

HILL — OF — ANGELS

U.S. MARINES AND THE BATTLE FOR CON THIEN
1967 TO 1968



MARINES IN THE VIETNAM WAR COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

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This monograph examines U.S. Marine and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) actions throughout much of the northern half of a region that became known as “Leatherneck Square,” an area bounded by Con Thien and Gio Linh to the north—just below the demilitarized zone (DMZ)—and Cam Lo and Dong Ha to the south. The Battle of Con Thien also included activities within the DMZ north and west of Con Thien as far as the Ben Hai River. More than a dozen Marine operations were involved in varying degrees with the Battle of Con Thien. This account deals with the battle’s most significant and costly operations: Operation Hickory (18–28 May 1967), Operation Buffalo (2–14 July 1967), Operation Kingfisher (16 July–31 October 1967), and Operation Kentucky (1 November 1967–28 February 1968).

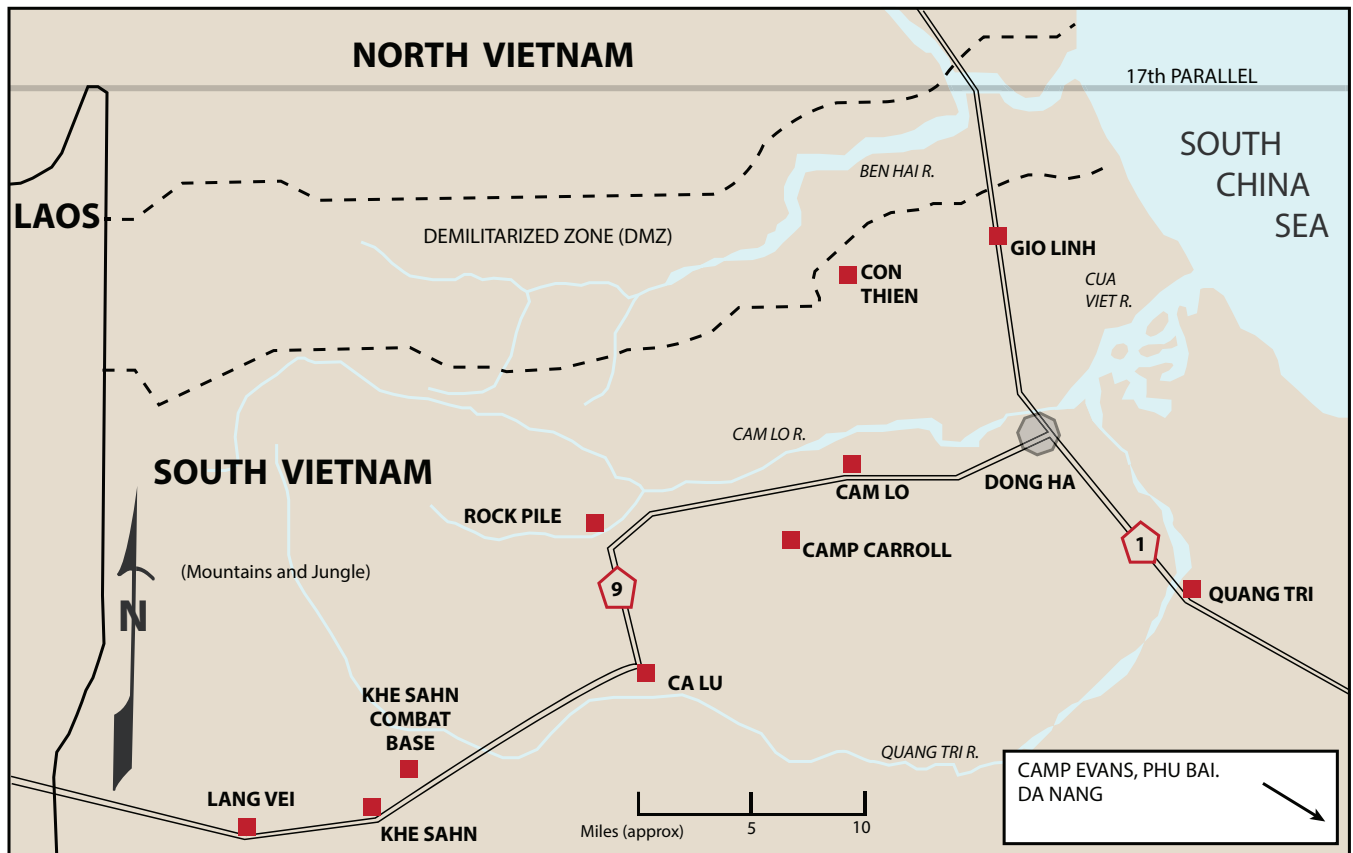
The Battle for Con Thien was therefore not a single event. Rather, it was an amalgamation of unit actions that can arguably be said to have lasted for years, the result of the strategies and attitudes of senior leadership generally far removed from the battlefield. This study focuses first on the planning and building of the controversial obstacle system of which Con Thien was an anchor. It then examines the period of the battle’s most intense combat—beginning in May 1967, when Marines first occupied the hill, and continuing until the early part of the following year.

Background to the Battle

To establish context, this commemorative begins with an overview of events that led up to the battle. Prior to World War II, Vietnam was part of the French colonial empire. France’s defeat by the Germans in 1940 left a power vacuum in Vietnam, and an aggressive Vietnamese political leader named Ho Chi Minh seized the opportunity to move the country toward independence. To this end, he formed a political/military organization called the Viet Minh and ruthlessly installed a Communist government.

In 1946, following World War II, France sent troops to Vietnam in an effort to reestablish its dominance. The result was the nearly eight-year-long First Indochina War, fought between the Viet Minh, relying primarily on guerilla tactics, and the conventional French army.

In 1950, the world’s Communist countries, led by the People’s Republic of China, gave formal recognition to the Viet Minh’s Democratic Republic of Vietnam as the country’s legitimate government. This recognition opened the door for China to send massive numbers of weapons, trainers, and laborers to be used against the French. The French suffered their most dramatic and final defeat of the war on 7 May 1954 at Dien Bien Phu, after which France withdrew its forces, never to return. During their fight for independence,



Map by author

the Viet Minh brutally slaughtered hundreds of thousands of their countrymen. Communist Party Chairman Ho Chi Minh realized that he must disband the bloody Viet Minh in order to build support from the citizenry, and the Viet Minh faded away.

Although Chairman Ho and his Viet Minh forces had won the war with France, the struggle was far from over. The majority of their countrymen in the south wanted a Western-style, democratic form of government, a sentiment that, of course, America and the European democracies supported. So, in July 1954, the Geneva Agreement divided Vietnam into two countries along the 17th parallel: the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the south.

In an effort to stem military aggression between the North and the South, a DMZ was created near the 17th parallel, roughly three miles on either side of the Ben Hai River, and extending from the South China Sea to Vietnam's border

with Laos. Until the Battle of Con Thien, American forces and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) adhered to the Geneva Agreement's intent and stayed out of the DMZ. The NVA, however, under the command of General Vo Nguyen Giap, used it as a safe haven and a staging area for manpower and materiel moving south. A sizeable percentage of South Vietnamese citizens armed themselves with these North Vietnamese supplied weapons. They were organized into military units and fought for North Vietnamese victory in the south using the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam as their name. Non-Communists called them the Viet Cong.

The United States first supported the RVN by diplomatic means, then by sending military advisors, and eventually by committing combat forces. By the time the 9th Marines landed in Vietnam in 1965, the NVA had established a labyrinth of trails across the DMZ, around South Vietnam's western border, and through Laos and Cambodia. Americans

dubbed the supply route the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The U.S. Air Force was tasked with bombing the trail complex in Laos and Cambodia while U.S. and ARVN ground forces were assigned responsibility for interdicting NVA infiltration across the DMZ. The Marine Corps was given the primary role in the ground effort.

The Strong Point Obstacle System

To stop—or at least to inhibit—the flow of men and materiel from North to South Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland, USA, the American commander in Vietnam, directed General Lewis W. Walt, commanding general of III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), to plan for the construction of a Strong Point Obstacle System (SPOS) below the DMZ. It was an idea that had been under discussion in Washington, DC, for months.

Although military leaders showed little enthusiasm for the barrier scheme, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara believed that the idea had merit. On 15 September 1966, he appointed Lieutenant General Alfred D. Starbird, USA, director of the Defense Communications Agency, to head a joint task force within the Department of Defense with the mission of devising the anti-infiltration system. The original plan envisioned wide usage of air-dropped munitions and electronic sensors to establish the barrier. This directive formally established the program that was to become known as Project Practice Nine.

The following month, General Westmoreland suggested to Secretary McNamara that a conventional barrier utilizing the strongpoint system could be constructed across all of northern South Vietnam. General Walt ordered Major General Wood B. Kyle, commanding general of the 3d Marine Division, to prepare the Marine portion of the concept since any implementation of the idea would directly affect that command. General Walt's only guidance was that he wanted the report to begin with a statement that III MAF disagreed with the barrier idea and preferred the mobile defense currently being employed. General Kyle also indicated his own preference for the mobile concept, stating, "A mobile defense by the size of the force envisioned for manning the barrier system (one and one-third divisions) would in itself provide an effective block to infiltration south of the DMZ, and in the process negate the necessity for construction of the barrier."

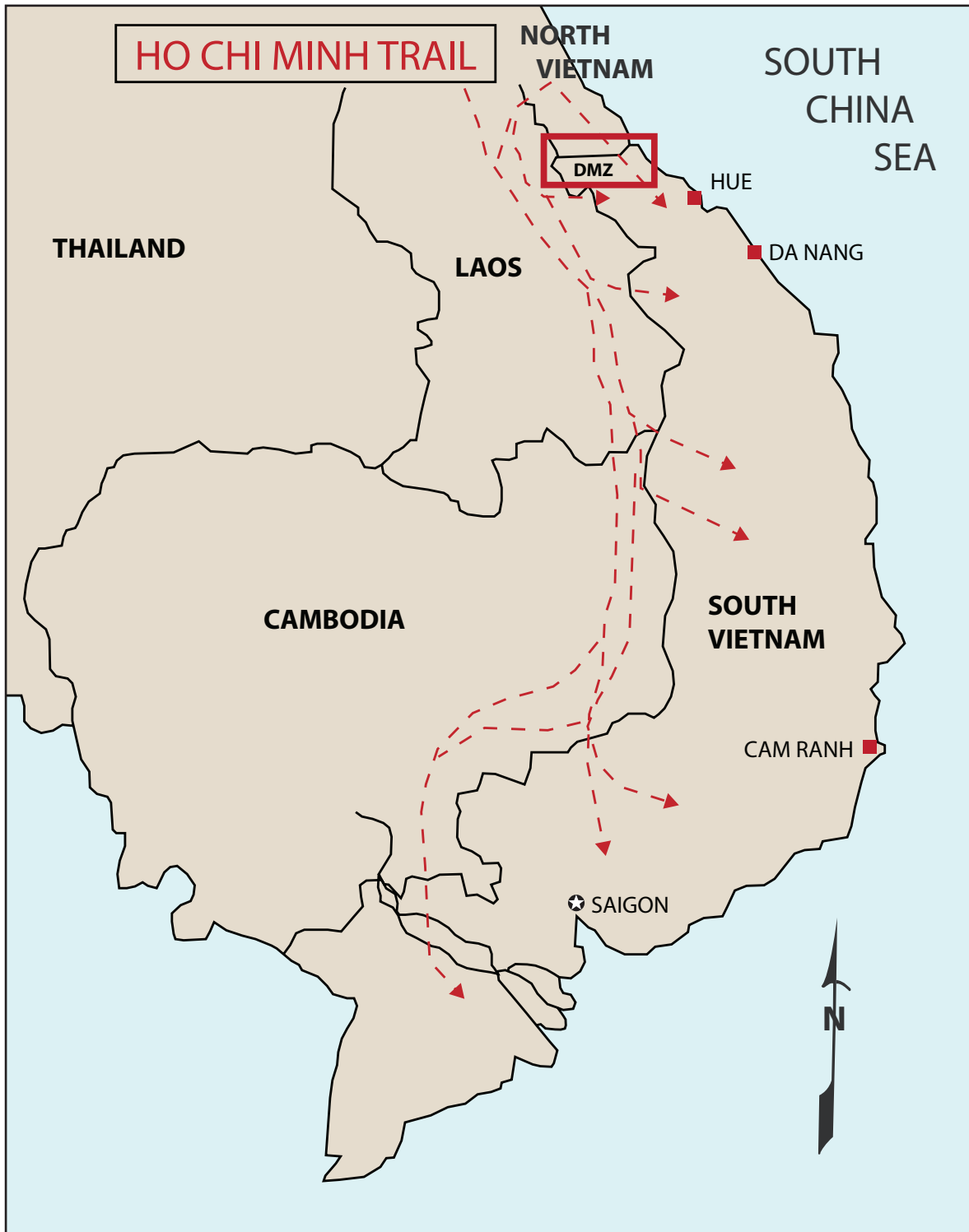
When General Walt forwarded General Kyle's proposed plan to Westmoreland, his cover letter made III MAF's view quite clear, stating that the plan was being submitted in response to a directive and that it was the opinion of the commanding general of III MAF that such a barrier, in effect, was not going to be worth the time and the effort it would require.

Kyle's submission called for a linear barrier immediately south of the DMZ, extending from the South China Sea to a point near Dong Ha Mountain, a distance of approximately 30 kilometers. This portion of the barrier was to be 600–1,000 meters wide, consisting of wire obstacles, minefields, sensors, watchtowers, and a series of strongpoints. The line was to be supported by an armored unit. The plan required the construction of artillery positions along Route 9 to provide fire support for the system. These positions also were to house the reaction forces needed to support the strongpoints. Other construction projects included in the plan were the improvement of Routes 1 and 9, expansion of the Cua Viet port facility, and the establishment of a major airfield near Hue, about 60 miles south of the DMZ.

After reviewing the proposal, McNamara directed that a procurement program be created to provide the materials for the linear section of the barrier. The materials were to be in South Vietnam by July 1967, and at least a part of the system was to be operational by 1 November 1967.

On 26 January 1967, the final plan was completed. The SPOS was to consist of a series of strongpoints and fortified base areas. Barbed wire and minefield obstacles were to be emplaced forward of the strongpoints to deny the enemy likely avenues of approach and to restrict movement, while sensors, detector devices, night observation devices, searchlights, and radar were to be used to locate the enemy. The strongpoints and base areas occupying key terrain features were to be constructed by tactical units under the supervision of engineers. These positions were to serve as both patrol and fire support bases. On-call, preplanned artillery support was to cover the entire area, and tactical aircraft were to be available on short notice. Reaction forces were to be stationed behind the system in positions from which they could deploy rapidly. All civilians were to be relocated south of the system.

The study group responsible for drafting the plan reckoned the minimum essential additional force required to man



Map by author

The DMZ was established as a result of the Geneva Agreement in July 1954 to serve as a buffer between the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam to the north and the democratic Republic of Vietnam to the south. Although the United States and South Vietnam adhered to the agreement, the North Vietnamese used the DMZ as a staging area and supply route for manpower and materiel moving south. It was 1967 before U.S. forces physically entered the DMZ.

the eastern portion of the system to be one infantry brigade or Marine regiment, augmented with supply, maintenance, construction, transportation, and other support units.

The Marines' opinions of the concept remained unchanged. In January, at a 3d Marine Division headquarters briefing held for Under Secretary of the Navy Robert H. B. Baldwin, the briefing officer reiterated the III MAF view of the barrier concept: "To sum it all up, we're not enthusiastic over any barrier defense approach to the infiltration problem. . . . We believe that a mobile defense by an adequate force, say one division, give or take a battalion, would be a much more flexible and economical approach to the problem."

Despite opposition from concerned Marine and Navy commanders, Secretary McNamara ordered General Starbird on 8 March to procure the materials for strongpoints and base camps, and enough sensors and surveillance devices to service a 10-kilometer section of the obstacle system. The ARVN representatives warmly endorsed the idea and suggested that an early start should be made on the project to take advantage of the weather. They did not believe that land procurement or civilian relocation would pose any problem.

As a result, General Westmoreland ordered General Walt, in coordination with Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, the commanding general of ARVN forces, to prepare a plan to implement the location, construction, organization, and occupation of a SPOS. Walt, in turn, ordered his chief G-3 Plans Division and III MAF Practice Nine officer, Lieutenant Colonel Marvin D. Volkert, to meet with his ARVN counterpart and begin the preparation of a combined barrier plan. By early April, although no written document was in existence (nor was one expected for at least 30 days), combined planning had progressed sufficiently to permit ground clearing between Con Thien and Gio Linh to begin.

Although the number of Marine units involved in the initial clearing effort was small, it precipitated the basic problem that III MAF had feared would result from the barrier project: the loss of flexibility. General Walt expressed his concern in a 26 April message to General Westmoreland, stating that the assignment committed his entire 3d Marine Division to the Practice Nine Project. He emphasized that the manpower required to construct and man even that portion of the system would not only use up all of the division's personnel, it would also fix all available division units

in place. He further observed that this was contrary to all previous positions. Walt maintained that unless he received the additional forces required to install and man the Practice Nine system, his capability to conduct offensive actions in the vicinity of the DMZ would cease almost immediately. There were, however, no additional forces available.

By 2 May, the 11th Engineer Battalion had cleared a 200-meter trace between Con Thien and Gio Linh and was beginning to clear a 500-meter perimeter around each position. While the engineers cleared the land, at least one infantry battalion, but normally two, provided security and screening for the engineering effort. One of the major problems encountered by the engineers during the initial clearing work was the large number of civilians living in the area. Although the government had begun the removal of the population in this region, it appeared that this would be an extremely difficult, extended task. But the inception of Operation Hickory on 18 May changed the picture completely. One of the objectives of Hickory was to clear the entire SPOS area of civilians. By 23 May, Vietnamese authorities reported that there were 6,000 people already at the Cam Lo temporary resettlement site. By the end of Operation Hickory on 29 May, the population at Cam Lo had grown to more than 11,000; the construction zone was virtually free of civilians.

On 1 June 1967, Lieutenant General Walt, who had led III MAF since June 1965, relinquished his command to Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman Jr., who was well aware of the problems involved in the construction of the anti-infiltration system. Unlike his predecessor, he believed that, once completed, the system would free his forces for missions elsewhere.* On 14 July, the Marine portion of the system came to be known as the Dye Marker Project.

During McNamara's visit to the 3d Marine Division in July, the division briefed him on the status of Dye Marker and flew him over the construction sites. The Marines had cleared the strongpoints at Con Thien and Gio Linh to a 500-meter radius and had begun building bunkers in both positions. They had cleared a 600-meter-wide strip between

*Gen Cushman apparently was making the best of a bad situation. In a 1981 communication with the Marine Corps History and Museums Division, he called the barrier concept and operation "stupid."



Photo courtesy of Vernon L. "Les" Stevenson

As a gesture of goodwill, appropriately talented Marines entertain some of the relocated South Vietnamese at Cam Lo.

Right: The author sang old Elvis songs for the show. When a teenage Vietnamese girl asked him to sing "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," he had to admit to having very limited talent.



Photo courtesy of the author

the two strongpoints and extended it to the floodplain east of Gio Linh. To the Marines on the ground, the seven-mile-long clearing was called the "Trace."

By mid-August, the enemy situation in the DMZ area was becoming critical. The enemy threat in the DMZ had increased progressively to the degree that Marine units were fully occupied with holding back the Communists in the Con Thien–Gio Linh region. Allied forces along the Trace were unable to defend their front and at the same time construct, man, and operate the SPOS in the rear. In a 16 August message to General Westmoreland, General Cushman stated that, although he had increased his own troop strength in the

area, he had received none of the forces considered as the minimum essential augmentation by the plan. Westmoreland promised to send two additional U.S. Army brigades.

By the end of the year, the Marine command's opinion of the barrier concept had not changed. One Marine officer stated, "With these bastards, you'd have to build the zone all the way to India and it would take the whole Marine Corps and half the Army to guard it; even then they'd probably burrow under it." Testifying before the Senate Subcommittee on Preparedness in August 1967, General Wallace M. Green Jr., the Commandant of the Marine Corps, declared, "From the very beginning I have been opposed to this project."



Photo courtesy of Joe Valento

Marines of Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, set in on the edge of the “Trace,” just east of Con Thien during Operation Kingfisher. Note the B-52 bombing strike in the background, in or near the DMZ.

Why Con Thien?

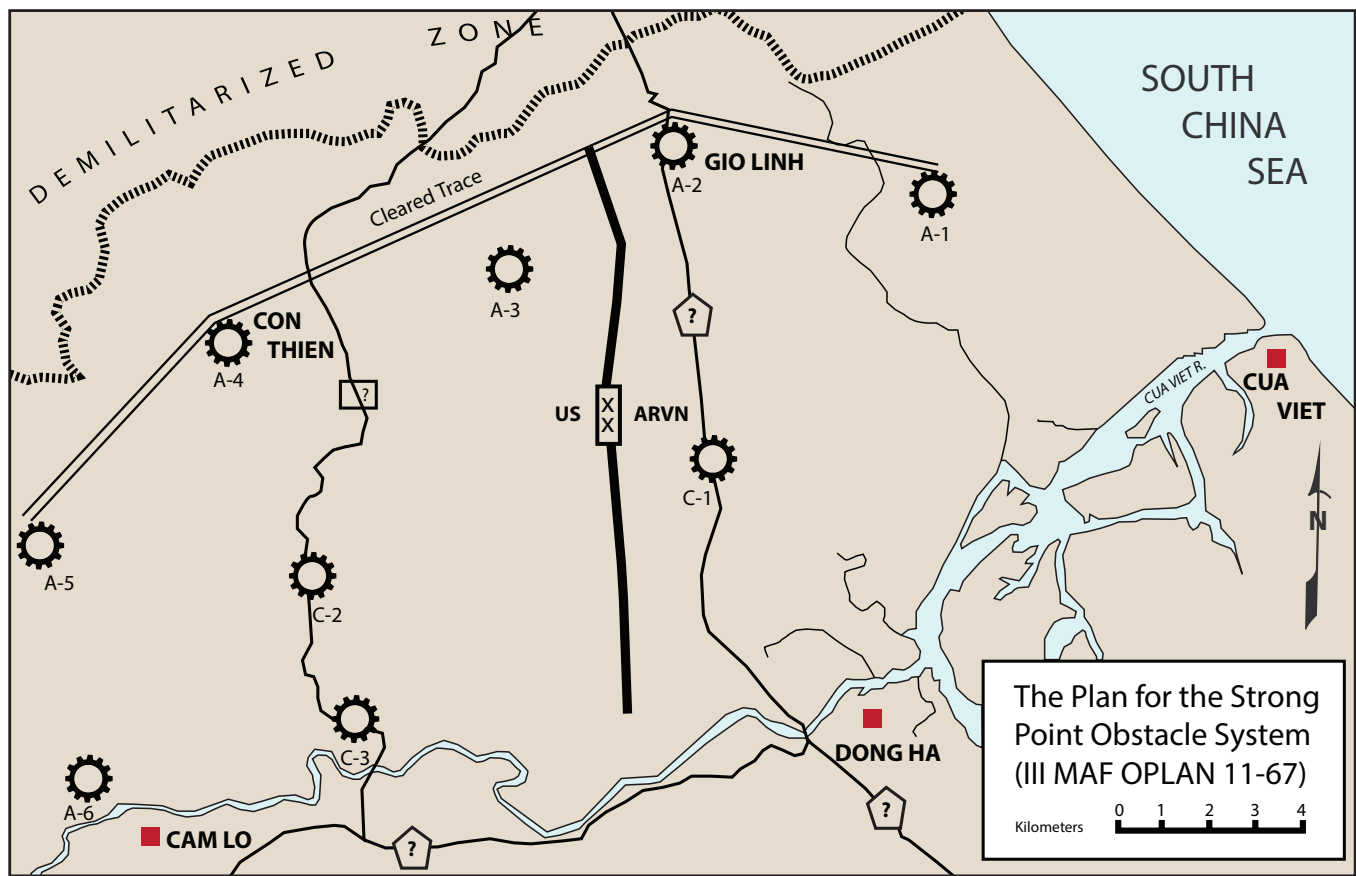
Marines along the DMZ began construction of the SPOS south of the DMZ in the spring of 1967 in compliance with orders from U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV) and Washington, DC. The system, nicknamed the “McNamara Line” by the Marines, proved to be a major burden to the 3d Marine Division. Security of the troops building the line, coupled with the demands on Marine units to fill sandbags, creosote bunker timbers, install wire, and perform other associated tasks, severely restricted the division’s combat activities.

While the construction of the SPOS limited the flexibility of III MAF, higher headquarters expected its speedy completion to force southbound NVA regiments to move westward into the mountains, thereby complicating the enemy’s logistical problems. The Marines’ combined-arms firepower from strongpoints would then confront the anticipated enemy attacks. Smaller enemy patrols and infiltration groups would face the challenge of the extensive obstacle system.

The Communists, however, chose to attack before the system became too strong.

The enemy decided to concentrate on the Marine strongpoint at Con Thien, located 14 miles inland and 2 miles south of the DMZ. This outpost was crucial to Marine efforts in the area. It occupied what would be the northwest corner of the SPOS, which enclosed the area that became known as Leatherneck Square. Con Thien also overlooked Route 561, one of the principal enemy avenues of communication into South Vietnam. Capture of the outpost would open the way for a major enemy invasion of Quang Tri Province by 35,000 NVA troops massed north of the DMZ, a victory of immense propaganda value.*

*Quang Tri was South Vietnam’s northernmost province, extending south from the Ben Hai River to the city of Quang Tri. The province contains about 1,800 square miles, stretching some 45 miles north and south and 40 miles east and west. Its rugged interior rises to the west, with jungle-canopied peaks reaching heights of 1,700 meters near the Laotian border. Eastern Quang Tri is characterized by a narrow coastal plain and a piedmont sector of rolling hills.



Map adapted by Marine Corps History Division

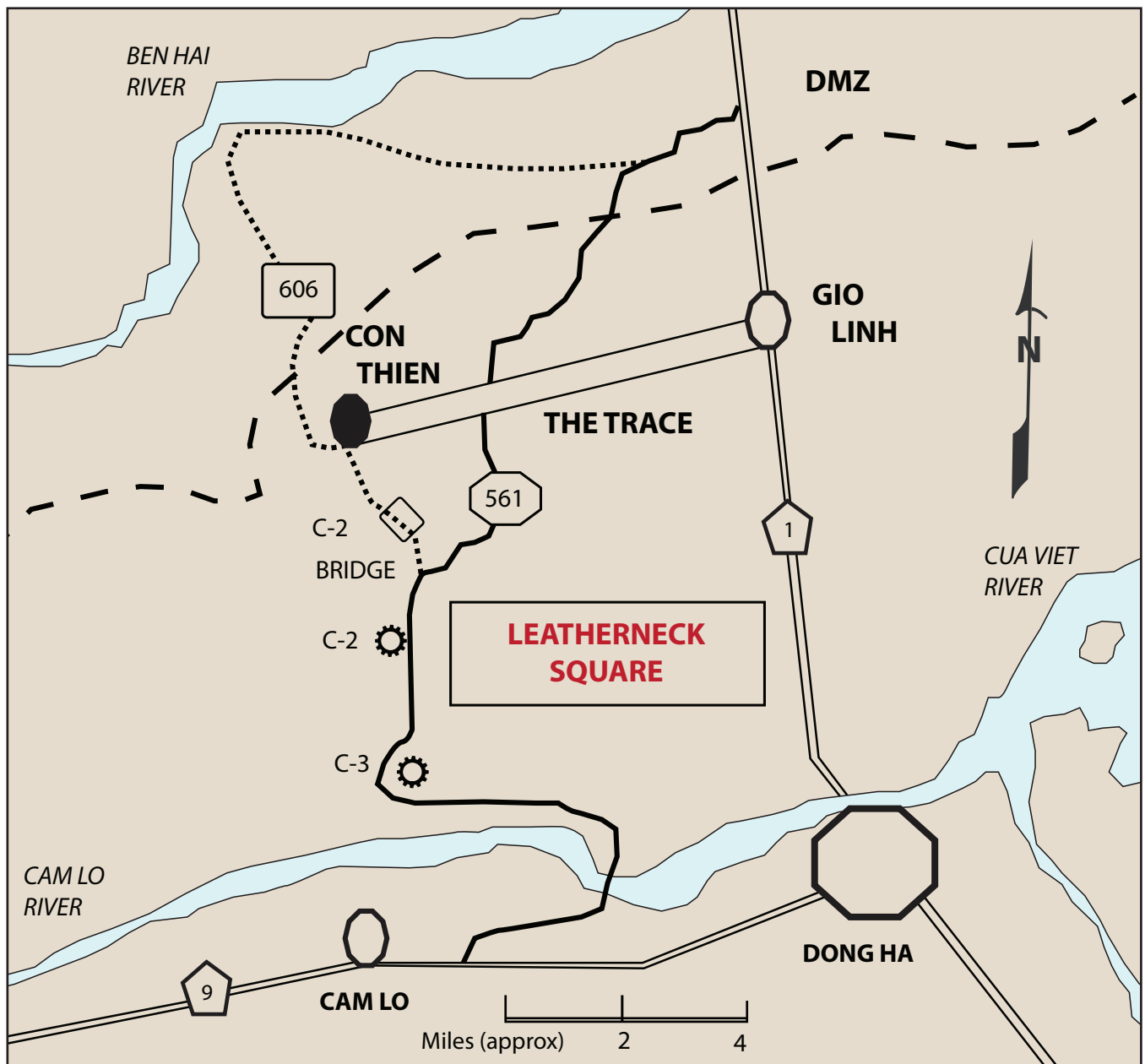
This November 1967 plan called for construction of all the strongpoints and cleared traces shown on this map. Neither the western leg of the Trace from Con Thien to A-5 nor some of the strongpoints were ever constructed.

Colonel Richard B. Smith, who commanded the 9th Marines, later described the outpost's importance: "Con Thien was clearly visible from the 9th Marines Headquarters on the high ground at Dong Ha 10 miles away, so good line-of-sight communications were enjoyed. Although Con Thien was only 160 meters high, its tenants had dominant observation over the entire area. Visitors to Con Thien could look back at the vast logistics complex of Dong Ha and know instantly why the Marines had to hold the hill. If the enemy occupied it, he would be looking down our throats."

The Communists made repeated offensive efforts to take the Con Thien region during the summer and fall of 1967. Although reinforced by heavy artillery, rockets, and mortars north of the Ben Hai River in the DMZ, each thrust collapsed under a combination of Marine ground and heliborne maneuvers coupled with supporting artillery, naval gunfire, and attack aircraft.

The first NVA offensive aimed at Con Thien occurred during May, shortly after Marines occupied the hill. The enemy exacted severe casualties on the Marine defenders but suffered more themselves as a result of the Marines' Operation Hickory, initiated to counter the NVA offensive. The second major effort, which was the NVA's largest in terms of troops committed, occurred in July. For the first time, the Communists employed extensive artillery to support its infantry, but the Marine counterattack, Operation Buffalo, beat back the enemy, netting more than 1,200 NVA dead. The final major Communist attempt came in September during the Marines' lengthy Operation Kingfisher. A heavy weapons attack of greater volume and duration supported a multipronged infantry assault on Con Thien, but this endeavor too ended in failure for the enemy.

In reviewing the enemy invasion attempts across the DMZ during 1967, analysts found the Communists used



Map by author

fewer troops as the year progressed but greatly increased their attacks by fire. The enemy sanctuary in the northern half of the DMZ, protected by U.S. policy, was always available for regrouping and employment of heavy artillery. This unique situation caused considerable frustration for the allied commanders. Even so, Communist plans for a significant victory in the DMZ area remained unfulfilled at the year's end, and construction of the allied SPOS continued as planned.

Marines' First Action: "Hill of Angels"

Since late 1966, Marines had been fighting the enemy in the area around Con Thien (the English translation of the name is "Hill of Angels"). Prior to 1 May 1967, however, the hill itself was defended by ARVN troops. Not realizing two Marine companies from 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, had replaced the ARVN soldiers, enemy planners executed a well-rehearsed attack to wrest Con Thien for their own use on 8 May, one day past the thirteenth anniversary of the fall of Dien Bien Phu.

At the time of the attack, the outpost contained a small command group of 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, reinforced Companies A and D of the battalion, and a Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Group unit. The Marines were there to provide security for the engineers, who, having completed the Trace on 1 May, were busy clearing a 500-meter-wide strip around the perimeter of the outpost. At 0255 that morning, a green flare lit the sky south of the hill, followed immediately by a savage 300-round mortar and artillery attack.

Enemy units maneuvering under cover of the barrage breached Con Thien's wire with Bangalore torpedoes, and small elements moved inside the perimeter. At approximately 0400, two NVA battalions, armed with flamethrowers, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and automatic weapons, attacked through the breach in the wire. The brunt of this assault fell on the right flank of Company D. The Marines engaged the enemy force in bitter hand-to-hand fighting. Proving the adage "Every Marine a rifleman," an engineer platoon moved to reinforce Company D. The situation became serious when the Marines ran out of 81mm mortar illumination rounds. Illumination from the nearest artillery support position at Gio Linh could not reach Con Thien. A Douglas AC-47 flare plane and gunship the Marines called "Puff the Magic Dragon" finally arrived and provided much-needed illumination until daylight.*

Meanwhile, Company A sent a platoon to help Company D, as well as to protect an ammunition resupply convoy composed of an attached Army M42 "Duster," two tracked landing vehicles mounted with howitzers (the LVTH6 version of the LVT5), and two 1/4-ton trucks. As these elements moved up to support the hard-pressed Marines of Company D, the relief vehicles came under enemy fire. The Army M42, which was the lead vehicle, stopped and burst into flames after being hit by an enemy RPG antitank projectile. A satchel charge exploded under the following LVTH6. It began to burn, but its crew managed to get out. The trailing LVTH6, trying to get around the burning vehicles that now included one of the 1/4-ton trucks, became entangled by barbed wire around its left rear sprocket and was stuck.

*The U.S. Air Force's Puff the Magic Dragon (or simply "Puff") was outfitted with illumination-dropping and 6,000-round-per-minute Gatling gun capabilities.

Despite their losses, the reinforcing Marines continued to Company D's position. With these reinforcements, Company D halted the enemy penetration and sealed off the break in the wire just before daylight. By 0900, enemy soldiers still within the perimeter were either dead or captured. The brush clearance around the perimeter paid early dividends. It permitted the Marines to catch the retreating North Vietnamese in the open as they crossed the cleared strip. Tanks and LVTH6s firing both conventional and "beehive" ammunition were particularly effective.** Supporting fires from Major Alfred M. Gray's Composite Artillery Battalion at Gio Linh ripped into the enemy as it withdrew north to the DMZ.

The defending Marines lost 44 killed and 110 wounded, as well as had two LVTH6s and one 1/4-ton truck destroyed, but the hard and bloody battle cost the enemy 197 killed and 8 captured. The Communists left behind 72 weapons, including 19 antitank weapons, 3 light machine guns, and 3 flamethrowers. The NVA displayed an inherent inability to adapt. They attacked the strongest point of the defensive perimeter and continued to press that attack, even when it was clear that it had encountered heavier resistance than anticipated.

Operation Hickory

Units from the 3d Marine Division launched Operation Hickory on the morning of 18 May. The 2d Battalion, 26th Marines—commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charles R. Figard—and the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines—commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John J. Peeler and supported by M48 Patton tanks and M50 Ontos—advanced northward from positions near Con Thien.*** Concurrently, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, moved by helicopters into a landing zone within the DMZ near the Ben Hai River, northwest of Con Thien. The heliborne battalion was to act as a blocking force to prevent the enemy from escaping to the north or to stop the movement of reinforcements into the area from the north.

Shortly after 1100, the lead element of 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, made contact with a force that intelligence officers later determined to have been two battalions. All elements of

**"Beehive" rounds are large-caliber antipersonnel shells containing thousands of sharp, dart-shaped metal flechettes.

***The Ontos is a lightly armored, tracked vehicle carrying six 106mm recoilless rifles.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A370551

A Marine patrol approaching the outpost at Con Thien, seen on the horizon of this photograph. Con Thien occupied a low hill, but one which provided excellent observation of the surrounding area as well as the key installations at Dong Ha.

the Marine battalion quickly became engaged in the battle; the enemy defended from well-prepared bunkers and trenches. As the battalion moved against the NVA positions, the right flank came under concentrated automatic weapons and mortar fire. Casualties were heavy. Among them were Lieutenant Colonel Figard and his operations officer, both of whom required evacuation. Despite the heavy enemy fire, the Navy hospital corpsmen continued their treatment of the wounded. By 1600, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, had moved up on the right of 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, and was also in close contact. Fighting continued until nightfall when the Marines broke contact and pulled back to evacuate casualties. During the day, enemy fire killed 5 Marines and wounded 142. Thirty-one enemy soldiers were known to have been killed.

The 3d Marine Division already had replaced the wounded Lieutenant Colonel Figard with a new battalion commander. As soon as it learned of Figard's condition, the division immediately ordered Lieutenant Colonel William J. Masterpool, who had just joined the division staff after commanding 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, to assume command of 2d Battalion, 26th Marines. That night, 75 radar-controlled air strikes hit the NVA positions in front of the two Marine battalions. At 0500 on 19 May, heavy artillery fire fell on the enemy defenses, and both battalions commenced the attack at 0700. During the preparatory fires, several short rounds landed on Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, killing three and wounding two Marines. Within minutes, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, again checked its advance because of savage fire

from its front and right, while 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, encountered light small-arms fire and pushed rapidly ahead to relieve the pressure on 2d Battalion, 26th Marines' flank. By 1030, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, had overrun the enemy bunker complex, accounting for 34 North Vietnamese killed and 9 wounded.

During the rest of the morning, both battalions continued to advance against negligible resistance. At 1330, Company H, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines—commanded by Captain Robert J. Thompson and on the easternmost flank of the advance—met heavy automatic weapon and mortar fire from the east. The company returned fire but then received additional enemy fire from a tree line 60 meters to their front. Again the Marines returned fire, and a tank moved up in support. It silenced the enemy with canister fire.* A squad sent forward to reconnoiter the area also came under heavy automatic weapons fire. The tank, moving to support the squad, halted, having been hit by RPG rounds, and began to burn. A second tank maneuvered forward to help; RPGs disabled it also. Captain Thompson, unable to use other supporting arms because there were wounded Marines to his front, moved the entire company forward to retrieve the dead and wounded. After moving the wounded to the rear, the company pulled back and called in supporting arms fire on the evacuated area. The action cost the Marines 7 killed and 12 wounded; enemy casualties were unknown.

In the meantime 3d Battalion, 4th Marines—after the heavy action involving 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, and 2d Battalion, 9th Marines—swept to the southeast to block the NVA withdrawal. On 18 May, the battalion made little contact, but discovered a large, abandoned, fortified position, well stocked with food and equipment. For the next two days, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, maneuvered toward the other Marine battalions that were moving north. Contact was light, but the battalion encountered intermittent mortar and artillery fire. The battalion continued to uncover large caches of rice and ammunition—more than 30 tons of rice and 10 tons of ammunition—but because of the effect of the intense heat on helicopter lift capability and the distance to the landing zones, much of the rice could not be moved and had to be destroyed.

*Canister is large-caliber antipersonnel ammunition filled with thousands of small metal balls; it is particularly effective against a concentrated enemy or in jungle combat.

To the southwest, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines—commanded by Lieutenant Colonel James S. Wilson and screening the western or left flank of the operation—saw little action during the first two days. Then, on 20 May, Company K, point for the battalion, made contact with what it initially estimated to be an enemy platoon deployed in mutually supporting bunkers in a draw. The enemy company opened fired on Company K. To relieve pressure on Company K, Company L maneuvered to the flank of the enemy position but was unable to link up with Company K because of heavy enemy fire. Both companies spent the night on opposite sides of the draw with the enemy force between them while supporting arms pounded the enemy position all night.

On the twenty-first, Company M moved forward and joined with K and L, and the three companies were able to clear the area. The clearing operation was costly: 26 Marines were killed and 59 wounded. The Marines counted only 36 enemy bodies, but the lingering smell in the draw indicated that many others were in the destroyed fortifications.

Meanwhile, the division reserve; Special Landing Force Bravo's (SLF Bravo's) Battalion Landing Team 2d Battalion, 3d Marines (BLT 2/3), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Earl R. DeLong; and Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 164 (HMM-164), under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Rodney D. McKittrick, joined Operation Hickory on the twentieth. The employment of SLF Bravo involved a unique departure from the norm for amphibious operations in that the heliborne force passed to the control of the 3d Marine Division as it went ashore. This procedure ensured positive control of all supporting arms covering the battalion's approach to its inland tactical area of responsibility.

The squadron helilifted the battalion into the DMZ northwest of Gio Linh to block possible withdrawal routes of NVA units then engaged with ARVN airborne formations to the east. By noon, all elements of the battalion were ashore and sweeping north toward the DMZ.** The Marines of BLT 2/3 made short work of eliminating the light resistance they encountered from small NVA units apparently left there to provide security for several large ordnance caches and bunker

**Operation Belt Tight was the name given to BLT 2/3's movement from the amphibious ready group ships to its inland tactical area of responsibility in support of Operation Hickory on 18 May 1967.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A801287

A log and dirt bunker—part of an enemy fortified complex found unoccupied by 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, on 18 May 1967 during Operation Hickory—illustrates the type of well-constructed and camouflaged NVA fortifications often encountered by the 3d Marine Division in operations in and below the DMZ.

complexes. One of the bunkers was exceptionally sophisticated, constructed of steel overhead and walls. The Marines captured more than 1,000 60mm mortar rounds, in addition to large quantities of small-arms ammunition and medical supplies in the same complex.

After sweeping the southern bank of the Ben Hai River, DeLong's Marines wheeled south and began a deliberate search in that direction. Although the battalion met no resistance, it did uncover and destroy two extensive subterranean bunker complexes filled with supplies and ordnance. On 23 May, the advance halted temporarily because of the declaration of a cease-fire to be observed throughout Vietnam in honor of Buddha's birthday.

After the brief stand down, two battalions—3d Battalion, 4th Marines, and 2d Battalion, 26th Marines—began sweeping the DMZ to the southwest toward the mountains west of Con Thien. A third battalion—3d Battalion, 9th Marines—continued to move northwest as the other two battalions moved

south. To the east, the remaining Operation Hickory battalions resumed search-and-destroy operations in the southern half of the DMZ, as well as within Leatherneck Square.

Early on the morning of 25 May, Company H, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, commanded by Captain John J. Rozman, made contact with a large NVA company in a mutually supporting bunker complex near Hill 117, three miles west of Con Thien. The action was extremely close and lasted for more than an hour before the company managed to gain fire superiority and disengaged to evacuate their casualties. Air and artillery then hit the enemy positions. When relieved of its casualties, Company H maneuvered north of the hill mass where, at 1345, it met Company K, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, commanded by Captain John H. Flathman and under temporary operational control of 2d Battalion, 26th Marines. Both companies moved against the hill. At 1500, savage fighting developed; the Marines estimated the enemy force holding the position to be at least several companies.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A188886

Marines team up with M48 tanks of the 3d Tank Battalion for a sweep near Con Thien during Operation Hickory.

When the Marines could not break through the strongly fortified position, Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool ordered them to disengage so that supporting arms could again attack the enemy positions. The two Marine companies again attacked but broke off the action at 1730 and established night positions north and west of the hill. Results of the day's fighting were 14 Marines killed and 92 wounded; the Marines counted 41 NVA bodies.

Marine air and artillery pounded the enemy positions all night in preparation for the next attack, which was scheduled for the next day. At 0915 on the twenty-sixth, enemy automatic weapons fire forced down a Bell UH-1E Iroquois helicopter (nicknamed the "Huey") on a reconnaissance flight

over the area. Among the wounded in the helicopter were Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool, his executive officer, and the commanders of Companies H and K. Masterpool and Captain Flathman had to be evacuated. Consequently, the battalion delayed the attack for another day to allow time for further bombardment of the hill and command adjustments. On the twenty-seventh, Companies E and F, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines—which were under operational control of 3d Battalion, 4th Marines—moved against the objective behind covering artillery fire. They met no resistance and secured the hill by 1600. Then 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, passed through Companies E and F and consolidated on the ridges leading up to the higher ground west of Hill 117. In the meantime,

Lieutenant Colonel Duncan D. Chaplin III arrived by helicopter to assume command of 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, which was temporarily under its executive officer, Major James H. Landers.

During the night, Colonel James R. Stockman, the commander of the 3d Marines, initiated artillery fire support from Con Thien and Gio Linh and used the 175mm guns of the Army's 2d Battalion, 94th Artillery, to heavily bombard the enemy-held high ground. The following morning, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, continued its westward movement onto the high ground without opposition, encountering only the extensive destruction of numerous fortified positions apparently abandoned by the NVA early in the artillery attack. Colonel Stockman then ordered 3d Battalion to move toward Con Thien.

With the exception of the Hill 117 battle, contact diminished during the last days of Operation Hickory and the artillery operations to the east. Nevertheless, the Marines found and destroyed numerous well-fortified areas before the operation terminated on 28 May. In addition, they captured or destroyed more than 50 tons of rice and 10 tons of ordnance. Total enemy casualties for the combined Marine/ARVN operation were 789 killed (the equivalent of two NVA battalions) and 37 captured, with 187 weapons taken. Of this total, 447 were killed by Marines: 143 in supporting special landing force Operations Beau Charger and Belt Tight, and 304 in Operation Hickory.* Allied losses for the operation were by no means light; the Marines lost 142 killed and 896 wounded, while ARVN losses were 22 killed and 122 wounded.

The first large-scale allied entry into the southern half of the DMZ signified that the rules had changed. The area was no longer a guaranteed Communist sanctuary from which the NVA could launch attacks. More immediately, the operation had upset, at least temporarily, the NVA organizational structure in the DMZ. The Marines, however, realized that this initial search-and-destroy operation would not permanently deny the enemy's use of the area. Nevertheless, while total friendly control had not been established over the region, the removal of the civilian population from the area

now permitted the Marines complete freedom to use supporting arms.

Operation Buffalo

Operation Buffalo began on 2 July, using 1st Battalion, 9th Marines—commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Richard J. Schening—in and around Con Thien. Companies A and B operated north-northeast of the strongpoint near a former market place on Route 561, while Company D, Headquarters and Service Company, and the battalion command group remained within the outpost perimeter. Company C was at Dong Ha at the 9th Marines' command post. The commanding officer of the 9th Marines, Colonel George E. Jerue, described the origins of the operation in the following way:

The [tactical area of responsibility] assigned to the 9th Marine Regiment was so large that the regiment could not enjoy the advantage of patrolling any particular sector on a continuing basis. As a result, an area would be swept for a few days and then it would be another week or so before the area would be swept again. Consequently, it became evident that the NVA, realizing this limitation, would move back into an area as soon as a sweep was concluded. In an attempt to counter this NVA maneuver, it was decided to send two companies of 1st Battalion, 9th Marines (Companies A and B) into the area (1,200 yards east of Con Thien and north of the Trace) which had just been swept during the last few days in June.

This was the reason the two companies were there on 2 July.

That morning, Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines—commanded by Captain Sterling K. Coates and a unit that gained a reputation for finding the enemy during earlier actions at Khe Sanh—walked into the heaviest combat of its Vietnam assignment. In order to conduct a sweep north of the Trace, it, along with Company A, commanded by Captain Albert C. Slater Jr., had moved a mile east of Con Thien the day before. At 0800 on 2 July, both units began moving north. Company A was on the left. Company B moved along Route 561, an old 8- to 10 foot-wide cart road bordered by waist-high hedgerows. The road led to trouble; two NVA battalions waited in prepared positions.

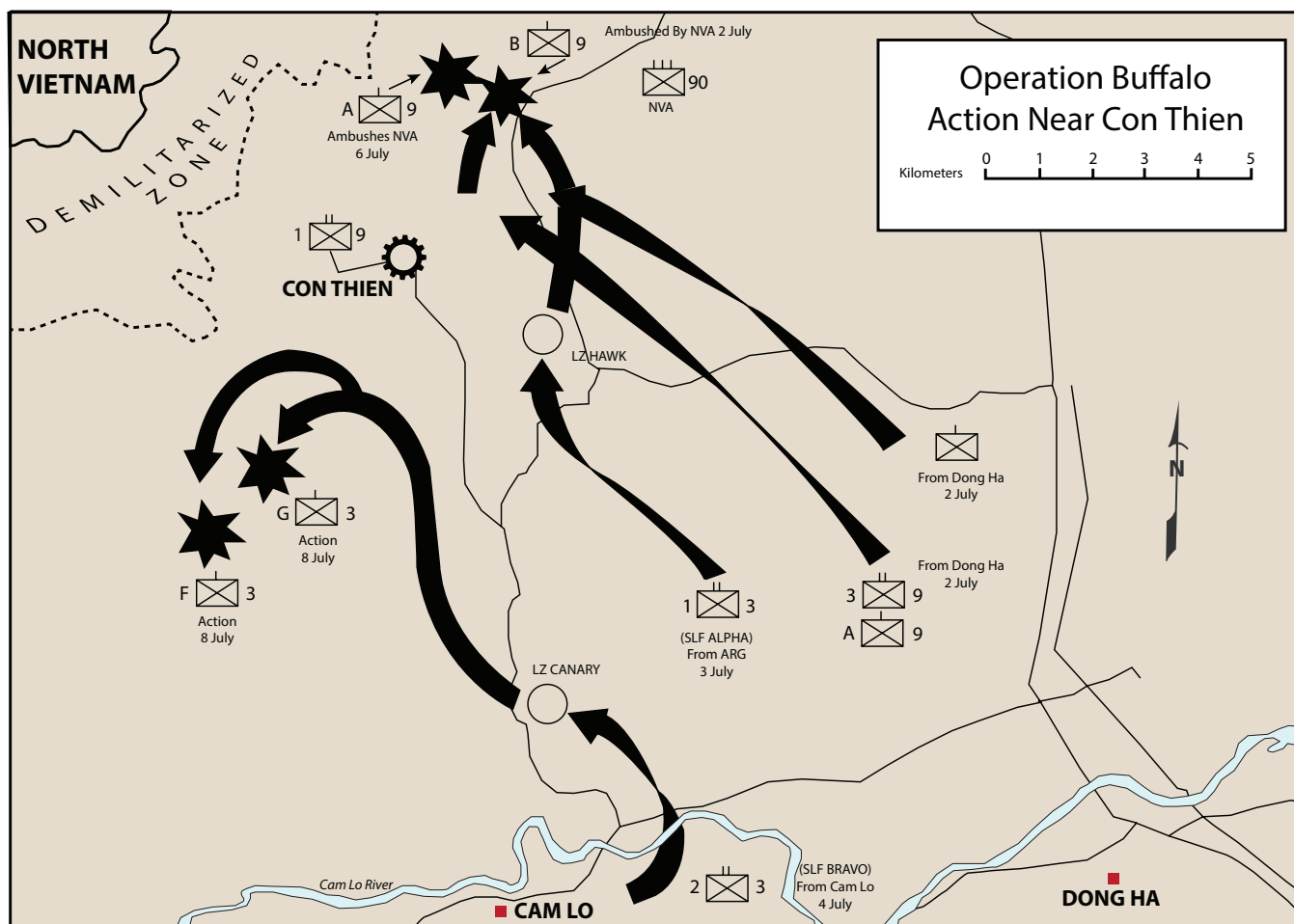
Company B's movement started smoothly, and by 0900 the 2d Platoon had secured its first objective, a small crossroads

*Operation Beau Charger was the name given to BLT 1/3's movement from the special landing force ships to its inland area of responsibility in support of Operation Hickory on 18 May 1967.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A188699

Pfc R. L. Crumrine bows his head in anguish after learning one of his closest friends was killed by the North Vietnamese. Crumrine was participating in Operation Hickory in the DMZ with the 9th Marines in the fierce fighting of 27 May 1967.



Map adapted by Marine Corps History Division

1,200 meters north of the Trace. There was no enemy contact. As the 3d Platoon and Company B's command group moved up the trail, enemy sniper fire started. The 3d Platoon and the command group moved to the left to suppress the enemy's fire, but as they pushed north the NVA fire intensified, halting the platoon. Captain Coates directed his 2d Platoon to shift to the right in a second attempt to outflank the Communist position. At the same time, he ordered the 1st Platoon forward to provide rear security for the company. The 2d Platoon tried to move, but enemy fire forced it back onto the road. The number of wounded and dead mounted as NVA fire hit the unit from the front and both flanks. To worsen matters, the enemy began pounding the Marines with artillery and mortars.

Shortly after the sweep began, Company A tripped two antipersonnel mines, and the need for casualty evacuation

delayed its movement. Afterward, Company A moved eastward to help Company B but could not link up because of heavy small-arms fire. Soon the company had so many casualties that it was unable to fight and move simultaneously.

Company B's position deteriorated. Enemy artillery and mortar fire cut off the 3d Platoon and the command group from the 2d Platoon. The NVA troops then used flamethrowers to ignite the hedgerows on both sides of Company B, as well as massed artillery in close coordination with a ground attack. Many of the Marines, forced into the open by the flamethrowers, died under the enemy fire. The Communist artillery and mortar fire shifted to the 2d Platoon as it attacked to help the 3d Platoon and the command group. This fire killed Captain Coates, his radio operator, two platoon commanders, and the artillery forward observer. The attached forward air controller, Captain Warren O. Keneipp Jr., took

command of the company, but he soon lost radio contact with the platoons. Only the company executive officer, at the rear of the 2d Platoon, managed to maintain radio contact with the battalion command post, but the heavy enemy fire kept him from influencing the situation.

Down the road, the 1st Platoon also took heavy punishment as it tried to push its way up to the lead elements of the company. North Vietnamese troops swarmed against the platoon's flanks, but air support arrived and the platoon commander, Staff Sergeant Leon R. Burns, directed strikes against the enemy. Burns said later: "I asked for napalm as close as 50 yards from us, some of it came in only 20 yards away. But I'm not complaining." The air strikes disrupted the enemy assault, and the 1st Platoon reached what was left of the 2d Platoon. Burns quickly established a hasty defense and began treating the wounded.

The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines' command group at Con Thien heard the crackle of small-arms fire from the 0930 action, followed by a radio report that Company B had encountered a dug-in NVA unit. The first assessment of enemy strength was a platoon, then a battalion, and ultimately a multibattalion force. When the firing increased, Lieutenant Colonel Schening alerted 1st Battalion, 9th Marines' Company C at Dong Ha to stand by to be helilifted into Company B's area. Since these reinforcements would not arrive for some time, Schening dispatched a rescue force composed of four tanks and a platoon from Company D. The assistant operations officer, Captain Henry J. M. Radcliffe, went with the small force to take command of Company B if a linkup could be made. First Lieutenant Gatlin J. Howell, the battalion intelligence officer, went also because he was familiar with the area where the enemy engaged Company B. The remainder of the battalion command group remained at Con Thien.

The small rescue force moved down the Trace from Con Thien to the junction of Route 561 without incident, but as it turned north up the road, it came under fire. A North Vietnamese unit, trying to encircle Company B, had moved south and was opposite Captain Radcliffe's small force. Helicopter gunships and the fire from the four tanks dispersed the enemy. Company C began arriving by helicopter, and Radcliffe ordered the Company D platoon to secure the landing zone and to evacuate casualties. As the lead elements of Company C came into the zone, they met a heavy artillery

barrage that wounded 11 Marines. Despite enemy fire, the platoon of tanks and the lead unit of Company C continued to push north toward Company B. Half a mile up the road, the advancing Marines found the 1st Platoon. Captain Radcliffe told Staff Sergeant Burns that he was the acting commanding officer and asked where the rest of the company was. Burns replied, "Sir, this is the company, or what's left of it."

After organizing the withdrawal of the 1st Platoon's wounded, Captain Radcliffe and the relief force, accompanied by Staff Sergeant Burns, continued to push forward to Company B's furthest point of advance to recover the company's casualties. The Marines set up a hasty defense, making maximum use of the tanks' firepower, and brought the dead and wounded into the perimeter. For Lieutenant Howell, the scene had a particular impact. He had commanded Company B's 3d Platoon for more than eight months before becoming the battalion's intelligence officer. He was seemingly everywhere as he searched for the wounded. Radcliffe estimated that Howell and Corporal Charles A. Thompson of Company D were instrumental in the evacuation of at least 25 Marines. The Marines then loaded their casualties on the tanks. Lacking space on the vehicles for the arms and equipment of the wounded, Radcliffe ordered them destroyed to prevent capture. The rescue force found it impossible to recover all the bodies immediately; some bodies remained along the road.

Company B came under heavy enemy artillery fire as it began to pull back. Two of the tanks hit mines, further slowing the withdrawal. When the company reached the landing zone, it came under devastating artillery and mortar fire again, hitting many of the wounded awaiting evacuation. Litter bearers and corpsmen became casualties as well. Casualties increased in the landing zone, among them were the platoon commander and platoon sergeant from Company D who had been directing the defense of the zone. In the resulting confusion, someone passed the word to move the casualties back to Con Thien. A group of almost 50 started making their way back until Marines at Con Thien spotted them in the Trace. Lieutenant Colonel Schening sent out a rescue party, headed by his executive officer, Major Darrell C. Danielson, in a truck, jeep and ambulance. Upon reaching the wounded Marines, Danielson saw that many were in a state of shock; some seemed in danger of bleeding to death. Fortunately, two helicopters landed in the area, and the Marines

loaded the more serious casualties on board. Enemy artillery fire delayed the evacuation of the remainder, but, despite the fire, Major Danielson and his party managed to get everyone into the vehicles and back to Con Thien for treatment and further evacuation.

During the battle, friendly and enemy supporting arms engaged in a furious duel. In the first few hours of the engagement, Marine aircraft dropped 90 tons of ordnance during 28 sorties. Artillery fired 453 missions, while Navy destroyers fired 142 five-inch rounds into enemy positions. The NVA force fired 1,065 artillery and mortar rounds during the day at Gio Linh and Con Thien; more than 700 rounds fell on the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, alone.

Company A remained heavily engaged. When the necessity of caring for the increasing numbers of wounded brought the company to a halt, Captain Slater had his 3d Platoon establish a hasty landing zone in the rear of the company. After the first flight of medevac helicopters departed the zone, the enemy hit the 3d Platoon with mortars then assaulted the position. Slater moved his 2d Platoon and company command group to reinforce the 3d Platoon.* The enemy advanced to within 50 meters of Company A's lines before small-arms and artillery fire broke up their attack. Enemy pressure and the remaining casualties kept Company A in their defensive position until the NVA force withdrew later in the evening.

At 1500, Lieutenant Colonel Schening at Con Thien notified the regimental commander that all of 1st Battalion, 9th Marines' companies were hard pressed, that he had no more units to commit, and that the situation was critical. Colonel Jerue ordered 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, now commanded by Major Willard J. Woodring, to move by helicopter to 1st Battalion, 9th Marines' assistance. Three companies and the command group of 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, were in position north of the Trace by 1800.

After landing, Major Woodring assumed operational control of Companies A and C of 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. The combined force made a twilight attack on the enemy's left flank, while elements of Company B and the platoon from Company D holding the landing zone pulled back to the Con Thien perimeter in expectation of an attack on the

outpost. The increased pressure provided by 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, caused the enemy to break contact.

When the worn and exhausted survivors of the morning's encounter mustered for a head count, the Marines found the total casualty figure shocking. Staff Sergeant Burns, who was subsequently awarded the Navy Cross, stated that only 27 Company B Marines walked out of the action. Not until 5 July were the recovery efforts completed. The executive officer of 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, Major John C. Studt, supervised the recovery of Company B's dead, a grisly task after three days in the hot sun. In all, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, had 84 dead and 9 missing. The battalion established no accurate count of enemy killed.

During the next three days, from 3 to 5 July, enemy contact continued. At 0930 on the third, an Air Force air observer reported more than 100 NVA soldiers advancing from positions north of Con Thien. Battery E, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, fired on them and killed 75. To the east, Major Woodring called in continuous air strikes for 12 hours to prepare for an attack the following day. The same day, 3 July, BLT 1/3 under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. Wickwire from SLF Alpha joined the 9th Marines and tied in with Major Woodring's right flank. The regiment planned a drive north to recover missing bodies and to push the NVA out of the Lang Son area, about 4,000 meters northeast of the Con Thien perimeter.

The attack started early the morning of the fourth. Third Battalion, 9th Marines, encountered heavy resistance from concealed enemy positions southwest of the site of Company B's engagement on 2 July. A prolonged fight followed, involving tanks, artillery, and close air support. By 1830, when the final Marine assault ended, the battalion had lost 15 dead and 33 wounded. BLT 1/3 suffered 11 wounded during the same action. The same day, BLT 2/3, under the command of Major Wendell O. Beard, joined the operation; the battalion landed by helicopter north of Cam Lo at Landing Zone Canary and moved west then northward on the western edge of the battle area toward Con Thien.

During daylight on 5 July, all units northeast of Con Thien came under enemy mortar and artillery fire, but there was relatively little ground contact while the Marines completed the grim task of recovering Company B's dead. That afternoon an air observer spotted a large concentration of enemy troops

*In the confused fighting, the 1st Platoon of Company A broke through the surrounding enemy and joined the relief force under Capt Radcliffe's command.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A188874

Marines of Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, and tanks of the 3d Tank Battalion operating one mile northeast of Con Thien during Operation Buffalo.

3,000 meters northeast of Con Thien. He called in artillery and tactical air strikes and reported seeing 200 dead NVA soldiers.

Following preparatory artillery fires on the morning of 6 July, all battalions continued moving north. BLT 2/3 ran into an enemy force supported by mortars less than three kilometers south of Con Thien. In the brief engagement that followed, the battalion killed 35 Communist soldiers, suffering 5 Marines killed and 25 wounded. Northeast of the outpost, BLT 1/3 and 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, advanced under intermittent NVA artillery and mortar fire. Major Woodring decided to move a reinforced company 1,500 meters to the north-northwest to cover his left flank. He chose attached Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, which now included the survivors of Company C, and a detachment from 3d Reconnaissance Battalion. Company A moved into position without opposition and established a strong combat outpost.

Captain Slater's composite force dug concealed fighting positions and sent reconnaissance patrols north in an attempt to discover where the enemy crossed the Ben Hai River.

While the movement of Captain Slater's composite company went unnoticed, the same was not true for the advance of the main elements of the two battalions. As they advanced, they encountered increasingly heavy artillery fire, and by 1600 they could go no further. BLT 1/3 had lost a tank and, because of the enemy fire, had pulled back without recovering it. Captain Burrell H. Landes Jr., the commander of Company B, climbed a tree to spot for air strikes and artillery fire in front of his position. An air observer radioed that a large enemy force was approaching his position. When Landes asked how big the force was, the reply was, "I'd hate to tell you, I'd hate to tell you." The air observer had spotted a 400-man force crossing the Ben Hai River in approach march formation; it was heading directly for the two battalions.

After the sightings, both battalions—minus composite Company A—came under heavy, accurate artillery fire. Between 500 and 600 rounds hit 3d Battalion, 9th Marines' position, and about 1,000 landed on BLT 1/3's position. During the Communist bombardment, one of Company A's reconnaissance patrols also spotted the 400-man NVA force and reported that it was moving toward the 3d Battalion. The enemy, still in column formation, was unaware that it was heading directly into Company A's concealed unit. The Marines opened fire at less than 150 meters distance. Captain Slater recalled: "When the point of the enemy column was brought under fire, the NVA alerted their unit with a bugle call. Their initial reaction was [one] of confusion and they scattered, some of them toward Marine lines. They quickly organized and probed at every flank of the 360-degree perimeter. Concealed prepared positions and fire discipline never allowed the NVA to determine what size unit they were dealing with. When the enemy formed and attacked, heavy accurate artillery was walked to within 75 meters of the perimeter. The few NVA that penetrated the perimeter were killed and all lines held."

Heavy enemy probes, mortar fire, and small-arms fire continued through the early evening. Some NVA soldiers crept close enough to hurl hand grenades into the Marine lines. One of the attached Company C fireteam leaders, Lance Corporal James L. Stuckey, responded by picking up the grenades and throwing them back toward their source. He was wounded when the third grenade exploded as it left his hand. He continued to lead his fireteam for the rest of the night without medical assistance, however, an action for which he later received the Navy Cross.

Despite heavy Marine artillery fire that effectively boxed in Company A's position, the NVA maintained pressure on the Marines until 2200. For the rest of the night, enemy small-arms and mortar fire harassed the company, but the NVA units were withdrawing. First light revealed 154 enemy bodies strewn around Company A's perimeter; the defenders had 12 casualties. Among the wounded Marines was Lance Corporal Stuckey; only tattered flesh remained where his hand had been.

While the attack on Company A continued, the rest of what intelligence officers later determined to have been the *90th NVA Regiment* assaulted the two Marine battalions.

To add to the effect of their preparatory fires, the attacking North Vietnamese threw fuzed blocks of explosives into the Marine positions to keep the Marines down as the assaulting troops moved in. The Marines countered with supporting arms. Flare ships, attack aircraft, helicopter gunships, naval gunfire, and all available artillery concentrated their fire on the attacking enemy. By 2130, the Marines had repelled the assault, and the Communist forces began withdrawing to the north.

At 0520 the next morning, Major Woodring ordered Captain Slater to pull Company A back into the battalion perimeter. The decision was most opportune. Immediately after the company cleared its night position, a 30-minute NVA artillery concentration landed within its old lines. Company A returned to the battalion's perimeter without incident. Both battalions spent the rest of 7 July trying to determine the extent of the damage inflicted on the *90th NVA Regiment*.

By 8 July, the Marines raised the NVA casualty count to more than 800. Counting enemy bodies proved to be a most difficult task because of the indescribably grisly carnage. Hundreds of bodies covered the scarred battleground, some half buried, others in pieces, all surrounded by a carpet of battered equipment and ammunition. Counting enemy canteens was one method used to try to establish realistic figures. The vast area that the bodies covered further complicated the morbid undertaking. As late as the afternoon of the eighth, Company C of BLT 1/3 found about 200 enemy bodies more than 600 meters east of Route 561.

The scattering of bodies to the north occurred when air and artillery hit groups of North Vietnamese that were moving toward or away from the main battle area. The lateral scattering from 3d Battalion, 9th Marines' position eastward across the front of BLT 1/3 was the result of the NVA attempt to outflank 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, without realizing that the battalion landing team was on line. Trying to move farther east, the enemy lost even more men to the guns of BLT 1/3. The Marines found it impossible to compute an accurate total of Communist losses to supporting arms because of the inability of allied forces to continue the count on the north side of the Ben Hai River.

The last significant engagements of Operation Buffalo took place on 8 July, southwest of Con Thien. After BLT 2/3 closed on Con Thien during its northward sweep, it turned

west, then headed south toward the Cam Lo River. At 1030, Company G, commanded by Captain James P. Sheehan, discovered a bunker complex. When small-arms fire and grenades interrupted further investigation, Captain Sheehan backed off and called in air and artillery. At 1300, Company G moved in, but some NVA soldiers continued to fight. Later that afternoon, after clearing the complex, Company G reported 39 dead Communists and 2 Marines killed with 29 wounded. One of the wounded was the company commander, Captain Sheehan.

At 1430, while Company G cleared the bunkers, a squad-sized patrol from Company F, located some 1,200 meters southwest of Company G, engaged another enemy force. When the Communists counterattacked, the company commander, First Lieutenant Richard D. Koehler Jr., sent in the rest of his Marines. When 82mm mortar rounds began falling, Koehler called in artillery and air strikes. The concentration of supporting arms cracked the enemy position, and when Company F moved in, it counted 118 enemy bodies. The Marines estimated the Communist unit to have numbered between 200 and 250. Marine losses totaled 14 killed and 43 wounded. Apparently the NVA had had enough. For the next five days, BLT 2/3 encountered only mines and harassing fires.

One ominous development that accompanied the Operation Buffalo fighting was the accurate employment of large-caliber, long-range NVA artillery. On 7 July, enemy artillery scored a direct hit on the command bunker of 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, at Con Thien, killing 11, including First Lieutenant Gatlin Howell, the intelligence officer who had gone to the aid of Company B on 2 July. Eighteen others sustained wounds; one was the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Schening.* The cause of the damage was a 152mm howitzer round, which penetrated five feet of sandbags, loose dirt, and 12 x 12-inch timbers. The same day, at Dong Ha, a delayed 130mm round landed at the base of the north wall of the 9th Marines' command post, exploding six feet below the bunker floor. Luckily, there were no injuries.

On 4 July, an NVA round landed on the road adjacent to the chapel at Dong Ha during Catholic services. The

chaplain's assistant, Corporal George A. Pace, was at the chapel's altar; he was the only person killed.** Dong Ha's storage areas, helicopter maintenance areas, and medical facilities were among the targets of the long-range weapons. The frequency and accuracy of the enemy fire contributed to Colonel Jerue's decision to move the 9th Marines command post to a location northeast of Cam Lo. There, relative quiet prevailed for the remainder of Operation Buffalo.

Another indication of the Communist buildup along the DMZ and around Con Thien during this period was the increased employment of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). While an Douglas A-4 Skyhawk aircraft was attacking the NVA in front of BLT 1/3 on 6 July, the enemy launched eight SAMs from sites north of the Ben Hai River. One hit Major Ralph E. Brubaker's Marine Attack Squadron 311 jet, causing the aircraft to crash in enemy territory. Only slightly wounded, Brubaker remained in enemy territory until picked up the next morning by a U.S. Air Force rescue helicopter.

Operation Buffalo closed on 14 July 1967. The Marines reported enemy losses of 1,290 dead and 2 captured. Marine losses, in contrast, totaled 159 killed and 345 wounded. The Marines found the enemy's large-scale July offensive against Con Thien a short one, but considerably more vicious than most Communist operations conducted in I Corps.*** The most savage aspect was the heavy employment of supporting arms by both sides. Of the known enemy killed, more than 500 were the result of air, artillery, and naval gunfire. In addition, supporting arms destroyed 164 enemy bunkers and 15 artillery and rocket positions, and caused 46 secondary explosions. To accomplish this, Marine aviation used 1,066 tons of ordnance; Marine and Army artillery consumed more than 40,000 rounds; and ships of the U.S. Seventh Fleet fired 1,500 rounds from their 5- and 8-inch naval guns.

Enemy artillery was effective as well, accounting for half of the Marine casualties during the operation and posing a constant threat to the Marine logistical support installations. The July fighting around Con Thien reaffirmed the Marines' faith in supporting arms. In spite of the appearance of SAMs and the presence of excellent, long-range Communist artillery,

*LtCol Schening also suffered wounds at Cape Gloucester and Peleliu in World War II, as well as in Korea. He thus survived wounds in three wars.

**Cpl Pace was a friend of the author's.

***I Corps was the northernmost of four military divisions within South Vietnam. It extended from the DMZ to south of Da Nang.

the Marines could prove that the latest enemy offensive had failed. Con Thien had held, and at least one first-line enemy regiment was in shambles. The Operation Buffalo victory did not breed overconfidence, but the body-strewn wasteland along the DMZ provided graphic evidence of the effectiveness of III MAF's defenses. The summer was far from over; they would be challenged again.

Operation Kingfisher

At the conclusion of Operation Buffalo, III MAF initiated Operation Hickory II, a short-term, two-battalion sweep of the southern half of the DMZ. Its mission was to destroy enemy fortifications and mortar and artillery positions. Marine casualties for the operation were 4 killed and 90 wounded. Total NVA losses were 39 killed and 19 weapons captured.

At the close of Hickory II, the two special landing force battalions (BLTs 1/3 and 2/3) were released by III MAF to return to amphibious ready status off the coast. On 16 July, the five battalions that remained near the DMZ, comprising the 3d and 9th Marine regiments, 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.

On 28 July, the 3d Marine Division sent 2d Battalion, 9th Marines—now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William D. Kent and reinforced with a platoon of tanks, three Ontos, three LVTE1s (LVT5s configured for engineering), and engineers—on a spoiling attack 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. At 1400, Company F was helilifted to Hill 37 overlooking the deserted hamlet of Thon Cam Son, located a stone's throw from the Ben Hai River and near where the rest of 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, would spend the night of 28 July.

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. Furthermore, the terrain channeled 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 battalion set in for the night in a defensive position so strong that Lieutenant Colonel Kent was confident an enemy division could not crack them. Company G formed a perimeter on the slopes of a low knoll overlooking the river. Company F manned Hill 37, located 600 meters to the southwest. Between these two well-defendable points, on the outskirts of Thon Cam Son, Kent formed a tight, tank-studded perimeter with the rest of the battalion.

The North Vietnamese did not molest the Marines in their night defensive positions near the Ben Hai River. Receiving no incoming enemy fire that night, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines' leaders were worried about the send-off they might receive when they left the next morning. Only the men of Company F heard anything that positively strengthened that suspicion. Shortly after midnight, the sound of truck engines reached their perimeter from across the river. Of this they were positive, and they radioed a report to the S-3 operations section of the battalion. An artillery mission of a few rounds was fired into the area generally northwest of the company, and no more attention was given to the incident. An hour after sunrise the following morning, 29 July, a Company F fireteam, which was holed up halfway down the south slope of Hill 37, radioed the S-3 that they could hear digging on the road; still, no action was taken.** At 0930, another fireteam on the south slope said they could hear Vietnamese calling to one another in the gully below them. A nearby 60mm mortar crew sent a few rounds into the bushes near the source of the sound, and the voices stopped.

The NVA had almost certainly been observing the two days of air and artillery attacks on one small sector of the DMZ, the increased radio traffic, an unusual amount of helicopter activity, and major troop and vehicle movements.

*Maj Willard Woodring, commanding the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, raised these objections at a division briefing prior to the operation, according to Col John Studt.

**A full-strength fireteam consists of four Marines led by a corporal. Three fireteams and a squad leader (sergeant) constitute a squad; three squads plus a platoon leader (second lieutenant), a platoon sergeant (staff sergeant), a radioman, and a corpsman make up a rifle platoon.



The enemy therefore had plenty of warning that Marines were coming to Than Cam Son. A review of the map and a knowledge of Marine tactics sufficed to fill in the blanks. The Marines would be going out the same way they came in.

Company E Marines scouted the objective area and destroyed several small, abandoned fortification complexes. About 1030, the battalion began its movement south out of the DMZ. It set out in a column led by Company E, followed

by Command Group A with Headquarters and Service Company, Company H, Company F, Command Group B, and finally Company G.* An airborne forward air controller circled overhead; he would soon be extremely busy.

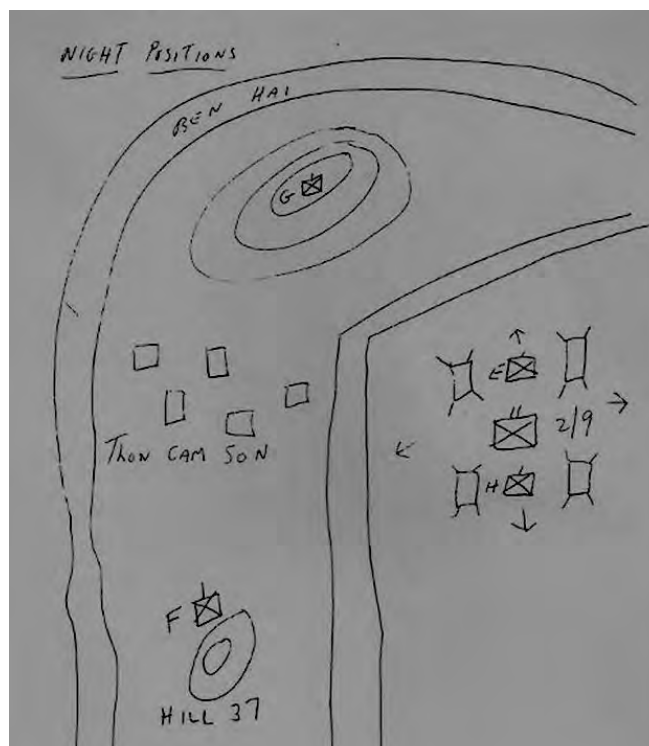
*This order of march reflects a change from the source document (*U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967* by Maj Gary L. Telfer, LtCol Lane Rogers, and V. Keith Fleming Jr.); it is based on the author's memory and was verified by an interview with William Southard, who was commanding officer of Company H at the time.



Photo courtesy of Vernon L. "Les" Stevenson

Marines of 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, moving north from Con Thien along Provincial Route 606 on 28 July 1967.

Company E was arranged with mine-clearing teams of engineers and infantry to the front, their eyes searching the bushes and the dust of the trail. It was a long column: 1st Platoon took the point, followed by the company commander and the battalion commander, then 3d Platoon with four



Map provided by Frank Southard; used by permission of West and Southard

Positions of 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, the night of 28 July 1967, drawn by Francis J. "Bing" West shortly after this action took place. Command Group B was colocated on the northern hilltop with Company G.

M48 tanks and two flame-throwing tanks, and the 2d Platoon taking up the rear. The first platoon had scarcely started down the road when the leader of the point squad, Corporal Richard L. Laffair, was blown up by a 250-pound bomb buried in the road.* Nearby, engineers found a similar bomb, rigged as a command-detonated mine, and destroyed it.**

Shortly after the second explosion, North Vietnamese soldiers near the road opened fire on the column with machine guns, rifles, and 60mm and 82mm 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 Marines' armored

*Francis J. "Bing" West agrees with the author and is at variance with the primary source, which states that five Marines were wounded but does not mention that any were killed.

**The author's memory is that the second explosion killed one Marine and wounded two.



Photo courtesy of Joe Valento

Forward air control radioman LCpl Joseph L. Valento holds two pieces of shrapnel as he stands in a bomb crater near Hill 37 in the DMZ on 28 July 1967. The sandbags visible at the top of the crater illustrate a common practice of digging foxholes at the crest and reinforcing them with sandbags to make a smaller target for enemy artillery. Valento joined 2d Battalion, 9th Marines' Bravo Command Group the following morning and was responsible for calling in numerous close air support missions. His superior service earned him a meritorious promotion to the rank of corporal.

column into roughly company-size segments. Each isolated segment fought its own way through the gauntlet of enemy 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 themselves required infantry protection. Heavy enemy fire made medical evacuation of the dead and wounded impossible, so casualties were loaded onto tanks. Some of those wounded were killed when the tank drew enemy RPG fire. One such case was 2d Battalion, 9th Marines' communications chief, Gunnery Sergeant David S. Prentice. Using the tanks as ambulances to transport the wounded further reduced the tanks' ability to fight. Tracked vehicles suffered all along the column.

An RPG round penetrated both sides of an LVT5 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 that 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.

Later that afternoon, the lieutenant in charge of the Ontos platoon (who was wounded and using a tree branch as a cane) approached Major Dennis J. Murphy—the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines' executive officer who was in charge of Command Group B—and explained that his vehicles had been hit by

*The author recalls that this LVT5 carried ammunition, which fortunately did not explode as the RPG round passed through it.

RPGs. He indicated that they could still run and that he had enough of a crew remaining to drive them out of the DMZ. He asked if the major would allow him to seek volunteers to man the machine guns. He received no volunteers but was able to drive his vehicles to safety before night fell.

The infantry's primary fire support came from the air controllers from Marine Observation Squadron 6; these men remained on station throughout the day, airborne in their tiny Cessna O-1 Bird Dog aircraft (a particularly helpful controller was Captain Thomas D. Redmon, call sign "Dream Hour 38"). The controller maintained contact with air representatives from each company and with the battalion air liaison officer. The airborne forward air controller directed bombing missions, usually from Marine-piloted McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom jets, whenever needed. The Marine infantrymen needed them often.

The Marines of Company F were sitting on Hill 37 when the day began and at first were more spectators than participants. Lance Corporal Joseph L. Valento, air controller for the company, had watched Company E start down the road and heard the two mines as they exploded. As the enemy began firing mortar rounds at Company E, Valento found that he was in an excellent location to take a compass bearing on the NVA mortar position. Company G was able to take a similar reading from a different angle. The aerial observer crossed the lines on his map and called for bombing missions on the "X."

The first attack plane to come in took fire from an anti-aircraft battery across the river in North Vietnam. It was hit squarely on its nose and barely pulled out. Lance Corporal Valento's vantage point enabled him to locate the enemy battery on his map and convey the coordinates to a second aerial observer. From their ringside seats, the Marines of Company F watched the jets demolish the anti-aircraft guns.

When the pilots turned their attention back to the mortars, their bombs were just as accurate, and Valento thought the job was finished. He was wrong. Twenty minutes later, NVA mortars were fired from a different gully. The same procedure with the jets followed and gained a respite of half an hour before more mortar shells were lobbed into the perimeter still occupied by Company G and Command Group B, commanded by Major Dennis Murphy. Lance Corporal Valento moved his forward air control operation from Company F to Command Group B's position, a location from



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A186027

The M50 Ontos was developed in the 1950s as a lightly armored, tracked antitank vehicle. In Vietnam, it proved to be a valuable asset, particularly efficient when firing its six 106mm recoilless rifles loaded with "beehive" antipersonnel rounds. It also mounted a .30-caliber machine gun. Its weaknesses included the requirement that the crew had to exit the armor-plated compartment to reload, the machine gunner was exposed, and the relatively thin armor plating, while effective against small arms, was vulnerable to RPGs.

which he was able to continue more efficiently coordinating air strikes against the enemy. The pattern repeated itself all day over distances too wide for a single or a few mortar crews to cover in short time spans, a fact which led many to conclude that the road was ringed by at least 10 crews, each firing from several sites.*

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 same terrain. At another point, Marine engineers with Company E spotted a 12.7mm anti-aircraft machine gun just off the road. They attacked, killed seven NVA soldiers,

*The author remembers lying in a ditch next to LCpl Valento and Maj Murphy as enemy mortars showered them with debris from nearby explosions. Valento radioed directions to the airborne controller who relayed them to an F-4 Phantom that was circling above, awaiting a specific mission. The Phantom came screaming down, almost perpendicular to the ground, and released all its bombs at one time. The bombs impacted on the nearby hillside from which the mortars were being fired, silencing that NVA mortar crew and resulting in substantial cheering by Marines of Command Group B and Company G.

Small Arms of U. S. Forces in Vietnam



M14

The M14 was adopted in 1957, the culmination of a long line of experimental weapons based upon the M1 Garand. Chambered for the powerful 7.62 x 51mm round, it was the primary infantry weapon in Vietnam until it was replaced by the M16.

Length	Weight	Cartridge	Magazine Capacity	Type of Action	Effective Range	Cyclical Rate	Velocity
44.3 in	8.2 lb	7.62 x 51	20 rounds	Gas operated semi/auto	450 meters	750 rpm	2,800 ft/s

M16

Marines traded in their M14 for the 5.56mm M16 in mid-1967. The stock was made of a plastic composite material, and it was considerably lighter than the M14. Since the early model was notorious for jamming during use, many Marines dubbed it the “Mattel toy.”



Length	Weight	Cartridge	Magazine Capacity	Type of Action	Effective Range	Cyclical Rate	Velocity
39.6 in	6.6 lb	5.56 x 45	20–30 rounds	Gas operated semi/auto	500 meters	800 rpm	3,250 ft/s



M79

The M79, a 40mm, indirect-fire grenade launcher, was called the “Bloop Gun” by Marines because of the sound it made when fired and the slow speed and high trajectory at which the projectile traveled.

Length	Weight	Cartridge	Magazine Capacity	Type of Action	Effective Range	Velocity
28.9 in	6 lb	40 x 46 grenade	Single shot	Break open	350 meters	247 ft/s

M60

The M60 machine gun, a 7.62mm weapon in service since 1957, is considered by many to be the workhorse of small arms. It ideally uses a team of three: a gunner, an assistant gunner, and an ammunition bearer. It can be fired from the shoulder or from a bipod, or mounted in a helicopter or a ground vehicle.



Length	Weight	Cartridge	Magazine Capacity	Type of Action	Effective Range	Cyclical Rate	Velocity
42.4 in	18.75 lb	7.62 x 51	Belt fed	Gas operated full auto	1,100 meters	550 rpm	2,800 ft/s



Length	Weight	Cartridge	Magazine Capacity	Type of Action	Effective Range	Velocity
8.6 in	2.5 lb	.45	7 rounds	Single action semiauto	25 meters	830 ft/s

M1911A1

The M1911A1 .45-caliber semiautomatic pistol was one of the most enduring weapons in the Marine Corps arsenal. Adopted in 1911, it was carried throughout the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, and into the 1980s before it was replaced by the 9mm Beretta.

Small Arms of the NVA and Viet Cong



AK47

The Soviet-designed AK47 was the primary weapon of choice for many armies (the Chinese version was called the Type 56, for instance). It is a durable 7.62mm rifle with fully automatic capabilities and comes in a variety of stock variants, from standard (shown) to a swing-out, collapsible shoulder stock, to a pistol-grip-only model.

Length	Weight	Cartridge	Magazine Capacity	Type of Action	Effective Range	Cyclical Rate	Velocity
35 in	6.8 lb	7.62 x 39	30 rounds	Gas operated semi/auto	350 meters	600 rpm	2,350 ft/s

SKS

The SKS is a 7.62mm semiautomatic rifle designed in 1943 for the Soviet Union. In the early 1950s, the Soviets replaced it with the AK47. The Communists used it extensively in Vietnam.



Length	Weight	Cartridge	Magazine Capacity	Type of Action	Effective Range	Velocity
40.2 in	8.5 lb	7.62 x 39	10 rounds	Gas operated semi/auto	400 meters	2,410 ft/s



M44

The M44 Mosin-Nagant is a bolt-action rifle developed in the late 1800s by Russian and Belgian inventors. It was used extensively by the Communists in Vietnam. It has a unique fluted bayonet that folds against the forestock when not in use.

Length	Weight	Cartridge	Magazine Capacity	Type of Action	Effective Range	Velocity
39.9 in	9 lb	7.62 x 54	5 rounds	Bolt operated	500 meters	2,838 ft/s

RPG7

The RPG7 rocket-propelled grenade launcher is an antiarmor weapon similar to the 3.5 Rocket ("Bazooka") of U.S. forces. It is still widely used throughout the world.



Length	Weight	Cartridge	Magazine Capacity	Type of Action	Effective Range	Velocity
37.4 in	7.9 lb	40mm antitank antipersonnel	Single shot	Manual	200 meters	360 ft/s

Photographs are from the small-arms collection of the National Museum of the Marine Corps



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A188379

The lightweight O-1 Bird Dog aircraft (Marine variant OE-1) was used extensively in Vietnam by aircrews for calling in air and artillery missions. The Marine Corps only lost seven Bird Dogs throughout the war. The enemy clearly learned that just shooting at one would result in catastrophic consequences from heavier Marine aircraft.

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 divided the company in two, but the attack failed.

Soon after Company F took its place in the column, it received instructions to establish a helicopter landing zone for evacuating casualties from Company E and Headquarters and Service Company. When the tanks carrying the dead and wounded reached the zone, the enemy opened fire 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 7 men killed and 31 more Marines and Navy corpsmen wounded. A gap then developed between the rear of Headquarters and Service Company and Company H. 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 2 more dead and 12 wounded by NVA mortar fire.

Late in the afternoon, Company E and Command Group A managed to break through the enemy to safety, although they had to leave behind two Company E squads that were unable to move because of intense enemy automatic weapons and rifle fire that ultimately killed two and wounded nine Marines. Company E and Command Group A continued 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 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, were no longer able to continue south. There were too many casualties to move through the intense enemy fire. At 1930, Company H drew back and established a defensive position on high ground at the edge of a clearing through which Route 606 passed. Joining Company H were two squads from Company E, two squads from Company F, and that portion

of Headquarters and Service Company that had not made it out. Company F and Command Group B consolidated into a hasty defense on the road north of Company H. Company G was farther north still, having moved only a short distance south from their position of the night of the twenty-eighth before being segmented due to strong enemy activity. 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, near Con Thien.

Company G's movement essentially came to an end when 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 were 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 medical evacuation helicopters for the casualties. The remainder of the night was relatively quiet; many of the NVA units were pulling back. Companies G and F both heard much NVA shouting to their west as they called in artillery missions on those positions.** The final event of the fight occurred at 0330 when a lone NVA soldier crept up to Company F's perimeter and killed one Marine and wounded three with a burst of automatic weapons fire. No Marines returned fire, and the NVA soldier withdrew.***

*As night fell, a group of about 15 Marines from Company G, including several casualties, was cutoff, alone, and unable to establish radio communication with the main body of the company. The author had radio communication with both elements and was able to pass conversations back and forth that led the small group through the darkness to the safety of the majority of the company. It was an exciting moment when, after about an hour of movement, the Marine in charge of the small group radioed the author to excitedly whisper, "We made it! By God, we made it!"

**The author recalls that a Sgt Houser, an artillery forward observer situated in the ditch with Command Group B, called in artillery missions "danger close" throughout the night. Many Marines said they heard the enemy screaming during these unusually pinpoint, accurate artillery missions.

***This is at variance with a statement in the source document that says fire was returned. The author was nearby, heard the enemy fire, and found it interesting that no fire was returned. This was confirmed by an interview with Vernon L. "Les" Stevenson, who was in the foxhole adjacent to that of the Marine who was killed.

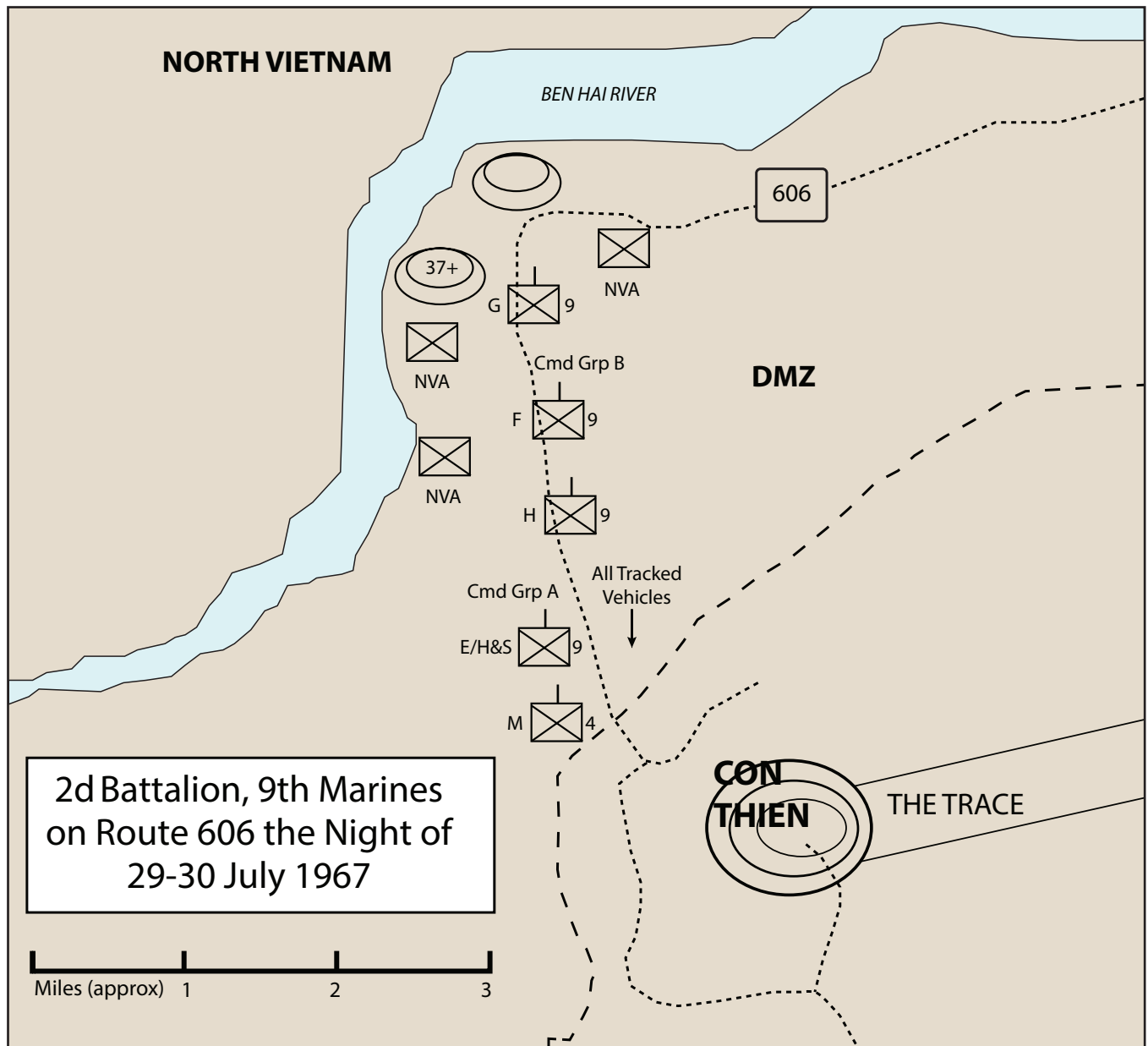


Photo courtesy of Vernon L. "Les" Stevenson

Late in the morning of 29 July 1967, LCpl Vernon L. "Les" Stevenson awaits word to move out from his overnight position near the deserted village of Thon Cam Son. He remains close to his foxhole, having already endured three mortar barrages and anticipating more.

The following morning, helicopters evacuated all casualties located at Company G's position. Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, moved north to link up with the rest of 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. Behind a screen provided by the 3d Battalion, Marines were able to evacuate the remaining casualties by 0900; all units were out of the DMZ by 1150. The gauntlet had been costly for 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. A total of 23 Marines died, and the wounded totaled 251, of which 191 required evacuation. Thirty-two NVA were confirmed dead, but the battalion estimated another 175 likely died.

The 30th of July was a Sunday, but 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, had no chapel services; the battalion chaplain, Lieutenant Nelson D. Chasteen, USN, had been wounded and evacuated. The battalion spent the day consolidating near Con Thien and dealing with casualties. But the next day, a service was held by a lay Marine, using a Bible always carried by battalion radioman Lance Corporal R. W. Johnson. The service was well attended. The 2d Battalion, 9th Marines' battle quickly entered the division's lore as the "armored thrust



Map by author

into the DMZ.” Concerning the purpose for this excursion, Brigadier General Louis Metzger, the assistant division commander of 3d Marine Division, stated, “We wanted to prove to the North Vietnamese that we could enter the DMZ anytime we liked.”

For the next few weeks, only scattered, small-scale fighting took place, although intelligence analysts reported the probability of a major enemy offensive in the region. Division G-2 Intelligence observed 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.

The first outburst of renewed NVA ground activity in the Kingfisher area happened in the southwestern portion of the tactical area on the morning of 21 August. A North Vietnamese battalion ambushed a small Marine convoy traveling south on Route 9 from the Rockpile to Ca Lu. Confirmed Communist losses were light, but 3 Marines and 3 U.S. Army artillerymen died, with another 35 wounded.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A188938

Men of 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, returning down Route 606 and through the perimeter of 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, on 30 July 1967 after fierce fighting with NVA troops within the DMZ. The vehicle in this photograph is an M274 "Mechanical Mule." Mules carried everything from ammunition to casualties and were even sometimes mounted with a 106mm recoilless rifle.

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. In eight hours of fighting, the Marines killed 92 of the enemy. American casualties totaled 5 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 Marine installations at Cua Viet, Gio Linh, and Con Thien. On 26 August, these also hit the large base at Dong Ha in

three separate attacks. Some 150 rocket and artillery rounds destroyed 2 helicopters and damaged 24 others. The most effective and spectacular of these attacks took place on election day. Forty-one artillery rounds slammed into the Dong Ha base that morning, destroying the ammunition storage area and bulk fuel farm, and damaging 17 helicopters of HMM-361, commanded by Major Horace A. Bruce.

During September, the North Vietnamese subjected the Marines on Con Thien to one of the heaviest shellings of the war. The hill itself was only large 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. Nevertheless, the completed engineer-constructed bunkers at Con Thien provided some cover as the NVA artillery and rocket attacks escalated and enemy ground



Photo courtesy of Joe Valento

An 81mm mortar position near Con Thien in August 1967. These were considered to be an infantry battalion's "hip pocket artillery."

activity increased. The main NVA 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. After the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines' battle in the DMZ on 29 July and during most of August, the level of combat was light, but enemy resistance began to stiffen toward the end of that month.

On 4 September, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines—now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Lee R. Bendell—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 heavy 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 the entrapped NVA force. The count of the enemy casualties at the end of the fight was 38 killed and 1 captured. As the battalion's units returned to their perimeters near Con Thien, they endured harassing fires from NVA mortars and artillery. Six Marines died and 47 suffered wounds in the day's action.

Three days later, Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Harry L. Alderman, found the enemy again three miles south of Con Thien.* The fight lasted for five hours and resembled the battle of the

*The 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, participated in Operation Kingfisher from 7 to 11 September.

fourth, except this time Marine tanks reinforced the infantrymen. Fifty-one NVA and 14 Marines died in this encounter.

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. Patrolling Marines spoiled a major enemy attack in the making. The battalion's command chronology reflects the feeling and intensity of this four-hour battle:

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

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. 1825H . . . the NVA appeared to be massing for an attack. 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. 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 by 1000 had evacuated all casualties. The Marines captured a large quantity of enemy material, including cartridge belts, packs, ammunition, and weapons. One hundred and forty enemy bodies lay scattered throughout the area. The 3d Battalion, 26th Marines' losses totaled 34 killed and 192 wounded. Alderman called it "the hardest fighting [the battalion] encountered since arriving in Vietnam."

Following this fight, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, moved near Phu Bai to refit. As its replacement in the DMZ area, the division pulled 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, under the



Photos courtesy of David Douglas Duncan

In this series of photos, Marines on Con Thien run for cover from the fire of North Vietnamese 152mm guns. September 1967 was especially brutal for Con Thien's Marines, with at least 200 enemy rounds falling almost daily.

command of Lieutenant Colonel James W. Hammond Jr., 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 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, which had been [severely] mortared 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.”

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

Shortly after the attack of the thirteenth, Colonel Richard B. Smith, the new commanding officer of the 9th Marines, moved two battalions to positions near Con Thien from which they could react if the enemy attacked in force.** The 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, again commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John Peeler, occupied the area southeast of Con Thien while 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, moved to a position southwest of the hill. At the same time, Colonel Smith ordered 3d Battalion, 9th Marines—now commanded by Major Gorton C. Cook—to move inside the main Con Thien 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. Casualties were heavy. Four of them were the result of a single round that struck the foxhole containing Captain Frank L. Southard, commanding officer of Company H, 2d Battalion,

*Enemy mortar fragments severely wounded 2d Battalion, 9th Marines’ commanding officer, LtCol Kent, and his executive officer, Maj Murphy. The author was in Maj Murphy’s foxhole with him but was not wounded at this time. As a result, LtCol John Peeler took over command of the battalion, having served twice as the commanding officer of 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, during 1967—from 1 January to 4 July and from 12 September to 28 October.

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

Foxhole Humor

After Lieutenant Colonel William Kent, commanding officer of 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, and his executive officer, Major Dennis Murphy, were wounded on 12 September 1967, the author was detailed to operate his radio for 2d Battalion, 9th Marines’ replacement commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel John Peeler. It was about a week later that the battalion was instructed to occupy the defensive location just southeast of Con Thien. As 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, crossed the concertina wire surrounding their new position, they first noticed pieces of a UH-34 helicopter lying about. It was clear that the enemy had the position on their programmed target list. For seven days, the battalion remained static within that small perimeter and absorbed NVA rocket and artillery barrages. The unit’s many casualties were moved for helicopter extraction to a new landing zone that was established outside the wire.

The evening after the enemy round landed in Captain Southard’s foxhole, Lieutenant Colonel Peeler and the author sat side by side, legs dangling into a foxhole, looking toward the north and listening for the telltale “bmp” sound that indicated incoming rounds were on their way. The author was only about three weeks from the date that would send him back to the states, so he was quite nervous. Sensing his discomfort, Lieutenant Colonel Peeler said, “Just relax, Long. If you get killed, I’ll sign the letter to your wife with my first name.” Peeler’s wisecrack might seem inappropriate to the uninitiated, but at that time and place, and under those circumstances, it provided comic relief that made the author feel much better. Such instances of finding and using the appropriate words and actions at just the right time were common traits of those Marines in leadership positions throughout the Battle of Con Thien.



Photo courtesy of Vernon L. "Les" Stevenson

These Marines from 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, are in a defensive position southeast of Con Thien in mid-September 1967. These are hasty rather than prepared positions with overhead cover. Con Thien is the hilly area on the horizon of this picture.

9th Marines; his radioman; company gunnery sergeant; and corpsman. The corpsman had jumped into the hole with the others just before the round hit. All but Southard were killed, and he was severely wounded.

After the immediate threat to Con Thien passed, the Marines there went on the offensive. On 21 September, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, 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 interspersed with hedgerows. The command group and Companies G and H were forced to stop, waiting for the rear elements to clear their previous position. As the lead elements advanced through the thick underbrush, maintaining visual contact became impossible.

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, killing one Marine and wounding four. As 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 that offered better cover and established a landing zone to evacuate casualties. Shortly after the engagement began, 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 NVA small-arms, automatic weapons, and mortar fire. Meanwhile, Companies E and F linked up and covered Company G by fire as it disengaged.

It was during this action that one of Company F's squads was suddenly hit by enemy small-arms and automatic weapons fire. Machine-gunner Lance Corporal Jedh C. Barker was among the squad's numerous casualties. Though seriously

wounded, Barker continued to fight until sacrificing his life to save his fellow Marines by absorbing a grenade blast. Barker received the Medal of Honor posthumously.

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, returned and picked up its dead in a later operation in the same area. 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 21 September, the Communists withdrew across the Ben Hai River.

Persistent enemy attacks during September appeared to be a desperate bid for military victory, with its attendant propaganda value, before the fall monsoon hit. Failing in attacks from three different directions, the NVA resorted to a massive attack by fire against Con Thien. From 19 to 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 Boeing B-52 Stratofortress bombers of the Strategic Air Command dropped tons of ordnance on the enemy in and north of the DMZ. The Con Thien garrison praised 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 they often found them rebuilt during subsequent patrols.

*Col Hammond remembered that MajGen Bruno A. Hochmuth said that G-2 put the number of enemy casualties at 350.

During early October, the Marines continued to find bunkers, but these were usually unoccupied. The experiences of 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, during October typified the trend of activity around Con Thien during the fall of 1967. On 4 October, the battalion, still under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Hammond, conducted a sweep southwest of Con Thien in conjunction with BLT 2/3, now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Henry Englisch from SLF Bravo. Leaving the line of departure at 0645, the battalion found three NVA shelters by 0830. An hour later and 1,000 meters farther, the Marines found several more ambush sites and 16 bunkers. Shortly thereafter, while skirting the southwest side of the Con Thien slope, Company H came upon 13 additional bunkers. 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 called 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, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, relieved Englisch's Marines as the defense force for the recently built bridge north of Strong Point C-2. The construction of the bridge, shown on military maps as "C-2A," permitted the reopening of the vital road to Con Thien that the heavy September rains had washed out as Marines were crossing. At one spot, an M76 Otter all-terrain vehicle capsized, and a U.S. Navy corpsman was washed away as a result. The location became known as the "Washout."** The 3d Marine Division was concerned that if the enemy destroyed the bridge, they would cut the only supply line to the Marines at Con Thien.

**The author stood at this site with LtCol Peeler shortly after the washout occurred. The new road had been constructed over two large-diameter corrugated steel culverts. When the monsoon rains rushed from the western high ground down the dry wash, the impact was so severe that the earth holding the culverts was washed out and the culverts were moved from their original places. The author, serving as the battalion commander's radioman at the time, recalls holding Peeler's web gear as he swam to a debris-laden tree in the middle of the rapidly flowing river in search of the Navy corpsman who had washed away. The corpsman's body was not found.

Lance Corporal Jedh C. Barker



Jedh Barker, who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for heroism in Vietnam, was born 20 June 1945 in Franklin, New Hampshire. At the age of six, he moved with his parents to Park Ridge, New Jersey, where he graduated from high school in 1964. After graduation, he attended Fairleigh Dickinson University and then Missouri State College until May 1966.

On 20 June 1966, he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve. He was a member of the Special Volunteer Reserve, 1st Marine Corps District, New York, New York, until discharged to enlist in the regular Marine Corps on 5 October 1966.

After completion of recruit training at Parris Island, South Carolina, in December 1966, he underwent individual combat training and weapons special training with the 2d Infantry Training Battalion, 1st Infantry Training Regiment, at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He was promoted to private first class on 1 December 1966.

In March 1967, Barker joined Marine Air Base Squadron 21, Marine Aircraft Group 12, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, in San Francisco, California, and served as group guard until the following June.

Reassigned as a machine gunner to Company F, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, 3d Marine Division, in South Vietnam, he was killed in action 21 September 1967, while on patrol near Con Thien. He had been promoted to lance corporal on 1 September 1967.

Medal of Honor Citation

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving as a machine gunner with Company F, Second Battalion, Fourth Marines, Third Marine Division, in the Republic of Vietnam on 21 September 1967. During a reconnaissance operation near Con Thien, Corporal Barker's squad was suddenly hit by enemy sniper fire. The squad immediately deployed to a combat formation and advanced to a strongly fortified enemy position, when it was again struck by small arms and automatic weapons fire, sustaining numerous casualties. Although wounded by the initial burst of fire, Corporal Barker boldly remained in the open, delivering a devastating volume of accurate fire on the numerically superior force. The enemy was intent upon annihilating the small Marine force and, realizing that Corporal Barker was a threat to their position, directed the preponderance of their fire on

his position. He was again wounded, this time in the right hand, which prevented him from operating his vitally needed machine gun. Suddenly, and without warning, an enemy grenade landed in the midst of the few surviving Marines. Unhesitatingly and with complete disregard for his own personal safety, Corporal Barker threw himself upon the deadly grenade, absorbing with his own body the full and tremendous force of the explosion. In a final act of bravery, he crawled to the side of a wounded comrade and administered first aid before succumbing to his grievous wounds. His bold initiative, intrepid fighting spirit, and unwavering devotion to duty in the face of almost certain death undoubtedly saved his comrades from further injury or possible death and reflected great credit upon himself, the Marine Corps, and the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country.

The defense of the bridge was no easy task for 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. Constant combat around Con Thien since 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, moved north from Camp Evans on 11 September had worn the battalion down from a “fox-hole strength” of 952 to about 462. The battalion had great difficulty in manning all the defensive positions prepared by the departed full-strength battalion landing team. 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 north-west 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, and Company E was 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 and rocket rounds 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 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 an AC-47 Puff the Magic Dragon to illuminate the area. Using starlight scopes, sniper teams watched the enemy as they massed only 50 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 remainder of the company held fire until the NVA troops reached a clearing 20 meters from the perimeter 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 in the attack. The battalion sent its assistant operations officer, Captain James W. McCarter Jr., to replace Captain Phillips, but enemy fire killed him before he reached Company G.

During this 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, Sergeant Paul H. Foster, a member of the fire support coordination center, continued to direct mortar and artillery fire upon the enemy even though he had been wounded by a grenade. When another grenade landed among a group of 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. Sergeant Foster subsequently received a posthumous Medal of Honor.

Before the melee ended, the North Vietnamese killed or wounded the entire forward air control team. The enemy also killed the battalion medical chief and wounded the fire support coordinator, headquarters commandant, and battalion sergeant major. 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 the AC-47, requested at the beginning of the fight, arrived about 0330 and aided the counterattack. By 0430, the enemy, pursued by Company E, began retreating from the position.

The next morning the battalion reconsolidated and evacuated casualties. A total of 21 dead, including 5 officers, and 23 wounded were the night’s toll. The NVA lost at least 24 killed. That afternoon, Lieutenant General Robert Cushman and Major General Bruno A. 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 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, the “Magnificent

*LtGen Metzger described the defense of this bridge as an “illustration of how our forces were tied to defending terrain and not free to operate.”

Bastards,” 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.

The last major action of Operation Kingfisher took place during a 9th Marines operation on 25–28 October. By this time 2d Battalion, 4th Marines (minus Company G, which was attached to 3d Battalion, 4th Marines), had moved to Cam Lo to take part in the operation. The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, was on Con Thien, and 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, was at the C-2 Bridge. The regimental order directed 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, to sweep north on the west side of Route 561 while the other two battalions provided blocking forces. At 0600 on the twenty-fifth, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, began its sweep. 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. His decision was prudent, given the nature of the enemy in the DMZ region and the recent combat losses that had 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. In actuality, his battalion was 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 Boeing CH-46 Sea Knights 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. His calculated risk failed. The resupply helicopters did not bring everything he ordered but, worse, delivered significant quantities and types of ammunition that the battalion had not ordered, including three pallets of barbed wire. There was more materiel than 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, could use or move. The battalion 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 or artillery 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 Sikorsky UH-34D Seahorse 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 become the battalion operations officer, took command of the battalion.

Upon learning that Lieutenant Colonel Hammond and Major Lawendowski were casualties, Colonel Smith, commanding the 9th Marines, decided to send an officer to take temporary command of 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. The obvious choice was right at hand. Lieutenant Colonel John Studt, the regimental operations officer, knew the details of the current operation; he had drafted the regimental order implementing the division’s directive for the operation. Smith sent Studt to the Dong Ha airfield to catch a helicopter to 2d Battalion, 4th Marines’ position.

Lieutenant Colonel Studt reached the airfield shortly after medical personnel removed 2d Battalion, 4th Marines’ casualties from Lieutenant Colonel Allgood’s helicopter. Studt explained his mission, and the two officers discussed the chances of success in reaching the battalion safely. Having had great difficulty in evacuating the four casualties, Allgood advised Studt that he was not 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.

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

Sergeant Paul H. Foster



Paul Foster, who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for heroism in Vietnam, was born 17 April 1939 in San Mateo, California. He attended elementary and high schools there and was a member of the varsity football and track teams. After graduating from high school in 1957, he went to work as an automobile mechanic helper.

He enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve on 4 November 1961, in San Francisco, California, and received recruit training in San Diego, California, and individual combat training with the 2d Infantry Training Regiment at Camp Pendleton, California.

After completion of combat training in March 1962, he joined the 5th 105mm Howitzer Battery (later redesignated Headquarters Battery, 14th Marines, 4th Marine Division), a Reserve unit, at Treasure Island near San Francisco. While on inactive duty, he was promoted to private first class in March 1963, to lance corporal in August 1963, to corporal in April 1964, and to sergeant on 1 February 1966.

Called to active duty in November 1966, Sergeant Foster embarked for Vietnam and joined Company H, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, 3d Marine Division, in December. While serving as an artillery liaison operations chief with the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, 3d Marine Division, near Con Thien, Sergeant Foster was mortally wounded on 14 October 1967 when he threw himself upon a hand grenade to save the lives of his five comrades.

Medal of Honor Citation

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving as an Artillery Liaison Operations Chief with the Second Battalion, Fourth Marines, Third Marine Division, near Con Thien in the Republic of Vietnam. In the early morning hours of 14 October 1967, the Second Battalion was occupying a defensive position which protected a bridge on the road leading from Con Thien to Cam Lo. Suddenly, the Marines' position came under a heavy volume of mortar and artillery fire, followed by an aggressive enemy ground assault. In the ensuing engagement, the hostile force penetrated the perimeter and brought a heavy concentration of small arms, automatic weapons, and rocket fire to bear on the Battalion Command Post. Although his position in the Fire Support Coordination Center was dangerously exposed to enemy fire and he was wounded when

an enemy hand grenade exploded near his position, Sergeant Foster resolutely continued to direct accurate mortar and artillery fire on the advancing North Vietnamese troops. As the attack continued, a hand grenade landed in the midst of Sergeant Foster and his five companions. Realizing the danger, he shouted a warning, threw his armored vest over the grenade, and unhesitatingly placed his own body over the armored vest. When the grenade exploded, Sergeant Foster absorbed the entire blast with his own body and was mortally wounded. His heroic actions undoubtedly saved his comrades from further injury or possible death. Sergeant Foster's courage, extraordinary heroism, and unfaltering devotion to duty reflected great credit upon himself and the Marine Corps and upheld the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country.



Photo courtesy of Vernon L. "Les" Stevenson

The CH-46 Sea Knight (often called a "Frog" because of its appearance) is one of the most durable aircraft in the Marine Corps inventory. It can lift 10,000 pounds or carry a squad of fully equipped troops.

Allgood lifted off from the airfield and managed to land the UH-34D inside the battalion perimeter around 0300 on the twenty-sixth.

Lieutenant Colonel Studt immediately climbed into Captain Brill's foxhole to get an appraisal of 2d Battalion, 4th Marines' situation. The first thing that struck him was the gaps in the battalion staff. Each time he asked about a key staff position, Brill reported that the respective officer was either a casualty in some hospital or that a new officer was filling the position. The battalion had been ground down during a month and a half of heavy fighting.

Released back to the battalion's control, Company G arrived at the defensive perimeter the following morning. The additional strength was welcome since 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."

Leaving Company F to guard the ammunition, 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 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 battalion perimeter. Those on the ground waved him off because of intense enemy fire.

As 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. Captain 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 hospital corpsman. The aircraft limped away as far as Strong Point C-2, where it made a forced landing.

Captain James E. Murphy—the air liaison officer for 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, who had been calling in air strikes



Photo courtesy of Vernon L. "Les" Stevenson

This UH-34D Seahorse prepares to lift off from Camp Evans for a resupply mission to Marines in the field in May 1967. Throughout the Vietnam War, Marine pilots flying "34s" delivered troops and equipment to the field and retrieved casualties, often under the most difficult and dangerous of conditions.

in front of Company E—saw Bennett's helicopter go down. With his radio still on his back, Murphy crawled out to the downed Seahorse, 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 Captain 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.

Murphy, however, could hear NVA soldiers nearby and could see some movement. He called in air strikes within 50 meters of the crashed helicopter with the aid of an airborne observer in an O-1C Bird Dog overhead. Working together, the two eventually managed to direct a Marine A-4 attack aircraft to deliver a line of smoke so that a helicopter could land and rescue the three Marines. 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 helicopter 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 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, at C-2 Bridge to send two companies and a small command group to 2d Battalion, 4th Marines' position. 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 for unknown reasons. After several hours of fruitless attempts by the engineers, he 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.

Company F reached the perimeter near dusk. The two companies from 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, arrived at about the same time. With these reinforcements, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, was ready that evening for any NVA attacks. In a later interview, 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 [command post], 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 into the zone and removing our emergency medevacs.

The trick probably would not have worked again.

Ground attacks ceased around 0200 on the twenty-seventh, 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. The enemy completed its departure by dawn. On orders from the 9th Marines, the battalion made a tactical withdrawal. Still harassed by enemy rocket and mortar fire and carrying the remainder of its dead and wounded, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, moved by echelon to Strong Point C-2 and then to Cam Lo.

During the period 25–27 October, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, lost 8 dead and 45 wounded, 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 twenty-eighth and resumed its role as the regimental reserve. Lieutenant Colonel William Wiese took command of the battalion, 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 [2d Battalion, 4th Marines] has met and beaten the best the enemy had to offer. Well done." Kingfisher resulted in 1,117 enemy killed and 5 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; the massed infantry assaults; and the depressing, ever-present drizzle and mud



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A193030

Men of the 9th Marines wait out a North Vietnamese rocket and artillery attack against the outpost at Con Thien in late 1967.

combined to make life 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 ravaged hill mass was referred to by all Marines as their "turn in the barrel" or the "Meat Grinder."

By the end of 1967, the DMZ front symbolized the frustrations of the American war in Vietnam. The bloody battle for the outlying hills surrounding Khe Sanh in April, and later the struggle for Con Thien, highlighted the fighting for the year. As casualty figures mounted on both sides, senior commanders voiced their concern. At the height of the fierce contest for Con Thien, Lieutenant General Victor H. "Brute" Krulak—the commanding general of Fleet Marine

Force, Pacific—observed that the Marines had suffered 956 casualties in September, and for the year, nearly 5,000 dead and wounded in the DMZ alone. Both General Krulak and Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, USN—the commander in chief of Pacific Command—concluded that such a rate could not be sustained and that “the operational benefits now being achieved in the area . . . are not consistent with the losses incurred.”

As early as July, General Krulak had warned about the disadvantages of waging the war in the DMZ sector. He told American commanders that they must face “the brutal facts” that the Marines were “under the enemy’s guns.” Krulak believed the enemy’s purpose was “to get us as near to his weapons and to his forces as possible, drench us with high angle fire weapons, engage us in close and violent combat, accept willingly a substantial loss of life for the opportunity to kill a lesser number of our men, and to withdraw into his North Vietnam sanctuary to refurbish.” At III MAF headquarters, General Cushman made adjustments to reinforce the northern battlefield.

Kentucky

Kentucky was the name given to one of five geographical areas of responsibility designated within northern I Corps on 1 November 1967, the day after Operation Kingfisher ended. Kentucky encompassed the eastern portion of the old Kingfisher tactical area of responsibility and incorporated most of the eastern strongpoint system. Assigned to the 9th Marines, Kentucky’s tactical area included the strongpoint at Con Thien and the C-2 and C-3 Combat Operating Bases, along with the C-2A Bridge at the Washout and C-3A Bridge over the Cam Lo River. Other operational areas were named Napoleon, Osceola, Lancaster, and Scotland. The artillery of the 12th Marines supported all of these operational areas.*

The 9th Marines was no stranger to the Kentucky area of operations. For all practical purposes, the change of designation served only to provide a convenient dividing line to measure the relative progress of the DMZ campaign with the body-count yardstick. The identical concept of operations

continued in effect: the 9th Marines was to hold on to Leatherneck Square, protect Dong Ha, build the barrier, and throw back any North Vietnamese forces attempting to infiltrate through the Con Thien area into the I Corps coastal plain.

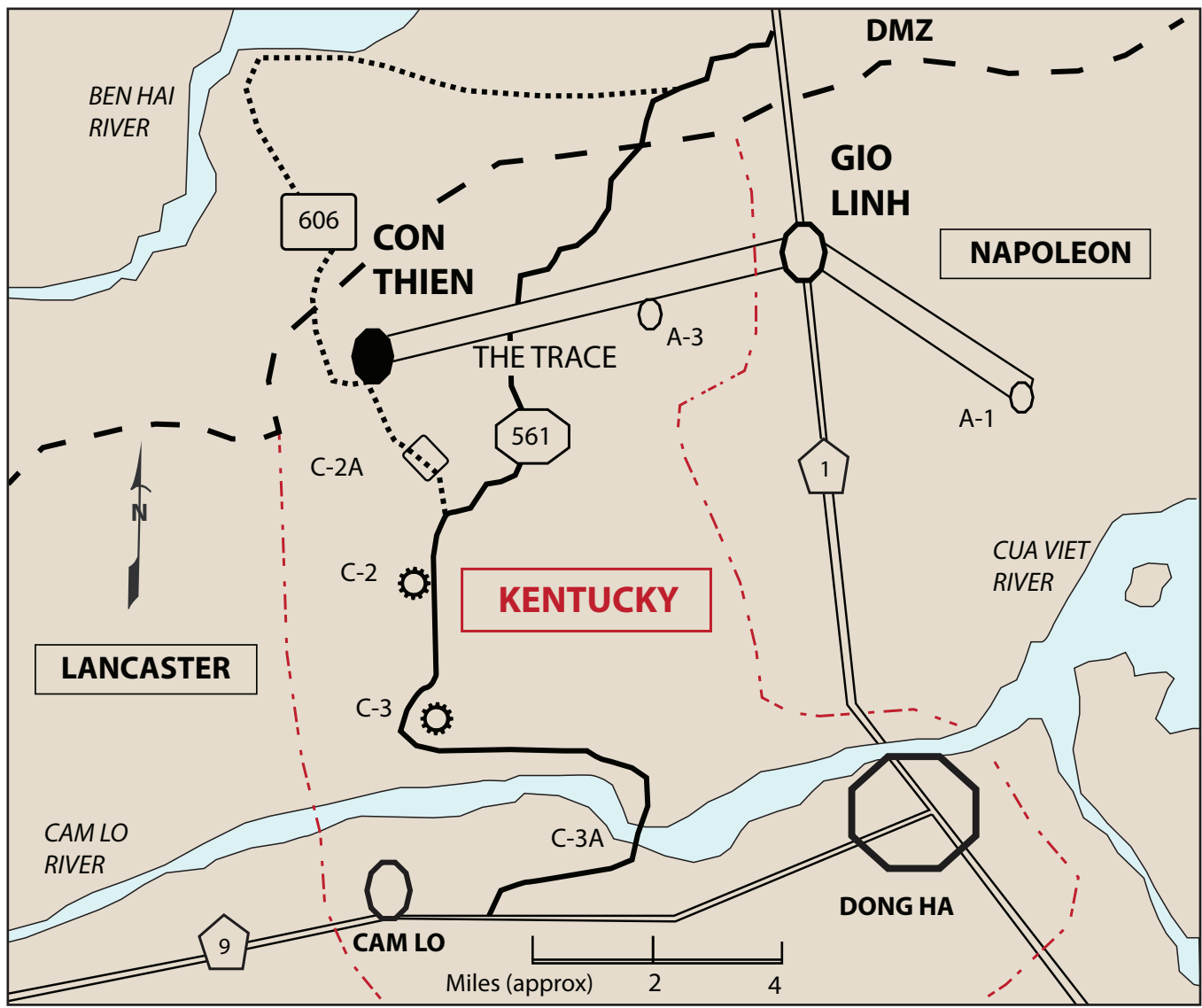
On 10 November 1967, BLT 1/3 celebrated the 192d birthday of the Marine Corps with an early morning move northward from Cam Lo to attack positions less than two kilometers east of Con Thien. With the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines—comprising only two companies and a command group—on its right, they moved out the next morning. The battalion landing team’s mission involved making a sweep from east to west around the northern face of the Con Thien base. The 9th Marines conceived the operation as a spoiling attack to disrupt suspected Communist concentrations around Con Thien.

The Kentucky planners were right; at 0830 on the eleventh, Company D hit an enemy platoon from the east, the blind side of the well-dug-in and concealed Communist position. The Marines forced the surprised NVA to fight; seven NVA died. That afternoon, Company D hit another dug-in enemy unit. This one suffered a similar fate; six more NVA soldiers died. One survivor, a squad leader, told his captors that his battalion had been in the Con Thien area for about a month. Apparently, operations in Kentucky, with excellent timing, upset Communist plans for Con Thien.

Although the action in the DMZ sector abated somewhat during October and November 1967, the situation was again tense by the end of the year. Just before Thanksgiving, General Krulak alerted General Cushman that the enemy was once more moving men and materiel into the DMZ, improving NVA artillery, and “preparing the battlefield.” At USMACV headquarters, General Westmoreland expressed his concern in early December about the enemy buildup. He believed that the next enemy move would be in the northern provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien. Therefore, on 16 December, he directed that I Corps receive priority on the B-52 bombing strikes for the next 30 days. At the same time, he ordered the immediate preparation of contingency plans to reinforce III MAF with Army troops and the development of logistic facilities to accommodate the forces.

In January 1968, Colonel Richard B. Smith, who had assumed command of the 9th Marines the previous September, controlled four infantry battalions and two companies

*LtGen Metzger noted that the operational names had little significance for the Marines who were there: “It was all one big battle. For most of us, one so-called operation looked just like another.”



Map by author

The Kentucky area of operations from 1 November 1967 to late February 1968.

from 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, from his command post at Dong Ha. Except for the companies of 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, all of the other battalions belonged administratively to other regiments: the 1st, 3d, and 4th Marines. The 2d Battalion, 1st Marines—commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Evan L. Parker Jr.—moved to Con Thien in mid-December and took over its defense. A 1st Marine Division unit—2d Battalion, 1st Marines—quickly learned the differences between the DMZ war and the pacification campaign in which the 1st Marine Division had been involved farther south. In contrast to the lightly armed and elusive Viet Cong

guerrillas, the North Vietnamese often stood their ground, supported by heavy machine guns, mortars, and artillery. By the time 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, occupied Con Thien, it had adjusted to the DMZ environment.

The 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, worked on Con Thien's SPOS fortifications with three companies; 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, screened Con Thien from positions on Hill 28, north of the Trace; and 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, occupied the C-2 Combat Operating Base and C-2A Bridge at the Washout on Route 561. In December, just before Christmas, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, had moved from positions

north of A-3 in the Kentucky area to Camp Carroll in the 3d Marines' Lancaster area of operations. A few days later, executive officer Major Dennis Murphy took Companies F and G back to Kentucky and relieved 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, at Cam Lo. Company F occupied the C-3 Cam Lo artillery position 1,000 meters above the Cam Lo River on Route 561, while Company G protected the Cam Lo Bridge (C-3A) at the river near Route 9.

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

With the command interest in the SPOS at the beginning of the year, the strongpoints and combat operating bases in the 9th Marines' sector took on even more importance. Anchoring the western segment of the cleared Trace, the strongpoint at Con Thien continued to play a major role in the regiment's defensive plan.** Major General Rathvon M. Tompkins, commanding the 3d Marine Division, concluded: "Dye Marker was a *bete noire* that influenced almost everything we did and they wouldn't let us off the hook. . . . The 3d Division was responsible for Dye Marker and if we were responsible for Dye Marker . . . then we had to have Carroll, we had to have Ca Lu, we had to have Con Thien, we had to have Khe Sanh. These are all part of this bloody thing. . . . It had a great deal to do with the 3d Division being tied to static posts."

*Some officers who served with the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, attached to the 9th Marines dispute whether there were standing operating procedures that restricted patrolling. A former company executive officer recalled that there were definite limitations on how far platoons and companies could move from their parent unit: 250 yards for platoons and 500 yards for companies. On the other hand, a former battalion commander and company commander with the 3d Battalion recalled no such limitations. No listing of such restrictions was found in the 9th Marines' command chronology for January 1968. The consensus seems to be that if there were such restrictions, they were not always enforced and perhaps not even known.

**LtGen Metzger observed that Con Thien and Gio Linh had been French forts, which indicated that both sites were recognized very early as key terrain.

Throughout December, the Marines of 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, worked feverishly on Con Thien's SPOS defenses. During the Christmas truce period, the battalion added 11 bunkers and dug a new trench along the forward slope. Troops then sandbagged the bunkers with a "burster" layer in the roofs, usually consisting of airfield matting "to burst delayed fuse rounds." They then covered the positions with rubberized tarps to keep the water out. By the end of the year, all of the new bunkers had been sandbagged and wired in with the new razor-sharp concertina wire. Protected by a minefield to its front, surrounded by wire, and supported by air, artillery, and tanks, the battalion lay relatively secure in its defenses at the exposed Con Thien outpost.

Over the 1968 New Year's night, the Marines of 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, on Con Thien enjoyed a small reprieve from the shooting war as both sides more or less adhered to the terms of a shaky New Year holiday truce, despite a small enemy probe of a Marine listening post on the perimeter. According to a Marine reporter, on New Year's Day a Marine forward artillery observer at Con Thien, looking through his binoculars at enemy forward positions across the Ben Hai River, suddenly spotted a large NVA flag with its single star emblazoned on a bright red background waving "in the breeze atop a rather crude flagpole." Other Marines, mostly young infantrymen, crowded around to take their turn to see for what most of them was their first tangible symbol of the enemy. Secure in their conviction that the Marines would adhere to the cease-fire, the NVA deliberately taunted the American troops.

Impatiently, the Marine gunners waited the few hours for the "false peace" to come to an end. As the time for the truce expired, the Con Thien guns opened up on the approaches to the defensive perimeter. The defenders then plotted a fire mission to take out the flag. Minutes before the artillerymen fired the first round, the NVA hauled down their colors. In a way, this incident mirrored many of the frustrations of the Marines in the DMZ. The average 19-year-old manning the defenses at Con Thien and his commanders had difficulty understanding the validity of such artificialities as DMZs that were militarized and cease-fires that appeared only to benefit the enemy.

The war soon resumed for 2d Battalion, 1st Marines. Although the intensity of combat around Con Thien never



Illustration by LtCol H. Avery Chenoweth, USMCR

Charlie Company's Command Post at Con Thien, Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam.

reached the level of September and October 1967, the North Vietnamese persisted in their probes and occasional bombardment of the Marine outpost. The battalion's monthly report said that "[the] . . . incoming was more harassing than destructive in nature." On 5 January 1968, the NVA gunners shelled Con Thien in groups of three to five bursts between 0945 and 1015. A total of 37 rounds, including five 120mm shells, fell on the Marine positions, with a direct hit on the battalion command post. This act resulted in one Marine killed, and eight wounded, including Lieutenant Colonel Parker, the battalion commander. Both Marine air and artillery attacked the suspected enemy firing positions, but the Marine command had no way of knowing the effectiveness of these efforts. After Parker's medical evacuation, Major James T. Harrell III, the executive officer, was named acting commander of the battalion. On 9 January, Lieutenant Colonel

Billy R. Duncan officially relieved Lieutenant Colonel Parker as battalion commander, and Major Harrell resumed his duties as executive officer. The enemy shelling of Con Thien remained sporadic, averaging about 30 rounds on those days the NVA chose to fire.*

On the ground, the North Vietnamese had taken advantage of the holiday truce period to bring up fresh units and to continue the pressure on the Marine outpost. The *803d NVA Regiment* relieved the *90th NVA* in the positions facing Con Thien. Almost daily, small patrols from the *803d* tested Marine defenses. For example, on 10 January, Company H reported in the early morning hours that "it had spotted three men, by starlight scope, moving in a westerly direction." The Marines fired three M79 grenade rounds and later checked the area "with negative results." Later, about 2100, a Marine squad from Company F on the northeastern perimeter picked up enemy movement on its radar scope and called in a mortar mission. A platoon-size Marine patrol that went to investigate the results of the action blundered into a minefield and sustained three casualties—one dead and two wounded.

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

*During January, the enemy fired on Con Thien 22 of the 31 days in the month.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A421910

Artillerymen of 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, at Con Thien fire a 105mm howitzer mission of high explosive and white phosphorous rounds into the DMZ. The ammunition, used around the clock by Con Thien Marines, was airlifted in by helicopters of the 1st MAW.



Photo courtesy of John Holguin

C-2A Bridge in December 1967 when defended by 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. The road toward the horizon led to Con Thien.

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

In January 1968, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Edwin A. Deptula, occupied both the C-2 and C-2A positions, having just relieved 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, in the sector. Deptula established his command post at C-2 with Companies A and B. His executive officer, Major John I. Hopkins, formed a second command group and with Companies C and D held the C-2A Bridge over the Washout.

Throughout the first weeks of the month, the battalion ran numerous squad- and platoon-size combat patrols from both C-2 and C-2A for distances of 1,500 meters from each of the bases and from Route 561. The most significant action

in the battalion’s area of operations involved a small patrol from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, which came across three NVA in a palm-covered harbor site, about 3,000 meters east of C-2, on 10 January. The reconnaissance Marines killed two of the enemy, took one prisoner, and captured all three of their weapons.

As part of the barrier system, the central effort at C-2 in early January was the completion of the bunker defenses. Several support units, including engineers, artillery, tank, and antitank detachments, shared the base area with 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. Although the engineers ran daily mine sweeps along Routes 561 and 606 to Con Thien to keep the road open, they, along with all the tenant units, assisted with the construction effort. On 10 January, a Dye Marker team visited the C-2 site to inspect the defenses. According to the battalion’s monthly chronology, “None of the bunkers could be considered complete. Maximum effort was later directed at bunker completion in keeping with the tactical situation.” Colonel Smith later explained some of the handicaps under which the Marine units worked in getting the barrier completed. Few of the units had “backhoes” to assist in digging foxholes or bunker foundations. He observed that the machines could “do in two hours what it takes a whole battalion to do in two days.” Despite scarcity of equipment, Smith also partially blamed Marine training for not teaching the troops “proper bunkering procedures—sandbagging.” He compared sandbagging technique to laying out bricks “with headers and stretchers.” He remarked that he saw more wasted effort with the sandbags “because the man doesn’t know what he is doing and the [noncommissioned officer] supervising him doesn’t know any more about it than he does, so the wall gets to be six-feet high and collapses . . . and there goes three days’ work gone to hell.” Overcoming limitations imposed by its own inexperience in constructing bunkers and the lack of heavy earthmoving equipment, they would complete 47 of the scheduled 81 bunkers in the C-2 base site by the end of January.

In the Cam Lo sector, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, ran patrols to keep the main supply route open to the farming villages above the Cam Lo River and Con Thien. At the C-3 base, Company F, together with supporting artillery and engineers, worked on the improvement of the Dye Marker defenses. On 15 January, the Marines at C-3 completed the



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A421698

This F-4 Phantom II took off from Da Nang fully loaded with high explosive bombs. Marines engaged in ground combat greatly appreciated the expertise F-4 pilots showed in providing close air support when called.

bunker requirements on schedule. During this period, Marine patrols encountered few enemy troops.

Meanwhile, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines—under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Lee R. Bendell—moved from C-2 to Hill 28 near Strong Point A-3, about three miles east of Con Thien and adjacent to the Trace, just inside the eastern boundary of the Kentucky area of operations. Bendell expanded his battalion's perimeter and moved his companies off the top of the hill to new positions lower down. Marine engineers bulldozed the growth and trees immediately to the west, an action that provided the battalion with better observation of the surrounding terrain and improved fields of fire. Low rolling hills with secondary scrub and thick brush, broken by flat, wet rice paddies of 75 to 150 meters, lay to the north and east. Wide rice paddies also were interspersed with the woods to the west. To the south, the Marines had a clear line of sight to Strong Point A-3 and the Trace, which

marked the battalion's southern boundary. The northern boundary extended to the southern edge of the DMZ, less than 1,000 meters from Hill 28.

Close to the DMZ and with elements of the *90th NVA Regiment* believed to be in his sector, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell insisted on particular alertness. He deployed his unit into a three-company perimeter, leaving one company in reserve. He used the reserve company for night ambushes and listening posts and as a reaction force during the day. According to the battalion commander, he maintained four to six ambushes and listening posts on any particular night. During the day, the battalion patrolled constantly with as many as two companies out at a time. Bendell reinforced the infantry companies with four 106mm recoilless rifles, two .50-caliber machine guns, and six of the battalion's 81mm mortars. He had left the two remaining mortars back in the base camp so that the extra men from the 81mm mortar platoon could

“hump . . . additional ammo, if we had to move out.” The 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, provided direct artillery support, and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing supplied close air support.

The “Thundering Third,” as 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, called itself, was no stranger to the DMZ war. It had been at Con Thien from July through early September 1967 during some of the heaviest fighting and bombardment around that strongpoint. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, who had assumed command that July, remembered that the battalion “had actively patrolled the surrounding area” that summer and helped establish the strongpoints at C-2 and the C-2A Bridge and C-3 and the Cam Lo Bridge (C-3A), and also deployed a detachment to Gio Linh.

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

The following morning, the last day of 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell sent out Company I, commanded by Captain John L. Prichard, into roughly the same area that Company M had met the NVA. Company I moved out from Hill 28 in platoon columns. As Bendell explained, this formation discouraged troops from stringing out and permitted the company commander “to deploy fire power immediately to the front.” Following a trail near the destroyed village of Xuan Hai 1,800 meters northwest of Hill 28, Prichard’s point, Staff Sergeant Charlie L. Colley, spotted four to five North Vietnamese troops to his front. The company commander ordered two platoons forward to a slight rise in the ground and brought his third platoon in behind the command post group to protect the rear. In the initial exchange, the North Vietnamese had the advantage, but the Marine company soon took the upper hand. Moving rapidly back

and forth across the Marine line, Captain Prichard, his officers, and his noncommissioned officers rallied their troops, and Company I soon gained fire superiority.

At that point, around noon, the Marines observed a second group of NVA maneuvering to reinforce the first. The company brought reinforcements supported by 60mm mortar and small-arms fire, and forced the enemy to lie low. A half-hour later the Marines themselves, came under heavy enemy 82mm-mortar bombardment from their right flank, generally to the northeast. By this time, it was apparent that the enemy was in “strong bunkered positions all across the front and right front of Company I.”

Despite marginal flying conditions because of 500–1,000-foot cloud ceilings and reduced visibility, an aerial observer arrived over the scene. Giving his call sign as “Smitty Tango,” the air observer made radio contact with Captain Prichard and adjusted the company’s 60mm countermortar fire. Marine mortars knocked out one of the enemy tubes and “caused the others to cease fire.” With this success to his credit, the observation aircraft pulled away, and the company called in an artillery mission, hitting the enemy positions with mixed caliber rounds. Marine shelling “threw [NVA] bodies in the air as India [Company I] walked 155mm [fire] towards friendly lines.”

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

Although the enemy attempted to jam the Marine radio net, Smitty Tango remained in communication with Captain Prichard and Second Lieutenant Albert B. Doyle, the company’s attached forward artillery observer. At 1350, the air observer ceased the artillery fire and called in two Marine Huey gunships from Marine Observation Squadron 6 that had covered the landing of the medevac helicopter. The gunships made several passes at the enemy mortar positions in

open bomb craters near the Marine positions. When the air support arrived, several NVA soldiers stood up in their holes, only 100 to 150 meters away from Company I, and fired at both UH-1s as they conducted strikes upon them. As the lead Huey, piloted by Major Curtis D. McRaney, came in on its first run, its guns jammed. According to McRaney's copilot, Major David L. Steele, "One of the NVA must have noticed this because he stepped out of his hole and began firing at us with his automatic weapon on our next pass." This was a mistake. As Steele observed, "On successive passes . . . we were able to cover the crater area with rockets and machine gun fire, killing most of the enemy." The air observer reported that he saw the North Vietnamese "dragging eight bodies into a tunnel."

After the air strikes, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, who had been monitoring the radio traffic, decided to pull Company I back to Hill 28. By this time, the North Vietnamese had brought up further reinforcements, and Bendell decided there was no need to assault the enemy position. Marine supporting arms, both artillery and gunships, would have the desired effect.

As Company I broke contact and started to withdraw, the troops saw a large NVA unit, reportedly dressed in Marine uniforms, closing in.* The Hueys laid down extensive covering fire; then the artillery took over. By 1530, the company had returned to Hill 28. Colonel Smith, the 9th Marines commander, personally greeted "the men of the Hungry I" with a deserved "well done." The company, while sustaining casualties of only 4 wounded, had accounted for 27 enemy dead, not including the 8 NVA taken out by the helicopters or the unknown number of enemy killed by the artillery. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell recommended Captain Prichard for the Navy Cross; he received the Silver Star.

After a few brief quiet days, the DMZ war in the western Kentucky sector flared again. The 9th Marines confirmed the presence of a screening force made up of the *320th NVA Division*, which had replaced the *324B Division* in the fighting

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



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A422890

The UH-1E was the Marine Corps' variant of the UH-1 "Huey." When equipped with rocket pods and certain other rapid-fire weaponry, it was called a "gunship" by the Marines. This photograph shows a Marine Huey gunship on a search-and-destroy mission. For close-in fire support, this helicopter was superb.

south of the DMZ. On 16 February, Marines on Con Thien observed three North Vietnamese tanks north of their position and called in air support. According to intelligence reports, the North Vietnamese division had two armored regiments, the *202d* and *203d*, each with 80 tanks (T-34 medium tanks and PT-76 light amphibious tanks). Without knowing the location of the two armored regiments, Americans acknowledged the capability of the enemy to use tanks in the areas where they could secretly mass his forces and overrun friendly outposts with little opposition. The Marines prepared antimchanized plans.

Leaving Hill 28, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, uncovered an enemy base area and then took up new positions at An Dinh between A-3 and Con Thien to investigate recent probes at the latter base. On 18 January, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell sent out a two-company patrol near an abandoned hamlet just north of the Trace about two miles northeast of Con Thien. Company M was the blocking force while Company L was the sweeping force. The previous evening, Captain John D. Carr, Company L's commander, had held a meeting of his platoon commanders. Second Lieutenant Kenneth L. Christy, who headed the 3d Platoon, remembered that Carr

briefed them on the next day's planned patrol. According to Christy, he noticed that the route of advance "took us through a bombed out ville that we all referred to as the 'Meat Market,' because it was 'Charlie's' [the enemy's] area, and almost every time we went there either us or them, somebody got hammered." Christy's platoon had run a patrol in that area very recently, but there had been no sign of the enemy. Captain Carr assigned the point position to his 1st Platoon.

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

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

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

By this time, the North Vietnamese fires had somewhat diminished. Captain Carr and a forward artillery observer who was with the cutoff troops, Sergeant Michael J. Madden, called in supporting U.S. artillery. Sergeant Madden also made radio contact with an air observer in a Huey who brought in helicopter gunships to keep the enemy at bay. Under this protective cover, Lieutenant Christy took one of his squads and, joined by Captain Carr, reached the 1st Platoon. Christy then deployed his men and crawled forward to another crater where Sergeant Madden, although wounded, was still calling in artillery strikes. There were four other wounded men with Madden. Christy remembered Carr covering him with a shotgun while he went forward again to reach some Marine bodies, including that of the 1st Platoon commander, some 50 meters to the front. With the supporting artillery fires, a squad from 3d Platoon brought back the wounded and dead of the 1st Platoon. Lieutenant Christy remembers

A Belated Medal

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



Photos courtesy of John Holguin

Top: Sign at the entrance to Con Thien, February 1968.
Bottom: Reverse of the sign at the entrance to Con Thien.

admonishing some of his men for being too gentle and that the bodies were not going to be hurt: “Let’s get these people policed up and get out of here before Charlie starts firing us up again.”

In the meantime, upon hearing of Company L’s predicament, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines’ commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, replaced Company M with another unit in the blocking position, then, with a skeleton command group, accompanied Company M to relieve Company L. After the linkup, the two companies overran at least three enemy mortar positions, several machine guns, and some individual fighting holes. With continuing helicopter gunship support and covering artillery, Marine helicopters evacuated the most seriously wounded. The two companies then “crossed the Trace in good order” late that afternoon, carrying their remaining casualties. In the action, the two companies sustained 9 Marines killed and 22 wounded, including Captain Carr, who was evacuated by helicopter. According to the 9th Marines, the enemy sustained over 100 casualties.

For the most part, the ground action in Kentucky slackened after the first two weeks of February. In one of the sharpest encounters, however, a sweep of the southern DMZ by two companies of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, encountered NVA infantrymen in bunkers on 16 February. With the assistance of air, Marines killed approximately 20 of the enemy at the cost of 6 wounded. While the enemy mounted no major offensive against Marine positions in Kentucky during the latter part of the month, the NVA continued to deploy forces in and through the DMZ. In the Kentucky area of operations during the month of February 1968, the Marines sustained casualties of 89 dead and 267 wounded. During the same period, they reported killing nearly 400 of the enemy and capturing 39 prisoners.

The End of the Marine Mission at Con Thien

On 20 January 1968, Generals Cushman and Westmoreland agreed to suspend the installation along the Trace of the linear obstacle system “pending clarification of the enemy situation in Quang Tri Province.” For all practical purposes, this ended the command emphasis on the barrier. As General Cushman later admitted, he “just quit” building what he termed the “fence,” and “Tet came along and people had something else to think about.”



Illustration by 1stLt Leonard H. Dermott, USMCR

Con Thien C.O.C. Artist's dedication: "In memory of the Marine casualties at Con Thien under the command of 1st Battalion, 1st Marines." The two Marines in the painting became casualties 20 minutes after the artist made the sketch for later painting.

The U.S. Army's 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), assumed control of the Leatherneck Square and Kentucky area of operations, and the Marines left in July 1968. The brigade had been reorganized at Fort Carson, Colorado, in late March for movement to Vietnam. After months of training, their main body began moving on 22 July, and by the thirty-first, the brigade had completed the movement of personnel from Fort Carson to Da Nang and then to Quang Tri.

As with all combat situations, the mettle of Marines in leadership positions was often tested throughout the Battle for Con Thien, from the lance corporal in charge of his

understrength fireteam to the lieutenant colonel responsible for a battalion. Though usually tired, frequently frightened, and always conscious of the weight of responsibility, the high preponderance of these leaders performed admirably. From time to time, fine leadership was recognized with an award. Far more often, it went unnoticed by any but those nearby. The stated mission of disrupting the NVA infiltration of manpower and materiel from the north in the vicinity of Con Thien was considered to have been successful; many believe it was because of effective small unit Marine leadership, and in spite of the SPOS.

Sources

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
BLT	Battalion Landing Team
DMZ	demilitarized zone
HMM	Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron
LVTE.....	tracked landing vehicle configured for engineering
LVTH	tracked landing vehicle mounted with a 105mm howitzer
MAF	Marine Amphibious Force
medevac	medical evacuation
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
RPG	rocket-propelled grenade
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
SAM.....	surface-to-air missile
SLF	Special Landing Force
SPOS.....	Strong Point Obstacle System
USMACV	U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

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Joseph C. Long

Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve (Retired)



Photograph courtesy of the author

The author as a lance corporal during Operation Kingfisher near Con Thien, August 1967.

Joseph C. Long enlisted in the Marine Corps in February 1966. Following recruit training at Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego, then infantry training and Field Radio Operator's School at Camp Pendleton, he joined 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, at Phu Bai, Republic of Vietnam, in mid-September of that year. Long was awarded the Purple Heart for a wound received at Dong Ha on 18 May 1967. Spending 13 months with 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, he experienced many of the events described in this monograph.

Upon being commissioned in 1974, Long served first as an infantry officer and later as a planner. His final Marine Corps assignment was as project manager for the creation of the National Museum of the Marine Corps. He retired after 37 years of active and Reserve military service. As of this writing, Joe Long is the director of the Veterans Business Outreach Center for the state of New Mexico's Department of Veteran Services.



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