

CHAPTER 11

The DMZ War Continues, Operation Prairie

Reconnaissance in Force, 3 August-13 September 1966—Assault from the Sea, Deckhouse IV—The Continued Fighting for Nui Cay Tre (Mutter) Ridge and the Razorback—The Opening of Khe Sanh and the 3d Marine Division Moves North

Reconnaissance in Force, 3 Aug-13 Sep 66

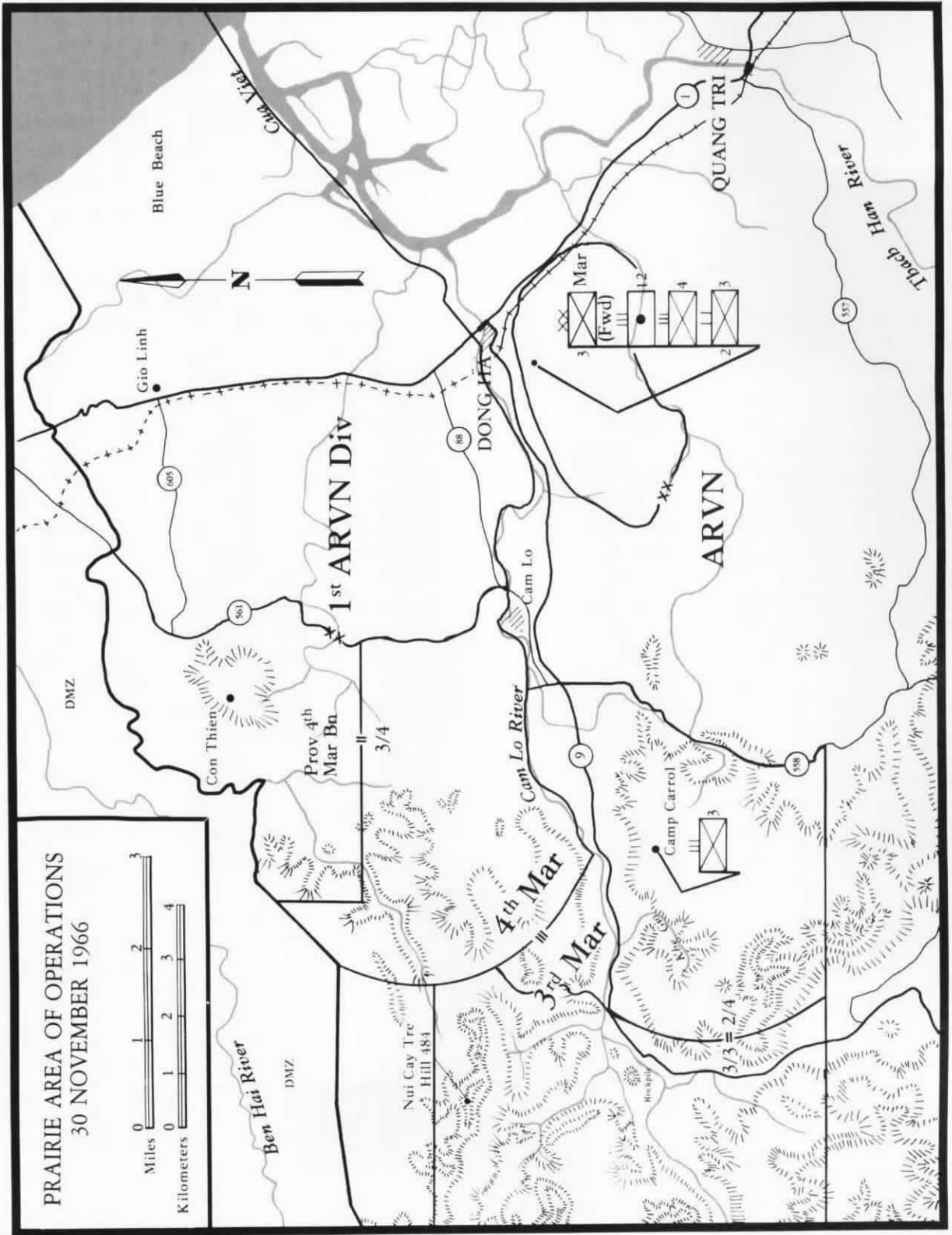
Enemy intentions in the DMZ area remained a matter of conjecture during the latter stages of Operation Hastings. On 22 July, Lieutenant General Krulak stated his opinion to General Westmoreland that the North Vietnamese were attempting to avoid direct contact with the Marines. Westmoreland replied that "just the reverse was the case and that the NVA forces were not seeking to get away." The MACV commander believed that III MAF could expect to encounter large numbers of the NVA and that elements of the *324B Division*, although bloodied, were still south of the DMZ. Furthermore, he had received reports indicating that the North Vietnamese were moving two more divisions, the *304th* and *341st*, into the area immediately north of the DMZ. Marine commanders recognized a buildup of enemy forces in the DMZ, but took exception to terms such as "massive buildup," "go for broke," "significant serious threats," and similar expressions contained in messages originating from Westmoreland's Saigon headquarters. Although MACV, FMFPac, and III MAF used identical intelligence data, they continued to interpret it differently.¹

After the closeout of Hastings on 3 August, the Marine command retained a small task force, formed around Lieutenant Colonel Bench's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines at Dong Ha, to monitor the potential threat in the north. Bench's command consisted of his four infantry companies, supported by the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company and Battery G, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, reinforced by two 155mm howitzers. Also attached to the 2d Battalion were a platoon each from the 3d Tank Battalion, the 3d Antitank Battalion, the 3d Engineer Battalion, and a logistic unit from the Force Logistic Command. The battalion CP was established at the Dong Ha air strip, but the attached artillery and tanks were at

Cam Lo; two infantry companies, F and G, provided security for the artillery positions. Two helicopter detachments, one from MAG-16 and the other from the U.S. Army 220th Aviation Company, were at Dong Ha to support the ground force.²

The Marine plan for the operation, codenamed *Prairie*, to determine the extent of NVA forces in the DMZ sector relied heavily upon the reports of Major Colby's reconnaissance Marines. UH-1Es from VMO-2 were to insert four- or five-man "Stingray" teams along suspected enemy avenues of approach. If the reconnaissance teams made contact with any NVA, they could call for artillery from Cam Lo, helicopter gunships, or Marine aircraft from Da Nang or Chu Lai. The infantry companies at Cam Lo and Dong Ha were poised to reinforce the reconnaissance patrols. Colonel Cereghino, the 4th Marines commander, held two battalions on eight-hour alert at Phu Bai to move to Dong Ha in the event of major enemy infiltration from the DMZ.

The first significant encounter during *Prairie* involved a Stingray patrol. On 6 August, a UH-1E inserted a five-man team in a jungle-covered hill mass 4,000 meters north of the Rockpile, approximately 1,000 meters to the southeast of the Nui Cay Tre ridgeline. The team, codenamed *Groucho Marx*, reported that it saw NVA troops moving along the trails and could smell smoke from enemy camp sites. The patrol twice called for the artillery at Cam Lo to fire on the suspected locations. On the morning of the 8th, the Marines saw 10 to 15 North Vietnamese troops moving in skirmish line 100 meters away, apparently looking for the American patrol. The team leader, Staff Sergeant Billy M. Donaldson, radioed Major Colby and reported the situation. Colby sent a pair of gunships to cover the patrol and then asked "if they thought we could get some prisoners out of there if I sent in a reaction force. They said affirmative and that there was a landing zone within 150 meters of them."³



Shortly afterward, six HMM-265 CH-46s landed in the zone, debarking a 40-man Marine platoon from Company E led by Second Lieutenant Andrew W. Sherman. By the time Sherman's platoon reached the reconnaissance team's perimeter, the enemy had disappeared. After a short, futile search for the North Vietnamese, Sherman asked for helicopters to lift the Marines out of the area.

In midafternoon, eight UH-34s from HMM-161 arrived overhead to extract the Marines. The first helicopter landed in the improvised landing zone without incident, but when it took off, North Vietnamese troops opened fire from a ridgeline to the north. Five UH-34s landed, but were able to evacuate only 20 of the 45 Marines because of the heavy fire. Lieutenant Sherman waved off the rest of the helicopters and set up a defensive perimeter.

At this point, the enemy, in company strength, tried to assault the Marine position. The American defenders turned them back with hand grenades and small arms fire, but Sherman was killed. His platoon sergeant, Sergeant Robert L. Pace, took command, but was wounded during the next NVA assault and command passed to Staff Sergeant Donaldson.

Surrounded, the small Marine force called for supporting arms. The 155s at Cam Lo responded immediately and at 1830, F-4B Phantoms from MAG-11 arrived overhead and stopped one NVA assault. Sergeant Donaldson was severely wounded during the last attack.⁴

At Dong Ha, the Company E commander, Captain Howard V. Lee, asked Lieutenant Colonel Bench for permission to take a relief force into the battle area to evacuate the Marines. The battalion commander finally acceded to Lee's entreaties and the captain gathered together seven volunteers besides himself. Three HMM-161 UH-34s flew the relief force to the battle site, but enemy fire forced the helicopters to land outside the Marine perimeter. Only three of the volunteers, including Lee, were able to reach the defenders. A VMO-2 UH-1E, piloted by Major Vincil W. Hazelbaker, evacuated the remaining Marines from the aborted relief expedition and flew them back to Dong Ha. Upon arriving in the shrinking Marine perimeter, Captain Lee immediately took command, reorganized the defenses, and supervised the distribution of ammunition which the helicopters had dropped inside the position.⁵

The enemy continued to close in on the Marines,

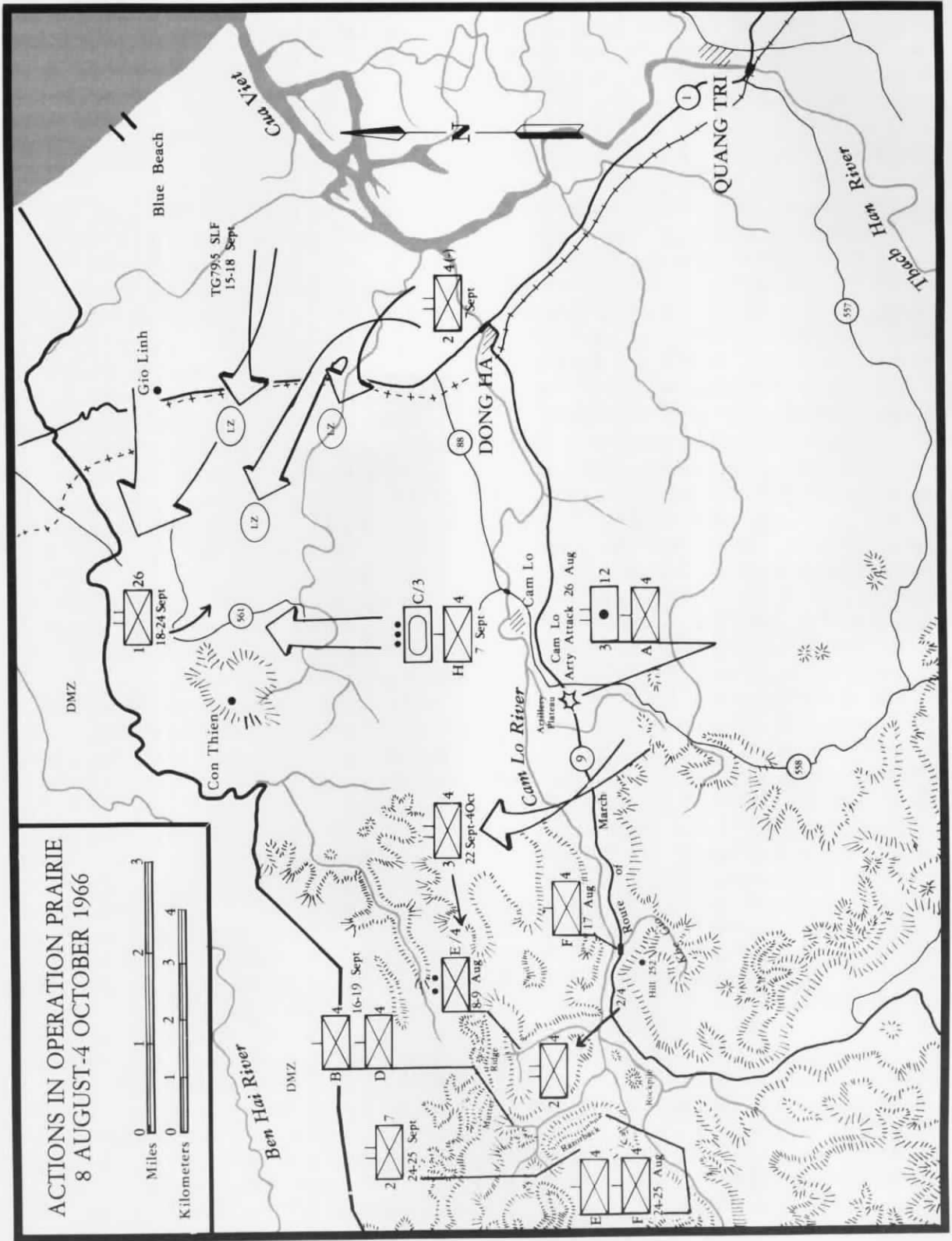
and, at the same time, prevented any more helicopters from landing. NVA ground fire drove off two HMM-265 CH-46s carrying additional Company E troops and hit one UH-1E gunship killing a crew member and wounding another. The Marine defenders repulsed repeated assaults on their positions, but their situation deteriorated. At 2030, Lee radioed Bench that he had only 16 men still able to fight. The company commander, himself, had been wounded twice, a slight nick on the ear when he first debarked from the helicopter and later severely, when an "NVA grenade . . . exploded no more than two feet" from him, "sending fragments into . . . [the] right eye and the right side of [his] body."⁶

Lieutenant Colonel Bench provided what support he could. He ordered all available artillery, firing at maximum range, including a section of 81mm mortars from the Marine outpost on the Rockpile, to hit the enemy-held hill mass north of Lee's perimeter. The 105 battery was out of range and Bench ordered it and a section of M-48 tanks to displace so that at first light they would be able to support the surrounded Marines.

Although Marine high performance close air support was called off because of darkness and low ceiling, VMO-2 UH-1E gunships made numerous rocket and strafing runs on enemy positions. A Marine C-117 flare ship arrived to provide illumination, but each lull between flare drops allowed the enemy to move closer. Later that night, two Air Force AC-47s arrived and strafed the hill slopes outside the Marine perimeter.

Several helicopters from MAG-16 made repeated resupply attempts. Major Hazelbaker, when he evacuated the stranded Marines outside the perimeter, was able to get in close enough to the defenders' positions for his crew to push out several boxes of 7.62mm linked ammunition. Enemy fire, however, aborted all other such attempts. Shortly before midnight, Lee reported that his troops were almost out of ammunition. Hazelbaker volunteered to fly another resupply mission and successfully landed his aircraft inside the Marine defenses.

While the UH-1E was on the ground and the troops and crew were unloading the ammunition, an enemy rocket "impacted on the rotor mast," crippling the helicopter. After helping two wounded crewmen out of the damaged craft, Major Hazelbaker and his copilot joined the fight on the ground.⁷



The enemy attack which damaged the Huey was the last major effort against the Marine position. The helicopter crew distributed ammunition and incorporated the helicopter's M-60 machine guns in the defense. Major Hazelbaker and Captain Lee waited for the NVA to make their next move. According to a Navy corpsman in the perimeter:

The rest of the night was quiet . . . You could hear them [the NVA] drag off the bodies. Some would come right up to the brush line and just start talking. Every time we shot at them another grenade would come in. They were trying to feel out our position.⁸

In the early morning hours, Captain Lee, weak from loss of blood, relinquished command to Major Hazelbaker. At dawn, the major directed a Marine napalm strike on the enemy positions; NVA fire completely stopped. Two hours later, Company F and the battalion command group arrived at the Marine-held hill, followed shortly by the rest of Company E. The two units fanned out, but the enemy had left the immediate area.

The Groucho Marx fight was over and the last Marines were lifted out that afternoon. The Marines had lost five killed and 27 wounded. Four of the dead Marines were from Company E, while one was a UH-34 gunner from HMM-161, killed by enemy ground fire. Of the wounded, 15 were from Company E, one from the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company, and the remainder from the MAG-16 helicopter crews including three pilots. The Marines counted 37 enemy bodies on the slopes of the hill, but bloodstains and drag marks indicated that the enemy had suffered much heavier casualties. The Marines recovered a document from one of the NVA bodies, which indicated that the dead man had been a company commander. For the Groucho Marx action, Captain Lee received the Medal of Honor, while Major Hazelbaker was awarded the Navy Cross.⁹

Prairie was just beginning. The action of 8-9 August convinced Colonel Cereghino, an experienced infantry officer who had served in both World War II and Korea, that the enemy had returned in strength.¹⁰ On 13 August, he established a forward command post at Dong Ha and moved Lieutenant Colonel Jack Westerman's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines north from Phu Bai. In addition, the infantry was reinforced by Major Morrow's 3d Battalion, 12th Marines and Captain John H. Gary's Company C, 3d Tank Battalion. Westerman's battalion was to relieve



Marine Corps Photo A187655
MajGen Wood B. Kyle, Commanding General, 3d Marine Division (back to camera), greets two members of Company E upon their return to Dong Ha. Elements of the company reinforced a reconnaissance team near the DMZ and stood off an attack by a North Vietnamese battalion.

Bench's battalion at Dong Ha and Cam Lo. Colonel Cereghino then ordered Bench to conduct a reconnaissance in force along Route 9 between Cam Lo and the Rockpile, followed by a search and destroy mission north of that site. Bench's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines left Cam Lo on 17 August after being relieved by Westerman's unit.

The 2d battalion with three companies, Company H remaining at Cam Lo, departed the base area about 0730 on foot. Marine air and artillery pounded suspected enemy strong points along the battalion's route of march. At 1215, Marine fixed-wing attack aircraft bombed Hill 252, whose steep cliffs overhung a bridge on Route 9, spanning the Song Khe Gio, a small north-south tributary of the Cam Lo River. After the airstrike, Company F, the lead company, pressed forward, but "was stopped dead at the bridge held by a bunker complex carved out of the sides of Hill 252."¹¹

With his lead company unable to move, and his other two companies unable to maneuver to support Company F because of heavy enemy automatic weapons fire and NVA snipers well-hidden in



Marine Corps Photo A188143

A Marine tank column is shown advancing along Route 9. M48 tanks, like those pictured here, provided much needed support to the infantry road reconnaissance during Operation Prairie.

camouflaged "spider traps," Lieutenant Colonel Bench called for artillery and air support. The resulting airstrikes and artillery missions, however, had little effect on the enemy concrete and metal-plated bunkers dug into the solid rock of Hill 252. Bench then requested Colonel Cereghino to reinforce his battalion with a section of tanks from the tank company at Cam Lo. The two M-48 tanks from Company C arrived at the Company F forward positions about 1600. After another airstrike, the M-48s with their 90mm guns laid direct fire into the enemy bunker complex. With the assistance of the tanks, the Marine infantry company withdrew to the night defensive positions of the rest of the battalion. Another tank from Company C reinforced the infantry and during the evening of 17 August, Marine air and artillery, as well as the tanks, continued to hit the enemy fortifications. About 1940 an air observer spotted about 40 enemy troops moving off Hill 252 in a southwesterly direction and called an air strike "with good coverage on target." For the day, the Marines sustained casualties of two dead and five wounded, all from Company F, while killing about 20 of the enemy.¹²

On the morning of 18 August, following a further bombardment of the enemy bunkers, Company G forded the Khe Gio south of the bridge and took Hill 252 from the rear, while the rest of the battalion continued its advance along Route 9. The Marines of Company G found in the former enemy fortifications three dead NVA soldiers, a light machine gun, and an inscribed sword. Reinforced by yet another

tank section, the 2d Battalion completed its reconnaissance of Route 9 that evening, encountering only minor resistance, and established its night defensive positions north of the Rockpile. The tank platoon returned to Cam Lo the following day while the 2d Battalion began its search and destroy mission in the high rugged terrain between the Rockpile and the Nui Cay Tre ridgeline. Although employed in relatively poor tank country, the M-48s had proved effective against an enemy strongpoint which Marine infantry and other supporting units had not been able to neutralize.¹³

For the next six days, the battalion found itself heavily engaged with elements of the 803d NVA Regiment. Lieutenant Colonel Bench had established his command post on a mountain some 2,000 meters northeast of the Rockpile and ordered his three companies "to fan out" and search the prominent terrain features 500 to 1,000 meters to the north, northwest, and northeast. On the 19th, Company E in a reconnaissance of a wooded ridge came across two concrete enemy bunkers. As the Marines maneuvered to reduce the enemy defenses, NVA 12.7mm machine guns on each flank and from the bunkers caught one Marine platoon in a crossfire. At the same time, enemy gunners mortared the company rear which had laid down a base of fire. Despite sustaining casualties of two dead and 14 wounded, the Marine company, supported by the 155mm howitzers at Cam Lo, Marine fixed-wing airstrikes, UH-1E gunships, 81mm mortars, and 106mm recoilless rifles, destroyed the enemy defenses and gun positions and killed a possible 30 of the enemy. From the 20th to the 22d, and after a B-52 strike in the valley behind the former enemy positions, the companies of the battalion continued to catch glimpses of enemy troops and occasionally were the targets of enemy mortars and heavy machine guns.¹⁴

At this time, Lieutenant Colonel Bench became concerned with a new turn of events that threatened the 11-man outpost on the Rockpile. The sheer cliffs of the 700-foot outcropping prevented resupply of the Marines there except by helicopter. Indeed, the Marine pilots had to perform the demanding maneuver of landing one wheel of their helicopter on the edge of the Rockpile while the aircraft hovered until the cargo could be unloaded. On 21-22 August, an enemy 12.7mm machine gun, positioned strategically midway between the Rockpile and another hill mass, nicknamed the



Marine Corps Photo A332463 (LtCol Curtis G. Arnold)
A Marine helicopter provides resupply for the Rockpile. One wheel rests on the wooden ramp while the aircraft hovers until it can be unloaded.

Razorback because of its sharp contours, 1,000 meters to the northwest, opened fire on the resupply aircraft. Repeated attempts by Marine air and artillery failed to silence the gun, which imperiled the helicopter lifeline to the Rockpile. Moreover, on the morning of the 22d, Bench and his command group observed enemy troops at the base of the Rockpile and took them under fire with 106mm recoilless

rifles and called an airstrike. Captain John J. W. Hilgers, who had become the 2d Battalion S-3 earlier that month, recalled in 1978, that he and Bench “went on an air recon and came close to being shot out of the sky by the 12.7 whose position we inadvertently flew over and located.”¹⁵

At this point, the morning of the 23d, Bench decided that he had to eliminate the enemy machine gun. He ordered Captain Edward W. Besch, who had relieved Captain Lee as commander of Company E after the action of 9 August, to “conduct a reconnaissance in force to locate and neutralize the 12.7 and supporting forces.” Captain Hilgers recalled several years later that he briefed Besch and recommended that the company commander establish a base of operations near two “knobs” in the vicinity of the gun where helicopters could get in, but not to “count on [their] availability. . . .”¹⁶

Shortly after 1000, Besch departed the battalion CP with his company, which he later remembered consisted of less than 60 personnel, divided into two platoons of two squads each. About two hours later the Marine company arrived in the general objective area, some two miles to the southwest of its starting point. Besch established his base camp in the valley between the two “knobs,” some 300 meters to the east of the southern portion of the Razorback. Finding little sign of any enemy in the immediate vicinity, he took three squads of the company to ex-

A view of the Rockpile (in the foreground) looking northwest to the Razorback (in the immediate background). Enemy gunners positioned strategically near the Razorback threatened the helicopter lifeline to the Rockpile.

Marine Corps Photo A332474 (LtCol Curtis G. Arnold)



plore the "rock face" of the hill mass. To cover his movements, Besch left in the camp site, under his executive officer, the remaining squad, reinforced by 60mm mortars and a 106mm recoilless rifle which had been brought in by helicopter earlier in the day.¹⁷

About 1400, Captain Besch with the forward elements of his company came upon a bowl-shaped ravine in the southeastern sector of the Razorback, honeycombed with caves. Besch several years later remembered that some of the "cave passageways were large enough to drive two trucks through, side by side. . . ." The Marines then began a systematic search of the caves. While encountering no enemy, the Marines found evidence, such as spent 12.7mm machine gun rounds, of recent occupation. With the exploration of the caverns taking him longer than he expected, Besch sent one of the squads back to look for the enemy machine gun on the low ground below the Razorback. The squad found no gun and returned to the company rear position held by the executive officer. Besch, in the meantime, with the remaining two squads continued to investigate the caves.¹⁸

Shortly after 1630, Besch made preparations to return to his base camp and close out the operation. A Marine helicopter already had lifted out the 106mm recoilless rifle and flew it back to its former positions with the battalion. About 10 minutes later, the Marines heard voices inside one of the caves. Hoping to take a prisoner, Besch attempted to coax out the NVA soldiers. Besch recalled that three shots rang out from inside the cave and:

Within seconds, squads of NVA soldiers . . . simultaneously erupted from five or six concealed caves in the craggy rock wall and immediately shot down the surprised Marine squad near the cave.¹⁹

The surviving Marines on the Razorback took what cover they could. Besch remembered that he and one of his two radiomen jumped into a bomb crater. Realizing that the other man was dying from a wound in the chest, Besch took the radioset and asked for supporting fires from the two squads still in the rear camp site. According to Besch, he and the small group with him survived only by feigning death.²⁰ Other remnants of his small force were scattered all along the ravine. The second radio operator, separated from Besch, radioed Lieutenant Colonel Bench that the North Vietnamese soldiers

were, "real close and closing on their flank, still throwing grenades and firing weapons."²¹

At this point, Lieutenant Colonel Bench, already concerned by the lapse of time that Besch had been on the Razorback, hastily prepared his plans for the relief of the embattled company. With Company E's forward positions on the outside fringes of the 155mm fan from Cam Lo, thus making the employment of artillery impractical, the battalion commander immediately requested both fixed-wing and helicopter gunships on station. At the same time, he formed a composite company by taking a platoon each from Companies F and G and his Headquarters and Service Company. His operations officer, Captain Hilgers, volunteered to take charge of the relief force and Bench reluctantly assented since he had no one else to send.²²

By late evening, Marine helicopters had landed Hilgers' makeshift company, reinforced by two 106mm recoilless rifles, flamethrowers, and .50 caliber machine guns, near the Company E base camp. After joining the rear elements of Company E, Hilgers later commented that he had "little choice under the circumstances," but to send the platoon from Company F to the immediate relief of the trapped men and to deploy the Company G platoon "around to the south to protect our highly vulnerable southern flank where known NVA units were located, including the 12.7." He stated that he "took a calculated risk that no enemy units were located on our northern flank as Besch had been in

A view from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines command post looking toward the Rockpile (extreme left of picture) and the Razorback ridgeline. Two bombs have just exploded behind the forward elements of Company E trapped on the Razorback by enemy troops.

Marine Corps Photo 532579 (Capt Edwin W. Besch)



that area.”²³ By this time the Marine jets had arrived overhead and bombed a valley to the west that the North Vietnamese were using in an attempt to flank the Marines. Two Marine VMO-2 gunships about 25 minutes later also strafed the enemy.

During the night, the Marines brought their entire arsenal into the battle. Marine artillery and flareships provided illumination and a U.S. Air Force AC-47 opened up with 7.62mm mini-guns on enemy bunkers. After the first flare dropped, the surviving radio operator of Company E, although wounded, contacted Hilgers and attempted to direct 106mm recoilless rifle fire against the North Vietnamese troops. He died of his wounds while still trying to adjust the missions.²⁴

With the assistance of the illumination provided by the flares, the Company F platoon, under 2d Lieutenant Stephen F. Snyder, made its way through the difficult jungle terrain to the face of the Razorback. Shortly after 0030 on the 24th, the platoon

The face of the Razorback as seen by the relief force of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, commanded by the battalion's operations officer, Capt John J. W. Hilgers. The barrel of a Marine 106mm recoilless rifle can be seen in the foreground.

Marine Corps Photo A332794 (LtCol John J. W. Hilgers)



reached the eastern lip of the natural bowl where the trapped men were, only to find Besch's Marines scattered below, and the North Vietnamese in control of the remaining three ledges of the ravine. Snyder hastily set up his defenses and then led a four-man patrol toward the western rim of the bowl where Besch had gathered together a few of his men to the side of a North Vietnamese-held cave. A North Vietnamese grenade barrage forced the patrol to turn back, but not before it had come within 15 meters of the remnants of Company E and rescued two of the wounded. Returning to its defensive positions, the Company F platoon laid down a base of suppressive fire and directed 106mm recoilless rifle missions upon the enemy positions.²⁵

At about 0600, it became apparent that the North Vietnamese were about to launch a final attack upon the Marines. Snyder, instead of waiting for the assault, ordered a counterattack. Captain Besch several years later recalled that as the North Vietnamese troops came out of the caves and formed in the open, Snyder's men took them under fire. According to Besch, the enemy troops "were very quickly (within seconds, like turning down a radio volume button . . .) annihilated by the Marines, one of whom shouted, 'One of 'em is still moving, shoot the son-of-a-bitch,' and nearly every Marine reopened fire."²⁶ In the exchange of fire, Snyder was killed, his platoon sergeant badly wounded, and finally the platoon guide, Sergeant Patrick J. Noon, Jr., took over the relief platoon.

With daybreak, Lieutenant Colonel Bench was able to bring additional units into the battle. He sent the rest of Company G to reinforce Hilgers' composite force. Later that morning, Marine helicopters lifted two platoons of his reserve company, Company H, from Cam Lo to the battalion sector, thus allowing the remaining elements of Company F to go forward. One platoon of Company H accompanied a platoon of M-48 tanks from Cam Lo along Route 9 to the objective area. With the reinforcements, the 2d battalion went into the attack, but at a painfully slow pace. Firing from behind rocks and from caves, the North Vietnamese had the advantage of terrain. With the employment of recoilless rifles and the tanks at point-blank ranges, the battalion eventually gained the upper hand. Under cover of artillery, which also had moved forward, and air, the Marines blasted the NVA out of their caves. By midmorning, the forward

elements of the relief force reached the battered Company F platoon and remnants of Company E. Bench's unit continued to scour the ridges for the next two days, searching caves and bunkers for the enemy, but the fight for the Razorback was over.

Losses on both sides were heavy, but the NVA had suffered a serious reverse. They had lost their outpost and no longer were in a position to threaten the Marines on the Rockpile. During the engagement, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines sustained more than 120 casualties, including 21 dead. Eleven of the dead and 13 of the wounded, including Captain Besch whose arm was shattered, were from Company E. Estimates of enemy dead ranged from 120 to 170.*

The Marines took one prisoner who identified himself as a sergeant and a member of the *803d Regiment, 324B Division*. The enemy soldier told his captors that his battalion's mission was to neutralize the Rockpile and then sweep eastward to join in an attack on the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines positions at Cam Lo.²⁷

The NVA sergeant's information proved timely. During the early morning hours of 26 August, the enemy launched a two-company attack against the Marine artillery near Cam Lo. At 0300, 1st Lieutenant Gerald T. Galvin, the commander of Company A, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, whose unit was responsible for the security of the perimeter, reported to his battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Westerman, that three of his outposts had seen movement to their front. Westerman ordered the company to "just sit tight and keep observing"

and to report any new development.²⁸ About fifteen minutes later, Lieutenant Galvin called back and declared that five outposts had spotted enemy troops moving toward their positions. According to Colonel Cereghino, who was with the battalion commander at Dong Ha, Westerman was about to send reinforcements to the company. Cereghino decided, however, that it would be too complicated an operation to move the Marines out in the dark. He believed that Galvin and his men "were in good shape, confident and gung ho" and that they could hold their own against any attacking force.²⁹ The regimental commander told Westerman "to hold up but to be prepared to move troops in a matter of minutes."³⁰ Lieutenant Colonel Westerman then directed Galvin to withdraw the outposts to the main perimeter and wait for the enemy to come through the wire, about 90 meters to the front.

The idea was to allow the NVA troops to crawl through the wire and then illuminate the area, making the North Vietnamese easy targets. The plan worked, in part. The wire channelized the infiltrators, the artillery fired illumination rounds, and an AC-47 dropped flares. On a prearranged signal, the Marines on the perimeter opened up on the attacking force, by then 40 to 50 meters in front of the Marine positions.

The enemy, however, was not entirely unsuccessful. Somehow the first wave passed through the Company A positions unnoticed and did do some damage. According to Lieutenant Colonel Westerman:

They [the NVA] snuck on through before we ever illuminated the area. . . . as you know, they're real proficient at moving at night . . . very silently, very slowly, and very patiently. . . . [the NVA] did get through even though our people were waiting for them. They crawled in between the holes, and our people never even realized that they passed through their positions.³¹

Those enemy troops that did get through placed explosive charges all over the positions, blowing up tents, trailers, and one tank retriever.

The destruction could have been much more extensive. Just the previous day, the 155mm howitzers had moved to new revetments further west to provide for better coverage of the Razorback-Rockpile complex. At the same time, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines had also changed the location of its fire direction center. The NVA attacking force had excellent intelligence on the location of the old posi-

*Both the III MAF and 4th Marines ComdCs for this period show 26 NVA confirmed dead, but these figures were apparently from preliminary reports. The 2/4 AAR does not furnish a total casualty count, but Shaplen, in his account, lists 170 KIA. Shaplen, "Hastings and Prairie," p. 180. Lieutenant Colonel Bench's comments to the Historical Division state 137 enemy were killed. LtCol Arnold E. Bench, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Sep69 (*Vietnam Comment File*). Figures do not agree on Marine casualties. The 4th Marines shows 11 Marines KIA in its AAR, but this reflects only the casualties of Company E. Lieutenant Colonel Bench's comments list 21 Marines KIA, while Shaplen speaks of a "score" of Marine dead. Indicative of the heavy fighting was the number of medals awarded. Captain Hilgers, Lieutenant Snyder, and Sergeant Noon received the Navy Cross, while Corporal Paul M. Reed, one of the radio operators of Company E, and Corporal William F. Wright, a radio operator with the platoon from Company F, both received the Silver Star.

tions and these moves helped to diffuse the effects of the raid. Yet, the largest factor in keeping the damage to a minimum was the rapid response of the Marine defenders. Within two hours, Company A and a security force from the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines had control of the situation. The Marines captured one NVA soldier. He identified himself as a member of the *812th Infantry Regiment, 324B NVA Division*, which in coordination with a local VC unit, had made the attack. Had this unit been able to join with the battalion from the *803d NVA Regiment* as originally planned, the attack on the Marine artillery position might well have been much more serious.* As it was, nine Marines were killed and 20 wounded. None of Major Morrow's artillery pieces were damaged.

This action at Cam Lo was the last significant contact in Operation Prairie during August. Lieutenant Colonel Bench's battalion returned to Dong Ha on 29 August to relieve the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. The latter battalion moved from Cam Lo and Dong Ha and conducted a reconnaissance in force along Route 9, but met little resistance.

The month was a bloody one for both the Marines and NVA. According to Marine reports, Prairie accounted for over 200 enemy dead, while the Americans suffered 37 killed and 130 wounded during this phase of the operation.

Colonel Cereghino realigned his forces. On 27 August he assigned Lieutenant Colonel John J. Roothoff's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, which had just arrived from Chu Lai, the area of responsibility formerly held by the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, including the Rockpile. When Westerman's battalion completed sweeping Route 9 into the Thon Son Lam area, 1,500 meters west of the Rockpile, it returned to Dong Ha, arriving on 7 September. It relieved Bench's 2d Battalion of the defense missions at both Dong Ha and Cam Lo.

At this point, Colonel Cereghino decided to extend his area of operations to the Con Thien region, due north of Cam Lo and adjacent to the DMZ. Bas-



Marine Corps Photo A187790
Enemy dead lie inside the Cam Lo perimeter after their mostly aborted attack on the Marine artillery. Smoke from a destroyed tank retriever can be seen in the background.

LtGen Victor H. Krulak, CGFMFPac (center), discusses the battle situation with LtCol John J. Roothoff, Commanding Officer, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, whose battalion had just relieved the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines in the Rockpile sector, and Col Alexander D. Cereghino, Commanding Officer, 4th Marines. MajGen Wood B. Kyle, CG 3dMarDiv, is standing behind Gen Krulak.

Marine Corps Photo A187832



*Colonel Cereghino commented that even if the battalion from the *803d* had been on the scene, the attack had no chance of success, "because we were loaded and locked [at Dong Ha] and but a few minutes away, had Lieutenant Galvin or Major Morrow needed us." Col Alexander D. Cereghino, Comments on draft MS, dtd 17Aug78 (Vietnam Comment File).

ed on new intelligence that a battalion of the 324B Division was moving into the area, the 4th Marines commander ordered Lieutenant Colonel Bench to conduct a reconnaissance in force to determine the extent of enemy activity. Company H, accompanied by a platoon of tanks from Company C, 3d Tank Battalion, left Cam Lo on the morning of 7 September. MAG-16 helicopters ferried the rest of the battalion into landing zones around Con Thien. The first significant contact occurred the next morning when Company G ran into an enemy platoon 1,000 meters northeast of the ARVN Con Thien outpost. The firefight lasted for three hours before the enemy disappeared. Five Marines were killed.

The next day, Bench's Companies E and F, reinforced by tanks, engaged a NVA company two miles south of the DMZ. The enemy had expected the Marines. Numerous firing positions and trenches had been dug, extending into the demilitarized area itself. Lieutenant Colonel Bench ordered the tanks to fire point-blank into the enemy positions; after stiff resistance the NVA disengaged. The Marines counted 20 bodies and estimated that they had killed at least another 14. Bench's unit sustained three killed and 17 wounded. The battalion continued its reconnaissance in the area until the 13th, but met only scattered resistance and then returned to Cam Lo.

Assault From The Sea: Deckhouse IV

The reconnaissance by the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines confirmed that elements of the 90th NVA Regiment, a subordinate unit of the 324B Division, were now operating south of the DMZ. General Walt had already planned an operation to determine the extent of enemy infiltration in the eastern portion of the Prairie area of operations. On 3 September, he requested that General Westmoreland obtain permission from the Seventh Fleet to use the Special Landing Force in the Con Thien-Gio Linh area.³² After General Westmoreland acceded to the III MAF request, General Walt held a planning conference on 7 September at Da Nang, attended by representatives of the amphibious ready group and the SLF to work out the details. At that time, they changed D-day from 12 September to the 15th. In effect, the SLF operation, Deckhouse IV,

was to continue the reconnaissance in force that Bench's unit had just carried out in this area.*

The operational concept provided for one company of BLT 1/26 (Lieutenant Colonel Anthony A. Monti) to land across Blue Beach, two miles south of the DMZ, north of the Cua Viet River. Lieutenant Colonel James D. McGough's HMM-363 was to bring the other companies into landing zones further inland, west of Highway 1. After the beachhead was secured and the artillery unloaded, Company A was to join the rest of the battalion west of the highway, six miles inland.

The assault phase went almost without incident. At 0700 15 September, the first wave of Company A in 11 LVTs from the USS *Vancouver* (LPD 2) secured Blue Beach without resistance. Forty minutes later, the first heliborne elements landed from the *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2); again no opposition. Later that day, HMM-363 lifted Company A and the artillery battery from the beach area to positions west of Route 1, where they joined the rest of the battalion.

Early that afternoon, the Marines experienced the first serious contact with the NVA. At 1330, a platoon from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, attached to the BLT for the operation, encountered a NVA company five miles northeast of Dong Ha while reconnoitering the southwestern portion of the objective area. The well-camouflaged NVA soldiers were moving down a trail in single file, and almost bumped into the Marines. Both units opened fire simultaneously. The reconnaissance Marines, vastly outnumbered, called for help. Marine helicopters arrived to attempt an evacuation, but heavy ground fire prevented them from landing. Five helicopters were hit and two crewmen were wounded in the abortive attempt.

At this point, the Marines on the ground called for supporting arms. The 107mm howtar battery attached to BLT 1/26 pounded the area with continuous fire and four F4Bs from MAG-11 bombed,

*There had been some changes within the SLF since Operation Hastings in July. Colonel Harry D. Wortman relieved Colonel Richard A. Brennehan as SLF commander on 31 August. On 5 August, BLT 1/26, which had sailed in new shipping from San Diego, was designated the SLF battalion. After a landing exercise in the Philippines, the battalion participated in Operation Deckhouse III with the 173d Airborne Brigade in III Corps until 29 August.

strafed, and rocketed the enemy positions, allowing the helicopters to make a second attempt to extract the patrol. This time the extraction proceeded smoothly.

During the two-hour engagement, the Marine patrol suffered one killed, six wounded, and one Marine unaccounted for. The troops tried to find the missing man, but enemy fire forced them to give up the search. The patrol claimed that it had killed at least nine NVA and estimated that at least 30 North Vietnamese were killed by supporting arms.

After the extraction of the Marine reconnaissance element, Lieutenant Colonel Monti, the BLT commander, ordered Company A to move from its positions on Route 1 at daybreak and work its way over to the area where the action had occurred. By the evening of the 16th, the Marine company had arrived at its objective and dug in for the night. At 0330 the next morning, the NVA attacked under cover of mortar fire. Company A, supported by naval gunfire and artillery, repulsed the attackers. At first light, patrols were sent out; the Marines found 12 bodies and captured a wounded NVA soldier. The Americans found a cigarette lighter on the wounded man which belonged to the missing reconnaissance Marine. The prisoner claimed that the Marine had died and that he had helped to bury him. The prisoner was evacuated to the *Iwo Jima* for treatment; he died on the operating table. Later that day, a Marine patrol found the grave of the dead American.

The battalion encountered much more opposition in the northwestern area near the DMZ. On the 16th, Company D came under heavy mortar fire, less than a mile from the DMZ. The mortar positions were so close that the Marines could hear the rounds drop into the enemy tubes. The Marines called for naval gunfire and the heavy cruiser *Saint Paul* (CA 73) responded with eight-inch guns. During the follow-up search, the Marine company found three destroyed mortars and 14 bodies.

South of Company D, Company B was also hit. One of its platoons walked into an enemy ambush on the outskirts of a hamlet. The Marines, outnumbered, took cover in the rice paddies. Once more air and artillery were called. After a 75-minute engagement, the enemy broke contact. The Marines were unable to determine enemy casualties; Company B suffered two dead and nine wounded.

The Marines soon discovered that the North Viet-

namese had constructed a large tunnel and bunker complex in the Con Thien and Gio Linh areas. Each time the battalion probed the northwestern portion of its area of operations, the enemy responded with heavy fire from well-concealed positions. Although Deckhouse IV officially ended on 18 September, the battalion remained ashore and came under the operational control of the 4th Marines until 24 September. The next day, the 25th, the battalion reverted to its SLF role and left the DMZ sector. During the period the battalion was committed to operations ashore, it killed at least 200 of the enemy at a cost of 203 casualties including 36 killed.³³

The Continued Fighting for Nui Cay Tre (Mutter) Ridge and the Razorback

While the SLF explored the swamps and rice paddies of the northern coastal plain of Quang Tri Province, action intensified in the western sector of the Prairie operation area. In contrast to the relatively flat eastern terrain, this fighting took place in the mountains and gullies north of the Rockpile, centering on the Nui Cay Tre ridgeline. According to American intelligence agencies, the North Vietnamese *324B Division* had established extensive defenses there to protect its infiltration routes. On 8 September, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines returned to the Rockpile from Dong Ha and relieved the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines. Colonel Cereghino ordered Lieutenant Colonel Westerman to conduct a deep reconnaissance toward Nui Cay Tre to determine the extent of enemy operations in the area. On 15 September, Companies B and D left the battalion perimeter near the Rockpile and advanced toward the southern approaches of the ridge.

The enemy struck at noon the next day. At that time, both companies were moving in column, with Company D in the lead. The NVA allowed the first two platoons to enter their ambush position before opening fire. Captain Daniel K. McMahon, Jr., the Company D commander, then pushed his third platoon forward into the fight. Lieutenant Colonel Westerman ordered Company B to move up to the forward company's positions. The two companies established a perimeter and Captain McMahon reported to Westerman: "We have 'em just where we want them, they're all the way around us."³⁴ The two Marine companies were surrounded by a North Viet-

namese battalion and the fight would last two and one-half days.

The Marines dug in. Marine air and artillery provided constant supporting fire. Helicopters from MAG-16 also played a vital role in sustaining the surrounded troops. The Marines on the ground hacked out a crude landing zone, for resupply helicopters. Colonel Cereghino ordered Lieutenant Colonel Roothoff to move his battalion to assist Westerman's two companies. After a two-day march from Cam Lo, the lead elements of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines reached the surrounded units the evening of 18 September, later joined by the rest of the battalion, and the relief was completed.

The enemy was gone, but Marine air, artillery, and the two infantry companies were credited with killing at least 170 of the North Vietnamese. Nine Marines from Westerman's battalion were killed in the battle.

An 81mm mortar team from the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines exchanges fire with the enemy near the Rockpile-Razorback complex. According to the original caption, the NVA, firing an 82mm mortar, returned round for round.

Marine Corps Photo A187852



The 1st Battalion, 4th Marines units returned to the battalion command post near the Rockpile on 19 September, while the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines continued to patrol in the Nui Cay Tre area. Lieutenant Colonel Roothoff's companies operated south of the Nui Cay Tre ridge for the next two days, coming under increasing enemy pressure, but then the battalion was ordered to withdraw to positions near the Rockpile.

Colonel Cereghino had two reasons for moving Roothoff back to the Rockpile. To attack the ridge from the south was futile; it was apparent that the North Vietnamese were strongly entrenched there, waiting for the Marines. Secondly, the North Vietnamese had returned to the Razorback and were mortaring the Rockpile. The regimental commander decided first to clean out the Razorback.

Lieutenant Colonel Roothoff established a combat base west of the Rockpile on 22 September, and ordered Companies F and G to sweep to the Razorback. On the 24th, a Company G patrol spotted five North Vietnamese soldiers on the western slopes of the hill mass and killed them, but 10 minutes later the company reported that it was under fire and "unable to advance or withdraw." The battalion commander ordered Company F to go to the assistance of Company G, but heavy enemy fire prevented the two companies from joining. Lieutenant Colonel Roothoff then directed both companies to back off so that air and artillery could hit the area.³⁵

A platoon of Company F commanded by First Lieutenant Robert T. Willis was moving to the relief of Company G when it came upon a trail which led the Marines into the enemy base camp. As the platoon entered the camp, the point man suddenly stopped because he heard a noise. Lieutenant Willis went forward to see what was happening. An enemy soldier, probably a sentry, fired, killing a machine gun team leader and slipped away. The Marines entered the camp from the rear, destroyed an enemy mortar, and then waited. According to Lieutenant Willis:

We sat in their own positions practically and waited for them [the NVA] to come back to their base camp from their attack on Golf Company. Two of my people who had reported to my unit at Cam Lo eight days earlier killed seven of the [NVA] coming up the trail where they were hitting Golf Company. They tried to mortar us—mortar their own base camp . . . We kept moving toward them and finally got them pinned in a gulch . . . We couldn't

get into it and they couldn't get out of it. We called for air and artillery and pretty well destroyed it.³⁶

The platoon was credited with killing 58 NVA. Company F reported three dead and 17 wounded while Company G suffered 3 Marines killed, 26 wounded, and 7 missing.³⁷

The 2d Battalion, 7th Marines participation in Prairie was over. On 28 September, the battalion began moving to the rear. Two days later, Company G recovered the bodies of the seven Marines missing since the 22d, and then left for Dong Ha. At Dong Ha, Lieutenant Colonel John J. Hess' newly arrived 2d Battalion, 9th Marines relieved Roothoff's battalion, which rejoined its parent regiment at Chu Lai.

Earlier in the month, Colonel Cereghino had developed another plan to drive the North Vietnamese off the Nui Cay Tre ridgeline to protect the Rockpile—Razorback—Thon Son Lam area. He intended to have Lieutenant Colonel William J. Masterpool's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, which had arrived at Dong Ha from Phu Bai on 17 September, attack the Nui Cay Tre heights. The attack was to come in from the east to cut into the enemy's flank. This attack was to result in the longest action of Prairie, from 22 September until 5 October.

On the morning of 22 September, Marine air and artillery, in an attempt not to give away the actual landing zone of Masterpool's battalion, bombarded a false target area. Three minutes after the artillery, commanded since the end of August by Lieutenant Colonel Charles S. Kirchmann, stopped firing, eight MAG-16 CH-46s brought the first elements of the 3d Battalion into the actual landing zone, 4,500 meters to the east of the Nui Cay Tre ridgeline. The battalion secured its two objectives, roughly 1,500 meters northwest of the LZ on the first day and dug in for the night. During the first few days, the Marines had as much trouble with the terrain as they did with the enemy. According to some veteran troops, the ground was covered with the densest vegetation they had encountered. At the foot of the ridgeline, there was a six-foot layer of brush which rose straight up to a canopy of bamboo and deciduous trees. Some of these trees were eight feet in diameter and the canopy was so thick that almost no light penetrated the jungle below.

The lead units of the battalion, Companies K and L, began their ascent, each Marine carrying only his



Marine Corps Photo A187871
A wounded Marine is being carried by four of his comrades to an evacuation site. The battalion encountered strong enemy resistance near the Razorback.

weapon, ammunition, two canteens, a poncho, and two socks stuffed with C-rations in his pockets. The only method of resupply was by helicopter and the Marines had to hack out the landing zones with what little equipment they had. Engineers used chain saws and axes to clear an LZ, but only the smaller UH-34s could land in these restricted sites, thus limiting the amount of supplies that could be brought in at one time. The only way the lead elements could move through the jungle was in column, slashing at the dense growth with their machetes. Occasionally they had to wait for bombs and napalm to blast or burn the jungle so the column could move again.³⁸

Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool compared his tactics with the action of a ballpoint pen. According to the battalion commander:

The idea was to probe slowly with the tip of the pen and then, when contact was made, retract the point into the pen's larger sleeve; that is, as soon as contact was made, supporting fire including napalm was directed onto the enemy positions.³⁹

Two hills dominated the ridgeline, Hill 484, the Marines' final objective, and Hill 400, 3,000 meters east of 484. As the lead element, Company L, approached Hill 400, the closer of the two heights, it

became obvious that the Marines were entering the enemy's main line of resistance. According to the company commander, Captain Roger K. Ryman:

As we got closer to 400, moving along some of the lower hills in front of it, we saw more and more enemy positions, including enough huts in the ravines to harbor a regiment, and piles and piles of ammunition. NVA bodies lying about and hastily dug graves were signs that we were moving right behind them.⁴⁰

The North Vietnamese resistance was skillful. Ryman recalled:

Their fire discipline remained excellent. Invariably they'd pick just the right piece of terrain, where it was so

During the fighting for Nui Cay Tre, a Marine from Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines rushes forward carrying a 3.5-inch rocket round in his hand. One of the remaining Marines is seen talking on the radio while the other uses his compass to get a position fix.

Marine Corps Photo A187904



narrow that we couldn't maneuver on the flanks, and they'd dig in and wait for us in the bottleneck. Sometimes they'd let the point man go by and then let us have it. On other parts of the ridgeline trail, where it dipped down through the thickest sections of the jungle, we would suddenly see a patch of vegetation moving towards us, and that was the only way we could detect an enemy soldier. Once, I heard a sudden snicker when one of our men slipped. The sound gave away a concealed enemy position a few feet away, and started a fire fight. The NVA was damn clever. We'd walk the artillery in—that is, direct fifty yards at a time towards us, sensing by sound where it was dropping. Then we'd pull back, opening the artillery sheath, and call for saturated firing in the area. But the NVA would guess what we were doing, and when we pulled back they'd quickly follow us into the safety zone between us and where the shells were dropping. And when the shelling stopped, they'd start shooting again.⁴¹

In spite of the slow going, by dusk on the 26th, Company L, reinforced by Company K, had secured a portion of Hill 400 and was dug in for the night.

The heaviest fighting occurred during the next two days. At 0730 on 27 September, Company K, commanded by Captain James J. Carroll, moved toward its next objective, 1,000 meters to the southwest, when it ran into the enemy. At noon, the company reported NVA all around its flanks on the lower leg of L-shaped Hill 400. After an hour and half, the North Vietnamese broke contact. Carroll's company already had 7 dead, 25 wounded, and 1 missing. Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool ordered the rest of the battalion to join Company K and set up defensive positions.

The next morning Company K pushed forward once more but immediately encountered enemy troops in heavily reinforced bunkers. The Marines pulled back and called in artillery. Captain Carroll sent a patrol out to search for the Marine reported missing during the previous day's fighting. At this point, the NVA counterattacked. Elements of Companies I and M reinforced Carroll's company and helped to throw back the enemy. One of Captain Carroll's platoon leaders, Sergeant Anthony Downey, described the action: "The stuff was so thick you couldn't tell who was firing, Charlie or us. They had everything—mortars, mines, and heavy weapons—and they had ladders in the trees for spotters to climb up and direct fire."⁴² The Marine companies killed 50 of the enemy while six Marines died and nine were wounded. They also found the body of the Marine missing from the previous day's fighting. By the end of the 28th, the Marines con-

trolled Hill 400 and prepared to advance to Hill 484.⁴³

Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool continued his step-by-step approach, alternating companies as the advance units. On 2 October, Captain Robert G. Handrahan's Company M secured a third hill between Hills 400 and 484, 500 meters east of Hill 484. The rest of the battalion joined the lead company later that day and prepared defensive positions for the night. The next day Company I found 25 enemy bunkers on "the Fake," the name the Marines gave the hill since it was not specifically marked on their maps. The bunkers contained ammunition, equipment, and documents, but no NVA. The Marines were ready to take the final objective, Hill 484.

At 0930 on 4 October, Captain Handrahan's 1st Platoon led the assault against heavy resistance from well-concealed bunkers. The Marines tried a frontal assault but were thrown back. Then, while the 1st Platoon put down a base of fire, the 2d Platoon tried to envelop the enemy's left, but this action also failed when the North Vietnamese countered with grenades from the upper slope. Because of the steepness of the terrain and the inability of Handrahan to call in supporting arms "without significant damage to . . . [his] company," Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool ordered the company to pull back to "the Fake."⁴⁴ Marine air and artillery then attempted to soften the North Vietnamese positions.



Marine Corps Photo A188472
Capt James J. Carroll, Commanding Officer, Company K, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, throws a grenade at the enemy during the struggle for Nui Cay Tre. Carroll was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross and the artillery plateau was renamed Camp Carroll in his honor.

An M60 machine gun crew provides covering fire for the advance up Nui Cay Tre. This fighting was some of the heaviest of the war.

Marine Corps Photo A187837



At 1000 the next morning, and after another airstrike on the enemy, Company M advanced once more against Hill 484. Believing that artillery would be useless because of the slope, Handrahan the previous night had arranged for direct fire from the tank company at two concentration points. The company commander recalled that:

As we approached the crest, I requested fire on concentration point one, intending to shift as we neared the top . . . We had agreed on five rounds but only two came at the target and they were well over.⁴⁵

Handrahan remembered that he then heard “explosions to my rear. I again requested support over the TAC net but was informed that they were receiving incoming. I continued without support.” Company M’s 2d platoon gained the crest of Hill 484 at 1200, followed by the 1st Platoon. The NVA held on until 1330 and then broke contact and fled into the

Marines from Company K, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines examine a captured enemy machine gun position on Nui Cay Tre. The broken and stripped trees are a result of a pre-attack airstrike.

Marine Corps Photo A187841



Marine Corps Photo A187838

1stLt Edward J. Crowell of Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines reports that the company had secured Hill 484. The taking of Hill 484 on 5 October ended the fight for Nui Cay Tre.

jungle, leaving behind 10 bodies. Captain Handrahan later wrote that his men saw numerous blood trails and recovered some 16-20 weapons.⁴⁶

Handrahan’s company sustained only six wounded in the attack, but further to the rear, Marine tank shells accidentally fell upon Hill 400, killing three Marines and wounding 10 others. Among the dead was Captain James J. Carroll who had been directing fire against Hill 484. The young captain, who had arrived in Vietnam only the month before, had described the fight for Hill 400, as “the high point of my career,” and ironically, was to die there as a result of American fire.^{47*} Carroll was awarded the Navy

*Major Handrahan commented that he and Captain Carroll had laid in the tank fire the previous evening, but later learned “that the tanks we adjusted had been replaced and guns were re-laid.” Maj Robert G. Handrahan, Comments on draft MS, dtb 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A187944

The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines holds a special ceremony at Dong Ha in honor of its fallen members in the struggle for Nui Cay Tre. The ridgeline was renamed "Mutter" Ridge, after the radio call sign of the 3d Battalion.

Cross for his actions during Prairie and the artillery base west of Cam Lo was renamed Camp Carroll in his honor.

The battle for Nui Cay Tre was over, but the price had been high, both for the Marines and the North Vietnamese. From 22 September through 4 October, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines suffered 20 dead while killing 100 enemy. Nui Cay Tre thereafter was known as "Mutter" Ridge, after the call sign of Masterpool's 3d Battalion.

*The Opening of Khe Sanh
and the 3d Marine Division Moves North*

Generals Walt and Kyle watched the intensifying action in northern Quang Tri Province with growing concern. In Saigon, General Westmoreland took an

even more alarmed view of the situation. He foresaw the likelihood of large numbers of North Vietnamese troops moving south through the DMZ and was apprehensive of what "might occur if the two NVA divisions did, in fact, elect to move into the Quang Tri area." He especially feared that the North Vietnamese might skip around the main Marine defenses keyed on the Rockpile and Dong Ha and attempt to open a corridor in the northwest corner of Quang Tri Province in the mountains bordering both Laos and North Vietnam. General Westmoreland suggested that General Walt reinforce Khe Sanh, 17 kilometers southwest of the Rockpile and 22 kilometers south of the DMZ, with a Marine battalion.⁴⁸

The Marine command resisted Westmoreland's suggestion until the matter came to a head. More than one Marine general expressed the belief that Khe Sanh had no basic military value. General English, the 3d Marine Division ADC, declared

“When you’re at Khe Sanh, you’re not really anywhere. It’s far away from everything. You could lose it and you really haven’t lost a damn thing.”⁴⁹ Despite Marine protests, it was soon obvious that III MAF would have to move into the area. The catalyst was a 26 September intelligence report that pinpointed a North Vietnamese troop concentration and base camp only 14 kilometers northeast of Khe Sanh.^{50*} General Walt bowed to the inevitable and ordered Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. Wickwire’s 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, already on the alert to move to Dong Ha from Da Nang, to move to Khe Sanh instead. This was done reluctantly; the III MAF G-3, Colonel Chaisson, aptly declared:

We were not interested in putting a battalion at Khe Sanh . . . [but] had we not done it, we would have been directed to put it out there . . . we put it out just to retain that little prestige of doing it on your own volition rather than doing it with a shoe in your tail.⁵¹

In any event, Lieutenant Colonel Wickwire received only 12 hours’ notice that the battalion’s next location was to be in Khe Sanh.**

*Lieutenant Colonel Fredric A. Green, who at the time was on the III MAF staff, observed that the 26 September report that pinpointed the North Vietnamese concentrations near Khe Sanh was a MACV intelligence report and not one from III MAF. Green remarked: “III MAF had been monitoring the base camp and infiltration for several months. This was neither new, threatening, nor alarming.” LtCol Fredric A. Green, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Jun 78] (Vietnam Comment File).

**General Westmoreland commented that he understood why the Marine command from its local perspective was reluctant to go into Khe Sanh. From the MACV point of view, however, Westmoreland stated that he had to consider the following main points:

/1/ A need for the base to launch intelligence operations into Laos such as cross border covert patrols, and responsive intelligence flights by small observation aircraft.

/2/ A northern anchor to defenses south of the DMZ. A base from which major movement from Laos along Route 9, could be blocked. An area near the border from which operations could be launched to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos when, and if, authorized by political authority.

/3/ To position ourselves to fight large North Vietnamese Army units without delivery of our fires (artillery and tactical air) being complicated by the proximity of civilian population.

/4/ Finally, I wanted the Marines to get to know the area and to gain confidence in fighting there if required.”

Gen William C. Westmoreland, Comments on draft MS, dtd 27May78 (Vietnam Comment File). See also Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 109, and Chapter 9 of this volume.



Marine Corps Photo A187956

The 1st Battalion, 3d Marines conducts a patrol near Khe Sanh. Montagnard tribesmen and their elephants were a common sight at this new Marine base.

On 29 September, Marine KC-130 transports ferried Wickwire’s battalion, reinforced with an artillery battery, to Khe Sanh. Its new mission was to determine the extent of the enemy buildup in the area. Lieutenant Colonel Wickwire established liaison with the U.S. Army Special Forces advisor at Khe Sanh who believed that the area was in imminent danger of being overrun.⁵² The Marines established their area of operations, coordinated their activities with the ARVN in the area, and manned defensive positions around the Khe Sanh airstrip. The 1st Battalion conducted extensive patrolling out to maximum artillery range, but made little contact with any North Vietnamese troops. The original 30-day stay of the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines was extended into 1967. During this period, the Marines killed 15 North Vietnamese troops, but North Vietnamese intentions remained obscure.

According to Colonel Chaisson:

Since we put it [1/3] out there, there has been no increase in the threat that existed at the time, nor may I add was there any substantial decrease in the threat that was in that particular area. They’re still picking up about the same type of sightings. Nothing that alarms you, but enough to convince the people who want to read the mail that way that there could be one or more battalions in the northwest corner [of South Vietnam].⁵³

At the time of the move to Khe Sanh, MACV received reports of an "unprecedented rapid buildup of enemy forces . . . along the entire length of the DMZ." Westmoreland was convinced that the North Vietnamese were preparing a massive advance into Quang Tri Province.^{54*}

Reacting to this intelligence, III MAF reestablished Task Force Delta and reinforced the northern border area. On 1 October, General English, the 3d Marine Division ADC, opened the Task Force Delta command post at Dong Ha and assumed responsibility for the Prairie Operation from Colonel Cereghino. With the positioning of Wickwire's battalion at Khe Sanh and the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel William C. Airheart's 2d Battalion, 5th Marines at Dong Ha from Chu Lai on 30 September and 1 October, English had six infantry battalions under his command, reinforced by Kirchmann's artillery and other supporting units.**

Reshuffling of III MAF units throughout northern I Corps continued during the first weeks of October. On 6 October, General Walt ordered the 3d Marine Division to displace from Da Nang into Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces. With this move the 1st Marine Division assumed the responsibility for the Da Nang TAOR in addition to the Chu Lai area of operations. Four days later, General Kyle opened the new 3d Marine Division CP at Phu Bai, but left one regiment, the 9th Marines, at Da Nang, under the operational control of the 1st Marine Division. At the same time, General Westmoreland moved one U.S. Army battalion, the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, 173d Airborne Brigade, to Da Nang to reinforce



Marine Corps Photo A187940
Headquarters personnel from the 3d Marine Division load trucks at Da Nang for the move to Phu Bai. The 1st Marine Division assumed control of the Da Nang TAOR while the 3d Division retained responsibility for operations in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces.

Three Marines from the 3d Marines relax for a moment in November 1966 during Operation Prairie and attempt to keep dry. During the northeast monsoon season, both the allies and the NVA curtailed their activities in the DMZ sector.

Marine Corps Photo A188069



*General English recalled that a CinCPac intelligence analysis predicted that the NVA were to launch a "three-division attack in 72 hours." BGen Lowell E. English intvw by FMFPac, 9Jan67 (No. 402, Oral Hist Col, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC). Lieutenant Colonel Green remarked that ". . . this hypothesis was intensely war-gamed at III MAF Headquarters by a Special War Games Group appointed by General Walt. Results were used to brief Walt, Westmoreland, and were the basis of III MAF and MACV contingency planning." LtCol Fredric A. Green, Comments on draft MS, n.d.[Jun78] (Vietnam Comment File). See Chapter 21 for the discussion of U.S. contingency plans.

**The six were 1st Battalion, 4th Marines; 3d Battalion, 4th Marines; 2d Battalion, 5th Marines; 1st Battalion, 3d Marines; 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, and 3d Battalion, 7th Marines. The latter two battalions had just relieved 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and 2d Battalion, 7th Marines in the Prairie area of operations.

the TAOR there. Two Army artillery battalions, the 2d Battalion, 94th Artillery and the 1st Battalion, 40th Artillery, arrived in the Prairie area. Colonel Benjamin S. Read, the commanding officer of the 12th Marines, who had moved his CP from Da Nang to Dong Ha, had command of both the Marine and Army artillery in Prairie. General Kyle deactivated Task Force Delta and established a 3d Marine Division (Forward) Headquarters at Dong Ha to control the operation. General English still retained command, but received additional staff personnel for his headquarters.

During this same period, the 3d Marines, under Colonel Edward E. Hammerbeck, took over the western half of the Prairie TAOR while the 4th Marines assumed the responsibility for the eastern half. Colonel Cereghino's headquarters was located at Dong Ha and his area of operations extended for roughly 5,000 meters eastward of Con Thien. One battalion, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, took over Con Thien from the ARVN while the other two battalions of the regiment, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines and 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, operated closer to Dong Ha and Cam Lo. The 3d Marines was responsible for the defense of the Camp Carroll*-Rockpile area while Wickwire's unit at Khe Sanh reported directly to General English.

Despite the massive III MAF preparations, or perhaps because of them, the expected enemy offensive never materialized. There had been no major action in the region since the capture of "Mutter" Ridge, although Airheart's battalion experienced some probes in mid-October. During November, intelligence sources indicated that the *324B Division* had retired north of the DMZ, although elements of the *341st Division* had infiltrated into the Cua Valley in the southern portion of the Prairie TAOR. Apparently, the mission of the *341st Division* had been to strengthen and train guerrilla units in the area. Although the enemy chose to remain inactive in the northern area during the northeast monsoon

season, there was every indication that fighting would start again once the rains stopped.**

By the end of the year with the diminishing activity on the northern front, the Marine command reduced the infantry strength of the 3d Marine Division in Prairie to one regiment, the 3d Marines, and four battalions. The 4th Marines just before Christmas moved back into the Co Bi-Thanh Tan sector to conduct Operation Chinook.

For all intents and purposes, Prairie was no longer an operation, but rather an area of operations. The Marines had established another base area similar to those at Chu Lai, Da Nang, and Phu Bai. At the height of the Marine buildup in mid-November, General English commanded a force of approximately 8,000 Marines, including eight infantry battalions, supported by the 12th Marines. Marine artillery, reinforced by the two Army 175mm battalions, Navy gunfire ships, and Marine air, covered the entire DMZ area from the western border with Laos to the South China Sea.

Dong Ha had become a forward Marine base and the center of operations in the northern area. Its airfield and that at Khe Sanh had been lengthened so that both easily could handle KC-130 transports. The Marines and Navy also developed a sizeable port facility at Dong Ha to accommodate craft bringing supplies up the Cua Viet River. Within the Prairie TAOR, Marine helicopters resupplied individual units from Dong Ha.

During Prairie in 1966, the Marines had prevented the NVA from establishing a major operating base in northern Quang Tri Province and had killed over 1,000 of the enemy. Colonel Cereghino remembered, "At the beginning of Prairie we were fighting well trained and well equipped soldiers. At the end we were running into poorly equipped young soldiers and frustrated commanders."⁵⁵

Yet the cost had been high in both men and Marine objectives. The Marines sustained casualties of 200 dead and well over 1,000 wounded. A sizeable Marine force still remained in the DMZ sector and the resulting dislocation of Marine units in the southern TAOR's seriously hampered the Marine pacification campaign.

*Colonel Edward E. Hammerbeck, who had assumed command of the 3d Marines in August, commented that in October 1966 when he established his CP in the north, the artillery plateau had not yet been designated Camp Carroll. He recalled that the official dedication of the base camp of the 3d Marines and the artillery plateau to Camp Carroll occurred on 10 November 1966, the Marine Corps Birthday. Col Edward E. Hammerbeck, Comments on draft MS, dtd 9Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

**The monsoon rainy season in most of I Corps begins in the latter part of October and ends in February.

PART V
THE UNRELENTING WAR IN CENTRAL
AND SOUTHERN I CORPS,
JULY-DECEMBER 1966

CHAPTER 12

The Struggle for An Hoa, Operation Macon

The First Clash—The Operation Expands—Macon Continues—Macon Ends but Little Changes

The First Clash

Before Operations Hastings and Prairie diverted Marine forces from the southern TAORs, the three regiments at Da Nang, the 1st, 3d, and 9th Marines, in Operation Liberty,* had reached the line of the Ky Lam and Thu Bon Rivers, 20 miles south of the airbase. Behind the advance of the infantry, the engineers followed and opened up new lines of communication. On 4 July, the 3d Engineer Battalion completed the first leg of a road, appropriately named "Liberty Road," which ran from the 9th Marines CP on Hill 55 south to Route 4, a distance of roughly 3,500 meters. During their southward push, the Marines forced the enemy *R-20 Doc Lap Battalion*, which had infiltrated north of the Thu Bon and Ky Lam during the spring political crisis, to withdraw again south of the two rivers.¹

Unexpectedly, the Marines received excellent intelligence which accurately stated the *R-20's* location and intentions. On 1 July, a 28-year-old squad leader from the *1st Company, R-20 Battalion* surrendered in the 9th Marines sector. During interrogation, the prisoner revealed that his unit had retreated south of the Thu Bon when the Marines approached the river. He indicated that the mission of the enemy battalion was to prepare defensive positions and counter any Marine attempt to cross the Ky Lam-Thu Bon line. To secure their defenses, the enemy troops removed the civilian population and built fortifications. The prisoner told his interrogators that the *R-20* contained 300 main force troops and guerrillas, armed with rifles and 60mm and 81mm mortars. The prisoner implied that the morale of the battalion had suffered and that the troops were short of both food and ammunition.²

The 9th Marines confirmed some of this information from other sources. On 2 July, Captain George R. Griggs, the S-2 of the 9th Marines, received a report from I Corps, stating that a Viet Cong battalion was operating south of the Thu Bon reinforced by two local guerrilla companies. The I Corps report placed the strength of the battalion at 500 men, armed with five 12.7mm antiaircraft machine guns, three 81mm mortars, and an unspecified number of 57mm recoilless rifles, as well as individual weapons. This report also reinforced the impression that the enemy planned to contest any Marine advance south of the rivers. Marine tactical air observers from VMO-2 reported freshly dug trenches and fortifications in the area, more evidence that the Viet Cong were attempting to establish a stout defense of the An Hoa region.³

Despite the intelligence that the Marines had obtained of enemy plans, the Viet Cong initiated the action. On 4 July, the same day the Marines opened Liberty Road, two companies of the *R-20 Battalion*

This picture presents an overview of the An Hoa industrial area, looking south toward the Que Son Mountains. The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines base camp can be seen to the right of the buildings of the complex.

Marine Corps Photo A187411



*See Chapter 6 for a description of Operation Liberty.

moved west toward the Thu Bon River. The Viet Cong commander probably was aware that Marine units were operating in the area and took appropriate precautions. That afternoon, he established a three-sided ambush between the hamlets of My Loc (3) and My Loc (4), approximately 2,500 meters south of the river and three miles northeast of the An Hoa airstrip.

At this time, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, which continued to make An Hoa its base of operations since Operation Georgia in May,* was involved in a routine search and clear mission in its sector. On 4 July, Company I had established a blocking position along the northwest fringe of the battalion's TAOR, the southern bank of the Thu Bon, while Company K advanced from the southeast. Company L was held at An Hoa as security for the airstrip and the battalion CP. Company M had been detached and was operating north of the Thu Bon during this period. Through the morning and early afternoon, the most unpleasant aspect of the operation was the oppressive heat.

The transition to battle was sudden and violent. Company K, pushing to the Thu Bon, entered the VC ambush position. At 1520, VC grenade launcher teams fired into the Marine column, knocking out one of the amphibian tractors supporting the company. Simultaneously, the rest of the ambush party opened up with mortars, machine guns, and small arms. The initial burst killed the crew chief of one of the LVTPs and two other Marines were wounded. Captain Valdis V. Pavlovskis, the company commander, reorganized his troops and ordered his men to close on the VC positions, at the same time reporting his situation to the battalion CP.

When he learned about the ambush of his company, Major George H. Grimes, who had assumed command of the battalion at the end of June, ordered Company I to protect the left flank of the engaged unit. Then he asked the regimental commander, Colonel Edwin H. Simmons, to provide helicopters to carry Company L from the airstrip to Hill 42, two kilometers south of My Loc (4). Grimes also asked for the return of Company M to battalion control. Upon the approval of both requests, MAG-16 received the mission to provide the helicopter support.



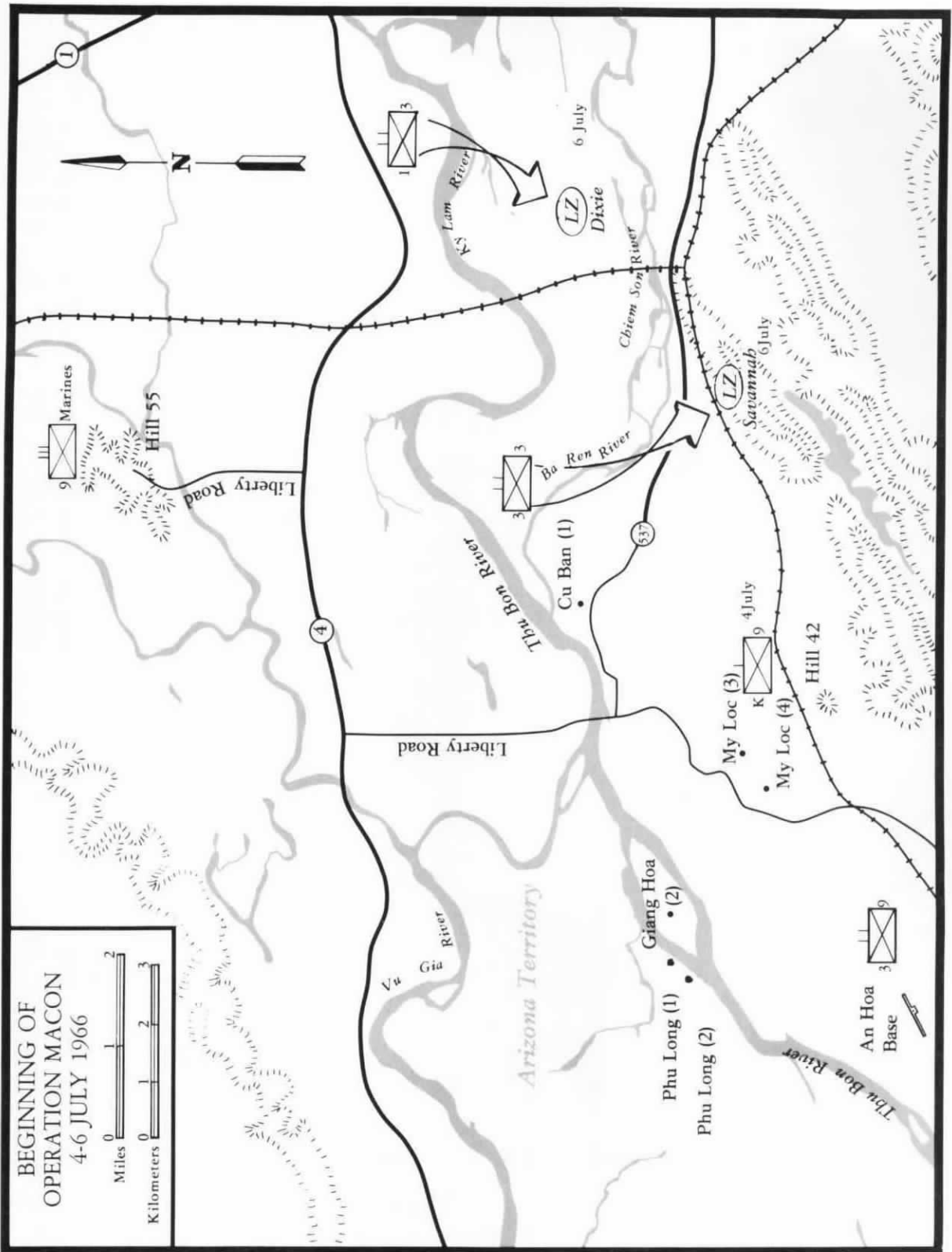
Marine Corps Photo A187566
LtCol Paul C. Trammell (left), the former commander of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, presents the battalion colors to the new battalion commander, Maj George H. Grimes, in a change of command ceremony at An Hoa during June 1966. Maj Grimes commanded the battalion during the first phase of Operation Macon in An Hoa.

Company K's situation remained tenuous for the next two hours. Company I tried to move to support Company K, but also ran into heavy Viet Cong opposition. Captain Pavlovskis' company held on, taking every advantage of the cover afforded by the hedgerows and bamboo groves that separated the rice paddies. Seven more Marines were dead, another 14 were wounded, and another tractor was out of commission. Heavy enemy machine gun fire drove off evacuation helicopters. Although the Marines called for artillery fire, Battery F, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, in support of Grimes' battalion, could not fire. The enemy was too close.

When Company I finally reached Company K at 1730, the tide turned. The Viet Cong commander, realizing that he would be hemmed in by superior Marine forces, decided to abandon his ambush site. An aerial observer in a VMO-2 UH-1E spotted 200-250 VC moving northwest and called in airstrikes and artillery. Between 1800 and 1900, MAG-12 A-4s and MAG-11 F-4Bs struck the exposed enemy. In addition, Battery F fired 516 105mm rounds at the Viet Cong troops. Although the wing reported "50 VC KBA, confirmed, and 25 KBA probable," ground estimates of the strikes' effectiveness varied between 12 and 62 VC dead.⁴

As enemy resistance diminished, HMM-265's CH-46As were able to land to take out casualties. Two of the helicopters were hit by enemy antiaircraft fire and one crewman suffered minor injuries. The major

*See Chapter 5 for a description of Operation Georgia.



action was over, but that night both Companies I and K were harassed by mortars and minor probes.

The Marines continued preparations to trap the elusive *R-20*. In accordance with Major Grimes' plan, MAG-16 helicopters lifted Company L from the An Hoa airstrip to Hill 42 shortly after 1800 and brought Company M back to An Hoa where it became the battalion reserve. At first light 5 July, Companies K and I resumed the offensive against the *R-20 Battalion*. Throughout the day, both Marine companies encountered light resistance.

Even though the intensity of the fire fights never reached that of the previous day, there were several sharp encounters. At 0840, Company K was fired on by a VC squad; one Marine was killed. Captain Pavlovskis requested artillery fire; 150 rounds from Battery F fell on the enemy positions. Marines counted 12 VC bodies. Shortly afterward, Company I, operating just to the west of Company K, observed an enemy platoon 1,500 meters to the northeast. Once again the Marines called in artillery. By midafternoon, Company L had joined the other two companies in the northwest sector of the An Hoa Basin and the search for the *Doc Lap Battalion* continued. By the end of the day, the Marine battalion reported that it had killed 17 more enemy and estimated another 20 to 30 "possibles."⁵

The Operation Expands

During the afternoon of the 5th, General Walt changed the entire dimension of the operation. He believed that the Marines had the opportunity to eliminate the *R-20 Battalion*. The III MAF commander ordered the initiation of Operation Macon, which would involve five Marine battalions in addition to the South Vietnamese forces normally assigned to this sector.⁶

The writing of the Macon operation plan, like so many operations in Vietnam, was completed 24 hours after initial contact had been made. The 3d Marine Division did not publish its "frag" order until 1545 on the 5th, but its mission statement read: "Commencing 4 July 1966 3d MarDiv conducts multi-bn S&D opn in An Hoa area . . ." ⁷ It was not until the early hours of 6 July, that the 9th Marines, the regiment responsible for the operation, issued orders to its subordinate battalions.⁸

There were several reasons for the time lag be-

tween the issuance of the division and the regimental order. The major one was that the division directive was purposely vague, allowing the regimental commander to fill in the details. The regiment's mission was to destroy "enemy forces, facilities and influence."⁹ Colonel Drew J. Barrett, Jr., newly arrived in Vietnam after graduating from the Army War College, became responsible for the operation when he assumed command of the 9th Marines from Colonel Simmons on 5 July. Barrett, a former battalion commander in Korea and veteran of Guadalcanal, immediately told his staff to determine the area of operations for each unit, and the helicopter landing zones within these areas, as well as landing times.

The concept of operations for Macon called for a three-phased operation. In the first phase, which had already begun with the ambush of Company K, Major Grimes' 3d Battalion would continue operations in the An Hoa northern sector, while the other two battalions of the 9th Marines established blocking positions north of the Thu Bon and Ky Lam Rivers. The second phase would consist of the helicopter lift of two battalions from the 3d Marines into two landing zones, one just east of the main north-south railroad and the other 4,000 meters to the southwest of the first. Grimes' battalion would then attack in a northeasterly direction toward the battalion positioned along the railroad. The third phase, if necessary, would be a one-battalion sweep in the area between the Ky Lam and Chiem Son Rivers, east of the main railroad line. General Walt expected the entire operation to end in 14 days, but the course of events extended Macon into the latter part of October.¹⁰

For all practical purposes, both the division and regimental orders changed very little for the battalions of the 9th Marines. Major Grimes' battalion continued Phase I operations in the An Hoa region, while Lieutenant Colonel Richard E. Jones' 1st Battalion, 9th Marines and Lieutenant Colonel John J. Hess' 2d Battalion, 9th Marines conducted operations in their sector of the TAOR and assumed blocking positions north of the Thu Bon and Ky Lam Rivers.

The second phase of Macon began on the morning of 6 July as the 12th Marines fired over 500 rounds of landing zone preparation fire and MAG-12 A-4s strafed the LZs for 20 minutes. At 1000 that morning, 20 CH-46s from HMMs-164 and -265 began the lift of two companies from Lieutenant Colonel



Marine Corps Photo A187575

Marine tanks and infantry deploy in Operation Macon. The tread marks of the tanks provide a foot path for the troops in the tall grass.

Robert R. Dickey III's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines to Landing Zone Dixie, 1,500 meters south of the Ky Lam River and east of the railroad track. An hour later, the Marine helicopters completed the lift of two companies of the other battalion, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, into Landing Zone Savannah, southwest of Dixie. In that one hour, Lieutenant Colonel Herbert E. Mendenhall's HMM-265 and Lieutenant Colonel Warren C. Watson's HMM-164 had ferried over 650 troops into the battle area without incident.¹¹

The only complication was a mixup in the flight schedule which resulted in a 30-minute delay in the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Earl "Pappy" R. DeLong, the commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and the rest of his command group. Two of his infantry companies were already in the objective area.¹² By noon, both battalions had reached their assigned blocking positions. Dickey's 1st Battalion established defenses along the north-south railroad track, while DeLong's 3d Battalion protected the approaches to the southern foothills.

As the two 3d Marines battalions sealed off the eastern and southern exits of the battlefield on the morning of the 6th, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines attacked from Route 537, its line of departure,

toward the northeast. The battalion was reinforced by tanks and amphibian tractors. On 7 July, six tanks and two LVTs crossed the Thu Bon and entered the operation, later joined by eight tanks, one tank retriever, five LVTP-5s and two LVTP-6s.¹³ By 10 July, the infantry and mechanized units reached the lines of the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines at the railroad. The second phase of Macon came to an end.

The VC had offered little resistance. The Marines encountered snipers, but no large VC force. Occasionally enemy gunners lobbed mortar rounds into Marine formations, but the anticipated large contact did not materialize. By the end of Phase II, the 9th Marines claimed to have killed 87 enemy, at the cost of eight Marines dead and 33 wounded.¹⁴

After consulting with General Kyle, on the afternoon of 10 July, Colonel Barrett issued orders to begin Phase III. The next morning, the 9th Marines commander ordered Dickey's battalion to attack east of the railroad together with the 51st ARVN Regiment, while Major Grimes' 3d Battalion, 9th Marines retraced its steps to the west from the railroad. At the same time, Colonel Barrett made some adjustment in his forces. One company and the command group from the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines were released from Macon and the other



Marine Corps Photo A193947
SSgt Charles W. Pierce, a tank section leader, scans the landscape in the An Hoa sector during Operation Macon. The M48 tank is armed with .50 caliber (pictured above) and .30 caliber machine guns and a 90mm gun.



Marine Corps Photo A187262
During the sweep in Operation Macon, a Marine checks the identity card of a Vietnamese civilian. The women are using the traditional Vietnamese carrying poles with ropes attached at each end to balance their burdens.

company was attached to Dickey's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines. Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines and the mechanized units also reinforced Lieutenant Colonel Dickey's unit.¹⁵

Phase III of Macon began shortly after 0600 on the 11th, when two companies of the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines crossed the line of departure. From 11 to 14 July, the only significant encounter occurred in the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines area of operations west of the railroad tracks. A VC platoon mortared the battalion command post early on 12 July. At 0250 that morning, 40 to 60 mortar rounds and small arms fire hit in the CP area. Major Grimes called for an artillery mission on the suspected VC mortar site; no results could be observed. Three Marines were slightly wounded by the VC attack.

In the eastern sector of Macon, Lieutenant Colonel Dickey's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, supported by the tanks and LVTs, reached its objective, 7,000 meters east of the railroad on the afternoon of 13 July. The battalion commander summed up his unit's participation succinctly: "The results of this operation were negligible. . . . During a three-day sweep of the area no VC were encountered."¹⁶

At this point, it appeared to General Kyle that no large VC units were operating in the An Hoa area. On the afternoon of the 13th, he ordered Colonel Barrett to terminate Macon the next day and return

the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines to its parent organization.¹⁷ Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines was to return to its own battalion and accompany the armored column to the Thu Bon River. At 0800 14 July, Colonel Barrett reported that Operation Macon was over.

Suddenly, the situation changed. A Marine reconnaissance patrol, operating in the southern foothills, spotted 300-400 Viet Cong moving through a pass into an assembly area seven miles east of the An Hoa airstrip. The patrol called for both artillery and air support. Marine aircraft hit the enemy with napalm, rockets, and bombs, while four supporting artillery batteries fired 105mm, 8-inch, and 155mm shells into the area.* This air and ground bombardment kill-

*Over 30 artillery pieces supported Operation Macon during Phases II and III. Battery A, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines; Battery D, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines; and Battery E, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines maintained firing positions north of the Thu Bon and were controlled by the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines Headquarters. These batteries were reinforced by a platoon of 155mm howitzers from Battery L, 4th Battalion, 12th Marines and a composite battery consisting of two self-propelled 155mm guns and two self-propelled 8-inch howitzers. Only Battery F, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines was located south of the Thu Bon and Ky Lam Rivers. The battery was positioned on the An Hoa airstrip itself. Through 1430 on 14 July, the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines had fired more than 8,500 rounds in support of Macon. 2d Battalion, 12th Marines ComdC, Jul66, p. 3.

ed at least 30 *R-20 Battalion* soldiers, once more frustrating that unit's attempt to move into the An Hoa region.¹⁸

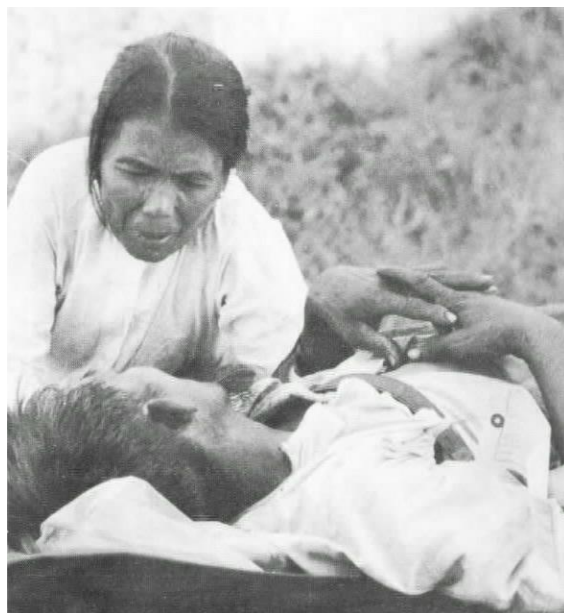
Macon Continues

Faced with the evident enemy presence in the southern foothills near An Hoa, Generals Walt and Kyle decided not to close out Operation Macon. The III MAF commander reported to General Westmoreland on 14 July that Macon would continue and later that evening General Kyle told the 9th Marines to disregard his previous order to terminate the operation.¹⁹ He advised Colonel Barrett: "Operation in the An Hoa operating area outside presently established 3d MarDiv TAOR will continue to be named Operation Macon on an indefinite basis."²⁰ The next morning, Colonel Barrett ordered his 3d Battalion to continue operations in the An Hoa area.

The continuation of Macon did not disrupt the plans of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. The battalion

A member of the South Vietnamese Regional Forces, right, identifies a prisoner captured during Macon as a Viet Cong. The Marines are from the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines.

Marine Corps Photo A187257



Marine Corps Photo A187258

A Vietnamese woman tries to comfort her seriously wounded husband as he waits evacuation to a hospital. The Viet Cong had mortared their village.

had intended to keep its command post at the An Hoa airstrip and conduct clearing operations to support the engineers who had started the extension of Liberty Road beyond the Thu Bon. In fact, at this time, the engineers were working on two extensions of the road, one leading south from Route 4 to the Thu Bon, while the other led north from An Hoa to the river. Macon was reduced to a one-battalion search and clear operation with the missions of keeping the lines of communication open in the An Hoa region and providing security for both the Marine engineers and civilian construction workers.²¹

Interest in the An Hoa region and the extension of the road was not confined to the Marine command. During one of his periodic visits to III MAF, General Westmoreland toured An Hoa in the latter part of July and specifically asked Colonel Barrett what forces were necessary to secure Liberty Road. The Marine colonel replied "We intend to secure it by using the forces we are now using, elements of two Marine companies and part of the 2d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment on the south side . . . of the river."²²

Although the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines was operating primarily against the guerrilla forces remaining in the An Hoa region during this phase of

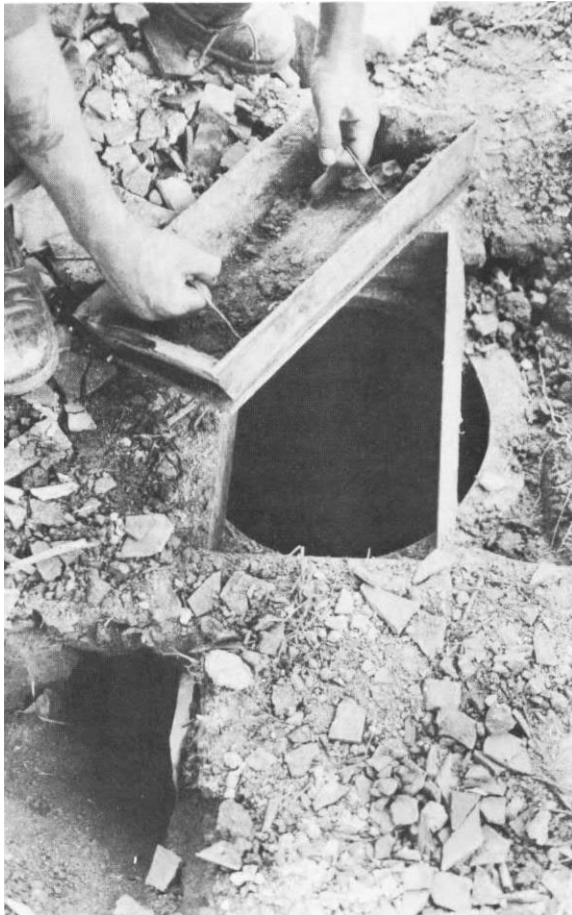


Marine Corps Photo A187782

Marine engineers work on the extension of Liberty Road to An Hoa. The troops are laying down abutments for a pontoon ferry which will link An Hoa to Da Nang.

The Viet Cong had skillfully hidden grenades in the rice vat pictured below. The opening of the vat had been covered by the simple "trap door" held above.

Marine Corps Photo A187530



Macon, it continued to be alert to the possibility of enemy main force unit infiltration. Local South Vietnamese authorities indicated that two enemy battalions, neither identified as the *R-20 Battalion*, were in the rugged hills south of An Hoa. One of the battalions was reputed to be North Vietnamese.²³ Throughout the remainder of July and August, Marine reconnaissance patrols spotted small groups of enemy soldiers in the mountainous terrain.

Nevertheless, through August, contact with the enemy in Operation Macon was only sporadic and few enemy units of any size were engaged. Indeed the major action for the 3d Battalion occurred outside of the Macon area of operations in support of a Navy detachment conducting a hydrographic survey of the Thu Bon River. On the morning of 20 August, the battalion with two of its own companies and a company from the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines reinforced by tanks and amphibian tractors crossed the river onto the peninsula formed by the Vu Gia and Thu Bon Rivers—the so-called "Arizona Territory" where Operation Mallard had taken place earlier.*

Shortly after noon, the battalion encountered about 100 VC from the *R-20 Battalion* in the hamlets of Giang Hoa (2) and Phu Long (1) and (2) on the western banks of the Thu Bon. Unwilling to stand up to the Marines who were supported by air and artillery, the VC fought a series of delaying actions and made good their escape to the west and north. The Marines sustained casualties of five dead

*See Chapter 3.

and 16 wounded while killing at least 10 of the enemy. Most of the Marine casualties were a result of enemy mines. With the completion of the survey, the 3d Battalion returned to its An Hoa base that evening.²⁴

In Operation Macon during the month, the battalion confined its activities to ambushes, patrols, and outpost operations along Liberty Road while the VC attempted to disrupt its construction. On three occasions, the Marines caught enemy troops in the open. Enemy mining incidents and ambushes increased markedly during this period, but progress on the road continued. Major Fred D. MacLean, Jr., who relieved Major Grimes at the beginning of the month, later remembered that on 27 August, "the first convoy from Da Nang rolled into An Hoa using the completed Liberty Road."²⁵

Macon remained at a low level of activity until 3 September when the 3d Battalion once more met its old adversary, the *R-20 Battalion*. Shortly after 1200, a platoon from Company I encountered a VC company near Cu Ban (1) on the Thu Bon River. In a fire fight that lasted nearly two hours, the Marine platoon

sustained 15 casualties including five dead. Although the Viet Cong unit escaped to the east, it left behind 32 bodies.

This action was not to be an isolated incident. On 5 September, the 3d Company, 2d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment and Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines engaged the rest of the *R-20 Battalion* along Route 537, two kilometers southeast of the site of the fighting on the 3d. Both the American and South Vietnamese companies had just left blocking positions from which they supported a clearing operation by other elements of the Vietnamese battalion. Both Company K and the Vietnamese 3d Company were moving west along the road when enemy troops in sites paralleling the highway opened fire on the ARVN company. The Marines tried to assist the South Vietnamese, but soon were unable to maneuver. Battery D, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, north of the Thu Bon, fired at the enemy positions. Major MacLean ordered Company I to attack southeast from its outpost at Phu Lac (6) to pinch the VC between it and the two engaged companies. Apparently the VC expected the American reaction. No

The first convoy using the completed Liberty Road rolls into An Hoa on 27 August 1966. The 6x6 Marine truck, carrying C-Rations, passes an honor guard and a reviewing stand during a ceremony marking the occasion.

Marine Corps Photo A187862



sooner had Company I advanced when enemy gunners, firing a 57mm recoilless rifle, disabled an Ontos supporting the company. By 1130, both Marine companies and the ARVN unit were heavily engaged.

Major MacLean requested more support, both artillery and air. Battery D responded with 158 rounds and was rewarded with "excellent effect on target."²⁶ At 1330, Marine planes appeared and repeatedly struck the enemy forces, but the VC fought back stubbornly. Marine 8-inch howitzers and 155mm guns reinforced the fires of Battery D and Marine air again bombed and strafed the enemy.

Slowly the Marine and ARVN companies gripped the VC between them in a pincer movement, but Companies I and K were not able to link up and surround the enemy before nightfall. At dawn the next morning, the three allied companies moved forward once more. To no one's surprise, the VC were gone. The Marines did find 29 enemy dead, and surmised that the VC had suffered so many casualties that they had been forced to abandon the bodies.²⁷ The allied forces were also hit hard: the Marine companies suffered three dead and 83 wounded, and the ARVN unit reported 25 wounded.²⁸ The 9th Marines intelligence section concluded that the heavy contacts of 3 and 5 September lent "substance to the belief that the area south of the Song Thu Bon is considered by the Viet Cong to be one in which they may still operate in major unit strength, though with increasingly less impunity."²⁹

This flareup of action in the first part of September was the last significant engagement during Macon. During the rest of the month, the Marines continued to encounter Viet Cong units of

squad size or less, but always at a distance. After an initial exchange of fire, the enemy troops would break contact and elude Marine pursuit. The Marine battalion reported that the total number of incidents and friendly casualties for September decreased, although enemy mining and boobytrap activity remained the same.³⁰

Macon Ends but Little Changes

In October, Operation Macon finally came to an end. During the month, the Viet Cong guerrillas continued to probe Popular Force and Regional Force outposts near the Marine positions, but Marine contact with enemy forces declined significantly. The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines encountered no major Viet Cong main force unit. On 27 October, General Walt authorized the termination of the operation and at noon the next day, Macon came to a close, 117 days after it had started. During this period, the Marines had killed about 380 of the enemy, while suffering 196 casualties, 24 of whom were killed.³¹

The ending of the operation had very little meaning for the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. Although the 3d Marine Division moved north on 10 October, the 9th Marines remained behind and the 3d Battalion continued to operate in the An Hoa region, even after Macon had officially ended. Major MacLean's battalion provided security for Liberty Road, protected the river crossing, and assisted the South Vietnamese. Behind the Marine infantry, engineers and Seabees entered An Hoa and joined with the Vietnamese to finish construction of the industrial complex.

CHAPTER 13

The Continuing War

Operations Washington and Colorado—The September Election—The Marine TAORs, July-December 1966

Operations Washington and Colorado

In the less densely populated sector of the 1st Marine Division at Chu Lai, the Marine command continued to concentrate its efforts on the elimination of the Viet Cong-North Vietnamese main force military structure in southern I Corps. During the early summer, General Fields and his staff completed their preparations for the much postponed campaign in the Do Xa region, the suspected location of the enemy *Military Region V Headquarters*.^{*} With the close out of Operation Kansas at the end of June, on 4 July Fields informed III MAF that he was prepared to carry out the operation, codenamed Washington, in the Do Xa. According to the 1st Division plan, the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion was to make an extensive reconnaissance of the Do Xa, with the capability of calling in air and artillery on appropriate targets of opportunity. If the reconnaissance Marines determined a large enemy presence in the Do Xa, a two-battalion Marine strike force at Chu Lai stood ready to exploit the intelligence. Thus, Fields planned to use the same tactics that had worked so well earlier in Operation Kansas—first, reconnaissance and then, exploitation.¹

General Walt agreed to the operation and obtained the necessary concurrences from MACV and the South Vietnamese I Corps command. Westmoreland readily approved the concept and later exclaimed to Admiral Sharp that the enemy could not feel safe in any of his base areas.² The South Vietnamese were less exuberant. In his concurring letter, which was

dated 6 July and arrived after the operation already had begun, the I Corps Chief of Staff saw no difficulty with the operation, but requested that the Marines coordinate their activities very closely with the 2d ARVN Division “in order to avoid mistakes.”³

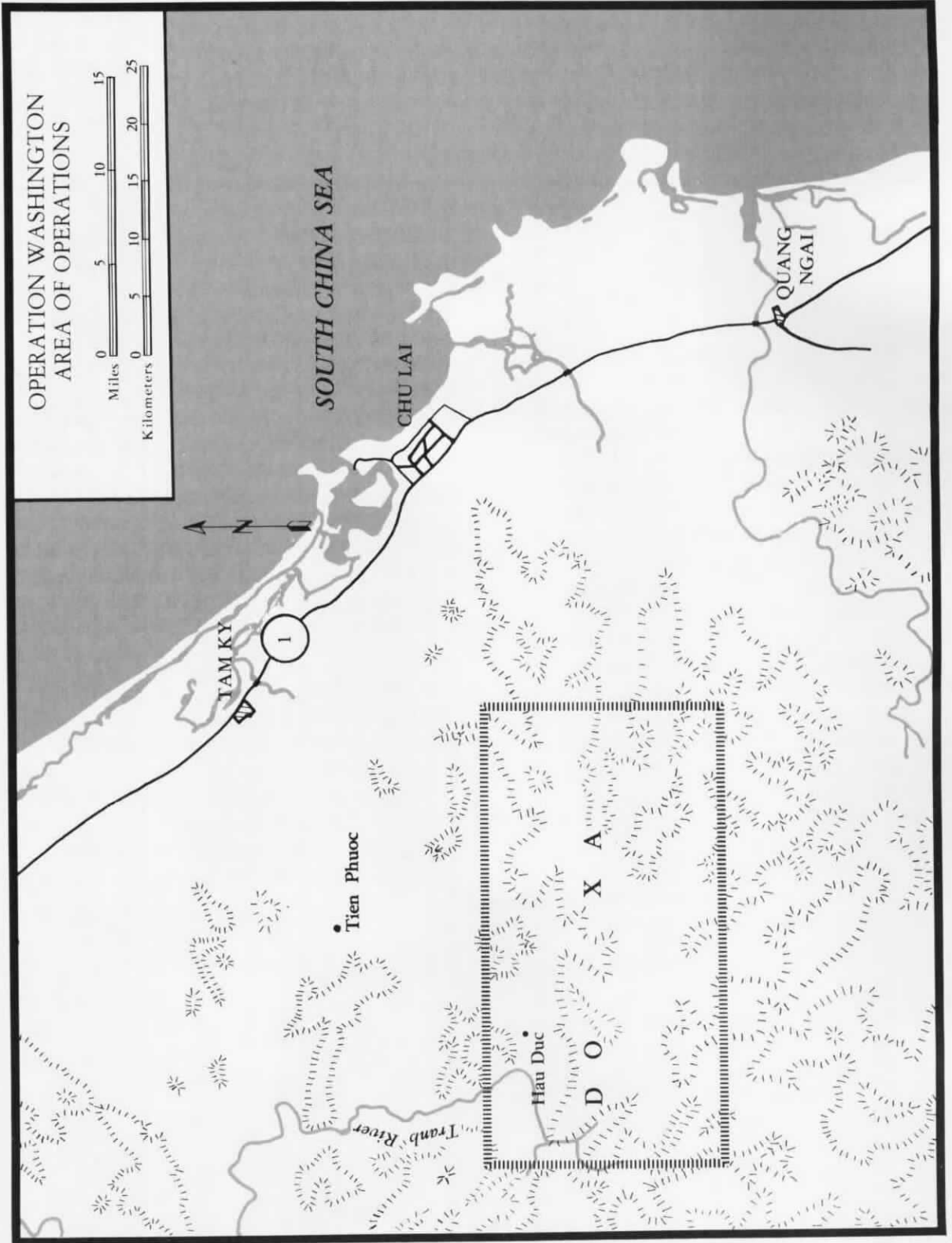
On the morning of 6 July, Marine helicopters transported Lieutenant Colonel Arthur J. Sullivan, commander of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, together with his command group and Company A, to the district town of Hau Duc in the northern fringes of the Do Xa sector, some 30 miles west of Chu Lai. With the establishment of the base camp for the operation, Marine CH-46s brought into Hau Duc the following morning two 105mm howitzers from Battery E, 2d Battalion, 11th Marines to provide artillery support. Another 105mm platoon from

A Marine reconnaissance team scrambles out of a CH-46 helicopter on a mission. The reconnaissance teams usually remained within artillery range and called in artillery and air on unsuspecting enemy. These “Stingray” tactics were used successively in Operations Kansas, Hastings, and in early July during Operation Washington in the enemy Do Xa base area, west of Chu Lai.

Marine Corps Photo A421476



^{*}See Chapter 8 for the discussion of the planning relative to an operation in the Do Xa and for a description of Operation Kansas, which caused the last postponement of a Do Xa operation.



Battery D, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, located since Operation Kansas at the Tien Phuoc Special Forces Camp 17 miles to the north, was in position to reinforce the fires from Hau Doc.⁴

For the next eight days, the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion with three of its companies and reinforced by a platoon from the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company ranged over a 280-square-mile area of the Do Xa. Despite the rugged mountainous terrain and the paucity of landing zones, all of the patrol insertions with one exception were by helicopter, with the pilots faking two insertions for every one made. When beyond the range of the supporting artillery, the reconnaissance Marines were able to call in close air support through the use of an airborne radio relay in a C-117 dedicated to the operation. All told, in 46 sightings, the reconnaissance patrols observed 201 VC. As a result of ground combat and supporting arms fire, the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion accounted for 13 VC KIA and four prisoners. The most significant encounter occurred on 10 July when a patrol from the 1st Force Recon Company platoon ambushed a group of VC below the Song Tranh, about 10,000 meters west of Hau Duc. Of the nine VC caught in the ambush, the Marines killed two, captured four (two men and two women) while the remaining three escaped. The prisoners, apparently couriers, had documents on them relating to the Communist organization in Quang Tin Province.⁵

With relatively few sightings of organized enemy forces, the 1st Division ended Operation Washington on 14 July without inserting any infantry units into the operations area. Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, the reconnaissance battalion commander, believed that his unit had disrupted the enemy lines of communication.⁶ General Fields, however, was dubious about the importance of the Do Xa region. He stated at a commander's conference that as a result of Operation Washington, "We found that there is nothing big in there [the Do Xa]."⁷

At this point, the 1st Marine Division again became concerned about the 2d (620th) NVA Division which had once more penetrated the strategic Que Son Valley along the Quang Nam and Quang Tin border. Intelligence sources in mid-July reported that the enemy division, which during Operation Kansas had retreated into the mountains north and southwest of Hiep Duc, was once more on the move.

Its 3d NVA Regiment, part of which had engaged



Marine Corps Photo A369470

A Marine from Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines finishes a cigarette while he waits in an assembly point for the beginning of Operation Colorado. Colorado, in August 1966, was a combined operation in the Que Son Valley, the scene of previous Marine large operations in 1966, Operations Double Eagle II and Kansas, and Operation Harvest Moon in December 1965.

Sergeant Howard's platoon in the fight for Nui Vu,* had departed its mountain bastion south of An Hoa and advanced southeast toward the coastal plain. The 21st NVA was believed to be near the district town of Que Son, while the division's remaining regiment, the 1st VC, was positioned somewhere between Que Son and Thang Binh, a village 20 kilometers north of Tam Ky on Route 1.⁸

As early as 18 July, General Fields informed III MAF that he wanted to exploit this intelligence with a multibattalion operation in the Que Son region. On 30 July, the 1st Division commander issued his planning directive to Colonel Charles F. Widdecke,

*See Chapter 8 for a description of the Nui Vu battle and for a general description of the Que Son area.



Marine Corps Photo A421305
LtCol McDonald D. Tweed, Commanding Officer, HMM-361, briefs his pilots prior to the helicopter lift of the 5th Marines into Operation Colorado. Marine helicopters ferried some 3,000 allied troops into the objective area on D-Day for the operation, 6 August 1966.

the 5th Marines commanding officer, for a search and destroy operation in the Hiep Duc-Song Ly Ly Valleys coordinated with the South Vietnamese 2d ARVN Division.⁹ The date for the beginning of the operation was contingent upon the end of Operation Hastings in the DMZ sector.¹⁰ While Colonel Widdecke and his staff worked on the plans, General Fields met on 2 August with General Walt, who decided that the reduction of Marine forces in the DMZ would allow the operation to begin in three or four days. By 4 August, the Marine and ARVN commands had completed their arrangements and issued their implementing orders.¹¹

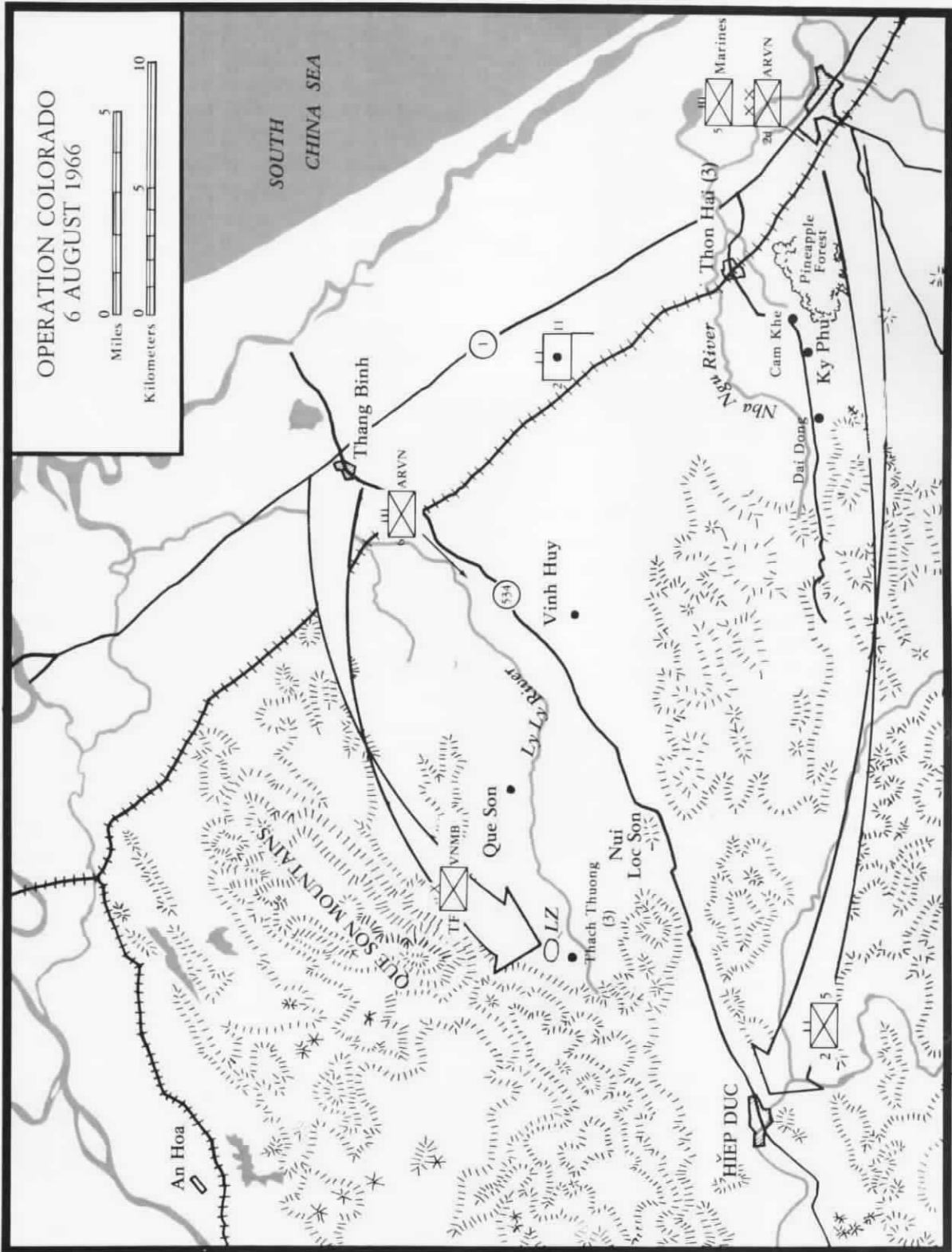
Colorado/Lien Ket-52 was to be a combined operation in which Colonel Widdecke's 5th Marines and the 2d ARVN Division were to locate and destroy the *2d NVA Division*. The command posts of the Marines and ARVN were to be collocated at Tam Ky.* An ARVN task force, consisting of the 6th ARVN Regimental Headquarters with its 2d and 4th Battalions, reinforced by the 2d and 3d Armored

*Brigadier General William A. Stiles recalled that although the 5th Marines in fact controlled the operation, his Task Force X-Ray Headquarters deployed to the field during Colorado and was collocated at Tam Ky. BGen William A. Stiles, Comments on draft MS, dtd 15May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

Personnel Carrier (APC) Troops of the 4th ARVN Armored Cavalry, was to cross the line of departure near Thang Binh on the morning of 6 August and attack in a southwesterly direction toward Que Son. Southwest of Que Son, a task force of three South Vietnamese Marine battalions was to establish blocking positions to support the western thrust of the 2d ARVN Division task force.

While the Vietnamese mounted their operations north of the road, MAG-36 helicopters were to lift a company from Lieutenant Colonel Walter Moore's 2d Battalion, 5th Marines into a landing zone southwest of Hiep Duc. If Moore's troops made contact, the rest of the battalion was to reinforce the initial landing party and exploit the opportunity. If there was no contact, the helicopters were to shuttle the 2d Battalion into new positions, 1,000 meters east of Hiep Duc and repeat the process. The plan required Lieutenant Colonel Harold L. Coffman's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines to reinforce Moore's battalion if necessary, and, if not, to enter the operation on the next day in an area eight miles due south of Que Son. Both Marine battalions were to use the same tactics—search an area, engage the enemy if possible, and if not move on to another objective, either on foot or by helicopter. Colonel Widdecke's 3d Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Bronars, was to remain in reserve, providing security for the proposed artillery positions, just below the Thang Binh-Hiep Duc Road and 2,000 meters west of the railroad. As the operation developed, the battalion was to move southwest to form blocking positions for the southern portion of the Colorado area.¹² Each of the 5th Marines' battalions left one infantry company behind in the Chu Lai TAOR as part of the defense force there.

A large array of allied supporting arms was prepared to back up this offensive by the 5th Marines and 2d ARVN Division. Three destroyers and a cruiser were offshore ready to engage. The U.S. Air Force provided two B-52 Arc Light strikes on 6 and 7 August against targets in the mountains south of the Colorado area where intelligence agencies believed there was a large enemy base and assembly area. Both the South Vietnamese and the Marines furnished artillery. Lieutenant Colonel Joe B. Stribling's 2d Battalion, 11th Marines was in direct support of the 5th Marines with 30 tubes, ranging from 4.2-inch mortars to 8-inch howitzers. At the same time, the wing commander, Major



General Louis B. Robertshaw, ordered both Colonel Richard M. Hunt, the commanding officer of MAG-16, and Colonel William G. Johnson, the commanding officer of MAG-36, to make available for the operation all helicopters that could be spared. Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Zitnik, the S-3 of MAG-36, was in the 5th Marines' operations center at Tam Ky to assist in coordinating the helicopters and the infantry.

On D-Day, 6 August, both helicopter groups ferried 3,000 allied troops into the battle area while MAG-11 and -12 aircraft made landing zone preparatory strikes and provided air support. Marine F-4s, F-8s, and A-4s flew more than 80 sorties on the first day of the operation expending more than 30 tons of bombs, 8.5 tons of napalm, 924 rockets, and 4,500 20mm rounds. In addition to bringing in the infantry, III MAF helicopters carried more than 50 tons of cargo to supply the ground troops.¹³

The only significant action on the first day occurred in the South Vietnamese Marine sector of the battlefield. All three of the Vietnamese Marine battalions encountered heavy rifle fire when they arrived in the landing zones west of Que Son. During the first few hours of 6 August, the South Vietnamese killed 50 enemy and took 20 prisoners. All of the prisoners were from a signal company attached to the *1st Battalion, 3d NVA Regiment*, apparently the rear guard covering the retreat of the rest of the regiment. The South Vietnamese Marines pursued the enemy unit in a northwesterly direction, but contact was lost toward evening. The Vietnamese Marine commander believed that the NVA force had established defenses near the hamlet of Thach Thu'ong (3), close to a small ridgeline 1,000 meters

north of the Ly Ly River. The Vietnamese Marines planned to press the attack the next morning. During the first day's action, the South Vietnamese killed 71 enemy troops at a cost of three killed and 23 wounded. One of the wounded was Captain Cornelius H. Ram, the senior U.S. Marine advisor to the 1st Vietnamese Marine Battalion.¹⁴

On 7 August, the South Vietnamese waited for U.S. Marine aircraft to pound the enemy positions in Thach Thu'ong (3), before attacking, but the weather favored the entrenched NVA. The entire battle during that day was fought in a driving rainstorm, and because of poor visibility, airstrikes could not take place until 1330 that afternoon. Even then they had only a limited effect on the enemy's defenses. Following the air attack, the Marines tried a frontal assault against Thach Thu'ong (3). The troops had to cross 400-500 meters of flooded paddy land against heavy fire. After two unsuccessful attempts, the South Vietnamese Marine battalions pulled back to their former positions and called for more air and artillery support. Despite the poor visibility, although the rain had stopped, Marine planes, directed by U.S. advisors on the ground, continued to bomb the enemy positions. Artillery and air blasted the enemy-held hamlet throughout the night and into the morning. At 0930 8 August, the Vietnamese Marines once more attacked, still under the canopy of supporting arms. This time, the South Vietnamese met no opposition; the enemy had retreated. When the South Vietnamese entered Thach Thu'ong (3), they found a trench containing the bodies of seven enemy soldiers, while another ditch held the jumbled remains of 30 more.¹⁵ Throughout 8 and 9 August, the South Vietnamese

A Marine UH-34 lifts off while troops from the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines deploy under cover of smoke during Colorado. The battalion encountered little opposition during the first days of the operation.

Marine Corps Photo A369410





Marine Corps Photo A371290

The 5th Marines have established their command post for Operation Colorado on the well-manicured lawn of the Tam Ky District Headquarters. At the request of the South Vietnamese authorities, the Marines had not dug individual holes, but the orders were changed after enemy gunners attacked the CP with recoilless rifle fire and mortars.

continued to search for the NVA, but without success.

During the first three days of Operation Colorado, the 5th Marines encountered little resistance. Lieutenant Colonel Moore's 2d Battalion, 5th Marines explored the southwestern portion of the Colorado TAOR near Hiep Duc during 6 and 7 August and made no contact. On 8 August, the battalion returned to Tam Ky to provide security for the regimental CP,* still without meeting any sizeable Viet Cong or NVA force. The next day, the battalion was helilifted into landing zones in the western portion of the Ly Ly River Valley with the mission of cutting off the retreat of the enemy unit which had engaged the Vietnamese Marines. This effort proved futile; on 10 August the battalion returned to Tam Ky.

*Colonel Zitnik, who was the air coordinator for the operation, recalled that after the battalion returned to Tam Ky, enemy gunners attacked the CP with recoilless rifle fire and mortars and then made good their escape. Zitnik remembered that the local government headquarters at Tam Ky was "considered safe" and that the Marines at the request of the South Vietnamese had not dug individual bunkers "in the relatively nice lawns." According to Zitnik, "the headquarters grounds took on a new appearance" the following morning. The Marines suffered only a few minor casualties and none of the helicopters were damaged since they had returned to Ky Ha for the night. Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

Lieutenant Colonel Coffman's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines had operated with the same lack of success in its portion of the TAOR east of Que Son and west of Route 1. Coffman's companies had conducted search and destroy missions throughout the area. On the morning of 10 August, he consolidated his battalion near Dai Dong, just south of the Nha Ngu River, approximately six miles west of the railroad. Coffman's objective for the day was the large hamlet of Thon Hai (3), astride the railroad.

As the battalion's three companies moved out in column at 0830, they began to encounter opposition. At first, the enemy used only long-range rifle fire. The Marines answered with their own small arms. At 1100, the battalion arrived at Ky Phu hamlet, the scene of a heavy battle the previous year during Operation Harvest Moon. Lieutenant Colonel Coffman halted the battalion. He discussed the situation with his company commanders and

Col Charles F. Widdecke, Commanding Officer, 5th Marines (center), discusses the situation with LtCol Harold L. Coffman, Commanding Officer, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines (left), and an unidentified officer in the hamlet of Ky Phu, the scene of heavy fighting in previous operations. The Viet Cong influence is obvious as indicated by the scrawled warning on the wall to U.S. troops.

Marine Corps Photo A369451





Marine Corps Photo A372957

Marines of Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines take cover near the hamlet of Cam Khe as they come under enemy automatic fire. The company finally cleared a North Vietnamese trenchline and organized resistance ended.

A Marine from the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines leaps across a break in a dike in the flooded rice paddies during Colorado. Some of the heaviest fighting in the operation occurred during a driving rainstorm.

Marine Corps Photo A369409



ordered them to respond more selectively to enemy harassment. Colonel Widdecke arrived for a short conference and directed Coffman to continue his advance. At 1400, the battalion resumed its march to the east.¹⁶

Dark clouds massed overhead as the afternoon wore on and soon the Marines were plodding through a heavy rainstorm. Shortly after 1500 the Marines reached the small hamlet of Cam Khe, 1,000 meters northeast of Ky Phu. As Company A pushed through the outskirts of the hamlet, the Marines spotted 30 NVA running across a paddy. In a quick burst of fire, the Marines cut down the enemy force in the open field. Another body of NVA troops took the Marines under fire. All three Marine companies found themselves heavily engaged at close quarters. Armed Hueys from VMO-6 were overhead, but were unable to see, much less provide covering fire for fear of hitting friendly troops. The rain finally stopped at 1730 and the sky cleared, allowing the Hueys and jets to strike. While the armed helicopters provided suppressive fire, two MAG-12 A-4s eliminated two NVA heavy machine guns. Shortly afterward, Company C cleared a trench line of NVA and organized resistance ceased. By nightfall, the enemy had broken contact and the Marines had organized their defenses. Taking no chances, artillery, naval gunfire, and aircraft provided a curtain of fire around the battalion's positions throughout the night.

The next morning, 11 August, the Marines

surveyed the results of the previous day's battle. Although suffering 14 dead and 65 wounded, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines had killed more than 100 North Vietnamese. Among the enemy dead was a company commander whose body yielded several documents. The Marines learned that they had engaged two battalions of the *3d NVA Regiment*. The Marine battalion continued to patrol the previous day's battlefield, but was met by only occasional snipers. The only surprise occurred that afternoon when General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., the Commandant of the Marine Corps, in Vietnam on an inspection tour, visited the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines' sector. He spoke to 1st Lieutenant Marshall B. (Buck) Darling, the commanding officer of Company C, and asked him about the action of 10 August: "Well, General," Darling replied, "we got into a fight with the enemy." The Commandant then asked what he did. "General," he said "we killed them."¹⁷

But the Marines had not killed all of the enemy. After the heavy fighting on the 10th, the North Vietnamese battalions retreated to the north where they engaged the South Vietnamese Marines three days later. The Vietnamese Marine task force, supported by ARVN APC units, was attacking to the east toward Thang Binh when the North Vietnamese struck just north of the village of Vinh Huy, four miles west of the railroad and nine miles northwest of Cam Khe where Coffman's battalion had met the enemy. At least two NVA battalions contested the Vietnamese Marine advance. The action, which began at 1030 on 13 August, continued through the afternoon. During that time, 1st MAF aircraft flew more than 50 sorties in support of the South Vietnamese units. After the air strikes, Lieutenant Colonel Douglas T. Kane, senior advisor to the Marine task force, noted a marked decrease in enemy fire.¹⁸ Still, the issue was in doubt.

At 1600, the 6th ARVN regimental commander ordered one of his APC troops, reinforced by infantry, to attack the flank of the enemy to relieve the pressure on the Vietnamese Marine battalions. The armored personnel carrier attack had mixed results. Opening up with a furious fusillade from their .50 caliber machine guns, the personnel carriers not only took the enemy under fire but also the Marine battalions. Lieutenant Colonel Kane radioed the U.S. Army advisor with the ARVN regiment and told him about the problem, asking him to try to redirect the



Marine Corps Photo A801848
Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, discusses the fighting in Cam Khe with LtCol Coffman, Commanding Officer, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines (right), and 1stLt Marshall B. "Buck" Darling, Commanding Officer, Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines (center). Lt Darling told the Commandant, "General, we killed them."

attack of the APCs. The Army advisor replied that the APCs could not be controlled. Kane then asked the advisor to tell the APCs to cease fire, but received the reply "that they . . . only ceased fire . . . when they were out of ammunition."¹⁹ One hour and 50,000 rounds later, the armored personnel carrier assault ended, but not before a number of Marines were casualties. At dusk, the Vietnamese Marine task force commander ordered his battalions to dig in for the night and evacuate the dead and wounded. The Vietnamese Marines lost 26 killed and 54 wounded as a result of this day's action.

On the morning of 14 August, one Vietnamese Marine battalion and the APC troop swept the battle area; the enemy was no longer there, but had left behind 140 of its dead. For the South Vietnamese, this was the last major engagement in Colorado/Lien Ket-52. The Vietnamese Marines ended the Vietnamese portion of the operation when they arrived at Thang Binh that evening.

The U.S. Marines finished Colorado/Lien Ket-52 seven days later. After the heavy action of 10 August, the 5th Marines encountered little opposition. On 12 August, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines moved to the eastern portion of the Colorado area and conducted a search and destroy mission in the



Marine Corps Photo A369453

Marines move through typical Vietnamese village during Operation Colorado. The villagers are nowhere to be seen, either having taken refuge in their shelters, or having fled the hamlet altogether.

“Pineapple Forest,” so named because of its shape on tactical maps. “The Pineapple Forest,” southeast of Ky Phu and Cam Khe, is studded with low lying hills, interspersed by rice paddies and hamlets. The battalion found a large rice cache, but encountered only fleeting resistance from local guerrillas. Before ending their mission in the “forest,” the Marines moved most of the civilian population to more secure areas. In the meantime, on the 13th, Lieutenant Colonel Moore’s 2d Battalion established blocking positions southwest of the Vietnamese Marines when they made contact with the enemy. The North Vietnamese remained far afield from the 2d Battalion and the situation was, “perimeter alert and secure; night ambushes being sent in; no enemy contact.”²⁰ Moore’s battalion returned to Tam Ky on 15 August and all battalions of the 5th Marines began displacing to the Chu Lai TAOR three days later. Colorado officially ended on 22 August.

Although Colorado/Lien Ket-52 had succeeded in driving the *NVA 2d Division* out of the Que Son

Valley temporarily, the allies only accomplished half of their task. Colorado was supposed to be the first of a series of operations to bring the entire Hiep Duc-Que Son area under the blanket of III MAF security. Because of the increasing commitment of Marine forces near the DMZ after August, General Walt’s plans for pacifying the valley at this time were preempted. In fact, it was not to be until April 1967 that the Marines once more entered the region in force.

The September Election

Despite the North Vietnamese incursion into the DMZ during the fall of 1966, the South Vietnamese were still able to take the first steps toward representative government and attempt to redeem the promises of the Honolulu Conference. On 11 September, a nationwide election selected delegates

to form a Constituent Assembly and draw up a new constitution for the nation.

The decision to hold an election in Vietnam during this period was a precarious undertaking, especially in I Corps. Memories of the spring "Struggle Movement" which had so disrupted the cities of Da Nang and Hue only a few months before were still fresh. Certain Buddhist leaders who had been in the forefront of the opposition asked the people to boycott the election. There was no doubt that the VC also would try to disrupt the electoral process. The fact that the North Vietnamese had drawn several Marine units away from the populated regions into the DMZ area complicated the situation. It was expected that the VC would attempt to exploit any void in local security caused by the departure of Marine units. Considering all of these handicaps, the electoral turnout in I Corps was surprising. Approximately 87 percent of the 900,000 eligible voters, who lived in relatively secure areas where government control existed at least during daylight, voted, compared to 81 percent eligible voter participation in the country at large. In the cities of Hue and Da Nang, voter participation percentages were 81 and 85 respectively.

The success of the electoral process in I Corps was partially attributable to the close cooperation and careful preparation on the part of the Marines, the U.S. civilian advisory organization, and the Vietnamese authorities. As early as July, the Marines noted an increasing awareness of the election among the people. Even in remote areas of Quang Nam Province, the government had distributed posters and banners announcing the election.²¹ While the Vietnamese were responsible for conducting the elections and providing security for the polling places, American troops were to see that the enemy was unable to take advantage of the situation.

On 26 August, General Walt established the policy that his forces were to follow during the election. He told his subordinate commanders that they should avoid any semblance of interference in the electoral process. American troops were to stay away from the immediate vicinity of polling places and populated areas. The general observed that the South Vietnamese Army was to stand down from major operations during the electoral period and assume responsibility for protecting the election. Each Marine regiment was to maintain one battalion command group and three rifle companies on an



Marine Corps Historical Collection
Vietnamese citizens obtain voting identification cards for the 11 September 1966 election in a voter registration office. Approximately 87 percent of the 900,000 eligible voters in I Corps went to the polls on election day.

alert status to assist the Vietnamese in the event the VC attacked. Although no large Marine units were to remain in the populated areas, Marine helicopters were to provide aerial surveillance of the III MAF TAOR. In addition, Marine artillery was to increase its harassment and interdiction of suspected enemy lines of communications and at the same time be prepared to support the Vietnamese Army. Most importantly, the Marine infantry battalions were to conduct large screening operations to prevent VC or NVA main force units from entering the populated areas. It was expected that the widely dispersed ARVN forces would be able to handle the local guerrillas.²²

General Walt was seriously concerned about the VC threats to dismantle the electoral process. In its August report, the Marine command noted that the VC had initiated an all-out propaganda and extortion campaign to prevent the election.²³ The 9th Marines reported that the VC had tasked local cadre and guerrilla forces with most of the operations to counter the government election. Colonel Barrett, the regimental commander, was unable to determine any specific mission for larger enemy formations, but was sure "they will be employed to exploit any opportunity where a larger force is required to

disrupt the election."²⁴ The Marines were determined that this opportunity would not arise.

During the period 1-11 September, General Walt put nine battalions in the field to conduct search and destroy operations away from the populated areas. The purpose of these operations was to keep the large enemy units off balance and away from the people. They were successful. Although there were 34 Viet Cong incidents on the day of the election in I Corps, no large enemy unit broke through the Marine screen. Most of the enemy incidents were isolated attacks. For example, the 1st Marines reported that two polling areas in its TAOR were hit by mortar fire, three rounds falling on each of the sites, but causing only minor disruption.²⁵

Perhaps Colonel Barrett offered the best explanation for the Communist failure to stop the election when he declared:

It is felt that the Viet Cong had never intended to conduct an extensive antielection campaign of a military nature since he did not possess sufficient resources to overcome the preventive measures initiated by the GVN, but rather he hoped that through propaganda against the election and threat of violence against those who participated he would successfully intimidate large numbers of voters and discourage them from going to the polls. His bluff was called as the results show.²⁶

The Marine TAORs, Jul-Dec 1966

Despite the success of the election, there were few victories for the Marine Corps pacification campaign in central and southern I Corps in late 1966. Pacification progress depended upon the individual Marine battalion. The Marine pacification concept dictated that the Marine battalions provide security for local villages and hamlets by constant small unit patrolling. From March through August 1966, III MAF units conducted more than 68,000 patrols, ranging in size from four to 40 men. Only 10 percent of these patrols made contact with the enemy, but the Marines maintained that the remaining 90 percent were equally beneficial. As Colonel Chaisson, the III MAF G-3, explained, "all of these small unit operations are conducted in the guerrilla environment. They are trying not only to kill the guerrillas but to curtail his freedom of movement."²⁷

There were other reasons for the extensive patrolling of the Marine TAORs, not the least of which

related to base defense. On the night of 23 July, Viet Cong gunners, from positions behind a Buddhist temple 2,600 meters southwest of the Marble Mountain Facility, lobbed 40-50 81mm mortar shells in a seven-minute barrage onto the airfield parking apron. Although little damage occurred, the attack exposed the vulnerability of the base to such hit and run tactics. Lieutenant Colonel Emerson A. Walker, whose 3d Battalion, 1st Marines was responsible for the southeastern sector of the Da Nang TAOR, recalled that "General Walt let all echelons know that he did not expect this to happen again." Walker remembered that the engineers constructed two 50-foot wood towers in his sector. According to the battalion commander, his Marines mounted a rocket launcher and machine gun on the towers and manned both weapons around the clock. Walker claimed that: "The towers proved to be such a formidable threat that all Viet Cong mortar activity ceased in that area."²⁸

The opening of the new front along the DMZ together with the heavy emphasis on base defense

The 2d Korean Marine Brigade on 20 September 1966 marks the first anniversary of its arrival in South Vietnam in a formal ceremony. The honor guard carries the Korean National flag (left) and the colors of the brigade (right). The Korean Marines reinforced III MAF in August 1966.

Marine Corps Photo A369489



and pacification in the southern TAORs placed a heavy strain on Marine manpower resources. This was somewhat alleviated with the long-planned deployment of the 2d Korean Marine Brigade to I Corps. The first echelons of the Korean Brigade arrived on 18 August and were assigned a TAOR in northern Quang Ngai Province on the Batangan Peninsula, 17 miles southeast of the Chu Lai Airfield. By the end of the month, the full brigade was established on the peninsula which was incorporated into the Chu Lai TAOR. The command relationship between the Koreans and the American Marines was delicate. General Walt did not have operational control of the Korean Brigade, but he did have coordinating authority. Although the III MAF commander could not order the Koreans to do anything, he and Brigadier General Lee Bong Chool, the Korean Brigade commander, who had attended the Marine Corps Schools at Quantico, formed a working arrangement that satisfied both sides.^{29*}

Even with the reinforcement of the Koreans, the increasing demands of the war in the north caused a serious setback to Marine pacification plans. The move of the 3d Marine Division to Phu Bai and the shift of the 1st Marine Division Headquarters to Da Nang not only disrupted the pacification campaign, but ended any chance to join the Da Nang and Chu Lai TAORs by the end of the year.

At Chu Lai, the 1st Division established an entirely new command structure. On 10 October, the new division commander, Major General Herman Nickerson, Jr., a holder of the Silver Star and veteran of World War II and Korea, who had just relieved General Fields, moved his headquarters to Da Nang. He spoke with some regret about leaving Chu Lai, "Very pleasant CP, beautiful, but I didn't get to stay there very long."³⁰

*Victor K. Fleming, Jr., a former Marine captain who served in the 7th Marines S-3 section during this period, recalled that there were some misunderstandings between the Koreans and the Chu Lai Marines before the rough edges in the command relations were smoothed out. On one particular occasion, the Koreans launched an operation near the Marine TAOR without informing the Marine units responsible for that sector. According to Fleming when the American command asked why it had not been notified, General Lee replied, 'Why should I? You don't tell me what you are doing.' This incident led to an immediate overhaul and improvement of liaison between the two commands." Victor K. Fleming, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 17Jun80 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A369613
MajGen Herman Nickerson, Jr., (front passenger seat of the jeep) has just arrived at the Chu Lai Airfield to relieve MajGen Lewis J. Fields, Commanding General, 1st Marine Division (rear seat). General Nickerson assumed command of the division the following day, 1 October 1966, and a few days later moved the division headquarters to Da Nang.

Brigadier General Stiles, the assistant division commander, then assumed command of the Chu Lai TAOR. Stiles reformed his Task Force X-Ray command which now consisted of four Marine infantry battalions and supporting forces. The 7th Marines had operational control of the four infantry battalions at Chu Lai while the 5th Marines Headquarters served as a coordinating headquarters for the task force.

At best this was an ad hoc arrangement. The strain on the overly extended units at Chu Lai remained great. Battalions still operated miles from Chu Lai and yet remained responsible for their sector of the TAOR. Lieutenant Colonel Warren P. Kitterman, who commanded the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, remembered that during an operation in southern Quang Ngai Province during late 1966, he, in effect, maintained three separate command posts. His executive officer "ran the TAOR [at Chu Lai] with four platoons from four different battalions," while his operations officer had "tactical control" of the battalion in the operation. Kitterman, himself, "was coordinating 2/7 with an ARVN Bn, an ARVN

Parachute Company, an ARVN arty battery, and H/3/11."³¹

Much the same situation existed in the Phu Bai TAOR. Although General Kyle had established the 3d Division Headquarters at the Phu Bai base in October, only one or two battalions actually operated in or near the TAOR. The 3d Division Headquarters took over from the 4th Marines, which regiment up to that point had maintained a rear headquarters at Phu Bai and direct control of the TAOR and the units there. This included the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, a provisional artillery battery, and support elements. On 11 October, the newly arrived 2d Battalion, 26th Marines moved from Da Nang to Phu Bai. After operating for a short period just south of the Phu Bai TAOR, the latter battalion began on 29 October Operation Pawnee III in Phu Loc District, north of the strategic Hai Van Pass, with the mission to keep Route 1 open between Da Nang and Phu Bai. In November, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines relieved at Phu Bai the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines which returned to Okinawa under the recently resumed intratheater battalion rotation policy.* Finally in early December, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines replaced the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, which in turn rotated to Okinawa.³²

With a lull in Operation Prairie in the north, General Kyle, in mid-December, decided to move a battalion back into the Co Bi-Thanh Tan sector, the old Cherokee and Florida operating area, 13 miles northwest of Hue, and where the enemy was once more active. On 10 December, VC units in well-coordinated attacks struck three South Vietnamese strongpoints, including the Phong Dien District Headquarters and the An Lao Bridge across the Bo River. Suspecting that elements of the 6th NVA again were attempting to infiltrate from their mountain base areas into the coastal populated region, General Kyle, on 17 December, ordered the just-arrived 3d Battalion, 26th Marines from Dong Ha into the Co Bi-Thanh Tan corridor. Travelling by truck from Dong Ha and with an attached artillery

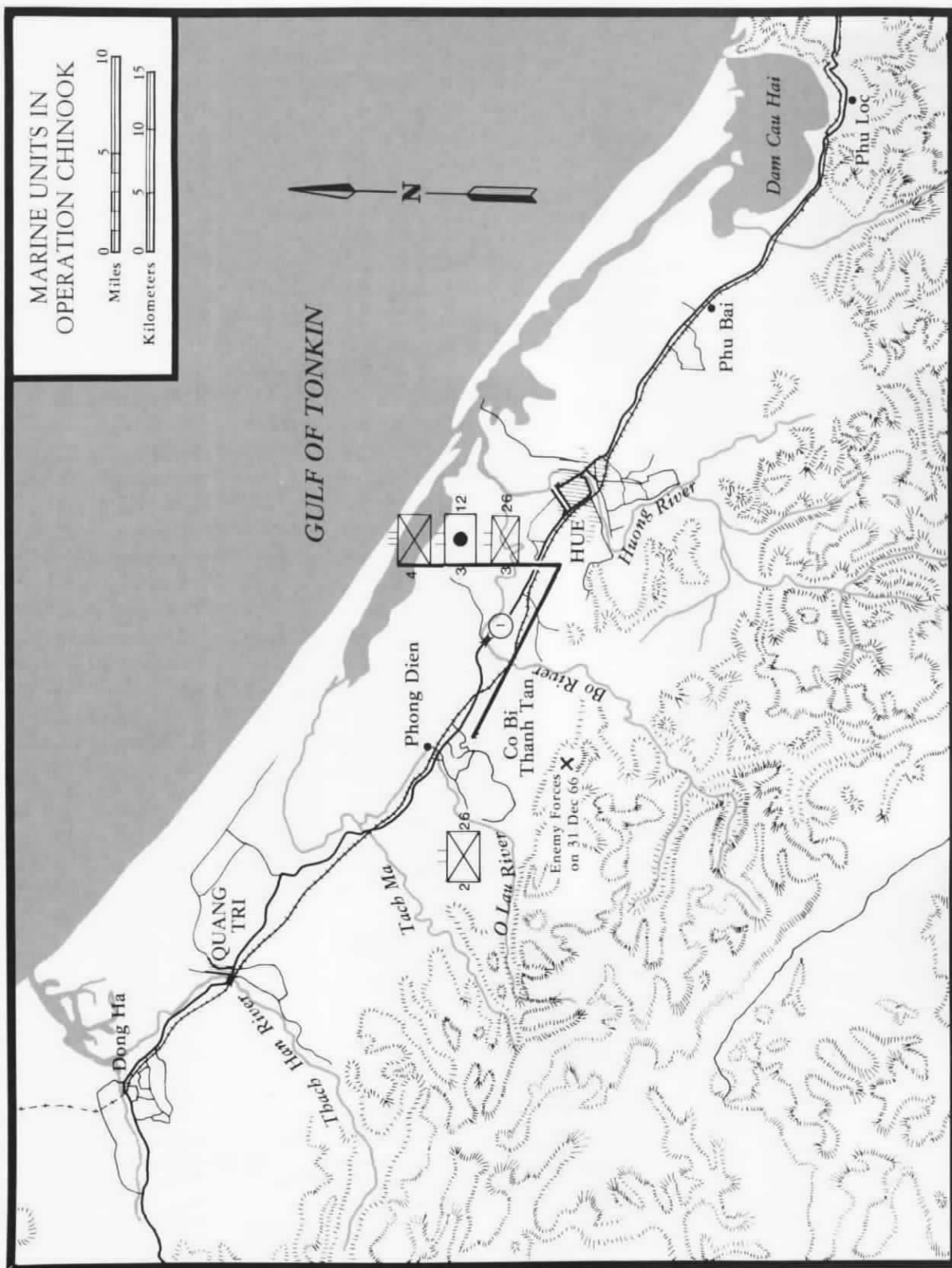


Marine Corps Photo A188089
Marines of Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines check the identity cards of suspected Viet Cong. The battalion is participating in Operation Chinook during December 1966 in the old "Florida" area, the Co Bi-Thanh Tan sector in Thua Thien Province.

battery, the 3d Battalion established, on 19 December, its CP west of Route 1, some 3,000 meters south of Phong Dien. After minor skirmishes with the Marines during the first two days, the enemy 802d VC Battalion launched two sizeable attacks against the Marine positions in the early morning hours of 22 and 23 December. In both cases, the enemy employed the same tactics; a mortar barrage, followed by a ground probe of the Marine perimeter. The VC then would withdraw, taking most of their casualties with them.³³

At this stage, 23 December, General Kyle elected to expand the operation, now codenamed Chinook, in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan, even further. He reinforced the 3d Battalion with the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, which moved from the Pawnee area into the Chinook sector, north of the O Lau River. At the same time, he ordered the 4th Marines Headquarters to deploy from Prairie and take control of the units in Chinook. These now included, in addition to the two infantry battalions, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, reconnaissance troops from Phu Bai, and support units. Colonel Cereghino, the 4th Marines commander, opened his CP in the Chinook area on Christmas day. Hampered by the northeast mon-

*The arrival of the 26th Marines and its battalions in WestPac in August and September allowed the Marines to reinstitute the intratheater rotation of battalions between Okinawa, Vietnam, and the SLF which had been suspended since March. (See Chapter 4). See Chapter 18 for further discussion of the 26th Marines and the battalion rotation policy.



soon, which limited the availability of both fixed-wing and helicopter support, the two infantry battalions encountered few enemy troops during the rest of the month. The most dramatic event occurred during the supposed New Year's truce period. On 31 December, Marine reconnaissance patrols, screening the foothills to the south of the Co Bi-Thanh Tan, observed more than 1,000 enemy troops, taking advantage of the terms of the standdown and moving north toward the lowlands.

After III MAF convinced MACV that the enemy force presented a clear and present danger to the Marines in Operation Chinook, Marine air and artillery bombarded the Communist troops. Operation Chinook continued into 1967.³⁴

In the heavily populated Da Nang TAOR, pacification continued to be the prime concern of the Marine forces there. The TAOR contained both the I Corps National Priority Area and fledgling An Hoa industrial site. During the spring and early summer, the Marine battalions had challenged the long-standing Communist domination south of the air base. This entire pacification effort, however, depended in great part on the ability of the Marines to provide the necessary security in the villages and hamlets.

The pacification effort south of Da Nang can be an "odorous" job. Troops from the 1st Marines probe a manure pile for hidden weapons.

Marine Corps Photo A369663



When General Nickerson's 1st Marine Division assumed responsibility for the Da Nang TAOR, the 3d Marines was the only infantry regiment to leave Da Nang; both the 1st and 9th Marines remained. Colonel Donald L. Mallory's 1st Marines reverted to 1st Marine Division operational control and retained responsibility for the southeastern portion of the Da Nang TAOR. Colonel Mallory, holder of the Navy Cross and former Assistant G-3 of the 1st Division, had assumed command of the regiment from Colonel Mitchell in August. Colonel Robert M. Richards' 9th Marines took over the western and southern portions of the TAOR formerly held by the 3d Marines. Richards, a 1942 Naval Academy graduate, relieved Colonel Barrett as the regimental commander on 8 October. The U.S. Army's 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry occupied the northern sector of the Da Nang TAOR, including the Hai Van Pass area.* The Army battalion was not under the operational control of a Marine regiment, but operated directly under General Nickerson. It was planned to hold at least eight infantry battalions in the Da Nang TAOR.³⁵

Despite the demands on Marine resources at Da Nang, General Walt continued his unstinted effort to make the An Hoa industrial complex a show case for pacification. He held at least one Marine battalion in An Hoa and pressured the government and MACV to support the industrial development there. Colonel Edward L. Bale, Jr., the 1st Marine Division G-4, remembered that the "extensive efforts of the 1st Marine Division and the Force Logistic Command to supply and support the An Hoa industrial complex . . . at times reduced our own forces . . . as to approach the danger point. Yet, it demonstrated the willingness of III MAF to support the only industrial development in the area."³⁶

*Col Walter S. Pullar, Jr., who as a major was executive officer and for a short period commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, recalled that when the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines departed for Khe Sanh at the end of September (See Chapter 11), he commanded a provisional battalion consisting of a reinforced company from the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, and one from the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. This battalion assumed responsibility for the northern sector including the Hai Van Pass until relieved by the Army battalion from the 503d Infantry. Col Walter S. Pullar, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 22May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

The An Hoa project had as much difficulty, if not more, with the South Vietnamese Government than with the Viet Cong. Some members of the government believed that the industrial complex was doomed to failure. General Westmoreland had proposed that the U.S. Embassy use its influence with the Vietnamese authorities to support the project. In the meantime, USAID officials began studies to determine the economic feasibility for the industrial exploitation of An Hoa.

One of the greatest threats to the entire An Hoa program was the fact that some of the key officials, including Mr. Can, the project director, were being drafted into the South Vietnamese Army. General Walt believed that if Can departed, progress at An Hoa would cease. The III MAF commander personally asked General Westmoreland to intercede with the South Vietnamese authorities to have Can deferred.³⁷ By the end of October, a compromise had been reached. The An Hoa employees were to be drafted, but required to serve for only one month in the army. After their month's service, they were to be transferred into the Popular Forces and returned to An Hoa.³⁸

The future of An Hoa was still unclear at the end of 1966. The industrial complex depended on coal from the Nong Son mine, 12 miles southwest of the factory site. Viet Cong guerrillas operated in some strength near the mine. Transporting the coal to An Hoa was also a problem. Activities at the industrial complex during this period were largely confined to renovating the plant and obtaining spare parts so the fertilizer factory could start production. According to Lieutenant Colonel Donald L. Evans, Jr., the recorder for the I Corps Joint Coordinating Council during much of 1966 and later head of the Civil Affairs Branch at Headquarters Marine Corps: "At this point [December 1966] very little had been accomplished except to focus attention on An Hoa as a potential industrial site."³⁹

The main pacification concern of the South Vietnamese officials in I Corps during this period was progress in the National Priority Area, encompassing portions of Hoa Vang, Hieu Duc, and Dien Ban Districts south of Da Nang. Although Marines did not participate directly in the campaign, the entire priority area was in the Da Nang TAOR. Battalions from the 1st and 9th Marines were prepared to assist the South Vietnamese units in the area, and in Oc-



Marine Corps Photo A187438
Mr. Le Thuc Can, project director, briefs a visiting team of USAID officials on the An Hoa Industrial Project. Can and other project officials faced induction into the Vietnamese Army, but upon the personal intervention of Generals Walt and Westmoreland, an accommodation was reached with the Vietnamese authorities and the project was continued.

tober, General Lam, the I Corps commander, assigned the entire 51st ARVN Regiment to the pacification campaign with two battalions operating in the National Priority Area. In addition, four Revolutionary Development teams were working in the priority area and six other teams which were to be assigned were in training at the Vung Tau Training Center. Despite this intensive effort, government forces succeeded in securing only 18 of the 38 hamlets in the National Priority Area that were scheduled to be pacified in 1966.⁴⁰

According to allied plans, the Vietnamese were to take over more of the pacification program in 1967. In I Corps, the ARVN forces were to have the primary mission of supporting Revolutionary Development, while Marine forces were to be deployed more and more against the enemy main force units. Yet, the Marines were still to secure their TAORs and clear the areas in the vicinity of the established bases. In a sense this could be called the beginning of Vietnamization, but several senior Marine officers doubted that the Vietnamese Army was prepared to take over the pacification program. In any event, pacification ended on a sour note in 1966; III MAF reported that no hamlets were added to the secure category in I Corps during December.⁴¹ General English summed up the Marine frustrations for the year: ". . . too much real estate—do not have enough troops."⁴²

