

PART V
SPECIAL EFFORTS

CHAPTER 11

The Special Landing Force

Doctrine Versus Expedient—Forming a Second SLF—Continuing Operations Throughout the Year

Doctrine Versus Expedient

In 1967 the Seventh Fleet's Special Landing Force (SLF) was the Pacific Command's strategic reserve for all of Southeast Asia, as well as Vietnam. The SLF contained a Marine command element of approximately the same organization as an infantry regimental staff; a Marine battalion landing team, consisting of a Marine infantry battalion reinforced by artillery, a small logistics support unit, and other elements to support independent operation; and a Marine helicopter squadron. The Marine SLF commander reported directly to the Navy amphibious commander. Although under the overall operational control of the Seventh Fleet, the SLF was readily available for MACV use in Vietnam.

SLF operations in 1967 concentrated in I Corps. The reasons for this change in practice were not entirely the result of a national level strategy for the conduct of the war. Without considering the Communists' strategy, there were sufficient conflicting interests within the many command levels of the U.S. Armed Forces to cause diverse opinions of the most appropriate use of this unique striking force.

Opinions were divided even within the Marine Corps. In III MAF, Marine division and wing commanders wanted to control their own battalions and squadrons which were siphoned off to man the SLF. Continuing reappraisals of required troop strength to "do the job" in I Corps amplified this desire. MACV and III MAF did not want troops floating off the coast when they could be "in country" and, most probably, in contact. However, the personnel in the SLF did not count against the "in-country" authorized troop strength ceilings and, as one operations officer noted, the SLF at least served as a source of emergency reinforcements following commitment of a division's reserve.¹ Other Marine commanders, primarily those outside Vietnam, such as Brigadier General Louis Metzger of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade on Okinawa, advocated a close adherence to approved amphibious doctrine.

General Metzger later wrote, "As Commanding General, 9th MAB, and at the direction of CG, FMFPac, Lieutenant General Krulak, I was precise in following the established amphibious operational command relationships and logistic support. It was a constant struggle, particularly with the Wing and Division commanders."²

Compounding the problem was the Seventh Fleet's position, reinforced by approved doctrine, that the Navy-Marine amphibious capability provided by the Amphibious Ready Group/Special Landing Force organization added great flexibility to the allied strategic options, as well as the Vietnamese tactical situation. U.S. Air Force considerations entered into the controversy because of air space control requirements. A final, but certainly not overriding, consideration in the III MAF stance was the Marine Corps' situation in I Corps. If additional MACV, in this case U.S. Army, troops could be released to go into lower I Corps, the 1st Marine Division would be able to move north to cover Da Nang, thereby allowing the 3d Marine Division to concentrate in northern I Corps. This would permit the 1st and 2d ARVN Divisions to devote their energies to pacification. These moves, however, could occur only if the Marine divisions could accomplish their mission without the SLF battalion. In January of 1967, all of the ramifications of this complex situation were not in evidence, but two basic questions were starting to form. What Marine formations would provide the SLF with its landing forces and where should it be used?

The Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) gained an additional landing ship, tank (LST) in January 1967, bringing the ARG ship total to five. The other ships in the group were: an amphibious assault ship (LPH), a dock landing ship (LSD), an attack transport (APA), and an amphibious transport dock (LPD).

Early in 1967, the Joint Chiefs of Staff made two significant decisions. They authorized the formation

of a second SLF and directed CinCPac to commit both SLFs to extended operations in Vietnam. Neither of these decisions were restrictive as far as the location of SLF landings, but the provision of the required logistic support provided a major reason why SLF operations became a purely I Corps function.

Under the heading of "Logistic Support for the Special Landing Force" in April, FMFPac's report of Marine operations in Vietnam revealed a major reason for concentrating SLF operations in I Corps; the support structure dictated operational location. The report stated:

With the decision by the Joint Chiefs of Staff . . . to commit the SLFs to extended operations in Vietnam, the normal logistic support procedure required some changes. The CG, III MAF now provides logistic support when the SLF operates in areas contiguous to III MAF logistic installations. When operating in areas isolated from established logistic support areas, ground units of the SLF utilize their own resources, with stocks reconstituted as practicable from the Force Logistic Command. While operating from the LPH, aviation units of the SLF will be supported by the LPH but, when operating ashore in the III MAF area of operations, support by the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing will augment that positioned by 9th MAB aboard ship. If the operations ashore extend beyond 15 days, support of helicopters will become the responsibility of CG, III MAF. When the SLF operates ashore in locations other than I CTZ (after 15 days), CG, III MAF will provide only aeronautical spares and special support equipment. All other logistic support responsibilities will remain with CG, 9th MAB [on Okinawa].*

A final determinant for SLF commitments which received due consideration was the Communist plan for 1967. As the year opened with the sour memory of an uneasy and far from inviolate 48-hour New Year's truce, there were continuing indications of enemy buildups and unit movements in and north of the DMZ. As events proved, the Marine occupation of the bases at Con Thien and remote, but vital, Khe Sanh alarmed the Communists, but at this early stage of the year there were no clear indications of Communist intentions in northern I Corps. Elsewhere in the corps area, the enemy obviously would continue to exert as much pressure as possible

*"When the 9th MAB assumed responsibility for Marine aviation and ground units in the Western Pacific which were not in Vietnam, it became an important part of SLF operations. . . . The Brigade's aviation component, MAG-15, became a composite MAG consisting of helicopters, KC-130s, and fixed-wing attack and fighter aircraft, and, as such, was one of the largest air groups we have ever had." Col David O. Takala, Comments on draft ms, 2Jun81 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

on allied units in order to immobilize or at least distract them. The year 1967 tested the validity of the SLF concept as the Communists forced the expedient of long and often unrewarding SLF commitments on the Marine commanders in I Corps.

Operation Deckhouse V

6 - 15 January 1967

The first SLF operation of 1967, Deckhouse V, was significant for two reasons. It was a sizable, combined U.S. Marine and Vietnamese Marine amphibious operation. More ominously, for the proponents of the SLF concept, it was the last SLF landing to take place beyond the boundaries of I Corps.

The ARG, under Captain John D. Westervelt, USN, with Colonel Harry D. Wortman's SLF embarked, steamed south to the coast of Kien Hoa Province in IV Corps for the landing. Deckhouse V was the only SLF operation for Major James L. Day's BLT 1/9 and it marked the end of SLF duty for Lieutenant Colonel Marshall B. Armstrong's HMM-362.

D-day for Deckhouse V was 6 January. Both BLT 1/9 and elements of Vietnamese Marine Brigade Force Bravo, primarily consisting of the 3d and 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalions, enjoyed support throughout the operation from HMM-362's mixed force of UH-34 and CH-46 helicopters operating from the USS *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2). The combined seaborne and heliborne force assaulted an area of suspected Viet Cong concentrations on the coast between the Co Chien and Ham Luong reaches of the Mekong River. Lasting until 15 January, the operation produced unspectacular results. The combined force killed only 21 Viet Cong, destroyed two small arms workshops, and captured 44 weapons and 42 tons of rice. Seven U.S. Marines died and one Vietnamese Marine died accidentally.

Some participants attributed Deckhouse V's failure to information leaks. The Marines encountered only local force VC in the operational area, but prisoners stated that larger VC units had been there before the landings. Someone told Captain Westervelt—he did not hear it himself—that a Philippine radio station broadcast the news when the ARG departed Subic Bay that the Marines were headed for the Mekong Delta.³

Many other difficulties marred the execution of the combined operation. Communications were bad, rough seas interfered, planning was hurried, and on D plus 1 the 4th Battalion VNMC endured a



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A191246

Two men of BLT 1/9 look out over some of the flooded rice paddies that hampered mobility in Vietnam's Delta region during Operation Deckhouse V in January 1967.

near record-breaking ship-to-shore landing-craft move of 23 miles, rivaled only by some of the U.S. shore-to-shore operations in the Pacific during World War II. Captain Westervelt recalled these difficulties:

The Navy aspects of the Deckhouse V landings were formidable. Normal operating depths of water for the LPH, LPD and other deep draft ships in the Amphibious Ready Group were about 8 to 10 miles to seaward off the coastal areas of Kien Hoa between the Co Chien and Ham Loung Rivers. The 8-inch gun cruiser *Canberra* had a fire support station some eight miles, as I recall, from the impact areas for her pre-assault bombardment. Water depths adequate for LST and rocket ship passage over the shallow bar into positions for the assault landings obtained only at high tide. Because an early morning landing time was required for the Marine assault forces in the LVTs vehicles, this meant that, to protect the surprise features of the landings, the LSTs and rocket ships had to proceed over the bar late in the preceding evening at high tide to be in position by dawn. . . .

The long distance off-shore required by the principal ARG ships plus the fact that some landing beaches were well upstream from the seaward beaches accounted for the long boat rides (up to 23 miles) required for some of the troops.

The seas were very rough on the original D-Day (4 Jan) and again on 5 Jan, so the actual D-Day on 6 Jan was 2

days late. However, even on the 6th it was not possible to load the [Vietnamese Marines] from the *Henrico* into LCM6's alongside, so *Henrico*, *Thomaston* and *Vancouver* returned to Vung Tau, transferred *Henrico*'s troops to the LPD and LSD so loading could take place in the well decks. The [Vietnamese Marines] actually landed on the 7th.^{4*}

The operation encountered problems at an even higher level. Amphibious doctrine called for the amphibious task force commander to control all aircraft in the amphibious operations area. Normally, these aircraft would come from the Navy and Marine Corps. The location of Deckhouse V created special circumstances, however, that dictated that all air support come from the Seventh Air Force. As Brigadier General John R. Chaisson later recalled, the commander of Seventh Air Force, Major General William W. Momyer, agreed with Navy control of aircraft in a traditional amphibious assault against a hostile shore. In the Mekong Delta, however, with the Air Force air control system already in place, General Momyer saw no valid reason to change the existing system just because an amphibious force

*See Chapter 12 for the U.S. Marine advisors' accounts of the VNMC participation in Deckhouse V.

temporarily was operating in the area. General Westmoreland backed the Navy in this argument in this case but all future SLF operations were to be in the I Corps area where such complicated command relationships could be avoided.⁵

Deckhouse VI/Desoto

16 February - 3 March 1967

During late January the two main components of the SLF changed. Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth E. Huntington's HMM-363 relieved HMM-362 and Lieutenant Colonel Jack Westerman's BLT 1/4 replaced BLT 1/9. Sailing from the Philippines, the newly constituted SLF arrived off the coast of Vietnam on the 14th of February.

While the SLF underwent its transition, significant changes occurred in I Corps. To release more ARVN troops for pacification work, U.S. Marine Task Force X-Ray, commanded by Brigadier General William A. Stiles, relieved Vietnamese troops of combat duties in southern Quang Ngai Province in January. General Stiles promptly initiated Operation Desoto, a search and destroy operation directed against known Communist strongholds in the region. To augment Desoto, the SLF received orders to operate in an area south of Task Force X-Ray's AO. The SLF operation was Deckhouse VI. As in Deckhouse V, Colonel Wortman commanded the SLF and Captain Westervelt, the ARG.⁶

The mission assigned to the SLF ground element, BLT 1/4, called for it to disrupt enemy movement in the Sa Huynh salt flats, search northward in the Nui Dau area, and, finally, link up with the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, then operating around Nui Dau in Operation Desoto.

At 0800 on 16 February, two rocket-firing landing ships started the naval gunfire preparation for the Deckhouse VI landings. Fifty-five minutes later, the first wave of HMM-363's helicopters lifted off the deck of the *Iwo Jima* and headed inland with the assault company, Company A. Company C landed in LVTs near Tach By and helicopters ferried the rest of the battalion inland. The landings were unopposed.

Brigadier General Louis Metzger, the commanding general of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade based on Okinawa, was there to observe this landing and commented later on the assault phase. He wrote:

Because of the insistence of MACV a NOTAM [Notice to Airmen] was published several days before each amphibious operation, I suppose to protect any commercial air in the area. It didn't take a very effective intelligence system for the Viet Cong and/or NVA to know just where and when a landing was going to take place. Secondly, I was concerned that even though this landing was taking place in a populated area, the amphibious force carried out routine naval gunfire and air strikes. . . . Civilian casualties did result. Following the operation, I discussed the matter with Commander 7th Fleet [Admiral John H. Hyland] and he supported my position. At least as long as I was CG 9th MAB the NGF and Air Strikes in future landings in populated areas were on call.⁷

Captain Westervelt later commented on a number of problems encountered during the assault landing in Deckhouse VI. He wrote:

Deckhouse VI was treated as a regular assault landing complete with heavy pre-assault fires for the boat landings. In retrospect, because of the U.S. Army forces operating just to the south and west and U.S. Marines operating to the north and west of the assault area, the pre-assault fires should have been "on call." There were weather problems at Deckhouse VI when heavy fog and rain obscured the landing zones on D-Day and caused a one-day postponement. Surface landings could have been carried out. The cruiser firing pre-assault fires commenced fire in spite of D-Day cancellation and probably gave some indication to any VC in the area that something unusual might be scheduled. However, this was improbable because the area was normally frequented by gunfire support destroyers.

The population of the villages just south of Sa Huynh congregated on the eastern face of a ridge, which sloped up from the boat landing area, to watch the Marine landing show. Originally, the pre-assault fires had included this area, but this had been changed on the advice of a representative from the Province Chief's staff on board the flagship. He pointed with a dirty finger to the ridge and forced out his interpretation of "Friend" in English. We took him at his word and put those particular fires "on call."⁸

The opening phase of Deckhouse VI was uneventful. The SLF planners had suspected this would be the case. True to form, local Communist units concentrated on delaying and harassing tactics. The BLT confirmed the Communist presence in the area by destroying 167 fortifications and capturing 20 tons of assorted supplies during the 32 days of Phase I. Though there never were any major contacts, the BLT claimed 201 VC killed during this period; only six Marines died. Unfortunately, on 25 February, the HMM-363 commander, Lieutenant Colonel Huntington, and his copilot received wounds during a troop lift; the squadron executive officer, Major Marvin E. Day, assumed command on the 28th and continued in command for the duration of



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A191174

Heavy monsoon rains flooded the wide expanse of rice paddies through which these Marines are wading during Operation Deckhouse VI near the coast in February 1967.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A191131

A member of Company A, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines hits the deck as his unit comes under fire in Landing Zone Bat during Deckhouse VI, the SLF's companion piece to Operation Desoto in February.

Deckhouse VI. Phase I ended on 26 February when the SLF Commander, Colonel Wortman, ordered a tactical withdrawal of the SLF from the Sa Huynh area to its ships to prepare for Phase II.

Only 14 and one-half hours after the last element of the battalion left the Sa Huynh salt flats, the SLF landed again, this time 10 kilometers north of Sa Huynh. Phase II of Deckhouse VI, by now integrated as part of the combined 7th Marines and ARVN Operation Desoto, started at 0830 on 27 February.

As the SLF helicopters approached LZ Bat, five miles inland from the beach, they met heavy fire

which hit eight of the 14 helicopters in the assault lift, and put six out of action. All other loaded helicopters diverted to the beach area while supporting Marine aircraft strafed and rocketed the VC defenders. Fortunately for the isolated Marines of the assault element, the Communists pulled out and that afternoon the rest of the battalion linked up with its first wave. By dark the BLT had consolidated near LZ Bat and began preparations for the next day's search and destroy operation.

Other than the opposed landing at LZ Bat, Phase

Infantrymen from BLT 1/4 rush a wounded Marine to a waiting CH-34D helicopter from HMM-363 for a flight to the amphibious ship USS Iwo Jima on 23 February 1967 during Operation Deckhouse VI.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188499



II action almost repeated Phase I. Occasional contact and intermittent sniper fire marked the only enemy reactions. In the six days required to accomplish the second phase, the battalion killed 78 more VC, destroyed 145 fortifications, and captured an additional five tons of supplies. Similarly, as in Phase I, the price totaled six more Marines dead. Deckhouse VI concluded on 3 March and the SLF promptly sailed for the Philippines; it returned to Vietnam, however, long before the month ended.

Beacon Hill I

20 March - 1 April 1967

In the spring of 1967, III MAF faced a growing Communist capability to overrun the Marine base at Gio Linh and its appealing prize of four 175mm guns. Units of the 3d Marine Division committed to Operation Prairie remained thinly spread over an extremely large area. Still more unsettling, intelligence sources reported five NVA infantry battalions in or near the eastern portion of the DMZ.

In response to this threat, the SLF, offshore since 14 March, went into action once more on the 20th.* Lieutenant Colonel Westerman's BLT 1/4, and HMM-363 commanded by newly-promoted Lieutenant Colonel Day, the former squadron executive officer, landed on the coast north of the Cua Viet. Operation Beacon Hill had begun.

*The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing reinforced HMM-363 with a detachment of UH-1Es and CH-53s.

A Navy hospital corpsman with Company D, 4th Marines treats a wounded Marine under fire in Operation Beacon Hill north of Cua Viet in March.

3d MarDiv ComdC, March 1967



3d MarDiv ComdC, March 1967

An unshaven Marine rifleman carefully removes enemy equipment from a bunker in the North Vietnamese defense line destroyed in Operation Beacon Hill by BLT 1/4 on 26 March after an intense two-day preliminary bombardment by air and artillery.

Contact was light until 21 March when the BLT engaged about 80 NVA troops, killing 14. The next day the battalion made contact again between Gio Linh and Con Thien. After a stiff fight the enemy, apparently a company, withdrew leaving 43 bodies behind. Progress during both days was slow because the NVA laced their positions with connecting tunnels which required detailed search.

On the 26th, after a two-day air and artillery preparation, the BLT broke through two well-prepared defensive trench lines. Again, the Marines encountered interconnecting tunnels. Finding the tunnels required care because the enemy had concealed them skillfully among the hedgerows. As the battalion cracked the position, the Communists again withdrew. Only sniper fire and minor rear guard actions slowed the advancing Marines. On 28 March, BLT 1/4 shifted to the operational control of the 3d Marines and occupied a blocking position 1,300 meters south of the Con Thien perimeter in support of a 3d Marines attack. This was the last phase of Beacon Hill and the operation ended on 1 April.

Beacon Hill results appeared promising. Although BLT 1/4 had suffered 29 Marines killed and 230 wounded, it reported 334 NVA dead even though the Communists had fought from positions which were difficult to identify, much less exploit.

With the end of Beacon Hill, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines transferred from the SLF to the 3d Marine Division. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines,



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A188496

LCpl Claude Tucker stands guard while the commanders of the two Special Landing Forces, Col Henry D. Wortman (center) of SLF Bravo and Col James A. Gallo of SLF Alpha look over a suspected Viet Cong on the first day of Operation Deckhouse VI.

commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Wendell N. Vest, a regular line battalion scheduled for rehabilitation on Okinawa, started loading on board the empty ships of the ARG shipping on 2 April. The transports sailed on the 5th.

While this exchange of units, ships, and roles took place, Marines on Okinawa were implementing the twin SLF concept. HMM-363 and the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines joined SLF Alpha (Task Group 79.4) and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and HMM-164 became part of SLF Bravo (Task Group 79.5) battalion. Task Group 79.5 had operated as the single SLF since 1965, but during the transitional period of March-April 1967, TG 79.5, now designated SLF Bravo, went through a standdown phase. Neither of the SLFs were in an offshore ready position during early April 1967. SLF Alpha, on board the ARG ships which sailed on 10 April, arrived on station near the DMZ on the 18th. The ships carrying SLF Bravo followed shortly thereafter, sailing on 17 April.⁹

Beacon Star

22 April - 12 May 1967

Beacon Star was the first operation for newly

designated SLF Bravo. As Navy Captain Richard L. Cochrane's ARG steamed toward northern I CTZ, Colonel Wortman, the SLF commander since September 1966, experienced normal prelanding doubts and anxieties. One reassuring factor was that both of his major subordinate units were I Corps veterans. The helicopter squadron, HMM-164, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Rodney D. McKittrick, had been in Vietnam since February 1966, and Lieutenant Colonel Earl R. Delong's BLT 2/3 originally arrived "in country" in May of 1965. Additional confidence stemmed from the fact that the BLT had just come from a one-month rehabilitation period on Okinawa. It was at full strength and all equipment was ready for combat.

The target area for Beacon Star was a major VC stronghold and supply area along the border of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. The small O Lau River is the natural terrain feature which delineates the provincial borders in the coastal region. The center of the Beacon Star amphibious objective area (AOA) was 27 kilometers northwest of Hue, on the edge of what French soldiers called "*La Rue Sans Joie*," or "The Street Without Joy." The



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193880

Col James A. Gallo briefs senior Marines on 7 May on SLF Alpha's progress in Operation Beacon Star near the border of Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. Prominent among the officers present are (seated, left) LtGen Victor H. Krulak and MajGen Robert E. Cushman, Jr. MajGen Herman Nickerson, Jr. and BGen Foster C. Lahue stand at left.

AOA was known for its heavy concentration of Communists; intelligence officers reported two battalions of the 6th Regiment and two main force battalions, the 810th and the 814th, were operating in the region.

The Beacon Star scheme of maneuver consisted of a waterborne and heliborne BLT landing on the coast. The battalion was to move inland, generally following the O Lau River, while, at the same time, gradually expanding its TAOR in a southwesterly direction.

Bad weather and poor visibility delayed operations on D-day, 22 April, but the first heliborne company landed at 0809. It met no opposition.* Beacon Star progressed according to plan; enemy resistance was minimal. On D plus four the battalion launched a combined helicopter and overland assault in the southwestern portion of the expanded TAOR to attack an estimated 250 VC spotted in the target area. Unfortunately, the BLT was not able to capitalize on this intelligence.

Urgent orders from the Commander Task Group 79.5 interrupted Beacon Star. The Phase I casualties, one killed and 10 wounded, would seem insignificant in the face of what happened in the next 24

hours. The new SLF Bravo was about to undergo its first real combat test. On 26 April, the name Khe Sanh was just another place name to many of Lieutenant Colonel Delong's Marines; by mid-March those who survived would never forget it.

While Phase I of Beacon Star proceeded, the Marines of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines discovered strong Communist formations in the hills west of Khe Sanh, 43 miles from the Beacon Star area. Realizing that one battalion could not carry the hill mass, the 3d Marine Division commander, Major General Hochmuth, ordered BLT 2/3 to break off operations in the original Beacon Star AOA and proceed to Khe Sanh.

The tactical move to Khe Sanh was a transportation triumph. At 1200 on the 26th, the division placed BLT 2/3, in the field and in contact with the enemy, under the operational control of the 3d Marines. By 1400, three of the BLT's companies and the command group were at Khe Sanh, and by 1600 the BLT effected a link-up with elements of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines northwest of the Khe Sanh perimeter. The BLT moved by helicopter from the Beacon Star AOA to Phu Bai, and from Phu Bai to Khe Sanh by Marine and U.S. Air Force KC-130 and C-130 Hercules transports. The total elapsed time from receipt of the warning order until the link-up near Khe Sanh totaled less than seven hours.

The second phase of Beacon Star is more commonly known as "The Khe Sanh Hill Fights" or the "First

*BLT 2/3 suffered approximately 60 heat casualties within about a three-hour period after landing. Colonel Rodney D. McKittrick later cited such incidents as part of the justification for the placing of an acclimatization room in the new *Tawara* class LHAs. Colonel Rodney D. McKittrick, Comments on draft ms, n.d. (1981) (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

Battle of Khe Sanh.”* The BLT’s casualties during the period 27 April-12 May gave evidence of the violence of the fighting for the Khe Sanh hills. During these weeks the BLT lost 71 killed and 349 wounded, more than a fourth of its strength. Of the 78 Navy corpsmen assigned to the BLT, five died and 15 suffered wounds.

The fighting at Khe Sanh tapered off in May and SLF Bravo’s BLT 2/3 transferred from the 3d Marines’ operational control back to the SLF. The return to ARG ships started on 10 May and finished on the 12th, signaling the official end of Beacon Star.

Beaver Cage/Union I

28 April - 12 May 1967

The other special landing force, SLF Alpha, formed on Okinawa on 1 March 1967 under the command of Colonel James A. Gallo, Jr. The new SLF contained BLT 1/3, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. “Pete” Wickwire, and HMM-263, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Edward K. Kirby. Both the helicopter squadron and the battalion

*For a detailed account of the bitter contest for Hills 558, 861, 881 North, and 881 South, see Chapter 4.

A 60mm mortar crew with Company A, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines fires against a North Vietnamese Army unit on 20 May during Operation Beau Charger, the SLF’s portion of Operation Hickory which cleared the southern portion of the DMZ.

3d MarDiv ComdC, May 1967



3d MarDiv ComdC, May 1967

2dLt John V. Francis, wearing no shirt under his armored vest because of the intense heat encountered in Operation Beaver Cage, takes a short break on 12 May as BLT 1/3 concludes its initial SLF operation.

had just finished rehabilitation periods on Okinawa and were at full strength. Departing from Okinawa on 10 April, the ARG, with SLF Alpha embarked, headed for Vietnam and made its first landing on the 28th.

The target for the first SLF Alpha landing, Operation Beaver Cage, was the rich and populous Que Son Valley, 25 miles south of Da Nang, important to the Communists as a source of both food and manpower. Beaver Cage started at 0700 28 April as the first heliborne elements of BLT 1/3 touched down. For the next four days heat caused more casualties than the enemy as operations continued against negligible opposition.

Moving to a more promising operational area five miles to the north, the BLT made its first significant contact on 2 May. An enemy force, at least a platoon, attacked Company C as it dug in for the night. After dark, USAF AC-47 “Puff the Dragon” gunships and “Spooky” flare planes, Marine artillery, and the BLT’s own supporting arms pounded the suspected Communist positions. The enemy fled.

The next morning the battalion resumed its sweeping operations. The enemy did not react until 5 May. That night the VC struck back, hitting the BLT headquarters and support elements with mortar and small arms fire as they evacuated a landing zone. The Headquarters and Service Company troops and



the attached Marines of 4.2-inch Mortar Battery, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines, repulsed the Communists. Despite the intensity of the attack and reduced visibility caused by oncoming darkness, Lieutenant Colonel Kirby's helicopters successfully extracted 200 men and more than 1 and one-half tons of ammunition without loss.

To the north, while BLT 1/3 conducted Beaver Cage, the 5th Marines engaged in Operation Union I. On 9 May the Beaver Cage scheme of maneuver reoriented to include an eastward sweep toward the coast coordinated with the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines on the BLT's right. In this manner the final stage of Beaver Cage became a part of the Union I plan, although the BLT designed its maneuver to place it in position for an amphibious withdrawal.* During the last week of the operation, 6-12 May, the BLT endured continuous mortar attacks and sniper fire.

On 10 May, as the eastward sweep continued, Companies B and C engaged in a day-long action with a sizable VC force. After much maneuvering, air strikes, mortar missions, and the insertion of a 40-man Sparrow Hawk unit, the VC broke off the action, but only after the BLT killed 86 enemy soldiers. Beaver Cage/Union I ended for the SLF Alpha units on 12 May as they returned to their respective ships.

The first operation for SLF Alpha had been a costly venture, but all units had demonstrated their fighting qualities. Battalion casualties totaled 55 Marines killed and 151 wounded, but in 16 days of continuous operations the BLT claimed 181 enemy dead and a bag of 66 prisoners. The next test of SLF Alpha was only five days away.

*Beau Charger/Belt Tight/Hickory
PrairieIV/Cimarron
18 May - 10 June 1967*

Because of the Communist rocket and artillery buildup in the DMZ during the spring of 1967, General Westmoreland issued a directive authorizing the entry of forces into the DMZ buffer zone south of the Ben Hai River, actually South Vietnamese territory. The authorization triggered planning for a series of simultaneous operations to be conducted in the new maneuver area, one by ARVN forces and three by the U.S. Marines. The code names for these operations were Hickory for 3d

Marine Division units, Beau Charger for SLF Alpha, Belt Tight for SLF Bravo, and Lam Son 54 for the South Vietnamese task force.* The overall concept envisioned the movement of SLF Bravo into the Hickory Operation by means of Operation Belt Tight, while SLF Alpha was to operate east of the Hickory/Lam Son 54 operational areas under the aegis of Beau Charger. The Beau Charger/Belt Tight/Hickory plan was unique in that it called for the employment of both SLFs in the same operational area at the same time.

The opening scheme of maneuver called for the movement of three separate assault forces to the Ben Hai River where they were to face about and drive south on roughly parallel axes, destroying all enemy units and installations in their paths. The plan included the establishment of a free-fire zone which would require the evacuation of more than 10,000 noncombatants from the buffer zone, a monumental task assigned to the Vietnamese National Police.

D-day for Beau Charger, SLF Alpha's show, was 18 May. Fifteen UH-34s of Lieutenant Colonel Kirby's HMM-263 lifted from the flight deck of the USS *Okinawa* (LPH-3) and headed inland, each loaded with five Marines from the assault element, Company A, BLT 1/3. L-hour was 0800. The landing zone, Goose, was less than six kilometers from the North Vietnamese boundary of the DMZ, and almost within small arms range of the north bank of the Ben Hai River.

The SLF planners studied aerial photographs of the terrain before the operation, but conducted no prelanding overflights to preserve secrecy. For the same reason, they requested no air and naval gunfire preparations of the LZ. Intelligence sources had reported the presence of many enemy antiaircraft machine guns in the area.

Flying lead, Kirby led his 34s toward the potentially dangerous zone, flying at altitudes of less than 50 feet to reduce the enemy gunners' effectiveness. A maximum speed approach, about 80 knots, lack of prominent landmarks, and the tenseness of the situation made navigation difficult at best. Kirby landed at the north end of the zone, but as he did machine gun fire ripped into his helicopter. The enemy bullets wrecked the helicopter's radio and wounded the copilot, crew chief, gunner, and three infantrymen. Another infantryman, killed, fell out of the helicopter. The wounded gunner returned fire

*See Chapter 3 for the 5th Marines' account of Union I.

*The non-SLF operations appeared in Chapter 1.

and, as Kirby later related, “. . . saved [our] bacon.”¹⁰

Kirby managed to get the helicopter back in the air, but without a radio he had no contact with the rest of his flight or with the *Okinawa*. Four other UH-34s in the assault wave and two escorting UH-1Es suffered damage from enemy fire, but the entire wave unloaded its troops. As soon as Kirby got his crippled helicopter back to the *Okinawa*, he briefed the SLF commander, Colonel Gallo, on the bad situation at LZ Goose. Colonel Gallo ordered the cancellation of all further lifts to Goose and the substitution of the alternate LZ, Owl, 800 meters south of Goose. The assault element of Company A at Goose was very much alone and in trouble.

Second Lieutenant Dwight G. Faylor's 2d Platoon, Company A spread over 800 yards at LZ Goose. A well-organized enemy force pressed his thinly held position from the northwest. The BLT naval gunfire liaison officer, Ensign John W. McCormick, vainly tried to call in naval gunfire. The ships denied his requests; no one was certain of the exact location of friendly positions and in many cases the enemy was too close to use naval guns without endangering the Marines. Rescue was on the way, but the Marines at Goose were in desperate straits.

While the abortive assault at LZ Goose was taking place, Company D landed in LVTs at Green Beach, 900 meters southeast of LZ Owl. This landing was unopposed. By 0855, the remainder of Company A had landed at Owl. Overland reinforcements arrived at Owl in the form of one platoon from Company D and a section of tanks. At 0930 the lead elements of Company B began landing. The force at Owl then moved out to rescue the beleaguered platoon at LZ Goose.

By 1100 the rescue force had regained contact with Faylor's platoon, but the enemy showed no signs of breaking off the engagement. Company B joined the fighting at Goose and the tempo of battle increased. Stymied by a tenaciously held trenchline, the Company A Marines tried another avenue of attack. Moving against the Communist position under the cover of a tree line, the Marines engaged enemy soldiers in furious hand-to-hand fighting. Company A's advance bogged down again and the infantrymen called in close air support to crack the tough position. Eleven jets blasted the entrenched Communists and finally both Companies A and B, supported by tanks, moved forward. As the fighting

died down, the Marines counted 67 Communist bodies.

Belt Tight started on 20 May. The initial mission of SLF Bravo was to land in the northeastern corner of the 3d Division's Hickory operational area and conduct search and destroy operations within a designated TAOR.* At 0714 on the 20th, Companies F and H with a BLT 2/3 command group started landing at LZ Parrot. Companies E and G followed with another command group landing at LZ Mockingbird at 0850. The initial enemy reaction was deceptive; the Marines encountered only light resistance.

The general trace of SLF Bravo's sweep in its TAOR was in a southerly direction. The Hickory planners wanted the SLF to dislodge enemy units in the area, thereby driving them into 3d Division units moving up from the south. Neither the 3d Marine Division nor SLF Bravo ever determined how many enemy troops Belt Tight displaced, but the SLF experienced four days of close combat during the operation, certainly an indication that its presence had a spoiling effect on enemy intentions. Throughout the Belt Tight period, BLT 2/3 encountered well-trained enemy troops who fought with skill and determination. The enemy's soundly constructed positions and excellent weapons employ-

*A description of 3d Marine Division participation in Operation Hickory appears in Chapter 1.

Two riflemen from BLT 1/3 pass carefully through a Vietnamese village while on Operation Beaver Cage.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371988



ment caused severe problems for the battalion as it fought its way south. During one of the many mortar attacks, Lieutenant Colonel Delong, the BLT commander, aggravated an old back injury which necessitated his evacuation. His experienced executive officer, Major Wendell O. Beard, a former Amphibious Warfare School instructor who joined the battalion in February, took command.

Belt Tight ended at 1559, 23 May 1967. At this time BLT 2/3 shifted to the operational control of the 9th Marines which assigned the BLT a new area of operations as part of Operation Hickory, representing a continuation of the Belt Tight sweep. Until Hickory ended at midnight on the 28th, the battalion continued its deliberate sweep operations. The highlight of this period was a sharp engagement between Company E, commanded by Captain Stuart R. Vaughan, and a determined NVA force defending the village of Xuan Hai. The battle started on the afternoon of the 24th and did not end until the Marines completed a detailed sweep of the village ruins at 2155 on the following day. The enemy force had built 40 defensive bunkers in and around the town. Company E destroyed them and counted 27 dead NVA soldiers on the site. SLF casualties were light during the nine days of Belt Tight/Hickory, considering the fact that the battalion was either in contact or under artillery attack during most of the period. SLF Bravo had 17 Marines killed and 152 wounded. North Vietnamese losses totaled a confirmed 58 killed and one prisoner taken by the Marines.

When Hickory finished on 28 May, BLT 2/3 remained in the field, still under the operational control of the 9th Marines. During the next three days the battalion participated in Operation Prairie IV which ended on the 31st. The BLT's assignment involved primarily a security operation in relief of both the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines and the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. BLT 2/3 protected artillery positions immediately north of the Cam Lo Bridge, the bridge itself, and provided route security for both truck convoys and engineer units on Route 561 from north of the Cam Lo Bridge to Con Thien, an air distance of slightly over 10 kilometers.

Although the Prairie IV assignment was of short duration, the end of the operation did not eliminate the security requirements for Route 561 and nearby positions. As a consequence, SLF Bravo, still under operational control of the 9th Marines, retained its Prairie IV mission as part of a new 3d Division plan,

Operation Cimarron. Cimarron lasted from 1 June until 2 July, though SLF Bravo's involvement lasted only through 10 June.

The SLF participation in Cimarron succeeded, in the sense that there was no local enemy activity. The enemy stayed away, the road remained open, and Con Thien maintained its defensive integrity. The BLT spent 9-10 June reorganizing and moving back to Dong Ha combat base. Reembarkation on the 11th marked the end of the longest SLF combat deployment ashore since its formation, 23 days of continuous operations. The shipboard respite would be short; SLF Bravo would land again in only a week's time.

Day On, Stay On—SLF Operational Tempo Increases

The spring and early summer of 1967 challenged the flexibility of the SLF concept in I Corps. Variations ranged from SLF Bravo's April "fire brigade" action at Khe Sanh during Operation Beacon Star to dull, but necessary, "housekeeping" duties assigned to BLT 2/3 during its 10 days with Operation Cimarron. As the year progressed, SLF operational commitments increased, not only in frequency, but also in days ashore. During the first four months of 1967, the average number of days of monthly combat commitment for a SLF was only 12.* SLF Alpha's Operation Beaver Cage landing in April signaled a drastic increase in operational tempo. The May combat-day average jumped to 16 and one-half days per BLT, while June operations resulted in a new high of 22 days for SLF Alpha and 24 for SLF Bravo.

The remainder of the year reflected a much heavier reliance on the SLFs. Average commitments remained above the 20-days-per-month figure. Not only did the number of combat days increase, but the number of individual operations involving the SLFs more than doubled.

The reasons for the increase in tempo were not related to a single cause. The forthcoming Vietnamese National elections, continuing Communist unit moves in northern I Corps, and offensive sweeps to protect Marine fire support bases were only some of the factors which demanded SLF participation.

*SLF Bravo provided the basis for this computation because of SLF Alpha's late entry into RVN, in April 1967. SLF Bravo's combat days by month in early 1967 were: January, 10; February, 13; March, 15; and April, 10.

Even though many of the SLF operations were inconclusive, their harried staffs deserve tribute. In spite of the stepped-up operational tempo of 1967, the SLF planners kept abreast of the often confusing, and always demanding, I Corps tactical situation.

Bear Bite/Colgate/Choctaw/Maryland

2 - 5 June, 7 - 11 June,

12 - 23 June, 23 - 27 June 1967

Bear Bite, a conventional LVT and helicopter assault, was the first of SLF Alpha's June operations. It targeted the Viet Cong operating along the coast 40 kilometers southeast of the DMZ in the "The Street Without Joy" region. Starting at 0730 on 2 June, BLT 1/3 spent the next 72 hours probing and destroying unoccupied enemy positions. Enemy snipers and a troublesome Marine tank stuck in a paddy were the only hindrances to the operation. There were no SLF casualties, but the Marines killed only two of the enemy and picked up nine suspects. On 5 June the BLT returned to the 4th Marines' perimeter by helicopter.

Two days later, the battalion moved out again on the uneventful Operation Colgate. During the intervening day the new SLF Alpha commander, Colonel John A. Conway, assumed command. The subsequent Operation Choctaw, southwest of the Bear Bite AOA, involved 11 days of tedious sweeps west of Route 1 along the Thac Ma River. About as productive as Bear Bite, Choctaw netted only 15 more detainees and nine enemy killed. Nineteen Marines suffered wounds. At 1300 on 23 June the last elements of the battalion returned from the field to the 4th Marines' Camp Evans, 23 kilometers northwest of Hue.

When it started Operation Maryland on 25 June, BLT 1/3 moved by helicopters into the same general area where it had been for Colgate. The battalion's zone of action included the southwestern edge of the grave-covered Maryland area. Elements of a VC battalion operated in the region. The Marine battalion did not find them, but ARVN units advancing from the north encountered what probably were two VC companies. The ARVN units killed 114 Communists. In its own zone, the BLT killed seven Communists, took 35 prisoners, and salvaged almost nine tons of rice at the cost of three Marines wounded. By mid-morning on the 27th, the BLT departed the area in helicopters as Maryland ended after four weeks of probing graves and tunnels. On 28 June,

HMM-362, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nick J. Kapetan, relieved HMM-263 as the SLF Alpha helicopter squadron, and the next day the BLT reembarked.¹¹

June was a trying time for SLF Alpha. Four separate operations, none of which achieved significant results, could only be called "good experience." For the Marines of the SLF, the loss of three men and the wounding of 51 others served as a terse reminder of the price of experience. The SLF Alpha BLT now had six operations to its credit, and, since its first landing on 28 April, it had killed 307 Communists.

Beacon Torch/Calhoun

18 June - 2 July, 25 June - 2 July 1967

Operation Beacon Torch placed SLF Bravo south of Da Nang in the coastal region near the Quang Nam and Quang Tin provincial border. A conventional search and destroy operation, Beacon Torch covered an enemy-controlled area east of the Troung Giang River and southeast of the city of Hoi An.

A companion operation, Calhoun, targeted against the "Pagoda Valley" west of the Beacon Torch AOA, started on 25 June. The area received this name because of the many small pagodas on the valley floor. III MAF suspected "Pagoda Valley" of being a Communist forward logistic base. In essence, BLT 2/3 phased into Calhoun and, when Calhoun ended, it withdrew as originally planned in Beacon Torch.

Beacon Torch started at 0630 on 18 June as assault elements of Company F, followed by Command Group Alpha landed in what the helicopter pilots thought was LZ Cardinal. Actually, the heliborne troops landed 2,000 meters south of Cardinal. Company H landed at what the pilots believed was LZ Wren. It, too, landed in the wrong place and 2,000 meters south of its planned starting position.

While the first heliborne companies untangled their LZ problems, Company G landed on Red Beach, followed by the 2d Platoon (Reinforced), Company A, 3d Tank Battalion. Once the squadron resolved the LZ location problems, it lifted Company E into the correct LZ Cardinal.

Company H made the first contact at 0930. Light encounters continued throughout the day until 1540 when Company H engaged about 100 enemy troops. In the ensuing firefight, 43 of Company H's Marines succumbed to nonbattle causes; most were heat casualties. The enemy killed five Marines and wounded 14 while the Communists left 23 bodies

behind. The enemy disengaged at sunset.

The BLT moved out again on the 19th. Small actions flared up throughout the day and the advancing Marines began discovering hidden enemy food stocks.

After another quiet night, the BLT renewed sweep operations at 0845 on the 20th when Company E crossed the Troung Giang River. That afternoon, Company H had great difficulty fording the Troung Giang, but by late afternoon the battalion began moving westward again. Scattered contact continued west of the river for the next three days. The highlight of this period was Company E's discovery of three tons of rice and two tons of potatoes early on the morning of the 24th. At 0600, 25 June, Operation Beacon Torch phased into Operation Calhoun.

By 1300, 25 June Company E had discovered another 1,000 pounds rice and at 1600 Company G uncovered a two-ton cache. The rice hunt continued and on the 26th the Marines bagged and helilifted another 7,600 pounds to the ARVN-controlled town of Dien Ban, nine kilometers west of Hoi An. The largest single find of the operation was a five-ton cache discovered by Company F on the morning of the 27th. Complementing this discovery, Company G, assisted by ARVN troops, rounded up and evacuated 84 stray cattle.

Minor skirmishes and the detention of scattered suspects continued until Calhoun ended at 1200, 1 July. Reverting to the Beacon Torch plan, the BLT began its retraction. As the last units returned to their respective ships, Beacon Torch ended at 1300, 2 July.

Beacon Torch/Calhoun hurt the Communists in central I Corps. The BLT captured more than 40 tons of rice and other food stocks, over 31 of which they evacuated for ARVN use. The rest they destroyed in place. The BLT's casualty ratio was favorable. Eighty-six enemy died in contrast to only 13 SLF Marines. The BLT suffered 123 nonbattle casualties.

Beacon Torch/Calhoun, however, had no lasting impact, as emphasized by the fact that the departing Marines sighted enemy troops near the beach area during the retraction. The Communists could not afford to lose control of the population and immediately reoccupied the area to repair the damage caused by the operation.

SLF Alpha in Bear Claw/Buffalo/Hickory II

3 - 16 July 1967

The first two days of July, SLF Alpha on board the

ships of TG 76.4, prepared for Operation Bear Claw, a proposed landing in eastern Quang Tri Province. The SLF cancelled Bear Claw at 0100 on the 3rd when it received orders alerting BLT 1/3 for immediate employment in the 9th Marines TAOR at Con Thien. The 9th Marines was in trouble.

Lieutenant Colonel Richard J. "Spike" Schening's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines provided the security of the Con Thien perimeter. Two of the battalion's companies, A and B, on patrol a mile and a half northeast of Con Thien, had discovered a large NVA force, at least two battalions of the *90th NVA Regiment*. The initial contact took place as the Marine companies were trying to link up. In this awkward situation, the North Vietnamese managed to punish each company separately. Additionally, the Communists hit the Marines with massed artillery fire from north of the DMZ. Casualties mounted on both sides as the battle intensified. Company B lost most of its officers; the company commander, his FO, the FAC, and two platoon commanders were casualties.*

Responding to this serious situation, Lieutenant Colonel Schening committed Company C, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, reinforced by tanks. The action intensified as the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines arrived from Dong Ha to help regain control of the situation. At this stage, III MAF requested SLF Alpha. Similarly, SLF Bravo, also at sea, went on alert. The mission assigned to SLF Alpha during Operation Buffalo, the name given the continuing engagement with the *90th NVA Regiment*, was to tie in to the right flank of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines and sweep the battle area to recover 1st Battalion, 9th Marines' casualties.

The original 0100 warning order for SLF Alpha preceded a regimental briefing at 0700 which set L-hour at 1030. After much frenzied action on the part of the SLF, the launch took place on schedule. Throughout the late morning of 3 July, Lieutenant Colonel Kapetan's HMM-362 flew BLT 1/3 into the zone of action, supplemented by CH-46s from SLF Bravo's HMM-164.¹² Unfortunately, the lead assault elements of the BLT landed 2,500 meters south of the designated landing zone, a mile southeast of Con Thien. Readjusting the battalion cost valuable time. The first physical contact with the right flank of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines occurred at 1315. By the time all of BLT 1/3 had moved into the cor-

*See Chapter 5 for additional description of this action.

rect positions, however, the level of fighting had waned, and only Communist gunners remained active. The night of 3-4 July was relatively quiet, as was the next day. The 5th opened with an early morning enemy mortar attack against Companies A and C. Exchanges of artillery and mortar fire punctuated most of the day. The battalion continued its sweep operation. On the 6th, enemy rockets knocked out a Marine tank. The fighting around the disabled tank became so savage that the BLT did not reach the burnt-out hulk until 1000 on the 7th of July. The Marines recovered the bodies of the crew early the next morning.

At 1330, 8 July, the BLT received orders to make an immediate withdrawal. This was a challenging operation even under ideal circumstances. Wickwire's battalion faced a dangerous situation. There were five complications: it was daylight; the battalion was in contact; the withdrawal would occur over 600 meters of open ground; two of the attached tanks were crippled; and the battalion had just received resupplies and had no organic transport to move the vital, though cumbersome, material. A sixth factor added to the BLT's problems. Just as the withdrawal began, the Communists opened up with small arms, mortars, and artillery. In spite of these difficulties, the battalion carried out this complex maneuver with only light casualties.

The next four days of Buffalo involved patrolling the Con Thien perimeter. Buffalo ended on the morning of 14 July. The Marines of BLT 1/3 had recovered the bodies of 11 fellow Marines from the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, but their efforts were costly; the BLT's price was eight killed and 179 wounded. Operation Buffalo produced a total of 424 verified North Vietnamese dead for the BLT.

While Buffalo neared its terminal phase, COMUSMACV directed that a followup sweep be conducted of the area south of the DMZ and east of Con Thien. In response, III MAF initiated Operation Hickory II. The plan called for SLF Alpha's BLT 1/3 to move out from its final Buffalo positions with the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines on the BLT's right. The combined force would sweep southward in a search and destroy operation. Three other battalions were to block north and south of the operational area. All Hickory II battalions came under the operational control of the 9th Marines, with the exception of SLF Bravo which served the 3d Marines as a blocking force on the western edge of the sweep zone.

The evening of the first day of Hickory II, BLT 1/3

received orders to move to a phase line approximately 15,000 meters south of its position by 1700 the next day. As a consequence, though the deployed battalion formations remained prepared to engage the enemy, the required speed of advance prevented the battalion from making a detailed search of its zone of action. During Hickory II, BLT 1/3 experienced no enemy contact, and the net result was the capture of 17 suspects. There were no friendly casualties. The operation ended at 1600 on 16 July and the next day SLF Alpha returned to the TG 79.4 ships.

SLF Bravo in Beaver Track/Buffalo/Hickory II

4 - 16 July 1967

When SLF Alpha joined Buffalo on 3 July, SLF Bravo went on standby, and it entered the Buffalo area on 4 July on Operation Beaver Track. At 0640, Major Wendell O. Beard,* the BLT 2/3 commander, and Company H loaded in Lieutenant Colonel Rodney D. McKittrick's Ch-46s and flew off the USS *Tripoli* (LPH 10); destination: Cam Lo. McKittrick's HMM-164 ferried the rest of the battalion to an assembly area north of Cam Lo where the BLT prepared for employment as directed by the 3d Marine Division. At 1300, BLT 2/3, under operational control of its parent regiment, gained the 1st Platoon of Company A, 3d Tank Battalion. The battalion spent the afternoon moving into position in preparation for impending search and destroy operations.

The Beaver Track operation order directed the battalion to move out at 0700 on 5 July and attack northward on a four-kilometer front to a point just south of the southern limit of the DMZ. There, the battalion was to turn and move roughly three kilometers west. During Phase II, a return sweep, the battalion was to maneuver south to the Cam Lo River from its DMZ position, following an axis parallel to but west of the Phase I axis of advance. Friendly units had occupied the area as recently as two days before the start of Beaver Track, but intelligence sources reported that elements of the 29th NVA Regiment were making a reconnaissance of the region.

At 0700, 5 July, Major Beard's troops moved out. As in many similar operations, nothing happened at

*Major Beard's nickname was "Moose," a reference to his size. LtGen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft ms, n.d. (1981) (Comment files, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)



Courtesy of Mrs. Wendell O. Beard

Company H, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines boards CH-46A helicopters from HMM-164 for a flight from the USS Tripoli to Cam Lo on 4 July as SLF Bravo begins Operation Beaver Track, a subsidiary of the 3d Marine Division's Operation Buffalo south of the DMZ.

first. The Marines discovered and demolished abandoned bunkers as the day progressed. By midafternoon, Company E was enduring desultory sniper fire, but no contact developed. That night remained quiet.

The enemy made the first move at 0535 on 6 July with a probe of Company E's perimeter. The Marines met the attack with skillful, coordinated machine gun and artillery fire. The Communists broke off the engagement, leaving 14 bodies behind plus abandoned weapons and equipment. Shortly after the beginning of the fight along the Company E perimeter, 40 NVA mortar rounds hit the BLT command group and Company G, located about four kilometers south of the DMZ. Return fires temporarily silenced the Communist gunners, but at 0800 a Company H patrol less than three kilometers to the northeast also came under mortar fire. Supporting tanks and artillery again silenced the enemy, but not before RPG rounds hit two of the supporting Marine tanks.

At 0930, the enemy struck a Company F patrol with a command-detonated claymore-type mine, and half an hour later, Company G, operating east of Company F, also encountered enemy claymores. A brief flurry of action occurred when the tank pla-

toon commander, 2d Lieutenant Edward P. B. O'Neil, spotted NVA troops in the vicinity of the destroyed town of Nha An Hoa. The tankers' 90mm guns and heavy machine guns accounted for 16 of them. The remainder of the 6th of July reverted to duels between Communist mortars and U. S. artillery.

As the sweep continued on the 7th, the SLF Bravo Marines confronted increasing numbers of enemy bunkers, all deserted, but many showing signs of recent use. The search for the elusive 29th NVA Regiment continued.

July 8th was a day filled with the curious whims of combat. At 0800 a patrol from Company H found a completely stripped UH-34D surrounded with assorted NVA equipment. While these Marines examined their disquieting prize, another Company H patrol was busily engaged destroying captured enemy equipment. Someone or something triggered an unknown explosive device which killed eight Marines. A Company G patrol tripped a "Bouncing Betty"* at 1030; two more Marines died and another received wounds. The tempo of action picked up an

*A "Bouncing Betty" mine, projected upward by a small charge, explodes its main charge at waist level.



Courtesy of Mrs. Wendell O. Beard

A division of CH-46A helicopters from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 164 carries elements of BLT 2/3 to shore from the USS Tripoli during Operation Beaver Track.

hour and a half later when Company G engaged in a sharp action in one of the many Communist bunker complexes. Air and artillery smashed the enemy position. The Company G Marines found 35 NVA bodies in the wreckage after the bombardment.

The fortunes of war smiled on the BLT that afternoon. As the battalion patrol actions continued, Company F executed a classic example of fire and maneuver. One squad, immobilized by enemy automatic weapons fire coming from a well-developed position, became a pivot for the rest of the company. The Marines fixed the Communists in their dug-in positions and called in supporting arms. The Marines counted 73 NVA bodies in the followup sweep and captured three 82mm mortars.

During the following days, the BLT Marines discovered and destroyed more bunkers, fighting positions, and shelters, but the Communists chose not to fight. Meanwhile, at sea on board the USS *Tripoli*, Lieutenant Colonel McKittrick's HMM-164 turned over its SLF assignment on 12 July to HMM-265, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William R. Beeler.

To capitalize on the results of Operation Buffalo, which had paralleled Beaver Track, ComUSMACV ordered that another sweep be made south of the Ben Hai River to destroy enemy weapons positions in the southern half of the DMZ. Known as Operation Hickory II, the plan was similar in concept to the 13-battalion Hickory I sweep conducted in the same area during May. Hickory II was smaller in scale; it employed seven maneuver battalions and four block-

ing battalions.** Since BLT 2/3 was already located northwest of Cam Lo, it became a blocking battalion on the western edge of the zone of action.

SLF Bravo received the Hickory II operation order on the morning of 13 July. At 0700 the next morning the battalion moved out, securing designated objectives en route to its final blocking position. At 1000, the battalion commander, Major Beard, became a casualty and his executive officer, Major John H. Broujos, took over the battalion. By 1230 the battalion reached the blocking positions and searched the surrounding terrain. During BLT 2/3's brief two-day involvement in Hickory II, Communist antipersonnel devices were the most serious threat. Grenades rigged as booby traps killed two Marines and wounded 13. Other than mortar fire, the 2d Battalion had no contact with the enemy during Hickory II.

The BLT reconstituted at 0600 on 16 July as Hickory II ended. Reembarkation began immediately. SLF Bravo's participation in the Beaver Track/ Buffalo/Hickory II operations produced an impressive, verified kill ratio. Sixteen SLF Bravo Marines gave their lives, while the battalion killed 148 NVA soldiers.

Bear Chain/Fremont

20 - 26 July 1967

At sea on 17 July 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Emil W. Herich assumed command of BLT 2/3, relieving

**See Chapter 6 for the account of other III MAF units' participation in Hickory II.

Major Broujos, who reverted to battalion executive officer. Lieutenant Colonel Herich had only a brief "shakedown;" SLF Bravo landed again on the 20th. The operation, Bear Chain, targeted the coastal region between Quang Tri City and the city of Hue. The mission was to attack the exposed seaward flank of the *806th VC Battalion* and to destroy it, or at least drive it westward toward ARVN forces engaged in Operation Lam Son 87.

Southwest of the Bear Chain operational area, the 4th Marines was conducting a search and destroy operation named Fremont. As Bear Chain progressed, it phased into Fremont. At 1400 on 21 July, BLT 2/3 switched to the operational control of the 4th Marines for the rest of the operation.

Bear Chain/Fremont produced the desired results. The enemy reacted as the Bear Chain planners had hoped. Communist units moved west toward Route 1, directly into the Lam Son 87 ARVN forces. In the following battle the South Vietnamese troops distinguished themselves. They held their positions with determination and 252 Viet Cong died. A secondary gain of Bear Chain/Fremont was the capture of an extremely large rice stock.

Late the afternoon of 24 July, BLT 2/3 Marines, searching the village of Don Que, less than a kilometer east of Route 555, captured a VC suspect, the only male found in Don Que. Company F received sniper fire from the village just before they captured the suspect. A search of the town turned up enormous quantities of rice. Villagers stated that the Viet Cong had told them to harvest their rice and be ready for the VC rice collectors who would arrive "within a few days." The final tally of rice was over 37 tons. The Marines bagged it and flew it out in HMM-265's helicopters.

The BLT Marines had helped maul the *806th VC Battalion* and confiscated its rice supply. Its purposes achieved, the Bear Chain portion of the operation ended on 26 July and SLF Bravo went back to sea. Nine Marines and two corpsmen died on the operation.

Beacon Guide

21 - 30 July 1967

SLF Alpha's BLT 1/3 held a change of command at sea on 16 July, the day after it returned from Hickory II. Lieutenant Colonel Alfred I. Thomas took over from Lieutenant Colonel Wickwire. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas' first operation was Beacon Guide. Starting with a helicopter and surface



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189132
LtCol Alfred I. Thomas, the new commander of BLT 1/3, checks a fire plan diagram drawn on the back of a cardboard C-rations case by one of his staff officers during Operation Beacon Guide below the DMZ.

assault, Beacon Guide was a search and destroy operation in the coastal region 18 miles southeast of Hue. The BLT's sweep was part of III MAF's continuing plan to maintain pressure on Viet Cong units in coastal I Corps. Beacon Guide was uneventful from its start on 21 July. Tangible results were negligible, and SLF Alpha reembarked on the afternoon of 30 July.

Kangaroo Kick/Fremont

1 - 3 August, 3 - 21 August 1967

August was a month of aggravating frustration for SLF Bravo and its new commander Colonel James G. Dionisopoulos.* Twenty-one operational days resulted in the death of only three enemy, while the SLF lost three killed and 44 wounded.

Operation Kangaroo Kick, 1-3 August, was another search and destroy sweep over the now familiar sand dunes, graves, and rice paddies of the Viet Cong sanctuary region along the O Lau River,

*Colonel Dionisopoulos replaced Colonel Wortman as the SLF Bravo commander as of 1 August. Colonel Wortman had served as the SLF commander since 1 September 1966.

midway between Hue and Quang Tri. They had operated there on Operation Beacon Star in April-May and again in July on Bear Chain. Kangaroo Kick, almost a carbon copy of the two previous operations along the O Lau, precipitated the standard VC reaction; they fled, only to return after the BLT departed.

At 0800, 3 August, BLT 2/3 shifted to the 4th Marines' operational control and rejoined Operation Fremont. Operation Fremont assumed almost marathon proportions; it did not end until 31 October. The BLT's mission during its second tour under the 4th Marines required relieving the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines of its many and complicated duties, including providing security for Camp Evans, Hill 51, and Hill 674; interdicting enemy lines of communications in the nearby Co Bi-Thanh Tan Valley; detaching one rifle company to the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines for operational use by that battalion; providing security for road sweeps between the 4th Marines' perimeter and Route 1; providing one company for "Sparrow Hawk" rapid reaction missions; and being prepared to provide one company for "rough rider" truck convoys between Phu Bai and Dong Ha.

Respite from the Camp Evans routine came on 16 August. The BLT, actually only Company F and Command Group Alpha reinforced by Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, conducted a daylong sweep. The operation took place in the My Chanh area north of the O Lau River, the scene of recently completed Operation Kangaroo Kick. The sweep was in conjunction with ARVN units operation in the same area.

BLT 2/3 lost one Marine killed and six wounded during the day's sweep. Unfortunately, a supporting tank returning to the 4th Marines command post ran over a mine, believed to have been made from a dud 500-pound bomb. The blast killed four Marines and wounded five. Later that afternoon a tank retriever hit another mine six kilometers west of the disabled tank. The explosion wounded another six Marines. Tank problems continued; while trying to destroy the tank lost on the 16th, an engineer tripped still another exploding device; one more Marine died. The engineers finally destroyed the tank by 1530.*

*The term exploding device refers to all enemy jury-rigged mines. The devices ranged from trip-wired grenades to pressure-detonated, re-fused dud bombs.

Another variation of the multiple duties shared by the BLT occurred on 18 August. Company F moved to Quang Tri to occupy the airfield there and to provide a show of force. At 0930 19 August, Lieutenant Colonel Herich received authorization to start reembarkation. The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines relieved BLT 2/3 of its Camp Evans duties and the SLF gladly went back to sea. III MAF released BLT 2/3 to CTG 79.5 at 1600 22 August.

The BLT commander, Lieutenant Colonel Herich, commenting on Kangaroo Kick and the 16 August Fremont sweep, expressed the growing frustration with operations along the O Lau:

Operation Kangaroo Kick was . . . in an area generally controlled by the enemy. Although this operation proved successful in completing the assigned mission, as in the past, the entire area . . . was reoccupied by the enemy as evidenced by his presence during the S&D [search and destroy] operation conducted by this BLT on 16 August 1967 on Operation Fremont.¹³

Beacon Gate/Cochise

7-11 August 1967, 11-27 August 1967

At 0700 on 7 August, SLF Alpha started Operation Beacon Gate by landing southeast of Hoi An along the coastal boundary of Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces. Intelligence reports fixed elements of the *V25 Local Force Battalion* and other

A radioman from BLT 1/3 pauses in Operation Beacon Gate to look over a cow and a calf in a shed during a routine search of a Vietnamese village.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A650000



smaller VC units in the battalion's operational area. During the five-day southerly sweep, the Marines endured continuous sniper fire. The infantrymen made extensive use of armed UH-1E helicopters to suppress the snipers. Operation Beacon Gate ended on 11 August at 0800; the Marines killed only 12 enemy soldiers.

The same day, SLF Alpha shifted to the operational control of Task Force X-Ray of the 1st Marine Division for the start of Operation Cochise. BLT 1/3 made a heliborne assault from the Beacon Gate AOA into a landing zone approximately seven miles east of Que Son. There the battalion occupied blocking positions to support elements of the 5th Marines which were attacking to the east.

On 16 August, BLT 1/3 started search and destroy operations, also in an easterly direction, in conjunction with the 5th Marines. The BLT made heavy contact with an enemy force late on the 16th, but the enemy broke off the engagement during the night. The rest of the first phase of Cochise consisted of sweep operations, still to the east, with contact limited to sniper fire.

Phase II of Cochise began on 19 August. BLT 1/3 transferred to the operational control of the 5th Marines. Enemy contact, as in Phase I, was negligible, but the Marines uncovered several rice caches and an ammunition dump. Phase III opened on 25 August. The BLT continued search and destroy operations northeast from Hiep Duc to Que Son. It encountered only snipers. When the battalion arrived at Que Son on 27 August Cochise ended. The next day the BLT moved by helicopters to Chu Lai where it began reembarkation. Beacon Gate/Cochise produced good results for SLF Alpha; the BLT claimed 59 VC/NVA killed and 65 detained at a cost of nine Marines dead and 51 wounded.

Belt Drive/Liberty

27 August - 5 September, 1 - 4 September 1967

Major Beard returned from hospitalization and reassumed command of BLT 2/3 on 23 August, replacing Lieutenant Colonel Herich. The same day, Major Gregory A. Corliss and his CH-46A squadron, HMM-262, landed on board the USS *Tripoli* to relieve the departing SLF helicopter squadron, HMM-265. Four days later, SLF Bravo was in action again. At 0545, 27 August, HMM-262 lifted the first elements of Company H from the *Tripoli* back to the familiar terrain of eastern Quang Tri Province.

The Belt Drive operation's objective area was the

densely vegetated high ground on both sides of the small Nhung River, less than nine kilometers south of Quang Tri City. The operation involved a spoiling attack against Communist units that could have interfered with the voting in Quang Tri City during the impending national elections. Small unit actions flared up during the next five days as the battalion encountered minor enemy formations, but no contact involved any determined enemy resistance.

The battalion commander, Major Beard, reported two interesting enemy reactions:

The use of demolitions by the enemy when attacking a defensive position . . . is a tactic with which the battalion had not yet been confronted. It is believed that it was definitely designed to simulate mortar fire in order to keep the defenders down deep in their positions. The exploding charges were almost immediately followed by three or four probers armed with automatic weapons who sought to penetrate the perimeter.

During this operation . . . the enemy failed to . . . leave a clean battlefield after an engagement. This situation is by all means contrary to their principle of battle and the first time in which the BLT was able to capture weapons and equipment without an immediate physical pursuit. Enemy KIAs, one WIA, and weapons . . . lay undisturbed overnight in killing zones and were easily recovered at first light on the morning following the encounter. On one occasion, two enemy KIAs and one weapon were recovered almost two days later by a patrol which swept an area in which an air strike had been run. These instances are reflections of the combat discipline and training of the enemy which the BLT engaged in its operating area.¹⁴

At 0800 1 September, the BLT once more shifted to the 4th Marines' operational control, this time to participate in Operation Liberty while holding Belt Drive in abeyance. The Liberty operation order assigned BLT 2/3 to sweep operations in the Hai Lang District of Quang Tri Province. The battalion was to assist the 4th Marines in blocking enemy approaches to Route 1, as well as Quang Tri City. Liberty simply was a minor reorientation of Belt Drive, with the provision of a command structure change.

At midnight 4 September, SLF participation in Liberty ended and Belt Drive resumed immediately. The last operational day, 5 September, involved moving the battalion and its supporting units out of the TAOR. By 2000, SLF Bravo had completed reembarkation.

Four dead Marines and 59 wounded represented the price of Belt Drive and Liberty, but 19 Communists died. The BLT Marines captured one dazed, wounded NVA soldier on the morning of 1 September. Unfortunately the BLT did not fully ex-

ploit his knowledge and mistakenly evacuated him to Camp Evans rather than to the *Tripoli*. What he knew of enemy locations might have changed the outcome of Belt Drive.

Trouble of a different nature developed during Belt Drive, trouble which caused serious problems not only for the SLFs, but for all Marine activities in I Corps. On 31 August, during a medical evacuation, the lead helicopter, a CH-46A, disintegrated in flight while en route to the *Tripoli*. The crew and their passenger died. The next day, another CH-46A experienced a similar failure at Marble Mountain Air Facility. These two similar accidents forced III MAF to restrict CH-46A missions to emergency categories. For all practical purposes, they were "down." In a matter of hours, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing lost 50 percent of its helicopter capability, and the LPHs became little more than troop transports.

A Change In Scenario — The 46s are Grounded

The grounding of the CH-46As was a severe blow to the SLFs. SLF Bravo's CH-46A Squadron, HMM-262, was "down." SLF Alpha fared better, since HMM-362 was a UH-34D squadron. However, MAG-16 recalled HMM-362, though another UH-34D squadron, HMM-163, replaced it only 4 days later. The USS *Tripoli*, the amphibious assault ship carrying SLF Bravo's helicopters, temporarily withdrew from ARG duties to ferry faulty helicopters to Okinawa for modification. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing rescheduled all planned squadron rotations. Emergency requests prompted shipment of 10 CH-53s and 23 more UH-34Ds from west coast U. S. ports, but they would not arrive until October. On 31 August 1967, III MAF had 150 available transport helicopters, and the SLF could muster 39 more. The next day, as the result of the grounding order, III MAF counted only 23 CH-53s and 73 UH-34Ds, while SLF Alpha could provide another 17 UH-34s. Five squadrons of CH-46As could operate under extreme emergency conditions.

Initially, SLF operations suffered from the helicopter strength reduction. Both landing forces, by necessity, operated as conventional ground units until resolution of helicopter allocations. SLF Bravo spent the rest of the year relying upon interim support from HMM-463's CH-53s operating from Marble Mountain. A detachment from HMM-262 remained on board the *Tripoli* to provide emergency CH-46A support for SLF Bravo. This detachment, known as the "Poor Devils," remained with SLF

Bravo until the end of the year, though the rest of the squadron left in mid-October.

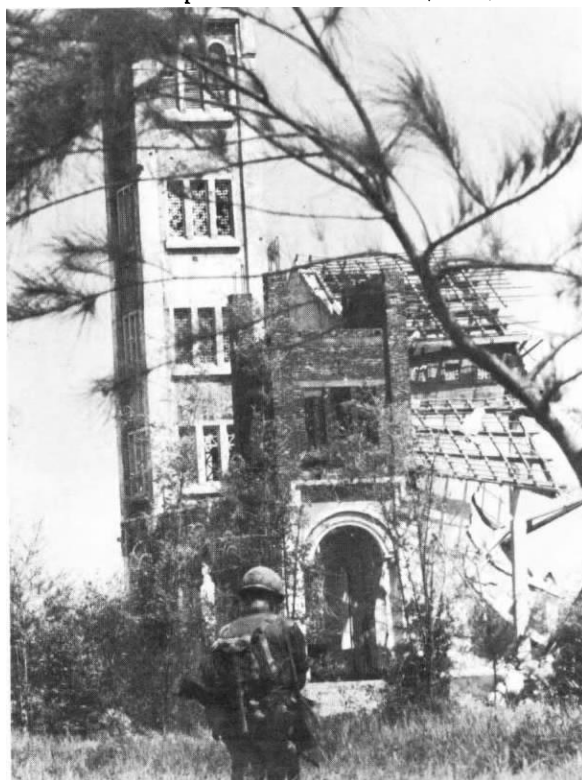
Necessarily, SLF operations reflected the reduced flexibility and lift capability. To provide better support for a landing force ashore, a new trend developed. The SLF BLTs would land, conduct a preliminary operation, and then shift to the operational control of a Marine regiment operating in the same area. Though this represented a reasonable solution under the circumstances, during the fall of 1967 SLF BLTs found themselves assigned to missions ranging from fortification construction to road security, a far cry from the stoutly defended SLF tenets of early 1967.

Beacon Point/Fremont/Ballistic Charge/Shelbyville 1 - 9 September 1967, 16 - 28 September 1967

On 1 September SLF Alpha landed in Thua Thien Province on Operation Beacon Point for a southerly sweep of the by-now all too familiar "Street Without Joy." Snipers and surprise firing devices were the only resistance encountered. At 1800 on 4 September, Lieutenant Colonel Kapetan's HMM-362 detached from the SLF and reverted to MAG-16 control. For-

A ruined church dominates the skyline as infantrymen of Company D, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines move through a area of the coastal plain known to both the French and the Americans as the "Street Without Joy" in the quiet Operation Beacon Point.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189242



unately, the lack of enemy activity did not subject the BLT to the full impact of the loss of its assigned helicopters. The most tangible result of Beacon Point was the evacuation or destruction of more than 35 tons of Viet Cong rice. After the BLT marched to an assembly area near Camp Evans on 5 September, Operation Beacon Point concluded at 0600 on the 6th.

Later that morning BLT 1/3 phased into Operation Fremont, again under the operational control of the 4th Marines. Elements of the battalion trucked to their blocking and screening positions south of Quang Tri. As during Beacon Point, snipers were the only active enemy troops.

A solution to SLF Alpha's helicopter needs occurred on 8 September. Lieutenant Colonel Walter C. Kelly's HMM-163, UH-34D equipped, reported on board the USS *Okinawa* just in time to prepare for the following day's extraction. SLF Alpha dropped out of Fremont on 9 September.

One week later, on the 16th, BLT 1/3 landed again. Operation Ballistic Charge involved a simultaneous heliborne and surface assault of an objective area four miles southeast of Dai Loc. The operation consisted of a rapid sweep to the north followed by a detailed search and destroy sweep to the south along the track of the first northward move. Again, opposition consisted of Communist snipers, but during Ballistic Charge the battalion did detain 55 suspects and three confirmed prisoners.

When Ballistic Charge ended on the 22nd, BLT 1/3 shifted to the operational control of the 1st Marines for Operation Shelbyville. BLT 1/3's involvement started with a heliborne assault from the Ballistic Charge AOA to a landing zone four miles southeast of Dai Loc, close to the original Ballistic Charge objective area. While the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines occupied blocking positions to the east, and the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines blocked to the south, Lieutenant Colonel Alfred I. Thomas' BLT 1/3 swept the operational area in an easterly direction. Sniper fire was the only enemy response.

On 25 September, the BLT reversed its axis of advance and, after a night movement, crossed the railroad tracks paralleling Route 1 on the morning of the 26th. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines was on the BLT's left during the advance. Late that afternoon, Company B had a brief firefight with an enemy company, but friendly artillery fire put a quick end to the engagement for SLF Bravo. Subsequent action remained limited to sniper fire. On the 28th the BLT

marched out of the operating area to the Liberty Bridge, and then moved by trucks to Da Nang where it reembarked. CTG 79.4 assumed operational control of SLF Alpha at 1715, 28 September.

September was not a spectacular month for SLF Alpha. Twenty-two operational days resulted in 26 Communists killed, 3 prisoners, and 108 detainees. To achieve this, eight Marines gave their lives and another 97 sustained wounds.

Fortress Sentry/Kingfisher

17 - 25 September 1967,

27 September - 15 October 1967

On 16 July 1967, the 9th Marines initiated Operation Kingfisher near Con Thien. This lengthy operation employed a force varying from three to six battalions. As Kingfisher progressed, a new enemy threat developed to the east in the I Corps coastal region. Identified NVA and VC units were operating between the coast and Dong Ha on the northern side of the Cua Viet River. To neutralize these Communist formations, III MAF planned to land SLF Bravo in this by-now familiar operational area for Operation Fortress Sentry. Previously, Operations Beacon Hill and Beau Charger swept the same locale.

A significant operational change occurred following the untimely grounding of the CH-46s; SLF Bravo had to land by surface means. III MAF directed the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion to supplement the ARG landing craft.

Poor visibility, rough seas, and generally bad weather hampered BLT 2/3's 17 September landing on the dunes bordering the "Street Without Joy." As usual, there was no resistance on the beach and only light contact as the battalion took its initial objectives. As the battalion moved north-northeast toward the DMZ, the 1st ARVN Division screened its left flank. Land mines damaged some amphibian tractors as the BLT moved inland, but contact remained light.

On 23 September about 100 NVA soldiers attacked the battalion, but it broke up the probe with the assistance of helicopter gunships. On the morning of the 24th, the Marines engaged another enemy force near the village of An My, three miles east of Gio Linh. Prisoners revealed that the Communists had expected an attack from the south or southwest and the appearance of the BLT east of their position had been a complete surprise.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189273

A Navy landing craft, utility (LCU) brings elements of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines from the USS Tripoli to the beach on 17 September for Operation Fortress Sentry, the day before the battalion phased into the 3d Marine Division's Operation Kingfisher.

The next morning at 0800 Fortress Sentry terminated and BLT 2/3 phased into Operation Kingfisher to the west.* SLF participation involved extensive sweep operations which resulted in only minor contact. On 10 October Lieutenant Colonel Henry Englisch relieved Major Beard as the BLT Commander. SLF Bravo phased out of Kingfisher on 15 October.

Bastion Hill/Medina/Liberty II/Fremont

10 - 19 October 1967, 19 - 23 October 1967

SLF Alpha, on board the ships of TG 79.4, engaged in an extensive rehabilitation effort, while SLF Bravo participated in Operation Kingfisher during the first nine days of October.

On 10 October, the 1st Marines, having displaced from Da Nang to Quang Tri Province, initiated Operation Medina in the rugged hills of the Hai Lang Forest south of Quang Tri City. Medina was part of a comprehensive plan to eliminate enemy base areas. The Hai Lang Forest contained the Communist's Base Area 101, and elements of the 5th and 6th NVA Regiments operated in and around the region.

SLF Alpha's mission in Medina was to serve as a blocking force for the 1st Marines on the eastern edge of the operational area. BLT 1/3 made its helicopter move to assigned blocking positions on the 10th under the operational code name Bastion Hill. The landing met no opposition. Except for one

sharp action between Company C and a company of North Vietnamese regulars early on the morning 11 October, the battalion's contact with the enemy during Medina involved scattered firefights, incoming mortar rounds, and many grenade mines and booby traps.

A major action related to Medina took place north of the SLF sector the day after the operation officially ended. There, the 6th NVA Regiment, moving eastward away from the SLF's former location, ran into the ARVN units participating in Operation Lam Son 138, an adjunct to Operation Medina. By the end of the day-long battle which followed, the ARVN reported 197 NVA troops killed.

Immediately after Medina, BLT 1/3 moved south to new blocking positions west of Route 1 and the railroad between Hai Lang and Phong Dien to participate in Operation Liberty II/Fremont. Upon joining Liberty II/Fremont, operational control of BLT 1/3 passed from the 1st Marines to the 4th Marines. This operation sought to prevent the Communists from disrupting the South Vietnamese National Assembly elections. BLT 1/3 activity during the next five days involved squad and fire team patrols and encounters with the enemy. Liberty/Fremont ended on 23 October, and 1/3 moved by trucks to Camp Evans to prepare for its next operation, Granite, which was only three days away. One of the most appreciated preparations was the issue of an extra poncho and poncho liner to the SLF Marines. The cold winter rains had come to I Corps.

Neither Medina nor Liberty II/Fremont produced

*Chapter 8 covers Kingfisher in detail.

any telling results, at least in the opinion of SLF Alpha. Two weeks in the field that accounted for only 9 confirmed enemy dead, 7 prisoners, and 11 suspects, while attrition gnawed at the battalion's rolls during both operations. The casualties totaled 10 Marines dead and 50 others wounded, 38 of whom required evacuation.

Formation Leader/Liberty II/Knox

17 - 18 October, 18 - 24 October,

24 October - 4 November 1967

Only two days after leaving Operation Kingfisher, Lieutenant Colonel English's BLT 2/3 began Operation Formation Leader in support of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines. Envisioned as an area control operation, Formation Leader focused on the stabilization of coastal Thua Thien Province east of Route 1, specifically Vin Loc and Phu Loc Districts. Because of the impending Vietnamese National Assembly elections, intelligence officers presumed that the Communists would concentrate disruptive efforts against these populated districts.

The Communists did not respond. BLT 2/3's greatest problems during Formation Leader were nontactical. Because of the grounding of the CH-46s, all troop lifts from the USS *Tripoli* relied upon CH-53s from Lieutenant Colonel Joseph L. Sadowski's HMMH-463, operating from Marble Mountain. The lifts were entirely satisfactory, but realining the BLT's serial assignment tables for the larger helicopters gave Major Douglas W. Lemon's battalion S-3 office a good prelanding workout. Additionally, high seas and bad weather slowed the landing of attached heavy vehicles at Hue. In fact, some remained on board for the duration of the operation.

There were no enemy contacts on the 17th and at 1000 on the 18th, BLT 2/3 shifted to the 3d Marine Division's operational control. Formation Leader terminated and a new operation, Liberty II, started, but SLF Bravo's mission and operational area remained the same. The enemy still did not respond. The most significant incident was the sighting and subsequent artillery attack on an enemy squad late on the 21st. Sadly, the next day five Marines on a trash-burning detail suffered wounds from the explosion of a grenade apparently dumped in the trash. Liberty II ended at 0800 on the 24th and Operation Knox started.

Shifted to the operational control of the 7th Marines, the BLT moved by truck to a new assembly

area 11 kilometers east of Phu Loc. There, it began sweep operations under the direction of the 7th Marines, and during the next 13 days the battalion experienced 12 enemy contacts, mostly mortar fire. The Marines killed two enemy soldiers, but Knox had a debilitating effect on BLT 2/3. Two Marines died in accidents and, of the 78 nonfatal casualties, only 15 were the result of enemy action. Fungus infections claimed 33 victims. Knox ended at 1000 on 4 November; however, bad weather prevented reembarkation. Instead all elements of the BLT moved to the Da Nang Force Logistic Command facility.

Granite/Kentucky II and III

26 October - 4 November, 6 - 16 November 1967

On 26 October, Operation Granite began for SLF Alpha with an early morning helicopterborne assault into the Hai Lang Forest. Granite was a two-battalion search and destroy operation in the region of Communist Base Area 114. The two assault battalions, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, and SLF Alpha's BLT 1/3, conducted Granite under the operational control of the 4th Marines.

The first day of Granite was uneventful for the Marines of BLT 1/3, but during the next nine days the enemy "continuously harassed the BLT . . . staying within a few hundred meters . . .," and "night probes were made with a consistency not normally experienced. . . ."¹⁵

By the afternoon of the 30th some of the BLT Marines began to believe that Granite was a jinxed operation; supporting arms mistakes were becoming costly. A friendly air strike, short of target, wounded two Marines on the morning of the 29th. At dusk a short 60mm mortar round wounded another Marine, and just after midnight a short artillery round wounded still another BLT Marine. Fortunately, this was the last Granite casualty inflicted by friendly forces.

BLT 1/3 never did find the enemy base area in the Hai Lang Forest, but it had no doubt of the presence of enemy troops there. When the battalion finished its sweep of the rugged terrain on 4 November, its journals revealed that it had called in 59 fixed-wing sorties and 652 artillery fire missions during the last 10 days. The battalion captured five AK-47s and killed 17 Communists. The tangled vegetation of the Hai Lang hid the rest of the story. All of the BLT returned to Camp Evans before dark on 4 November. Granite ended with three Marines dead and 24 wounded.

The SLF Alpha battalion did not stay at Camp Evans after Operation Granite. Just before noon on 6 November, the division shifted BLT 1/3 to the 9th Marines' operational control. The BLT spent the rest of the day moving west to Cam Lo where it joined Operation Kentucky as the 3d Division reserve. Kentucky began on 1 November, the day after Operation Kingfisher ended. The Kentucky area of responsibility, including Con Thien and Cam Lo, was nothing more than the eastern portion of the old Kingfisher TAOR. Kentucky was the assigned TAOR of the 9th Marines while Lancaster, to the west, was the 3d Marines' responsibility.

BLT 1/3 celebrated the 192nd birthday of the Marine Corps with an early morning move from Cam Lo north to attack positions less than two kilometers east of Con Thien. With the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines—comprised of only two companies and a command group—on its right, BLT 1/3 jumped off on Phase II of Kentucky the next morning. The BLT's mission involved making a sweep from east to west around the northern face of the Con Thien base. The 9th Marines conceived the operation as a spoiling attack to disrupt suspected Communist concentrations around Con Thien.

The Kentucky planners were right. At 0830 on the 11th, Company D hit an enemy platoon from the east, the blind side of the well-dug-in and concealed Communist position. The Marines forced the surprised NVA to fight; seven died. That afternoon Company D hit another dug-in enemy unit. This one suffered a similar fate; six more NVA soldiers died. One survivor, a squad leader, told his captors that his battalion had been in the Con Thien area for about a month. Apparently, Kentucky, with excellent timing, upset Communist plans for Con Thien.

The SLF battalion's combat commitment to the opening phases of Kentucky ended the morning of 12 November. The battalion marched back to Position C-3, a base area in the strong point/obstacle system, and then moved on to Dong Ha by truck. BLT 1/3 remained at Dong Ha, again as 3d Marine Division reserve, from 12 November until released by the 9th Marines at 0900 on the 16th, at which time the BLT started reembarkation. SLF Alpha, however, would see Kentucky again.

While the BLT phased out of Kentucky, III MAF provided some relief for the loss of mobility caused by the grounding of CH-46s. On 15 November, Lieutenant Colonel Daniel M. Wilson's HMM-361

flew its UH-34Ds out to the USS *Iwo Jima* to become the new SLF Alpha helicopter squadron. The reliable 34's were a welcome addition, especially since circumstances forced the BLT to rely on other sources for helicopter support during all of Kentucky II and III.

Badger Hunt/Foster

13 - 29 November 1967

In Quang Nam Province, north of the concluded Beaver Cage area of operation, enemy contact during the fall of 1967 had been relatively light. The 1st Marine Division committed units of the 5th and 7th Marines to spoiling operations to prevent infiltration of the Da Nang rocket belt. In November SLF Bravo participated in Operation Badger Hunt as a continuation of the spoiling tactics. The division conceived Badger Hunt as an amphibious operation to support the 7th Marines' Operation Foster which two spectacular VC raids triggered. On 2 November and again on the 8th, the Viet Cong raided the district headquarters and refugee settlements at Hieu Duc and Dai Loc, approximately 15 miles south of Da Nang. The VC killed 22 civilians, wounded another 42, and destroyed or damaged 559 houses.

To rid the area of the Communist raiders, both operations focused on the river complex of Dai Loc District and the flat lands and foothills west of the Thu Bon River. SLF Bravo, under its new commander, Colonel Maynard W. Schmidt, and consisting of BLT 2/3, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Englisch, and a detachment of HMM-262, started Badger Hunt by landing at An Hoa. The 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Roger H. Barnard, began Operation Foster west of Dai Loc and north of the Thu Bon River.

There was little contact during either operation, with the exception of one company-sized engagement on the 29th. The Communists evaded both sweeps, heading for the hills to the west. The enemy suffered some casualties as reconnaissance teams and air observers called in air strikes and artillery fire on fleeing enemy groups. The final tally for Badger Hunt and Foster totaled 125 Communists killed and eight captured. Marines losses added up to 25 killed and 136 wounded. The most significant accomplishment of both operations, other than driving the enemy out of the area, was the destruction of most of the enemy's supporting installations in the region. The Marines destroyed over 6,000 bunkers, tunnels,

and shelters and captured 87 tons of rice. Badger Hunt ended on 29 November.

Fortress Ridge

21 - 24 December 1967

On 1 November 1967, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Max McQuown, learned it would be the new SLF Bravo BLT, in relief of the BLT 1/3. McQuown's battalion passed to the command of SLF Bravo on 1 December and the same day embarked for the Special Landing Force Camp at Subic Bay in the Philippine Islands for intensive training and equipment rehabilitation. On the 17th, the SLF sailed again, destination: I Corps.

Fortress Ridge involved seaborne and heliborne landings on the beach area of Gio Linh District, seven kilometers south of the DMZ. After seizing four separate objectives, each company was to conduct search and destroy operations in adjacent areas. Intelligence sources reported one battalion of the 803d NVA Regiment, an unidentified main force battalion, and the K400 Local Force Company near the beach. The operation started on the morning of 21 December as BLT 3/1's Company M, commanded by Captain Raymond A. Thomas, landed in LVTs on Red Beach. Half an hour later, Company L landed on the north bank of the Cua Viet River, almost five kilometers to the southwest. HMM-262 took Companies I and K into two zones in the sand dunes four kilometers inland from Company M.

Nothing happened during the morning, but at 1324 hours Captain Lawrence R. Moran's Company I received small arms and mortar fire on the south side of the village of Ha Loi Tay. A heavy firefight ensued between Company I and Communist forces. Information from Company I indicated that they had met a sizable, well-entrenched enemy force. Accordingly, the battalion mounted Company M on LVTs and moved it north on the beach side of the Gulf of Tonkin, where it could support Company I. When Company M arrived in the dune area north of Giem Ha Trung village, the Communists started shelling it with mortars. Rocket and artillery fire from Communists guns north of the Demilitarized Zone hit both companies. Darkness came early and Company I and the Communists broke contact. Company I established a defensive position to the west of Ha Loi Tay. Company M set up a perimeter defense in the area where it stopped that afternoon.¹⁶



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A190226
Rain-soaked Marines of the Special Landing Force board a Navy medium landing craft (LCM-6) for the return trip to their assigned ships after an operation.

Events of the 21st indicated that the Communists were in force behind the beach, north of the day's area of operation. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown requested permission from the SLF to conduct search and destroy operations 1,000 meters north of Objective 1 and 1,000 meters inland from the beach. The SLF approved the plan, and shortly after 0800 on the 22nd, Company M moved through the Communist positions that had opposed Company I. The latter company remained in position to support the advance of Company M.¹⁷ By 0900 Company M discovered the first positive result of Fortress Ridge: three NVA bodies. Both Companies I and M continued moving northward for the rest of the day, finding quantities of enemy arms and equipment in abandoned positions. Company K, north of Objective 3, had no contact. At dusk, Company L, four kilometers southwest of Companies I and M, came under small arms fire from across the Cua Viet, the last enemy action of the day. After a quiet night, the battalion resumed search and destroy sweeps on the 23rd. The day remained uneventful. Company I found the major portion of the day's harvest of duds and enemy ordnance.

Fortress Ridge concluded on the morning of the 24th. By 1100 all units were back on board ship for a contemplative Christmas Eve. In its first operation in its new role, SLF Bravo lost 10 shipmates and had another 27 wounded, but the Marines, however, had



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371075

Company I, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines continues to move northward with the rest of the battalion on 23 December as Operation Fortress Ridge along the coast draws to a close.

counted 10 dead VC soldiers and observed enough enemy equipment on the battlefield to know they had hurt the Communists. In his after action report, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown summarized the results of 21-24 December, writing, "Operation Fortress Ridge provided the confidence and experience needed for a newly formed BLT to perform as a professional combat unit."

Badger Tooth

26 December 1967 - 2 January 1968

Special Landing Force Bravo's last commitment in 1967 was Operation Badger Tooth. The original plan called for the BLT to land one company by LVT to seize Landing Zone Finch, slightly more than three kilometers inland from the beach on the southern Quang Tri Province border. The rest of the battalion would follow by helicopter. The proposed objective area was on the extreme western side of the "Street Without Joy," and this time intelligence estimates placed as many as 1,700 enemy troops in the area of operation.¹⁸

The BLT commander, Lieutenant Colonel Max McQuown, described the plans for the operation:

The scheme of maneuver called for a river crossing over the Song O Lau River once all the BLT Task Organization had landed from ARG shipping. After the river crossing the BLT was to conduct search and destroy operations through 14 towns and villages on a route running southwest from LZ Finch terminating at the town of Ap

Phouc Phu, 11 kilometers from LZ Finch. Initial fire support for the operation would be organic 81mm mortars, available on-call air support, and naval gunfire support. Once the BLT had closed on the first intermediate objective, Thon Phu Kinh, 105mm howitzers from a platoon of the 3rd Battalion, 12th Marines and a battery from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines would provide artillery support.¹⁹

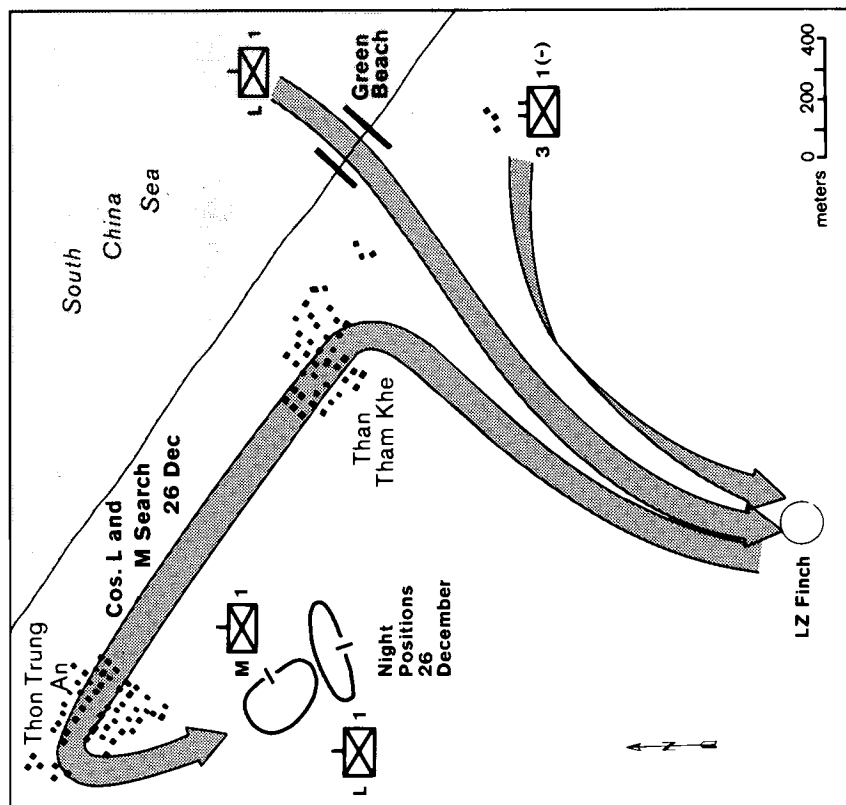
Information relayed to the SLF by a U.S. Army liaison officer with nearby ARVN units changed the Badger Tooth plan. After the seizure of LZ Finch, the SLF directed the BLT to search new objectives consisting of the coastal villages of Thom Tham Khe and Tho Trung An. Intelligence officers suspected enemy forces hid there after evading ARVN operations to the north and west. Once the BLT cleared the two villages, the SLF would continue with the originally planned sweep to the southwest.

Badger Tooth started as Company L in LVTs landed over Green Beach at 1100 on 26 December and proceeded to LZ Finch. The operation continued as scheduled against very light opposition. Major David L. Althoff's "Poor Devils" from HMM-262 landed the last elements of the battalion at Finch by 1415. Two hours later Company K suffered the first casualty of Badger Tooth when automatic weapons fire west of the LZ wounded a Marine.

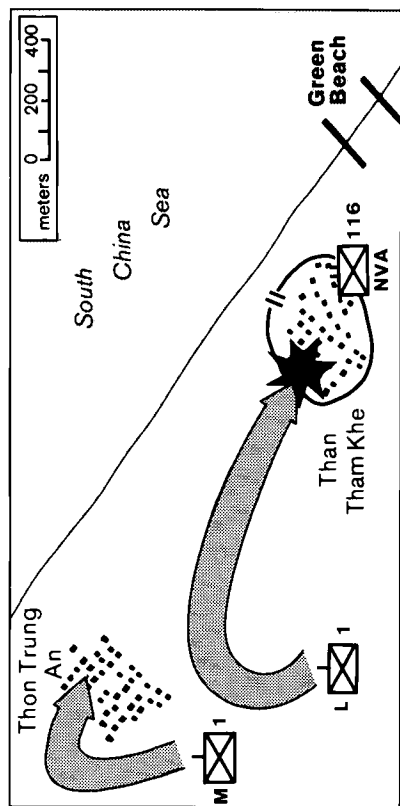
The SLF commander, Colonel Schmidt, accompanied by the U.S. Army liaison officer to ARVN forces in the area, arrived at the battalion command post with orders for the BLT to change direction and

Operation Badger Tooth 26-28 December 1967

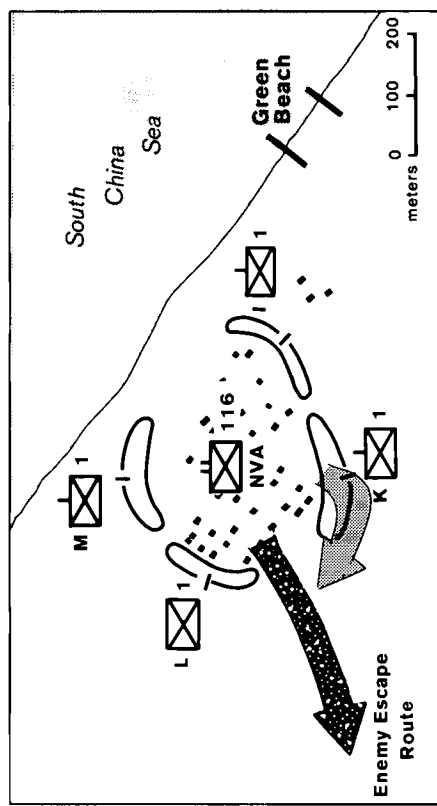
- 1 - 26 December
- 2 - 27 December
- 3 - Thon Tham Khe Night of 27-28 December



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2



3

sweep the coastal villages of Tham Khe and Trung An. Company L received the mission of sweeping Tham Khe, with Company M in support. After moving to the edge of the village in LVTs, Company L advanced northwest into the built-up area. By 1822 Company L had cleared the first village and was well into Trung An. Both towns were clean; the Marines killed only three Viet Cong and detained four. The infantrymen found no evidence of the presence of Communist formations. By 1940, both Companies L and M had tied in for the night north and west of Tham Khe. The night was quiet.

At 0700 on the 27th, both companies moved out on another sweep of the two villages. Company M moved north on a line parallel to Trung An so it could begin its sweep of the village from north to south. Company L, with the mission to sweep Tham Ke, initially moved out to the northeast. Leading elements of Company L were almost into the south of Trung An when Company L's commander realized that his leading platoon had not turned south toward Tham Ke. Company L reversed direction immediately and started toward Tham Ke.

Just as the leading platoon of Company L approached the edge of the village, a concealed enemy force opened up with a devastating volume of fire

from machine guns, rifles, RPGs, and mortars. The company immediately suffered many casualties and Captain Thomas S. Hubbel decided to pull his company back and regroup for another attack. He requested supporting arms fires on Tham Ke while his company prepared for its new assault. After two air strikes, followed by naval gunfire, Company L assaulted the village. The enemy again met the Marines with withering defensive fires, killing Captain Hubbel and his battalion "tac-net" radio operator. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown lost communications with the company for a short period until the acting company executive officer assumed command of Company L.

During the period without radio contact with Company L, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown ordered Company M to move east and south and join the fight on the left flank of Company L. Company M reached its attack position and immediately came under heavy enemy fire. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown realized at this time that the two companies were up against a major enemy force in well-prepared defensive positions. The search of Tham Ke the previous day had been inadequate.

Lieutenant Colonel McQuown ordered Company I to move to the south of Tham Ke. He then re-

Marines of BLT 3/1 take cover as they fight to enter the village of Tham Khe on 27 December after their first search of the village the previous day failed to detect the presence of the elaborate but well-camouflaged positions of the 116th NVA Battalion.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A190208



quested that the SLF land the tank platoon from the ARG ships. Next, he instructed Company K to take the pressure off Companies L and M by attacking the south end of Tham Ke. After prepping the area with 81mm mortar fire, Company K attacked against fierce resistance.

Company K made no progress until the arrival of two Marine tanks at the company's position. Unfortunately, the two tanks had sustained water damage to their communications equipment during the landing and could not communicate with the infantrymen except by voice.* This reduced their effectiveness; however, the tankers did knock out some enemy bunkers by direct fire from their 90mm guns. The inability to coordinate the tanks' fire with its own assault kept the company from making more than a limited penetration into the village complex. It did, however, gain a foothold in the village amid the enemy defenses.

Companies K, L, and M continued their battle as night fell, Lieutenant Colonel McQuown expected the enemy would use the darkness to cover their escape. To counteract this, he moved Company I to the right flank of Company K where it could maintain control over the eastern, or beach side, of Tham Ke. Company M, to the north, could cover part of the beach side of the village by fire. Lieutenant Colonel McQuown also moved elements of both Companies L and K to the west of Tham Ke. Even though the extent of the area involved precluded a link-up of these elements, McQuown anticipated that his unit dispositions would block the enemy within the confines of the village. Such was not the case.

The following morning, the 28th, Company K, already in the southern edges of Tham Ke, and Company I renewed their assault on the village. They quickly subdued the initial heavy enemy small arms fire and secured the village by noon. McQuown's Marines spent the afternoon in a detailed search of Tham Ke. He recalled:

This search revealed a village that was literally a defensive bastion. It was prepared for all-around defense in depth with a network of underground tunnels you could

stand up in, running the full length of the village. Connecting tunnels ran east and west. This tunnel system supported ground level bunkers for machine guns, RPG's, and small arms around the entire perimeter of the village. Thus the NVA were able to defend, reinforce, or withdraw in any direction. All defensive preparation had been artfully camouflaged with growing vegetation. Residents of Tham Ke, questioned after the fight, disclosed that the NVA had been preparing the defense of this village for one year.²⁰

The search turned up numerous machine guns, RPGs, AK-47 rifles, and thousands of rounds of ammunition which clearly indicated that a major NVA force had defended the village, not local Viet Cong. A dying NVA soldier confirmed it; the enemy force had been the *116th NVA Battalion*. The Marines also learned that ARVN forces operating northwest of Tham Ke had found over 100 bodies from the *116th NVA Battalion* abandoned in the sand dunes. The enemy force apparently had evacuated its casualties through the gap between L and K Companies during the night.

At 1800 on the 31st, a New Year's truce went into effect and SLF Bravo prepared to return to its ships; the New Year's stand-down cancelled any further thoughts of attacking inland. Bad weather and rough seas slowed back-loading, but by 1130, 2 January the BLT had left the "Street Without Joy." In the sharp fighting at Tham Khe, the Marines suffered 48 killed and 86 wounded; 31 enemy soldiers were known dead. Tham Khe was a bitter experience for the Marines of BLT 3/1, but Badger Tooth was a poignant tactical lesson which would be remembered in the clouded future of 1968.

Ballistic Arch/Kentucky V/Osceola

24 - 27 November, 27 November - 29 December,
30 December—continuing 1968

Eight days after leaving Cam Lo, SLF Alpha landed again. While at sea, BLT 1/3's commanders changed, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas turned over his command to recently promoted Lieutenant Colonel Richard W. Goodale. The 24 November landing, Ballistic Arch, was a helicopter and surface assault of Viet Cong-dominated villages on the northern coast of Quang Tri Province, only seven kilometers south of the southern DMZ boundary.

Ballistic Arch aimed at Communist sympathizers reported in and around the hamlet of Mai Xa Thi. The operation was a "walk through" for most of the battalion, but the opening minutes were tense for the crews of the LVTP-5s of the 4th Platoon, Com-

*Of the five tanks assigned to the BLT, only these two participated in this action. One tank was under repair at Da Nang; a second would not start and had to be left aboard ship. None appear to have been properly waterproofed for landing. The third tank reportedly "submerged" during the landing and the other two, though operable, "received water damage on landing." BLT 3/1 AAR, Operation Badger Tooth, dtd. 16Jan68, p. 15 (Archives, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A190211
Company I, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines rests on the beach on 28 December 1977 after it and Company K completed their assault through the village of Tham Khe and eliminated the rear guard of the 116th NVA Battalion, which had covered the withdrawal of the bulk of the enemy battalion during the night.

pany A, 5th Amphibian Tractor Battalion and the embarked Marines of the BLT's Company A.

Poor information on surf conditions presented the amphibian tractors with a serious problem. As they approached the beach, they started to take on more sea water than their pumps could handle; at times it was knee deep in the tractors. Two Marines, riding on top of a tractor washed overboard, but fortunately others rescued them. At last the vehicles grounded and climbed the dunes of the Quang Tri coast. There were no losses.

The expected contact did not materialize. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Goodale summarized the apparently poor intelligence which triggered Ballistic Arch, saying, "no fighting holes, bunkers, or fortifications of any kind were uncovered during the operation . . . The area appeared to be quite pacified and the indigenous personnel were very friendly."²¹ Ballistic Arch ended at noon on 27 November, and BLT 1/3 immediately came under the 9th Marines' operational control.

The BLT again phased back into the continuing Kentucky Operation. Its only active participation, however, was a sweep during the period 28-30 November. On 2 December the battalion moved back to the A-3 Strongpoint to provide security and engineer support for its construction. The Marines made a concerted effort to complete construction. By

Rice paddy mud provides the only resistance to BLT 1/3 Marines after poor intelligence caused Operation Ballistic Arch to take place in a thoroughly pacified area of Vietnam.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189961



the time of the departure of BLT 1/3 on 29 December, the Marines had completed the defensive wire and minefield and almost finished the bunker complex.

Enemy contact during the stay at A-3 was very light. The battalion experienced small enemy probes until 11 December when supporting arms broke up a platoon-size Communist attack. Enemy ground action dropped off appreciably afterward. Enemy artillery, mortar, and rocket fire were the main deter-

rent to the Marines' engineering effort at A-3. From 2 December until the 29th, 578 rounds landed on the position. Phase V of Kentucky concluded on 29 December. BLT 1/3 made a combined tactical foot and motor march back to Quang Tri Airfield complex. The last two days of December passed as the BLT prepared to relieve the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, then involved in Operation Osceola. The end of the year brought no slowing of the planned tempo of SLF operations.

CHAPTER 12

Pacification

The Problem Defined—County Fair Marine Grass-Roots-Level Participation—Reporting and Evaluation

The Problem Defined

Military commanders in Vietnam realized that operations against Communist main force units, alone, could not win the war. These operations could only provide a shield of security behind which the South Vietnamese Government and its allies could implement a Revolutionary Development or pacification program, a program aimed solely at winning the support of the people.

Pacification is a relatively simple concept; the process and means of accomplishment are extremely complex. Because of differing interpretations and frequent interchanges of the terms “pacification,” “revolutionary development,” and “nation

building,” ComUSMACV issued a memorandum, “Clarification of Terms,” which listed the following definitions:

Pacification is the military, political, economic, and social process of establishing or reestablishing local government responsive to and involving the participation of the people. It includes the provision of sustained, credible territorial security, the destruction of the enemy's underground government, and the initiation of economic and social activity capable of self-sustenance and expansion. The economic element of pacification includes the opening of roads and waterways and maintenance of lines of communication important to economic and military activity.

Revolutionary development, the leading edge of

An infantryman from Company D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines demonstrates the need for a viable pacification program by holding up an empty bulgur wheat sack found in a North Vietnamese Army unit's bunker destroyed by the battalion on 26 March 1967.

3d MarDiv ComdC, March 1967



pacification, is the formalized Government of Vietnam program, under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Revolutionary Development, in specified hamlets generally within RD campaign areas. It includes the local security for these hamlets and the political, economic, and social activities at that level.

Nation building is the economic, political, and social activity having an impact nationwide and/or in urban centers. It is related to pacification in that it builds on the results of pacification and contributes to the establishment of a viable economic and social community.¹

Since the beginning of United States involvement in Vietnam, security for the rural population remained the basic requirement for pacification, and how best to provide this security was the subject of continuing debate between American and Vietnamese officials. The military side contended that the problem was a fundamental military issue, that physical security of the contested area must be established before starting any developmental programs; civil officials, on the other hand, viewed the problem as a political issue, stating that political, economic, and social developmental projects would make greater inroads on Communist influence and therefore should have greater priority. The contrasting views led to the initiation of programs which often resulted in duplication, as well as confusion on the part of the Vietnamese offices charged with implementing and administering them. To help already overloaded local administrators, MACV dispatched more American advisors to the provinces, but, unfortunately, in many cases their presence actually retarded pacification progress. Zealous advisors often stifled local initiative.

At the same time, MACV experienced equally perplexing problems. While MACV perceived that security was the first prerequisite for a successful program, it had difficulty implementing a sound, balanced management system. As in the civilian programs, military civic action concepts evolved by trial and error.

The Vietnamese had experimented with pacification programs since 1954. Based on past experience, a new program emerged late in 1965. The Vietnamese adopted the concept of the armed propaganda cadre as the basis for the national program. The civil side of the program began slowly in 1966, primarily because of the shortage of trained cadre, but the Vietnamese Government provided enthusiastic direction and the prospects for success were optimistic.

In February 1966, the Honolulu Conference align-

ed many of the diverse American and Vietnamese opinions and actions. Top-level U.S. and Vietnamese policy makers agreed to consider the civilian aspects of the war as important as the military effort. This summit changed the system of priorities and caused the initiation of additional programs and provision of more of the requisites needed to wage what many called the "other war." Perhaps the most significant outcome of the conference was President Johnson's decision that only one person would direct United States pacification efforts in Vietnam. This led to the establishment of the Office of Civil Operations (OCO) in late autumn 1966. This new organization brought the various U.S. civilian pacification programs under the control of a senior official who, in turn, reported directly to the deputy ambassador.

The South Vietnamese Government assigned the overall responsibility for the Vietnamese side of the national pacification plan, the Revolutionary Development Program, to Major General Nguyen Duc Thang, who headed the newly created Ministry of Revolutionary Development. A reorganization of the Vietnamese war cabinet on 12 July 1966 gave Thang direct supervision over the Ministries of Revolutionary Development, Agriculture, Public Works, and Interior. At this juncture, Thang gained authority to direct coordination and integration of civil/military Revolutionary Development activities at all echelons of the government.

The main operational element for the civil aspects of Revolutionary Development was the 59-man Revolutionary Development cadre team. The government recruited these teams from within each district, trained them at the National Cadre Training School at Vung Tau, and returned them to their provinces for assignment to a district chief for work in one of his hamlets. Their first task involved the security and defense of their assigned hamlets. Once they established security they started working with the people to create a better way of life within the hamlet.

In September, to ensure military assistance for the program, the South Vietnamese appointed General Thang to the position of assistant for territorial affairs and pacification to the Chief, Joint General Staff. Major functions of his position included development of policies and concepts for military activities in support of revolutionary development and supervision of the employment, maneuver, and training of regional and popular forces. The primary

Revolutionary Development role of the military forces required achieving a level of security which would permit the accomplishment of civil activities and subsequent nation building. The 1967 Combined Campaign Plan assigned the primary mission of supporting the Revolutionary Development program to ARVN forces, thus, by the end of 1966, the South Vietnamese Government had taken major steps to consolidate its pacification programs.*

As the Vietnamese reorganized, the Americans also continued to reform their own programs. The Office of Civil Operations (OCO) confidently reported that it had integrated the pacification effort with military operations and was making significant progress in implementing the various programs. One of the most important OCO contributions was the appointment of four regional directors, one for each corps area. These four men had full authority over all American civilians in their respective regions and reported directly to the director of OCO; previously there had been no central management of the various pacification programs. During the spring of 1967, the United States realized that it needed a stronger organization and placed all of the various components of the American pacification effort, both civilian and military, under a single manager, ComUSMACV. The name of the new organization was Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS).

On 23 May, MACV Directive 10-12 implemented CORDS. Ambassador Robert Komer became General Westmoreland's deputy for CORDS with full responsibility for the entire program. The directive specifically charged the ambassador with "supervising the formulation and execution of all plans, policies and programs, military and civilian, which support the GVN's revolutionary development program and related programs." In addition, the directive provided for the integration and consolidation of all OCO and revolutionary development support activities at all levels: nation, corps, province, and district. The OCO regional director became the deputy for CORDS to each corps commander, while the senior provincial and district advisors became CORDS representatives at those levels. Accommodation of this extensive program proved to be a simple matter in I Corps, chiefly because the I Corps Coordinating Council had performed a very similar function for 20 months.

dinating Council had performed a very similar function for 20 months.

By early August 1965, Marine civic action had expanded to the point that coordination with other United States agencies in I Corps became imperative for the effective support of the Vietnamese pacification program. General Walt ordered the creation of the I Corps Joint Coordinating Council. The council drew its members from all major U.S. and Vietnamese agencies in I CTZ, including representatives from both Marine and ARVN military staffs. When the council met on 30 August 1965, it was the first working regional council of its kind in South Vietnam. This organizational step preceded the formation of subcommittees for public health, education, roads, refugees, distribution, and police. Although the Joint Coordinating Council had no directive-making authority or material resources of its own, the influence of its members made it the most effective group for carrying out the total pacification program in I Corps.* By the fall of 1966, the success of the council encouraged and assisted the formation of other joint coordinating councils (JCC). These JCCs were independent of the corps-level council, but had similar staffs and missions. As 1967 began, growing Vietnamese participation in council activities and sponsored programs indicated the value of the JCC approach.

During 1965 III MAF created a fifth general staff section, G-5, to coordinate all civic action programs. The Marines established G-5/S-5 sections in every Marine division, regiment, and battalion serving in Vietnam. At the same time, to prevent overlap of projects, III MAF assigned responsibility for the coordination of civic action in particular geographical areas to specific units. This enabled them to coordinate all programs within their areas with local government officials. By the end of 1966, these two steps formed a sound base for both the III MAF and Vietnamese pacification programs.

Following the formation of CORDS, many of the functions of the III MAF G-5 section shifted to the CORDS representatives at III MAF Headquarters. Such a shift inevitably caused some friction between the two offices. Among them was the tendency of

*For a detailed description of the Revolutionary Development Program during 1966 and the development of the Combined Campaign for 1967, see Shulimson, *U. S. Marines in Vietnam, 1966*.

*Vice Admiral Thomas R. Weschler wrote that General Walt's leadership was the key element that molded the various agencies into a team dedicated to a successful pacification campaign. Vice Admiral Thomas R. Weschler, Comments on draft ms, 18Jun81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

the CORDS staff to report through their own channels directly to Saigon, bypassing III MAF. Despite daily meetings, the G-5 section believed that much information from the CORDS system was not reaching the G-5. "As CORDS took on more of the responsibility for pacification from the G-5," wrote Colonel James L. Black, who served as III MAF G-5, "coordination among the [III MAF] G-3, G-2, and G-5 became almost non-existent." III MAF sharply reduced the size of the G-5 section and it almost integrated into the CORDS staff. However, in spite of being the smallest staff section in III MAF, G-5 remained charged with major requirements to support the pacification effort.²

The G-5 officer found a number of obstacles in his path. Even though the Army's 29th Civil Affairs Company supported III MAF, the growth of CORDS blurred the command relationship between III MAF and the company. Further, Colonel Black did not believe the company's task organization properly reflected its mission. Another limiting factor was the lack of understanding of civil affairs among Marines assigned to G-5/S-5 staffs at all command levels. Few had been school trained in their duties and had to learn on-the-job. Those with formal school training had to learn to shift their thinking from theoretical, classroom concepts to the practical situation at hand. The learning process slowed progress in the III MAF civil affairs effort.

The importance placed upon civic action required the III MAF G-5 to submit a daily civic action report to FMFPac headquarters. The report included such topics as the amount of lumber, clothing, garbage, and other material distributed to the Vietnamese people during the last 24 hours. This classified report could not be delayed, not even by heavy message traffic during peak operational periods. "If this report did not reach FMFPac within 24 hours," wrote Colonel Black, "you would receive a 'nasty' phone call [from Hawaii]." The reports problem ended, according to Colonel Black, in the spring of 1968.³

County Fair

Throughout 1967, the Marines concentrated on the basics of pacification development. In accordance with the Honolulu Declaration of 1966, the Marines directed much of their effort at the expansion and refinement of the pacification program they had initiated earlier. For their programs to succeed, the Marines needed to provide secure conditions in which the Vietnamese people could live and in

which all levels of legal government could function without enemy interference. To this end, the Marines' main objective was the isolation of the VC from the people, both physically and economically. Golden Fleece operations, in which Marines provided security during rice harvests, had proven successful in protecting the villagers' rice crops since September 1965; however, they occurred only during the two or three yearly harvest seasons. On the other hand, the war on the VC infrastructure was a daily affair.

The source of the enemy's strength was the local guerilla organization which operated in 5- to 10-man cells within each hamlet. Each cell acted as a clandestine *de facto* government which worked to foster Communist influence, while simultaneously undermining the influence of local officials and the central government. If the local population was not sympathetic to the Communist cause, the guerillas resorted to intimidation and terror to control inhabitants. Each guerrilla acted as an agent between the people and the VC main force units which needed food, recruits, and intelligence. Simply stated, pacification involved eliminating the agents and thus reducing the large Communist units to the status of conventional forces groping around in hostile territory. Furthermore, with the destruction of the guerrilla infrastructure, the seeds of RVN influence could fall on neutral, if not completely fertile, ground.

The Marines recognized these realities during the early stages of the campaign and devised several techniques to combat the guerrillas. One of the most successful, initiated in 1966, was the County Fair concept. Basically, County Fairs involved elaborate cordon and search operations conducted by combined ARVN and Marine forces. Since the South Vietnamese government needed to know who belonged where, the ARVN handled the population control aspects, as well as the actual searching of the targeted village, while the Marines usually remained in the background, providing tactical "muscle."

Once the combined commanders selected an operational area, Marine units moved in at night and established a cordon around the designated village to prevent the VC, if any, from escaping or gaining reinforcements. At dawn, ARVN troops entered the village, rounded up the inhabitants, apologized for the inconvenience, and announced that they intended to search the hamlet. While district and village leaders mingled with the people explaining what was



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370115

Vietnamese peasant women hold out their straw hats for the mixture of ham and rice prepared by the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines during a "County Fair" operation in May.

happening, other officials checked identification cards and took a census.

The allies tried to make the experience as pleasant as possible. They set up a temporary dispensary to provide the villagers with free medical and dental care. They fed the people, including providing candy and other delights for the children. Entertainment featured movies, live presentations, and band concerts which helped to cover the serious business of uprooting the Communists. These organized amusements provided the name "County Fair."

While the distractions continued in the assembly area, South Vietnamese troops systematically combed the village. Often the guerrillas slipped into tunnels or spider holes at the first sign of approaching troops, but if the troops discovered the underground hiding place they literally smoked out the VC. On some operations, the searchers used portable blowers, called "Mighty Mites," to saturate the shafts with tear gas and smoke.* If the guerrillas chose to run away, they encountered the Marine cordon around the village.

While these operations proved successful, County Fairs were not an end in themselves. When Marine

and ARVN units left the area, they took with them the security essential to the survival of pro-government villages. Even if the allies eradicated the existing VC infrastructure, their departure created a vacuum into which other guerrilla cadre could filter. During a survey conducted by Marine civil affairs personnel in the Chu Lai area, most civilians interviewed stated that they appreciated the medical care, the clothing, the new schools, and all of the other benefits, but what they really wanted was protection from the Viet Cong. Revolutionary Development teams and Popular Forces could only partially remedy the situation because of their limited training and armament. The Marines realized these facts, but they also recognized the unexploited potential which the popular forces offered: total familiarity with local conditions, loyalties, needs, and every physical characteristic of their home villages. Marine recognition of this potential, and efforts to develop it, produced one of the most productive innovations in I Corps, the Combined Action Program.

Marine Grass-Roots-Level Participation

The birth of the Combined Action Program occurred in the summer of 1965 in Lieutenant Colonel William W. Taylor's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines as a means of controlling the population around the Phu

*The term Mighty Mite should not be confused with the similar nickname for a light vehicle used as a jeep by Marine units in the 1960s.

Bai combat base. The battalion civil affairs officer, Captain John J. Mullen, Jr., provided the original inspiration. Understanding the Vietnamese culture, Mullen realized that the militia troops living in the villages were the key to local security. Rural Vietnamese had an orientation toward families, ancestors, and hamlets; they were not strong nationalists. Most farmers spent their entire lives within a 10-mile radius of their hamlets. PFs usually performed poorly if moved to another district, but in defense of their own homes they could be tough. In the war with the VC, motivation alone could not overcome superior firepower and experience. Mullen believed the Marines could add the necessary ingredients and, given proper leadership and firepower, the PFs not only could, but would stand up to the VC.

Lieutenant Colonel Taylor agreed with Mullen's idea and, on 3 August 1965, he sent four squads of Marines to work with six platoons of PFs in the three villages northwest of his perimeter. First Lieutenant Paul R. Ek, who spoke Vietnamese, became the company commander and a PF lieutenant worked as his executive officer. Under this leadership, the program got underway.

Lieutenant Ek's success with combined action prompted III MAF to expand the program. General Walt, a strong advocate of the pacification program, approved of the results at Phu Bai and, in January 1966, decided to initiate similar programs at Da Nang and Chu Lai.* General Walt's initiating order stated:

1. . . . the Commanding General, I Corps has concurred in III MAF proposal to expand the Marine-Popular Force program throughout all Marine enclaves and has published instructions to subordinates throughout I Corps.

2. Action will be taken immediately to establish liaison through Province, District, and down to village/hamlet as required to take operational control of Popular Force units within a zone of action in accordance with reference (b). In each case ensure that local officials thoroughly understand the program and have been apprised of General Thi's letter. Specifically, presentations will include that Marine forces intend to establish communications to Popular Force units, provide supporting arms, reserve forces, and plan to place Marines with selected Popular Force Platoons. Where possible Popular Force units in proximity to each other will

be organized into Combined Action Companies.* In discussions, stress the mutual benefits of the program in that Marines can profit from Popular Forces knowledge of area, language, and people while the Popular Force will receive valuable training and will be provided additional security. Of primary importance is the fact that this relationship will provide a basis for better understanding and building of mutual respect between our forces. In presenting the program to RVN officials, avoid the use of the terms "operational control" by substituting "cooperation or coordination."

3. Insure a thorough indoctrination on the overall aims of programs to all concerned. These are to improve the effectiveness and prestige of the Popular Forces with a view to increasing recruitment to build up this critically understrength force. The importance of the Popular Forces to provide security for rear areas, which will allow Marine/ARVN combat forces to move forward, cannot be overstressed. At every opportunity when dealing with GVN officials, highlight the Popular Force problem and assess the adequacy of the program at local levels to improve this force.

4. Upon receipt of this letter, report:

- a. Location of Popular Force units in area of operation.
- b. Assigned mission of each unit.
- c. Commander.
- d. Personnel present for duty.
- e. Amount and condition of equipment.
- f. Uniform requirements.
- g. Plans for implementing program.

5. After the initial report submit summary of operations conducted and evaluation of the program on a weekly basis.³

By January 1966, there were seven combined action platoons in existence; by July, 38; and by the beginning of 1967 the number had risen to 57. III MAF planned still more.

While it was important to have the support of III MAF command levels for combined action, the success or failure of the venture ultimately rested on the shoulders of 19- and 20-year-old Marines. Combined Action units needed a special Marine; a man without the necessary motivation, understanding, and compassion could do more harm than good. All Marines in the original program were volunteers with at least four months' combat experience, a favorable recommendation from their commanding officer, no record of disciplinary action, and, all important, no discernible racial prejudices. These men were the

*Captain Mullen, who replaced Lieutenant Ek upon the latter's rotation in September 1965, and several members of the original company assisted and advised in the establishment of the second unit. Lieutenant Colonel John J. Mullen, Jr., Comments on drafts, 21 May 61 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

*The name of these units soon changed to Combined Action Platoons (CAPs). The Marines found that the acronym "CAC" was, under certain pronunciations, a vulgarity in the Vietnamese language.

foundation upon which the Marine side of the program was built.

By mid-1967, III MAF had compiled statistics which illustrated the dedication of Marines in the Combined Action Program. The average Marine participant had a 75-percent chance of being wounded once during his tour and a 30-percent chance of being hit a second time. The ultimate statistic, those who would die, was just under 12 percent. Despite these grim mathematical reminders, over 60 percent of the Marines volunteered for at least one six-month extension to their normal 12-month tours in Vietnam. The high extension rate was a strong indication to their leaders that the Combined Action Program had a better than average chance of success.

The basic operating unit of the program, the combined action platoon (CAP), consisted of a 14-man Marine squad and a Navy corpsman, integrated into a nominal 35-man Popular Forces platoon. The ideal scenario following establishment of a combined action unit was as follows:

Initially, there was only one objective, around-the-clock security of their assigned hamlet. The first days were the most dangerous, the period when unit cohesiveness and proficiency were most questionable. The Marines first had to teach the PFs to defend themselves. The Marines provided the knowledge of tactics and weaponry while the PFs contributed their knowledge of the terrain and local conditions. In the field the Marine squad leader, normally a sergeant, usually controlled the unit; but during the daily routine, cooperation replaced command. As the PFs' confidence and skill grew, CAP patrolling became more aggressive. Continuous sharing of experience gained through daily, side-by-side participation in training and patrolling created truly effective, integrated platoons and a new degree of reliable hamlet security. As the strength of the CAP grew, the peoples' willingness to accept the unit also increased. Then, and only then, could lasting social action within the hamlets become a reality.

Time worked paradoxically for the CAP Marines. To ensure their own survival, they had to quickly transform the CAP into a cohesive defense force, but the opposite was the case in their dealings with the people. The Vietnamese, possessing a wariness of outsiders typical of peasant societies, would not let the Marines force their way into the existing social structure of the hamlet. Acceptance took time. Usually the breakthrough in acquiring community



3d MarDiv ComdC, June 1967

This Marine, though wearing starched, pressed trousers and shined boots for the visiting photographer, wields a hoe alongside a Popular Forces militiaman to demonstrate the importance of cooperative effort in the Combined Action Program.

acceptance came from the hamlet children. Since the CAP compound was a natural gathering place for the naturally curious and uninhibited children, they accepted the Marines and, in turn, gained the friendship of the Americans. In most cases, hamlet children became the most significant factor in bridging the cultural gap. As parents began to know and understand the Marines through their own children, empathy could develop which aided the establishment of common purposes.

This approach was not without its pitfalls, as Navy Chaplain Vincent T. Capadonno, a former missionary on Taiwan, pointed out in a series of lectures to Marine units at Chu Lai in the summer of 1966. Young American males, he said, love to play with children—for about 15 minutes. Then they tire of the children and start pushing them away, sometimes having to get rough before the children realize the game is over. Further, in Vietnamese peasant society, where infant and child mortality were high, children, though loved by their parents, had little social standing. Among the Vietnamese, social standing was a matter of age, with the elderly having the highest, most respected status. The American cultural emphasis on youth could lead young Marines to concentrate on young Vietnamese and ig-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189582

Popular Forces militiamen and Marines work together to improve village defenses by building a traffic control gate over a bridge near the combined action platoon's position.

nore the village elders, a situation that could create resentment within the village power structure.⁶

In areas of strong Communist influence, the development of a close relationship was even more difficult. The Marines had to counter VC propaganda which pictured them as blood-thirsty mercenaries who burned, raped, and pillaged, but participants managed to overcome these obstacles when their actions disproved the Communists' claims. They had to live, work, and eat with the people, respect their customs, and treat them as equals. The CAP corpsmen also helped to narrow the gap by providing rudimentary but vital medical assistance. Most importantly, the Marines' approach had to demonstrate that they genuinely cared about the well-being of the villagers.

Once the people accepted the Marines, true civic action could start, but again the Americans could not take charge. For civic action to be effective, it had to reflect what the people sincerely wanted, as well as what they were willing to support. Once everyone determined these needs, only the imagination and initiative of the Marines and the villagers limited the extent of the program. The range of projects accomplished by Marines, PFs, and citizens working together ranged from school construction to animal husbandry. Many desired civic action projects exceeded the material resources available to the CAPs, but they could turn to the vast inventories of

agencies as USAID and CARE. Local Marine commands also helped by providing the hamlets available construction material, machinery, tools, and clothing.

When they demonstrated military proficiency and gained popular support, the CAPs could apply greater pressure on the VC. By denying the guerrillas access to the hamlets, the defense force curtailed the Communists' logistic and manpower sources. The CAPs also established antiguerrilla intelligence nets in their immediate areas. When the people realized that to help the CAPs was to help themselves, they provided the Marines information on VC movements, storage areas, and the locations of mines and booby traps.* Armed with this intelligence, the CAPs managed to inflict heavier casualties on the Viet Cong, driving them further from the mainstream of hamlet life.

The CAPs also attempted to erode Communist strength through persuasion. They aimed this effort primarily at the relatives of the local guerrillas. The Marines entreated the resident families of known VC to ask their kin to give up the VC cause, pointing out that sooner or later the CAPs would find and possibly kill them. This approach not only ac-

*The Marines rarely, if ever, patrolled without the PFs, because the Vietnamese, being more familiar with the area, could spot mines and booby traps more readily than the Americans.

celerated enemy defections, but it also reinforced the permanency of the CAP program in the minds of the peasants.

All of these activities contributed to the growth of the villagers' belief in their own government and their allies. Perhaps the most important factor in promoting confidence in the program was the fact that the Viet Cong had not regained control of any area in which a CAP had established security. The presence of a successful CAP in a village complex prohibited further use of that village by the VC.

Not all CAP units succeeded, especially during the period of rapid expansion of the program. Lieutenant Colonel Max McQuown, the commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, was not favorably impressed with either of the two units in his battalion TAOR. He described the problems of these units:

Few of the Marines assigned to these two CAP units had prior ground combat experience. . . . [They] were an admixture out of combat service support units. The leaders and the Marines under them . . . lacked skills in scouting and patrolling, mines and booby traps, map reading, observed fire procedures, basic infantry tactics, and VC tactics and techniques. Further, they had scant knowledge of the Vietnamese language and were unfamiliar with the social and religious customs of the people they were living with.

With respect to their PF counterparts, *not one* PF was a

resident of either village . . . all the eligible resident males, who should have been members of the PF platoons, were gone! They had been drafted into the ARVN, joined the VC, or deserted the village to keep from [serving in either the ARVN or VC]. The strength of each PF platoon in these villages never exceeded 20 men. . . .

Marine [and PF] members of the CAP platoon . . . kept themselves aloof from the villagers they were supposed to be helping. . . .

There was *no* record of either CAP unit capturing a VC, let alone destroying the VC infrastructure in these villages. In fact, the VC operated with impunity around these villages unless elements of 3/1 were in the area. . . .

[The chiefs of the two villages], both many times wounded [and] ardent anti-communist leaders, chose to deal directly with [the battalion S-2 and S-5 sections] with respect to VC activity and civic action programs. Both chiefs were instrumental in initiating 3/1 action against VC operating in and around their villages. Neither chief had faith that the CAP units would accomplish anything.⁷

The existence of similar problems among a number of CAP units, which were traceable to rapid expansion of the program, was apparent to III MAF headquarters. To enhance the program's effectiveness, General Cushman, the new III MAF commander, established a provisional combined action group (CAG) headquarters at Da Nang. The primary purpose of this provisional CAG was to oversee training and support of the combined action units. A month later, III MAF formed two more

A large South Vietnamese flag flies over the bunkers and barbed wire protecting the gate leading into the headquarters of Combined Action Platoon 3-1 in August 1967.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189537



CAGs to direct activities in the Phu Bai and Chu Lai areas.

During July, III MAF revised control and support of the CAP Marines by removing them from the command of the Marine division responsible for their area. The new chain of command linked the CAPs through their companies and groups directly to III MAF. Under the revised system, supervisory authority rested with the deputy commanding general of III MAF, Major General Herman Nickerson, Jr., via his Combined Action Program Staff. This command revision occurred following the relocation of Marine tactical units after the arrival of the Army's Task Force Oregon at Chu Lai.

The CAP program continued to grow during 1967. By July there were 75 CAPs and by the end of the year, 79 operated under 14 company headquarters.

The increasing success of the Combined Action Program demonstrated the results achievable. Pacification involved not changing, but rather, reinforcing the villagers' own aspirations. The successful CAP Marines understood this and, because of it, achieved one of the basic goals of the entire pacification effort, the unification of interest between the South Vietnamese villager and the individual Marine. For the process to work in the Marine TAORs, III MAF needed the same identity of interest between the Marines in the regular units and the local populace. Marines in companies and battalions had to realize that their mission was the protection of the people, while the Vietnamese peasants had to learn to overcome their fear of Americans.

The Marine Corps attempted to solve this problem with its Personal Response Project, a program designed to help the individual Marine to understand the South Vietnamese. III MAF initiated the project in July 1966, but it remained in a data collecting stage until early in 1967. The first steps of the program consisted of making several surveys of Marines throughout I Corps to establish a representative sample of Marine attitudes toward the Vietnamese people. At the same time, III MAF chaplains conducted lectures and discussions to acquaint the Marines with the basic features of Vietnamese culture and civilization. III MAF distributed a *Platoon Leader's Personal Response Notebook* to all small unit commanders as an instruction guide for Marines under their command.

In February 1967, the 3d Marine Division established a Personal Response Council and a Per-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189650
Cpl Gary W. Armstrong fires his M-60 machine gun toward a Viet Cong sniper's position while on a combat patrol with a combined action unit on 9 May.

sonal Response Contact Team. The council and team started a variety of programs directed toward improving Marine-Vietnamese relationships, essentially through eliminating any negative attitudes held by the Marines.⁸ By the end of May, both the 1st Marine Division and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing had similar programs.

The Headquarters, Marine Corps statement of the purpose and objectives of the Marine Corps Personal Response Project was:

The Personal Response Project is a systematic effort toward attitudinal improvement in intercultural relations. By discovering the ways in which people of another culture relate their religious and ethical value systems to daily life the project develops effective anticipation of acculturative problems. Such anticipation and understanding is one of the keys to the elimination of offensive behavioral patterns toward indigenous citizens. It is expected that appropriate mutual assistance between Marines and the citizenry will be a by-product of increased understanding and contributory to the elimination of local guerrilla forces in an insurgency environment.

The objectives of the Personal Response Project are to: assist military personnel to respond to the predisposition of indigenous citizens to act in concert with their social, religious, and cultural value systems; identify the expression of these value systems and the motivation implicit in them; and recognize that the lives, relationships, and ac-

tions of indigenous citizens are of the same importance as those of all other human beings.⁹

Despite the heavy language, the approach seemed helpful. By the end of 1967, the Personal Response Project had become one of the anchors of III MAF's civic action program. Lieutenant Colonel Donald L. Evans, the III MAF assistant G-5 at the time the project started, stated that he considered the Personal Response Project as important as psychological operations and the Combined Action Program.¹⁰

The Marines realized that any effective pacification plan must have both a political and a psychological impact. They found that civic action and psychological operations had to be mutually supporting and to obtain a maximum benefit, required close coordination with Vietnamese officials. To this end, the County Fair and Combined Action Programs proved most effective. Other joint psychological operations involved relocation of refugees from VC controlled areas and the support of tactical operations with armed propaganda teams' presentations, leaflet drops, audio-visual productions, combat loudspeaker performances, and movie festivals. Vietnamese Cultural Drama Teams served in Marine operational areas to entertain local peasants; these teams presented short dramas and songs weaving in appropriate political points.

The most significant psychological effort was the *Chieu Hoi* (Open Arms) Program. This was the government's campaign to win over the Viet Cong. The government provided them with assistance for a new start by teaching them a trade to use when returning to their homes. Ralliers (*hoi chanhs*) often provided valuable information, especially regarding the location of troops and equipment caches, but more importantly, III MAF believed this program provided still another avenue for achieving pacification. Consequently, III MAF accelerated planning to support the *Chieu Hoi* Program. Planned support included the building of new *Chieu Hoi* centers to increase the handling capability of the returnees. During 1967, the *Chieu Hoi* Program accommodated 2,539 ralliers in I Corps.

In July 1966, the Marines used *hoi chanhs* for the first time during a County Fair operation. The *hoi chanhs* addressed small groups of villagers to describe the Viet Cong methods and intentions, as well as the benefits of the Government's Revolutionary Development Program. The success of *hoi chanh* employment rapidly became apparent; for ex-

ample, in two months' time one rallier identified more than 30 VC.

Achieving the full potential of the ralliers demanded rigid screening and orientation. Six participated in combat operations on a trial basis in October 1966. The *hoi chanhs*' intimate knowledge of the terrain, their familiarity with local people, and their knowledge of the VC *modus operandi* proved invaluable to the tactical units. When General Nickerson, then commanding the 1st Marine Division, learned of the success of the trial, he ordered that all qualified returnees join field units as soon as possible. General Nickerson also originated the new collective name for the *hoi chanhs*; he called them Kit Carson Scouts, after the famous guide of the western frontier. At the end of 1966, 19 scouts served in the 1st Marine Division program.

In February 1967, General Walt ordered the program adopted throughout III MAF. A newly established Kit Carson Training Center standardized scout training, and by the end of December 132 scouts served with Marine units in I Corps. During the year 1967, scouts killed 58 Viet Cong, captured 37, and seized 82 weapons. Equally important to the Marines operating with them was the scouts' discovery of 145 mines and explosive devices.

Among other civic action programs employed by the Marines during 1967, public health and educa-

Pham Duoc, a veteran of five months as a Kit Carson Scout, points on a map to likely Viet Cong hiding places to LCpl R. D. Kilmer and Cpl P. F. Collins, while fellow Scout Ho Quyet (center) watches.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189519





3d MarDiv ComdC, May 1967

2dLt Edward F. McCourt, Jr. (left), SSgt Roy C. Sharp, and He-Xung, an interpreter/translator, train Kit Carson Scouts on the M-16 at the training center at Phu Bai.

tion continued to be keystones of the effort. Of the two, medical assistance produced the most immediate results. Almost every unit conducted medical and dental civic action projects (MedCAPs and DentCAPs) for their humanitarian value. As an adjunct to MedCAPs, Navy medical personnel distributed medical supplies to the Vietnamese and Vietnamese medical workers.

The Public Health Program bridged the gap between pure medical assistance and self-help projects. These efforts operated under the aegis of CORDS and the supervision of the Public Health Committee of I Corps' JCC. A general sanitation campaign included trash removal, inoculations, preventive medicine, pest control, and water purification.

Just as good health was a prerequisite to the villagers' general well being, education was mandatory for economic and social growth. Medical assistance, particularly the MedCAP efforts, produced immediate, tangible results; conversely the III MAF civil education program offered few short-term advantages, but the Marines could not ignore the requirement for education and its long-range impact. During 1967, the Marines expanded the school building project they started during the spring of 1966. They coordinated this program through the Education Committee of I Corps JCC to determine the hamlets that wanted to participate. Each participating hamlet provided an adequate school site, agreed to provide labor for its construction, arranged for a teacher, and paid the teacher's salary. In return, the Marines agreed to provide construction

materials, technical advice, and heavy equipment. Each application required coordination with the local government and CORDS officials to ensure compatibility with overall national school construction plans.

Even more widespread than the school building programs were those of providing school supplies. Most of the refugee village schools needed every type of school supply. Elementary school kits from the Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere (CARE) were the most popular item distributed to individual students. Classroom supply kits, also from CARE, went to those students who needed only replacements. By the end of 1967, almost every school-age child in I Corps had received, at one time or another, one of the CARE kits.

These humanitarian programs were very difficult to accomplish in actual practice. Committing a battalion to an operation outside its TAOR or transferring it to another area could often disrupt the continuity of the pacification effort within a village. Vietnamese teachers were understandably reluctant to risk their lives by working in newly-built schools in contested villages. In addition, as Lieutenant Colonel McQuown of the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines pointed out, some projects required a 48-hour day to complete. "The Vietnamese people," he wrote, "labored from dawn to darkness just to farm and raise enough food to subsist. At the end of the working day they were too tired to be interested in a lecture on the necessity of screening or covering a toilet that had been open for 3,000 years. . . ."¹¹ In spite of



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370042
Lt Thomas E. Bunnell, a Navy physician assigned to the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, gives a shot to a Vietnamese child during a medical civic action patrol (Medcap) to a village five miles northeast of Chu Lai.

these and other obstacles, the Marines persisted in their pacification efforts.

Reporting and Evaluation

As 1967 began, the Marines in I Corps used two measurement systems to evaluate progress in the various pacification programs. III MAF in-

dependently developed one system. On the other hand, MACV used the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) on a country-wide basis to evaluate all areas where Government authority existed.

In February 1966, the Marines introduced an index system to measure and record a broad range of essential indicators of pacification status. The index related civic action and Revolutionary Development programs in the TAORs and, at the same time, tied in Marine Corps combat operations to both programs. Essentially, the system equated progress in pacification with the progress of the war, and included indicators of improvement which required action by military organizations. The system included five basic general indicators of progress:

1. Destruction of enemy military units
2. Destruction of enemy infrastructure
3. Establishment of local security by the Vietnamese
4. Establishment of local government by the Vietnamese
5. Status of New Life Development Programs

The village served as the basic measurement unit in this assessment since it consisted of a clearly defined area for applying uniform standards for comparative purposes. The evaluator determined the level of pacification progress in each village based on five general indicators which, in turn, subdivided into subordinate elements. The subordinate elements carried various weights, so that a village that fully satisfied all elements of each indicator received 100 points. For the subdivision and specific weights of the system, see table this page.

| Pacification Progress Indices | | | |
|--|----|---|-----|
| 1. Destruction of Organized VC Military Forces | | 4. Establishment of Local Government | |
| a. VC local/main force units destroyed or driven out | 15 | a. Village chief and council elected and functioning | 4 |
| b. GVN/FW/MAF capable of defending the area | 5 | b. Village chief lives and sleeps in the village | 3 |
| | 20 | c. Hamlet chiefs and councils elected and functioning | 4 |
| 2. Destruction of VC Infrastructure | | d. Hamlet chief lives and sleeps in the hamlet | 4 |
| a. Census completed | 2 | e. Psyops and public information services established | 3 |
| b. VC infrastructure discovered and destroyed or neutralized | 8 | f. Village statutes enacted | 1 |
| c. GVN intelligence network established | 5 | g. Village social and administrative organization completed | 1 |
| d. Census grievance teams completed interviewing each family | 2 | | 20 |
| e. Principal grievances proceed | 3 | 5. Completion of Initial New Life Hamlet Programs | |
| | 20 | a. Necessary public health works, required to meet initial needs of populace, completed | 4 |
| 3. Establishment of Local Security | | b. Necessary educational requirements, to satisfy initial needs, have been met | 4 |
| a. Defense plans completed | 2 | c. Necessary agricultural works completed | 4 |
| b. Defense construction completed | 3 | d. Adequate ground transportation into and out of the area has been established | 4 |
| c. Local defense forces trained and in place | 12 | e. Necessary markets established | 4 |
| d. Communications established with supporting unit | 3 | | 20 |
| | 20 | Maximum points | 100 |

Each component of the system depended on the others, thus the evaluation could not reflect a great achievement in the category "Establishment of Local Government" until the village made large advances in the category "Destruction of Enemy Units." A high score in "Completion of Initial New Life Hamlet Programs" was possible only if it represented gains in security and the establishment of local apparatus in the village. A score of 60 points for a village indicated that government had established firm influence. A "pacified" village was one which attained the grade of 80 points. The system proved to be highly successful and, with minor refinements, became the basic technique used by the Marines to assess pacification progress. At the end of 1967, it remained the standard system.

The Hamlet Evaluation System, devised by the Department of Defense in conjunction with the U.S. Mission Council, Vietnam, appeared in December 1966. Patterned after the Marine evaluation system, it differed in several important areas:

The HES system focused on the hamlet level, while the Marine system graded villages.

HES presented the results of its hamlet evaluation in letter form, while the Marine project rated the village by numerical percentage.

Several HES elements required subjective evaluation, while the Marine system was basically objective.

HES evaluated all areas in which Government authority was present, while the Marines' system rated only those villages in which III MAF influence was present.

HES utilized the advisory structure for its information while the Marine system used the military structure.¹²

HES, like the Marine system, operated on a monthly reporting cycle. The heart of the system was the Hamlet Evaluation Worksheet (HEW), which each district advisor prepared for each of his district's hamlets possessing some degree of Government control. The advisor analyzed each hamlet's pacification status in terms of six general categories:

1. VC military activities
2. VC political and subversive activities
3. Security (friendly capabilities)
4. Administrative and political activities
5. Health, education, and welfare
6. Economic development

Each of the six categories received a rating indicator, from A (best) through E. The advisor also completed a multiple-choice list of 14 questions about the hamlet's problems during the month. Despite the basic differences between the Marines' System and the HES, the systems proved compatible as well as complementary.

Neither system was flawless, however. Both required a great deal of work to compile statistics that were not always meaningful. As Colonel Black, the III MAF G-5 noted, the fact a village chief slept in his village was misleading. "If the chief did," wrote Black, "the usual assumption was made that pacification was really in progress. [However, the] chief could be VC and sleep in the village and the village or hamlet could be under VC control." Nevertheless, III MAF considered the village report the better indicator of pacified areas.¹³

PART VI
SUPPORT AND CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 13

Supporting Arms

Marine Air Operations—Fixed-Wing Operations—Helicopter Operations—Artillery

Marine Air Operations

At the start of 1967, Major General Louis B. Robertshaw's 1st Marine Aircraft Wing consisted of three fixed-wing groups, MAGs-11, -12, and -13, and two helicopter groups, MAGs-16 and -36. One fixed-wing group, MAG-11, operated from Da Nang, while the other two were at Chu Lai. The two helicopter groups operated from different bases also; MAG-36 was at Ky Ha, and MAG-16 split between Marble Mountain and Phu Bai. Wing headquarters, services, command, and control functions came from units of Marine Wing Headquarters Group 1 (MWHG-1) at Da Nang.

General Robertshaw, as III MAF's air component commander, exercised operational control of these units through his staff and by means of the Marine

air command and control system. The key unit in this system, the tactical air direction center (TADC), was at wing headquarters in Da Nang.* This agency monitored the employment of all wing aircraft and allocated resources to specific missions. TADC exercised control through two subordinate organizations, the tactical air operations center (TAOC) and the direct air support centers (DASCs).

*The senior agency in the Marine air command and control system normally is the Tactical Air Command Center (TACC). Since the Seventh Air Force had a TACC in Saigon, the 1st MAF center used "TADC" as provided for in doctrine. Lieutenant General Keith B. McCutcheon, "Marine Aviation in Vietnam, 1962-1970," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, May 1971, p. 138.

Sunlight reflects from a .50 caliber machine gun sticking from the side of a CH-46A helicopter as it heads out on a late afternoon mission to a unit southwest of An Hoa.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421675



The TADC, manned by Marine Air Control Squadron 7 (MACS-7), was the main control center for both anti-air warfare and air traffic control. Plotters wrote information from the unit's various radars on vertical display boards from which controllers maintained positive air traffic control, as well as target area air space control. In June, wing control capabilities significantly increased when MACS-4 arrived to replace MACS-7. The new unit brought with it a new semi-automated, computer-oriented TAOC which comprised part of the Marine Tactical Data System (MTDS). This TAOC permitted the wing to handle more than 200 aircraft tracks at the same time. When the complete MTDS became operational on Monkey Mountain on the Tiensha Peninsula northeast of Da Nang in July, it provided a link with the Navy Tactical Data System of the Seventh Fleet for instant exchange of air defense data with ships operating in the Gulf of Tonkin. Future plans for the MTDS included a connection with the Air Force Tactical Data System for passing air defense and air control data instantly from Thailand to Da Nang and naval units in the Tonkin Gulf.

While the TAOC, collocated with the MTDS and a Hawk missile battery on Monkey Mountain, served as the hub of wing control and air defense, the DASCs were the main centers of support for ground units. At the beginning of 1967, three DASCs were in operation; one at each of the division headquarters and one at the 3d Marine Division (Forward) Command Post at Dong Ha. Marine Air Support Squadrons (MASS) 2 and 3 provided the DASCs. Requests for air support, both attack and helicopter, passed through battalion and regimental air liaison officers to the DASC at division headquarters; requests from AOs and FACs went directly to DASC.

The support squadrons also contained the air support radar teams (ASRTs). During 1967, there were five ASRTs in operation. Located at Chu Lai, Da Nang, Phu Bai, and Dong Ha (two), each team used TPQ-10 radar to control aircraft in direct support missions during low visibility conditions. TPQ-10s had a 50-mile range, thus the Marine radar coverage included almost all of I Corps.

Although their mission was not tactical in nature, the Marine air traffic control units (MATCUs) were vital to the conduct of effective air operations. At all Marine airfields, the MATCUs provided terminal traffic control, including landing instructions and



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189984
Men from Marine Air Traffic Control Unit 62, a subordinate unit of MAG-12, operate at the Khe Sanh airstrip from expeditionary equipment they have sandbagged against NVA artillery and rockets.

ground-controlled approach data during periods of low visibility.

Until the activation of Marine Air Control Group 18 on 1 September 1967, the units operating the Marine air command and control system were part of Marine Wing Headquarters Group 1. With one headquarters squadron, two air support squadrons, two air control squadrons, and two anti-aircraft missile battalions on 1 July 1967, the group was one of the largest known to Marine aviation. Its personnel served throughout I Corps, including Chu Lai, Phu Bai, Dong Ha, Marble Mountain, Monkey Mountain, and the Hai Van Pass.¹

Throughout 1967 the 1st MAW operated under the provisions of MACV Aviation Directive 95-4 of 25 June 1966. This directive gave the commander of the Seventh Air Force, in his capacity as Deputy Commander USMACV (Air), the "coordinating authority" for tactical air support in South Vietnam, but not actual operational control of Marine air. The system allowed 1st MAW to meet all of III MAF's air support requirements while making its excess sortie capability available to Seventh Air Force for supporting other U.S. and allied forces.

A Memorandum of Agreement between III MAF and Seventh Air Force guided 1st MAW's air defense operations during 1967. Both services recognized the

necessity of a unified air defense system in the event of a North Vietnamese air attack on South Vietnam. The agreement gave the Air Force overall air defense responsibility, including naming an air defense commander. The 1st MAW designated which of its forces would participate in air defense and granted the Air Force certain authority over those forces, including the scrambling of alert aircraft, designation of targets, declaration of Hawk missile control status, and firing orders.

Marine commanders were essentially satisfied with the adequacy of these documents. In actual practice, 1st MAW controlled all air operations in support of ground units in I Corps while making available 25 to 30 sorties per day to the Seventh Air Force.² This system remained in effect until the advent of "single management" in early 1968.

Fixed-Wing Operations

In the absence of enemy aircraft over South Vietnam, the day-to-day mission of the 1st MAW fighter and fighter attack squadrons became close air support (CAS).³ By long-established doctrinal definition, these air strikes were against targets so close to friendly forces that each mission required integration with the fire and maneuver plans of the ground combat element. For better coordination and to reduce the possibility of friendly casualties, a forward air controller (FAC) with the supported unit or an airborne forward air controller (FAC[A]) controlled these strikes.

There were two basic categories of CAS mission, preplanned and immediate. A preplanned strike was the culmination of a complex process. For example, a Marine battalion commander with the mission of taking a specified objective normally would submit a request for strike aircraft through his air liaison officer the day before the operation began. From the battalion this request passed through the DASC at division and eventually to the wing TADC at Da Nang. There, the TADC assimilated all requests and assigned missions to one of the three fixed-wing groups, depending on the nature of the target and aircraft type desired for the mission.

As soon as the TADC passed the mission to a MAG, the group operations officers compared the orders with aircraft availability within the group and assigned a schedule to each squadron for the following day. Each mission passed by TADC through group received a mission number, a time on target

(TOT), and a prescribed ordnance load;* the squadron scheduling officer merely assigned pilots and aircraft.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421815

A Marine forward air controller in a small O-1 observation aircraft checks a target after directing an air strike on the position by fixed-wing attack aircraft.

At the appropriate time, the aircraft took off and headed for the target. Once airborne, the flight leader contacted TADC to confirm that his flight was airborne and proceeding on schedule. Usually the TADC simply cleared the leader for his original mission, but if a target of higher priority developed, the TADC could divert the flight. In this case, before entering the new operating area, the leader contacted the responsible DASC, which cleared the flight to a local controller. Normally this was a division air liaison officer (ALO) or a Marine or Air Force FAC(A) flying over the area of the infantry unit to be supported.

FAC(A)s in either light observation planes or UH-1E helicopters controlled most CAS missions in I

*Colonel John M. Verdi pointed out that this system did not relieve the squadron commander of his responsibilities. The squadron commander had to carefully supervise the weight and balance of the prescribed load on the aircraft to avoid unnecessary danger to the crew and aircraft during takeoff and combat maneuvering. Col John M. Verdi, Comments on draft ms, 4Jun81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.), hereafter Verdi Comments.

Corps. During these missions, the airborne controller monitored the ground unit's VHF radio net and directed the attacking aircraft over his UHF radio. When a flight arrived on station, the FAC informed the pilots* of the target description, elevation, attack heading, direction of pull-out, number of passes desired, and the number and type of bombs to be dropped on each pass. He also relayed the direction and distance to the nearest friendly units. The FAC then marked the target with a white phosphorous rocket or a smoke grenade. Once certain that the pilots had identified the correct target, the controller cleared the jet for an approach with the phrase "cleared hot." Thus instructed, the flight leader would make the first pass on the marked target, followed closely by his wingman. Throughout the strike, the ALO or FAC would relay corrections to the attack planes, often directing them to new targets as the Communist troops maneuvered or fled.

While preplanned missions required approximately 20 hours from time of request to time of delivery, the wing could respond much more quickly if necessary. This response was an "immediate mission." If an emergency developed, the TADC or DASCs diverted airborne flights to another target, and briefed them en route to the new target. The TADC also could launch aircraft from one of three "hot pads." Each of the three fixed-wing groups maintained four planes on an around-the-clock alert for this type of emergency. Two of the planes at each group were on primary alert, and the other two served as a backup in case of another emergency. The time lapse between notification to launch and until the on-call aircraft became airborne normally was just under 10 minutes. As soon as a flight of alert aircraft became airborne, another flight replaced it on the pad.

Another important aspect of Marine fixed-wing operations was deep air support. These strikes did not take place in the immediate vicinity of friendly forces and, therefore, did not require integration with the ground maneuver plan. Deep air support missions helped isolate the battlefield by destroying enemy reinforcements, support troops, and logistic

resources. If a FAC(A) was available in the objective area, he controlled the strikes, but his services were not mandatory because the distance from the target to friendly forces eliminated the chance of accidental bombing. However, pilots of strike aircraft often preferred to work with a FAC(A) on such missions because of the latter's greater familiarity with targets and enemy defenses in the area.⁴

The aircraft most frequently selected for close support missions was the Douglas A-4E Skyhawk. Colonel Jay W. Hubbard's MAG-12 included four A-4 squadrons. The A-4E was a small, highly maneuverable, attack jet capable of extremely accurate bombing. The Skyhawk could deliver a variety of ordnance including bombs, rockets, napalm, smoke, and 20mm cannon fire. The most significant performance limitation of the A-4 was the size of its payload, roughly 3,000 pounds.*

The McDonnell F-4B Phantom II was a more versatile aircraft. Four F-4 squadrons operated in Vietnam during 1967, one assigned to Colonel Franklin C. Thomas, Jr.'s MAG-11, at Da Nang and three with Colonel Douglas D. Petty, Jr.'s MAG-13. Designed to perform the primary air-to-air mission and modified to perform a secondary air-to-ground mission, the F-4 was one of the fastest interceptors in the world, yet it could carry as many as twenty-four 500-pound bombs for ground support.⁵

Lieutenant Colonel John M. Verdi commented, however, that this was a theoretical figure that did not reflect the realities of combat. He wrote recently:

... the F-4 *could* be loaded with as many as 24 Mk-82 bombs ... But (1) *not* an F-4B (unless one elected to go with 2,000 pounds less than full internal fuel so as to comply with max gross weight), and (2) *not* if the target was anywhere further away than the end of the runway. I daresay somebody might have hauled such a load in combat (to get his picture taken), but in the real tactical world the choices came down to TANK-3-6-3-TANK ([as did VMFA-] 122 and most USAF units) and 3-3-TANK-3-3 (most Navy units). Of course, Brand X [squadrons] did it 6-3-TANK-3-6, which (1) overloaded the airplane, (2) cracked the wing spars, and (3) gave the crew an unmanageable rolling moment in event of failure of one of those outboard MERs (multiple ejection racks) to release or jettison (something [the Air Force] found out when *they* tried it, which is why they went back to TANK-3-6-3-TANK.)⁶

*Colonel John M. Verdi noted that such in-the-clear radio transmissions also informed enemy monitors of the particulars of the mission. This was true of all radio transmissions, ground or air, without voice encryption devices, especially during this period when radio frequencies and call signs did not change on a daily basis. Verdi Comments.

*As is common with aircraft, the A-4's practical payload varied from as much as 5,000 pounds in the winter monsoon to as little as 2,000 pounds in the heat of summer, assuming a center-line external tank. Verdi comments.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A26453

A large ordnance load and multiple bomb racks made the A-4 Skyhawk, shown here in the A-4F version entering production in 1967, a mainstay for close air support missions.

Two other types of Marine aircraft available for ground support operations during 1967 were the Ling-Temco-Vought F-8E Crusader and the Grumman A6-A Intruder. One squadron of each type served under MAG-11 at Da Nang.

The Crusader carried internally mounted 20mm cannon and was the only Marine aircraft in Vietnam configured to carry more than one 2,000-pound bomb until the arrival of the A-6A. Because the F-8Es were originally designed as a high performance fighter, the Marines phased out these planes and replaced them with F-4s.⁷

The morning of 1 April, VMA(AW)-533, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Williams P. Brown, arrived at Chu Lai to become MAG-12's first A-6 squadron.* The A-6A was the only operational U.S. aircraft that had a self-contained all-weather bombing capability using a moving target indicator.⁸ It flew extensive interdiction missions during the monsoon season, not only in South Vietnam, but also in Laos and North Vietnam. The Intruder could carry a heavy bomb load to a target 400 miles away, drop its ordnance, and return to base, even during severe monsoon conditions.

The increase in heavy ground action in northern I Corps during the early months of 1967 brought demands for many more close and direct air support missions in that region. The heavy fighting at Khe Sanh in late April and early May provided a classic

example of integrated employment of modern, fixed-wing aviation in support of ground maneuver elements. In the two weeks of bitter fighting for Hills 881 North and South, the 1st MAW flew more than 1,000 sorties for Marine infantry units. The defeat of the enemy on this critical terrain was the product of skillful and closely coordinated air-ground action.

As the enemy continued to focus on northern Quang Tri Province, Marine aviation, from 2 June under the command of Major General Norman J. Anderson, increased the tempo of attack operations there. Primary targets were enemy artillery and rocket sites, a major threat to allied units and installations along the DMZ. By July, intelligence officers had identified approximately 130 sites, including weapons as large as 152mm gun-howitzers. The heaviest raids against these positions occurred during and after the battle for Con Thien, when Marine aircraft participated in joint operations called Headshed, Neutralize, and Eradicate. These operations received the acronym SLAM, for searching, locating, annihilating, and monitoring. This concept used the entire spectrum of supporting fire: B-52s, tactical air, artillery, and naval gunfire. Elements of the Seventh Air Force, Strategic Air Command, Seventh Fleet, Vietnamese Air Force, Marine and Army artillery, and 1st MAW concentrated on destroying the enemy fire support positions. By the end of the year, the effort destroyed less than 40 of the NVA weapons.

While the majority of the 1st MAW's out-of-

*Lieutenant Colonel Howard Wolf's VMA(AW)-242, also flying the A-6A and part of MAG-11, had arrived in Vietnam on 1 November 1966.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A422400-B

General purpose bombs hang from the wings of an A-6A Intruder from VMA(AW)-242 and an F-4B Phantom II from VMFA-542 enroute on a scheduled mission in Vietnam.

country missions were in the DMZ area, Marine pilots also participated in strikes against North Vietnam. These strikes involved the six areas of North Vietnam which planners called "route packages." Route Package I was immediately north of the DMZ; Route Package VI lay in the extreme north of the country. Bombing of the southern portion of Route Package I, codenamed "Tally Ho" and under the control of Seventh Air Force, began in July 1966. By the winter of 1967, Tally Ho missions ceased as a separate entity; strikes in the area thereafter fell within the overall interdiction campaign.⁹

The Seventh Air Force's retaliatory Rolling Thunder raids, initiated in March 1965, expanded to include high intensity interdiction missions during 1967. On 18 May 1967, VMA(AW)-242 participated in the first Rolling Thunder strike in Route Package VI (Hanoi/Haiphong).¹⁰ The other A-6A squadron, VMA(AW)-533, kept just as active. The sophisticated electronic equipment and superb all-weather capability of the Intruder made it an ideal aircraft for attacks against attractive, but heavily defended, North Vietnamese targets.

Because of the A-6's all-weather capability, 1st MAF reduced the enemy's antiaircraft effectiveness by flying most Marine Rolling Thunder missions at night and as single-aircraft missions.¹¹ During the strikes, the attack pilots relied upon assistance from their fellow Marines from VMCF-1. EF-10Bs and EA-6As of VMCF-1, the same basic aircraft as the A-6As, carried equipment for electronic countermeasure

missions; they carried no ordnance.¹² During the raids, the EF-10Bs or EA-6s orbited beyond North Vietnamese surface-to-air missile range and jammed the enemy's fire control radar while the attacking Intruders made their target runs. Because of their lighter equipment load, the EA-6As could remain on station longer than the attack aircraft, an ideal situation for superior electronic countermeasure raid protection. Prime targets for Rolling Thunder missions were bridges, fuel facilities, rolling stock, airfields, missile sites, and supply lines.*

In addition to close and deep air support missions, Marine fixed-wing squadrons conducted a variety of less dramatic, but equally important, tasks such as landing zone (LZ) preparation. These operations illustrated the then prevalent Marine Corps concept that the helicopter was a mode of transportation, not an attack aircraft. The 1st Wing provided fixed-wing support for helicopter assaults of contested landing zones. Prior to and during these landings, Marine attack aircraft would strike the objective area to clear obstacles and neutralize possible antiaircraft threats. As the troop-carrying helicopters entered the zone, the covering jet pilots would shift their attacks to terrain around the LZ from which the enemy could op-

*After the NVA's deployment of missiles in the DMZ area in April, electronic countermeasure EA-6As and older EF-10B Sky Knights remained airborne over the area to counter this threat. Their effectiveness limited Marine aircraft losses to only two missile kills during 1967.



3d MarDiv ComdC, September 1967

Cargo parachutes stream from the rear of one of VMGR-152's KC-130s bringing supplies to the Khe Sanh combat base in September 1967 after enemy activity closed the only road leading to the base.

pose the landing. These strikes not only protected the helicopters, but also shielded the first infantry waves during the critical, early phase of the landing.

Other Marine fixed-wing pilots contributed immeasurably to the overall air effort, even though they never fired a shot or dropped a bomb. Some flew the C-117Ds assigned to the headquarters of the aircraft groups. These C-117D missions varied from routine logistics support to dropping flares over friendly forces at night. Another group of transport pilots came from VMGR-152. The squadron's Lockheed KC-130 Hercules provided extensive and varied support for both III MAF and 1st MAW. Though VMGR-152's home base remained at MCAS Futema, Okinawa, the squadron maintained a detachment of at least four planes on a rotational basis at Da Nang. The Marine transport's 30,000- to 35,000-pound cargo load, depending on mission range, served many varied logistic requirements. The 130s flew diversified missions such as in-flight refueling of jets, paradropping of bulk lots of ammunition and supplies, flare drops, and even service as airborne DASCs; as well as for daily, routine shipments of hundreds of passengers and tons of

cargo. Such varied missions required great flying skill, especially those into Khe Sanh and Dong Ha. Flying into Khe Sanh under visual flight rules and into Dong Ha with its dust and short runway were routine but far from dull missions for VMGR-152 pilots.¹³

VMCJ-1's version of the Phantom II, the RF-4B, equipped with cameras in the nose, performed a variety of photo-reconnaissance missions for 1st MAW. These aircraft also contributed directly to the defense of Da Nang, as described by one of the squadron's commanders, Major Edgar J. Love:

... after the second rocket attack on Da Nang, 14 July 1967, the RF-4B played a major role in helping to keep the VC from launching rockets within the 12,000 meter ring [around the base]. Through use of its sensors, the RF-4B was able to [monitor] a fairly large area on a daily basis from about 5 miles north of Da Nang to about 20 miles south and from the sea on the east to some 30 miles inland. When it was determined that the various [enemy] teams transporting rockets were converging into a central area, harassing fires or air strikes (including B-52s) were directed into these areas. It was a coordinated effort of reconnaissance patrols, artillery, air strikes, and airborne reconnaissance. As a side light, Major Richard W. Hawthorne and Captain Richard R. Kane, while flying one

The sun rises beneath the nose of a venerable C-117 at the Ky Ha airfield at the Chu Lai combat base in February. This particular aircraft had logged over 15,000 hours in the air and still performed reliably.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421604





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421998
Cpl William H. Mielke (top) and LCpl Phillip J. Orlando of Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron 36 repair the AD20-8 engine of their squadron's C-117D at Phu Bai on 30 December.

of these many reconnaissance flights, crashed in September 1967 and were declared missing.*¹⁴

Helicopter Operations

The Vietnam War was the first conflict in history to involve large-scale employment of helicopter forces. This "Cavalry of the Sky" provided the allies with the advantages of mobility and staying power which negated much of the advantage held by an already elusive enemy. To the infantryman the helicopter was more than a tactical expedient; it was a part of his life. Helicopters carried him into battle, provided him with life and fire support, and rushed him to the hospital if he were sick or wounded.

At the beginning of 1967, MAGs-16 and -36 and the SLF had a total of 11 helicopter squadrons operating in South Vietnamese air space. Of these, eight were transport squadrons flying either the Sikorsky UH-34D, a Vietnam veteran since early 1962, or the relatively new and larger Boeing-Vertol CH-46A. The other three squadrons were observation squadrons equipped with the highly

maneuverable, single-engined Bell UH-1E.*

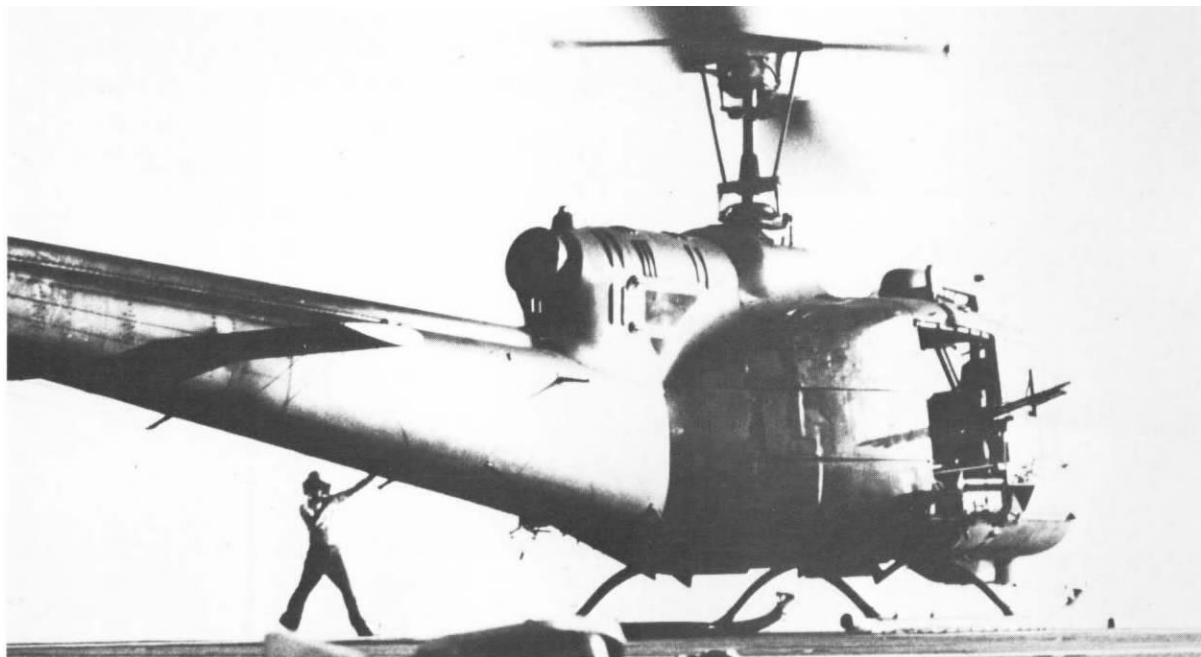
The Marines used helicopters for five basic missions: tactical airlift of troops, insertion and extraction of reconnaissance teams, supply, downed aircraft recovery, and search and rescue. The helicopter groups frequently supported more than a dozen major ground operations during a given month. The 1st MAW maintained direct control of the helicopter groups, issuing orders to them on the basis of the ground units' daily needs. The air request and allotment chain of command was basically the same as for fixed-wing squadrons. While the daily schedule covered routine missions, many unforeseeable situations occurred, such as medical evacuations, emergency extractions, and downed aircraft. To deal with these contingencies, the squadrons kept a section of helicopters on strip alert, normally either one UH-34 or CH-46 transport and one armed UH-1E to fly "chase."

"Medevac" and emergency extractions were especially critical because lives depended on the quick and effective response of the helicopter crews. Most of these missions occurred when friendly forces were in close contact with the enemy; in such cases, ground fire in the landing zone was almost a certainty. Even with the jet and armed helicopter escort, rescue helicopters rarely departed the landing zone without sustaining hits from enemy fire. These flights usually took place over extremely rugged terrain, which gave the pilots problems in even finding the landing zone. MAG-16 and -36 squadrons flew these missions daily. The skill and courage of the helicopter crews were the major factors enabling nearly 99 percent of the wounded evacuees to survive.¹⁵

A major factor in the success of these missions was the presence of UH-1E "gunships." Assigned to the observation squadrons (VMOs), the UH-1Es functioned in a number of roles. The armed version, or gunship, carried four fuselage-mounted, electrically fired M-60 machine guns and two 19-round rocket packs. Gunships flew escort and close air support missions and also served as command and control

*The Marine Corps later administratively declared both officers legally dead. The determination occurred on 28 November 1978 for Hawthorne and 26 February 1980 for Kane.

*VMO squadrons each rated 12 light helicopters in 1965 and the Marine Corps had obtained UH-1Es based on this figure. The scarcity of suitable fixed-wing observation planes resulted in further procurement, so that by 1967 UH-1Es were the only aircraft assigned to the three VMOs in Vietnam. By December of that year, each squadron had between 21 and 27 UH-1Es available. This interim measure continued until the arrival of the long-awaited OV-10 in 1968.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421708

A Navy flight deck crewman on the USS Okinawa (LPH 3) signals the pilot of a Marine UH-1E that he is cleared for take off in support of Operation Beau Charger, Special Landing Force Alpha's assist to Operation Hickory against NVA forces below the DMZ.

"birds" for airborne forward air controllers as well as senior ground commanders. Each division commander had a permanently assigned helicopter; regimental and battalion commanders used others on an "as available" basis.

In the FAC(A) mode, one rocket pack carried white phosphorous marking rockets, the other contained high explosive missiles. In a clean, unarmed configuration, appropriately referred to as a "slick," the aircraft could carry seven to nine fully equipped troops. "Slicks" also performed administrative and transport missions such as VIP flights.

An incident occurred in southern Quang Ngai Province in late 1967 which demonstrated both the firepower of the armed UH-1E and the tenacity, skill, and courage of Marine gunship crews. On 19 August, Captain Stephen W. Pless, a VMO-6 gunship pilot, was flying chase for an emergency medevac mission when he heard over the radio net of another emergency situation. Pless learned that four U.S. Army soldiers were stranded on a beach north of Duc Pho and were about to be overwhelmed by a large Viet Cong force. Breaking off from his original mission, the Huey pilot flew to the scene. On arrival, Pless saw about 50 VC in the open; some were bayoneting and beating the Americans. He swept in

1stLt Jack H. McCracken, a helicopter pilot with HMM-165, escaped serious injury during a resupply mission in Quang Ngai province when the .30-caliber round he holds smashed into his cockpit and lodged in the hard rubber heel of his left boot.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A423001





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A422068

The terror of a helicopter medevac flight under fire shows on the faces of a wounded Marine, Cpl Larry R. Miklos (center) and an unidentified Navy hospital corpsman as they watch an enemy machine gun shooting toward their helicopter on 1 September.

on the VC, killing and wounding many and driving the survivors back into a treeline. He made his rocket and machine gun attacks at such low levels that fragments from his own ordnance pelted the gunship. Though still under heavy small arms fire, Pless landed his gunship between the Communists in the treeline and the wounded soldiers. His two enlisted crewmen, Gunnery Sergeant Leroy N. Poulson and Lance Corporal John G. Phelps, leaped out of the helicopter and raced through enemy fire to help the wounded men.

Captain Rupert E. Fairfield, Jr., the co-pilot, killed three of the nearest VC with a burst from a M-60 machine gun, then ran to help Poulson and Phelps drag the soldiers to the aircraft. Captain Pless hovered his UH-1E and sent streams of machine gun fire into the Viet Cong positions in the treeline. Under cover of his fire, the three crewmen pulled the wounded soldiers into the helicopter. Pless headed the dangerously overloaded aircraft out to sea. Four times the helicopter settled into the water. Each time Captain Pless skipped it back into the air. While the crew threw out all unnecessary gear to lighten the craft, Pless jettisoned the rocket pods. Gradually, the UH-1E gained altitude and limped back to the 1st Hospital Company's landing pad at Chu Lai. In addition to rescuing the Americans, the crew received credit for killing a confirmed total of 20 VC and

probably killed another 38. Fairfield, Poulson, and Phelps each received the Navy Cross; Captain Pless

The Da Nang press center provides the location for this photograph taken during a news conference on 26 August following the dramatic flight that earned VMO-6's Capt Stephen W. Pless (second from left) his Medal of Honor. Others of the UH-1E crew, LCpl John G. Phelps, Capt Rupert E. Fairfield, Jr., and GySgt Leroy N. Poulson, received the Navy Cross.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189212





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370412

A smoke grenade marks the landing zone as a member of a helicopter support team-brings in a CH-34D with supplies for the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines in Operation Shelby.

received the Medal of Honor, the first awarded to a member of the 1st MAW for action in Vietnam.*

While the armed helicopters participated in many dramatic exploits, the yeoman's share of the workload fell to the transport helicopters, the UH-34s and the CH-46s. In March of 1966, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing's tactical/logistical airlift capability significantly increased with the arrival of the CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter. It could carry a four-man crew and 17-20 combat-loaded troops, or 4,000 pounds of cargo, in contrast to the five to seven troops, or 1,500-pound lift capacity of the aging UH-34. The twin-engined, tandem-rotor transport had a retractable tail ramp, a 115-mile combat radius, and a top speed of about 145 knots. The Sea Knight was the only Marine helicopter in

Vietnam armed with two .50-caliber machine guns.*

The arrival of another aircraft in 1967 further improved Marine helicopter capabilities. On 8 January, a four-plane detachment of CH-53A Sea Stallions from HMH-463 joined MAG-16 at Marble Mountain. They were the first increment of a phased replacement of the obsolescent CH-37s. By the end of the year, 36 of the big CH-53s operated in I Corps. These twin-turbine, single-rotor assault transports could carry an impressive internal cargo of 8,000 pounds, but more significantly the "53A" had a six-ton external lift capability which permitted battlefield salvage of disabled UH-34Ds and CH-46s. By the end of 1967, Marine Sea Stallions had retrieved more than 120 damaged aircraft which avoided

*In addition to the Medal of Honor, Captain Pless, who flew over 700 combat missions in two tours in Vietnam, earned the Silver Star Medal, the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Bronze Star Medal, 32 Air Medals, the Navy Commendation Medal, the Korean Order of Military Merit, and the Purple Heart. After returning to the U.S., this colorful Marine aviator died in a tragic motorcycle crash at Pensacola, Florida, in 1969. See Appendix D for Captain Pless' Medal of Honor citation.

*Major General Norman J. Anderson has cautioned that there was a greater complexity behind this simple statement about two .50-caliber machine guns on helicopters. "This became standard, replacing the .30-caliber," he wrote, "only after extensive experience proved the need for the range and impact of the heavier weapon. Issues such as this, and there were many in the ordnance and engineering areas, were important and should not be [overlooked] or you create the impression that aviation sailed through the war without problems." MajGen Norman J. Anderson, Comments on draft ms, 10Jul81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370575

Infantrymen lean forward against the rotor wash and rush forward to unload supplies from a CH-46A Sea Knight helicopter in the 1st Marine Division's Operation Citrus.

destroying them in place. Troop lift and ambulance capabilities also increased with the Sea Stallions' arrival; normal loads were 37 combat troops or 24 litters. Fully loaded, the aircraft could accomplish missions at ranges up to 200 miles at a comfortable cruise speed of 120 knots.

The arrival of the "Super Bird," as the Marines quickly nicknamed the CH-53, was providential. In September III MAF grounded all CH-46s following several unexplained crashes. An on-site investigation, conducted by a joint Naval Air Systems Command/Boeing Vertol accident investigation team, revealed that structural failures were occurring in the area of the after pylon.* The team recommended structural and systems modifications to reinforce the rear rotor mount, as well as the installation of an indicator to detect excessive strain on critical parts of the aircraft.

*Lieutenant General Louis Metzger, a former assistant division commander of the 3d Marine Division, recently wrote his recollections of the grounding of the CH-46s: "Several CH-46s had gone down in flight before this. One was observed by an assistant air officer of the 3d Marine Division, a major [who was an] aviator. He had described seeing the tail fly off a CH-46 in flight. However, it is believed that [because of] a desire to accord the lost crew members the honor of dying in combat rather than in an accident, this observation was ignored. It wasn't until the accidents occurred as stated in the text, that the CH-46s were grounded. LtGen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft ms, n.d. (1981) (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

The entire modification program, requiring approximately 1,000 man-hours per aircraft, occurred in three phases: (1) disassembly of the aircraft, (2) incorporation of the modifications, and (3)

Aviation personnel at Dong Ha on 16 January look over one of the huge CH-53s from HMH-463 only eight days after the first detachment of four of the new helicopters arrived in South Vietnam for service with MAG-16 at the air facility at Marble Mountain.

3d MarDiv ComdC, January 1967





3d MarDiv ComdC, December 1967

A CH-53, the Marine Corps' largest and most powerful helicopter, retrieves a UH-34 downed in a mission to the Con Thien combat base in December.

reassembly and flight tests. Marines performed phases one and three; Boeing Vertol personnel completed phase two. Okinawa served as the principal modification site because it was the nearest secure Marine base which could provide both adequate facilities and skilled civilian workers. The program modified 80 aircraft at MCAF Futema, Okinawa, while the remaining 25 aircraft, already undergoing normal overhaul in Japan, received their modifications there.

The Marines of HMM-262, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Gregory A. Corliss, detached from the SLF to perform the Marine portion of the work. On 11 October, the Marines unloaded 40 CH-46s at Futema, and disassembly began immediately. Five days later, 114 Boeing Vertol specialists began phase two. By the end of December, the program had modified 89 aircraft and began phasing them back to the squadrons. The remaining 16 aircraft completed the modification program in February 1968.

Until the 46s returned, III MAF lost approximately half its tactical/logistic airlift capability and had to find replacement helicopters. As soon as the Marine Corps learned the seriousness of the CH-46s' defect, it rushed 23 UH-34s from the United States by cargo planes. They arrived on 15 October and immediately entered battle, often flown by pilots from the downed CH-46 squadrons. Ten additional CH-53s

entered the wing's inventory to further augment the lift capability in Vietnam. Finally, 31 U.S. Army UH-1Ds of the 190th Aviation Company joined General Anderson's forces at Phu Bai until the Sea Knights returned to flight status.¹⁶

The shifting of additional ground forces into the northern two provinces of I Corps during the fall of 1967 increased the tempo of helicopter operations. During this period, the two main areas of enemy activity were the DMZ and the Que Son Basin south of Da Nang, but as combat to the north intensified, MAG-36 at Chu Lai found itself further and further from the scene of Marine ground operations. As a result, General Anderson ordered MAG-36 to Phu Bai where it could better support 3d Marine Division operations. The first squadron, VMO-6, relocated on 4 October and 11 days later Colonel Frank E. Wilson displaced his group headquarters from Ky Ha to Phu Bai. The next day, Colonel Wilson took over VMO-3, HMM-164, HMM-362, and MATCUs-62 and -68 from Colonel Edwin O. Reed's MAG-16. At the same time, HMM-265, a MAG-36 CH-46 squadron at Marble Mountain, passed to Colonel Reed's command. On 30 October, another UH-34

A CH-46A from HMM-164 lands on 2 March 1967 to pick up infantrymen from the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines engaged in Operation Prairie II north of Cam Lo, while an escort helicopter circles overhead.

3d MarDiv ComdC, March 1967





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189791

CH-34Ds, the mainstay of transport helicopter operations following grounding of the CH-46s for structural problems, land infantrymen in a dry paddy for Operation Essex.

squadron, HMM-163, joined MAG-36 from the USS *Okinawa* (LPH 3) and moved to the new airfield at Quang Tri.* By the end of the month, MAG-36 occupied its new home; only HMM-165 remained at Ky Ha, until space became available at Phu Bai in November. The relocation of MAG-36 proved to be

*Before joining the SLF, HMM-163 had been at Phu Bai as part of MAG-16. LtCol Horace A. Bruce, Comments on draft ms, 14Jul81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

A CH-46A takes off after bringing supplies to an infantry unit on a hill top somewhere in Vietnam.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370584



a wise decision, as events of early 1968 demonstrated.

Operational statistics indicate the sharply increased scale of Marine helicopter squadrons' efforts in Vietnam during 1967. The sorties rate increased by more than 20 percent over that of 1966. In 1967, 1st MAW helicopters flew 510,595 sorties, carrying 628,486 personnel and 70,651 tons of cargo.

Artillery

In January of 1967, the Marines had the entire family of Marine Corps artillery—light, medium, and heavy—in I Corps. The method of employment of these weapons differed little from World War II and Korea: direct support of a specific unit or general support of divisional units.

Division-level light artillery, the 4.2-inch mortar or the 107mm M30 mortar and the 105mm M101A1 howitzer, provided direct support of infantry units. Division Medium artillery, the 155mm M114A1 howitzer (towed) and the 155mm M109 self-propelled (SP) howitzer, were the general support weapons.* Force artillery elements attached to the

*The Marine Corps replaced 155mm M114A1s in the Marine divisional artillery regiments with the 155mm M109/SP just before the Vietnam conflict. As the need for more artillery developed, the Marine Corps shipped the old towed weapons to Vietnam and formed provisional batteries. Personnel and required equipment came from artillery battalions already there. Ironically, the older M114A1 enhanced the overall mobility of the divisional 155mm capability. The heavy tracked M109/SP was essentially roadbound and served in a "fortress artillery" role, while the lighter M114A1 could move both by helicopter and truck.

Marine Artillery Capabilities

| Marine Artillery Capabilities | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---|-------------------------|--|-------|--|-----------------------|--------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------|
| WEAPONS | RANGE (meters) | WEIGHT (pounds) | SUSTAINED RATE OF FIRE PER MINUTE | PRIME MOVER | EFFECTIVE AREA OF BURST: METERS, ONE ROUND | | AMMUNITION | | | | FINAL PROTECTIVE FIRE |
| | | | | | DEPTH | WIDTH | TYPES AVAILABLE | FUZES AVAILABLE | WEIGHT OF FUZED HE PROJO | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 105mm How Towed M101A1 | 11,000 | 4,980 | 3 | Helo 2 1/2-ton truck | 20 | 30 | | Q,D Ti VT CP | (pounds) 33 | 200 | |
| 155mm How Towed M114A1 | 14,600 | 12,950 | 1 | Helo 5-ton truck | 30 | 50 | HE L HE Illum WP Smoke RAP Gas Nuclear | Q,D Ti VT CP | 95 | 300 | |
| 155mm How (SP) M109A1 | 14,600 | 53,060 | 1 | SP | | | | | | | |
| 8" How (SP) M110 | 16,800 | 58,500 | 0.5 | SP | 30 | 80 | HE Spot Gas Nuclear | Q,D Ti VT CP | 200 | N/A | |
| 155mm Gun (SP) M53 | 23,500 | 96,000 | 0.5 | SP | 30 | 50 | | Q,D VT | 95 | N/A | |
| 107mm Mort M30 | 5,656 | 671 | 15-20 | Helo 3/4-ton truck | 30 | 30 | Illum WP Gas | Q,D Ti VT | 26 | 200 | |



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421672

A maintenance team from HMM-165 rigs a hoist sling to a CH-46A sitting in a mountain stream northwest of Chu Lai on 12 May. Enemy ground fire had set the aircraft on fire and the pilot, Capt James F. Pleva, force-landed in the stream, dousing the flames.

artillery regiments provided increased range and delivery capabilities.¹⁷ Force artillery included the 155mm M53 self-propelled gun and the 8-inch M55 self-propelled howitzer. The Marine Corps replaced the M55 during the year with the new M110 self-propelled model.

Although the basic techniques of artillery employment in Vietnam differed little from those used elsewhere, local circumstances required certain refinements. Probably the most difficult problem facing Marine artillerymen and the infantry they supported was the need to minimize civilian casualties and property destruction, while still furnishing adequate fire support. Strongly worded MACV directives, further amplified by instructions from III MAF and the divisions, enjoined restraint and careful fire planning. These required careful selection of helicopter landing zones and scheduling artillery and air strikes with the goal of keeping both Marine and civilian casualties at the lowest possible level, especially in heavily populated areas such as those around Da Nang. Firing into populated areas, using reconnaissance by fire, and planning harassment and interdiction fires presented significant problems. The Marine artillerymen continually balanced the possible tactical advantages against the danger to long-term pacification goals. When

Marine units planned operations in coordination with Vietnamese province and district chiefs, a liaison officer from the Marines or a Marine or Army advisor stayed at the district headquarters to coor-

An unidentified Marine helicopter crewman smokes a cigarette beside his M-60 machine gun mount during a quiet flight in a CH-53A in December 1967.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370848



