

PART II
SPRING FIGHTING IN
SOUTHERN I CORPS

CHAPTER 5

The War in Southern I Corps

*The Situation — Operation Desoto — Deckhouse/Desoto — Desoto Continued
Operation Union — Union II*

The Situation

The buildup of regular NVA forces along the DMZ attracted command attention, but the fighting there was only one segment of the I Corps-III MAF campaign. The 1st Marine Division, in the southern portion of the III MAF zone of operations, was fighting a three-pronged war. Marine operations of battalion size or larger extended to the outer periphery of the division's TAOR to destroy North Vietnamese units and Viet Cong main forces and base areas, while company-size and smaller counter guerrilla operations sought to protect both allied installations and the civil population. At the same time, the division provided support for the Vietnamese Government Revolutionary Development Program which was trying to neutralize the guerilla infrastructure.

The area of responsibility of Major General Herman Nickerson, Jr.'s 1st Marine Division consisted of the three southernmost provinces of I Corps: Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai. This area was important for diverse reasons. It contained a large population, was a rich rice-producing basin, and was a major source of salt.* Furthermore, the tree-covered foothills of the Annamite Mountains jutting into the coastal plain and the numerous rivers provided the enemy with natural access to the area.

Forty-three large unit operations, involving a force of at least a battalion, were conducted in southern I Corps during the first six months of 1967. In addition, thousands of small unit operations abetted the larger "sweeps." During the first three months of the year, for example, the 1st Marine Division carried out no less than 36,553 company-size operations, patrols, and ambushes in the Da Nang Tactical Area alone.

*Salt had traditionally been a medium of barter and a taxable commodity in Vietnam. Moreover, the hot climate of Vietnam makes its use a dietary necessity.

These small unit actions occasionally were hard-fought battles with the Viet Cong. One such occurred on 31 January during a patrol approximately 15 kilometers southwest of Da Nang by Company H, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, commanded by Captain Edward J. Banks. Just before noon, as the company approached the hamlet of Thuy Bo, located immediately west of the north-south railroad, it came under heavy fire from a Viet Cong main-force battalion. The latter's armament included .50-caliber and other automatic weapons which hit several Marines in the lead platoon. The casualties mounted as the enemy gunners' fire found the Marines taking shelter behind low rice paddy dikes. Evacuation of the dead and wounded proved difficult and only one helicopter managed to land and pick up some of the casualties.

Captain Banks requested air and artillery strikes on the enemy force. By 1330, he decided to ask for a quick reaction mission to bring in reinforcements. Supporting arms continued to hit the Viet Cong but did not eliminate the main-force battalion's fire. The Marines had to remain in their exposed positions the rest of the day and all night.

The following morning, the Marine company assaulted the hamlet. There was some gunfire during the assault; however, the enemy battalion had withdrawn during the night. Marine casualties numbered 5 dead and 26 wounded, most of whom were from the lead units on 31 January. One Marine later died from his wounds. The Marines estimated they had killed 101 Viet Cong soldiers.

During the next two days, local Vietnamese peasants brought 22 dead and 18 wounded villagers to the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines command post. These casualties had resulted from air, artillery, and small arms fire. After an investigation, the battalion determined that these civilian casualties were a regrettable corollary to the fighting on 31 January and 1 February.

The 1st Marines followed up the 31 January action with Operation Stone, which lasted from 10-12



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A369882

Operation Desoto occurred as the 1st Marine Division prepared to issue the M-16 rifle to its infantrymen. MajGen Herman Nickerson, Jr., used a 21 February visit to Operation Desoto to discuss the weapon with one of the few 1st Division Marines to have one.

February. Three Marine battalions participated in the operation's first phase on Go Noi Island, a 12-kilometer-long island formed by the river south of Company H's action. Phase II took place north of the river and included the Thuy Bo area. However, only a single reinforced battalion, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, conducted the remainder of the operation.

The 1st Battalion managed to establish a cordon on 19 February around elements of the Viet Cong *R-20 Battalion*. Beginning the following morning, the Marine battalion's companies took turns sweeping back and forth across the cordoned area. By the end of the operation on 12 February, the 1st Battalion had killed a confirmed total of 68 Viet Cong soldiers and captured 25 prisoners and 17 weapons.

Marine casualties for all of Operation Stone totaled 9 dead and 76 wounded. One Kit Carson Scout also died. The 1st Marines claimed 291 Viet Cong killed in the entire operation and listed another 112 as probably killed, plus 74 enemy captured.

While such actions established a tedious balance in the "cat-and-mouse" game of subduing local guerrillas, operations of a larger scale, responding to confirmed intelligence reports, attempted to smash larger, established Communist concentrations. Four major operations, Desoto, Deckhouse VI, Union, and Union II, produced the most significant results during January-June 1967, and are discussed in this chapter as being representative of the major unit fighting in southern I Corps during this period. Although these operations produced tangible and

significant results, it is, and was, impossible to measure the full impact of the "unsuccessful" operations, much less the small unit patrols and ambushes that encountered no enemy. "No contact" had to be considered as a potential victory in the war for area and people control.

The Vietnamese-U.S. 1967 Joint Combined Campaign Plan specified several areas of southern I Corps for allied operations in early 1967. The Thu Bon area between Da Nang and An Hoa and the rich, densely populated Que Son Valley were main areas of concern. The results of Marine and ARVN efforts in these regions for the past two years were tangible, but continued pressure was required to extend and consolidate government authority there. Pacified areas, and those undergoing pacification, required protection, as did military bases and population centers. The gradual increase of Communist capabilities made it necessary to pay higher costs for the security of these locations.* At the same time, the enemy sanctuary in the Duc Pho-Mo Duc sections of Quang Ngai, demanded immediate attention. Intelligence reports indicated that NVA units had moved north into these two districts from II Corps.

*On 27 February 1967, the enemy attacked the Da Nang air base complex with 140mm rockets, which had a range of 8,000 meters. This was the first use of the weapon in the war. To counter the increased firepower capability the Marines extended their search areas by approximately 2,500 meters. (See Chapter 6 for a more detailed account of this attack.)



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370227

A peasant family's bomb shelter provides a place for a machine gun team from the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines to set up to provide covering fire for infantrymen searching a village during Operation Arizona in June. Arizona was one of the many conducted by the 1st Marine Division to maintain control over the populated areas south of Da Nang.

Duc Pho, the southernmost district of Quang Ngai Province, had been under Communist influence for many years. The salt flats at Sa Huynh, as well as the rich and populated, fertile coastal plain, were a vital source of supply for the Viet Cong war effort. Furthermore, the Tra Cau inlet and the coast immediately to the north had long been suspected as infiltration points. Intelligence reports also indicated that the district harbored the Viet Cong political subdivision of the region. South Vietnamese Army activity in Duc Pho had been restricted to the outposting of two predominant hills, Nui Dang and Nui Dau. An ARVN battalion occupied these hilltops and controlled the area around the district capital of Duc Pho, but nothing more. As a result, the guerrillas developed extensive fortifications and supply installations throughout the countryside. Astonishing as it may seem, the Communist control over the area was so complete that many of the inhabitants had never come in contact with military forces other than the Viet Cong.

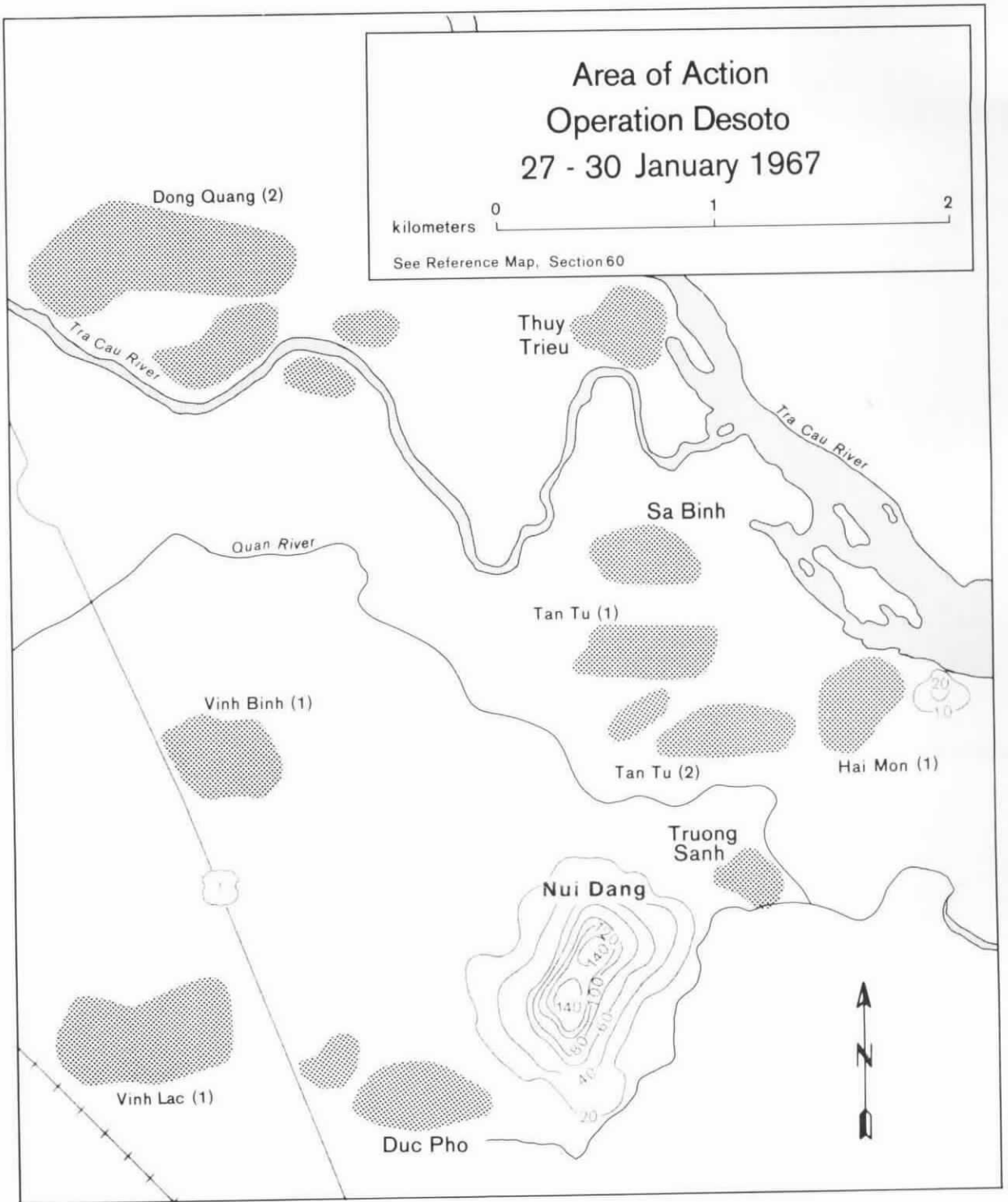
Geographically, the Duc Pho region is a predominantly flat rice paddy interspersed with numerous small streams having steep banks four to

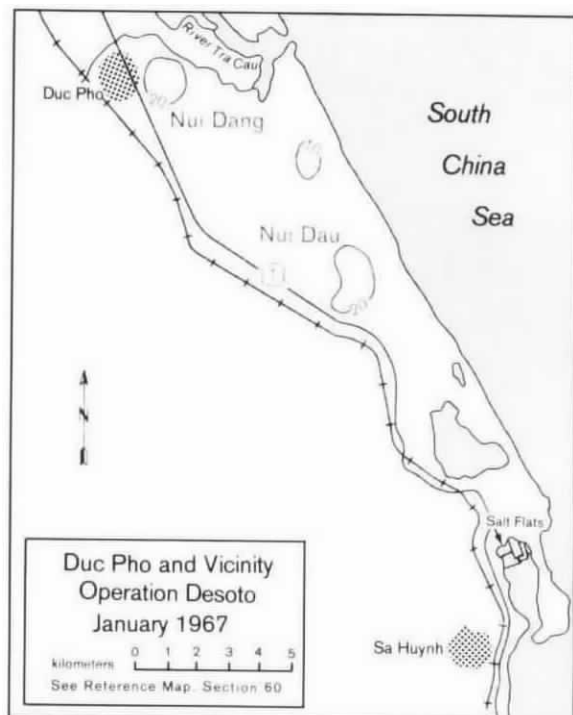
five feet high. The majority of the streams are fordable. Hedgerows border virtually all the rice paddies and cane fields and bamboo groves are scattered throughout the area.

Operation Desoto

Operation Desoto originated from the joint Vietnamese-U.S. 1967 Combined Campaign Plan in which III MAF forces were to relieve ARVN units from outpost duty so that they could be employed more effectively elsewhere in the Revolutionary Development Program. The 4th Battalion, 4th Regiment, 2d ARVN Division, stationed in Duc Pho District, was one of the units selected to concentrate on the pacification program. In turn, General Stiles' Task Force X-Ray assigned one of its battalions to relieve the ARVN battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Raymond J. O'Leary's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines received this mission.*

*LtCol O'Leary's 3d Battalion came to the operation with considerable experience in fighting both NVA and VC units. During the latter part of 1966, the battalion participated in Operation Prairie I in the DMZ and in the Dai Loc/Hill 39 TAOR west of Da Nang. Col Francis V. White, Comments on draft ms, 22Nov82 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)





The relief operation termed Desoto began on 27 January. Marine helicopters lifted Company L and four 105mm howitzers and crews of Battery I, 12th Marines to Nui Dang to relieve the Vietnamese units there. The howitzers were to provide fire support for a battalion assault the next morning. At 0800 on the 28th, Company M, followed by the rest of the battalion, made a helicopter assault into landing zones just north of the Nui Dang position. The only opposition was sniper fire, but intermittent firing continued throughout the day.

Shortly after the battalion's landing, Companies I and M moved out to secure the villages of Vinh Binh and Truong Sanh.* Sniper fire harried Company I during its advance to Vinh Binh, but by the end of the day the company had secured the village and established night positions east of it. Company M also encountered light harassing fire as it moved toward Truong Sanh, but it occupied the village without opposition. Villagers at Truong Sanh told the Marines that strong VC forces were east of the Song Quan (Quan River) in the hamlet of Tan Tu (2).

*Truong Sanh appears on maps in use in 1967 but not on the 1970 edition of the Mo Duc mapsheet. It occupied the area north east of Nui Dang and south of the Song Quan.

To exploit this information, the battalion command group, Company M, and one platoon moved east of the stream south of the hamlet. As the lead elements began to move into Tan Tu (2) they came under sniper fire, and when they tried to close with the snipers a strong VC bunker complex stopped their advance. The company called in artillery and air strikes against the positions. After the bombardment, the Marines attacked again, but stopped once more because of heavy fire from machine guns and automatic weapons to the north and northeast. The Marines directed more supporting arms fire against the Communist positions. Under its cover, Company M recovered its dead and wounded and, following orders from the battalion, withdrew across the stream and established company night positions.

Because of the sharp engagement east of the Song Quan, Lieutenant Colonel O'Leary decided to use both Companies I and M to assault the Tan Tu village complex on the 29th. During the night supporting arms blanketed the village to prepare for the attack, and at first light both companies began moving toward the objective. As they forded the Song Quan, sniper fire broke out. The enemy snipers were unusually accurate; they wounded three men from Company I almost immediately. Both companies returned the enemy fire and pushed on into the village against little resistance.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A369746
A rifleman races for the cover of a paddy dike as his 7th Marines unit draws sniper fire on 28 January, the first day of Task Force X-Ray's Operation Desoto.

By 1330, the Marines had secured Tan Tu and moved into the adjacent village of Sa Binh, still harassed by long-range sniper fire. Periodic bursts of heavy fire were the only sign of the enemy; the majority had withdrawn. The two companies searched the village and dug in for the night on a small knoll north of Sa Binh.

The next day, Company M again searched the two communities. One patrol found an enemy landmine foundry with 500 pounds of uncut metal, mine molds, and tools. After photographing the entire works for intelligence purposes, the Marines demolished the foundry.

Meanwhile, Company I had started to sweep southeast toward the village of Hai Mon. Since this area had sheltered enemy snipers on the 29th, the Marines first called in artillery and naval preparatory fires on suspected positions near the community. As the lead element advanced, they met heavy small arms fire from Hai Mon. The FAC assigned to Company I called in jets armed with napalm and 500-pound bombs, followed by attacks by two UH-1Es which hit the area with rockets and machine gun fire. One UH-1E, badly damaged by ground fire, force-landed at the battalion CP.

One of the battalion's 106mm recoilless rifles revealed the degree of fortification of the village when one of its rounds hit one of the thatched huts and revealed an oval concrete bunker. A direct hit from another 106mm round penetrated the bunker.¹

Hai Mon proved to be more difficult by the minute. The defending enemy had fortified many rice paddy dikes to create positions providing a deadly cross-fire. By 1330, Company I had taken cover in deep rice paddies west of the village. As the afternoon wore on, the situation became even worse. Enemy gunfire, including fire from heavy machine guns, raked the company from four sides. The company could not evacuate its casualties and ammunition ran low. At 1655, the battalion ordered Company I to break contact and withdraw to the west.

Withdrawal and reconsolidation were not easy. Company M fought its way up to the eastern flank of Company I and replenished the latter's ammunition, then both companies tried to disengage under the cover of air strikes, artillery, and naval gunfire.* By 2000, Company M had established a casualty collec-

*Col Francis V. White, then the 3d Battalion's S-3 officer, recalled in 1982 that, at the height of this firefight, Capt Alan L. Orr, the battalion S-4 officer, led an ammunition party to Company M's position, then to Company I, to deliver badly needed



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A369818
Enemy fire on 1 February during Operation DeSoto forced this Marine from Company I, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines to crawl to cover while another Marine elected to avoid the mud and dash forward on foot.

tion point and both companies gathered their casualties there. The Marines could not complete the medical evacuation until 2200 because some casualties had been point men caught in the open by the initial enemy fire. Marines could recover these bodies only by crawling out under cover of darkness. By then, the battalion estimated that Hai Mon was 60 percent destroyed. Supporting arms amounting to 325 5-inch naval rockets, 125 5-inch shells, 590 105mm rounds, and 50 tons of aviation ordnance had smashed the enemy fortifications.

Lieutenant Colonel O'Leary, realizing the village was highly fortified, was not content with the damage to Hai Mon and ordered more shelling to neutralize the area. Again on the 31st, the battalion directed air, naval gunfire, and artillery at all known and suspected Communist positions in and around the village.

While supporting arms pounded Hai Mon, Company M resumed the deliberate search of the Tan Tu hamlets, as Company I swept the area west of Hai Mon. To the south, Company K, operating from Nui Dau, made several small contacts, but enemy activity was light. The heaviest action of the day occurred at 2200 when the battalion command post and logistic support area came under small arms and 60mm mortar fire. Shortly thereafter, 20 VC probed the perimeter. Company L and Headquarters and

ammunition and to assist in casualty evacuation. Col Francis V. White, Comments on draft ms, 22Nov82 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

Service Company security troops stopped the attack in the outer wire of their defenses, killing two of the enemy. Marine losses were 14 wounded, eight of whom required evacuation. The battalion's 81mm mortars and supporting artillery fired on possible escape routes to catch the withdrawing enemy, but a followup search of the area turned up only two Russian-made rifles, several grenades, and some satchel charges.

During early February, the battalion remained in the new TAOR and conducted repeated search and destroy operations. On 2 February, Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Bronars relieved Lieutenant Colonel O'Leary as commanding officer of the battalion. The next day, 3 February, Companies L and M, 5th Marines, which joined the operation on 31 January, conducted a two-day sweep in the village complex southeast of Nui Dang. Although contact in the area was light, the Marines found the hamlets to be well fortified, and discovered more than 100 tons of rice which they bagged and turned over to ARVN authorities. After searching this community, the Marines again turned their attention to Hai Mon and Hill 26 east of it.

Aerial observation reports and Company I's bloody experience of the 30th indicated that most of the enemy fortifications in the village pointed west. Lieutenant Colonel Bronars decided to attack the position from the east by vertical envelopment, using Companies L and M. The morning of 5 February, artillery, naval gunfire, and air bombardment blanketed the objective area. The assault helicopters from Lieutenant Colonel Ural W. Shadrick's HMM-262 followed approach and retirement lanes which allowed the artillery at Nui Dang and the naval guns offshore to maintain suppressive fire throughout the landing.

Light machine gun fire and several rounds of 57mm recoilless rifle fire greeted the companies as they moved into the hamlets. They responded by calling in artillery and naval gunfire. At this time, Marines spotted a number of sampans carrying about 30 Viet Cong fleeing northward across the Song Tra Cau. Bronar's Company M sprayed the withdrawing force with small arms fire and fixed-wing aircraft made several strikes, destroying several of the sampans.

After seizing Hill 26 and Hai Mon, the Marines searched the area and uncovered a vast, intricate bunker and cave system. They promptly destroyed the bunkers, but the caves, particularly those on Hill

26, were so extensive that the battalion called in engineers to determine the amount of explosives needed to seal them. By the time the last cave on the hill had collapsed, the engineers had used 3,600 pounds of explosives. The well-prepared defensive positions and the skillfully laid fields of fire confirmed that the Communists had expected an attack from the west; the assault from the east caught them by surprise. Possession of the village enabled the Marines to control the southern bank of the Song Tra Cau inlet.

Desoto continued during February, consisting of frequent platoon and company sweeps and extensive patrolling and ambushing throughout the area. The battalion's area of operations expanded with each passing day. The villages of Thuy Trieu, An Trung, Dong Quang, Vinh Lac, and Thanh Lam appeared on daily situation reports, but for the Marines on the ground each one was just another "ville" that had to be seized and cleared, a dirty and often painful task.² Attrition among company grade officers was quite high, and the high tempo of daily operations had a noticeable deleterious effect on the rifle companies.³

Snipers were a constant threat and the major source of Marine casualties. The Marines countered with scout-sniper teams positioned at carefully selected vantage points; however, the teams had difficulty in locating an enemy who fired from cleverly constructed spider traps.

Throughout the month the battalion exploited reports of Viet Cong positions with artillery and naval gunfire and extensively used radar-controlled aerial bombing of suspected enemy concentrations. Surveillance reports indicated that the supporting arms attacks were very effective against the Communist sanctuaries.

Deckhouse/Desoto

While Lieutenant Colonel Bronars' battalion gradually expanded control of the Nui Dang-Nui Dau area, the Marines of Colonel Harry D. Wortman's SLF landed near Sa Huynh at the southern tip of the district. The SLF's amphibious operation area included the only area in I Corps where the Annamite Mountains extend to the coastline. It was a predominantly Communist-controlled area. The heavily forested hills concealed the supply routes leading to major enemy base areas further inland. A sheltered harbor and anchorage, and several landing beaches on the coast enhanced Sa Huynh's infiltration potential.

SLF Operation Deckhouse VI had several goals: to prevent free movement of Communist forces in the area; to conduct harbor, beach, and airfield surveys to locate a site from which to provide more economical logistic support for allied forces in southern Quang Ngai; and to provide security for the construction of a CIDG camp which would establish permanent government control in the region. Upon completion of these tasks, the SLF was to join with Bronar's battalion to continue search and destroy operations throughout the Duc Pho region.

The first phase of the operation began at 0800 16 February when the naval gunfire support ships, including the rocket ships USS *Clarion River* (LSMR 409) and USS *White River* (LSMR 536), began preparation fires. When the naval fires ended, two UH-1Es of VMO-2 directed air strikes on the primary and alternate landing zones. At 0855, the first wave of helicopters from Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth E. Huntington's HMM-363 lifted off the deck of the USS *Iwo Jima* (LPH-2) with Company A of Lieutenant Colonel Jack Westerman's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. The helicopters landed on high ground five miles inland. Two UH-1E gunships accompanying the flight suppressed a platoon-size ambush, killing 12 of an estimated 30-man VC force near the LZ.

On 20 February, operational control of the SLF passed to General Stiles' Task Force X-Ray. Lack of opposition around Sa Huynh allowed General Stiles to reorient the BLT's efforts. He ordered Westerman to begin deliberate search and destroy operations to the northeast, while elements involved in Operation Desoto moved into blocking positions south and west of Nui Dau. By the afternoon of the 25th, the BLT had passed through Lieutenant Colonel Bronar's battalion and moved into positions near Nui Dau, thus ending the first phase of Operation Deckhouse VI.

During their sweep north, Lieutenant Colonel Westerman's Marines found numerous bunkers, tunnels, caves, and supply caches; they demolished 167 fortifications, captured 20 tons of supplies, and destroyed 10 caves and 84 booby traps. In the process of defending these positions, the enemy force killed six Marines and wounded another 61. Most of the enemy casualties came from supporting arms fire called in by reconnaissance teams operating to the west; these fires killed 201 enemy soldiers.

The operation plan scheduled the second phase of Deckhouse VI to take place along the northern por-

tion of the Desoto TAOR. Intelligence reports indicated that the *38th VC Battalion* was infiltrating into the Duc Pho area from the northwest. General Stiles arranged to exploit this information by an operation involving his Task Force X-Ray, the SLF, and 2d ARVN Division units in Quang Ngai Province.

One Marine and two ARVN battalions were to be helilifted into the area northwest of Duc Pho and sweep eastward. At the same time, other 2d ARVN Division units would screen the northern flank of the operational area while elements of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines secured the southern flank from blocking positions within its TAOR. The plan ordered the SLF Marines to make an amphibious assault between the Mo Duc-Duc Pho district boundary and the Song Tra Cau, then sweep southwest to entrap any VC withdrawing from the other allied forces advancing eastward.

On the morning of 26 February, Lieutenant Colonel Peter L. Hilgartner's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines and two ARVN battalions landed northwest of Duc Pho and began sweeping northeast. They encountered only long-range sniper fire, but discovered numerous caves and bunkers, all oriented toward the east.

With the insertion of three battalions in the western portion of the area of operation, General Stiles ordered the SLF withdrawn, and by 1825 that evening the BLT completed its withdrawal. Less than 15 hours after the last elements of the BLT left the beach near Nui Dau, the SLF made another amphibious assault, 10 kilometers further north in Duc Pho District.

Following preparation of the beach area and landing zones by naval gunfire and aircraft, the helicopterborne assault elements launched from the USS *Iwo Jima* at 0830 on 27 February. Two armed UH-1Es escorted the 12 UH-34s and two CH-46s carrying the first wave of Company A into LZ Bat, 1,500 meters from the beach.

As the troop-laden helicopters from HMM-363 made their approach into LZ Bat, enemy soldiers, located in and around the landing zone, opened up with a heavy volume of small arms fire. Marine helicopter crewmen immediately returned fire with their door-mounted machine guns; the UH-1Es closed in to provide suppressive fire with rockets and machine guns.

The first wave of Company A got into LZ Bat at the cost of battle damage to eight medium



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800971

A unit of BLT 114 establishes a night defensive position in the middle of a broad expanse of muddy rice paddies during Operation Deckhouse VI. One of the Marines in the foreground has obtained a non-issue M1 rifle which rests against a pack on the dike.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A191134

Capt Richard F. Corcoran uses his radio to coordinate the defense of Landing Zone Bat on 27 February at the beginning of Phase II of Operation Deckhouse VI. Only one platoon and the company headquarters managed to get into the LZ; heavy enemy fire forced other units to land on the beach.

helicopters. All eight flew back to the *Iwo Jima* but three made forced landings onto the flight deck. Another three of the damaged aircraft also had to be grounded.

Company C landed by LVTs at 0837. With the beach area safe for helicopters, Company B and the remainder of Company A used the area as their LZ. As soon as they reorganized, they moved toward LZ Bat and linked up with the isolated elements of Company A. Enemy sniper fire continued, wounding seven Marines by 1200.

LZ Bat remained hazardous for aircraft all morning. At 1030, a UH-34 encountered heavy small arms fire while making an emergency medevac from the zone. Fortunately, it suffered no hits. Around noon, two other helicopters from HMM-363 were not so lucky. The squadron's after action report said:

At 1206H, two aircraft were launched for an emergency med-evac [from] Landing Zone Bat. YZ-81 received five rounds upon approach and had to wave-off. His wingman, YZ-83, then proceeded into the zone, but also encountered heavy fire on approach and, after taking three rounds, waved off. One of the rounds lodged in the co-pilot's right thigh causing moderate injury. Shrapnel from the same round hit the co-pilot's left foot and the pilot's chin, causing minor injuries. Both aircraft returned to the *USS Iwo Jima* with battle damage.⁴



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188495

An armed Navy LCU lands Marines at Blue Beach during the first day of Operation Deckhouse VI. Ships of the Seventh Fleet's Amphibious Ready Group dot the horizon.

The rest of the BLT continued to land and by mid-day the command group was controlling the operation from ashore and the two artillery batteries were set up, ready to support the battalion. Company D landed by helicopter at 1430 and the battalion began to sweep to the southwest.

The SLF remained in almost constant contact with fleeing groups of VC for two days after the landing, but by the afternoon of 1 March the contact diminished. The morning of 3 March the operation terminated. Phase II of Operation Deckhouse VI cost the enemy 76 dead; but they killed a Marine and wounded 50 others.*

For Hilgartner's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, operating inland with the ARVN battalions, the entire operation had been frustrating. Although the Marines found and destroyed numerous fortifications, they had very little enemy contact. The following excerpt from a report of 2 March typifies the battalion's encounter with the enemy during the period 26 February-3 March:

Company D while sweeping through a hamlet observed 3 VC carrying packs. One VC was dressed in black, one in white, and one in green trousers. The VC spotted the Marines and began to run in a westerly direction. Company D fired 10 rounds of small arms fire and physically pursued the VC. VC wearing green trousers was captured. The VC carried a well-stocked firstaid kit. Marines con-

tinued to pursue and captured the VC wearing white trousers. This VC was carrying a pack with assorted clothing. Marines continued to pursue third VC with negative results.^{4A}

When Deckhouse VI ended on 3 March, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, had accounted for 17 Communists killed and 11 captured. The 1st Battalion suffered two killed and 12 wounded.

Both the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines and the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines departed the Duc Pho area after Deckhouse VI. The 1st Battalion, 4th Marines reverted to SLF control while the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines returned to Chu Lai. With the departure of these units, responsibility for the Duc Pho TAOR again rested with the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines.

Desoto Continued

Operation Desoto continued through the months of March and April. The 3d Battalion conducted daily company- and platoon-size search and destroy operations while maintaining and improving the Nui Dang base camp and LSA area and positions on Nui Dau. Throughout this period, brushes with local VC were frequent. Constant pressure by the Marines forced the VC to give up attempts to defend the hamlets and resort to delaying actions, harassment, and only an occasional attack.

The most damaging enemy action during the period took place early in the morning of 24 March when an enemy force hit the battalion base camp and logistic support area with 250 mortar and recoilless rifle rounds. The first rounds landed in the

*See Chapter 8 for detailed descriptions of SLF participation in Operation Deckhouse VI.

CP/LSA part of the camp. Battery I began counter-battery fire before its gun positions came under fire. The VC quickly responded and fired 70 rounds into the artillery revetments, scoring direct hits on two of the Marine guns, killing three Marines and wounding 14 others. The artillerymen fired more than 100 rounds, silencing the enemy weapons. The effects of the Communist attack remained visible long after the action stopped. The enemy fire had hit the tactical fuel dispensing system and dumps in the LSA; 70,000 gallons of fuel burned far into the night.

A search of the area the next morning located 36 75mm recoilless rifle cannisters and several freshly dug mortar positions. All the positions showed damage from the thorough artillery counterbattery fires. Followup intelligence reports revealed that the attacking force came from the 95th VC Battalion and that they had forced local villagers to carry ammunition for the 12 recoilless rifles used in the attack.

A sequel to this incident occurred on the 27th, when the enemy attacked the destroyer USS *Ozbourne* (DD 843), lying 1,000 meters off the mouth of the Song Tra Cau, with 18 rounds of recoilless rifle fire. There was no damage to the ship and her answering fire drove off the attackers.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A369802
The strain of the constant patrolling and combat of Operation Desoto shows on the face of this Marine from Company F, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines. Company F served under the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines during some of the heaviest fighting in Desoto.

Operations in the Que Son Basin brought an increase in the base and logistics structure in the area. Here, a Marine CH-46 lands on a newly constructed helicopter platform surrounded by the sand-bagged bunkers at the fortified hilltop position of Nui Dang.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421627



The same day, Company K conducted a search and destroy operation northwest of Nui Dau, accompanied by the village chief and National Police representatives. Company G, 7th Marines, which had joined the operation on 23 March, assumed blocking positions outside the village while a plane flew over the village, broadcasting advice to the villagers to remain in their homes.* As the Marines of Company K began moving into the hamlets, they saw several VC slipping into the waters of the Dam Lam Binh and into sampans moored nearby. The Marines captured these, and found 13 more hiding in a bunker. The pilots of UH-1E helicopters supporting the operation saw more Communists camouflaged with moss in shallow swamp water. The gunships made several strafing runs to force the VC toward shore. After each pass, some of the enemy waded to shore to be captured by Company K. The aviators flushed 3 VC from the swamp in this manner and killed another 23. The number of prisoners reached 49 during the operation.

By 31 March, the battalion had swept approximately 75 percent of the assigned area of responsibility. Reconnaissance teams operating in the hills to the west and aerial observers continued to report moving enemy, which supporting arms took under fire with good results. Targets outside the TAOR, acquired through intelligence sources, suffered attacks by Marine radar-controlled air strikes and USAF B-52s. The steady pressure exerted by the Marine infantrymen in the rice paddies and hamlets began to pay dividends. The harassed local Communist forces reverted to guerrilla tactics as evidenced by an increase in their use of mines and booby traps.

The most costly mining incident during this period occurred at dusk on 5 April. As full darkness approached, Captain Robert B. Wilson began to move his Company G, 7th Marines into a night defensive position on a small hill southeast of Nui Dang. Someone in a security element tripped an anti-personnel mine devised from a 105mm round. The explosion wounded two Marines, one of whom required immediate evacuation. Unfortunately, the medevac helicopter, which had been in the area all day, had departed for Ky Ha. Instead, the pilot of a UH-1E gun ship volunteered to make the evacuation.

Captain Wilson suspected there might be additional mines hidden in the chest-high elephant grass on the hill. He advised the UH-1E pilot by radio to hover, rather than land, when picking up the casualty. The pilot hovered just above the ground and several infantrymen loaded the wounded Marine on board. As the loading occurred, a second, larger explosion disintegrated the UH-1E, causing numerous additional casualties. Other nearby Marines rushed to the scene to provide assistance only to be caught by a third explosion as large as the second.

Darkness made it difficult for Captain Wilson to get an accurate casualty count; the reported figure was 10 dead and 13 wounded. (Not until a week later did Marines recover the body of an 11th victim, a crew member of the UH-1E. The crewman's body, still strapped in its seat, lay more than 200 meters from the site of the explosion.)⁵

Company G searched the area around the three craters and found two wires leading from the hill to a cane field 500 meters away; the VC had command detonated the last two mines. Analysis of the craters from the last two explosions revealed they had been made by bombs of 250 pounds or larger.

While all the enemy's harassing actions were not as successful as the one on 5 April, Marine casualties were high. Lieutenant Commander Robert M. O'Brien's Company B, 1st Medical Battalion, operating with the Marines at Duc Pho, treated an average of 12 casualties and performed two major surgical operations a day. On one day alone, they handled 49 wounded. One of these casualties, a young Marine who was seriously wounded and under the influence of sedation, asked O'Brien if he would live. A few minutes later the chaplain arrived and, as he approached, heard the wounded man say "Chaplain, I don't need you. The doctor says I'm going to live."⁶

The return of local Viet Cong units to guerrilla tactics was not the only indication of the Marines' growing influence in the region. District officials reported that the populace, enjoying more security, became increasingly pro-Government. Indicative of growing anti-Viet Cong feeling among the people was the fact that they often volunteered information pinpointing VC locations.

Unfortunately, military success outpaced civic action progress, particularly in the resolution of the refugee problem. About 11,000 Vietnamese became refugees from the heavy combat in the Duc Pho area. Of these, local government officials considered

*Company G, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines replaced Company F, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines which had relieved Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines on 23 February.

about 7,500 as "permanent" refugees who were to be resettled on an island 10 miles off the coast. However, since there were few vessels available to move such numbers, food and housing became critical in the Desoto area of operations.⁷

Local factors complicated the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines' civic action problems. The area was the home of the vice premier of North Vietnam, a fact in which many local Vietnamese took great pride. In addition, intelligence sources gave indications the province chief was a Viet Cong sympathizer, as were many of the refugees. Despite positive efforts by the commander of the Marine battalion, including obtaining new leadership for the attached Army civil affairs platoon, the civic action aspects of Operation Desoto remained unsolved long after the operation ended.⁸

By 7 April, when Operation Desoto ended, the Marines had expanded positive military control over 43 square kilometers of the Duc Pho District and had ensured relatively safe movement in another 50 square kilometers. Revolutionary Development teams were able to work effectively, a virtual impossibility three months earlier. Desoto was a landmark in that it was an initial step toward restoration of Government control in southernmost I Corps.

Logistically, Operation Desoto had been unique. The terrain and tactical situation required that all logistical support be provided by helicopter. At the beginning of the operation, the Marines established a logistical support area at the Quang Ngai airfield, and for the first six days flew all supplies from there directly to units in the field. Thereafter, six CH-46 helicopters arrived daily from Chu Lai, to supply an LSA at Duc Pho. On 8 February, to preserve the wing's helicopters and conserve critical flight time, III MAF obtained a Navy logistical support ship which established a forward supply point providing all operational support. The ship, an LST, loaded at Chu Lai with all classes of supply and then stationed itself off the coast, only five miles from the Duc Pho LSA. Helicopters, hovering over the ship, picked up supplies as external lifts and moved them to the LSA. This technique reduced the daily helicopter requirement from six to four. The Navy further improved the system later in February by providing a helicopter refueling capability by mooring an LCU (landing craft, utility) alongside, loaded with two 10,000-gallon reinforced rubber tanks full of aviation gas. Helicopters landing on the cargo deck of the LST could have their fuel tanks filled from the

alongside LCU at the same time they reloaded for another mission to Duc Pho. A forward supply point at Quang Ngai backed up the logistic support ship. Bulk items, fuel, and ammunition arrived there by trucks from Chu Lai. A detachment of the Marines' new heavy-lift helicopters, Sikorsky CH-53D Sea Stallions from HMM-265, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William R. Beeler, lifted the bulk items to the operational area when required. The new helicopters made possible air transportation of heavy equipment such as Ontos, 155mm howitzers, and D-4 Caterpillar tractors for which there had been no previous means of aerial delivery.

Logistical problems during the operation almost equaled the operational difficulties of eliminating the Communists from the area. From 27 January when Desoto began, until 7 April when it ended and control of the area passed to elements of the U.S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), the Marines killed a reported 383 enemy soldiers. But in terms of American casualties the cost was high—76 Marines died and another 573 received wounds.

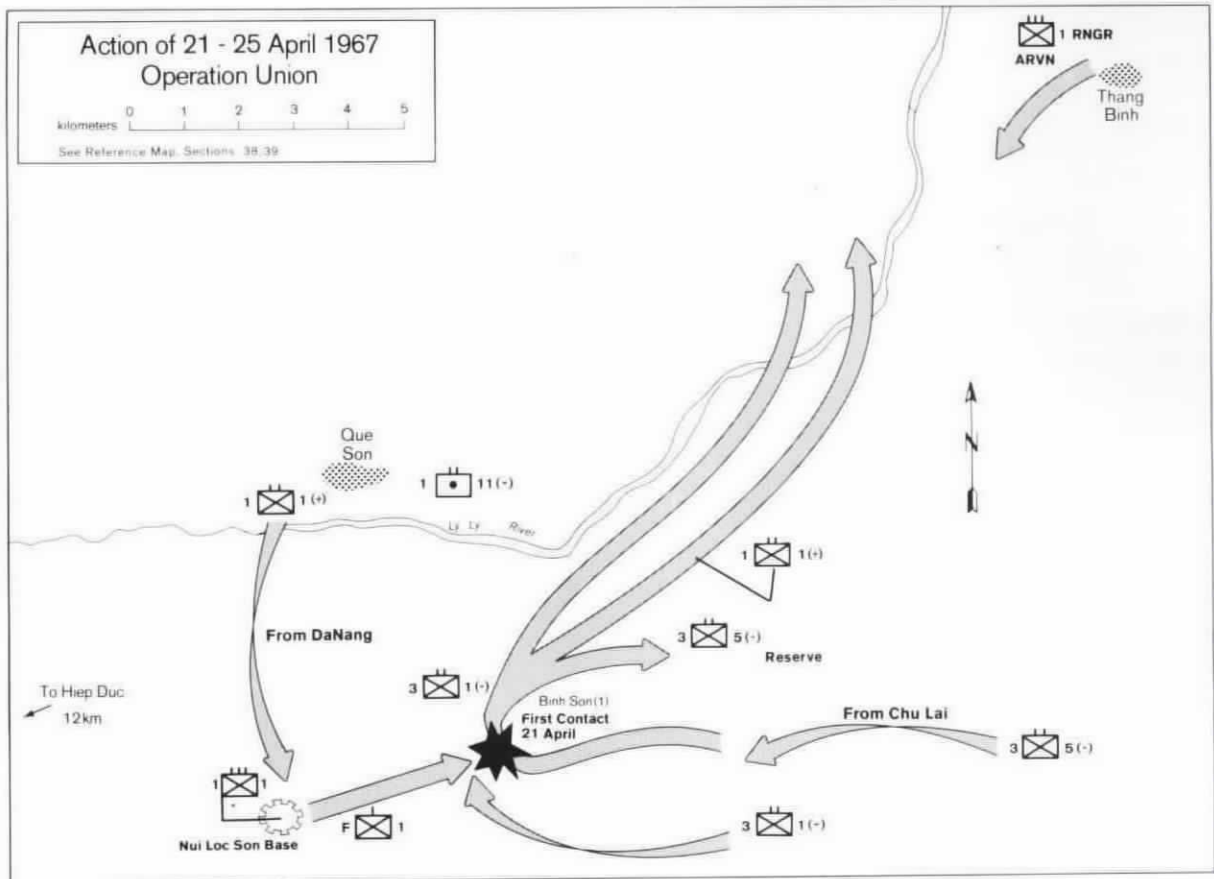
Operation Union

Operation Union, like Desoto, was an outgrowth of the 1967 Joint Combined Campaign Plan and the requirement for III MAF to replace ARVN units at isolated outposts. The hill complex of Nui Loc Son, overlooking the Que Son Valley, is 25 kilometers northwest of Tam Ky.* In 1967 it was the site of one of the ARVN manned outposts.

The Marines realized that dominance of the fertile, densely populated Que Son Basin region astride the Quang Nam-Quang Tin boundary was one of the keys to control of the five northern provinces of Vietnam. The enemy needed this agriculturally rich and populous area to support operations in the coastal lowlands. Despite a number of operations in the basin by both Marine and ARVN forces, Government control continued to be negligible.

The principal enemy force in the basin was the *2d NVA Division*. Although headquarters elements of the division appeared there in July 1966, units of its *3d* and *21st NVA Regiments* did not arrive in force until late February 1967. As the year progressed, the

*Some sources refer to this area as the Nui Loc Son Basin. The term Que Son Basin is used for consistency within this volume.



3d VC Regiment, also part of the *2d NVA Division*, joined them after moving north into the region from Quang Ngai Province.

The demand for Marine units elsewhere long denied the permanent assignment of a battalion or larger formation to the valley, and ARVN troops lacked the strength to carry the burden alone. However, the deployment of U.S. Army units to southern I Corps during April freed the 1st Marine Division for operations in this critical area.* Operation Union marked the beginning of the bitter campaign for control of the Que Son Basin.

In mid-January 1967, Captain Gene A. Deegan's Company F, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines had relieved the ARVN unit on Nui Loc Son and began operations under the direct control of Colonel Emil J. Radics' 1st Marines. By positioning Marines on this small hill mass, III MAF hoped to achieve three

*Two battalions of the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) temporarily moved into Duc Pho pending the arrival of Task Force Oregon units which were to be assigned to I Corps to reinforce III MAF later in April. See Chapter 4 for a detailed account of the U.S. Army's arrival in I CTZ.

goals: establish a modicum of control over VC/NVA access to this rice producing area; initiate a much needed civic action effort in a region frequented regularly by U.S. Forces; and force the *2d NVA Division* into open battle.

Company F, reinforced with an 81mm mortar section and a 106mm recoilless rifle section from the battalion and a 4.2-inch mortar battery from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, engaged small enemy units attempting to cross the valley floor. The company undertook civic action projects which generated a good relationship with the Vietnamese and produced accurate intelligence of NVA/VC activities in the area. The successful combination of small unit operations and civic action disturbed the NVA who had previously operated with impunity in the Que Son Basin. Colonel Radics described these actions as ". . . the planned and premeditated utilization of a Marine rifle company to create a situation."⁹ The *2d NVA Division* took the bait; in April it came out in force to fight.

The enemy's desire for a fight did not go unnoticed. As Colonel Radics recalled:

During early April, while making one of my twice weekly visits to Nui Loc Son, Captain Deegan advised me of increasing enemy movement in the hills to the west and south of the Que Son Basin. We deduced that, perhaps, he was at last making his move. On April 15, [the enemy] started infiltrating small units into the valley floor east of F Company's position. This buildup continued through the 16th and 17th, and on the night of April 18, Captain Deegan reported . . . that he believed the enemy [force] to be of at least two regiments in size.

My options were two. Let the enemy initiate action against F Company on Nui Loc Son and then react—or—assume the initiative and strike him first. I chose the latter option . . . The concept of a heliborne assault had been on the books and we only needed to know where the enemy would locate his major elements. . . . His option to locate east of Nui Loc Son was just what the 1st Marines wanted. This would enable the regiment to inhibit the enemy from [either] assaulting F Company's position or rapidly seeking sanctuary in the mountains to the south and east.¹⁰

The 1st Marines staff worked throughout the night of 18-19 April developing its final plan of attack. The plan provided for the following: Company F was to make contact from its outpost position, covered by supporting arms fire; elements of the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines would make a helicopter-borne assault into the operational area, followed by the 1st Battalion (-), 1st Marines; and another, as yet undesignated, battalion from Chu Lai would act as regimental reserve. Artillery from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines would move by helicopters to Que Son village for direct support. The 1st Marines command group would control the operation from the Nui Loc Son outpost.

The 1st Marines presented its plans to General Nickerson on the morning of the 19th, with the recommendation for execution that same day. General Nickerson approved the plan but delayed its execution because of another operation in progress within the division TAOR. On the afternoon of the 20th, he gave permission to begin Operation Union the following day.

Early on the morning of the 21st, Company F moved out from Nui Loc Son. By 0700, the company had several brief encounters with small NVA elements and had seen a large enemy force moving into the village of Binh Son (1) four kilometers to the northeast. At 0930 the Marine company came under heavy small arms fire and pulled back to a tree line where it called in artillery and air strikes on the enemy positions. At 1100, Captain Deegan moved his 2d and 3d Platoons against the village, while the 1st Platoon provided covering fire. The assault

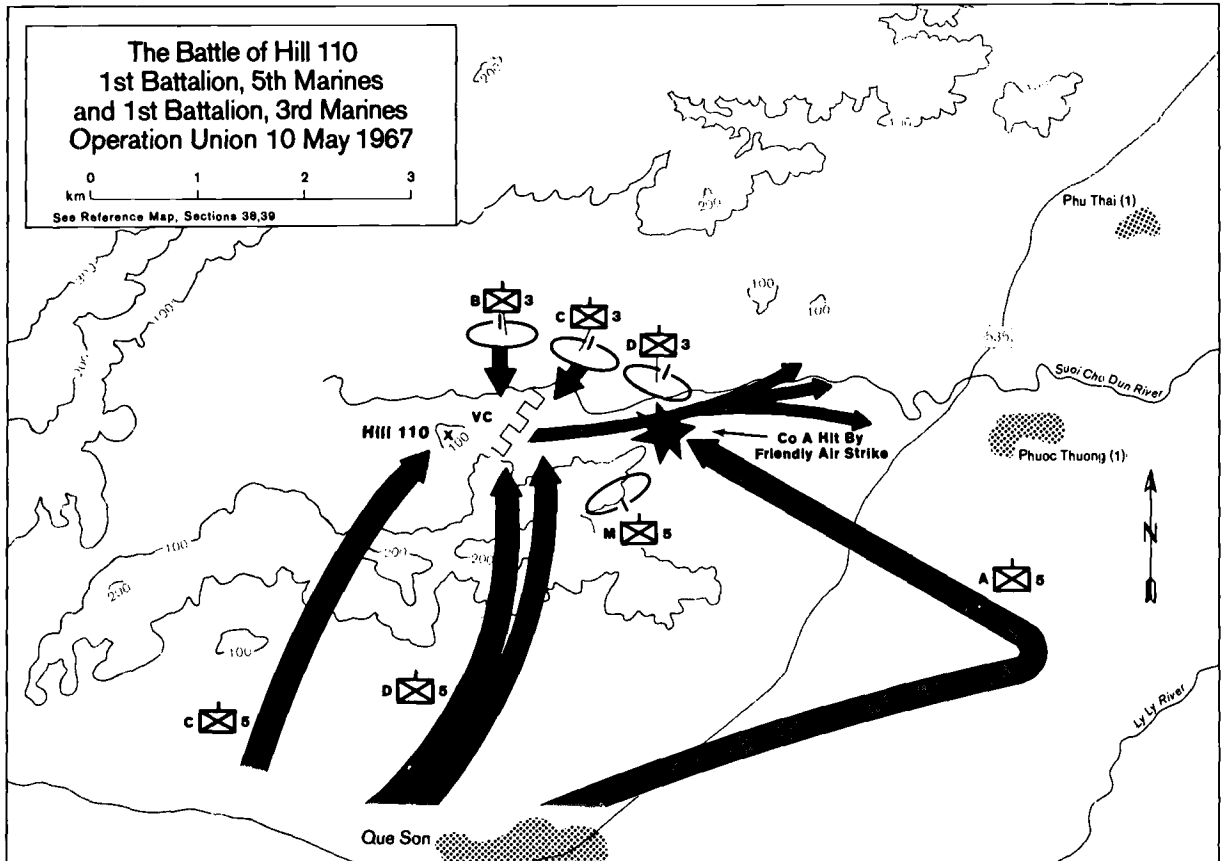
elements encountered almost no resistance as they jumped off in the attack, but as they started to enter the village they were stopped cold by heavy fire. The 1st Platoon tried to flank the enemy position, but as it moved it came under equally heavy fire. Despite repeated artillery and air strikes on the NVA positions the company was stuck, unable to maneuver because of the volume of enemy fire.

Lieutenant Colonel Hillmer F. DeAtley, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, his command group, and Companies I and M, joined the fight, entering a hotly contested landing zone 1,500 meters from the Company F action. The force fought its way to help Deegan, who, despite serious wounds, continued to direct his company until evacuated after DeAtley's battalion arrived. At 1610, the lead elements of Lieutenant Colonel Dean E. Esslinger's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines from Chu Lai began landing east of the battlefield. Esslinger's Marines moved west through scattered resistance to link up with DeAtley's Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Van D. Bell, Jr.'s 1st Battalion, 1st Marines arrived from Da Nang, landing in darkness near the 1st Marines command post at the Nui Loc Son outpost. Bell's battalion moved out immediately to join the battle.

To support the rapidly committed battalions, helicopters lifted Battery B, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines to Que Son village and a platoon of U.S. Army 175mm guns from the 3rd Battalion, 18th Field Artillery moved from Chu Lai to Tam Ky. The heaviest supporting arms fire power for the opening phase of the operation came from planes of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.

During the first day's action, the men of Company F and the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines bore the brunt of the fighting, but by dawn of the 22nd, all elements were locked in battle. The Marines drove the enemy soldiers out of their positions and maneuvered to force them northward. While withdrawing, the Communists suffered severe casualties from air strikes and artillery. Bell's and Esslinger's battalions attacked northeast, while the three-battalion ARVN 1st Ranger Group moved southwest from Thanh Binh to catch the fleeing enemy.

The pursuit continued as the infantrymen searched north and east of Nui Loc Son, but there were only scattered contacts. On the 25th, Colonel Kenneth J. Houghton's 5th Marines arrived from Chu Lai and moved into the valley, allowing the 1st Marines to be



returned to their Da Nang TAOR.* By 26 April, all elements of the 1st Marines had returned to Da Nang, with the exception of Company F which remained at the Nui Loc Son outpost.

Lieutenant Colonel Esslinger's battalion began a thorough search of the mountains south and west of the basin to find the NVA. Action was generally light, but an incident on the night of the 27th proved that the enemy remained active in the area. A Marine stepped on a mine which triggered a series of explosions throughout a landing zone. Marine casualties were one killed and 43 wounded, 35 of whom required evacuation.

On 28 April, Colonel James A. Gallo, Jr.'s new SLF Alpha, which landed by helicopters southeast of the Nui Loc Son outpost, joined Esslinger's battalion.** Both battalions met only light resistance as

they swept their respective zones. Despite the lack of contact, intelligence reports indicated that major enemy forces were still in the area.

Colonel Houghton, an experienced combat commander in two wars, responded to this information by helilifting Lieutenant Colonel Hilgartner's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines into the mountains 13 kilometers east of Hiep Duc on 1 May. Initially, the battalion encountered only light opposition, but as it swept west along the Song Chang, there was a sharp increase in the number of engagements.

On 5 May, Hilgartner's Company D came upon an enemy regimental storage site three kilometers north of Hiep Duc. The cache contained recoilless rifle rounds, shoes, 8,000 uniforms, 3 complete surgical kits, maps, and other assorted equipment.¹¹

As the two battalions of the 5th Marines continued to sweep north, Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. Wickwire's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines helilifted into the Que Son area of the basin and began a sweep northwest of Que Son village. As the operation progressed, all three battalions had brief contacts with small enemy units, but in each case the NVA withdrew.

*The 5th Marines consisted of only the regimental CP and the 1st and 3d Battalions. The 2d Battalion guarded the industrial complex at An Hoa in the Da Nang TAOR under the operational control of the Commanding General, 1st Marine Division.

**The code name for SLF Alpha's participation in the operation was Beaver Cage. See Chapter 10 for a detailed account of SLF action during Beaver Cage.

On 10 May the Marines engaged a larger and more determined Communist force. Hilgartner's Company C was moving up the southwestern slope of Hill 110, 4,000 meters north of Que Son, when it came under heavy fire from a battalion entrenched along the face of Nui Nong Ham to the southeast. The Marines took Hill 110, but when they reached the summit they found themselves still under deadly fire from a cane field below and from caves in the lower slopes of Nui Nong Ham. Captain Russell J. Caswell, the company commander, called for help.

Companies B and C of Wickwire's battalion were the nearest units to Caswell's Marines; they were northeast of Hill 110. The two companies shifted to Hilgartner's operational control. They moved to join the action but a determined enemy and heavy NVA fire halted their advance. The Marines adjusted supporting arms fire on the Communists' positions, but it was not effective; friendly and enemy forces were too close. The two companies requested reinforcements. Marine helicopters flew a platoon of Wickwire's Company A to the area. The platoon met such fierce resistance while landing that further helicopters could not land. The enemy shot down one UH-34 in the landing zone which further complicated the situation.

Hilgartner's Company A, 2,000 meters to the east, moved to help Wickwire's companies. As the company approached the battle area it also came under fire. The company commander, Captain Gerald L. McKay, quickly deployed his troops to push through the enemy positions. Just as the company began its assault, an airborne forward air controller mistakenly marked the company's position with rockets and four Marine F-4s strafed the company, killing five Marines and wounding another 24. The combination of the attack and the enemy fire halted Company A's advance.

Hilgartner's command group and Company D were on the slope of Nui Nong Ham, southeast of Hill 110. They climbed over the crest of Hill 185 to assist Company D and BLT 1/3 below them. By 1500, they had arrived at a position from which they could support by fire. The battalion's mortarmen could see the enemy in the valley below and could immediately adjust their weapons. They fired at a rapid rate; the tubes were "just about red hot."¹²

At 1530, Esslinger's Company M landed at Hilgartner's position from helicopters and Company D moved into Nui Nong Ham to join up with Captain Caswell's Company C. The two companies

quickly consolidated their position and began to provide covering fire for the Marines below. Under the cover of supporting fire from above, the BLT companies maneuvered against the NVA in the sugar cane field and on the northern slope of Nui Nong Ham. By evening the Marines drove the enemy force from its position and forced it to withdraw to the northeast. Artillery and air strikes followed the retreating North Vietnamese. Not all of the NVA escaped. The Marines found the bodies of 116 enemy soldiers the following day. Marine losses were also high: 33 died and another 135 received wounds, including the casualties from the misguided air strikes on Company A.

On 12 May, BLT 1/3 turned over its responsibilities to the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and the SLF flew by helicopters to its ships off the coast. Although the operation was over for the SLF, it was far from over for Lieutenant Colonel Bell's battalion and the two battalions of the 5th Marines. On the 12th and 13th of May, all three elements stayed in almost continual contact with enemy platoons and companies in the valley. Esslinger's battalion engaged an enemy battalion five kilometers east of Que Son the evening of the 13th. After an exchange of mortar and small arms fire, the battalion called in artillery and air strikes. As the Marines began their assault, aerial observers shifted supporting fires to block possible withdrawal. The attacking Marines met only token resistance as the assault moved through the area, but 122 Communist bodies scattered over the position attested to the ferocity of the battle.

For the next two days firefights continued and artillery missions and air strikes harried enemy units as they tried to avoid the Marines in the valley. The devastation caused by supporting arms became most apparent on the afternoon of 14 May when Bell's Company D found 68 dead enemy soldiers in one location, all killed by fragments or concussion.

The last major battle of the operation took place on 15 May, when the 5th Marines' Companies A and M found another bunker complex. Artillery and air strikes pounded the fortifications as the Marines maneuvered into assault positions. After the heavy preparation fires, the Marines attacked. They met only light resistance and secured the position quickly. They counted 22 enemy bodies in what remained of the fortifications.

The next day, Lieutenant Colonel Bell's battalion, following its orders, departed the valley and return-

ed to the Da Nang TAOR. The following morning Colonel Houghton closed down Operation Union. It had lasted for 27 days, during which time the Marines killed 865 enemy troops; including a reported 486 who were NVA regulars of the *2d NVA Division*. The Marines suffered 110 killed, 2 missing in action, and 473 wounded.

Although the number of enemy casualties was large, Colonel Houghton believed that the psychological impact of Operation Union on the population of the basin was even more important. As he stated:

The prolonged operations by the 5th Marines in the agriculturally rich Hiep Duc-Que Son-Thang Binh corridor broke the VC control of the area that had spanned almost twenty years. With the establishment of two permanent bases deep in this corridor, the fixing and subsequent destruction of hundreds of the enemy, the capture of significant quantities of supplies, equipment and weapons, the enemy loss in prestige in the eyes of the people is readily apparent. The psychological impact of Operation Union equalled or even exceeded the material damage to the Communist effort in this area of operations.¹³

Despite this optimistic opinion, enemy influence in the Que Son Basin was far from erased. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, which assumed the responsibility for the Nui Loc Son outpost and established its battalion command post on Hill 51 west of the village of Que Son, had daily skirmishes with enemy forces remaining in the area. Continuing activity substantiated reports that the *3d* and *21st NVA Regiments* were moving back into the basin. Operation Union II was the response.

Union II

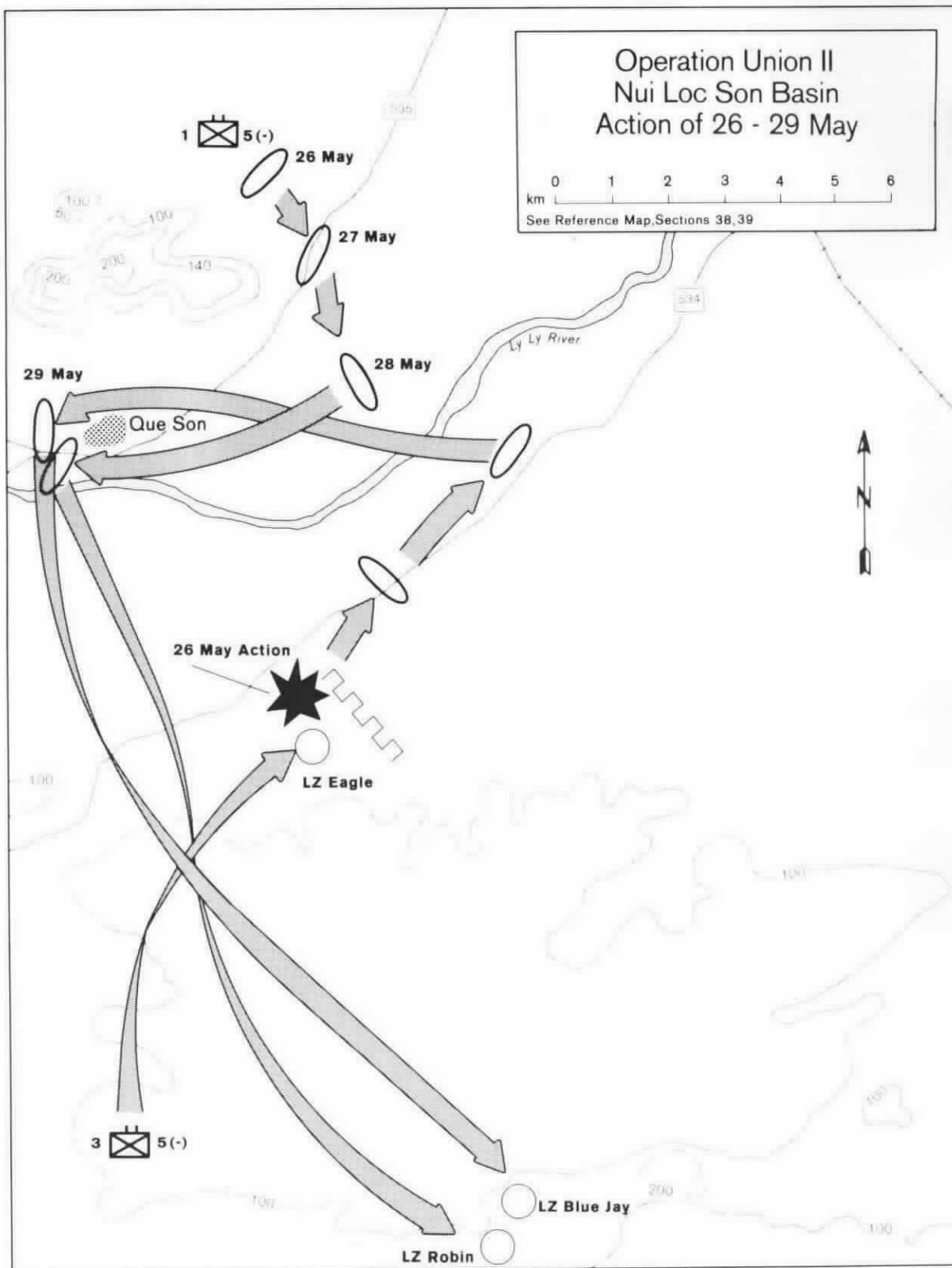
Union II, like Union I, involved coordination with the 6th ARVN Regiment and the 1st ARVN Ranger Group. The 1st and 3d Battalions, 5th Marines once again became the maneuver elements for III MAF's portion of the operation. The operation plan directed Hilgartner's 1st Battalion to establish blocking positions in the western portion of the valley. The three RVN Ranger Group battalions were to attack southwest from Thang Binh, while two units of the 6th ARVN Regiment were to attack northwest from a position near Tam Ky. Esslinger's 3d Battalion would move by helicopters into the southern portion of the basin and sweep northeast. The ARVN named their part of the operation Lien Kit 106.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370448

Shortly after landing from helicopters at the beginning of Operation Union II, this rifleman and the rest of Company L, as well as Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines attack a fortified North Vietnamese position firing upon helicopters in the landing zone.

On the morning of 26 May, Esslinger's Marines, three companies and a command group, made a heliborne assault into an area five kilometers east of Nui Loc Son outpost. Company L's first two waves experienced only sniper fire as they landed at LZ Eagle, but as Company M and the command group landed, heavy small arms and mortar fire struck the LZ. At 1134 the enemy defenders shot down a CH-46 over the LZ. As Company I landed, Companies L and M attacked north to relieve the pressure on the LZ. The attacking companies found a well-trenched enemy force northeast of the landing zone. While artillery and air strikes pounded the NVA positions, Company I moved to the northeast to envelop the enemy's flank, and in the face of strong resistance drove through the position. Fighting continued throughout the afternoon. When the Marines finally overran the last enemy





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421853

Low rice paddy dikes provided the only available cover for these men from the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines after debarking on 26 May from helicopters of HMM-361. This photograph, taken from a helicopter, shows the barrel of the crew's M-60 machine gun.

positions at 1630, they counted 118 dead NVA soldiers scattered over the battlefield. The 3d Battalion lost 38 killed and 82 wounded, including Lieutenant Colonel Esslinger, who was wounded in the eye.

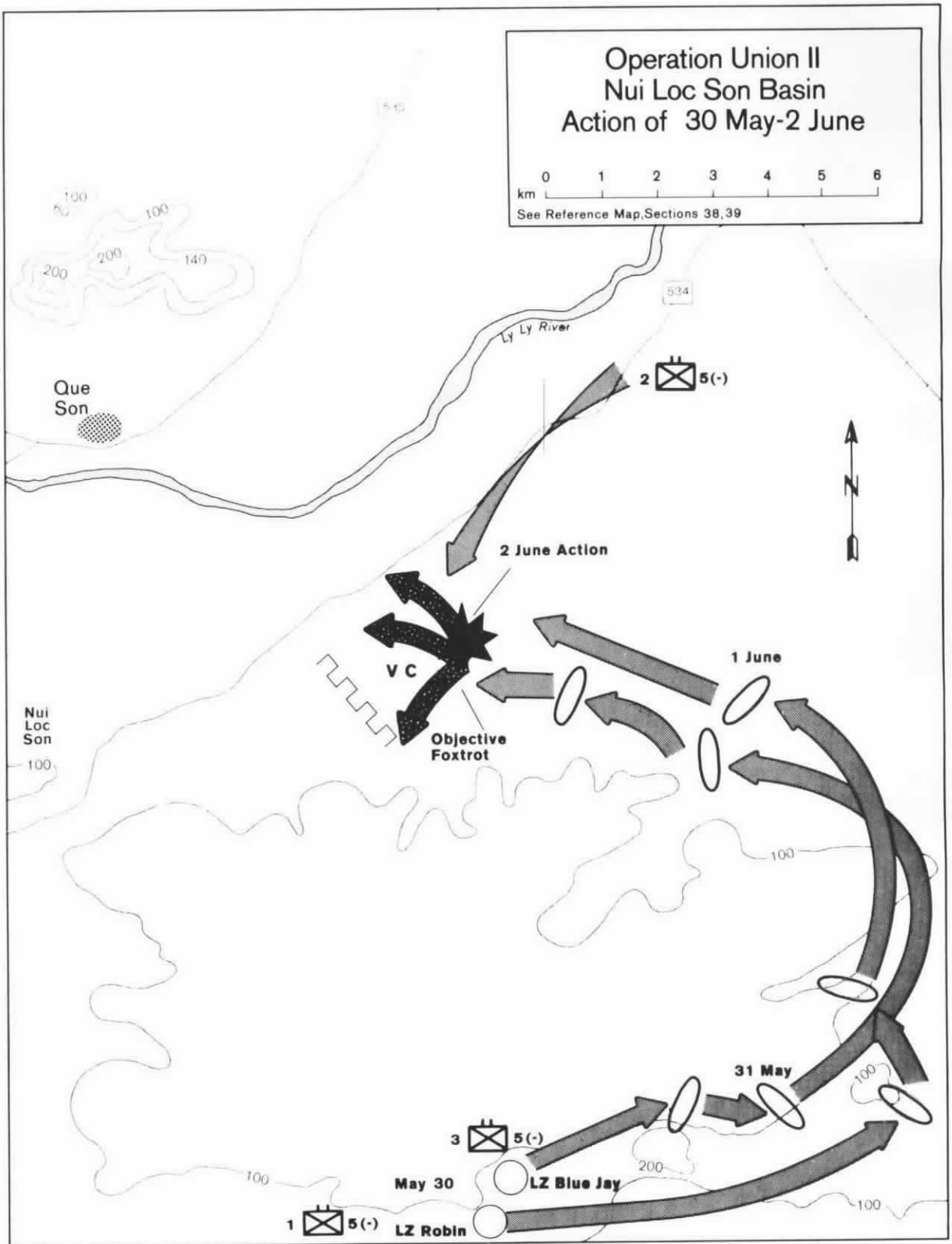
While the Marines of Esslinger's battalion engaged the enemy force, Hilgartner's Marines established blocking positions to the northwest as planned. The ARVN ranger and infantry elements closed from the northeast and southeast to box in the enemy. For the next three days, all four forces swept the area. There were only isolated exchanges of fire; once more the *3d NVA Regiment* had withdrawn from the basin. Convinced that the enemy had escaped, the South Vietnamese ended their operation, but Colonel Houghton did not believe that all the NVA forces had left the Que Son region.

After analyzing available intelligence, Houghton decided to change the direction of attack toward the hills along the southern rim of the basin, southeast of the 3d Battalion's battle area of the 26th. On 30 May, he had his two battalions flown into the area by helicopter and began a sweep to the northeast. Their advance encountered only long-range sniper fire. By the afternoon of 1 June, both battalions had

reentered the basin and moved northwest generally toward the site of the original 26 May contact.

On 2 June, the Marines moved out, two battalions abreast, with the 1st Battalion on the right. Objective Foxtrot in the Vinh Huy Village complex was their destination. By 0930, the two lead companies of the 3d Battalion were under heavy fire from 200 dug-in North Vietnamese troops 1,000 meters east of the objective, and roughly 3,000 meters east of the scene of the 3d Battalion's heavy action on 26 May. By 1300, after savage fighting and extensive use of supporting arms, the Marines overran the position. As the companies consolidated and began to evacuate their casualties, a helicopter took a direct hit from a 57mm recoilless rifle, killing one Marine and wounding seven others.

While the units of the 3d Battalion, now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charles B. Webster, engaged the enemy, Hilgartner's 1st Battalion pushed forward to relieve the pressure. The battalion moved with Company D on the right and an attached company, Company F, 5th Marines, on the left. About 1130, Company D began crossing a 1,000-meter-wide rice paddy that contained a horseshoe-shaped hedgerow. The location of the



hedgerow was such that the Marines could not approach it except by crossing the open paddy. When the company was halfway across the field, well-camouflaged NVA troops in fortified positions in the horseshoe opened fire. The enemy fire swept the Marines' front and left flank, catching the left flank platoons in a crossfire. The reserve platoon tried to envelop the enemy, but heavy automatic weapons fire forced it back. The Marines consolidated their positions while artillery and air strikes softened up the enemy fortifications.

Company F, commanded by Captain James A. Graham, was in serious trouble on Company D's left. Initially, Graham's unit moved under the cover of air and artillery strikes and encountered only sniper fire. As it began crossing a large open paddy area, a Kit Carson Scout with the company started shooting at several mats of hay lying in the paddy.* The NVA had concealed themselves under the mats and the Marines killed 31 of them as the company advanced.

As the company continued across the open area, mortar and automatic weapons fire inflicted many casualties. Hardest hit was the 2d Platoon; two concealed enemy machine guns stopped it in the middle of the open field. Captain Graham quickly organized his small headquarters group into an assault unit and attacked through the 2d Platoon's position, forcing the North Vietnamese to abandon one of their guns. With some of the pressure relieved, the platoon moved some of the wounded to a more secure area. Captain Graham then tried to silence the second gun, but was unsuccessful. Wounded twice by this time and with his men's ammunition exhausted, the captain ordered his Marines to move back to friendly positions while he stayed behind to protect a wounded man who could not be moved. The last word over the radio from Captain Graham was that 25 enemy soldiers were attacking his position.**

At 1420, Lieutenant Colonel Hilgartner's CP came under heavy mortar, recoilless rifle, and RPG fire. Despite the extensive use of air and artillery by the Marines, the Communist force was too well dug-in and too big for the battalion to dislodge. Colonel Houghton, advised of the situation, asked for help. Since his 3d Battalion was already involved in heavy

*Kit Carson Scouts were former enemy soldiers used by the Marines. The program is discussed in detail in Chapter 11.

**Captain Graham received the Medal Of Honor posthumously for his action. See Appendix D for complete citation.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370265
PFC George Hase of Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines reflects on the initial combat of Operation Union II when casualties sustained from North Vietnamese fire forced him to shift from ammunition carrier to assistant gunner on his machine gun team.

fighting, he asked for the commitment of the division reserve, Lieutenant Colonel Mallett C. Jackson, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. Major General Donn J. Robertson, a Navy Cross holder who had just assumed command of the division on 1 June, concurred and the 2d Battalion prepared to move out by helicopter to join in the battle.* The three companies that made up Lieutenant Colonel Jackson's force for this operation were his own Company E; Company D from the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines; and Company E, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines.**

The 5th Marines' commander paved the way for the 2d Battalion's entry into the operation by ordering 90 minutes of air and artillery preparation of the planned landing zone. He intended to insert the battalion northeast of the enemy position so it could drive south into the left flank of the NVA force. By 1900, the battalion command group and two com-

*General Nickerson, who had commanded the 1st Marine Division since September 1966, became Deputy Commanding General, III MAF, upon his relief.

**Colonel Hilgartner later described the insertion of Lieutenant Colonel Jackson's battalion as crucial. "Mal Jackson's entry into the battle saved the day for us," he remembered. Colonel Peter L. Hilgartner, Comments on draft ms, 2Jun81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370268

During the last few days of May, two Marine battalions, engaged in Operation Union II, searched the rugged mountains found along the southern rim of the Que Son Basin.

panies had landed. They were unopposed and quickly organized the position.

As night fell, one of Jackson's companies still had not arrived. Aware of the urgency of the tactical situation facing Hilgartner's battalion, and concerned about the fate of Captain Graham's company from his own battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Jackson requested permission to begin his attack without the missing company.¹⁴ Colonel Houghton concurred. Leaving a security platoon in the landing zone, Jackson maneuvered his force south against the enemy. The battalion had not gone far in the darkness before it collided with an NVA force trying to withdraw to the north. The Marines quickly drove through the Communists and continued south.

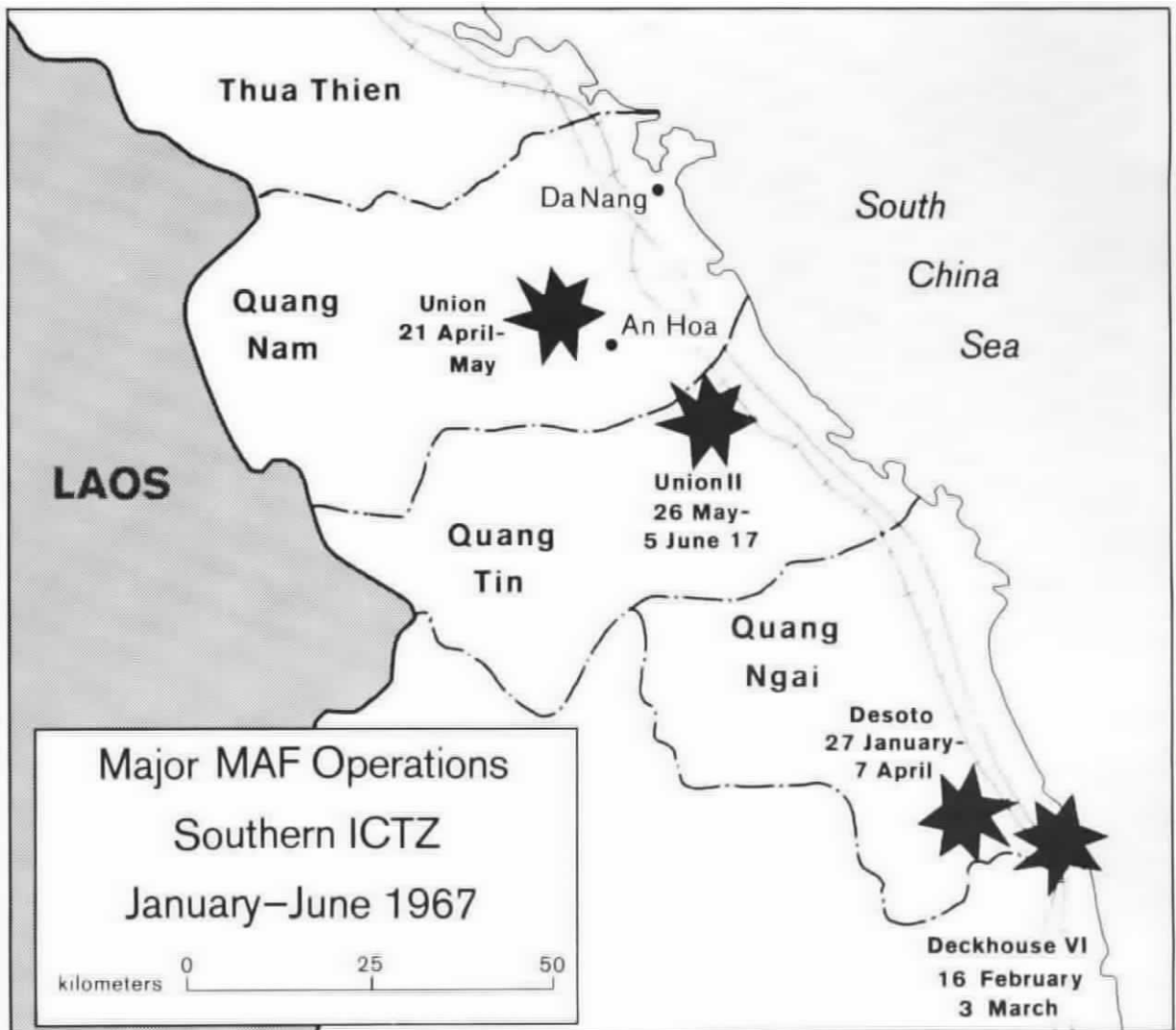
The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines suffered almost 20 casualties in this initial contact. To evacuate the wounded, the battalion's forward air controller called in a passing CH-53. The pilot landed his helicopter in the middle of the command post, not far from where Company E still engaged the enemy. As Marines completed loading the wounded, an enemy mortar round landed just to the rear of the aircraft and enemy automatic weapons took it under direct fire. The pilot quickly took off. The 2d Battalion later heard that, on its arrival at Da Nang,

ground crews counted approximately 58 holes in the helicopter.¹⁵

The sudden presence of a strong force on its northern flank caused the NVA units to disengage and make a hasty withdrawal to the southwest, but the move proved costly. Once NVA soldiers left the protection of their fortifications, they were easy targets for Marine supporting arms fire. Air strikes were devastating. On one occasion two F-4 aircraft used an unusual technique of target acquisition which proved especially effective. The first aircraft approached the area at low speed and switched on its landing and running lights. When the enemy fired at the plane, the second aircraft, following closely behind without lights, spotted the enemy and dropped napalm on the firing positions.

While supporting arms fire hastened the Communist departure from the battlefield, the 5th Marines spent the night regrouping and evacuating casualties. The following morning, all three battalions swept the battle area. The Marines counted 476 dead North Vietnamese in and around the contested rice paddy and its formidable hedgerow complex. The Marines themselves suffered 71 killed and 139 wounded in the fight.

During the sweep of the battle area, Lieutenant



Colonel Hilgartner received a radio message from one of his companies that enemy working parties were out collecting the NVA dead. The company commander asked if he should open fire. Hilgartner declined for he saw this as a chance to recover his own dead, including Captain Graham's body. For the remainder of the day there was an undeclared truce; the two sides intermingled but ignored each other as they went about collecting their dead.¹⁶

When the enemy main body withdrew, they transported their wounded on two poles lashed together, similar to the "travois" used by the American Plains Indians. The day after the undeclared truce, Hilgartner's battalion tried to follow the travois skid marks but could not catch up with the main body of the NVA force. Halts to call in helicopters to evacuate casualties caused by the enemy's rear guard hindered the Marines' progress.

The NVA force escaped.¹⁷

The action on 2 June marked the last significant battle of Union II. Total enemy casualties were 701 killed and 23 captured, a favorable ratio to 110 Marines killed (the same number as during Union I) and 241 wounded.*

Despite the heavy losses suffered during the two Union operations, throughout the summer the enemy continued to pump replacements into the region in a determined effort to regain control of the Que Son Valley. Elements of III MAF met and thwarted each Communist thrust into the area. Government control was returning to the region, and forcing the Communists to pay a big price in men and material.

*For action in both Union I and II the 5th Marines and units under its operational control received the Presidential Unit Citation.

CHAPTER 6

Task Force Oregon

The heavy fighting of early 1967 had been anticipated by the American command. Throughout the fall of the previous year, both III MAF and MACV expressed concern over the NVA buildup north of the Demilitarized Zone and along the Laotian border to the west. In a 13 September 1966 message to Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, Commander in Chief Pacific (CinCPac), General Westmoreland outlined his appreciation of the threat to I Corps:

The current enemy buildup . . . constitutes a direct threat to US/FW GVN forces in I CTZ and to the security of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. The seriousness of this threat underscores the importance and urgency of utilizing all practicable means to prevent the enemy from generating a major offensive designed to 'liberate' the provinces in question and to inflict maximum casualties on US/FW GVN forces. . . .

He continues to use the DMZ as a troop haven and as a supply head for his forces moving into northern I CTZ. . . . The size of his buildup, disposition of forces, forward stockage of supplies, AA weapons systems being deployed southward, and depth of patrols are developing an offensive as opposed to a defensive posture. By October, the weather in Laos will be clearing and the enemy may be expected once again to move personnel and supporting material in quantity through the area. . . . Utilizing traditional [infiltration] routes through the Laos panhandle, he will be able to reinforce large scale diversionary attacks further south in coordination with a main assault through the DMZ and the western flank. . . .¹

To counter the threat, the Marines established positions covering the eastern and central infiltration routes across the DMZ. They had already occupied Khe Sanh, to the west, in late 1966, and they took over the ARVN camps at Ca Lu and Ba Long, both astride natural routes leading east through the Cam Lo Valley. While the occupation of these locations did not entirely halt infiltration, they did make it more difficult, but manning the positions seriously depleted III MAF's strength as the year began.

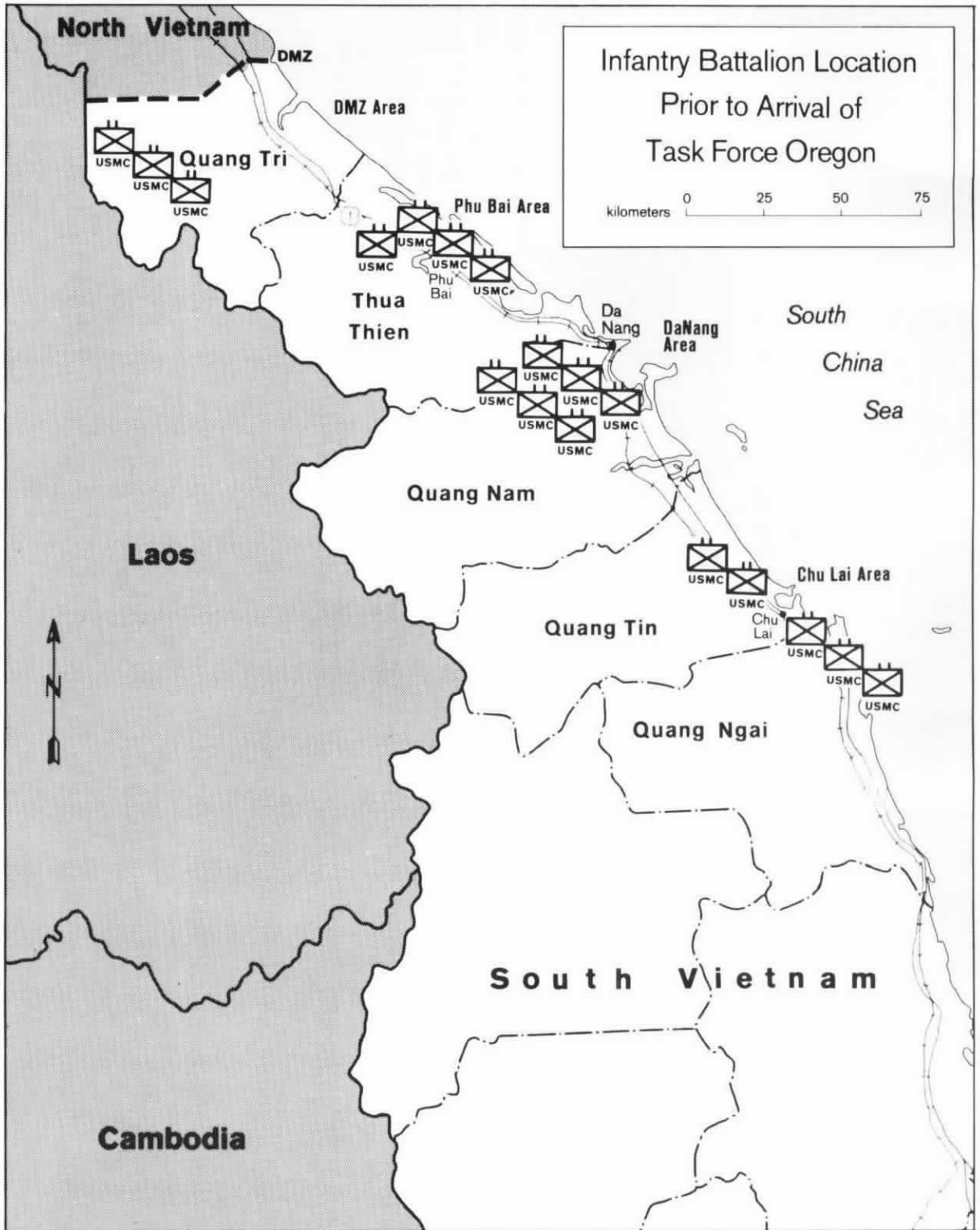
In early 1967 several developments, other than

Vietnamese domestic problems, contributed to reduced III MAF troop availability. The necessity of protecting large bases and the resulting extension of the protective TAORs around them tied down a large number of men. The requirement to relieve ARVN units for redeployment to the revolutionary development program also drained available forces. The most threatening situation was the enemy troop buildup in Quang Ngai Province. Infiltration from Laos and the influx of NVA troops and supplies into the A Shau Valley and the mountains west of Hue caused some very touchy and precise repositioning of units. As January began, most of General Walt's reserve consisted of already committed forces earmarked for oncall helicopter redeployment.

MACV Headquarters appreciated the problem facing III MAF but viewed things from a different perspective. As Brigadier General Louis Metzger, the assistant division commander of the 3d Marine Division, recalled:

On one occasion General Westmoreland told me that he knew that the 3d Marine Division was overextended, but that he was achieving a victory (words not exact but that was the meaning) in the II Corps Area, and we would just have to hold on. One really cannot fault his position as he was following the principle of war "Economy of Force;" holding with the Marines while expecting his Army elements to the south to achieve a victory. It did make it lonesome along the DMZ.²

For all practical purposes, these troop shortages reduced the allied situation in I Corps to a holding action. III MAF did not have enough troops to expand TAORs and at the same time block NVA thrusts across South Vietnam's borders. III MAF needed additional forces to regain the initiative. On 11 January, after a visit to I Corps, General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., the Commandant of the Marine Corps, commented that ". . . one Marine division/wing team reinforced or its equivalent [was needed] in I Corps in addition to those forces already there." He contended that these forces would permit



III MAF to counter enemy infiltration across the borders and regain momentum in pacifying the populated coastal areas.² At the beginning of the year these forces did not exist.

After the Tet cease-fire of 8-12 February, enemy activity intensified. The NVA initiated aggressive efforts to offset the embryonic Revolutionary Development Program, while continuing the buildup of forces in I and II Corps. The *2d NVA Division* and supporting battalions moved south from Quang Tin Province to Quang Ngai Province. This move appeared related to movement of other subordinate units at the turn of the year in preparation for a proposed dry season offensive in Quang Ngai.

As enemy activity continued to intensify, both in southern I Corps and immediately south of the DMZ, on 19 February General Westmoreland directed his Chief of Staff, Major General William B. Rosson, to develop a contingency plan for the organization and deployment of a divisional task force to the troubled northern provinces. The purpose of the proposed shift was twofold: to release Marine units for action along the DMZ and to use the new force to expand the scope of operations in southern I Corps. Westmoreland's headquarters code-named the proposed task force, "Oregon."

The Oregon plan was not the first contingency plan prepared for the reinforcement of III MAF. At the time of the first NVA thrust across the DMZ in mid-1966, MACV Headquarters developed several schemes. The Tennessee plan proposed the movement of a U.S. Army brigade to Chu Lai. Another, dubbed the South Carolina plan, was to deploy an Army brigade to the 3d Marine Division's area of operation in northern I Corps, while North Carolina would have introduced an Army brigade into southern I Corps. The latter two contingency plans included the movement of a Republic of Korea Army regiment to Chu Lai. During November 1966, General Westmoreland gave consideration to the deployment of the 9th Infantry Division to I Corps when it arrived in South Vietnam, but shelved the idea in December 1966 and the division moved into the region east of Saigon.

While General Rosson and his staff were developing the Oregon plan, events in I Corps forced the planners' hand. On 27 February, NVA forces attacked Da Nang Airbase with 140mm rockets, the first known use of large tactical rockets by the enemy in South Vietnam. The Da Nang attack preceded rocket attacks on Camp Carroll in Quang Tri Pro-

vince on 6 and 12 March and another attack on Da Nang on 15 March.* The rockets were the enemy's most economical weapon of the war. They were easily transported, usually backpacked, and required only a few personnel for installation and employment. The February Da Nang attack demonstrated the speed with which the rockets could be launched. More than 50 rockets hit the base in less than a minute.

With the introduction of rockets, the Marines expanded their protective patrolling out to a range of 9,000 meters, rather than 5,000 meters, the maximum effective range of heavy mortars which had been the primary concern before the rocket threat. The speed with which the rockets could be employed also required the Marines to deliver counterbattery fire on the rocket launching positions in a matter of two to three minutes, a factor which complicated the already complex problem of coordinating the use of air and artillery in populated areas.

Rocket attacks were not the only indication that the enemy's main target was I Corps. During the first six weeks after Tet, enemy attacks increased by approximately twice the 1966 rate. Enemy expenditures of artillery, mortar, recoilless rifle, and rocket ammunition for the month of March were 5,057 rounds, compared to 2,183 in January and 2,656 in February.

At the same time, the NVA buildup continued along the DMZ. Intelligence agencies reported that elements of another division, including fire support units, had reinforced the *324B* and *341st NVA Divisions*. Captured prisoners and documents verified the presence of the new units. Increased mortar fire and the employment of artillery and rockets confirmed the arrival of the fire support units. The seriousness of these developments was even more apparent when Marine intelligence officers learned that the NVA forces in the northern provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien were under the control of North Vietnamese Army *Military Region 4*, with headquarters in Vinh above the DMZ. The North Vietnamese considered the targeted provinces as a subregion of this command.

*The rockets employed in the attack against Camp Carroll were 102mm Communist copies of the U.S. 4.5-inch barrage rocket, with a range of 5,000 meters. The 140mm Soviet rocket used at Da Nang had a range of almost 9,000 meters.

In an 18 March message to Admiral Sharp, General Westmoreland reflected his concern over the growing threat to I Corps. He stated:

In I Corps, the situation is the most critical with respect to existing and potential force ratios. As a minimum, a division plus a regiment is required for Quang Tri Province as a containment force. The latter had been justified previously in another plan. Employment of this force in the containment role would release the units now engaged there for expansion of the Da Nang, Hue-Phu Bai, and Chu Lai TAORs as well as increase security and control along the corps' northern coastal areas. One of the most critical areas in RVN today is Quang Ngai Province. Even if a major operation were conducted in this area during 1967, the relief would be no more than temporary. A force is needed in the province to maintain continuous pressure on the enemy, to eliminate his forces and numerous base areas, and to remove his control over the large population and food reserves. The sustained employment of a division of 10 battalions is mandatory in Quang Ngai Province if desired results are to be realized. Employment of this force would provide security for the vital coastal areas facilities, opening and securing Route 1 and the railroad and, perhaps equally important, to relieve pressure on northern Binh Dinh Province.⁴

One week later, on 25 March, reconnaissance photographs verified increased infiltration of the Tri Thien subregion. They revealed five new bivouac areas and two possible way stations on infiltration routes from Base Area 606 in central Laos to western Quang Tri Province. The photographs also pinpointed new bivouac areas along infiltration routes in the northern A Chau Valley, indicating reinforcement in that region. Equally alarming, the NVA continued to hold three divisions in or near the DMZ, despite heavy casualties suffered during the Marines' recently conducted Operations Prairie II and Beacon Hill.

At the same time, enemy activity in southern Quang Nam and Quang Tin increased; the enemy made multicompany attacks near Tam Ky. A high-ranking Communist officer, Colonel Haynh Cu, who surrendered to III MAF forces in early March, stated that the Que Son Basin would be a major objective for the forthcoming NVA summer campaign, scheduled to begin during April. He also revealed that Operation Desoto had uncovered a primary supply route which the VC believed required their control for effective operations in that region. This revelation added to the indications that Duc Pho would remain a primary enemy objective.

In a 28 March followup message to CinCPac, General Westmoreland reiterated his earlier sentiments regarding additional forces required in I Corps, but this message reflected his increased concern over the growing enemy threat. General Westmoreland stated:

Failure to provide two and one-third divisions for I Corps would result in the diversion of existing forces from other tasks to deny and defeat infiltration or invasion. Security in support of Revolutionary Development could not be increased to the desired degree in the coastal area, the major LOC's could be able to continue operating virtually unmolested throughout the key Quang Ngai Province.⁵

If this force were available, Westmoreland estimated that III MAF could make gains in 1967, especially in the restoration of the populated areas of I Corps to secure GVN control. Unfortunately, the additional forces were not available.

The first week of April confirmed the need for reinforcements as the enemy increased pressure throughout the five northern provinces. Intensified terrorism and regimental-size attacks marked the opening days of the month. On 6 April, a large enemy force broke into Quang Tri City, inflicting severe losses and permitting more than 200 VC prisoners to escape from the local jail. This was the first large-unit incursion into a provincial capital since early in 1965. The Quang Tri attack preceded an attack on an ARVN regimental headquarters 10 miles north of the city of Hue. Generals Walt and Westmoreland agreed that these incidents heralded a large-scale, coordinated enemy offensive in the two northern provinces. On 6 April, therefore, General Westmoreland decided to execute the Task Force Oregon plan.

As conceived and refined by General Rosson's staff, Operation Oregon was to be executed in three separate phases. First, an army brigade from II Corps was to move into the Duc Pho district. Two days later a second brigade from III Corps was to begin movement to Chu Lai, and at a later date a third brigade, and possibly a fourth, was to be shifted into the area. The Task Force Oregon headquarters was to be activated on the 12th, to arrive at Chu Lai no later than 20 April.

By the afternoon of the 7th, the headquarters of the 2d Brigade, 5th Cavalry, 1st Air Cavalry Division, and two battalions, arrived at Duc Pho and relieved the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines. The size and mobility of the Army force impressed the Marines.

The Marine battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel John D. Counselman, recalled, "They had so many 'choppers' that the company defensive areas of 3/7 were occupied in less than an hour. . . ."⁶

The use of the 1st Air Cavalry unit was only temporary; according to the Oregon plan it was to be replaced by the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division before the end of April. To accomplish the logistical support for this unit, MACV temporarily included the two southernmost districts of Quang Ngai Province, Duc Pho and Ba To, in the 1st Air Cavalry Division's TAOR, pending the arrival of the Task Force Oregon headquarters.

On 9 April, Brigadier General Richard T. Knowles' 196th Light Infantry Brigade of four battalions began arriving at Chu Lai. The brigade completed the move on the 14th, and the infantrymen assumed operational tasks in the Chu Lai area under the control of the 1st Marine Division. On 17 April, the brigade initiated Operation Lawrence, west of the airfield. This was the first U.S. Army operation in I Corps. Although the soldiers made no contact with the enemy during the three days of Lawrence, they gained a familiarity with their area of operation.

The task force command group activated as scheduled on 12 April. The headquarters and selected combat support and combat service support units began deploying to Chu Lai. Task Force Oregon headquarters became operational on 20 April and assumed control of all Army forces operating from Chu Lai. The task force commander was Major General William B. Rosson, the former MACV chief of staff and author of the original Oregon plan. When Colonel James G. Shanahan's 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division arrived at Duc Pho two days later, it also came under control of Task Force Oregon. Combat support for the task force consisted of four artillery battalions, an engineer battalion, and one medium and three light helicopter companies.

The arrival of the Army units allowed the Marines to concentrate in the northern three provinces of I Corps. The 7th Marines moved from Chu Lai to the Da Nang TAOR, completing the move on 13 April. The consolidation of the 1st Marine Division at Da Nang permitted the 3d Marine Division, in turn, to concentrate its regiments in the northern part of I Corps.

The shift that produced the most immediate results occurred on 25 April when the 5th Marines,

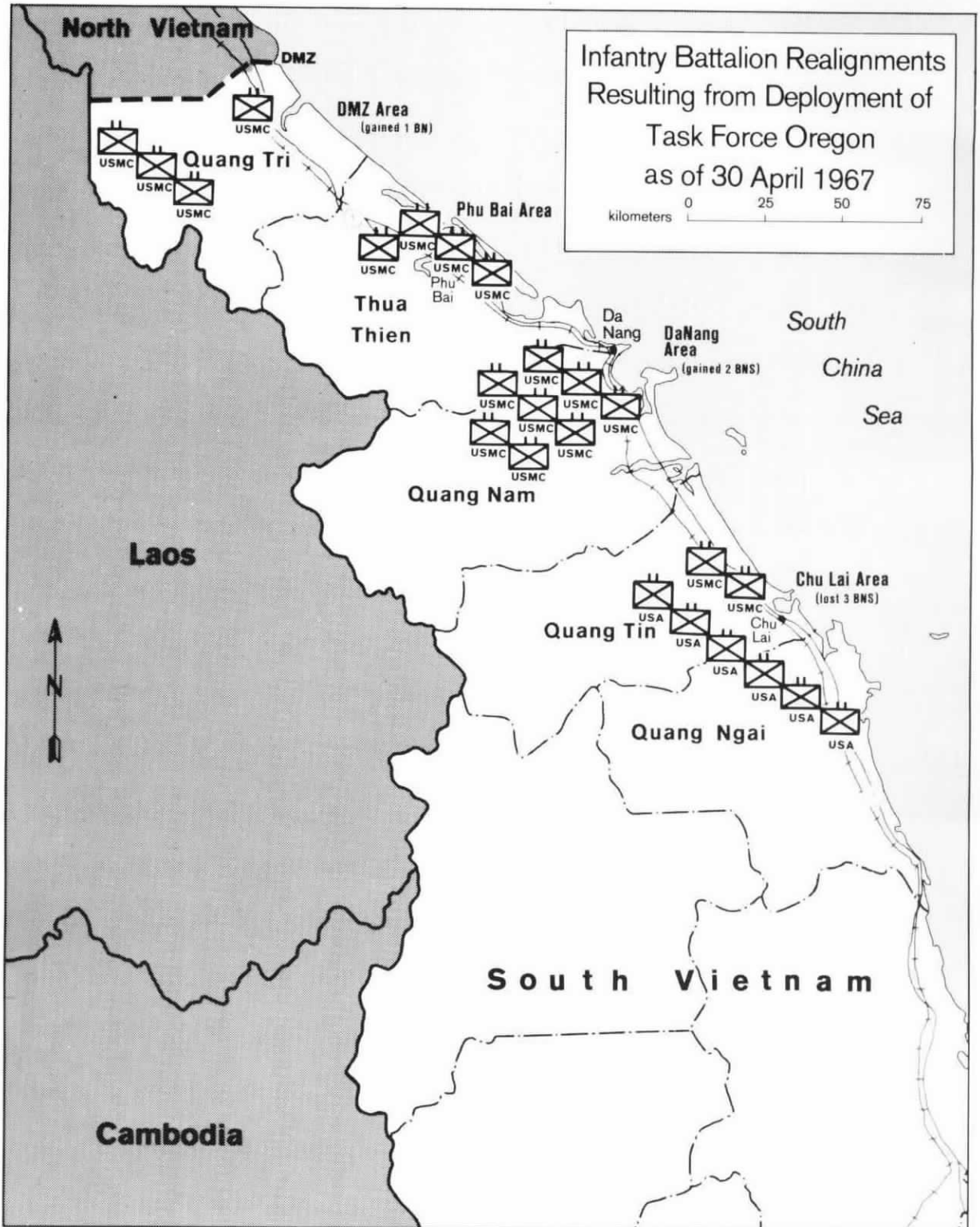


Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC 639323
A Marine amphibian tractor carries members of the Army's 196th Light Infantry Brigade on a village search on 27 April, after Task Force Oregon took control of the former Marine enclave at Chu Lai.

with two battalions, moved into the Thang Binh area and assumed responsibility for operations in the Que Son Valley. The second of the two battalions did not arrive in the valley until 1 May because of a delay in the turn-over of its portion of the Chu Lai TAOR. The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines served as a separate battalion under the direct control of the 1st Marine Division with responsibility for the security of the An Hoa industrial complex 22 miles southwest of Da Nang.

With the shifting of these forces, the Marines deactivated Task Force X-Ray at 1200 on 26 April and Task Force Oregon, under III MAF operational control, assumed responsibility for all of the Chu Lai TAOR, including the Chu Lai Base Defense Command. The turnover went smoothly. The Army units were not equipped or manned to handle postal services, an exchange system, or a clubs system. Since the Marines previously had organized those services at Chu Lai, Marine personnel remained in place until the Army units took over these functions or substituted their own systems.

Chu Lai continued to be the home of a large component of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, Force Logistic Support Group Bravo, and the 7th Communications Battalion. In addition, approximately 200 Marines assigned to combined action units also





Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC 639318

Soldiers of the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry, 196th Light Infantry Brigade search a deserted village in April as Army units gain familiarity with the Chu Lai tactical area after Task Force Oregon took responsibility for the region from the 1st Marine Division.

Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC 639319





Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC 640815

American soldiers (top) of the 2d Battalion, 35th Infantry advance toward a tree line under enemy fire near Duc Pho in May in Operation Malheur, conducted by Task Force Oregon after it assumed control of the Chu Lai area. As enemy fire increases (below), an armored personnel carrier of the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment fires in support.

Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC 640811



to eliminating the guerrilla infrastructure. During the ensuing months, the Viet Cong found it increasingly difficult to obtain support from the people in the surrounding countryside.

The introduction of Task Force Oregon was only the first step in the buildup and realignment of forces in I Corps. The second step was the temporary commitment of the CinCPac reserve, the Seventh Fleet's Amphibious Ready Group with Special Landing Forces Alpha and Bravo. In mid-May, BLT 3/4, the last major element of the Marines' Western Pacific reserve, arrived in a 42-plane shuttle at Dong Ha to participate in Operation Hickory. The 26th Marines' regimental headquarters followed from Okinawa to provide the operational control of units in the Khe Sanh area in northwestern Quang Tri Province.*

*The movement of BLT 3/4 and the 26th Marines headquarters to Vietnam ended unit rotation to Okinawa for refitting and retraining. This was a real loss to the Marine units fighting in Vietnam. LtGen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft ms, n.d. (1981), (Vietnam Comment files, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)



Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC 640809

A platoon leader of Company C, 2d Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment radios for a medevac helicopter after an encounter with an enemy unit in May's Operation Malheur.

The large number of enemy casualties in I Corps during the month of May reflected some of the impact of the sudden III MAF reinforcement. In I Corps 6,119 enemy died fighting the Americans, compared with a total of 3,723 in the other three corps areas. The surprise arrival of 12 new U.S. battalions and the reshuffle of forces already in I Corps

upset the Communists' plans. They did not find the coastal plains undefended as expected, and Hanoi demanded adherence to the plan. The ability of the allies to reinforce I Corps against the anticipated summer campaign cost the Communists a high price in troops lost and doomed North Vietnam's hopes for a resounding 1967 summer victory.

PART III
CONTINUING ACTION
ALONG THE DMZ

CHAPTER 7

The Barrier—Another Approach

Evolution of the Concept

Evolution of the Concept

The arrival of Task Force Oregon with its nine maneuver battalions vastly changed the friendly to enemy troop ratio in I Corps. The increase was intended to give III MAF much more flexibility, but this is not the way it worked out. At the time of Oregon's addition, General Westmoreland directed General Walt to begin a task which ultimately tied down as many III MAF units as TF Oregon added. The task was the construction of a barrier or strong-point obstacle system below the DMZ.

The idea of a DMZ barrier had been under discussion in Washington for months. In March of 1966, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara raised the question of a barrier with the JCS¹ which, in turn, requested the views of Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, CinCPac, on the construction of a conventional mine and wire barrier to be backed up by monitoring troops. The proposed barrier was to extend from the South China Sea across northern South Vietnam through the panhandle of Laos to Thailand.

The CinCPac staff studied the idea and in April Admiral Sharp pointed out a number of problem areas with the concept. The problems included the tremendous strain that the project would place on logistic facilities in both South Vietnam and Thailand, the enormous construction effort, and the large number of troops it would require before, during, and after completion. Admiral Sharp also expressed his opinion that the barrier would deny the advantages of maneuverability to friendly forces.

September 1966 brought another proposal, this one the result of a study conducted by a panel of scientists under the auspices of the Institute for Defense Analyses. Known as the Jason Plan, the study proposed the employment of an aviation supported barrier system across infiltration routes into South Vietnam and Laos. This barrier was to consist of two parts: one to block foot traffic and one to stop vehicles. The foot traffic barrier was to be placed along the southern edge of the DMZ, while the



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189042
Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, shown here during his visit to MAG-11 in July, believed a barrier system south of the DMZ would retard the move of NVA combat units into South Vietnam.

antivehicle system was to be built in Laos where the Communists were developing an extensive road network. The barriers were to consist of large numbers of gravel mines, button bomblets, and acoustic detectors, supported by patrol and strike aircraft.* Ground personnel, tasked to emplace detectors and plant mines would man the portion of the barrier in South Vietnam.

Admiral Sharp forwarded his response to the Jason Plan to JCS on 13 September 1966. The reply pointed out that while the establishment of an aviation supported barrier might be technically feasible, CinCPac doubted that such a barrier would impede infiltration, even initially. He maintained that "a

*Gravel mines are small mines designed to damage feet and legs. Button bomblets are small mines which make a loud report, but are not designed to injure when stepped on by a shod foot; they make a noise to be picked up by acoustic sensors.

barrier system must be tended; if not, it could be breached with ease, while the flow of men and material to the VC/NVA continued." An aerial delivered obstacle would not be expected to supplant the need for soldiers on the ground, and the time, effort and resources of men and material required to establish a ground barrier would be tremendous."²

While military leaders showed little enthusiasm for the barrier schemes, Secretary of Defense McNamara believed that the ideas had merit. On 15 September, he appointed Lieutenant General Alfred D. Starbird, USA, director of the Defense Communications Agency, to head a joint task force within the Department of Defense with the mission of devising an anti-infiltration system that would stop, or at least inhibit, the flow of men and material from North to South Vietnam. The mission envisioned wide usage of air dropped munitions and electronic sensors to establish the barrier. This directive formally established the program that was to become known as Project Practice Nine.

In October 1966, General Westmoreland suggested to Secretary McNamara, as an alternative to previous recommendations, that a conventional barrier utilizing strong points could be constructed across all of northern South Vietnam. This barrier would be augmented by selective use of air delivered munitions and sensors in Laos. Key terrain was to be organized behind the barrier, with observation posts and patrols integrated into the scheme. Reaction forces were to be emplaced to respond if the barrier was breached. General Westmoreland believed that a division, supported by an armored cavalry regiment, would be needed as the containment force. Secretary McNamara told General Westmoreland that he was receptive to the concept and requested that the idea be refined into a requirement plan. At the same time, the Secretary charged the Starbird task force with functioning as an expediting agency to obtain and deliver munitions, sensors, and equipment to support the MACV concept.

General Westmoreland ordered his staff and all involved subordinate commands to develop the plan. The burden of preparing the aviation portion fell on the Seventh Air Force; III MAF and the MACV Combat Operations Center were to provide the concept for the conduct of mobile defense and conventional barrier aspects.

General Walt ordered the 3d Marine Division to prepare the Marine portion of the concept, since any

implementation of the idea would directly affect that command. His only guidance to General Kyle, the division commander, was that he wanted the report to begin with a statement that III MAF disagreed with the barrier idea and preferred the mobile defense currently being employed.³ General Kyle, briefing Walt on the division plan, also indicated his preference for a mobile concept, stating:

A mobile defense by the size of the force envisioned for manning the barrier system (one and one-third divisions) would in itself provide an effective block to infiltration south of the DMZ, and in the process negate the necessity for construction of the barrier.⁴

After the III MAF staff reviewed General Kyle's plan, General Walt forwarded it to General Westmoreland. His covering letter made III MAF's view quite clear, stating, ". . . this plan was being submitted in response to a directive, and that it was the opinion of the Commanding General III MAF that such a barrier, in effect, was not going to be worth the time and the effort that would be put into it."⁵

On 26 November, General Westmoreland forwarded the plan to the Secretary of Defense after additional refining at MACV Headquarters. As submitted, it called for a linear barrier immediately south of the DMZ, extending from the South China Sea to a point near Dong Ha Mountain, a distance of approximately 30 kilometers. This portion of the barrier was to be 600-1,000 meters wide, consisting of wire obstacles, minefields, sensors, watch towers, and a series of strong points. The line was to be backed up by an armored unit. From the west end of this linear barrier to the Laotian border there were to be a series of about 20 defile barriers, each to consist of a minefield and wire obstacles extending roughly 1,000 meters across the avenue of approach to be blocked by the barrier. Manned strong points were to occupy commanding hills and ridgelines overlooking these obstacles. The plan called for a division to man this portion of the system.

The plan also required the construction of artillery positions along Route 9 to provide fire support for the system. These positions also were to house the reaction forces needed to support the strong points. Other construction projects included in the plan were the improvement of Routes 1 and 9, expansion of the Cua Viet port facility, and the establishment of a major airfield near Hue.

After reviewing the proposal, Secretary McNamara

directed General Starbird on 19 December to prepare a procurement program to provide the materials for the linear section of the barrier. The materials were to be in South Vietnam by July 1967. Although the Secretary's memorandum did not specify an exact date for commitment of the materials, it stated that at least a part of the system should be operational by 1 November 1967. On 22 December 1966, General Starbird submitted his proposal which specified the time schedule to be followed and funding and personnel needed by 1 November.⁶

As 1967 began, MACV was preparing a new Practice Nine Requirement Plan to conform with the timetable in the Starbird proposal. On 26 January MACV completed this plan and forwarded it for review. The study provided the concepts and estimated troop and logistic requirements to support the anti-infiltration system for the eastern portion of the area as outlined in the earlier plan. The system was to consist of a series of strong points and fortified base areas. Barbed wire and minefield obstacles were to be emplaced forward of the strong points to deny the enemy likely avenues of approach and restrict movement, while sensors, detector devices, night observation devices, searchlights, and radar were to be used to locate the enemy. The strong points and base areas occupying key terrain features were to be constructed by tactical units under the supervision of engineers. The positions were to serve as both patrol and fire support bases. On-call, preplanned artillery fires were to cover the entire area, and tactical aircraft were to be available on short notice for support. Reaction forces were to be stationed behind the system in positions from which they could deploy rapidly. All civilians were to be relocated behind the system. The plan envisioned that future strong points and obstacles possibly would be extended westward to the Laotian border, but the westward expansion would be contingent upon time, forces, material, and security conditions.

The study group also cautioned that the term "barrier" should not be used, because the connotation of an impregnable defense exceeded the scope of this system, and that an effective obstacle system across northern South Vietnam would require, at a minimum, an additional force of one division and one armored cavalry regiment. The study group considered the minimum essential additional force necessary to man the eastern portion of the system to be one infantry brigade, or Marine regiment,

augmented with supply, maintenance, construction, transportation, and other support units.⁷

Despite the apparent growing interest in the strong point obstacle system (SPOS) at MACV, the Marines' opinions of the concept remained unchanged. In January, at a briefing held for Under Secretary of the Navy Robert H. B. Baldwin at the 3d Marine Division Headquarters, the briefing officer reiterated the III MAF view of the barrier concept:

To sum it all up, we're not enthusiastic over any barrier defense approach to the infiltration problem. . . . We believe that a mobile defense by an adequate force, say one division, give or take a battalion, would be a much more flexible and economical approach to the problem.⁸

III MAF was not the only command that had reservations about the idea. On 6 February, a CinCPac message to JCS admitted that the SPOS was feasible, but questioned the necessity for one. The message stated:

The level of infiltration in the area in which the obstacle system is to be installed does not justify diversion of the effort required to construct and man such a system. Moreover, there is no indication that present operations are inadequate to cope with what has been an insignificant infiltration problem in this particular area of SVN.⁹



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A369973
The 3d Marine Division staff briefed Under Secretary of the Navy Robert H. B. Baldwin, shown here visiting a refugee center in January 1967, on the III MAF view that a mobile defense of the DMZ region was better than building an extensive barrier system.

Despite opposition from concerned Marine and Navy commanders, on 8 March Secretary McNamara ordered General Starbird to procure the materials for strong points and base camps, and enough sensors and surveillance devices to service a 10-kilometer section of the obstacle system. At the same time, he directed the improvement of Route 1 and the ports at Hue and Cua Viet. He also arranged with the State Department to secure South Vietnam Government support for required land acquisition and civilian relocation.

On 17 March at III MAF headquarters, General Westmoreland met with General Walt, General Lam of the ARVN I Corps, and other GVN representatives to explain the basic concept of a strong point system in northeastern Quang Tri Province. The ARVN representatives warmly endorsed the idea and suggested that an early start should be made on the project to take advantage of the weather. They did not believe that land procurement or civilian relocation would pose any problem.

As a result, General Westmoreland ordered General Walt, in coordination with General Lam, to prepare a plan to locate, construct, organize, and occupy a SPOS. He also informed General Walt that discussion of Practice Nine with the South Vietnamese at this time should be limited to the SPOS.¹⁰

General Walt, in turn, ordered his chief, G-3 Plans Division and III MAF Practice Nine officer, Lieutenant Colonel Marvin D. Volkert, to meet with his ARVN counterpart and begin the preparation of a combined barrier plan. Walt instructed Volkert to lead the planning and to complete the total effort without divulging details of the Practice Nine plan such as equipment and forces required. By early April, although no written document was in existence nor even expected for at least 30 days, combined planning had progressed sufficiently to permit initial ground clearing between Con Thien and Gio Linh. At that time Marine spokesmen described the project as a modest effort to clear fields of fire and to install a limited obstacle system, but Lieutenant Colonel Volkert had ensured that the work would fit into the Practice Nine concept.

Although the number of Marine units involved in the initial clearing effort was small, it precipitated the basic problem that III MAF had feared would result from the barrier project: the loss of flexibility. On 19 April, a message from Westmoreland to CinCPac intensified the problem. General Westmoreland indicated that, "The mission of

establishing a strong point/obstacle system south of the DMZ initially will be given to the U.S. Marines."¹¹ General Walt expressed his concern in a 26 April message to General Westmoreland, stating that the assignment committed his entire 3d Marine Division to the Practice Nine Plan. He pointed out that ARVN participation in the anti-infiltration belt construction accelerated the anticipated reduction in his forces.

The clearing of the area between Con Thien and Gio Linh was nearing completion, opening the way for the installation of towers, wire, strong points, mines, sensors, and communications. General Walt emphasized that the manpower required to construct and man even that portion of the system would not only use up all of the division's personnel, but also would fix all available division units in place. General Walt observed that this was contrary to all previous MACV positions.

From the outset the plan had:

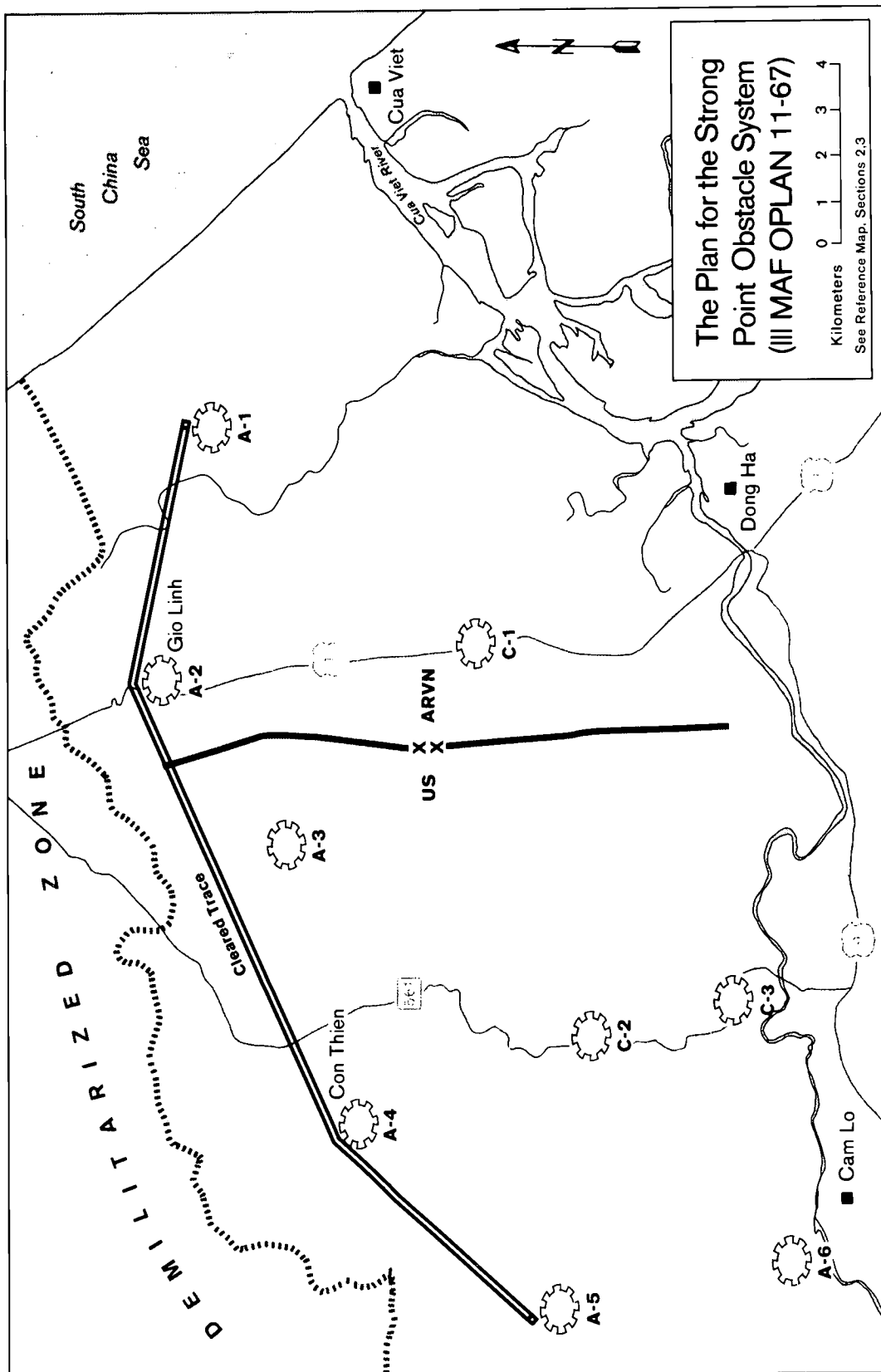
Consistently protected [the] integrity of Marine Corps forces in [the] northern portion of ICTZ (i.e., have inferred that forces now in northern Quang Tri have not unduly been tied to any of the projected barrier systems).

Recognized the requirement for significant forces over and above those now in place to construct and man whatever system is finally adopted.

General Walt contended that both of these positions remained valid, and maintained that unless he received the additional forces required to install and man the Practice Nine system, his capability to conduct offensive actions in northern I Corps would cease almost immediately.¹²

There were no additional forces available in South Vietnam at the time. The posting of the U.S. Army's Task Force Oregon to southern I Corps had reduced troop strength in the other three corps areas to a minimum. These facts, and the 1 November target date for the completion of the first portion of the SPOS, forced General Westmoreland to place the responsibility for the system's construction on III MAF, but the MACV commander did indicate that as additional forces became available he would use them to reinforce the Marines.

By 2 May the 11th Engineer Battalion had cleared a 200-meter trace between Con Thien and Gio Linh and was starting to clear a 500-meter perimeter around each position. Once the battalion completed this task it planned to widen the 200-meter trace to 600 meters and then extend it eastward beyond Gio Linh to the flood plain. While the engineers were clearing the land, at least one infantry battalion, but



normally two, provided security and screening for the engineering effort.

One of the major problems encountered by the engineers during the initial clearing of the trace was the large number of civilians living in the area. Although the government had begun the removal of the population in this region, it appeared that this would be an extremely difficult and extended task, but the inception of Operation Hickory on 18 May changed the picture completely. One of the objectives of Hickory was to clear the entire SPOS area of civilians. By 23 May, GVN authorities reported that there were 6,000 people already at the Cam Lo temporary resettlement site. By the end of Hickory, on 29 May, the population at Cam Lo had grown to over 11,000; the construction zone was virtually free of civilians.

On 18 June, III MAF published Operation Plan 11-67, outlining the SPOS concept. This plan envisioned that, in its completed form, the system would require one U.S. regiment and one ARVN regiment, disposed at six strong points and three battalion base areas. The U.S. portion of the defense was to include four company strong points and two battalion base areas. An additional U.S. battalion was to be based at Dong Ha to be employed in tactical operations in support of the defense.

The plan divided the construction and manning of the system into two phases. The first phase consisted of expansion of the trace to a 600-meter width, installation of a linear obstacle system, and clearing and construction of four strong points and three base areas. Concurrently, III MAF units would improve Routes 1, 9, and 561 and prepare a fortification materials storage site at Dong Ha. The plan set the completion date for Phase 1 as 1 November 1967.*

The Marines planned to begin Phase 2 of the plan at the end of the monsoon season. It required the construction of the final two strong points west of Con Thien and continued obstacle construction on both flanks of the Phase 1 line. III MAF anticipated that the entire system would be completed by July 1968.

Although the III MAF plan had not used the MACV code name Practice Nine, the plans were identical. A partial compromise of the classified code name Practice Nine occurred in June, and III MAF received instructions to discontinue use of the Prac-

tice Nine code name. MACV assigned the interim name Illinois City for use until 14 July when the code name Dye Marker became effective. At the same time, 14 July, the air-supported portion of the program, which was still in a conceptual stage, acquired the code name Muscle Shoals.*

Renaming of the project was not the only change to occur in June. On 1 June, Lieutenant General Walt, the burly Marine veteran from Colorado, who had led III MAF since June of 1965, relinquished his command to Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., recipient of the Navy Cross as a battalion commander on Guam during World War II. General Cushman had been deputy commander at III MAF since early in the year. The new commanding general was well aware of the problems involved in the construction of the anti-infiltration system, but, unlike his predecessor, he believed that, once completed, the system would free his forces for missions elsewhere.**

During Secretary McNamara's visit to the 3d Marine Division in July, the division briefed him on the status of Dye Marker and flew him over the construction sites. The Marines had cleared the strong points at Con Thien and Gio Linh to a 500-meter radius and had begun building bunkers in both positions. They had cleared the 600-meter-wide trace between the two strong points and extended it to the flood plain east of Gio Linh. The staff opinion was that with release of the Dye Marker materials, the division could finish Phase 1 of the system by the 1 November target date. Since the monsoon would greatly reduce trafficability in the area, the engineers made a major effort to improve Routes 1, 9, and 561 which linked the strong points to the base areas.

These accomplishments had been costly for III MAF. All of the forces used for clearing the strong point obstacle system had come from III MAF and they had not begun installation of wire and other obstacles. The amount of Marine efforts devoted to the Dye Marker project to that stage had been:

(1) Direct labor: 5,795 mandays; III MAF estimated the

*The air-supported portion of the system was the responsibility of the Seventh Air Force and this monograph does not cover it.

**General Cushman apparently was making the best of a bad situation. In his comments in 1981 on the draft of this volume, he wrote, "Your handling of the *stupid* barrier concept and operation was even handed." Gen Robert E. Cushman, Comments on draft ms, 17May81 (Vietnam Comment files, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

*The ARVN were to construct strong points A-1 and A-2 and base area C-1.

11th Engineer Battalion was applying 50 percent of its resources to Dye Marker.

(2) Equipment hours: 18,440.

(3) Equipment losses: destroyed tractors, 15; dump trucks, 2.

(4) Personnel losses: KIA 4; WIA, 77.¹³

At the same time, the construction effort was meeting increased enemy resistance, requiring more security forces. Further, Marine units still had responsibility for their respective TAORs. The 9th Marines' TAOR, for example, stretched from the sea above Cua Viet to Con Thien in the west and as far south as the newly constructed airfield at Quang Tri. "Although the 9th Marines was reinforced with at least one additional infantry battalion and often two," recalled Colonel George E. Jerue, "the additional mission of assisting in the construction of the trace precluded any rest for the combat troops involved."¹⁴

One example of the effort required was that of Lieutenant Colonel Lee R. Bendell's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines at Con Thien in late August and early September. As one company worked on construction projects within the perimeter, company-sized patrols conducted sweeps north, east, and west of Con Thien while platoon-sized patrols covered the south.

Those working within the perimeter endured over 100 rounds of incoming enemy artillery and rockets, which dictated strict flak jacket discipline. "The Marines much preferred to take their chances on patrol," recalled Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, "than be sand bag fillers and bunker construction 'experts' interrupted by incoming barrages."¹⁵

By mid-August, the enemy situation in the DMZ area was becoming critical. In a 16 August message to General Westmoreland, General Cushman stated that although he had increased his own troop strength in the area, he had received none of the forces considered as the minimum essential augmentation by the 26 January 1967 plan. The enemy threat in the DMZ had increased progressively to the degree that Marine units were fully occupied with holding back the Communists in the Con Thien-Gio Linh region. Allied forces along the trace (four battalions plus combat support and combat service support, with the effective assistance of extensive and continuous artillery, air, and naval gunfire support) were unable to defend their front and at the same time construct, man, and operate the SPOS in their rear. General Cushman concluded by stating that he required more forces in northern Quang Tri if he were to meet the 1 November target date for the

The construction of the barrier system, also called the strong point obstacle system, created severe logistics problems for III MAF. For example, the heavy timbers used in this partially completed bunker at Strong Point C-2 had to be acquired and then hauled to the site over dirt roads made almost impassable by the monsoon rains late in the year.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189849



SPOS. His only alternative, barring the arrival of reinforcements if he was to continue the project, was to shift one Task Force Oregon brigade north to free elements of the 5th Marines for deployment in Quang Tri.¹⁶

General Westmoreland responded to CG III MAF's request by ordering another Army brigade to I Corps to permit the 5th Marines to deploy further north. He also informed General Cushman that he planned to send a second brigade into the area in October. As a result, the III MAF commander informed General Westmoreland that he would use nine Marine battalions; seven committed to searching, clearing, and screening in support of the construction effort, while the other two infantry battalions and an engineer battalion would construct the obstacles and man them as the work was completed. All of these forces would be in the range of enemy artillery. Moreover, increased NVA use of proximity fuzes posed a greater threat to those troops who would have to do the work, expected to take six weeks. Because of this, General Cushman emphasized that the flow of equipment and materials would have to be timely. The general pointed out that the 3 September artillery attack on Dong Ha also had reduced his ability to proceed with the project.¹⁷

On 7 September, General Westmoreland directed III MAF to assess the cost of installing the SPOS in terms of casualties resulting from enemy fire. At the same time, he requested that the Marines submit an alternate plan to be executed between then and November should a decision be made not to proceed with the Dye Marker plan. On 10 September, III MAF presented its analysis of the casualties that could be expected if it pursued the existing plan. The Marines based this analysis on actual casualties from previous operations in support of the SPOS, with an adjustment made for the increased enemy artillery capability. They estimated the system installation time as 29 days. Total projected casualties were: 672 U.S. killed and 3,788 wounded; projected South Vietnamese casualties for the same period were 112 killed and 642 wounded.¹⁸

Three days after the submission of the casualty analysis, General Westmoreland approved III MAF's alternate plan, Operation Plan 12-67. The major change in the new plan was the cessation of obstacle construction until after completion of the strong points and base areas and stabilization of the tactical situation. Other changes outlined in the plan in-

cluded relocation of Base Area C-3 nearer to Cam Lo and the addition of a fourth base area north of the Cua Viet POL facility. One other change, not involving construction, was the provision for manning all four strong points with ARVN forces, freeing a Marine battalion for security of the new Quang Tri airfield. Operations in the western, or defile, area were to be conducted from battalion combat operating bases (COBs). This plan envisioned that the COBs would support the area between Camp Carroll and Khe Sanh. Subsequently, the Marines would establish bases in the vicinity of Lang Ru'ou and Lang Vei.¹⁹

The onset of the seasonal monsoon further complicated construction efforts. The heavy rains in September, for example, turned Route 561 between Cam Lo and Con Thien into a quagmire impassable to any type of vehicle. While CH-53 helicopters, often guided by TPQ-10 radar, attempted to ferry sufficient supplies to Con Thien, the 11th Engineer Battalion received orders to make Route 561 useable; this became the battalion's top priority. The major problem facing the engineers was the location and movement of sufficient crushed rock to build a sub-base for the road. The nearest supply was near Camp Carroll, which required hauling the rock in dump trucks more than 15 miles. "When the project was completed and the first vehicles made it to Con Thien," commented Lieutenant Colonel Willard N. Christopher of the 11th Engineer Battalion, "General Hochmuth told me that he was elated to 'get them off my back,' and congratulated the men in the battalion who had done the bulk of the work."²⁰

By mid-October General Westmoreland was expressing dissatisfaction with the rate of progress on the Dye Marker project. He realized that the heavy rains in late September and early October had required a large effort to keep the roads open, and he also appreciated that there had been some delay because construction materials had not arrived on schedule, but, despite these recognizable problems, he believed that more progress should have been made. On 22 October, he told General Cushman that, as a result of his own observations and inspections by his staff, he had concluded that quality control of the project was inadequate, that the Dye Marker system had not received the priority consistent with its operational importance, and that the project required more command emphasis and bet-

ter management.* He ordered General Cushman to take immediate steps to correct deficiencies and to institute a positive system of quality control over the entire Dye Marker project.²¹

General Cushman appointed the assistant III MAF commander, Major General Raymond L. Murray, a distinguished and highly decorated veteran of two wars, to head a permanent Dye Marker special staff. At the same time, III MAF informed all commanders concerned that the Dye Marker project had high national interest and a priority second only to emergency combat requirements. In addition, General Cushman planned to move another regiment north to provide more troops for tactical requirements. General Cushman pointed out that although all construction was incomplete, all the A and C sites, except A-3, included in his 12-67 plan were manned and engaged in anti-infiltration operations. He assured the MACV commander that the task of completing construction and improving the cases and strong points would be pursued as a matter of utmost urgency.²²

On 10 December, General Cushman reported that III MAF had made significant progress. All bunkers at sites A-4, C-2, and C-4 were complete. Engineers had completed the wire and mine emplacement at C-2, and had finished most of the other two sites. Construction had started on the combat operating base at Ca Lu and Marines were conducting tactical operations to clear the A-3 site. Vietnamese Army construction at sites A-1 and C-1 did not meet the new 1 December target date, but completion was near. Engineers had prepared Route 561 to handle a 60-ton capacity and opened it from Cam Lo to Con Thien, but delayed asphaltting the road because of weather. The new Quang Tri airfield was completely operational, substantially easing the logistic burden in the area.

By the end of the year, III MAF units finished all strong points and base areas, except A-3 and C-3.

*Lieutenant Colonel Willard N. Christopher of the 11th Engineer Battalion remembered a Saigon staff officer suggesting the bunkers be painted white, as the ones at Long Binh supposedly were. This convinced Christopher that the quality control issue basically was a matter of "cosmetics." General Metzger, however, suspected that such "nit-picking" criticisms from the MACV staff stemmed, in part, from interservice rivalry. LtCol Willard N. Christopher, Comments on draft ms, 31Jul81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.); MajGen Louis Metzger, ltr to CG, FMFPac, Subj: Debrief, dtd 22Jan68 (Archives, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

Both A-3 and C-3 were approximately 70 percent finished, as was the Ca Lu COB. The total Dye Marker effort and its associated security tasks had required 757,520 mandays and 114,519 equipment hours by 31 December. Equipment lost to enemy action during the construction effort amounted to a monetary loss of \$1,622,348.²³

By the end of the year the Marine command's opinion of the barrier concept had not changed. One Marine officer stated, "With these bastards, you'd have to build the zone all the way to India and it would take the whole Marine Corps and half the Army to guard it; even then they'd probably burrow under it." General Wallace M. Greene, Jr. the Commandant, testifying before the Senate Subcommittee on Preparedness in August 1967, declared, "From the very beginning I have been opposed to this project."²⁴

Each of the strong points in the barrier system contained bunkers designed to withstand enemy artillery and rocket fire. These South Vietnamese soldiers are adding a thick layer of dirt to the top of this bunker at Strong Point C-2 in mid-October.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189856



CHAPTER 8

Con Thien and the Summer Battles Along the DMZ

Why Con Thien?—Operation Buffalo

Why Con Thien?

The Marines along the DMZ began construction of the strong point obstacle system south of the border in the spring and fall of 1967 in compliance with orders from MACV and Washington. The system, called the "McNamara Line" by the Marines, proved to be a major burden to the 3d Marine Division. Security of the troops building the line, coupled with the demands on Marine units to fill sandbags, creosote bunker timbers, install wire, and other associated tasks, severely restricted the division's combat activities.

While the construction of the obstacle system limited III MAF's flexibility, higher headquarters expected its speedy completion to force southbound NVA regiments to move westward into the mountains, thereby complicating the enemy's logistical problems. The Marines' combined-arms fire power from strong points would then confront the anticipated enemy attacks. Smaller patrols and infiltration groups would face the challenge of the extensive obstacle system. The Communists, however, chose to attack before the system became too strong.

The enemy decided to concentrate on the Marine strong point at Con Thien, located 14 miles inland and two miles south of the DMZ. This outpost was crucial to Marine efforts in the area. It occupied what would be the northwest corner of the strong point obstacle system, which enclosed an area which became known as "Leatherneck Square." Con Thien also overlooked one of the principal enemy routes into South Vietnam. Capture of the outpost would open the way for a major enemy invasion of Quang Tri Province by 35,000 NVA troops massed north of the DMZ, a victory of immense propaganda value. Colonel Richard B. Smith, who commanded the 9th Marines, later described the outpost's importance:

Con Thien was clearly visible from the 9th Marines Headquarters on the high ground at Dong Ha 10 miles

away, so good line-of-sight communications were enjoyed. Although Con Thien was only 160 meters high, its tenants had dominant observation over the entire area. Visitors to Con Thien could look back at the vast logistics complex of Dong Ha and know instantly why the Marines had to hold the hill. If the enemy occupied it he would be looking down our throats.¹

The Communists made two offensive thrusts into the Con Thien region during the second half of 1967. Although reinforced by heavy artillery, rockets, and mortars north of the Ben Hai River in the DMZ, each thrust collapsed under a combination of Marine ground and helicopter-borne maneuvers coupled with supporting artillery, naval gunfire, and attack aircraft.

The first offensive aimed at Con Thien, the largest in terms of troops committed, occurred in July. For the first time the NVA employed extensive artillery to support its infantry, but the Marine counterattack, Operation Buffalo, beat back the enemy, netting more than 1,200 NVA dead.

The outpost at Con Thien, which this Marine patrol is approaching, occupied a low hill, but one which provided excellent observation of the surrounding area as well as the key installations at Dong Ha.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370551



The second attempt came in September. A heavy weapons attack of greater volume and duration supported a multipronged infantry assault on Con Thien, but this endeavor, too, ended in failure for the Communists.

In reviewing the enemy invasion attempts across the DMZ during 1967, analysts found the Communists used fewer troops as the year progressed, but greatly increased their attacks by fire. The enemy sanctuary in the northern half of the DMZ, protected by U.S. policy, was always available for regrouping and employment of heavy artillery. This unique situation caused considerable frustration for the allied commanders. Even so, Communist plans for a significant victory in the DMZ area remained unfulfilled at the year's end, and construction of the allied strong point obstacle system continued as planned.

Operation Buffalo

Operation Buffalo began on 2 July utilizing Lieutenant Colonel Richard J. Schening's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines in and around Con Thien. Companies A and B operated north-northeast of the strong point near a former market place on Route 561, while Company D, Headquarters and Service Company, and the battalion command group remained within the outpost perimeter. Company C was at Dong Ha at Colonel George E. Jerue's 9th Marines command post. Colonel Jerue described the origins of the operation:

The TAOR assigned to the 9th Marine Regiment was so large that the regiment could not enjoy the advantage of patrolling any particular sector on a continuing basis. As a result, an area would be swept for a few days and then it would be another week or so before the area would be swept again. Consequently, it became evident that the NVA, realizing this limitation, would move back into an area as soon as a sweep was concluded.

In an attempt to counter this NVA maneuver, it was decided to send two companies of 1/9 ("A" and "B" Cos.) into the area (1,200 yards east of Con Thien and north of the Trace) which had just been swept during the last few days in June. This is the reason the two companies were [there on 2 July].²

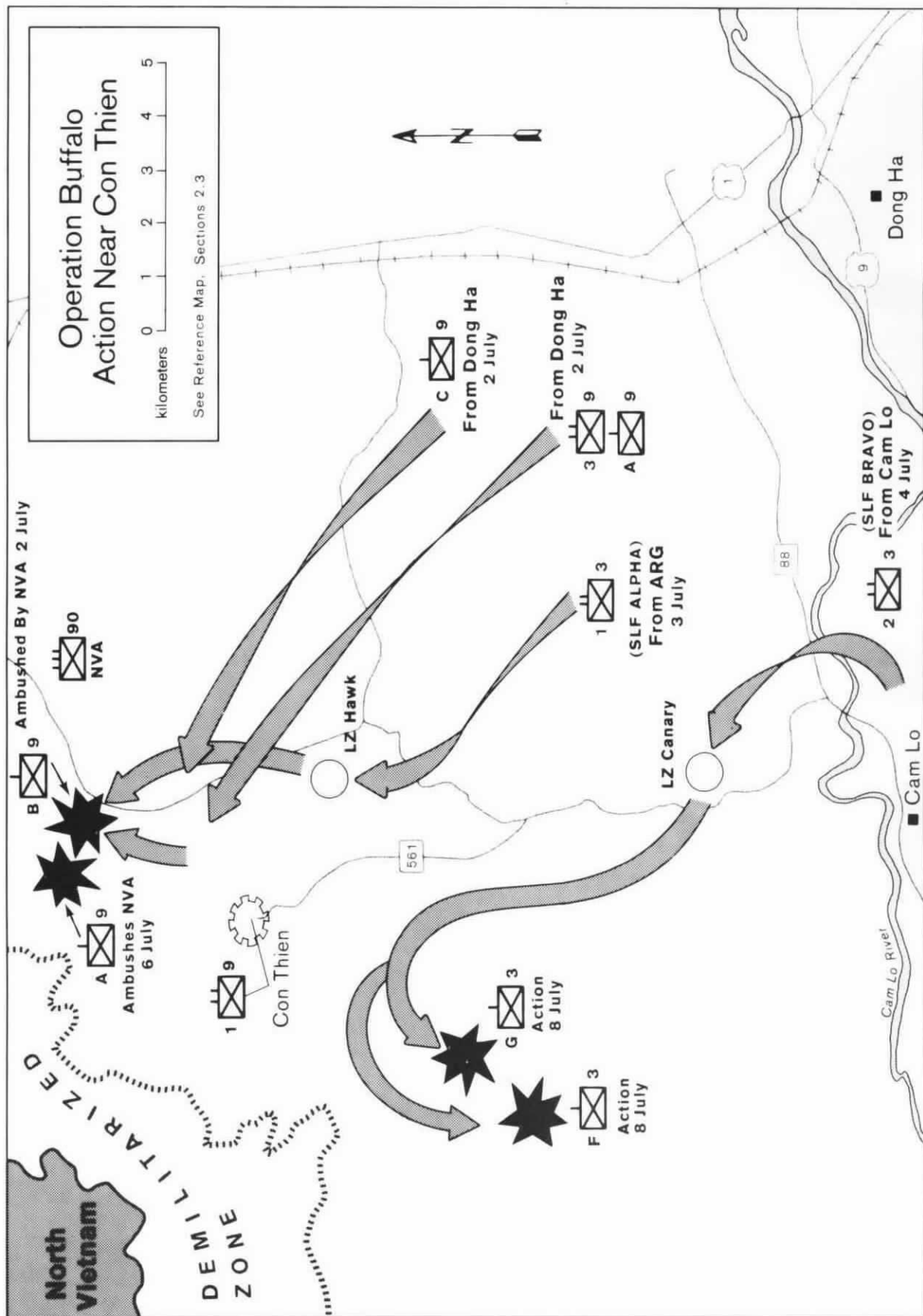
That morning, Captain Sterling K. Coates' Company B, a company which gained a reputation for finding the enemy during earlier actions at Khe Sanh, walked into the heaviest combat of its Vietnam assignment. It had moved a mile east of Con Thien the day before in company with Captain

Albert C. Slater, Jr.'s Company A to conduct a sweep north of the cleared trace. At 0800 on the 2nd, both units began moving north. Company A was on the left. Company B moved along Route 561, an old 8- to 10-foot-wide cart road bordered by waist-high hedgerows. The road led to trouble; two NVA battalions waited in prepared positions.

Company B's movement started smoothly and by 0900 the 2d Platoon had secured its first objective, a small crossroads 1,200 meters north of the trace. There was no contact. As the 3d Platoon and the command group moved up the trail, enemy sniper fire started. The 3d Platoon and Captain Coates' command group moved to the left to suppress the enemy's fire, but as they pushed north the NVA fire intensified, halting the platoon. Captain Coates directed his 2d Platoon to shift to the right in a second attempt to outflank the Communist position; at the same time he ordered the 1st Platoon forward to provide rear security for the company. The 2d Platoon tried to move, but enemy fire forced it back onto the road. The number of wounded and dead mounted as NVA fire hit the unit from the front and both flanks. To worsen matters, the enemy began pounding the Marines with artillery and mortars.

Shortly after the sweep began, Company A tripped two Claymore mines and the need for casualty evacuation delayed its movement. Afterward, Captain Slater moved his company eastward to help Company B, but could not link up because of heavy small arms fire. Soon the company had so many casualties that it was unable to fight and move simultaneously.

Company B's position deteriorated. Enemy artillery and mortar fire cut off the 3d Platoon and the command group from the 2d Platoon. The NVA troops then used flamethrowers to ignite the hedgerows on both sides of Captain Coates' unit, as well as massed artillery in close coordination with a ground attack.³ Many of the Marines, forced into the open by the flamethrowers, died under the enemy fire. The Communist artillery and mortar fire shifted to the 2d Platoon as it attacked to help the 3d Platoon and the command group. This fire killed Captain Coates, his radio operator, two platoon commanders, and the artillery forward observer. The attached forward air controller, Captain Warren O. Keneipp, Jr., took command of the company, but he soon lost radio contact with the platoons. Only the company executive officer, at the rear of the 2d





3d MarDiv ComdC, July 1967

Much of the terrain around Con Thien and the area south of the DMZ was well suited for armored vehicles. These infantrymen from Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines have teamed up with M-48 tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion during Operation Buffalo.

Platoon, managed to maintain radio contact with the battalion CP, but the heavy enemy fire kept him from influencing the situation.⁴

Down the road, the 1st Platoon also took heavy punishment as it tried to push its way up to the lead elements of the company. North Vietnamese troops swarmed against the platoon's flanks, but air support arrived and the platoon commander, Staff Sergeant Leon R. Burns, directed strikes against the enemy. Burns said later, "I asked for napalm as close as 50 yards from us, some of it came in only 20 yards away. But I'm not complaining." The air strikes disrupted the enemy assault and the 1st Platoon reached what was left of the 2d Platoon. Burns quickly established a hasty defense and began treating the wounded.⁵

The 1st Battalion command post at Con Thien heard the crackle of small-arms fire from the 0930 action, followed by a radio report that Company B had encountered a dug-in NVA unit. The first assessment of enemy strength was a platoon, then a battalion, and ultimately a multibattalion force. When the firing began to increase, Lieutenant Colonel "Spike" Schening alerted his Company C, at Dong Ha, to stand by to be helilifted into Company B's area. Since these reinforcements would not arrive for some time, Schening dispatched a rescue force composed of four tanks and a platoon from Company D. The assistant S-3, Captain Henry J. M. Radcliffe, went with the small force to take com-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192417

Moving through seven-foot-high "elephant grass" in the DMZ region could be nerve-wracking. Grass offered the superb concealment desired by an enemy lying in ambush. Close-range encounters were always a threat that required constant alertness for the slightest sign of the presence of NVA soldiers.

mand of Company B if link-up could be made. First Lieutenant Gatlin J. Howell, the battalion intelligence officer, went also because he was familiar with the area where the enemy engaged Company B.⁶ The remainder of the battalion command group remained at Con Thien.

The small rescue force moved down the cleared trace from Con Thien to the junction of Route 561 without incident, but as it turned north up the road it came under fire. A North Vietnamese unit, trying to encircle Company B, had moved south and was opposite Radcliffe's small force. Helicopter gunships and the fire from the four tanks dispersed the enemy. Company C began arriving by helicopter and Captain Radcliffe ordered the Company D platoon to secure the landing zone and evacuate casualties. As the lead elements of Company C came into the zone they met a heavy artillery barrage, which wounded 11 Marines.

Despite enemy fire, the platoon of tanks and the lead unit of Company C continued to push north toward Company B. Half a mile up the road, the advancing Marines found the 1st Platoon. Captain Radcliffe told Burns that he was the acting commanding officer and asked where was the rest of the company. Sergeant Burns replied, "Sir, this is the company, or what's left of it."⁷

After organizing the withdrawal of the 1st Platoon's wounded, Radcliffe and the relief force, accompanied by Burns, continued to push forward to Company B's furthest point of advance to recover the company's casualties. The Marines set up a hasty defense, making maximum use of the tanks' firepower, and brought the dead and wounded into the perimeter.

For Lieutenant Howell the scene had a particular impact. He had commanded Company B's 3d Platoon for more than eight months. Howell was seemingly everywhere as he searched for the wounded. Captain Radcliffe estimated that Howell and Corporal Charles A. Thompson of Company D were instrumental in the evacuation of at least 25 Marines.⁸ The Marines then loaded their casualties on the tanks. Lacking space on the vehicles for the arms and equipment of the wounded, Radcliffe ordered them destroyed to prevent capture. The rescue force found it impossible to recover all the bodies immediately; some bodies remained along the road.

The company came under heavy enemy artillery fire as it began to pull back. Two of the tanks hit mines which further slowed the withdrawal. When

the company reached the landing zone it came under devastating artillery and mortar fire again, hitting many of the wounded who awaited evacuation. Litter bearers and corpsmen became casualties as well.

Casualties increased in the landing zone, among them were the platoon commander and platoon sergeant from Company D who had been directing the defense of the zone. In the resulting confusion, someone passed the word to move the casualties back to Con Thien. A group of almost 50 started making their way back until Marines at Con Thien spotted them in the cleared trace. Lieutenant Colonel Schening sent out a rescue party, headed by his executive officer, Major Darrell C. Danielson, in a truck, jeep and ambulance. Upon reaching the wounded Marines, Major Danielson saw that many were in a state of shock; some seemed in danger of bleeding to death. Fortunately, two helicopters landed in the area and the Marines loaded the more serious casualties on board. Enemy artillery fire delayed the evacuation of the remainder but, despite the fire, Major Danielson and his party managed to get everyone into the vehicles and back to Con Thien for treatment and further evacuation.⁹

During the battle, friendly and enemy supporting arms engaged in a furious duel. In the first few hours of the engagement Marine aircraft dropped 90 tons of ordnance during 28 sorties. Artillery fired 453 missions, while Navy destroyers fired 142 5-inch rounds into enemy positions. The NVA force fired 1,065 artillery and mortar rounds during the day at Gio Linh and Con Thien; more than 700 rounds fell on Lieutenant Colonel Schening's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines alone.

Captain Slater's Company A remained heavily engaged. When the necessity of carrying the increasing numbers of wounded brought the company to a halt, Slater had his 3d Platoon establish a hasty landing zone in the rear of the company. After the first flight of medevac helicopters departed the zone, the enemy hit the 3d Platoon with mortars and assaulted the position. Slater moved his 2d Platoon and company command group to reinforce the 3d Platoon.* The enemy advanced to within 50 meters of Company A's lines before small arms and artillery

*In the confused fighting, the 1st Platoon of Company A broke through the surrounding enemy and joined Captain Radcliffe's relief force. LtCol Albert C. Slater, Comments on draft ms, 12May81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

fire broke up their attack. Enemy pressure and the remaining casualties kept Company A in the defensive position until the NVA force withdrew later in the evening.¹⁰

At 1500 Schening, at Con Thien, notified the regimental commander that all of his companies were hard pressed, that he had no more units to commit, and that the situation was critical. Colonel Jerue, commanding the 9th Marines, ordered Major Willard J. Woodring's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines to move by helicopter to Schening's assistance. Three companies and the command group of the 3d Battalion were in position north of the trace by 1800.* After landing, Major Woodring assumed operational control of Companies A and C of the 1st Battalion. The combined force made a twilight attack on the enemy's left flank, while elements of Company B and the platoon from Company D holding the landing zone pulled back to the Con Thien perimeter in expectation of an attack on the outpost. The increased pressure provided by the 3d Battalion caused the enemy to break contact.

When the worn and exhausted survivors of the morning's encounter mustered for a head count, the Marines found the total casualty figure shocking. Staff Sergeant Burns, subsequently awarded the Navy Cross, stated that only 27 Company B Marines walked out of the action. Lieutenant Colonel Schening's battalion lost 53 killed, 190 wounded, and 34 missing. Not until 5 July did the battalion complete the recovery efforts that reduced the number of missing to nine, but the number of dead increased to 84.** The battalion established no accurate count of enemy killed.¹¹

During the next three days, 3-5 July, enemy contact continued. At 0930 on the 3rd, an Air Force air observer reported more than 100 NVA soldiers ad-

vancing from positions north of Con Thien. Battery E, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines fired on them and killed 75. To the east, Major Woodring called in continuous air strikes for 12 hours to prepare for an attack the following day. The same day, 3 July, Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. Wickwire's BLT 1/3 from SLF Alpha joined the 9th Marines and tied in with Woodring's right flank. The regiment planned a drive north to recover missing bodies and push the NVA out of the Lang Son area, only 4,000 meters northeast of the Con Thien perimeter.

The attack started early the morning of the 4th. The 3d Battalion encountered heavy resistance from concealed enemy positions southwest of the site of Company B's engagement on 2 July. A prolonged fight followed, involving tanks, artillery, and close air support. By 1830 when the final Marine assault ended, Woodring's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines had lost 15 dead and 33 wounded. BLT 1/3 had 11 wounded during the same action. The same day Major Wendell O. Beard's BLT 2/3 from SLF Bravo joined the operation; the battalion landed by helicopter north of Cam Lo at LZ Canary and moved west and then northward on the western edge of the battle area toward Con Thien.

During daylight on 5 July all units northeast of Con Thien came under enemy mortar and artillery fire, but there was relatively little ground contact while completing the grim task of recovering Company B's dead. That afternoon an air observer spotted a large concentration of enemy troops 3,000 meters northeast of Con Thien. He called in artillery and tactical air strikes and reported seeing 200 dead NVA soldiers.

Following preparatory fires on the morning of 6 July, all battalions continued moving north. Major Beard's BLT 2/3 ran into an enemy force supported by mortars less than 3 kilometers south of Con Thien. In the brief engagement that followed the battalion killed 35 Communist soldiers, while suffering five killed and 25 wounded.

Northeast of the outpost, Wickwire's and Woodring's battalions advanced under intermittent NVA artillery and mortar fire. Major Woodring decided to move a reinforced company 1,500 meters to the north-northwest to cover his left flank. He chose Captain Slater's attached Company A, 9th Marines, which now included the survivors of Company C, and a detachment from 3d Reconnaissance Battalion. Slater's company moved into position without opposition and established a strong combat

*Enemy artillery quickly zeroed in on 3/9's LZs. Helicopters could not land in the LZs during later resupply missions, which caused 3/9 to go entirely without water for a day and a half. Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft ms, 9Jul81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

**The XO of 3/9, Maj John C. Studt, supervised the recovery of Company B's dead, "... a grisly task after 3 days in the hot sun ... [Most] appeared to have been left right where they fell. They were in flank security positions too close to the road to have prevented an ambush or in the [sunken] road itself which ... [offered] some cover ... [Company B] clearly had walked into a [very well executed] ambush." Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft ms, 9Jul81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)



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Members of H&S Company, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines board a CH-46 helicopter as their battalion moved to assist hard-pressed elements of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, then fighting a North Vietnamese force north of the Con Thien combat base on 2 July.

Members of Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines move behind one of their attached tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion as it skirts a large bomb crater during Operation Buffalo. This tank-infantry combination, aided by artillery and air strikes, destroyed a North Vietnamese defensive position in heavy fighting near Con Thien on 4 July 1967.

3d MarDiv ComdC, July 1967



outpost. Slater's composite force dug concealed fighting positions and sent reconnaissance patrols north in an attempt to discover where the enemy crossed the Ben Hai River.¹²

While Slater's move was unnoticed, the same was not true for the advance of the main elements of the two battalions. As they advanced, they encountered increasingly heavy artillery fire and by 1600 they could go no further. Wickwire's battalion had lost a tank and, because of the enemy fire, pulled back without recovering it. Captain Burrell H. Landes, Jr., commanding Company B, BLT 1/3, climbed a tree to spot for air strikes and artillery fire in front of his position. An aerial observer radioed that a large enemy force was approaching his position. When Landes asked how big the force was, the reply was, "I'd hate to tell you, I'd hate to tell you." The AO had spotted a 400-man force crossing the Ben Hai River in approach march formation; it was heading directly for the two battalions. After the sightings, both battalions, less Slater's company, came under heavy, accurate artillery fire. Between 500-600 rounds hit the 3d Battalion's position and about 1,000 landed on BLT 1/3.

During the Communist bombardment, one of Slater's reconnaissance patrols also spotted the 400-man NVA force and reported it moving toward the 3d Battalion. The enemy, still in column formation, was unaware that it was heading directly into Captain Slater's concealed unit. The Marines opened fire at less than 150 meters distance. Captain Slater recalled:

When the point of the enemy column was brought under fire, the NVA alerted their unit with a bugle call . . . Their initial reaction was [one] of confusion and they scattered, some of them toward Marine lines. They quickly organized and probed at every flank of the 360 degree perimeter. Concealed prepared positions and fire discipline never allowed the NVA to determine what size of unit they were dealing with. When the enemy formed and attacked, heavy accurate artillery was walked to within 75 meters of the perimeter. The few NVA that penetrated the perimeter were killed and all lines held.¹³

Heavy enemy probes, mortar fire, and small arms fire continued through the early evening. Some NVA soldiers crept close enough to hurl hand grenades into the Marine lines. One of the attached Company C fireteam leaders, Lance Corporal James L. Stuckey, responded by picking up the grenades and throwing them back toward their source. He was wounded when the third grenade exploded as it left his hand. He continued, however, to lead his

fireteam for the rest of the night without medical assistance.¹⁴

Despite heavy Marine artillery fire that effectively boxed in Slater's position, the NVA maintained pressure on the Marines until 2200. For the rest of the night, enemy small arms and mortar fire harassed Company A, but the NVA units were withdrawing. First light revealed 154 enemy bodies strewn around Company A's perimeter; the defenders had 12 casualties. Among the wounded Marines was Lance Corporal Stuckey; only tattered flesh remained where his hand had been.*

While the attack on Company A took place, the rest of what intelligence officers later determined to have been the *90th NVA Regiment* assaulted the two Marine battalions. To add to the effect of their preparatory fires, the attacking North Vietnamese threw fuzed blocks of TNT into the Marine positions to keep the Marines down as the assaulting troops moved in. The Marines countered with supporting arms; flare ships, attack aircraft, helicopter gunships, naval gunfire, and all available artillery concentrated their fire on the attacking enemy. By 2130, the Marines had repelled the assault and the Communist forces began withdrawing to the north.

At 0520 the next morning, Major Woodring ordered Captain Slater to pull back into the battalion perimeter. The decision was most opportune; immediately after Company A cleared the night position, a 30-minute NVA artillery concentration landed within its old lines.** Company A returned to the battalion's perimeter without incident. Both battalions spent the rest of the 7th trying to determine the extent of the damage inflicted on the *90th NVA Regiment*. By 8 July the Marines raised the NVA casualty count to more than 800. Counting enemy bodies proved to be a most difficult task; the grisly carnage was beyond description. Hundreds of bodies covered the scarred battleground, some half buried, others in pieces, all surrounded by a carpet of battered equipment and ammunition. Counting enemy canteens was one method used to try to

*Corporal Stuckey received the Navy Cross for his actions on 6 July 1967.

**Colonel John C. Studt, the XO of 3/9 in July 1967, said this incident was typical of the battalion commander. "Major Woodring, a former drill instructor, a woodsman and a deerhunter, possessed that rare instinct which enabled him to frequently anticipate enemy actions." Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft ms, 9Jul81, (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

establish realistic figures. The vast area which the bodies covered further complicated the morbid undertaking. As late as the afternoon of the 8th, Captain Gerald F. Reczek's Company C, BLT 1/3 found about 200 enemy bodies more than 600 meters east of Route 561.

The scattering of bodies to the north occurred when air and artillery hit groups of North Vietnamese moving toward or away from the main battle area. The lateral scattering from the 3d Battalion's position eastward across the front of BLT 1/3 was the result of the NVA attempt to outflank Major Woodring's unit without realizing that the BLT was on line. Trying to move further east, they lost even more men to the guns of Wickwire's Marines.¹⁵ The Marines found it impossible to compute an accurate total of Communist losses to supporting arms because of the inability of allied forces to continue the count on the north side of the Ben Hai River.

The last significant engagements of Operation Buffalo took place on 8 July, southwest of Con Thien. After BLT 2/3 closed on Con Thien during its northward sweep, it had turned west, and then headed south toward the Cam Lo River. Moving south, at 1030 Captain James P. Sheehan's Company G discovered a bunker complex. When small arms fire and grenades interrupted further investigation, Sheehan wisely backed off and called in air and artillery. At 1300, Company G moved in, but some NVA soldiers continued to fight. Later that afternoon, after clearing the complex, Company G reported 39 dead Communists, 2 Marines killed, and 29 wounded, including the company commander.

At 1430 while Company G cleared the bunkers, a Company F squad patrol, located some 1,200 meters southwest of Company G, engaged another enemy force. When the Communists counterattacked, the company commander, First Lieutenant Richard D. Koehler, Jr., sent in the rest of his Marines. When 82mm mortar rounds began falling, Koehler knew he was in trouble and called in artillery and air strikes. The concentration of supporting arms cracked the enemy position, and when Company F moved in, it counted 118 enemy bodies. The Marines estimated the Communist unit to have numbered between 200 and 250. Marine losses totaled 14 killed and 43 wounded. Apparently the NVA had had enough; for the next five days BLT 2/3 encountered only mines and harassing fires.

One ominous development which accompanied the Buffalo fighting was the accurate employment of

large-caliber, long-range NVA artillery. On 7 July, enemy artillery scored a direct hit on the command bunker of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at Con Thien, killing 11, including First Lieutenant Gatlin J. Howell, the intelligence officer who had gone to the aid of Company B, 9th Marines on 2 July. Eighteen others sustained wounds; one was the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Schening.* The cause of the damage was a 152mm howitzer round, which penetrated five feet of sand bags, loose dirt, and 12x12-inch timbers.

The same day, at Dong Ha, a delay-fuzed 130mm round landed at the base of the north wall of the 9th Marines' command post, exploding six feet below the bunker floor. Luckily, there were no injuries. The NVA also scored a direct hit on the Dong Ha chapel during Catholic services, killing the chaplain's assistant. Storage areas, helicopter maintenance areas, and medical facilities were among the targets of the long-range weapons. The frequency and accuracy of the enemy fire caused Col-



Marine Corps Historical Collection
The heat during the summer battles south of the DMZ made water a precious commodity. Following a helicopter resupply mission, these two Marines use a Vietnamese technique to carry a five-gallon can of water to their squad during Operation Buffalo.

*Lieutenant Colonel Schening also suffered wounds at Cape Gloucester and Peleliu in World War II, as well as in Korea. He thus survived wounds in three wars.

onel Jerue to move his command post to a location northeast of Cam Lo. There, relative quiet prevailed for the remainder of the operation.*

Another indication of the Communist buildup along the DMZ and around Con Thien during this period was the increased employment of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). While an A-4 aircraft was attacking the NVA in front of BLT 1/3 on 6 July, the enemy launched eight SAMs from sites north of the Ben Hai River. One hit Major Ralph E. Brubaker's VMA-311 jet, causing the aircraft to crash in enemy territory. Brubaker, only slightly wounded, remained in enemy territory until picked up the next morning by an Air Force rescue helicopter.

Operation Buffalo closed on 14 July 1967. The Marines reported enemy losses as 1,290 dead and two captured. Marine losses, in contrast, totaled 159 killed and 345 wounded. The Marines found the enemy's large-scale July offensive against Con Thien a short one, but considerably more vicious than most

*Colonel Joseph J. Kelly recalled in 1981 that the requirement to find room for a forward division headquarters to be reopened at Dong Ha also influenced this move. In addition, regimental staff officers knew the old French barracks housing the regimental headquarters were prominent features on maps used by the North Vietnamese. Col Joseph J. Kelly, Comments on draft ms, 29May81 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

Con Thien proved that Marines, although offense-minded, also had to know how to build sturdy bunkers to fortify their defensive positions. This Marine inspects a bunker constructed of dirt-filled ammunition boxes which collapsed after being hit by artillery.

Marine Corps Historical Collection

