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**U. S. Marines  
In  
Vietnam**

**Part I**

**Introduction**

**Chapters 1-4  
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**Historical Division  
HQMC  
10 April 1970**

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## INTRODUCTION

Section 206(c) of the amended National Security Act of 1947, as codified and re-enacted into law as 10 USC 5013, reads in part:

...The Marine Corps shall be organized, trained, and equipped to provide fleet marine forces of combined arms, together with supporting air components, for service with the fleet in the seizure or defense of advanced naval bases and for the conduct of such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign...

Further...To perform such other duties as the President may direct.

This delineation of the Marine Corps role and mission has not applied precisely to the Vietnam experience any more than it did to the Korean conflict. The amphibious landings made by the Marines on the littoral of South Vietnam have not been executed primarily to seize or defend naval bases and related land operations have not been essential to a purely naval campaign. The mission of the Marines in Vietnam has been a mixed endeavor involving the amphibious capability, the support of other Services and Allies, and such other duties as the President has directed.

What had started out as a response to a standard contingency operation by a Marine amphibious force, soon developed into a protracted land war of monumental proportions. Considering

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the Korean experience, this nonamphibious role was really nothing new. It was something that had to be taken in stride. The expansion of the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) to the size of a field army was, however, a unique experience for the Marines. By May 1968, there were more US Army maneuver battalions under III MAF operational control than Marine battalions--29 as compared with 24. Overall, 30 percent of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (ComUSMACV) assets were committed to III MAF's operational area, the I Corps Tactical Zone (ICTZ), which covered the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. The 2d Republic of Korea Marine Brigade further increased the scope of this command with four more battalions under "operational guidance" of III MAF. The Marines absorbed this responsibility in spite of the fact that their organizational structure was not initially geared to the task. Even though administering a field army was a new experience for the Marines, they readily accepted this expanded role and out of necessity emphasized land warfare.

Still, the amphibious role was the Marine Corps' raison d'etre and its vested interest. Further, commitment to a land war did not diminish the need or responsibility for maintaining an amphibious capability in the Western Pacific. There were a number of contingency plans in the area that required a continuous state of readiness by the Seventh Fleet and its amphibious forces. There was a danger in preoccupation with South Vietnam. Both the Navy and the Marines had to be

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constantly ready to conduct amphibious operations elsewhere, on short notice, even when committed to an extended land campaign in South Vietnam. Consequently, the Special Landing Force (SLF) was maintained to provide this strategic reserve. The SLF, originally instituted in the mid-50s under various other titles, historically consisted of one or two battalion landing teams (BLTs), and later, with helicopter support.

The SLF had a checkered history in Vietnam primarily because amphibious operations generally were not the best tactical option to apply to a land-oriented war where Marines were already on the beach. Nevertheless, some of the purely amphibious operations of the SLF netted significant enemy casualties (the highest casualties, however, were in the non-amphibious SLF operations ashore); and even in the low-kill amphibious operations, there was always the short term effect of upsetting enemy activity in the coastal areas. Most significantly, the SLF provided ComUSMACV the only immediate reserve force with its own organic support for in-country contingencies.

Another benefit of maintaining the SLF was the resultant upgrading of combat-fatigued, in-country units. During the early part of the war in Vietnam, units assigned to the SLF from III MAF rotated and underwent a rehabilitation program on Okinawa. This program permitted improvement of combat effectiveness, training of personnel, refurbishment of supplies and equipment, and a break from the grind of continuous combat duty.

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Unfortunately, this very beneficial program stopped with the enemy build-up in the DMZ in late spring 1967.

In late fall 1967, the assignment of SLF units ashore under operational control of III MAF commands for protracted periods of time became standard practice. Some in-country Marines openly expressed the opinion that amphibious operations were a waste of time and that the SLFs should be left ashore. These Marines, barbed by ComUSMACV critics interested in enemy body count, failed to appreciate that the SLF was not solely dedicated to the war in Vietnam and that CINCPAC had other responsibilities as well. Understandably, the immediate war at hand was their prime concern and, of course, at a higher level, that of CINCPAC as well.

With Tet and its aftermath, the contingency capability of the Seventh Fleet amphibious force deteriorated as both SLFs remained ashore in support of prolonged III MAF operations from February through May 1968. As Tet and the subsequent "mini-Tet" subsided and the demands of land conflict ashore diminished to manageable proportions, the SLFs were at long last able to return to their shipping and resume their amphibious role.

The SLF record thereafter included several more operations over the summer of 1968; then there was a period when one SLF served ashore while the other underwent rehabilitation at Subic Bay in the Philippines. By October 1968, both SLFs were again in full operation and conducted amphibious operations until

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September 1969. At this point, the SLF resumed its normal role of being a ready force afloat, prepared to execute any of its contingency plans.

The long and short of the Marines' war in Vietnam was that this particular conflict had limited application for the specialty of amphibious operations. The Marine Corps was forced by circumstances to perform in a capacity other than its primary role and function. Despite the fact that Vietnam was not a showcase for amphibious operations, the Marines performed their mission as an amphibious force wherever it was tactically feasible. This monograph provides an analysis of these Special Landing Force operations as a part of the Marines' total effort in South Vietnam.

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## CHAPTER I

### DEVELOPMENTAL BACKGROUND AND EARLY DEPLOYMENT OF THE

1. USE BLACK BOLD. ALL LETTERS MUST BE IN ALL CAPS. NO SLASHES.
2. USE SINGLE SOLID LINE

(1) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: U. S. Naval Hist Div, CNO, History of U. S. Naval Operations, Vietnam, v. 1, 1946-63(S), hereafter CNO HD NavOps VN, v. 1, 1946-63(S); CNO HD NavOps, v. 2, 1964(S); Maj James M. Yingling, Capt Harvey D. Bradshaw, Mr. Benis M. Frank, "United States Marine Corps Activities in South Vietnam, 1954-63, A Study Prepared for the Secretary of Defense," (HistBr, G-3 Div, HQMC) (S); LtCol John J. Cahill and Jack Shulimson, "History of U. S. Marine Corps Operations in Vietnam, January-June 1965," (HistBr, G-3 Div, HQMC) (S), hereafter Cahill and Shulimson, USMC Ops VN, Jan-Jun65 (S); Marine Corps General Officers Symposium, 1962, 007A20662 of 26 Jul 1962 (S); Fleet Marine Force, Atlantic: Test Report, Fast Landing Force Concept, 039-58 of 17 May 1958 (C), hereafter FMFLant Test Rpt, 17May58 (C); Air/Ground Task Force Structure 1953-1960, File VE 23.2N 120308, Historical Reference Branch, HQMC (S); 2/5 ComdD, 3 Jul-16 Oct 1960 (C), hereafter 2/5 ComdDs (S); 2/9 ComdD, 7 Feb-31 May 1961 (U); 3/9 ComdD, 24 Mar-22 Jun 1961 (S); 1/3 ComdD, 15 Jun-23 Aug 1961 (C); 2/3 ComdD, 15 Jul-6 Oct 1961 (C); 3/3 ComdD, 11 Aug-18 Dec 1961 (C); 1/9 ComdD, 15 Dec 1961-21 Feb 1962 (U); 2/9 ComdD, 19 Feb-23 Apr 1962 (C); 1/3 ComdD, 20 May-22 Aug 1962 (C); 3/9 ComdD, 24 Apr-Jul 1962 (S); 2/3 ComdD, 22 Aug-18 Oct 1962 (C); 3/3

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ComdD, 18 Oct-17 Dec 1962(C); 2/9 ComdD, 1 Jan-31 Mar 1963(U);  
3/9 ComdD, 28 Mar-23 May 1963(C); 2/3 ComdD, 24 Jul-16 Sep  
1963 (S); 3/3 ComdD, 31 Aug-8 Dec 1963(S); 1/3 ComdD, 13 Jun-  
23 Jul 1964(C).

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The concept of the Special Landing Force has a number of parallels dating back to Captain Samuel Nicholas' battalion landing on New Providence Island in the Bahamas on 3 March 1776. The commitment of battalion-size landing forces has been a rather common experience in Marine Corps history. In contrast, the employment of floating battalions built around combined arms, poised for immediate contingency response, is more unusual except in relatively recent times. This more precise parallel probably had its origin during the Civil War.

In June 1861, Captain Samuel F. DuPont, USN, with the backing of the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Gustavus V. Fox, arranged to have a Marine battalion assigned to a special transport (SS Governor) for a naval campaign along the coastal and riverine areas of the Confederate States. After its establishment afloat, this battalion, under command of Major John G. Reynolds, met with ill fortune when the Governor swamped at sea in a Hatteras gale. As a result, the battalion was deprived of its role in the fight at Port Royal, Virginia. Despite its ill-fated start, this unit is probably the oldest ancestor of the floating battalion concept in the U. S. Marine Corps.(2)

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(2) Colonel Robert D. Heinl, Jr., Soldiers of the Sea (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1962), pp. 73-74, hereafter Heinl, Soldiers of the Sea.

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The Spanish-American War marked a further application of the floating battalion. On 22 April 1898, Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Huntington embarked a battalion (five companies of infantry and one 3-inch artillery company) aboard a specially fitted transport, the USS Panther, for expeditionary service in Cuba. This unit, self-contained in its mobile logistical base, was reinforced by the guns of Commodore Winfield S. Schley's Flying Squadron. Although this battalion spent a relatively short period afloat--the troops were temporarily disembarked at Key West--it was finally committed on 10 June at Guantanamo, Cuba. The unit's performance as the spearhead of American forces in Cuba (including the battle of Cuaco Well<sup>2</sup> on 14 June), became ~~one~~ one of the brightest highlights of this short six-month war.(3)

Floating battalions were prominent during the expeditionary period of the early 1900s. In 1903 when Panamanians started a revolution for independence from Colombia, Major John A. Lejeune's floating battalion landed to help stabilize the situation. Off-loaded amidst a torrential downpour at Colon, the Marines quickly thwarted the Colombian soldiers from pursuing the revolutionaries. Once established, it took the U.S. only four days to recognize the new Panamanian government, and in turn assure U. S. rights for canal development. Subsequently, a Marine brigade was formed, commanded by no less a personage than Brigadier General Commandant George F. Elliott.

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(3) Ibid., pp. 113-117.

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This marked the last time a commandant took personal command in the field.(4)

In September 1906, Lieutenant Colonel Albertus W. Catlin landed his floating battalion in Havana, Cuba. This expedition had the mission of ensuring the stability of the Cuban government as provided for in the provisions of the Platt Amendment. Other Marine battalions followed until there was a brigade force on duty as well as Army units. Finally, in 1909 the last elements of the force returned from this extremely long stint of guard duty.(5)

The floating battalion concept flourished until the First World War. The battalion bases when in home waters were Brooklyn, League Island, or Pensacola, and when in the Caribbean, Guantanamo Bay. With the advent of the Advance Base Concept and the War in Europe, however, the floating battalion concept was overshadowed. In essence it remained in obscurity until after World War II.(6)

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(4) Ibid., pp. 147-148.

(5) LtCol Clyde H. Metcalfe, A History of the United States Marine Corps (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1939), pp. 312-324, hereafter Metcalfe, USMC History.

(6) The Advance Base Force featured a small expeditionary Marine Brigade with combined arms support, equipped to seize and hold temporary naval bases as well as accompany the fleet for any contingency in time of war. See Ibid., pp. 310-311

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Within the context of modern methods of warfare and technology, the most comparable force to the Special Landing Force harkens back to 1947. At that time the Commander in Chief of Naval Forces, Mediterranean requested that the Chief of Naval Operations furnish a battalion-size Fleet Marine Force unit to bolster the striking power of the U. S. Sixth Fleet in connection with supporting the "Truman Doctrine" in that area. In January 1948 a reinforced battalion joined the fleet for duty. Since that time, except for two short periods, Marine landing forces have been continually assigned on a rotational basis to the Sixth Fleet; also, during much of that time Marine air was deployed to the Mediterranean as well. (\*)

This Sixth Fleet amphibious force, obscured at times by the developmental trends of the '50s toward larger unit packages, still held its own. There was always a need for a light-weight task force to respond to contingency calls--whether it was for a quick small-scale show of force to calm a political crisis or to grab a toe hold until a larger force could arrive on the scene.

Following the Korean Conflict, the Marine Corps, as was the case with the other services, was deeply concerned with its

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and Heinl, Soldiers of the Sea, p. 160.

(\*) These periods were from August 1950 to March 1951 during the Korean Conflict, and from March 1955 to April 1956, when funds were not available to deploy such a force.

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postwar role. The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., endeavored to guide the Corps back to a peacetime posture and at the same time perpetuate a high state of combat readiness. On 12 April 1954, the Commandant wrote a letter to the Commanding General of Fleet Marine Force, Atlantic (FMFLant), which was to have long-term implications for the Marine Corps. This directive triggered the "packaged" concept of task forces-in-readiness that was to become the motif of Marine contingency planning that still is strongly in evidence today. The Commandant expressed the belief that "the Marine Corps' vital role as a force-in-readiness would be greatly enhanced by having available at all times, for rapid movement, light-weight task forces of regimental group size [vis a vis battalion group size]," such forces to be "capable of movement to the objective area in thirty-knot combatant shipping, and of initiating and maintaining assault operations by HRS helicopters as a sole means of transportation."(7)

As a result of this letter, Brigadier General Homer L. Litzenberg was appointed to head an informal board that was to submit proposals relative to the organization, equipment, and concepts for employment of such a force. The board studied the matter and developed a "Fast Landing Force" (FLF) concept employing a regimental landing team (RLT). After considerable evaluation at Headquarters, Marine Corps and at the Marine Corps

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(7) FMFLant Test Rpt, 17 May 1958 (C).

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Schools, Quantico, Virginia, orders were issued directing that the FLF concept be tested during the 1958 amphibious exercises. This test was combined with a 2d Marine Division exercise, PHIBEX 1-58, and was held at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Much of the FLF activity revolved around the evacuation of American nationals, similar to the Suez Crisis of 1956.

The development and refinement of light-weight task forces continued in the late 50s. There were experiments with variable-size packages under different designations in numerous amphibious exercises on both coasts and in the Pacific. Significantly, the battalion landing team (BLT), composed of an infantry battalion reinforced by necessary combat and service elements, became the basic troop unit in an assault landing. The Lebanon Crisis of July-October 1958 provided a test-in-earnest of the concept with the commitment of BLTs 1/8, 2/2, and 3/6, reinforced by a standard infantry battalion (2/8), ultimately all under the command of the 2d Marine Provisional Force (Brigadier General Sidney S. Wade).

With the increase of political tensions in the Far East during 1960, especially in Laos, Seventh Fleet and 3d Marine Division planners worked together and readied a fast seaborne reaction force of BLT size, similar to the "Med" battalion, for contingency deployment. On 20 July 1960, the First Provisional Battalion Landing Team Afloat (BLT 2/5), under command of Lieutenant Colonel Warren A. Butcher, was activated at Camp Schwab, Okinawa for duty with the Seventh Fleet. This BLT, the

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immediate forerunner of the SLF, was to be rotated periodically, usually about every two and a half months.

The mission of the BLT employed with elements of the Seventh Fleet was to be prepared to conduct assault or non-assault landings in order to:

1. Support the State Department evacuation responsibility in the following areas (or as otherwise directed):  
Japan, Korea, Ryukyus, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Thailand, Burma, Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Philippines, British Borneo, Indonesia, Netherlands New Guinea, Portuguese Timor, Australia (including Trust Territories), New Zealand (including island dependencies) and French and British Oceania.
2. Conduct other operations as may be required to support the national policy of the United States, to protect United States interests, or relieve human suffering. (8)

BLT 2/5 underwent a training period followed by a series of inspections and departed Okinawa on 4 August 1960. Once aboard, the unit journeyed to training areas and liberty ports in Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Hong Kong for a period of two and a half months. The activities of this BLT and the others that followed soon proved to be rather similar if not stereotyped. Looking over the "significant events" entries

(8) 2/5 ComdD, 3 Jul-16 Oct 1960 (C).

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in the command diaries, one encounters a continuous round of inspections, training exercises, embarkations and debarkations, combat and ceremonial reviews, athletic competitions, parties with foreign dignitaries and officers, and liberty runs in Subic Bay, Manila, Hong Kong, and Kaohsiung. Wherever the unit was during these cruises, it was always ready to perform its contingency mission on short notice. The traditional Marine Corps image of readiness, albeit in a small 1,300-man force, was continuously in evidence in Southeast Asia.

In August 1961, after six BLTs had gone through the rotation cycle as the First Provisional BLT Afloat, the designation changed to the "Special Landing Force," a name that continues as of this writing. The term "Special Landing Force" in 1961 as in 1970 indicated the presence of aviation support for the BLT, a squadron of medium helicopters.(\*)

The period of 1961 to 1965 was marked by numerous contingency alerts involving the various nations of Indochina. Most of these alerts were a matter of the SLF floating offshore on a standby basis without executing any landings. In May 1962, there was a departure from this pattern when the Thai government requested military assistance because of attacks in Laos by Communist forces and the movement of Communist military units

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(\*) The term "Special Landing Force" was unique to the Pacific Fleet. Similar BLT deployments were taking place in the Caribbean and as indicated earlier, in the Mediterranean.

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toward the border of Thailand. President John F. Kennedy quickly honored the request, and the SLF landed on 17 May. Portions of BLT 3/9 (Lieutenant Colonel Harold W. Adams) on board the USS Valley Forge (LPH-8) flew ashore in HMM-261 (Lieutenant Colonel Fred A. Steele) helicopters and landed at Don Muang Air Base outside of Bangkok. The remainder came ashore by barges from the USS Navarro (APA-215) and the USS Point Defiance (LSD-31) and proceeded to the airfield in Thai trucks. From Don Muang, the troops completed the journey to Udorn by C-130 aircraft. Class III, IV, and V supplies were shipped by rail to Udorn but tanks and amtracs were not committed because of the extensive distance and poor trafficability of Thai roads in the interior.

Once ashore, the BLT reported for operational control to the Chief, Joint US Military Advisory Group, Thailand (Major General Briard R. Johnson, USA), and remained under his control until 20 May 1962. At that time, the operational control shifted to the 3d Marine Expeditionary Brigade (Brigadier General Ormond R. Simpson) which had arrived from Okinawa. The entire Marine force ultimately came under the operational control of the Commander, Joint Task Force 116 (Lieutenant General James L. Richardson, Jr., USA). (\*)

(\*) The 3d MEB consisted of a headquarters company, a provisional Marine aircraft group, a logistical support group, and the SLF BLT. JTF 116 included a US Army infantry brigade, a logistic

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The BLT established its base camp and command post approximately eight miles south of Udorn along route 27, while the Brigade Headquarters set up its CP at the Udorn airstrip. Initially housed in shelter halves, the Marines soon improved their base camp so that within a month, all personnel were comfortably quartered in large general purpose tents with wooden decks. Establishing a base of operations, however, was only a small part of the task at hand, something that had to be taken in stride with operations in the field.

The BLT conducted extended platoon and company-size armed reconnaissance patrols along Routes 26 and 27: north to Nong Khai, south to Khon Kaen; east to Sakon Nakhon, northwest to Loei, the cardinal distances being 160 by 100 miles. When compared to the III Marine Amphibious Force area, I Corps Tactical Zone, that subsequently was established in South Vietnam in 1965, this was an exceptionally large operational area. Two companies conducted helicopter exercises including a night operation. Daily helicopter training patrols were conducted by BLT personnel consisting of a drop at one location and an extraction a considerable distance away at another predetermined location. The name of the game was to make the Marines' presence known--a show of force. Motorized patrols were utilized as well. The Marines in this case would ride to the outer fringes of a town, debark, march through the

command at Khorat, and elements of an Air Force air division.

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town, and then reembark on the outskirts. Additionally, two platoons had the assignment of assisting in the training of the Thai Border Patrol Police at schools located in the vicinity of Udorn and Ubon. Classwork in general military subjects and live-firing exercises in the field were also emphasized.

There were problems that limited the Marines' activities. One expressed shortcoming was the lack of a Marine observation squadron (VMO). With the vast amount of terrain to be covered, a VMO was sorely needed to improve reconnaissance, artillery spotting, and airborne air control. Another impediment was the poor quality of Thai routes of communication for military operations. Subsequent to this expedition, particularly during the Allied buildup in South Vietnam, considerable attention was brought to bear on this problem with American aid.

A highlight of the expedition in Thailand was a visit by the King and Queen on the 15th of June 1962. A BLT formation was held in their honor with a display of weapons and equipment. King Bhumibol and American Ambassador Kenneth Todd Young addressed the Marines during the visit in a formal ceremony. There were also other visits from time to time by senior U. S. and Thai officers and government officials.

Gradually, the crisis diminished and on 28 July the BLT was ordered back to Okinawa. This return was accomplished by airlift, including 2 C-124 and 16 C-130 aircraft. A total of 37 loads were required to complete the airlift. On 30 July the BLT commander reported to the Commanding General, 3d Marine

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Division for operational control. The remainder of the 3d MEB and the JTF dissolved shortly thereafter and returned to their respective home bases in the Pacific area.

Both 1963 and 1964 were marked by major Seventh Fleet deployments intended to influence security on the Indochinese peninsula. In April 1963, the Communist Pathet Lao were once again making advances that threatened the frail Laotian coalition government. The Seventh Fleet quickly moved two task groups to a location in the South China Sea just south of the 17th Parallel near the Demilitarized Zone of Vietnam. An attack carrier group (TG 77.5 formed around the USS Ticonderoga) and an amphibious assault group (TG 76.5 with the USS Princeton as the principal unit with the SLF, TG 79.5, embarked) cruised offshore in order to pressure Hanoi, the controlling influence behind the Pathet Lao, to curtail its activity. As was the case in Thailand in 1962, the threat subsided to an acceptable level and the naval force with its Marines moved to normal stations.

With the advent of the Tonkin Gulf Crisis in August 1964, the United States forces experienced their first overt confrontation with the North Vietnamese. On 2 August 1964, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked the USS Maddox and shortly thereafter on the 4th, set upon the Maddox again and also the USS Turner Joy. U. S. Navy aircraft retaliated from carriers in the Tonkin Gulf on the 5th, hitting PT boat harboring sites and fuel storage areas along the coast of North Vietnam. In Washington, Congress quickly adopted the "Tonkin Resolution"

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which established that the US would support the Republic of Vietnam and "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States." (9)

An immediate buildup of U. S. forces in Southeast Asia followed during the period 2-15 August to thwart any violent reaction by North Vietnam or Communist China to the U. S. retaliatory attacks (PIERCE ARROW strikes) in North Vietnam. Within the Seventh Fleet, reinforcements included two attack carriers, a carrier with a submarine hunter-killer group embarked, plus seven destroyers. The amphibious capability also was substantially reinforced. Initially, the SLF, embarked aboard the Valley Forge (LPH-5), the Alamo (LST-33), and Cavalier (APA-37), set sail from Subic on the evening of 5 August to a point 300 miles off the South Vietnamese coast between Saigon and Da Nang. Shortly thereafter on the 8th, RLT 9 began leaving Okinawa with the Marine Logistic Support Group following. By the 15th, the entire amphibious task force rendezvoused, the amphibious shipping under command of Rear Admiral John H. Lee and the Marine units assembled as the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB) under the command of Brigadier General Raymond G. Davis. The Marine force consisted of a regimental headquarters and three BLTs, including the SLF battalion (2/3) and its supporting squadron, HMM-364; approximately

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(9) Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Background Information, p. 156.

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6,000 Marines in all. Significantly, the SLF was to remain under the 9th MEB/III MAF aegis until June of the following year.

During this period, political unrest in Saigon itself generated Seventh Fleet response. The crisis, inspired by General Nguyen Khanh's new constitution of 16 August, caused Admiral Thomas E. Moorer, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, to split his Seventh Fleet into two groupments. Stationed off Cape Varella, the Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), including the SLF, moved to a point near Cape St. Jacques approximately two hours away by helicopter from Saigon. The Amphibious Transport Group (ATG) with the RLT embarked established its position approximately four hours from Da Nang. Additionally, on 13 September, there was an attempted coup to depose General Khanh. During this particular crisis, the Marines continued their vigil off Cape St. Jacques.

Several days later (18-19 September), further attacks by North Vietnamese torpedo boats on the USS Morton (DD-948) and the USS Edwards (DD-950) also contributed to the already critical state of tension. By the end of September, however, the situation calmed and most of the Seventh Fleet forces returned to normal operations. At this juncture, the Marines maintained two battalions afloat as compared to the one extant before August. Shortly thereafter, the 9th MEB changed hands as Brigadier General John P. Coursey assumed command on 16 October.

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With the exception of two more "dry-run" alerts and flood relief activity, there was no more significant activity for the SLF in 1964. The first alert in early November was associated with the Viet Cong attack on the Bien Hoa Airbase and involved the SLF and the readying of two battalions of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade. By 5 November, a stand-down was in effect. Soon thereafter, typhoons Iris and Joan hit Da Nang and Quang Ngai. The SLF helicopter squadron, HMM-162 (Lieutenant Colonel Oliver M. Curtis) embarked on the USS Princeton, flew over 1,000 sorties to land some 2,000,000 pounds of food and clothing for the victims in the Quang Ngai area, often amidst VC sniper fire. The final alert of the year in late December involved another quick deployment of ARG shipping, with the SLF embarked, to the Cape St. Jacques locale. Resurgent unrest caused by the provisional legislature and establishment of power within the South Vietnamese Government (GVN) by an Armed Forces Council prompted this precautionary movement. This alert, like the previous ones, gradually wound down until normal operations were once again underway.

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With the inherent training and maintenance difficulties associated with prolonged shipboard deployment, the ~~Brigade~~ faced a continual problem. Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, Commanding General, ~~FMF~~ Pacific, remarked to Admiral Moorer, *report* that, "as a rule of thumb, troops should not remain embarked for a period exceeding one month without an opportunity for physical conditioning ashore or for field training." (10) This guidance was reflected in rotation of the afloat SLF battalions of the MEB: 2/3 with 3/9; 2/3 with 3/3; followed by 3/9 with 1/9 in February of 1965. As for the MEB headquarters itself, it maintained its command post at Subic Bay or at sea on board the USS Mount McKinley (AGC) while one BLT or the other, *Member* and at times both, would stand off the coast of Vietnam. The battalions were prepared to land at Da Nang or Saigon or both simultaneously. Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch, who assumed command of the 9th MEB on 22 January, stated: "When the temperature went up, we got closer." (11) The MEB was merely playing a traditional Marine Corps role--being a force-in-readiness.

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(10) CG FMFPac msg 182020Z Sep64 quoted in MCCC, Items of Significant Interest, dtd 10Sep64 (S).

(11) Transcript of BGen Frederick J. Karch Presentation to the Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va., dtd 27May65 (HistDiv, Oral Hist Collection) (S).

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Such was the state of affairs during the early years of the SLF prior to the Marines landing in force in South Vietnam in 1965. Seventh Fleet and Special Landing Force activities continually revolved around those nations most vulnerable to Communist aggression in Southeast Asia--Laos, Thailand, and South Vietnam. As the tempo of Communist activity in South Vietnam increased, actual SLF commitment (as an element of the 9th MEB) was merely a matter of time.

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## CHAPTER II

## THE LANDINGS AT DA NANG AND QUI NHON(1)

(1) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: CinCPac Comd Hist (Vol II), 1965, n.d. (TS), hereafter CinCPac Hist, 1965 (TS); Com Amphib For, U. S. Seventh Fleet, Hist of Amphib Ops in South Vietnam, Mar 65-Dec66, n.d. (C); hereafter CAF Seventh Flt, Hist of Amphib Ops (C); Cahill and Shulimson, USMC Ops, Jan-Jun 65 (S); Hq, FMFPac, U. S. Marine Corps Forces in Vietnam, Mar 65-67, Hist Summary, n.d., v. 1 Nar (S) and v. 2 Stat (S), hereafter USMC in RVN Hist Summary (S); Hq, FMFPac, Ops of III MAF Vietnam, Mar-Sep 65, n.d. (S), hereafter III MAF Ops (S); FMFPac ComdC, 1 Mar 65-31 Dec 65 (S), hereafter FMFPac ComdC (S); 9th MEB Reports, 1964-65 (S); 9th MEB ComdDs, Mar-Apr65 (S); 3d Marines ComdD, Apr 65 (S); 1/3 ComdD, Mar-Apr65 (S); 1/9 ComdD, 23 Dec 64-7 Mar 65 (S); 2/9 ComdD, 28 Jan-26 Apr 65 (S); 3/9 ComdDs, 8 Jan-28 Feb, Mar, Mar-Apr, 11-30 Jun 65 (S); 9th MEB Arty Gru ComdDs, Mar-Apr65 (S); BLSG ComdDs, Mar-Apr65 (S); TG 79.5 (SLF) Jun-Dec 65 (S); 3/7 ComdD, Jun-Jul (S); MCCC Items of Significant Interest, Mar-Jul 65 (TS); Col Edwin H. Simmons, USMC, "The Marines Response to Vietnam and Santo Domingo," MS Individual Research Paper, dtd 15 May 67, NWC, Washington, D. C. (U), hereafter Simmons, Marine Corps Response (U); Taped Interview with Capt David Whittingham, CO, Det 1st For Recon Co, FMFPac, Hist Br Tape No. 81, dtd 15 Feb 66 (U); Taped

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Comments of Colonel Norman G. Ewers on draft monograph, "U. S. Marine Corps Operations in the Republic of Vietnam, January-June 1965" (S), hereafter Ewers Comments.

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Shortly after General Karch's assumption of command, planning activities for landing in South Vietnam increased in tempo. The brigade commander and members of his staff conferred with General William C. Westmoreland, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam in Saigon on 25 February about plans for commitment at Da Nang. Concurrently, a detachment of the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company (Captain David S. Whittingham) conducted a survey of the landing beaches in the amphibious objective area (AOA). After several other conferences and a command post exercise, General Karch joined Rear Admiral Donald W. Wulzen on 6 March on board the USS Mount McKinley, 10 miles off the coast of Vietnam. By the end of the month, the final revision of the 9th MEB Operational Plan (37D) was completed. Basically, it provided for the amphibious landing of one of the SLF BLTs, 3/9 (Lieutenant Colonel Charles E. McPartlin), (\*) and the airlift of 1/3 (Lieutenant Colonel Herbert J. Bain) from Okinawa to protect the Da Nang Air Base.

Finally, on 7 March, the long anticipated order from the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) in Washington was received by Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, Commander in Chief, Pacific (CinCPac). *Security* The directive had the belying title "Improved Security Measures in the Republic of Vietnam." Because of the lack of last minute approval by the South Vietnamese government and poor

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(\*) The second SLF BLT in existence at this time, 1/9, was given a 96-hour standdown for relief by 2/9 at Subic Bay.

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weather conditions, the landing was delayed by Admiral Sharp. The next morning, after concurrence arrived from the South Vietnamese, the Admiral issued orders to execute the landing.

At 0545 on 8 March 1965, the amphibious elements of Task Force 76 prepared to launch after closing to within 4,000 yards of the shoreline in Da Nang Harbor. The order to land followed at 0600 but the heavy swells within the harbor prevented loading of the landing craft.

After postponement of H-Hour until 0900, 3/9's first wave of LVTs landed at RED BEACH 2, some seven kilometers north of the Da Nang Air Base. The lead elements arrived only three minutes late. Company I landed over the northwest sector of the beach; Company K disembarked to secure the southwest sector. Company L followed, acting as advance guard for the approach to the Da Nang airfield; Company M was reserve for the landing force and provided protection for the support elements on the beach.

At 0918 all scheduled waves were ashore and general unloading started. With the previous sweep of the area by two ARVN battalions and friendly air cover overhead, there were no immediate tactical problems for the Marines. Generally speaking only difficulties of an administrative nature were encountered.

Unlike most beaches assaulted by Leathernecks over the years, RED BEACH 2 was complemented with lovely giggling girls in "ao dai," the dainty pants-suit worn throughout Vietnam.

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These girls were garlanded in lei reflecting the national colors, red and yellow. Of less interest to the young Marines swarming ashore was Mayor Nguyen Van Thien of Da Nang, the I Corps commander, Brigadier General Nguyen Chanh Thi, and a group of university students. The charming young ladies ceremoniously decorated the leading elements of the landing force including General Karch, who posed with them for photographs.

Travelling over a new road built by RVN engineers to Highway 1 and the airfield, Company L moved out from the beachhead followed by Company I, the artillery, and Company K. Company M remained on the beach as security for the unloading details throughout the night. By 1300, Admiral Wulzen passed operational control to General Karch.

A few minutes later, the second BLT of the 9th MEB, 1/3 arrived at the Da Nang airfield from Okinawa in KC-130s of the 315th Air Division, USAF. This airlift, temporarily delayed by overcrowding of the limited airfield facilities, was completed by 1800 on 12 March with only occasional harassment by Viet Cong snipers in the aircraft approach areas.

The 9th MEB was given specific instructions that the overall defense responsibility of the Da Nang area remain with the South Vietnamese forces. The assigned mission was initially only to reinforce existing forces at the Da Nang Air Base and whatever installations agreed upon with General Thi.

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Photo # 1

3/9 landing at RED BEACH, 8 March 1965, DOD Photo (USMC Photo A183818).

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Specifically, the Brigade shared responsibility for close- in defense of the airfield. An eight-mile tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) was established. BLT 1/3 was assigned the task of defending the airfield proper and 3/9 the mission of defending the dominating terrain immediately to the west of the airfield (Hills 327 and 268). BLT 3/9 had the additional concern of providing security for the Engineer Group deployed in their assigned area and the Light Antiaircraft Missile (LAAM) Battery established on Hills 327 and 268. *P.S.*

Once in position, 3/9 commenced perimeter patrolling on a regular basis. There were several incidents of unidentified movement resulting in friendly small arms fire. The first casualties, as fate would have it, were Marines killed by their own fire. During the night of 14-15 March, one member of a four-man fire team located on Hill 271 accidentally fired upon three other members who were returning from investigating a noise. Two received fatal wounds while the third was slightly wounded.

Other incidental concerns included periodic small arms fire ricocheting from a nearby ARVN training camp into the 3/9 area. Reporting the situation to the ARVN commander seemed to have little effect. Another incident that rankled the BLT officers took place at what was supposed to be a joint check point with members of the Popular Forces (PF). The PF arrived at the prescribed check point but then casually retired to a nearby village for more interesting pursuits.

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On the 8th of April, 3/9 and 1/3 exchanged positions. Protecting the airfield proper provided somewhat different problems. Located in key areas of approach to the airfield were numerous minefields. Dogs repeatedly crossed these fields and detonated the mines, in one case slightly wounding a Marine with shrapnel. There were also accidental weapons discharges by the PFs in the area. BLT 3/9 had one of their own as well with the accidental discharge of a .45 caliber pistol in the Company K area, seriously wounding one Marine.

J. As April wore on, there were various items of note including an accidental explosion at the Air Force ammunition dump; a visit by Senator Thomas J. Dodd of Connecticut; a visit by the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Wallace M. Greene; and an inspection by General Karch. For the most part, activity was pretty routine. As could be expected with no real combat concerns, training and quick reaction exercises were stressed. At the end of the month an unconfirmed report indicated that an enemy regiment was moving into Phu Loc near the Hai Van Pass in preparation for an attack on the air base. Tension of a sort developed but no attack materialized. The Marines carried on with their chore of tedious vigilance.

Another significant development that occurred in April was President Johnson's decision to change the role of the Marines from static defense to counterinsurgency combat operations. Still, this change in modus operandi did not really affect 3/9's protecting the airfield proper. Its operations

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mission remained a tactical form of guard duty.

On 3 May 1965, Major General William R. Collins, Commanding General of the 3d Marine Division, arrived by air at Da Nang with a small advance party. Within three days the 9th MEB was deactivated and the III Marine Expeditionary Force (changed to III Marine Amphibious Force on 7 May) was in business as was the 3d Division (Forward) CP.

There were adjustments in the status of the SLF as the buildup of Marine forces in RVN continued. The role of 3/9 in its nonamphibious posture at Da Nang continued until its relief by 1/9 on 17 June at which time 3/9 returned to Okinawa for transplacement to the "States."(\*) BLT 2/9, the second SLF, had been returned to Okinawa earlier after its tour floating off RVN. Consequently, the SLF was temporarily shelved.

The need for maintaining an amphibious force afloat was continually apparent to the planners in their juggling of units to meet in-country requirements. Both Admiral Sharp and

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(\*) Under the battalion transplacement system, a battalion from the 1st Marine Division in California relieved a battalion of the 3d Marine Division in the Western Pacific (WestPac), assuming its designation and mission. The 3d Division battalion then joined the 1st Division at Camp Pendleton, where it assumed the designation of the battalion which relieved it in WestPac. The strength of the two divisions remained the same, only a change of personnel occurred.

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General Krulak urged reforming the SLF as soon as possible, and in June 1965, BLT 3/7 (Lieutenant Colonel Charles H. Bodley) and HMM-163 (Lieutenant Colonel Norman G. Ewers) formed a new SLF on Okinawa. Ewers, the senior lieutenant colonel, was designated as SLF commander and his squadron staff doubled in brass as the SLF staff. The only exception was the communications officer who was borrowed from the BLT staff. (\*)

a The force embarked at White Beach, Okinawa, on board the USS Iwo Jima (LPH-2), USS Point Defiance (LSD-31), and the USS Talladega (APA-208) but not without difficulties. The compressed time frame for embarkation planning created loading problems. Mount-out blocks of spare parts and repair items to be shipped by follow-on shipping after the departure of the SLF. Also, the squadron had no time for carrier practice prior to flying aboard the LPH. The squadron's last carrier operation had been conducted in September 1964 aboard the USS Bennington (CVS-20). Rushed as the embarkation was, the force staged and loaded in the prescribed time and set sail on 26 June.

Four days later (the battalion and squadron had just completed reworking and updating their basic landing plan) an order to land at Qui Nhon in II Corps arrived. The reason for committing the SLF at this location was General Westmoreland's

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(\*) This "hip-pocket" arrangement ultimately proved inadequate and was later supplanted (October 1965) with an abbreviated regimental-type staff with a full colonel as SLF commander.

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concern over the inadequate force level to cope with the Communist threat there. If the VC managed to control the Central Highlands, South Vietnam would be split in two. In mid-June General Lewis W. Walt was asked to have two battalions ready for deployment to the Pleiku-Kontum region, if required. The most immediate concern in this area, however, was the lack of protection for the blossoming logistical installation at Qui Nhon, which was the key to supporting operations An Khe and Pleiku. Qui Nhon had to be protected until Army troops could arrive on the scene.

On 1 July, BLT 3/7 was to land and establish a tactical area of responsibility (~~TAOR~~) at Qui Nhon. The battalion plan called for the landing of two companies by helicopter at 1400. A third company was to land across Red Beach just north of the city of Qui Nhon the next morning. The fourth company was to remain on board the Iwo Jima as reserve. Artillery, tanks, and antitank weapons were to remain on board as well with the exception of the 107mm howtars, which were to accompany the two helilifted assault companies.

Companies I and K and the howtar battery came ashore on schedule. Then it was decided to speed up the plan by unloading Company M that afternoon, too. All three companies established defensive positions on the high ground south of the city and started patrolling.

The BLT's stay in Qui Nhon proved to be another dry stint of guard duty. To provide some variety, Lieutenant Colonel

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Bodley ordered Company L to relieve Company I, which reembarked on the Iwo Jima as the battalion reserve. The 105mm howitzer battery was brought ashore without its tubes to do its share of infantry duty in the lines.

Command and control was accomplished by accommodation rather than by any well-defined command chain. Because of the division of responsibility for the defense of the area, the command arrangement was rather nebulous. Part of the responsibility was vested in the senior U. S. Army advisor at Qui Nhon and part with the 22d ARVN Division. The BLT, however, hardly had any time to work out a viable arrangement before it was relieved by BLT 2/7 (Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter). (\*) BLT 3/7 continued to remain in the area offshore for a period of 13 days until HMM-161 arrived and relieved HMM-163 which had been supporting BLT 2/7. Finally on 20 July, the SLF was released. Leaving Qui Nhon for Subic Bay, the BLT prepared for a training and upkeep period at the naval base there.

(\*) BLT 2/7 remained at Qui Nhon until 7 November 1965.

Initially under III MAF operational control, the battalion was placed under operational control of the U. S. Army Task Force Alpha (Major General Stanley R. Larsen, USA) on 5 August, 1965.

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While underway, the ARG/SLF was diverted for an unusual undertaking--to assist the destroyer USS Frank Knox which had run aground on the Pratas Reef, 105 miles east of Hong Kong. The reason for the commitment of the ARG/SLF to this task was twofold: the Marine helicopters were needed for transportation of personnel and equipment as were the facilities of the Iwo Jima and the Point Defiance. While this provided flying practice and training for the helicopter squadron, it did little for the BLT. The crowded conditions on board ship afforded little opportunity to conduct training and upkeep of equipment. Moreover, the already crowded deck space was needed for salvage operations. In fact, the Point Defiance had to return to Subic to unload some of the BLT equipment in order to facilitate salvage operations. Naturally, the splitting of the ARG seriously reduced the readiness for contingency deployment.

As July came to a close, the salvage chore required only the Point Defiance on station and the bulk of the ARG/SLF headed for Hong Kong and a seven-day liberty call. After taking in all the wonders of the British Crown Colony, the amphibious force headed to Subic for its delayed upkeep and training. During this period at Subic, Navy and Marine staffs worked on plans for amphibious raids along the South Vietnamese littoral under the code name "Dagger Thrust."

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When UH's outfit was the first to use  
 tear gas in the Vietnam affair. Caused  
 much backlash here - The old "first  
 use of gas" by Amer. troops. Hanson  
 strongly supported UH on this. In  
 fact, he had nothing but good to say about  
 UH's outfit.

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Substitute:

needs expansion. "US forces in Vietnam  
 initially, <sup>were</sup> ~~permitted~~ only defensive or small unit  
 missions. This was gradually  
 relaxed until, on 6 August, Gen  
 W — was authorized <sup>large unit</sup> offensive  
 action by his troops. Significantly,  
 this directive opened the new  
 phase in SLF activities. No  
 longer would administrative movement  
 and defensive missions characterize  
 SLF <sup>commitment</sup> ~~activities~~."

Follow with <sup>revised</sup> last sentence on pg 13.

"Therefore, at Subic Bay, Navy  
 and Marine staffs - - - - -"



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Upon return to Vietnamese waters, there was to be a new phase in SLF activities. The period of assignment to larger forces involving administrative movements and extended guard duty was over. With General Westmoreland's new authority of 6 August permitting large unit offensive operations, combat commitment of the SLF was only a few days away.

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### CHAPTER III

#### OPERATION STARLITE

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(1) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: MACV Comd Hist (TS); CAF Seventh Flt, Hist of Amphib Ops (C); USMC in RVN, Hist Summary (S); III MAF Ops, Mar-Dec65 (S); III MAF ComdCs, Aug-Dec65 (S); 3d MarDiv ComdCs, Aug-Dec65 (S); 1st MAF ComdC, Aug65 (S); MAG-16 ComdC, Aug65 (S); MAG-11 ComdC, Aug65 (S); MAG-12 ComdC, Aug65 (S); 7th Mar ComdCs, Aug-Sep65 (S); 2/4 ComdC, Aug65 (S); 3/3 ComdC, Aug65 (S); TG 79.5 (SLF), ComdC 19Jun-31Dec65 (S); 3/7 ComdCs, Jun-Sep65 (S); HMM-163 Comd Ds and Cs, 16Sep62-31Dec67 (S); HQMC Msg File (TS); Flag Plot File (S); MCCC Items of Significant Interest, Aug65 (S); NMCC Op Summaries, Aug65 (S); Viet Comment File (S); Taped Interview with Col Oscar F. Peatross, CO, 7th Mar Hist Br Tape No. 157 (U); BGen Oscar F. Peatross, "Application of Doctrine; Victory at Van Tuong Village," in USNI, NAVAL Review, 1967, pp. 2-13 (U), hereafter Peatross, Victory at Van Tuong Village (U); Simmons, Marine Corps Response (U); HQMC, MCOAG, Marine Corps Study on SLF Opns, RVN, 30Mar70 (S), hereafter MCOAG Study (S); LtCol Ralph F. Moody, Maj Thomas E. Donnelly, Capt Moyers S. Shore II, and Jack Shulimson, U. S. Marines in Vietnam, MS (HistDiv, HQMC) (S), hereafter Moody et al, Marines in Vietnam (S); Vietnam Comment File.

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By August 1965, the expansion of the Marine enclaves at Da Nang, Phu Bai, and Chu Lai posed a serious threat to the Viet Cong's position in the coastal regions of ICTZ. The Communists were losing control in locales that were previously their uncontested domain. Marine TAORs had grown from 8 square miles in March to over 600 miles in August--areas reflecting a 350,000 population base. The Viet Cong needed the support of these populous areas for recruits, revenue, and basic logistical support. With the Marines gradually cutting inroads into the foundation of the V. C. guerrilla organization, retaliatory action was inevitable. The VC soon initiated plans, one of which was to assault the newly established airbase at Chu Lai, 57 miles south of Da Nang.

Increasing numbers of unconfirmed reports of VC movements indicated that a buildup was underway south of Chu Lai. The 1st VC Regiment was thought to be in the hills west of Ba Gia, 20 miles to the south. Actually on the 14th of August, the enemy CP was in the village complex of Van Tuong, 12 miles south of the Marine base. This regiment, a veteran of earlier Communist campaigns including service in the Viet Minh against the French, consisted of the 60th and 80th Battalions, elements of a local force unit, the 52d VC Company, and a heavy weapons company of the 45th Weapons Battalion. The heavy weapons company was equipped with 57mm and 75mm recoilless rifles, 82mm mortars, and antiaircraft machine guns. The enemy infantry battalions were armed with a variety of Chinese-made versions of U.S.

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rifles, light machine guns, grenades, 60 and 81mm mortars as well as some U.S. made weapons.

On 15 August, a defector from the 60th VC Battalion revealed his unit's plans to attack Chu Lai on 19 August and pinpointed his battalion's location in Van Tuong. General Thi immediately became interested in this information and personally queried the prisoner. The general became convinced that the information was valid since it matched intelligence from another source. Wasting no time, he visited General Walt and passed on what he had learned from the defector.

After conferring with Thi, the III MAF commander moved rapidly. He called together his senior commanders in the area including General Karch, Colonel James F. McClanahan (CO, 4th Marines, positioned at Chu Lai), and Colonel Oscar F. Peatross (CO, 7th Marines, freshly arrived from Okinawa). After weighing the alternatives of defending the Chu Lai base or striking out aggressively at the enemy in Van Tuong, General Walt chose the latter course. The 7th Marines was designated as the attacking force.

Upon conclusion of the conference, Colonel Peatross decided on a combination heliborne and amphibious assault. Several considerations predominated in his decision: there was the tactical advantage of surprise in employing a dual assault from both the air and sea; more significantly, there were not enough helicopters available to land his battalions simultaneously. Furthermore, amphibious shipping was required to land the heavy weapons,

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equipment, and supplies needed to support the operation in this relatively inaccessible objective area.<sup>(\*)</sup> The alternative concept of an overland assault presented a security problem along Highway 1, the main approach to the AOA. Moreover, the Van Tuong complex was some 12 kilometers east of Highway 1 with only minor connecting roads and trails to handle the traffic of the amphibious force. Most important, an overland assault would ruin any possibility of surprise.

The objective area was typical of most coastal areas in southern ICTZ. The gently rolling terrain included sandy beaches extending inland as much as 200 meters from the water's edge and numerous villages and hamlets clustered along the shore and inland. There were cultivated garden plots and compartmented rice paddies surrounded by dikes and hedgerows (6 to 10 feet high) as well as scattered scrub growth (3 to 6 feet high). Approximately 75 percent of the operational area was under cultivation of one sort or another. The temperatures ran around 90-95 degrees with the humidity hitting the 90 percent mark.

Late on 16 August, the assault units, BLTs 2/4, 3/3, the RLT 7 Headquarters, and reinforcing support units were alerted for the impending operation. The Seventh Fleet Special Landing Force, still BLT 3/7 and HMM-161, was also alerted and requested to rendezvous in the AOA to act as the RLT reserve. The Iwo Jima,

(\*) BLTs 1/7 and 3/9 had just landed at Da Nang and Chu Lai and the ships were still in port.

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carrying the BLT headquarters and Companies I and L, quickly departed Subic Bay. The Talladega, carrying Companies K and M, set sail from a point near Subic. The Point Defiance, still engaged in the salvage of the Knox with the remainder of the BLT on board, left from the Pratas Reef. All these ships were to rendezvous off Van Tuong on the 18th, the day selected as D-Day.

As it turned out, all the key command elements had worked together just a few months earlier at Camp Pendleton, California in Exercise SILVER LANCE. Amphibious Squadron Seven (PhibRon-7) (Captain William R. McKinney, USN) and RLT-7 already had a working relationship established in the exercise and, of course, the trip from Okinawa to South Vietnam. Even the SLF BLT was a participant as a helilift unit of the 7th Marines during SILVER LANCE. This joint experience was to pay dividends in the course of the ensuing operation.

The operation, administration, and embarkation orders were completed by the morning of the 17th. The concept of the operation involved landing one BLT and the RLT Headquarters from the sea; the other BLT was to land by helicopter; the SLF BLT was to stand by for employment wherever needed in the AOA. The tactical scheme behind the entire operation was to isolate the battlefield and squeeze the VC between the Marines and the South China Sea. The final selection of the landing beach was made after evaluation of beach surveys previously accomplished in the spring and aerial reconnaissance by Colonel Peatross prior

  
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to D-Day.

The shoreline adjacent to An Cuong (1) was chosen as the landing beach because of its favorable tide, surf, and gradient. This beach was also close enough to Chu Lai to permit establishment of blocking positions as required. Further inland, helicopter landing zones (LZs) were selected in open terrain to accommodate the helicopters. These LZs were at least 2,000 meters apart to allow supporting arms coverage without interference when employing air strikes simultaneously with artillery or naval gunfire.

The tactical scheme was simple--isolation and then destruction of the enemy. All elements of the RLT were to land and link up by early afternoon on D-Day, leaving only one escape route to the north which ran into a company-size blocking position. BLT 3/3 (Lieutenant Colonel Joseph E. Muir) was designated as the surface-landed BLT while BLT 2/4 (Lieutenant Colonel Joseph R. Fisher) was scheduled to be helilifted from Chu Lai into the AOA.

Established doctrine proved to be a significant factor in the planning. The old standby, "Doctrine for Amphibious Operations", known to the Marines as LFM-01, the Navy as NWP 22(A), and the Army as FM 31-11, came into full play in the planning process. This much-thumbed directive was well worth all the years of effort involved in its writing. Just as the Marine Corps Schools instructors at Quantico had traditionally preached, the principles and techniques of this "Bible" saved precious

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time and greatly reduced the confusion that can be epidemic in managing the myriad details of an amphibious operation. Colonel Peatross later wrote, "Plans were completed as quickly as they were because the forces involved were well trained in doctrine. Had there not been such a set of guidelines, or had the forces not been trained in them, the VC would have had time to strike at Chu Lai long before the Marines were ready to attack."<sup>(2)</sup>

The operation, code-named STARLITE, got underway quietly on 17 August, D minus 1. Company M/3/3 departed from Chu Lai in LVTs for the northwestern coast of the Trung Phan Peninsula. Once ashore, the company proceeded on foot to a blocking position in the northern sector of the AOA (See Map, page 9). There were no serious difficulties in the course of its movement, only occasional sniper rounds and booby traps. Upon arrival at position, the company immediately dug in.

D-Day, the 18th, started with pre-H-hour preparation of the LZs. The initial bombardment was provided by division artillery positioned at Chu Lai and aircraft from MAG-11 and -12. The USS Galveston (CLG-3) and the USS Orleck (DD-886) steamed offshore to lend support as required.

While the bombardment of the LZs was underway, BLT 3/3, Companies I and K abreast, landed by LVT over GREEN BEACH. The beach was strafed, but there had been no bombardment because of the proximity of dwellings in An Cuong [1]. Upon conclusion of

(2) Peatross, Victory at Van Tuong Village, p. 7 (U).

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the LZ bombardment, BLT 2/4 began to disembark from its helicopters: Company G in LZ RED at 0645; Company E at 0730 in LZ WHITE; and Company H, 15 minutes later in LZ BLUE.

Initially, everything went pretty much according to plan. The companies of both battalions landed in good form and experienced little difficulty in controlling the maneuvering elements. Company H/2/4 encountered moderate resistance in LZ BLUE on the southern flank, but this did not impede the unit's initial movement. The landing in LZ RED was unopposed, but there was some sporadic fire in WHITE. Company H then moved out from LZ BLUE, but resistance stiffened and the Marines employed supporting arms to clear their path. Around 1000, 3/3 began to receive heavy mortar and automatic weapons fire from An Cuong (2). This was just outside of 3/3's zone of action. After requesting and receiving authority from RLT headquarters, 3/3 secured the offending hamlet. By 1200, command was passed ashore from Commodore McKinney.

Less than an hour later, activity developed adjacent to 3/3's rear CP near the beach. Two flame tanks and five supply-laden LVTs were trundeling along just 400 meters from the CP en route to Company I/3/3. As the column approached a maze of hedgerows, enemy 3.5-inch rocket and 57mm recoilless rifle fire slammed into the column in conjunction with raking automatic weapons fire. Unfortunately, the convoy was still some 200 meters from the Company I positions. Colonel Peatross, sensing that the enemy was attempting to exploit the separation of his

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battalions and perhaps even overrun his CP (which included BLT 3/3's rear CP), directed that the 3/3 executive officer move out with support troops, five LVTs, five ontos, and a tank to aid the beleaguered column. This effort bogged down when the fire of the mechanized support became masked by friendly troops in the battle area.

At the same time the battalion reserve company, L/3/3, landed across GREEN BEACH and took fire on its right flank. The company then wheeled north parallel to the coastline, dislodged their antagonists, and assumed Company I/3/3's former position. The latter continued to press, albeit with little progress, toward the LVT column. This maneuvering allowed K/3/3 and L/3/3 to advance abreast toward a dominating hillside some 1,500 meters north/northeast of the RLT CP. In midafternoon, K/3/3 encountered heavy resistance. After calling in supporting arms, K and L Companies secured the hill mass and established a perimeter.

Since both BLTs were heavily engaged, Colonel Peatross requested the landing of the SLF which had just arrived on the scene. The Iwo Jima had arrived at 0930 that morning, the Talladega at 1400, and the Point Defiance with its armor shortly after midnight. The first unit ashore was Company L/3/7 from the Iwo Jima which landed at the regimental CP at 1543. This company, attached to 3/3, was given the mission of assisting I/3/3 with the support of two tanks. Arriving in the area just short of LZ BLUE at 1845, they were soon taken under fire by

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60mm mortars, automatic weapons, and small arms. In the fire fight that followed, L/3/7 lost 4 (KIA's) and 14 (WIA's). With the onset of darkness, the estimate of enemy killed was 15, but there were only 5 bodies actually <sup>found</sup> lying within the company's perimeter. Company I/3/3, on the other hand, suffered 14 KIA, including its company commander, and 53 wounded. <sup>Final</sup> Their tally of enemy dead was 125.

In the course of the evening, Colonel Peatross called ashore two more companies of the SLF and adjusted the positions of his units. Company I/3/7 and Lieutenant Colonel Bodley's command group arrived around 1730; Company M/3/7 landed by LCMs and LCVPs from the Talladega after midnight. Company I/3/3 and a platoon from H/2/4, which had seen hard fighting during the day, were pulled in to provide security for the regimental CP complex. The Marines in and around the ambushed LVT column continued to experience contact during this period.

Once BLT 3/7 was ashore (less Company K which remained on board ship until 22 August and the artillery which did not disembark at all), Colonel Peatross issued his instructions for continuing the operation. His plan was still basically the same; surround the VC and drive him into the sea. He modified the boundaries between the battalions which reduced the 3/3 tactical area in the east. The next morning at 0730, Lieutenant Colonel Muir's battalion, L/3/3 on the right, K/3/3 on the left, and L/3/7 in the rear, was to attack to the northeast of their existing positions at Phase Line BANANA (See map, page 12).

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BLTs 2/4 (Companies E and G) was to push eastward to the sea and link up with 3/3. Companies I/3/7 and M/3/7 were to head out from the regimental CP area and extract the LVT supply column and then proceed northwest to a blocking position. Company M/3/3 was still assigned its blocking position to the north. Wherever the VC emerged, he was to be buffeted towards the sea.

The fighting on the 19th proved to be the finale of STARLITE as the Marines closed the trap on the 1st VC Regiment. At 0700, both BLTs 2/4 and 3/3 jumped off and quickly experienced contact with the enemy, varying from light to heavy resistance. Supporting arms and tanks were employed on several occasions. Company H/2/4 was still having firefights near LZ BLUE. By 1030, K/3/3 and E/2/4 met sporadic resistance but was able to push ahead to the east. Companies E/2/4 and F/2/4 had already bulldozed their way through scattered VC opposition for 2,000 and 2,500 meters respectively. They had to go as much again before reaching the sea. An enemy CP, possibly the 1st VC Regiment Headquarters, was found in Van Tuong (1) along with a PRC-10 radio and a couple of lengthy telephone lines. BLT 3/3 advanced from its hilltop perimeter to Phouc Thuan (3) on the Vung Nho Na Bay. It was in this locale that the last heavy fighting of STARLITE took place. Supporting arms came into heavy play. The wall of naval gunfire between the 1st VC Regiment and the sea was especially effective. A force of approximately 100 VC were sighted on the beach trying to escape. The Orleck turned

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her 5-inch guns on the bewildered remnants and destroyed them. Nearby, just the day before, Company E/2/4 had caught a similar-size group in the open. Calling in a fire mission to the 107mm howtar battery in position with M/3/3, the Marines killed 90 VC with 20 well placed rounds.

Meanwhile, BLT 3/7, with Companies I and M, set out at 0900 in the wake of preparatory fires to secure the area surrounding the ambushed LVT/flame tank column. Even though the column had had steady contact during the night, 3/7 met little resistance. All personnel were brought out and arrangements to extract the disabled LVTs and tanks got underway. The two companies of 3/7 also searched out two villages and found 13 VC field packs and several documents of a military nature. Company I uncovered extensive trenchworks with X-frame bamboo barriers, antihelicopter stakes, small punji stakes, and several long stretches of communication wire running from the flank of Nam Yen (4) village to a common location which was some form of a command post. There were no casualties as a result of enemy action for either company of the SLF.

Slowly but surely, the enemy resistance began to wither in the AOA. As BLT 2/4 worked down the Phouc Tuan Peninsula, General Walt radioed ComUSMACV that "His [the VC] back is to the sea and he has no place to go." By nightfall the 1st VC Regiment offered no further organized resistance and the Marines turned to mopping up the battlefield, a task that was to last until the 24th of August.

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This final phase of STARLITE was to be conducted by 1/7 and 3/7 for the purposes of confirming VC body count, securing enemy material, locating documents of intelligence value, and, of course, uncovering and eliminating any VC that might remain in the area. At this point, BLT 1/7 relieved 3/3 and then both (3) 2/4 and 3/3 returned to the Chu Lai perimeter.

The intensity of the remainder of the operation varied. The 3/7 after action report indicated that there were no enemy confirmed KIA on the 20th, 31 on the 21st, 14 on the 22d, and 3 and 2 respectively on the last two days of the operation. There were 16 POWs captured and 67 VC suspects apprehended as well. The background of the capture of one of these POWs was quite unique. Sergeant \_\_\_\_\_ Torres of HMM-163, a crew chief on a reconnaissance chopper, eyed a VC trying to escape from sweeping forces on the ground. The pilot landed the helicopter and Torres jumped out to pursue the bewildered VC. In short order, Torres made a flying tackle and took him prisoner.

Materiel captured by the SLF was not particularly spectacular. It included 21 weapons, 24 grenades, an 81mm mortar round, 20 pounds of C-4 explosive, 4 pounds of TNT, 22 field packs, a box of medicine, and 1,200 pounds of rice and corn. In Nam Yen (3), several thousand punji stakes were found in a school yard where children had been making them during class breaks. An old villager voluntarily helped destroy the stakes. In

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(3) CG III MAF msg 0942Z 19Aug65 (HQMC Msg File) (S).

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the course of searching out An Phouc (2), a VC indoctrination center and headquarters building were found and destroyed.

On the 23d of August, the mop-up operation began to wind down. BLT 3/7 was given the mission of covering the withdrawal of the 7th Marines CP. Meanwhile, BLT 1/7 marched to a LVT pick-up point near the mouth of the Song Tra Bon for further transport to Chu Lai. Finally, at 1940 on the 24th, 3/7 returned to its shipping under the cover of darkness and resumed its role as the SLF BLT.

Operation STARLITE officially terminated with RLT-7 suffering 45 KIA, 6 DOW, and another 203 wounded. The VC lost 645 killed, though subsequent information taken from POWs, captured documents, and other sources suggested a toll of over 1,000 enemy dead, not including the wounded--half of the VC force in the area. Of these totals, the SLF suffered four killed (all from Company L on the first day of action) and nine wounded (six evacuated); the BLT killed 60 of the enemy.

Assessment of SLF participation in STARLITE reveal several problems that emerged in the areas of command relationships, fire support coordination, logistics, and communications. The command relationship ashore proved to be vague in the eyes of the SLF commander. Considering that this was the first combat employment of the SLF under operational control of an in-country command, problems and adjustments were to be expected. Although it was clear that III MAF had the authority to commit the SLF, the SLF Commander failed to receive notification of

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its commitment. Once the SLF was engaged, there was some further confusion regarding the operational control of HMM-163.

More significantly, there were difficulties in fire support coordination with the RLT FSCC ashore and the Navy. Close coordination with the helicopter direction center on board ship and with the aviation elements ashore was mandatory in order not to mask artillery and naval gunfire and, of course, to avoid hitting friendly aircraft in the AOA. During STARLITE, there were several incompletely controlled firing situations that plagued the helicopters ferrying troops, supplies, and medevacs.

There were other command problems that emerged with the Navy and within the SLF itself. First of all, the SLF commander, as a lieutenant colonel, was not of equal rank with his naval counterpart, a captain and commodore of the Amphibious Ready Group. Within the SLF, the senior officer of its two basic units, the BLT and the helicopter squadron, was designated the SLF commander. This situation did not sit well with those who supported the contention that a ground commander was a better choice for commanding an amphibious operation because of training and tactical experience.

Moreover, the SLF staff, actually a catch-as-catch-can meld of the HMM staff and the BLT staff, was neither high-powered nor flexible enough to handle properly the planning and coordination with the Navy and the higher headquarters ashore which included III MAF, its subordinate commands, and subsequently

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ARVN headquarters. Simply stated, the planning and coordination requirements overtaxed the SLF capabilities as organized.

STARLITE precipitated the necessary changes and adjustments to the command and staff structure of the SLF. On 10 September 1965, CG FMFPac started the ball rolling and ordered establishment of an abbreviated regimental-type staff with a full colonel as commander. This organization included an S-type staff, a fire support coordinator, and a communications section, totalling 6 officers and 12 men.

There were other minor improvements and modifications to the SLF throughout its participation in the Vietnamese conflict. This change, however, relieved the BLT and squadron commanders of burdens that were not properly in their domain. The commanders could turn to the immediate tasks of combat and combat support with a minimum of interference and disruption from higher and other service commands. In retrospect, this development was one of the more significant outgrowths of STARLITE for the SLF.

From the III MAF level, STARLITE was a complete success. The enemy had been dealt a telling blow with a minimum loss to the Marines. According to subsequent interrogation reports, the 60th VC Battalion and the 2d Company, 45th Heavy Weapons Battalion were destroyed while the 80th VC Battalion was severely mauled. The 7th Marines, including the SLF, openly met the foe in the first large-scale combat action in South Vietnam and trounced him smartly. STARLITE was to be one of

  
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the sweeter victories in this protracted and ugly war--in fact, considering its results, it was a classic example of the application of amphibious forces in a counterinsurgency situation.

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Chapter IV  
OPERATIONS OUTSIDE OF ICTZ  
1965-67

(1) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: MACV Comd Hist, (TS); III MAF Ops, Mar65-Mar67 (S); CinCPac Comd Hist, 1965 (TS); CAF Seventh Fleet, Hist of Amphib Ops (C); USMC in RVN, Hist Summary (S); TG 79.5 (SLF) ComdCs, Jun65-Mar67 (S); BLT 2/1 ComdC, Sep-Dec65 (S); BLT 2/3 ComdC, Jan-Mar66 (S); BLT 1/5 ComdC, Mar-May66 (S); BLT 3/5 ComdC, Jun-Jul66 (S); BLT 1/26 ComdC, Aug-Sep66 (S); BLT 1/9 ComdC, Jan67 (S); HMM-163 ComdCs, Sep-Oct65 (S); HMM-261 ComdCs, Nov-Dec65 (S); HMM-362 ComdCs, Jan-May66, Jan67 (S); HMM-363 ComdCs, Jul-Aug66 (S); HMM-364 ComdC, Jun66 (S); NHD Riverine Warfare: The U.S. Navy's Operations on Inland Waters (Wash, 1969, GPO) (U); MCOAG Study (S).

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(situation in ICTZ only called for sporadic)

As summer slipped into fall, the ~~pace of~~ large-scale Marine operations ~~in ICTZ was sporadic~~ and the demand for ARG/SLF employment <sup>in that area</sup> was at <sup>a</sup> low ebb. Productive utilization of this amphibious force had been a <sup>continuing</sup> concern in command circles ~~for some time~~ and a concept for its employment outside of ICTZ had, in fact, been drawn up back in May 1965. At that point ~~there was a conference in Saigon between~~ <sup>a</sup> ComUSMACV ~~and~~ CinCPacFlt ~~which resulted in~~ <sup>conference developed</sup> the idea of conducting several quick-hitting amphibious raids in a short time frame along the South Vietnamese littoral. These raids were to be unilateral, combined, or joint operations in support of U. S. MARKET TIME efforts to prevent infiltration from the sea.

Subsequently, after the evaluation of available intelligence, several target areas were ~~considered~~ and selected and outline plans of the proposed operations were forwarded to CinCPac for approval. The objective areas were located in II- and III-ICTZ in order to support the all too thin ComUSMACV commitment there at the time. The raid sites included the Vung Mu Peninsula, 12 miles south of Qui Nhon; Ben Goi Bay, 27 miles north of Nha Trang; Tam Quan, 31 miles south of Quang Ngai City; Lang Ke Ga, 20 miles south of Phan Thiet; and Phu Thu, 43 miles south of Quang Ngai City.

<sup>Map ??</sup> ~~Ultimately, On 22 September 1965 after the objectives and preliminary plans were approved, the operation order became effective. The code name for these raids was DAGGER THRUST~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~was assigned.~~

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On 23 September, a rehearsal within the Chu Lai enclave was held for the SLF with the newly assigned BLT, 2/1 (Lieutenant Colonel Robert T. Hannifin, Jr.) and HMM-163 (still under command of Lieutenant Colonel Ewers). Included in the rehearsal were a clandestine underwater demolition team survey and an insertion of reconnaissance teams. Aside from irritating difficulties (a tank became submerged in shallow water during back-loading), the rehearsal was considered satisfactory. The preparations accomplished, the ARG/SLF set sail for the first target area, the Vung Mu Peninsula.

## DAGGER THRUST: THE VUNG MU PENINSULA

This peninsula, just south of the <sup>new</sup> budding U.S. Army logistic base at Qui Nhon, reportedly harbored a VC main force battalion. Army intelligence further indicated that the adjacent interior hilly region was under VC control and that a POW compound was located only a short distance away from the proposed objective area. The terrain of the peninsula resembled that of the Phuoc Thuan Peninsula encountered in STARLITE. The area was typical flat coastal plain with numerous villages scattered throughout. The inhabitants relied upon fishing and agriculture for their livelihood. To the VC, the peninsula provided logistical support and recruits to fill its ranks, and conceivably a convenient staging area for an attack on Qui Nhon. In retrospect, the available intelligence was for the most part scanty and dated and not on a par with that provided for STARLITE.

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There was, however, a helicopter overflight to supplement the intelligence garnered from local sources. The task force was under the command of Rear Admiral Donald W. Wulzen, who carried the designation of Commander Amphibious Task Force 76 (CATF 76). His ships included the Iwo Jima (LPG-2), the Talladega (APA-208), the Point Defiance (LSD-31), the Diachenko (APD-123), his flagship, Estes (AGC-12), and the destroyers Mason (DD-852), and Small (DDR-838). His Marine counterpart, the Commander Landing Force 78 (CLF 78) was Colonel Edwin G. Winstead, who was the overall commander of the Marine elements of the task force. (\*)

Arriving in the objective area early on the morning of 26 September under darkened ship conditions, the CATF issued orders to land the landing force with H/L hour set for 0700. The UDT elements reported the presence of numerous fishing boats heading to sea, but these were forced to return under guard to the beach as the boat and helicopter waves landed. Leaflets were dropped

(\*) The CATF, <sup>as</sup> is the naval officer designated in the initiating directive as commander amphibious task force, normally ~~she~~ <sup>he</sup> has operational control of the assigned Marine landing force <sup>only</sup> until the amphibious phase of the operation is completed ~~and then when~~ operational control is passed ashore to the CLF. In South Vietnam, however, there were a number of SLF operations <sup>where</sup> ~~the~~ operational control remained with the CATF for the entire operation. ~~Such was the case in the DAGGER THRUST raids.~~

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from aircraft over the inhabited areas during the initial phase of the landing.

The BLT landed with Companies E and F in assault formation over RED BEACH and <sup>into</sup> LZ BUZZARD without opposition. At 0820, the BLT CP was established ashore. Shortly thereafter, Company E moved out to the southern portion of the peninsula and established a blocking position. Company H landed in trace of Company E and secured LZ VULTURE, followed by Company G in LZ CROW. The latter then proceeded down the peninsula. Company G ~~subsequently~~ encountered punji traps and isolated rifle fire upon entering Vinh Cuu Phui (2).

~~As the day wore on,~~ <sup>enemy activity</sup> little ~~of significance~~ occurred as the companies swept their zones of action. Some of the villages were extensively tunneled and booby traps were found, but little else. Navy doctors and corpsmen dispensed medical aid in the villages as the units passed through. At 1700 the reserve landed as CP security and then the companies settled down for the night in defensive perimeters. The only activity during the hours of darkness was a bit of rock throwing and vocal harassment in an apparent attempt to have Company E disclose its positions and the explosion of a solitary 60mm mortar round in the H&S Company perimeter. Mason fired illumination missions for the BLT ~~but little~~ came of this effort.

The next morning the withdrawal started at 0800 and was completed by 1400. The only difficulty, as in the rehearsal at Chu Lai, was the submersion and subsequent salvage of a M48A3

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*Why? - The thought arises that we were to be in a position to do it for SLF.*

*results*

tank. An assessment of the operation at this point indicated that the results were not very impressive. Out of 28 villagers apprehended, only one was considered a bona fide VC. Six Marines were wounded by punji sticks, three of whom were medevacs and three returned to duty. Eight Marines were heat casualties. There was only one enemy casualty.

Intelligence obtained in the course of the operation indicated that there had been ~~only~~ a platoon-size force in the area in the 10 days prior to D-Day. All but a few of the local guerrilla force left for the mainland on 25 September. Moreover, there ~~were~~ *had been* lookouts at Tuy Phuong (1) to watch for the approach of ships off the peninsula. In short, the operation ~~lacked the element of surprise~~ *was compromised*, a disturbing ~~truth~~ *situation* that was to be experienced numerous times in the course of SLF operations.

#### DAGGER THRUST II; BEN GOI

The second of the DAGGER THRUST raids was to be different in character than the effort at Vung Mu. This time there was to be a landing of reconnaissance teams at three sites in the Ben Goi Bay area to determine whether there was, in fact, any VC activity worthy of exploitation by the SLF. If a lucrative target developed, additional forces could be landed by helicopter or by surface means as required. In view of the limited intelligence available, and considering the results of DAGGER THRUST I, this approach seemed to be a better course of action. *It was also a technique employed by III MAF forces to avoid unproductive operations.*

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The reconnaissance teams, made up of members of the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company and South Vietnamese <sup>Not cited</sup> UDT personnel, were landed in rubber boats from the Diachenko during the evening of 27 September. The three teams consisted of four Marines and two South Vietnamese each. The first team (Team 31) made a diversionary reconnaissance of several beaches prior to landing near the proposed objective beach. Here the group encountered dense jungle growth which severely hampered their movement and observation. There were communication difficulties as well, resulting in loss of radio contact with CATF on board the Estes throughout the night and early morning. A helicopter was dispatched to the vicinity where the team was operating to establish contact but to no avail. After an extensive <sup>Visual</sup> search which brought the naval units close to the beach (thus ruining any possible element of surprise), the team was finally spotted and extracted. To further complicate matters, a UH-34 developed engine trouble in the course of the extraction and landed on a small island in the bay. Upon repair, it returned to the Iwo Jima.

The other two teams landed in their designated sites but likewise encountered dense vegetation and steep hill masses and were able to reconnoiter only about 500 meters of terrain from time of insertion to extraction. Their observations included reports of motorized junk traffic and the sighting of a few men with weapons. There were no casualties.

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In view of the minimal information gained and the loss of the element of surprise, CATF cancelled the operation and ordered his ships to move out of the area. <sup>(? gain the absolute</sup> The net result of need for adequate intelligence of the objective area was shown, this operation can be tersely summed up as a frustrating experience--a common occurrence in this early phase of the war in Vietnam. <sup>Reconnaissance teams must be inserted where it is possible for them to fulfill their assignment.</sup>

## DAGGER THRUST III: TAM QUAN

Moving northward, the ARG/SLF prepared for another <sup>operation</sup> assault, this time at Tam Quan, 31 miles south of Quang Ngai City. The An Lao Valley west of Tam Quan was reputed to have been a Viet Cong stronghold since the days of the French in Indochina. Available intelligence indicated the possible presence of several VC battalions and, like Vung Mu, a POW camp. Tam Quan was considered to be a focal point for enemy logistical support in the valley, especially from the sea. Despite these contentions, last minute reconnaissance photography revealed little in the way of VC activity. The terrain was typical coastal plain country, but much more suited for amphibious operations than the heavily forested and precipitous Ben Goi target. 3

The conduct of this two-day operation was not a complex affair as amphibious landings go. Company E landed as the assault element on RED BEACH at 0640 on 1 October with all waves ashore by 0650. Leaflets explaining the intention and purpose of the landing were again dropped by aircraft over the inhabited areas shortly before the troops landed. In crossing the

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*embarked in LVTs,*  
*encountered*  
*spread*  
 beach, the Marines ~~ran~~ into small arms fire from the left flank, barbed wire, punji stakes, and a number of trenches. The amphibious tractors and tanks had difficulty traversing the sand dunes and the trenches. The company was forced to dismount from the LVTs for their move inland. The tracked vehicles ~~finally~~ made an exit <sup>ed</sup> at the extreme northern end of the beach. Meanwhile, Company H landed to the south of Company E on RED BEACH and proceeded to its initial objective with no difficulties. At 1015, Company G landed in LZ DIANE and blocked the northern entrance to a railroad tunnel which contained some 75 civilians. These civilians were turned over to ARVN interpreters for questioning and were subsequently released. By 1100 all of the initial objectives were reached. Resistance throughout the assigned company zones of action was limited to sporadic small arms and some automatic weapons fire. No main force or local force units were identified.

During the late afternoon (1715 hours), Company F landed over GREEN BEACH (south of RED BEACH). This unit encountered small arms fire from its right flank. *although* *were pursued,* Pursuing the snipers, *and* *used,* *The snipers managed* even with the employment of close air support, the Marines *to elude capture,* failed to nail them. After this temporary diversion, the company moved north to RED BEACH to act as BLT reserve.

The battalion spent a relatively uneventful night. The Marines conducted security patrols within the TAOR and executed harassing and interdiction fires at likely avenues of approach with naval gunfire, 81mm mortars, and 107mm howtars. The enemy

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countered with ineffective small arms fire, punctuated occasionally with 60mm mortar fire. There were no Marine casualties.

After an abbreviated sweeping of Cui Loi village the next morning by Company F, the BLT backloaded aboard the ARG ship-  
ping. The withdrawal was marked by intermittent small arms  
fire which forced down the tactical air observer in a UH-34.  
The helicopter was quickly repaired and returned to the LPH  
with no casualties. Once again, there was a tank that floun-  
dered in six feet of water to impede the withdrawal process.

The results in this case were still marginal--only two VC  
killed. There was one Marine wounded by <sup>shrapnel</sup> splinters from an ex-  
ploding round as well as 25 heat casualties, <sup>and a few other</sup> a torn knee liga-  
ment case, <sup>non-battle injuries</sup> and a sprained ankle. ~~It can be said that at least~~

<sup>did, at least</sup> The enemy ~~make~~ his presence known on this foray. Another as-  
pect of the raid was that the villagers were generally reluc-

<sup>tant to give information, primarily because of VC brutality.</sup>  
<sup>The use, by the VC, of the population to screen their operations is illustrated by the following</sup>  
<sup>incident:</sup> The TAO spotted, ~~as a case in point,~~ a number of VC crossing a

stream in boats using women and children to shield themselves  
from the aircraft. When ashore, the VC shot their hostages  
and fled into the countryside. Generally speaking, this raid  
proved more fruitful than the previous two, <sup>and could have</sup> ~~but that was not~~  
<sup>possible, however</sup> (2) ~~saying much.~~ <sup>more productive if the troops had been able to</sup>  
<sup>remain in the area longer.</sup>

(2) CAF Seventh Flt, Hist of Amphib Ops, p. 46 (C).

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## INDONESIAN INTERLUDE

As has been indicated earlier in the text, the SLF had other commitments to support in its contingency plans. <sup>As an</sup> ~~good~~ <sup>right after the third DAGGER THRUST raid</sup> <sup>During the period</sup> example <sup>and in response to the situation created by</sup> was the response provided by the ARG/SLF on 3-8 October 1965, <sup>during</sup> the ill-fated Communist coup attempt in

Indonesia, <sup>Right after the third DAGGER THRUST raid, the SLF ARG/SLF</sup> <sup>steamed to Indonesia</sup> ~~set sail~~ and was on hand to evacuate American noncombatants and other designated persons if required. After the situation calmed, the SLF returned to South Vietnamese waters.

## THE SECOND SERIES OF DAGGER THRUST RAIDS

Almost a month <sup>Then</sup> passed before the SLF was <sup>called on</sup> to conduct another <sup>operation</sup> ~~amphibious~~ raid. On 30 November, the ARG/SLF undertook DAGGER THRUST IV, ~~which was~~ the first of a second series of raids. The landing was at Lang Ke Ga on the coast of II CTZ, southwest of Phan Thiet and <sup>the troops were ashore</sup> ~~lasted~~ two days. As before, the objective area was supposedly VC controlled and was a probable point of sea-borne infiltration. The mission was simply to search <sup>for</sup> and destroy enemy personnel and installations. An UDT detachment conducted a preliminary sweep and reported the surf conditions in the AOA.

<sup>Delayed 24 hours by bad weather</sup> ~~After a delay of 24 hours due to adverse weather,~~ the raid <sup>began</sup> ~~got underway~~ at 0630 on 30 November. Two reinforced rifle companies of BLT 2/1, (E and H) <sup>from</sup> landed by LVTs, LCVPs, LCMs, and LSUs while a third company, G, landed by helicopter two miles inland to perform a blocking role. Leaflets were used once

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again. The III MAF Headquarters provided four UH1E armed helicopters for escort of the HMM-261 helicopters while aircraft from the ~~Kitty Hawk~~ <sup>Je 13</sup> were on station for fixed-wing close air support. 11

All troop landings, both helo and waterborne, were unopposed and all objectives were secured in short order. Upon linkup, the three rifle companies swept the high ground to the north in the AOA. At 1045 there was contact by a patrol of Company E with four VC on a trail near the northern boundary of the objective area. The VC opened fire and the Marines immediately replied, wounding one VC. The enemy patrol escaped, however, taking the wounded man with it. 12

The Marine LVTs, tanks, and other heavy equipment ran into problems with mud flats caused by heavy rains and a high water table. A TD-24 bulldozer used in retraction of the vehicles became so bogged down that it ultimately had to be destroyed in place.

The enemy was hard to find. No local inhabitants were seen and there was no activity in the villages. Rice crops had not been worked and contact was almost nil. There were no Marine casualties and only one probable VC WIA. ~~Net result-- another dry run.~~

#### DAGGER THRUST V: PHU THU

The final raid (5-6 December 1965) was the most productive of the two series. The landing was a tactical surprise, and

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despite the fact that only a small number of uniformed troops were encountered, they were caught in the open, a rare occurrence in any operation against the VC.

The objective was Phu Thu, a coastal village some 40 miles north of Qui Nhon in Binh Dinh Province in IICZ. Like Tam Quan (DAGGER THRUST III) 12 miles to the north, this was another of the <sup>presumed</sup> ~~sea~~ <sup>entire</sup> infiltration points to the vital An Lao Valley. The terrain was typical of the South Vietnamese seacoast where rice and fishing were the main staples of the economy.

The assault on the 5th was conducted by two rifle companies E and F/2/1, in LVTs, LCVs, LCMs, and LCUs. At the same time, a third company, G/2/1, set up blocking positions inland to thwart any enemy trying to flee the area. A fourth rifle company, H/2/1, was maintained in reserve until later in the morning at which time it was committed as a search and destroy maneuver element. By 0740 all initial objectives were seized with only moderate resistance. A number of well prepared trenches and defensive positions were uncovered and destroyed by the Marines. As the morning progressed, there were a number of fire fights involving approximately 50 VC.

Supporting arms came into play during the course of the raid. Aircraft from the USS Bon Homme Richard and armed UH1Es flew close air support missions during the morning, and on one occasion, scored a direct napalm hit on a group of 10 VC. The <sup>fires</sup> of the 5-inch guns of the USS Orleck <sup>were called on another 10 man</sup> ~~worked over another similar-size~~ <sup>VC group, but no</sup> ~~troop concentration with un~~ verified results.

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The villagers appeared more amicable than at Tam Quan-- the leaflet drop technique again had been used. Operation HANDCLASP material (\*) was distributed as well. Nevertheless, ~~the presence of~~ Numerous VC billboards was observed in the outlying villages surrounding Phu Thu, and by the end of the day, ~~there were~~ 38 VC suspects <sup>had been</sup> rounded up, many of them of military age. A package of VC documents was uncovered in the course of the operation.

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1 The Marines ~~rode out the night~~ <sup>remained</sup> in defensive positions ~~under~~ <sup>for the night with</sup> cover of the standard harassing and interdiction fires provided by supporting arms. The next morning brought no significant activity to change the pace of the operation. There was only nominal resistance with sporadic small arms fire, some of which was directed at the UH1Es. A Company E patrol ran into a VC ambush, but sustained no casualties. Also, there were two secondary explosions caused by close air strikes on Hill 106. As the forces backloaded, a UH1E helicopter crashed (the crew was rescued) and a LVTC was lost in heavy swells.

The results of the raid included 16 VC KIA, and a rice cache of 2,700 pounds. The Marines suffered 3 KIA and 10 WIA. ~~The element of surprise held and the VC reacted rather poorly by their standards to the Marine attack.~~

(\*) Operation HANDCLASP material included clothing, utensils, tools, toys, and sundry other items collected by U. S. Marine Reserve units and benevolent groups in the U. S.

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 Review of all of the DAGGER THRUST operations reveals one prevalent characteristic: the contact with the VC was always negligible. The criticisms of poor intelligence and protracted planning which allowed the VC foreknowledge were thoroughly aired in command circles and elsewhere (ARVN representatives invariably participated in the planning and were suspect, especially in two of the operations.) <sup>(3)</sup> As time would prove, the security was always a problem that had to be lived with when working with the South Vietnamese military personnel. Techniques to minimize the enemy reaction time had to <sup>be</sup> improved.

The after action reports provide considerable commentary <sup>on</sup> <sup>as well as</sup> the benefits <sup>and</sup> problems generated by these <sup>operations</sup> raids. Some of the <sup>benefits were</sup> more salient points made are that the operations provided naval forces with a measure of needed initiative; that they helped show the local populace that the VC were not in complete control of a given area; that improved intelligence resulted from the operations; and that with a demonstration of restraint and compassion, Marines ashore could counter anti-US/anti-GVN propaganda.

Some of the adverse commentary hits upon the sore spots <sup>felt by</sup> within the Navy-Marine Corps team. Intelligence, as has been indicated, was generally dated and characterized by incompleteness and inaccuracy; liaison with intelligence agencies ashore

(3) III MAF Ops, Nov65, p. 10 (S); HMM-163 ComdC, 22Oct65, p. 10 (C).

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was not what it should have been; NIS beach surveys were incomplete; <sup>and intelligence</sup> aerial photos <sup>and</sup> readouts were inaccurate, <sup>and</sup> ~~planning~~ <sup>was done in a real-time intelligence vacuum.</sup> The need for freer

mission-type orders that did not impose so many restrictions on the tactical commander ashore and his coordination of supporting

arms <sup>was frequently noted; although</sup> ~~was bandied about as well~~ <sup>the peculiar requirements of Vietnam probably would not have permitted such freedom of action.</sup>

The FMFPac commentary recorded in the November 1965 summary provides a succinct evaluation of the DAGGER THRUST series:

Despite the absence of measurable results, the raid concept is considered to be sound. Raids cause VC in an area to move; they exhibit U.S. presence to Vietnamese who would not otherwise be exposed to us; and they serve as excellent training for battalions soon to be committed as in-country forces. It is plain, however, that the full impact of these benefits has not been realized...a review of target intelligence and planning procedures would appear prudent. (4)

1966-67

By the end of 1965, large U.S. combat units had been operating in South Vietnam for approximately 10 months and they had achieved one primary goal--they had thwarted an immediate Communist takeover. President Johnson's appeal <sup>to H. Chiems</sup> to conduct unconditional discussions based upon the 1954 and 1962 Geneva

? (4) Ibid.

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Geneva Accords had been rejected <sup>at of 1954</sup> by Ho Chi Minh. By February 1966, the Honolulu Conference established full and prompt support to the government of South Vietnam. Establishing security and spreading GVN influence were emphasized in the strategy discussions conducted at this conference.

The military role in supporting <sup>The</sup> GVN was established by the time of the Honolulu Conference. At this point certain trends <sup>emerged</sup> had developed as <sup>The</sup> modus operandi for the long months and years ahead. The large unit operation had been established as a definite and integral part of Marine strategy in ICTZ as was, of course, the civic action effort. For the purposes of this monograph, SLF participation in an early period, large unit operation has already been noted in STARLITE. STARLITE was the optimum example of 1965-early '66 large unit operations where the SLF was chopped ashore to support III MAF. Other III MAF large unit operations of comparable size and scope followed, including HARVEST MOON in December in Quang Tin Province and DOUBLE EAGLE in Quang Ngai/Quang Tin Provinces. In both of these operations, the SLF was charged with a reserve force role and was committed as an amphibious force. HARVEST MOON generated 407 VC KIA at a loss of 47 Marines. DOUBLE EAGLE caused 437 enemy KIA with 27 Marines KIA and 252 WIA. These III MAF operations with SLF augmentation set the mold for many of the large-scale operations that followed up through the fall of 1969.

~~On the other hand,~~ Whenever the III MAF tactical situation <sup>enough to permit it,</sup> in ICTZ was relatively stable, the SLF ~~continued to support~~

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other corps areas ~~until 1967 when the demand for forces in the north became critical.~~ Operations outside of ICTZ in 1966-67 included DECKHOUSE I in IICTZ, DECKHOUSE III in IICTZ, DECKHOUSE V in IVCTZ, and Operation JACKSTAY in the Rung Sat

Special Zone (RSSZ). ~~All of these operations had their place in the support of ComUSMACV strategy,~~ <sup>and while they</sup> but did not directly bear upon the <sup>area of</sup> primary Marine concern in ~~South Vietnam~~, ICTZ, <sup>They</sup>

<sup>are important in that they supported Army forces in areas of Army concern where USAF interests in air control were operable.</sup>  
DECKHOUSE I (18-30 June 1966)

In the case of DECKHOUSE I, this was the first of a new series of amphibious attacks on the littoral of South Vietnam. The landing took place in the vicinity of Song Cau in Phu Yen Province, south of the Vung Mu Peninsula. The SLF (BLT 3/5<sup>th</sup>, Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Bronars<sup>3</sup> and HMM-364, Lieutenant Colonel David A. Somerville) encountered only moderate resistance, killing 51 VC in a period of 9 days. The VC withdrew southward and ran into elements of the U.S. 1st Air Cavalry Division some seven miles below. There was heavy contact as the VC decided to fight it out, ~~against aggressive Army attacks.~~ <sup>Aggressive Army response</sup> which developed into a nine-battalion operation, NATHAN HALE. The SLF was chopped to the 1st Air Cavalry Division on 27 June, but by that time the fight had simmered down. In 14 days ashore, the SLF had netted 65 VC KIA and 72 POWs. They captured 211 tons of rice in the course of the two operations. Three Marines were killed and 21 wounded. <sup>In all respects, a successful</sup> operation.

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DECKHOUSE III (16-29 August 1966) took place near Vung Tau in Tin Phuc Tuy and Tin Binh Tuy Provinces 60 miles southeast of Saigon in IICTZ. There were three phases to this operation ~~that were~~ conducted by the SLF (BLT 1/26 <sup>2</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Anthony A. Monti<sup>3</sup>, and HMM-163 <sup>2</sup> Lieutenant Colonel James D. McGough). Two of these were blocking force endeavors in conjunction with the US Army's 173d Airborne Brigade and the First Australian Task Force. The third was a simple landing involving <sup>search and destroy</sup> a S&D mission. All produced negligible contact. Total losses were: 2 VC KIA; 4 USMC KIA and 25 WIA.

In January 1967, the SLF sailed 400 miles south to IVCTZ and conducted DECKHOUSE V in Kien Hoa Province, 62 miles south of Saigon. This landing was made in concert with two battalions of the <sup>Republic of Vietnam</sup> ~~South Vietnamese~~ Marine Corps. Units involved were BLT 1/9 (Lieutenant Colonel James L. Day) and HMM-362 (Lieutenant Colonel Marshall B. Armstrong). The <sup>RVNMC</sup> ~~RVMC~~ battalions, however, operated independently of the SLF. The operation <sup>lasted</sup> ran for 10 days <sup>with sporadic</sup> and contact was sporadic. <sup>There was concern that a</sup> ~~The old saw of a "tip-off" was~~ <sup>had occurred since</sup> ~~on the tongues of the participants~~ as only 21 VC were killed and 11 captured <sup>while</sup> ~~two~~ enemy small arms factories were destroyed, and 42 tons of rice and 44 weapons were captured in the jungle and mud bog environment. The Marines lost 7 killed and suffered 35 wounded.

DECKHOUSE V (6-15 January 1967) had the distinction of being the last SLF operation undertaken outside of ICTZ and the <sup>purely</sup> only US Marine operation in IVCTZ. Another unique facet of

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this operation was that a ship to shore serial got out of phase and deposited a boatload of news media representatives on the beach ahead of the infantry. In this instance the Marines were not the first to land contrary to the popular conception inspired by recruiting posters over the years.

#### OPERATION JACKSTAY

Probably the most unique SLF operation outside of ICTZ was Operation JACKSTAY (26 March-7 April 1966), conducted in the Rung Sat Special Zone (RSSZ) in IICTZ. The AOA in this instance was in the Mekong River Delta, just 25 miles north of Saigon. To the uninitiated, it seems natural for Marines with their amphibious capability to be well suited for operations in a riverine environment. As practical experience was to prove, the landing craft and ships developed during and after World War II for conventional amphibious operations were rather ill-suited for this new role. The tactics and techniques of riverine combat called for a change from the standard amphibious variety. As it turned out, the Marines were not ultimately charged with the mission of conducting riverine warfare in South Vietnam, but the SLF did have one interesting and challenging experience with it.

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Rung Sat (Forest of Assassins) is a densely covered mangrove swamp area, roughly circular in shape and about 20 miles across in diameter. The native population of some 15,000 inhabitants is concentrated in nine villages on the few dry islands

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there. The only road is on the Long Thanh Peninsula. Movement is generally by water in streams that are shallow, narrow, and winding in character. The vegetation further restricts access in interior areas and there is extensive flooding at high tide.

The relatively few deep channels adjacent to this delta formed the main shipping route up river to Saigon and were subject to harassment and interdiction by the VC units in the zone. Generally speaking, the region was a sprawling logistics base for transient units up to company-size and included "cottage" variety ammunition and weapons factories, bunkered supply caches, and training facilities. From this locale, it was apparent that the VC engineers lead forays against the shipping in the narrow channels that ran to Saigon, especially during February and early March of 1966.

The mission of the SLF, at this time BLT 1/5 (Lieutenant Colonel Harold L. Coffman) and HMM-362 (Lieutenant Colonel James Aldworth), was "...to locate and destroy Viet Cong forces and base areas to assist in establishing positive RVN control over the vital ship channels between the South China Sea and the port of Saigon."<sup>(5)</sup>

The concept of ~~operations~~ was basically rather simple: it was to be a unilateral, two-phase operation lasting about 10 days. Phase I encompassed a helicopter and surface assault of

(5) TG 79.5 ComdC, 9Jun66, Tab I, (S).

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the Long Thanh Peninsula to secure an area suitable for a base camp for further operations. Phase II was to be a search and destroy effort throughout the RSSZ. ~~The unilateral nature of this concept changed, however, before the operation commenced.~~ As the planning developed, the ~~Republic of Vietnam Marine Corps~~ (RVNMC) expressed a desire to participate with a force of two battalions. <sup>So</sup> Appropriate RVNMC staff officers and advisors were sent to the flagship ~~as a result~~ to conduct planning and develop coordinating instructions. The 4th and 5th RVNMC Battalions were <sup>subsequently</sup> assigned areas of operation in the northwest sector of the RSSZ. <sup>These areas</sup> ~~that~~ were separate and noninterfering with SLF operations, <sup>because of the difficulty of coordination of the multinational force, authorized,</sup> but still mutually supporting. Mission-type orders were promulgated by the landing force and the RVN Marines came under the coordination and control of the landing force. The fact that the RVNMC participated under CATF/CLF control, although <sup>in that such command relations were not normally permitted by COMUSMACV,</sup> loosely so, was unique. Thus the landing became a combined operation.

D-Day proved to be difficult for the landing force, but not because of the enemy. There were bad weather conditions, mechanical failures, and shaky boatsmanship to be reckoned with during the <sup>Six</sup> ~~eight~~-mile approach from the ships of the ARG. The Provisional Company of the BLT, including H&S Company personnel and those of the amtrac, tank, motor transport, shore party, and antitank detachments, landed over RED BEACH (actually 600 meters east of the beach) in the vicinity of Dong Hoa. Company C landed in LZ SPARROW as the UH1Es completed dropping

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leaflets in the area. At 0820 naval gun preparatory fires hit LZ ROBIN followed by the landing of the remainder of the heli-borne elements of the BLT: Company A secured LZ ROBIN at 0940 and established defensive positions; Company D, upon landing at LZ ROBIN, moved west to link up with the Provisional Company; the BLT command group landed at LZ ROBIN at 1025 followed by Company B at 1100; and <sup>finally, at high tide,</sup> ~~at the end of the day~~ (1700) the artillery landed over RED BEACH, ~~under conditions of high tide.~~

The landing was unopposed. The only V.C. activity in the area was sporadic sniper fire encountered during the search and destroy sweep by Company D, which killed one Marine. Company B suffered six WIA when a mine exploded in the middle of an advancing column. Also of note was the presence of a dead Vietnamese male who was later identified as a fisherman, a V.C. kidnap victim. By evening defensive positions were established with UDT and SEAL outposts in place to check enemy movement out of the BLT zone of action. Artillery and naval gunfire executed H&I fires on suspect enemy positions throughout the night.

The enemy, as might be expected, wasted little time in probing Marine positions. Company C was hit shortly after 2000 with small arms fire and hand grenades which mortally wounded one Marine. At 2100 Company A received sniper fire and grenades but suffered no casualties. A little after midnight, Company C was again probed with grenades resulting in another KIA and two WIA. Between 0130 and 0500, the Provisional Company came in for its share of harassment as well, but it took no casualties.

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~~There were~~ Approximately 40 VC harassing the front and rear of the company during the night. Altogether, retaliatory fires and hand grenades killed or wounded a probable ~~figure of~~ 10 enemy based upon outcries during the night, bloodstains, drag marks, and fresh footprints found the next morning.

On Sunday, 27 March, the UDT and SEAL surveillance teams returned at dawn and Companies B and D continued their advance to link up with blocking forces to the east and west on the Long Thanh Peninsula. Throughout the day there was negligible contact and the companies joined up by nightfall. The foot of the peninsula was cleared and preparations <sup>were made</sup> ~~underway~~ for the commencement of Phase II, a deep penetration of the mangrove swamps via the inland waterways.

This second phase required techniques that were unorthodox at the time and were conducted with boats and equipment that were not designed with riverine warfare in mind. Nevertheless, the task was <sup>commenced</sup> ~~taken in stride~~.

The sophisticated naval craft and ships that were evident in the Delta in 1968 and later were either on the drawing boards or in the process of being built or converted from older vessels and boats. The <sup>Mobile Riverine Force (MRF)</sup> ~~MRF~~ flagship, monitors, assault support patrol boats, the (ATC(H)) floating helicopter platform, and assault troop carriers were all to come with the subsequent expansion of the U.S. Navy's Riverine Force. The only specially designed riverine craft available in 1966 were ~~South Vietnamese of France vintage and older modified American types.~~

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On D+2 the Marines were to hit Objective 4, a suspected arms factory and staging area that was to have been previously hit by a B-52 <sup>CAPS</sup> Arc-Light strike. Two LSTs, the Washoe County and the Henry County, pushed 15 miles up the Soi Rap River preceded by RVN monitors and minesweepers during the hours of darkness to BLUE BEACH and anchored. The Marine infantrymen boarded their landing craft and headed ashore as far as the gradient would allow. Splashing under dense foliage and climbing over ~~heavy octopus-like~~ <sup>tangled mangrove</sup> roots that bordered the river banks, Companies A and C struggled inland. ~~There were~~ Booby traps and land mines to impede their progress along with the muck and thick vegetation. The two LSTs provided fire support with their twin-40mm cannon and, quite uniquely, deckmounted Ontos fired on-call missions. The Provisional Company and Howtar battery were helilifted into LZ BLUEJAY, to the south of Objective 4 to support A and C Companies.

Meanwhile, Company D moved to a ~~different location~~, Objective A to the southeast. After establishing a patrol base at LZ BLACKBIRD, the company sent out reinforced squad-size patrols to the north and southeast with the 105mm howitzer battery in support near LZ ROBIN. This endeavor was likewise plagued by swampy jungle terrain and surprise firing devices.

As the Marines proceeded into the overgrown morass, usually in waist-deep water or stagnant muck, they experienced only sporadic rifle fire in both objective areas. Observation was very poor and coordination difficult. In the case of Objective

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4, meaningful exploitation of the B-52 strike <sup>could be</sup> ~~was~~ not realized. With no good LZs in the target area, the overland trek as the only alternative approach proved too slow. The VC exited the target area leaving only token harassing elements behind to slow down the Marines' progress.

Back in the village of Can Gio on the Lang Thanh Peninsula, a Navy/Marine civic action team dispensed HANDCLASP material. Doctors, dentists, and medical corpsmen of this group treated approximately 600 patients and extracted some 500 teeth. Village nurses were given instructions on the extraction of teeth and then were provided a dental instrument set for their use. The inhabitants proved to be amicable and hospitable despite recent VC presence in the area.

The remainder of the operation continued at about the same pace with light contact. Going from one objective to another ~~with similar type events occurring,~~ the SLF worked over the RSSZ until D+12 on 7 April. Some of the highlights included:

D+4 (30 March) Company A Marines ambushed a VC junk, killing four VC and recovering a U.S. 1917 Enfield rifle and assorted documents.

D+5 (31 March) Company D discovered a large camouflaged VC village with bunkers, a tunnel network, machinery caches, 18 U.S. carbines, and over 1,000 grenades. Company B likewise uncovered a VC arms factory along with numerous caves and tunnels.

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h.c. D+6 (1 April) Company C and assigned engineers destroyed an elaborate hospital and extensive supplies of food, clothing and ammunition. The hospital and rest camp (150 X 100 meters) contained well-built structures, raised sidewalks, a crematory, and large stocks of drugs and medicines.

D+8 (3 April) Company D personnel uncovered a mine factory and 200 mines. The VC in this compound abandoned hot food in their haste to escape.

D+9 (4 April) Company C ambushed another sampan killing four VC. One enemy mortar round exploded in the well deck of an LCM-3 salvage boat, wounding three men.

D+10 (5 April) Two Marines (Company B) drowned while crossing a river. Their bodies were not recovered. (6)

The results of this operation again reflected the fact that the VC did not choose to fight except for harassment in varying degrees. Their losses included 63 confirmed dead. The Marine casualties were 5 KIA, 2 MIA, and 25 WIA. There were 55 cases of heat prostration, an indicator of the <sup>high</sup> ~~miser-~~ <sup>to be encountered in tropical riverine environments.</sup> ~~able~~ heat and humidity in this miasma. BLT equipment lost or damaged was more extensive than usual because of the swampy nature of the terrain, especially such items as electronic gear, clothing, and individual equipment.

(6) BLT 1/5 AAR Operation JACKSTAY, Apr66, (S).

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*operation developed essentially as*  
 In retrospect, the ~~planning accomplished in Saigon on~~  
~~The concept was envisioned in the 9-11 March Saigon planning sessions,~~  
~~9-11 March, was developed with no significant problems.~~ The  
 B-52 strike would have been more effective had it been more  
 closely linked with the actual scheme of maneuver on the ground.  
 Since the strikes were not ~~practically~~ dovetailed to the  
~~and the intelligence situation,~~  
 Marines' rate of advance, the effects of ~~this terrific weapon~~  
 proved to be of little benefit.

There were numerous other problems that hampered the BLT  
 in the course of the operation. Generally speaking, the radio  
 communications between the companies and the BLT CP and other  
 units were marginal. The infantry companies were forced to  
 carry light loads because of the terrain and were unable to  
 tote along the heavy RC-292 antennas. The BLT CP did use this  
 antenna, but it was not enough to do the job without the com-  
 panies having it on the other end. Reception was poor in most  
 of the objective areas. Orientation on the ground proved to  
 be extremely difficult as well. *One solution provided for to provide*  
~~Helicopter pilots would assist~~  
~~a fix on smoke grenades employed by the infantry.~~  
~~on request whereupon the infantrymen would employ smoke grenades~~  
~~to establish a fix.~~ Also, with the high humidity, there was  
 difficulty in lifting the 105s by helicopters (which lost power  
 under these conditions) ~~from one position to another.~~ Lastly,  
 the need for well-briefed liaison officers on a continuing basis  
 was an obvious necessity for coordination with the RVNMC oper-  
 ating to the northeast of the BLT.

In attempting to assess the value of JACKSTAY, it can be  
 fairly stated that the operation was a pioneering effort in a

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task for which the US Navy and the Marines were marginally equipped and trained to accomplish. The art of riverine warfare, despite historic precedents in years past including the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Seminole War in Florida, the Civil War, and others in lesser degrees, was still in its founding stages. ~~in South Vietnam at this time.~~ ~~Certainly,~~ the ~~Marines have a tradition of tackling any assigned mission,~~ but their training was not truly compatible with this type of specialized warfare in early 1966. ~~There was more training and experience needed in riverine warfare than conventional amphibious training and landings had provided.~~ Had the Marine Corps not been committed to ICTZ on such a large scale, the riverine role would probably have been theirs to develop with the Navy. As it was, the US Army forces in IICTZ absorbed the role as a matter of geographical responsibility in the operations that followed there in the subsequent course of the war. Any Marine who participated in JACKSTAY would probably be inclined to say, "Let 'em have it!" ~~To be sure, there were problems aplenty in ICTZ, but the terrain was generally more congenial than the miserable swamps of the Delta.~~

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## Chapter V

SLF ACTIVITY: 1966-69 (1)

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(1) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: USMC in RVN, Hist Summary (S); III MAF Ops, Jun66-Nov69 (S); FMF PAC COMD Cs, 1966-69 (S); MCOAG Study (S); 9th MAB Comd Cs, June 66-Nov 69 (S); Taped interview with LtGen V. H. Krulak, CG, FMFPac, HistDiv Tape No (S); Vietnam Comment File; Moody et. al., Marines in Vietnam MS (S).

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By mid-1966, the military situation in ICTZ developed a new dimension: the enemy invasion of Quang Tri Province by North Vietnamese regulars. Within the next two years, there were to be five distinct invasion attempts into northern ICTZ. Because of these intrusions, III MAF gradually had to shift its forces north and fill the void with US Army units as they could be spared from other corps areas.

Northern ICTZ and the DMZ were not the only problem areas for III MAF. Southern ICTZ, particularly the Nui Loc Son region, also demanded considerable attention with periodic sharp confrontations throughout the 1966-69 period and after. The Viet Cong, and the NVA regulars who later filled the depleted ranks of this guerrilla army, fought repeatedly over the same battlegrounds in their attempts to control this strategic rice-growing region.

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## CHANGES IN THE ARG/SLF

As the war ground on and escalated by stages during these three years, III MAF strength grew from 55,745 to 132,600; <sup>(2)</sup> similarly, the SLF and its Navy counterpart, the ARG, underwent changes in strength and organization. Ultimately the ARG/SLFs doubled in size into ARG/SLF ALFA and BRAVO. Coupled with the buildup of III MAF were several shifts in parent organizations of the SLF. ~~Ever~~ Since 1959, the 3d Marine Division had been the parent organization of the SLF and provided ~~for~~ <sup>Support</sup> its administrative and logistical ~~needs~~ <sup>in effect</sup> while serving with the ARG. This arrangement was ~~the case~~ <sup>The following</sup> at the time of the 9th MEB landing at Da Nang on 8 March 1965. On 28 June, ComSeventhFt published OPlan 104-R <sup>establishing</sup> ~~for the establishment and maintenance of~~ the Ready Amphibious Force (RAF), which included a Ready Afloat Marine Amphibious Brigade (RAMAB). The RAMAB Headquarters was given <sup>designated</sup> ~~the task designator~~ TF 78, <sup>adding a second unit</sup> ~~which created two~~ FMF headquarters in the Seventh Fleet, TFs 79 and 78. Concurrently, it removed the SLF (TF 79.5) from TF 79 <sup>and headquarters</sup> ~~and established it in the newly~~ constituted RAMAB <sup>assigned to</sup> ~~with the designator~~ 78.5.

During July and until the advance party of the 1st Marine Division Headquarters arrived on Okinawa on 24 August, a small

(2) June 1966 and September 1969 figures extracted from FMFPac III MAF Ops. Figures include Marine, Navy, and Army forces under III MAF OPCON, but exclude SLF strengths attributed to the Seventh Fleet.

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element of the 3d Marine Division Headquarters (3d MarDiv (Rear)) remained as TF 79. The TF 79 designator was then passed on to the 1st Marine Division upon its arrival on Okinawa. On 23 December ComSeventhFlt dissolved the RAMAB (TF 78) and the SLF again became CTG 79.5 under 1st Marine Division auspices.

As the 1st Division was phased into South Vietnam, the parent organization responsibility was passed on to the newly formed 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade (9th MAB, TF 79), stationed at Camp Hansen, Okinawa. While under the aegis of 9th MAB, the SLF achieved its highest peak of development and its most concentrated period of amphibious activity in South Vietnam.

In Chapter 3, mention was made of a change in composition of the SLF headquarters in October 1965 to include a full colonel and an abbreviated regimental-type staff. This change was designed to up-grade the command and staff functions within the SLF as well as provide rank parity for the CLF in his relations with the CATF. In the course of SLF operations, there were times when this parity broke down as in the case of the DAGGER THRUST raids, where the CATF was in fact a rear admiral and the CLF a colonel. After the establishment of the 9th MAB, its commanding generals made a practice of flying down from Okinawa in any operation where a naval flag officer was going to be on the scene. These visits provided the desired command interest, usually without direct involvement in the conduct of the operation. In the case of Operation BOLD MARINER, where both SLFs operated in concert, there was direct involvement and

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control by CTF 79. In any case the parity of rank was apparent and a smoother working relationship resulted between the Navy and the Marine task groups.

The ARG/SLF was traditionally a task-organized, amphibious force having no doctrinal composition, <sup>except</sup> only that generated by the specific requirements of the task to be performed. This concept prevailed for both the ARG and SLF with the primary organizational change being its growth from one ARG/SLF to two in April 1967.

Looking at the Navy side of this amphibious team, the changes in the ARG were mostly in the types and numbers of ships assigned. The ARG specifically consisted of the sailors, ships, and associated equipment assigned to an Amphibious Squadron (PhibRon) by the Commander of the Amphibious Forces, Seventh Fleet (ComPhibForSeventhFleet (CTF 76)). Initially in 1965, the shipping included a LPH, a LSD, and an APA. With the periodic rotations that normally took place every eight months, ~~there were different type~~ <sup>2 of</sup> vessels <sup>here</sup> assigned to the PhibRon. In November 1966, there was an APA, a LSD, a LPD, and an AKA. By January 1967, the first LST was assigned. Throughout the ARG/SLF combat operations, the most common organization included a LPH, a LSD, a LST, an APA, and a LPD or AKA.

The SLF similarly had a variety of changes in its task organization. FIGURE 1 portrays a nominal composition for the ARG/SLF and highlights the range of manning levels and aircraft employed.

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FIGURE 1

## COMPOSITION OF ARG/SLF

ARG SHIPS

1 LPG, 1 LSD, 1 LST,  
and  
1 APA or 1 LPD or 1 AKA

PERSONNEL

	Officers	Staff	Enlisted Men
Typical	10		50
Maximum	13		53
Minimum	0		0

	BLT				HMM			
	USMC		USN		USMC		USN	
	Off	EM	Off	EM	Off	EM	Off	EM
Typical	60	1550	8	80	48	190	1	3
Maximum	72	1659	9	93	59	230	1	5
Minimum	35	983	1	49	15	25	0	0

FIREPOWER (BLT Only)

Small arms	2000
Machine Guns	138
106mm Recoilless Rifles (including 5 ONTOS)	38
Mortars (81mm)	8
Artillery Pieces	12
Medium Tanks	5

HMM AIRCRAFT

	Types of Aircraft	Dates
SLF A HMM	UH-34D	2 Apr 1967 - 31 Dec 1968
SLF B HMM	UH-34D	19 Jun 1965 - 3 Apr 1967
	CH-46A)	4 Apr 1967 - 31 Dec 1968
	CG-46D)	

(3) MCOAG Study, p. 5 (S).

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## THE ROTATION AND REHABILITATION PROGRAM

Fundamental to the whole SLF concept was the battalion and helicopter squadron rotation and rehabilitation system that sustained it. Reference to the periodic rotation of SLF units <sup>was</sup> had been made in Chapter I and notation of the SLF participation in the inter-theater battalion transplacement system from CONUS in Chapter II. With the Vietnam build-up, this arrangement became impractical and individual replacement was put into effect on 3 September 1965. After the cessation of the battalion transplacement system, a new intra-theater program was implemented on 19 November under the auspices of the 1st Marine Division and later the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade which provided a unique opportunity for the rotation and refurbishment of in-country battalions on Okinawa--a real asset for III MAF. This rotation of SLF units involved some 21 BLTs and 23 HMMs from November 1965 through September 1969, the month of the last SLF combat operation, DEFIANT STAND. [Although the rotation program was not extensive enough to benefit the entire organization of III MAF, it certainly did help upgrade the assigned infantry battalions and helicopter squadrons as well as the attached support units/elements including artillery, engineers, tanks, and amtracs.]

The course of this program was not always standard. Commitments in-country, training exercises, logistics considerations and the availability of shipping all <sup>affected it</sup> had a bearing on its length. Generally, a period of six to eight weeks was average.

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During the heyday of this program, in late 1966 and early 1967, the 9th MAB developed and provided a well-organized program to handle the incoming SLF units. The infantry battalion was billeted at Camp Schwab and the helicopter squadron at Futema. Other support elements were nested with like units within 9th MAB. Upon arrival, these SLF units immediately set to work. In lockstep sequence, the 9th MAB, ~~and~~ 3d FSR shops ~~and~~ ran around the clock to rehabilitate tanks, howitzers, engineer equipment, LVTs, and motor transport vehicles. Section chiefs and equipment operators worked directly with the permanent shop personnel to repair and service their vehicles and equipment. Individual and crew-served weapons were checked and repaired or exchanged as required. Individual clothing and equipment were replaced for that worn out in service. Also, general supply items were requisitioned on a priority basis. On an average, the 9th MAB, with the backup of 3d FSR, accomplished about 60 percent of these requisitions before the SLF units departed the island. The HMM squadron underwent a similar rehabilitation program for its men, equipment, vehicles, and aircraft with <sup>its</sup> ~~their~~ refurbishment coming primarily from naval supply and maintenance services on the island.

In short, the SLF rotation and rehabilitation program provided a bonus effect that ultimately improved the combat capability of III MAF, albeit in a relatively small scale. This sort of program was impractical in-country at the time, on a regular basis or even periodically. Despite the apparent

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success, however, the refurbishment effort was no panacea for all the personnel and logistical problems of the SLF units. Nevertheless, it did offer a considerable improvement of the combat readiness of the units and provided a break from the grind of combat, including some good liberty on Okinawa and often in the Philippines.

In conjunction with the refurbishment effort was a training program conducted primarily in the Northern Training Area (NTA) of Okinawa. There was also a scheduled landing exercise conducted in the Philippines called MUDPUPPY. This training emphasized the techniques of combat as experienced in South Vietnam and, most significantly, amphibious operations. A broadening of the scope of this amphibious training evolved in April 1967 during the tenure of Brigadier General Louis Metzger as CG 9th MAB. The 9th MAB itself (jokingly referred to as the Ryukyan National Guard by members of the the command) joined in the amphibious training with SLF "ALFA" in an exercise on Okinawa dubbed BEACH BARON I in order to hone its proficiency as a brigade headquarters.

*Secret* This amphibious emphasis was the only real activity of the sort in West Pac for the Marines. III MAF may have been an amphibious force by title, but certainly not in its commitment. The SLF in this case carried the torch for the Corps' primary mission in the Far East.

By spring of 1967, the SLF reached a peak in development and employment in combat as an amphibious force. On 1 April

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a second SLF was in operation. TF 79.5 (Colonel Harry D. Wortman) became SLF BRAVO and the newcomer, TF 79.4 (Colonel James A. Gallo), became SLF ALFA. The rationale behind the designation is not clear. Whatever the reason, these two SLFs were the last to be refurbished until the summer of 1968. The demand for forces in-country in the latter half of 1967 and the first half of 1968 was too great to allow the rehabilitation and refurbishment program to continue.

#### A DIFFERENT MODUS OPERANDI

There was a gradual change in employment of the SLF in South Vietnam that proved to be a significant trend in the history of SLF combat operations. Up until April 1967, the only available SLF conducted raids, search and clear/destroy operations, or blocking operations of short duration along the entire coast of South Vietnam. After the institution of the second SLF, the operations took place solely in ICTZ and periods ashore steadily became longer. (See FIGURE 2, SLF periods in-country, 1965-68). By 1968 BLT 2/4 (SLF ALFA) spent a record 200 days ashore (27 January to 13 August 1968), <sup>under the operational control of</sup> ~~chopped to~~ III MAF. BLT 3/1 (SLF BRAVO) accumulated 133 days (1 December 1967 to 15 June 1968).

This change in employment caused ~~a certain amount of re-~~ <sup>problems for all concerned since the SLFs</sup> ~~verberation in logistics procedures from FMFPac right down to~~ <sup>were not, logistically, part of III MAF,</sup> the individual SLF units. The following extract from FMFPac's

April report of III MAF operations capsulizes the problem and

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## Figure 2

(4)

## Dates when SLF/BLT's were in-country

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its resolution:

Normally when the SLF is landed in a contingency deployment which cannot be supported by CG, III MAF and which promises to continue longer than 15 days, or when it is landed to become a part of a force build-up, the CG, 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade on Okinawa insures that follow-on supplies are shipped to the SLF.

" With the decision by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in April [1967] to commit the SLFs to extended operations in Vietnam, the normal logistics support procedure required some changes. The CG, III MAF now provides logistic support when the SLF operates in areas contiguous to III MAF installations. When operating in areas isolated from established logistic support areas, ground units of the SLF utilize their own resources, with stocks reconstituted as practicable from the Force Logistic Command. While operating from the LPH, aviation units of the SLF will be supported by the LPH but, when operating ashore in the III MAF area of operations, support by the First Marine Aircraft Wing will augment that positioned by the Ninth MAB aboard ship. If the operations ashore extend beyond fifteen days, support of helicopters will become the responsibility of CG, III MAF. When the SLF operates ashore in locations other than ICTZ (after 15 days), CG III MAF will provide only aeronautical spares and special support equipment. All other logistic support responsibilities will remain

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with CG, Ninth MAB. Any major end items furnished by the  
 FLC will be replaced by the CG, Ninth MAB. <sup>(5)</sup>

During the period of the post-Tet '68 struggle, the SLFs were not just chopped ashore for one single operation. From 27 January to 13 August 1968, SLF ALFA's BLT 2/4 participated in 12 different consecutive operations under OPCON of III MAF including the bloody battle of Dai Do with no amphibious activity whatsoever. SLF BRAVO participated in several operations, with stints at Camp Carroll and Ca Lu combat bases in between. Examining the length of individual operations, a 15-day amphibious/CHOP ashore operation was typical in 1967. In 1968, the figure rose to 46 days while ashore under III MAF OPCON as a standard infantry battalion (BLT support attachments were farmed out to parent or related in-country units).

The ~~twisting~~ course of the war in South Vietnam continually demanded changes in the forces committed to it. ~~As III MAF acted and reacted,~~ The SLFs were gradually absorbed into the protracted land war in ICTZ as standard maneuver elements with no amphibious role. The overriding interests of JCS, ComUSMACV, and III MAF were best served at this time by the long term employment in-country. General Giap's Tet Offensive offered no alternative.

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## Chapter VI

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## SIGNIFICANT SLF OPERATIONS IN NORTHERN ICTZ

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(1) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: MACV Comd Hist (TS); CAF Seventh Flt, Hist of Amphib Ops, Mar65-Dec66 (S); USMC in RVN, Hist Summary (S); FMFPac ComdCs, 1966-68 (S); III MAF Ops, Jul66-May68 (S); 3d MarDiv ComdCs, Jul66-May68 (S); 1st MAW ComdCs, Jul66-May68 (S); 4th Mar's AAR for Opn HASTINGS; SLF (TG 79.5) ComdCs, Jul66-May68 (S); SLF ALFA (TG 79.5) ComdCs, Apr67-May68 (S); BLT 3/5 AAR for DECKHOUSE II and HASTINGS (S); BLT 1/4 AAR for BEACON HILL (S); 3d Mar ComdCs, April-May67 (S); BLT 2/3 AAR for BEACON STAR (S); BLT 1/3 AAR, for BEAU CHARGER (S); BLT 2/3 AAR for BELT TIGHT (S); 9th Mar AAR for BUFFALO (S); 2/3 AAR for FORTRESS SENTRY (S); 9th Mar AAR for KINGFISHER (S); 3d Mar ComdCs, Apr-May68 (S); Taped interview with Col D. W. Sherman, CO 4th Mar and CS, TF DELTA, HistDiv Tape No. 199 (S); Taped interview with 1stLt K. W. Gregory, <sup>sup</sup> XO B/1/3, HistDiv Tape No. 3257 (C); Taped interview with 1stLt A. F. Prescott et al, HistDiv Tape No. 2804 (C); Simmons, Marine Corps Response (U); Admiral U.S.G. Sharp, USN, CinCPac, and Gen W. R. Westmoreland, USA, ComUSMACV, Report on the War in Vietnam (as of 30 June 1968) (Camp H.M. Smith, Hawaii: 1968), hereafter Sharp and Westmoreland, Report on the War; Moody et al, Marines in Vietnam MS (S); MCOAG Study (S); Viet Nam Comment File.

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From mid-1966 to September of 1969 the personnel of the SLFs demonstrated a great deal of flexibility and versatility as they were assigned missions in the differing environments of ~~the~~ southern and northern I CTZ. In the south, the 1st Marine Division countered <sup>predominantly</sup> guerilla activity with high levels of booby trap and sniper activity in an area of high population density. In the north, the 3d MarDiv faced a combination of guerilla activity and conventional warfare with large North Vietnamese regular Army formations in an area of relatively low population density. ~~The/differences/in/tactical/approaches/to/the situation~~

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*See Appendix*

The operational record of the SLFs from mid-1966 to September 1969 points to distinctions in the type of warfare encountered. In southern ICTZ the guerrilla war was predominant. In northern ICTZ there was a hybrid combination of guerrilla and conventional warfare with regular North Vietnamese troops participating in large numbers. This situation caused differences in the way the 1st Marine Division conducted its war in the south and the methodology applied by the 3d Marine Division in the north. As 1st Division units ultimately moved northward into Quang Tri Province and the areas bordering the DMZ, they had to make adjustments to a different kind of war including enemy artillery fire vis-a-vis mortars and rockets. The SLFs had continued experience in both environments, particularly in 1967 when they regularly bounced back and forth between the two regions.

~~In order to appreciate the extent and scope of these SLF activities in both northern and southern ICTZ during 1966-69, a review of the significant operations is in order. Chapter VI will deal with seven operations in the north and Chapter VII will cover five in the south. The choice of these particular operations for discussion and analysis, out of some 50 conducted in this time frame, is predicated upon the results of SLF activity achieved, including enemy kills; unusual or unique developments; representative trends of employment, of the time concerned; or any of these factors.~~

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## DECKHOUSE II/HASTINGS

During the first eight months of 1966, the enemy escalated his activities in RVN by infiltration of NVA forces from North Vietnam and by a heavy drawdown on guerrilla elements to provide muscle for larger enemy units. This particular build-up reached its peak in the summer of 1966. The Marines necessarily were drawn northward by this enemy threat, but III MAF and the ARVN continued to maintain a hold, though tenuous at times in certain localities, on the coastal lowlands to the south.

TF 79.5 was still operating in southern ICTZ and in IICTZ in late spring of 1966, conducting Operation OSAGE (27 April-2 May) in Quang Nam Province in ICTZ and DECKHOUSE I/NATHAN HALE in Phu Yen Province in IICTZ. By the time July rolled around, the pressure along the DMZ came to a head and the SLF moved north.

Rumors of large enemy units in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces had been entertained for some time at III MAF but with little real evidence to support this contention. On 5 July these rumors were substantiated when a POW was captured south of Dong Ha and was identified as a member of the 812th Regiment, 324 B NVA Division. Two other regiments, the 90th and the 803d were reported in Quang Tri Province. Within two days, 2/1 (Lieutenant Colonel Jack D. Spaulding) and elements of the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion were rushed into the suspect

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area to make an assessment. During the next six days, additional captives and captured documents indicated the movement of some 5,000 troops of the 324 B Division across the DMZ to "liberate" Quang Tri Province.

Major General Walt reacted quickly. Before the NVA could complete their build-up and launch an attack, there were seven USMC and five ARVN battalions on hand in the area including the SLF BLT, 3/5 (Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Bronars). The assembled Marine force was established as Task Force DELTA under the command of Brigadier General Lowell E. English, ADC of the 3d Division. This task force had a formidable mission as it was to participate in the largest and most violent operation of the war until that time, involving approximately 8,000 Marines, 3,000 ARVN, and possibly as many as 12,500 Communists.

The terrain in the HASTINGS Operational area, south of the DMZ, varied from poorly drained seacoast flatland to extremely rugged, heavily forested inland mountains with razor-back ridges running to 550 meters in height. The greater part of the heavy action of HASTINGS took place northwest of Cam Lo in the environs of a ragged rocky mass called the Rockpile. The heavy jungle growth and difficult terrain provided excellent cover and concealment for the enemy. Since the enemy <sup>had been</sup> was in the area in force before the Marines, he had control of the high ground and the observation of the channelized approaches it provided.

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Substantial-size elements of the 324 B Division, probably in conjunction with main force VC units, appeared to be deployed west of Cam Lo on a north-south arc approximately 15 miles long and 4 miles wide. Enemy patrols came within one mile of Cam Lo. The ARVN units to the south encountered little of note but did capture one POW and a substantial ammunition cache.

The Marines' concept involved <sup>widely separated</sup> helicopter landings <sup>OF</sup> by two ~~widely separated~~ battalions six miles west of Cam Lo. One battalion, 3/4 (Lieutenant Colonel Sumner A. Vale), established blocking positions across the primary trails in its area while a second battalion, 2/4 (Lieutenant Colonel Arnold E. Bench), conducted a search and destroy operation southward toward 3/4. A third battalion, 1/3 (Lieutenant Colonel Robert R. Dickey), remained in reserve at Dong Ha. The artillery battalion, 3/12 (Major Samuel M. Morrow), and subsequently the SLF 105 and howtar batteries, were in position somewhere south of Cam Lo. <sup>Cap</sup> D-Day was 15 July but the SLF BLT did not enter the operation until 18 July because of its initial commitment to a coastal sweep in the Gio Linh District northeast of Dong Ha.

D-Day was beset with difficulties for the task force. The first wave of 3/4 touched down in LZ CROW in the Song Ngan Valley just a mile south of the DMZ without contact; the second encountered opposition right after landing. The small LZ generated problems for the CH-46As; two collided and a third hit a tree attempting to avoid the first two. Two Marines

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were killed and seven injured; all three helicopters were so badly damaged that they had to be destroyed. A fourth helicopter was downed by an enemy 12.7mm machine gun <sup>fire</sup> later in the day while bringing reinforcements into the 3/4 CP area. There were 13 Marines killed in this incident. Consequently, the Song Ngan Valley was named "Helicopter Valley."

The second battalion, 2/4, touched down at the other end of the valley in LZ DOVE, some three miles to the northeast. Landing without mishap, 2/4 then swept westward towards 3/4. Both battalions encountered sporadic contact during the day but by nightfall, K/3/4 became heavily engaged. Exposed at some distance from the battalion proper, elements of the company were surrounded. The heavy contact continued, which peaked <sup>only</sup> on the night of the 16th and the afternoon of the 18th. The fighting was especially close, intense and bloody. Artillery and air strikes pounded the enemy steadily in order to relieve the pressure on Company K. On the evening of the 18th, after L/3/4 broke through to the beleaguered company, the enemy fire diminished and 2/4 and 3/4 linked up and consolidated their positions. There ~~were~~ <sup>were</sup> two Medals of Honor awarded as a result of this fighting. *Whe*

While the bulk of TF DELTA was heavily engaged in Helicopter Valley, the SLF BLT made a simultaneous helicopter and surface landing about four miles south of the DMZ on the coast. Landing on the 16th, its mission was to seize key objectives, establish a beach support area, conduct S&D operations, and

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provide a protective screen for the right flank of the forces engaged in HASTINGS to the west. This phase of the SLF operation was called DECKHOUSE II. The AOA was a flat, poorly drained sandy region with intermittent dunes, scrub, and occasional clusters of pine trees along the coastline. Poor tide conditions prevailed and caused the men that were surface landed to wade ashore in five feet of water off BLUE BEACH. //

As intelligence indicated, there were only local force VC in the area and these either fled or took to the fields as "peaceful" farmers when the Marines arrived. The results were limited: three enemy KIA; six assorted weapons, some ammunition, individual equipment, food, and a number of miscellaneous documents captured. The landing did assure, however, that the enemy was not active in the coastal area. But now the BLT was ashore with its reinforcing attachments (making it nearly twice the size of the other battalions) and was inserted into HASTINGS on the 18th.

BLT 3/5 moved inland to the Dong Ha Mountain area, seven miles west of the town of Cam Lo and north of the Cam Lo River. The area is dominated by a horseshoe-shaped hill mass with Dong Ha Mountain at the apex. This horseshoe forms the three main valleys wherein 3/5 conducted its part in Operation HASTINGS. The jungle canopy ran 60 to 90 feet in height and made air observation of the ground nearly impossible. Trails and streams abound under this jungle canopy. Intelligence indicated that a regimental-size CP was probably in the area.

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The mission of the BLT was basically a search and destroy endeavor in its assigned area of responsibility. The concept of the operation involved four rifle companies scouring the BLT operational area from east to west within their respective zones of action. Organic artillery was assigned supporting fire positions south of Cam Lo.

Shortly after noon on the 18th the BLT Company M, 3/5, landed in LZ CROW and immediately came under fire from an estimated NVA platoon. The Marines in the zone immediately returned fire and called in supporting arms killing 21 of the enemy, more than the five DAGGER THRUST raids totaled altogether (19 enemy KIA). Also captured were two NVA WIA, a 12.7mm machine gun, a .30 caliber machine gun, and 12 individual weapons. Company L also landed in LZ CROW but did not encounter any enemy until later in the afternoon, when it killed three NVA, destroyed a .30 caliber machine gun, and captured a submachine gun. Companies I and K landed in LZ DOVE but encountered no enemy as they pushed westward in their drive.

This was to be a different sort of action for the BLT--the enemy was willing to stick it out and fight a while. Throughout the operation, contact with the enemy involved groups of less than 30 men, often a squad or less. There were two types of encounters: one where small enemy units delayed and harassed the Marines according to plan and those where NVA units or individuals had become separated from their main body and just stumbled into their adversaries.

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The most noteworthy encounters with the NVA occurred on 22 and 24 July. In the first instance, Company M moved out in the morning to check out information from a POW that a regimental CP was located in the vicinity of Hill 314. In combing the area, the Marines found 200 to 300 newly constructed reinforced bunkers covered by fresh foliage. Pressing their search around Hill 314, Company M came under heavy automatic weapons fire and grenade bombardment from an estimated 40 to 50 NVA. The enemy were located in log bunkers on the high ground above the company. In the course of the action, the Marines unsuccessfully employed an ARVN interpreter to encourage the NVA to surrender. In short order the Marines maneuvered and overran the bunkers, killing 20 NVA and capturing a number of weapons and a machine gun.

The second and most significant contact for the BLT in HASTINGS took place two days later at midday. Company I was moving along a ridgeline on a narrow trail when the lead element of the company came under heavy automatic weapons fire and a shower of grenades. Within minutes, the head of the column was pinned down in a firefight where the underbrush was so thick that the enemy's muzzle flashes could not be seen. The NVA then called in mortar fire on the Marines who doggedly kept up their return fire. Shortly, the artillery began to pound the area around the pinned-down Marines and the enemy automatic weapons fire diminished somewhat and the mortar fire lifted completely. Close air support was employed as well to

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break up the ambush. The Marine company commander estimated that at least two enemy companies were engaging his unit.

At 1640 the Marines attempted to remove their wounded by helicopter but the volume of fire forced the choppers out of the area. Twenty minutes later, the NVA resumed mortaring the company. Finally by 2000, the mortars were located and were knocked out by artillery fire, which also caused two secondary explosions.

The company continued to receive heavy small arms fire throughout the night and during most of the next day. All during Company I's predicament, Company K tried to come to its aid but ran into an estimated 40-50 NVA in log bunkers. The company returned fire, maneuvered unsuccessfully to get around the enemy, withdrew, and then plastered the area with artillery and air strikes. After the bombardment, they found only seven enemy KIA.

When the action finally abated, and casualties were evacuated, the Company I Marines searched the heavy undergrowth and bunkers to see if there were any more enemy in the area. They found 25 dead NVA, 27 rifle and submachine guns, over 15,500 rounds of ammunition, and sundry items of individual equipment. Enemy ordnance destroyed in the fight included a 12.7mm machine gun, a 57mm recoilless rifle, three mortars and an estimated 50 rounds of mortar and AT rounds.

In other locations throughout 3/5's zone of action, there were eight major installations uncovered. Six of these could

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accommodate a battalion or larger-size unit. The most elaborate was a regimental-size CP and bivouac of 400 bunkers and shelters which contained the following: 560 uniforms; 300 packs; 323 blue sweat shirts; 435 shelter halves; 297 pairs of sandals; 70 pounds of manuals, letters, and documents; and a large amount of 12.7mm brass scattered throughout the area. The gear was for the most part brand new. Another site included explosives from an engineer battalion such as TNT, Claymore mines, blasting devices, and associated equipment.

Although BLT 3/5 knowingly made contact with only one basic unit, the 6th Battalion, 812th Regiment, it was apparent that at least an NVA regiment and an engineer battalion occupied the area prior to the Marines' arrival. It was conjectured that possibly the 324 B Division headquarters was in the 3/5 zone of action.

HASTINGS continued on until 3 August, although 3/5 departed the battle area on 30 July. The remainder of the operation for the task force was generally characterized by quick shifting of Marines by helicopter to search out and destroy the NVA in the various zones of action. Once the NVA met strong resistance, the enemy attempted to withdraw as intact as possible into the DMZ or westward into Laos. This withdrawal was organized and usually accompanied by positive delaying actions. They made skillful use of terrain, camouflage, covered routes of withdrawal, and highly effective covering fire with automatic weapons and mortars.

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Results were indicative of the intensity of the fighting. The SLF killed 155 NVA by body count; probably killed over 160 more; and captured 79 (2 died of wounds). The SLF lost 52 KIA and had 155 WIA. Total enemy losses accredited to TF DELTA were 824 NVA KIA and 14 captured. Totally, the Marines suffered 126 KIA and 448 WIA, 126 of whom immediately returned to duty.

HASTINGS was considered to be a good example of <sup>an</sup> ~~ground-~~  
<sup>of an air/ground force</sup> ~~air~~ employment in a difficult combat environment. Techniques  
<sup>for more efficient</sup> ~~of~~ task force employment developed in earlier operations ~~fur-~~  
<sup>in the</sup> ~~ther~~ south <sup>were further developed.</sup> ~~came into full play.~~ The mobile <sup>Div of Air Support Center</sup> (DASC) was one such  
 innovation which had been used previously and proved fruitful in handling the diverse aviation requirements of HASTINGS. There were about 10,000 helicopter and 1,700 fixed-wing sorties executed in the course of the operation. There were approximately 12,000 tons of bombs dropped in support of the ground elements. Artillery certainly had a fair share of the supporting arms work during the operation firing some 42,000 rounds but there were times when the deep ravines and slopes made artillery fire difficult. In these situations, air strikes proved to be the best solution to support the infantry.

The enemy in this more conventional-type fighting ~~readily~~  
 showed his capability of delivering a heavy volume of fire <sup>rockets, artillery,</sup>  
 from an excellent inventory of automatic weapons, mortars, <sup>and</sup> recoilless rifles. The obvious counteraction was to make maximum use of air and artillery including extensive preparation

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fires. When it came to <sup>responding to</sup> ~~handling~~ the numerous ambushes from well-camouflaged and fortified positions, the platoon, squad, and fire team quick-action drills <sup>proved to be of greatest value</sup> ~~were stressed as the best~~ <sup>as a</sup> solution to a knotty tactical situation. Whatever was called for, the Marines ~~adapted quickly and forced~~ the enemy out of the area of operation--at least for a while.

HASTINGS was dramatic; it marked the first division-size employment of NVA regulars; it was the largest-size Marine operation and caused the highest number of enemy casualties of any single operation to that date. As time was to prove, this was not the last incursion by regular NVA forces in the DMZ locale. General Giap had no intention of rejecting the concept of invasion through the DMZ. There were to be several bloody sequels.

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## SLF OPERATIONS IN SUPPORT OF PRAIRIE

## DECKHOUSE IV

*Hastings was successful, but the DMZ situation*  
 Despite the pronounced success of HASTINGS, the III MAF ~~was far from being reassured.~~  
 planners realized that there was no room for complacency re-

*After*  
 garding the DMZ situation. On the very day that HASTINGS ~~terminated~~ *ended on*, 3 August 1966, a single battalion ~~S&D and reconnaissance~~ *began an S&D and reconnaissance*

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 sance operation started in the same region. This effort  
 marked the beginning of Operation PRAIRIE, *ultimately there* ~~which was to last~~  
~~would be four phases to PRAIRIE and it would last~~  
 almost nine months. As time passed and the northeast monsoon  
~~until 31 May 1967.~~  
 season set in, PRAIRIE continued, ultimately into four phases  
 ending on 31 May 1967.

There were numerous sharp battles throughout PRAIRIE in-  
 volving as many as 10 battalions at one time (7 Marine and 3  
 ARVN). For all the phases there were a total of 2,831 enemy  
 and 527 Marines killed. ~~As for the SLF, it~~ participated in  
 two operations ~~that supported~~ *in support of* PRAIRIE, DECKHOUSE IV and BEACON  
 HILL.

*DECKHOUSE IV covered the period*  
~~The first of these occurred during~~ 15-25 September 1966  
 and involved BLT 1/26 (Lieutenant Colonel Anthony A. Monti) and  
 HMM-363 (Lieutenant Colonel James D. McGough). The BLT <sup>was</sup> landed  
 just south of the DMZ in the northeastern part of the Gio Linh  
 District, ~~and established~~ *with the enemy was established* contact almost immediately. ~~One of~~  
~~SLF was in an excellent position to employ amphibious supporting arms and~~  
~~the more noteworthy incidents involved the destruction of three~~  
~~NVA 82mm mortars and their crews by naval gunfire from the~~  
 USS Saint Paul (CA 73) and the USS Hull (DD 945) ~~were credited with~~  
~~destroying three NVA 82mm mortars and their crews,~~

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Two days later, the BLT was <sup>assigned</sup> ~~chopped~~ to the 4th Marines and remained under its operational control for a period of 10 days. ~~The BLT~~ participated <sup>ing</sup> in several fights in the Gio Linh and Con Thien locales. As in HASTINGS, ~~there were~~ well-constructed <sup>enemy</sup> fortifications ~~to contend with, which~~ were overcome by air strikes, artillery, naval gunfire, tank fire, or a combination of these supporting fires. The SLF reembarked on the 25th of September <sup>having accounted for</sup> ~~with a tally of~~ 35 percent (254) of the enemy casualty toll for PRAIRIE for the month of September.

PRAIRIE continued through the particularly difficult monsoon season of 1966-67 with numerous spells of inaction followed by heavy clashes. General Walt moved as many battalions into the area as his other commitments throughout ICTZ would allow. <sup>In order to counter the long-range NVA artillery and provide adequate fire support for his wide-ranging battalions,</sup> ~~Army support units were injected direct from the States~~ including 8 self-propelled 175mm guns and 18 self-propelled 105mm howitzers <sup>were provided to Gen. Walt direct from the U.S.</sup> By 31 January, the first phase of PRAIRIE terminated and shortly thereafter, the firing of artillery into and north of the DMZ against purely military targets was authorized.

7777 About this same time, 2/3, <sup>ing</sup> ~~in preparation~~ to rotate to Okinawa for rehabilitation, <sup>and to tour as an SLF,</sup> ~~became involved in a vicious battle~~ <sup>was attacked by</sup> against two battalions of the <sup>NVA</sup> 812th Regiment. The enemy was apparently mounting an attack on installations in the vicinity of Camp Carroll and Cam Lo. Casualties for 2/3 exceeded 100 including both the battalion commander (Lieutenant Colonel Victor Ohanesian) and the sergeant major (Sergeant Major

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Wayne N. Hayes) who died of wounds. *The battle, costly as it was* As this episode drew to *to 2/3, spoiled the enemy attack plans by inflicting* a close, painful as it was *to 2/3, it was apparent that the* sufficient casualties *that they* NVA once again received more punishment than they could *afford* offer and fled back across the DMZ in relatively large groups (approximately 250 in one case) carrying their dead with them. They were hastened by Marine air strikes and artillery fire whenever under observation. By the time PRAIRIE II ended on 48 March, over 700 more enemy were dead.

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## BEACON HILL

There was increasing concern over the enemy's capability to overrun the Gio Linh base and its prize of four 175mm guns. Operation PRAIRIE forces were still dangerously thin for their large TAOR and ~~the SLF was once more called upon to screen the~~ eastern portion of the DMZ borderlands. <sup>was</sup> Intelligence <sup>was</sup> reported the following units in the ~~SLF AOA~~: the 5th and 6th Battalions, 812th Regiment; the 7th and 8th Battalions, 90th Regiment; and the 1st Battalion, 31st Regiment (all NVA).

<sup>In response to this threat,</sup>  
On 20 March, TF 79.5, consisting of BLT 1/4 (Lieutenant Colonel Jack Westerman) and HMM-363 (Major Marvin E. Day), and an embarked detachment of UH-1E and CH-56 helicopters of the 1st MAW, ~~conducted a landing~~ <sup>ad</sup> on the coast north of the Cua Viet River. Contact was light until the ~~second day~~ <sup>21st</sup> when 1/4 uncovered a group of 80 NVA and killed 14 in a two-hour battle.

On the 22d, the battalion encountered an enemy company ~~as it~~ pushed westward between Gio Linh and Con Thien. ~~In this in-~~ <sup>The enemy left</sup> ~~stance, there were 43 enemy dead~~ <sup>behind</sup> ~~after a stiff engagement.~~ <sup>Throughout this area</sup> ~~The~~ enemy ~~made extensive use of~~ covered fighting holes, trenches,

and connecting tunnels. Heavy infantry weapons ~~were employed~~ <sup>possibly up to 140mm</sup> extensively, including 57mm recoilless rifles, 60, 82, and 120mm mortars, and probably 140mm rockets. <sup>more was performed</sup> ~~It was thought~~ <sup>that the enemy was</sup>

(\*) ~~Determining the size of the rockets was based on the~~ <sup>analysis of</sup> ~~rocket trails.~~ <sup>105mm</sup> ~~In the case of the 105mm, a Chinese-made~~ <sup>also</sup> ~~projectile was found.~~

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~~that possibly an enemy 105 howitzer was used at one point in the operation. An unusual revelation took place in the sector cleared by Company B, the Marines found two dead NVA soldiers tied to 75-pound sandbags and their machine gun with heavy twine. Despite conjecture, as to the reason for this stringent measure, no positive explanation was revealed.~~ *for this unusual procedure has been found.*

By the sixth day of the operation, the BLT broke through two well-prepared defensive lines, consisting of trenches and connecting tunnels concealed by hedgerows. *after a two-day preparation by artillery and air, The rest of the operation then* dwindled to intermittent sniper fire and enemy rear guard *actions* activity. On the 28th, the BLT was chopped to the 3d Marines, *and assigned a mission* as a blocking force *to support* 1,300 meters south of the perimeter at Con Thien, *in order to complement* a regimental push from the south.

BEACON HILL came to a close on 1 April. *BLT 1/4 became* another 3d Division maneuver battalion *with* and its supporting elements *going* went their separate ways to parent units. ~~its tour was over, and 2/3 assumed the duty as SLF BLT. In the tally that is characteristically made after battle, the SLF accounted for 334 NVA KIA and 31 weapons captured during BEACON HILL. Marine losses were 29 KIA and 230 WIA. One expressed reason for the low number of Marine KIA was the BLT commander's insistence upon digging in with an L-shaped (down and in) fighting hole which provided reasonable overhead cover during heavy~~ *an indicated*

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mortar attacks as well as close-in friendly fires. (2)

Overall, BEACON HILL was characterized by heavier than normal contact encountered in the northern coastal lowlands. The enemy's <sup>with</sup> emphasis upon <sup>supporting</sup> mortars and <sup>fire</sup> rockets <sup>fire</sup> certainly made the going more difficult <sup>for</sup> than in their <sup>commitment</sup> previous experience just a couple of weeks before in DECKHOUSE VI in Quang Ngai Province. In short, the enemy was beginning to show signs of building up his supporting arms capability, using the DMZ as a sanctuary.

(2) Taped interview with Lieutenant Colonel Jack Westerman, CO BLT 1/4, HistDiv Tape No. 269 (S).

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## THE SUMMER CAMPAIGN, 1967

The PRAIRIE series and BEACON HILL operations were marked by an increasing number of solid clashes with the enemy in the DMZ region. ~~Even though enemy casualties rose significantly, it certainly did not diminish the Communist's determination for a victory.~~ Between June 1966 and the spring of 1967, General Giap ~~pumped~~ <sup>sent</sup> 19 new battalions into the DMZ, bringing the Communist forces to a total of 37 battalions with a corresponding increase in supporting arms. ~~This influx caused a new and heightened order of warfare in the months that followed.~~

The Communists made three offensive thrusts into Quang Tri Province during the period April-September 1967, reinforced by artillery, (\*) mortars, and rockets generally located north of the Ben Hai River within the DMZ. These offensive efforts were often popularly referred to as the "Summer Campaign of '67," ~~but actually ran from April through September of that year.~~ The first of these thrusts took place in the Khe Sanh area, south of the western reaches of the DMZ, during the latter part of April. A second offensive effort took place in July around Con Thien, northwest of Dong Ha, which was probably the biggest in terms of enemy troop commitment. In September there was a

(\*) Artillery was not employed in the ~~Hill fights~~ <sup>of 1967 at</sup> ~~Khe Sanh by the NVA.~~ <sup>the North Vietnamese did, however, use artillery</sup> ~~Artillery was employed, however,~~ <sup>in-</sup> ~~creasingly throughout this period in the eastern half of the DMZ area.~~ <sup>during this period.</sup>

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third attempt, a heavy weapons attack of greater volume and duration supporting multi-pronged infantry assaults in the Con Thien area. ~~Amid these three enemy drives~~ On 18 May, the 3d Marine Division, both SLFs, and ARVN forces undertook a massive combined operation ~~actually~~ within the eastern portion of the DMZ south of the Ben Hai. This marked the first penetration of the southern half of the DMZ in the war by U.S. forces. Aside from inflicting 837 enemy KIA, the Allies served due notice to Hanoi that the southern half of the DMZ was no longer privileged territory.

~~There was a definite~~ <sup>The</sup> role <sup>of</sup> for the SLFs in repelling these thrusts and in the Allied counter drive into the DMZ in May 1967. <sup>was as</sup> ~~Whenever their assistance along the DMZ was required,~~ <sup>a flexible, ready</sup> the SLFs provided a quick reserve for III MAF that could be employed expeditiously--<sup>either amphibiously</sup> ~~whether it was for an amphibious operation or a rapid insertion~~ <sup>or</sup> on an in-country <sup>support</sup> ~~CHP~~ basis. The response in the "Hill Fights" at Khe Sanh was a <sup>good</sup> classic example of this flexibility.

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## KHE SANH: The Hill Fights ( )

The "hill fights" opened on 24 April 1967 when 1<sup>st</sup> Lt Philip H. Sauer of Company B, 1/9 (Then the garrison force for Khe Sanh Combat Base (KSCB)) an 81 mm forward observer (FO), a radio operator and 2 riflemen were ambushed on the slopes of Hill 861. Intelligence indicated the 325 C NVA Division was involved. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division responded rapidly by assigning the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines (Colonel John P. Hamigan) to counter the NVA forces in the area.

On 27 April, LT Col. Earl R. DeLong brought the SLF, Bt 2/3 to Khe Sanh and relieved 3/3 on the approaches of Hill 861. It should be noted that ~~the~~ the SLF had been engaged in an amphibious operation north of Hue when this conflict started. It was withdrawn, shuttled to Khe Sanh and relieved a battalion in contact with the enemy in a period of 2 days.

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## KHE SANH: THE HILL FIGHTS ( )

Need to be same Part and as much of whole Khe Sanh affair is included as is needed to understand the situation.

Shortly before midday on 24 April 1967, First Lieutenant Philip H. Sauer of Company B, 1/9, an 81mm forward observer (FO), a radio operator, and two riflemen were climbing up Hill 861, north of Khe Sanh Combat Base (KSCB), to establish an observation post. Some 200 meters from the top, the group was ambushed. The lead man was killed instantly by a burst of fire from a bamboo thicket just five meters away. The second rifleman and the radio operator also fell. Sauer was last seen blazing away with his .45 automatic to cover their withdrawal. Only the FO managed to escape.

Subsequently after, <sup>the ambush was</sup> reports of the ambush, Second Lieutenant Thomas G. King of the 2d Platoon of Company B <sup>led</sup> a small group of men to retrieve the bodies of the ambushed party and to determine the size of the enemy unit in the area. Stealthily working their way through the sharp-edged elephant grass on the way to the ambush site, they came upon two of the bodies, but encountered no more NVA. King called in a UH-34 to pick up the victims of the ambush. As the chopper touched ground, all hell broke loose from the crest of the hill. Dashing through a heavy hail of automatic weapons fire, the lieutenant's party got aboard the helicopter unscathed. The chopper, however, took 35 hits but still managed to fly away from the enemy gunners. Two Huey gunships assigned as escort for the UH-34 immediately took the concealed enemy under fire on the crest of 861. It was evident that at least a reinforced company was

( ) For the story of Khe Sanh, see  
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in position there (later assessment set the strength at least a battalion).

The fight gradually expanded as Marine artillery and mortars started to pound Hill 861. Simultaneously, the 1st and 3d Platoons of Company B were diverted from a position 2,000 meters to the north to join in the fight by attacking the Communists from the rear of 861. After wheeling about and traversing only 300 meters, they met a fusillade of automatic weapons fire. Using their 60mm mortars to extricate their right flank, the Marines soon encountered a volume of NVA countermortar fire which forced them to scramble for more secure positions where they could dig in. The men from Company B--and many other Marines--were in for a tough fight. The "Hill Fights" were underway.

The question of why the Communists chose the Khe Sanh area over other access routes into Quang Tri Province, moot as it may be, was logical in view of their experience in HASTINGS and PRAIRIE in the rugged foothills and lowlands to the east. They had been consistently thwarted in these areas in 1966 and early 1967. Despite the remoteness of Khe Sanh from the enemy's ultimate objectives in the lowlands, there were numerous natural features that were favorable. The Khe Sanh area, with its cloud-shrouded hills (the highest being 1,105 meters in height), its heavy jungle canopy (rising as high as 60 feet), and its dense bamboo thickets and spreads of elephant grass interspersed with mountain streams, made a fine, although difficult, approach.

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Moreover, the KSCB, located on an extended plateau, was lightly manned: 1/3 had recently left the area and only a reinforced rifle company, B/1/9, remained. Elsewhere in the area, there were only a handful of U.S. Army Special Forces advisors coupled with a Marine Combined Action Company in Khe Sanh village, a unit of South Vietnamese irregulars at nearby Lang Vei, a 105mm battery at KSCB itself (F/2/12), and the Army's 175mm guns, miles away, at the Rockpile and Camp Carroll. It was a shoestring force that depended upon air for logistical support, <sup>and was</sup> a potentially ripe plum for the Communists to pick.

There was good reason why there were so few U.S. and friendly forces at Khe Sanh. The Marines at Cam Lo, Con Thien, and Gio Linh had been tied down with PRAIRIE and BEACON HILL and were drawing heavily upon the available units which were already very thinly stretched over the 3d Division area of responsibility. (\*) The contention among the Marine planners was that if Khe Sanh did erupt, a reshuffle by air was the obvious course of action. Thus, ~~it was that~~ B/1/9 was assigned to the KSCB in a relatively static TAOR, emphasizing patrolling, periodic reconnaissance-in-force activity, and interdiction by artillery and air--in short, checking NVA infiltration. There were just not enough Marines, helicopters, and logistical backup

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(\*) The 3d Division had only 9 infantry battalions at this time to cover 4,000 square miles. There was simply not enough infantry to control this immense area adequately.

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in April 1967 in northwestern ICTZ to employ the mobile-base concept seen in late 1968 and thereafter.

Apparently, in view of the events as they transpired, the enemy scheme for taking Khe Sanh involved striking Camp Carroll, Con Thien, Gio Linh, Dong Ha, and Phu Bai by fire as a diversionary measure and to disrupt any aid that might be forthcoming. Also, they hoped to cut Route 9 by NVA sapper teams between Cam Lo and Khe Sanh to prevent any overland reinforcement. The final touch to his plan was to mount a diversionary ground attack against the <sup>Civil Irregular Defense Group</sup> CIDG camp at Lang Vei, approximately seven kilometers southwest of KSCB. All of these subsidiary efforts were directed to support the major thrust of the 325C NVA Division which was to attack from the northwest and capture KSCB.

As it turned out, almost everything went off according to plan except the 325C Division's main thrust. In this instance Lieutenant Sauer's group <sup>was forced</sup> ~~was~~ tripped the enemy into action on 24 April, instead of the probable intended invasion date of 1 May. The other ancillary diversionary and blocking efforts (some 1,200 mortar, rocket, and artillery rounds descending upon the various fire support and logistics bases and the disruption of Route 9) took place on the 27th and 28th of April. The Lang Vei attack followed on 4 May.

The 3d Marine Division Headquarters responded quickly by assigning the 3d Marines (Colonel John P. Lanigan) to counter the NVA forces in the area. On 25 April, 3/3 (Lieutenant

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Colonel Gary Wilder) operating at Dong Ha landed at KSCB. Lieutenant Colonel Wilder's orders were to assume operational control of B/1/9 north of 861 and to develop the situation to determine the enemy's intentions. Since Khe Sanh was threatened by the enemy's presence on Hill 861, the battalion commander moved directly (after heavy artillery preparation) on the afternoon of the 25th. Company B, 1/9 was to attempt a link-up with the two platoons north of 861 while I/3/3 was to seize the hill mass itself. The battalion bogged down in the face of withering fire. The next day Wilder ordered K/3/9, fresh from Camp Carroll, to assist B/1/9 which was suffering heavy casualties. After completion of the extrication of B/1/9 and withdrawing I/3/3 from the lower slopes of 861 (accomplished at 0530 on the 27th), the SLF BLT, 2/3 (Lieutenant Colonel Earl R. Delong), relieved 3/3 on the approaches of 861. The BLT had been withdrawn from an amphibious operation 20 kilometers north of Hue, shuttled to Khe Sanh, and chopped to the 3d Marines the day before. Wilder's force returned to KSCB. At the base, meanwhile, B/1/12 arrived by air and with F/2/12 formed a provisional artillery group under command of Major Richard J. Wheelock.

By late afternoon of the 28th, the 3d Marines units were in position to attack the NVA-dominated hills north of KSCB. The three hills involved formed an approximate right triangle with 881 North (N) at the apex and 881 (S) and 861 on the respective left and right extremities of the base. The distances

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from KSCB were approximately 8,000 meters to 881(N), 7,000 to 881(S), and 5,000 to 861.

The 3d Marines' concept of attack called for the ~~seizure~~ of the three hills which overlooked KSCB. The SLF battalion ~~was~~ to assault 861 with Wilder's battalion, <sup>(3/3)</sup> in trace from ~~its~~ position south of the hill mass. Once the hill was secured, 3/3 was to swing westward, clearing the terrain in its advance, to ultimately seize 881S. In coordination with the 3/3 attack, <sup>The SLF</sup> ~~2/3~~, after consolidating 861, was to advance toward 881N to screen the right flank of 3/3 and reinforce if required. With the securing of 861 and 881S, 3/3 was to advance in a northwesterly direction to support 2/3 in its initial assault of the final objective, 881N.

After a heavy preparation by aircraft of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and artillery at KSCB, 2/3 attacked 861 and encountered only sporadic mortar fire. By 1630 the battalion ~~had~~ secured the hill. In ~~clambering over the bomb blasted conquest,~~ The Marines found over 200 fighting holes, 4 mortar positions, 11 sleeping bunkers, and several weapons and grenades. They found no enemy dead but they did recover the bodies of six Marines who had fallen in 3/3's first fight there. ~~Thanks to~~ The effective preparation by Marine air and the artillery group <sup>had played off.</sup> at KSCB, ~~no other Marines were lost in taking Hill 861.~~

On the morning of the 29th, 3/3 jumped off for Intermediate Objective A, a small promontory en route to 881S, with M/3/9 screening its movement. In short order M/3/9 met small

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arms and 60mm mortar fire. Replying with artillery and close air strikes, the company neutralized the enemy and continued the attack. While M/3/9 was busy, the main body of 3/3 headed southward with no contact and then proceeded to Intermediate Objective A. After digging in for the night, M/3/3 continued to have contact with what was estimated to be a company-size force. Again the Marines called in artillery with apparent effect.

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The next morning M/3/3 moved out and its lead platoon reached the crest of 881S at 1025, encountering light small arms fire. The Marines committed another platoon to the fight and were hit by a tremendous fusillade of automatic weapons fire from camouflaged bunkers and from snipers perched in trees. Thirty rounds from 82mm mortars added to the crescendo of this already furious din. Company K, 3/9, and the remaining platoon of M/3/3 joined in and a violent battle ensued. Helicopter gunships and fixed-wing aircraft covered the enemy positions with ordnance, in some cases only 50 meters from the Marines' positions. Despite the pummeling by air and artillery before and during the attack, numerous strongpoints kept up their murderous fire.

*W.C.*

At nightfall M/3/3 was ordered to disengage and withdraw to Intermediate Objective A under cover of artillery and mortar fire. Even though there had been 323,750 pounds of aviation ordnance and 1,685 rounds of artillery expended on the hill mass, it was obvious that further preparation was necessary. There

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were 43 Marines killed and 109 wounded, 90 of whom were evacuation cases.

The next day was spent bombarding the hill and reorganizing 3/3 for the assault. The 1st MAW dispatched 166 sorties to Khe Sanh to deliver a thundering 650,000 pounds of ordnance, including 130 2,000-pound bombs. Major Wheelock's gunners fired 1,445 more artillery rounds. As the day wore on, the NVA ~~resistance~~ <sup>resistance</sup> began to weaken. After three particularly vicious air strikes, an enemy platoon fled from its bunkered positions into the open where the infantrymen of 3/3 cut them down. Also during this preparatory period, M/3/3 departed for Dong Ha and F/2/3, the regimental reserve, moved to fill the void. Company E, 2/9 was flown in to become the regiment reserve.

~~On 2 May, dawn~~ Dawn broke on 2 May, and 3/3 assaulted 8815. The effort was anticlimactic as only sporadic rifle fire met the advancing infantrymen. Once established on the hill, the battalion found approximately 50 very solidly built bunkers on the northern slope, undamaged despite direct hits with 500- to 2,000-pound bombs from 150 air strikes. These positions were also interspersed with connecting trenches and light antiaircraft gun positions. The location of the fighting bunkers presented a classic example of mutually supporting positions capable of providing interlocking bands of automatic weapons fire. When one machine gun bunker was knocked out, another immediately could fill the gap, a technique encountered 49 years earlier at Belleau Wood by Marines of another era. As usual, the

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~~del~~

(2) On The morning of The 29<sup>th</sup>, 3/3 jumped off for Hill 8815 - an ~~ant~~ objective that was not seized until 2 May 6.

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police of the battlefield by the NVA was exceptional. Notwithstanding the difficulties in the macabre business of body-counting, there were 303 NVA killed in the entire fight for Hill 881S.

(2)

~~The final objective, 881N, now came into the limelight.~~

The SLF battalion, 2/3 had been pushing northwest since the 28th, clearing the ravines and ridges in its path. The Marines passed over two intermediate objectives and were finally in position for an assault of the hill. ~~Kicking off~~ at 1025 on 2 May, Companies E and G moved out with H in support. All three companies experienced sharp action. As Company E neared the crest of 881N, a terrific squall, typical of the area, developed with gusts of blinding rain blowing up to 40 miles an hour. Appreciating the control problems the poor visibility was causing, Lieutenant Colonel Delong pulled back to more defensible terrain for the night. His decision proved to be quite prudent, ~~Two company, mortar, assault~~ as at 0415, E/2/3 experienced a savage NVA attack by ~~two companies supported by mortars~~. The northeastern portion of the perimeter was overrun. Shortly thereafter, First Lieutenant Frank M. Izenour took his 1st Platoon from the western edge of the perimeter to halt the penetration. The men were abruptly stopped by two enemy machine guns and took several casualties, in the process. Izenour asked for help from the company commander, Captain Alfred E. Lyon, who immediately sent 11 engineers as infantry into the fight. ~~After what seemed an eternity, the attack was stalled~~ With considerable help from the artillery -

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(3) <sup>the penetration was stopped.</sup>  
 and fixed-wing aircraft. <sup>from the rear,</sup>  
~~Aside from the~~ artillery support, ~~there was assistance~~  
~~from the flank.~~ <sup>on the flank,</sup> Recoilless riflemen of 3/3, <sup>3/3 recoilless riflemen</sup> situated on their  
 vantage point on 881S, fired more than 100 rounds into the NVA  
 with ~~devastating bombardment.~~ <sup>results.</sup> ~~Still, this assistance from~~  
~~employment of~~ supporting arms, ~~was not enough.~~ <sup>Despite the full</sup> The enemy continued to hold a  
 significant salient in Company E's <sup>the</sup> perimeter.  
<sup>Because</sup> Since Company E ~~did not have enough strength~~ <sup>was unable</sup> to reduce  
 the salient, <sup>by</sup> ~~itself,~~ <sup>was landed by helicopter</sup> F/2/3 moved in ~~by chopper to help,~~  
~~to help.~~ <sup>to help.</sup> The company pressed on to  
 the southern edge of the enemy penetration, <sup>while</sup> ~~At the same time~~  
 H/2/3 drove into the rear of the NVA from the north. Eventu-  
 ally, the ~~enemy within the salient met their end as~~ <sup>was reduced by</sup> Company H  
~~finished the fighting~~ around the treeline in the center of  
the perimeter in a bitter hole by hole contest ~~that lasted~~  
 till mid-afternoon.

The price in lives was steep. The Marines lost 27 men  
 killed in action and 84 wounded. The Communists lost 137  
 killed by actual body count and another 124 based upon sight-  
 ings and blood trails. There were also three POWs in the  
 accounting. ~~The enemy was whipped and was only able to follow~~  
~~up his attack with two feeble probes which cost five more~~  
~~NVA KIA.~~

(3) Interview with 1stLt Frank M. Izenour, USMC, dtd 12 May  
 1967, Tape No. 2105 (Oral History Collection, HistDiv, HQMC) (S).

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The next day, the 4th, brought the Communists a modicum of success, but not of the order that would influence the effect of their overall offensive effort. A reinforced enemy company attacked the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei southwest of Khe Sanh. The enemy overran the defenses of the camp in a lightning raid destroying all key installations, killing 22 of the defenders including the U. S. Army Special Forces commander and his executive officer, and capturing or driving off 39 irregulars. The enemy suffered only nominal casualties during his attack and withdrawal, despite the ~~box fires~~ <sup>for close in artillery protective fires.</sup> called ~~by~~ the defenders. In response to this threat from the southwest, the 3d Division sent C/1/26 to augment Khe Sanh against any further possible attacks.

On the morning of the 5th, Delong's battalion assaulted 881N from positions it had secured the day before on the southern extremity of the hill. Company F met increasing resistance as it worked its way up the slope. The company held up to let aircraft and artillery clear the path of advance and then pushed on as Company E laid down a base of fire. At the same time Company G swung around in an enveloping maneuver from the north. Facing only light sniper fire, the Marines secured the last of the hill masses at 1445. Hill 881N was theirs.

For the next few days, there was little consequential activity except for deep patrols, STING RAY insertions, and supporting arms interdiction of apparent and suspected enemy routes of egress. <sup>(Deep observation posts organized to call in supporting arms.)</sup> There were several sightings followed up

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with attacks by fire directed by airborne or STING RAY observers. There were approximately 20 NVA killed during this phase. All indications pointed to the contention that the enemy was backing off and heading for safer ground in North Vietnam and Laos. The 325C NVA Division was hurt. Nevertheless, it was able to strike back at its pursuers.

A two platoon force from F/2/3 was patrolling on the lower slope of Hill 778, 3,200 meters to the northwest of 881N, when ~~sniper fire cracked out~~ <sup>they received small arms fire</sup> from the ridgeline to the front.

~~Both~~ The Leathernecks reacted by deploying into a skirmishers' formation <sup>and a</sup> ~~and headed up the ridge~~ <sup>as they attacked</sup>. Suddenly, the ridge erupted with small arms and mortar fire as well as grenades. The Marines suffered numerous casualties including the company commander. This time artillery was not immediately available because of communication difficulties. Finally ~~after much frenzied switching of frequencies and fruitless transmitting,~~ Second Lieutenant Terry M. Weber managed to make contact with another station which relayed his fire request to the KSCB batteries. The enemy at this point began to disengage. They were not in bunkered positions this time and they well realized that the Marines would soon be raking them over with artillery. In fact as the NVA withdrew, the Khe Sanh batteries and 60mm mortars from Company E to the south opened up.

When contact with the ~~outed~~ <sup>counted</sup> enemy unit ceased, the Marines ~~discovered~~ 31 NVA dead on the battle site along with 203 freshly dug graves of previous enemy victims of the Hill

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~~lights.~~ Probables based on sightings and blood trails indicated another 45 kills. There was a considerable amount of individual equipment and rice left behind by the departing enemy, ~~too~~. In contrast, the Marines lost 24 dead and 19 wounded, most of whom were cut down <sup>them</sup> in the initial point-blank fusillade.

The ~~Hill~~ <sup>Hill</sup> Fights ended on 12 May; there were 940 NVA and 155 Marines dead as a result of the struggle. The SLF suffered 76 dead of this number as well as 228 wounded. The battles fought around Khe Sanh were a far cry from the hit-and-run encounters with the Communists elsewhere in ICTZ. The ~~enemy was playing the role of aggressor in a conventional regular forces. When he defended, he did so from, sense, not solely as a guerrilla force. Once committed (as it turned out, prematurely) he had to play a defensive role--a tactic he was prepared for and performed with savage determination in his~~ <sup>invaded and fought with well-led, well-trained</sup> ~~well~~ <sup>well</sup> ~~cloverly~~ <sup>well</sup> emplaced reinforced bunkers. The Marines' response was just as determined and because of their mobility, their aggressive infantry attacks, and their superior supporting arms, the Communist's first encroachment upon Khe Sanh met with failure.

~~Khe Sanh hardly qualified as an amphibious objective area.~~

<sup>OK good</sup> ~~Yet~~ The SLF BLT, executing its deepest <sup>immediately</sup> inland move, was there <sup>available and prepared to fight</sup> on the spot when most needed, and ready to fight. This mobile versatility was instrumental in influencing the course of the "hill battles" and proved to be a trump card for III MAF in countering the Communists' endeavors there.

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## ENTRY INTO THE DMZ

~~While the NVA 325C Division was running to recuperate from its drubbing in the Khe Sanh hills, General Watt's III MAF planners were busily working on a new offensive operation. This effort was unique in that it called for ground operations within the DMZ to the east.~~

*In response to this situation,*  
 This operation had its origins in February 1967 during PRAIRIE II. *During February 1967,* At that time authority was granted to fire artillery into and north of the buffer zone to interdict infiltration routes. This artillery support provided much needed augmentation to the air strike program in the area. *Because* With the Marines being *were* unable to pursue the enemy physically in *to the* his sanctuary, the NVA *naturally* used the DMZ as a springboard.

~~for attack as seen in the events of 8 May 1967.~~

*On the 13th anniversary of the fall of Dien Bien Phu,* a two-battalion NVA force, covered by heavy mortar, rocket, and artillery barrages *hitting* all *of the* eastern DMZ strongpoints, struck out to seize the *base at* ~~outpost of~~ Con Thien. The attackers, *di-*rectly supported by mortars and flamethrowers, were ultimately repulsed by 1/4 in a hard and bloody battle. The enemy lost 197 KIAs, 10 POWs, and 72 weapons. The Marines lost 44 killed and 110 wounded as well as several tracked and wheeled vehicles *but* destroyed or damaged. Following this battle, the enemy's use of the DMZ for artillery and ground rocket firing sites increased. The region south of the Ben Hai was used for the

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~~shorter ranged weapons, mortars, and rockets, and the north~~  
~~for the longer-ranged 85s (later 122s, 130s, and 152s).~~ <sup>ordnance</sup> A1-  
 together, there were some 4,200 mortar, rocket, and artillery  
 rounds fired at Marine positions in the area during the month  
 of May.

Because of this threatening activity, ComUSMACV issued a  
 directive granting authority for friendly forces to enter the  
 portion of the DMZ buffer zone that was in fact RVN territory,  
 i.e. the area south of the Ben Hai River. The concept of the  
 plan called for one ARVN and two USMC operations. The code  
 names were HICKORY for the 3d Division units, BEAU CHARGER for  
 SLF ALFA, and LAM SON 54 for the five ARVN battalions. SLF  
 BRAVO was to move ashore to join HICKORY once the combined  
 operation was underway <sup>(4)</sup> under the code-name of BELT TIGHT.  
 The general scheme involved the movement of these forces to  
 the Ben Hai, whereupon they were to drive south on roughly  
 parallel axes, destroying enemy units, installations, and  
 supplies. A major facet of the plan included development of a  
 free-fire zone involving evacuation by South Vietnamese National  
 Police of some 10,000 noncombatants living within the buffer  
 zone. In order to preserve <sup>tactical secrecy</sup> ~~security of the operation~~, distri-  
~~bution of the plan was withheld~~ until the last practicable  
 moment, ~~thus affording the enemy a minimum of reaction time in~~

(4) This was the first time both SLFs were committed in the  
 same operation, though not under the same OPCON.

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the event of compromise.

*Five* The support of this operation was *greater* more prodigious than any previous operation in the DMZ. The U.S. and ARVN forces' *overpowering* fire support was augmented by the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, the cruisers Saint Paul and Boston and seven destroyers (six U.S. and one Australian), as well as aircraft from the Seventh Air Force and the Seventh Fleet. The bulk of this support was for the direct suppression of NVA artillery north of the Ben Hai River. On occasion, in the case of naval gunfire ships, it became a question of counterbattery fire with NVA shore batteries.

*Wow!* The 18th of May was D-Day. It turned out to be a rather bright, sunny morning, but the cheery weather did little to dispel the ominous pall caused by the impending operation. There was the usual barking of orders and the hustle of last minute preparations for battle: the hefting of packs, ammunition loads, equipment, and other shoulder-cutting impedimenta so familiar to the ever-burdened infantryman. For many Marines ashore at Dong Ha and other nearby locales, it meant moving from one dusty LZ to another equally dusty LZ. *D-Day* For Colonel James A.

*delicate* Gallo's Special Landing Force ALFA (BLT 1/3 commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. Wickwire and HMM-263 by Lieutenant Colonel Edward K. Kirby) *was 18 May* off the coast of the DMZ, the scene was different. At first glance the spectacle of helicopters taking off from the deck of an LPH was a perfect backdrop for a recruiting poster or a flashy Public Information Office photograph--the Navy-Marine Corps amphibious team in full

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splendor. But to the Marine pulling his way up a steep ladder from a stale-smelling troop compartment to his debarkation station, there was nothing glamorous about it at all. He was, like his fellow Marines ashore, quite concerned about the grim thought that this day might be his last.

~~not~~ Loaded down with five Marines of the assault element of Company A in each helicopter, 15 UH-34s <sup>lifted</sup> lumbered away from the flight deck of the USS Okinawa (LPH-3) <sup>and headed</sup> ~~for~~ They headed over the South China Sea in the direction of Landing Zone GOOSE, just 1,500 meters below the Ben Hai. The objective area they were approaching was generally flat with gently rolling sand dunes ~~running~~ up to 10 meters in height. Toward the northwest was a sand dune ridge about 20 meters high which was the demarcation line for a three kilometer-wide expanse of poorly drained rice paddies and dikes. The terrain had been well studied before the operation by using a current <sup>photo map</sup> pictomap; however, there was no other aerial reconnaissance and, significantly, no preparation by naval gunfire or air because of ~~The need~~ security. <sup>for secrecy.</sup>

<sup>led</sup> The squadron commander was leading the flight in helicopter EG-14. Because of an intelligence report that there was a substantial number of antiaircraft machine guns in the area, the choppers flew <sup>at an alt. of 25 to 50 feet</sup> between 25 and 50 feet <sup>alt.</sup> altitude at a speed of 80 knots. This low-flying ~~technique~~ coupled with the lack of prominent landmarks in the maze of sand dunes made navigation ~~not~~ difficult. As a result, Lieutenant Colonel

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Kirby ~~and~~ overshot ~~its~~ mark, LZ GOOSE, by some 800 meters.

He no sooner touched down than a burst of machine gun fire ~~from 50-100 feet away stitched the fuselage of the helicopter.~~ *damaged the helicopter, destroyed the radio and*

*wounded* the copilot, crew chief, gunner, and three infantrymen, ~~were~~

~~wounded. One unfortunate infantryman was killed and fell from~~

~~the helicopter to the ground.~~ The crewman on the door gun re-

turned the fire and, in the words of the squadron commander,

"saved their bacon." <sup>(5)</sup> Kirby, ~~unscathed, seeing that his ship~~ *was able to take off, but*

~~would be finished in a matter of seconds, gunned EG-14 for all~~

~~it was worth, back into the air. To make matters worse, his~~

~~radio was damaged. He lost~~ *had no* contact with the rest of the flight

~~and~~ <sup>or</sup> the Okinawa. Two other UH-34s in the first wave were also

damaged by automatic weapons fire along with both UH-1Es flying

escort. ~~Still, except for Kirby with his cargo of wounded, the~~

rest of the pilots managed to offload their Marines, albeit in

an 800 meter swath *instead of at GOOSE as planned.*

Lieutenant Colonel Kirby, unable to control his flight,

headed back to the LPH as best he could <sup>together</sup> along with the other

damaged helicopters. As the squadron commander brought his

craft down on the deck of the Okinawa, all his instruments went

dead. In all, there were 53 bullet holes in EG-14; Kirby's

tough old bird had held on till the last gasp. The two UH-1Es

(5) Lieutenant Colonel Edward K. Kirby's comments on Draft MS, Moody et al, Marines in Vietnam, dtd 18Jan70 (Vietnam Comment File).

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were likewise out of commission upon landing. The wounded, including the copilot of one of the gunships, were hustled down to the sickbay while Kirby rushed to the Supporting Arms Coordination Center to report on the situation. *Upon receipt of this information,* Colonel Gallo conferred with Lieutenant Colonel Wickwire and directed a change to an alternate LZ, OWL, 1,300 meters south of LZ GOOSE.

The situation back at GOOSE remained confused. Second Lieutenant Dwight G. Faylor's 2d Platoon was pinned down and scattered over 800 meters of terrain. The elements to the northwest of the LZ were in the most serious trouble. Ensign John W. McCormick, the naval gunfire liaison officer, tried to call in naval gunfire but the request was denied out of necessity. The disposition of friendly troops in relationship to the enemy could not be established and the probability of killing Marines was too great. The ensign's voice finally faded away over the crackling radio until only the snapping of automatic weapons fire could be heard in the background.

Concurrent with the heliborne assault at GOOSE, LVTs carrying Company D landed on GREEN BEACH (1,200 meters south of LZ OWL) encountering only sporadic small arms fire. At 0855 the remainder of Company A landed at OWL and was subsequently reinforced by a platoon of Company D and a section of tanks from GREEN BEACH. By 1100 Captain Charles G. Jordan, the company commander, and his force worked their way from OWL to Faylor's beleaguered platoon in and near GOOSE. Contact with the enemy continued and Company B landed to join the fight at

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GOOSE. Impeded by a tenaciously held trench line, Jordan tried to punch through the position by way of a tree-lined approach.

There was heavy hand-to-hand fighting. Further advance was

out of the question without close air <sup>support</sup> assistance. Eleven air-  
~~craft took turns at pasting~~ <sup>in rotation blasted</sup> the entrenched NVA. As it turned

out, they were tackling an estimated three reinforced companies.

When the ~~dust of~~ <sup>quieted</sup> battle had settled enough to ~~count bodies,~~ <sup>take stock, it appeared</sup>

<sup>that</sup> Company A <sup>had</sup> accounted for 41 <sup>NVA KIA's</sup> ~~kills~~ and B, 14. Air strikes accounted for 12 killed.

After a relatively quiet night, the battalion pressed on

towards its objectives ~~the next morning~~ with the RVN National Police assisting in evacuating the noncombatants <sup>in their path.</sup>

The battalion support area, however, <sup>received over 120 rounds</sup> became the focal point of ~~of incoming 85mm artillery fire which damaged 2 howitzers~~  
~~activity on several occasions during the day. Major Billy D.~~  
~~and killed 4 Marines and wounded another 10.~~

Thornbury, the battalion executive officer, was running the

~~show there. Garbed in a skivvy shirt and a flak jacket gar-~~

~~nished with a dangling .45, he animatedly supervised the myriad~~

~~details of keeping the battalion support running smoothly. His~~

~~efforts were interrupted on several occasions by 85mm artillery~~

~~firing from North Vietnam. At 1310 on the 19th, there was a~~

~~deluge of 60 rounds; at 1630 another 32 rounds; and the next~~

~~day another 30 rounds. One cool Marine crouching in his hole~~

~~had enough presence to record one of the barrages on a little~~

~~Japanese-made tape recorder. Because the troops were well dug~~

~~in, casualties were kept to a minimum; all told, 4 KIA's and 10~~

~~WIA's. In addition there were two 107mm howitzers knocked out by~~

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~~the NVA gunners.~~

~~The major was determined to get back at the enemy artil-~~  
~~lerymen and asked SACC to smother the suspected gun positions~~  
 with naval gunfire and particularly to hit a reinforced concrete  
 lighthouse off the coast of North Vietnam that was looking down  
 the Marines' throats on the beach. ~~SACC responded with a tre-~~  
~~mendous naval gunfire effort to suppress the enemy firing bat-~~  
~~teries. The lighthouse was another matter. Even though the~~  
~~Seventh Fleet gunners used their 5-inch guns, the tower would~~  
~~not tumble. Close air strikes followed and the tower stood as~~  
~~before, smashed and shattered, but still stubbornly upright.~~ (\*)  
 Satisfied that no observer could be alive ~~in this devil's pul-~~  
~~pit~~ the naval gunfire and close air support were transferred  
 (\*\*)  
 to more active targets.

~~Over~~ As the next couple of days ~~were on~~, there was still artil-  
~~lery to be reckoned with~~, not only at GREEN BEACH but at WHITE  
 BEACH as well, which fortunately was 5,800 meters further south,  
 just beyond the effective range of the NVA 85s. Each time the  
 enemy gunners ~~cut loose~~, they received naval gunfire in

(\*) A month and a half later the tower was again rebuilt by  
 the North Vietnamese.

(\*\*) A VC suspect, approximately 20-24 years of age, was appre-  
 hended on 19 May after an intense barrage on the BRAVO Command  
 CP on GREEN BEACH. Carrying a 3" <sup>mirror</sup>, he was considered a  
 prime suspect in directing the artillery on target.

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~~reply. Consequently, the enemy cannonners could not keep firing for any length of time, despite being revetted in well-~~  
~~camouflaged positions.~~ Air strikes, counterbattery artillery, and naval gunfire <sup>which</sup> kept ~~the~~ <sup>them</sup> ~~NVA~~ from accomplishing more than ~~many~~ harassing fires which ultimately had no effect upon the BLT's mission.

~~The operation proceeded~~  
~~In the course of the action, the scheme of maneuver went~~  
 pretty much according to plan, ~~objective by objective.~~ Companies A, B, and C advanced north to the Ben Hai. Once there, they saw the sampans the enemy <sup>had</sup> used to cross the river during the night <sup>pulled up</sup> on the northern bank. <sup>With the NVA unit abreast,</sup> The worst of BEAU CHARGER was over except for occasional light contact and harassment by artillery and mortars. In the process of moving south toward WHITE BEACH (the LSA at GREEN BEACH <sup>had been</sup> ~~was~~ moved there out of <sup>85m</sup> ~~artillery~~ range of ~~the 85s~~ on the 20th), the battalion along with the National Police evacuated some 750 inhabitants. In some cases the inhabitants followed the Marines; one company commander remarked that the civilians would leave as long as there were Marines present. Using amtracs, the Marines transported the refugees to naval landing craft which carried them down the coast to the Cua Viet River and Dong Ha. The bulk of these uprooted civilians ultimately wound up in refugee camps near Cam Lo.

The finale to the operation was a withdrawal by the BLT on three different axes to WHITE BEACH in order to reduce the battalion's vulnerability to enemy artillery. ~~The effort was most successful.~~ The next day all elements departed WHITE

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BEACH for the ARG shipping as Company D covered their withdrawal, without incident.

?? BEAU CHARGER, an ambitious amphibious undertaking considering the <sup>potential civilian</sup> evacuation problem and the enemy artillery threat, cost 23 Marine and Navy lives; there were 79 men wounded. As for the Communists, they lost 85 KIA, 61 of them during the initial fighting south of the Ben Hai. Without the terrific naval gunfire support, air cover, and artillery support, the U. S. losses would have indeed been higher.

Further inland but adjacent to the BEAU CHARGER AOA, five ARVN battalions jumped into LAM SON 54, on 18 May, by advancing rapidly up Route 1, reaching the Ben Hai at dawn. Initially, they encountered little resistance. Two of the battalions swung to the east of the highway and then south. The three other battalions (all airborne troops), supported by tanks, wheeled to the west of the road and also headed to the south on a parallel course. The NVA were apparently caught napping at first but the situation soon changed and they provided continuous contact until the close of the operation. When LAM SON 54 terminated, the ARVN had killed 342 enemy in their zone of action, mostly in the area known as the rocket belt north of Dong Ha. ~~The ARVN lost 21 killed and 116 wounded.~~

Concurrent with BEAU CHARGER and LAM SON 54, the 3d Marine Division units commenced Operation HICKORY ~~as 2/9 and 2/26~~ moved <sup>149</sup> northward from positions near Con Thien. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines made a helicopter assault at the same time south

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of the Ben Hai and swept generally towards the battalions  
(6)  
coming up from Con Thien.

Right at the start, ~~2/9 and 2/26 met~~ heavy opposition from  
~~fortified positions north of Con Thien~~ <sup>was encountered</sup> Forty-eight hours of  
hard fighting ensued, marked with innumerable air strikes and  
artillery missions, before the Marines broke through the NVA  
positions. ~~Lieutenant Colonel Wendell N. Vest's 3/4 shifted~~  
~~eastward within the DMZ in order to entrap the scurrying enemy~~  
~~troops in front of 2/9 and 2/26. As often has been the case,~~  
~~the fleet-footed Communists disengaged with remarkable speed~~  
~~and fled to the northeast before 3/4 could reach its blocking~~  
~~positions.~~

SLF BRAVO, commanded by Colonel Harry D. Wortman, joined  
in the operation on the 20th. Its introduction into this com-  
bined operation <sup>under the</sup> (SLF BRAVO's operational code name <sup>of</sup> ~~was~~ BELT  
TIGHT) was somewhat different than past operations. BLT 2/3's  
<sup>not independent, but was</sup> insertion was ~~directly~~ in conjunction with and under opera-  
tional control of the 3d Division. There was no AOA and CATF

(6) BLT 3/4, originally scheduled as a SLF rotation unit, had  
just arrived from Okinawa in a massive 42-plane airlift of  
Air Force and Marine C-130s. This BLT, as the last ground ele-  
ment of the CinCPAC Reserve, was committed at the request of  
ComUSMACV. The entire airlift of the 1,233<sub>1</sub> man force took  
exactly 31 hours to close at Dong Ha, three hours ahead of  
schedule.

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*What was 2/3's mission??*  
 had no responsibility in controlling and coordinating supporting arms. Everything was done through 3d Division agencies.

*Map?*  
 L-Hour was at 0700 on the 20th. Companies F and H and Command Group Alpha flew into LZ PARROT and secured Objective 3; Companies E and G plus Command Group Bravo touched down in LZ MOCKINGBIRD and secured Objective 2, both objectives being in the northeastern corner of the HICKORY operational area (See Figure ). The terrain in the battalion's sector was gently rolling with some cultivated rice paddies interspersed with scrub pine growth and fordable streams. The first contact with the enemy was in LZ PARROT, consisting of 20 rounds of 60mm mortar fire which was quickly squelched by fixed-wing aircraft on station. The contacts for the rest of the operation involved light mortar attacks, small arms and automatic weapons fire, and, on the second day, a mixed attack of 169 mortar and artillery rounds on the battalion CP. In all cases, the enemy mortar and artillery was countered with friendly artillery fire or air strikes.

The enemy proved to be well trained and employed his weapons from well concealed and varied positions with skill and accuracy. His defensive positions were well constructed, including steel girders and corrugated steel siding. One installation that was overrun appeared to be a division-size CP. Overall, the enemy provided good contact for the first 48 hours in 2/3's advance southward. The Communists lost 23 KIA and 1 POW in the first two days of the operation. Thereafter, there was only

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intermittent contact. Total casualties for BELT TIGHT/HICKORY were 58 enemy killed; BLT 2/3's losses were 16 KIA and 152 WIA.

Elsewhere during HICKORY, 2/26 and 3/4 ran into a series of fortified bunkers near Hill 117 in the western sector of the 3d Division operational area. The strength of the complex, the heavy scrub growth, and the extremely hot weather all contributed to bogging down the initial attack. The troops backed off and air and artillery pounded the hill. Lieutenant Colonel William L. Masterpool, commander of 2/26, was assigned the task of coordinating and controlling the next attack using K/3/4 and H/2/26. While making an aerial reconnaissance with members of his staff and the two company commanders, enemy ground fire tore into their helicopter and forced it to the ground. All of the passengers were wounded including Masterpool who was medevaced. The attack was consequently delayed for another day for further bombardment of the objective and adjustments within the command. On the third day, the Marines attacked under control of Lieutenant Colonel Vest and successfully seized the bunker complex and OP, killing 41 of the occupants.

With the exception of the Hill 117 fight, activity dwindled toward the end of HICKORY and all ancillary operations in the eastern DMZ. The fact that an enemy division-size command post was overrun by the Marines no doubt contributed to his diminishing activity. On the 28th, the operation officially terminated with enemy losses of 362 killed. Material captured or destroyed included 108 weapons, 50 tons of rice, and 8 tons of

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① The significance of the overall HICKORY, HANSON<sup>4</sup>, BELT TIGHT and BEAU CHARGE<sup>2</sup> operation is adequately covered elsewhere. In so far as SLTs are concerned, this was the first time both SLTs were employed in the same operation. It should be noted that differing command relationship arrangements were used with no appreciable difficulty. The BEAU CHARGE operation points up the fact that solid tenets of the amphibious doctrine should not be ignored simply for expediency. The near disaster of the initial landings at LZ COUSE could have been avoided. Significantly, on the other end of the scale, the 2 SLTs demonstrated a particularly good capability to control all the supporting arms of an amphibious force. Above all, the units were ready.

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explosives and ammunition. The Marines involved in HICKORY/  
BELT TIGHT lost 119 killed and suffered 817 wounded.

The significance of HICKORY, LAM SON 54, BELT TIGHT, and  
BEAU CHARGER was quite apparent to friend and foe alike. The  
southern half of the DMZ was no longer guaranteed sanctuary  
for launching attacks to the south. Further, the enemy command  
structure was temporarily disrupted within the DMZ. On the  
negative side of the scoreboard, ComUSMACV and III MAF realized  
that 13 battalions worth of effort could not permanently deny  
the enemy's use of the international buffer zone entirely. Like-  
wise, no higher order of friendly control within the DMZ could  
be realized as long as the enemy retained and manned his forti-  
fied border north of the Ben Hai. *Substitute ①*

#### The SLFs and CON THIEN

During the hot summer period that followed, the activity  
in the DMZ region generally centered around a twenty square  
mile area in and around Nui Con Thien. *Combat base* This *outpost*, situ-  
ated on a hill only 158 meters high, commanded an excellent  
view of the surrounding countryside including the Marine logis-  
tics base at Dong Ha to the southeast. As a strategic terrain  
feature, the hill mass was important to the Communists. As  
time passed and casualties continued to rise, it became sym-  
bolically important to them, too. Like Khe Sanh in early 1968,  
Con Thien was a beleaguered fortress though it never made as  
many headlines nor achieved as much alarmist editorial coverage

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(\*)  
back in the U.S. From March through September 1967, over 6,000 NVA dead were counted by Marines on the fields of battle there. Yet, the hill itself was only large enough to accommodate a reinforced battalion--<sup>And</sup> at times that was too dense a population considering the terrific enemy shelling. Except for the major attacks upon the <sup>base</sup> ~~outpost~~ <sup>activities of</sup> itself, the enemy casualties were primarily the result of the maneuver battalions screening <sup>it</sup> ~~the promontory at one location or another.~~

Both SLF battalions of the period served as reinforcing maneuver units to the <sup>base</sup> ~~outpost~~. The first time was in early July 1967 during Operation BUFFALO when both 1/3 and 2/3 were rushed into the area in a "fire brigade" role to hold back a massive enemy attack upon the bastion. The second time was in September and October when 2/3 phased into Operation KINGFISHER from its own amphibious operation on the coast, FORTRESS SENTRY.

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(\*) The daily peak of incoming rocket, mortar, and artillery rounds at Khe Sanh was 1,307 rounds compared with 1,233 at Con Thien. Con Thien, however, covered approximately one-tenth of the land area of Khe Sanh.

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## OPERATION BUFFALO

BUFFALO had its fateful beginning on 2 July with the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines operating in and around the Con Thien perimeter. Companies A and B were working the area north/northwest of the outpost near the former market place west of Gia Binh. Company D and H&S with its CP group were within the outpost perimeter on Nui Con Thien, and Company C was back at Dong Ha with the 9th Marines CP.

While proceeding in extended column along a sunken road, Company B began receiving small arms fire in a steadily increasing volume. The first assessment of the enemy strength was a handful, then a battalion, and ultimately a multi-battalion force of the 90th NVA Regiment. Company A moved eastward to help out but was unable to effect a link-up after repeated attempts in the face of intense small arms fire from all sides. To make matters worse, the enemy began pounding the unfortunate Marines with artillery and mortars. In fact, this was the first time the enemy employed artillery in mass and in close coordination with his ground attack. Back at Dong Ha, Company C was alerted to stand by for <sup>A</sup>helilift to the area of contact. Meanwhile, the radio transmissions were becoming more grim by the moment; the enemy was using flamethrowers; the Company B commander, his radio operator, two platoon commanders, and the artillery forward observer were KIA. The forward air controller took command of the company but contact with him was lost a short time later. Only the company executive officer

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with the rear platoon managed to maintain radio contact with the battalion CP. Also caught in the heavy enemy fire at the rear of the extended column, he was in no position to influence the situation to any great extent. He did regroup the personnel remaining around him and managed to move some of the casualties to an LZ established to cover the arrival of Company C from Dong Ha. (\*)

Company C, arriving by chopper, was met by a heavy artillery barrage, estimated to be 85mm or larger, and suffered 11 WIA. Marrying up with a platoon of Company D and a platoon of tanks from Con Thien, the reinforcements worked their way into Company B's position, established a defensive perimeter, and proceeded to evacuate those wounded and dead within reach. The task of extricating the wounded proved most difficult as the evacuation LZ was, out of necessity, some distance from the scene of the fighting. Furthermore, the enemy gunners were blasting away at the LZ throughout the day. The wounded were far from safe and many of them took additional wounds while awaiting evacuation. Litter bearers and corpsmen became casualties as well.

All during the fight, friendly and enemy supporting arms were very active. Marine aircraft in the first few hours of

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(\*) A platoon from Company D on Con Thien and a platoon of tanks were sent to the rear of Company B to establish a secure LZ in preparation of Company C's arrival.

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u battle delivered 90 tons of ordnance in 28 sorties. Artillery fired 453 missions, while naval guns of the Seventh Fleet slammed 142 5-inch rounds into enemy positions. On the other hand, the enemy was determined to impede any reinforcing efforts by the Marines; he fired 1,065 artillery and mortar rounds during the day on Gio Linh and Con Thien. More than 700 rounds fell on 1/9 elements alone.

At 1500, Lieutenant Colonel Richard J. Schening, the 1/9 commander, notified <sup>his</sup> regiment <sup>headquarters</sup> that all companies were hard pressed and with no other reinforcements available, the situation was critical. Colonel George E. Jerue, CO of the 9th Regiment, dispatched 3/9 by helicopter to the battle area at 1730. After two and one-half hours, three companies and the command group were in position north of the "trace," a 600 meter-wide and six-mile long surveillance strip which ran between Gio Linh and Con Thien. At this juncture, 3/9, under command of Major Willard J. Woodring, assumed OPCON of Companies A and C. Woodring's battalion made a twilight attack on the enemy's left flank while the effective elements of Company B and the platoon from Company D, holding the LZ, pulled back to the Con Thien perimeter in expectation of an attack on the outpost. Under the increased pressure provided by 3/9, the enemy broke contact. Worn down and exhausted, the survivors of the morning's fight took muster. The tally of this day was a terrible revelation that caused many a shocked response from Vietnam all the

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① From 2 to 5 July, 1/9, The defenders of Con Thien were in extremely heavy contact with a large, well-led enemy force. The enemy's well coordinated combined arms attack by five battalions with massed light and medium artillery, mortars as well as flamethrowers was something not encountered to this date in the DMZ area. 1/9 lost were 53 KIA, 190 WIA and 31 MIA.

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way back to the United States. Altogether, 1/9 lost 53 KIA, 190 WIA, and 31 MIA. It was not until the 5th of July that recovery efforts were completed and the number of missing was reduced to 1 and the number of KIA increased to 84. In view of the heavy and widespread contacts with the enemy by ground, air, artillery, and naval gunfire units, no accurate or complete count of enemy <sup>could be</sup> established (estimates during the operation ran into the thousands). (7)

It rapidly became apparent to III MAF that this battle was the heaviest and most costly engagement of the war to that date. This well coordinated combined arms attack <sup>by</sup> of five battalions with massed light and medium artillery, mortars, as well as flamethrowers was something never encountered before in the DMZ. It was conventional warfare in the purest sense.

In response to this combined arms threat, III MAF quickly requested the <sup>assignment</sup> assistance of both SLFs. SLF ALFA, now commanded by Colonel John A. Conway, was preparing for a landing in eastern Quang Tri Province but immediately ~~shifted gears~~ <sup>to</sup> into its new mission with the 9th Marines. Special Landing Force BRAVO, <sup>now</sup> just withdrawn from Operation BEACON TORCH in Pagoda Valley, 100 miles to the southeast, was also alerted. In less than 25 hours after 1/9's ~~tragic~~ contact, SLF ALFA's BLT 1/3, still under command of Lieutenant Colonel Wickwire, touched down one

(7) Col Richard J. Schening, comments on draft manuscript, dtd 23Jan70 (Vietnam Comment File) (S).

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mile southeast of Con Thien. The entire battalion with its artillery battery was in position by the afternoon of the 3d.

During the period 3-5 July, enemy contact continued. On the 3d, <sup>My</sup> Woodring, <sup>re 3/9 Commander of Con Thien,</sup> called in continuous air strikes for 12 solid hours. The next morning, 3/9 with 1/3 tied in on its right, jumped off and developed heavy contact at 0915 southeast of the market place near Gia Binh. A prolonged close-range clash ensued with tanks, artillery, and liberally applied close air support interspersed with considerable amounts of enemy incoming.

When the Marines' final assault was over at 1830, ~~there were 15 Marines killed including the commander of Company I and a platoon leader from K. There were 33 wounded including the CO of Company G.~~ BLT 1/3 <sup>had</sup> on the other hand suffered ~~only~~ 11 WIA in its advance on the right flank. The next day, SLF BRAVO's BLT 2/3 (Major Wendell O. Beard) landed adjacent to Cam Lo and moved northward toward Con Thien on the western periphery of the combat area. (\*)

The daylight hours of the 5th brought little contact and the grim task of recovering the dead of B/1/9 was completed. During the evening, however, there was a change in pace. Major Woodring decided to slide a reinforced company out about 1,500 meters to cover an approach to 3/9's perimeter. He used the composite company from 1/9, composed of survivors of A and

(\*) Colonel James G. Dionisopolous relieved Colonel Wortman as CO, SLF BRAVO (TG 79.5) on \_\_\_\_\_.

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C Companies, for this task. About 2100, an NVA company, apparently unaware of this shift, came down the approach trail into the awaiting Marines. An all-night fight followed, but the Marines were well dug in and artillery and air strikes created virtual havoc amongst the stubborn NVA. By dawn, the NVA had had enough, withdrew, and left behind 154 of their dead. (8)

~~On the 6th of July will be remembered by those who participated in this operation as a bit of redemption for the events of the 2d. The enemy provided the opportunity for a supporting arms bonanza by massing his units in attack formations in numbers never seen before in ICTZ. Consequently, some of the most effective supporting arms work of the war came to pass during~~

~~BUFFALO.~~ As BLT 2/3 was conducting a sweep during the morning of the 6th near Con Thien, it ~~ran into~~ <sup>encountered</sup> an enemy force employing mortars. The Marine battalion killed 35 of the invaders from the north by rapid employment <sup>by</sup> of supporting arms <sup>without</sup> and suffered ~~any~~ <sup>no</sup> casualties of its own. ▽

Late in the afternoon of the 6th, Captain Burrell H. Landes, CO of B/1/3, climbed a tall tree in order to call in air strikes and artillery fire <sup>on enemy targets</sup> in front of his position. In the middle of his activity, an aerial observer informed him that a large enemy force was approaching his position. When Landes asked what the size of the force was, the reply was, "I'd hate

(8) LtCol John C. Studt, Comments on draft MS, dtd 14Jan70  
(Vietnam Comment File) (S).

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(9) *It turned out to be about*  
 to tell you, I'd hate to tell you." ~~Actually it was roughly~~

a 400-man force crossing the Ben Hai in approach march formation heading directly for 1/3 and 3/9. <sup>BLT</sup> All units braced for the attack.

*Consolidated*  
 In short order both 1/3 and 3/9 began receiving extremely heavy and accurate incoming mortar and artillery fire. Estimates varied from 5-600 rounds at 3/9's position to 1,000 at 1/3's. ~~Whatever the actual amounts were,~~ it was quite apparent that the enemy was making a coordinated attack with a considerable amount of massed fire support. ~~To add to the ferocity of this bombardment,~~ NVA sappers <sup>very close</sup> immediately behind the barrage flinging fuzed blocks of TNT into fighting holes. <sup>artillery and mortar</sup> ~~Box fires defense files~~ were called in for A/1/9 and continued throughout the fight. The whole gamut of supporting arms was brought to bear on the attacking NVA: flare ships, fixed-wing attack aircraft directed by TPQ-10 radar, <sup>HUEY</sup> (Huey) gunships, naval gunfire, and all varieties of available artillery (nine batteries ranging from 105<sup>mm</sup> to 175mm). In Colonel Jerue's estimation, "Not enough can be said for the tremendous assistance by all supporting arms."

By the 8th when reports were finally gathered, the enemy KIA count had risen to 567 for BUFFALO. ~~As a practical matter,~~

(9) Taped interview with Maj Burrell H. Landes, USMC, former CO, B/1/3, dtd 8Jul69, HistDiv Tape No. 4253 (S).

(10) Colonel George E. Jerue, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jan70 (Vietnam Comment File) (S).

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~~the counting of enemy bodies was proving to be a most difficult task. (The grisly carnage was beyond description. There were literally hundreds of bodies strewn about the cratered battle-ground, some half buried by the exploding artillery shells and bombs, others in pieces amongst disarrayed items of individual equipment, weapons, and ammunition. The counting of enemy canteens was one of the methods used to develop a realistic tally. Incoming artillery further complicated this malodorous reckoning.~~

The widely scattered location of these kills was surprising. ~~too~~ Even as late as the 8th, Captain Gerald F. Reczek's C/1/3 came upon a find of 200 or so enemy dead near Hill 39, 600 meters east of Route 561. ~~that~~ <sup>They had been in</sup> Apparently contained a headquarters group that had not been previously counted by aerial observers or ground units. <sup>(11)</sup> Typically as in all the DMZ battles, the true tally of the enemy dead killed by artillery, naval gunfire, and air strikes will never be known because of the sanctuary problem.

(11) Ibid. The scattering of casualties to the north was caused by air and artillery hitting NVA moving toward or away from the main battle area. The scattering laterally from 3/9's position eastward across the front of 1/3 was the result of the NVA attempting to outflank 3/9 without realizing that 1/3 was on the line. Attempting to move further east, they lost even more men to the guns of 1/3.

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The last significant contacts of BUFFALO came on 8 July to the south and southwest of Con Thien by 1/4 and <sup>BLT</sup>2/3 (under operational control of the 3d Marines, commanded by Colonel James R. Stockman). Both were violent clashes against an entrenched foe and involved combined arms. When it was ~~all said~~ <sup>over</sup> and done, 1/4 <sup>had</sup> killed 45 NVA soldiers and 2/3 another 39.

An interesting new development in this intense fighting around Con Thien was the enemy's employment of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) against Marine close air support aircraft from across the DMZ. While an A-4 aircraft was working over the NVA in front of BLT 1/3 on the 6th, eight SAMs were launched from North Vietnam, just north of the DMZ. One of these hit the jet, piloted by Major Ralph E. Brubaker of VMA-311, and caused it to crash in hostile territory. Another of the rounds exploded in erratic fashion 1,000 meters south of Dong Ha. Brubaker, only slightly wounded, was picked up the next day by the Air Force rescue chopper, a "Jolly Green Giant." To the Marines on the ground, the reaction to this weapon was puzzled surprised followed by a quick prayer for the pilot. To the aviators, it was a clear indication that their already dangerous trade was becoming even riskier.

Operation BUFFALO closed on 14 July 1967. The assessment; ~~dismal at first with B/1/9's devastation,~~ became a stinging battlefield defeat for the Communists and the 90th NVA Regiment. The enemy losses were tallied at 1,290 killed and 2 captured. Amongst the booty of battle were 21 crew-served weapons, mortars,

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and machine guns. According to some participants from 1/3, they could have improved their casualty count and picked up more weapons had they not been ordered back <sup>to other duties</sup> ~~on the trace~~. (12) There was just not enough time to assess their battlefield accomplishments completely. Total Marine losses in contrast were 159 killed and 345 wounded.

This distinct large-scale offensive aimed at Con Thien was short lived and considerably more <sup>intense</sup> vicious than most of the Communist operations conducted in ICTZ. <sup>because of the extremely</sup> ~~The thing that made~~ <sup>use of supporting arms by both sides,</sup> ~~it more vicious than usual was the heavy employment of artillery by friend or foe--literally a "hell on earth" for the~~ ~~Marines and the North Vietnamese.~~ Of the 1,290 enemy killed, 475 were credited to air, artillery, and naval gunfire. Beyond this, supporting arms destroyed 164 enemy bunkers, 15 artillery and rocket positions, and caused 46 secondary explosions at ammunition dump <sup>sites</sup>. This effort required 1,006

(12) Taped interview with Maj Burrell R. Landes, <sup>OP. C.</sup> ~~former CO,~~ Co B, 1/3, HistBr Tape No. 4253-(S). The Jerue comments point out that, on 8 July, ~~the decision was made by~~ Major General <sup>Quinn</sup> Hochmuth, CG, 3d Marine Division, <sup>to</sup> withdraw 3/9 and 1/3 to positions just south of the trace for several specific reasons; the NVA had lost the initiative in the area and was rapidly withdrawing into the DMZ; the defensive positions south of the trace were as good as those to the north; the responsibility of the division, stretching from the Hai Van Pass north to the DMZ and west

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tons of aviation ordnance, over 40,000 rounds of III MAF artillery and 1,500 5- and 8-inch naval gunfire shells from the Seventh Fleet. The July '67 contest for Con Thien was over-- till the next round. And once more, the next encounter was to bring the SLF on the scene.

to the Laotian border, did not permit the luxury of tying down too many infantry battalions for long periods of time unless absolutely necessary; the division units had to realign themselves so that the SLFs could be released back to the Seventh Fleet; and lastly, the defensive positions of "Dye Marker", ~~the DMZ barrier~~, were to be on the south side of the "trace" and orders from higher headquarters directed the division to prepare these positions with all deliberate speed. "Dye Marker" was a code name for the <sup>barrier</sup> DMZ <sup>strongpoint</sup> system sponsored by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. Popularly, it was known as ~~McNamara's "fence," "line," or "wall."~~

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## FORTRESS SENTRY/KINGFISHER

The Communists were still determined to achieve a ground victory at Con Thien despite their heavy losses during BUFFALO. Casualties were not their primary concern, the taking of this bastion was. Hanoi sorely needed a victory to satisfy its continued frustration. On 3 September, the day of the South Vietnamese presidential and senatorial elections, the Communists unleashed increasing amounts of artillery and rockets across the eastern portion of the DMZ at the Cua Viet facility, Gio Linh, Dong Ha, and Con Thien. The attack on Dong Ha was especially successful as it virtually destroyed the ammunition dump and severely damaged the bulk fuel farm with its stores and dispensing equipment. On the 4th, there was a sharp clash between NVA elements and eight Marine units south of Con Thien and from that point on ground activity increased and continued throughout the month in various localities around the hill mass. Enemy artillery, rocket, and mortar fire was particularly effective and voluminous.

The 9th Marines had been conducting Operation KINGFISHER since 16 July with a varied force of three to six battalions. In the course of KINGFISHER, there was concern over the eastern flank of the Con Thien region, along the coast. The 270th NVA Regiment and local force VC units were known to be operating in the locale between the coast and Dong Ha on the northern side of the Cua Viet River. The area had been covered several times

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before during DECKHOUSE II and IV, BEACON HILL, and BEAU CHARGER. ~~The concept of this operation, however, was to be different--a throwback to World War II operations.~~

All CH-46A helicopters in WestPac were grounded (except for emergency combat missions) because of essential modifications to the rear motor mounts and landing gear assemblies.

This restriction, of course, affected SLF BRAVO's helicopter squadron, HMM 262 (Major Gregory A. Corliss). Consequently, except for observation assistance and limited assistance from in-country sources, helicopter support was not available. <sup>BLT 2/3.</sup> The landing <sup>would have</sup> was to be conducted ~~in the time honored fashion of~~ <sup>as a</sup> surface assault over the beach. The 1st Amtrac Battalion's LVTPs <sup>would</sup> ~~were to~~ augment the Navy landing craft in the operation.

The landing <sup>was initiated</sup> ~~kicked off~~ in the early morning darkness of 17 September. ~~The weather was so bad that the attack plans had to be modified;~~ <sup>5.</sup> the rough seas upset the time table of the ship-to-shore movement. <sup>that effect was to be to delay</sup> Despite the adverse weather conditions, the Marines landed, although slowly, experiencing no contact with the enemy. The element of surprise was lost because of the delay caused by the weather but the resultant reduced visibility helped compensate for this shortcoming.

During the course of the operation, there was only sporadic contact as the battalion took its initial objectives and then headed on a north/northwest axis toward the DMZ. The 1st ARVN Division screened <sup>BLT</sup> 2/3's left flank. En route, there were problems with land mines which caused damage to several of the

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amtracs. On the 23d, the tempo of activity changed as approximately 100 enemy using mortars attacked elements of E/2/3 in

the vicinity of Hill 31 in the flatlands. Employing ~~Gunships~~ <sup>with</sup> ~~in~~ strafing and rocket runs, ~~the Marines~~ <sup>helped</sup> ~~broke~~ up the enemy

~~attack.~~ <sup>72 dead were counted.</sup> There were 22 Communists strewn about the area after the enemy's withdrawal. The Marines suffered no casualties.

The following morning, just three miles east of Gio Linh near the village of An My, the Marines of F/2/3 and G/3/3, with elements of the 1st ARVN Division acting as a blocking force, killed 33 NVA in several encounters amidst periodic enemy artillery and mortar fire. In the case of An My, subsequent interrogation revealed that the NVA expected an attack from the west and southwest. With the BLT bearing down from the northeast, ~~the~~ surprise was ~~most~~ effective. To offset the enemy artillery fire from north of the DMZ some of which was out of range of organic Marine artillery, naval gunfire was used with apparent success.

At 0800 on the 25th, FORTRESS SENTRY, the 44th landing for the SLFs, terminated. The results included 89 enemy KIA, 2 POWs, 2 Marines KIA, and 106 Marines and Navy wounded and evacuated. The BLT then phased into Operation KINGFISHER to the west. This sequel was not particularly active, involving patrolling and sweeps with little contact.

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DAI DO

In the early part of 1968, <sup>to that date</sup> ~~witnessed~~ <sup>was</sup> the largest enemy endeavor of the Vietnamese War, <sup>the infamous</sup> Tet Offensive. In this offensive, Marine activity was particularly heavy at Khe Sanh and at Hue, although Da Nang and other population centers had their share of activity, too. As the fighting at Khe Sanh and Hue diminished, a new offensive developed--the Second Offensive or "mini-Tet." The two SLF <sup>BLTs</sup> ~~battalions~~ were committed to the eastern DMZ area throughout these periods. The Khe Sanh ~~seige~~ and the battle for Hue did not involve either of the SLF battalions. The Second Offensive did, however; SLF ALFA's 2/4 (Lieutenant Colonel William Weise).

The BLT and its attachments had been ashore under operational control of the 3d Marine Division since January and <sup>had</sup> experienced frequent contact with NVA units. On 18 March, for instance, the battalion killed 130 enemy during an attack on the fortified village of Vinh Quan Thuong, just three miles northeast of Dong Ha. This and other engagements of the period between Tet and the end of April featured enemy artillery and rocket support from the north. The amphibious role of SLF ALPHA and its BLT (as was the case with SLF BRAVO) was entirely dormant during this period.

Reports from intelligence sources revealed that the elements of the 320th NVA Division were shifting from the locale of Cam Lo to the area east of Con Thien. On 15 April, an aerial observer sighted a NVA regiment in approach march formation,

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six miles north of Gio Linh. Subsequently on 29 April, a South Vietnamese civilian told ARVN officers that there was a large number of NVA troops in his village, four miles north of Dong Ha. Responding immediately to the villager's lead, two 2d ARVN regiment battalions and a company of Marines ( ) headed north and hit the NVA on both sides of Route 1, killing 151. Moreover, by 30 April traffic along the Cua Viet River, <sup>Revised: Proposed Grenade</sup> always a chancey affair with RPG and mortar fire and mines, was completely halted. A NVA battalion had taken over the village of Dai Do and was busy fortifying it.

Dong Ha and all its installations were in distinct jeopardy and the ARVN and the Marines moved rapidly; 3/9 (Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. LaMontagne) moved from Cam Lo to cover the western flank; <sup>BLT</sup> 2/4 advanced westward from its position toward Dai Do; and the 1st ARVN Division headed to the northwestern approaches to Dong Ha to cut off any possibility of enemy escape in that area.

The initial disposition of <sup>BLT</sup> 2/4 forced a piecemeal introduction of its companies into the Dai Do area. Two companies of 2/4, E and G, were tied up elsewhere and were not immediately available for the impending attack. Company E was posted as security for the 3d Division on a Route 1 bridge north of Dong Ha; Company G was located in the northern extremity of the battalion operational area in Lam Xuan (west) and Nhi Ha. The CO of the 3d Marines (Colonel Milton H. Hull) consequently re-<sup>BLT</sup>inforced 2/4 with B/1/3 which was in closer proximity for the

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attack on Dai Do.

Towards the end of the morning on 30 April, two of the companies were deployed for the attack: Company F (Captain James H. Butler) was given the mission to seize Dai Do; Company H (Captain James L. Williams) was to seize the village of Dong Huan, 700 meters east of Dai Do. Company H, the first to jump off, secured Dong Huan without too much difficulty by 1400. Company F, however, met a solid wall of fire on the edge of Dai Do. ~~Cleverly~~ Camouflaged fortifications with firing ports just inches from ground level were everywhere. ~~The Marines were stymied wherever they tried to maneuver. More and more men fell, dead or wounded.~~ By late afternoon, there were only 50 able-bodied men left to fight <sup>in Company F.</sup> Recognizing the futility of trying to seize Dai Do without reinforcements, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Company F to withdraw to Dong Huan and establish a night defensive perimeter with Company H.

The third company provided to 2/4, B/1/3 (1st Lieutenant George C. Norris), moved from the south bank of the Cua Viet in amtracs to secure a toehold on the opposite bank. The river crossing accomplished, the company attacked toward Dai Do but was stopped short in a hamlet on the southeast side of Dai Do. Again, the Marines met a wall of fire from well camouflaged fighting bunkers. Casualties mounted including the company commander who was killed in the fierce fighting. In this instance the battalion commander ordered B/1/3 to hold fast for the night and prepare to attack again in the morning. Supporting

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arms including artillery and naval gunfire pounded the enemy positions in the environs of Dai Do throughout the night.

On the western approaches to Dong Ha along the Cam Lo River, another battle developed. Here, 3/9 (Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. La Montagne) crushed a NVA battalion-size ambush organized to prevent any Marine reinforcement of Dong Ha. The battalion, heavily supported by tanks, artillery, and air, destroyed 41 Communist soldiers, dispersed the remainder, and then viciously pursued them with supporting arms. This threat to the defense of Dong Ha was more easily accomplished than resolution of the Dai Do situation.

Back at the outskirts of Dai Do, preparations for the next day's attack were the primary concern--more troops were urgently needed. Company G of 2/4 (Captain Manuel S. Vargas) (\*) reported to the battalion base camp at Mai Xa Chanh approximately three miles northeast of Dai Do. This company then proceeded to the battle area in M-8 landing craft.

Supported by a platoon of two tanks, Company G and the forward battalion CP group attacked to the northwest toward Dai Do shortly before 1300 of the 1st. The other companies, F, H, and B/1/3, were prepared to support G Company's attack, or to reinforce as required. Following concentrated artillery and air preparation, G ground its way through the village. In

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(\*) Captain Vargas was awarded the Medal of Honor for his participation in the Battle of Dai Do.

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late afternoon, the enemy mounted a powerful counterattack and pushed the Marines into the northeastern corner of the village. The situation became critical and B/1/3 moved in to reinforce G but became bogged down in the face of the heavy enemy fire. Even though there were several enemy attacks during the night, the companies held to their perimeters. Whenever the enemy massed to attack, he was saturated with supporting arms and small arms fire.

Company E (Captain James E. Livingston)<sup>(\*)</sup> had arrived in the battle area about 1800 on the 1st and at dawn on the 2d, both E and G Companies attacked northward and once more ejected the enemy from Dai Do. The fighting was extremely vicious and casualties were heavy. The decision was made to have Company H pass through E to maintain the momentum of attack and also capture the village of Dinh to the northwest of Dai Do. The Communists recouped with a counterattack at 1300 and forced E and H back to the southwestern extremity of Dai Do.

After casualty evacuation, resupply, and reorganization, G and F attacked again into increasingly heavy fire. In late afternoon of the 2d, the battalion CP group was hit hard: Lieutenant Colonel Weise was severely wounded along with two radio operators and Sergeant Major John Malnar was killed. The NVA were on the verge of overrunning both companies when the order

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(\*) Captain Livingston was also awarded the Medal of Honor for his part in the battle at Dai Do.

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(\*) to withdraw was passed. Amidst concentrated enemy fires, the two companies moved back to the E and H perimeter on the southern side of the village established earlier by the battalion S-3, Major George F. Warren.

Major Charles W. Knapp, 2/4's executive officer, took command and rushed to Dai Do from Mai Xa Chanh. He brought with him 60 men, headquarters personnel and wounded who were still able to fight, to reinforce the depleted companies in Dai Do. The night was spent keeping the enemy out of the perimeter using all means available. A flareship arrived on station which proved invaluable in illuminating the battle field and preventing the enemy from massing an attack. Supporting arms came into full play during the hours of darkness.

The next day, the 3d, the former SLF battalion, 1/3 (Lieutenant Colonel Charles W. Jarman), relieved 2/4 and advanced through Dai Do meeting only light resistance. Apparently the enemy withdrew the bulk of his force during the night in face of the heavy supporting arms fire. Littered throughout the village were considerable amounts of equipment and weapons as

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(\*) Lieutenant Colonel Weise later remarked that the pullback was necessary at this point since the ARVN battalion attacking on the northwestern flank of 2/4 withdrew. This situation allowed the enemy to move in from the left and rear to out flank the forward elements of G/2/4. Weise Comments on Draft MS, Oct 69.

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well as the many dead from the see-sawing battles that had taken place there since the 30th. In clearing out Dai Do and surrounding objective areas, 1/3 accounted for 330 more NVA killed. On the 5th in the last major engagement of the Dai Do area, 1/3 killed another 151 NVA in a confrontation involving a 1,600 meter front. ~~Only 10 Marines were killed, but 90 were wounded and evacuated.~~

Aside from the heavy action in and around Dai Do, there was considerable activity just a few kilometers away to the northwest. The U.S. Army's 21st Infantry and 1st Air Cavalry troops, fresh from Khe Sanh, tackled elements of the 320th NVA Division in the village of Nhi Ha. The Communists suffered 137 killed, 45 of them through Marine close air strikes. Army losses were 14 KIA and 24 wounded and evacuated. Concurrently, ARVN units to the northeast of Dong Ha successfully mauled an NVA battalion, killing 103.

The enemy's bid for Dong Ha was forged out of desperation. Tet '68 had been a disaster and so was the Second Offensive or "mini-Tet" three months later in which the bid for Dong Ha was a vital episode. The 320th NVA Division fought doggedly to accomplish its mission despite the problem of having numerous new recruits or support-type replacements in its ranks. Before the encounter with 2/4 was over, the NVA of this command lost almost 600 dead in the battle from 30 April through 2 May. The supporting arms assistance--artillery, naval gunfire, and air--hurt them tremendously.

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The <sup>3<sup>rd</sup></sup> 2d Battalion, 4th Marines had borne the brunt of the NVA division's attack and had suffered accordingly; 80 KIA and 256 WIA and evacuated, leaving the rifle companies considerably below half strength. This battalion, divorced from its normal amphibious role with the Seventh Fleet, served as a conventional maneuver battalion and, in so doing, became involved in what proved to be one of the fiercest engagements of the Marines' long commitment in ICTZ.

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## Chapter VIII

## IN RETROSPECT

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(1) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: Taped interview with Col Alfred I. Thomas, former CO, BLT 1/3 and CO, SLF ALFA (TF 79.4), HistDiv Tape No. 3064 (S); Taped interview with Col John F. McMahon, former CO, SLF Alfa (TG 79. ), HistDiv Tape No. 4479 (S).

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Altogether, the SLFs participated in 67 combat operations in South Vietnam. Of these, 27 were purely amphibious in nature; the rest involved assignment to III MAF for operational control. A number of the amphibious target areas were clearly second priority. The kill ratios are reflected in this fact. Some operations were predicated upon weak intelligence and the results were correspondingly low. Other operations, where the SLF units were chopped ashore, involved heavy combat, including among others STARLITE, HASTINGS, UNION, the Hill Fights, BUFFALO, and Dai Do. In these confrontations, the SLFs' results mirrored the severity of the crisis to which they were committed as a reserve force or as a regular line battalion chopped ashore. Totally, the four-year record of the SLFs accounts for 679 enemy killed and 365 captured. Their losses were 130 killed and 409 wounded.

Looking at the long tortuous history of the conflict in Vietnam, it is quite apparent that it was basically a land war. To be sure, naval and amphibious applications were to be found and employed; but these applications did not change the basic character of the war. Against this backdrop, how valid was the amphibious role and mission of the Marines, established by the National Security Act of 1947 and dutifully perpetuated ever since? Was the Marine Corps in tune with the times?

Any objective analysis of this question brings to light one very significant fact: the Marines were ready, on board U.S. Navy ships in the South China Sea, when President Johnson

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ordered them to land in South Vietnam in March 1965. The Marines' role and mission were well satisfied at a time when other service forces were not ready or available for varying reasons.

It can be reasonably argued that ~~the need for~~ an amphibious landing per se was not really necessary at Da Nang. The <sup>rel. sec.</sup> airbase there was secure and an airlift could have essentially performed the same task. The factor of a totally hostile environment was lacking in this situation. On the other hand, had South Vietnam been completely hostile, the Navy-Marine team was prepared to handle the problem with a full-blown assault. Preparedness for all eventualities was apparent in the early stages of the Vietnam experience. The Marines basic mission was quite valid and fully answered the needs of the U. S. government at the time.

The changing nature of the conflict, from a purely guerrilla war to a large-scale land conflict, relegated the amphibious role of the Marines to the background. Still, contingency plans for the western Pacific called for an amphibious striking force. This responsibility did not diminish throughout the entire war. The Indonesian alert of 1965 serves as a case in point. Despite actual combat commitment in South Vietnam, the SLF had to set sail for Indonesian waters for possible evacuation of American nationals.

Maintaining this mobile ready force capability with the increasing pressures of the fighting in Vietnam was no easy

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task and at times fell short of the mark. Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, Commanding General of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, particularly strove to maintain a ready force afloat despite pressure from ComUSMACV to land the SLF and keep it in country. Because of General Krulak's intensive efforts, the SLF was kept alive as a reserve for in-country crises and as a contingency force for other commitments in the western Pacific --in fact, it was doubled in size. Obviously, during the first half of 1968 with Tet and its aftermath, the SLFs' units remained ashore because of the extremely critical need for forces in-country. As soon as the Communist offensives were exhausted, the SLFs returned to their ships and continued to conduct operations along the coast of ICTZ and to act as the Seventh Fleet Reserve for western Pacific contingencies.

Readiness was and always will be a continuing goal for the Marines and the amphibious force afloat, as developed over the years, was and still is one of the most realistic ways to achieve this end. Despite all the conflicting demands of the war in Vietnam, this responsibility somehow had to be fulfilled. It was done, albeit in an interrupted and tenuous fashion.

Aside from the issue of readiness, there was the bonus effect of the rehabilitation program for III MAF units assigned to the SLFs. Although its scope was not extensive enough to affect all III MAF units, there were a good many infantry battalions and helicopter squadrons that upgraded their combat capabilities from this training and refurbishment effort from

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June 1965 to September 1969. Considering the difficulties in effecting a similar program in-country for combat-attrited units, this was an obvious benefit for III MAF.

Another useful feature of the SLF concept, <sup>which stems directly from its amphibious nature</sup> was its mobility. The capability of supporting the entire theater of war on short notice provided flexibility to reaction responses as well as to planned offensive operations. The existence of the SLFs presented another dimension to the problems the enemy faced in prosecuting his war. Certainly, it was expensive and inefficient in terms of the mechanics of troop employment. But measured against the overall military responsibilities in the western Pacific, the rehabilitation feature, and the mobile threat to Communist forces in Vietnam, the SLF proved its value.

As the war wound down after 1969, these concerns became a matter of history. No doubt in time, similar issues will come to pass again. The salient lesson to be gained from it all is that there is no substitute for readiness, a principle to which the Marine Corps will remain dedicated. The exercise of different strategies, tactics, and techniques throughout the war have not refuted the principle of readiness nor the need for an amphibious capability as expressed in the initial landing of 1965 and the III MAF and SLF operations thereafter. The Marine Corps role and mission was and still is valid. It will remain valid as long as the Marines continue to enhance their amphibious technology and stress afloat readiness. To date, this emphasis has proved to be the best and most reliable means of

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providing incremental time advantage, when short-notice reaction has been required to support U.S. diplomacy in friendly and hostile environments.

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