN Division, canceled all leaves and ordered his units on full alert. Most of the troops, however, already on leave, were unable to rejoin their units. Moreover, the only South Vietnamese forces in the city itself were the division staff, the division Headquarters Company, the Reconnaissance Company, a few support units, and Truong's personal guard, the elite "Black Panther" Company. The division headquarters was in the walled *Mang Ca* military compound, self-contained in the northeast corner of the Citadel. General Truong positioned the Black Panthers on the Tay Loc airfield in the Citadel, about a mile southwest of the division compound. In the southern city, the U.S. maintained a MACV compound in a former hotel which served as a billet and headquarters for the U.S. advisory staff to the 1st ARVN Division.<sup>1</sup>

### *The NVA Attack*

Although allied intelligence reported elements of two NVA regiments, the *4th* and the *6th*, in Thua Thien Province, there was little evidence of enemy activity in the Hue sector. Indeed, the 1st ARVN Division dismissed any conjecture that the enemy had either "the intent" or "capability" to launch a division-size attack against the city. U.S. order of battle records listed the *6th* NVA headquarters with its *804th Battalion* in the jungle-canopied *Base Area 114*, about 20 to 25 kilometers west of Hue. One battalion, the *806th*, was supposed to be in the "Street Without Joy" area in

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\*Peter Braestrup, then the Saigon Bureau Chief for the *Washington Post*, observed that this informal truce only applied to Hue. Peter Braestrup, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan95] (Vietnam Comment File).



Phong Dien District, 35 kilometers northeast of Hue, successfully evading ARVN forces in the sector. American intelligence officers believed the remaining battalion, the 802d, to be about 20 kilometers south of the city or with the regimental headquarters in *Base Area 114*. According to the best allied information, the 4th NVA Regiment was in the Phu Loc area near Route 1 between Phu Bai and Da Nang.<sup>2</sup>

Unknown to the allies, both enemy regiments were on the move towards Hue. The 6th NVA had as its three primary objectives the *Mang Ca* headquarters compound, the Tay Loc airfield, and the imperial palace, all in the Citadel. South of the Perfume River, the 4th NVA was to attack the modern city. Among its objective areas were the provincial capital building, the prison, and the MACV advisors compound. The two regiments had nearly 200 specific targets in addition to the primary sites, including the radio station, police stations, houses of government officials, the recruiting office, and even the national Imperial Museum. The target list contained detailed intelligence to the extent of naming suspected government sympathizers and their usual meeting places.<sup>3</sup>

On 30 January, some of the enemy shock troops and sappers entered the city disguised as simple peasants. With their uniforms and weapons hidden in baggage, boxes, and under their street clothes, the Viet Cong and NVA mingled with the Tet holiday crowds.\* Many donned ARVN uniforms and then took up pre-designated positions that night to await the attack signal.<sup>4</sup>

By this time the 6th NVA Regiment was only a few kilometers from the western edge of the city. About 1900, the regiment had assembled on a slope designated "Hill 138" for its evening meal. According to a North Vietnamese Army account, the troops ate a meal of "dumplings, Tet cakes, dried meat, and glutinous rice mixed with sugar." The commander and his officers inspected the men's gear and many of the soldiers

\*Colonel John F. Barr, who as a lieutenant colonel, commanded the 1st Field Artillery Group, had recently arrived at Phu Bai as part of Operation Checkers. (See Chapter 6) Barr remembered that on the morning of the 30th, he visited Hue "to effect command coordination between the 1st Field Artillery Group and the ARVN artillery commander in the Citadel. While into and through the city, I noted the unusual number of young men in civilian clothes; unusual in that most Vietnamese youths were either drafted by the ARVN or off in the hills with the Viet Cong. I mentioned this upon arrival at the ARVN artillery headquarters. I was assured by the artillery commander that it was customary for local farmers to come into Hue to celebrate the Tet holiday. Since he was a thoroughly professional soldier with eight years combat experience in the province, I accepted his explanation—to my subsequent regret." Col John F. Barr, Comments on draft, dtd 24Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A188251

*Top, picture taken in February 1967, long before the battle, shows the elaborate entrance and part of the surrounding wall to the Imperial Palace grounds in the Citadel. This wall is separate from the walls of the Citadel itself. Bottom, the Golden Throne of the former Vietnamese Emperors is at the heart of the palace, which the North Vietnamese used as a headquarters during the fighting for the city.*

Photo courtesy of Alex Wells, Jr.



“changed into new khakis.” At 2000, the regiment “resumed its march.”<sup>5</sup>

At this point the *6th NVA* divided into three columns, each with its particular objective in the Citadel. At 2200, about four kilometers southwest of Hue, the commander of the 1st ARVN Division Reconnaissance Company, First Lieutenant Nguyen Thi Tan, was on a river surveillance mission with about 30 men, when a Regional Force company to his east reported that it was under attack. Remaining under cover, Lieutenant Tan and his men observed the equivalent of two enemy battalions filter past their positions, headed toward Hue. Tan radioed this information back to the 1st Division. The two battalions were probably the *800th* and *802d Battalions* of the *6th NVA*.<sup>6</sup>

Despite Tan’s warning, the enemy troops continued toward Hue unmolested. In the enemy command post to the west of the city, the NVA commander waited for word that the attack had begun. At approximately 0230 31 January, a forward observer reported, “I am awake, I am looking down at Hue . . . the lights of the city are still on, the sky is quiet, and nothing is happening.” Anxiously, the NVA officers looked at one another, but no one voiced their doubts. A few minutes later, the observer came back upon the radio and announced that the assault was under way.<sup>7</sup>

At 0233, a signal flare lit up the night sky above

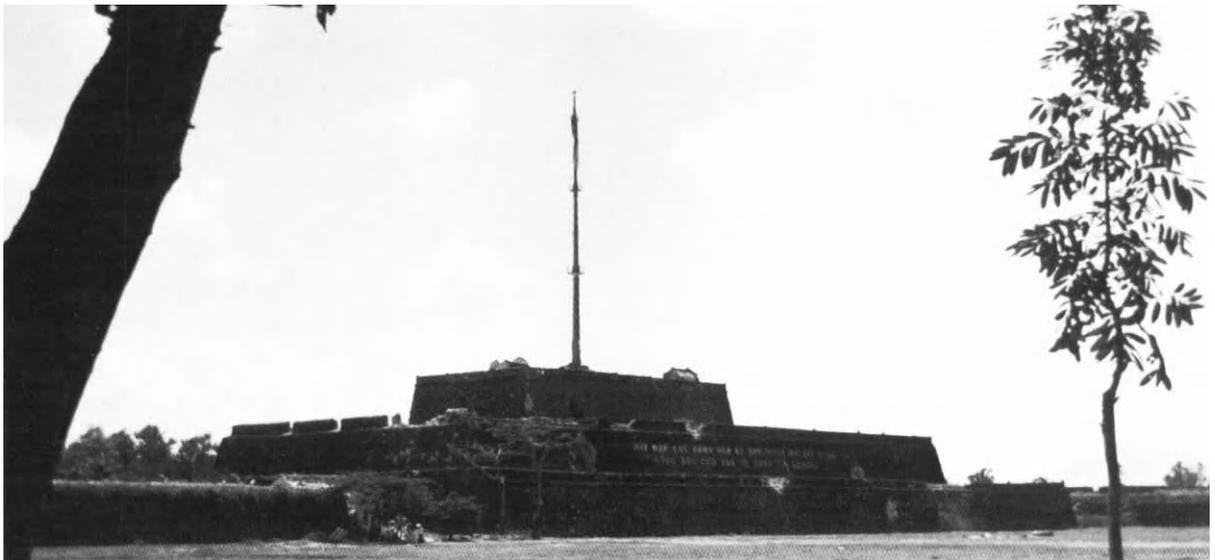
Hue. At the Western Gate of the Citadel, a four-man North Vietnamese sapper team, dressed in South Vietnamese Army uniforms, killed the guards and opened the gate. Upon their flashlight signals, lead elements of the *6th NVA* entered the old city. In similar scenes throughout the Citadel, the North Vietnamese regulars poured into the old imperial capital.<sup>8</sup>

The *800th* and *802d Battalions* pushed through the Western Gate and then drove north. On the Tay Loc airfield, the “Black Panther” Company, reinforced by the division’s 1st Ordnance Company, stopped the *800th Battalion*. Although the enemy battle account stated that the South Vietnamese “offered no strong resistance,” the NVA report acknowledged “the heavy enemy [ARVN] fire enveloped the entire airfield. By dawn, our troops were still unable to advance.”<sup>9</sup>

While the fighting for the airfield continued to see-saw with first the ARVN having the upper hand and then the Communists, the *802d Battalion* struck the 1st Division headquarters at *Mang Ca*. Although the enemy battalion penetrated the division compound, an ad hoc 200-man defensive force consisting of staff officers, clerks, and other headquarters personnel managed to stave off the enemy assaults. General Truong called back most of his Black Panther Company from the airfield to bolster the headquarters defenses. With the reinforcements, the division headquarters remained secure. Nevertheless, by daylight, more than

*The southern gate to the Citadel, with its flagpole, is where the North Vietnamese raised the Viet Cong banner.*

Photo courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd II, USMC (Ret)



60 percent of the Citadel, including the imperial palace, was in the hands of the NVA. At 0800, North Vietnamese troops raised the red and blue Viet Cong banner with its gold star over the Citadel flag tower.<sup>10</sup>

Across the river in southern Hue, much the same situation existed. U.S. advisors to the 1st ARVN Division in the MACV compound, a complex of several two- to three-story buildings, including a former hotel, awoke in the early morning hours to the sound of bursting mortar and rocket rounds. The Americans grabbed any weapons that were at hand and manned their defenses. Like the 1st Division staff, the advisors successfully repulsed the initial enemy ground attack. While not mounting any further ground assaults, the NVA maintained a virtual siege of the compound with mortars, rockets, and automatic weapons fire.<sup>11</sup>

The *4th NVA Regiment* with the *804th NVA Battalion*, supported by local force companies and elements of the *Hue City Sapper Battalion*, had launched its offensive against the modern city. Divided into several attack groups, the enemy sought out key civil and military facilities. Even according to the North Vietnamese official account, the enemy actions and preparations in the new city lacked the cohesion and timing of those in the Citadel. The North Vietnamese author wrote: "The attacks on southern Hue were carried out by many forces which employed many very different forms of tactics." One unit lost its way in the darkness and did not arrive in the city until 0600. Despite confusion and some reverses, that morning, the NVA had control of most of southern Hue except for the prison, the MACV compound, and the Hue LCU (landing craft, utility) ramp on the waterfront to the northeast of the compound.<sup>12</sup>

In the Citadel, on 1 February, the embattled General Truong called in reinforcements. He ordered his 3d Regiment; the 3d Troop, 7th ARVN Cavalry; and the 1st ARVN Airborne Task Force to relieve the pressure on his *Mang Ca* headquarters. Responding to the call at PK 17, the ARVN base located near a road marker on Route 1, 17 kilometers north of Hue, the 3d Troop and the 7th Battalion of the Airborne task force rolled out of their base area in an armored convoy onto Route 1. A North Vietnamese blocking force stopped the ARVN relief force about 400 meters short of the Citadel wall. Unable to force their way through the enemy positions, the South Vietnamese paratroopers asked for assistance. The 2d ARVN Airborne Battalion reinforced the convoy and the South Vietnamese finally penetrated the lines and entered the Citadel in the early morning hours of the next day. The cost had been

heavy: the ARVN suffered 131 casualties including 40 dead, and lost 4 of the 12 armored personnel carriers in the convoy. According to the South Vietnamese, the enemy also paid a steep price in men and equipment. The ARVN claimed to have killed 250 of the NVA, captured 5 prisoners, and recovered 71 individual and 25 crew-served weapons.<sup>13</sup>

The 3d ARVN Regiment had an even more difficult time. On the 31st, two of its battalions, the 2d and 3d, advanced east from encampments southwest of the city along the northern bank of the Perfume River, but North Vietnamese defensive fires forced them to fall back. Unable to enter the Citadel, the two battalions established their night positions outside the southeast wall of the old City. Enemy forces surrounded the 1st and 4th Battalions of the regiment, operating to the southeast, as they attempted to reinforce the units in Hue. Captain Phan Ngoc Luong, the commander of the 1st Battalion, retreated with his unit to the coastal Ba Long outpost, arriving there with only three clips per man for their World War II vintage M1 rifles.\* At Ba Long, the battalion then embarked upon motorized junks and reached the Citadel the following day. The 4th Battalion, however, remained unable to break its encirclement for several days.

South of the city, on 31 January, Lieutenant Colonel Phan Huu Chi, the commander of the ARVN 7th Armored Cavalry Squadron attempted to break the enemy stranglehold. He led an armored column toward Hue, but like the other South Vietnamese units, found it impossible to break through. With the promise of U.S. Marine reinforcements, Chi's column, with three tanks in the lead, tried once more. This time they crossed the An Cuu Bridge into the new city. Coming upon the central police headquarters in southern Hue, the tanks attempted to relieve the police defenders. When an enemy B-40 rocket made a direct hit upon Lieutenant Colonel Chi's tank, killing him instantly, the South Vietnamese armor then pulled back.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Redeployment at Phu Bai and Marines Go to Hue*

The first U.S. Marines to bolster the South Vietnamese in the city were on their way. They were from the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, part of Task Force X-

\*Although the U.S. was reequipping the South Vietnamese Army units with the magazine-fed automatic 5.56mm M16, most South Vietnamese Army units in February 1968 were equipped with the semi-automatic, 8-shot, .30-caliber clip-fed M1. See Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973*, United States Army in Vietnam (Washington: CMH, 1988), p. 284.

Ray, the new command just established at the Marine base at Phu Bai, about eight miles south of Hue.<sup>15</sup> As part of Operation Checkers, the Task Force X-Ray commander, Brigadier General Foster “Frosty” C. LaHue had opened his command post on 13 January.\* Two days later, as planned, he took over responsibility for the Phu Bai base from the 3d Marine Division. LaHue, who had been at Da Nang until that time, serving as the 1st Marine Division assistant division commander, had barely enough time to become acquainted with his new TAOR, let alone the fast-developing Hue situation. This was true as well for most of his commanders and units at Phu Bai.<sup>16</sup>

With several changes making the original Checkers plan unrecognizable by the eve of Tet, LaHue had under him two regimental headquarters and three battalions. These were the 5th Marines, under Colonel Robert D. Bohn, with its 1st and 2d Battalions, and the 1st Marines, under Colonel Stanley S. Hughes, with its 1st Battalion in the Phu Bai sector. While Colonel Bohn had arrived with Task Force X-Ray on the 13th, Colonel Hughes did not reach Phu Bai until 28 January. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel Marcus J. Gravel, began making its move from Quang Tri about the same time. His companies C and D had reached Phu Bai on the 26th while his Company B, and Headquarters Company came three days later. The battalion’s remaining company, Company A, deployed on the 30th. Captain Gordon D. Batcheller, the Company A commander, remembered that while most of his troops were at Phu Bai on that date, two of his platoon commanders “had mistakenly stayed at Quang Tri” and the third was at a “Division Leadership School . . .”<sup>17\*\*</sup>

On 30 January, the 1st Marines assumed from the 5th Marines responsibility for the Phu Bai area of operations as far south as the Truoi River. At the same time, Colonel Hughes took formal operational control of his 1st Battalion. Companies B, C, and D of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines had already relieved the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines at various bridges along Route 1 and other key positions in this northern sector. When Company A arrived on the 30th, it became the Phu Bai reserve or “Bald Eagle Reaction Force.” Captain Batcheller years later recalled that the company actually was to “stand down” until 1 February when it was to

assume security of the LCU Ramp in Hue itself, just north of the MACV compound.<sup>18\*\*</sup>

In the meantime, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines had moved into the Phu Loc sector and took over that area south of the Truoi River and as far east as the Cao Dai Peninsula. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines remained responsible for the rest of the Phu Loc region, extending to the Hai Van Pass.<sup>19</sup>

In the Phu Loc area on 30 January, about 1730, a Marine reconnaissance patrol, codenamed “Pearl Chest,” inserted about 3000 meters south of the town of Phu Loc, observed a North Vietnamese company moving north armed with three .50-caliber machine guns, AK-47s, and two 122mm rockets. “Pearl Chest” set up an ambush, killing 15 of the enemy troops. The North Vietnamese fell back and surrounded the Recon Marines, who called for assistance. Both air and the artillery battery attached to the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines at Phu Loc responded to the request. The fixed-wing aircraft, however, could not “get a fix” on the enemy troops and were unable to assist.<sup>20</sup>

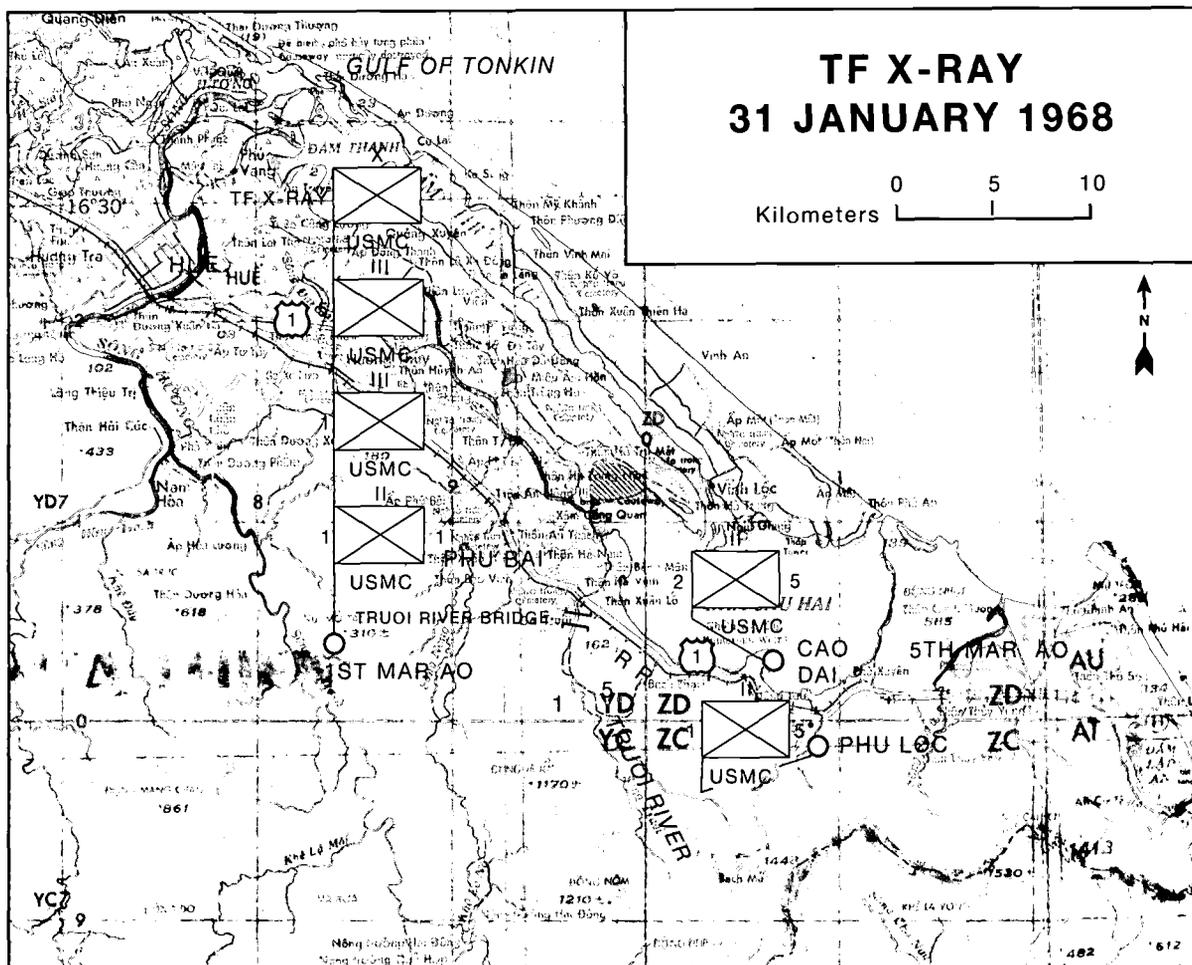
At that point, about 1930, Lieutenant Colonel Robert P. Whalen, the 1st Battalion commander, sent his Company B to relieve the Recon team. As the relieving company approached the ambush site, they heard Vietnamese voices, movement, and someone threw a grenade at them. In return, the Marines hurled grenades of their own and then moved in where they had heard the commotion. The enemy was no longer there, and the Marine company advanced cautiously. Lieutenant Colonel Whalen asked Colonel Bohn, the 5th Marines commander, for reinforcements so as not to uncover his defenses at Phu Loc itself.<sup>21</sup>

At the direction of Colonel Bohn, Lieutenant Colonel Ernest C. Cheatham, Jr., the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines commander, who had just established his command post on the Cao Dai Peninsula, sent his Company F to reinforce the 1st Battalion. Captain Michael P. Downs, the Company F commander, later recalled that the North Vietnamese ambushed his company as it moved into the 1st Battalion sector. Approximately around 2300, on the 30th, about 1,000 meters southeast of the Cao Dai Peninsula along Route 1, enemy troops opened up on the Marine com-

\*See Chapter 6 for the establishment of Task Force X-Ray at Phu Bai.

\*\*Batcheller related that the platoon leader at the division leadership school was there “as a student, although already nominated for a Silver Star! . . . Battalion could not refuse to fill a Division quota.” Col Gordon D. Batcheller, Comments on draft, dtd 10Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Batcheller Comments.

\*\*\*It is not clear that the 1st Marines planned to assign a company permanently to the LCU Ramp. According to the Task Force X-Ray operating orders, the 1st Marines had the responsibility to ensure the security for road convoys enroute from Phu Bai to the LCU Ramp. It is probable that Company A was to be assigned to road convoy security to the LCU Ramp. See TF X-Ray OpO, dtd 26Jan68, Encl, 1st Mar ComdC, Jan68.



pany from the railroad tracks which paralleled the road with both automatic and semi-automatic weapons, killing one Marine and wounding three. After the initial burst, the NVA broke contact and the Marine company secured a landing zone to evacuate the wounded. Company F then returned to the 2d Battalion perimeter.<sup>22</sup>

By 2400 on the 30th, the engagement south of Phu Loc was about over. The Marine command did not want to commit any more troops and ordered the Recon Team "to break out and move to the north." Lieutenant Colonel Whalen then directed his Company B to return to Phu Loc, which it did without incident. The results of this activity including that of Company F were 1 Marine dead and 5 wounded and 16 enemy dead, 15 killed initially by the Recon Team, and another by Company B. Colonel Bohn, the 5th Marines commander, believed that this action prevented a full fledged attack upon Phu Loc itself.<sup>23</sup>

On the night of 30–31 January, the same time the North Vietnamese struck Hue, the Marines had their hands full throughout the Phu Bai area of operations. Enemy rockets and mortars struck the Phu Bai airstrip and Communist infantry units hit Marine Combined Action and local PF and RF units in the region including the Truoi River and Phu Loc sectors. At the key Truoi River Bridge, about 0400 a North Vietnamese company attacked the South Vietnamese bridge security detachment and the nearby Combined Action Platoon H-8. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham ordered Captain G. Ronald Christmas, the Company H commander to relieve the embattled CAP unit. The Marines caught the enemy force beginning to withdraw from the CAP enclave and took it under fire. Seeing an opportunity to trap the North Vietnamese, Cheatham reinforced Company H with his Command Group and Company E, which by this time had returned from its abortive venture to Phu Loc.<sup>24</sup>

With his other companies in blocking positions, Cheatham hoped to catch the enemy against the Truoi River. While inflicting casualties, the events in Hue were to interfere with his plans. At 1030, 31 January, Company G departed for Phu Bai as the Task Force reserve. Later that afternoon, the battalion lost operational control of Company F. Captain Downs years later remembered the company “disengaged . . . where we had them [the NVA] pinned up against a river, moved to the river and trucked into Phu Bai.” With the departure of Company F about 1630, the NVA successfully disengaged and Companies H and E took up night defensive positions. According to the casualty box score, the Marines of Second Battalion 5th Marines in this engagement killed 18 enemy troops, took 1 prisoner, and recovered sundry equipment and weapons including 6 AK-47s, at a cost of 3 Marines killed and 13 wounded.<sup>25</sup>

While the fighting continued in the Truoi River and the Phu Loc sectors, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines had begun to move into Hue city. In the early morning hours of 31 January after the rocket bombardment of the airfield and the initial attack on the Truoi River Bridge, Task Force X-Ray received reports of enemy strikes all along Route 1 between the Hai Van Pass and Hue. All told, the enemy hit some 18 targets from bridges, Combined Action units, and company defensive positions. With Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines as the Phu Bai reserve, Colonel Hughes directed Lieutenant Colonel Gravel to stage the company for any contingency. At 0630, Colonel Hughes ordered the company to reinforce the Truoi River Bridge. All Captain Batcheller recalled several years later was that “we were rousted up about 0400 on the 31st and launched south on trucks to rendezvous with and reinforce . . . [ARVN] forces about a map sheet and a half south of Phu Bai.”<sup>26</sup>

According to Captain Batcheller, the truck convoy carrying his company was escorted by two Army “Dusters,” trucks armed with four .50-caliber machine guns, one at the head and the other at the rear of the column. When the convoy reached its destination, there were no ARVN troops to meet them.\* On their way south on Route 1, the compa-

\*These trucks were not actually “Dusters,” which refers to the Army M42 tracked vehicle mounting 40mm antiaircraft guns. Battery D, 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, U.S. Army at Phu Bai was equipped with both the trucks equipped with the quad .50-caliber machine guns (M55) and the M42s. The Marines referred to both vehicles as “Dusters.” See 1st Mar AAR, Opn Hue City, p. 12 and Shelby L. Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. News Books, 1981), pp. 104, 278, and 355.

ny had passed several Combined Action units, whose troops told them “‘boo-coo’ VC moving towards Hue, but none had been hit, and all bridges were up.” Batcheller then received orders from Lieutenant Colonel Gravel to reverse his direction, either to reinforce an Army unit north of Hue or, on the other hand, to go to the assistance of a Combined Action unit just south of Phu Bai.\*\* In any event, whatever the case, this new mission was short-lived. About one-half hour later, about 0830, the company again received another set of orders, presumably from Task Force X-Ray, “to proceed to the Hue Ramp area . . . to investigate reports that Hue City was under attack.”<sup>27\*\*\*</sup>

Up to this point the fighting for Hue had been entirely a South Vietnamese affair. General LaHue, the Task Force X-Ray commander, actually had very little reliable intelligence on the situation. All he knew was that Truong’s headquarters had been under attack, as was the MACV compound. Because of enemy mortaring of the LCU ramp in southern Hue, the allies had stopped all river traffic to the city. As LaHue later wrote: “Initial deployment of forces was made with limited information.”<sup>28</sup>

With this “limited information,” Company A continued north towards Hue. As the convoy proceeded along Route 1, it met up with four tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion. The tanks had been on their way from Phu Bai to the LCU ramp at Hue for embarkation and transfer north to the 3d Marine Division at Dong Ha. These tanks had happened upon some of the burnt-out hulks of the 7th ARVN Armored Cavalry Squadron and had decided to return to Phu Bai when Company A “came up behind them.” Batcheller remembered that he talked over the situation with the major in charge “and he agreed to join us as we moved towards the MACV compound.” According to the Company A commander, a short time later, Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. LaMontagne, the 3d Marine Division embarkation officer,

\*\*Batcheller remembered that Gravel told him to reinforce the Army division, which would have had to have been the 1st Air Cavalry Division located at Camp Evans, 12 miles north of Hue. On the other hand, the 1st Marines Command Chronology states that at 0805 “Bald Eagle (A/1/1) [was] diverted from Truoi Bridge to the location of CAP A-3 . . . to investigate reports of NVA activity.” Batcheller Comments and 1st Mar ComdC, Jan68, p. III-A-4.

\*\*\*Batcheller later wrote that he had “never heard of Task Force X-Ray, or General LaHue.” As far as he knew, he “was working for Mark Gravel and Major [Walter D.] Murphy,” the battalion operations officer. Batcheller Comments.

accompanied by a Navy chief petty officer, sought him out and "made the valid observation that we were moving too slow." Batcheller stated that he was "never clear" about the status of LaMontagne, "who never tried to assume command," but offered excellent advice. Actually LaMontagne was on the way to the LCU Ramp to supervise the loading of 3d Marine Division (Rear) equipment and personnel who were still redeploying from Phu Bai to Dong Ha.<sup>29\*</sup>

As the Marine company approached the southern suburbs of the city, they began to come under increased sniper fire. In one village, the troops dismounted and cleared the houses on either side of the main street before proceeding. The convoy then crossed the An Cuu Bridge, which spanned the Phu Cam canal, into the city. Caught in a murderous crossfire from enemy automatic weapons and B-40 rockets, the Marines once more clambered off the trucks and tanks. Sergeant Alfredo Gonzalez, a 21-year old Texan and acting 3d Platoon commander, took cover with his troops in a nearby building. When enemy machine gun fire wounded one Marine in the legs, Gonzalez ran into the open road, slung the injured man over his shoulder, and despite being hit himself by fragments of a B-40 rocket, returned to the relative safety of the building. Responding to orders from Captain Batcheller, Gonzalez rallied his men, who were on the point, and the column was again on the move.<sup>30</sup>

This time the Marine convoy only advanced about 200 meters before Communist snipers again forced them to stop. The enemy was on both sides of the road with a machine gun bunker on the west side of the road. A B-40 rocket killed the tank commander in the lead tank. At that point, Sergeant Gonzales, on the east side of the road with some men of his platoon, crawled to a dike directly across from the machine gun bunker. With his Marines laying down a base of fire, Gonzales jumped up and threw four grenades into the bunker, killing all the occupants.

\* Lieutenant Colonel Karl J. Fontenot, who at the time commanded the 3d Tank Battalion, remembered that the 3d Battalion was in the midst of displacing from Phu Bai to Quang Tri and that the last four tanks, two gun and two flame tanks, in the battalion were slated to go by LCU from Hue to Dong Ha. According to Fontenot, LaMontagne was to supervise the loading of these tanks at the LCU. Fontenot recalled that he happened by chance to be at Phu Bai on the 31st, and was informed that the MACV compound was under attack and that the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines was going to Hue. He claimed that he radioed these tanks and "briefed them on the enemy threat and advised them to load and prepare to fight." LtCol Karl J. Fontenot, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File).

As the Marine company cautiously made its way northward in the built-up area, Captain Batcheller maintained "*sporadic* radio contact" with Lieutenant Colonel Gravel at Phu Bai. For the most part, however, he heard on his artillery and air radio nets nothing but Vietnamese. The convoy reached a "causeway or elevated highway in the middle of a large cultivated area," and once again came under enemy sniper fire. Batcheller went to the assistance of a fallen man and was himself wounded seriously in both legs. Gunnery Sergeant J. L. Canley, a giant of a man, six feet, four inches tall and weighing more than 240 pounds, then took command of the company.

As Company A engaged the enemy on the outskirts of Hue, Colonel Hughes, the 1st Marines commander, requested permission from General LaHue to reinforce the embattled company. The only available reinforcements were the command group of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, which earlier that morning had become the Phu Bai reaction force in place of Company A. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel, the 1st Battalion commander, remembered that there was no intelligence on the situation in Hue and that his own battalion was "strung out" in the Phu Bai sector with elements still at Quang Tri. He had never met Captain Charles L. Meadows, the Company G commander, until "that first day." Gravel said the only planning he was able to accomplish was to give the order: "Get on the trucks, men." For his part, Captain Meadows recalled that his task was to "get into the trucks with . . . [his] company, go up to the 1st ARVN Division headquarters and escort the CG [commanding general] back down to Phu Bai." The mission should "take no longer than two to three hours."<sup>31\*\*</sup>

Crossing the An Cuu Bridge, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel's relief column reached Company A in the early afternoon. With the linking up of the two forces, Gravel kept the tanks with him, but sent the trucks and the wounded, including Captain Batcheller, back to Phu Bai. The vehicles returned without escort, just "truck drivers and the wounded. Some of the wounded could fire weapons." Lieutenant Colonel Gravel determined that this was the only feasible way to evacuate the wounded because "we weren't going to get

\*\* According to the 1st Marines account, Colonel Hughes directed Gravel to reinforce Company A at 1030. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines Journal shows that the command group departed Phu Bai at 1243 that afternoon. 1st Mar ComdC, Jan68, p. III-A-4; 1/1 Jnl, 31Jan68, Encl, 1/1 ComdC, Jan68.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371336

*A Marine M48 tank moves in one direction on one of the broad streets of modern Hue, while a group of South Vietnamese citizens flee the fighting in the other direction. Marine tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion supported the first Marine units to enter the city*

any helicopters in there . . . .” According to Gravel, this “was a terrible longshot . . . but it worked . . . .”<sup>32</sup>

With the tanks in the lead, then Company A, the battalion headquarters group, and Company G following in trace, Gravel’s makeshift command made its way toward the MACV compound, arriving there about 1515. By this time, the enemy attackers had pulled back their forces from the immediate vicinity of the compound. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel met with Army Colonel George O. Adkisson, the U.S. senior advisor to the 1st ARVN Division. According to Marine accounts, Adkisson told the Marine battalion commander that the “Citadel was in fine shape,” but that they needed assistance in evacuating American nationals.<sup>33</sup>

This contradicted an earlier telephone conversation between the South Vietnamese I Corps and the III MAF command centers, both located at Da Nang. General Lam, the I Corps commander, had heard that the ARVN troops in Hue were surrounded and out of ammunition. The Task Force X-Ray commanding general, Brigadier General LaHue, remembered that

reports came in that the 1st ARVN Division was “in trouble” and “we were ordered to go across the river to relieve some of the pressure.” He relayed these orders to Lieutenant Colonel Gravel.<sup>34\*</sup>

Leaving Company A behind to secure the MACV compound, the Marine battalion commander took Company G, reinforced by the three tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion and a few South Vietnamese tanks from the ARVN 7th Armored Squadron, and attempted to cross the main bridge over the Perfume River. Gravel left the armor behind on the southern bank to provide direct fire support. As he remembered, the American M48s were too heavy for the

\*In a personal letter to Captain Batcheller, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel expressed his anger about the order: “We proceeded to the MACV compound then were gifted with the most stupid idiotic mission to cross the Perfume River Bridge and go to the aid of the CG 1st ARVN Division.” He stated that he told “Task Force X-Ray” about his concerns, but was ordered to “go anyway.” LtCol Mark Gravel ltr to Capt Gordon D. Batcheller, dtd 24Feb68, Encl to Batcheller Comments, hereafter Gravel ltr, Feb68.

bridge and the South Vietnamese tankers in light M24 tanks “refused to go.”<sup>35</sup>

As the Marine infantry started across, an enemy machine gun on the other end of the bridge opened up, killing and wounding several Marines. One Marine, Lance Corporal Lester A. Tully, later awarded the Silver Star for his action, ran forward, threw a grenade, and silenced the gun. Two platoons successfully made their way to the other side. They turned left and immediately came under automatic weapons and recoilless rifle fire from the Citadel wall. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel recollected that it was late in the afternoon and the sun was in their eyes: “We were no match for what was going on . . . I decided to withdraw.”<sup>36</sup>

This was easier said than done. The enemy was well dug-in and “firing from virtually every building in Hue city” north of the river. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel radioed back to Colonel Adkisson “for some vehicle support . . . to come and help us recover our wounded.” According to Gravel, “the trucks didn’t come and they didn’t come . . .” Becoming more and more agitated, the battalion commander took his radio man and an interpreter “to find out where in the hell the vehicles were.” They came upon some U.S. naval personnel and a few of the American advisors in two Navy trucks and brought them back to the bridge. In the meantime, the Marines commandeered some abandoned Vietnamese civilian vehicles and used them as makeshift ambulances to carry out the wounded. Among the casualties on the bridge was Major Walter D. Murphy, the 1st Battalion S-3 or operations officer, who later died of his wounds. Captain Meadows remembered that he lost nearly a third of his company, either wounded or killed, “going across that one bridge and then getting back across that bridge.”<sup>37\*</sup>

\*Lieutenant Colonel Gravel in his letter to Batcheller gave the number of Marines from Company G that were wounded as 44. Eric Hammel in his account gives the casualties for Company G as 5 dead and 44 wounded, which probably does not include Major Murphy. Colonel Meadows, years later, commented that “to my recollection LtCol Gravel did *not* join us on the other side of the bridge. I remember calling him on the radio and giving him my sitreps and eventually the urgent need for vehicles.” Gravel ltr, Feb68; Eric Hammel, *Fire in the Streets, The Battle for Hue, Tet 1968* (Chicago, Ill: Contemporary Books, 1991), p. 90; Col Charles L. Meadows, Comments on draft, dtd 13Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

By 2000, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines had established defensive positions near the MACV compound and a helicopter landing zone in a field just west of the Navy LCU Ramp in southern Hue. On that first day, the two Marine companies in Hue had sustained casualties of 10 Marines killed and 56 wounded. During the night, the battalion called in a helicopter into the landing zone to take out the worst of the wounded. According to Lieutenant Colonel Gravel, “it was darker than hell and foggy,” and the pilot radioed “‘Where are you? I can’t see.’” The sergeant on the ground, talking the aircraft down, knocked on the nose of the CH-46, and replied, “‘Right out here, sir.’” Gravel marvelled that the sergeant “had a knack about working with helicopter pilots . . . He brought it [the helicopter] right on top of us.”<sup>38\*\*</sup>

The American command still had little realization of the situation in Hue. Brigadier General LaHue later commented: “Early intelligence did not reveal the quantity of enemy involved that we subsequently found were committed to Hue.”<sup>\*\*\*</sup> General Westmoreland’s headquarters had, if possible, even less appreciation of the magnitude of the NVA attack on the city. Westmoreland cabled General Earle G. Wheeler, the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, that the “enemy has approximately three companies in the Hue Citadel and Marines have sent a battalion into the area to clear them out.”<sup>39</sup>

\*\*One of the co-authors expressed doubts about the accuracy of the above account: “Not very long ago, I stood on an LZ trying to communicate with a CH-46 pilot through the helicopter’s own IC [internal communication] system. Impossible, and this helicopter was on the ground, at low power. A hovering helicopter is louder by at least a magnitude. I have been under them . . . when they are less than 10 feet off the deck and I can tell you that I don’t believe this story for a minute. Having said all this, I still feel it’s too good to pass up.” Maj Leonard A. Blasiol, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 30Jun88 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*\*General Earl E. Anderson, then the III MAF Chief of Staff at Da Nang as a brigadier general, recalled that he was in “constant contact by phone . . . [with] Frosty LaHue . . . , neither of us sleeping more than an hour or two a night.” Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

## CHAPTER 10

# The Struggle for Hue—The Second Phase

*More Reinforcements—The Beginning of the Advance 3–4 February—Block by Block 5–8 February*

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### *More Reinforcements*

By the morning of 1 February, the actual situation was becoming only too apparent to both the South Vietnamese and American troops in Hue. In Da Nang, General Lam, the I Corps Commander, and General Cushman, CG III MAF, agreed that the 1st ARVN Division would assume responsibility for the Citadel while Task Force X-Ray would clear that part of the city south of the Perfume River. General LaHue, the TF X-Ray commander, ordered Lieu-

tenant Colonel Gravel's "bobtailed" 1st Battalion, 1st Marines in southern Hue to advance to the Thua Thien provincial headquarters building and prison, a distance of six blocks west of the MACV compound. Still unaware of the extent of the enemy forces in both the old and new cities, LaHue told a group of American reporters at Phu Bai: "Very definitely, we control the south side of the city . . . I don't think they [the Communist forces] have any resupply capability, and once they use up what they brought in, they're finished."<sup>1</sup>

*Marine infantry advance cautiously under support of the 90mm gun of a M48 tank in street fighting in Hue. Even with the tank support, the Marines found the enemy resistance difficult to overcome in the first days of the operation.*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190400



At 0700, Gravel launched a two-company assault supported by tanks towards the jail and provincial building. As a M79 grenadier from Company G, 5th Marines recalled: "We didn't get a block away [from the MACV compound] before we started getting sniper fire. We got a tank . . . got a block, turned right and received 57mm recoilless which put out our tank." The attack was "stopped cold" and the battalion returned to the MACV compound.<sup>2</sup>

By this time, General LaHue realized the enemy strength in Hue was much greater than he had originally estimated. Shortly after noon, he called in Colonel Stanley S. Hughes of the 1st Marines and gave him tactical control of the forces in the southern city. In turn, Hughes promised Gravel reinforcements and provided him with the general mission to conduct "sweep and clear operations in assigned area of operation . . . to destroy enemy forces, protect U.S. Nationals and restore that portion of the city to U.S. control."<sup>3</sup>

North of the Perfume River, on the 1st, the 1st ARVN Division enjoyed some limited success. Although the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 3d ARVN Regiment remained outside of the Citadel walls unable to penetrate the NVA defenses, the 2d and 7th Airborne Battalions, supported by armored personnel carriers and the Black Panther Company, recaptured the Tay Loc airfield. About 1500, the 1st Battalion, 3d ARVN reached the 1st ARVN command post at the *Mang Ca* compound. Later that day, U.S. Marine helicopters from HMM-165 brought part of the 4th Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment from Dong Ha into the Citadel. One of the pilots, Captain Denis M. Dunagan, remembered that the call for an emergency trooplift came in about 1400. Eight CH-46 "Sea Knights" made the flight in marginal weather with a 200-500 foot ceiling and one mile visibility, arriving in an improvised landing zone under enemy mortar fire. The deteriorating weather forced the squadron to cancel the remaining lifts with about one-half of the battalion in the Citadel.<sup>4</sup>

In the meantime, Marine helicopters had completed a lift of Captain Michael P. Downs' Company F, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines into southern Hue. Captain Downs, whose company had relieved Company G as the Task Force X-Ray reserve the previous day, remembered that on the 1st he reported to Major Ernest T. Cook, the 1st Marines operations officer, who told him he was going into the city and be under the operational control of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. Although coming under machine gun fire from the Citadel walls across the river shortly after 1500, the Marine CH-46s

carrying the company landed south of the LCU Ramp "with minimum difficulty." Upon arrival, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel told Downs to relieve a MACV communications facility surrounded by a VC force. Downs remembered that nothing he had been told back in Phu Bai prepared him for the situation he encountered. The company "spent the better part of the afternoon" trying to reach the isolated U.S. Army signal troops and "never made it." According to personal records that he kept, Captain Downs stated his company sustained casualties of 3 dead and 13 wounded.<sup>5</sup>

Company F then returned to the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines command post at the MACV compound. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel prepared to renew his effort to reach the jail and provincial headquarters. At 2300, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel requested air support "to suppress heavy resistance . . ." The tactical air observer reported that the low ceiling precluded any aviation support. Gravel received orders to remain in his night positions.<sup>6</sup>

At Da Nang, General Cushman continued to discuss the situation with General Lam. The two commanders decided against the employment of fixed-wing aircraft or artillery in Hue. As Cushman later related, "I wasn't about to open up on the old palace and all the historical buildings in there. I told Lam he was going to have to do it." While the South Vietnamese would remain responsible for the Citadel and the Marines for the southern city, Cushman made plans to cut the enemy lines of communication to the west.<sup>7</sup>

With the concurrence of General Westmoreland, the III MAF commander made arrangements for

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\*Former captain and now retired Brigadier General Downs remembered that he received orders after returning to the MACV compound to take his company and a couple of tanks to the jail. He stated that he "found the order no more reflective of what the situation was in the city at the time and questioned the sensibility of it." Lieutenant Colonel Gravel agreed with him and sent a message drafted by Downs to Task Force X-Ray suggesting that the order be rescinded. The order was rescinded. As far as the air support, General Downs probably correctly observed that the rules of engagement at the time probably would have prevented any use of air support in the city. BGen Michael P. Downs, Taped Comments on draft, dtd 11Dec92 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Downs Taped Comments, Dec92 and BGen Michael P. Downs, Comments on draft, dtd 19Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Downs Comments, Dec94. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel described the order to go take the provincial jail slightly differently. He stated that when Company F arrived he was given "another stupid mission. Go down and secure the Provincial prison. Well I didn't go, I finally convinced them that we didn't have the power and that the prisoners had been released on 30 January." LtCol Gravel ltr to Capt Gordon D. Batcheller, dtd 24Feb68, Encl to Col Gordon D. Batcheller, Comments on draft, dtd 10Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

bringing the newly arrived 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) into the Hue battle. In late January, the 1st Air Cavalry with two of its brigades had relieved the 1st Marines at Camp Evans, about 12 miles north of Hue. Since 31 January, the division's 1st Brigade, reinforcing the 1st ARVN Regiment, was committed to the fight for Quang Tri City. On 1 February, General Cushman then alerted the 1st Air Cavalry commander, Major General John J. Tolson, to be ready to deploy his 3d Brigade from Evans into a sector west of Hue. By 2215 that night, Tolson's command had asked III MAF to coordinate with I Corps and Task Force X-Ray its designated area of operations in the Hue sector.<sup>8</sup>

Tolson's plan called for the insertion of two battalions of the 3d Brigade northwest of Hue. The 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry was to arrive in the landing zone first, followed by the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry and the 3d Brigade headquarters. Attacking in a southeasterly direction, the two battalions would then attempt to close the enemy supply line into Hue. An attached battalion from the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), the 2d Battalion, 501st Airborne, would cover the Camp Evans base area. The 1st Brigade would continue to operate in the Quang Tri sector.<sup>9</sup>

Under difficult circumstances, the "First Team" began its movement into the Hue area. Peter Braestrup of the *Washington Post* remembered that he dined with General Tolson a week later and that he "heard and saw how the bad weather was hampering . . . [the] newly moved division's logistics buildup and its efforts to move down on Hue."<sup>10</sup> In mid-afternoon on the 2d, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry arrived in a landing zone about 10 miles northwest of Hue and then pushed towards the city.<sup>11</sup>

In southern Hue, on 2 February, the Marines made some minor headway and brought in further reinforcements. The 1st Battalion finally relieved the MACV radio facility that morning and later, after a three-hour fire fight, reached the Hue University campus.\* Although the NVA, during the night, had dropped the railroad bridge across the Perfume River west of the city, they left untouched the bridge across the Phu Cam Canal. About 1100, Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, commanded by Captain G.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371126  
*Marines of Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines lower a wounded comrade from the rooftop of one of the buildings of the Hue University campus.*

Ronald Christmas, crossed the An Cuu Bridge over the canal in a "Rough Rider" armed convoy.<sup>12</sup>

As the convoy, accompanied by Army trucks equipped with quad .50-caliber machine guns and two Ontos, entered the city, enemy snipers opened up on the Marine reinforcements. Near the MACV compound, the Marines came under heavy enemy machine gun and rocket fire. The Army gunners with their "quad .50s" and the Marine Ontos, each with six 106mm recoilless rifles, quickly responded. In the resulting confusion, the convoy exchanged fire with a Marine unit already in the city. As one Marine in the convoy remembered, "our guys happened to be out on the right side of the road and of course nobody knew that. First thing you know everybody began shooting at our own men . . . out of pure fright and frenzy."<sup>13\*\*</sup>

\*Although the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines Journal makes reference to securing the University at 1630 on 2 February, Brigadier General Downs recalled that the battalion did not secure the University that day: "We got to Hue University. Had a tank hit and didn't get any further. We were then ordered back to our MACV positions." 1/1 Jnl File, dtd 2Feb68, Encl 1/1 ComdC, Feb68; Downs Comments, Dec94.

\*\*General Downs recalled that his company was shot at by one of the Marine convoys that entered Hue. He believed, however, this occurred on 3 February rather than 2 February. Downs Comments, Dec94.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190816

*One of the collapsed bridges across the Perfume River connecting the new city with the Citadel. The NVA destroyed the Perfume River bridges, but left standing for a time the bridge over the Phu Cam Canal leading into the new city from Phu Bai along Route 1.*

Within a few minutes, the guns were silent. Neither of the Marine units took any serious casualties and the Marine fire had suppressed the enemy weapons. One rocket, however, disabled a truck and the Marines successfully towed the vehicle to safety. Two journalists, Cathy Leroy and Francois Mazure, both French citizens, took asylum with the convoy after their release by North Vietnamese soldiers.<sup>14</sup>

About mid-day, Company H joined Lieutenant Colonel Gravel where the 1st Battalion had established

its toehold near the MACV compound. The NVA, however, continued to block any advance to the south. An enemy 75mm recoilless rifle knocked out one of the supporting tanks. By the end of the day, the Marines had sustained 2 dead and 34 wounded and claimed to have killed nearly 140 of the enemy. As one Company G Marine remarked, the unit spent the day "hitting and seeing what was there." The battalion consolidated its night defensive positions and waited to renew its attack on the following day.<sup>15</sup>



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371335

*Machine gunner PFC Dominick J. Carango, Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, provides covering fire for advancing troops of his company with his M60 machine gun in the Hue street fighting. His assistant, with bandoliers of 7.62mm ammunition rounds wrapped around him, crouches beside him*

At Phu Bai, during the meantime, Colonel Hughes prepared to bring his headquarters group into Hue. On the afternoon of the 2d, Colonel Robert D. Bohn, the 5th Marines commander, called in his 2d Battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Ernest C. Cheatham, three of whose companies were already in Hue. According to Cheatham, a big man who had played professional football, Bohn told him, “saddle up what you need . . . [the 1st Marines] headquarters is going to Hue tomorrow. There’s problems up there . . . We’re going to put you in . . .” The battalion commander remembered, “and so the next morning we went. We went blind. And that was it.”<sup>16</sup>

On the 3d, both the command groups of the 1st Marines and the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines arrived in Hue in another “Rough Rider” armed convoy. The weather had taken another turn for the worse: a cold 50 degrees with constant precipitation in the form of fog, a fine mist, or rain. Although the Marine trucks came under enemy sniper and mortar fire, they safely reached

the MACV Compound in the city. Colonel Hughes established his new command post there and held a hurried conference about 1330 with his two battalion commanders. While Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham then took control of his three companies already in the city, Gravel retained command of his Company A. The regimental commander gave the latter the task to keep open the main supply route while Cheatham was to continue the attack south from the University towards the provincial headquarters.<sup>17</sup>

At this point, Hughes, a pre-World War II enlisted Marine, who had been awarded the Navy Cross for action on Cape Gloucester in the Pacific campaign, turned to Cheatham. According to the 2d Battalion commander, Hughes told him: “I want you to move up to the Hue University building, and your right flank is the Perfume River and you’re going to have an exposed left flank . . . attack through the city and clean the NVA out.” Cheatham expectantly waited for further clarification of his orders, but the regimental comman-

der gruffly stated, "if you're looking for any more, you aren't going to get it. Move out!" He then softly added: "You do it any way you want to and you get any heat from above, I'll take care of that."<sup>18</sup>

### *The Beginning of the Advance 3–4 February*

Establishing his command post at the University, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham ordered a two-company, tank-supported attack against a complex of buildings—the public health, the provincial treasury, and the post office—just across the street from his positions. While Company G remained in reserve, Company H was to capture the public health building and Company F, the post office and treasury facilities. Like Lieutenant Colonel Gravel before him, Cheatham discovered there was no quick solution. The thick walls of the treasury and postal buildings appeared to be impervious to the Marine bullets and LAAWs (Light antiarmor weapons).<sup>\*</sup> According to Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham, the battalion tried to take the post office and treasury buildings about five or six different times: "That means mustering everybody's courage and energy up. . . . You'd assault and back you'd come, drag your wounded and then muster it up again and try it again."<sup>19</sup>

Although Company H reached the public health building by evening, it had to fall back to the University. As Captain Christmas later explained, the Marines just did not have enough men. The frontage for a company was about one block, and with two companies forward "that left an exposed left flank" subject to enemy automatic weapons fire. The battalion stayed in its night defensive positions and waited for daylight.<sup>20</sup>

In the meantime, Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines maneuvered to the southeast of the MACV Compound and captured an abandoned South Vietnamese police station against nominal resistance. The Marines found 30 carbines, 2 Browning automatic rifles, 10 M1 rifles, 20 60mm mortar rounds, and 40 cases of small arms ammunition. At 1900, the battalion reported that the nearby International Control Commission (ICC) team was safe and that "no USMC personnel entered ICC building," thus not providing

<sup>\*</sup>The M72 LAAW was a 66mm single-shot rocket-propelled anti-tank weapon with an effective range of 325 meters. The launcher tube was discarded after firing. It can penetrate 36 inches of concrete. Brigadier General Downs, who commanded Company F, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines in Hue, commented that despite what the manuals say, there was "no way" the LAAW could penetrate 36 inches of concrete. Downs Comments.

any grounds that U.S. troops violated the terms of the 1954 Geneva accords.<sup>21\*\*</sup>

The following morning, 4 February, Colonel Hughes discussed the situation with his two battalion commanders. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel was not surprised to learn that the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines was "exactly where we'd left them" the day before. Believing "that there perhaps was some second-guessing down at headquarters on the inability of 1/1 to attack," Gravel now felt somewhat vindicated. In any event, Colonel Hughes decided to place the 1st Battalion on Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham's exposed flank and continue the push against the enemy defensive positions.<sup>22</sup>

As the 1st Battalion began to clear its objective area, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel had only one infantry company, Company A, now under First Lieutenant Ray L. Smith, who had relieved the wounded Captain Batcheller. Lieutenant Smith recalled that from the 2d, when he arrived in Hue,<sup>\*\*\*</sup> until then, the battalion had basically held its own near the MACV Compound. Now on the morning of the 4th its first objective was the Joan of Arc School and Church, only about 100 yards away. According to Smith, the building "was square with an open compound in the middle and we found by about 0700 that it was heavily occupied." Smith's Marines found themselves engaged in not only building-to-building, but room-to-room combat against a determined enemy. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel remembered that in the convent building "in these little cloisters that the ladies live in . . . we went wall-to-wall . . ." One Marine would place a plastic C-4 charge against the wall, stand back, and then a fire team would rush through the resulting gaping hole.<sup>23</sup>

In the school building, Sergeant Alfredo Gonzalez' 3d Platoon secured one wing, but came under enemy rocket fire from across the courtyard. The Marine sergeant dashed to the window and fired about 10 LAAWs to silence the enemy. A B-40 rocket shattered the grilled pane and struck Gonzalez in the stomach, killing him instantly. Lieutenant Smith credited Gonzalez for taking out two enemy rocket positions before he was killed. Sergeant Gonzalez was

<sup>\*\*</sup>The International Control Commission was created by the Geneva Agreement of 1954 to ensure the provisions of that treaty. It consisted of Polish, Indian, and Canadian members. Although by this time, the Commission was unable to enforce anything, it still retained facilities and personnel in both North and South Vietnam.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>Lieutenant Smith had arrived in Hue in the convoy with Company H on 2 February.



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A374463 and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371436  
*Top, a Marine from the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines from a classroom at Hue University returns fire with his M16 at a NVA sniper in a building across the street. The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines made its command post in the University. Below, Marine Sgt Reginald Hiscks, Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, wearing an unauthorized beret, fires his M3A1 submachine gun. Strapped to his back are four extra clips of .45-caliber ammunition.*



later awarded the Medal of Honor for both his actions here and on 31 January.<sup>24</sup>

After securing the school, Smith's Company A maneuvered to the sanctuary which lay among a grove of trees and houses. Gravel wistfully recalled that it was "a beautiful, beautiful, church." As the troops advanced upon the building, the NVA threw down grenades, killing or wounding several Marines. According to the battalion commander, "They [the enemy soldiers] were up in the eaves, the wooden overhead; and they were in there and we couldn't get them out." Reluctantly, Gravel gave the order to fire upon the church. Marine mortars and 106mm recoilless rifles pounded the building. In the ruins, the battalion found two European priests, one Belgian and one French, both unhurt, but according to Gravel, "absolutely livid," that the Marines had bombarded the building. Believing he had little choice in his decision, Gravel thought the clerics in their dark clothing were fortunate to escape with their lives as the troops were "braced" to shoot at anyone in a black uniform.<sup>25</sup>

At 0700 on 4 February, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham's companies renewed the attempt to take the public buildings across from the University. Captain Christmas' Company H blasted its way through walls and courtyards with 3.5-inch rockets, employing squad and fire team rushes, and captured the public health building. From there, the company was in position to support Company F's assault upon the treasury building.

Captain Christmas recounted that his company employed the 106mm recoilless rifles to cover its movements. At first, the Marines attempted to use smoke grenades, but the NVA clearly saw through this tactic. As if on signal, "everything that was on our flank just opened up on that street." To counter the enemy ploy, the Marines would "pop smoke" to ascertain the enemy machine gun position or positions and then "here would come a mule-mounted\* 106 and those Marines would wheel that thing out. Go through the full drill . . . crank off" a .50-caliber spotting round and then the 106mm round. The backblast of the 106 raised a cloud of dirt and the recoilless rifle shell forced the enemy troops to keep their heads down. Taking advantage of the opportunity and the dust cover, the Marine infantry dashed across the street. Christmas then explained, "once we got across that street . . . that first lead element could direct its fire back toward that automatic weapon [or weapons]."<sup>26</sup>

\*The mechanical mule was a small flatbed four-wheeled drive vehicle which often was used to carry a 106mm recoilless rifle.

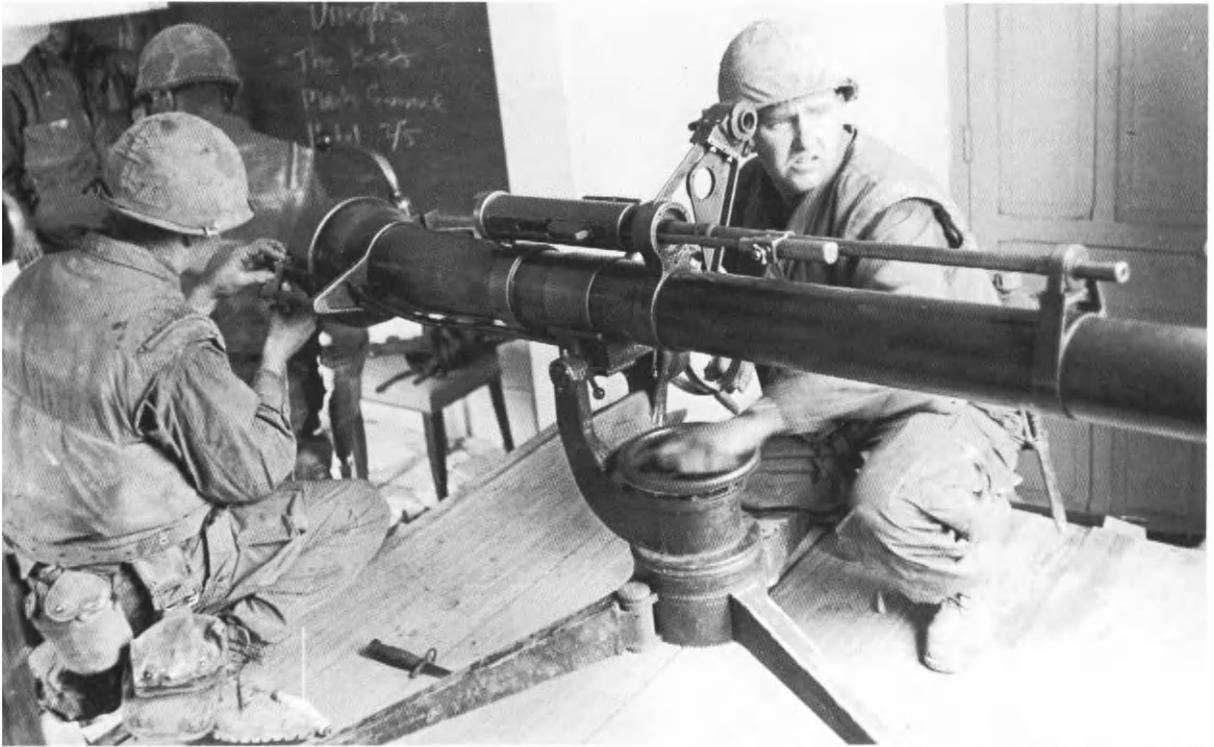


Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190301

*Top, A Marine from Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, armed with a M16 and with two LAAWs (light antiarmor weapons) strapped to his back, runs for cover. A Marine 106mm recoilless rifle on a trident can be seen in the gateway to the house in the background. Below, the ruined interior of the St. Joan of Arc Church appears after its capture by the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. LtCol Marcus J. Gravel, the battalion commander, reluctantly gave the order to fire upon the sanctuary, remarking that it was a "beautiful, beautiful church."*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190474





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371216

*A Marine 106mm recoilless rifle team set the weapon on its tripod in one of the Hue University classrooms, to take out an enemy machine gun. According to one of the gunners, "we fired it with a lanyard where we knocked out our objective—we kind of knocked out the building that the 106 was in too, but it didn't hurt the gun, once we dug it out."*

According to one of the NCOs, the recoilless rifles teamed up with both the 81mm mortar crews and the infantry. The 106s would blast "holes into the back of buildings so that units could get in without using the normal exit." Marine recoilless rifle gunners flushed out the NVA and then forward observers for the 81s called in the mortars: "Blowing the buildings open so that the infantry could get through." Sergeant Terry Cochrane, the platoon sergeant of the 2d Battalion's 106mm platoon, remembered that the gunners even fired one recoilless rifle from inside one of the University buildings. Unable to position their weapon to knock out a machine gun that blocked the battalion's advance, Cochrane and his gunners took their 460-pound recoilless rifle "inside . . . and we fired it with a lanyard where we knocked out our objective—we kind of knocked out the building that the 106 was in too, but it didn't hurt the gun, once we dug it out."<sup>27</sup>

The North Vietnamese, nevertheless, were still in force inside the treasury building. With its thick walls and large steel door, the structure remained impervious to Company F's repeated efforts to force its way into the

building, despite the use of recoilless rifles and tanks. The NVA covered with fire all avenues of approach. At this point, according to one account, Major Ralph J. Salvati, the 2d Battalion's executive officer, suggested employing CS (a variant of tear gas) against the enemy. Salvati told Cheatham that he had seen a stack of E-8 CS launchers in the MACV compound and proposed that he go and obtain them. Lightweight and compact, one launcher could fire 64 CS canisters in four volleys of 16 each. After a jeep trip in which he acquired the launchers, Salvati joined Captain Downs in an abandoned school near the treasury.<sup>28\*</sup>

Putting on their gas masks, Salvati and two enlisted Marines ran into an adjoining courtyard and set up the launcher. After a misfire, the Marine major hooked up a battery to the trigger mechanism. This time the E-8 launcher hurled the gas canisters into

\* According to a member of the 1st Marines staff, Colonel Hughes "stressed the use of the E-8 CS dispenser until no more were available." Maj Ernest Cook, Comments on draft ms, dtd 20Oct69, Donnelly and Shore, "Ho Chi Minh's Gamble" (Vietnam Comment Files).



Top picture is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371122 and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A372950  
*Top, Marines from the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines wearing gas masks are about to flush out enemy soldiers holding out in a stronghold. The Marines used CS (a variant of tear gas) to disable the enemy and curtail casualties. Bottom, a Marine M48 tank is stationed next to the blown An Cuu bridge. With the bridge down, the main land resupply route into the city from Phu Bai was closed.*



the treasury compound and within minutes produced a huge chemical haze. With the gas permeating the building and under the protective fire of 81mm mortars and 3.5-inch rockets, goggle-eyed Marines of Company F pushed forward in their gas masks. According to Captain Downs, once the Marines got inside the building, “the NVA wanted no part of us and they exited the building as quickly as they could.”<sup>29</sup>

Until 4 February, the An Cuu Route 1 bridge over the Phu Cam Canal still stood and permitted the Marines to reinforce the troops in Hue. On the morning of the 4th, Company B, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines arrived in a “Rough Rider” armed convoy and joined Lieutenant Colonel Gravel’s command. That night, however, North Vietnamese sappers blew the bridge, effectively closing the land route into the city. This left the Marine command only two alternatives to resupply the Hue forces—river traffic and helicopters. With the continuing mist and overcast, every helicopter mission was a hit-and-miss venture. More than once, heavy enemy 12.7mm antiaircraft fire forced Marine pilots to jettison their loads of ammunition slung underneath their low-flying helicopters. The river route also presented problems. Taking advantage of the narrow ship channel up the Perfume River from the sea, the enemy subjected allied craft to both mortar bombardment and automatic weapons fire.<sup>30</sup>

In the interval, nevertheless, Task Force X-Ray had taken advantage of the reprieve to build up the combat stocks of the 1st Marines in Hue. On the 4th, Marine trucks from Company B, 1st Motor Transport Battalion brought in enough rations to sustain both infantry battalions in Hue for two days. The following day, a Navy LCU from Da Nang braved the NVA crossfire from both banks of the Perfume River and docked at the LCU ramp in the city. In Hue, the 1st Marines now had enough rations to last through 16 February. With the arrival of a second LCU on the 5th, and another landing craft three days later, the regiment experienced no shortage of ammunition despite its expenditure at 10 times the normal combat rate in Vietnam.<sup>31</sup>

### *Block by Block 5–8 February*

The Marines in Hue began to adapt to the street fighting, so different from the paddies and jungle of the Vietnamese countryside in their previous sectors. As Captain Christmas of the 2d Battalion later

observed, “street fighting is the dirtiest type of fighting I know.” Although one Marine fire team leader agreed with Christmas that “it’s tougher in the streets,” he also remarked, “it beats fighting in the mud . . . . You don’t get tired as quickly when you are running and you can see more of the damage you’re doing to the enemy because they don’t drag off their dead.”<sup>32</sup>

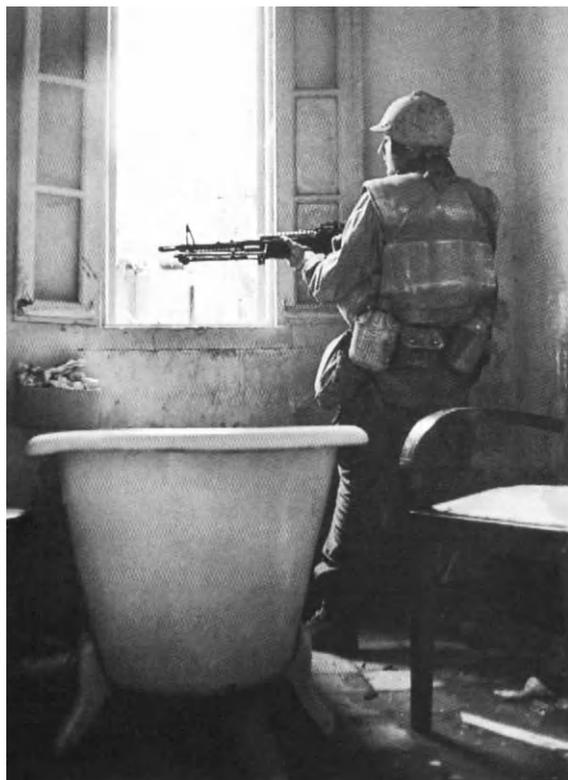
One of the immediate problems caused by the change of locale from the countryside to the urban was in orientation. Both Lieutenant Colonels Gravel and Cheatham complained about the inadequacy of their maps. Originally their only references were the standard 1:50,000-scale tactical maps which showed little of the city detail. As Captain Meadows, commander of Company G, observed, “you have to raid the local Texaco station to get your street map. That’s really what you need.” Both battalions eventually obtained sufficient maps, which numbered the government and municipal buildings and prominent features of the city. Cheatham and Gravel and their commanders used the numbers to coordinate their activity.<sup>33\*</sup>

Prior to that time, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham and his commanders used colors to designate their positions. Captain Christmas later related some of the resulting confusion. He would radio Captain Downs and yell, “Hey, I’m in a pink building.” Downs would reply, “Hey, that’s fine. I’m over here in a green building.” Then Captain Meadows would chime in with “Good! I’m in a brown building.” At this point, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham would come up on the network and ask, “Where the hell are the green, brown, and pink buildings?”<sup>34</sup>

By this time, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham had a firm idea about the extent of the task that his battalion faced. The 2d Battalion had an area of operations about 11 blocks wide and 8 to 9 blocks deep. As the battalion commander later declared: “It wasn’t that big [but] it looked plenty big at the time.” He recalled that he “attempted to . . . attack with two companies up and keep that third company of mine back, protecting our left flank.” Cheatham admitted that usually he had to commit his reserve: “The area was just too large for one infantry battalion, minus a company, to attack.”<sup>35</sup>

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\*General Downs commented on the map situation as follows: “Chuck Meadows may well have taken a map off the gas station wall but the ones we used were 1:12,500 AMS [Army Map Service] maps. They were most valuable. Initially, I think there were only three in the battalion with only the company commanders having one.” Downs Comments.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371220  
*A Marine from Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, holding a M60 machine gun inside the bathroom of a private household, looks out the window for enemy forces in house-to-house fighting in Hue. Strapped to his back is an apparent ammunition box.*

With little room to outflank the enemy, the battalion had to take each building and each block “one at a time.” According to Cheatham, “we had to pick a point and attempt to break that one strong point . . . and then we’d work from there.” After a time, Cheatham and his officers noted that the enemy “defended on every other street. . . . When we would take him off one street, we would usually push through the next row of houses fairly quickly and then hit another defensive position.”<sup>36</sup>

The close-quarter combat and the low-lying cloud cover prevented both Marine infantry battalions from depending upon air and artillery. Fixed-wing close air support was out of the question. Both units used artillery only occasionally and then usually later in the operation and for interdiction missions on suspected enemy approach and escape routes. As Lieutenant Colonel Gravel explained, “artillery in an area like that is not terribly effective because you can’t observe it well enough. You lose the rounds in the

buildings, in the streets . . . and you have a difficult time with perspective.”<sup>37\*</sup>

Supported by the four tanks from the provisional platoon of the 3d Tank Battalion which arrived with the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines on the 31st and a platoon of Ontos from the Anti-Tank Company, 1st Tank Battalion, the Marine infantry advanced methodically against stubborn enemy resistance. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham had reservations about the employment of the tanks in his sector. He later commented, “you couldn’t put a section of tanks down one of those streets. The moment a tank stuck its nose around the corner of a building, it looked like the Fourth of July.” The enemy opened up with all the weapons in its arsenal from B-40 anti-tank rockets to machine guns. According to Cheatham, one tank sustained over 120 hits and another went through five or six crews. The battalion commander observed that when the “tankers came out of those tanks . . . they looked like they were punch drunk.”<sup>38</sup>

The Marine infantry commanders were much more enthusiastic about the Ontos with its six 106mm recoilless rifles. Despite its “thin skin,” Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham described the vehicle “as big a help as any item of gear that we had that was not organic to the battalion . . . .” An even stronger backer of the Ontos, Colonel Hughes, the 1st Marines commander, later commented “If any single supporting arm is to be considered more effective than all others, it must be the 106mm recoilless rifle, especially the M50 Ontos . . . .” Hughes believed that the mobility of the Ontos made up for the lack of heavy armor protection and that its plating provided the crew with sufficient protection against enemy small arms fire and grenades. From ranges of 300 to 500 meters, the 106mm recoilless rifles rounds routinely opened “4 square meter holes or completely knock[ed] out an exterior wall.” Even at distances of 1,000 meters, the recoilless rifles proved effective. Because of the Ontos’ vulnerability to enemy RPGs and B-40 rounds, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham

\*Colonel Robert C. V. Hughes, who as a lieutenant colonel commanded the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines in artillery support of TF X-Ray, commented that while use of artillery was limited, especially the 105mm howitzers, “the heavier more accurate, 155mm and 8-inch were utilized more effectively.” He declared that his battalion’s fire support coordinator with the 1st Marines “from an OP [outpost] on the roof of the MACV Headquarters building, called and adjusted fire missions. He was able to accurately ‘walk’ rounds along streets disrupting enemy troop buildup and sniper emplacements.” Col Robert C. V. Hughes, Comments on draft, n.d. [1995] (Vietnam Comment File).



The top picture is courtesy of LtCol Ralph J. Salvati, USMC (Ret) and the bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371125  
*Top, LtCol Ernest C. Cheatham, in forefront of the picture, directs a target for a Marine Ontos equipped with six 106mm recoilless rifles, along Le Loi Street. The Perfume River can be seen in the background as well as the Citadel across the river. Bottom, Marines from Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines take cover behind a partially destroyed brick wall in heavy street fighting in Hue City.*





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371124

*A Marine from Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines carries an elderly woman patient out of the hospital complex to relative safety. During the heavy fighting, the Marines evacuated the patients from the hospital as best they could.*

employed the vehicle in hull defilade, “even if the defilade was only behind a brick wall . . . .”<sup>39</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham reserved his greatest praise for his own battalion’s organic supporting weapons, including 106mm recoilless rifles, the 3.5-inch rockets, and mortars. He especially liked the 3.5-inch rockets that could penetrate 11 inches of steel and “that thing would pop these walls.” He specifically remembered one firefight that lasted for nearly two hours between Marine and enemy gunners shooting 3.5-inch and B-40 rockets at one another at a range of 50 meters. Cheatham recalled “hundreds and hundreds of rockets going out . . . And the same thing is coming back at us. But we had more ammunition than they did.”<sup>40\*</sup>

Company F’s commander, Captain Downs, recollected the similar use of 81mm mortars at extremely

close quarters. He regularly brought his own mortar fire within 35 meters of his men: “We were on one side of the street and the 81s were fired on the other side of the street.” Cheatham compared his battalion’s application of 81mm mortars to a sledge hammer: “If you put enough 81 rounds on top of a building, pretty soon the roof falls in.” Captain Downs remembered that his orders from Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham were that “if we even suspected that the enemy were in a building to blow it down.” In Down’s opinion, this was when “we really became serious about retaking the city.”<sup>41</sup>

On the morning of 5 February, both Marine battalions resumed the attack in a southwesterly direction toward the city hospital and provincial headquarters. On the right flank, Captain Christmas’ Company H advanced along Le Loi street, paralleling the riverfront. The two companies of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines secured the left flank. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel tried to keep a two-block front, which he later explained, “is simple enough. But when you realize that there’s no one on your left . . . you’ve got to expand this out . . . .” This took troops, “resources that we were very, very short of.” Lieutenant Smith later wrote that 5 February was “an extremely rough day”

\*Brigadier General Downs, who commanded Company F in Hue City, wrote in 1994 that Cheatham should receive credit for bringing the 3.5 rocket launchers and ammunition into the city with him: “He collected them from the 2/5 company supplies at Phu Bai. We had not been carrying any with us.” Downs recalled that the manuals stated that the 3.5s and the LAAWs were similar, but “in fact the 3.5’s were far more effective.” Downs Comments, Dec94.

with the battalion sustaining 19 casualties and advancing “only 75 yards.” Gravel remembered, “The going was slow. We would go, maybe a block. We fought for two days over one building.”<sup>42</sup>

Although both battalions encountered “moderate to heavy” enemy resistance on the 5th, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham’s 2d Battalion, 5th Marines made somewhat faster progress. About 1630, Captain Meadow’s Company G secured the main hospital building after a 90-minute firefight supported by a M48 tank, 106mm recoilless rifles, and 3.5-inch rockets. The Marines removed the civilian patients as best they could from the line of fire, killed 4 NVA soldiers, and took 30 wounded prisoners. For the day, the three companies of the battalion accounted for over 70 North Vietnamese dead and 40 captured enemy weapons.<sup>43</sup>

The following morning, Cheatham’s battalion continued clearing the hospital complex with all three companies on line. Two of the companies, H on the right and G in the center, met with relatively minor resistance, and quickly consolidated their positions. Company F on the battalion’s left flank, however, took heavy fire from its front and pulled back to call in both 81mm mortars and for one of the few times, even 105mm howitzer support from Marine artillery forward gun sites. About 40 high explosive 105mm shells fell upon the enemy. By late afternoon, the NVA broke contact under fire and the Marine company secured the last of the hospital buildings. Down’s company sustained 4 dead and 11 wounded, but killed over 20 of the enemy.<sup>44\*</sup>

In the interim, Captain Meadow’s Company G, from the hospital complex, launched its attack against the provincial prison, just to the southwest. While the 1st Platoon provided protective fire from the second story of the main hospital building, Marine mortar-men and 106mm recoilless rifle gunners blasted a hole in the prison walls. One Marine corporal remembered that the Marines fired CS canisters into the gaping hole, hoping to force the enemy troops out, but “they threw it [the CS] back against us.”<sup>45</sup>

\* Then captain, now Brigadier General Downs, recalled years later, that after securing the hospital complex, his company entered a nearby building by the Perfume River. As Downs joined his men, one of his platoon sergeants “had two Vietnamese spread eagled up against the wall.” When the company commander asked who they were, the sergeant answered that one of them was “trying to tell me that he is the mayor of Hue.” One of the Vietnamese turned out to be Lieutenant Colonel Pham Van Khoa, the South Vietnamese Thua Thien Province Chief who had been hiding until then in an attic cubby hole with his body guard. Downs Taped Comments, Dec92. See also Chapter 12.

Believing the NVA were also equipped with gas masks, the Marine infantry, wearing their masks, cautiously searched the rooms and cells of the prison beginning with the top floor. As a Marine squad leader, Sergeant G. B. Zachary, related: “Clear the top deck and work your way down.” Second Lieutenant Michael A. McNeil, Company G’s 1st Platoon commander, described the taking of his unit’s first prisoner, an NVA sniper, equipped with both a SKS and a M1 rifle and eight grenades. Although McNeil had a Thompson submachine gun in the man’s face, the prisoner tried to jump Sergeant Zachary and take one of the latter’s grenades. The Marine lieutenant wrestled the NVA soldier down to the floor with a “half nelson” and then bound his hands behind his back. Yet, the Marines “had to carry him down, with him fighting all the way.” According to McNeil’s account, his platoon took eight more prisoners, who threw “down their weapons, raised their hands and came walking out.”\*\* In the capture of the prison, Company G killed 36 NVA at a cost of only 1 Marine wounded.<sup>46</sup>

On the 2d Battalion’s right flank, Captain Christmas’ Company H encountered tough going after it left the hospital and pushed forward toward the nearby provincial headquarters. Like its sister companies, Company H employed mortars, gas, and 106mm recoilless rifles to soften up the objective. A Marine driver of one of the flatbed mules mounting a 106mm recoilless rifle later stated:

[The] NVA threw everything they had at us. We took incoming mortars and rockets and automatic fire. We had to push the mule out, fire, and pull it back in under heavy sniper fire while we were firing. We opened up the way for the ‘grunts’ [the infantry] to take the building.

Two Marine tanks came up to support the attack. One of the tanks took two direct hits from B-40 rockets but continued to fire. In addition, the Marines expended over 100 81mm mortar shells, 60 recoilless rifle rounds, and 4 E8 CS launchers in support of the assault on the headquarters. Wearing their gas masks, the tired Marines of Company H, in midafternoon, finally overwhelmed the NVA defenders in the provincial headquarters. They killed 27 enemy soldiers, took

\*\* Lieutenant McNeil’s version is somewhat at odds with the official after-action report. The report shows only two prisoners captured in the fight for the prison. If the report is accurate, McNeil may have confused the five ARVN soldiers and two South Vietnamese prison officials who were liberated in the battle with North Vietnamese soldiers. 2dLt Michael A. McNeil in LCpl Charles D. Bedford et al., *intvw*, 10 May 68, Tape 2673 (Oral HistColl, MCHC); 2/5 AAR Hue City.



Photo is from the Abel Collection  
*Happy Marines from Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines display the Viet Cong banner that flew from a flagpole in the courtyard of the Provincial Building. The Marines raised the American flag in its stead, ignoring for a time a MACV directive that forbade the display of the U.S. flag without the South Vietnamese flag beside it.*

3 prisoners, and captured an assortment of enemy small arms and ammunition. The company sustained 1 dead and 14 wounded in the fight.<sup>47</sup>

The province headquarters had served as a symbol for both the NVA and the Marines in the modern city. A now-frayed flag of the Viet Cong National Liberation Front had flown from the flagpole in the courtyard of the provincial building since the NVA initial takeover of the city. Immediately after the capture of the headquarters, two Marines rushed into the courtyard and hauled down the enemy ensign. Gunnery Sergeant Frank A. Thomas “vaulted through a hole in the wall” and ran to the flagpole clutching an American flag. As a CBS television crew filmed the event, Thomas raised the Stars and Stripes on the pole.\* According to Thomas, “We never knew exactly where the flag came from, but when we said we wanted an American flag to raise, one of our Marines produced one a very few minutes later.” For this one time, the Marines ignored the MACV directive that forbade the display of the U.S. flag without the South Vietnamese national banner beside it.<sup>48\*\*</sup>

The capture of the provincial headquarters was more than symbolic. The building apparently had served as the command post for the *4th NVA Regiment*. Once the headquarters fell to the Marines much of the enemy organized resistance in southern Hue collapsed. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham remarked on the enemy’s lack of maneuverability. Once the Marines overcame a NVA strongpoint, although a gap might exist between the Marine companies, the enemy troops “never enveloped, they never came back around behind us or anything.” As Lieutenant Smith from the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines wrote, from 6 February forward “[Company] A began to roll and although we took more casualties, we never had a day to match” the earlier fighting. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel was even more emphatic:

He [the NVA] seemed to lose his stomach for the fight . . . once we started rolling . . . the main force sort

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\* Former *Washington Post* Correspondent Peter Braestrup commented that as the flag was raised, “NVA soldiers in covered foxholes were discovered at the same time—and shown on CBS film.” Peter Braestrup, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94–Jan95] (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\* Brigadier General Downs, who commanded Company F in 1968, related that in September 1991 when the Aegis Cruiser CG 66 *Hue City* was officially commissioned, “The first flag raised on that ship was the same flag that was raised in front of the Provincial Headquarters Building on 6Feb68 and the flag was raised by Gunny Thomas and the two Marines who assisted him.” Downs Taped Comments, Dec92.

of evaporated . . . and left some local force—rinky dinks . . . when his defense crumbled, it crumbled.<sup>49</sup>

On the morning of 7 February, both Marine battalions renewed their offensive. On the right flank, Cheatham's battalion with two companies on line and one in reserve made rapid progress. According to the battalion's entry for the day in its after-action report, "it became quite obvious the enemy had retreated leaving bodies and weapons behind." On the left flank, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines also moved forward, but at a slower pace, and met pockets of heavy resistance. The NVA knocked out an Ontos supporting the battalion with a B-40 rocket, killing the driver and wounding the vehicle's commander. After a firefight, a platoon from Company B retrieved the damaged vehicle, evacuated the wounded Marine, and recovered the body of the dead man.<sup>50</sup>

By 10 February, despite some desperate efforts by isolated groups of NVA and the occasional sniper, the two Marine battalions had reached their objectives. With the Marines in control south of the Perfume River and the NVA still holding fast in the Citadel north of the river, Hue was now indeed two cities. Three days earlier, North Vietnamese sappers had blown the main bridge across the Perfume, literally dividing the city in two. Marine engineers destroyed the Le Loi Bridge at the end of Le Loi Street to prevent the enemy from bringing reinforcements into southern Hue from the west. At the same time, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, reinforced by Company G, had secured the northern end of the wrecked An Cuu Bridge over the Phu Cam Canal. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham and the remaining companies of the 2d Bat-

talion prepared to cross the Phu Cam and enter a new area of operations south of the city.<sup>51</sup>

In clearing the modern city, the Marines took a heavy toll of the enemy, but at a high cost to themselves. The Americans had accounted for over 1,000 enemy dead, took 6 prisoners, and detained 89 suspects. Marine casualties included 38 dead and about 320 wounded. Company H had been particularly hard hit. Every officer, including Captain Christmas, and most of the staff NCOs had sustained wounds. Corporals were now squad leaders. One Marine from Company G observed, "we would start getting new guys and it just seemed that every time we got new guys we would lose them just as fast as we got them." Another Marine from the same unit remarked, "the stink—you had to load up so many wounded, the blood would dry on your hands. In two or three days you would smell like death itself."<sup>52</sup>

With the Marine lines secure, the South Vietnamese authorities assisted by U.S. military and civilian advisors began to bring some semblance of order into southern Hue. They established a refugee center at the University for the hapless civilians unexpectedly caught in the middle of a war. The National Police began to take harsh measures against both civilians and ARVN troops participating in the wholesale looting that occurred behind the Marine advance. By 13 February, Marine engineers had built a pontoon bridge alongside the destroyed An Cuu span and Marine truck convoys brought in much-needed supplies and food for both the troops and the civilian population. Although the battle for southern Hue was largely over, the fight for the Citadel had just begun.<sup>53</sup>