

**U.S. MARINES
IN VIETNAM
FIGHTING THE NORTH VIETNAMESE
1967**



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by

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and

V. Keith Fleming, Jr.



HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION
HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS
WASHINGTON, D.C.

1984

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U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1970-1971, now in preparation

U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1971-1973, now in preparation

U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1973-1975, now in preparation

Library of Congress Card No. 77-604776

PCN 190 003090 00

Foreword

This is the fourth volume in a planned 10-volume operational and chronological series covering the U.S. Marine Corps' participation in the Vietnam War. A separate topical series will complement the operational histories. This volume details the change in focus of the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), which fought in South Vietnam's northernmost corps area, I Corps. III MAF, faced with a continued threat in 1967 of North Vietnamese large unit entry across the Demilitarized Zone separating the two Vietnams, turned over the Chu Lai enclave to the U.S. Army's Task Force Oregon and shifted the bulk of its forces—and its attention—northward. Throughout the year, the 3d Marine Division fought a conventional, large-unit war against the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) near the demilitarized zone. The 1st Marine Division, concentrated in Thua Thien and Quang Nam provinces, continued both offensive and pacification operations. Its enemy ranged from small groups of Viet Cong guerrillas in hamlets and villages up to formations as large as the *2d NVA Division*. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing provided air support to both divisions, as well as Army and allied units in I Corps. The Force Logistic Command, amalgamated from all Marine logistics organizations in Vietnam, served all major Marine commands.

This volume, like its predecessors, concentrates on the ground war in I Corps and III MAF's perspective of the Vietnam War as an entity. It also covers the Marine Corps participation in the advisory effort, the operations of the two Special Landing Forces of the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet, and the services of Marines with the staff of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. There are additional chapters on supporting arms and logistics, and a discussion of the Marine role in Vietnam in relation to the overall American effort.

The nature of the war facing III MAF during 1967 forced the authors to concentrate on major operations, particularly those characterized by heavy combat. The uneven quality of the official reports submitted by combat units also played a role in selecting the materials presented in this volume. This is not meant to slight those whose combat service involved long, hot days on patrol, wearying hours of perimeter defense, and innumerable operations, named and un-named. These Marines also endured fights just as deadly as the ones against large enemy regular units. III MAF's combat successes in 1967 came from the efforts of all Americans in I Corps.

All three authors have been historians in the History and Museums Division. Major Gary L. Telfer, now a retired lieutenant colonel, has a bachelor of arts degree from Muskingum College, Ohio. He had two tours in Vietnam, first as an advisor with a Vietnamese Army artillery battalion and, three years later, with the 12th Marines. Major Telfer began this history project and produced the initial manuscript. His replacement, Lieutenant Colonel Lane Rogers, now also retired, expanded the materials into a second draft. He is a member of the class of 1953 of the U.S. Naval Academy and was an advisor with the Vietnamese Marine Corps. The third author, Dr. V. Keith Fleming, Jr., is a

former Marine officer who served as a rifle company commander in Vietnam. He prepared the comment edition and then incorporated the suggestions of the reviewers. He has bachelor of arts and master of arts degrees from the University of Alabama and a doctoral degree in American military history from Ohio State University.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "E. H. Simmons". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "E" and "S".

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

Preface

U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967, like its predecessors, is largely based on the holdings of the Marine Corps Historical Center. These official files include the monthly unit command chronologies, after action reports, messages, units' daily journal files, the oral history collection, comment files, and previously classified studies prepared by members of the division. Especially useful in the latter category were Lieutenant Colonel Ralph F. Moody and Major Thomas E. Donnelly, "Introduction of North Vietnamese Regulars," and Lieutenant Colonel Ralph F. Moody, "A Higher Order of Warfare," parts IV and V of a then-projected single-volume history of the war.

The authors supplemented the above sources with research in the records of the other Services and pertinent published primary and secondary sources. Although none of the information in this history is classified, some of the documentation on which it is based still has a classified designation. More than 250 reviewers, most of whom were participants in the events described in this volume, read a comment edition of the manuscript. Their comments, where applicable, have been incorporated into the text. A list of all those who commented is included in the appendices. All ranks used in the body of the text are those held by the individuals in 1967.

The production of this volume, like its predecessors, has been a cooperative effort. All of the Vietnam historians, past and present, in the Histories Section, History and Museums Division, have reviewed the draft manuscript. Mrs. Joyce Bonnett, head archivist, and her former assistant, Mrs. Linda T. Benedict, aided our access into the records in the Archives Section. Miss Evelyn A. Englander, head librarian, and her assistant, Mrs. Patricia E. Morgan, were very helpful in obtaining needed references. The Reference Section, headed by Mr. Danny J. Crawford, and earlier by Mrs. Gabrielle M. Santelli, made its voluminous files available and answered the authors' numerous questions cheerfully and professionally. Mrs. Regina Strother, formerly with the Defense Audio-Visual Agency, but now with the History and Museums Division, graciously assisted in the photographic research. Mr. Benis M. Frank, the head of the Oral History Section, was equally helpful in making his tapes and transcripts available.

Mr. Robert E. Struder, head of the Publications Production Section, skillfully guided the manuscript through the various production phases. Mr. Struder also served as the project officer supervising the contract with the University of Maryland's Cartographic Services Laboratory, which made the maps in this volume. Mrs. Bonnie Kane and Ms. Lee Ritzman Ebinger were the cartographers, under the supervision of Mrs. Sue Gibbons and her successor, Ms. Vickie Taylor. The typesetting of the manuscript was done by Corporals Paul W. Gibson, Joseph J. Hynes, Mark J. Zigante, and Stanley W. Crowl. Mrs. Catherine A. Kerns contributed significantly to the typesetting effort, and provided considerable technical expertise on typesetting procedures. Mr. William S. Hill, the Division's graphics specialist, completed the design and layout of the book, incorporating some work completed earlier by his predecessor, Mr. Dennis W. Kirschner.

The authors give special thanks to Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, the Director of Marine Corps History and Museums, whose policies guide the Vietnam series. Four successive Deputies for Marine Corps History—Colonel Herbert M. Hart, Colonel John E. Greenwood (now editor of the *Marine Corps Gazette*), Colonel Oliver M. Whipple, Jr., and Colonel John G. Miller—have shepherded this project to its completion. Mr. Henry I. Shaw, Jr., the Chief Historian, aided all three authors by giving us the benefit of his considerable experience in writing Marine Corps History, encouragement and advice when needed, and general editorial guidance. Mr. Jack Shulimson, now the senior Vietnam historian, provided advice to all three authors and aided research through his knowledge of Vietnam-era Marine Corps records. The historians in the historical offices of the Army, Navy, and Air Force have freely exchanged information with the authors and assisted in locating documents needed to complete our research. We express our gratitude to all those who reviewed the comment edition and pointed out needed corrections. They also were generous in providing personal photographs, documents, and the insights available to participants in events. Finally, the authors are responsible for the contents of the text, including the opinions expressed and any errors in fact.

GARY L. TELFER

LANE ROGERS

V. KEITH FLEMING, JR.

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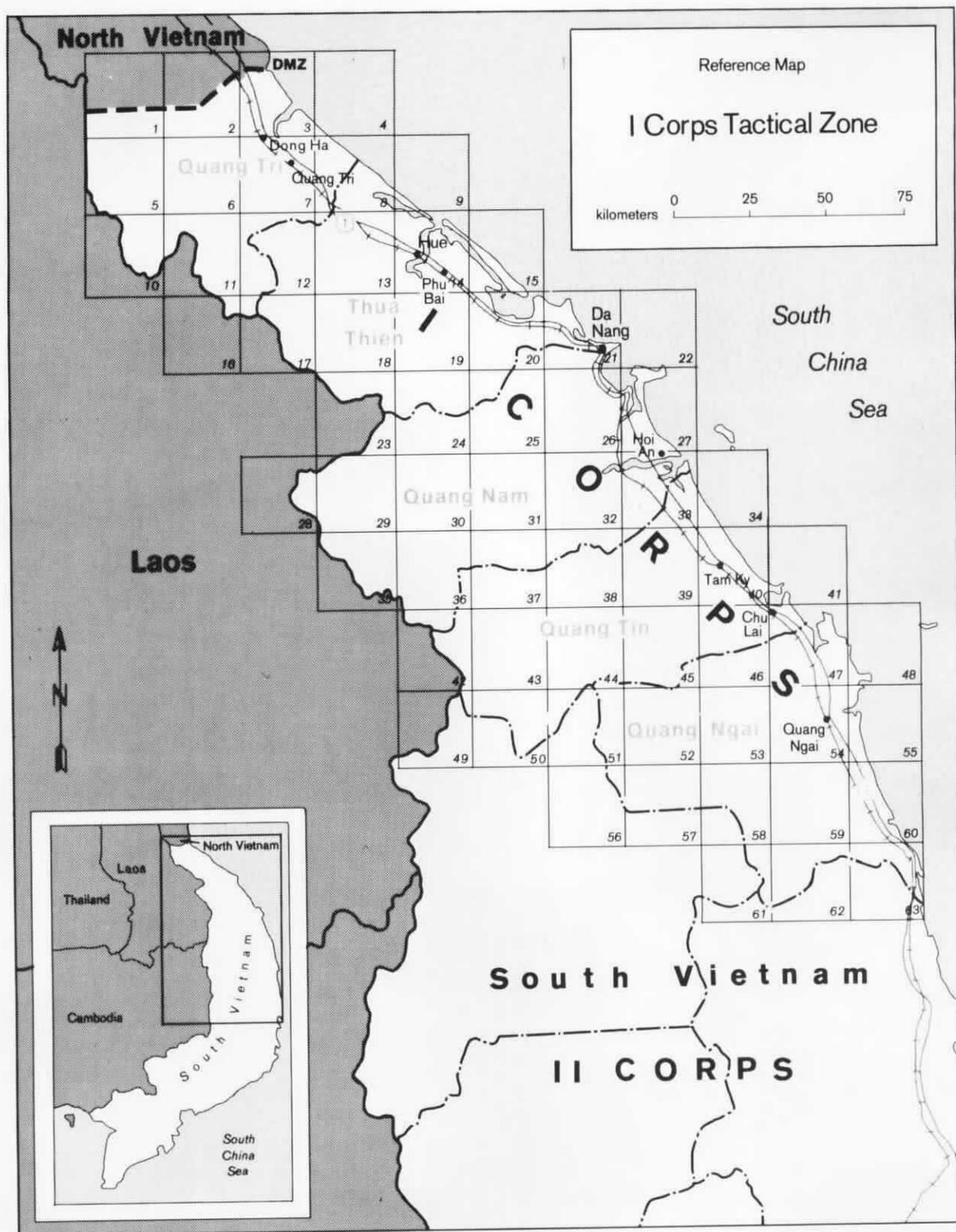
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PART I
THE DMZ IN EARLY 1967



CHAPTER 1

The Situation at the Start of the Year

*The Early Days—Command Relations—The Plan for the Year—A Change in Strategy
The Enemy Organization—Tactical Considerations*

The Early Days

The landing of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) at Da Nang on 8 March 1965 reaffirmed the United States' determination to assist the South Vietnamese government in defending itself against increasing Communist military pressure from Viet Cong (VC) forces and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Two Marine infantry battalions reinforced the Marine helicopter task unit which had supported the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) since the spring of 1962. Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 3/9 landed across the beach just north of the Da Nang Air Base from U.S. Seventh Fleet amphibious ships and the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines arrived by air from Okinawa. Additional Marine units, both ground and air, arrived during April and May, and Marine units established two more bases in the I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ) of South Vietnam at Chu Lai and Phu Bai.

On 7 May 1965 the 9th MEB disbanded when the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) absorbed its mission. First under the command of Major General William R. Collins and then Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, III MAF initially consisted of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and the 3d Marine Division. In August, the Commanding General, III MAF, became senior advisor to the Vietnamese I Corps commanding general and, as such, assumed responsibility for the Corps advisory effort. He directed all U.S. ground operations in I CTZ, as well as the security of all U.S. bases in the Corps area. By the end of March 1966, III MAF's combat power increased following the arrival of the 1st Marine Division.

The first large-scale encounter between III MAF Marines and an enemy main force unit took place in August 1965, when the 7th Marines successfully defeated the *1st VC Regiment* south of Chu Lai during Operation Starlite. This battle was followed by

battalion- and regimental-size combat operations against VC and NVA units throughout I CTZ. In addition, the Special Landing Force (SLF) of the Seventh Fleet conducted amphibious operations against enemy forces in I CTZ and other areas of South Vietnam.

Behind the shield provided by these operations, smaller Marine units conducted patrols, ambushes, and sweeps to destroy local Communist forces and to secure the Vietnamese countryside. Once the Marines established security, they initiated civic action programs to aid the Vietnamese government's Revolutionary Development Program. By mid-1966, these tactics were forcing the guerrillas out of traditional strongholds, denying them sources of supply and manpower, and most importantly, seriously eroding the enemy's hold over the people.

In July the Communists reacted to III MAF's expanding control over the heavily populated, rice-rich coastal areas by thrusting the North Vietnamese *324B Division* across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) into the comparatively unpopulated province of Quang Tri in northern I CTZ. Although the Marines' Operation Hastings soundly defeated this invasion attempt, the enemy tried again in September, this time with elements of two divisions. Again the Marines repulsed the invaders by conducting Operation Prairie, an effort that continued through the end of the year.

While both of the major NVA efforts suffered defeat as did all others throughout I CTZ, the Communists did succeed in relieving some of the pressure on the hard-pressed guerrilla forces in the coastal areas to the south. All signs indicated that most of the Communist forces had withdrawn across the DMZ, but Marine troop dispositions remained oriented northward in the face of the enemy's apparent willingness to invade this northern area.

As 1966 ended, III MAF's Marines found themselves fighting essentially two separate but in-

terrelated "wars." The 3d Marine Division conducted basically a conventional war along the DMZ against regular NVA formations. At the same time, the 1st Marine Division continued its combination of large unit and counter guerrilla operations south of the Hai Van Pass.

Command Relations

As the commander of III MAF, General Walt operated under a complicated web of command relations that put him virtually under two masters. Operational control of all United States forces in South Vietnam rested with General William C. Westmoreland, whose Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), was a unified command under Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, the Commander in Chief, Pacific Command (CinCPac). On the other hand, Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, who headed Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac), retained command of III MAF in the areas of administration and logistics. Further, the air war in most of North Vietnam, in which some III MAF aircraft participated, remained under the personal control of Admiral Sharp. Finally, General Walt, as the senior American officer in I Corps, served as the senior advisor to the South Vietnamese forces in the corps area. His burden would have been heavier had he

not relinquished in 1966 his responsibilities as Naval Component Commander for all American naval forces in Vietnam.

At the beginning of 1967, the 18 infantry battalions of III MAF occupied bases throughout the I CTZ. I Corps, the name commonly given to I CTZ, which consisted of the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam, stretched 225 miles from the DMZ in the north to the northern border of II CTZ in the south. Twenty-one fixed-wing and helicopter squadrons of the 1st MAF supported the allied ground forces. These units and the numerous supporting organizations gave General Walt a total of more than 70,000 troops in I CTZ.

The enemy's two major thrusts across the DMZ during the summer and fall of 1966 resulted in the shifting of some 10,000 Marines north to meet these threats. The prolonged commitment of substantial Marine forces in the north forced a realignment of operational commands within III MAF. On 10 October 1966 Major General Wood B. Kyle of the 3d Marine Division assumed control of all U.S. forces committed to Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. Brigadier General Lowell E. English established a forward command post at Dong Ha, in Quang Tri Province. At the same time, the main 3d Division command post moved from Da Nang to Phu Bai,

Senior Marine commanders pose at Da Nang with MajGen Bruno A. Hochmuth upon his arrival to assume command of 3d Marine Division. They are, from left, MajGen Louis B. Robertshaw (1st MAF), MajGen Herman Nickerson, Jr. (1st MarDiv), LtGen Louis W. Walt (III MAF), Gen Hochmuth, and MajGen Wood B. Kyle (3d MarDiv).

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A19456



north of the Hai Van Mountains which separate the two northern provinces from the rest of I CTZ. At the turn of the year, III MAF had committed 7 of its 18 battalions in this northern area.

With the 3d Division's move, the 1st Marine Division, commanded by Major General Herman Nickerson, Jr., shifted its headquarters north from Chu Lai to Da Nang, but General Nickerson left Brigadier General William A. Stiles' Task Force X-Ray, a brigade-size force of four battalions, at Chu Lai. The X-Ray force stretched between two provinces; two battalions operated in Quang Tin Province and two in Quang Ngai Province. Additionally, three battalions of Korean Marines, commanded by Brigadier General Yun Sang Kim, were in Quang Ngai Province. The command relationship with the Korean Marines was one of cooperation and coordination.

Because of the fluid, nonlinear type of warfare peculiar to the Vietnam conflict, the individual infantry battalion became the key maneuver element. Under the system of operational control, or "opcon," a battalion might operate under a task force headquarters, or even as part of a regiment other than its parent unit. For example a battalion of the 7th Marines might be attached to the 4th Marines while a battalion of the 4th Marines was a part of another command. This command situation became further confused in August of 1966 when Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac) reestablished the intra-theater unit rotation program between Marine battalions in Vietnam and Regimental Landing Team 26 (RLT-26) located on Okinawa.*

The Special Landing Force (SLF) of the Seventh Fleet complemented the strength of III MAF and all allied forces in Vietnam. Consisting of a SLF headquarters, a Marine battalion landing team, and a Marine helicopter squadron, the SLF operated from ships of the Seventh Fleet Amphibious Ready Group (ARG). The SLF could land either as an independent force or in conjunction with other units withdrawn from combat and temporarily embarked on other amphibious ships.

*RLT-26 was an element of the 5th Marine Division which activated at Camp Pendleton, California, on 1 June 1966. The rotation system permitted units to withdraw from South Vietnam and go to Okinawa for a 1- or 2-month refitting and retraining cycle.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A369912

BGen William A. Stiles (right) of Task Force X-Ray greets LtGen Victor H. Krulak at Chu Lai on 9 March during one of the latter's frequent visits to South Vietnam. Krulak, as commander of FMFPac, had administrative control over Marine units in III MAF.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189027

BGen Yun Sang Kim commanded the 2d Republic of Korea Marine Brigade in Quang Ngai Province. The Korean Marines were independent of III MAF but both Marine commands cooperated and coordinated their efforts against the common enemy.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189011
LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam, as the South Vietnamese commander of I Corps, had administrative and tactical control of the country's five northern provinces.

To support the ground elements, Major General Louis B. Robertshaw's 1st MAW deployed to five principal airfields. Wing headquarters was at Da Nang, fixed-wing squadrons were at Da Nang and Chu Lai, and helicopter squadrons were at Phu Bai, Marble Mountain east of Da Nang, and Ky Ha near Chu Lai. Additional helicopter detachments were at Dong Ha and Khe Sanh.

The ARVN I Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, shared its tactical zone of action with III MAF. At the beginning of 1967, this ARVN force consisted of the 1st and 2d Army Divisions, a Ranger group, and three temporarily assigned battalions of Vietnamese Marines, a total of 34 infantry battalions. Regional and Popular Forces, added to the ARVN regulars, brought the South Vietnamese troop total to 77,000 in the five provinces of I CTZ.*

*Regional Forces (RF) companies recruited their personnel within their respective provinces, to be used within the boundaries of the province, while Popular Forces (PF) platoons obtained their men locally for employment only as security forces at their home villages or hamlets.

The posture of the regular ARVN forces at the start of the year was as follows:

I Corps headquarters was at Da Nang.

The 1st Division headquarters was in the city of Hue. Its area of operation was the two northern provinces, Quang Tri and Thua Thien.

The 2d Division's headquarters was in Quang Ngai City. Its tactical area included the two southern provinces of Quang Tin and Quang Ngai.

The 51st Regiment, an independent unit located in the central province of Quang Nam, had the mission of pacification security.

A Ranger Group of three battalions was the corps reserve and moved throughout the I Corps area.

Although III MAF and ARVN I Corps were co-equal commands, their respective commanders recognized the need for close operational coordination in an agreement which stipulated that, while neither force would serve under the control of the other, elements of either force could be temporarily placed under the tactical direction of the other for specific operations.

The Plan for the Year

The objectives assigned these two commands by the Vietnamese Joint General Staff and MACV in the Combined Campaign Plan for 1967 were threefold:

To counter rapidly any threat of invasion across the I Corps borders;

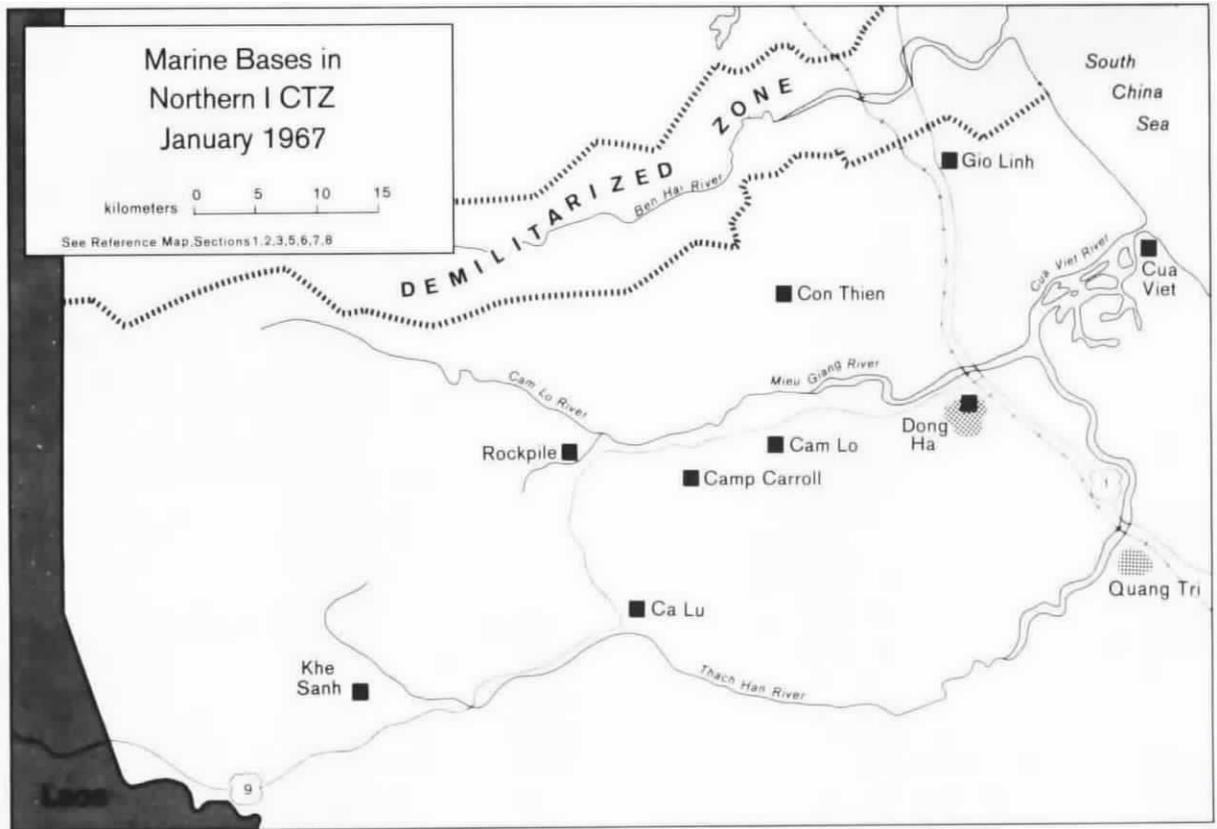
To destroy Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army units attempting to disrupt the government's expanding control over the populated areas; and,

To ensure the security of the base areas and lines of communication that were enabling the government to expand its control.

A Change in Strategy

The major change in strategy from 1966, as outlined in the 1967 Combined Campaign Plan, was the assignment of the Vietnamese armed forces to the primary role of pacification. To free the South Vietnamese Army units for pacification, American forces assumed the tactical tasks hitherto pursued by the South Vietnamese, at the same time carrying the bulk of the offensive effort against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese.

The American focus on the enemy's forces, however, was not to be at the expense of U.S.



pacification efforts. General Westmoreland, addressing a joint session of Congress in April 1967 said, "The only strategy which can defeat such an organization is one of unrelenting but discriminating military, political, and psychological pressure on his whole structure—at all levels."¹

Ironically, just when allied strategy placed increased emphasis on pacification, the Marines found themselves hard-pressed to pursue their own pacification program, initiated as early as 1965. Spread throughout the five provinces, III MAF forces simultaneously faced large-scale attacks by NVA and VC units throughout I Corps. There was a substantial increase in the tempo of guerrilla warfare, as well as the threat of a major invasion in the DMZ area by an enemy force of possibly three divisions. At the same time, III MAF's mission still included the defense of the three large base areas which contained the five principal I CTZ airfields.

The 3d Marine Division's area, along the DMZ, caused the greatest Marine concern. III MAF headquarters expected the enemy to exploit his shorter supply lines. U.S. policy, well known in North Vietnam, prohibited the pursuit of Communists into the

DMZ. Strong enemy pressure south of the DMZ possibly could gain a prestige victory, perhaps even the conquest of the two northern provinces, Quang Tri and Thua Thien. Such pressure would also divert the Marines from the pacification program which was beginning to fragment the guerrilla infrastructure further south.

The Enemy Organization

The Marines of III MAF faced a hierarchy of enemy units ranging from local, part-time guerrillas to conventional North Vietnamese Army divisions. At each level, an appropriate political headquarters controlled various subordinate units' operations. The village Communist Party chapters supervised their own squads of guerrillas. Viet Cong local force companies and battalions came under the Party committees of the province or district. Main force Viet Cong or North Vietnamese units received their orders from the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) or other major headquarters which, theoretically, were subordinate to COSVN. In practice, however, these headquarters usually took their orders directly from Hanoi.

Military Region 5 (MR-5), commanded by a North Vietnamese general officer, controlled enemy units in the northern part of South Vietnam. Two sub-regional headquarters shared the command responsibilities for this large area. The *B-3 Front* commanded Communist units in Darlac, Kontum, and Pleiku provinces. South of the DMZ, the important Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces operated under the *Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region*, which, for all practical purposes, was subordinate to North Vietnam's *Military Region 4*.

MR-5 commanded two infantry divisions that threatened the Marines in southern I Corps. The *2d NVA Division*, also known as the *620th*, and composed of two NVA regiments and the *1st Viet Cong Regiment*, operated in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin provinces. The *3d NVA Division*, also made up of two NVA and one VC regiments, worked further to the south in Binh Dinh, Quang Ngai, and Kontum provinces.

North of the DMZ were four NVA divisions, the *304th*, the *320th*, the *324B*, and the *325C*, all under the command of North Vietnam's *Military Region 4*. The *324B* suffered heavy casualties in combat with the 3d Marine Division in July and August 1966 and withdrew back across the DMZ to refit. The *325C* served as the strategic reserve for *MR-4*.

Tactical Considerations

As 1967 began, III MAF could not attack the NVA divisions in and north of the DMZ; American policy

prohibited such action. Many Marines disagreed with the policy, including the commander of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade on Okinawa, Brigadier General Louis Metzger, who later became the assistant commander of the 3d Division, General Metzger recently commented:

It has long been my belief that the most significant aspect of operations along the DMZ was the publicly stated United States policy that U.S. forces would not enter North Vietnam. This allowed the enemy to deploy his forces across the DMZ at the time and place of his choosing, and to withdraw to a sanctuary when it suited his convenience; to utilize his artillery against U.S. positions and bases while at the same time denying the Marines the most effective means of destroying the enemy weapons, i.e., to overrun them; [and] to free his infantry elements from guarding his artillery so that they could be employed against U.S. forces and positions south of the DMZ.³

In response to the enemy challenge in the DMZ area, MACV began working on two sets of contingency plans in the latter part of 1966. First, if necessary, General Westmoreland would shift U.S. Army units north to reinforce III MAF. In addition, he planned, at the urging of the Secretary of Defense, to build an elaborate anti-infiltration barrier system south of the DMZ to seal off the area from North Vietnamese incursions. Both actions would have a profound effect upon III MAF's operations in 1967 as it struggled to fight both a counterinsurgency war against the VC infrastructure and a conventional war against regular NVA infantry divisions.

Some principal figures in the war in I Corps discuss the situation on 3 May 1967. Those present include, from left, an unidentified Marine colonel; BGen John R. Chaisson, the senior Marine on the MACV staff; Col Archelaus L. Hamblen, USA, who commanded the Army Advisory I Corps Headquarters; Gen William C. Westmoreland, USA, the MACV commander; BGen Ngo Quang Truong, commander of the 1st ARVN Division; MajGen Hoang Xuan Lam, the I Corps commander; LtGen Lewis W. Walt, the III MAF commander; MajGen Bruno A. Hochmuth of the 3d Marine Division; and an unidentified Vietnamese colonel wearing the shoulder patch of the 1st ARVN Division.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC)801029



CHAPTER 2

Spring Action South of the DMZ—February-April 1967

Operation Prairie I Continues—Operation Prairie II—Operation Prairie III

Operation Prairie I Continues

As 1967 began, the 3d Marine Division was fighting two wars: a conventional one along the DMZ, where division confronted division, and a counter guerrilla war in the rest of Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. Although committed to both campaigns, the situation forced the division to give priority to the DMZ.

During January, the enemy avoided major ground contact with ARVN and Marine units in the DMZ area, but the NVA did maintain energetic screening and reconnaissance efforts south of the DMZ. Mortar and rocket attacks on friendly positions increased sharply, particularly during the period 8-28 January, and there was a noticeable increase in local and main force guerrilla activity throughout the month.

In January Marine units were still conducting Operation Prairie along the DMZ. Three battalions of Colonel John P. Lanigan's 3d Marines and the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines were operating from combat bases along Highway 9.* The largest of the combat bases, the nerve center for the entire area, was at Dong Ha, the command post (CP) of the 3d Marine Division (Forward), the controlling headquarters for the operation.

The intermediate position at Cam Lo was seven miles west. Four miles further west, Camp J. J. Carroll was occupied by artillery units of the 12th Marines, reinforced by U.S. Army 175mm self-propelled guns. An additional artillery position, the Rockpile, was near the base of a jagged mountain six miles west of Camp Carroll. The last and most westerly of the combat bases was Khe Sanh, only a

few miles from the Laotian border. In addition to these major positions along Highway 9, Marines were establishing two strongpoints just south of the DMZ at Con Thien and Gio Linh.

One feature of Operation Prairie was the provision of a specific "package" of aircraft for support of the 3d Marine Division. In this manner the wing increased its efficiency and decreased response time for missions within the DMZ region. The "package" contained a variety of helicopters, such as UH-1Es, CH-46s, CH-37s, and fixed-wing observation aircraft. A total of 40 helicopters and 8 O-1 observation aircraft supported the division daily. Marine air support radars (TPQ-10) provided the capability of conducting radar-controlled bombing missions during bad weather and at night.

Operation Prairie I ended on 31 January. At its height the operation involved six Marine infantry battalions. It accounted for the largest number of enemy casualties in a single Marine operation to that date: 1,397 killed and 27 captured. Marine casualties for the same period were 239 killed and 1,214 wounded.

Operation Prairie II

The mission assigned to the Marines for Operation Prairie II was essentially the same as that for Prairie I: to conduct operations in conjunction with ARVN forces, to seek out and destroy enemy forces, and to defend the area against attack. To accomplish this, Brigadier General Michael P. Ryan, assigned as Commanding General, 3d Marine Division (Forward) and Assistant Division Commander, 3d Marine Division, since February 1967, controlled a force of three infantry battalions, two reconnaissance companies, and supporting units.

The concept of operations during Operation Prairie II called for patrols and sweeps by units of various sizes, including infantry battalions. Normally, 3d Marine Division (Forward) kept one infantry

*Route 9 was a two-lane, east-west road which ran from the Laotian border to the city of Dong Ha. Only the eastern portion of the highway was paved in 1967.

battalion at a time involved in mobile operations while the remainder of its units defended the combat bases. Meeting the latter responsibility required the frequent shifting of rifle companies and their operational control. Rifle companies, as a result, often found themselves under the operational control of other battalions or even directly under the commander of the 3d Marines.

To expand artillery coverage, the 12th Marines shifted some units. The February artillery distribution was:

Khe Sanh: two 4.2-inch mortars, two 155mm, and six 105mm howitzers
 Rockpile: two 175mm guns, two 155mm guns, six 105mm howitzers
 Ba Long: six 105mm howitzers
 Ca Lu: six 105mm howitzers
 Camp Carroll: six 175mm guns, four 155mm, and six 105mm howitzers
 Cam Lo: two 155mm howitzers
 Cua Viet: six 105mm howitzers (LVTH-6)
 Gio Linh: four 175mm guns and six 105mm howitzers

The 12th Marines' firing fans covered almost all of Quang Tri Province, and stretched well north of the DMZ and several miles into Laos.

Except for mortar attacks, enemy activity during the first week of Operation Prairie II was confined to reconnaissance and screening actions, similar to activity during the last two months of Prairie I. With the bombing halt during the *Tet Nguyen Dan* truce period, 0700 8 February - 0700 12 February, enemy movement dramatically increased, both north and south of the Ben Hai River.* Of special significance was the activity immediately north of the DMZ. Aerial observation and photographic readouts revealed heavy truck and boat traffic throughout the area. There was little doubt that the NVA had taken advantage of the truce to accomplish resupply and personnel replacement.

As a result of the detection of a large concentration of enemy troops and material north of the Ben Hai River, the Marines on 25 February asked for and received permission to fire into and north of the DMZ against purely military targets.** The North

Vietnamese could no longer consider the DMZ area as a safe haven; staging and support areas and artillery positions now could be interdicted on a 24-hour basis.

The Communists reacted quickly to the sudden vulnerability of their previously safe positions. On the 27th of February, heavy enemy mortar, rocket, and artillery fire struck Con Thien and Gio Linh. The composite artillery battalion at Gio Linh bore the brunt of these attacks; on the 28th more than 400 rounds landed on the battalion's position in a 17-minute period.

The morning of the 27th, the same day the NVA began the artillery attacks, a Marine reconnaissance team 5,000 meters northwest of Cam Lo attempted to ambush what appeared to be only two enemy soldiers. The team actually engaged an enemy company which proved to be the lead element of the *812th Regiment, 324B Division*. By 1045, the reconnaissance team reported that it was surrounded by at least 100 North Vietnamese. The closest friendly force was Captain Alan H. Hartney's Company L, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines which, minus one rifle platoon but reinforced with a platoon of tanks, was patrolling north of Cam Lo. Colonel Lanigan immediately ordered Captain Hartney's force to go to the reconnaissance team's relief. Captain Hartney reported slow progress; brush 4-12 feet high blocked his route.

With the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines already involved in an operation near the Rockpile, Colonel Lanigan had few reserve forces. He turned to Lieutenant Colonel Victor Ohanesian's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, located at Camp Carroll. Most of this battalion was already on board ships prior to sailing for Okinawa after being relieved by the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. Now, however, Company G, the only intact company still ashore, would have to go to the aid of the endangered reconnaissance team.

Ironically, only a few hours previously the commanding officer of Company G, Captain Carl E. Bockewitz, had been assured by Major Robert F. Sheridan, the battalion S-3 officer, that there were no plans to send the company on an operation. The latter officer recalled:

The morning before his unit was committed . . . Captain Bockewitz, who was on an extension of his tour, came to see me in the S-3 bunker and asked if there was any chance we would be going north of the Cam Lo River. As over half of our battalion was already on ships ready to go

**Tet Nguyen Dan*, or festival of the lunar new year, usually called "Tet," is the most important holiday of the Vietnamese year.

**The code name for these artillery attacks against targets in and north of the DMZ was Operation Highrise.

to Okinawa and our in-place relief was almost completed, I told him there was no way we were going north. Only Company G, Company F (-), and a token command group were left in country. Captain Bockewitz was visibly relieved as he stated, "That's good. Last night I had a dream that if I went north of the Cam Lo I would die."¹

Despite his forebodings, Captain Bockewitz led his company from Camp Carroll and began to move overland to link up with the reconnaissance team. Bockewitz, as had Captain Hartney, also found tough going and did not reach the reconnaissance team until 2342 that night. Captain Bockewitz established a defensive position and stayed there for the night.

About the same time that Company G was leaving Camp Carroll, Captain Hartney's company, while trying to cross a stream, came under fire from a large enemy force. After a heavy firefight in which the tanks played a decisive role, the company was able to break contact and began to move toward the recon-

A Marine of Company L, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines helps a casualty to a medevac helicopter during Operation Prairie's heavy fighting on 28 February.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188455



naissance team. The tanks now proved to be a handicap; one of them threw a track. Company G could not leave it. Captain Hartney reported his dilemma and was ordered to establish a night position and evacuate his wounded.

To exploit the two enemy contacts, Colonel Lanigan decided to commit the remaining available elements of Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, which consisted of a small command group and part of Company F. On the morning of the 28th, Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian, who had operational control of all units in this action, planned to move his group overland to link up with Company G. Then the united force was to sweep east to Cam Lo. Company L was to act as a blocking force and then move back to its original position at Cam Lo after linkup. That was the plan; the North Vietnamese had other ideas.

At 0630 a vicious mortar and infantry attack stunned Company L. More than 150 82mm mortar rounds hit the company's position and NVA forces struck from three sides with heavy automatic weapons, small arms, and antitank (RPG) fire.* RPG rounds hit two tanks; one caught fire, but both tanks continued to support the company with their turret-mounted .50-caliber machine guns. By 0900 the Marines had repulsed three enemy attacks. During the attack, Captain Hartney and his artillery observer had called in artillery fire to within 30 meters of the company position.

Because of this heavy attack, Colonel Lanigan ordered Ohanesian to link up with Company L instead of Company G as originally planned. Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian's small force left Camp Carroll by truck, disembarked at Cam Lo, and forded the river. By 1030, it had reached Company L, guided at the end by the sound of enemy mortar explosions. Captain Hartney's Company L had four dead and 34 wounded.

Major Sheridan remembered that, upon arrival, the force "... attacked and secured the high ground in the area, encountering large numbers of well-equipped NVA troops. In my year in Vietnam, I had never seen this number of NVA troops in the open.

*The Soviet RPG is a 40mm recoilless, antitank grenade launcher, in many respects similar to the German World War II *Panzerfaust*. The later model RPG-7 can penetrate 9.4 inches of armor.

After securing the high ground, a [helicopter landing zone] was established to evacuate the dead and wounded. . . ."²

At the same time that the regiment ordered Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian's force to Company L's relief, Company G and the reconnaissance team received orders to move north to Hill 124 to establish blocking positions.* At approximately 1035 on the 28th, as Company G began moving up the hill, it came under fire from well-concealed positions on both flanks. The fighting was heavy, casualties mounted on both sides. Among the Marine dead was Company G's commander, Captain Bockewitz.

Second Lieutenant Richard C. Mellon, Jr., the company executive officer, assumed command while the heavy fighting continued. Company G was not able to recover its dead until late that afternoon. When the fight ended the Marines had suffered 7 more killed and 18 wounded.

To relieve the pressure on Company G, Colonel Lanigan decided to place another company under the operational control of Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian and to commit it north of Hill 124. He designated Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines as the unit to move by helicopter to Hill 162 immediately north of Company G's position. Company M completed the lift by 1430 and began to move south toward Company G. Company M encountered only light contact during the move.

By early afternoon, the remaining platoon of Company L and a section of tanks reinforced Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian's position. At 1430, Ohanesian's command group and Company F began to move toward Company G, leaving Company L and the serviceable tanks to guard the disabled tanks. First Lieutenant Richard D. Koehler, Jr.'s Company F led, followed by the command group. Major Sheridan later wrote:

We were ordered to proceed . . . knowing full well we were walking into a hornet's nest. Based on the number of enemy forces we had already encountered and the vast amounts of equipment, new weapons, and ammunition, we knew we were outmanned and outgunned. . . . We left the perimeter . . . and within 200 yards we came upon a very large radio complex. The trail was narrow and we could not disperse our troops. One could almost smell the enemy forces.³

*Hill 124 was about 2,000 meters due west of Company L's position which was approximately the same distance northwest of Cam Lo. The hill was the commanding terrain feature along the enemy's probable route of withdrawal.



Marine Corps Historical Collection
A Marine of the 3d Platoon, Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines throws a hand grenade toward North Vietnamese positions in close fighting on 1 March during Operation Prairie II north of Cam Lo.

As the last man left Company L's original position, the lead elements of the column came under automatic weapons and mortar fire. The Marines had stepped into an ambush. Company F's lead elements took cover from the growing volume of fire from the front and both flanks; enemy mortar fire walked down the length of the column. Heavy brush hid the enemy and the Marines could not establish fire superiority. At 1510, Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian ordered a withdrawal.* Sheridan described the move:

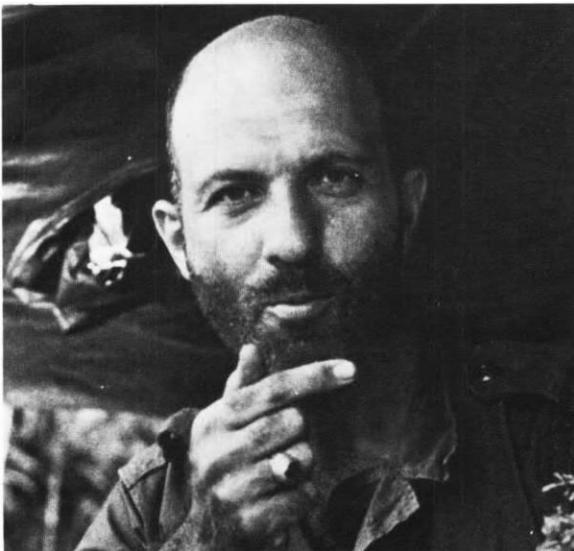
. . . all radios had been hit and casualties continued to mount. Moving the dead and wounded out of the killing zone required feats of bravery beyond comprehension. The NVA were everywhere. Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian was carrying the last of the wounded Marines towards the perimeter when an explosion mortally wounded him,

*For his actions during the closely fought engagement Private First Class James Anderson, Jr., received the Medal of Honor, posthumously. When the fight began, the thick brush beside the trail prevented the Marines from deploying. When a grenade landed in the midst of the Marines, Anderson reached out, pulled the grenade to his chest, and curled around it as it went off. See Appendix D for complete citation.

[plus] three other Marines, and myself. None of us could walk and Marines had to leave the relative safety of their holes to come get us.⁴

Although painfully wounded, Sheridan assumed command and directed the rest of the withdrawal to Company L's position and the consolidation of the perimeter. He requested emergency evacuation for the more than 100 casualties. While the Marines organized their defensive perimeter, the enemy closed to within 20 meters and attacked with small arms and grenades. The Marine tank crewmen and infantrymen returned the fire and forced the enemy to withdraw. At this time the helicopters arrived to pick up the wounded, but they were unable to land because of heavy fire in the landing zone. At 1830, the position was still being hit by intermittent mortar shelling, which by now had lasted more than three hours. Sheridan recalled:

The enemy continued to alternately shell and [attempt to] overrun our small position the remainder of the night. Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian died around midnight as it was impossible to secure a landing zone. Sergeant Major Wayne N. Hayes died about the same time of wounds suffered in hand-to-hand combat and grenade and mortar blasts. Constant artillery, night air strikes within 50 meters of our position and the courage of the Marines on the ground finally took their toll and the NVA withdrew.⁵



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189092

LtCol Victor Ohanesian, the commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, shown here in Operation Allegheny in August 1966, died early on 1 March 1967 from shrapnel wounds suffered the previous afternoon as he carried a casualty to safety.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193922
Members of Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines who had finished Operation Chinook II, rest while waiting for the helicopters that will transport them to Cam Lo Province to participate in Operation Prairie II just south of the Demilitarized Zone.

Earlier, upon learning that Lieutenant Colonel Ohanesian had been wounded, Colonel Lanigan ordered his executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Earl R. "Pappy" Delong to take command of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. In addition, Lieutenant Colonel Delong received operational control of Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines which, fortuitously, was at Dong Ha after serving as escort for a "Roughrider" vehicle convoy from the south. Company F went by truck to Cam Lo where it would begin moving overland to reinforce the hard-pressed 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Delong attempted to reach his new command by helicopter but enemy fire prevented a landing. He ordered the helicopter to Cam Lo where he joined Company F for the overland march. At 0340 on 1 March, Delong arrived at the battalion's position and began reorganization and preparation for the evacuation of casualties.

The 2d Battalion remained in position the entire day. About noon it was joined by Companies G and M. The Marines searched the surrounding area and recovered a large amount of enemy equipment. Company M made several contacts with small enemy groups, but the NVA force was withdrawing. The 2d Battalion, 3d Marines could continue its interrupted embarkation for Okinawa.

Two additional battalions were brought into the area on 1 March, Major James L. Day's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Gary Wilder's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Major Day's battalion moved by helicopters to Hill 162, Company M's former location, and began to sweep north.

Meanwhile, Wilder's battalion attacked northwest from a position north of Cam Lo to try to squeeze the withdrawing enemy against the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. This maneuver restricted the Communists' escape route, thereby concentrating targets for Marine supporting arms. On 3 March, an air observer sighted three large enemy groups moving northwest toward the DMZ, carrying bodies. Massive artillery and air strikes were ordered. A followup sweep of the area by the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines revealed that the North Vietnamese had used the bomb and shell craters as mass graves for their dead; more than 200 NVA bodies were found.

All enemy forces had not withdrawn. On the morning of 7 March, the enemy made three separate mortar and rocket attacks on Camp Carroll. Between 420 and 485 rounds hit the camp, including 209 spin-stabilized 122mm rockets.

The remainder of the Prairie II operation consisted of a series of battalion sweeps between Cam Lo and Con Thien. The Marines located several mass graves; the discovery of many abandoned bodies emphasized the disorganized state of the enemy. Numerous artillery and air strikes hit the scattered enemy forces trying to avoid contact. During the last week of the operation ARVN airborne units caught up with the NVA east and southeast of Con Thien. The enemy force, estimated to have been three battalions, broke contact after losing more than 250 killed.

At 2400 on 18 March Operation Prairie II ended. Prairie II cost the NVA 694 killed and 20 captured; Marine casualties were 93 killed, 483 wounded, and, of these, approximately one-third of the Marines killed and two-thirds of the wounded were victims of mortar fire.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189085
Maj James L. Day (right), commanding the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, briefs BGen Michael P. Ryan on 3 March on the progress of Prairie II, as Company A's commander, Capt Donald Festa (left), checks a map.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188463
Marines of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines pause on 3 March in their sweep of an area used by the North Vietnamese to bury more than 200 soldiers killed by supporting arms during Operation Prairie II.



Marine Corps Historical Collection
2dLt Jerry D. Garner of Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines orders his platoon forward during the pursuit of NVA units north of Cam Lo on 3 March.

*This was the first use of this weapon in the DMZ area. The Chinese Communist 122mm rocket is similar to the obsolete U.S. 4.5-inch rocket used during World War II. It has a range of 5,000 meters.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188464

The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines encountered a wide variety of terrain conditions and enemy activity during Operation Prairie II. Excellent observation in an area of elephant grass permitted 2dLt Jerry D. Garner of Company A (above photo, left) to observe the effectiveness of an airstrike on a distant NVA unit. The following day, 3 March, an NVA soldier surrendered to the company. The final day of the operation, 18 March, found Company C moving through a bombed-out forest in hills near Cam Lo.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188525

Marine Corps Historical Collection



Operation Prairie III

Increased enemy use of supporting arms became a constant concern for the Marines during Prairie III, which started immediately after Prairie II. At the start of the operation, enemy activity centered on the Cam Lo and Gio Linh districts. Contact was moderate, generally limited to small enemy groups. Prairie II had blunted earlier NVA intentions in the area, but all indications were that the enemy's determination to challenge the Marines' presence had not diminished in spite of heavy casualties.

Anticipating renewed NVA efforts, III MAF held five infantry battalions and four artillery battalions in the area. Battalions at Dong Ha served under the operational control of the 3d Division's forward headquarters, while those at Camp Carroll and the Rockpile came under the control of the 3d Marines. Additional company-strength outposts were at the Cua Viet port facility, Gio Linh, Mai Loc, Ba Long, and Ca Lu; a two-company outpost was at Khe Sanh. The Marines conducted energetic reconnaissance throughout the area.

The increased operational tempo in the DMZ area placed a heavy strain on Dong Ha logistic facilities. Supplies for the Prairie area of operation arrived at either the Dong Ha airfield, which had been extended to handle C-130 transports, or they came north



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188524
The start of Operation Prairie III found Company C, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines moving through heavy elephant grass as the battalion searched the mountains north of Cam Lo for North Vietnamese units.

Trucks of the 9th Motor Transport Battalion move over Highway 9 from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh on 28 March. The 11th Engineer Battalion had opened the road on the 19th after months of effort that involved coping with adverse weather and enemy attacks.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



from Da Nang by LCUs (landing craft, utility) up the Cua Viet River to Dong Ha. On 18 March, a major step in easing the logistic burden occurred when an LST (landing ship, tank) ramp opened at Cua Viet. These LSTs could discharge their cargo for transshipment up the river by LCUs and LCMs (landing craft, medium). The Cua Viet facility more than tripled the daily tonnage that could be brought in by ships.

A second significant logistic event occurred on the 19th. Route 9 opened from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh, thanks to Lieutenant Colonel Ross L. Mulford's 11th Engineer Battalion. Mulford's engineers had worked on the road for months, hindered by terrible weather conditions, mines, and the NVA. The military significance of their effort was considerable, since it reduced the requirement to commit aircraft for logistic support of the Khe Sanh outpost until late summer, when enemy activity closed the road.

When Operation Prairie III started, it appeared that Marine forces continued to face elements of the *324B* and the *341st NVA Divisions* north of the Ben Hai River. Battalion-size elements of both enemy divisions were in Quang Tri Province, conducting extensive screening and reconnaissance missions, as well as attempting to disrupt the Revolutionary Development Program. Additionally, ARVN units reported that the *808th VC* and *814th NVA Battalions* were east and south of Quang Tri City.

On 20 March Lieutenant Colonel William H. Rice's Composite Artillery Battalion at Gio Linh came under attack by mortars, rockets, and artillery. The attack demonstrated the enemy's ability to employ artillery from positions north of the Ben Hai River. Although the bombardment on the 20th was the heaviest, both Gio Linh and Con Thien received almost daily attacks during the next two weeks.

Further evidence of increased enemy activity in the area occurred on 21 March. At 0200 an enemy force ambushed an ammunition resupply convoy only 300 meters south of Gio Linh. As the convoy approached the artillery position, the enemy struck with heavy small arms and mortar fire, destroying eight trucks and damaging six others. Fortunately, friendly casualties totaled only eight wounded because of the rapid reaction of both the convoy guard and the Gio Linh security company, Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines.

When Prairie III began, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines were conducting a mission in the mountains west of Cam Lo

approximately 6,000 meters north of Camp Carroll. The seven-day operation ended on the 21st having made little contact with the enemy, but discovered numerous mortar positions and rocket launching sites, which probably were the positions used in the attack against Camp Carroll on 7 March. A search of the area uncovered 125 large rockets and 3 rocket launchers. Both battalions received orders to sweep north from Cam Lo in support of Operation Beacon Hill being conducted to the east by Seventh Fleet's SLF.

For some time General Walt had been troubled by growing enemy activity in the region northeast of Dong Ha. His greatest concern was the possibility of an NVA attempt to overrun the Gio Linh artillery base. Its 175mm guns were capable of firing at positions deep in North Vietnam. To counter this threat, General Walt asked the commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (ComUSMACV) to have the SLF committed to this area.* CinCPac approved the request on 15 March. Operation Beacon Hill moved into the planning phase, with 19 March set as D-Day.

Bad weather postponed the scheduled landing from ships of the Seventh Fleet's Amphibious Ready Group until the early afternoon of the 20th. Initial operations were unopposed, but BLT 1/4 elements near Gio Linh received fire from enemy supporting arms that night. Company B made contact on the 21st, and the BLT engaged well-entrenched enemy units through the 26th. On 28 March, BLT 1/4 passed to the operational control of the 3d Marines. On 1 April Beacon Hill ended, and III MAF released the BLT to SLF control.

The contribution of Beacon Hill to the Prairie III operation, going on 10 miles to the west, can be measured, in part, by casualty figures. During 12 operational days, BLT 1/4 killed 334 NVA soldiers who otherwise would have been available for use against the battalions involved in Prairie III. Beacon Hill tied up a substantial enemy force. Marine casualties totaled 29 SLF Marines killed and 230 wounded.**

*General Westmoreland, as ComUSMACV, could not authorize the landing of the SLF; CinCPac was the authorizing command.

**Chapter 11 contains the detailed account of SLF participation in Beacon Hill/Prairie III.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188583

Members of Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines cross a stream on 19 March as the battalion conducted a seven-day search west of Cam Lo early in Operation Prairie III.

To the west of Beacon Hill, other Marines involved in Operation Prairie III experienced similar light contact during the opening phases. The two battalions under command of the 3d Marines—the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and 1st Battalion, 9th Marines—had moved from the Dong Ha/Dong Ma Mountain complex to Cam Lo on 21 March in preparation for a sweep north to Con Thien. The next morning both battalions jumped off at first light; Lieutenant Colonel Wilder's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines was on the left and Major Day's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines was on the right. They encountered light contact during the first two days, but on 24 March Day's battalion found an NVA battalion southeast of Con Thien. The enemy was in well-prepared defensive positions consisting of mutually supporting bunkers. After two hours of heavy fighting, which included concentrated air and artillery strikes, the enemy withdrew, leaving 33 bodies.*

While Major Day's 1st Battalion attacked the

Communist bunker complex, Lieutenant Colonel Wilder's battalion, on the left, engaged an NVA company. This unit was also well entrenched in camouflaged, reinforced bunkers. The enemy's light mortars were dug in below ground level, making them even more difficult to locate. Artillery, followed up by an assault by Company I, cracked the position. The NVA broke contact and withdrew, leaving behind 28 bodies, including two uniformed women.

The enemy attempted to delay the Marine advance with harassing mortar and sniper fire for the next two days. By the evening of 26 March the Communist force had broken contact and withdrawn into the DMZ.

On the 28th, the 3d Marines pulled both battalions out of the area and replaced them with Lieutenant Colonel James S. Wilson's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. Wilson's mission was to conduct night ambushes in the area immediately north of Cam Lo. There was very little contact for the first two days, but on the 30th, as Company I completed establishing platoon ambush positions, the NVA attacked the company command post and the 2d platoon's position. Company I's positions were approximately six miles northwest of Cam Lo. The Communists walked mortar fire over the position twice, then followed with a ground assault in company

*During this action Sergeant Walter K. Singleton of Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, assaulted the key enemy strong point with a machine gun. Though mortally wounded, he drove the enemy from the position. Sergeant Singleton was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously. See Appendix D for complete citation.

strength. The first assault failed when the company commander, Captain Michael P. Getlin, called in supporting arms. As the first attack started, both the 1st and 3d Platoons tried to help the command group and the 2d Platoon, but the enemy stopped the Marines with a cross-fire of automatic weapons. The NVA assaulted a second time. This time they overran the position.

With the help of UH-1E gunships, the company managed to drive off the enemy. The NVA lost 67 killed and 2 captured in both attacks, and a search of the area the following morning turned up a heavy machine gun and 12 automatic weapons. Company I's losses were heavy. Sixteen Marines died, including the company commander, executive officer, and the weapons platoon commander; 47 more were wounded, including the company first sergeant.*

Enemy activity around Quang Tri City increased during the first week of April. The NVA launched a series of mortar and ground attacks against ARVN positions in the area. On 6 April a Viet Cong unit broke into the Quang Tri provincial jail, freeing more than 200 prisoners.

In spite of this surge of enemy activity to the south, the Marines' main concerns in the Prairie area continued to be blocking major invasion attempts by the NVA and clearing an anti-infiltration trace between Gio Linh and Con Thien. The second task, in-

cluded in the development of a strongpoint system, was intended to stop large-scale infiltration in the critical area along the eastern DMZ.*

On 12 April, Major General Bruno A. Hochmuth, a lanky Texan who had assumed command of the 3d Marine Division from Major General Kyle the previous month, established a task force around Lieutenant Colonel Theodore J. Willis' 1st Battalion, 4th Marines.** Its mission was to provide security for Company C, 11th Engineer Battalion. The engineer company was to clear a 200-meter-wide strip from Gio Linh to Con Thien, a distance of 10,600 meters. Willis' task force was reinforced with a platoon of tanks, an armored amphibian tractor (LVTH-6) platoon, a platoon of M-42 track-mounted dual 40mm guns of the 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, USA, and some ARVN forces. From the onset the clearing operation proceeded under constant harassment by enemy artillery, mortars, mines, recoilless rifles, and small arms. Despite enemy activity, the Marines had completed approximately half of the strip by 19 April when Operation Prairie III ended.

Prairie III cost the enemy 252 killed, 4 captured, and 128 weapons seized. Marine losses were 56 killed and 530 wounded. The Prairie series was far from over; Prairie IV began the next day in the same place and with the same forces.

*Second Lieutenant John P. Bobo, the weapons platoon commander, later received a posthumous Medal of Honor for his actions during the encounter. See Appendix D for the complete citation.

*The trace or strong point system will be covered more fully in Chapter 8.

**At the conclusion of Operation Beacon Hill, 1 April 1967, BLT 1/4 transferred from the SLF to the 3d Marine Division.

CHAPTER 3

Combined US/ARVN Operations in the DMZ

*Operation Prairie IV Begins—Attack on Con Thien—Into the DMZ—Operation Lam Son 54
Operation Beau Charger—Operation Hickory—Operation Prairie IV Ends*

Operation Prairie IV Begins

Enemy concentrations of troops and artillery in the DMZ area dictated the reinforcement of the 3d Marine Division. Responding to the demands of the situation, MACV deployed Army Task Force Oregon to the southern two provinces of I Corps in April to allow Marine units to reinforce the northern three provinces.* As a result of the northward shift of Marine forces, Colonel Robert M. Jenkins' 9th Marines headquarters moved from Da Nang to Dong Ha during 12-16 April. At the same time, III MAF shifted the 2d Battalions of the 4th and 26th Marines from the 1st Marine Division area to the vicinity of Phu Bai.

The introduction of a second regimental headquarters into Quang Tri Province permitted the closing of the 3d Division's forward command post at Dong Ha after the conclusion of Operation Prairie III. Units operating from Dong Ha reverted to the operational control of the 9th Marines, while the 3d Marines controlled those operating from Camp Carroll.

Operation Prairie IV started on 20 April as a two-regiment search and destroy operation, covering the same area as Prairie III. The concept of employment placed the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines in the northwest portion of the area of operations. The 9th Marines, using the 1st Battalions of the 4th and 9th Marines, was to cover the vital piedmont area in and around Quang Tri City. The boundary between the two units was just west of the Cam Lo-Con Thien axis.

Initially, the operation confined all units to relatively fixed positions. Lieutenant Colonel

*The deployment of Task Force Oregon into the Chu Lai area is covered in detail in Chapter 6.

Wilson's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines was charged with the security of Camp Carroll and the outpost at Mai Loc. Wilder's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines held the Rockpile and placed companies at Ca Lu and Ba Long. The latter battalion was also responsible for providing security for the 11th Engineers, who kept



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188645
A UH-34D from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 163 uses a newly constructed helicopter pad on top of the Rockpile to resupply members of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Helicopters previously performed this mission by hovering with one wheel on a tiny wooden ramp. (See photograph on page 183 of the volume U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1966.)

Route 9 open into Khe Sanh. In the 9th Marines' area of operation, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines defended the Dong Ha combat base and provided one company for security of the Cua Viet petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL) facility. The 1st Battalion, 4th Marines protected the engineers clearing the trace between Gio Linh and Con Thien, referred to as "Ryan's Road" because of Brigadier General Michael P. Ryan's frequent visits and interest in the project. The battalion also continued to provide a company for security for the Gio Linh Composite Artillery Battalion.

Although contact with enemy infantry was light at the beginning of the operation, reconnaissance reports indicated an NVA buildup northwest of the Rockpile. Mortar, rocket, and artillery attacks continued against the Marines clearing "Ryan's Road," as well as against the Con Thien and Gio Linh outposts. Attacks on these two positions and against Lieutenant Colonel Willis' 1st Battalion, 4th Marines and the engineers became almost daily affairs, and included not only mortar and rocket fire from the southern half of the DMZ, but also medium and heavy artillery fire from a growing number of fortifications north of the Ben Hai River.

On 24 April a major battle broke out in the western DMZ near Khe Sanh, the beginning of heavy fighting which continued throughout the summer all along the demarcation line.* In conjunction with the battle being fought in the west, the enemy stepped up activity in the east. Enemy forces cut Route 9 between Cam Lo and Khe Sanh repeatedly in an effort to isolate the Marines in that area. In consort with this effort, the NVA attacked the Marine installations at Gio Linh, Camp Carroll, and Dong Ha with mortars, rockets, and artillery. The period 27-28 April was particularly savage. Approximately 850 rounds of artillery, plus 200 mortar rounds blasted Gio Linh, while more than 50 140mm rockets hit Dong Ha.

Attack on Con Thien

On 8 May, the 13th anniversary of the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the NVA tried to overrun the Marine position at Con Thien. The outpost, less than two miles from the southern boundary of the DMZ, was on a hill only 158 meters high in the middle of a red mud

plain. It afforded the best observation in the area, overlooking the DMZ to the north and west, as well as the Marine base at Dong Ha to the southeast. As a strategic terrain feature, Con Thien was important to the Communists; before the summer was over, it achieved an additional symbolic importance.

At the time of the attack, the outpost contained a small command group of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, reinforced companies A and D of the battalion, and a civilian irregular defense group (CIDG) unit. The Marines were there to provide security for the engineers, who, having completed the trace on 1 May, were busy clearing a 500-meter-wide strip around the perimeter of the outpost. At 0255, the morning of 8 May, a green flare lit the sky south of the hill, followed immediately by a savage 300-round mortar and artillery attack. Concurrently, Camp Carroll, Gio Linh, and Dong Ha also came under fire.

At Con Thien, enemy units maneuvering under cover of the barrage breached the defensive wire with bangalore torpedoes, and small elements moved inside. At approximately 0400, two NVA battalions, armed with flamethrowers, RPGs, and automatic weapons, attacked through the breach in the wire. The brunt of this assault fell on the right flank of Company D. The Marines engaged the enemy force in bitter hand-to-hand fighting. An engineer platoon moved to reinforce Company D. The situation became serious when the Marines ran out of 81mm mortar illumination rounds; artillery illumination from the nearest artillery at Gio Linh could not reach Con Thien.* A flare plane finally arrived and provided much-needed illumination until daylight.

Meanwhile, Company A sent a platoon to help Company D, as well as to protect an ammunition resupply convoy composed of an attached Army M42 "Duster," two LVTHs, and two 1/4-ton trucks. As these elements moved up to support the hard-pressed Marines of Company D, the relief vehicles came under enemy fire. The Army M42, which was the lead vehicle, stopped and burst into flames after being hit by an enemy RPG antitank projectile. A satchel charge exploded under the following LVTH. It began to burn but its crew managed to get out. The trailing LVTH, trying to get around the burning vehicles, which now included the 1/4-ton trucks,

*For a detailed account of the action at Khe Sanh see Chapter

*There is no illumination round for the 175mm gun.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193904

An amphibian tractor (LVTP-5) hit by North Vietnamese mortars on the night of 8 May at Gio Linh still burns the next morning. The other vehicle is an Army M-42 "Duster" equipped with twin 40mm automatic cannon and often used in a ground support role.

became entangled by barbed wire around its left rear sprocket. The tractor was stuck. Despite their losses, the reinforcing Marines continued to Company D's position. With these reinforcements, Company D halted the enemy penetration and sealed off the break in the wire just before daylight. By 0900, the enemy soldiers still within the perimeter were either dead or captured.¹

The recently completed brush clearance around the perimeter paid early dividends. It permitted the Marines to catch the retreating North Vietnamese in the open as they crossed the cleared strip. Tanks and LVTHs firing both conventional and "beehive" antipersonnel ammunition were particularly effective.* Supporting fires of the Composite Artillery Battalion at Gio Linh ripped into the enemy as it withdrew north to the DMZ.

The defending Marines lost 44 killed and 110 wounded, as well as two LVTHs and one 1/4-ton truck destroyed, but the hard and bloody battle cost

the enemy 197 killed and 8 captured. The Communists left behind 72 weapons, including 19 antitank weapons, 3 light machine guns, and 3 flamethrowers.*

The 8 May attack on Con Thien had been carefully rehearsed, but the enemy displayed an inherent inability to alter plans. The NVA attacked the strongest point of the defensive perimeter and continued to press the attack at this point, even when it was clear that it had encountered heavier resistance than anticipated. The enemy planners were not aware of the arrival of the two Marine companies. Company D had replaced an ARVN unit only a few days before the attack.

Following this battle, enemy activity intensified throughout the "Leatherneck Square" area.** The number and volume of artillery attacks increased greatly. More than 4,200 mortar, rocket, and artillery rounds were fired at Marine positions during the month. The enemy revealed the degree and

*This was the first instance of NVA use of flamethrowers against the Marines.

**"Leatherneck Square" was the quadrilateral between Con Thien, Gio Linh, Dong Ha, and Cam Lo.

*See Chapter 13 for discussion of "beehive ammunition."



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Maj Edward H. Boyd, the executive officer of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, shows one of the three captured flame throwers used by NVA units that attacked the base at Con Thien in the early hours of 8 May.

sophistication of its buildup in the area on 10 May by the destruction of a Douglas A-4E Skyhawk flying a radar-controlled mission near the southern boundary of the DMZ. As the plane approached its target, Marines on the ground witnessed the firing of three surface-to-air missiles (SAM) from positions north of the Ben Hai River. One of the missiles hit the A-4E; the aircraft disappeared from the controlling radar screen at Dong Ha. This was the first reported use of Communist SAMs over South Vietnam.

Into the DMZ

Enemy ground action increased. During the period 13-16 May, while clearing Route 561 from Cam Lo to Con Thien, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines made heavy contact with a large NVA force in well prepared positions just south of Con Thien. The enemy fought well and retired north of the DMZ boundary only after extreme pressure.

Once again the enemy used the unusual advantage conferred by the de facto access to the DMZ, and thus to all of South Vietnam. Marine forces still

were forbidden by U.S. policy to move beyond the southern edge of the DMZ. For some time much of the shelling, particularly that by shorter-ranged weapons, mortars, and rockets, came from the region south of the Ben Hai River. It was equally clear that the enemy was using the southern DMZ as a sanctuary from which to launch ground attacks, such as the one against Con Thien.

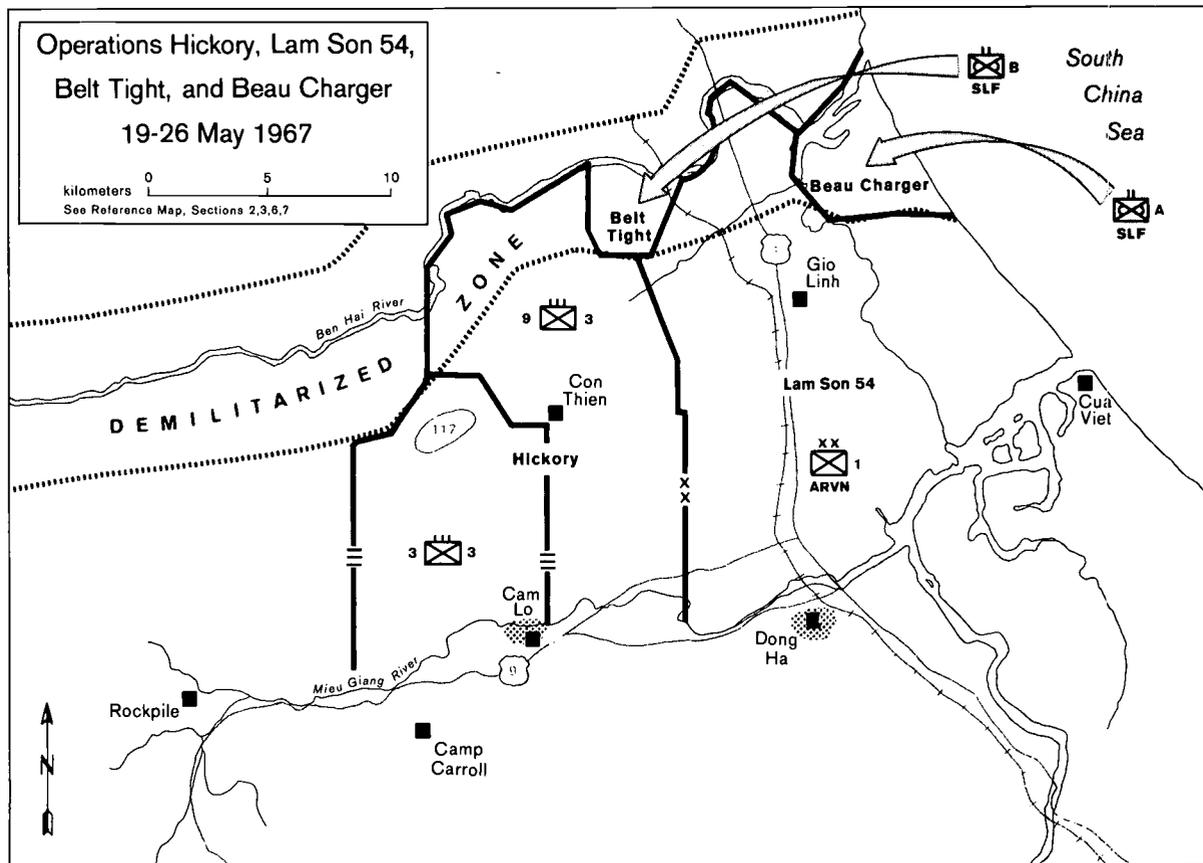
On 8 May, after the Con Thien attack, Washington changed the DMZ policy. MACV then authorized III MAF to conduct ground operations in the southern half of the DMZ, and III MAF, in conjunction with the South Vietnamese, quickly drew up plans for combined USMC/ARVN ground, amphibious, and heliborne operations in the eastern portion of the area. The basic concept called for ground attacks by the 3d Marine Division and 1st ARVN Division along parallel routes, as far north as the Ben Hai River.

Combined with the ground attack, the newly formed Special Landing Force Alpha was to conduct an amphibious landing in the southern portion of the DMZ along the coast to secure the area as far north as the south bank of the Ben Hai River*. On reaching the Ben Hai, all units were to turn around and attack south on a broad front, sweeping as far as Route 9, destroying all enemy units, installations, and supplies encountered. In addition, the plan included the development of a freefire zone which involved the evacuation by South Vietnamese National Police of some 12,000 noncombatants living within the buffer zone. Operational code names were Hickory for the 3d Marine Division units, Beau Charger and Belt Tight for the SLFs, and Lam Son 54** for the ARVN forces. The ARVN force for this operation was composed of three battalions of airborne troops and two battalions of the 1st ARVN Division. The combined operation was to start on 18 May. More fire support was allocated for this operation than for any previous operation in the 3d Division's operating area.

The available fire support included artillery, augmented by the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, two cruisers, and seven destroyers (six U.S. and one Australian), as well as by aircraft from the Seventh

*At ComUSMACV's request, CinCPac committed a second SLF to the area on 15 April. The two SLFs were identified as Alpha and Bravo. (See Chapter 11).

**Lam Son was an ancient Vietnamese cultural hero for whom all the 1st ARVN Division operations were named. LtGen Louis Metzger, comments on draft MS, [1981].



Air Force and the Seventh Fleet. The majority of the support focused on enemy concentrations and gun positions in the northern portion of the DMZ and the adjacent area to the immediate north, and, if required, as counterbattery fire against North Vietnamese shore batteries.

A buildup of Marine forces in the Prairie area preceded the operation. Lieutenant Colonel Charles R. Figard's 2d Battalion, 26th Marines arrived from Phong Dien on 15 May; the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Wendell N. Vest, came in from Okinawa on the 15th; and the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John J. Peeler, arrived from Phu Bai on the 16th.* At the beginning of the operation three battalions, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines and the 1st and 3d Battalions, 9th Marines provided augmentation from Operation Prairie IV

*At the request of ComUSMACV, CinCPac directed the deployment of BLT 3/4, the last element of the Pacific Command reserve, to I Corps. In a massive 42-plane Air Force and Marine airlift the BLT moved directly from Okinawa to Dong Ha. The entire lift of the 1,233-man force took exactly 31 hours.

forces. In addition, SLF Bravo was to act as 3d Division Reserve. The same day Colonel Edward E. Hammerbeck, the new regimental commander, deployed the 9th Marines command post to a position just north of Cam Lo.

During the night of 17-18 May the NVA directed heavy mortar, rocket, and artillery attacks against all Marine positions along the DMZ. Gio Linh and Dong Ha suffered the most. From 2350 on the 17th until 0401 on the 18th, over 300 rounds hit Gio Linh, killing 1 Marine and wounding 12 others. During the attack on Dong Ha, at 0315, 150 140mm rockets killed 11 and wounded 91. One rocket scored a direct hit on the roof of the 3d Marine Division Combat Operations Center (COC), but there were no casualties. The rocket detonated prematurely upon hitting a tin roof the division recently had built a few feet above the original sandbagged but leaky roof.² Next door, the ARVN COC had no sandbag protection and suffered numerous casualties. The rockets also damaged considerable amounts of equipment, including minor fragment damage to several helicopters of Major Marvin E.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

North Vietnamese soldiers captured in Operations Hickory and Lam Son 54 stand blindfolded outside the 9th Marines' headquarters at the Dong Ha combat base on 25 May.

Day's Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 363.* The Communist artillery attacks, nevertheless, were fortuitous for they allowed the allied forces to bombard the NVA positions in and north of the DMZ, under the guise of counterbattery fire, thereby maintaining tactical surprise for the forthcoming operation.

Operation Lam Son 54

Hickory/Lam Son 54 started on schedule. The 1st ARVN Division elements jumped off at 0500, moving in column up Route 1, into the DMZ. Surprise was complete; the ARVN units encountered no resistance as they moved to the Ben Hai and wheeled south. The two 1st ARVN Division battalions started their sweep south on the east side of Route 1, while the three airborne battalions, supported by tanks,

*While the damage to the helicopters was minor, this and subsequent attacks disrupted helicopter operations by preventing normal maintenance. This caused the rotation of squadrons in July and the subsequent abandonment in the fall of Dong Ha as a permanent helicopter base in favor of Quang Tri. LtCol Horace A. Bruce, Comments on draft ms, 14Jul81, (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

turned to the west and then southward abreast the advance of the 1st Division units east of the highway.

On the 19th, the airborne battalions engaged elements of the 31st and 812th NVA Regiments. From then until the 27th, when Lam Son 54 ended, ARVN units were in constant contact with the enemy. Their casualties were 22 killed and 122 wounded. The enemy suffered more substantial losses: 342 killed, 30 captured, and 51 weapons seized. Most of the casualties occurred in the area known as the "rocket belt" north of Dong Ha.

Operation Beau Charger

East of the Lam Son 54 operational area, Operation Beau Charger began at the scheduled L-hour and H-hour of 0800, 18 May. Just before and during the launching of the assault, a duel started between Navy fire support ships and NVA shore batteries. Although the NVA batteries hit no ships, 10 salvos bracketed the USS *Point Defiance* (LSD 31). After return fire silenced the shore batteries, the surface landing proceeded without further incident; there was no opposition.

The Beau Charger heliborne force experienced a different reception. Landing Zone Goose was a "hot" zone, and only one platoon of Company A, the assault company, managed to land. The Communists closed in and the situation was very much in doubt. At 1100 elements of Company D and the rest of Company A, reinforced with tanks, succeeded in joining up with the isolated assault platoon. The Communists withdrew only after air strikes began to hammer their positions.

On the 18th, NVA gunners ranged in on supporting Marine SLF artillery positions, knocking out two guns. Ships of the Seventh Fleet returned fire, silencing the North Vietnamese batteries. The Marines relocated their remaining guns at positions 5,800 meters further south.

Action during the rest of Beau Charger consisted of light contact and continuing artillery harassment until the operation ended on 26 May.* West of the Beau Charger operational area the 3d Marine Division was faced with a much different situation. There, the enemy had come to fight.

Operation Hickory

Adjacent to the Lam Son 54/Beau Charger operational area, 3d Marine Division units launched Operation Hickory on the morning of 18 May. Lieutenant Colonel Figard's 2d Battalion, 26th Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Peeler's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, supported by tanks and Ontos, advanced northward from positions near Con Thien.** Concurrently, Lieutenant Colonel Vest's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines moved by helicopters into a landing zone (LZ) within the DMZ near the Ben Hai River, northwest of Con Thien. The heliborne battalion was to act as a blocking force to prevent the enemy from escaping to the north, or to stop the movement of reinforcements into the area from the north.

Shortly after 1100 the lead element of Figard's 2d Battalion, 26th Marines made contact with a force which intelligence officers later determined to have been two battalions. All elements of the Marine battalion quickly became engaged in the battle; the

enemy defended from well prepared bunkers and trenches. As the battalion moved against the NVA positions, the right flank came under vicious automatic weapons and mortar fire. Casualties were heavy. Among them were Lieutenant Colonel Figard and his S-3, both of whom required evacuation. Despite the heavy enemy fire, the Navy hospital corpsmen continued their treatment of the wounded.³ By 1600, Peeler's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines had moved up on the right of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines and was also in close contact. Fighting continued until nightfall when the Marines broke contact and pulled back to evacuate casualties. During the day, enemy fire killed 5 Marines and wounded 142; 31 enemy soldiers were known to have been killed.

The 3d Marine Division already had replaced the wounded Lieutenant Colonel Figard with a new battalion commander. As soon as it learned of Figard's condition, the division immediately ordered Lieutenant Colonel William J. Masterpool, who had just joined the division staff after command of 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, to assume command of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines.

That night, 75 radar-controlled air strikes hit the NVA positions in front of the two Marine battalions. At 0500 on 19 May, heavy artillery fire fell on the enemy defenses and both battalions jumped off in the attack at 0700. During the "prep" fires several short rounds landed on Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, killing 3 and wounding 2 Marines. Within minutes, the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines again checked its advance because of savage fire from its front and right, while Peeler's battalion encountered only light small arms fire and pushed rapidly ahead to relieve the pressure on Masterpool's flank. By 1030 the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines had overrun the enemy bunker complex, accounting for 34 North Vietnamese killed and 9 wounded.

As the 3d Marine Division begins Operation Hickory on 18 May, CH-46A Sea Knight helicopters commence lifting the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines to a blocking position within the DMZ near the Ben Hai River, northwest of the important Con Thien base.

Marine Corps Historical Collection

*See Chapter 11 for the detailed operation of SLF involvement during Operation Beau Charger.

**The Ontos, or M50A1, was a lightly armored, tracked vehicle which mounted six 106mm recoilless rifles. Originally intended as an antitank vehicle, the Ontos, because of its mobility, became an all-purpose infantry support weapons system in Vietnam.





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A801287

This log and dirt bunker, part of an unoccupied enemy fortified complex found by the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines on 18 May during Operation Hickory, illustrates the type of well constructed and camouflaged North Vietnamese Army fortifications often encountered by the 3d Marine Division in the battles in and below the Demilitarized Zone.

During the rest of the morning both battalions continued to advance against negligible resistance. At 1330, Captain Robert J. Thompson's Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, on the easternmost flank of the advance, met heavy automatic weapon and mortar fire from the east. The company returned fire, but then received additional enemy fire from a tree line 60 meters to the front. Again the Marines returned fire and a tank moved up in support. It silenced the enemy with cannister fire. A squad sent forward to check out the area also came under heavy automatic weapons fire. The tank, moving to support the squad, halted after being hit by RPG rounds and began to burn. A second tank maneuvered forward to help; RPGs disabled it also. Captain Thompson, unable to use other supporting arms because of wounded Marines to his front, moved the entire company forward to retrieve the dead and wounded. After moving the wounded to the rear, the company pulled back and called in supporting arms fire on the evacuated area. The action

cost the Marines 7 killed and 12 wounded; enemy casualties were unknown.

In the meantime, Lieutenant Colonel Vest's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, after the heavy action involving the 2d Battalions, 26th and 9th Marines, swept to the southeast to block the NVA withdrawal. On 18 May the battalion made little contact, but discovered a large, abandoned, fortified position, well stocked with food and equipment. For the next two days Vest's battalion maneuvered toward the other Marine battalions which were moving north. Contact was light, but the battalion encountered intermittent mortar and artillery fire. The battalion continued to uncover large caches of rice and ammunition—over 30 tons of rice and 10 tons of ammunition—but due to the heat and distance to the landing zones much of the rice could not be moved and had to be destroyed.*

*High temperatures reduce helicopter lift capability, hence the inability to evacuate the large quantities of rice without diversion of additional helicopters from other missions.

To the southwest, Lieutenant Colonel Wilson's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, screening the western or left flank of the operation, saw little action during the first two days. Then, on 20 May, Company K, point for the battalion, made contact with what it initially estimated to be an enemy platoon deployed in mutually supporting bunkers in a draw. The enemy, at least a company, took Company K under fire. To relieve pressure on Company K, Company L maneuvered to the flank of the enemy position, but was unable to link up with Company K because of heavy enemy fire. Both companies spent the night on opposite sides of the draw with the enemy force between them, while supporting arms pounded the enemy position all night.

On the 21st, Company M moved forward and joined with K and L and the three companies were able to clear the area. The clearing operation was costly: 26 Marines were killed and 59 wounded. The Marines counted only 36 enemy bodies, but the lingering smell in the draw indicated that many others were in the destroyed fortifications.

Meanwhile, the division reserve, SLF Bravo's BLT 2/3, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel DeLong, and HMM-164, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Rodney D. McKittrick, joined Operation Hickory on the 20th. The employment of SLF Bravo involved a unique departure from the norm for amphibious operations in that the heliborne force passed to the control of the 3d Marine Division as it crossed the high water mark. This procedure ensured positive control of all supporting arms covering the battalion's approach to its inland tactical area of responsibility (TAOR).*

The squadron helilifted the battalion into the DMZ northwest of Gio Linh to block possible withdrawal routes of NVA units then engaged with ARVN airborne formations to the east. By noon all elements of the battalion were ashore and sweeping north toward the DMZ. The Marines of BLT 2/3 encountered only light resistance from small NVA units, apparently security elements for several large ordnance caches and bunker complexes. One of the bunkers was exceptionally sophisticated, constructed of steel overhead and walls. The Marines captured

*The battalion's movement from the SLF shipping to its inland TAOR was called Operation Belt Tight. See Chapter 8 for a more detailed account of SLF participation in Belt Tight.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188700

Capt Troy T. Shirley, commanding Company L, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, talks to some of his men after the company sustained heavy casualties during Operation Hickory close to the Demilitarized Zone.

more than 1,000 60mm mortar rounds, as well as large quantities of small arms ammunition and medical supplies in the same complex.

After sweeping the southern bank of the Ben Hai River, De Long's battalion wheeled south and began a deliberate search in that direction. Although the battalion met no resistance, it did uncover and destroy two extensive subterranean bunker complexes filled with supplies and ordnance. On the 23d the advance halted temporarily because of the declaration of a cease-fire to be observed throughout Vietnam in honor of Buddha's birthday.

After the brief "stand down," two battalions, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines and the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, began sweeping the DMZ to the southwest toward the mountains west of Con Thien. The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines continued to move northwest as the other two battalions moved south. To the east, the remaining Hickory battalions resumed search and destroy operations in the southern half of the DMZ and "Leatherneck Square."



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188699
PFC R. L. Crumrine, serving with the 9th Marines in Operation Hickory, bows his head in anguish after learning one of his closest friends had died fighting the North Vietnamese near the Demilitarized Zone.

Early on the morning of 25 May, Captain John J. Rozman's Company H, 26th Marines made contact with a large NVA company in a mutually supporting bunker complex near Hill 117, three miles west of Con Thien. The action was extremely close and lasted for more than an hour before Rozman's Marines managed to gain fire superiority and disengaged to evacuate their casualties. Air and artillery then hit the enemy positions. When relieved of its casualties, Company H maneuvered north of the hill mass where it met Captain John H. Flathman's Company K, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines at 1345. Both companies moved against the hill. At 1500 savage fighting developed; the Marines estimated the enemy force holding the position to be at least several companies.

When the Marines could not break through the strongly fortified position, Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool ordered them to disengage so that supporting arms could again attack the enemy

positions.* The two Marine companies again attacked but broke off the action at 1730 and established night positions north and west of the hill. Results of the day's fighting were 14 Marines killed and 92 wounded; the Marines counted 41 NVA bodies.

Marine air and artillery pounded the hill all night in preparation for the next attack, scheduled for the next day. At 0915 on the 26th, enemy automatic weapons fire forced down a UH-1E helicopter on a reconnaissance flight over the area. Among the wounded in the helicopter were Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool, his executive officer, and the commanders of Companies H and K; Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool and Captain Flathman had to be evacuated. Consequently, the battalion delayed the attack for another day to allow time for further bombardment of the hill and command adjustments. On the 27th, Companies E and F, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, under the control of Lieutenant Colonel Vest's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, moved against the objective behind covering artillery fire. They met no resistance and secured the hill by 1600. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines then passed through Companies E and F and consolidated on the ridges leading up to the higher ground west of Hill 117. In the meanwhile, Lieutenant Colonel Duncan D. Chaplin III arrived by helicopter to assume command of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, temporarily under its executive officer, Major James H. Landers.⁴

During the night, Colonel James R. Stockman, the commander of the 3d Marines, initiated heavy artillery fires from Con Thien and Gio Linh and using the 175mm guns of the Army's 2d Battalion, 94th Artillery to "literally change the face of the earth" on the enemy-held high ground. The following morning, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines continued its westward movement onto the high ground without opposition. Lieutenant Colonel Vest's men encountered only the extensive destruction of numerous fortified positions, apparently abandoned by the NVA early in the artillery attack. Colonel Stockman then ordered the battalion to move toward Con Thien.⁵

With the exception of the Hill 117 battle, contact diminished during the last days of Operation

*Operational control of Company K had passed to Colonel Masterpool's 2d Battalion, 26th Marines at 1645 on the 25th.

Hickory and the artillery operations to the east. Nevertheless, the Marines found and destroyed numerous well-fortified areas before the operation terminated on 28 May. In addition, they captured or destroyed more than 50 tons of rice and 10 tons of ordnance. Total enemy casualties for the combined Marine/ARVN operation were 789 killed (the equivalent of two NVA battalions), 37 captured, and 187 weapons taken. Of this total 447 were killed by Marines (85 in Beau Charger, 58 in Belt Tight/Hickory, and 304 in Hickory). Allied losses for the operation were by no means small; the Marines lost 142 killed and 896 wounded, while ARVN losses were 22 killed and 122 wounded.

The first large-scale allied entry into the southern half of the DMZ signified that the rules had changed. The area was no longer a guaranteed Communist sanctuary from which they could launch attacks. More immediately, the operation had upset, at least temporarily, the NVA organizational structure in the DMZ. The Marines realized that this initial search and destroy operation would not permanently deny the enemy's use of the area. Nevertheless, while total friendly control had not been established over the region, the removal of the civilian population from the area, some 11,000 people, now permitted the Marines complete freedom of use of supporting arms.

Operation Prairie IV Ends

At the end of Operation Hickory, all participating forces joined Operation Prairie IV and continued sweeps of "Leatherneck Square" and the area southwest of Con Thien. On 28 May, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines made heavy contact on Hill 174, approximately four miles southwest of Con Thien. The NVA were in bunkers, similar to the complex encountered on Hill 117. Two Companies, M and L, attacked late in the afternoon, only to be "blown off 174"⁶ by a heavy volume of fire from enemy small arms, automatic weapons, 57mm recoilless rifles, and 82mm mortars. Accounting for all personnel took much of the night. Results of this initial engagement were 2 Marines killed and 21 wounded. Known enemy casualties were 4 dead; with another 4 probably killed.

The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines called in artillery throughout the night; the North Vietnamese

responded with 82mm mortars. The following day, the 29th, Companies M and I, the latter led by Lieutenant Walter E. Deese's 1st Platoon, attacked up the hill. Despite being hit by friendly 60mm mortars, the Marines made contact with the NVA defenders around 1600. Enemy resistance remained firm; 5 more Marines died, 33 suffered wounds. This time, however, the Marines managed to hold positions on the western and northern slopes of Hill 174. The crest remained in enemy hands.

On 30 May, I and M Companies attacked again. Despite heavy supporting arms fire and the Marines' use of flame throwers and 3.5-inch rocket launchers, the enemy retained control of the hill. Another Marine died; 45 were wounded. There were seven confirmed enemy dead. The North Vietnamese, however, decided to give up the contest. Company M reached the crest of Hill 174 on 31 May, meeting no resistance.⁷

Operation Prairie IV, the last of the Prairie series of operations was over. It, like its predecessors, hurt the enemy: 505 died, 8 captured, and 150 weapons seized. Friendly losses were 164 killed and 1,240 wounded.

On 1 June, Operation Cimarron began in the same area and with the same formations. The operation lasted through 2 July, producing only light contact. The Marines discovered and destroyed several large, abandoned, fortified positions in the area southwest of Con Thien and unit sweeps located numerous enemy graves and several supply caches.

While Cimarron progressed, the land clearing project from Con Thien through Gio Linh to the high water mark on the coast reached completion by 1 July. The Marine engineers widened the previously cleared area to 600 meters for the entire 13.5 kilometers of its length. The 11th Engineer Battalion contributed more than 10,000 man hours and 4,500 tractor hours to this hazardous effort.

During the last days of Cimarron a sharp increase in enemy artillery activity, coupled with several small but intense engagements between patrols and dug-in NVA units around Con Thien, indicated that the enemy was preparing for renewed offensive operations in the area. There was to be much hole digging and sandbag filling before the summer ended.

CHAPTER 4

The First Battle of Khe Sanh

*The Early Days—Opening Moves of the Battle—Hill 861—Reinforcing the Hill 861 Attack
Attacking Hill 881S—The Final Objective: Hill 881N—End of the Battle—Operation Crockett*

The Early Days

The war in the northwestern portion of the 3d Marine Division's area of operations intensified early in 1967. During the spring the NVA gradually increased its forces around the Marine base at Khe Sanh. As the Marines maneuvered to determine the enemy's intentions, they became engaged in one of the bloodiest battles of the war.

The Khe Sanh area in western Quang Tri Province had been a major infiltration route into South Vietnam for as long as the Vietnamese had been at war. That slight but definite plateau, rising abruptly from the foothills bordering Laos and Vietnam, is dotted with hills and low mountains, providing a natural route into the two northern provinces of I Corps. The majority of the trails in the more mountainous area are concealed by tree canopies up to 60 feet in height, while those on the lower heights are hidden by dense elephant grass and bamboo thickets. Concealment from aerial observation was good and the dense undergrowth limited ground observation in most places to no more than five meters. Dong Tri Mountain is 1,015 meters high, the highest peak in the region. With Hills 861, 881 North and 881 South, it dominates the three main avenues of approach. Two trails enter from the northwest. One crosses the Laos-Vietnam border and winds southeast along the streams and valleys that join the Rao Quan River. The second approach from the northwest is a ridgeline that crosses the border to merge with Hills 881N, 881S, and 861. The third approach is Route 9 from the Laotian border through the village of Lang Vei to Khe Sanh.

American troops first arrived in the area in August 1962, when a U.S. Army Special Forces detachment established a CIDG camp at the small airfield just northeast of the village of Khe Sanh. These troops engaged in border surveillance and clandestine

operations to detect and thwart infiltration.

During the fall of 1966 intelligence reports noted increased enemy movement on an east-west trail network which ran into the region from Laos. As a result, III MAF ordered a battalion to be deployed to Khe Sanh as part of Operation Prairie I. Its mission was to prevent Communist occupation, as well as to provide security for a detachment from U.S. Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (Seabee) 10 which was improving the Khe Sanh airfield.

On the 29th of September, Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. Wickwire's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, reinforced by Battery B, 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, assumed the Khe Sanh mission and flew by helicopters into the position. The Marines occupied the key terrain around the airfield and began construction of defensive positions. Reconnaissance and combat patrols searched out to 6,000 meters to detect enemy buildup in the area. The battalion used the 6,000-meter range because it suspected the Communists would bring in 120mm mortars to attack the complex.*

As the logistic support for the battalion began to arrive at the airfield, the battalion command post, the reserve company, and the artillery battery set up in the immediate vicinity of the camp complex and established a perimeter defense. The Special Forces garrison and service support elements received responsibility for portions of the perimeter while the rifle companies continued to operate from company strong points. The battalion then extended the patrolling effort out to 10,000 meters and beyond, depending upon the size of the patrol.**

*The 120mm mortar's maximum range was 5,700 meters.

**During December 1966-January 1967 the Special Forces Camp was 9,000 meters west near the village of Lang Vei.

Initially, Battery B, reinforced with two 155mm howitzers and two 4.2-inch mortars, provided the battalion's only immediate artillery support. Late in October, additional artillery became available when U.S. Army 175mm guns moved into positions at Camp Carroll 13 miles to the east. While the fires of the 175s augmented the base's defensive plans, they normally fired interdiction missions and support of Marine reconnaissance units operating from the base.

Air support for the battalion came from three UH-34 helicopters assigned to Khe Sanh on a daily basis. These aircraft provided routine and emergency resupply, evacuation, troop lifts, and reconnaissance missions. Additional helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft were available on request.*

As 1967 began, the battalion experienced no significant contacts. On 31 January, Operation Prairie I ended. Wickwire's battalion could claim only 15 enemy killed during the four months it had participated in Prairie. While the casualty figures for the operation were not impressive, the battalion had established control of the Khe Sanh Plateau, and the extended airstrip provided a terminus from which III MAF could challenge the movement of enemy forces through the area.

After Operation Prairie I, III MAF reduced operations from Khe Sanh to reconnaissance efforts. As a result, when the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines moved to Okinawa on 6 February, only a single company, Company B, 9th Marines, augmented by a 45-man security platoon and Battery I, 12th Marines, remained to defend Khe Sanh Base.** The mission of Captain Michael W. Sayers' company was essentially the same as the 1st Battalion's had been: To defend the airstrip and patrol the surrounding area out to a distance of 15,000 meters. The company also maintained a 30-man force as emergency support for Marine reconnaissance patrols operating in the area.

Poor weather, primarily fog, through February hampered the activities of both Captain Sayers' com-

pany and the platoon of the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion working from the base, but reconnaissance contacts did indicate an increase in enemy activity. Five reconnaissance patrols came under attack from NVA units during this period and helicopters extracted them under fire. Then, on 25 February, a sharp contact occurred only 3,000 meters from the airstrip; the days of watchful waiting were over.

A squad patrol from the 2d Platoon, Company B, led by Sergeant Donald E. Harper, Jr., was moving up a small hill west of the airstrip when an NVA unit opened up with small arms fire, killing one Marine and wounding another. The patrol pulled back immediately and called in artillery fire. When the artillery stopped, Harper's squad again moved against the enemy position and this time made contact with about 50 North Vietnamese. Once more the Marines backed off the hill and called in artillery fire. Captain Sayers sent a second squad to reinforce Harper's patrol. The Marines assaulted the position for the third time and after heavy fighting were able to take the hill. They found only nine enemy bodies on the position, but a search of the area uncovered fire direction center equipment, an 82mm mortar, 380 82mm mortar rounds, 3 mortar base plates, 2 individual weapons, some clothing, and 10 enemy packs. Friendly losses in the action were one killed and 11 wounded.¹

Although the area remained quiet after this sharp encounter, an unfortunate incident occurred at Lang Vei on the evening of 2 March. Two USAF aircraft mistakenly bombed the village, killing 112 civilians, wounding 213, and destroying 140 buildings. The Marines immediately sent helicopters and trucks to the village to help with the evacuation of casualties. A KC-130, carrying a group of 1st Marine Aircraft Wing personnel especially organized for such events and under the command of Major William F. Morley, arrived at the airfield and flew out 53 of the wounded before weather closed the field.²

The NVA took this opportunity to hit the base with more than 90 82mm mortar rounds, killing two Marines and wounding 17, while damaging two CH-46s and two UH-1Es. Three days later, on the 5th, 14 enemy soldiers probed the airfield perimeter from the north and west. The defending Marines detected and drove them off with command-detonated claymore mines before they could do any damage.

*The number of helicopters assigned to the Khe Sanh Base increased during January to six: two CH-46s, two UH-1Es, and two UH-34s.

**Battery I replaced Battery B/13 on 26 January. Two 155mm howitzers and the two 4.2-inch mortars reinforced Battery I.

The 3d Marine Division responded to the increased enemy activity by reinforcing Khe Sanh with Captain William B. Terrill's Company E, 9th Marines on 7 March. With the addition of the second company, the Marines increased their patrols of the surrounding area, with particular emphasis given to the 861-881 hill complex northwest of the base. Reconnaissance teams there had made numerous sightings during the past few weeks. Patrols and ambushes in the area saw signs of enemy activity, but made no contact; on 16 March, however, the NVA provided the Marines with all the contact they could handle.

At 1000 on the 16th, the 1st Platoon of Company E was returning from a night ambush position on Hill 861. As the point squad, under Sergeant Donald Lord, moved past some dense bamboo bordering the trail, it came under heavy crossfire from both sides. The two remaining squads advanced to help the point element. After 15 minutes they drove the enemy away. The Marines then moved back up the hill about 100 meters to a suitable landing zone to evacuate their casualties, one killed and five wounded. Nearing the zone they came under heavy fire again; six more Marines died, four suffered wounds, and one was missing. Another firefight started and the Marines directed artillery fire against the enemy, but this time the NVA did not withdraw.

In the meantime, two squads of Second Lieutenant Gatlin J. Howell's 2d Platoon, Company B, which had been operating about 1,500 meters east of Hill 861, received orders to move to help the 1st Platoon, Company E. As they moved up they came under fire from the top of the hill. Air strikes drove the enemy from the crest; they left 11 bodies behind. Both Marine units moved to the summit and began clearing a landing zone (LZ).

By 1600 the Marines had cleared the LZ and three CH-46s were on station to evacuate the casualties. The first helicopter landed, and took off, but as the second one touched down the NVA hit the zone with mortar fire. The CH-46 made its pickup and managed to get out of the zone, but the Marines on the ground were not as lucky. Both units' corpsmen were killed; several other men were wounded. The Marines called in artillery fire on suspected enemy mortar positions, then requested the helicopter to come in to evacuate the new casualties. As the aircraft approached the zone, the NVA struck again with mortar fire. The helicopter broke away, but the exploding rounds caught the Marines who had car-

ried the wounded out to the LZ and they became casualties themselves. Captain Terrill recalled, "The platoon commander tried to move the LZ down to the reverse slope of the hill, but by this time there were not enough able-bodied men in the platoon to move all the dead and wounded."³

At 1705, a helicopter carrying the 3d squad, 2d Platoon, Company B attempted to set down in the landing zone on the reverse slope, but the CH-46 overshot the zone and crashed at the base of the hill. A second helicopter picked up the squad, but it had to return to Khe Sanh because of casualties caused by the crash. Then Captain Terrill and the 2d Platoon, Company E moved by helicopter into the LZ. The new platoon moved to the top of the hill and began to bring down the wounded. By 2100, when fog stopped helicopter operations, all but three of the wounded had been evacuated and by 1300 on the 17th all the dead and the rest of the wounded had been lifted out. The Marines attempted but failed to extract the CH-46 that had crashed, forcing Captain Terrill's unit to remain at the LZ as security for the aircraft. Another helicopter finally lifted the damaged one out by 1100 on the 18th and Terrill and his Marines, now reinforced by 1st Platoon, Company B, began a two-day sweep of the area north and west of the hill. The search was to no avail; the enemy force had departed. The action on the 16th had been costly for the Marines: they suffered 19 killed and 59 wounded, almost all of whom were from Company E. The Marines found the body of the missing man the next day. Enemy losses in the engagement were only the 11 known killed.

Immediately after this contact, reconnaissance teams operating northwest of the hill complex reported several sightings of large enemy forces moving southeast. There were several exchanges of small arms fire between Marine patrols and small enemy units, but in all cases the enemy quickly broke contact and withdrew.

Captain Sayers, responsible for the defense of the Khe Sanh perimeter, recognized the growing threat to the combat base. He expressed his concerns during one of the frequent visits to the base by Brigadier General Michael P. Ryan, the commander of 3d Marine Division (Forward). General Ryan agreed and asked what Sayers needed to defend the base. Sayers provided his "shopping list" and, as soon as the Marine engineers opened the road from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh, General Ryan sent additional firepower. Sayers gained a light section of Marine

tanks and a heavy section of Ontos. Each of the latter mounted six 106mm recoilless rifles, which, with the proper ammunition, could be devastating antipersonnel weapons. Equally deadly were two light sections of Army truck-mounted heavy weapons. One section had dual 40mm automatic cannon; the other had quad-.50 machine guns. Offsetting these gains, however, was the loss of Company E, 9th Marines, which, depleted by the fighting on 16 March, returned to Dong Ha on 27 March to rebuild.⁴

The reinforcements to the base's firepower seemed even more important in the early weeks of April when agent reports indicated two NVA regiments moving into the region northwest of Khe Sanh. These reports and earlier sightings prompted the Marines to intensify reconnaissance and patrolling in the area. In spite of these efforts, the Marines did not determine the full extent of the enemy's buildup.

Allied personnel in the Khe Sanh area numbered less than 1,000 men. Among these were the CIDG force at Lang Vei and the Marines' Combined Action Company Oscar, located between Khe Sanh Village and the combat base and within mortar range of the latter.* The Khe Sanh combat base housed Company B, 9th Marines, reinforced by an aggregation of support detachments, and a Marine reconnaissance platoon. Organic artillery support for these units came from Captain Glen Golden's Battery F, 12th Marines, which replaced Battery I on 5 April. While the allied forces were too small to be a deterrent to major enemy incursions, they did serve as an advance warning unit.

On 20 April, operational control of forces at Khe Sanh passed to the 3d Marines which had just begun Operation Prairie IV, though Khe Sanh was not included as part of the Prairie IV operational area. Rather it was a territorial appendage, attached for control purposes to the 3d Marines because that regiment was in the best position to oversee the base and reinforce it if the need arose. The time of need was imminent.

*III MAF created the Combined Action Program to increase the ability of the local Vietnamese militia units to defend their own villages. These units included Marines who lived, worked, and conducted operations with their Vietnamese counterparts. The company at Khe Sanh formed in February 1967 and was unique in that its indigenous forces were Montagnards rather than Vietnamese. A more complete coverage of the Combined Action Program is contained in Chapter 11.

Opening Moves of the Battle

On 23 April, two of Company B's platoons, the 1st and 3d, were operating from patrol bases north and east of Hill 861. Late that afternoon Captain Sayers ordered them to link up and establish a night position north of the hill in preparation for a sweep the following morning of a cave complex located to the northwest.

The morning of the 24th, Second Lieutenant Thomas G. King and 30 men from his 2d Platoon, with an 81mm mortar section, moved from the airfield to Hill 700, south of Hill 861. Their mission was to provide additional fire support for a company sweep then starting to the northwest. Once the mortars were in position, First Lieutenant Phillip H. Sauer took four men, including a forward observer (FO) to the top of Hill 861 to establish an observation post.* As the FO team entered a bamboo thicket 300 meters from the crest of the hill, it stepped into an enemy ambush. When the NVA opened fire the point man yelled, "I'm hit," and went down. Lieutenant Sauer ordered the rest of the team to pull back and then stood firing at the enemy with his pistol to cover their withdrawal. Only the forward observer managed to escape. Although the action lasted but a few minutes and appeared to be just another small unit encounter, it marked the beginning of the "First Battle of Khe Sanh," one of the bloodiest and hardest fought battles of the Vietnam War.⁵

Lieutenant King, having lost radio contact with the forward observation team but aware of the firefight on the hill, sent a squad to investigate. As the squad moved forward it came upon the FO, the lone survivor of the ambushed team. The squad, accompanied by the FO, moved back into the area of contact to recover the other four members of the team. They saw two of the bodies but were unable to get to them because of heavy enemy fire. The unit withdrew to Lieutenant King's mortar position. King directed mortar and artillery fire at the hill and then took another squad and went back to the ambush site. The enemy had gone. The Marines recovered

*First Lieutenant Sauer was the commander of the Ontos heavy section that had recently been attached to Captain Sayer's Company B. He accompanied Lieutenant King's unit to assist the forward observer.

the two bodies seen by the other squad, but after searching the area they still could not find the other two Marines.* King pulled back and threw a smoke grenade to bring in a helicopter to evacuate the two bodies. Just as the UH-34's wheels touched the ground the whole crest of Hill 861, approximately 300 meters wide, erupted with automatic weapons fire. The infantrymen took cover without casualties, but the enemy fire hit the helicopter 35 times in a matter of seconds. Two UH-1E gunships escorting the UH-34 immediately strafed the hilltop. As the enemy fire let up, King's Marines loaded the bodies aboard the helicopter, and after it took off King and his men returned to the mortar position.

While the mortars on Hill 700 and the artillery at Khe Sanh base shelled the enemy positions, Captain Sayers, who had joined King after a forced march with a security platoon, ordered his 1st and 3d Platoons to sweep southeast across Hill 861 and strike the enemy from the rear. Sayers' Marines were roughly 2,000 meters northwest of their new objective. When the two platoons turned toward their new direction of advance, five 82mm mortar rounds hit, killing one Marine and wounding several others. The Marines continued on and the point squad moved down the reverse slope of a small knoll until halted by heavy fire from its right flank.

The Marines returned fire in an attempt to gain fire superiority. Lance Corporal Dana C. Darnell disregarded the enemy fire and brought his 60mm mortar into action. Unable to set up the weapon properly, he placed the base of the tube in a helmet between his legs and steadied the mortar with his hands. The firing quickly heated the tube; another Marine kept Darnell's hands from being burned by urinating on the mortar tube to cool it. Darnell kept firing until he exhausted his immediate supply of ammunition. Ignoring the enemy fire, he several times gathered additional rounds from nearby Marines to keep up his firing.⁶

The enemy answered with its own mortars and the Marines moved back over the crest of the hill to find cover and call in helicopters to evacuate casualties. During the move, Lance Corporal Darnell dragged two wounded Marines toward cover until temporarily

ly blinded by dirt and rock fragments blown into his eyes by enemy fire. Within an hour, however, he was assisting in the care of the wounded.*

Helicopter pilots made two attempts to get the wounded out, but each time they came in the enemy hit the Marine position with mortars and automatic weapons, causing more casualties. After the second rescue attempt, the Marines received orders to move to a more secure position and dig in for the night.⁷ After expending all of their mortar ammunition on Hill 861 and in support of the 1st and 3d Platoons, the mortar section, Captain Sayers, and the security platoon on Hill 700 moved back to the base just before dark on the 24th. There, Captain Sayers, his company command group, and the 22-man 2d Platoon prepared to join the 1st and 3d Platoons by helicopter at first light on the 25th. Casualties for the first day included 12 Marines killed, 17 wounded, and 2 missing. There were five known NVA dead.

Captain Sayers' Marines had forced the North Vietnamese into the premature revelation of their plans to overrun Khe Sanh Combat Base. Their plan resembled the one they used so successfully against the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. In both cases the enemy buildup occurred over a period of about a month and included the occupation of key terrain. Before the main attack, they engaged in a prolonged supply staging activity and, just prior to the main attack, made coordinated attacks against support facilities, particularly airfields and lines of communication.

After-the-fact reconstruction by General Walt of the NVA plans for Khe Sanh indicated that the first step was the buildup of troops and supplies in the region north of the base. Step two was to be the isolation of the base by knocking out the transport helicopters based near the coast and by cutting key stretches of Route 9. Next, Camp Carroll, Con Thien, Dong Ha, Gio Linh, and Phu Bai were to be hit with supporting arms, both as a diversion and to reduce their ability to provide fire and logistic support. A diversionary attack was to be carried out against the Lang Vei Special Forces Camp to present a threat from that direction. All of these efforts were in support of the main attack from the north through the Hill 881/861 complex by regimental-

*These two bodies later were found. They had been decapitated and burned. Maj Michael W. Sayers, Comments on draft ms, 18May81. (Vietnam Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

*LCpl Darnell, killed in action two days later on the 26th, received a posthumous Navy Cross for his actions on the 24th.

size units of the *325C NVA Division**. Fortunately, the contact made by Lieutenant Sauer's FO party on the morning of the 24th and subsequent action by Company B alerted III MAF to enemy intentions.

Hill 861

The job of stopping the NVA fell to Colonel John P. Lanigan's 3d Marines. Although Lanigan was unaware of it at the time, this assignment was to be similar to one 22 years before on Okinawa which earned him the Silver Star Medal. Both involved driving a determined enemy force off a hill.

Originally, Colonel Lanigan planned that Company K, 3d Marines, would relieve Captain Sayers' Company B on 29 April, so liaison personnel were already at Khe Sanh when the action began. On the morning of the 25th, heavy fog at Khe Sanh delayed the arrival by helicopter of the remainder of Company K as well as Lieutenant Colonel Gary Wilder and his 3d Battalion, 3d Marines command group. By the time they arrived, Captain Sayers and his 2d Platoon had already departed by helicopter to join the rest of Company B.

There had been no chance for coordination between the battalion command group and Company B. Inevitably, communications proved difficult since Company B did not have the battalion's codes and radio frequencies. Captain Sayers, convinced that the enemy monitored his transmissions, relayed his coded position reports through his company's rear command post at Khe Sanh. This problem plagued the two units throughout the coming fighting.⁸

Shortly after landing at Khe Sanh, Lieutenant Colonel Wilder started his force moving north to assist Company B. By 1500, the lead elements were moving up Hill 861.

When Company K of the 3d Marines reached the slopes of Hill 861, its commander, Captain Bayliss L. Spivey, Jr., ordered his platoons to move on two axes. The 1st Platoon moved up a ridgeline, followed by the company command group. The 3d Platoon started up another ridgeline to the right. The 2d Platoon, understrength because one squad was still attached to another company, remained behind to

provide security for the battalion command group and the 60mm mortar section.

Captain Spivey had his forces in position for his attack by 1525. Artillery check fire was in effect, however. Captain Spivey requested and received permission to continue up the hill without further artillery preparatory fires.

The 1st Platoon moved upward through the heavy growth on the ridgeline. When the platoon was 300 meters from the crest, it made contact with an enemy company. The platoon found itself under heavy, grazing fire from well-fortified, expertly concealed bunkers, as well as from mortars sited on the reverse slope of the hill. The vegetation made locating the bunkers difficult. Countermortar and artillery fire were relatively ineffective in silencing the enemy mortars; the grazing fire from the enemy automatic weapons and small arms continued from the mutually supporting bunkers.

The 1st Platoon fought its way uphill for about 200 meters, but by 1730 only about 10 men remained effective. With darkness fast approaching, it was imperative for the company to get more Marines on the line. The 3d Platoon could provide no immediate assistance; its advance up the adjacent ridgeline encountered no enemy opposition but the rugged terrain slowed its movement. Captain Spivey had no option but to ask for the 2d Platoon. Aware of the gravity of the situation, the battalion assented.

The 2d Platoon moved forward and quickly became engaged in heavy fighting that continued until nightfall. Since it could not evacuate its casualties, the company spent the night in place; Captain Spivey ordered all elements to dig in. The battalion command group and 60mm mortar section, located on a small knoll only 300 meters from the hill, forced to provide its own security, also dug in for the night.⁹

Progress of Company B during the day had been equally difficult; it too had no luck evacuating its wounded. Each time a helicopter attempted to land, it met a screen of enemy small arms and mortar fire. One helicopter did get into a nearby zone around 1000 when the fog lifted, bringing in Captain Sayers and the 22 men of the 2d Platoon, but it could pick up only three wounded before being driven off by incoming mortar rounds. Slowed by numerous litter cases and sporadic enemy contact which required the seizure of each succeeding ridgeline, Company B succeeded in moving only to a point 800 meters northwest of Hill 861.

*Apparently the enemy launched all of the diversionary attacks on schedule. On 27 and 28 April, the previously mentioned Marine positions were hit by 1,200 rockets, mortar, and artillery rounds. They cut Route 9 in several places. Other enemy units attacked and severely battered the Lang Vei Special Forces Camp on 4 May. The Marines detected and subsequently thwarted only the main effort. FMFPac Ops USMC Vn, Apr67, pp. 27-28.

As a result of the heavy resistance encountered by both companies, Captain Jerrald E. Giles' Company K, 9th Marines flew in from Camp Carroll. By 1800 on the 25th, the company had arrived at Khe Sanh base; it remained there for the night.

At about 0500 on the 26th, the 3d Battalion command post (CP) shook under more than 200 82mm mortar rounds. At the same time, Khe Sanh base was the target of 100 mortar and recoilless rifle rounds, most of which, thanks to fog which obscured the enemy's aim, landed outside the perimeter. While the shelling did not cause any damage, it did confirm that the NVA were on Hill 881S. The Marines replied by hitting suspected enemy positions with artillery and air strikes; the NVA fire quickly ceased.

Captain Sayers later recalled:

. . . B-1/9 was close enough to the NVA recoilless rifles to see and hear their backblast in the fog. They were on the eastern slope of 881S. We directed artillery on the recoilless rifles and silenced them. We could hear the 82mm mortars but couldn't see the muzzle flashes. We directed artillery by sound. By [105mm artillery illumination rounds] and holes in the fog, we confirmed destruction of the recoilless rifles. (The fog was in layers—the hill masses were covered and the valleys were clear.)⁹

At 0800 on the 26th, Captain Giles' company moved out from the airfield toward Lieutenant Colonel Wilder's position, using the rear elements of Company B as guides. The company arrived at the battalion command post shortly after noon. Spivey's Company K had been heavily engaged on Hill 861 all morning. The enemy unit, fighting from a strongly fortified position, repulsed a second Marine attempt to take the hill, this time by the 3d Platoon. All efforts to break off contact and withdraw failed because of numerous casualties. Lieutenant Colonel Wilder ordered Captain Giles to send two platoons up the hill to help Spivey disengage and evacuate the dead and wounded. By 1400, the two companies linked up, but, despite the effective use of helicopter gunships in a close support role to suppress enemy fire, it was not until 1900 that the last Marine elements got off the hill.

In the meantime, Company B's advance also stopped. The company had been moving southwesterly to skirt Hill 861 and link up with the battalion. As the Marines turned south, they met fierce enemy resistance. The NVA troops, well-concealed in the thick underbrush, allowed the Marines to move to within five meters before opening fire, almost cut-

ting the point man in half. Four or five others, including Captain Sayers and members of the command group, received wounds. At the same time, the enemy hit the entire column with mortar fire. Casualties were heavy. With the aid of gunships and artillery, the company finally gained fire superiority and at 1200 it broke contact, pulling back to the top of a small knoll. There the company attempted to evacuate some of its wounded, but as the helicopters came into the area the infantrymen waved them off; they were helping the NVA mortars to pinpoint the Marines' position. At 1445, Captain Sayers reported to Lieutenant Colonel Wilder that he had so many casualties that he could not move.¹¹

The battalion ordered Captain Sayers to leave his dead behind and bring out his wounded. Sayers replied that he could not move, even with only the wounded. Resupply was impossible, the company had only five operational radios, powered by weak batteries. Sayers reported he would move into the fog, assume a defensive posture, and ". . . fight until it was over."¹² This option proved unnecessary, however.

As Sayers later recalled:

Captain Glen Golden [the commander of Battery F, 12th Marines at Khe Sanh] found me in the fog by walking artillery rounds to me. (Once in the fog I could only make an educated guess as to my exact position.) Artillery put a "ring of steel" around my defensive position that was so tight we were taking dirt from the impact. It was the most professional and accurate piece of artillery work that I have ever seen. No doubt it saved our lives.¹³

Lieutenant Colonel Wilder sent Captain Giles and his one remaining platoon to assist Sayers. It took Giles' party almost four hours to hack their way to the battered company. Under the cover of a heavy ground fog, darkness, and periodic downpours, and preceded by artillery fire from Battery I, the united force began its move toward the battalion CP, skirting the south edge of Hill 861. Progress was slow. Every man, except the point and rearguard, was burdened with stretchers and the equipment of the casualties. Sayers remembered:

We were carrying KIAs and WIAs in ponchos [borne by] four men to a litter. The heat deteriorated the bodies rapidly and they bloated fast. Almost impossible to carry in the dark, the mud, and the rain. Many times we stopped our march to retrieve a body that had fallen out of a poncho and rolled down a hill. Identification was difficult [as] KIA tags were lost. . . . not until we arrived back at Khe Sanh and matched our company roster with the evacuation list was I convinced that we had not left a fellow Marine in the hills.¹⁴

The weary column arrived at a safe area south of the 3d Battalion CP at 0500 on the 27th. Helicopters soon arrived and by 0730 had evacuated all of the casualties and salvaged equipment. The remnants of Company B refused the offer of trucks to transport them back to Khe Sanh; they marched back.¹⁵

Reinforcing the Hill 861 Attack

After the fierce action of the morning of the 26th, the 3d Marine Division realized the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines did not have the strength to carry Hill 861 alone. Major General Hochmuth shifted the SLF Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Delong's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines back to its parent regiment for the Khe Sanh operation. At the time, the battalion had been conducting Operation Beacon Star, 16 miles north of Hue. Picked up in the middle of the operation at noon on 26 April, Delong's battalion flew to Phu Bai in helicopters from HMM-164¹⁶ and then to Khe Sanh by transport aircraft. By 1600, companies E, G, and H and the battalion command group had arrived at the Khe Sanh Combat Base and started moving toward Hill 861. The battalion established night positions approximately 500 meters east of Wilder's battalion.

The 27th was a day of preparation. By 1130, the 3d Battalion had completed all its medical evacuations and moved overland from Hill 861 to Khe Sanh base for replacements for its battle-depleted companies. Colonel Lanigan transferred both Companies M of the 3d Marines and 9th Marines to Wilder's battalion in relief of Companies K, 3d Marines, and B, 9th Marines, which had sustained the heaviest casualties. Company F, the remaining company of the SLF battalion, arrived and assumed the mission of regimental reserve. Battery B, 12th Marines, the SLF artillery battery, arrived at 1900 and was ready to fire by 2050. By the end of the day, Battery B and Battery F, the resident artillery unit at Khe Sanh, had established an organization that permitted them to function as an artillery group, with one battery in direct support of each battalion. The two 155mm howitzers and two 4.2-inch mortars attached to Battery F assumed the general support mission for the operation.

Artillery and air took on the job of softening up the objective area. For the better part of the 27th and 28th of April, the Khe Sanh artillery group and the Army's 175mm guns, further east, poured tons of high explosives onto Hill 861. During the two-day period, artillerymen fired more than 1,800 rounds of

observed fire and 270 of harassment and interdiction, but the preponderance of support came from the air. During this period, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing dropped 518,700 pounds of ordnance on the target area. As each flight arrived on station, the Marine and Air Force airborne forward air controllers, (FAC[A]) directed them to orbit on the top of a large holding pattern. The flights gradually worked their way downward as preceding flights dropped their ordnance and headed for home.

To destroy the solidly built and well-camouflaged bunkers, the FACs devised a new technique. Many of the bunkers were so thick that even a direct hit with a 500-pound bomb would not completely destroy them. Napalm was ineffective until the jungle growth was cleared because the jellied gasoline burned out in the treetops. Consequently, aircraft armed with 250- and 500-pound "snakeye" bombs were called in on low runs to ripple their loads, stripping the trees and heavy foliage from the hill.* With the bunkers exposed, other aircraft armed with 750-, 1,000-, and 2,000-pound bombs came in on high-angle passes to destroy the bunkers.

Late in the afternoon of the 28th, the Marine infantrymen were ready to resume the attack. The concept of operations involved a two-battalion assault; Hill 861 became Objective 1, Hill 881S was Objective 2, and Hill 881N was Objective 3. From its position south of Hill 861, Lieutenant Colonel Delong's 2d Battalion was to seize Objective 1 on 28 April. Lieutenant Colonel Wilder's 3d Battalion was to follow the 2d Battalion. After taking the first objective, Wilder's Marines were to turn west, secure the ground between Hill 861 and 881S, then assault Objective 2 from the northeast. As the 3d Battalion attacked, the 2d Battalion was to consolidate Objective 1, then move out toward Hill 881N, screening Wilder's right flank, reinforcing it if necessary. After securing Objectives 1 and 2 Delong's battalion was to seize Objective 3, Hill 881N.

After the preparatory fire lifted, the 2d Battalion assaulted Hill 861 with two companies abreast. The Marines moved up the hill against sporadic mortar fire, but met no other resistance; the NVA had withdrawn. Both assault companies dug in on the

*The "snakeye" is a 250- or 500-pound bomb with large tail fins that unfold after release to retard the descent of the bomb. For greater accuracy, it was dropped at a low altitude. The slow parabolic trajectory of the "Snakeye" gives the aircraft time to clear the blast and fragmentation pattern.

objective while the command group and the reserve company took up positions on the southern slope of the hill. A search of the objective revealed that the enemy's withdrawal had been professional; the area was well policed, with no equipment or anything of intelligence value left behind. Though the NVA withdrawal had been orderly, it had not been without cost; the strong odor of dead bodies saturated the area. Supporting arms had done a thorough job. The hill was heavily fortified with 25 bunkers and more than 400 fighting holes, all mutually supporting, but the Marines took the hill without losing a man. Bombs and artillery had stripped most of the vegetation, leaving only charred and splintered trees.

Attacking Hill 881S

After Hill 861 was secured, the 3d Battalion, composed of Companies M, 3d Marines and K and M, 9th Marines moved from Khe Sanh to take positions on the west flank of the 2d Battalion. A small hill mass, 750 meters northeast of Hill 881S, was the battalion's intermediate objective. Lieutenant Colonel Wilder planned to secure the intermediate objective the next day, as a jumping off point for the assault on Objective 2, Hill 881S.

Early in the morning of 29 April the battalion started its advance, with Company M, 9th Marines as



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Sgt R. E. Ferdeit, armed with a shotgun, keeps a wary eye out for North Vietnamese soldiers as the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines completes its preparations on 30 April for an assault on Hill 881S near Khe Sanh.

the lead element. At 1120, the point engaged an enemy platoon in a small draw. The company deployed, took the platoon under fire, and called for artillery and air support. At the same time, the second element of the battalion column, Company M, 3d Marines, passed south of the firefight, continuing the attack toward the battalion objective.

At 1915, Company M, 3d Marines secured the intermediate objective with no contact, and dug in for the night. Shortly after occupying the position, the company spotted North Vietnamese soldiers emplacing mortars on Hill 881S. The company called in artillery, and the enemy fired only four rounds before being dispersed. An hour later, the Marines spotted more North Vietnamese moving toward their perimeter. Although it was dark by then, the FO with Company M adjusted variable time (VT) fuzed artillery fire on the enemy's position.* As the rounds exploded over their heads showering the enemy with fragments, screams of the wounded could be heard. The NVA force quickly withdrew and the Marines passed the rest of the night without incident.

At first light on 30 April, while Wilder's battalion prepared to assault Hill 881S, DeLong's battalion moved off Hill 861, along a ridgeline toward Hill 881N. Its mission was to clear the area on Wilder's right flank, and to secure positions for a final assault on Objective 3, Hill 881N. Company H, 3d Marines moved into the area where Company M, 9th Marines had made contact the previous day. As soon as it entered the area, the company ran into two NVA platoons in a bunker complex. After a brief, vicious firefight, the Marines backed off to evacuate casualties, 9 dead and 43 wounded, of whom helicopters evacuated 29 while artillery and air worked over the enemy positions. Later that afternoon, Company G assaulted the bunker complex and after heavy preparation fires, the Marines overran the position.

The men of Company G, like those of Company H, knew that they had been up against a tough and well-disciplined foe. Staff Sergeant Ruben Santos, platoon sergeant of the 1st Platoon, witnessed the tenacity of the defending North Vietnamese. One of

*VT fuze detonates an artillery round several meters above the ground, thus increasing the fragmentation pattern and effective kill radius. Air bursts are especially effective against troops in the open or in unprotected positions such as foxholes and open trenches.

his squads found two enemy soldiers in a bunker. The Marines threw in several hand grenades killing one man, but the other grabbed a grenade and sat on it to smother the blast. Although the explosion "blew his ass off," it did not kill him. When one of the Marines went into the bunker to clear it, the enemy soldier shot and wounded him. Sergeant Santos grabbed the Marine and tried to drag him to safety but the NVA soldier fired another burst into the Marine, killing him. Santos tried to flush the enemy soldier from the bunker by throwing in tear gas but he still would not come out. The Marines then threw fragmentation grenades in until they were sure that he was dead. Sergeant Santos later said, ". . . there was no way of getting them out . . . unless you dragged them out after they were dead."¹⁷

The Marines of the 3d Battalion learned the same lesson before the day was over. The strength and dispositions of the NVA forces on Hill 881S were unclear on the morning of the 30th. Thirty-three aircraft sorties had slammed 250 2,000-pound bombs into the positions on the evening of the 29th and over 1,300 rounds of artillery rained down on the hill during the night. At 0800, as the last rounds of the preparation fires hit, the Marines of Wilder's battalion began their assault.

The rough and broken terrain restricted the approach to the ridge; the Marines could not maneuver. The 3d Battalion jumped off in the attack against the hill from the northeast with Company M, 3d Marines in the lead, followed by Company K, 9th Marines. By 1025, the lead platoon reached the western end of the top of the hill after encountering only occasional small arms fire. A second platoon moved up and the two companies closed on the enemy. Suddenly the NVA struck back with automatic weapons in camouflaged bunkers and with accurate sniper fire from the trees. Thirty mortar rounds fell on the attacking platoons. They were stuck, unable to move forward or backwards. NVA infantrymen from bypassed bunkers and holes blocked the way back down the hill. Company K and the remaining platoon of Company M advanced into the savage firefight. "Huey" (UH-1E) gunships and attack aircraft streaked in, covering the enemy positions with ordnance as close as 50 meters from the Marines. At 1230, Lieutenant Colonel Wilder ordered both companies to disengage and pull back off the hill, but it took several hours to break contact. When they did move back down the hill, the

Marines were able to carry their wounded with them, but not their dead. The cost had been high: 43 Marines died and 109 suffered wounds. Heavy casualties rendered Company M temporarily ineffective as a fighting unit.

The cost was even greater to the enemy. Marine infantry, artillery, and air strikes killed 163. Marine aircrews flew 118 sorties and the Khe Sanh artillery group fired 1,685 rounds that day, but it had not been enough. More supporting arms preparation fire was needed before the hill could be assaulted again.

The next day the air space over Khe Sanh was stacked high with Marine aircraft; 166 sorties attacked hills 881N and 881S. Over 650,000 pounds of ordnance, including 130 2,000-pound bombs and 1,445 artillery rounds, plastered both hills. On one occasion, the constant bombardment of Hill 881S became too much for the enemy to endure. After three very heavy airstrikes, one enemy platoon ran from its bunkers. Once the NVA soldiers were in the open, they came under fire by aircraft, as well as mortar and small arms fire from Wilder's battalion. Most died before they could escape. By the end of the day close air support pilots reported 140 more enemy killed, including 81 killed by a single strike west of the battle area.

While Hill 881S was being pounded, the 3d Battalion remained on its intermediate objective north-east of 881S, reorganizing its companies. At 1200, Company M, 3d Marines relinquished position to the regimental reserve, Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines.* The depleted Company M returned to Khe Sanh and flew to Dong Ha that evening.

With the reserve committed, Major General Hochmuth transferred Company E, 9th Marines to the control of the 3d Marines and by 1910, 1 May, the company was in position at Khe Sanh. During the day both battalions brought up their "Mule"-mounted 106mm recoilless rifles to assist in the reduction of enemy bunkers and fortifications by direct fire.**

*Captain Raymond H. Bennett, who was ashore from one of the carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin on a 30-day indoctrination assignment, temporarily commanded Company M.

**The "Mule" is a small, rough terrain vehicle, primarily used for resupply. It is the standard platform and transportation for the 106mm recoilless rifle, an antitank weapon.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

The 2d Battalion, 3d Marines used its 106mm recoilless rifles to destroy North Vietnamese bunkers on Hill 881S prior to the 3d Battalion's final assault on the hill, 2 May.

The 3d Battalion was ready to go again on the morning of the 2nd, and after a final artillery preparation, the 9th Marines' Companies M and K moved out against Hill 881S. By 1420, the Marines had secured the hill, having encountered only sniper fire in the process. That evening Lieutenant Colonel Wilder established his CP on 881S and dug in for the night with two assault companies. Company F, the most recent arrival, remained behind on the intermediate objective. The Marines, at last, had the opportunity to see what they had run up against on the 30th.

The enemy had dug about 250 bunkers on the hill; after four days of heavy air strikes and artillery preparation fire, 50 remained. Wire communications connected the bunkers and they mutually supported each other with interlocking fields of fire. Two layers of logs and as much as five feet of dirt covered small bunkers, leaving only a small two-foot opening. Larger fortifications, capable of holding four men, were equipped with small storage shelves, bamboo mat floors, and a simple but effective drainage system. The largest dugouts, command posts, had two entrances and roofs covered by four to

eight layers of logs, in addition to 4 feet of dirt on top of the logs. The extent of the fortifications on 881S caught the Marines by surprise, but their discovery alerted Delong's battalion as to what to expect on Hill 881N.

The Final Objective: Hill 881N

With Hill 881S secured, the Marines turned their attention to Objective 3, Hill 881N. Since 28 April, when the battalion took Hill 861, Lieutenant Colonel Delong's Marines had been sweeping the area northwest of the hill, checking out each successive ravine and ridgeline. By the morning of 2 May the battalion was ready to move against 881N. At 1015, the action began with Company E attacking the hill from the south and Company G assaulting from the east. Company H was in a supporting position between the two units. Company G made contact almost immediately and after a brief firefight pulled back to employ artillery fire. After the artillery attack, the company moved in, but again came under automatic weapons and mortar fire. Additional Marine supporting arms silenced the enemy. Com-

pany H, moving to a position to support Company G, also came under enemy mortar attack which ceased when Company G called in fire support requests. At the same time, Company E battered its way almost to the top of the hill. Suddenly, a heavy rain squall driven by gusts up to 40 miles per hour lashed the hills. Lieutenant Colonel DeLong, realizing that control was impossible and that the coordinated assault by his units could not be made, pulled the battalion back to more defensible terrain for the night.

A strong enemy counterattack, early in the morning of 3 May disrupted Marine plans to continue the assault. At 0415, Company E, in night positions on a small hill 500 meters south of Hill 881N, endured small arms and mortar fire followed by an aggressive ground attack. Two reinforced NVA companies struck the Marines' perimeter from the northeast and, after bitter hand-to-hand fighting, penetrated that portion of the defenses. The attackers either killed or wounded all Marines in this area. After penetrating the lines, the NVA units moved into a tree line in the middle of the position and reoc-

cupied some of the bunkers which the engineers had not yet destroyed.

About 10 minutes after the first attack, First Lieutenant Frank M. Izenour, Jr., whose platoon held the western half of the perimeter, received orders to take a squad to attempt to seal off the penetration. With his second squad, the lieutenant moved forward, but immediately came under fire from two machine guns which hit several of his men. Lieutenant Izenour reported that he needed reinforcements. Company commander Captain Alfred E. Lyon did not want to weaken the 1st Platoon further so he organized 11 attached engineers as a squad and sent them into the fight. Both squads took positions on the left edge of the penetration and fired into the enemy's flank. With the help of artillery, gunships, and jets, the Marines stalled the attack, but the platoon commander still did not have enough force to drive the enemy out of the penetration.¹⁸

A flareship arrived and its two-million-candlepower parachute flares practically turned night into day. From Hill 881S, the Marines of the

This well constructed, log-reinforced North Vietnamese Army bunker on Hill 881 South, its embrasure hidden among the deep shadows around the base, remained fully intact despite a bomb explosion in April that left a large crater just over 10 feet away.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800216



3d Battalion could see approximately 200 NVA soldiers moving toward Company E from the west. They quickly moved the battalion's 106mm recoilless rifles into positions and fired more than 100 rounds into the enemy's flank, breaking up the attack. Then artillery pounded the North Vietnamese force as it withdrew.

By first light, the Marines had shattered the NVA attack, but some enemy soldiers still remained inside Company E's position. At 0700, Company F reverted to the operational control of its parent unit, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. From its position on the 3d Battalion's intermediate objective, one platoon of the company flew in helicopters from HMM-164 to a landing zone next to the Company E perimeter. The reinforcing unit immediately attacked the southern edge of the penetration. In the meantime, Lieutenant Colonel Delong ordered Company H to close in on the enemy's rear from the northeast. Moving toward each other the two units finally managed to seal the breach.

Company H then began the difficult task of eliminating the NVA soldiers in the bunkers and tree line. The effort required bitter close-quarters fighting which continued until 1500 when the company reported the final bunker cleared. The NVA soldiers fought virtually to the last man. The NVA attack killed 27 Marines in the action and wounded 84, but enemy bodies covered the area. The NVA attackers left behind 137 dead, and the Marines captured three prisoners, plus a large quantity of weapons and equipment.

Interrogation of the prisoners revealed the enemy planned another attack for that night. As a result, Lieutenant Colonel Delong consolidated his companies on the southern slope of Hill 881N and established a tight perimeter defense. After dark, helicopters from HMM-164 flew in extra defensive equipment, including concertina wire, trip flares, and Claymore mines. The Marines were ready for the assault, but the attack failed to materialize. Instead an NVA unit hit the Special Forces Camp at Lang Vei 10 kilometers to the southeast.¹⁹

At 0435, 4 May, a reinforced NVA company assaulted the Lang Vei camp. The attack was to have served as a diversion for the major NVA thrust from the northwest which the Marines had preempted on 24 April. The action had a little effect on the battle taking place in the hills, but was a tactical victory for the Communists. The NVA attackers quickly overran the camp's defenses and penetrated to the heart

of the compound. There, they destroyed vital installations and killed many key personnel, including the U.S. Army Special Forces detachment commander and his executive officer. Despite artillery fire from the Marines at Khe Sanh, the attackers withdrew with only light casualties. The South Vietnamese irregulars defending Lang Vei were not as lucky; 20 died and another 39 disappeared. To counter any further threats from the southwest, the 3d Marine Division ordered Company C, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, airlifted from Phu Bai later in the afternoon of 4 May and added to the Khe Sanh reserve.

The next morning Lieutenant Colonel Delong's Marines advanced toward the final objective, Hill 881N. His three companies had spent most of 4 May reorganizing, while additional preparatory fires blasted the hill. At 1530, the battalion moved into assault positions on the southern slopes of the objective. At 0850 5 May, Companies E and F jumped off, meeting gradually increasing resistance as they advanced. Both units temporarily disengaged so that air and artillery could again work over the hill. At 1300, Company F resumed the attack while Company E established a base of fire and Company G enveloped the north. The two attack Companies, F and G, met only sniper fire and secured the objective at 1445. The Khe Sanh hill complex belonged to the Marines.

End of the Battle

For the next three days, there was little contact with NVA units. Both battalions thoroughly searched Hills 881N and 881S, while engineers destroyed the remaining enemy fortifications. Marine aircraft struck suspected enemy positions to the north and west, while platoon patrols covered the area immediately west of the two hills. Airborne observers remained on station to call in artillery and air strikes on likely avenues of escape. Air support achieved a unique first during the period. An AO sighted a lone NVA soldier waving a flag, indicating his desire to surrender. A helicopter flew in and picked up the rallier.

Observers spotted enemy troops to the northwest. The sightings indicated that the 325C NVA Division was withdrawing toward North Vietnam and Laos. On 9 May, a patrol of two platoons of Company F finally caught up with one of the evading enemy units. The patrol had just swept down the northern

finger of Hill 778, 3,200 meters northwest of Hill 881N, when it ran into sniper fire from a ridgeline to its front. The lead element deployed on line and started up the slope, only to be met pointblank by a heavy fusillade. The action remained furious for 20 minutes as the Marines tried to gain fire superiority and call in artillery fire.

Getting artillery support was not an easy matter. Company F's forward observer, Second Lieutenant Terrence M. Weber, tried feverishly to contact Khe Sanh Fire Support Control Center; apparently it was out of radio range. Finally, Weber raised another Marine unit which relayed his fire requests. About 30 minutes after the firefight started, the North Vietnamese began to disengage and withdraw. As they pulled back, artillery and gunships tore into the enemy ranks. The battalion ordered Company E, south of the engagement, to go to Company F's aid. Company E's 60mm mortar hit the right flank of the NVA unit. The battalion also sent two 81mm mortars, two 106mm recoilless rifles, and a security platoon by helicopters to Company E's position. As a result of the rapid reaction by reinforcing units and supporting arms fire, the enemy's orderly withdrawal turned into flight.²⁰

When the fighting ended, the Marines counted 31 NVA bodies in the area. A search of the position uncovered large amounts of equipment and rice as well as 203 freshly dug graves. The bitter fighting cost the Marines 24 dead and 19 wounded, most of whom became casualties in the opening minutes of the battle. Bad weather prevented a withdrawal, so Companies E and F set up a defensive perimeter and passed the night without further contact.

To the west, another encounter between a seven-man reconnaissance team from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion and an enemy company marked the last significant action of the operation. Helicopters inserted Reconnaissance Team Breaker at 1650 on 9 May. Shortly after midnight it became heavily engaged. The enemy easily could have overrun the outnumbered Marines, but they chose not to do so. Apparently they were more interested in shooting down helicopters attempting to extract the team. The heroic performance of 18-year-old Private First Class Steve D. Lopez highlighted the action. Wounded four times, twice in the head, the young Marine remained on his radio for 12 hours, calling in artillery and air strikes practically on top of

his own position. In addition, he killed several enemy soldiers at close quarters with his M-16.²¹

Helicopters made two attempts during the night to extract the team and another in the early morning; all three failed because of heavy ground fire. At 1145, they made a fourth try. After sealing off the area with fixed-wing and gunship coverage, a UH-1E landed and picked up the three survivors. Four members of the reconnaissance team and one helicopter pilot died in the action, as did a known total of seven enemy soldiers.

This action ended the First Battle for Khe Sanh, one of the finest examples of an air-ground team effort during the war. The men of the 3d Marines fought a conventional infantry battle against a well-entrenched NVA force. Although aggressive infantry assaults finally took the various objectives, much of the credit for overwhelming the enemy force belongs to the supporting arms. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing flew more than 1,100 sorties, expending over 1,900 tons of ordnance during the operation. Air attacks proved particularly effective in uncovering and destroying enemy bunkers and fortifications. While Marine air provided all the close and direct air support for the operation, 23 U.S. Air Force B-52 strikes hit enemy troop concentrations, stores, and lines of communications. Artillery also provided a large share of combat support, especially during the many periods of reduced visibility. Artillery units fired more than 25,000 rounds in support of their comrades on and around the Khe Sanh hills.

The battle was also the first major test of the M-16 rifle by the Marine Corps. Opinions of the results were mixed. The light weight of the rifle and the ability of the troops to carry more ammunition than with previous rifles were important positive factors. One Marine officer attributed the success of the final assault on Hill 881 to the M-16s used by the attacking Marines. Others, however, strongly criticized the weapon for a tendency to jam.^{22*}

The First Battle for Khe Sanh did not turn into the spectacular victory that the North Vietnamese desired. Reported enemy casualties in the action from 24 April through 11 May stood at 940 confirmed killed. The cost of stopping the Communist effort was not light; 155 Marines died and another 425 suffered wounds.

*See Chapter 14 for a discussion of the problems with the M-16 and the efforts to correct them.

Operation Crockett

With the enemy threat in the area relieved for the time being, Lieutenant General Walt began reducing forces at Khe Sanh. From 11-13 May, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines replaced the two battalions from the 3d Marines and, at 1500 on the 13th, Colonel John J. Padley, commanding officer of the 26th



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188672

The 26th Marines constantly patrolled the area around Khe Sanh after the beginning of Operation Crockett in mid-May. This patrol from Company A climbs through rugged terrain near Hill 881 North that had been blasted by several earlier air strikes.

Marines, assumed responsibility for Khe Sanh from Colonel Lanigan.*

The mission assigned to Colonel Padley's Marines was to occupy key terrain, deny enemy access into the vital areas, conduct aggressive patrolling in order to detect and destroy enemy elements within the TAOR, and provide security for the base and adjacent outposts. Colonel Padley was to support the Special Forces Camp at Lang Vei with his organic artillery, as well as to coordinate all activities of allied units operating in the area. The code name for Marine operations in the Khe Sanh TAOR was Operation Crockett.

To accomplish the mission, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Donald E. Newton, stationed one company each on Hill 881S and 861; a security detachment on Hill 950 at a radio relay site; and the remainder of the battalion at the base, acting both as base security and battalion reserve. The units at the company outposts patrolled continuously within a 4,000-meter radius of their positions. Company A, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, operating from Khe Sanh, inserted reconnaissance teams at greater ranges to provide long-range surveillance. Although numerous sightings and reports indicated that all three regiments of the 325C NVA Division were still in the tri-border region, there was only occasional contact during May.

As June began, there was a sharp increase in the number of sightings throughout the Crockett TAOR. At 0101 6 June, twenty-five 120mm mortar rounds and 102mm rockets hit the base. One hour later the radio relay site on Hill 950 came under attack from the west and northeast by an unknown number of enemy soldiers. The enemy penetrated the position, but the defending Marines quickly forced them to withdraw, leaving 10 dead, one wounded, and seven weapons. Marine losses in the action were six killed and two wounded. The next afternoon, mortar and small-arms fire hit a patrol from Company B, approximately 2,000 meters west of Hill 881S. The mortar attack immediately preceded an assault by about 40 NVA troops. The Marines

*The official designation of the unit at Khe Sanh was the 26th Marines (Forward). It consisted of one battalion and a small regimental headquarters. The other two 26th Marines battalions were in Vietnam, but under the control of other units. The regimental rear headquarters remained on Okinawa.

repulsed the enemy charge and called artillery in on the attackers. A platoon from Company A arrived by helicopter to help. By 1630, when the enemy withdrew, the two Marine units had killed 66 North Vietnamese and lost 18 of their own men. Twenty-eight Marines suffered wounds.

Two days later the enemy shot down an armed UH-1E in the same area, killing the pilot and wounding the copilot. Friendly forces rescued the copilot and two crew members, but the aircraft had to be destroyed. Due to the increasing number of enemy contacts, Lieutenant Colonel Kurt L. Hoch's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines returned to the operational control of the 26th Marines (Forward) at Khe Sanh; the battalion arrived at Khe Sanh on the 13th.

During the two weeks after the 3d Battalion's arrival, both Marine battalions had many contacts with isolated enemy forces throughout the TAOR. In the early morning of the 27th, 50 82mm mortar rounds hit the Khe Sanh base. The attack was extremely

costly to the Marines; it killed nine and wounded 125. Another attack occurred at 0525 by 50 102mm rockets. Casualties resulting from the second attack totaled one killed and 14 wounded. The Marines' artillery answered both attacks with unknown results.

At 1230 on 27 June, Company I, 26th Marines, while searching for a suspected mortar position to the west of the base, ran into two NVA companies. Company L landed by helicopter to reinforce the engaged Marines. By 1900 the NVA broke contact and withdrew to the northwest leaving 35 bodies on the battlefield. This was the last significant action during June.

Operation Crockett continued as a two-battalion effort until it ended the 16th of July. During the July period of the operation there was a gradual increase in the number of sightings, but only occasional contact. Nevertheless, the Marines knew the NVA was not ready to abandon the Khe Sanh area.

Following the battles of April and May for the Khe Sanh area, shell-scarred Hill 881 South, shown here in an aerial view, became a combat base for a 26th Marines company.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189356

