

PART IV
FALL COMBAT, NORTH AND SOUTH

CHAPTER 9

Continuing Operations Against the *2d NVA Division*

Raids and Rockets in Quang Nam—Operation Cochise
Operation Swift—A Busy Calm Before the Storm

Raids and Rockets in Quang Nam

During June allied units intensified operations against elements of the *2d NVA Division* and Viet Cong units in the southern three provinces of I Corps. The enemy continued to pump replacements into the region in a determined effort to regain control of the area, particularly the Que Son Basin. The allied forces, in greater numbers and with increased firepower, thwarted each Communist move as it developed. As a result of continuing enemy defeats, the pacification program began to show positive results as demonstrated by its expansion into virgin territory.

As July began, the 1st and 7th Marines, both from the 1st Marine Division, which Major General Donn J. Robertson still commanded, were operating in the densely populated area around Da Nang. Two battalions of the 5th Marines continued operations

against elements of the *2d NVA Division* in the Que Son Basin, while the other battalion of the 5th Marines, the 2d, provided security for the An Hoa industrial complex and Nong Son coal mine, southwest of Da Nang.

Further south, the nine U.S. Army battalions of Task Force Oregon, now commanded by Major General Richard T. Knowles, USA, continued their operations in southern I CTZ. Four of the Army battalions operated in and around Chu Lai, while the remainder of the force expanded allied control over the populated coastal plain of Quang Ngai Province. The Korean Marine Brigade of three battalions remained in its TAOR south of Chu Lai.

The combined efforts of these units forced NVA and VC main force units to pull out of the populated regions and move back into the mountains. Despite this setback, the enemy tenaciously maintained a

Two battalions of the 5th Marines, the 1st and 3d, remained in the Que Son Basin after the arrival at Chu Lai of Army units of Task Force Oregon. Marines of the 3d Battalion maneuver under fire on 21 July while in contact with units of the 2d NVA Division.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370216



presence in the three provinces by cutting lines of communication and attacking allied installations by fire. The Communists targeted Revolutionary Development teams and isolated units for their main efforts. These tactics enabled the enemy to limit force commitments and still gain moral and propaganda victories while, at the same time, reconstituting regular units. Communist actions in Quang Nam Province during July 1967 provide an excellent example of this *modus operandi*.

The Communists chose the relatively isolated Marine outpost at Nong Son, the site of the only producing coal mine in South Vietnam, as their first target. First Lieutenant James B. Scuras' Company F, 5th Marines provided security for the mine. The company manned two positions near the mine itself and a third, with an attached 81mm mortar section and two 4.2-inch mortars, on top of the hill overlooking the mine. The enemy chose the mortar position as his objective.

At 2327 on 3 July, a Marine listening post outside the upper position reported, "I have movement to my front," and within seconds, "They're all around me," and then, "We've been overrun."¹ Next, the main position came under mortar attack. One of the first rounds blew up the 4.2-inch mortar ammunition dump. Immediately following their mortar barrage, enemy sappers moved into the position, throwing grenades and satchel charges into the Marine bunkers. Simultaneously, other enemy units made a mortar attack on the Marine artillery positions at An Hoa to neutralize their support of the Nong Son outpost. The Marines of Captain John Pipra's Battery E, 2d Battalion, 11th Marines, however, immediately began firing in support of the Company F Marines.

By the time Pipra's first artillery barrage landed around the edge of the position, the enemy assault had already faltered. The attackers had not caught all of the Marines in their bunkers. Private First Class Melvin E. Newlin, an 18-year-old machine gunner from Wellsville, Ohio, and four other Marines had been manning a perimeter position when the attack started. Although the initial attack killed his four companions and wounded him, Newlin kept his machine gun in action. He fought off two additional attempts to overrun his position before a grenade wounded him again and knocked him unconscious.

With Newlin temporarily silenced, the Viet Cong moved into the center of the outpost and destroyed both 4.2-inch mortars. As the enemy prepared to attack the Marines on the other side of the perimeter,

Newlin regained consciousness, remanned his machine gun, and opened fire. His fire caused the VC to break off their assault of the remaining Marine bunkers and once again they attacked him. Newlin withstood two additional enemy attempts to silence his gun before he died.*

When the attack started, Lieutenant Scuras took two squads and moved to relieve the 1st Platoon in the upper outpost. Arriving at the top of the hill at about midnight, the reinforcements, with the assistance of the surviving defenders, drove the enemy out of the position. As the VC withdrew from the hill, the Marines remanned their 81mm mortars and brought them to bear on the retreating force. In addition, they called in artillery on suspected escape routes.

At approximately 0100, the battalion's Company E arrived at Nong Son and assumed responsibility for the two lower positions. The remaining elements of Company F then moved to the top of the hill to reconsolidate their position and evacuate the casualties. The attack had killed 13 Marines and wounded 43.

For the Viet Cong, the attack on the position was expensive. They did not overrun the entire outpost as they hoped, and the loss of 44 of their members made the effort very costly, but they succeeded in destroying the two heavy mortars in the position.²

The Communists executed two other attacks to influence the people in Quang Nam Province. Both mutually supporting actions took place on the night of 14 July. The first attack occurred in the town of Hoi An at 2300 when an enemy force hit the U.S. advisors' compound with mortar fire. At the same time, two platoons of VC, dressed in ARVN uniforms, attacked the nearby provincial jail. The enemy force broke into the jail and released 1,196 military and political prisoners. During the confused fighting that followed, the ARVN recaptured 206 prisoners and killed 30, but 960 escaped. Only 5 of the Viet Cong died in the attack; ARVN units wounded another 29. The return of almost 1,000 cadre to the VC ranks increased their capacity to oppose the September elections, but the psychological blow caused by the untimely "liberation" had an equally severe impact.

The Communists chose their other target equally well: the Da Nang Airbase, center of American

*For his actions Private First Class Newlin received a posthumous Medal of Honor. (See Appendix D for his citation.)

presence in the northern provinces. The home of Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF), Marine, and U.S. Air Force tactical squadrons, the Da Nang Airbase stood as an undisputed symbol of U.S. and GVN strength. The Communists were aware that an attack on Da Nang would be more difficult than their earlier attempts to strike the base. Since the first rocket attack on the base in February, the Marines had intensified their defensive efforts, instituting as many as 800 daily patrols and ambushes. Allied aircraft conducted overflights of the rocket belt itself to detect any movement in the area, and artillery fired more than 2,000 rounds every 24 hours to interdict likely avenues of approach to the rocket belt.

Despite these impressive Marine countermeasures, the Communists were confident they could attack the base successfully. The reason was their new 122mm rocket, a weapon which they had not used south of the DMZ. This rocket was a high trajectory weapon, capable of being emplaced virtually anywhere. A trained crew could prepare a 122mm rocket for firing in less than 30 minutes. Its range of 12,000 meters, 2,000 meters greater than that of the 140mm rocket, allowed emplacement beyond what the Marines had established as the rocket belt.

During the night of 14 July, enemy rocket units moved out of "Happy Valley," southwest of Da Nang, and established six firing positions, divided into two clusters of three positions each. Each firing position contained six individual launcher sites. Shortly after midnight the enemy fired their rockets at the airfield; within five minutes 50 projectiles hit the base.

Marines responded swiftly to the first volley. Almost instantly, a number of friendly units reported the firing and three minutes after the enemy launched the rockets an Air Force plane attacked one of the sites. At the same time, artillery units plotted the launch site locations and commenced firing at both the sites and the probable escape routes. This rapid reply by supporting arms was exemplary, but it was only a countermeasure and not a solution to the problem of defending the Da Nang complex against the new, long-range threat. In the attack, the rockets destroyed 10 aircraft, 13 barracks, and a bomb dump, and damaged 40 more aircraft. Eight Americans died and another 176 suffered wounds.

The Communists had not only succeeded in destroying a large quantity of material, but the resulting fires provided visible evidence of a suc-

cessful attack to the 300,000 people living around Da Nang. That the VC carried out the attack successfully, while the Marines and ARVN forces had been actively trying to prevent it, vastly increased its propaganda value.

The 14 July attack forced immediate adjustments of III MAF's defense of the airfield. III MAF extended the rocket belt to include the space between two radii of 12,000 and 8,000 meters, the maximum ranges from which the VC could launch both 140mm and 122mm rockets. The new belt also included the most likely areas of penetration by enemy launching units. The Marines established a centralized control system for all aspects of the counter-rocket effort and increased their patrols and overflights. They also instituted a waterway control plan which included an 1800-0600 movement curfew on all streams within the belt. Deep reconnaissance patrols along the enemy's approach routes outside the belt increased by 40 percent. In addition, the 1st Marine Division developed an elaborate psychological operations (PsyOps) campaign to counter the threat, including the offer of 10,000-piastre rewards for information on rockets, location of caches, and routes used to bring rockets into the Da Nang area. On a day-to-day basis, the division allocated more than 90 percent of its PsyOps assets to this program.³

For the Marines operating in the rocket belt the war was particularly frustrating. Each patrol contended with the probability of encountering mines and booby traps. So called secure areas were never entirely free from these threats. Over 50 percent of the division's casualties during the first half of 1967 resulted from explosive devices encountered while patrolling in these dangerous though densely populated areas. There was no easy solution, and in spite of the Marines' efforts rocket attacks continued.

Operation Cochise

While the Communist rocket gunners were annoying the Da Nang TAOR, intelligence agencies reported that the *3d NVA Regiment* had moved into northern Quang Tin Province during late July. Intelligence also indicated the headquarters of the *1st VC Regiment* also had moved from Quang Ngai Province to a new location east of Hiep Duc in the Que Son Basin. Reacting to these reports, on 9 August General Robertson reactivated Task Force X-Ray, again under the command of his assistant division

commander, Brigadier General Foster C. LaHue. General LaHue received orders to strike the enemy wherever possible within the Que Son Basin and surrounding hills, with emphasis on the Hiep Duc area which intelligence officers believed contained the *2d NVA Division's* headquarters and logistic base. For this operation, code named Cochise, General LaHue's Task Force X-Ray controlled the 1st and 3d Battalions of Colonel Stanley Davis' 5th Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Alfred I. Thomas' BLT 1/3 from SLF Alpha.

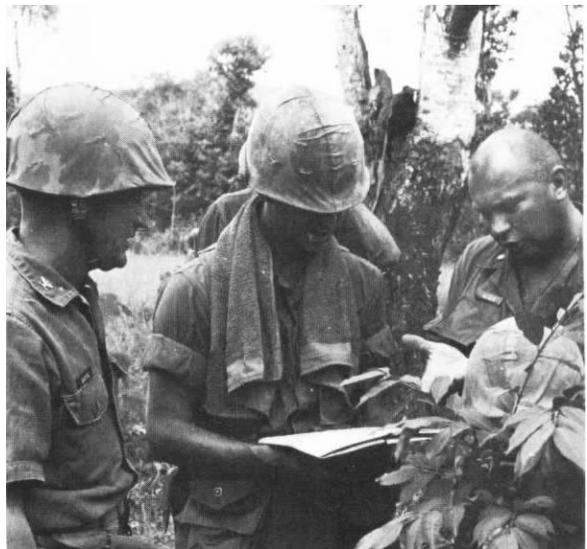
General LaHue's concept of operations for Cochise consisted of three phases. The first phase involved the insertion of the two 5th Marines battalions south of Nui Loc Son outpost between the tactical elements of the *2d NVA Division* and its suspected logistic base. The two battalions were to drive east toward friendly blocking positions and eliminate Communist tactical forces in the vicinity of the logistic installations. Phase II called for a helilift of two battalions into the suspected enemy base area, and the third phase a two-battalion sweep from the Hiep Duc region northeast to Que Son.

South of the Cochise area of operation the 2d ARVN Division was about to conduct companion operation Lien Ket 112; its concept resembled Cochise. Two ranger battalions were to be helilifted into landing zones southeast of Hiep Duc and sweep eastward, while three battalions of the 6th ARVN Regiment occupied blocking positions west of Tam Ky. Both operations began early on the morning of 11 August.

The ARVN rangers made the first significant contact. On the morning of the 12th, three battalions of the *21st NVA Regiment* attacked the rangers. Heavy fighting continued throughout the day and by 1700 the rangers reported heavy casualties. Dangerously low on ammunition, with darkness approaching, and with no sign of a letup on the part of the enemy, the rangers requested an emergency resupply. At 1730, a CH-46 from HMM-165, accompanied by two UH-1E gunships from VMO-6 arrived overhead with the badly needed ammunition. The gunships scouted the intended landing zone and reported that the CH-46 could not land in the contested zone. The pilot, Captain Jack H. McCracken, well aware of what would happen to the rangers without ammunition decided to try to deliver his cargo anyway. He ordered his crew chief, Corporal James E. Bauer, to stack the ammunition on the rear ramp. Captain McCracken nosed over his helicopter and raced for the

landing zone. McCracken then hovered 30 feet over the zone, and Corporal Bauer lowered the ramp and most of the ammunition dropped into the zone. While repeated enemy small arms hits shook the helicopter, Corporal Bauer kicked out the rest of the ammunition. As the last box dropped, enemy bullets severely damaged the helicopter, but McCracken's resupply permitted the rangers to continue the battle⁴. At 2300, the NVA units finally pulled back, leaving 197 bodies behind. The ranger losses also had been heavy, 81 killed and 153 wounded.

During the next three days, there were numerous encounters with small VC elements. On the night of 16 August, enemy units twice attempted to infiltrate BLT 1/3's night positions, but turned back in the face of small arms and artillery fire, leaving 36 bodies behind. The next morning, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph A. Nelson, commanding officer of VMO-6, in a UH-1E gunship, was escorting resupply helicopters when he sighted more than 50 VC in the open. The VMO-6 commander expended all of his ordnance in the process of fixing the enemy group in place. He then directed a fixed-wing mission against the target. Meanwhile, a company of Lieutenant Colonel Charles B. Webster's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines moved into assault positions under cover of the air strike. After Webster's attack,



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370348
Col Stanley Davis, commanding the 5th Marines, and the regimental operations officer, Maj Richard J. Alger (right), confer in the field on 16 August with LtCol Charles B. Webster of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines during Cochise in the key Que Son Basin.

a sweep of the area located 40 VC bodies. Total Marine casualties totaled only three wounded.

On the afternoon of the 18th, the first phase of Operation Cochise ended and Task Force X-Ray withdrew Webster's battalion. The next morning helicopters lifted the remaining two battalions into the Hiep Duc area for Phase II. Though the Marines anticipated a sizable enemy force in this region, there was little contact and the operation turned into a bush-beating effort. The final phase of Cochise began on the 25th and continued until 28 August. Enemy contact during the last three days consisted of sniper fire and booby traps.

Final casualty results for Cochise included 156 enemy killed and 13 captured. Marine casualties were light in comparison, 10 killed and 93 wounded. Vietnamese Operation Lien Kit 112 accounted for 206 NVA killed, 12 prisoners, and 42 weapons seized. ARVN losses were more severe than Marine casualties during Cochise, 83 killed, 174 wounded, and 3 missing.

Although these operations forced a major portion of the 2d NVA Division to withdraw, III MAF had no illusions of the enemy abandoning the densely populated, rice-bearing lands of the Que Son Basin. Cochise and Lien Ket 112 had been tactical victories, but the 2d NVA Division had suffered only a reverse, not a defeat.

Operation Swift

As September neared, the Communists faced an increasing loss of control of the population in the coastal region south of Da Nang. The 2d NVA Division again moved into the Que Son Basin.

The Marines anticipated that the Communists would try to increase their strength in this area during this period, since it corresponded with the time of the South Vietnamese national elections, as well as preparations for the fall rice harvest. At the beginning of September, intelligence sources reported that elements of all three regiments of the NVA division had moved into the area. There were increasing indications that these enemy units planned offensive actions to disrupt the elections in Que Son District. The Marines responded with numerous small unit operations to screen the district polling places. Operation Swift was the outgrowth of one of the election day screening sweeps near Dong Son (1) village, eight miles to the southwest of Thang Binh along Route 534.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370355

The second phase of Operation Cochise brought little enemy contact since the elements of the 2d NVA Division had withdrawn from the Que Son Basin. This Marine moves down a narrow trail through thick vegetation as Company D, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines searches for the elusive North Vietnamese.

The operation began when the enemy attacked Captain Robert F. Morgan's Company D, 5th Marines just before dawn on 4 September. The action unfolded slowly. At 0430, the enemy force struck the Marine company with small arms fire and mortar rounds from positions 100 meters northwest and west of the company perimeter. The Marines returned fire and recalled the company outposts. Help arrived in the form of an armed UH-1E, but when the Marines marked their position with a strobe light, the NVA soldiers saw it too. As soon as the light began flashing, the enemy hit the position with even more accurate small arms and mortar fire.

A short time later, Marines discovered enemy infiltrators inside the western segment of the company perimeter. Captain Morgan organized a force to drive the NVA out and by 0620 reestablished the perimeter. As it reorganized, more NVA automatic weapons hit Company D, killing Captain Morgan. The executive officer, First Lieutenant William P. Vacca, called for air strikes, some within 50 meters of

the company lines. The enemy pulled back. As the fire let up, Vacca completed the perimeter reorganization and requested helicopter evacuation for his casualties. At the same time, he reported that he faced at least an enemy company and needed help. His battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Peter L. Hilgartner, responded by ordering Captain Thomas D. Reese, Jr.'s Company B, then 4,000 meters to the west and near the battalion CP on Hill 51, to move overland to Vacca's position.

Company B arrived in the vicinity of the battle by 0820, and within the hour it came under fire from another enemy force, apparently a company, entrenched in the town of Dong Son (1). Captain Reese asked for a tear gas drop on the dug-in NVA, and "Hueys" from VMO-2 obliged by dropping 400 pounds of the agent on the enemy lines. The Communists broke and ran north toward the Ly Ly River. Company B attacked, killing 26 of the enemy, and secured the eastern end of Dong Son (1). While Company B fought in the east end of town, HMM-363 helicopters arrived over the battle area to pick up Company D's casualties. The NVA force greeted the aircraft with heavy fire and decoy smoke signals. They hit two UH-34s and shot one down over Company D. They also shot down one of VMO-2's UH-1Es, piloted by Major David L. Ross, who managed to land in the Company D perimeter. Ross changed his "Deadlock" radio call sign to "Deadlock on the deck" and continued to help direct air strikes on the enemy. He also provided ammunition and machine guns from his aircraft to help in the defense of the perimeter.⁵

At 0925, Lieutenant Colonel Webster's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, based at the regimental command post seven miles east of Que Son, received orders to prepare two companies for a helilift to the Dong Son area for attachment to Hilgartner's battalion. By 1245 both of the 3d Battalion companies, K and M, and Hilgartner's 1st Battalion command group had landed four kilometers east-northeast of Dong Son (1) and were preparing to move toward Companies B and D. Meanwhile, Company B found another enemy pocket in the west end of Dong Son (1). After an air strike, the company moved in and cleared the west end; they killed nine more Communists in this action. Fighting in the town diminished as Companies B and D consolidated their positions in the western edge of the village; Hilgartner's force was less fortunate.

At 1430, Hilgartner's Companies K and M were

advancing in column. Company K, accompanied by Lieutenant Colonel Hilgartner's command group, led the movement. "We were alerted to the impending conflict," said Hilgartner, "when one of our scouts brought in a Chinese-made, magazine-fed, light machine gun which was found teetering back and forth on a large rock." Hilgartner radioed this information to Major Richard J. Alger, the regimental operations officer. Alger replied that he had just received an intelligence report that a large enemy force was in the area.⁶

These two events gave Hilgartner time to begin to change his tactical formation from a column to two companies on line. He ordered Company M to move up on Company K's right. As Company M advanced, both companies came under intense fire from a large NVA force in what the Marines later found to be an L-shaped, entrenched position.⁷

Company M's 1st Platoon was crossing a rice paddy about 1430 when it first came under heavy fire from an estimated enemy company. First Lieutenant John D. Murray, commanding Company M, sent his 2d Platoon to assist the 1st Platoon. While crossing a small knoll near the village of Chau Lam (1), the 2d Platoon ran head-on into still another entrenched NVA company. The 1st Platoon's commander, Second Lieutenant Edward L. Blecksmith, ordered his Marines to pull back to the top of the knoll. While the 2d Platoon fought the by now attacking North Vietnamese, Lieutenant Murray ordered the remainder of the company to move onto the knoll with the 1st Platoon and set up a perimeter. The enemy quickly encircled Company M and pounded it with more than 200 mortar rounds, as well as extremely heavy automatic weapons fire. Murray requested a tear gas drop on the enemy positions to help the 2d Platoon disengage. While the gas did slow up the Communist assaults, it did not help the many Marines who had lost or discarded their gas masks during the action.

As the gas lifted, the NVA renewed their attack and, on at least one occasion, succeeded in penetrating the 2d Platoon's lines. Sergeant Lawrence D. Peters, a squad leader, stood up to point out NVA positions until hit in the leg. Despite his wound, he led his men until they drove the enemy from the position. Sergeant Peters died later that evening from a fragment wound.*

*Sergeant Peters received a posthumous Medal of Honor for his actions. See Appendix D for the citation.

The enemy attacks separated Hilgartner's two companies; each had to fight independently. Captain Joseph R. Tenny, commanding Company K, fought and maneuvered his company against the enemy in a firefight that lasted until nightfall. Finally, he had to back off and set up night positions with Hilgartner's command group.

As darkness fell over the Que Son Valley, the Marines called for air strikes. Captain Robert J. Fitzsimmons and his aerial observer, First Lieutenant Robert H. Whitlow, arrived over the battlefield in a Cessna O-1 Bird Dog to control the strike.* Napalm and 500-pound bombs exploded as close as 50 meters to Company M's lines. To the west, Marine artillery from Que Son fired in support of Companies B and D. Early in the evening the fighting reached a crescendo when the North Vietnamese opened up against the attacking planes with heavy machine guns. Marine A-6A Intruders, directed by Whitlow, attacked the main cluster of enemy anti-aircraft positions on Hill 63. After silencing these guns, the A-6As struck at Communist mortars within 60 meters of Company K. By 2000 the one-sided air-ground duel was over. Although scattered action continued on the ground, the destruction of the NVA anti-aircraft positions signaled the end of major fighting. Corporal Joseph E. Fuller, a Company M squad leader, was one of many infantrymen who recognized the value of Marine close air support during the night of 4 September. Referring to the strikes, Fuller later commented, "I'd like to thank the FAC that called it in . . . I think that is what really saved us."⁸

Marine artillery fire from Que Son and Thang Binh continued to pound the North Vietnamese after the heaviest fighting subsided. Under the cover of artillery fire, UH-34 helicopters from Lieutenant Colonel Robert Lewis, Jr.'s HMM-363 delivered supplies and evacuated casualties. At 0100, Captain Francis M. Burke's Company I, 5th Marines fought its way to Hilgartner's positions. After its arrival, the enemy backed off and the rest of the night passed quietly.

While these events took place, Lieutenant Colonel Webster's 3d Battalion Command Group and Company D, 1st Marines received orders to join Com-

panies B and D to the west. Early on 5 September, Webster's force reached the two companies, at which time he assumed operational control.

The same morning, 5 September, Hilgartner's troops searched the battle area and reported 130 dead NVA soldiers and 37 captured weapons. Marine casualties were 54 killed and 104 wounded; among those killed was the 3d Battalion's chaplain, Lieutenant Vincent R. Capadonno, USNR. During Company M's heavy fighting, Chaplain Capadonno made repeated trips out of the perimeter to help 2d Platoon casualties. Wounded twice, he refused medical aid, continuing to help wounded until killed by the enemy. Lieutenant Capadonno received a posthumous Medal of Honor for his gallantry; he was the first Navy chaplain killed in action in Vietnam.*

Although the NVA broke contact with the Marines, they did not leave the basin area. The 5th Marines commander, Colonel Davis, ordered his 1st and 3d Battalions to sweep toward the foothills bordering the southern edge of the basin. The morning of the 6th, the two battalion command groups exchanged operational control of their respective companies and the 5th Marines continued the attack to the southeast. At 1515 that afternoon Hilgartner's companies ran into two battalions of the *1st VC Regiment* near Vinh Huy (3). Lead elements of the Marine battalion came under fire from snipers and as the Marines continued to advance, heavy automatic weapons fire stopped the lead platoon, the 3d Platoon of Company B, in an open rice paddy. Captain Reese sent his 2d Platoon around to the right of the stalemated platoon to provide covering fire so that it could withdraw, but the 2d Platoon also came under extremely heavy and accurate fire which stopped its advance. The Marines took cover behind some graves and a hedgerow and once more tried to establish a base of fire to cover the 3d Platoon's withdrawal. Again, enemy fire superiority prevailed. Reese then sent the 1st Platoon further to the right in still another attempt to outflank the NVA. As the 1st Platoon moved, it found itself outflanked and almost surrounded. Forced to pull back almost immediately, the platoon had to leave some of its dead behind, but managed to bring out all of the wounded. While the North Vietnamese concentrated on the 1st Platoon, there was a lull in the firing in front

*The O-1 observation aircraft were not part of VMO-2 at this time. Instead they had their own officer-in-charge who functioned directly under MAG-16. Colonel Philip M. Crosswait, comments on draft ms, 14Jul81 (Vietnam comment files, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

*See Appendix D for Chaplain Capadonno's citation.

of the 3d Platoon, so at last, it managed to pull back from the exposed paddy.

Next, the NVA hit the 2d Platoon position with a frontal assault, as well as an envelopment of the right flank. Lance Corporal Lonnie R. Henshaw recalled:

We looked up and saw many NVA in full uniforms, packs, and cartridge belts running across the rice paddy at us. We started shooting and we could see them falling, but they didn't stop and more and more of them kept coming. Nothing could stop them, it was like they were doped up.⁹

The platoon commander, First Lieutenant John E. Brackeen, seeing the enemy's flanking attempt, ordered the platoon to fall back 50 meters to a trench line and set up a new perimeter. The NVA closed quickly and the enemy attack turned into a grenade duel. One landed in the trench near Lieutenant Brackeen and some of his men. The platoon guide, Sergeant Rodney M. Davis, seeing the danger to his lieutenant and the others, jumped on the grenade, taking the full impact of the explosion with his body. For thus giving his life, Sergeant Davis received the Medal of Honor.*

By now the enemy, in strength, was so close that Lieutenant Brackeen realized he could not hold the position much longer. He requested tear gas to cover the withdrawal of what was left of the platoon to the battalion perimeter. The tear gas worked and the Marines moved back to the battalion position with their wounded, but not their dead.

After the gas attack to support Brackeen's withdrawal, enemy fire slackened, but as the gas dissipated the NVA renewed their assault. Artillery fire from Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Hunter, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 11th Marines landed within 50 meters of the Marine lines, while air strikes hit as close as 100 meters from the position. The NVA assaults stopped; however, as night fell the battalion came under heavy mortar and rocket fire. NVA soldiers, crawling as close as 15 meters to the perimeter, began lobbing grenades into the lines, while others attempted to slip through the defenses. The battalion's S-3, Major Charles H. Black, checking a sector of Company D's lines, discovered some of the infiltrators. Major Black killed several of them as he rallied nearby Marines to drive out the others. The enemy attacked until about 0200, at which time they withdrew, leaving behind 61 bodies. The Marines had lost 35 killed and 92 wounded in the action.

Northeast of the 1st Battalion action, the 3d Battalion also became heavily engaged on the afternoon of 6 September. By 1400, Lieutenant Colonel Webster's Marines had seized Hill 48, without meeting significant resistance. Webster then ordered Captain Francis M. Burke's Company I to seize Hill 43, 1,100 meters southeast of Hill 48. When Burke's company was about 200 meters from the base of the hill, the lead elements saw two camouflaged NVA soldiers and opened fire on them. Automatic weapons fire erupted from the left front, but initial Communist resistance was light and the lead platoon continued to push through. Resistance began to stiffen and Captain Burke ordered his other two platoons up on either flank of the lead platoon. All three platoons continued to push on. At 1630, heavy machine gun fire hit Burke's left platoon. The advance stopped. Burke ordered the other two platoons to shift over to help the stalled platoon, but they also became heavily engaged. Finally the company managed to consolidate its position. Lieutenant Colonel Webster ordered Company K to go to Burke's assistance. By the time that Company K had fought its way to Burke's position, Company I had many casualties, some of whom were still forward of the company front. With the arrival of the second company, the Marines recovered most of their casualties and established a better perimeter.

While the Marines consolidated their position, a UH-1E gunship from Lieutenant Colonel Philip M. Crosswait's VMO-2 reported a large number of NVA immediately south of the perimeter. The pilot cut short his report, saying that the enemy was, "... swarming all over the top of this hill and I've got to get to work."¹⁰ The gunship killed 23 NVA before it had to break off the attack to rearm and refuel.

Between 1900 and 2300, Companies I and K repulsed two determined NVA assaults. Heavy machine guns supported both attacks and the second broke into the Marine positions before the Marines threw it back after furious hand-to-hand fighting. At 2300, Lieutenant Murray's Company M, the battalion reserve, joined Companies I and K. The enemy pressed the position until just after midnight when the Marines used tear gas to drive them off. Only a few mortar rounds interrupted the rest of the night. Dawn revealed 88 enemy bodies around the position. Webster's losses were 34 killed and 109 wounded.

At first light on 7 September, both battalions began searching the enemy dead for items of in-

*See Appendix D for Sergeant Davis' citation.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370399

Operation Swift's objective was to destroy elements of the 2d NVA Division and deny the enemy access to the food derived from the basin's extensive rice paddies, such as these being crossed by Marines with the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines on 7 September.

telligence value. They found a map which revealed the defensive positions of a battalion of the *1st VC Regiment*. It pinpointed company and command post locations, as well as mortar positions and ammunition storage sites. This information triggered an attack to the east by Hilgartner's battalion. Supporting arms blasted the plotted enemy positions and then the infantry swept through them. As the operation progressed, on the 9th, the 1st Battalion Marines found 91 cases of small arms ammunition, 27 cases of mortar rounds, hundreds of hand grenades, and 6 cases of 75mm recoilless rifle rounds as well as a vast assortment of loose ordnance. The Marines saved samples for intelligence purposes, and blew the rest in place.*

At this time, General Robertson again activated Task Force X-Ray under the command of Brigadier General LaHue. X-Ray now included the U.S. Army's 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Peter P. Petro, USA. Simultaneously, the Vietnamese started their companion Operation Lien Ket 116.

*Lieutenant Colonel William K. Rockey arrived by helicopter around noon that day, 7 September 1967, and assumed command of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines from Lieutenant Colonel Webster. Colonel William K. Rockey, Comments on draft ms, 28Jul81 (Vietnam Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

There were two more significant encounters during the last days of Operation Swift. The first occurred on 10 September during a patrol northeast of Hill 43 by Captain Gene W. Bowers' Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines.*

Early in the afternoon, Company H searched a small village and found it empty except for a few women and children. The Marines noted, however, that the enemy had fortified the village with bunkers, interlocking trenches, and barbed wire.

Upon completion of its search of the village, Company H continued its patrol. After moving another 1,500 meters, the company established a defensive position on a small hill at about 1400 and requested resupply by helicopter. To provide additional security, Captain Bowers ordered Second Lieutenant Allan J. Herman's 3d Platoon to patrol around the hill in a circle with about a one-mile radius. The 3d Platoon departed the perimeter and a heavy rain began falling.

The patrol route took the 3d Platoon back to the small village which Company H had recently searched. In the interim, however, a reinforced North Vietnamese company had slipped back and reoc-

*Captain Bowers' company served under the operational control of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines at this time.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370397

LCpl Patrick J. Ferguson, who had received a superficial gunshot wound in the left side in June, takes a breather on 7 September during Operation Swift. LCpl Ferguson, who is carrying an AN/PRC-47 radio, was part of a forward air control team attached to the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines for the operation.

cupied the well-constructed defensive positions. Herman's platoon reached the vicinity of the village around 1430 and began crossing the rice paddies around it. The North Vietnamese company remained quiet until the lead squad of Marines was about to enter the village, then opened up with sudden, intense, automatic weapons fire, including .50-caliber machine guns, and virtually eliminated lead Marine squad. The heavy fire, supplemented by 60mm mortars, gave the North Vietnamese fire superiority over the rest of the Marine platoon and it could not move. The platoon was soon leaderless; Lieutenant Herman died trying to rescue a wounded Marine in the rice paddy.

Company H had just received its supplies by helicopter when Captain Bowers heard the sound of automatic weapons and mortars from the direction of the village. Since he could not contact the 3d Platoon by radio, Captain Bowers left a small contingent to guard the supplies and quickly moved the rest of his company toward the sound of the firing. Enroute, Bowers made radio contact with a wounded

corporal from the 3d Platoon who described the situation, including the death of Lieutenant Herman.

Captain Bowers sent the 2d Platoon around to the left where it could provide a base of fire as well as cover by fire the enemy escape route from the rear of the village. The company headquarters and the 1st Platoon continued toward the 3d Platoon and attempted to gain fire superiority over the NVA unit. "Mortar and artillery fire," wrote Bowers, "was brought to bear on the enemy . . . with fire landing within 50 meters of friendly positions. Helicopter gunships arrived to rocket and strafe the NVA [positions] while artillery sealed the rear of the village."¹¹

Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, which the battalion commander sent to assist Company H, arrived on the scene and joined the fight. After several air strikes by fixed-wing aircraft armed with 250-pound bombs, two A-4 aircraft dropped tear gas on the enemy. The two rifle companies then made a successful, coordinated assault on the village. Only a few NVA soldiers escaped out the other side of the village.

After the assault, the Marines searched the village and counted 40 dead NVA soldiers above ground. Others, Bowers reported, probably lay buried in the bunkers and trenches collapsed by the artillery and air strikes.

Nine Marines died in the action, six of them in the rice paddies just in front of the enemy fortifications. "[They] were found," noted Bowers in 1981, "with their M-16 rifles broken down in an attempt to remove cartridges jammed in the chambers. They had powder-burned bullet holes in their heads."¹²

The second engagement at the end of Operation Swift started at 0330 the morning of 12 September. Two NVA companies attacked Captain Burke's Company I patrol base. Burke's Marines repulsed the attack, but as the enemy withdrew they bumped into one of Captain Tenney's Company K platoon outposts and received a further battering. NVA losses were 35 killed and four captured.

During the same period, an ARVN ranger group operating north of the Swift AO during Operation Lien Ket 116 had two sizable contacts. The morning of 10 September, the 37th Ranger Battalion came under heavy mortar attack, followed by a ground assault by a NVA battalion. When the enemy finally withdrew, the rangers had lost 13 killed, 33 wounded, and 9 missing, but the NVA left 70 bodies behind.

Elements of two enemy battalions hit the rangers again at 1700 on the 13th. The enemy closed to grenade range and heavy action continued until about 1900. That night, more ARVN units arrived in the area in helicopters to help the rangers. Both the 1st and 3d Battalions, 5th Marines debarked from helicopters in a secure LZ northeast of the engaged ranger group. The Marine battalions attacked south-southeast to relieve the pressure on the rangers, and by dawn, the NVA broke contact leaving 49 bodies on the battlefield. The rangers suffered 69 wounded and 15 killed in the engagement. This action was the last sizable encounter of both Swift and Lien Ket 116.

Operation Swift ended on 15 September. Once more allied forces had driven the *2d NVA Division* from the basin. The enemy's 1967 dry season offensive in the southern part of I Corps had failed. By the end of September allied commands regarded the *1st VC* and *3d NVA Regiments* unfit for combat. More than 4,000 enemy troops reportedly died between 21 April, when Union I began, and the last day of September. A prime reason for this turn of events was the sudden arrival of a large U.S. Army force in Southern I Corps, which allowed III MAF units to operate in the Que Son Basin on a permanent basis, thereby breaking the Communist stranglehold on the area.

Operation Swift's heavy, sustained combat created personnel accounting problems which were unusual in the kind of war most of the 1st Marine Division fought in 1967. The 5th Marines and the division encountered many difficulties during Swift with casualty reporting, recovery, evacuation, and disposition of the dead, as well as with what Colonel William R. Earney termed "the big No-No," missing in action. "They [5th Marines] could tell you," commented Colonel Earney, "where the enemy was and their body count [of enemy dead] but not a comprehensive report as to what their own condition was."¹³ The task of answering many of the personnel questions fell to the division staff, including, according to Colonel Earney, determining which morgue held the corpse of Medal of Honor recipient Capadonno before his brother arrived in South Vietnam to view the body.¹⁴

Other allied activity, both north and south of the Que Son Basin, also hurt Communist formations in I Corps. The enemy, buffeted between the allied forces in the basin and those in contiguous areas, lost the initiative. To the north, Colonel Herbert E. Ing's

1st Marines continued to prod the VC around Hoi An. Operation Pike, conducted in early August, was one of the more significant operations in this area. Two Marine battalions, Lieutenant Colonel George E. Petro's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Webster's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines executed a box and sweep maneuver that accounted for 100 enemy dead and four captured. South of the basin, General Knowles' Task Force Oregon conducted Operation Benton in the hills west of Chu Lai during the latter part of August. Army troops made a helicopter assault of a suspected enemy base camp and then drove south and east, encountering enemy platoons and companies. When Benton ended, on 1 September, Task Force Oregon reported 397 NVA soldiers killed and nine captured.

Much further south, between Quang Ngai and Duc Pho, Task Force Oregon's Operation Malheur series, lasting from 11 May through 2 August, produced a total of 857 enemy troops killed. A more important result was the opening of Route 1 from the border of II Corps to Dong Ha, the last section of this vital artery to be cleared in I Corps.

Hood River followed Malheur II in a locale 25 miles south of Quang Ngai City. Hood River occurred in conjunction with the Korean Marine Brigade's Dragon Head V and the 2d ARVN Division's Lien Ket 110. The soldiers on Hood River claimed credit for 78 enemy dead and 45 prisoners. Army casualties were only three killed.

All of these operations maintained constant pressure on the *2d NVA Division*. Continual use of the search and destroy process in the basin and adjacent areas from April through August by the 5th Marines, the Special Landing Force, and ARVN units forced the enemy to move south. As the Communists tried to regroup in the hills west of Chu Lai, Task Force Oregon pushed them back to the Que Son Basin to face the Marine and ARVN Swift-Lien Ket 116 operations. Once more the enemy withdrew, this time trying to escape to the hills near Tam Ky. There four U.S. Army battalions were on hand to meet the remnants of the *2d NVA Division* during Operation Wheeler. Task Force Oregon became the Americal Division on 22 September and by the end of that month the soldiers of the Army division had killed an additional 442 Communists. Once more they drove the NVA units back into the basin. A new opponent was waiting for the North Vietnamese division.

A Busy Calm Before the Storm

Increased September activity in I Corps once more caused General Westmoreland to send reinforcements north. On 4 October, Colonel James D. McKenna's 3d Brigade, 1st U.S. Cavalry Division, having been transferred to III MAF and, in turn, to the Americal Division, began Operation Wallowa in the Que Son Basin. With the arrival of this brigade, the Americal Division took over responsibility for the entire basin and the 5th Marines moved to Hoi An, relieving Colonel Ing's 1st Marines there. Operational control of the 1st Marines shifted from the 1st to 3d Marine Division and Colonel Ing then moved his headquarters and two battalions to the northern provinces of I Corps.¹⁵

Most operations in southern I Corps during the last three months of 1967 reflected the enemy's desire to avoid casualties, but even in this the enemy was unsuccessful. The Americal Division, now commanded by Major General Samuel W. Koster, USA, continued to harry the 2d NVA Division in the Que Son Valley as the Communists frantically tried to collect rice and supplies there. During October, the Army units, engaged in Operation Wheeler and Wallowa, were in almost constant contact with small NVA units. By the end of the month Operation Wheeler had reported 498 enemy killed, while Wallowa recorded another 675 NVA dead.

During November, the Americal Division combined Operations Wheeler and Wallowa as Operation Wheeler/Wallowa and a force of seven U.S. Army battalions, more than twice the number previously available, deployed in the area. The army battalions systematically pursued NVA elements as they tried to escape to the mountains in the west. Ancillary operations such as the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines' Essex in "Antenna Valley," six miles south of An Hoa, drove the enemy back against the Army units in the basin.

There were two main engagements with NVA forces in Antenna Valley during Operation Essex.* Both involved company-sized attacks on fortified villages which the North Vietnamese chose to defend. Lieutenant Colonel George C. McNaughton, commander of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, described these fortified villages in his after-action report:

In each instance, the village had a wire fence around the perimeter . . . consisting of three to six strands of cattle fence with woven wire running up and down through the horizontal strands. The wire fence line was either concealed in bamboo tree lines or camouflaged with bamboo and shrubs. Behind these perimeter fences, the enemy had dug a communication trench . . . that was four to six feet deep with firing positions and deep caves for protection against artillery and air attack. Some of these caves were fifteen feet deep. Spider holes, caves, and bunkers were found in depth through the village. Fortifications were carefully located to achieve an interlocking and mutually supporting series of defensive positions. Both [villages] were located such that attacking infantry had to cross stream barriers [to reach] the defensive positions. As attacking troops emerged from the stream beds, they found themselves to be within close range (50-150 meters) of the enemy perimeter defenses with open rice paddy in between. [Both villages were] situated on the sides of the valley adjacent to high ground such that the enemy had ready routes of egress into the mountains.¹⁶

Both Marine attacks took place during afternoon hours and the enemy force successfully defended its positions into the night. In each case, however, the NVA defenders withdrew from the fortified positions under cover of darkness in spite of continuous artillery fire in and behind the village. "In summary," wrote McNaughton, "when Marine units attacked the villages in the afternoon, the enemy defended with vigor. When Marine units delayed an attack until dawn and conducted heavy preparation by air and artillery, the NVA units made their escape."¹⁷

Company H, commanded by Captain Gene W. Bowers, conducted one of the fortified village assaults. Bowers used tactics similar to those that had succeeded so well in a similar situation during Operation Swift.

Company H had landed by helicopter in Antenna Valley earlier in the day, as had the rest of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines.* The company then proceeded toward its assigned objective, the village of Ap Bon (2) in the northeast portion of the valley. As it approached the objective, Company H made heavy contact with a large enemy force within the village.

Captain Bowers ordered Second Lieutenant Duane V. Sherin to maneuver his 2d Platoon to the left of the village and then envelop the enemy. The platoon, however, ran into more NVA soldiers in the

*In Operation Mississippi in Antenna Valley during the fall of 1966, the Marines evacuated more than 2,000 refugees. Less than 600 civilians remained in the entire valley in 1967.

*Company F, according to the original plan, was not scheduled to participate in Operation Essex. It was to remain in the battalion's primary TAOR as a rapid reaction force.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189790

The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines boards helicopters in November for Operation Essex in Antenna Valley, six miles south of An Hoa. Essex drove the 2d NVA Division back into the Que Son Basin where the Americal Division was conducting Wheeler/Wallowa.

heavy brush west of the village, sustained two Marines killed and several wounded, and then, on Bowers' orders, withdrew with its casualties back to the company. Upon its arrival at the company position, Bowers directed the 2d Platoon to move to the company's right flank and establish a base of fire for an assault on the village by the 1st and 3d Platoons. The assault began after air and artillery strikes on Ap Bon(2). Bowers recalled the subsequent action:

The assault was well-coordinated and executed, maintaining continuous fire superiority over the enemy until the assault line reached the bamboo hedgerow on the periphery of the village. Eight taut strands of U.S. [-type] barbed wire were unexpectedly encountered woven among the bamboo stalks. As the Marines fought to break through the barrier, .50 caliber machine guns from 800 meters on the right flank and 800 meters on the left flank commenced enfilading, grazing fire down the line of barbed wire, as 60mm, 82mm, and 4.2-inch mortar rounds began impacting in the paddy before the village. One platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Robert W. Miller, Jr., was killed and both platoon sergeants were severely wounded. The assault faltered and the Marines took cover, protected by small inter-paddy dikes.¹⁸

The fighting developed into an exchange of rifle fire and grenades as reported air strikes hit the village. Some bombs and napalm fell within 50 meters of the exposed Marines in the paddies. Captain Bowers requested reinforcements and Captain

Edward J. "Buck" Byer, Jr.'s Company F arrived about 1600. With Company H acting as a base of fire on the village, Company F made an assault which the North Vietnamese repulsed.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189791

Marine UH-34Ds land the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines in abandoned rice paddies in Antenna Valley at the beginning of Operation Essex. Few civilians remained in the area after the evacuation of the valley in the fall of 1966 by Marines in Operation Mississippi.

At dusk, both companies moved back about 70 meters, carrying all wounded Marines and equipment, and established night defensive positions. The North Vietnamese maintained pressure on the two companies until almost dawn despite flares and machine gun fire from AC-130s, which fired on targets within 10 meters of the Marines. Around 0430, the North Vietnamese slipped away.

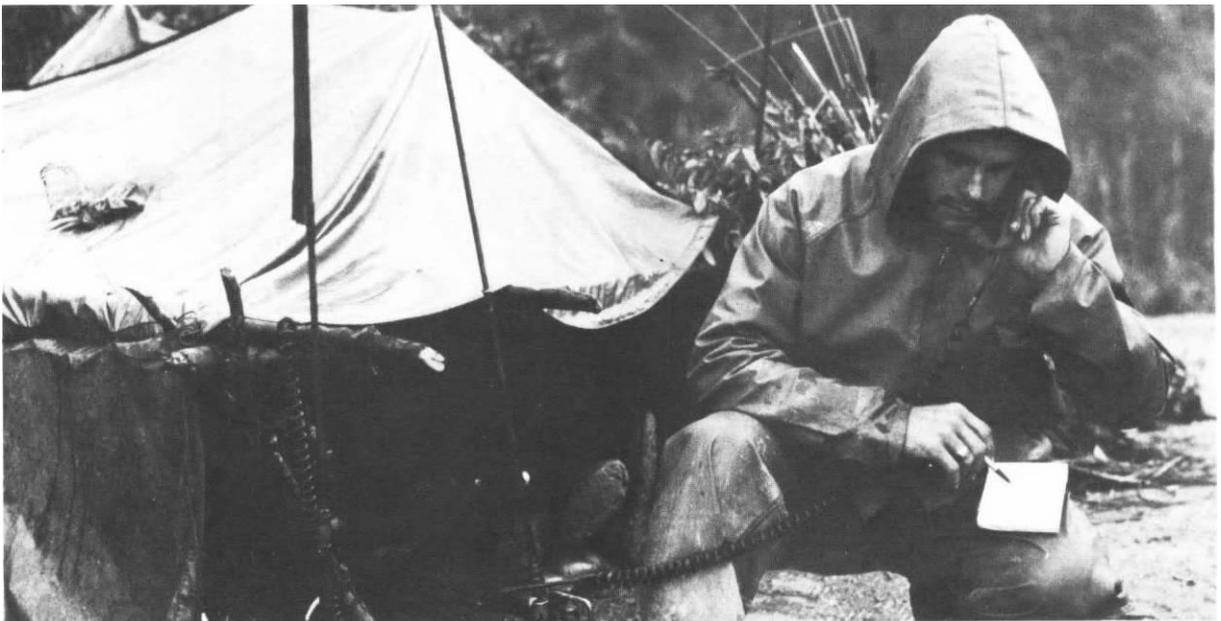
At dawn, the two Marine companies advanced and searched the village without resistance. There were no enemy bodies. All bunkers and trenches had collapsed under the intensive artillery and air strikes. The Marine companies had suffered 53 serious casualties, including 16 dead, in the fighting of Ap Bon (2).

The following days involved pursuit of small groups of fleeing NVA soldiers. On 10 November, the 2d Battalion captured an NVA aspirant (officer cadet) who claimed to have been in Ap Bon (2) on 6 November. He said the village had contained a division headquarters battalion. A direct bomb hit on the command post bunker killed the battalion commander; 60 enlisted men died in the fighting and many were severely wounded. Operation Essex ended a few days later, on the 17th.

By the end of December, cumulative reports for



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370661
A member of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines' 81mm Mortar Platoon, chilled and wet from the monsoon rains, takes a rest during Operation Pitt in December. Pitt was one of several operations late in the year which the 1st Marine Division conducted to protect the Da Nang air base from enemy rocket attacks.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371053
LCpl C. M. Wolfe, clad in a rain suit as protection from the cold monsoon rains in December, takes a message over an AN/PRC-25 radio. He and other members of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines on Operation Pitt have fashioned a "hooch" from ponchos as protection from the weather. Air mattresses in the shelter keep the Marines out of the mud.

Wheeler/Wallowa cited 3,188 enemy killed, 87 captured, and 743 weapons seized, while U.S. Army units listed their own losses as 258 killed and 1,190 wounded. As 1967 ended there could be little question that control of the Que Son Basin was returning to the South Vietnamese Government.

North of the Que Son Valley, in the 1st Marine Division's Quang Nam Province zone of action, the level of enemy contacts dropped during this period. Fifth Marines units executed Operations Onslow and Essex, while elements of the 7th Marines conducted Knox, Foster, Pitt, Citrus, and Auburn. All of these operations were designed to keep the enemy out of the Da Nang rocket belt. The most significant of these was Foster and a companion SLF operation, Badger Hunt.*

Foster/Badger Hunt followed two savage Viet Cong attacks against the district headquarters and refugee settlement at Duc Duc and Dai Loc, 15 miles southwest of Da Nang. The attacks killed 34 civilians, wounded 42, and another 51 were reported missing. In addition, the enemy destroyed 559 houses and left 625 families homeless.

*See Chapter 10 for the SLF participation in Badger Hunt.

The rotor wash from a medevac helicopter, not to mention the proximity of the aircraft itself, forces men of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines to duck during Operation Foster, one of the operations protecting the Da Nang air base complex from enemy rocket attacks.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371016





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A370659

Patrols in the rugged interior of South Vietnam could encounter dangers other than enemy soldiers. Three men of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, wearing unorthodox uniforms, proudly display the hide of a tiger they killed during a five-day patrol. They are, from left, LCpl James Ortega, LCpl Thomas L. Little, and Sgt James L. Griffith.

destruction of enemy supplies and installations than enemy killed. The Marines destroyed 6,000 enemy buildings, bunkers, tunnels, and shelters and uncovered rice caches totaling 87 tons. By the end of the operation, 30 November, reported enemy casualties totaled 125 killed and eight captured. More important than the personnel losses inflicted on the enemy, the Marines evacuated more than 11,500 refugees from the Communist-dominated area.

The loss of a large, readily available labor and manpower pool annoyed the local Communist leaders. Previously, the enemy, following the Communist guerrilla dictum that the good will of the people must be preserved, had been very selective in targeting acts of terror. During December, as the Marines challenged their hold on the populace, Communist terror attacks increased, demonstrating that the "liberating" Communists were not really

concerned about popular good will. Distrust of the Communists spread in the refugee communities. Intended to force the refugees to abandon their Government-sponsored settlements, the terror raids caused grave doubts about the promises made by the Viet Cong.

The refugees from western Quang Nam Province, like those from the Que Son Basin and the coastal plains of Quang Ngai Province, demonstrated a desire not to be incorporated in the Communist system. Would they rally to the South Vietnamese Government and be loyal citizens? The next step was the implementation of the pacification program to win the support of the mass of displaced, confused, and often apathetic residents of Vietnam's food-producing regions. In I Corps it was III MAF's job to provide the physical security for the Vietnamese Government's pacification efforts. It would prove to be a tough, unrewarding, tedious assignment.

CHAPTER 10

Fall Fighting in the North

*Operation Kingfisher—Medina/Bastion Hill/Lam Son 138
Adjustments Within the 3d Marine Division*

Operation Kingfisher

After the conclusion of Operation Buffalo, III MAF ordered a sweep of the southern half of the DMZ. The Marines intended for the operation, Hickory II, to destroy enemy fortifications, mortar, and artillery positions in the southern portion of the buffer zone. The concept resembled that employed during Operation Hickory, the Marines' initial entry into the area on 18 May.

During Hickory II, two Marine battalions, one from SLF Alpha, attacked north to the Ben Hai River, wheeled about, and swept southward to the Cam Lo River. BLT 2/3 of SLF Bravo screened the inland left flank, while to the east three ARVN battalions and an armored personnel carrier troop advanced up Route 1 to the Ben Hai, then turned and attacked southward. On the coast east of the ARVN thrust, Lieutenant Colonel Albert R. Bowman II's 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion drove northward through the coastal sand dunes from Cua Viet. There was little resistance. The sharpest action occurred on 15 July, when Bowman's battalion engaged an enemy unit four miles east of Gio Linh, killing 25. Marine casualties, when the operation ended on 16 July, were four killed and 90 wounded. Total NVA losses totaled 39 killed and 19 weapons captured.

At the close of Hickory II, the two SLF battalions, upon release by III MAF, returned to a ready status off the coast of I Corps, but the remaining five battalions which comprised the 3d and 9th Marines began a new operation in the same general area. Called Operation Kingfisher, its mission, as in previous operations along the DMZ, was to block NVA entry into Quang Tri Province. From the 16th through the 27th there were only minor contacts.

On 28 July the 3d Marine Division sent Lieutenant Colonel William D. Kent's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, reinforced with a platoon of tanks, three Ontos, three LVTEs, and engineers, on a spoiling at-

tack into the DMZ. The main body, including the tracked vehicles, moved north on Provincial Route 606 with Companies E and G providing security on the flanks. Company F remained in a landing zone south of Con Thien, ready to board helicopters and exploit any heavy contact with the enemy.

There was no contact; the armored column moved north without incident. The terrain, however, restricted the tracked vehicles to the road and thick vegetation made movement difficult for the flanking companies. Further, the terrain canalized the column into a relatively narrow "V" of land bounded by the Ben Hai River on the west and north and a tributary stream to the east. The reinforced battalion would have to return by the same route by which it entered the DMZ.* The North Vietnamese were already moving units into previously prepared positions covering Route 606.

The North Vietnamese did not molest the Marines in their night defensive positions near the Ben Hai River. The following morning, the 2d Battalion scouted the objective area and destroyed several small abandoned fortification complexes.

Late in the morning the battalion began its movement south out of the DMZ. It would move in a column led by Company E and followed by Command Group A, H&S Company, Command Group B, and Companies F, H, and G. An airborne forward air controller circled overhead; he would soon be busy.

Company E began moving south at 1000; at 1115 the enemy detonated a 250-lb bomb buried in the road, wounding five Marines. Nearby, engineers found a similar bomb, rigged as a command-detonated mine, and destroyed it.

Upon the second explosion, North Vietnamese soldiers near the road opened fire on the column with machine guns, rifles, and 60mm and 82mm

*Major Willard H. Woodring, commanding the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, raised these objections at a division briefing prior to the operation. Colonel John C. Studt, Comments on draft ms, 9Jul81 (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)



3d MarDiv ComdC, July 1967

The 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, supported by tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion, moves through the open terrain south of the Ben Hai River in Operation Hickory II in July.

An armored column, composed of tanks, Ontos, amphibian tractors, and infantrymen from the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines moves unopposed toward the Ben Hai River inside the Demilitarized Zone on 28 July. NVA units, however, already were moving in behind the column and it would have to fight its way south to safety the following day.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A191240



mortars, initiating a running battle that did not end until dark. The NVA units, using heavy fire from prepared positions combined with the maneuver of other units, quickly fragmented the armored column into roughly company-sized segments. Each isolated segment fought its own way through the gauntlet of fire.

The tracked vehicles became more of a liability than a tactical asset. They were restricted to the road because the thick brush provided excellent cover for NVA soldiers armed with antitank weapons. Instead of providing support to the infantry Marines, the tracked vehicles required infantry protection. Using them as ambulances to transport the wounded further reduced the vehicles' ability to fight.

Tracked vehicles suffered all along the column. An RPG round penetrated both sides of an LVTE moving with Company E. Another RPG explosion disabled the turret of a tank with Company F, wounding three crewmen. When Company H brought up an Ontos to suppress NVA fire that was holding up its movement, an RPG gunner hit the vehicle and wounded three crewmen. A second Ontos came forward, beat down the enemy fire with its machine gun, and permitted the company to move again.

The infantry's primary fire support came from the airborne controllers, one of whom was on station throughout the day. The controller maintained contact with air representatives with each company and with the battalion air liaison officer. The airborne forward air controller directed fixed-wing air strikes whenever needed. The Marine infantrymen needed them often.

The North Vietnamese units knew the danger from American supporting arms and attempted to stay close to the Marine column. Company F had hardly cleared its night defensive position when it realized an NVA unit had immediately occupied the position. At another point, Marine engineers with Company E spotted a 12.7mm antiaircraft machine gun just off the road. They attacked, killed seven NVA soldiers, and destroyed the weapon and its ammunition. At the rear of the column, Company G had problems with enemy units following in its trace and maneuvering back and forth across the road. Company G killed 12 and wounded 10 of these soldiers; an attached scout-sniper team killed another 15. Shortly afterward, an enemy assault from the flank almost cut the company in two, but the attack failed.

Shortly after Company F took its place in the col-

umn, it received instructions to establish a helicopter landing zone for evacuating casualties from Company E and H&S Company. When the tanks carrying the dead and wounded reached the zone, the enemy opened up with RPGs, machine guns, and 60mm and 82mm mortars. The mortar fire walked across the entire landing zone. In addition to the earlier casualties, the Marines now had another seven men killed and 31 more Marines and Navy corpsmen wounded.

A gap then developed between the rear of H&S Company and Company F. The latter company loaded the casualties in the zone on the tanks and attacked to close the gap. It did so at the cost of a further two dead and 12 wounded by NVA mortar fire. The company resumed its fight south.

Late in the afternoon, Company E and Command Group A managed to break through the enemy to safety. They left behind, however, two Company E squads which could not move because of intense enemy automatic weapons and rifle fire that killed two and wounded nine Marines. Company E and the command group continued on until they linked up at 1830 with Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines which had moved up from Con Thien.

By this time the other companies of the 2d Battalion were no longer able to continue south; there were too many casualties to move. At 1930, Company H drew back and established a defensive position on high ground at the edge of the clearing through which Route 606 passed at that point. Joining Company H were Company F, two other squads from Company E, two squads from Company G, plus H&S Company. It was an all-infantry force; the tracked vehicles, carrying some of the wounded, had broken through to join the lead elements at the position of Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines.

Company G's movement came to an end about the same time. It could no longer both fight and transport its wounded. By 2100, the company was in a defensive position for the night.

The two isolated squads from Company E found themselves rescued early in the evening. Lieutenant Colonel Kent had taken operational control of Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines and accompanied that unit back to the two squads. They accomplished the mission by 1930 and Company M moved into a good defensive position for the night. To the south, the bulk of Company E organized its defenses and called in medevac helicopters for the casualties.

The remainder of the night was relatively quiet;

the NVA units were pulling back. Company G and Company F both heard much shouting west of their respective positions and called in artillery missions. The final event of the fight occurred at 0330 when an NVA soldier crept up to Company F's perimeter and killed one Marine and wounded three with a burst of automatic weapons fire. Other Marines opened fire and the NVA soldier withdrew.

The following morning, the 30th, helicopters evacuated all casualties located at Company G's position. Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Kent moved north to link up with the rest of the 2d Battalion. The Marines evacuated the remainder of the casualties by 0900 and all units were out of the DMZ by 1150 behind a screen provided by the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines.

The gauntlet had been costly for Lieutenant Colonel Kent's 2d Battalion. Twenty-three Marines died and the wounded totaled 251, of whom 191 required evacuation. There were 32 confirmed NVA dead but the battalion estimated another 175 probably died.

While the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines' battle quickly entered the division's folklore as "2/9's armored thrust into the DMZ,"¹ an earlier and relatively minor action on Route 9 had a more lasting impact on the tactical situation in northern I Corps. It led to

an end to vehicle convoys to Khe Sanh; thereafter, the base relied upon aerial resupply.

III MAF supplied Khe Sanh at the time by aircraft and "Rough Rider" vehicle convoys from Dong Ha. One of the largest of the convoys, composed of over 85 vehicles and several U.S. Army 175mm guns,² departed Dong Ha on 21 July. Part of its route passed through the TAOR of Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Needham's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. This gave the battalion the responsibility for securing that portion of Route 9.

Lieutenant Colonel Needham ordered his Company M to send a platoon out that morning to sweep Route 9 from Ca Lu west to the boundary between the regimental TAORs of the 3d and 26th Marines. The convoy departed Dong Ha at about the same time as the 2d Platoon, Company M began its check of the road.

The 2d Platoon searched Route 9 without incident for about five kilometers. Then the point surprised an NVA soldier urinating beside the road.³ The point opened fire; other NVA soldiers answered with rifle fire from high ground north of the road and from a tree line south of it. The whole platoon quickly became engaged with what the platoon commander first believed was an NVA platoon. He soon changed his estimate to an NVA battalion.

Infantrymen of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines move into the safety of the perimeter of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines on 30 July after a running battle the previous day with NVA units that fought to fragment the column and destroy the reinforced Marine battalion piecemeal as it came back south from the Ben Hai River and out of the DMZ.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189064



The 3d Battalion, 3d Marines ordered the platoon to disengage but the unit could not do so. The battalion staff at Ca Lu worked quickly to coordinate air and artillery support and alerted the rest of Company M to prepare to move to the 2d Platoon's rescue. In the midst of this activity, the Rough Rider convoy's arrival at Ca Lu created some confusion.⁴ The battalion requested and received permission to halt the convoy immediately since there was only one place between Ca Lu and the 2d Platoon's position where the convoy could be turned around.⁵

Company M moved toward the firefight with two U.S. Army vehicles in support. One of these mounted dual 40mm cannon, the other carried a quad-.50 machine gun. As the force neared the 2d Platoon, the enemy fired approximately 200 rounds from 82mm mortars at the road. Enemy riflemen opened fire from the high ground north of the road.

Under the cover of fixed-wing aircraft strikes on the high ground and heavy fire from the two Army vehicles, Company M reached its 2d Platoon and the Marines disengaged. Two tanks came up from Ca Lu and provided additional fire against the tree line to the south. The combined force then returned to Ca Lu.

The Rough Rider convoy could not continue to Khe Sanh until the road was secure. The division ordered it to turn around and return to Camp Carroll.

At noon the following day, the 22d, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, using its own Company L and Companies A and C of the 9th Marines, moved against the enemy positions north of Route 9. There was only scattered contact with the enemy; however, the Marines found ample evidence the previous day's action had prevented a major ambush of the Rough Rider convoy to Khe Sanh. They found 150 well-camouflaged fighting holes in the area where the 2d Platoon had engaged the enemy. The North Vietnamese obviously had constructed the fighting holes for a horseshoe-shaped ambush whose killing zone was the open road. Nearby was a large, abandoned NVA base camp containing another 200 fighting holes and 25 two- and four-man log bunkers camouflaged with dirt and elephant grass. The camp also contained several huts, some for sleeping and others for cooking.

The following day Company K, 3d Marines, supported by tanks and Army M42 "Dusters" (the latter mounting dual 40mm cannon), joined the operation and attacked Hill 216 north of, and overlooking the

NVA ambush site on Route 9. Company K ran into heavy machine gun fire from a bunker complex on the hill's east slope which killed one Marine and wounded two. The company called in an artillery mission and the supporting tracked vehicles opened fire on the enemy. Company K then pulled back to allow fixed-wing aircraft plenty of room to bomb the bunkers. At the completion of the strike, Company K attacked, but the NVA unit had gone. The Marines continued to the crest of Hill 216.

Later that afternoon, fixed-wing aircraft bombed Hill 247, located west of Hill 216 and which also overlooked Route 9. Following the air strike, Company L, 3d Marines moved west on Route 9 and linked up with Company B, 26th Marines which had cleared the road from the western edge of the 26th Marines' TAOR.

During its move, Company L uncovered 30 Chinese-made anti-personnel mines buried along approximately 2,000 meters of the southern margin of Route 9. The enemy had rigged the mines with trip wires to catch the Marines and soldiers from the Rough Rider convoy as they sought cover from the planned ambush.

With Route 9 cleared, the Rough Rider convoy, minus any 175mm guns, completed the trip to Khe Sanh on the 25th. The whole episode, however, changed the thinking about resupply for Khe Sanh. There was one more large convoy to Khe Sanh and a few to the Lang Vei Special Forces camp, but these ended in early August. There were no other convoys to Khe Sanh until Operation Pegasus opened Route 9 at the end of the "siege" of Khe Sanh in 1968.*

For the next few weeks only scattered, small-scale fighting took place. Intelligence analysts reported the probability of a major enemy offensive in the region. They reported a large buildup of supplies north of the DMZ, and estimated at least five Communist battalions were preparing for offensive operations. Sighting reports of vehicles north of the Ben Hai increased substantially, including, for the first time, reports of armored vehicles there.

The first outburst of renewed NVA ground activity in the Kingfisher area happened in the southwestern portion of the TAOR on the morning of 21 August. A North Vietnamese battalion am-

*Robert Pisor's *The End of the Line: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (New York: 1982), p. 94 says the convoy with the 175mm guns had "... run into 'one horrendous ambush' and turned back. ..." The NVA's planned ambush literally might have been "horrendous" except for one NVA soldier's bladder discomfort.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193261

CH-53 helicopters bring 105mm howitzers of Battery I, 12th Marines to Hill 881 South near Khe Sanh on 3 August following intelligence reports of an NVA buildup nearby.

bushed a small Marine convoy traveling south on Route 9 from the Rockpile to Ca Lu. In the first moments of the attack, enemy antitank rockets hit and put out of action two Marine trucks and two Army track-mounted, dual 40mm guns of the 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery. The security force with the convoy returned fire and radioed for air and artillery support. Company L of Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Needham's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines came down from the Rockpile, and a reinforced platoon from Company M moved up from Ca Lu. These maneuvers trapped the ambushers. The action lasted for more than six hours as the Marine units, supported by air and artillery, converged on the NVA battalion. As night fell the enemy broke contact and fled to the west. Confirmed Communist losses were light, but 3 Marines and 3 Army artillerymen died, with another 35 wounded.

The North Vietnamese tried again on 7 September at almost the same location, but again the enemy commander miscalculated the location of Marine forces, their ability to maneuver, and the speed with which the Marines could bring supporting arms to bear. The NVA ambushed a convoy at 1010, and again Marine units converged on the site from the north and south. This time the battle continued for more than eight hours. The Marines killed 92 of the enemy before the fight ended at dusk. American casualties in this encounter totaled five killed and 56 wounded.

Additional indications that the Communists remained determined to achieve a victory at Con Thien became evident during late August. To gain maximum propaganda effect, the North Vietnamese timed their new offensive to coincide with the South Vietnamese elections scheduled for 3 September. As the date for the elections approached, the NVA fired an increasing volume of artillery and rockets across the DMZ at Cua Viet, Gio Linh, and Con Thien. On 26 August these hit Dong Ha in three separate attacks; 150 rocket and artillery rounds destroyed two helicopters and damaged 24 others.

The most effective and spectacular of these attacks took place on election day. Forty-one artillery rounds slammed into Dong Ha base that morning, destroying the ammunition storage area and bulk fuel farm and damaged 17 helicopters of Major Horace A. Bruce's HMM-361. Damage control teams fought the fire and explosions for four hours before they controlled the situation. Miraculously, no one died, but 77 suffered wounds, one seriously. Spectators as far away as Phu Bai could see the billowing smoke cloud that rose over the base. Because of this and similar attacks, III MAF moved the logistics base in 1968 from Dong Ha to Quang Tri, beyond the range of the enemy's 130mm guns.⁷

The attack on 3 September ended the use of Dong Ha as a permanent helicopter squadron base facility. HMM-361 personnel flew back to the Marble Mountain facility that day in the CH-53s of HMM-463. All



3d MarDiv ComdC, August 1967

Firemen contain the fire at the Dong Ha combat base following a rocket attack on 26 August, just a week before NVA artillery destroyed the fuel facility.

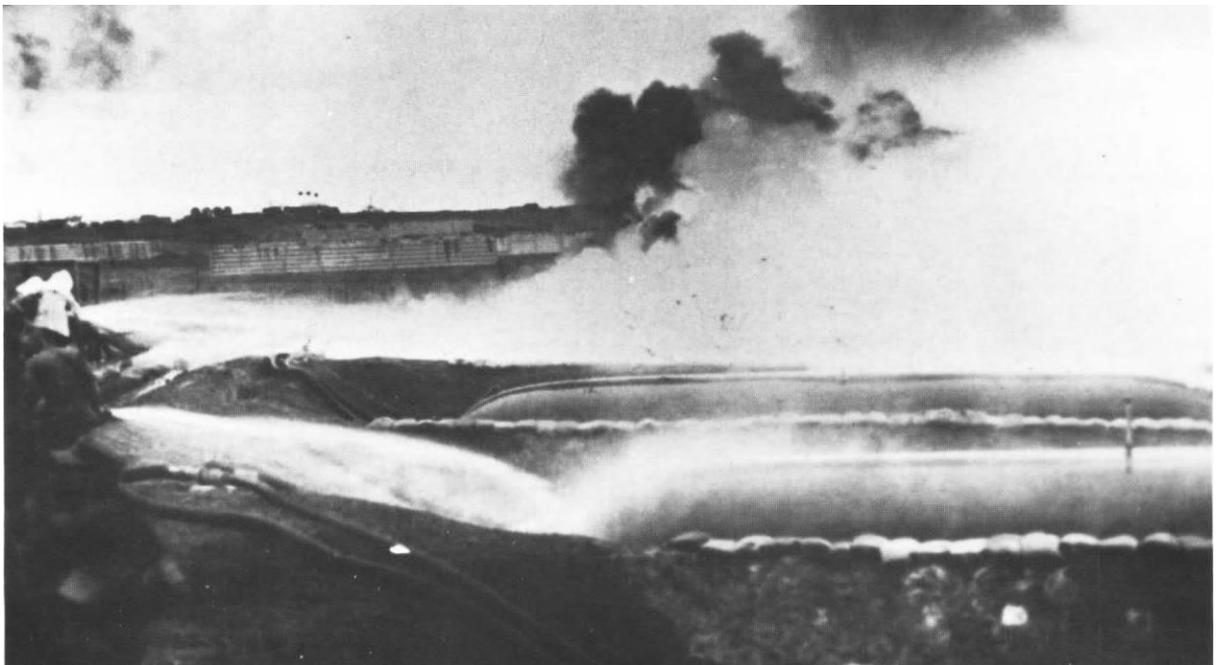


Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A355576

A burned-out Marine cargo truck sits in the middle of the rubble of the ammunition storage area at Dong Ha after the 3 September artillery attack.

Marines fight to save the fuel storage area at Dong Ha after a rocket attack on 26 August. Some are trying to put out the fire while others cool down the remaining fuel bladders.

3d MarDiv ComdC, August 1967



of HMM-361's aircraft caught on the ground suffered damage from blast, shrapnel, or both and the CH-53s had to lift them to Marble Mountain. Until III MAF readied a new field at Quang Tri, helicopter support for the DMZ area came from squadrons at Marble Mountain and Phu Bai.⁸

Brigadier General Metzger had good reasons for vividly remembering these attacks. He recalled:

When one of the attacks hit Dong Ha I was in a UH-1E on the pad getting ready to take off. The pilot lifted off the ground and turned to the south, thereby flying right through the barrage of "incoming." We felt the "bird" shudder and knew we were hit. After a futile attempt to spot the enemy firing batteries, we finally landed at Camp Evans and examined the plane. There was a hole about 15 inches in diameter in the tail. We were fortunate!⁹

Con Thien was the primary NVA artillery target. During September, the North Vietnamese subjected the Marines there to one of the heaviest shellings of the war. The hill itself, known to local missionaries as "The Hill of Angels," was only big enough to accommodate a reinforced battalion. Almost daily Con Thien's defenders could expect at least 200 rounds of enemy artillery fire, and on 25 September more than 1,200 shells rained down upon the position. The completed "Dye Marker" bunkers at Con Thien provided some cover as the NVA artillery and rocket attacks escalated.¹⁰

Under cover of the artillery and rocket attacks, enemy ground activity increased. The NVA's main thrust was to the south and southeast of Con Thien. Since the beginning of Operation Kingfisher, the 9th Marines had been operating in that area with a force varying between three and six battalions. The level of combat was light, but enemy resistance began to stiffen at the end of August.

On 4 September, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines met strong opposition. At 1100 that morning, the battalion's Company I, commanded by Captain Richard K. Young, engaged an enemy force 1,500 meters south of Con Thien. The company pressed the enemy unit, but by 1400 its advance halted because of the volume of enemy fire. Company M and the battalion command group moved to the left of Company I and, after extensive artillery preparatory fires, struck the NVA flank. Moving slowly, with two tanks in support, Company M pushed through the Communist position, relieving the pressure on Company I. The maneuver trapped a group of enemy soldiers between the two Marine units, and Company I assaulted and overran



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421910
Artillerymen from the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines load their 105mm howitzer at Con Thien for counterbattery fire against North Vietnamese Army units. In the background are some of the bunkers in which Marines took refuge during the frequent enemy artillery fire against the Marine combat base.

the entrapped NVA force. The count of the enemy casualties at the end of the fight was 38 killed and one captured. As Bendell's units returned to their perimeters near Con Thien,¹¹ they endured harassing fires from NVA mortar and artillery. Six Marines died and 47 suffered wounds in the day's action.

Three days later, Company I of Lieutenant Colonel Harry L. Alderman's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines* found the enemy again three miles south of Con Thien. The fight lasted for five hours and resembled the battle of the 4th, except this time Marine tanks reinforced the infantrymen. Fifty-one NVA died in this encounter; so did 14 Marines.

On 10 September, Alderman's Marines engaged what seemed to be the entire *812th NVA Regiment*. The fight began in the early evening four miles southwest of Con Thien. In this instance the patrolling Marines spoiled a major enemy attack in the making. The battalion's command chronology reflects the intensity of this four-hour battle:

*3/26 participated in Operation Kingfisher from 7-11 September.

1615H—Co M and Co K received estimated 60 rounds of 140mm rockets followed by a coordinated attack by NVA (reportedly) wearing USMC flak jackets and helmets.

1630H—Co I and Co L came under attack by NVA wearing USMC equipment and supported by mortars.

1637H—Co K and Co M were hit by 12 140mm rockets followed by 12 more at 1645H.

1655H—Co I and Co L came under an extremely heavy assault from the north and west sides of their perimeter by an estimated NVA battalion. Fixed-wing air, which was on station, began making strikes immediately, and napalm consistently fell 50 to 75 meters from the friendly lines. The flame tank and gun took direct hits from RPGs fired from approximately 75 meters. The flame tank was destroyed and burned the remainder of the night, and the gun tank was rendered useless and rolled into a draw. . . . The crews of both tanks withdrew into the perimeter.

1700H—The tank supporting Co K fired on 100 NVA in front of their lines with unknown results.

From 1705H to 1754H—Each company reported numerous sightings of NVA in various sized units maneuvering around both defensive perimeters.

1825H—The [battalion] CP received heavy incoming mortar fire and the NVA appeared to be massing for an attack.

1825H—M-1 [1st Platoon, Company M] was pinned down in a bomb crater 70 meters west of the CP.

1900H—Co M pulled back towards the CP to consolidate the lines and was forced to abandon a disabled tank.

1905H—An emergency resupply was attempted to Co I and Co L and although suppressive fires were delivered, the enemy fire was too intense and the helicopter could not land.

1905H—A flareship arrived on station. Co K and Co M had formed perimeter around the CP and were boxed in with well aimed artillery.

2030H—The enemy ground attack ceased although 60mm mortar [rounds] were still being received by Co I and Co L.

The next morning the companies searched the battlefield for casualties and abandoned equipment, and evacuated all casualties by 1000. The Marines recovered a large quantity of enemy material, including cartridge belts, packs, ammunition, and weapons; 140 enemy bodies lay scattered throughout the area. The 3d Battalion's losses totaled 34 killed and 192 wounded. Alderman called it ". . . the hardest fighting [the battalion] encountered since arriving in Vietnam."¹²

Following this fight, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines moved to near Phu Bai to refit. As its replacement in the DMZ area, the division pulled Lieutenant Colonel James W. Hammond, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 4th Marines off an operation near Camp Evans and sent it north. Hammond later wrote:

We stopped overnight at Cam Lo and then went north

to take the place of [the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines] which had been mortared [severely] in their position northwest of Con Thien. We then became the roving battalion outside Con Thien. . . . the battalion moved every day but still was shelled as much, if not more than Con Thien. The difference was that we had to dig new holes in every position . . . we were hit pretty hard during our month-plus along the DMZ.¹³

Both sides shed more blood around Con Thien before the month ended. At 0325 on the 13th, a North Vietnamese company attacked the north-northeast sector of the perimeter of the outpost. Even though artillery, mortars, and heavy machine guns supported the attacking force, the Communists failed to penetrate the wire. They gave up and withdrew after a heavy pounding from the Marines' supporting arms.

Following the attack of the 13th, Colonel Richard B. Smith,* the new commanding officer of the 9th Marines, moved two battalions to a position behind Con Thien from which they could react if the enemy attacked in force. Lieutenant Colonel John J. Peeler's** 2d Battalion, 9th Marines occupied the area southeast of Con Thien while Lieutenant Colonel James W. Hammond, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 4th Marines moved to the southwest of the hill.¹⁴ At the same time, Colonel Smith ordered the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, now commanded by Major Gorton C. Cook, to move inside the main perimeter. The anticipated assault did not materialize; instead the NVA bombarded all three battalions with savage artillery and mortar attacks for the next seven days.

With the passing of the immediate threat to Con Thien, the Marines there went on the offensive. On 21 September, Hammond's battalion started a search and destroy operation 1,800 meters east of Con Thien. The battalion front, Companies E and F, moved out on line. Movement was cautious but steady, but maintaining alignment proved difficult in terraced terrain broken up by hedgerows. The command group and Companies G and H had to stop, waiting for the rear elements to clear their previous position.

*Colonel Smith, an experienced combat commander and veteran of two wars, assumed command of the 9th Marines from Colonel Jerue on 13 September, the day of the attack on the outpost.

**Lieutenant Colonel Peeler had the distinction of serving twice as the commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines during 1967, from 1 January to 4 July and 13 September - 28 October. He assumed command in September after enemy mortar fragments severely wounded Lieutenant Colonel William D. Kent near Con Thien.



3d MarDiv ComdC, October 1967

Company K, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines moves off a thickly-wooded hill during a patrol near Camp Evans. The battalion moved to the base to refit after heavy fighting with the 812th NVA Regiment four miles southwest of Con Thien on 10 September.

As the lead elements advanced, maintaining visual contact became impossible in the thick underbrush. At 0750, Company E encountered fire from snipers. Then, when the company pushed forward, it came under heavy automatic weapons fire from the front and left, which killed one Marine and wounded four. The tempo of the battle increased; the Communists opened up with mortars. The Marines, now close to the NVA force, heard shouted orders and directions for a mortar crew, and the two sides soon became involved in a deadly grenade duel.* The battalion could not call in artillery because of the close contact, and Company F was in no position to help. Company E slowly withdrew to a position which offered better cover and established a landing zone to evacuate casualties.

Shortly after the beginning of the engagement, Lieutenant Colonel Hammond ordered Company G to envelop the left flank of the NVA position, but 150 meters of open ground faced the assaulting troops. The company advanced to within 30 meters of the objective, but withdrew in the face of nearby

*Lance Corporal Jedh C. Barker received a posthumous Medal of Honor for his actions in this battle. See Appendix D for his citation.

NVA small arms, automatic weapons, and mortar fire. Meanwhile, Companies E and F linked up and covered Company G by fire as it disengaged.

The battle turned into a stalemate. The battalion needed tanks, but after 96 hours of rain the approaches to the area were impassable. At dusk the fighting died down and the Marines pulled back to the main battalion perimeter. The NVA force had killed 16 Marines and wounded 118; 15 of the bodies remained on the battlefield until 10 October when the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines went back and picked up its dead in a later operation in the same area.¹⁵ The battalion could not determine the total Communist casualties but reported at least 39 NVA soldiers killed.* Intelligence officers later identified the enemy force as part of the *90th NVA Regiment*. After the action of the 21st, the enemy withdrew across the Ben Hai River.

The persistent enemy attacks during September appeared to be a desperate bid for a military victory, with its attendant propaganda value, before the fall



3d MarDiv ComdC, September 1967

A CH-53 delivers supplies destined for the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines to the muddy landing zone of the Con Thien combat base in September 1967.

*Colonel Hammond remembered in 1981 that Major General Hochmuth said that G-2 put the number of enemy casualties at 350. Colonel James W. Hammond, Jr., Comments on draft ms, 18May81 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

monsoon hit. Failing in attacks from three different directions, the NVA resorted to a massive attack by fire against Con Thien. During the period 19-27 September, more than 3,000 mortar, artillery, and rocket rounds blasted the position.

The Americans retaliated by massing one of the greatest concentrations of firepower in support of a single division in the history of the Vietnam war. III MAF artillery units fired 12,577 rounds at known and suspected enemy positions in the region, while ships of the Seventh Fleet fired 6,148 rounds at the same area. Marine and Air Force fighter pilots flew more than 5,200 close air support sorties and B-52 bombers of the Strategic Air Command dropped tons of ordnance on the enemy in and north of the DMZ. The Con Thien garrison applauded the results; North Vietnamese pressure on the outpost subsided as September drew to a close.

Although enemy activity gradually diminished at Con Thien; defense of the base remained a continuing ordeal. Marine searching and patrolling activity discovered a multitude of bunker and trench complexes around the hill mass, most of which were about 1,500 meters from the main perimeter. The Marines destroyed the bunkers, but often during subsequent patrols they found them rebuilt again. During early October the Marines continued to find bunkers, but by then these were usually unoccupied.

Experiences of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines during October typify the trend of activity around Con Thien during the fall. On 4 October the battalion, still under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Hammond, conducted a sweep southwest of Con Thien in conjunction with Lieutenant Colonel Henry English's BLT 2/3 from SLF Bravo. Leaving the line of departure at 0645, the battalion had found three NVA shelters by 0830. An hour later and 1,000 meters further, the Marines found several more ambush sites and 16 bunkers. Shortly after that, Company H came upon 13 more bunkers while skirting the southwest side of the Con Thien slope. Similarly, Company G found abandoned mortar positions, loose 82mm mortar rounds, and powder-charge increments. Just before 1500, the unmistakable odor of decaying human flesh led the Marines to the partially covered graves of 20 North Vietnamese. Backtracking, Company G discovered fresh enemy footprints around the previously destroyed bunkers. Tension heightened. The three companies moved back to the perimeter west of Con Thien, but while pulling back Company G heard movement and call-

ed in artillery to cover their return march. The Marines observed no NVA casualties, but had no doubt the Communists were still active.

Several days later the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines relieved BLT 2/3 as the defense force for the recently built bridge north of Strongpoint C-2.* The construction of the bridge had permitted the reopening of the vital road to Con Thien which the heavy September rains washed out. The battalion defended the bridge** because the 3d Marine Division was concerned that if the enemy destroyed it, they would cut the only supply line to Con Thien.¹⁶

The defense of the bridge was no easy task for Lieutenant Colonel Hammond's battalion. Since its move north from Camp Evans on 11 September, the constant combat around Con Thien had worn the battalion down from a "foxhole strength" of 952 to about 462. The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines had great difficulty in manning all the defensive positions prepared by the departed full-strength BLT-2/3.¹⁷

The defensive position around the bridge was divided into quadrants by virtue of the road, which ran roughly north and south, and the stream, which ran east and west. Company G had the northwest quadrant; Company H was on the same side of the road but across the stream in the southwest quadrant. Company F was in the northeast; Company E in the southeast. The battalion command group set up beside the stream in Company G's area and near the center of the position.

At 0125 on 14 October, 25 artillery rounds, rockets, and 135-150 mortar rounds hit Company H. An ambush squad posted in front of the company reported an enemy force moving toward it, and immediately took the advancing enemy under fire. The Marine squad leader notified his company that he had three casualties and that the enemy seriously outnumbered his squad. The company commander, Captain Arthur P. Brill, Jr., ordered the squad to pull back and, at the same time, called for night defensive fires to block the avenues of approach to his position. The battalion requested flare ships to illuminate the area. Using starlight scopes, sniper teams watched the enemy as they massed only 50

*BLT 2/3 phased out of Operation Kingfisher to resume its duties with the Special Landing Force.

**In 1981, Lieutenant General Metzger described the defense of this bridge as an "... illustration of how our forces were tied to defending terrain and not free to operate." Lieutenant General Louis Metzger, Comments on draft ms, n.d. (1981) (Vietnam Comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

meters in front of the company. The snipers and two tanks attached to the company opened fire, forcing the North Vietnamese to start their assault prematurely. The rest of the company held fire until the NVA troops reached a clearing 20 meters from the wire. Of the entire attacking unit, only two NVA soldiers reached the wire and Marines killed both as they tried to breach that obstacle.

The enemy withdrew, leaving bodies behind, but they were far from finished. At 0230, enemy mortars shelled Company G. Direct hits by RPGs destroyed a machine gun emplacement and several backup positions on the primary avenue of approach into the company position.* The NVA force attacked through this break, overran the company command post, and killed the company commander, Captain Jack W. Phillips, and his forward observer. Three platoon leaders, two of whom had just arrived in Vietnam that morning, also died. The battalion sent its S-3A, Captain James W. McCarter, Jr., to replace Phillips, but enemy fire killed him before he reached Company G.¹⁹ During the confused, hand-to-hand combat some of the North Vietnamese fought their way within grenade range of the battalion command post in the center of the position.

In the command post, although wounded by a grenade, Sergeant Paul H. Foster, a member of the fire support coordination center, continued to direct mortar and artillery fire upon the enemy. Another grenade landed among a group of six Marines. Sergeant Foster threw his flak jacket over the grenade and jumped on top of the jacket. The grenade blast mortally wounded him, but this action saved his fellow Marines.** Before the melee ended, the North Vietnamese killed or wounded the entire forward air control team.²⁰ The enemy also killed the battalion medical chief, and wounded the fire support coordinator, headquarters commandant, and battalion sergeant major.²¹

Lieutenant Colonel Hammond moved what was left of his command group to a better location within Company H's position. He ordered Company F to move to Company G's right flank and

counterattack to push the NVA forces out of the perimeter. Illumination and automatic weapons fire from "Puff," the AC-47 requested at the beginning of the fight and which arrived about 0330, aided the counterattack. By 0430, the enemy began retreating out of the position, pursued by Company E.

The next morning the battalion reconsolidated and evacuated casualties. Twenty-one dead, including five officers, and 23 wounded were the night's toll. The NVA lost at least 24 killed. That afternoon, Lieutenant General Cushman and Major General Hochmuth visited the bridge site. They granted a request from Lieutenant Colonel Hammond that the new bridge be named Bastard's Bridge* to honor the 21 Marines of the 2d Battalion who gave their lives in its defense. At 1400, Hammond's battalion turned over the bridge to Lieutenant Colonel Needham's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and then moved to Dong Ha where it assumed the mission of regimental reserve after 42 days of close combat.²¹

The last major action of Kingfisher took place during a 9th Marines operation on 25-28 October. By this time Hammond's battalion (minus Company G which was attached to the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines), had moved to Cam Lo to take part in the operation. The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines was at Con Thien and Needham's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines was at C-2 Bridge.²³ The regimental frag order directed Hammond's Marines to sweep north on the west side of Route 561 while the other two battalions provided blocking forces.

The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines began its sweep at 0600 on the 25th. Lieutenant Colonel Hammond planned to move his understrength battalion all day to reach the objective before dark. There was no enemy contact but heavy brush slowed the move. As darkness approached, the battalion was still about 1,000 meters from the objective. Hammond decided to halt the battalion and request additional ammunition before darkness.

Hammond's decision was prudent, given the nature of the enemy in the DMZ region and the re-

*Lieutenant Colonel James E. Murphy commented in 1981 that the NVA force used tear gas in their attack. "Company G got the brunt of it and it lasted only for a few minutes but [the gas] greatly added to the confusion." Lieutenant Colonel James E. Murphy, Comments on draft ms, 6Aug81 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

**Sergeant Foster subsequently received a posthumous Medal of Honor. See Appendix D for Sergeant Foster's citation.

*The nickname "Magnificent Bastards" has been claimed by the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines for many years. Tradition traces the nickname to World War II; however, the Marine Corps Historical Center has no evidence to substantiate the claim. It appears likely that the battalion borrowed the phrase from the book, *The Magnificent Bastards* by Lucy Herndon Crockett (New York: 1953) which is a fictionalized account of Marines in the South Pacific in World War II.

cent combat losses that reduced his entire battalion to just over 400 men. Additional ammunition could partially compensate for the loss of firepower resulting from personnel shortages and the absence of Company G. He controlled, at the time, a "battalion" only a little larger than a standard reinforced rifle company. The resupply helicopters would give away the battalion's location, of course, but he took the risk that his command could receive its additional ammunition and move on to the objective before the enemy responded.

Helicopters were in short supply at this time, following the grounding of all CH-46s after a series of accidents. III MAF by necessity reserved the available helicopters for meeting emergency requests from units in the field. Hammond ordered an "emergency resupply" of ammunition.

Lieutenant Colonel Hammond took a calculated risk and lost. The resupply helicopters did not bring everything he ordered but, worse, also delivered significant quantities and types of ammunition that the battalion had not ordered, including three pallets of tactical wire. There was more material than the battalion could use or move. Hammond's Marines would have to spend the night in place and try to get the excess ammunition flown out the next morning. Unfortunately, the helicopters had revealed the Marines' position to the enemy.

The North Vietnamese hit the battalion's perimeter about 2330 with 10 rocket rounds.* The battalion executive officer, Major John J. Lawendowski, died and Lieutenant Colonel Hammond and two others required evacuation for wounds. Lieutenant Colonel Frankie E. Allgood, the newly promoted executive officer of HMM-363, landed his UH-34D at the battalion command post and flew the casualties to Dong Ha. Captain Arthur P. Brill, Jr., who had moved up the previous day from commanding Company H to be the battalion operations officer, took command of the battalion.

Upon learning that Hammond and Lawendowski were casualties, Colonel Richard B. Smith, commanding the 9th Marines, decided to send an officer to take temporary command of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. The obvious choice was right at hand. Lieutenant Colonel John C. Studt, the regimental operations officer, knew the details of the current

operation; he had drafted the regimental frag order implementing the division's directive for the operation.²⁴ Colonel Smith sent Studt to the Dong Ha airfield to catch a helicopter to the 2d Battalion.

Lieutenant Colonel Studt reached the airfield shortly after medical personnel removed the 2d Battalion's casualties from Lieutenant Colonel Allgood's helicopter. Studt explained his mission and the two officers discussed the chances of succeeding in reaching the 2d Battalion safely. Having had great difficulty in evacuating the four casualties, Allgood advised Studt that he wasn't sure he could make it into the battalion's position. He also pointed out that fog was increasing throughout the whole area. Both officers decided, however, that the situation required that the flight be attempted. Studt climbed into the passenger compartment of the helicopter, which, he noted, still had fresh blood on the floor.²⁵ Allgood lifted off from the airfield and managed to land the UH-34D inside the battalion perimeter around 0300 on the 26th.

Studt immediately climbed into Captain Brill's foxhole to get an appraisal of the 2d Battalion's situation. The first thing that struck Studt were the gaps in the battalion staff. Each time Studt asked about a key staff position, Brill reported that the respective officer was either a casualty in some hospital or a new officer was filling the position.²⁶ The battalion had been ground down during a month and a half of heavy fighting.

Company G, released back to the 2d Battalion's control, arrived at the defensive perimeter the following morning. The additional strength was welcome since Lieutenant Colonel Studt had learned he would have to leave one company behind to guard the pile of excess ammunition. Due to other commitments, the regiment reported, there were no helicopters available to move it. "I could not help but note," wrote Studt, "that this short-sighted policy resulted in [III MAF] providing a number of helicopters for emergency medevacs, which might not have been necessary had they been a little more flexible and appreciative of the tactical situation on this operation."²⁷

Leaving Company F to guard the ammunition, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines moved toward its objective and occupied it by 1300. Shortly afterward, enemy 60mm mortars hit the battalion as it organized its defenses. One hour later, the NVA struck with a heavy mortar barrage, followed by small arms fire from the west and northwest. The Marines began

*The official reports describe these as rockets, however, Colonel Hammond believes they were actually artillery rounds. Colonel James W. Hammond, Jr., Comments on draft ms, 18May81 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

taking casualties and requested a helicopter medevac.

In an effort to pick up some of the casualties, Captain Ronald D. Bennett of HMM-363 attempted to land his UH-34D within the 2d Battalion's perimeter. Those on the ground waved him off because of intense enemy fire. As Captain Bennett pulled away, enemy fire hit the rear of the helicopter, separating the tail pylon. The aircraft crashed, rolled and began burning about 150 meters outside the Marine lines. Bennett and a gunner, Corporal Edward Clem, died in the crash. Second Lieutenant Vernon J. Sharpless and Lance Corporal Howard J. Cones, both seriously injured, managed to crawl from the burning wreckage.

A second helicopter from HMM-363, piloted by Captain Frank T. Grassi, tried to land to pick up the survivors but could not. Enemy fire hit Grassi in the leg and arm, damaged the helicopter, and slightly wounded one of the gunners and a Navy hospital corpsman. The aircraft limped away as far as Strong Point C-2 where it made a forced landing.

Captain James E. Murphy, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines' air liaison officer, who had been calling in air strikes in front of Company E, saw Bennett's helicopter go down. With his radio still on his back, Murphy crawled out to the downed helicopter, moving past NVA soldiers in his path. He found the two survivors near the burning helicopter. The three Marines were surrounded and there was no way Murphy could get them back to Marine lines. Fortunately, the enemy soldiers in the area either did not know the three men were there or simply did not care. Captain Murphy could hear NVA soldiers nearby and see some movement, however, and called in air strikes within 50 meters of the crashed helicopter with the aid of an airborne observer in an O-1C aircraft overhead. The latter eventually managed to direct a Marine A-4 attack aircraft to deliver a line of smoke so that a UH-1 helicopter could land and rescue the three Marines.²⁸

The rescue helicopter was a UH-1C from the U.S. Army's 190th Helicopter Assault Company whose pilot volunteered to make the pickup. Enemy fire hit the aircraft twice during the rescue and the pilot suffered a minor wound in the arm. The UH-1C also managed to reach Strong Point C-2 where it, too, made a forced landing.

Lieutenant Colonel Studt's observation during his short period of command convinced him of the need for reinforcements. At his request, the 9th Marines

ordered the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines at C-2 Bridge to send two companies and a small command group to the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines' position.²⁹

Company F still occupied its exposed position and Studt decided to move it within the battalion perimeter. He directed the company to have its attached engineers blow up the excess ammunition, but they were unable to do so.* After several hours of fruitless attempts by the engineers, Studt told the company to leave the ammunition and join the rest of the battalion. The battalion had direct observation of the ammunition pile and would cover it by fire.³⁰

Company F reached the perimeter near dusk. The two companies from the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines arrived at about the same time.³¹ With these reinforcements, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines was ready for any NVA attacks that evening. Studt recounted the night's subsequent events:

From before dusk . . . until almost 0200 in the morning, we were under almost continuous attacks by both direct and indirect fire, and our perimeter was hit again and again by ground attacks. . . . The wounded were being accumulated in the vicinity of my CP, which consisted of foxholes, and their suffering was a cause of anguish. After several attempts to medevac them by helicopter were aborted due to intense enemy fire, we came up with the plan that on signal every man on the perimeter would open fire on known or suspected enemy positions . . . for a few minutes with an intense volume of fire. During this brief period, a volunteer pilot . . . succeeded in zipping in to the zone and removing our emergency medevacs. The [trick] . . . probably would not have worked again.³²

The ground attacks ceased around 0200 in the morning of the 27th, but the Marines heard enemy movement for the rest of the night as the North Vietnamese removed their dead and wounded. Dawn revealed 19 enemy bodies within or in sight of the Marine positions. Lieutenant Colonel Studt decided not to send anyone to sweep the area since any movement still drew enemy artillery and mortar fire.³³

The enemy completed its departure by dawn. The Marines soon did likewise; on orders from the 9th Marines, the battalion made a tactical withdrawal. Still harrassed by enemy rocket and mortar fire and carrying the remainder of its dead and wounded, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines moved by echelon to

*The reason for the failure to detonate the ammunition is not clear from the records. Studt himself wrote in 1981 that he never knew the reason. Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft ms, 9Jul81 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

Strong Point C-2 and then to Cam Lo.³⁴ During the period 25-27 October, eight 2d Battalion Marines died and 45 suffered wounds giving the battalion an effective strength of around 300 Marines. Known NVA casualties were the 19 bodies counted by the battalion on 27 October.

The battalion moved back to Dong Ha on the 28th and resumed its role as the regimental reserve. Lieutenant Colonel William Wiese took command of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Studt returned to his duties at the 9th Marines' command post.* That day a message from Lieutenant General Cushman arrived, the last line of which read "2/4 has met and beaten the best the enemy had to offer. Well done."³⁵

Kingfisher listed 1,117 enemy killed and five captured; Marine casualties totaled 340 killed and 1,461 wounded. General Westmoreland described the operation as a "crushing defeat" of the enemy.

The Con Thien area remained a grim place. The constant danger of artillery, rocket, and mortar fire, and massed infantry assaults, and the depressing drizzle and mud from which there was no escape, combined to make it miserable for the Marines there. Neuropsychiatric or "shell shock" casualties, relatively unheard of elsewhere in South Vietnam, were not unusual. Duty on and around the drab hill mass was referred to by all Marines as their "Turn in the Barrel," or "the Meatgrinder."³⁶

Medina/Bastion Hill/Lam Son 138

On 5 October, in conjunction with the arrival of a fourth U.S. Army brigade in southern I Corps, Colonel Herbert E. Ing, Jr.'s 1st Marines, consisting of two battalions, came under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division and moved north from the Da Nang TAOR to the southern part of Quang Tri Province. On the 11th, the regiment, reinforced by SLF Alpha, started Operation Medina in the rugged hills of the Hai Lang National Forest.** The operation was part of III MAF's comprehensive program to

*Studt had hoped to retain command but Colonel Smith was more interested in keeping him as the regimental operations officer. "Unfortunately," wrote Smith, "I extolled [Studt's] virtues so much to General Tompkins that he was grabbed later to take over a battalion at Khe Sanh where he distinguished himself." Colonel Richard B. Smith, Comments on draft ms, 21May81 (Vietnam comment file, MCHC, Washington, D.C.)

**SLF Alpha's (BLT 1/3) move to its Medina blocking positions had the code-name Operation Bastion Hill.

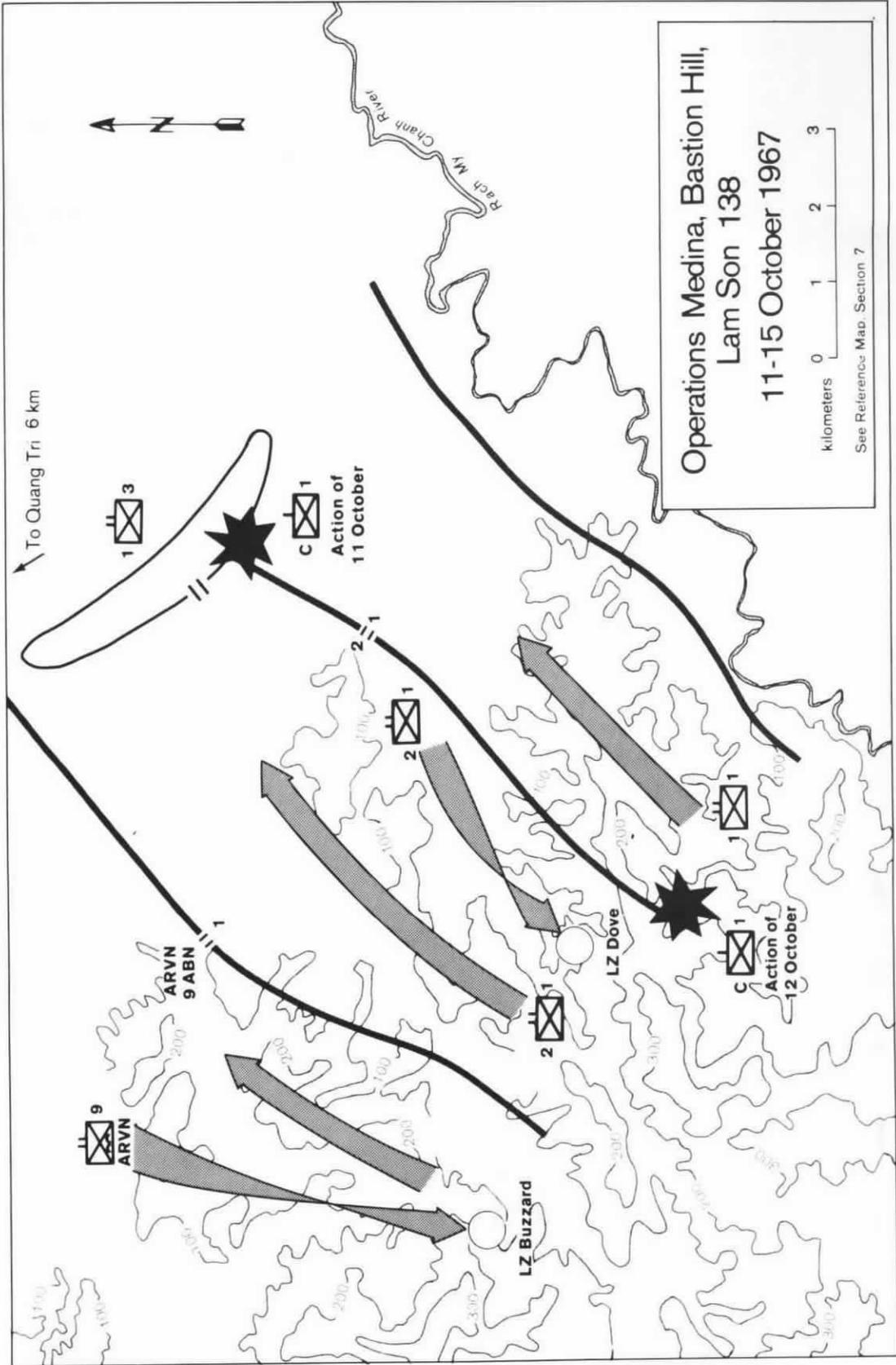


Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189393
Marines and journalists wait on 2 October in the safety of a trench beside Con Thien's landing zone until the arrival and touchdown of the helicopter that will take them from the base back to Dong Ha.

destroy enemy base areas previously left alone because of lack of forces. The Hai Lang forest area south of Quang Tri was the enemy's Base Area 101, the support area for the 5th and 6th NVA Regiments. Northeast of the Medina AO, two ARVN airborne battalions conducted Operation Lam Son 138.

Medina started as Lieutenant Colonel Albert F. Belbusti's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Archie Van Winkle's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines made a helicopter assault landing in the forest. After landing they cleared the area around LZ Dove and then swept in a northeasterly direction while BLT 1/3 blocked to the east. At 0330 on the 11th, Company C of BLT 1/3 came under mortar and small arms fire, followed by a ground assault. The company drove off the attackers and the fighting subsided.

The next day both of the 1st Marines' battalions continued searching to the southwest, while BLT 1/3 remained in its blocking positions. At 1515, Company C, 1st Marines was moving through thick jungle when the point element engaged 10 NVA soldiers. The exchange of fire wounded several Marines. Company C pulled back to a small clearing





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421900

Operation Medina begins early on 11 October as two battalions of the 1st Marines make a helicopter assault into Landing Zone Dove in a III MAF drive to clear enemy base areas in the thick Hai Lang forest, located approximately 12 miles south of Quang Tri City.



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An air observer with the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines directs an air strike early in Operation Medina on enemy positions located on an adjacent ridgeline.

and established a perimeter before calling in helicopters to pick up wounded. Just after the evacuation was completed, three NVA companies attacked Company C from two sides. The firefight continued as darkness fell; hand grenades figured heavily in the exchange. The battle surged back and forth across the small clearing. At the height of the struggle a grenade landed in the company command post. Corporal William T. Perkins, Jr., a combat photographer attached to the company, yelled, "Grenade!" and threw himself on the deadly missile. The explosion killed him.*

Lieutenant Colonel Belbusti reinforced Company C with Company D and the two companies drove off the attacking NVA force. Dawn on the 13th revealed 40 enemy dead around the Marines' position. The enemy attack had killed eight Marines and wounded 39.

After these two fights, the enemy avoided further contact; Medina turned into a search for small groups of North Vietnamese in the nearly impenetrable forests. The 1st Marines did find a number of base camps, but the enemy had evacuated the sites. The Marines captured more than

*Corporal Perkins received a posthumous Medal of Honor, becoming the first Marine combat photographer to receive the nation's highest award. See Appendix D for Corporal Perkins' citation.

four tons of rice, 16 weapons, and a quantity of small arms ammunition.

The enemy's efforts to elude the sweeping Marine units resulted in the largest action of the companion Operation Lam Son 138. On the morning of 20 October, the *416th NVA Battalion*, a subordinate unit of the *5th NVA Regiment* collided with one of the ARVN airborne companies involved in Operation Lam Son 138. The airborne company held and, after reinforcement, killed 197 North Vietnamese in the day-long battle.

Operation Medina ended on the 20th. The SLF battalion transferred to Colonel William L. Dick's 4th Marines, which was conducting Operation Fremont to the south. The 1st Marines stayed in the former Medina area and started Operation Osceola the same day. Osceola was an unspectacular, but systematic, search for enemy forces in the Hai Lang forest.

Adjustments Within the 3d Marine Division

A new series of operations began in November. Only Osceola continued from October. The 3d



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A Marine with the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines places explosives before blowing a helicopter landing zone in the Hai Lang forest during Operation Medina.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193856

An LVTP-5 carries members of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, operating as infantrymen, on a sweep of the shoreline north of the Cua Viet River in September. The battalion continued these patrols in November and December in Operation Napoleon.

Marine Division split the Kingfisher TAOR in two: Kentucky, embracing the region including Gio Linh, Con Thien, Cam Lo, and Dong Ha came under the control of Colonel Richard B. Smith's 9th Marines; and Lancaster, to the west, covered Camp Carroll, the Rockpile, and Ca Lu under Colonel Joseph E. LoPrete's 3d Marines. The division renamed Operation Ardmore at Khe Sanh to Scotland and continued it as a one-battalion operation under the control of Colonel David E. Lownds' 26th Marines. On the coast, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion conducted Operation Napoleon north of the Cua Viet River. In Thua Thien Province, Colonel William L. Dick's 4th Marines continued to cover approaches to Hue City west of Route 1 as Operation Neosho replaced Fremont. The 3d Marine Division had tactical responsibility for all territory west of Highway 1 in the northern two provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien, while the 1st ARVN Division was responsible for all terrain east of the road except for the Napoleon operational area north of the Cua Viet River.

Artillery support for all of these operations came from Colonel Edwin S. Schick, Jr.'s 12th Marines. Composed of five Marine artillery battalions, three Army artillery battalions, and two Marine separate

batteries, it was the largest artillery regiment in the history of the Marine Corps. The reinforced regiment's 220 weapons³⁷ were located throughout the division TAOR. Each infantry regiment could call upon a direct support battalion of 105mm howitzers. In addition, the artillery regiment's medium 155mm howitzers and guns, and heavy 8-inch howitzers and 175mm guns, provided reinforcing or general support fires.

While the new operations were beginning, the division headquarters at Phu Bai prepared for a visit from Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey on 1 November. After the stop at the division command post, the Vice President flew over the division's area of operations. Upon his return to Da Nang, he presented the Presidential Unit Citation to the 3d Marine Division for "extraordinary heroism and outstanding performance of duty in action against North Vietnamese and insurgent Communist forces in the Republic of Vietnam from 8 March 1965 to 15 September 1967."

After pinning the streamer on the division colors, the Vice President warmly congratulated the division commander, Major General Hochmuth. This was the last official ceremony that the general attended.

Major General Hochmuth died on 14 November when his UH-1E exploded and crashed five miles northwest of Hue.

Colonel William L. Dick, commanding the 4th Marines at Phu Bai, learned of the crash around 1400 on 14 November. Since he had a helicopter sitting on a pad at his headquarters, Dick, accompanied by his operations officer, Major James D. Beans, and the regimental sergeant major, quickly reached the crash scene. Colonel Dick described the rescue attempt:

After several passes, I spotted the Huey upside down in a rice paddy filled to the brim by the heavy rains which had been falling for several weeks. . . . I directed the helicopter pilot to land on the paddy dike nearest the crash site from where the three of us walked through about 200 yards of paddy water until we reached the wreckage. There were flames on the water's surface around the aircraft. While the sergeant major attempted to extinguish these, Major Beans and I commenced diving beneath the surface, groping through the water for possible survivors. We had no idea just how long it had been since the crash had occurred. This was a difficult task, as you can imagine, since the water was full of silt, not to mention leeches, and impossible to see through. The three of us were joined by a Vietnamese farmer who refused to identify himself and could be distinguished only by a small gold crucifix around

A machine gun team from Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines pauses during its movement in November in Operation Lancaster in the 9th Marines' portion of the former Operation Kingfisher area. The team wears its ammunition bandolier-style.

3d MarDiv ComdC, November 1967





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A190235

MajGen Bruno A. Hochmuth, the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division, wearing a rainsuit as protection from the monsoon, sits in a UH-1E helicopter prior to a routine inspection of the divisional area on 7 November, one week prior to his death.

his neck. The four of us, after getting rid of the aviation fuel flames, repeatedly went below the surface into the helicopter cabin and by touch, finally found the bodies, one by one, of the six who had died in the crash. The helicopter had turned upside down just before impact which made the situation even more difficult. The last body recovered was General Hochmuth. I found him in the rear seat of the helicopter, the spot where he usually traveled when visiting the various command posts.³⁸

Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, a veteran of more than 32 years' Marine service and holder of the Navy Cross as a battalion commander at Saipan, received immediate orders as General Hochmuth's replacement. Brigadier General Louis Metzger, the assistant division commander, assumed command until General Tompkins arrived from the United States on 28 November.

One of General Tompkins' first steps after his arrival was to discuss the overall situation with his division operations officer, Colonel James R. Stockman, who had commanded an 81mm mortar platoon under Tompkins on Saipan. "Tell me," said Tompkins, "about the operational folklore in the division's area of operations." Stockman replied with, among other things, descriptions of the enemy and the terrain and the frustrations of fighting under the



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189947

MajGen Rathvon McC. Tompkins inspects an honor guard on 28 November during the ceremony at Da Nang in which he assumed command of the 3d Marine Division after MajGen Hochmuth's death.

restrictions imposed by MACV and Washington. Stockman recalled that Tompkins disliked the system which considered infantry battalions as interchangeable parts to be shifted from one regimental headquarters to another, depending upon the tactical situation. Tompkins accepted it, however, as "temporary operational folklore," which he would have to live with. "He faced," wrote Stockman, "a worsening operational situation in the late part of 1967 with as much fortitude and optimism as humanly possible."³⁹

During November and December, the most significant activity in the 3d Marine Division's zone of action was small unit fighting near the strong-point obstacle system around Con Thien and Gio Linh. In November, platoon and company-size NVA units operated from well camouflaged bunkers in the area, trying to ambush Marine patrols and to hinder the system's construction. The Marines countered with attacks that drove the NVA units out of their positions on four different occasions during November, killing 65 Communists. In addition, Marine patrols found and destroyed three extensive



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189948
Company G, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines engages an NVA unit on 3 December during the portion of Operation Kentucky conducted to prevent enemy interference with the construction of Strongpoint A-3 of the barrier system south of the DMZ. The 3d Marine Division originally planned to call this protective effort Operation Newton but decided on 28 November to consider it as simply part of Kentucky.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A189997
A patrol from Company F, 9th Marines, part of the screening effort during the construction of Strongpoint A-3, moves out carefully after finding fresh enemy footprints and bunkers on 22 December.

bunker systems. On 29 November, three Marine battalions and two ARVN battalions began clearing operations within the Kentucky TAOR between Con Thien and Gio Linh, the planned site of Strong Point A-3 of the proposed barrier plan, or "McNamara wall." The Marine units swept south of Con Thien eastward to Site A-3, while the ARVN units moved from near Gio Linh westward to clear a road to the strong point location. The following day, Lieutenant Colonel William M. Cryan's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines found a North Vietnamese company in bunkers two and one-half miles northeast of Con Thien. The battalion maneuvered to envelop the enemy and overran the position by 1800, killing 41 defenders. Marine casualties totaled 15 killed and 53 wounded requiring evacuation.

Although the Marine and ARVN units continued screening operations north of A-3 during December, the largest engagement during the month took place southeast of Gio Linh in the Napoleon area of operation. Lieutenant Colonel Edward R. Toner's 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion and Company F, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines were protecting the movement of building materials to Strongpoint C-4 on the coast, two kilometers north of the Cua Viet River. Company F, under the operational control of the tractor battalion, occupied Strongpoint C-4. Platoon and

squad patrols routinely operated 2,000 meters north of C-4 as forward security for both the strongpoint and the battalion's position at Cua Viet port facility.

Early in the afternoon of the 10th, two squads patrolled near the fishing village of Ha Loi Tay. Their operational area was a sea of sand dunes, interrupted by a strip of scrub pine growth and hedgerows dotting the coastline. As they approached a break in the coastal tree line south of the village, sniper fire surprised them. The Marines fired back, killing eight North Vietnamese. The enemy fire killed one Marine and wounded three in this brief encounter.

As the Marines checked the area, they discovered 20-25 NVA soldiers, some wearing American helmets and flak jackets. The Marines opened fire and called for reinforcements. The company commander, First Lieutenant Michael H. Gavlick, radioed the situation to the battalion CP, and then took a platoon and the third squad of the engaged platoon forward to join the battle.

Contact continued throughout the afternoon. Before dark, Lieutenant Colonel Toner ordered two provisional rifle platoons from his Company B and two LVTH-6s to go to the scene of contact to assist. As darkness settled, Lieutenant Gavlick drew his composite force into a tight perimeter. At 0630 on the 11th, the composite unit moved out under a light drizzle toward the area of the previous day's action. At 0800, lead elements spotted 40 of the enemy trying to move south across the break in the tree line. The Marines observed 11 NVA soldiers digging a mortar position and another 15 moving behind a sand dune to the north. While the Marines took these enemy under fire with artillery and the LVTH-6s, Lieutenant Colonel Toner moved his Company A, organized as an infantry unit, and his command group to Strong Point C-4. At the same time, the U.S. advisor with the ARVN battalion occupying Strong Point A-1, 2,500 meters across the sand dunes west of the contact, asked if his battalion could help. Toner asked the ARVN battalion to move a unit into a blocking position southwest of the action. The NVA force had moved around to the west of the Marines and were now attacking from the south. The advisor informed Toner that an ARVN company would move to the desired blocking position. Fifteen of the enemy had already attacked the Marines and, although driven off, had fired 10 RPG antitank rounds. One of these rounds hit a LVTH-6 on the bow, but the round glanced off without

damaging the tractor. The LVTH-6 destroyed the antitank gunners' position with direct 105mm howitzer fire.

The number of enemy troops involved in the battle increased. A 30-minute firefight began; Gavlick's composite company took heavy small arms fire from three sides, then the Communists began hitting the Marines with mortars. Throughout the action, the two LVTH-6s maneuvered back and forth to engage the enemy, often firing at ranges between 50 to 150 meters. The remaining four LVTH-6s at Cua Viet and a detachment of 4.2-inch mortars at C-4 added their fire to the battle.

As the Marines tightened their perimeter, the NVA made a second assault. Fifty-five of the enemy attacked from the north, 12 more came in from the northeast, and 20 others from the south. Again, mortar fire supported their assault. The Marines responded with artillery, and used naval gunfire to hold back enemy reinforcements. The Communist assault failed, but individual soldiers continued to pop up around the perimeter. One audacious NVA mortar crew, protected by infantry, went into action on an exposed sand dune only 90 meters from the Marine perimeter. They fired six rounds before machine guns and direct fire from one of the LVTH-6s killed them.



3d MarDiv ComdC, December 1967

PFC F. N. Bunton carries a small Christmas tree on his pack while on Operation Kentucky with Company C, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines in December.

By this time, the ARVN company had crossed the sand dunes and was moving into its blocking position. As it entered the position, the company spotted a mortar crew that had been giving the Marines trouble from the southwest. After a brief fire fight the enemy mortar crew ran away to the north, leaving two bodies behind. After this, the fighting dwindled to sniper fire.

Lieutenant Colonel Toner ordered Company A to sweep the area north of C-4 and clear it of any remaining NVA soldiers. At the same time, he ordered Lieutenant Gavlick to withdraw his composite company to C-4. Artillery and naval gunfire continued to shell the tree line north of the battle position. As Lieutenant Gavlick's force moved south, they found a supply dump bordered by communications wire strung waist high from trees as a guide. The site contained many full storage bins, dug into the sand dunes next to the trail. Live vegetation

camouflaged their trap-door entrances. The Marines destroyed the bins as they discovered them, after which they returned to Stongpoint C-4. The day-long battle resulted in 54 enemy known killed, while the composite Marine unit suffered 20 wounded.

As the year came to a close, all of the operations which had started in November remained in progress. Although contact was light, there were signs of renewed enemy activity in the Scotland TAOR. Intelligence officers reported at least two NVA divisions, the *325C* and *304th*, moving into the Khe Sanh region. Because of these reports, General Tompkins strengthened Khe Sanh with an additional battalion during December and prepared to deploy more reinforcements on short notice. The year 1967 ended as it had begun; a major invasion of northern Quang Tri Province appeared to be the enemy's next move.

