

CHAPTER 5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

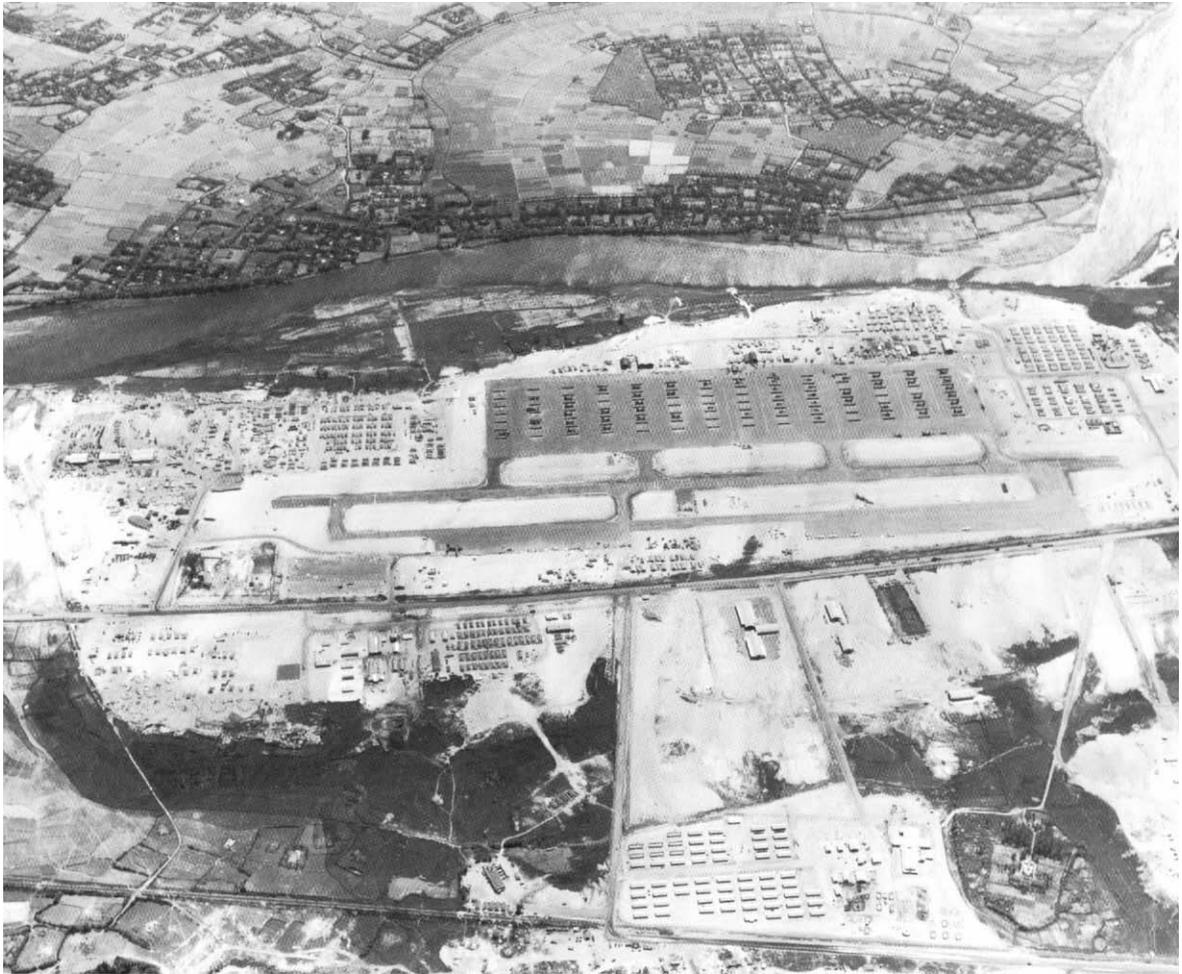
Despite the obvious potential for fraudulent claims, the program still saved lives. During the Christmas truce, for example, a nine-year-old boy approached the PFs in Thon Nai Bieu (2) where the 2d Battalion's Company G had set up defensive positions. Through an interpreter, he told the company commander,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

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

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

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

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



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801101

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

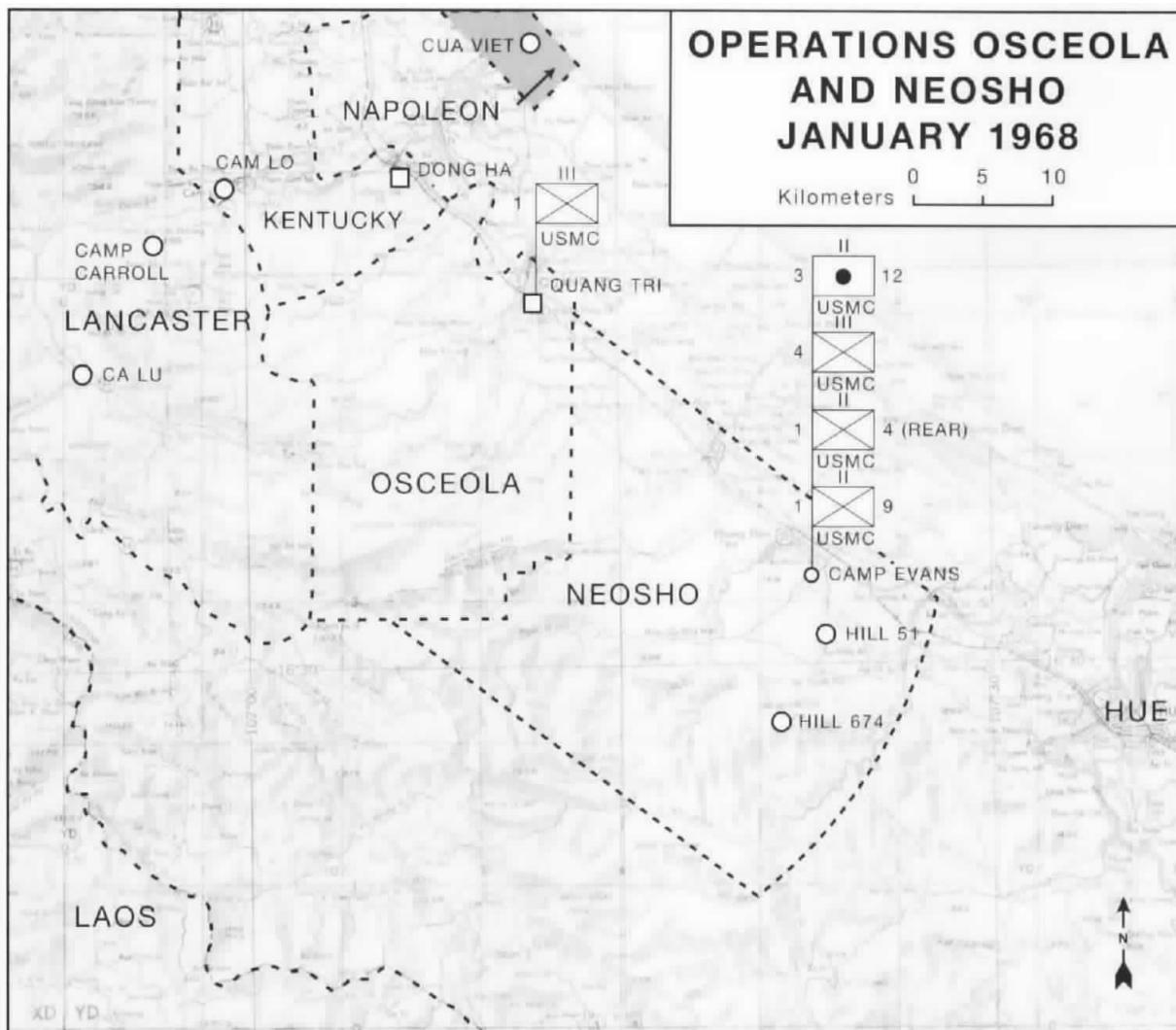
Shortly after beginning its advance, Company B encountered small arms fire, about 30 rounds, from its front. The Marines responded with their M-16s and 60mm mortars. After progressing another 2,000 meters without resistance, the company again engaged the VC, in this instance calling upon artillery support.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

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

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

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

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



1st Battalion, 3d Marines' sector. According to the battalion January report, the battalion Marines counted 166 enemy sightings, not including the 57 reported during the two-company sortie across the Thach Han on 2 January. Most of these sightings were at distances of 500 meters or further. The Marines would either call artillery or, if the enemy were within range, open up with small arms. In either event, the Marines seldom found out how effective their fire was upon the enemy. They did know the NVA and VC kept coming.¹⁷

The battalion's biggest catch occurred on 16 January. A patrol from Captain Gordon D. Batcheller's Company A came across a wounded North Vietnamese officer in the hills south of the village of Hai Phu. The officer, First Lieutenant Nguyen Van Dinh, was the assistant company commander of the *1st Company, K.8 (808th) Battalion*. A South Vietnamese Armed Propaganda Team had shot Lieutenant Dinh during a recon-

naissance he was making of the La Vang and Quang Tri City vicinity. He apparently was trying to make his way back to his base area when the Marines captured him. According to a diary that the enemy lieutenant carried on him, Dinh had participated in a December attack on a Marine position just south of Hai Phu.¹⁸

Two days later, Captain Merrill J. Lindsay's Company C encountered a significant number of North Vietnamese, south of the Hai Le hamlets, a village complex bordering the Thach Han. At 0945, two VC nearly walked into a Marine position in the hills south of the village. The Marines opened fire and killed both of them and captured one carbine. Later that evening, about 1730, another Marine patrol from Company C encountered about 12 khaki-uniformed NVA just outside Hai Le. In the exchange of fire, the Marines slew another enemy soldier and recovered a submachine gun. One hour later, in about the same area, the

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

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

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

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

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

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

On 1 November 1967, at the start of Operation Neosho, Colonel William L. Dick, the 4th Marines commander, a veteran of four World War II campaigns including Iwo Jima, had three infantry battalions and one artillery battery under his operational control. At Camp Evans, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines provided security for the regimental command post, the artillery battalion, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, and supporting forces. The two remaining infantry battalions, BLT 1/3, the SLF Alpha battalion, and the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, were conducting a subsidiary operation to Neosho, Operation Granite, south of CoBi-Thanh Tan, and west of Hill 674.²³

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

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



Photo from 12th Mar ComdC, Jan69

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Operation Checkers

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 6

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

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

A Time of Transition

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

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

units, but admitted that General Westmoreland would not "let me move his Army divisions without there being a plan that he'd okayed."^{1*}

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

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

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



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371163

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Photo courtesy of Igor Bobrowsky

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

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

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

64 members of the VC Hoi An infrastructure and the capture of significant enemy planning documents.^{7*}

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

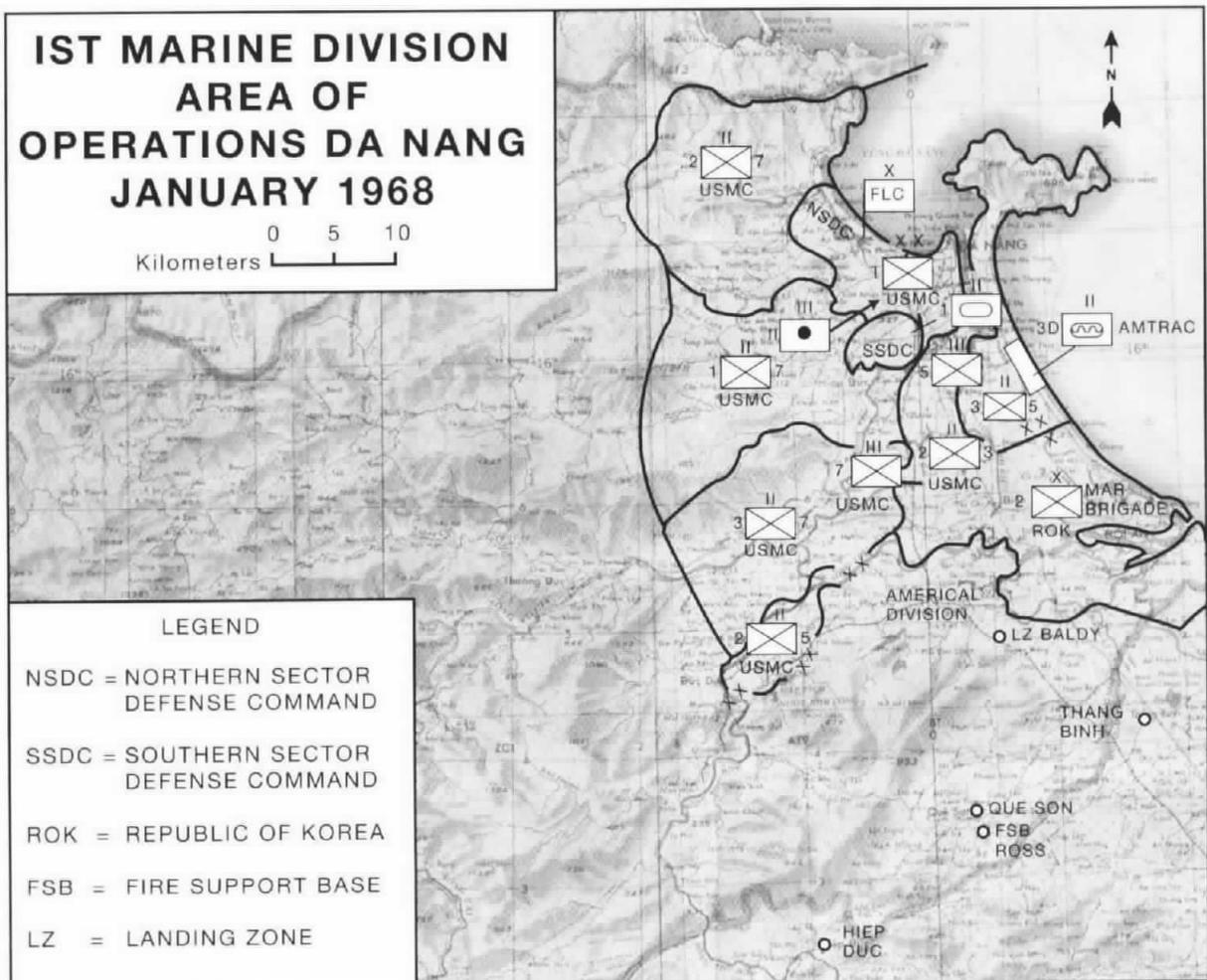
*Lieutenant Colonel Kelly observed that although the attack failed to materialize, some enemy rocket troops failed to get the word and "tried to rush forward to firing sites . . ." They were intercepted by Marines and "the first enemy 122mm launcher was captured." LtCol John F. J. Kelly, Comments on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

The Da Nang TAOR

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

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

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





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801132

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

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

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

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

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

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

waterway traffic in the rocket belt area. Division psychological operations teams, moreover, developed an extensive campaign among the local villagers including money awards for information on the enemy rockets.^{13**}

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

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

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

equipment, the NVA could keep an entire Marine division occupied.^{14*}

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

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

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

Operation Auburn: Searching the Go Noi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Abel Collection Photos

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



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

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

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

support was needlessly withheld from the Battalion because of this imposition."²⁴

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

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

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

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

3d Battalion sustained casualties of 19 dead and 25 wounded.²⁷

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

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

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

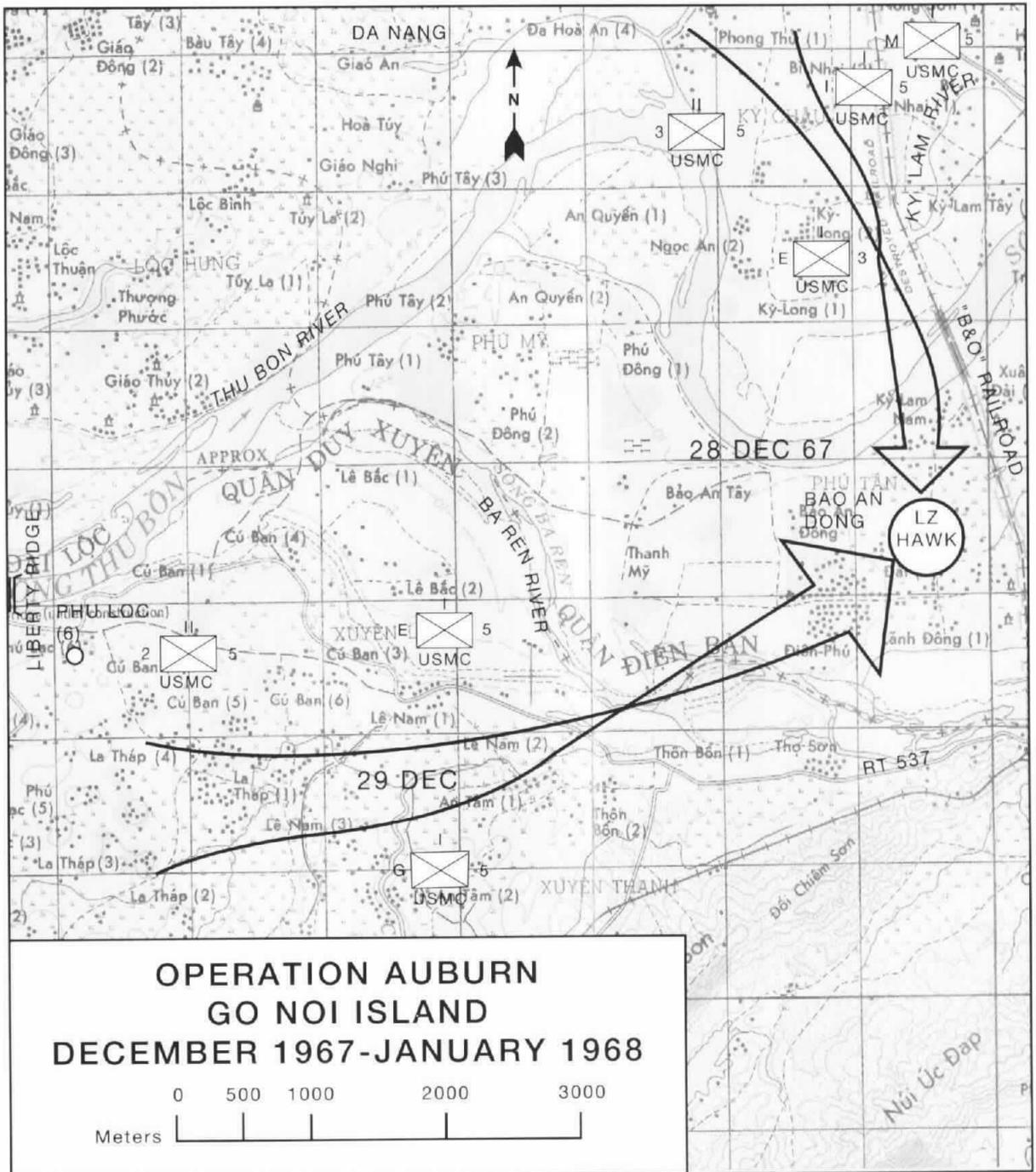
The operation on the 29th went much as planned with relatively light resistance from the enemy. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines seized its objective without opposition. After its arrival in Landing Zone Hawk, shortly after 1000, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines advanced with its Company E in the lead and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

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

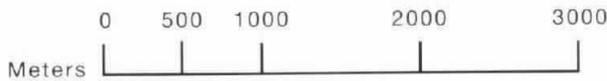
Shortly after noon, the two Marine companies began their search of the hamlet. They detained two suspicious Vietnamese clad in the usual black pajamas and recovered the bodies of the nine Marines killed in the earlier fighting. About 1330, as the battalion command group approached, VC snipers once more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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

A Busy Night at Da Nang

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Continuing Heavy Fighting and Increasing Uncertainty

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Phu Loc Operations

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

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

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

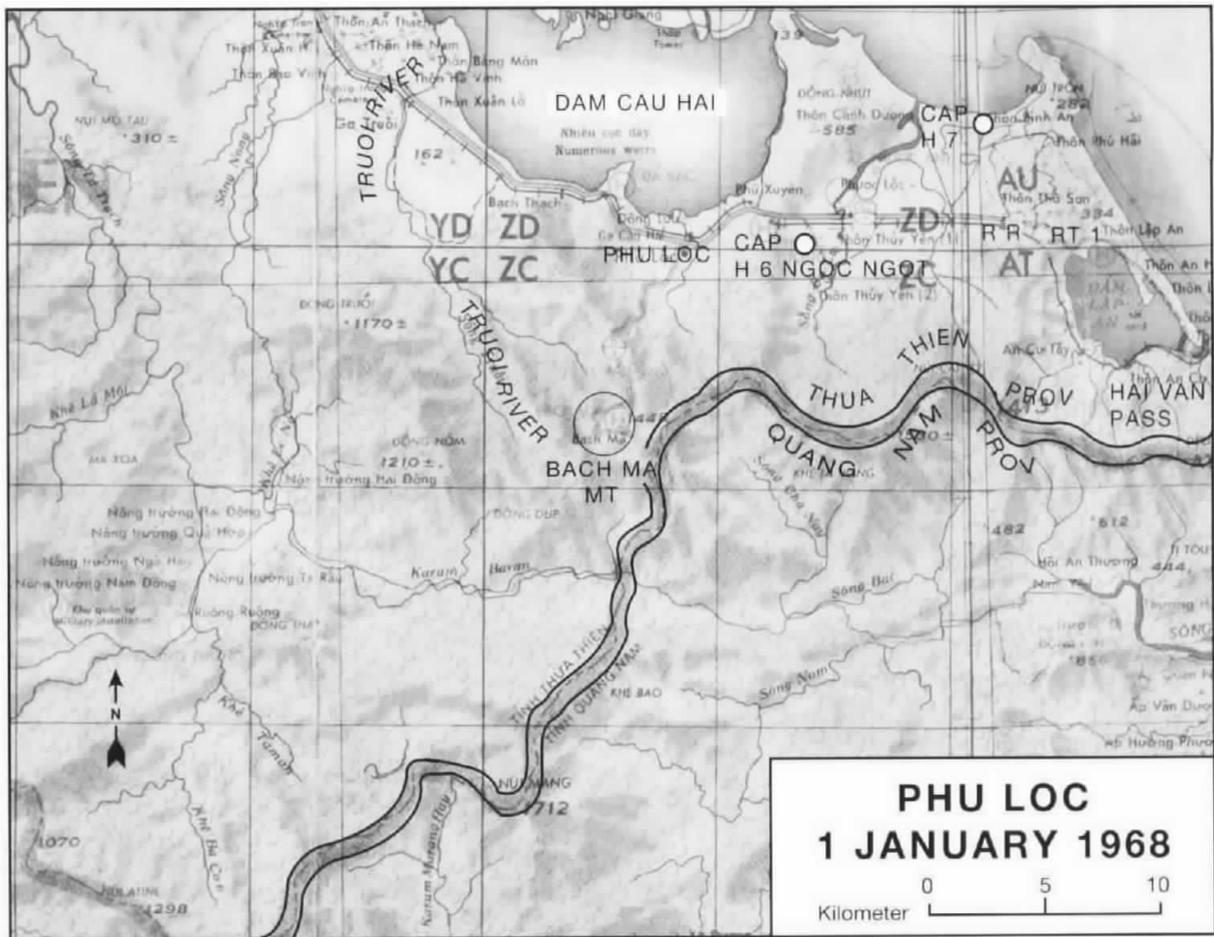
Company D, established its base area about 15,000 meters to the east of the rest of the battalion and about 10,000 meters north of the Hai Van Pass. The 1st Division attached two artillery batteries from the 11th Marines to Lieutenant Colonel van den Berg's command. Battery D, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Formation and Deployment of Task Force X-Ray

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

displacing a hell of a lot more troops up north than they had before.”^{72*}

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

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

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

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

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

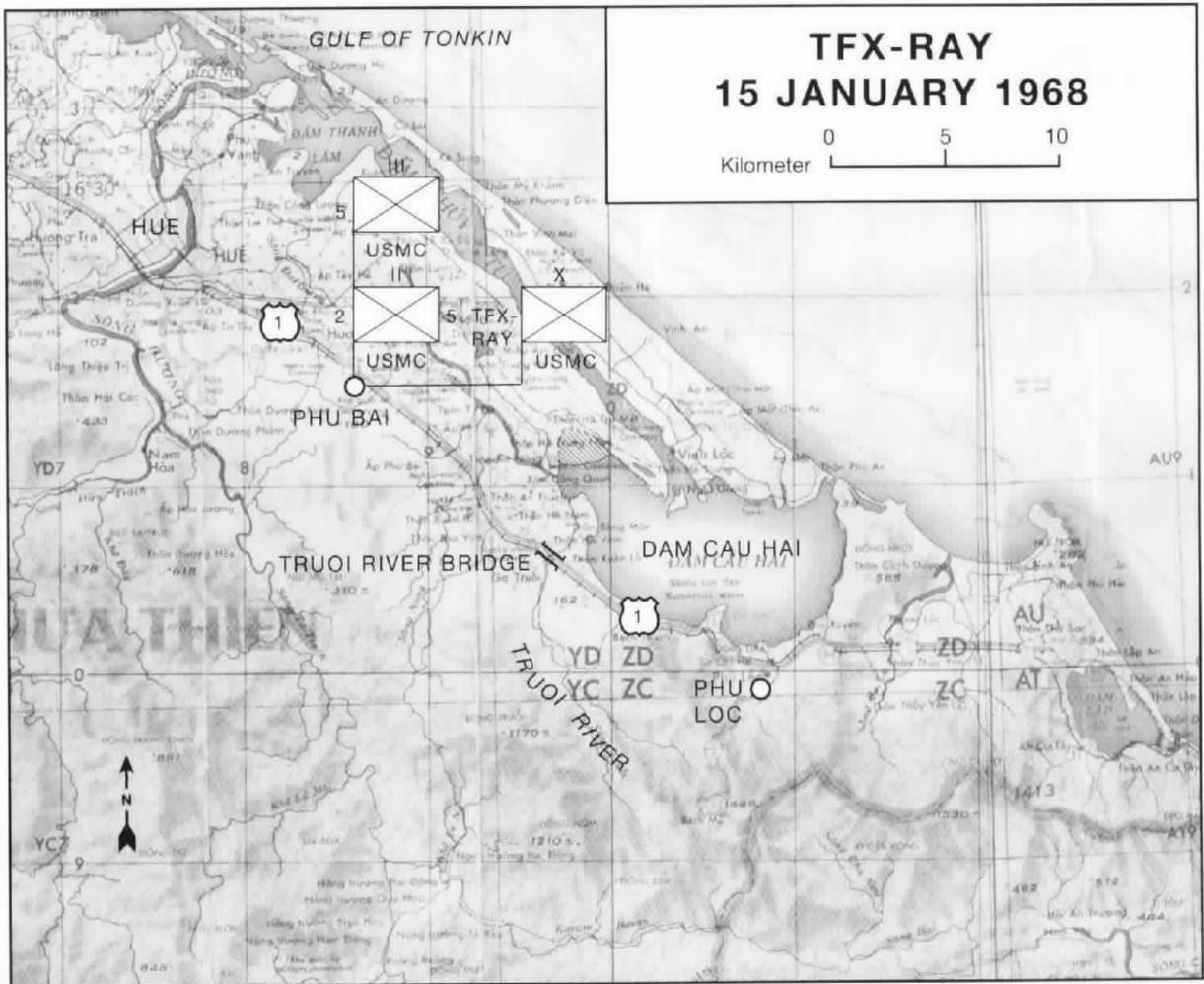
The Cavalry Arrives

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Changed Situation in the North

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PART II
THE TET OFFENSIVE

CHAPTER 7

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

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

The Cua Viet is Threatened

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

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

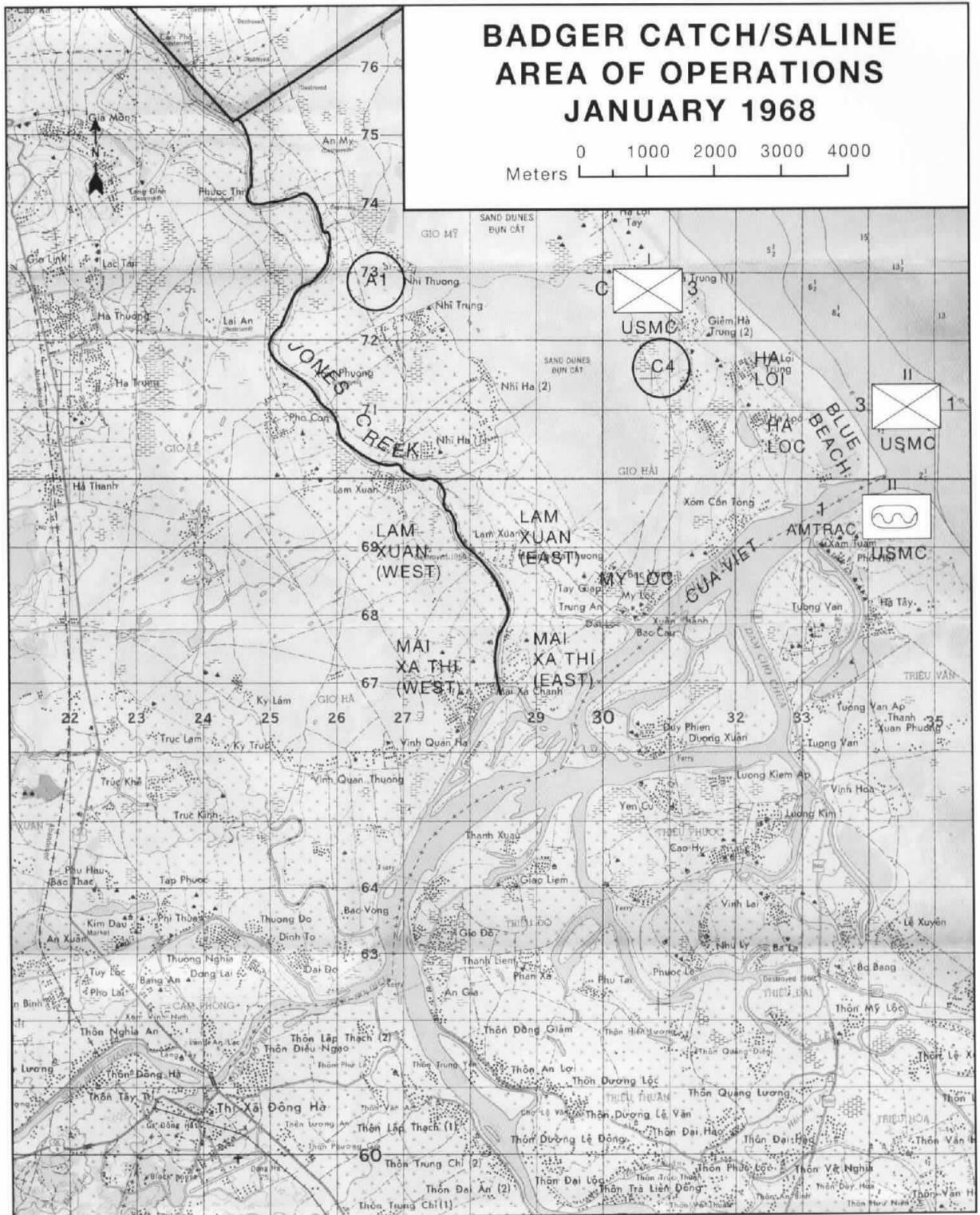
Almost simultaneously with attacks on Khe Sanh, the North Vietnamese appeared to be making a determined attempt to halt the river traffic on the Cua Viet. On 20 January, enemy gunners positioned on the northern bank of the river forced the temporary closing of the Cua Viet. Up to this point, Lieutenant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

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

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191332

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191332





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190277

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

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190435



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

*Adjustment of Forces in
Southern Quang Tri Province*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Heavy Fighting Along the DMZ

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

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

With the move of the 4th Marines to Camp Carroll, the regiment's "tempo of action picked up immediately." Upon the first night of the arrival of the regimental headquarters and staff, North Vietnamese gunners fired some 30 140mm rockets into Camp Carroll reinforced by 15 rounds of 85mm artillery fire. Although causing relatively little damage, these turned out to be the first shots in a determined attempt by the North Vietnamese to isolate Camp Carroll and cut Route 9.²¹

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

The enemy soldiers opened up with small arms, mortars, machine guns, and recoilless rifles, immediately immobilizing all four vehicles. Using their weapons, including the quad .50, to defend themselves, and taking what cover they could, the Marines with the convoy called for assistance. The 4th Marines sent a reaction force from Camp Carroll, consisting of a platoon from Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines; two tanks, one a flame tank, from Company B, 3d Tank Battalion; and two Army M42 Dusters from Battery C, 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery. The North Vietnamese, however, were waiting for the reaction column. An enemy gunner fired on the lead tank, stopping it with a recoilless rifle round and killing the

* Actually it was a battalion and a half, as the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines only had two companies in Lancaster. The other two companies were under the command of the battalion executive officer in the neighboring 9th Marines Kentucky area of operations. See Chapter 3.

reaction force commander, Captain Daniel W. Kent, who was also the tank company commander. Again the Marines fought back and called for support. When two UH-1E gunships appeared overhead, about 1830, the North Vietnamese troops broke contact and disappeared. A second relief column of two more dusters and two trucks armed with quad .50s arrived from Dong Ha and assisted with the evacuation of the dead and wounded. The Marines suffered casualties of 8 men dead and 44 wounded. They killed about three of the enemy. Not only did the vehicles of the original convoy require extensive repairs, but two of the dusters and the one tank hit by the RPG round also sustained damage.

General Tompkins, the 3d Marine Division commander, could not tolerate this situation. It appeared that the North Vietnamese at will could cut Route 9 and thus, in effect, deny access to Camp Carroll and the other Marine bases in Operation Lancaster. Upon learning about the ambush, he transferred Lieutenant Colonel Lee R. Bendell's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines from the Kentucky area of operations to the Lancaster one and returned the battalion to its parent regimental control. The battalion was to clear the ambush site and then sweep Route 9.²³

On the afternoon of 24 January, Marine helicopters brought Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, the battalion commander, a skeleton battalion command group, and Company M to Camp Carroll. At 1900, Bendell and his small headquarters group accompanied Company M under Captain Raymond W. Kalm to the ambush site to assist in the evacuation of casualties. Upon learning that the second relief force had already brought in the wounded and some of the bodies, the Marine company established night positions on a ridgeline, about 1500 meters south of and overlooking Route 9 and also screening "the NVA from Camp Carroll."²⁴ The next morning the company would begin its reconnaissance of the battalion's planned objective area.²⁵

At 0630, on the 25th, the company departed its nighttime positions. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell advised Captain Kalm to occupy a small hill just north of Route 9, about 2,000 meters south of the Cam Lo River. After sending his 3d Platoon under Second Lieutenant John S. Leffen, to occupy the strategic height, the Marine captain led the rest of the company to the ambush site of the previous day, about 1,000 meters to the west.*

*Major John S. Leffen, then the platoon commander, remembered some of the events somewhat differently. He recalled moving to the hill north of Route 9 the previous evening. Maj John S. Leffen, Jr., Comments on draft, n.d. (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Leffen Comments.

The company recovered four of the Marine dead from the earlier action and then began a sweep from west to east on Route 9. About 0915, the lead platoon had no sooner passed by the damaged vehicles still strewn along the side of the road when it came under automatic weapons fire.** With the assistance of Leffen's platoon left on the hill, the company obtained fire superiority. Lance Corporal Jack L. Patton, a machine gunner with the 3d Platoon, sighted the enemy gun. Patton later laconically stated, "my gun returned fire and we killed the enemy." In that action, the Marines sustained casualties of two dead and two wounded and killed three of the enemy. They also recovered the NVA light machine gun.^{26***}

Company M then established a defensive perimeter on the hill and waited for the rest of the battalion to join it. By mid-afternoon, both Companies I and L as well as the rest of the battalion command group had arrived. Although not suffering any more killed, the battalion sustained 17 more wounded from random mortar fire from nearby enemy gunners. That night the battalion "established a three-company, tied-in perimeter" across both sides of Route 9.²⁷

At about 0230 on 26 January, Colonel Dick, the 4th Marines commander, radioed Lieutenant Colonel Bendell that he had received intelligence of large North Vietnamese forces operating just north of the Cam Lo River. The regimental commander wanted the 3d Battalion to secure Route 9 from the Khe Gia Bridge, about 5,000 meters west of the battalion's present position, east to Cam Lo, a distance of about 9,000 meters. Two companies were to deploy north of the river, while the remaining company cleared the road. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell suggested instead that "the mission of securing the road was best performed along the road and south of the Cam Lo River." The regiment, however, insisted that the battalion carry out the mission as originally ordered.²⁸

Lieutenant Colonel Bendell then prepared his plans and started to carry out his new orders. Companies I and L were to cross the Cam Lo and operate

**Colonel Bendell recalled that "one Marine managed to start the abandoned tank and pulled all the convoy vehicles back toward Cam Lo." Col Lee R. Bendell, Comments on draft, n.d. [Nov94] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Bendell Comments.

***Major Leffen, the 3d Platoon commander, recalled that the captured enemy weapon was a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) rather than a light machine gun. Leffen Comments.

on the northern banks of the river while Company M secured Route 9, south of the river. The enemy, however, forced the Marines to change the original concept of the mission. At 0845 on the morning of the 26th, a Company M patrol discovered that the enemy had blown a bridge on Route 9 over a small streambed, just below the hill, now dubbed "Mike's Hill" after Company M, where the company had established its night defensive position. The patrol reported that the road was "impassable without engineer improvement." Just as Company I was about to cross the river, the regimental commander changed his order about operating on both banks of the Cam Lo.* Colonel Dick directed the battalion to "continue to secure Route 9, to deny enemy access to bridges and culverts, and to patrol and ambush 375 meters north and south of Route 9, occupying the high ground on either side of the route as necessary." In effect, the battalion was to secure that portion of Route 9 that extended from the opening to Camp Carroll eastward to the destroyed bridge.²⁹

During the rest of the morning and afternoon of the 26th, the three companies patrolled the approximately 2,000 meters of Route 9, encountering little resistance except for the occasional sniper and mortar bombardment. Throughout the day, however, the battalion recovered enemy equipment, including pieces of clothing and web gear, ammunition, grenades, and even antipersonnel mines and spotted small groups of enemy soldiers. By nightfall, concerned about the perimeter of the previous night on relatively low terrain, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell ordered the battalion to form three separate company defensive perimeters "on favorable high ground on both sides of Route 9, including Company M on Mike's Hill."³⁰

After returning to its hill for the night, Company M also established several small ambush sites. The 3d Platoon commander, Second Lieutenant John S. Leffen, sent out an ambush squad and established a fire team listening post at the bottom of the hill. According to Leffen, both the squad and fire team as they arrived at their designated positions reported there were North Vietnamese soldiers all around them. Lieutenant Leffen pulled back the listening post, but

left the ambush squad where it was because of its "tactical importance."³¹

During the night of 26–27 January, North Vietnamese soldiers attempted to infiltrate the Marine positions through a streambed to the west of Mike's Hill and gullies and other streambeds to the north and east.** On Mike's Hill, Lieutenant Leffen remembered that about 0500 on the morning of the 27th, "we heard what sounded like 'wall to wall' NVA all around our positions." He remarked on the poor noise discipline of the enemy troops. Although the Marines could not hear the sound of the movements of the NVA soldiers, "What gave them away was their constant talking." A Marine mortarman, Frank Craven,** with Company M several years later recalled, "They were at the bottom of the hill and we were at the middle of the hill . . . They didn't know it and we didn't know it until . . . we butted heads." According to Craven, "we heard some noise and then it was automatic machine gun fire from then on. It was terrible."³²

The fight for Mike's Hill would last through the entire afternoon and spread to Route 9 and involve all three companies of the 3d Battalion. On the hill, itself, the battle turned into a wild melee. Clambering up three slopes of the hill, the North Vietnamese employed mortars, rocket propelled grenades, and automatic weapons to cover their advance. The Marines responded in kind. Lieutenant Leffen remembered "when we ran out of bullets we threw grenades and misdelivered .50 cal rounds in a variable and alternating fashion to keep the NVA honest until the helos could bring us more ammunition."³³ From an enlisted man's perspective, Frank Craven recalled that it was "every man for himself. You still work as a team somewhat . . . but as far as a coordinated formal thing, all that gets wiped away. The thicker the battle the more informal and it was very thick." Craven particularly remembered one machine gunner at the top of the hill that kept the enemy back: "He just kept that area sprayed."³⁴

From a nearby hill to the east of Company M, Company L fired 60mm mortars and rifle rounds into an exposed enemy flank. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, from his temporary command post on

*Colonel William L. Dick explained in his comments that once the bridge was blown, "a change in plans was obviously required" and required a "rapid reevaluation." Col William L. Dick, Comments on draft, dtd 1Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Dick Comments.

**Colonel Bendell commented that the enemy had moved into attack positions under cover of darkness and that "it appeared their principle attack was along the road where the battalion perimeter had been located the night earlier." Bendell Comments.

***Frank Craven later legally changed his name to Abdullah Hassan.



Top photo is from the John S. Leffen Collection and the bottom is courtesy of Col Lee R. Bendell, USMC (Ret) *The fight for Mike's Hill, named after Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, would be the pivotal battle in the opening up of Route 9 to Camp Carroll in January 1968. In the top photo, the smoke from a Boeing B-52 Arclight strike on North Vietnamese positions can be seen from a Company M position on Mike's Hill. Each of the B-52 Stratofortresses could hold 27 tons of ordnance. Below, Mike's Hill after the battle has much of its foliage destroyed. Route 9 can be seen in the foreground and the Cam Lo River in the background.*



Mike's Hill, then ordered Captain John L. McLaughlin, the Company L commander, to maneuver his company down to Route 9 and relieve a Company M squad surrounded by North Vietnamese troops at an ambush site near the destroyed bridge. By noon, after overcoming determined pockets of enemy resistance with the assistance of 81mm mortars and coordinated small arms fire from a Company M squad on Mike's Hill, Company L reached the bridge and relieved the embattled Marines there. In the process, the company took some casualties, but killed 23 of the enemy and captured 3 prisoners.

With the arrival of Company L at the bridge and Mike's Hill now secure, the battalion commander directed Captain John L. Prichard, the Company I commander, to advance eastward along Route 9 from his positions toward Company L, a distance of some 1,000 meters. Because of the nature of the terrain in the sector, open ground interspersed with hedgerows and heavy brush, Bendell called artillery fire upon enemy firing positions north of the Cam Lo River to cover Company I's open left flank.* About 200 meters west of the bridge, a well-camouflaged and dug-in NVA company using streambeds and dense vegetation as cover stopped Company I. Failing to overcome the enemy resistance with repeated frontal assaults, Captain Prichard asked for reinforcements. He ordered up his reserve platoon from his old position and Lieutenant Colonel Bendell directed Company L to send one platoon to Prichard. By 1400, with the support of Huey gunships, the two companies had linked up and began the mop up. For the most part, the battle for Mike's Hill was over.³⁵

About that time, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell received a radio message from Colonel Dick that Major General Tompkins, the 3d Division commander, wanted the battalion to return to Camp Carroll. Concerned that the NVA were still in force north of the river, Bendell failed to see the tactical advantage of "re-seizing terrain fought for earlier" and recommended the battalion stay and mop up the area.³⁶ After first ruling against Bendell, Colonel Dick and General Tompkins decided to permit the battalion to continue

*Colonel Bendell recalled that he directed his operations officer and his artillery liaison officer "to 'seal off' the battle area by artillery fires all along the Cam Lo River at the suspected crossing points. This apparently prevented reinforcements and even made retreat hazardous for those south of the river." Bendell Comments.

with the road-securing mission for another day.** By 1700 on the 27th, "vehicles were able to move without harassment along Route 9 from both directions to the destroyed bridge . . ."³⁷

After evacuating the casualties, which included the Company I commander, Captain Prichard, who later died of his wounds, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell formed his battalion into two companies. He placed Company I under the operational control of Company M and attached one of Company M's platoons to Company L. According to the battalion commander, instead of having "three short-strength companies," he now had two "full-strength" ones. During the day, the battalion had killed more than 130 of the enemy, captured 6 prisoners, and recovered 3 57mm recoilless rifles, 2 60mm mortars, 35 AK-47s, and extensive ammunition and equipment. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, however, had paid a heavy price: 21 men dead and 62 men wounded.³⁸

On the 28th, the now two ad hoc companies continued their patrolling of Route 9 with relatively little incident. About 1430, a Company L patrol happened upon a tunnel. Its entrance was three feet in diameter and it extended about eight feet underground. Five other tunnels, running east to west, intersected with the first one. In these tunnels were several North Vietnamese bodies, some lying on makeshift litters. The Marines buried the bodies and destroyed the tunnels.³⁹ After completing this grisly task, the battalion received orders once more to return to Camp Carroll. Marine helicopters flew Company L to Camp Carroll, while the revamped Company M returned to the base on foot. Once the Marines were a safe distance away, Air Force B-52s in an Arflight mission carpet bombed suspected enemy avenues of retreat and firing positions north of the Cam Lo River.^{39****}

**Colonel Dick later wrote, "it was manifest that the battalion couldn't remain in the area indefinitely and there was no available unit for relief. In any event the position would have to be uncovered . . . when the CG stated his wish for 3/4 to withdraw I certainly wasn't going to 'rule' against him but did demur to the extent that Lee [Bendell] was on the ground and in a better position to make a reasonable estimate of the situation, and could be brought in the following day. Which is what happened." Dick Comments.

***These bodies were included in the figures of North Vietnamese dead listed above for the action of 27 January.

****Major Leffen remembered that an aerial observer "spoke directly to me indicating we were 'in a lot of trouble.' He . . . could see a column of 3's headed south toward our position as far as he could see. We were then told to be five clicks south of the hill by 1700." He wrote that the B-52s struck exactly at that time and "we could see pieces of the enemy in the trees following the arflight." Leffen Comments



Both photos are courtesy of Col Lee R. Bendell, USMC (Ret)

At top a well-camouflaged NVA foxhole was used during the fighting for Route 9. These fighting positions were often interconnected by a complex tunnel network. Below, the first Marine convoy arrives at Camp Carroll after the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines reopened Route 9.



The following day, 29 January, the battalion reinforced by tanks and Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines returned to the destroyed bridge on Route 9. The mission was to provide security for an engineer unit building a bypass for the bridge and to open the road for vehicular traffic. Company L this time occupied Mike's Hill, while Company M and the tanks patrolled Route 9 west to the Khe Gia Bridge. Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines remained with the engineers at the downed span. For the most part, the road-clearing mission was uneventful. Enemy gunners once mortared Mike's Hill which resulted in two wounded Marines from Company L. On the road patrol, a nervous Marine mistakenly shot and wounded a second Marine, whom the first thought to be an enemy soldier. The infantry-tank patrol also came across 30 enemy bodies and several weapons just north of Route 9. At the damaged bridge site, Company H took two wounded North Vietnamese soldiers prisoners. At 1530 that afternoon, the engineers completed the work on the bypass and "a huge Dong Ha convoy began moving through the bridge point, enroute to Camp Carroll." Route 9 was once more open.

With the completion of opening Route 9, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines returned to Camp Carroll, but remained under the operational control of the 4th Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell sent a personal message to the officers and men of his command, thanking them for their efforts: "You may all take pride in a good job, well done." The following day, the battalion received a message from General Westmoreland, the MACV commander, complimenting "the officers and men of 3/4 for the aggressive attack against the enemy's 64th Regiment . . . This action undoubtedly pre-empted enemy attack against Camp Carroll."⁴⁰

Despite the hard-won accomplishment of reopening Route 9, the identification of the 64th NVA Regiment had ominous undertones for the Marine command. Intelligence officers were now sure that a new enemy division, the 320th NVA, had replaced the 324B NVA Division in the western Demilitarized Zone. The new division consisted of the 48th and 56th NVA Regiments in addition to the 64th.* All the prison-

ers captured by the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines were from the 64th, and most were recent draftees. This new enemy regiment had crossed the Ben Hai about 10 days previously, apparently with the mission of cutting Route 9 and isolating Camp Carroll and the other bases in the Lancaster area. There was no doubt that there would be another attempt.⁴¹

A Lull in Leatherneck Square

For Colonel Richard B. Smith's 9th Marines in Leatherneck Square, things had been relatively quiet. Because of the uncertainties of enemy intentions in the DMZ, on 20 January, General Westmoreland had agreed to a III MAF request to suspend work on the barrier until the situation clarified. The 9th Marines continued to be responsible for the defense of the A-3 and A-4 (Con Thien) Strongpoints just below the cleared trace, and their supporting combat bases. On the 21st, enemy gunners fired upon the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, then still under the 9th Marines in positions about six kilometers northeast of Con Thien, with about 300 rounds of mixed caliber artillery and mortar rounds. The battalion sustained 10 casualties, all wounded. Until the end of the month, there were several small actions, but no major attempt of the North Vietnamese units to penetrate in strength the Marine defenses.⁴²

For the most part, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines at Con Thien bore the brunt of whatever enemy activity there was, largely continuing mortar and artillery bombardment. Having already lost one commander to enemy mortars, the 2d Battalion earlier had hopes that in Operation Checkers, it would leave Con Thien and rejoin its parent regiment, the 1st Marines. Major General Tompkins, the 3d Marine Division commander, however, told General Cushman that "with present enemy threat . . . the relief of 2/1 at Con Thien is postponed until after Tet."⁴³

The small hill, only 160 meters high, but less than two miles south of the Demilitarized Zone, remained a key terrain feature for the Marines and a favorite target for North Vietnamese gunners and small infantry probes. Shortly after noon on 22 January, the enemy bombarded the Marine strongpoint with 100 rounds of 82mm mortar, followed by 130 rounds of 152mm shells from guns within North Vietnam. The battalion sustained 2 men killed and 16 wounded. One-half hour later, about 1,000 meters north of the base, Companies F and G encountered a North Vietnamese infantry company. The enemy unit withdrew under

*There is a minor question whether the 64th NVA was involved in the fighting for Route 9 from 24-29 January. According to the 3d Marine Division's after-action report for Lancaster II, dated over a year after the action, the 64th was in reserve, while the other two regiments attacked Route 9. It claims that prisoners captured in the action "substantiated this intelligence." Yet, all the contemporary documents refer only to the 64th identified in this fighting. If the 64th was in reserve, it appears contradictory that the prisoners captured by the Marines would be from that regiment.

cover of 60mm mortar fire. In the firefight, the Marines sustained casualties of two men dead and eight wounded and killed three of the NVA. The following night the enemy hit the Marine base again, but with much less force. At 2300, 40 82mm and 20 60mm mortar rounds together with 10 rounds of 152mm artillery shells landed within the Con Thien perimeter. This time the Marines sustained six wounded but no dead.⁴⁴

On 29 January, the battalion demonstrated the value of maintaining the Con Thien outpost despite the continuing harassment. About 0125, a Marine forward observer there looking through his starlight scope discovered a North Vietnamese convoy moving on a secondary road, about a 1,000 meters in the DMZ north of the Ben Hai River, and called in air and artillery missions. The observer then saw the enemy at a site, just below the Ben Hai, launch four to five SAMs (surface-to-air missiles) at the American aircraft. He then ran a radar-controlled (TPQ) mission on the SAM site. After the firing and bombing missions, the Marine outpost reported a "total of nine secondary explosions including a huge fireball, and one secondary fire for area of convoy and suspected SAM sites."⁴⁵

While the enemy activity in the Kentucky area of operations remained relatively low, General Tompkins did not want to deplete his defenses in the sector. The division and 9th Marines continued to receive reports of enemy movement around Marine positions in the operation. News about the arrival of the *320th NVA Division* on the DMZ reinforced the unease that the Marine commanders had about the overall situation on the northern front.⁴⁶

The transfer of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines to the Lancaster area of operations and the unexpected assignment of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines to Khe Sanh forced General Tompkins again to look to the Special Landing Force, this time SLF Alpha with BLT 2/4, for reinforcement. Earlier, on 22 January, BLT 2/4, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William Weise, had relieved the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at Camp Evans and had come under the operational control of the 1st Marines. With the takeover of Evans by the 1st Cavalry Division and the movement of the 1st Marines to Phu Bai, the BLT was once again free.* With the concurrence of the Seventh Fleet, Generals Cushman and Tompkins agreed to assign Weise's BLT the area of operations northeast of Con Thien, just vacated by the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines.⁴⁷

On 26 January, BLT 2/4 reembarked from Camp Evans to SLF Alpha amphibious shipping and the following day, in Operation Fortress Attack, deployed to the Kentucky area of operations. Shortly after 0900 on the 27th, the SLF helicopter squadron, HMM-361, landed the first wave of the battalion in a landing zone near the combat operating base, C-2, on Route 561. By 1900, the entire BLT was ashore and the 9th Marines assumed operational control of the battalion from the Navy. According to plan, most of the supporting elements of the BLT including the Ontos and the amtrac platoons were detached and placed under other division commands. The following day the battalion moved from the C-2 base to its assigned new area of operations near Con Thien.⁴⁸

On 31 January, General Tompkins would shift forces once more. He divided the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines into two command groups, each with two companies. The 3d Division commander sent Command Group A with Companies F and G attached to Camp Carroll and placed it under the operational control of the 4th Marines. Command Group B, under Lieutenant Colonel Weise's executive officer, remained with the 9th Marines in the Kentucky area of operations. As Tompkins explained to General Cushman, he believed that the "enemy will aim a major effort to overrun Camp Carroll, Thon Son Lam [the Rockpile area], and Ca Lu." According to the 3d Division commander, the "*320th Division* is admirably positioned" for such an attack which "offers enemy greatest return [and] more profitable for him than similar major effort against hardened positions" of the barrier strongpoints in the Kentucky area of operations. General Cushman agreed.⁴⁹

The Cua Viet Continues to Heat Up

To the east of the Kentucky area of operations, the North Vietnamese continued their effort to close the Cua Viet River channel. Following the sinking of the LCM on 24 January by a command detonated mine, the next morning NVA gunners struck again. From positions in the hamlet of My Loc on the northern bank of the river they fired rifle propelled grenades and recoilless rifles at a Navy convoy of two LCMs and a LCU (landing craft, utility). Both the two LCMs took hits and returned to the Cua Viet Port Facility. The LCU continued on to Dong Ha. The action resulted in five Americans wounded, four Navy crewmen and a Marine from Company K, BLT 3/1. In their return fire at the enemy positions, the Navy gun crews inadver-

*See Chapter six for operations in Thua Thien Province.

tently struck Company K trying to clear the northern bank in Operation Badger Catch.⁵⁰

Since coming ashore on the evening of 23 January, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown's BLT 3/1 began its mission of attempting to clear the hamlets north of the river. The terrain in the Badger Catch area of operations consisted largely of sand dunes and sandy barren soil extending some 5,000 meters inland to a tributary of the Ben Hai River. This stream, unnamed on the maps but called Jones Creek by the Marines, ran south from the DMZ into the Cua Viet. Bordering both Jones Creek and especially the Cua Viet were extensive paddy areas that supported rice farming. The rice growers lived in hamlets on the banks of the Cua Viet or the adjacent area just above it. Because of the war, many of these hamlets were now abandoned and others were used as refugee centers.

According to agent reports, the enemy force in the Cua Viet sector numbered about 1,200 men, consisting of three North Vietnamese companies and three Viet Cong companies, two main force and one local force. On the 24th, the BLT had secured its first objective, a refugee resettlement village on the river about a 1,000 meters east of My Loc without incident. It also had searched two hamlets to the north, Ha Loc and Ha Loi, again without meeting any resistance. In a separate operation on an island in the river, Company L had little success in locating any of the enemy forces that might have been responsible for the sinking of the LCM that day.⁵¹

On the 25th, the battalion encountered much stiffer resistance. Even the previous day, it had come under small arms and mortar fire from My Loc, one of the battalion's prime objectives. At dawn, and without preparatory fires, Captain John E. Regal, the Company K commander, ordered his company into an attack on the hamlet along a narrow front. He deployed one platoon to the right to form blocking positions north of the city. While attempting to maneuver around the hamlet, the blocking platoon came under heavy machine gun and small arms fire. With this platoon caught in a deadly cross fire from the hamlet, Regal sent in reinforcements including tanks attached to him for the operation. Even with the tanks in support, Company K had difficulty in pulling out its casualties from the initial action. The tanks exchanged fire with enemy antitank gunners armed with RPGs. Although the tanks sustained five hits, all escaped relatively unscathed. It was about this time, the enemy gunners in My Loc opened up on the Navy convoy. About 1000, the company had

succeeded in bringing out its dead and wounded, six killed and nine wounded.⁵²

By this time, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown and Captain Regal had learned from nearby ARVN units that a NVA battalion was in My Loc. They decided to pull Company K back and bring in air strikes and supporting arms. From 1030 to 1430, Marine, Air Force, and Navy jets flew four close air support missions against My Loc. Then under covering artillery fire, about 1500, Company K once more moved upon the hamlet, this time meeting almost no resistance except a few occasional sniper rounds. In My Loc, the company recovered an RPG-7 rocket launcher and the bodies of 20 North Vietnamese soldiers. The Marines also captured one prisoner. Later that evening, the company came under artillery fire from firing positions north of the DMZ, but sustained no casualties. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown selected My Loc for his command post and also for the battalion's main combat base because of the hamlet's "strategic location relative to river traffic."⁵³

For the time being, the Marine occupation of My Loc appeared to confound the enemy gunners. For the next few days, the enemy was unable to interfere with the American shipping on the Cua Viet. General Tompkins and the commander of the Cua Viet Naval Support Activity also implemented increased security arrangements that may also have contributed to the safe passage of the Navy craft. The Naval Support Activity provided Navy crews with PRC-25 radios that permitted them to communicate with Marine air observers flying overhead and with helicopter gunships. Moreover, the two commanders agreed upon check points along the river where boats could "report their location in relation to any enemy activity." This permitted the 3d Marine Division "to react to any contact with artillery, naval gunfire, air, when available, and ground forces in the form of USMC and/or ARVN Sparrow Hawk reaction forces." Finally, the two commanders concurred upon the assignment of two Navy patrol boats on the river carrying armed Marines, two National policemen, and an interpreter to stop and search "indigenous water craft."⁵⁴

Despite the limited reprieve for the Cua Viet shipping, the enemy still posed a real threat to the 3d Marine Division river lifeline. The fighting for My Loc revealed that the *NVA 803d Regiment*, part of the *324B Division*, had shifted from positions in the Kentucky and Lancaster operational areas to the northern coastal plain east of Route 1. Skirting the 2d ARVN Regiment's positions at the A-1 Strongpoint and the C-1



Both photos are from the Abel Collection

Top, a Marine from Company K, BLT 3/1 carrying a M79 grenade launcher runs gingerly through an NVA-held hamlet during Operation Badger Catch. During the same operation, below, a 60mm mortar team from the BLT casually prepares to fire its weapon in support of the infantry.



Combat Base, at least one battalion of the regiment had infiltrated between the C-4 Combat Base manned by Company C, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines and the Cua Viet River. With the obvious mission to interrupt the flow of supplies along the river to Dong Ha, the *3d Battalion, 803d Regiment* occupied those hamlets fronting on the river and a few just above.⁵⁵

For the most part, the enemy troops built rather formidable fortifications in these hamlets. As in My Loc, their first line of defense was on the edge of the hamlet or village. They constructed these defenses in depth with bunkers, fighting holes, interconnecting tunnels, and trench lines often extending into the center of the hamlet. The North Vietnamese soldiers usually converted the villagers' "family type bomb shelters" into fortified bunkers for their own use. From the nature of the defenses and the skill with which they used them as reflected in My Loc, the enemy intended to hold their positions unless forced out by overwhelming strength.⁵⁶

For BLT 3/1 the taking of My Loc was only the beginning of the attempt to clear the enemy out of the Cua Viet sector. Several small hamlets, while not on the river, but just above it, provided cover for the units of the *803d*. On the following day, 26 January, another company of Lieutenant Colonel McQuown's command, Company I, encountered much the same, if not even more tenacious resistance, in the hamlet of Lam Xuan as Company K in My Loc.

On the morning of the 26th, while Company K continued to secure My Loc, Captain Lawrence R. Moran's Company I covered the northern flank. After a few enemy probes and calling an air strike on Lam Xuan, about 1500 meters to the northwest, Moran's company, that afternoon, advanced upon the latter hamlet. Attacking from east to west, Company I at first met hardly any opposition. The enemy troops allowed the Marines to move into the first tree line of the hamlet before opening up. Firing from well-concealed positions, especially scrub brush immediately to the rear of the Marines, the enemy, according to the battalion's report, "inflicted moderate casualties and . . . [caused] the attack to bog down."⁵⁷

Lieutenant Colonel McQuown immediately sent in his attached tanks and an attached Ontos platoon to assist the beleaguered company. Even with the tanks and the Ontos, the latter equipped with 106mm recoilless rifles, Moran had difficulty in disengaging. Under covering artillery fire, smoke shells, and close air strikes, it took the Marine company more than five hours to extract all of its casualties from Lam Xuan.

With night coming on, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown decided to pull back Company I and concentrate the rest of his forces rather than continue the attack. In this first fight for Lam Xuan, Company I suffered 8 dead and 41 wounded. The Marines claimed to have killed 17 of the enemy and taken 2 prisoners.

The first phase of Operation Badger Catch was over. At 1400 on the 27th, the amphibious ready group commander relinquished command of the forces ashore to the 3d Marine Division. In turn, General Tompkins gave operational control of BLT 3/1 to Lieutenant Colonel Toner, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion commander and senior to Lieutenant Colonel McQuown. The 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion remained responsible for Operation Napoleon and the BLT operation became Operation Saline. For Lieutenant Colonel McQuown, outside of new reporting procedures, his task remained the same.⁵⁸

On the 27th, the battalion consolidated its positions before continuing with the attack. Lieutenant Colonel Toner provided the battalion with five more tanks, the ones detached from the SLF Alpha battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Weise's BLT 2/4. At 1955 that evening, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown informed the amtrac battalion commander that he planned to attack Lam Xuan the following morning.

During the night and early morning hours of 28 January, two Marine fixed-wing aircraft carried out radar-controlled bombstrikes on Lam Xuan. This was followed shortly after 0800 by naval gunfire missions by Navy ships in the South China Sea. Then, supported by two tank platoons and the Ontos platoon, Captain Edward S. Hempel's Company L took its turn against the Lam Xuan defenses. Despite the display of U.S. supporting arms, the North Vietnamese unit in Lam Xuan remained undaunted and relatively unscathed. It had constructed its bunkers and trenchlines with overhead covers which were, as Lieutenant Colonel McQuown observed, "only subject to damage from direct hits."⁵⁹

As the tanks moved up into the attack positions, enemy mines disabled three of them. Another fell into a deep bomb crater full of water and became submerged. Still with the direct fire support of the tanks and the recoilless rifle fire of the Ontos, Company L, attacking from east to west, made slow but deliberate progress. As the enemy resistance stiffened, Captain Hempel pulled his men back about noon, so that Marine supporting arms could work over the area once more. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown then reinforced Company L with Captain Regal's Company K. The

two Marine companies advanced on line. Company M also established a platoon blocking position north of Lam Xuan. At dusk, under cover of North Vietnamese guns from north of the DMZ, the NVA troops tried to withdraw. With a flare plane overhead, the Marines continued to press the attack against the enemy. Most of the NVA in the hamlet, nevertheless, managed to make good their retreat, leaving a rear guard to hold off the Marines. About 2100, Companies K and L consolidated their positions in Lam Xuan. The following morning the Marines continued with their mopping up. At 1445 the afternoon of the 29th, the two companies reported that Lam Xuan was "completely secured." The Marines, however, once more paid a price in casualties: 8 dead and 41 wounded. They had killed 69 of the enemy and captured 2 prisoners.⁶⁰

The war still continued to have its surreal qualities. While the fighting expanded all along the DMZ, the allies still prepared for the usual annual Tet truce. According to MACV directives, the truce period was supposed to extend for 36 hours beginning at 1800 on 29 January. In the DMZ sector, BLT 3/1's fight for Lam Xuan made the implementation of the truce very unlikely. Major General Tompkins recalled that 30 minutes before the prospective cease-fire he received a telephone call from General Cushman, "that exempted the 3d MarDiv . . . from any such foolishness. It was to be 'business as usual' for northern I Corps." An entry in the BLT 3/1 journal read, "29[January]1800H— Received information that the 'Tet cease-fire' will not go into effect." Captain Regal, whose company still remained in Lam Xuan, remembered that he took no chances, cease-fire or no cease-fire. At 1800, his company remained on alert and a few minutes later "we again received the inevitable 40 rounds of incoming." Five minutes after the bombardment the message arrived "to disregard all previous traffic regarding the 'cease-fire;' it would not apply to the northern provinces."⁶¹

On the day of Tet, 31 January 1968, while Company K remained in Lam Xuan, BLT 3/1 was once more engaged in a struggle for another of the hamlets on the northern bank of the Cua Viet, Mai Xa Thi. Strategically located where Jones Creek emptied into the Cua Viet, the hamlet spread over both banks of the smaller waterway. This time, Captain Raymond A. Thomas' Company M spearheaded the assault against the hamlet. Under cover of darkness, Thomas' company moved out of My Loc into attack positions just southwest of Mai Xa Thi. To the north, Captain Regal sent one of his platoons from Lam Xuan towards Mai Xa Thi,

about 2,000 meters to the south. The plan was for the Company K platoon to make a diversionary attack by fire, while Company M made the main assault from the opposite direction.⁶²

The Marines achieved surprise and the plan seemed to be working. About 0700, the Company K platoon opened fire from its positions north of the hamlet. About 15 minutes later, under cover of supporting artillery and morning fog, Company M moved through a tree line, into an old graveyard, and then across a rice paddy into the hamlet. The North Vietnamese soon recovered from their initial shock and fought back with RPGs, .50-caliber machine guns, and mortars from covered positions within Mai Xa Thi. The enemy even employed artillery in the Demilitarized Zone against the Marines in the hamlet. With his right platoon heavily engaged, Captain Thomas attempted to call in a close air strike, but the fog had not lifted and the sky remained overcast.⁶³

At this point, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown decided to reinforce Thomas. He sent Company I up the Cua Viet in LVTs to take over Thomas' left flank. At the same time, a platoon of LVTH-6s, amphibian tractors equipped with 105mm howitzers, arrived to provide direct artillery support. Even with the reinforcements, the Marines only made slight progress as the enemy continued to resist. From positions across Jones Creek, enemy gunners fired rocket-propelled grenades into the Marine flank. Marine artillery fire soon subdued the North Vietnamese gunners, but the Marine advance remained stalled. While Company I took over his left flank, Captain Thomas and the remaining three platoons had joined the right flank platoon. Frustrated in their attempts to force the enemy out of their well dug-in positions, the Marines needed assistance. About 1500, the two Marine companies received word to pull back as the reduced cloud cover now permitted an air strike. The bombing missions proved somewhat of a disappointment because "of haze and many duds."⁶⁴

About 1600, Companies I and M returned to the attack. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown now sent in Company L to follow in trace the first two companies. While still resisting, the enemy began to give way. At 1900, the three companies reported that they were making better progress. A flare plane arrived overhead and the Marines continued to press forward under illumination. By 2130, the Marines had secured about 80 percent of the hamlet and radioed back that "sniper fire continues, but organized resistance has ceased." The following day,



The top photo is from the Abel Collection; bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190420. *Marines of BLT 3/1 also sustained casualties during the fighting. At top, four Marines from Company K carry one of their wounded comrades to relative safety. Below, Navy Corpsman HM3 Edward F. Darewski, also with Company K, provides a wounded Marine an intravenous solution.*





Photo is from the Abel Collection
A BLT 3/1 platoon leader directs his men to attack enemy positions during Operation Badger Catch, as the enemy offered heavy resistance to Marine efforts to clear the hamlets near the Cua Viet.

the three companies occupied all of the hamlet. In the fighting, the BLT sustained 12 dead and 46 wounded. They killed 44 of the enemy and captured 2 North Vietnamese soldiers.⁶⁵

From prisoner interrogation, the battalion later learned that Mai Xa Thi had been the command post of the 3d Battalion, 803d NVA Regiment. As Lieutenant Colonel McQuown observed, that despite all of the sophisticated intelligence sources, "BLT 3/1 was not able to ascertain when the enemy occupied a given area." He therefore worked on the assumption that "all areas that could be occupied by the enemy" were defended by the enemy. According to McQuown, "This practice consumed time and resources but prevented the kind of surprise encounters which had been costly on previous operations."⁶⁶

Thus for the Marines along the DMZ front, Tet had little meaning. It was the same dogged fighting that they had encountered for the last two to three weeks. There was no truce, but also there was no sudden thrust through the DMZ or attack on Khe Sanh that the allies half-expected. The only significant new enemy initiatives in this period were the attempts to cut Route 9 and more importantly, the Cua Viet supply line.

The Battle For Quang Tri City

While along the DMZ, 31 January was just another day in the war, the same was not true for the allied forces near Quang Tri City. In the early morning hours of 31 January, all of the military installations near the city came under either enemy rocket and mortar attack, or both. This included the 3d Marines base area in Operation Osceola II at Ai Tu, the 1st Air Cavalry's 1st Brigade's LZ Betty, and the 1st ARVN Regiment command post near La Vang east of Route 1. Simultaneously with the bombardment of the military base areas, the 812th NVA Regiment launched a ground attack against Quang Tri City.

The 1st ARVN Regiment, not noted for its aggressiveness, withstood the shock of the North Vietnamese assault against the city. U.S. military advisors considered the 1st the weakest of the three regiments of the 1st ARVN Division. Only a few months previous, a 3d Marine Division message contained the observation that while Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Huu Hanh, the commanding officer of the regiment, had a "mediocre reputation," he was "not incompetent." The advisors blamed the "present passive" role of the regiment in support of the "Revolutionary Development" program of tending "to adversely effect regiment and Hanh."⁶⁷

It was, nevertheless, because of its participation in Revolutionary Development, that the 1st ARVN was in position to counter the thrust of the North Vietnamese attack. Two of the battalions, the 2d and 3d, were conducting security missions relatively close to Quang Tri City and could be called back into the city at very short notice. Hanh had stationed his 1st Battalion, together with the regimental armored personnel carrier (APC) squadron, at a military installation in the western suburbs of Quang Tri. Just to the northeast of the city, in the Catholic hamlet of Tri Buu, Hanh placed the 9th Airborne Battalion that had been sent north from Saigon and put under his operational control. In the city itself, Regional Force troops and combat police supplemented the regular forces. Because of these dispositions, the 1st ARVN Regiment could readily concentrate its forces and those of the local militia.⁶⁸

The South Vietnamese had some inkling that the city was in some danger. Given the unsettled situation in the north, on 28 January, General Lam, the I Corps commander, flew to Quang Tri City and consulted with Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Am, the

Quang Tri Province Chief and former commander of the 1st ARVN Regiment. They decided to place the city “in a state of emergency” and also imposed martial law. Am also provided weapons to various cadre and government civil servants. At the same time, elements of the 812th NVA Regiment, which had formerly been operating in the DMZ sector, infiltrated into the hamlets and countryside surrounding Quang Tri City. According to a South Vietnamese account, the arrival of the enemy troops sent “thousands of local people panicking toward the city.” By now the entire city was alert.⁶⁹

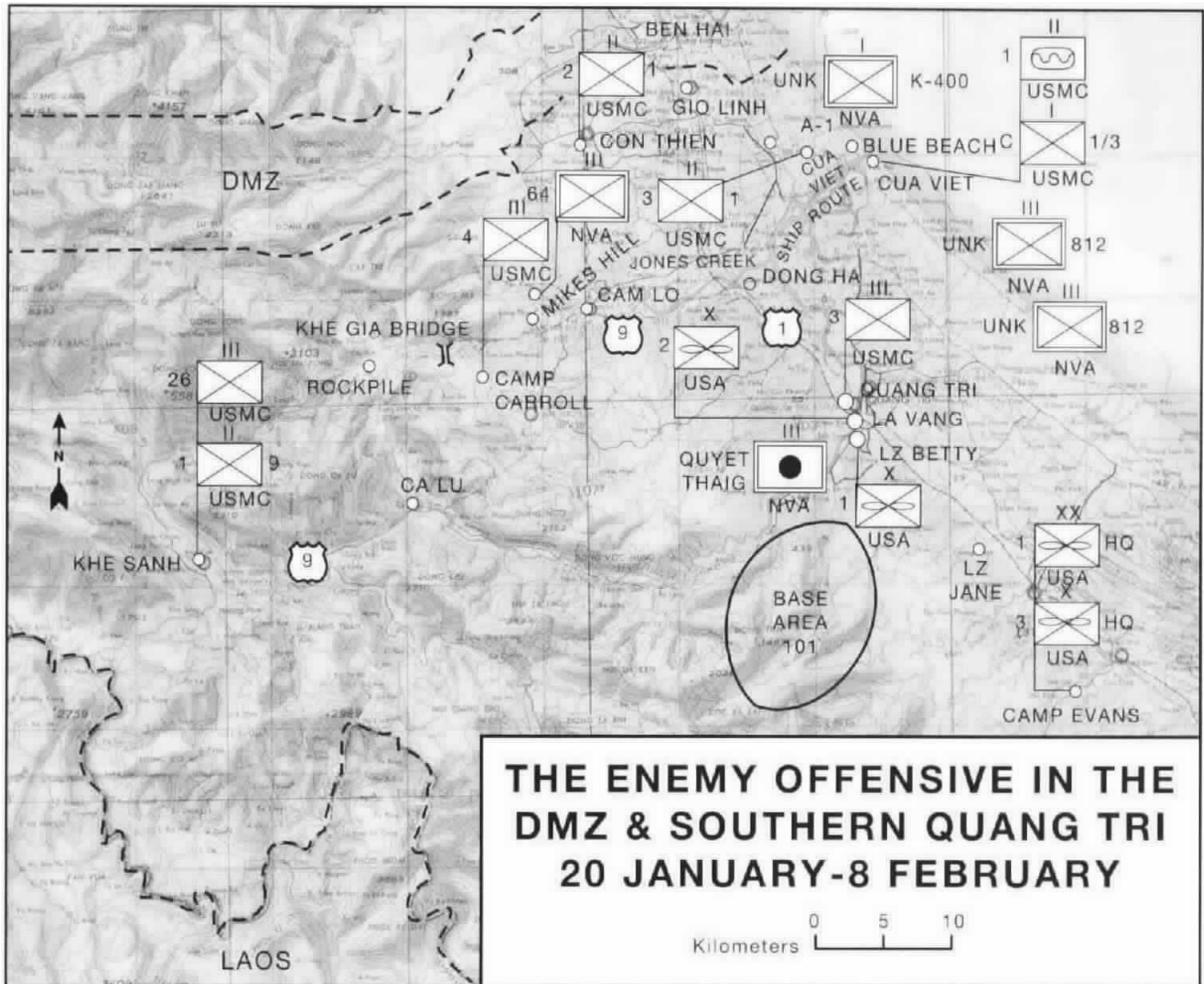
The enemy failed to carry out his plan. Sappers were supposed to infiltrate into the heart of the city on the night of 30–31 January and create a diversion. Once the sappers struck, the 812th was to launch its attack under cover of a mortar and rocket barrage. The plan went awry for the North Vietnamese, however, almost from the beginning. A platoon from the 10th Sapper Battalion reached its objectives around 0200 on the 31st, but soon found itself isolated and easily rounded up by local police and militia. The 812th with five battalions under its



Both photos are from the Abel Collection

Top, after heavy fighting in the Cua Viet area, Marines from BLT 3/1 examine an enemy fighting hole with one Marine actually in the enemy position. Below, Marines from the BLT interrogate a frightened NVA prisoner captured in the fighting





control was more than two hours late in getting started. Rain-swollen streams and the unfamiliarity of the North Vietnamese with the terrain accounted in part for the delay.⁷⁰

Unexpected resistance by the South Vietnamese forces also played a role. At Tri Buu, for example, the *814th VC Main Force Battalion*, attached to the *812th NVA Regiment*, encountered the 9th Airborne Battalion. Apparently the VC tried to take the South Vietnamese troops off guard by donning ARVN paratroop uniforms. The ruse failed when one of the 9th Airborne sentries observed that the “impostors had worn rubber sandals rather than the genuine jungle boots.” Despite the uncovering of the Viet Cong, the 9th Airborne at Tri Buu was heavily outnumbered and had little choice but to fall back into Quang Tri City. By daybreak, the *812th* had penetrated the city at several points, but the South Vietnamese had repulsed an attack on the Quang Tri Citadel and the jail. The issue was still in doubt at noon.

At about this time, the civilian director of theCORDs organization in Quang Tri Province, Robert Brewer, and the senior U.S. Army advisor to the 1st ARVN visited Colonel Donald V. Rattan, the 1st Brigade commander, in his command post at LZ Betty. They told Rattan that the situation inside the city “was still highly tenuous.” Brewer believed that at least an enemy battalion was in the city and that the ARVN “were badly in need of assistance.” The North Vietnamese appeared to be reinforcing from the east “and had established fire support positions on [the] eastern and southern fringes of the city.” Colonel Rattan agreed to provide a relief force from his command.⁷¹

Given the disposition of U.S. and South Vietnamese forces in the sector, Rattan had the only forces available that could reinforce Quang Tri City. West of the city at the Quang Tri Airfield at Ai Tu, Colonel Lo Prete’s 3d Marines in Operation Osceola II consisted of only one infantry battalion, some artillery, and a makeshift

infantry company composed of rear elements of the 3d Marine Division headquarters and support troops.* Of these forces, Lo Prete kept two companies of his infantry battalion deployed to the west, out to mortar and sniper range, to screen the vital area. Two companies remained in reserve and the 500-man ad hoc company guarded the perimeter. Lo Prete had no men to spare for the defense of Quang Tri City which was an ARVN responsibility.^{72**}

Rattan also could only send a limited force to relieve the ARVN in Quang Tri City. Like the 3d Marines, Colonel Rattan had no responsibility for the defense of the city. Looking to the eventual relief of Khe Sanh and to cleaning out the enemy *Base Area 101*, three of the four battalions attached to the 1st Brigade were oriented to the west and southwest of LZ Betty. With the 1st Battalion of the 8th Cavalry providing the only security for the Cavalry fire bases in the northern reaches of *Base Area 101* and the 1st Battalion, 502d Airborne Infantry committed to base security at LZ Betty, Rattan had only two battalions, the 1st of the 12th and 1st of the 5th, "free to maneuver against the attacking enemy" in Quang Tri City.⁷³

After consulting with Brewer and his Army advisor colleague and determining the most likely enemy infiltration and support positions, Colonel Rattan selected his landing assault areas. He wanted to destroy the enemy supporting mortar and rocket positions and then block the North Vietnamese from either reinforcing or withdrawing their infantry units in the city. At 1345, the brigade commander ordered the air assaults "as soon as possible with priority on lift assigned" to the 1st of the 12th. The 1st of the 5th would follow. At the same time, he alerted the 1st Squadron of the 9th Cavalry to fly "armed reconnaissance missions at tree top level" using both gunships and H-13 Aerial Rocket Artillery helicopters.⁷⁴

Within two hours, by 1555, the 1st Cavalry helicopters had landed five companies, three from the 1st

of the 5th and two from the 1st of the 12th, into landing zones east of Quang Tri. In the two central landing zones, straddling the rear support positions of the enemy *K-4 Battalion, 812th Regiment*, Companies B and C of the 1st of the 12th encountered resistance from the very beginning. In fighting that lasted until 2000 that night, the "surprised and confused enemy" employed machine guns, mortars, and recoilless rifles against the American soldiers. Between them, the two Air Cavalry companies accounted for over 60 of the enemy left on the battlefield. Already heavily engaged inside the city with the ARVN troops and now in its rear by the two companies of the 1st of the 12th, the *K-4 Battalion* for all practical purposes was "rendered ineffective."⁷⁵

To the north, Company B, 1st of the 5th, attached to the 1st of the 12th for this operation, arrived in a relatively calm landing zone northeast of Tri Buu. Army Captain Michael Nawrosky, the Company B commander, remembered that the "little people [the ARVN] were in pretty good contact that night." Although the Company B position remained quiet for the most part, on two occasions enemy soldiers retreating from Quang Tri and Tri Buu skirted the company's perimeter. In both cases, according to Nawrosky, "we engaged with mortar, 79s, and machine guns, but had negative assessment that night." When the company searched the area the following morning, Nawrosky related, "there were no dead; this is VC and NVA tactics in moving them out." Later that day, Company B joined the other two companies of the 1st of the 5th Cavalry in their landing zones southeast of Quang Tri City between the railroad and Route 1.⁷⁶

Like the two companies of the 1st of the 12th, Companies A and C of the 1st of the 5th on the afternoon of the 31st met relatively large enemy forces near the village of Thong Thuong Xa just south of Route 1. They established blocking positions behind the *K-6 Battalion, 812th Regiment* which had attacked Quang Tri from the southeast. Similar to their sister battalion, the *K-4*, the *K-6* found itself "wedged between the ARVN forces and the cavalymen." The 1st Brigade's scout gunships and aerial rocket artillery (ARA) helicopters "created pandemonium in the *K-6 Battalion* rear." According to the brigade's account, the NVA soldiers "were obviously completely unfamiliar with Air Cavalry techniques of warfare." The ARA helicopters and gunships "experienced unusual success against the enemy troops." Rather than firing at the approaching helicopters, the NVA

*Lieutenant Colonel Karl J. Fontenot, the commanding officer of the 3d Tank Battalion, remembered that "we organized a provisional rifle company from the tank battalion, H & S Company, supplemented by about 70 men by other division elements and this went to Quang Tri." LtCol Karl J. Fontenot, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec 94] (Vietnam Comment File).

**Colonel Vaughn R. Stuart, who was executive officer of the 3d Marines in 1968, recalled that the Marine battalion at the Quang Tri Air Field "functioned closely with the First Brigade of the 1st Air Cav after it displaced to the outskirts of Quang Tri City." As he remembered, the Marine battalion was under the "op con" of the 1st Brigade for the short period the Brigade was there. Col Vaughn R. Stuart, Comments on draft, dtd 20Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

“would attempt to play ‘dead.’” The brigade only lost three aircraft to enemy gunfire.⁷⁷

By the morning of 1 February, it was obvious that the North Vietnamese had given up on the attempt to take Quang Tri City. In the city itself, ARVN and local South Vietnamese militia and police mopped up. Outside the city, the Communists initiated a half-hearted anti-government march against Quang Tri by the residents of Tri Buu. The South Vietnamese police quickly dispersed the demonstration and by that evening, with support of U.S. fixed-wing air support, ARVN forces retook Tri Buu. For the most part, the North Vietnamese were now only interested in getting out the best they could. During the night, many of the NVA units broke down into small groups to make good their retreat. Some North Vietnamese soldiers tried to escape by mingling among the thousands of refugees now leaving the city. Captain Nawrosky told of his company finding at least two North Vietnamese soldiers who “had donned civilian clothing over their own uniforms . . . they’d thrown their weapons away and they tried to get out wearing civilian clothes.”⁷⁸

While the mopping up or pursuit phase continued for several more days, most of the major contacts were over by 1 February. In the most significant action of the day, Company A, 1st Battalion, 502d Airborne Regiment, newly inserted into the operation and supported by ARA and gunship helicopters, killed over 75 of the enemy near a large cathedral about 5,000 meters south of Quang Tri City. According to American records, the North Vietnamese lost over 900 men killed, 553 by the ARVN, and 86 captured, as well as substantial weapons and equipment, in their aborted attempt to take Quang Tri City. The allies took substantial casualties as well, but much less in comparison to the North Vietnamese.* The outcome may very well have been different and caused even more complications for III MAF if the Cavalry’s 1st Brigade had not been in position to have come to the assistance of the South Vietnamese. Still the unexpected tenacious resistance by the poorly regarded and outnumbered 1st ARVN Regiment and the local militia provided the opportunity for the Cavalry to come to the rescue.⁷⁹

*The after-action reports and the Vietnamese accounts do not provide specific American and allied casualties. Department of the Army records show, however, that for all of Operation Jeb Stuart, not just for the battle of Quang Tri City, through 10 February, U.S. casualties were 58 KIA and 303 wounded as opposed to 855 enemy dead. Dept of the Army, Operational Summary/Brief, dtd 11Feb68 (CMH Working Papers).

Tet Aftermath Along the DMZ

On the DMZ front, the North Vietnamese continued to place pressure on the Marine units, but to a somewhat lesser extent than before Tet. Along the coast, above the Cua Viet, the 803d continued its efforts to cut that vital waterway. BLT 3/1 in Operation Saline remained the frontline battalion. Of all the battalion’s units, Captain John Regal’s Company K in the hamlet of Lam Xuan was the most vulnerable and exposed to an enemy attack. Having stayed in Lam Xuan since finally securing the hamlet on 29 January and having observed increased enemy activity, Regal believed “that something was up.” On the afternoon of 1 February, he requested and received permission from his battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown, to move to new night positions, about 300 meters east of Lam Xuan.⁸⁰

Waiting until darkness so that it could not be easily detected, the company shifted to new fighting positions. Later that night, Regal received intelligence that added weight to his opinion that his company had been targeted by the enemy. An enemy officer captured in the fighting for Mai Xa Thi on the 31st told his captors that the 803d planned a battalion-size attack against one of the Marine companies. Regal had no doubts that the company was his.

Company K had only a short wait until the fireworks began. At about 0245 on 2 February, about 100 82mm mortar rounds followed by a similar number of 130mm artillery rounds fell into the company’s former positions in Lam Xuan. According to Regal, “Lam Xuan was sparkling like a Christmas tree . . . Fortunately for us we weren’t there.” With additional light provided by a flare ship over Gio Linh that lit up the entire Cua Viet area, the Marines then spotted the enemy infantry. Captain Regal later wrote: “There they were; from my position, I could see the enemy walking from right to left in single file. They were just outside a hedgerow, east of the hamlet, no more than 100 meters from our line.” As the forward elements of the North Vietnamese unit approached the Marine positions, they appeared confused as officers tried to regroup their men. Regal believed that the enemy “must have been going to sweep through the area into which we had moved after they found we had abandoned the village and just stumbled into our lines.”

Regal called for an illumination round which completely exposed the enemy troops in front of the Marine lines. He then gave the signal to fire. For the next few hours until sunrise, the outnumbered Marines of Com-

pany K supported by Navy gunfire, mortars, and artillery repulsed repeated assaults by the NVA battalion. These attacks, however, lacked coordination and consisted for the most part, as described by Captain Regal, of sporadic rushes by small groups of NVA "in a fanatic attempt to penetrate our lines." They all failed.⁸¹

Lieutenant Colonel McQuown sent forward some LVTs with additional ammunition for the company, but North Vietnamese artillery forced the amtracs to hold up. The battalion commander then ordered Company M with two tanks to reinforce the embattled Marines of Company K whose ammunition was now running low. Arriving at daybreak and with the two tanks as a spearhead, Company M, supported by Company K, launched the counterattack against the NVA. Like the previous actions in Lam Xuan, the fighting "was from hedgerow to hedgerow driving the remainder of the NVA to the northwest through the area covered by NGF [naval gunfire]." With supporting fires from three artillery batteries, the tanks, and a destroyer offshore, the battalion reported at 1445 that afternoon while continuing to meet resistance, "most of hamlet area has been secured. Large numbers of NVA bodies and amounts of equipment are being found throughout the area." The two companies continued their search and collected the enemy weapons and equipment found upon the battlefield. At nightfall, the Marines then pulled out of the hamlet once more, establishing their night positions in Mai Xa Thi to the south. They left behind them, however, the North Vietnamese dead and Lieutenant Colonel McQuown called in "interdicting artillery and fire" on the known trail from the north leading to Lam Xuan. As the battalion commander later explained, he anticipated that the NVA "would attempt to recover the bodies." The American supporting fires "continued through the night until dawn . . ."⁸²

In the third battle for Lam Xuan, the Marines killed 141 of the enemy and captured 7 prisoners at a cost of 8 Marines dead and 37 wounded. The morning of 4 February, Companies I and K returned to Lam Xuan but the NVA had departed. Of the enemy dead, the Marines found only nine bodies in the hamlet which the NVA had not dragged away. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown recalled that those corpses "left behind were still in the makeshift litters that were being used to carry them off." As Captain Regal later observed, "We had not seen the last of the *803d*."⁸³

Further to the west in Operation Kentucky, Tet for the 9th Marines was quieter than usual. Even so, on 31 January, Combined Action Marines assigned to hamlets

in the Cam Lo sector reported large concentrations of enemy troops in their vicinity. Receiving further intelligence that the enemy might attack the Cam Lo District headquarters, south of the Cam Lo River, Colonel Smith, the 9th Marines commander, ordered Lieutenant Colonel William M. Cryan, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines commander, to reinforce the Combined Action Company P (Papa) headquarters located there and one of the Combined Action platoons, "Papa" 1, in one of the nearby hamlets on Route 9. Cryan sent an infantry platoon with a detachment of Army M42 Dusters to the Cam Lo District headquarters compound and dispatched an infantry squad to CAP Papa 1.⁸⁴

The Communist forces struck at 0215 the morning of 2 February with mortar and recoilless rifle bombardment of both the district headquarters and CAP Papa 1 compounds. At the district headquarters, the enemy also launched a three-sided ground assault. In the first fusillade, a recoilless round killed the senior U.S. advisor, Army Major James C. Payne. Army Captain Raymond E. McMacken, his deputy, then assumed command of the headquarters compound. McMacken called in artillery "to box the headquarters in." According to the Army captain, the Marine defenders "just stacked them up on the wire."* He recalled that "five Marines rushed across the compound and took over a machine gun bunker. They got a .30 [caliber] machine gun into action to kill 15 NVA on the wires in front of them." An enemy RPG gunner, however, took out the machine gun bunker, wounding all five of the Marines inside. One of the Combined Action Marines, Lance Corporal Lawrence M. Eades, the company clerk of CACO Papa, suddenly found himself a machine gunner. According to Eades, "When we were hit, I grabbed my M16 and a M60 machine gun and ran to my position on the northwest side of the perimeter." McMacken credited Eades with killing over 20 of the enemy.⁸⁵

With the supporting arms including the dual 40mm antiaircraft guns mounted on the Army M42 Dusters, the Cam Lo compound successfully held out against the attackers. In fact, the enemy troops only succeeded in getting through the first of the three belts of wire around the headquarters compound. By

*Colonel Richard B. Smith recalled that before he took over the 9th Marines he was the division inspector. He stated that he was "a great believer in wire. . . . Much of my effort was to get the CAP's wired in and I mean *heavily* wired. The enemy didn't expect this and attackers would get hung up before realizing what was there." Col Richard B. Smith, Comments on draft, dtd 19Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Smith Comments.

0615, a reaction force from the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, including a reinforced Marine platoon and another detachment of Army Dusters, arrived on the scene. Later they were joined by another reaction force from Dong Ha. The Marine infantry intercepted the enemy attacking force attempting to recross the Cam Lo River north of the compound. According to the 9th Marines, the Americans killed 111 of the Communist troops, probably from the *27th Independent Battalion* and the *VC Cam Lo Local Force Company*, and rounded up 23 prisoners.* The U.S. forces sustained casualties of 3 dead, two Marines and the U.S. Army senior advisor, and 18 Marines wounded.

From a III MAF perspective, Colonel Franklin L. Smith described the defense of the Cam Lo District headquarters as a "hot little action," but successful, "largely through the determination of the CAP unit." Colonel Richard B. Smith, the 9th Marines commander, had a dissenting view. He believed that the establishment of the Combined Action units in the DMZ, where the people were relatively unsympathetic to the government, "a waste of time." According to the 9th Marines commander, he continually had to divert line infantry units from their main mission of defending the strongpoints against the NVA to come to the rescue of the CAPs. He saw the Cam Lo action in that context.^{86**}

For the most part, for the next few days, the 9th Marines units except for the occasional bombardment of Con Thien had a sort of reprieve along the barrier. This ended on 7 February with an enemy ambush of Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Shortly after 1230, Company K's 3d Platoon, patrolling below the main supply route between A-3 and A-2 just west of Route 1, triggered the trap. Using small arms,

*Although the 9th Marines took several prisoners, the regiment's situation and intelligence reports did not cite the specific units that carried out the attack on Cam Lo. On the other hand, the intelligence section of the regimental command chronology shows only the above two units operating in the Cam Lo sector. An article in the III MAF newspaper claims three North Vietnamese battalions participated in the attack. 9th Mar ComdC, Feb68; Clipping "Cam Lo—Hub of the DMZ," *Sea Tiger*, n.d. [Feb68], Encl, Bendell Comments. Colonel Smith recalled that the 9th Marines claimed 130 enemy and 40 prisoners but would not dispute the figures in the text: "I have never seen a body count report that I agreed with." Smith Comments.

**In his comments, Colonel Smith further stated that outside of the Marines assigned to the CAP, the defenders "could not find any CAP people to man their guns. The position was saved by the Marines inside." He recalled that the senior "Army advisor . . . had called on me the day before for this support. He knew from his intelligence sources that he was going to be hit." Smith Comments.

machine guns, and grenades in a sudden outburst of fire, the North Vietnamese killed nine Marines including the platoon commander and wounded another seven. With the death of the Marine officer, "confusion set in." Captain Donald R. Frank, the Company K commander, with his 1st and 2d Platoons, about 500 meters to the north, moved to reinforce the 3d.⁸⁷

The NVA had expected the Marines to do just that and had set up another ambush slightly to the north of the first. As the 2d Platoon tried to maneuver, a hidden machine gun opened up, followed by small arms fire and then grenades. The platoon suffered 18 dead and 10 wounded in the first five minutes of the action including the platoon commander and two radio operators. In the meantime, the 1st Platoon attempted to relieve the 3d Platoon and succeeded in bringing out some of the wounded and the able bodied. After the helicopter evacuation of the most serious casualties, the 1st and 3d joined the 2d Platoon in its shrinking perimeter.

At the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines combat operations center at A-3, Lieutenant Colonel James W. Marsh, the battalion commander, and Major Raymond F. Findlay, Jr., the battalion operations officer, monitored the radio. Upon being briefed on the situation by Captain Frank, Major Findlay replied "Okay, hang on. We're on our way." He sent Company L to set up blocking positions and alerted Company M. The battalion then called for an air observer to assist in bringing in supporting arms. Flying over the ambush site, the observer, using the codename "Southern Comfort," reported: "I've never seen such a concentration of NVA." Remarking on an extensive NVA bunker system and interconnected trenches, Southern Comfort estimated the size of the enemy force to be between 200 to 400 men. According to Jeff "TJ" Kelly,^{***} then a corporal, who was handling the communications with Southern Comfort, the "AO was running gunships on the NVA, but it was in the center of the bunker complex, not close to Kilo [Company K] where it was most needed. he could not get it closer because Kilo and the NVA were mixed together."⁸⁸

By late afternoon, Company L had established blocking positions to the southwest and engaged a number of enemy trying to reach the hamlet of Phu Tho, about 2,000 meters below A-3. Company M, accompanied by Major Findlay, had reached Company

^{***}According to the unofficial historian of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, Kelly's full name was Thomas Jeffrey Kelly and in Vietnam went by the nickname TJ. He now prefers to be called Jeff. LtCol Otto Lehrack, Comments on draft, dtd 29Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).

K, dug in about 150 meters southwest of the original contact. Corporal Kelly, who had become the radioman for Company M, remembered that “Kilo’s platoons: first, second, weapons and what was left of third were strung out in a tactical withdrawal.” Major Findlay consulted with Captain Frank. According to Corporal Kelly, the Company K commander “want[ed] to go back in . . . we have people in there.” With heavy rain and low cloud ceiling precluding any more air support and well-entrenched enemy, Findlay decided against an immediate assault: “We’re going to pull back Come first light we’re going to get some more firepower in here and go after them.”

During the night, Company L returned to A–3 while Companies K and M established a two-company defensive perimeter west of Route 1 near Gio Linh. The 12th Marines provided heavy supporting fires around the two exposed companies. Corporal Kelly remembered that it was a wet “miserable night . . . [and] rain swirled into the hole chilling us . . .” At the end of the long and comparatively uneventful night, the Marines prepared to renew the attack. A detachment of tanks from Gio Linh joined the two companies and the Marine artillery opened up with their preparatory fires upon the enemy entrenchments.

Under cover of the Marine artillery bombardment followed by Huey gunship strafing runs, on the morning of 8 February, the two Marine companies crossed Route 1 into a small woods that contained the NVA entrenchments. As Kelly observed: “It was all grunts now.” The NVA suddenly began to panic and bolt. Corporal Kelly later described the Marine attack:

Now Kilo was the grim reaper, killing anything that moved as they assaulted through the North Vietnamese trenches and bunkers in a tactic so simple and direct I was amazed by its effectiveness. Their firepower was a wave of destruction surging before them, overwhelming the enemy. It was over quickly.⁸⁹

Other members of the battalion remembered the events of that morning less melodramatically. Captain Otto J. Lehrack, the commanding officer of Company I, later wrote that his recollection was that Company K “did launch an assault, supported by tanks from Gio Linh, but by that time there wasn’t much of an enemy force left and it was pretty much of a walk.” According to Lehrack, the company sergeant of Company K, Gunnery Sergeant Jimmie C. Clark, later told him: “What NVA was left in the holes were chained to their guns . . . so they couldn’t get up and run.” Clark went on to state: “We went in and retrieved our own and brought our own people out. . . . We were pretty

beat and torn up, but we had to do it.”⁹⁰

During the two-day fight, casualties were heavy for both sides. The Marines claimed to have killed 139 of the enemy, but sustained a total of 30 Marine dead and 35 wounded. Some of the wounded were from the previous two ambushes and perilously survived the night among the North Vietnamese. One American survivor related that an English-speaking North Vietnamese soldier called out “Corpsman, I’m hit,” and then shot the Navy medic when he came to assist. Another Navy corpsman, Hospital Corpsman 3d Class, Alan B. Simms, who remained unscathed, hid and tended four wounded Marines, saving their lives. At least four of the North Vietnamese soldiers blew themselves up with grenades rather than surrender. After helicopters evacuated the American wounded from an improvised landing zone, the Marine infantry loaded the American dead and North Vietnamese gear upon the tanks. According to Kelly:

It was absolutely quiet except for the groans of the loaders and the sounds made by the bodies of the dead being dragged to the tanks. They were stacked four high—one on his back, the next on his stomach—the heads and arms placed between the legs of the body underneath to lock in the stack and prevent it from toppling. . . . The tank crews watched in horror.

The tanks returned the bodies to Gio Linh and the infantry returned to A–3.⁹¹

Once more, the war along the DMZ for another brief period went into one of its customary lulls. Contrary to General Tompkin’s expectations that the North Vietnamese would make their major effort in the Camp Carroll/Rockpile/Ca Lu sector, the 4th Marines in Lancaster had few flareups of any significant action. The enemy made no significant attempt to cut Route 9 after the fighting for “Mike’s Hill.” Outside of an artillery bombardment on Camp Carroll on 2 February, and an attack on a truck convoy a week later, the Lancaster sector remained quiet during the first two weeks of February. While maintaining pressure all along the DMZ front, the NVA largely limited their Tet offensive in the north to the disruption of the Cua Viet supply line, which apparently was intertwined with the attack on Quang Tri City. As captured enemy documents later indicated, North Vietnamese commanders attributed their failure to take Quang Tri City to their inexperience with the coordination of large forces that involved two major commands: *The DMZ Front* and the *Tri Thien Hue Front*.⁹² This failure of coordination characterized the entire enemy Tet offensive and was especially true of the enemy attacks in the Da Nang area further south.