

## CHAPTER 14

# The Siege of Khe Sanh

*Digging In—Opening Moves—"Incoming!"—The Fall of Khe Sanh Village  
Reinforcement and Fighting Back—Round Two—The Fall of Lang Vei—The Intensifying Battle  
Settling the Score—Operation Pegasus*

### *Digging In*

By late January, U.S. planners at every level were determined to defend Khe Sanh, despite the suggested possibility of "another Dien Bien Phu."\* General Westmoreland voiced numerous reasons for defending the remote outpost. It was a valuable base for monitoring North Vietnamese infiltration through Laos along the "Ho Chi Minh" and "Santa Fe" Trails.\*\* It was also important to Westmoreland's planned invasion of Laos by which he intended physically to cut the trails. Moreover, Khe Sanh served as left flank security for the Strong Point Obstacle System, also known as the Dyemarker Project. Finally, and vitally significant when considering the unpopularity of the war to many Americans by 1968, was the psychological significance of Khe Sanh. While it had no intrinsic political importance, being neither a cultural nor economic center, to relinquish it in the face of North Vietnamese pressure would result in a major enemy propaganda victory.\*\*\* Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, and Westmoreland's immediate superior, concurred in this analysis, saying "withdrawal from any portion of Vietnam would make immediate and sensational news, not only through the Western news media, but also through the Communist capitals as a major propaganda item."<sup>1</sup>

At Khe Sanh, the 26th Marines had the responsibility to prevent the base from falling to the sur-

\* See Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of the events preceding the Battle for Khe Sanh.

\*\* The "Santa Fe" Trail was actually part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network, entering South Vietnam from Laos northwest of Khe Sanh. See Chapter 3.

\*\*\* In his comments, General Westmoreland wrote that "the abandonment of that central terrain feature [Khe Sanh] would have made available to the enemy a route to the populated area near the coast. Our control of Khe Sanh forced the enemy to change his battle plans and to reduce the threat to the coastal areas and its population." Gen William C. Westmoreland, USA, Comments on draft, dtd 18Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Unnumbered Department of Defense (USMC) Photo  
*An aerial view of the Khe Sanh Combat Base looking west was taken during the siege. The runway of the airstrip can be seen below and in the top right of the picture is what appears to be a rocket pod hanging below the aircraft taking the picture.*

rounding Communist forces. With three infantry battalions, an artillery battalion, and a full range of supporting units, including tank and antitank detachments, antiaircraft weapons, engineers, shore party, air control, communications, and a host of others, Colonel David E. Lownds, the 26th Marines commander, continued improving his defenses.

The Marine positions arced around the combat base from the westnorthwest to the north, forming a line of heavily fortified, mutually supporting strongpoints. Seven kilometers northwest of the combat base, Company I and Company M occupied Hill 881 South, from which Company I sortied on 20 January

meeting heavy Communist resistance.\* Three kilometers to the east of Hill 881 South, Company K sat atop Hill 861. The 2d Battalion's main position was on Hill 558, just over a kilometer east of Company K, overlooking the Song Rao Quan valley. Further still to the east, and almost four kilometers north of the combat base, the 2d Platoon of Company A sat high atop the dominant precipice known as Hill 950 to guard the radio relay site there. At the combat base proper, the 1st Battalion and Company L, 3d Battalion defended the airstrip with the headquarters elements, and the firing batteries of the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines.

Adjacent to the combat base and just north of Route 9 was the massive bunker complex of the secretive SOG Forward Operating Base 3 (FOB-3) whose members conducted clandestine anti-infiltration operations in Laos and along the border. Outlying defensive positions further south included those of Combined Action Platoons Oscar and the 915th Regional Force Company protecting the hamlets of Khe Sanh Village as well as the small MACV advisory team at the district headquarters located there. Further to the southwest was the Lang Vei Special Forces CIDG Camp located on Route 9, nine kilometers from the combat base and only two kilometers from the border with Laos.\*\*

In every position, the defenders continuously worked to prepare for the coming battle. Following a visit to Khe Sanh, General Cushman directed that all fighting holes have overhead cover capable of withstanding direct hits from 82mm mortars and that the ammunition supply point be reorganized to provide better protection for the ammunition stocks, much of which were outside the revetments.<sup>2</sup> Fortification material was in short supply, but the Marines used many field expedients, including damaged portions of the airstrip's steel matting and metal pallets used for air delivery of supplies. Rolls of "German tape," with its razor-like edges, were added to the multiple layers of protective barbed wire ringing the combat base and

the hill outposts in a band 25 meters wide in many places. Marines placed explosives inside rolls of barbed wire to produce boobytraps which, when activated by a tripwire or detonated on command, would send sharp shards of twisted metal flying in every direction. In some places, the defenders emplaced drums of *fougasse*, a mixture of gasoline and diesel fuel detonated by plastic explosive which produced a wall of flame certain to discourage even the most determined attacker. Still there were shortcomings in the Marine defenses. Former *Washington Post* correspondent Peter Braestrup, who served as a Marine officer during the Korean War, remembered that after he visited Khe Sanh at the end of January, 1968, "I saw on main base [that] many perimeter trenches were waist high, no more. Marines don't like to dig."<sup>3\*\*\*</sup>

In addition to the physical preparation of the ground at Khe Sanh, higher headquarters entered the picture to assist in the defense of the combat base and its outlying positions. General Westmoreland ordered that Khe Sanh receive maximum support from Boeing B-52 Stratofortress heavy bombers and ordered the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division to prepare to deploy to I Corps Tactical Zone on 24-hour notice. General Cushman directed the 3d Marine Division to shift heavy artillery units for better support of Khe Sanh and requested that the 3d Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division be alerted for deployment to the Hue-Phu Bai area on 24-hour notice.<sup>4</sup>

Logistical preparations went forward at the same time. By the third week in January, Khe Sanh had at least a 30-day supply of ammunition for all of its

\* A detachment of three 105mm howitzers from Battery C, 1st Battalion, 13th Marines was attached to Company I on Hill 881 South to provide additional fire support for the base. Colonel Kent O. W. Steen, who served with the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines as a young officer in 1968, wrote: "There were times when these three artillery pieces were all that could be brought to bear on attacks on the . . . main base." Col Kent O. W. Steen, Comments on draft, dtd 1Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Steen Comments; 1/13 ComdC, Feb68.

\*\*See Chapter 4 relative to the activities and establishment of these organizations in the Khe Sanh sector.

\*\*\*For discussion of Marine vulnerabilities at Khe Sanh see Chapter 4. See also LtGen Philip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), pp. 554-56; LtCol Frederick J. McEwan, Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File); and William J. O'Connor, Comments on draft, dtd 29Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter O'Connor Comments. See also the references to Marine shortcomings in building fortifications and bunkers in Chapter 1, especially with reference to comments by Major Gary E. Todd who served on the 3d Marine Division intelligence staff in 1968 and Colonel John C. Studt. Colonel Studt, who as a lieutenant colonel took over the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines at Khe Sanh in March 1968, observed that "the first thing I undertook was a total reconstruction of our defensive positions starting with the company commanders building a proper bunker with me." Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File). From another perspective, Colonel Kent O. W. Steen, an artillery officer at Khe Sanh, commented, "we did homemade bunkers not because we wanted to or didn't know better, but that there weren't enough airlift and construction resources in Vietnam to provide the materials we need once the threat was understood." Steen Comments.



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190273 while the bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190685.

*Top, a Marine infantryman takes a brief nap in his covered overhead bunker, protecting him from incoming artillery and mortar rounds. Below, the photograph is an overview of the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines bunker defenses along the western perimeter of the base. The Marines had come under criticism for not "digging in."*



howitzers, mortars, and small arms. Even so, Cushman declared that when aircraft became available, he intended to increase those stocks by another five days' supply.<sup>5</sup>

The rallier who surrendered to Captain Kenneth W. Pipes' Company B Marines on 20 January proved to be a gold mine of information.\* Lieutenant La Thanh Tonc answered questions freely, providing intelligence officers detailed information concerning the North Vietnamese plan for the attack and reduction of the Khe Sanh Combat Base. Tonc claimed that the Khe Sanh campaign was the most important effort undertaken by the North Vietnamese since the U.S. became involved in the war. Their objective was to seize Quang Tri Province and force the U.S. out of South Vietnam by capturing every U.S. base between the Laotian border and Con Thien. According to La Thanh Tonc, the effort was so important that the North Vietnamese Defense Ministry controlled it directly.<sup>6</sup>

The enemy plan called for a major offensive effort by the North Vietnamese *325C Division*. The *5th Battalion* of the division's *95C Regiment* was to capture Hill 1015, the highest peak of Dong Tri Mountain, which would neutralize the Marine-manned nearby Hill 950. From this high ground overlooking the airfield and its approaches, Communist gunners could interdict aerial supplies and reinforcements. The *6th Battalion, 95C Regiment* was to seize Hill 861. The *4th Battalion, 95C Regiment* had orders to attack the western end of the airstrip, near where, on 2 January, the Marines had killed the North Vietnamese reconnaissance party. The *101D Regiment* was to attack the east end of the airstrip in coordination with the effort by the *4th Battalion, 95C Regiment* at the other side of the combat base. Lieutenant La Thanh Tonc told the interrogators that the North Vietnamese *29th Regiment* was in division reserve, its location unknown to him (it was, in fact, headed for Hue City and the savage battles of the Tet Offensive). The cooperative lieutenant was unable to provide specific information concerning the size, designation, location, or equipment of any NVA artillery units, but he was certain that heavy artillery and rockets would support the attacks. The offensive, he claimed would begin before Tet—only 10 days away.<sup>7</sup>

### *Opening Moves*

Just after 2000 on 20 January, an eight-man Marine reconnaissance team, four kilometers west of Khe Sanh on Hill 689, reported that it was surrounded, under attack, and required artillery support. Lieutenant Colonel John A. Hennelly's 1st Battalion, 13th Marines responded. Through the night, Hennelly's gunners enclosed the reconnaissance team in a protective box of artillery fire, preventing the North Vietnamese from overrunning its position. In all, over 2,200 rounds of friendly artillery fire fell around the trapped Marines, sometimes within 20 meters of them. The technique was effective. Marines reported 25 North Vietnamese casualties, while the patrol sustained only two wounded.<sup>8\*\*</sup>

Within a few hours, however, the fight on Hill 689 would become a sideshow. Shortly after midnight, two red star cluster signalling flares soared into the darkness above Hill 861, and immediately 300 North Vietnamese fell upon Company K's lines from the northwest. Striking from attack positions within 100 meters of the crest, the enemy blasted holes in the protective wire with bangalore torpedoes and quickly advanced, supported by mortars targeting Company K's bunkers and trenches. The NVA moved up the northwest slope, keeping the crest of the hill between the combat base and their attacking units, thus curtailing the Marines' use of artillery fire in the defense.<sup>9</sup>

Company K, commanded by Captain Norman J. Jasper, Jr., fought back hard as enemy rifle, machine gun, and mortar fire poured into Hill 861, but the North Vietnamese penetrated the 1st Platoon's defenses and overran the company's landing zone. Moving through his company area, directing the defense of the hill, Captain Jasper was wounded three times and unable to carry on. His executive officer, First Lieutenant Jerry N. Saulsbury, took command of Company K in the middle of the fight.

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<sup>\*\*</sup>Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly remembered that his artillery used eight 105mm howitzers "to keep literally a wall of fire" between the Marine patrol and the enemy. The plan had been to extract the men by helicopter, but this proved infeasible because in order to do so the artillery had to stop firing and the North Vietnamese . . . [would have] moved back in. By this time, the entire base was under attack and he recalled that he had the three howitzers firing the east end of the box cease fire and passed the word to the reconnaissance team to move east to the base. Hennelly stated the team arrived safely back about dawn, which he believed was a miracle. LtCol John A. Hennelly, Comments on draft, dtd 30Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Hennelly Comments.

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\*The details concerning the actual capture of Lieutenant La Thanh Tonc are contained in Chapter 4.



Photo is from the Ted Vdorick Collection

*A photo of Hill 869 was taken from the trenchline of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at the Rock Quarry.*

The 3d Battalion command group was still on Hill 881 South, where it had gone earlier in the day to monitor Company I's battle on Hill 881 North.\* The weather had closed in during the afternoon, grounding helicopters and effectively trapping Lieutenant Colonel Harry L. Alderman and key members of the battalion staff atop Hill 881 South.

Alderman's operations officer, Major Matthew P. Caulfield, contacted Hill 861 by radio during the fight and learned that Lieutenant Saulsbury had assumed command. Caulfield knew that Saulsbury had recently been dropped from flight training and had no infantry experience. Concerned, Major Caulfield told Saulsbury to rely on the company gunnery sergeant, who was well known in the battalion as an effective and experienced combat leader. "The Gunny is dead," Saulsbury replied. When Caulfield next told Saulsbury to get advice from the company first sergeant, Saulsbury informed him that the first sergeant was in the wreck of the company command post, dying.<sup>10</sup>

Lieutenant Saulsbury turned to the task at hand, fighting Company K like a veteran combat commander. The action was close and fierce, with North Vietnamese moving through parts of the position, heaving satchel charges into bunkers. The enemy next pene-

trated the southwest side of 861's perimeter, forcing the 3d Platoon from its positions and occupying the Marines' bunkers. Sergeant Mykle E. Stahl singlehandedly counterattacked, distracting the enemy troops while other Marines recovered casualties. As he advanced up the trenchline, three North Vietnamese attempted to capture him and Stahl suffered a bayonet wound before killing two of them. When his rifle malfunctioned, another Marine killed the third man. Stahl then picked up an enemy AK-47 assault rifle and attacked a third bunker, killing three of the enemy and capturing three others. When the 3d Platoon reoccupied its positions, Stahl, although wounded three times, manned a .50-caliber machine gun and continued to fight.<sup>11\*\*</sup>

Major Caulfield ordered some of the battalion's 81mm mortars on Hill 881 South to fire in support of Hill 861, ever mindful that the NVA might also attack Hill 881 South at any time. The mortars fired 680 rounds that night, causing the tubes to become so hot that the Marines cooled them first with water, then fruit juice, and finally, by urinating on them.<sup>12</sup>

By 0530, the enemy onslaught had spent itself against the determined defense of Hill 861. Marine signal intelligence personnel reported hearing the

\*See Chapter 4.

\*\*For his actions, Sergeant (later Captain) Stahl received the Navy Cross.

commander of the attacking NVA unit ask for reinforcements. But it was too late for that. Company K hit the enemy with a final blast of fire, driving them off the hill.<sup>13</sup>

The battle for Hill 861 left 4 Company K Marines dead and 11 wounded. At daybreak, elements of the company swept the area outside their wire, finding 47 dead North Vietnamese and capturing 3 wounded. One of the prisoners claimed to belong to the *4th Battalion, 95C Regiment*, a slight conflict with Lieutenant La Thanh Ton's revelation of the previous afternoon, but, nonetheless, close enough to lend further credibility to his information.

*"Incoming!"*

No sooner had the North Vietnamese abandoned their attempt to take Hill 861 than they struck the Khe Sanh combat base itself. At 0530, enemy artillery, mortar, and rocket fire smothered the airstrip and its surrounding bunkers and trenches. The first round landed in the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines area, scoring a direct hit on the generator which powered its digital fire control computer, but the battalion continued to fight back with the fire direction center computing firing data manually.<sup>14</sup>

Within minutes of the opening salvo, enemy shells hit the base's ammunition supply point known as "ASP Number 1". More than 1,500 tons of ammunition began exploding, throwing fragments and unexploded rounds, some of them on fire, through the air to land in and around the Marines' fighting positions. Captain Pipes, the commanding officer of Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, moved his command post three times because the explosions continued showering his position with smoldering mortar and artillery projectiles which threatened to detonate at any moment.<sup>15\*</sup>

Incoming rounds smashed into the airstrip, ripping apart the steel plates and damaging helicopters. A direct hit destroyed the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines mess hall and another struck the tiny post exchange. Company D, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines lost all of its personnel records to enemy shell fire. Riot control grenades burned in the inferno at ASP Number 1,

\*Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth W. Pipes, the commander of Company B in 1968, remembered that one of the first Marines killed was his radio operator: "I found him slumped over the entrance to our bunker, as I exited to search for him." LtCol Kenneth W. Pipes, Comments on draft, dtd 10Mar95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Pipes Comments, 1995.

sending choking clouds of "CS" gas rolling through the trenches and bunkers to add to the Marines' misery. Some did not have gas masks and could only cover their faces with wet towels.<sup>16</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly's artillerymen remained at their howitzers, providing counterbattery fire. In Battery C's position, near the ASP, scores of hot, smoking shells thrown skyward by explosions, fell once more to earth. Captain William J. O'Connor, First Lieutenant William L. Eberhardt, and Sergeant Ronnie D. Whiteknight, all of Battery C, picked up between 75 and 100 of these dangerously hot projectiles and moved them away from the gun pits. Captain O'Connor recalled that one Marine driver abandoned his truck loaded with ammunition "sitting in the middle of my Battery area." At that point, Sergeant Whiteknight "rushed out of a bunker and drove the truck away from the guns and into a less dangerous area." When CS gas rolled over the gun line, Lieutenant Eberhardt and Sergeant Whiteknight brought gas masks to the cannoneers so that Battery C might continue its duel with the North Vietnamese gunners.<sup>17\*\*</sup>

At 1000, a large quantity of C-4<sup>\*\*\*</sup> and other explosives went up with a tremendous blast, rocking the entire combat base. A shock wave rolled through Khe Sanh, cracking the timbers holding up the roof of the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines command post. The battalion staff fell to the ground but the roof, after settling about one foot, held fast.<sup>18</sup>

As the enemy shells continued to fall and ASP Number 1 continued to burn, each new explosion took its toll on the Marines' ammunition supply.<sup>19</sup> Ammunition technicians from Force Logistic Support Group-B fought the flames with fire extinguishers and shovels, but by afternoon the garrison was dangerously low on many types of ammunition. General Cushman's warning of the previous week to "tidy up" ASP Number 1 was driven home. Worse, the logistical air effort to build up ammunition stocks would have to begin again, meaning that other types of supplies would wait even longer for delivery while the priority for space on board planes continued to go to ammunition.

\*\*William O'Connor, the Battery C commander, recalled that when he took over the battery, the troops had a dog mascot with the mange. O'Connor related, "despite my orders the dog was not destroyed but was cleaned up. He was smart enough to hide from me, but when we got hit . . . [on 21 January] CS rolled into the area from the exploding dump and I found myself sharing my gas mask with the dog. That dog later left for the States with one of our rotating troops and did make it back safe and sound." O'Connor Comments.

\*\*\*A plastic explosive.



Photo from the David Douglas Duncan Collection, MCHC

*A lone combat boot and helmet are seen among the debris where a Marine's "booth" stood before it was destroyed when a 122mm rocket hit the nearby ammunition dump.*

Nightfall brought no respite for the defenders of Khe Sanh. At 1950, the 2d Platoon, Company L, 3d Battalion reported about 35 North Vietnamese crawling toward its wire near the western end of the airstrip. The Marines opened fire with grenade launchers and light antiarmor weapons (LAAWs).<sup>\*</sup> When the action ended an hour later the North Vietnamese were seen dragging away casualties and 14 enemy dead remained in the wire.<sup>20</sup>

The fighting and shelling of 21 January resulted in 14 Marines dead and 43 wounded. Combined with the ammunition dump explosions, the shelling destroyed a Bell UH-1 Iroquois helicopter, all of the weather monitoring equipment, most of the airstrip's night lighting system, many field telephone lines, bunkers, engineer equipment, generators, the post exchange, a mess hall, and other facilities.<sup>21\*\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup>The M72 Light Antiarmor Weapon (LAAW) is a 66mm anti-rank rocket system in which a projectile is prepackaged in a disposable launcher. In Vietnam, the Marines used these weapons against enemy bunkers and as on this occasion even against infantry.

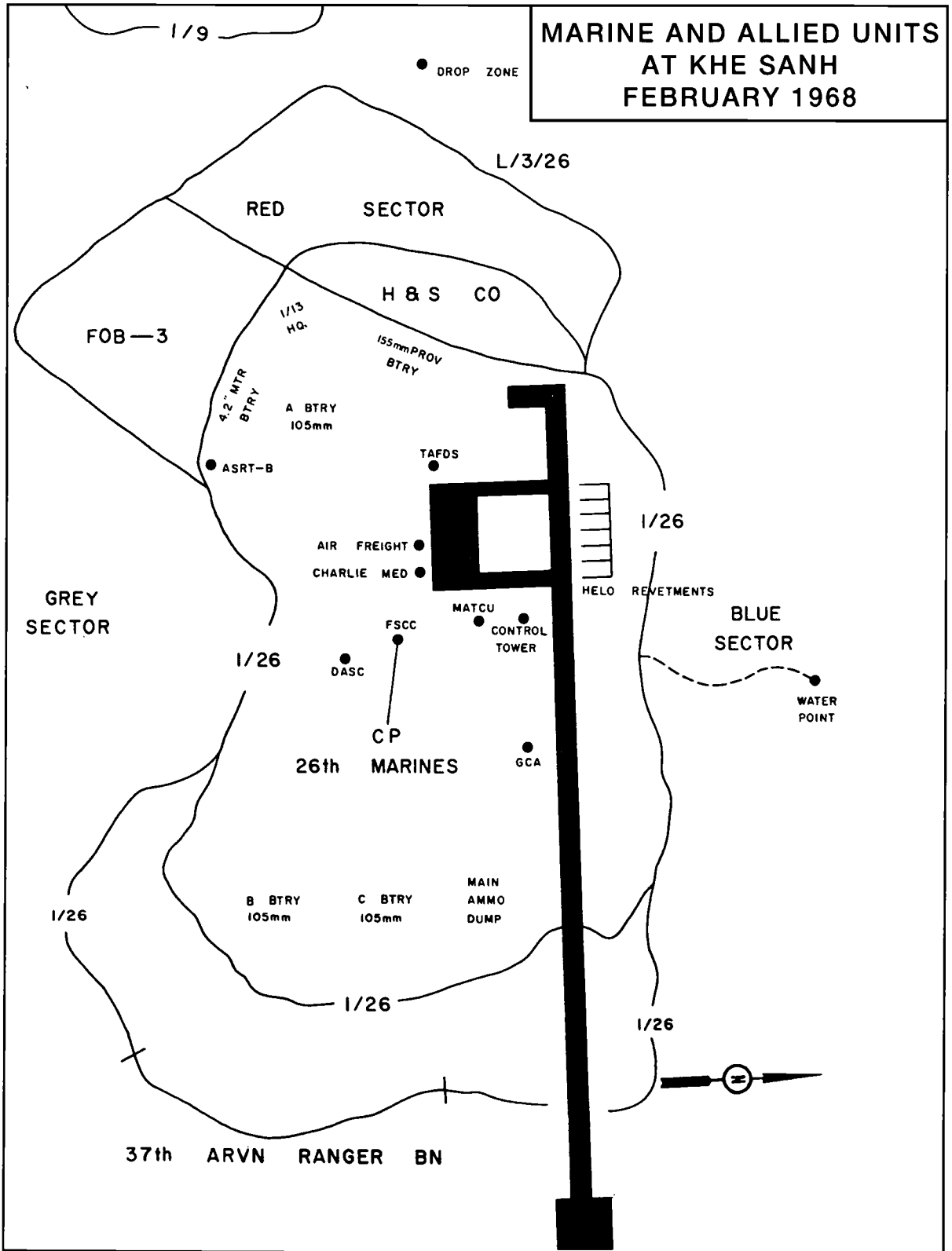
<sup>\*\*</sup>Colonel William H. Dabney, who as a captain commanded Company I on Hill 881S, recalled that as well as the main base being bombarded, "several rounds of 120mm mortars struck" Hill 881S, wounding several Marines, and that "as they were being evacuated, several more rounds struck the helicopter zone, killing the company copman and two other Marines and destroying a CH-34 helicopter and wounding its crew." Col William H. Dabney, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Dabney Comments.

III MAF immediately moved to replenish the ammunition lost in ASP Number 1, but the task was complicated by damage to the airstrip. With only 1,800 feet of the 3,900-foot runway open, large-capacity cargo aircraft could not land. Further, the damage to the night lighting system and poor weather added to the problem. Nonetheless, six Fairchild C-123 Provider light cargo aircraft of the 315th Air Commando Wing landed at Khe Sanh after dark on 21 January under artillery illumination, bringing in 26 tons of much needed ammunition. After midnight, a 1st Marine Aircraft Wing Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter delivered whole blood after an extremely dangerous landing on the "socked-in" airstrip.<sup>22</sup>

### *The Fall of Khe Sanh Village*

Almost simultaneously with the attack on the main base, the North Vietnamese launched an assault against the Regional Force troops and Combined Action Oscar units in Khe Sanh Village about 3,000 meters to the south.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Early on the morning of the 21st, under cover

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>Marine records state that the attack on Khe Sanh Village occurred at 0630 on the morning of the 21st while Colonel Bruce B. G. Clarke, USA, who was the senior U.S. Army advisor for Huong Hoa District, in an account he wrote in April 1968, states that the NVA attack began at 0500. See 26th Mar ComdC, Jan68, and Capt Bruce Clarke, untitled account, dtd Apr68, attached to Col Bruce B. G. Clarke, Comments on draft, n.d. [Apr95] (Vietnam Comment File).





of fog, elements of the *66th Regiment, 304th North Vietnamese Division* struck the Huong Hoa District headquarters in the village complex. The mixed group of defenders included two platoons of the 915th Regional Force Company, the small four-man U.S. Army advisory group headed by Army Captain Bruce B. G. Clarke, and two Combined Action Platoons of Combined Action Company "Oscar," commanded by Marine First Lieutenant Thomas B. Stamper. The total strength of the allied force consisted of approximately 175 soldiers and Marines. Combined Action Platoon Oscar-1 (CAP O-1) consisting of 10 Marines and 1 Navy corpsman, headed by Sergeant John J. Balanco, and about an equal number of Bru tribesmen, was in the headquarters hamlet. The second Combined Action Platoon, Oscar-2 (CAP O-2), led by Sergeant Roy Harper, at about the same strength, was in a nearby hamlet about 200 yards to the west.

With Captain Clarke and Lieutenant Stamper coordinating artillery and air support from the headquarters command bunker, CAP O-1 and the RF troops stood off the initial attacks in fierce fighting.\* While eventually forced to give up most of the hamlet, the two units established a final defensive perimeter in the headquarters compound. CAP O-2 also managed for that first day to stave off the NVA in their sector.

As the fog lifted about midday on the 21st, the intensity of the combat slackened somewhat. While the North Vietnamese continued to place pressure upon the defenders with mortar and RPG bombardments, they limited their infantry action to small arms fire and probes. Helicopters attempted to resupply the embattled headquarters compound, but could not land. According to Corporal Balanco, the crews managed, however, to kick out some much needed ammunition.

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\*Captain Clarke was on a separate advisory radio net from Lieutenant Stamper. Clarke managed to keep in radio contact with Robert Brewer, the Senior Quang Tri Province Advisor in Quang Tri City, and more importantly established radio contact with an Air Force forward air controller who called in repeated air strikes against the North Vietnamese. Lieutenant Stamper had direct radio contact with the 26th Marines and was able to call in artillery support and Marine air through the Marine radio net. Col Bruce B. G. Clarke, USA, Comments on draft, n.d. [Apr95] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Clarke Comments; Capt Bruce Clarke, untitled account, dtd Apr68, attached to Clarke Comments. According to Prados and Stubbe, Captain Clarke was out on an early morning patrol just before the enemy onslaught on the 21st, but "miraculously got back to the perimeter and under cover" to help coordinate the defense. John Prados and Ray W. Stubbe, *Valley of Decision, The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1991), p. 258.

Two relief expeditions also failed in their attempts. In the first, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines from the Khe Sanh base sent out a platoon from Company D to the village. The platoon reached Hill 476 overlooking Khe Sanh Village and could see North Vietnamese troops deploying. Receiving new orders that the relief mission was too dangerous, the platoon returned to base. The second expedition was a disaster. The U.S. Army 282d Assault Helicopter Company attempted to bring in that evening the South Vietnamese 256th Regional Force Company from Quang Tri City. Unfortunately, in a series of mishaps and misunderstandings, the aircraft came down in a landing zone near the abandoned French Fort, 2,000 meters east of Khe Sanh, the former home of FOB-3, and now a North Vietnamese stronghold. It was a near slaughter: the North Vietnamese killed over 25 of the American pilots and crew and 70 or more of the RF troops. Among the dead was the expedition leader, U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Seymoe, the deputy advisor for Quang Tri Province. According to authors John Prados and Ray Stubbe, this failed expedition "in terms of proportionate casualties and equipment losses . . . would be the worst military debacle of the entire campaign at Khe Sanh."<sup>23</sup>

During the night of 21-22 January in Khe Sanh village, the situation remained tense but relatively quiet, except for some enemy sniper fire. During this time, the Marines and surviving Bru of CAP O-2 to the west, fought their way to the headquarters compound.\*\* The Marines sustained several wounded but no dead. On the morning of the 22d, Sergeant Balanco, who was later awarded the Silver Star for his part in the fight, led a patrol towards the Old French Fort, hoping to find survivors of the aborted relief mission. At the bottom of the hill upon which the fort was situated, Balanco turned back, fearing he was being set up for an ambush after seeing some Vietnamese in strange uniforms. Upon approaching the western sector of the headquarters compound, Balanco and his men recovered what he claimed to be 150 weapons, including RPGs and assault rifles, many of them

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\*\*Former Navy Corpsman John R. Roberts, who served with CAP O-2, recalled that Sergeant Harper, although badly wounded, continued to coordinate the defense. Roberts wrote that most of the other Marines in the CAP were also wounded. Despite their wounds, the CAP-2 Marines decided that the only choice they had was to break out and attempt to reach CAP-1 in the headquarters compound, which they successfully did. John R. Roberts, "The Bastard Sons of Khe Sanh, the Marines of CAP, Oscar II," ms, attached to John J. Balanco, Comments on draft, dtd 15Nov94 and 5Apr95 (Vietnam Comment File).

brand new, from the bodies of the “hundreds of mutilated and mangled NVA” there.<sup>24</sup>

During the late morning of 22 January, a Marine helicopter took Lieutenant Stampler back to the Khe Sanh base to consult with Colonel Lownds about the feasibility of continuing the defense in the village. According to Lownds, upon Stampler’s recommendation and after “long consideration and proper evaluation of the facts,” he decided to evacuate the units.<sup>25</sup>

The resulting evacuation took place under chaotic conditions including North Vietnamese shelling. Sergeant Balanco remembered, “We received an agonizing radio message . . . from an emphatic and concerned Lt. Stampler telling us to pack up.” According to Balanco, “no R.F.’s or Bru with their ‘weapons’ would be allowed on the helicopters to return to the combat base.” He recalled that six helicopter evacuation missions flew out of the village that day. As the first helicopters took off, a group of frightened Vietnamese civilians rushed to board the aircraft. Balanco fired “a few M-70 rounds” in the opposite direction, causing them to hold back so that the wounded could be taken out first.<sup>26</sup>

The helicopters took out all of the American wounded including two U.S. Army sergeants from the Advisory Group. Captain Clarke also had received orders from Robert Brewer, the Senior Quang Tri Province Advisor, to evacuate the headquarters. According to Clarke, Brewer had not wanted to abandon Khe Sanh Village, but in that Colonel Lownds could not provide any further artillery support, there was no longer any choice. Clarke and one of his advisory sergeants declined to board the helicopters. They led the remnants of the 195th RF Company and several of the Bru safely to the FOB-3 compound along a secret trail.<sup>27\*</sup>

\*There seems to be some doubt whether Colonel Lownds ordered that the RFs and the Brus not be evacuated by helicopter. According to Lownds’ interview, he ordered the evacuation of the Bru CAPs and RFs, but they and Captain Clarke elected to walk out rather than board the helicopters. Col David E. Lownds inrvw, 13Mar68, pp. 22-23, in Khe Sanh: Transcriptions of Oral History, MCHC. Given the accounts on the ground by both Clarke and Sergeant Balanco, it is obvious that the RFs and the Bru would have boarded the helicopters if they had the choice. It may very well have been that Colonel Lownds’ orders may have been misunderstood or that the situation on the ground may have dertermined the decision not to evacuate them. In any event the relations between the Army advisors and the Marine command with the exception of the CAP Oscar Marines was not very good. Colonel Clarke later wrote: “It was so bad that the Marines were eavesdropping on our radio nets . . . In this regard, I had coordinated to have my own alternate communicarions back to Quang Tri.” Clarke Comments.



Photo courtesy of John J. Balanco  
Cpl Bruce Brown, LCpl Frank Batchman, and Sgt John J. Balanco, members of Combined Action Company Oscar who served with the Bru Montagnards in the Khe Sanh village complex, are seen at the secretive Forward Operating Base (FOB) 3, next to the Khe Sanh base, where they set up new positions with their Bru Popular Force troops.

Sergeant Balanco departed on the last helicopter to leave the headquarters compound. Just before he boarded the aircraft, two civilian Bru approached him carrying a badly burned man and asked the Marine to take him on board. At the same time, the pilot was shouting: “No one except Americans could go on the LAST CHOPPER OUT and he was departing RIGHT NOW!” Taking out his pistol and thinking to put the wounded man out of his misery, Balanco suddenly changed his mind. He returned the pistol to his holster and “screamed for everyone to move back and got him on that last chopper out.” After arriving at the Khe Sanh base, the Marines of Combined Action Company Oscar, including CAP-3 which also evacuated its hamlet located north of the headquarters, joined the RF troops and the Popular Force Bru at the southern edge of the FOB-3 compound.<sup>28\*\*</sup>

### *Reinforcement and Fighting Back*

On 22 January, Khe Sanh Combat Base was the scene of frenetic activity. The resupply effort continued as 20 Air Force C-123 sorties delivered another

\*\*Captain Clarke later that afternoon led a Special Forces Strike Force from FOB-3 which destroyed everything of value in the Khe Sanh Village headquarters. Clarke Comments and Balanco, “Abandoned,” p. 186.



Photo from the Abel Collection

*An Air Force C-123 Provider transport is about to land just beyond the leveled ammunition dump at Khe Sanh, bringing in much-needed supplies.*

130 tons of ammunition. After unloading, the empty aircraft joined the helicopters of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 362 in evacuating wounded Marines and civilian refugees. Attack aircraft of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, as well as Navy and Air Force planes, struck known and suspected Communist positions in the surrounding area. The North Vietnamese did not remain silent. Artillery, rockets, mortar, and small arms fire pounded the base and hill positions at intervals throughout the day, playing havoc with efforts to repair damage. Enemy fire hit one CH-46 helicopter as it was lifting off from the airstrip, causing it to crash within the perimeter.<sup>29</sup>

At 1200 on the 22d, the 3d Marine Division ordered Lieutenant Colonel John F. Mitchell's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines to deploy to Khe Sanh.\* Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell recalled that his battalion command group and two rifle companies arrived by helicopter that day. Mitchell remembered that as the helicopters landed the battalion was greeted by

“a hail of automatic weapons fire followed by mortar fire” and the unit sustained its first casualties at Khe Sanh. According to the battalion commander, there were no guides and he directed his company commanders “to disperse their companies as best they could, seek protective cover or trenches, and await further orders.” Then Mitchell sought out Colonel Lownds in the 26th Marines command post. The 26th Marines commander told Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell to assemble his troops and “be prepared for immediate deployment due west” of the Khe Sanh base. At Mitchell's request, given the lateness of the hour, Colonel Lownds agreed that Mitchell could wait until the following day to deploy to his new sector.<sup>30</sup>

The next morning, the battalion moved out from the combat base and spent much of the time in “clearing/reconnoitering the area west/southwest” of the combat base. Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell selected a small hill that fronted a rock quarry approximately 1,500 meters to the west southwest of the main base for his command post and main defensive area. Mitchell then sent the 1st Platoon of Company A about 500 meters outside the battalion perimeter on an

\*See Chapter six for the redeployment of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines from Camp Evans.

even smaller hill to set up an outpost on a knoll west of the quarry, which he designated Alpha 1.\* His priority at both sites was the building of his defensive positions starting “from scratch.” While “building materials, wire, and mines” arrived from the main base as they “became available,” the battalion first depended upon its own “ingenuity and hard work—digging—scrounging, . . . to survive the incoming.”

Over the next several days, Khe Sanh maintained a high level of activity, as helicopters and cargo aircraft flew in and out as often as the weather permitted, and Marines worked to improve their defensive positions. On 23 January, enemy antiaircraft fire became a significant threat, with NVA gunners downing a helicopter and a jet attack aircraft in a 20-minute period.<sup>31</sup>

Communist shelling continued, completely destroying the base post office and further damaging bunkers, trenches, and the airstrip.<sup>32</sup> The Marines fought back, expending massive quantities of artillery and mortar ammunition in attempts to silence the enemy guns. This, however, proved to be a difficult task. The enemy gun positions were well-concealed in dense jungle, visible only when actually firing. Because these positions were usually located on the reverse slopes of hills, they were often not even visible from Marine positions. Air observers of the 3d Marine Division maintained constant patrol over the area during daylight hours, providing some of the information the Marines needed to return fire effectively.<sup>33\*\*</sup>

\* Bert Mullins who served as a radioman to Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell recalled that after leaving the main base that they actually reached first the small hill which later became A-1. He remembered Mitchell “re-marking that we must be on the wrong hill because it was much too small.” Bert Mullins, Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Mullins Comments. Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell stated that he ordered the establishment of the A-1 outpost because he believed that the NVA would need more than one avenue of approach to make an all-out assault on the main base and that A-1 lay “astride the west to east axis” to Khe Sanh. Moreover, he needed “as much warning as possible before the enemy would reach 1/9’s MLR [main line of resistance].” Col John F. Mitchell, Comments on draft, dtd 5Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Mitchell Comments.

\*\* Navy Captain Bernard D. Cole, who as a lieutenant junior grade and naval gunfire officer assigned to the 26th Marines, served as an assistant target intelligence officer in the 26th Marines Fire Support Coordinating Center. He recalled that “air dropped sensors were a primary source of targeting data for us.” These sensors “were still classified . . . and we were not supposed to refer to them as an info[r]mation source . . .” Cole remembered that “we received a formatted readout from the sensors . . . [which] would indicate the sensor location and type, and the type of target (troops or vehicles) and the approximate number . . .” Capt Bernard D. Cole, USN, Comments on draft, dtd 27Oct94 and 23Jun96 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Cole Comments.

Enemy long-range artillery presented an even more difficult problem. The accepted view was that the artillerymen fired their large guns from positions on Co Roc Mountain, a precipitous cliff southwest of the combat base, across the Laotian border and outside the maximum range of the artillery pieces of the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines. One 3d Marine Division intelligence officer, Major Gary E. Todd, wrote that the reports he read stated that “NVA artillery was dug into the eastern face of Co Roc so as to be almost impossible to hit with counter-battery fire, even if we had the artillery with range.” These same sources reported that the NVA gun emplacements were in “man-made caves, completely camouflaged, and fitted out with rails similar to railroad tracks.” The North Vietnamese gunners “would roll their guns to the mouth of the cave and, with barrel protruding, fire, then roll back smoothly into the cave and restore the camouflage.” Navy Lieutenant Junior Grade Bernard D. Cole, attached to the 26th Marines as the assistant target intelligence officer, remembered that he “personally targeted Arc Light strikes (which came in flights of three B-52s) on Co Roc.” According to Cole, “The strikes would quiet down the NVA gunners for a couple of hours—from the shock . . . , but then they would resume firing.”<sup>34</sup>

Captain William H. Dabney, who commanded Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines on Hill 881 South had a different perspective. According to Dabney, “Co Roc was a myth, perhaps because of the imposing look of the mountain and the romantic sounding name.” While granting that some rounds were fired from artillery at Co Roc, he argued that the more destructive NVA firing positions were located to the west of Hill 881 South. Dabney contended that being seven kilometers west of Khe Sanh and 1,500 feet higher than the Marines on the base, his company was in a better position to locate the enemy artillery positions. While not always hearing the guns being fired, he declared, “we could usually hear the rounds going over.”<sup>35</sup>

He described how one of his artillery spotters, Corporal Molimao Niutoa, a native Samoan and blessed with unusually good eyesight, using powerful ships’ binoculars, found several of these enemy guns to the west. Because of the location of Hill 881 and its height, the Khe Sanh DASC often passed off aircraft with unexpended munitions to Company I. As Dabney explained, the Khe Sanh DASC “rarely could see targets of opportunity” and “we, conversely, *always* [emphasis in the original] had targets.” On one such occasion, according to the Marine captain, he just had



Photo is from the Ted Vdorick Collection

*A lone Marine can be seen standing up along the trenchline of Company D, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, located in the Rock Quarry about 1,500 meters west of the main base. Note the sandbags along the trenchline.*

*The American flag flies over the command bunker of Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines on Hill 881 South, one of the main hill outposts. Captain William H. Dabney, the Company I commander, who had the colors raised every morning, argued that his company was in one of the best positions to locate the enemy guns.*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191078



several flights of "Navy and Air Force birds handed off" to him when Corporal Niuatoa suddenly "spotted a flash and then several others." A few seconds later, the Marines on the hill heard the rounds going overhead and then saw them impacting on the main base. This time, Dabney contacted a Marine airborne forward air controller codenamed Southern Oscar flying a Cessna light single-engine fixed-wing O-1E. Turning over control of the aircraft given to him to Southern Oscar, Captain Dabney described to the airborne controller the nature of the target and relayed to him Corporal Niuatoa's directions. When Southern Oscar had one of the aircraft drop his bombs on a ridgeline and ask for an adjustment, Dabney recalled the corporal's response: "Left a click, add two ridge lines." Given these new bearings, the air controller spotted first one gun and then several others. While not sure because of enemy antiaircraft fire, Southern Oscar believed that the resulting airstrikes took out four of the guns. Dabney wanted to call in B-52 strikes on these positions, but declared that one of his everlasting frustrations was that nothing ever came of his recommendations.<sup>36\*</sup>

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\*In his comments, Colonel Dabney wrote: "For what it's worth, the folks in the Khe Sanh COC [Combat Operations Center] never realized how the NVA artillery was emplaced and employed, but then, they never came up to [Hill] 881S and looked." He believed that they were unnecessarily fixated upon Co Roc. Although respecting the abilities and brilliance of Captain Mirza M. Baig, the 26th Marines Target Intelligence Officer, Dabney believed the latter too engrossed in his "technological acquisition goodies" and "forgot he had . . . eyeballs working for him." In supporting his viewpoint, Colonel Dabney asked why would the North Vietnamese employ their Russian-made 130mm guns with a 27,000 meter range from Co Roc which was only 12,000 meters from Khe Sanh and risk losing them. He observed that Hill 881 South was three to four miles off the gun target line from Co Roc, and "if we could *hear* [emphasis in the original] the rounds whistling over, they couldn't be coming from Co Roc!" Instead, he believed the main enemy guns were located about five kilometers north of Co Roc and about 15,000 meters west of Hill 881 South. Instead of emplacing them in battery positions, they placed individual guns "along the gun-target line, about 500 meters apart, since the target (Khe Sanh) was fixed, they had only to adjust each gun for range based on its location. Deflection was a constant." He concluded: "It made sense, really, to put their artillery, guns firing at extreme range . . . to the west, where they could fire down the long axis of the target. That way, 'over and shorts' still had effect on target." Dabney Comments. Captain Bernard D. Cole, USN, after reading Colonel Dabney's comments, wrote: "I do not dispute that Col Dabney was able to spot arty firing at Khe Sanh from positions other than Co Roc, but I certainly disagree that 'Co Roc was a myth.' We obviously knew about and targeted non-Co Roc arty, which we located through 'all source' intelligence—although Harry Baig regularly went out to the perimeter (without helmet or flak jacket!), our job in the FSCC was of course not observation but fire support coordination. I simply think that Col Dabney is basing his conclusion on inadequate information." Captain Cole also insisted that "If anyone called in a viable Arflight target, we would hit it . . ." Cole Comments, dtd 23Jun96.

While there may have been some question about the location of the enemy guns, there was little dispute that enemy rockets, especially the 122mm Soviet type, posed possibly an even greater threat to the Khe Sanh base. Used in great volume and difficult to suppress, the enemy gunners fired them from west of the base which offered "the long axis of the base" as a target. Given the limited range of the missiles, Hill 881 South was in a strategic position. From the hill, the Marines of Company I could observe the NVA gunners shoot off their rockets, usually in sheaves of 50 rockets firing simultaneously towards Khe Sanh. This permitted Dabney to give the main base about a 10-second warning to sound the alarm and for the Marines there to take cover. While unable to suppress the rockets when they fired because of their sheer volume, Dabney's Marines were able to take countermeasures. According to the Company I commander, the North Vietnamese regularly used the same sites over and over so he employed his mortars and 106mm Recoilless Rifles against them "at night while they were setting up sometimes producing secondary explosions." The Marines also called in air strikes against the sites, but with mixed results because of the weather.<sup>37</sup>

An ominous indication of an even more extensive North Vietnamese campaign against the Marine base occurred in mid-January. On the morning of the 24th, Communist tanks overran the BV-33 Battalion, Royal Lao Army, at Ban Houaysan, an abandoned airfield on Route 9, just across the border in Laos. The appearance of NVA tanks outside North Vietnam was extremely unusual. Later the same day, an air observer reported sighting a MiG aircraft 10 to 15 miles west of Khe Sanh.

Closer to home, the 3d Platoon, Company F, 26th Marines engaged an NVA company only one kilometer north of the battalion's position on Hill 558. The Communist troops were equipped with helmets and flak jackets and used whistle signals. They were not afraid to leave their positions to maneuver, at one point sending 50 men against the Marines' flank. The Marines reported that the enemy fought tenaciously, refusing to withdraw even after "four hours of pounding" by artillery and aircraft. One North Vietnamese machine gunner remained at his post until killed by rifle fire at a range of only five meters.<sup>38</sup>

In light of the major battle anticipated at Khe Sanh, General Westmoreland requested that Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, the I Corps com-



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801114  
*ARVN Rangers occupy a defensive trench east of the runway and actually just outside the main base. The American command wanted a Vietnamese unit to participate in Khe Sanh for "psychological" reasons as well as military.*

mander, provide South Vietnamese units to participate in the defense of the combat base, citing "psychological reasons as well as military." Lam agreed, and on 27 January, Captain Hoang Pho and his ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion arrived at the combat base and took their place at the east end of the runway just forward of Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, actually outside of the base defensive perimeter. According to one source, Colonel Lownds wanted "to gain more elbow room . . . to push out the perimeter" since he had received implied criticism from his superiors about the limited extent of his defenses in this sector.<sup>39</sup> Although their unit, 318 men strong, was about 100 short of its authorization, these tough, disciplined soldiers would prove themselves time and again during the battle, earning the respect of the Marines.<sup>40</sup>

Enemy sappers were at work, apparently preparing the way for planned ground attacks. Marines on the perimeter found barbed wire cut, but replaced to

look as if it were whole, and Claymore mines\* turned around to face Marine trenches.<sup>41</sup> Intelligence reports from higher headquarters warned Colonel Lownds to be watchful for signs of NVA tunneling. The Marines monitored seismic intrusion detectors, drove metal engineer stakes into the ground and listened to them with stethoscopes borrowed from the medical unit, and even employed divining rods. They dug a number of "countermines" in response to possible indications of tunneling, but found no enemy tunnels.<sup>42</sup>

Beyond Marine positions, American aircraft opened a new era in warfare, planting unattended ground sensors near likely enemy avenues of approach and assembly areas.\*\* These devices were extremely sensitive and could monitor sound or vibrations, transmitting their information by radio to intelligence personnel. The position of each sensor was carefully recorded, permitting the Marines to quantify unusual enemy activity. By noting the activation of a number of different sensors, intelligence personnel could estimate the size and composition of an enemy unit, as well as its direction of march and speed. The devices would play a key role in the battle.<sup>43\*\*\*</sup>

### *Round Two*

By the end of January, intelligence officers painted a frightening picture of the magnitude of the North Vietnamese effort around Khe Sanh. Reacting to developments, Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division, ordered Lownds to limit patrolling to within 500 meters of friendly lines. Tompkins feared that the North Vietnamese wanted to draw the Marines out into the open, away from the protection of their bunkers, trenches, mines, and barbed wire. Patrolling, he reasoned, was unnecessary because intelligence was

\*A directional anti-personnel mine emplaced above ground facing the enemy.

\*\*According to Colonel Dabney, he observed that these sensors were planted "by black, unmarked, 'Air America' [a CIA sponsored aviation company] birds which looked to me to be B-26s." Dabney Comments.

\*\*\*Colonel John F. Mitchell, who in 1968 commanded the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at Khe Sanh, commented that the 26th Marines provided him in early February with a "black box" that monitored sensors along Route 9. He observed that "it was very productive." His battalion S-2 or intelligence officer listened in on the NVA radio nets in conjunction with the sensor monitoring and "the raw intelligence gleaned . . . was put to good use throughout the siege." Mitchell Comments.

providing accurate information on enemy unit locations and activities.<sup>44\*</sup>

Tet Mau Chanh, by far the most significant and celebrated holiday season in Vietnamese culture, approached. During some previous holiday periods, both sides had agreed to temporary cease-fires which were observed more often in the breach. In 1968, the Tet cease-fire was scheduled for the period from 1800, 29 January until 0600, 31 January. At 1100, 29 January the command post of the 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion received a radio message in a "northern accent" stating that the NVA had an ARVN Ranger patrol in sight, but would not fire because of Tet. The voice advised the Rangers to recall their patrols until after the holidays. The ARVN unit changed radio frequencies.<sup>45</sup> Later that day, the 3d Marine Division notified Khe Sanh that the Tet truce was canceled. One unit history recorded that "as if to signal that they also heard the news the NVA dropped six 60mm mortar rounds into the Combat Base at precisely 311800 January."<sup>46\*\*</sup>

With the truce cancellation, the massive air campaign under Operation Niagara continued unabated. On 30 January, B-52s carried out the biggest strike of the war to that date against targets in the Khe Sanh area, dropping 1,125 tons of bombs.<sup>47\*\*\*</sup>

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\*This limitation on patrolling did not apply to all of the forces at Khe Sanh. The members of FOB-3, the Studies and Observation Group (SOG), with their attached Montagnards continued to run their clandestine operations. Navy Captain Bernard D. Cole, who served in the 26th Marines FSCC, recalled that Colonel Lownds "had a small map room separate from the main FSCC Hq. When he took proposed B-52 strikes for approval, a Special Forces captain there plotted the progress of long-range patrols into Laos." Cole Comments. Former Marine Sergeant John A. Balanco who served with CAP O-2 at FOB-3 recalled: "Black helicopters would land with no markings on them and take men dressed in civilian clothes away." He mentioned that Captain Clarke and the mixed group with him also patrolled and the CAP Oscar Marines occasionally joined them. Balanco, "Abandoned," pp. 185-91. Colonel Mitchell stated that he did not adhere to the 500-meter limit either and that "1/9 patrolled every day of the week" north, south, and west of his positions, "up to 1,200 meters or more." He mentioned that he and FOB-3 were the only commands that patrolled daily and that he and the FOB-3 commander "devised a coordinated plan for patrolling and intelligence gathering." It was his opinion "that you must have maneuverability to complement fire power and to keep your enemy having doubts about your intentions." Mitchell Comments.

\*\*Both the North Vietnamese and the allied forces at Khe Sanh routinely monitored each others' radio nets. Colonel Mitchell with the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines commented that by monitoring the enemy nets, it was apparent that the North Vietnamese had "complete knowledge of the . . . T/O and T/E of the Marine units at Khe Sanh," including the "names of key commanders." Mitchell Comments.

\*\*\*For further discussion of Operation Niagara see Chapter 23.

The troop and logistics buildup at Khe Sanh, as well as the massive air support effort, indicated the resolve of U.S. forces to defend the base. Commanders and officials at every level, including the President, expressed concern for the situation in northwest Quang Tri Province. President Johnson, in particular, was sometimes depicted as having had a fixation with Khe Sanh. Indeed, an enduring legend of the campaign concerns an incident in which the President supposedly asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to sign a letter to the effect that they believed Khe Sanh could be defended. In truth, President Johnson asked for General Westmoreland's personal assessment of the situation, which was then circulated among the Service chiefs for comment. The Joint Chiefs of Staff unanimously endorsed Westmoreland's conclusion that Khe Sanh could and should be held.<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps the most dramatic indication of the President's concern was his question to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle G. Wheeler, about the feasibility of using tactical nuclear weapons to resolve the battle on favorable terms. Westmoreland established a "small secret study group" to examine the consequences of what was nicknamed Operation "Fracture Jaw." The group reported that "because the region around Khe Sanh was virtually uninhabited, civilian casualties would be minimal." Although planning never proceeded beyond this stage, the President's interest in the possibility of such a drastic step underscored his perception of the seriousness of the situation at Khe Sanh.<sup>49</sup>

Bru refugees streamed into Khe Sanh seeking evacuation from the war-ravaged area. They told the Marines that the North Vietnamese claimed they would "liberate the Khe Sanh airstrip" by 5 February. Indeed, on the night of 3-4 February, sensors northwest of Hill 881 South detected the movement of 1,500 to 2,000 people. Captain Mirza "Harry" M. Baig, Colonel Lownds' Target Intelligence Officer, initially believed the movement to be a North Vietnamese resupply effort and passed the information to fire support units for their attack. On the following night, however, the massed movement continued and further study caused Baig to change his opinion. He now thought the sensors had detected a North Vietnamese regiment in attack formation.<sup>50</sup>

The 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, joined by four batteries of Army 175mm guns to the east, pounded the area indicated by Baig with volley after volley of artillery fire. The dreadful hammering had a telling effect. The sensors transmitted the rumble





Photo from the David Douglas Duncan Collection, MCHC

*MajGen Rathvon McC. Tompkins, the CG, 3d MarDiv, is seen as a passenger with an unidentified crew member in a Marine helicopter on one of his frequent visits to the Khe Sanh base.*

of impacting shells, as well as the voices of hundreds of panic-stricken men running to escape the deadly barrage.

Just to the east of the target area, the men of Captain Earle G. Breeding's Company E, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines watched the scene from a hilltop position just 500 meters northeast of Company K's strongpoint on Hill 861. Company E had occupied the hill (dubbed "861A") that morning, 5 February, because it blocked direct observation between Hill 861 and the 2d Battalion strongpoint on Hill 558. There were no sensors near Hill 861 or 861A.<sup>51</sup>

At 0300, about two hours after the Marine and Army artillerymen shelled the suspected North Vietnamese regiment, the combat base came under Communist rocket, artillery, and mortar fire. Five minutes later, Captain Breeding reported that 200 North Vietnamese were breaching the wire atop Hill 861A and Colonel Lownds immediately set a "Red Alert" for the 26th Marines.<sup>52</sup>

*Smoke from a B-52 massive Arclight airstrike rises in the background as photographed from FOB-3. During Operation Niagara, the Boeing Stratofortress long-range bombers based at Guam and Thailand conducted hundreds of these strikes in support of the Marines at Khe Sanh.*

Photo courtesy of John J. Balanco



Intense mortar and small arms fire rained down on Company E from the attacking NVA even as the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines poured on a heavy answering barrage. Communist sappers blasted holes in the protective barbed wire through which following infantry advanced, shooting as they came. Company E, having occupied the hill only a few hours before, was not well-entrenched. Still, the Marines used every weapon they could bring to bear, including CS gas grenades, against the oncoming North Vietnamese.<sup>53</sup>

The enemy troops pressed their attack vigorously, reaching and penetrating the 1st Platoon's perimeter. First Lieutenant Donald E. R. Shanley and his platoon withdrew in good order to alternate positions from which they continued the fight. Meanwhile, friendly artillery rolled back and forth over the slope upon which the North Vietnamese were attacking, seeking to cut off any following reinforcements. Aircraft joined

in, dropping their loads under radar control accomplished by the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing's Air Support Radar Team (ASRT) B of Marine Air Support Squadron (MASS) 3 at the combat base.

Shortly after the North Vietnamese penetration, at 0500, Lieutenant Shanley led his men from their fighting holes in a bold counterattack. The 1st Platoon fell upon the enemy with knives, bayonets, rifle butts, and fists. Captain Breeding later described the scene as "just like a World War II movie . . . Charlie didn't know how to cope with it . . . we just walked all over him."<sup>54</sup> The North Vietnamese who survived the counterattack fled the hilltop, then regrouped and attacked again, halfheartedly. The Marines quickly repulsed the discouraged enemy.

While the fight for Hill 861A cost Company E, 7 dead and 24 wounded, a company sweep at dawn revealed over a 100 enemy dead on the slope of the hill

*President Lyndon B. Johnson confers with U.S. Army Gen Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Joint Chiefs concurred with Gen Westmoreland's assessment that Khe Sanh could be successfully defended*

Photo Courtesy of Center of Military History





Photo from the David Douglas Duncan Collection, MCHC

*A Marine sniper team on Hill 861A from Company E, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines goes into action. On the left is LCpl Albert Miranda with his Remington 700 sniper rifle, taking aim at a distant target, while his partner, in the center, LCpl David Burdwell, points out the enemy soldier to his platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Alec J. Bodenweiser, with the binoculars.*

and within the perimeter. Captain Baig later speculated that the heavy and accurate artillery fire (almost 2,000 rounds from the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines alone) on and behind the assaulting Communists had prevented their reserves from joining the attack.<sup>55</sup>

### *The Fall of Lang Vei*

Having failed to capture first Hill 861, then its neighbor 861A, the North Vietnamese turned their attention elsewhere. Their next target was the new Lang Vei Special Forces Camp, defended by Detachment A-101, Company C, 5th Special Forces Group and four CIDG companies of Bru Montagnards.

Lang Vei was a heavily fortified position on Route 9 about two kilometers from the Laotian border from which Detachment A-101 ran patrols to monitor North Vietnamese infiltration into Quang Tri Province. About a kilometer closer to Khe Sanh was the village of Lang Vei, site of the old Special Forces

camp. Here, the survivors of the Royal Lao BV-33 Battalion, overrun by North Vietnamese tanks at Ban Houaysan a few days before, rested with thousands of civilian refugees, including their own families.<sup>56</sup>

The many missions assigned to the 26th Marines for the Khe Sanh battle included responsibility for providing fire support for Lang Vei and for reinforcing the camp should the enemy attack it. Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly sent a 1st Battalion, 13th Marines forward observer to the camp on 6 January to register defensive fires. A month earlier, Colonel Lownds sent a company from Khe Sanh to Lang Vei to rehearse the reinforcement plan. It stayed off the road under the assumption that the enemy would set ambushes along Route 9 as part of an attack on Lang Vei. Because of the heavy jungle, the company took 19 hours to cover the nine-kilometer distance.<sup>57</sup>

At 0030, 7 February, the North Vietnamese struck the Lang Vei camp. In the first engagement between



Both photos are from the David Douglas Duncan Collection  
*Top, Capt Earle G. Breeding, Commander of Company E, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, with cigar in his right hand and radio in his left, reports the successful counterattack of his company against the enemy on Hill 861A. Below, two Marines of Company E repair the unit's barbed wire after its successful defense of Hill 861A. The body of one of the attackers is in the foreground.*



American troops and enemy tanks since the Korean War, 12 Soviet-built PT-76 light amphibious tanks of the 202d Armor Regiment, followed closely by infantry from the 304th Division, crashed through the chain link fence surrounding the compound and rolled through the camp shooting. The defenders destroyed a number of the tanks with 106mm recoilless rifle fire, but to no avail. In a desperate and hard-fought action, the enemy overwhelmed Detachment A-101 and the Bru CIDG companies. Survivors remained in bunkers, among them the detachment commander, Army Captain Frank Willoughby, a former Marine noncommissioned officer.<sup>58</sup>

From his underground combat operations center (COC), Willoughby called for air and artillery support. The 1st Battalion, 13th Marines responded to Willoughby's request with repeated missions, firing the brand-new, top-secret controlled fragmentation munitions (COFRAM), colloquially known as "Fire-cracker," for the first time in combat.\* Overhead, Marine and Air Force attack aircraft tried to follow Willoughby's directions in the darkness to drop their bombs on enemy concentrations in and around the camp.<sup>59</sup>

For most of the night, Willoughby and a few other survivors remained in the COC bunker with an enemy tank on top of them, firing, while the North Vietnamese rolled countless fragmentation and gas grenades into the bunker and called to the soldiers in English to surrender. Willoughby remained in radio contact with the 5th Special Forces Group in Da Nang which requested that the 26th Marines execute

the previously arranged contingency plan for the reinforcement of Lang Vei. Colonel Lownds refused, reporting that the combat base itself was even then being heavily shelled and that he expected an enemy assault against the airstrip at any time. Further, the difficulty of moving through the difficult terrain to Lang Vei at night with enemy tanks on Route 9 made reinforcement, in the words of one Marine staff officer, "suicidal."<sup>60</sup>

Generals Westmoreland, Cushman, and Tompkins accepted Lownds' decision. Westmoreland later wrote, "honoring the prerogative of the field commander on the scene, I declined to intervene until I could ascertain more on the situation." During the late morning of 7 February at Da Nang, General Westmoreland met with General Cushman and other senior commanders in I Corps. While the conference dealt with the situation throughout I Corps, General Westmoreland expressed his concern about the Lang Vei situation. Among the participants at the meeting were Army Colonel Jonathan F. Ladd, the commander of the 5th Special Forces Group, who had just flown from Khe Sanh to Da Nang, and Army Lieutenant Colonel

*Bru civilian refugees, including many children, walk toward Ca Lu along Route 9 after the fall of Lang Vei. Not having the resources to care for them and fearing the possibility of enemy infiltrators, the Marines decided against allowing the refugees into the Khe Sanh base.*

Photo from the 3d MarDiv ComdC, Feb68



\* A projectile containing a number of "submunitions" or bomblets, which are ejected from the shell and spread over a wide area, each bomblet exploding like a small grenade. It is considerably more lethal than the standard high explosive projectile. This ammunition is still in use today under the name Improved Conventional Munitions (ICM). Lieutenant Colonel John A. Hennelly who commanded the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines recalled that sometime earlier an Army brigadier general and warrant officer "flew into Khe Sanh with some 105mm cofram and a hand-written set of firing tables for the new ammo." From his understanding, "it sounded like COFRAM would be good against troops in the open on terrain without much vegetation." Hennelly stated that when "things hit the fan" and the Special Forces required artillery support, he would have preferred "HE [high explosive] rounds" with variable or time fuzes. He, however, received orders to use the COFRAM, "The orders were coming from Washington, D.C. (honest to Pete)." Hennelly stated that "we fired a mission or two with Cofram but it was not the time or situation to be messing around with a new ammo. It was slowing the fire missions down." He directed that they switch back to conventional ammunition and "that's primarily what we fired although I was telling folks up-the-line we were using cofram." Hennelly Comments.

Daniel L. Baldwin, III, the northern SOG commander. Ladd strongly advocated that a relief force be sent immediately to relieve or evacuate the survivors. Lieutenant Colonel Baldwin recommended that the Special Forces troops at FOB-3 conduct a helicopter-supported evacuation of the camp. After much discussion and some recrimination, General Westmoreland ordered General Cushman to provide helicopter and fixed-wing support to Baldwin.<sup>61\*</sup>

By this time, however, the defenders were largely dependent upon their own efforts. Individually and sometimes in groups, the Special Forces and Bru CIDG troops broke out of the camp and most made their way to Lang Vei Village where the Royal Laotian BV-33 Battalion still remained. Special Forces personnel with the battalion in the old camp there attempted to encourage and plead with the Laotians to assist their comrades in the new camp, but the results were only a few feeble and begrudging counterattacks.

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\* Colonel Ladd, the 5th Special Forces Commander, in an oral history several years later described his activities and participation in the 7 February meeting. He declared that he had been at Lang Vei up to the night before the camp had been hit, and that the Special Forces there "could hear the tanks moving around." Ladd departed by helicopter to obtain anti-tank mines and assistance. According to Ladd, he talked to General Cushman at Da Nang who wanted to help him, but the people in Saigon did not believe that there were tanks there and that the Special Forces "didn't need" the mines. He then flew back over Lang Vei the following morning and saw tanks sitting on top of the base. According to his account, he then went to Khe Sanh and asked Colonel Lownds to mount a relief expedition which Lownds refused to do. Ladd then flew back to Da Nang and found General Westmoreland there. According to the Special Forces colonel, he then told Westmoreland there were three choices: "Stay there and hold; abandon the place; or the Marines reinforce." Frustrated at the meeting, Ladd declared he then called General Abrams, stating: "I just can't get Westmoreland's attention long enough to do anything. He is just putting it off." Ladd claimed that it was General Abrams who called General Norman Anderson, the Marine 1st MAW commander and ordered him to provide aircraft support for an evacuation. Col Jonathan F. Ladd, USA (ret) intvw, n.d. [1977?] (U.S. Army, Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa), pp. 22-30, attached to Clarke Comments, hereafter Ladd Intvw. The discussions at the meeting of 7 February were wide ranging and involved the situation at Da Nang as well as at Lang Vei (See Chapter Eight). Many of the participants at the meeting had very different perceptions of what occurred. General Westmoreland later wrote that he was "shocked at things that virtually begged to be done . . ." Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 342. On the other hand, both General Cushman and General Earl E. Anderson, Cushman's chief of staff, remembered no acrimony at the meeting. Cushman Intvw, Nov82, p. 29 and Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson, however, who headed the MACV Combat Operations Center, in a letter soon after the meeting, wrote about "recriminations between the Green Berets and the Marines." BGen John R. Chaisson ltr to his wife, dtd 8Feb68 (Chaisson Papers, Hoover Institute).

Shortly after 1700, under strong air cover from fixed-wing aircraft and helicopter gunships, Marine CH-46s helilifted the relief force from FOB-3 into old Lang Vei. Despite some mobbing by Laotian and some of the Vietnamese troops, the helicopters brought out most of the Americans and the most seriously wounded of the Laotians and Vietnamese troops. The rest made their way to Khe Sanh on foot. The loss of life was heavy for the Special Forces and CIDG troops at "new" Lang Vei. Almost 300 of the camp's 487 defenders were killed, wounded, or missing, including 10 Americans killed and missing, and another 13 wounded from a total of 24.<sup>62</sup>

Of the debacle and its aftermath, General Cushman later said:

The base was overrun in the middle of the night, in a matter of a couple of hours. . . . The garrison had already been defeated. There was nothing one could do really, to salvage the situation. . . . it would have been a grave risk to send Marines from Khe Sanh to Lang Vei in the hours of darkness.<sup>63\*\*</sup>

The destruction of Lang Vei created a secondary problem for Colonel Lownds. More than 6,000 refugees, many of them Laotians of the BV-33 Battalion and their families, as well as a number of Vietnamese Special Forces and Bru CIDG personnel who had escaped Lang Vei alive, crowded outside the gates of the combat base. Lownds refused to admit them

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\*\* Most Marines agreed with General Cushman and would accept the statement of Navy Chaplain Ray W. Stubbe, who has written and researched extensively on the subject of Khe Sanh, that an entire NVA regiment "waited to ambush any rescue force." LCdr Ray W. Stubbe, USN, Comments on draft, dtd 23Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File). Major Gary E. Todd, who served as an intelligence officer on the 3d Marine Division staff during this period, supported this view in his comments that Bru refugees "had seen what amounted to an NVA regiment lying in ambush between KSCB [Khe Sanh Combat Base] and Lang Vei that night during the attack." Maj Gary E. Todd, Comments on draft, dtd 28Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File). One Marine exception to the contention that a relief expedition was infeasible that night was Colonel John F. Mitchell, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, at the time, the unit slated to carry out the Marine contingency plan for the relief of Lang Vei. Colonel Mitchell commented that at the end of January Colonel Lownds assigned him the Lang Vei relief mission. According to Mitchell, the plan at that time called for the battalion to make the relief overland. The battalion commander suggested to Colonel Lownds that "the only successful way to accomplish this mission, would be by Helo Assault." At that point, Lownds answered, "Hell you would lose one-half your force and helicopters during the landing." While not taking exception to Colonel Lownds projection, Mitchell replied, "Yes, but I would be there." Colonel Mitchell still contends: "In my opinion the Marines should have done the 'right thing' by sending a relief unit." Mitchell Comments, dtd 9Feb96.

because he did not have the resources to care for them and because he feared that the crowd might conceal enemy infiltrators. But neither could he allow them to remain outside the wire for fear that the enemy might use them to shield an attack on the perimeter.

On the afternoon of 7 February, General Tompkins issued guidance for dealing with the refugees in the event the NVA attempted to use them to screen an attack. First, the Marines were to use CS gas in an attempt to disperse the crowd. If that failed, they would fire over their heads. If the North Vietnamese continued to push the refugees in front of an attack, Tompkins authorized the garrison to shoot into the crowd.<sup>64</sup> To preclude such a disastrous occurrence, Lownds arranged to move the refugees about two kilometers from the perimeter for the night. Some were eventually processed and flown out, but most simply walked away, down Route 9 to the east.\*

### *The Intensifying Battle*

Fresh from their first major success of the Khe Sanh campaign, the Communist forces moved quickly against their next objective. During the night follow-

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\*The situation with the refugees especially with the Bru exacerbated the already strained relationships between the Army Special Force troops and the Marine command at Khe Sanh. The Special Force units believed that the Bru who had served with them faithfully and well were being misused. Colonel Ladd stated in an interview several years later that when the Bru arrived at the Khe Sanh base they were stripped of their weapons and turned back. According to Ladd, the Marines at the base said, "they couldn't trust any gooks in their damn camp." Ladd Intvw. Both Army Colonel Bruce B. G. Clarke, who had been at Khe Sanh Village and later brought his forces to FOB-3 and former Marine Sergeant John J. Balanco CAP O-2 also at FOB-3 wrote of the suspicion that they received. As a CAP Marine, Balanco identified very closely with the Bru with whom he served and stated that he felt very isolated after the CAPs were "not allowed on the base with our fighting Bru!" While at FOB-3, he noticed that the Marine tanks at Khe Sanh had their guns trained on FOB-3. Balanco, "Abandoned," pp. 185-91. Colonel Clarke noted that at FOB-3, "We often took more fire from behind than from the NVA to our front." Clarke observed that the basic difficulty at Khe Sanh was "that there was no unity of command in the AO [Area of Operations], a lack of communication and coordination and misunderstanding of the interrelated destiny that would be ours." Clarke Comments. In relationship to unity of command, Colonel Lownds was in a difficult situation. As one Marine officer, Colonel William H. Dabney, who at the time commanded Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines on Hill 881S, observed the Special Forces had their own command channels separate from the Marines and were not under Colonel Lownds' operational control. From the Marine perspective, the Special Forces including the FOB-3 troops, "were so secretive and so independent that they were impossible to coordinate as part of a larger battle. . . . Special units do not belong near a pitched battle. They only inhibit fire support and get in the way." Dabney Comments.

ing the Lang Vei battle, three companies of the 101D Regiment moved into attack positions near the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines.

About 500 meters west of the battalion's perimeter, Second Lieutenant Terence R. Roach, Jr., and Company A's 1st Platoon, occupied "Alpha 1," named after the platoon's designation. With added machine gun teams, forward observers, and corpsmen, Lieutenant Roach's reinforced platoon numbered 66 men. The outpost provided an extra measure of security for the battalion through its ability to detect and report enemy activity well forward of the lines.

The Alpha 1 outpost was a well-prepared defensive position. The hill itself was quite steep on all but the northwest slope. It was ringed by multiple layers of barbed wire on the slopes and, at the crest, a trench network which included a number of sandbagged bunkers.<sup>65</sup>

At 0415 8 February, in heavy fog and near-total darkness, the North Vietnamese struck the outpost, laying down a heavy and accurate mortar barrage that covered the hilltop for three to four minutes. Enemy infantry followed close on the heels of the mortar fire, attacking from the northwest.

The North Vietnamese assault troops threw canvas over the outpost's protective barbed wire and rolled over it. Almost immediately, enemy soldiers swarmed into the inner perimeter. Lieutenant Roach tried to stem the breakthrough almost singlehandedly, killing several of the enemy with his rifle and attempting to rally the troops on the perimeter. While able to pull one of the badly wounded Marines to relative safety, he died in a hail of automatic weapons fire. The enemy had successfully captured half of the hilltop, while the remnants of the platoon attempted to regroup, especially in the southeastern portion of the outpost.<sup>66</sup>

While the defenders of the Alpha 1 outpost fought desperate hand-to-hand encounters in the trenchlines, sometimes swinging entrenching tools or five-gallon water cans, the rest of the battalion endured persistent and heavy shelling, apparently intended by the NVA to prevent the dispatch of reinforcements. Nonetheless, the battalion's mortar crews braved the incoming rounds to fire in support of Alpha 1.

On the hill, about 30 Marine survivors gathered in the southern portion of the trench network and used sandbags to wall off their part of the trench from the enemy. Some of their weapons were damaged or destroyed, ammunition was scarce, and many of the men were wounded. The North Vietnamese did not rush them, but instead contented themselves with

showering great numbers of grenades on the Marines. One survivor later recounted, “. . .they continued throwing 25 or 30 grenades every 4 or 5 minutes. It was unbelievable how many . . .grenades they had actually transported into battle.”<sup>67</sup>

At 0740, the commanding officer of Company A, Captain Henry J. M. Radcliffe, gathered up his 2d Platoon and went to the rescue of the outpost. The relief force fought its way to the base of the hill in 25 minutes. There, Radcliffe directed an air strike on the North Vietnamese, then led his Marines in a frontal assault which forced the enemy off the hill and directly into the fire of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. Companies B and D joined the 106mm recoilless rifles and a tank in cutting down the retreating enemy troops. By 1100, the battle was over and the charred and blasted remains of the outpost were again in Marine hands.<sup>68\*</sup>

Alpha 1 Marines had paid a high price. Worse than the utter destruction of their position, casualties numbered 24 dead and 27 wounded. Over 150 North Vietnamese bodies littered the hill and many more may have died. Additionally, the Marines captured much enemy equipment, including 13 machine guns, an indication that the North Vietnamese fled the battlefield in disorder.<sup>69</sup>

Although the hill was once more under friendly control and evidence suggested that the Communist forces had suffered a defeat, Colonel Lownds ordered the outpost abandoned. Captain Radcliffe and his men withdrew to the battalion perimeter.

In the four days from 5 February through 8 February, the North Vietnamese launched three major assaults on positions in the Khe Sanh complex, succeeding only at Lang Vei. The battles for Hill 861A and the Alpha 1 outpost, though desperate and bloody for the Marines, had ended as stinging defeats for the Communist forces. The second round was over.

Apparently still smarting from heavy casualties suffered in their assaults on the outlying positions, the Communist forces tried a new approach. They stopped attempting to seize the outposts and increased their attentions to the combat base itself.

North Vietnamese trenches reached toward the eastern end of the airstrip, growing at the astonishing speed of several hundred meters in a single night.<sup>70</sup>

\*Colonel Mitchell, the battalion commander, stated that he had wanted to launch the relief mission earlier, but did not receive permission until 0730. Mitchell also explained that he had one tank attached to his battalion, but would move the tank every night. This way the enemy would know “1/9 had a tank capability, but he wouldn’t know how many.” Mitchell Comments.

One Marine recorded that, “we watched with some fascination and no small apprehension, day by day, as the trenches crept closer and closer to our perimeter.”<sup>71</sup> Some of the enemy trenchlines stretched 2,000 meters from assembly areas to within 35 meters of the Marines’ perimeter.<sup>72</sup>

The Marines tried a number of tactics to discourage the enemy’s digging. Aircraft attacked the trenches with rockets, 2,000-pound bombs, and “napalm baths,” a scheme in which they dropped a number of unfused napalm tanks on the target which were then ignited by rocket or cannon fire from following planes. Despite the Marines’ best efforts, however, the digging continued apace.<sup>73\*\*</sup> At the same time, North Vietnamese gunners kept up their program of daily firing on the base, especially during periods when fog or clouds reduced visibility and hampered U.S. air operations, thereby helping to conceal the enemy guns.<sup>74</sup>

Throughout the siege, the base remained totally dependent upon air-delivered supplies, which fact the North Vietnamese were obviously aware. Enemy anti-aircraft guns appeared in the hills surrounding the airstrip, forcing cargo aircraft to run a gauntlet of fire both on their approach to and their retirement from Khe Sanh. Aircraft attempting to land prompted an avalanche of incoming fire seemingly from every weapon, of every caliber, which the North Vietnamese could bring to bear on the airstrip. The destruction on 10 February of a Marine KC-130 dramatized on television the vulnerability of the air link to Khe Sanh.<sup>75\*\*\*</sup>

The incredible firepower the Marines marshalled to defend Khe Sanh scarred the countryside so that it looked, in General Tompkins words, “like pictures of the surface of the moon, in that it was cratered and pocked and blasted.”<sup>75</sup> Aircraft and howitzers pounded the surrounding countryside with unrelenting ferocity, treating the NVA to a steady diet of attacks. A diverse and highly developed targeting system supported this process, using input from air observers, sensors, signal intelligence, agents, prisoners, ralliers, refugees, and

\*\*Colonel Mitchell, nevertheless, claimed that his 1st Battalion, 9th Marines attained some success against the enemy’s digging efforts. He stated that he ordered his Company D commander to send out units from fire team to platoon, before the fog lifted, to destroy or collapse the enemy tunnels. He also stepped up patrols to 400 meters “to ensure the beginning of tunnel activity.” According to Mitchell, his intelligence officer who monitored the NVA radio nets, heard “discontinue tunneling activities in the 1/9 sector as it is non-productive.” Mitchell Comments.

\*\*\*See Chapter 23 for the detailed account relative to the air supply of the Marine base.





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190852

*Two Marine forward observers lying on top of a bunker train high-powered binoculars on enemy trenchlines in an attempt to locate NVA mortars. Another Marine can be seen resting inside the bunker.*

special operations units, as well as information provided by the Marines manning the defenses of Khe Sanh. In one instance, the 26th Marines scheduled a special air and artillery strike in reaction to a report concerning a “force-wide meeting” of enemy commanders and their staffs in a schoolhouse on the Laotian border. Twenty minutes after the scheduled start time of the meeting, 2 Grumman A-6 Intruders and 4 McDonnell-Douglas F-4 Phantoms dropped 152 500-pound bombs followed by 8 artillery batteries firing 350 rounds into an area large enough “to take in the hangers-on and other idlers who usually congregate around large staffs.”<sup>76</sup>

Near the end of February, the intensity of enemy shelling increased even further, reaching a crescendo on the 23d, when according to an official count, 1,307 rounds of artillery, rocket, and mortar fire slammed into the base, killing 12 and wounding 51.\* A chance hit on Ammunition Supply Point Number 3 caused secondary explosions which consumed over 1,600 rounds of 90mm and 106mm ammunition.<sup>77</sup>

\*Colonel Dabney doubted the accuracy of this official count, making the point that “when you are getting that many rounds, nobody is fool enough to sit around and count them.” Dabney Comments. On the other hand, Captain Cole related that “the FSCC made a serious attempt to count incoming rounds—and . . . Jack Hennelly [Lieutenant Colonel John A. Hennelly, commander of the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines] was very conservative about this, so if 1,307 was too exact, it probably was not too far off the mark.” Cole Comments, dtd 23Jun96.

On 25 February, Second Lieutenant Donald Jacques led the 3d Platoon, Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines through the perimeter wire of the combat base and headed south on a short-range patrol as part of the regiment’s effort to gather information on enemy activity close to the base. About a kilometer south of the base, the patrol spotted three North Vietnamese near the road leading to Khe Sanh Village and gave chase. Just south of the road, the Marines ran into an ambush. A company-sized enemy unit occupying a bunker complex allowed the platoon to advance to within point-blank range before opening fire and driving the Marines to cover.<sup>78</sup>

The platoon attempted to maneuver, but under the intense enemy fire, casualties mounted rapidly. Jacques ordered a withdrawal while the company commander, Captain Pipes, sent another platoon to assist. Second Lieutenant Peter W. Weiss led the 1st Platoon through the gaps in the perimeter wire and headed for the scene of the ambush. About 300 meters from the beleaguered 3d Platoon, Weiss and his men received enemy machine gun fire from 20 meters to their front, forcing them to the ground.<sup>79\*</sup>

\*\* According to George W. Jayne, who was a fireteam leader with the 1st Platoon, his squad received the bulk of the enemy’s first burst of fire, killing both the squad leader and Navy corpsman. George W. Jayne, Comments on draft, dtd 1Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A190594

*Large clouds of dust and smoke obscure part of the Khe Sanh combat base after an enemy rocket and artillery bombardment. On 23 February another Marine ammunition supply point took a direct hit, which resulted in several secondary explosions*

With both platoons still under extremely heavy close-range fire, the Marines at the combat base attempted to provide supporting fire from tanks, heavy machine guns, and 106mm recoilless rifles, but fog and the proximity of friendly and enemy forces hampered their efforts. To add to the confusion, the North Vietnamese entered Company B's radio net, possibly using a radio captured from one of the 3d Platoon's destroyed squads, compounding communication problems in the critical situation.<sup>80</sup>

Several survivors from the 3d Platoon filtered back to the 1st Platoon. Lieutenant Weiss ordered his men to gather the wounded and withdraw. The 3d Platoon was a shambles. Lieutenant Jacques was severely wounded, and most of his men were either wounded, dead, or missing. The 81mm mortar forward observer, a Blackfoot Indian corporal named Gilbert Wall, threw Lieutenant Jacques over his shoulder and carried him, with his radio, back to the perimeter, adjusting mortar fire missions all the way

back. The lieutenant, however, was hit in both femoral arteries and bled to death even as Wall carried him.<sup>81\*</sup>

For what had started out as a platoon patrol, the casualties were staggering: 6 killed in action, 17 wounded, and 25 missing.<sup>82\*\*</sup> No enemy casualties could be confirmed. On 27 February, Colonel Lownds issued further restrictions on patrolling,

\*Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth W. Pipes, who commanded Company B at Khe Sanh, observed that Lieutenant Jacques was one of his strongest platoon leaders. His platoon had occupied one of the key defensive positions at the base and Jacques' men had ambushed an NVA reconnaissance unit in late December 1967. Pipes remarked that all the leaders of this platoon including the squad leaders were killed in this action—in front and leading their men. According to Pipes, "the extent of the NVA entrenchments and fortifications were not as evident until the tragic action . . ." Pipes Comments, 1995.

\*\*One of the Marines listed as killed in action was Sergeant Ronald L. Ridgway, who turned out to have been captured by the North Vietnamese and released in March 1973 after the Paris Agreement of January 1973.

limiting it to that which was “necessary to insure the security of . . . defensive obstacles and local security elements.”<sup>83</sup>

Apparently buoyed by their success against the ill-fated Marine patrol, the North Vietnamese once more tried their hands at penetrating the combat base perimeter. During the night of 28–29 February, sappers prepared the ground to the front of the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion, cutting holes in the wire, and removing mines and trip flares. Their activity went undetected until the next morning.<sup>84</sup>

The following night at 2130, in heavy fog, a battalion of the North Vietnamese *66th Regiment, 304th Division* struck the ARVN positions. Unknown to the enemy, electronic sensors had silently heralded their impending attack and by the time the first waves of assault troops rushed the wire, two B–52 strikes, diverted from other targets, were on the way. The 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, accompanied by the Army’s 175mm guns and radar-directed attack aircraft, pounded the North Vietnamese infantry with telling effect. The B–52s saturated the area to the rear of the assault waves with tons of high explosive bombs, devastating what the sensors indicated was a second enemy battalion moving forward to attack.<sup>85</sup>

Once again, the weight of U.S. fire support wrecked the enemy’s efforts. The Rangers reported that the North Vietnamese left 7 dead in the perimeter wire, but a search the following morning revealed 71 more with many bangalore torpedoes and satchel charges. Of the carnage, one account read,

... the dead were still huddled in trenches, many in the kneeling position, in three successive platoon lines, as if they had been caught in the assault position. The devastating effect of the firecracker round was apparent.<sup>86</sup>

The only friendly casualty was a single wounded Ranger.

For the remainder of the Khe Sanh battle, the enemy concentrated most of his efforts against the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion, attacking its position seven times during March, including another battalion-sized assault on the 18th. Although North Vietnamese sappers breached the wire during one of these attacks, the Rangers repulsed every attempt, with the assistance of supporting fires from the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines and attack aircraft.<sup>87</sup> In addition to these assaults, the North Vietnamese employed psychological warfare against

the ARVN, using loudspeaker broadcasts enticing them to defect.<sup>88\*</sup>

At the beginning of March, III MAF began planning Operation Pegasus, a major effort to reopen Route 9 from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh. In the meantime, air delivered supplies remained the order of the day.<sup>\*\*</sup> The monsoon ended in March, greatly easing the weather problems which had earlier plagued air operations in the area.<sup>89</sup> Antiaircraft fire and incoming rounds on the airstrip, however, remained a problem. The first day of the month, mortar fire struck a C–123 as it landed, destroying the aircraft.<sup>90</sup> On 6 March, enemy gunners downed another C–123 about five miles east of Khe Sanh, killing 43 Marines, a sailor, and the crew of 4.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Only one and a half hours later, incoming fire damaged and grounded another C–123 attempting to take off. This aircraft remained at Khe Sanh awaiting repairs, where it was hit once more on the 17th and destroyed.<sup>91</sup> Helicopters suffered as well, with two Boeing CH–46 Sea Knights and a Bell UH–1 Iroquois falling to enemy gunners during the month.<sup>92</sup>

In early March, North Vietnamese propaganda teams entered Montagnard villages, announcing that the final, major attack on Khe Sanh Combat Base would soon begin. But, by the middle of the month, the theme had changed to “Ho Chi Minh would be unhappy if they [the NVA] wasted their time on only 6,000 Marines at Khe Sanh!”<sup>93</sup> At the same time, U.S. intelligence sources reported that the North Vietnamese *325C Division* was relocating to Laos and the *304th Division* was withdrawing to the southwest.<sup>94</sup>

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\*Former Marine Bert Mullins, who served with the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at Khe Sanh, observed that the NVA also employed psychological war techniques against the Americans as well. He recalled leaflets fired by North Vietnamese artillery that urged American troops to surrender. Mullins Comments.

\*\*While supplies were adequate for very basic needs and no one starved, Navy Captain Bernard D. Cole recalled that food was in “relatively short supply during the ‘siege.’” He remembered that he received just “two C–ration meals per day . . .” Cole stated that this was an “observation, not a complaint: obviously, the troops in the trenches had higher priority than those of us sitting on our butts in the relative safety of the FSCC!” Cole Comments. Colonel Kent O. W. Steen, a former artillery officer at Khe Sanh, wrote that the priority for resupply was upon ammunition and “at times, we were down to one C–Ration per day . . .” He observed that the “uncomfortable-tired-dirty-stressed souls at Khe Sanh were quite hungry for the most part.” Steen comments.

\*\*\*This aircraft is variously reported as either a C–123 or a C–130. Air Force records indicate the former. Nalty, *Air Power*, p. 46; 3d MarDiv COC msg to III MAF COC, dtd 7Mar68, in III MAF Khe Sanh Ops File.

Despite these indications that the battle was drawing to a close, the North Vietnamese continued pounding the Marines with artillery fire. On 22 March, over 1,000 rounds fell on the combat base and hill positions. Once again, a hit on ASP Number 1 resulted in several hours of secondary explosions and a fire which destroyed more than 900 rounds of artillery ammunition, almost 3,000 rounds of antitank ammunition, and lesser quantities of fuzes, demolition kits, and other assorted items. The enemy bombardment continued the following day with even more shells striking the Marine base.<sup>95</sup>

The enemy had far from given up the fight. On 24 March, Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines engaged two North Vietnamese platoons for over four hours. The contact resulted in 5 Marines killed and 6 wounded, a UH-1 helicopter gunship downed, and 31 dead North Vietnamese.<sup>96</sup> Two days later, a small-unit patrol\* from Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines encountered a North Vietnamese company entrenched on a small hill that the battalion used as a daylight observation post, about 200 meters west of its perimeter. According to the Marine forward observer with the patrol, Larry J. Seavy-Cioffi, they walked into "a well-entrenched NVA company, 15 feet from the top . . . ." Seavy-Cioffi recalled that the patrol point man spotted an enemy soldier "adjusting his helmet otherwise we would have been walking dead right into their laps." The patrol withdrew under heavy fire and called for fire support. Company B reinforced the patrol and the Marines finally retook the hill. According to Marine documents, the North Vietnamese lost 26 men and Company B suffered 3 dead and 15 wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell later wrote: "This was the closest penetration by a company size NVA to 1/9's defensive perimeter, and never happened again during the siege."<sup>97</sup>

### *Settling the Score*

Since the fateful patrol of 25 February, the men of Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines had a score to settle with the North Vietnamese. On 30 March, they got their chance in what one report termed "the first

\*There is some question about the size of this patrol. The official reports indicate a platoon, while both Colonel Mitchell and his radioman, Bert Mullins, state that it was a reinforced squad. Larry J. Seavy-Cioffi, who was an artillery forward observer with Company B, stated that he was on that patrol and it consisted of no more than six men, including himself. See Mitchell Comments, Mullins Comments, and Larry J. Seavy-Cioffi, Comments on draft, dtd 12Dec94 and 29Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

planned . . . attack of a known enemy position in the battle for Khe Sanh Combat Base." Lieutenant Colonel Frederick J. McEwan, who relieved Lieutenant Colonel James B. Wilkinson as the battalion commander on 15 March, recalled that he and his operations officer, Major Charles E. Davis III, planned the attack "with careful attention to every detail." With the assistance of the battalion artillery officer and air officer, they especially laid out the projected fire support to box the enemy troops in and to prevent the NVA from reinforcing. Morning fog and low air cover, however, forestalled the effective use of air and made the attack even more dependent upon its artillery arm.<sup>98</sup>

In the early morning hours, under cover of fog and darkness, Captain Kenneth W. Pipes led Company B through the perimeter wire and into attack positions 300 meters south of the combat base. As the company deployed for the attack in a line along the enemy's left flank, the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines began preparation fires to soften the enemy positions. By noon, the cannoneers would fire over 2,600 rounds in support of Company B.<sup>99</sup>

At 0755, the company launched its assault behind a rolling barrage fired by nine batteries of artillery, including heavy artillery firing from near the Rockpile. The 2d Platoon under First Lieutenant John W. Dillon seized the first objective, an NVA trenchline, near the lower slopes of Hill 471. From there, the platoon laid down a base of fire while the Company B command group and the other two platoons passed through and attacked toward the second objective, an NVA bunker complex near where the earlier patrol had been ambushed.<sup>100</sup>

The Marines advanced through the bunker complex with fixed bayonets, grenades, flamethrowers, and anti-tank rockets, and in the words of one account, "killing all NVA in sight."<sup>101</sup> Engineers followed the infantry, setting demolition charges to destroy the larger bunkers. According to Major Davis, "the only serious glitch occurred when the NVA came up on the conduct of fire net and called for a cease-fire." Davis declared that before the battalion was able to get "the fire turned back on," enemy mortars opened up on the attacking Marines and "inflicted most of the casualties." Among the wounded was Captain Pipes, who still retained command. One Marine in the 3d Platoon, Wayne Morrison, who later was awarded the Silver Star, as was the captain, remembered that Pipes, carrying two radios with his right arm and with a wound in his left shoulder, came up behind him and said "we were going to have to attack because we were pinned down."<sup>102</sup>

The initial Marine attack, nevertheless had stalled. Captain Pipes recalled that his command group had been "decimated." Among the dead was his artillery forward observer First Lieutenant Marion H. "Hank" Norman, who died in his arms and assisted in the preparation of the firing plans. Lieutenant Dillon brought up the 2d Platoon and "covered the ordered withdrawal back to the base."<sup>103</sup>

The North Vietnamese bunker complex was a flaming ruin, but the Marines had failed to locate the remains of the men killed in the February ambush.\* Casualties on both sides had been heavy. The Marines claimed to have killed 115 of the enemy and intercepted enemy messages indicating that the NVA unit, later identified as the *8th Battalion, 66th Regiment, 304th Division*, sustained grievous losses. Company B, however, had not gone unscathed: it suffered 10 dead, 100 wounded and 2 missing. One Marine artillery officer later wondered if the raid to try to bring back the bodies had been worth the additional bloodshed: "No matter whether you get the bodies back at that point or not, you still [had] left your bodies out there." He argued at that point "getting the bodies simply wasn't that important." Nevertheless, as Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, the FMFPac commander who happened to have witnessed the Company B attack, later wrote, the attack served to signal "that the siege was ended." It may not have been over as yet, but it was indicative that the Marines on the ground had started to bring the fight to the NVA and a new phase was about to begin.<sup>104</sup>

On the day following Company B's raid, Operation Scotland ended, giving way to Operation Pegasus. Elements of the *101D Regiment* still remained in the area, possibly to cover the withdrawal of their comrades. Although the official enemy casualty count for Operation Scotland totalled 1,602 dead, 7 prisoners, and 2 ralliers, intelligence estimates placed the death toll in the neighborhood of 10,000 to 15,000.<sup>105</sup>

The allies had applied an incredible amount of firepower upon the North Vietnamese. Tactical aircraft and B-52s flew 24,449 sorties in support of Khe Sanh, dropping 103,500 tons of ordnance. The artillerymen of the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines and the 2d Battalion, 94th Field Artillery fired 102,660 rounds of various calibers at enemy positions.<sup>106</sup>

The North Vietnamese, in turn, fired 10,908 rounds of artillery, mortars, and rockets into U.S. positions in and around Khe Sanh. This fire, com-

bined with small-unit action from Operation Scotland, beginning on 1 November 1967, caused the deaths of 205 defenders of Khe Sanh. Another 1,668 fell wounded, about half of them serious enough to require evacuation.<sup>107\*</sup>

### *Operation Pegasus*

While in March the garrison of the Khe Sanh Combat Base remained in the grip of strong North Vietnamese forces, the allies had already taken initial steps to lift the siege. During Operation Scotland, the defenders had endured daily pounding by enemy artillery, mortar, and rocket fire, as well as frequent probes which kept alive the threat of a massive ground assault. Route 9, the only practical overland route to Khe Sanh from the east, was impassable due to its poor state of repair and the presence of enemy units. Supplies continued to reach the combat base by air, but the massive logistical effort strained the already thinly stretched supply of transport aircraft available in Vietnam. Intelligence officers at General Tompkins' 3d Marine Division headquarters noted reports from prisoners, ralliers, and agents that the North Vietnamese were moving missiles into the DMZ and northern Quang Tri Province for use against Con Thien and Khe Sanh. It was obvious the American command could not permit this situation to continue for much longer.<sup>108\*\*</sup>

On 2 March, General Cushman met in Da Nang with his subordinate commanders and, with General Abrams present, approved the initial concept to open Route 9 and relieve Khe Sanh. The following week, in a meeting on 10 March, also at Da Nang, General Westmoreland, in turn, agreed to the concept of operations for the relief of Khe Sanh, now codenamed Operation Pegasus. Among the members of this conference was Army Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, the commander of the newly created Provi-

\* U.S. casualty figures for Operation Scotland are sometimes questioned as being too low. The casualty reporting system listed only those casualties suffered by the unit (and its attachments) responsible for a given operation. Other casualties incurred in an operational area, by air crews flying in support, for instance, were usually reported by the parent unit. For example, some of the 43 men killed in the C-123 crash of 6 March are not included in Operation Scotland figures because they were members of the aircrew and others were Marines who had not yet reported to the 26th Marines.

\*\* Prados and Stubbe quote Captain Dabney about the possible firing of a Soviet FROG (Free Rocket Over Ground) missile, but found no other evidence of the NVA employing ground to ground missiles during the Khe Sanh campaign. Prados and Stubbe, *Valley of Decision*, p. 392.

\* The remains were recovered a few days later.

sional Corps or Prov Corps.\* While a subordinate command of III MAF, Prov Corps included the 1st Air Cavalry Division, 101st Airborne Division, and 3d Marine Division and was responsible for all operations in northern I Corps. General Rosson assigned to Major General John J. Tolson, the commander of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, the responsibility for the detailed planning of the operation in coordination with the 3d Marine Division. Rosson also placed under the operational control of the 1st Air Cavalry Division the 1st Marines, the 11th Engineers, and a Seabee battalion.<sup>109</sup>

According to the concept of operations for Pegasus, the 1st Air Cavalry Division together with the 1st Marines would deploy from positions near Hue to a new base to be specially constructed at Ca Lu, 16 kilometers east of Khe Sanh. Capitalizing on its air mobility, the Army division would advance along the axis of Route 9. Engineers would follow, repairing culverts and bridges to make the road passable to vehicles. The South Vietnamese promised an ARVN airborne task force of three battalions to participate in the operation. D-day was set for 1 April 1968.

Preparations began immediately. The 11th Engineer Battalion and Naval Mobile Construction (Seabee) Battalion 5 joined the 1st Air Cavalry Division engineers in building the base at Ca Lu, to be called "Landing Zone Stud." The project included bunkers, supply storage facilities, and an airstrip capable of handling Fairchild C-123 Provider cargo aircraft. At the same time, the 1st Air Cavalry Division completed the detailed plans for the attack westward and the 3d Marine Division scheduled a deception operation designed to divert the enemy's attention from Khe Sanh to Dong Ha. The 1st Marines at Phu Bai began "extensive retraining and rehabilitation" as a recuperative measure following its participation in the battle for Hue City.<sup>110\*\*</sup>

The 1st Air Cavalry Division began preparing the battlefield on 26 March when Lieutenant Colonel Richard W. Diller's 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry began helicopterborne reconnaissance patrols in ever-widening arcs from LZ Stud. Diller's squadron located and targeted NVA positions, and prepared landing zones by directing air strikes using delay-fuzed or "daisy cutter" bombs to blast gaping holes in the dense vegetation.<sup>111</sup>

At 0600, 30 March, the 3d Marine Division launched the diversionary operation northeast of Dong Ha. Task Force Kilo, composed of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines; the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry; and two ARVN infantry battalions, attacked north toward the DMZ along the coastal plains near Gio Linh. Encountering light resistance, the task force reached its objectives the first day, but continued the operation through 1 April to mask the preparations for Pegasus.<sup>112</sup>

As a final step for the coming offensive, Operation Scotland at Khe Sanh came to a close on 31 March, and General Rosson at that time placed the 26th Marines under the 1st Air Cavalry for Operation Pegasus.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Intelligence reports from Khe Sanh indicated that the North Vietnamese were abandoning their positions around the combat base and retiring to Laos, leaving a few units in place to cover the withdrawal. Prisoners reported that NVA units suffered from low morale as a result of heavy casualties and severe supply problems.<sup>113</sup> The enemy, reportedly, was having "difficulty coordinating anything larger than a company operation."<sup>114</sup> The allied forces poised to attack these battered North Vietnamese units numbered over 30,000 troops organized into 19 infantry battalions with a host of supporting artillery, engineer, and aviation units, making Operation Pegasus "the largest III MAF offensive of the war," up to that time.<sup>115</sup>

Despite the extensive preparations and high expectations, Operation Pegasus started not with a bold and powerful thrust, but with a decidedly more ponderous motion. At H-hour—0700, 1 April—foul weather grounded the helicopters of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, but the men of the 1st Marines, on foot, crossed the line of departure on time, initiating the offensive. The regiment attacked along Route 9 with the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines north of the road and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines south of it. As the infantry moved forward, the 11th Engineer Battalion opened Route 9, removing mines and obstacles from the road and repairing bridges, culverts, and bypasses. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines remained at Ca Lu, providing security for the recently completed LZ Stud.<sup>116</sup>

By 1300, the weather cleared, allowing Tolson's 3d Brigade to conduct the planned air assaults into landing zones along Route 9 west of the 1st Marines.

\*See Chapter 13 for the establishment of Prov Corps.

\*\*Actually outside of the 1st Marines regimental headquarters, only the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines had participated in the battle for Hue. See Chapters 9–12.

\*\*\*General Rosson remembered that Major General Tompkins "suggested to me that the 26th Marines be placed under the operational control of the 1st Cavalry Division to facilitate coordination as the relieving forces approached the combat base." Gen William B. Rosson, Comments on draft, dtd 27Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File).

Despite the delay, the brigade secured its landing zones and flew in its artillery before nightfall. Throughout the area of operations, allied forces made only light contact with the North Vietnamese. In the following days, the operation continued in the pattern set on D-day, including the seemingly obligatory bad weather in the mornings, which forced delays in airmobile operations. The North Vietnamese remained elusive.<sup>117</sup>

The garrison at Khe Sanh joined the offensive on 4 April from the combat base when the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines sortied against Hill 471. With Company B protecting the perimeter at the rock quarry west of the combat base, the battalion moved to the line of departure at 0230, finally leaving the positions it had defended for 73 days. At 0600, the Marines attacked along the fog-shrouded Che Rien Ridge toward Hill 471, which lay two kilometers to the southeast. Following a lengthy artillery and air preparation, Company A assaulted the hill at 1500. The defenders, a reinforced platoon of the *8th Battalion, 66th NVA Regiment*, put up a spirited fight, but Company A soon overwhelmed them, securing the hill at 1600. The attack cost the battalion 10 dead and 56 wounded. The enemy left 16 dead on the objective.<sup>118</sup>

The North Vietnamese were not content to give up Hill 471 that easily. Shortly after the Marines overran the hill, enemy rocket fire began and by midnight, 192 rounds had fallen. At 0430, two companies of the *66th NVA Regiment* assaulted Captain Ralph H. Flagler's Company C on the eastern half of the hill. Company A, located on the western side, was masked by the crest of the hill and could not fire in support. North Vietnamese infantry swarmed up the slope firing rifles, sub-machine guns, and RPGs, while heavy machine guns pounded Company C's positions. The enemy advanced to within 20 meters of the Marine fighting holes, but Flagler's men stood fast, with the help of almost 1,000 rounds of artillery fire from the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines. By 0630, the enemy attack was spent and the North Vietnamese withdrew. At a cost of 1 Marine dead and 28 wounded, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines killed over 140 North Vietnamese and captured 5 prisoners.<sup>119</sup>

Other units of the Khe Sanh garrison went on the offensive as well. On 6 April, Captain Lee R. Overstreet's Company G, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines left Hill 558 in the early morning on the battalion's first long distance patrol of the Khe Sanh battle. Its mission was to determine if the enemy occupied the ridge which extended southeast from Hill 861 like a huge, stubby finger pointed at the combat base.<sup>120</sup>

Just before noon, as the company reached the crest of the ridge, North Vietnamese concealed in camouflaged, mutually supporting bunkers opened fire, cutting down several Marines at point-blank range. Unable to advance into the heavy and accurate enemy fire, Company G suffered additional casualties as Marines tried to recover the fallen men nearest the enemy positions. Captain Overstreet called for artillery and air support, but the number of aircraft available was limited and the artillery frequently entered a "check fire" status to allow for the safe passage of planes supporting other units. Because of these fire support coordination problems, the Marines could not overcome the stiff enemy resistance atop the ridge. With six Marines missing in action, but presumed to be dead within the enemy perimeter, Captain Overstreet ordered Company G to withdraw to Hill 558 at nightfall "as a result of regimental policy to recall units to the defensive positions for the night." In addition to the 6 MIAs, Company G lost 4 killed and 47 wounded and claimed 48 NVA died in the fight.<sup>121\*</sup>

Elsewhere in the area, many major events took place on 6 April, giving Operation Pegasus the appearance of a three-ring circus. The 1st Battalion, 26th Marines attacked out of the combat base to the south, sending Company D against the NVA bunker complex where 25 missing members of Company B had last been seen during operations on 25 February and 30 March. Company D recovered the remains of 21 Americans.<sup>122</sup> The 1st Air Cavalry Division's 3d Brigade, clearing Route 9 in the area west of the 1st Marines, encountered a strong NVA blocking position and fought a day-long battle which ended when the enemy fled, leaving 83 dead.<sup>123</sup> At noon, the men of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines became the first defenders of Khe Sanh relieved in Operation Pegasus when the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry landed at Hill 471 and assumed responsibility for its defense.<sup>124</sup> The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines immediately attacked westward toward Hill 689. As a climax to the many events of the day, the ARVN 84th Company, 8th Airborne Battalion landed by helicopter at the Khe Sanh Combat Base and linked up with the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion. This marked the first entry of an organized ground combat unit into the base since the Rangers themselves had arrived on 27 January.<sup>125</sup>

The momentum of the offensive continued unabated on 7 April. The 2d Battalion, 26th Marines returned to the scene of the previous day's ambush,

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\*The six missing Marines were later found dead on the ridge.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191220

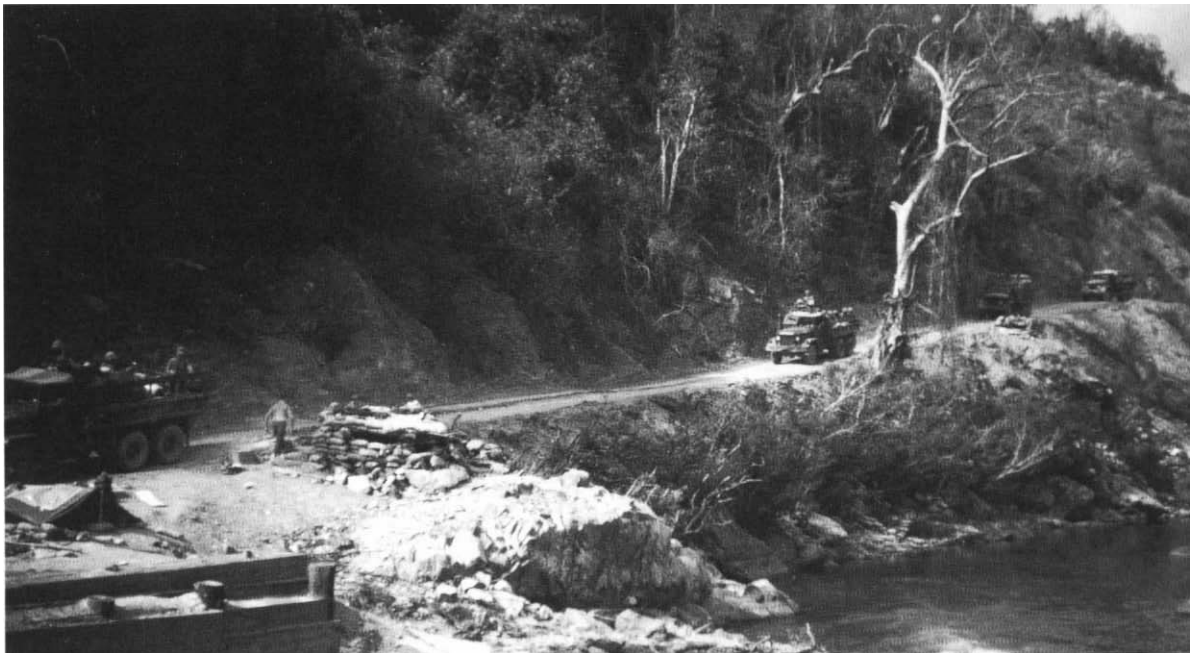
*Top, PFC Murray C. Henderson of Company F, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines cools himself off using his helmet as a bucket on the way from Ca Lu to relieve Khe Sanh during Operation Pegasus. Below, a Marine convoy moves along Route 9 between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh. This road had been closed since the previous summer.*

this time with two companies, and cleared the ridge of enemy, killing over 30. The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines continued the westward advance it had begun the previous afternoon, capturing Hill 552 with no enemy resistance. Near Khe Sanh Village, the 2d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division captured the old French fort after a three-day battle against an NVA battalion. Along Route 9, the 1st Marines conducted a few airmobile operations of its own, as the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines searched the vicinity of the highway for signs of enemy activity which might threaten the 11th Engineer Battalion's road repair project. The 3d Brigade of General Tolson's division pressed on along Route 9, still west of the 1st Marines.<sup>126</sup>

Enemy resistance began crumbling even further as the allied force maintained pressure. Units reported finding many abandoned weapons and large numbers of North Vietnamese bodies and mass graves as enemy units withdrew toward Laos. Some organized resistance remained, however, as the Communist forces continued to conduct limited objective ground attacks and probes in some areas.<sup>127</sup>

The much awaited linkup of U.S. forces at the Khe Sanh Combat Base proper occurred at 0800 on 8 April, when the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry entered the base along the coffee plantation road.<sup>128</sup> As the 3d Brigade began moving in, the 26th Marines prepared to depart the base it had defended amid so much

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191584





adversity and for so long. But the offensive did not slow down, even for this event. West of the base, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines advanced onto Hill 689 which had, for 11 weeks, dominated its position at the quarry. The enemy, although unseen, made their presence felt through steady and accurate mortar fire which killed 9 Marines and wounded 27 during the battalion's advance.<sup>129</sup>

No enemy artillery fire fell on the combat base on 9 April, and General Rosson, commander of the recently formed Provisional Corps, Vietnam, reported to General Cushman that airdrops of supplies were no longer necessary because the airstrip was open to all types of aircraft up to and including C-130s.\* In keeping with a plan to begin supplying all units in northwestern Quang Tri from LZ Stud, Operation Pegasus forces began using the ammunition at Khe Sanh in an attempt to draw down the huge stockpiles to a manageable level which III MAF could later evacuate.<sup>130</sup>

The engineers declared Route 9 open to vehicular traffic on 11 April, ending a project involving the replacement of 9 bridges, the construction of 17 bypasses, and the repair of 14 kilometers of road. It was the first time the road was passable from Ca Lu to Khe Sanh since September 1967.<sup>131</sup> The same day, General Rosson ordered the 1st Air Cavalry Division to make ready immediately for offensive operations in the A Shau Valley. Hours later, the division's 1st Brigade left the Khe Sanh area and the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion followed shortly afterward.<sup>132</sup>

As Army units prepared to move south, the 1st and the 26th Marines continued offensive operations around Khe Sanh. With patrols reporting enemy units remaining on Hill 881 North, Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, the new commanding officer of the 26th Marines, ordered the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines to clear the hill, scene of the bitter fighting which had marked the beginning of the siege almost three

\*Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, who relieved Colonel Lownds shortly after this order, remembered that on 13 April 1968, an Air Force C-130 was hit by "rocket shrapnel" as it came in for a landing, shredding its tires, lunging partially off the runway, hitting some equipment, and bursting into flames. Ground rescue crews saved the lives of the crews and most of the passengers. The only person who died in the crash was Felix Poilane, the French planter, who was returning to his plantation located near the fire base. According to Meyers, "while the C-130 was burning on the runway, it shut down the bulk of our airfield activity until it burned down and was finally put out with foam and bulldozed off the runway." Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on draft, dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Meyers Comments, Feb95.

months before and "the last enemy position posing a threat to Khe Sanh."<sup>133\*\*</sup>

Unlike Company I's reconnaissance in force of 20 January which was the last time U.S. forces had been near Hill 881 North,<sup>\*\*\*</sup> the attack planned for Easter Sunday, 14 April, called for the entire 3d Battalion to take part. With the relief of the main base by the Army, Lieutenant Colonel John C. Studt, who had assumed command of the 3d Battalion the previous month, had consolidated his companies on Hill 881 South. Studt had expanded the area of operations to include "Pork Chop Hill," the high ground immediately to the north, which the North Vietnamese had vacated. With the order to take 881 North, the battalion commander laid on a full menu of fire support, even lining up all eight of the battalion's 106mm recoilless rifles to support the assault. In addition to the howitzers and guns emplaced at the main base and Ca Lu, the battalion also had the support of the three 105mm howitzers on Hill 881S.<sup>134</sup>

After nightfall on the 13th, the battalion prepared to mount the attack. Shortly after midnight, under the cover of darkness, all four companies accompanied by two scout dog teams moved along routes previously secured by patrols into assault positions in the "saddle" located between Hills 881 South and North. Lieutenant Colonel Studt left one platoon of Company I together with his H&S Company on Hill 881 South. He had relieved Captain William Dabney, who had been selected for promotion to major, and placed him in command of a battalion Provisional Weapons Company and rear security on Hill 881 South.<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> Throughout the night Marine artillery and mortar shells crashed into Hill 881 North, destroying the enemy's bunkers and trenches, as Lieutenant Colonel Studt's Marines waited for daybreak and the order to mount the final attack.<sup>135</sup>

\*\*Colonel Meyers, who commanded Special Landing Force Alpha prior to his assignment to the 26th Marines, assumed command of the 26th Marines on 12 April. He remembered that on 10 April he departed the LPH *Iwo Jima* and flew to the 3d Marine Division CP at Dong Ha where he received a briefing and his orders: "Move out in the attack and retake the hills around Khe Sanh . . ." He then traveled by helicopter to LZ Stud where Major General Tolson and his staff briefed him further. After the briefing, he flew to Khe Sanh and "began walking the perimeter" with Colonel Lownds. The turnover continued during the next day and finally on the 12th, "we had a very brief change of command ceremony." Meyers Comments, Feb95.

\*\*\*See Chapter 4.

\*\*\*\*Studt not only wanted to use Dabney's experience, but also to keep him relatively safe after being in such an exposed and isolated position for so long. See LtCol John C. Studt, "Battalion in the Attack," *Marine Corps Gazette*, July 1970, pp. 39-44.



Top Photo is courtesy of Col Bruce F. Meyers (Ret) and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A416482  
*Top, at a change of command ceremony of the 26th Marines, Col David E. Lownds, left front, is about to turn over command of the regiment to Col Bruce F. Meyers, standing next to him. Col Lownds still has the distinctive moustache that he wore during the entire siege. Below, President Lyndon B. Johnson presents the Presidential Unit Citation Streamer to SgtMaj Agrippa W. Smith, who is holding the colors of the 26th Marines, as Col Lownds, right, who has shaven off his moustache, watches.*



Finally, shortly after dawn about 0530, following closely its artillery final preparation fires, the battalion attacked with three companies abreast and the command group and one company in reserve close behind. Surging forward through an eerie and barren landscape of charred limbless trees and huge bomb craters, the Marine battalion rolled up the enemy's defenses on the southern slope of the hill. Colonel Meyers, who watched the attack with Captain Dabney from 881 South, remarked on the effective use of the supporting 106mm recoilless rifle fire. As the Marine lead elements approached a tree line in their "uphill assault . . . the 106's [on Hill 881 South] literally blew the tree line away."<sup>136</sup> Finally, with the crest of Hill 881 North before it, the battalion called for a massive artillery firing mission. When over 2,000 rounds of artillery fire had fallen on the objective, Company K attacked along the right flank. Captain Paul L. Snead's men rushed through the smoking debris of the NVA defenses, rooting out the defenders from the ruins of bunkers and trenches. At 1428, Company K marked Hill 881 North as friendly territory by raising a U.S. flag which a squad leader had brought along. The 3d Battalion lost 6 dead and 21 wounded. The Marines took two prisoners from the *8th Battalion, 29th Regiment, 325th NVA Division* and killed over 100 of the North Vietnamese troops. With the enemy driven from the hill, at least for the time being, the Marines began withdrawing to Hill 881 South, their mission accomplished. According to Colonel Meyers, the Marine Corps Schools at Quantico, Virginia, later used the assault on Hill 881 North "as a classic example of a Marine battalion in the attack."<sup>137</sup>

The attack on Hill 881 North was the last battle of Operation Pegasus. At 0800, 15 April, the 3d Marine Division once again assumed responsibility for the Khe Sanh Combat Base and Operation Pegasus gave way to Operation Scotland II. The 1st Air Cavalry Division transferred its command post to Camp Evans, but left its 2d Brigade under the control of the 3d Marine Division. The 1st Marines, to this point still operating along Route 9 just west of Ca Lu, moved to Khe Sanh to assume responsibility for defense of the combat base from the 26th Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Studt recalled that his 3d Battalion, on 15 April, "was shuttled out of the 881 area by choppers . . . first to Khe Sanh than to Quang Tri [Airfield]." Even as the Marines boarded their helicopters out of the Khe Sanh sector, Company K came under enemy mortar fire. As the helicopters landed at the Quang Tri Airstrip, the 3d Marine Division band,

playing the Marine Corps Hymn, was there to greet the troops. According to the band master,

... it was the most inspiring performance of his career: chopper after chopper disgorging filth covered Marines in tattered and torn utilities, some with bandages, many carrying NVA souvenirs, but the expressions on their faces as soon as they perceived the strains of the Hymn was what moved him.

With a sense of irony, Captain Dabney many years later observed that the attacks on Hill 881 North marked the beginning and the end to the siege.<sup>138</sup>

In Operation Pegasus, allied forces accomplished their mission of reopening Route 9 between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh at a cost of 92 Americans dead and 667 wounded, and 51 ARVN killed. The North Vietnamese lost over 1,100 killed and 13 captured. III MAF units found supply caches estimated as "exceeding the basic load for an NVA division," including 3,000 tons of rice, over 200 crew-served weapons, 12,000 rounds of large caliber ammunition, 5 wheeled vehicles, and a tank.

A cloud of controversy has surrounded the story of Khe Sanh in the years since the battle. Some of the unsettled issues remain: 1. the reasons for defending the base in the first place; 2. the importance of the roles played by the various supporting arms (particularly B-52s, as opposed to tactical aircraft and artillery); 3. the failure of the 26th Marines to reinforce Lang Vei; 4. speculation why the North Vietnamese made no attempt to cut the source of the water supply for the base, pumped from a stream north of the Khe Sanh perimeter and in the area controlled by NVA troops; 5. and finally whether Khe Sanh was an attempted replay of Dien Bien Phu or a diversion for Tet.\*

\*Both Lieutenant General Krulak, the former CGFMFPac, and Colonel Frederic S. Knight, the 3d Marine Division G-2 or staff intelligence officer, remarked on the failure of the North Vietnamese to cut the water supply. In his book, General Krulak argued that the fact that the North Vietnamese did not do so is an indication that the enemy may have "had no intention of undertaking an all-out assault on the base." LtGen Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight, An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Naval Institute Press: Annapolis, Md., 1984), p. 218. Colonel Knight called this failure the most "puzzling aspect of the siege. . . . They literally could have cut off our water." He observed that the airlifting of the water would have "added an enormous logistical burden." Col Frederic S. Knight, Comments on draft, dtd 10Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File). In his comments, Colonel Steen observed that "when the hose was cut by artillery fragments or the pump was down, we were out of water and on our knees." He observed that as it was the Marines rationed their water until they left in April and "personal sanitation was at a minimum." Steen Comments. Navy Captain Bernard D. Cole also commented on the failure of the NVA to interrupt the water and as well remarked that they made no attempt to cut the land line telephone connection from Khe Sanh to MACV. Cole Comments.

Controversy aside, there is little question that the North Vietnamese committed considerable resources to the battle and that their units fought hard in what appeared to have been a major effort. The U.S. and South Vietnamese defenders of the Khe Sanh Combat Base surrounded and outnum-

bered, nevertheless, with the use of extensive supporting arms skillfully fought a difficult battle against a resolute enemy until the siege was lifted in Operation Pegasus. By any accounting, Pegasus regained the initiative for III MAF forces in northwestern Quang Tri Province.

## CHAPTER 15

# The Battle for Dong Ha

*Why Dong Ha?—The Fight for Dai Do, The First Day—The Continuing Fight for Dai Do  
The End of the First Offensive—The Second Offensive*

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### *Why Dong Ha?*

With the commitment of large U.S. forces to the far western reaches of I Corps in Operations Scotland II around Khe Sanh and Delaware in the A Shau Valley, the North Vietnamese decided to mount a new offensive in the eastern DMZ. Perhaps hoping that the American command with its attention riveted to the west would be caught off guard, the *320th NVA Division* at the end of April and early May struck in the sector just above Dong Ha. Dong Ha served not only as the command post for both the 3d Marine Division and the 9th Marines, but also remained the main logistic base for the north. It lay at the junction of Routes 1 and 9 and was the terminus of the Cua Viet River route. During the month of April, while the new Quang Tri base and Wunder Beach further

south in Quang Tri Province alleviated some of the logistic pressure on Dong Ha, nearly 63,000 tons of supplies came in by sea at the Cua Viet port facility for the 3d Marine Division and then were shipped up the Cua Viet River to Dong Ha.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its obvious importance, Dong Ha was vulnerable to a determined enemy attack. The most immediate available troops were from the nearby 2d ARVN Regiment which had its command post in the town of Dong Ha. Marine support units rather than line infantry were at the Dong Ha base itself. Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins' only reserve was Task Force Robbie, under Colonel Clifford J. Robichaud, consisting of a rifle company, Company D, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, and an armored company, Company A, 3d Tank Battalion, reinforced by four Army vehicles including two M42 "Dusters," a pla-

*An aerial photo shows the sprawling Dong Ha base and surrounding terrain. Dong Ha was the headquarters and forward base of the 3d Marine Division. The airstrip can be seen in the center of the picture.*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801122



toon of Ontos, and a platoon of engineers. For the most part, even this modest force was committed elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, Dong Ha lay just below where three ongoing operations converged. To the west of Route 1, the 9th Marines conducted Operation Kentucky with three battalions, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines; 1st Battalion, 4th Marines; and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. The 3d Marines, to the east of Route 1, was responsible for the Napoleon/Saline sector, also with three battalions under its operational control, the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines; the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion; and BLT 2/4. Between the two Marine regiments, the 2d ARVN Regiment with four battalions\* held the area of operations along both sides of Route 1, north of the Bo Dieu River\*\* and Dong Ha, to the Demilitarized Zone. This sector included both the A-1 and A-2 (Gio Linh) and the C-1 and C-2 Dyemarker positions, and much of the Leatherneck Square sector east of Route 1 to Jones Creek, the tributary of the Ben Hai that ran north and south, and emptied into the Cua Viet. The North Vietnamese were well aware of the unit boundaries, which only changed occasionally after some negotiations, and were not slow to make use of the allied dispositions for their own advantage.

During most of April, in both the Kentucky and Napoleon/Saline areas, the tempo of operations had slowed from the previous month. This was especially true of the Napoleon/Saline coastal sector after the Task Force Kilo offensive at the beginning of April. With only scattered actions during the rest of the month, the 3d Marines had turned much of its attention to civic action and refugee resettlement. After the initial clearing offensive north of the Cua Viet, many of the South Vietnamese farmers and fishermen attempted to return to their abandoned villages north of the waterway. As Lieutenant Colonel William Weise, the BLT 2/4 commander, remembered, "things had calmed down" but he suspected "that the enemy had shifted his major efforts westward into the ARVN area."<sup>3</sup>

For some time, through prisoner interrogations and captured enemy documents, the 3d Marine Division

staff knew that elements of the 320th NVA Division had infiltrated into the eastern DMZ sector. During the last week of April, Navy Task Force Clearwater, which was responsible for convoying and protecting the shipping on the Cua Viet, received reports of enemy intentions to interdict the waterway. Also during this period, the North Vietnamese guns north of the Demilitarized Zone increased their bombardment of allied positions and especially of the port facilities both at Dong Ha and at the mouth of the Cua Viet.<sup>4</sup>

On the afternoon of the 29th, the 320th initiated attacks against the ARVN 2d Regiment and against the Marines in the Kentucky area of operations. On 29 April, enemy sappers blew a culvert on Route 1 near the hamlet of An Binh, about four miles north of Dong Ha. Acting upon intelligence that North Vietnamese regulars had entered An Binh, the ARVN 2d Regiment sent in its 1st and 4th Battalions north from Dong Ha and south from C-1 to investigate the incident and trap any enemy forces between them. The ARVN units themselves, however, encountered heavy resistance "which they could not handle" and called for assistance. According to a newspaper account, Lieutenant Colonel Vu Van Giai, the 2d ARVN commander, told Major General Tompkins that "he was holding on the road but that he was worried about some new pressure that was starting to build up on his left flank." At that point, about 1415, Major General Tompkins ordered Task Force Robbie to move from C-3 with Company D, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, reinforced by Company A, 1st Tank Battalion, to assist the ARVN.<sup>5</sup>

At Cam Vu on Route 88, a secondary route running parallel and 3,000 meters north of Route 9, about 5,000 meters west of An Binh, the Marine task force ran into a North Vietnamese blocking force waiting for them. In a seven-hour "sharp engagement," lasting from 1600 till nearly midnight, Task Force Robbie suffered casualties of 11 dead and 22 wounded and reported killing 26 of the enemy. Four of the tanks with the task force also sustained damage. Task Force Robbie returned to its original positions at C-3. In the meantime, the two South Vietnamese battalions had disengaged and retreated to C-1. The ARVN reported killing 130 of the enemy while taking casualties of 17 dead and 47 wounded.

On the evening of 29 April, concerned about the obvious presence of North Vietnamese units on Route 1, General Tompkins alerted additional forces. He directed Colonel Milton A. Hull, the 3d Marines commander, to be prepared to send a company from the

\* An ARVN battalion numbered between 200 and 400 men, less than half of the 900-man Marine battalion.

\*\*The Cua Viet just above Dong Ha becomes the Bo Dieu. On some maps it is also shown as the Mieu Giang. Brigadier General William Weise observed that the "Bo Dieu River (a continuation of the Cam Lo and . . . Mieu Gang) flows east from Dong Ha and empties into the Cua Viet . . . (about 3 km northeast of Dong Ha) which in turn flows into the . . . Gulf of Tonkin . . ." BGen William Weise, Comments on draft, dtd 29Oct92 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191498

*A Marine M48 tank and two Marines, part of Task Force Robbie, engage an enemy force near Dong Ha. Task Force Robbie was the 3d Division's small armored reserve force, called after the nickname of its commander, Col Clifford J. Robichaud.*

Napoleon/Saline sector to a new defensive position near Route 1. At 1715, Marine helicopters lifted Company E, BLT 2/4 from near the hamlet of Nhi Ha in the Napoleon northwestern sector to just north of the Dong Ha bridge.\* Later that night, Tompkins ordered the helicopter lift of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines from the 4th Marines Operation Lancaster II sector to C-3 to reinforce Task Force Robbie.6\*\*

On the afternoon of the 30th, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines arrived at C-3. Reinforced by four tanks from Task Force Robbie, the battalion then pushed forward towards Cam Vu. Just north of Cam Vu, about 1610, Company I of the 3d Battalion, like Task Force Robbie the previous day, came up against North Vietnamese, probably in company strength, in an L-shaped ambush. As Company I attempted to establish a defensive perimeter, the other companies of the battalion and the tanks pushed forward to assist the exposed company. With the coming of the reinforcements, the Vietnamese disengaged under cover of artillery north of

the DMZ and their own mortars.\*\*\* The Marine reports showed 41 enemy killed at a cost of 20 Marines dead and 72 wounded. Despite the severity of the clash at Cam Vu the fiercest fighting of the day occurred about 10,000 meters to the northeast, involving BLT 2/4 and units of the 320th NVA Division in the village of Dai Do, about 2,500 meters north of Dong Ha. The battle for Dong Ha had begun.7

### *The Fight for Dai Do, The First Day*

Dai Do was actually a cluster of five hamlets, only one of which was actually named Dai Do, on a small peninsula carved out by the Cua Viet where it runs into the Bo Dieu. The Cua Viet rims the eastern edge while the Bo Dieu forms the southern boundary. Two unnamed small tributary streams of the larger rivers outline the northern and western reaches of the peninsula. The northernmost stream which flowed into the Cua Viet marked the boundary between the 2d ARVN Regiment and the 3d Marines. This stream separated the hamlet of Bac Vong in the Napoleon/Saline area of operations from the hamlet of Dong Huan on the northeastern lip of the peninsula. About 500 meters south of Dong Huan was the hamlet of An Loc which overlooked the Bo Dieu. Dai Do was another 500

\*There is some question whether Company E actually deployed near the Dong Ha Bridge or to another smaller bridge spanning Route 1 another 5,000 meters north of the Dong Ha Bridge. Brigadier General William Weise insists that it is the latter bridge and the BLT 2/4 CAAR is in error on this matter. BGen William Weise intvw, 21Feb83 (Oral HistColl, MCHC).

\*\*Major Gary E. Todd, who at the time had just joined the battalion as the acting operations officer alpha, remembered that only three of the companies and the battalion command group were committed to the operation. The remaining company stayed at the Rockpile under the executive officer. Maj Gary E. Todd, Comments on draft, dtd 28Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Todd Comments.

\*\*\*Major Todd recalled that the intermingling of forces limited the use of air support. He observed that the North Vietnamese professionally adjusted their artillery fire and that the Marines faced an "army that was as well equipped as their government and its supporters could afford." Todd Comments.

meters to the northwest abutting the western stream, as were the two remaining adjacent hamlets Dinh To and Thuong Do to the north. Rice paddies and two cemeteries lay interspersed among the five hamlets.

Sometime during the previous days, at least four North Vietnamese battalions, two of them for certain from the *48th* and *52d NVA Regiments* of the *320th NVA Division*, had made their way without being noticed in relatively flat and open terrain, south from the DMZ through the 2d ARVN Regiment into the Dai Do peninsula complex. In a relatively short time, the enemy troops were in formidable defenses. These included a series of fortified A-frame bunkers "covered with several feet of earth, reinforced by bamboo legs, and well-camouflaged" and supplemented by trenches, and fighting holes. Lieutenant Colonel Weise recalled that the bunkers "could support the weight of an M48 tank without collapsing."<sup>8</sup>

All of the North Vietnamese defenses were well designed, protected by barbed wire, mutually supporting, with clear lines of fire, and took advantage of the terrain, especially the hedgerows on the perimeter of each of the hamlets. Lieutenant Colonel Weise later stated that over time, small North Vietnamese units had come into the area and used the local populace to do "most of the work with a few of their officers in there to direct the placements of the various positions." This was all done according to a very careful plan so that all the regulars had to do when they arrived on the scene were to man the positions. Weise personally believed that the only way the enemy accomplished this task was because the 2d ARVN Regiment which was responsible for the sector "was asleep at the switch."<sup>9</sup>

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\*Colonel Max McQuown, whose BLT 3/1 had been relieved by Weise's BLT 2/4 in the Cua Viet, observed that a Vietnamese village or hamlet, "viewed from the air . . . looks like a group of small squates delineated by dense bamboo hedgerows . . . Bamboo will bend with the wind but will not break. The roots are as strong as iron. The NVA converted these natural barriers into formidable defensive positions. They built interconnecting tunnels under each hedgerow, reinforced the rough overhead root system and cut and camouflaged ground level fittings for rifles, machine guns, and RPG's. Mottar positions were located in houses, our buildings, pig sties, or haystacks. The beauty of this defense was the NVA remained in a concealed protected position and, using the connecting tunnels, they could move to any side of a village that was being threatened and engage the enemy without exposing themselves." McQuown agreed in his comments with Weise that "villagers participated in the construction of these bastions," probably having little choice, but that he believed "some of the ARVN had to know what was going on." He declared that the lesson that his BLT learned "was to assume all villages had similar defenses" and to attack with sufficient troops "to get the job done quickly." Col Max McQuown, Comments on draft, dtd 26Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter McQuown Comments.

While the 3d Marine Division had intelligence of the *320th* moving into the eastern sectors with a vague mission of interdicting the Cua Viet, the allies had almost no inkling of the buildup in the Dai Do area. Up to this time, the 3d Marines and 2d ARVN Regiment had encountered mostly small groups in squad or platoon formations, and occasionally a company-size unit to the north, east, and west of Dai Do. The most recent actions provided some evidence that the enemy was perhaps making his main effort to the northwest.<sup>10</sup>

In the early morning of the 30th, the North Vietnamese revealed their presence in the Dai Do sector. About 0330 enemy soldiers from positions in the hamlet of An Loc on the northern bank of the Bo Dieu fired upon a Navy Task Force Clearwater river patrol boat with small arms and machine guns. The Navy craft returned the fire and turned back for the Dong Ha ramp area. Approximately a half-hour later, the NVA from the same position opened up upon a Navy LCU, this time with rocket-propelled grenades as well as rifle and machine gun fire. The Navy ship sustained several hits and casualties, one sailor dead and six wounded. This ship too returned to the Dong Ha ramp.<sup>11</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Weise remembered that he routinely monitored the Task Force Clearwater radio net and overheard the report relative to the last incident, the attack on the LCU. Shortly afterwards, Captain James L. Williams, the commander of Company H, radioed that one of his patrols not too far from the hamlet of Bac Vong had also seen the incident. Weise relayed the information to Colonel Hull, the 3d Marines commander. About two hours later, at daybreak, about 0600, Hull ordered Weise to investigate the incident. Since An Loc was in the 2d ARVN regimental sector, Lieutenant Colonel Weise requested Colonel Hull for a shift of boundaries, which had to be authorized by the 3d Marine Division. While waiting for the permission, Weise then alerted Captain Williams about the situation. About 0700, with the boundary shift approved, the battalion commander ordered Williams to send the platoon near Bac Vong across the adjacent stream and to "reconnoiter area from which attack occurred." At the same time, he directed Williams to "assemble remainder of Hotel [Company H] which was widely dispersed on patrol."<sup>12</sup>

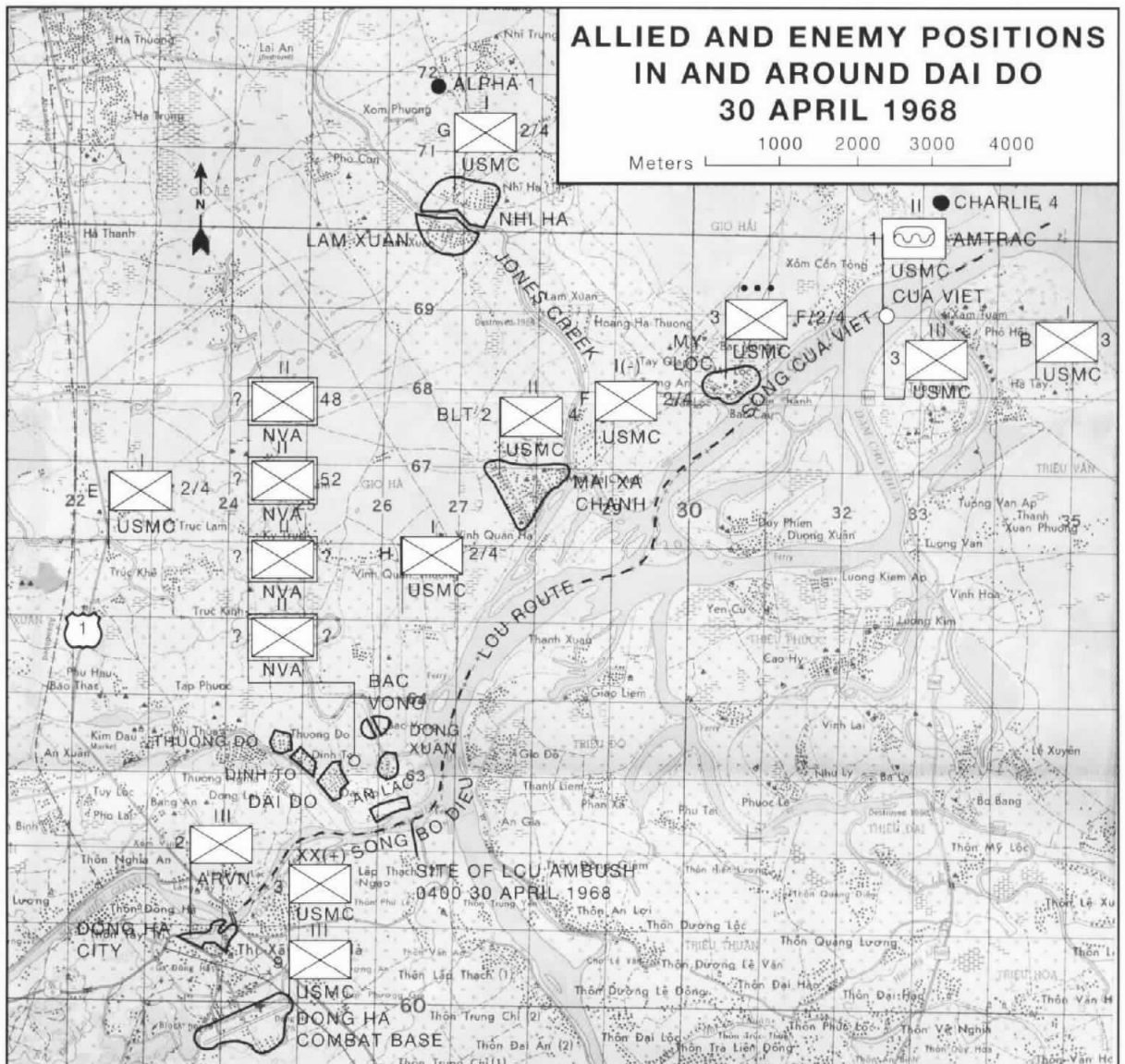
For that matter, at this point of time, Lieutenant Colonel Weise's entire command was widely dispersed. Weise maintained his command post at Mai Xa Chanh at the southern terminus of Jones Creek, about 5,000 meters northeast of Bac Vong, collocated with his Company F. One platoon of Company F



was at My Loc on the Cua Viet, about 3,000 meters east of the company and battalion command posts. Company G was positioned another 3,000 meters to the north of the battalion command post near the hamlets of Lam Xuan and Nhi Ha on both sides of Jones Creek. The previous day, Weise had lost operational control of his Company E, now positioned on Route 1, about 5,000 meters to the west of the Napoleon sector, to the 3d Marine Division. Moreover, according to the battalion commander, he could not move Company G and the Company F platoon at My Loc from their positions without first obtaining the approval of the 3d Marine Division. This, in effect, only left him two maneuverable infantry units

to carry out the mission, Company H and the two platoons of Company F with him at Mai Xa Chanh. At the time he ordered Captain Williams to assemble his company, Lieutenant Colonel Weise also told Captain James H. Butler, the Company F commander, to mount his two platoons on amphibian tractors and to deploy from Mai Xa Chanh to Bac Vong.<sup>13</sup>

About 0830, as the initial platoon of Company H advanced through Bac Vong and approached the stream which had been the original boundary with the 2d ARVN Regiment, the platoon came under heavy rifle and machine gun fire as well as mortar and rocket bombardment. The enemy was well entrenched in the hamlet of Dong Huan just across the stream from Bac



Vong. It was obvious to both Captain Williams and Lieutenant Colonel Weise that it would take more than a platoon to get the North Vietnamese out of the objective area. The battalion commander directed Williams to pull his platoon back and wait for the rest of his company and the two platoons from Company F to arrive. He also reinforced Williams with the reconnaissance platoon attached to his BLT and two M48 tanks. Before the Marines could reach An Loc, they had to eliminate the NVA from Dong Huan.<sup>14</sup>

Expecting resistance from the enemy, Weise asked for permission to move Company G from Nhi Ha and the Company F platoon from My Loc to Bac Vong to support the attack. At this time, about 0900, Lieutenant Colonel Weise and a small operational group, consisting of his sergeant major, air liaison officer, and three radio operators, boarded a Navy monitor (an armored LCM 6) so that he could see and possibly control the course of events. According to Weise, the "monitor proved to be an ideal command post with good communications and significant fire power—a breech-loaded 81mm mortar, two 20mm cannons, plus .50- and .30-caliber machine guns." The Navy ship sailed up the Cua Viet from Mai Xa Chanh to a point on the river opposite Dong Huan.<sup>15</sup>

Weise's plan for the attack was to have artillery and air to prepare the objective area and then for William's Company H to cross the stream. The two M48 tanks, the reconnaissance platoon, and Company F and the amphibian tractors reinforced with two 106mm recoilless rifles were to lay down a heavy base of fire to cover the Company H attack. Once Company H was well established on the other side of the stream, Company F with the two 106s and the amphibian tractors would cross. Company F was to create a diversionary effort to draw the enemy's attention from Company H, which would then attack Dong Huan. With the securing of Dong Huan, Company F would then take Dai Do. If the situation became tenuous, Lieutenant Colonel Weise, who had received back operational control of his Company G at Nhi Ha, hoped to helilift the latter company back to the former battalion CP at Mai Xa Chanh. From there, the company with the BLT's two tanks would board an LCM-8 to reinforce the two other companies in the Dai Do sector.<sup>16</sup>

At first, the plan appeared to be working. With radio links to an aerial observer, the battalion directed helicopter gunship and fixed-wing airstrikes as well as artillery on suspected enemy positions throughout the entire five-hamlet village complex. According to the aerial observer, the airstrikes

knocked out at least three of the North Vietnamese .50-caliber machine gun positions. With the lifting of the air bombardment, Company H crossed the stream about 400 meters northwest of Bac Vong. According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise, "Captain Williams did a masterful job of moving his company . . . across open rice paddies under enemy fire," ford the stream, and then move south, literally crawling the last 1,500 meters, again in the open, to reach the assault position with relatively light casualties. As planned, the tanks, the amphibian tractors, the reconnaissance Marines, and the Marines of Company F provided covering fire for the assault company. The artillery batteries of the 12th Marines used white phosphorous and smoke shells to cloak the movement of Company H.<sup>17</sup>

With Company H in the assault positions, the two platoons of Company F on top\* of the amphibian tractors crossed the stream and took positions on the right flank of Company H. While Company H was to attack Dong Huan, Captain Butler was to secure Dai Do, about 700 meters to the west of Dong Huan. About 1400, both companies launched their assaults. In a relatively short, but fierce struggle, Company H successfully fought its way into Dong Huan, but at some cost. Among the casualties was Captain Williams, wounded by a grenade about halfway through the hamlet. Williams killed his assailant with a well-placed shot from his .45-caliber service pistol. With the company commander down, First Lieutenant Alexander F. Prescott assumed command, rallied the troops, and continued the attack. By 1500, the Marines controlled Dong Huan. Company H had consolidated its positions and began evacuating its casualties.<sup>18</sup>

Captain Butler's Company F with the amphibian tractors had not fared as well. Sporadic enemy artillery from the north and enemy mortars, recoilless rifles, and machine guns from positions in Dai Do prevented the company from reaching its objective. The enemy recoilless rifles took out two of the tractors. As a field expedient, the Marines had mounted their two 106mm recoilless rifles on top of two of the tractors, "secured by sandbags." Despite the added fire power, the 106s failed to silence the enemy weapons in Dai

\*Brigadier General Weise later explained that "we usually avoided riding inside the LVTP-5 Amphibian Tractor . . . because its highly volatile gasoline fuel tanks were located beneath the troop compartment. It was feared that there would be little chance of escape if the amtrac struck a land mine. Land mines were plentiful in our area." Weise, "Memories of Dai Do," Footnote 4, Footnotes, p. 3.

Do. Although one of the platoons reached the eastern edge of the hamlet, the other remained in the open in a cemetery about 300 meters to the east. At one point in the course of the afternoon, Captain Butler radioed that he only had "26 effective Marines."<sup>19</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Weise had wanted to reinforce Company F with Company G, but these hopes were soon dashed. The company had prepared for the helilift from Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan back to the battalion CP. After the first wave of helicopters had taken out the 81mm mortar section and some of the supplies, enemy artillery and mortars bombarded the landing zone followed by a ground assault against the company positions. Left with little choice, Captain Manuel S. Vargas,\* the company commander, canceled the rest of the helilift. The company beat back the enemy attack and then Vargas ordered the company to make a night march back to Mai Xa Chanh.<sup>20</sup>

Earlier in the afternoon, Colonel Hull had boarded one of the Navy patrol boats, a lightly armed, 14-foot, fiberglass boat with a 35-horsepower outboard motor that the Marines called "skimmers," to have a look at the situation for himself. He first stopped at Dong Huan and discussed the fighting and evacuation of the casualties with Lieutenant Prescott and then joined Lieutenant Colonel Weise on board the "monitor." According to Weise, Hull told him that now that the "battle was joined we had to maintain pressure on the enemy to keep him off balance." Hull promised the battalion commander operational control of Company B, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, which had a platoon of LVTPs attached to it south of the Bo Dieu.<sup>21</sup>

First Lieutenant George C. Norris, the Company B commander, radioed Lieutenant Colonel Weise to report his availability. Weise briefed Norris on the situation and then ordered "his company to mount the amtracs, cross the river, attack and seize An Loc, the hamlet from which the enemy had earlier attacked the Navy Utility Boat." At 1625, the first of two waves of Company B landed on the northern shore of the Bo Dieu River just south of An Loc under covering fire from the weapons of Task Force Clearwater's River Assault Group boats. By 1710, the second wave was ashore, but Company B had only succeeded in establishing a rather insecure beachhead.<sup>22</sup>

The enemy greeted the company with automatic weapons, RPGs, mortars, and heavy small arms fire,

not only from inside An Loc but also from the hamlet of Dai Do to the north, and from the hamlet of Dong Lai, about 1,000 meters to the northwest and across the second or western stream in the Dai Do sector. NVA recoilless rifles damaged several of the amphibian tractors, disabling one of the amtracs and destroying another. Despite the strong enemy resistance, in its initial assault, the company pushed through into about half of An Loc. At this point, the casualty toll forced the advance to falter. Lieutenant Norris, the company commander, was dead. A hidden enemy sniper killed the Marine lieutenant as he was being helped to the rear after being seriously wounded. According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise, who had carefully monitored the events ashore, about an hour before dark, he "ordered Bravo Company (now confused, disorganized, and with only one officer left) to halt, reorganize, form a defensive perimeter in the western half of the hamlet . . ."<sup>23</sup>

Concerned at the same time about being able to coordinate three separate perimeters, the battalion commander also told Captain Butler of Company F to gather his unit together as best he could outside of Dai Do and withdraw to the positions held by Company H in Dong Huan. Under cover of darkness and with supporting fires provided by Company B and Company H, Company F reached Dong Huan without sustaining further casualties. In fact, Captain Butler discovered that when he had reassembled his company he had about twice the force that he thought he had. With the establishment of the two defensive perimeters at Dong Huan in the north and An Loc in the south, the fighting on the 30th was about over.

During the night of the 30th, the enemy made several probes at Dong Huan, but Companies F and H with the assistance of friendly artillery easily repulsed them. At 2330, although under artillery bombardment by enemy guns north of the DMZ, Company G to the east completed its night march to Mai Xa Chanh from Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan. Company E, however, was still under operational control of the division and remained in its defensive positions on Highway 1, northwest of the Dai Do complex. In the day's action, both the North Vietnamese and the Marine BLT including Company B from the 3d Marines had sustained heavy casualties. The Marines reported approximately 90 enemy killed while suffering losses of 16 dead and 107 wounded.<sup>24</sup>

At the end of the long day, Lieutenant Colonel Weise remained frustrated. He believed that if he had Companies E and G attached to him from the very beginning that he could have seized both Dai Do and

\*On December 26 1973, then Major Vargas legally changed his name from Manuel Sando Vargas to Jay R. Vargas. Col Jay R. Vargas Biographical File (Ref Sec, MCHC).

An Loc after Company H had captured Dong Huan. Moreover, he had requested additional airstrikes\* and 8-inch artillery missions which were not forthcoming. He was especially disappointed that he “did not get a radar controlled 2,000 pound bomb strike by Marine A-6 Intruder aircraft.” He asserted that the heavy air and artillery ordnance with delayed fuses would have “cracked some of the enemy’s . . . fortifications” and “followed by napalm” would possibly have destroyed the enemy’s defenses. It was obvious to Weise that his unit did not have priority for either air or artillery support. He did not blame Colonel Hull who had given him all the reserve force he had available—Company B, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines. With the piecemealing of his forces into the battle, Weise declared later “I felt ‘an hour late and a dime short’ throughout the fight.”<sup>25</sup>

From the perspective of General Tompkins at the 3d Marine Division command post, he could not be sure that the main thrust of the enemy was in the Dai Do sector. At the same time that BLT 2/4 fought in Dai Do, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines at Cam Phu, about three miles to the west, had engaged other elements of the *320th NVA Division*, the same place where Task Force Robbie had run into trouble the day before.\*\* Along Route 1, the 2d ARVN Regiment also reported continuing contact with enemy forces. Together with the attacks on the Navy river boats, Tompkins believed the North Vietnamese poised a real threat to the entire coastal plain from Cam Phu south to Quang Tri. Still, according to Major William H. Dabney, recently promoted and a former company commander at Khe Sanh reassigned to the 3d Marine Division G-3 staff at this

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\*Up to this point, possibly because of the new single manager system that had just been established “fixed-wing air support required a 36-hour notice before it could be planned on. This caused problems when situations would change between the planning stage and actual execution of an operation order.” According to the BLT 2/4 after action report, “as the battle of Dai Do proceeded it became less difficult to get the close air support that the BLT requested.” BLT 2/4 CAAR, *Operation Napoleon*, pp. 3-4. Colonel Max McQuown, who at the time commanded BLT 3/1, observed, however, that in the 3d Marine Division, “close air support was always a crap shoot. Requesting units just never knew if the requested strike would occur.” He claimed that these air support problems existed even before the advent of “Single Manager.” McQuown stated that the “glaring problem was that all air support requests had to be forwarded to the 3d Division air officer instead of going directly to the DASC, . . . the agency that was supposed to coordinate and control all air.” McQuown Comments.

\*\*In fact a contemporary Army historical account of the battle gives much more emphasis on the ARVN and Cam Phu action and does not even mention the fighting in Dai Do on 30 April, but begins its description with events there on 1 May. Waldron and Beavers, “The Critical Year,” pp. 57-59.

time, General Tompkins entered the division FSIC (Fire Support Information Center) on the evening of the 30th and ordered the artillery commander, “to take every tube that is in range of Dai Do . . . to shift its trail so that it is pointing at the Dai Do area and . . . fire max sustained rate with every tube all night.”<sup>26</sup>

In an interview a few days after the initial action, a reporter quoted General Tompkins as stating, “Yes, I can tell you the exact moment when I made up my mind it was going to be a real battle—it was at 9:15 Tuesday morning (April 30).” According to the Tompkins interview, when the general looked at the map, the “situation was pretty obvious.” He believed, “the whole picture adds up to one of two things—the enemy was either driving through to Dong Ha itself, or he was planning to . . . slip by one or both sides of Dong Ha, and go for the provincial capital of Quang Tri, just eight miles due south.” According to Tompkins such a threat was more than the 2d ARVN Regiment could handle, “it was time to call in the Marines.”<sup>27</sup>

The 3d Marine Division commander only had a limited number of reserves that he could throw into the battle.\*\*\* Tompkins believed that the insertion of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines at Cam Phu contained the enemy forces to the west. He still remained concerned, however, about the capability of the ARVN to hold the center and also about the uncovering of the northern approaches to Dong Ha with the withdrawal of Company G from Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan. As Lieutenant Colonel Weise later observed, “Nhi Ha had always been a key staging area for NVA infiltrating south along ‘Jones Creek.’” With BLT 2/4 committed to Dai Do, only the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines remained in the Napoleon/Saline sector, safeguarding the southern banks of the Cua Viet. General Tompkins request-

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\*\*\*While the 26th Marines had deployed to the Quang Tri base after Khe Sanh on 18 April, the regiment was basically recuperating from its ordeal at Khe Sanh. Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, who had just assumed command of the 26th Marines in April, recalled that the regiment was “being reequipped and obtaining replacements (the bulk of the regiment’s artillery, motor transport, generators, mess equipment, virtually all of the ‘heavy’ TO/E gear had been shot up and/or left at Khe Sanh when we pulled out.” Temporarily the regiment conducted a rice protection operation appropriately named “Operation Rice” in the area south of the Quang Tri base. Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on draft, dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File). On the other hand, Colonel Max McQuown, who commanded BLT 3/1 at the time, asserted that either his battalion or the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines were both at Ca Lu, and therefore, “there was a ‘swing’ battalion available to go anywhere in the division TAOR. It could have been 2/9 or BLT 3/1—it turned out to be neither.” McQuown Comments.

ed a battalion of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, the Prov Corps reserve, from Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, the corps commander, to fill any gaps in the division's defenses. General Rosson remembered Tompkins telling him "that the 320th NVA Division had Dong Ha in its sights."<sup>28</sup> At 0900, 1 May, the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry arrived by helicopter in a landing zone just north of Dong Ha. Later that day, General Tompkins turned over operational control of the Army battalion to the 3d Marines to insert into the Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan area.<sup>29</sup>

### *The Continuing Fight for Dai Do*

The fighting in the Dai Do area, however, was far from over. Just before daybreak on 1 May, a reconnaissance patrol from Company B in An Loc noticed that the North Vietnamese had slipped out of the hamlet. At that point, on order of Lieutenant Colonel Weise, who had come ashore by skimmer boat, the company took over all of An Loc. At daybreak, Com-

pany H in Dong Huan noticed about 60 enemy soldiers moving across an open field rice paddy west of Dai Do and north of An Loc. Calling in supporting arms as well as employing their own rifle and automatic weapons, the Marines of both Companies H and B participated in what amounted to a "turkey shoot." Lieutenant Colonel Weise later speculated that the North Vietnamese may have been "a reinforcing unit looking for the village of Dai Do" or possibly "stragglers . . . from An Loc."<sup>30</sup>

After this initial action, there was a relative lull in the fighting largely confined to the continuous artillery shelling of Dai Do, as both sides attempted to marshal and reinforce their forces. At first, Lieutenant Colonel Weise had planned to have Captain Vargas' Company G make a night landing at An Loc and then launch a predawn attack on Dai Do. The Navy landing craft that were to carry the Marine company from Mai Xa Chanh to An Loc, however, were not available. Instead Company G, reinforced by the BLT's two tanks, waited at Mai Xa Chanh until about 0830 to board two

*Two Marines from BLT 2/4 survey the ruins of the hamlet of Dai Do after several days of heavy fighting. The Marine on the left is carrying three LAAW's (light antiarmor weapons) strapped to his back.*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191498



LCM-6s. Lieutenant Colonel Weise, once more in his "skimmer" boat, intercepted Company G on the water. He joined Captain Vargas on the lead LCM and briefed the company commander on the situation and the revised plans. The company was to come ashore at An Loc, pass through Company B's lines, and then take the hamlet of Dai Do. Company B was to remain in reserve, while Companies F and H would provide covering fire from Dong Huan.<sup>31</sup>

As planned, around 1000, Company G landed at An Loc and prepared to launch its attack on Dai Do. So as not to reveal the presence of the two M48 tanks, the amphibian tractors with Company B revved up their engines and made several false starts. Marine artillery and naval gunfire continued to pound the North Vietnamese troops in Dai Do and just after the artillery fire lifted, two Marine A-4s swooped low and dropped bombs and napalm on the hamlet. Passing by the eastern flank of Company B, the Marines of Company G with the tanks between the two assault platoons and under covering smoke and white phosphorous rushed forward to cover the 500 meters of open rice paddy between them and Dai Do.

While heavy mortar and automatic weapons stopped the left flank about 200 meters short of Dai Do, the rest of the company reached the enemy's first line of bunkers. As one company officer told a newspaper reporter later: "We could have used 10 tanks. We had two and we had to send both of them to the rear with damage." The fighting in Dai Do reverted to intensive short-range fighting, with the Marines blowing holes in the enemy bunkers with satchel charges and grenades. Bypassing some of the defenses, by 1400, the company attained the northern reaches of Dai Do. Indicative of the heavy combat, Captain Vargas later related that "I started out with 123 men and by the time I got through the village I was down to 41. . . . Every trooper had a captured AK-47." The Marines also had taken several prisoners.<sup>32</sup>

The North Vietnamese were not about to allow the Marines to stay in Dai Do and mounted a counterattack in about battalion strength from both north and west of Dai Do. Employing both well-aimed artillery from positions north of the DMZ and mortars, the enemy troops forced Company G to give ground. Also North Vietnamese troops in Dai Do who had been bypassed, especially in the southwestern part of the hamlet, opened fire on the Marines of Company G from the rear. Given the situation, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Vargas "to fall back and establish a

defensive perimeter in the eastern part of Dai Do." By 1700, Company G had established its new perimeter, called in supporting arms, and waited for resupply and reinforcements and a new enemy attack. In the process, Captain Vargas was wounded but not seriously enough to relinquish command.

While sitting in its new perimeter, Company G reported the sighting of a large number of enemy troops in the vicinity of Truc Kinh, about 3,000 meters northeast of Dai Do. At about the same time, an aerial observer spotted the troop movement at Truc Kinh and also a North Vietnamese artillery forward observation team and called in fixed-wing and helicopter gunships on both positions. According to one report, the fixed-wing sorties killed all 13 of the NVA artillery spotter team, which resulted in a reduction of the effectiveness of the enemy artillery. Lieutenant Colonel Weise remembered that "on our air net we could hear the excited pilots as they strafed, bombed, and rocketed enemy in the open in daylight, a rare sight!" BLT 2/4 now had priority for close air support, although Weise later asserted not as much as "we requested nor as quickly as we needed it."<sup>33</sup>

At An Loc, Lieutenant Colonel Weise tried to reinforce Company G. At first, he ordered Company F to attack from Dong Huan to relieve the embattled company. Enemy artillery and automatic weapons and small arms fire stopped the attack far short of its objective. Although the North Vietnamese attempted to jam the Marine radios, the battalion by changing frequencies was able to call in supporting arms including airstrikes to provide protective cover for the second Marine company. At this point, around 1700, Weise had few reserves that he could send into the battle. Although earlier in the day, he had requested and received operational control of his Company E from the 3d Marine Division, the company had not yet arrived from its former position along Route 1. With the number of casualties that it sustained the day before, Company H in Dong Huan was not in any position for "a major effort." This left only Company B, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines at An Loc, where its parent battalion had sent in several replacements including a new company commander, executive officer, and several experienced noncommissioned officers.<sup>34</sup>

About 1700, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Company B, 3d Marines into the attack. According to Weise, the plan was for the company, on top of the LVTs, to cross rapidly the 500 meters of rice paddy separating it from Dai Do, "dismount and fight its

way to link up with Golf [Company G].” It did not work. The enemy laid down a tremendous amount of both automatic and small arms fire that literally stopped the attack dead in its tracks. Both the new company commander, First Lieutenant Thomas A. Brown, and many of his key personnel were wounded. According to Weise, Company B was in very bad straits—a young, inexperienced Marine officer had assumed the command and was close to panic. At that point, Captain Vargas of Company G made radio contact with him and in a “calm, confident voice settled the excited Marine down, enabling him to gain better control of the situation.”<sup>35</sup>

Fortunately, Weise’s Company E under Captain James E. Livingston, after crossing the dangerous stream\* to the west, arrived at An Loc about 1730 from its former position on Route 1. With the coming of darkness, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Company B to pull back to An Loc. Both Captain Livingston and First Lieutenant Clyde W. Mutter, the commanding officer of the reconnaissance platoon, “personally led a number of small expeditions during darkness, across the fire-swept rice paddies, and helped Bravo Company successively withdraw back to An Loc with all its wounded.” By this time, Company F had rejoined Company H in Dong Huan. In its tight perimeter in the northeastern part of Dai Do, with supporting arms and light provided by flare ships, Company G repulsed several attempts of the North Vietnamese to overwhelm its positions. Casualties had been heavy for both sides on 1 May. The Marines suffered 24 dead and 44 wounded and evacuated. BLT 2/4 took 2 prisoners and reported 91 enemy dead.<sup>36</sup>

With enemy probes all along his positions, Lieutenant Colonel Weise spent a long sleepless night as he prepared his plans for the next day. Worried about the ability of Company G to continue to hold out in Dai Do, after learning according to one prisoner that the North Vietnamese had at least 12 companies in Dai Do, Weise decided upon a predawn attack. Company E was to attack to the northwest from An Loc into Dai Do and link up with Company G. The two companies would then clear the hamlet. If the attack stalled, Weise planned to send in Company H. Companies F

and B would continue to secure Dong Huan and An Loc, respectively, and be prepared to reinforce.<sup>37</sup>

About 0500 on 2 May, while Company G provided covering fire, Company E left its line of departure for attack positions south of Dai Do.\*\* Heavy enemy fire caused two of the Company E platoons to hesitate, but Captain Livingston personally led his reserve platoon to regain the momentum. At the same time, Company G attacked the enemy positions in southern Dai Do from the rear. The fighting would continue for several hours at close range with the Marines using flamethrowers, white phosphorous, grenades, satchel charges, and LAAWs (light antitank assault weapons) to crack the NVA bunkers and kill the enemy troops inside them. As one Marine squad leader with Company E observed, the NVA were “in fortified positions and bunkers and not moving.”<sup>38</sup> Although wounded by grenade fragments, Captain Livingston continued to encourage and prod his men forward. By about 0930, the two companies had secured Dai Do.<sup>39</sup>

About a half-hour earlier, Colonel Hull made another visit to Lieutenant Colonel Weise’s temporary command post at An Loc. Satisfied with the progress of the attack, Hull directed the BLT commander to continue “to keep the pressure on the enemy.” Weise remonstrated that his unit “had just about run out of steam.” He recommended instead reinforcement by other battalions to his north and on both his flanks. Using anvil and hammer tactics, the battalions on the north would attack south and squeeze the NVA between them and the Marines in Dai Do. At this point, however, Colonel Hull had few available resources and could only promise Weise that he would try to get the 2d ARVN to cover BLT 2/4’s western flank.<sup>40</sup>

About noon, Colonel Hull informed the BLT 2/4 commander that an ARVN mechanized battalion would be available. Using the stream to the west of Dai Do as a boundary, the ARVN were to capture the ham-

\*According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise the stream was “nearly unfordable,” being about five and a half feet deep and fairly swift running. Livingston solved the problem by having a “half dozen of his tallest Marines strip down, plant themselves in the deepest part of the stream, and pass the shorter, heavily laden Marines hand-to-hand to the shallow water.” Weise, “Memories of Dai Do,” p. 19.

\*\*Master Gunnery Sergeant James W. Rogers, who at the time was the 1st Squad Leader, 3d Platoon, Company E, recalled that during the night of 1–2 May his squad had the mission of establishing an “ambush listening post outside of An Loc and to remain in position until dawn.” He and his squad emplaced their position near a burial mound about 75–100 yards in front of the company perimeter. Just before daylight, they heard voices in front of them. Assured by Captain Livingston that this was not a friendly patrol, Rogers thought that they may be NVA attempting to surrender and called out to them in Vietnamese asking if they were Chieu Hoi. The NVA opened fire and the Marines responded with their M16s and a M60 machine gun. The firefight ended and the Marine squad pulled back to the company perimeter to take part in the attack. MGySgt James W. Rogers, Comments on draft, dtd 21Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

lets of Dong Lai and Thong Nghia across the stream. The Marines would attack north into the hamlets of Dinh To and Thuong Do.

Following his orders to continue the pressure, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Company H into the assault. He told First Lieutenant Prescott, the company commander, to pass through the lines of Companies E and G and seize Dinh To. Leaving the line of departure about 1300, Company H fought its way into about a third of the hamlet. At that point, the enemy counterattacked. While the company maintained its positions, Lieutenant Prescott radioed for assistance, believing that he would be overwhelmed by the next enemy attack.<sup>41</sup>

According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise, Captain Livingston in Dai Do did not wait for orders. He gathered up what remained of his company, about 30 men, and rushed forward into Dinh To. Lieutenant Prescott remembered the change in his men when they learned that Company E was on its way:

We were really desperate. Then my radio operator told me, "Captain Livingston is coming." I knew then that we would be O.K. I yelled "Echo is coming." The cry was repeated by others, "Echo is coming . . . Echo is coming." Everyone felt like I did.<sup>42</sup>

For a time, both companies rallied and appeared to have gained the upper hand, but not for long. Although Lieutenant Prescott sustained a serious wound and was evacuated to the rear, Second Lieutenant Bayard V. Taylor assumed command of Company H and effectively took control. The two companies fought their way through a series of trenches until stopped by an enemy machine gun. At that juncture, the North Vietnamese mounted yet another attack. According to Lieutenant Taylor:

The enemy counterattack dwarfed the fighting that had gone before in intensity and volume. I recall seeing banana trees and the masonry walls of a hooch cut down by the [NVA] automatic weapons fire. The bushes to our front seemed to be alive with heavily camouflaged NVA soldiers.<sup>43</sup>

Sergeant James W. Rogers, an acting platoon leader with Company E, remembered much the same: "NVA soldiers were all over . . . as soon as you shot one, another would pop up in his place. We were receiving a lot of machine gun fire." Rogers credited the "coolness and calmness" of the Company E commander, Captain Livingston, "who seemed to be everywhere," with keeping the Marines "from panicking."<sup>44</sup>

About 1430, Lieutenant Colonel Weise, who had moved his forward command post to Dai Do,

ordered the two companies to disengage and return to the battalion command post. An injured Captain Livingston, unable to walk because of machine gun rounds in both his legs, insisted that he not be helped to the rear until the rest of the wounded had been evacuated. Under the cover of Marine airstrikes and supporting artillery, the two companies pulled back with all of their wounded to the relative safety of Dai Do.

By this time, Weise received the information that the ARVN mechanized battalion had occupied Dong Lai, about 500 meters to the west of Dai Do. With the approval of Colonel Hull, the Marine battalion commander worked out a plan for the Marine and ARVN battalion to advance abreast along both sides of the stream—the Marines again to move into Dinh To and the ARVN to push from Dong Lai to Thuong Nghia, a distance of some 1,000 meters to the northwest. According to Weise, "coordination and communication was difficult at best," but he had no spare officer to send as a liaison to the ARVN. Both he and his operations officer, Major George F. Warren, however, talked by radio to the U.S. Army advisor with the ARVN unit who assured them that the ARVN battalion commander understood and agreed to the plan.<sup>45</sup>

For the attack, Weise selected Companies G and F. Although Company G was down to about 40 men, it still had four officers. Company F, which had been reinforced by the platoon at My Loc, had about 80 men. Captain Vargas' Company G was to be in the lead followed "in trace by Company F." The idea was for Company G to advance rapidly until it encountered enemy resistance and then for Company F to push through and continue the attack. Lieutenant Colonel Weise and a small command group accompanied Company G. Major Warren, the operations officer, assumed command of the perimeter formed by Companies E and H in Dai Do. Company B remained in An Loc in what had become the BLT rear sector.<sup>46</sup>

Close to 1600, under cover of Marine air and artillery, the two companies moved into the attack. This time, Company G only met sporadic small arms fire as it pushed through Dinh To. Company F, however, became bogged down in the rice paddies east of the hamlet where it came under artillery and heavy automatic weapons fire from its northeast. Unaware that Company F was not behind it, Company G drove to the southern edge of Thuong Do. At that point, however, the company took fire from its front and



right flank. According to Weise, he told Captain Vargas to halt and for Company F to move up, only then to discover that the latter company was not where he thought it was. About the same time, about 1700, Company G came under automatic weapons fire on its left flank and left rear from across the stream, an area supposedly secured by the ARVN mechanized battalion in its armored personnel carriers (APCs). In fact, Lieutenant Colonel Weise remembered that when “we first received fire from over there, we thought it was them [the ARVN] . . . We saw a large number over there to the left and we didn’t realize that they were NVA and not ARVN that were on the move until we realized that we saw no APCs. Ten or 15 minutes we looked at those guys.”<sup>47</sup>

BLT 2/4 was in an untenable situation. In effect, its lead companies were in unprotected perimeters with enemy troops in between them. Weise later related, “There was just one hell of a donnybrook and ‘Charlie, bar the door situation.’” The battalion commander called in artillery, “all around and top of us.” An enemy RPG round killed Weise’s Sergeant Major, John Malnar, and Weise himself was seriously wounded by an NVA AK-47 rifle. The battalion commander praised Captain Vargas, who also had sustained a minor wound, for his conduct of the battle: “He was everywhere at once . . .”<sup>48</sup>

Company G stopped the initial enemy frontal attack and then turned around “and picked off most of the enemy” coming at it from the rear. According to Weise, “every Marine who was able to shoot, including wounded who could handle a weapon, fired and the fighting was violent and close.” Using the tactic of withdrawal by fire teams, with two able-bodied Marines dragging a wounded man, the company fought its way back to the positions held by Company F. The two companies then retreated to Dinh To where they were met by Major Warren, the operations officer, who had organized a provisional platoon supported by amphibian tractors.<sup>49</sup>

After evacuating the most seriously wounded, including Lieutenant Colonel Weise,\* by 1800, the battalion had once more consolidated its perimeter in Dai Do. With replacements and some reorganization, each company consisted of 40 men and 1 officer.

\* An Associated Press photograph taken at the time shows a still feisty Lieutenant Colonel Weise with a fat cigar in his mouth lying on a litter holding his own plasma bottle in an evacuation area near Dai Do. Clipping from the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, p. 2 (Weise Folder, Dai Do).



Photo courtesy of BGen William Weise, USMC (Ret)  
*A seriously wounded but still feisty LtCol William Weise, with a cigar in his mouth, lies on a litter holding his own albumin serum bottle awaiting medical evacuation. In the background, Navy medical personnel and Marines attend to other wounded.*

Major Warren had assumed command of the battalion from Lieutenant Colonel Weise and was in turn relieved later that night by Major Charles W. Knapp, the battalion executive officer, who had maintained the BLT rear headquarters on board the *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2). In the fighting for the Dai Do village complex on 2 May, the 3d Marines reported casualties of 40 Marines dead and 111 wounded and the killing of nearly 380 of the enemy.

The fight for Dai Do was practically over. Although there were further probes on the night of 2–3 May on the Marine lines in the hamlet of Dai Do, by daybreak there was little sign of the enemy. Aerial observers saw small groups of North Vietnamese retreating north from Thuong Do and called in airstrikes. Later that day, Lieutenant Colonel Charles V. Jarman’s 1st Battalion, 3d Marines took over from BLT 2/4 responsibility for the Dai Do sector. The 1st Battalion made a sweep through the hamlets of Dinh To and Thuong Do without incident. Companies G and H of BLT 2/4, which were temporarily under the operational control of Jarman, followed in trace and collected the Marine dead



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191447  
*Marines of BLT 2/4 board a "Mike" boat (landing craft, mechanized) for return to their base area in the Napoleon/Saline area of operations, after inflicting and sustaining large casualties in the Dai Do village complex.*

from the previous day's fighting who could not be evacuated.\* By 1935, on 3 May, Companies G and H had completed their grisly mission and began to depart the Dai Do area. Shortly after 2100, the last elements of the two companies had returned to the BLT's old command post at Mai Xa Chanh.<sup>50</sup>

The three-day fight for the Dai Do complex had been a bloody one for both sides. From 30 April through 2 May, BLT 2/4 had sustained casualties of 81 dead and nearly 300 wounded.\*\* Marine estimates of the number of enemy dead ranged from nearly 500 to

\*Colonel Charles V. Jarman, whose 1st Battalion, 3d Marines relieved BLT 2/4, recalled that several of the Marine dead had their hands tied behind their back. It was his belief that these Marines "were captured and subsequently executed by the NVA when the battle appeared to be going against them." Col Charles V. Jarman, Comments on draft, dtd 12Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*All of the sources basically agree about the number of Marine dead. The listing of the number of wounded, however, vary from 247 mentioned by III MAF to 297 according to Brigadier General Weise. According to General Weise, his personnel officer gave the figures of 81 KIA and 297 wounded and evacuated while he "was in the hospital ward aboard the U.S.S. *Iwo Jima*." BGen William Weise (Ret) ltr, dtd 11Mar83 to BGen Edwin H. Simmons (Ret) (Weise Folder, Dai Do).

over 600. According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise, based on the estimates and counts made by other units around Dai Do, the Marines found 600 bodies in the immediate area of the battle and another 500 to 600 in the extended battle area. Admitting that "body count figures are always suspect," Weise, nevertheless argued that even if one "cut these figures in half for inflation, you're talking about the equivalent of two enemy regiments that were decimated in that area." Lieutenant Colonel Weise later received the Navy Cross and Captains Vargas and Livingston were later awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions in the Dai Do battles.<sup>51</sup>

### *The End of the First Offensive*

While the Dai Do sector may have been the site of the heaviest fighting during this period, the 320th NVA Division had not limited its efforts only to this area. Throughout the three-day period, from 30 April through 2 May, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines near Cam Phu continued to have sporadic contact with scattered units of the enemy division. The 2d ARVN Regiment also reported continuous action during the night of 1–2 May. Its 1st Battalion sustained 5 dead and 16 wounded in taking Dong Lai to the west of Dai Do and claimed killing 39 of the North Vietnamese.<sup>52</sup>

To the northeast, the Army's 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry ran into the most intense combat outside of that in Dai Do in the Nhi Ha sector along Jones Creek. The departure of Company G from the Nhi Ha and the Lam Xuan village complexes on the night of 30 April–1 May, left the entire Jones Creek area open to the North Vietnamese. With the assignment of the Army battalion of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade to the operational control of the 3d Marines on the evening of 1 May to fill that gap, Colonel Hull ordered the commander of the 3d Battalion, Army Lieutenant Colonel William P. Snyder, to reenter the area the following morning.<sup>53</sup>

About 0800 on 2 May, the battalion landed in a helicopter landing zone near Lam Xuan East (located on the eastern bank of Jones Creek and so designated to differentiate it from its neighboring hamlet with the same name located on the opposite bank about 1,000 meters to the northwest). The battalion occupied the two Lam Xuans with relative ease, and then moved on to Nhi Ha. At this juncture, the North Vietnamese sprung one of their traps. In close combat, the enemy killed 9 of the American soldiers and wounded 15.

Another four were missing. The Army battalion fell back to night positions in Lam Xuan West and called in supporting arms on the enemy in Nhi Ha.

On 3 May, while BLT 2/4 and the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines had a relatively quiet time in the Dai Do sector, the Army battalion again fought a see-saw battle with the North Vietnamese in Nhi Ha. After Marine artillery softened the enemy defenses, the 3d Battalion launched another attack into Nhi Ha. The troops recovered the bodies of the four members of the battalion reported missing the night before. About noon, the enemy struck back with the first of three counterattacks. While repulsing the attacks, the Army unit fell back to permit Marine air once more to hit the enemy defenses. The airstrikes were accurate but North Vietnamese antiaircraft guns downed one of the Chance Vaught F-8 Crusaders, killing the pilot. Although unable to take Nhi Ha and returning again to their night positions at Lam Xuan West, the Army battalion sustained relatively light casualties during the day, 1 dead and 7 wounded while accounting for 67 of the enemy.<sup>54</sup>

The fighting at Nhi Ha the following day was a repetition of that of the 3d. Once more, Marine air and artillery bombarded the enemy in Nhi Ha. At 0936, the Army troops again attacked, but only to find themselves once more enmeshed in the North Vietnamese field fortifications and bunkers. The 3d Battalion spent another night in defensive positions in Lam Xuan West. At 0940 on the morning of 5 May, after the usual air and artillery bombardment, the 3d Battalion again moved into the attack. Encountering almost no resistance, the battalion reported at 1135, "Nhi Ha was secured." The Army soldiers found 64 North Vietnamese bodies in the hamlet, all killed by supporting arms. All told, the 3d Battalion suffered 16 dead and 33 wounded while it estimated that the North Vietnamese lost more than 200 men in the three-day struggle for Nhi Ha.<sup>55</sup>

In the meantime, the fighting had shifted westward. After a short hiatus in the Dai Do area, on the morning of 5 May, Lieutenant Colonel Jarman's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines attacked north from Thuong Do towards Truc Kinh, a distance of 1,200 meters to the northwest. The 2d ARVN regiment was to protect the battalion's western flank. With Companies C and D in the lead and Company B following in trace, the Marine battalion reached its first objective, the hamlet of Som Soi, about 300 meters southeast of Truc Kinh, encountering only token resistance. Within a short time, however, about 1130, the Marine battalion came under

heavy fire from Truc Kinh and some scattered fire from the southeast. Calling in artillery and fixed-wing airstrikes, especially against Truc Kinh, the battalion fought its way through Som Soi.<sup>56</sup>

At this point, about 1250 on the 5th, the North Vietnamese launched a counterattack from Truc Kinh with Company D on the eastern flank bearing the brunt of the assault. Lieutenant Colonel Jarman then ordered Company C to swing around to the right to contain the enemy attack while Company B screened the movement. This maneuver, however, exposed the battalion's western flank since the 2d ARVN Regiment's attack to the southwest had already stalled and the South Vietnamese were in no position to support the Marines. According to Jarman, an aerial observer radioed him that "500 Charlies were preparing to flank our position."<sup>57</sup> Colonel Hull, the 3d Marines commander, upon learning of the situation, immediately requested reinforcements. The 3d Division released Companies I and M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines to the operational control of the 3d Marines. Marine helicopters brought the two companies into a landing zone near Thuong Do. Despite the loss of one helicopter, the two 4th Marines companies quickly advanced to the northwest to provide protection for Jarman's western flank. After consolidating his positions in a defensive perimeter established by Companies I and M in a tree line, about 1,000 meters to the south of Truc Kinh, Lieutenant Colonel Jarman described the situation "relatively routine" as Marine air and artillery continued to pound the enemy.<sup>58</sup> About 1800, the North Vietnamese broke contact.

On the morning of the 6th, Companies C and D again reoccupied Soi Son without meeting any resistance. While Company D provided protective fire, Company C then advanced upon Truc Kinh. By 1400 that afternoon, the 1st Battalion had secured the latter hamlet. Most of the North Vietnamese had fled except for the dead from the previous fighting, and three NVA soldiers who surrendered to the Marines. In the two-day action for Truc Kinh, the Marines reported 173 of the enemy dead, captured 3 prisoners, and recovered 75 rifles and 19 crew-served weapons. The Marines sustained casualties of 15 dead and 71 wounded.

While Lieutenant Colonel Jarman's command enjoyed a relatively uneventful day on the 6th, about five miles to the northeast, the U.S. Army 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry's Nhi Ha sector again became active. The North Vietnamese ambushed the battalion's Company A which was conducting a sweep

northwest of Nhi Ha. Before the Army unit could disengage under cover of air and artillery support and return to Nhi Ha, it lost 5 men dead and 17 wounded. Company A reported another 14 soldiers missing. Two of the missing returned to the company's lines that evening, and the battalion recovered the bodies of 11 of the others. One soldier remained on the rolls as missing in action.<sup>59</sup>

With the continuing contact with elements of the *320th* by the Army battalion in the Nhi Ha area and by the ARVN 2d Regiment, whose 4th Battalion on the 6th engaged a North Vietnamese unit just east of Route 1, Major General Tompkins decided to insert the two-battalion 2d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division into the fight to exploit the situation. Earlier he had asked General Rosson for and received permission to redeploy the brigade if needed from the Scotland II area of operations near Khe Sanh into the Dong Ha sector. With few other reserves available to him, the Air Cavalry brigade provided Tompkins, not only additional troops, but a force, with sufficient helicopters, "ideally configured for operations against a retreating enemy force operating in small formations" and to "patrol large areas effectively and move forces quickly to exploit sightings and contacts."<sup>60</sup>

At 1715 on 6 May, the first battalion of the brigade, the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, under Lieutenant Colonel C. E. Jordan, landed in a landing zone about 3,000 meters east of the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines in Truc Kinh. Temporarily, General Tompkins placed the Cavalry battalion under the operational control of Colonel Hull of the 3d Marines. From 7–8 May, the 1st Cavalry battalion made a careful sweep northwest toward the Marine battalion. At Truc Kinh, Lieutenant Colonel Jarman's Marines continued to patrol, finding a few more enemy dead and capturing three more prisoners. On the morning of the 9th, the 2d Brigade of the Air Cavalry under Army Colonel Robert N. McKinnon, with the 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, arrived and took over the sector. The 3d Marines relinquished operational control of the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, and Lieutenant Colonel Jarman's battalion returned to its former operational area south of the Cua Viet River.<sup>61</sup>

On the morning of the 9th, the 2d Brigade then began Operation Concordia Square in an area of operations carved out of that of the 2d ARVN Regiment, sandwiched between the ARVN on the west and the 3d Marines in Operation Napoleon/Saline to the east. Its heaviest action of the operation actually occurred

on that very day. About 5,000 meters southeast of Gio Linh, about 0800, a North Vietnamese force heavily engaged two companies of the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, cutting off one and preventing the other from coming to its assistance. The brigade quickly deployed units of its 2d Battalion into blocking positions north of the action and ordered the remaining two companies of the 1st Battalion to relieve the embattled companies. In the fast-moving action supported by Marine fixed-wing aircraft and helicopter gunships, enemy gunners shot down one UH-1H helicopter, the Army version of the Bell "Huey," and hit eight others. By 1300, the North Vietnamese had disengaged leaving behind an estimated 80 enemy dead. The Army troopers sustained casualties of 16 dead and 52 wounded.<sup>62</sup>

Except for scattered action in Concordia Square, and one large engagement on 10 May north of Nhi Ha involving the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry, the *320th Division* was no longer engaging the allied forces. In the action on the 10th, Company C, 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry in predawn darkness spotted about 300 enemy troops moving toward its positions. The company pulled back all of its night patrols and called in continuous illumination and artillery upon the NVA. The enemy answered with artillery from north of the DMZ and mortars, and then about 0600 launched a ground assault against the entire battalion front. With the support of fixed-wing aircraft, helicopter gunships, artillery, and naval gunfire, the Army troops broke the back of the enemy attack in a one-sided battle. By 1500, all enemy resistance had ended. The 3d Battalion suffered only 1 soldier dead and 16 wounded. It reported killing 159 of the enemy, took 2 prisoners, and recovered 55 rifles and 18 crew-served weapons.<sup>63</sup>

After the one assault on Nhi Ha on the 10th, rather than attempting to infiltrate south to close the Cua Viet and possibly attack Dong Ha, the *320th* was now breaking into small groups who were trying their best to make their way north into the Demilitarized Zone. Operation Concordia Square ended on 17 May. From 9–17 May, the 2d Air Cavalry Brigade reported enemy casualties of 349 dead while sustaining 28 killed and 117 wounded. Both the Air Cavalry Brigade and the Americal's 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry returned to their base camp at Camp Evans. The enemy offensive had petered out.<sup>64</sup>

With what appeared to be the end of the "most awesome battle by the standards of the Vietnamese War," General Tompkins asked his operations staff to



Photo courtesy of Col Francis I. Fenton, USMC (Ret)

*U.S. Army LtGen William B. Rosson, CG Prov Corps, officiates at a 3d Marine Division change of command ceremony. Standing behind Rosson is MajGen Raymond G. Davis, left, who is relieving MajGen Rathvon McC. Tompkins, right, as the commanding general of the division.*

come up with a statistical summary of the action since 30 April. According to the division account, in an 18-day period, the allies killed over 2,100 of the enemy (including 221 by air). Perhaps more reliable and indicative figures were the 41 prisoners captured by the allies and the recovery of more than 500 enemy weapons including 132 crew-served weapons. The cost, however, had been high. In the fighting, the Army and Marine units under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division suffered losses of 233 killed, over 800 wounded, and 1 missing soldier from the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry. Task Force Clearwater took casualties of 15 dead and 22 wounded, while the ARVN lost 42 dead and 124 wounded. With the extensive bloodletting, Major General Tompkins "had good reason to believe . . . that the 320th NVA Division would not pose a serious threat to the allied positions along the DMZ for some time to come." General Tompkins also had received word that he was about to relinquish his command.<sup>65</sup>

### *The Second Offensive*

Contrary to General Tompkins' expectations, the 320th was to come south again and the results were to be much the same, but even more one-sided than the previous attempt. Within the brief interlude between the two enemy thrusts, the enemy had been relatively quiescent except for an artillery attack on the 3d Marine Division base area at Dong Ha. On 14 May, a North Vietnamese artillery barrage exploded there about 110 tons of ammunition, killing 1 Marine and wounding 15. The division's Kentucky and Napoleon/Saline sectors, however, remained relatively inactive through 21 May.<sup>66</sup>

On 21 May, there was a sort of a musical chairs shift throughout the Marine Corps Vietnam command structure. Major General William J. Van Ryzin, the III MAF Deputy Commander, received a promotion to lieutenant general and became the Chief of Staff to the Commandant at Headquarters, Marine Corps in

Washington.\* Since Major General Tompkins was the next senior Marine ranking officer in country, Lieutenant General Cushman, the III MAF commander, selected Tompkins to become his new deputy. With the concurrence of the Commandant, General Chapman, Cushman appointed Marine Major General Raymond G. Davis, the deputy commander of Prov Corps, to take Tompkins place as commander of the 3d Marine Division.

On 21 May, in a brief change of command ceremony at Dong Ha, Major General Davis, a native of Georgia and holder of the Medal of Honor from the Korean War, assumed command of the 3d Marine Division. From his former vantage point at Prov Corps, Davis had become impressed with the airmobile tactics of the 1st Air Cavalry Division during Operation Pegasus. As one Army officer remembered, the senior members of Rosson's Prov Corps staff would "take turns having dinner with him every night in the headquarters mess, giving him our ideas on mobile warfare, and during the day we flew around with him." Davis was well aware of the purposes of the attentions of the Prov Corps staff. As he declared later, he had known the Prov Corps commander for some time and when Davis arrived at Prov Corps headquarters, Rosson began "orienting me towards . . . the effectiveness of forces [an euphemism for the airmobile tactics]." Davis believed that the 3d Marine Division had become tied down to its fixed positions and too defense-minded. As he confided to Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson on Westmoreland's staff, it was his opinion that the 3d Division earlier in May at Dai Do and afterwards had "missed a great opportunity" and allowed the North Vietnamese to "get away."<sup>67\*\*</sup>

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\*General Van Ryzin later recalled that he received a telephone call from General Chapman, the Commandant, who had already spoken to General Cushman. The Commandant told Van Ryzin that "I'm going to ask you to come back as my Chief of Staff. I'm going to give you exactly two hours to say yes or no." General Van Ryzin talked the matter over with General Cushman who told him that, "I was stupid if I didn't take it." Van Ryzin accepted the position. LtGen William J. Van Ryzin intvw, 2Apr75, p. 218 (Oral HistColl, MCHC). In his comments, General Van Ryzin observed that he "was still becoming acquainted with the situation [in Vietnam] when I returned to the U.S." LtGen William J. Van Ryzin, Comments on draft, n.d. [Oct94] (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*General Rosson years later observed: "Unhappily, a substantial portion of the 320th was able to elude us, reorganize and return in a matter of days. General Davis, who had followed the action as my Deputy, harbored the view that the 320th should have been destroyed south of the DMZ." Gen William B. Rosson, Comments on draft, dtd 27Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File).

General Davis was to have his "opportunity" almost as soon as he took over the 3d Marine Division. The 320th NVA had once more left the sanctuary of the DMZ and entered Quang Tri Province. As Davis later stated, "It was gone just nine days and came back to welcome me the night I took command . . . ." Although not expecting the enemy division to make another foray so soon after the first, this time the Marines were ready for the 320th.<sup>68</sup>

In what the 3d Marine Division listed as the first phase of the new offensive, the North Vietnamese division moved into the Operation Kentucky Leatherneck Square sector northwest of Dong Ha halfway between Con Thien and Gio Linh. This sector had been somewhat quiet since 8 May when the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines had overrun an NVA regimental headquarters, but had sustained heavy casualties during an enemy artillery bombardment.<sup>69</sup> During this lull, Captain Matthew G. McTiernan assumed command of Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. He recalled that the Marine battalions during this period would shift boundaries between A-3 and Con Thien to confuse the North Vietnamese who had the tendency of working the unit boundary lines. On the morning of 22 May, his company had the mission of establishing "a series of ambushes along the old AO [area of operations] line." The company left the perimeter about 0400 that morning with his 3d Platoon in the lead. Just southwest of the A-3 Strong Point, the company encountered what it first thought was a small enemy patrol. The Marines soon realized that the enemy was in at least company strength and called for reinforcements. McTiernan then asked for air support and received helicopter gunship support "which proved too much for the NVA." According to the Marine captain, the enemy had been on the move, had no prepared positions, and were easy targets for air: "We had caught the NVA unit cold."<sup>70</sup>

In the meantime, a Company A, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines patrol ran into another enemy force just east of Con Thien. Given the intensity of the enemy resistance supported by artillery, Colonel Richard B. Smith, the 9th Marines commander, assumed that the North Vietnamese had infiltrated possibly a battalion if not a larger force into his sector. While the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines reinforced from A-3 and the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines attacked east from Con Thien, Smith attempted to exploit the contact. He asked General Davis for and received operational control from the 4th Marines of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. Marine helicopters landed the battalion into blocking positions to

the south of the contact. At the same time, Colonel Smith ordered the helicopter lift of his 1st Battalion, 9th Marines into other blocking positions to the north.

During the next two days while the enemy sought to disengage, the 9th Marines with 12 companies attempted to place a cordon around the NVA forces. When either of the two assault battalions, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines or the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, found itself in too close to an action, "the unit involved backed off and assaulted the NVA with massive supporting arms." According to a 9th Marines account: "On one occasion, the encircled enemy attempted to escape across the trace; however, artillery . . . , gunships, fixed wing and tanks were brought to bear . . . with devastating effect." By noon on the 24th, the fight was over in the 9th Marines sector. Since the morning of the 22d, the Marines had sustained about 100 casualties, 23 dead and 75 wounded and evacuated, but had reported killing 225 of the North Vietnamese and captured 3 prisoners.<sup>71</sup>

On 25 May, the flats above Dong Ha in both the 2d ARVN regimental sector and the Napoleon/Saline area again became the centers of action. That morning Company E, BLT 2/4 encountered an NVA force in about battalion strength near Nhi Ha, while the ARVN about 2,000 meters above Dong Ha ran into a similarly sized force. Once more the Marines rapidly reinforced both over land and by helicopter-borne forces. In the Nhi Ha sector, Colonel Hull, the 3d Marines commander, ordered the helilift of Company H BLT 2/4 into blocking positions to the south while Company E attacked the hamlet from the north under a rolling barrage. In fighting that lasted all day, the two Marine companies together with supporting artillery and air reported killing 238 of the enemy. Marine casualties were also heavy, 18 dead and 33 wounded and evacuated. To the southwest, the 2d ARVN Regiment in their contact, near Thuong Nghia, just west of the former Dai Do perimeter, repulsed the enemy attack, and claimed killing 122 of the enemy.<sup>72</sup>

On the 26th, concerned that the North Vietnamese *320th* was again attempting to cut the Cua Viet or even strike at Dong Ha itself, General Davis attempted to cordon off the North Vietnamese units. He ordered the helilift of the 1st and 2d Battalions, 9th Marines into blocking positions west of Nhi Ha and placed the two battalions under the operational control of the 3d Marines. At the same time, he ordered Colonel Smith, the 9th Marines commander, to move the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines overland to exploit the ARVN contact near Thuong Nghia.<sup>73</sup>

In the southern cordon on the 26th, the two Marine battalions, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, formed blocking positions about 3,000 meters north of Thuong Nghia. The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, in the vicinity of Truc Kinh, twice encountered resistance from North Vietnamese in entrenched defenses. In the first clash, about 1300, the battalion ran into a force of about 100 enemy troops. After first contact, the Marines pulled back "to allow heavy pounding of enemy positions by air and artillery." The battalion sustained casualties of 10 Marines dead and 12 wounded. At the same time, it captured 5 prisoners and reported killing 56 of the enemy.<sup>74</sup>

In the second action later that afternoon, about 1630, Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines outside of Truc Kinh came under intensive small arms and automatic weapons fire. Tanks attached to the infantry attempted to reinforce the company, but became bogged down in the rice paddies. An aerial observer called in close air support so that the company could withdraw before last light. Captain McTiernan, whose Company I protected Company K's left flank, recalled that during this action, his troops "saw a long column of troops moving out of a small hamlet located 200 yards to our left front." Apparently the enemy was attempting to reinforce their units engaging Company K. With assurances that the column was NVA, Company I opened fire with devastating effect in what Captain McTiernan described "as target practice . . . In the course of ten or fifteen minutes the entire column was destroyed." Still the 3d Battalion had not gone unscathed, Company K sustained 23 wounded and reported 5 missing in action. During the same day, the ARVN about a 1,000 meters to the north of Thuong Nghia claimed to have killed 110 of the enemy while suffering casualties of 2 dead and 7 wounded.<sup>75</sup>

On the 27th, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, reinforced by the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, took its objectives, meeting only scattered enemy resistance. In Truc Kinh, the Marines recovered the bodies of the five men from Company K reported missing the day before. Throughout the day, the Marine units in the southern cordon killed about 28 of the enemy while sustaining only four wounded. For the next two days, the Marines in the two battalions together with the ARVN maintained the cordon subjecting the North Vietnamese units between them to "massive fixed-wing and general support ordnance . . ." Finally on the 30th, enemy resistance broke and the two battalions "swept through the area," taking 18 prisoners and recovering 23

weapons. For the days of the cordon, 26–30 May, the 9th Marines reported that the two battalions killed a total of 161 of the enemy, captured 26 prisoners, and retrieved over 100 enemy weapons, including 29 crew-served weapons. Marine casualties were also heavy; 41 dead and 119 wounded. The ARVN during their participation in the southern cordon operation claimed to have killed 384 of the enemy and sustained 19 killed and 45 wounded.<sup>76</sup>

During the same period, the 3d Marines in the northern cordon sector around Nhi Ha encircled a North Vietnamese battalion in the hamlet of Lai An, about 2,500 meters northwest of Nhi Ha. While BLT 2/4 and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines established blocking positions, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines reinforced by the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines attacked Lai An. Using 11 companies to form the cordon, the 3d Marines finally secured the hamlet on 30 May. Again the price was high. In the taking of Lai An, the Marines sustained casualties of over 20 dead and 200 wounded. From 27–30 May, the 3d Marines reported the finding of 90 bodies and the capture of 8 prisoners in the fight for Lai An.<sup>77</sup>

The “second” battle for Dong Ha was over. Once more the *320th NVA Division* had taken heavy casualties and retreated north of the DMZ. In the two phases of the second offensive, the 3d Marine Division reported killing over 770 of the enemy. Combined with the number estimated killed by the ARVN, the enemy division would have lost more than 1,000 dead from the period 22 May to the end of the month, not including the 61 prisoners captured by the allies. Allied casualties including 112 dead totaled 558.<sup>78</sup>

Thus in the two offensives mounted by the *320th NVA Division*, the North Vietnamese had lost over 3,000 troops. While American casualties had been heavy, their total of dead and wounded was about half of the reported number of North Vietnamese killed. What was even more apparent was that the second offensive was even more futile than the first. While the North Vietnamese may have sustained fewer casualties in the second offensive, they also fought much less effectively. According to the 3d Marines, the enemy troops in the later encounters showed poorer discipline and while well-equipped were less experienced and more willing to surrender. General Davis related that one captured North Vietnamese sergeant stated that of the 90 men in his company, 62 were new. One frightened enemy soldier captured near Lai An told the Marines that his unit lost 200 out of 300 men since crossing the Ben Hai River. In any event,

the *320th* remained out of action in the DMZ war for the next two months.<sup>79</sup>

In many respects, questions still remain about the intent of the enemy. Obviously, the thrust of the *320th* was part of the overall NVA so-called “mini-Tet offensive” that the enemy attempted in May to initiate country-wide, a somewhat “poor man’s imitation” of the January-February Tet offensive. More than the earlier offensive, except for increased fighting in the capital city of Saigon, the North Vietnamese May offensive was largely limited to attacks by fire at allied bases and acts of terrorism in the hamlets and villages. In I Corps, while the North Vietnamese may have attempted to cut the Cua Viet, they did not or were not able this time to coordinate that attempt with attacks against the major cities of Quang Tri, Hue, and Da Nang. Moreover, the *320th* apparently mistakenly fired early upon the shipping on the Cua Viet, giving away its presence and triggering the Marine response, before all of its units were in position. After once engaged, while showing tenacity, the North Vietnamese division revealed little imagination and an inability to counter the American advantages in manpower, equipment, and supporting arms.

For its part, the 3d Marine Division made several changes in the way it was fighting the DMZ war. Immediately upon taking command of the division, General Davis issued a directive to reduce the number of units manning the strongpoints. In Davis’ words, “battalion positions . . . immediately . . . [became] company positions.” For example, in the 9th Marines sector, one battalion was responsible for all the strongpoints with one company positioned at each. The other three battalions were “swing’ units” to reinforce a developing battle using helicopter assault and cordon tactics.<sup>80</sup>

Some controversy has arisen over the question about the 3d Marine Division tactics in the earlier offensive. If the division had used more mobile operations and attempted to reinforce Lieutenant Colonel Weise’s BLT 2/4 at Dai Do would it have destroyed or trapped more of the *320th*? This is one of the questions that may never be answered and it is of course much easier to answer with hindsight after the event. In all fairness to Major General Tompkins and his staff, his attention and that of his command had been directed towards Khe Sanh since the beginning of the year. He had inherited the barrier and Dyemarker situation from his predecessor and was under constant MACV pressure to maintain and man these defenses. Even if Dyemarker and Khe Sanh were not factors, General Tompkins at



the same time as Dai Do had good reason to believe that the attacks on Nhi Ha to the northeast and at Cam Phu to the southwest may have been the main effort of the 320<sup>th</sup>. With the beginning of the drawdown of forces from the Scotland area of operations, General Davis had more freedom of action to implement a more mobile concept in the 3d Marine Division sector, a strategy that the Marines had recommended in the DMZ area since late 1966 and early 1967. At that time, instead of the barrier, the Marines had recommended “a mobile defense by an adequate force—say one division give or take a battalion . . .” Different circumstances provided different opportunities.<sup>81\*</sup>

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\*Many of the reviewers of this chapter still had strong opinions about the differences between the earlier and later tactics of the division. Captain McTiernan, for example, wrote that, “the decisive change in tactics initiated by General Davis” was the most important factor in the defeat of the NVA offensive. Capt Matthew G. McTiernan, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan 1995] (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel Max McQuown argued that prior to Davis assuming command there were “a myriad of static defensive positions of little tactical value. These positions and the rigid control the Division exercised over every combat unit, fragmented battalions, reduced their combat capability, and

severely limited their freedom of action. Thus, after soundly defeating the NVA ‘Tet’ offensive the initiative passed to the NVA by default in the 3d Marine Division TAOR.” McQuown Comments. On the other hand, Colonel Vaughn R. Stuart, who served on the division staff and as a regimental commander later under General Davis, observed that although members of the division “knew very well that we were not mobile, that we were not carrying the war to the enemy . . . , General Tompkins did what he could to change the status quo.” He blamed Tompkins’ problems, in part, on the factor that the 3d Marine Division commander could not obtain enough helicopters from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. Col Vaughn R. Stuart, Comments on draft, dtd 20Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). See the discussion in Chapter 25 on this last subject. Colonel William M. Cryan, who was the 3d Marine Division G-3 under General Davis, agreed that the division “was stymied by Dyemarket and fixed bases . . . ,” and credits General Davis for getting “the division moving.” Col William M. Cryan, Comments on draft, 12Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel William H. Dabney, who served on the division staff under both Generals Tompkins and Davis, agreed with the statement in the text that “different circumstances provided different opportunities.” He also declared that intelligence “was far from perfect the first time around, and that General Davis had the benefit of General Tompkins’ experience for the second round.” Dabney concluded, however, that the “*difference in style*” [emphasis in the original] between Davis and Tompkins may also have affected the outcome of Round II.” Col William H. Dabney, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File).

## CHAPTER 16

# Khe Sanh: Final Operations and Evacuation 16 April–11 July 1968

*To Stay or Not to Stay—The “Walking Dead”—Operation Scotland II—Operation Robin  
Razing Khe Sanh: Operation Charlie*

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### *To Stay or Not to Stay*

General Westmoreland originally had ordered the defense of Khe Sanh as a block to enemy infiltration along Route 9 and as a possible “jump-off point” for a planned invasion of Laos.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the siege, the Paris negotiations with the North Vietnamese had ended all thoughts of expanding the war into Laos. With the increased availability of additional mobile forces following the defeat of the enemy’s Tet offensive, Westmoreland faced an entirely new tactical situation. As he recorded later:

It was clear . . . that the base had outlived its usefulness. We now had the troops and helicopters to control the area, . . . and we had the logistics and a secure forward base at Ca Lu to support these operations.<sup>2</sup>

In light of these new developments, Lieutenant General Cushman, the III MAF commander, and Army Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, the Provisional Corps commander, pressed for the evacuation of Khe Sanh immediately. According to General Rosson, he had prepared a plan which General Cushman had endorsed and that he thought had the tacit approval of General Westmoreland. Rosson had proposed the immediate redeployment of the 1st Air Cavalry Division to operation Delaware, and the “progressive deployment eastward” of the 3d Marine Division units. As he recalled, he talked personally by telephone with Westmoreland and told the MACV commander that the Marine and ARVN units would remain at Khe Sanh only to ensure security for the “removal of supplies” during the proposed “inactivation of the base.” In Rosson’s opinion, “General Westmoreland understood the plan that General Cushman and I had agreed upon,” and offered no objection.<sup>3</sup>

On 15 April, this understanding, if there was such an understanding, fell apart at a commander’s conference that General Rosson hosted at his headquarters at Phu Bai. Rosson had called the meeting which originally was to include the 3d Marine Division and 1st Air Cavalry Division commanders and various staff members “to finalize the plan and issue orders.” As a courtesy, Rosson invited his immediate superior,

General Cushman, who in turn had invited General Westmoreland. The Provisional Corps commander remembered that he had just finished outlining the concept and had asked for comments when: “General Westmoreland—to Cushman’s and my own surprise and embarrassment—stated that Pegasus would not be terminated.” While permitting the greater part of the 1st Air Cavalry Division to redeploy to Operation Delaware, one brigade of the Air Cavalry and Marine and ARVN units would continue “to comb the area” using Khe Sanh as their base of operations. Any decision to curtail “these activities,” dismantle the base, or redeploy the remaining forces “would await further developments.” General Westmoreland later would say that he basically agreed with Rosson’s plan, “but not its timing.” General Rosson remained puzzled: “In essence, I either misunderstood General Westmoreland’s approval, or he had second thoughts. . . . Why he did not communicate his disagreement to us prior to the conference continues to perplex me.” In any event, while Operation Pegasus did officially end on 15 April, U.S. units would continue to operate in and around Khe Sanh, for the time being, under the operational name of Scotland II.<sup>4\*\*</sup>

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\*\*Like the meeting on 8 March (See Chapters 8 and 14) the participants had different interpretations about General Westmoreland’s demeanor at the April meeting. According to Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson, who headed the MACV Combat Operations Center, when General Westmoreland learned that General Cushman, the III MAF commander, and General Rosson, the Prov Corps commander, planned to evacuate the base, “Westy lowered the boom. He was so mad he wouldn’t stay around and talk with them. Instead he told me what he wanted and left me to push it with Rosson and Cushman.” BGen Chaisson ltr to Mrs. Chaisson, dtd 17Apr68 as quoted in Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet, The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (N.Y., N.Y.: The Free Press, 1993), p. 129. On the other hand, General Rosson wrote: “General Westmoreland certainly did not ‘lower the boom’ on me when he learned of the plan during our telephone conference. Nor did he do so during the commanders conference. While he was incisively firm in expressing himself on that occasion, he did not exhibit anger. Moreover, he remained after the conference for a short time to converse informally with various commanders, key staff officers, Cushman and myself. I frankly do not remember John’s [Chaisson] remaining to ‘push it with Rosson and Cushman.’” According to Rosson, he rather recalled “resuming the conference after General Westmoreland’s departure to forge a new course of action and revise the orders.” Gen William B. Rosson, USA, Comments on draft, dtd 29May95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Rosson Comments, May95.

*The "Walking Dead"*

When the 3d Marine Division once more prepared to assume control of operations at Khe Sanh with the end of Operation Pegasus, General Tompkins, the 3d Marine Division commander had sent his Assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General Jacob E. Glick, to command the forces there. General Glick several years later remembered that his orders were to "close the base down. . . . I went up with a minimum staff with instructions to just hold on, without mounting operations. . . . Then the rules changed" after General Westmoreland reversed the original decision.<sup>5</sup>

Glick's command, not surprisingly, was designated Task Force (TF) Glick and included the 1st Marines; the 26th Marines; the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines; and the 2d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, which was operating east of Khe Sanh. The 1st Marines began relocating to Khe Sanh from Ca Lu, relieving battalions of the 26th Marines, which, in turn, started to redeploy out of the Khe Sanh sector. On 16 April, Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, the 26th Marines commander, still had one artillery and five infantry battalions under his control and was also responsible for Operation Scotland II, which had just begun. Meyers reported directly to General Glick and oversaw the relief of his battalions by those of the 1st Marines. Lieutenant Colonel John J. H. Cahill's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines remained at the base as part of TF Glick and continued offensive operations west of the combat base.<sup>6</sup>

At 0700 on 16 April, Captain Henry D. Banks led two reinforced platoons of Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines on a patrol southwest of the battalion's perimeter on Hill 689 and a small adjoining hill. Banks ordered the company to halt at 1000 and sent two squads to search for signs of the enemy on a nearby ridge that was covered with four-to-six-foot-high elephant grass. The squad came under small arms and mortar fire, then fell back and reported two Marines killed.\* Banks deployed the company with the 1st Platoon establishing a base of fire and the 2d Platoon

attacking up the ridge against what he believed to be the enemy's left flank.<sup>7</sup>

First Lieutenant Michael P. Hayden led the 2d Platoon up the north end of the ridge and against the enemy position, but the North Vietnamese, firing from well-concealed bunkers, drove the Marines to the ground. In rapid succession, first Hayden and then his platoon sergeant were killed. The 2d Platoon halted in the deep grass at the fringe of the North Vietnamese bunker complex and returned fire, but with little effect.

Captain Banks ordered the 2d Platoon to fall back so that he could call for supporting arms, but word reached him that dead and wounded Marines still lay within 10 meters of the bunker complex, under the enemy's guns. The intense enemy fire continued and casualties mounted to 10 dead and 20 wounded.\* Banks reported to Lieutenant Colonel Cahill that he was engaged with an estimated North Vietnamese squad in heavily fortified positions, then refused Cahill's offer of help. He again tried to evacuate casualties and withdraw, but was unable to do so. Cahill alerted Companies C and D.<sup>9</sup>

At noon, Banks reconsidered and asked for help. Two platoons of Captain Lawrence Himmer's Company C moved out first, with Lieutenant Colonel Cahill accompanying them. On reaching the scene of the action, Cahill found Company A on the north end of the ridge, with heavy casualties and unable to move. He ordered Himmer to attack from the south. Colonel Meyers, monitoring the radio reports from the regimental command post, asked Cahill if he needed help, but like Banks earlier, Cahill refused.<sup>10\*\*</sup>

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\*\*Colonel Meyers noted that there were problems with message transmission. Lieutenant Colonel Cahill at 1320 had informed Colonel Meyers that he was committing his two other companies to the action. Because of the necessity of the various radio relays, Meyers did not receive this message until 1543. Within two minutes of receiving this message, Meyers contacted Cahill to "request his current status and to ask if he needed any additional assistance. Cahill . . . declined the proffered additional support." Colonel Meyers also had more than the predicament of Company A on his mind. He recalled that on 16 April, "we received three direct hits of 122mm rockets which set the ASP [ammunition supply point] three on fire." Meyers observed that, "when you are the regimental commander and one of your main ammo dumps within your perimeter is hit, burning, and blowing up, it became more than a line entry in the command chronology!" Meyers Comments and Copy of Statement of Col Bruce F. Meyers to Board for Correction of Naval and Military Records, n.d. [1968], attached to Meyers Comments, hereafter Meyers Statement, Meyers Comments.

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\*Colonel Meyers recalled that the action actually began when a Marine fire team about 1030 or 1100 "ran into a reverse slope horse-shoe shaped NVA bunker complex." In this contact one of the members of the team was killed and two others wounded as "they crested the ridge." Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on draft, dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Meyers Comments.

Company C deployed on line and advanced up the ridge against what appeared to be the enemy's right flank. As the Marines approached the bunkers, enemy fire broke out from another hidden fortified position on their left flank. Within moments, Himmer, both platoon commanders, a platoon sergeant, and several squad leaders fell with wounds. The acting company executive officer, First Lieutenant William C. Connelly, assumed command. An artillery fire mission on the bunker complex to the company's left resulted in friendly fire impacting within 50 meters of the Marines, so the artillery forward observer ended the mission.<sup>11</sup>

At 1500, Companies A and C were both in desperate straits. Casualties were high, including many unit leaders, and the Marines were nearly immobilized in the elephant grass by the intense enemy fire from two mutually supporting bunker complexes and from nearby mortars which steadily pounded the slopes of the ridge. Nearby, Company D was helping Company A to evacuate the wounded who had been able to crawl away. Cahill moved toward the LZ, suffering three wounds along the way, and ordered Captain John W. Cargile's Company D to deploy along Company A's right flank, then attack across the ridge from northwest to southeast.<sup>12</sup>

Heavy casualties had by now rendered Company A ineffective, and Captain Banks was concentrating on attempts to evacuate casualties as Company D began its attack. Cargile's men advanced through the grass, receiving heavy and accurate sniper fire which dropped four Marines with single shots to the head. The deep grass and the profusion of units and individuals on the hill firing weapons left Cargile's men uncertain of the enemy's exact location and dispositions. Although Company D continued to move forward, progress was painfully slow and casualties mounted.<sup>13</sup>

At about 1730, Banks was seriously wounded and Second Lieutenant Francis B. Lovely, Jr., assumed command of Company A. Cahill learned by radio of increasing casualties in Company D and ordered his companies to evacuate their wounded and withdraw, leaving their dead. Having assumed command of the battalion in the field only two weeks before, Cahill was not aware of General Tompkins' standing

orders emphasizing that all KIAs should be evacuated.<sup>14\*</sup>

It was 0300 before the last company closed on the battalion perimeter, and another hour before a casualty count reached Cahill showing 20 killed and 20 missing. The battalion continued taking musters and comparing statements of participants which soon reduced the number of missing to 15.<sup>15</sup>

At 0630 on the morning of the 17th, several Marines heard the voice of Corporal Hubert H. Hunnicutt III, calling across the valley from the ridge where the battle had taken place. Two squads moved into the valley and shouted back to him, attempting to pinpoint his location. After hearing two shots near where they thought Hunnicutt was located, the patrol no longer heard his voice.<sup>16</sup>

A few hours later, after Cahill had presented Meyers and General Glick his plan to recover the bodies on 19 April, an air observer (AO) reported seeing a live Marine about 50 meters from the enemy bunkers. Volunteers from the battalion boarded two Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters for a rescue attempt. One helicopter held a fire team and the other a body recovery detail. When the first helicopter landed atop the ridge, it crushed an enemy soldier with the tail ramp and the fire team ran out shooting. Four North Vietnamese who popped up from fighting holes fell dead immediately. Others surrounding the landing zone poured fire into the helicopter as the Marines quickly searched for the survivor. Finding only dead bodies which had been decapitated and disemboweled, the fire team ran back on board the badly shot up CH-46, which flew 1,000 meters back to Hill 689, then crash landed with about 20 hits in the engine. An AO watching the rescue attempt reported that the search party had missed the live Marine who could still be seen waving

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\* Several years later, General Glick declared that "the division policy on recovery of MIAs and KIAs was, to my mind, not clearly defined, because in the previous months that I had been there, there had been a general understanding that the forces should not risk additional deaths and casualties unnecessarily to recover KIAs, but that all reasonable effort should be made to recover MIAs. . . . yes, we always recovered KIAs if we could. But, it definitely was considered not right to go into high-risk areas if it was a known KIA. . . . If the person might still be alive, then it would justify to take some risks with other Marines." The general stated that Colonel Meyers of the 26th Marines "was fairly cautious about ground operations to recover people that were probably KIAs." BGen Jacob E. Glick intvw, 20 Jun and 11 Jul 89, pp. 10-11 (Oral Hist Coll, MCHC).

from a shell hole only meters from where the helicopter had landed.<sup>17\*</sup>

Shortly after the failed rescue attempt, an Army helicopter pilot using the call sign "Blue Max 48" volunteered to make another try. With Army helicopter gunships blasting enemy positions atop the ridge, Blue Max 48 sat down near the bunker complex and a crewman leaped out and carried the wounded Marine on board. The helicopter then delivered him directly to the field hospital. Lieutenant Colonel Cahill logically assumed that the Marine who was rescued was the same Marine, Hunnicutt, who had called across the valley earlier in the day. Only later would he learn that the rescued Marine was not Hunnicutt, but a member of Company C named Private First Class G. Panyaninac.<sup>18</sup>

Certain that no live Marines remained on the ridge, Cahill and his staff set to work once more on a plan to recover the remains of those killed in the engagement of the 16th. Attack aircraft bombed the objective through the night of 17 April and the early morning hours of the 18th. But at about 0630, 18 April, Marines on the battalion perimeter once again reported hearing Corporal Hunnicutt calling for help. Lieutenant Colonel Cahill directed that a patrol be dispatched to rescue Hunnicutt and he informed Colonel Meyers of his plans. Meyers approved, but ordered that the patrol not proceed further than 500 meters from the perimeter because the 26th Marines was scheduled to pass control of all forces in the area to the 1st Marines at 0800 and he did not wish to leave in the middle of an engagement. In the meantime, he offered to retain control of the operation until the recovery of

the Marine could be accomplished, but Brigadier General Glick, envisioning that the recovery could take a day or more, ordered that control of the operation pass at 0800, as scheduled. Twenty some years later, General Glick remembered:

I had instructions from the division to go ahead with the relief of the 26th Marines. They had been in Khe Sanh for months on end, and General Tompkins wanted them moved out. The other regiment was on the way; it was all set up to go at a certain time. There was a very questionable situation as to whether sending a patrol out was going to do anything anyway. So the decision was made to go ahead with the relief of the 26th Marines on schedule.<sup>19\*\*</sup>

In a repeat of the previous day's performance, an Army helicopter pilot agreed to attempt Hunnicutt's rescue. Corporal Hunnicutt tells the story:

About noon I guess, an Army Huey started flying around me, a spotter plane. The spotter plane dropped two red smokes on me and scared me to death. I thought they were going to blow me away. I tried to stand up and wave to them. I threw paper all over the place and waved, and one of the copters came right down on me about three times. I could see the man's face, and then finally he set down and one of the machine gunners came out and helped me into the plane.<sup>20</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Cahill met Hunnicutt at the Khe Sanh aid station. To Cahill's astonishment, Hunnicutt claimed that Captain Himmer had still been alive as late as the afternoon of the 17th. Although wounded himself, Hunnicutt had cared for the severely injured Himmer since the 16th, moving him down the ridge toward the battalion perimeter until they became separated when Hunnicutt fell into a gorge. Himmer was never seen alive again. For his courageous

\*Colonel Meyers remembered the circumstances of the aborted rescue attempt somewhat differently. According to him, the helicopter landed and the fire team ran out and immediately came under fire. The helicopter also took about 20 hits in the engine and fuel compartments. At that point, the gunners on board the aircraft fired their .50-caliber machine guns to suppress the enemy fire and the "fire team reboarded and the 46 'backed out' from the touch down point and as they did, the tail ramp crushed the NVA soldier . . ." Meyers Comments. Colonel John E. Hansen, who commanded Provisional MAG 39 which controlled Marine helicopter support in Quang Tri Province, wrote that he and Major David L. Althoff, the executive officer of HMM-262, piloted the aircraft that landed with the fire team. Hansen could not see from the cockpit either the fighting or the soldier crushed by the tail ramp: "Our crew chief was in the rear of our helicopter and reporting to us on our radio internal communications system on the progress of the search . . ." Hansen recalled that as soon as the fire team returned they took off: "We were fortunate to be able to get back to Hill 689 with the aircraft still operating. The helicopter was later recovered by a heavy lift copter and returned to Quang Tri." Col John E. Hansen, Comments on draft, dtd 16Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*According to Colonel Meyers, he was very distressed at the situation. He remembered that General Tompkins denied his request for a delay in the change of operational control between the two Marine regiments. Meyers immediately briefed the incoming 1st Marines commander Colonel Stanley S. Hughes of the situation. Colonel Hughes stated that he would initiate the recovery operation at 0630 despite the fact that he was not to assume operational control until 0800. Meyers stated that as a "control feature" he permitted the patrol to go out 500 meters at which point "they would check in with whichever regimental commander had opcon at the time they reached this checkpoint." According to Meyers, the rescue took place before the patrol ever reached the 500 meter checkpoint, so the entire subject became moot. Meyers Comments. In an earlier statement, Meyers stated that before reaching the 500 meter checkpoint, the patrol saw Hunnicutt who warned them not to approach since he believed the NVA were using him as a decoy. The patrol called in gunships which provided cover while one of the aircraft rescued him. By this time, Colonel Meyers had been relieved of responsibility for the operation and was on his way to the Quang Tri base. Meyers Statement, Meyers Comments.

attempt to save his commanding officer's life, Corporal Hunnicutt was awarded the Navy Cross.<sup>21</sup>

In an operation conducted on 22 April, the 1st Marines recovered all but three of the bodies.\* The final casualty count totalled 38 Marines and 3 Navy corpsmen killed in action and 32 Marines wounded, almost half of them seriously. But the story did not end there. General Tompkins appointed Colonel Walter H. Cuenin to investigate the operation and its aftermath. In reviewing the report of this investigation, General Tompkins noted "inexcusable" failures in reporting to division headquarters, as well as actions which "did not reflect the urgency of the occasion." He took administrative action to correct the problems, and relieved Lieutenant Colonel Cahill of command.<sup>22\*\*</sup>

This tragic and costly incident served as a sour note on which to end the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines' gallant part in the defense of the Khe Sanh Combat Base. The aftermath of the engagement, moreover, points up the extraordinary depth of responsibility faced by a military commander. Lieutenant Colonel Cahill, though thrice wounded while doing his utmost in a difficult and confused situation, nonetheless, bore the burden for the mistakes and failures laid at the doorstep of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines.<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

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\*Bert Mullins, who served as a radioman with the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, commented: "This was a truly botched mess!" He remembered that Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines "was scheduled to recover the bodies, but that was canceled when the air officer transmitted the plan in the clear to the 26th Marines." Since the 26th Marines departed the area on 18 April, this must have occurred probably on 17 April. After that period "Bravo went opcon to 1st Marines and three of their companies recovered the bodies." Bert Mullins, Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*General Tompkins also stated that Colonel Meyers "failed to display the initiative and force the situation called for." Colonel Meyers in his rebuttal defended his conduct stating that he offered assistance to the battalion commander and was told it was not needed. He did not learn about the actual seriousness of the situation until the early hours of 17 April. When he arrived at the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines CP later in the morning and discovered there were 20 Marines still missing, he immediately made plans for a rescue operation. Meyers Statement, Meyers Comments.

\*\*\*Lieutenant Colonel Cahill was later promoted to Colonel and continued to serve until his retirement in 1978. Colonel Frederic S. Knight, who also served as a battalion commander in 1968, wrote that "but for the grace of God, went I and every battalion commander in the 3d Marine Division." He recognized that Major General Tompkins' policy on recovering the bodies of Marine dead was part of the deep tradition of the Marine Corps of "taking care of each other, dead or alive . . ." Nevertheless, this policy of bringing back all the KIAs "had the effect of creating Tar Babies for the commanders; they wanted to disengage to reduce casualties and seek a more advantageous tactical situation, but under that stricture they could not." He would advocate a policy of weighing "our traditions . . . against the utilitarian principle of the greatest good for the greatest number and actions taken accordingly." Col Frederic S. Knight, Comments on draft, dtd 10Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

### *Operation Scotland II*

By this time, Operation Scotland II was in full swing. General Glick recalled that his new orders directed him now "to continue operations in . . . [the Khe Sanh] area, at least in a limited scope," rather than dismantle the base.<sup>23</sup> The units of the 1st Marines commanded by Colonel Stanley S. Hughes had begun to take the places of battalions of the 26th Marines. For example, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines left LZ Stud to the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines and shifted west to the hills near Khe Sanh: 558, 950, 861, and 881 South. The 2d Battalion, 1st Marines and the regimental command post set up in the combat base and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines remained along Route 9, providing security. The operation continued to grow as elements of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines arrived at Hill 689.<sup>24</sup>

For the rest of April, the battalions patrolled the rugged country of the Huong Hoa District, occasionally making contact with the enemy, but for the most part finding only abandoned North Vietnamese bunkers and equipment and the remains of Communist soldiers left behind. Still, the NVA threatened to cut the road. On 19 April, a convoy of five trucks belonging to Battery B, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines ran into an enemy ambush halfway between Khe Sanh and Ca Lu. In the ensuing firefight, three Marines died and seven others suffered wounds. Only one truck continued on to Ca Lu, as the others were either damaged, pressed into service by the infantry to evacuate casualties, or left without drivers as a result of the casualties sustained in the ambush. Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. V. Hughes, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, remembered that the ambush site "was up a draw leading into the river . . . The NVA dug bunkers into the root masses of trees lining the top of the draw . . . The firing ports . . . were almost impossible to see unless you observed a muzzle flash."<sup>25</sup> The 1st Marines Commander, Colonel Stanley Hughes, responded by restricting vehicle traffic on Route 9 "to only those vehicles performing tactical missions." To help control the road, he formed a "Provisional Mechanized Company" by combining elements of the 3d Tank Battalion: the Antitank Company (-); the 3d Platoon, Company B; and the 3d Platoon, Company G.<sup>26</sup>

Near the end of April, Brigadier General Carl W. Hoffman relieved General Glick. For a short time the task force was known as "TF Hoffman," but soon became known as "TF H." In the habit of pronouncing all single letters by the phonetic equivalent used on the

radio, the Marines referred to the new command as "Task Force Hotel." General Hoffman continued to maintain his CP at Khe Sanh and directed the same type of limited mobile operations as General Glick. He also instituted what he called "key hole missions" consisting of four-man deep reconnaissance patrols. Using a "touch and go" insertion system, four or five helicopters with only one carrying the team would "come in at various locations, set down, and be gone almost immediately." The same procedures would be used to extract the teams. According to Hoffman these reconnaissance probes brought back invaluable intelligence about the location of enemy forces in the sector.<sup>27</sup>

The units conducting Operation Scotland II continued to draw their supplies from the logistic support unit at Khe Sanh, as had the units in Operation Pegasus, in an effort to reduce the stocks which had accumulated there during the siege. On 5 May, Khe Sanh reported a five-day level of supplies and the logistic support unit closed down. TF Hotel transferred the remaining stocks to Ca Lu by convoy and helicopter. From that time on, units in northwestern Quang Tri Province drew their supplies from Ca Lu.<sup>28</sup>

The requirement to resupply from LZ Stud once again increased the level of traffic along Route 9, prompting the NVA to respond with another ambush on 14 May. A convoy enroute to the combat base from Ca Lu encountered an enemy force along Route 9 just over one kilometer from the intersection where the coffee plantation road led north into Khe Sanh. Company G, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, which was providing security for the convoy, deployed and engaged the enemy.

Nearby, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines was assembling for a helicopter lift to Hill 1015. When the ambush took place, the battalion canceled the move to Hill 1015 and went to the rescue of the convoy. The NVA fled in haste, but the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines caught up with them 1,500 meters south of the ambush site and attacked them from two sides. The North Vietnamese, in company strength, withdrew into a bunker complex, pursued by the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. The ensuing fight lasted into the following day, leaving 74 enemy dead. The Marines lost 7 killed in action and 36 wounded.<sup>29</sup>

The ambush of 14 May signalled the onset of increased enemy activity in the area. While patrolling

*Marine M48 tanks patrol Route 9 between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh, passing a Marine small encampment along the way. The 3d Tank Battalion formed a "Provisional Mechanized Company" to monitor road traffic in this sector.*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191580



Route 9, halfway between Khe Sanh and Lang Vei on 17 May, Company H, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines spotted five enemy soldiers and gave chase. The five led the company into an ambush where an NVA company lay in bunkers firing from close range and shouting, "Die Marine!" Company H withdrew slightly, called in artillery and air strikes, then assaulted and overran the bunkers. The Marines lost 6 dead and 8 wounded in the ambush, and counted 52 dead North Vietnamese.<sup>30</sup>

From 17 to 19 May, two kilometers north of Company H's engagement on Route 9, elements of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines patrolled the ridge between Hill 552 and Hill 689. A dominant terrain feature overlooking the combat base, the ridge had been occupied or patrolled by U.S. forces regularly since the early part of Operation Pegasus. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines encountered, nonetheless, several NVA units there, killing a total of 84 enemy and capturing 5 others in a three-day period.<sup>31</sup>

An even bigger fight was yet to come. During the night of 18–19 May, the enemy moved a battalion to within two kilometers of the combat base. At about 0400, an enemy platoon attacked Company H, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines southeast of Khe Sanh along Route 9. Assaulting from all sides with heavy small arms fire, grenades, satchel charges, and RPGs, the North Vietnamese killed three Marines and wounded three others before retiring. They left behind eight dead. Almost simultaneously, an enemy company, using 60mm mortar support, probed Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines on Hill 552. After a short fight, the Marines heard the North Vietnamese digging in. Exchanges of fire continued through the night. In the morning, the Marines assaulted the nearby enemy, driving them from their positions with 42 dead and 4 taken prisoner. Four Marines suffered wounds.<sup>32</sup>

At 0710, 19 May, while Company I was still fighting near Hill 552, a platoon of Company F, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines and two tanks headed south from Khe Sanh along the coffee plantation road, sweeping ahead of a convoy bound for Ca Lu. About 300 meters from the road's intersection with Route 9, the Marines triggered an NVA ambush at a range of 25 meters. An enemy company, dug in, forced the Marines to take cover under a storm of automatic weapons fire, RPGs, and grenades. The Marines attempted an assault, but the enemy repulsed them, adding a heavy barrage of mortars to the Marines' discomfort. The rest of Company F, waiting at the combat base with the convoy, immediately reinforced the endangered platoon, then assaulted with the entire company. The Communists

not only threw back the Marines a second time, but even left their own positions to counterattack. This time, it was Company F's turn to hold fast, and the Marines repulsed the enemy assault. Lieutenant Colonel Billy R. Duncan, the battalion commander, recalled that by this time he had arrived at the scene with a small command group. The company commander, however, had been mortally wounded and "contact during the next hour was mixed with serious probes by both sides."<sup>33</sup>

Company G advanced south along the road to join the fight, killing three North Vietnamese who had sneaked to the rear of Company F. After the two companies linked up, Lieutenant Colonel Duncan asked for napalm air strikes. According to Duncan, the enemy was anywhere between 35 to 50 yards distant from the Marine positions and too close for artillery support, therefore the call for napalm. While some of the Marines accidentally also were covered by napalm jelly, the fixed-wing strikes broke the enemy "will to stay and fight."<sup>34</sup> As the enemy retreated, Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines struck the NVA from the flank. With the ambush site cleared, the rest of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines went to the field and searched the area south-southwest of the combat base trying to regain contact until 22 May, but met only minor resistance. During the operation, 8 Marines died, including the commanders of Companies F and G, and 34 fell wounded. The battalion captured 3 North Vietnamese and reported killing 113, of whom 69 were found in the ambush site.<sup>35</sup>

The enemy troops killed and captured by the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines were described as "clean, well dressed, and neatly groomed."<sup>36</sup> According to Lieutenant Colonel Duncan, one of the prisoners stated the enemy mission was to "stop all movement along Route 9."<sup>37</sup> This did not match the depiction of the enemy forces in the Khe Sanh area as defeated and on the run. Coupled with the extraordinary surge in North Vietnamese offensive operations, such reports prompted the 1st Marines to warn of "a high probability of a division-size attack on the Khe Sanh Combat Base or one of the outlying units."<sup>38</sup> According to a rallier, Private (who claimed to be a former Warrant Officer) Vo Manh Hung, the NVA *308th Division* had arrived in northwestern Quang Tri Province with its *88th* and *102d Regiments*. The *308th Division* was one of the five so-called "Steel Divisions" of the North Vietnamese Army which could only be committed by the Joint Military Staff. Claiming that the *308th* had been committed because "the war is going to end," Hung told intelli-



gence officers that the *304th*, *308th*, *325th*, and another unidentified division would attack Khe Sanh. The North Vietnamese, he said, would cut Route 9, bring anti-aircraft guns in from Laos and overrun the combat base "as Dien Bien Phu was." Intelligence officers placed little confidence in Hung's information, rating it "F-6" (the lowest rating for reliability and likelihood of being true). Still, III MAF sent Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Lamontagne's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines to reinforce the 1st Marines for the defense of Khe Sanh against another possible major NVA effort.<sup>39</sup>

For the rest of May, TF Hotel continued the original plan for Operation Scotland II, conducting offensive operations to maintain the initiative around Khe Sanh. Enemy contact was frequent and sometimes heavy, with the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines fighting a running battle which lasted for over a week.

On 24 May, Company G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines engaged an NVA company on a hill overlooking Route 9 four kilometers southeast of the combat base, the same position to which enemy ambushers had retreated after attacking the convoy 10 days before. The enemy occupied bunkers which withstood a preparation of artillery fire and air strikes. Indeed, when the fires lifted, the enemy left their bunkers and attempted to envelop the Marines. Observing a larger enemy force to the rear of the closest North Vietnamese positions, Company G fell back and called for additional air, artillery, and mortar support. At 1800, the Marines attacked once more, still under extremely heavy fire. With helicopter gunships, artillery, and mortars supporting their advance, Company G swept up the hill, reaching the high ground at 2015 that night. The enemy broke contact, leaving behind the bodies of 58 dead. In the day's fighting, Company G suffered 15 dead and 21 wounded. The following morning, an air observer reported a "ragged enemy withdrawal to the south and southeast."<sup>40</sup>

The 2d Battalion, 3d Marines remained near the site of the 24 May engagement. Three companies spaced about 700 meters apart stretched to the northwest in a line starting from Company F, on a small finger overlooking Route 9 about a kilometer west of the NVA bunker complex. Company E was at the intersection of Route 9 and the coffee plantation road, and Company G was on a finger between the other two companies.

At 0245, 28 May, Company F Marines, using a Starlight Scope, observed enemy movement outside their perimeter, and the acting company commander, First Lieutenant James L. Jones, called for an artillery mission. Three North Vietnamese with satchel charges

suddenly leapt into one of the company's listening posts north of the perimeter and blew themselves to bits, also killing three of the four Marines at the post. Immediately, an NVA battalion charged up the slope from the north on a wide front using a very heavy volume of small arms fire and more than 40 RPG rounds. With the enemy already in the perimeter, Lieutenant Jones gave the order to employ the final protective fires.\*

Noticing that the North Vietnamese were using pencil flares, apparently as signals, Lieutenant Jones fired a red pencil flare of his own, at which the NVA precipitously broke contact.\*\* The respite was brief, however. After a momentary lapse, the assault continued with renewed fury as the enemy battalion poured machine gun and rocket fire into Company F's lines. After several minutes of fierce fighting, the enemy drove the 1st Platoon from its holes and overran the company's 60mm mortar position. Under intense fire, the 2d and 3d Platoons restored the defensive perimeter while the 1st Platoon regrouped to establish a new position on a knoll to the east of the company perimeter.<sup>41</sup>

At 0330, after the enemy gained a foothold in the Marine perimeter, their attack slackened momentarily, but as if to demonstrate coordination, 40 rounds of 130mm artillery fire from enemy guns fell on Company G. A Douglas AC-47 "Spooky" gunship, accompanied by a flareship, reported on station at 0415 to light the battlefield and fire in support of the Marines. The NVA took the planes under heavy fire with .50-caliber machine guns and resumed their attack on Company F, this time from all sides.<sup>42</sup>

For two hours, the battle raged, literally within Company F's original perimeter. Again and again, the NVA regrouped and stormed the Marines, attempting to overwhelm their defenses with massive ground assaults as RPG gunners on dominant high ground to the southeast smothered Company F under an estimated 500 rounds of rocket fire. With the flareship lighting the scene, "Spooky"

\*The "FPF" is a defensive tactic used to stop imminent penetration of a unit's defensive lines. It employs supporting arms firing in pre-planned locations and the unit's own riflemen and machine gunners firing along predetermined lines at the maximum rate to create what is known as "interlocking bands of grazing fire." The significance of firing the FPF lies in the fact that it is an act of near desperation, a final resort which, if unsuccessful, will give way to hand-to-hand combat within the fighting holes of the defending unit.

\*\* Harold R. Blunk, who in 1968 was a PFC and a forward observer with Company F, commented that now-Lieutenant General James L. Jones told him in June 1996 that he fired the red flare rather than the green one because "'Green for go—Red for stop. It was that simple.'" Harold R. Blunk, Comments on draft, dtd 27Jun96 (Vietnam Comment File).

slammed machine gun fire into the enemy at the rate of 18,000 rounds per minute and Battery B, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines joined the infantry battalion's own mortar platoon in pounding the North Vietnamese.<sup>43</sup>

At 0700, air observers reported that "the entire battle area was littered with NVA dead."<sup>44</sup> The observers directed attack aircraft against enemy reinforcements moving in from the west. A napalm strike killed 30 North Vietnamese and ended the enemy effort but, unfortunately, also resulted in napalm impacting less than 20 meters from Company F. Fanned by the wind, the fire spread, soon forcing Company F from their positions after an all-out attack by an enemy battalion had failed. When the flames died down, the Marines quickly reclaimed their positions and fired on the withdrawing enemy.<sup>45</sup>

Only 20 minutes later, at 1150, Company E arrived to help, first sweeping the ridge to the west of Company F. After securing this area, Company E turned on the North Vietnamese RPG gunners firing from the high ground near Company F's 1st Platoon. Within two hours of their attack, Company E put the enemy to flight. Following an emergency resupply and the evacuation of casualties from both companies, Company E moved out in pursuit. The battle cost the 2d Battalion 13 dead and 44 wounded. A search of the area revealed 230 dead North Vietnamese.<sup>46</sup>

The shelling which fell upon Company G during the battle was a reminder that the enemy still maintained artillery positions within range of Khe Sanh. All through the siege, these guns had kept firing, despite many efforts to silence them. Even afterwards, the North Vietnamese continued to pound Marine positions. General Glick, the former Task Force commander, remembered that through the period he was there: "Khe Sanh was receiving heavy shelling on a daily basis . . ." and that "all commander, service, and living facilities [at Khe Sanh] were in underground bunkers or deep trenches."<sup>47</sup> On 30 May, TF Hotel provided security for a convoy of four 175mm self-propelled guns and four 8-inch self-propelled howitzers from Camp Carroll to Khe Sanh. These heavy artillery weapons took up firing positions from which they could reach the Co Roc cliffs, where the enemy guns were believed to be, and fired for 48 hours in a limited duration artillery raid dubbed Operation Drumfire II. Like the previous attempts at counterfire, which used

even B-52s against Co Roc, Operation Drumfire II had no noticeable effect.<sup>48\*</sup>

The enemy's infantry showed that they could match the annoying persistence of their gunners. At 0400, 31 May, the North Vietnamese attacked Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines from all sides on the very ridge where the battle had taken place three days before. The enemy again coordinated their attack with 130mm artillery fire, as well as 82mm mortar fire. The ground attack, however, in no way matched the fury of the previous engagement and the NVA disengaged in the morning.<sup>49</sup>

Only one kilometer to the north, Company B, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, moving toward Company E's engagement at 0850, ran into a North Vietnamese platoon entrenched just off Route 9. Company G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and Company E, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines fell in on the right of Company B. Attacking with all three companies abreast, supported by tanks, the Marines closed with the North Vietnamese and overran their trenches, finishing the fight hand-to-hand. They killed 42 North Vietnamese and lost 8 dead and 31 wounded. A single prisoner reported his unit to be the *102d Regiment* of the *308th Division*. Total Marine casualties for the morning's fighting were 32 dead and 99 wounded. A search revealed 136 enemy dead.<sup>50</sup>

### *Operation Robin*

As May ended, III MAF intelligence analysts confirmed reports that the North Vietnamese had infiltrated the *88th* and *102d Regiments* of their *308th Division* into northwestern Quang Tri Province. Further, aerial photography revealed a new enemy road under construction in the jungle south of Khe Sanh. The road entered South Vietnam from Laos and ran parallel to Route 9, but about 15 kilometers further south. When discovered, the road extended approximately 30 kilometers into South Vietnam along a path that seemed to

\*Colonel Robert C. V. Hughes, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, observed that "Operation Drumfire II like most preplanned, not observed, fire missions merely caused the NVA to pull back into their tunnels and wait it out. Our 'Rules of Engagement' forbid flying aerial observers over Co Roc who could have adjusted fire missions while the enemy was actively shelling the base." Col Robert C. V. Hughes, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan95?] (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel William H. Dabney's explanation for the limited effect of Drumfire II on Co Roc was very simple: "That's not where the guns were!" Col William H. Dabney, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec 94] (Vietnam Comment File). For further information about the debate on the location of the enemy guns near Khe Sanh see the discussion in Chapter 14. See Chapter 26 for a further account of Drumfire II.

lead directly toward Hue City. A III MAF intelligence report on the road said, "agent reports have mentioned the possibility of enemy tank battalions in eastern Laos awaiting the completion of this road."<sup>51</sup>

TF Hotel planned a two-part operation in accordance with the 3d Marine Division's fresh emphasis upon mobility and firebases, under its new commander, Major General Raymond G. Davis, to counter the enemy buildup in the area.\* The first phase, Operation Robin North, called for Colonel Hughes' 1st Marines to thrust south from the combat base into the mountains, engaging the newly introduced enemy forces near Route 9. In the second phase, Operation Robin South, Colonel Edward J. Miller's 4th Marines would conduct airmobile operations even further south to locate and destroy the enemy road.<sup>52</sup>

Preparations for Operation Robin began at the end of May. Units garrisoning the hill positions around Khe Sanh shifted to make battalions available for the attack. Marine Aircraft Groups 36 and 39 delivered a five-day supply of ammunition to the units left around Khe Sanh so that helicopter assets could concentrate on supporting the extensive airmobile requirements of the operation. For the five days prior to D-Day, TF Hotel coordinated preparation fires which included 219 sorties of attack aircraft and 30 B-52 sorties delivering thousands of tons of bombs to blast landing zones in the jungle and to destroy enemy weapons and troop concentrations. Nine artillery batteries representing every caliber of artillery weapon in the Marine Corps fired over 10,000 rounds into the area of operations.<sup>53</sup>

D-Day, 2 June, began with the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines occupying blocking positions along Route 9 immediately south of the combat base. At midday, Lieutenant Colonel Archie Van Winkle's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines conducted a helicopterborne assault into LZ Robin, a newly prepared landing zone situated in the steep hills 10 kilometers southeast of Khe Sanh. After landing, the battalion attacked north, hoping to drive the enemy into the blocking positions along Route 9. The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines flew from Ca Lu to LZ Robin and set up a defensive perimeter for the night.<sup>54</sup>

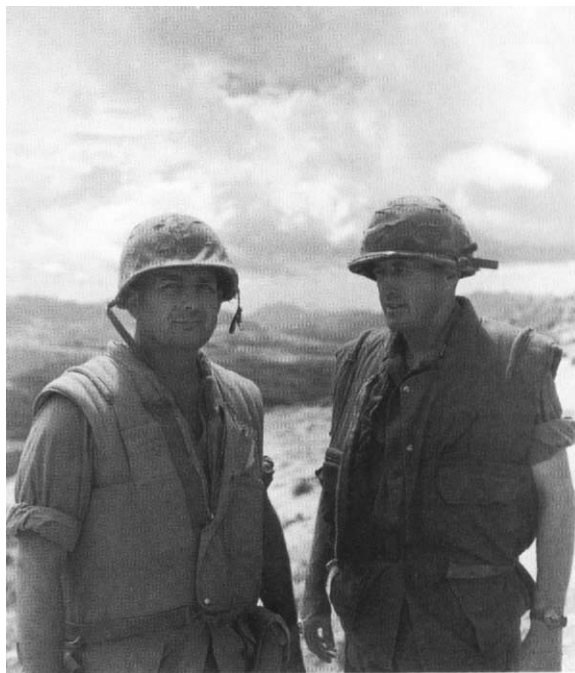
On 3 June, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines continued its attack to the north and TF Hotel fed the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines into the operation at LZ Robin. Relieved of the responsibility for defending LZ Robin, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines boarded helicopters once



12th Mar ComdC, Jan69

*Top, from the air, Landing Zone Robin, located in the steep hills, is about 10 kilometers southeast of Khe Sanh. Below, LtCol Archie Van Winkle, left, with the 3d MarDiv commander, MajGen Raymond G. Davis. LtCol Van Winkle's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines opened Operation Robin with the helicopter assault onto LZ Robin in line with Gen Davis' tactical emphasis upon mobility and fire support bases.*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191666



\*See both Chapters 15 and 18 for discussion of the tactical concepts introduced by General Davis.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191807  
*Marines of Company A, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines barely can be seen as they climb up a hill through five-foot-high elephant grass near Landing Zone Robin.*

again and assaulted LZ Loon, four kilometers to the west. The enemy, quiet on D-Day, greeted the Marines at LZ Loon with light small-arms, mortar, and artillery fire, delaying the helicopter lift but not seriously hampering the landings.<sup>55</sup>

North Vietnamese interest in LZ Loon became apparent the following morning, only hours after the Marines arrived. At 0600, a company of the NVA 88th Regiment probed Company F, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. After a short engagement, the enemy withdrew at dawn, leaving 34 dead. Company F lost 2 killed and 24 wounded.<sup>56</sup>

With both of the new landing zones secured by the 1st Marines, TF Hotel began preparing them to serve as firebases to support the 4th Marines during the second phase of the operation. The headquarters of the 4th Marines and the 1st Battalion, 12th Marines landed at LZ Robin and prepared to assume control as engineers used equipment lifted in by helicopters to construct artillery emplacements, bunkers, trenches, and barbed

wire entanglements.<sup>57</sup>

Companies C and D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines flew into LZ Loon, freeing the 2d Battalion to join the attack north toward the blocking positions. In keeping with the airmobile character of the operation, the 2d Battalion advanced by conducting still another helicopterborne assault into LZ Crow, two kilometers northeast of LZ Loon and near the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.<sup>58</sup>

The attack northward met its first significant resistance on 5 June, when Company C, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines engaged an enemy unit four kilometers south of Route 9. The enemy troops fought from bunkers and from trees. Company C attacked the position, supported by artillery and the battalion's 106mm recoilless rifles. In a fight which lasted into the following afternoon, the Marines overran and destroyed a North Vietnamese bunker complex which documents identified as belonging to the 304th Division, a veteran of the earlier fighting during the siege of Khe Sanh.<sup>59</sup>

During the evening of 5 June, the 4th Marines assumed control of its own 1st Battalion, disposed between LZ Loon and LZ Robin, in preparation for the beginning of Operation Robin South the next morning. Before the Marines could strike, however, the North Vietnamese hit first. At 0600, an enemy battalion assaulted LZ Loon, supported by artillery and mortar fire.<sup>60</sup> Companies C and D fought back, calling for their own artillery and mortars, as well as attack aircraft and helicopter gunships. After a two-hour battle, the enemy withdrew slightly, leaving 154 dead, but kept up a galling fire with their small arms, and frequent shelling from nearby 82mm mortars and the ever-present 130mm guns. By midday, the continued shelling had rendered LZ Loon untenable.<sup>61</sup> Helicopters lifted Company C back to LZ Robin at 1400, followed a few hours later by Company D. The last helicopter out, a CH-46, took heavy fire from a North Vietnamese .50-caliber machine gun and crashed in flames, bringing the total U.S. casualty count for the defense of the LZ to 24 dead and 37 wounded.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the attack on LZ Loon, on 6 June, as scheduled, the 4th Marines launched Operation Robin South. Helicopters lifted the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines into a landing zone southeast of LZ Robin, near the eastern extension of the North Vietnamese jungle road. The battalion located the road and found it to be quite well-developed, up to 18 feet wide in places, with stone bridges, culverts, and a surface graded smooth by heavy engineering equipment. The North Vietnamese had concealed the road by bending trees over it and

tying them together to form a living archway of vegetation beneath which troops and vehicles could pass unseen from the air. Along the road, the Marines found fighting holes, living bunkers, hospitals, kitchens, and a wealth of equipment, especially tools. There were picks, shovels, wrecking bars, axes, and explosives. Captain Gary E. Todd, who commanded Company I, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines and a former division intelligence officer, observed that the road "was a virtual clone of the Ho Chi Minh Trail." According to Todd, it was "more than a road, it qualified as a type of logistics infrastructure."<sup>63</sup> Prisoners and captured documents showed that the construction of the road was the mission of the NVA *83d Engineer Battalion*. One prisoner said that the construction schedule called for the road to reach Hue by 30 July, a formidable task which would have required pushing the road through the steep jungle terrain at a rate of over one mile—as the crow flies—per day.<sup>64</sup>

For several days, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines advanced along the road to the west, blasting apart bridges and culverts (sometimes with captured North Vietnamese explosives), cratering the road surface, and destroying the enemy facilities found along the way. Company A, 3d Engineer Battalion provided much of the technical expertise for the demolition project. The North Vietnamese avoided contact.<sup>65</sup>

As battalions returned to Khe Sanh from participating in Operation Robin North, they freed other units to join the 4th Marines in Operation Robin South. On 11 June, helicopters landed the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines near Lang Hole, a Montagnard village south of LZ Loon said by prisoners to be the site of a major enemy supply cache. The battalion searched the area for almost a week with only light contact.<sup>66</sup>

The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines joined its parent regiment in Operation Robin South on the morning of 14 June by conducting a helicopterborne assault onto the NVA road near the border with Laos. They advanced east along the road, toward the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, which was still moving down the road from the other end. The 2d Battalion found the western portion of the road as well developed as the rest. In one area they found a complex of over 500 bunkers and storage areas containing 400 pounds of ammonium nitrate (a crude explosive), hand tools, a welding machine, a one-and-one-half-ton truck and a complete machine shop mounted on a Russian three-ton truck. Unwilling to leave the latter prize behind, ingenious young Marine tinkerers dismantled the

entire truck and machine shop, then transferred the pieces to Khe Sanh by helicopter where they reassembled it for the drive along Route 9 to the 3d Marine Division headquarters at Dong Ha.<sup>67</sup>

One hour before dawn on 15 June, a battalion or more of the North Vietnamese *88th Regiment* struck the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines south of Lang Hole. Pressing their attack behind heavy RPG fire, the enemy infantry penetrated Company M's lines and occupied several fighting holes, setting up a machine gun in what had been the company command post. As the battle entered its third hour, the Marines counterattacked, ejecting the North Vietnamese from the perimeter. Helicopter gunships harried the enemy attack formations, helping to reduce their enthusiasm to continue the assault. Just before 0900, the North Vietnamese fired a "green star cluster"\* and the attack ended. The Marines swept the area, occasionally engaging North Vietnamese troops who feigned death, then "popped up" to fire their weapons. The final tally was 219 enemy killed along with 11 prisoners, 82 weapons, and 20 radios captured. The Marines lost 16 killed and 58 wounded.<sup>68</sup>

Despite the seemingly staggering casualties the North Vietnamese suffered on 15 June, the battle near Lang Hole appeared only to whet their appetites for fighting. The very next morning at 0215, they struck LZ Torch, a new fire support base near the jungle road which was defended by the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines since its withdrawal from LZ Loon. An enemy company fell upon the perimeter from the south and west, using mortar fire, RPGs, machine guns, and satchel charges to pave the way. Concentrating their assault on a small part of the perimeter, the enemy penetrated Company I's lines and advanced on the guns of Battery C, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines. Under the light of flares, the Marine gunners leveled the tubes of their howitzers and slammed round after round of "Beehive" ammunition\*\* into the attacking North Vietnamese. Although the enemy reached one of Battery C's gun emplacements, the "Beehive" proved too much for them. Leaving 28 dead, they fell back at 0400. Fourteen Marines died in the assault.<sup>69</sup>

The North Vietnamese continued their program

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\* A pyrotechnic signaling device.

\*\* An artillery antipersonnel round which explodes sending thousands of tiny darts, called flechettes, toward the enemy.

of predawn attacks on 18 June, when NVA sappers crawled to within 30 feet of Company K, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines near the jungle road. Preceding their assault with a mortar preparation, the enemy sprang from their nearby positions against Company K, quickly penetrating the lines. The Marines held their ground and fought back, using artillery and air support to help repulse the attacking North Vietnamese battalion. After four hours of fighting, the Marines drove back the Communist troops. Three Douglas A-4E Skyhawks of Marine Attack Squadron 311 pounded the retreating enemy, killing many. Sporadic fighting continued through the day; the Marines engaged enemy snipers and automatic weapons emplacements left behind to cover the withdrawal. When the last resistance ended, 131 North Vietnamese lay dead in and around Company K's position. Marine casualties numbered 11 killed and 30 wounded.<sup>70</sup>

On the day after Company K's battle along the jungle road, Operation Robin South ended and the 4th Marines returned to Khe Sanh having accomplished its mission. The Marines cratered the road in 28 places, destroyed 2 bridges and 4 culverts, and created a rock slide in one place. In addition, they reported killing 635 enemy and captured 48 NVA, an extraordinary prisoner count. Large quantities of enemy facilities were destroyed and supplies captured in the area of operations, dealing the North Vietnamese a hard blow.<sup>71</sup>

Operations Robin North and Robin South were the first multi-regiment Marine Corps operations "supported entirely by helicopter."<sup>72</sup> Marine commanders were highly enthusiastic, touting the "mobile offensive concept."<sup>73</sup> One unit's official account recorded that the operations:

... confirmed that fire base techniques are well within the operational scope of the Marine Corps, both conceptually and doctrinally. . . . Experience will improve our ability to manage the fire base concept. "Robin South" gave us a running start.<sup>74</sup>

### *Razing Khe Sanh: Operation Charlie*

General Westmoreland departed Vietnam on 11 June, in the middle of Operation Robin South, and was relieved by General Creighton Abrams, his former deputy, as Commander USMACV. Just over a week later, on 19 June, TF Hotel began executing the 3d Marine Division plan for the evacuation

and destruction of Khe Sanh Combat Base: Operation Charlie.<sup>75\*</sup>

The units returning from Operation Robin South assumed new positions to screen and support the evacuation. Along Route 9, battalions of the 4th Marines occupied key terrain from which they could control the road and protect the many convoys between Khe Sanh and Ca Lu required to move the supplies and equipment out of the combat base. The 1st Marines defended Khe Sanh and the surrounding hill positions. The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines reported to the 1st Marines at the combat base to serve as a work force to assist Company A, 1st Engineer Battalion in the physical dismantling and destruction of the facilities at Khe Sanh.<sup>76</sup>

The plan for Operation Charlie called for the Marines to withdraw all salvageable supplies and equipment and to destroy all fortifications and anything of possible use which they could not move. They went about the task thoroughly. Convoys rolled from Khe Sanh to Ca Lu daily, heavily laden with stockpiled supplies, salvaged fortification materials, and previously stranded damaged equipment. Detachments from the 3d and 11th Engineer Battalions and the 3d Shore Party Battalion arrived with bulldozers and mechanics to help with the work. Even burned out vehicle hulks and damaged equipment were cut apart into smaller pieces, moved to secure areas, and buried to prevent their use in enemy propaganda. The same Navy Seabee unit which had toiled to repair and upgrade the airstrip months before now returned to

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General Rosson observed that he was involved "directly and personally" with the decision to deactivate Khe Sanh." He remembered that after the "decision [to deactivate] had been made early in June. I discussed with General Davis the methodology and timing of the deactivation." Gen William B. Rosson, Comments on draft, dtd 27Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File). General Hoffman remarked that he received a decision from higher headquarters sometime in June "that we would abandon Khe Sanh combat base in favor of moving to a new combat base" initially called Stud. While Hoffman believed his units "were successfully conducting reconnaissance-in-force operations in any direction we wanted to," he recognized the desirability of consolidating mobile operations and shortening supply lines. MajGen Carl W. Hoffman, Comments on draft, dtd 15Dec94 and MajGen Carl W. Hoffman intvw, 14Nov68, pp. 151-53 (Oral HistColl, MCHC), hereafter Hoffman Comments and intvw. According to Army historian George L. MacGarrigle: "Westy never wanted to abandon Khe Sanh; Abrams certainly did. When Westy returned to Washington for his confirmation hearing [for his appointment as Army Chief of Staff], Abe was the "acting ComUSMACV." The agreement was, the base would not be abandoned on Westmoreland's 'watch' and I'm almost certain that MACV provided Westy with his 'cover' statement." George L. MacGarrigle, Comments on draft, dtd 5Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Both photos are from the Abel Collection

*Top, Marines of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines at Khe Sanh salute their fallen comrades during a memorial service for those who gave their lives to defend the base. Below, a Marine from the battalion takes a long look at the Khe Sanh airstrip before preparing to depart*



rip up the steel matting runway. Working parties destroyed over 800 bunkers and 3 miles of concertina wire, throwing the wire into the trenches and filling them with soil. They slit open the countless sandbags and emptied them, wrecked standing structures, and burned what remained to the ground. As a final step to discourage the North Vietnamese from attempting to dig through the ruins for useful material, the Marines sprinkled the area with CS powder, an irritant chemical agent.<sup>77\*</sup>

The enemy could not, and did not, misinterpret the activity at the combat base. Communist political officers proclaimed the U.S. withdrawal from Khe Sanh as a victory for the North Vietnamese Army. III MAF warned units at Khe Sanh that, as the withdrawal proceeded, the enemy might conduct limited offensive operations to lend credibility to their claims.<sup>78\*\*</sup>

The prophecy came true on 1 July. Three kilometers southeast of the combat base near the old French fort, the NVA began a series of light probes against Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines at 0325. The probes, accompanied by mortar fire, continued for four hours. At 0725, a NVA unit of at least company-size launched a full-scale assault on the Marine perimeter to the accompaniment of mortar fire and 130mm guns. Alerted by the probes, Company I quickly blunted the enemy attack and the North Vietnamese broke contact. Later that morning, the Marines sighted the enemy unit nearby and engaged it once more, calling in helicopter gunships and attack aircraft. The fighting con-

tinued until late afternoon, with the Marines reporting over 200 dead North Vietnamese, half of them within 100 meters of Company I's lines. Two Marines died in the engagement.<sup>79</sup>

For the next several days, the enemy continued to step up the pressure. Occasional heavy incoming artillery and mortar fire fell on the hill positions, and small groups of North Vietnamese probed Marine perimeters attempting to cut through barbed wire barriers. There were no further attacks, however, on the scale of that of 1 July.<sup>80</sup>

At 2000 on 5 July, the Khe Sanh Combat Base, now just a smoldering scar on the land, officially closed.<sup>81</sup> On the following day, the 1st Marines sent their remaining rolling stock to Ca Lu by convoy. As the last trucks passed over Route 9, engineers removed and recovered the tactical bridging equipment which they had installed during Operation Pegasus. Just before midnight on 6 July, Operation Charlie ended.<sup>82</sup>

The 1st Marines remained near Khe Sanh for another week, attempting to recover the remains of the Marines who died in the fighting near Hill 689. After days of seesaw battles which left 11 Marines and 89 North Vietnamese dead, the 1st Battalion finally recovered 7 bodies under cover of darkness on 11 July using small teams operating by stealth. With this accomplished, the 1st Marines boarded helicopters and flew east to Quang Tri City.<sup>83</sup>

Twenty years after the battle, when asked to name the decision of which he was the most proud, General Westmoreland replied, "The decision to hold Khe Sanh."<sup>84</sup> It had been a controversial move in 1968, but after the commitment in men and materiel to hold it, the decision to evacuate the place was even more difficult for many to understand. In fact, there were more American casualties at Khe Sanh and its immediate vicinity after the breakout until the final evacuation of the base than during the siege.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> As a battle which

\* Colonel Billy R. Duncan, the commander of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, wrote that at the time his unit departed Khe Sanh, "much of the steel matting was still in place. Too difficult to remove . . ." and the enemy guns were "still a daily threat." Col Billy R. Duncan, Comments on draft, dtd 15Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Major Gary E. Todd, the commander of Company I, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, observed that the dismantling required "working parties to move around exposed and 'non-tactical' in what was still very much a *tactical* situation. The more bunkers we destroyed and trenches we filled, the less protection we had against incoming artillery, a fact not wasted on an ever-watchful enemy." Maj Gary E. Todd, Comments on draft, dtd 28Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\* General Hoffman stated he had instituted an orderly program of withdrawing his units so as not to reveal his intentions to the North Vietnamese. He blamed Correspondent John S. Carroll from the *Baltimore Sun* for breaking news confidentiality and printing a story that the Marines were abandoning Khe Sanh. According to Hoffman, the North Vietnamese increased their bombardment after the publication of the story. MACV suspended Carroll's press credentials for six months. Hoffman intvw and Comments. For the suspension of Carroll's accreditation, see also John Prados and Ray W. Stubbe, *Valley of Decision, The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991), p. 448.

\*\*\* The confusion about the number of Marine casualties in the Khe Sanh battle is one aspect of the controversy over the defense of the base. According to general Marine Corps records, the Marines sustained casualties of 205 dead from November 1967 through the end of March, the period of Operation Scotland. The casualty reporting system was based on named operations rather than on actual locale. Another 92 Marines were killed in Operation Pegasus during April, and another 308 during Operation Scotland II through 30 June. Scotland II continued through the end of the year with another 72 Marines added to the KIA list. Obviously all of the operations included a broader area than the perimeter of the Khe Sanh base itself, thus compounding the difficulty in determining an exact number of casualties. To do so, the researcher must "clarify the time span and geographical area of the so-called 'Battle of Khe Sanh.'" Jack Shulimson, Sr. Vietnam Historian, ltr to Bert Mullins, dtd 2Sep1983 (Vietnam War, Khe Sanh



captured the personal interest of many Americans, to include President Johnson, Khe Sanh became a symbol. When U.S. forces withdrew from the hills of Khe Sanh, the inevitable question arose: "Why did we defend it in the first place?" At that point in time, in January 1968, there was probably no choice unless the

U.S. was prepared to air evacuate its troops and abandon its supplies there. Whether the base should have been closed immediately after Pegasus or whether a base should have been established there at all are still subjects of debate as is the motivation of the North Vietnamese in laying siege to the base.

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File, RefSec, MCHC). Former Navy Chaplain Lieutenant Commander Ray W. Stubbe, who has done extensive research in this area, has provided the following figures based on his findings: He found the number of Marines killed for Operation Scotland to be 274 as opposed to 205. He cautions, however, that there are differences between the figures given in the command chronologies and those in the after-action reports and that none of the totals really jibe. Lieutenant Commander Stubbe gives as the best total for Operation Scotland and Pegasus, not including Lang Vei, as 560, including specialized Marine, Army, and Air Force units. He gives a total of 219 KIA (Army and South Viet-

namese) for Lang Vei. Chaplain Stubbe explained that there were many reasons for the discrepancies including staff officers frequently engaged with an on-going operation, "while still attempting to write reports on a previous operation." He also observed that for most troops, "the entire period from the beginning of the siege until their departure is, for them, their 'Khe Sanh battle.' Dates of the beginnings and endings of the various operations are as artificial and abstract as the border of Laos and Vietnam! It is the difference between 'lived' battles and 'officially recorded' battles." LCdr Ray W. Stubbe, USN, Comments on draft, dtd 23Oct and 25Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).