

## Counteroffensive Operations in Southern ICTZ

*The Situation in September—Operation Maui Peak—The End of Mameluke Thrust and Renewed Attacks on Da Nang—Operation Meade River—Operation Taylor Common*

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### *The Situation in September*

Following the failure of the Communist “Third Offensive” in late August, III MAF forces in southern ICTZ pursued enemy forces, attempting to defeat them in detail, until Typhoon Bess brought most offensive operations to a halt. During the first week in September, 60-knot winds and 20 inches of rain battered the Da Nang area. Rivers swelled, flooding low-lying areas and carrying away bridges. Trenches and bunkers collapsed, mud slides closed Route 1 over Hai Van Pass, and aircraft remained grounded. In consolation, III MAF Marines had the satisfaction of knowing that the typhoon brought misery to the enemy, as well, flooding their many underground caches of food and arms.<sup>1\*</sup>

In the wake of the typhoon, III MAF forces underwent major organizational changes. On 10 September, the 27th Marines redeployed to the United States following seven months of combat in Vietnam, reducing by three the number of infantry battalions available to General Cushman. Colonel Robert G. Lauffer’s 1st Marines, under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division since late March returned at the end of August and early September to the 1st Marine Division and relieved the 27th Marines. The 2d Light Anti-Aircraft Missile Battalion, based near Chu Lai, which had stood ready to engage enemy aircraft since September 1965, but had never fired one of its HAWK missiles in anger, prepared for redeployment to the U.S. Operation Houston ended on 12 September, after more than six months during which the 5th Marines, and then the 26th Marines, kept Route 1 open between Phu Bai and Da Nang, killing a reported 702 enemy in the process. As Houston ended, XXIV Corps units assumed control of the area around Phu Bai, allowing General Youngdale to dissolve Task Force X-Ray and move the 26th Marines south to the Da Nang TAOR.<sup>2\*</sup>

While III MAF realigned forces, the enemy began recovering from the effects of the typhoon and the defeat of the Third Offensive, albeit the recovery was somewhat slow. At the same time, the Communists maintained pressure through small-scale terrorist and sapper attacks. In one small, but spectacular incident, an enemy sapper, using a bamboo reed as a snorkel, swam through heavy debris clogging the Vinh Dien River to place an explosive charge under the Tu Cau Bridge. The Marines guarding the bridge saw the sapper and took him under fire, but could not stop the attack. The charge exploded, damaging a 28-meter section of the bridge and closing it to vehicles.<sup>3</sup>

Southwest of Da Nang, Operation Mameluke Thrust continued, with the 5th Marines conducting offensive operations in the Arizona Territory and the An Hoa area, and the 7th Marines resumed offensive operations north of Go Noi Island immediately following the typhoon. On 14 September, Lieutenant Colonel Francis X. Quinn, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines commander, sent two of his companies, L and M, to establish blocking positions in support of an ARVN operation in the “Dodge City” sector outlined by the Thu Bon, Ai Nghia, and La Tho Rivers. As Company L started to move into its blocking position about 4,000 meters south of Hill 55, it came under automatic weapons and small arms fire as well as a mortar barrage from a Communist force of unknown-size, well-entrenched in concealed bunkers. In the ambush, the Marine company suffered heavy casualties, reporting 1 known dead, 21 wounded, and 4 Marines missing in action (MIA). Reinforced by Company M, Company L “returned fire and tried to retrieve the MIAs, but [were] unable to do so.” Pulling back to more defensive positions, the two Marine companies called upon supporting artillery and airstrikes as the fighting continued into the night. The Marines did capture one North Vietnamese prisoner who identified his unit as the *D-3 Sapper Battalion*.<sup>4</sup>

During the early morning hours of the 15th and under the cover of darkness, Lieutenant Colonel Quinn brought up his command group and newly attached

\*See Chapters 19 and 20 for accounts of the havoc that Typhoon Bess caused at Da Nang and in the DMZ respectively.

\*\*See Chapters 19 and 20 as well about the departure of the 27th Marines and the arrival of the 1st Marines at Da Nang.



Photocopy of III MAF Briefing Map (Nov-Dec 1968)

Gen Earl.E. Anderson Collection

Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines. Quinn consolidated the three companies in defensive positions about 3,000 meters to the southwest of the original contact. By this time, Colonel Herbert L. Beckington, the 7th Marines commander, had alerted Lieutenant Colonel LeRoy E. Watson, whose BLT 2/7 (the SLF battalion) was under the operational control of the 7th Marines. While BLT 2/7 established blocking positions, Quinn's 3d Battalion was to sweep through the previous day's contact area.<sup>5</sup>

As planned, at first light on the 15th, Marine helicopters landed the BLT 2/7 command group and Companies F and H in the southern Dodge City sector. At the same time, the three companies of Quinn's battalion attacked to the northeast. At 1700, Company L found the bodies of the four Marines who had been reported the previous day as missing in action. The two battalions linked up on the morning of 16 September and continued to sweep the area. While encountering no significant resistance, the Marines uncovered and destroyed 72 heavily fortified bunkers.<sup>6</sup>

Both battalions continued the search until the afternoon of 17 September. At that time, Colonel Becking-

ton, the 7th Marines commander, ordered a change in plans. The 3d Battalion, 7th Marines was to return to its combat base area the following morning while BLT 2/7 was to stay in place, receive reinforcements, and then support the 51st ARVN Regiment.<sup>7</sup>

As scheduled, on the morning of 18 September, Marine helicopters brought in Companies E and G of BLT 2/7 and took out the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines. BLT 2/7 advanced southeast below Route 4 toward the main north-south railroad line. The mission of the Marine battalion "was to conduct sweeps to find, fix and destroy the enemy" in the new area of operations. At the time, "the only certain information . . . was that ARVN forces of the 51 ARVN Regiment . . . were in contact with a 'large' NVA force" north of the La Tho River near the railroad. On the evening of the 18th, the BLT established defensive positions just west of the railroad berm.<sup>8</sup>

The following morning, the BLT reached the railroad near its intersection with Route 4 and prepared for resupply. Company F sent a security element into a treeline 250 meters east of the railroad. When the Marines approached to within 15 meters of the heavy

band of kunai grass and banana trees, hidden enemy troops opened fire. As the company mounted an attack, North Vietnamese troops in bunkers, holes, and trenches pounded the advancing Marines with heavy, grazing fire. Enemy rifles, machine guns, mortars, RPGs, and snipers positioned on the flanks, where the treeline extended in a crescent, inflicted 42 casualties on Company F in the initial moments of the battle including the company commander. Lieutenant Colonel Watson threw Companies G and H into the fight on either flank and Company E, previously in reserve, surged forward to replace the bloodied Company F.<sup>9</sup>

The heavy growth in the treeline compounded the Marines' problems in estimating the enemy's strength. While initial reports showed a North Vietnamese platoon in the treeline, the estimate later grew to two companies. To make matters worse, constant overflights by RVNAF aircraft supporting a nearby ARVN unit hampered the Marines' efforts to bring artillery fire on the enemy. For safety reasons, the Marines were compelled to "check fire" the artillery during these unannounced overflights.

Companies G and H pressed hard against the enemy's flanks, but more and more Marines fell under the ferocious hail of fire coming from the NVA position. Late in the afternoon, the 7th Marines directed

the helilift of two companies of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, who established blocking positions along the Suoi Co Ca, 1,000 meters to the east. The battle raged, however, until 1900, when BLT 2/7 broke contact and withdrew to the railroad berm so that supporting arms could engage the enemy without endangering friendly troops. Casualties totalled 14 Marines dead and 54 wounded, as well as 19 non-battle casualties (a category which included accidental injuries, heat casualties, and the like).<sup>10</sup>

On 20 September, BLT 2/7 directed a heavy preparation fire against the treeline, pounding it liberally with artillery, mortars, and airstrikes. At first light, the Marines moved forward in the attack once again, this time meeting no resistance. Inside the treeline, they found a well-developed fortified position and three dead enemy soldiers of the NVA *2d Battalion, 36th Regiment*.<sup>11</sup>

Companies G and H continued past the treeline toward the 3d Battalion blocking positions near the Suoi Co Ca. By 0800, Company G was engaged with a large enemy force, which it believed to include a battalion command post, in the hamlet of Nong Son (2), about 600 meters from the river. Company G disengaged with 5 Marines dead and 19 wounded, then called for air and artillery support, while Company H attacked the enemy's right flank against strong resis-

*A Navy corpsman serving with BLT 2/7 south of Da Nang rushes forward toward the smoke cover to take care of a wounded Marine. Strands of a barbed wire fence can be seen behind him.*

Photo is from the Abel Collection





Photo is from the Abel Collection

*PFC R. R. Kransiewski, right, adjusts the antenna of radioman LCpl A. J. Terry, who is talking on the radio during a routine sweep south of Da Nang by Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines. Other Marines of the company can be seen advancing in the background.*

tance. At 0900, while the battle raged, Lieutenant Colonel Charles F. Bunnell, Jr., replaced Lieutenant Colonel Watson as Commanding Officer, BLT 2/7.

In the early afternoon, ARVN units to the north began pushing the enemy southward. BLT 2/7 maintained steady pressure from the west, so that the North Vietnamese were forced into the 3d Battalion's blocking position. Airstrikes and artillery fire tore into the trapped enemy. At 1600, with the North Vietnamese still resisting strongly, aircraft unloaded 500-pound bombs and napalm on them,

prompting enemy troops to begin fleeing in groups of 20 to 30. Aircraft and artillery continued to bombard the area, but a North Vietnamese flag still flew over an enemy bunker.

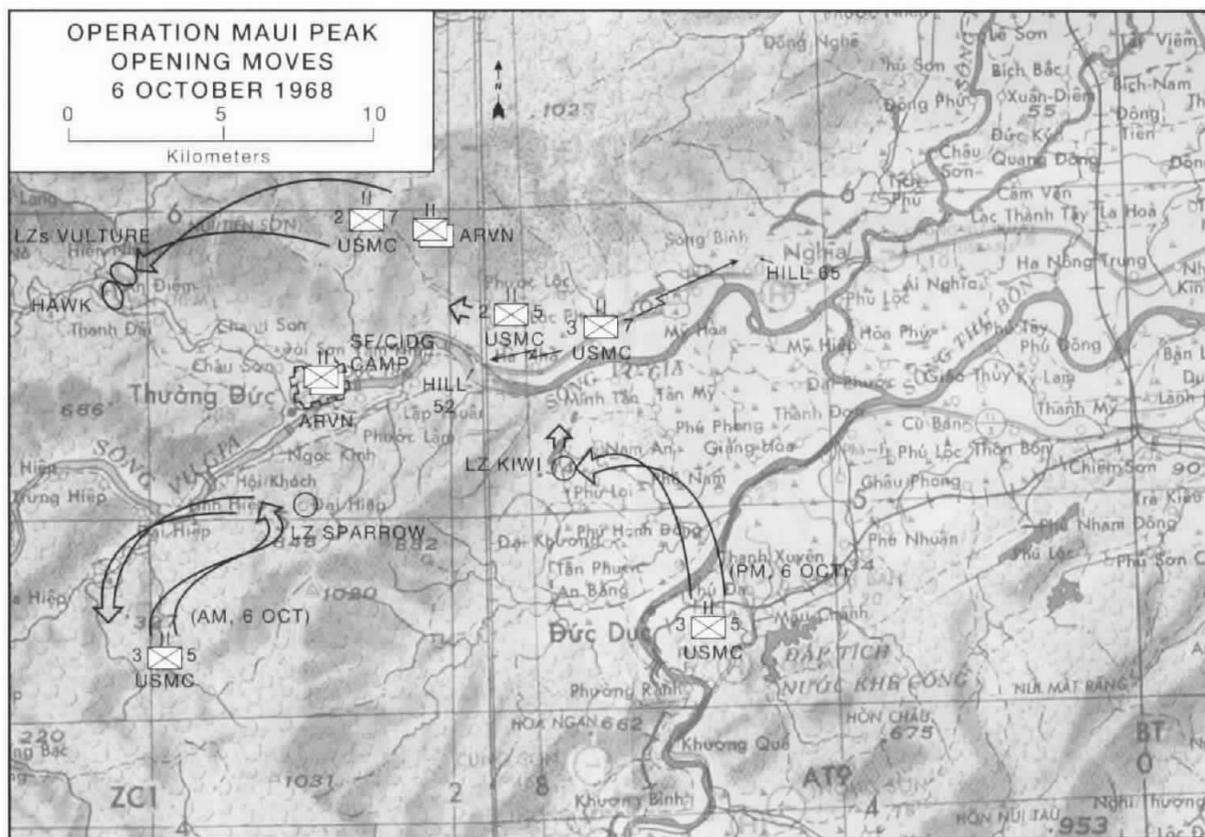
Companies G and H moved forward in the assault, soon hitting antipersonnel mines and boobytraps. Despite the heavy bombing, the remaining North Vietnamese maintained heavy and accurate fire from their fortifications. At dusk, the Marines dug in, hard by the North Vietnamese bunkers. Late that night, Marines reported a strong odor of marijuana drifting from the enemy's positions.

At dawn on the 21st, the Marines attacked once more, and quickly captured the objective. They found the area so liberally seeded with mines and boobytraps that, after three Marines suffered wounds, both companies withdrew and called an airstrike against the area in hopes of detonating the devices. Returning once again, they found the usual assortment of bunkers, trenches, and fighting holes, food, equipment, and documents. Three prisoners indicated that the area was the command post of the NVA 36th Regiment and the main position of that organization's 2d Battalion. The Marines reported 69 enemy dead, and the prisoners admitted that their battalion had lost 80 dead and 60 wounded in the previous day's fight at the treeline. Their battalion's assistant commander was killed in the action.<sup>12</sup>

After another day of sweeping the area, BLT 2/7 returned to the Dai La Pass sector west of Hill 327 and assumed a division reserve mission. The 3d Battalion remained south of Hill 55, searching for the enemy, but the destruction of the 2d Battalion, 36th NVA Regiment brought at least temporary calm to that part of the province.<sup>13</sup>

As often happened, however, a hard-fought victory in one part of the province had no effect on enemy activity elsewhere. Shortly after midnight on 21 September, three explosions rocked the Esso gasoline depot at the northern end of Da Nang Bay. With two large fuel storage tanks ablaze, sentries fired on a man who entered the water immediately after the attack, but the man apparently escaped. Later, Marines found a ladder, satchel charges, blasting caps, and a length of fuze in and around the compound.<sup>14</sup>

The following night, Communist rocket units attacked Marble Mountain Air Facility, damaging 45 helicopters. Other rockets struck Da Nang Airbase, Force Logistic Command, the NSA Hospital, and I Corps headquarters. At the same time, enemy forces launched company-sized ground attacks on Hoi An,



Dien Ban, and several Combined Action Platoons. One of these attacks, carried out against the Vinh Dien Bridge, one kilometer north of Dien Ban, temporarily closed Highway 1.

On 29 September, south of the Thu Bon River near Liberty Bridge in the Go Noi Island sector, elements of the 5th Marines engaged a large enemy force in the village of Cu Ban, a notorious Communist hideout and scene of many firefights. In a two-day battle, the Marines surrounded and pressed hard against the North Vietnamese. Late on the 30th, Company F, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines assaulted the village and overwhelmed the defenders, reporting 57 enemy dead and 3 prisoners. Seven Marines died and 12 suffered wounds in the fight. Further to the west at the end of the month, NVA regular forces threatened the Special Forces Camp at Thuong Duc, resulting in a III MAF multi-battalion operation.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Operation Maui Peak*

The Special Forces camp at Thuong Duc was nestled in a valley at the confluence of the Song Vu Gia and the Song Con, where “Green Berets” trained

and advised CIDG troops recruited from the local villages. By controlling these two river valleys, the Special Forces soldiers and their CIDG counterparts forced the enemy to move troops and supplies bound for the Da Nang area along far more difficult routes through the mountainous jungle. Additionally, they denied the enemy access to the source of food and recruits located in the populated areas along the rivers.

Near the end of September, the Communists were ready to strike. III MAF intelligence officers identified elements of two NVA infantry regiments surrounding the camp: the 21st from the 2d NVA Division and a new 141st Regiment. The 368B Rocket Regiment was in support. In a pre-dawn attack on 28 September, the enemy overran and occupied two of the camp's outposts, seriously threatening the main compound. With bad weather hampering normal close air support operations, a Marine Tactical Air Control Party flew into Thuong Duc in the late afternoon. Using a radar beacon, the forward air controller directed 18 sorties of Grumman A-6A Intruder all-weather attack aircraft against the enemy force. By the afternoon of the 29th, the enemy troops occupying the two outposts with-

drew, their position rendered untenable by the A-6A Intruders of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.<sup>16\*</sup>

With Thuong Duc temporarily safe, but still surrounded, General Youngdale moved to lift the siege, assigning Colonel Beckington's 7th Marines the task. For Operation Maui Peak, Youngdale gave Beckington control of the 7th Marines' own 3d Battalion and BLT 2/7 (still the SLF battalion, but temporarily under the operational control of the 7th Marines), and the 2d and 3d Battalions, 5th Marines. General Cushman placed one brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division on six-hour standby to reinforce, and General Lam assigned four ARVN battalions to operate in coordination with the Marines.<sup>17\*\*</sup>

On 1 October, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines was conducting operations along the southern bank of the Thu Bon River in the An Hoa sector and Company G

had engaged a small enemy force near the river edge. Lieutenant Colonel James W. Stemple later related that in the middle of this firefight he received orders from the 5th Marines that he was being attached to the 7th Marines for a new operation and that he should prepare his battalion for immediate helicopter movement to Hill 65, about 15 kilometers east of Thuong Duc. Immediately detaching from the engagement, the battalion consisting of Companies E and G, and Company A from the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, arrived at Hill 65 about 1300. At that point, Stemple remembered he was told to report to Colonel Beckington at the 7th Marines command post on Hill 55. After some delay to obtain a jeep, he arrived in time to attend the 7th Marines briefing for the operation. Stemple later observed that he was not too inspired when one of the briefing officers remarked, "I don't know how we are going to support this operation; I guess we'll play it by ear."<sup>18</sup>

According to Stemple, the concept of operations called for his battalion to secure not only Hill 65, but also Hill 52, only six kilometers from Thuong Duc, before nightfall. Upon his return to Hill 65 and maintaining an outpost there, the battalion moved out in a column of companies following Route 4. With an attached engineer platoon from the 1st Engineer Battalion assisting in the detecting and clearing of antipersonnel, antivehicle, and antitank mines, the battalion arrived at Hill 52 about 1630. In taking the hill, the Marines captured one prisoner from the *141st NVA Regiment*.<sup>19</sup>

While the battalion gained a measure of control over Route 4, which was the only road available for ground resupply, Lieutenant Colonel Stemple vaguely recalled that an enemy road mine accounted for at least one Marine vehicle. During the next four days, artillery units of the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines and Army 175mm guns of the 4th Battalion, 8th Field Artillery took up firing positions at Hills 65 and 52. The 3d Battalion, 7th Marines moved into the area between the two hills, guarding the road and freeing the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines to direct its efforts westward, toward the enemy.

On the morning of 6 October, attack aircraft and B-52s began bombarding landing zones in the hills surrounding Thuong Duc.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> At the same time, the 2d

\* About mid-July, III MAF intelligence officers reported that captured enemy documents indicated that a new regiment, the *141st NVA Regiment*, *312th NVA Division*, was operating in Quang Nam Province. The first prisoner from the regiment was captured on 5 September, and stated that the regiment had been activated in North Vietnam in 1966. It left North Vietnam in January 1968 and arrived in western Quang Nam about the end of May. In mid-September, the *21st NVA Regiment*, *2d NVA Division* had moved up from Quang Tin Province into southern Quang Nam. According to a Marine intelligence analysis of 15 September, three North Vietnamese Regiments, the *31st*, *21st*, and *141st*, were in position to pose a threat to Thuong Duc. In the attacks on the Special Forces Camp on 28-29 September, the allies captured prisoners from both the *21st* and the *141st*. See: III MAF PerIntRep No. 30-68, dtd 28Jul68, p. A-44, in III MAF PerIntReps, 14Jul-31Aug68; III MAF PerIntRpts, No. 37-68, dtd 15Sep68, pp. 4 and B-3, and No. 40-68, dtd 8Oct68, p. B-3, in III MAF PerIntReps, 1Sep-12Oct68. Lieutenant Colonel Merrill L. Bartlett, who as a captain in September 1968 assumed command of the 13th Interrogation and Translation Team assigned to the 5th Marines, remembered that when he arrived at An Hoa, he "immediately formed sub-teams of one officer, one NCO, and one ARVN each and sent them to the bush with the three infantry battalions of the 5th Marines." Bartlett recalled that the 5th Marines in September captured a North Vietnamese private whose interrogation revealed that he was from the *141st NVA Regiment*, but that intelligence officers from the 1st Marine Division refused to accept that he was from that regiment. Lieutenant Colonel Bartlett faulted the Marine intelligence system in the 1st Marine Division for "failure to get the word down to the subordinate units, reluctance to believe anything unless it was supported by 'usually reliable sources' (intercepts by radio battalion or counter-intelligence agent report), and unwillingness to change an opinion or assessment once it was determined." LtCol Merrill L. Bartlett, Comments on draft, dtd 8Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Bartlett Comments.

\*\* There is also some confusion about the allied supporting forces. Although some sources indicate that the only ARVN units participating were the 1st and 2d Battalions, 51st Regiment, others note that two ARVN Ranger battalions were in reserve. Also, where 1st MarDiv FragO 405-68 specifies a brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division on standby, 1st MarDiv ComdC, Oct68, p. 21 claims that it was a brigade of the 101st Airborne Division.

\*\*\* Colonel Stemple remembered that several bombs from one of the B-52s, "fell short of their objective with two bombs landing in the E/2/5 area to the rear of Hill 52." Fortunately there were no Marine casualties and the rest of the errant bombs fell harmlessly into the river. Col James W. Stemple, Comments on draft, n.d. [1995] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Stemple Comments.



Photocopy of painting from Marine Corps Art Collection

*In this contemporary painting by Marine combat artist Maj Albert M. "Mike" Leaby, the artist depicts a Marine Douglas A-4E Skyhawk in a close air support mission during Operation Maui Peak about to bomb and rocket enemy positions on a ridgeline near LZ Sparrow. Thuong Duc can be seen in the background.*

Battalion, 5th Marines stepped off in the attack westward along Route 4 toward the Special Forces camp. This was to be a feint to distract the enemy from the landing of the helicopter-borne elements. Soon after crossing the line of departure, however, the Marines became decisively engaged with the NVA 1st Battalion, 141st Regiment, and Colonel Beckington canceled the plan for a feint and ordered the 2d Battalion to clear the enemy from the battlefield.<sup>20</sup>

While the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines mounted the hills overlooking Route 4 and came to grips with the enemy, other units joined the operation. At 1030, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing helicopters, carrying the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, swooped down into LZ Sparrow, four kilometers south of Thuong Duc. The preparation fires had ended at 0730, after severely pounding the LZ

and surrounding area. If the fires had hurt the North Vietnamese units in the vicinity, the enemy commander apparently made good use of the three-hour break between the end of the preparation and the landing of the helicopters. As the first wave of aircraft touched down in the landing zone, a hail of heavy machine gun fire filled the air. Unable to complete the mission against such stiff resistance, the helicopters turned away, carrying the 3d Battalion back to An Hoa.<sup>21</sup>

At 1100, BLT 2/7 and two ARVN battalions landed unopposed in LZ Vulture and LZ Hawk, seven kilometers northwest of Thuong Duc. While the rest of the battalion remained at the LZ with Battery W, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, Companies E and G, 7th Marines struck out for the high ground overlooking Thuong Duc from the north. The terrain was extremely chal-

lenging. At times, the Marines needed lifelines to negotiate steep hills covered by a thick jungle canopy and dense undergrowth.<sup>22</sup>

Back on Route 4, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines was still involved in a heated battle against North Vietnamese units in the hills overlooking the road. At one point, where the road passed along a very narrow gap between the river and a large, steep hill, the enemy put up a spirited defense, beating back the Marines' first two assaults. After a third pounding by supporting arms, the battalion attacked and captured the hill, gaining control of the vital pass.<sup>23</sup>

In the late afternoon, Colonel Beckington ordered the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, already "shot out" of one LZ that day, to mount a helicopter-borne assault into LZ Kiwi, nine kilometers northeast of LZ Sparrow. Accordingly, the battalion landed at 1740, then marched a kilometer north and established a defensive position on a hilltop overlooking the southern bank of the Song Vu Gia. With the exception of an assault by two squads of North Vietnamese against the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, the night passed quietly.<sup>24</sup>

On 7 October, the 7th Marines began to close the circle around Thuong Duc. To the west, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines attacked along the valley of the Song Con and along the ridges overlooking it. It did not make contact with the enemy, but lost one Marine to heat stroke in the torturous terrain. Likewise, southeast of Thuong Duc, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines moved southwest into the rugged mountains, suffering eight casualties from a combination of heat and falls from the steep slopes.<sup>25</sup>

General Youngdale assigned the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines to the operation, and Colonel Beckington ordered it to attempt another helicopter-borne assault into LZ Sparrow. Since the aborted assault of the previous day, attack aircraft had thoroughly blasted the area around the LZ with 750-pound bombs and Fuel-Air Explosive (FAE)\* bombs, but this, apparently, "did not faze the defenses." As the helicopters once again descended into LZ Sparrow at 0910, Communist antiaircraft gunners once more opened up with an overwhelming fire, turning away the assault for the second time.<sup>26</sup>

The main action of 7 October occurred along Route 4 where the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines ran into strong enemy opposition. Company A, 5th Marines, under

the control of the 2d Battalion, engaged two entrenched North Vietnamese platoons on a steep hill adjacent to the highway, only 200 meters west of the hill the battalion had seized the previous day. Even after aircraft and artillery fire pounded the objective, the North Vietnamese still resisted fiercely. Company A fell back with 12 wounded and occupied the same position as it had the previous night. According to Marine sources, the enemy lost 42 dead in the fight.<sup>27</sup>

After another full day of preparation fires, Company E, 5th Marines, supported by four M48 tanks, attacked the hill late in the afternoon of 8 October, finally capturing it just before dusk after a brisk fight in which one Marine died and nine others suffered wounds. On the hill, the Marines reported 37 dead North Vietnamese.<sup>28</sup>

Elsewhere in the operation, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines continued its slow advance along the steep ridge west of Thuong Duc which separated the Song Vu Gia from the Song Con. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines moved ever deeper into the mountains south of the Special Forces camp, struggling against heat and rough terrain which combined to result, on 8–9 October, in 40 nonbattle casualties, some fatal.<sup>29\*\*</sup>

The North Vietnamese reserved their main effort against the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines in the fight for control of Route 4. At 0400, 12 October, 82mm mortar fire began falling on Company E. Following a preparation of about 40 rounds, an NVA company struck the Marines. As the North Vietnamese infantry attacked, the mortar fire continued, but shifted to Company G, which was to the rear of Company E. Using a heavy volume of small arms and RPG fire, the enemy closed to within grenade-throwing range. Company E held fast, calling for fire support, which involved more than 1,000 rounds of artillery (including 8-inch howitzers) and mortar fire, attack aircraft, and AC-47 gunships. The Marines reported killing 46 North Vietnamese and capturing 1 in the fight. Lieutenant Colonel Stemple, the battalion commander, commented "this was a particularly vicious attack against 'E' Company that almost succeeded." He cred-

\* An aircraft-delivered canister which releases an explosive aerosol vapor over an area, then ignites the vapor, creating blast overpressure which causes casualties and explodes mines.

\*\*The largest number of non-battle casualties involved Marine helicopters. In addition to the casualties on the 8th and 9th, on 11 October, a resupply helicopter from HMM-265, "carrying replacements and supplies . . . was struck from below by a H-34D helo [from HMM 362] that had just taken off." According to Colonel Stemple, who witnessed the accident, "both helicopters exploded in flames a few hundred feet over the river [Song Vu Gia] and crashed." There were no survivors. Stemple Comments. See also MAG-16 ComdC, Oct68; HMM-265 ComdC, Oct68; and HMM-362 ComdC, Oct68.



Photo is from the Abel Collection

*Troops from the 5th Marines cross a small stream in Operation Maui Peak. The second Marine in the water is carrying a 3.5-inch rocket launcher and a following Marine carries a rocket round for the weapon in addition to his rifle.*

ited the close air support “very instrumental in turning the tide of battle . . . .” Friendly casualties totalled 8 dead and 20 wounded.<sup>30</sup>

During the next few days, enemy contact diminished. BLT 2/7 finished its sweep of the high ground and moved into the valley, nearer the Special Forces camp. The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines maintained its position and conducted patrols. South of the Song Vu Gia, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines continued to struggle through the heavily forested and treacherous slopes, finally capturing LZ Sparrow on 14 October with the only enemy resistance being desultory mortar fire. Later that day, Company F of BLT 2/7 entered the Thuong Duc Special Forces camp, officially lifting the so-called “siege.”<sup>31\*</sup>

\*Lieutenant Colonel Ronald R. Welpott, who as a captain commanded Company F during the operation, recalled that his company was the only one to enter the camp “as the size of the camp and heavy rains made it more suitable for the rest of the battalion to remain in the hills above the camp to the northwest.” Lieutenant Colonel Ronald R. Welpott, Comments on draft, dtd 19Mar95 (Vietnam Comment File).

In mid-October, Tropical Storm Elaine struck Quang Nam, dramatically curtailing operations.<sup>\*\*</sup> In the seven days ending on 18 October, 39 inches of rain fell around Thuong Duc, with as much as 13 inches falling in a single day. Swollen rivers washed away many bridges and left others under six feet of water. Air operations slowed to a near halt and many units, particularly those in the hills, suffered a lack of critical supplies. The Special Forces unit at Thuong Duc supplied some food to the Marines to see them through the crisis. Eventually, the rain washed out Route 4 between Hills 52 and 65, then Route 540, to the east, over which convoys carried supplies to Hill 65 for distribution to the forces participating in Operation Maui Peak.<sup>32</sup>

\*\*General E. E. Anderson, the III MAF Chief of Staff, observed at the time in personal letters that the storm had brought both U.S. and enemy operations “to a standstill,” and that for “several days we needed wading boots and rain suits.” BGen E.E. Anderson, ltrs to MajGen McCutcheon, dtd 17Oct68 and LtGen W. J. Van Ryzin, dtd 25Oct68, Encl to Gen E.E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

On 17 October, with the mission accomplished, the rain seriously hampering offensive operations, and the enemy relatively quiet, Colonel Beckington ordered all units to prepare to withdraw. By 19 October, only the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines remained, and Operation Maui Peak officially came to a close.<sup>33\*</sup>

*The End of Mameluke Thrust  
and Renewed Attacks on Da Nang*

Operation Mameluke Thrust\*\* ended on 23 October, after five months, with the participating units reporting 2,730 enemy killed, 47 prisoners, and 8 ralliers. As the 5th Marines closed Mameluke Thrust, it opened Operation Henderson Hill in the same AO. The net result of this was a continuation of the same operation, in the same area, under a new operational codename. Lieutenant Colonel Stemple remembered that the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines had returned to the An Hoa sector after Maui Peak, and on the 23d, his battalion command group and two of his companies were patrolling the area east of Liberty Road, when he received word to disengage. The Marines boarded trucks and returned to An Hoa where Stemple was met by Major General Youngdale and several members of the 1st Marine Division staff. According to Stemple, the division commander told him that a new NVA regiment, the *90th*, was suspected of having moved into the Arizona Territory and that there had been numerous sightings of enemy troops in the area. After a quick aerial reconnaissance, Stemple and the MAG-16 helicopter coordinator selected a primary and secondary landing zone. While enemy small arms fire prevented the landing in the primary zone, the Marine battalion reached its assigned objectives in the Arizona before nightfall, but no indication of the reported large numbers of North Vietnamese troops. In a series of sweeps as part of Henderson Hill during the next few days, both the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 5th Marines developed little enemy contact, but captured a 24-page document describing the enemy's proposed "Winter-Spring 1968-69 Campaign." The

\*Colonel Stemple, the commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, believed it was obvious that the North Vietnamese were "not investing too much in Thoung Duc except using it as 'bait' to invite a III MAF response along Route 4 where they could select and prepare positions from which they could attack the U.S. reaction force." While stating that "2/5 beat its head out against the 141st (well dug-in)," Stemple understood that later reports indicated that the NVA regiment "took such a beating that . . . [it] never recovered." Stemple Comments.

\*\*See Chapters 17 and 19.

operation then continued in the An Hoa and Go Noi Island sectors into November.<sup>34</sup>

October ended as the first month since December 1967 during which the enemy launched no rocket attacks. NVA commissars and VC cadres, though, dramatically stepped up their political proselytizing. They visited hamlets, ostensibly to "train" the populace for upcoming elections which were supposed to result in the formation of "People's Revolutionary Committees." Enemy propagandists distributed leaflets and used loudspeakers to appeal to ARVN troops to desert. In the village of Nui Dat Son, which was adjacent to the large Marine base at Hill 55, the villagers conducted an antiwar demonstration calling for an end to U.S. bombing of villages. South Vietnamese National Police arrested 71 of the demonstrators, 60 of whom they later released. Intelligence reports filtering in to III MAF indicated that the Communists planned a nationwide demonstration during November, in which "the people" would demand the neutralization of central Vietnam.<sup>35</sup>

On Halloween night, President Johnson announced from Washington that, effective 0800, 1 November (2100, Saigon time), the U.S. would halt all bombing of North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese, who had stridently insisted on an unconditional bombing halt, had finally accepted a compromise agreement which allowed the inclusion of the South Vietnamese and Viet Cong in the Paris peace negotiations. The only military conditions imposed were an end to North Vietnamese violations of the DMZ, and an end to their attacks on cities and towns in South Vietnam. The President's announcement had no noticeable effect on the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing's "out-of-country" sortie rate. The missions previously flown over North Vietnam were transferred to Laos.<sup>36\*\*\*</sup>

Again, the Communists stepped up political and propaganda activity in the villages of ICTZ. Commissars hailed the bombing halt as a great Communist victory. They conducted further controlled elections of so-called "Liberation Committees", proclaiming that "a coalition government for South Vietnam is near at hand."<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, the war went on. In Operation Henderson Hill, the 5th Marines surrounded and attacked the NVA *1st Battalion, 36th Regiment* at the familiar battlefield of Chau Phong, site of so many earlier engagements. Uncharacteristically, the enemy did not defend, but rather, attempted to escape, the NVA

\*\*\*See also Chapters 20 and 24.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A 371827

*Marine engineers probe for more rockets as they explore an enemy rocket site. On a mud ramp ready to fire are three NVA 140mm rockets.*

troops donning disguises, hiding their weapons, and attempting to slip through Marine lines in the dark.<sup>38</sup>

On 16 November, the enemy went on the offensive around Da Nang, conducting ground attacks and firing 122mm rockets at Da Nang Airbase and the port, one of which scored a direct hit on the deep-water pier, killing 2 people and wounding 16 others. Within the city, several small firefights erupted, in which Free World security units captured seven prisoners claiming to belong to the *Q.91 Special Action Sapper Unit*. North of the city, near the Song Cu De, North Vietnamese forces overran and annihilated a seven-man ambush team from the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines. The dead Marines all suffered bullet wounds to the head inflicted at close range, in execution fashion. At the opposite end of the Da Nang TAOR, at the Vinh Dien Bridge north of Dien Ban, elements of the *NVA 36th Regiment* attacked ARVN bridge security units and a Combined Action platoon. In heavy fighting that lasted through the following day, the Marine command reported 305 North Vietnamese dead.<sup>39</sup>

The enemy offensive around Da Nang continued for several days. In an indirect fire attack during the night of the 19th, 13 rockets fell on the Force Logistic Command, and another 12 struck the city. At Marble Mountain Air Facility, mortar fire wounded 7 men and damaged 13 helicopters. Mortar fire also struck the NSA Hospital. On the morning of the 21st, 10 rockets hit the 1st Marine Division command post,

killing 2 American soldiers and destroying a helicopter and 2 jeeps.<sup>40</sup>

During the night of the 21st, an enemy battalion attacked An Hoa. Supported by fire from 82mm and 60mm mortars, 57mm recoilless rifles, and B-40 rockets, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops advanced against the base's eastern perimeter. When the attack began at 2200, Marine tank and artillery crews on the perimeter began direct fire against the advancing enemy, using "Beehive" antipersonnel ammunition.\* Amphibian tractors arrived and added the weight of their machine guns to the battle.

CAP 2-9-1, positioned in the hamlet of Mau Chanh (2), about a kilometer east of the base, lay in the path of the attack. The CAP Marines and their PF counterparts took the enemy flanks and rear under fire, calling for air and artillery support. At 2330, the Communist troops fell on CAP 2-9-1. AC-47 gunships held back the enemy while a platoon of Marines mounted in amphibian tractors, with tanks and helicopter gunships escorting, attacked east from An Hoa to reinforce the hamlet and bring an ammunition resupply.

The battle raged for five hours, during which the Marines threw back four waves of attacking NVA and VC. At 0330 the shooting died down. Despite the

\* Each "Beehive" projectile contains thousands of tiny darts, called flechettes, which are expelled and thrown forward at high velocity, spreading in a deadly pattern.





Photo is from the Col Robert G. Lauffer, USMC (Ret), Collection

*In an aerial view of the 36-square-mile "Dodge City" area south of Da Nang, the Ky Lam River, the southern boundary of the sector, is at the top.*

like many which had been conducted previously, but on a much grander scale. Rather than surround and search single hamlets or villages, the division planned a cordon around 36 square kilometers in the Dodge City area, south of Da Nang.

Like Go Noi island to the south, Dodge City was heavily infested with Communists. At the center of the fertile Da Nang-Hoi An-Dai Loc Triangle, the area's terrain was almost completely flat, reaching only four to five meters above sea level. Many hamlets dotted the countryside, homes to the farming families who tended the vast tracts of rice paddies. Waterways of various sizes crossed Dodge City, as did the National Railroad and Route 4. The characteristics of the area gave it special potential as a source of food and recruits for the enemy. Its proximity to Da Nang, Hoi An, and the Dien Ban District headquarters gave it tactical significance as a possible enemy staging area for attacks on those key locations.<sup>44</sup>

Colonel Lauffer, the commander of the 1st Marines, recalled that the Korean Brigade had the tactical responsibility for the area, but had failed to keep the Communist forces out. Since its arrival at Da Nang, the 1st Marines TAOR included the area to the north of Dodge City, but in almost self-defense, the regiment had conducted several small-scale operations "to familiarize units with the situation and to gain additional intelligence." According to Lauffer, "we were fully apprised of the fluid and rapidly changing situation concerning enemy troop strength in the Dodge City area." For Operation Meade River, Marine intelligence officers estimated that enemy forces in Dodge City numbered between 100 and 150 Viet Cong infrastructure personnel and could include up to 900 NVA or VC regular forces. The only identified units in the sector, however, were two VC companies, the *R-20 VC Battalion* and the *1st Battalion, 36th NVA Regiment*, totalling an estimated 630 enemy troops.<sup>45</sup>

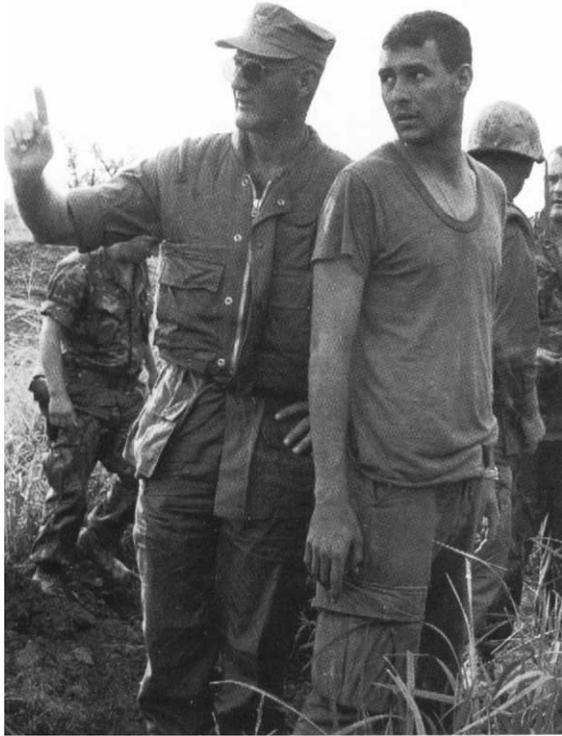


Photo is from the Col Robert G. Lauffer, USMC (Ret), Collection Col Robert G. Lauffer, the commander of the 1st Marines in Operation Meade River, is accompanied in the field by 1stLt Francis B. Ahearn, the S-2, or intelligence officer, of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.

Early on the morning of 20 November, seven Marine battalions, under the control of the 1st Marines, began moving into prearranged positions to form a ring around part of Dodge City.\* Using 72 aircraft, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in one of its largest helicopter operations lifted four battalions (one of them from amphibious shipping lying offshore). Trucks moved another battalion, and two battalions marched in. By 0825, Dodge City lay within the 1st Marines' cordon. Colonel Lauffer observed that a helicopter was available to him throughout Meade River and that "concerned commanders were given numerous airborne views to enhance our tactical decisions."<sup>46</sup>

In the initial hours of the operation, the Marines encountered light resistance. The Communist forces

\*Colonel Lauffer commented that he actually had operational control of nine infantry battalions. While seven participated in Operation Meade River, he kept two battalions in his regular area of operations, "particularly concentrating on the rocket and mortar belts." Because of the large size of his TAOR, he normally had four battalions under his control. Col Robert G. Lauffer, Comments on draft, dtd 29Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Lauffer Comments.

shot down two 1st Marine Aircraft Wing helicopters and damaged several others during the assault. On the ground, they used a command-detonated mine to destroy a truck, killing 1 Marine and wounding 23 Marines and 2 ARVN soldiers.<sup>47\*\*</sup>

Along the Song La Tho, where the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines manned the northern edge of the cordon, helicopters lifted in two towers. In the flat terrain, these towers provided improved observation for Marines controlling artillery fire and airstrikes. Snipers also manned the towers and engaged enemy troops in Dodge City. Clockwise around the cordon from the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines were: BLT 2/26; the 2d and 3d Battalions, 5th Marines; the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines; BLT 2/7; and finally, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines.<sup>48</sup>

Just before noon, Lieutenant Colonel Neil A. Nelson's BLT 2/7 began the next phase of the operation by attacking from its position on the western side of the cordon toward the railroad berm. By 1600, Company H secured the southern end of the battalion's objective, after only minor contact with the enemy. At 1630, however, the battalion ran headlong into a strong Communist defensive complex located at a large bend in a stream which Marines called the "Horseshoe." Company G, attacking in the center of the BLT 2/7 zone of action, made heavy contact with what proved to be North Vietnamese regulars. Under fierce fire from mutually supporting bunkers, Company G withdrew one kilometer, leaving behind six Marines, believed dead.<sup>49</sup>

When darkness fell over Dodge City, artillery and aircraft units illuminated the area with flares. Psychological operations (PsyOps) team used powerful loudspeakers to advise civilians of the cordon and to direct them to central collection points for the questioning which was intended to winnow out the Communists among them. BLT 2/7 licked its wounds and prepared to resume the assault on the Horseshoe.<sup>50</sup>

Colonel Lauffer decided to reinforce BLT 2/7 for the attack. He ordered Company D, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and Company L, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines to report to Lieutenant Colonel Nelson for duty. Nel-

\*\* According to Colonel Lauffer, the mine knocking out the truck could have been even more devastating: "Highway 1, in many areas was rimmed on either side with rice paddies or low wet areas. A breach in the road could have been catastrophic." To prevent such a breach, the Marines had "strategically prepositioned dump trucks loaded with gravel and marsten matting." This precaution permitted the convoy to continue "to join those in front of the explosion with little delay." Lauffer Comments.



Photo is from the Abel Collection

*Infantrymen from the 5th Marines advance through five-foot elephant grass after being dropped into a landing zone during Operation Meade River. In one of the largest lifts, Marine helicopters brought four Marine battalions into the cordon operation.*

son placed all four of his own companies on line for the assault, then used Company L as his new reserve. He ordered Company D to move south and to sweep the northern flank of Company F, which was on the battalion left.<sup>51</sup>

Nelson scheduled a preparation fire to begin on the Horseshoe at 0630. The fire support units found it difficult to coordinate their fires because of the proximity of friendly units to one another, and the almost circular shape of the cordon, which required extraordinary care to deliver fires safely. Thus, the preparation was delayed until 0920.

The enemy reacted violently, even before the infantry attack began. As Company G moved into positions from which it was to provide supporting fire, the North Vietnamese went into action. Heavy fire drove Company G to cover. Company F attempted to carry out a flank attack from the north to relieve the pressure, but, according to Captain Ronald R. Welpott, the company commander, "due to sporadic enemy contact, boobytraps, and difficult terrain," it could not find a place to ford the stream separating it

from the enemy bunkers.<sup>52</sup> Once again, the attack bogged down and ground to a halt.<sup>53</sup>

The next day, 22 November, BLT 2/7 launched a third attack on the Horseshoe. Following essentially the same plan as the previous day, Company G established a base of fire while Companies D, 1st Marines and E, 7th Marines attacked from the north, crossing the stream to strike the enemy's right flank. The North Vietnamese hid in their bunkers during the preparation fire, then, when the fire lifted, assumed mutually supporting fighting positions. They usually attempted to keep a rice paddy or other natural barrier between them and the Marines, and in this case, caught Company E at the stream and poured on extremely heavy fire from a range of 100 meters. In 10 minutes, the company lost 7 killed and 23 wounded. With the company commander among the wounded, Company E broke contact and withdrew to the north bank of the stream.

Meanwhile, Company D crossed the Song La Tho and attacked south along the railroad berm, about a mile east of where the BLT 2/7 attack had stalled. The

North Vietnamese within the Horseshoe pounded the advancing Marines with machine guns, rifles, and mortars, but Company D advanced to within 300 meters of the Communist positions as casualties continued to mount. Enemy fire struck down the radio operators for the forward air controller and the battalion tactical radio net, greatly compounding communications problems. Finally, with 2 Marines dead and 17 wounded, Company D withdrew to the stream, but remained on the south bank, setting up an LZ to evacuate the wounded. Medevac helicopters arrived, only to have the North Vietnamese drive them away under heavy fire. Only after dark could Company D begin to medevac its casualties, even then still under heavy fire. Another night fell with the Horseshoe still in enemy hands.

During the morning hours of 23 November, while BLT 2/7 remained in position, still evacuating casual-

ties from the previous day's action, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines advanced from the southwest corner of the cordon into Dodge City. With its right flank anchored on the railroad berm, the battalion attacked across Route 4, moving north. As the battalion approached the Horseshoe, the NVA opened fire and the Marines took cover.<sup>54</sup>

BLT 2/7 joined the attack once again. Company G opened fire on the Communist positions, and Company H, now on the left of the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines swept northward and overran one group of enemy positions. BLT 2/7 recovered the bodies of the six Company G Marines missing from the initial attack. To restore the integrity of the cordon, Company H withdrew and linked up with the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines. Although the attack had been partially successful, many enemy positions remained within the Horseshoe.

*In an aerial view of the "Horseshoe" sector of Operation Meade River, looking east, from the bend of the stream it is easy to see why the area was so named.*

Photo is from the Col Robert G. Lauffer, USMC (Ret), Collection



Determined to eliminate the enemy bunker complex, Colonel Lauffer reinforced BLT 2/7 still again, placing Company K, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines under Nelson's control. On the 24th, after a morning of preparatory fire, Companies H, BLT 2/7 and K, 26th Marines attacked from the south, in the Marines' fifth attempt to eject the North Vietnamese from the Horseshoe. At 1530, the two companies came under extremely heavy fire from enemy troops in bunkers and a treeline 100 meters to the front. Unable to force the position by frontal assault, both companies tried to drive in an enemy flank, but to no avail. Colonel Lauffer added yet another unit, Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, to the attack. Company C moved in from the north, but not in time to help. At 1830, once again frustrated by the enemy's stiff resistance, the Marines broke contact and withdrew with 5 dead and 31 wounded.

On the morning of the 25th, the Marines near the Horseshoe pulled back and began pounding the area

*Marine Sgt H. D. Vines, a section leader of an 81mm mortar section with BLT 2/7, snaps off a shot with his M79 grenade launcher at an enemy-held treeline during Meade River. A puff of smoke from the grenade can be seen by the trees.*

Photo from the Abel Collection



with artillery. Low clouds over Dodge City precluded airstrikes. Following the preparation, BLT 2/7 surged forward, encountering no resistance. By noon, the Marines overran the entire Horseshoe and the battalion consolidated its position along the railroad berm. A search of the area revealed bunkers constructed of reinforced concrete, railroad ties, and rails, covered with six feet of earth. Lieutenant Colonel Nelson, the BLT commander, remembered an order "to destroy" the railroad berm, but "after many tons of explosion being wasted the destruction was called off."<sup>55</sup>

It was apparent that the enemy forces trapped within the cordon was somewhat larger than originally anticipated. At the Horseshoe, the Marines had encountered regular enemy troops, specifically the *3d Battalion, 36th NVA Regiment*. While pushed back, the NVA battalion remained a formidable fighting force.<sup>56</sup>

Since the beginning of the operation, South Vietnamese troops and police had worked to evacuate 2,600 civilians from Dodge City to interrogation centers. With these civilians out and the Horseshoe finally cleared, Colonel Lauffer launched the next phase of the operation. BLT 2/26 and the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines attacked from the eastern edge of the cordon toward the Suoi Co Ca to relieve the 51st ARVN Regiment which had earlier established blocking positions at the river.

Over the next four days, the Marine battalions tightened the cordon as they advanced. Using probes fashioned from metal stock especially for Operation Meade River, the Marines located many caches of enemy arms and supplies. Enemy troops attempted to evade at night, but almost continuous flare illumination and Marine ambushes turned them back. When engaged, the enemy would break contact and flee. Captain James F. Foster, the commander of Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, later related that his Marines not only found several enemy caches, but also captured "13 North Vietnamese soldiers who all had automatic weapons and a large amount of South Vietnamese Piasters."<sup>57</sup>

As the cordon grew smaller, fire support coordination problems grew larger. Units in contact with the enemy often experienced interruptions in fire support caused by interference from neighboring units. Worse still, the close quarters created by seven battalions in a constantly shrinking area resulted in severe safety problems and occasional instances of friendly fire impacting Marine positions. One unit reported, "continuing problems with friendly artillery fire which



Photo from the Abel Collection

*South Vietnamese Maj Tran Phouc Xang, a battalion commander with the 51st ARVN Regiment, battles in the left center of the picture, tries to explain to Vietnamese villagers why they have to be evacuated from their homes during Operation Meade River.*

inflicted casualties, destroyed confidence in the supporting units, and lowered morale.”<sup>58</sup>

On 28 November, Thanksgiving Day, BLT 2/26 and the 2d Battalion 5th Marines reached the Suoi Co Ca. On the same day, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines which had been helilifted earlier into the southern Dodge City area, relieved the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines along Route 4. The latter battalion was then to attack north toward a series of phase lines between the railroad berm and Suoi Co Ca. Lieutenant Colonel John W. P. Robertson, the commander of the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, remembered that his unit “enjoyed” a Thanksgiving dinner of turkey loaf and prepared to follow the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines in the attack.<sup>59</sup>

At midnight on the 28th, Marine artillery began a heavy and concentrated barrage on the now greatly diminished area within the cordon. Following six hours of intense artillery fire, PsyOps teams used loudspeakers in an attempt to convince the enemy to surrender or rally. The broadcasts continued for an

hour between 0600 and 0700 on the morning of 29 November and painted a grim, but true picture:

Why is your unit still surrounded? Why have your leaders found no way for you to escape? There *is* no way to escape. North, south, east, and west, you are completely surrounded and the circle is getting smaller. Today, you cannot go a thousand meters in any direction. Tomorrow, will you be killed in your bunker? Tomorrow, will your legs be blown from your body and will you die in a hole in the ground far from your home?

There is a way to avoid being killed. Many of your friends have become Hoi Chanh [ralliers]; surrender today, or will you be killed tomorrow?

For awhile, now, the artillery and bombs will stop falling. Put down your weapons, pick up your wounded comrades and Chieu Hoi [rally]. Your wounded will receive medical treatment and you will not be harmed.

You are completely surrounded. You cannot move a thousand meters in any direction. Will you Chieu Hoi today or die tomorrow? Chieu Hoi now, while the bombs and artillery are stopped for a little while.<sup>60</sup>

The enemy troops were unimpressed by the broadcasts. As the 1st Marines reported, "they chose to fight."<sup>61</sup>

After the broadcasts, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines launched its attack. Although the enemy resisted in isolated groups, clearing even small fortified positions was dangerous and difficult. It took the Marine battalion the entire day of 29 November to secure the first objective, Phase Line Alpha, about 800 to 1,000 meters above Route 4.<sup>62</sup>

On 30 November, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines continued its northward advance, reaching Phase Line Bravo, where the area between the railroad berm and the Suoi Co Ca becomes narrow, constricting maneuver and further compounding fire support coordination problems. Still, the blocking forces on the eastern bank of the river, BLT 2/26 and the 2d Battalion 5th Marines ambushed and took under fire

enemy troops attempting to avoid the tightening cordon. Marines called nightly upon Air Force AC-47 gunships to add their deadly fires to those of the Marines on the ground. Lieutenant Colonel Stemple, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines commander, remembered that enemy troops tried to swim the river at night to escape to the south.<sup>63</sup>

On 1 December, about two kilometers north of Route 4 and just above Phase Line Bravo, at a small bend in the Suoi Co Ca which would become known as the "Hook," the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines ran into a strong bunker complex. As the 1st Marines reported, "the Hook was not to be taken in a few hours. The enemy fire from well entrenched, reinforced bunkers was devastating." In the first encounter, Company L sustained 2 dead and 28 wounded. The Marine battalion pulled back and called for artillery and air support.<sup>64</sup>

*An aerial view of the bend of the Suoi Co Ca River, called the "Hook" by the Marines, makes it obvious how the "Hook," like the Horseshow obtained its name.*

Photo is from the Col Robert G. Lauffer, USMC (Ret), Collection



The fighting for the Hook would continue for the next four days. On 2 December, even after heavy air and ground bombardment, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines failed to make any headway against the North Vietnamese defenders. That evening the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Harry E. Atkinson, left one company to isolate the Hook, while the rest of the battalion moved north another 1,000 meters to Phase Line Charlie. On 3 December, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines advanced from Route 4 to Phase Line Bravo to continue the attack on the Hook.<sup>65</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Robertson, the battalion commander, recalled that Colonel Lauffer, the 1st Marines commander, took him and his battalion operations officer up in a helicopter to make an aerial reconnaissance of the enemy defenses there. According to Robertson, he saw a tremendous bunker and trench complex and it was obvious that the only stratagem was to enfilade the area and then make the final assault on the Hook defenses from the rear. With continuing heavy resistance, the Marines again called upon air and artillery, using 750-pound bombs, napalm, and "danger close supporting arms." Across the Suoi Co Ca, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines pulled back and dug into the soft mud, but Lieutenant Colonel Stemple, the battalion commander, remembered that the exploding bombs from across the river covered his Marines with debris. After the aerial bombardment, an artillery officer, according to Stemple, suggested and Colonel Lauffer approved, "the pin-point destruction of the bunkers using a single 8-inch artillery piece, controlled by an airborne spotter."<sup>66</sup>

With the supporting destructive fires, Company I punched its way into the Hook and by nightfall on 4 December, the battalion had maneuvered to the rear of the bunker complex. After continuing artillery support and airstrikes through the night, at first light the next morning, the "field commander and I Corps Commander both taped broadcasts to entice the enemy out . . ." With only a few takers, the 3d Battalion prepared its final assault. After fixed-wing aircraft gave the defenders a final dousing of napalm and bombs, the battalion overran the position. The heavy preparation fires had done the job. Without a single casualty, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines seized the objective, where the Marines, according to differing reports, found 75 to 100 enemy dead and pulled out some 5 to 15 prisoners from "partially destroyed tunnels and bunkers."<sup>67</sup>

With the securing of the Hook, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines started a sweep to the west and Robert-

son's battalion prepared to take its place on Phase Line Charlie. At the same time, the changing shape of the cordon squeezed out the two battalions on the eastern side of the Suoi Co Ca, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines and BLT 2/26. The latter battalion except for its Company E departed the area of operations and Lieutenant Colonel Stemple ordered his 2d Battalion, 5th Marines to prepare for helicopter extraction and the return to An Hoa.<sup>68</sup>

Captain Ronald J. Drez' Company H, on the 2d Battalion's southern flank, waited for the lift. After 15 days of what had been, for them, a very unexciting operation, the Hotel Company Marines were anxious to return to the base. They sat eating C-rations and idling away the time until the helicopters arrived. At 1400, Stemple radioed Drez, ordering him to prepare his company, not to return to base, but to conduct a helicopter-borne assault under the operational control of the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines. Even more startling, Drez learned that the assault lift was to begin in five minutes! Lieutenant Colonel Stemple later remembered that he selected Drez' company since it was closest to the 3d Battalion. He made the turnover just as the rest of his unit departed the area.<sup>69</sup>

Drez and his company gunnery sergeant quickly put together a plan for what Drez later characterized as one of the "shortest tactical airlifts in history."<sup>70</sup> The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing helicopters which lifted the still surprised Company H Marines from the eastern bank of the Suoi Co Ca set them down again less than 1,000 meters away. At about the same time, helicopters also brought in Captain James F. Foster's Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, which "landed in a 'hot' landing zone, dispatched the enemy" and took up positions west of Company H.<sup>71</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Robertson's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, now reinforced with two additional companies, lined up with five companies abreast to continue the move to Phase Line Charlie. In the meantime, Company E, BLT 2/26, which had been under the operational control of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines remained in "a reconnoitering role" north of the Phase Line. On the 6th, while the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines reached Phase Line Charlie without incident, Company E encountered strong NVA forces in a bunker complex that the Marines called the "Northern Bunker Complex," about 1,000 meters to the north, just below the La Tho River. The company remained in position until first light the next morning and then crossed the La Tho River and joined the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines in blocking positions there.<sup>72</sup>



Photo is from the Col Robert G. Lauffer, USMC (Ret), Collection

*Aerial view of the Northern Bunker Complex reveals its location just below the La Tho River, near the top of the picture. This was the scene of some of the heaviest fighting during Meade River.*

On the 7th, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines launched its assault into the Northern Bunker Complex. Companies I, K, and L, maintaining their line, swung to the left like a huge door, pivoting on Company H, 5th Marines and formed the battalion in a giant inverted "L." With the railroad berm on their left and a three-company blocking position on their right, Company A, 7th Marines and Drez' Company H launched a frontal attack. Soon, the Marines ran headlong into stiff enemy resistance. Company H made contact in a cemetery where North Vietnamese troops fighting from two pagodas laid down heavy fire. Much of the ground was under water, forming a quagmire through which the Marines were unable to maneuver. On

the left flank, NVA units in a fortified hamlet opened fire on Company A and casualties began to mount. Soon, 10 Marines were dead and another 23 were wounded. Under the intense fire, the attacking companies recovered their wounded only with great difficulty. Both companies halted, dug in for the night, and called for preparation fires. After dark, volunteers moved forward to recover the dead. Captain Foster, the commander of Company A, recalled that he, six Marines, and a Navy corpsman participated in the recovery of the dead and the wounded of his company. According to Foster, the Navy corpsman continued treating casualties although wounded himself and was among the last to be evacuated.<sup>73</sup>

Having had a taste of the enemy's tenacious defense, the Marines prepared themselves for the coming battle. Captain Drez remembered that:

We dug in and prepared for what we knew would be a real hard push the next day. The enemy had shown themselves to be there in force, and they also showed that they were not going to give up easy. The word came down from battalion that we could expect . . . the 3d Battalion, 36th NVA Regiment to die fighting. They had shown no inclination to surrender or to become Hoi Chanh [ralliers]. They were good, hard North Vietnamese Army troops.<sup>74</sup>

At 1120 on the 8th, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines attacked to the north with five companies abreast. The 2d Troop, 4th ARVN Cavalry, which had arrived the previous evening, consisting of 12 armored personnel carriers (APCs), reinforced the Marine assault. In their path, the Marines reported 79 dead North Vietnamese near the site of the previous day's battle. When Company H reached a rice paddy a few hundred meters from their starting point, Communist troops hidden in a treeline suddenly opened fire, trapping Marines in the paddy. For 30 minutes, the Marines returned fire individually, then began moving in small groups toward a large bunker which appeared to be the linchpin of the Communist defenses. Just beyond the bunker and treeline, they could see the Song La Tho, on the other side of which the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines remained in its blocking position.<sup>75</sup>

The Marines requested air support. Because of the proximity of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, the aircraft had difficulty attacking targets without endangering friendly troops. In one instance, a napalm bomb impacted directly on Company H, but miraculously bounced safely away before detonating. Captain George B. Meegan, the commander of Company L, 26th Marines in another sector, recalled that a "napalm strike landed" by his 1st Platoon and that several Marines sustained minor burns.<sup>76</sup> Neither the airstrikes nor mortar and 3.5-inch rocket fire overcame the enemy resistance.

When supporting arms failed to silence the enemy in the bunker facing him, Captain Drez requested Lieutenant Colonel Robertson to provide him with some of the ARVN APCs. The APCs arrived, armed with recoilless rifles, and halted in the rice paddy. According to Drez, however, the ARVN refused to help. Instead, Drez had his attached combat engineer, Private First Class Michael A. Emmons, jerryrig a satchel charge consisting of C-4, hand grenades, two 3.5-inch rockets, and a five-second fuze. With the

assistance of another Marine, they carried the satchel charge to the top of the bunker where Drez lit the fuze and Emmons flipped the charge through an embrasure. When the others ran, Emmons momentarily remained atop the bunker. The explosion tossed him into the air, but he landed unhurt.\* The blast smashed the bunker, killing all but one of the North Vietnamese inside. The Marines reported 39 enemy dead and 1 prisoner in the vicinity of the bunkers.<sup>77</sup>

The other attacking companies also had their share of fighting. Captain Foster's Company A overran an enemy fortified position containing 12 bunkers and 30 covered fighting holes, reporting 47 North Vietnamese dead. Several hours later, Company A attacked and killed nearly 20 North Vietnamese in a firefight which ended with 6 Marines dead and 12 wounded. Late in the afternoon, Captain Meegan's Company L engaged an enemy platoon. In a short, but fierce encounter, Lima Company accounted for another reported 15 enemy killed, at a cost of 5 Marines dead and 11 wounded.<sup>78</sup>

The combat on 8 December was so intense that some senior Marines said that it was "the fiercest fighting they had ever seen."<sup>79</sup> That night Staff Sergeant Karl G. Taylor of Company I led a rescue effort to relieve the company's lead platoon, cut off by enemy fire. After his Marines took out several of the most severely wounded, Sergeant Taylor returned with another four volunteers to reach yet another group of seriously wounded men lying near an enemy machine gun position. Finding the position too strong, Taylor told his Marines to go back and then armed with a grenade launcher charged across the open paddy. Although wounded several times, Sergeant Taylor silenced the enemy weapon. The sergeant was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.<sup>80</sup>

On the morning of 9 December, the enemy still occupied a narrow strip of ground between the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines and the Song La Tho. It would take another push to finish the job.

After supporting arms, including the battleship *New Jersey* lying off the coast with its 16-inch guns, bombarded the enemy's last remaining toehold all night and most of the morning, the 3d Battalion launched its final drive at 1000 on the 9th. The Marines assaulted violently, yet methodically, destroying and searching every bunker and fighting hole in their path. Enemy resistance was tenacious, but lacked

\* Emmons was later awarded a Silver Star Medal for his action.



Photo from the Abel Collection

*Marine engineer LCpl Jerry Kanone runs a detonating cord from a charge placed inside an enemy bunker that can be seen at the right of the picture.*

the organization encountered earlier. Lieutenant Colonel Robertson credited the ARVN 2d Troop, 4th ARVN Cavalry with their APCs in providing the necessary shock action to break the final NVA resistance.<sup>81\*</sup> It was apparent that the fighting had taken its toll on the NVA. Collapsed bunkers and scores of dead North Vietnamese gave evidence of the ferocity of the fighting. Within some bunkers, the Marines found stacks of enemy bodies. Other dead were undoubtedly buried under the rubble of their destroyed bunkers.<sup>82</sup>

Company A was first to shoot its way through the North Vietnamese and reach the river. Captain Foster, the Company A commander, later wrote that his Marines chased “the enemy at a sprint into the Song La

Tho . . . [and a] ‘turkey shoot’ ensued.”<sup>83</sup> Company H followed shortly afterward, killing a reported 9 enemy only 20 meters from the river’s banks. The battalion swept through the Communist stronghold thoroughly, tabulating 130 dead North Vietnamese—some killed during the preceding days—and took 8 prisoners. Captain Meegan, the Company L commander, remembered that one of his platoons captured an enemy warrant officer who told the Marines that it took him six months to reach the Dodge City sector.<sup>84</sup>

At 1800, 9 December, the 1st Marines terminated Operation Meade River. What had begun as a giant “County Fair” had turned into a major battle pitting determined Marines in the assault against equally determined North Vietnamese soldiers defending from heavily fortified positions.

According to Marine sources, the immediate, tangible results of Operation Meade River included 1,023 enemy dead, 123 prisoners, and 6 ralliers.\*\* Intelligence personnel, working with South Vietnamese police, questioned 2,663 civilians, identifying 71 members of the VC political infrastructure. The attacking Marines destroyed 360 bunkers and captured 20 tons of rice. The price the Marines paid for their success was high, 108 dead and 510 wounded. The ARVN sustained 2 killed and 37 wounded. In a message to General Cushman, General Youngdale speculated that “. . . these results should signify the end of the enemy’s stranglehold on the Dodge City Area.”<sup>85</sup>

The aftermath of Operation Meade River, however, is more a statement on the nature of counterinsurgency. After the other units departed the area, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines crossed the Song La Tho into Dodge City to exploit the success of the operation. By 11 December, the battalion added to its tabulation of enemy dead, 20 more North Vietnamese while taking 1 prisoner. A week later, patrols observed an increase in sniper fire. As 1968 ended, the 1st Marine Division reported that “. . . the enemy is persistent. By the end of [December] he had reoccupied the Meade River

\*The role that the ARVN APC troop played still remains a matter of controversy. Captain Drez complained that the ARVN failed to come to his aid on 8 December and then claimed credit for participating in the battle by reporting the serial numbers of captured weapons. Mr. Ronald J. Drez intvw, 29Mar89, Tape 6512 (Oral HistColl, MCHC). Captain George B. Meegan, the commander of Company L, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines in his comments supported Captain Drez, writing “the same APCs milled around [the] L/3/26 position [on the] last day and then claimed credit for NVA dead that had been killed the previous evening by my machine gunner . . .” Capt George B. Meegan, Comments on draft, dtd 2Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*Records disagree on the number of enemy casualties. Figures in the text are from FMFPac, MarOpsV, Nov68, p. 3; 1st MarDiv ComdC, Dec68, p. 17; 1st Mar ComdC, Dec68, p. II-C-4, 5; 1st Mar AAR, Meade River. Other reports were prepared so soon after the end of the operation (in one case, only 57 minutes later) that they did not include enemy dead later found on the battlefield. See 1st MarDiv SitRep No. 78, Opn Meade River, in 1st MarDiv Operation SitReps. Lieutenant Colonel Merrill L. Bartlett, who served as commander of the 13th Interrogation and Translation Team, commented that he personally believed some of the statistics were “suspect, especially the number of enemy captives.” He believed that many of the prisoners listed as VC POWs were either Vietnamese civilians or possibly members of the VC infrastructure. Bartlett Comments.



Photo is from the Col Robert G. Lauffer, USMC (Ret), Collection

*One can see the formidable nature of the enemy bunkers with their reinforced timbers that the Marines encountered during Meade River. This bunker was in the Hook sector.*

area, and gave indications of again preparing for a thrust against Dien Ban/Hoi An and Da Nang . . . .<sup>86</sup>

By that time, though, the 1st Marine Division had turned its attention to another operation. Far to the west, a new subordinate command of the division was to strike at a major enemy base area in an operation named Taylor Common.

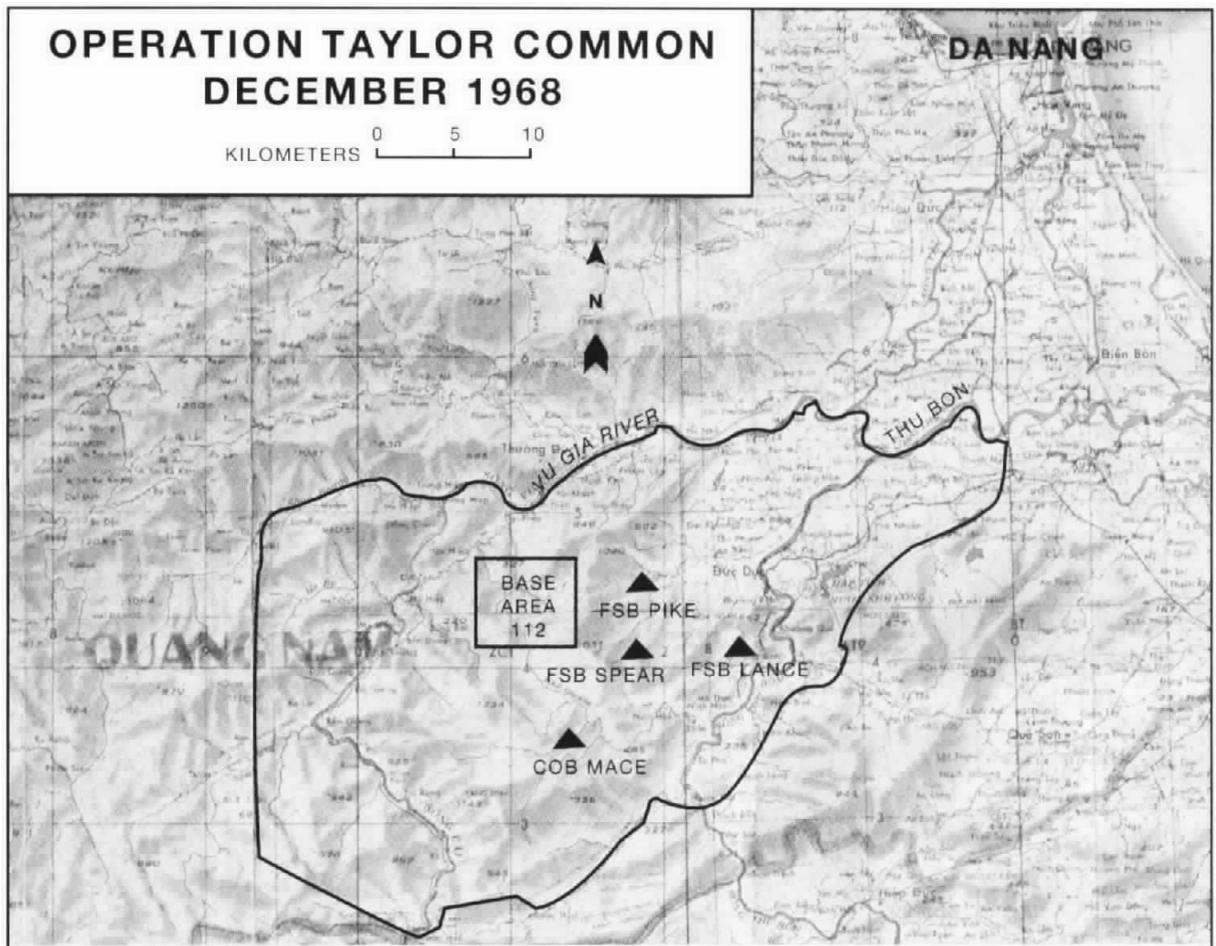
### *Operation Taylor Common*

As Operation Meade River ground to a close, MACV ordered a strike into Base Area 112, the rugged mountainous region southwest of the Arizona Territory, between the Song Thu Bon and the Song Cai. Base Area 112 was a staging and logistic base for enemy units operating in southern Quang Nam Province. Multi-layered jungle canopy 70-feet thick concealed an estimated 7,000 North Vietnamese troops of the 21st Regiment, the 3d Battalion, 68B Rocket Regiment, and the 2d Battalion, 141st Regiment, as well as support and headquarters units.<sup>87</sup>

Under the codename Operation Taylor Common, Brigadier General Ross T. Dwyer, Jr., one of the two assistant division commanders, would form and com-

mand an ad hoc organization under the 1st Marine Division, dubbed Task Force Yankee.\* The Task Force was built around Colonel James B. Ord's 5th Marines, which would include BLT 2/7, with the normal complement of supporting organizations. Lieutenant Colonel Raymond B. Ingrando's 1st Field Artillery Group served as the higher headquarters for a force of two direct support artillery battalions and elements of other units, including 8-inch howitzers, 155mm guns, and 175mm guns.<sup>88</sup>

\*General Dwyer, who as a colonel commanded the 1st Marines until 14 August, became a 1st Marine Division ADC on 15 August upon his promotion to brigadier general. Brigadier General Carl W. Hoffman on 18 August became the second ADC with the division. General Hoffman was previously an ADC with the 3d Marine Division until his transfer to the 1st Marine Division. Hoffman while with the 1st Marine Division served in a dual capacity as G-3 or operations officer for III MAF. He later wrote that Major General Ormond R. Simpson, who relieved General Youngdale as division commander on 21 December 1968, called him [Hoffman], "his phantom ADC." General Youngdale on that date relieved Major General Rathvon McC. Tonipkins as Deputy Commanding General, III MAF. See Command and Staff list and MajGen Carl W. Hoffman, Comments on draft, dtd 15Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).



On 6 December, General Dwyer issued the order launching Operation Taylor Common. The task force's mission was to "neutralize" Base Area 112 and to develop Fire Support Bases (FSBs) to interdict Communist infiltration routes leading from the Laotian border. The plan included three phases. The first step was to be a search and clear operation to ensure that An Hoa was secure. Units of the task force, in coordination with the ARVN 1st Ranger Group would sweep the Arizona Territory and the area between Liberty Bridge and An Hoa. In the second phase, TF Yankee would penetrate Base Area 112, establish a series of fire support bases in the eastern half of the area, and begin reconnaissance-in-force operations to locate and destroy the enemy. Phase three was to be an extension of the second phase, with Marine battalions operating out to the western edge of Base Area 112 in search of enemy units and facilities.<sup>89</sup>

In order to free the 5th Marines for assignment to TF Yankee, the 1st Marine Division ended operation Henderson Hill at midnight, on 6 December. Exactly

one minute later, Operation Taylor Common began.<sup>90</sup>

At 0830, Marine Medium Helicopter Squadrons 165 and 364 delivered BLT 2/7 to the Arizona Territory to act as a blocking force for the 1st ARVN Ranger Group. Other units, including the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, were already in the field when the operation began. To these Marines, the fact that Operation Henderson Hill had given way to Operation Taylor Common made little difference, at least initially, for the mission of the units around An Hoa remained the same as before. Having completed Operation Meade River, the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 5th Marines departed Dodge City, sweeping the area from Liberty Bridge to the hills south and southwest of An Hoa. Lieutenant Colonel Stemple recalled that during this sweep his Company G "flushed a group of six Vietnamese in civilian clothes." The company commander sent a platoon to investigate. As the Marines approached, someone among the Vietnamese fired a weapon. The troops dropped to the ground, but soon discovered they were not the

target. When the shots ended, one of the Vietnamese stood up with his hands in the air. The other five were dead, killed “execution style by a bullet to the back of the head, apparently while in a kneeling position.” The sole survivor refused to answer any questions, but, according to Stemple, his “manner and dress indicated that this was not a run-of-the-mill local VC.” The battalion commander later learned that his prisoner turned out to be the chief political officer of the North Vietnamese *Command Group 4*.<sup>91</sup>

Starting on 11 December, a major reshuffling of III MAF units occurred as a result of Operation Taylor Common. The requirement to penetrate and “neutralize” the vast reaches of Base Area 112, while simultaneously maintaining the security of the Da Nang TAOR, called for the employment of a large force. With the 27th Marines no longer in Vietnam, the 1st

*In a formal change of command ceremony, MajGen Ormond R. Simpson, left, accepts the colors of the 1st Marine Division from his predecessor as division commander, MajGen Carl A. Youngdale. Gen Youngdale became the Deputy Commander, III MAF.*

Photo from the Abel Collection



Marine Division did not have enough units to accomplish both tasks. To assist in the effort, General Cushman ordered Colonel Michael M. Spark's 3d Marines to redeploy from Quang Tri Province to Quang Nam. General Raymond G. Davis' success in reducing the 3d Marine Division's requirement for fixed garrisons by employing his forces in mobile operations made this move possible.<sup>92</sup>

Colonel Spark's headquarters moved to An Hoa on 9 December, ahead of the regiment's subordinate battalions. The plan called for the 3d Marines to conduct the actual penetration of Base Area 112 while the 5th Marines secured An Hoa. As the enemy situation around An Hoa did not indicate the need for a full regiment to protect the base, General Dwyer ordered elements of the 5th Marines placed under Colonel Spark's control. Lieutenant Colonel Harry E. Atkinson's 3d Battalion reported on 11 December and became the first unit to penetrate Base Area 112 during Operation Taylor Common.<sup>93</sup>

On the morning of the 11th, artillery and aircraft blasted and bombed Hill 575, about eight kilometers southwest of An Hoa, in an attempt to create a suitable landing zone in the heavily forested terrain. When the fires lifted, some trees remained, so a platoon from Company B, 3d Engineer Battalion and a platoon from Company K, 5th Marines rappelled from helicopters into the LZ to complete the job. At 0950, the rest of Company K landed and the Marines set to work developing the hilltop into what would be called FSB Lance, part of Dwyer's planned network of fire support bases from which TF Yankee units could range throughout Base Area 112.<sup>94</sup>

Two days later, on the 13th, Spark assumed control of Lieutenant Colonel Stemple's 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. Again a platoon of Company B, 1st Engineers Battalion accompanied this time by a platoon from Stemple's Company E rappelled onto a hilltop near the southwest corner of the Arizona Territory and blasted out an LZ. By evening, the rest of the 2d Battalion had landed and was busy establishing FSB Pike. Just as in the landings at FSB Lance, there was no enemy resistance.<sup>95</sup>

The organic units of the 3d Marines began arriving in Quang Nam on 13 December. By the following day, both the 1st and 3d Battalions were at An Hoa, preparing to enter Base Area 112.<sup>96</sup>

Meanwhile, TF Yankee was employing a new weapon to prepare LZs for the introduction of the newly arrived battalions. The M-121 Combat Trap was a 10,000 pound bomb which parachuted to the



Both photos from the Abel Collection

*Top, Marine engineers have just cleared with explosives a landing zone for Operation Taylor Common to take place in Base Area 112 in the rugged terrain southwest of An Hoa. After the "big blast" some stubborn trees and brush remain to be cleared. Below, artillerymen from the 11th Marines at Fire Support Base Lance watch as a Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallion brings in ammunition. A 105mm howitzer can be seen in the foreground.*



earth and detonated over a potential LZ at a height which would blow down trees without creating a crater. General Dwyer personally directed this experimental operation from a helicopter. Air Force C-130s dropped the M-121s from high altitude, aiming for small hilltops selected by Dwyer and his staff. In terms of explosive power, the Combat Traps proved impressive. In General Dwyer's words, ". . . it looked like a mini-nuclear weapon burst. The concussion rocked us in the helicopter. . . . it just really blew down this high, hundred foot canopy. . . ."97 Accuracy, however, left something to be desired. Although some near misses still created marginally suitable LZs, Dwyer concluded that the technique was of little use in situations requiring pinpoint accuracy. TF Yankee returned to the proven technique of bringing in low-flying attack aircraft with heavy ordnance, followed by engineers with chain saws and explosives to finish the job.<sup>98</sup>

With help from the indispensable Company B, 3d Engineer Battalion, the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines landed, unopposed, atop Hill 558 on 15 December. A steep prominence four kilometers west of the recently established FSB Lance, Hill 558 was, by then, awash in a sea of splintered timber, the results of numerous M-121 near-misses. Following the pattern



Photo courtesy of Col James W. Stemple, USMC (Ret)

*Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Commandant of the Marine Corps, at right with back to tree, receives a briefing on use of Scout Dogs during Operation Taylor Common at Fire Support Base Pike on Christmas Day, 1968. Other officers in the picture are, from left: LtCol James W. Stemple, commander of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines; BGen Ross T. Dwyer, Jr., CG of TF Yankee; Col James B. Ord, commander of the 5th Marines (standing); and MajGen Carl A. Youngdale, Deputy Commander, III MAF (seated). Col Michael M. Spark, commander of the 3d Marines, has his back to the camera.*

previously established, the battalion began constructing FSB Spear atop the hill. With Fire Support Bases Lance and Pike, FSB Spear formed the point of a triangle which extended TF Yankee's thrust ever deeper into the heart of Base Area 112.<sup>99</sup>

Northeast of Base Area 112, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines and BLT 2/7 maintained the security of An Hoa through constant patrolling. Having accomplished its blocking force mission in the Arizona Territory, BLT 2/7 conducted a helicopter assault into an LZ near the western end of Go Noi Island, at the edge of the huge Taylor Common area of operations. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines patrolled in the vicinity of An Hoa, frequently encountering small groups of the enemy.<sup>100</sup>

TF Yankee completed the initial penetration of Base Area 112 on 18 December, when the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines mounted a helicopter-borne assault on Hill 375, about four kilometers south of FSB Spear. After scoring yet another unopposed landing for the task force, the battalion began developing the hilltop as Combat Operations Base (COB) Mace.\*

The four battalions ensconced in the eastern half of Base Area 112 began a program of saturation patrolling and reconnaissance-in-force operations, depending upon helicopters alone for all logistic sup-

\* A Combat Operations Base differed from a Fire Support Base, primarily, in not having any artillery.

port. Fortunately, the seasonal monsoon did not develop, and incoming loads totalled some 250 tons per day, which were dispersed among the units at bases and those on patrol. General Dwyer later characterized the helicopter support during the operation as “a mixed performance,” noting numerous instances of performance that was less than adequate. In the final analysis, however, he allowed that, “. . . the net effect was: We had plenty of artillery, plenty of food, plenty of ammunition. . . .”<sup>101\*</sup>

Throughout the last half of December, units of the 3d Marines searched the eastern half of Base Area 112, frequently finding signs of the enemy’s recent presence, but only rarely encountering Communist troops. The area included scores of NVA rest camps, kitchens, small unit headquarters, surgical facilities, and even apparent prisons (or POW holding areas), all abandoned. Usually, the Marines found enemy graves, small quantities of stored food, weapons, ammunition, medical supplies, or documents. Occasionally, patrols engaged small groups of North Viet-

namese or Viet Cong, but no major contacts developed. Lieutenant Colonel Stemple remembered that his F and H Companies, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines during patrols on a slope west and south of FSB Pike had “sharp short engagements with small NVA units.” According to Stemple, he initially assigned two scout dog teams to each company in this triple canopy terrain “to sniff out any enemy to the front or flank.” Because of the restricted visibility, the advantage lay with the side who spotted the other first. The battalion commander stated that the North Vietnamese very quickly observed that it was to their benefit to kill the dogs before shooting at Marines. In late December, he recalled that he had the opportunity to make his case for more dogs during a visit to Vietnam by the Commandant of the Marine Corps General Leonard F. Chapman. The flow of scout dogs to the combat units soon increased and that in the later stages of Taylor Common, Stemple assigned three dogs to a company.<sup>102</sup>

The second phase of Operation Taylor Common ended with 1968 on New Year’s Eve. During the third and final phase of the operation, which lasted until March, TF Yankee pushed west to within 30 kilometers of Laos, finally encountering more enemy troops.\*\* The task force accomplished its mission by locating and destroying the enemy logistics infrastructure in Base Area 112. Although Operation Taylor Common did not attract a great deal of attention—owing this, thought General Dwyer, to the remoteness of the AO—it was a successful large, mobile operation. The multi-regiment task force, operating far from its permanent bases, carried III MAF offensive striking power deep into enemy territory, using much the same tactics as that of the 3d Marine Division in the north.

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\*Colonel Stemple, the commander of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, remembered that while his unit established itself on Fire Support Base Pike and the battalion was in the process of building ammunition storage revetments there he was told that a large number of helicopters was to bring in the next day the entire ammunition storage level to Pike. According to Stemple, he protested the order, stating that the ammunition dumps were far from ready. Nevertheless, the following morning, “a literal daisy chain of helicopters” brought in heavily laden cargo nets filled “with 155mm artillery shells and boxes of green and white bag gun powder for the 155s and boxes of 105 and 81mm mortar ammunition.” With the operation in full swing, enemy rocketeers took the base under fire. Two rockets landed in one of the revetments containing 155mm gun powder. The battalion commander related the “resulting explosion was visible for miles around and secondary explosions rocked the fire support base.” Miraculously only one Marine was killed. A Marine and Army ordnance disposal team deemed tons of the ammunition as unstable which had to be then helilifted to facilities at Da Nang. Colonel Stemple remembered that, “the ammunition stock levels at the support base were reduced and the stocking completed as safe storage was completed.” Stemple Comments.

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\*\*For a complete treatment of the closing phase of Operation Taylor Common, see Charles R. Smith, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1969: High Mobility and Standdown* (Washington, D.C.: Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, 1988), pp. 88–102.

## CHAPTER 22

# The 3d Division's Labors Bear Fruit

*Elimination of the Infrastructure—Rough Soldiering—Thua Thien and the End of the Year*

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The 3d Marine Division's persistent mobile offensive during the autumn forced the enemy back into his base areas in the hinterlands and the sanctuaries of North Vietnam and Laos. The withdrawal, motivated more by necessity than by choice, nevertheless, afforded the enemy an opportunity to refurbish his consistently outmaneuvered and battle-depleted combat units. Hampered both by heavier than normal monsoon rains during September and October and the offensive mobility of the 3d Division, the enemy, nonetheless, retained the capability for harassing attacks against allied installations and population centers. He also could still initiate a major offensive against the South by marshalling his forces positioned north of the DMZ.

The Government of South Vietnam, with United States assistance, instituted a country-wide accelerated pacification (Le Loi) campaign, on 1 November, designed to drive the enemy from populated areas and provide extra momentum to the 1968 Revolutionary Development Program. The purpose of the campaign was to organize government functions, establish self-help projects, bolster local security, and eliminate the Viet Cong infrastructure in a number of selected hamlets.

The inauguration of the Government's wide-ranging pacification campaign coupled with the withdrawal north in late October of the three regiments of the *320th NVA Division*, as well as the *138th* and *270th NVA Regiments*, now allowed the 3d Marine Division to turn a large portion of its efforts toward implementing and expanding the pacification initiative. In the province's populated coastal lowlands and piedmont, the 3d Division, and forces under its control, would seek out those elements actively attempting to disrupt the campaign. At the same time, it continued the bold employment of Marine infantry in the mountainous jungles to the west.

### *Elimination of the Infrastructure*

The departure of the 1st Cavalry Division from northern I Corps in early November forced a realignment of forces in the division's eastern area and a reduc-

tion in the commitment to the anti-infiltration system along the DMZ. On 1 November, the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry (Mechanized), under the command of U.S. Army Colonel James M. Gibson, was directed to move from the Kentucky area of operations into an area near Quang Tri City. The new area, labeled Napoleon-Saline II, incorporated all of the former Napoleon-Saline area, centered on Cua Viet, and the northern, or Quang Tri, portion of the cavalry division's area of operations. Lieutenant Colonel George F. Meyers' 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, as a result, was placed under the operational control of the brigade and continued search operations in the former Napoleon-Saline area, now designated Area of Operations Green. Lieutenant Colonel George E. Hayward's 3d Tank Battalion, which had been operating in the Napoleon-Saline area, was put in direct support of the 3d Marines, which assumed control of the Kentucky area.

With the evacuation of the 1st Brigade from positions just south of the DMZ, General Cushman requested and received authority from General Abrams to close the strongpoints at A-3 and C-3.<sup>1</sup> The two outposts, part of the Dyemarker strongpoint and trace system, initially were scheduled to be manned by a Marine regiment and a reinforced ARVN regiment. Although all the strongpoints, with the exception of A-5, had been, or were in the process of being completed, by mid-June, the 2d ARVN Regiment had only secured three, A-1, A-2, and C-1. Marine forces occupied the remaining strongpoints and combat bases. A revised plan, codenamed *Duel Blade*, submitted by III MAF on 15 June, called for the ARVN regiment to relieve Marine units at A-3 and A-4 by December and the elimination of the two westernmost combat bases. However, in follow-on discussions between Lieutenant General Cushman and Lieutenant General Lam, the I Corps Tactical Zone commander, the Vietnamese general balked at committing ARVN forces to the two positions until the sensors and intermediate barriers had been installed. Lam instead suggested that two battalions of the 2d Regiment continue to occupy A-1, A-2, and C-1, while the regiment's remaining two battalions be employed in a mobile role

with Marine forces along the DMZ. General Cushman recommended to General Abrams that General Lam's suggestion be adopted and that he, General Cushman, would proceed on the premise that the original concept be abandoned in favor of a revised, more mobile posture.<sup>2</sup> Although General Abrams subsequently accepted General Cushman's recommendation, he suggested that the South Vietnamese should be eased into both sites after sufficient training.

As ARVN and Marine commands continued their Duel Blade planning with respect to construction and specific control procedures, General Abrams on 22 October ordered all construction and planning efforts associated with the anti-infiltration effort halted.<sup>3</sup> The 1 November bombing halt in the DMZ and North Vietnam, aimed, in part, at restoring the DMZ to a true buffer zone, combined with manpower demands on U.S. forces in the north, made the strongpoint and obstacle barrier system no longer feasible.

Under the new concept, still referred to as Duel Blade, allied forces, supported by air, artillery, and naval gunfire, would, while maintaining a mobile posture, actively resist infiltration from the North by maintaining a comprehensive surveillance effort. While ground reconnaissance inserts would be a part of the effort, attended and unattended detection devices or sensors would provide a majority of the around-the-clock capability. By the end of December, the engineers had implanted three sensor fields in the eastern portion of the DMZ, south of the Ben Hai River.\*

At the same time the American command had made rapid progress in the defoliation of a 2,000-meter-wide trace, adjacent to the Laotian border south of the DMZ, which neared completion, and began planning to implant sensors in the western area. Despite these efforts, little evidence existed reflecting a decline in the enemy's intention to continue to use the DMZ for staging troops and supplies, infiltration, and, north of the Ben Hai, as a sanctuary. Marine units, nevertheless, were now under standing orders not to enter the DMZ.

According to the revised concept, the "A" and "C" strongpoint sites considered essential would be used as fire support bases. Those of no value, such as A-3 and C-3, would be closed. With the departure of General

Westmoreland in June and the launching of more mobile operations, III MAF halted construction and shifted much of the material set aside for the Duel Blade effort to the construction of an anti-infiltration barrier around Da Nang.

The 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division moved south into the populated coastal sand dune and rice paddy region, covering the districts of Trieu Phong, Mai Linh, Hai Lang, and Quang Tri City. Here, it found an area largely devoid of battalion-sized Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army units. These units, having suffered a number of decisive defeats, had retired west into the jungle-covered mountains bordering on Laos. The remaining Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army forces continued to maintain liaison with local force units and the VC infrastructure. They also continued to move rice and other supplies to main force units further west. These elements included units of the *808th NVA Battalion* which endeavored to reinforce two local force companies, the *C-59* in Trieu Phong District and the *H-99* in Hai Lang District. These two companies, in an effort to avoid allied capture, had broken down into small groups of five to six men and tended to operate with village and hamlet guerrilla forces, which varied in size from cells to squads and in some cases platoons. Allied intelligence estimates placed Viet Cong strength in the region, including infrastructure members, at 4,000. Seventy-eight of the 234 hamlets within the brigade's area of operations were considered to be under Viet Cong control. Intelligence analysts rated 18 as being contested and they considered the remainder to be under South Vietnamese control.

Taking advantage of the absence of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese main force units, Gibson's mechanized brigade concentrated on conducting strike operations. Emphasizing search and clear and cordon and search operations in cooperation and coordination with local forces and the 1st ARVN Regiment, whose area of operation coincided with that of the brigade's, Gibson's troops sought to weed out and destroy the Viet Cong infrastructure. Organized into two infantry and one armored task forces, the 1st Brigade supported the Le Loi campaign and conducted a series of large-scale cordon and search operations and deployed numerous patrols, ambushes, and small "Hunter Killer" teams throughout its new area of operations during the months of November and December. In addition, it provided transportation, hauled construction materials, assisted in road building, and provided security for the long-awaited reset-

\* Colonel John F. Mitchell recalled that from July to October 1968, he was given the task of "establishing the 1st Ground Surveillance Section" in the 3d Marine Division. According to Mitchell, the group used sensors with laser technology to track enemy forces. Col John F. Mitchell, Comments on draft, dtd 5Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

tlement of coastal fisherman and their families into the Gia Dang fishing village.

The cordon on Thon My Chanh, which began on 2 November as a transition operation to introduce the brigade into the area, involved elements of the 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry; 1st Battalion, 61st Infantry (Mechanized); 1st Battalion, 77th Armor; and 4th Squadron, 12th Cavalry. In coordination with three battalions of the 1st ARVN Regiment, the brigade cordoned the village which straddled the Quang Tri and Thua Thien provincial boundary, while ARVN infantry and South Vietnamese local forces swept through the area. On 5 November, Company B, 9th Marines and Company G, 3d Marines were placed under the operational control of the brigade and assigned security duty at Landing Zone Nancy, relieving other brigade forces which began an extensive campaign of local ambushes and patrols. The Thon My Chanh cordon ended on 16 November with a total of 60 Viet Cong reported killed, 58 of which were credited to the 1st ARVN Regiment.

The following day, Companies B, C, and D, 11th Infantry; Company I, 4th Marines; and Companies B and C, 9th Marines, in conjunction with two battalions of the 1st ARVN Regiment, established a cordon around the Thon Thuong Xa and Thon Mai Dang village complex, eight kilometers southeast of Quang Tri City. The three Marine companies anchored the eastern portion of the three village cordon and provided security for the checkpoint of Route 1. While elements continued to sweep through the Thon Mai Dang area, Companies B and C, 9th Marines, working with the 2d Battalion, 1st ARVN Regiment, established a 360-degree cordon around the village of Thon Thuong Xa on the 24th, and sent out patrols in all directions from the cordon.<sup>4</sup> With the end of the cordon on 27 November, the three Marine companies returned to their parent units and like the Thon My Chanh cordon, the 1st ARVN Regiment garnered the lion's share of the enemy killed and weapons captured.

Throughout the first nine days of December, Gibson's brigade continued large-scale cordon and search operations in the rice growing area east of Quang Tri City at Thon Tra Loc, and in the sand dunes north of Fire Support Base Tombstone and west of Wunder Beach. On the 9th, Operation Napoleon-Saline came to an end. According to Marine sources, the operation which began at the end of February, when operations Napoleon and Saline were combined, resulted in the death of more than 3,500 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops and the capture of 831 weapons. Marine, Army, and ARVN losses

were put at 395 killed and 1,680 wounded.

As Napoleon-Saline ended, the brigade moved into Operation Marshall Mountain. Relying heavily on dismounted infantry units, Gibson's troopers continued to operate extensively throughout their assigned area of operation with elements of the 1st ARVN Regiment and local Popular and Regional Forces. These combined operations included the integration of Popular Force squads and platoons into mechanized infantry and tank platoons, assigning a Popular Force squad to one tank as a means of transportation and fire support for the local South Vietnamese. The tank and mechanized infantry platoons would be used as blocking units while the Popular and Regional Forces searched an area. Although used elsewhere, the brigade concentrated the efforts of these combined search and clear operations during the remainder of the month on the area immediately south and west of Quang Tri City to interdict enemy movement from the piedmont into the populated coastal lowlands.

In addition to small combined operations, the 1st Brigade continued to conduct a large number of cordons of suspected Viet Cong-dominated villages and initiated a series of strike operations in the mountains to the west. On 20 December, three companies from the 11th Infantry conducted heliborne assaults into the southern portion of enemy Base Area 101, but encountered no sizeable enemy forces. By the end of the month, all three companies had returned to Fire Support Base Sharon. The brigade's activities including combat operations and civic action projects resulted in a heightened sense of security throughout the region and an increase in the effectiveness and fighting spirit of local Regional and Popular Force platoons.

To the north of Gibson's brigade, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George F. Meyers, who was replaced in mid-November by Lieutenant Colonel Walter W. Damewood, Jr., continued to conduct an extensive program of combat patrols, and ambushes throughout the Green area of operations. First Lieutenant Peter N. Schneider's Company A conducted mechanized and infantry patrols, night ambushes, and search and destroy missions, concentrating on the area along the Song Cua Viet between My Loc and the Mai Xa Thi village complex to the southwest. During the sweeps, Schneider's Marines discovered and destroyed numerous bunkers, some of which were old and deteriorated and others recently constructed which indicated enemy activity in the area. Company A, however, encountered no enemy troops.

Further north, Company B, under the acting command of First Lieutenant Thomas M. Whiteside, continued the consolidation of the C-4 Strong Point and the outpost at Oceanview, the eastern anchors for the Duel Blade anti-infiltration effort. Reinforced by a platoon of Marine tanks, a section of 40mm Dusters, an Army artillery target acquisition team, and a naval gunfire spotter team, the company maintained both visual and radar coverage of the DMZ and requested fire missions on sighted squad- to company-sized enemy forces, bunker and trenchline complexes, suspected supply and staging areas, heavy trail activity, and sampan and boat movement. While tactical air, artillery, and naval gunfire missions destroyed or damaged many of these targets, the enemy reacted to aerial reconnaissance flights over the DMZ on several occasions by firing at friendly aircraft with small arms as well as .30- and .50-caliber anti-aircraft weapons.

With the end of Operation Napoleon-Saline II in early December, operational control of Damewood's battalion was transferred from the 1st Brigade to the newly formed Marine Task Force Bravo. The Task Force, commanded by Colonel Thomas W. Clarke, took over responsibility for Operation Kentucky and, in addition to the amtrac battalion, consisted of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and the 3d Tank Battalion. According to Lieutenant Colonel Damewood, as part of Operation Kentucky, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion had one of the largest area of operations in the division sector extending from the DMZ south to the Cua Viet and west of the mouth of the Cua Viet to Dai Do village.<sup>5</sup> While Company A launched numerous mechanized and infantry patrols along the Cua Viet, in coordination with the Navy Task Force Clearwater, Company B maintained both visual and night detection radar coverage of the eastern DMZ in an effort to prevent enemy infiltration.\* The company, in late December, joined the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines in an extensive cordon and search of Xuan Khanh Resettlement Village, one kilometer northwest of the mouth of the Cua Viet. While the Marine units maintained the cordon, elements of the 2d ARVN Regiment swept through the village with negative results.

To the west of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion's area, the 2d and 3d Battalions, 3d Marines sup-

planted the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division in early November, which had moved into the 1st Cavalry Division's former area. Operating primarily from Cam Lo, C-2, C-3, and Con Thien, elements of both Marine battalions conducted extensive patrols in their new sector. They also participated extensively in the pacification effort in Cam Lo and Huong Hoa Districts.

Early in November, Lieutenant Colonel Bryon T. Chen's 2d Battalion moved into the Cam Lo District, on a test basis, and began the process of integrating with local Regional and Popular Forces in an attempt to upgrade their training, efficiency, and overall combat effectiveness. The initial effort to place a Marine platoon with each of the district's Regional Force companies met with limited success and the battalion then shifted to a program of total integration. Captain Donald J. Myers' Company H had a fire team with each Regional Force squad, a squad with each platoon, and a platoon with each of the three Regional Force companies in Cam Lo District. Command, control, and coordination was maintained by appointing the Marine unit leader as an advisor or assistant commander to a Regional or Popular Force unit one echelon above their own. A Marine squad leader, for example, was the advisor to a Regional Force platoon and its

*Marines from Company H, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines integrated with South Vietnamese Regional Forces (RF) in the Cam Lo Sector. In the photo, Marines of the company and RF troops ride on top of a Marine tank during a combined sweep in the sector.*

Photo courtesy of Col Donald J. Myers USMC (Ret)



\*Lieutenant Colonel Damewood recalled that the executive officer of the Navy Task Force was a Marine and that "extensive coordination was required between division units, especially the 1st AmTrac Bn and Clearwater to optimize safe transit of the river." LtCol Walter W. Damewood, Jr., Comments on draft, dtd 31Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Top photo is courtesy of LtCol Justin M. Martin USMC (Ret) and bottom photo is courtesy of Col Donald J. Myers USMC (Ret)  
*In Huong Hoa District, Marines try to integrate with South Vietnamese forces in Mai Loc Village. Top, Marines from Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines stand by while the U.S. Army district advisor talks to the commander of the South Vietnamese 220th RF Company. Below, Marines of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines conduct a cordon and search of Mai Loc village with South Vietnamese RF troops. South Vietnamese officials are seen talking to the assembled villagers.*



assistant commander. First Lieutenant Justin M. Martin's Company F adopted a similar force structure in Huong Hoa District.

While integrating at all levels, at the same time elements of the two battalions launched a series of major cordon and search operations throughout the area of operations. Their mission was to capture the local Viet Cong and disrupt his organization as well as conduct an accurate census of the population and civic action program. On 13 November, Companies E, F, and L, 3d Marines; Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines; Company B, 3d Tank Battalion; and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines joined the 5th Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment in a cordon and search of the Xam Rao Vinh Valley in the northeast portion of the Mai Loc TAOR, east of Cam Lo. The rapid cordon and search of the valley, suspected to be populated by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong whose mission was to harass the civilian population and conduct guerrilla operations against Marine units in the area, yielded little and the operation ended four days later.<sup>6</sup>

While the 2d and 3d Battalions blanketed the Kentucky area with cordons and patrols, the remaining battalion of Colonel Michael M. Spark's 3d Marines, the 1st Battalion, remained in the Lancaster II area and provided security for Camp Carroll, Landing Zone Mack, the Dong Ha Mountain outpost, Thon Sam Lam, and Khe Gio Bridge. Lieutenant Colonel Richard B. Twohey's Marines also furnished escorts for Rough Rider truck convoys and details for the daily road sweep of Route 9. Although there was a marked increase in the use of mines and Camp Carroll received an occasional enemy mortar attack, the majority of attacks by fire and encounters with enemy forces took place around Landing Zone Mack and Landing Zone Sierra to the north. While on patrol near Sierra on the afternoon of 15 November, Company A's point element came under fire from an estimated enemy platoon, which initiated the contact by detonating several directional, or claymore mines, and grenades. Supported by 60mm mortars, the enemy platoon then opened fire with automatic weapons and small arms. Captain James L. Shaw's Marines countered with direct artillery fire and 106mm recoilless rifle and 81mm mortar fires, and reported as a result five enemy troops killed. During the firefight, Company A lost 7 Marines killed and 23 wounded in addition to a scout dog.

On 21 November, as the western boundary of the Lancaster area of operations again was shifted east, Twohey's battalion was helilifted from Landing Zone Sierra to Mack and then to C-1. The departure of 1st

Battalion, 3d Marines from the jungle-covered mountains northwest of Camp Carroll coincided with the termination of the 10-month-long operation, code-named Lancaster II, and the absorption of the area into that of Scotland II and Kentucky. According to Marine sources, Lancaster II, which began in late January, accounted for more than 1,800 enemy troops killed and 913 weapons captured. Allied losses were placed at 359 killed and a total of 2,101 wounded.

From C-1, on 22 November, Companies A, B, and C, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, and Company C, 3d Tank Battalion, in coordination with the 2d Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment moved north along Route 1 and established a tank and infantry cordon near Gio Linh.<sup>7</sup> The three-day cordon resulted in more than 3,900 Vietnamese being processed, of which 188 were detained. Of the 188, 147 were later classified as Viet Cong suspects and 41 were found to be deserters or draft dodgers. Following the Gio Linh-Ha Thanh cordon, Lieutenant Colonel Richard B. Twohey's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines moved to the southern portion of the 2d ARVN Regiment's area of operation and began a cordon and search of the Thon Nghia An, Thon Thanh Luong, and Thon Truong Xa village complex, north and west of Dong Ha. Other than receiving a few sniper rounds, Twohey's Marines found little evidence of recent enemy activity.

The last days of November witnessed the beginning of one more cordon operation. On the 29th, Lieutenant Colonel Chen's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines moved into the rice-growing area around Thon Vinh Dai, east of Cam Lo and north of Route 9. In seven days, working with local Regional and Popular Forces, Chen's Marines, assisted in the screening of 1,604 civilians, 85 of whom were classified as Viet Cong suspects.

Although heavily committed to the pacification effort, two battalions of Colonel Sparks' 3d Marines were alerted for deployment to Quang Nam Province in early December. The III MAF commander, General Cushman, warned General Stilwell the commander of XXIV Corps that intelligence indicated that the enemy planned, "to press his attacks on major cities of Da Nang and Quang Ngai . . . to thwart our successes in the countryside." He told Stilwell:

To counter his plans, III MAF will embark on an intensified campaign . . . to destroy his major means for carrying out his aggression. To do this will require the destruction of BA 112, which contains command and control headquarters and support facilities. It also requires destruction of the 2d and 3d NVA Divisions and prevention of their escape into Laos.

Since no additional forces were available to accomplish this mission, the existing forces in I Corps would have to be reallocated. Cushman asked the XXIV Corps commander to furnish two battalions to the 1st Marine Division "with proportionate share of division combat and combat service support for the accelerated effort against 2d NVA Div and BA 112."<sup>8</sup> The 3d Marines regimental headquarters, two infantry battalions, and normal combat support elements were designated to move south.\*

As Spark's 1st and 3d Battalions left the field for Quang Tri Combat Base and rest and refitting before being airlifted to An Hoa, the 3d Marine Division activated, on 7 December, Task Force Bravo for planning. On 9 December, Colonel Clarke, the task force commander, assumed tactical responsibility for the Kentucky area of operations.

Following a short cordon encompassing a majority of the hamlets in Huong Hoa District, on 12 December, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel James J. McMonagle, moved into the area of operations formerly occupied by the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Stretching from the DMZ south to the Cua Valley, the 300-square kilometer area included the fixed installations of Con Thien, C-2 Bridge, C-2, and C-3, three of which previously were secured by a battalion each, now were the responsibility of two companies.

The last three weeks of December found McMonagle's battalion with two companies, Company F in Huong Hoa District and Company H in Cam Lo District, assisting in the pacification effort through integrated operations and training with Regional and Popular Forces. Company E provided security for Con Thien and C-2 Bridge, as well as patrolling and ambushing throughout its assigned 54-square kilometer area. McMonagle's remaining Company, G, secured C-2 and C-3, while likewise conducting patrols and ambushes in its area. Despite the lack of enemy activity and the insurmountable tasks assigned, the battalion was fully confident that the area of operations "was being denied to the enemy due to total effort on the part of all companies."<sup>9</sup>

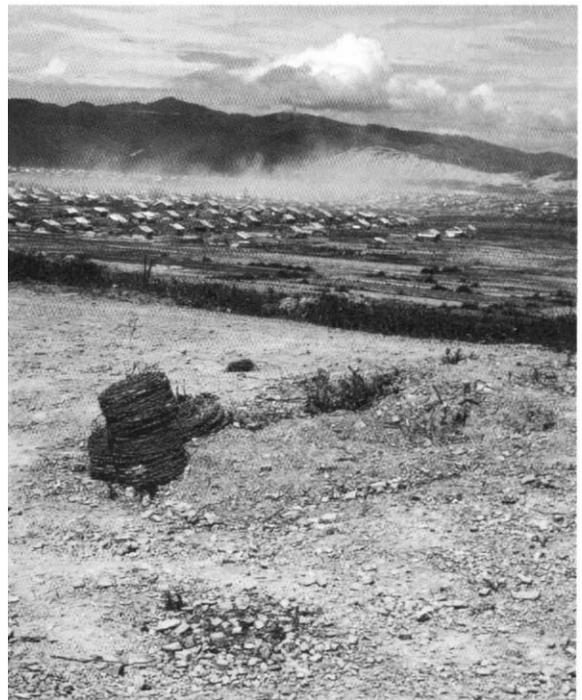
While McMonagle's four companies blanketed their assigned areas with patrols and ambushes, Task Force Bravo conducted two large cordon and search operations targeted at the Cam Lo Resettlement Village and the village of Xuan Khanh, near Cua Viet.

The first, involving two companies of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines and elements of the 1st and 2d ARVN Regiments, screened more than 10,000 villagers, 93 of whom were detained as Viet Cong suspects. The target of the second was the fishing village of Xuan Khanh, near the mouth of the Cua Viet. On the day after Christmas, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines was relieved of positions in the western mountains and helilifted into the area, where Companies F, G, and H cordoned the fishing village, permitting the 3d Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment to search the area and process more than 9,000 inhabitants. Of the 174 who were detained, a majority later was determined to be draft evaders.

Due to the division's extensive commitment to the pacification effort during the last two months of 1968, the local Viet Cong, noted General Davis, had to "rewrite his book." According to Davis, the VC used to "strike and run to a hideaway, in a secure area. He doesn't have that now. Marines are on his trails, in his hideaway, in his secure areas not only in the hills but doing the same thing" in populated areas. The effect of the

*A view of Cam Lo Resettlement Village includes the surrounding hills. The U.S. and South Vietnamese built new homes for Vietnamese refugees and resettled them here to keep the people away from the VC and also away from the combat areas.*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371645



\* See Chapter 21.

allied pacification on Quang Tri Province, Davis continued, was to make it "as secure internally as it's ever going to be. . . . It compares favorably with many places I know in the United States insofar as levels of violence and security are concerned."<sup>10</sup>

*Rough Soldiering*

As November began, Colonel Martin J. Sexton's 4th Marines and Colonel Robert H. Barrow's 9th Marines, under the overall command of Brigadier General Frank E. Garretson's Task Force Hotel, conducted offensive operations throughout the Scotland II area of operations. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas H. Galbraith's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines provided security for artillery units and radio relay sites located at Fire Support Bases Cates and Shepherd and Hills 691 and 950, and patrolled out from the four bases. At the same time, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel James L. Fowler, continued the defense and development of Fire Support Base Gurkha and patrolled the Khe Xa Bai and the Song Rao Quan Valleys. To the northwest of her sister battalions, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, commanded by Major William L. Kent, completed its sweep west of Fire Support Base Alpine, finding several abandoned North Vietnamese positions,

but no evidence of recent enemy activity. On 4 November, Company E was helilifted eight kilometers northwest to Hill 1308 and began construction of Fire Support Base Argonne. Positioned one-and-one-half kilometers from the Laotian border and the highest fire support base in South Vietnam, Argonne provided excellent observation of the vital enemy road net in Laos which funneled troops and supplies south. Although the Marines on the base made numerous sightings, higher headquarters repeatedly denied clearance for fire missions as the sighted enemy positions were well beyond the border.

By 11 November with construction of the fire support base completed, the 1st Battalion replaced the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. The 2d Battalion, now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Joseph E. Hopkins, displaced to Fire Support Bases Cates and Shepherd and Hills 691 and 950. It then began sweep operations north of Cates and west along Route 9 toward the village of Khe Sanh following the closure of Shepherd. With the departure of Hopkins' Marines, Galbraith's battalion conducted a two-company search north and east of Argonne, into an area of sharp-sloped mountains covered in triple-canopy jungle and cut by many small fast-rushing streams. The search yielded





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A800541

*Marines of Company B, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines cross a fast-rushing stream in Operation Scotland II, east of Vandegrift Combat Base. Drinking water appears to be at a premium, judging from the extra number of canteens that each Marine is carrying.*

numerous unoccupied or hastily abandoned living areas, harbor sites, and natural caves containing a considerable number of supply, weapons, and ammunition caches. But, as Companies A and B progressed eastward, enemy forces in the region began a series of delaying actions which took the form of small but sharp engagements between point elements of the companies and small groups of enemy. When contact was broken, pursuit of the enemy inevitably led to the discovery of further caches.

On 21 November, Companies C and D, which had secured Argonne and Alpine, replaced Companies A and B in the search to the east. Thirteen days later and 14 kilometers further east, as the two companies crossed the Khe Ta Bong and moved toward higher ground, they began the process of developing a new fire support base, to be named Neville, atop Hill 1103. With the positioning of Battery G, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines at Neville on 14 December, Task Force Hotel ordered all search and destroy operations to the west halted and Fire Support Bases Argonne, Gurkha, and Alpine closed. With Neville in full operation, Compa-

nies C and D evacuated the area and subsequently were placed under the operational control of Task Force Bravo to assist in the Cam Lo Refugee Village cordon, while Companies A and B helilifted to Vandegrift Combat Base.

After a short stay at Vandegrift, where it secured the combat base and surrounding Marine positions following the search around Gurkha, Lieutenant Colonel Fowler's 3d Battalion moved by helicopter 14 kilometers to the north on 21 November to defend and further develop Fire Support Base Winchester and Landing Zones Mack and Sierra. Known as the Son Phan Cong Hoang Quoc Gia National Forest Reserve, the mountainous region surrounding the battalion's positions was characterized by steep slopes and long narrow ridgelines covered with dense forest and jungle consisting of a single, but thick, canopy. The battalion was joined on the 24th by Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, which assaulted into Winchester and then moved one kilometer east along the Dong Tien ridgeline and began construction of Fire Support Base Russell. Other than occasional sniper fire, battalion patrols

encountered little enemy resistance, but did discover a number of large, recently constructed enemy bunker complexes which yielded a modest amount of ammunition and equipment.

During the first week of December, as the 3d Battalion, now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William A. Donald, began a several-week, two-company search north of Russell, Lieutenant Colonel Hopkins' 2d Battalion assaulted into four landing zones on two parallel ridgelines east of Mack and three kilometers north of Dong Ha Mountain. The landings were unopposed and Hopkins' four companies fanned out toward their first objectives, establishing perimeters while deploying listening posts and squad ambushes.

Moving toward new objectives on 8 December a squad patrol from First Lieutenant Jimmie G. Bear-den's Company E, as it approached Hill 208, was taken under small arms fire from a tree- and trench-line. Moving to engage, the patrol observed approximately 10 armed enemy troops retreating into the

heavy brush. Two squads were sent to reinforce the engaged unit and prevent the enemy's escape, but as the attacking Marine platoon maneuvered forward it found that the enemy had taken cover in a heavily fortified trench and bunker complex. The platoon entered the complex and immediately was caught in a crossfire of small arms, grenades, and white smoke or CS gas. With darkness approaching and casualties mounting, the platoon withdrew, carrying out nine wounded Marines, but leaving the bodies of three dead behind.

While air, artillery, and mortars pounded the complex throughout the night, Lieutenant Colonel Hopkins rapidly moved the battalion's other three companies into blocking positions around the complex with the hope of catching some of the estimated 50 North Vietnamese soldiers attempting to escape. But the enemy apparently "hit the ground running," and the sweep through the area the following day, during which the bodies of the three dead Marines were recov-

*Smoldering fires and a denuded forest bear stark witness to the intensity of the combat for "Foxtrot Ridge," named after Company F, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines.*

Photo from the Abel Collection



ered, went unchallenged.

Two days later, Hopkins ordered Captain Richard J. Murphy's Company F to cross the Song Ngan valley and assault the ridgeline extending along the southern boundary of the DMZ, the site of several suspected enemy mortar positions. After heavy air and artillery strikes, the company seized the western portion of the ridgeline under fire. As Murphy's Marines moved eastward, hidden NVA opened up with small arms and automatic weapons on the lead elements of the company. The enemy was well entrenched and dense vegetation made it difficult to spot the sources of enemy fire. Having fought its way into the middle of a large, well-laid out bunker complex, the company now found it hard to maneuver without taking additional casualties and leaving its wounded.

Despite overwhelming odds, Murphy's company extracted its casualties, reorganized, and following another heavy air and artillery strike, prepared to assault. Turning to his troops, platoon leader Second Lieutenant Steven P. Brodrick shouted: "All right Marines, take this hill and earn your pay!" Brodrick then led his platoon back into the enemy complex and maneuvered forward until he was killed by a direct burst of automatic weapons fire.<sup>11</sup>

Alerted earlier in the day to follow in trace of Company F, Hopkins quickly committed Company H to reinforce Murphy's Marines. Attempting to envelop the enemy complex from the north, it too ran into heavy enemy fire and a fierce firefight ensued. However, once Company H was able to bring its full firepower to bear, the enemy withdrew and by the time Company G moved in to reinforce its engaged sister companies, the battlefield had quieted. Enemy losses were unknown, but the battalion suffered 13 killed and 31 wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Hopkins remembered that the battle, "took place on a hill on which the southern boundary of the DMZ ran across the topographical crest." The NVA kept its forward defensive positions south of the DMZ, "while the bulk of his forces" remained in the so-called demilitarized area.<sup>12</sup>

Following air, artillery, and mortar missions, Captain Joseph M. Dwyer's Company G led out in the assault on 12 December. Those of the enemy, who could, had escaped, and the attacking companies searched the area without contact. One North Vietnamese soldier was found alive and unharmed in a bunker and he quickly was relieved of his loaded light machine gun and whisked off to the battalion command post. Under interrogation, he told his captors that the position had been occupied by the *1st Battal-*

*ion, 27th NVA Regiment*, and that the battalion commander and his staff had died in the fighting. Lieutenant Colonel Hopkins later wrote about his frustration of not being permitted "to pursue the fleeing *27th NVA Regiment* . . ." He recalled bitterly, "standing on the topographical crest . . . showing various media representatives the blood-stained trees on both sides of the trails leading into the DMZ . . ." Hopkins was convinced "that a significant volume of enemy casualties and materiel could have been captured or uncovered before being moved back across the Ben Hai."<sup>13</sup>

During the next two weeks, Hopkins' battalion searched east and west along the ridgeline, dubbed "Foxtrot Ridge." Employing tactics to draw the enemy south of the DMZ, the battalion repeatedly maneuvered out of the area as if leaving, then quickly struck back. But, because of his losses, the enemy apparently had decided not to contest the terrain, and no further engagements occurred. On the day after Christmas, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines departed the area by helicopter for the Cua Viet sector where they participated with the 3d Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment in cordoning the village of Xuan Thanh.\*

The first days of November found Colonel Robert H. Barrow's 9th Marines scattered throughout the southern portion of the division's area of operations, where the Scotland area was expanded due to the departure of the 1st Cavalry Division. Lieutenant Colonel George W. Smith's 1st Battalion, which had relieved elements of the Cavalry division's 1st Brigade at Fire Support Base Anne, southwest of Quang Tri, continued to conduct company-sized patrols of the surrounding area in search of the enemy, his supplies, and base camps. Later in the month, the battalion participated in two combined cordon operations: the first with the 3d Marines in the Mai Loc area and the second with elements of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division around the Thuong Xa and Mai Dang village complexes south of Quang Tri City.

The 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, under Major Frederick E. Sisley, which had been inserted into the eastern portion of the Vietnam Salient in late October, by

\*Brigadier General Hopkins remembered that the week before Christmas, bad weather restricted helicopter resupply and then the weather cleared a few days before the holiday. When resupply resumed, the battalion faced the dilemma of either receiving C-rations or "the Christmas packages stacked up in the rear awaiting delivery." The Marines decided upon the "Christmas packages." Hopkins quoted one of his troops, "if we don't get enough food in the Christmas packages, we can always find a few more rice caches." BGen Joseph E. Hopkins, Comments on draft, dtd 6Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

early November had moved around the horn and was patrolling in the northern portion of the area between the Da Krong and the Laotian border. Lieutenant Colonel Elliott R. Laine's 3d Battalion, located at Vandegrift Combat Base, secured the base and surrounding Marine installations at Ca Lu and Signal Hill. On 8 November, Company L assaulted into landing zones near Hill 512, 15 kilometers southeast of Vandegrift and began construction of Fire Support Base Tun Tavern. Upon completion of Tun Tavern several days later, the remaining three companies of Laine's battalion moved into the area and began patrol operations in the Da Krong Valley and the ridgeline to the east, between the Da Krong and Ba Long Valleys.

Despite the rugged, mountainous terrain and the physical problems it caused the individual Marine, the two battalions conducted a methodical search of their assigned areas, as Colonel Barrow later described:

Each battalion has four companies operating out of company operating bases, each separated from the other

by about 2 to 3,000 meters. A company will spend, characteristically, two, three, or four days in one of these operating bases and conduct extensive patrolling by platoon or squads in all directions. So that after three or four days the area extending in a radius of a couple of thousand meters out from the operating base has been covered. The operating base represents a place of resupply and for a patrol that has been out perhaps for two days to rest for a day, preparatory for renewing its patrolling activities.<sup>14</sup>

According to Barrow, when the companies had worked over one area completely, Marine helicopters would then helilift the battalion into a new adjoining or nearby sector. In leapfrog fashion, the aircraft would bring the two companies of the battalion that were the farthest away into the new area. In turn, the remaining two companies would be "leapfrogged over them." Barrow explained there was, therefore "a constant heli-borne move of companies to new areas, but no company passes overland, covering an area that has already been covered by another company." The methodical

*Photocopy of Northern I Corps Briefing Map (Nov-Dec 1968) From Gen E. E. Anderson Collection*



search produced large caches of rice and grain in addition to numerous bunkers and fighting positions which were destroyed. Operating in small groups, the enemy chose to avoid contact whenever possible, posing little or no threat to the maneuvering companies.<sup>15</sup>

On 14 November, Company A, 9th Marines was lifted by helicopter into Landing Zone Miami and assaulted, seized, and occupied Hill 618, beginning the construction of Fire Support Base Dick. Three days later, Company E took Hill 347, overlooking the horseshoe bend in the Da Krong and began construction of Fire Support Base Shiloh. With the completion of Shiloh, the remaining three companies of Major Sisley's battalion shifted their patrol operations west and south to the Laotian border, meeting little enemy resistance.

With a realignment of divisional boundaries between the 3d Marine and 101st Airborne Divisions in late October, the Marine division's area of operations was expanded southward presenting it an opportunity to conduct major offensive operations in and west of enemy *Base Area 101* and the Ba Long Valley.<sup>16</sup> The first of a series of offensive operations, codenamed Dawson River, began on 28 November, as Colonel Barrow's regiment moved deeper into the new area; an area, he noted, "which had never been entered before by any forces, other than enemy, of course."<sup>17</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Smith's 1st Battalion simultaneously relieved Major Sisley's 2d Battalion, which assumed the security for major Marine installations throughout the division's western area of operations.

Broken down into companies and platoons, Laine's and Smith's battalions thoroughly covered their assigned areas, finding numerous small caches of enemy equipment, supplies, and a large number of graves. Although they anticipated encounters with major elements of the *7th Front*, the only groups met in large numbers were Bru and other Montagnard tribesmen who voluntarily surrendered and subsequently were resettled to the east. In his assessment of the operation, which ended on 25 December, Colonel Barrow noted that while the number of enemy killed was low, the regiment provided a measure of security for the entire province:

We have kept him on the move, which combined with the activity that has taken place in the piedmont area to the east and the lowlands still further east, keeps him entirely on the move in this area so that he has no place that he can withdraw to as a sanctuary when pressure becomes too great in one, in say the piedmont or the lowlands. We have . . . given a measure of reassurance to the people operating in the lowlands and pied-

mont that there are no large-scale enemy forces marshalling in these mountains, in these jungles, preparatory to coming down to harass or interdict their operations being conducted in those areas.<sup>18</sup>

Following a short, two-day stay at the division's in-country rest and recreation center at Cua Viet, Lieutenant Colonel Smith's 1st Battalion and the 2d Battalion, now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George C. Fox, prepared to assault landing zones north of Route 9 and begin search operations west of Khe Sanh to the Laotian border.<sup>19</sup> Concerned about the possibility of a Tet offensive on the scale of 1968, Task Force Hotel and division staffs, as the year ended, began planning for a foray into the lower Da Krong Valley, north of the A Shau Valley, an area of increasing enemy activity and an area that had not been searched or explored since early April.

#### *Thua Thien and the End of the Year*

To the south of the 3d Marine Division, in Thua Thien Province, the 101st Airborne Division continued the division-level operation, Nevada Eagle. Targeted against local force units and the Viet Cong infrastructure in the lowlands, and main and North Vietnamese Army forces in the mountains, the operation's central objective was to maintain a favorable environment for the South Vietnamese Government's Accelerated Pacification Campaign in the heavily populated lowlands around Hue.

Working closely with local and Regional Force companies and elements of the 3d and 54th ARVN Regiments, the division again concentrated its efforts of elimination of Viet Cong forces from the districts of Phu Vang, Huong Thuy, and Phu Thu. Techniques such as cordons, intensive searches, saturation patrols, night ambushes, and the rapid exploitation of intelligence appeared to be successful in rooting out enemy forces and dissolving the existing lines of continuity within the local Viet Cong infrastructure.

In addition to uprooting the Viet Cong and his sympathizers in the populated lowlands, Major General Melvin Zais' airborne troops launched a series of mobile operations into the mountains southwest of Hue. Throughout the first, Nam Hoa I, Zais used combat assaults, flanking maneuvers, and massed firepower to trap and destroy elements of the *5th NVA Regiment*. During the second, Rawlins Valley, elements of the division employed similar techniques against the *6th NVA Regiment* with minimal results. However, both operations forced the enemy to withdraw deeper into the mountains thereby abandoning his forward

positions to allied destruction and at the same time losing the capacity to launch attacks into the lowlands in the immediate future.

Throughout the last seven months of 1968, Marine, Army, and ARVN troops continued the relentless and successful pursuit and destruction of enemy forces in northern I Corps. But as the year ended, the enemy avoided contact while maintaining widely dispersed elements of his main force units in the northern two provinces of South Vietnam and regrouping, resupplying, and retraining in his sanctuaries in Laos and North Vietnam.

For the 3d Marine Division, the tactical situation throughout Quang Tri Province during the latter half of 1968 dictated the maximum use of its combat elements in a highly mobile posture. This was a change from the relatively static posture during the early part of the year. Continually on the offensive with hard-hitting mobile operations, troops of the 3d, 4th, and 9th Marines in rapid succession drove

North Vietnamese forces from the coastal plains, crushed the *320th NVA Division*, and penetrated and systematically destroyed the enemy's mountain bases, areas once considered inviolate. Still as one Marine veteran of the 3d Marine Division later commented that all he remembered was "the rain, the mud, the heat and the misery that were so much a part of our existence." The last two months of the year were a blur of "routine patrols marked by little or no contact with the enemy."<sup>20</sup>

In both Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces, nevertheless, a concerted campaign featuring the integration of American, South Vietnamese Army, and territorial forces disrupted the Viet Cong military and political structure in the population centers. The two allied offensives against the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong had, by year's end, rendered the enemy incapable of conducting an effective campaign in northern I Corps.