

## CHAPTER 7

# “They’re Not Supermen,” Meeting the NVA in Operation Utah, March 1966

*First Contact with the NVA—Operation Utah Expands*

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### *First Contact With the NVA*

In contrast to the extended antiguerrilla small-unit war waged in the Da Nang TAOR, the Marines in southern I CTZ fought a series of sharp engagements during the late winter and early spring against North Vietnamese regulars. The first heavy fighting occurred during Operation Utah, early in March. Planning for Utah began when Colonel Bruce Jones, USA, senior advisor to the 2d ARVN Division, visited General Platt on 3 March, just after Platt returned to his CP at Chu Lai following Operation Double Eagle. Jones told Platt that the ARVN division had obtained intelligence that the *21st NVA Regiment* had recently moved into a region seven miles northwest of Quang Ngai City.

With the concurrence of both Generals McCutcheon and English, who were acting CG III MAF and CG 3d Marine Division, respectively, during General Walt’s visit to Washington, General Platt decided to mount a coordinated attack with the 2d ARVN Division. Platt ordered his senior regimental commander, Colonel Peatross, the commanding officer of the 7th Marines, to meet with the 2d Division commanding general, who was still General Lam. Colonel Peatross, who, like General Platt, had worked closely together with General Lam during previous operations, flew that evening together with Colonel William G. Johnson, the commanding officer of MAG-36, to the 2d Division Headquarters at Quang Ngai City. There, the American and South Vietnamese commanders agreed to launch a combined operation using one ARVN and one Marine battalion.

According to the concept of operations, the two battalions were to land near the hamlet of Chau Nhai (5), 15 kilometers northwest of Quang Ngai City. The ARVN battalion was to land first and secure the landing zone, followed by the Marine bat-

talion. Then both battalions were to advance southeastward paralleling Route 527 and then due east to Route 1, a distance of seven miles. The ARVN battalion was to operate north of Route 527, while the Marines were to deploy south of the road.

The planning period was very brief. Arriving back at Chu Lai late on the night of 3 March, Colonel Peatross and Colonel Johnson, who had been designated tactical air commander, met with Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter, the commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, at the 7th Marines CP and told him about the forthcoming operation. By morning, the 2d Battalion had three companies staged at Chu Lai for helicopter movement. Captain Alex Lee, the battalion’s assistant operations officer, characterized the preparations as “nothing more than get on your horse and go.”<sup>1</sup>

The objective area consisted of paddy lands and the hamlets of the Chau Nhai village complex. Hills 97 and 85 overlooked the landing zone from the southwest. Doughnut-shaped Hill 50 was the dominant terrain feature to the northeast. The hamlet of Chau Nhai (5), the first objective of the ARVN battalion, southwest of that hill was to be the scene of extensive fighting during the next few days.

On the morning of 4 March, Marine A-4s from MAG-12, F-4s from MAG-11, reinforced by USAF Martin B-57 Canberra bombers, strafed and bombed the objective area to prepare for the helicopter landings. Despite this aerial bombardment, the MAG-36 helicopters carrying the first elements of the 1st ARVN Airborne Battalion were taken under 12.7mm antiaircraft fire as they began to land at 0900. Within 10 minutes, all four of the accompanying armed UH-1Es from VMO-6 were hit. Enemy gunners downed one of the Hueys, but its crew was evacuated. Marine jets overhead attacked while the tactical air commander increased the landing intervals between successive helicopter waves. Enemy ground fire shot down one F-4 from VMFA-531 while it was making a napalm run, but the crew was

rescued after ejecting and landing in the South China Sea.

Despite the intensity of the antiaircraft fire, the MAG-36 helicopters continued landing. Ten of the 20 UH-34s from HMM-261 and HMM-364 in the first lift were hit. Major Michael J. Needham, the HMM-364 strike leader, was forced to relinquish control of the landing when his aircraft was hit in the fuel line. Colonel Johnson later recalled: "the role of strike leader was then passed from aircraft division [usually four planes] to aircraft division as each division came in to land its troops." As the tactical air commander for the operation with access to 1st Wing support assets, the MAG commander was airborne in a command and control helicopter on his way from Chu Lai to the Quang Ngai Airfield at the time of the insertion of the ARVN airborne troopers. When hearing of the heavy resistance encountered in the landing zones, he "ordered by radio all MAG-36 helos to report to Quang Ngai for a briefing." This order caused an interruption of all planned missions and "consternation in air command and control agencies, but was effective." Sixteen UH-34s from the group's remaining transport squadron, HMM-363, soon joined the HMM-261 and HMM-364 aircraft to lift the remaining ARVN airborne troops from the Quang Ngai field to the landing zone.<sup>2</sup>

By 1030 that morning, the last elements of the 1st ARVN Airborne Battalion were in the zone. The Marine helicopter group had completed the lift of more than 400 men of the battalion under most adverse circumstances. Colonel Johnson expressed the opinion that:

The North Vietnamese did not think we would continue the lift in the face of that automatic weapons fire. We did continue the lift and we kept the automatic weapons under almost constant attack by fixed-wing aircraft while we were going in there. And this enabled us to get in.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the heavy opposition that the Marine pilots encountered, the South Vietnamese troops met little resistance on the ground as they attacked northeast toward Hill 50.

With the completion of the landing of the South Vietnamese battalion, the MAG-36 helicopters returned to Chu Lai to bring Lieutenant Colonel Utter's battalion into the objective area. By 1040, the first elements of the battalion were on their way. Once more enemy gunners challenged the landing. The first wave, the 1st Platoon of Company F, land-



Marine Corps Photo A186813  
*Marines from Company F, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines meet resistance after arriving in the landing zone during Operation Utah. Marine on the right is firing a M79 grenade launcher.*

ed under heavy fire. The platoon was isolated for 15 minutes until the helicopters could bring in the rest of the company. By 1130, both Companies F and G, and the battalion command group, were on the ground, meeting only light resistance as they secured the immediate area, but the intensity of the enemy antiaircraft fire delayed the arrival of Company H until after 1300.

During the two-and-one-half hour lift, Colonel Johnson's helicopters, reinforced by a squadron from MAG-16, moved more than 600 men of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines from Chu Lai into the Utah area of operations. In the course of landing the Marine battalion, several more UH-34s were hit and one crashed in the landing zone. One platoon from Company H remained in the LZ to provide security for the downed craft. Lieutenant Colonel Utter had to send a platoon from Company G 1,500 meters southwest of the landing zone to guard the UH-1E downed earlier, thus further reducing his effective strength. His Company E was already lost to him for the operation because it had been assigned to accompany Battery M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines which had displaced to firing positions near Binh Son, 7,000 meters northeast of Utter's position.

While the 2d Battalion was arriving in the battle area, the Marine command began preparations to expand the operation. Colonel Peatross had accompanied Colonel Johnson to Quang Ngai. He was present when Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Zitnik, the commanding officer of VMO-6, reported to Colonel Johnson after leading his gunships in the pre-H-hour preparation of the landing zones. According to Peatross, Zitnik stated something to the effect that "we have a tiger by the tail." Agreeing with the VMO commander that the heavy antiaircraft fire indicated the presence of a sizeable enemy force, Colonel Peatross left his operations and intelligence officers at the 2d ARVN Division command post and returned to Chu Lai to give General Platt a firsthand report and to alert additional Marine forces.<sup>4</sup>

At this point, approximately 1130, General Platt decided to reactive Task Force Delta. Colonel Peatross was assigned as Chief of Staff and personnel from the 7th Marines and 4th Marines Headquarters made up the rest of the staff. By late afternoon, a Marine truck convoy had moved most of the Task Force headquarters personnel and equipment to a command post near Quang Ngai, close to the 2d Division CP. According to General Platt, the two headquarters were "literally collocated. . . . I was very close to General Lam. Our 2s and 3s were only a few feet apart." Both CPs were about 2,000 meters northeast of Quang Ngai City on a 101-meter height named Nui Thien An, meaning "Mountain of Heavenly Peace," but called "Buddha Hill" by the Marines because of a nearby Buddhist temple. General McCutcheon, the acting III MAF commander, later compared the hill to "Little Round Top" at Gettysburg as it overlooked the southern sector of the developing battle seven miles to the northwest.<sup>5\*</sup>

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\*Captain Edwin W. Besch, who at the time was the Task Force Delta Headquarters commandant, recalled that both the TF Delta and 2d Division CP were virtually without any security the first night, while located "about 50 yards from a Regional/Popular Forces triangular-shaped fortified company outpost which had been *annihilated* by a Main Force unit" a month before. According to Besch, security was later provided by a variety of units, including a South Vietnamese airborne company, ". . . only 38 men strong, but looking extremely confident (cocky) and armed with a mixture of M-14 rifles, captured AK-47s . . . Thompson & M-3 submachine guns, etc. . . . a Marine rifle company in reserve, and an ARVN 105mm battery, and a small unit of . . . Nung mercenaries." Capt Edwin W. Besch, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A332583 (MajGen Oscar F. Peatross)  
*Col Oscar F. Peatross, Commanding Officer, 7th Marines visits the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines command post during Operation Utah. Col Peatross became the TF Delta Chief of Staff under BGen Jonas M. Platt.*

*A view of Utah area of operations as seen from Buddha Hill, the TF Delta command post. Because it overlooked the developing battle, MajGen McCutcheon compared Buddha Hill to "Little Round Top" at Gettysburg.*

Marine Corps Photo A332571 (MajGen Oscar F. Peatross)



Shortly after 1300, Lieutenant Colonel Utter's battalion secured Hills 97 and 85 and began advancing south. Although the Marine companies encountered only very light resistance, the airborne battalion to the northeast ran into heavy opposition in the vicinity of Chau Nhai (5) and then Hill 50. About 1330, the ARVN commander asked for help from the Marine battalion. Utter received permission to stop his advance and ordered his companies to wheel about to reinforce the southern flank of the Vietnamese battalion. In Utter's words:

We went cross-country and found the airborne battalion engaged in an argument with the enemy over a small hill [Hill 50] that dominated the surrounding terrain. . . . I met a real soldier . . . when I sought out the American advisor Captain Pete Dawkins [Captain Peter Dawkins of West Point football fame] and I met his counterpart, the airborne battalion commander . . . we agreed to attack to the east. Airborne on the left, Marines on the right.<sup>6</sup>

The Marines were forced to make some late-minute adjustments to their original plan. Lieutenant Colonel Utter received a radio message from Dawkins that the ARVN airborne battalion commander planned "to work completely around Hill 50" before attacking. Utter then ordered Captain Jerry D. Lindauer, who had recently assumed command of Company F on the battalion's northern flank, to maneuver his company toward the ARVN right and then hold this line until Company G moved abreast. In effect, the Marine battalion was to make a pivoting movement and tie in with the ARVN flank.<sup>7</sup>

The ARVN battalion did not move, which initially did not alarm the Marines. Captain Lindauer, the Company F commander, several years later recalled that he spoke to Captain Dawkins, "to let him [Dawkins] know we were moving forward," and remembered: "It was a mutual understanding that the ARVN would remain in the vicinity of Hill 50" until the ARVN wounded were evacuated.<sup>8</sup>

The Marine battalion then advanced in a general easterly direction: Company F on the left, Company G in the center, and Company H in an echelon formation to protect the open southern flank. According to Lieutenant Colonel Utter:

We got off to a good start. It was fairly even ground, we had a nice even line with good contact, there was enough excitement to keep everyone on his toes, air was on station and artillery was within range and in position. I wasn't even too concerned about being minus one company and short a platoon from each of two others.<sup>9</sup>

The Marines had only pushed forward a few hundred meters in this fashion when they came under heavy fire from what Lieutenant Colonel Utter later estimated to have been two battalions of the *21st NVA Regiment*. The enemy fought from well prepared positions and took full advantage of the ground. They were too close to the Marines for Utter to call in artillery and air. He had very little choice but to continue the attack. Utter later explained, "we were in a frontal attack pure and simple, with everything committed from the outset."<sup>10</sup>

His Company G, under Captain William D. Seymour in the battalion center, penetrated the enemy positions in two places, but Utter did not have the reserves to exploit these minor gains. According to one of the battalion's staff officers, the Marines "employed fire and maneuver taking cover behind rice paddy dikes" but that the "NVA heavy machine gun fire . . . was delivered at so close a range it actually destroyed sections" of these dikes.<sup>11</sup>

Company H on the battalion right had made some progress, when the enemy counterattacked. An estimated NVA company maneuvered to the south and attacked the Marine company from that direction. Using his 81mm mortars to good effect, the company commander, a West Point graduate, 1st Lieutenant James Lau, directed the defense. Company H repulsed the enemy attack.

The growing gap on the Marine battalion's left flank between it and the ARVN battalion posed the greatest danger to the Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Utter requested Captain Dawkins, the U.S. Army advisor, to ask the Vietnamese battalion commander to attempt to close this gap between the two battalions but the Vietnamese commander "refused to do so."<sup>12</sup>

According to Utter:

This meant our left flank was wide open, with nothing to put there. But the PAVNs [Peoples Army of Vietnam] had plenty of people, so they poured through. . . . and back to the south the enemy was going at it again with "H" Company. And there we were, taking it from three sides, the front, and both flanks, and from an enemy who was literally hugging us so we wouldn't use our supporting arms.<sup>13</sup>

Captain Lindauer's Company F on the exposed left flank was most vulnerable to the enemy attack. Lindauer, who was 200 meters behind his lead platoons, the 1st and the 2d, when the enemy struck, moved forward ". . . to get a firmer grasp of the situation." He managed to reach the 2d Platoon, but

the 1st Platoon, further north, was cut off from the rest of the company, and the entire company was taking heavy casualties. Lindauer, who had been wounded himself, recalled that, "other than the fact that I was damned mad about the situation, I was lucid and able to make decisions."<sup>14\*</sup> He radioed the battalion executive officer, reported the situation, and remonstrated about delays in artillery and medical evacuation helicopters. Lindauer later apologized, explaining that he "was somewhat distraught with all the dead and wounded" around him and that he "expected miracles in that field," but now realized that the battalion was doing all that was possible, under the circumstances. In fact, shortly after speaking to the executive officer, as Lindauer recalled:

Air came up on Bn Tac [battalion tactical net] and asked me to mark the target. I had a yellow smoke thrown and told him to take a 90 degree azimuth 100-200 meters from it and keep hitting it. Simultaneously Arty said they were ready to fire, so I told air to stand by until completion of the fire mission, and if Arty was on, to hit the same area. You can tell Jim Black [Captain James O. Black, Commander, Battery M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines] he was right on the money, and then the air started a continual attack which took a lot of pressure off us. . . .<sup>15</sup>

Learning that Lindauer had a badly shattered arm, Lieutenant Colonel Utter sent his assistant operations officer, Captain Lee, to take over the command of Company F. Lee made his way through heavy fire and finally reached the company's CP about 1700 and relieved Lindauer. The new company com-



Marine Corps Photo A186812  
*Marines from 2d Battalion, 7th Marines take cover and return fire as they come under attack during Operation Utah. The Marines engaged two battalions of the 21st NVA Regiment.*

mander reported to Utter that Company F's situation was still serious and that they were running out of ammunition. At this point the battalion received reinforcements; the platoon from Company H, left behind in the landing zone to protect the damaged helicopter, arrived at the battalion command group's position, the helicopter having been repaired and flown back to Chu Lai. According to Utter, ". . . the decision was made for me—they [the Company H platoon] had to go to that open left flank." This assistance enabled Lee to solidify his positions and close the gap between his 1st and 2d Platoons.<sup>16</sup>

By this time, all of Utter's companies were reporting shortages of ammunition. The battalion S-4, Captain Martin E. O'Connor, had organized a group of 81mm mortarmen to distribute ammunition to the frontline elements.\*\* Although the group ac-

\*Captain Lindauer, a retired lieutenant colonel in 1978, bitterly recalled the refusal of the ARVN battalion to reinforce the Marines: ". . . I received no support from the ARVN and my supporting arms requests to the left flank were denied as too close to the ARVN. During that entire day, I am not aware that the ARVN Airborne Battalion did anything except view our critical situation as detached observers from the vantage point of Hill 50, and even allowed the NVA to come in behind us." Lindauer stated that Captain Dawkins "endeavored to get . . . [the battalion commander] to move but to no avail." LtCol Jerry D. Lindauer, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant Colonel Utter in his after action report was more charitable to the ARVN commander. He declared that he was not aware of the ARVN situation nor of the "ability of the ARVN commander to respond to this request." Utter suggested that, "The answer could have been a single commander on the spot to coordinate and direct both forces, based on the engagement of each." 2/7 AAR, Opn Utah, dtd 12Mar66. In any event it is not clear that the ARVN ever secured Hill 50. If they did, they soon abandoned it.

\*\*Captain O'Connor recalled in his comments that the ammunition which was distributed had been brought in by two helicopters, which "landed under fire and jettisoned their badly needed cargo." LtCol Martin E. O'Connor, Comments on draft MS, dtd 24May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

completed this mission and also evacuated the seriously wounded to a more secure area, the battalion's position remained precarious. Lieutenant Colonel Utter decided to order his companies to fall back. He later explained:

... darkness coming ... up against superior numbers ... no reserve; the enemy increasing his fire and his movement around us; wounded and dead on our hands; and fast running out of ammunition. I had nothing to lose but my pride in ordering a withdrawal—so I ordered one.<sup>17</sup>

The Marine battalion disengaged under heavy pressure. According to Utter, "We made the first 50 to 100 yards—painfully. Then we rolled in the air. Under cover of bombs, rockets, napalm, and strafing runs we made 200 more rather easily." As Company H began to pull back, it came under 60mm mortar fire and enemy infantry advanced toward the Marines. The company repulsed the North Vietnamese attack and continued its withdrawal to Chau Nhai (4), where the battalion was establishing night defensive positions. The last elements of the battalion reached the new perimeter two hours after dark.<sup>18</sup>

General Platt had already begun to take measures to reinforce the 2d Battalion. His main concern at that stage was that the North Vietnamese might

*A Marine jet streaks in to provide close air support during Operation Utab. Marine infantry can be seen advancing in the foreground.*

Marine Corps Photo A186942



evade the allied force as they had done during Double Eagle. He had ordered the deployment of another 155mm battery to Binh Son and Lieutenant Colonel James R. Young's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines to establish blocking defenses north of Utter's battalion. Shortly after 1800, Young's battalion was in position on the high ground south of the Tra Bong River, 5,000 meters west-southwest of Binh Son. Because of the heavy resistance encountered by Utter's battalion, General Platt alerted yet another battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Paul X. Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines still at Chu Lai, for helicopter movement the following morning to a landing zone 2,500 meters south of Utter's night perimeter.<sup>19</sup>

During the night of 4-5 March, the enemy continued to harass Utter's battalion in Chau Nhai (4). The North Vietnamese became especially active when helicopters arrived. Because of the intensity of the enemy fire, Lieutenant Colonel Utter had called off helicopter missions during the day, but about 2130, MAG-36 once more renewed flights. During the next seven hours the helicopter pilots brought in much needed supplies and evacuated 70 casualties, despite some NVA fire.\* Lieutenant Colonel Utter remarked:

As we tried resupply and evacuation, we received .50 caliber and mortars on each bird. But this disclosed a trenchline to our right rear and "H" Company took it in a night assault—killing twenty. After that the birds worked all night—while my Marines gleefully used their fresh ammunition on the enemy. . . .<sup>20</sup>

During that night Marine supporting arms also played a large role. An Air Force AC-47 arrived on station and dropped flares. Marine jets continued to strike at suspected enemy positions with bombs, rockets, and napalm, while A-4s from MAG-12 made high altitude, radar-controlled bombing strikes on enemy trail networks leading into the bat-

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\*General Peatross commented on the difficulty of resupplying the committed units during the night of 4 March. Although observing that no unit actually ran out of ammunition, "we had to be selective as to which units to resupply. . . . as it generally happens, the units that needed it most were the most difficult to get to. Nevertheless, in total darkness, helicopters flew into the area . . . and hovered as low as was practical—50 to a 100 feet above—and dropped the ammunition and other items of supply." MajGen Oscar F. Peatross, Comments on draft MS, dtd 1Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

tle area. Colonel Leslie E. Brown, the MAG-12 commander, recalled:

We were just in a long stream of bombing and coming back and rearming and going back as fast as we could . . . you were not necessarily flying with the same squadron that you left with. You came back and joined up and the next two to four airplanes off became a flight . . . the level of proficiency was so high that it didn't matter who was leading.<sup>21</sup>

Artillery kept pace with the air effort during the night and early morning hours of 4-5 March. Both 155mm howitzer batteries at Binh Son, Batteries K and M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines, fired in support of the Marines and the ARVN airborne battalion further north. The Marine artillerymen expended so many rounds that two ammunition resupply truck convoys from Chu Lai were required to replenish the stock.\*

Just as the second convoy arrived at Binh Son shortly after 0500, the North Vietnamese launched a major attack against the 1st ARVN Airborne Battalion's defensive position near Hill 50. Major Elmer N. Snyder, at that time Task Force Delta operations officer, asked the artillery liaison officer to call for ". . . maximum fires on the four grid squares that comprised the battlefield. . . ." In the largest single fire mission yet conducted in the Chu Lai area, the two Binh Son batteries, reinforced by a 155mm gun battery at Chu Lai, fired 1,900 rounds in two hours.<sup>22</sup>

At 0730 on the 5th, General Platt ordered Lieutenant Colonel Young to advance south from his blocking positions south of the Tra Bong River to secure the northern flank of the 1st ARVN Airborne Battalion. Young's 3d Battalion, with Company L on the right, Company M on the left, and the command group and Company I following, met only

slight resistance during the first two hours as it pushed forward to relieve enemy pressure on the South Vietnamese troopers.

### *Operation Utah Expands*

While the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines moved to link up with the ARVN airborne troopers, Generals Lam and Platt brought additional forces into the battle. Having found that the *21st NVA Regiment* was more than willing to stand and fight, both commanders wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to surround and destroy the enemy unit. During the early morning, General Lam ordered the 37th Ranger Battalion, supported by his Strike Company\*\* and an APC troop, to move from Quang Ngai to form blocking positions, 1,500 meters west of the railroad track and 3,000 meters east of Chau Nhai (4). The South Vietnamese Airborne Task Force Alfa command group and the 5th ARVN Airborne Battalion was to be airlifted from Saigon to Quang Ngai. On its arrival, General Lam planned to land the 5th ARVN Airborne in the same landing zone where the 1st ARVN Airborne Battalion and the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines had landed the previous day. From there, the newly inserted ARVN unit was to attack northeast, joining the 1st ARVN Airborne. Utter's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines was to secure the landing zone for the Vietnamese unit, clear its battlefield of the previous day, and serve as the Task Force Delta reserve battalion. General Platt also had alerted Lieutenant Colonel James P. Kelly's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines command group for movement to Binh Son and had inserted "P. X." Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines into the southern Utah area to close out any avenue of escape for the enemy regiment.<sup>23</sup>

The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines began landing shortly after 0830 on a small hill near An Tuyet (1), 3,000 meters north of the Tra Khuc River. Despite air preparation of the landing zone, Communist gunners contested the helicopter landing of the Marine battalion. Heavy machine gun fire put several MAG-36 helicopters out of commission and

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\*According to Colonel Paul B. Watson, Jr., who commanded the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines in March 1966, "the convoys consisted of supply trucks, a 105mm howitzer battery, and the command group from 3d Battalion, 11th Marines. . . . they departed Chu Lai at 0200. Upon arrival at the Binh Son artillery positions, the ammunition trucks were backed up to the gun positions and unloaded one round at a time directly into the weapons chambers." Both Colonel Watson and General Peatross suggested that this was "the first Marine convoy to have ventured out of either the Da Nang or Chu Lai enclaves at night." Col Paul B. Watson, Jr., Comments on draft MS, n.d. [June 78] (Vietnam Comment File). See also MajGen Oscar F. Peatross, Comments on draft MS, dtd 1Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

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\*\*The Strike Company of the 2d ARVN Division was an elite infantry unit directly under the operational control of the division commander.



caused repeated transfers of leadership during the lift. Lieutenant Colonel Mervin B. Porter, Commanding Officer, HMM-261, the first flight leader, was hit several times on his third trip into the landing zone and was forced to retire. Major David A. Spurlock then became flight leader, but the enemy gunfire forced his aircraft down in the landing zone. Captain James P. Kenny from HMM-261 took over as leader, and with eight other pilots completed the battalion lift, but not before another UH-34 crashed in the LZ. Major Snyder, the Task Force Delta operations officer, wrote:

American advisors to the 2d ARVN Div had warned me when planning 2/4's lift into the LZ selected that a VC Battalion (Provincial Force) had long operated in that area and that we might receive substantial trouble. What with the tempo of operations, it was determined that this was a necessary calculated risk.<sup>24</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's battalion met stiff resistance on the west and in the villages northwest and southwest of the landing zone. Two of Kelley's companies were engaged at close quarters until 1100. At that time, General Platt ordered the battalion commander to continue the original mission of closing the southern flank of the objective area. Kelley disengaged the two companies, G and H, from the firefight and began a sweep to the north. Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, attached to Kelley's command for the operation, remained in the landing zone to provide security for the downed helicopters. The battalion's forward companies and command group reached Lieutenant Colonel Utter's battalion without incident and established night defensive positions.<sup>25</sup>

While these events were going on in the southern Utah area, Lieutenant Colonel Young's battalion in the north encountered major enemy opposition shortly after 1030 while trying to link up with the 1st ARVN Airborne Battalion. Company M on the 3d Battalion's eastern flank came under heavy fire just north of Chau Nhai (3). Company L skirted the Company M fight and one of its platoons was ordered to "join the ARVN" on Hill 50. As the 3d Platoon moved to carry out these orders, it soon became clear that the NVA not the ARVN held Hill 50. The enemy confronting both companies had the advantages of prepared positions and terrain; they held the high ground. Bamboo fences and hedgetows masked the enemy position from the Marines. Having constructed an extensive tunnel



Marine Corps Photo A186762  
*BGen Jonas M. Platt, Commanding General, Task Force Delta, visits site of captured NVA command post on Hill 50 during Utah. Capt Charles W. Lattin, the commanding officer of Company M, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, gestures as he describes the action to Gen Platt.*

network which connected bunkers and spider traps, the enemy lay in wait in elaborate entrenchments protected by minefields and booby traps.

Despite these formidable defenses, the Marine battalion pressed the attack. Eventually reinforced by the 1st ARVN Airborne, Company L succeeded in taking Hill 50 after a three-and-a-half-hour engagement. Near Chau Nhai (3), Company M, however, made little headway against an estimated NVA battalion. With Company M stopped, Lieutenant Colonel Young sent his reserve company, Company I, into the action; it passed around Company M's positions and tried to push into Chau Nhai (3) from the east. At the same time, the 5th ARVN Airborne Battalion advanced toward Young's battalion in a pincer movement from the southwest. Plans called for them to relieve Company L on Hill 50. As darkness fell, both Companies L and M withdrew well to the north, while Company I consolidated its position on the eastern edge of Chau Nhai (3). Lieutenant Colonel Young's battalion's casualties were 32 killed and 90 wounded during the day's fighting.<sup>26</sup>

At this point, Generals Lam and Platt believed they had the enemy regiment surrounded and could tighten the ring the next morning. In addition to the two ARVN airborne battalions and the 3d Battalion,

1st Marines closing in on the Hill 50 area, the two generals had moved other units into blocking positions to the east and south. The 2d Battalions of the 7th and 4th Marines were to the south and the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines was to the northeast. A 2d Division task force, consisting of the 37th Ranger Battalion and 1st Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment, was along the railroad due east of the battle area. General Platt had already reinforced the artillery at Binh Son with the command group of the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines and a 105mm howitzer battery.

Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, far from the previous fighting, was still providing security for one of the downed helicopters near An Tuyet (1). Paradoxically, the heaviest action of the night and early morning hours of 5-6 March occurred at this relatively isolated position. At 2300, Captain Robert C. Prewitt, the company commander, reported to the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines that he was under mortar and heavy small arms attack.\* According to Lieutenant Colonel Kelley, "Prewitt advised me that he was dangerously low on ammunition." The battalion commander informed General Platt of the situation and asked for an emergency resupply for the company. The task force commander approved the mission and two HMM-364 helicopters took off from Quang Ngai to deliver the needed ammunition.<sup>27</sup>

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\*General Peatross commented on the rationale for leaving Prewitt's company behind to guard the downed helicopters. He declared that the question "To leave or not to leave a helicopter had been a subject as old as the first helicopter in the testing stage, in the Marine Corps Schools, in writing of the manual Helicopterborne Operations, in training exercises . . . and other operations." Peatross recalled that General McCutcheon during a visit to the Task Force Delta CP suggested destroying the aircraft, but that "I felt otherwise. We discussed that matter in . . . detail and concluded that we should not leave one unless the helicopter was already destroyed beyond repair." According to Peatross, there were two major reasons for this decision: The first was to keep up the morale of the helicopter crews who knew they and their craft would be protected and "the other point was that a downed helicopter almost invariably drew enemy action near it or to it everytime one went down. . . . as we were constantly searching for the enemy in our daily activities in Vietnam, why leave the helicopter when we knew that the enemy was going to come to it." Peatross remembered General McCutcheon calmly stating that if it "did not interfere with pursuit of the bigger enemy force, to do what we saw fit about the downed helicopter. This we did." MajGen Oscar F. Peatross, Comments on draft MS, dtd 1Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

As the aircraft approached the landing zone, they both came under heavy fire and were unable to land. According to Major Snyder, who was in radio contact with Company B, the lead pilot, First Lieutenant Terril J. Richardson, radioed Prewitt:

. . . and regretfully announced that they would not be able to land. After Prewitt informed him of the severity of the need (less than 100 rds of rifle ammo left in the company) the pilot [Richardson] said in effect that they would get the ammo in somehow. The result was that the two helos came across the zone a few feet off the ground and at about 10-20 mph while the crewmen kicked the ammo boxes out the doors. Both aircraft were hit by ground fire, but managed to flounder back to Quang Ngai.<sup>28</sup>

On the ground, Prewitt's company came under increasing pressure. Supported by mortars and automatic weapons, two North Vietnamese companies closed in on the Marine perimeter. About 0130, the enemy attacked the Marine positions from three directions—north, south, and west. With the help of Marine artillery at Binh Son and an ARVN 105mm battery at Quang Ngai, the newly replenished Marines repulsed the NVA attack. Even after the attack failed, the North Vietnamese continued to subject the Marine company to heavy mortar, small arms, and automatic weapons fire until early morning.

At 0745 6 March, General Platt ordered the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines to return to the landing zone and relieve Company B. The battalion left the blocking positions that it had established the night before, leaving the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines in place. By midafternoon, Kelley's battalion had moved overland and seized the high ground west of the landing zone. There was only light enemy resistance to the move; the main enemy force had withdrawn, but not without heavy losses. Captain Prewitt confirmed 38 enemy dead and estimated that at least twice that figure had been carried away. Major Snyder observed that "Bravo Company was too busy fighting for its life to worry about sophisticated estimates."<sup>29</sup>

The heavy fighting anticipated in the northern Utah area never developed. The night of the 5th was relatively quiet. On the morning of 6 March, Company I pulled back to join Companies L and M, and the two ARVN airborne battalions pulled back from forward positions to allow for the employment of supporting arms. After an intensive two-and-one-half-hour air and artillery bombardment, which

lasted until 1240, the three battalions advanced. The North Vietnamese were no longer there.

The North Vietnamese regiment had sustained heavy losses during the three-day fight. Lieutenant Colonel Young's Marines found 100 enemy bodies when the 3d Battalion reoccupied Hill 50 on 6 March. Later that afternoon, the battalion found an enormous cave complex, which apparently had served as the NVA regimental command post. The extensive tunnel network, still largely undamaged despite the allied bombardment, contained weapons, supplies, and documents. Earlier, Lieutenant Colonel Utter's battalion had discovered a similar defensive complex in its sector, consisting of "caves, trenches, foxholes, wire barricades, and deep, deep shelters." Utter remarked that some of the shafts went straight down for 15-to-20 feet and then swerved off in two to four directions. The 2d Battalion, 7th Marines found 43 enemy bodies in one of these tunnels. During Utah, allied forces claimed to have killed nearly 600 North Vietnamese soldiers and captured five prisoners and 49 weapons, including three 12.7mm machine guns and two mortars. Marine casualties were 98 dead and 278 wounded, while ARVN forces lost 30 killed and 120 wounded.<sup>30</sup>

Operation Utah ended on 7 March after Lieutenant Colonel Young's battalion, assisted by



Marine Corps Photo A332584 (MajGen Oscar F. Peatross) *BGen Hoang Xuan Lam (wearing beret), Commanding General, 2d ARVN Division, inspects one of the captured enemy 12.7mm machine guns that had been used so effectively against the Marines and ARVN in Operation Utah. Gen Platt, the Task Force Delta commander, is on the right of the picture.*

Marine engineers, destroyed the enemy's defensive complex. Lieutenant Colonel Utter characterized the NVA enemy by saying, "they're not supermen. But they can fight. And they will fight when cornered or when they think they have you cornered."<sup>31</sup>

## CHAPTER 8

# Further Fighting and an Expanding Base of Operations, Chu Lai, March-June 1966

*A Bloody March—Expansion at Chu Lai—Operation Kansas*

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### *A Bloody March*

A few weeks after Operation Utah ended, the Marines engaged another Communist regiment in the Binh Son/Son Tinh region. Unknown to the allies, the *1st VC Regiment* had moved south from the Que Son area north of Chu Lai into northern Quang Ngai Province. On the night of 18-19 March, the enemy regiment overran a remote outpost on Hill 141 about 2,000 meters south of the Tra Bong River and 12,000 meters west-southwest of Binh Son District town. The position was known as the An Hoa outpost taking its name from a nearby village.\*

When radio contact was lost with the outpost, manned by the 936th Regional Force (RF) Company, and after learning that a 15-man patrol returning to the camp had come under heavy small arms fire from inside the camp, General Lam, on 19 March, decided to send a 2d ARVN Division reaction force to An Hoa. A 10-helicopter detachment from HMM-261, led by Major Robert P. Guay, picked up 120 ARVN soldiers at Quang Ngai and flew toward the outpost. As the helicopters approached the landing zone, enemy heavy machine guns opened fire, hitting eight of the 10 aircraft. Only three of the UH-34s were able to land, discharge their passengers, and take off. At this point, General Lam and the wing decided to "abort" the mission. Two Phantom jets from VMFA-542 bombed and strafed the former RF outpost so that the Marine helicopters could take out the 30 ARVN troops stranded in the nearby landing zone. HMM-261 completed the evacuation shortly after 1630.<sup>1</sup>

Faced with the fact that, An Hoa position was now in enemy hands, General Lam asked III MAF for

assistance in retaking the outpost. General Kyle, the 3d Marine Division's commanding general, ordered Colonel Peatross, the 7th Marines commander and senior officer at Chu Lai since General Platt's departure to become the III MAF Chief of Staff, to establish liaison with the 2d ARVN Division. On the afternoon of the 19th, Lam and Peatross had agreed to a concept of operations similar to that used for the Utah operation. Marine helicopters were to land a Marine and an ARVN airborne battalion about 4,000 meters west of An Hoa. Both battalions then were to close in on the former RF camp on top of Hill 141. Marine artillery was to support the operation and other infantry units were to be committed as required. The two commanders alerted their respective assault forces, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines and the 5th ARVN Airborne Battalion, for the combined operation, codenamed Texas.<sup>2</sup>

By early morning on 20 March, Colonel Peatross and Colonel Johnson had established the forward command posts of the 7th Marines and MAG-36 at Binh Son.\*\* Colonel Johnson was once more the tactical air commander for the operation. The 2d ARVN Division also collocated its forward headquarters with the Marines. A battalion artillery group formed around the headquarters of the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, and consisting of a 105mm howitzer battery and a 155mm howitzer battery, moved into firing positions 5,500 meters southwest of Binh Son. After fixed-wing strikes in the objective area, the 155mm howitzer battery, Captain James O. Black's Battery M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines, started firing the landing zone preparation mission at 0730.

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\*\*Colonel Zitnik, the commanding officer of VMO-6 in March 1966, recalled that he dropped off Colonel Peatross and a few of his officers at Binh Son sometime around 2200 on the night of 19 March. Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

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\*This An Hoa should not be confused with the An Hoa basin southwest of Da Nang.

Following the air and artillery bombardment, MAG-36 helicopters landed Lieutenant Colonel Charles H. Bodley's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines and the ARVN 5th Airborne Battalion. The two units moved east with the ARVN battalion on the left flank and the Marines on the right. Neither unit met any serious opposition. The 3d Battalion's Company I was helilifted to the top of Hill 141 where the Marines found the bodies of 31 of the outpost defenders; the other 85 were missing. The enemy had departed.

That afternoon, Lieutenant Colonel "P. X." Kelley, whose 2d Battalion, 4th Marines had been designated the backup force for Operation Texas, decided to visit Binh Son to check the course of the battle. After an unscheduled stopover at the positions of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, he arrived at the 7th Marines command post. Discussing the situation with the regimental staff, he learned that the allies believed that the enemy force, suspected to be the *NVA 21st Regiment*, had escaped to the west and that his battalion "would most likely not be committed."<sup>3</sup>

According to Kelley:

I then talked with Colonel Bruce Jones, the senior advisor to the 2d ARVN Division and suggested that the VC might have moved towards the Vinh Tuy Valley, an area which had considerable activity in the past. My original suggestion at the time was to have 2/4 land there. After considerable discussion, I mentioned the fact that possibly the VC may have done the reverse of the obvious—that they may have moved in an easterly direction from Hill 141, towards the coastal plain. I then suggested the possibility of 3/7 changing its axis of advance to the Vinh Tuy Valley, and once it had passed through the valley it could join with 2/4 for a two-battalion sweep eastward to National Route 1.<sup>4</sup>

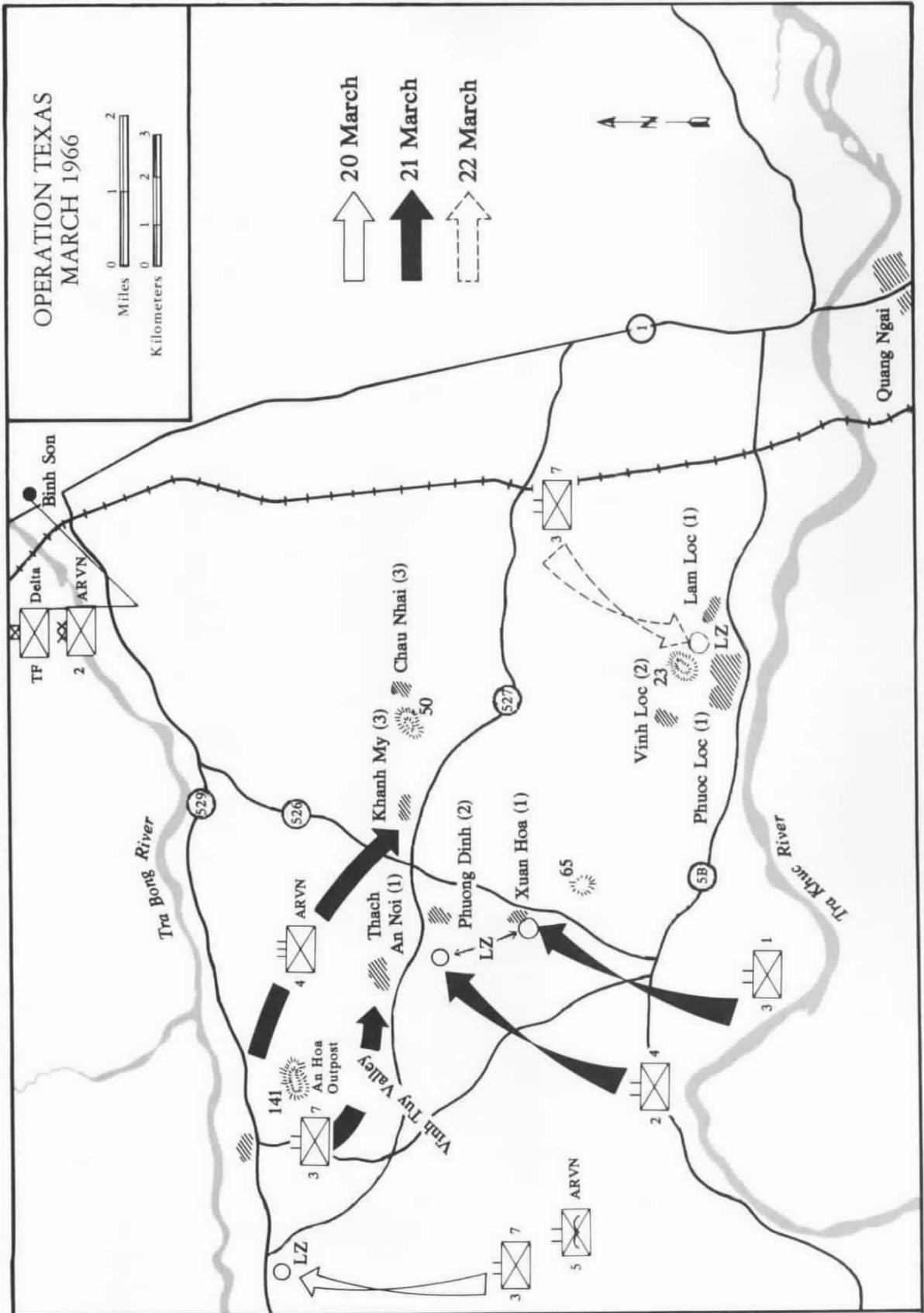
Colonel Jones and Kelley decided to present this concept to Colonel Peatross. Kelley later recalled that Colonel Peatross agreed in principle, but wanted to discuss the new plan with General Lam. The three officers then boarded a helicopter, piloted by Lieutenant Colonel Zitnik, commander of VMO-6, and Colonel Johnson, and flew to Quang Ngai City where they ". . . received General Lam's blessing." On the return flight to Binh Son, their course took them over Phuong Dinh (2) hamlet, 4,500 meters southeast of the An Hoa outpost. Colonel Peatross and Lieutenant Colonel Kelley, with the concurrence of Colonel Johnson, selected a large open field 1,000 meters west of the hamlet as the

landing zone for the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines on the following day.<sup>5</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Zitnik several years later observed that this close coordination between the senior air and ground officers permitted the air commander with a nod of his head to indicate to the ground commander that "their plans were supportable and they could proceed."<sup>6</sup>

The allies planned for the ARVN and Bodley's battalion to attack southeast from An Hoa on 21 March, while Kelley's battalion landed near Phuong Dinh (2) further to the south. General Lam reinforced the 5th ARVN Airborne Battalion with the 4th ARVN Regimental Headquarters; the 2d Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment; and an APC company. This ARVN task force was to advance until it reached Route 527 and then follow the road until it linked up with another ARVN battalion, the 3d Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment, in blocking positions west of Route 1. Operating west and southwest of the ARVN forces, Lieutenant Colonel Bodley's battalion was to march through the Vinh Tuy Valley and tie in with Kelley's battalion at Phuong Dinh (2). In the event of sizeable contact, Colonel Peatross would then commit his reserve, Lieutenant Colonel Young's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines.<sup>7</sup>

On the 21st, both Kelley's and Bodley's battalions encountered large enemy forces in strongly fortified positions. For Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, the battle began as UH-34s from MAG-36 carrying the battalion's lead elements approached the landing area. The enemy reacted with small arms and machine gun fire. Company F, which landed first, repulsed attacks from north, east, and south of the landing zone. While the company maneuvered to secure the area, MAG-12 A-4s struck Phuong Dinh (2). Armed UH-1Es from VMO-6 flew suppressive fire missions while controlling the MAG-12 jets.

By 1115, the battalion command group, Company D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, attached to the 2d Battalion for the operation, and Company E had joined Company F on the ground. At this time, Kelley called for artillery bombardment of Phuong Dinh (2) from where most of the enemy resistance was coming. Once the artillery fire ended at 1230, the 2d Battalion began its assault on Phuong Dinh (2). Company D maneuvered toward the slightly higher ground north of the hamlet, while Companies E and F, with Company E in the lead, attacked due east. Aerial observers overhead detected no movement in Phuong Dinh (2). Five minutes after



the attack started, one of the pilots from VMO-6 radioed Lieutenant Colonel Kelley exclaiming, "My God, I can't believe it! They're erupting from the ground! There are hundreds of them."<sup>8</sup>

Simultaneously, the advance elements of Company E were hit by massed enemy infantry weapons fire. While the rest of the Marine company established a heavy base of covering fire, one platoon fought its way through the hamlet's outer defenses, only to discover three more interior defensive perimeters, including mutually supporting bunkers and three bands of tactical wire entanglements. Commenting on the situation, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley later wrote:

Since ammunition was running low, I ordered Company E to withdraw to a covered position near the line of departure so that more artillery and air could be delivered on the target. At the same time, I ordered Company D to . . . establish a base of fire to relieve the pressure on Company E.<sup>9</sup>

Company D also ran into heavy enemy resistance and was unable to advance, but the company was able to place enough fire upon the enemy to afford some relief for Company E. At this time, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley and his command group were on a small rise about 50 meters west of the hamlet, caught in a cross fire. Fourteen Marines in this group were killed or wounded. The situation for the 2d Battalion was so critical that Kelley called in air strikes which dropped napalm unusually close to his frontlines.<sup>10</sup>

Marine air and artillery engaged in an all-out effort to support the stalled infantry. Lieutenant Colonel Paul B. Watson, Jr., the commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, added two new batteries, one 105mm howitzer and one 155mm howitzer, to the battalion artillery group supporting the operation. The original two batteries fired 1,346 rounds in support of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines during one continuous firing mission lasting from 1330 to 1500. Marine jets at the request of Colonel Johnson supplemented the artillery effort. By 1600, A-4s and F-4s had flown 51 strikes against the enemy. The 1st MAW Tactical Air Control Center (TACC) reported that it had diverted all Marine jets to the Texas operation. Lieutenant Colonel Zitnik remembered that the requests caused some disruption "at the TACC, but all were provided and utilized."<sup>11</sup>

With this support and the arrival of additional



Marine Corps Photo A186286  
*A Marine helicopter crew member mans a machine gun during Operation Texas. The helicopters bringing in the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines came under fire as they approached the landing zone.*

supplies by 1800, the 2d Battalion was able to consolidate its positions west of Phuong Dinh (2). Kelley later recalled:

I seriously considered a night attack, but with the average company strength down to 80-90, and pitted against a numerically superior enemy in well dug-in positions, with no reserve battalion to back up, I opted to continue the attack by fire.<sup>12</sup>

About 2,000 meters to the north of Phuong Dinh (2), the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines had encountered another fortified hamlet. As the battalion moved through the Vinh Tuy Valley the morning and early afternoon of 21 March, it passed through several nearly abandoned villages which displayed telltale signs of Viet Cong control. Only a few old men, women, and children appeared in fields abounding



Marine Corps Photo A186822

*Marines prepare to evacuate killed and wounded from battle area in Operation Texas. The troops are collecting extra ammunition and equipment from the casualties.*

in unharvested rice and other grains, while Marines found abandoned enemy defenses such as spider traps and tunnels. About 1515, near Thach An Noi (1), enemy machine guns and AK-47s began firing. As at Phuong Dinh (2), the enemy troops fought from well-prepared positions and showed a high degree of battle discipline. An overcrowded radio net caused delay in obtaining supporting air and artillery, but after three hours of close fighting in the hamlet, the Communist force, an estimated two companies, broke contact.<sup>13</sup>

With two of his battalions heavily engaged on the afternoon of 21 March, Colonel Peatross decided to commit his reserve. He selected the hamlet of Xuan Hoa as the target, 1,500 meters southeast of Phuong Dinh (2). The helilift of Lieutenant Colonel Young's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, reinforced with the 2d ARVN Division Strike Company, began at 1600. Lieutenant Colonel Zitnik remembered that his Hueys from VMO-6 had controlled fixed-wing air strikes all afternoon and he had "thought we had neutralized . . ." the area. The transport helicopters carrying Young's battalion flew "low over open fields" toward the objective hamlet, situated at the

foot of a low-lying hill. Zitnik recalled seeing some uniformed VC heading toward Xuan Hoa and calling down strikes on the hamlet. According to the VMO-6 commander:

The hamlet was almost totally destroyed when the helos appeared, but . . . a few large mm tracers were fired at the flight and hit their mark. The A-4D pilots quickly took the position under attack and quieted the fire, but not until after one helo was hit.<sup>14</sup>

The helicopter from HMM-163 "rolled, inverted, and crashed," exploding and burning on impact. Seven 3d Battalion Marines and three crew members died in the wreckage. The pilot, 1st Lieutenant Noah M. Kraft, was thrown clear, but later died of injuries.<sup>15</sup>

On the ground, the Marine infantry battalion and ARVN company encountered only sporadic resistance until reaching the outskirts of Xuan Hoa. Once more, the Marines and ARVN met well-entrenched VC who had organized their defenses within a tree line and bamboo fence which surrounded the hamlet. By nightfall, after two hours of close-quarter combat, Young's battalion had advanced 150 meters into Xuan Hoa. At this time, the

estimated enemy company disengaged and retreated, pursued by Marine artillery and Huey gunships.<sup>16</sup>

In the northern Texas area on 21 March, the ARVN 4th Regimental Task Force reached Route 527 and advanced east toward Route 1, without incident, at first. The 1st Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment was on the regimental left flank while the 5th ARVN Airborne Battalion was on the right. Outside Khanh My (3), 2,000 meters west of the Chau Nhai complex where Operation Utah had taken place, the 5th Airborne Battalion and its supporting APC company ran into an enemy battalion. Twice, the ARVN airborne troops attacked the hamlet, supported by artillery and air, and twice, the Communists drove them back. Nine of the 12 tracked vehicles supporting the ARVN airborne were hit by mortars and grenades. Fighting continued into the night.<sup>17</sup>

By this time, General Lam had moved to his forward headquarters at Binh Son and very early on 22 March, Brigadier General Lowell E. English, the 3d Marine Division assistant division commander, assumed command of the Marine forces in Operation Texas as Commanding General, Task Force Delta. This reactivation of Task Force Delta was in line with General Walt's policy of having Marine generals in command of major operations in the field with their Vietnamese counterparts. According to Colonel Peatross, the reactivation of Task Force Delta was a change of designation not the establishment of a new headquarters. The 7th Marines staff became the Task Force Delta staff; the only thing that changed was the name. He later wrote:

General English did fly into the CP and remain until the operation was over. . . . There was no question in my mind but that he was in command, but he brought no staff with him, no aide, no runner nor any communications. . . . Technically he was in command and I was the chief of staff, but, I continued to run the operation and kept him informed.<sup>18</sup>

The allied plan of action for 22 March was to continue the attack. ARVN forces were to advance toward Route 1, while the Marine battalions cleared their respective sectors in the southern area of operations. If the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines met further resistance in Phuong Dinh (2) and Thach An Noi (1), Lieutenant Colonel Young's battalion was to attack north, otherwise it was to seize Hill 65, 2,000 meters

southeast of Xuan Hoa, and then advance to the northeast.<sup>19</sup>

As planned, the allied battalions renewed their attacks at daybreak, but encountered little opposition. The Communist forces had slipped away during the night. The 4th ARVN Regimental Task Force secured Khanh My (3) and continued, uncontested, eastward along Route 527. Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's 2d Battalion took Phuong Dinh (2) and began searching the hamlet and destroying the enemy's defenses. Further south, Lieutenant Colonel Young's 3d Battalion met only scattered resistance as it seized Hill 65 at 1700 that afternoon and then moved to the northeast to set up night defenses. Bodley's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines also successfully carried out its mission, advancing through Thach An Noi (1), and then eastward until it reached a line 2,000 meters east of the hamlet.

When it became apparent that strong enemy forces were no longer in the original Texas objective area, General English and Colonel Peatross decided to extend the operation further south. They ordered the helilift of Bodley's battalion from Thach An Noi (1) to a new area near the Phuoc Loc village complex,



Marine Corps Photo A186816  
MajGen Wood B. Kyle, Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, walks with LtCol Paul X. (P. X.) Kelley, Commanding Officer, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines after the battalion secured Phuong Dinh. The strain of battle is reflected on the faces of the exhausted Marines on each side of the path.

9,000 meters to the southeast just above the Tra Khuc River.<sup>20</sup>

The helicopter landing of Bodley's battalion took place without incident and by 1815 the battalion had secured Hill 23, 500 meters north of Phuoc Loc (1). With the command group remaining on the hill and Company I in blocking positions to the west, Companies K and L advanced on the hamlet. The Marines soon found themselves in the same type of combat that characterized the fighting in Phuong Dinh (2) and Thach An Noi (1) the day before. The enemy force, about two battalions, was firmly entrenched in the hamlet. As the Marine companies

*Marine rifleman escorts a prisoner taken in the fighting for Phuong Dinh. The prisoner is 16 years old.*

Marine Corps Photo A194538



closed in on Phuoc Loc (1), the VC opened fire and stopped the Marine advance. Heavy fighting continued until after dark, but the Marine battalion remained unable to penetrate the enemy's defenses.

Soon after making contact, the Marines called for air and artillery support. The artillery response was immediate; the task force artillery group fired almost 2,000 155mm rounds in support of the 3d Battalion. When the artillery was not active, jets from both MAG-11 and MAG-12 bombed and strafed the objective area.

The 1st MAW had made some adjustments to bring in fixed-wing support for the operation. When Task Force Delta was activated, General McCutcheon sent Lieutenant Colonel Richard A. Savage from MAG-11 to Chu Lai to be the assistant tactical air commander for the operation. Savage placed the fixed-wing support aircraft on ground alert, rather than on combat air patrols. By keeping the jets on 15-minute ground alert and by close monitoring of the tactical situation, he could scramble the "... aircraft when it became apparent that they would be needed."<sup>21</sup>

On the morning of 23 March, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines secured Phuoc Loc (1). Again the VC had slipped out during the night. Bodley's battalion remained in the hamlet to destroy the extensive fortifications there. In their search, the Marines discovered an outer and inner ring of trenches and over 300 fighting holes. The Marine battalion also uncovered two intricate tunnel networks which explained how the enemy was able to get out of Phuoc Loc. According to the villagers, the VC had divided into two groups, one of which crossed the Tra Kruc River by boat while the other escaped on foot to the west.

Questioning the residents of Phuoc Loc (1) with the assistance of an ARVN intelligence officer and local authorities, the Marines learned that the enemy force had suffered substantial casualties. Apparently anticipating a battle, the VC had taken 30 men of the hamlet to serve as stretcher bearers on the afternoon of 22 March. They later returned and impressed 80 more people, including old men, women, and children, to haul away the dead and wounded. One old couple told the Marines that they had counted 30-32 dead and about 100 wounded VC being carried past their house. A 56-year old farmer stated that he had seen another 36 bodies shuttled toward the river. Some villagers provided distorted figures

obviously to please the Americans; one estimate was 500 dead. Most of the inhabitants of the hamlet remained in their family shelters during the fighting and could not have seen anything. Although finding no enemy bodies in Phuoc Loc (1), Lieutenant Colonel Bodley, as a result of an analysis of the interrogations, reported 60 enemy dead. The Marine battalion lost seven men killed and 56 wounded in the same engagement.<sup>22</sup>

On the morning of 23 March, the 4th ARVN Regimental Task Force encountered a VC force just west of the railroad on Route 527, killing 40 of the enemy. This engagement was the last significant action of the combined operation. The Marines continued Operation Texas for two more days in order to complete mopping up in Phuoc Loc (1) and Phuong Dinh (2).

On 24 March, General English deactivated Task Force Delta, and the 7th Marines reassumed control of the operation.\* The Marines closed out Texas the following day. From captured enemy documents, the allies determined that they had encountered elements of three battalions, the 60th and 90th from the 1st VC Regiment and the 11th from the 21st NVA Regiment. The Marines reported killing 283 enemy troops while sustaining casualties of 99 dead and 212 wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's 2d Battalion found 168 of the enemy dead in Phuong Dinh (2).<sup>23</sup>

A few days later, Kelley offered the following analysis of his battalion's experience in Operation Texas, which for the most part held true for the other Marine battalions which participated in the operation:

The overriding problem in Operation Texas was one which had plagued the Marine Corps for many years: how to inflict maximum loss on a determined, well-entrenched enemy with complex defensive positions at a minimum loss to one's own forces. In the case of Phuong Dinh (2) over 2,500 rounds of artillery and innumerable air strikes with napalm and heavy ordnance were called. The net result, however, indicated that the enemy in well-constructed bunkers, in holes with overhead cover and 20-foot deep tunnels was not appreciably hurt by our preparatory fires and had to be killed in his positions by infantry action at close quarters.<sup>24</sup>



Marine Corps Photo A186818  
Gen William C. Westmoreland, ComUSMACV (center), attends briefing on Operation Texas. Col Oscar F. Peatross (on the right of the picture) holds the briefing charts while BGen Lowell E. English, Commanding General, Task Force Delta (to the left and rear of Westmoreland), and Gen Hoang Xuan Lam, Commanding General, 2d ARVN Division (left), look on.

General Westmoreland visited Phuong Dinh (2) on 24 March and observed the extent of the enemy defenses. He had Colonel Peatross assemble the two battalions in the area and thanked them personally for their performance. Later, he sent a congratulatory message to General Walt. The MACV commander complimented the Marine units in the operation for their aggressive spirit and close coordination. General Walt added his "well done."<sup>25</sup>

There was a short epilogue to Texas—Operation Indiana. Early on the morning of 28 March, the 3d Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment, which had remained in positions near the hamlet of Lam Loc (1) approximately 1,500 meters east of Phuoc Loc (1), repulsed several attacks by an estimated Communist regiment. The Marine command reinforced the ARVN forces when Marine helicopters brought Lieutenant Colonel James P. Kelly's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines into a landing zone 2,000 meters northwest of Lam Loc (1) late that afternoon. The 1st Battalion was to establish blocking positions 2,000 meters to the southwest on the northern bank of the

\*General Peatross commented that the deactivation of Task Force Delta merely consisted of General English flying back to Da Nang. MajGen Oscar F. Peatross, Comments on draft MS, dtd 1Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

Tra Khuc, but Kelly's Company C ran into an estimated enemy battalion in the hamlet of Vinh Loc (2), about 500 meters northwest of the landing zone. Shortly after 1900, after taking heavy casualties, the company fell back, so that Marine supporting arms could hit the enemy forces.

On the following day, Kelly's 1st Battalion renewed the assault on Vinh Loc (2) while Lieutenant Colonel Utter's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines deployed into blocking positions 3,000 meters north of Vinh Loc (2). By this time the enemy units had disengaged and escaped during the night. Kelly's battalion captured one VC and 19 weapons in Vinh Loc (2). The Marines killed 69 of the enemy while the ARVN forces claimed another 100 Communist dead. Marine losses were 11 dead and 45 wounded, nearly all from the 1st Battalion's Company C. The 7th Marines ended Indiana on 30 March.<sup>26</sup>

Colonel Peatross observed that his battalions fought these March battles largely as integral units. Headquarters and support personnel filled in the gaps in the Chu Lai defenses left by the infantry. Paymaster personnel logged more time in the defense than any other unit at Chu Lai. Peatross later wrote that his 7th Marines had two distinct advantages over other regiments during his tour in Vietnam: "it had one regimental commander and no changes in the battalion commanders, and these units were always together. . . ." <sup>27\*</sup> In any event, the month of March had proven to be a bloody one for both the allies and Communist forces in southern I Corps.

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\*Colonel Leon N. Utter, who commanded the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines during this period, reinforced Colonel Peatross' observations on the importance of unit integrity: "Platoons, companies and battalions are *not* interchangeable parts of identical machines. . . . As a battalion commander, I frequently was directed to provide a platoon or a company to someone else's headquarters for operations. My answer was, invariably, 'Assign me the mission and let me take my own people! While this required the replacement of 'my own people' on the line—we went to the field as 2/7. We *knew* each other, how to *communicate*; we had our common experiences and lessons learned and mistakes made; we could anticipate one another. While we frequently distressed administrators and logisticians by wanting to fight *as a unit*, it is my not-too-humble opinion that our tactical successes proved, repeatedly, the validity of the concept and justification of the effort." Col Leon N. Utter, Comments on draft MS, dtd 13Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).

### *Expansion at Chu Lai*

Between August 1965 and January 1966, the headquarters and battalions of the 1st and 7th Marines had entered Vietnam incrementally, while the division's support and combat support elements had arrived in small echelons, often bumping against the total in-country personnel ceiling established by Washington. In February the last units of the 1st Marine Division departed Camp Pendleton for Okinawa, and on 9 March the division officially closed its rear headquarters at the California base. By the end of March, nearly all of the division, including the aforementioned two infantry regiments, the 11th Marines with three of its four artillery battalions, the 1st Tank Battalion, the 1st Motor Transport Battalion, the 1st Engineer Battalion, the 1st Medical Battalion, and the 1st Shore Party Battalion, was in Vietnam. Only the 5th Marines; the 2d Battalion, 11th Marines; and a few support units remained on Okinawa. A few days before he and his headquarters left for Vietnam, Major General Lewis J. Fields, the division commander, received the following message from General Krulak: "You met every deadline and every shipping date and when your unit sailed they were ready to fight. No one could ask more."<sup>28\*\*</sup>

On 29 March, General Fields arrived at Da Nang. After a brief meeting with General Walt, he went on to Chu Lai where he established the division command post. That afternoon he assumed operational control of all Marine ground forces at Chu Lai and also became the deputy commander of III MAF. In this capacity General Fields was the Chu Lai installation coordinator responsible for the security of all

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\*\*There had been some thought given to retaining a division rear headquarters on Okinawa under the assistant division commander, Brigadier General William A. Stiles, who had arrived from Camp Pendleton in mid-February. It was decided, however, in order to avoid administrative and fiscal complications, not to establish an official division rear. Instead Brigadier General Stiles, with a small personal staff, was assigned on 30 March as a double-hatted commanding general of both Task Force 79 and the newly established 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade (9th MAB) on Okinawa. General Stiles was relieved of these temporary assignments and assumed his duties as assistant division commander at Chu Lai on 15 April 1966. 1st Mar Div ComdCs, Feb-April 1966. See Chapter 18 for further discussion of the 9th MAB.



Marine Corps Photo A194540

*A joint honor guard of the 1st and 3d Marine Divisions passes in review at a ceremony at Da Nang marking the arrival of the 1st Marine Division in Vietnam. The 1st Marine Division Headquarters was established at Chu Lai while the 3d Division retained control of Marine units at Da Nang and Phu Bai.*

organizations and facilities located within the TAOR. To meet these requirements, he activated the Chu Lai Defense Command and tasked it with the defense of vital areas on Ky Ha Peninsula, the SATS airfield, and the supply complex. This command consisted of two rifle companies from one of the infantry battalions and two platoons each from the tank and antitank battalions. An additional 400 personnel from the ground elements of the two aircraft groups augmented the defenses.

Colonel Glen E. Martin, who had been Chief of Staff of the former ADC group at Chu Lai, recalled the initial nervousness of some of the newly arrived troops, who had taken over security of the division CP area. He remembered that "About midnight a few rounds were fired, followed by several explosions from hand grenades. Then firing became continuous

by the CP Security Group." Martin "finally brought an end to the firing by going to each security point in a jeep with the lights on, putting the lights on the security point, and walking in the lights to the Marine sentry on duty." The colonel then identified himself and advised "the Marine there were better things to do than fire at his fellow Marines." The firing finally stopped and Martin and another officer went to the 7th Marines "regimental mess for coffee."<sup>29</sup>

There was some modification in the disposition and control of the Chu Lai infantry regiments and battalions. The 7th Marines, with all three of its battalions under its operational control, continued to be responsible for the southern half of the TAOR, but received a new commander. On 7 April, Colonel Eugene H. Haffey relieved Colonel Peatross, whose



Marine Corps Photo A801960

*The photo depicts an aerial view of the Chu Lai base area in April 1966, looking south. The 1st Division Headquarters is located approximately in the middle of the picture.*

tour in Vietnam was about to come to an end. Colonel Haffey had been the 1st Marine Division comptroller and according to General Fields, "a most valued member" of his staff.<sup>30</sup>

The major changes at Chu Lai were made in the 1st Marines sector as the battalions of the 5th Marines arrived. On 13 April, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines landed at Chu Lai and on the following day it replaced the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines in the 1st Marines sector. The latter battalion, which had been under the operational control of the 1st Marines, moved to Da Nang. Colonel Byran B. Mitchell, the 1st Marines commander, now had his own 3d Battalion and the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, under his control. On 22 May, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines also displaced to Da Nang and was replaced in the 1st Marines northern sector by the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, which had been relieved earlier in the month by BLT 3/5 as the SLF battalion. Finally on 27 May, Colonel Charles F. Widdecke, a holder of both the Navy Cross and Silver Star earned in World War II, brought the 5th Marines' Headquarters from Okinawa to Chu Lai. On 3 June, Widdecke's headquarters assumed control of the 1st and 2d Bat-

*The 1st Battalion, 7th Marines debark from UH-34s in an unopposed landing south of Chu Lai in April 1966. From April through June, the 1st Division units at Chu Lai conducted 10 battalion-size operations.*

Marine Corps Photo A373657





Marine Corps Photo A369046

*The 7th Marines display U.S. manufactured weapons captured during Operation Hot Springs. The weapons include Browning automatic rifles in the foreground, .30 and .50 caliber machine guns, and 106mm recoilless rifles.*

talions, 5th Marines, while the 1st Marines Headquarters transferred to Da Nang.

In June 1966, the 1st Marine Division at Chu Lai consisted of over 17,000 men in two infantry regiments of three and two battalions respectively, an artillery regiment of four battalions, and other supporting units including engineer, tank, amtrac, antitank, and reconnaissance battalions, as well as separate detachments. Future plans called for the deployment to Chu Lai of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines and reinforcement by the Korean Marine Brigade later in the summer.

The Chu Lai TAOR had expanded from 205 square miles at the beginning of the year to 340 square miles at the end of June. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines established its command post on Hill 54, some 10 miles north of the airfield and only six miles south of Tam Ky, the capital of Quang Tin Province. The Marines planned that the Da Nang and Chu Lai TAORs would meet at Tam Ky, a point equidistant between the two enclaves, by the end of the year.

In the Chu Lai TAOR, the division continued to use the same combination of battalion and indepen-

dent small-unit actions that had characterized earlier operations. From April through June, 1st Marine Division units at Chu Lai launched 10 battalion-sized operations outside the division TAOR. In one, Operation Hot Springs in April, the 7th Marines again engaged the *1st VC Regiment* in the same general area where Utah, Texas, and Indiana had taken place. The Marines killed over 150 of the enemy and captured 23 weapons, including 6 that were crew-served. Although carefully planned and executed, the other nine large operations had minimal contact with the NVA and VC. On the other hand, the small-unit actions within the TAOR increased during this period. Marine patrols and ambushes rose from 2,285 in April, resulting in 11 enemy dead, to nearly 2,900 in June resulting in 72 enemy dead.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Operation Kansas*

At the beginning of June, the 1st Marine Division turned its attention toward the Do Xa Region, a suspected enemy base area, 30 miles southwest of Chu Lai near the western border of I Corps. MACV placed the headquarters of the enemy *Military Region V* in the Do Xa and for some time had wanted the Marines to mount an operation there. Since late April and shortly after his arrival at Chu Lai, the 1st Division assistant division commander, Brigadier General William A. Stiles, a 1939 Naval Academy graduate and seasoned campaigner, commanded a special task force headquarters, Task Force X-Ray, to plan a reconnaissance in force in the Do Xa. After some postponements and some problems with coordination, Stiles and his staff had completed their plans for the Do Xa when disturbing reports reached III MAF that the enemy's *2d Division*, also known as the *620th NVA Division*, with all three regiments, the *3d NVA*, the *21st NVA*, and the *1st VC*, had entered the Que Son Valley straddling the Quang Tin-Quang Nam provincial boundaries northwest of Chu Lai.<sup>32</sup>

Control of the Que Son Valley was important to both sides, and it had been the area of operations for both Double Eagle II in February and Harvest Moon the preceding December. Bounded by mountains on the north, south, and west, the valley extends some 24 miles east to west from Route 1 to Hiep Duc. The Ly Ly River and Routes 534 and 535 traverse most of

its length. Supporting a population of 60,000 persons, the valley contains some of the best farmland in Vietnam as well as rich salt deposits. General Thi, the former I Corps commander, once described the Que Son area as one of the keys to the struggle for I Corps.<sup>33</sup>

Faced with the reported incursion of North Vietnamese units into the strategic Que Son Valley, Generals Walt and Fields had little choice but to postpone the Do Xa operation. On 13 June, they ordered an extensive reconnaissance campaign between Tam Ky and Hiep Duc and directed General Stiles' Task Force X-Ray Headquarters to begin planning for a combined operation with the 2d ARVN Division. The concept of operations for the reconnaissance effort called for the insertion of six teams from the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion and a seventh team from the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company into selected landing zones to determine the extent of the NVA penetration. On the 13th, the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion's command group, which was to control the reconnaissance operation, and a 13-man reconnaissance team were to be helilifted to Nui Loc Son, a small mountain in the center of the Que Son Valley and some seven miles northeast of Hiep Duc. Another 18-man reconnaissance team, on the same date, was to be landed on the Nui Vu hill mass that dominates the terrain approximately 10 miles west of Tam Ky. These initial landings were to be followed on the next day by the insertion of the remaining teams—two to the higher ground just south of the valley, two to the northwest of the valley, and one to the south of Hiep Duc. The last group, a 13-man team from the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company, was to make a parachute drop on Hill 555 just east of the Tranh River.<sup>34</sup>

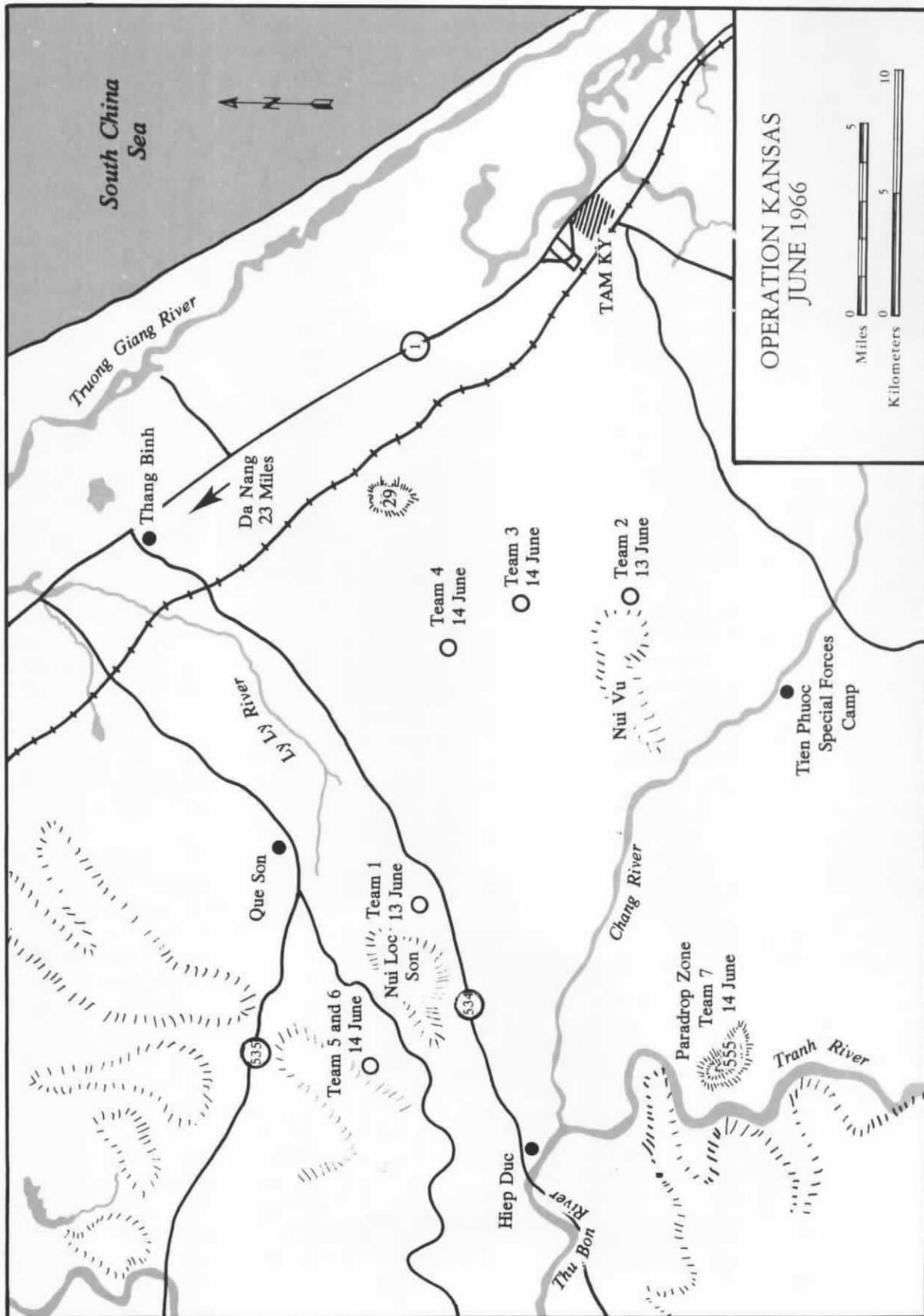
The insertion of the reconnaissance teams went much as planned. During the early evening of 13 June, the first two reconnaissance teams had landed on Nui Vu and Nui Loc Son and Lieutenant Colonel Arthur J. Sullivan, the commanding officer of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, had established his command post at Nui Loc Son. On the night of 13-14 June, the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company team made a successful parachute drop from an Army transport into their objective area. Their only casualty was one man who slightly twisted his ankle on landing. Marine helicopters brought the four remaining teams from the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion into their respective landing zones without in-

cident late on the evening of 14 June, thus completing the first phase of the operation.<sup>35</sup>

The team from the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company was the first to be extracted from its zone of action. Upon landing, the men had buried their parachutes and climbed Hill 555, where they established their observation post. The team during the course of the morning and afternoon of the 14th spotted approximately 40 armed enemy dressed in khaki or "black pajamas" and wearing sun helmets, some of whom were apparently undergoing tactical training. At about 1830, two woodcutters with a dog came across the spot where the team had hidden its parachutes. The dog apparently detected an unfamiliar scent and the woodcutters found one of the chutes and immediately departed. About a half hour later, the Marines observed the two woodcutters accompanied by nine armed men moving along the eastern bank of the Tranh River, obviously looking for someone. At this point, 1st Lieutenant Jerome T. Paull, the patrol leader, asked that his men be extracted from their position. Shortly afterward, a Marine helicopter brought the men back to Chu Lai.<sup>36</sup>

Of the remaining patrols, the 18-man team led by Staff Sergeant Jimmie L. Howard on Nui Vu was to have the sharpest encounter with the enemy forces. After their insertion on the 13th, Howard's men found the 1,500-foot hill an excellent observation platform and for the next two days reported extensive enemy activity in the region. Supported by an ARVN 105mm battery located at the Tien Phuoc Special Forces Camp, seven miles south of Nui Vu, the Marines called artillery missions on targets of opportunity.<sup>37</sup>

Although Howard had taken the precaution to call the fire missions only when an American spotter plane or helicopter was in the area, the enemy by the 15th had become aware of the patrol's presence in the area. Late that night, a patrol from the Special Forces camp reported an enemy battalion moving toward Nui Vu from the southeast. Between 2130 and 2330, Howard called for artillery support as the Marines heard North Vietnamese troops massing at the bottom of the hill. Shortly after midnight, the Communists probed the Marine defenses and then followed with a three-sided, all-out attack. According to the Navy corpsman with the Marines, the enemy forces, ". . . were within 20 feet of us. Suddenly there were grenades all over. Then people



started hollering. It seemed everybody got hit at the same time." Despite the intensity of the enemy assault, which was supported by heavy machine gun fire, the Marine perimeter held. Howard radioed Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, his battalion commander, "You've gotta get us out of here . . . There are too many of them for my people." Sullivan attempted to reassure the patrol leader and told him that assistance would be on the way.<sup>38</sup>

About 0200, supporting air arrived overhead including Marine and Air Force flare planes, helicopters, and attack aircraft. Under the light of the flares, Marine jets and Huey gunships attacked the enemy forces massing at the bottom of the hill. At times, VMO-6 gunships strafed to within 20 meters of the patrol's perimeter and the fixed-wing aircraft dropped bombs and napalm as close as 100 meters. At 0300, enemy ground fire drove off a flight of MAG-36 helicopters which were trying to pick up the patrol. Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan told Howard that the patrol could not expect any reinforcements until dawn and to hold on as best he could.\*

The action on and around the hill was reduced to small, scattered, individual fire fights. Wary of the U.S. aircraft orbiting overhead, the Communist forces decided against another mass assault, but continued to fire at the Marines throughout the night. Running short of ammunition, Howard and his men fired single shots and threw rocks at suspected enemy positions, hoping that the NVA would mistake the rocks for grenades. The fighting was exacting a heavy toll on the reconnaissance patrol; each man had been wounded at least once and six were dead. Sergeant Howard was struck in the back by a ricochet, temporarily paralyzing his legs. Unable to use his lower limbs, Howard pulled himself from hole to hole, encouraging his men and directing fire.

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\*Colonel Zitnik commented on the extensive effort by VMO-6 to support Howard's patrol: "Huey availability was down to three aircraft during these early hours, yet continuous TAC(A) [tactical air controller (airborne)] and gunship support was provided with the TAC(A) working without his gunship escort. Helicopters refueled at Ky Ha where they returned with gauges indicating near zero each flight. . . . Crews were not rotated as there was no time to brief new crews. They merely reported while the aircraft were refueling and returned to the scene." Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 7Jun78 (Vietnam Comment Files).



Marine Corps Photo A414461  
*SSgt Jimmie C. Howard is seen wearing his Medal of Honor and other medals. Sgt Howard's platoon stood off a NVA battalion on Nui Vu, later called "Howard's Hill," near the Que Son Valley north of Chu Lai.*

At dawn on 16 June, MAG-36 UH-34s, escorted by Huey gunships, safely landed Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines near the base of Nui Vu. One of the gunships, however, piloted by Major William J. Goodsell, the commanding officer of VMO-6, was hit by enemy fire and crash landed. Both Major Goodsell and his copilot were evacuated, but Goodsell later died of his wounds. Lieutenant Colonel Zitnik, who had commanded the squadron until March, remembered that Colonel Johnson, the commanding officer of MAG-36, was the TAC(A) for the mission and observed an enemy soldier "throw a grenade into the downed helo but elected not to divert forces from the primary rescue mission of Sergeant Howard."<sup>39</sup>

The Marine company on the ground met some resistance as it advanced up Nui Vu to relieve Howard's patrol. When the relief force finally reached the top of the hill, Howard greeted them with the warning, "Get down . . . There are snipers right in

front of us." First Lieutenant Marshall B. "Buck" Darling, the Company C commander, remembered that he found Howard's men mostly armed with AK-47s taken from dead North Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese, later identified as a battalion from the *3d NVA Regiment*, continued to battle the Marines for control of the hill until noon, and then disengaged. They left behind 42 dead and 19 weapons while Company C suffered two dead and two wounded.<sup>40\*</sup>

By this time, General Stiles and his Task Force X-Ray Headquarters had completed the planning for a combined operation with the ARVN, codenamed Kansas, in the Que Son region. These plans called for a force of eight infantry battalions, four from III MAF and four from the 2d ARVN Division, supported by air and artillery, to take part in the operation. Two battalions from the 5th Marines and two Vietnamese Marine Battalions, attached to the 2d ARVN Division for the operation, were to make up the initial assault force. The Task Force X-Ray and 2d ARVN Division Headquarters were to be collocated at Tam Ky.<sup>41</sup>

In anticipation of Kansas, III MAF on 16 June deployed artillery units from both Da Nang and Chu Lai into forward firing positions on Hill 29, just west of the railroad some seven miles north of Tam Ky, and near Thang Binh, nine miles further north on Route 1. The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines with a command group and two companies accompanied the artillery from Da Nang and provided security for the gun positions at both Hill 29 and Thang Binh. Battery K, 4th Battalion, 12th Marines with six 155mm howitzers (towed) and the 4th Battalion, 11th Marines Headquarters were in position on Hill 29 and Provisional Battery Y, 4th Battalion, 12th Marines was near Thang Binh with two 155mm howitzers (towed).<sup>42</sup>

Shortly after General Stiles established his forward headquarters at Tam Ky on 17 June, General Walt reduced the scope of the proposed operation. That morning, General Lam, the I Corps commander, had informed Walt that the two Vietnamese Marine battalions would not be available for Kansas because

of the political situation in Hue. The I Corps commander was sending one of the battalions to that city and wanted to keep the other at Da Nang in case the trouble spread there. General Walt agreed to delay the operations, and, at the same time decided to change the Kansas plan of action. Instead of a multibattalion heliborne operation in the Que Son Valley, Walt elected to continue the reconnaissance effort of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion supported by the Marine artillery already deployed in the field. The 5th Marines would remain in the Chu Lai TAOR, but remain ready to exploit the situation in the event the reconnaissance teams came across a sizeable body of enemy troops. General Stiles' headquarters with the 5th Marines would control the operation.<sup>43</sup>

During the next few days, the Marines reinforced the artillery and repositioned some of the guns to provide better coverage for the reconnaissance teams. On 18 June, Battery K, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines with four 155mm howitzers (SP), joined the 4th Battalion Headquarters on Hill 29, and, at the same time, the provisional battery from the 12th Marines deployed to new firing positions, some 6,000 meters southwest of Thang Binh. The following day, Battery K of the 12th Marines moved from Hill 29 and linked up with the provisional battery further north. On the 19th as well, two especially prepared CH-46 helicopters lifted two 105mm howitzers from Battery D, 2d Battalion, 11th Marines, from the Chu Lai TAOR to the Tien Phuoc Special Forces Camp, a distance of some 30 miles. The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, which came under the operational control of the 5th Marines on 17 June, provided security for the artillery near Route 1 while the ARVN provided the security for the Marine and South Vietnamese 105mm batteries at Tien Phuoc.<sup>44</sup>

With the supporting arms largely in position, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, the reconnaissance battalion commander, had moved his forward CP on 18 June from Loc Son to the Tien Phuoc Special Forces Camp. From the 19th through 28 June, the reconnaissance battalion, reinforced by two platoons of the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company and the 2d ARVN Division Reconnaissance Company, continued to conduct extensive patrolling throughout the Que Son region. Beginning with the initial entry on 13 June, 25 reconnaissance teams took part in the operation. With the exception of the parachute drop

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\*For this action, 15 men of Howard's platoon were awarded the Silver Star and two more the Navy Cross. Staff Sergeant Howard was awarded the Medal of Honor.

and two other patrols that walked into their target areas from forward bases, Marine helicopters inserted and extracted the Marine reconnaissance teams.<sup>45</sup>

Operation Kansas, which officially began on 17 June and ended on the 22d when General Stiles closed his Tam Ky headquarters, never expanded much beyond the reconnaissance stage. The Marine infantry participation, with the exception of the relief of Howard's platoon, was confined to a one-company exploitation of a B-52 Arc Light strike on 21 June in rugged terrain 3,500 meters east of Hiep Duc. Shortly before 0900, Marine helicopters landed Company E, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines in the landing zone near the B-52 bomb impact area. Although encountering some minor resistance near the landing zone, the Marine company found little evidence of any large body of enemy forces. By 1015, the last elements of the company had reembarked on board helicopters for the return flight to Chu Lai.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the official end of Kansas on 22 June, both the Marine artillery and reconnaissance teams remained deployed in and around the Que Son Valley for six more days. Throughout the entire period from 13 June through 27 June, the reconnaissance teams made 141 sightings and observed a total of 763 enemy troops. The teams had a direct communication link with the fire direction center with the 4th Battalion, 11th Marines on Hill 29 and could call upon artillery and air. Marine jets flew, and the artillery batteries fired, an equal number of missions, 43 each, in support of the reconnaissance Marines. In addition, the USS *Morton* (DD 948) provided naval gunfire support, firing 384 rounds of naval gunfire at suspected enemy positions. In one of the more successful actions, a Marine reconnaissance outpost brought artillery fire upon a small force of NVA, killing all seven of the enemy. The Marines then asked "the guns to remain laid on this position." Soon afterward, more NVA arrived to remove the bodies and the Marines called artillery down upon this new group, inflicting another 10 casualties on the North Vietnamese. Exclusive of the

enemy killed in the fight for Nui Vu, the Marine reconnaissance teams by calling upon supporting arms accounted for 85 enemy dead as well as 40 elephants and 10 water buffalo. The Marines sustained casualties of nine killed and 20 wounded. All of the Marine dead and 14 of the wounded were as a result of the NVA attack on Nui Vu.<sup>47</sup>

More significant than the comparative casualty ratio was the fact that a relatively few reconnaissance Marines, supported by air and artillery, prevented the NVA from massing their forces and penetrating the Que Son Valley in strength. As Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan observed:

Whatever his [the enemy's] intentions for forming in that area, this recon effort supported by fire broke up his formations, caused him to move, and inflicted casualties upon him and his logistic buildup. . . . He is particularly vulnerable to observed fire and air strikes.<sup>48</sup>

The experience of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion in Operation Kansas was an exceptional one. Usually it fell to the infantry to tramp the rough terrain on both large operations and small-unit patrols to seek out the illusive enemy and destroy him in sharp fire fights. In Kansas the Marines did it a different way.

By the end of June, III MAF reported substantial progress against the enemy in southern I Corps and in the pacification of the Chu Lai TAOR. In contrast to Da Nang and Phu Bai, the spring political crisis had little impact on the Chu Lai base. The 2d ARVN Division, which operated in this area, had remained loyal to the government, and its commander, General Lam, had become the I Corps commander. The extensive Marine operations in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin Provinces and the reconnaissance campaign in the Que Son Valley had succeeded in keeping the enemy's large units out of the coastal populated areas. Moreover, statistics compiled by the Marines and pacification teams showed that nearly 30,000 of the 160,000 people in the Chu Lai TAOR lived in villages that scored more than 80 percent on Marine pacification indices. There was every reason for optimism by midyear.<sup>49</sup>

PART IV  
THE DMZ WAR



## CHAPTER 9

# The Enemy Buildup in the North

*Speculation about the Enemy's Intentions—Reconnaissance at Khe Sanh, Operation Virginia—Marine Operations in Thua Thien, April-May 1966—Contingency Planning and Reconnaissance at Dong Ha—Politics and War—Heavy Fighting in Thua Thien Province—Further Reconnaissance in the North*

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### *Speculation About the Enemy's Intentions*

Throughout the period of political unrest and the expansion of the Marine base areas at Da Nang and Chu Lai, General Westmoreland continued to be concerned about northern I Corps and speculated about Communist intentions there. As early as February at the Honolulu Conference, he told President Johnson that if he were an enemy general he would attempt to "capture Hue." The MACV commander made the point that the former imperial capital was a "symbol of a united Vietnam," and its loss would have a traumatic effect upon the allied war effort. He periodically referred to the military advantages for the enemy to make a thrust in the north. Westmoreland argued that such a move not only shortened the lines of communication for the NVA, but that the mountain spur north of Da Nang effectively isolates the two northern provinces of Thua Thien and Quang Tri from the rest of South Vietnam and made them particularly vulnerable to an enemy attack. Any allied reinforcements along Route 1 and the railroad, the only north-south arteries, had to wend their way through the narrow

confines of the strategic Hai Van Pass, which was subject to enemy harassment. The Marines only kept the pass open through extensive patrolling and armed "Rough Rider" road convoys. Through March, the enemy effectively closed the railroad between Da Nang and Hue 50 percent of the time.<sup>1</sup>

Intelligence reports and events reinforced Westmoreland's belief that the enemy was staging his forces in the north for a major offensive. He contended that the fall of A Shau may have been only a prelude for a later attack on Hue itself. Allied intelligence estimates placed the enemy infiltration into South Vietnam as averaging 7,000 men a month during the period January through March of 1966. Several sources reported the massing of North Vietnamese units in Laos opposite the border with Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. In early April, MACV received information that the North Vietnamese had begun to move their 324B Division from Ha Tinh, 180 kilometers north of the DMZ, into southern North Vietnam. The MACV enemy order of battle carried three enemy regiments and indicated the possible existence of a fourth in the two northern provinces of South Vietnam. In addition, other intelligence revealed the establishment of a

*A view of the Royal Palace in Hue as photographed in February 1966. Hue was the former imperial capital of Vietnam and stood as a "symbol of a united Vietnam."*

Marine Corps Photo A187610



major enemy headquarters in north central Thua Thien Province, some 20 miles west of Hue. At first, allied intelligence officers believed the headquarters to be that of a division, but later identified it as that of the newly formed *Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region*, which reported directly to the North Vietnamese command.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to MACV, General Walt and his staff read the intelligence data differently. Although acknowledging some buildup of enemy forces in the two northern provinces, they saw little evidence of any major enemy all-out offensive. The III MAF intelligence section, in comparison to the MACV J-2, was relatively conservative in giving credence to the establishment of enemy regimental organizations in northern I Corps. As opposed to the three and possibly four enemy regiments carried by MACV, III MAF officially placed the third regimental headquarters, the *6th NVA*, in its order of battle only on 15 April. Moreover, the Marines contended that since the arrival of the 4th Marines at Phu Bai in late March, contact with the enemy had been sparse. Although throughout April reports reached the 4th Marines of the movement of large Communist forces into the area, an extensive reconnaissance effort "failed to confirm a significant buildup in the approaches leading into Hue-Phu Bai."<sup>3</sup> Commenting on the failure of the enemy to react to the Marine reinforcement of its northern base, Colonel Donald W. Sherman, the commander of the 4th Marines, later stated, "I don't think the enemy was planning anything against Phu Bai at the time."<sup>4</sup> Further north, the 1st ARVN Division, with the exception of two relatively small engagements on 28 March and 10 April, also encountered few Communist forces. Even General Westmoreland remarked on the lull in enemy activity, but quickly observed that he believed the Communists were preparing the battlefield.<sup>5</sup>

At a MACV commanders' conference on 21 April, Westmoreland asked General Walt if the III MAF commander had any reason to doubt the number of major NVA units in I Corps that were being carried by the MACV J-2. Walt replied that his forces in extensive long-range reconnaissance operations had been unable to verify the existence of any large body of enemy troops. He then declared, "If they [the NVA] were there, that they were hiding in the mountains not far from the Laos border."<sup>6</sup> Throughout this period, the Marines resisted, as one III MAF staff officer remembered, every effort to

"get us extended" and away from the pacification campaign further south.<sup>7</sup>

### *Reconnaissance at Khe Sanh, Operation Virginia*

Despite such reluctance, the Marines in April, at the insistence of General Westmoreland, conducted a one-battalion operation near the isolated Special Forces camp at Khe Sanh in the northwestern corner of Quang Tri Province. General Westmoreland placed a very high priority on the strategic location of Khe Sanh. Surrounded by high hills and mountains and located 4 miles from the Laotian border, 14 miles south of the DMZ, and 55 miles northwest of Phu Bai, the Khe Sanh base overlooked Route 9, the most feasible entry into Quang Tri Province from the west. Using the base to monitor enemy infiltration and for special reconnaissance operations into Laos, the MACV commander also viewed Khe Sanh as "an eventual jump-off point for ground operations to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail" if he ever received permission from Washington. He continually stressed to General Walt "the critical importance of the little plateau."<sup>8</sup>

In January 1966, the Communists employed 120mm mortars against the Khe Sanh base, but failed to follow up with a ground assault. Intelligence reports, nevertheless, persisted through the following months of an enemy buildup in the area. At the same time that A Shau fell, the Khe Sanh commander informed MACV that enemy units were staging in the area north of the camp. Fearing that a similar fate awaited Khe Sanh as had befallen A Shau, MACV urged upon the Marines a battalion search and destroy mission in the Khe Sanh sector. III MAF planned such an operation, codenamed *Virginia*, for mid-March, but circumstances, including the Marine commitment to Operation Oregon in northeastern Thua Thien Province, forced the Marine command to postpone the operation. In his meeting with General Walt at Chu Lai on 24 March, General Westmoreland continued to emphasize the dangers in the north.<sup>9</sup>

On 27 March, General Kyle, the 3d Marine Division commander, ordered the 4th Marines at Phu Bai to deploy one battalion, reinforced by a 105mm howitzer battery and a mortar battery, to Khe Sanh. Colonel Sherman selected the 1st Battalion, 1st

Marines to carry out the operation. Lieutenant Colonel Van D. Bell, Jr., who was to assume command of the battalion on 1 April from Lieutenant Colonel Hatch, several years later recalled that he flew to Khe Sanh at the end of March to establish liaison with the Special Forces commander and to get a feel for the terrain. Bell remembered that he found the Special Forces troops "very nervous." According to the Marine officer, the Special Forces were not patrolling, but "trusted this important mission to the Nungs and some ARVN . . .," who often brought in false intelligence. Bell related:

Surprisingly, the Special Forces commander believed their reports. . . . During the S-2 briefing, I was shown the enemy contact profile and it appeared that they had the Special Forces camp surrounded.<sup>10</sup>

After the completion of his visit, Lieutenant Colonel Bell returned to Phu Bai and, on 3 April, issued his operation order for Virginia, scheduled to begin two days later. An advance party consisting of the battalion's executive officer, logistic support personnel, and a rifle platoon from Company C arrived at Khe Sanh on 4 April, but bad weather together with the uncertainties of the South Vietnamese political crisis caused a delay in the beginning of the operation for more than a week. On 17 April, Marine KC-130 aircraft from VMGR-152 began to fly the main body of the Marine battalion into the small airfield at Khe Sanh. Once more weather conditions hindered the operation and forced the Marines to stop the airlift after nearly 50 percent of the Marine force had landed. Finally on the next day, the transports completed the lift of the battalion and its supporting forces to Khe Sanh.<sup>11</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Bell established his main base at a coffee plantation just north of the Special Forces camp. His plan called for a three-phased operation within a 10-kilometer radius of Khe Sanh. The Marines were to first search the northeast quadrant, then move to the northwest, and finally to the southwest sector of the area of operations. An ARVN battalion was to secure the southeast quadrant.

On 18 and 19 April, Bell with the assistance of Marine helicopters from HMM-163 moved his forward headquarters, his mortars, an attached reconnaissance platoon, and Company C to a blocking position about six kilometers north of the base camp. Later on the 19th, the Marine helicopters



Marine Corps Photo A193997  
*LtCol Van D. Bell, Jr., Commanding Officer, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines (sitting right), briefs his company commanders at Khe Sanh in April 1966 during Operation Virginia. Khe Sanh at this time was a Special Forces camp in northwestern South Vietnam near the Laotian border.*

lifted the battalion's remaining companies, A and B, into a landing zone some nine kilometers further to the east.\* According to plan, the two companies then pushed westward along parallel axes toward the blocking positions. Encountering no resistance, except from the dense vegetation, the attacking companies reached their objective on 21 April. The Marine battalion returned to its base camp two days later.

At this point, the Marines decided to modify their plans for Virginia. Based on negative reports from his reconnaissance patrols in the northwestern sector of the battalion's area of operations, Bell cancelled the second phase of the operation. At the same time, staff officers at both the division and MAF levels wanted to expand the operation to determine, if

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\*The battalion's fourth company, Company D, was still at Da Nang under the operational control of the 3d Marines.



Marine Corps Photo A187001

*Marines from the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines scale a steep cliff in Operation Virginia. The photo gives a good depiction of the rugged terrain surrounding Khe Sanh.*

possible, the validity of the claims of an enemy buildup in the north. Colonel George W. Carrington, Jr., the 3d Marine Division G-2, later wrote that he suggested Bell march his battalion "along Route 9 from Khe Sanh east to the sea. It was territory hitherto untouched in the war, but it was important to learn if there was infiltration from the north, across the DMZ."<sup>12</sup> Colonel Chaisson, the III MAF G-3, remembered:

Old "Ding Dong" [Bell] only had one shot fired at his unit in the whole [period] he was up there [at Khe Sanh] . . . But in order for just a little bravado and to do it a little differently from anyone else up there, we let him march

out. So he marched out Highway 9, which was allegedly the first major force that had ever come along Highway 9 in something like eight or nine years.<sup>13</sup>

In preparation for the march, Lieutenant Colonel Bell prepositioned three 105mm howitzers, together with a second command group under his executive officer and a security force, at Ca Lu, 15 miles east of Khe Sanh on Route 9, to cover the infantry. At the same time, the Marine command moved the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines command group and two companies from Phu Bai to Dong Ha, the eastern terminus of Route 9, from where it could provide a reaction force if Bell's battalion ran into trouble. Outside of difficulty with an attached recalcitrant ARVN company and the heat, the 1st Battalion's trek was uneventful. The battalion reached Cam Lo, some 30 miles from Khe Sanh, at the end of the month. On 1 May, the foot-weary troops rode Marine trucks the remaining eight miles to Dong Ha, where they were greeted by both Generals Walt and Westmoreland. The artillery and the second command group had already been retracted.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the dramatic flourish closing out the operation, Virginia's results were inconclusive except to invalidate the reports of the supposed enemy buildup around Khe Sanh. The size of the enemy's

*The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines is seen crossing a bridge along Route 9 during its march from Khe Sanh to Dong Ha. The Marine unit was the first allied force to use this route in several years.*

Marine Corps Photo A187769.



forces in the north and his intentions remained a matter of conjecture. As Lieutenant Colonel Bell pointed out in his after-action report:

... it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the extent of enemy presence along the route of march. The failure of the enemy to attack, or even to harass, the march column could have been inspired by either (1) inadequate forces, (2) fear of excessive punishment by Marine supporting arms and aircraft, or (3) a desire to inspire overconfidence in the area later—or any combination of these or lesser factors.<sup>15</sup>

*Marine Operations in Thua Thien, April-May 1966*

Throughout April, the enemy avoided any contact with the Marines in Thua Thien Province. At Phu Bai, with the departure of Bell's battalion for Khe Sanh, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines took over from the 1st Battalion the western sector of the TAOR while still providing security for the Phu Bai Vital Area. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines under Lieutenant Colonel Vale continued to operate in the southern portion of the TAOR while Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines remained in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan area. All the Phu Bai battalions conducted Golden Fleece rice protection operations while Sullivan's battalion also provided security for Marine reconnaissance teams northwest of Phu Bai. In the only large unit operation in Thua Thien during the month, the SLF battalion of the Seventh Fleet, BLT 1/5, in Operation Osage, made an amphibious landing on 27 April in Phu Loc District, north of the Hai Van Pass. The SLF Marines failed to engage any major enemy unit and reembarked on board their ships on 6 May.

During May, the 4th Marines increased the number of named operations in the Phu Bai area. This increase may have been influenced by the continuing debate with MACV over the statistical measure "battalion days in the field," as much as by intelligence indicating a sharp influx of enemy units in the sector. Since "battalion days in the field" did not include Marine pacification efforts within the TAORs, III MAF compared unfavorably in the number of "battalion days" it attained as opposed to those accumulated by Army units in less densely populated regions. As one Marine officer on the

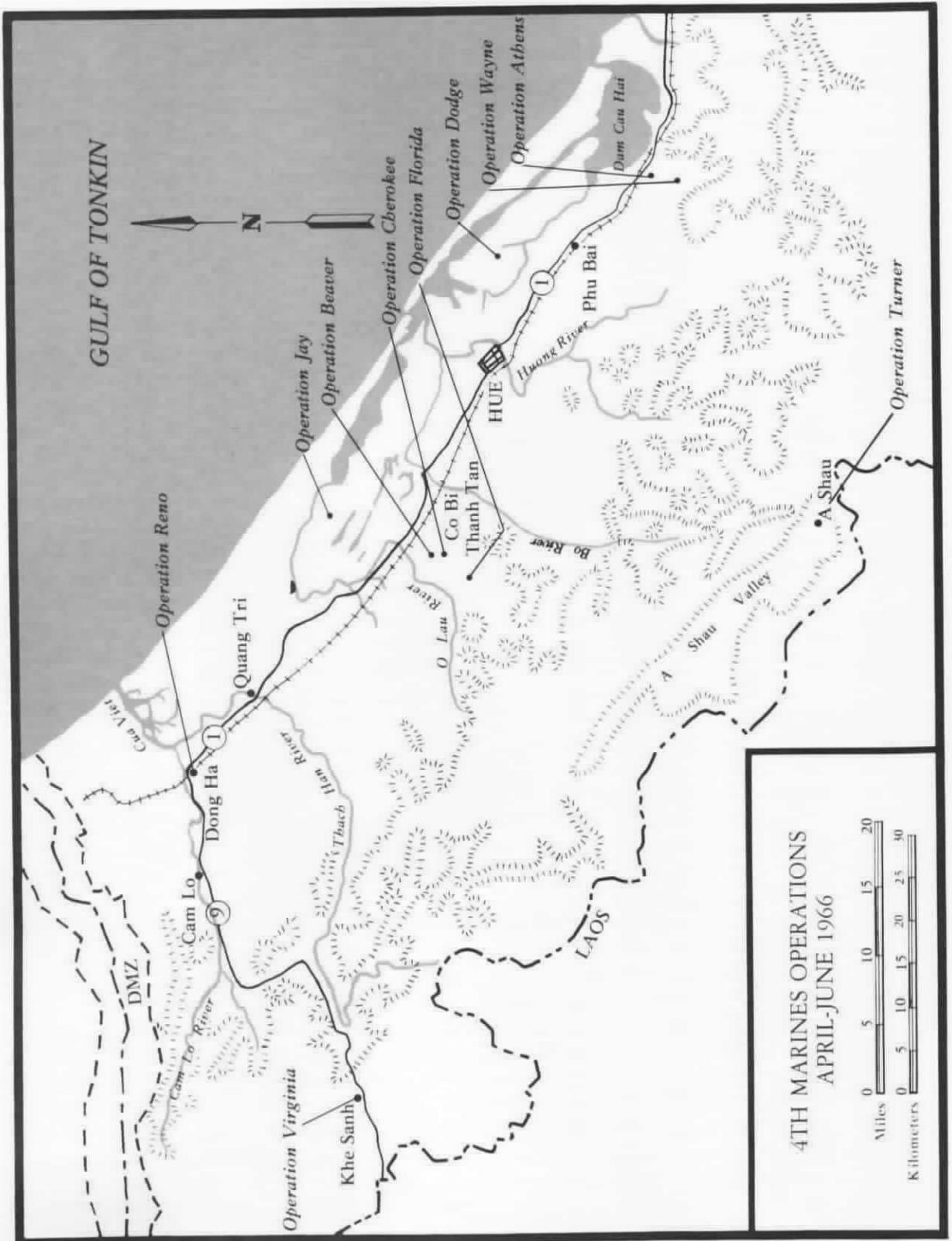
MACV staff, Colonel Francis F. Parry, observed: "It looks as if the Marines are standing on their hands." Parry recalled that he suggested to III MAF that the Marines should play the statistical game "more realistically." He specifically recommended that three of the four battalions at Phu Bai:

... should be considered on operations all the time. ... [This] may seem a little dishonest, but it is something we have to do in self-defense. As long as we are in a statistical war in which the analysts back in the Pentagon are going to look at these statistics every week, we have to put ourselves in as favorable a light as possible.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever the Marine rationale may have been, General Westmoreland, on 1 May, remarked that he "was delighted to see that the Marines are planning more operations on a sustained basis."<sup>17</sup>

In the first operation, Operation Cherokee, 5-7 May, Colonel Sherman moved a regimental command group into the Co Bi-Thanh Tan region and reinforced the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines already there with two other battalions, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines (back from Virginia) and the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, and supporting units. During the three-day operation, the Marines accounted for nine VC while sustaining losses of one Marine killed and 17 wounded. Then acting on intelligence that the *804th VC Battalion* was in Phu Loc District, some 10 miles south of the Phu Bai Airfield and only one mile south of the TAOR, the 4th Marines on 10-12 May conducted Operation Wayne with the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, and its own 3d Battalion, supported by artillery and engineers, in the area southwest of Route 1 in this sector. The results were similar to Cherokee; the Marines killed five VC and suffered 11 wounded. After the completion of the operation, Lieutenant Colonel Vale's 3d Battalion remained in this area and on 15 May began Operation Athens just northeast of the Wayne area of operations with the mission of keeping Route 1 open. This operation continued into June with only minor enemy resistance.

Based on several sightings and contacts with VC units by Marine reconnaissance patrols in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan area in mid-May, the 4th Marines planned a combined operation in that sector with the 1st ARVN Division. The continuing political turmoil in I Corps at this time, however, prevented any such undertaking with the South Vietnamese. The only change that the Marines made in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan area at this point was to replace the 1st Bat-



4TH MARINES OPERATIONS  
APRIL-JUNE 1966

Miles 0 5 10 15 20  
Kilometers 0 5 10 15 20 25 30

talion, 4th Marines there on 25 May with the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's 1st Battalion then took over the protection of the Phu Bai Vital Area. Recalling his battalion's activities in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan area, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan later wrote: "I'd bet that of all the VC-NVA mortar ammo expended in I Corps during this period, 1/4 was on the receiving end of nearly half of it. As someone once observed, 'Few things in life are as exhilarating as to be shot at with very little result.'" <sup>18</sup>

### *Contingency Planning and Reconnaissance at Dong Ha*

Through this period, General Westmoreland continued to insist on the development of contingency plans to meet any enemy offensive. At the April commanders' conference, he asked that all subordinate commands "work up detailed scenarios of what the enemy might do." In preparing such studies, the MACV commander suggested that the U.S. planners assume that the Communists "will try to suck us into a fight on a field of their choosing," and that it was "necessary to wargame in order to avoid barging into battle at a disadvantage." He further told the assembled commanders that they could not depend upon MACV for reserves since the enemy might strike in more than one place and that they should plan accordingly. <sup>19</sup>

Other U.S. commands, outside of MACV, were also preparing contingency studies. Earlier in the month, the U.S. Army Pacific presented a plan to CinCPac that called for the establishment of a two-division Army corps which would be deployed north along the DMZ and extend into Laos. According to the Army planners, such a move would take "the war out of the south," and bring it "to the north, where we can fight better and make the enemy mass near the DMZ." <sup>20</sup>

Although General Westmoreland was reluctant to move any Army troops into I Corps and opposed at the time to the insertion of another command there not under III MAF, he looked favorably at the establishment of a corps-sized contingency force under his control. At the April commanders' conference, he brought up the idea of the establishment of a corps-size "strike" force, consisting of three divisions, that would be "capable of moving anywhere in

South Vietnam to confront any strong enemy thrusts." The MACV commander cautioned that this idea was still in a conceptual stage and that none of the major command and control or logistic problems posed by such a force had as yet been addressed. Westmoreland was not even sure whether such a "strike force" would be based in Vietnam or on Okinawa, or possibly split between the two. In any event, during the next month or so, both the Westmoreland "strike force" and the U.S. Army Pacific plans continued to be discussed among senior U.S. commanders, but without any resolution. <sup>21</sup>

While the American commands prepared their various contingency plans, evidence began to mount of an enemy buildup in the eastern DMZ sector. In mid-May, U.S. reconnaissance aircraft observed increased truck traffic in southern North Vietnam moving south along Route 1. On 19 May, NVA units, in early morning assaults, attacked two ARVN outposts, Gio Linh and Con Thien, just south of the Demilitarized Zone. At both outposts, the South Vietnamese sustained heavy losses, 43 dead and 54 wounded at Gio Linh and 20 casualties at Con Thien. On the same date, a North Vietnamese surrendered to the ARVN and told his captors the *324B NVA Division* had infiltrated through the DMZ into South Vietnam. Three days later, 22 May, the 2d Battalion, 2nd ARVN Regiment, in a search and destroy mission about eight kilometers north of Dong Ha, located a VC company, killing 35 and capturing three of the enemy, at a cost of seven ARVN dead. <sup>22</sup>

Based on additional intelligence that indicated the presence of a North Vietnamese force, possibly of regimental size, east and west of Dong Ha with the mission of taking that city and later attacking Quang Tri, MACV alerted III MAF on 28 May that the situation might require the movement of a Marine battalion to the Dong Ha Air Facility. In anticipation of the proposed operation, the Marine command designated Lieutenant Colonel "P. X." Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines at Da Nang for the move north. Kelley's battalion was already slated to join its parent regiment at Phu Bai and exchange TAORs with Lieutenant Colonel Bell's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines which was scheduled to go to Da Nang.\*

\*The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines moved to Da Nang from Phu Bai on 31 May and came under the operational control of the 9th Marines. See Chapter 6.



Marine Corps Photo A187155

*Marines from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines arrive at Dong Ha by Marine KC 130 to begin Operation Reno. The battalion remained in the Dong Ha sector for 11 days but encountered few enemy.*

On 29 May, General Kyle, the 3d Marine Division commander, made liaison arrangements with the 1st ARVN Division and issued his operational order for the Dong Ha operation, codenamed Reno. The following day, he placed Kelley's battalion under the operational control of the 4th Marines and Marine KC-130s flew the 2nd Battalion's command group, two infantry companies, an attached artillery battery, and support troops to Dong Ha.<sup>23</sup>

From 30 May through 8 June, Kelley's battalion, in coordination with the ARVN, conducted a reconnaissance in force within an eight-kilometer radius of Dong Ha. During this 11-day period, the only enemy activity was an ambush of a six-man U.S. Air Force survey team from the Air Force radar detachment based at the Dong Ha Air Facility. The team

*The U.S. radar site at the Dong Ha Air Facility pictured here was manned by U.S. Air Force personnel. It provided early warning of any air threat from the north.*

Marine Corps Photo A187948



had departed the airfield in a jeep on the morning of 5 June after refusing an offer by Kelley to provide security. An air observer at 1500 that afternoon spotted a burning vehicle four miles south of Dong Ha and a Marine reaction force, arriving at the scene 20 minutes later, found all six men of the survey team shot to death. There was no sign of the VC. The ambushers apparently stopped the jeep with a grenade, killed each of the Air Force men with a bullet to the head, and then burned the vehicle.<sup>24</sup> Despite this incident, the 2d Battalion found little evidence of any major enemy unit in the Dong Ha sector. With the closeout of Operation Reno on 8 June, the Marine battalion departed Dong Ha. During the operation, the Marines killed three NVA with no casualties of their own. The enemy's intentions in the north still remained unclear.<sup>25</sup>

### *Politics and War*

Although South Vietnam was confronted with a possible buildup of enemy forces in the north, the political confrontation between the Struggle Forces and the central government during this period had a larger impact on the war effort in the two northern provinces. It particularly had an erosive effect upon the morale of the 1st ARVN Division which was responsible for the northern sector. Recruited locally, the troops and several commanders were personally loyal to the former commander of I Corps, General Thi, who had once commanded the division and made his home in Hue. Division Buddhist chaplains led the men in demonstrations against the government. Brigadier General Pham Xuan Nhuan, the division commander, refused to commit himself to either side and conveniently became ill or disappeared at strategic moments. After the burning of the U.S. Information Center Building in Hue on 1 June, the new I Corps commander, General Lam, briefly considered employing the division to put down the disorders in the city, but finally decided against such a move. The division had become politicized and was no longer a dependable fighting force.<sup>26</sup>

The 4th Marines maintained a "hands-off" policy, but attempted to keep open the lines of communication between Phu Bai and the LST ramp in Hue. In the Co Bi-Thanh Tan area, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines conducted Operation Beaver from 1-7 June. The battalion met

only scattered resistance, but confiscated 25,000 pounds of rice. Hoping to get the 1st ARVN Division back into the war, Generals Walt and Lam scheduled a combined operation in this region.<sup>27</sup>

On 5 June, Colonel Sherman with members of his staff visited the 1st Division Headquarters at Hue to coordinate the operation, codenamed Florida, with the South Vietnamese. Based on intelligence that the 6th NVA Regimental Headquarters and the 800th VC Battalion were in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan area, the planners selected a 54-square-mile area sandwiched between the two rivers, the O Lau on the west and the Bo on the east. Two Marine battalions, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines already in the area, and Kelley's 2d Battalion, which was to be helilifted from Dong Ha to the Co Bi-Thanh Tan sector, were to attack south from Route 1. Colonel Sherman was to move his forward headquarters into the objective area and the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines was to provide artillery support. In a companion operation, Doan Ket, the 1st ARVN Division with two of its own battalions, a Vietnamese Marine Corps battalion, and two airborne battalions, was to secure the high ground to the south, the Marines rear to the north, and the Marine left flank to the east. Marine reconnaissance teams were to screen the area west of the Song O Lau.<sup>28</sup>

First on, then off, and then on again, the operation was beset with problems at the outset. The tense political situation caused the allies to postpone the operation, originally scheduled to begin on the 7th. Dissidents clogged the streets of Hue and Route 1 with Buddhist altars, blocking both military and civilian traffic. Brigadier General English, the 3d Marine Division assistant commander, and Colonel Sherman went to Hue on the 7th to discuss the situation with the South Vietnamese authorities. Because of General Lam's reluctance to delay the operation further, the allied commanders decided to test the situation on the following day by sending two Marine convoys down Route 1. One supply column, which had been stuck at the LST ramp in Hue, would try to travel south to Phu Bai. The second convoy consisting of Battery B, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines, which had been in support of Kelley's battalion in Reno, would attempt to move from Dong Ha south to the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines CP in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan sector. ARVN troops would escort both convoys.<sup>29</sup>

The test proved inconclusive. Although stopped



Marine Corps Photo 532569 (Capt Edwin W. Besch [Ret.])

*Col Donald W. Sherman (in center of group in right front of picture) responds to a newspaperman's question during Operation Florida. Buddhist demonstrators had halted a 4th Marines column by placing religious altars in the Marines' path.*

for a time south of Quang Tri, the artillery column from Dong Ha reached its destination on 8 June with few complications. The supply convoy from Hue ran into more difficulty. More than 2,000 statues and altars were strewn along Route 1 between Hue and the Marine base. At one point when the Marine vehicles could not move, ARVN soldiers demolished a concrete culvert to make a by-pass. A "friendly monk" then guided the trucks "around the altars . . . and there was no unpleasant incident." The convoy arrived at Phu Bai at 2100 that evening. The allied commanders, nevertheless, elected to go with the operation on 9 June.<sup>30</sup>

Again, on the 9th, Buddhist roadblocks delayed the beginning of the operation. Although both infantry battalions supported by two 105mm batteries were already in the Florida operating area, the 4th Marines command group, the artillery command group, and a 155mm battery were to move by convoy along Route 1 from Phu Bai into the Co Bi Thanh Tan sector. The operation was scheduled to start at 0730, but Buddhist altars on a bridge halted the Marine column from Phu Bai. Buddhist and student demonstrators refused to remove the items and

the ARVN escort was apparently under orders not to disturb the religious artifacts. At 1100, after failing to resolve the impasse with the dissidents, Colonel Sherman decided to return to Phu Bai and forego the support of the medium artillery battery for the operation.\* MAG-16 helicopters lifted the two Marine command groups from the Phu Bai Airfield into the operational area.<sup>31</sup>

Operation Florida finally got underway at 1630 on 9 June. As could be expected with the fits and starts that characterized the beginning of the operation, any enemy unit in the area had long left. The Marines and the South Vietnamese ended Florida/Doan Ket on 12 June with only minimal military results. At a cost of four wounded because of mines and booby traps, the two Marine battalions in Florida accounted for 15 VC dead. Yet there was

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\*Captain Edwin W. Besch, who at the time of Florida commanded Headquarters Company, 4th Marines, remembered that later the altars "were smashed by Vietnamese Marines." Capt Edwin W. Besch, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12 Jun 78 (Vietnam Comment File).

another aspect to the operation that Colonel Sherman pointed out:

It is considered that from the ARVN standpoint, the primary operation was political in nature and was achieved, that objective being the displacement of the 1st ARVN Division out of the city of Hue and into the field.<sup>32</sup>

The denouement of the political situation soon followed. With the arrival of additional police at Hue and the massing of Vietnamese Marines and airborne troops at Phu Bai, the government was about to make its move. On 14 June, General Lam told the American command that he planned to go into Hue, "with whatever force required, arrest the leaders of the Struggle Group, clear the streets of the Buddhist altars, and reestablish government control."<sup>33</sup> Although the dissident leaders called for demonstrations and for South Vietnamese troops to stop fighting, only two battalions of the 1st Division heeded the call. On 17 June the battalions left an ARVN operation and headed for Hue, but stopped before reaching their destination after being strafed by Vietnamese aircraft. The following day, a South Vietnamese airborne brigade and a two-battalion Vietnamese Marine task force entered the city and occupied key positions. At the same time, the Vietnamese Joint General Staff replaced the equivocating General Nhuan as commander of the 1st Division with the airborne commander, Colonel Ngo Quang Truong. By morning on the 19th, Hue was quiet.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the aborted mutiny of the two battalions, the 1st Division recovered remarkably fast from its embroilment with the "Struggle Movement." Shortly after the breakup of the dissident group in Hue, the division, with two of its own battalions together with two South Vietnamese Marine battalions and supported by its armored troops and U.S. Marine air, defeated the *808th NVA Battalion*. Apparently emboldened by the political crisis, the enemy unit, one of the battalions of the *6th NVA Regiment*, had entered the Quang Tri coastal plain from its mountainous base area on a rice-gathering mission and was willing to take on the South Vietnamese in a stand-up fight. In a two-day engagement, lasting from 21-23 June, seven kilometers northeast of Quang Tri City, the ARVN division killed 312 of the enemy while sustaining casualties of 37 killed and 104 wounded. In addition, the South Vietnamese captured 40 NVA troops including one company com-

mander. The 1st Division had returned to the war with a vengeance.<sup>35</sup>

### *Heavy Fighting in Thua Thien Province*

In Thua Thien Province, following Operation Florida, the 4th Marines made some adjustments in its units. As directed by the 3d Division, Colonel Sherman ordered Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines out of the Co Bi-Thanh Tan area and back to Phu Bai where it took over the TAOR formerly manned by Bell's 1st Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines remained responsible for the Phu Bai Vital Area, while Vale's 3d Battalion continued with Operation Athens, south of the TAOR, against very light enemy resistance until 25 June. After its participation in Operation Florida, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, on 17 June, began Operation Dodge, five miles north of the base. During the operation which lasted until 23 June, the battalion encountered few enemy, but confiscated 4,000 pounds of rice.<sup>36</sup>

During this period, a small 4th Marines force made a daring, if uneventful, sortie into the abandoned A Shau Special Forces Camp. After the fall of the camp in March, the *95th NVA Regiment* apparently returned to its base area in Laos without any major attempt to clean up the battlefield. In May, a Special Forces patrol entered the camp to recover the allied dead left behind during the evacuation. Much to the patrol's surprise none of the bodies had been disturbed or boobytrapped and a great deal of ammunition and weapons lay strewn around the camp. Upon the return of the Special Forces detachment with the bodies, it reported its findings to higher headquarters.<sup>37</sup>

Based on the Special Forces' report, General Walt, on 1 June, decided to send a Marine demolitions team later in the month into the former camp to destroy the ammunition. He ordered General Kyle to come up with a plan.<sup>38</sup> On 10 June, the 3d Marine Division reported back to III MAF with a tentative concept of operations. It called for a ground force of some 70 Marines, to include a reinforced rifle platoon, demolition personnel, and an engineer detachment, supported by eight to 10 CH-46 helicopters and fixed-wing close air support. General Kyle suggested that it might be better to accomplish the destruction mission with air strikes rather than

risk a ground operation.<sup>39</sup> III MAF, nevertheless, insisted on the ground force, and the division, in turn, gave the assignment to the 4th Marines.<sup>40</sup>

Working with the 3d Division concept, Colonel Sherman's staff developed the plans for the operation, codenamed Turner. A platoon from Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, reinforced with a machine gun team, a forward air control team, and demolitions and engineer personnel, was to carry out the mission. With the attack force divided into two groups, one element was to destroy the ammunition within the compound while the second exploded two pallets of small arms ammunition that had been airdropped southwest of the camp during the March fighting. The remaining platoons of Company I would stay at Phu Bai as a reserve reaction force.<sup>41</sup>

After extended rehearsals and one or two postponements, Operation Turner went off smoothly. On 23 June, under cover of Marine fixed-wing aircraft and armed Hueys from VMO-2, six CH-46s from HMM-164 lifted the attack force into A Shau. Arriving at their destination prior to 0700, both groups completed their missions and were once more airborne within two hours. The Marines were back at Phu Bai by 0915, having seen no sign of any enemy force in the objective area.<sup>42</sup>

If the 95th NVA had become a phantom regiment, the allies had little difficulty in locating the battalions of the 6th NVA which had moved into the coastal region of southern Quang Tri and northern Thua Thien Provinces. As a result of their contact with the 808th Battalion in Lam Son-283 north of Quang Tri City, the South Vietnamese learned that the remaining two battalions of the enemy regiment, the 806th and 812th, were in Quang Dien District in Thua Thien. On 23 June, an ARVN patrol in the district, operating just north of the O Lau River ran into a strong enemy force and sustained heavy casualties. After looking at the available intelligence, U.S. advisors to the 1st Division and the 4th Marines staff believed that both the 806th and 812th had entered the old Operation Oregon\* area and were deployed along Route 597.<sup>43</sup>

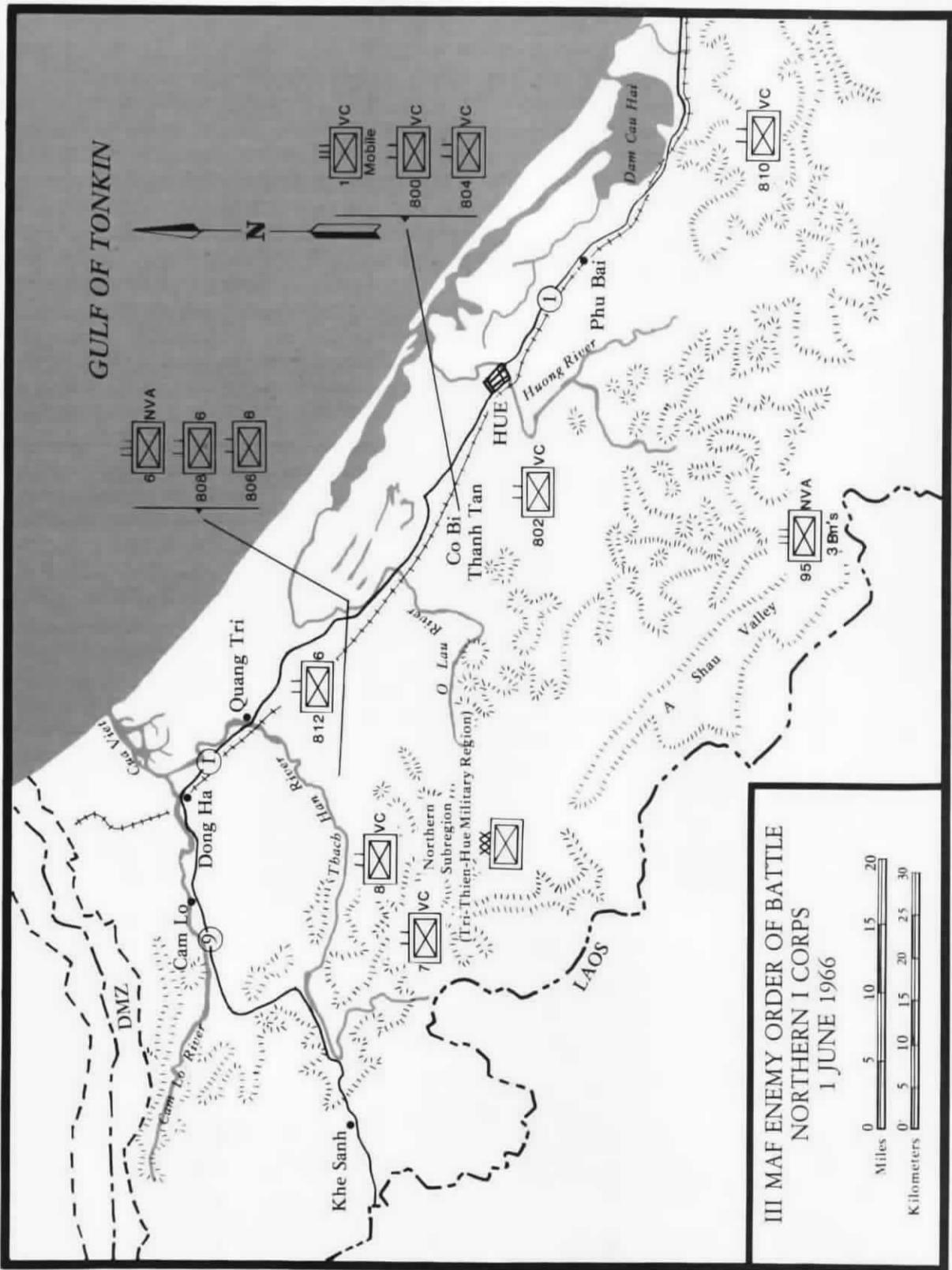
Acting on this information, Colonel Sherman and his staff on 24 June visited the 1st ARVN Division Headquarters at Hue where they worked out a concept for a combined operation. Quickly approved by

the various echelons of command, the resulting plan called for the helilift of two Marine battalions into an area of operations bounded by the O Lau River on the north and west, and Route 1 to the south. The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines would land in the northwest sector and attack along Route 597 toward blocking positions established by the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, approximately 6,000 meters to the southeast. The 4th Marines command group together with the artillery battalion, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, and other support forces would move by road convoy along Route 1 into the southern portion of the operational area, just north of Phong Dien. Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines was the regimental reserve for the operation and the 3d Battalion remained ready to provide additional companies if needed. The 1st ARVN Division in the companion operation, Lam Son-284, was to establish blocking positions to the north of the Marine operation, across the O Lau River. A Navy destroyer stood offshore to provide naval gunfire while the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing would furnish both fixed-wing and helicopter air support.<sup>44</sup>

By 0730 on the morning of 25 June, the operation, codenamed Jay, was ready to begin. Colonel Sherman had opened his forward CP in the objective area and the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines artillery, consisting of a 105mm battery and a 155mm battery, was in place. To the north, two ARVN battalions were in position across the O Lau. At 0800, under clear skies, the first wave of 19 CH-46s from MAG-16, carrying the lead elements of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, started their descent into Landing Zone Raven, approximately 8,000 meters north of the 4th Marines' command post. After some delay, the Marine helicopters completed the lift of the remainder of Kelley's battalion without incident at 0945. One-half hour later, the battalion crossed its line of departure with Company F on the north side of Route 597, Company H on the south of the road, and the command group and Company E following in trace.

The terrain in the objective area consisted of dry paddy land interspersed with several streams and lagoons. Despite the relatively flat, open ground in the region, paddy dikes and thick stands of bamboo, hedgerows, and scrub growth, as well as extensive tree lines surrounding the hamlets, provided excellent cover and concealment for any defending enemy force.

\*See Chapter 4 for a description of Operation Oregon.



III MAF ENEMY ORDER OF BATTLE  
 NORTHERN I CORPS  
 1 JUNE 1966

Kelley's battalion, nevertheless, reached its first objective, Phase Line Bravo, some 2,000 meters southeast of LZ Raven, without encountering any opposition. As the Marines renewed their advance, however, the enemy opened up with heavy small arms fire from Ap Chinh An, the same fortified hamlet that had caused such frustration for the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines earlier in Operation Oregon. The Marine attack soon stalled. Lieutenant Colonel Kelley then ordered his Company H to swerve north in order to flank the enemy and at the same time asked for naval gunfire, artillery, and air support. Despite the employment of the supporting arms, the Marine battalion still was unable to penetrate the enemy defenses.

Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, meanwhile, had arrived at 1100 in its landing zone, LZ Shrike, approximately 9,000 meters southeast from LZ Raven. As planned, the battalion then established its blocking positions at Phase Line Delta, some 3,500 meters northwest of its LZ. At 1420, Colonel Sherman ordered Hanifin to move his battalion into new positions at Phase Line Golf, another 1,500 meters to the northwest to reinforce Kelley's battalion. As the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines advanced with Company G on the north side of Route 597 and Company H on the south, the Marines met strong enemy forces in the hamlet of My Phu. While still taking fire from its front, Company H deployed to rescue the crew of a downed

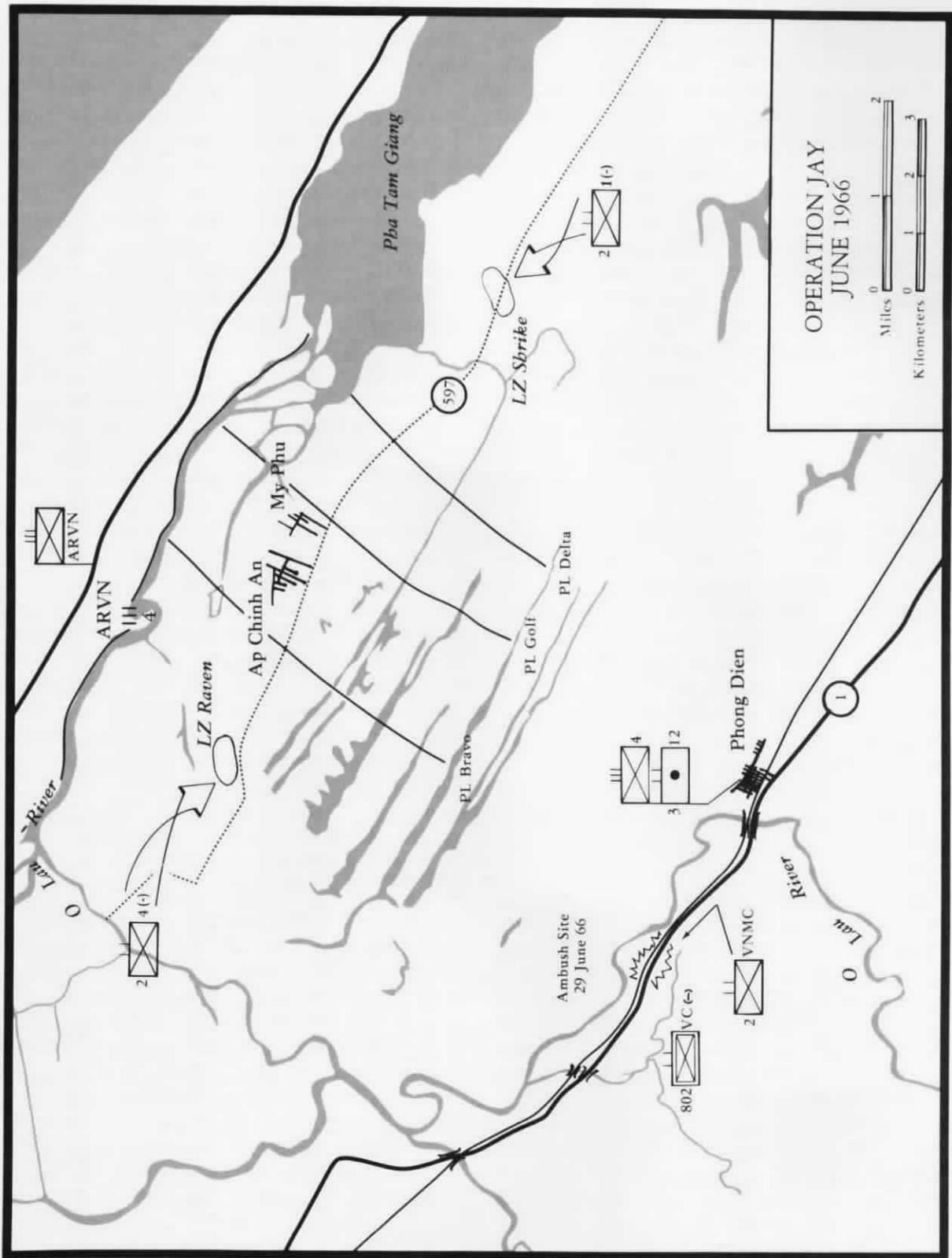
Marine helicopter from HMM-161 which had crashed 1,000 meters south of the hamlet. Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin then ordered his Company F to reinforce Company G in the attack on My Phu. After accomplishing its rescue mission, Company H then maneuvered to link up with Kelley's battalion.

Through the night and early morning hours of 25-26 June, both battalions continued to encounter heavy resistance in the two hamlets. With two of his companies engaged in Ap Chinh An, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley ordered his Company E to advance southeast and attempt to reach Hanifin's battalion. Although the Marines of Company E could see the men of Company H of the 1st Marines battalion, they were unable to break through the enemy lines to make physical contact. From well dug-in positions in both hamlets, the enemy defenders, employing 60mm, 80mm, and 81mm mortars, heavy automatic and small arms weapons, fought tenaciously. At 2100, the NVA made a strong counterattack against Company H, 4th Marines, south of Ap Chinh An, but with the assistance of supporting arms the Marines repulsed the assault. Despite problems with coordination because of the proximity of the two Marine battalions to one another, Marine aircraft and artillery reinforced by the guns of the destroyer *Davis* (DD 957) repeatedly bombarded the enemy positions in the two hamlets. The *Davis* alone fired more than 530 rounds on the 25th. Believing they had the enemy force hemmed in between them, the

*Marines unload supplies from a helicopter during Operation Jay in June 1966. In heavy fighting, the 4th Marines engaged three enemy battalions in northeastern Thua Thien Province.*

Marine Corps Photo A187772





two Marine battalions waited for daylight before renewing their attacks on Ap Chinh An and My Phu.<sup>45</sup>

There were two other separate but related actions on the night of 25-26 June. At the request of the U.S. sector advisor, Colonel Sherman sent his reserve force, Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, together with a section of Ontos to reinforce a South Vietnamese Popular Force platoon some 5,000 meters northwest of the 4th Marines CP. As they reached the objective areas, the Marines received some scattered shots and returned the fire. The VC force quickly disengaged, leaving eight dead behind.<sup>46</sup> Further north, a strong NVA force, suspected to be from the *806th Battalion*, assaulted the two ARVN battalions in Lam Son-284. U.S. supporting arms broke up the attack. According to a Marine report, "two large secondary explosions were observed and the VC appeared to be running in confusion."<sup>47</sup>

On the morning of 26 June, the 4th Marines made its preparations for the final assault on Ap Chinh An and My Phu. Colonel Sherman reinforced Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's battalion at 0655 with another company, Company L, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines. After a preliminary artillery and air bombardment, the two battalions launched their attacks. Although the Marines met resistance in both hamlets, it was soon apparent that the bulk of the enemy forces had pulled out during the night, leaving behind a rear guard to hamper the progress of the Marines. With the assistance of supporting arms, the Marine infantry slowly but surely cleared out the remaining enemy.

The most serious incident occurred when a misdirected Marine 105mm shell fell on a 2d Battalion, 4th Marines company CP, killing one Marine and wounding three others.<sup>48</sup> At 1600, Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, linked up with the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, and Lieutenant Colonel Kelley relinquished operational control of the company to Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin. By nightfall, the Marine battalions had captured the two hamlets.

Through 28 June, the two Marine battalions continued with the mop-up in their respective sectors. In My Phu, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, "swept and reswept . . . with only civilians and hidden bodies remaining in the objective area."<sup>49</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's battalion in Ap Chien An also came across "some bodies and equipment . . . in

various hiding places."<sup>50</sup> Both the Marines and the NVA had sustained heavy losses during the fighting. From 25-28 June, the two Marine battalions took casualties of 23 dead and 58 wounded, with all but two of the deaths and seven of the injuries having occurred in the initial fighting of 25 June. The Marines recovered 82 bodies of the enemy and estimated killing 200 more.<sup>51</sup>

On 28 June, Colonel Sherman received permission to make Jay a one-battalion operation. He directed that Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's battalion close out its portion of the operation and that the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines take over the entire sector in the Ap Chien An-My Phu village complex.<sup>52</sup> Although on the night of the 28th the regiment received intelligence that a VC force was about to attack the command post, the attack never materialized and the Marines continued with their plans to reduce the scope of the operation.<sup>53</sup> On the morning of the 29th, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley assumed control of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines sector while the latter unit prepared to depart for the regimental CP. Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines reverted to the operational control of its parent battalion and Company L, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines returned to the 4th Marines CP as part of the regimental reserve. In the artillery area, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines made its preparations to leave for Phu Bai. The Marine artillerymen had staged their non-essential vehicles for departure when shortly after 0830:

The sounds of automatic small arms and mortar firing were heard in the CP. Two large columns of smoke [rose] . . . in the air. The Battalion S-3 immediately ordered action rear on all weapons . . . in anticipation of some fire missions.<sup>54</sup>

The allied intelligence of the movement of an enemy battalion into the Jay area of operations had not been entirely a false alarm. On the night and early morning hours of 28-29 June, the *802d VC Battalion* departed its base area in the mountains southwest of the Marine operating area and at 0200 reached its destination on Route 1, some 2,500 meters northwest of the 4th Marines CP. Its target, however, was not the Marines' CP, but rather a South Vietnamese Marine truck convoy, due to pass by later in the morning. Armed with 75mm and 57mm recoilless rifles, 60mm mortars, and automatic weapons, the VC battalion deployed along both sides of the road and waited.<sup>55</sup>

The South Vietnamese convoy of 28 trucks carry-

ing the 2d Battalion, Vietnamese Marine Corps left Hue City at 0730. Loaded on board the vehicles by company, the 1st Company was at the head of the column; the 3d Company, H&S Company, and the command group were in the center; and the 2d and 4th Companies brought up the rear. Although there had not been an ambush along this sector of Highway 1 for more than 10 months, the South Vietnamese troops faced outward and automatic weapons on the trucks were at the ready. The battalion commander provided for planned artillery coverage along the route of march and kept an artillery forward observer with him. For added insurance, a small South Vietnamese spotter plane flew overhead. In the event of an ambush, the battalion was "to dismount, form up by units, and stand and fight as . . . directed."<sup>56</sup>

About 0830, the Vietnamese truck convoy crossed the bridge over the O Lau River at Phong Dien and continued north. As the first echelon drove past an open 3,000-meter area, enemy gunners on the west side of the road opened up at a range of 200 meters "with a heavy volume of accurate mortar and recoilless rifle fire" at the center of the convoy. The enemy infantry then joined in with machine gun and rifle bursts directed along the entire length of the column. Ten of the trucks were hit; three were completely destroyed. The battalion commander halted the convoy and ordered his troops to dismount. Marine Captain Thomas E. Campbell, the senior U.S. advisor to the 2d Battalion, remembered that despite heavy casualties the Vietnamese Marines accomplished this in good order and deployed along the road, returning the enemy fire.<sup>57</sup>

The side of the road offered very little cover and the Marines continued to take casualties. Campbell recalled that they could see through the thin stand of trees to the west of the highway the "backblasts from the recoilless weapons along the crest of the low rolling hills," and enemy troops maneuvering forward. The Marine battalion commander ordered his companies to move back to the relative security of the railroad tracks which paralleled the highway, some 75 meters to the east. As the Marines, led by the H&S Company and command group, together with the 2d and 4th Companies, approached the railroad cut they were met with a "withering volume of small arms fire and hand grenades." Up to this point, all of the enemy activity had been from west of the highway and the two VC companies east of the road

had allowed the Marines to come within 10 yards of their positions before opening fire. The Vietnamese Marine battalion commander was seriously wounded and "virtually the entire command group was killed outright or incapacitated by wounds." Some 15-20 Marines from the H&S Company reached the railroad cut but were mowed down by machine gun fire "directed down the railroad tracks and into their left flank." The enemy had succeeded in dividing the Marine battalion into two, one group centered around the 2d and 4th Companies together with the remnants of the H&S Company, and the second group consisting of the 1st and 3d Companies, some 500 yards away. Less than six minutes had elapsed since the ambush had been triggered.<sup>58</sup>

The Marines were relegated to maintaining two perimeters, separated by open ground and not mutually supporting. Fortunately for the embattled troops, a U.S. Army spotter plane arrived overhead. The U.S. Marine advisors on the ground made radio contact with the pilot and called for assistance. At this point, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, which had been monitoring the U.S. Marine advisor radio net, broke in and offered its services. The first artillery shells fell into the impact area at 0846. About this time a U.S. Air Force FAC(A) aircraft was on the scene and began to direct Marine F-4s, which had been circling overhead, into strikes on the enemy positions.<sup>59</sup>

Shortly afterward, both the 4th Marines and the ARVN 1st Division began preparations to send reinforcements to assist the beleaguered South Vietnamese Marine battalion. At 0915, Colonel Sherman, together with members of his staff and one of his company commanders, made an aerial reconnaissance of the ambush site and on his return ordered his reserve company accompanied by an Ontos platoon into the area. The ARVN division, which had been conducting a new operation, Lam Son-285, a few miles north of the ambush, sent two infantry battalions reinforced by an APC troop and tank company.<sup>60</sup>

At the ambush site, once the American aircraft began their strikes, the *802d Battalion* lost interest in the South Vietnamese Marines and concentrated on making good its escape. To the east of the railroad, the enemy troops had the advantage of thick cover and were able to get out relatively unscathed. To the west of Highway 1, however, the VC had to cross largely open ground before they



Marine Corps Photo 532567 (Capt Edwin W. Besch [Ret.])  
*An ARVN M8 armored car stands guard at 4th Marines CP during Operation Jay while Marines in background inspect weapons captured from the 802d VC Main Force Battalion. The 802d had ambushed a Vietnamese Marine battalion, but in turn was caught in the open by Marine air and ground forces together with an ARVN airborne battalion.*

could reach the relative security of the hills. Marine artillery and air enjoyed a field day while the Ontos platoon, which arrived in the area shortly after 0950, "obliterated a VC squad on a ridgeline with a single 106mm salvo."<sup>61</sup>

Within one and one-half to three hours after the ambush, two Marine companies, I and L, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines; the Ontos platoon; and the 1st ARVN Division units, reinforced by an airborne battalion, had converged on the objective area and cut off the retreat of those enemy forces still west of the highway. Between them, the allies killed more than 185 of the enemy and captured nine prisoners. They also recovered 39 individual and eight crew-served weapons. One Marine recalled that "General Walt directed his own helicopter to land and capture a 75mm recoilless rifle abandoned by retreating VC."<sup>62</sup>

The victory over the 802d had not come cheaply. The 2d Vietnamese Marine Battalion sustained casualties of 42 killed, including the battalion commander who died of his wounds, and 95 wounded. Captain Campbell, who had also been wounded in the action, later wrote that the reasons that the battalion had not suffered even more grievous losses were the:

... maintenance of unit integrity, the skillful maneuvering of these companies by their commanders, and the outright doggedness, determination, and raw courage of individual Marines.<sup>63</sup>

Operation Jay continued for a few more days, but the fighting was over. The two Marine companies and the Ontos platoon, which participated in the action of the 29th in support of the Vietnamese Marine battalion, returned to the 4th Marines CP the following morning. On the 30th, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's 2d battalion also departed for Phu Bai. The following day, Colonel Sherman closed his CP in the Jay operation and, on 2 July, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines completed its mop up and civic action activities in the Ap Chien An and My Phu complex. During the eight-day operation, the Marines and ARVN, supported by Marine air and artillery, and naval gunfire, smashed three enemy battalions, the 802d, 806th, and 812th. Marine estimates of the enemy dead in both Jay and in the reaction to the Vietnamese Marine ambush, not including those killed by the ARVN, were more than 475. Allied intelligence later learned that the 812th literally ceased to exist, with its remaining personnel distributed among three other battalions.<sup>64</sup>

Following Jay, the Marines also made an attempt to finish off the 802d Battalion, which allied intelligence believed had returned to its base area south of the old Florida area after the ambush on 29 June. Colonel Sherman assigned the operation to his 3d Battalion, which after completing Operation Athens exchanged TAORs with the 1st Battalion and had become the regimental reserve. The plan was for the Marine battalion, supported by air and artillery, to exploit a B-52 strike on the suspected enemy base camp. As planned, the 3d Battalion began the operation, codenamed Holt, on 2 July, but enjoyed meager results. For the next few days through the end of the operation on 6 July, the Marines killed seven of the enemy at the cost of one wounded Marine. The battalion had most of its difficulty with the dense foliage, which often limited its progress to a pace of 50-100 yards per hour. As one Marine officer observed, "Holt was not particularly inspiring," but it gave the Marines a taste of jungle warfare that they were soon to encounter farther north.<sup>65</sup>

#### *Further Reconnaissance in the North*

While the 4th Marines engaged the units of the 6th NVA Regiment in northern Thua Thien Pro-

vince, the 1st ARVN Division reported that new large NVA units had infiltrated Quang Tri Province through the DMZ region. Despite the lack of contact that the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines had during Operation Reno earlier in the month, III MAF intelligence officers observed in their June report that these reports of an enemy buildup in the DMZ, "while still unconfirmed, have not been discounted."<sup>66</sup>

At MACV Headquarters, General Westmoreland, who believed that the enemy wanted to take advantage of the disruptions caused by the political crisis, warned his subordinate commanders that the NVA soon might mount an offensive either in the Central Highlands or through the DMZ. The MACV commander was convinced that the *NVA 324B Division* had moved into Quang Tri Province and that the "NVA had gone to great lengths to establish supply areas and structural facilities in the DMZ area and adjacent to it."<sup>67</sup> Yet, as Westmoreland later explained to *New Yorker* correspondent Robert Shaplen:

I didn't want to react too quickly, and I wanted to be sure we had enough intelligence to guide us. At the time, though I had nearly two hundred and fifty thousand troops in the country, I was still operating on a shoestring, maneuvering battalions all over the place. I had to have more intelligence on what was going on up north, and there was no better way to get it than by sending in reconnaissance elements in force.<sup>68</sup>

The responsibility for the execution of the reconnaissance mission, of course, lay with III MAF. Since the beginning of the month, General Walt had completed contingency plans to reinforce the 1st ARVN Division and continued to work with General Lam on the possibility of combined operations with the South Vietnamese in Quang Tri Province. Following extensive sightings of enemy forces in the Cam Lo sector and, on 18 June, a mortar attack on the ARVN Cam Lo outpost, some eight miles west of Dong Ha on Route 9, the Marine command decided to begin its reconnaissance of the DMZ region.<sup>69</sup>

At Phu Bai, the 4th Marines had expanded their reconnaissance capability. Since March, Reconnaissance Group Bravo at Phu Bai, structured around Company B, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, had been reinforced by a platoon from Company A and the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company. Major Dwain A. Colby, the commanding officer of the Force Reconnaissance Company, as the senior of-



Marine Corps Photo A707701 (Stephen Iannece)  
*The bridge spans the Ben Hai River, which divided the two Vietnams. The flag of North Vietnam can be seen on the far shore while the flag of South Vietnam is seen on the near bank.*

ficer, assumed command of Recon Group Bravo. By the end of May, the 4th Marines reconnaissance zones had grown from three to six, extending from southern Thua Thien to southern Quang Tri.<sup>70</sup> With the decision to begin an extended reconnaissance in the DMZ sector, Colonel Sherman ordered the formation of Task Unit Charlie, with Colby in command, and consisting of: two reconnaissance platoons, one from the Force Reconnaissance Company and the other from Company A; Company E, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines; and Battery H, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, reinforced by two 155mm howitzers.<sup>71</sup>

On 22 June, Task Unit Charlie moved from Phu Bai to Dong Ha and Cam Lo. The Marine artillery established firing positions at the latter base, while Company E, reinforced by an infantry platoon already at Dong Ha from the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, provided security for both sites. Covered by the artillery, the reconnaissance Marines were to determine "the size, designation, and equipment" of enemy units in the Cam Lo area.<sup>72</sup>

III MAF, which still had its reservations about the existence of a large enemy force in the DMZ sector, was soon to have all of its doubts removed. On 28 June, the NVA mortared the Cam Lo base, which resulted in two dead and five wounded, and as Major Colby recollected, "a personal visit by Major General Kyle." More significant, every reconnaissance insertion, according to Colby:

... encountered armed, uniformed groups and no patrol was able to stay in the field for more than a few hours, many for only a few minutes. Reports of this activity brought General Walt to the scene (probably to relieve the incompetent that couldn't keep his patrols out). But after talking to the reconnaissance teams, one of which was still in its jungle garb, having been extracted under fire minutes before General Walt's arrival, he apparently decided there was something to the rumor that the NVA was crossing the DMZ.<sup>73</sup>

By the end of the month, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin opened the CP of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines at Dong Ha and a new phase of the war was about to begin.

## CHAPTER 10

# Marines Turn North, Operation Hastings

*Finding the Enemy—Reactivation of Task Force Delta and Heavy Fighting Along the DMZ, 12-25 July 1966—Hastings Comes to an End, 26 July-3 August 1966*

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### *Finding the Enemy*

The reconnaissance phase of the operation in the north was to last a couple more weeks. With the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines at Dong Ha, he assumed operational control of the Dong Ha-Cam Lo sector while Major Colby retained responsibility for the reconnaissance activity. Colby recalled that the resulting command relations were delicate in that Hanifin's mission was to support the reconnaissance effort, without actual control over it. The reconnaissance commander credited both Hanifin and himself with "A great

deal of tact and self-control . . . to make this relationship function."<sup>1</sup>

Despite reinforcement by the infantry and additional reconnaissance units as well as a change in designation from Task Unit Charlie to Detachment A, Recon Group Bravo in early July, little had changed for Colby's reconnaissance Marines. They continued to observe and encounter, in increasing numbers, uniformed regulars of the North Vietnamese Army. On 4 July, a patrol, led by First Lieutenant Theard J. Terrebone, Jr., moved into the area 16 miles west of Dong Ha where a 700 foot "sort of toothpick-type mountain stuck out in the middle of an open area," with "sheer cliff straight up and down," and known as the Rockpile, dominates the

*A Marine helicopter makes a one-wheeled landing on top of the Rockpile in the DMZ sector. The Rockpile, a 700-foot mountain dominating the nearby landscape, was to become a familiar terrain feature to Marines in the "DMZ War."*

Marine Corps Photo A187836





Marine Corps Photo A332831 (Maj Theard J. Terrebonne, Jr.)

*Marines of 3d Platoon, Company A, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, led by 1stLt Theard J. Terrebonne, Jr., pose at Dong Ha after a patrol extraction in early July. During this period, 14 out of 18 patrols in the DMZ sector had to be withdrawn because of enemy contact.*

landscape.<sup>2</sup> During the 24-hour period the patrol remained in the vicinity of the Rockpile, the Marines observed several well-camouflaged enemy firing positions including trench lines, mortar pits, and fighting holes. After calling an artillery fire mission on some nearby enemy forces, the patrol returned to its base area. For the next 10 days, the Marines continued their reconnaissance effort, but of the 18 patrols conducted during this period, 14 had to be withdrawn because of enemy contact. The reconnaissance Marines sighted more than 300 North Vietnamese troops.<sup>3</sup>

During this period, South Vietnamese Army units operating in the same region obtained more evidence about the movement of North Vietnamese regulars across the border. On 6 July, 1st ARVN Division troops captured a NVA soldier near the Rockpile. He identified his unit as part of the *5th Battalion, 812th Regiment* of the *324B Division* and stated that the other regiments of the division, the *90th* and the *803d*, also had entered South Vietnam.

Three days later, a lieutenant from the *812th Regiment* surrendered in the same area. He provided detailed intelligence on the positions and designations of the *324B Division*, and declared that the mission of the North Vietnamese division was to “liberate” Quang Tri Province. The enemy lieutenant further explained that other NVA and VC units, both in Quang Tri and Thua Thien, were to block any ARVN reinforcements attempting to move north.<sup>4</sup>

This information finally convinced the senior Marine commanders that the NVA had indeed advanced into South Vietnam through the DMZ. General Kyle recommended to Walt that the Marines “move troops north to try to get them [the North Vietnamese] out of there and drive them back.” Walt agreed and so advised General Westmoreland, who needed little persuasion.<sup>5</sup>

There followed a brief two to three days of hasty consultation and planning. On 11 July, Brigadier General Lowell E. English, the 3d Marine Division



Marine Corps Photo A421324

*South Vietnamese airborne troopers deploy after debarking from a Marine CH-46 helicopter to begin Operation Lam Son-289. Lam Son-289 was the South Vietnamese counterpart operation to Hastings.*

ADC, conferred at Hue with General Truong, the CG, 1st ARVN Division, and Colonel Sherman of the 4th Marines about combined plans for combating the enemy threat in the north. Meeting at the 1st ARVN Division Headquarters, the three officers agreed on a general concept of operations. A Marine task force was to move into the area south of the DMZ to participate in Operation Hastings, the codename given on 7 July to the Marine reconnaissance in northern Quang Tri. ARVN forces were to engage in a counterpart operation, Lam Son-289, south of the Marines. The original plan called for a D-Day of 13 July for the new phase of Hastings.<sup>6</sup>

General Kyle agreed to the need for an expanded operation and authorized Colonel Sherman to establish a forward headquarters at Dong Ha. The 3d Marine Division commander, however, had reservations about the D-Day date. He believed that more detailed planning was required, especially in relation to the logistic implications, before the second phase of Hastings could begin.<sup>7</sup>

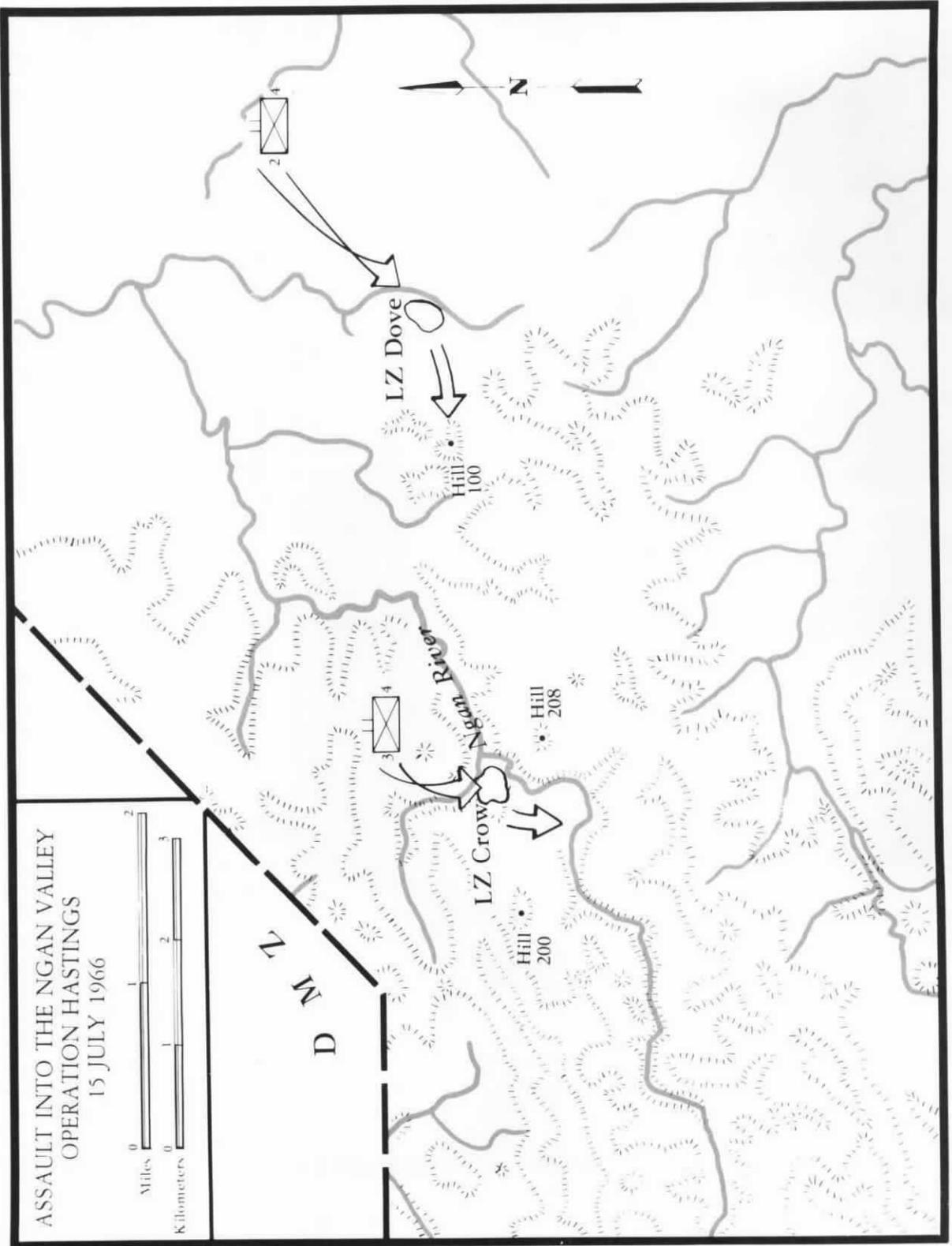
In Saigon, during the interim, General Westmoreland, on 11 July, met with General Cao

Van Vien of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff. According to Westmoreland, he told Vien that they knew that the *324B Division* was moving south, but not its destination. The MACV commander suggested that he and Vien meet with their respective subordinate field commanders. On 12 July, Westmoreland and Vien flew to Da Nang where they visited with Generals Lam and Walt. The four generals then went to Hue, discussed the situation with General Truong, and later attended a briefing at Dong Ha. Convinced that the enemy had moved in force across the DMZ into northern Quang Tri, Westmoreland directed Walt to move up to a division to Quang Tri. He told the III MAF commander that he would make the necessary arrangements with CinCPac to have the Seventh Fleet SLF available for the operation, while Vien promised Lam the use of five battalions of the South Vietnamese general reserve. They reassured Walt and Lam that III MAF and I Corps would have the necessary resources for the successful execution of an allied counterstroke in the north.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Reactivation of Task Force Delta and Heavy Fighting Along the DMZ, 12-25 July*

On the afternoon of 12 July, General Kyle ordered the reactivation of Task Force Delta at 0800 the next morning and once more selected his ADC, General English, as its commander. Colonel Sherman's 4th Marines Headquarters provided the nucleus for the staff, while Sherman himself became Chief of Staff. In addition to the 4th Marines Headquarters, Task Force Delta consisted of four infantry battalions, 2/1, 1/3, 2/4, and 3/4; one artillery battalion, 3/12; and other supporting forces. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing was to furnish both fixed-wing and helicopter support. VMGR-152's KC-130s flew the first elements of English's command to the Dong Ha airstrip, and on 14 July, General English established his command post near Cam Lo, seven miles west of Dong Ha and south of the Cam Lo River, a tributary of the Cua Viet River which empties into the South China Sea. Dong Ha Airfield served as the command's logistic support area and provided a forward helicopter staging area.

The terrain in which the task force was to operate varied from coastal plain east of Route 1, traversable by wheeled and tracked vehicles, to dense



undergrowth and jungle forests inland covering the rugged mountains. Between Dong Ha and Cam Lo, the ground is fairly level and cultivated, with populated areas along the Cam Lo River. North of Cam Lo, the terrain consists of rolling hills covered with scrub growth and coarse elephant grass. West of this piedmont area, the terrain is composed of a series of ridges and steep hills rising to an elevation of 550 meters. Heavy foliage and rough terrain made all ground movement difficult and reduced the number of possible helicopter landing zones. The heaviest fighting of Hastings was to occur in the Song Ngan Valley, six miles northwest of Cam Lo and about one-to-three miles south of the DMZ.

After studying the available intelligence based on the air and ground reconnaissance, the allied commanders determined that the 90th NVA Regiment, estimated at a strength of 1,500 men was using the Ngan Valley as one of its major infiltration routes into Quang Tri. Furthermore, they believed that the 324B Division had established its command post on Hill 208, a strategic height overlooking the southwestern portion of the valley. Working from these premises, General English drew up his plan of action “. . . to take the enemy by surprise on his key trails and behind his own lines and to smash and destroy him before he had a chance to regain his balance and momentum.”<sup>9</sup>

Shortly after the activation of his command and before his move to Dong Ha, General English issued his order for the expansion of Hastings. Based largely on the plan developed at the conference at Hue on the 11th, but with D-Day postponed from 13 to 14 July, and finally firmly established for 15 July, English's concept of operations called for a two-battalion helicopter assault in the Ngan Valley. Lieutenant Colonel Vale's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines was to land in the southwestern sector of the valley and establish blocking positions below the bend of the river to prevent enemy movement. Three miles further to the northeast, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Arnold E. Bench, was to land near the mouth of the valley and attack southwest along the high ground toward Hill 208 and the 3d Battalion's blocking positions.<sup>10</sup>

The plan for the Marine thrust into the Ngan Valley required an extensive buildup of allied forces in the north together with supporting operations. Two Marine battalions were to remain at the base



Marine Corps Photo A193954  
*Gen William C. Westmoreland, ComUSMACV (center), together with senior Marine commanders, looks at a map depicting the battle situation in Operation Hastings. Gen Walt is to the left of Gen Westmoreland; MajGen Wood B. Kyle, CG 3d Marine Division is to the left and behind Walt; and BGen Lowell E. English, the Task Force Delta commander is to the right rear of Gen Westmoreland.*

areas. The 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, since 2 July commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Jack D. Spaulding, would provide security for Dong Ha, while Lieutenant Colonel Robert R. Dickey III's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines at Cam Lo protected General English's CP and the nearby artillery positions. Lieutenant Colonel Bell's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines was scheduled to join Task Force Delta at Dong Ha on 16 July to relieve the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines of its airfield security mission. On 16 July, the Seventh Fleet SLF battalion, BLT 3/5, was to conduct an amphibious assault, Operation Deckhouse II, eight miles northeast of Dong Ha. After the SLF had established a firm foothold ashore, Deckhouse II was to be terminated and BLT 3/5 was to join Task Force Delta further inland. In the meantime, the South Vietnamese 1st ARVN Division and an airborne task force were to conduct Lam Son-289. The ARVN division was to operate in the area west of Route 1, north of Dong Ha, while the airborne task force was to operate south of Route 9.\* Major Colby's recon-

\*General English observed that "General Truong [the CG 1st ARVN Division] moved his CP alongside so there was common access to all vital information of both commands." The former Task Force Delta commander remarked that this procedure had become "SOP in our battle operations." MajGen Lowell E. English, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A187797

*An aerial view of Landing Zone Crow which was later called "Helicopter Valley" by the Marines. Three helicopters, apparently damaged, can be seen on the ground.*

naissance Marines were to screen the western approaches of the Hastings area of operations.<sup>11</sup>

The success of the planned extended infantry operations in northern Quang Tri depended on the close coordination of Marine supporting arms. Colonel Richard M. Hunt, the commanding officer of MAG-16, assumed the additional duty of tactical air commander for Task Force Delta and established a forward headquarters at the small airfield at Dong Ha. In his latter capacity, Hunt had control of both fixed-wing and helicopter support for Hastings. He collocated a direct air support center (DASC) with the Task Force Delta fire support coordination center at the Cam Lo CP. Major Samuel M. Morrow, commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, had five artillery batteries under his operational control on 15 July. The reinforced artillery batteries consisted of 30 tubes, 18 105mm howitzers and 12 155mm howitzers. Morrow had moved one 105mm battery three miles southwest of Cam Lo to provide direct support for the ARVN task force operating south of Route 9. To support the Marine battalions, the artillery commander positioned his other batteries at the Cam Lo Combat Base.<sup>12</sup>

On the morning of 15 July, the Marine penetration of the Ngan Valley began. A-4 Skyhawks from MAG-12 joined F4-B Phantoms from MAG-11, bombing and napalming the two helicopter landing

zones.\* Once the Marine attack aircraft had completed their bombing runs, Morrow's artillery fired an opening salvo at 0725 on Landing Zone Crow, the objective of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines. After 20 minutes of preparation fire, 20 CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters from HMM-164 and -165 brought the first wave of Marines into Crow, five miles northeast of the Rockpile.

Although the Marines met no initial resistance in the landing zone, small arms fire and the terrain took their toll of men and machines. The landing zone was small; two helicopters collided and crashed. A third CH-46 hit a tree while trying to avoid the first two. As a result of these collisions, two Marines were dead and seven were injured. All three helicopters were too badly damaged for recovery and would have to be destroyed. Later that evening, the North Vietnamese shot down another troop-laden helicopter, which fell near Lieutenant Colonel Vale's

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\*See MAG-11 Sit Rep for 15 July 66 in MAG-11 ComdC, July 66. During the rest of the day the Marine Phantoms were to fly 14 more sorties and the group's F-8 Crusaders flew several sorties in support of Hastings. The MAG-12 records do not indicate the number of sorties flown as landing zone preparation missions, but for the day of 15 July the Skyhawks flew 31 sorties, over 47 hours, and dropped more than 12 tons of bombs and two tons of napalm. See MAG-12 ComdC, July 66.



Photo Courtesy of Wide World Photo

*A troop-laden Marine CH-46 is in flames after being hit by North Vietnamese ground fire near LZ Crow. The resulting crash left 13 Marines dead and three injured.*

CP, killing 13 men and injuring three others. Thereafter, the Marines referred to the Ngan Valley as "Helicopter Valley."<sup>13\*</sup>

*Marines from the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines are seen escaping from a crashed helicopter in Landing Zone Crow. Three helicopters were badly damaged during the landing of the battalion.*

Marine Corps Photo A187270

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\*Colonel Vale recalled in 1978 that "We picked the landing site from a helicopter flying at several thousand feet (to avoid ground fire and also not to give away that we were scouting out possible landing sites)." He remembered that in the first helicopter crash that the dead Marines had been killed by the "helicopter blades as they were getting out of the helicopters." The last helicopter, carrying reinforcements from the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, "came under ground fire from the ridge on the south side of the valley . . . The pilot tried to land in the landing zone but as he slowed down and hovered the smoke got into the flight compartment and he had to move forward to keep the smoke out. As a result, he overshot the landing zone and after moving over the CP tried to set down again. By this time the helo was rolling and barely remaining airborne. The pilot had to move forward again and then crashed on the edge of the area in which our CP and 81 mortars were set up." Col Sumner A. Vale, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Lieutenant Colonel Vale had arrived in LZ Crow with three of his four companies.\* Company M had stayed at Phu Bai as security for the base. He established his CP in the landing zone and held Company I as battalion reserve. First Lieutenant Charles L. George's Company I formed a defensive perimeter around the landing zone. Vale's two other companies, K and L, were to establish blocking positions south and west of LZ Crow. Company L, under First Lieutenant William E. Healy, encountered occasional small arms fire as it moved to occupy Hill 200, one kilometer west of the CP.

Captain Robert J. Modrzejewski's Company K followed a trail that meandered along the southern bend of the Song Ngan. The company's objective was a ridgeline 500 meters below the river and 1,800 meters south of the landing zone.<sup>14</sup> As Modrzejewski's platoons advanced toward the river, NVA snipers, hidden in the dense vegetation, opened fire. The Company K commander recalled:

Underneath the jungle canopy we found a complete 200-bed hospital in a bamboo building about 30 yards long and 20 yards wide. One man was guarding it, and we shot him. Inside we found 1,200 pounds of small-arms ammunition being guarded by three men. We shot them too.<sup>15</sup>

After this brief flurry, the Marine company continued to move southward toward its objective.

At 0935, while Vale's battalion was establishing its blocking positions, the Sea Knight helicopters of HMM-164 and -165 brought Lieutenant Colonel Bench's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines into Landing Zone Dove three miles to the northeast. With Companies H on the left, G on the right, and E bringing up the rear, Lieutenant Colonel Bench began advancing toward the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines. Bench's battalion, like Vale's, had left one company behind

at the Phu Bai TAOR. Although the 2d Battalion made no contact with the enemy, oppressive heat and high elephant grass slowed progress. By midafternoon the battalion had covered less than two miles. Captain John J. W. Hilgers, the commander of Company H, in 1978 still vividly recalled:

... the problems we were having negotiating the terrain, particularly the vegetation. Though we knew our location, we could not see where we were going; trusting only to our compasses. The heat with no breeze and unlimited humidity was devastating.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, Vale's battalion, continued to encounter heavy resistance. The North Vietnamese repulsed Company K's attempt to cross the Song Ngan, with a loss of three Marines killed and five wounded. After three more unsuccessful attempts to cross the river, Captain Modrzejewski decided to establish night positions on a hill 200 yards from the river. By this time, the NVA had begun to organize countermeasures and attacked the battalion with small arms, mortars, and machine gun fire. This fire continued unabated, even though the battalion called in air strikes and artillery on suspected enemy positions. At 1930, Lieutenant Colonel Vale reported that he was completely surrounded, but one-half hour later the enemy fire diminished. Vale believed that the opposing NVA unit had pulled back, but 45 minutes later, at 2015, a reinforced North Vietnamese company tried to overrun Company K's lines. After a nearly three-hour fire fight, the enemy finally fell back. According to Captain Modrzejewski:

It was so dark we couldn't see our hands in front of our faces, so we threw our trip flares and called for a flare plane overhead. We could hear and smell and occasionally see the NVA after that . . . but in the morning . . . we found 25 bodies, some of them only five yards away, stacked on top of each other.<sup>17</sup>

By early evening, in the interim, Lieutenant Colonel Bench had halted his battalion about a mile short of its first objective, and directed that the battalion establish its night defenses. Earlier, about 1600, Lieutenant Colonel Vale had requested that the 2d Battalion come to the aid of the 3d Battalion, which was then under attack, but Bench had radioed back that "the terrain and time of day made immediate efforts [to reach the 3d Battalion] infeasible." With General English's permission, the 2d Battalion commander decided "to abort . . . [the

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\*Colonel Vale remembered that there was an hour-and-a-half to two-hour delay between the first and second lifts of his battalion. As he recalled, the helicopters after making the first lift returned to Dong Ha and brought the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines into its landing zone. The former 3d Battalion commander remarked: "I never did find out why this happened. Plans for the lift had been clearly made and the rest of the 3d battalion was in the pick-up zone ready and waiting. I landed in Crow after the first lift had cleared. I had been in a command UH1E flown by Colonel Richard Hunt, the MAG C.O., and General English." Col Sumner A. Vale, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).

sweep mission toward Hill 208," and take advantage of the "lower, easier, terrain" along the river to close in on Vale's positions the following morning.<sup>18</sup> During the 15th, Task Force Delta had sustained total casualties of 18 killed and two wounded as opposed to enemy losses of 31 dead.<sup>19</sup>

The enemy started the next morning with a mortar attack on Lieutenant Colonel Vale's CP. The battalion commander immediately called in Marine air and artillery which silenced the enemy weapons. South of the battalion CP, Modrzejewski's company still was unable to cross the river. The advancing Marines found it difficult to flush out the camouflaged NVA. The Company K commander stopped, organized a defensive perimeter, and called for air and artillery to neutralize the enemy. During the day, Lieutenant Colonel Vale's other two companies probed north and northwest of the battalion CP. Lieutenant Healy's Company L uncovered an ammunition cache which included 35 boxes of 12.7mm ammunition, 24 antitank mines, and 1,000 rounds of small arms ammunition.<sup>20</sup>

To the northeast, Lieutenant Colonel Bench's 2d Battalion moved off the high ground shortly after dawn toward the Song Ngan. Advancing in a generally westerly direction, the lead company, Company G, reached the river shortly after 0800 where the Marines killed two NVA and captured their weapons. The company then followed the river southwest toward the 3d Battalion. Bench's unit had one serious clash with the NVA when Company G, about 1045, received heavy fire from enemy positions on the high ground to the west of the river. The battalion commander several years later remembered that he "called *very close* airstrikes while we took cover in the deep banks of the river."<sup>21</sup> Marine aircraft scored two direct hits on the enemy, but not before the Marine company sustained losses of two dead and seven wounded. Despite further occasional resistance, the lead elements of the 2d Battalion arrived at Lieutenant Colonel Vale's CP shortly after 1445.<sup>22</sup>

Although the link up of the two Marine battalions had not been challenged seriously, the enemy renewed attacks during the night of 16 July. Once more, Captain Modrzejewski's Company K bore the brunt of the assault. The company had remained in its defensive positions 800 meters south of the junction point of the two battalions. At 1930, the North Vietnamese attacked the entire company perimeter,



Marine Corps Photo A187778  
*A Marine from Company G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines holds his rifle chest-high as he crosses a stream. The battalion is moving to link up with the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines in Helicopter Valley.*

concentrating heaviest pressure on the left platoon. For the next three and a half hours, the NVA made repeated assaults against the Marine company. Modrzejewski's Marines repulsed three attacks, one of which came to within five meters of their positions. The company commander credited Marine artillery fire "and a flare ship which stayed with us all night" in helping him to stave off the enemy. In beating back the NVA, the Marines suffered one dead and five wounded. Captain Modrzejewski reported that 30 to 40 other Marines had sustained minor wounds as a result of "grenades being thrown back and forth from distances as close as 10 meters." The enemy suffered more grievous losses. According to Modrzejewski:

... we could hear bodies being dragged through the jungle for four hours after the shooting stopped. A thorough search at first light revealed 79 enemy dead by body count. . . .<sup>23</sup>

While the two battalions had been moving toward each other in Helicopter Valley, General English repositioned his reserve. The arrival of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines on 16 July at Dong Ha permitted the task force commander to free Lieutenant Colonel Spaulding's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines from its security mission there. Over 30 helicopters from squadrons HMM-161, -164, -265, and -163 lifted Spaulding's battalion to Landing Zone Robin, 3,000 meters east-northeast of Landing Zone Crow. From this position, the battalion could readily reinforce either Vale's or Bench's battalion.

Also on the morning of 16 July, the SLF of the Seventh Fleet began Deckhouse II on the coast east of the Hastings area of operations. With clear weather, moderate seas, and minimal surf, Companies I and K of Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Bronars' BLT 3/5 landed with ease at 0630 across Blue Beach, 2,500 meters above the mouth of the Cua Viet River. Simultaneously Lieutenant Colonel James D. McGough's HMM-363, the SLF helicopter squadron, lifted Company L 3,500 meters inland from the landing beach. By evening, the entire BLT was ashore and had established its defensive perimeter. Although technically Bronars' BLT did not come under General English's operational control for another two days, it blocked NVA routes of advance through the DMZ into Quang Tri Province east of Route 1, and was readily available to reinforce Task Force Delta if necessary. In fact, the SLF helicopter squadron, HMM-363, immediately came ashore and was assigned to the operational control of MAG-16's forward headquarters.\*

During the late afternoon of 16 July, General English achieved tactical surprise in his southwestern area of operations with the commitment of only a small force. At 1600, a platoon of Marines from Ma-

ajor Colby's 1st Force Reconnaissance Company rappelled from a MAG-16 helicopter onto the summit of the Rockpile. From this perch, the reconnaissance troops had a commanding view of the relatively open terrain in this sector. Three hours later, the Marines spotted a column of North Vietnamese troops below them, 2,000 meters to the east-northeast. After 155mm howitzers from the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines fired 51 rounds at the enemy column, the reconnaissance Marines reported 21 enemy dead. Later that night, the Marine platoon observed flashing lights 1,000 meters south of the Rockpile near the bend of the Cam Lo River. They called for artillery; 3d Battalion guns once more replied. The mission results could not be observed due to darkness, but the reconnaissance Marines reported "excellent effect on target."<sup>24</sup>

Based upon the sightings from the Rockpile, General English decided to move Spaulding's battalion from Landing Zone Robin, 10 kilometers to the northeast, into the river valley east of the Rockpile. Twelve UH-34s and eight CH-46s from MAG-16 lifted the battalion into its new area of operations during the morning of 17 July. Spaulding's battalion encountered only minor resistance.

During the 17th, the two battalions operating in Helicopter Valley also had very little contact with the enemy. In Landing Zone Crow, Lieutenant Colonel Vale abandoned any further attempts to advance to the south and ordered Captain Modrzejewski's Company K to remain in its defensive positions and not to cross the Song Ngan. Anticipating a renewed enemy night assault on his forward company, the battalion commander ordered Lieutenant Healy's Company L to reinforce Company K. By evening, Vale's and Bench's battalions had established a common perimeter.

With the enemy on the high ground south of the Ngan blocking the Marine attempts to cross the river, General English decided to change his scheme of maneuver. On the evening of the 17th, he directed the two battalions to move out of the valley the next day along a corridor to the northeast. Lieutenant Colonel Bench's 2d Battalion was to sweep and clear out any enemy as it advanced, and then establish blocking positions astride the Song Ngan, about a mile south of the DMZ. Vale's battalion, in the meantime, was to destroy the captured enemy ammunition and the three downed

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\*For reporting purposes, Operation Deckhouse II remained a separate operation from Hastings. Deckhouse II was a SLF operation under the operational control of the amphibious commander. See Chapter 19 for further discussion on the command and control of the SLF. BLT 3/5 AAR for Operation Deckhouse II and Operation Hastings, end 6, TF Delta AAR. Colonel Noble L. Beck commented on the difference in size between the fresh SLF battalion and the understrength in-country battalions. He remembered that when General English first saw "3/5 on the move . . . in battalion column," the Marine general exclaimed, "I'd forgotten just how big a *real* battalion is. . . ." Col Noble L. Beck, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Aug 78] (Vietnam Comment Files).



Courtesy of Wide World Photo

*Marines from the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines rush for cover as the battalion's command post comes under mortar attack. The Marine radioman in the foreground carries his rifle and radio in his left hand and his armored vest in his right.*

helicopters, and then move to Hill 100, a mile southeast of the 2d Battalion's blocking positions. From Hill 100, the 3d Battalion was to attack southeast across high ground on the morning of the 19th and assault Hill 208, basically the same route of attack that the 2d Battalion would have followed according to the original plan.<sup>25</sup>

General English also planned to insert the SLF battalion, BLT 3/5, on the 18th into a small valley, a suspected NVA marshalling area, 3,000 meters south of the Song Ngan. U.S. Air Force B-52s had bombed this area on the afternoon of 17 July and the Marine battalion was to exploit the results of this strike.\* This valley, in the center of the Hastings operations area, was also an avenue of escape from the Song Ngan; the SLF battalion would be in position to support Vale's and Bench's battalions.

Deckhouse II ended on the morning of 18 July and Lieutenant Colonel Bronars SLF battalion was helilifted into its new area of operations that after-

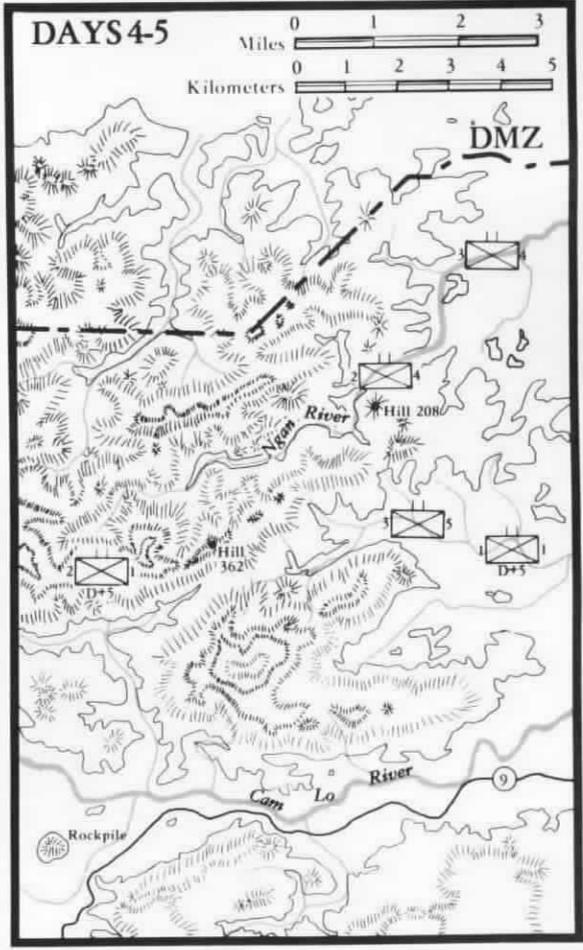
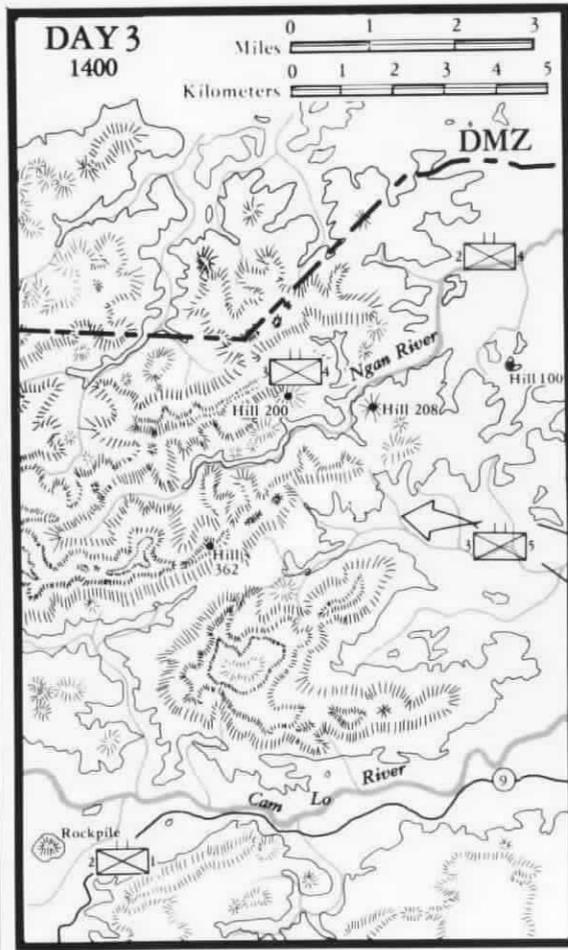
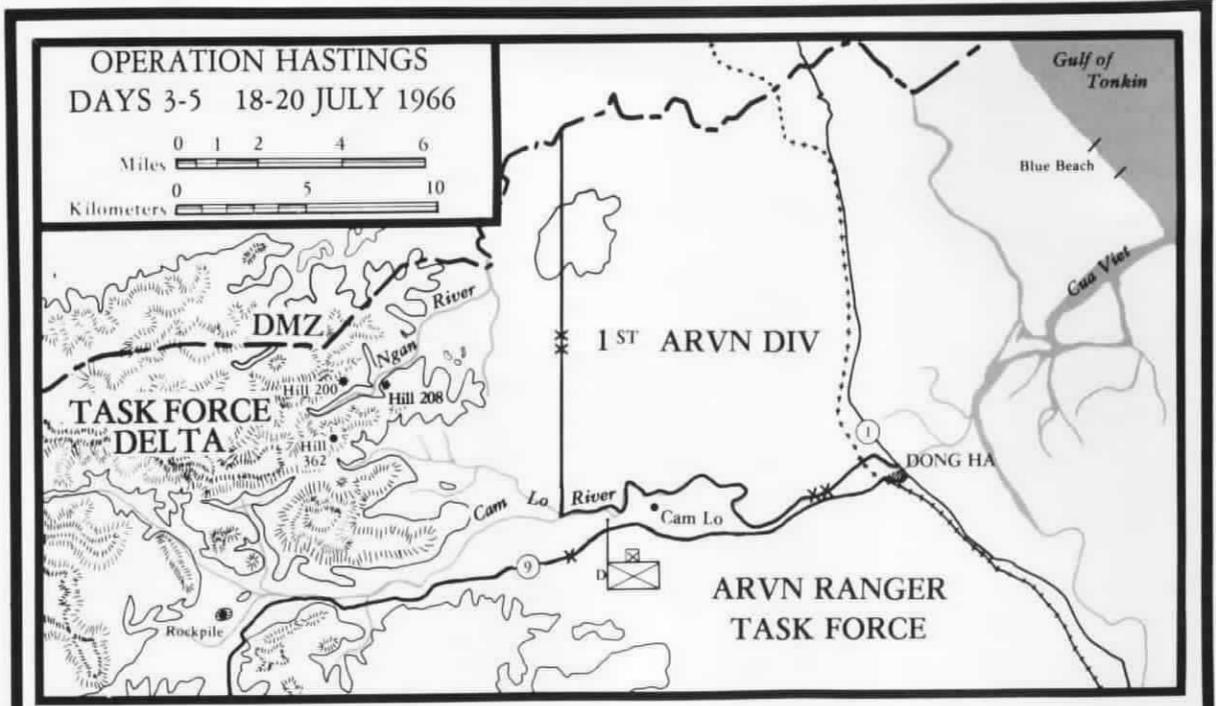
noon. Only Captain Harold D. Pettengill's Company M encountered serious resistance after landing. After Marine jets responded to Pettengill's call for support, the Marine company overran the enemy positions, killing 21 of the enemy and capturing two machine guns and 11 rifles. During the day, BLT 3/5 Marines killed three more NVA and then established night defenses.<sup>26</sup>

As the SLF battalion was landing 3,000 meters to the south, the two 4th Marines battalions began to carry out General English's new orders. The 2d Battalion moved through the valley in wedge formation with Company H on the left flank. By midafternoon the battalion had completed its sweep and Company H established a blocking position on the high terrain to the north and across the river.<sup>27</sup>

At about 1400, the 3d Battalion started to follow the 2d Battalion out of the valley. Company K, which had remained behind to provide security for the battalion command post and the engineers, who were to blow the ammunition and destroy the helicopters, was about to depart the area of the former landing zone about one half-hour later. At this time, the enemy struck, first with mortars, then with infantry. Lieutenant Colonel Vale, who had not yet left his CP, recalled several years later:

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\*The B-52 bombers from Guam carried out five strikes during Operation Hastings. The effectiveness of the raids is difficult to determine; only the raid on the 17th was exploited on the ground.



Since we had already filled in our fighting holes there was nothing to do but clear out of there on the double to the east, which we did. Unfortunately, the rear guard did not move fast enough and it was still in the area when the enemy infantry attack started.<sup>28</sup>

In the landing zone, Company K's 1st Platoon, under Staff Sergeant John J. McGinty, which had become separated from the rest of the company, endured the full thrust of the enemy assault. According to the platoon leader:

. . . we started getting mortar fire, followed by automatic weapons fire from all sides . . . they were blowing bugles, and we could see them waving flags . . . "Charlie" moved in waves with small arms right behind the mortars, and we estimated we were being attacked by a thousand men. We just couldn't kill them fast enough. My squads were cut off from each other, and together we were cut off from the rest of the company. I had some of my men in the high grass, where our machine gunners had to get up on their knees to shoot, which exposed them. "Charlie" never overran us, but he got one or two of his squads between us.<sup>29</sup>

Captain Modrzejewski tried to maneuver his other platoons to support McGinty, but to little avail. Air and artillery support was brought in, and as Modrzejewski later recalled:

We were getting mortars right in the landing zone and the bombs and napalm were dropping only 50 yards away from us. At one point, the NVA were trying to get the ammo out of those three wrecked helicopters that were still sitting there. Napalm got about 20 of them and then another 40, in the middle of the landing zone. I remember one kid shouting, "Here come some more Marines!" But they weren't Marines at all—they were NVA. And when they saw us, they ducked into the river on our flank. All we could see was their heads and their rifles above water—it was like shooting pumpkins.<sup>30</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Vale, in the meantime, "rounded up" his command group, "particularly the radiomen, to reestablish communications and get things sorted out."<sup>31</sup> He directed his executive officer, Major Clark G. Henry, to bring Company L to reinforce Company K. At the same time, he radioed Lieutenant Colonel Bench to come to his assistance.

Shortly before 1700, Company L joined Company K in the landing zone while Lieutenant Colonel Bench, with a hastily formed forward headquarters and his Company G, established supporting positions on the high ground. Quickly attaining fire superiority, the Marine reinforcements relieved the pressure on McGinty's platoon. Under covering fire, McGinty and his men were able to withdraw,

evacuating their wounded, but forced to leave the dead behind. Two platoons from Company I reinforced Companies K and L and according to Modrzejewski, "We formed a column of walking wounded, wounded to be carried, security, and then proceeded upstream, where the wounded were evacuated that night."<sup>32\*</sup>

For all practical purposes, the battle was over. By 1900, the two battalions formed a common perimeter where Lieutenant Colonel Bench had left his Company E, about 1,700 meters northeast of Landing Zone Crow. The enemy's attempt to obliterate the Marine rear guard had been costly. While friendly casualties numbered 14 dead and 49 wounded, enemy losses were 138 known dead; estimates ran as high as 500.<sup>33</sup> Modrzejewski's Company K, especially McGinty's platoon, had been hit hard. Of the 32 men in the already understrength platoon, 8 were dead and 14 were wounded. According to Modrzejewski, "our company was down from 130 to 80, and I had kids who were hit in five or six places."<sup>34</sup> Both Modrzejewski and McGinty received the Medal of Honor for their actions in Helicopter Valley.

Undoubtedly, Marine supporting arms had spelled the difference between success and disaster on the 18th. Major Morrow's 3d Battalion, 12th Marines fired 120 missions, expending nearly 1,000 rounds of 105mm and 155mm ammunition in support of the Marine battalions. Aircraft from MAG-11 and -12 flew 70 close support sorties. At one time, the Marine aviators were supporting three battalions at the same time: 3d Battalion, 4th Marines in Helicopter Valley; 3d Battalion, 5th Marines to the south; and an ARVN battalion to the east, with the "action too fast to count damage."<sup>35</sup>

Following the heavy fighting on 18 July, the enemy attempted to avoid battle and fought only when he had no choice. The remainder of Operation Hastings, with one exception, was characterized by a series of sharp, brief clashes followed by an enemy withdrawal.

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\*Colonel Bench remembered that he and Lieutenant Colonel Vale "coordinated the evacuation of 29 *seriously* wounded." Bench praised the work of the helicopter pilots, who "on a pitch-black night . . . descended into an unlighted gorge, talked in by their exhaust glow, to have a flare popped when they were only a few feet off the landing zone." Col Arnold E. Bench, Comments on draft MS, dtd 20Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A187543  
*Marines from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines move up Hill 208, the suspected CP of the 324B NVA Division. Smoke can be seen in the upper part of the picture from the airstrikes which preceded the attack.*

On 19 July, the two battalions exchanged missions. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, with the exception of Company K which was pulled out for rehabilitation, remained in its blocking positions, while the 2d Battalion consolidated its forces for the assault on Hill 208. Captain Hilgers' Company H, which had spent a long day and night, 18-19 July, on forward positions across the Ngan under constant NVA probing, rejoined the rest of the battalion on the afternoon of the 19th, having sustained relatively light casualties. The following morning, the 2d Battalion, after heavy airstrikes, attacked over the high ground toward Hill 208, the suspected CP of the 324B Division. According to General English, "Hill 208 was heavily fortified, but the position was

only lightly defended, and the division command post still eluded us."<sup>36</sup>

On the morning of 21 July, Company H, which had provided flank security for the attack on Hill 208, returned to "Helicopter Valley" to recover the Marine dead left behind during the fighting on the 18th. Moving against scattered enemy resistance, the company located six Marine bodies on a sand spit as if "they had been placed there in anticipation of evacuation." Further on, the troops found two more dead Marines, an officer and an NCO. Several NVA dead were also strewn about the former battlefield. Captain Hilgers, in 1978, remarked:

The startling thing about the whole situation is that none of the bodies (with one exception—the first NVA encountered, had no weapon and someone had attempted to hastily cover him with dirt) had been disturbed. They all had their weapons. The Marine lieutenant still had his pistol, binoculars and wrist watch. The helicopters had not been touched.<sup>37</sup>

While one platoon secured a hastily made HLZ and another platoon occupied itself with the evacuation of the Marine dead, Hilgers and his 1st Platoon continued to press forward. Later that afternoon they captured an enemy soldier, but then came under heavy enemy fire and returned to the HLZ. The following day the rest of the battalion joined Company H and continued the search of the valley.

During this time, General English began to deploy other Marine battalions farther to the south. On 20 July, Lieutenant Colonel Bell's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines joined with BLT 3/5 in the valley below the Song Ngan. The 1st Battalion had been relieved at Dong Ha by the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines which had arrived at the airfield earlier that day from Da Nang. Both Bronars' and Bell's battalions met light but persistent resistance during the next three days as they moved west. According to the BLT commander, most of the encounters were with NVA units of less than 30 men:

The small [enemy] units appeared to be one of two types: Those who were assigned to delay and harass friendly units and those who had become separated from their present units and stumbled into contact with Battalion Landing Team 3/5.<sup>38</sup>

In order to close out any avenue of retreat for the enemy, on 20 July, General English ordered Lieutenant Colonel Spaulding's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines to establish blocking positions at the western exit of the valley, 4,000 meters north of the Rockpile. By the next morning, the battalion commander had

deployed two of his Companies, F and H, there. On the night of 21 July, both companies were taken under fire along their entire front. The Marines responded with small arms and mortar fire, as well as fire from the attached 4.2-inch Mortar Battery, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines. The attack was broken up.

Although the NVA made a concerted effort to eliminate the Marine blocking positions, the enemy assault became more and more disorganized as it progressed. Shortly after midnight, Lieutenant Colonel Spaulding reported that the enemy action had subsided. The Marines had suffered two killed and 13 wounded; there was no way of determining North Vietnamese casualties.<sup>39</sup>

For the next two days, action was sporadic, but, on the 24th, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines found a North Vietnamese battalion 3,500 meters northeast of Spaulding's blocking positions. Lieutenant Colonel Bronars had ordered Company I, under Captain Samuel S. Glaize, to establish a radio relay station on Hill 362. Glaize's men had little difficulty reaching the top of the hill, getting there about noon, but when his 2d Platoon moved down the other side to put in forward defenses the North Vietnamese opened up. Taking full advantage of the concealment of 60- to 90-foot-high jungle growth, enemy soldiers cut down the Marines with rifle and machine gun fire.

Lance Corporal Richard A. Pittman, 1st Platoon, rushed forward with a machine gun to cover the ambushed 2d Platoon.\* The platoon survivors and Pittman fought their way back to the crest of the hill, but had to leave their casualties behind. According to Lance Corporal Raymond L. Powell, one of the wounded men of the 2d Platoon, the North Vietnamese soldiers went through the American bodies, methodically shooting "anyone who moved. It was darn near like a massacre. I pretended I was dead when they got to me. They took my cigarettes and my watch, but they didn't shoot me."<sup>40</sup>

The North Vietnamese then turned on the Marines on the crest of Hill 362. Two enemy mortars on each flank of the Marine position began to fire with deadly accuracy. According to one of the attached Navy corpsman, the Marines suffered most of their casualties in the first few minutes of the enemy

mortar barrage.<sup>41</sup> The Marines quickly dug in and there were relatively few casualties from there on. They remained under constant mortar fire for the next two hours until a Marine UH-1E gunship from VMO-2 temporarily silenced the enemy weapons.<sup>42</sup>

As soon as Lieutenant Colonel Bronars heard about the Company I ambush, he ordered Captain Richard E. Maresco's Company K to assist Glaize. Company K moved to within 300 yards of Company I's position on Hill 362 before meeting heavy enemy resistance. Despite the cover of Marine air and artillery, Company K was unable to advance and Captain Maresco had no choice but to dig in for the night.<sup>43</sup>

The elements also worked against the Marines. Rain squalls of Typhoon Ora and the thick jungle canopy hindered helicopter evacuation of the wounded. Temporary landing zones had to be blasted out of the jungle. Even after engineers were lowered to the ground by hoist from helicopters to help cut landing zones, MAG-16 helicopters could only take out the 11 casualties from Company K.<sup>44</sup>

Captain Glaize's company spent "one long night" on Hill 362.\*\* The North Vietnamese made repeated assaults against the Marine positions, often closing to within 15 to 30 feet of the company perimeter. Marine Corporal Mark E. Whieley exclaimed, "The Commies were so damn close we could hear them breathing heavily and hear them talking."<sup>45</sup> By dawn, however, the North Vietnamese had disappeared, and the Marine company remained intact.

By midmorning, under clearing skies, Company K had joined Company I on top of Hill 362. Company I had 100 casualties, 18 dead and 82 wounded, but, the enemy had been hurt too. The Marines counted 21 enemy bodies on the battlefield, recovered two NVA mortars as well as 27 rifles, a machine gun, and a recoilless rifle. Glaize's men also had captured two NVA soldiers, but one died during the night. As a

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\*\*Captain James J. Kirschke, who at the time commanded the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines mortar platoon, recalled that about 2000, the enemy mortars once more opened up on Company I's positions. Major Robert A. Monfort, the battalion executive officer, turned to Kirschke, then a lieutenant, and asked him if he were the attacking enemy platoon commander where he would place his mortars. Kirschke "then provided the coordinates for an artillery mission which caused two secondary explosions." The mortar fire stopped. Captain James J. Kirschke, Comments on draft MS, dtd 7Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).

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\*Lance Corporal Pittman was later awarded the Medal of Honor.



Marine Corps Photo A190174

*Marines evacuate the wounded from Company I, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines into a waiting helicopter. The company suffered 18 dead and 82 wounded in the fighting for Hill 362.*

result of the interrogation of the surviving captive, Bronars learned that his two companies had engaged the *6th Battalion, 812th Regiment*.<sup>46</sup>

The bloody fighting of 24-25 July marked the end of the large-scale action during Hastings. On the 25th, General Kyle met with General English at Dong Ha to discuss the battle. He ordered his task force commander to withdraw his battalions to the south and southeast because "of the difficult terrain currently being encountered, the obstacles to infantry maneuver, and the paucity of landing zones for helo assaults." Kyle suggested that the Marines "saturate those difficult terrain areas in the vicinity of the DMZ which contain clearly defined enemy military activity with maximum artillery" and air strikes.<sup>47\*</sup>

#### *Hastings Comes to an End, 26 July-3 August 1966*

On 26 July, General English implemented his new orders. Lieutenant Colonel Bell's 1st Battalion, 1st

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\*Colonel Samuel M. Morrow, who as a major commanded the artillery in Hastings, recalled in 1978 that General Kyle's directive was "to hit every grid square with artillery from my position north to the DMZ and westward to Laos. My reaction to this was that we had better get the ammunition trains running throughout the Pacific because we would be out of ammunition by noon the following day." Col Samuel M. Morrow, Comments on draft MS, dtd 23May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

Marines, operating in the eastern sector of the same valley as the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, was ordered to move south toward Cam Lo. The SLF battalion, on the other hand, was to continue its advance to the southwest of the valley and operate just north of the Rockpile. Lieutenant Colonel Spaulding then moved his 2d Battalion, 1st Marines 3,000 meters east of the Rockpile into the Cam Lo River on 27 July.<sup>48</sup>

The Marines also began withdrawing from the Helicopter Valley region. As early as 21 July, General English had replaced Lieutenant Colonel Vale's 3d Battalion, which had been bled in the early fighting, with Lieutenant Colonel Dickey's relatively fresh 1st Battalion, 3d Marines in the blocking positions in the northern sector of the valley. Lieutenant Colonel Bench's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines had continued with its search mission in the southern portion of the valley against small but persistent enemy forces until 25 July. On one occasion, the battalion maneuvered against an enemy automatic weapon position. Bench described the event as one of the more unusual episodes of his career, declaring:

I was on a slope of the valley . . . a fire fight was going on below me in a relatively open area. Two of my companies were engaged, and I could see both of them, as well as a

*Marines from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines move through difficult terrain in the Helicopter Valley sector. The thick elephant grass pictured above reached heights of over four feet.*

Marine Corps Photo A187798



third one, which was behind me. I was able to control the whole operation by arm signals, and as I stood there moving my arms I could see North Vietnamese and Marines firing and falling.<sup>49</sup>

On the night of 24-25 July, the Marine battalion sustained casualties of one killed and 64 wounded from an NVA mortar attack.<sup>50\*</sup> Later, on the afternoon of the 25th, the battalion CP "received a direct hit by two 250 lb bombs,"<sup>51</sup> dropped short of their target by U.S. aircraft, but "Miraculously, no one was killed. . . ."<sup>52</sup>

On 26 July, General English relieved the battle-weary 2d Battalion, 4th Marines with Lieutenant Colonel John J. Hess' 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. The following day, both Hess' and Dickey's Battalions marched south out of the valley. On the 29th, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines arrived at the Task Force Delta CP while Dickey's battalion established a new area of operations, 3,500 meters northwest of Cam Lo.

With the withdrawal of the infantry battalions to the south, the role of the reconnaissance Marines became even more important. From the beginning of the operation, Major Colby's men had conducted deep patrols and called down supporting arms upon enemy forces. Colby had laid down four basic rules:

1. Stay together no matter what happens;
2. Upon reaching an observation post, call artillery fire upon a set of known coordinates so later fire missions can be called by shifting from a reference point;
3. Maintain constant radio communications with headquarters;
4. Never stay in one spot more than 12 hours.<sup>53</sup>

On 28 July, one of these patrols, led by Sergeant Orest Bishko (and accompanied by Captain Francis J. West, a Marine reservist who was on a special assignment from Headquarters Marine Corps to develop small unit combat narratives of Marines in Vietnam) reported approximately 150 to 250 North Vietnamese troops about three and one-half miles southwest of the Rockpile. The team adjusted ar-

tillery fire on the enemy force. As a result of this particular action the enemy lost 50 men.<sup>54</sup>

According to West, after he returned to III MAF Headquarters and described the patrol to General Walt and Colonel Chaisson, they both expressed the opinion that such missions deserved a special section in the reporting system and selected the name "Stingray" for this purpose.<sup>55</sup> Major Colby claimed that the marriage of the reconnaissance Marines and artillery was one of the major innovations of the war, declaring "Recon elements are a truly deadly force in hiding among enemy units with this capability in hand."<sup>56\*\*</sup>

The action of 28 July was the last significant sighting of a large body of enemy troops during Hastings. The *324B Division* either had crossed into the DMZ or was hiding in the inaccessible jungle to the west. On 30 July, Lieutenant Colonel Bronars' BLT 3/5 reverted to the operational control of the Seventh Fleet and returned to the *Princeton*. Two days later, General English deactivated his headquarters and the operation came under the control of the new 4th Marines commander, Colonel Alexander D. Cereghino. Hastings officially ended on 3 August. Only Lieutenant Colonel Bench's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, supported by an artillery battery and reconnaissance elements, remained in the Hastings area of operations.

During Hastings, Marine supporting arms played a decisive role. Marine F-4B Phantoms, A-4 Skyhawks, and F-8 Crusaders maintained a sortie rate of 100 a day, averaging 32 close air support missions, 40 interdiction missions, and 28 radar-controlled missions. During the entire operation, attack aircraft completed 1,677 tactical sorties against the enemy. At the same time, MAG-16 helicopters flew nearly 10,000 sorties and lifted a daily average

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\*\*Lieutenant Colonel Colby wrote in 1978 that in Stingray operations, the artillery, usually two guns, "was actually placed in direct support of a single recon team for the duration of its mission." LtCol Dwain A. Colby, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File). The term "Stingray" was in use at HQMC by mid-August to describe these operations while FMFPac began reporting "Stingray" activities in its July summary, using as its starting date for statistical analysis Sergeant Howard's patrol of 13 June 1966. HQMC, G-3 Division (A03H-14), Point Paper, dtd 16Aug66 (HQMC G-3 Div, Point Papers, West Pac, Jul-Dec66), and FMFPac, *III MAF Ops*, Jul66. (See chapter 8 for the description of Sergeant Howard's patrol.)

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\*Colonel Bench remarked that just before the mortar attack an attached U.S. Navy psychological warfare team began broadcasting taped appeals for the enemy to surrender. According to Bench, the NVA cleverly used "the noise shield of the broadcast" to muffle their mortar attack, thus resulting in the large number of casualties. Col Arnold E. Bench, Comments on draft MS, dtd 20Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A801286

*Marines from the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines are seen in a temporary base area near Dong Ha. The "pitched tents" are actually ponchos used as tents since they were easier to carry than the shelter halves.*

of 620 troops. On the ground, Major Morrow's artillery fired nearly 34,500 rounds in support of the Marine and South Vietnamese infantrymen.<sup>57</sup>

Logistic support during the operation had also been massive. By 18 July, the KC-130 transport planes from VMGR-152 and -352 had hauled 1.3 million pounds of supplies from Da Nang to Dong Ha. From that date to the end of the operation, the transport pilots brought in 115 tons per day to sustain the Marine task force. In addition, "Rough Rider" truck convoys, using Route 1, brought 120 tons of ammunition from Phu Bai to the task force logistic support area at Dong Ha. MAG-16 and -36 helicopters were used exclusively to move the supplies from the LSA to the battalions in the field. Despite the fact that after 21 July all CH-46A helicopters were grounded for mechanical reasons, the 42 UH-34s and four CH-37s at Dong Ha lifted an average of 75 tons per day, with a peak of 110 tons, to supply the infantry battalions.<sup>58</sup> General English later reminisced: "I was a battalion commander at Iwo Jima and I didn't get anywhere near the support I was able to give these Marines here."<sup>59</sup>

Operation Hastings/Lam Son-289, the largest and most violent operation of the war up to that point, involved 8,000 Marines and 3,000 South Vietnamese. The number of North Vietnamese regulars engaged probably equalled the total American and

South Vietnamese strength. During the battle, the Marines fought elements from all three regiments of the 324B Division: the 90th, the 803d, and the 812th.

Both sides suffered heavy casualties. The Marines had lost 126 killed and 448 wounded while the ARVN had 21 killed and 40 wounded. The allies inflicted a still higher toll on the enemy; reported enemy casualties numbered over 700 killed and 17 captured. Enemy equipment losses were significant, included were over 200 weapons, 300 pounds of documents,\* and over 300,000 rounds of ammunition.<sup>60</sup>

Summing up this major engagement along the DMZ, General Walt described the enemy in the following terms:

We found them well equipped, well trained, and aggressive to the point of fanaticism. They attacked in mass formations and died by the hundreds. Their leaders had misjudged the fighting ability of U.S. Marines and ARVN soldiers together; our superiority in artillery and total command of the air. They had vastly underestimated . . . our mobility.<sup>61</sup>

\*These 300 pounds consisted of some 6,000 individual documents and, according to General English, that for U.S. intelligence, "this was some of the most meaningful information found in South Vietnam up to this time." MajGen Lowell E. English, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).