

board the helicopter. That instant, mortar rounds struck the landing zone, mortally injuring Lieutenant Bruggeman and dispersing his men. As the Marines scrambled on board the helicopter, Worth was not with them. As Warrant Officer Sheridan glanced about him, he saw a few shell-shocked Vietnamese soldiers, but all the rest of the ARVN force had left.

The aircraft took off, flew to the Ai Tu Combat Base to pick up ANGLICO's HM1 Thomas E. "Doc" Williamson, USN, who attempted life-saving measures on Bruggeman. With the corpsman on board, Sheridan then headed for Da Nang. Lieutenant Bruggeman died of wounds halfway back to the medical facility. Corporal James Worth was never seen again after the fall of Alpha 2. He joined the ranks of the missing Americans, who were either dead or captured at the war's end.*¹⁹

As Alpha 4, Alpha 2, Fuller, Khe Gio, and Holcomb were lost, General Giai moved his division headquarters to the rear. With the departure of the bulk of Team 155 south of the Thach Han River, VNMC Brigade 258 headquarters was ordered to leave its 3d VNMC Battalion at Dong Ha and to move to Ai Tu to assume overall control of the division forward command post during the displacement. As Lieutenant Colonel Ngo Van Dinh and his staff arrived at Ai Tu around 1500, together with the 6th VNMC Battalion which had come up from FSB Barbara, a barrage of more than 800 rounds of artillery greeted them.²⁰

The Collapse of the Ring of Steel

At 1620, 1 April, Lieutenant Colonel Normand Heon, assistant senior advisor, Team 155, had recommended the withdrawal of all the remaining U.S. personnel at Ai Tu. The U.S. Marine advisors, not subject to this order, stayed with their Vietnamese counterparts. Two U.S. Army advisors also voluntarily remained with the 56th ARVN Regiment at Camp Carroll. The forward command post at Ai Tu, manned by 30 Americans, both officers and enlisted men, represented the U.S. Marine Corps, Army, and Air Force. Now under Lieutenant Colonel Turley, each man volunteered to remain to operate the division-level combined arms coordination center, the only command and control center north of Da Nang with working communications.²¹

By 1700, Charlie 1 and Charlie 2 were abandoned. As the fire support bases below the DMZ fell and were

*He was listed missing in action and declared dead by the Secretary of the Navy under Title 37, U.S. Code, Section 555 on 17 December 1976.

evacuated, soldiers and civilians thronged southward and were infiltrated by NVA forward observers. Refugees moving east along Highway 9 reported that the 27th NVA Regiment was at Cam Lo. Refugees and ARVN stragglers came across the Dong Ha bridge in an unbroken stream. ARVN units were fragmented and ineffective. No kind of identification of rank or unit was in evidence. Approximately one out of three "fatigue-clad persons" carried a weapon. Press reports called it a "3d Infantry Division debacle . . . as government troops panicked."

Colonel Metcalf observed later that it took a great deal of expertise to withdraw correctly in combat, "in the sense of being able to deploy yourself by echelon down a highway or out of an area." With the hasty retreat of the ARVN forces, Metcalf learned that you "can't sit down as the senior advisor with the division commander or the senior advisor with the regimental commander and say well, this is the way the book says."²²

Now Communist T-54 main battle tanks, PT-76 amphibious tanks, and BTR-50 armored personnel carriers drove across the DMZ creating panic among the confused refugees.**²³ As "tank panic" took hold, soldiers of the 3d ARVN Division threw their weapons and equipment away and joined the civilian exodus. General Giai, while hastily formulating a defensive plan, personally attempted to stem the wholesale desertions of the DMZ defensive positions by his soldiers, but all order had been lost. Whatever Giai's faults, he was not a coward, recalled an Army advisor at the time.²⁴

As soldiers of the 57th ARVN Regiment streamed across the Dong Ha Bridge, Giai grabbed them and demanded to know why they were running and was told "tanks, tanks!" Giai replied, "Show me a tank and I will go with you, and we will destroy it together." Personal example was to no avail. By darkness on 1 April every ARVN combat base north of the Cam Lo

**The North Vietnamese had always had armored units and some vehicles had been used in the south in the past. More recent experience was available with the NVA use of armor during the 1971 Lam Son 719 incursion into Laos and in their attack on the Plain of Jars. The two armored units committed—the 202d and 203d NVA Armored Regiments, as well as the infantry divisions, used a variety of armored vehicles, differing in nomenclature and technical details. After action analysis revealed the vehicles to be a mix of Soviet and Chinese manufactured equipment, for example: the Soviet T-54 or the Chinese Type 59, the Soviet PT-76 amphibious tank or the similar Chinese Type 63, the Soviet BTR-50 armored personnel carrier or the Chinese Model 1967, and the Soviet M46 130mm gun or the Chinese Type 59. For simplicity in the narrative, the terms used are those found in the contemporary records. (Besch comments)



North Vietnamese Army Photo

An infantry attack in a "combat" photograph by the North Vietnamese. The soldier to the left of the tower waves a red and blue National Liberation Front banner, despite this being a NVA unit. The soldier on the right carries a rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

River had fallen.²⁵ The NVA had taken a mere 48 hours to crush the northern "ring of steel." At best, the retreating ARVN had served to slow the NVA because the enemy had deployed into battlefield formations.

At 1900 on 1 April 1972, Colonel Metcalf left Ai Tu Combat Base with General Giai for the new command post located in the Citadel in Quang Tri City. Since the main 3d ARVN Division command post displaced to Quang Tri City without maintaining the normal duplicate command and communications radio channels, Turley and his small staff were the only facility which had the capability of controlling all U.S. supporting arms. During the initial critical days of the invasion, this small band of Americans operated

around the clock recommending B-52 Arc Light strikes, directing tactical air support, and adjusting Vietnamese artillery and naval gunfire support. All the fire support coordination in Quang Tri Province for the next few days was carried out by 30 men in one bunker north of the Thach Han.

Although good communications were maintained with FRAC's operations center in Da Nang as well as with the 3d ARVN Division main command post at Quang Tri City, at no time did Turley receive any major tactical guidance from these higher headquarters. General Frederick J. Kroesen's newly organized FRAC headquarters had replaced the Army's XXIV Corps, which only 10 days earlier had departed for Japan. The



Photo courtesy of LCdr Francis C. Brown, USN

American helicopter support in the 3d ARVN Division area of operations was under the direct control of the senior American advisor of MACV Advisory Team 155. This Bell UH-1 Iroquois and its crew are on standby at the "Tiger Pad" at the Quang Tri Citadel. Support by these aircraft was in great demand during the hectic days at the offensive's start.

advisory command, recalled General Kroesen, was "heavily weighted to provide administrative assistance and logistical advice," with only a token intelligence and operations section. It was neither manned nor equipped to monitor the combat activity or to provide tactical guidance.²⁶

Turley continued to operate in his own fashion, relying on his previous experience and Marine Corps training.* Brigadier General Thomas W. Bowen, USA, the

*Lieutenant Colonel Turley was awarded a Legion of Merit in part for his advisory actions that were credited with the delay of the multi-division attack in MR 1 that allowed I Corps units to organize a defense in Quang Tri Province.

deputy FRAC commander, authorized him the use of B-52 Arc Light bombing to halt the attack. An unidentified Air Force "general" called directly from Saigon and told Turley to give him the center of impact for desired targets and that he would provide them as requested. Turley asked for strikes on areas that earlier sensor "readings" indicated were assembly areas or likely enemy avenues of approach. The U.S. Air Force flew 64 B-52 strikes called by Turley on these targets. Despite these strikes the enemy closed on the ARVN defenses south of the Cam Lo, Mieu Giang, and Cua Viet Rivers. The situation was critical.²⁷

CHAPTER 4

The Defense of Dong Ha

*The Easter Sunday Crisis—The Dong Ha Bridge—Action at the Bridge—Reaction at Saigon
Camp Carroll Surrenders—Mai Loc Exposed—The Dong Ha Bridge Destroyed
Callsign Bat-21—Mai Loc Evacuated*

The Easter Sunday Crisis

Easter Sunday, 2 April 1972, proved to be a fateful day for the defenders of northern Quang Tri Province. Sunday morning, things were grim at Mai Loc, where VNMC Brigade 147 remained under constant enemy artillery fire. Bad weather limited the effectiveness of the airborne forward air controllers and air support. The 155mm guns at the combat base had depleted their ammunition in largely futile counterfire. After almost three days of constant bombardment and no radio contact with the battalion at Sarge or the two companies on Holcomb, no supporting B-52 strikes, and rapidly depleting supplies, Major Jim R. Joy, the brigade advisor, requested help from the 3d ARVN Division to resupply small arms ammunition, artillery rounds, and food.¹

The survivors from Sarge and Nui Ba Ho started to reappear after a night on the run. Major Tran Xuan Quang, the 4th VNMC Battalion commander, and Major Walter E. Boomer, had decided at daybreak to stop evading and strike out for friendly lines at Mai Loc combat base. Just as the group of survivors left the jungle to enter a cleared, hilly area, an NVA unit attacked. The exhausted Marines, with little ammunition and some without weapons, broke and ran, leaving their wounded comrades. Major Boomer covered the retreat with his own fire. His delaying action allowed the dispirited troops to withdraw to the east. Boomer, who now was no longer with the battalion commander, guided eight other Vietnamese Marines to the comparative safety of Mai Loc.

Lieutenant Colonel Gerald Turley's position at Ai Tu as an involved visitor by this time had become one of grave responsibility and direct authority. The only optimistic note was a report from a naval gunfire ship which informed him that the 31st MAU was present on Seventh Fleet amphibious assault ships within sight of the beach. At 0915, Colonel Metcalf telephoned Lieutenant Colonel Turley from the newly established 3d ARVN Division command post in the Citadel of Quang Tri City, and told him, "You are directed to take over as senior American advisor to the 3d ARVN Division, Forward, by order of the Commanding General, FRAC."²

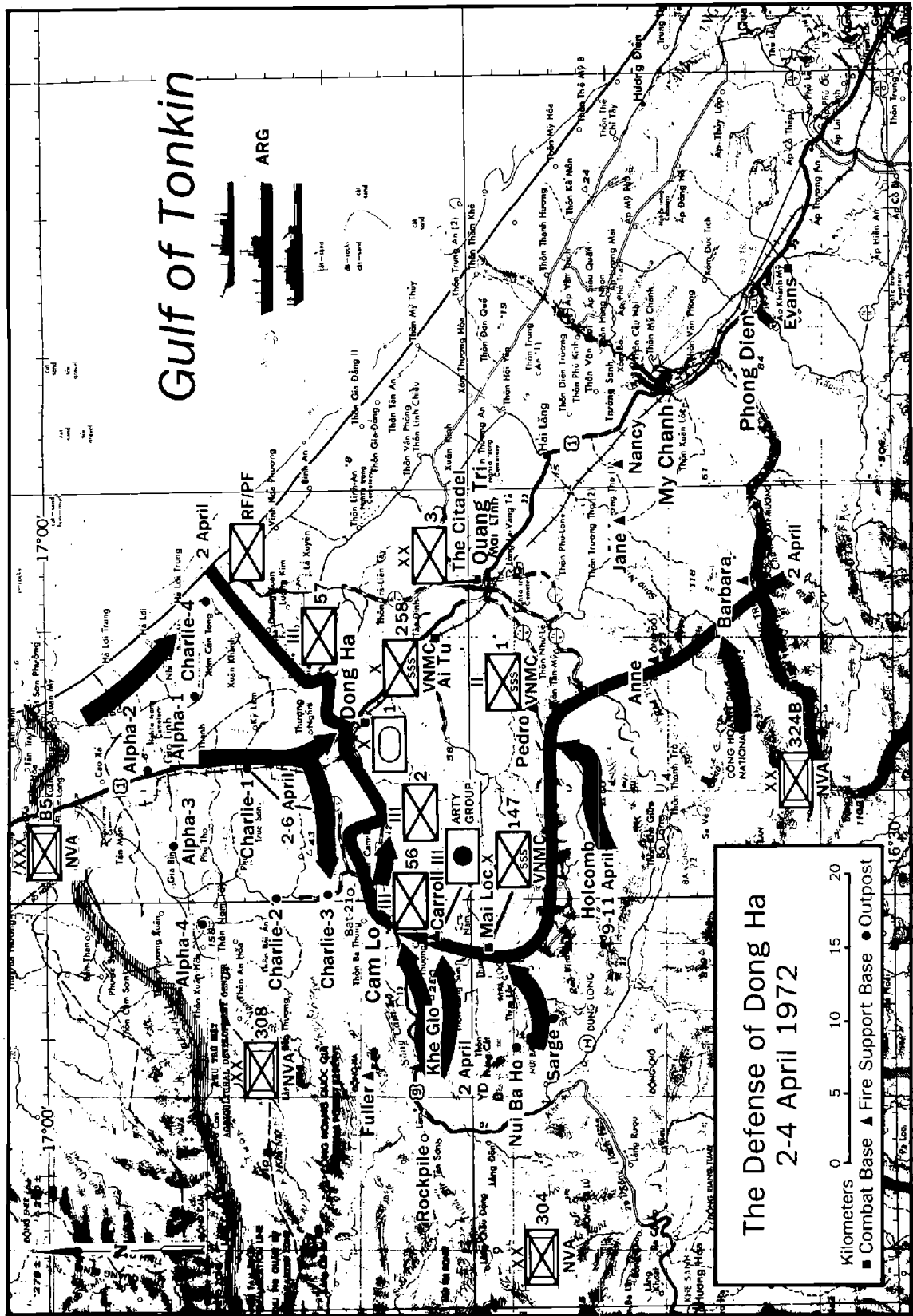
The battered and disorganized 57th ARVN Regiment, which almost 24 hours earlier had evacuated its command post at Charlie 1, radioed Ai Tu around 1015 and reported NVA armor on QL-1 in the vicinity of Alpha 2. The radio message reported the vehicles as 20 Soviet-built PT-76 and T-54 tanks. When asked if they could stop the tanks north of the Mieu Giang River, the unidentified voice indicated that they could not. Turley passed this information to FRAC headquarters, as it appeared that the road to Dong Ha was wide open to a rapidly moving enemy armored force.

The Dong Ha Bridge

Outside of Dong Ha was the 3d VNMC Battalion, with Captain John W. Ripley as its advisor. This meager blocking force had to gain enough time for the 3d ARVN Division to organize a new defensive line along the Mieu Giang River. With the report of advancing NVA armor, Lieutenant Colonel Ngo Van Dinh, Marine Brigade 258 commander at Ai Tu, immediately ordered Major Le Ba Binh, 3d battalion commander, to defend Dong Ha and its bridges "at all costs." Dinh also sent four of the 6th VNMC Battalion's jeep-mounted 106mm recoilless rifles north to provide antitank support. At Quang Tri, Colonel Ngo Van Chung, deputy commander of the 3d ARVN Division, in the absence of General Giai, committed the freshly painted and newly received M48 battle tanks of the 20th ARVN Tank Battalion, also to meet this threat.³

Major Binh had little intelligence on the situation he now faced. A North Vietnamese red and gold flag was seen flying from the girders of an old railway bridge over the Mieu Giang River. When Major Binh heard a spurious radio report of the fall of Dong Ha, he turned to Captain Ripley and said, "If you please, I am going to send a message on my command net." He sent over both Vietnamese and American channels the message that there were "Vietnamese Marines in Dong Ha" and "as long as one Marine draws a breath of life, Dong Ha will belong to us."⁴

Major Easley, Senior Advisor to Brigade 258, had called Captain Ripley and told him to expect the worst and that reinforcements were not anticipated. Easley said that radio contact with the 57th ARVN had been





David Burnett Contact Press Images

At the 3d VNMC Battalion command post at Dong Ha, the American is Capt John W. Ripley. Bending over the map is the battalion commander, Maj Le Ba Binh. Note the number of radios used to control the unit and the ARVN M113 armored personnel carrier.

lost, NVA tanks were on the move southward, refugees were streaming across the main Dong Ha bridge, and the brigade headquarters had to remain at Ai Tu Combat Base to maintain perimeter security for the forward command post of the division.

At approximately 1100, the Marines were joined by elements of the 20th ARVN Tank Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Ton Ta Ly, with U.S. Army Major James E. Smock as his counterpart. General Giai designated Lieutenant Colonel Ly, who was senior in rank to Major Binh, as overall area commander. As control was passed, the two units' command posts were consolidated in an M113 armored personnel carrier (APC). By 1115, forward elements of one company of the 3d Battalion were just short of the principal Dong Ha bridge, waiting for the rest of their unit to join them.

As two rifle companies of the 3d Battalion moved into Dong Ha from the west to establish a defensive position on either side of the main bridge, a third company was extended westward along Highway 9 to cover the railroad bridge. The position was in full view of the NVA on the north bank, particularly the NVA

soldiers at the railroad bridge. As the battalion command group, now mounted on tanks, moved past the outskirts of Dong Ha, a devastating artillery barrage hit it. All troop movements south of the river stopped. Ripley described it as an "absolute fire storm." Shells blew buildings and defensive structures apart. The enemy artillery took its toll of civilian refugees fleeing the battle. The march to the bridge had to loop to the south to enter Dong Ha from a less exposed direction.

At one point, a large group clad in ARVN uniforms passed the Marines, "not a civilian refugee among them, just a huge glob of men—moving south, neatly dressed and covered, but with no rank or insignia. About every third man was armed." It was more than Major Binh could take. He leaped off his tank, grabbed one of the fleeing soldiers and screamed at him, "Where are you going?" The startled soldier replied that it was "no use, no use." Major Binh drew his pistol and killed the soldier on the spot, but the retreating horde continued southward unimpeded. No one even took notice of the incident as they skirted the fallen soldier and continued southward.

The 36th NVA Regiment attempted to cross the par-



David Burnett Contact Press Images

Other Americans at Dong Ha were with the 20th ARVN Tank Battalion. Maj James E. Smock, USA, shown here, was crucial to the destruction of the Dong Ha bridges. He is wearing the standard American helmet and protective body armor or "flak jacket."

tially destroyed railroad bridge. When the NVA infantrymen gained a foothold on the south side of the railroad bridge, Captain Ripley called for a continuous naval gunfire mission. His request went directly to the fire support coordinators at the Ai Tu tactical operations center. First Lieutenant Eisenstein, in charge of the ANGLICO liaison team, contacted Commander Williams J. Thearle, USN, commanding officer of the USS *Buchanan* (DDG 14). The *Buchanan*, a guided missile destroyer, was the flagship of Naval Gunfire Support Task Unit 70.8.9. The task unit included the destroyers *Buchanan*, *Strauss* (DDG 16), *Waddell* (DDG 24), *Hamner* (DD 718), and *Ander-son* (DD 786). Ripley called for interdiction fire in the vicinity of the railroad bridge, 300 meters to the right and left of the bridge. There was almost instant response. The ANGLICO team, consisting of Lieutenant Eisenstein and Sergeant Joe D. Swift, also

worked up a number of defensive fire plans in the vicinity of QL-1 and called for fire on unobserved targets. Four columns of black smoke indicated that the ships' automatic 5-inch guns had found their targets.

For more than an hour continuous naval gunfire interdicted the approaches to both bridges. Ripley requested that fire support boxes of approximately 1,000 x 2,000 meters be shifted between the bridges.* It was a very effective and responsive system: no fire commands, no map checks, no adjustments, just a request for more fire at the railroad bridge. Upon hearing tanks on the north bank about 200 meters up QL-1, Ripley called for another fire mission which bracketed the area.

The 3d VNMC Battalion continued to deploy under the protective fire of U.S. Navy ships. Shortly, two companies of Marines and the 3d Troop of the 20th ARVN Tank Battalion moved forward and occupied Dong Ha and established defensive positions on the south side of the main bridge. The 1st Troop and Headquarters' Section occupied the high ground southwest of the village, a position which provided good observation of QL-1 north of the Mieu Giang River. Upon seeing four enemy PT-76 tanks traveling along the banks of the river just east of Dong Ha, Ripley shifted the naval gunfire. With responsive and accurate fire, the ships destroyed all four tanks. Ripley was watching from a vantage point. He recalled the incident:

We could see them burning clearly. My counterpart, the Marine Battalion commander and the tank battalion commander were both observing this superb display of naval gunfire. When the tanks were hit and burning, both were surprised and elated in seeing the potential of NGF. I was to receive many requests for NGF by the Vietnamese after this attack.⁵

Other enemy tanks, however, appeared on the horizon, raising "rooster tails" of mud and dust as they barreled down QL-1 toward the main Dong Ha bridge. When the tanks were within 1,000 meters of the bridge, the weather cleared, and Vietnamese-piloted A-1 McDonnell Douglas Skyraider aircraft, orbiting overhead, dived through the cloud opening and bombed and strafed the fast-moving tanks. The VNAF pilots destroyed 11 tanks, but one pilot was forced to bail out of his burning aircraft. The violent and savage noise of battle strangely quieted as opposing elements stopped firing and looked skyward as the pilot's parachute blossomed and he drifted slowly toward imminent capture on the north side of the river.

*Boxes are rectangular areas in which naval gunfire projectiles impact.



Government of Vietnam Photo

South Vietnamese troop movement was hampered by large numbers of refugees on the roads, including military stragglers. Communist forces used them to screen their own deployment, causing destruction and the needless deaths of those fleeing the battle area.

The 20th ARVN Tank Battalion was equipped with American M48 main battle tanks. Armed with a 90mm gun and range finder, it held its own against enemy armor.

Photo courtesy of Capt Edwin W. Besch, USMC (Ret)





North Vietnamese Army Photo

After the penetration of forward South Vietnamese defenses by infantry and artillery, North Vietnamese tanks were used to make rapid advances to secure critical locations. Light amphibious tanks armed with 76mm guns are shown crossing a river early in the offensive. The vehicles carry infantrymen on their upper decks and are camouflaged.

The cleared skies permitted the Vietnamese A-1s to stop the tanks momentarily, but others continued the thrust southward. Although the NVA tanks across the river were moving in defilade, Ripley could hear them and see the dust raised by their tracks. An observation aircraft orbiting overhead kept the command center at Ai Tu informed of the tanks' movement. At Ai Tu, Turley and Dinh anxiously monitored the positioning of the thin line of defense along the river line.

At 1200, an NVA tank column came into view moving south along QL-1 from Charlie 1 toward Dong Ha. Although the range was in excess of 2,500 meters, the tanks of 1st Troop on the high ground immediately took the column under fire and knocked out six enemy vehicles. The NVA unit commander was stunned. His monitored radio message to his higher headquarters reported the loss of six tanks to direct fire weapons, but he indicated that he had no idea where the fire had come from. The 20th's executive officer, Major

Kieu, in command of his own tank, claimed two of the T-54s, spotting his cannon shots through the use of machine gun rounds viewed through his rangefinder at a range of 3,000 meters. The South Vietnamese tankers had learned their lessons well.⁶

The 308th NVA Division's thrust from the DMZ to the south had gained momentum as each ARVN outpost and fire support base fell. After more than three days of continuous artillery attacks and tank-infantry assaults, it now appeared that the North Vietnamese were making their main attack along the axis of QL-1. At this time Camp Carroll and Mai Loc to the west were still in friendly hands, but all resistance to the north of the Cam Lo and Cua Viet Rivers had crumbled. By noon on Easter Sunday nothing was between the enemy and the coveted Quang Tri City—except a river, a bridge, and a battalion of Vietnamese Marines and ARVN tanks.

At about 1215, as the first NVA tank nosed out

toward the north side of the bridge, Vietnamese Marine Sergeant Huynh Van Luom, a veteran of many years fighting, took two M72 Light Antitank Weapons (LAW), simple shoulder-fired, single-shot rockets, and walked up to the south side of the bridge. Although he was an assault team section leader, he had elected to move forward alone. As he reached the planking of the bridge he took two ammunition boxes filled with dirt and one strand of concertina wire and placed them in front of him. It was a ludicrous situation, the 90-pound Marine crouched in the firing position to do battle with the 40-ton behemoth bearing down on his meager fortification. Luom coolly extended both his LAWs as the tank started across the bridge.

The tank stopped. Perhaps the tank commander could not believe his eyes, but he stopped dead in his tracks as he watched the lone Marine take aim. Sergeant Luom fired. The round went high and to the right. The tank started to ease forward. Luom picked up the second rocket, aimed and fired. The rocket ricocheted off the front armor, detonated on the turret ring, and caused the turret to jam.

The whole incident took only a few seconds. The slightly damaged tank backed off onto the north side of the bridge. Sergeant Luom grinned. The whole front breathed easier. In his assessment of the situation, Captain Ripley gave Sergeant Luom credit for singlehandedly stopping the momentum of the entire enemy attack. Ripley called Sergeant Luom's initial decisive action at the bridge the "bravest single act of heroism I've ever heard of, witnessed, or experienced." The enemy tank commander, in backing off the bridge, had made the worst possible decision he could have made, for all at once the Marines along the river realized that an enemy tank could be stopped. While Sergeant Luom's heroic stand had temporarily halted the NVA, Captain Ripley knew that they would try again, in overwhelming force, and that the outnumbered Marines might not be able to hold. Both he and Army Major Smock, with 20th Tanks, radioed the Ai Tu TOC and requested permission to destroy the bridge.⁷

Lieutenant Colonel Turley conferred with VNMC Brigade 258's Lieutenant Colonel Dinh. The two soldiers knew bridges are not arbitrarily blown in combat. A local commander must consider all aspects before destroying a bridge that, only hours later, could be beneficial to him. General Giai wanted armor to cross over and secure a bridgehead on the north bank for a counterattack, and Giai's deputy, Colonel Chung, would not give permission to destroy it. Ripley, the

man on the spot, persisted, "you can't deny me permission, we only have one company at the bridge . . . you've got to permit me to blow it!" Turley shot back a "Wait, out," which is radio procedure indicating a reply is forthcoming after a moment of consultation.

The moments dragged by as Turley deliberated what to do. He was the senior American north of the Thach Han River, but his role was that of an advisor. Colonel Dinh said that he could not make the decision, this would have to come from I Corps. The operations center became very quiet as the Americans there and two Americans at the bridge waited for a decision. If the bridge was not blown, it would be only a matter of hours before the North Vietnamese armor would be rolling into Quang Tri or even Hue. Turley fidgeted as he waited for his counterpart to take action. He felt, due to Major Smock and Captain Ripley's insistent, on-site, appraisal of the situation, that it had become an operational necessity to blow the bridge. Turley called the FRAC G-3 and presented the plight, but the FRAC tactical operations center could not permit the bridge to be destroyed. Based on a MACV standing operational procedure, FRAC denied permission to destroy the span; permission would have to come from Saigon. At 1245, Turley took matters into his own hands. He radioed Smock and Ripley to blow the Dong Ha Bridge immediately. Turley indicated that, if necessary, additional demolitions would be sent up and that FRAC had been informed of the decision. Ripley replied, almost gleefully, that he had always wanted to blow a bridge.⁸

As Turley consolidated available support, fragmentary information sent out by the forward command post over the radio was confused by Destroyer Squadron 3, which sent a message to the Amphibious Ready Group and 31st MAU requesting immediate withdrawal of U.S. personnel from Ai Tu and the possible landing of the landing force.* The squadron commander, Captain Roger D. Johnson, went on to state that "NVA and ARVN tanks engaged at Quang Tri airfield," while the NVA armor was still north of the Cam Lo-Mieu Giang-Cua Viet River. Information copies of the message were sent to FRAC, NavForV, MACV, and had entered the national military command system. Lieutenant Colonel D'Wayne Gray, commanding Sub Unit One, who was at FRAC headquarters in Da Nang to coordinate ANGLICO sup-

*ComDesRon 3 msg to CTG76.4 dtd 020510Apr72. This "landing force" message was used to recall Turley to Saigon to explain to Rear Admiral Robert S. Salzer, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam, his reasons for sending the message.

port, was in radio communications with Brigadier General William H. Lanagan, Jr., at MACV in Saigon and the ANGLICO team at Ai Tu. Lanagan thought Turley "had gone crazy," when the garbled message traffic arrived at MACV with "Turley Sends," and wanted to know what a Marine was doing with an army unit.⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Turley had more immediate concerns at the time.

Action at the Bridge

Captain Ripley, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate, had commanded a rifle company in Vietnam in 1966, earning a Silver Star Medal. He had gained extensive experience with demolitions while attending the U.S. Army Ranger School and while serving with British Royal Marines. As Ripley walked forward toward the bridge, Major Smock drove up on an ARVN tank, yelled to him, "Hey Marine, climb aboard and let's go blow a bridge."

The two Americans with two ARVN tanks moved forward to within 100 meters of the bridge, at the junction of highways 9 and 1, known as "The Triangle." The tanks, being in total defilade, stopped at this point. Ripley and Smock dismounted and, shielded from enemy view by an old, heavily constructed Dye Marker* bunker, moved behind the bunker. From the bunker to the bridge was open space and enemy artillery and small-arms fire was sweeping the area. The sun was bright, the weather had cleared, but there were no aircraft overhead and no naval gunfire coming in.

The two men ran forward across the open space and found a small group of ARVN engineers desperately trying to emplace demolition charges. The engineers had about 500 pounds of TNT block and C4 plastic explosive positioned at the juncture of the bridge and the approach ramp. The main Dong Ha bridge was a two-lane, 60-ton, American-built structure of concrete and steel girders, with a wooden roadway approximately 505 feet long. Unfortunately, ARVN engineers had placed the explosives in such a position that upon detonation, the bridge might have merely "flapped" in place and would not have torqued and dropped.

Ripley realized that all of the explosives, C4 and TNT blocks in about 25-30 wooden artillery ammunition boxes, would have to be transported onto the bridge and placed in a staggered alignment underneath the girders. A high chain-link fence topped by concertina "German-steel-tape" wire prevented easy access to the underpinnings of the bridge. After a

*"Dye Marker" was the code name given to the McNamara Line which was constructed along the trace of the DMZ in 1967-1968.

quick conference with Smock, it was agreed that once Ripley cleared the fence, Smock would push the TNT over the fence and Ripley, in turn, would place it underneath the spans.

Swinging his body up and over the fence, Ripley barely cleared the concertina as he slashed his uniform on the barbed-wire. Clearing this obstacle, with a satchel charge and some blasting caps, the Marine started crawling hand-over-hand above the water along the first "I" beam girder. From underneath, the bridge "looked like a battleship" in size and appearance. Half-way out on the span he tried to swing himself up into the steel girders by hooking his heels on either side of the "I" beam. It was then that he realized that he still had on his personal combat equipment and that his CAR15 rifle was slung over his shoulders.** All at once the weight was oppressive. As he was hanging by his hands, laden with explosives, web gear, and weapons, and with the NVA soldiers on the north bank watching, Ripley made an effort to secure a foothold on the beam. His arms ached with pain, his finger grasp felt insecure, and he knew he could not hang there indefinitely. After several attempts to swing his body, he lodged his heels on the "I" beam. Working his way up into the steel of the bridge, he discovered that the support girders were separated by practically the width of the artillery ammunition crates in which the explosives had been packed.

Crawling back and forth between the beams, Ripley placed the demolitions in a staggered alignment among the six beams. Major Smock, remaining at the fence, muscled the 50-pound boxes near the five channels created by the six beams by climbing the fence each time and placing them within reach. As each channel was armed, it was necessary for Ripley to drop down from one beam and swing over the next, very similar to a high wire act in a circus.

As the Marine laboriously dragged each crate of explosive charges down the chute formed by the legs of each of the "I" beams, Major Smock became impatient with Ripley's meticulous manner. He called, "Hey, you dumb jar-head, that isn't necessary What are you doing that for? Work faster!" Ripley replied, "This is the way the Army taught me. You tankers don't know anything!"¹⁰ Ripley assured Smock that the charges had to be placed diagonally in order to torque the span from its abutment. Smock insist-

**The CAR15 was a shortened and modified version of the M16 service rifle, not standard issue to the Marine Corps, but available through other sources. It was also known as the XM177 Colt Commando.



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Naval Academy
This diorama depicts the situation Capt John W. Ripley faced in placing demolition charges underneath the Dong Ha Bridge. The boxes containing explosives were slid down the bridge framework. To move from charge to charge required him to swing under the girders in full view of North Vietnamese riflemen.

ed that there was enough power to blow that bridge and "three more like it." Despite the "interservice" rivalry, the bridge had to blow on the first try. There would be no time for a second attempt. After lifting all the demolition boxes to Ripley, Smock, exhausted, sat down and lit a cigarette while Ripley relaxed amidst the steel girders.¹¹

Reaction at Saigon

While these events were underway, Lieutenant Colonel Turley received a response from Saigon, but not the one he expected. During the first few days of the offensive, the situation in northern MR 1 was viewed by MACV with concern, "if not with alarm." With Colonel Metcalf at Quang Tri City, Turley was the senior advisor for the ARVN units in direct contact with the major elements of three NVA Divisions. He was constantly on the radio with higher headquarters at Da Nang and Saigon in an effort to convince them that the attack that "could not happen," was, in fact, underway. MACV and the Vietnamese Joint General Staff, lulled into a kind of complacency by reports of the success of the Vietnamization effort and by the intelligence community's forecasts, were very

skeptical of these reports, despite the evidence that now faced them. Earlier in the day, the senior Marine advisor, Colonel Dorsey, had tried to get Turley out of Ai Tu. By this time, General Abrams was even more exasperated by the spurious request for Seventh Fleet Marines. Colonel Dorsey again ordered Turley to return to Saigon as soon as possible in a message passed by ANGLICO's Lieutenant Colonel Gray, at Da Nang, who had voice radio communication with the Ai Tu operations center.¹² This would be overtaken by other battlefield events.

Camp Carroll Surrenders

At 1520 Sunday afternoon, the forward division tactical operations center received a radio call from U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel William C. Camper, senior advisor to the 56th ARVN Regiment at Camp Carroll.¹³ Camper reported that white flags were going up all over the place, the Vietnamese were surrendering, and that he requested to be evacuated immediately. At that moment an Army Boeing CH-47 Chinook, callsign "Coachman 005," appeared over Mai Loc, dropped an external load of artillery ammunition at the position, made an abrupt turn and headed for Camp Carroll, with two escorting gunships. Apparently the pilot had monitored the conversation.

The fall of Camp Carroll was a significant blow to the overall defense of Quang Tri Province, and has yet to be fully explained. Team 155 contemporary after-action reports indicate that the fate of the 56th Regiment "remains unknown," after it had been told the division and corps had no more reserves to support it and that the commander should act as he thought proper. Personnel of the regiment had made radio contact with the NVA to negotiate terms of capitulation, or as the Communists would call it, a "collective combat refusal."* Camper had advised the ARVN commander, Lieutenant Colonel Pham Van Dinh, to break out with available armored vehicles and those soldiers willing to fight. When Dinh refused, Camper requested evacuation of the Americans.

Men of the 24th NVA Regiment were coming through the camp gate as the helicopter landed at Carroll to get Camper, Major Joseph Brown, Jr., USA, and their ARVN radio operators. Camper loaded another 30 ARVN soldiers who had kept their weapons and "were willing to fight on." Battery B, 1st VNMC Artillery Battalion, continued to resist until overrun at

*On 3 April 1972, the 56th ARVN Regiment commander made a broadcast on Radio Hanoi asking other South Vietnamese units to surrender.



Marine Corps Historical Collection
LtCol Ngo Van Dinh commanded VNMC Brigade 258 at Ai Tu and later as a colonel during the Quang Tri counteroffensive. He had attended the U.S. Marine basic course and was an 18-year service veteran.



Marine Corps Historical Collection
Col Phan Van Chung, senior brigade commander, was with VNMC Brigade 369 as part of the national reserve as the spring offensive began. He was a North Vietnam native and graduate of the U.S. Marine basic course.

North Vietnamese infantry move through defensive positions at Camp Carroll. In the foreground is an M42 twin 40mm Duster, an antiaircraft weapon used for ground defense.

North Vietnamese Army Photo



dusk. In the confusion caused by this surrender, none of the artillery pieces was destroyed. By the time the South Vietnamese called an air strike on the base, the NVA had moved the self-propelled guns. Eventually 1,000 soldiers of the 2,200 man regiment regained friendly lines.¹⁴

Mai Loc Exposed

Because of their mutually supporting missions, the fall of Camp Carroll left Mai Loc open to enemy ground attack without supporting artillery fire. The Marine advisors at Mai Loc had been without rest for more than 96 hours. During this period, Captains Earl A. Kruger, David S. Randall, and Clark D. Embrey time and again had moved between the brigade operations center and battalion command posts across fire-swept terrain to erect fallen AN/RC292 radio antennas in order to maintain communications with the 3d ARVN Division. Major Joy realized that the tactical situation had become untenable and briefed his advisory personnel on the withdrawal plan. At the same time he directed the destruction of all equipment that could not be carried. Stragglers from the 8th VNMC Battalion from Holcomb and elements of the 4th VNMC Battalion from Sarge and Nui Ba Ho, as well as remnants of the 56th ARVN Regiment from Carroll, began consolidating at Mai Loc with the battalion of regional forces located there.¹⁵

By this time, Major Boomer and his small band arrived at Mai Loc as the rest of the Alpha command group straggled in. The 4th VNMC Battalion, which had been 632 strong, could muster only 285 of its Marines, including the wounded who had been able to walk. In recalling the incident, Major Boomer said that the NVA ground attack on Sarge and Nui Ba Ho had been carried out flawlessly, that enemy artillery was accurate and intense, and that he had the distinct impression that the 3d ARVN Division headquarters was not convinced of the urgency of the situation.¹⁶ Boomer and Captain Ray Smith, both believing the other to be dead, were reunited outside of Mai Loc. They remained outside the base perimeter with the survivors of their battalion "watching it receive a great deal of accurate enemy artillery fire," but were not attacked themselves. Joy briefed them by radio about the plans to pull out. Smith and Boomer's exodus was not over.¹⁷

The Dong Ha Bridge Destroyed

While Ripley completed preparations at the main highway bridge, Major Smock and the ARVN engineers went to complete the demolition of the railroad

bridge upstream. Finally, with all the explosives in place, Ripley took electric blasting caps from his pocket and crimped them to communications wire and ran this from the charges. As a precaution he had also prepared 30 to 45 minutes of time fuze before attempting an electrical detonation. Clearing the fence, he ran the wire to a nearby M151 utility truck, a Jeep which had been hit by shell fire and was still burning. Ripley touched the communication wire to either terminal, but the bridge did not blow. Now it seemed the fate of South Vietnam's northern provinces rested on a burning fuze sputtering its way toward 500 pounds of high explosive. After what seemed an eternity, the time fuze was nearing its end. The tell-tale smoke trail was now out of view and Ripley "waited and hoped."

At this time, the command group of the 1st ARVN Armored Brigade reached Dong Ha and the unit's commander and his advisor, Lieutenant Colonel Lewis C. Wagner, Jr., moved to The Triangle to see the bridge their unit was supposed to cross and to assume command of the Dong Ha area. Colonel Nguyen Trong Luat and Lieutenant Colonel Wagner felt that the bridge should not be destroyed until the situation was clearer. At this time the only enemy action was sporadic small arms and mortar fire met by friendly air and naval gunfire. Suddenly, the bridge blew! The span, curling in the predicted twisting manner, was severed from the abutment and "settled into the river." The wooden roadway was to continue to burn for several days. Ripley reported to Turley that both Dong Ha bridges had been destroyed at 1630.*¹⁸

Now all the firing had stopped and there was a calm for a few moments. Then, on the north side, armor noise was evident once more as the NVA medium tanks shifted from their positions to make room for the amphibious tanks to come forward to the river's edge. The enemy seemed determined to cross. Ripley saw four of them ready to cross and immediately called a naval gunfire mission. The *Buchanan* sailed within the five-fathom curve, a minimum safe depth, to get within effective range and let go with a salvo. All four tanks were destroyed on the river bank. Ripley later remarked that it probably was one of the few ships in the Navy that rated four enemy tanks painted on her stacks. Subsequently, a B-52 strike, which had earlier been scheduled for that area, silenced the tank activity to the east of Dong Ha, for the time being at least.¹⁹

*Team 155's Colonel Metcalf stated "a great amount of confusion" existed about the blowing of the Dong Ha bridges. Eventually credit was given to the 57th ARVN Regiment, 20th Tanks, and the 3d VNMC Battalion. (Metcalf intvw)

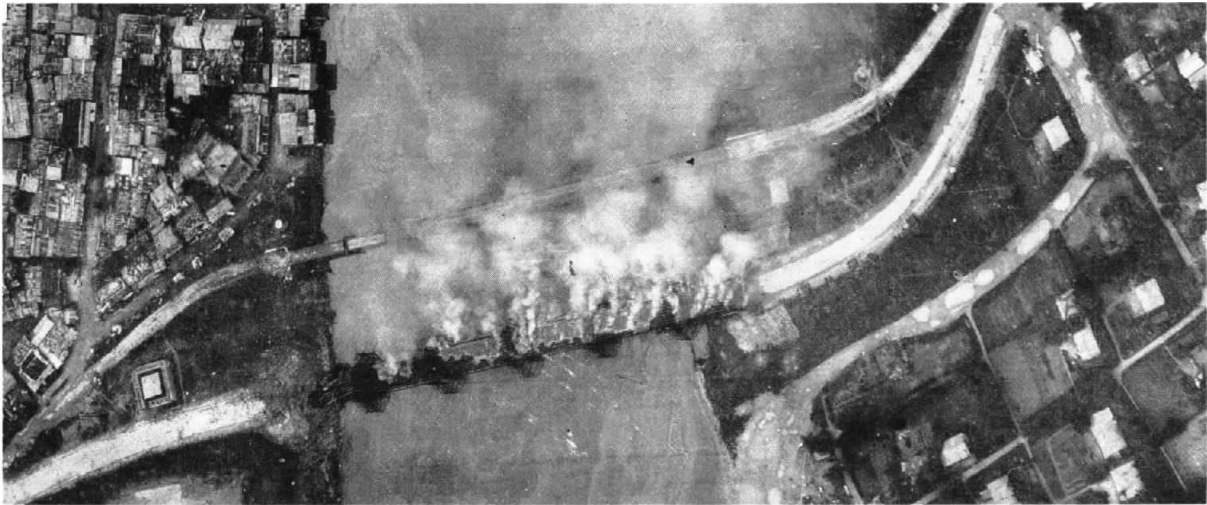


Photo courtesy of Col John W. Ripley, USMC

A reconnaissance aircraft photographed the Dong Ha Bridge shortly after its destruction. To the left is "The Triangle" road junction of Highways 1 and 9 and to the right is the Dye Marker bunker and the bridge and its burning road bed. At far right are Communist armored vehicles pulled off the road, exposed to air attack and unable to advance further.

With their armored thrusts thwarted at the Dong Ha and mouth of the Cua Viet River, the determined enemy exerted pressure in the western portion of the battle area. The Cam Lo Bridge, directly south of the abandoned combat base at Charlie 3 was the next objective. The 1st ARVN Armored Brigade's advisor called for airstrikes to destroy the bridge and naval gunfire support was called for by the Ai Tu forward command post and fire from the guns of the *Buchanan*, *Strauss*, and *Waddell* squelched the enemy movement. All night long, hundreds of naval projectiles were called in upon the enemy. It was not uncommon to call in "danger close" missions, that is firing upon targets that were within 300 meters of friendly forces.

Callsign BAT-21

At 1800 on 2 April, a U.S. Air Force Douglas EB-66 electronic warfare aircraft was hit by a Communist missile over the DMZ while covering a B-52 strike. The aircraft radio callsign was "BAT-21" and the recovery of its sole survivor, also known as BAT-21, began to take shape.²⁰ Air Force Captain David K. Mann, together with the Pacific Air Force Headquarters operations analysis directorate, concluded that the mission "was possibly the most extensive SAR effort ever attempted." In mounting the largest-scale search and rescue operation of the war, Seventh Air Force, acting for MACV, assumed control of all American supporting arms within the operating area of the 3rd ARVN Division for the next 11 days. A no-fire zone was placed

around the American airmen to protect them and U.S. aircraft from "friendly fire." The authority to request and control air, naval gunfire, and artillery was preempted by the I Direct Air Support Center (I DASC) at Da Nang. This sent ANGLICO'S Lieutenant Colonel Gray into a rage that drove him "absolutely up the wall. I could not convince the Air Force colonel in Da Nang to change his position. Neither could I get his U.S. Army seniors to even try to change his position." That there were other Americans and South Vietnamese at risk had no weight.²¹

According to Major General Frederick J. Kroesen, at FRAC, this rescue mission and the absolute fire control vested in the Air Force "was a peacetime system imposed on a wartime situation for which it was totally anachronistic." Remembered Lieutenant Colonel Turley, then at the Ai Tu Combat Base, the "unilateral rear area arrangement of giving the USAF control of all TAC air, naval gunfire and artillery fire probably seemed like a rational decision to officers eighty kilometers from the battle lines. However, it was a tragic decision for the 3d ARVN Division."²² General Kroesen concluded, "no commander in MR 1 could change it and no command authority in Saigon could be convinced of the need to change it."²³

The 3d ARVN Division continued to fire organic artillery, despite the no-fire zones, and rescue force aircraft did attack North Vietnamese forces, but the enemy was not met with the kind of concentrated



Photo courtesy of LtCol George Philip III, USMC (Ret)

Artillerymen break out projectiles from shipping containers and fuze them for use at Vietnamese Marine artillery positions at Mai Loc combat base. This was a time-consuming process and it limited mobility when a large amount of ammunition was in this condition.

Communist soldiers pursued South Vietnamese and American stragglers after the fall of the defensive positions. This was often a confused situation that saw the fragmentation of units on both sides as one moved to escape and the other moved to destroy them.

North Vietnamese Army Photo



defensive fires needed at a critical period. Lieutenant Colonel Turley cites this as one reason that the then-critical Cam Lo River Bridge was not destroyed prior to its capture by the Communist forces. To the surprise and frustration of the American and Vietnamese fighting for their lives to hold collapsing positions south of the DMZ, this MACV operation took on a life of its own, seemingly out of proportion to the defense of Quang Tri Province.²⁴

Mai Loc Evacuated

Low on ammunition and without resupply, Lieutenant Colonel Bao, the 147th Brigade commander recommended that Mai Loc be evacuated. General Giai concurred and the evacuation plan went into effect. All equipment that could not be carried was destroyed.²⁵ The Bravo command group of the 4th VNMC Battalion, which had reorganized at the village of Mai Loc, led the column eastward toward Dong Ha. Earlier the executive officer of this battalion had watched a U.S. Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter come in on a resupply run. He noticed that the helicopter had flown low to the ground and had not been fired upon during its approach. Taking an azimuth on its route, just

as night was falling, he then put the stragglers in column and charted the way to Dong Ha. Brigade 147 was evacuating Mai Loc, but it was leaving as an organized fighting unit, with a point, flank security, a rear guard, and with all of its wounded.²⁶

Left as the rear echelon of the withdrawing brigade was the recently attached 7th VNMC Battalion, from VNMC Brigade 258. Major Andrew D. DeBona and Captain Ronald R. Rice were present at 1815 when the order to pull out arrived. They would later recall the "monumental" effort for the battalion to disengage, as two of three rifle companies were fighting the *66th NVA Regiment*. As darkness fell, the battalion was separated into disorganized groups mingling with the Brigade 147 column or preceding on their own towards Ai Tu. The battalion command group started across country on a compass azimuth, with two companies and an assortment of civilian refugees. The 20-kilometer, cross-country march did not end until 1000 the next day. For the two Marine advisors it proved to be a long, dark, wet, and anxiety-ridden ordeal.²⁷

The 3d ARVN Division had failed to hold its main defensive positions in Quang Tri Province.

CHAPTER 5

Battered Quang Tri Holds

*The Fighting Continues—At Dong Ha—Development in the West
The Fight for Pedro—Bright Lights—The NVA Mount a Third Offensive in MR 1*

The Fighting Continues

On 3 April 1972, I Corps' Lieutenant General Lam, now convinced that the action in the north was the predicted Communist offensive, requested reinforcements for the Quang Tri area. After three days of continuous and brutal fighting, the ARVN tanks and Marines had held their ground against superior North Vietnamese forces. The destruction of the bridge at Dong Ha had slowed the impetus of the NVA attack across the DMZ.¹ Infantry, armor, and naval gunfire had won this fight, since, during these days, heavy cloud cover and NVA air defenses had precluded effective close air support and had prevented assessment of the results of the B-52 strikes flown each day against suspected enemy concentrations and staging areas.² The situation was still tenuous, and General Lam wanted to launch a counterattack as soon as weather permitted the use of close air support.

During his return south on 3 April, Lieutenant Colonel Turley slept for the first time since the invasion began. The responsibility for assisting with the defense of Dong Ha was left to the U.S. Marine advisors and ANGLICO Marines with VNMC Brigade 258 at Ai Tu. In Saigon that afternoon, an anxious Turley met Rear Admiral Robert S. Salzer, Commander Naval Forces Vietnam, and briefed the admiral on the situation along the DMZ, using maps and log entries. Salzer directed Turley to return to MR 1 with Colonel Joshua W. Dorsey and the VNMC Division.³ That same day, Lieutenant Colonel Camper had arrived at Da Nang and reported to General Kroesen for debriefing. Camper reported that the enemy had launched a massive invasion in the north and that civilians and ARVN troops were fleeing southward in panic and confusion. The 56th ARVN Regiment had surrendered Camp Carroll to the NVA without attempting to destroy its artillery, ammunition, or facilities. Camper's report confirmed Turley's assessment of the situation in MR 1 that had only begun to filter through to I Corps and MACV.⁴

During the week after Easter, the headquarters of the VNMC Marine Division and VNMC Brigade 369, which had been the Joint General Staff reserve in Saigon, moved by air transport to the Phu Bai Airfield.

The division headquarters and its supporting elements established themselves in the Citadel at Hue, under the command of Lieutenant General Le Nguyen Khang, who was put in command of the Hue City defenses. The subordinate brigades of Khang's division were under the tactical control of General Giai at Quang Tri City. Brigade 147, consisting of the 4th and 8th Battalions, was at Hue City to refit and act as the corps' reserve. Brigade 369 took charge of a large and critical area north of the My Chanh River.

Besides the additional Marine brigade, the arrival of the ARVN Ranger Command, which consisted of three groups of three battalions each, supplemented by another Ranger group from Quang Nam, bolstered the troops of the 3d ARVN Division and seemingly ensured the successful defense of the northern provinces. The presence of these reinforcements strengthened General Lam's resolve to regain lost territory.⁵

Brigade 369, commanded by Colonel Pham Van Chung, was given an area of operations bordered on the east by the South China Sea, on the north by the Nhung River, and on the west by the jungles of Hai Lang District. The brigade's 5th VNMC Battalion, the Black Dragons, arrived by truck from Phu Bai and were dropped off on QL-1 about five kilometers north of the My Chanh River. Colonel Chung ordered the battalion westward to occupy Fire Support Base Jane. Enroute, the battalion advisor, Major Donald L. Price, observed a VNAF helicopter gunship circling low over the unit's route. Suddenly he saw a smoking contrail streak towards the helicopter. Price first thought an NVA gunner had fired an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) antitank rocket, "a dumb mistake for the gunner in view of the gunship's firepower." Then Price realized the rocket had changed course as the helicopter banked hard to avoid it. As the battalion continued on to Jane, they captured a young NVA soldier, who was dazed by the gunship's attack. On questioning, he admitted the Communists had a small surface-to-air missile that one man could fire, that would "chase the fire in the airplane." It was the heat-seeking SA-7. Major Price reported this information to his senior advisor at brigade, Major Robert F. Sheridan. They recalled that the conduct and effectiveness of airborne



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Vietnamese Marines were among reinforcements sent north in Military Region 1 soon after the Spring Offensive began. They display personal weapons and equipment carried by fully loaded Marines in combat.

control and close air support significantly changed from that time onward.⁶

At Dong Ha

While reinforcements were hurriedly being shuttled northward, the 3d VNMC Battalion and 20th ARVN Tank Battalion repulsed repeated enemy attempts to capture the now-ruined town of Dong Ha. The enemy's artillery and mortar fire continued unabated and each night, using small craft, he attempted to infiltrate platoon-sized units across the river on either side of the blown bridges. Initially, the 20th Tank Battalion's crews illuminated these attempted probes with their tank-mounted searchlights. The searchlights quickly became targets for NVA artillery and mortar fire and after two or three nights were no longer effective. During daylight, intermittent sniper fire came from the north side of the river. A steady rain cloaked the battle area and allowed enemy troops to make small, undetected forays along the south bank. In spite of numerous minor penetrations of the thin defensive line, from 3 to 8 April, the small combined force prevented the NVA from establishing a major bridgehead. The gunfire support ships which delivered planned fires and responded to urgent requests from

the field fully supported the defenders. Although the tank units shifted regularly to alternate positions, the battalion advisor, Army Major Jim Smock felt that the blocking mission assigned to the tank battalion nullified the tanks' mobility, firepower, and shock effect. Additionally, lack of aggressive leadership and the reluctance of the ARVN tank commander to visit forward positions increased the problems of the tankers' morale and desertion rate. With the only information regarding the friendly situation being the sight of the local forces withdrawing through their defensive positions, the individual tankers assumed that they had been abandoned to a last-ditch effort to hold Dong Ha.

Nearly 20,000 civilian refugees had already fled south, but there were an estimated 28,000 more to come.⁷ It would be inviting disaster to allow them to move, in unbroken pace, through the Dong Ha area defensive positions; they would have to bypass to the east. To reduce the problem of enemy infiltration, 3d Battalion's Major Binh blocked refugees from coming into Dong Ha village. Brigadier General Thomas W. Bowen, Jr., deputy commander of FRAC, had notified Ai Tu that "all restrictions are off on air."⁸ Arc Light operations continued north of the Cua Viet River irrespective of civilian presence, "accepted and endorsed as a military necessity . . ." by the American and South Vietnamese authorities.⁹

With Dong Ha devoid of civilians, looting of the destroyed houses and household possessions occurred

A UH-1 gunship makes a rocket-firing run. As "airborne artillery," the helicopter gunships flown by Vietnamese and American forces were used to provide fire support while units were moving and without their own weapons in position. In this task, helicopters were vulnerable to the SA-7 missiles used by the NVA.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Photo courtesy of Maj Charles W. King, USMC (Ret)

An advisor and his radio operator were essential to the South Vietnamese for obtaining American supporting arms during the defense of Quang Tri Province. Maj William R. Warren and the Marine carrying his PRC25 radio are with the 6th VNMC Battalion.

by soldiers in search of food and other belongings. At Hue, General Khang heard about the looting and took immediate steps to stop any misconduct by his service. Khang issued instructions by printed proclamation which was distributed over the battlefield from helicopters. The letter cited the achievements and the fighting spirit of the Vietnamese Marines against overwhelmingly superior enemy forces. He acknowledged that their accomplishments had given a new spirit to the will of the Vietnamese populace and congratulated his warriors for their valiant deeds. Then in no uncertain terms he stated that due to the current tactical situation, the conduct of operations in densely populated and built-up areas was necessary, but that all ". . . fighting men are instructed to assist the people in every way possible to protect lives and property. Marine unit commanders are ordered to kill on sight any Marine who is caught red-handed robbing!" The looting ceased immediately.¹⁰

A group of 250 men, comprising the 57th ARVN Regiment, arrived at Dong Ha to give some relief to the 3d VNMC Battalion and the 20th ARVN tanks. This battalion-sized regiment was assigned an area

from Highway 9 to the naval base boat ramp on the Cua Viet River. The still-rattled ARVN unit permitted the enemy to gain a foothold on the south side shortly after they arrived, although the 20th's tanks provided support by fire. Major Binh, disgusted with the 57th ARVN, requested that another Marine battalion be sent forward to reinforce his battalion.

Developments in the West

Before the invasion, the 1st VNMC Battalion, operating from Fire Support Base Pedro, had encountered a company-size NVA patrol and had killed 32 enemy soldiers. One of the dead had a map indicating every fire support base and trail in the vicinity. It was evident that the enemy had more than a passing interest in the area, so the Brigade 258 commander, Lieutenant Colonel Dinh, decided to strengthen his western flank with mines. By now, the 1st Battalion, with Major Robert C. Cockell as senior Marine advisor and Captain Lawrence H. Livingston as his assistant, had laid approximately 5,000 mines along the forward edge of the western perimeter of Ai Tu out to Pedro except for the road leading into the fire support base itself. On 4 April, the Bravo group with Captain Livingston

was hit by a “sapper” attack during the early morning hours. The attack was stopped short when the NVA were caught in the crossfire between the Alpha and Bravo groups.¹¹ The question the advisors now asked was, when will the enemy attack next?

On 5 April, General Giai had alerted the 6th VNMC Battalion at Ai Tu to prepare to move to the vicinity of Dong Ha at first light the next day. Major Do Huu Tung, the battalion commander, after a reconnaissance to Dong Ha, began briefing his unit on the move north. Assisting in this were his advisors, Major William R. Warren and Captain William D. Wischmeyer. By 1300, however, the plans had been changed; the 6th VNMC Battalion was going to Pedro instead and the 1st VNMC Battalion was moved back to Ai Tu to assume a portion of the perimeter defense.

Further south, by now, VNMC Brigade 369 was to the west of Hai Lang and had the mission of keeping open this highway, QL-1, the main supply route from Hue to the battle area. The brigade's battalions occupied a series of old and abandoned U.S. Army fire support bases in open, rolling terrain. They included FSBs Barbara, Sally, Nancy, and Jane, which blocked

Under fire at Dong Ha, Capt John W. Ripley scrambles to get his dead radioman's equipment and another American advisor helps wounded to the shelter of the M48 tank that will take them to safety. Maj Jim Smock was wounded during this incident.

David Burnett Contact Press Images



the approaches into southern Quang Tri Province from the Ba Long River Valley and the Hai Lang national forest.¹²

On the morning of 6 April, some unexpected visitors arrived at Dong Ha in a rented Citroen automobile. They were news reporters and television cameramen intent on getting the story of the Dong Ha standoff first-hand. The news contingent reached the mobile command posts of the 3d VNMC Battalion and the 20th Tank Battalion as an enemy force approached through a woodline a scant 50 meters to the north. Although Captain Ripley was concerned with the pressing tactical situation, the ring of correspondents closed in on the American Marine. As microphones were thrust into his face, and cameras whirred away, the clucking sound of mortar rounds being dropped into their tubes was distinctly heard.

Ripley yelled for everyone to take cover as an incoming round detonation rent the air. The explosion sent bodies flying in all directions. Ripley, ringed in by the newsmen, was unhurt, but the shell had killed Ripley's radioman and all seven of the correspondents were wounded. As the thumping of mortar rounds increased, Ripley ran back across the field where the group had initially been taken under fire. He was attempting to find a radio antenna to replace one that was destroyed when his operator was killed. He wanted to get the radio operating in order to call for a medical evacuation helicopter. The tempo of the mortar attack increased. Ripley yelled to Major Jim Smock, "They've bracketed us!" Smock, himself wounded, quickly assisted the other wounded in boarding an armored personnel carrier. A nearby explosion sent the tank advisor sprawling into a ditch with a painful back wound. Unaccountably, Ripley remained unscathed as he moved through the dense fire.

The armored vehicles pulled back from the impact area on orders from their commander. Ripley flagged down a withdrawing M113 and helped some of the wounded climb aboard. The APC pulled off, however, leaving other newsmen in the ditch. With the persuasion of his leveled CAR15 rifle, Ripley convinced the commander of the last tank departing the battlefield to stop. As he helped Smock and the rest of the wounded Americans onto the superstructure of the tank, he thought that the enemy was concentrating his fire on them. The tank departed abruptly, leaving Ripley amid exploding mortar rounds. Later, Major Smock was to credit Ripley for displaying "the only resemblance of command and control on the battlefield," in that he had remained calm and had immedi-

ately organized a blocking force that had enabled the evacuation of all the wounded.

As Ripley stooped to lift the body of his radio operator, he realized he was all alone on the battlefield. He saw a squad of NVA infantrymen moving across Highway 9 and into the cemetery to the northwest. Although they were less than 50 meters away, the enemy simply watched as the American Marine captain shouldered his dead radio operator and, without glancing back, started walking toward friendly lines. He expected to be shot in the back at any moment as he walked down the road to relative safety. Only when the NVA saw that Major Binh and his two "cow-boys" had returned to search for their advisor did they open fire.* The small group made its way to friendly lines through a maze of burning buildings with the NVA in hot pursuit.¹³ Suddenly, a large rocket shot from ground level in the northwest sector and headed toward an airborne FAC spotter aircraft. Ripley, who had never before seen a surface-to-air missile (SAM), said "it looked like a telephone pole lumbering skyward." The SAM missed, perhaps due to the low altitude of the OV-10, but the enemy's threat to allied air took on a new meaning.

This enemy anti-aircraft capability, now at the forward edge of the battle area, severely hampered search and rescue operations as well as restricted use of those AC-130s specially equipped for suppressive fire support north of Ai Tu Combat Base. Overhead was an ANGLICO spotter in an OV-10 Bronco, who had been monitoring Ripley's radio messages and relaying them to the Ai Tu COC. This was one of the four Air Force Rockwell International OV-10 Bronco's that had recently been taken north at the urging of Lieutenant Colonel Gray who, with Major Edward J. Dyer, was now supervising the ANGLICO effort for MR 1.

The battered 3d VNMC Battalion withdrew from Dong Ha on 7 April, leaving the town defended by the 1st ARVN Armored Brigade, the 4th and 5th Ranger Groups, and the understrength 57th ARVN Regiment. The 1st and 3d Troops of the 20th Tank Battalion remained in support of the Ranger Groups, while the 2d Troop moved to Ai Tu Combat Base as a local reserve. The 3d VNMC Battalion rejoined its sister battalions, the 1st and the 6th, as VNMC Brigade 258 consolidated its perimeter security at Ai Tu Combat Base and defended the western portion of the 3d ARVN Division's area. With the 20th ARVN Tank Bat-

tion, these Marines had stopped a reinforced NVA division at the river's edge at a place where, according to later intelligence reports, the NVA had foreseen little opposition. For the 3d VNMC Battalion, the cost had been high. Of 700 Marines who had been ordered to Dong Ha on 30 March, only 200 walked back to Ai Tu eight days later.¹⁴

The Fight for Pedro

In Brigade 369's area of operations, the 5th VNMC Battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Ho Quang Lich, had his executive officer, Major Tran Ba, take two companies 1,200 meters west of Fire Support Base Jane to see if contact could be made with the enemy. Upon entering the Hai Lang Forest on 8 April, the South Vietnamese found a dug-in NVA force with mortars and machine guns. Major Ba and his command group were cut down at the outset and Captain Marshall R. Wells, the American advisor, assisted the now-leaderless Marines back to Jane. Major Price recalled that as this group broke cover from the treeline, artillery and machine gun fire had to be used to shake off the pursuing NVA. The death of Ba, a well-respected combat officer and personality, caused brigade commander, Colonel Pham Van Chung, to focus on the danger from the west to QL-1 and the NVA concentrated there. A threat that FSB Jane was in position to meet.¹⁵

To the northwest, on the morning of 8 April, the 6th Battalion command group arrived at Fire Support Base Pedro, but fortunately Major Tung elected not to position his command post inside the base. Instead, he moved his remaining three companies to the north and northeast of Pedro and formed them into a crescent perimeter which intersected a dirt road used to resupply Pedro from Ai Tu. Intelligence reports indicated that enemy armor would soon would attack from the west along the axis of Route 557.

On 9 April, the battalion commander's judgement was vindicated. Following its established pattern of preceding a ground assault with intense artillery preparation, the NVA opened fire on Ai Tu with 130mm guns shortly after midnight. The heavy barrages continued throughout the night. At first light, enemy tanks could be seen through the haze to the west, rolling up Route 557 and across the open piedmont countryside. By 0645, it was clear that 16 tanks and two battalions of enemy infantry were in the attack.

The lead tanks, moving at an estimated 20 miles per hour, outstripped their supporting infantry and breached FSB Pedro's perimeter at approximately 0715.

*The combination bodyguard-personal servants who accompanied Vietnamese officers and their advisors.

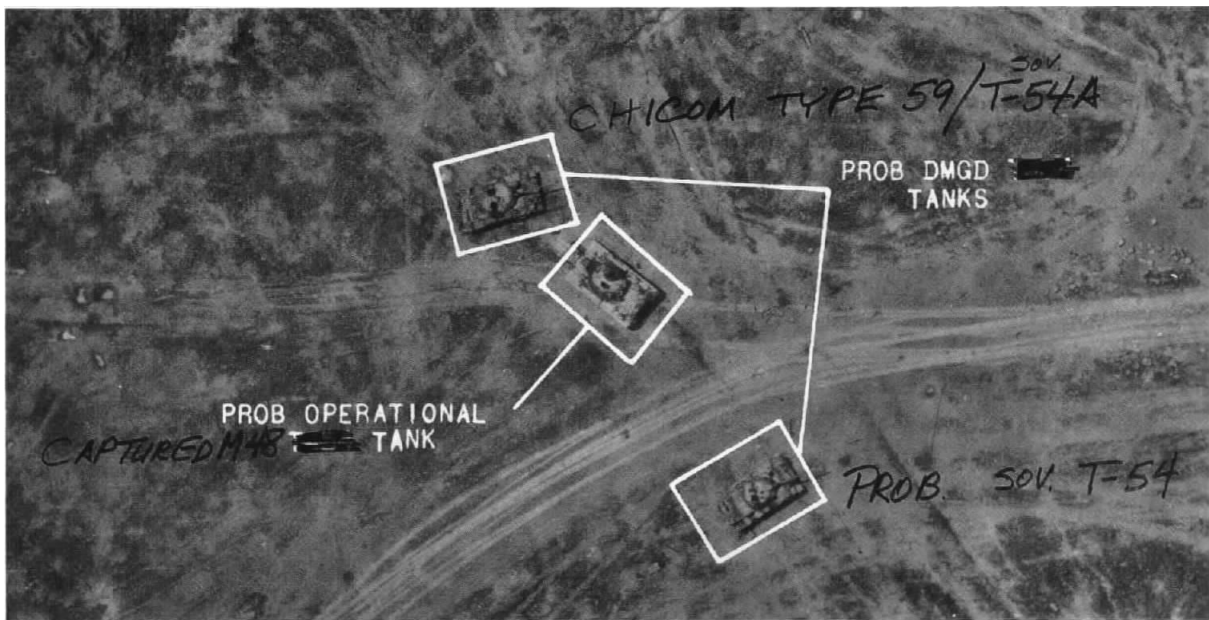


Photo courtesy of Capt Edwin W. Besch, USMC (Ret)

An aerial photograph shows destroyed armor 500 meters west of Fire Support Base Pedro during the Communist attacks. Annotations are from analysis conducted in 1972. Another possible explanation for the ARVN M48 tank was the close proximity of the fighting.

They easily rolled over the two protecting bands of concertina wire and collapsed the decrepit bunkers. An entire platoon outpost was overrun and annihilated either by gunfire or the churning tank tracks. The Marines inside Pedro crouched in their holes while firing their small arms. The tanks rolled over the entire area, killing some of the defenders in their positions and taking those who had fled toward Ai Tu under fire with their main guns. While two T-54s were churning up Pedro's defensive positions, the other tanks without waiting for their infantry protection started moving across the mine field. Nine tanks were lost in the process.

Although there was a 1,000-foot ceiling that prevented close air support, horizontal visibility was good. Upon seeing the first two T-54s, Major Warren called Major Easley at brigade on the advisor's radio net. He requested reinforcement by the troops of the 20th Tank Battalion, which was in reserve at Ai Tu, and also called for a heavy artillery concentration to be fired on the enemy infantry which followed in trace one-half mile behind the assaulting tanks. As he was talking to Easley, he reported, "The NVA tanks are flying red over white, swallow-tail pennants from their radio antennas." Almost immediately, all the pennants disappeared. Obviously the NVA were not only employing fluent English-speaking operators on their ra-

dios but also were coordinated and tied together with radio communications since all the tanks reacted simultaneously.¹⁶

As reports of the enemy tank attack came into VNMC Brigade 258's headquarters over both the Vietnamese tactical and U.S. advisor nets, Lieutenant Colonel Dinh began assembling a reaction force. Within 30 minutes, two infantry companies of the 1st VNMC Battalion accompanied by Captain Livingston as advisor, and an armored force of eight M48 tanks and 12 M113 armored personnel carriers from 2d Troop, 20th ARVN Tank Battalion, were moving quickly to reinforce the 6th VNMC Battalion. At the same time Vietnamese Marine 105mm howitzer fire, augmented by two barrages from ships just offshore, forced the NVA infantry to withdraw from the battlefield and seek refuge in the Ba Long Valley.

Meanwhile, a hole had opened up in the overcast sky, allowing four Vietnamese A-1 Skyraiders to attack the tanks threatening the 6th VNMC Battalion's command post. The bombs knocked out five tanks that were maneuvering toward the slight knoll on which the command group was located. Although the Communist-built tanks were within easy striking distance of the battalion's command post, inexplicably they did not fire their main guns before the air strikes came in.

The break in the weather and its attendant air support had provided the time necessary for the reaction force to arrive on the scene. A brief tank battle occurred as the leading ARVN M48s moved into position around the 6th VNMC Battalion's command post, with the M48 proving more than a match for the Communist-built T-54s. The ARVN tank crews achieved first- or second-round hits on T-54s at ranges up to 1,500 meters. The NVA tanks' fire control system seemed not to be as effective since the T-54 tank crews appeared to try to bracket their targets. When the smoke had cleared the ARVN crews had destroyed five T-54s without losing any of their tanks. Major Nguyen Dang Hoa had organized the counterattack with his own 1st VNMC Battalion and the Bravo command group of the battalion. The Marines, mounted on tanks and APCs, quickly retook Pedro. Bravo Group, with Captain Livingston, moved through the fire support base and swept south for about 1,000 meters. The sweep accounted for about 100 enemy dead and one captured tank.

Captain Livingston, later recalling the incident, stated that the enemy employed poor tactics: their artillery, tanks, and infantry were used in an uncoordinated manner. He said that the Vietnamese Marines were terrified when first confronted by the enemy armor and reacted in an "uncontrolled state of panic," but once they realized that their LAWs could knock out a T-54, they reacted with confidence. In fact, some of the Vietnamese Marines crouched in their holes and let the tanks run over them and then hit the tank in the rear with a LAW. The 1st VNMC Battalion, over six months, was credited with destroying more than 60 enemy tanks with the LAW. A fellow advisor said that Livingston probably had "more experience with nose-on-nose tank battles than any other U.S. Marine" during this period.

Within two hours after Major Hoa's force had begun its counterattack, 13 of the 16 T-54 tanks had been destroyed by mines, tank fire, air strikes, or infantry weapons. One tank escaped, but the remaining two were captured. One of the tanks was captured in a most unorthodox manner. An unnamed VNMC private in an outpost position held fast in his hole as one of the T-54s came clanking up a slight incline. The angle of the tank's bow, as it climbed the hill, obstructed the driver's view; he could not see the private's position. Suddenly the Marine leaped up with his M16 rifle and motioned for the driver and the crew, who had their hatches open, to dismount. The NVA, looking somewhat sheepish, cleared the tank, turning it

over to the Vietnamese Marines. This tank, along with the other captured one, was driven back to the Ai Tu Combat Base. There, the tanks were adorned with huge Vietnamese Marine Corps emblems and later sent to Saigon as war trophies.

On 10 and 11 April, additional attacks were beaten back by the Pedro defenders with the NVA leaving 211 dead behind. On 12 April, the Bravo command group of the 1st VNMC Battalion, with Captain Livingston, was ambushed by an estimated two battalions of NVA which had infiltrated during the previous night and had dug in astride the dirt road leading back to Ai Tu. The enemy had recoilless rifles and antiaircraft guns in the fighting holes with them. Major Tung, 6th VNMC Battalion commander, deployed his units and, after a reconnaissance by fire, ordered an assault led by his executive officer, who was killed during the attack. Captain Livingston rallied the Marines, then led the armor assault force until the senior company commander was able to direct the action. The shock effect of the armor, immediately followed by the supporting infantry proved to be too much for the disciplined enemy. Although some withdrew, most fought and died in their holes. Captain Livingston received the Silver Star Medal for his courage and leadership while under fire.¹⁷

An enemy prisoner and some captured documents revealed that the NVA's effort against the Marines' western front had consisted of an infantry regiment and a tank battalion. Had the enemy been successful in his attack, he would have destroyed the combat effectiveness of the 3d ARVN Division's forces north of the Thach Han River. The enemy, however, had not been successful and the Vietnamese Marine Corps proved that individuals could indeed destroy enemy armor with their own antitank weapons. The M72 LAW had been thoroughly tested against armor in a wide variety of controlled situations during its development and had been carried by U.S. Marines for years in Vietnam. The NVA offensive, however, provided its first battlefield test against enemy armor. Its success in this role bolstered the morale of the South Vietnamese forces. While it was reassuring for the Marines to know they could stop the mighty T-54 main battle tank with their LAWs, it was the Communist 130mm gun that was the real problem. The incessant pounding of the "130s" indicated that, despite setbacks, the North Vietnamese intended to continue their attack toward Quang Tri and toward their final objective—the ancient imperial capital of Hue.

In the week following the battles at Pedro, numer-



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Special forces such as these MACV Special Operations Group maritime commandos at Da Nang were used to recover the American airmen evading capture north of the Cam Lo River. Though wearing South Vietnamese uniforms, most of the weapons they carry are of Communist origin. The two submachine guns, however, are Swedish Karl Gustavs.

ous enemy attempts to break the stabilized 3d ARVN Division defense lines were turned back. I Corps headquarters repeatedly reported that South Vietnamese infantry, tanks, and artillery, augmented by U.S. naval gunfire, caused the attacking enemy to break and withdraw in disorder. Continued bad weather, however, precluded the use of VNAF or U.S. tactical air power. General Lam, commanding I Corps, continued to plan for a counteroffensive as soon as the weather lifted and his air support could be employed. Another factor noted by General Kroesen was that General Lam's horoscope was favorable for such a move.¹⁸

Bright Lights

Concurrent with these events, the BAT-21 incident still continued just south of the DMZ. By this time in the war, political pressure would not permit any more Americans to be captured, the South Vietnamese notwithstanding.¹⁹ Marine Lieutenant Colonel Andrew E. Andersen was the officer-in-charge of the MACV-SOG Joint Personnel Recovery Center (JPRC) tasked with the location and recovery of American evaders

and prisoners in Southeast Asia.* His "Bright Light" teams provided for the recovery of Americans after the usual search and rescue efforts had ended. He was nearing the end of his tour in 1972 when the Spring Invasion began and he was sent to MR 1 to direct the recovery of airmen and any U.S. advisors who were still behind enemy lines. Prior to this, two Air Force OV-10s and an HH-53 had been shot down and two Army helicopters additionally were lost, before the recovery effort was turned over to the JPRC.

Arriving at the 3d ARVN Division headquarters at Quang Tri City, Lieutenant Colonel Andersen and a team of two American and six Vietnamese special

*MACV's 2,000-man Studies and Observation Group, commonly known as "SOG," conducted special warfare tasks throughout Southeast Asia. By definition, special warfare consisted of the three interrelated tasks of counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, and psychological warfare. Unconventional warfare included guerrilla operations, resistance operations, and escape and evasion operations. MACV-SOG was composed of units from the Army, Navy, and Air Force and some 8,000 local irregulars. Marine Corps units were not assigned to the task force, but direct support was provided throughout the war and individual Marines were assigned to fill various billets within the command.

forces troops from the SOG-Maritime Operations Branch moved west out Highway 9 to an ARVN blocking position at the Cam Lo bridge. From this location it was possible for his men, dressed as civilians, to cross the Cam Lo River and recover the evaders.* Andersen established the no-fire "boxes" around the American evaders and felt that the 3d ARVN Division "had quit by this time!" As many as 90 air strikes a day were run in direct support of the rescue effort. By 13 April, two American airmen were recovered alive by the JPRC teams of Lieutenant Colonel Andersen. Andersen wrote later that there "were no friendly forces forward of our recovery position . . . Khe Sanh to our west was lost and a major enemy thrust to cross at Dong Ha was expected at any moment."²⁰

The month's first two weeks also witnessed the arrival of III Marine Amphibious Force units responding to direction from Seventh Fleet, CinCPac, and JCS. In addition to forces afloat off the DMZ, two Marine fighter squadrons flew in from Iwakuni, Japan, with their mount-out supplies, and set up at Da Nang Air Base. Highly sophisticated electronic sensor aircraft were deployed to bolster the overall air effort. ANGLICO's Sub Unit One expanded from 89 to 191 personnel. On 13 April, air observers from the Okinawa-based 3d Marine Division reported to Sub Unit One in Da Nang. On 14 April, more air observers, newly arrived from Camp Pendleton, California, were briefed at Saigon before departing for MR 1 and MR 4 for airborne spotting duty from USAF and VNAF aircraft. Major Glen Golden, a naval air observer and artillery officer, reported to the 3d ARVN Division at the Quang Tri Citadel with the assignment as Naval Gunfire Officer for MR 1. ANGLICO's Lieutenant Colonel D'Wayne Gray regarded Golden as an expert practitioner of fire support coordination and a "rock of stability during a time when stability was hard to find." Available naval gunfire support now included 27 destroyers, 2 light cruisers, and a heavy cruiser.²¹

Since the beginning of the offensive, General Giai, responding to the continuous enemy pressure, had persistently requested reinforcements from the corps commander. General Lam reluctantly committed the reinforcements which, in keeping with the principle of unity of command, were attached to the 3d ARVN Division. Now, the unwieldy command structure of the division was breaking down in its efforts to control two ARVN infantry regiments, two VNMC

*This exploit earned Lieutenant Thomas R. Norris, USNR, the Medal of Honor.



Marine Aircraft Group 15 Command Chronology
Commanders coordinate U.S. Marine Corps support to the South Vietnamese armed forces. Shown in discussion are, from the left, BGen William H. Lanagan, Jr., MACV; MajGen Frederick J. Kroesen, Jr., FRAC; LtGen William K. Jones, FMFPac; and MajGen Leslie E. Brown, 1st MAW. Face-to-face contact was critical to the effective prosecution of nationwide operations.

brigades, four Ranger groups, and one armor brigade, as well as the Regional and Popular Forces in Quang Tri Province.²²

The Ranger groups and Marine brigades, under the operational control of the 3d ARVN Division at Quang Tri City, continued to report to their parent organizations for support. The reason for this was two-fold. Loyalty to their units played a part, of course, but, more importantly, at no time was the 3d Division Headquarters' communications system or logistic base expanded to provide adequately for the command or support of the attached units. Attached Rangers and Marines were forced to use their own command channels in order to have their needs met. In retrospect, it was evident that the commanders of I Corps and the 3d ARVN Division could not properly accommodate the rapid buildup of forces. As an example, a request by General Khang, supported by General Kroesen, to assume control of his three brigades was dismissed as unnecessary by General Lam.²³

The NVA Mount a Third Attack in MR 1

The invading NVA, thwarted at Pedro, continued to push men and armor toward Quang Tri City, crossing the Cam Lo and Mieu Giang River barrier by the