

# THE FIRST

U.S. MARINES IN OPERATION STARLITE, AUGUST 1965

# FIGHT



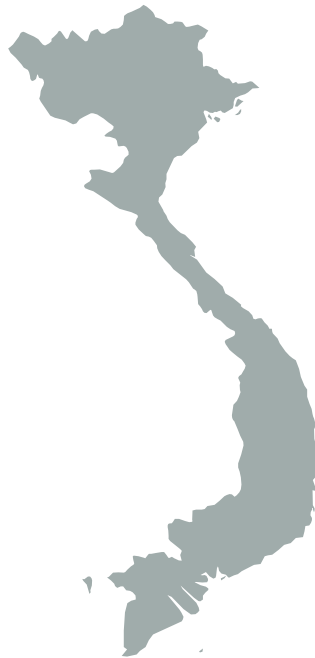
MARINES IN THE VIETNAM WAR COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

# **THE FIRST FIGHT**

**U.S. MARINES IN OPERATION STARLITE**

**AUGUST 1965**

COLONEL ROD ANDREW JR., U.S. MARINE CORPS RESERVE



MARINES IN THE VIETNAM WAR COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

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On 18 August 1965, U.S. Marines of Regimental Landing Team 7 (RLT 7) and Viet Cong soldiers of the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* met each other in a ferocious struggle that would continue for several more days. Operation Starlite, as the Marines called it, took place on the Van Tuong Peninsula, about 10 miles south of the Marine base at Chu Lai. It was a significant battle for many reasons. Though the Marines and Viet Cong had encountered each other in small-sized patrols and ambushes before, Operation Starlite was the first time they met in open battle in regimental-sized formations. Both sides learned several lessons about how the enemy fought, and each came to appreciate the other as a formidable foe. In the short term, the tactical victory won by the Marines validated such operational concepts as vertical envelopment, amphibious assault, and combined arms that had not been put into practice on a large scale since the Korean War. It proved that Marine ground troops and their junior officers and noncommissioned officers, as well as Marine aviators, were just as tough and reliable as their forebears who had fought in World War II and Korea. In the long term, Starlite foreshadowed the American military's commitment to conventional warfare in Vietnam

and showed how difficult it would be to defeat Communist forces in South Vietnam.

For years, the United States had grown increasingly concerned about the expanding Communist insurgency in South Vietnam. Influenced by the domino theory of the Cold War, American policy makers came to believe that a Communist success in overthrowing the U.S.-backed government in Saigon would destabilize all of Southeast Asia and represent a major victory for Communism. By late 1964, the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson was convinced that the United States would have to intervene directly with American military forces to prevent this from occurring.

In its most significant effort to date to persuade North Vietnam to end its support of the Communist insurgency in the south, the Johnson administration approved a major aerial bombardment campaign in early 1965. Code-named Rolling Thunder, this operation commenced on 2 March 1965. It did nothing to curtail North Vietnamese infiltration into or Communist attacks within South Vietnam, however, and the campaign was therefore extended indefinitely (it would continue until November 1968). This reliance on air attacks to influence Communist behavior made it all the

# Mainland Southeast Asia





Defense Department (Marine Corps) A183734-B

BGen Frederick J. Karch, commander of 9th MEB, talks with MajGen Nguyen Chanh Thi (center) and BGen Hoang Xuan Lam (left) on the beach just prior to the Marines' initial landing at Da Nang on 8 March 1965. General Thi was the ARVN commander for the entire I Corps region, and General Lam was the commander of 2d ARVN Division, which would participate in the mop-up phase of Operation Starlite.

more important to provide reliable security for the American air base at Da Nang in the northern region of South Vietnam. American planners deemed the base vital for future air campaigns against the North and considered the ability of South Vietnam's own forces to protect the base questionable.

Thus, on 8 March 1965, the U.S. Marines' Battalion Landing Team 3/9 made an amphibious landing just north of Da Nang, marking the beginning of the formal presence of American ground troops in Vietnam. Later that day, Battalion Landing Team 1/3 began arriving by airplane at the Da Nang airfield. This landing and the initial buildup of forces in the Da Nang area came under the operational control of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB) commanded by Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch. The 9th MEB also included two helicopter squadrons and limited logistical support.

The initial justification for the Marines' presence in Da Nang, then, was the security of the air base there. Senior

military leaders argued that it would serve other purposes as well. The Joint Chiefs of Staff; General William C. Westmoreland, USA, commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV); Marine Corps Commandant General Wallace M. Greene Jr.; and Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, commanding general of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac), argued that the arrival of the Marines in Da Nang would make Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces available for more aggressive operations in the area and would establish a protected enclave that could facilitate a further escalation of the American presence or protect a withdrawal if the president thought either necessary. Additionally, the Johnson administration seemed hopeful that such a show of American force could reinvigorate the ARVN and have a decisive effect in stabilizing South Vietnam, without involving U.S. troops in actual ground combat. The 7 March landing order from the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington had directed that "the U.S. Marine force will not,



repeat will not, engage in day-to-day actions against the Viet Cong.” In fact, the Marine infantry battalions’ formal mission was simply to provide security for the Da Nang airfield, from which American aircraft were supporting ARVN operations inside South Vietnam. During this period, there were many restrictions on how the Marines could be employed, and even on their ability to return hostile fire—restraints which were frustrating to the men in the fighting holes.

General Westmoreland, however, pushed for a broader role for American ground troops. He did not believe that securing air bases, launching air attacks on North Vietnam, and assisting in the buildup of ARVN forces would be enough to force North Vietnam to cease its support of the Viet Cong or to stabilize South Vietnam’s government. In late March, he recommended a further buildup of U.S. ground forces and a more active role for them. He had little trouble convincing his superiors. On 1 April, President Johnson approved an increase of U.S. forces in Vietnam, including the deployment of more Marines. He also sanctioned an alteration of the 9th MEB’s mission that would allow the Marines to participate “in active combat under conditions to be established and approved by the Secretary of Defense in consultation with the Secretary of State.” By 14 April, the Marines had received permission to engage in offensive operations under certain conditions.\*

Meanwhile, more Marines had arrived in Da Nang, as well as in the area of the Hue–Phu Bai airstrip, about eight miles south of the ancient capital city of Hue. In addition, the 9th MEB, soon to become superseded by the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), began establishing a third enclave at Chu Lai, about 50 miles south of Da Nang and 8 miles north of the mouth of the Tra Bong River. Finally, in mid-July, a reinforced battalion and a helicopter squadron established a fourth enclave at Qui Nhon, some 175 miles south of Da Nang.

The arrival of American ground troops in the spring of 1965 marked the escalation of a debate over strategy. General Westmoreland convinced President Johnson that the United States should deploy more than 200,000 troops to the

Republic of Vietnam and, with the help of such allies as Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea, begin offensive operations to prevent an enemy victory in 1965, with the ultimate aim of destroying enemy forces on the battlefield by 1968. Thus, Westmoreland envisioned focusing on the destruction of enemy forces in a purely military sense, in what would later be called “search-and-destroy” operations. The United States would use large mobile formations and rely on its superior firepower to seek out and destroy Communist military formations, both conventional and guerilla, which would in turn bring peace and stability to South Vietnam. Holding a different point of view were senior Marine leaders such as Lieutenant General Victor Krulak, successive III MAF commanders Major Generals William R. Collins and Lewis W. Walt, and Brigadier General Frederick Karch. These generals did not object to seizing occasional opportunities to strike Communist main force units, but they preferred to pursue an “enclave,” “pacification,” or “clear and hold” strategy. This would entail bringing the focus of the war to the village level. American forces would establish physical security and foster economic development, land reform, and local democracy, thereby denying to large enemy forces the local support they needed in terms of food, taxes, and intelligence. American troops would also train local pro-Saigon “popular forces” and work closely with the ARVN. Like a “spreading ink blot,” more and more rural areas would be pacified in this way, denying support to the enemy and stabilizing the South Vietnamese regime. Marine officers conceded that this approach would take time, but it would cause fewer American casualties, foster a closer relationship with a strengthened South Vietnamese government, and ultimately be more effective in stabilizing the country. This internal strategic debate between senior Marine Corps and Army leaders would shape American operational concepts for several more years. For the most part, General Westmoreland, as the senior military commander in Vietnam, won the debate. In many ways, Operation Starlite would represent the coming ascendancy of his approach to fighting the war.

General Walt’s III MAF took on the responsibility of assisting the ARVN in pacifying the I Corps Tactical Zone, consisting of South Vietnam’s five northernmost provinces—Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai. The terrain, weather, and enemy presence in

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\*Westmoreland permitted the Marines to engage in offensive action as a reaction force in coordination with South Vietnamese forces, make deep reconnaissance patrols, and “undertake in coordination with RVN [Republic of Vietnam] I Corps, an intensifying program of offensive operations to fix and destroy the VC [Viet Cong] in the general Da Nang area.”

the I Corps zone presented formidable challenges. The flat, sandy terrain along the coast in the I Corps area quickly gave way to a strip of arable land aptly described by Marine historian Allan R. Millett as “delta rice lands,” full of “rice paddies, dikes, narrow village trails, and tree lines.” The delta, in turn, merged into hilly or mountainous terrain full of bamboo thickets and thick rain forests. Miserably cold and wet in the winter monsoon season (some areas receive more than 100 inches of rain per year), the Marines in I Corps would endure debilitating heat and humidity in the summer. The area’s northern location put it close to Communist base camps in North Vietnam and Laos. Moreover, the Viet Cong had been particularly active there over the last several years and controlled most of the countryside and the local population.

By mid-July, the Marines of III MAF had established enclaves (air bases protected by ground troops) at Da Nang, Phu Bai, Chu Lai, and Qui Nhon. Operating in and around the Chu Lai base was the regimental command post of 4th Marines with two of its battalions—1st Battalion, 4th Marines, and 2d Battalion, 4th Marines—as well as 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. The Chu Lai base received further reinforcement on 14 August with the arrival of the headquarters of 7th Marines and the administrative (rather than tactical) landing of 1st Battalion, 7th Marines.

## The Enemy

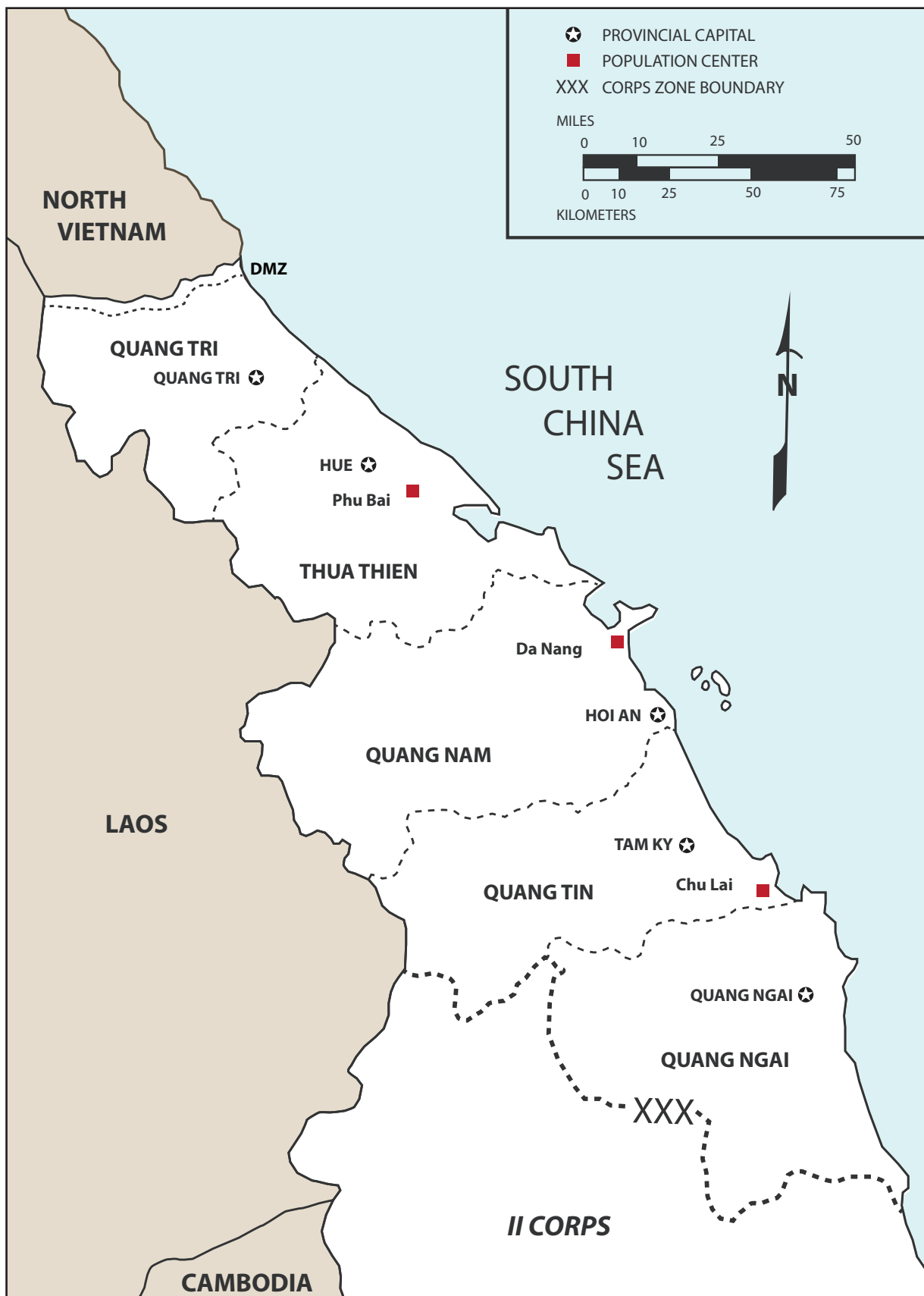
Vietnamese Communists also perceived the year 1965 as a crucial time. Since 1959, the Communist regime in Hanoi had stated its intention was to destabilize and overthrow the pro-Western regime based farther south in Saigon, in the Republic of Vietnam. In 1961, it established the People’s Liberation Armed Forces or Liberation Army of South Vietnam, more commonly known as the Viet Cong, to help achieve this goal. Increasingly, one of the means of challenging the Saigon regime had been through conventional military operations against the ARVN. By the end of 1964, the Viet Cong were operating in several locations in regimental strength. In several pitched battles between December 1964 and the summer of 1965, the Viet Cong inflicted devastating losses on ARVN units. Hanoi was confident of the Viet Cong’s ability to destroy the ARVN in a one-on-one fight, but the crucial remaining wild card was the Americans. The Communists

needed to defeat the ARVN before the Americans could arrive in sufficient strength to turn the tide in Saigon’s favor.

Three factions of the Viet Cong operated under Communist control. First, explains historian Warren Wilkins, were the “village guerillas or militia detachments [that] resembled the Westernized caricature of a Viet Cong combatant—a shoddily armed, ‘farmer by day, guerilla by night’ fighter engaged in setting booby traps and picking off American infantrymen.” The second group consisted of “local force” Viet Cong organized at the provincial level who were better trained and better armed. Finally, there were the “main-force” Viet Cong units organized up to the battalion and regimental levels; these units were well trained, well equipped with Communist bloc weapons, and well led by a cadre of veterans who had fought the ARVN, the French, and in some cases even the Japanese. Unlike local guerillas at the village level, main-force Viet Cong units were committed early in the war to demolishing ARVN units before the large-scale deployment of American forces made that goal more difficult. When the United States did commit ground units on a large scale, the Viet Cong made a deliberate effort, at least for a period beginning in August 1965 and lasting well into 1966, to defeat those forces with conventional tactics in a “big unit” war.

The *1st Viet Cong Regiment*, like other main-force Viet Cong units, was a veteran, professional force. It was capably led and well supplied, and had repeatedly defeated ARVN forces in major actions in the latter half of 1964 and first half of 1965. It consisted of four battalions—the *40th*, *60th*, and *90th* recently reinforced by the *45th Weapons Battalion*. Many of its officers were veterans of the war against the French. By the time of Operation Starlite, some of the enlisted soldiers were recent conscripts obtained from the Quang Ngai region, the province just south of Chu Lai. Others were conscripts who had joined the regiment months earlier, and some were volunteers who had angrily decided to resist abuses by officials serving the Saigon regime. Whether conscripts or volunteers, many of the men were already veterans of several fierce battles with ARVN forces. Recently, the regiment had overrun the 1st Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment, in the last week of May. This action occurred at the village of Ba Gia, 20 miles south of Chu Lai. Five weeks later, the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* struck the same ARVN battalion again, and





this time virtually annihilated it. By the end of the battle, the ARVN battalion's strength was reduced from 257 men to 40. The Viet Cong had captured two 105mm howitzers and reportedly killed two American advisors attached to the ARVN battalion—Captain William F. Eisenbraun, USA, and Sergeant First Class Henry A. Musa Jr., USA—as well as the copilot of an American helicopter providing air support—Chief Warrant Officer Allen L. Holt, USA.\* These two actions at Ba Gia were so successful that the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* proudly called itself the “*Ba Gia*” *Regiment*.

The *1st Viet Cong Regiment* had sustained heavy losses at Ba Gia as well, and it began moving north in early August toward Chu Lai in order to rest, refit, and gather and train new recruits. At that time, Colonel Leo J. Dulacki, General Walt's intelligence officer, began receiving “countless low-level reports” from the various intelligence collection organizations on the movement of the *1st Viet Cong Regiment*. Many of the reports seemed contradictory and unreliable, but with careful study the general picture emerged that the enemy regiment was moving north toward Chu Lai.

This information corresponded with increased pressure on III MAF from General Westmoreland to engage the enemy in large-scale conventional combat operations. Marine officers in Vietnam at this time, despite their faith in pacification and combined action with loyal progovernment militia, had no particular aversion to launching larger offensive operations as well. In fact, frustration was already growing throughout the ranks, from private to general, with the endless routine of patrols, ambushes, and counterambushes that occasionally produced Marine and enemy casualties but no opportunity to fix and destroy large enemy formations in open battle. But when General Westmoreland pushed the III MAF commander, Major General Walt, to launch larger offensive operations farther away from his bases, Walt had to remind him that such a course would violate his latest written instructions. A 6 May letter of instruction limited III MAF offensive operations to “reserve/reaction” missions in support of South Vietnamese units already heavily engaged with a Communist force and to limited offensive operations

within the tactical area of responsibility of III MAF forces “to prevent massing of enemy forces for surprise attacks on base areas.” In other words, the only time that the Marines could launch major offensive operations was to bail out ARVN units that were already in trouble or to preempt an imminent Communist strike on a Marine base. Westmoreland replied that those restrictions were no longer realistic, that General Walt was to rewrite them in order to give himself the authority he needed to act more aggressively, and that Westmoreland would approve the revisions. On 6 August, Walt received official permission to undertake large offensives against the enemy.

Thus, III MAF had obtained permission to go after the enemy on a large scale at a time in which the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* had just come into its sights and intelligence sources were painting a clearer picture of where the unit was. Moreover, this occurred when Marines of all ranks were growing weary of the seemingly indecisive outcomes of patrols and small-unit actions. On the very day that Walt's written guidance from Westmoreland was officially changed, a battalion-sized force from the 4th Marine Regiment and the 51st ARVN Regiment launched a two-day operation, Operation Thunderbolt, south of the Tra Bong River but west of Highway 1, thus west of the area in which Operation Starlite would later take place. The Marines returned to base on the seventh having met only light resistance.

Meanwhile, units from 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, had been patrolling in the Van Tuong Peninsula south of the Tra Bong River, 9–10 miles south of Chu Lai, since the previous month. It was an area of dense vegetation with few open fields of fire except in areas of open rice paddies. Even the rice paddies were divided and segmented by hedgerows six to eight feet high consisting of bamboo thickets and hardwood trees that could provide cover and concealment to defending forces. Many small villages dotted the area, including the centrally located Van Tuong. The broken terrain militated against Marines easily conducting a sweep of the area to root out local guerrillas along with their weapons and underground supplies, a common activity of Marine troops. The Marines came to realize that the Viet Cong already had a significant hold in the Van Tuong area and had been able to extract supplies and conscripts from it. Additionally, during Starlite itself, they would find that there were literally hundreds of

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\*Capt Eisenbraun was initially reported killed; however, later reports showed that he was captured and died in captivity in 1967. SFC Musa and CWO-2 Holt were definitely killed in the Ba Gia engagement.

# Major General Lewis W. Walt



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A412382

Lewis Walt graduated in 1936 from Colorado State University, where he was captain of the football and wrestling teams, student body president, and cadet colonel of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps detachment. He accepted a commission as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps in July of that year. By the time the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Walt had served two overseas tours;

he was promoted to captain that month. He volunteered to join the 1st Raider Battalion and led Company A of that unit in its assault on Tulagi in the Solomon Islands in August 1942. For his gallantry in that action, he was awarded the Silver Star. He was promoted to major the next month and given command of 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, on Guadalcanal. In that epic battle, Walt was wounded, cited for bravery, and "spot promoted" to lieutenant colonel, having now been promoted twice in a year's time. For his leadership of 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, at Cape Gloucester on New Britain, he was awarded the Navy Cross. He received a second Navy Cross for his leadership of the same unit at Peleliu in 1944. During the Korean War, Colonel Walt commanded the 5th Marine Regiment and also served as chief of staff of 1st Marine Division. In Korea, he was awarded the Legion of Merit and the Bronze Star, both with Combat "V." While commanding the 5th Marine

Regiment in Korea, one of Walt's battalion commanders had been Oscar F. "Peat" Peatross, who would later lead RLT 7 during Starlite.

In June 1965, Major General Walt became commander of III MAF in Vietnam, where he served until 1967. He was promoted to lieutenant general in 1966, and he became Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps on 1 January 1968. While still holding this post, he was promoted to general. He retired from the Marine Corps on 1 February 1971. At the end of his career, Walt published a book titled *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (1970) in which he reflected on his Vietnam experiences and expressed regret that Army officers had not been more open to methods of counterinsurgency warfare that were well known to Marine officers in the 1930s who had suppressed insurgencies in Haiti and Nicaragua during the so-called Banana Wars.

underground caves and interconnected tunnels, some used by civilians to store their food and others by the enemy to hide weapons, ammunition, supplies, and soldiers. The Viet Cong had transformed the majority of the villages in the area into fortified villages, complete with bunkers, interconnecting tunnels, booby traps, and huts with collapsing walls that could be quickly lowered, enabling machine guns inside to fire in prearranged fields of fire.

Marines of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, patrolled the Van Tuong Peninsula region frequently in July, originally with platoon-sized units. As they consistently made significant enemy contact, they subsequently shifted to company-sized patrols of two to four days' duration. The commander of

Company M, Captain Calvin M. Morris, remembered that "every time we went over there, we got hit. We got hit and got hit and got hit." Obviously, there was a significant Viet Cong militia presence in the area even before the arrival of the *1st Viet Cong Regiment*. By the middle of August, though, Morris noticed a difference in the appearance and quality of enemy troops his Marines were facing. On 14 August, Morris's company conducted a heliborne operation in the area. Marines from Company M had numerous sightings of well-equipped and well-armed enemy soldiers and exchanged fire several times. At one point, Morris called in an artillery fire mission on an enemy mortar position. When the mission was complete, Morris and his men discovered several dead



Photo courtesy of LtCol Calvin M. Morris

Then-Capt Calvin M. Morris (left), commanding officer of Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and his company executive officer, 1stLt William M. Krulak (center), son of FMFPac's commanding general, LtGen Victor H. Krulak. This photo, taken weeks before Starlite, shows the Marines very near the spot where Company M established its blocking position north of Van Tuong on 17 August.

enemy soldiers. Unlike the black pajama-clad guerillas they had previously encountered, these were “dressed in khaki, squared away,” well equipped and well armed. They had AK47 Kalashnikov assault rifles and Russian-made rocket launchers, weapons that Morris's Marines had never seen the enemy carry before. Company M's Marines put the bodies and the captured weapons on a helicopter and sent them back to base for inspection. To Morris, it was the first indication that the Marines were now dealing with a professional, well-trained force.\*

On the day of Company M's return to Chu Lai, 15 August, two other major pieces of intelligence arrived that had a decisive effect on the thinking of General Walt and his staff. First, Major General Nguyen Chanh Thi, ARVN commander for the entire I Corps region, informed Walt that a Viet Cong defector had provided his forces with urgent information. The enemy deserter was a 17-year-old youth named Vo Thao

who had been conscripted earlier in the year and assigned to the *40th Battalion, 1st Viet Cong Regiment*. Thao had family members on both sides of the war, although most worked for the ARVN or the Americans, and he had requested leave to visit his family. When his commander refused, the young man forged fake leave papers and deserted. General Thi personally questioned Vo Thao, who stated that the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* was on the Van Tuong Peninsula and preparing to attack the Marine base at Chu Lai. Thi considered this information to be the most important and reliable intelligence he had received during the entire war and informed Walt immediately. The Marine general immediately made plans to visit his own commanders in Chu Lai the next day, the sixteenth. One possible response to the information Walt had was to continue to strengthen the defenses around Chu Lai and wait for the presumed enemy attack. Instead, by the evening of the fifteenth, it was clear that Walt had already made up his mind to launch a large preemptive attack on the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* as soon as possible.

Also on 15 August, signals intelligence sources confirmed the location of the enemy regiment on the Van Tuong Peninsula. National Security Agency officials in Saigon alerted

\*Later, the Marines would find that, despite the presence of Chinese and Soviet-bloc weapons, the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* was also armed with U.S. weapons, including World War II-era Garand M1 rifles, Browning Automatic Rifles (BARs), M79 grenade launchers, and 60mm and 81mm mortars.





Photo courtesy of LtCol Calvin M. Morris

Mouth of the Tra Bong River. As Marines from the Chu Lai area conducted numerous operations in the area south of the river in July and August 1965, they often were inserted or extracted from the mouth of the river with LVTP5 “amtracs.”

General Joseph A. McChristian, USA, chief of the intelligence staff of USMACV. General Walt also probably learned of this development on the fifteenth, though he certainly knew of it by the next day when General McChristian met with him personally. According to a National Security Agency article that was classified at the time, Walt referred to the signals intelligence report as “a clinching factor in the decision to launch this operation.”\*

The information given by the Viet Cong defector was useful, but not wholly accurate. Based on his interrogation, Marine planners believed that two complete battalions, the

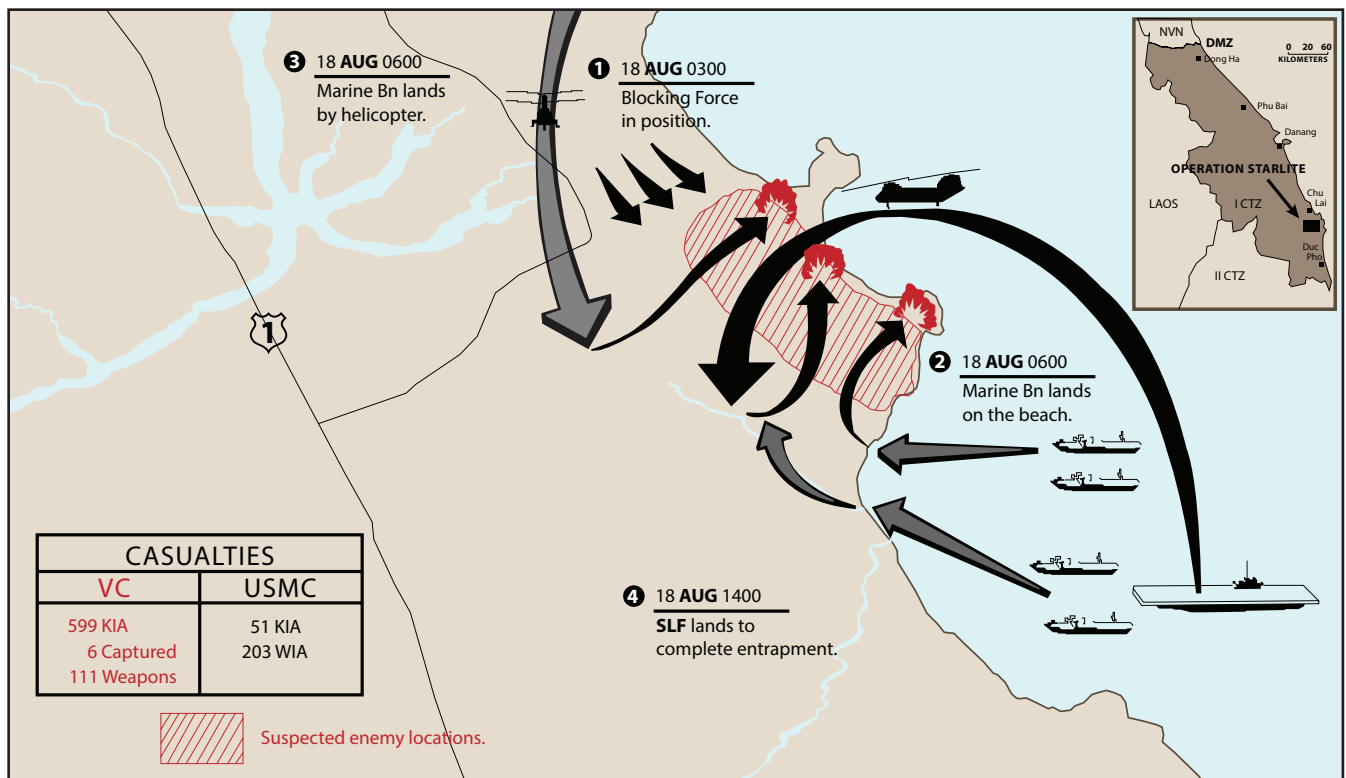
40th and 60th, were in the Van Tuong area, as well as the regimental command post and elements of the 90th Battalion and the 45th Weapons Battalion—a total of about 2,000 men. Apparently, the forces that were actually there were the 40th and 60th Battalions and elements of the 45th Weapons Battalion—a total of 1,500 men. The regimental command post and the rest of the battalion were located approximately 15 kilometers farther south. The senior officers of the regiment were away at a planning meeting in the hill country farther west. Contrary to American and General Thi’s assumptions, the 1st Viet Cong Regiment had no immediate plans to make a large attack on Chu Lai. As related above, the unit was recuperating in addition to recruiting and training new recruits.

### Planning the Battle, 16–17 August

General Walt flew to Chu Lai on the sixteenth for a planning conference. Present were Brigadier General Karch, now the assistant division commander of 3d Marine Division, and

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\*According to the III MAF command chronology, the III MAF staff received news of the defector’s information on the night of 14 August. This is not inconsistent with the claim of most sources that Gen Thi personally briefed MajGen Walt on the fifteenth. Meanwhile, it is possible that, as Otto J. Lehrack claims, III MAF and Gen Walt received the signals intelligence report on 15 August, before Gen McChristian met with Walt on the sixteenth. Walt probably received both pieces of information on the fifteenth and had made the decision by that evening to strike the 1st Viet Cong Regiment.



FMFPac Headquarters

This map was produced by FMFPac after the conclusion of Operation Starlite as a summary of the battle's concept of operations and outcomes.

Colonels James F. McClanahan and Oscar F. Peatross, commanders of the 4th Marines and 7th Marines, respectively. General Karch suggested first sending a reconnaissance battalion through the area "to see what's in there." Karch later summarized the response to his suggestion as "no, we've got to surprise them, we've got to overwhelm them, and this is the way we are going to do it."

The way the Marines "were going to do it" was to combine their heliborne and amphibious capabilities with fire support from air, artillery, and naval guns, along with speed, secrecy, and surprise. Walt and his officers envisioned a hammer-and-anvil operation. On the north side of the engagement area, one company would act as a blocking force. One battalion, or the bulk of it, would embark on amphibious shipping in Chu Lai and make a landing on the beaches south of the Van Tuong village complex. A second battalion would land by helicopter on the western side of the engagement area in three separate landing zones named Red, White, and Blue.

The two battalions would drive the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* east and northeast into the sea with the blocking force preventing an escape to the north. Trapped between Marine forces in several directions and the sea, the enemy would have little room to maneuver or escape.

Throughout the planning of Operation Starlite, heavy emphasis was placed on secrecy. General Thi himself insisted that his own ARVN officers should not be informed. He agreed with General Walt that it should be a Marine-only operation and shared the concerns of American officers that whenever ARVN officers knew about American plans, it seemed that leaks occurred and the enemy learned of them as well. General Walt did not object to this policy, but he did express concern to General Thi about the possible reaction of the nearby 2d ARVN Division, commanded by Brigadier General Hoang Xuan Lam, if a large-scale battle flared up in their area. In the words of the 3d Marine Division operations officer, Colonel Donald P. Wyckoff, Walt "convinced Thi that



General Lam had to know ahead of time to keep his own forces in rein. To my recollection, this was done on a person-to-person basis from Thi to Lam and Lam kept the information in strict confidence until the battle began.”\* Even most of the Marines who would be participating in the operation were told nothing of the larger mission or concept of operations until after the battle began. Battalion and company commanders received orders not to divulge details to their men.

There was also a great emphasis on speed, in carrying out the operation quickly with a minimum of planning time. This was partly related to the desire for secrecy, but also to make sure the Americans could take decisive action while the intelligence on the location of the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* was still valid. As the intelligence chief of 7th Marines later said, when it took four or five days to plan an operation, the intelligence on Viet Cong locations never seemed to be accurate. It was important to react more quickly than that to credible intelligence. Besides, the belief of General Thi and his American allies was that the enemy regiment was planning an attack on Chu Lai, and General Walt wanted to preempt that possibility. Colonel Peatross recalled that in the early planning “it was a matter of going quickly or not going at all.”

This sense of urgency affected, in turn, the difficult decision on which infantry units to use for the attack. The primary forces at Chu Lai consisted of the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 4th Marines, along with 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Walt did not consider the bulk of the 4th Marines to be available because its use would leave Chu Lai too weakly defended. There were other units in Da Nang and Qui Nhon, but they were too far away to be employed quickly. Colonel Peatross’s command group of the 7th Marine Regiment, however, along with 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, had just landed in Chu Lai the day before. Thus, early in the planning meeting on the

sixteenth, Walt turned to Colonel Peatross and said, “Peat, you’re the only one available.” Although Colonel Peatross’s regimental command group was present and ready, the battalions of 7th Marines were scattered. The 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, was some distance away at Qui Nhon and had not been under Peatross’s operational control for several months; the 3d Battalion had been afloat as part of the Seventh Fleet’s Special Landing Force (SLF) and was currently 722 miles away at Subic Bay, the Philippines. In accordance with orders from III MAF, the 1st Battalion had just made an administrative, rather than tactical, amphibious landing at Chu Lai, with the expectation that it would have several days to get ready for action. Some of its logistical supplies were still on board ship, and other equipment was on the beach and not yet married up with its appropriate companies. Moreover, this battalion was new to Vietnam and, unlike the battalions already at Chu Lai, unfamiliar with the area in which it would have to operate.

Walt and the other senior officers at the conference decided to commit 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, and 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, to the operation and assign them to the operational control of Colonel Peatross and his 7th Marines command group. Their departure from the Chu Lai perimeter would create some risk, but the recent arrival of 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, would partially offset that. The use of only two battalions, however, made the numerical odds of Marines to enemy soldiers no better than one-to-one in a relatively complicated offensive operation. Colonel Peatross therefore asked for the use of 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, then part of the SLF.\*\* Walt immediately agreed and quickly was able to gain approval from Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, USN, commander in chief of Pacific Command. In fact, the availability of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, was critical to the planning of the operation. Late on the afternoon of the fifteenth, Marine planners in Chu Lai received word that the SLF could arrive off the coast of the Van Tuong Peninsula within 72 hours; hence, if Starlite was set to begin on 18 August,

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\*Earlier works on Operation Starlite imply that it was Walt who asked Thi not to inform other ARVN officers of the attack, as they quote Walt’s later comment that he “recommended that only Generals Thi and Lam be told. General Westmoreland concurred and approved my action” (see Shulimson and Johnson, p. 83; and also Lehrack, p. 64). However, both the postwar written comments of Walt’s S-2 intelligence officer, Col Leo Dulacki, and a 1973 interview of Peatross clearly state that it was Thi who wanted the secret kept from other ARVN officers; it was Walt who convinced Thi that Gen Lam needed to be informed as well. Probably, Thi and Walt were in general agreement about the need to guard the information from most ARVN officers, and Walt was the one who passed that recommendation on to Gen Westmoreland.

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\*\*Marine elements belonging to the SLF at this time included 3d Battalion, 7th Marines; Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 163 (HMM-163); and the USS *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2), USS *Point Defiance* (LSD 31), and USS *Talladega* (APA 208). In July, the SLF had defended the Army supply base at Qui Nhon until combat-ready Army units could arrive. At the time of the initial planning of Operation Starlite, it was in Subic Bay conducting training and equipment upkeep.

the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, would be available sometime that day.

In addition to a third infantry battalion, Peatross's regimental-sized force, RLT 7, would enjoy naval gunfire support from two U.S. Navy destroyers—the USS *Orleck* (DD 886) and USS *Pritchett* (DD 561)—and one cruiser—the USS *Galveston* (CLG 3). Air support would include fighter aircraft from Marine Aircraft Groups 11 and 12 (MAG-11 and MAG-12) from Chu Lai; approximately 8 Army Bell UH-1E Iroquois helicopters (commonly known as Hueys) based in Quang Ni; and a total of 24 Sikorsky UH-34D Seahorse helicopters and Hueys from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadrons 261 and 361 (HMM-261 and HMM-361). The latter two units would shuttle 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, into the landing zones on the morning of 18 August, then provide medical evacuation and resupply support to the entire ground force as the battle progressed. Finally, two artillery batteries belonging to 3d Battalion, 12th Marines Artillery Group, in Chu Lai would move south, one by helicopter and one overland, to better support the infantry. Planners anticipated that other long-range artillery belonging to the artillery group in Chu Lai would also be able to deliver fires from there without having to move south.

Assuming overall command of RLT 7 was the 7th Marines' commander, Colonel Peatross. A native of Raleigh, North Carolina, and a graduate of North Carolina State College, Peatross had joined the Marine Corps in 1940. His rich, soft Southern drawl and trim, bespectacled figure belied his ferocity in combat. In World War II, Peatross had been a member of the famed 2d Marine Raider Battalion, earning the Navy Cross for valor on the Makin Island raid. He subsequently fought at Guadalcanal, Bougainville, and Iwo Jima, and in the Korean War as a battalion commander under then-Colonel Lewis Walt.

Peatross found himself in the interesting situation of leading two battalions into combat that did not organically belong to him; only the floating reserve, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, currently with the SLF, was formally a part of his regiment. Peatross, however, considered himself “rather fortunate” in that he was very familiar with the battalion commanders who would come under his direction. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph E. Muir, commander of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, had earlier commanded a battalion in 7th Marines as a major under

Peatross, and Peatross had great confidence in him. A former enlisted Marine, Muir was soft-spoken, energetic, hard-driving, and universally respected by his men. Muir was at the front lines with his troops so often that his staff officers were constantly concerned about him.\* Lieutenant Colonel Joseph R. “Bull” Fisher, commander of 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, was also a former enlisted man and a veteran of World War II. Fisher and Peatross had served together at Iwo Jima, where Fisher had been wounded twice. Later, he earned a Navy Cross while leading an infantry company in the breakout from the Chosin Reservoir in Korea in 1950. Fisher, too, enjoyed the confidence of Peatross and the affection of his Marines, one of whom remembered him as “a good, tough, old guy.” As Peatross later related, he, Fisher, and Muir were “familiar with each other from a personality point of view,” which Peatross considered to be very important. Moreover, Peatross's staff had also worked with Lieutenant Colonels Fisher and Muir and had no problem working with their respective battalion staffs. In fact, remembered Peatross, the planning was so hasty that “there was no time to bring up problems.”

Around 1330 on 16 August, Lieutenant Colonel Muir summoned Major Andrew G. Comer, his battalion executive officer, to his tent and informed him that their battalion and 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, would be attacking enemy forces on the peninsula on the eighteenth. This left little time for planning. Admittedly, some initial planning and thought had already been done by the senior officers of 4th Marines in anticipation of having to attack enemy forces on the peninsula one day. These rough plans were turned over to the 7th Marines' command group. The staffs of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and the 4th Marine Regiment had frequently discussed and made plans for an amphibious assault. As Comer remembered, “We already had a similar operation on paper.” Nevertheless, the final planning had to be done quickly, and

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\*Just weeks after Starlite, on 11 September 1965, LtCol Muir was killed in an operation in the Da Nang area when he stepped on a 155mm shell that had been rigged as a booby trap. He was the first American battalion commander to be killed in Vietnam. Muir was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross for his bold leadership during Operation Starlite. Capt David A. Ramsey, the S-3 operations officer in Muir's battalion, called him “one of the finest Marines that I had the pleasure to serve with.” Attending his funeral was his 18-year-old son, Joseph E. Muir II, a cadet at West Point. The younger Muir asserted that he was “very, very, very proud” of his father and wanted to go fight in Vietnam as a soldier or Marine.

# The Ontos



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185287

The official name for the Allis-Chalmers M50 Ontos was the “Rifle, 106mm, Self-Propelled M50.” It was an armored tracked vehicle originally designed in the 1950s to be a fast-moving antitank weapon. The Army rejected the Ontos, but the Marine

Corps, badly needing an antiarmor capability, purchased 297 of them. It featured six M40 106mm recoilless rifles that could be fired in immediate succession to blast through an armored target, as well as a .30-caliber machine gun. Four of the recoilless rifles had a .50-caliber spotting rifle attached to aid in marking targets. The vehicle could carry 18 rounds of main gun ammunition at a time.

The Marine Corps used the Ontos extensively in the Vietnam War, though rarely in its originally designed role as a tank-killer since the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong had virtually no armor capability. Instead, the Marines used it in Vietnam much as they did tanks, as a powerful anti-infantry weapon. In fact, in some ways the Ontos was more useful than the M48 tank because it was lighter

and could traverse terrain that tanks could not. It was popular with infantrymen because of the firepower it brought to the battlefield, as well as its maneuverability. The Ontos did have problems, however, such as its inability to carry more than 18 rounds at a time and the need for its crew to expose themselves to enemy fire in order to reload the recoilless rifles. Its light armor was effective against small arms and machine guns but vulnerable to rocket propelled grenades. Still, the Ontos played a significant role in many battles fought by the Marines in Vietnam. Because the Ontos had been purchased in limited numbers, it was largely expended by 1969, when it was officially removed from service.

it required “maximum effort” to plan and stage the forces in time for a morning landing on 18 August. To this end, a number of officers, including Colonel Peatross and the two battalion commanders, flew over the peninsula in General Walt’s personal UH-1E helicopter just before dusk on 16 August. During this flight, the officers selected a beach for a landing site for 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and three helicopter landing zones for 2d Battalion, 4th Marines.

Marine officers in Chu Lai then hurriedly completed the details of the plan. On 17 August, Company M of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, would make a five- to six-mile foot march to the beach just north of the mouth of the Tra Bong River. There the company would board amphibian tractors\*

(nicknamed “amtracs” or “amtraks”), make the short journey to the beach south of the mouth of the river, debark, and move inland in a southerly direction. It was to be in position as a blocking force in the northern portion of the engagement area by early the next morning.

The rest of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, would conduct the amphibious landing. As the battalion withdrew from its positions around Chu Lai in the predawn hours of 17 August, it would be replaced by 1st Battalion, 7th Marines. The rifle companies and supporting arms, including three M67 flame tanks, five M48 Patton tanks, and four M50 Ontos antitank vehicles, would board amphibious shipping later that day. The amphibious task force would depart at 2200 and initially sail east to deceive Viet Cong or local informants who might be in sampans just off the coast. Then the ships would turn south and arrive off the landing area a few hours before H-hour, which was 0630 on the eighteenth. Most of the Marines who

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\*Specifically, these were LVTP5s. The Landing Vehicle, Tracked, Personnel, Mark 5 (LVTP5) was an armored amphibious assault vehicle equipped with two .30-caliber machine guns.

boarded the ships did not learn where they were going until they arrived off Green Beach at An Cuong (2).<sup>\*</sup> Companies K and I from 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, were to land on Green Beach—Company K on the right and Company I on the left. Company K would seize the high ground in its front and be prepared to turn right and continue the attack to the north. Company I was assigned to attack through the village of An Cuong (1) and push west until making contact with the right flank of 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. Both companies would be accompanied by a detachment of combat engineers. The platoon of four Ontos antitank vehicles from the 3d Anti-Tank Battalion were to begin landing with Company K and provide that company with direct support as more of its vehicles arrived in successive waves. Similarly, a platoon of M48 tanks would begin arriving two minutes behind Company I and initially provide direct support for it. After the initial landing, the battalion reserve—Company L of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines—would arrive along with the 81mm mortar platoon, the latter in general support of the battalion landing team.

Just as 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, was establishing a beachhead and beginning to drive inland, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, was scheduled to land by helicopter to the west of the engagement area. Company G was to land at Landing Zone (LZ) Red at 0645, Company E at LZ White at 0730, and Company H at LZ Blue at 0745, followed by the battalion command group at LZ White at 0815. The battalion would then push northeast, linking up with 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, on the right, and eventually with Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, on the left.

According to Colonel Peatross's plans, the Marines would rely heavily on U.S. Navy shipping not only to support the amphibious landing with landing craft and naval gunfire, but also for logistics. The regimental commander ordered his staff not to maintain a large logistics support area (LSA) ashore in order to facilitate mobility and reduce the need to use ground troops for security. The LSA would maintain only one day's worth of rations and two days' of ammunition. Peatross's logistics staff worked out a plan by which supplies would be stockpiled on the helicopter deck of the USS *Cabildo* (LSD

16), and helicopters would ferry the supplies ashore, in most cases directly to the supported battalions rather than to the regiment's LSA.

The first Marines to arrive in the engagement area were those of Captain Calvin Morris's Company M from 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. They landed on a beach less than a kilometer south of the mouth of the Tra Bong River at 1700 on 17 August. Morris moved his company in a southerly direction in three parallel platoon columns. Two platoons followed a parallel pair of ridgelines with another in the valley in between. Each platoon column was approximately 200 to 300 meters apart so that they could provide mutual support. Company M had little enemy contact other than several sniper rounds from long range and one man being slightly wounded by a booby trap. When this mishap occurred, Captain Morris passed the word that the injured man would be carried by his comrades rather than evacuated by helicopter as usual. In keeping with the secrecy of the mission, he did not explain the reason for this order, but his thinking was that such an evacuation would draw attention to the operation and alert the enemy that a large operation was in the works. The company dug in at dusk and then moved again at 0100 on the eighteenth, occupying and securing another position around 0400. The reason for this latter move was that Company M had a secondary mission besides acting as a blocking force. It was also supposed to secure a landing zone for the 107mm "howtar" battery that would be arriving that morning and then provide security for it.

The howtars were an innovation that combined two existing weapons systems. The 107mm mortar was mounted onto the platform of the 75mm pack howitzer. The result was not only a mortar that had more firepower than the standard 81mm mortar, but one that could be towed by vehicles and still be light enough to be transported by helicopter as well. No helicopter available at the time could transport the lightest standard U.S. artillery piece, the M101 105mm howitzer, but this was not the case with the howtar. Howtar batteries were manned by artillerymen rather than mortarmen. Operation Starlite included the use of a howtar battery, also known as Whiskey Battery, from 3d Battalion, 12th Marines Artillery Group, and the howtars would play a major fire support role in the upcoming battle. They were assigned a direct

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<sup>\*</sup>Hamlets and villages in Vietnam sometimes have the same name; in such cases, parenthetical numbers are used after the name in order to differentiate them.





Courtesy of LtCol Calvin M. Morris

These three photos depict the terrain Company M traversed after it debarked from amtracs and marched to its blocking position on 17–18 August. After debarking, the company moved through standing water, sand dunes, and then hilly terrain with thick vegetation.

support mission to RLT 7.\* Delays in picking up the howtars at Chu Lai meant that they arrived later than scheduled in the landing zone that Captain Morris's Marines had secured, coming in at 0930. For the next several days, Company M not only had to protect the howtars, but also cover at least a mile of frontage as a blocking force, something Morris attempted to do with an ongoing series of platoon-sized patrols.

The other battery that moved south from the Chu Lai cantonment was Battery K, 4th Battalion, 12th Marines, which was also part of the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines Artillery Group. It was accompanied by a forward fire-direction center from the artillery group under Captain George A. Baker III, the group's assistant operations officer and fire direction officer. The use of Battery K was an example of the secrecy and haste in which Starlite was planned and executed, and the difficulties that resulted. Captain Baker was given simple and perfunctory verbal orders instead of an operations order or a fragmentary order. At 0500, he led three of Battery K's guns (M109 155mm self-propelled howitzers) and his fire direction cell out of the cantonment and traveled south along Highway 1 in the dark. The battery emplaced near the junction of the highway and the north bank of the Tra Bong River, assuming the future need of resupply and hoping to minimize the risk of hitting mines when travelling off-road.

Captain Baker remembered that, for most of the operation, communications were "horrible." One major problem was that he was not provided with the frequencies for 7th Marines, the unit he was supposed to support, and could usually only communicate with the regiment through aerial observers in aircraft. When no aerial observers were aloft, his communications suffered again. He did have communications with the artillery group command post at Chu Lai, and sometimes it could relay for him. Often, though, the lack of communications between Battery K and 7th Marines meant that the infantry relied on the howtar battery for most of its support. Every participant familiar with the howtars noted that their contribution was outstanding, but the 155mm howitzers possessed by Battery K were a naturally more accurate weapon than the howtars. Thus, several missions fired by

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\*For more on the employment, advantages, and disadvantages of the howtar weapons system, see Capt John J. Carr's interview with Maj E. A. Godfrey, 14 July 1966, Tape 161 (Oral History Collection, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA).



Map adapted by Marine Corps History Division

Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, landed near the mouth of the Tra Bong River late on the afternoon of 17 August 1965. This map shows its subsequent positions at 0100 and 0420, 18 August, as well as that of the 107mm howtar battery.

the howtars because of the poor communications and communications planning could probably have been fired more effectively by Battery K. Moreover, Baker and the artillery battery with him had no infantry support, even though they were located several miles outside the cantonment and vulnerable to an enemy infantry attack, or even to an ambush while travelling along Highway 1. Still, Battery K was able to fire a number of useful missions (an average of about 10 missions per day over the next several days) in support of the infantry. Because of the difficulties in communications,

however, it often took far longer to fire and complete a mission than it should have. Around 1200 on the eighteenth, two more of the battery's guns were sent to join Baker and the forward element because of the large volume of fire requested by RLT 7.

## Amphibious Landings

As Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, was establishing its blocking position on the northern side of the engagement area in the late afternoon and night of 17 August, the



remainder of the battalion was loading onto ships and making its circuitous route to Green Beach. Companies K and I of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and their supporting attachments landed as planned at 0630 on 18 August. Just prior to their landing, the beach was prepped by several strafing runs by Douglas A-4 Skyhawks from MAG-12. Colonel Peatross and his staff had decided to use strafing runs, but not naval gunfire or aerial bombs, on the beach because of the danger to the nearby village of An Cuong (1).

On the right flank, Captain Jay A. Doub's Company K received automatic weapons fire immediately upon landing. After calling in an air strike, the Marines moved forward, securing the right, or northern, side of the village of An Cuong (1). They then pushed forward and secured the high ground immediately beyond the village, which included Hill 22. Company K pivoted right and began advancing in a northerly direction, with 3d Platoon on the right, 2d Platoon on the left, and 1st Platoon in reserve. The company had advanced nearly two kilometers inland from the beach when both 2d and 3d Platoons began receiving heavy automatic weapons fire from a trench line in their front and from the left flank. Both platoons were pinned down, with the exception of 1st Squad of 2d Platoon. At that point, First Lieutenant Amos Burt Hinson III, platoon commander of 2d Platoon, led his 1st Squad in a ferocious assault. During the course of the action, the platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant James A. Campbell, was wounded, and the squad leader of 1st Squad, Sergeant Frank H. Blank, was killed. Still, the squad advanced against heavy enemy fire, with Lieutenant Hinson firing his pistol and the handful of Marines with him killing numerous Viet Cong soldiers. Hinson would later be awarded the Silver Star for his actions. His leadership and the determination of the Marines with him had driven the Viet Cong away and relieved pressure along the entire front of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines.

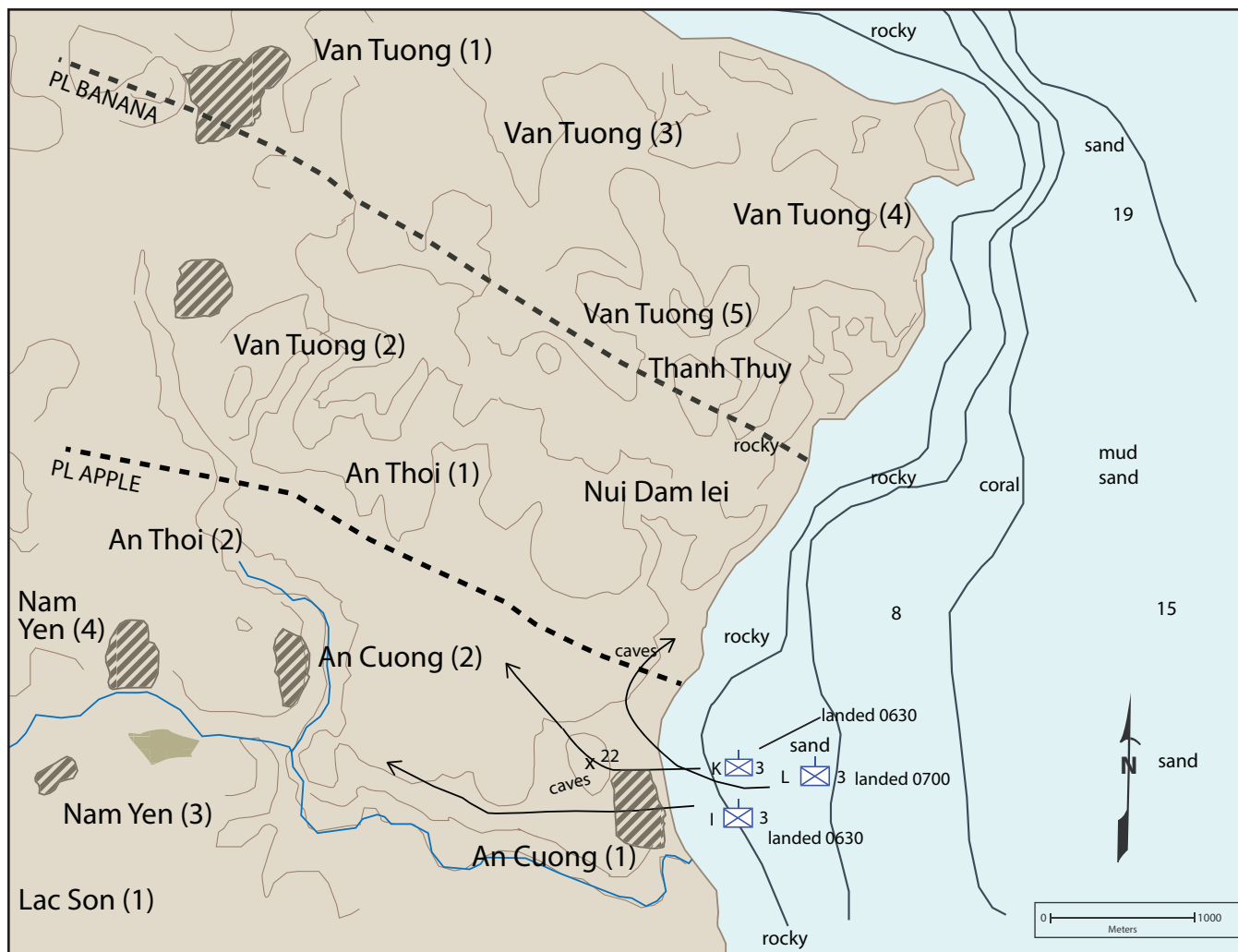
Captain James E. McDavid's Company L, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, landed 30 minutes after Company K and moved quickly to the right flank of the beachhead. As the Marines of Company L moved out, they received fire from small arms and at least one automatic weapon. Captain McDavid immediately deployed his Marines from what he called a "crowded type landing" to deal with these threats. He moved the 3d Platoon to the far right to attempt to flank the source of the



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A184498

Marines in an LVTP5 amtrac receive final instructions before going ashore during an amphibious landing in Vietnam in the summer of 1965. Marines from 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, went ashore in amtracs like this one on the morning of 18 August during Operation Starlite. Marines based in Chu Lai also used these vehicles in numerous operations near the mouth of the Tra Bong River in summer 1965.

incoming fire and 2d Platoon into the center. He then located an Ontos on the right flank of Company K and moved it into the line of fire. McDavid reported later that the crew chief of the Ontos, who remained unnamed, "distinguished himself in this action and continually exposed himself to direct fire." The Ontos crew chief could not fire his 106mm main armament due to the closeness of the terrain and the risk of injuring Marine infantrymen located directly behind the weapon. When he tried to use his machine gun, it quickly jammed, so he began engaging the enemy with his .50-caliber spotting rifle. McDavid also deployed an M60 machine gun to the left of the Ontos and reported that the gunner, Private First Class John H. Boast, "also particularly distinguished himself." Boast moved onto the top of a small hill that offered no cover and "calmly set in his MG [machine gun] with the incoming [fire] cutting the leaves around him." The combination of Boast's machine gun fire, the fire from the Ontos, and Captain McDavid's leadership silenced the incoming fire so that all three platoons could advance. Soon the company encountered a large cave network, which was later destroyed with explosives by the combat engineers. Throughout the course of the day, Company L received small-arms and machine-gun fire as it advanced inland to the west and north alongside the



Map adapted by Marine Corps History Division

Amphibious landings by 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and initial inland advance, 0630–1000, 18 August. Companies K and I landed at 0630, and Company L landed at 0700.

right flank of Company K. Both companies crossed Phase Line Apple and then reached Phase Line Banana, utilizing artillery fire (which was inaccurate and ineffective), mortars, and air support. By nightfall they had driven some 2,000 meters inland and established perimeter defenses along Phase Line Banana.

As Company K was landing and preparing to secure the northern half of Green Beach and of An Cuong (1), Company I performed similar tasks on the southern half of the landing area. Just as the ramps lowered on the landing vehicles to allow the Marines to rush ashore, a large explosion occurred on the beach just in front of them. The blast certainly got

the Marines' attention, but injured no one; they soon found an electrical wire running from the site of the explosion to a trench line 150 meters away. Facing no other immediate resistance, Company I quickly secured the southern half of the village and continued with its next assignment, which was to move west until it reached a streambed two kilometers beyond the village. Along the way, the company encountered a covered trench line that led to two cave systems. Searches of the caves turned up nothing more than digging tools.

Though the Viet Cong in the area were expecting an American attack in the near future, they were initially caught off guard in the opening phase of the battle. The enemy forces

opposing the Marine advance came under the overall command of Nguyen Dinh Trong, a political officer who served as the acting regimental commander while the actual commander was away. Trong was a veteran of the colonial wars against the French. He and his subordinates did not fully appreciate the ability of the Marines to bring large forces into battle by sea and by helicopter, and they ultimately concluded that the main threat would be overland attacks from the north and west. Consequently, when an entire battalion of Marines stormed ashore at An Cuong (1), the Viet Cong were not prepared.

Seeing the ships offshore early on the morning of the eighteenth, Trong decided that one of his main goals would have to be delaying the Marine advance long enough to protect the regimental headquarters located in the village of Van Tuong (1), just four kilometers from Green Beach. Leading the effort on the front lines against 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, was a capable staff officer, Lieutenant Phan Tan Huan. When the explosive charge detonated on the beach had failed to slow Company I and machine gun fire from An Cuong (1) had not stopped the Marines of Company K, Lieutenant Huan continued to resist from positions on Hill 22. Later, his forces would direct heavy enemy fire on the Marines from positions on the high ground just southeast of An Thoi (1).

On the left of Company K, Company I continued advancing west. Company I's commander, Captain Bruce D. Webb, was aware that the unit on his left, Company H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, was having great difficulty. He therefore asked and received permission to cross into 2d Battalion's zone of action to help secure the village of An Cuong (2). About the time Company I reached the village, it was joined by three tanks that had landed at Green Beach shortly after Company I's landing. There was a wide, deep trench south of the village, requiring the tanks to make a wide detour to the south and west. Captain Webb ordered the 1st Squad of 1st Platoon, led by Corporal Robert E. O'Malley, to accompany the tanks. O'Malley placed three or four men on each tank, and the tanks began advancing rapidly on the far left flank of Company I. For much of the route, the tanks and O'Malley's squad advanced alongside a long hedgerow that, they thought, offered some concealment. Within minutes, however, enemy rounds from an automatic rifle ripped into the column, badly wounding Lance Corporal Merlon E. Marquardt. O'Malley

halted the tanks, ordered two Marines to tend to Marquardt, and sent Lance Corporal Christopher W. Buchs back to the village to find a medical corpsman. Buchs ran quickly to the village and returned with a promise from a corpsman that he would come as soon as he finished assisting another casualty. Meanwhile, the remaining members of the squad used fire-and-maneuver tactics as they advanced across a rice paddy toward the hedgerow, firing their weapons and lobbing grenades. They realized, however, that the Viet Cong were in a trench behind the hedgerow, so as the grenades sailed over the hedgerow, they went over the trench as well and had little effect. Lance Corporal Buchs, who had returned from seeking a corpsman, spotted a gap in the hedgerow, and he and Corporal O'Malley crawled toward it. Buchs recalls that O'Malley then turned to him and said, "Let's go, Buck."

Both Marines burst through the hedgerow and jumped into the trench, with Buchs firing to the left and killing four enemy soldiers and O'Malley firing to the right, immediately killing eight. The two Marines ran out of ammunition just as they saw more Viet Cong approaching, so they jumped out of the trench to reload and jumped back in. They were joined by Lance Corporal Forrest Hayden and Private Robert L. Rimpson. One of the wounded Viet Cong was only pretending to be dead and tossed a grenade, wounding Hayden in the hip and O'Malley in the foot. Buchs killed this enemy soldier, and then he and O'Malley pulled Hayden out of the trench. Immediately afterward, Rimpson stepped up and killed another Viet Cong with his M79 grenade launcher at a range of 15 yards. The members of O'Malley's squad then gathered the enemy weapons in the trench; collected their own wounded and the body of Lance Corporal Marquardt, who had died; loaded them on the tanks; and continued the advance west.

After remounting the tanks, then dismounting a second time after receiving more fire, Corporal O'Malley and the rest of his squad were involved in more heroics. As the tanks they were riding continued advancing, they received enemy mortar, artillery, and small-arms fire. This fire disabled one of the tanks and caused more casualties in the rifle squad; O'Malley was wounded in the forearm by a piece of shrapnel but refused to be evacuated. He moved his squad to a trench line behind and away from the tanks, hoping to protect his men from the fire the tanks were receiving. He, Lance

# Corporal Robert E. O'Malley



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185287

Robert O'Malley was the first Marine of the Vietnam War to receive the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest decoration, for conspicuous gallantry in combat as a corporal on 18 August 1965. He was decorated by President Johnson at a White House ceremony on 6 December 1966.

O'Malley was born 3 June 1943, in New York, New York. He attended high school there and worked as a newspaper carrier for the *Star Journal*. Enlisting in the Marine Corps on 11 October 1961, he completed basic training at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina. Transferred to Camp Pendleton in California, he served with the 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division. He was promoted to private first class in May 1962.

The following year, he arrived on Okinawa as a member of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, 3d Marine Division. While there, he was promoted to lance corporal in March 1963 and to corporal in November 1963. He returned to Camp Pendleton in 1964 as a member of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division. Corporal

O'Malley was transferred overseas again in 1965 and took part in combat in Vietnam while assigned to Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marine Regiment, 3d Marine Division. He was promoted to sergeant in December 1965.

## Medal of Honor Citation

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action against the Communist (Viet Cong) forces at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving as Squad Leader in Company "I," Third Battalion, Third Marines, Third Marine Division (Reinforced) near An Cu'ong 2, South Vietnam, on 18 August 1965. While leading his squad in the assault against a strongly entrenched enemy force, his unit came under intense small arms fire. With complete disregard for his personal safety, Corporal O'Malley raced across an open rice paddy to a trench line where the enemy forces were located. Jumping into the trench, he attacked the Viet Cong with his rifle and grenades, and singly killed eight of the enemy. He then led his squad to the assistance of an adjacent Marine unit which was suffering heavy casualties. Continuing to press forward, he reloaded his weapon and fired with telling effect into the enemy emplacement. He personally assisted in the evacuation of several wounded Marines, and

again regrouping the remnants of his squad, he returned to the point of the heaviest fighting. Ordered to an evacuation point by an officer, Corporal O'Malley gathered his besieged and badly wounded squad, and boldly led them under fire to a helicopter for withdrawal. Although three times wounded in this encounter, and facing imminent death from a fanatic and determined enemy, he steadfastly refused evacuation and continued to cover his squad's boarding of the helicopters while, from an exposed position, he delivered fire against the enemy until his wounded men were evacuated. Only then, with his last mission accomplished, did he permit himself to be removed from the battlefield. By his valor, leadership, and courageous efforts in behalf of his comrades, he served as an inspiration to all who observed him, and reflected the highest credit upon the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

Corporal Buchs, and Private Rimpson began assisting in the evacuation of many wounded Marines, mostly belonging to 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, in the vicinity of the village of An Cuong (2). He made several trips across open terrain under fire to retrieve dead and wounded Marines and carry them back to a landing zone where they were being evacuated. At one point, a mortar round exploded and wounded O'Malley in the chest—his third wound. Lance Corporal Buchs recalled, "I looked at him; I could see he was hurt, but he kept moving." O'Malley continued to fire on the enemy and assist in evacuating others. By this point, every member of O'Malley's squad had been killed or wounded, and the only ones who had not been evacuated were him, Buchs, and Rimpson. The latter two tried to persuade O'Malley to board one of the helicopters, but as Rimpson related later, "He said he didn't feel right going back, and he wasn't going to leave us there alone." When a helicopter arrived to evacuate the remaining wounded Marines in his squad, O'Malley stayed behind and provided covering fire so that the rest of the Marines could cross an open field to reach the aircraft. He was the last Marine in his squad to be evacuated.

Later, Corporal O'Malley would become the first Marine in the Vietnam War to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.\* As for Buchs and Rimpson, they were both evacuated to a hospital ship, where they heard rumors that "India Company had been wiped out." Both of them managed to hitch helicopter rides back to their unit, still on the Van Tuong Peninsula, to find out that the story fortunately was not true. They both received the Silver Star for their actions on 18 August.

Corporal O'Malley's squad was not the only element of Company I to face fierce resistance as it crossed a streambed and approached An Cuong (2), a heavily wooded village fortified with trench lines covered with branches and log and sand fortifications. There were fighting holes inside the village itself and a system of interconnected tunnels. With a platoon of tanks reinforcing them, the Marines assaulted the village with three platoons abreast. Company I suppressed the fire coming from the other side of the streambed, crossed

the streambed, and reached the outskirts of An Cuong (2). As one Marine began to shoot "dead" Viet Cong on the ground to make sure they were not simply "playing dead," Captain Webb ordered him not to do so, saying it was inhumane. Moments later, one of the Viet Cong, pretending to be dead, lobbed a grenade toward Webb and his command group. Several Marines were wounded or killed, and Captain Webb, beloved and respected by his men, was killed. At this time, the company executive officer, First Lieutenant Richard D. Purnell, was on the left flank of the company near O'Malley's squad, attempting to oversee the evacuation of casualties. He soon learned that not only had Captain Webb died, but the unit had also lost its company gunnery sergeant, the artillery forward observer, and two of its radio operators. Purnell was new to the outfit and knew few of the platoon or squad leaders well, and his command group was decimated, but now it was up to him to take charge. He radioed his battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Muir, to inform him of the situation and of the fact that Company I had cleared the village. Muir ordered Purnell to move the company north and catch up with the left flank of Company K.

## Helicopter Landings

The reason that the threat from An Cuong (2) still existed on Company I's left flank, and the reason that Colonel Peatross allowed Captain Webb to cross into 2d Battalion, 4th Marines' zone of action, was that Company H of the 2d Battalion—which was supposed to be on Company I's left flank by that time—was having plenty of trouble of its own. Though LZ Red, the northernmost landing zone, was virtually undefended by Viet Cong forces, LZ White was not, and LZ Blue, unbeknownst to the Marines, was located near the heart of the Viet Cong defenses.

The worst of the fighting did not begin immediately. The 2d Battalion began its series of helicopter landings at 0645, shortly after artillery and aircraft delivered preparatory fires on the landing zones. At that time, Company G landed virtually unopposed at LZ Red. At 0730, Company E landed at LZ White while receiving small-arms and automatic-weapons fire from a ridgeline one kilometer to the northeast. Attack aircraft and Huey helicopters attacked the ridgeline in support of Company E. Nevertheless, the Marines on the ground suffered a few casualties while still in the landing

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\*1stLt Frank S. Reasoner of 3d Reconnaissance Battalion was the second; his action occurred weeks before O'Malley's, but his family did not receive his posthumous award until after O'Malley was recognized.





Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185827

A Marine M48 main battle tank (far left) assists as infantrymen search a riverbed during Operation Starlite. As this picture was taken, the Marines found several holes along the shores that were suspected hiding spots for Viet Cong.

zone that had to be evacuated only minutes after arrival. At 0815, Lieutenant Colonel Fisher's 2d Battalion command group also landed at LZ White while under sporadic small arms fire.\*

At 0830, Companies E and G began attacking in a northeasterly direction, while the battalion command group followed in the trace of Company E. Company G received virtually no resistance as its Marines secured the villages of Phu Long (1) and Phu Long (2). While searching the villages, the Marines found tunnels, trenches, and fighting holes that were cleverly concealed in hedgerows. They also apprehended eight Viet Cong in the area. By midafternoon, Company G had established positions along Phase Line Banana roughly two

kilometers northeast of its original position at LZ Red and made contact with Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines.

Company E and the command group had a more difficult time. As they advanced northeast, they received fire from 60mm and 81mm mortars, machine guns, and small arms from an estimated 60 Viet Cong. Company E managed to secure the first ridge to the northeast of LZ White at around 1000, but this accomplishment came at the cost of 2 Marines killed and 15 wounded. Medical evacuations were requested, though it was some 50 minutes before the first helicopters could arrive. The 81mm mortar section displaced forward and, according to 2d Battalion's official command chronology, "continued to fire at probable Viet Cong withdrawal routes." Once the first ridge was secured and casualties evacuated, Company E and the command group resumed their sweep at around 1100, moving in a northeasterly direction. At around 1200, when they were located near a hamlet several hundred meters past the ridge, they began receiving fire from the front, front right, and left flank. An estimated 50 Viet Cong were firing 81mm and 60mm mortars, 57mm recoilless rifles,

\*The command chronology for the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, states that Company E suffered no casualties in the first minutes of the landing, but 1stLt Douglas M. Ryan, a platoon commander in the company interviewed shortly after the battle, contradicts that statement. Often, after action reports in command chronologies were written hurriedly and while the unit was busily engaged in other operations, so this account favors 1stLt Ryan's recollection. Ryan's platoon was the first to land, and he was in a good position to know whether or not there were casualties in the opening minutes.





Map courtesy of Capt Edward Garr

Tactical map used by then-GySgt Edward Garr, who became acting S-3 operations officer of 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, on 18 August. At the bottom of the map, the boundary between 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, and 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, is inaccurately drawn. It should follow the streambed just east of An Cuong (2).

automatic weapons, and small arms. Company E's Marines returned fire with all their organic weapons and one .50-caliber machine gun attached to the unit.

The hamlet to the right front of Company E was nearly surrounded by a thick bamboo wall roughly seven to eight feet high. On the right flank of the company was 3d Platoon, led by First Lieutenant Douglas M. Ryan. The Marines in Ryan's platoon found a gap in the wall on the right side, and he and his rightmost squad passed through the gap and along the path that led from it toward the interior of the hamlet. There were punji traps of bamboo spikes on either side of the path. The other two squads were following behind but still outside the wall. At that point, mortar rounds exploded in the midst of the Marines on the path, and the Viet Cong poured automatic weapons fire into them. Almost immediately, five or six 3d Platoon members—mostly from the leading squad—were wounded; the Navy medical corpsman was wounded

as well. Ryan dove into a trench and tried to figure out where the fire was coming from. He unsuccessfully tried to reach the company commander on the radio. Then, he got the attention of the squad leaders of the other two squads and motioned for them to charge through the gap and move quickly to the right alongside the interior of the wall. Without hesitation, they did so, as other Marines brought up a machine gun and killed the Viet Cong. Third Platoon retrieved all its wounded, and they were evacuated by helicopter within minutes. Aggressiveness and initiative thus kept the situation from becoming worse than it was. After Company E consolidated the position, evacuated eight wounded Marines (along with two from the command group), and gathered more enemy weapons, it continued its pursuit. As Lieutenant Ryan said, "We definitely had the VC on the run, but they definitely knew how to set up an ambush." By this point, Company E

and the command group had lost two men killed and at least two dozen wounded.

As Company E and the command group continued their advance, they continued to find numerous enemy fighting holes and camouflaged punji traps. Around 1515, members of the command group—including Gunnery Sergeant Edward Garr, the acting S-3 operations officer, and the 81mm mortar platoon assistant platoon commander, Master Gunnery Sergeant John S. Russell—spotted a group of approximately 100 Viet Cong moving at a slow trot. The enemy troops were less than a kilometer east of the Marines who spotted them, and they were moving southeast past the Marines, who were moving north. They were carrying mortars, machine guns, small arms, and recoilless rifles and, uncharacteristically, were in the open and easy to spot, though they did have foliage attached to their backs. The command group called an artillery mission. There was a lapse of 12 minutes before the first







Defense Department (Marine Corps) A184945

Marines advance through the broken terrain of the Van Tuong Peninsula during Operation Starlite on 18 August 1965. This picture is looking toward the village of Van Tuong and shows smoke from American supporting arms attacks in the background.

Thus, the fortunes of the units of 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, varied on 18 August. Company G, the first to land, encountered no resistance in the landing zone and none afterward. Company E, the second to land, had some difficulty in the landing zone and much more as the day wore on, but it was able to accomplish its objectives despite the heavy casualties sustained by it and the command group. The helicopter crews who spent the morning shuttling the infantrymen into the landing zones noticed how enemy resistance became fiercer as the morning went on. Staff Sergeant Coy D. Overstreet, the crew chief for HMM-361's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Lloyd J. Childers, remembered that the first deliveries of troops he made into LZ White had received only moderate fire. As he put it, "It seems like they held their fire on the first and second wave," not realizing the Americans were launching a major operation. Indeed, the Marines later learned that Viet Cong units in the area were eating breakfast and conducting unit training on the morning of the eighteenth and not expecting a large-scale attack, at least not by air. Within an hour or two of the initial landings, however, enemy resistance stiffened. Thus, while Company E

and the command group eventually found themselves in a tough fight, it was Company H, the last unit to arrive, that ran into trouble almost as soon as it landed.

### The Ordeal of Hotel Company

The first elements of Company H began arriving at LZ Blue, just south of Nam Yen (3), on schedule at 0745. The village was only 100–200 meters north of the landing zone, while a small knoll, Hill 43, was approximately 400 meters to the southwest. The other high ground that overlooked the landing zone was Hill 30, just north of the village of An Cuong (2). The Marines of Company H were unaware that they were actually landing within the perimeter of the *60th Viet Cong Battalion*; in fact, U.S. intelligence had estimated the battalion's location to be farther away. The enemy allowed the first aircraft to land against little resistance, but then poured heavy fire into the succeeding waves and into the Marines already on the landing zone. The majority of the fire was coming from the southwest, in the direction of Hill 43.

A number of Americans were killed in the barrage of enemy fire. A handful of U.S. Army Huey gunships from the

7th Airlift Platoon were providing covering fire for the landing force. The pilots of one of the gunships, Major Donald G. Radcliff, USA, was shot through the neck and killed, while a crew member was wounded. Casualties began to mount on the ground as well, but Company H's commander, First Lieutenant Homer K. Jenkins, was not yet fully aware of the enemy's strength in the area. In fact, he believed that his Marines had at least established fire superiority over the enemy to his southwest, and they could already count three dead Viet Cong troops. Soon, the company had established its perimeter around the landing zone. Lieutenant Jenkins led his 1st and 3d Platoons toward his first objective, Nam Yen (3), from which he had not yet received any fire. He ordered 2d Platoon to secure Hill 43 to his rear.

Both attacks ran into intense resistance and bogged down. At Hill 43, 2d Platoon collided with an enemy unit that had fortified the hill with bunkers, trenches, and machine gun positions. One Marine, Lance Corporal Ernie W. Wallace, spied a large group of Viet Cong advancing along a trench line and fired at them with his M60 machine gun. Advancing toward them and firing the gun from his hip and shoulder, the hulking Lance Corporal Wallace single-handedly killed an estimated 25 enemy soldiers. Still, 2d Platoon's attack got no farther than the base of the hill.

The attack on Nam Yen (3) fared little better. Using his 3d Platoon as a supporting base of fire, Jenkins had his 1st Platoon assault Nam Yen (3). There, they ran into the *3d Company* of the *60th Viet Cong Battalion*, which held its fire until 1st Platoon came within a very short range of the village. Suddenly, the Viet Cong unleashed a withering fusillade of small-arms and machine-gun fire and grenades. Snipers fired at the Marines from the tops of trees, and what seemed to be bushes turned out to be enemy soldiers firing at them. The village was filled with numerous spider holes and bunkers. In some cases, the walls of houses dropped to the ground, allowing the enemy to use preplanned fields of fire. The 1st Platoon briefly fought its way into the village and was able to pass the first row of houses, but the fire became so intense that Jenkins ordered it to withdraw.

Jenkins then made several decisions. First, even as he withdrew 1st Platoon from Nam Yen (3), he called air strikes on the village. Probably, he hoped that this would help cover his withdrawal, but even while the air strikes were occurring,

his men still received small arms fire from Nam Yen (3). These were the air strikes that momentarily halted the advance of Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, as fragments from the bombs slightly wounded two Marines from that company near An Cuong (2).

Second, Lieutenant Jenkins decided to concentrate on one objective at a time, and with Hill 43 being the highest point in the area from which he could receive small arms fire and with it being to his rear, he decided to attack it with his entire company. He called for additional air strikes on Hill 43, and soon he had the support of McDonnell Douglas F-4B Phantoms from Marine Fighter Attack Squadrons 513 and 542 of MAG-11, which covered the hill with high-explosive bombs and napalm. Aided also by two tanks that had landed on the beach at An Cuong (1), Company H doggedly attacked the hill as well as the hedgerows, houses, and other positions in the area from which it received fire. By 1000, Jenkins had the support of five tanks, including one flame tank, and three Ontos. His men eliminated several enemy machine-gun positions, discovered numerous dead Viet Cong scattered throughout the brush, captured 50 enemy weapons, and evacuated one enemy prisoner.

Thanks to the heroic efforts of HMM-361, Company H also managed to evacuate its first Marine killed in action, Lance Corporal James R. Brooks Jr., and 11 of its wounded. By 0900, the helicopter pilots and crewmen had each made four or five trips to the landing zones to ferry troops into the fight. As Staff Sergeant Overstreet, the crew chief for Lieutenant Colonel Childers recalled, from about 0815 or 0830 onward, the helicopters received heavy fire every time they went into a landing zone. Again and again, they landed and took off under fire in response to urgent requests for casualty evacuations, ammunition, and water. During one of his landings at around 0900, Overstreet engaged in a firefight with enemy soldiers with his M60 machine gun at a range of less than 50 yards. As Childers hovered over the landing zone to allow wounded infantrymen to be gathered and loaded on board, the staff sergeant observed two men charging toward the aircraft. Marine infantrymen in the area appeared not to notice them, even after the number of charging enemy soldiers grew from 2 to 20. As Overstreet recalled it, the Viet Cong soldiers had been camouflaged as bushes: "All the bushes got up and they started firing." Staff Sergeant



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A37440

## The UH-34 Helicopter

The workhorse among Marine Corps helicopters in the early part of the Vietnam War was the Sikorsky UH-34D Seahorse,\* the same aircraft that the Army called the CH-34 Choctaw. In Vietnam, its main roles were troop and “very important person” transport, medical evacuation, and search-and-rescue missions. It typically could carry 12–16 troops or up to 8 casualties on stretchers, and was often fitted with M60 machine guns. The UH-34D was gradually replaced by the Bell UH-1E Iroquois (Huey), with its turbine-powered engine, but still saw extensive use by the Marine Corps through 1968. During its service in the Vietnam War, the UH-34 gained an excellent reputation for being able to absorb a great deal of enemy ground fire and still return its crews home safely. The UH-34Ds belonging to HMM-163, HMM-261, and HMM-361 played a critical role in Operation Starlite in troop transport, resupply, and medical evacuation operations, and sustained their reputation for durability and reliability.

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\*This piston-engine helicopter was designated as the HUS-1 Seahorse until 1962, when it became the UH-34.

Overstreet hit at least two of the enemy with his machine gun fire; meanwhile, an enemy recoilless rifle round struck the ground just beneath the aircraft and shook it violently. Lieutenant Colonel Childers held the helicopter in position long enough to load the casualties and departed just in time.

By around 1300, 14 of HMM-361’s 16 helicopters had been struck by enemy fire. More than eight of them had

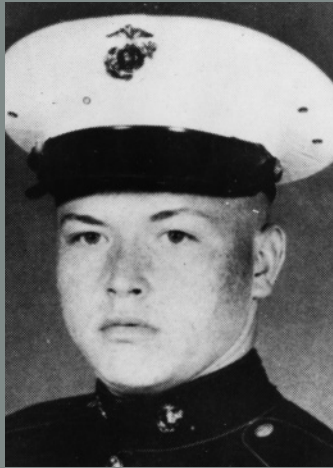
suffered “downing hits” but managed to reach a location where they could be repaired. Crews on the ground took parts from some aircraft to keep others going. Additionally, five or six pilots and several crew chiefs and gunners had been wounded, requiring the constant shuffling of aircrews to keep the helicopters in the air.

Now that Company H had secured Hill 43, Lieutenant Jenkins turned his attention back to resuming his attack to the north. Company H and the tanks and Ontos advanced into the area of rice paddies divided by tall hedgerows between Nam Yen (3) and An Cuong (2). Jenkins mistakenly believed that Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, had cleared Nam Yen (3), and planned to bypass it on its eastern side. As Company H moved, 2d Platoon was on the right, 3d on the left, and 1st Platoon was acting as a rear guard. Lieutenant Jenkins placed the tanks immediately behind the assault line of the leading platoons, and the three Ontos in the rear and on the flanks. While the company was in this open terrain, 1st Platoon, in the rear, began receiving machine gun fire from Nam Yen (3), as well as from the east. Then mortar rounds began raining down on the two lead platoons, and the tracked vehicles had trouble maneuvering in the soggy rice paddies.

With the company now receiving heavy fire from nearly all directions, the Marines responded aggressively. One squad from 1st Platoon attacked Nam Yen (3) to its northwest and killed nine Viet Cong who were manning an 81mm mortar. Before they could recover the mortar, however, the fire became so intense that the squad had to withdraw. In the 2d Platoon sector, Corporal Richard L. Tonucci’s squad provided other examples of heroism. Corporal Tonucci saw that there were several wounded Marines stranded between their comrades and the enemy, and that a heavy machine gun was pouring devastating fire into the Marines’ positions. Meanwhile, a group of Viet Cong was trying to move toward the wounded Marines to finish them off. Tonucci decided to take action himself to neutralize the machine gun, and he ordered Lance Corporal Joe C. Paul to stay and protect the wounded. Paul himself was already wounded. He had just boarded a medical evacuation helicopter when he saw the predicament his platoon was in, disembarked, and went back to see how he could help.

Corporal Tonucci saw another group of Viet Cong traveling along a trench line toward him. The flame tank, which

# Lance Corporal Joe C. Paul



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Joe Paul, a 19-year-old Marine who lost his life during Operation Starlight, was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously on 7 February 1967. He was honored by Secretary of the Navy Paul H. Nitze, who presented the award to his parents.

Paul was born 23 April 1946, in Williamsburg, Kentucky. He graduated from grammar school and attended high school for one year before enlisting in the U.S. Marine Corps on 26 April 1963, shortly after his seventeenth birthday. In August 1963, after completing recruit training at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego, California, he was transferred to the Marine Corps Base at Camp Pendleton, where he underwent individual combat training with the Second Infantry Training Regiment, graduating in October 1963. He then joined Company H of 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, 1st Marine Brigade, in Hawaii, where he was promoted to private first class in December 1963 and to lance corporal in October 1964. With that unit, he sailed for the Far East, arriving in Chu Lai in South

Vietnam on 7 May 1965, where this unit was redesignated Company H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, 3d Marine Division.

On 18 August 1965, while serving as a fire team leader with Company H, Lance Corporal Paul placed himself between his wounded comrades and the enemy and delivered effective suppressive fire in order to divert the Viet Cong long enough to allow the casualties to be evacuated. He fought in this exposed position until he was mortally wounded. He succumbed to his wounds the next day, 19 August 1965.

## Medal of Honor Citation

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty as a Fire Team Leader with Company H, Second Battalion, Fourth Marines, 3d Marine Division (Reinforced) during Operation Starlite near Chu Lai in the Republic of Vietnam on 18 August 1965. In violent battle, Lance Corporal Paul's platoon sustained five casualties as it was temporarily pinned down by devastating mortar, automatic weapons, and rifle fire delivered by insurgent Communist (Viet Cong) forces in well-entrenched positions. The wounded Marines were unable to move from their perilously exposed positions forward of the remainder of their platoon, and were suddenly subjected to a barrage of white phosphorus rifle grenades. Lance Corporal Paul, fully aware that his tactics would almost certainly result in serious

injury or death to himself, chose to disregard his own safety and boldly dashed across the fire-swept rice paddies, placed himself between his wounded comrades and the enemy, and delivered effective suppressive fire with his automatic weapon in order to divert the attack long enough to allow the casualties to be evacuated. Although critically wounded during the course of the battle, he resolutely remained in his exposed position and continued to fire his rifle until he collapsed and was evacuated. By his fortitude and gallant spirit of self-sacrifice in the face of almost certain death, he saved the lives of several of his fellow Marines. His heroic action served to inspire all who observed him and reflect the highest credit upon himself, the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life in the cause of freedom.



was nearby, scorched the enemy with a blast of napalm. As the burning men ran out of the trench, nearby Marines shot them down. Then Tonucci, accompanied by Private First Class Ronald L. Centers, advanced on the machine gun position. Together they neutralized one bunker, and then the bunker that actually protected the machine gun. When another machine gun crew emerged to replace the one the two Marines had killed, Tonucci and Centers killed them as well. The two Marines would later receive the Silver Star for this action.

Meanwhile, Lance Corporal Paul and the wounded Marines he was guarding were receiving fire from small arms, recoilless rifles, mortars, and a barrage of white phosphorus grenades. Paul decided on a risky gamble to divert enemy fire from his wounded comrades. He raced 75 yards across the rice paddy toward the Viet Cong, placed himself in an exposed position, and began pouring machine gun fire into the enemy. He was close enough to the enemy that they were lobbing hand grenades at him. He was wounded several more times, at least once in the chest, but refused to withdraw until all the wounded Marines were pulled to safety. Eventually he “collapsed over his weapon,” remembered Corporal Leroy T. Hyatt. Paul was finally placed on a medical evacuation helicopter, but he died of his wounds. He was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the second Marine from Operation Starlite to receive the nation’s highest award for valor in combat. As another comrade, Lance Corporal James H. Myers, wrote in his official statement, “He risked his life to save mine, and died in order that his fellow Marines could be saved.”

With his Marines in open ground and receiving fire from virtually every direction, Lieutenant Jenkins knew that the position of Company H was untenable. He called artillery fire on the village of Nam Yen (3) and an air strike on the high ground to his north, and in response to orders from Lieutenant Colonel Fisher, he began moving the company back toward LZ Blue once again. On the way back to LZ Blue, 1st Platoon, led by First Lieutenant Christopher C. Cooney, was forced to take a detour. Numerous helicopters were attempting to land in an area in its path of march, so it diverted to the east. This platoon became separated from the rest of the company and found itself with two squads of Company I,

3d Battalion, 3d Marines, that had been guarding a downed helicopter.

The other two platoons of Company H fought their way back to LZ Blue, killing Viet Cong and taking casualties as they went. In the course of the two-hour movement back to the landing zone, two Marines, Lance Corporal Ernie Wallace and Private Sam Badneck, would perform feats that would earn them the Navy Cross, and Corporal Edward L. Vaughn would earn the Silver Star. Lance Corporal Wallace, in particular, was credited with killing more than 40 enemy soldiers with his machine gun over the course of the day.

By 1630, the battered remnants of Company H and its armored attachments were reestablished on LZ Blue. As they were still receiving small arms fire from Nam Yen (3), Lieutenant Jenkins ordered the Ontos vehicles to flatten all the buildings in the village, after which the small arms fire ceased. The company received resupplies of food, water, and ammunition; was reinforced with a section of 81mm mortars; and dug in for the evening. At that time, Jenkins had only 24 of his own infantrymen left, along with the mortar section, three tank crews, and three Ontos crews. It had been a brutal day for Company H, landing in the midst of an enemy battalion and receiving fire from multiple directions for much of the following eight hours. By the end of the day, the company had achieved none of its original objectives, but it had struck a blow in the heart of the Viet Cong defenses and inflicted massive damage on the enemy as well. And no one would question the company’s fighting spirit. Rarely in Marine Corps history has one rifle company been awarded one Congressional Medal of Honor, two Navy Crosses, three Silver Stars, and one Bronze Star in one day of battle.\*

## The “Lost Convoy”

By midafternoon, Companies E and G of 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, were well on their way to achieving their objectives for the day and reaching Phase Line Banana. The same was true of Companies K and L of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Company I of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, had lost its company

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\*The Bronze Star was earned by PFC Robert L. Stipes, who charged across a rice paddy and laid down covering fire to allow several of his pinned-down comrades to withdraw safely. Later, Stipes helped evacuate casualties under fire.

# Lance Corporal Ernie W. Wallace

Ernie Wallace was born 30 January 1944 in Wayne, West Virginia. In 1965, he was a 21-year-old lance corporal, serving as a machine gunner with Company H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, 3d Marine Division (Reinforced), during Operation Starlite. His fearless actions, for which he was awarded the Navy Cross, saved his fellow Marines and helped turn the tide of the battle. After retiring from the Marine Corps as a master sergeant, he returned to West Virginia and passed away there on 11 March 2008.

## Navy Cross Citation

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Lance Corporal Ernie W. Wallace, United States Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism while serving as a machine gunner with Company H, Second Battalion, Fourth Marines, Third Marine Division (Reinforced), Fleet Marine Force, during Operation Starlite against insurgent Communist (Viet Cong) forces in the Republic of Vietnam on 18 August 1965. While the platoon to which he was attached was temporarily pinned down by intense mortar, automatic weapons, and small arms fire, Corporal Wallace and one rifle squad took cover in a trench. Realizing that the enemy was closing in on the squad in the trench line, he fearlessly moved into an exposed position and, firing his machine gun from the offhand and assault positions at close range, delivered such devastating fire into the stunned adversary that he personally accounted for twenty-five dead

enemy, allowing the squad he was with to maneuver to a more advantageous area. Throughout the rest of the day he was seemingly inexhaustible in his efforts. Time and again he fearlessly exposed himself, as he dashed out into the open to provide cover by fire for the evacuation of wounded Marines in exposed areas. On one such occasion the bipod was shot from his weapon; however, he was not deterred as he continued to fire, accounting for the killing of fifteen more of the enemy. His outstanding performance of duty undoubtedly saved many Marine lives and materially aided the company in turning the tide of battle into a virtual annihilation of a numerically superior foe. Corporal Wallace's extraordinary heroism and inspiring dedication to duty reflected great credit upon himself and the Marine Corps and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

commander, Captain Bruce Webb, at An Cuong (2). It had regrouped under First Lieutenant Richard Purnell and, minus two squads left behind to guard a damaged helicopter and assist with medical evacuations, was now moving north toward Phase Line Banana. It had also made contact with the left flank of Company K so that the line of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, was fully intact. Company I's northerly progress was about to be arrested, however, by one of the strangest and most remarkable episodes of Operation Starlite—the "lost convoy."

Shortly after noon, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Muir of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, had ordered Major Andrew Comer to dispatch a supply convoy, called Column 21, to Company I. The column was to carry water and ammunition, both of

which were badly needed. It departed from the battalion's logistics support area, which was located with the regimental command post several hundred meters west of An Cuong (1). It consisted of five amtracs of a platoon from 1st Amphibious Tractor Battalion and three M67 flame tanks. The platoon commander was Second Lieutenant Robert F. Cochran Jr., and the platoon sergeant was Staff Sergeant Jack E. Marino Jr. Major Comer briefed Lieutenant Cochran on the route and the location of Company I, and then Column 21 departed.

Soon after the convoy departed, it ran into a fierce Viet Cong ambush somewhere between the villages of Nam Yen (3) and An Cuong (2). Staff Sergeant Marino later suspected that the convoy had missed Company I and gone too far, and another officer intimately familiar with the episode believed



Map adapted by Marine Corps History Division

Tactical situation at 1600, 18 August, including the approximate location of Column 21, the “lost convoy” (indicated by a question mark). Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, has landed by helicopter near the regimental headquarters of 7th Marines.

that the convoy actually drove by the Marines of Company I without realizing it. Travelling fast and “buttoned up” inside their vehicles with the lead tank kicking up a great deal of dust, the drivers of the convoy likely passed by Company I Marines who, because of the presence of other armored vehicles in the area belonging to 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, did not realize the convoy was looking for them and did not stop them. As the lead tank rounded a bend in the path, an explosion occurred on or near it. Then, a barrage of mortar

rounds landed on the column, reinforced by fire from 57mm recoilless rifles and rocket launchers. The amtracs repositioned themselves to face to the left, the direction from which most of the fire was coming, and the Marines fired back with every weapon at their disposal. The flame gun on one of the tanks was disabled, and a 57mm round penetrated another tank, badly wounding two of the Marines inside. Staff Sergeant Marino was in one of the amtracs firing his .30-caliber machine gun, and he was astounded by the scene. A large

## Sergeant James E. Mulloy Jr.

James Mulloy, of Jeffersontown, Kentucky, served 34 years in the Marine Corps. On 18 August 1965, he was a sergeant serving on a supply convoy in Operation Starlite. As a result of his valor in defending his fellow Marines when the column was ambushed, he was awarded the Navy Cross. Later, he was commissioned into the warrant officer ranks. He spent all his overseas assignments in Southeast Asia, including assignments in Vietnam, Japan, Okinawa, the Philippines, and Thailand. He performed in varied Marine Corps assignments—infantry, embarkation, Vietnamese language interrogation, and translator—before finishing as a supply officer. He completed his education at San Diego State University following his retirement from the Marine Corps in 1984.

### Navy Cross Citation

For extraordinary heroism while serving with Headquarters and Service Company, Third Battalion, Third Marines, during Operation Starlite near Chu Lai, Republic of Vietnam, on 18 August 1965. While participating in a combat resupply mission in support of assault units of Regimental Landing Team Seven, Sergeant Mulloy was aboard an amphibious tractor when his armored column came under intense mortar, automatic weapons, small arms, and recoilless rifle fire from determined and well fortified insurgent Communist (Viet Cong) forces. As he attempted to maneuver through the enemy fire his tractor became bogged down in a rice paddy. Quickly comprehending the gravity of the situation, he immediately responded to the challenge by providing the leadership and personal example of exceptional courage, which helped to rally the Marines present to the defense of the stricken vehicle. He

administered first aid to the wounded and inspired them with his calmness. Realizing that the armored tractor was especially vulnerable to attack due to limited observation from within, he left the tractor and assumed a position in the rice paddy. For twenty hours he conducted a virtual one-man defense. On several occasions Viet Cong guerrillas attempted to penetrate his position to get to the vehicle, but he repeatedly drove them back and inflicted extremely heavy casualties. When aid arrived the following morning he insured that all of the wounded were evacuated before seeking relief for himself. His courageous actions, inspiring leadership, and loyal devotion to duty without regard for his personal safety undoubtedly saved the lives of many of his fellow Marines. Sergeant Mulloy's heroic conduct throughout was in keeping with highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

number of Marines were already wounded or dead, including Lieutenant Cochran, who was killed as he tried to organize the defense. Marino saw Viet Cong in every direction and estimated that there were more than 350 of them. As soon as the mortar barrage lifted, they began charging the convoy. Soon, so many Marines were disabled that Marino's machine gun was the only American automatic weapon still firing. Later, he killed four with his pistol, as some Viet Cong made it to within 15 meters of the vehicles. Eventually, some Viet Cong climbed on top of the abandoned vehicles, only to be shot by the machine guns of the vehicles that were still occupied by Marines. Within a few hours, Staff Sergeant Marino had 5 Marines killed and many wounded, leaving 9 Marines who could still fight out of an original contingent of 30. Some of those 9, including Marino, were wounded

themselves.\* One of the men who had survived so far was Sergeant James E. Mulloy Jr., who had not been sheltered in the armored vehicles but had been risking his own safety to tend to wounded Marines and then, as his medal citation stated, conducting a virtual "one-man defense" while lying in the rice paddy. Other Marines present credited Sergeant Mulloy with personally killing an extraordinary number of enemy attackers.

Indeed, while the ferocious fighting around the supply convoy had taken a toll on the Marines, it had taken an even heavier one on the Viet Cong. Postwar Communist accounts indicate that the ambush was made by the *1st Company* of the *40th Viet Cong Battalion* and that company experienced

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\*SSgt Marino received the Silver Star for his actions on 18–19 August.



crippling losses as it attempted to annihilate the Marine column. As Sergeant Ho Cong Tham recalled:

The company organized three-man cells equipped with sub-machineguns and grenades and sent them to try to climb up on the vehicles in order to destroy them and kill the enemy troops. When 1st Cell charged all of its men were killed. Then 2d Cell charged, and all of its men were killed as well. 3d Cell launched its assault and suffered heavy losses. The following cells continued to run up next to the vehicles, but they were unable to climb up onto the vehicles because the enemy vehicles were very tall and very slippery. When some of our men managed to climb up onto an enemy vehicle, they were killed or wounded by machinegun fire from the other enemy vehicles.

The next day, more than 60 Viet Cong bodies would be found in the immediate vicinity of Column 21.

As soon as the ambush occurred, a radio operator in the convoy had alerted higher headquarters that the unit was under attack and about to be overrun. Major Comer attempted to monitor the traffic, but he could not get a clear idea of where the convoy was. Moreover, it had been hard to get any information from the convoy for some time because the frightened radio operator kept the transmitting key depressed, making it difficult for others to transmit to him. Comer alerted Lieutenant Colonel Muir to the situation, and Muir ordered Company I to return to the battalion command post and join a relief convoy led by Major Comer. Colonel Oscar Peatross was also aware of the crisis and provided the regiment's one uncommitted tank, an M48, for the convoy. Another tank appeared at the command post as well. The crew chief, a staff sergeant, reported to Major Comer that he had been with the lost convoy. The tank's periscope and .50-caliber machine gun were inoperable, and it was out of .30-caliber ammunition. Furthermore, two of the crew were wounded. The staff sergeant told Comer that he had just driven through An Cuong (2) without incident, however, and could lead the relief column back to the lost convoy. His damaged tank was left behind, and he rode in the M48 tank assigned to the column by Colonel Peatross.

Major Comer's plan was to lead a fast-moving armor-infantry team to the lost convoy and overwhelm its besiegers with the suddenness of the assault. Of course, he still did not

know exactly where the surrounded Marines were, but the damaged tank's crew chief seemed confident he could lead him there. Unfortunately, the mission would not turn out to be that simple. The relief column set out at 1300 with the tank, two Ontos, and four amtracs, and the bulk of Lieutenant Purnell's Company I riding on or in the vehicles. The column traveled about 400 meters and crested an area of high ground just west of An Cuong (2).<sup>\*</sup> At that point, the lead tank was struck by an enemy projectile and began to back up, ramming into the vehicles behind it. Heavy and accurate mortar fire, as well as small arms fire, hit the convoy. Marines from Company I dismounted, and an Ontos deployed to provide protection and return fire to the front. Meanwhile, several Marines were killed and wounded in a matter of minutes. Officers in the convoy began arranging the evacuation of casualties and the calling of artillery fire on the wooded area to the front. In the meantime, Major Comer and Lieutenant Purnell formulated a plan for the latter to continue the relief effort by marching on foot. Purnell would leave one of his platoons behind under First Lieutenant John A. "Jack" Kelly to secure the evacuation site and evacuate the wounded.

Shortly after Lieutenant Purnell and his infantrymen departed on foot, they were joined by the two squads under Corporal O'Malley that had previously been guarding the damaged helicopter. The helicopter had been repaired and had taken off, and they were trying to rejoin their company. At the same time, they were also joined by Lieutenant Chris Cooney's 1st Platoon from Company H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, the unit that had become separated from its parent company. Lacking a radio operator and carrying its wounded and dead, this decimated platoon was told to help secure the high ground where the relief column had been ambushed and await an opportunity to be returned to its company or to the regimental command post. Its wounded were finally evacuated.

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<sup>\*</sup>Maj Comer's postwar statement referred to this high ground repeatedly as "Hill 30," and this was repeated in Shulimson and Johnson's official history. It is unclear from a topographical map of the area what he meant by the term. The only two obvious locations for a "Hill 30" would have been much farther north or west than would make sense from the narrative supplied by him or Lt Purnell. Purnell referred to the area where the relief column was ambushed as "the top of the ridgeline," placing the ambush site less than 200 meters east of An Cuong (2).

Lieutenant Purnell and the remainder of Company I ran into more resistance as they approached An Cuong (2). This was ground that they had already cleared earlier in the day. It was neither the first nor the last time during Operation Starlite that Marines were ambushed or fired upon from terrain they thought they had secured, illustrating how skillful the Viet Cong were at utilizing camouflaged fighting holes and cave and tunnel networks to reinfiltate behind Marine lines. As a result, Lieutenant Purnell called an air strike on An Cuong (2). Company I found itself in a heavy firefight among the hedgerows and trenches around the village. Its Marines pushed into An Cuong (2) and then 600–800 meters past it. It was now dark, and they still had not found the lost convoy. Staff Sergeant Marino and his handful of survivors with the convoy would have to hold out throughout the night.

### Committing the Reserve

By early afternoon, it had become clear to Colonel Peatross that it was time to commit part of his reserve from 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, which was originally part of the Special Landing Force (SLF). The ships of the SLF had arrived off the coast of the Van Tuong Peninsula at around 0930. Companies I and L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, were on board the USS *Iwo Jima*, a helicopter-landing carrier, while Company M, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, and the battalion's Headquarters and Service Company were on board the USS *Talladega*. At 0930, it was not yet clear that Company H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, would be unable to reach its objectives, and of course the crisis of the lost supply column and ambushed relief column had not yet occurred. By early afternoon, however, a Viet Cong salient was developing in the Marine front line. The rifle companies on the left and right flank were making good progress, but in the center Company H was struggling to hold on in the Nam Yen (3) area. And Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines—having sustained heavy casualties, including its captain, and forced to detach two squads to help guard a grounded helicopter—was now being diverted back to the south to rescue the lost convoy. In fact, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, and 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, had not made meaningful contact as of yet—there was a gap between them. The only physical contact they had was when the platoon of Company H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, stumbled into the



Defense Department (U.S. Navy) USN 1117022

USS *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2) with helicopters on its flight deck in October 1965. In August 1965, as part of the Special Landing Force, the *Iwo Jima* carried helicopters that landed two companies from 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, onto the Starlite battlefield.

lines of Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Clearly, more combat power was needed in the center.

Operational control of 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, had now been given to Colonel Peatross, and he ordered that unit to land by helicopter and sea and placed it under the control of Lieutenant Colonel Muir's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, began landing by helicopter at a landing zone adjacent to the 7th Marines' regimental command post at 1543. This company received orders to advance in support of Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, in the An Cuong (2)–An Thoi area and assist in its mission of locating the missing Column 21. The company had the support of a section of tanks and one tank retriever.\*

Company L encountered a large number of Viet Cong soldiers as it traversed the same area that Company I had

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\*Shulimson and Johnson state that Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, began arriving at 1730. This time is clearly too late to be accurate according to contemporary references.

swept through twice. Some of these enemy soldiers were dead, their bodies already decomposing in the intense heat. Others were quite alive and peppered the column with sporadic sniper fire, again proving the Viet Cong's ability to offer resistance in areas that Marines thought they had already cleared. A flame tank accompanying the unit at least once scorched enemy soldiers with napalm. The napalm, as well as tracers from the infantrymen's weapons, set the hedgerows on fire, adding smoke to the intense heat and confusion of the battlefield. The company also rounded up prisoners and suspected Viet Cong and sent them back to the command post.

At around 1845, Company L arrived at its assigned location just north of An Cuong (2) and immediately found itself in an intense firefight. The Viet Cong fired 60mm mortars, automatic weapons, and small arms. The Marines responded with their own organic weapons and with another blast from the flame tank, which squelched some of the resistance. By the time the fight was over, however, 4 of the company's Marines were dead, including 1 of its platoon commanders, and 14 men were wounded. Others, having spent weeks on board a ship and being unaccustomed to the fierce heat and humidity, suffered from heat exhaustion. The Marines found 5 dead Viet Cong in the area, but estimated that they killed 16. Clearly, Company L had provided needed combat power in the center of the Marine line.

One of the strange facts about the fighting of 18 August, however, was the failure of either Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, or Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, to bring relief to Column 21. The area in which the convoy could conceivably have been located was small enough that two rifle companies with their normal frontage should have found it. Instead, Company I traversed the area throughout the late afternoon and much of the night, but Lieutenant Purnell reported that he never made contact with Column 21. It appears that Marines from Company L did find the convoy, yet apparently neither the company's officers nor the staff of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, realized it had. After fighting off the Viet Cong in the area of An Cuong (2), the company sent one patrol to the north and another to the west to look for the convoy. The first patrol found nothing. Two other Marines in the company, however, including Corporal Robert A. Collins, saw some burning amtracs in the distance, but enemy fire prevented them from getting close

enough to investigate. Nevertheless, Corporal Collins and a lieutenant were able to get to a tank. They searched it and found body parts and some abandoned M14 rifles, which they rendered inoperable to the enemy by removing the bolts and bending the barrels. They did not find any living Americans, however. Before they left the tank, they heard someone walking up behind them. When the person did not answer a challenge, they fired, and then returned to their own lines. Later, the after action report for Company L reported that "there [were] a number of damaged LVT's at the objective area. No U.S. casualties were found." In somewhat different wording, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, after action report stated that Company L "located one burning tank and one disabled LVT" just southwest of An Cuong (2). It seems improbable that the abandoned tank and the amtracs located by Company L were not part of Column 21, as there were certainly no other amtracs in that part of the battlefield. Yet by dusk on 18 August, no one in the regiment believed that the lost convoy had been definitively located. By the time of day that Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, was in the area, Staff Sergeant Marino and his nine surviving Marines in the convoy were "buttoned up" inside a few of the amtracs. If Company L found the convoy, Marino and his Marines did not see their relief force, and the latter did not see them. Since a number of Viet Cong were still in the area and still trying to kill the survivors of the convoy, it is possible that enemy fire prevented Company L Marines from getting close enough to the vehicles to determine that there were still live Marines in them. Indeed, Captain Ronald A. Clark, the commander of Company L, having just arrived on the battlefield a few hours before and having limited information about adjacent friendly units, may not have known there were no other American amtracs in that sector of the battlefield at that time.

Due to the uncertain status of the convoy and of Company I, Lieutenant Colonel Muir briefly considered closing the rest of the battalion with Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, located just north of An Cuong (2). In other words, Company K and Company L, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, would withdraw to their left rear to make contact with Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, to consolidate the battalion's lines and provide maximum possible support to Company I, 3d

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\*In common parlance, Marines often referred to LVTP5s simply as "LVTs."

Battalion, 3d Marines, which was still west of An Cuong (2) and in enemy contact, and with the supply convoy. After communicating with Company I, however, and determining that the company was able to deal with the Viet Cong resistance it was encountering, Muir decided such a withdrawal was not necessary. Instead, he ordered Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, before dark to leave its current position and establish a perimeter along Phase Line Banana to the left of Company K, the position that originally was assigned to Company I. After searching the area in which they had just fought and evacuating their casualties, the Marines of Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, moved north to take their assigned place after dark on the front line of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Meanwhile, two tanks previously attached to Company H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, at LZ Blue were sent forward to the general area in which the missing convoy was believed to be located. Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, would later receive orders to withdraw to the rear of the battalion's lines.

Fortunately, Regimental Landing Team 7 (RLT 7) had the means to bring reinforcements ashore rapidly during the evening of 18 August. Company I, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, helilifted in from the *Iwo Jima*, landed at 1800, and helped provide security for the regimental command post during the night. Company M, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, would land by sea later in the night. Thus, although Company H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, and Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, had been weakened and would soon be pulled out of the fight, American amphibious and heliborne capabilities had brought another full battalion ashore to take their places.

### **Situation, Nightfall, 18 August**

By nightfall, Colonel Peatross could feel satisfied that RLT 7 had accomplished all its first-day objectives. Companies K and L, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, had established positions on the American right along Phase Line Banana. On the left, Companies E and G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, had also reached their objectives on Phase Line Banana. Company E's left flank was less than 400 meters from the center of Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Captain Calvin Morris's Company M had blocked off any escape to the north by constant patrolling. Thus, the Marines had established a cordon around the elements of the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* that were located on the Van Tuong Peninsula.

In the center, however, that cordon was weak and stretched thinly enough to allow many Viet Cong soldiers, perhaps the bulk of the regiment's survivors, to escape. Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, in the center was battered and separated into smaller units. During the night, Lieutenant Purnell would lead the largest component of that company, the equivalent of about one and a half platoons, as it searched the An Cuong (2) area for the missing convoy and then carried out its instructions to return to the regimental command post to be extracted from the battlefield. By that time, one of Company I's platoons had been detached to help evacuate casualties in the vicinity of where the aborted relief column had been halted north of the command post, and most of the two squads that had been guarding the downed helicopter had been evacuated. Company I would never take its original assigned place on Phase Line Banana to the left of Company K. It had lost roughly one-third of its strength due to casualties (detailed casualty figures for Company I are provided later in this narrative). Fortunately, Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, was available to take its place on the left of Company K, and by midnight the rest of 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, was on the ground in the vicinity of An Cuong (1) and the regimental command post as a regimental reserve.

The other company in the center—Company H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines—had fought just as bravely as Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, but fared even worse. Lieutenant Homer Jenkins had done a remarkable job holding this company together as it had landed and attempted to attack while in the midst of a Viet Cong battalion. By the end of the day, however, the company was dug in at its original landing zone, minus one platoon that had wandered into the lines of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Jenkins's casualties, too, had been heavy. One of the most concerning things, especially to Lieutenant Colonel Muir of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, was the fate of the lost supply column, also located somewhere in the middle of the battlefield. As far as he knew, the column had still not been located. Lieutenant Colonel Lloyd Childers, commanding officer of HMM-361, had even flown over the area in his helicopter and not been able to locate the column.

### **Enemy Situation**

The Viet Cong had been generally unprepared for the swiftness of the American attack and for the means by which it





Map adapted by Marine Corps History Division

Tactical situation, night, 18–19 August. All of 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, is now ashore and Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, has moved north to reinforce the lines of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Approximate location of the missing supply convoy is indicated by a question mark.

came—by sea and by air. Certainly, they had suffered heavy casualties. As Marine infantrymen moved forward on 18 August, they found hundreds of bodies of Viet Cong soldiers they had killed and were certain that other corpses had been dragged away by the surviving insurgents. The howtar mission called by the command group of 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, alone had killed an estimated 90 Viet Cong. On 19 August, more than 60 Viet Cong bodies would be found in the vicinity of the ambushed Marine supply column.

After the initial shock of the attack wore off, however, the Viet Cong had fought back fiercely. For defense, they had expertly employed camouflage and previously fortified positions to maximize the casualties they could inflict on the Marines. They had also skillfully used underground tunnels to infiltrate areas the Marines had already cleared, forcing the latter to clear the same ground again and again. When attacking, the enemy had shown incredible bravery, but less skill. The column of 100 Viet Cong moving toward An Cuong (2) and

the Marines' regimental command post—which was struck by the air attack called in by 2d Battalion, 4th Marines—had been jogging in column in full view of Marine observers. And while the enemy had skillfully sprung the ambush on the supply column, he had underestimated the firepower and marksmanship of American infantrymen by charging across open rice paddies in close formations in an attempt to kill the survivors of the ambush. As Staff Sergeant Marino commented, the Viet Cong “got a bad habit of bunching up, because we killed quite a few of them in bunches.”

While the Viet Cong as a whole had fought ferociously, interrogations of those who had been captured illustrated that the shock of battle had affected their units, too. Nguyen Mai, a 17-year-old member of *2d Platoon, 2d Company, 60th Viet Cong Battalion*, reported that his unit was about to begin its usual morning training at around 0700 when American helicopters were seen flying overhead. From his perspective, his unit was “surrounded” by an American heliborne force. After fighting for half an hour, his company “was broken up and in disorder, and [Mai] was captured” near Van Tuong (2).

After fighting resolutely for most of the day, the officers of the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* decided there was nothing more to gain from continuing the battle on the same terms. During the day, officers at the regimental level had considered sending the regiment's two battalions located to the south northward to help their besieged comrades. They finally decided that it would be unwise to have these units moving at daylight with American aircraft in the area, however. Hence, the bulk of the regiment, after having fought the Marines at relatively close range, attempted to break contact during the night of 18–19 August, and it seems that many of the regiment's survivors were able to do so. After the war, survivors told Marine author Otto J. Lehrack that they escaped from near where Company H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, was dug in. Indeed, with Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, located two kilometers to the north, it would not have been difficult for the Viet Cong survivors of the fighting in the Nam Yen (3)–An Cuong (2) area to escape in that direction. They claimed that the regiment deliberately left one company in vicinity of Van Tuong (1) to continue to harass the Marines and to assist civilians with casualties. Based on the number of enemy killed and captured in the following days, it is likely that there was more than one company's worth of Viet Cong in the area on

19 August, and there may have been local-force guerillas as well as members of the *1st Viet Cong Regiment*. Still, by 19 August, the Marines would be fighting the remnants of the enemy force, not the bulk of it.

### Helicopters and Supporting Arms

The determination of U.S. Marine ground troops and Viet Cong infantrymen had defined the nature of the battle, but the valor of American helicopter crews was notable as well, and their contributions to the fight had been immense. Twenty-four UH-34D and Huey helicopters from HMM-361 and HMM-261, both squadrons belonging to MAG-16, brought 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, into the battle. Shortly after the landings, the 8 helicopters from HMM-261 departed for other assignments in the Da Nang area, leaving the 16 aircraft of HMM-361. And that was about the time that the work got extremely busy and very dangerous for HMM-361. The crews flew constantly, scrambling to meet the urgent demands for medical evacuations, water, and ammunition. Sometime after noon, Lieutenant Colonel Childers, the squadron commander, paused from his flights to assess the condition of his unit. His squadron had 14 out of 16 helicopters that had been hit by enemy fire. Around 8 to 10 of these craft had suffered “downing hits” but had made it back to a place where they could be repaired. Maintenance crews took parts from some helicopters to keep others going. Roughly half a dozen Marines on the flight crews had been wounded, so there was constant shuffling of Marines among aircrews to keep the aircraft flying.\* By midafternoon, almost half of the squadron's helicopters could not fly at all. One had crashed on the beach, and then it was deliberately destroyed by an air strike. Another had been forced to land in the vicinity of Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and was guarded by the infantrymen until it could be repaired and take off again. The pilot of this aircraft, Major Donald J. Reilly, subsequently had two more aircraft disabled by hostile fire. By that time, there were no more aircraft available for Major Reilly to fly, preventing him from returning to the battle a fourth time.\*\* Another pilot, First Lieutenant Richard J. Hooten, made

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\*By the end of the day, seven Marines from HMM-361 were wounded by enemy fire.

\*\*Maj Reilly was recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross for actions during Starlite.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A801157

A Marine A-4 Skyhawk preparing for takeoff in Vietnam, September 1965. Marine infantrymen uniformly noted the effective support provided by Skyhawks from MAG-11 and MAG-12 during Operation Starlite.

several medical evacuations under fire and twice had his helicopter (and his crew, the second time) badly shot up, barely making it back to a ship or to Chu Lai. Still, he insisted on going out once again. Lieutenant Hooten was not even supposed to be flying because he was assigned to serve as the squadron maintenance test officer for that day. When several of his fellow aviators were wounded, however, he had jumped into the fight.\* At around 1600, HMM-361 was relieved and allowed to stand down. HMM-163, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Norman G. Ewers, took over resupply and medical evacuation duties from HMM-361. HMM-163 had been part of the SLF and had arrived via the *Iwo Jima*. This squadron also had brought Companies L and I of 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, ashore during the afternoon. Between 18 and 24 August, the 23 UH-34 helicopters of the squadron would make 2,975 sorties, conduct 197 medical evacuations,

and bring thousands of tons of much-needed supplies, as well as reinforcements, to allied ground troops on the Van Tuong Peninsula.

The combat engineers and tanks attached to the infantry battalions had also been important to the Marines' success. Combat engineers destroyed scores of enemy fortifications, especially trenches and caves, and would continue to do so over the next several days. The tanks, though proven to be somewhat vulnerable to the enemy's 57mm recoilless rifles and to mortar fire, had also brought a great deal of combat power to the battlefield. As Colonel Peatross said, "The tanks were certainly the difference between extremely heavy casualties and the number that we actually took."

Naval gunfire, air support, and artillery also played a key role in the first day's battle. After action reports by Marine infantry units noted that air support from F-4Bs and A-4s flown by MAG-11 and MAG-12 pilots was timely, accurate, and effective. Naval gunfire was also extremely helpful,

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\*Lt Hooten was subsequently awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.



though sometimes slow. On the other hand, infantry commanders almost universally complained about the slow response of artillery and the difficulty of completing adjust-fire missions. These problems almost certainly stemmed from the poor communications that aggravated the artillerymen as well. Poor, intermittent, and broken communications between forward observers, liaison officers, and the artillery can make it almost impossible to complete a fire mission, particularly when the commands and adjustments have to be relayed through third parties, as was often the case. Still, on several occasions, infantry officers commented that missions fired by the artillery had decisive effects on their targets. They were in awe, for example, of the destruction inflicted by the howtar battery on the 100 Viet Cong spotted jogging south by 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. This fire mission quite likely broke up a large counterattack deep into the center of the American lines. As Lieutenant Colonel Muir reported in his after action report, "Artillery support, while extremely effective once delivered, was slow to the point of being unsatisfactory because of so much traffic on the conduct of fire net." Muir also pointed out that both 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, were attempting to share the same conduct of fire net, and non-fire-support personnel were improperly trying to use it.\*

Part of the communications and fire support difficulties bedeviling the regiment resulted from the hasty planning that went into a large, complex operation. By the end of the first day of the battle, three infantry battalions, a regimental headquarters, and several ships and aircraft squadrons had come together in an operation without—or almost without—having fought together before. Indeed, it was the first American regimental-sized operation in Vietnam against a large enemy force, and communications and fire support coordination suffered. For example, Muir reported that, while naval gunfire support was excellent in terms of accuracy and volume of fire, "The time required to obtain the first round of naval gunfire was often too long due to the requirement of positioning the ship. It is believed this discrepancy will not exist in operations where the planning phase is longer

than thirty-six (36) hours." As previously mentioned, the fire direction officer for the artillery complained that he did not even have the frequencies for the infantry regiment, and generally missions had to be relayed to him through third parties. Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines—the northernmost rifle company serving as a blocking force—was sometimes able to relay fire missions from other units to the artillery batteries. This arrangement was of course unplanned and not doctrinal; moreover, Company M's own communications were not good, either. The lack of communications and fire support coordination also affected the helicopters. The after action report of HMM-163 explained that although a fire support coordination center was established ashore, "Control and coordination of both Naval Gunfire and artillery appeared to be inadequate. Several near misses occurred due to helicopters not having knowledge of artillery and NGF [naval gunfire] that were firing." Infantry officers also complained of this lack of coordination and prior knowledge of incoming fire, and they were stunned when fire they were not expecting landed uncomfortably close to friendly troops. As the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines' after action report noted: "This Hq [headquarters] was not informed on air strikes and Naval Gunfire being used within our area of operations resulting in 5 rounds of Naval Gunfire being fired into our position and 2 air strikes, 1 of whose rockets landed 200 meters in front of Co. E."

The level of communications training and discipline was also a problem. In this first regimental-sized operation, the nets were clogged with a large volume of tactical, logistical, and administrative traffic. Overanxious to communicate their information, Marine leaders and their inexperienced radio operators communicated traffic that should have been labeled "routine" as "priority" or "flash." At one point, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, received a message that 26 reporters were about to land at a higher headquarters as a priority message, though it obviously had nothing to do with the battalion's immediate concerns. Meanwhile, urgent tactical information like the transmission of an update to the operations order, a fragmentary or "frag" order, was transmitted as "routine." To break through all the clutter on the nets, tactical units resorted to similar upgrading of messages. After 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, experienced great delay in transmitting the fire mission on the column of 100 Viet Cong to the howtar battery,

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\*"Conduct of fire" nets were specifically reserved for sending and processing requests for fire support. Administrative, logistical, and other radio traffic was generally not supposed to be communicated on conduct of fire nets.



it eventually upgraded its communication to a flash message and finally received its fire mission. Ultimately, logistical and administrative information about reporters and even resupply and maintenance requests should not have been passed on tactical nets at all, but on administrative ones. As Lieutenant Colonel Fisher insisted in his report, “Administrative traffic can not be tolerated on tactical nets.” Finally, the terrain itself tended to hamper line-of-sight communications systems such as the frequency modulated (FM) radios used. In some places, the vegetation itself was so thick that it blocked radio signals.

### **Logistical Challenges**

Logistics and supply issues also surfaced during the first day of Operation Starlite. Fundamentally, they all revolved around the need to keep the rifle companies resupplied with water and ammunition with a limited amount of helicopters. Colonel Peatross had expected to have 30 helicopters available to him rather than the 24 he got, and those 24 became 16 after the departure of HMM-261 in late morning. The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, was almost totally dependent on those helicopters not only for medical evacuations, but especially for water. The temperature on 18 August was over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and troops suffered terribly from thirst after their two to three canteens were quickly emptied. Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, along with the command group, received no resupply of food and only 30 gallons of water over a period of 36 hours. Over the same period, Company G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, received no resupply at all of food or water. On the following day (19 August), Company G, having still received no water, would suffer eight heat casualties. The helicopters struggled to keep up with medical evacuation requests, and when they took off to perform them, apparently no one thought to put full water cans on board. This was a problem that continued for American units in Vietnam, and it was a matter of equipment as well as aircraft or oversights by logistics personnel. The standard way to resupply infantry units with water was with 10-gallon metal water cans. Once the helicopters delivered them into a landing zone, troops had to be detached from their units to carry the heavy cans back to their comrades, sometimes over a distance of several kilometers. Then, the cans either had to be abandoned or carried back; many were damaged

in the process, and the fighting efficiency of the rifle companies was diminished. Third Battalion, 3d Marines, did not suffer as badly in this regard on 18 August since it had landed amphibiously and some of its resupply came by sea and amtracs, rather than the overburdened helicopters. The exception to this was Company I of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. The resupply column that was supposed to replenish its water supply was lost and ambushed. The end result was that Company I's Marines fought for nearly 24 hours with only two canteens of water per man. Amazingly, not a single man was evacuated for heat exhaustion, though this was not the case in some other units.

### **Night, 18–19 August**

During the night, Colonel Peatross and the officers of RLT 7 concentrated on securing their perimeters and solidifying the Marine lines along Phase Line Banana. Two elements of the landing team were either behind enemy lines or in the contested no-man's land in the center of the battlefield in the An Cuong (2)–An Thoi area. The gap in the center was partially closed up with the arrival of Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, on the left of Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Lieutenant Jenkins's Company H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, was dug in on LZ Blue and resupplied and reinforced with mortars; it would be extracted from the battlefield the following day. Lieutenant Colonel Muir and his staff also decided to retract Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and bring it back to the battalion command post east of An Cuong (2). Consequently, sometime during the night, Lieutenant Purnell received the order to withdraw his company to the battalion command post.

The adventures of Company I in trying to carry out this mission in darkness were just as harrowing and difficult as its experiences of the previous day. As the company attempted to return to friendly lines, it was hampered by the continuous use of illumination rounds on the battlefield. Throughout the night, artillery and naval guns fired illumination rounds over the area to reveal any Viet Cong who might be attempting to move about the battlefield, either escaping the area or positioning themselves for a counterattack. This was helpful to Marine units that were dug in for the night, but it seriously impeded the withdrawal of Company I. Its men would take a few steps, then hit the deck and remain motionless every time they heard



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185319

Illumination flares like these were fired throughout the night of 18–19 August and lit up much of the battlefield, making it difficult for Viet Cong units to escape or organize counterattacks without being detected and coming under direct or indirect fire. The flares also greatly hampered the night movements of Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. This picture was actually taken during Operation Piranha on 7 September 1965, two weeks after Starlite.

an illumination round function overhead so that they did not become targets to Viet Cong in the area. There never seemed to be more than 10 seconds at a time without illumination.

And there were indeed a large number of Viet Cong in the vicinity. In fact, Company I's column literally became intermixed with Communist units that were also attempting to withdraw from the battlefield, although in a more southerly or southwesterly direction. This made for some hair-raising encounters in the dark. At one point in the march, the Marines were fired upon by Viet Cong in a hedgerow just 25 or 30 meters away. Fortunately, the Marines had just hit the deck to avoid being lit up by an illumination round, but they still suffered one man killed and another wounded. They quickly made a flanking attack on the hedgerow and searched it afterward to find no Viet Cong remaining in it. Later, the machine gunner who was the company rear guard

killed five Viet Cong at point-blank range. The Marine was lying beside the path to avoid yet another illumination round when four enemy soldiers carrying a wounded comrade came close enough that they were about to step on him. He opened up and killed all five. Still later, the point man of the company was walking along a trench line when he turned a corner and came face to face with a Viet Cong, whom he killed.

Company I's men were now carrying one dead comrade and a wounded one, and also assisting a third man who was suffering a severe asthma attack. Lieutenant Purnell called for an emergency medical evacuation, and a helicopter pilot attempted to find him in the dark. When the pilot asked Purnell to illuminate the landing zone, Purnell responded that all he could do was point a flashlight at the sky. Almost immediately, the pilot saw the entire area lit up with flashlights pointed toward the sky, giving the Marines the eerie

feeling, the conviction even, that the Viet Cong were monitoring their transmissions. Purnell's Marines eventually covered their own flashlight with a blanket and blinked it on and off repeatedly. The helicopter made a difficult landing, but received no enemy fire and successfully evacuated the casualties. After this event, Company I received no more enemy fire, but Purnell reported that he and his men could clearly hear the shouting of enemy soldiers all around them. They did not reach the command post until 0430, after having fought nonstop for nearly 24 hours, inflicting 125 confirmed kills on the enemy while suffering 15 of their own killed and more than 50 wounded.\*

The other unit that was not in a secure position on the night of 18–19 August, of course, was the missing supply column. Lieutenant Colonel Muir and his staff were extremely concerned about these Marines, but it was hard to know what else they could do for them since they still could not figure out where they were. The 3d Battalion's after action report stated that the battalion staff were able to get two tanks detached from Company H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, at LZ Blue to move forward to the area in which the convoy was believed to be located "to increase the defensive capability in that area." Staff Sergeant Marino requested an air strike and also a medical evacuation, but neither was possible since he could not provide his location. The battalion staff still had radio contact with the supply column, however, and it was clear they were no longer under attack. With great regret, Muir decided that he would launch no more relief columns until daylight. The next morning, aircraft flying over the area were finally able to locate the convoy's position. The infantrymen of 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, reached the convoy at about 1000. One of the disabled amtracs had to be destroyed in place; one of the others could move on its own power, and the rest had to be towed back. The Marines found that the Viet Cong had booby-trapped the corpse of one of their dead comrades and left it on the ramp of one of the abandoned amtracs. Inside the amtrac, they had rigged another booby trap by placing a hand grenade inside an empty C-ration can and placing it on

the seat beside the driver's hatch. Both traps were disarmed.

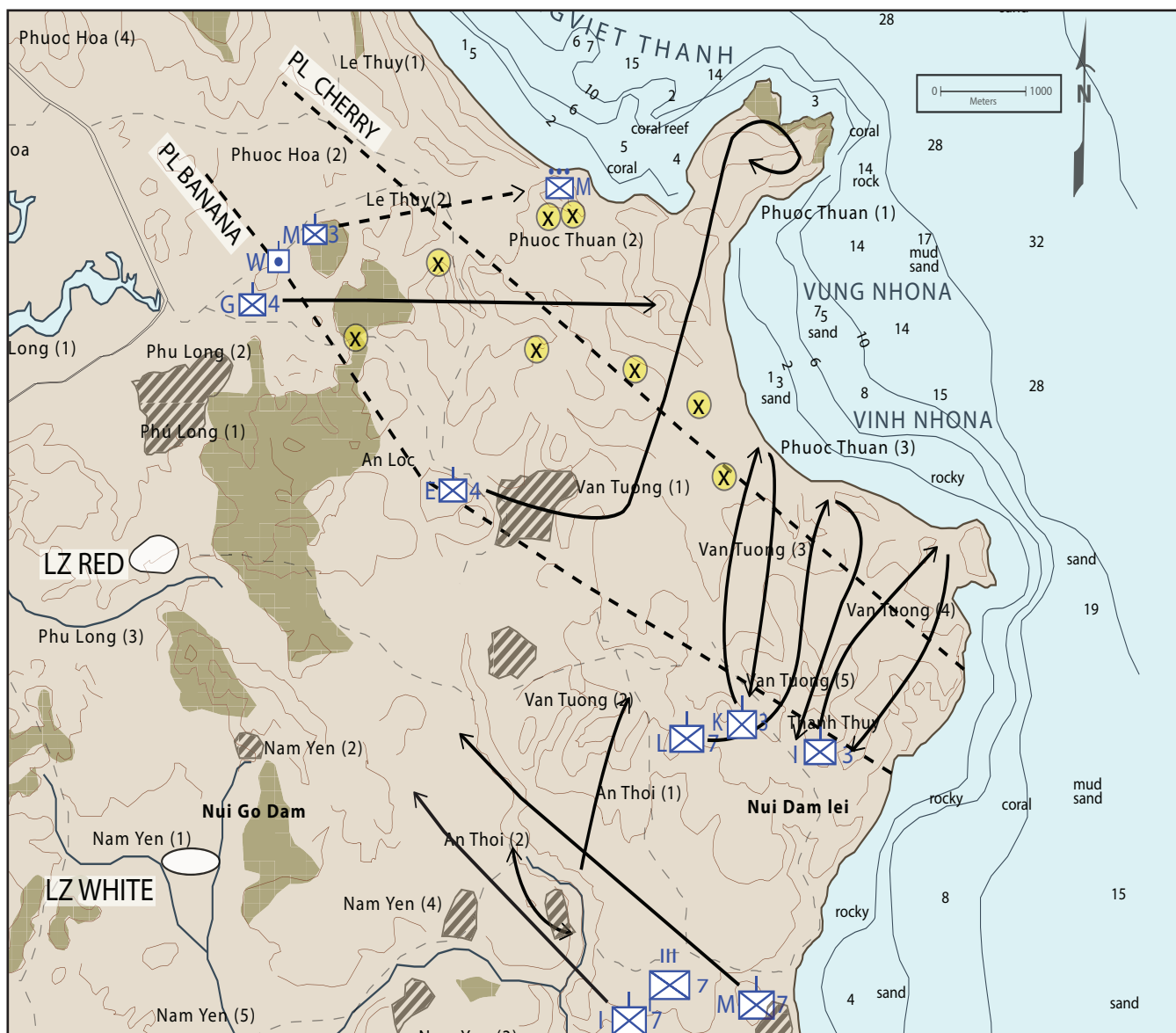
While the Marines focused on shoring up their lines during the night, the Viet Cong focused on slipping out of the noose the Marines were drawing around them. As related earlier, a large number were able to escape to the south and southwest around the flanks of Company H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. Company G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, observed another group of approximately 40 Viet Cong moving in front of its position from east to west, probably in another attempt to escape the battle area. The Marine infantrymen called an artillery mission, but by the time the first rounds arrived 15 minutes later, they assumed that the enemy troops were already gone. At least one Viet Cong company stayed behind in the vicinity of Van Tuong (1), and the Marines' work over the next few days was to capture or kill the remaining holdouts.

### **The Fight Continues, 19 August**

Colonel Peatross's concept of operations remained essentially the same on 19 August: his goal was to tighten the cordon around the enemy and drive him into the sea. The zone of action of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, including its temporarily assigned Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, was narrowed somewhat to the east. Lieutenant Colonel Muir understandably felt that his battalion had had too much frontage to cover the day before, with three—and at one point, two—companies trying to advance over a frontage of nearly three kilometers. Third Battalion's mission on 19 August was to drive northeast toward the sea, eliminating enemy resistance along the way. Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, would be on the left; Company L, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, on the right; and Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, in reserve. Second Battalion, 4th Marines, would drive toward the east, linking up with 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and also eventually reaching the sea. The two remaining companies of 3d Battalion, 7th Marines—Companies I and M—were to drive through An Cuong (2), help extract the supply column, and establish a blocking position in the An Thoi area to prevent the escape of Viet Cong. Company M of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, would continue to serve as the blocking force in the north and provide security for the howtar battery. During the day, Captain Morris moved one of its platoons two kilometers to the east where it occupied a hill along the coast that

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\*Company I's after action report gives an original strength of 7 officers and 177 enlisted. It lists a figure of 14 killed in action and 47 wounded, but this apparently did not include attachments, of which 2 U.S. Navy corpsmen were wounded and 1 killed, and 3 forward observers attached to the unit were also wounded.



Map adapted by Marine Corps History Division

Movements of Marine rifle companies on 19 August, including eastward movement of one platoon of Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Xs mark locations from which the Marines received enemy fire during the course of the day.

offered excellent observation of the ground to the south and west. While moving to its new position, the platoon spotted 12 Viet Cong soldiers moving south and fired on them. Upon reaching the position, the Marines found five enemy dead.

The Marines of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, stepped off at 0700. As they reached Phase Line Cherry, just a few hundred yards from the beach, the front two companies and the command group began receiving intense small-arms and sniper fire and some mortar fire. One mortar round killed a Marine

in Company L, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and wounded 11 others. At that moment, First Lieutenant Richard E. Schwartz, the weapons platoon commander, saw smoking, unexploded white phosphorus rounds in the area and bravely removed them before they could explode and injure others. The Marines swept forward to the dune line overlooking the ocean as they responded with their own weapons and with artillery, naval gunfire, and air attacks. Observers on ships offshore could observe Viet Cong trying to escape by climbing



down cliffs to the beach and boarding sampans. Naval gunfire literally blew the sampans out of the water and decimated the enemy troops on the cliffs and beaches. Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, initially the reserve company for 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, encountered resistance as well and killed an estimated 10 Viet Cong over the course of the day. At around 1700, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, turned back to the south and reestablished its previous positions along Phase Line Banana.

The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, began its sweep about the same time as 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and established contact with 3d Battalion's left flank at around 1000. Company G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, found itself in two fierce fire-fights between 0800 and 0930 with an estimated 40–50 Viet Cong. In the second engagement, the company was able to kill four of the enemy and capture two. Company G suffered no casualties from enemy fire; however, later in the day the unit would lose eight men to heat exhaustion due to still not being resupplied with water. Company E, on the battalion's right flank, swept through the village of Van Tuong (1). The Marines of this company and of the command group found abundant evidence of the Viet Cong's recent presence. There were packs, documents, small arms, grenades, and miles of communications wire. The underground bunkers and tunnels were so numerous that Lieutenant Colonel Fisher did not believe he had time to search them all adequately, and he recommended to Colonel Peatross that an ARVN battalion be sent in to search the village more thoroughly. Around 1000, the company received intense small arms fire from an estimated 20 Viet Cong. The Marines of Company E swept the Phuac Thuan Peninsula, killed one Communist and captured two, and established a position on Hill 32, where they stayed overnight.

Thus, while the fighting on 19 August nowhere near matched the intensity of the day before, there was still a significant Viet Cong presence in the area. The operation was originally scheduled to end on the third day, but Major General Lewis Walt apparently decided that it had been successful enough to warrant further sweeps of the area, and he extended it until 24 August. On 20 August, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, swept south to Green Beach, where it loaded onto ships and returned to Chu Lai. It was replaced by 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, which had come ashore on Green Beach



hours earlier and been guided into its positions by personnel from 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, was extracted on the afternoon of 20 August by helicopter.

The 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, remained in the area until 24 August. From 19 to 24 August, this battalion killed a confirmed 35 enemy soldiers and captured 17; dozens of other prisoners could not be definitively determined to be Viet Cong at the time of capture. During this period, the battalion suffered another 21 men wounded, though none were killed. Joining 1st and 3d Battalions, 7th Marines, in the operation from 20 to 24 August were two battalions from the 2d ARVN Division—2d Battalion of the 51st Regiment and 3d Vietnamese Marine Battalion. These ARVN units moved



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185824

Troops from 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, search a village on the Van Tuong Peninsula for Viet Cong during Operation Starlite.

overland from the south and patrolled the southern and western edges of the battlefield in order to round up any more Viet Cong fugitives from the Van Tuong area. Their efforts produced few tangible results.

Operation Starlite officially concluded at 2400 on 24 August, with all American troops either back in Chu Lai or on board the ships by which they had arrived. ARVN troops continued to sweep the area for several more days. The feeling was that American forces had inflicted a decisive defeat on the enemy. The number of confirmed enemy dead was 614. Relying on the knowledge that the Viet Cong dragged away their dead whenever possible, on the assumption that more enemy soldiers were killed when Marines destroyed

and sealed off underground caves and bunkers, and on the reports of ARVN officers and village chiefs that more bodies were found, an American intelligence report in September estimated that 1,430 Viet Cong had actually been killed. Quite likely this latest estimate was too high, considering that probably no more than 1,500 enemy soldiers of the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* had been present; still, there is no doubt that enemy casualties had been severe. The Marines captured nine confirmed Viet Cong soldiers and hundreds of enemy weapons. In comparison to these high Communist losses, the Marines lost 45 killed and 203 wounded, although 5 additional Marines later died from their wounds.

## Reactions and Lessons Learned

Long before the conclusion of Operation Starlite, it had begun to generate intense interest in Washington and Saigon, as well as in the American media. Around the world, word was spreading that U.S. Marines and Communist troops were engaged in a large, violent confrontation and that American troops were inflicting a decisive defeat on the enemy. Before the operation was 24 hours old, General William Westmoreland's headquarters in Saigon began receiving a stream of messages from Washington with President Lyndon Johnson demanding immediate information on its progress. During the following days, the president requested detailed summaries listing the units involved, friendly and enemy casualties, participation by the ARVN, and when the American units would be withdrawn. In turn, USMACV in Saigon demanded frequent and detailed updates from III MAF, which the latter dutifully provided.

For their part, South Vietnamese army officers' reaction to the battle was more negative. They were skeptical of reports that the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* was destroyed, having seen supposedly destroyed enemy units spring back to life within a matter of months. Moreover, some were resentful at having not been informed of the operation before it began and of ARVN units being included in it only after the toughest fighting was over. On the other hand, Colonel Peatross felt that he was able to establish an excellent relationship with Brigadier General Lam, the commander of the 2d ARVN Division. His staff and General Lam's staff began working together on 19 August. Peatross felt that the staffs cooperated well and that he and Lam had great mutual trust for as long





Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185829

During the mop-up phase of Operation Starlite, two Marines from Company D, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, search the area to their front for Viet Cong snipers on 22 August 1965.

as he served in Vietnam. On the whole, though, there was considerable grumbling among South Vietnamese officers, although General Thi's own insistence on secrecy was probably the main reason the ARVN had no prior knowledge and only limited participation in the operation.

The American news media was also interested in the largest battle yet fought by U.S. troops in Vietnam. The reporting indicated the beginning of a rift between the news media and the military, however, one perhaps involving the White House as well. No reporters were with the Marines on the first day of the battle because the operation had been launched in secrecy. Once news of its size and importance got out, however, there was a surge of media attention. On 19 or 20 August, 21 journalists boarded three helicopters and landed at the RLT 7 command post virtually unannounced. By the evening of 19 August, Washington time, their stories were appearing in evening editions of newspapers in the United States. In some

articles, the reporters seemed duly impressed with the successes achieved in the battle, including the large number of enemy casualties. Yet, at least one reporter, who later became very well known to American audiences, chose to focus on what was more tragic and less flattering. He wrote an article on the lost supply column that appeared in a number of large newspapers under various titles: "Marine Supply Trip Runs into Disaster," "Death Overtakes a U.S. Supply Unit," and "Marine Supply Column Lumbers to Death." A number of statements in the article exaggerated the tragedy of the story, which was tragic enough, but also painted a picture of incompetence. The author of the story claimed that the column "never returned," and he gave graphic details on how some of the men were killed. Under the subheading, "Amtraks Fail to Find Way," the article reported that the amtrac crews were "not trained" to maneuver the vehicles in the terrain and that "the huge amtraks flopped from one rice paddy to another,

unwieldy behemoths unable to find their way.” In another version, the reporter stated that as the amtracs “flopped” among the rice paddies, the Marines of the convoy were “calling at one battalion and then the next. No one seemed to pay much attention to it.” In “Death Overtakes a U.S. Supply Unit,” the version printed in the *New York Times*, the article reported that “relief forces counted 18 Viet Cong bodies,” not the 60 that numerous Marine witnesses and after action reports cited.

On the very day that most of these articles appeared, President Johnson referred them to Headquarters Marine Corps, and within hours USMACV headquarters in Saigon and Lieutenant General Victor Krulak were informed as well. USMACV responded in a classified “telecon” message to Washington the same day, providing a more factual account. Military officers denied that the amtrac crews were untrained for their jobs and objected to the charge that it was an “easy” mission gone awry or that the crews “called to one battalion, and then another” with no response, pointing out correctly that the column was in constant radio contact with 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. The report ended with the statement that the reporter had been the subject of a background investigation in May, and that “he is temperamental [*sic*], had admitted writing slanted stories when displeased by actions of the military. In general, he writes sensational type stories.” A military officer at Headquarters Marine Corps explained in a log entry that “the basis for the President’s concern was the flippant attitude taken toward Marines KIA [killed in action]. (‘These boys have mothers who will read that article ...’).” Clearly, the relationship between the press and the military and national command authority at this early stage in the war was already beginning to deteriorate.\*

Another aspect of the battle that did not go well for the Marines was the attempt to integrate South Vietnamese Popular Forces (PFs) into the battle to liberate the Van Tuong Peninsula. The PFs were local village militias organized into platoons that were at least nominally loyal to the Saigon regime. During the summer of 1965, the Marines in I Corps were beginning their efforts to integrate the PFs into

the Combined Action Program. In terms of both military effectiveness and loyalty and reliability, the PFs had the worst reputation in the ARVN establishment. A number of PF soldiers landed by helicopter with 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, and unfortunately they did nothing during Operation Starlite to improve their poor reputation. In fairness, the PF soldiers were minimally trained, and their primary purpose was to maintain security in their home villages; they were totally unprepared for the scale of violence they would face in this operation. Often, they would hide in trenches and refuse to follow the Marines as the latter advanced. The battalion’s after action report said that “the PF’s would not cooperate. They wanted to go to the villages to cook and get water. They were instructed several times to remain with the company as they might get shot or hurt. They demanded twice the amount of food and water as we normally get.” Thus, the battalion’s official report testified to the PFs’ ineffectiveness; individual Marines later related that the PFs were not only ineffective but a threat to their supposed allies. During the hottest part of Company H’s battle in the Nam Yen (3) area, a handful of PFs allegedly concluded that the Marines were losing, decided to join the winning side, and fired on the Marines. Several Marines angrily responded in kind and killed the PFs that were firing on them.\*\*

The U.S. Marines who fought on the Van Tuong Peninsula, along with their Navy and Army brethren, effectively capitalized on the strengths of the U.S. military, especially its overwhelming firepower, relatively sophisticated equipment, and ability to coordinate multiple sources of fire support. With less than three days’ planning, American servicemen were able to bring naval gunfire, fixed wing, rotary wing, and artillery support to a complex operation that combined vertical envelopment with an amphibious landing. Two destroyers and one light cruiser of the U.S. Navy fired a total of 1,562 rounds during Starlite, including high explosive, white phosphorus, and illumination. Despite the close calls in which

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\*Operation Starlite occurred during the same month as the controversial Cam Ne incident, in which a media crew filmed Marines burning huts in a South Vietnamese village.

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\*\*Marine units’ after action reports do not indicate exactly how many PFs accompanied 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, for Starlite. Apparently, Companies G and H had PFs with them, and it is possible that Company E and the command group did as well. Nor do reports indicate how many became casualties. Cpl Robert Collins, a Marine with Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, was on board the *Iwo Jima* shortly before boarding a helicopter to enter the fight when he saw a PF soldier on a stretcher, recently evacuated from the battlefield. Collins was amazed at the stoicism of this PF soldier whose foot had been severed and was still in his boot.



naval gunfire rounds landed among or dangerously close to friendly troops, officers in 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, universally acknowledged the effectiveness of naval gunfire during the battle.

The Marines, who had pioneered the development of close air support techniques in the 1930s and 1940s, proved they could still execute them well during Operation Starlite. Throughout the day on 18 August, aircraft from 1st Marine Aircraft Wing flew 78 sorties in support of the Marines on the ground, with some strikes called within 50 yards of friendly positions. These air attacks were extremely valuable to Marine ground troops. There is no doubt, for example, that they aided Company H, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, in its attack on Hill 43, and later helped the company give as good as it got as it spent much of the day virtually surrounded and probably outnumbered by a well-armed and determined foe. General Walt was with 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, on 19 August, and he personally witnessed several air strikes that confirmed his confidence in Marine close air support. A veteran of World War II and Korea, Walt saw firsthand that Marine air had not forgotten how to support the infantry. "Hour after hour," he recalled, A-4 Skyhawks loaded with bombs and napalm supported Marine rifle companies as they advanced from hedgerow to hedgerow, striking enemy positions within 100 meters of the Marines they were supporting. "It was," Walt claimed, "one of the most fantastic demonstrations of close air support that I have ever seen."

American use of air superiority was not limited to attack jets. Army Grumman OV-1 Mohawk reconnaissance aircraft provided 24-hour aerial observation of the battlefield, aided by observation planes from Marine Observation Squadron 2. And, of course, the performance of the work-horse helicopters of the operation, the UH-34Ds, along with the Hueys, helped validate the tactic of vertical envelopment for the near future. The first day of the operation saw more than 500 helicopter sorties flown by these aircraft, which brought 600 Marines and 20 tons of cargo into the battle, as well as the evacuation of casualties. Eight other Hueys belonging to the U.S. Army had provided useful fire support during the initial helicopter landings. Colonel Peatross considered Starlite a test that the Hueys and UH-34s had passed. Despite the fact that logistics were strained at times, Peatross believed the battle showed that



the helicopters generally could keep up with the demand of resupplying troops in the field. There had also been concerns prior to the battle about the helicopters' survivability against small arms while conducting medical evacuations. Despite the hits sustained by the aircraft of HMM-361, or perhaps because of them, those doubts largely disappeared.

Marine infantry commanders were generally very pleased



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A186281

U.S. Marines being resupplied by helicopter in Vietnam, 1965. The aircraft pictured is the UH-34 Seahorse, which played a critical role in troop transport and resupply in Operation Starlite and allowed for vertical envelopment tactics.

with the naval gunfire and air support they received during the battle. This was despite the fact that the number of close calls due to friendly fire from naval gunfire and American aircraft were almost too numerous to count. Time and again during the first three days of Operation Starlite, rounds from friendly aircraft or naval guns landed among or dangerously close to Marine positions, and no one could figure out

who called the mission. One friendly-fire incident certainly occurred in the usual way; that is, one unit spotted a friendly unit and, being confused on its actual location, assumed it to be an enemy force. This occurred on 19 August when Company G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, accidentally called an air strike on elements of its adjacent unit, Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Fortunately, Company M's commander was able to get the mission stopped before more than three bombs were dropped, and no Marines were injured.

Other close-call missions, however, seemingly came out of nowhere, and fueled suspicion among some Marines that clever Vietnamese Communists were using American radio nets to call some of the fire missions. Given the confusion reigning on the conduct of fire nets, that hypothesis is not out of the question. During the night of 19 August, five rounds of naval gunfire passed directly over the heads of the command group and Company G of 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, flying low enough to hit the treetops above them and potentially cause casualties. This mission was neither called nor controlled by anyone in 2d Battalion; fortunately, its personnel were able to stop the mission after sending several flash messages. Two hours later, both elements were hit with an air strike, with rockets and bombs landing within 200 meters of their troops. Incredulous that they were once again receiving close-in friendly fires that they had not requested, officers in 2d Battalion again sent a flash message to halt the attack. In all, 2d Battalion endured one bombardment of naval gunfire and two air attacks, and 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, received two naval gunfire attacks and several air attacks.

Miraculously, no Marines were injured in any of these friendly-fire incidents, but they were at least as unsettling as the case in which the Viet Cong seemingly intercepted the transmission between a helicopter and Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and lit flashlights to confuse the pilot. Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, was the victim of so many friendly-fire missions that Captain Morris considered that aspect of the battle, along with communications difficulties, to be the most serious challenge his Marines faced. In addition to the air strike mistakenly called on his unit by Company G of 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, Company M was also fired on by naval guns during the evenings of 18 and 19 August. Somehow, none of the rounds exploded. Captain Morris knew that some of these incidents were due to poor

communications and the fog of war in general, but he remains convinced that enemy soldiers who could speak English were infiltrating American conduct of fire nets and calling in fire on Marine positions. “I swear to you today,” he says, “that some very fluent Vietnamese were calling them in also.”

Although hampered by poor communications and incomplete fire planning prior to the battle, the artillery made an important contribution to the battle as well. The howtar battery and Battery K of 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, fired a majority of the rounds, though the infantry also received some long-range fires from batteries located at Chu Lai. Altogether the artillery fired 2,446 rounds during Starlite, and aerial observers or those with the infantry credited that arm with killing 116 Viet Cong and wounding 13.\*

Certainly another element of the American war machine that proved its mettle in Operation Starlite was the individual Marine himself, along with his small unit leaders. The division, regimental, and battalion commanders in the operation were veterans of World War II and Korea, while the younger men they commanded had never faced determined Japanese, North Korean, or Chinese adversaries. Starlite reassured the older generation of officers and staff noncommissioned officers that the new generation could be counted on to fight. The heroics of Corporal O'Malley, Lance Corporal Paul, and a host of others served notice that the Marines of the mid-1960s would uphold the legacy of valor passed on to them. First Sergeant Art Petty of Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, marveled at the three wounded Marines of his company who defied doctors' orders in Chu Lai, checked out new rifles, and hitched rides on a helicopter to rejoin their company. Lieutenant Colonel Muir nearly became emotional when speaking of Marines who had refused evacuation for their wounds until after the battle was over, relating, “This morning (the day after the battle) we had half a dozen men report to sick call to have shrapnel taken out of them. They hadn't reported they'd been wounded until they were sure the battle was over.” Moreover, the small unit leaders at the company, platoon, and squad level proved they were tough and smart and that they could be counted on to take the initiative

and make hard decisions on their own. Asked eight years later about the quality of junior officers in Vietnam, Colonel Peatross insisted that the Vietnam generation was actually better than he and his contemporaries had been in World War II and Korea—and his first opportunity to observe them in action had been during Operation Starlite.

Another aspect of the American effort on the Van Tuong Peninsula that demands evaluation is the rapid and complex planning that went into the operation and whether or not the secrecy and speed in the planning actually helped achieve the element of surprise. American officers believed for years after the battle that they had surprised the Viet Cong. Vietnamese sources published later and interviews with former Viet Cong officers by Marine veterans and historians have modified this view somewhat. It was virtually impossible for the French in Vietnam, and later the Americans, to conceal daytime troop movements from the Vietnamese population, which meant that sooner or later that information would reach the Viet Cong. Reconnaissance overflights by fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters and the shuffling of units within the Chu Lai cantonment probably attracted notice. Former Viet Cong officers claim they knew an American attack was coming on the Van Tuong Peninsula.

What they clearly failed to anticipate was the means by which the attack would come and how soon. The Viet Cong leadership was expecting an attack from the north or west, but not from the south (particularly not an amphibious one) and expected that the bulk of the attacking force would travel overland, not by helicopter or sealift. Thus, the enemy greatly underestimated the Americans' amphibious and heliborne capability at this early stage of the war. In an analysis that was unusually candid for postwar Communist Vietnamese battle studies, one account, republished in Warren Wilkins's study of the Viet Cong, admitted:

Even though we had detected the enemy's planned operation ahead of time and had prepared a plan to counter the enemy operation, perhaps because the regiment was ready to move out of the area to carry out a new mission, the plan that we developed was too simplistic and failed to anticipate the enemy's ability to conduct an amphibious landing operation from the sea. . . . [The Viet Cong officers at Van Tuong] concluded that the enemy's primary effort would be an

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\*A report by USMACV headquarters in Saigon gives the same Viet Cong casualty figures but says that the artillery fired 3,048 rounds. The author has chosen the lower number of rounds provided in the command chronology prepared by 3d Battalion, 12th Marines.



attack mounted overland, but in fact the enemy's primary effort was helicopter assault landings combined with an amphibious assault from the sea.

This failure to account for American helicopter and amphibious lift capability partly explains the Viet Cong response in the opening hour or two of the battle. Though Nguyen Dinh Trong was eventually able to organize a stubborn resistance just inland from the beach, the initial Viet Cong defense of Green Beach was anemic, consisting mainly of an ineffective line-charge detonation and scattered small-arms and machine-gun fire. The stiffest resistance came from the western portion of the battlefield, one of the directions from which the attack was expected.

Viet Cong activity just prior to and during the attack indicates that enemy officers did not expect the attack to come as soon as it did. If they had, the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* could have either quickly evacuated the peninsula before the landings of 18 August or reinforced it with its remaining one and a half battalions and its regimental and battalion commanders. The regiment attempted neither of these courses of action until it was too late to avoid a serious tactical defeat. The Viet Cong assumption that the attack was not imminent also explains the universal testimony of captured soldiers that when it came, their units had just finished breakfast and were beginning routine training exercises. They were not manning their defenses in expectation of attack, which perhaps explains the lack of resistance to the landing in LZ Red and the initially weak resistance at LZ White.\*

### Communist Reaction

The official Communist response to the Van Tuong battle years later was to hail it as a glorious victory. The Hanoi regime's official history of the war claimed that the Americans had 100 tanks and armored personnel carriers in the operation, and that their troops outnumbered the Viet Cong by a ratio of 20 to 1. In another wild exaggeration, it stated that local Viet Cong militia and the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* killed

or wounded more than 900 American soldiers, destroyed 22 tanks and other armored vehicles, and shot down 13 aircraft. Another source gave similar figures and said that the "American imperialists" had been defeated, though they "selected the battlefield, . . . chose the timing of the attack, and . . . held absolute superiority in both manpower and firepower." A third claimed that eight Marine battalions had attacked on 18 August, not the two (or three, if one counts the belated arrival of 3d Battalion, 7th Marines) that were ashore that day.

Clearly, Communist propaganda greatly distorted the truth, and it is undeniable that the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* was defeated in mid-August 1965. Suffering very heavy casualties, it was forced to withdraw from an area that had served as a staging area and source of supplies for some time, after which U.S. Marine and ARVN forces destroyed hundreds of caves, bunkers, fighting holes, and trench lines, and captured hundreds of weapons. The Marines had captured a Viet Cong stronghold. Beneath Hanoi's exaggerated claims, however, the fact remained that the Viet Cong soldier had performed well and could no longer be safely dismissed with the stereotype of a sneaking, cowardly guerilla. The Americans saw that the *1st Viet Cong Regiment*, which had already humiliated ARVN units on several occasions, was skilled in defensive fighting and in the preparation of defensive positions. Its soldiers were experts at using trenches, bunkers, caves, and tunnels to slow an enemy advance and infiltrate areas that American troops had already secured or "cleared." Moreover, the Viet Cong soldier was not cowed by American tanks. When dug in, he could withstand heavy air and artillery attacks and continue to fight. When the Viet Cong infantryman attacked, he did so boldly, as in the case of the trapped supply convoy. With determined resistance and skillful use of firepower, Americans could repulse enemy attacks with heavy casualties, but the insurgents were likely to inflict at least some American casualties in the process.

Operation Starlite was a learning experience for the Viet Cong. First, having gained a new respect for American amphibious capability, never again would they leave a unit situated so close to the coast that it was vulnerable to an attack from the sea. The coastline, they learned, was not a protected flank, but an avenue of attack for the Marines. Second, Communist forces, which were already somewhat exposed

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\*A common Viet Cong tactic was to let the first wave of helicopters land without firing in order to shoot down others and leave the first wave of troops stranded. It is possible that some Viet Cong leaders were thinking along those lines on the morning of 18 August; however, postwar accounts quoted in this text seem to indicate that the enemy was initially unprepared for American helicopter landings that day.





Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

LtGen Victor H. “Brute” Krulak was a veteran of World War II and the Korean War. From 1964 to 1968, he served as commanding general of FMFPac and was the highest-ranking Marine in the Southeast Asia theater during that time. In 1984, 15 years after his retirement, he published *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*. In this book, Krulak continued to argue that the U.S. military should have placed more emphasis on a pacification strategy in Vietnam rather than an attritional strategy utilizing the traditional application of firepower and large, conventional battles.

to American vertical envelopment tactics, further developed their techniques and tactics for opposing helicopter landings, or “antiairmobile doctrine.” Finally, at the operational or strategic level, the Viet Cong did not yet give up their attempts to fight big-unit battles against the ARVN and U.S. forces, something that Lieutenant General Krulak had prematurely predicted in a report on Starlite in September 1965. Despite the losses suffered at Van Tuong, General Nguyen Chi Thanh of the People’s Army of Vietnam, who was the senior Communist military officer in South Vietnam, concluded that the battle showed that even with overwhelming firepower and the advantage of selecting the battlefield, the Americans had not been able to annihilate a main-force Viet Cong regiment;

it would live to fight another day. As early as December, in fact, U.S. Marines would square off against a rebuilt *1st Viet Cong Regiment* in Operation Harvest Moon. Still, Starlite was the first of a series of big-unit battles between American and Viet Cong forces in 1965 and 1966 that stemmed the tide of military defeats that the latter had been able to inflict on the ARVN. The Communists’ desire to crush the ARVN before the large-scale involvement of American ground troops would not be fulfilled.

### American Reaction

The initial American reaction to Operation Starlite was enthusiastic. President Johnson eagerly hailed the good news as evidence of growing success in Vietnam. In an official, public message to General Westmoreland on 19 August, he extended his “heartfelt thanks and congratulations—and those of the American people—to the military units under your command which have achieved clearcut victory against the 1st Viet Cong Regiment at Chu Lai. This nation is deeply proud of its fearless fighting sons. They will have the continued, united, and determined support of their people at home.” Marines in Vietnam, as well as senior Army officers in Vietnam, shared some of this enthusiasm and were glad of the opportunity to engage the enemy in open battle rather than in platoon-sized patrols and ambushes. General Walt, for example, said that “Operation Starlite was the first opportunity where we fought the Viet Cong on our own terms.”

Walt’s comment suggests several things about the future of the American war effort in Vietnam. First, the success of Starlite partially validated Westmoreland’s conventional approach to fighting the war. Even General Krulak, who refused to de-emphasize the pacification approach, stated that the Americans had performed well in doing what they best knew how to do. The intelligence had been timely and useful, and the “Marines, ground and air, just behaved like they were supposed to behave.” In other words, the Marines, soldiers, and sailors had performed well in what they had been trained to do: effectively utilize firepower, coordinate the use of combined arms, and kill enemy soldiers and “liberate” territory from enemy control. Second, there was a sense among most American military men and civilian leaders in Washington that this was the way the war should proceed—fighting conventional battles was what the American military



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A184979

On 17 August 1965, Marines deliver 15 tons of supplies to the village of Tra Kieu near Da Nang. 1stLt William H. Gibson (left) and Lt Paul Toland, USN (right), the Catholic chaplain of MAG-16, made initial contact with the village priest, Father Hao, to determine the needs of the orphanage, schools, and old folks home in the village.

was most comfortable and effective in doing, and ultimately it would bring success.

Still, General Krulak and other senior Marine leaders insisted that the big-battle war must coexist with and reinforce efforts at pacification in the countryside. In a key report prepared by his FMFPac staff, Krulak contended that one of most significant facts about Starlite was not the number of Viet Cong soldiers killed, but that “it exhibited once again the great value of intelligence, particularly that which comes from the people as a result of our civic action efforts.”<sup>\*</sup> In a long message to the Commandant of the Marine Corps in

<sup>\*</sup>The report stated that the second significant lesson from Starlite was that it “exhibited that a firm, sea-based position, such as Chu Lai, which cannot be outflanked, possesses dual virtue. First, as in this case, it posed a threat which obliged the VC to mass to destroy it frontally. [At the time, it was still believed that the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* was planning an attack on Chu Lai.] Second, it provided us a secure base for an air/sea attack on the VC force.”



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185791

On 9 October 1965, PFC Charles A. Morley, a radio operator with Headquarters and Service Company, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, carries a Vietnamese girl to a medical corpsman. One means by which U.S. Marines hoped to succeed in pacification efforts was by winning the trust of the population by providing medical care and other humanitarian aid.

September, Krulak argued that the success of Starlite and the relative inactivity of large Viet Cong units since then showed that the enemy was abandoning “direct engagement of their organized units with our forces” and would probably revert to an emphasis on guerilla activity. The top Marine commander in the Pacific maintained that what had been just as important as Starlite’s success were the “combined military-civic action programs” in the Da Nang, Phu Bai, and Chu Lai areas that had brought much-needed security and economic opportunity to scores of villages. Krulak did not want to miss opportunities to trap and destroy large Communist units when they arose. But, he insisted, “The real victories are to be won in the villages, and it is really our clear-hold-civic action-peacemaking-domestic tranquility efforts that have paid off; and this is what is hurting the Viet Cong.”

In one sense, General Krulak was mistaken. The Vietnamese Communists had not yet given up trying to defeat



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185694

The war continued for the Marines who survived Starlite. This picture of Marines from Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, was taken on 19 September 1965, one month after the operation. Company I had seen some of the fiercest fighting on 18–19 August and was now back in action. Here, Sgt Muliman Tela, squad leader of 1st Squad, 3d Platoon, Company I, briefs his fire team leaders in the rain. Left to right, they are PFC Jose Pacheco, Sgt Tela, LCpl Charles Landaur, and Cpl Richard Milton. The Marines are armed with the M14 rifle, which was still the standard infantry weapon for U.S. forces in 1965. Landaur and Milton are wearing ponchos, which Marines usually found offered only limited protection from the rain.

American units in set-piece battles. During the subsequent Operation Piranha (7 September 1965), the Marines tried to duplicate the results of Operation Starlite by using an amphibious landing and helicopter landings to trap a Viet Cong unit in a coastal area. The Viet Cong lost 178 killed in the operation but generally attempted to avoid battle. Such was not the case in other areas of Vietnam throughout 1965 and 1966, and the Communists never completely abandoned the big-unit war even as they conducted insurgency

operations as well. Indeed, the Marines would have to fight the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* again in December during Operation Harvest Moon. Hauntingly, that battle also took place near Chu Lai, and one of the Marine units involved was 3d Battalion, 3d Marines.

Nor were General Westmoreland and national leaders in Washington won over to Krulak's approach. Marines in the I Corps area would continue their pacification efforts with some success, and the Army would attempt to establish





Defense Department (Marine Corps) A186108

Marines of Company L, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines—another unit that saw heavy action in Operation Starlite—cross a river to make a sweep on a Vietnamese village. This photo was taken on 17 November 1965, during the second phase of Operation Blue Marlin.

similar programs elsewhere. Overall, though, General Westmoreland and his headquarters in Saigon demanded evidence from both Army and Marine units that they were taking the fight to the enemy in the form of major combat operations, the destruction of enemy units, and enemy body counts. Generally, the U.S. military, arguably including the Marines as well, focused on fighting a conventional war in Vietnam.

The rebuilding of the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* after Operation Starlite was another sobering lesson to the Americans,

who did not realize that they had only fought part of the regiment at Van Tuong, not the entire force. It is unclear whether the regiment's ranks were mainly replenished from new local recruits or from personnel sent from North Vietnam, as at least one senior Marine officer suspected. It does seem that the regiment benefitted from the attachment of a North Vietnamese Army unit, the *195th Antiaircraft Battalion*, in October. Regardless of how the unit was reconstituted, however, its recovery illustrated the resiliency of the Viet Cong. Several times during the war, American intelligence would write off the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* as a credible force, only to see it reappear. One junior officer, Kenneth P. Sympton, later wrote that "it took some months before I had any sense at all of the staying power of the Viet Cong. . . . We could destroy the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* only to find it reincarnated a few months later. . . . So we would continue to fight and kill the same enemy, often in the same place." As historian Otto Lehrack notes, "Many thousands of Viet Cong who belonged to this unit were killed over the years, but the unit always bounced back."

Though the reappearance of the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* after Starlite mystified the Marines, the hard-fought battle on the Van Tuong Peninsula bolstered their confidence that American firepower and fighting ability would eventually vanquish the enemy. Thus, in many ways, the operation epitomized much of the war and set the stage for much of what followed. First, in the short term, it was the first of several large battles in which American ground troops were able to stem the tide of Communist military success in 1964–65 and buy time for the stabilization of the South Vietnamese government in Saigon. Although the opinion was not unanimous, many American military and political leaders concluded that they could win a war of firepower and attrition against Communist insurgents in Vietnam. Starlite therefore signaled that the United States and its South Vietnamese allies would continue to use conventional tactics and firepower to achieve victory. Finally, as warriors, the U.S. Marines and the main-force units of the Viet Cong learned a great deal about each other in Operation Starlite. Carefully assessing the other's strengths and weaknesses, each side was forced to concede that their enemy was a formidable foe. This was the first time each would take the measure of the other in open battle; it would not, however, be the last.



## Sources

This work is based largely on unit documents, such as after action reports and command chronologies submitted after Operation Starlite, and on interviews of participants conducted shortly after the battle. All of these are located at the Gray Research Center at Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia. These are supplemented with two more recent interviews of Operation Starlite participants and email correspondence with them. Additionally, several participants in the battle submitted very helpful comments on a draft manuscript of the work by Shulimson and Johnson mentioned below. These are located at the Gray Research Center and the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. The National Archives also has reports of interrogations of Viet Cong prisoners during the relevant time period, as well as daily reports by the J-3 section of USMACV, in Record Group 472.

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
FMFPac	Fleet Marine Force, Pacific
LVTP	Landing Vehicle, Tracked, Personnel
LZ	Landing Zone (used only with formally named landing zones, e.g., LZ Red)
LSA	Logistics Support Area
MAG	Marine Aircraft Group
MAF	Marine Amphibious Force
MEB	Marine Expeditionary Brigade
HMM	Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron
RLT	Regimental Landing Team
PF	South Vietnamese Popular Forces
PL	Phase Line
SLF	Special Landing Force
USMACV	U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
VC	Viet Cong

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Photo courtesy of the author

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