

CHAPTER 5

The Quang Tri Border Areas

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

No Change in Tactics

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

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

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

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

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

The DMZ Front

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The proposed scheme of maneuver called for a three

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192846





Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center

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

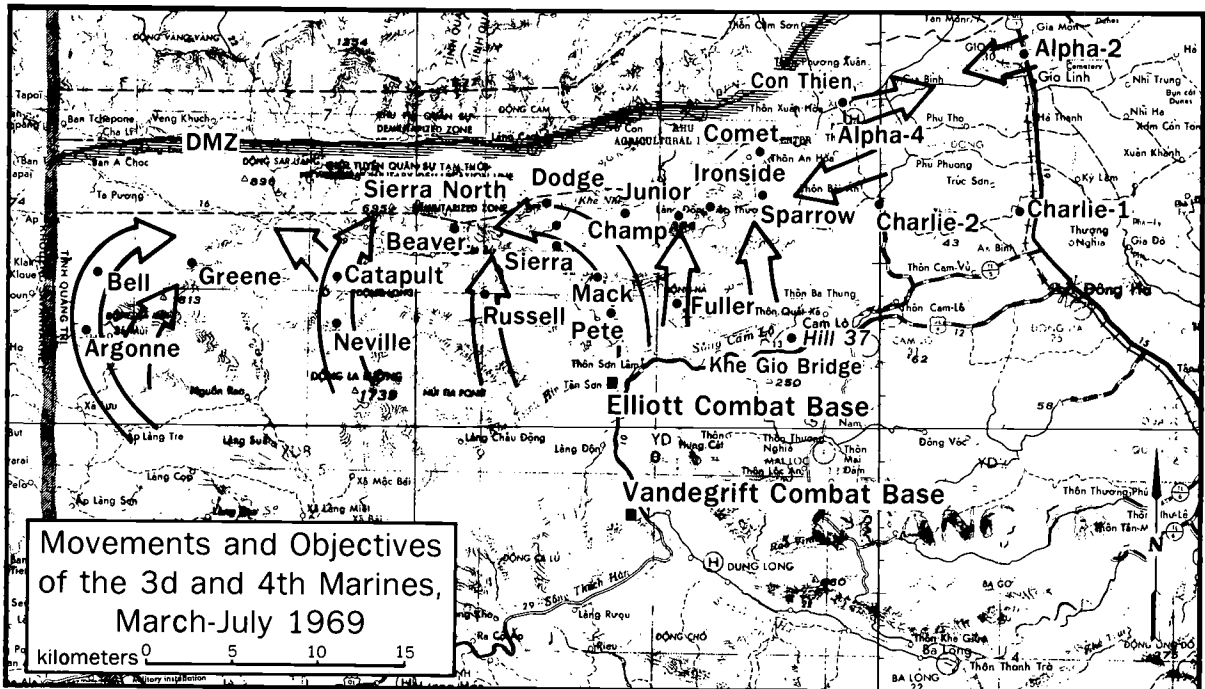
ion maintained patrols within the DMZ, as well as in the vicinity of Landing Zones Sierra and Mack, both designed to halt enemy infiltration, until the end of the operation.

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

First Battalion Marines continued search operations

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

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



See Reference Map, Sections 1, 2, 3

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

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

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

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

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

Brigade Mauls 27th

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

The 9th Battles the 36th

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Vietnam Salient

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

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

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center





Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

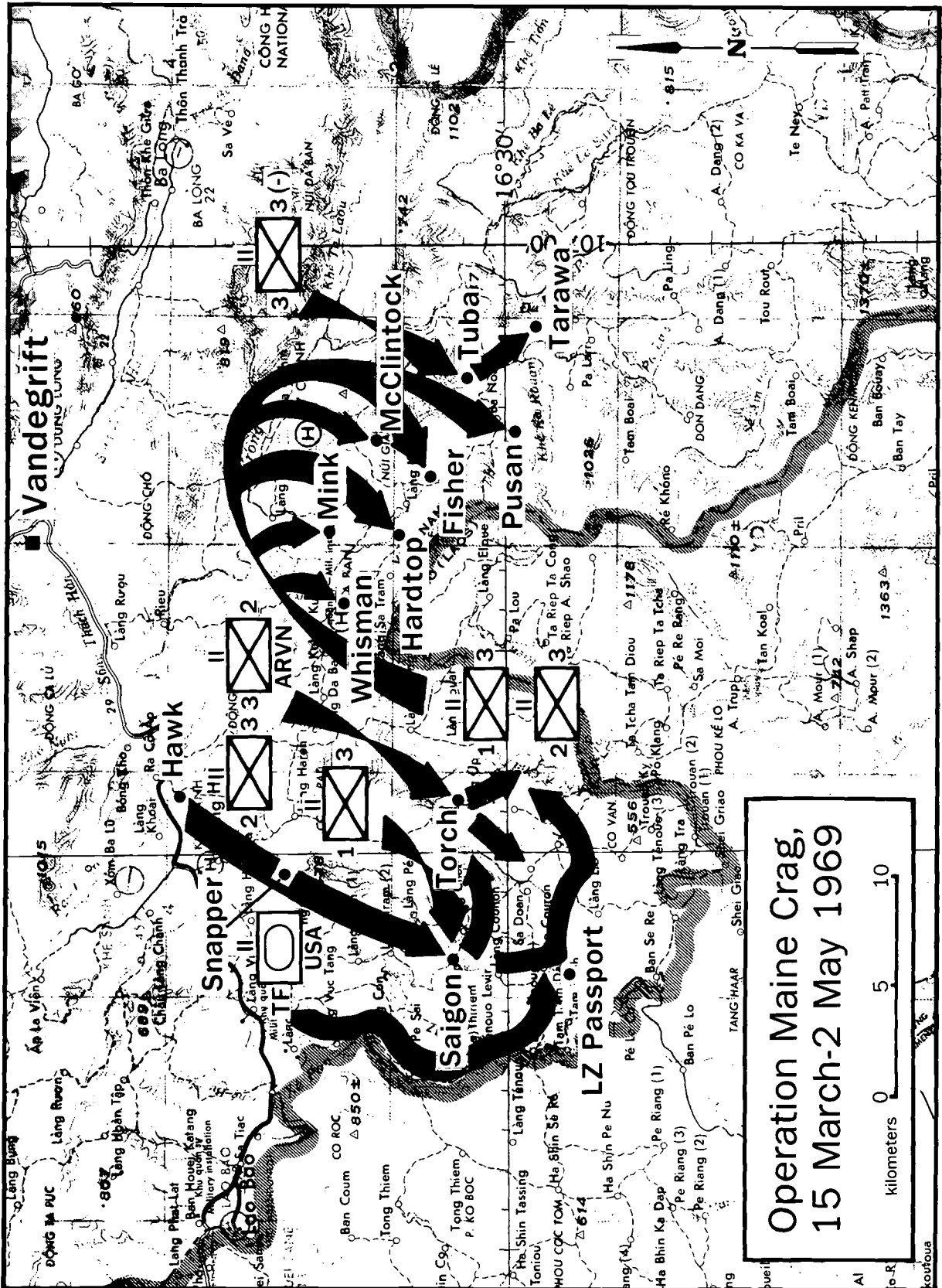
east-bound enemy trucks approach their position. Allowing the first truck, which was empty, to pass, the ambush opened fire on the second, destroying it and its cargo of 122mm rocket and mortar ammunition. The Marines then attacked the security element of the lead truck, which had halted a short distance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

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

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

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

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



See Reference Map, Sections 10, 11



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Apache Snow

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

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

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

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

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

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193758

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

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

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

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

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

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

As elements of the two battalions converged on Hill

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

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

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

Author’s Collection



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

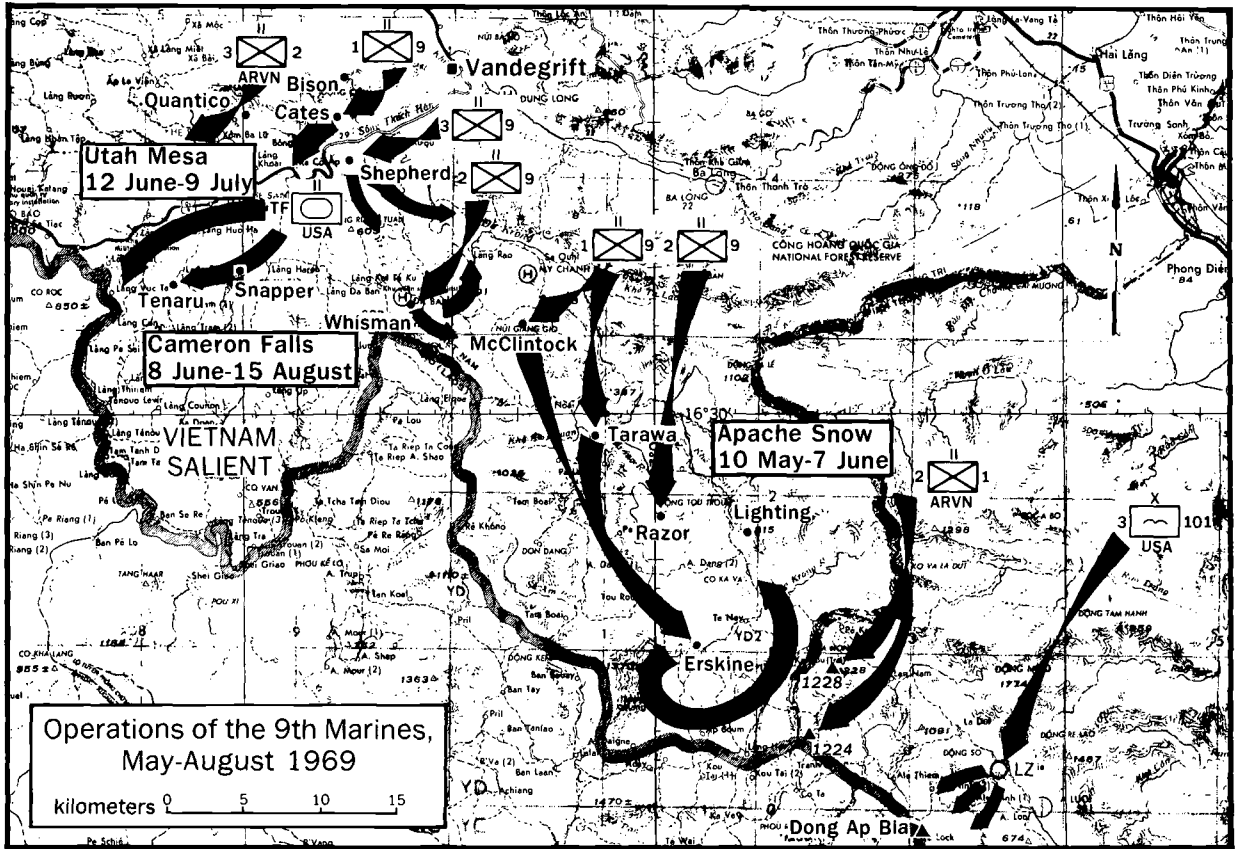
On 2 July, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, under Major Robert L. Modjeski, who had replaced Lieutenant Colonel Fox on the 22d, helilifted 14 kilometers south of Khe Sanh in order to reactivate FSB Spark and conduct sweeps of Route 926 in support of Task Force Guadalcanal. Shortly after reoccupying the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

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

Central DMZ Battles

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

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



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

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

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

stallations and roving patrols of the surrounding terrain.²⁴

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

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

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

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

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

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

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193235



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eastern Quang Tri and Thua Thien

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



Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PART II
SOUTHERN I CORPS BATTLEGROUND

CHAPTER 6

Destruction of Base Area 112

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

Defense of Da Nang

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

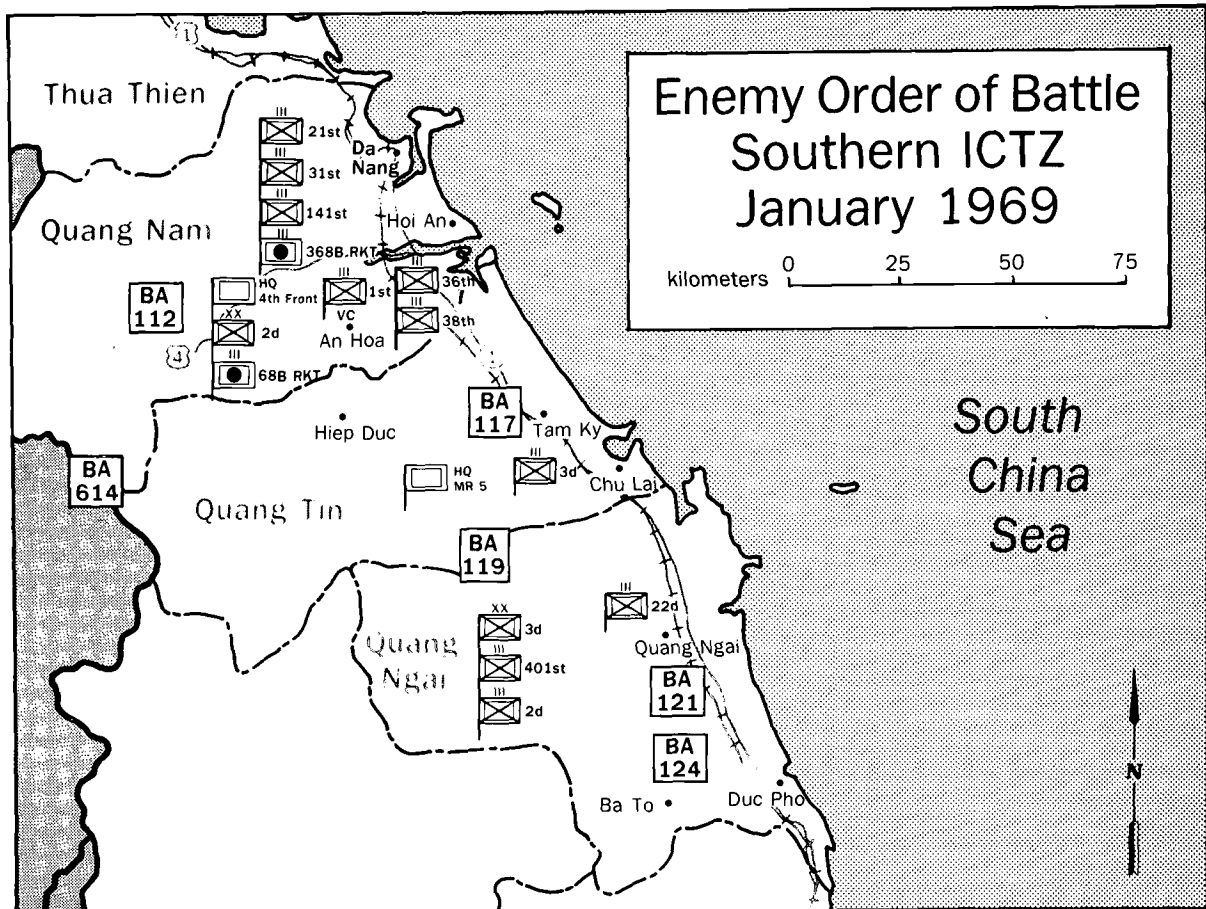
terrain rose westward into the jungle-covered mountains of the Annamite Chain and opened out to the south and southwest into the flat, treeline-broken, rice-paddy country of the An Hoa-Song Thu Bon basins, and Go Noi Island. It was heavily populated terrain which offered the enemy numerous places of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

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

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

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

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



See Reference Map, Sections 18-36

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

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

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

Attack into 112

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



Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371820

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

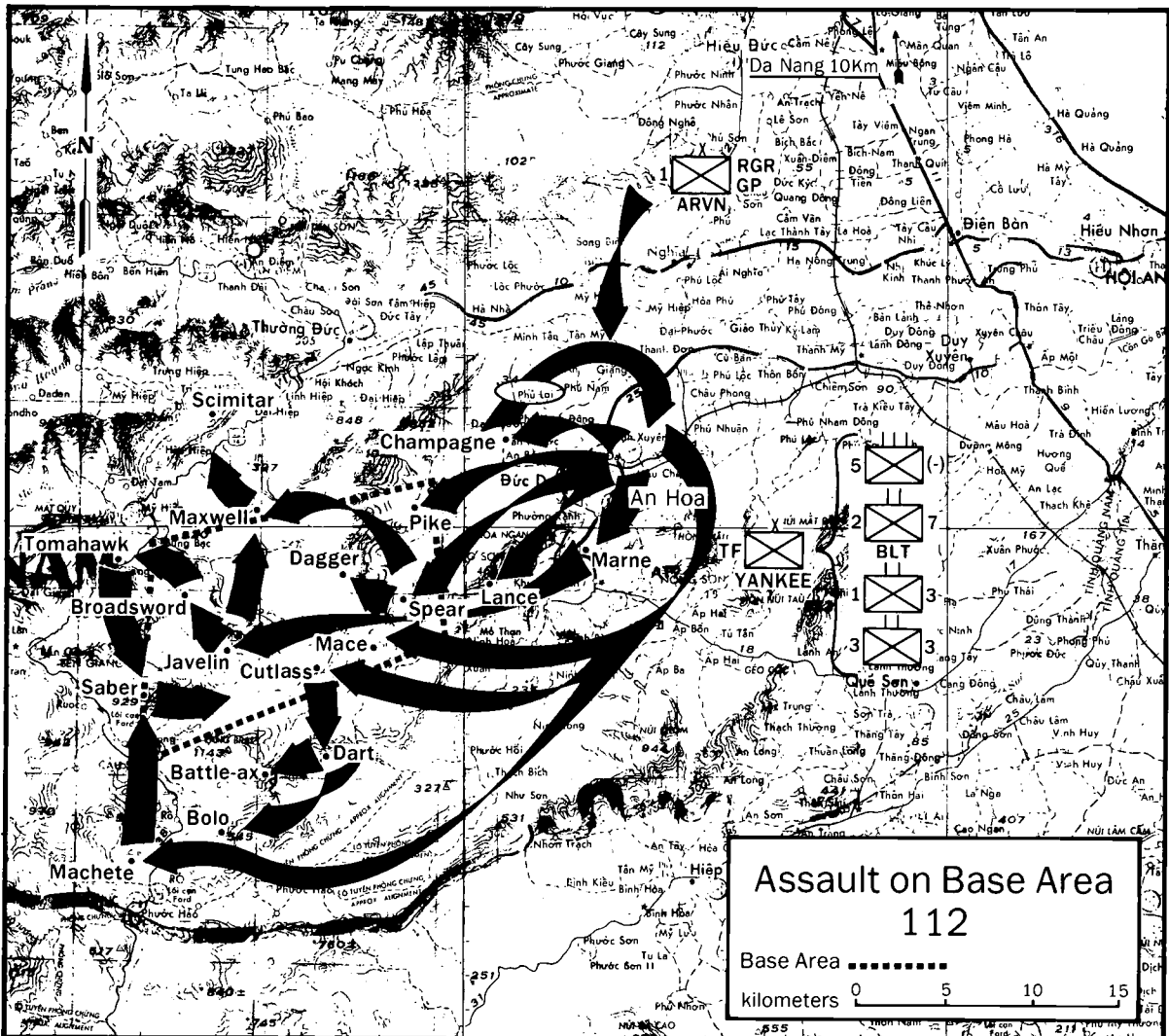
parallel axis north and west of Maxwell, and then developing COB Scimitar on Mai Guy ridgeline overlooking the confluence of the Song Cai and Song Boung. By 5 February, units of Task Force Yankee were operating along the entire length of the Song Cai within Base Area 112, while 1st Force Reconnaissance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

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

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

Marine Corps Historical Collection





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A372866

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A Little Urban Renewal"

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

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

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

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800567



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

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

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

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



Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marine Corps Historical Collection



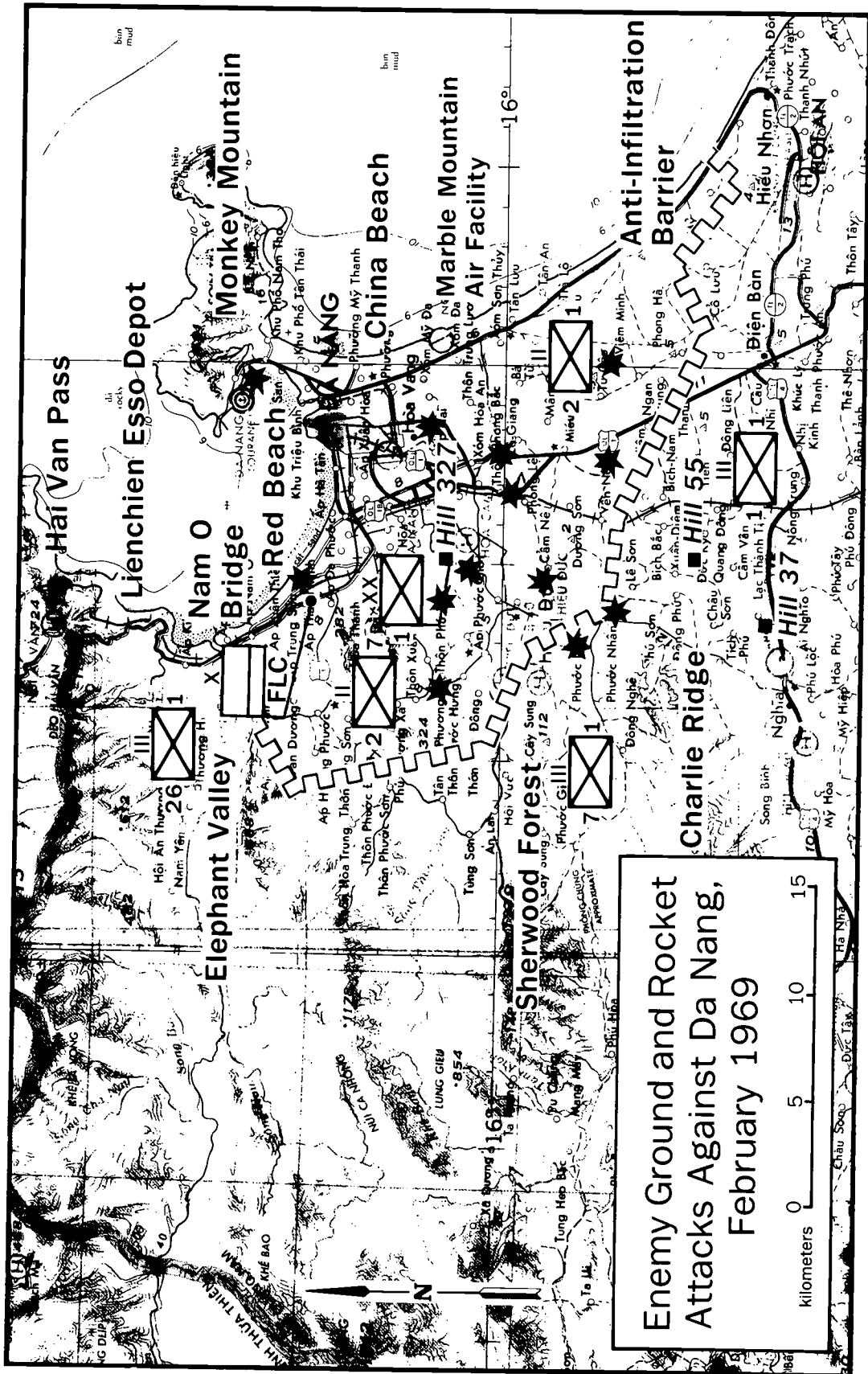
of ambushes in order to catch any enemy troops using the facility. Twenty soldiers attempting to move into the base camp activated the first trap shortly before midnight. By 0200 the following morning, Company D had surprised two additional NVA units. Of a total of 45 enemy observed and engaged, the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

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

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

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

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



**Enemy Ground and Rocket
Attacks Against Da Nang,
February 1969**

See Reference Map, Sections 26, 27

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

Americal's TAOI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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