

U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

THE DEFINING YEAR

1968



COVER: Marine infantry advance cautiously under support of the 90mm gun of a M48 tank in street fighting in Hue. Even with the tank support, the Marines found the enemy resistance difficult to overcome in the first days of the operation.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190400

U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM THE DEFINING YEAR

1968

by

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Foreword

This is the last volume, although published out of chronological sequence, in the nine-volume operational history series covering the Marine Corps' participation in the Vietnam War. A separate functional series complements the operational histories. This book is the capstone volume of the entire series in that 1968, as the title indicates, was the defining year of the war. While originally designed to be two volumes, it was decided that unity and cohesion required one book.

The year 1968 was the year of the Tet Offensive including Khe Sanh and Hue City. These were momentous events in the course of the war and they occurred in the first three months of the year. This book, however, documents that 1968 was more than just the Tet Offensive. The bloodiest month of the war for the U.S. forces was not January nor February 1968, but May 1968 when the Communists launched what was called their "Mini-Tet" offensive. This was followed by a second "Mini-Tet" offensive during the late summer which also was repulsed at heavy cost to both sides. By the end of the year, the U.S. forces in South Vietnam's I Corps, under the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), had regained the offensive. By December, enemy-initiated attacks had fallen to their lowest level in two years. Still, there was no talk of victory. The Communist forces remained a formidable foe and a limit had been drawn on the level of American participation in the war.

Although largely written from the perspective of III MAF and the ground war in I Corps, the volume also treats the activities of Marines with the Seventh Fleet Special Landing Force, activities of Marine advisors to South Vietnamese forces, and other Marine involvement in the war. Separate chapters cover Marine aviation and the single manager controversy, artillery, logistics, manpower, and pacification.

Like most of the volumes in this series, this has been a cumulative history. Lieutenant Colonel Leonard A. Blasiol researched and wrote the initial drafts of the chapters on Khe Sanh as well as Chapters 17, 19, and 21 and the account of Operation Thor in Chapter 26. Mr. Charles R. Smith researched and drafted Chapters 16, 18, 20, and 22. Captain David A. Dawson researched and wrote Chapter 27. Dr. Jack Shulimson researched and wrote the remaining chapters, edited and revised the entire text, and incorporated the comments of the various reviewers.

Dr. Shulimson heads the History Writing Unit and is a graduate of the University of Buffalo, now the State University of New York at Buffalo. He earned his master's degree in history at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan and his doctorate from the University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland in American studies. Mr. Smith is a senior historian in the Division and served in Vietnam as an artilleryman and then as a historian with the U.S. Army. He is a graduate of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and received his master's degree in history from San Diego State University. Lieutenant Colonel Blasiol is an experienced artilleryman and a graduate of Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, with a degree in history, and of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College. Captain Dawson is an infantry officer now stationed at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He holds a bachelor of arts degree in history from Cornell University, Ithaca, New York and a master's degree in history from Kansas State University, Lawrence, Kansas.



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

Preface

U.S. Marines in Vietnam, The Defining Year, 1968 like the preceding volumes in this series is largely based upon the holdings of the Marine Corps Historical Center. These include the official unit command chronologies, after-action reports, message and journal files, various staff studies, oral histories, personal papers, and reference collections. In addition, the authors have used the holdings of the other Services and pertinent published primary and secondary sources. Most importantly, nearly 230 reviewers, most of whom were participants in the events, read draft chapters and made substantive comments. They are listed by name in a separate appendix. While some classified sources have been used, none of the material in the text contains any classified information.

To a large extent, the measurement of this war relied not upon territory occupied, but upon casualties inflicted upon the enemy. In enumerating enemy casualties, the authors are not making any statement upon the reliability or accuracy of these numbers. These are merely the figures provided by the reporting units. They are important in that the U.S. military and national leadership depended in part upon the comparative casualty yardstick to report and evaluate progress in the war.

In any project this large and that involved so many people, the authors are in debt to several of their associates, past and present, in the History and Museums Division. While it is not possible to list everyone, we would be most negligent if we did not thank the following. First, Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, Director Emeritus, provided the vision and backing for the entire series, insisting upon readability and accuracy. Colonel Michael F. Monigan, Acting Director, gave the impetus for final completion of the project. Chief Historian Benis M. Frank, and his predecessor, Henry I. Shaw, Jr., furnished editorial guidance and encouragement. Ms. Wanda J. Renfrow of the Histories Section and Mr. Robert E. Struder, Head of Editing and Design, read the entire manuscript together with Mr. Frank and prevented several minor errors and some embarrassments. Mrs. Cathy A. Kerns, of the Editing and Design Section, typed the photograph captions and the Medal of Honor Appendix. Both Mrs. Kerns and Ms. Renfrow painstakingly inserted the multitudinous entries for the index, carefully checking the index against the text. Finally, Ms. Renfrow patiently and ably made the numerous revisions in the organization of the index. Mr. William S. Hill provided technical direction for both the maps and insertion of the photographs. Ms. Evelyn A. Englander of the library was most helpful in obtaining publications. The Archives staff (under the direction of Fred J. Graboske and his predecessor, Ms. Joyce Bonnett), especially Ms. Joyce M. Hudson and Ms. Amy C. Cohen, cheerfully made their resources available, as did Art Curator John T. Dyer, Jr. The Reference Section under Danny J. Crawford was always most cooperative, especially Ms. Lena M. Kaljot, who assisted in the duplication of most of the photographs. A special thanks goes to Lieutenant Colonel Leon Craig, Jr., Head of the Support Branch; his administrative officer, First Lieutenant Mark R. Schroeder; and his enlisted Marines, especially Staff Sergeant Myrna A. Thomas and Corporal Juan E. Johnson, who assisted in that last push for publication.

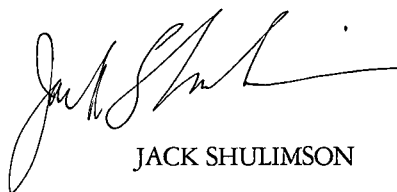
Both Mr. Struder and Mr. Hill adroitly handled the liaison with the Typography and Design Division of the U.S. Government Printing Office in the layout of the book. Mr. Struder deftly and professionally assisted in the reading of page proofs and Mr. Hill meticulously monitored the preparation of charts and maps. The authors also appreciate the efforts of Mr. Nicholas M. Freda and Mr. Lee Nance of the Typography

and Design Division, Mr. Freda for his careful layout of text and Mr. Nance for the final preparation of all maps and charts.

Finally, the authors want to acknowledge the contributions of former members of the Histories Section who reviewed and commented on several chapters, including Lieutenant Colonels Lane Rogers and Gary D. Solis, Majors George R. Dunham, Charles D. Melson, and Edward F. Wells, and Dr. V. Keith Fleming, Jr.

Special mention and most heartfelt thanks go to various interns who have assisted with the preparation of this volume. Naval Academy Midshipman Third Class Thomas Moninger, who prepared the Chronology of Events, and Maderia School students Ms. Jaime Koepsell and Ms. Sylvia Bunyasi who drafted the initial Command and Staff list. Marine Sergeant Neil A. Peterson, a student at the Citadel, sketched over half of the draft maps used in this volume. James E. Cypher, a senior at Loyola University, in New Orleans, assisted in the tedious but most important final editing of the index. Finally, there was Peter M. Yarbo, who as a student at Johns Hopkins, for over a year, once a week, took the early morning train from Baltimore to Washington, to assist with the project. Peter prepared several of the charts in the appendices, but even more significantly, he did almost all of the photographic research, saw that the photos were duplicated, and made the initial selection of photographs, organizing them by chapter. This book could never have been published at this time without his specific assistance and that of the other interns.

The authors are also indebted to Dr. Douglas Pike, who opened up his Indochina Archives, then located at the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, for their examination. Mr. Robert J. Destatte, Defense Prisoner of War and Missing Personnel Office, U.S. Department of Defense, provided a translation of several published Vietnamese documents. Finally our thanks to those who contributed comments on the draft and to our colleagues in the other Defense historical offices, who assisted with their advice and comments. In the end, however, the authors alone assume sole responsibility for the content of the text, including opinions expressed and any errors in fact.



JACK SHULIMSON

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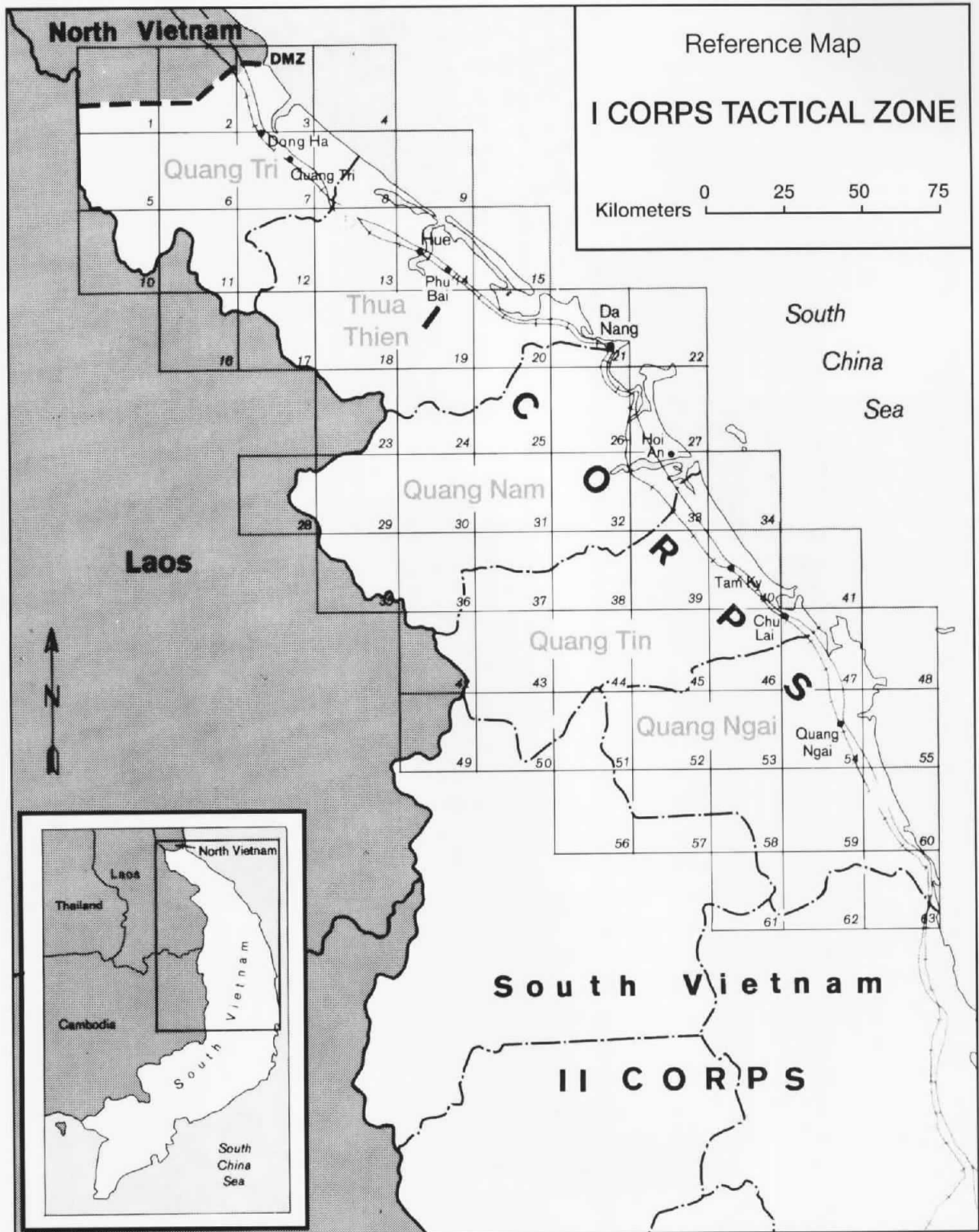
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PART I
PRE-TET 1968

CHAPTER 1

A Puzzling War

*III MAF January 1968—MACV and Command Arrangements—South Vietnam and I Corps
The Enemy—Focus on the North—MACV Vis-à-Vis Marines—An Ambivalent Outlook*

III MAF January 1968

After more than two and a half years since the commitment of major U.S. combat forces to the war in Vietnam, the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) entered 1968 with portents of a possible climax to the conflict. American intelligence indicated a buildup of enemy forces throughout South Vietnam and especially in the northern border region. Regiments from three North Vietnamese Army (NVA) divisions massed in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) dividing the two Vietnams and in Laos near the isolated Marine base at Khe Sanh. To counter this threat, the American command prepared to reinforce the Marines in I Corps Tactical Zone (ICTZ), the five northern provinces in South Vietnam. Although 1967 ended and 1968 began with the usual holiday truces between the opposing forces (more honored in the breach than in the observance), the Marines girded themselves for future heavy fighting.

With its headquarters at the sprawling and centrally located Da Nang base, III MAF at the beginning of January 1968 numbered more than 100,000 Marines, sailors, and soldiers. Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., Naval Academy Class of 1935 and Commanding General, III MAF, since the previous June, had under his command two reinforced Marine divisions, the 1st and 3d; a U.S. Army division, the Americal; the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW); and the Force Logistic Command. Supplementing these units and temporarily attached to III MAF were the nearly 3,000 Marines of the Seventh Fleet's two special landing forces (SLFs). Part of the U.S. Pacific Command's strategic reserve, the SLFs each consisted of a Marine battalion landing team (BLT), a battalion reinforced by supporting elements and a helicopter squadron. In addition, the III MAF commander had "coordinating authority" over the four-battalion Republic of Korea (ROK) 2d Marine Brigade (meaning orders to the Koreans took the form of requests). Including the ROK Marines, General Cushman had available 40 infantry battalions and 23 Marine aircraft squadrons in



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A192347
Marine LtGen Robert E. Cushman, Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force, returns a salute during a ceremony at Da Nang. By January 1968, III MAF, the senior U.S. command in I Corps, the five northern provinces of South Vietnam, equalled a field army in size.

the III MAF area of operations, extending some 220 miles from the DMZ in the north to the border with II Corps Tactical Zone in the south.¹

The 53-year-old Cushman, commanding nearly a field army in size, had multiple responsibilities which had grown apace with the expansion of III MAF from the original Marine contingent, the 5,000-man 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB), which had landed at Da Nang in March 1965. As the senior U.S. general officer in I Corps, General Cushman wore several "hats." As well as Commanding General, III MAF, he was both the U.S. I Corps "Area Coordinator" and "Senior Advisor." In one capacity or another he was responsible for all U.S. forces in the northern five provinces.²

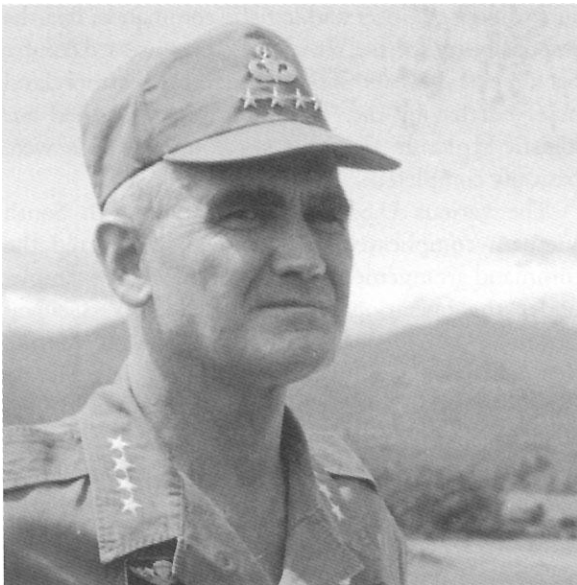
Well respected in the Corps, with a reputation for intelligence and political adroitness, General Cushman brought a broad background in both military and national affairs to his duties at III MAF. The native Minnesotan, a battalion commander in World War II, was awarded the Navy Cross for heroism at Guam. Following the war, he served as an instructor at the Marine

Corps Schools at Quantico, Virginia, and then headed the Amphibious Warfare Branch, Office of Naval Research, in Washington. After two years with the Central Intelligence Agency and a promotion to colonel, General Cushman joined the staff of the Commander in Chief, U.S. Naval Forces, Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean Fleet, in London, and then returned to the United States as a member of the faculty of the Armed Forces Staff College. In 1956, he commanded an infantry regiment, the 2d Marines, at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and the following year became the assistant for national security affairs to then-Vice President Richard M. Nixon.

Following promotion to general officer rank and a tour with the 3d Marine Division on Okinawa as assistant division and then division commander, General Cushman returned to Washington in 1962 where he filled the positions of assistant chief of staff for intelligence and then for operations at Headquarters, Marine Corps. In 1964, he became commander of Marine Corps Base, Camp Pendleton, California, where in June 1966 he formed the 5th Marine Division to meet the increasing manpower demands caused by the Vietnam War. Arriving in Vietnam in April 1967 as Deputy Commander, III MAF, General Cushman on 1 June 1967 relieved Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt

Army Gen William C. Westmoreland, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, visits a Marine battalion command post south of Da Nang. Gen Westmoreland is the senior U.S. military commander in South Vietnam.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371378



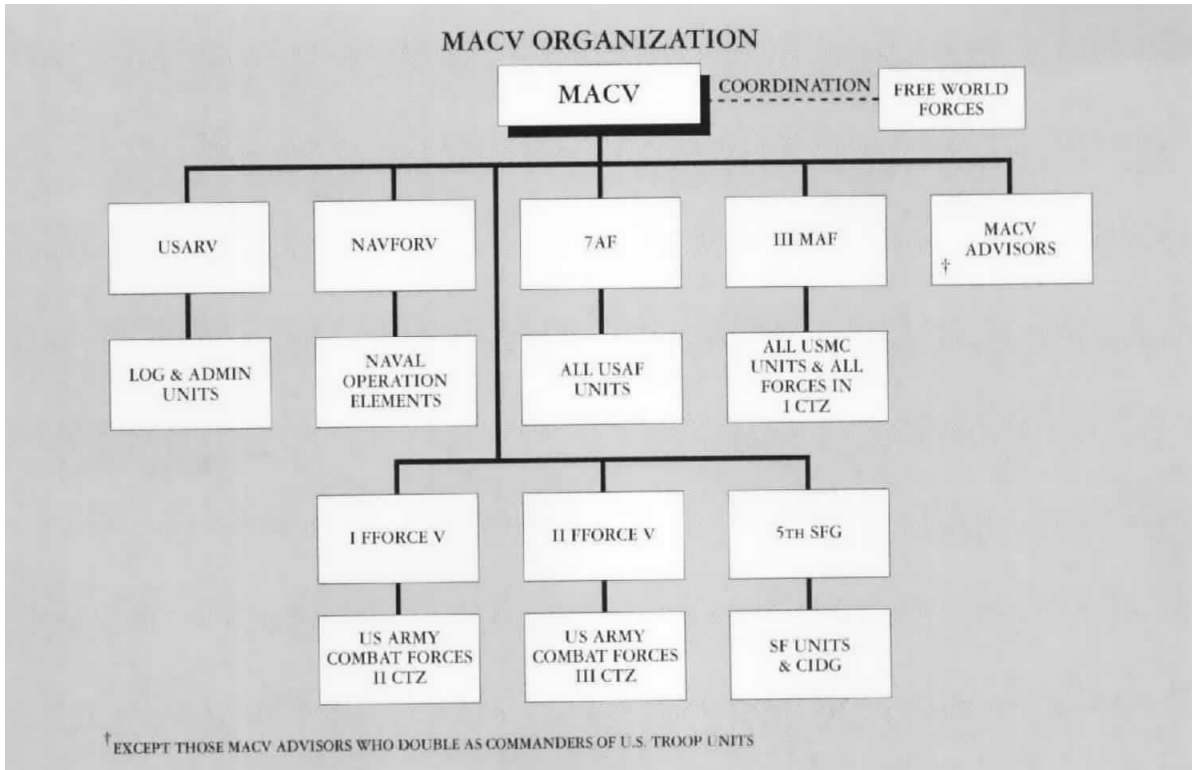
as commanding general. Cushman's diverse experience would serve him in good stead to face the complications of command in Vietnam.³

MACV and Command Arrangements

As the war expanded, command arrangements, like the U.S. commitment, evolved over time without a master plan. Having originated in January 1962 as a small advisory organization, the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), in January 1968 totaled nearly 500,000 and, by that time, had taken over from the South Vietnamese much of the large-unit war. Army General William C. Westmoreland, who became Commander, USMACV, in June 1964, had presided over the buildup and commitment of U.S. troops to battle. A ramrod-straight West Pointer, and, indeed, former Superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy, Westmoreland had full responsibility for the conduct of the war in the south and for all U.S. forces based there. He, however, exercised this authority through the U.S. chain of command reaching back to Washington. MACV, itself, was a unified command directly subordinate to the U.S. Pacific Command in Honolulu, Hawaii. The Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CinCPac), Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, gave Westmoreland a relatively free hand over ground and air operations in the south, but retained personal direction of the air campaign over most of North Vietnam.^{4*}

The control of U.S. air activity and forces in Southeast Asia was a complicated affair. While General Westmoreland directed the bombing in Route Package 1, the southern sector of North Vietnam above the DMZ, he shared authority with the U.S. Ambassador to Laos for the "Steel Tiger/Tiger Hound" air operations over that country. The Seventh Air Force provided air support for MACV from airfields both in the Republic of Vietnam and from Thailand. The 46,000 Seventh Air Force personnel in South Vietnam came under the operational control of General Westmoreland, while the Thailand units were under U.S. Air Forces, Pacific, which in turn reported to Admiral Sharp. General William W. "Spike" Momyer, the Commanding General, Seventh Air Force, was also the MACV Deputy Commander for Air and had overall responsibility for the air defense of South Vietnam and

*U.S. Air Force Historian Wayne Thompson observed that "Washington often dealt directly with Westmoreland and cut out Sharp." Dr. Wayne Thompson, Air Force History Support Office, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 23Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File)



air support for Army and allied forces. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, however, remained directly under III MAF and flew close air support for Marine and allied units in I Corps.⁵

In South Vietnam, General Westmoreland controlled his tactical ground forces through three regional commands, roughly corresponding with the corps areas of the Republic of Vietnam. III MAF was in the north in I Corps; the U.S. Army's I Field Force, Vietnam, was in II Corps, consisting of the central highlands and central coastal provinces of South Vietnam; and the Army's II Field Force, Vietnam, operated both in III Corps, centered around the capital city of Saigon, and IV Corps, which included the populous Mekong Delta. All told, MACV ground combat forces, including Marines and "Free World" troops from Korea, Australia, and Thailand consisted of 11 divisions and 14 separate brigades and task forces adding up to 118 maneuver battalions counting both infantry and tank units. Some 60 Army artillery battalions, two heavily reinforced Marine artillery regiments, a 500-man New Zealand artillery battalion, 11 Marine helicopter squadrons, and 96 Army aviation companies supported these maneuver units.⁶

The Navy and the Army divided the logistic support for U.S. and allied troops in Vietnam. General

Westmoreland retained direct command of the Army component, the U.S. Army, Vietnam, and had operational control of the naval, U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam. The latter, through its 22,000-man Naval Support Activity, Da Nang, which included the 3d Naval Construction Brigade, furnished heavy engineering and common item supplies for all U.S. and Korean forces in I Corps. U.S. Army, Vietnam, through its subordinate engineer and logistic commands, had the responsibility for the remaining corps areas. Looking back several years later, General Westmoreland observed that by the "beginning of '68 we had our logistic structure finished: ports and airfields were basically completed"⁷

The various U.S. service components in South Vietnam complicated and occasionally blurred the command arrangements within MACV. For example, under the operational control of MACV, General Cushman also reported directly through Marine channels to the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, Lieutenant General Victor H. "Brute" Krulak. Krulak retained administrative command and overall responsibility for the readiness, training, and logistic support of all Marine forces in the Pacific. Although not in the operational chain of command, General Krulak was not one to deny General

Cushman the benefit of his advice.* The other service components also had divisions of authority. General Momyer's Seventh Air Force reported not only administratively to U.S. Air Forces, Pacific, but operationally to that command for the "Rolling Thunder" air campaign over North Vietnam. Moreover, the question of control of Marine fixed-wing air remained a matter of contention between Generals Momyer and Cushman, with General Westmoreland often acting as mediator.⁸

Rear Admiral Kenneth L. Veth, Commander, U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam, also had multiple responsibilities and mixed channels of command. While under the operational control of MACV, he reported administratively through the Seventh Fleet chain of command to the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Fleet. In addition to his logistic responsibilities, Admiral Veth directed the coastal and maritime anti-infiltration campaign and was the overall commander of the Navy's segment of the Mobile Riverine Force operating with an Army brigade in the Mekong Delta. In this divided jurisdiction, both the senior Army commander and Admiral Veth permitted the flotilla and brigade commanders flexibility in making local command arrangements.⁹

Obfuscating the command lines even further were MACV relations with external U.S. commands, the U.S. Embassy in South Vietnam, and the South Vietnamese themselves. For naval gunfire support and use of the Marine Special Landing Forces on board the ships of the Navy Amphibious Ready Groups, General Westmoreland had to coordinate with the Seventh Fleet through CinCPac channels. In addition to the amphibious forces, MACV also coordinated through the same Navy channels the carrier aircraft of Seventh Fleet Task Force 77 to supplement the Seventh Air Force and Marine air support of ground forces in South Vietnam. Another chain of command existed with the

Strategic Air Command in order to process requests for the use of Boeing B-52 Stratofortresses in bombing missions over the south.¹⁰

General Westmoreland had a unique relationship with the U.S. Embassy. In April of 1967 he had taken over from the Embassy responsibility for the U.S. pacification assistance program. The newly created Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) agency became part of MACV and its head, the outspoken former presidential advisor, Robert J. Komer, served as Deputy ComUSMACV for CORDS under Westmoreland. Yet the MACV commander shared overall policy formulation in South Vietnam with the U.S. Ambassador, Ellsworth Bunker, a distinguished career diplomat. Ambassador Bunker chaired and General Westmoreland was a member of the Mission Council, the central U.S. policy and coordinating body within the country. Westmoreland and the Ambassador worked in harmony. The MACV commander later wrote: "My military colleagues and I gained a staunch supporter in Ellsworth Bunker. Although his military experience was limited to artillery ROTC at Yale University 50 years before, he understood the application of power."^{11**}

The U.S. relationship with the South Vietnamese military was a delicate one. General Westmoreland did not have command of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces and, indeed, rejected the idea of a combined U.S./RVN command headquarters. He believed it important that the South Vietnamese knew "that I recognized that they were running their own country, that I was no pro-consul or high commissioner."¹² In his opinion, his role as senior U.S. advisor to the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff gave him "defacto control over the scope of operations."¹³ The watchwords were close consultation and coordination. As one historian observed, the command arrangements for the Vietnam War "were not the best they could have been, but they did work."¹⁴

*The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., in Washington also had his perceptions on the conduct of the war. In his comments on the draft of this chapter, General Greene wrote that he was in daily communication with General Krulak in Hawaii. The latter "kept me fully informed and enabled me to efficiently do business with the Joint Chiefs . . . and with the White House and other echelons." According to Greene, he did not believe the other Chiefs were kept "fully informed by Gen Westmoreland" and that he [Greene] personally "briefed the Vice President regularly—once a week—privately at the White House—at his request—since he was not kept properly informed by the Pres[ident] or the White House staff!" General Greene believed that General Westmoreland "objected to my liaison with General Krulak," but never made an issue of the matter. Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Comments on draft Ms, dtd 11Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Greene Comments, 1994.

**Army historian Graham A. Cosmas observed that the CORDS relationship with MACV was more complex than it appeared on chain of command charts: "The CORDS organization was a part of the MACV staff, although in practice it functioned with a high degree of autonomy." Cosmas also noted that when MACV was established in 1962, the State Department and Department of Defense "informally agreed that on policy matters the Ambassador in SVN was '*primus inter pares*' [first among equals], and this remained the case in 1968. Bunker was head of the US country team, and ComUSMACV while as a field commander nominally independent of him, in practice deferred to Bunker on political and policy matters." Dr. Graham A. Cosmas, CMH, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 23Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

South Vietnam and I Corps

Beginning with the French-Viet Minh struggle following World War II, Vietnam had been at war for more than 20 years except for a brief respite during the mid-1950s. After the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva Accords in 1954 resulted in the breakup of what had been French Indochina and divided Vietnam at the 17th Parallel. The Viet Minh leader, Ho Chi Minh, established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under the rule of the Communist Lao Dong Party in the north. South of the 17th Parallel, Ngo Dinh Diem, a strong anti-Communist Vietnamese nationalist, became the first president of the Republic of Vietnam, displacing Bao Dai, the former Vietnamese Emperor under the French.

Through the 1950s and into 1960, Diem consolidated his power in the south against what many considered insurmountable odds. He defeated various sectarian armies, suppressed his political enemies, and created a seemingly viable government. Assisted initially by French and American military advisory groups, Diem strengthened his armed forces to meet any armed thrust from the north. South Vietnam appeared to represent a force for stability against what American policy makers perceived as a Communist drive for domination of Southeast Asia.

These relatively halcyon days were soon over. By the early 1960s, Diem and his regime were under heavy pressure in both the political and military arenas. Frustrated by Diem's refusal to hold joint elections as called for by the Geneva Accords that would have unified the two Vietnams, the North Vietnamese began as early as 1959 the sub-rosa campaign to bring down the southern government. By 1961, the South Vietnamese were fully engaged in counter-guerrilla operations against the Viet Cong (VC), a deprecatory name given to the southern Communists. With the introduction of U.S. helicopter units and the expansion of the American advisory effort in 1962, the South Vietnamese started to make measurable gains against the Communist forces. Surviving an aborted coup by a group of "Young Turk" officers in 1960, Diem progressively alienated important segments of South Vietnamese society. In 1963, South Vietnamese Buddhists, led by their clergy, took to the streets in increasingly violent demonstrations against restrictive measures of the Catholic-dominated Diem government. By November, the South Vietnamese military, with American knowledge if not consent, threw over



Photo courtesy of Col Edwin S. Schick, USMC (Ret)
South Vietnamese Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, wearing his aviator's scarf, is seen greeting Marine officers on a visit to I Corps. President Nguyen Van Thieu, a South Vietnamese Army general, eventually overshadowed the more flamboyant Ky in the inner circles of the Vietnamese military who ran the nation.

Diem. South Vietnamese officers killed the deposed president the day after the coup.

The period after the death of Diem was one of turmoil and disintegration. Military leaders and politicians jockeyed for position with one leader emerging and then another. Simultaneously, the Communists reinforced their forces in the south with regular units from the north. The war was going badly and South Vietnam appeared ripe for the plucking.

It was not until 1965 that the situation stabilized. The infusion of U.S. troops staved off defeat at the hands of the North Vietnamese. In June, the South Vietnamese military ended the political chaos by assuming full control of the reins of government. A military council, headed by Army General Nguyen Van Thieu and Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, directed South Vietnamese affairs for the next few years.

By the end of 1967, the South Vietnamese government had established a constitutional claim to legitimacy. Overcoming renewed Buddhist agitation in the spring of 1966, the ruling military council held elections for a constitutional convention in September 1966. Following the promulgation of the new constitution, the South Vietnamese, in September 1967, elected Thieu and Ky, heading a military slate of candidates, as President and Vice-President respectively of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).¹⁵

The South Vietnamese military establishment was still the dominant factor in South Vietnam. By January 1968, government decrees, although not yet imple-

mented, called for partial mobilization, reduction of student deferments, and increased draft calls. The Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (RVNAF) totaled more than 620,000 men. These included a small Air Force of 15,000 men, a Navy of nearly 18,000, an even smaller Marine Corps of 8,000, nearly 300,000 in the Army, and another 291,000 in the local militia, the Regional and Popular Forces (RFs and PFs). Nominally, all of the service military commanders reported directly to the Chief of the Joint General Staff, General Cao Van Vien, who also commanded the Army. In fact, however, the actual control of the military remained with the coalition of senior generals centered around President Thieu who formed the military council that had run the country since 1965.¹⁶

Deployed and recruited generally along regional lines, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) consisted of 10 infantry divisions, two separate regiments, an airborne division, armor and ranger commands, a Special Forces group, and supporting elements. If desertion rates were indicative of efficiency and morale, the ARVN had made vast strides in 1967 with almost a 30 percent reduction from the previous year. Part of this dramatic improvement, however, probably reflected that American forces had largely taken over the large-unit war while the ARVN concentrated on pacification. With the exception of the Marines and airborne, who made up the South Vietnamese general reserve, the ARVN units normally confined themselves to operations in their assigned corps tactical zones.¹⁷

The corps tactical zones of South Vietnam were more than military subdivisions; they were also regional and political entities. None loomed larger in importance than the northernmost corps area, ICTZ. With its military value enhanced by geographic, economic, and cultural considerations, as well as the significant buildup of enemy forces in the DMZ and Khe Sanh sectors, I Corps had become the focus of the war. In fact one Marine commander, Lieutenant General Krulak, maintained: "... the bulk of the war is in the I Corps Tactical Zone."¹⁸

If the map of Vietnam resembles the traditional peasant carrying pole with a rice basket on either end, the Red River Delta in the north and the Mekong in the south, I Corps lay about in the upper middle of the shaft. With a total of 10,800 square miles and less than 3,000,000 of the 16,500,000 inhabitants of South Vietnam, I Corps was the second smallest of the Corps tactical zones in area and the smallest in population. Although no wider than 75 miles at any one point and

35 miles at its narrowest, I Corps contained three distinct regions: the rugged Annamite chain in the west with some peaks over 6,000 feet, a piedmont area of densely vegetated hills interlaced by river valleys, and the coastal lowlands. The central southern coastal lowlands below Da Nang consist of some of the richest farm lands and densest concentration of population in all of Vietnam. Influenced by the northeast or winter monsoon (lasting from October to February), the weather in this sector, one of the wettest in all of South Vietnam, permits two annual growing seasons. The two major cities in I Corps, Hue, the old imperial Vietnamese capital and major agricultural market center, and Da Nang, an important seaport, added to the economic worth of the region. Despite its limited size, ICTZ was indeed a valuable prize.¹⁹

Part of what had been Annam in Indochina, I Corps had a distinctive regional cast. With their cultural center at Hue, the Annamites traditionally looked down upon both the Tonkinese from the north and the southerners from Saigon and the Mekong Delta. The Buddhist agitation against Diem had begun in I Corps and, in 1966, the Buddhist "revolt" against the central government again broke out in Da Nang and Hue after the removal of the popular I Corps commander, General Nguyen Chanh Thi. After the suppression of the 1966 "Struggle Movement," I Corps was politically quiescent. Thi's eventual successor, General Hoang Xuan Lam, having neither the ambition nor the charisma of his predecessor, exercised his power cautiously.²⁰

As in the rest of South Vietnam, the political and civilian apparatus in I Corps were intertwined, but distinct from one another. General Lam, as I Corps commander, appointed the five province chiefs, usually military officers, who in turn selected the district chiefs, again usually military officers. The province and district chiefs administered their respective domains and also controlled the local militia, the Regional and Popular Forces. Regional Forces operated under the province chief while Popular Forces usually confined their activities to a particular district. Under another chain of command, General Lam had control of the regular military forces in I Corps. These consisted of two divisions, the 1st and 2d; an independent regiment, the 51st; and two airborne battalions from the general reserve; totaling some 34,000 troops. Including the Regional and Popular forces, the South Vietnamese mustered some 80,000 men under arms in I Corps Tactical Zone.²¹

Vulnerable to direct attack and infiltration through the DMZ from North Vietnam to the north and from



Abel Collection Photo

South Vietnamese LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam, Commanding General of I Corps, center, is shown in conversation with U.S. Marine Corps Commandant Gen Leonard F. Chapman, left, and the III MAF commander, LtGen Robert E. Cushman, outside of the I Corps Headquarters located in Da Nang.

Laos to the west, I Corps, by January 1968, resembled an armed camp with a quarter of a million U.S., South Vietnamese, and allied troops deployed within its borders. The 3d Marine Division and 1st ARVN Division were responsible for the northern two provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien. Similarly, the U.S. Army's Americal Division and the ARVN 2d Division operated in the two southern provinces of Quang Tin and Quang Ngai. The 1st Marine Division and the 51st ARVN Regiment provided the protection for the central province of Quang Nam which contained I Corps headquarters at Da Nang, the Da Nang Airbase, the Quang Da Special Sector, and more than 35 percent of the I Corps population.²²

The relationship between the American and South Vietnamese commands in I Corps paralleled the arrangement at the national level. As Senior Advisor, General Cushman had a direct channel to General Lam. The Marine general later related that he had a rapport with General Lam, whom he considered an excellent administrative and political leader and "a good general considering his resources. . ." but no "Julius Caesar or . . . Napoleon."²³ As with General Westmoreland and General Vien, the emphasis was on advice and close coordination. To facilitate this coordination, each of the American and South Vietnamese units had its specific tactical area of responsibility, where its commander had a relatively free rein. Moreover, in accordance with the combined 1967 plan

worked out by the MACV and Republic of Vietnam Joint General Staff, the Vietnamese units were taking an increased proportion of the pacification and revolutionary development mission. Still the ARVN and American units had to operate together. The following excerpt from a 3d Marine Division report exemplifies the working relations between the American and South Vietnamese units in general, and the 3d Marine Division and 1st ARVN Division in particular:

The basic concept underlying command relations between the division and RVNAF has been one of cooperation and coordination in the conduct of operations. . . . As a matter of practice, decisions regarding multi-battalion combined Marine/ARVN operations are made by personal liaison between CG 3d Marine Division and CG 1st ARVN Division.

After the two commanders approved a basic concept of operation:

the required staff liaison is accomplished and plans are finalized. When practicable, co-located command posts are established to facilitate coordination, cooperation, mutual assistance, and decision making.

The report concluded:

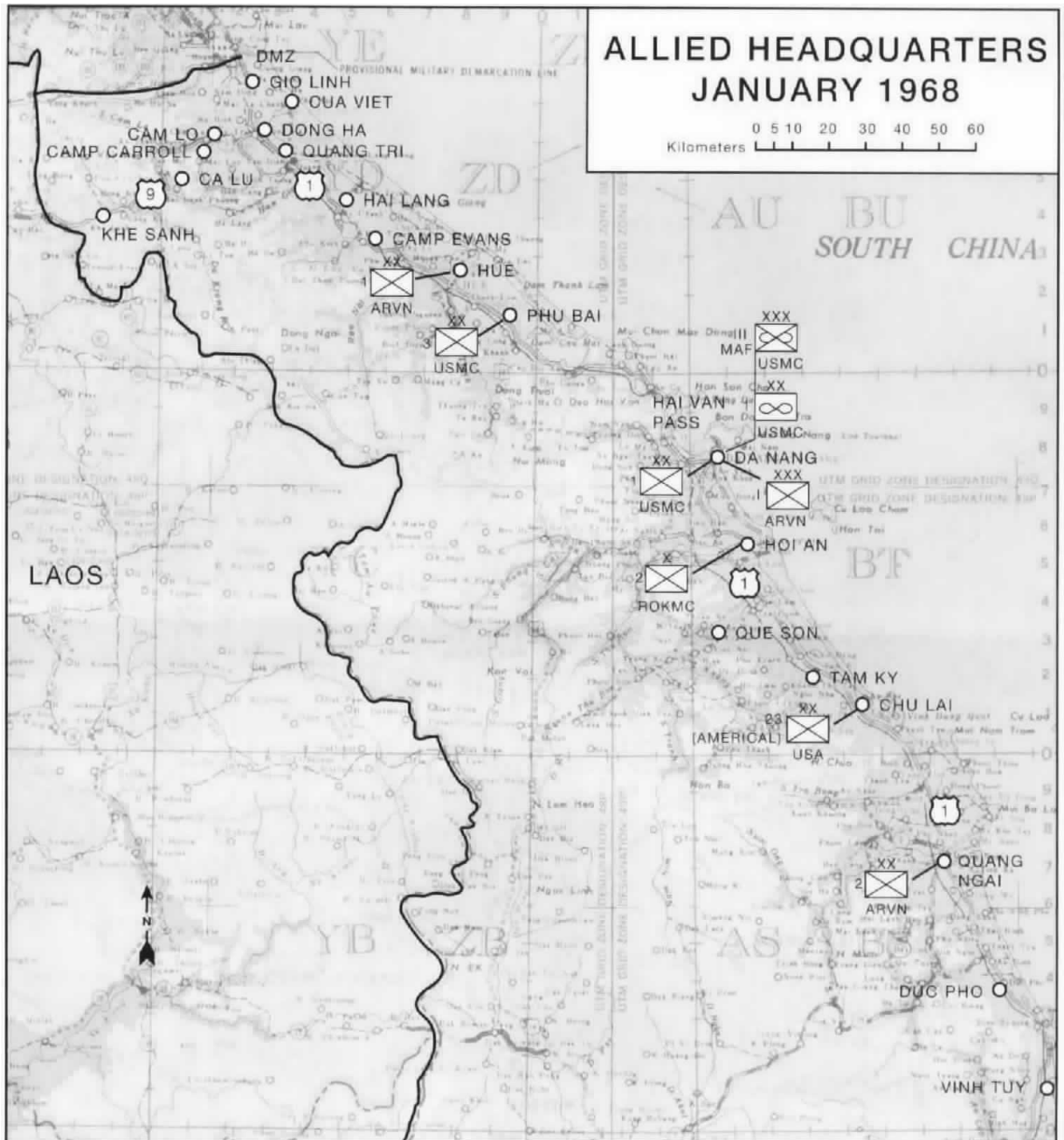
The 1st ARVN Division is an aggressive, well-led fighting force. Its commander is responsive to the desirability of combined/coordinated operations and invariably produces required forces. Numerous operations have instilled a sense of mutual respect and confidence between 1st ARVN Division and Marine personnel.²⁴

These command procedures worked with the elite 1st ARVN Division, but less so with the average ARVN unit.

The Enemy

From a Western perspective, the Communist command and control apparatus appeared complex and murky, yet there was no doubt about who was in charge. From the beginning of the Viet Cong insur-

gency, the North Vietnamese directed the war. According to recent revelations by North Vietnamese leaders, the 15th Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party in 1959 decided on a determined policy to overthrow by force the government of South Vietnam. In July of that year, men and material began to flow over the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" through Laos and Cambodia into the south. The "Second Indochina War" had started.²⁵



The North Vietnamese masked their direct control through a web of cover organizations. In 1960, the Communists announced the formation of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF), a so-called coalition of "democratic forces" to lead the struggle against the South Vietnamese government and give the appearance of a popular uprising. Even within the Communist apparatus in the south, the North Vietnamese went to extraordinary lengths to conceal their participation. In late 1961, the Communists changed the name of their party in the south from the Lao Dong (Worker's Party) to the People's Revolutionary Party. Shortly afterward, they created the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) to coordinate both the political and military aspects of the war in the south. Under COSVN, a myriad of interlocking regional, provincial, and district committees tightly controlled the Viet Cong political infrastructure and military forces down to the hamlet and village level. Yet, COSVN, itself, reported directly to the Politburo of the Lao Dong Party of North Vietnam through the Reunification Department with its headquarters in Hanoi.²⁶

The extent of North Vietnamese involvement and control of the war was more obvious in northern South Vietnam than elsewhere. Very early, the Communists separated the two northern provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien from their *Military Region (MR) V*, which roughly corresponded to I and II Corps. *MR Tri-Thien-Hue*, as the new region was named, came directly under the North Vietnamese high command rather than COSVN. All told, "three ill-defined military headquarters" in what had been part of *MR V* reported directly through North Vietnamese channels. In addition to *Tri-Thien-Hue*, there were the *B-3 Front*, which controlled military operations in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, and the *DMZ Front*, which apparently had command of all units in the DMZ sector and at Khe Sanh. Despite denials and elaborate attempts by the North Vietnamese to cover troop movements through constantly changing unit designations, American intelligence in 1967 identified seven North Vietnamese Army divisions within South Vietnam, five of these divisions in I and II Corps.²⁷

By the end of the year MACV held in its order of battle of enemy forces some 216,000 troops. These included some 51,000 North Vietnamese regulars, 60,000 Viet Cong main and local forces, and about 70,000 full-time guerrillas. About 35,000 administrative troops rounded out the total. The MACV esti-

mate, however, omitted certain categories such as VC "self-defense" forces and other irregulars and some 70,000 political cadre. Although extensive disagreement existed within the U.S. intelligence community over these exclusions and the total strength of the enemy, the numbers of regulars and full-time guerrillas were largely accepted.²⁸ As General Westmoreland later explained: "Intelligence is at best an imprecise science: it is not like counting beans; it is more like estimating cockroaches. . . ."²⁹ More open to question was the MACV claim that the total enemy strength had diminished.^{30*}

From an American perspective, the Communists had suffered only defeats since the U.S. intervention in the war in 1965. American units in extensive operations ranging the length and breath of South Vietnam had taken a large toll of enemy forces. The allies turned back with heavy Communist losses every thrust the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) made from the Ia Drang Valley in the Central Highlands during 1965 to the hills around Khe Sanh in the spring of 1967. For the year 1967 alone, MACV estimated the number of enemy killed in battle as more than 88,000.³¹

The Communist view of the situation remains obscure. In late summer 1967, the North Vietnamese Defense Minister and architect of the Dien Bien Phu victory, General Vo Nguyen Giap, wrote: ". . . the situation has never been as favorable as it is now. The armed forces and people have stood up to fight the enemy and are achieving one great victory after another."³² Yet, apparently there was divided opinion among the North Vietnamese leadership as to the best course of action. There were the advocates of a reversion to guerrilla warfare and a protracted war while others argued in favor of taking the offensive against the allies and especially the Americans on all fronts. Because of the extraordinary secretiveness and paranoia within the higher reaches of both the Lao Dong Party and the North Vietnamese government, neither the extent of these differences nor even the makeup of the opposing factions was obvious. Much of the speculation centered around Giap whom various authorities identified with one or the other of the cliques or with neither. What is known is that in June 1967 the politburo of the party met to assess the sit-

* Commenting on the MACV perception of the Communist forces, General Krulak, the former FMFPac commander, recently wrote: "our strategic intelligence was uniformly poor." LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 31Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).

uation and to resolve the issues. At this meeting in which Giap apparently played a large role, the party called for "a decisive blow" to "force the U.S. to accept military defeat."³³

Within a few months, the Communist forces launched the first phase of their 1967–68 Winter-Spring Campaign. In a reverse of their usual tactics, the North Vietnamese mounted mass assaults lasting over a period of several days instead of attempting to disengage quickly. During September and early October, the Marine outpost at Con Thien in the eastern DMZ sector came under both infantry attack and artillery bombardment. Firing from positions north of the 17th Parallel, enemy gunners employed artillery pieces up to 152 millimeters. Repulsed at Con Thien, the North Vietnamese then tried to overrun the district capital of Loc Ninh near the Cambodian border in Binh Long Province north of Saigon along Route 13.

Again forced to pull back after several days of fighting and suffering extensive losses, the enemy then struck in the Central Highlands at Dak To near the junction of the Cambodian, Laotian, and South Vietnamese borders. After 22 days of bloody combat in November, the North Vietnamese forces withdrew after once more taking staggering casualties.³⁴

By the end of December, 1967, the enemy appeared to be ready to make a fresh assault in northwestern South Vietnam at Khe Sanh. Following a period of relative calm since the battles earlier that spring near this isolated Marine base, American intelligence picked up reports of North Vietnamese troop movements in the sector. Although experiencing only limited combat activity at Khe Sanh in December, one Marine company commander declared that he could "smell" the enemy out there.³⁵

To MACV, the North Vietnamese strategy appeared clear. It was an attempt to draw the allied forces into remote areas where the enemy had the advantage and then move to a "mobile War of Decision."³⁶ To Lieutenant General Krulak at FMFPac, the enemy's intent was also apparent. Quoting General Giap, he later wrote: "The primary emphasis [is] to draw American units into remote areas and thereby facilitate control of the population of the lowlands." According to Krulak, the people were the final objective.³⁷

Focus on the North

The increasing pressure by the North Vietnamese Army in late 1967 continued the pattern

of large-unit operations in the border regions of South Vietnam that had characterized the war, especially in the north, since 1966. With the first incursion of enemy regulars in the summer of that year, III MAF shifted forces north. Forced to fill the gap left in southern I Corps, MACV in April 1967 reinforced the Marines in I Corps with the Army's Task Force Oregon, which later became the Americal Division. After this northward deployment, the DMZ sector and Khe Sanh became the focus of allied concern.³⁸

Given the emphasis on the northern battlefield, the Marines at the direction of General Westmoreland in April 1967 began the erection of the strong point obstacle system (SPOS) along the DMZ to prevent North Vietnamese infiltration. Dubbed the "McNamara Line," after the U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, this so-called "barrier" was to consist of three parts: (1) a linear-manned obstacle system in the eastern DMZ sector extending some 34 kilometers to the sea and consisting of barbed wire, a 600-meter-wide cleared trace, minefields, and electronic and acoustic sensors; (2) a series of strong points to the Laotian border built along obvious avenues of approach from the north with Khe Sanh as the western anchor; and (3) in Laos, the seeding of suspected infiltration routes with sensors monitored and supported by aircraft. Strong enemy opposition and shortages of men and material slowed the progress of the SPOS. By mid-September the 3d Marine Division had only completed the clearing of the trace from Con Thien to Gio Linh, a distance of 13 kilometers. Faced with mounting casualties, General Westmoreland approved a modification to his original plans. In essence, the division was to halt all construction of the trace until "after the tactical situation had stabilized," and continue only with the work on the strong points and base areas. By the end of 1967, the Marines had completed work on the four strong points and all but two of the base areas. In the western sector of the barrier, only the base at Khe Sanh existed.³⁹

With the 3d Marine Division tied down in fixed positions along the eastern DMZ and at Khe Sanh, manpower considerations became an overriding concern for both III MAF and MACV. Earlier in the year, during the spring, General Westmoreland had requested an increase in his authorized strength. Asking for a minimum of 80,000 more men (his optimum figure being nearly 200,000), he planned to reinforce the Marines in I Corps with at least two

Army divisions. Fearful that these new numbers would necessitate a call-up of the Reserves, Washington in the summer of 1967 cut Westmoreland's request nearly in half and established a new authorized force ceiling of 525,000 men for July 1968. This represented an increase of less than 46,000 personnel. MACV was hard pressed to reinforce I Corps at all.^{40*}

As the war intensified throughout Vietnam in late 1967 General Westmoreland persuaded President Lyndon B. Johnson to establish earlier arrival dates for units already scheduled to deploy to Vietnam. The deployment of the 101st Airborne Division and the 11th Infantry Brigade in December provided General Westmoreland some room for maneuver. Keeping the 101st and the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) as a general country-wide reserve, he attached the 11th Brigade to the Americal Division in southern I Corps. III MAF began to shuffle its units north to reinforce both Khe Sanh and the DMZ sectors.⁴¹

MACV Vis-à-Vis Marine

While reinforcing the Marines in I Corps with Army units and concentrating his forces in the north, General Westmoreland had growing doubts about the ability of the Marine command to handle the developing situation. Since 1965, senior Marine generals conducted a "sotto voce" debate with MACV over the direction of the American combat effort. Both Generals Krulak and Greene criticized the MACV emphasis upon the large-unit major war, which they believed failed to provide for population security and, moreover, involved the U.S. in a war of attrition, which in their opinion, favored the Communists. They voiced their concerns directly to General Westmoreland and through the command channels open to them.

* The question of the total number of American troops required to wage the war in South Vietnam was a continually sensitive issue in Washington, especially since larger numbers probably involved the call-up of Reserve units. General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., the Marine Corps Commandant, recalled that sometime in the late 1965 or early 1966 time-frame he advocated "that a major increase be made in the number of U.S. troops" in South Vietnam. According to an estimate that his staff made at the time, it would take approximately 595,000 American troops five years to conclude a successful end to the war. According to the analysis, "the number of men of military age becoming available each year" in North Vietnam as contrasted to the Communist casualty rate would permit the North Vietnamese "to continue the war indefinitely" at the then-level of American troop commitment. Greene Comments, 1994. For further discussion of manpower constraints upon Marine forces see Chapter 27.

Although differing in minor details, the two Marine generals in essence advocated increased pressure upon North Vietnam and basically an "ink blot" strategy in South Vietnam. Both Marine generals recommended in the north the targeting of air strikes against North Vietnamese heavy production facilities and transportation hubs and a blockade of the North Vietnamese major ports including Haiphong. Greene and Krulak emphasized for the south a combined U.S.-South Vietnamese campaign in targeted areas to eradicate the Communist infrastructure in the countryside and replace it with one loyal to the South Vietnamese government. This pacification campaign would consist of a centralized combined allied command structure employing military action together with civic action, and the enhancement of the local South Vietnamese militia forces and government structure. The concept was that initial success would provide the momentum, much as a spreading inkblot, for the linking together of the pacified sectors. While not neglecting the enemy's main forces, both viewed this war as secondary. As General Krulak stated: "The real war is among the people" and not in the hinterlands. He would engage the Communist regulars for the most part only "when a clear opportunity exists to engage the VC Main Force or North Vietnamese units on terms favorable to ourselves."⁴²

While the two Marine generals received a hearing of their views, they enjoyed little success in influencing the MACV strategy or overall U.S. policy toward North Vietnam. According to General Greene, the Joint Chiefs were interested in his proposal for a coastal pacification campaign but "Westmoreland wasn't and being CG MACV his views of the 'big picture,' the 'broad arrow' prevailed." In November 1965, General Krulak wrote directly to Secretary McNamara, whom he knew from his days as special assistant for counterinsurgency to the Joint Chiefs during the Kennedy administration, hinting at some divergence between the Marine "saturation formula" and the Army "maneuver formula." While allowing that both techniques were sound and maneuver had its place in the sparsely inhabited highlands, he pointedly observed that in the heavily populated area south of Da Nang you "cannot shoot everything that moves." He then continued: "We have to separate the enemy from the people." According to the Marine general, the Defense Secretary told him that the "ink blot" theory was "a good idea but too slow." Both Generals Greene and Krulak would continue to offer

their counter-view to the MACV perspective, but with little effect either in Washington or Saigon.⁴³

In Vietnam, from the very inception of its responsibility for I Corps, III MAF, the Marine command, first under General Walt and then by General Cushman, had placed a great deal of emphasis on the small-unit war in the villages. The Marines had developed several new pacification programs to win over the people in the hamlets to the government cause. These included: a vigorous civic action effort to meet the needs of the local villagers, cordon and search "County Fair" operations with psychological warfare overtones in the hamlets, coordination of pacification through the I Corps Joint Coordinating Council (ICJCC), and perhaps most significant, the Combined Action Program. This latter program involved the assignment of a squad of Marines to a Vietnamese Popular Forces platoon. The premise was that this integration of the Vietnamese militia with the Marines would create a bond of understanding and mutual interest with the local populace. The Marines maintained that with the villagers on their side, they could, as General Cushman stated, "break the connection between the guerrillas and the infrastructure, and the enemy main forces . . ."⁴⁴

Despite the III MAF efforts, General Westmoreland and his staff continued to perceive the principal mission of the U.S. troops to be the defeat of the enemy main forces. The U.S.-South Vietnamese 1967 Combined Plan basically reflected the MACV concept: the South Vietnamese now had responsibility for pacification while the U.S. forces were to conduct the large-unit war. General Krulak, the FMF-Pac commander, expressed the Marine displeasure in July 1967, declaring: "We have seen what we sincerely believe to be a maldeployment of forces, a misapplication of power . . ."⁴⁵ Years later the Marine general wrote that these differences between the Marines and Westmoreland over pacification went "to the heart of the war."⁴⁶

Despite their differences, the dispute between the Marines and MACV never came to a head. Although the 1967 Combined Plan called for the Americans to take over most of the war against the enemy's conventional forces, there was "no clear-cut division of responsibility" with the ARVN in this area or in pacification.⁴⁷ Moreover, III MAF still operated under its 6 March 1966 Letter of Instruction which gave the Marine command a broad all-inclusive mission to carry out operations "in support

of and in coordination with CG I ARVN Corps and in other areas of RVN as directed by ComUSMACV in order to defeat the VC/NVA and extend GVN control over all of South Vietnam."⁴⁸ Rather than directly challenge the authority of the Marine commanders, General Westmoreland preferred to issue "orders for specific projects that as time passed would gradually get the Marines out of their beachheads."⁴⁹ While continuing the "discussion" with MACV over pacification, General Cushman also wanted no controversies. He remembered, "I soon figured out how Westy [General Westmoreland] liked to operate and tried to operate the same way, and get on with the war and not cause a lot of friction for no good reason."⁵⁰

In spite of the efforts of both Westmoreland and Cushman to keep relations on an even keel, substantive differences continued to exist, and not only over pacification. The "McNamara Line" was a constant irritant. General Cushman recalled that he:

really got in a fit with some of the engineer colonels that would come roaring up from Saigon to see how the fence was doing and . . . I'd say "Well it's doing fine, go up and take a look," which they did. Always had a few people around, but we just weren't going out getting everybody killed building that stupid fence.⁵¹

In what appeared to be an inconsistency, MACV, on the one hand, criticized III MAF for lack of mobile operations in the rest of I Corps, while, on the other, placed a Marine division in fixed positions along the DMZ and at Khe Sanh. Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, the soft-spoken but blunt commander of the 3d Marine Division, voiced the opinion of most Marines when he later called the entire barrier effort "absurd." He pointed out that the original design was to stop infiltration, but by the time actual construction began, the North Vietnamese were in strength in the DMZ "supported by first class artillery." Tompkins caustically observed, "it was perfectly obvious that if there would be an incursion, it would be by NVA divisions and not by sneaky-peekies coming through at night."⁵²

Unhappy about the Marine defensive measures in northern I Corps, General Westmoreland believed that General Cushman and his staff "were unduly complacent."⁵³ Westmoreland may have had some justification about the Marine defenses. Major General Raymond L. Murray, Cushman's deputy and a highly decorated veteran of both World War II and Korea, remarked that the Marines were an offensive organization, and "often

we don't do well in organizing defenses." Murray commented that "in many units, the concept of a defensive position seemed to be a big long trench and just put a bunch of Marines there and shoot at any thing that came along rather than truly organizing the defense in some depth."^{54*}

Logistics was another area where the Marines and MACV had their problems. The Marine experience with the M16 rifle was a case in point. In December 1967, Marine inspectors found 75 percent of 8,413 rifles in the 3d Marine Division with pitted chambers, which could result in misfirings. Marine logisticians planned an extensive replacement of these M16s with ones equipped with chromed chambers. Another logistic complicating factor was the temporary closing in December of the two LST ports in the north, Tan My in Thua Thien Province and Dong Ha in Quang Tri Province, because of bad weather and silting in the shipping channels. If MACV was to reinforce the Marines with further Army units, General Westmoreland had obvious reasons for concern. Still, the Marines believed that MACV put undue logistic burdens upon them. At the end of the year, III MAF and FMFPac protested a MACV requirement for a reduction in the level of stockpiled supplies. General Murray called such peacetime accounting economies in Vietnam part of a "balance sheet war." Although acknowledging that these procedures "may have saved on waste," Murray maintained they also "took an awful lot of time and effort that a military man felt would be better spent in other ways."⁵⁵

A myriad of elements compounded the difficulties in the relationship between MACV and III MAF, not the least of which were personality traits and service considerations. As General Tompkins observed, some Army and Marine rivalry was natur-

al, "it's the dog and cat business . . . nothing Machiavellian or anything else."⁵⁶ Army generals spoke about Marines using unimaginative tactics, either putting their heads down and charging or sitting tight on "top of Semper Fidelis."⁵⁷ Marines replied that they trained from the same manuals as the Army and employed basically the same infantry tactics of fire and maneuver.⁵⁸ For their part, many Marines believed that their performance in Vietnam would determine the survival of their Corps. General Krulak remarked that the war would not last forever and "as soon as it is over, and perhaps before, the Marines are going to be faced with the same problems that has faced us after every conflict . . . self-defense." The Marines would require "a fund of irrefutable facts which portray our combat effectiveness, our competence, and most of all our readiness to fight when the whistle blows."⁵⁹

General Westmoreland hardly endeared himself to the Marines when inadvertently he became involved in the succession for the Commandancy of the Marine Corps. Both Generals Krulak and Walt, the former III MAF commander, were leading candidates to succeed General Greene. A newspaper account in late November 1967 carried the story that General Westmoreland supported General Walt and had recommended him to the President. General Westmoreland later wrote that in making out General Walt's fitness or efficiency report in 1966, he had observed "that General Walt was fully qualified to be Commandant of the Marine Corps," and that this was not meant to be an endorsement of Walt's candidacy.⁶⁰ With the selection of Lieutenant General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., then Chief of Staff at Headquarters Marine Corps, as the new Commandant, the furor soon blew over.

In more germane matters relating to the war, the differing personalities and styles of Generals Westmoreland and Cushman impacted upon the MACV-III MAF command relations. A large bulky man, the bespectacled Cushman offered a sharp contrast to the rigid military bearing of Westmoreland, who appeared to be "standing at attention while on the tennis court."⁶¹ The MACV commander insisted on detailed plans of operations with no loose ends. On the other hand, General Cushman maintained an informal staff structure, confiding in few persons and relying largely on his chief of staff, Brigadier General Earl E. Anderson. Although concerned about the enemy buildup in the north, reinforcing Khe Sanh in December with another battalion, Cushman was

*Other Marine officers also commented about Marine deficiencies relative to digging bunkers. Colonel John C. Studt recalled that when he was operations officer of the 9th Marines General Westmoreland was unhappy "with inadequate Marine bunkers" and directed that the Marines send representatives to the U.S. Army's 1st Division "to learn how to construct bunkers. As humiliating as this was for Marines, Gen Westmoreland was absolutely right: Marines didn't have a clue how to construct good bunkers. We taught hasty field fortification and that was it." Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File). Major Gary E. Todd, who served on the 3d Marine Division staff, observed that field fortifications "seemed to end up with as much of the thing above ground as below, filling sandbags with soil to raise walls and parapets." Maj Gary E. Todd, Comments on draft chapters, dtd 28Oct and ?Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Todd Comments.



Abel Collection Photo

LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Pacific, left, visits with Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Commandant of the Marine Corps, in the Commandant's office in Washington, D.C., in May 1968. LtGen Krulak had a strong influence in the development of Marine pacification concepts and had been a leading candidate, together with Gen Chapman and LtGen Lewis W. Walt, for the Commandancy.

confident that he had the situation under control. General Westmoreland, however, worried about what he perceived as the Marine command's "lack of followup in supervision," its employment of helicopters, and its generalship. By January 1968, the MACV commander seriously considered making a change in the command relations in the north.^{62*}

An Ambivalent Outlook

Despite the signs of an enemy buildup and concerns about the Marine command, General Westmoreland just earlier had voiced his optimism about the course of the war. Called back to Washington in mid-November 1967, ostensibly for consultation,

*General Anderson mentioned that since his arrival in December 1967, he "participated in every conference or meeting held by General Cushman during my tenure in Da Nang. Our relationship could not have been closer . . ." Anderson allowed that on the III MAF staff there were some weak links in that "General Cushman was one prone to accept the personnel sent to him by higher headquarters without complaining, so consequently certain senior staff members had to fill this void." Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Another III MAF staff officer described General Cushman as a "perceptive gentleman [who] was content to soldier without comment as long as Westy [Westmoreland] didn't try to maneuver subordinate units in ICTZ (as he did in other Corps areas) and left Marine air under Marine control." LtCol John F. J. Kelly, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 13Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

but more to shore up public support for the administration's Vietnam policy, he assured his audiences that the end was in view and that the "ranks of the Vietcong are thinning steadily."⁶³ Reflecting this same optimism in his directives, Westmoreland advised his subordinate commanders that the situation was "conducive to initiating an all-out offensive on all fronts: political, military, economic, and psychological."⁶⁴

In drawing up plans for 1968 operations, the MACV staff accentuated this emphasis on the offensive. The 1968 Combined Plan with the Vietnamese continued to assign to the U.S. units the primary mission of destroying the NVA and VC main forces. American planners called for a three-pronged campaign: large-unit operations to keep the enemy off balance, destruction of the enemy base areas, and expanded "territorial security." General Westmoreland and his staff expected to launch "multi-brigade offensives" against enemy strongholds "not previously invaded." American contingency planning included possible operations in such enemy sanctuaries as Cambodia, Laos, and even an amphibious operation north of the Demilitarized Zone.⁶⁵

Notwithstanding the flurry of contingency planning, General Westmoreland realized that administra-

tion policy would confine his operations within the borders of South Vietnam. His Northeast Monsoon Campaign Plan for the period October 1967-March 1968 centered around the 1st Cavalry Division. He wanted to use the division as a "theater exploitation force" in areas where the weather favored helicopter-borne tactics. His original concept delineated a four-phased campaign. The 1st Cavalry was to conduct the first three phases in III Corps and then, as the weather improved, move north to I Corps. The objective in I Corps was the enemy's Do Xa base in western Quang Ngai and Quang Tin Provinces and the suspected headquarters of *Military Region V*. This fourth phase was given the code name "York."⁶⁶

By the end of the year, with one eye on the growing enemy strength in the north, the MACV staff modified the York plans. York, itself, was to be a four-phased operation. As part of a larger task force, the 1st Cavalry Division was to penetrate the western Do Xa in York I. Completing that phase of the operation, the division was then to be inserted into the A Shau Valley in western Thua Thien Province and the site of a former U.S. Special Forces Camp overrun by the NVA in the spring of 1966. Following York II, the 1st Cavalry, in Phase III, was to conduct operations further north in western Quang Tri Province and sweep to the Laotian border. In the fourth phase, the Army division would return to the Do Xa. III MAF was to be responsible for the planning of York II and III and General Murray, the III MAF deputy commander, was to command the A Shau Valley operation. General Westmoreland later wrote that the purpose of the York campaign was to set the "stage for the invasion of Laos that I hoped a new administration in Washington would approve."⁶⁷

While planning for offensive actions in 1968, III MAF and MACV had to counter the enemy threat in the northern border regions. As early as October, General Westmoreland reinforced the Marines with a brigade from the 1st Cavalry in the Que Son sector south of Da Nang which permitted General Cushman to move one regiment, the 1st Marines, from the Da Nang area to Quang Tri Province. The arrival of the Army's 11th Infantry Brigade in December allowed a further realignment of III MAF units. General Cushman began to implement this repositioning of forces in Operation Checkers which called for the deployment of the entire 3d Marine Division to either the DMZ front or Khe Sanh. The 1st Marine Division was to shift what was in essence a two-regiment task force under the assistant division commander to Phu Bai in Thua

Thien Province and cover the western approaches to Hue City.⁶⁸

By the end of 1967, Operation Checkers was in full swing. The Americal Division began to take over from the Korean Brigade the TAOR (tactical area of operational responsibility) south of Chu Lai. In turn, the first Korean battalions moved to the Hoi An sector south of Da Nang, relieving units of the 5th Marines. On 20 December, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines deployed north of the strategic Hai Van Pass to the Phu Loc area of Thua Thien Province. All plans were complete. The 1st Marine Division was to activate Task Force X-Ray in early January and the remainder of the 5th Marines was to go to Phu Bai. At that time, the 3d Marine Division was then to transfer its command post (CP) from Phu Bai to Dong Ha in the eastern DMZ. Later in the month, the 1st Marines at Quang Tri was to return to its parent division by taking over from the 4th Marines the CoBi/Than Tan Sector at Camp Evans in Thua Thien Province. The 4th Marines would then rejoin the 3d Division along the DMZ. Thus as 1968 approached, III MAF was in a state of flux as units began to displace.⁶⁹

The signs of progress in I Corps were mixed. Action had flared up in early December throughout the Corps area. On the 5th, the enemy overran a district headquarters in Quang Ngai Province. Along the DMZ, the North Vietnamese launched a series of company-strength attacks on Marine positions in the northeast sector above the Cua Viet River. The 1st Marine Division at Da Nang in its southern TAOR engaged strong enemy forces while the Americal Division units and the attached brigade from the 1st Cavalry Division encountered resistance from the *2d NVA Division* in the important Que Son Valley along the border of Quang Tin and Quang Nam Provinces. By the end of the month, the NVA and VC took a more defensive stance toward the American units and turned on the ARVN and local forces in hit-and-run actions. Although sustaining heavy casualties in these attacks, the enemy "was successful in penetrating and damaging several positions."⁷⁰

Despite the heavy fighting in December, various indicators pointed to some success in the village war in I Corps. After a dropoff in pacification measurements during the first half of 1967, there was a marked increase in the figures for the rest of the year. In December, approximately 75 percent of the village chiefs were living in their home villages as opposed to 50 percent in January 1967. Other categories—the conducting of village censuses, establishment of

defense plans, and functioning of local governments—showed similar, if less dramatic, improvement. According to Marine Corps criteria, 55 percent of the population in I Corps in December lived in secure areas, ranging from a high of 80 percent in the Phu Bai sectors to a low of 34 percent at Duc Pho. The Marines credited several factors for this upsurge, not the least of which was the insertion of Army units in southern I Corps to take up the slack left by the departure of the Marines for the northern battle sector. Yet III MAF believed that its innovative pacification techniques accounted for much of the progress.⁷¹

With the coming of the Christmas and New Year season, the war continued on its ambivalent course. The holiday truce periods symbolized the cross-currents of the conflict. Giving vague hints of peace, the Communists agreed to a 24-hour truce over Christmas and a slightly longer, 36 hours, respite over the New Year's celebration. Taking advantage of the cease-fires and the halt in U.S. air operations, the North Vietnamese moved supplies to their forward units. Over Christmas, American air observers spotted some 600–800 vehicles and boats hauling and landing military provisions and equipment in southern North Vietnam. MACV reported 118 enemy violations—40 of them major—over Christmas, and 170—63 major—during the New Year's truce period. The New Year's violations resulted in 29 allied soldiers dead and 128 wounded, with two South Vietnamese troops listed as missing in action. In turn, the allies killed 117 of the enemy. The American command called both standdowns a “hoax” and recommended that any cease-fire for the Vietnamese Tet or lunar new year be as short as possible.^{72*}

U.S. leaders worried over the Communist intentions for the new year. In a departure from the optimistic public rhetoric of his administration about the war, President Johnson privately warned the Australian Cabinet in late December of “dark days ahead.”⁷³ Much evidence indicated that the enemy was on the move. American intelligence reported two North Vietnamese divisions near Khe Sanh and a third along the eastern

DMZ. Further south, prisoner interrogations revealed the possible presence of a new enemy regiment in Thua Thien Province. American commanders believed Hue was a major enemy objective although the 1st ARVN Division could not “credit the enemy with ‘the intent’ nor the ‘capability’ to launch a division-size attack” against the city.⁷⁴ At Da Nang, III MAF received information that the *2d NVA Division* was shifting its area of operations to Quang Nam Province.⁷⁵ Captured enemy documents spoke of major offensives throughout South Vietnam. One in particular observed “that the opportunity for a general offensive and general uprising is within reach . . . ,” and directed the coordination of military attacks “with the uprisings of the local population to take over towns and cities.”⁷⁶

By January 1968, a sense of foreboding and uncertainty dominated much American thinking about the situation in Vietnam and the course of the war.⁷⁷ According to all allied reports, Communist forces had taken horrendous casualties during the past few months, causing one senior U.S. Army general to wonder if the North Vietnamese military command was aware of these losses.⁷⁸ Yet, all the signs pointed to a major enemy offensive in the very near future. Although captured enemy documents spoke of assaults on the cities and towns, General Westmoreland believed the enemy's more logical targets to be the DMZ and Khe Sanh, while staging diversionary attacks elsewhere. He thought the Communist objectives to be the seizure of the two northern provinces of South Vietnam and to make Khe Sanh the American Dien Bien Phu.^{79**}

While planning their own offensive moves, MACV and III MAF prepared for a NVA push in the north. General Cushman reinforced Khe Sanh and in Operation Checkers began to deploy his forces toward the northern border.

*Major Gary E. Todd, who served as an intelligence officer on the 3d Marine Division staff, commented that the “the last shot fired before the ‘cease fire’ took effect was like a starter's pistol to the North Vietnamese, crouched down and tensed to explode into a sprint” to resupply their forces in the south. Todd Comments.

**Army Lieutenant General Philip B. Davidson, the MACV intelligence officer, commented that General Westmoreland stated his expectation of the coming enemy offensive “in broad terms as a result of series of war games conducted by and at MACV headquarters. It was considered as nothing more than a ‘probable course of enemy action’” Davidson contends that the MACV commander was open “to consideration of other possible forms of the enemy offensive right up to the initiation of the Tet offensive.” Davidson observed also that General Cushman “concurred” with the MACV expectations. LtGen Philip B. Davidson, Jr. (USA), Comments on draft chapter, dtd 25Oct68 (Vietnam Comment File).

CHAPTER 2

The 3d Marine Division and the Barrier

The 3d Marine Division in the DMZ—The Barrier

The 3d Marine Division in the DMZ

The war in the north was largely the responsibility of the 3d Marine Division. Since the summer of 1966, the division had parried several successive North Vietnamese Army thrusts in Quang Tri Province, both in the northeast and in the west near the Marine base at Khe Sanh. Commanding one of the largest divisions in Marine Corps history, Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins had more than 24,000 men under him organized into five infantry regiments, one artillery regiment, and supporting elements. U.S. Army artillery units and Navy logistic forces, including Seabees, supplemented the Marines. Two of the regiments of the 1st ARVN Division also reinforced the 3d Division. The division's forward command post was at Dong Ha some eight miles below the Demilitarized Zone. Although one regiment, the 4th Marines, remained in Thua Thien protecting the western approaches to Hue, the bulk of the 3d Division was in Quang Tri Province, mainly facing north, to counter the expected enemy onslaught.

Quang Tri Province contains some 1,800 square miles, extending about 45 miles north and south and 40 miles east and west. Its rugged interior rises to the west with jungled canopied peaks reaching heights of 1,700 meters near the Laotian border. Eastern Quang Tri is characterized by a narrow coastal plain and a piedmont sector of rolling hills. In the north, the Ben Hai River marked the boundary with North Vietnam. The six-mile-wide Demilitarized Zone followed the trace of the river for 30 miles inland and then went in a straight line to the Laotian border. Despite some relaxation of the U.S. rules of engagement in the DMZ south of the Ben Hai, both the Demilitarized Zone and Laos offered a sanctuary for the North Vietnamese Army to mass its forces and position its artillery.

These terrain and political considerations largely determined the enemy's avenues of approach and the 3d Marine Division dispositions in the DMZ sector. The North Vietnamese made their base areas

in the Demilitarized Zone and Laos and tried to infiltrate their forces into the river valleys and coastal plain to cut the allied lines of communications. Route 1, the main north and south highway, connected the Marine bases of Dong Ha and Quang Tri in the north to Phu Bai and Da Nang further south. The Cua Viet River provided the division its chief logistic artery, running from the Cua Viet Facility at its mouth to Dong Ha. Little more than a mountain path in its western reaches, Route 9 linked Dong Ha with Khe Sanh. Since August 1967, however the North Vietnamese had successfully severed Route 9 west of the Marine outpost at Ca Lu, isolating the Marines at Khe Sanh and permitting resupply only by air.

East of Khe Sanh, the 3d Division was strung out in a series of outposts and bases that allowed protection for Route 9, the important Cam Lo River Valley which extended to Dong Ha, and the coastal plain. The most significant of these were: Ca Lu, 10 miles east of Khe Sanh; the Rockpile, a sheer 700-foot outcropping, eight miles further north; followed by Camp Carroll, 10 miles to the east; and then the heralded "Leatherneck Square," the quadrilateral outlined by Cam Lo, Con Thien, Gio Linh, and Dong Ha.

For purposes of delineation and control, the division divided this extensive area into a series of regimental and battalion operational areas with designated code names. For example, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion in Operation Napoleon was responsible for keeping open the Cua Viet waterway. Further north, the 9th Marines, in Operation Kentucky, manned the defenses in the Leatherneck Square sector. In Operation Lancaster, the 3d Marines screened the area from Cam Lo to Ca Lu. Scotland was the code name for the 26th Marines operations at Khe Sanh. To the south, the 1st Marines in Operation Osceola guarded the approaches to the provincial capital and the secondary Marine base near Quang Tri City. The 1st ARVN Division was responsible for the sector east of Route 1 and south of Dong Ha. With its command post at Dong Ha, the 12th Marines, the artillery regiment, supported all of these operations

from firing positions at Dong Ha, Camp Carroll, Gio Linh, Khe Sanh, and Quang Tri.*

By the end of 1967, the DMZ front symbolized the frustrations of the American war in Vietnam. The bloody battle for the outlying hills surrounding Khe Sanh in April and later the struggle for Con Thien highlighted the fighting for the year. As casualty figures mounted on both sides senior commanders voiced their concern. At the height of the fierce contest for Con Thien, General Krulak observed that in September the Marines had suffered 956 casualties and for the year nearly 5,000 dead and wounded in the DMZ alone. Both General Krulak and Admiral Sharp concluded that such a rate could not be sustained and that "the operational benefits now being achieved in the area . . . are not consistent with the losses incurred."¹

As early as July, General Krulak had warned about the disadvantages of waging the war in the DMZ sector. He told American commanders that they must face "the brutal facts" that the Marines were "under the enemy's guns." Krulak believed the enemy's purpose was:

... to get us as near to his weapons and to his forces as possible, drench us with high angle fire weapons, engage us in close and violent combat, accept willingly a substantial loss of life for the opportunity to kill a lesser number of our men, and to withdraw into his North Vietnam sanctuary to refurbish.²

In a message on 23 September, General Krulak outlined to General Cushman the limited options on the northern front available to the Marine command. III MAF could withdraw its forces to defensive positions further south, out of the range of the North Vietnamese artillery north of the Ben Hai. Krulak rejected this move, although tactically sound, as carrying "too large a price." The enemy could claim a propaganda victory, and moreover it meant abandoning the barrier and strongpoint obstacle system. He noted "whatever criticism may have been directed at the concept before, it is now an official U.S./GVN endeavor, and to back away from it now could not conceivably be identified with progress in the war." Another alternative was to invade North Vietnam, which also was not feasible, because of logistic and political ramifications. Krulak believed the only

remaining viable choices were the reinforcement of the 3d Division in Quang Tri and the intensification of American air and artillery bombardment of the enemy in and immediately north of the DMZ.³

General Krulak's message more or less reflected the thinking of both General Westmoreland at MACV and General Cushman at III MAF of the situation in the north. None of the American commanders seriously considered the abandonment of the U.S. positions north of Dong Ha or Route 9. General Westmoreland established a small group in his headquarters to examine the possibility of an amphibious landing in conjunction with an overland sally through the DMZ into North Vietnam. These deliberations, however, went no further than the planning stage.⁴ Thus, left with rather a Hobson's choice, Westmoreland and Cushman elected their only remaining courses of action. General Westmoreland in early October reinforced III MAF with a brigade from the 1st Cavalry Division, which permitted General Cushman to redeploy the 1st Marines from Da Nang to Quang Tri City. At the same time, III MAF received the bulk of available B-52 strikes and naval gunfire support. By 12 October, General Westmoreland reported to Admiral Sharp that "our successful application of firepower through B-52 strikes, tactical air, and extensive artillery fires has caused the enemy to suffer heavy casualties which coupled with increasing flood conditions to his rear renders his massed posture in the vicinity of Con Thien no longer tenable."⁵

Although the action in the DMZ sector abated somewhat during October and November, the situation was again tense by the end of the year. Just before Thanksgiving 1967, General Krulak alerted General Cushman that the enemy was once more moving men and material into the Demilitarized Zone, improving his artillery, and "preparing the battlefield."⁶ At MACV Headquarters, General Westmoreland expressed his concern in early December about the enemy buildup. He disagreed with President Thieu's assessment that the North Vietnamese were creating "a diversionary effort" in the DMZ to mask their real objective, the Central Highlands. Westmoreland believed that the next enemy move would be in the northern two provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces.⁷ On 16 December, he once more directed that I Corps for the next 30 days receive priority of the B-52 Arclight strikes. At the same time, he ordered the immediate preparation of contingency plans to reinforce III MAF with Army troops and the development of logistic facilities to accommodate those forces.⁸

*Lieutenant General Louis Metzger noted that the operational names had little significance for the Marines who were there: "It was all one big battle. For most of us, one so-called operation looked just like another." LtGen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 17Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Metzger Comments.

At III MAF Headquarters, General Cushman also made his adjustments to reinforce the northern battlefield. In late December, he implemented Operation Checkers which would eventually result in the 1st Marine Division taking over responsibility for all operations in Thua Thien Province so that General Tompkins's 3d Division could concentrate its full resources in the DMZ and Khe Sanh sector. By January 1968, elements of the 1st Division's 5th Marines had deployed into the former 3d Division TAOR south of Phu Bai. Both divisions had established timetables for the phased placement of their regiments and battalions into new operating areas. In sort of hop, skip, and jump movements, hence the name Checkers, the units were to displace one another. For example, the 4th Marines was to assume control of Operation Lancaster in the central DMZ from the 3d Marines. In turn, the 3d Marines was to go to Quang Tri and relieve the 1st Marines. The 1st Marines then was to replace the 4th Marines at Camp Evans in Thua Thien Province and return to the operational control of the 1st Division. Both the 9th Marines and the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion would continue with their respective operations, Kentucky and Napoleon. The 2d ARVN Regiment would stay tied in with the 9th Marines on the right and take over more of the strongpoints of the barrier system. On 15 January, General Tompkins planned to transfer his command post from Phu Bai to Dong Ha.⁹

General Tompkins was relatively new to the Vietnam War. He assumed command of the 3d Division in November after the unexpected death of his predecessor, Major General Bruno A. Hochmuth, in a helicopter crash. Holder of the Navy Cross, Silver Star, and Bronze Star, General Tompkins was a veteran of the island campaigns of Guadalcanal, Tarawa, and Saipan in World War II. He had the 5th Marines in Korea after the signing of the armistice and oversaw the implementation of its terms in his sector. During the Dominican crisis of April–May 1965, he commanded the Marine forces ashore. While Commanding General, Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina, he received his orders to Vietnam.¹⁰

Regarded in Marine Corps circles as one of its best tacticians, General Tompkins was thought the ideal candidate to take charge of the DMZ War. Vietnam was to be a unique experience for him. Colonel James R. Stockman, his operations officer who had served with him on Saipan, recalled that when General Tompkins arrived he asked one question: "Tell me about the

operational folklore in the division's area of operations." According to Stockman, he told the general that from his point of view it "was a bad war, highly inhibited by MACV restrictions . . . [and] political considerations emanating from Washington."¹¹

General Tompkins soon became well acquainted with the "operational folklore" of the 3d Marine Division. He learned quickly that a regiment may have responsibility for a sector but have none of its battalions under its command. For example, the 9th Marines in the five-battalion Operation Kentucky only had one of its original battalions, the 2d Battalion with only two of four companies, participating in the operation. The other four battalions came from the 1st Marines, 3d Marines, and 4th Marines. According to Colonel Stockman, General Tompkins "caught on fast to the term 'opcon' [operational control]" which permitted the interchange of battalions from regiment to regiment without the relinquishment of administrative responsibility.^{12*}

This tasking of units, as one Marine historical analyst, Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, observed, "demonstrated the interchangeable nature of Marine battalions and gave the division commander great flexibility."¹⁵ Yet this flexibility had a price. Command lines were somewhat blurred and tactical integrity was more difficult to maintain. Simmons noted "One regimental commander estimated that it took about two weeks of working with a new battalion to iron out problems of procedures and communications."^{14**}

Two other aspects of the "operational folklore" of the 3d Marine Division impinged upon General Tompkins as 1967 drew to a close. One was Khe Sanh and the other was the strongpoint system or barrier. Although ordered to reinforce Khe Sanh with a battalion in December by both Generals Westmoreland and Cush-

*Colonel Vaughn R. Stuart, who served both as executive officer and later commander of the 3d Marines, commented that General Hochmuth believed that regiments were "capable of controlling any number of battalions." The regimental headquarters would be located "in the important areas . . . and the principal tactic was in the shifting of the maneuver battalions to various regiments as the situation dictated." Col Vaughn R. Stuart, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 20Dec1994 (Vietnam Comment File).

**Lieutenant General Metzger, the 3d Marine Division assistant division commander in January 1968, remarked that General Tompkins wanted to bring "the tangle of battalions and regiments into some sort of order; to the extent possible, aligning the battalions with their parent regiments." Metzger believed that Tompkins "was faced with nearly an impossible situation, fighting the battle with an inadequate force for the assigned missions." Metzger Comments.



Abel Collection Photo

LtGen Robert E. Cushman, left, CG III MAF, pins the Distinguished Service Medal on MajGen Rathvon McC. Tompkins at an award ceremony at Da Nang. Gen Tompkins, who served as CG 3d MarDiv, and later as Gen Cushman's deputy, was very much involved in the building of the barrier and its problems.

man, General Tompkins was more concerned about the situation he confronted in the DMZ sector.* In 1976, he wrote that he still did not understand why the North Vietnamese “did not contain” the base at Khe Sanh “and sideslip the rest of their formations” towards the coast and more lucrative targets.¹⁵

The barrier or “McNamara Wall” was the other feature of the war in the north that overrode most other considerations confronting the 3d Marine Division. It determined both the disposition and the tactics of the division along the DMZ. According to Colonel Stockman, both Khe Sanh and the barrier had become “sacrosanct” by the end of the year and that the latter “could not even be discussed, much less argued, when I was G-3” Stockman claimed that the barrier “became an objective in itself, causing field commanders to be committed to an unattainable act of juggling real tactical considerations and [barrier] requirements.”¹⁶

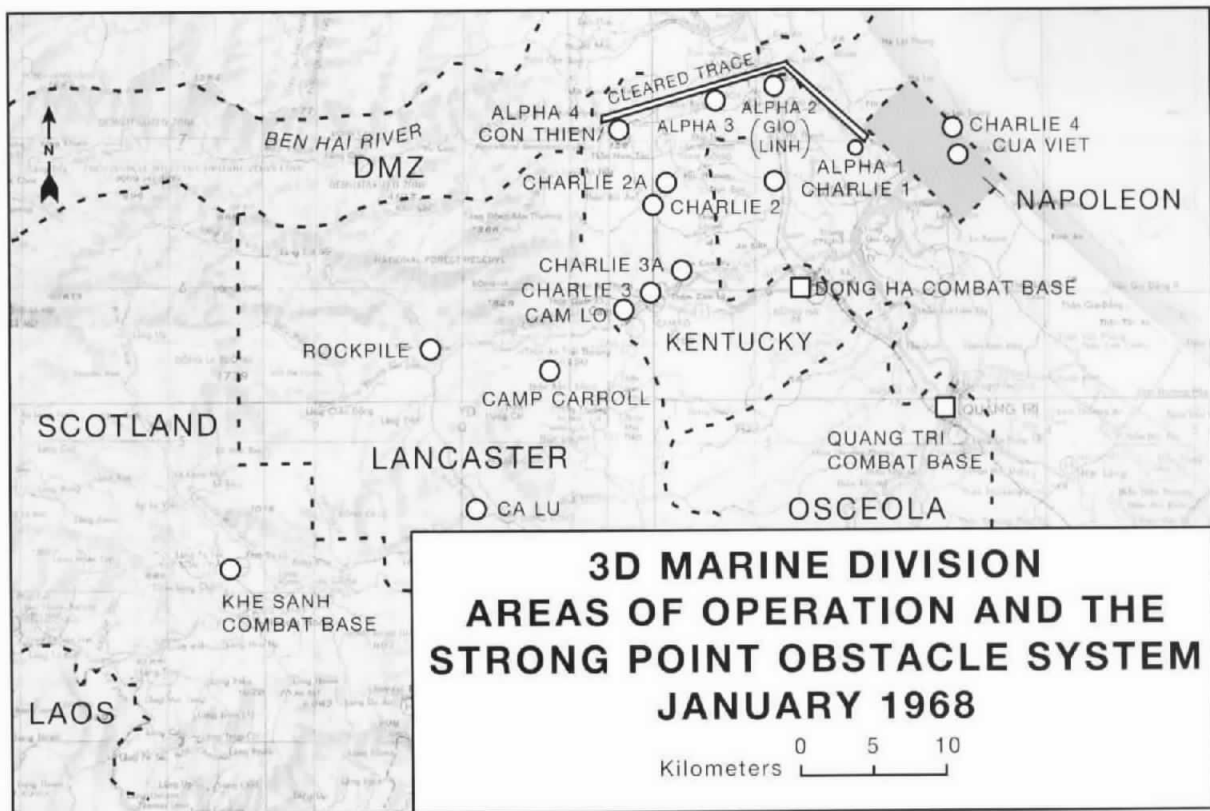
*General Metzger observed that General Westmoreland did not give a direct order to General Tompkins to reinforce Khe Sanh. Although the MACV commander “became perilously close” to violating the chain of command “on his many visits with comments and suggestions,” he never “bypassed III MAF.” Metzger Comments.

The Barrier

Although credited to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, the concept of a defensive “barrier” between the two Vietnams had many authors. As early as the late 1950s, President Diem asked his senior U.S. Army military advisor, Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams, to assist in building “a series of strongpoints (concrete) each to hold an infantry squad, across from the sea to Laos just below the DMZ.”¹⁷ A few years later, in the fall of 1961, General Maxwell Taylor, President Kennedy’s Special Military Representative, on a visit to South Vietnam, directed Brigadier General Edward F. Lansdale, the Air Force counterinsurgency expert who accompanied him on the trip, “to do a study of fortifying the DMZ.”¹⁸ In early 1965, before the commitment of major U.S. units to the Vietnam War, Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson, proposed sending a “multinational four-division force . . . to man defensive positions south of the DMZ and to overwatch the Laotian border area to the west, thereby impeding the movement of enemy forces from the north.”¹⁹

The Defense Department, however, only began to give serious consideration to a DMZ barrier in the spring of 1966 when Secretary of Defense McNamara raised the question with the Joint Chiefs. He then directed the establishment of a special study group to examine the technical feasibility of such a plan. Sponsored by the Institute of Defense Analysis, 67 scientists participated in the study and released their findings, known as the Jason Report, on 30 August 1966. The report concluded that a unmanned air-supported barrier could be established in a year’s time. This barrier was to consist of two parts—one aimed at individuals on foot and the other against vehicles. The former was to be along the southern edge of the DMZ while the latter was to extend into Laos. Both parts were to contain gravel mines (small mines with the purpose of crippling legs and feet on detonation), button bomblets (mines designed only to make a loud noise which could be picked up by an acoustic sensor) and both acoustic and seismic detectors (sensitive to sound and ground vibrations). Patrol and strike aircraft were to monitor and support the ground barrier.

Although many of the military had serious reservations, especially CinCPac, Admiral Sharp, Secretary McNamara believed the proposal had merit. He appointed Army Lieutenant General Alfred Starbird to head a joint task force within the Defense Department



to study the possibilities of implementing the Jason Report recommendations. The Starbird task force was to devise an anti-infiltration system based on air-dropped munitions and electronic sensors that would slow, if not stop, the flow of men and material from the north into the south. This entire planning effort was to have the code name "Practice Nine."

General Westmoreland had mixed feelings about the barrier proposal. He was well aware of the disadvantages of any barrier. In a message to General Starbird, he observed that the North Vietnamese, "will be able to harass a fixed barrier at selected times and places both during and after the construction phase . . . The enemy will make full use of the 'bait and trap' technique in attempts to lure friendly elements into prepared ambushes." Westmoreland concluded with an analysis of the North Vietnamese: "Our enemy is self-confident, determined, ingenious and uses terrain and weather to his advantage. His solutions to problems are usually elemental, simple and practical from his viewpoint." Despite these doubts about a barrier, he himself, was thinking of building a "strongpoint obstacle system" that would "channel the enemy into well-defined corridors where we might bring air and artillery to bear and then hit him with mobile ground

reserves." He saw the Starbird project as an opportunity to institute his own concept.²⁰

On 3 October 1966, the MACV commander ordered his own staff to come up with a study of the various defensive options in the DMZ sector and report back to him in six days. In its preliminary findings, the MACV planning group recommended a mobile defense behind a barrier system. The MACV planners suggested a linear barrier extending from Dong Ha Mountain to the sea. This linear barrier would consist of a 1,000-meter wide "trace" with barbed wire, minefields, remote sensor devices, bunkers, watch towers at periodic intervals, all tied together with an extensive communications network. The original scheme called for an ARVN armored cavalry regiment to man, screen, and provide depth to the defense. III MAF would be prepared to provide reinforcements or blocking forces as the situation might demand. West of the trace, the plan would have a strongpoint defense centered around strategic defiles in the mountainous terrain. The western strongpoint system would consist of 20 outposts manned by a Republic of Korea division and reinforced by artillery and air. This preliminary plan would go through several transitions, but would be the basis of all subsequent discussion and planning efforts.

The day after receiving his briefing, 11 October 1966, General Westmoreland met with Secretary McNamara in Vietnam. He recommended his alternative to the Washington plan. The Secretary, after flying over the DMZ, was receptive to the Westmoreland proposal. He directed that MACV should continue with its planning effort and at the same time charged General Starbird's Washington group with the production and delivery of the munitions and sensors to support these measures. Planning would also continue on the development of air-delivered munitions and sensors in Laos to augment the anti-infiltration system to be constructed in South Vietnam. The Seventh Air Force would be responsible for the aviation aspects while III MAF together with the MACV Combat Operations Center were to draw up the designs for the barrier and strongpoints within South Vietnam.

Despite their wishes, the Marine command would be at the center of the barrier developments. Very early, Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, then III MAF commander, made known his unhappiness with the barrier concept. It was his belief and that of his commanders that if he had the additional forces projected by the barrier planners, "a far better job of sealing the DMZ could be accomplished without the barrier itself." It was the Marine position that a barrier defense "should free Marine forces for operations elsewhere *not freeze* such forces in a barrier watching defensive role." With their objections overruled, the Marine commanders had no choice but to comply with their directives.²¹

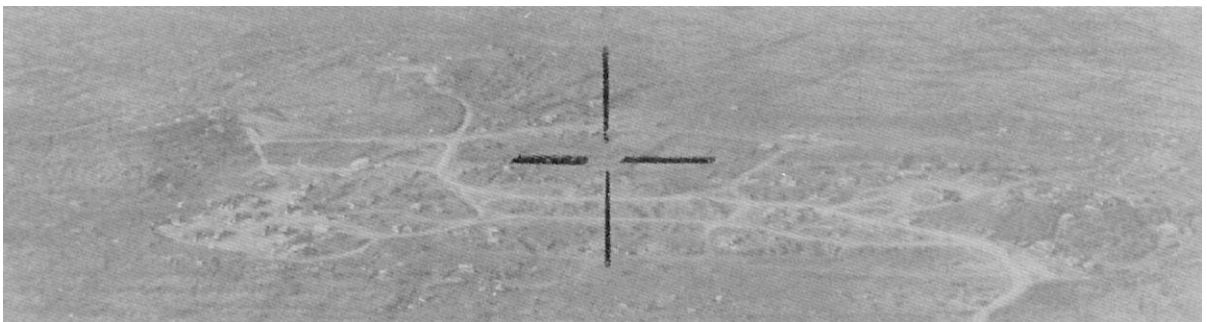
III MAF submitted its formal operational plan for the barrier at the end of December 1966 and MACV incorporated the Marine concepts, with some modifications, in its Practice 9 Requirements Plan of 26 January 1967. The Marine plan had established a deadline of 1 August 1967 for the construction and manning by an ARVN regiment of the eastern portion of the barrier.

III MAF would have started work on a road network and the dredging of the Cua Viet to support the project. A Korean division was to assume responsibility for the area west of Dong Ha Mountain on 1 August 1967 as well, and the 3d Marine Division would then be free of the barrier defense. MACV, in its changes, pushed back the final completion date of the eastern section to 1 November and postponed the entry of additional forces into the western defile area until November. The original plan had called for a deadline of 1 November for the building of the western strongpoints, which MACV changed to read, "the remainder of the system in this area will be completed subsequent to 1 November 1967." Marines, however, were to construct a strongpoint at their Khe Sanh base. MACV did make some cosmetic revisions in wording: anti-infiltration system was substituted for barrier, since the latter had the connotation of an impregnable defense. More importantly, MACV requested an additional division and regiment specifically earmarked for the strongpoint system in the Demilitarized Zone, to supplement its forces already in Vietnam.²²

Despite not acting upon Westmoreland's request for additional units for the barrier, which became caught up in the Washington review of overall MACV manpower needs during the spring of 1967, Secretary McNamara approved in early March the basic MACV strongpoint proposal. He authorized General Starbird to procure the necessary material to build and equip the strongpoints and base camps for a 10-kilometer "trace" in the eastern DMZ. The Secretary also ordered work to begin on the improvements of Route 1 and the ports near Hue and on the Cua Viet. At the same time, the State Department arranged with the South Vietnamese Government to discuss the necessary land purchases and the resettlement of the civilian population in the area of the trace.

In aerial photograph, Strongpoint A-4 at Con Thien is marked by the cross hairs. Less than 160 meters high and located two miles south of the DMZ, Con Thien still dominated the surrounding flat terrain.

Photo from 12th Mar ComdC, Jan69



General Westmoreland soon passed his directives on to III MAF. He ordered General Walt to prepare a plan in coordination with the South Vietnamese I Corps commander, General Lam, for the Strongpoint Obstacle System. The Marine command was to confine its discussions with the South Vietnamese only to the eastern sector. No mention was to be made of the western strongpoint defile or of the air-supported system in Laos. Even with the lack of a formal plan, Marine engineers in early April began clearing the terrain between Gio Linh and Con Thien under the guise of clearing fields of fire and building modest field fortifications.

By mid-April, the barrier for III MAF had become a reality, and not to the liking of senior Marine commanders. On 19 April, General Westmoreland told General Walt that "the mission of establishing a strongpoint/obstacle system south of the DMZ initially will be given to the U.S. Marines."²³ In his reply, General Walt protested that this order assigned his entire 3d Marine Division to the barrier. In effect, the division would be confined to fixed positions and to the construction and the manning of the strongpoint system. The III MAF commander argued that unless he received reinforcements in the north he would not be able to conduct offensive operations there. General Westmoreland had no additional forces to give him, but indicated that he would reinforce the Marines as troops and units became available. General Krulak, the FMFPac commander, was quick to point out to the Commandant, General Greene, "that we are already embarked on a form of Practice Nine." He observed that the reinforcement of Army troops in Task Force Oregon at Chu Lai had "been counterbalanced by MACV assigning III MAF the barrier mission." Krulak asked General Greene "to demonstrate at the Joint Chiefs and the Department of Defense levels" that Marine resources were going into the strongpoint system "with only a presumptive basis for assuming we will be compensated."²⁴

Notwithstanding this unified front on the part of the Marine Corps, III MAF, again, had little alternative but to continue with its planning and building of the strongpoint system. In May, during Operation Hickory, the 3d Division moved some 11,000 civilians from the construction sites to a resettlement village at Cam Lo. The 11th Engineer Battalion cleared the terrain while one or two infantry battalions provided the security. On 18 June, III MAF finally published its operation plan which outlined the eastern strongpoint obstacle system. According to the plan, a cleared trace would extend from a strongpoint (A-5), some six kilo-

meters west of Con Thien, for over 25 kilometers to its eastern terminus at another strongpoint (A-1),* some six kilometers east of Gio Linh. The "trace" would be supported by six company strongpoints, labeled A-1 through A-6. Gio Linh was Strongpoint A-2 and Con Thien was Strongpoint A-4. Behind the strongpoints were to be three battalion base areas, designated C-1 through C-3. An ARVN regiment was to man Strongpoints A-1 and A-2 and Base Area C-3. A Marine regiment was to be responsible for the strongpoints and base areas west of Route 1.

The plan called for the work to be completed in two phases. In Phase 1, a 600 meter-wide trace was to be built from Con Thien to Strongpoint A-1. Four of the strongpoints, A-1 through A-4, as well as all of the base areas were to be finished by 1 November 1967, the deadline for Phase 1. III MAF, at the same time, would improve the road network to include Routes 9, 1, and 561. The latter road was to connect Con Thien to its combat support bases and Route 9. The 3d Marine Division base at Dong Ha was to be the logistics center of the entire effort. It was hoped that by the onset of the monsoon season that the barrier obstacle system of mines, radars, towers, barbed wire, and sensors, would be in place along that part of the trace from Con Thien to Gio Linh. In the second phase, at the end of the monsoon season, III MAF would finish the construction of the two strongpoints west of Con Thien and complete the extension of the trace and its obstacle system from Strongpoint A-1 to A-5. The entire project would be over by July 1968.²⁵

The III MAF barrier plan proved to be overly optimistic. By the end of July 1967, Marine engineer and construction units had accumulated an impressive set of statistics pertaining to the number of man and equipment hours devoted to the project, yet progress was relatively slow. The 11th Engineer Battalion committed nearly 50 percent of its total resources to the construction of the trace at a loss of 15 tractors and two dump trucks. As Marine units extended their efforts, North Vietnamese resistance increased. The same infantry battalions that were assigned to construction projects also had security missions. More than one bat-

*General Metzger wrote that the original Dyemarker plan did not contain the A-1 strongpoint: "It was only after the 3d Marine Division emphatically pointed out the area in which A-1 was finally located was the 'rocket belt' from which the enemy, after crossing the Ben Hai River, set up rockets and fired them into the Dong Ha Base. It was essential that this terrain be denied the enemy, thus A-1." Metzger emphasized the need for tactical plans to be developed by those who are closest to the situation. Metzger Comments.

talion commander complained about the strain on his men to build the barrier at the same time they fought the war. Brigadier General Louis Metzger, the 3d Marine Division Assistant Division Commander (ADC), several years later wrote that the "Marines required to do the construction work were exhausted from protracted combat and the so-called security missions were in fact heavy combat."²⁶

The Marine command began to view Dyemarker, the new codename for Practice Nine, as an albatross around its neck. Originally, although not happy with the barrier concept, General Krulak in June 1967 thought that it might be feasible to extend the trace from the sea some 25 kilometers inland and deny the enemy "a direct north-south route into the populous areas."²⁷ General Cushman, who had assumed command of III MAF in June, also thought that the completion of the strongpoint obstacle system would free his forces along the DMZ for operations elsewhere.²⁸ By the end of July, both men had second thoughts. In messages to the III MAF commander and to General Greene, the FMFPac commander voiced his concerns. Krulak radioed Cushman: "I am fearful, that, unless we call a halt, that MACV is going to nibble us to death in the Dyemarker project." He stated that he understood Cushman's problems: "You must get as much of the job done as possible in advance of the monsoon and you need help to do it."²⁹ In his message to General Greene, General Krulak remarked on the slow progress and the high costs of the barrier program. He reminded both men that the original barrier concept called for specific forces to take over the barrier, and he now feared that MACV was hedging on this support.³⁰

These considerations started to come to a head in August. III MAF briefed General Greene on the Dyemarker situation during the Commandant's visit to Vietnam in the early part of the month. The III MAF briefers observed that the original MACV concept called for a minimum of 7,691 additional men including an infantry brigade, construction battalions, truck companies, and other support units to reinforce the Marines in Dyemarker. None of these units had yet been forthcoming. The III MAF staff ended its presentation with the observation that the "Enemy activity in northern Quang Tri . . . greatly exceeded that assumed . . .," yet the Marines were under directives "to accomplish the tasks within available force levels."³¹

On 16 August, General Cushman appealed directly to General Westmoreland. He made much the same argument that he had in the briefing for General Greene. The III MAF commander reiterated that he

had not received any of the additional forces supposedly specified for the Dyemarker project. He emphasized that the buildup of enemy forces in the DMZ made the original estimate of minimum forces for the barrier now hopelessly out of date. Cushman then explained that the seven battalions that he had up in the north "cannot accomplish that task up forward and at the same time construct, man, and operate and defend the Strongpoint/Obstacle System . . . to their rear." He remarked that the only way "to get on with the job," was to shift an Army brigade from Chu Lai to Da Nang, and then move a Marine regiment from the Da Nang TAOR to the DMZ sector. General Cushman then asked General Westmoreland to consider this latter alternative.³² Cushman received assurances that he could deploy his forces as he saw fit, and on 30 August directed his 1st Marine Division to prepare plans for the movement of two battalions north to the DMZ. He explained to the division commander, Major General Donn J. Robertson, "everyone has to strain during Dyemarker."³³

At this point, the North Vietnamese took matters into their own hands. In early September, they began an artillery bombardment of Marine positions along the strongpoint system and Marine rear areas from positions above the DMZ. On 3 September, more than 40 rounds of mixed caliber shells struck the overcrowded Dong Ha base. An ammunition storage area and the bulk fuel farm went up in flames. The Marine helicopter squadron at the Dong Ha Airfield sustained damage to 17 of its aircraft, already in short supply. From as far away as 50 miles, Marine pilots aloft could see billowing smoke rising over Dong Ha. Considering the extent of the explosions and fires, Marine casualties were relatively light—no one killed and 77 wounded, and only one man seriously. The impact upon Marine logistics in the north and upon the III MAF capability to continue the Dyemarker project was another matter. In a message to General Westmoreland, General Cushman laid out the implications of the losses of material as a result of the attack on 3 September, and continuing with the barrier under the guns of the enemy. He observed that the destruction of the Dong Ha ammunition supply point "had a direct impact on my ability to proceed with Dyemarker." The III MAF commander then remarked that "We are rapidly approaching the time when a decision must be made as to . . . installation of the Strongpoint Obstacle System." Cushman related again the effort that his forces had been making despite shortages in material for Dyemarker and without the promised troop reinforcements for the project.

Both the ports of Cua Viet and Dong Ha as well as the troops working on Dyemarker were under the "same fan of guns" that had blown up the ammunition dump. According to the barrier plan, nine Marine infantry battalions and the 11th Engineer Battalion were committed to the project. Seven of the nine infantry battalions provided a protective screen while the engineers and remaining infantry units installed the obstacle system and completed the strongpoints. General Cushman estimated that this work would take another six weeks. During that time, troops putting in the obstacle system would be in the open and vulnerable to enemy fire. Cushman stated that he was ready to implement this part of the plan if certain minimum requirements were met. He wanted more artillery, air, and naval gunfire support, as well as a higher proportion of B-52 Arlight strikes. III MAF also needed additional supply, trucking, and engineering units.³⁴

Concerned about the increasing enemy strength and the progress of the barrier, General Westmoreland met with General Cushman on 7 September to make his own appraisal of the situation. After listening to the III MAF commander, Westmoreland asked Cushman to estimate the cost in both casualties and in material of continuing the emplacement of the obstacle system within the trace. Obviously expecting that the price tag would be too high, the MACV commander also ordered the Marine general to begin preparation of an alternative plan, based on the assumption of "no continuous obstacle . . . along present trace." III MAF's estimates of the consequences of adhering to the schedule of installing the obstacles caused the inevitable revision of the entire project. The Marine staff projected more than 700 men killed and at least 4,000 wounded, including both U.S. and ARVN troops, if the present course of action were to be followed. On 13 September 1967, General Westmoreland approved a new III MAF barrier plan.³⁵

The new Marine barrier plan postponed all work for the time being on the trace and emphasized instead the construction of the strongpoints and the base areas. Strongpoints A-5 and A-6 were eliminated while a new base area, C-4, was added just north of the Cua Viet. The ARVN was to construct the easternmost strongpoint, A-1, while the 3d Division was to remain responsible for the other strongpoints and the base areas. The plan called for the 2d ARVN Regiment to man all of the strongpoints eventually, while the Marines provided a mobile reserve force. In the western defile system, the Marine division would establish seven combat operating bases including Khe Sanh, Ca

Lu, the Rockpile, and Camp Carroll. These four operating bases as well as all of the eastern strongpoints were to be completed by 1 November. As far as the trace was concerned, the plan only read that the Marines were to install "the anti-infiltration system in such manner as to provide the option of further development of the obstacle system . . ." ³⁶

The enemy and nature were to combine to frustrate the new Marine time schedule. Through September and early October, North Vietnamese artillery, occasionally reinforced by ground forces, in effect, laid siege to the Marines at Con Thien. NVA artillerymen maintained an average of 200 rounds per day on the Marine strongpoint. On 25 September, more than 1,200 shells fell upon Con Thien. In a 10-day period, 18-27 September, the enemy gunners fired more than 3,000 rounds of mortars, artillery, and rockets at the embattled forward positions. Even as the enemy guns blasted away at the Marines, some of the heaviest rains in years fell on northern I Corps resulting in wide-range flooding. Swollen streams and rivers rose above

Portrait photograph of MajGen Raymond L. Murray, a highly decorated veteran of both World War II and the Korean War, who in early 1968 served as Deputy CG III MAF. Gen Cushman, CG III MAF, placed Gen Murray in charge of the barrier project.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A414537





Photo courtesy of Col Lee R. Bendell, USMC (Ret)

Into 1968, Gen Westmoreland continued to show command interest in completing the barrier. He is seen here, left, with LtGen Cushman, CG III MAF, center, and Marine BGen John R. Chaisson, who headed the MACV Combat Operations Center, visiting Marine Base Area C-2.

their banks and the onrushing waters washed away bunkers and trenches and made a quagmire of much of the barrier area. Although the enemy artillery was relatively silent in mid-October, the building of the strongpoints and base areas was at a standstill. In late October, after a period of benign neglect during the struggle for Con Thien and the monsoon rains, MACV again put on the pressure to continue with the strongpoint system. The assistant division commander, General Metzger, much later observed that there was a constantly "changing emphasis" on the Dye-marker project. There would be high interest followed by periods of low interest "with no materials available and response, direction, and guidance from higher headquarters either slow or non-existent." Metzger noted that "Those on the lower levels of the military hierarchy became very expert at reading the indicators" of both high and low interest.³⁷

Aware of the difficult circumstances under which the Marines on the DMZ labored, General Westmore-

land still believed that General Cushman and his staff should have had better control of the situation. On 22 October, he radioed Cushman that he was unhappy with the "quality control" maintained by III MAF over the construction of the Dye-marker facilities. The MACV commander stated that the project had "not been accorded a priority consistent with its operational importance." He noted that he was "on record with higher headquarters to meet a fixed time schedule." He realized that the schedule could be adjusted but "any slippage . . . must be supported by factors recognized as being beyond our control . . ." Westmoreland then directed General Cushman "to take immediate steps to correct deficiencies in the construction of the strongpoints and to institute a positive system of quality control over construction and installation of the entire Dye-marker system." The strongly worded message concluded with a reaffirmation that "Project Dye-marker is an operational necessity second only to combat emergency."³⁸

General Cushman, in turn, was to relay this new emphasis on the barrier to his subordinate commanders. In transmitting the MACV message to Major General Hochmuth, then the Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, Cushman remarked the "screws are being tightened." He then told Hochmuth: "This was not unpredictable and I am well aware of the factors involved . . . Nevertheless we must give this our closest personal attention and insure that we are taking all possible action within our capabilities and resources."³⁹

The III MAF commander's first action was to appoint a completely separate staff under his deputy commander, Major General Raymond L. Murray, to oversee the entire barrier effort. General Murray's Dye-marker staff reevaluated the efforts relative to the barrier and came up with yet another plan. In this new version of Dye-marker, the drafters reinstated Strongpoint A-5 and eliminated any hedging about the installation of the obstacle system along the trace. This latter feature was to be an integral component of the eastern sector of the barrier. Except for Strongpoint A-5, emphasis remained on completion of all of the eastern strongpoints by the end of the year. According to the new schedule of completion, the 2d ARVN Regiment would take over four of the strongpoints in 1968. The Marines would remain responsible for manning Strongpoint A-5 and the combat operating bases, except for C-1. In the western defile system, the plan called for construction to begin only at the Ca Lu combat operating base during the monsoon season.⁴⁰

Despite the elaborations of his staff on the barrier concept, General Murray had serious reservations about the entire project. He later revealed that he never really obtained a handle on the situation. Much of the Dye-marker material had been siphoned off by various commands for their own purposes. Many of the original timbers for the bunkers were green and untreated and began to rot under the pervasive dampness of the monsoon period. The Marines had much the same problem relative to the enormous number of sandbags required for the bunkers, and their rotting caused a "constant replacement problem." General Murray was able to obtain promises from General Starbird's group in Washington of new timbers and of replacement items, but his troubles continued. The III MAF deputy commander partially blamed some of his problems on his own lack of authority. He believed that the Dye-marker staff should not have been separate from the III MAF staff. Murray stated he was not in a position "to directly order anybody to do anything with relation to Dye-marker." As one of the most decorated Marine com-

manders during World War II and Korea, Murray instinctively "sympathized with the division commander whose primary mission was the tactical handling of his troops . . . rather than build the damn line that nobody believed in, in the first place." The seizure of the site for Strongpoint A-3 in early December confirmed Murray's doubts about Dye-marker: "How in the hell were you going to build this thing when you had to fight people off, while you were building it."⁴¹

Notwithstanding the handicaps under which they worked, the Marines had made significant progress by the end of the year. The 11th Engineer Battalion, under wretched weather and physical conditions, resurfaced Route 561 with rock and partially sealed it with asphalt. The battalion also worked on the laying of the subbase for Route 566. Route 561 connected Route 9 with Con Thien while 566 was to run parallel to the trace and link the strongpoints. Assisted by the engineers and Navy Seabees, the Marine infantry had built 167 bunkers with another 234 ready, except for overhead cover.* More than 67,000 meters of tactical wire had been laid and 120,000 meters of minefields emplaced. Strongpoint A-1 in the ARVN sector was finished as was the combat operating base C-2, south of Con Thien. The remaining positions in the eastern strongpoint area were about 80 percent completed. In the western defile system, the work at the Ca Lu strongpoint had proceeded with little difficulty with nearly 70 percent of the bunkers and material in place. With the expected arrival of additional supplies in the near future, the Marines expected to finish in February the installation of the obstacle system along the trace. The cost of these gains was dear. Not including the lives lost and the men wounded in trying to build Dye-marker, Marines spent 757,520 man-days and 114,519 equipment-hours. More than \$1,622,348 worth of equipment had been lost to enemy action in establishing the barrier up to this point in time.⁴²

The bickering, nevertheless, over the strongpoint system continued. Engineer inspectors from the MACV Dye-marker staff made several visits while the

*One Marine battalion commander, Colonel John F. Mitchell, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, which occupied Con Thien in the fall of 1967, remembered that he had a detachment of engineers "under my protection and operational control" for the building of Dye-marker. According to Mitchell, the engineer detachment worked "during daylight hours, mostly, in the open with heavy equipment . . . and showed enormous courage setting an example for all of us." Mitchell stated that the detachment suffered a higher percentage of casualties than his infantry Marines. Col John F. Mitchell, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 5Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

work progressed and made several criticisms ranging from the size to the color of the bunkers. During two trips to the DMZ sector in December, General Westmoreland expressed his dissatisfaction. He was particularly unhappy about the fortifications at Con Thien. Westmoreland observed that the bunkers there were built to house a 900-man Marine battalion rather than the 400-man Vietnamese battalion which was scheduled to take over the positions in the spring. Venting his frustrations in his personal journal, he wrote:

I have had no end of problems with the strongpoint obstacle system. The reason seems to be that the Marines have had little experience in construction of fortifications and therefore lack the know-how to establish them in the way I had visualized. I thus have been remiss in taking for granted that they had the background; hopefully it is not too late to get the project on a solid track.⁴³

In a formal message to General Cushman, the MACV commander laid out in detail what he wanted relative to the barrier. He stated at the outset that a strongpoint was "to be virtually an impregnable defensive position." Westmoreland noted that it was to be emplaced so that an ARVN battalion with supporting arms could withstand an attack by an enemy division. He wanted the primary defense to be based on "two-man fighting bunkers, that are hardened, mutually supporting, [and] protected by a dense field of defensive wire and mines." Radars, sensors, night observation devices, and searchlights would complement the defenses. General Westmoreland finally reminded the III MAF commander that he could consult *Army Field Manuals* 7-11 and 7-20 for further guidance on preparing defensive positions.⁴⁴

The Marine command, on the other hand, viewed the MACV staff and General Westmoreland's criticisms as unjustified. Marine generals saw the barrier largely as an impediment to fighting the war. Building the fortifications for the strongpoints was a case in point. The 3d Division looked at the bunkers as living areas able to withstand "a certain amount of enemy attention."⁴⁵ The actual fighting positions were outside the bunkers themselves. General Murray recalled that when General Westmoreland visited the positions, he called them foxholes and directed the building of covered emplacements for the fighting positions and bunkers with loopholes for rifles and automatic weapons. The Seabees then built for the Marines a half dozen of the new types of bunkers which the MACV commander personally inspected. Murray remembered that Westmoreland spent most of the visit discussing the comparative virtues of a sloping front as compared

with those of a solid front. According to Murray, he later often wondered why a MACV commander was concerned with "such trifles."⁴⁶

The 3d Division ADC, Brigadier General Metzger, laid much of the difficulties with the barrier directly at the feet of MACV. He remarked on the changing plans "verbally and informally, by General Westmoreland and seemingly on the whim of various staff officers." Several years later, Metzger remembered that the MACV commander constantly altered requirements. At Con Thien, "the 'bursting layer' on top of the bunkers was originally required to stop a mortar shell, that was soon increased to stop a 105mm shell." The Marine general personally suspected that the "Army would not be unhappy if the Marine Corps did not accomplish a first class job on Dyemarker, and is 'nit-picking' with the hope of establishing a background of 'Marine Corps incompetence.'" He believed that "at least some of the problems with MACV Headquarters are motivated by such a feeling."⁴⁷

Thus as 1968 began, the 3d Marine Division, under heavy pressure from higher headquarters, continued with its efforts to complete the strongpoint system according to the new guidelines. The division, on 31 December 1967, issued a detailed operational order, complete with overlays, charts, deadlines, and bunker designs. Based on the III MAF Dyemarker order of November 1967, the 3d Division directive specified the missions for each of the individual units. The 9th Marines had responsibility for most of the eastern strongpoint system. Its tactical area included all of the proposed strongpoints except for A-1 in the ARVN sector and A-5, a site not yet selected. With support of the engineers, the regiment was to complete construction of the strongpoint at Con Thien and the three combat operating bases, C-2, C-3, and C-3A, strung along Route 566. To the west, the 3d Marines was to start on Strongpoint A-5 when so instructed and to finish the strongpoint at Ca Lu in the western defile system. The 2d ARVN Regiment sector contained the easternmost strongpoint, A-1, and the C-1 Combat Operating Base. On the coast, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion was responsible for the C-4 Combat Operating Base.⁴⁸ This emphasis from above had limited impact on the actual units, except for the issuance of additional directives. On 22 January, the 9th Marines published its operational order on the barrier.⁴⁹ At the troop level, Dyemarker remained, nevertheless, only a vague concept except for the building of the bunkers. The Marine infantrymen's concern was the ability to defend themselves



Top illustration is Department of Defense (USMC) photo A801126 and bottom is from 12th Mar ComdC, Jan69
Aerial views take in Strongpoint A-1, Gio Linh, top, and Base Area C-3, bottom. Marine BGen Louis Metzger, the 3d MarDiv assistant division commander, noted the triangular shape of A-1 and compared C-3 to "an octagonal French Fort."



from their positions including bunkers, fighting holes, trench lines, wire, and minefields against the enemy with as few men as possible.⁵⁰

Bunkers and fighting holes were still subjects of discussion among MACV, III MAF, and the ARVN 1st Division. General Metzger observed that the ARVN-built bunkers varied greatly from the Marine. He compared the A-1 Strongpoint on the coast to "an immigrants' wagon train deployed in concentric circles to fight off an Indian attack." According to Metzger, C-1 looked like "an octagonal French Fort," and he described the Gio Linh strongpoint as "basically triangular in shape." The ARVN, he maintained, insisted that the bunkers "were not only for living, but also for fighting."⁵¹ By 14 January 1968, the MACV staff and ARVN staff members together with General Murray had worked out an agreement on the organization of the defenses. The ARVN accepted the concept of three-man fighting bunkers as opposed to 14-man living bunkers for primary defense. These fighting bunkers would be mutually supporting and connected by communication trenches. U.S. Seabees and engineers would prepare small prefabricated concrete fighting bunkers as soon as possible. Strongpoint A-1 would be redesigned and the engineers would install new fighting bunkers at Strongpoints A-2 at Gio Linh and A-3.⁵²

Work on the bunkers, minefields, and wire emplacements continued until the end of the month when "tactical requirements took precedence over Dye-marker."⁵³ Earlier, on 20 January 1968, General Cushman and General Westmoreland agreed to suspend the installation of the linear obstacle system along the trace "pending clarification of the enemy situation in Quang Tri Province."⁵⁴ For all practical purposes this was to end the command emphasis on the barrier. As General Cushman later admitted, he "just quit" building what he termed the "fence," and "Tet came along and people had something else to think about."⁵⁵ Yet, as General Tompkins concluded:

Dyemarker was a bete noire that influenced almost everything we did and they wouldn't let us off the hook The 3d Division was responsible for Dyemarker and if we were responsible for Dyemarker . . . then we had to have Carroll, we had to have Ca Lu, we had to have Con Thien, we had to have Khe Sanh. These are all part of this bloody thing . . . it had a great deal to do with the 3d Division being tied to static posts.^{56*}

* General Earl E. Anderson, who in 1968 was the III MAF Chief of Staff as a brigadier general, commented that he and General Cushman agreed with the opinion expressed by General Tompkins that Dye-marker influenced the entire tactical situation for the 3d Marine Division. Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

CHAPTER 3

The War in the Eastern DMZ in Early and Mid-January

*The NVA in the DMZ Sector—Operation Napoleon—Kentucky Operations and the Barrier
Operation Lancaster and Heavy Fighting in Mid-January*

The NVA in the DMZ Sector

As 1968 began, III MAF looked for the enemy to renew his initiative in the north. According to Marine intelligence, elements of nine North Vietnamese regiments belonging to three different divisions were in or below the Demilitarized Zone. These regiments operated either under their parent divisions or directly under the *DMZ Front Headquarters*. In 1967, the North Vietnamese had created this relatively new command, separate from the *Tri Thien Hue Military Region*, to coordinate NVA operations in and just south of the DMZ. All told, the *Front* controlled some 21,000 troops including divisions, regiments, and separate battalions and companies. In its annual report, MACV observed that the establishment of the North Vietnamese *DMZ Front Headquarters* "was a significant strategic move by the enemy." The North Vietnamese had succeeded in tying down a large allied force in the border area and were in position to mount a major offensive in northern Quang Tri Province.¹

In its December 1967 enemy order of battle, III MAF identified elements of three regiments of the *324B NVA Division*—the *812th*, the *803d*, and *90th*—and two of the regiments of the *325C NVA Division*—the *29th* and *95th*—operating south of the Demilitarized Zone. The Marines believed the headquarters of the *325C Division* and the *95th Regiment* to be five to ten miles northwest of Khe Sanh. The *29th NVA* regimental headquarters and two battalions remained in the southern sector of the DMZ about 20 miles north of Khe Sanh, but with one battalion, the *8th*, located only five miles north of the Marine base.²

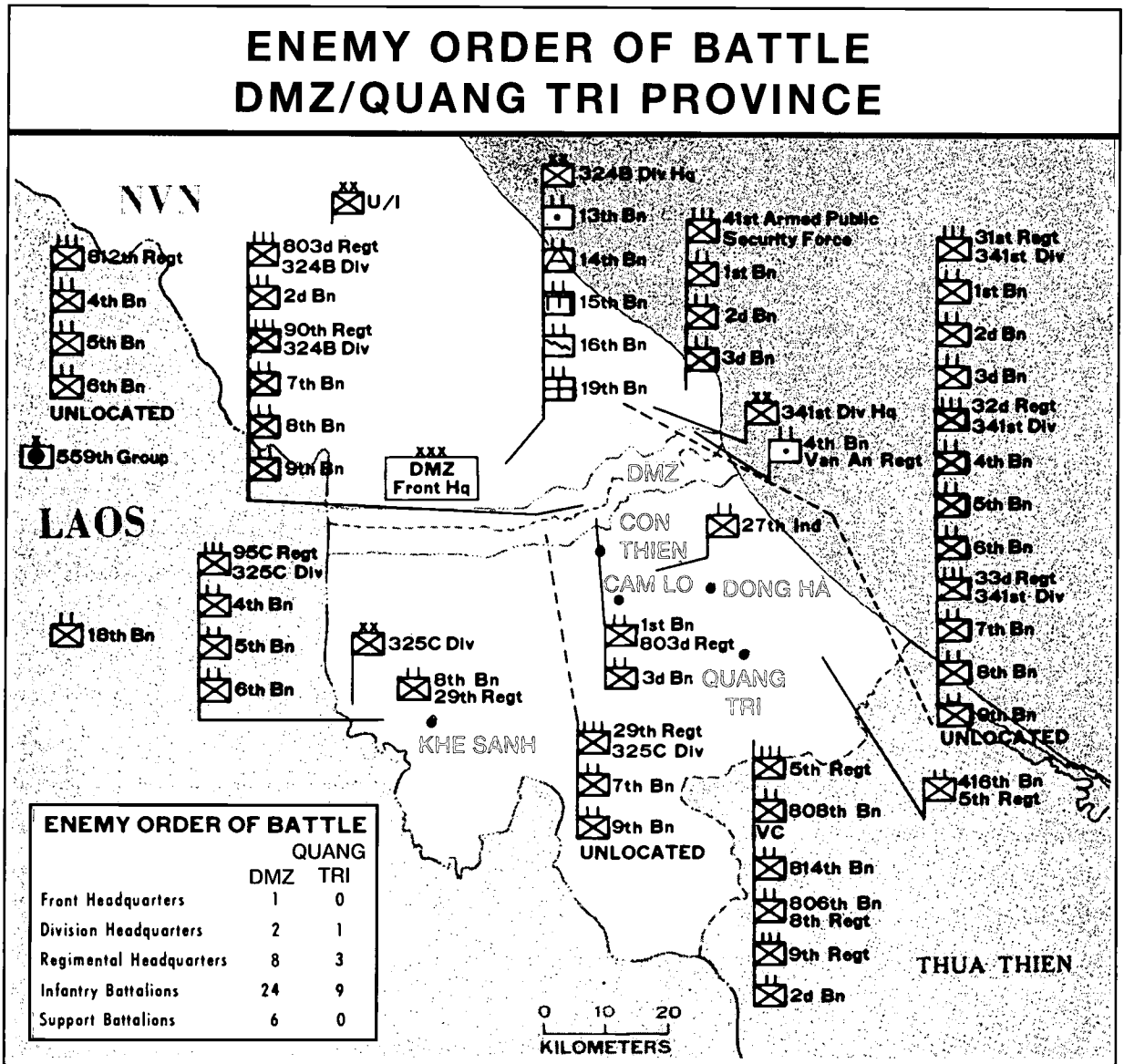
In the eastern DMZ, FMFPac intelligence officers placed the *324B Division Headquarters* five miles north of the Ben Hai River. The *812th NVA Regiment*, with all three of its battalions, was in the southern DMZ below the river, about five miles north of Camp Carroll. Both the *803d* and *90th* regimental headquarters were supposed to be collocated just above the Ben Hai.

According to the FMFPac order of battle, which differed in some details from the III MAF, the *803d* had only one battalion with the regimental headquarters. Contrary to being above the DMZ as III MAF showed in its monthly report, FMFPac indicated the other two battalions, the *1st* and the *3d*, operated inside South Vietnam—the *1st*, north of Con Thien, and the *3d*, near the flat, coastal area east of Gio Linh despite its lack of cover and concealment.³

The *90th NVA Regiment* also posed problems for the Marine intelligence community. FMFPac in its December summary displayed all three battalions, the *7th*, the *8th*, and the *9th*, together with the regimental headquarters above the Ben Hai in the DMZ north of Con Thien. III MAF, however, had evidence that two battalions of the *90th* had departed the regimental area, using elephants as pack animals, and moved west into Laos. The enemy units then entered South Vietnam south of Khe Sanh and traveled northeast. Following the *Mientay*, "The Road to the West," in this case actually the road to the east, one 600-man battalion ended up about five miles southwest of Quang Tri City. According to agent reports, the other battalion, about 400 men, infiltrated south into Thua Thien Province. To confuse matters even more, this intelligence indicated that the *90th* was now under the operational control of the *312th NVA Division* rather than the *324B Division*. This appeared to be unlikely, however, since the *312th* had not been in the DMZ region since 1966 and no other reports made reference to this division.^{4*}

In addition to the *324B* and the *325C Divisions*, FMFPac intelligence officers reported another division, the *341st NVA*, located in the Vinh Linh District of southern North Vietnam and obviously prepared to reinforce the enemy forces in the DMZ and in Quang

*Major Gary E. Todd, who served as an intelligence officer on the 3d Marine Division staff, commented that the North Vietnamese changed their unit designations "to frustrate our intelligence collection efforts against them, much like a criminal uses aliases to elude police." Maj Gary E. Todd, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 28Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Todd Comments.



Map from *Marine Operations in Vietnam, Dec 67*

Tri Province. The FMFPac order of battle also held another 5,000 enemy troops operating in southern Quang Tri that could be brought up to support the enemy forces in the DMZ sector. These included the 5th and 9th NVA Regiments, as well as elements of the 6th and the 27th Independent Battalions.⁵

While building up their infantry strength in the DMZ sector, the North Vietnamese maintained a credible artillery threat to the allied forces in the north. With some 100 artillery pieces, rockets, and mortars ranging from 60mm mortars to 152mm field guns, the North Vietnamese had all of the major Marine bases in the central and eastern DMZ well within their artillery fan. Their Soviet-built

130mm field guns with a range of over 27,000 meters easily reached Dong Ha, about 15 kilometers south of the Ben Hai.⁶

Dependent upon a relatively rudimentary supply system, however, the enemy failed to sustain a high rate of fire, seldom reaching a level of 1,000 rounds per day. From April through December 1967, NVA American-made 105mm howitzers and 81mm/82mm mortars accounted for the largest amount of enemy artillery expenditure. Over 13,000 of the mortar shells and slightly more than 5,000 105mm rounds impacted in or near American defensive positions, mostly around Con Thien or Gio Linh. These latter two allied bases were the only ones that were within the range of

the 105s. Although concerned about the enemy 130mm field guns, Major General Raymond L. Murray, the III MAF deputy commander recalled, “. . . they were an annoyance far more than an effective weapon. I don't think we lost very many people from them, and certainly we lost no territory as a result of them but it was a constant annoyance . . .” During the April-December period, the North Vietnamese fired fewer than 500 rounds from the big guns at allied targets in the south. Brigadier General Louis Metzger, a former artillery officer and the 3d Marine Division assistant division commander, observed that the enemy artillery followed certain patterns. Usually his bombardments occurred around 0600, at noon, and at 1700 with relatively little shelling at night. Whenever enemy use of the heavier calibers lessened, his employment of mortars rose. Metzger gave the North Vietnamese gunners generally only fair grades. Despite their employment of forward observers, the North Vietnamese artillerymen's readjustment fires on American positions were often inaccurate. Yet, Metzger conceded that the enemy gunners and rocketeers had little difficulty in targeting Dong Ha when they wanted.^{7*}

Notwithstanding that the North Vietnamese artillery units operated on a logistic margin, Marine commanders could hardly dismiss the danger they posed to the American defenses in the DMZ sector. Mortars and artillery rounds caused more than 70 percent of the allied dead and wounded in the north. For example, from 3–10 December, enemy shelling

*Major Gary E. Todd elaborated in his comments somewhat further on the effectiveness of the North Vietnamese artillery. While acknowledging that the volume of artillery fire was light compared to other wars, he emphasized that “this situation was different from other wars and this fire went beyond what we would call H&I [harassing and interdiction] fire.” He observed that the North Vietnamese guns often fired on Dong Ha, for example, “when aircraft were landing or taxiing to take off. By preregistering their fires on the airstrip their first rounds might give them the bonus of one of our aircraft, along with passengers and crew.” He noted, nevertheless, that the North Vietnamese gunners were selective in their firing so as not to give away their positions. Todd wrote that the North Vietnamese usually had a logical reason for their bombardment of Dong Ha—to keep voters away from the polls during an election or knowing that a few rounds at the Dong Ha base may explode an ammunition dump. According to Todd, “At any rate, the NVA artillery attack represented clever and cost-effective use of their assets.” Todd Comments. Colonel Edwin S. Schick, Jr., who commanded the 12th Marines in 1968, remarked that the North Vietnamese gunners had the benefit of the excellent military maps they had appropriated from the French and that “any point that they wanted to hit, they could.” Col Edwin S. Schick, Jr., Taped Comments on draft chapter, n.d. [1994] (Vietnam Comment File).

resulted in 124 Marine casualties from 727 rounds that fell in or around the Marine defenses. Although the artillery fire from the north diminished towards the end of the month, the NVA could increase the pressure whenever it elected to do so.⁸

With the guns massed into two major groupings, the North Vietnamese artillery belt extended westward some 15 kilometers from the Cap Mui Lay coastal region to a finger lake area just above the Ben Hai River. The belt contained about 130 interconnected artillery sites with each site capable of holding one to four guns. Reinforcing their artillery with a sizable antiaircraft concentration including nine SAM-2 (surface-to-air missile) sites and a mix of heavy machine guns and antiaircraft guns up to 57mm, the North Vietnamese impeded American air strikes against the gun positions and hampered air observation for effective counter-battery target acquisition.⁹

Both Generals Westmoreland and Metzger confessed at different times that American commanders lacked the detailed accurate information to determine the damage U.S. air and artillery inflicted upon the enemy defenses in the DMZ. Several years later, General Metzger observed that the American estimates on the number of enemy guns in the DMZ were derived from the III MAF enemy order of battle. According to Metzger, all the order of battle officer did was to take “all the identified enemy units known to be in a certain area and multiplies the weapons known to be in those battalions, regiments, and divisions. The actual numbers can be significantly greater or smaller.” Metzger claimed that the North Vietnamese moved their artillery pieces almost nightly from position to position, playing a kind of “moving shell game” with American intelligence officers, gunners, and aviators. At best, the North Vietnamese offered only fleeting targets for the U.S. forces. On 6 January, the 9th Marines reported that the NVA had constructed three new artillery positions north of the DMZ, each consisting of two guns and supported by an antiaircraft unit.¹⁰

While building up their infantry and combat arms in the north, the North Vietnamese also strengthened their logistic network and combat support capability. According to Marine intelligence estimates, the North Vietnamese had “demonstrated a remarkable degree of ingenuity” in overcoming U.S. air efforts to interdict their lines of communication. They quickly repaired roads and built pontoon or cable bridges to replace those damaged by American bombs. Major roads remained open to through truck traffic, but

were subject to delays because of the numerous bypasses, fords, ferries, and damage caused by the bombing. As a result, the enemy often substituted bicycles and porters for trucks. A man on a bicycle could transport about 500 pounds while porters could carry some 50 to 60 pounds.* The NVA supplemented its human pack carriers with mules, horses, and even elephants. A horse or mule could bear about 150 to 300 pounds while an elephant could take about 1,000 pounds on its back. An animal-drawn bull cart could hold up to 1,500 pounds. These alternate modes of transportation were slower, but more maneuverable than motor vehicles. Nevertheless, where and when they had the opportunity, the North Vietnamese continued to rely on both trucks and shipping to bring their supplies into the DMZ sector.¹¹

The enemy lines of communication in the North Vietnamese panhandle from Dong Hoi south to the DMZ consisted of 16 interconnecting roads, five waterways, the national railroad, and an extensive trail network. At Dong Hoi, North Vietnamese stevedores unloaded the cargo of seagoing vessels for transfer either to river craft or trucks for transshipment south. The enemy then impressed ships of 800 tons or less, or fishing junks, to ply the deeper waters and occasionally the open sea. Small shallow-draft canoe-like craft called pirogues with attached outboard motors were used on the more restricted inland water passages, such as the Ben Hai and the Ben Xe Rivers. Although the railroad was not functioning, its railbed served as a roadway for foot and bicycle traffic. The main north-south road arteries, Routes 101, 102, 103, and 1A, connected the three main North Vietnamese base areas in and above the

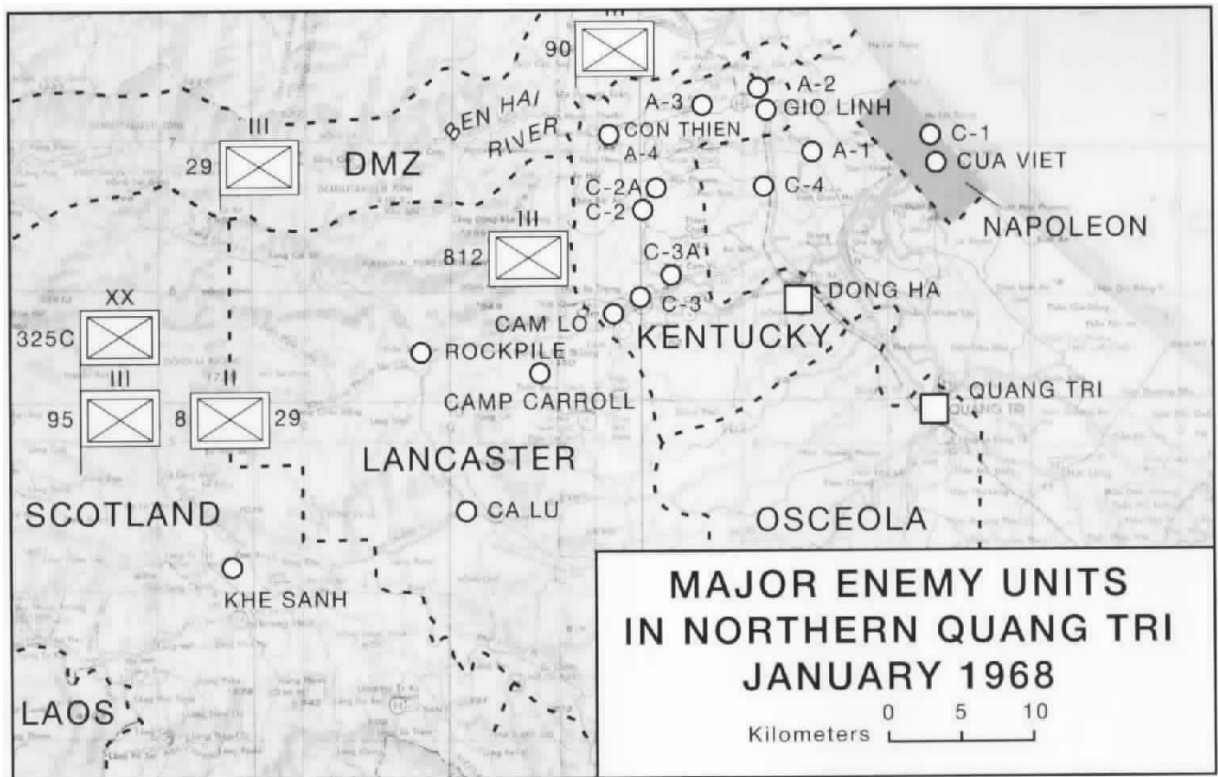
DMZ to one another and to the infiltration corridors further south.¹²

The northernmost base area, Base Area (BA) 510, 40 kilometers southeast of Dong Hoi, contained some 19 installations, including general storage areas, a warehouse, a POL (petroleum, oils, and lubricants) facility, and an ordnance depot. Located near the junction of Routes 101 and 103, which run southeast and southwest, respectively, towards the DMZ, the jungle-canopied base provided a relatively safe harbor for both troops and supplies destined for the forces further south. The largest of the base areas, BA 511, some 100 kilometers in area and at one point only 10 kilometers southeast of BA 510, extended to the northern edge of the DMZ. Its confines accommodated three bivouac areas, six troop-staging areas, and logistic storage depots. Lying astride the junction of Routes 101 and 1A, the base area served as the gateway for the North Vietnamese units moving south to attack the positions in the eastern DMZ sector.¹³

The North Vietnamese also moved supplies and troops from both Base Areas 510 and 511 to the westernmost base area, BA 512, situated in the DMZ where North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and Laos all joined together. This base area included a large staging complex consisting of both underground shelters and surface structures. Moreover, with Route 103 traversing its lower sector, BA 512 was a major transshipment point for both men and equipment prior to infiltration into the south. As 1967 ended, III MAF received disturbing intelligence that NVA units coming down the "Santa Fe Trail," the eastern branch of the "Ho Chi Minh" Trail in Laos that paralleled the South Vietnamese-Laotian Border, were entering the Khe Sanh sector rather than skirting it as they had in the past. In both the eastern and western rims of the DMZ sector, the enemy appeared to be on the move.¹⁴

At the end of the year, American commanders and intelligence officers attempted to assess the enemy intentions. Although the North Vietnamese Army had suffered heavy casualties in the DMZ sector, some 10,000 dead according to Marine sources, and had obviously been hurt, it was still a formidable adversary. General Westmoreland recognized the obvious advantages that the situation provided the enemy: He later remarked that the proximity of I Corps to North Vietnam was "always frightening to me." Indeed, he declared that "it was more frightening to me than it was to . . . [Lieutenant General Robert E.] Cushman," the III MAF commanding general.¹⁵

*The notion that a man either on a bicycle or walking a bicycle could move a load of 500 pounds may very well be hyperbole. Colonel Frederic S. Knight, a member of the 3d Marine Division staff, recalled a conversation that he had with news columnist Joseph Alsop: "he talked and I listened." According to Knight, Alsop presented the case of the bicycle and the 500-pound load. The Marine officer recalled he told Alsop that "such an assertion was unmitigated nonsense; add a 120-pound man to the 500-pound load and the weight of the bicycle itself and you get an unmanageable vehicle. I doubt it could be ridden, and if it could, it would have to be down a gently sloping very smooth paved road. Imagine pushing it up rutted muddy mountainous jungle trails and trying to brake that load on the way down. And if the bicycle fell over, how would one man ever restore equilibrium." Knight remembered that Alsop "did not address my objection beyond saying that he was privy to certain recondite research that indicated it was possible." Knight concluded, however, that this "datum go into the folklore category." Col Frederic S. Knight, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 10Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File)



Marine commanders and staffs, nevertheless, shared some of Westmoreland's concerns. At the beginning of the year, the headquarters of the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific in Hawaii prepared a 92-page "Estimate of the Enemy Situation, DMZ Area, Vietnam, 1 January 1968." In this detailed study, the FMFPac intelligence staff outlined both the perceived NVA strengths and weaknesses, the options available to the NVA commanders, and their most likely courses of action.¹⁶

According to the FMFPac staff, the North Vietnamese Army was "one of the best in Southeast Asia . . ." The NVA adapted well to the DMZ situation where they knew the exact location of the American positions and were generally more familiar with the terrain than the Marines. Although limited for the most part to movement by foot, the North Vietnamese soldier also gained a singular leverage from this apparent liability. As the Marine report noted, "This is certainly a slow mode, but due to this circumstance he [the NVA soldier] is restricted only from those areas which are virtually impassable to foot movement." Acknowledging the relative high morale and dedication of the North Vietnamese Army, the FMFPac staff writers observed that one of the enemy's major attributes was that he viewed "the present conflict as one which has existed for two generations, and he has no

great expectations that it will end soon, thus all of his actions are tempered by patience."¹⁷

The enemy, nevertheless, had obvious vulnerabilities. His troops lacked technical and mechanical training and experience. North Vietnam's "archaic logistical support system" depended upon a large reservoir of manpower and the NVA "continually revealed an inability to exploit any tactical opportunity calling for the rapid deployment of units and material." Moreover, the lack of modern communications often prevented senior NVA commanders from influencing decisions at critical moments once the battle was joined, handicapped by their limited capability to coordinate and control their units in rapidly changing situations. Prisoner interrogation also revealed that the high morale of the NVA soldier deteriorated "the longer he remains below the Ben Hai River."¹⁸

Balancing the assets and debits of the NVA forces in the north, the FMFPac staff officers then evaluated the most likely stratagem that the enemy would adopt in the DMZ sector. According to the Marine analysis, the North Vietnamese had various feasible alternatives, the most likely being:

1. a division-strength attack into northeastern Quang Tri to "establish temporary control of selected areas . . . ;
2. conduct multi-battalion or regimental-size attacks against "multiple" allied targets between Highway 9 and

the DMZ using forces both in eastern Quang Tri and near Khe Sanh. Might attempt "to hold Khe Sanh at least temporarily . . . because of its remoteness . . . ;

3. continue the present "pattern of harassing friendly forces with hit and run attacks, interdiction of lines of communication with battalion-size forces . . . ;

4. continue the present pattern and also fortify areas and ambush sites in Quang Tri to trap friendly forces and "dissipate our efforts and to inflict heavy personnel casualties and equipment losses on friendly forces . . . ;

5. withdraw all forces north of the Ben Hai and strengthen defenses.¹⁹

Given these choices, the FMFPac report concluded that the North Vietnamese would probably elect a combination of options 1 and 2, while at "the same time harass friendly forces with hit and run attacks, mining, and interdiction of lines of communications." Despite the NVA's recent reverses in the DMZ, the FMFPac staff members believed that the North Vietnamese leadership, "imbued with a Dien Bien Phu mentality," wanted to inflict a series of tactical defeats and heavy casualties among U.S. forces that would demoralize the American "home front" and make continued U.S. participation in the war politically untenable. On 13 January, General Cushman, the III MAF commander, radioed General Westmoreland, "An immediate enemy threat to III MAF forces is poised west of Khe Sanh. Additional heavy enemy concentrations are indicated in the A Shau Valley as well as in

and north of the DMZ." At this point, both MACV and the Marine command perceived northern I Corps as the most likely setting for any major enemy push.²⁰

Operation Napoleon

Along the DMZ, much of the war was indistinguishable from the preceding year. Work on the barrier continued and the same politically based rules of engagement applied to the DMZ. U.S. ground forces could not cross the Ben Hai River, but were allowed to conduct operations in the Demilitarized Zone south of the demarcation line and return fire across the line. Artillery, naval gunfire, and air missions were permitted against valid targets in the north. MACV insisted, however, that the Marine command notify it of every action against the North Vietnamese under these ground rules. Marine units remained in the identical sectors, each with its designated operational name, that they had manned in December.²¹

In the DMZ, the 3d Marine Division maintained three distinct tactical areas designated by operational codenames, Napoleon, Kentucky, and Lancaster. Lieutenant Colonel Edward R. Toner's 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion was responsible for the Napoleon Area of Operations, extending some three miles above and two miles below the Cua Viet waterway and two miles inland from the coast. The battalion's mission was to safeguard the vital Cua Viet Port Facility and

Navy LSTs (landing ship, tank) and smaller seagoing vessels could be unloaded at the Cua Viet Port Facility in the DMZ Sector, and transhipped to the main Marine base upriver at Dong Ha.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801124



companion logistic support facility as well as protect the river supply route to Dong Ha.

With the establishment at the mouth of the Cua Viet of an LST (landing ship, tank) ramp in March 1967, ships' cargoes could be unloaded onto LCUs (landing craft, utility) and LCMs (landing craft, mechanized) for the trip upriver to Dong Ha. As Marine forces and facilities expanded in northern Quang Tri, the Cua Viet supply channel became even more crucial to the Marine command. By the end of the year, the Navy Cua Viet Port Facility could accommodate two LSTs, three LCUs, and three LCMs, and move 940 short tons daily through to Dong Ha.²²

The 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion had transferred from the Da Nang TAOR to its new command post at the Cua Viet Port Facility at the end of April 1967 to provide general support for the 3d Marine Division. At the same time, the commanding officer of the amphibian tractor battalion became the Cua Viet installation coordinator and responsible for both the defense and administration of the Cua Viet area. In November, the 3d Marine Division divided Operation Kingfisher, the codename for the division campaign in the DMZ eastern sector, into the three operations of Lancaster, Kentucky, and Napoleon. In Operation Napoleon, Lieutenant Colonel Toner remained responsible for roughly the same area that the "Amtrackers" had been operating all along.²³

The battalion had the additional duty to construct the C-4 Combat Operating Base, about 2,000 meters north of the Cua Viet, and to assist the adjoining ARVN 2d Regiment to build the A-1 Strong Point, another 3,000 meters to the northwest. The A-1 and C-4 positions marked the eastern terminus of the barrier. While helping with the work on the barrier in December, Toner's Marines on the 11th engaged in some of the heaviest fighting of the month. In the sand dunes and scrub pine growth near the fishing village of Ha Loi Toi just north of C-4, the battalion in a day-long battle killed 54 of the enemy at a cost of 20 wounded Marines. Five days later the Cua Viet Facility came under artillery and rocket attack which resulted in 5 Marines killed and 31 wounded. Through the end of 1967, according to Marine statistics, Operation Napoleon accounted for 87 enemy dead and the capture of 2 prisoners at a loss of 10 Marine dead and 48 wounded and evacuated.²⁴

In January 1968, Lieutenant Colonel Toner's battalion consisted of his Headquarters and Support Company, Companies A and B, and an attached infantry company, Company C, from the 1st Battalion, 3d

Marines. A platoon of six LVTH-6s (an amphibian tractor with a turret-mounted 105mm howitzer) from the 1st Armored Amphibian Company, attached to the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, provided artillery support. A mortar section of three 4.2 mortars from the 12th Marines reinforced the fires of the howitzers.^{25*}

With its flat sandy coastal plain and the Cua Viet waterway, the Napoleon area of operations was ideal terrain for Toner's battalion. The battalion commander had at his disposal 64 troop-carrying LVTP-5s (landing vehicle tracked, personnel), 6 command and control tractors, 4 LVTEs (landing vehicle tracked, engineer) used for mine clearing, and 2 LVTR-1s (landing vehicle tracked, retriever) for repair purposes. These lightly armored amphibian tractors afforded mobility both on land and water. Within minutes, the Marines could reinforce any trouble spot within the TAOR.²⁶

Early January was a relatively quiet period for the amtrac Marines. They busied themselves with civic action in the nearby fishing village of Gia Hai, working on C-4, and building revetments for the tractors. Marine Sergeant Ron Asher with the attached Company C, 3d Marines at C-4 wrote his mother in December 1967 that he spent most of his "'down time' from patrols filling sandbags, and getting the amtracs and tanks dug in."²⁷

During a visit to the battalion on Christmas Day, General Westmoreland had expressed his dissatisfaction about the lack of protection for the amphibian vehicles. In relaying this concern to Lieutenant Colonel Toner, the 3d Division commander, General Tompkins, suggested that the battalion use steel revetments combined with oil drums and ammunition boxes filled with sand to safeguard the LVTs.²⁸

It was not until mid-month that the North Vietnamese made any serious attempt to probe anew the Marine positions in Napoleon. On 14 January, a Marine patrol, about 2,500 meters south of the Cua Viet near the coast, came across a design drawn in the sand, consisting of four circles with a huge arrow in the

* A later successor to Lieutenant Colonel Toner as battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Walter W. Damewood, observed that the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion in 1968 "had to be one of the most unique Marine battalions of the time in terms of personnel and equipment structure." He noted that in addition to its normal complement of personnel and equipment, the battalion had attached to it: Marine combat engineers, Marine infantry and tanks, and reconnaissance elements as well as Army armored personnel, and South Vietnamese Popular Force troops. He noted that the members of the battalion became known as "Am Grunts" because of the infantry role and mission assigned to them. LtCol Walter W. Damewood, Jr., Comments on draft chapter, dtd 31Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Top photo from 12th Mar ComdC, Jan69; bottom photo courtesy of Ron Asher
Combat Base Area C-4 appears in the top photo, while the bottom picture displays a typical bunker at C-4 in January 1968. The 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion in Operation Napoleon had the main responsibility for the construction of C-4 as well as the protection of the Cua Viet sector.



center pointing northwest towards the battalion command post. Making the obvious conclusion that this was a crude aiming stake for enemy mortars, the Marines changed the direction of the arrow so that any rounds fired from that site would fall into the sea. That same night, about 1,000 meters to the southwest, a Marine squad ambush from Company B, 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, just outside the village of Tuong Van Tuong, saw nearly 50 enemy troops moving on line towards them from the southeast. The Marine squad leader immediately called for artillery support. Within two minutes, the 105mms on the LVTH-6s dropped more than 100 rounds upon the advancing enemy. The NVA soldiers regrouped twice, but "broke each time under fire." A Marine looking through his starlight scope observed a number of enemy troops fall, but when two reinforced Marine platoons from Company B checked the area the following morning there were no bodies. Throughout the DMZ sector, the enemy appeared once more attempting to infiltrate into and behind the allied positions.²⁹

Kentucky Operations and the Barrier

Aligned along both sides of Route 1, the 2d ARVN Regiment filled in the gap between the Napoleon and Kentucky area of operations. Part of the highly rated 1st ARVN Division, the regiment occupied in December both the A-1 and A-2 Strong Points of the barrier and the C-1 base area. Major Vu Van Giai, the regimental commander, whom the Marines described as "an impressive officer with a good command of English," established his command post at C-1, located just west of the railroad and Route 1, about 6,000 meters south of Gio Linh. Giai kept one battalion at the C-1 base and deployed two battalions forward, one at A-1, near the destroyed fishing village of An My, about 2,000 meters below the DMZ, and the other at A-2, just above Gio Linh. On 3 January, Giai moved his reserve battalion, the 2d Battalion, 2d ARVN, from below Gio Linh to new positions north of the Cua Viet in the vicinity of Dong Ha. As a result of this relocation, the regiment and the 9th Marines in Operation Kentucky readjusted their boundaries. Nominally, the A-2 stronghold at Gio Linh, although manned by the ARVN, remained in the 9th Marines TAOR. According to the barrier plan, the ARVN eventually were to take over also the A-3 Strong Point, located halfway between Gio Linh and Con Thien, when it was finished.³⁰

Until that time, however, the defense and building of the barrier lay with the 9th Marines in Kentucky. Encompassing "Leatherneck Square," the approximately six-by-eight-mile area, outlined by Gio Linh and Dong Ha on the east and Con Thien and Cam Lo on the west, the 9th Marines area of operations included three of the five strong points of the "Trace" and two of the combat operating bases of the barrier, C-2 and C-3. The terrain in Kentucky varied from low-lying hills interspersed by woods and rice paddies in the northern sector to the cultivated Cam Lo River Valley in the south extending from Cam Lo to Dong Ha. Route 1 connected Gio Linh to Dong Ha and Route 561 extended from Con Thien to Cam Lo. Route 605 in the north linked the strong points along the trace to one another while Route 9, south of the Cam Lo River, ran from Dong Ha into Laos. All of these lines of communication, except for Route 1, required extensive engineer roadwork, including paving, widening, and resurfacing, to meet the logistical requirements of the barrier effort.

Although Operation Kentucky officially began on 1 November 1967, the 9th Marines was no stranger in its area of operations. The regiment remained responsible for the same ground and positions that it held during the previous operation, Kingfisher. For all practical purposes, the change of designation only served to provide a convenient dividing line to measure with the body-count yardstick the relative progress of the DMZ campaign. The identical concept of operations continued in effect: the 9th Marines was to hold on to Leatherneck Square, protect Dong Ha, build the barrier, and throw back any North Vietnamese forces attempting to infiltrate into the I Corps coastal plain.³¹

In January 1968, Colonel Richard B. Smith, who had assumed command of the regiment the previous September, controlled from his command post at Dong Ha four infantry battalions and part of another, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. Except for the two companies of the 2d Battalion, all of the other battalions belonged administratively to other regiments, the 1st, 3d, and 4th Marines. The 2d Battalion, 1st Marines defended the A-4 Strong Point at Con Thien; the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines worked on the fortifications of the A-3 Strong Point with three companies; the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines screened A-3 from positions on Hill 28, north of the trace; and the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines occupied the C-2 and C-2A combat operating bases on Route 561. Further south, the two companies of the 9th Marines protected the Cam Lo Bridge where Route 561 crossed the Cam Lo River and the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines artillery positions on Cam Lo Hill, the C-3

combat operating base. The remaining rifle company of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, Company M, attached to the 12th Marines, guarded the provisional Marine artillery battalion situated at the Gio Linh fire support base, south of the ARVN in the A-2 Strong Point.³²

A sea-going Marine during World War II and an infantry company commander during the Korean War, Colonel Smith had definite ideas about the war in the DMZ. He later observed that the Marines were "sitting in defensive positions up there playing strictly defensive combat" Smith believed that the troops required training in defensive warfare. He claimed that was an unpopular viewpoint since "Marines are always supposed to be in an assault over a beach, but this just isn't the name of the game out there." The emphasis was on good defensive positions and clear lines of fire.^{33*}

With the command interest in the barrier at the beginning of the year, the strong points and combat operating bases in the 9th Marines sector took on even more importance. Anchoring the western segment of the cleared trace, the A-4 Strong Point at Con Thien continued to play a major role in the regiment's defensive plan.** Located less than two miles south of the DMZ, Con Thien, although less than 160 meters high, dominated the surrounding terrain. Colonel Smith observed that if the enemy had held the position, "he would be looking down our throats" at Dong Ha.³⁴

Lieutenant Colonel Evan L. Parker, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 1st Marines had taken over the responsibility of the Con Thien defense in mid-December. A 1st

Marine Division unit, the battalion quickly learned the differences between the DMZ war and the pacification campaign further south. In contrast to the lightly armed and elusive VC guerrillas in the south, the North Vietnamese here often stood their ground, supported by heavy machine guns, mortars, and artillery. By the time the battalion occupied Con Thien, it had accommodated to the DMZ environment.³⁵

The Marines of the 2d Battalion in December worked feverishly on the A-4 Strong Point defenses. During the Christmas truce period the battalion added 11 bunkers and dug a new trench along the forward slope. The troops then sandbagged the bunkers with a "burster layer" in the roofs, usually consisting of air-field matting "to burst delayed fuse rounds." They then covered the positions with rubberized tarps to keep the water out. By the end of the year, all of the new bunkers had been sandbagged and wired in with the new razor-sharp German-type barbed wire. Protected by a minefield to its front, surrounded by wire, and supported by air, artillery, and tanks, the 2d Battalion lay relatively secure in its defenses at the exposed Con Thien outpost.³⁶

As the new year began, the Con Thien Marines enjoyed a small reprieve from the shooting war. Both sides more or less adhered to the terms of the shaky holiday truce, despite a small enemy probe of a Marine listening post on the perimeter. According to a Marine reporter, on New Year's Day, a Marine forward artillery observer at Con Thien looking through his binoculars at enemy forward positions across the Ben Hai suddenly spotted a large NVA flag with its single star emblazoned on a bright red background waving "in the breeze atop a rather crude flagpole . . ." Other Marines, mostly young infantrymen, crowded around to take their turn to see for what most of them was their first tangible symbol of the enemy.*** Secure in their conviction that the Marines would adhere to the cease-fire, the NVA deliberately taunted the American troops. Impatiently the Marine gunners waited the few hours for the

*There is dispute among some officers who served with the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines attached to the 9th Marines, whether there were standing operating procedures relating to restrictions on patrolling. A former company executive officer recalled that there were definite limitations on how far platoons and companies could move from their parent unit, 250 yards for platoons and 500 yards for companies. On the other hand, a former battalion commander and company commander with the 3d Battalion recalled no such limitations. The author found no listing of such restrictions in the 9th Marines Command Chronology for January 1968. The consensus seems to be that if there were such restrictions they were not always enforced and perhaps not even known. For the various viewpoints see Chambers Intvw and Maj Justice M. Chambers, Jr., Comments on draft chapter, dtd 17Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File); LtCol Otto Lehrack, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 29Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File); and Col Robert C. Needham, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Needham Comments.

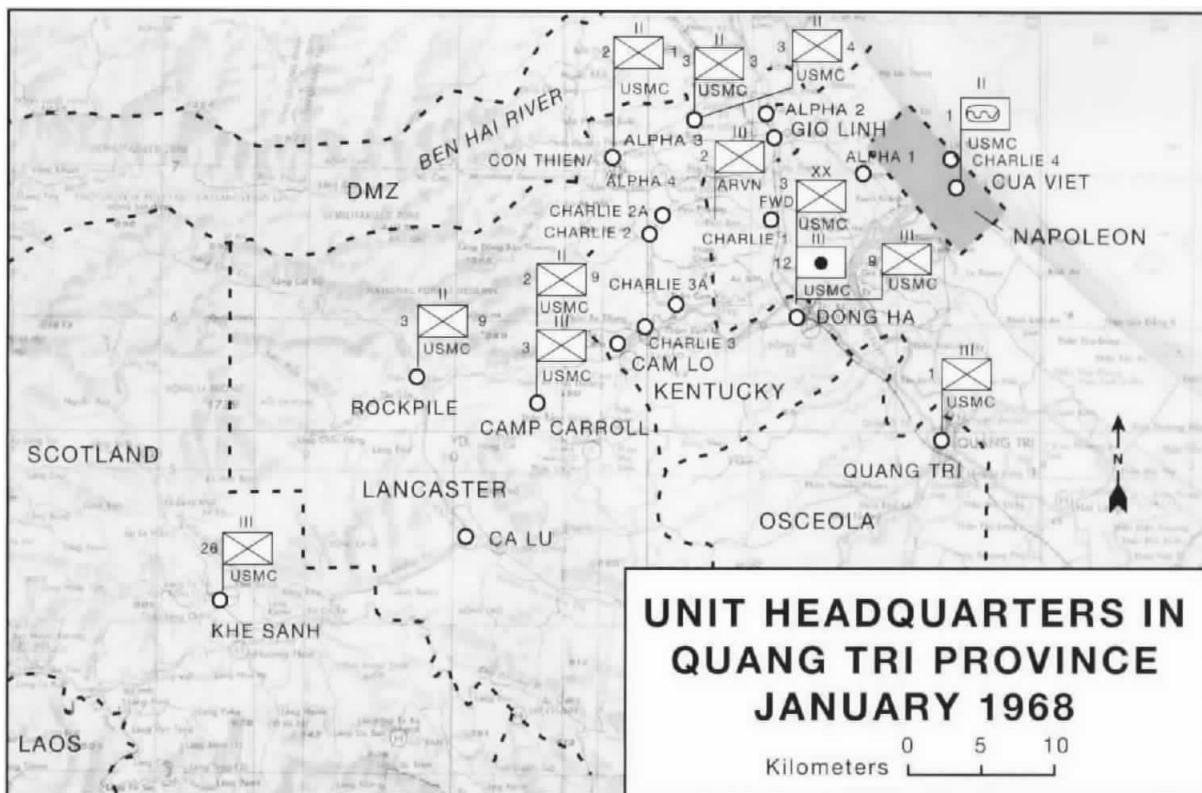
**Lieutenant General Metzger observed that Con Thien and Gio Linh had been French forts, which indicated very early that both sites were recognized as key terrain. LtGen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 17Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Metzger Comments.

***According to Lieutenant Colonel Otto Lehrack, who was a company commander with the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, it was not so unusual to see a NVA flag north of the Ben Hai River "just about any time you were on the cliffs near Gio Linh." He does concede, however, that the truce period may have been the only time that the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines may have had an opportunity to see the North Vietnamese banner. LtCol Otto Lehrack, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 29Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Lehrack Comments. See also Otto J. Lehrack, *No Shining Armor, The Marines at War in Vietnam, An Oral History* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992), pp. 211-12.



Top photo courtesy of Col Joseph L. Sadowski, USMC (Ret), and bottom photo courtesy of Col Lee R. Bendell, USMC (Ret) *The Marine base at Con Thien (A-4) is seen at top, with Marines constructing bunkers at A-4 in photograph at bottom. Col Lee R. Bendell, whose 3d Battalion, 4th Marines served at Con Thien in 1967, observed that NVA artillery fire "necessitated overhead protection."*





“false peace” to come to an end. As the time for the truce expired, the Con Thien guns opened up on the approaches to the defensive perimeter. The defenders then plotted a fire mission to take out the flag. Minutes before the artillerymen fired the first round the NVA hauled down their colors. In a way, this incident mirrored many of the frustrations of the Marines in the DMZ. The average 19-year-old manning the defenses at Con Thien and his commanders had difficulty understanding the validity of such artificialities as demilitarized zones that were not demilitarized, and cease-fires that appeared only to benefit the enemy.³⁷

The war soon resumed for the 2d Battalion at Con Thien. Although the intensity of combat never reached the level of September and October, the North Vietnamese persisted in their probes and occasional bombardment of the Marine outpost. The incoming mortar, artillery, and recoilless rifle rounds soon reached the level experienced by the defenders’ immediate predecessors. As recorded in the battalion’s monthly report, the “incoming was more harassing than destructive in nature”³⁸ On 5 January, the NVA gunners mortared Con Thien in groups of three to five bursts between 0945 and 1015. A total of 37 rounds, including five 120mm shells, fell on the Marine positions, with a direct hit on the battalion command post. This

resulted in one Marine killed, and eight wounded, including Lieutenant Colonel Parker, the battalion commander. Both Marine air and artillery attacked the suspected enemy firing positions, but the Marine command had no way of knowing the effectiveness of these efforts. After the medical evacuation of Lieutenant Colonel Parker, Major James T. Harrell III, the executive officer, was named acting commander of the battalion. On 9 January, Lieutenant Colonel Billy R. Duncan officially relieved Lieutenant Colonel Parker as battalion commander and Harrell resumed his duties as executive officer. The enemy shelling of Con Thien remained sporadic, averaging about 30 rounds on those days the NVA chose to fire.^{39*}

On the ground, the North Vietnamese had taken advantage of the holiday truce period to bring up fresh units and continued the pressure on the Marine outpost. The 803d NVA Regiment relieved the 90th NVA in the positions facing Con Thien. Almost daily, small patrols from the 803d tested the Marine defenses. For example, on 10 January, Company H reported in the early morning hours that “it had spotted three men, by starlight scope, moving in a westerly direction.” The Marines

*During January, the enemy fired on Con Thien 22 of the 31 days in the month. 2/1 ComdC, Jan68, p. II-4.

fired three M79 grenade rounds and later checked the area "with negative results." Later that night, about 2100, a Marine squad from Company F on the northeastern perimeter picked up enemy movement on its radar scope and called in a mortar mission. A Marine platoon patrol that went out to investigate the results of the action "blundered into [a] friendly minefield" and sustained three casualties, one dead and two wounded.⁴⁰

A few days after this incident, the night of 14 January, Con Thien Marines heard an explosion in the minefield directly to the north of their defenses. The Marines fired illumination and saw a wounded NVA soldier lying in the minefield and other North Vietnamese troops withdrawing. A Marine squad equipped with a starlight scope then attempted to recover the wounded man. By the time it reached the area, the Marines found no one there. Shortly afterward, a Marine outpost sighted about four to five NVA entering the battalion's perimeter apparently to retrieve their injured comrade. Another mine went off. Lieutenant Colonel Duncan sent a platoon out to check for any enemy casualties. About 0120 on the morning of the 15th, the Marine patrol as it neared the minefield "heard whistling and a great deal of noise," evidence of a large enemy force nearby. Both sides withdrew under covering fires. The NVA used recoilless rifles, small arms, and 60mm mortars to make good their retreat while Marine artillery and mortars targeted the enemy escape routes. Two Marines received minor wounds. About 1000 that morning a Marine patrol returned to the area where the enemy was last seen and found a pick, a wrench, a poncho "with fragmentation holes and large blood stains."⁴¹

For the Marines of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines in January, their tour at Con Thien, like the units before them, was their "time in the barrel." As Lieutenant Colonel Duncan many years later recalled, the North Vietnamese artillery destroyed much of the northwest minefield protecting the Marine outpost "as well as the forward trenches and bunkers in that area. Casualties were mounting. The hospital bunkers exceeded capacity with wounded on stretchers." The battalion commander remembered that one of the chaplains "broke under stress and attempted suicide."⁴²

Route 561, running north and south, was the lifeline for Con Thien. To keep this road open, General Metzger remembered that Marine engineers in 1967 "straightened out the route by cutting a 'jog' in the road that went to a by-then deserted village which reduced the length to Con Thien and simplified security." Despite this improvement, other complications arose. According

to Metzger, once the torrential rains came the water washed out the road. It took the engineers an extended time to obtain sufficient rock until they could build "a suitable roadbed" to carry the heavy traffic.⁴³

The Marines also established two combat operating bases, C-2 and C-2A, to protect Route 561. About 2,000 meters southeast of Con Thien, the C-2A base overlooked a bridge spanning a stream which intersected the road there. The Marines nicknamed the area the "Washout," because in heavy rainstorms, the waters flooded the low-lying ground. Another 3,000 meters to the southeast was the C-2 base which contained both artillery and infantry fixed positions. The terrain along Route 561 between Con Thien and Cam Lo consisted of low-rolling hills, numerous gullies, and waist-high brush. From both the C-2A and C-2 bases Marine patrols ventured forth "to keep the NVA off the road."⁴⁴

In January 1968, Lieutenant Colonel Edwin A. Deptula's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines occupied both the C-2 and C-2A positions, having just relieved the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines in the sector. Lieutenant Colonel Deptula established his command post at C-2 with Companies A and B. His executive officer, Major John I. Hopkins, formed a second command group and with Companies C and D held C-2A. Throughout the first weeks of the month, the battalion ran numerous squad- and platoon-sized combat patrols out of both C-2 and C-2A for distances of 1,500 meters from each of the bases and from Route 561. Actually the most significant action in the battalion's area of operations involved another unit. On 10 January, a small patrol from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion came across three NVA in a palm-covered harbor site, about 3,000 meters east of C-2. The reconnaissance Marines killed two of the enemy, took one prisoner, and captured all three of their weapons.⁴⁵

As part of the barrier system, the central effort at C-2 in early January was the completion of the bunker defenses. Several support units, including engineers, artillery, and tank and antitank detachments, shared the base area with the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. Although the engineers ran daily mine sweeps along Route 561 to Con Thien to keep the road open, they, as all the tenant units, assisted with the construction effort. On 10 January, a "Dyemarker" (barrier) team visited the C-2 site to inspect the defenses. According to the 1st Battalion's monthly chronology, "None of the bunkers could be considered complete. Maximum effort was later directed at bunker completion in keeping with the tactical situation."⁴⁶



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190200 and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190197. *Marine engineers with a bulldozer are building ammunition storage bunkers at Combat Base Area C-4, top, and a Marine platoon from the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines is seen at work building a bunker emplacement at C-4 with sandbags for overhead cover in January, bottom.*



Colonel Smith, the regimental commander, later explained some of the handicaps that the Marine units worked under in getting the work on the barrier completed. Few of the units had "backhoes" to assist in digging foxholes or bunker foundations. He observed that the machines could "do in two hours what it takes a whole battalion to do in two days." Despite scarcity of equipment, Smith also partially blamed Marine training for not teaching the troops "proper bunkering procedures—sandbagging." He compared sandbagging technique to laying out bricks "with headers and stretchers." The regimental commander remarked that he saw more wasted effort with the sandbags "because the man doesn't know what he is doing and the NCO supervising him doesn't know any more about it than he does so the wall gets to be six-feet high and collapses . . . and there goes three days' work gone to Hell." Overcoming the limitations imposed by its own inexperience in constructing bunkers and the lack of heavy earth-moving equipment, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines would complete 47 of the scheduled 81 bunkers in the C-2 base site by the end of the month.⁴⁷

South of Deputula's 1st Battalion in Kentucky were a small command group and two companies of Lieutenant Colonel William M. Cryan's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. In December, just before Christmas, the 2d Battalion had moved from positions north of A-3 in Operation Kentucky to Camp Carroll in the 3d Marines' Lancaster area of operations. A few days later, Lieutenant Colonel Cryan detached his Companies F and G and placed them under his executive officer, Major Dennis J. Murphy. While Cryan and the rest of the battalion remained at Camp Carroll, Murphy and his command returned to the Kentucky area of operations and relieved the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines at Cam Lo. Company F occupied the C-3 Cam Lo artillery position, 1,000 meters above the Cam Lo River on Route 561, while Company G protected the Cam Le Bridge (C-3A) on Route 9 at the river.⁴⁸

In the Cam Lo sector, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines patrolled Route 561 to keep the main supply route open to Con Thien and the farming villages above the river. At the C-3 base, Company F, together with supporting artillery and engineers, worked on the improvement of the Dyemarker defenses. On 15 January, the Marines at C-3 completed the bunker requirements on schedule. During this period, the Marine patrols encountered few enemy troops. In fact, during the first two or three weeks of the month, the enemy limited his activity to a mining incident on Route 561

on 2 January and to infiltrating the hamlets above the Cam Lo River at night. In these nocturnal visits, Viet Cong guerrillas recruited or kidnapped villagers and demanded food and other supplies. During the first two weeks of January, one Popular Force unit west of the hamlet of An My on three separate occasions ambushed VC troops trying to enter the village, killing at least three of the enemy. By the end of the third week, the 2d Battalion reported, however, "it was clear that there was a large amount of movement in and out of these villages, particularly to the east." In their patrolling of the hilly brush terrain in the Cam Lo northern area of operations, 2d Battalion Marines by mid-January made contact with more and more North Vietnamese regulars coming down.⁴⁹

To the northeast of the 2d Battalion at C-3 and C-3A, Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Needham's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines concentrated on finishing the last of the strong points along the "Trace," A-3, in the 9th Marines sector. In November, Marine engineers, later reinforced by a Seabee battalion, had begun work on the strong point. Designed according to ARVN specifications, A-3 was to consist of 30 18 x 32 feet bunkers, heavily timbered and sandbagged and covered by dirt. These were to sleep up to 18 ARVN troops on three-tiered wooden bunks. By Christmas, the Seabees and engineers had completed the raising of the timbers of the bunkers and departed, "leaving to the infantry the task of finishing the sandbagging." Up to this point, the Special Landing Force (SLF) Alpha battalion, BLT 1/3, had been attached to the 9th Marines and assigned to the A-3 position. At the end of December, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines with three companies moved from the Cam Lo sector to the A-3 position and relieved the SLF battalion, which was to join the 1st Marines at Quang Tri.^{50*}

*General Metzger commented that A-3 was a special situation: "first we had to fight to clear the ground of the enemy. Then as Christmas approached General Westmoreland suggested we withdraw until after Christmas and abandon the positions so there would be no casualties during the holidays.' We resisted to the maximum, pointing out that the enemy would occupy the position in our absence . . . the casualties in retaking the position would far exceed those which we might sustain in completing the position. In order to avoid abandoning the partially completed position we guaranteed that it would be completed before Christmas. A-3 was given the highest priority. Bunker material was flown in by helicopter and maximum effort was expended which was completed well before Christmas." Metzger Comments. Colonel Robert C. Needham, who commanded the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines at the time, remembered "the stringing of defensive wire and emplacing AP mines around the perimeter was, for all intents and purposes, completed when 3/3 relieved SLF 'A' (1/3) at A-3." Needham Comments.

Although the Seabees with their heavy equipment had left, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines had much work to do at A-3. The rains had come during December and the only fill for the sandbags was "sticky mud." A-3 still required defensive wire and some 30,000 mines to be laid. The battalion supported by engineers dug four-man fighting holes. Using mechanical ditchdiggers, the Marines and engineers trenched around the entire position. By 12 January, the 3d Battalion had erected an observation tower and nearly completed the entire project. According to Colonel Smith, the A-3 Strong Point "was a model for this sort of installation. This is the only one in the AO that had a plan to begin with. The others 'just grew' under half a dozen different commanders."^{51*}

Although subject to enemy artillery, the 3d Battalion took very few casualties at the A-3 Strong Point because of NVA shelling. The battalion's Company M protecting the American gun positions south of Gio Linh, on the other hand, sustained three killed and two wounded on 9 January as a result of enemy mortar fire. These were more casualties than Lieutenant Colonel Needham's remaining companies suffered at the hands of the enemy for the entire month.⁵²

The 3d Battalion, 3d Marines did come under fire from an unexpected source in January. In his monthly chronology, the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Needham, reported: "On 13 separate occasions a total of 54 friendly artillery rounds were received in or near the inner perimeter of A-3 and Hill 28 [just to the north of A-3]." On 5 January, for example, a white phosphorous shell landed inside the 3d Battalion's perimeter. The 9th Marines and the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines investigated the matter which resulted in the relief of the battery commander. Six days later, the battalion was on the receiving end of six 105 rounds within its wire, followed on the 13th by 24 rounds. At the same time, a short round fell on Hill 28 and killed two Marines and wounded six others. Other "friendly fire" incidents occurred on 15 and 19 January. In its monthly report, the artillery battalion, the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, made no mention of the mishaps but remarked, "considerable difficulty was experienced with computer hot lines to the firing batteries due to the unreliability of radio relay." It then contained the statement that staff visits

*Lieutenant Colonel Otto Lehrack, who commanded a company in the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, wrote that the battalion's operations officer, Major Raymond F. Findlay, "who designed and supervised the system" deserved the credit for A-3. Lehrack Comments.

to liaison officers and forward observers "have resulted in better communications on the conduct of fire nets." Lieutenant Colonel Needham, a former artillery officer himself, remembered several years later that "the situation got top-level attention and quick resolution when I finally told [the 9th Marines] that I refused any further support from the 12th Marines, and prefer no artillery to what I was getting." In his monthly report, he wrote that "corrective action appears to have been initiated and a definite improvement in this regard has been made during the latter part of the month."^{53**}

Just north of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Lee R. Bendell's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines screened the approaches to the A-3 Strong Point. On 26-27 December, Bendell's battalion deployed from C-2 and relieved the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines on Hill 28, a slight rise about 600 meters north of A-3 and just forward of the trace. Bendell expanded his battalion's perimeter and moved his companies off the top of the hill to new positions lower down. Marine engineers bulldozed the growth and trees immediately to the west, which provided the battalion better observation of the surrounding terrain and improved fields of fire. Low rolling hills with secondary scrub and thick brush, broken by flat, wet rice paddies of 75 to 150 meters, lay to the north and east. Wide rice paddies also were interspersed with the woods to the west. To the south, the Marines had a clear line of sight to the A-3 Strong Point and the trace which marked the battalion's southern boundary. The northern boundary extended to the southern edge of the Demilitarized Zone, less than 1,000 meters from Hill 28.⁵⁴

Close to the DMZ and with elements of the 90th NVA Regiment believed to be in his sector, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell insisted on alertness. He deployed his battalion into a three-company perimeter, leaving one company in reserve. Bendell used the reserve company for night ambushes and listening posts (LP) and as a reaction force during the day. According to the battalion commander, he maintained four to six ambushes

**Colonel Needham observed in his comments that it was obvious to him "that the friendly fire we received was due to basic breakdowns at the firing battery/FDC [fire direction center] levels." Needham Comments. Lieutenant General Louis Metzger believed that the problem was that the main division headquarters was still at Phu Bai in early January 1968 and the "need for fire control elements was at Dong Ha." He believed the situation was alleviated when the division later in the month moved the main headquarters elements to Dong Ha. Metzger Comments.



Photo courtesy of Col Robert C. Needham, USMC (Ret)

Col Richard B. Smith, second from left, the 9th Marines commander, is seen visiting Strongpoint A-3 in January 1968 and in conversation with LtCol Robert C. Needham, to the right of Col Smith, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines commander, and two of his officers: Maj Raymond F. Findlay, Jr., the 3d Battalion operations officer, is to the left of Col Smith, and Captain Robert R. Beers, the commander of Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, is to the right of LtCol Needham.

and LPs on any particular night. During the day, the battalion patrolled constantly, with as many as two companies out at a time.

Lieutenant Colonel Bendell reinforced the infantry companies with four 106mm recoilless rifles, two .50-caliber machine guns, and six of the battalion's 81mm mortars. He had left the two remaining mortars back in the base camp so that the extra men from the 81mm mortar platoon could "... hump... additional ammo, if we had to move out."⁵⁵ The 2d Battalion, 12th Marines provided direct artillery support and the 1st MAW, close air support.

The "Thundering Third," as the battalion called itself, was no stranger to the DMZ war. It had been at Con Thien in July through early September 1967 during some of the heaviest fighting and bombardment around that strong point. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, who had assumed command that July, remembered that the battalion "had actively patrolled the surrounding area" that summer and helped establish strong points at C-2, C-3, Cam Lo Bridge, and the "Washout," and also deployed a detachment to Gio Linh.⁵⁶

Soon after the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines arrived on Hill 28, it again found itself engaged with the enemy. On the morning of 30 December, Company M, commanded by Captain Raymond W. Kalm, Jr., on patrol to the southwest of the battalion perimeter came across six empty NVA bunkers facing east, about 2,000 meters from Hill 28. After destroying the enemy bunkers, the company advanced toward the northwest. About 1330 that afternoon near a small stream about 1,500 meters west of Hill 28, the Marines ran into an enemy rear guard of about 4 to 10 men. In the resulting exchange of fire, Company M sustained casualties of one killed and four wounded. Captain Kalm called in artillery and 81mm mortar missions. After the skirmish the Marines found the body of one North Vietnamese soldier.⁵⁷

On the following morning, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell sent out Captain John L. Prichard's Company I into roughly the same area that Company M had met the NVA. Prichard's company moved out from Hill 28 in platoon columns. As Bendell explained, this formation discouraged the troops from stringing



Photo courtesy of Col John D. Carr, USMC (Ret)

LtCol Lee R. Bendell, the commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, center, poses with the company commanders of the "Thundering Third." From left are Capt John L. Prichard (Company I), Capt John D. Carr (Company L), Bendell, Capt Raymond W. Kalm, Jr. (Company M), and Capt Edward O. Leroy (Company K)

out and permitted the company commander "to deploy fire power immediately to the front." Following a trail near the destroyed village of Xuan Hai where the DMZ boundary made a northward hump on the map, 1,800 meters northwest of Hill 28, Prichard's point, Staff Sergeant C. L. Colley, spotted four to five North Vietnamese troops to his front. The company commander ordered two platoons forward to a slight rise in the ground and brought his third platoon in behind the CP (command post) group to protect the rear. In the initial exchange, the North Vietnamese had the advantage, but the Marine company soon had the upper hand. Moving rapidly back and forth across the Marine line, Prichard and his officers and NCOs rallied their troops and "India Company rather shortly gained fire superiority."⁵⁸

At that point, around noon, the Marines observed a second group of NVA maneuvering to reinforce the

first. The company brought the reinforcements under 60mm mortar and small-arms fire and forced the enemy to lie low. A half-hour later, the Marines, themselves, came under heavy enemy 82mm-mortar bombardment from their right flank, generally to the northeast. By this time, it was apparent that the enemy was in "strong bunkered positions all across the front and right front of India Company."⁵⁹

Despite marginal flying conditions because of 500- to 1,000-foot cloud ceilings and reduced visibility, an aerial observer (AO) arrived over the scene. Giving his call sign "Smitty Tango," the AO made radio contact with Prichard and adjusted the company's 60mm counter-mortar fire. The Marine mortars knocked out one of the enemy tubes and "caused the others to cease fire." With this success to his credit, the AO pulled off and the company called in an artillery mission, hitting the enemy positions with mixed caliber rounds. The Marine shelling "threw [NVA] bodies in the air as

India [Company I] walked 155mm [fire] towards friendly lines."⁶⁰

The Marine company sustained four wounded and had begun to take fire from its right front. One of the wounded was one of the company's snipers who had moved too far forward and lay exposed to enemy fire. A corpsman attempted to rescue the man, but was hit himself and forced to turn back. With his gunnery sergeant laying down a base of fire, Captain Prichard rushed forward and carried back the seriously wounded Marine to the company positions. A Marine helicopter from HMM-163, in a medical evacuation (MedEvac) mission, flew the wounded out from an improvised landing zone just to the company's rear in a defilade area.⁶¹

Although the enemy attempted to jam the Marine radio net, "Smitty Tango" remained in communication with Captain Prichard and Second Lieutenant Albert B. Doyle, the company's attached forward artillery observer. At 1350, the AO checked the artillery fire and called in two Marine "Huey" (Bell UH-1E helicopter) gunships from Marine Observation Squadron (VMO) 6 that had covered the landing of the evacuation helicopter. The gunships made several passes at the enemy mortar positions in open bomb craters near the Marine positions. When the air arrived, several NVA soldiers "actually [were] standing up in their holes, only a 100 to 150 meters away from India Company and firing both at the AO and the aircraft as they conducted strikes upon them." As the lead Huey, piloted by Major Curtis D. McRaney, came in on its first run, its guns jammed. According to McRaney's copilot, Major David L. Steele, "one of the NVA must have noticed this because he stepped out of his hole and began firing at us with his automatic weapon on our next pass." This was a mistake. As Steele observed, "on successive passes . . . we were able to cover the crater area with rockets and machine gun fire, killing most of the enemy." The AO reported that he saw the North Vietnamese "dragging eight bodies into a tunnel."⁶²

After the air strikes, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, who had been monitoring the radio traffic, decided to pull India Company back to Hill 28. By this time, the North Vietnamese had brought up further reinforcements and Bendell believed, "There was no need to assault the [NVA] position." According to Bendell, Marine supporting arms, both artillery and gunships, would have "a real desired effect upon the enemy . . ."⁶³

As Company I broke contact and started to withdraw, the troops saw a large NVA unit, apparently

dressed in Marine uniforms,* closing in. The Huey gunships then laid down extensive covering fire and then the artillery took over. By 1530, the company had returned to Hill 28. Colonel Smith, the 9th Marines commander, personally greeted "the men of the Hungry I" with a deserved "well done." The company, while sustaining casualties of only four wounded, had accounted for 27 enemy dead, not including the eight NVA taken out by the helicopters, or the unknown number of enemy killed by the artillery. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell recommended Captain Prichard for the Navy Cross; he received the Silver Star.⁶⁴

For the next few days, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines had a relatively uneventful time in their forward position. In the early morning hours of 6 January, however, a listening post heard movement just outside the battalion's perimeter. The Marines opened fire with both small arms and M79 grenade launchers. One of the defenders saw something fall, but an attempt to check the area drew enemy fire. In daylight hours, the Marines found no evidence of any enemy bodies. It was apparent to the battalion, however, that its quiet period was over.⁶⁵

On the following day, 7 January, the Marines on Hill 28 began to take sniper rounds from an enemy-held ridgeline about 800 meters to their front and situated just to the south of the DMZ boundary. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell ordered Captain John D. Carr, the commanding officer of Company L, to flush out the sniper who had already wounded one Marine. Carr sent out that morning two six-man teams from his 1st Platoon. The two teams approached the enemy-held ridge from both flanks and then linked up into a squad-size patrol. As the squad moved over the ridgeline, enemy AK-47s and machine guns opened up. Positioned in well-entrenched defenses dug out of the numerous American-made bomb craters pocketing the side of the ridge, the NVA gunners killed one Marine and wounded another. Unable to advance or withdraw, the Marines took what cover they could and returned the fire. In radio contact with the squad and aware of its plight, Captain Carr ordered the remainder of the 1st Platoon to reinforce the entrapped Marines.

*Major Gary E. Todd, a former 3d Marine Division intelligence officer, wrote that he doubted that the NVA were dressed in Marine uniforms: "there were several instances when Marines mistook NVA for other Marines, due to the similarity of uniforms. They [the NVA] wore utilities of almost the identical color to ours, and often wore Russian-style steel helmets, frequently with a camouflage net . . . We, of course, had cloth camouflage covers on our helmets. . . . From a distance . . . the helmets were hard to distinguish." Todd Comments.

Although the platoon reached the embattled squad about 1530 that afternoon, it too found itself in an untenable position. The North Vietnamese had good clear fields of fire and also had brought up reinforcements. Employing M79 grenade launchers, hand grenades, and rifles, the 1st Platoon fought off the NVA and called for further assistance.⁶⁶

Captain Carr then led the rest of Company L to the base of the ridge and flanked the enemy positions. Although unable to link up with its 1st Platoon on the forward slope, the company laid down a base of fire and Carr called in artillery to prevent the enemy from making any further reinforcements. Despite a slight drizzle and a low-lying cloud cover, the company commander made radio contact with an aerial observer who was able to adjust the supporting arms including the company's 60mm mortars. With the increased fire support, the 1st Platoon managed to hold out but with evening fast approaching the situation remained serious.⁶⁷

At this point, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell ordered Captain Carr to have the 1st Platoon "to break contact and pull back across the ridgeline." To cover the platoon's withdrawal, the aerial observer called in air strikes and artillery within 100 meters of the Marines. The battalion commander also deployed two platoons of Company K to high ground about 1,000 meters west of Company L. Despite these protective measures, the enemy took a heavy toll of the Marines of the 1st Platoon as they disengaged and rejoined the rest of the company. Since its first elements made contact with the enemy, Company L sustained casualties of 6 dead and 36 wounded, 28 of whom required evacuation. Captain Carr asked for a MedEvac helicopter to take out the worst of the wounded.⁶⁸

As the Marines waited, a CH-46D Boeing Vertol "Sea Knight" helicopter from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 164 (HMM-164), piloted by Captain Richard G. Sousa, took off from Phu Bai to carry out the evacuation mission. Because of the rain and heavy winds, Sousa flew low to the ground. As the helicopter approached the improvised landing zone, the Company L Marines fired illumination flares to guide the pilot "out of the darkness." Tracers from NVA machine guns made the situation literally "touch and go." After the aircraft landed, the enlisted crewmen immediately jumped out and helped the infantry load their casualties on board. The helicopter then lifted off, still under fire and unable to use its M60 machine guns because the North Vietnamese were too close to the Marine company.⁶⁹

With the safe evacuation of most of its wounded and under cover of supporting arms, Company L made its way to Company K's forward positions without taking any further casualties. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell explained that he had placed Company K's two platoons on the high ground for psychological reasons as much as for tactical: "If you can pass through friendly lines when you are half-way back, it's a big morale boost to the troops, and also covers the rear of the force returning to the battalion perimeter." On the whole, Bendell praised Carr's handling of a difficult situation: "We committed early, the company commander made good time up there, and was able effectively to employ his supporting arms." Otherwise, the battalion commander believed "this one platoon would have been cut off and destroyed." As it was, in the confusion of the evacuation of the dead and wounded, the Marine company left a body of a 1st Platoon Marine on the ridgeline.⁷⁰

On the following day, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell sent Company L out to recover the missing Marine. Bendell ordered Captain Carr to delay the mission until noon because of the continuing rain and low ceiling. The battalion commander wanted an aerial observer overhead to cover the Marine company. As Company L advanced toward its previous day's position, the AO spotted the body of the Marine and about 12 NVA in the vicinity. The North Vietnamese had dragged the dead man into the DMZ. Believing "that the body was being used as a bait for a trap," Bendell recalled the Marine company to Hill 28 and then saturated the area with artillery and air.⁷¹

Lieutenant Colonel Bendell then decided upon a new tactic. He and his staff worked out plans for a three-company operation, supported by air and artillery, into the Demilitarized Zone to bring back the body. Instead of approaching the objective straight on, the battalion would leave one company in blocking positions on high ground northwest of Hill 28, south of the DMZ. The other two companies were first to move northeast, then wheel due north into the DMZ, and then advance in a southwesterly direction, coming upon the enemy from the rear and the flanks.⁷²

After a preliminary artillery bombardment and ground-controlled TPQ radar air strikes all along the eastern DMZ front so as not to give away the route of march, at 0500 on 11 January, the battalion moved out as Lieutenant Colonel Bendell remembered, "with strict radio silence."⁷³ As planned, Captain Carr's Company L occupied the ridgeline to the northwest. Under the cover of darkness and fog, the two attack

companies, Companies K and M, with Company K in the lead, and Bendell's command group sandwiched between the two companies, advanced in a northeasterly direction toward the DMZ. After about 1500 meters, the battalion veered north and penetrated 500 meters into the southern half of the Demilitarized Zone. Once in the DMZ, according to plan, the two companies swung in a southwesterly direction along parallel paths, separated by a fallow rice paddy. Company M, with the battalion command group, remained still somewhat behind Company K, protecting both the battalion rear and left flank. With the lifting of the morning haze about 0900, the first of a trio of 3d Marine Division aerial observers arrived overhead. At about the same time, Captain Edward O. Leroy's Company K came across the first of several NVA bunkers near the abandoned and largely destroyed village of An Xa. Employing both artillery and air support, the company easily overcame scattered enemy resistance. At one point, Captain Kalm, the Company M commander, saw what appeared to be, at first blush, three bushes, but turned out to be well-camouflaged NVA soldiers, maneuvering to the rear of his company column. He directed machine gun fire in that direction "and then started calling artillery fire and the three bushes were seen to disappear over the hill to our rear."⁷⁴

For the next three hours, the two Marine companies remained in the DMZ. In and around An Xa, Company K blew up some 25 bunkers and captured about 10 weapons including one machine gun, a rocket-propelled grenade launcher (RPG), and several AK-47s and other rifles. The Marines also confiscated or destroyed cooking utensils, pieces of uniform and equipment, food, and documents that identified the North Vietnamese unit in the sector as the *2d Company, 7th Battalion, 90th NVA Regiment*. In their haste, the NVA troops left cooked rice still in the pot and still warm. Further to the south, Company M protected Company K's exposed southern flank and recovered without incident the body of the missing Marine from Company L. By afternoon on the 11th, both companies had passed through Company L's blocking positions and returned to the battalion CP on Hill 28. The Marines sustained only two casualties, both wounded, and only one of whom had to be evacuated. According to Marine accounts, they killed at least 15 NVA and probably inflicted more casualties with artillery and air.⁷⁵

According to Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, by "achieving surprise . . . moving during darkness," he

and his operations officer, Major Richard K. Young, believed the sweep of the southern DMZ was a successful demonstration of coordination between the infantry on the ground and supporting arms. On two occasions, the aerial observers called in air strikes on NVA troops in the open attempting to flank the Marine companies. Young, who stayed behind at the battalion combat operations center (COC) on Hill 28, later stated: ". . . we were able to have artillery on 30 seconds before air got there and then we could run air strikes and then turn on the artillery . . . [we] had some type of fire on the enemy almost the entire duration of the operation." The operations officer remembered: "Several times when artillery wasn't getting there fast enough, the company commander would jump on the battalion tac [tactical radio net] and get in touch with myself back at the COC." Young would then "get 81mm fire out there to fill the void in artillery or get with my artillery liaison officer or my forward air controller and get this continuous fire while the troops were advancing along the bunker complex." Shortly after the return of the battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell briefed the 3d Marine Division staff and the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., who was on a visit to Vietnam, at the Dong Ha headquarters on the successful completion of the operation.⁷⁶

With the termination of the DMZ sweep, the sojourn of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines on Hill 28 was about over. The completion of the A-3 Strong Point reduced the need for a forward battalion to protect the approaches. On 12 January, Bendell's battalion began its move to a new position along the trace near the abandoned village of An Phu and closer to Con Thien.* For the 9th Marines in Operation Kentucky, the strongpoint system was about as complete as it was ever going to be. Still, as Lieutenant Colonel Bendell several years later observed: "there was evidence of an NVA build up throughout the DMZ sector."⁷⁷

Operation Lancaster and Heavy Fighting in Mid-January

By mid-January, the North Vietnamese began to intensify their efforts to cut Route 9 especially along

* Lieutenant Colonel Lehrack who was with the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines at this time noted that even with the reduced need for a forward battalion and after the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines departed Hill 28, his battalion placed two companies on the hill and kept them there for several months. Lehrack Comments.



Top photo courtesy of Col Gorton C. Cook, USMC (Ret) and bottom is from the 12th Mar ComdC, Dec68. *Route 9 is seen looking south from a Marine outpost located on the northern end of the Rockpile, top, and an aerial photograph shows the Marine base at Ca Lu, bottom. In January 1968, Ca Lu for the Marines was the western terminus of Route 9 since the road was cut between there and the Marine base at Khe Sanh. LtCol Gorton C. Cook's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines manned both the Rockpile and Ca Lu posts.*



the tenuous supply route to Ca Lu. Since November 1967, Colonel Joseph E. Lo Prete's 3d Marines had conducted Operation Lancaster protecting the western flank of the 9th Marines in Kentucky. The Lancaster area of operations contained the key Marine bases of Camp Carroll, an important artillery position, the Rockpile, and Ca Lu. The Rockpile, a 700-foot sheer cliff outcropping, dominated the nearby terrain. Perched on its top, Marine observers had a clear view of the most likely approaches into the Cam Lo River Valley and of Route 9, the two most strategic east-west arteries in the DMZ sector. About 12,000 meters below the Rockpile and part of the Dyemarker system was Ca Lu, in effect the southern terminal of Route 9 since the North Vietnamese had effectively cut the road between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh, about 20,000 meters to the west. An obvious way station for any relief effort of Khe Sanh, Ca Lu, at the junction of the Quang Tri River and Route 9, also provided the Marines an outpost to warn of enemy infiltration into the Lancaster area from the west, southwest, and from the Ba Long Valley to the southeast. Similar to much of the terrain in the DMZ area, the Lancaster area of operations consisted of rolling hills rising into jungle-covered mountains of 700–800 feet with tree canopies reaching up to heights of 20 to 60 feet. Fifteen-foot elephant grass and dense brush vegetation restricted movement even in the relatively low regions.

Like Colonel Smith and the 9th Marines, Colonel Lo Prete was tied to his base areas. With only two infantry battalions, and one of those battalions having only two companies, the 3d Marines commander had to make do with limited resources and manpower. Lo Prete maintained his command post at Camp Carroll which was also the home for Lieutenant Colonel William M. Cryan's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. Cryan with only his Companies E and H under his operational control kept Company H at Carroll and positioned Company E about 3,000 meters southeast of Camp Carroll where it protected a main supply route. Lo Prete assigned his other battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Gorton C. Cook's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, the responsibility for the defense of both Ca Lu and the Rockpile area. Cook and three of his companies remained in the Thon Son Lam sector just below the Rockpile while he placed his Company L at Ca Lu. An article in the battalion newsletter at the time noted that the sector was "pretty quiet now except for some sporadic ambushes between here and our company-sized outpost at Ca Lu."⁷⁸

Artillery and tanks reinforced the infantry in Lancaster. Three 105mm howitzer batteries and one 155mm howitzer battery all under the 1st Battalion, 12th Marines at Carroll provided direct support to the infantry battalions. An ad hoc battery of mixed caliber guns, Battery W, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines, was with Company L at Ca Lu. Company B, 3d Tank Battalion maintained two platoons of M48 medium gun tanks and one heavy section of M67A2 flame tanks at Carroll. For the most part, the tanks bolstered the defenses at Camp Carroll and furnished protection for road convoys to Ca Lu. An attached U.S. Army artillery unit, Battery C, 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery (Automatic Weapons, Self Propelled) also augmented the Marine fire power. The Army M42s or "dusters" armed with twin 40mm antiaircraft guns employed as machine guns gave added protection to Marine convoys and to the Marine fixed defenses.⁷⁹

The Marines worried most about their relatively exposed position at Ca Lu. There, the isolated garrison numbered about 625 Army, Navy, and Marine personnel including the Marine infantry company. Navy Seabees and Marine engineers had nearly completed the permanent facilities required for the Dyemarker project. While not directly attacking the Marine outpost, the North Vietnamese had mined Route 9 occasionally in December and ambushed one Marine convoy on a return trip from Ca Lu to the Rockpile. Despite a relative lull during the first two weeks of January, Marine intelligence indicated that North Vietnamese forces were on the move.⁸⁰

A division "Stingray" reconnaissance team operating in the general area of the Ca Lu base soon confirmed the presence of enemy troops in the general area.* On 12 January, about 1415 in the afternoon, Reconnaissance Team 2C3, using the codename "Blue Plate" and operating in the mountains about 4,000 meters southwest of Ca Lu below the Quang Tri River, radioed back that it was being followed by five NVA "wearing black pjs and carrying automatic weapons." The "Blue Plate" Marines fired upon the enemy but missed. For a time all was quiet and the Marines continued upon their way. About two hours later, the Marines came back on the air to report that they were surrounded by about 30 North Vietnamese troops armed with AK-47s. Marine gunships appeared overhead and provided covering fire while

*Stingray patrols usually consisted of a small Marine reconnaissance unit, usually squad-size, which called artillery and air on targets of opportunity.

another helicopter extracted the Marine team. The reconnaissance Marines sustained only one casualty, one wounded man.⁸¹

The incident on the 12th was only a harbinger of what was to come. On the following day, the North Vietnamese sprang an ambush on an engineer convoy bringing Dyemarker supplies and equipment to Ca Lu. Under an overcast sky and a slight drizzle, about 1120 on the morning of the 13th, the 20-vehicle convoy departed the Rockpile area. Marine artillery had already fired 15-minute preparation fires at suspected ambush sites. With two tanks in the lead, the convoy consisted of 10 six by six trucks interspersed with two more tanks in the center of the column, four "low boy" tractor trailers, and two of the Army "dusters" bringing up the rear. The vehicles carried about 200 men including engineers, drivers, the M42 crews, support personnel, and Company I, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines.⁸²

About 1150, approximately 3,000 meters above the Ca Lu, enemy gunners took the convoy under fire with rocket-propelled grenades, small-arms fire, and mortars. At the same time, the NVA ambushers detonated a command mine which set two trucks on fire, one a "low boy" and the other carrying 81mm mortar ammunition. The truck with the mortars exploded which forced the rear section of the convoy to come to a complete halt. The infantry from Company I hastily dismounted from their trucks to engage the enemy, only for many of the troops to trigger several "surprise firing devices" and mines skillfully hidden along both sides of the road.

Lieutenant Colonel Cook recalled several years later that before the convoy had started out he and his sergeant major had moved to an outpost on a hill top just west of Route 9. From there, he remained in radio contact with both his command post and the convoy and could observe the vehicles as they moved south toward Ca Lu. When he saw the convoy stopped after the initial burst of fire, he directed "the lead element to continue on to Ca Lu and return with reinforcements." He then joined the stalled troops. According to Cook, from the site of the ambush, he "called and directed artillery fire through his COC [Combat Operations Center] on enemy escape and reinforcing routes both east and west of Route 9."

In the meantime, Company L, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines boarded at Ca Lu the lead trucks to relieve the embattled column. At the ambush site, about 1215, an aerial observer using the call sign "American Beauty" arrived overhead to assist in calling in supporting fires.

The leaden skies precluded the use of Marine fixed-wing jets, but two helicopter gunships strafed the enemy firing positions. Marine artillery fired over 700 rounds including 54 155mm howitzer shells in support of the convoy after the initial contact.

With the arrival of Company L and the continuing artillery bombardment, the Marines disengaged under occasional enemy sniper fire and completed the trip to Ca Lu, arriving there about 1510. The convoy made the return trip to the Rockpile area late that afternoon without incident. The costs, however, had been high. American dead and wounded totaled 19 killed and over 70 wounded. Most of the casualties were sustained by Company I in the first moments of the ambush. The Marines accounted for 10 enemy dead and captured one prisoner. Marine intelligence officers estimated that a North Vietnamese company participated in the attack.*

For a time after the ambush, the 3d Marines' attention shifted once more to the north and east in that area between Camp Carroll and the Rockpile above Route 9. Shortly after 0800 on the morning of 16 January, a 3d Reconnaissance Battalion "Stingray" team there found itself surrounded by about 40 North Vietnamese on high ground about 2,000 meters north of the Cam Lo River. According to the team, the enemy were obviously NVA regulars, wearing green utilities and helmets impressed with a yellow lightning bolt design, and armed with AK-47 rifles and two machine guns. The 3d Marines immediately sent a reaction platoon from Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines to assist the encircled team. Lifted into a helicopter landing zone about a 1,000 meters east of the reconnaissance team, the 2d Battalion reaction platoon came under machine gun fire. The platoon returned the fire and called in air and artillery. After the artillery and air strike silenced the enemy guns, the infantry platoon joined up with the reconnaissance team. By this time, the North Vietnamese troops had disappeared, leaving six dead behind. At 1340 that afternoon, Marine helicopters

*Colonel Robert C. Needham commented that this ambush was very similar to one that 3/3 had run into in the same area in August and September 1967. Needham Comments. A survivor of the ambush who visited Vietnam in 1994 wrote in a veteran's newsletter that on the road to Ca Lu he reached "the 13 January 1968 ambush site . . . In my mind's eye I could see the first cloud of black smoke [when] the ambush was sprung, and I smelled the odor of gunpowder in the air." Before leaving, he and his companion planted some flowers in memory of the men killed there. Phil Quinones, "Vietnam—Tour '94," *Comwire, Vietnam*, Oct 1994, v. 4, No. 1, pp. 3-4, Encl to Todd Comments.

extracted both groups of Marines to Camp Carroll. The units sustained one Navy corpsman killed and four Marines wounded. It was obvious that the enemy was becoming much more aggressive all along Route 9 and the DMZ in general.⁸³

After a few brief quiet days, the DMZ war in the western Kentucky sector also flared up. After leaving Hill 28 and uncovering an enemy base area, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines took up its new positions at An Dinh between A-3 and Con Thien to investigate recent probes at the latter base. The battalion immediately began patrolling its area of operations. On the 17th, Bendell planned to send out a two-company patrol the next morning near an abandoned hamlet just north of the trace about two miles northeast of Con Thien. Company M was to be the blocking force while Company L was to be the sweeping force.⁸⁴

The evening of the 17th, Captain John D. Carr, the Company L commander, held a meeting of his platoon commanders. Second Lieutenant Kenneth L. Christy, who headed the 3d Platoon, remembered that Carr briefed them on the next day's planned patrol. According to Christy, he noticed that the route of advance "took us through a bombed out ville that we all referred to as the 'Meat Market'," because it was "Charlies' area—and almost everytime we went there either us or them, somebody got hammered." Christy's platoon had run a patrol in that area very recently, but there had been "no sign of Charlie or Charlie decided not to engage." Captain Carr assigned the point position to his 1st Platoon. Lieutenant Christy argued ("to the degree that a second lieutenant argues with a captain") that his platoon knew the area and should have the point. Captain Carr, however, stated that the 3d Platoon needed a break and he wanted to give one of the other platoons the point experience.⁸⁵

As planned, with the 1st Platoon on point, followed by the 2d Platoon with the command group, and the 3d Platoon bringing up the rear, Company L departed the battalion lines at An Dien in pre-dawn darkness. Suddenly the NVA about 0945 from well-camouflaged bunkers and spider holes near the "Meat Market" sprang their ambush on the Marine company. The 1st Platoon on the point engaged what it thought was a NVA platoon only to find itself divided into separate groups, with the forward element cut off from the rest of the company. Captain Carr brought up the 2d Platoon and his command group and joined the rear element of the 1st Platoon, in a large B-52 bomb crater.⁸⁶

In the company rear, Lieutenant Christy recalled that when the ambush occurred, "it sounded like a few sporadic gun shots and then all hell broke loose." The men of his platoon hit the ground "facing outward as we usually did." Christy took cover in a 105mm shell crater with his platoon sergeant and radio man. At that point, Captain Carr ordered the 3d Platoon commander to join him, about 180 meters to the platoon's front. Under heavy automatic fire, the 3d Platoon joined Carr in a series of rushes taking shelter in shell and bomb craters along the way. Miraculously, the platoon had made the dash without sustaining any casualties. According to Christy, "we closed off the backside of what was the company perimeter."⁸⁷

As Company L more or less consolidated its position, the North Vietnamese continued to direct automatic weapons fire from all sides, mortars, and even large caliber artillery upon the embattled Marines. More urgently, the enemy was using the cutoff squad-size remnant of the 1st Platoon, about 100 meters in front of the rest of the company, as "bait" in a "NVA killing zone." Lieutenant Christy remembered Captain Carr told him that there were "dead and wounded up front and needed 3d Plat [platoon] to go up there and collect them up so we could get the wounded and dead med-evaced and the hell out of the area."⁸⁸

By this time, the North Vietnamese fires had somewhat diminished. Captain Carr and a forward artillery observer who was with the cutoff troops, Sergeant Michael J. Madden, called in supporting U.S. artillery. Sergeant Madden also made radio contact with an air observer in a Huey who brought in helicopter gunships to keep the enemy at bay. Under this protective cover, Lieutenant Christy took one of his squads and joined by Captain Carr reached the 1st Platoon group. Christy then deployed his men and crawled forward to another crater where Sergeant Madden, although wounded, was still calling in artillery strikes. There were four other wounded men with Madden. Christy remembered Captain Carr covering him with a shotgun while he went forward again to reach some Marine bodies, including that of the 1st Platoon commander, some 50 meters to the front. With the supporting artillery fires, the 3d Platoon squad brought back the wounded and dead of the 1st Platoon. According to Lieutenant Christy, he admonished some of his men for being too gentle and that the bodies were not going to be hurt: "Lets get these people policed up and get out of here before Charlie starts firing us up again."⁸⁹

In the meanwhile, upon hearing of the Company L predicament, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, the battal-

ion commander, replaced Company M with another unit in the blocking position and then with a skeleton command group accompanied Company M to relieve Company L. After the linkup, the two companies overran at least three enemy mortar positions and several machine guns and individual fighting holes. With continuing helicopter gunship support and covering artillery, Marine helicopters evacuated the most seriously wounded. The two companies then "crossed the trace in good order," late that afternoon carrying their remaining casualties. In the action, the two companies sustained casualties of 9 dead and 22 wounded including Captain Carr who was evacuated by helicopter. According to the 9th Marines, the enemy sustained over 100 casualties.^{90*}

By 20 January, a new phase of the war was about to begin. Colonel Lo Prete and his 3d Marines staff were about to close out the Lancaster operation and

take over the Osceola area in the Quang Tri sector from the 1st Marines. The 1st Marines in turn was to relieve the 4th Marines in the Camp Evans sector. Colonel William Dick, the 4th Marines commander, was then to assume control of the units in Lancaster. For the most part, this phase of Operation Checkers was a case of regimental musical chairs and had little effect on the battalions in the various sectors. Both the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines and the two companies of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines were to remain in Lancaster, now called Operation Lancaster II.

According to the usual body-count measurements of the war, the 3d Marines in Operation Lancaster I accounted for 46 enemy dead at a cost of 22 Marines killed and 140 wounded. In comparison, during the same period, the 9th Marines in Operation Kentucky sustained 90 dead and over 800 wounded while killing nearly 700 of the enemy. Still the indications were that the North Vietnamese were raising the ante throughout the DMZ sector including Khe Sanh. Near the coast, on 20 January, enemy gunners fired at two Navy craft on the Cua Viet River forcing the Naval Support Activity, Cua Viet temporarily to close that important waterway, the main supply channel to the Marine base at Dong Ha. At the same time, the 3d Marines observed that a large enemy force, probably the *29th NVA Regiment* had moved into the area north of the Quang Tri River and west of Ca Lu. Just as significant, another regiment had replaced the *90th NVA Regiment* in the Lancaster northern area of operations. The *90th NVA* had then shifted to the southwest and had possibly entered the "Scotland" or Khe Sanh area of operations. Perhaps the big enemy offensive in the north was about to begin.⁹¹

*For this action on the 18th, Captain John Carr, the Company L Commander, was awarded the Silver Star and Purple Heart; Captain Raymond W. Kalm, Jr., the Company M commander, received the Bronze Star with V; Sergeant Michael J. Madden also received the Bronze Star with V; and one of the helicopter pilots received the Distinguished Flying Cross. On 25 March 1994 at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, Colonel Kenneth L. Christy, Jr., was awarded the Navy Cross for his heroism on 18 January 1968, more than 26 years after the event. Sergeant Madden, who credited Christy for saving his life and the others with him, had submitted an award recommendation. Somehow the paperwork got lost and Madden in 1988 was surprised to learn that Christy had not received any medal for his actions that day. Madden then launched a one-man successful campaign to rectify the situation. The Navy Cross is second only to the Medal of Honor in awards for heroism in the Marine Corps. Bendell Comments; Col Kenneth L. Christy, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 8Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File); Colonel Kenneth L. Christy, Jr., Biographical File, Reference Sec, MCHC.

CHAPTER 4

Khe Sanh: Building Up

*The Battlefield—The Early Days—Protecting the Investment—The Isolation of Khe Sanh
The Decision to Hold—The Stage is Set—Sortie to Hill 881 North—The Enemy Plan Unfolds*

The Battlefield

The village of Khe Sanh, composed of nine hamlets and also the capital of Huong Hoa District, once sat astride National Route 9 in the extreme north-western corner of South Vietnam. According to a census, 10,195 civilians lived in the district, mostly clustered within four miles of the village.* Khe Sanh controlled road movement from nearby Laos into northern Quang Tri Province and was the terminus of a number of trail networks which crossed the Laotian border further to the north and wound their way through the valleys and along the rivers to intersect the highway in the vicinity of the village. National Route 9 was actually little more than a wide trail in places, yet it was a key feature of the area because it provided a means of movement between nearby Laos and the coastal region. Between Khe Sanh and Dong Ha, Route 9 ran for 63 kilometers, crossing 36 crumbling old bridges along the way. Most of them, relics of the French colonial era, could be bypassed and often were, due to their deteriorated condition.¹

The terrain of the Huong Hoa District is characterized by steep, jungle-covered mountains separated by plunging valleys. Mountain peaks tower over the hamlets along Route 9, rising from 200 meters to 600 meters above the elevation of the highway. Streams flow through many of the valleys, emptying into one of two rivers. The Song Rao Quan drains the region to the north, flowing southeast to join other rivers which continue to the sea. West of Khe Sanh, the Xe Pon, or Tchepone, flows east across the Laotian panhandle to a point 15 kilometers from the village, where it turns south forming a part of the international border between South Vietnam and Laos.

* Former Navy chaplain Ray W. Stubbe, a noted authority on Khe Sanh and its environs, observed that this census did not include the approximately 12,000 Montagnard tribesmen who lived in "some half dozen villes" in the immediate Khe Sanh area. LCdr Ray W. Stubbe, ChC, USN, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 23Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Stubbe Comments.

There are two types of rain forest in the area. The primary growth is found at higher elevations where some trees reach 90 feet in height, forming a canopy beneath which other trees, some up to 60 feet high, form a second canopy. The dense canopies reduce the light at ground level to the point that growth there is limited to seedlings, flowers, and climbing plants. Because of the sparse ground cover, the jungle can be penetrated on foot with little difficulty.²

The secondary rain forest is located at lower elevations where the ground has first been cleared, then later left for the jungle to reclaim. Here, the trees are smaller, allowing more light to penetrate to ground level. The resulting thick growth of bamboo, elephant grass, and climbing plants limits foot travel considerably.³

The weather in the region varies through the course of a year. It is warm in the summer, although cooler than at the lower elevations near the coast, while in the winter, it is sometimes oppressively cold and damp. Annual rainfall exceeding 80 inches, much of it occurring during the winter monsoon, feeds the rain forests and contributes to the discomfort caused by the cold temperatures. A thick, milk-colored fog known in Indochina as *crachin*** occurs frequently in the winter months, reducing visibility considerably.

During the war, a Montagnard tribe, the Bru, lived near Khe Sanh, although the people in the village

**A weather condition which occurs in the highland regions of Southeast Asia for periods of three to five days at a time between October and April. It is described as: "A persistent low-level stratus phenomenon accompanied by prolonged precipitations which greatly affects military operations. Clouds are generally 3,000 to 5,000 feet thick with ceiling under 1,000 feet and frequently below 500 feet. Visibility is . . . generally below 2 miles and frequently below 1/2 mile." Asst Chief of Staff, G-2, memo to Asst Chief of Staff, G-3, dtd 4Jul67, Subj: Planning Conference, in 3d MarDiv ComdC, Jul67. Colonel Frederic S. Knight, who served as the 3d Marine Division G-2 or intelligence officer in 1968, noted that the word comes from the French verb, *cracher*, which means to spit: "A friend said the true meaning of the word is best described as 'that which blows back into your face when you spit into the wind.'" Col Frederic S. Knight, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 10Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Knight Comments.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190186

A typical Bru village south of Khe Sanh has simple houses built on stilts to be above the ground and with grass roofs for protection from the elements. One of the aboriginal tribes who inhabited the Vietnamese highlands and whom the French called Montagnards, the Bru had been resettled largely along Route 9 near Khe Sanh by the South Vietnamese government.

itself were ethnic Vietnamese.* A simple honest people without even a written language, the Bru cared little for the authority of the national government or for the political upheavals of the war, preferring to remain neutral, or at most, to sympathize half-heartedly with whichever side controlled their village at any particular moment. While their original territory covered most of the district, as well as equally large areas in Laos and North Vietnam, the South Vietnamese government resettled most of the Bru of Huong Hoa District along Route 9 to prevent the enemy from recruiting among them.

In addition to the Bru and Vietnamese, a few French coffee planters and American missionaries inhabited the area in the vicinity of Khe Sanh. Some of the Bru were employed by the former and a few even received a rudimentary education from the latter.

*The Montagnard (a French word meaning "mountaineer") tribes were not Vietnamese by descent or culture, but rather, an aboriginal people who inhabited the highlands. Unworldly, poor, and apolitical, the Montagnards were often viewed by the Vietnamese as a lesser people and sometimes were treated with contempt. Colonel Knight wrote that the Vietnamese name for the tribesmen was *Moi* which meant savage. He explained that the term Montagnard came into use "at the insistence of Ngo Dinh Diem who deplored the common Vietnamese usage . . ." Knight Comments. Chaplain Stubbe noted the sharp contrast between the houses in Khe Sanh Village made of concrete and wood where the ethnic Vietnamese lived and the homes of the Bru made of bamboo with grass roofs and on stilts in the surrounding "villes". Stubbe Comments.

The Early Days

The history of Marines at Khe Sanh predates their involvement in the Vietnam War by three decades. Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, who served as the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific during the war, remembered that while stationed in China in 1937, his battalion commander, Major Howard N. Stent, visited the area to hunt tiger. Like many visitors to Khe Sanh, Major Stent was impressed with its beauty, and returned to China with stories of the tall, green mountains, waterfalls, abundant game, and the peaceful Bru tribespeople.⁴

In August 1962, MACV established a Special Forces CIDG camp at an old abandoned French fort, about two kilometers east of the village of Khe Sanh and just below Route 9, for border surveillance and anti-infiltration operations.** In November 1964, the Special Forces team moved from the French fort to a light-duty airstrip, built by French forces in 1949 on the Xom Cham Plateau, above Route 9 and about two kilometers north of their former base. This new site, which eventually became the Khe Sanh base, had sev-

**CIDG is an acronym for Civilian Irregular Defense Group. The CIDG consisted of local militia, armed, trained, advised, and, in fact, led by U.S. and South Vietnamese Special Forces personnel. Such camps were scattered throughout the country. This French fort site was later referred to by the American forces at Khe Sanh as the "old French Fort."

eral advantages. Militarily, it was on relatively level ground and offered good fields of fire in all directions. The terrain provided both good drainage and stable soil, mostly consisting of "laterite clay or weathered iron/aluminum rock." It also contained a "few basalt outcroppings, at what was later called the 'Rock Quarry.'" At their new camp, the Special Forces and CIDG personnel built a number of bunkers which the Marines later at Khe Sanh would refer to, erroneously, as "old French bunkers."⁵

Earlier, in the spring of 1964, Major Alfred M. Gray, later the 29th Commandant of the Marine Corps, arrived in the Khe Sanh sector with a signal intelligence detachment and an infantry platoon and established a radio monitoring site atop Dong Voi Mep, better known to the Marines as Tiger Tooth Mountain, north of the CIDG camp. The composite force, designated Marine Detachment, Advisory Team 1, was "the first actual Marine ground unit to conduct independent operations in the Republic of Vietnam." After its position had been compromised in July, the team redeployed to Da Nang.^{6*}

In 1966, III MAF carried out two battalion-sized operations near Khe Sanh to search for North Vietnamese units reported by Special Forces personnel. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines arrived in April and established a camp around the airstrip from which to conduct Operation Virginia. After searching the mountains around the CIDG camp for a week without finding a trace of the enemy, the battalion marched back to the coast along Route 9, becoming the first "major force" to accomplish this feat in at least eight years.⁷

In late September 1966, Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. Wickwire's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines arrived at Khe Sanh as part of Operation Prairie, beginning 22 months of continuous Marine presence in the area. The monsoon was upon Khe Sanh by this time, and the Marines experienced temperatures as low as 40 degrees and winds which gusted to 45 knots. The bad weather caused the airstrip to close frequently and when aircraft could not land at the combat base, some types of supplies reached dangerously low levels. After four months of vigorous patrolling, the Marines found little in the way of enemy forces, claiming only 15 dead North Vietnamese.⁸

* The Marines would later establish in late 1966 a radio relay station on Hill 950, about 3,500 meters north of Khe Sanh and 9,000 meters southeast of Tiger Mountain. Prados and Stubbe, *Valley of Decision*, p. 128. See also Stubbe Comments.

During Operation Prairie, the Special Forces personnel relocated their CIDG camp to the village of Lang Vei on Route 9 between Khe Sanh and the Laotian border. A detachment known as Forward Operating Base 3 (FOB-3),** first located in Khe Sanh village, moved to the old French fort, and then, in the latter part of 1967, deployed to newly built quarters adjoining the Khe Sanh combat base. A small MACV advisory team remained at the district headquarters in Khe Sanh village.⁹

In February 1967, III MAF had established Combined Action Platoon O to work with the Bru in the area. "CAP Oscar," as it was called, was the only unit in the Combined Action program to work with a Montagnard tribe. The CAP headquarters was in Khe Sanh village from where they patrolled the surrounding Bru hamlets.¹⁰

By this time, February 1967, the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines had departed for Okinawa, but Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines took the battalion's place to protect a detachment of Seabees from Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 10 which was assigned to extend and improve the airstrip. The company patrolled the hills and valleys for any sign of Communist forces. Within a month, increased contact led the 3d Marine Division to reinforce Khe Sanh with a second company and in late March the Marines became engaged with a powerful enemy force. The 3d Marine Division assigned control of the forces at Khe Sanh to the 3d Marines on 20 April 1967. Within a matter of days, the Marines encountered strong North Vietnamese forces in fortified positions on the hills to the north of the Khe Sanh Combat Base, prompting the commanding officer of the 3d Marines, Colonel John P. Lanigan, to deploy his 2d and 3d Battalions to the area. The ensuing battles to eject the North Vietnamese from the commanding terrain overlooking the combat base became known as the "Hill Battles" and lasted until 11 May. In some of the most vicious fighting of the war, Marines wrested control of Hills 861, 881 North, and 881 South from the enemy.^{***}

The fighting in the First Battle of Khe Sanh was savage and costly for both sides. Marine casualties

**FOB-3 was an element of the Studies and Observation Group (SOG), which trained Nung, Muong, and Bru Montagnards for clandestine operations against Communist forces along infiltration routes.

***For detailed accounts of the Hill Battles, see Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1967*, Chapter 4 and Prados and Stubbe, *Valley of Decision*, pp. 83-105.

numbered 155 killed and 425 wounded, while the North Vietnamese left nearly 1,000 dead on the battlefield. When the battle ended, the Marines held the hills which overlooked the combat base, thus hampering Communist observation and fire on the vital airstrip through which supplies and replacements flowed.¹¹

Protecting the Investment

Immediately following the Hill Battles, III MAF reduced the force at Khe Sanh to a single battalion. The 3d Marines departed the area, giving way to Lieutenant Colonel Donald E. Newton's 1st Battalion, 26th Marines. Overall control of operations around Khe Sanh passed to Colonel John J. Padley, commanding officer of the 26th Marines.

Lieutenant Colonel Newton's Marines maintained company outposts on some of the commanding hills and conducted patrols in the surrounding jungle as part of Operation Crockett. As enemy contacts and sightings increased, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines deployed to Khe Sanh, giving Colonel Padley the capability, if necessary, to meet another major North Vietnamese effort like that encountered during the Hill Battles.

Supplies reached the Marines at Khe Sanh either by air or by vehicle convoys from the 3d Marine Division base at Dong Ha. The trip along Route 9 took the convoys through territory which was far from secure, and they traveled well-armed and protected, usually accompanied by an infantry unit and often by armored vehicles.

On 21 July, an infantry unit sweeping ahead of an 85-vehicle convoy trying to bring 175mm guns to reinforce the Marine base encountered strong enemy forces along the highway. While the Marine infantry engaged the North Vietnamese, the convoy, which included besides the 175s, "trucks loaded with ammunition and C-4 explosives, claymores, mines, and other ordnance," returned to Camp Carroll. The ambush threat was too great to risk the guns.^{12*}

While the Marines would continue some road convoys into Khe Sanh in the fall, it soon became clear that

for all practical purposes Route 9 was closed.** Since the runway was closed for repairs to damage caused by the constant landing of heavily laden transport aircraft, the Marines had to depend on helicopters and parachutes to maintain their logistic lifeline.

The Isolation of Khe Sanh

With their successful interdiction of Route 9, the Communist forces isolated Khe Sanh from the rest of the ICTZ. Fortunately for the Marines, while the weather remained clear, air resupply could provide for the needs of the combat base. With the onset of the monsoon and the *crachin*, however, low cloud ceilings and limited visibility would severely limit flights to Khe Sanh. III MAF was familiar with this problem. As early as 1966, III MAF staff members conducted a wargame of the defense of Quang Tri Province in which they failed to defend Khe Sanh. During the exercise, when General Westmoreland expressed his dismay at this decision,** III MAF planners had responded that they considered Khe Sanh too difficult to support, citing the ease with which the enemy could cut Route 9 and the problems with air resupply during the monsoon. Now the game had become real. In July 1967, before the combination of enemy action and monsoon rains ended the convoys, the logisticians of the 3d Marine Division recommended planning for the air delivery of supplies to the combat base whenever the weather permitted. The airstrip remained closed to all but light aircraft and helicopters throughout September while the Seabees peeled up the old steel matting, and laid a new sub-grade of crushed rock.^{13****}

*Lieutenant Colonel Frederick J. McEwan, who in 1967 was the S-4 or logistics officer for the 26th Marines, remembered an occasion when the North Vietnamese blew a bridge over the Roa Quan River. He, with the regimental commander and engineer together with a rifle company, made a reconnaissance on the practicality of repairing the span: "A search was made for alternate crossing points to no avail. Major damage was done to the bridge. There were strong indications of the enemy's presence. It was not the time to build a bridge over the Roa Quan River on Route 9 leading to Khe Sanh." LtCol Frederick J. McEwan, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter McEwan Comments.

**As former *Washington Post* reporter Peter Braestrup commented, "Westmoreland always wanted to hold Khe Sanh as a base for U.S. operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail." Peter Braestrup, Comments on draft chapter, n.d. [Dec94-Jan95] (Vietnam Comment File).

***Lieutenant Colonel McEwan remembered that obtaining the crushed rock was not a simple matter. He recalled that it was not until "a sergeant found a hill mass that had rock" which later naturally became known as the "Rock Quarry." McEwan Comments.

*One authority on the battle for Khe Sanh, Chaplain Stubbe, commented that he was not sure why the guns were sent in the first place. His supposition was that they would be used to support FOB-3 operations in Laos. He was certain, however, that the guns would have made excellent targets for the North Vietnamese when they attacked the base. Stubbe Comments.

In October, the monsoon struck with a vengeance, pouring 30 inches of rain on ICTZ. Khe Sanh did not escape the deluge. The hill positions were especially hard hit. Unlike the Xom Cham plateau, the surrounding hills and mountains did not have soil suitable for construction, and the rain pointed up this weakness. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel James B. Wilkinson, described some of the damage:

...when the first torrential rains of the season hit [Hill] 861 the results were disastrous. The trenchline which encircled the hill washed away completely on one side of the position and caved in on another side. Some bunkers collapsed, while others were so weakened they had to be completely rebuilt.^{14*}

The Marines kept busy repairing damage and improving their positions. New bunkers on Hill 861 stood almost completely above ground, and the new trenchline included a drainage system jury-rigged from discarded 55-gallon drums. Space on board resupply helicopters was critical, and priority for construction materials went to the airfield project, leaving little or no room for imported fortification materials. Logging details searched the nearby jungle for suitable wood, but many trees were so filled with steel fragments from the earlier Hill Battles that the engineers' chain saws could not cut them.¹⁵

October brought more than the monsoon. That month, the North Vietnamese 325C Division, which had taken part in the earlier "Hill Battles," appeared again in the enemy order of battle for Khe Sanh.¹⁶ On 31 October, Operation Ardmore ended with Operation Scotland beginning the next day. Little more than a renaming of the continuing mission of defending Khe Sanh and using it as a base for offensive action against Communist infiltration, Operation Scotland became the responsibility of the 26th Marines.

November began clear and sunny at Khe Sanh, but by the 10th, the *crachin* returned. Seabees continued work on the airfield, improving it to the point that it was suitable for use by medium-sized cargo aircraft, such as the Fairchild C-123 Provider, but more work was necessary before it could safely handle the heavy Lockheed C-130 Hercules aircraft.¹⁷

Anxious to find alternate methods to support the units on the hill outposts, should bad weather or enemy fire prevent helicopter resupply, the 26th



Photo courtesy of Col Robert W. Lewis, USMC (Ret)
An aerial view of the Khe Sanh Combat Base facing northwest (note north arrow at top of photo) was taken in November 1967 at 10,000 feet, with the airstrip seen in the center of the photo. By this time, medium-sized fixed-wing transport aircraft could land on the airstrip, but the road supply network had been cut.

Marines studied the route from the combat base to Hill 881 South. Representatives from the 3d Motor Transport Battalion, the 3d Antitank Battalion, and the 3d Engineer Battalion examined the route and determined that it would require extensive engineer preparation before it could accommodate vehicle convoys.¹⁸

The 3d Marine Division assigned the 26th Marines to prepare a contingency plan for the relief, if needed, of the Lang Vei Special Forces CIDG Camp.** The new commanding officer of the 26th Marines, Colonel David E. Lownds, ordered his 1st Battalion to find an overland route from the combat base to the CIDG

**There were actually two Lang Vei Special Forces Camps. The first one had been overrun in May 1967 while the Marine command was engaged in the Hill Fights. The American command decided to relocate the camp a few hundred meters to the southwest. Lieutenant General Louis Metzger, in 1967 a brigadier general and the 3d Marine Division assistant division commander, commented that "Westmoreland was specially interested in this camp . . . and had the Seabees completely rebuild that camp with heavy concrete bunkers . . . so strong . . . [that it could withstand] a tank on top of it without crushing it in." The new camp was finished in the fall of 1967. LtGen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft, dtd 17Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File). See also Prados and Stubbe, *Valley of Decision*, pp. 188-189. Army Colonel Bruce B. G. Clarke observed that the contingency plan also called for the relief of the district advisors in Khe Sanh village. Col Bruce B. G. Clarke, USA, Comments on draft chapter, n.d. [Apr95] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Clarke Comments.

*Lieutenant Colonel Harper L. Bohr commented that the rain in September resulted in "the collapse of some newly completed bunkers resulting in the deaths of several Marines." LtCol Harper L. Bohr, Jr., Comments on draft chapter, dtd 2Nov1994 (Vietnam Comment File).



Photo courtesy of Col Robert W. Lewis, USMC (Ret)

Aerial view of Hill 881 South in November 1967, reveals the strategic outpost northwest of Khe Sanh. The Khe Sanh base can be seen in the background.

camp which could be used by a company-sized relief force. Captain John W. Raymond led Company A into the jungle to find such a route, avoiding well-used trails to reduce the risk of ambush. The straight-line distance was less than nine kilometers, but only after 19 hours of struggling through the treacherous terrain, did the Marines reach the CIDG camp, proving that it could be done, but demonstrating that it could not be done quickly or easily. The 26th Marines attempted no further efforts to locate cross-country routes to Lang Vei.

On 9 November, III MAF moved to increase the intelligence collection capability at Khe Sanh by deploying a detachment from the 1st Radio Battalion* under now Lieutenant Colonel Gray to the combat base. The detachment moved to Hill 881 South and

established an electronic listening post, much as Gray's other unit had done four years earlier.¹⁹

The *crachin* so hampered air operations at Khe Sanh during November that on the 18th, Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson passed the word to his men to prepare for the possibility of reducing rations to two meals per day.²⁰ The same weather problems affected direct air support bombing missions. To improve the accuracy of bombing near Khe Sanh during periods of heavy fog or low clouds, the Marines installed a radar reflector atop Hill 881 South which, in theory, would serve as a navigation aid to attack aircraft supporting the combat base. The reflector did not work, however, as it was incompatible with the radar systems on board the Grumman A-6A Intruder attack aircraft which were designed to carry out bombing missions in conditions of restricted visibility.²¹

Enemy activity increased dramatically during December. The 3d Marine Division's intelligence offi-

*Radio battalions are Marine Corps electronic warfare units capable of conducting signal intelligence activities, mainly intercepts.

cers identified two North Vietnamese units between Khe Sanh and Ca Lu: the *8th Battalion, 29th Regiment* and the *95C Regiment*. Around the combat base, Marine patrols sighted new bunkers near Hill 881 North as well as North Vietnamese carrying supplies and heavy weapons. Sniper fire increased around Hill 881 South and the enemy attempted probes against Hills 861 and 950. Intelligence sources reported that both the *304th Division* and the *325C Division* of the North Vietnamese Army were near Khe Sanh and another enemy unit, the *320th Division*, was east of the combat base, near Camp Carroll and Cam Lo. Perhaps the most revealing indicator of increased enemy activity was the rise in North Vietnamese truck traffic along the nearby Ho Chi Minh Trail network from a monthly average of 480 vehicles in the fall to more than 6,000 in December.²²

With only one battalion at Khe Sanh to protect the combat base and its vital airstrip, as well as the surrounding hills, the 26th Marines' defenses were stretched thin. The III MAF staff, with many sources of intelligence available, recognized the significance of the enemy buildup, prompting Lieutenant General Cushman to call Major General Tompkins on 13 December to direct that another battalion be sent to Khe Sanh. Major General Tompkins, fearing that northeastern Quang Tri was much more vulnerable, argued the point and recorded later that he was "not at all excited about the idea."²³ Nevertheless, within five hours, Lieutenant Colonel Harry L. Alderman's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines touched down at Khe Sanh's recently refurbished airstrip.*

The 3d Battalion conducted a four-day sweep of a ridge line west of the combat base, then settled into new positions. Companies I and K occupied Hills 881 South and 861, respectively, and Company L joined the 1st Battalion at the combat base proper as Colonel Lownds juggled the units among his defensive positions.

Taking advantage of his increased troop strength to conduct battalion-sized operations once again, Colonel Lownds sent the 1st Battalion north of the combat base to search the Rao Quan River Valley during the last three days of December. As on the 3d Battalion's expedition the previous week, the 1st Battalion encoun-

tered only light contact, but found ominous signs of freshly built bunkers and small caches of supplies.^{24**}

The increased enemy activity noted during December continued. Early in the evening of 2 January, a listening post established by Company L, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines near the west end of the airstrip reported several persons 60 meters to their immediate front. The company commander dispatched a squad to reinforce the listening post. The Marines challenged the unidentified men but received no reply. At the Marines' second attempt to challenge, the intruders opened fire on the listening post. Marines all along the nearby perimeter returned fire. The firing died down, which saw one Marine slightly wounded, and the squad sent to reinforce the listening post searched the area to the immediate front, but found nothing in the dark. At first light, a patrol searched the area again and found five enemy dead. Using a scout dog, they followed the trail of a sixth man, believed wounded, but did not find him.²⁵

The 26th Marines' intelligence officer, Captain Harper L. Bohr, Jr., examined the bodies of the five enemy and came to the conclusion that one of them was Chinese, because the man "was just too big and too non-Vietnamese looking." He sent photographs and a medical description to the 3d Marine Division in hopes of receiving confirmation of his supposition. Captain Bohr determined that at least some of the dead were officers, and a legend later grew that one of them was a regimental commander.^{26***} At any rate, it appeared to the Marines that the enemy had indeed been reconnoitering the perimeter, further fueling speculation that a major North Vietnamese attack was in the making.

Colonel Lownds continued to seek information concerning the enemy. Infantry companies scoured the nearby jungle while small reconnaissance teams established observation posts on more remote hilltops and watched for signs of movement. The Marines continued to employ the latest technology to augment their troop patrol effort, including sensors, signal intelli-

*Colonel Frederic S. Knight of the 3d Marine Division G-2, or intelligence staff, recalled that there was the need for a smaller scale map of the Khe Sanh sector to show more detail, one on a scale of 1:10,000, as opposed to the 1:50,000 standard maps. There was none available, but Knight finally found a Seabee, who "laboriously drew on what I would call butcher's paper the tactical map displayed in Colonel Lownds' bunker during the entire siege." Knight Comments.

**Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth W. Pipes, who as a captain commanded Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, commented that his company was the anvil for this operation and that one of his platoons ambushed an enemy reconnaissance unit, killing two or three North Vietnamese soldiers. He remembered some maps and that the enemy gear and weapons were helilifted out. LtCol Kenneth W. Pipes, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 10Mar95 (Vietnam Comment File).

***Captain Bohr later wrote that this claim could not be substantiated. See Maj Harper L. Bohr, Jr., Comments on "The Battle for Khe Sanh," 18Dec68 (Khe Sanh Monograph Comment File).

gence, infrared aerial photo reconnaissance, and a relatively new device formally known as the XM-3 airborne personnel detector (APD), but popularly called the "People Sniffer." The XM-3 was the size of a suitcase, able to be mounted in a Huey helicopter, and designed to measure "ammonia emanations from the skin." While no one technique was sufficient in itself, in tandem, they provided the U.S. command sufficient evidence that the enemy was in the Khe Sanh sector in strength.^{27*} For the Marines at Khe Sanh, increased patrol contact indicated an enemy counter-reconnaissance screen in action.

The Decision to Hold

On 6 January, General Westmoreland initiated Operation Niagara, a two-part plan to find enemy units around Khe Sanh and to eliminate them with superior firepower. The first part of the operation, Niagara I, called for intelligence officers to mount a "comprehensive intelligence collection effort" to locate and identify enemy units. In Niagara II, aircraft, including Boeing B-52 Stratofortresses of the 4133d Bomb Wing in Guam and the 4258th Strategic Wing in Thailand, were to saturate target areas with bombs.²⁸ Major General George Keegan, Seventh Air Force G-2, moved quickly to establish an integrated intelligence collection and analysis effort that would compile and record information from all sources. He went so far as to bring eight French generals, some of whom were survivors of Dien Bien Phu, to Vietnam as experts on Communist siege tactics.^{29**}

In the U.S. capital, the Johnson administration focused almost obsessively on the Khe Sanh situation with the President himself poring over detailed maps of the area. On 11 January, General Earle G. Wheeler,

*Chaplain Stubbe recalled that the "People Sniffers" were bringing back hundreds of contacts. He remembered in the 26th Marines command post, "the map with the little red dots on the plastic overlay, and everyone wondering if this might not be an error—the detections of the ammonia from the urine of packs of monkeys." Stubbe also observed that the Marines also realized that radio pattern analysis could err when the NVA put out false transmitters, "broadcasting as though they were a Hq thus drawing airstrikes on a lone transmitter in the hills rather than a NVA Hq . . ." Notwithstanding these flaws, Stubbe contended eventually "together and coordinated, the intelligence was of great significance." Stubbe Comments.

**Accomplished without the knowledge of the American Ambassador, this allegedly agitated the Director of the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office, Saigon. See W. Scott Thompson and Col Donald D. Frizzell, USAF, eds., *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak, and Co., 1977), p. 183.



Photo C8543-7 from LBJ Library Collection

The situation at Khe Sanh has intense high level interest as President Lyndon B. Johnson, right, is seen here studying a map of Khe Sanh with Presidential Assistant Walt W. Rostow, left, and CIA Director Richard Helms.

USA, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sent General Westmoreland a message in which he noted that there had been "discussion around town in very high non-military quarters" concerning the enemy's intentions at Khe Sanh. He outlined the two divergent views which were food for thought among the highly placed, but unnamed, individuals who were concerned about the coming battle. One view held that Khe Sanh must be defended because it afforded an opportunity to draw large enemy forces to battle, then to destroy them with a combination of superior firepower and a counterthrust into Laos. The other view strongly counseled abandoning Khe Sanh because "the enemy [was] building toward a Dien Bien Phu."³⁰

On a superficial level, the situation at Khe Sanh began to have a certain resemblance to Dien Bien Phu, 14 years earlier.^{***} Both were remote outposts organized

***In November 1953, the French occupied and fortified the village of Dien Bien Phu in northwest Tonkin. The Viet Minh besieged the outpost, capturing it in May 1954 after a dramatic battle involving great loss of life on both sides. The fall of Dien Bien Phu was the final straw which broke the back of French colonialism in Indochina, leading to the 1954 Geneva Accords and the partitioning of the Associated States of French Indochina into autonomous countries. In both his comments and his book, Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, who was CGFMFPac in 1968, took strong exception to the Dien Bien Phu analogy. He observed that militarily the differences far outweighed the similarities. He emphasized the vast advantages in both fire and the overall tactical situation that the Americans possessed at Khe Sanh over the French at Dien Bien Phu. LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 31Oct1994 and *First to Fight*, pp. 215-16.

around small airstrips in the highlands. They were each served by a single light-duty road which, in both cases, was cut by the enemy, and were forced to rely upon air delivered supplies. In early 1954 the *crachin* restricted flying at Dien Bien Phu as it did at Khe Sanh in early 1968.

The Dien Bien Phu analogy mentioned in General Wheeler's message dated back to at least January 1967, well before it was touted and dissected in Washington's "very high non-military quarters." Even before the First Battle of Khe Sanh, the 3d Marine Division staff prepared an informal document entitled "Khe Sanh Area Report." The report analyzed the terrain and situation which the French had encountered at Dien Bien Phu, comparing them to the terrain and possible enemy action at Khe Sanh.³¹

MACV also made its comparison between the two events, but after the enemy buildup. General Westmoreland ordered his command historian, Colonel Reamer W. Argo, Jr., USA, to prepare a study on the siege of Dien Bien Phu and other "classic sieges" to determine how Khe Sanh fit into the historical precedent. With his study not completed until early February, Colonel Argo presented to the MACV staff the rather bleak conclusion that Khe Sanh was following "the pattern of previous sieges" in which the advantage lay with the besieging forces rather than the defense. In his diary, Westmoreland characterized the entire presentation "fraught with gloom."³²

Despite the chilling effect of Colonel Argo's study upon his staff, General Westmoreland was determined that Khe Sanh could be held because the Marines

there had advantages which the French had lacked at Dien Bien Phu. First, they controlled the hills which dominated Khe Sanh, whereas the French had left the commanding heights around Dien Bien Phu to the enemy in the mistaken belief that artillery could not possibly be moved onto them through the rugged terrain. Further, the French were strangled by lack of sufficient air transport and delivery capability to meet resupply needs. At Khe Sanh, the airstrip could now handle the large C-130 cargo aircraft and, even when weather or enemy fire precluded landing, modern U.S. air delivery methods could ensure that the base remained supplied. Probably most significant, though, was the advantage in firepower which the Marines enjoyed. The French had supported Dien Bien Phu with a few World War II-era aircraft flying from distant bases to reach the battlefield at extreme range, thereby reducing their payload and "loiter time" over the target area. The Marines at Khe Sanh could expect massive and overwhelming fire support from modern, high-performance jet attack aircraft and Boeing B-52 Stratofortresses with their precision, high-altitude, heavy bombardment capability. Marine artillery units at the combat base and on the hill positions, as well as 175mm guns based at Camp Carroll, could provide continuous all weather firepower.³³

All of the American commanders on the scene had no doubt about their ability to hold the base. Lieutenant General Cushman, the III MAF commander, spoke for all of his Marine commanders when he later stated, "I had complete confidence in my Marines. Of course they were outnumbered, but we had beautiful

U.S. Army artillerymen from the Third Section, Battery C, 2d Battalion, 94th Artillery Regiment at Camp Carroll are seen firing a 175mm gun in support of the Marines at Khe Sanh. The M107 175mm gun fired a 147-pound projectile and had a maximum range of nearly 20 miles.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801357



air and artillery support." He remarked that while weather was a factor the forecasts were that the weather would improve rather than deteriorate. As he concluded, "I was concerned but not worried about the battle." While General Westmoreland, the MACV commander had less confidence in the defensive measures taken by the Marines at the base, he later wrote that his decision to hold Khe Sanh, "was to my mind militarily sound and strategically rewarding."³⁴

Even while General Westmoreland ticked off the reasons why Khe Sanh could be defended, the bigger question was: why should it be defended? General Westmoreland later wrote:

Khe Sanh could serve as a patrol base for blocking enemy infiltration from Laos along Route 9; a base for SOG operations to harass the enemy in Laos; an airstrip for reconnaissance planes surveying the Ho Chi Minh Trail; a western anchor for defenses south of the DMZ; and an eventual jump-off point for ground operations to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail.³⁵

General Westmoreland's proposal for a ground operation against the Ho Chi Minh Trail took the form of a planned invasion of Laos, codenamed Operation El Paso. Although planning for the operation continued through January, MACV did not intend to execute it until fall or winter, after the northeast monsoon had passed. General Westmoreland said he wanted the plan to be ready in time for the November 1968 presidential elections "so that we would have a military plan that could take advantage of a possible change in national policy."³⁶

In addition to these reasons for defending Khe Sanh, General Westmoreland pointed to tactical considerations, noting that "had we not taken a stand in that remote area, our forces would have inevitably been required to fight in the more populous coastal areas where the application of firepower would have been hampered in order to protect civilians."³⁷

Lieutenant General Cushman was "in complete agreement" with the decision to hold Khe Sanh, pointing out that, although the combat base did not really deter infiltration, it was "a complete block to invasion and motorized supply." He further felt that it was necessary to retain bases like Khe Sanh because they allowed him to conduct mobile operations in the enemy's base areas at a time when III MAF did not have enough troops effectively to cover all of the territory near the DMZ.³⁸

Even General Krulak, who in 1966 had opposed the idea of large unit operations near Khe Sanh, now agreed with General Westmoreland, saying that while

"to withdraw would save lives that would otherwise be lost. . . . nobody ever won anything by backing away."³⁹ Although agreeing with the need to defend Khe Sanh once engaged, Krulak continued to insist that the Marines never should have been there in the first place. He quoted General Giap as wanting to stretch "the Marines as taut as a bow string and draw them away from the populated areas."⁴⁰ While the North Vietnamese continued to place pressure on the Marines at Khe Sanh, General Krulak doubted that General Giap would engage the Americans on their terms. For Krulak, "Khe Sanh was an unsound blow in the air."⁴¹

The intentions of the North Vietnamese at Khe Sanh still are a subject of debate. In contrast to General Krulak, Army Brigadier General Philip B. Davidson, the MACV intelligence officer or J-2, later argued that General Giap meant for "Khe Sanh to be Phase III, the culmination of the Great Offensive, Great Uprising." Davidson maintained that the North Vietnamese planned to overwhelm the American base with two to four divisions and end "the war with a stunning military victory."⁴²

In one of their recapitulations of the Khe Sanh experience in 1969, the North Vietnamese appeared to agree in part with elements of General Krulak's analysis of their designs and also those of General Davidson and General Westmoreland. The North Vietnamese authors stated that the mission of the overall general offensive including Khe Sanh "was to draw the enemy out [into remote areas], pin him down, and destroy much of his men and means of conducting war." Specifically, the Khe Sanh-Route 9 campaign portion of the overall offensive had several aims, including the destruction of "an important portion of the enemy's strength, primarily the American." The North Vietnamese wanted to draw the U.S. forces "out Route 9, the further the better," and then "tie them down." The campaign called for close coordination with other North Vietnamese and Viet Cong commands throughout South Vietnam, especially with *Military Region Tri-Thien-Hue*. According to the North Vietnamese study, the destruction of "enemy strength and coordination with other battlefields [military regions] are the most fundamental [and] important." The plan directed that North Vietnamese commanders "focus mainly on striking the enemy outside his fortifications," but "to strike the enemy in his fortifications when necessary and assured of probable victory." In effect, the North Vietnamese would take Khe Sanh if they could, but there were limits to the price they were willing to pay.

Their main objectives were to kill American troops and to isolate them in the remote mountain border region of western Quang Tri Province.⁴³

The Stage is Set

On 10 January, Colonel Lownds closed a regimental staff meeting with the warning that he expected an enemy attack within 10 days.⁴⁴ The Marines continued the unending process of “digging in” with the objective of providing every fighting position and important facility with overhead protection. Over the next few days, patrols continued to engage the enemy. Units reported that enemy sappers had cut the perimeter wire in some places, but had carefully replaced it to hide the cuts.

Lieutenant General Cushman wired Major General Tompkins on 13 January to expect an attack on Khe Sanh to begin on the 18th. To meet the threat, III MAF, he said, would give Khe Sanh priority on B-52 sorties, effective 16 January. Further, General Cushman requested that two U.S. Army brigades be placed on 24-hour

alert for redeployment to ICTZ.⁴⁵ The same day Colonel Lownds ordered that all personnel within the Khe Sanh Combat Base, starting on 15 January, would wear helmets and flak jackets and carry weapons at all times.⁴⁶

On the afternoon of 14 January, Second Lieutenant Randall D. Yeary led a reconnaissance patrol back towards friendly lines on Hill 881 South after four days in the jungle. As the patrol moved down the south slope of Hill 881 North, one kilometer from their destination, the North Vietnamese caught them in an ambush. In the opening shots of the fight, an RPG round killed Lieutenant Yeary and Corporal Richard J. Healy. The six remaining men in the patrol, heavily outgunned and all but two wounded, withdrew, leaving the bodies behind. Nearby, under heavy fire, helicopters extracted the survivors. A platoon from Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines searched the area later and recovered the bodies.⁴⁷

Far to the south, as part of Operation Checkers, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines occupied new positions at

Marines at Khe Sanh, wearing their flak jackets, fill sandbags to reinforce bunkers from incoming artillery rounds. The Marines later came under criticism that they left too many positions vulnerable to the enemy bombardment.

Photo from 3d MarDiv ComdC, Feb68



Phu Bai, freeing the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines to redeploy to Dong Ha. On 15 January, while the latter battalion moved into its new quarters at Dong Ha, Major General Tompkins became concerned about the increase in enemy probes against Khe Sanh. Deciding that Colonel Lownds “didn’t have enough people,” he sent a message to III MAF advising that he intended to reinforce Khe Sanh. General Cushman concurred and at 1730, the 3d Marine Division contacted the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines and notified the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Francis J. Heath, Jr., that his destination was changed to Khe Sanh.⁴⁸

At 0715 the following day, Heath’s Marines began flying into Khe Sanh on board fixed-wing transport aircraft and for the first time since arriving in Vietnam, the 26th Marines was together as a regiment.⁴⁹ While the rest of the battalion occupied an assembly area near the western edge of the airstrip, Company F marched three kilometers north to Hill 558. Overlooking the Song Rao Quan at a point where its valley opens toward the combat base, Hill 558 was a good position from which to control movement along the river. Company F reported that the hill was clear of the enemy and on 17 January, the rest of the battalion moved forward and established a three-infantry company strongpoint.

While the 2d Battalion was redeploying, General Cushman inspected the defenses of Khe Sanh. Following the visit, he told General Tompkins that he thought the combat base needed a better patrolling plan, more seismic intrusion detectors, and additional work on the fortifications. Of particular concern to General Cushman was the ammunition storage area which, he advised General Tompkins, needed “tidying up.” A large quantity of the base’s ammunition was stored outside the revetments, making it vulnerable to enemy fire. Within a week, this last warning would appear a prophecy.^{50*}

* Army Lieutenant General Philip B. Davidson, the former MACV J-2, wrote that on 20 January 1968 he visited the Khe Sanh base with his counterpart on the III MAF staff to talk with Colonel Lownds about the enemy buildup. While there, he noted the “tents, fuel ammunition dumps, and command post—all above ground and unprotected . . .” In reporting his discussion and what he saw to General Westmoreland, the latter became agitated about the “description of the unprotected installations at Khe Sanh and the general lack of preparation to withstand heavy concentrations of artillery and mortar fire . . .” Davidson recalled that Westmoreland turned to his deputy, General Creighton W. Abrams, and said, “Abe, you’re going to have to go up there and take over.” According to Davidson, this was the prelude to the establishment of MACV (Forward). See Chapter 6 for further discussion relative to MACV (Forward). LtGen Philip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946–1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), pp. 554–56.

The Marines at Khe Sanh were well aware of their vulnerabilities. What had been a one-battalion outpost in early December had now expanded to three battalions. With Route 9 closed, U.S. aircraft could keep the Marines supplied with adequate ammunition and rations, but could only bring in limited heavy equipment and fortification material. Lieutenant Colonel Frederick J. McEwan, the 26th Marines S-4, years later remembered that the artillery battalion’s bulldozer “was one of the most valuable and overcommitted heavy equipment items.” According to McEwan, “it dug gun emplacements, ammo revetments, other berms, . . . tank hull defilade positions, and was used extensively and dangerously maintaining the land sanitation fill.”⁵¹

In an attempt to disperse the ammunition, Lieutenant Colonel McEwan provided for three storage areas. He placed the main ammunition dump on the east end of the combat base, just off the runway and dug in with revetments, but it was filled to capacity. Another ammunition dump was located on the western end of the airstrip near the artillery battalion, and a third closer to the central area of the combat base. As an expedient for further dispersion, he force fed as much ammunition as feasible to the combat units. Still, as Captain William J. O’Connor, commander of Battery C, 1st Battalion, 13th Marines at Khe Sanh, recalled that he personally was “very concerned . . . that the ammo dump was located between my area and the air strip.” It was obvious to him that its location would place his battery and the air strip “in jeopardy” and the target of enemy guns. O’Connor insisted that his men dig spider holes outside the gun emplacements and that they wear their helmets and flak jackets.⁵²

On 18 January, the 26th Marines reported another sudden heavy increase in enemy sightings and activity. That afternoon, a reconnaissance team made contact with the enemy on Hill 881 North, suffering two casualties and immobilizing the team. The 3d Platoon of Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, moved out from a patrol base nearby and rescued the team without incident. The reconnaissance Marines, however, lost a radio and a manual encryption device** during the firefight.

** Called a “shackle sheet” by the Marines, this was simply a small printed page containing letters and numbers arranged in random fashion with a key used to arrange them in a rudimentary code. It was used to encrypt certain information, such as friendly positions, for transmission over the radio.

Captain William H. Dabney's Company I received orders to search for the missing radio and codes. At dawn on 19 January, the 1st Platoon, commanded by Second Lieutenant Harry F. Fromme, departed Hill 881 South for the scene of the ambush. At 1200, while moving along a finger which led northeast up to the crest of Hill 881 North, the platoon engaged a North Vietnamese unit in defensive bunkers. Fromme and the platoon had patrolled the hill before and noticed that the trail had been altered, which alerted them to possible danger.⁵³

Lieutenant Fromme called for mortar fire and artillery as he led his platoon through the thick vegetation, attempting to maneuver against the North Vietnamese. When three Marines fell with wounds, Private First Class Leonard E. Newton stood erect in the high kunai grass and fired his M60 machine gun from the shoulder, providing covering fire for others who attempted to rescue them. Even after the wounded Marines were carried to safety, Newton continued to stand, engaging North Vietnamese positions until he was killed in action.^{54*}

Fromme's Marines broke contact and returned to Hill 881 South with total casualties of one killed and three wounded. Eight North Vietnamese were confirmed dead. The platoon did not find the missing radio nor the code sheet.⁵⁵

Captain Dabney, having a premonition that "something was about to happen," requested and received permission to conduct a reconnaissance-in-force to Hill 881 North with his entire company on the next day. Marine helicopters brought in two platoons and a command group from Company M, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines to Hill 881 South to help man the perimeter during Company I's absence.⁵⁶

Elsewhere around Khe Sanh, sightings of the enemy continued unabated. Reconnaissance patrols reported groups of as many as 35 North Vietnamese at a time and listening posts detected enemy troops moving near Marine positions.⁵⁷ It seemed that Captain Dabney's guess was correct: "something was about to happen."

Sortie to Hill 881 North

Company I departed at 0500, 20 January, moving through dense fog into the valley which separated

* For his courageous act, Private First Class Newton received the Silver Star, posthumously. Lieutenant Fromme remembered that Newton, who was right next to him, was killed in the "first few minutes of the fire fight." The platoon's radioman "tried repeatedly to pull him down." Harry F. Fromme, Comments on draft chapter, dtd 27Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Fromme Comments.

Hill 881 South from its neighbor to the north. Dabney split his company into two columns which moved along parallel fingers about 500 meters apart. On the left, Lieutenant Fromme and his 1st Platoon led the way, followed by the company command group and Second Lieutenant Michael H. Thomas' 2d Platoon. In the column on the right marched Second Lieutenant Thomas D. Brindley's 3d Platoon and the six Marines remaining from Company B, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion who had participated in the patrol of 18 January.⁵⁸

At 0900, the fog lifted as the Marines crossed the narrow valley floor and began the climb up Hill 881 North. As during the first part of their journey, the two columns traveled along parallel fingers. Near the crest, four small hills formed a line perpendicular to Company I's advance.

Thirty minutes into Company I's ascent, the enemy opened fire from positions on one of the small hills, forcing the 3d Platoon to the ground. The other column surged forward on the left in an attempt to flank the North Vietnamese, but was almost immediately stopped by heavy fire from another enemy strongpoint which caused several casualties. The company "dug in" and called for fire support. Enemy gunners shot down a Sikorsky UH-34 Sea Horse helicopter from Marine Aircraft Group 36 attempting to pick up Company I's wounded, but the crew escaped injury.^{59**}

As Marine artillery fire fell on the enemy, the 3d Platoon, joined by the reconnaissance team, advanced once again, assaulting and overrunning the nearest NVA positions, then continued to the top of the hill. Lieutenant Brindley charged to the crest of Hill 881 North at the head of his platoon, only to fall to a sniper's bullet, mortally wounded.^{***} With the 3d Platoon now atop the hill but low on ammunition, suffering numerous casualties, and under heavy machine gun fire, Dabney committed his reserve. The 1st Platoon held fast and supported by fire, while the 2d Platoon and command group

** Lieutenant Fromme remembered that "one of the more daring moments happened after the chopper was hit. It 'slid' off the left side of the finger and down some 50 meters to the draw below." Fromme stated that his platoon sergeant took one of his squads to rescue the crew of the helicopter: "For me, it was 30 minutes of nerves. Still, directing suppressing fire on the hill Brindley's then Thomas' platoons were trying to take. I wonder to this day why the NVA on our finger did not attack at this moment." Fromme Comments.

*** Lieutenant Brindley received the Navy Cross, posthumously, for the action on Hill 881 North.

North and returned to Hill 881 South at 1800. The company lost 7 killed and 35 wounded. While withdrawing, it estimated at least 100 dead North Vietnamese on the face of the hill.^{62*}

The Enemy Plan Unfolds

While Company I battled what appeared to be a Communist battalion for Hill 881 North, a rather bizarre and fortuitous event took place at the combat base: the disclosure of the enemy plan for the attack on Khe Sanh. At 1400 on 20 January the 2d Platoon, Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines reported that a North Vietnamese soldier was waving a white flag near its position on the northeastern perimeter of the combat base. The company commander, Captain Kenneth W. Pipes, took a fire team approximately 500 meters outside the lines where the Communist soldier

*Army Colonel Bruce B. G. Clarke commented that on the 20th as well, the Army advisors at the district headquarters led a small force and patrolled an area to the south of the Khe Shan base, but withdrew to make way for a B-52 strike. Clarke Comments.

willingly surrendered. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel James B. Wilkinson, questioned the prisoner immediately after his capture and was "impressed by his eagerness to talk."⁶³

The rallier,** as he turned out to be, was Lieutenant La Thanh Tonc, the commanding officer of the *14th Antiaircraft Company, 95C Regiment, 325C Division*. He freely provided detailed information on the enemy's dispositions and plan of attack for Khe Sanh, including the fact that the North Vietnamese would attack Hill 861 that very night. Coming as it did on the heels of Company I's encounter with the enemy on nearby Hill 881 North, the information was plausible. Colonel Lownds dispatched an officer courier to 3d Marine Division headquarters with the information. The combat base and the hill positions were as ready as possible under the circumstances. There was nothing left to do but wait.⁶⁴

**The term "rallier" was applied to North Vietnamese or Viet Cong who availed themselves of the "Chieu Hoi" ("Open Arms") program to defect to the Government of South Vietnam.