

# U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

## HIGH MOBILITY AND STANDDOWN

### 1969



*COVER: Men of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines wait to board the amphibious transport Paul Revere at Da Nang, during the first phase of the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam.*

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# U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

HIGH MOBILITY AND STANDDOWN

1969

by

Charles R. Smith



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

1988

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### Anthology and Bibliography

- The Marines in Vietnam, 1954-1973, An Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, 1974, reprinted 1983; revised second edition, 1985

# Foreword

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This is the sixth volume in a planned nine-volume operational and chronological series covering the Marine Corps' participation in the Vietnam War. A separate functional series will complement the operational histories. This volume details the change in United States policy for the Vietnam War. After a thorough review, President Richard M. Nixon adopted a policy of seeking to end United States military involvement in Vietnam either through negotiations or, failing that, turning the combat role over to the South Vietnamese. It was this decision that began the Vietnamization of the war in the summer of 1969 and which would soon greatly reduce and then end the Marine Corps' combat role in the war.

The Marines of III Marine Amphibious Force continued the full range of military and pacification activities within I Corps Tactical Zone during this period of transition. Until withdrawn, the 3d Marine Division, employing highly mobile tactics, successfully blunted North Vietnamese Army efforts to reintroduce troops and supplies into Quang Tri Province. The 1st Marine Division, concentrated in Quang Nam Province, continued both mobile offensive and pacification operations to protect the city of Da Nang and surrounding population centers. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing provided air support to both divisions, as well as other allied units in I Corps, while Force Logistic Command served all major Marine commands.

Although written from the perspective of III MAF and the Marine ground war in I Corps, an attempt has been made to place the Marine role in relation to the overall American effort. The volume also treats the Marine Corps' participation in the advisory effort, the operations of the Seventh Fleet Special Landing Force, and, to a lesser extent, the activities of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), 23d Infantry (Americal) Division, and 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). There are separate chapters on Marine air, artillery, surveillance, and logistics.

The nature of the war facing III MAF during 1969 forced the author to concentrate on major operations. This focus in no way slights those Marines whose combat service involved innumerable patrols, wearying hours of perimeter defense, and long days of providing logistical and administrative support for those in the field. III MAF's combat successes in 1969 came from the combined efforts of all Americans in I Corps.

The author, Charles R. Smith, has been with the History and Museums Division since July 1971. He has published several articles on military history, and is the author of *Marines in the Revolution: A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (Washington: Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, 1975). He is a graduate of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and received his master's degree in history from San Diego State University. He served in Vietnam with the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) in 1968 and 1969, first as an artilleryman and then as a historian.



E. H. SIMMONS

Brigadier General, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret.)  
Director of Marine Corps History and Museums



# Preface

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*U.S. Marines in Vietnam: High Mobility and Standdown, 1969*, like its predecessors, is largely based on the holdings of the Marine Corps Historical Center. These holdings include the official unit monthly command chronologies, combat after-action reports, daily message and journal files, files and studies of HQMC staff agencies and those of the Office of the Commandant, and the Oral History, Personal Papers, and Reference Collections of the Center.

The author supplemented these above sources with research in the records of the other Services and pertinent published primary and secondary sources. Although none of the information in this history is classified, some of the documentation on which it is based still carries a restricted or classified designation. More than 200 reviewers, most of whom were participants in the events covered in this volume, read a comment edition of the manuscript. Their comments, where applicable, have been incorporated into the text. A list of those who made substantial comments is included in the appendices. All ranks used in the body of the text are those held by individuals in 1969.

Like the previous volumes in the series, the production of this volume has been a cooperative effort. Members of the Histories Section, History and Museums Division, past and present, have reviewed the draft manuscript. Mrs. Joyce Bonnett, head archivist, and her assistants, aided the author's access to the records of the division and Headquarters Marine Corps staff agencies. Miss Evelyn A. Englander, head librarian, and her assistant, Mrs. Patricia E. Morgan, were very helpful in obtaining needed reference materials, as were members of the Reference Section, headed by Mr. Danny J. Crawford. Mrs. Regina Strother, formerly with the Defense Audio-Visual Agency and now with the History and Museums Division, graciously assisted in the photographic research. Mr. Benis M. Frank, head of the Oral History Section, was equally helpful in not only making his tapes and transcripts available, but also in interviewing a number of key participants and reviewing a copy of the draft manuscript.

Mr. Robert E. Struder, head of the Publications Production Section, adeptly guided the manuscript through the various production phases and assisted the author in partially mastering the intricacies of computer publication. The typesetting of the manuscript was done by Corporal James W. Rodriguez II and Lance Corporal Javier Castro. Mrs. Catherine A. Kerns contributed significantly to the typesetting effort, developed the charts accompanying the text, and cheerfully and professionally provided considerable technical expertise on typesetting procedures. Mr. William S. Hill, the division's graphics specialist, expertly produced the maps and completed the design and layout of the volume. The index was prepared by the author and Mrs. Meredith P. Hartley with the guidance and assistance of Mr. Frank.

The author gives special thanks to Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, Director of Marine Corps History and Museums, whose policies guide the Vietnam series; to Deputy Directors for History, Colonel Oliver M. Whipple, Jr., Colonel John G. Miller, and their successor, Colonel James R. Williams, who provided continuing support and guidance; to Mr. Henry I. Shaw, Jr., Chief Historian, who aided the author by giving him the benefit of his considerable experience in writing Marine Corps history, encouragement, advice,



prodding when needed, and general editorial direction; and to Mr. Jack Shulimson, Head, Histories Section and Senior Vietnam Historian, for providing advice and guidance, and for editing the final manuscript.

The author is also indebted to his colleagues in the historical offices of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Joint Chiefs of Staff, who freely exchanged information and made pertinent documents available for examination. The author must express his gratitude also to all those who reviewed the comment edition and provided corrections, personal photographs, and the insights available only to those who took part in the events. To all these individuals and all others connected with this project, the author is indebted and truly grateful. In the end, however, it is the author alone who is responsible for the content of the text, including opinions expressed and any errors in fact.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charles R. Smith". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Charles" being the most prominent.

CHARLES R. SMITH

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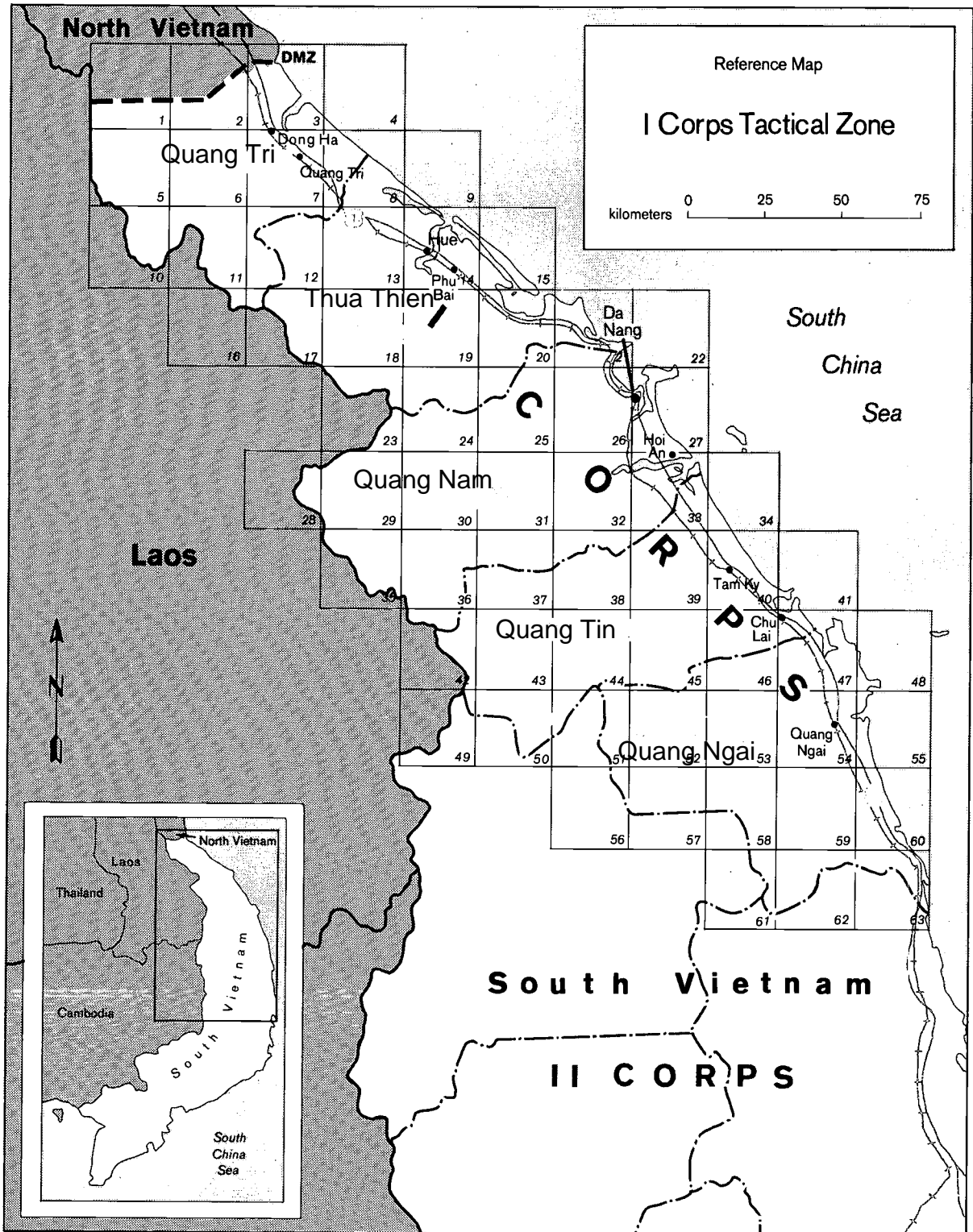
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PART I  
THE CONTINUING WAR



## CHAPTER 1

# Planning the Campaign

### *I Corps Order of Battle—Strategy: A Reevaluation of Priorities—I Corps Planning*

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#### *I Corps Order of Battle*

Responsibility for the defense of the Republic of Vietnam's five northernmost provinces of Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai in January 1969 rested with III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF). Commanded by Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., III MAF consisted of approximately 81,000 Marines situated at positions throughout the provinces which constituted I Corps Tactical Zone (ICTZ). Major General Charles J. Quilter's 15,500-man 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW) controlled more than 500 fixed-wing and rotary aircraft from fields at Chu Lai, Da Nang, Phu Bai, and Quang Tri. Headquartered on Hill 327 southwest of Da Nang, Major General Ormond R. Simpson's 1st Marine Division, 24,000 strong, operated throughout Quang Nam Province. The 21,000-man 3d Marine Division, commanded by Major General Raymond G. Davis and controlled from Dong Ha Combat Base, was responsible for Quang Tri Province. At Da Nang, the 9,500 officers and men of Brigadier General James A. Feeley, Jr.'s Force Logistic Command (FLC) provided the wing and two Marine divisions with combat materiel and maintenance support. Scattered throughout the hundreds of villages and hamlets of the five provinces were the 1,900 officers and men of the Combined Action Program (CAP), under Colonel Edward F. Danowitz, who continued the Marines' ambitious experiment in local security, still hampered somewhat by the residual effects of the enemy's 1968 *Tet* Offensive.

In addition to Marines, III MAF controlled approximately 50,000 United States Army troops. Located in Quang Tri Province, 5,000 officers and men of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), commanded by Colonel James M. Gibson, USA, aided in preventing enemy infiltration of the coastal plains. To the south, in Thua Thien Province, the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), under Major General Melvin Zais, USA, deployed three brigades totalling 20,000 men in an arc protecting the ancient imperial capital of Hue. These two Army units, which had been shifted to I Corps in 1968, together with the 3d Marine

Division, constituted XXIV Corps, commanded by Army Lieutenant General Richard G. Stilwell.\* Located at Phu Bai, Stilwell's organization was under the operational control of III MAF. Based at Chu Lai in southern I Corps, the 23,800 Army troops of Major General Charles M. Gettys' 23d Infantry (Americal) Division operated in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces under the direct control of III MAF. Also under the direct control of General Cushman, in his capacity as Senior U.S. Advisor in I Corps, were the 400 officers and men from all services of the United States Army Advisory Group (USAAG), who provided professional and technical assistance to South Vietnamese military units operating in I Corps Tactical Zone.

As a member of the III MAF staff, Mr. Charles T. Cross, the civilian deputy for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), coordinated the pacification effort in I Corps through his U.S. civilian and military representatives at the province and district level. Directly controlled by MACV, CORDS was created to integrate and direct the country-wide pacification program.

Other U.S. and allied contingents that were neither attached to nor controlled by III MAF also operated within the boundaries of I Corps. Assigned to the U.S. Army Support Command, U.S. Naval Support Activity, 3d Naval Construction Brigade, 45th Army Engineer Group, Task Force Clearwater, and the Air Force's 366th Tactical Fighter Wing were approximately 31,000 U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel. While controlled by their respective services, these support units cooperated closely with III MAF. Like the other five major allied organizations, the 7,800-man 2d Republic of Korea Marine Brigade, commanded by Brigadier General Dong Ho Lee, which protected an enclave south of Da Nang centered on Hoi An, received operational guidance from III MAF, but was under the direct authority of the commanding general

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\*In order to provide operational direction for the expanded United States military effort in northern I Corps during *Tet*, MACV Forward was established at Phu Bai in early February 1968. On 10 March, the command unit was redesignated Provisional Corps, Vietnam, and on 15 August again redesignated as XXIV Corps.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192828

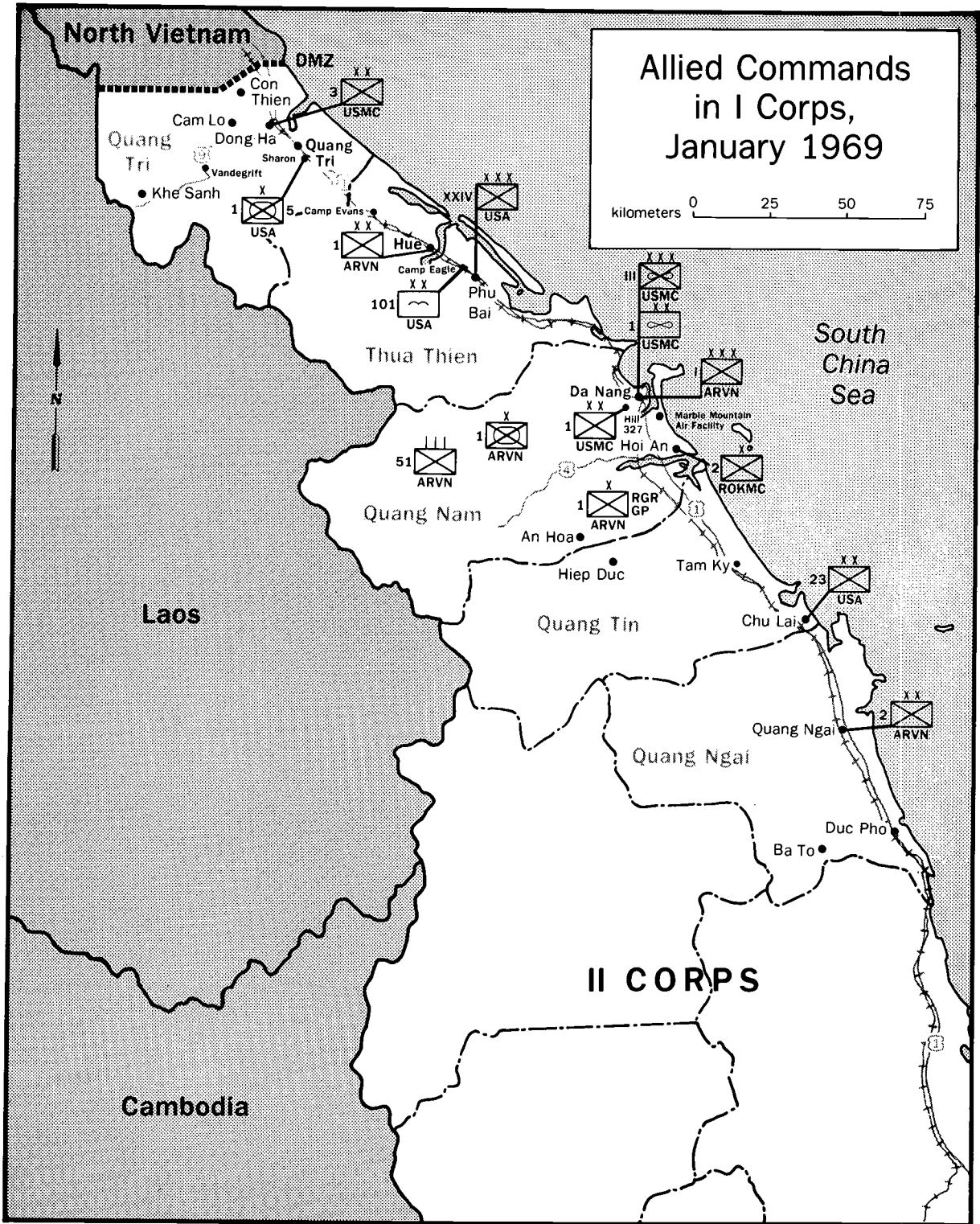
*LtGen Robert E. Cushman, Jr., right, is congratulated by Gen Creighton W. Abrams, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, after being presented a Gold Star in lieu of a second Distinguished Service Medal. As Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force since June 1967, Cushman oversaw a doubling of III MAF's strength.*

of Korean Forces in Vietnam, whose headquarters was in Saigon.

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and its paramilitary forces gradually were assuming a much greater share of the fighting in I Corps by 1969. Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, commanding ICTZ, controlled a force of 34,000 ARVN regulars. Headquartered at Hue, the 17 battalions of Major General Ngo Quang Truong's 1st ARVN Infantry Division pursued enemy forces in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. In southern I Corps the 2d Division's 12 infantry battalions, commanded by Brigadier

General Nguyen Van Toan, fought both enemy regulars and guerrillas throughout Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces. Between the two ARVN infantry divisions, the 51st Infantry and Armored Cavalry Regiments operated in Quang Nam Province. The 1st Ranger Group, normally stationed at Da Nang, acted as corps reserve, while the Vietnamese Air Force's 41st Tactical Wing, also located at Da Nang, provided over-all air support.

Reinforcing ARVN regulars were 49,800 troops of the Regional and Popular Forces (RF and PF), and 8,500 trained members of the part-time People's Self-



Defense Force (PSDF)—a paramilitary organization recruited, trained, and stationed in local areas. Among other Vietnamese units available to combat small groups of guerrilla infiltrators and root out members of the local Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI), were the 9,000-man National Police, and the National Police Field Force with a strength of 2,500. In addition, there were 6,200 men of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG), composed of Montagnard and Nung tribesmen, Cambodians, and Vietnamese, recruited and trained by the South Vietnamese Special Forces and advised by the U.S. Army's 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), which occupied nine mountain camps rimming the lowlands. Their task was to collect intelligence on enemy activities and attempt to block enemy infiltration routes into the heavily populated coastal plains.<sup>1</sup>

From a modern complex of air-conditioned buildings on the banks of the Song Han at Da Nang, General Cushman coordinated the activities of this diverse group of forces. Like his predecessor, Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, he functioned within a complex chain of command. III Marine Amphibious Force was under the operational control of the Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, General Creighton W. Abrams; but with respect to administrative matters affecting his Marines, General Cushman reported directly to Lieutenant General

Henry W. Buse, Jr., Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac), in Hawaii. As commanding general of III MAF, General Cushman not only directed the operations of all United States combat units in I Corps, but also provided guidance to the commander of the Korean Marine Brigade and others as I Corps Coordinator for United States and Free World Military Assistance Forces and, as Senior U.S. Advisor for I Corps, coordinated the activities of Lieutenant General Lam's ARVN units with those of his own.

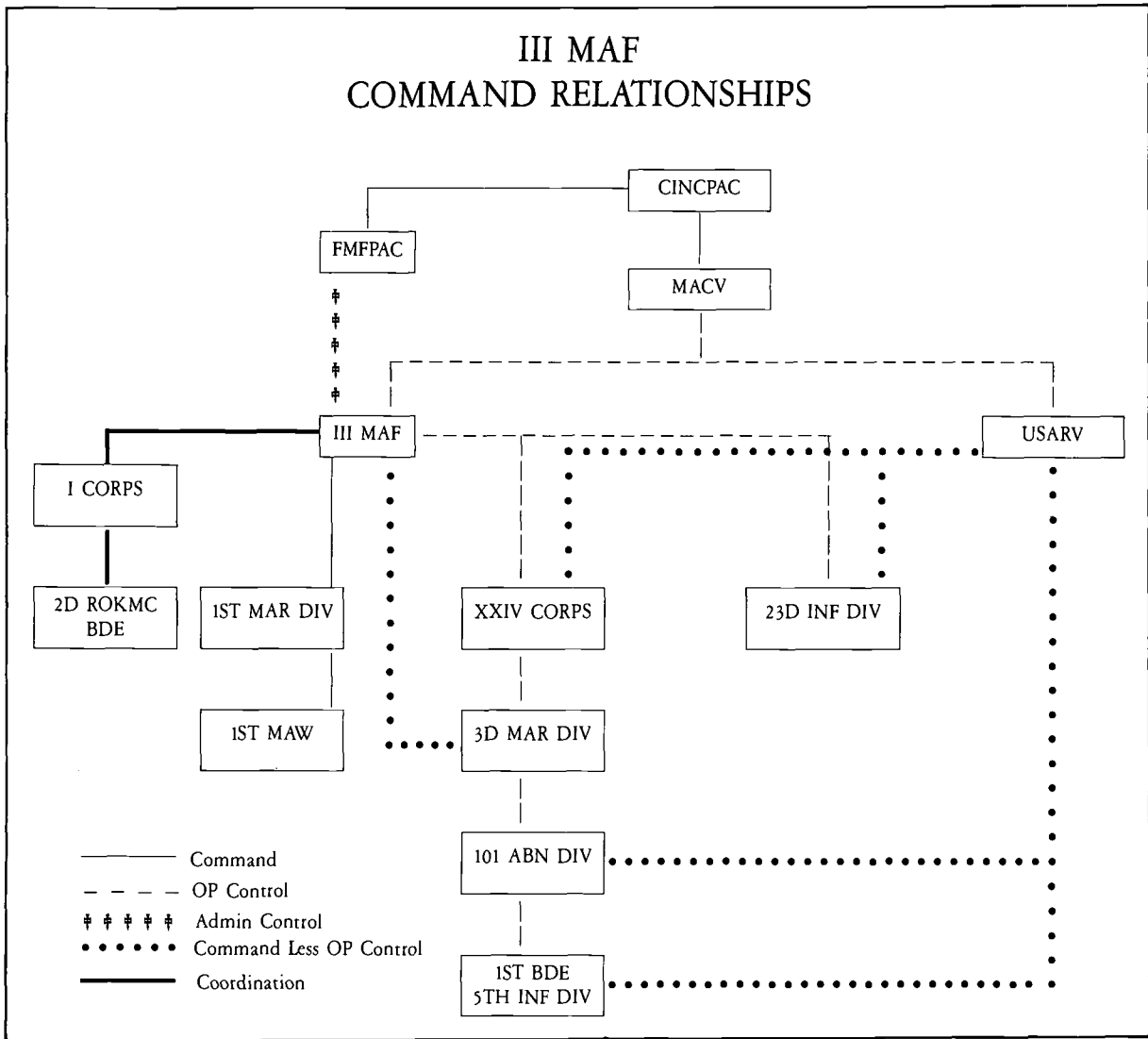
General Cushman was well prepared when he assumed the post of top Leatherneck in Vietnam. A graduate of the Naval Academy (Class of 1935) and recipient of the Navy Cross as a battalion commander during the recapture of Guam, Cushman served four years on Vice President Richard M. Nixon's staff as Assistant for National Security Affairs. In addition he commanded the 3d Marine Division in 1961, and later while serving as Commanding General, Marine Corps Base, Camp Pendleton, headed both the 4th Marine Division Headquarters nucleus, and the newly organized 5th Marine Division. In April 1967, he was appointed Deputy Commander, III Marine Amphibious Force. Three months later he assumed the duty of Commanding General, III MAF, replacing Lieutenant General Walt.

During his tenure, General Cushman managed III

*LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam, left, Commanding General, I Corps; LtGen Richard G. Stilwell, USA, Commanding General, XXIV Corps; and MajGen Ngo Quang Truong, right, Commanding General, 1st ARVN Division, pose with Gen Cao Van Vien, center left, Chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff during the latter's visit to Phu Bai.*

Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC649680





MAF's growth from a force of 97,000 Marine, Navy, and Army personnel to 172,000 by the beginning of 1969. His responsibilities, however, changed little. Like General Walt, Cushman was charged with the defense of I Corps Tactical Zone. Although the smallest in area and population, ICTZ was the most strategically located of the four South Vietnamese military regions due to its proximity to major enemy infiltration and supply routes, and base areas in Laos, the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and North Vietnam. Cushman would be replaced in March 1969 by Lieutenant General Herman Nickerson, Jr., a highly decorated veteran of World War II and Korea, and former commanding general of the 1st Marine Division in Vietnam from October 1966 to May 1967.

Opposing American, South Vietnamese, and Korean forces within the boundaries of I Corps, the

Demilitarized Zone, and contiguous North Vietnamese and Laotian border regions, were 123 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and 18 Viet Cong (VC) combat and support battalions composed of close to 89,000 enemy troops. According to allied intelligence estimates of early 1969, 42,700 were North Vietnamese Army regulars while 6,500 were Viet Cong main and local force unit members. In addition, there were approximately 23,500 guerrillas and 16,000 political and quasi-military cadre. Added to these known North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units were additional infantry and support battalions with an estimated strength of 30,000 troops located within striking distance of the corps tactical zone.

Five different headquarters directed enemy operations within the corps tactical zone to varying degrees: the *B-5 Front* which controlled troops along the DMZ;



Marine Corps Historical Collection  
*LtGen Herman Nickerson, Jr., right, relieves Gen Cushman as Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force in formal ceremonies at Da Nang on 26 March 1969. LtGen Nickerson previously served in Vietnam as Commanding General, 1st Marine Division and Deputy Commanding General, III MAF.*

7th Front which directed units within Quang Tri Province; *Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region* which had charge of units in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces; troops attached to the 4th Front which operated in Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces, and the city of Da Nang; and units subordinate to *Military Region 5* which operated in Quang Ngai Province. The five political and military headquarters were thought to receive orders from the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), which in turn was subject to the directives of the Reunification Department of the North Vietnamese Lao Dong Party.\*

The dramatic and massive corps-wide attack, concentrated in the northern two provinces, and resultant severe losses during the *Tet* and post-*Tet* Offensives of 1968, forced the enemy to reevaluate his military position as the new year began. As a result, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army strategy and tactics shifted from an attempt to win an immediate

victory to an attempt to win by prolonging the conflict. Large unit assaults were to be undertaken only if favorable opportunities presented themselves; small unit operations, particularly highly organized hit-and-run or sapper attacks, attacks by fire, harassment, terrorism, and sabotage would be used more extensively. The Communists hoped to inflict troop losses by cutting allied lines of communication, attacking base, rear service, and storage areas while conserving their military strength, defeating the pacification effort, and strengthening their negotiating position at Paris. Through such actions the enemy hoped to maintain an aura of strength and demonstrate to the South Vietnamese populace that its government was incapable of providing security for its people.

The differences in terrain and population north and south of Hai Van Pass, which essentially bisected the corps tactical zone, resulted in markedly different military situations by the end of 1968. In the north, with less than a third of the zone's population, the enemy tended to concentrate regular units in the uninhabited, jungle-covered mountain areas, close to border sanctuaries. The war in the north, then, was one fought between allied regular units and North Vietnamese Army regiments and divisions. It was, to draw an analogy, "like the Army fighting the Japanese in New Guinea—inhabitable jungle, mountainous terrain; the enemy being not little guys in black pajamas, but little guys in well-made uniforms and well-equipped and well-led, and certainly well-motivated."<sup>2</sup>

Faced with a smaller population base and a somewhat weaker infrastructure in the northern two provinces, and pursued at every turn by allied forces, enemy strength by year's end had dwindled to about 29 battalions from a high of 94 in mid-1968. The allied shift to a more mobile posture and the saturation of the remote mountain regions of western Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces with numerous patrols, sweeps, and ambushes resulted in the opening of vast areas of hitherto uncontested enemy strongholds, exposing havens and supply caches. Further, it allowed allied forces to exploit the advantages of the helicopter to the fullest, which permitted the massing of regimental or multi-regimental-size units anywhere within the provinces in a matter of hours. Allied operations north of the Hai Van Pass by the end of 1968 had produced a yearly total of almost 40,000 enemy casualties, forcing both North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units to withdraw in an attempt to regroup, reindoctrinate, refit, and prepare for the winter-spring

\*COSVN, the North Vietnamese forward control headquarters, consisted of a few senior commandets and key staff officers organized as an extremely mobile command post. Thought to be located in Tay Ninh Province, III Corps, near the Cambodian border, COSVN, although targeted by numerous American and South Vietnamese operations, eluded capture throughout the war.

offensive scheduled to begin in the early months of 1969.

The three provinces which constituted southern I Corps posed a contrasting problem to that of the northern provinces. The large population base and stronger enemy infrastructure, built up over many years in the region south of Da Nang and around Quang Ngai, created a continuous threat to the large population centers and allied military complexes, which were, in spite of the best attempts, the targets of frequent enemy ground and rocket attacks. Population and territorial security was progressing, albeit slowly, and by the end of 1968, 69 percent of the civilian population, according to allied statistics, lived within secure villages and hamlets. As enemy strength in the north diminished and engagements became progressively rarer, the enemy was able not only to maintain current force levels in the south, but even to increase them slightly. The 42 enemy battalions in southern I Corps in mid-1968 were increased to about 54 by the end of the year.<sup>3</sup>

Taking advantage of favorable weather and the allied out-of-country bombing pause, which went into effect on 1 November, the enemy renewed efforts to build and repair strategic roads, greatly expanding resupply capabilities within the corps tactical zone and surrounding border areas. With the infusion of men and material from the north, tactical redistribution of forces, and increased determination to carry on the fight, the Communists began the new year as they had begun the previous year—seeking the overthrow of the South Vietnamese Government and the reunification of the two Vietnams under Communist domination. III MAF was ready to ensure that the enemy did not succeed.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Strategy: A Reevaluation of Priorities*

In 1969, the sixth year of direct United States combat operations in Southeast Asia, the basic issues of the war remained largely unchanged. The Viet Cong, supported by regular North Vietnamese troops, continued to seek control over South Vietnam by attempting to destroy the existing governmental structure and substituting in its place one of Communist domination. On the other hand, the Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, with allied assistance, sought to check the VC and NVA assaults by building a viable nation immune to Communist overthrow. To accomplish this, the South Vietnamese Government asked for and received United States economic and



Courtesy of Maj Charles D. Melson, USMC  
*Enemy troops assemble in preparation for battle. The Russian-designed 7.62mm automatic rifle each carries was the standard rifle of North Vietnamese Army soldiers and of guerrillas fighting in South Vietnam.*

military support, particularly the manpower, mobility, and firepower of the United States Armed Forces.

In the four years prior to 1969, the United States presence grew rapidly as did its preoccupation with successful military operations. The protection and fortification of South Vietnam's political, economic, and social institutions had been, to a large extent, left to its own government, and improvement and modernization of its combat power had received little emphasis. The advisory effort of the 1950s and early 1960s had become United States direction and prosecution of the war. The realization, both in Washington and Saigon, that the enemy had the capability of launching a major offensive in 1968 led to greater emphasis on meaningful programs, leading to increased population security, a stable government, and a military strategy designed to seize the initiative. These goals, combat operations to defeat the enemy and promote security, increased effort to improve and modernize the Vietnamese Armed Forces, and emphasis on building a viable state, were to receive equal attention.<sup>5</sup> The transition, then, was to turn the course away from "Americanization of the war" toward "Vietnamization of the peace."

For the enemy, too, 1969 was a year of transition. From 1965, the main thrust of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese strategy was to match the United States troop buildup and endeavor to defeat the allied forces on the battlefield, a strategy that was followed until *Tet* of 1968. The failure of the *Tet* and post-*Tet* Offensives resulted in the reformulation of strategy and tactics. North and South Vietnamese Communist leaders set forth a new, pragmatic strategy that dismissed the possibility of a total victory on the field of battle over United States and South Vietnamese Forces, seeking instead to parlay limited military victories into withdrawal of U.S. troops, establishment of a coalition government, and ultimate Communist political victory in South Vietnam. It was a strategy designed to weaken and exhaust the allies. As a captured enemy document noted: "For each additional day [U.S. troops] stay, they must sustain more casualties. For each additional day they stay, they must spend more money and lose more equipment. Each additional day they stay, the American people will adopt a stronger anti-war attitude, as there is no hope to consolidate the puppet administration and Army."<sup>6</sup>

Tactics, like overall strategy, were to change. North and South Vietnamese Communist leaders championed the more frequent use of small unit tactics in the form of ground attacks or attacks by fire against population centers, economic areas, and allied bases, while still maintaining the option of large unit actions. They emphasized the importance of the political aspects of the war and moved to bolster their political appeal in the South by establishing a formal governmental structure. They prepared for either protracted warfare or a ceasefire, while trying to broaden their options in South Vietnam, and enunciating their major demands at the on-going peace negotiations in Paris. The basic enemy campaign plan for South Vietnam aimed to blunt the allied security program and to foil attempts to Vietnamize the war.

With the first large commitment of United States troops to the war in 1965, U.S. strategy focused on assisting the Government of South Vietnam and its armed forces in defeating Communist subversion and aggression. This strategy stressed military operations, and advisory and financial assistance to aid in creating a secure environment, necessary for the success of national development programs. Further, efforts were made to encourage and assist the South Vietnamese in assuming greater responsibility for the development and maintenance of a free and independent nation.

Various operational concepts to support this strate-

gy were developed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CinCPac), with primary emphasis on maintaining maximum pressure against the enemy's disruptive and war-making capabilities through three interrelated undertakings. First were the destruction of the Viet Cong main and North Vietnamese Army forces in South Vietnam, forcing the NVA to withdraw, and the separation of the VC units from the population by providing a protective shield through ground, air, and naval offensive operations against the remaining enemy main force units. The second undertaking involved the establishment of a militarily secure environment within which the governmental apparatus of South Vietnam could be extended, consolidated, and sustained. This entailed accelerating offensive operations against Viet Cong guerrilla and main forces, with priority being given to the elimination or neutralization of the enemy's political and military infrastructure while simultaneously developing and improving the Republic's armed and security forces. Third was the improvement of the national development effort through a number of integrated security, political, economic, and social programs.

Although all three of these undertakings were conducted simultaneously well into 1968, priority was given to the first operational goal. Military operations designed to inflict unacceptable casualties on the enemy and thereby bring about a successful outcome to the war were stressed. A strategy of attrition, while never formally articulated, was adopted. As General William C. Westmoreland, Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, until July 1968, stated:

Our strategy in Vietnam is to secure our bases which are essential if we are to fight troops and sustain combat; to control populated and productive areas, . . . to neutralize his [the enemy's] base areas which are in the main situated . . . along international borders, . . . to force the enemy back, particularly his main forces, back to peripheral areas and to contain him there. Next to interdict infiltration. And finally to inflict maximum attrition on his ranks.<sup>7</sup>

In short, until mid-1968, "it was to grind down the enemy using the combined forces available in South Vietnam."<sup>8</sup> The other two operational goals received relatively little in terms of effort and resources.

As allied losses declined and territorial security improved following the enemy's failed *Tet* and post-*Tet* Offensives, greater emphasis was placed on population security and improvement of South Vietnam's Armed Forces. Out of this change in operational em-



phasis evolved a balanced approach which was to become the guiding principle for all future allied operations. In September 1968, General Creighton W. Abrams, General Westmoreland's successor at MACV, advanced the "one war" concept which in essence recognized no such thing as a separate war of big units or of population and territorial security. Under this integrated strategic concept, allied forces were to carry the battle to the enemy simultaneously, in all areas of conflict, by strengthening cooperation between U.S. advisors and commanders and their South Vietnamese military and civilian counterparts. Major elements of the "one war" concept were population security, modernization and improvement of South Vietnam's Armed Forces, and combat operations, each to receive the highest priority, and each to be kept abreast of the other and moving forward with the ultimate aim of ensuring a strong and viable nation. No single element was to be allowed to overshadow the other two.

Under this concept, all allied forces were to be marshalled into a single integrated, all-out attack against the enemy's forces, organization, activities, and facilities. Working in close coordination with the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam and other governmental agencies, each element within the overall effort was to be assigned a mission and related tasks most appropriate to its particular capabilities and limitations. Emphasis was to be placed on combined operations in which Free World Military Assistance Forces and Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces would join in an effort to increase the latter's experience and confidence. In all operations, mobility and flexibility were to be stressed; as the enemy situation changed, existing plans were to be rapidly modified to counter or capitalize on the changing situation. The strategy of attrition was dead. As General Abrams pointed out to his major field commanders in mid-October:

The enemy's operational pattern is his understanding that this is just one, repeat one, war. He knows there's no such thing as a war of big battalions, a war of pacification or a war of territorial security. Friendly forces have got to recognize and understand the one war concept and carry the battle to the enemy, simultaneously, in all areas of conflict. In the employment of forces, all elements are to be brought together in a single plan—all assets brought to bear against the enemy in every area, in accordance with the way the enemy does his business . . . . All types of operations are to proceed simultaneously, aggressively, persistently and intelligently—plan solidly and execute vigorously, never letting the momentum subside.<sup>9</sup>

The "one war" concept embodied Abrams' long-held belief that both the multi-battalion and pacification

wars were mutually supporting aspects of the same struggle.\*

As a corollary to the "one war" concept, significant emphasis was to be given to the Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC), initiated in November 1968. Recognizing that insurgency would fail if cut off from popular support, allied efforts were to be directed toward denying the enemy access to population and rice-growing centers, which in turn would deprive him of his mobility and force him to divert combat troops to logistical duties for which he would otherwise impress local laborers.

Guided by these principles, the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS), in coordination with General Abrams' MACV staff, issued two documents late in 1968 which set forth strategy for the conduct of the war in the coming year. The 1969 Pacification and Development Plan was the first attempt by the South Vietnamese Government to present in a single document the strategy, concepts, priorities, and objectives which were to guide the total pacification effort. Issued on 15 December by South Vietnamese Premier Tran Van Huong and members of the newly formed Central Pacification and Development Council (CPDC), it was to take effect with the termination of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign in February 1969. Although a unilateral plan, it was considered to be directive in nature for all allied forces. The primary objectives of the plan were to provide at least a measure of security for 90 percent of the South Vietnamese population by the end of 1969, and extend national sovereignty throughout the country by eliminating the Viet Cong Infrastructure, strengthening local government, increasing participation in self-defense forces, encouraging defection among enemy units and their supporters, assisting refugees, combating terrorism, and promoting rural economic development and rice production.

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\*In commenting on the "one war" concept, promulgated by General Abrams, General Westmoreland stated: "It was not Abrams that did it, it was the changed situation which he adapted to. The change was the situation, it was not the personality because, General Abrams was my deputy for over a year. He and I consulted about almost every tactical action. I considered his views in great depth because I had admiration for him and I'd known him for many years. And I do not remember a single instance where our views and the courses of action we thought were proper, differed in any way." Continuing, "there was no change in strategy. But there was a change in the situation, a profound change after the defeat of the *Tet* Offensive." (Gen William C. Westmoreland intvw, 4Apr83, pp. 7, 19 [Oral-HistColl, MCHC, Washington, D.C.] )



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192540

*A Marine infantryman scrambles down a steep mountain slope during a typical patrol in I Corps' rugged, jungle-covered mountainous terrain in search of North Vietnamese Army Forces, base camps, and cache sites.*

The four corps and Capital Military District commanders were given primary responsibility for executing the pacification plan on the basis of province plans prepared under corps supervision and reviewed in Saigon. To focus and ensure success for the effort, intermediate goals were established. These goals, to be accomplished by 30 June 1969, were deliberately set high in order to exact maximum effort.

The second document issued was the Combined Campaign Plan (CCP) for 1969, which provided basic guidance for all Free World forces in the conduct of military operations in South Vietnam. The 1969 plan inaugurated a number of changes in annual campaign planning which strengthened the status of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff. Unlike previous campaign plans, which were prepared by MACV, the 1969 plan was prepared by the JGS with assistance from MACV. In addition, U.S. forces were for the first time listed among Free World forces instead of separately, and more significantly, the plan, once drawn up, was signed by each of the national commanders.

The basic assumptions included in the plan remained unchanged from those of 1968, except for ac-

knowledging the on-going Paris peace negotiations and assuring that allied force levels would remain stable throughout the year. Under the plan, United States and South Vietnamese troops were to continue mobile operations against enemy forces and bases, while screening population centers against attack and infiltration. The plan also directed continued extension of government control by securing major cities, towns, and military installations, and denying enemy access to important economic regions, rail and road links, and centers of government. Again emphasized were the need for population security, elimination of enemy infrastructure, development of local self-defense forces, and civic action programs, but to a much greater degree than similar programs had received in previous campaign plans.

Twelve major objectives and goals were enumerated for use in measuring progress. As compared with the 1968 plan, the 1969 campaign plan reduced and simplified the list, making it more meaningful and more reasonably attainable than were the percentile goals used in the past. The goals established for Free World forces varied: defeat Viet Cong and North Vietnamese armed forces; extend South Vietnamese Government control; modernize and raise the level of South Vietnam combat readiness; inflict maximum enemy casualties; increase the percentage of territory and population under South Vietnamese control through an expanded pacification effort; reduce the enemy's ability to conduct ground and fire attacks against military and civilian targets; destroy or neutralize enemy base areas; enhance the effectiveness of provincial security forces; secure vital lines of communication; neutralize the enemy's infrastructure; increase the number of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army deserters; and, maximize intelligence collection and counter-intelligence activities. In order to make substantial progress in achieving these goals, allied military resources were to be applied to critical areas, with economy of force being practiced in less essential areas.

In ICTZ, allied forces were to be committed primarily to offensive operations in order to destroy enemy forces throughout the tactical zone and those which might cross the Demilitarized Zone and Laotian border. Operations were also to be conducted to destroy enemy base areas, and to protect the major population centers of Hue, Da Nang, Quang Ngai, and the main lines of communications, especially Routes 1 and 9. Pacification activities would be concentrated on the populated coastal areas surrounding the major cities and extended to other populated areas along Route 1.

In essence, the 1969 country-wide Combined Campaign Plan abandoned the earlier concept of a protective shield of containment, and both emphasized and implemented the concept of area security and control, while again stressing the spirit of the offensive and relentless attack against the enemy. It recognized both the enemy's political and military threats and advocated expanded spoiling and preemptive operations against all types of enemy organizations and facilities, with particular emphasis placed on eliminating the Viet Cong Infrastructure. Further, it recognized that there was just one war and the battle was to be carried to the enemy, simultaneously, in all areas of conflict. Friendly forces were to be brought together in a single plan against the enemy in accordance with the way he operated. "The key strategic thrust," as stated in the MACV Strategic Objectives Plan approved by General Abrams early in 1969, was "to provide meaningful, continuing security for the Vietnamese people in expanding areas of increasingly effective civil authority." As envisioned by MACV and the JGS, the "one war" concept was to be forcefully implemented on all fronts in 1969. As General Abrams stated to a gathering of his major field commanders early in January:

Pacification is the "GUT" issue for the Vietnamese. This is why I think that we cannot let the momentum die down. I started off by saying that I think we have the cards. I believe that. But the artistry in this situation is going to be to play the cards at the proper time and in the proper place. We do not have so many extras that we can afford to blunder around and put forces where the enemy isn't and where the pacification effort doesn't need it. It is going to require the utmost in professional work and professional judgment during the next weeks to ensure that we play our cards in the most effective way. If we do not and we get sloppy, pacification is going to really suffer. You can't let the old steam roller get going and not feed it fuel and expect it to keep going.<sup>10</sup>

### *I Corps Planning*

On 26 December 1968, South Vietnamese, Korean, and American commanders in I Corps Tactical Zone issued their Combined Campaign Plan for 1969. Designed to implement the objectives outlined in the nationwide campaign and pacification plans, this document was to provide basic guidance for the operations of Marines and allied forces in ICTZ throughout the coming year.

The drafters of the plan assumed that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in I Corps would continue to follow the strategy used during the campaigns of late 1968 — that of concentrating men and materiel in

attacks on population centers in order to inflict a defeat on the ARVN and incite a popular uprising that would culminate in either the overthrow of the South Vietnamese Government, or its replacement by a coalition government which would include representatives of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam.

Due to a number of decisive tactical defeats, heavy casualties, and failure to gain popular support by 1969, allied planners noted:

Realizing that he cannot win a military victory, the enemy is apparently resorting to a "fighting while negotiating" strategy. In adopting such a strategy, he now hopes to gain political advantage at the conference table through continued offensive action in RVN [Republic of Vietnam]. The enemy is expected to expand his efforts to control the rural areas and strengthen his infrastructure as a base for further action.<sup>11</sup>

In pursuit of this goal, the planners declared, the NVA and VC in I Corps would endeavor to "wear down and eliminate RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces] and Allied forces to the maximum extent possible and to draw friendly forces away from urban areas and thereby relieving pressure on those enemy forces attacking the urban areas."<sup>12</sup> In the attack on the urban population, Communists forces would continue to rely on such standard tactics as assassination, rocket and mortar attacks on vital areas and key installations, and direct assaults on isolated units, outposts, and towns. These actions were aimed, the planners noted, at demoralizing allied forces, discrediting the South Vietnamese Government, and disrupting its pacification effort.

To meet and eliminate the enemy threat, campaign planners divided the opposing force into two categories, the VC and NVA main force units often found in remote areas and local VC guerrilla units and their supporters, concentrated in and around urban population centers. They assigned a distinct yet overlapping function to each allied unit: Korean, American, and ARVN regulars were to focus on destruction of the enemy's main forces, neutralization of base and logistical areas, and prevention of infiltration of population centers. Regional and Popular, People's Self-Defense, and National Police forces were to weed out and eliminate Viet Cong local force units and infrastructure. These auxiliaries were to furnish "security for hamlets and villages and will defend the LOCs [lines of communication], political and economic centers and government installations. They will also participate in and coordinate with the ARVN regular



Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center

*LtGen Robert E. Cushman, left, Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force; LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam, Commanding General, I Corps; and BGen Dong Ho Lee, right, Commander, 2d Republic of Korea Marine Brigade, sign the I Corps Combined Campaign Plan for 1969, outlining allied coordination and assistance policies for I Corps.*

forces in the protection of cities and provincial and district capitals.”<sup>13</sup>

The major task assigned to the regular forces under the plan was to locate and “systematically neutralize” the enemy’s base areas scattered throughout the tactical zone, predominantly in the mountains adjacent to the Laotian border. Allied troops were to concentrate on those enemy command, control, and logistical facilities which “directly affect the selected RD [Revolutionary Development] priority areas, key population and economic centers, and vital communications arteries.”<sup>14</sup> Priority was given to those enemy base areas within striking distance of Dong Ha and Quang Tri City (Base Area 101), Da Nang (Base Area 112), and Quang Ngai City (Base Area 121).<sup>\*</sup> For the more remote bases where complete neutralization and permanent denial was impossible, “repeated air strikes with random pattern ground operations” were to be

<sup>\*</sup>Each enemy base was assigned a three-digit number. The first digit represented the country in which it was located (1 for South Vietnam and 6 for Laos), while the last two digits indicated sequential position of discovery by allied troops.

used to “create insecurity, disrupt command channels, and deter stationing and movement of VC/NVA forces” within those areas.<sup>15</sup> The drafters of the campaign plan were convinced that:

The destruction of the enemy’s command, control, and logistics facilities will contribute to his eventual defeat. The neutralization of these bases will also require the enemy to place greater demands on the people for more manpower and resources. As these demands increase, the people will become more susceptible to friendly psychological operations. This will support the objective of assisting the GVN in expanding territorial control.<sup>16</sup>

“Territorial control” or territorial security was stressed by the authors as the primary objective of all allied activity in I Corps:

The campaign to provide sustained territorial security in the countryside and concurrently to introduce political, economic and social reforms which will establish conditions favorable for further growth and stability, is just as important as anti-aggression operations. Operations to annihilate the enemy, while clearly essential to pacification, are by themselves inadequate. The people must be separated and won over from the enemy.<sup>17</sup>

Each allied unit was assigned a security function, in addition to its other allotted duties. American, Korean, and ARVN regulars, when not engaged in major operations against enemy base areas and main force units, were to "prevent enemy infiltration into the fringes of towns, cities, and areas adjacent to population" centers by constantly patrolling those areas.<sup>18</sup> They were to reinforce territorial units under attack, furnish air and artillery support, and assist them in their campaign to eliminate local Viet Cong. Regional and Popular Force units within the tactical zone were to carry out ambushes, cordons, and patrols near inhabited areas, while the National Police and People's Self-Defense Forces were to maintain public order and conduct operations aimed at eradicating the enemy's infrastructure.

I Corps planners also sought to delineate the often conflicting responsibilities for pacification by requiring each locality to be placed into one of five general security categories: uninhabited areas, North Vietnamese Army- or Viet Cong-controlled areas, contested areas, areas being secured, and those areas considered completely secure. Uninhabited areas encompassed that territory just inside the national frontiers which did not contain officially recognized hamlets. NVA- or VC-controlled areas were regions in which the enemy was present and able to exert military and political influence. In both of these areas, allied units were to conduct only transient operations, with no intention of gaining complete and permanent control.

Closer to the main population centers were the contested areas. Selected as targets for Revolutionary Development activities, these areas were to be cleared

permanently of all organized enemy main force and guerrilla unit activity by regular forces. In areas in the process of being secured, all "organized resistance" was considered to have ceased and the government to be in the process of destroying what remained of the enemy's guerrilla network, thereby preventing its re-emergence.

Secure areas, the final category, were densely populated regions where government control was complete, or where permanent New Life Hamlets (Ap Doi Moi) were being developed. Here the population could move freely without fear of organized enemy attacks, except for occasional individual acts of terrorism or sabotage, and indirect attacks by fire. In both secure areas and areas being secured, the responsibility for defense and maintenance of public order rested with local officials and their principal security forces, the RF and PF, the PSDF, and the National Police.

The purpose of this regional organization was not only to fix responsibility for pacification, but to integrate and unify all allied activity. Combat operations, population and territorial security, and RVNAF improvement and modernization were to be equally emphasized in the "one war" concept as enumerated by the ICTZ/III MAF Combined Campaign Plan for 1969.

Against this background, the battlefields of I Corps Tactical Zone were relatively quiet during the early days of 1969. The Viet Cong's unilateral 72-hour New Year's truce ended on 2 January, but intermittent fighting took place as allied forces, who had refused to recognize the ceasefire, continued both large and small unit operations.

## CHAPTER 2

# Mountain Warfare

*Northern I Corps—Off Balance—From the Cua Viet, South*

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### *Northern I Corps*

Arrayed within the provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien as 1969 began were the following major United States headquarters and combat units: Headquarters XXIV Corps; 3d Marine Division; Task Force Hotel; 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile); 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized); XXIV Corps Artillery; and U.S. Navy Task Force Clearwater. Generally deployed along the Demilitarized Zone and Laotian border within Quang Tri Province was the 3d Marine Division, less two battalions of the 3d Marines, with the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) under its control, operating throughout the eastern portion of the province, primarily within the piedmont and coastal lowlands. Located at Vandegrift Combat Base in western Quang Tri was Task Force Hotel, which essentially functioned as 3d Marine Division Forward Headquarters. Deployed within Thua Thien Province were the three brigades of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), headquartered at Camp Eagle, south of Hue and northwest of Phu Bai. Collocated with Headquarters, XXIV Corps, at Phu Bai Combat Base was XXIV Corps Artillery, while stationed at Dong Ha was the subordinate 108th Artillery Group. The Navy's Task Force Clearwater, with the mission of river and inland waterway security, operated from a base near the mouth of the Song Cua Viet in Quang Tri Province, with river patrol groups securing the Song Cua Viet and Song Huong (Perfume River), and patrol air cushion vehicle (PACV) elements patrolling inland waterways.

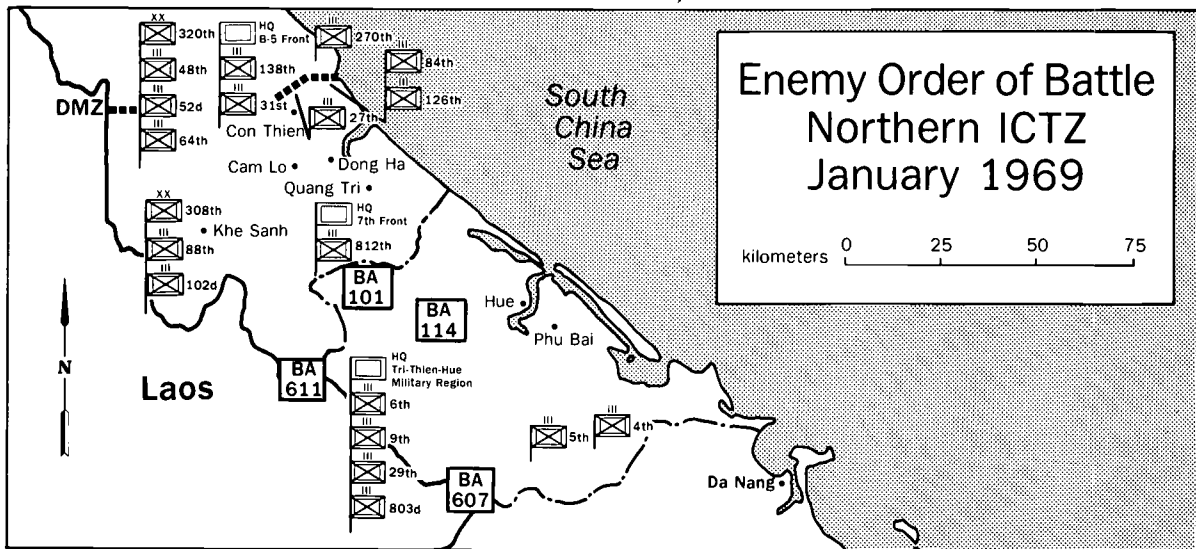
Enemy activity throughout northern I Corps was light and sporadic during the early days of January 1969. Along the Demilitarized Zone, units of the 3d Marine Division and 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) faced elements of six North Vietnamese regiments, the *138th*, *270th*, *84th*, *31st*, *27th*, and the *126th Naval Sapper*, all independent regiments of the unlocated *B-5 Front Headquarters*. Three regiments of the veteran *320th NVA Division* had withdrawn from western and central Quang Tri Province for refitting in North Vietnam following their third defeat in late 1968.<sup>1</sup> What enemy activity there was, was generally limited to infrequent rocket and

mortar attacks on allied positions, ground probes by squad- and platoon-size units, and attempts at interdicting the Song Cau Viet with mines. Artillery fire from within and north of the Demilitarized Zone had all but ceased in December.

Within the central portion of Quang Tri Province, units subordinate to the *7th Front*, including three battalions of the *812th Regiment*, were for the most part pulled back into jungle sanctuaries on the Quang Tri-Thua Thien provincial border for resupply and infusion of replacements. These three units were badly mauled during the 1968 *Tet* and post-*Tet* Offensives, and their forward base areas and cache sites destroyed by Marine and ARVN search and clear operations during the late summer and fall campaigns. Enemy strength at the end of January, within the Demilitarized Zone and Quang Tri Province, was estimated at 36,800, approximately 2,500 more than the December total. Of these, more than half were confirmed to be combat troops.

In Thua Thien Province the enemy situation was similar. North Vietnamese Army units, with the exception of small forward elements of the *4th* and *5th Regiments*, had been withdrawn into the A Shau Valley and Laos under constant U.S. and ARVN pressure during the previous year. These forward elements did conduct occasional attacks by fire, but were forced to confine much of their effort to attempts at rice gathering and survival in the foothills of the province. Viet Cong local force units and the Viet Cong Infrastructure remained under steady pressure from Army, ARVN, and provincial forces, and likewise devoted much of their energy toward survival and avoiding discovery. End-of-January estimates placed enemy strength within the province at 15,200, a 25-percent increase over December figures.

To the west, in the A Shau Valley and beyond, there were signs of increasing enemy activity. Roadwork was being conducted on Route 548 in the valley and on Route 922 in Laos. Vehicular traffic and troop movement was light at the beginning of the month, but soon picked up as January progressed, particularly in and around Route 922 and enemy Base Area 611 in Laos.



See Reference Map, Sections 1-27

### Off Balance

While the enemy generally avoided contact in January, American and South Vietnamese forces in northern I Corps continued their efforts at keeping him off balance, striking at his traditional base areas and infiltration routes, and increasing security within populated areas. Driving deeper into the mountains and areas bordering the Demilitarized Zone, allied forces pushed and probed for evidence of infiltration and supply build-up, in order to determine the enemy's intentions in the months ahead and thwart them before they could be implemented.

Leading the effort in Quang Tri Province was the 3d Marine Division under the command of Major General Raymond G. Davis. A veteran of the Guadalcanal, Cape Gloucester, and Peleliu campaigns of World War II and Medal of Honor recipient for actions at the Chosin Reservoir during the Korean War, Davis assumed command of the division in May 1968, following a short tour as Deputy Commanding General, Provisional Corps, Vietnam.

Under Davis' leadership, the tactical disposition of the division would be turned around. No longer consigned to defensive positions, the 3d Marine Division, with helicopter support, now would assume a highly mobile posture, characteristic of Army air cavalry and airborne operations of 1968. As General Davis noted:

We had something like two dozen battalions up there all tied down (with little exception) to these fixed positions, and the situation didn't demand it. So, when the Army moved into Pegasus to relieve the Khe Sanh operation [in April 1968] they applied forces directly responsive to the enemy's dispositions and forgot about real estate—forgetting about bases, going after the enemy in key areas—this

punished the enemy most. Pegasus demonstrated the decisiveness of high mobility operations. The way to get it done was to get out of these fixed positions and get mobility, to go and destroy the enemy on our terms—not sit there and absorb the shot and shell and frequent penetrations that he was able to mount. So all this led me, as soon as I heard that I was going, it led me to do something I had never done before or since, and that is to move in prepared in the first hours to completely turn the command upside down. They were committed by battalion in fixed positions in such a way that they had very little mobility. The relief of CGs took place at eleven o'clock. At one o'clock I assembled the staff and commanders; before dark, battalion positions had become company positions. It happened just that fast.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to establishing a more mobile posture, Davis reinstated unit integrity. For various reasons, the regiments of the division had slowly evolved into operational headquarters which might have any battalion of the division assigned. There was constant rotation; the 9th Marines, for example, might have a battalion of the 3d Marines, a battalion of 4th Marines, and only one of its own. Thus, as Colonel Robert H. Barrow, one of Davis' regimental commanders and later Commandant of the Marine Corps, noted, the individual battalions "felt . . . they were commanded by strangers. Every unit has a kind of personality of its own, often reflecting the personality of the commander, so you never got to know who did what best, or who would you give this mission to."<sup>3</sup> Davis changed that; each regiment, under normal operating circumstances, would now control its constituent battalions. As General Davis later commented, "it was the key to our success."<sup>4</sup>

As battalions of the division moved from defensive operations to more aggressive operations against ele-

ments of the *320th NVA Division* during the latter half of 1968, the need for helicopters grew. "I was very fortunate in this," Davis was later to state, "that the later model of the CH-46 was arriving in-country in large numbers. Whereas it would pick up a platoon, the old 46 would hardly pick up a squad."<sup>5</sup> In addition, due to his close working relationship with Army Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, Provisional Corps commander, and Lieutenant General Richard G. Stilwell, his successor at XXIV Corps, Davis had the promise of Army helicopter support if needed. More important, however, was the creation of Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 39 and the subsequent assignment, initially on a temporary basis, of a Marine air commander for northern I Corps who, as General Davis stated, "had enough authority delegated to him from the wing, where he could execute things; he could order air units to do things."<sup>6\*</sup> With helicopter transport assured, division Marines moved from relatively static positions south of the Demilitarized Zone and along north-south Route 1 and east-west Route 9, the main lines of communication, into the mountainous regions of Quang Tri Province in search of the enemy and his supplies.

Davis' concept of mobile operations depended not only on the helicopter, but on the extensive exploitation of intelligence, specifically that gathered by small reconnaissance patrols, which he continuously employed throughout the division's area of responsibility and which supplemented both electronic and human acquired intelligence. Operating within range of friendly artillery were the heavily armed "Stingray" patrols, whose mission was to find, fix, and destroy the enemy with all available supporting arms, and rapid reinforcement, if necessary. In the more remote areas, beyond artillery range, he used "Key Hole" patrols. Much smaller in size and armed with only essential small arms and ammunition, the function of these patrols was to observe.<sup>7</sup> The 3d Marine Division, Davis noted, "never launched an operation without acquiring clear definition of the targets and objectives through intelligence confirmed by recon patrols. High

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\*Assistant Wing Commander, Brigadier General Homer S. Hill, was temporarily assigned to 3d Marine Division Headquarters for "operations requiring more than routine air support and used his normal position within the Wing to coordinate air operations on the spot." The assignment of a Marine air commander to northern I Corps "did not involve any new command structure." (Col Edwin H. Finlayson, Comments on draft ms, 25Nov86 [Vietnam 69 Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.]



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192746  
MajGen Raymond G. Davis led 3d Marine Division.

mobility operations [were] too difficult and complex to come up empty or in disaster."<sup>8</sup>

Armed with information on probable enemy troop and supply locations provided by reconnaissance patrols and other intelligence sources, such as radio intercepts, 3d Division Marines would advance rapidly into the proposed area of operations. Forward artillery positions, or fire support bases (FSBs), defended by a minimum of infantry personnel, would be established on key terrain features. These mutually supporting bases, constructed approximately 8,000 meters apart with a 3,000-meter overshoot in order to cover enemy mortars, provided ground troops operating under the fan with continuous, overlapping artillery support. Once inserted, Marine rifle companies, and even entire battalions, would move rapidly, although methodically, and largely on foot, throughout the area to be searched. Additional fire support bases would be constructed, permitting deeper penetration of the area of operations.

The purpose of the intelligence collection effort and subsequent combat operations, if required, was to prevent the enemy from sticking his "logistics nose in-country." "The [enemy's] first order of business," as Colonel Barrow later noted, was to "move all the things of war; all of their logistics forward from the sanctuaries of North Vietnam, just across the DMZ, or from Laos." This movement would take weeks, or possibly



months. At the appointed time, troops would quickly move in, marry up with the cached supplies, and then do battle. As General Davis believed and Barrow later stated:

We must do everything we can to find that stuff, wherever it exists and obviously destroy it. And if we miss any of it, we must attempt by vigorous patrolling, radio intercept, signal intelligence, recon team inserts, and whatever else, to find out when any troops were moving in. Maybe we hadn't found their logistics, their caches, and we didn't want to have the surprise of not finding them until after they had married up and were about to engage us some place.<sup>9</sup>

Thoroughly indoctrinated in the mobile concept of operations, Marines of the 3d Division at the beginning of 1969 could be found from the Laotian border to the coastal lowlands. To the west, elements of Colonel Robert H. Barrow's 9th Marines continued searching north of the Khe Sanh plateau in operations begun the year before. In the center, the 4th Marines, under Colonel William F. Goggin, patrolled the mountainous areas north of Vandegrift Combat Base and south of the Demilitarized Zone. Further east, one battalion of Colonel Michael M. Spark's 3d Marines continued to search areas south of the DMZ and north

of Route 9, while the remainder of the regiment assisted the 5th Marines in Operation Taylor Common in Quang Nam Province.

On 31 December 1968 and 1 January 1969, teams from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion were inserted west of Khe Sanh along the Laotian border, initiating Operation Dawson River West. The teams immediately secured seven landing zones, eliminating the need for preassault artillery and air strikes. On the morning of the 2d, elements of Barrow's 9th Marines and supporting artillery made simultaneous helicopter landings into the secured zones north of Route 9. The initial assaults were made by Lieutenant Colonel George W. Smith's 1st Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel George C. Fox's 2d Battalion, and Company L, 3d Battalion under First Lieutenant Raymond C. Benfatti. A battalion of the 2d ARVN Regiment assaulted south of Route 9 to the right of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines on the 4th. Fire Support Bases Geiger and Smith, occupied by batteries of Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Scoppa, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, supported the 9th, while an ARVN artillery battery at Fire Support Base Snapper supported the South Vietnamese.

Throughout the three-week operation, Barrow's Marines experienced minimal enemy contact during the

*Infantrymen of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines move through waist-high elephant grass in search of enemy troops and supply areas around Khe Sanh during Dawson River West.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800506





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800503

*A solitary Marine moves up a small stream near the abandoned Khe Sanh base, carefully checking out both banks for hidden North Vietnamese Army supplies and harbor sites.*

search. They uncovered numerous small weapons caches, of which a great majority contained U.S. equipment, rations, and ammunition lost during and after the sieges of Lang Vei and Khe Sanh in 1968. The South Vietnamese located more recent hoards of 122mm rockets, mortars, and artillery rounds along Route 9 in the vicinity of Lang Vei. The general pattern of search during the operation was from the Laotian border north of Route 9, in the vicinity of Fire Support Base Argonne, south and astride Route 9; a probe into the "Vietnam Salient," that portion of South Vietnam which protrudes into Laos, near Fire Support Base Passport; and finally back toward Vandegrift Combat Base. At the close of Dawson River West, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines resecured Fire Support Bases Henderson, Tun Tavern, Cates, and Shiloh near the Ba Long Valley, southwest of Vandegrift.

While the 9th Marines accounted for few enemy casualties and limited equipment captured, Operation Dawson River West proved significant in ascertaining that no sizeable enemy concentrations or supplies existed in the Khe Sanh area or Vietnam Salient at the time. "If there was ever a piece of ground in the western part of Quang Tri that was searched out thoroughly," Barrow remembered, "that was that operation."<sup>10</sup> In addition, the 9th Marines created a number of landing zones and fire support bases, facilitating continued operations against the NVA in western and southwestern Quang Tri Province, and providing a

springboard for the regiment's turn to the south and future push into the upper Song Da Krong Valley, southwest of Vandegrift.

East of the Dawson River area of operations, Colonel Goggin's 4th Marines continued search and clear operations in the Scotland II area, while elements of the 3d Marines' Task Force Bravo, in Operation Kentucky, conducted search and cordon operations in the vicinity of the outposts at Cam Lo, Con Thien, and Charlie-2, south of the DMZ. Scotland II, a continuation of operations initiated in November 1967 in and around Khe Sanh by the 26th Marines, was begun 15 April 1968 under the control of Task Force Glick, later redesignated Task Force Hotel and now under the command of Assistant 3d Division Commander, Brigadier General Frank E. Garretson. Employing various battalions of the division, led by the 4th Marines, and elements of the 2d ARVN Regiment in search and clear operations in an area generally bounded by Route 561, Route 9, the Demilitarized Zone, and the Laotian border, Marines of Task Force Hotel had, since April the previous year, accounted for nearly 4,000 enemy killed and 1,100 weapons captured.

Ground combat was light and scattered throughout January and into early February as Lieutenant Colonel George T. Sargent, Jr.'s 1st Battalion, 4th Marines conducted searches of the area surrounding Nui Tia Pong, west of Elliott Combat Base (Rockpile), and Lieutenant Colonel Joseph E. Hopkins' 2d Battalion continued extensive squad-size reconnaissance patrols

along the Demilitarized Zone, north and west of Con Thien. The 3d Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel William A. Donald, in cooperation with the Quang Tri Provisional Rifle Company, maintained patrols from Ca Lu and Vandegrift Combat Base. The searches and extensive patrolling did uncover several important enemy fighting positions and supply caches. On 10 January, two companies of Lieutenant Colonel Sargent's 1st Battalion discovered a large bunker complex northeast of Fire Support Base Neville, containing over 120 mortar rounds, miscellaneous small arms ammunition, and explosives. Company L, working in conjunction with the 2d Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment, on 23 January uncovered nearly 500 mortar rounds in multiple dumps in the vicinity of bases Charlie-1,

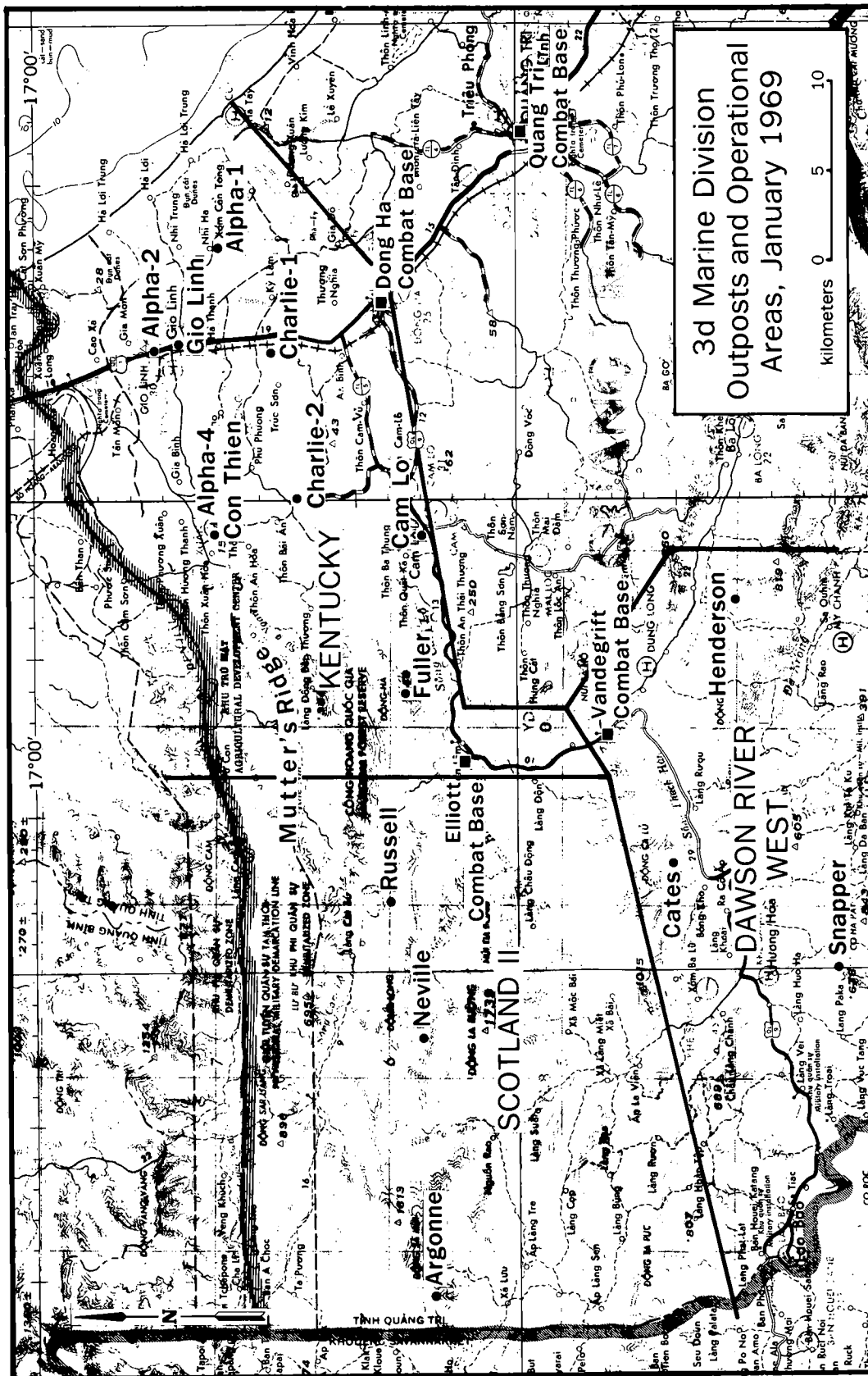
Charlie-2, and Alpha-1, northwest of Cam Lo. It appeared from the location of the caches that the NVA were prepositioning ammunition and supplies as far forward as possible along the Demilitarized Zone in order to support future offensive operations.

As a result of these and other discoveries within the Scotland area of operations, Colonel Goggin ordered Lieutenant Colonel Hopkins' 2d Battalion to conduct reconnaissance patrols within the southern half of the Demilitarized Zone, while maintaining search and clear operations immediately to the south. "Our operations north of the southern boundary of the DMZ," Hopkins noted, "were not search and destroy operations per se. There were certain political implications involved, obviously. It had to be a carefully controlled

*Marines of Company B, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines pick their way among rocks as they cross one of the many streams which traversed the rugged mountainous terrain which characterized the Scotland II area of operations, south of the Demilitarized Zone.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800539





3d Marine Division  
Outposts and Operational  
Areas, January 1966

kilometers 0 5 10

See Reference Map, Sections 1-3, 5-7

reconnaissance of the southern half of the DMZ under some specific rules of engagement which rather limited the number of personnel who might be in that area at any time."<sup>11</sup>\* The reconnaissance effort was to involve teams from the division's 3d Reconnaissance Battalion and a rifle squad from Companies F, G, and H; a squad being the largest unit which could be introduced into the Demilitarized Zone for any purpose. Specific targets of the reconnaissance effort were enemy forces, fortifications, and supply caches.

Operations within the DMZ began on 1 February with the insertion of three division reconnaissance teams and an equal number of squads from the 2d Battalion. Generally, the teams covered less area and were involved in more fighting than Hopkins' squads during the two-week effort. As a result, the division reaction force, designated "Sparrow Hawk," was usually sent in to reinforce the reconnaissance teams. This technique, as Lieutenant Colonel Hopkins later reported, "offered an opportunity to put a larger force of Marines in, an additional platoon, and by walking them directly south, offered the opportunity to perform a good solid reconnaissance by a good-size unit of a portion of the area."<sup>12</sup>

Under the watchful eyes of North Vietnamese soldiers, some of whom stood in the open on the northern bank of the Ben Hai which bisected the DMZ, Hopkins' squads covered approximately 50 percent of the 36-square-kilometer reconnaissance zone assigned. Contact was sporadic, the actions involving either transients, local guides, cache guards, or screening and reconnaissance units of no more than a squad. Although the enemy's maneuverability was lessened and a number of his large cache sites discovered and destroyed, the reconnaissance effort was unable, according to the battalion's intelligence officer, First Lieutenant Larry L. Eastland, to discern "what their future plans are, what their future plan for a short period of time is to be."<sup>13</sup> Near the end of February, the enemy struck—first at Fire Support Base Neville and then at Russell, north of Vandegrift.

In the early morning hours of the 25th, Fire Support Base Neville, located northeast of the Elliott Combat Base, and defended by two platoons of Company

H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and Battery G, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, and protected by concertina wire, tanglefoot, listening posts, mines, and sensors, was assaulted by 200 highly trained and highly motivated sappers (raiders) from the *246th NVA Regiment*. "The night of the attack was pretty much of a typical night at Neville," reported Captain John E. Knight, Jr., Company H's commander, "very foggy; it looked like something right out of a horror movie with fog drifting through the trees; visibility almost nil. . . . The first indication we had that anything was out of the ordinary other than just normal movement was when a trip flare went off and evidently they were infiltrating at that point and one of their people had set off a trip flare. We H and I'd [harassing and interdiction fires] the area with the 60's and approximately a half an hour after that, at 0030 we were taken under attack by the sappers."<sup>14</sup> After infiltrating the concertina wire barrier on the west side of the perimeter, the attacking force systematically crisscrossed that portion of the fire base occupied by the 1st platoon and Battery G's number six gun pit, tossing satchel charges which forced the defenders into bunkers which the enemy then destroyed.

In the glow of flares and burning powder, the Marines rallied and with the assistance of 60mm mortar fire, drove the attacking force from the hill. "We beat these sappers, which are supposed to be the worst thing the North Vietnamese got," noted Gunnery Sergeant John E. Timmermeyer. "We beat these people not with air, not with arty, not with any supporting arms; we beat them and we beat them bad with weapons we had in our own company . . . M-16s, or M-79s, or 60s, or frags, everything we had in the rifle company, this is what we used to beat these people with, we didn't have to have supporting arms. We did it without them."<sup>15</sup> At dawn, Captain Knight's Marines, who lost 11 killed and 29 wounded, found 36 enemy dead and wounded, several of whom still had satchel charges and other explosives strapped to their backs and quantities of opium in their pockets.

Ten kilometers east, Fire Support Base Russell, defended by platoons of Companies E, F, and K, Mortar and H Batteries of the 12th Marines, and a detachment from the 1st Searchlight Battery, came under attack the same evening. A sudden heavy mortar barrage followed by a 200-man sapper attack by troops of the *27th NVA Regiment*, swiftly breached the base's northeast perimeter. "In the first few minutes, the 81mm mortar section and the company CP, both located on the east and southeast side were decimated."<sup>16</sup>

\*Then current rules of engagement prohibited U.S. ground forces from crossing the southern boundary of the DMZ without specific orders from COMUSMACV. Every local commander, however, retained the right and responsibility for the defense of his forces. (COMUSMACV msg to CGIIIMAF, et al., dtd 20Feb69, MACV Hist-DocColl, Reel 54)



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*Fire Support Base Russell occupied a mountaintop within range of the Demilitarized Zone, and because of its location was often subjected to enemy mortar and ground attacks.*

Fighting was hand-to-hand as the Marines, with the help of a heavy artillery cordon, coordinated by the battalion operations officer at Vandegrift Combat Base, drove the enemy back through the perimeter. At daybreak, Marine air came on station, and consolidation began with only two officers and one staff non-commissioned officer left out of the original complement. The Marines on Russell suffered 26 killed and 77 wounded, while accounting for 25 enemy troops, most of whom were cut down inside the wire. Marine patrols pursued the enemy north toward the DMZ at dawn, and reported finding bloody uniforms and bandages, as well as several fresh grave sites along trails the enemy used in their escape.

Both fire bases were reinforced the following day, but continued to report enemy probing activity. Fire Support Base Neville remained surrounded by enemy units employing mortars from several positions for several days despite heavy air concentrations, artillery

and counter-mortar fires, and extensive patrols, and was eventually relieved of pressure by Company G which moved into the area by forced march over rugged terrain.<sup>17</sup>

The end of February found the 4th Marines engaged in base security and reaction force duties, and in patrolling the areas immediately around Fire Support Bases Neville and Russell in an attempt to severely punish the 27th and 246th NVA Regiments. On the 28th, Operation Scotland II ended with most regimental units remaining in place throughout the operational area.

Further east, two brigade-size operations were being conducted in support of the South Vietnamese Government's resettlement and pacification effort as the new year began. Centered in the Cam Lo and Con Thien areas, and along the Song Cua Viet, Operation Kentucky consisted of one Marine infantry battalion, one tank battalion, and elements of the 1st Amphib-

ian Tractor (Amtrac) Battalion, under the control of the 3d Marines' Task Force Bravo. This search, clear, and cordon operation, begun in November 1967, had at one time included all three battalions of the 3d Marines and the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), following its arrival in northern I Corps in July 1968. In December, the 1st Brigade redeployed to an area south of the Cua Viet, and the 1st and 3d Battalions, 3d Marines moved to southern I Corps where they joined elements of the 1st Marine Division in Operation Taylor Common.

The new year found Lieutenant Colonel James J. McMonagle's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines conducting pacification operations in the Mai Loc area south of Route 9, securing friendly positions along the Con Thien-Cam Lo corridor, and assisting Regional Forces around Cam Lo. Lieutenant Colonel George E. Hayward's 3d Tank Battalion continued armored combat, security patrols, and road sweeps between Quang Tri and Dong Ha Combat Bases, and in the vicinity of Con Thien, while the 1st Amtrac Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Walter W. Damewood, Jr., continued motorized patrols near the Cua Viet, not far from Mai Loc. As the month progressed and the enemy became more furtive, the battalions began a series of short platoon- and company-size reconnaissance-in-force operations, designed to expose enemy positions, infiltration routes, and supply caches. Results were disappointing; most of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong having been driven out by the intense artillery and air bombardments.

On occasion these small but frequent operations did initiate short skirmishes, and these skirmishes, combined with intelligence from captured enemy troops, pointed to Leatherneck Square as the only active area within the Kentucky area of operations.\* As a result, on 18 January, the 2d ARVN Regiment, assisted by Lieutenant Colonel McMonagle's battalion and Lieutenant Colonel William A. Donald's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, with tanks attached, began a cordon and search operation northeast of Cam Lo, the local district headquarters. The Marines maintained blocking positions along the square's northern boundary, while the ARVN force swept from Gio Linh to Cam Lo, hunting for enemy troops and resettling any displaced villagers in the Cam Vu Valley. As the cordon dissolved

\*Leatherneck Square was a four-by-six-kilometer piece of cleared, flat piedmont about three kilometers east of the Vietnamese coast. Often characterized as a "parking lot" or "golf course," the area was bordered by Con Thien and Gio Linh on the north, and by Dong Ha and Cam Lo on the south.

on the 26th, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, less Company M, rejoined its regiment, and a land-clearing operation, utilizing 20 to 30 tractors of the Army's 59th Engineer Battalion, was begun. The 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, assisted by Company M, 4th Marines; 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry's Troop A, 4th Squadron, 12th Cavalry; and later Troops B and C, 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, provided security for the engineers and conducted reinforced company-size search and destroy operations in the Con Thien, Cam Lo, and Mai Loc areas.

Task Force Bravo's control of the aggressive patrol operations within the Kentucky area continued until 18 February, when the remainder of the 3d Marines returned from southern I Corps and reassumed control of the task force, which was later deactivated. Following the return of the regiment, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines began operations in the Cam Lo and Nhi Ha areas, replacing two companies of the 2d Battalion, helilifted west into Fire Support Bases Cunningham and Erskine, overlooking the Song Da Krong, to support the 9th Marines in Operation Dewey Canyon. With the westward shift of elements of the 2d Battalion and the transfer of control of the 1st Battalion to Task Force Hotel at Vandegrift, the 3d Marines ended Operation Kentucky.

#### *From the Cua Viet, South*

South of the Cua Viet, elements of the Army's 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) and the 1st ARVN Regiment continued a combined search and clear and cordon operation (Marshall Mountain), begun on 10 December. The area of operation encompassed the political districts of Trieu Phong, Mai Linh, and Hai Lang, and Quang Tri City; and the area stretching from the coastal dunes west of Highway 1 to the jungle-canopied eastern portions of enemy Base Area 101 in southwestern Quang Tri Province. Approximately two-thirds of the province's population lived in the area, and consequently it was a key target for enemy infiltration and harassment efforts.

Friendly forces taking part in Operation Marshall Mountain were to interdict enemy movement by employing small-unit (squad and fire team) patrols and ambushes, known as "Hunter Killer" teams, and conduct detailed cordon and search operations in conjunction with the 1st ARVN Regiment, Regional and Popular Forces, Provincial Reconnaissance units, and National Police Field Forces. Capitalizing on the mobility of the 1st Brigade along the coastal plains and



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800470

*Men of the 3d Marines on board tanks of the 3d Tank Battalion sweep the Con Thien Corridor within the Kentucky Area of Operations, north of Cam Lo District Headquarters.*

in the piedmont, ready reaction forces were maintained to close rapidly in the event significant numbers of enemy troops were encountered.\*

During the initial stages of the operation, elements of the 1st Brigade and 1st ARVN Regiment moved into the western portion of the area of operations to clear out remaining detachments of enemy main force units which had previously withdrawn to the mountainous regions of the province. These stay-behind enemy troops attempted to maintain rice collection points, not only posing a threat to the security of villages and hamlets throughout the area, but also hampering the government's pacification efforts. The forces involved simultaneously conducted combined search and cordon operations within the three districts, and by the end of the operation on 28 February, 37 such searches and cordons had been carried out. North of the Song Cua Viet, the 1st Amtrac Battalion supported the brigade with a search and clear operation along the beach from Ha Loi to the Demilitarized Zone.

Enemy action was generally defensive, with scattered attacks by fire and widely dispersed mines and other surprise firing devices. At the termination of the

brigade operation, 568 enemy troops had been killed, 397 captured, and 307 civil defendants rounded up, many of whom were later identified as local infrastructure members. Four hundred ninety-six individual and 41 crew-served weapons were captured, along with miscellaneous arms and nearly 80 tons of rice.

In northern Thua Thien Province on 31 December, Operation Todd Forest began within the 101st Airborne Division's area of operation. In response to intelligence indicating a significant enemy presence in Base Area 101, the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry and elements of the 1st ARVN Regiment conducted combat assaults into the Nam Hoa District highlands. Subsequent reconnaissance-in-force operations met light enemy resistance as NVA and VC troops again chose not to expose their forces, and Todd Forest ended within two weeks.

In the central portion of the province, around Hue, various elements of the 101st Airborne Division continued to conduct a large-scale division-level operation, initiated 17 May 1968, in support of the South Vietnamese Government's Accelerated Pacification Campaign. The initial goal of Operation Nevada Eagle had been to clear the provincial lowlands of NVA units following the *Tet* Offensive, and then to sever the link between NVA regular units and VC local forces

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\*The brigade and its subordinate units were configured into three task forces: the first, infantry with a tank company attached; the second, armor with an infantry company attached; and the third, mechanized infantry with tanks attached.



in the coastal plains. A series of combat operations were grouped under Nevada Eagle, all directed at the pacification of Thua Thien Province. During the summer of 1968, combat assaults in and around Base Area 114, coupled with rice denial operations, forced the *803d NVA Regiment* to withdraw its main elements from Thua Thien. A succession of cordon and sweeps were then carried out within the province to harass and destroy local-force VC units and the infrastructure, including highly successful Vinh Loc and Phu Vang security operations. This all-out offensive against the VC included night ambushes to intercept rice gathering parties, propaganda and proselytizing teams, and blocking attempts by the Viet Cong to regroup. Phu Vang IV, conducted during December and January, was a combined cordon and search of the Phu Vang, Huong Thuy, and Phu Thu Districts by the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry; elements of the 54th ARVN Regiment; Regional Forces; and patrol units of Task Force Clearwater, which thwarted attempts by the VC to reenter the coastal area. Seventy-five of the enemy were killed and 35 infrastructure members were captured. Ambush operations in Phu Loc District, particularly in the vicinity of the Song Truoi, during January, severely restricted attempts by the *4th* and *5th NVA Regiments* and VC local forces to gain provisions, and to propagandize the area.

Just north of the Hai Van Pass, which separated northern and southern I Corps, elements of the 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry, and the 1st and 2d Battalions, 327th Infantry, initiated Platte Canyon on 6 January, a reconnaissance-in-force operation in the vicinity of the Ruong Ruong Valley. This portion of southern Thua Thien had long been considered the traditional location of the *4th NVA Regiment*. Rain and low-hanging clouds, typical of the northeast winter monsoon season, hampered initial operations, but the three battalions pushed on against moderate resistance as here too the enemy elected to disengage

and avoid decisive combat. One large staging area was located and destroyed by reconnaissance elements, along with miscellaneous enemy equipment and ammunition.

Certain signs pointed to the likelihood that an offensive effort was brewing north of the Hai Van Pass as the Vietnamese Lunar New Year season approached. The evidence was strong that major elements of the *6th* and *9th NVA Regiments* were attempting to work their way eastward through the A Shau Valley. Enemy activity in Base Area 611, straddling the border between Laos and South Vietnam, had gradually increased through the end of 1968, and continued to provide evidence that the North Vietnamese were moving personnel and supplies toward the Vietnamese border in large numbers. Then, too, the NVA were active along the DMZ, although losing materiel nearly as fast as it could be positioned forward. Also, many of the supply and ammunition caches uncovered were arranged in temporary or makeshift facilities, which suggested ready accessibility for further transport in support of offensive operations. Finally, several caches were discovered in areas recently checked and found "clean," pointing to an intensification of efforts to push ammunition and supplies forward.

Even though the enemy's forward supply areas had been disrupted, the *4th* and *5th NVA Regiments* forced out of their traditional forward operating areas, and the VC local force and infrastructure restricted along the coastal lowlands, it seemed apparent that the NVA intended an offensive of some kind in the near future. A victory, even against one or more limited objectives of minor or temporary tactical value, could have significant impact upon the civilian population, and a more far-reaching effect upon bargaining positions at the ongoing Paris Peace Talks. The enemy's jungle logistics system therefore would have to be destroyed before it could be used.<sup>18</sup>

## CHAPTER 3

# The Spring Offensive Preempted

### *Strike into the Da Krong—A Phased Operation—Phase I—Backyard Cleanup*

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#### *Strike into the Da Krong*

With the beginning of the new year, Vietnamese border areas again became the focal point of allied concern about enemy activity in northern I Corps. From various intelligence sources it was learned that North Vietnamese Army engineer units, inactive for several months, had reopened a number of major infiltration routes, among them Route 922 which parallels the Laotian border and then enters Vietnam south of the Song Da Krong Valley, becoming Route 548. Reports also indicated a dramatic surge in vehicular traffic; the enemy again was attempting to stick his logistics nose into South Vietnam. The number of trucks traveling south along 922 and then east on 548 doubled in early January—Marine and Air Force reconnaissance and attack aircraft at times sighted more than 1,000 trucks a day. Allied air interdiction efforts successfully closed a number of choke points on both roads, but only for short periods as enemy engineers quickly repaired the damage.

North Vietnamese determination to maintain and defend Routes 922 and 548 also was evident as the volume of antiaircraft fire increased during the same period. Friendly aircraft on armed reconnaissance, interdiction, and direct support missions reported heavy 12.7mm, 25mm, and 37mm fire with airbursts as high as 16,000 feet.<sup>1</sup> The only reported loss was an A-6 "Intruder" from Marine All Weather Attack Squadron (VMA[AW]) 242, which was shot down by 37mm antiaircraft over the northern A Shau Valley on the night of 17 January. The squadron conducted both visual and electronic searches, but the plane and its pilot and navigator were not found.<sup>2</sup>

Main enemy forces in the area were tentatively identified as elements of the *6th NVA Regiment*, *9th NVA Regiment*, *65th Artillery Regiment*, and the *83d Engineer Regiment*—largely support and replacement troops. Intelligence reports also noted that these units, which recently had crossed over from Base Area 611 in Laos, were stockpiling materiel, and then attempting to work their way eastward through the Da Krong and A Shau Valleys to Base Area 101 southwest of Quang Tri and Base Area 114, west of Hue.<sup>3</sup>

These recent developments in enemy activity did not go unnoticed at Dong Ha where Major General Raymond G. Davis and his staff at Headquarters, 3d Marine Division, closely monitored all pertinent intelligence information as it became available. When it looked as if the potential enemy threat might become an eventuality, General Davis requested authority from XXIV Corps to conduct an operation in the upper Song Da Krong Valley to block the threat. On 14 January, General Davis ordered Brigadier General Frank E. Garretson, Commanding General, Task Force Hotel, to prepare plans for a regimental-size search and clear operation in the Da Krong, scheduled to take place "as soon as practicable after 22 January, on order."<sup>4</sup> The following day, the 9th and its supporting 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, then conducting a similar operation (Dawson River West) near the Laotian border west of Khe Sanh and north of Lang Vei, were put on alert by General Garretson, who requested that the regiment submit a detailed plan of operation for approval prior to D-Day.<sup>5</sup>

At this time, Colonel Barrow's 9th Marines was the division's "swing" regiment; it could be used at any time or place as the situation dictated. As such, it operated under the direct orders of General Davis even though the regiment was under the control of Task Force Hotel. "It was a strange sort of a relationship," Barrow remembered, "I was under his [Garretson's] OpCon [operational control], but most of what the relationship was, . . . was to support me with whatever Task Force Hotel and Vandegrift Combat Base could provide" in terms of supplies. "I got most of my orders, if you will, directly from General Davis."<sup>6</sup>

Except for information gleaned from agent reports and aerial reconnaissance photographs, little was known about the upper Song Da Krong Valley. Surrounded by high mountains broken by a number of sharp protruding ridgelines and bisected by the meandering Da Krong, the valley was located in the remote southwest corner of Quang Tri Province, 62 kilometers west of Hue and 48 kilometers southwest of Quang Tri. Several kilometers further south lay the A Shau Valley. Between the two, and dominating both, were two large hill masses: Tam Boi (Hill 1224) and Co A



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*Aerial photograph of the Da Krong Valley with the Song Da Krong in the foreground, paralleling Route 922, one of the enemy's major supply routes from Laos into Vietnam.*

Nong (Hill 1228), commonly known as Tiger Mountain. Co Ka Leuye, a razorback ridge 1,500 meters high and 3,500 meters long, sitting astride the Laotian border, formed the valley's western boundary. Vegetation in the area varied, consisting of head-high elephant grass mixed with brushwood west of the river, and rugged triple-canopied jungle in the eastern half of the valley. South of the river, which ran east to west and then abruptly turned north, the area was stripped of much of its natural ground cover by frequent allied air and artillery bombardment.

During the final months of the northwest winter monsoon, January to March, temperatures in the valley were generally chilly compared to the 100-degree temperatures of the lowlands, rarely rising above 71 degrees or falling below 51 degrees. Skies were overcast with light drizzle or occasional thunderstorms, but no significant rainfall was recorded. As a result, the mountains were continually shrouded in clouds while the valleys and numerous ravines were blanketed with heavy fog.

#### *A Phased Operation*

Planning for the Da Krong operation, codenamed Dawson River South, began in earnest even before the 9th Marines returned to Vandegrift Combat Base from Dawson River West. Colonel Barrow made several

visual reconnaissance flights over the objective area with his battalion commanders, staff, and the direct support artillery battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Scoppa, in order to select appropriate sites for fire support bases.<sup>7</sup> In extensive discussions which followed there emerged a number of factors which would bear heavily upon the operation's concept, execution, and eventual success. Of primary importance was intelligence. The 3d Marine Division warning order stated simply: "Intelligence agencies indicate considerable enemy activity in the subject area." No concrete information was provided as to exact enemy strength, location, or composition, other than the existence of antiaircraft artillery, which Barrow noted, "was a tip-off that they were protecting something."<sup>8</sup> The effect was to urge prudence. Instead of simultaneous heliborne assaults over a wide area, a phased operation requiring strong fire support base defense, extensive infantry patrols, and a reliable intelligence system designed to locate enemy antiaircraft and artillery positions was decided upon.

A second factor was time. General Davis had expressed a desire to have maximum forces available in critical areas of Quang Tri Province during *Tet*, which was to begin 17 February. Since the operation, therefore, was limited to approximately 24 days, a mini-



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*Col Robert H. Barrow, Commanding Officer, 9th Marines, led the regiment in the assault into the Da Krong Valley and enemy Base Area 611 beyond.*

mum force of three infantry battalions and three 105mm howitzer batteries with 155mm support would be necessary; anything less would severely restrict the regiment's ability to conduct the operation and meet Davis' *Tet* deadline. Distance and weather were likewise viewed as limiting factors. Operating 50 kilometers from the nearest Marine combat base and logistical supply point, requests for resupply, reinforcements, medical evacuations, and air support would be delayed, 45 to 60 minutes for helicopters and 30 to 45 minutes for fixed-wing aircraft. Air operations would be hindered further by weather, at best unpredictable during the final months of the northwest monsoon.<sup>9</sup>

What emerged after five days of discussions, briefings, and frequent liaison with all participating or supporting echelons, including Headquarters, XXIV Corps, was a phased operation involving the step-by-step deployment of three infantry battalions protect-

ed by overlapping artillery fans, all requiring a minimum of helicopter support. The first phase was to consist of getting the regiment and its direct support artillery battalion into the area of operations and establishing fire bases within eight kilometers of each other to support the scheme of maneuver. The second phase was to include extensive patrolling around the fire support bases and the alignment of forces prior to launching into the target area. The final phase was visualized as a conventional three-battalion attack into the objective area. During this critical phase the regiment would depart from the highly mobile concept of operations, so successful in the past, and make the final move overland, securing ground and permitting helicopter resupply and support over an area already cleared of enemy forces, calming fears voiced by representatives of the 1st Wing. Aircraft and troop losses due to expected heavy antiaircraft defenses in the target area therefore would be reduced.<sup>10</sup> The 2d ARVN Regiment and the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) were to conduct supporting operations east and southeast of the Dawson River South area of operations. As in the past, a high degree of flexibility was built into the plan of operations so as to permit a refocusing of effort should either allied or enemy situations change.<sup>11</sup>

The entire concept of operations required the close coordination of Marine supporting arms. Fixed-wing aircraft based at Da Nang and Chu Lai were to provide landing zone preparations and close air support. Colonel Walter Sienko's Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 39 at Quang Tri, augmented by Marine Aircraft Group 36 at Phu Bai under Colonel Bruce J. Matheson, was to furnish helicopter support. The direct air support center (DASC), collocated with the 9th Marines' fire support coordination center (FSCC) at Vandegrift, was to control all aircraft. As the operation progressed, the FSCC and a DASC subunit were to move with the regiment into the operational area. The six firing batteries (three 105mm, two provisional 155mm, and one 4.2-inch mortar) of the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines (Reinforced), were to be deployed at eight kilometer intervals throughout the area of operations. A battery of Army 175mm guns from the 1st Battalion, 83d Artillery at Fire Support Base Jack, west of Hue, was to provide long-range support.<sup>12</sup>

The operational plan further provided that the logistic support area (LSA) at Vandegrift be designated the primary resupply point for all classes of equipment. Quang Tri Combat Base and the 3d Brigade,

101st Airborne's Camp Evans, north of Hue, were to be used as alternate or emergency resupply points in case of bad weather, and would be stocked with an additional 6,200 rounds of 105mm, 155mm, and 4.2-inch mortar shells.<sup>13</sup> Marines themselves were to carry an extra day's long-range patrol ration, plus twice the standard load of dry cell batteries and ammunition.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Phase I*

The first stage of the movement into the area of operations was to open three previously established fire support bases which stretched southward from Vandegrift. On 18 January units of Lieutenant Colonel Elliott R. Laine, Jr.'s 3d Battalion, 9th Marines resecured FSB Henderson, eight kilometers southwest of Ca Lu, in conjunction with a brief operation in the Ba Long Valley. This operation was a natural corollary to the base security mission picked up by the 9th Marines as it returned to Vandegrift from Dawson River West. On the 20th, Company L, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines reopened FSB Tun Tavern, unoccupied since early December 1968, after a team from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion checked for mines and boobytraps.

Battery D, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines occupied reconstructed artillery positions later the same day, and began shelling FSB Shiloh, another eight kilometers south.

Shortly after Marine air prepped Shiloh on the 21st, Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines occupied the fire base. Insertion of the artillery was delayed due to a fuze malfunction on one 750-pound bomb; the bomb detonated on impact instead of above ground, wiping out two previously constructed 105mm howitzer parapets, half of a third, and two ammunition berms. To repair the damage required seven hours of bulldozer work. With the reoccupation of Shiloh by two batteries of the 12th Marines, a forward LSA was established on the site and stocked with 5,000 rounds of artillery ammunition, and a 10-day supply of rations and batteries for an infantry battalion.

Shiloh turned out to be a "vacation land" for the Marines of Company A who were assigned the mission of providing security for the two artillery batteries. In addition to the normal patrols, as Lieutenant Colonel Wesley L. Fox, then a first lieutenant and com-

*Infantrymen of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines relax while waiting for helicopter transport at Vandegrift Combat Base prior to jumping off on operations in the Da Krong.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192763-B



pany commander, later remembered, "a platoon a day went off of the hill to the small river at the foot . . . for swimming and fishing. Swimming and lying in the sun on the nice sand bar were great, but the real treat was the fish provided by the fishing expedition. The platoons would wind up their day at the river by throwing grenades in the deep holes and simply wading out and picking up the fish that floated to the top." Throughout the remaining days of the operation, during which the company would experience a number of heavy firefights, shortages of both water and rations, and exhaustive patrols, Fox continued, "Marines were heard to talk about the good old days back on Shiloh."<sup>15</sup>

With Henderson, Tun Tavern, and Shiloh reoccupied, the 9th Marines was now poised to launch attacks into the new area of operations. On the morning of 22 January, four companies of Lieutenant Colonel George C. Fox's 2d Battalion lifted off from Vandegrift with a two-fold mission: Companies E and H were to assault a 600-meter hilltop about eight kilometers south-southeast of Shiloh, while Companies F and G would secure a landing zone, Dallas, five kilometers beyond to the southwest. Except for scattered small arms fire the landings of Companies E and H went unopposed, and work on the fire support base, named Razor, began immediately.\*

Razor was similar to other bases constructed by the 9th Marines' infantry, artillery, and engineer team during the previous eight months of mountain warfare, but technically more difficult. Trees measuring three to four feet in diameter—the largest encountered—had to be cleared, a job which posed major problems for the inexperienced Marines of Company H. According to Captain David F. Winecoff, commanding officer of the company:

We went in with . . . enough power saws and axes to do the job if we had the experienced people to work these things. But, I found out that there are very few people in Hotel Company, and we were the ax swingers, that knew how to swing an ax properly, and we immediately proceeded to bust about 50 to 60 percent of our axes . . . It was only through the cooperation of the engineers and all hands concerned in Hotel Company [that] with the power saws and

\*The first fire support base established in the area of operations was named by Colonel Barrow in honor of General Davis. "Razor" was the nickname given Davis by Major General James M. Master, Sr., when both served on Okinawa in the early 60s: "the razor cuts to the root of problems." (Gen Raymond G. Davis, Comments on draft ms, Aug86 [Vietnam 69 Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.]

the limited amount of axes that we got . . . Fire Support Base Razor opened up in time . . . It was quite a feat.<sup>16</sup>

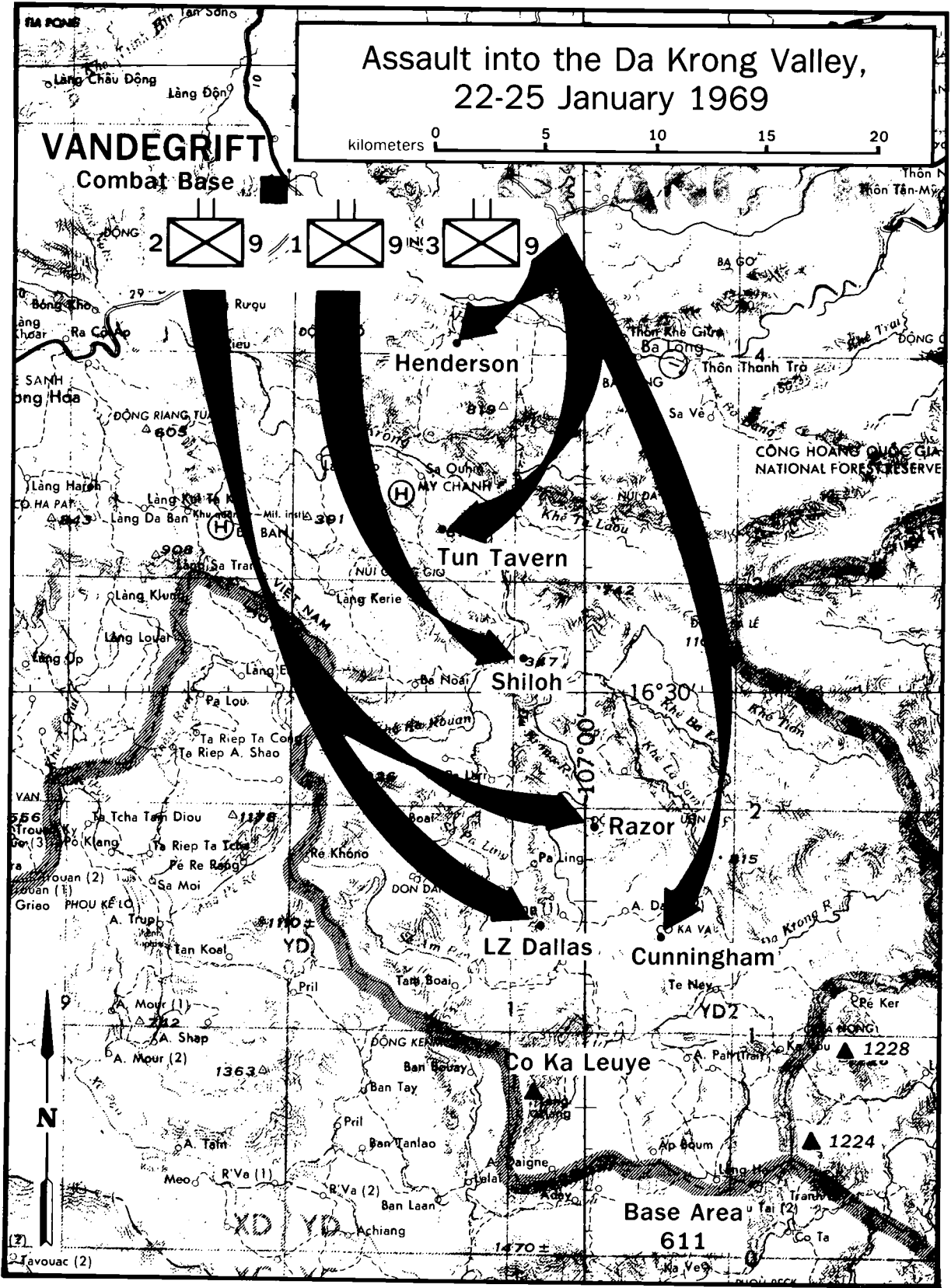
Winecoff's Marines cleared the trees, but the gentle slope on one side coupled with two hummocks on the flanks proved troublesome, and light bulldozers were brought in by helicopter to widen the landing zone and build gun pits and ammunition berms.

In the rapid buildup which followed, CH-46 "Sea Knight" helicopters, under the control of the wing DASC and the protective umbrella of gunships and observation aircraft, brought 1,544 Marines and 46 tons of cargo into the landing zone. By the evening of 23 January, a battery of 105mm howitzers was in place. The following day, the regimental command group displaced to Razor and occupied the gently sloping finger on the fire base's northwestern edge. The 2d Battalion, 12th Marines' command and fire control groups followed a short time later. Direction of the FDC and FSCC was then passed from Vandegrift to Razor without loss of continuity or centralized fire control. Six days after the introduction of Laine's 3d Battalion, the regiment was well into the zone of action.

On the morning of the 25th, after heavy air strikes, Laine's battalion assaulted three landing zones atop Ca Ka Va, a 1,100-meter-long razorback ridgeline, 6,000 meters south-southwest of FSB Razor. A short time later an artillery advance party and a team of engineers helilifted into the landing zones and began construction of what was to become FSB Cunningham, named for the first Marine aviator, Lieutenant Alfred A. Cunningham. From an artillery standpoint, Cunningham was ideal. Being at the center of the planned operational area and large enough to accommodate an integrated battalion position, it represented a simple solution to fire support requirements and coordination. As for the 9th Marines, its 11-kilometer artillery fan extended south and southwest almost to the limit of the area of operations.

Within the next four days the regimental command group and five artillery batteries moved into position on Cunningham. Mortar and D Batteries, the former from Vandegrift and the latter from Tun Tavern, displaced by sunset on the 25th. The 1st and 3d Provisional 155mm Howitzer Batteries helilifted in on 28 January from Ca Lu and Shiloh, respectively. When Battery E displaced from Shiloh to Cunningham the following day, the artillery movement into the Da Krong Valley was complete.

Soon after Cunningham opened, a small regimental forward logistical support area, capable of resupplying eight rifle companies with rations, water,



See Reference Map, Sections 11, 12, 16, 17



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193044

*A CH-53 Sea Stallion lands supplies and ammunition at Fire Support Base Razor shortly after the mountaintop was secured by members of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines.*

batteries, and small arms ammunition on a daily basis, was established. A tactical logistical group (Tac Log), used primarily in amphibious operations, also was established, enabling the supply officer to work closely with the regimental commander, the operations officer, and the air liaison officer. As Major Charles G. Bryan, the regimental S-4, noted: "The procedure permitted the establishment of realistic priorities to minimize interference with tactical operations and also to ensure maximum utilization of available helicopter assets. And it further provided for a more effective control and coordination of resupply operations." The tactical logistical group was set up "with an administrative Tac Log net from each battalion with the logistics requirements being passed through the regiment; the regiment would then pass these logistic requirements to the personnel in the rear at Vandegrift who would ensure that these supplies were promptly staged on the LSA and lifted to the field."<sup>17</sup> This technique would prove invaluable as the regiment moved into the second phase of the operation, now called Dewey Canyon.\*

#### *Backyard Cleanup*

Following the rapid movement of the regiment into the area of operations, companies of the 2d and 3d

\*After a majority of the regiment was deployed, and the area of operations expanded, the operational codename was changed from Dawson River South to Dewey Canyon. However, Dawson River South remained in effect for those elements of the 9th Marines still at Fire Support Bases Tun Tavern and Henderson.

Battalions moved out from Razor and Cunningham on the 24th and 25th, initiating Phase II. Their mission was to clear the area around the two fire support bases, secure the flanks, and then gradually move into position along the Da Krong's east-west axis, designated Phase Line Red, for Phase III. This placed the 3d Battalion on the eastern flank and the 2d Battalion on the western flank near the Laotian border. The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel George W. Smith, would be introduced into the middle once the two battalions were in place. Among the critical second phase objectives were: the seizure of the Co Ka Leuye ridgeline, assigned to Company G; the construction of FSB Erskine, four kilometers southwest of Cunningham, by Company F; and the occupation of Landing Zones Lightning and Tornado, located four kilometers northeast of Cunningham, by Company K.

Patrolling 2,000 to 3,000 meters apart, the two battalions encountered screening forces of major enemy units thought to be operating further south. Engagements with single NVA soldiers or small bands of support troops were commonplace, and the ensuing firefights short. On 25 January, one such contact led to the discovery of a sophisticated four-strand communications wire by Company M. Running from Laos into Base Area 101 to the east, the line was strung between tree-mounted porcelain insulators and well concealed by overhead cover. A five-man special Marine and Army intelligence team, which had accompanied the Marines, tapped the wire and eventually broke the



NVA code, but no information was provided the 3d Battalion as it was "presumed to be of strategic rather than tactical value," noted Lieutenant Colonel Laine.<sup>18</sup>

Another significant find during the first stage of Phase II was the *88th NVA Field Hospital*. Discovered by Company F, 2d Battalion, near the Song Da Krong, the complex consisted of eight large permanent buildings capable of accommodating 150 to 160 patients. A detailed search revealed large quantities of Russian-made stainless steel surgical instruments, antibiotics, foodstuffs, and evidence that the area had been evacuated the previous day.<sup>19</sup>

Company G, under Captain Daniel A. Hitzelberger, launched its attack on Co Ka Leuye (Hill 1175) the afternoon of 31 January from LZ Dallas. After a short skirmish with a small group of NVA soldiers who sought to draw it into an ambush at sunset, the company crossed a tributary of the Da Krong and advanced 500 meters up the mountain before settling in for the night. The following morning the Marines continued their climb, roping up sheer rock cliffs and traversing slopes with grades averaging 65 to 75 degrees. As the day progressed, the weather began to deteriorate, adding yet another obstacle. Heavy rains alternated with drizzle and dense fog, reducing the hard, red Viet-

namese soil to mud, visibility to 25 meters, and the ceiling to zero. Despite weather and terrain problems, Company G continued the climb toward the objective.

As Hitzelberger's company moved up Co Ka Leuye, the two other regimental objectives were taken. Company F secured the ground for Erskine on 1 February, but was prevented from developing the fire support base by the same bad weather hampering Company G's movement. Four kilometers east of Cunningham, Company K secured a landing zone and began construction of FSB Lightning. Within hours of completion, the 1st and 2d Battalions, 2d ARVN Regiment, plus the 1st Battalion, 62d Artillery Regiment (ARVN) lifted into the fire support base just before inclement weather halted all helicopter operations.

Predictably, enemy-initiated attacks increased during this period of bad weather. On 2 February, FSB Cunningham received approximately 30 to 40 rounds from one or more enemy 122mm field guns located on or near the border. Although one of the 1st Provisional Battery's 155mm howitzers was temporarily disabled by a near hit, and the 3d Provisional Battery's fire direction center was put out of action by a direct hit, the batteries maintained uninterrupted counter-battery fire. The 2d Battalion, 12th Marines sustained

*Two Marine UH-1E (Huey) helicopters touch down at the operation's main fire support and logistic base, Cunningham, bringing in additional supplies and personnel in support of the 9th Marines and artillery batteries of the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192655





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192844  
*Despite rugged terrain and heavy jungle growth, infantrymen of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines struggle up one of the many ridges in the area of operations.*

a total of five killed and an equal number of wounded. Subsequent crater analysis and aerial sightings indicated that the enemy guns were in Laos just beyond the maximum range of the battalion's 155mm howitzers. The Army's 175 guns, located along the coast, proved inaccurate but were used to harass. Therefore the only means of delivering effective counterbattery was by air. If the guns could be visually located, they could be destroyed. However, it soon became apparent that if an aerial observer (AO) remained on station for any length of time, all enemy fire would cease. Therefore, as Barrow later noted, "counterbattery was a simple thing of always having an AO up."<sup>29</sup> The fire support base continued to receive enemy incoming throughout the operation at sporadic but frequent intervals, notably when the observers left the area, even for short periods.

By the 3d, after four days of bad weather, Colonel Barrow had to make a decision. Should present posi-

tions be held? Had the regiment overextended itself by placing Company G on Co Ka Leuye? With no relief in sight and helicopter resupply and medical evacuations halted throughout the area, Barrow instructed the 2d and 3d Battalions to pull in their companies and hold them close to areas from which they could be easily supported. The decision proved to be a wise one, since Razor and Cunningham were well-stocked with rations and small arms ammunition. Artillery ammunition, however, was in short supply. The 2d Battalion, 12th Marines had attempted to stock extra shells, but the scarcity of heavy lift helicopters (Marine CH-53s and Army CH-47s), and the weather made it impossible to achieve the initial stockage objectives. Without the reserve, artillery missions had to be reduced. For the first 10 days of February, the battalion fired 6,078 rounds, assisting only engaged units.

Except for Company G, 2d Battalion, all rifle companies assumed a modified defensive position or were quickly moving into one by 4 February: Company L was on Cunningham, while I, K, and M were close by; Company H was on Razor; Company F was on Erskine; and Company E was at LZ Dallas. On the morning of the 5th, Hitzelberger's company began retracing its steps:

As we came down off of 1175 my point element, which was from the 3d Platoon, observed three NVA off to the right; however, because of the contacts we had the previous day we decided to check out the area a little bit further. So I held the column in place and allowed the point fire team to go out to see if there was any more forces there or take the three NVA if they could. Our point then came under fire.<sup>21</sup>

From what Captain Hitzelberger was able to piece together, the company had been drawn into a classical U- or V-shaped enemy ambush.

The point fire team soon found itself pinned down in the midst of approximately 30 NVA troops scattered in low-lying bunkers and well-camouflaged among rocks and trees. Silhouetted against the sky if it attempted to withdraw, the team waited until the rest of the 3d Platoon was brought up. The 2d Platoon was then moved to the left, and as it started to sweep through the enemy position, came under a hail of automatic weapons and rocket propelled grenade (RPG) fire. With the 2d and 3d Platoons stopped, Hitzelberger decided to commit the 1st by swinging it further to the left and through a small ravine, flanking the enemy. By this maneuver, the 3d Platoon was able to break through and force the NVA to withdraw. The company then pushed through the ambush site to a

communications line where it consolidated its position. A cursory check of the immediate area revealed two enemy bodies and several blood trails. Five Marines were killed and 18 wounded. Among those who gave their lives during the battle was fire team leader Lance Corporal Thomas P. Noonan, Jr., of Brooklyn, New York, who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his daring rescue of a seriously wounded fellow Marine.

With 30 minutes to reorganize for fear of a second attack, there was only time enough to destroy excess equipment and rig stretchers. At 1730, after putting out a strong rear guard and plotting artillery concentrations along the proposed route, the company moved down the ridge. The pace was slow and rest breaks frequent, as half the company was either assisting the walking wounded or carrying stretchers. At 0200 the following morning, Hitzelberger decided to stop and settle in for the night even though the company was split because of a treacherous slope.

Early the next day, the company consolidated and began its trek toward a predetermined rendezvous with a relief platoon from Company E. The terrain, as before, proved to be an obstacle. "At this time the stretcher cases were moving up and down slopes in excess of 70 degrees," reported Captain Hitzelberger, "we had to use six, eight and, at times, ten men to carry a stretcher and it would take us over 30 minutes to move one stretcher case over one bad area."<sup>22</sup> At 1400, the company paused and then began what was to be the most difficult part of its descent. During the next several hours, Marines roped the stretchers and wounded down the face of a rocky cliff without incident. At the bottom the company linked up with the relief platoon which had brought out medical supplies and the first rations the Marines had had in three days. For the next 36 hours, the company wound its way down Hill 1175 toward the river. Once on the Da Krong, Marine aircrews made a heroic effort to extract the most seriously wounded. In dense fog, two medical evacuation helicopters from HMM-161 flew south up the Da Krong, using the river as their guide. Without Huey gunships for cover, and after having been fired on from the high ground during their approach, the two CH-46 helicopters landed, picked up the casualties, and returned to Vandegrift.

On the 8th, Company G returned to LZ Dallas. The ordeal, as Lieutenant Colonel George C. Fox later noted, "was a tremendous performance in leadership and fire discipline . . . . I went out and talked to those



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*Capt Daniel A. Hitzelberger, right, and GySgt Charles A. Baker led the Marines of Company G off Co Ka Leuye ridgeline during an extended period of bad weather and heavy fighting when it was impossible to reinforce and resupply the company by helicopter.*

young Marines as they came in; every last one of them. They were smiling and laughing. Their clothes were torn, and in some cases completely off of them, but they were ready for a fight."<sup>23</sup>

The two ARVN battalions on FSB Lightning experienced a somewhat similar problem. As the weather closed in on 1 February the battalions' direct support artillery battery and remaining supplies were in the process of being inserted. By the time all helicopter operations halted, only one of the six 105mm howitzers and 400 rounds of ammunition had been delivered. The battalions themselves carried only the basic allowance supplied to each infantryman. With conventional resupply out of the question, it was decided to attempt a helicopter-parachute drop by directing two CH-46s from HMM-161 over the target with the assistance of the Vandegrift air support radar team (ASRT).<sup>\*</sup> Both drops landed within 100 meters of the ARVN position, even though the team's radar equipment was operating beyond its normal range.

From 5 to 8 February, Marine fixed-wing KC-130s made additional ASRT-controlled drops adjacent to Marine positions. Although the "Hercules" could drop greater quantities of supplies, the drops proved to be less accurate, and the percentage of loads recovered fell from 80 to 66. These initial experiences led to a

<sup>\*</sup>The ASRT employed a radar-course-directing central computer which consisted of a precision radar and associated computer equipment designed to accurately position aircraft without visual reference to the earth's surface.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*Using a winch and cable, aircrewmembers from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 242 hoist a wounded Marine through jungle canopy into a hovering CH-46.*

refinement of the Vandegrift facilities and the installation of a second ASRT team at Cunningham on 26 February.<sup>24</sup> Working together, they provided extended radar coverage, increasing the accuracy of subsequent resupply drops and the regiment's counterbattery capability during periods of darkness and inclement weather.

Another innovation that paid high dividends concerned the handling of casualties in the field when poor weather conditions precluded helicopter medical evacuations. In November 1968, the regimental and three battalion surgeons had developed and fabricated a helicopter-transportable aid station, capable of providing maximum lifesaving care as field conditions would allow. One such aid station accompanied the 9th Marines to Cunningham and was placed into full operation soon after the fire support base opened. During the first week of February, when the weather would not permit helicopter evacuation of casualties, the Cunningham station proved invaluable in the number of lives saved.

Nine days of bad weather cost the regiment its momentum. They also permitted the enemy, who by this time had determined the purpose and strength of the Marine attack, to prepare and fortify his defenses. By 10 February, the weather cleared sufficiently for helicopters to move elements of the 1st Battalion from Vandegrift and Shiloh to FSB Erskine, and Battery F from Razor to Erskine. With all battalions in place, the stage was now set for the southward drive across the Da Krong.

## CHAPTER 4

# The Raid into Laos

*Across the Da Krong—The NVA Retaliates—Ambush Along 922—Heavy Fighting  
Back Into Laos—Persistent Problems—Phased Retraction—Laos: Repercussions*

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### *Across the Da Krong*

The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines crossed the Song Da Krong early on the morning of 11 February, initiating Phase III of Operation Dewey Canyon. The 1st and 2d Battalions followed the next day. According to the concept of operations, each battalion was given a zone of action approximately five kilometers wide, and an objective about eight kilometers south southwest of the point of departure. To the east, the 3d Battalion was to attack along ridgelines 2,000 meters apart, with one company securing Hill 1228 (Tiger Mountain), and two companies taking Hill 1224 (Tam Boi). The 1st Battalion was to advance over two parallel ridgelines further west, converging on a single objective astride the Laotian border. On the regiment's western flank, the 2d Battalion was to attack through a broad valley with secondary assaults on the ridges to the east. The battalion's final objective also lay on the South Vietnamese-Laotian border.

Tactically, Colonel Barrow divided each battalion: two companies attacking along parallel ridgelines with two companies in trace. The lead company was to attack and if heavily engaged, the company in trace, or its platoons, was to act as the maneuver element, assisting the attacking company and securing a landing zone for resupply and medical evacuation, if necessary. When the situation permitted, the company in trace would assume the lead and the company in the attack would fall back. The scheme of movement, according to Barrow, "was masterfully done." "Battalion commanders went right along with [their troops], no jeeps obviously, or any of that nonsense."<sup>1</sup>

As each battalion moved across Phase Line Red, it made strong contact. Three companies of Lieutenant Colonel George W. Smith's 1st Battalion immediately encountered a sizeable enemy force which had apparently been positioned to mount a ground attack against FSB Erskine. Assisted by well-aimed fire of five artillery batteries, the Marines forced the enemy to withdraw, leaving behind 25 killed in addition to numerous weapons, packs, and explosives. Meanwhile, further east, Company M threw back a mortar-supported ground attack by an estimated NVA platoon,

tooth, killing 18 while losing two Marines. After fighting a day-long series of minor skirmishes on the 13th, Company C collided with a mortar- and machine gun-reinforced enemy platoon, deployed on a hilltop in a line defense. The ensuing Marine assault forced the enemy from the hill, killing 12 NVA. That night, the Marines employed mortars and artillery to break an enemy effort to retake the hill, claiming an additional 12 NVA during the battle. Company C losses for the day were two killed and 21 wounded.

The opposition the Marines found themselves up against was determined and formidable. Enemy forces, unlike those encountered during Phase II, were well-disciplined and remained in their bunkers or fighting holes until overrun or destroyed. At night they would probe or attack Marine company positions using squads or platoons. Snipers frequently were tied in trees, and would fire at close range or wait until Marines were directly beneath and drop grenades. These suicide techniques seemed to be designed for only one purpose: to prevent or delay the Marines' advance on Route 922, and the important supply area and artillery positions which encircled it.

The enemy's tough resistance achieved little success. Employing a heavy volume of accurate artillery fire and air strikes, the three battalions advanced steadily southward. Attesting to the performance of Marine firepower, two 122mm field guns were destroyed on 15 February—one by air, the other by artillery. Marine scout-sniper teams also contributed to the success of the attack by shooting their NVA counterparts out of trees on several occasions.

Sharp clashes across the entire front marked the action on 16 and 17 February. On the left flank, Company K, 3d Battalion, moving toward an intermediate objective, was attacked from the front and rear by an unknown number of North Vietnamese troops. Using all available supporting arms to silence enemy mortar and rocket propelled grenade fire, the company killed 17 and seized a number of weapons in taking the position, while sustaining few casualties. On the 17th, while advancing along the right flank, Company G, 2d Battalion exchanged small arms and supporting fire with an enemy company in a daylong running



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800561

*Riflemen of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines cross the shallow Song Da Krong below FSB Cunningham, beginning the long-awaited-for penetration of enemy Base Area 611.*

battle. Thirty-nine NVA lost their lives, while the Marines counted five killed and 12 wounded.

#### *The NVA Retaliates*

In observance of *Tet*, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong unilaterally declared a weeklong truce. The allied countrywide 24-hour truce went into effect at 1800 on 16 February. But as Major Joseph B. Knotts, the regimental operations officer, commented: "out on Dewey Canyon you wouldn't know there was any."<sup>2</sup> At 0345 the following morning, an enemy sapper platoon supported by a reinforced company launched an attack on FSB Cunningham. Dressed in shorts, skull-caps, and weighted down with explosives, the NVA broke through the defensive wire and dashed toward the center of the fire support base, tossing concussion grenades and satchel charges into every open hole. Although initially caught by surprise, the Marines of Company L, securing the fire support base, quickly organized a drive to clear the base in the face of heavy enemy mortar and recoilless rifle fire.

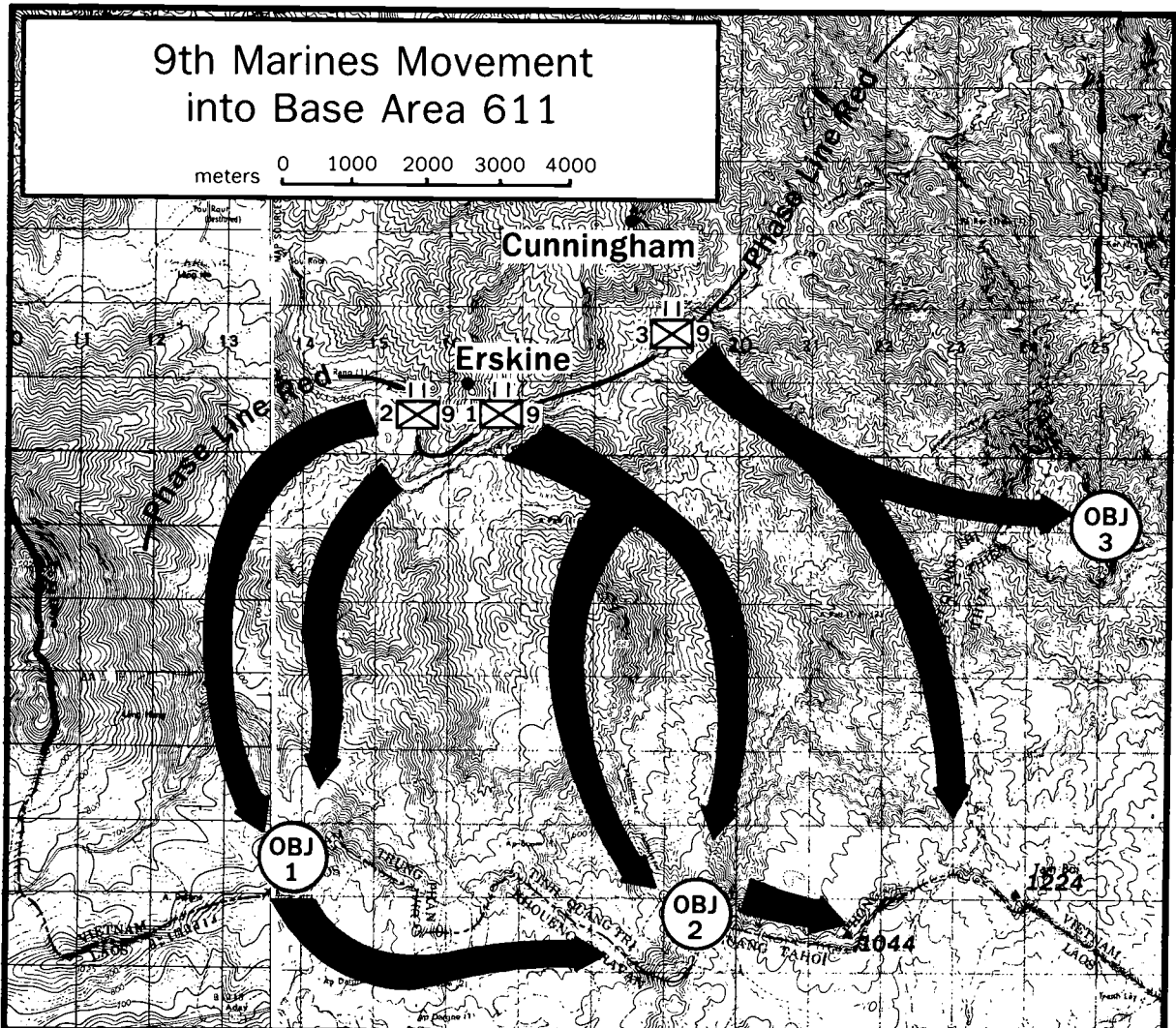
Lieutenant Colonel Scoppa's 2d Battalion, 12th Marines bore the brunt of the attack, suffering major damage within the first minutes; the battalion's fire direction center was put out of action, as was one howitzer. Within 30 minutes, however, the battalion reestablished centralized fire control and batteries continued with their missions. Throughout the night they expended 3,270 rounds on targets of opportunity, suspected assembly areas, and likely escape routes; included among the total were 147 "flechette" and

"beehive" rounds of direct fire. In support, the ARVN 105mm battery on FSB Lightning unleashed reinforcing fires totalling 340 rounds.

A sweep of the base and surrounding hillsides at first light revealed 37 NVA bodies, 13 of which were within the perimeter. A number of individual weapons, grenades, and packs were also located, the latter containing quantities of marijuana and other drugs. The use of narcotics, Second Lieutenant Milton J. Teixeira explained, "made them a lot harder to kill. Not one of the gooks we had inside the perimeter had less than three or four holes in him. Usually it took a grenade or something to stop him completely."<sup>3</sup> Four Marines lost their lives and 46 were wounded during the three-hour defense. On the 20th, Companies E, G, and the command group of Lieutenant Colonel James J. McMonagle's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines assumed the mission of providing security for Fire Support Bases Cunningham and Erskine, relieving Companies G and L, which joined their respective battalions in the move southward.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Ambush Along 922*

The heaviest fighting of the Da Krong campaign took place from 18 to 22 February, the majority occurring within the sector assigned to Lieutenant Colonel Smith's 1st Battalion. On the morning of the 18th, Company A encountered stiff opposition from an enemy platoon dug into camouflaged, reinforced bunkers on a heavily forested ridgeline, five kilometers southeast of FSB Erskine. Armed with small arms



See Reference Map, Sections 16, 17

and automatic weapons, the enemy "appeared to want to hold their position at all cost."<sup>5</sup> Preceded by air and artillery strikes, Company A assaulted and overran the position, counting more than 30 NVA dead. The following morning, Company C moved through Company A's lines and continued the attack against the heavily reinforced hilltop emplacement, killing an equal number of NVA. Friendly casualties resulting from the two actions were one killed and 14 wounded.

Pressing the attack through the bunker complex, Company C again made contact during the late afternoon on the 20th, engaging a large enemy force supported by small arms, grenades, and machine gun fire. Two hours later, the Marine assault, assisted by fixed-wing air strikes with napalm drops within 50 meters of the point element, carried the position, killing 71 NVA. Equipment captured included two Russian-

made 122mm field guns, and a five-ton, tracked prime mover.\* Employing company rotation tactics, Company A continued the attack through Company C's forward lines and overran yet another enemy emplacement, killing another 17 NVA and seizing a two-and-one-half-ton truck and assorted artillery and antiaircraft ammunition. Marine losses sustained in the two actions were five killed and 28 wounded in Company C, and one killed and two wounded in Company A.

As the attacking forces neared the Laotian border, concern over enemy artillery attacks, protection of the regiment's right flank, and potentially lucrative ene-

\*The two 122mm artillery pieces, the largest captured during the Vietnam War, subsequently were evacuated. One of the field guns is on display at the Marine Corps Air-Ground Museum, Quantico, Virginia.

my targets generated plans and requests for the tactical deployment of troops across the international boundary. After discussion at division and with XXIV Corps, Major General Davis forwarded a message to MACV requesting that the Special Operations Group (SOG) expand and redirect ground reconnaissance and exploitation operations, codenamed Prairie Fire, being carried out in the Laotian panhandle, toward Base Area 611.<sup>6\*</sup> MACV approved and quickly implemented the request.<sup>7</sup> Reacting to the NVA artillery attack of 2 February on FSB Cunningham, Davis had initially requested that the 9th Marines be permitted to enter Laos and destroy the threat: "From the present position of the 9th Marines, a raid by a force of two battalions could be launched quickly and effectively to cut road No. 922 and moving rapidly back to the east, destroy art[illery] forces and other forces and installations which threaten us."<sup>8</sup>

Davis' request was put aside for a period as current rules of engagement did not permit the introduction of a large combat force into Laos for the purpose of conducting what was in essence a secondary search and destroy operation, and which could possibly be viewed as an expansion of the war. The rules did permit United States and other Free World World Forces to "maneuver, while actually engaged and in contact with enemy forces, into Laos as necessary for the preservation of the force," and employ artillery and air strikes on threatening military targets. The rules in no way prohibited commanders from taking the "necessary counteractions against VC/NVA forces in the exercise of self-defense and to defend their units against armed attacks with all means at their disposal."<sup>9</sup> These exceptions provided the 9th Marines with the justification it needed.

As Barrow's troops moved further south, it became increasingly clear that the enemy was making extensive use of Route 922, either to reinforce or to withdraw his forces. "In either case, interdiction of the road was clearly essential," noted Colonel Barrow. "Efforts by B-52 arc light strikes, fixed-wing attacks, and unobserved artillery had been to no avail; he was continuing to use it. During the day the AOs were reporting fresh vehicle tracks, including tracked vehicle tracks on the road, and as our forces moved fur-

ther south, we could hear vehicles on the road. This was a pretty unacceptable situation, and it cried out for some sort of action to put a stop to it."<sup>10</sup>

By 20 February, two companies, E and H, of Lieutenant Colonel Fox's 2d Battalion were on the Laotian border. At least two additional companies were expected within the next 24 hours. As Company H sat on the ridgeline overlooking the border and Route 922 beyond, Marines watched as an enemy convoy composed of truck and tracked vehicles moved slowly in a westerly direction along the road. As Captain David F. Winecoff later reported:

The company, of course, was talking about let's get down on the road and do some ambushing. I don't think they really thought that they were going to let us go over into Laos, . . . I knew if the military had their way we'd be over there in Laos and the company was all up for it . . . With the Paris Peace Talks going on, I wasn't sure what route was going to be taken.<sup>11</sup>

Winecoff reported the observations and fire missions called, but from "1,700 meters away it is difficult to zero in on movement."<sup>12</sup>

With the information provided by Winecoff's company, and intelligence gathered by SOG teams and 1st Radio Battalion intercepts, indicating that the enemy was evacuating its heavy artillery westward out of the reach of the 9th Marines, Lieutenant General Stilwell revived Davis' initial request. In a message to Lieutenant General Cushman on the 20th, he recommended a limited raid into the heart of enemy Base Area 611 to a maximum depth of five kilometers along a 20-kilometer front. If, however, the proposal was "beyond the realm of political acceptability," he suggested a lesser course of action which would involve the use of a Marine company as an extraction force if SOG reconnaissance teams encountered trouble. According to Stilwell, "this would multiply the number of SOG RT teams which could be deployed simultaneously."<sup>13</sup> Cushman, in a message to General Abrams later the same day, passed on the suggested courses of action and noted that "while recognizing the political implications of Gen Stilwell's proposals, . . . balanced against the military value of this unique opportunity, I fully endorse both."<sup>14</sup> The matter of an incursion into Laos was now left up to Abrams.

Events in the field, however, moved more rapidly. Company H, on the night of the 20th, again observed heavy truck traffic on Route 922. Winecoff reported the observations, and once again the company directed a number of fire missions on the targets, but with

\*The mission of the Special Operations Group's Prairie Fire program provided for crossborder reconnaissance operations into the panhandle of Laos using combined US/RVN forces to locate, interdict, and destroy enemy personnel and equipment on infiltration routes into South Vietnam.



unknown results. The following afternoon, Captain Winecoff received a hand-coded message, the result of several days of planning, from Colonel Barrow directing him to set up a company ambush along Route 922 that evening, with specific instructions to be back in South Vietnam no later than 0630 the next morning.<sup>15</sup> "Hotel Company," reported Barrow, "was in the best position; really the only position to do it,

and the job fell to them."<sup>16</sup> Winecoff immediately requested a 24-hour postponement because of the limited time available and the condition of his men, most of whom had been on patrol since early morning. Barrow denied his request.

With no time to rehearse and little time to plan, Captain Winecoff decided to use only his 1st and 2d Platoons, as the men of the 3d were exhausted after

*The advance of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines is halted temporarily by a group of North Vietnamese support troops attempting to protect their supplies and road network.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193159





Marine Corps Historical Collection  
*One of the 12 captured North Vietnamese Army 122mm field guns. With a range of 14 miles, it was the largest enemy artillery piece captured in Vietnam.*

several tiring days of continuous patrol. At 1610, the company command group and the 1st Platoon, reinforced by mortar, forward observer, and machine gun teams, moved out for the 2d Platoon's position at the bottom of the ridge, leaving the 3d as security. Making good time over difficult terrain, they joined the 2d Platoon a little over an hour later, and the 1st passed through the 2d Platoon's position to establish the planned order of march. At 1800, after a meal and a 30-minute forward reconnaissance, the order arrived to execute and Winecoff quickly briefed the company on ambush tactics, signals, and night movement.

Shortly after dark, the company headed toward the road, 900 meters away. Staying off trails and using a creek bed and then a ridge line to minimize noise, the point element reached the small river which paralleled Route 922 at about 2030. Winecoff halted the column and sent his lead platoon commander and the chief scout, an experienced Marine sergeant, forward to find a route across the stream and to select an ambush site. As the company waited, it observed six trucks pass in front of its position; each stopping for a short period to "recon by silence."<sup>17</sup> A tracked

vehicle mounting a spotlight also passed. "It was a very exciting moment for Hotel Company because the spotlight was scanning up and down the river and on the bluff, and it was playing over the lead elements of the company, but we were not spotted. Finally it proceeded on down the road."<sup>18</sup>

The two-man reconnaissance team returned around 2215, and after a quick brief, the company moved forward, crossing the river in column formation and then the road. About 35 meters beyond, Winecoff halted the company and set up a hasty linear ambush with the 1st Platoon on the right, and the 2d on the left, and the command group in the center. Within minutes of moving into position, the Marines heard trucks approaching from the west. They passed the word to let the vehicles proceed through the ambush site, as the claymores and flank security were not yet in place. By 0100 in the morning, the ambush was ready.

With the men of Company H about 500 meters inside Laos, Colonel Barrow informed Task Force Hotel of the move, "thinking that even that much of a minor violation might in itself provide a little bit of assurance

*Marines move down one of the numerous enemy supply roads which crisscrossed the enemy base area.*

Marine Corps Historical Collection



of approval." "There was a little bit of opposition to what we were doing, and much discussion," noted Barrow, "and finally approval came through that, yes, we could do what we were going to do, but the implication clearly was, you had better make it work."<sup>19</sup>

While the 9th Marines' staff obtained approval, Winecoff's men waited. The wait was not long. Less than ten minutes after setting up the ambush, a single NVA appeared, aimlessly walking along the road firing his AK47 assault rifle into the brush. Not wanting to "bag one NVA soldier," Winecoff passed the word to let this "dude" walk through the killing zone. Forty minutes later, flank security detected a single truck approaching. Again not wanting to destroy just one vehicle, Winecoff passed the order to let it through, instructing his forward listening post to visually check its contents. As it turned out, the truck carried a load of lumber.

The next half hour was tense for Winecoff's men; nothing moved, but voices could be heard 800 to 1,000 meters off to the right. "I felt," Captain Winecoff noted, "that sooner or later something was going to be coming along into the killing zone."<sup>20</sup> The company continued to wait. Meanwhile, a radio request came in from the battalion asking for a status report; they were "afraid that we'd blown it," but Winecoff assured them otherwise. At 0230, the lights of eight trucks suddenly appeared off to the east. All positions were alerted. As the trucks moved closer, stopping now and then to "recon by silence," the men of the ambush braced for action.

Three of the vehicles had already entered the killing zone when the entire column stopped. Fearing that the enemy would detect his ambush, Winecoff detonated his claymore. With a loud roar and a boiling cloud of thick, black smoke, the mine disabled the second truck, killing its three passengers. As the smoke cleared, Winecoff could see that the explosion had also set the first truck afire and forced the third off the road. Small arms and automatic weapons fire poured into the vehicles from the flanks; "everybody had been waiting a long time and the excitement was keen."<sup>21</sup> Within seconds the forward observer alerted the artillery and rounds bracketed the company position.

After several minutes of unrestricted fire, Winecoff gave the signal to move forward, making sure everything within the ambush site was destroyed. Once on the other side of the road, the company was given "left face," and "we proceeded in column right back in the same direction we came, crossing the river in the exact

area, up the other side, and went about 5 to 600 meters up to a rally point where we . . . hung 'till daylight."<sup>22</sup> Later, the company rejoined the 3d Platoon on the ridgeline where it was resupplied and the men given a rest. In addition to the three trucks destroyed, H Company counted eight NVA dead. Not a single Marine had been killed or wounded by enemy fire.

First reports of the ambush to reach the 3d Marine Division were sketchy and based largely on monitored 9th Marines radio traffic. Colonel Martin J. Sexton, 3d Division Chief of Staff, immediately recommended that only XXIV Corps and III MAF be informed of the incident and that no report would be relayed to MACV until Brigadier General Frank E. Garretson, commanding Task Force Hotel, had prepared a "spot report in compliance with directives pertaining to rules of engagement."<sup>23</sup> On being informed of the ambush, Brigadier General George E. Dooley, III MAF Chief of Staff, was elated: "Hit 'm hard! Good news—who knows where the border is anyway?"<sup>24</sup>

About mid-afternoon on 22 February, a reply to Stilwell's and Cushman's messages of the 20th arrived at III MAF. Responding to their proposals, General Abrams stated emphatically that "all operations in connection with Base Area 611 will be with SOG forces," and that close coordination between Marine units in South Vietnam and SOG teams in Laos was authorized.<sup>25</sup> Although an apparent conflict existed between the action of Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, and General Abrams' directive, Garretson solved it by making reference to the appropriate rules of engagement permitting a local commander to exercise the right of self-defense in his report.<sup>26</sup> However, larger questions remained. With all three battalions on or just north of the border, and substantial enemy installations and lines of communication directly ahead, what future direction was Operation Dewey Canyon to take? Was the international boundary to remain a permanent barrier to the 9th Marines?

While the ambush itself was dramatic and successful, its real value, according to Colonel Barrow, lay in the leverage it provided to request a continuation of such operations in Laos. "Therefore, the next day I sent a message to higher headquarters stating why we had done what we had done, reiterating the successes achieved, and then my final paragraph made an urgent request for authority to maneuver into Laos as applied from North-South gridline 01 to the North-South [east-west] gridline 02. This generally was about a 2,000 meter extension and included all of Route 922."

Again he stated that his request was based upon the “immediate and constant” enemy threat to his troops and on intelligence which continued to place enemy troops and equipment concentrations in the area. And, noted Barrow, “I put a final comment on my message, which said, quote, ‘put another way, my forces should not be here if ground interdiction of Route 922 not authorized.’ ”<sup>27</sup>

Lieutenant General Stilwell would not give up. Adopting Barrow’s recommendations, he requested authority from MACV for “a selected advance south to the east-west 02 gridline—a distance not exceeding two kilometers from the border at any point.”<sup>28</sup> Faced with a *fait accompli*, General Abrams finally approved Stilwell’s request on 24 February, but placed restrictions on all public discussion of the Laotian incursion, fearing possible adverse effects on international policy.<sup>29</sup> Knowledge of the operation was also to be limited; the American ambassador in Laos, William H. Sullivan, for example, was not informed until the operation was well underway, as was Laotian Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, who when informed, “expressed understanding of the action and said the essential element was to keep the matter secret,” but hoped it would be short.<sup>30</sup>

### *Heavy Fighting*

In the regiment’s center, Company A, 1st Battalion, protecting the battalion’s left flank, continued to reconnoiter the site of the previous day’s contact, and then headed east off the ridge on the morning of 22 February. About 1,000 meters from the battalion command post near Lang Ha on the border, the 1st Platoon encountered an NVA squad in well-positioned bunkers. Under Second Lieutenant George M. Malone, Jr., the platoon quickly overran the position, killing seven while losing one Marine. “At this point,” observed First Lieutenant Wesley L. Fox, “it looked like that was all the resistance we had. Everything was quiet, so I radioed up to battalion to send the water details [from Headquarters and Service and C Companies] down to the creek. We were in bad need of water. The helicopters could not get in due to weather, and the battalion was low.”<sup>31</sup> A 20-man detail moved down and as they started to fill canteens, they came under enemy 60mm mortar and machine gun fire. Lieutenant Fox immediately ordered the detail back, reoriented his 1st Platoon toward the south, and moved it forward, beginning the last large engagement of Operation Dewey Canyon.

Pushing through triple-canopied jungle, banana



Courtesy of LtCol Wesley L. Fox  
*1st Lt Wesley L. Fox rests at Company A’s position overlooking the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a week after the action for which he would be presented the Medal of Honor.*

groves, and dense underbrush, Lieutenant Malone’s platoon ran up against a reinforced NVA company in a well-prepared, well-camouflaged, and heavily fortified bunker complex. To the rear, on a high ridgeline, the enemy had emplaced RPGs, machine guns, and mortars. Fox moved up the 3d Platoon and placed it on line with the 1st. When the momentum of the assault faltered, the 2d was then committed through the center of the two attacking platoons. Even though casualties mounted, Lieutenant Fox found he could not use air and artillery support as the company was boxed in by a low ceiling, terrain, and vegetation, and so locked in combat that if he withdrew to use artillery, he would run the risk of incurring additional casualties. Momentum nevertheless had to be maintained.

As the three platoons pressed the attack, the company command group took a direct mortar hit, killing or wounding everyone except the executive officer, First Lieutenant Lee R. Herron, who was given command of the 2d Platoon. Lieutenant Fox, despite his wounds, continued to control the advance.\* Finally,

\*First Lieutenant Wesley Lee Fox was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions during this engagement.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192685

*Infantrymen of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines move up an artillery-scarred slope toward the crest of Tiger Mountain, Hill 1228, one of the regiment's three major objectives.*

Company D, which had been ordered to assist, appeared, moving through the banana groves in front of Company A's position. "They had gotten off on the wrong trail and came in behind the enemy position, and then walked into our front." "At this time," noted Lieutenant Fox, "I realized that we had already penetrated the enemy position; we had already pushed through the entire position, and all Delta Company had to do was walk down and help us carry up our wounded."<sup>32</sup> Results included 105 NVA killed and 25 automatic weapons captured; the dead, clad in new uniforms, included several officers, all of whom were highly decorated veterans of other campaigns. Marine casualties were heavy: 11 killed and 72 wounded, 54 of whom required evacuation.

Because of Company A's daylong battle, the 1st Battalion reoriented its direction of search eastward, towards Hills 1044 and 1224 (Tam Boi). During the next four days, it moved along Route 548, just north of the border, encountering small groups of enemy personnel and discovering several minor arms caches. On 27 February, while searching the slopes of Hill 1044, Company D stumbled onto one of the largest enemy weapons and munitions caches of the war. "I was walking along the side of a road," Gunnery Ser-

geant Russell A. Latona reported, "and there was a bomb crater there and sticking out of the bomb crater I saw the footpod of a mortar bipod." Alerting the company, he ordered several men to start digging. "They dug down about four or five inches and they found boards. They lifted up the boards and they started digging a hole and this is when we found several weapons."<sup>33</sup> A further check of nearby bunkers and bomb craters revealed that the company had moved into the midst of an NVA supply depot, a storehouse which would eventually yield 629 rifles, 108 crew-served weapons (60 machine guns, 14 mortars, 15 recoilless rifles, and 19 antiaircraft guns), and well over 100 tons of munitions. The next two days were spent inventorying and then destroying the cache.

Meanwhile, on the left flank of the regiment's area of operations, although encountering lighter opposition, Lieutenant Colonel Laine's 3d Battalion gained substantial results. Attacking generally down the trace of Route 922 within South Vietnam, elements of the battalion uncovered numerous enemy facilities containing tons of supplies and equipment. On the 18th, Company L located an NVA cemetery containing 185 bodies, most of whom had been buried in June 1968. On the 21st, Company M found a well-camouflaged

maintenance installation, complete with six repair pits, a bulldozer, a front-end loader, several disassembled engines, and more than three hundred 50-gallon fuel drums. Pushing southward, the battalion, after securing Hill 1228 (Tiger Mountain), began a detailed search of the Tam Boi mountain complex, discovering on the 23d two spiked 122mm field guns, along with a prime mover and assorted artillery, mortar, and small arms ammunition. Further penetration of the Tam Boi complex revealed a headquarters and administrative facility composed of 11 immense tunnels. Carved into solid rock, these 150- to 250-meter-long, cross-connected tunnels contained extensive repair shops, storage facilities, and a "hospital which they had abandoned very rapidly and left one patient on the operating table to die."<sup>34</sup> All were capable of withstanding direct hits from air and artillery attacks.

With Tiger Mountain secured, Battery E, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines displaced to the top on 28 February, and established FSB Turnage, named after a former 3d Marine Division commander, General Allen H. Turnage. The fire support base, used the year before by the 1st Cavalry Division, was opened primarily to provide balanced artillery support for further operations of the 3d Battalion in the northeast corner of Thua Thien Province.

#### *Back Into Laos*

Within hours of General Abrams' approval, Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines was again instructed to move "back down onto the bloomin' Route 922." According to Captain Winecoff, the men's "morale zoomed way down because the company was extremely tired, [and] we were afraid that we were going to have to go off and leave our supplies . . . This included half a pallet of 60mm mortar ammunition, quite a few C-rations, and of course not the beer; we consumed that."<sup>35</sup> But move out they did.

The plan was for Company H, followed by Companies E and F, to move into Laos, and then drive eastward along Route 922, forcing enemy troops into the waiting sights of the 1st and 3d Battalions. In addition, intelligence indicated that the NVA were desperately trying to evacuate their remaining artillery pieces in the face of the other two battalions' push southward. In essence, the direction of the operation was now toward removing the enemy threat to the regiment's right flank.

Once again on the road, Company H, after a six-hour night march, set up another hasty ambush, and at 1100 on the 24th, engaged six unsuspecting NVA

soldiers, killing four. Moving eastward the following day, another 10 were engaged, resulting in eight killed, one 122mm field gun and two 40mm antiaircraft guns captured. Marine losses were two dead and seven wounded. Later the same day, a company patrol was ambushed by an estimated 15 enemy troops in fortified bunkers and fighting holes. Reinforced, the patrol pushed through the enemy position, killing two and capturing a second 122mm gun. Marine casualties were high: three killed and five wounded. Among those who gave their lives was Corporal William D. Morgan, who in a daring dash, directed enemy fire away from two wounded companions, assisting in their rescue. For this action, he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Company H and the battalion "jump" or field command group, continued to move eastward, flanked by Companies E and F. "The thought here," noted Colonel Fox, "was to have a force in position to launch a flank attack quickly were we hit from the rear (west) by major enemy units advancing from deeper in Laos."<sup>36</sup> Progress was rapid; too rapid for some: "I felt that if we had been moving slower and had more time to check things out, we probably would have found a heck of a lot more equipment than we did," noted Captain Winecoff.<sup>37</sup> As it was, elements of the 2d Battalion did capture over 20 tons of foodstuffs, and thousands of rounds of ammunition, while killing 48 enemy soldiers.

By 1 March, the three companies were within 1,000 meters of the South Vietnamese border, having covered over 5,000 meters in five days against light enemy resistance. Two days later, they helilifted to Vandegrift Combat Base. The battalion, while in Laos, sustained eight killed and 33 wounded, 24 of whom required evacuation. All dead were officially reported to have been killed "near Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam"; no reference was made to Laos for political reasons.

#### *Persistent Problems*

While the 9th Marines enjoyed a number of successes it also experienced two critical and persistent problems during the month-long push southward, resupply of units in the field and casualty replacement. Early in the operation it was found that resupplying rifle companies without halting their forward progress or pinpointing their positions was impossible. To make matters worse, once a company was ready to continue its advance after being resupplied, a squad or platoon often had to remain behind to secure transport nets,

water containers, and other items until retrieved. This not only reduced company strength, but unnecessarily exposed the smaller unit to attack. An effort was made to improve this situation through the use of a Helicopter Emergency Lift Pack, designed and fabricated by the 3d Shore Party Battalion. C-rations, ammunition, and other items were placed on wood pallets or bundled in discarded canvas, slung on inexpensive loop-type wire cables, and lifted into the field. Marines were then able to obtain their supplies, dispose of the packaging, and continue the advance with little or no delay.

Initially included among the items of the Emergency Lift Pack were 5-gallon plastic water bottles, which did not supply the need of Marines in the field, and were subject to leakage. Instead of increasing the number of containers, 155mm, 175mm, and 8-inch artillery canisters, each capable of holding approximately 13 gallons of water were substituted, and proved highly successful.<sup>38</sup>

A number of units sustained moderately high casualties, and, as a result, lost some effectiveness in the movement southward. Although anticipated in early planning, the 9th Marines, because of transpor-

tation problems, due mostly to weather, was forced to shift personnel already in the field about. Success was achieved, but in most cases units had to operate for several days below the desired strength level before receiving replacements.<sup>39</sup>

#### *Phased Retraction*

By the beginning of March, all the battalions of the 9th Marines had obtained their major objectives. Organized enemy resistance had virtually collapsed; most enemy troops not killed or captured had withdrawn westward, deeper into Laotian sanctuaries. There was scattered activity from small groups of enemy throughout the operational area, but it was apparent that no further significant contacts would occur.

The 9th Marines had successfully interdicted Route 922. It had captured or destroyed thousands of tons of enemy food, medical supplies, and ammunition. The equivalent of two medium artillery batteries (twelve 122mm field guns) and one light battery (four 85mm guns) had been seized, along with prime movers and munition carriers. Enemy underground headquarters, storage facilities, hospitals, and troop billeting areas, as well as his fortified positions, had

*Marines inspect and inventory a portion of the tons of captured weapons and ammunition in what would be the largest haul of enemy supplies taken during the war.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800583



been overrun and a significant portion of his anti-aircraft potential was located and destroyed. In short, by 1 March, with the exception of mopping up, the 9th Marines had accomplished its mission.

The original concept of operations envisioned a leapfrogging retraction from the area of operations, with each element always under a protective artillery fan—the reverse of the technique used to get the regiment into the area of operations. This movement would have required about 10 battery displacements and, since a reasonable level of artillery ammunition had to be maintained during the leapfrog maneuver, it would have entailed approximately 25 heavy lifts per howitzer battery and five heavy lifts for the mortar battery, not including normal resupply lifts. If good weather prevailed, and helicopters were abundant, the leapfrog retraction would be accomplished in seven days.

As the operation drew to a close, however, several factors dictated a reappraisal of the original retraction plan. First, the weather showed no signs of improving. Second, continuation of the operation throughout the retraction phase would require an initial 100 lifts of artillery ammunition to bring stocks up to appropriate levels. That this level of lift support would not be forthcoming was evident from the daily shortfall of normal ammunition resupply during the last week of February and the first few days of March. For example, the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines required 93 lifts on 1 March to sustain normal artillery operations of which it received 35; the battalion required 94 the following day and only two were received. Part of the discrepancy was due to marginal weather; however, a larger part was due to limited helicopter assets. Finally, the 9th Marines was scheduled to relieve the 3d Marines in the Vandegrift-Rockpile-Route 9-Cam Lo area so that the latter could join Operation Maine Crag, which had already begun.

The retraction plan originally had the 2d Battalion scheduled to lift to Vandegrift on 3 March, followed by the 1st Battalion on the 4th. After the 1st Battalion was out, Battery F and the 1st Provisional Battery, which had been covering the 1st Battalion's sector of the area of operations from FSB Erskine, would displace to Vandegrift, and Company G, 2d Battalion, would close Erskine. On 5 March, the 3d Battalion and Battery E would lift to Vandegrift, leaving one company at FSB Turnage as security for the ARVN 105mm battery remaining there. On 6 March, the 2d ARVN Regiment would retract from its area of operations un-

der cover of its battery on Turnage, and FSB Cunningham would be evacuated with all units going to Vandegrift. Finally, on 7 March, the ARVN battery and the one company from the 3d Battalion would be extracted from Turnage under the cover of fixed-wing aircraft, and the retraction of the regiment would be complete.

The first step in the retraction plan—the retrograde of the 2d Battalion—went as scheduled. Everything thereafter changed. The weather turned from marginal to bad. In addition, before clearing the area of operations, III MAF tasked the 9th Marines with linking up with and extracting SOG forces which had been operating in Laos. A third development was the discovery of additional cache sites in the eastern portion of the operational area which had to be searched.

On 8 March, the 1st Battalion, with its huge cache exploited, began to move overland to Tam Boi. In addition, FSB Erskine was evacuated, with Battery F going to Ca Lu and the 1st Provisional Battery going to Vandegrift. Two plans were then developed, designated A and B, for further operations and the extraction of the remaining forces, both of which hinged on whether or not the 1st Battalion linked up with SOG forces by 1300 on 10 March. If it did, Plan B provided for its extraction that day, followed by the displacement of all artillery on FSB Cunningham to Vandegrift before dark. Then on 11 March, Company K, 3d Battalion, would be extracted from Turnage and moved to Vandegrift under cover of fixed-wing aircraft. Plan A provided for the displacement of Mortar Battery to Tam Boi on 10 March to cover the extraction of the 1st Battalion; for the closing of Cunningham by Company K; and, finally, for the employment of Mortar Battery to cover the closing of Turnage. Eventually, the 9th Marines implemented a modified version of Plan A, which essentially followed the same scheme as the original, but which was changed frequently as weather and other factors dictated.

The weather finally broke sufficiently on 15 March to move Mortar Battery to Tam Boi, and to extract all the artillery and most of the 3d Battalion from Fire Support Base Cunningham.\* Control centers established helicopter approach and retirement lanes which permitted all batteries to fire a continuous smoke and mortar suppression program until the last gun lifted

\*During the movement of the 3d Battalion to Cunningham, Company M came under intense automatic weapons fire. During the firefight, Private First Class Alfred M. Wilson was killed protecting a fellow Marine from a grenade. For his heroic action, Private Wilson was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.



out. During their displacement, batteries on Cunningham fired over 1,000 rounds, including 547 rounds on active missions and 389 rounds of smoke. A small rear echelon left behind was brought out two days later.

Helicopters lifted the 3d Provisional Battery from Cunningham to Dong Ha. Army CH-47 "Chinooks" carried out the move, the first time that heavy-lift Army CH-54 "Skycranes" had not been used to move the 155mm Marine howitzers. Following the departure of the 3d Provisional Battery, Battery D displaced to Vandegrift, as did the 3d Battalion (-). With all batteries except two out of the area of operations, the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines decentralized tactical control of Battery E on Turnage and Mortar Battery on Tam Boi, and moved to Vandegrift. To provide fire support for the 1st Battalion and Company I, 3d Battalion, Battery E was given the mission of direct support of those units, and tactical fire direction of Mortar Battery; the 1st Battalion FSCC was given responsi-

*Artillerymen of 2d Battalion, 12th Marines load a 4.2-inch mortar round while covering the withdrawal of the remaining elements of the 9th Marines.*

Marine Corps Historical Collection



bility for all fire support coordination within the operational area.

Marginal weather dominated the execution of the withdrawal plan to the finish. Company K and the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines' rear echelon on Cunningham were extracted on the 18th, and the fire support base closed. By this time, the 1st Battalion had joined with SOG forces and was also ready to be extracted, but the weather closed in again, effectively isolating the battalion and exposing it to enemy ground probes and constant mortar fire.

To have followed the planned sequence of events might have required more good weather than it appeared prudent to expect. Therefore, when the weather around Tam Boi broke on the morning of the 18th, Lieutenant Colonel George W. Smith, commanding the 1st Battalion, decided to extract whatever could be lifted out, weather permitting. As a result, Mortar Battery was extracted first, and thus it did not provide covering fires for the evacuation of FSB Turnage as planned. Instead Battery E, in conjunction with fixed-wing and helicopter gunship strikes, covered the withdrawal of the 1st Battalion under heavy enemy mortar and antiaircraft fire, and was in turn covered by fixed-wing. Operation Dewey Canyon terminated at 2000, as the last helicopter touched down at Vandegrift Combat Base.

During Dewey Canyon, supporting arms played a decisive yet somewhat muted role due to weather. Marine fixed-wing aircraft flew a total of 461 close air support missions, expending over 2,000 tons of ordnance. At the same time, Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 39 and Marine Aircraft Group 36 flew nearly 1,200 helicopter sorties, transporting a total of 9,121 troops and 1,533,597 pounds of cargo. On the ground, Lieutenant Colonel Scoppa's artillery fired approximately 134,000 rounds in support of Marine and South Vietnamese infantrymen.

Both sides suffered heavy casualties. The Marines lost 130 killed and 920 wounded, while reporting enemy casualties of 1,617 killed and five captured. Enemy equipment losses were significant: 1,223 individual weapons, 16 artillery pieces, 73 antiaircraft guns, 26 mortars, 104 machine guns, 92 trucks, over 807,000 rounds of ammunition, and more than 220,000 pounds of rice.

The final score, however, reached far beyond mere statistical results. The Marine strike into the Song Da Krong Valley disrupted the organizational apparatus of Base Area 611, effectively blocking the enemy's abil-

ity to strike out at civilian and military targets to the east. Attempts to rebuild this base and reorder disrupted supply lines would be long and arduous. In reporting to General Abrams on Dewey Canyon, General Stilwell stated:

In my possible parochial estimate, this ranks with the most significant undertakings of the Vietnam conflict in the concept and results: striking the enemy unexpectedly in time and place, destroying a NVA base area and LOC center and pre-empting a planned NVA spring offensive somewhere in ICTZ . . . . The enemy took a calculated risk in massing installations right at the border, misjudging our reach; he lost . . . . Above all though, a Marine Regiment of extraordinary cohesion, skill in mountain warfare, and plain heart made Dewey Canyon a resounding success. As an independent regimental operation, projected 50KM airline from nearest base and sustained in heavy combat seven weeks, it may be unparalleled. Without question, the 9th Marines' performance represents the very essence of professionals.<sup>40</sup>

#### *Laos: Repercussions*

Knowledge of the Laos incursion, ordered kept under wraps by General Abrams, found its way into the press during the first week of March, causing concern in Saigon:

We have received word from III MAF that a number of correspondents have considerable knowledge of that part of Dewey Canyon that has extended into Laos. Newsmen apparently picked up bits and pieces from troopers while sitting around talking and eating. Media involved are AP, UP, NY Times, Newsweek, AFP, and the New Yorker. We have a rumor that some of the media have photos that they claim were taken in Laos; however, we cannot confirm that any newsman or photographer actually entered Laos in the Dewey Canyon area.<sup>41</sup>

Although the story was out, the official line was to say nothing on the subject, diverting press attention instead to the large amounts of enemy supplies captured.

On 8 March, however, Drummond Ayres, Jr., of the *New York Times* informed MACV that he was filing a story on Marine operations in Laos. Attempts were made to persuade Ayres to ignore the story, but it appeared in the Sunday edition of the *Times* the fol-

lowing day. While noting that Marines had "technically violated Laotian neutrality" guaranteed at Geneva in 1954, and again in 1962, the operations were carried out "to protect the flanks of Marine elements maneuvering nearby along South Vietnam's northwestern border." Concluding, Ayres reported that "Operation Dewey Canyon seems to indicate that allied commanders operating along borders may dip across lines to secure their flanks."<sup>43</sup>

The subject was brought up again during the final news conference of Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird's fact-finding mission to Vietnam. Asked if American troops had been operating in Laos during the last week, Mr. Laird said:

I would not confirm that they were there now but I would certainly say that there have been operations in which it has been necessary in order to protect American fighting forces that—that border being a very indefinite border—it may have been transgressed by American forces in carrying out this responsibility.<sup>43</sup>

The Secretary noted that the decision to permit operations inside Laos had been reviewed at the highest level and approved by General Abrams on the basis of the "safety of our men." He further explained that "Marines took up positions in Laos to protect their flank during a sweep of the area near the border."<sup>44</sup>

Secretary Laird's statements acknowledging the American incursion into Laos caused embarrassment in Vientiane. The Laotian Government immediately sought to counter the Secretary's remarks by issuing a communique "clearly designed to confine the controversy to a discussion of a single incident rather than to the general implications for Laotian neutrality." Ambassador William H. Sullivan subsequently apologized to the Laotian Premier for the incident and assured him that the United States would avoid any further extension of hostilities into Laotian territory.<sup>45</sup> The controversy did not end. In 1970 and again in 1973, the Marine incursion into Laos during Operation Dewey Canyon came to the fore, both times in connection with Congressional hearings on Vietnam.<sup>46</sup>