

From there, the Marines were to sweep to the sea through the Van Tuong village complex and over the Phuoc Thuan Peninsula. Artillery batteries at Chu Lai were to provide artillery support while two U.S. destroyers, the *Orleck* (DD 886) and the *Prichett* (DD 561), and the cruiser *Galveston* (CLG 3) were available for naval gunfire. Aircraft from MAGs-11 and -12 were to fly close support for the operation. The planning phase was short; Colonel Peatross later remarked, "there just wasn't enough time for anyone to bring up any problems."<sup>7</sup>

### *The Battle*

With the completion of planning, the Marines began preparations for the operation. Lieutenant Colonel James P. Kelly's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines took over the defensive positions of Muir's 3d Battalion in the Chu Lai TAOR, while two companies, one each from the Da Nang and Phu Bai enclaves, were flown in to man the perimeter held by Fisher's 2d Battalion. At 1000 on the 17th, Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines boarded LVTs at Chu Lai and moved along the coast to the Trung Phan Peninsula; then the company marched four miles south where it established its blocking position. The Marines of Company M met only minor resistance, an occasional sniper and booby traps. One man tripped a mine and suffered superficial wounds; no one else was injured. Before dawn on the 18th, the company reached its objective and dug in. Marine patrols had been active in this area for some time and to the casual observer the company's activity was just another small unit movement.

At 1700 on 17 August, the rest of Lieutenant Colonel Muir's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, with Colonel Peatross and his staff, embarked on the three ships of the amphibious task group, *Bayfield* (APA 33), *Cabildo* (LSD 16), and *Vernon County* (LST 1161). Three M-67 flame tanks attached to the 7th Marines and a platoon of five M-48 tanks assigned to Fisher's battalion boarded two LCUs, which then sailed independently towards the amphibious objective area, timing their arrival to coincide with that of the troop transports. That night at 2200, the larger ships were under way. The task force first sailed east to deceive any VC in sampans in the coastal waters. Once over the horizon, the ships changed course to the southwest, arriving in the amphibious objective area shortly after 0500. There they were joined by

the *Galveston* and the *Orleck*, which were to cover the landing.\*

At 0615, 15 minutes before H-Hour, Battery K, 4th Battalion, 12th Marines, which had displaced to firing positions on the northern bank of the Tra Bong River in the Chu Lai TAOR the night before, began 155mm preparation fires of the helicopter landing zones. The artillery was soon reinforced by 20 Marine A-4s and F-4s which dropped 18 tons of bombs and napalm on the LZs. The Marines limited their preparation of GREEN Beach to 20mm cannon strafing runs by MAG-12 A-4 Skyhawks, because of the proximity of An Cuong (1) to the landing site.

As the air and artillery fires lifted, the ground forces arrived. Lieutenant Colonel Muir's Companies I and K, in LVTs, landed across GREEN Beach at 0630 and pushed inland according to plan. A charge exploded to the front of Company I, but caused no casualties. The troops quickly spread out and moved into An Cuong (1). After a futile search for VC, the company continued advancing to the west. Company K received sniper fire from its right as it crossed the northern portion of GREEN Beach. Two platoons quickly moved northward and the enemy fire ceased. The third platoon secured the northern half of An Cuong (1). Fifteen minutes after H-Hour, Company G landed at LZ RED. Company E and Fisher's command group landed at LZ WHITE and Company H arrived at LZ BLUE 45 minutes later. On the beach, Lieutenant Colonel Muir, who had moved his CP ashore, was joined at 0730 by Colonel Peatross and his staff. Tanks and Ontos rolled off the LCUs and LCMs and made their way forward to support the assault companies. Company L came ashore and established perimeter security for the supply area at the beach.

Most of the Marine companies met only light resistance as they moved into the attack. Company G searched two hamlets in the vicinity of LZ RED and then advanced to the northeast and linked up with Company M without incident. At LZ WHITE south

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\* The *Prichett* did not arrive to support the operation until D plus 1. Colonel Floyd J. Johnson, Jr., the 7th Marines S-4 for STARLITE, believes the Marines were able to achieve the element of surprise because the ships used in the operation were the same ones that brought RLT-7 to Vietnam and "When we backloaded and sailed so soon after arrival, it's very possible the VC paid little attention, since the ships were due to leave anyway." Col Floyd J. Johnson, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 29Nov76 (Vietnam Comment File).

of LZ RED, Company E encountered stiffer opposition from the Viet Cong. The enemy manned firing positions on a ridgeline east and northeast of the LZ, employing mortars, machine guns, and small arms. After dogged fighting, the Marines cleared the hills. By midmorning, Company E began moving northeast. At one juncture, the Marines spotted about 100 VC in the open and asked for artillery fire. The 107mm Mortar (Howtar) Battery, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, helilifted into the position held by Company M, shelled the enemy force. Fisher, who later flew over the impact area in a helicopter, estimated that the artillery mission had accounted for 90 enemy dead. Company E continued to push forward, finding only occasional opposition.

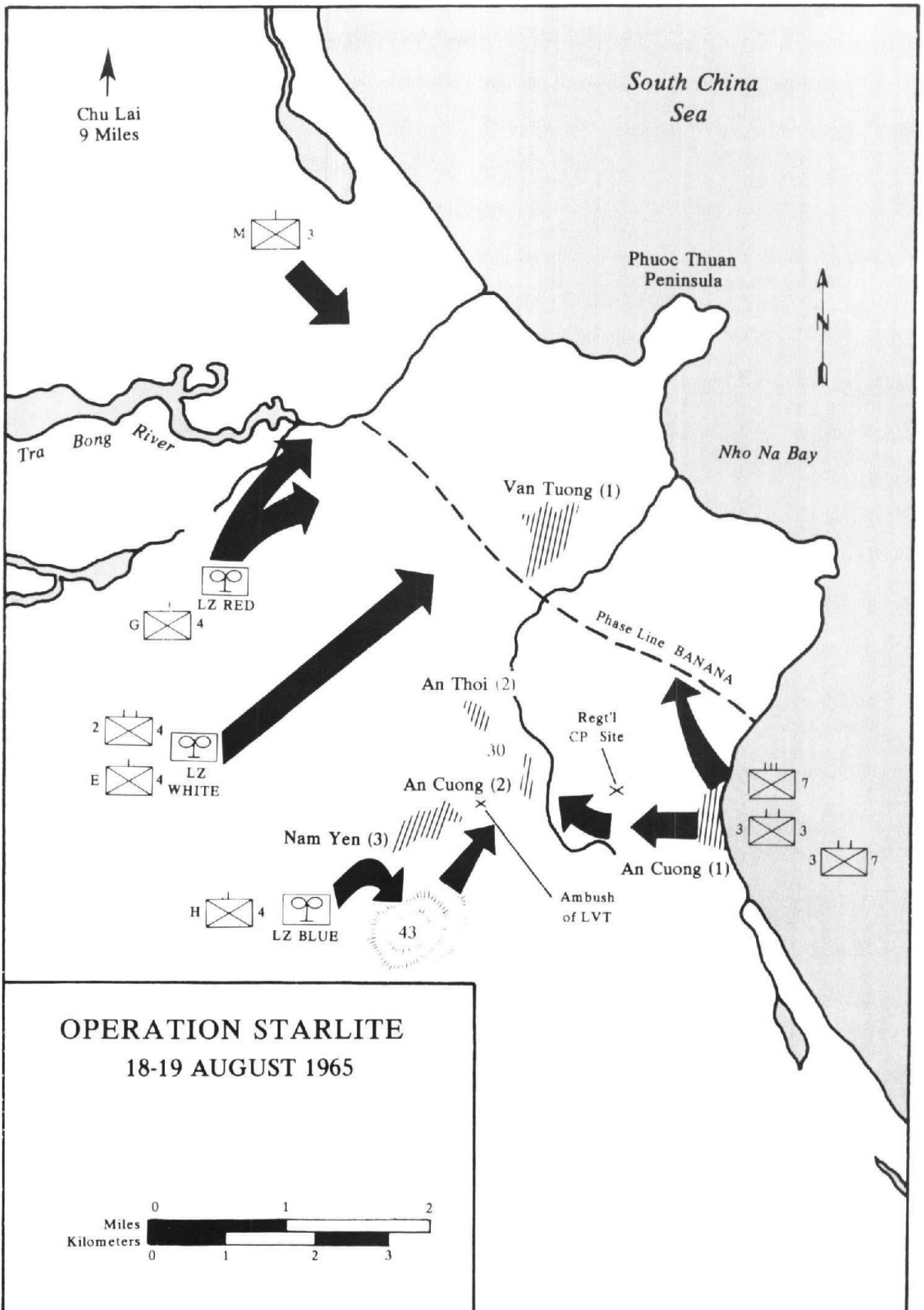
Along the coast, Company K had advanced to Phase Line BANANA, 2,000 meters north of the landing beach. There a VC force, entrenched on a hill overlooking the Marine positions, blocked the advance of the company. Lieutenant Colonel Muir, who had established his forward CP with Company K, ordered Company L forward. By midafternoon, the two Marine companies, aided by supporting arms, carried the high ground and set up night defenses.

The major action developed in the south near LZ BLUE, at the junction of Fisher's and Muir's units. This area, roughly one square kilometer, was bound by the hamlets of An Thoi (2) on the north, Nam Yen (3) on the south, and An Cuong (2) to the east.



USMC Photo A184967

*A Marine helicopter from HMM-361 brings ammunition to a howtar position during Operation STARLITE. The howtar is a 107mm mortar tube mounted on a pack howitzer chassis, hence the name howtar.*



It was a patchwork of rice paddies, streams, hedgerows, woods, and built-up areas, interspersed by trails leading in all directions. Two small knolls dominated the flat terrain, Hill 43, a few hundred meters southwest of Nam Yen (3), and Hill 30, 400 meters north of An Cuong (2). LZ BLUE was just south of Nam Yen (3), between Hill 43 and the hamlet. Company H's LZ was almost on top of the *60th VC Battalion*. The enemy allowed the first helicopters to touch down with little interference, but then opened up as the others came in. According to one of the helicopter pilots, Captain Howard B. Henry from HMM-361, "You just had to close your eyes and drop down to the deck."<sup>8</sup> Three U.S. Army UH-1B Huey gunships from the 7th Airlift Platoon, took the VC on Hill 43 under fire while the infantry company formed a defensive perimeter around the landing zone.

The Company H commander, First Lieutenant Homer K. Jenkins, was not yet aware of the size of the enemy force. He ordered one platoon to take the hill and the rest of the company to secure Nam Yen (3). Both attacks soon stalled. The platoon attacking Hill 43 was still at the bottom of the hill when Jenkins called back his other two platoons from the outskirts of Nam Yen (3) in order to regroup. He requested air strikes against both the enemy hill position and Nam Yen (3). He then renewed the attack, but this time, Jenkins moved all three of his platoons into the assault on the hill. The VC fought tenaciously, but the Marines, reinforced by close air support and tanks, were too strong for the enemy. One Marine platoon counted six dead VC near a heavy machine gun position and more bodies scattered throughout the brush. Jenkins' men took one prisoner and collected over 40 enemy weapons.

The airstrikes called by Jenkins against enemy positions at Nam Yen (3) momentarily halted the advance of Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines at a streambed east of Nam Yen (3). Bomb fragments slightly wounded two Marines. After the bombing run, Company I moved north along the stream for 500 meters to a point opposite An Cuong (2). Under fire from the hamlets, Captain Bruce D. Webb, the company commander, requested permission to attack An Cuong (2), although it was across the bank in the area of responsibility of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Muir approved the request, after consulting with Colonel Peatross.

An Cuong (2) was a fortified hamlet, ideally suited

to Viet Cong combat tactics. Major Andrew G. Comer, Muir's executive officer in charge of the 3d Battalion's rear command group at the 7th Marines CP, described the area surrounding the hamlet as heavily wooded with severely restricted fields of fire. The only open areas were the rice paddies and "even these were interspersed with hedgerows of hardwood and bamboo thickets."<sup>9</sup> An Cuong (2), itself, consisted of 25-30 huts, fighting holes, and camouflaged trench lines connected by a system of interlocking tunnels. As the company cleared the first few houses, a grenade exploded, killing Captain Webb and wounding three other Marines. No sooner had the grenade exploded, than two 60mm mortar rounds fell on the advancing troops, inflicting three more casualties. First Lieutenant Richard M. Purnell, the company executive officer, assumed command and committed the reserve platoon. The company gained the upper hand and the action slackened as the troops secured the hamlet. Making a hurried survey of the battlefield, Purnell counted 50 Viet Cong bodies. He then radioed his battalion commander for further instructions.

Muir ordered Purnell's company to join Company K, which was heavily engaged at Phase Line BANANA, 2,000 meters to the northeast. Company H remained near Nam Yen (3) to clean out all enemy opposition there and then planned to link up with Muir's battalion.

As Company I was preparing to move from An Cuong (2), a UH-1E gunship from Lieutenant Colonel George F. Bauman's VMO-2 was shot down by enemy small arms fire northeast of the hamlet. Lieutenant Colonel Muir ordered Purnell to leave some men behind to protect the helicopter. The lieutenant ordered two squads and three tanks to stay with the helicopter until the craft was evacuated. As the company departed, its members could see that Jenkins' Company H had left Hill 43 and was advancing on the left flank of Company I.

At 1100 Jenkins led his unit, augmented by five tanks and three Ontos, from the Hill 43 area into the open rice paddy between Nam Yen (3) and An Cuong (2). Jenkins bypassed Nam Yen (3) as he mistakenly believed that Company I had cleared both hamlets. Suddenly, from positions in Nam Yen (3) and from Hill 30, the VC opened up with small arms and machine gun fire, catching the Marine rear guard in a murderous crossfire. Then mortar shells began bursting upon the lead platoons. Company H

was taking fire from all directions, and tracked vehicles, Ontos and tanks, were having trouble with the muck of the paddies. Jenkins drew his armor into a tight circle and deployed his infantry. One squad moved to the northwest of Nam Yen (3) and killed nine VC who were manning a mortar, but were driven off by small arms fire and had to withdraw to the relative security of the tanks.\*

Lieutenant Jenkins saw that his position was untenable, and after radioing for supporting arms, he ordered his force to withdraw to LZ BLUE. Artillery hit Nam Yen (3) while F-4s and A-4s attacked Hill 30. About 1400, the company tried to move back to the landing zone. The lead platoon was forced to alter course when medical evacuation helicopters tried to land in the midst of the unit. As it maneuvered off to the flank of Company H, this platoon became separated from Jenkins' main body and was engaged by the Viet Cong. At this juncture, the platoon unexpectedly linked up with Purnell's helicopter security detail which had started to move toward its parent company after the downed helicopter had been repaired and flown out. The small force was quickly engaged by a Viet Cong unit, but together the two Marine units fought their way to An Cuong (2).\*\* Meanwhile, Jenkins and his other two platoons fought a delaying action and withdrew to LZ BLUE, arriving there at 1630. Lieutenant Colonel Fisher directed Jenkins to establish a defensive perimeter and await reinforcements.

The expected reinforcements never arrived; they had been diverted to help a supply column that had been ambushed 400 meters west of An Cuong (2). Just before noon, Lieutenant Colonel Muir had ordered Major Comer to dispatch "our mobile (LVT) resupply" to Company I, which, at the time, was only a "few hundred yards" in front of Comer's command group. Major Comer recalled that he briefed both the five LVTs and the section officers of

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\* Lance Corporal Joe C. Paul, a fire team leader in Company H, was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his gallant actions during the engagement near Nam Yen (3). A copy of his citation is printed in Appendix D.

\*\* Company I senior squad leader, Corporal Robert E. O'Malley, killed eight VC single-handedly that day. For his action, O'Malley became the first Marine to receive the Medal of Honor in Vietnam although Captain Frank S. Reasoner was later posthumously awarded the medal for an action in July 1965. See Chapter 11. Copies of both citations are printed in Appendix D.

the three flame tanks, the only tactical support available at the time, on the location of the company and marked the routes they were to follow on their maps.<sup>10</sup>

The supply column left the CP shortly after noon, but got lost between Nam Yen (3) and An Thoi (2). It had followed a trail that was flanked on one side by a rice paddy and on the other by trees and hedgerows. As the two lead vehicles, a tank and amtrac, went around a bend in the road, an explosion occurred near the tank, followed by another in the middle of the column. Fire from Viet Cong recoilless rifles and a barrage of mortar rounds tore into the column. The vehicles backed off the road and turned their weapons to face the enemy. Using all of the weapons at their command the troops held off the closing VC infantry. The rear tank tried to use its flamethrower, but an enemy shell had rendered it useless. Throughout the bitter fighting, the convoy was still able to maintain communications with the command post.

At the rear CP area, Major Comer received "word on the LVT command net . . . that the column was surrounded by VC and was about to be overrun." Comer recalled:

The LVT radio operator kept the microphone button depressed the entire time and pleaded for help. We were unable to quiet him sufficiently to gain essential information as to their location. This continued for an extended period, perhaps an hour.

Major Comer relayed the information about the ambush to Lieutenant Colonel Muir. The battalion commander replied that he was returning Company I to the rear CP and that Comer "was to gather whatever other support . . . [he] could and to rescue them as rapidly as possible." Major Comer told Colonel Peatross about the proposed rescue mission. The regimental commander, well aware of the vulnerable positions of both Company H and the supply column and fearing that the enemy was attempting to drive a salient between the two battalions, heartily approved and provided Comer with "the single available M-48 tank for support."<sup>11</sup>\*\*\*

When Company I arrived at the rear CP, Comer held a hurried briefing with Lieutenant Purnell and

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\*\*\* Colonel Peatross later stated that the enemy force which ambushed the supply column may have been getting ready to hit the regimental CP when the LVTs rumbled into them. Peatross, "Victory at Van Tuong," p. 9.



USMC Photo A185824

*Marines from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines assemble near a small hamlet during Operation STARLITE. The unit pictured is a command group; note the number of radio antennas.*

the other leaders of the improvised rescue force. The plan was to use “a rapidly moving tank, LVT, and Ontos column through the previously cleared An Cuong (2) area.” Before the meeting broke up, one of the flame tanks which had been in the supply column arrived at the CP. According to Comer, “The crew chief, a staff sergeant, reported to me that he had just passed through An Cuong (2) without being fired upon and that he could lead us to the LVT supply column.”<sup>12</sup>

Shortly after 1300, Comer’s force moved out. Just after cresting Hill 30, the M-48 tank was hit by recoilless rifle fire and stopped short. The other vehicles immediately jammed together “and simultaneously mortar and small arms fire saturated the area.” Within a few minutes, the Marines suffered 5 dead and 17 wounded. The infantry quickly dismounted and the Ontos maneuvered to provide frontal fire and to protect the flanks. Major Comer called for artillery fire and air support. With the response of supporting arms, the enemy fire diminished but did not stop. According to Comer, “It was obvious that the VC were deeply dug in, and

emerged above ground when we presented them with an opportunity and withdrew whenever we retaliated or threatened them.”<sup>13</sup>

With the letup of the action on Hill 30, Comer ordered Company I to resume its advance toward An Cuong (2) leaving a small rear guard on Hill 30 to supervise the evacuation of the casualties. The company entered An Cuong (2) against surprisingly little resistance, but Comer and the command group were caught by intense fire from a wooded area to their right front and forced to take what cover they could in the open rice paddies. At the time, the Marines came upon the two reinforced squads from Company I which had been left to guard the downed Huey and the platoon from Company H. The two squads from Company I fought their way to Hill 30 where they were evacuated while the Company H platoon remained with Comer in the rice paddies. At this point Comer recalled:

When it became obvious that I could not move the “B” group [the command group] in either direction . . . I radioed instructions to Lieutenant Purnell to extricate the supply column as rapidly as he could as I deemed that the

most urgent matter, and that I would support him from my present position as best I could . . . I also advised Lieutenant Colonel Muir of our situation as I had been doing all day.<sup>14</sup>

While Company I maneuvered through An Cuong (2) encountering periodic strong enemy resistance, Colonel Peatross committed one company of his reserve battalion to the battle.\* A ship of the special landing force, the LPH *Iwo Jima* with Companies I and L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines and HMM-163 on board, arrived offshore shortly after 0930. As the intensity of the battle increased, Colonel Peatross ordered a halt to the advance of the units from LZs RED and WHITE and along the coast to prevent the overextension of his lines. He ordered Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, commanded by Captain Ronald A. Clark, to be landed. This company was helilifted to the regimental CP at 1730. There it was placed under operational control of Lieutenant Colonel Muir, who ordered Clark to reinforce Comer's group and then join Company I in the search for the supply train.

Supported by two tanks, Clark's force moved out. As the company advanced through the open rice paddies east of An Cuong (2), it came under heavy fire, wounding 14 and killing four. The Marines persevered and the VC broke contact as night fell.

The addition of a third Marine company to the area, coupled with the weight of supporting arms fires available, evidently forced the *60th VC Battalion* to break contact. The Marines radioed the *Galveston* and *Orleck* requesting continuous

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\*Major General Peatross recalled that at the time he did not have the authority to commit the SLF battalion. General Walt could not delegate this decision without first receiving permission through command channels, himself. General Walt had arrived at the 7th Marines CP earlier in the day, but had departed before the heavy fighting broke out. At this time, Lieutenant General Krulak, CGFMFPac, who was in Vietnam on an inspection visit, flew into the CP by helicopter while "rifle and recoilless rounds were flying around." General Karch, who was also present, told Peatross "to keep him [Krulak] aboard the helicopter and then fly to the command ship of the SLF, and then obtain permission to employ 3/7." General Krulak later remarked that he was not entirely successful in this mission: "We watched the confusion then took off, only to have to land with a hit in our chopper's gas tank." Colonel Peatross, nevertheless, received permission to employ both the SLF infantry and squadron since "the number of helicopters seemed to be reduced by the hour." MajGen Oscar F. Peatross, Comments on draft MS, dtd 26Oct76 (Vietnam Comment File), and Lt Gen Victor H. Krulak, Comments on draft MS, dtd 2Aug77 (Vietnam Comment File).

illumination throughout the evening over the Nam Yen-An Cuong area.\*\* As darkness fell, Colonel Peatross informed General Walt that the VC apparently intended to defend selected positions, while not concentrating their forces.<sup>15</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Muir decided that it was too risky to continue searching for the supply column that night, especially after having learned that the column, although immobilized, was no longer in danger. Muir ordered Captain Clark's Company L to move to Phase Line BANANA and join Companies K and L, and establish a perimeter defense there. He also ordered Company I to return to the regimental CP. For all intents and purposes, the fighting was over for Company I; of the 177 men who had crossed the beach, 14 were dead, including the company commander, and another 53 were wounded, but the company could claim 125 dead VC.

During the night of 18 August, Colonel Peatross brought the rest of the SLF battalion ashore. Company I, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines arrived at the regimental CP at 1800 followed shortly by Lieutenant Colonel Bodley and his command group. Just after midnight, Company M landed across GREEN Beach from the *Talladega*. With the arrival of his third battalion, Colonel Peatross completed his plans for the next day.

The regimental commander's concept of action remained basically the same, squeeze the vise around the VC and drive them toward the sea. As a result of the first day's action against the *60th VC Battalion*, he readjusted the battalions' boundaries. At 0730, Lieutenant Colonel Muir's battalion, with Companies K and L abreast and Company L from Bodley's battalion following in reserve, was to attack to the northeast from Phase Line BANANA. Simultaneously, Fisher's unit, with Companies E and G, was to drive eastward to the sea, joining Muir's force. Jenkins' Company H, Comer's group, and Company I were to withdraw to the regimental CP.\*\*\* The remainder of Lieutenant Colonel Bodley's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines was to fill the gap. Companies I and M of his unit were to move out of the regimental CP, extract the ambushed supply column, and then move toward An Thoi (2) to

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\*\*At about 0530 the next morning, the ships ceased firing; their magazines had been emptied of star (illumination) shells.

\*\*\*Company H had accounted for 156 dead VC and sustained 45 evacuated casualties; 15 killed and 30 hospitalized.



USMC Photo A184946

*Marines from Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines move out from LZ WHITE during Operation STARLITE. Shortly after this picture was taken, the company met stiff resistance from Viet Cong entrenched to the right of the photograph.*

establish a blocking position there which would prevent the VC from slipping southward. Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines was to hold its blocking positions further north. The enemy was to be left no avenue of escape.

On the 19th, the SLF battalion moved into its zone of action which included the area of the fiercest fighting of the day before. The VC were gone. At 0900, Companies I and M of Bodley's battalion left the regimental CP, and moved through An Cuong (2), meeting no enemy resistance. They brought out the supply convoy\* and by 1500 had established their assigned blocking position at An Thoi (2).

Although much of the enemy resistance had disappeared, Fisher and Muir still found pockets of stiff opposition when they launched their combined attacks at 0730. The terrain was very difficult. The

compartmented rice paddies, ringed by dikes and hedgerows, hindered control, observation, and maneuverability. The VC were holed up in bunkers, trenches, and caves which were scattered throughout the area. Marines would sweep through an area, only to have enemy snipers fire upon them from the rear. In many cases, the Marines had to dig out the enemy or blow up the tunnels. By 1030, Company E had linked up with Company K and the two battalions, continued their advance to the sea. By nightfall, the 2d Battalion had completed its sweep of the Phuoc Thuan Peninsula. Enemy organized resistance had ceased.

### *The Aftermath*

Although the cordon phase of STARLITE had been completed, General Walt decided to continue the operation for five more days so that the entire area could be searched systematically. He believed that some of the enemy had remained behind in underground hiding places. Fisher's and Muir's

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\*Of the 23 Marines assigned to the convoy, five were killed and several others wounded. Only nine men remained in action throughout the three-hour period they engaged the VC. The enemy left 60 bodies behind.





USMC Photo A184966

*A MAG-16 helicopter evacuates STARLITE casualties, while a Marine M-48 tank stands guard. The Marine on the left carries a M-79 grenade launcher.*

battalions returned to Chu Lai on the 20th and Lieutenant Colonel Kelly's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines moved into the objective area and joined Bodley's battalion and units from the 2d ARVN Division for the search. The Marines killed 54 more VC in the Van Tuong complex before STARLITE came to an end on 24 August. The Marines had killed 614 VC, by body count, taken 9 prisoners, held 42 suspects, and collected 109 assorted weapons, at a cost of 45 Marines dead and 203 wounded.

The exploits of the infantry battalions were only part of the story of the battle. Colonel Peatross had high praise for both the tank and engineer detachments attached to his command. He observed the engineers were particularly helpful in destroying enemy fortifications, "mostly trenches and caves during the heat of battle and many more during the

five days that followed the mop up." The regimental commander later claimed that "the tanks were certainly the difference between extremely heavy casualties and the number that we actually took. Every place the tanks went, they drew a crowd of VC."<sup>16</sup>

Another factor in the outcome of the battle was the vast amount of firepower that the Marines brought to bear against the enemy. Elements of Lieutenant Colonel Page's artillery group at Chu Lai, supporting the operation, fired over 3,000 rounds of high-explosive, white phosphorous, and illumination. Fifty-eight missions were called in by artillery forward observers. The remainder consisted of preparation fires, marking concentrations, and harassing and interdiction missions. On five occasions, aerial observers reported secondary ex-

plosions in fortified villages. The 107mm Mortar Battery from the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines operating with Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and Battery K, 4th Battalion, 12th Marines provided most of the artillery support for the 7th Marines, firing over 2,400 rounds.\*

The ships *Orleck*, *Galveston*, and *Prichett* fired 1,562 rounds in support of STARLITE. One of their most effective fire missions occurred on 19 August when 100 VC were spotted on a beach trying to escape. The destroyer *Orleck* engaged the target with rapid salvos from her 5-inch guns with excellent effect. In addition, the *Orleck* sank seven sampans in which VC were attempting to flee.

Close air support was provided by Colonel Robert F. Conley's MAG-11 and Colonel John D. Noble's MAG-12 was a vital adjunct to the Marines on the ground. Seventy-five Marine F-4Bs and A-4s from five squadrons flew air support missions, at times dropping ordnance within 50 meters of friendly positions.\*\* The fixed-wing planes of the 1st MAW flew a total of 78 sorties on the first day of the operation and expended 65 tons of bombs, 4 tons of napalm, 523 2.75-inch rockets, and 6,000 rounds of 20mm ammunition. Over 290 sorties were flown during the entire operation.

Colonel Leslie E. Brown, the Wing Operations Officer, recalled:

... The Marines were in trouble . . . and our airplanes were literally just staying in the flight pattern and they'd land and rearm and take off and be right back again in a few minutes just dropping and strafing and firing rockets as fast as we could rearm them . . . in the three day period, we flew more sorties than in the history of any other attack group before or since, in support of that one operation which took place . . . in an area probably about two miles square . . . Air control was pretty racy. People were congested and the helicopters were bouncing in and out. Helicopters were being struck and helicopters were burning. So it was a pretty exciting two or three days.<sup>17</sup>

\*The Chu Lai artillery group, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Leslie L. Page, established a forward fire direction center (FDC) with Battery K on the northern bank of the Tra Bong. Other Chu Lai artillery units which provided support for the operation were Battery C, 1/12; Battery M, 4/11; the 3d 155mm Gun Battery (SP); and a platoon, two guns, of the 1st 8-inch Howitzer Battery (SP). The 105mm howitzer and 107mm mortar batteries embarked with the SLF were not committed.

\*\*The A-4s were from VMA-214, VMA-225, and VMA-311 while the F-4s were from VMFA-513 and VMFA-342.

General Walt later stated:

I was near the front lines when this close air support action was taking place. It was an outstanding professional performance of the highest order. Strafing was done within 200 feet of our pinned down troops and was a very important factor in our winning the battle. I have never seen a finer example of *close* air support.<sup>18</sup>

The helicopters of Colonel Thomas J. O'Connor's MAG-16 furnished the infantry with maneuverability and the capability of quick resupply and casualty evacuation. A task force of 24 UH-34s from HMM-361 and -261 escorted by Marine and U.S. Army 'Huey' gunships brought the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines into battle. After the first landings, the eight helicopters from Lieutenant Colonel Mervin B. Porter's HMM-261 returned to Da Nang, leaving Lieutenant Colonel Lloyd F. Childers' HMM-361 to carry the burden of resupply and evacuation. Fourteen of Childers' 16 helicopters were hit by enemy fire. After the SLF arrived, Lieutenant Colonel Ewers HMM-163 was able to assume part of the load. During the entire operation, the helicopter squadrons flew over 500 sorties in support of the ground troops.\*\*\*

Logistics for STARLITE became strained as the operation was extended, nevertheless, every critical demand was met. Major Floyd J. Johnson, the 7th Marines S-4 for the operation, later wrote that Colonel Peatross had directed "that we not maintain

\*\*\* Colonel O'Connor assumed command of MAG-16 from Colonel King on 7 August. He wrote: "I left Da Nang about an hour before dawn in a UH-1E, in company with HMM-361 and HMM-261, and flew to the pickup zones west of Chu Lai. At this time MAG-16 was based at crowded Da Nang airfield, and the hazards of getting [the] squadrons airborne and en route to the objective area in darkness were apparent. The flight time to Chu Lai for a helicopter was about 50 minutes." Colonel O'Connor also remarked on the poor marksmanship of the VC gunners: "One feature of battle damage stood out. Most of LtCol Lloyd Childers' helicopters took extensive small arms fire but it was not crippling. Most of the bullet strikes occurred in the tail booms aft of the passengers compartments. This indicated poor training of VC gunners on moving targets. Most of these hits occurred when the helicopters were approaching or leaving landing zones, at airspeeds under 60 knots." Colonel Thomas J. O'Connor, Comments on draft MS, dtd 7Nov76 (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel Mervin B. Porter commented that when his squadron, HMM-261, returned to Da Nang, it "received word of the heavy action and 261 returned to the STARLITE area with all available aircraft and supported operations there until about 2000 or 2030." Col Mervin B. Porter, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Nov 76] (Vietnam Comment File).

a big logistic support area" in order not to lose mobility and to "reduce the need for security." Johnson stated that he kept in the logistic support area "one days rations and two days of ammunition." To insure "continuous and responsive logistic support," the 7th Marines stockpiled supplies on the helicopter deck of the LSD *Cabildo*. Johnson explained, "A special communication link was created between the RLT CP and the ship and most of the resupply to the battalions was made by helo direct from what was really a large floating dump."<sup>19</sup>

One of the greatest demands was for water. Over 1,500 gallons of water per day were supplied to the troops ashore from the *Cabildo*, causing the ship to go on short water rations; even so, high temperatures and high humidity caused several cases of heat prostration. An effective means was devised for bringing the water from the ship to shore. LVTs loaded with empty cans were floated into the well deck of the *Cabildo* where a two-inch water hose was lowered into the tractors and the cans were filled in place without having to manhandle them. The heavy cans still presented a problem; they had to be carried from the regimental collection point to the operating units. As a result, Colonel Peatross recommended that plastic water containers replace the impractical bulky cans and that in the future, infantry battalions carry enough water to supply each man with four gallons per day.

Civilians in the combat zone presented complications. The first attempts to evacuate them were difficult; the people were frightened and did not trust the Marines. Eventually most of the local populace were placed in local collecting points where they were fed and provided with medical attention. Although attempts were made to avoid civilian casualties, some villages were completely destroyed by supporting arms when it became obvious that the enemy occupied fortified positions in them. Colonel Peatross commented:

No . . . [supporting fires] were utilized unless called for by one of the units and each had a forward air controller, naval gunfire teams and forward observer. All weapons were controlled and no fire ashore was conducted unless it could be observed; consequently, neither aircraft nor naval gunfire made any judgments on "military necessity." Only ground units being supported made such judgment.<sup>20</sup>

There could be no doubt, however, that the hamlets in the area were used by the Viet Cong as staging areas for their operations. Lieutenant Colonel

Kelly provided the following description of Van Tuong (1):

The village was encircled with a trench line and double apron fence. The streets had punji traps for personnel and vehicles, as well as spider traps. There were numerous hand-painted anti-American signs. There were numerous caves throughout the village . . .<sup>21</sup>

Accumulated evidence indicated that this hamlet had served as the CP of the *1st VC Regiment*. The Marines found communication equipment, numerous documents, munitions, rice, and propaganda leaflets in Van Tuong (1).

During Operation STARLITE, III MAF severely punished the enemy regiment. According to prisoners, the Marines completely destroyed the *60th VC Battalion* and badly mauled the *80th*. General Krulak credited intelligence as the primary reason for the Marine success. He later wrote, "The Marines, ground and air, just behaved like they were supposed to behave." According to the FMFPac commander, it was "the confluence of all of the many information sources in a credible picture of what was happening," that was the "decisive factor in STARLITE."<sup>22</sup>

The reaction to the Marine victory was not altogether what would be expected. General Westmoreland reported that several ARVN general officers on the Joint General Staff made some rather disparaging remarks about the Marine operation. The MACV commander attributed their attitude to the extensive press coverage that the Marines received and suggested that on future occasions that Vietnamese units be included on operations so they could receive their share of plaudits. Moreover, none of the Vietnamese General Staff, except for General Thi and Lam, had been informed about the operation until after it had started. Colonel Don P. Wyckoff, the 3d Marine Division G-3, recalled that none of the Vietnamese were told, at the insistence of General Thi. According to Wyckoff:

General Walt, concerned about the reaction of ARVN forces in the area when a large scale operation flared up unexpectedly, convinced Thi that General Lam had to know ahead of time to keep his own forces in rein. To my recollection, this was done on a person to person basis from Thi to Lam and Lam kept the information in strict confidence until the battle began.<sup>23</sup>

General Walt later stated that he received his "instructions from General Westmoreland. I had requested that the 'need to know' among the Vietnamese be limited to the very minimum," and



USMC Photo A801265

*General Walt, Commanding General, III MAF, congratulates Colonel Oscar F. Peatross, Commanding Officer, 7th Marines, upon the awarding of the Navy Unit Commendation to the 7th Marines for the regiment's participation in Operation STARLITE. Lieutenant Colonel Charles R. Bodley, Commanding Officer, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, looks on.*

recommended that only "Generals Thi and Lam be told. General Westmoreland concurred and approved my action."<sup>24</sup>

Regardless of laudable press reports or restrained Vietnamese reaction, the Marines came out of STARLITE with a renewed faith in their ability. They had passed the first big test. What they did not

fully appreciate may have been the cause for the less-than-enthusiastic Vietnamese response. The veteran RVN commanders had seen more than one enemy unit supposedly destroyed, only to reappear on the battlefield at full strength a few months later. The 60th and 80th VC Battalions had taken a beating, but they would be back.

# The Enemy Refuses to Give Battle: September-November Operations

*Operation PIRANHA—Much Ado About CS, Operation STOMP—October-November Operations*

## *Operation PIRANHA*

After Operation STARLITE, III MAF entered a new stage of operations aimed at striking at enemy main force units. Having eliminated the threat posed to the Chu Lai base by the *1st VC Regiment*, General Walt considered the time opportune to complete the destruction of the enemy regiment. His intelligence sources indicated that its remnants had withdrawn to the Batangan Peninsula, eight miles south of Van Tuong. After consulting with General Thi, General Walt issued a warning order on 26 August to Colonel Peatross for the 7th Marines to plan for a coordinated operation in the area.\*

In contrast to STARLITE, the planning and preparations for the new operation were extensive. From 31 August through 2 September, Marine and naval commanders travelled between Da Nang and Chu Lai. They were briefed by the III MAF staff and prepared detailed plans. Captain McKinney and Colonel Peatross once more were to be the respective

commanders of the amphibious task force and landing forces. They coordinated their activities with the the South Vietnamese and on 3 September the plans were complete. That date, the 7th Marines published Operation Order 423-65, codenamed PIRANHA.

The concept of operations for PIRANHA was similar to that of STARLITE. Two Marine battalions, Lieutenant Colonel Kelly's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines and Muir's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, would be embarked on Seventh Fleet shipping, while another battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Bodley's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, would conduct a heliborne assault of the objective area.\*\* On D-Day, Kelly's battalion would land across WHITE Beach, north of the Batangan Peninsula, and push south, while Bodley's helilifted Marines would set up blocking positions 4,000 meters inland. Muir's battalion would remain at sea as a floating reserve. Participating Vietnamese battalions, the 2d Battalion, 4th ARVN Regiment and 3d Vietnamese Marine Battalion, would be moved by helicopter into the region south of Bodley's position. There the South Vietnamese would conduct a search and clear mission on the An Ky Peninsula which was separated from Batangan by the Sa Ky River.

On 6 September, Captain McKinney's task group, consisting of the attack transport *Bayfield*, two dock landing ships, *Belle Grove* and *Cabildo*, and three tank landing ships, sailed for the amphibious objective area. They arrived early the following morning and were joined by the naval gunfire ships, the cruiser *Oklahoma City* (CLG 5), and two

\* Colonel Wyckoff, the 3d Marine Division G-3 at the time, recalled that following STARLITE, he worked closely with Major Charles T. Williamson, the Division G-2, to locate the *1st VC Regiment*: "The Division G-2 staff sought for indicators in two general areas: the eastern edge of the mountains coming down toward Chu Lai and the cave-dotted Batangan Peninsula. In the latter they found a 'V' of older field fortifications pointing inland with its open end toward the sea. Kept under visual and photographic surveillance, a second 'V' of new positions, inland of the older ones showed under development. A series of transparent overlays was made up, showing the progression of activity over several days. General Walt concurred in the analysis and a staff team was flown down to Saigon to brief General Westmoreland, using the same set of maps and overlays." Col Don P. Wyckoff, Comments on draft MS, dtd 16Oct76 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\* BLT 3/7 joined III MAF on 1 September when it landed at Chu Lai. The battalion had been replaced in the SLF by BLT 2/1.



USMC Photo A185836

*Lieutenant Colonel Charles H. Bodley, Commanding Officer, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, writes an order for one of his units during Operation PIRANHA. The operation took place on the Batangan Peninsula, eight miles south of where Operation STARLITE took place.*

destroyers, *Prichett* and *Orleck*. In addition, the high-speed destroyer transport *Diachenko* (APD 123) stood offshore prepared to provide direct fire.

Small boats from the South Vietnamese Navy's Junk Division 15 screened the local fishing craft from the American naval task group. By 0500 on the morning of 7 September, all amphibious forces were in position, except for the amphibious assault ship *Princeton* with Muir's 3d Battalion embarked. It arrived later that day.

Two days after the operation had started, the *Oklahoma City* was replaced by the cruiser *Galveston* and the *Orleck* by the destroyer *Braine* (DD 630). An additional destroyer, the *Walke* (DD 723), also arrived. The *Princeton* had stopped off the coast of

Chu Lai to unload newly arriving elements of Colonel William G. Johnson's MAG-36 before proceeding southward.

Air operations over the objective area began with the 0520 arrival of a Marine KC-130, configured to function as an airborne DASC until one could be established ashore. Shortly afterwards a USAF Fairchild C-123 Provider flare plane reported on station to provide illumination. Under the light of the flares, eight A-4s from Colonel Noble's MAG-12 strafed the landing beach with 20mm cannon fire from 0555 to 0615. A lone A-4 laid a smoke screen to cover the assault of the landing force. Marine pilots next turned their attention further inland. Beginning at 0620, eight F-4s and four A-4s dropped eight tons of "Daisy Cutter" bombs to prepare the helicopter landing zones.\*

While the aircraft bombed the LZs, the first waves of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines landed across WHITE Beach at 0635. Two LVTE-1s\*\* came ashore to clear enemy mines on the beach. These two amphibian tractors were followed by the assault elements of Companies A and C. The troops dismounted at the water's edge and deployed. The enemy reaction was a few sniper rounds.

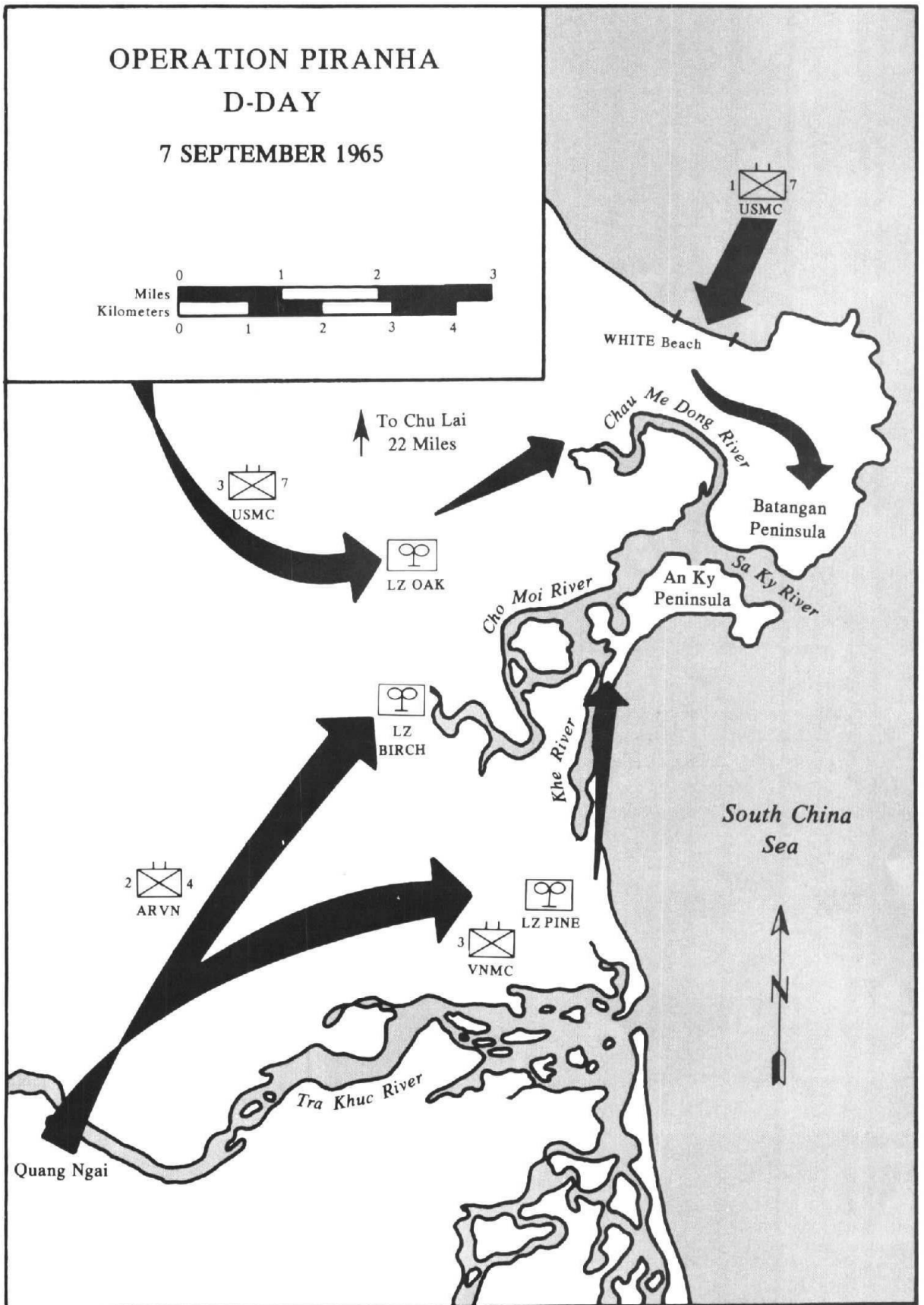
The entire battalion was ashore within 20 minutes and enemy resistance continued to be very light. The tractors proved their worth in ploughing paths through the numerous hedgerows where any boobytraps were likely to be hidden. One of the tractors slightly damaged its dozer blade when it detonated a VC boobytrap buried in the sand. This was the first use of the LVTE-1 tractors in combat.

As Kelly's battalion was securing its beachhead, 40 UH-34Ds from MAG-16 helilifted the assault elements of Bodley's 3d Battalion to their objective area, LZ OAK, four miles to the west. The Marines encountered no opposition in the landing zone and completed the helilift in less than three hours.

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\* "Daisy Cutter" is a term given to bombs equipped with a nose probe which causes the bomb to explode above ground. This causes a clearing by blowing-away the vegetation with a minimum of cratering. These daisy cutters were of the 250- and 500-pound varieties.

\*\* The LVTE-1 is an amphibian tractor equipped to clear a path through minefields. It fires a string (line) of demolitions to its front; these demolitions then explode on the ground setting off mines. The tractors are also equipped with a front dozer blade. Only one of the tractors was able to fire its line chargers without difficulty, but the beach was not mined.





USMC Photo A185303

*A Marine whistles while searching a hamlet for VC during Operation PIRANHA as two Vietnamese boys watch him. The Marines encountered relatively little resistance during the operation.*

Lieutenant Colonel Bodley established his command post and set up his blocking positions on the high ground.

After inserting the 3d Battalion, 16 of the UH-34Ds flew to Quang Ngai and began shuttling the two South Vietnamese battalions into their landing zones, LZs BIRCH and PINE. This was the only opposed helicopter landing of the day. Four U.S. Army Huey gunships escorting the troop carriers and two of the Marine helicopters were hit by ground fire. As the Vietnamese troops moved out of the landing zones, the firing stopped.

During the three-day operation, only Lieutenant Colonel Kelly's 1st Battalion found a significant number of enemy. On 8 September, Kelly's Company B discovered a VC field hospital in a large cave near the center of the Batangan Peninsula. The Marines captured four prisoners, but then came under fire from other VC in the cave. Kelly's men

returned the fire and attempted to convince the enemy inside to surrender. Marine engineers then placed explosives in the cave. After the detonation, the Marines counted 66 Viet Cong bodies inside. They also found medical supplies, some small arms, and a small amount of ammunition. While searching the cave, six of the Marines were overcome by oxygen starvation. One of them, a lieutenant, died of asphyxiation.

During PIRANHA, allied forces killed 178 VC, seized 20 weapons, and captured or detained 360 enemy and suspected enemy. Lieutenant Colonel Kelly's battalion accounted for 106 of the enemy dead. Allied losses were two Marines and five South Vietnamese killed, 14 Marines and 33 Vietnamese wounded.

The low level of artillery and naval gunfire required during PIRANHA further underscored the enemy's absence. During the first 24 hours of the





USMC Photo A185340

*Marines uncover an enemy underground position during Operation PIRANHA. One Marine can be seen inside the tunnel searching for enemy documents and supplies.*

operation, the two artillery units, the 107mm Mortar Batteries from the 3d Battalions of the 11th and 12th Marines, fired only 10 missions totaling 110 rounds from positions on Batangan.\* The second day they fired 111 rounds. The naval gunfire ships fired 1,052 rounds, but only two illumination missions of 127 rounds for the American forces. Marine air-naval gunfire liaison teams (ANGLICO) attached to the South Vietnamese battalions called in the remainder of the naval support.

Another reason for the limited use of supporting arms fire was the elaborate precautions the Marines took to safeguard the civilian population. The following excerpts from Lieutenant Colonel Kelly's operation order furnish some evidence of this:

. . . All naval gunfire, artillery, mortar, and close air support must be approved explicitly by this headquarters (FSCC) fire support coordination center prior to being fired. . . . Once approved, all artillery, mortar, and naval gunfire will be fired on forward observer's command. . . . Supporting fires on populated areas will be approved only when organized resistance is being encountered therefrom. Sniping does not constitute organized resistance. . . . No houses or villages will be burned or destroyed as a retaliatory measure.<sup>1</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Kelly noted that despite the attempt of the Marines to assure the local populace

\* Two South Vietnamese artillery units, a four-gun 105mm howitzer battery, and a two-gun section of 155mm howitzers, supported their portion of the offensive.

that no harm would come to them, the villagers remained aloof and made no friendly overtures.<sup>2</sup>

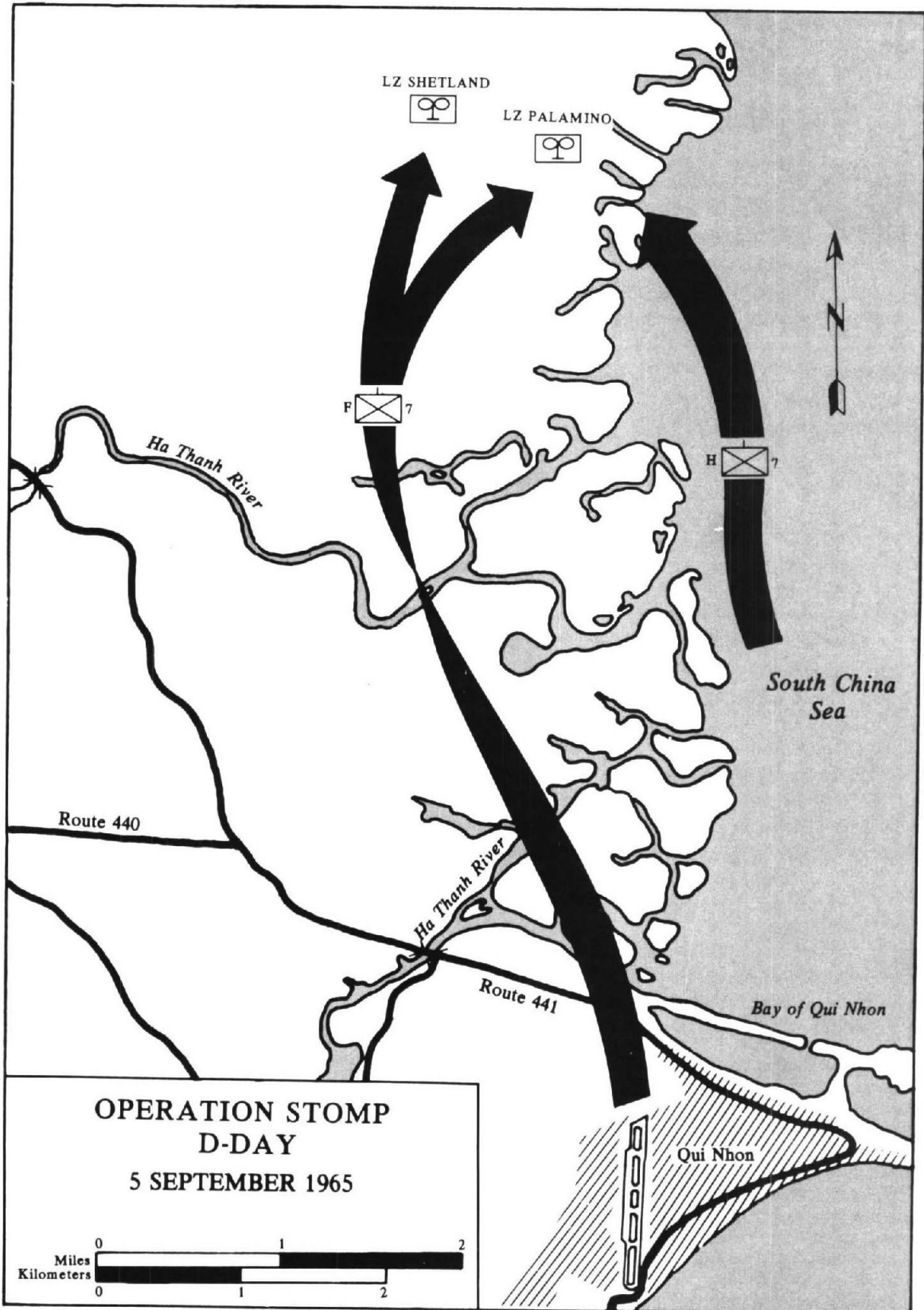
Considering the magnitude of the allied effort, PIRANHA hardly could be called a success. The target of the operation, the 1st VC Regiment, had withdrawn from the Batangan Peninsula before the operation began. Local villagers told the Marines that Viet Cong units had been in the area but had left, some less than 24 hours before PIRANHA started. Intelligence reports later indicated that the enemy regiment began leaving the area on 4 September, coinciding with the increased movement of the amphibious ships at Chu Lai and the increased activity of the South Vietnamese naval junk force.

The Marine experience in Operation PIRANHA pointed to the need for the development of tactics to clear VC out of caves and enclosed areas. After the operation, Lieutenant Colonel Kelly recommended to General Walt that Marines be authorized to use riot-control gas to save both American and enemy lives. This suggestion touched on the very sensitive political subject of gas warfare; there was no response, for the moment.\*\*

#### *Much Ado About CS, Operation STOMP*

The U.S. and South Vietnamese commands had suspended the use of riot-control ammunition, including tear gas, in the spring of 1965 after a public outcry in the United States against such tactics. When Secretary of Defense McNamara visited Saigon in July, he told General Westmoreland that public opinion would not support the use of gas in any form. Despite this statement, during the continuing deployment of U.S. forces to South Vietnam and the reorganization of the American Command in Vietnam, not all echelons of MACV received word of the prohibition. In II Corps, Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, which on 5 August came under the operational control of Army Major General Stanley R. (Swede) Larsen's

\*\* Lieutenant Colonel Kelly later commented: "It was apparent from this operation that the enemy could not be talked out of the caves and therefore some techniques had to be devised that would enable the Marines to cope with him in his underground hide-out and at the same time minimize as much as possible the risks involved." LtCol James P. Kelly, Comments on Shulimson, "USMC Ops Jul-Dec65," dtd 28May71 (Vietnam Comment File).





(Courtesy of Major Gary W. Parker) USMC Photo A707622

*An aerial view of the Operation STOMP area of operations north of Qui Nhon. Smoke from artillery preparatory fires can be seen in the left center of the picture.*

Task Force ALPHA,\* was unaware of the ban. The Marine battalion employed tear gas (CS) near Qui Nhon during an operation codenamed STOMP, which took place from 5-7 September, just before PIRANHA.

Major Raymond W. Wilson, Utter's executive officer, curious about a suspected Communist stronghold some 10 miles north of Qui Nhon, visited a Special Forces camp on Ky Son Mountain which overlooked the region in early September. From intelligence reports, Wilson concluded that the surrounding area was an operating base for a VC

main force unit. He learned that the terrain was honeycombed with a network of tunnels. Major Wilson then suggested to his battalion commander that their unit conduct a search and clear operation through Ky Son and its surrounding countryside. Utter agreed and, after General Larsen gave his permission, the battalion prepared for a two-company sweep of the Ky Son area. Lieutenant Colonel Utter assigned Major Wilson as the commander of the operation and the battalion S-3 officer, Captain Alvin J. Doublet, as second in command. The Marines planned to envelop the Communist forces, with one company landing by LVTs and the other by helicopter.

The basic problem was to kill or capture the Viet Cong, who blended with the civilian population, without harming the innocent. Captain Doublet had been attached to the 7th Marines during STARLITE

\* Task Force ALPHA was the forerunner of Field Force, Vietnam, which was established on 25 September with Larsen as commander. Major General Larsen had much the same responsibility for U.S. forces in II Corps as General Walt had for I Corps. See chapter 8 for further discussion of these command relations.

where he observed several occasions when CS or CN riot-control ammunition could have been most effectively employed in routing the VC from shelters and tunnel complexes. He suggested the use of tear gas for this purpose when he and Wilson briefed Lieutenant Colonel Utter on STOMP. When a thorough review of his orders and message traffic revealed nothing prohibiting the use of such munitions, the battalion commander approved and ordered the execution of the operation.

Operation STOMP unfolded according to plan. Company H made its LVT assault through the mud flats of Qui Nhon bay while Company F landed by helicopter to cut off the VC avenues of retreat. The two companies closed their cordon around the Viet Cong, killing 26 and capturing three. With escape denied, the enemy went underground, taking many local peasants with them for use as human shields. During the mop-up of the area, a much-publicized action occurred. As the Marines slowly and methodically searched out a complex of tunnels, they threw in tear gas grenades to flush out the occupants. Seventeen VC were forced from hiding in this fashion, as well as more than 300 women, children, and old men, not one of whom was harmed.

When the story broke, the Communist propaganda machines went to work. Radio Hanoi broadcast on 8 September that the "U.S. Marines imprudently used toxic gas, killing or seriously affecting many civilians."<sup>3</sup> Both the Communist China News Agency and Russian TASS organization made similar charges.

USMACV headquarters in Saigon was surprised by the news. One of General Westmoreland's subordinates stated that although BLT 2/7 had not been told that tear gas was prohibited, nonetheless, "Everyone knew how Westy felt about it and had permission been asked to employ it, such permission would have been denied." Lieutenant Colonel Utter, fearing the worst, later recalled that he "already had his farewell remarks to his troops in mind."<sup>4</sup>

General Larsen's headquarters conducted an investigation following which the general backed the battalion commander's decision. Larsen declared that had he been asked about the use of tear gas in this operation, he not only would have approved, he would have directed that it be used. He went on to state that the use of tear gas was the most humane way to handle the tactical situation and that he was in receipt of no restrictions on its use. Major Wilson

later wrote that the order for the operation had been "submitted to and approved by General Larsen's headquarters prior to enactment. Although in all fairness, it is doubtful that it was read by anyone other than [the] 2/7 liaison officer to the task force."<sup>5</sup>

A *New York Times* editorial of 11 September perhaps best expressed U.S. public opinion, declaring:

If the government prohibits the use of tear gas it will thereby order to certain death or injury more Americans and Vietnamese than the absolute necessities of war demand. Nonlethal riot-control gases can be far more humane and will cause far less casualties than many of the weapons now being used in Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

By the end of the month, the Washington authorities acceded to a request from General Westmoreland that U.S. forces be permitted to use riot-control ammunitions in tunnel-clearing operations. In October while on a visit to Qui Nhon, General Westmoreland told Lieutenant Colonel Utter that it was the successful use by his battalion of nontoxic gases that had altered world opinion to accept their employment in combat.<sup>7</sup>

#### *October-November Operations*

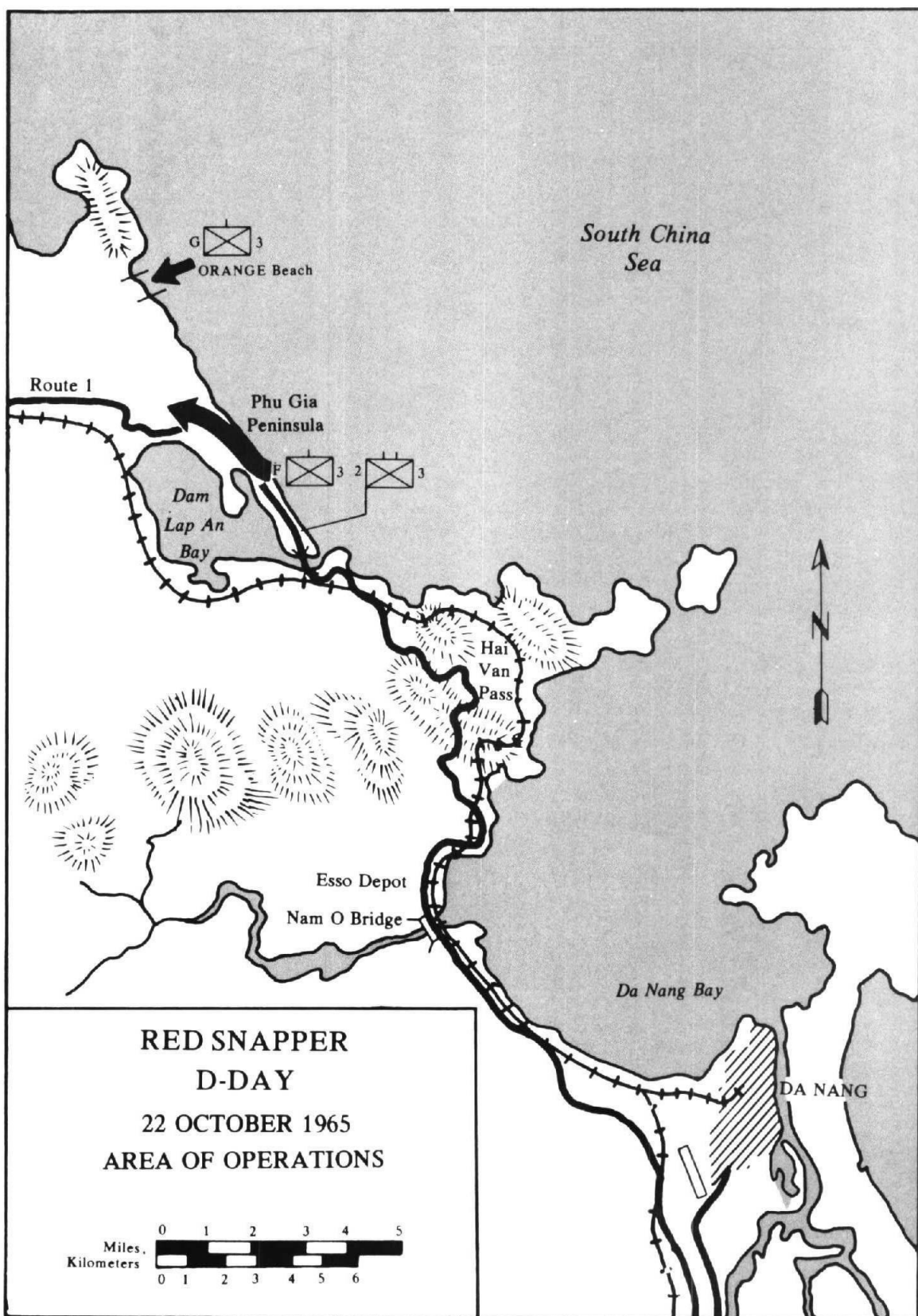
In I Corps, III MAF increased the number of battalion-size operations against VC main force elements outside of the Marine TAORS, but with disappointing results. For the next two months, the Viet Cong refused to give battle, except on their own terms. During October, the Marines mounted six attacks far afield from their enclaves, but they resulted in few Communist casualties. Typical of these were Operation RED SNAPPER and LIEN KET-10.

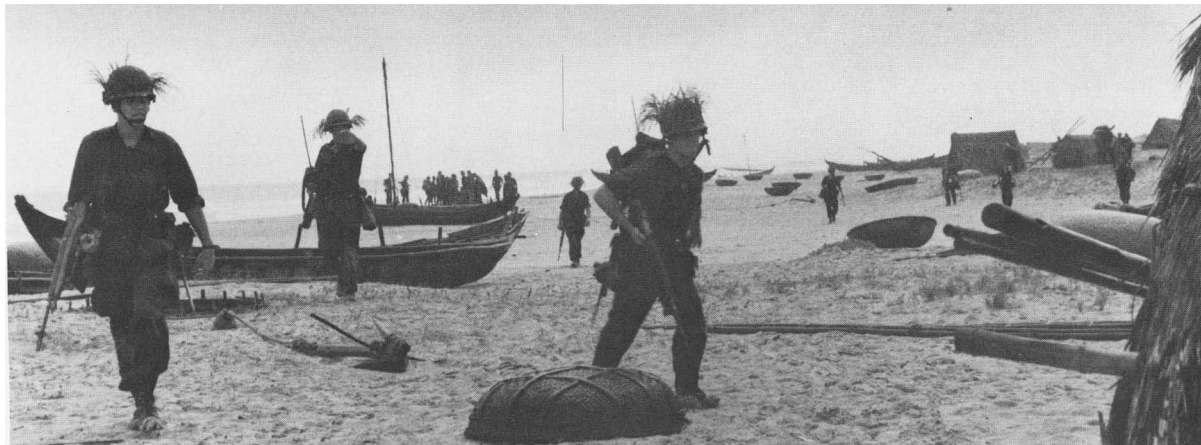
Operation RED SNAPPER was a coordinated USMC/ARVN search and clear operation conducted on the Phu Gia Peninsula overlooking Dam Lap An Bay, 20 miles north of Da Nang. From this region, the Viet Cong threatened Route 1, the vital main road link between Da Nang and Phu Bai.\*

The operation involved two companies of Lieutenant Colonel Clement's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and one company from the 3d Battalion, 4th

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\*The strategic Nam O Bridge, which was Da Nang's only northward link over the Cu De River, the Esso storage facilities, and the Hai Van Pass were all on this route, all good targets for the VC.





USMC Photo A186103

*Marines from the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines cross a beach in the second phase of BLUE MARLIN. Vietnamese fishing boats are in the background.*

Marines. The South Vietnamese provided two ARVN battalions, one ARVN ranger battalion, and four Regional Force/Popular Force companies for the offensive. RED SNAPPER began on 22 October when Clement loaded his command group and Company F into trucks and left Da Nang in a motorized column for the Phu Gia promontory. Coinciding with Clement's arrival, his Company G landed from two LCUs over ORANGE Beach halfway up the eastern coast of the peninsula. Concurrently, the ARVN forces deployed along Route 1, west of the Marines, in order to block the withdrawal of any Viet Cong moving away from the two-pronged Marine attack.

Both Marine elements moved into the objective area as planned without encountering any opposition. The next day the company from Phu Bai was helilifted into the operation to reinforce Clement's Company F. At the same time, Clement's Company G conducted a second amphibious landing by LCU further north along the coast and then pushed inland. RED SNAPPER ended on 25 October with meager results; the VC had left before the landing began. Marines captured 1 VC, 4 weapons, and 90 pounds of TNT; ARVN forces killed seven VC, captured five, and seized four weapons.

Operation LIEN KET-10 was equally disappointing. This operation, mounted by Lieutenant Colonel Rodolfo L. Trevino's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and the 3d Battalion, 6th Regiment of the

ARVN 2d Division, took place in the hills 12 miles west of Chu Lai in the eastern part of the Viet Cong's Do Xa base area. On 29 October, after preparation of the two landing zones by Marine air and artillery, 26 helicopters lifted the two battalions into their respective zones. The Marines encountered no enemy, but did find several deserted huts and a 200-pound rice cache. The second day, Trevino's force captured an enemy courier carrying a brief case of documents. There was little doubt that the combined force had entered a recently evacuated VC staging area, but neither Trevino's battalion nor the ARVN were able to find the enemy. The operation ended that afternoon when III MAF received warning of an imminent attack on the Chu Lai airfield. Trevino's battalion was ordered back to reinforce the TAOR; the attack never materialized.\*

Although the VC avoided combat, the Marines were not discouraged and continued their offensive forays during November. During Operation BLACK FERRET, elements of the 1st and 3d Battalions, 7th Marines joined forces in a coordinated effort with two

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\*Lieutenant Colonel Trevino, who replaced Lieutenant Colonel Fisher on 16 October as battalion commander, commented that he believed that had the operation continued, it would have resulted in contact in the region adjacent to and in the western portion of the LIEN KET-10 TAOR. The VC prisoner captured during the operation later committed suicide in the Chu Lai compound. Col Rodolfo L. Trevino, Comments on Shulimson draft MS, "USMC Ops, RVN, Jul-Dec65," n.d. (Vietnam Comment File).



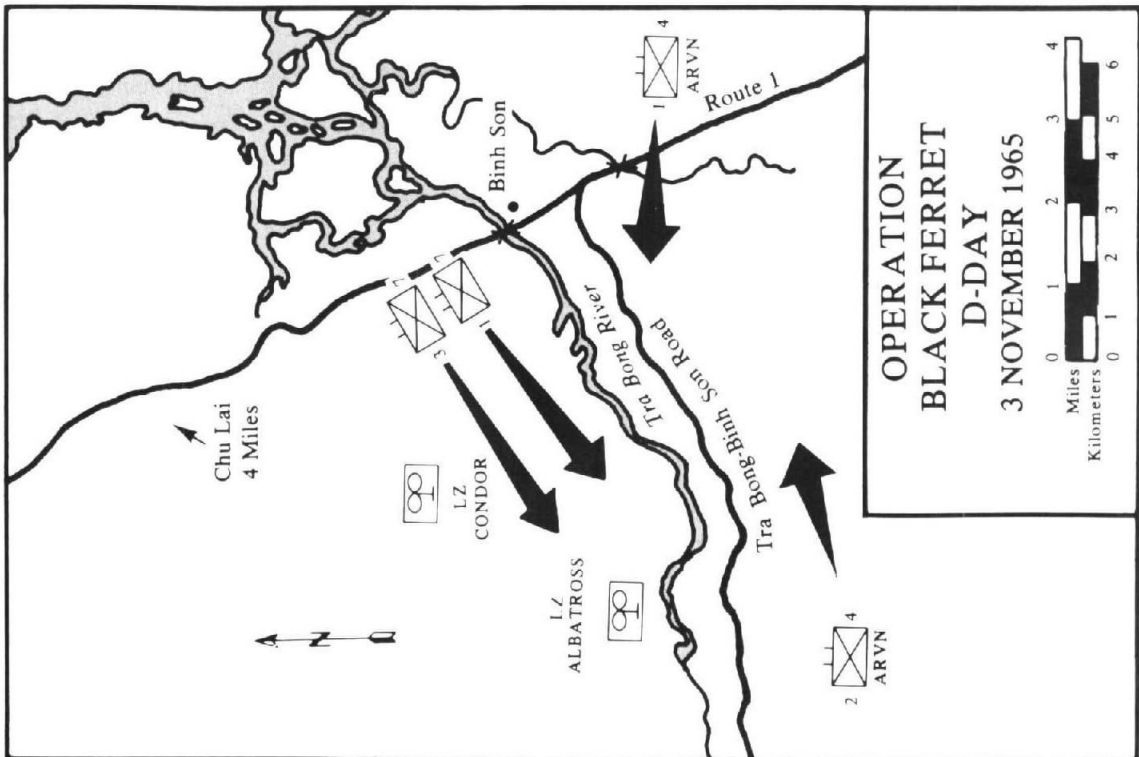
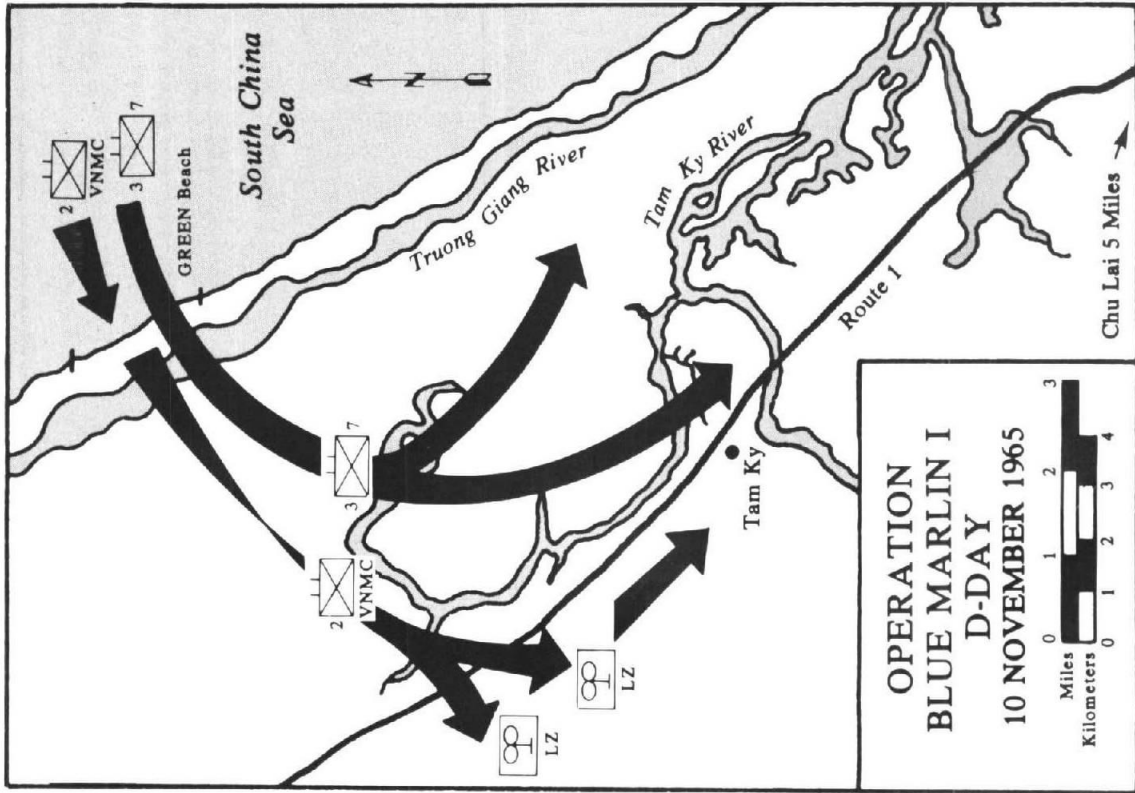
USMC Photo A186116

*Marines from the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines debark from Navy landing craft in Operation BLUE MARLIN. The troops are deploying from Qui Nhon to Chu Lai.*

battalions of the 2d ARVN Division's 4th Regiment in a search and destroy operation 10 miles south of the Chu Lai airfield, just north of the Song Tra Bong. On 3 November, the Marines opened the operation, attacking southward toward the river from an assembly point on Route 1. While the ARVN patrolled the south bank of the Tra Bong, two platoons of the Marines' 1st Reconnaissance Battalion were helilifted into screening positions on the northern and western edges of the battle area, LZs CONDOR and ALBATROSS. The 3d Battalion, 11th Marines furnished artillery support with a battery of six 105mm howitzers, a battery of six 107mm mortars (howtars), and two sections of 155mm howitzers. Allied intelligence sources reported the presence of a VC main force battalion in the region and the

BLACK FERRET scheme of maneuver envisioned the Marines pushing the enemy southward toward the river where the VC would be trapped between the two allied forces.

Once more the allies were disappointed. No VC battalion materialized, just occasional snipers and booby traps. On the second day of the operation, 4 November, a Marine patrol triggered a booby trap consisting of a M-26 grenade and an 81mm mortar shell. In the ensuing blast newswoman Dickey Chapelle, who had covered Marine operations since World War II, was killed and six Marines were wounded. During the entire operation, the Marines suffered 1 KIA and 13 WIA, while killing at least 2 VC, capturing 6, and taking 79 suspects into custody.







USMC Photo A186113

*Marines from the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines use a Vietnamese fishing boat to cross a river during BLUE MARLIN. Other Marines wait their turn to cross.*

There were still many positive results of the operation. The Marines had entered an area where the inhabitants had long been sympathetic to the enemy. Since the Marines indicated that they would be frequent visitors, the ARVN decided to establish a permanent outpost on the southern bank of the Tra Bong. In addition, Marine firepower may have hurt the VC more than the statistics of the operation indicated. Marine aircraft hit several enemy craft on the Tra Bong River and a Marine artillery mission, fired at a suspected VC concentration area, produced secondary explosions.

The last large operation initiated in November was the two-phased BLUE MARLIN. This offensive was the outgrowth of a realignment of forces and an abundance of available amphibious shipping, a combination which offered an excellent opportunity to conduct search and clear operations between the coast and Route 1 in the 50-mile littoral corridor between Da Nang and Chu Lai. Responding to a U.S. appeal for troop assistance from its SEATO allies, the South Korean government dispatched its famed "Tiger Division" to Vietnam's Binh Dinh Province in II CTZ during October. This deployment of forces freed Lieutenant Colonel Utter's BLT 2/7 from its mission at Qui Nhon. General Walt decided to return Utter's unit to its parent regiment at Chu Lai and to move the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines from Chu Lai to its parent regiment at Da Nang. Walt received approval from Seventh Fleet to use the ships of Amphibious Squadron 5 (PhibRon-5) which were then in Korean waters embarking the "Tiger" troops. He then designated Colonel Thell H. Fisher, the deputy chief of staff of III MAF, as the BLUE MARLIN landing force commander and sent him to

Pusan, Korea. On the voyage southward, Colonel Fisher and Captain William J. Maddocks, USN, the amphibious squadron commander, completed the preliminary planning for the operation.

After the Korean troops had relieved Lieutenant Colonel Utter's BLT 2/7 on 4 November, the task group sailed northward to Chu Lai where the 3d South Vietnamese Marine Battalion also boarded the ships. On 10 November, the 190th birthday of the U.S. Marine Corps, the combined USMC/VNMC force\* landed according to plan 15 miles north of Chu Lai. Helicopters from Colonel Johnson's MAG-36 ferried the South Vietnamese inland from the beach to landing zones west of Route 1. The combined force then swept southward along both sides of the road. BLUE MARLIN I ended two days later when the allies reached the Chu Lai TAOR. Except for numerous booby traps, no other enemy presence was encountered.

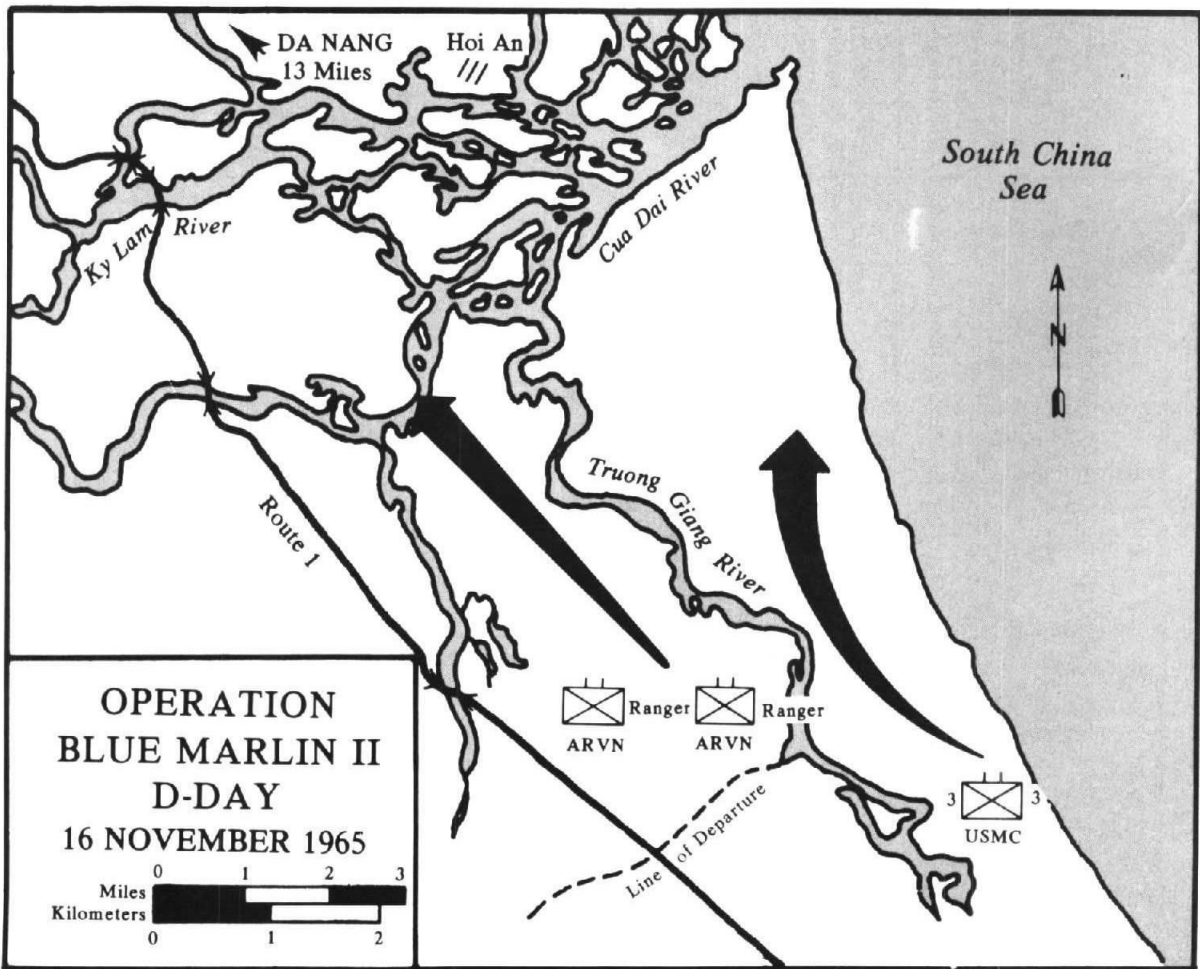
The second phase of BLUE MARLIN followed a similar pattern. After Phase I ended, the amphibious task group returned to Chu Lai where Lieutenant Colonel William H. Lanagan, Jr.'s 3d Battalion, 3d Marines embarked on the ships. Lieutenant Colonel Lanagan had assumed command of the battalion five days after Lieutenant Colonel Muir's death during an operation south of Da Nang.\*\* On 16 November, the battalion landed over beaches 22 miles south of Da Nang, and pushed north. The area of operations for Lanagan's force was a corridor bounded by the Truong Giang River to the west, the Cua Dai River

\*Major Richard E. Romine accompanied the South Vietnamese Marines in BLUE MARLIN. He recalled: "We had a bad time getting on the beach with the Amtracs due to the extremely rough surf. . . . we landed north of Tam Ky and swept towards Chu Lai." On 10 November, he remembered that he celebrated the Marine Corps Birthday with "a beer that an H-34 pilot dropped to me that evening." Romine added, ". . . although enemy contact was very light, the snipers seemed to single me out from the Vietnamese Marines I was near." LtCol Richard E. Romine, Comments on draft MS, dtd 25Oct76 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\* The 3d Battalion, 3d Marines had flown from Chu Lai to Da Nang on 10 September to support a 9th Marines operation. On the early morning of 11 September, Lieutenant Colonel Muir stepped on a 155mm shell rigged as a mine and was killed with his radio operator. Four other Marines were wounded in the blast. This occurred on Hill 55, a strategically located elevation 8,000 meters south of the Cau Do. The 3d Battalion returned to Chu Lai on 14 September. In the interim, Major Comer, the executive officer, was the acting battalion commander until relieved by Lieutenant Colonel Lanagan. See Chapter 8.

to the north and the South China Sea to the east. Two ARVN ranger battalions conducted a coordinated search and destroy mission west of the Truong Giang. During the three-day operation, the combined forces killed 25 Viet Cong. In addition, 15 VC were captured, 79 suspects apprehended, and 9

weapons were seized. Friendly casualties were two ARVN killed, and one ARVN and three Marines wounded. At the conclusion of the operation, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines moved to Da Nang by amphibious shipping and helicopters where it assumed the mission of division reserve.



## CHAPTER 7

# The 1st VC Again— Operation HARVEST MOON

*The Abandonment of Hiep Duc—Activation of Task Force DELTA and Planning the Operation—The VC Strike and the Marines Are Committed—The Search of the Phouc Ha Valley—The Fight at Ky Phu—The Wrap-Up*

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### *The Abandonment of Hiep Duc*

In November, the 1st VC Regiment, obviously recovered from the beating received during Operation STARLITE, attacked the South Vietnamese outpost located at Hiep Duc, 25 miles west of Tam Ky.\* This district capital, situated on the headwaters of the Song Thu Bon, was the western gateway to a fertile mountain valley which later became known to Marines as the Nui Loc Son Basin, named for a rugged, narrow hill that protrudes from the center of the valley floor. Also known as the Que Son Valley, the broad, heavily populated expanse of farm land constituted one of the more strategic areas between Da Nang and Chu Lai. During the north-east monsoon season, heavy rain clouds shrouded the valley and its western approaches, thus allowing the enemy freedom of movement without being observed from the air.

On the evening of 17 November, the enemy regiment, with all three of its battalions, the 60th, 80th, and 90th, overran the small Regional Force garrison. Enemy units were identified later from captured documents and by interrogation of a VC defector. Hiep Duc District leaders reported 174 of the 433 defenders missing and 315 weapons lost.

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\* Colonel Wyckoff, remarked in his comments on the draft that he was unconvinced that the 1st VC ever recovered from STARLITE. He believes that its "resurgence as a fully active unit was the result of reinforcement by North Vietnamese Regulars." Colonel Wyckoff recalled message traffic at the time in which the VC main forces were "notifying the local guerrillas to stick it out on their own until help came down from the north; that their current role was to be assistance to the main force, not vice versa." Col Don P. Wyckoff, Comments on draft MS, dtd 16Oct76 (Vietnam Comment File).

Soon after reports reached Da Nang of the loss of Hiep Duc, F-4B Phantoms from MAG-11 and A-4 Skyhawks from MAG-12 arrived over the outpost and conducted strikes against enemy positions in the surrounding hills. At the same time, the two helicopter groups, MAG-16 and MAG-36, prepared to helilift two South Vietnamese battalions into the battle area.

Colonel Thomas J. O'Connor, the MAG-16 commander and airborne coordinator for the operation, Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Zitnik, the commander of VMO-6, and the South Vietnamese infantry commander made an early morning reconnaissance flight over the fallen base on 18 November "to look over the area and select a landing zone." O'Connor remembered as they looked down:

The area was ominously quiet. We didn't see a living soul. There was much evidence of the fight the day before. The typical triangular-shaped French fortification in the village had been penetrated in several places. There were several corpses hanging on barbed wire around a few of the outposts across the Song Thu Bon.<sup>1</sup>

In their search for a suitable landing zone, the three officers rejected a rice paddy about 500 meters north of Hiep Duc because of the potential of an enemy ambush. Instead, the South Vietnamese commander selected a small hill, about 80 meters high, 700 meters southeast of the village. With this decision made, the three returned to Tam Ky where the transport squadron commanders were organizing the lifts to Hiep Duc.

The site chosen for the landing zone would create problems. It was quite small and could only accommodate two helicopters at one time. Furthermore, the hill on which the landing zone was situated was the western end of a ridgeline stretching



USMC Photo A186279

*Captain Richard E. Theer, Commanding Officer, Company B, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, describes the battle situation to General Walt. The scene is near the base of Hill 407 in the Que Son Valley.*

about 4,000 meters east of Hiep Duc with some peaks over 200 meters high. Unknown to the allies, the VC had emplaced 12.7mm machine gun positions on this hill mass which dominated the landing zone.

The enemy gunners allowed the first helicopters to land on 18 November, but then opened fire on the following waves.\* Colonel O'Connor, who was airborne with Lieutenant Colonel Zitnik over Hiep Duc during the landing attempt, stated that, "they [the enemy gunners] were actually firing down on the landing helicopters." Several of the aircraft were

hit and, according to O'Connor, "It became obvious that we had to knock out those guns on the peaks or suffer unacceptable helicopter losses." Colonel O'Connor recalled:

I stopped the oncoming helicopter flights, and directed them to circle their positions about 3 miles east of the hill mass. Then, A-4's and F-4's from MAG 12 and MAG 11 began a thorough neutralization of gun positions on the hill under control of some Army light fixed-wing observation aircraft.

We took a risk in stopping the helicopter lift, because we had landed less than a company in the zone. Enemy ground movement was observed after the first helicopter had landed. They [the enemy troops] began to displace from their original positions north and west of the paddy we had scouted, and moved into the village toward the landing zone. Bob Zitnik and I were fired upon while circling Hiep Duc observing these movements. But we had to give the jets a good clear shot at the gun positions, and they did their job.<sup>2</sup>

After a 20-minute wait for the Marine jets to

\*It was later learned that the intense and well directed 12.7mm anti-aircraft fire was delivered by the NVA 195th [also known as the 9th] Anti-aircraft Battalion. This North Vietnamese unit had been formed from elements of the NVA 308th Division early in the spring of 1965, and moved south via the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos and arrived in South Vietnam during September. It had joined the 1st VC Regiment in the Que Son-Hiep Duc Region on 20 October 1965. III MAF ComdC, Dec65.

knock out the enemy anti-aircraft emplacements, Colonel O'Connor resumed the troop lift. Although the VC ground forces were converging on the landing zone, "we landed a superior force in the zone without further opposition." For the operation, the Marines had employed 30 UH-34s, 17 of which were hit, and 3 badly damaged. One Marine crewman was killed and three others wounded.<sup>3</sup>

The relief force had its work cut out for it, but with Marine close air support and determined fighting, the ARVN gained the advantage. By the end of the 19th, the South Vietnamese reoccupied Hiep Duc, but the *1st VC Regiment* still controlled the critical terrain to the northwest. The two ARVN battalions killed 141 VC and captured 87 weapons while suffering 33 killed and 73 wounded themselves. American advisors with the ARVN estimated that Marine air support had accounted for another 300 VC killed.

General Thi now had to make a major decision: either regarrison the district capital with the ARVN force, or abandon the outpost. In spite of rainy weather and poor flying conditions, Lieutenant Colonel Bodley's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines at Chu Lai was ready to reinforce the ARVN should the need arise. The Communists actually decided the issue when they attempted to overrun an isolated outpost, Thach Tru, in southern I Corps.\* Forced to commit more forces to this action, Thi ordered the two ARVN battalions withdrawn from Hiep Duc.<sup>4</sup>

Instead of reinforcing Hiep Duc, Bodley's battalion was committed to the Thach Tru engagement, 16 miles south of Quang Ngai. The attacking force was identified as North Vietnamese, the *18th NVA Regiment* reinforced by the *45th VC Heavy Weapons Battalion*. Although the Marines arrived on 22 November, the day after the attack had begun, their help was never really needed. The defenders, two RF companies and the 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion, repulsed the attack, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. Dense cloud cover over the area hampered close air support, but two U. S. destroyers provided

\* Advance elements of Bodley's 3d Battalion were actually helilifted to Hiep Duc area on 21 November, but the bad weather prevented the unit from landing. The battalion had planned to start Operation QUICK FIRE that day in the Hiep Duc region in support of the ARVN's ongoing Operation QUYET THANG 485; the Marine plans were cancelled the next day when the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines went to Thach Tru.



USMC Photo A801116  
*Brigadier General Melvin D. Henderson, Commanding General, Task Force DELTA (left), and Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter, Commanding Officer, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines (right), discuss the commitment of Utter's battalion into Operation HARVEST MOON. Utter's Marines were inserted after the VC struck the 5th ARVN Regiment.*

much needed fire support during the engagement. Two U.S. Marine advisors to the 2d ARVN Division, flying over the battlefield in O-1B observation aircraft, directed the 5-inch guns of the *O'Brien* (DD 725) and *Bache* (DD 470) against enemy formations. The ARVN Ranger commander credited these two ships with breaking the back of the enemy attack.<sup>5</sup> During the three-day battle, the ARVN, supported by naval gunfire and Marine air, killed 175 enemy and captured 136 weapons. Bodley's force accounted for another three enemy dead and took 17 prisoners. Unfortunately, one Marine UH-34D and its four crew members were lost during a troop lift sortie. The 3d Battalion, 7th Marines was helilifted back to Chu Lai on the 24th, after being relieved by the 11th ARVN Ranger Battalion at Thach Tru.



*A Marine helicopter brings in supplies to a forward company during Operation HARVEST MOON. The Marine in center of the picture is making landing signals to the pilot.*

The two actions at Hiep Duc and Thach Tru typified the enemy's monsoon strategy. Moving during periods of poor weather which hampered air operations, the Communists attacked isolated outposts and then established ambushes to trap any relief forces. At Thach Tru the enemy had miscalculated, but at Hiep Duc, in forcing the ARVN to abandon control there, the 1st VC Regiment was in excellent position to enter the strategic Nui Loc Son Basin, threatening ARVN outposts at Que Son and Viet An.

To counteract this threat, on 17 November General Westmoreland ordered General Walt to hold two battalions on a 12-hour alert so that they could be deployed rapidly as a mobile reserve. Five days later, he issued a new letter of instruction in which he reaffirmed his previous verbal order to Walt that III MAF should "conduct search and destroy operations against more distant VC base areas to destroy or drive the VC out."<sup>6</sup>

At about the same time, General Krulak, though not in the official operational chain-of-command, commented on the need for the Marines to recapture the initiative. General Krulak made several suggestions including the idea of enticing the VC to

attack a supposedly weak position which was actually "loaded for bear." The place the general mentioned was Hiep Duc.<sup>7</sup>

General Walt, concerned about the enemy's growing control in the Nui Loc Son Basin, met with General Thi on 4 December to discuss the mounting threat. According to intelligence reports, the enemy had moved northeast from Hiep Duc and was threatening the ARVN outposts at Que Son and Viet An. Both commanders concurred in the need to launch a sizeable attack against the VC before the enemy unit was able to establish a firm base of operations. The result of this agreement was Operation HARVEST MOON/LIEN KET 18.\*

#### *Activation of Task Force DELTA and Planning the Operation*

On 5 December, III MAF activated a temporary command, codenamed Task Force DELTA, under the Assistant Division Commander, 3d Marine Division, Brigadier General Melvin D. Henderson, to control the upcoming operation.\*\* Two battalions, Lieutenant Colonel Utter's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines from Chu Lai and Lieutenant Colonel Joshua W. Dorsey's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines from Da Nang, were assigned to the task force.\*\*\* A provisional artillery battalion was formed from elements of the 11th and 12th Marines, consisting of two 105mm howitzer batteries. In addition, III MAF had received permission to use the SLF as the task force reserve.

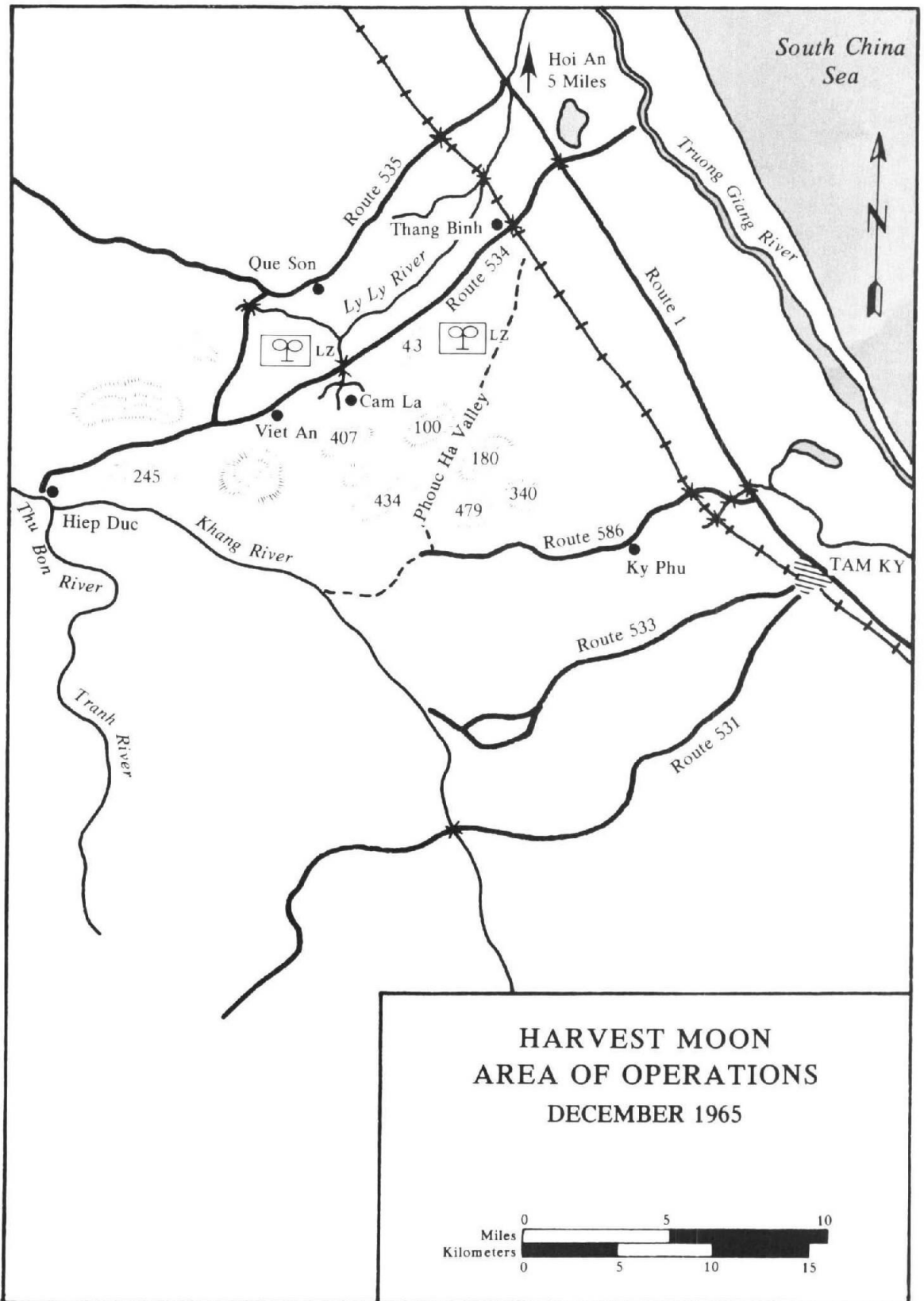
By 7 December, General Henderson had completed planning efforts with his ARVN counterpart, Brigadier General Hoang Xuan Lam, commander of

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\* This operation should not be confused with the rice harvest operations, also named HARVEST MOON, conducted during September-October. These pacification efforts are discussed in Chapter 9.

\*\* At this time there were two assistant division commanders of the 3d Marine Division. General Henderson was stationed at Da Nang while Brigadier General Jonas M. Platt, who had relieved General Karch on 9 November, was assigned to Chu Lai and also acted as base coordinator there.

\*\*\* LtCol Dorsey had relieved LtCol Lanagan as battalion commander on 1 December. During HARVEST MOON, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines had only one of its own companies, Company L, but had attached Company E from 2d Battalion, 9th Marines and Company G from 2d Battalion, 4th Marines for the operation.





USMC Photo A186244

*Marines from Company E, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines receive a briefing before boarding helicopters during Operation HARVEST MOON. The helicopters wait in the background.*

the 2d ARVN Division. General Lam, “a figure familiar to the Marines in his black beret with silver badges, tanker’s jacket, and swagger stick,” would establish his operational CP at Thang Binh, while Henderson would locate his near the artillery positions at Que Son.<sup>8</sup> The largest combined operation since the arrival of the Marines was about to begin.

The plan for Operation HARVEST MOON/LIEN KET 18 directed the 5th ARVN Regiment, consisting of the headquarters group and 1st Battalion, and the 11th Ranger Battalion, to enter the Que Son Valley along the Thang Binh-Hiep Duc road on 8 December. The objective for the first day was a point south of the village of Que Son, eight miles southwest of Route 1. According to allied intelligence sources, the *1st VC Regiment* was west of this area; contact was not expected until the second day. On 9 December, Lieutenant Colonel Utter’s battalion was to be inserted behind the enemy to force them eastward into the advancing ARVN. Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey’s battalion would then be inserted to reinforce Utter’s unit when needed.

#### *The VC Strike and the Marines Are Committed*

The 5th ARVN Regiment left Thang Binh on schedule with the 11th Ranger Battalion on the right of the road, and the regiment’s 1st Battalion on the left. During the first few hours, the advance was

uneventful. At 1330 about halfway to Que Son, the ranger battalion was ambushed by the *70th VC Battalion*.<sup>\*</sup> The enemy allowed the ARVN to close within 20 meters and then opened fire. In the first 15 minutes of the battle, the rangers lost nearly one third of their personnel and were overrun. According to an American advisor who was with the ARVN force, “They attacked in a mass and hit us from all sides. . . . People were dropping around us right and left.”<sup>9</sup>

The badly mauled ranger unit was able to withdraw to a position 1,200 meters to the northwest and

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<sup>\*</sup> The *70th*, although not organic to the *1st VC Regiment*, was attached during this period. IntellRept, Encl 2, *TF DELTA AAR*, p. 1-2. Lieutenant Colonel Ralph E. Sullivan, at the time a member of the TF DELTA staff, recalled that information on the operation was severely restricted. According to Sullivan, the 5th ARVN regimental commander, “was told his mission was to be a routine ‘sweep and clear’ along highway 1 to the vicinity of Ky Lam. On reaching the vicinity of Thang Binh, [the regimental commander] was brought to the ‘bunker’ at Da Nang about 1500 on 7 December and apprised of his actual mission. General Thi warned us not to discuss the operation with any of the ARVN except for a select few in his own headquarters and that of General Lam’s. The fact that at 1330, 8 December the 11th ARVN Ranger Battalion walked into a prepared ambush is *prima facie* evidence that if [the regimental commander] was kept in the dark, the commander of the *1st VC Regiment* was not.” LtCol Ralph E. Sullivan, Comments on draft MS, dtd 28Oct76 (Vietnam Comment File).