



**COMBAT**

Vietnam 1967–68

# US Marine VERSUS NVA Soldier

David R. Higgins



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# Introduction

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Since the 18th century the United States Marine Corps (USMC) has served as a powerful rapid-response vanguard in every major American conflict, from Guadalcanal during World War II to Inchon in the Korean War. Tasked with participating in America's "Advisory and Combat Assistance Era" in the decade after 1954, on March 8, 1965, the "Ambassadors in Green" would once again be thrust into their primary role as a combat spearhead. Without a clear Congressional mandate – or widespread public debate and support, which could have helped clarify US goals, benchmarks, and an exit strategy – Battalion Landing Team, 3/9 Marines landed at coastal Đà Nẵng, South Vietnam, and heralded the US ground commitment in the ongoing Vietnamese conflict.

The Marines would face the battle-hardened regular forces of North Vietnam, which traced their origins from a small Armed Propaganda Team, established in December 1944. Alongside Việt Minh militias, it was initially tasked with fighting and expelling Vietnam's Japanese occupiers, and promoting the North Vietnamese Communist Party's revolutionary ideology. After Japan's defeat, efforts were made to increase the force's size, strength, and capabilities, and in 1950 its name was changed to the People's Army of Vietnam, AKA the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Eight years later, Hanoi began sending cadres south to support operations conducted by the National Liberation Front (AKA Việt Cộng or VC to the Americans and South Vietnamese), as they moved from a political to an armed struggle. As the fighting escalated, larger NVA forces in up to divisional strength would be sent south as well.

Like so many post-1945 conflicts, the long war for control of Vietnam, formerly French Indochina, had its roots in World War II. At 1945's Potsdam Conference, Vietnam was temporarily bisected administratively along the 17th Parallel. Having enjoyed considerable US support during their fight against Japanese occupation forces, in the weeks leading up to Japan's surrender Communist Việt Minh guerrillas led by Hồ Chí Minh (1890–



A North Vietnamese soldier wearing a khaki cotton uniform and an olive-drab cloth-covered sun helmet – one of the few military items North Vietnam produced during the conflict. As a symbol of Communism, the emblem comprises a gold, five-pointed star set in blood-red enamel and surrounded by two rice stalks and an industrial gear. One North Vietnamese veteran recalled: “Generally speaking, the cadres in my battalion were friendly. They always treated other men in the unit kindly and cordially. They had the troops realize their errors and corrected the errors for them. In the unit, if one man does not know something he will be helped by the others. The cadres would criticize the troops and the latter could do likewise. We understood that we had the mission to fight for the nation and the people, so the first thing we had to do was to unite, understand, and coordinate with each other. Most of the cadres in the unit were serious and friendly. Being commanders of the troops and the people, we had to act in such a way as to gain the confidence of every person. If the troops trusted the cadres they would fight zealously, and if the people loved the cadres and the troops they would provide help to us and we could record victories” (First Lieutenant Hà Tâm, 14 (NVA) Battalion). (Photo by Paul Popper/Popperfoto/Getty Images)

1969) quickly moved to consolidate power in Vietnam before the French could reclaim their lost position. When Japan officially capitulated on September 2, 1945, Hô, having distanced himself from the Soviet Union, declared a new Provisional Government from Hanoi. Although US intelligence tended at this stage to portray Hô as a neutral, America’s political leaders were unwilling officially to risk alienating its Western European French ally. As a result, French forces returned to southern Vietnam, with its predominantly Cochinese population, while Nationalist Chinese forces sought to control the Tonkin north.

Hoping to avoid fighting both entities simultaneously, in an effort to unify Vietnam, Hô attempted first to deal with his nation’s historic enemy, China. France initially expressed willingness to compromise, but French elections in 1946 ushered in a foreign-policy change that stifled the effort. On December 23, 1946, Việt Minh forces embarked on the First Indochina War (1946–54)

As is typical in war, Vietnamese civilians were frequently caught between the belligerents, with roughly 1 million (3.1 million, according to a Vietnamese estimate) killed between 1965 and 1975. In 1954, the United Nations had created a Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) along the existing administrative border; 100km long and 10km deep, this boundary straddled the Bến Hải River along its eastern end. Meanwhile the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) promoted a one-year "land reform" period in which those in the country's north (predominantly Catholic and anti-Communist) and south could relocate freely, after which a national election was to be conducted in 1956. While some 1,300,000 people moved from the country's northern zone, which represented roughly 10 percent of North Vietnam's population, Communist Việt Minh fighters that remained in the south were temporarily to forego military operations, and instead conduct a political battle to promote Hanoi's agenda of unification. As Diệm knew that his adversary would win any such vote, he simply refused to hold elections in what he professed was an unstable environment, with the result that they never materialized. Although the CIA hoped to portray the North as unstable, as evidenced by the sizeable migration numbers, the endeavor ultimately benefited Hồ, as it removed a large anti-Communist element from his midst, and overwhelmed the South's ability to accept and integrate the influx. (Sergeant N. Berkowitz (Marine Corps))



by launching a surprise attack to wrest Hanoi from French control, as part of a low-level insurgency orchestrated by Võ Nguyên Giáp (1911–2013). Concerned that he might appear soft on combating Communism, US President Harry S. Truman (in office 1945–53) presented “President Hồ” as a Soviet tool, and someone to be stopped, along with the spread of his ideology and increasingly supported South Vietnam’s zealous anti-Communist President Ngô Đình Diệm (1901–63) and his corrupt government. After conducting a lengthy campaign that steadily eroded French morale, in May 1954, Việt Minh forces crushed the besieged French Army at Điện Biên Phủ, and left the region a geographic patchwork disputed by both sides.

With a Second Indochina War – that would be known as the Vietnam War in the West, and the American War in Vietnam – brewing by the late 1950s, in 1962 American military advisors began arriving in-country to assist Diệm. Instead of an entirely covert approach to solving the Vietnam crisis, US President John F. Kennedy (in office 1961–63) looked to retain the CIA’s paramilitary services, but in coordination with overt, conventional forces to conduct a counterinsurgency. After the ascent of Lyndon B. Johnson (in office 1963–69) to the position, the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam prompted the Americans to focus predominantly on military solutions. Looking for a pretext to provide direct American involvement backed by popular support, in early August 1964 President Johnson exploited a non-existent Tonkin Gulf naval engagement in which the North Vietnamese torpedo boats had allegedly followed up on an actual skirmish two days previously. Johnson announced on national television that the United States was going to retaliate against the North Vietnam provocation and – at a time when over 70 percent of the US population trusted its government – quickly

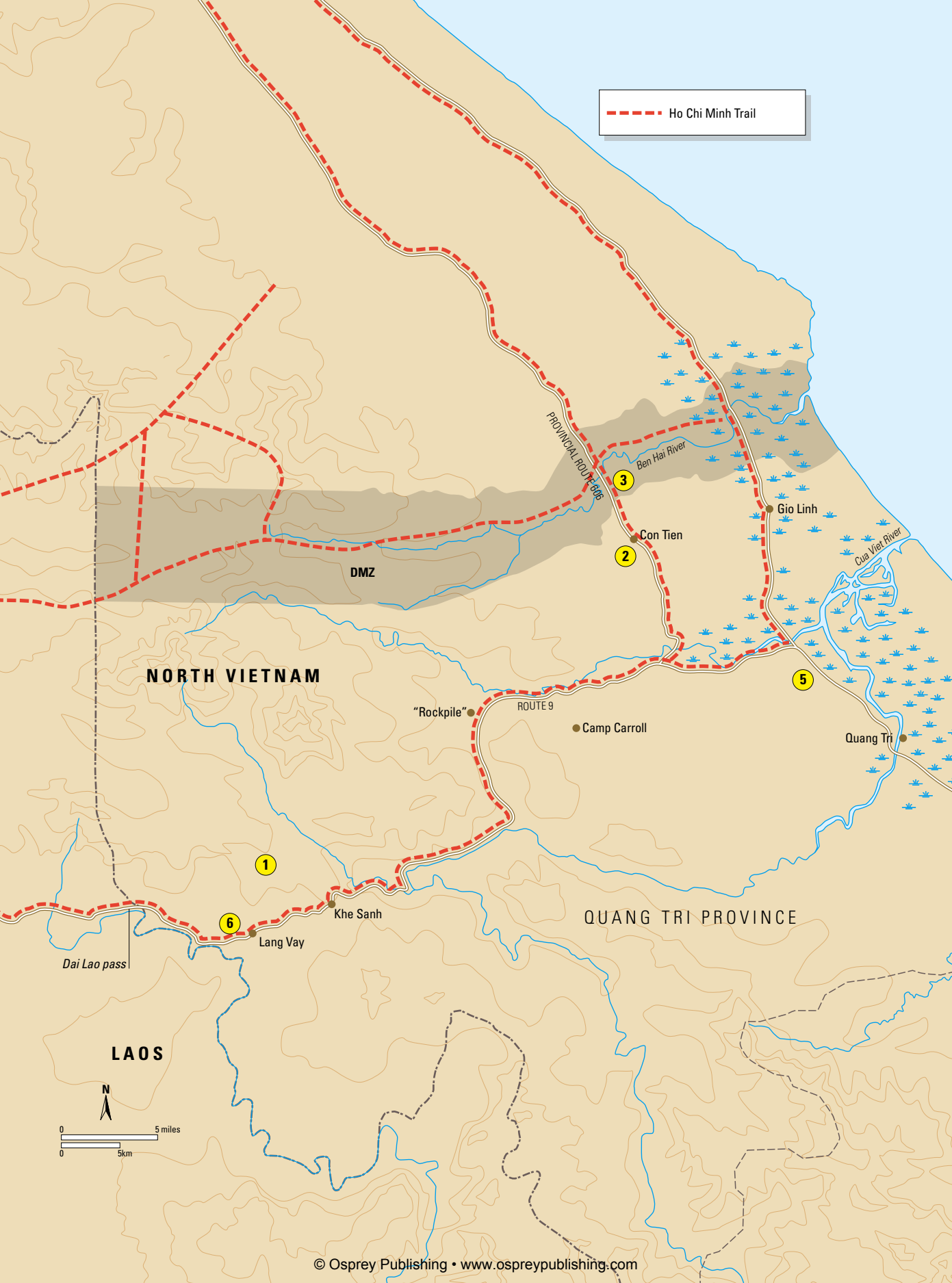


signed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, giving the Executive Branch the power to take the nation to war, without having to officially declare it as such.

As part of this transition, General William C. Westmoreland (1914–2005), appointed Commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) in June 1964, opted for large, attritional “search and destroy” operations that leveraged American assets including field artillery, armed helicopters, tactical air support and reconnaissance, and naval gunfire to cause such high casualties that the enemy would be unable to continue the struggle. With US involvement escalating sharply in 1965, Johnson emphasized a limited war could be conducted within the confines of South Vietnam’s borders, primarily to avoid drawing China and the Soviet Union into similar direct regional involvement, and to avoid creating an undue financial burden that might defund his domestic social programs. Adding to his senior commanders’ chagrin, the president refrained from activating American reserves, which would provide the necessary manpower to best conduct the conflict. For the next several months, US battlefield successes promoted a degree of optimism, but by 1967 the nation’s commitment of men, money, and material neared its zenith, and support for a largely inept, corrupt South Vietnamese government, domestic war-weariness, high casualties, rising inflation, and a political mindset that focused on not losing the conflict rather than winning it, combined to severely hamper the American commitment.

During Operation *Virginia* (April 17–May 1, 1967), the first large-scale American action near Khe Sanh, 1/1 Marines conducted a largely unsuccessful sweep north of the Special Forces Base to uncover intelligence on NVA infiltration across the DMZ, and their potential buildup in northwest Quảng Trị Province. This Marine is pictured with his 7.62mm M14 battle rifle, a weapon superseded from 1967 by the 5.56mm XM16E1 assault rifle. As such missions often had the undesired side effect of inflicting “collateral damage” on civilians, such tactics cumulatively served to disenfranchise essential popular support – something compounded by the difficulty in distinguishing combatants from non-combatants. (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)

--- Ho Chi Minh Trail



**NORTH VIETNAM**

**QUANG TRI PROVINCE**

**LAOS**

Dai Lao pass

PROVINCIAL ROUTE 506

ROUTE 9

DMZ

Ben Hai River

Cua Viet River

3

2

5

1

6

Camp Carroll

Con Tien

Gio Linh

Quang Tri

Khe Sanh

Lang Vay



## The DMZ's southern edge, 1967–68

- 1 April 24–May 11, 1967:** The “Hill Fights” near Khe Sanh. During early 1967, NVA forces begin infiltrating through the DMZ near Khe Sanh Combat Base.
- 2 July 2–14, 1967:** Operation *Buffalo*. Having carefully plotted artillery points south of the DMZ, and employing captured Marine gear to confuse their opponents, NVA forces execute a well-planned ambush of Bravo Company, 1/9 Marines.
- 3 July 16–October 31, 1967:** Operation *Kingfisher*. Having encountered minimal resistance after *Buffalo*, 2/9 Marines, with armor support, enter the DMZ as part of a reconnaissance-in-force to determine NVA strength north of Cồn Tiên.
- 4 January 30– March 3, 1968:** The battle of Huế. Part of the Tết Offensive. Although Huế had been relatively untouched by the war, in late January NVA forces quickly capture most of the city, including its historic Citadel. US Marines from the south are allocated to take it back, and over

the next several weeks steadily complete their task at the cost of high casualties.

- 5 January 31–February 6, 1968:** The battle of Quảng Trị. One of the Tết Offensive’s numerous actions across South Vietnam. Bordering as it did the DMZ, Quảng Trị Province’s geographic location made it the focus of NVA forces. Having attempted to lure American forces to the Khe Sanh sector over the last few weeks to lessen resistance around the region’s targeted capital, Quảng Trị City, NVA elements that attack on January 31 unexpectedly encounter a sizeable Marine and ARVN presence, and are soon soundly defeated.
- 6 February 6–7, 1968:** The battle of Làng Vây. In an effort to eliminate the US Special Forces Base at Làng Vây, NVA infantry with armored support surround and constrict the targeted area, which contains two-dozen US Special Forces personnel and several hundred local tribespeople. After enduring the attack throughout the night of February 6/7, and suffering heavy casualties, the defending remnants, and thousands of civilians, escape to Khe Sanh.



# The Opposing Sides

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## COMBAT DOCTRINE AND ROLE

### USMC

Having emerged from World War II with a powerful, modern conventional armed forces backed by an extensive manufacturing base and infrastructure, the United States naturally had a penchant to view subsequent military endeavors as soluble through out-producing an adversary. Although the US military had experience with conducting low-intensity combat operations in Haiti and elsewhere, its primary adversary remained the Soviet Union, and its considerable number of conventional assets. While unconventional, asymmetric assets existed, and were used by the United States to good effect in covert reconnaissance, demolition, and similar small-unit tasks, they were primarily employed to assist more established forces. With the post-1945 global transition toward smaller, potentially more numerous conflicts that were often in restricted terrain or in environments unsuited for armor and mechanized formations, however, the American military's lack of emphasis on light infantry who were minimally dependent upon a logistic tail would prove to be a severe handicap in the largely underdeveloped jungles and savannahs of an agrarian Vietnam.

As a light-infantry force, the USMC appeared to be suited to operating within a wider conventional war, as well as the looser, asymmetric tactics of guerrilla operations, and looked to provide solutions to both partisan and insurgency issues by adopting an expanding "clear and hold" approach. Major



General Wallace Greene, USMC chief of staff, originated such pacification tactics to help secure the area around important South Vietnamese coastal cities, such as Đà Nẵng. As greater numbers of Army and Marine personnel arrived in these regions, efforts were made to expand inland to deny enemy access to the local population, instead of engaging large enemy formations. In contrast with the Army's "search and destroy" approach, Marine tactics helped minimize civilian casualties and alienation, but success was dependent upon considerable time, numbers, commitment, and money.

The Marine concept of combined action evolved from Marine operations in Haiti and the Dominican Republic between 1915 and 1945, where they trained and organized non-partisan combatants. During the Vietnam fighting, two proponents of such small-war operations, Lieutenant General Victor Krulak and Major General Lewis Walt, were respectively responsible for training and readiness, and implementation, the latter as commander of III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF). By instilling an aggressive, offensive spirit in their charges, indigenous militias were soon operating alongside their American allies to clear villages, conduct intelligence gathering and anti-Communist propaganda, and secure terrain. Krulak believed pacification and protection of the South Vietnamese population – a "clear and hold" approach – was more appropriate than an attrition strategy of "search and destroy."

Having developed and embraced a workable solution, in which a Marine squad would be partnered with local Popular Forces to protect individual villages, and deny them as enemy sanctuary, Westmoreland would complain that the Combined Action Platoon concept lacked the necessary offensive spirit that was the Army's model, and subjected dispersed forces to defeat in detail. As part of a 1968 top-secret message to Washington, he even went so

A downed CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter in the Khe Sanh sector, 1968. During the Vietnam War, the USMC formations serving in South Vietnam's northern provinces possessed a considerable technological and material advantage that included close air and armored support, and aerial transport. While imparting considerable maneuverability and infantry fire support, supporting the number and diversity of such assets in a timely manner across a dispersed combat zone that included mountains, jungles, and low-lying swampy terrain would often prove difficult, thereby minimizing these combat modifiers. Having to contend with a lengthy logistical tail and Indochina's underdeveloped road network would exacerbate the limitations of land-based transportation and place increasing emphasis on air and water transport. (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)

far as to state that "... the military professionalism of the Marines falls short of the standards that should be demanded of our Armed Forces."

As American political leaders believed that a larger conventional war aimed at conquering and occupying North Vietnam risked bringing Communist China, or the Soviet Union, into an open war with the United States, instead of invading beyond the DMZ, caution dictated limiting the fight to protecting South Vietnam. As such, a host of often fluctuating rules of engagement constraints would serve to hamper the Marines' freedom of action, and frequently place them at additional risk. Being saddled to a corrupt, inept South Vietnamese government did little to endear the US forces to the population.

## NVA

The military leadership in Hanoi modeled their strategic view after that of Mao Zedong, in which political and military efforts were integrated into a single struggle. From this, the NVA were presented as a continuation of centuries of Vietnamese resistance to foreign occupation, with emphasis on patriotism, the superiority of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, and the cause of unifying the country. In concert with military actions and objectives, the political battlefield involved total mobilization of effort to manipulate and provide a fighting force; subversion, and other means to make the enemy

This photograph dated 1968 shows an NVA patrol on the move in the forest south of the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. Unlike the largely insurgent operations in which their VC comrades fought, NVA soldiers were conventionally organized and equipped; although other Communist countries provided Hanoi with considerable logistical, military, and political support, it would never be enough to challenge the United States in a stand-up fight. To best negate their adversary's considerable hardware advantage, the NVA adopted protracted attritional and ambush tactics that inflicted casualties and damage at times and locations mainly of their choosing, before dispersing. Their training emphasized conventional operations; with little direction given to jungle fighting, which when encountered was learned "on the job," and their organization promoted overlap, redundancy, and control throughout the ranks. While training, equipment, and combat preparedness were acceptable, like many Communist forces, they generally had an inflexible approach to a changing tactical situation, which resulted in unnecessarily high casualties. (AFP/AFP/Getty Images)



doubt and weaken their morale; and to do the same to its population. The adopted Revolutionary Chinese approach to warfare comprised three phases, in which an initial guerrilla movement first won popular support, in part by attacking the established authority before advancing to striking government forces and facilities. A final phase involved a conventional effort to seize terrain, and “liberate” the country, in concert with a South Vietnamese civilian uprising.

By 1967 the NVA fielded two conventional forces: a homeland defense, with armor, artillery, air support, a small navy, and paramilitary security; and a larger “Army of Liberation,” with limited supporting artillery alternatives, such as mortars, rockets, and recoilless rifles, which starting in 1956 began infiltrating into South Vietnam to conduct military operations, and support VC activities, and its armed insurgents, the People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF). The NVA also deposited cadres to raise and train replacement units, and although seemingly two distinct forces, after 1958 both the NVA and VC were centrally controlled from Hanoi. To properly maintain such a campaign, starting in 1959, NVA transportation units Group 559 (men and materiel infiltration), Group 759 (water transportation), and Group 959 (Pathet Lao – Laotian Communists – support) were created, which used a series of mountain and jungle paths, collectively termed the Hồ Chí Minh Trail.

Except for offensive operations in 1965 and 1968, NVA forces would tend to remain on the operational defensive. When conducting attacks, however, they focused on fixed installations, ambushes, and indirect fire against targets of opportunity. Much as had proven successful against the French, large conventional battles would be avoided, in favor of numerous hit-and-run actions that eroded enemy morale and resolve over the long-term, and helped preserve the NVA forces’ strength and cohesion. Both offensive and defensive actions adhered to a “one slow, four quick” tactic, with the first part indicating a low-key logistical buildup ahead of the fighting forces to maintain the operation, which for larger operations could take several months, and numerous rehearsals. Units involved conducted their own planning, preparation, and execution, with emphasis placed with political goals more than military, while more senior headquarters provided assistance as the final arbiter.

## RECRUITMENT, TRAINING, AND LOGISTICS

### USMC

The United States reintroduced the draft in 1964; those selected were given a choice of branches in which to serve, and although the USMC prided itself on being an all-volunteer force, the rapid military buildup necessitated accepting draftees to maintain numbers. Volunteers could sign up for two, three, or four years, and were sent to boot camp at either the Marine Corps Recruit Depot at Parris Island, South Carolina or Camp Pendleton, California. After 1965, the increased need for Marines forced a training reduction from 12 to eight weeks, which placed considerable pressure on drill instructors to maintain high standards. The average recruit was 17 years old, and had a 10th-grade education. Arriving at night to boot camp, recruits had their heads



En route to Vietnam, Marines stayed at Camp Pendleton for four weeks of intense instruction in new enemy tactics, jungle survival skills, and writing wills, and other personal documents, as well as conducting wargames. In total the entire process to produce a Marine took nearly six months. In an effort to provide a more realistic combat-training experience, friendly personnel were often allocated to imitate enemy tactics and likely combat scenarios. The photograph caption indicates that this “NLF” soldier is participating in such an exercise with 1st Marine Division elements in October 1967. He carries an AKM assault rifle, and wears what looks like an American-made M1956 belt, and homemade (mismatched) “Hò Chí Minh Freedom Sandals.” (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)

shaved, before receiving toiletries, clothing, and other supplies. Having received inoculations and a functional M14 rifle, for the remainder of their training any undesirable behavior was quickly corrected with negative reinforcement that included verbal and sometimes physical abuse, such as punching in the solar plexus or throat, or more creative inducements. The men were expected to run everywhere, as part of a proven process that broke down individuality to forge unit cohesion, discipline, and a killer instinct, as well as dehumanize their enemy, and instill the Marine ethos.

Training consisted of an initial phase devoted to marching and drilling, wearing the uniform, attending classes, First Aid training, military courtesy and traditions, and similar introductory tasks, including taking the Initial Strength Test. As every Marine was expected to be a marksman, the second phase comprised two weeks on the Rifle Range, which comprised “snapping in,” in which firearm positioning and safety were perfected. Actual shooting followed, where the recruit needed to pass with a minimum score of 190, as well as serving mess and maintenance

duties, close-order drill, etc. A third, and final, phase focused on performing guard duty, classes, drill evaluation, and a Physical Fitness Test. After boot camp, the newly christened Marines advanced to Infantry Training Regiment (ITR) at Camp Geiger, North Carolina, where they gained proficiency with a considerable range of Marine Corps weapons. Those with an Infantry Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) received six weeks of training at ITR, while those with a non-infantry MOS received four weeks. Afterward, Marines went to train in their weapons specialty as a rifleman, mortar man, machine-gunner, etc. Recruits who graduated from Officer Candidate School were commissioned as second lieutenants, after which they attended Basic School, which reversed the OCS objectives, and the Corps now built the men up and instilled their motivation. Prior to that graduation the men were given an opportunity to request an MOS, and although not guaranteed, they expressed preferences, such as infantry, artillery, and armor.

Between the Marines’ arrival in-country and early 1967, their logistics worked to commensurately accommodate the rapid increase in personnel. There were supply shortages of varying durations, especially with ammunition in late 1966 following unexpectedly high consumption rates. Available supply rates and substitutes helped mitigate such issues. As was the case in previous conflicts, America’s physical isolation and natural resources promoted considerable industrial capabilities that translated into a major factor in producing and maintaining its various military assets. A “pull” approach to logistics meant supply usage was determined in Vietnam, with assistance from rudimentary computers housed in climate-controlled facilities, after which requirements were submitted to the United States and Okinawa. For the USMC, the primary supply tail originated in Albany,

Georgia, and Barstow, California, which would ship material across the Pacific to Hawaii and then Okinawa. From there, supplies went to I Corps, the Marines' primary operational command, before being doled out to the various combat zones and storage areas. A rapid-response supply "surge tank" was also retained on Okinawa.

## NVA

NVA recruitment was primarily conducted per the North Vietnamese draft, which was mandatory for all males between 16 and 45 years of age, although many volunteered, or were coerced or abducted into service. Registration was conducted during the first five days in January of the draftee's eligibility year. A medical exam determined, among other things, a draftee's physical-fitness level; once passed, draftees were released to await induction, generally occurring the following December. Those who had physical disabilities, were a sole remaining son, or proved they were their family's principal support means – as well as party officials, students, and specialist technicians – could be deferred. The remainder reported to indoctrination centers at places like Xuân Mai near Hanoi, where they took an oath of allegiance for what was to be service for the conflict's duration, without homeland rotations.

Basic training could be conducted at recruit depots, or in the field under experienced cadres, and commonly lasted for 90 days, but could be as few as 30. It included instruction in conventional military tactics, such as squad assault, platoon air defense, marching, and digging foxholes, as well as using grenades, rifles, machine guns, and bayonets. Special emphasis was placed on physical conditioning, but little instruction was provided in jungle warfare or asymmetrical actions. An intense, two-week "study period" of political lectures and films drilled home the justness in liberating South Vietnam, and promoted political and battlefield successes from which to emulate and motivate. Those slated for infiltration duties received at least one additional month of instruction, including heavy weapons, signals, medical, and



North Vietnamese forces prepare for firing during a military exercise in Bạch Đằng, near Hanoi, on July 19, 1966. Roughly one-third of NVA soldiers were 17–24 years of age, with another one-third aged 24–29, and the remainder, 30–40. Unlike VC personnel, who averaged fewer than three years of education, their northern comrades commonly had at least nine years of schooling – high by Asian standards of the era. Nearly half had prior compulsory training and indoctrination in various militias, such as the Hồ Chí Minh Communist Youth Union, and construction units, although most were not determined Communists, but had learned to live within the system. Considering North Vietnam was predominantly rural and agrarian, some 80 percent of NVA soldiers came from farming backgrounds, with around 40 percent being what were considered poor. Although the Communist Party officially touted a classless society, it was not reflected in reality, as all were conscious of each other's social standing, with those on the low end having little chance of being promoted in rank. As a result of the great migration from the north in 1954/55, slightly less than 10 percent of NVA soldiers had a close relative living in the south. During 1967, only 15 percent of NVA personnel were full Communist Party members, with slightly fewer being probationary. (STF/AFP/Getty Images)



This 22-year-old Marine is of African-American descent, and had at least some college before volunteering for service. Subsisting on C-rations while in the field, he would have received hot meals only when at base. Seeing considerably more combat days than those who fought in World War II, US combatants in Vietnam commonly suffered battlefield stress and fatigue; if wounded, small-arms fire followed by an explosive device were the most likely causes.

## Operation Kingfisher, July 28–29, 1967



### Weapons, dress, and equipment

As a modern replacement for several weapons used during World War II and Korea, the M60 machine gun (1) was heavily influenced by the German MG 42; it fired 7.62×51mm NATO rounds at around 600 rounds per minute from 100-round belts (2). A Pistol, Caliber .45 Automatic, M1911A1, shown here in its M1916 leather holster (3), provides personal protection.

Developed in 1941, this man's M1 manganese steel helmet (4) has a reversible brown–green Mitchell leaf-pattern camouflage cover. Although meant to be used for fastening fresh foliage, the rubber band commonly held a variety of small items, such as eating utensils, ammunition, or in this case a Lubricant Small Arms bottle and a toothbrush. The M1955 nylon "Marine Vest" (5) comprised 23 133×133×32mm fiberglass-based Doron inserts that provided

protection against shrapnel, but not bullets, while its lower eyelets were sometimes used to hold items, as opposed to a harness. This man wears olive-green army shade 107 cotton jungle trousers (6) with bulging pockets that hold items such as a Fulton MX-991/U flashlight, M18 colored smoke grenades, or spare .45-cal. magazines (7), and combat boots (8).

Along with a Marine jungle first-aid kit (9), he wears an M1956 1-quart (.95-liter) olive drab polyethylene plastic canteen (10), with a felt-lined cotton duck cover that also helped keep the water cool. Suspended on a cotton bandoleer, a waxed cardboard box of 100 linked rounds (11) rests against an M17 field protective gas-mask container (12). All told, his combat load comes to about 25kg.

As motorized vehicles were unsuited for traveling much of the Hồ Chí Minh Trail's rugged, isolated connecting paths, bicycles proved an effective way to transport supplies into South Vietnam. Note the modified handlebar to assist steering, and the captured crate labeled "HANDLE WITH CARE – GLASS." Food was considered adequate, and included a usually consistent kilogram of rice per day, although civilians didn't always have enough to sell when operating away from regular supply. What regular supplies that were available were husbanded and dispersed in hidden caches around likely operational areas. Most NVA were wounded at least once during their service, and were frequently reintegrated into combat before they were healthy. Considering the limited availability of supplies and expertise, medical treatment was generally good, although medics often tried to make up for inadequate medical supplies by providing increased personal care. Malaria accounted for some 70 percent of non-battlefield casualties, although Bari-Bari, jungle rot, dysentery, and asthma remained a problem as well. NVA illness was prevalent, with two-thirds seriously sick at some point during their service time. (Public domain)



battles in the South, I felt that I was relatively-well trained” (PFC Nguyễn Ngọc Dung, 1/16 (NVA) Regiment). Conversely, another recalled: “I myself had not received proper training. I was specialized in land survey and intelligence. I had studied the techniques of artillery firing but I had not practiced it. Regarding H-12 rockets [Chinese Type 63], which were issued to my unit, I was given training for only three days” (Master Sergeant Phạm Bang Cu, C7 Artillery Company, 3 Subregion).

On completing training, NVA soldiers were granted a three-day pass to spend with family before appearing for duty. Some were then allocated to anti-aircraft defense units around Hanoi or Haiphong, and similar duties in the north. Others were rail-transported south to near the border, from where they infiltrated into South Vietnam or Laos on foot. Most were provided with ten days of dried food, and used streams for bathing, as they moved from station to station along the Hồ Chí Minh Trail where they could rest, and occasionally even watch a politically approved movie. Each station had been established about a day's walk from the others, and as ground attack and B-52 bomber strikes were a great concern, groups tended to be fewer than 400 soldiers to present a minimal target. NVA soldiers new to operating in the south often spent several weeks or months acclimating to the hot, humid climate. Before integrating with an experienced front-line formation, recent trainees served with a guerrilla unit.

## LEADERSHIP AND MORALE

### USMC

The USMC demanded professional, competent commanders, who were well-versed in military history and its lessons, self-reliant, and bold. Open, frank assessments and feedback were encouraged, and the Marines trusted their

leadership, whether deserved or not, and were willing to carry out an order, or die trying. Small-unit leaders, especially junior officers, were exposed to some of the best military courses offered, and a Marine mindset that demanded leading by example and sharing equally in hardships and danger. As part of its force planning to create, maintain, and apply military assets, and help define clear objectives, the Marines' approach was concept-based to

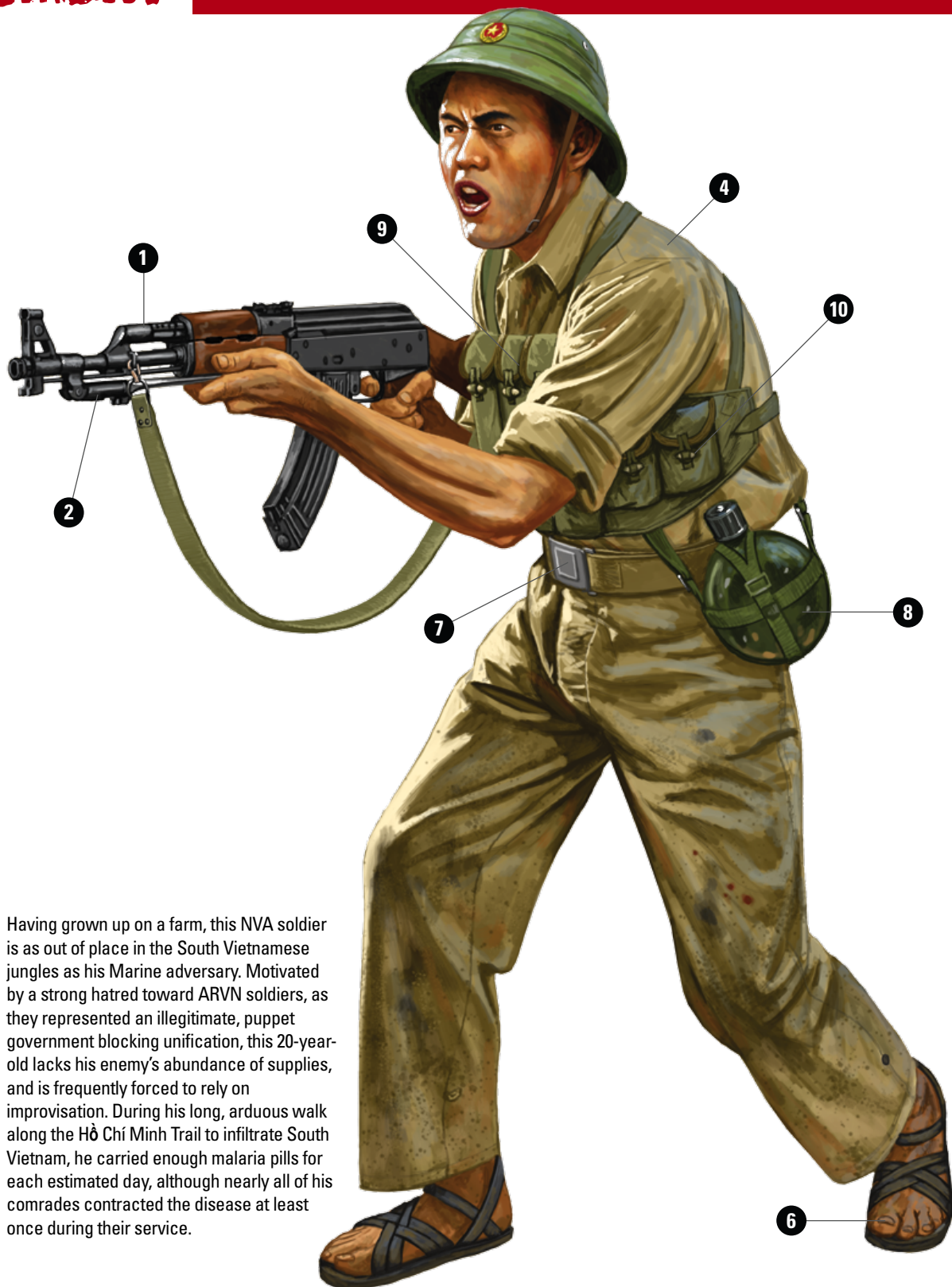


describe mission types and how best to accomplish them. During operations, forces were formed into Marine Air-Ground Task Forces (MAGTF), which as task-oriented battlegroups comprised a mix of ground, air, logistics, and command assets. In practice, however, combat units often lacked essential cohesion, due to Johnson's reluctance to call up reserves, and a corresponding rotation policy that constantly removed experienced personnel from the mix. Johnson wanted to refrain from putting the United States on a full war footing, due to political and financial reasons, and thus withheld allocating reserves. Newly arrived personnel were viewed as less important than those who had spent time "in-country," which translated into a lack of on-the-job training and higher casualties among the former. Units were classified on a readiness scale from C-1 (totally prepared) to C-5 (critically unprepared). With most enlisted personnel in their late teens or early 20s, captains and lieutenants were often viewed as father figures and big brothers, respectively.

Unlike the tactical telephone-based communications used since World War II, US forces in Vietnam benefited from the improved quality and increased frequency ranges of portable FM radios; these provided greater flexibility to coordinate inter-unit operations, and maintain contact with upper echelons. AN/PRC-25 backpack field radios, with an 8km range, enabled small-unit commanders to call upon artillery, air strikes, medevac, resupply, and other support. A Marine rifle company of some 200 men lacked communication personnel, motor transport, and artillery observers, and such units were attached as needed by the tactical situation. In defensive positions, telephone lines were laid to provide command and control with local, relatively static combat assets.

Many recruits viewed stopping Communism in Southeast Asia as part of a larger global effort to prevent its spreading "domino effect," lest Burma, Thailand, and other nations in the region similarly succumb; if they fell India, Australia, and other US Pacific allies would subsequently be threatened. Some men joined due to what was seen as a family military tradition, while others simply looked to leave their small towns for something new and adventurous. As the conflict continued, declining morale and discipline resulted in increased instances of intentionally killing one's superior officer, although cases in the Marines were considerably less common than in Army ranks.

A USMC Cessna L-19/O-1 Bird Dog provides observation during a low-level pass over Hué during action in the Imperial City on February 23, 1968. Such aircraft provided a variety of tasks, including medevac, artillery observation, and bomb damage assessment. With its relatively slow speed and lengthy loiter times, the Bird Dog acted as a Forward Air Controller assisted fast-moving jet aircraft with target acquisition by directing mortar or artillery-directed white-phosphorus rounds as markers. Having transitioned from providing tactical support for large, Cold War conventional operations to those involving small units, these aircraft provided valuable air-to-ground liaison intelligence, such as local enemy activity, or direction. According to Marine doctrine each rifle battalion was allocated an Air Liaison Officer to coordinate with the unit's Fire Support Coordination Center, and two to work with the companies in the field. (Lance Corporal D.M. Messenger (Marine Corps))



Having grown up on a farm, this NVA soldier is as out of place in the South Vietnamese jungles as his Marine adversary. Motivated by a strong hatred toward ARVN soldiers, as they represented an illegitimate, puppet government blocking unification, this 20-year-old lacks his enemy's abundance of supplies, and is frequently forced to rely on improvisation. During his long, arduous walk along the Hồ Chí Minh Trail to infiltrate South Vietnam, he carried enough malaria pills for each estimated day, although nearly all of his comrades contracted the disease at least once during their service.

## Operation *Kingfisher*, July 28–29, 1967



### Weapons, dress, and equipment

Considering other Communist nations provided much of North Vietnam's military accouterments, this NVA soldier carries a gas-operated, Chinese-manufactured Type 56 assault rifle (1), which was based on the Soviet AK-47. It was capable of firing 650 7.62×39mm rounds per minute; a pivoting bayonet (2) was attached under the barrel.

His phenolic (synthetic resin-impregnated cardboard) sun helmet (3) is covered with reed-green cloth. Having originated as tan khaki, NVA tunics (4) and trousers (5) started transitioning to olive drab green in 1966, with rank insignia absent as per regulations. With issued shoes or boots having worn out by the time NVA soldiers

arrived in the south, many subsequently relied on locally made "Hò Chí Minh Freedom Sandals" (6) that were made from used tires and inner tube straps.

A canvas belt (7) is worn with an aluminum buckle. As with American helmet liners, many NVA soldiers decorated their Chinese-manufactured canteens; this example (8) has a reed-green split-yoke harness and brown phenolic cap. A canvas "Chicom" chest rig (9) held three 30-round magazines, and a pair of holders (10) on either side for grenades or boxed cartridges used bamboo pieces to hold the flaps closed. Altogether, the combat load here is in the region of 10kg.

## NVA

The Communist command structure was intentionally complex in order to provide redundancies to accommodate for casualties. Operating at the front alongside his men, a leader was expected to emphasize personal contact, demonstrate expertise, and project a nearly puritanical professional ethics code; this was considered secondary to martial talent. Most leaders projected a demanding persona, played favorites, and criticized the sick or wounded for implied malingering, which together with a considerable lack of individual freedom and harsh discipline could serve to degrade morale. Leaders had few options in offering rewards – money and leave were virtually nonexistent – and instead used awards, commendations, and bounties. Physical punishments and incarceration were seldom used, except in extreme cases where a soldier might be assigned to a “reeducation” camp for two to six months. Generally, when a soldier was accused of laziness or “freedomist” thoughts, in which they acted for their own convenience, group-sanctioned criticism tended to shame the offender to adjust his attitude. The NVA leader’s legitimate power rested mainly on Vietnamese cultural values, such as fatalism, nationalism, and respect for elders, and the fact that the government that appointed him was respected for its effectiveness.

In contrast to the military commander’s role, the unit’s political leader was tasked with maintaining morale, instilling Communist-inspired enthusiasm and aggressive, fearless behavior; he also monitored the men for signs of demoralization or flagging spirits. Approachable, amicable, and friendly, the political leader worked to motivate the men, and made every effort to discuss battlefield or political successes only. Attempts at Communist indoctrination focused on teaching that the Americans were invading the South to oppress and exploit the Vietnamese people, as previous invaders had done.

Service and indoctrination within the Communist system meant that the typical NVA soldier was older and more seasoned than his US and ARVN opponents. He tended to draw pride from military success, encouraged by what he saw as the unalterable support and sympathy of the people, and rely heavily on what he insisted was the righteousness of the cause. As South Vietnam was considered an administrative construct that artificially divided a nation he and his relatives had long fought to unify while expelling foreign occupation, most were willing to sacrifice considerably to achieve these ends, and defend their homeland. Although pay and rations were often meager,

NVA soldiers maintained excellent morale, in large measure due to continuous indoctrination, and unit cohesion that was reinforced by having all social and military activities centered on it. NVA soldiers and officers were expected to be completely committed to the Revolution, and to sacrifice everything, including “dying gloriously” to see it succeed. Most were distressed by the

In what looks to be training or a staged “patrol” in 1966, these NVA soldiers carry a Chinese Type 56 (or Soviet AK-47) assault rifle, and a Chinese Type 56 (or Soviet RPD) light machine gun. The NVA continually shifted its organizational goals to meet a tactical situation, and “emulation” campaigns were to keep the soldier informed of the group’s goals that provided a basis for measuring their contribution. The NVA launched a “Troop Training and Combat Competition – An Emulation Plan,” designed to intensify its combat effectiveness against the United States, in which it illustrated that a company that destroyed one American platoon, or two “puppet” ARVN platoons to receive a “good” rating. Annihilating two US platoons or an ARVN company warranted a “fair” designation. Individuals could also receive a special status for actions, including “Assault Hero” or “Valiant American Killer.” (Photo by Rolls Press/Popperfoto/Getty Images)



lengthy separation from family and once operating south of the DMZ, personal mail ceased. Individual soldiers were motivated, in large part, due to the threat of their families back home having rations reduced or eliminated, or being publicly ostracized, due to some failure in their military conduct. Roughly 85 times more VC personnel defected than NVA soldiers between 1963 and late 1969, with the latter tending to be small-unit leaders more than the rank and file. This was a difficult undertaking, considering the numerous check- and control-points to reach the other side, where he had been told to expect torture and death. Some 60 percent of NVA soldiers expressed a belief in their cause and hatred for the Americans as their primary motivation for fighting. Self sacrifice was encouraged to demonstrate loyalty to the cause, and units were able to bounce back from battlefield setbacks or casualties due to a rather ambivalent attitude toward an action's outcome.



To provide temporary shelter from fire and the elements, North Vietnamese combatants dug individual fighting holes such as this bunker on Hill 881S, photographed in 1966. They were lined with local foliage and material, and covered with a blast layer consisting of about 30cm of logs, dirt, and a camouflage cloth. The NVA's primary small unit was the three-man cell, in which each man felt as a brother to the other two, with the men providing support for on another. If an individual lacked the expected motivation and commitment, the issue was taken to his squad leader. Barring resolution, the case went to the political officer, which if still unresolved, would see the soldier being removed so as to not "infect" his comrades. In an effort to reflect and improve upon actions, "criticism and self-criticism" sessions were held. After action, units could get up to 10–15 days in a quiet zone to rest, although shorter periods were more common, before being returned to combat or labor duties. (Marine Corps)

## WEAPONS AND TACTICS

### USMC

Considering the rugged terrain throughout most of Vietnam, and frequently humid, rainy, and muddy environment, light, reliable small arms that possessed striking power to penetrate foliage, and were easily maintained in the field, were paramount. In the weeks before the Hill Fights battle described in this book, the Marines at Khe Sanh had been issued the XM16E1 rifle, which used a 5.56mm round, and was intended to be a more accurate, select-fire replacement for the heavier 7.62mm M14, which shared ammunition with the squad's M60 machine gun. The XM16E1's smaller size also made it more user-friendly with physically smaller ARVN personnel, but a "failure to extract" propensity did little to win initial approval, and many made efforts to continue using its predecessor. With Colt having touted their new weapon as requiring minimal maintenance, cleaning kits were not considered a priority, which without necessary maintenance, or a chrome lining to stand up better to rapid firing, promoted chamber pitting that accumulated dust and propellant residue. This constricted the chamber, increased internal pressure and cyclic rates, and promoted jamming. The issuance of ball powder accentuated the problem, as while suitable for the M14 and M60, it produced too much residue for the XM16E1's tight tolerances. One of the two allocated ammunition types had such a thin rim that the extractor could pull them off and leave the spent round in the chamber. To remove rounds, many Marines resorted to using substitute implements such as bayonets, which were unsuited for the task, especially during combat – a problem perhaps best exemplified in July 1967 during Operation *Buffalo*, when NVA forces (apparently aware of the defective weapons) overran and wiped out two platoons from Bravo Company, 1/9 Marines.

Personnel of Alpha Company, 1st Engineer Battalion armed with M16A1 rifles engage NVA snipers across the Perfume River during the fighting in Hué on February 22, 1968. Unlike the AK-47, the M16A1 was less well-suited to left-handed operators due to the location of controls and cartridge ejection. As 2/5 Marines' after-action report commented, "Small unit leadership, professional attitude and a competitive spirit to defeat a determined enemy played a major part in the month's successful activities." (Corporal M.J. Smedley (Marine Corps))



Before that battle [Hill 881S], we were issued M-16's a month or month and a half before the battle. We only practiced with a couple hundred rounds. There never was prolonged rapid fire for training and we just shoot some small dat, dat, dat, maybe 5 rounds at a time like in combat. So they were not combat tested until April 30th, the day of the battle. Only every third person had a cleaning rod for their rifles and you had to ram the cleaning rod down the barrel to get the shell out that was jammed up in the chamber. And we would be right up on top of the NVA and we didn't have a prayer. (PFC Kenneth Flowers, Kilo Company, 3/9 Marines)

A Marine sergeant from Alpha Company, 1/1 Marines fires an M3A1 "Grease Gun" fitted with an M9 flash hider at VC positions in Hué on February 20, 1968. Note the weapon's open safety port, which if closed prevented firing. In addition to newer M16 assault rifles and M60 machine guns, the Marines were issued with older World War II and Korea-era small arms that remained in their inventory. Although over 1kg heavier than the M16, the semiautomatic M1 Garand rifle, the M14's precursor, was available in limited numbers. Considering the often confined battle space, shotguns were commonly used, including the Winchester Model 1912, Remington Model 870, and especially the Ithaca Gun Company's Model 37 – the same company that produced the "Grease Gun" and M1911 pistol. (Corporal Sundley (Marine Corps))

Although its bolt and operating rod was susceptible to breaking, and it was burdensome to carry, the M60 machine gun proved to be a valued, mechanically simple weapon. With most small-unit engagement ranges under 100m (200m for snipers), both the M16 and the M60 provided sufficient volume and impact mass to enable fire and movement. While lacking the penetrative power of its .50-caliber cousin, the M60 could be used from a variety of positions, with several firing options, including sustained (six- to nine-round bursts, with four to five seconds in between, requiring a barrel change every ten minutes); rapid (10 to 13 rounds, with two to three seconds'



break, necessitating barrel changes after two minutes); and a continuous burst, with a barrel change every minute. To conserve ammunition and minimize impact dust and debris around the target, short bursts of up to five rounds at a time proved best.

In 1944, the US Marine Corps reconfigured its 12-man squads from what had been in practice a trained, but loosely organized armed group into a more effective configuration of three fire teams. By employing a triangular structure for what was now the Corps' smallest independent tactical and movement element, the squad leader was better able to control and supervise three subordinate leaders, instead of nearly a dozen Marines. Although the change meant incurring casualties would significantly reduce a fire team's effectiveness, reaction times improved, as the change produced defined maneuver elements centered around the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR). With the M14, and later M16, used during the Vietnam War, the fire team no longer comprised an automatic weapon core, as every rifle now possessed the capability.

Initial doctrinal reaction was simply to assign one Marine to keep his weapon on automatic, while his other three teammates set theirs to semiautomatic. While this maintained the fire team's integrity, and was intended to conserve ammunition, it was an awkward solution that the Marines tried to make work. With the NVA employing weapons of increasing caliber starting in early 1967, Marine tactics needed to change the better to address fighting at a numerical disadvantage, and avoid suffering high casualties. As a byproduct of the rotating personnel system, many new junior officers lacked the necessary field skills or experience to instill confidence in their subordinates. Often, enlisted personnel or NCOs who had risen through the ranks to commissioned officer status – and had months of hard-won experience – proved a considerable asset, as these “Mustangs” naturally garnered considerable loyalty from the squad, as they could be relied upon to ensure the squad's best chance of survival.

In addition to a stand-up fight, ambushes presented an excellent opportunity to inflict disproportionate casualties on an unsuspecting or unprepared enemy. As part of Marine Standard Operating Procedure, day patrols were intended to provide intelligence on where best to establish an ambush site, using maps or terrain features. Such positions were to be well concealed, and parallel to the enemy's expected route, in a right-angle configuration to minimize friendly fire. M60s, if available, were to be placed along one line of resistance, with tripwire-triggered “Claymore” directional mines placed on potential approach routes. Grenades were to be readily available by placing three or four within easy reach, and were in part used early in a firefight to mask muzzle flashes. During an ambush, there was to be no smoking, talking, eating, or any unnecessary action. Although only around 10 percent of such efforts resulted in a firefight, discipline and preparation were paramount, as once engaged such actions tended to be of short duration, very violent, and provided little time to rectify mistakes.



During the Hué fighting on March 4, 1968, a Marine fires an M79 grenade launcher at a suspected sniper position during an advance toward the Citadel. Nicknamed “The Thumpgun,” the 2.95kg, single-shot weapon fired 40mm high-explosive, air-burst, tear gas, and smoke rounds out to a maximum of 400m (effective ranges were 150m for point targets and 350m for area targets). Note the 277g round affixed to his helmet. (Lance Corporal N.J. Smith (Marine Corps))

## NVA

As a largely agrarian nation, North Vietnam lacked sufficient industry and infrastructure to produce its own arms, equipment, and material to prosecute the war effectively, and relied on considerable importing from friendly Communist nations. The Soviet Union provided much of what was required, while Communist China supplied the majority of small arms and ammunition. One of the most prevalent NVA assault rifles, the Type 56, was a direct Chinese copy of the more widely known AK-47, and later its modernized AKM variant, both of which the North Vietnamese also employed. As these weapons incorporated loose mechanical tolerances, they could reliably operate in a variety of harsh conditions, and were well suited to their NVA users, being simple to fire and maintain, and could be produced in large numbers. Considering North Vietnam's colonial history, and a logistical trail that included Communist Eastern Europe, the NVA also used large numbers of captured and aging German and French automatic and semiautomatic rifles. An equally varied arsenal of 7.62mm Mosin-Nagant, 7.92mm Mauser Kar 98k, and other bolt-action rifles were available, as were multinational World War II-vintage and early Cold War submachine guns and machine guns. With such a range of small arms and other weapon systems in the field, providing an adequate supply of ammunition and spare parts to the combat zone was understandably challenging.

In combat, NVA and VC forces fought a typical guerrilla war in that they avoided holding terrain, unless it represented a key base, or other significant feature, and when confronted they typically had a defined exit strategy from which they relocated to continue the fight. Without defined main lines of resistance, few safe areas existed for the combatants and civilians, and the specter of booby traps and landmines remained prevalent. As large gatherings of combatants risked detection and presented an unnecessarily concentrated

target, small groups predominated, living in the wilderness and conducting hit-and-run and other actions when operating south of the DMZ. The NVA preferred operating at night to best mask their movements, and favored using ambushes, as the combat modifier leveraged the effectiveness of a numerically inferior, or under-gunned, force. Stressing an active defense, the NVA commonly fought tenaciously from bunkers, or other built-up positions, in concert with local counterattacks to keep the enemy off balance. Offensively, the NVA frequently attacked a defended position, with the intention of conducting a sudden, surprise strike against the enemy's anticipated relief force. By operating physically close to their American adversary, such "hugging" tactics worked to dissuade close air and artillery support for fear of causing friendly casualties. The NVA also routinely employed snipers, often concealed in trees, to cause enemy casualties and confusion, and degrade American morale. North Vietnamese propaganda was also used effectively to motivate its personnel, and undermine enemy resolve.

A minimally equipped VC fighter with a Soviet-made 7.62mm semiautomatic SKS carbine. Note the folded bayonet. Although NVA and VC soldiers were essentially part of the same command structure, their respective roles meant the former usually used standardized equipment. Both tended to use similar Soviet- and Chinese-supplied weapons, but with the peasant-dressed VC operating within the local population, and away from established logistics, they frequently used improvised weapons made from US landmines and grenades, captured munitions, and unexploded ordnance. (NARA)





In spring 1972, North Vietnamese forces launched the “Easter Offensive,” one part of an effort to defeat ARVN forces, and overrun as much of the South as possible to provide leverage for forthcoming peace talks. As part of the attack against the Central Highlands, soldiers from 2 (NVA) Division (shown here on April 28, 1972) are mopping up around Tân Cảnh and Đắk Tô, having secured a bunker. Minimally equipped, they wear soft “boonie” hats and carry Chinese Type 56 (or Soviet AK-47) assault rifles, a Chinese Type 56 (or Soviet RPD) LMG, and a B-40 (RPG-2). (PHAN DUY/AFP/Getty Images)

Once a proposed operation was approved by the Province Committee, the Military Affairs Committee allocated the operational tasks among its Military Staff (undertaking reconnaissance to study the objective, and constructing a sand model), Political Staff (sending a cadre to contact local civilians to glean their reaction to the proposed attack, and making sure the attacking soldiers had sufficient morale), and a Rear Services Staff (determining whether the local population could sustain an attacking force, and providing labor). An attempt was made to maintain need-to-know security right up until the attack’s commencement, which if even suspected of having been compromised, would be cancelled – something that occurred far more often than actual attacks.

Once committed, NVA forces would conduct a quick advance to the targeted area’s assembly positions, which could involve several dozen kilometers in a day. On the trail, two NVA personnel would normally lead small groups by 20–30m. VC fighters prepared base camps, and provided intelligence and guides for NVA reconnaissance teams, with laborers volunteered from the local population. A quick attack followed, which having previously conducted reconnaissance focused on the enemy’s weak spots via a strong fight, assault, and pursuit. On an attack’s successful completion, NVA soldiers worked rapidly to secure the battlefield to remove weapons and casualties, before conducting a final “quick” egress component, which involved exiting the battle area to a pre-arranged rendezvous point where the force dispersed into smaller groups. As one former company commander recalled, “Everybody had to engage in combat to learn by experience. Moreover, there would be no second battle without a first one. Also, there were platoon leaders who had been engaging in combat for several years, had much experience, and were always with my unit. Therefore my assignment to the position of company commander was no problem” (First Lieutenant Hà Tâm, 14 (NVA) Battalion).

A staged NVA attack in 1967. In actual combat, the foliage affixed to their back served to break up their profile and provide camouflage. The soldier in the center appears to wear an East German M56 steel helmet, which would have been sold, or given, to North Vietnam, being a fellow Communist nation. (JUSPAO)



# The Hill Fights

April 23–30, 1967

## BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

A World War II-era M101A1 105mm howitzer in action at the besieged KSCB on February 14, 1968. With rounds that were easier to handle than those of the larger 155mm gun, the 105mm was well suited for employment at remote bases, being helicopter-transportable, relatively easy to reposition, reliable, and possessing a high rate of fire. To compensate for loose or soft soil that would shift the piece during firing, logs were generally used to better anchor the gun's placement. To minimize shrapnel damage from incoming artillery or mortars, such emplacements were dug below the surrounding terrain, and reinforced with sandbags. (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)

Looking to counter enemy supply movement in South Vietnam's northwestern corner, on July 8, 1962, MACV placed a 12-man Special Forces "A" (Green Beret) team at an abandoned French fort some 2km east of Khe Sanh, a village of some 1,000 indigenous Bru Montagnard (Fr. "Mountaineer") tribespeople.





As the expanding American commitment of personnel to Vietnam reciprocally caused an increase in NVA infiltration, on March 6, 1967, the US Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, directed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to initiate the construction of a 40km-long barrier along the DMZ's southern edge. As the US bombing campaign against the North had failed significantly to impact the flow of men and material south, the concept was similar in function to what the French military had recently constructed to fight an insurgency war in Algeria. It was to consist of early warning seismic and acoustic sensors, barbed wire, gravel mines that eluded metal detectors, and sprayed plastic pellets. Carefully selected fortified positions constructed on key terrain would provide a manned element, while a series of strongpoints along likely NVA approaches, and air interdiction, would control the western DMZ, with aircraft-dropped sensors beyond the Laotian border. Despite numerous senior-commander protests that offensively minded Marines would be better used in actively countering NVA efforts to annex South Vietnam's two northern provinces than in building such a system, the "MACV Practice Nine Requirements Plan" was approved, much to the dismay of Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, the III MAF commander. Here, Walt confers with General Westmoreland, wearing a 187th RCT (Airborne) patch; Brigadier General Lowell E. English (Asst. CO, 3rd Marine Division); Lieutenant Colonel Van D. Bell (CO, 1/1 Marines); and Captain J.F. Trehly. (PFC E.L. Cole, Marine Corps)

To help secure the remote position, the Special Forces personnel trained and organized local warriors into covert, CIA-sponsored militia Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG). Along with local French coffee-plantation owners who traveled along the unkempt, often constricted Route 9, the groups provided valuable intelligence from both sides of the Laotian border. As the area grew in importance, two years later the Special Forces contingent relocated north a few kilometers to a plateau on which the French had constructed an airfield more than a decade previously.

In 1964, General Westmoreland envisioned Khe Sanh as a key facility from which to conduct aggressive reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering missions around the DMZ. Being outside the military hierarchy, and subject to little oversight or accountability, the CIA quietly operated in Laos and both Vietnams, using a network of local agents and turned NVA soldiers who were incorporated into Joint Technical Advisory Detachment (JTAD) 14, to conduct deep, unsupervised field missions. As Special Forces constructed bunkers and reinforced their positions at Khe Sanh Combat Base (KSCB) throughout late 1965, on December 22 they destroyed a large NVA patrol following a chance encounter. The NVA retaliated on January 3, 1966, by shelling the camp with debuting 120mm mortars; the Marines mistakenly thought this was the extent of heavier enemy weapons in the surrounding hills, and extended their patrols out to some 6km from base to compensate for the weapon's 5,700m range. To help ascertain enemy activity in the area, small propeller aircraft that were providing visual reconnaissance during Operation *Tiger Hound* were occasionally reallocated from the US Air Force's aerial interdiction effort against the Hô Chí Minh Trail south of Xépôn.

With signs of an increasing enemy presence along the North Vietnamese border, in August 1966, III MAF initiated *Prairie*, a five-month operation to clear enemy forces south of the DMZ from Gio Linh toward Khe Sanh, where 1/3 Marines was correspondingly sent on September 29. With conventional



A member of the Weapons Platoon, H&S (Headquarters and Service) Company, 2/3 Marines fires a 106mm recoilless rifle near Hill 881N in this photograph taken after the Hill Fights. The M274 "Mechanical Mule" was often used to mount such weapons to provide a degree of mobility. Note the steering column has been moved away to provide additional room. (Lance Corporal Stevens (Marine Corps))

forces strengthening the facility, between December 1966 and January 1967, its Special Forces contingent relocated to Làng Vây nearer the Laotian border. Although *Prairie* resulted in considerable NVA casualties, the DMZ's western edge remained relatively quiet. During January 8–28, 1967, however, North Vietnamese and local guerrilla activity increased noticeably, including rocket and mortar fire. With its assignment completed, 1/3 Marines was withdrawn from the KSCB area, and on February 6, a reinforced Bravo Company, 1/9 Marines took its place, alongside India Battery, 3/12 Marines, with its 105mm M101A1 howitzers, 155mm M114 howitzers, and 4.2in "Goon Gun" mortars, with respective ranges of 11,270m, 14,600m, and 4,023m. In an effort to disrupt the growing NVA presence along the North Vietnamese border, on February 25, Westmoreland authorized III MAF to fire artillery against military targets inside and beyond the DMZ, which until the previous year had been officially off-limits to American personnel. The enemy replied in kind, targeting Gio Linh, Cồn Tiên, and Camp Carroll, which as fire-support bases possessed 155mm howitzers and M107 175mm self-propelled guns for mutually supportive artillery fire. The MACV commander also looked to reposition Army elements to reinforce I Corps' southern sector, in order to free Marines for operations farther north.

NVA forces commensurately increased their presence along the DMZ, including the Khe Sanh area, and on February 25 a patrol from Bravo Company, 1/9 Marines made enemy first contact just 1.5km west of the airstrip. With NVA forces having tried unsuccessfully to overrun KSCB on March 3, four days later, Major General Bruno A. Hochmuth's 3rd Marine Division reinforced the red dust-covered base with Echo Company, 2/9 Marines, which assisted in patrolling Hill 881S and Hill 861, suffering 18



A 1st Marine Aircraft Wing A-4E Skyhawk drops 125kg BLU-10/B napalm canisters on NVA targets on May 7, 1967. First used in 1942, the thin canisters risked ground fire, and other penetrating impacts that could prematurely trigger oxygenation and an explosion. Although stabilizing fins could be added, the tumbling by those lacking such fins better spread the contents. In addition to the two Marine companies at Khe Sanh, US Army M42A1 2x40mm Duster air-defense vehicles, a Marine M50A1 Ontos antitank platoon, and various support personnel were available to help occupy the perimeter, and free forces for localized patrols. Three UH-34D Sikorsky Seahorse helicopters were also stationed at the base for medevac, reconnaissance, and resupply. A platoon-sized "Sparrow Hawk" standby force was available to assist the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion as needed via rapid helicopter insertion, as were Camp Carroll and the "Rockpile," with their 155mm M114 howitzers and 40,000m-ranged 175mm M107 self-propelled guns. (Sergeant Groscoat (Marine Corps))

killed during an encounter on March 16. Local 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion Marine Force Recon patrols and *Tiger Hound* pilots reporting an alarming buildup of enemy fortifications and activity combined to indicate a growing threat to the facility's security.

In early 1967 Giáp, now NVA Commander-in-Chief, began formulating a plan involving multiple attacks against all major South Vietnamese cities, as a prelude to forcing South Vietnam to sue for peace. As a prelude to draw enemy attention north, two descendants of the six vaunted Việt Minh-era "Steel and Iron Divisions" that had been reconstituted in late 1965 – 325C Division (18C, 95C, and 101D regiments), and 304A Division (9B, 57B, and 66B regiments) – were moved into the DMZ. Numbered in the 300s to differentiate Vietnamese from Chinese divisional numbering in the 100s and 200s, these replacement formations received the same numerical designation as their cadre unit, followed by a letter designation. Once in position, the pair conducted heavy bombardments against American bases all along the border, while additional forces sought to isolate KSCB from ground supply by cutting Route 9 to the east. For the last several weeks, overcast, foggy conditions allowed 18C (NVA) Regiment quietly to enter hills surrounding Khe Sanh from the west, where its personnel built bunkers and defensive positions from which they would soon launch an attack against the base.

With sufficient forces in place, the Marines extended their patrols out to some 10,000m; always aware of the range of supporting artillery to avoid any "firebase psychosis," by March, 11th and 12th Marines provided artillery along the DMZ's length. On April 18, Corporal Robin Walker led "Hawk Patrol" (Alpha Company, 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion), inserted by CH-46 Sea Knight some 8km north of the three hills, on a ridge leading to Hill 665. During their patrol, they encountered evidence of a large NVA force, and moved to higher ground to better observe the area, where they remained for the next five days reporting considerable enemy movement at night. Several Special Operations Group members who had been conducting CIDG training through the hills northwest of the base corroborated Tiger Hound reports, and considering the area's numerous bunkers and enemy personnel, recommended that the area be prepared by air strikes, after which an artillery barrage would precede a Marine ground sweep to eliminate the danger definitively. Numerous, exaggerated higher-command intelligence reports of large enemy movement along the western DMZ had left the Marine base commander, Lieutenant Colonel James H. Reeder, unconvinced, and in need of definitive proof before allocating already overstretched 3rd Marine Division assets.

## 3/3 Marines and 95C (NVA) Regiment in the Hill Fights, April 23–30, 1967

### MAP KEY

- 1 0530hrs, April 24:** 1st and 3rd Rifle platoons from Bravo Company, 1/9 Marines advance for Hill 516.
- 2 Mid-morning, April 24:** Elements from 18C (NVA) Regiment initiate an ambush against the Marine platoons.
- 3 April 27:** Having been brought to the area as reinforcements, elements of 2/3 and 3/3 Marines move into the hills northwest of KSCB.
- 4 April 28:** Echo Company, 2/3 Marines advances on Hill 881N.
- 5 Midday, April 29:** Mike Company, 3/3 Marines on Hill 881S engages lead elements from 5 Infantry Battalion, 95C (NVA) Regiment.
- 6 1230hrs, April 30:** Mike Company, 3/3 Marines begins to extricate itself from Hill 881S.

## Battlefield environment

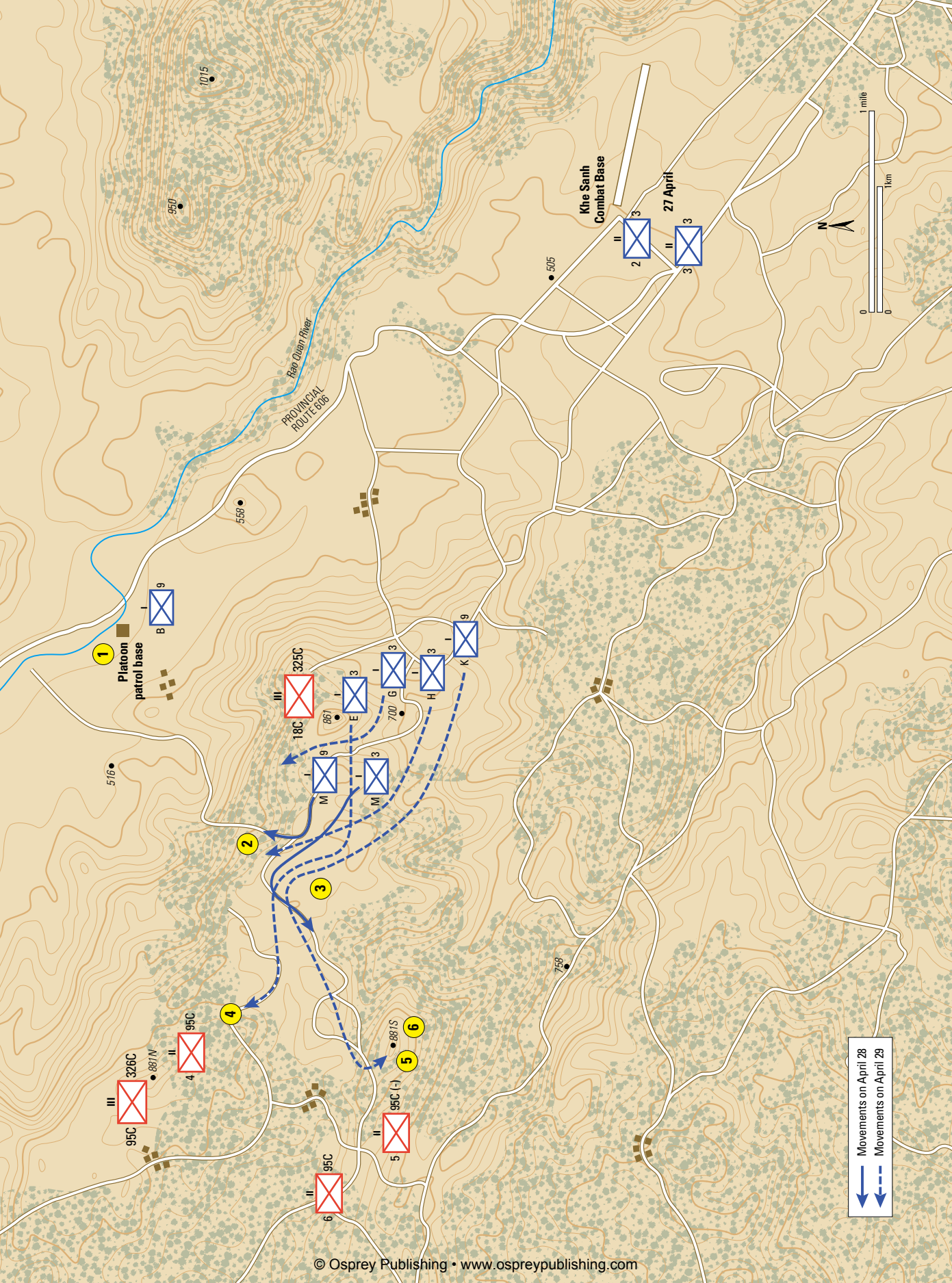
Intermittent rain and repeated US air and artillery strikes had left sections of the rugged hills northwest of KSCB muddy and scorched, although not enough to uncover or eliminate all of the numerous NVA bunkers. At several hundred meters above sea level, daytime temperatures reached the relatively mild mid-80 degrees Fahrenheit (roughly 28–32 degrees Celsius), with a light breeze. Low clouds, however, frequently prevented American tactical air support, although many of the surrounding indigenous tribes provided valuable intelligence and ground support. Having lived in Indochina for over two millennia, the Montagnards' ancestral land encompassed much of what was designated South Vietnam. In large measure to assist their fight to gain cultural and political autonomy from both its, and the North's government

infringement and persecution, many allied themselves with the American effort. Much of the area was covered in triple-canopy jungle, while the ground featured clusters of bamboo and tall elephant grass, and dense, sometimes impassible terrain, through which centuries of Montagnard foot traffic had produced narrow paths.

Originally a French airstrip, KSCB served as a vital supply asset, as the only land option along Route 9 was generally unsuited for large vehicles. Its exposed position made it vulnerable to artillery and rocket fire from the surrounding hills. With NVA activity along the western DMZ and Laotian border, the garrison encountered enemy forces on Hill 861, Hill 881N, and Hill 881S on April 23, 1967, and over the next several days would eject them from the area.

An aerial view of KSCB looking north on September 12, 1967. The dark terrain to the upper right is the base of Hill 1015. Roughly 1,100km long, the mountains of the Annamite Range had served as the natural boundary between Vietnam and Laos for centuries. During the First Indochina War, Việt Minh forces used the remote region's numerous, well-trodden trails to maintain communication along, and inside, Vietnam's lengthy border. At the onset of subsequent American involvement, the region once again provided a relatively safe, albeit restricted, supply and infiltration route into South Vietnam. Just north of the DMZ, the Mụ Giạ and Ban Karai passes served as major access points for NVA units moving south along the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. Prior to Route 9's dirt construction in 1904, armies had used the Đai Lào Pass between Xépôn, Laos, on the Mekong River, and Quảng Trị in Vietnam to launch cross-border invasions. In May 1961 it was similarly used following the NVA capture of the Laotian town, which was then incorporated into the logistical route. (Staff Sergeant Thomas N. Bland, Jr. (Marine Corps))





 Movements on April 28  
 Movements on April 29

## INTO COMBAT

While 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company, 1/9 Marines conducted a routine sweep of several ridge fingers that ran north and northwest of Hill 861, at around 1630hrs on April 23, 1st Platoon sighted several previously unknown caves on Hill 516. For the last several days, the unit had been running squad-sized patrols out of a nearby platoon patrol base, but without enemy contact, the consensus was that the NVA had left the area for the flatter terrain to the east. To settle the matter to his satisfaction, Reeder ordered both platoons to converge to investigate the area, while Second Lieutenant Thomas G. King's 2nd Platoon, Bravo Company remained at the base as potential reinforcement. The two platoons met at around 1800hrs, and settled in for a restless, but uneventful night roughly 300m apart, and 1km north of Hill 861.

At 0530hrs on April 24, 1st and 3rd platoons, Bravo Company set out once again just before dawn, amid rain and low clouds. The fog lifted a few hours later and the units headed west along parallel routes some 300m apart, en route to Hill 516. As the Marines approached the recently discovered caves, enemy activity was unexpected considering the area's relatively open terrain that was devoid of much cover. Suddenly, one of the men in 3rd Squad, 1st Platoon sighted almost a half-dozen khaki-uniformed NVA soldiers moving their way and carrying a wounded comrade on a stretcher. As the Marines moved to establish an ambush, they were sighted and engaged at some 50m. Returning fire, they drove the stretcher bearers off, killing the wounded enemy soldier and another attempting to escape down the hill. Considering the vitriol and determination with which both sides fought, quarter was not expected or given, and prisoners were rarely taken. As nearby NVA forces soon responded with heavy fire, both Marine platoons maneuvered to protective defiles in the terrain to establish defensive positions, under a 60mm mortar's protection, which dropped accurate fire from its exposed location. Taking casualties, 1st Platoon was ordered to withdraw to the Bravo Company commander, Captain Mike Sayers, after which low-flying F-4 Phantom II aircraft flew in to skim the nearby area with napalm; a few foolhardy NVA soldiers resisted the effort with AK-47 fire. With Bravo Company's Weapons Platoon having returned to KSCB that morning after having spent the last few days sweeping the southern approaches to Hill 861, it soon went back out to support Second Lieutenant King, who had moved his 30-man 2nd Platoon, an 81mm section with 120 rounds, and an Ontos, with its six external M40 106mm recoilless rifles, up to Hill 700 to provide support. By 1000hrs, King had reached his designated position, from where he bombarded the cave area with mortar fire. Five Marines sent ahead as observers came under NVA fire from Hill 861's crest, some 300m to the northwest; while trying to extract themselves, all but one of the Marines were killed. Sayers took a helicopter up to Hill 700, which came under intense fire, followed by an odd silence across Hill 861. Although no observation post could be established there, 81mm mortars effectively helped 1st Platoon's extraction to medevac the wounded out. Although one helicopter came in and removed several casualties, increasing enemy fire prohibited a second from landing, and what remained of 1st Platoon dug in for the night. With M18A1 Claymores being an integral part of perimeter defense, the NVA and VC would often try to quietly turn the directional C-4 explosive to spray hundreds



Before the widespread availability of the AK-47, and its derivatives, North Vietnamese forces used captured small arms from the French, Japanese, and elsewhere, and those supplied by Communist allies. As the Chinese Type 50 submachine gun (based on the Soviet PPSH-41) was considered too bulky, Vietnamese manufacturers converted them to be lighter, and better suited to the environments in which they were to operate. As such the barrel jacket was shortened by 76mm, the muzzle compensator removed, a wooden handle and front sight were added, and a lighter, collapsible steel-wire buttstock was incorporated to replace the heavier wooden variety. The weapon could use a PPSH-41-type 35-round curved box magazine or its 71-round drum to fire 7.62mm bullets, and although its accuracy was poor beyond 100m, its 700 rounds-per-minute rate of fire offered some compensation. (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)

of ball bearings back on an unwary user, to which the Marines often countered by placing a fragmentation grenade underneath it as an eventual deterrent.

Having fared little better than their Bravo Company comrades, the men of 3rd Platoon were ordered to pull back as well, during which they had to leave half of their equipment behind, and struggled with improvised stretchers to remove the wounded. As the American unit searched for a suitable helicopter landing zone, NVA mortar fire rained down, although the targets moved faster than the crews could effectively adjust their weapons. With the Marines on the ground greatly outnumbered, American aircraft continued to hit NVA positions with napalm, with some striking friendly units in the vicinity. While establishing preventative safety zones, radar guidance, and subordination to Forward Air Controller (FAC), the Americans could never entirely eliminate blue-on-blue fire. 3rd Platoon also had to dig in for the night, without the benefit of entrenching tools, some 900m from 1st Platoon. With 2nd Platoon's mortar section having exhausted its ammunition, Sayers withdrew the mortar crews to base.

By dawn on Wednesday April 25, 18C (NVA) Regiment had established itself on Hill 861, with 95C (NVA) Regiment a few kilometers to the west. Just to the north, a small group of NVA soldiers was making their way toward the latter when they inadvertently walked into "Hawk Patrol's" kill zone, and during the ensuing close combat, the American team was whittled to just four effectives. With Corporal Walker having been wounded, Corporal Thomas Rudolph, the assistant team leader, assumed the role as the Marines looked for a medevac landing zone. When the first CH-46, and attending gunships, arrived soon after, heavy NVA fire halted the effort, and with both door gunners' weapons having jammed, the twin-engine helicopter withdrew. A second Sea Knight came in to land below heavy gunship fire, but still took small-arms rounds and hand grenades, as the crew dragged the wounded to the helicopter while it leaked transmission fluid. As the first head count totaled only five, a crew member went out there to help a "Hawk Patrol" member retrieve two other wounded. Having unknowingly fought elements of a NVA battalion that was moving toward Hill 881N in preparation for a fight, six wounded or unconscious and two effective personnel of "Hawk Patrol" boarded the CH-46, which evacuated the entire force to KSCB, and ultimately to Đà Nẵng.

That morning, as 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company was preparing to walk point ahead of the unit, a NVA deserter suddenly walked into the gathering as the Marines were organizing their equipment. He identified himself as Vũ Văn Tích



Starting in November 1950, a joint US Army–Marine Corps project aimed to produce a light, air-transportable antitank vehicle based on the M56 Light Antitank Vehicle that would incorporate the engine of the 2½-ton GMC truck. With the unveiling of the first prototype in 1953, however, the Army so disliked the result that it withdrew from the endeavor. Having envisioned the ungainly-looking vehicle's potential to fit within its combat mindset, the Marines ordered 297 examples of what it officially titled "Rifle, Multiple 106mm self-propelled M50." With only around half still in service when they were sent to Vietnam in 1965, the Ontos proved itself very capable in infantry support, with High-Explosive Anti-Tank (HEAT) and "beehive" rounds for use against bunkers and personnel. The Ontos' light weight allowed it to negotiate terrain that was too soft for most other combat vehicles, and be rapidly repositioned. (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)

from 4 Battalion, 32 (NVA) Regiment (341 (NVA) Division), which had recently been reported in the A Sâu Valley west of Huế; this initially concerned the Marines that they had been surrounded. One helicopter arrived at the platoon landing zone soon after, which brought up Sayers and 22 Marines of his 2nd Platoon, and returned with several wounded, including the enemy combatant. Throughout the day, ongoing NVA fire and later a dense fog conspired to keep medevac helicopters from removing casualties from Hill 861 and depositing supplies. Marines engaged the enemy, while trying to extract their wounded and killed comrades, but as the poor visibility continued into the late afternoon, and made movement through the area's tall elephant grass risky, they settled in for another night in the field. Soon after, B Team, 27 (NVA) Artillery Battalion fired rockets that arced overhead en route to the airbase.

I was almost killed right in my first battle . . . of course, everybody prefers to stay alive. However, when I went South I knew that I would either be killed or captured. I accepted my fate. Many North Vietnamese were killed by American bombs. And many South Vietnamese were also killed and disabled by American air and artillery attacks, so how can a soldier like me avoid death? The point is, sometimes one should accept death so that his younger generation will grow. One feels better when he knows about this fact of life. (PFC Nguyễn Xuân Đại, 1 Battalion, 2 (NVA) Regiment)

On Thursday April 26, word arrived that NVA formations had executed an orchestrated, simultaneous attack on multiple Marine bases along the DMZ. US intelligence also determined that the enemy had moved an entire division into Laos, and sent a full regiment into the hills around KSCB, through which the Americans thought an additional one to two regiments would pass, en route to destroying the facility. With the NVA threat evident, Lieutenant



As the VC frequently operated in the field, and avoided constructing the very visible fire support bases and other established positions, concealed positions offered some protection against observation, especially from the air. Dwellings such as this bunker were covered with between 1m and 1.5m of earth and logs to resist artillery and mortar impacts, with fresh foliage employed to best blend in with the surrounding jungle, and make them all but invisible beyond a few meters. An all-round defensive system of trenches and tunnels commonly connected several supporting bunkers and gun emplacements to facilitate communications, logistics, and redeployment. Most complexes comprised 20 to 40 bunkers, with each generally 3m wide by 2m high by 1.5m deep. (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)

Colonel Earl R. “Pappy” Delong’s 2/3 Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Gary Wilder’s 3/3 Marines, plus Mike and Lima companies, 3/9 Marines, were sent to reinforce the Khe Sanh position. Weather similarly hampered the movement of the command element of 3/3 Marines into the Khe Sanh area from the “Rockpile.” Wilder brought his Kilo Company, 3/3 Marines, which – along with its four officers, five Navy Corpsmen, and 128 enlisted men – included artillery, mortar forward observers, and a battalion scout element. Having commanded the battalion for just three weeks, Wilder ordered his men to capture Hill 861, and after arriving at KSCB in the early afternoon of April 26, by 1705hrs Kilo Company was in action and approaching its goal. Coming under fire some 300m from the summit, from bunkers on the crest and mortars from the reverse slope, within 30 minutes 3rd Platoon’s 37 Marines were

whittled down to ten. With such losses making disengagement impossible, Wilder allocated 2nd Platoon from near the battalion command post.

During the morning of April 28, 2/3 Marines moved to the northwest en route to clear Hill 861, upon which earlier airstrikes had dropped some 191 tons (173 metric tons) of ordnance, including a dozen Mark 84 bombs that each left an 11m-deep, 15m-wide crater, and spewed fragmentation out to nearly 400m. Artillery had similarly joined the softening process with 968 observed mission rounds, along with 107 used for harassment and interdiction fire. Some 10km east and 10km west of Hill 861, two B-52 "Arc Light" missions provided additional, peripheral support, which endeavored to keep NVA reinforcements from joining the ground fight. By early afternoon, Echo Company, 2/3 Marines, moving up abreast of Golf Company, reached just northwest of Hill 861. Sporadic 60mm NVA mortar fire was soon silenced, as the company's mortar section fired equally sized counter-fire rounds, and the hill was soon secured at 1630hrs. With the terrain feature now secured, 3/3 Marines moved to a position 2km south of 2/3 Marines in preparation for the next day's mission that comprised taking Hill 881S and Hill 881N. Each platoon sent a fire team to a stream nearby to fill canteens for the others, and although at least one NVA soldier lay dead in the water, adding iodine tablets was considered sufficient to make the water potable.

At noon on April 29, Wilder's lead element – Mike Company, 3/9 Marines – moved through the valley between Hill 861 and its next objective, where its 1st Platoon encountered an entrenched NVA force with snipers and automatic weapons; an air strike with napalm soon silenced it. Meanwhile, Captain Raymond H. Bennett had led Mike Company, 3/3 Marines past the left flank of those engaged to gain the battalion's intermediate objective, a lower hillock northeast of Hill 881S, where 20 NVA soldiers and two mortar crews were seen sighting their weapons. US artillery support was called in with desired effect, and the NVA crews only managed to fire four rounds; for the rest of the night, Bennett's command had no further enemy contact. NVA defenses on Hill 881S consisted of very well-camouflaged bunkers, with both knobs of the hill organized for defense, each an independent strongpoint with linear defenses between the knolls. There were six mortar pits, linked with the command posts by communications wire, with the main command post on the western knoll. During the night of April 29/30, the NVA commander quietly inserted the fresh 95C (NVA) Regiment into excellent defensive positions on Hill 881S and Hill 881N, while withdrawing the shattered 18C (NVA) Regiment, which broke contact and returned to base camps in Laos.

After fine-tuning our defensive posture for the night, Echo Company officers were summoned to the company command post (CP) for a briefing. During that briefing, we were told that elements of the 3rd and 9th Marines were moving to an intermediate objective to our west-northwest to continue the attack on Hill 881 South the morning of 30 April. We were told that literally hundreds of North Vietnamese had been spotted in the open on 881 South and that artillery bombardment would prevail on the hill most of the night. It did. Artillery rained down on Hill 881 South so heavily and for so long, we thought that nothing could have survived it and that next day would be a piece of cake for the attacking unit or units. Not so, as we could later attest. (2nd Lieutenant James R. Cannon,



Commander 2nd Platoon, Echo Company, 2/3 Marines, courtesy Paul Marquis, Bravo Battery & Echo Company Marines Website)

The next morning, fresh NVA soldiers awaited their battered adversary, who now had to fight uphill. At 0800hrs on April 30, Mike Company, 3/3 Marines initiated its assault on Hill 881S; its forward platoon reached the western end of the westernmost knoll by 1025hrs and began to swing back. With sporadic enemy fire increasing in volume, Bennett sent in 2nd Platoon to assist, but it was unable to maneuver, as the enemy held firm in their bunkers. The 155mm detachment supporting the attack consisted of older, towed guns, with long, awkward trails, and in the muddy terrain, their crews needed 30 minutes to reposition them to engage another location.

It was a Sunday, April 30, 1967. I was sitting in elephant grass next to two North Vietnamese enemy soldiers who had been charcoaled by napalm. Around 11 AM I was gazing up Hill 881 South not knowing that in an hour or so we would be assaulting the hill. Hill 881 South was really a mountain that was 881 meters above sea level. I was seeing the enemy NVA moving like rats from one hole to another. I was around a half mile [0.8km] away watching them moving from hole to hole or bunker to bunker. (PFC Kenneth Flowers, Kilo Company, 3/9 Marines)

Golf Company, 2/3 Marines assaulting Hill 881N on April 29, 1967. As part of their M61 "Deuce" kit, some have covered M43 entrenching tools, which had an M1910 hanger to attach them to their M41 haversacks. They wear M1 helmets, with reversible Mitchell covers showing the green leaf pattern, carry M61 ammunition pouches, a Carlisle bandage pouch, and appear to have 4th-type (2nd-pattern) jungle boots. The Marine in the center also has a three-pocket grenade carrier on his left thigh. The surrounding elephant grass hampered the identification of NVA bunkers and defensive positions. Note the lack of flak jackets, and the extra M1956 canteen. (Staff Sergeant R.E. Wilson (Marine Corps))



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## The Hill Fights

With US Marines having worked for several days to clear 18C (NVA) Regiment from the hills overlooking KSCB to the northwest, on April 30, 1967, 3/3 Marines attempted to secure Hill 881S's heavily fortified crest. Although aerial bombing and artillery had been used in an effort to support the US assault, the area's heavy foliage helped preserve much of the concealed bunkers and trenchworks, which the fresh 95C (NVA) Regiment had occupied the night before, having replaced its shattered predecessor. With Mike Company elements having captured Hill 881S's western edge by the late morning, 2nd Platoon (shown here) struck the eastern knoll using small arms that included M79 grenade launchers, M60

machine guns, and recently allocated XM16E1 assault rifles. Prone to jamming, and firing a 5.56mm round that lacked the mass to effectively penetrate jungle terrain, in such an environment the latter proved inferior to the NVA's Type 56, with its more reliable, looser mechanical tolerances, and larger 7.62mm bullet. Although visibility at the nearly kilometer-high battlefield was good, such close ground fighting hindered tactical air support that risked blue-on-blue casualties. Fought down against heavy opposition, Mike Company received assistance from Kilo Company, which finally enabled the Marines to eliminate resistance.

Bennett eventually committed his 3rd Platoon along with others in a bid to secure the eastern face of the hill, which resulted in heavy casualties. For Wilder, at battalion HQ, Hill 881S was too difficult and his men would have to come off so that the hill could be pounded by more air and artillery support. Around noon, he sent Kilo Company, 3/9 Marines to help Bennett disengage from the maelstrom; the Marines thought flak jackets would slow their advance and they were left behind.

There was a three prong movement of Marines going up the hill ... Some were going up the ravines, but we were going up a ridge. I was the point man (scout) of a single file of a company behind us. I got almost three-fourths to the top of the hill. First Lieutenant John Braxton Woodall sent two other men, Eddie Aponte, from New Jersey, and Freddie Pitts, my fire team leader from Walton Beach, Florida on as scouts. They went above us 20 to 30 yards [18–27m]. I heard a machine gun cut loose on them. Evidently, they walked over a machine gun nest, a bunker hole with machine guns camouflaged with brush and bamboo and tree limbs. (PFC Kenneth Flowers, Kilo Company, 3/9 Marines)

By 1230hrs heavy NVA fire forced Wilder to order a withdrawal, which took several hours to accomplish, during which the Marines removed 109 wounded, but not the 43 presumed dead. Mike Company, 3/3 Marines effectively ceased to exist as a fighting force, and it was soon withdrawn to Đông Hà; Echo Company, 2/9 Marines took its place.

I saw a hand grenade hit about 3 or 4 feet [80–120cm] from me ... it hit me and paralyzed my right arm, blew up my right leg, and jammed my neck around to the left ... The rest of the squad, around ten to twelve men, pulled up while bullets from enemy rifles were kicking up dust the dust like a rain shower on a hot summer day. People were falling left and right. In a minute or two all the bullets stopped and all I could hear were people moaning in pain. I looked up around the side of a hill and saw a North Vietnamese soldier coming toward me maybe 30 yards [27m] away. He had the coned shaped hat draping over his back attached by two strings and his rifle was pointing down like he was on a rabbit hunt. He



appeared to have a smile on his face. I was still trying to get the magazine into the rifle so I could kill him. I wasn't thinking about pain from my injuries. I was thinking, "Kill him before he kills me." I was aiming for his head. I didn't see the second hand grenade, and it blew me down the hill. I went one way and the rifle went another. Now I had shrapnel in my right buttock, right thigh, and more shrapnel all up and down my right leg. Two or three enemy soldiers came out of their bunkers above me and started shooting the moaning Marines in their heads. (PFC Kenneth Flowers, Kilo Company, 3/9 Marines)

Hill 881S as seen from Hill 881N on October 23, 1967. The results of artillery and air attacks on the terrain are evident. (Lieutenant Olsen (Marine Corps))

In an effort to secure Wilder's right and reach a suitable position from which to assault Hill 881N, 2/3 Marines moved off Hill 861 when another sharp fight ensued. DeLong committed two rifle companies to sweep Hill 881N's base, with 1,685 rounds of artillery and 118 air sorties dropping 323,750lb (146.85 metric tons) of bombs and rockets in support. Unknown to the Marines, the NVA forces withdrew from Hill 881S during the night of April 30/May 1. Thus the big bombardment by 166 air sorties dropping 325 tons (294 metric tons) of bombs and 1,445 artillery rounds at Hill 881S and Hill 881N on May 1 achieved little. The next day, May 1, Wilder's Marines went in again against the former with two companies on the line, but found little save several collapsed bunkers. Throughout early May the Marines secured the area and evicted NVA forces. During 16 days of fighting northwest of KSCB, Marine casualties included 168 killed, 443 wounded, and two missing. They confirmed 807 enemy dead, another 611 probable, and six prisoners. Support comprised 23,472 artillery rounds and 1,915 tons (1,737 metric tons) of air-delivered ordnance – 16 percent napalm and 84 percent explosives – from 1,170 sorties.

# Operation *Kingfisher*

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July 28–29, 1967

## BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

At the end of June 1967, some 35,000 NVA soldiers were positioned above the DMZ in preparation for a forthcoming general offensive, in conjunction with an uprising in South Vietnam. Although Giáp objected to such an undertaking, he ultimately acceded to the enterprise espoused by the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Lê Duẩn, which like Westmoreland's "big battles" concept was expected to score an important propaganda victory ahead of the South's September 3 presidential elections. Following the Marines' successful completion of Operation *Buffalo* (July 2–14), in which they tried to neutralize the buildup around Cồn Tiên, the considerable number of casualties they inflicted on 90 (NVA) Regiment illustrated that the North was willing to accept such losses in hindering the construction of the "McNamara Line." Under the newly created DMZ Front Headquarters, 304, 320, and 325C (NVA) divisions focused on Khe Sanh, while 324B (NVA) Division, under General Giáp Văn Cương, with its 31, 803, 812, and 90 (NVA) regiments, remained near the DMZ and Cồn Tiên. With most of its personnel well fed, supplied, and rested, the aggressive, disciplined formation possessed the usual mix of 12.7mm machine guns, AK-47 and SKS assault rifles, B-40s, 57mm and 75mm recoilless rifles, and 60mm and 82mm mortars, in addition to artillery, rockets, anti-aircraft guns, and surface-to-air missiles. Many sported captured enemy uniforms (including



A trio of Communist-supplied weapons to North Vietnam. The Soviet-produced RPD ("Degtyaryov handheld machine gun") (or its Type 56 Chinese copy) shown above provided NVA squads with a light, portable weapon that could be fired like an assault rifle, as well as from a bipod. Limited to automatic mode only, it could realistically fire off its 100-round drum magazine and reload in about a minute. The centre Soviet SKS (or Chinese Type 56) semiautomatic rifle used a ten-round magazine, with those weapons having serial numbers up to 9 million possessing a Russian-style folding blade bayonet, while the remainder had a folding spike variety. The bottom Chinese Type 56 assault rifle, a copy of the Soviet AK-47, had a pivoting blade bayonet in the closed position, and a 30-round magazine. All three weapons fired a 7.62×39mm round, with effective ranges of 1,000m, 400m, and 350m respectively. (Neil Grant)

flak jackets and helmets) and weapons, such as M1 and M2 carbines, M14s, and M16s, and had stockpiled a considerable amount of ammunition and established a communications network. Having such a surplus, NVA artillery and rockets were fired from the relatively safe zone north of the Bến Hải River to harass nearby Marine bases – especially Cồn Tiên, considering its proximity to the DMZ – with each at a disadvantage in targeting and conducting counterbattery fire into or beyond the border.

Concerned that 324B (NVA) Division might assault the Strong Point Obstacle System barrier near its present terminus at Cồn Tiên, III MAF ordered a new operation, *Hickory II*, into effect on July 13, 1967. Similar to



As the VC and NVA often resorted to improvisation, concealed mantraps offered an effective combat modifier that sapped an adversary's morale and resolve. Non-explosive booby traps, such as this "mantrap," incorporated either a concealed thin cover that broke under a soldier's weight, or pivoted, to impale him on bamboo Punji stakes or other sharpened implement; these were often coated with poison or human excrement to promote infection. To maximize their impact, "mantraps" were usually established near high-traffic areas, such as helicopter landing zones or river crossings. (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)

Cồn Tiên Marine Base in June 1967, looking northwest. The darker terrain some 1.5km beyond the hill's base is the forested area flanking the Bến Hải River, which bisected the DMZ. (T.N. Bland, Jr. (Marine Corps))



the first-named action two months earlier, this more limited undertaking looked to sweep the area, and eliminate enemy mortar and artillery positions and ammunition and supply depots along the DMZ's southern edge, although NVA territory north of the Bến Hải River remained off limits. Once the mission was completed, two battalions returned to the nearby coast to be ready for future rapid insertion, while 3/9 Marines' remaining personnel began a new operation in the same area. As with the previous endeavor, *Kingfisher* was intended to block NVA entry through the DMZ and into Quảng Trị Province. Although encountering only minor enemy elements during July 16–27, III MAF had been receiving reports that 324B (NVA) Division was moving across the border, just north of Cồn Tiên, an area nicknamed “The Hill” for the trio of 150m+ hills upon which the clay dust-covered base resided. In the lead-up to the expected confrontation, US activity increased, with trucks and CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopters depositing a steady flow of ammunition and supplies.

A one-week tank proficiency and orientation course for new personnel (MDS 1811) was established prior to assignment of personnel ... This training was deemed necessary because the line companies felt that new incoming personnel were not thoroughly familiarized with tank operation and maintenance ... Training during July consisted of troop orientation for new personnel and daytime and nighttime patrolling. H&S personnel were fam-fired with the M-16 and re-instructed on care and cleaning. A bi-monthly briefing has been established for all Battalion personnel by the Commanding Officer and staff for the purpose of

keeping all hands well-informed on friendly and enemy activities. A special briefing was conducted once a week for all staff non-commissioned officers. The special staff briefings were held nightly ... Training was conducted on company level, covering self-aid and buddy-aid, with much of the instruction centering on the use of the morphine syrette and recognition and treatment of heat casualties. VD and personal hygiene lectures were also given. (Headquarters, 3rd Tank Battalion)

The plan III MAF and 3rd Marine Division commanders had formulated involved a 93 percent-strength 2/9 Marines under Lieutenant Colonel William D. Kent, which had been operating east of Cồn Tiên since July 9. The unit had played a major role in *Hickory I* in May, and had since operated continuously in "Leatherneck Square," an area along the DMZ bounded by Cồn Tiên, Gio Linh, Đông Hà, and Cam Lộ, where the Marines maintained a sizeable presence. Now, it was to advance to the Bến Hải River, head east for several kilometers, and turn south toward "The Trace," a prominent 600m-wide cleared strip extending east across the area's low, rolling hills to the forward artillery position at Gio Linh, with the hope that if Giáp Văn Cương had moved forces into the area, the Marines' preemptive "spoiling attack" would take them in the rear. Despite the concerns of 3/9 Marines commander, Major Willard H. Woodring, that the planned foray risked getting trapped between the waterway and the surrounding wooded borderlands, just before sunset on July 27, the American battlegroup was assembled in a forested area about 1km southwest of Cồn Tiên in preparation for heading north into the DMZ. To bolster the "show of force," five M48A3 Patton tanks from Alpha Company, 3rd Tank Battalion, along with three M50A1 Ontos, three Landing Vehicle, Tracked, Engineer (LVTE-1) armored amphibious minesweepers – known as "amtracs" – and a combat-engineer platoon from 3rd Engineer Battalion were attached, while 3/4 Marines remained at Cồn Tiên as support.



An M48A3 from the 3rd Tank Battalion pictured with personnel of 3/4 Marines some 2.5km northwest of Cồn Tiên during *Kingfisher* on July 29, 1967. The lead Marine carries a multirole M60 machine gun, which was modeled on the German MG 42. The "Pig" served as the primary squad automatic weapon. (Lance Corporal L.P. Brown (Marine Corps))

## 2/9 Marines and 803 (NVA) Regiment in Operation *Kingfisher*, July 28–29, 1967

### MAP KEY

- 1 Morning, July 28:** Kilo Company, 3/9 Marines is transported by helicopter from Côn Tiên to Hill 37. As part of Kilo Company's effort to support 2/9 Marines' advance, Hill 37's elevation and open terrain provided an excellent landing zone from which to monitor NVA activities along the Bến Hải River.
- 2 Night of July 28/29:** Having advanced nearly 2km into the DMZ, 2/9 Marines establishes a position in a bend in the Bến Hải River. Hotel Company, 2/9 Marines reports hearing vehicles across the river, and digging near potential fording sites.
- 3 After daybreak, July 29:** Engineers and Golf Company, 2/9 Marines scout the route ahead, and discover a bridge that in combination with the surrounding soft terrain would prohibit

the accompanying armor crossing, prompting the US forces to commence their withdrawal.

- 4 1115hrs, July 29:** As Echo Company, 2/9 Marines withdraws south along Provincial Route 606 a repurposed 250lb (113kg) B-52 bomb is command-detonated by the NVA forces, killing and wounding several Marines.
- 5 1300hrs, July 29:** As Echo and H&S companies move to establish a landing zone to evacuate their wounded, fire from NVA RPGs and machine guns hampers the effort.
- 6 1400hrs, July 29:** Echo Company reaches the southernmost ambush site; heavy fire from NVA small arms and RPGs continues to take a toll on the Marines and their vehicles.

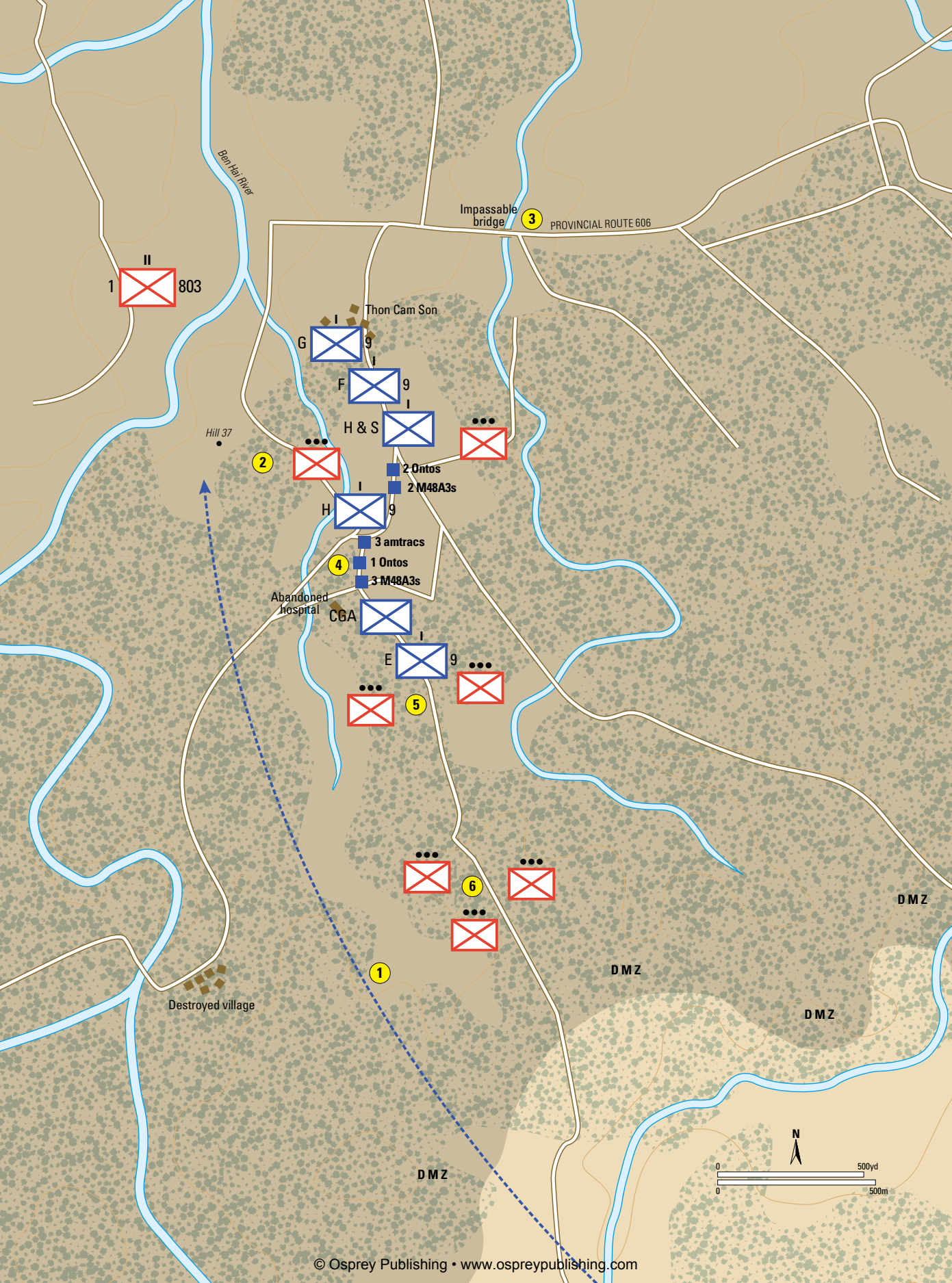
## Battlefield environment

Unlike the more temperate region to the west, the low-lying terrain north of Côn Tiên reached temperatures of over 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius). Within the enclosed jungle, high humidity and little wind made walking fatiguing, let alone combat. Although Route 606 was the primary route through the DMZ north from Côn Tiên, numerous trails criss-crossed the area to connect

settlements, or other locations otherwise inaccessible through the difficult terrain. The region along the sand-banked Bến Hải River contained several mangroves and lagoons, and with the introduction of the DMZ, what settlements that had existed along the river were commonly abandoned.

The low-lying terrain along the Bến Hải River is evident here, with the area between 20m and 30m above sea level. In addition to leeches, mosquitoes, and poisonous cobras, vipers, and spiders, landmines had been liberally strewn across the region, alongside unexploded ordnance. Because of the limited number of trails, often only wide enough for just one person, artillery and mortars could more easily pre-register potential targets. The heavily forested region along both riverbanks impeded American aerial reconnaissance, as 2/9 Marines would discover to its detriment when accompanying engineers discovered a tributary bridge along physically constrained intended route through the DMZ during Operation *Kingfisher* on July 29, 1967. (Nguyễn Thanh Sơn)





1 II 803

Impassable bridge 3 PROVINCIAL ROUTE 606

Thon Cam Son

Hill 37 2

2 Ontos  
2 M48A3s

4 3 amtracs  
1 Ontos  
3 M48A3s

Abandoned hospital

CGA

E 9

5

6

Destroyed village

1

DMZ

DMZ

DMZ

DMZ



## INTO COMBAT

The morning of July 28 heralded another hot day along the DMZ, as the Marines set out north along Provincial Route 606, essentially a dirt cart path. Even the veterans were scared considering the potential number of enemy awaiting their approach; most suffered from dysentery, and there was cynical acceptance of a rumor that President Johnson and his administration had ordered the mission to illustrate that the American military possessed the ability to operate wherever it pleased, which would, in turn, bolster flagging public support for the Johnson Administration. Echo and Golf companies provided flank security, on the right and left respectively, but the thick terrain along the edges tended to funnel the Marines toward the center, where they presented more concentrated targets. En route, the column passed “The Trace,” as well as deserted, burned-out hamlets, and numerous trails. Nearer the DMZ, the vegetation grew thicker, with visibility around 5m, over which a 3–4m canopy predominated, and was broken by rice paddies, and fewer, but more prominent trails. After waiting out the morning as a reserve should the main force get into trouble, Kilo Company’s 152 Marines boarded three CH-46, three UH-34D, and two UH-1E Iroquois helicopters south of Cồn Tiên and flew ahead to Hill 37 along a bend in the Bến Hải River. Just prior to touching down, A-4E Skyhawk aircraft laid down a smokescreen to the west between the high ground and the oncoming column.

During 2/9 Marines’ advance, as was customary in such operations, supporting artillery was ready with plotted on-call fires along their route to save response times, but few NVA soldiers were encountered. On entering the DMZ, Echo and Golf companies began uncovering unoccupied bunkers and spider holes at several clearings paralleling the path. A hastily evacuated NVA field hospital discovered near Kent’s Command Group “A” made everyone edgy, especially as the Marines knew large numbers of the enemy were undoubtedly in the area, and would certainly not leave them without a fight. As the column approached the abandoned village of Thon Cầm Sơn, the decision was made to establish a camp for the night, and the tanks and combat engineers set to destroying several bunkers before dark.

Aware of the American presence, NVA soldiers began moving into the surrounding area to reoccupy abandoned positions or construct new ones. Although they refrained from engaging the Marines in their respective perimeters, Hotel Company, and Echo Company near Hill 37, reported hearing truck motors, voices, and digging on the waterway’s left bank near potential crossing sites. Artillery was called in, with uncertain results, and to add to the foreboding Kent was informed – during a radio call to his 9th Marine Regiment superior, Colonel George E. Jerue – that that five NVA battalions were en route toward 2/9 Marines’ position, and that the USMC battalion was to exit the DMZ as a precaution.

On the morning of July 29, Kent called his company and tank commanders together to discuss the situation. At the battalion’s northernmost point, combat engineers passed Golf Company to scout ahead along Provincial Route 606 to determine whether the way remained clear, and would be able to support the heavy armored vehicles. After traveling some 500m, they encountered a narrow concrete bridge over a tributary that regimental and division intelligence had apparently missed, and was not included in the operation’s planning. Having

determined that the structure would not support the M48A3s, and as bypassing it meant moving over prohibitively soft terrain, Kent called 9th Marines headquarters, stating his command would have to return the way it had come, much to everyone's chagrin.

Rightly concerned that the North Vietnamese had already moved units into previously prepared positions covering Provincial Route 606, Kent organized his command to provide interspaced, mutually supportive infantry and armored firepower. At 1000hrs, Echo Company led the way back, with the battalion commander and his Command Group "A" following. Initially designated to cover the battalion's rear during the extraction, Hotel Company came next; three M48A3s, an Ontos, and the amtracs covered the space between it and Kent's command, and the remaining vehicles behind it. Tank commanders fought with their cupola hatches open at such close ranges, as visibility provided better protection than armor. Golf Company proved unable to entirely break free from the closely pursuing NVA soldiers. H&S, Foxtrot, and Golf companies brought up the rear, while overhead, a circling forward air controller (FAC) provided additional visibility, and was prepared to direct fast-moving, fixed-wing air strikes in the area whenever needed.

After making slow progress for 75 minutes, about 1km from the night bivouac, 2nd Platoon, Echo Company had just crossed a clearing when an NVA engineer detonated a 250lb (113kg) dud bomb from a B-52 buried in the road, which had also been repurposed as a command-detonated mine. The explosion killed and wounded several Marines, blew up the NVA engineer, and threw body parts across a wide area. Farther down the path, alert Marine engineers found a similar rigged bomb, and destroyed it with explosives. As if the second explosion were a signal, North Vietnamese soldiers along the road opened fire on the column with machine guns, rifles, and 60mm and 82mm mortars. To avoid shrapnel from road strikes, many Marines scrambled into the bordering vegetation only to trigger booby traps or stumble onto Punji stakes that had been laid the previous night. In the chaos, a B-40 round holed through both sides of an amtrac supporting Echo Company's advance. The NVA units, using heavy fire from prepared positions combined with the maneuver of other units, quickly broke the column into roughly company-sized segments, with each fighting its own way through the gauntlet, in which NVA soldiers had established three ambush positions along Provincial Route 606, each some 500m apart. In the restricted environment, the tracked vehicles were a liability, as the foot-bound Marines had to help cover their advance against an enemy that could fire antitank weapons from the surrounding thick brush at short range. As the US wounded piled up, and the vehicles were used as makeshift ambulances, the Marines' fighting ability was further degraded.

Soon after, another B-40 explosion disabled the turret of a tank with Foxtrot Company, wounding three crewmen. When Hotel Company brought up an Ontos to suppress NVA fire that was holding up its movement, a B-40 projectile struck it as well, wounding three more Marines. A second Ontos came forward, suppressed the NVA fire with its machine gun, and enabled that part of the US column to continue. Restricted to 25mph (40km/h) and very maneuverable, the vehicles were ideally operated by a three-man crew, but could get by with two, although rounds greater than .30-caliber could penetrate their armor. As their main armament was externally mounted,



Members of Lima Company, 3/4 Marines watch an air strike within the DMZ on July 29, 1967, in support of 2/9 Marines' extraction from an ambush. To help soften enemy positions or protect a beleaguered ground force, Marine A-4E Skyhawk and F-4 Phantom II aircraft were directed to a target, with assistance from loitering FAC. The Skyhawk carried up to 4,490kg of bombs of up to 1,000lb (454kg) each, as well as napalm, cluster bombs, and rockets, while the Phantom II could carry up to 8,400kg of ordnance. Often operating from offshore aircraft carriers, these aircraft provided valuable, versatile, often rapid-response tactical air support throughout the conflict. (Lance Corporal L.P. Brown (Marine Corps))

## Hoàng Văn Lược

Hoàng Văn Lược was born in 1941 at Long Thành, Thành Chương District, Nghệ An, some 300km southwest of Hanoi. He was assigned to 1 Battalion, 803 (NVA) Regiment, 324B (NVA) Division, on April 14, 1967. Politically indoctrinated, with reinforcing psychological controls, he was dedicated to his cause, and firmly convinced that a foreign occupier had once again enslaved the people of the South, who needed to be liberated. Having been told that his homesick American enemy suffered from declining morale, and an inability to adjust to the region's largely tropical climate, he anticipated victory on learning of an advancing Marine force moving up from Cồn Tiên along Provincial Route 606 on July 28, 1967. As the enemy force entered the DMZ, Hoàng, and 1 Battalion elements left their encampment south of Thôn Cẩm Sơn to cross the nearby Bến Hải River, and allow the enemy to pass through unmolested. That night, under a first quarter moon, the NVA soldiers reoccupied their previously abandoned bunkers and trenches in anticipation of 2/9 Marines returning along what was essentially a bicycle path as part of Operation *Kingfisher*. From these concealed positions on July 29, Hoàng and his comrades ambushed the Marines, with the intent of breaking them into several uncoordinated groups to prevent their withdrawal, and eliminate them in several "kill zones." During this fighting, he was killed.



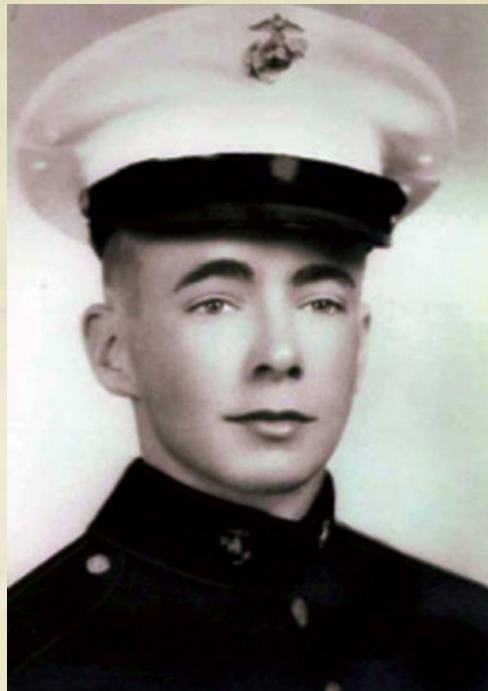
Hoàng Văn Lược. (Public domain)

during the rainy season between May and September, 30-weight oil was applied to the recoilless guns' outsides to protect against rusting. The infantry's primary fire support came from the FAC, which remained on station throughout the day. The controller maintained contact with air representatives from each company and with the battalion air-liaison officer; the North Vietnamese soldiers knew very well the danger from American supporting arms, and attempted to stay close to the Marine column. Foxtrot Company had hardly cleared its night defensive position when NVA soldiers occupied the position. Echo Company and Command Group "A," plus the follow-on tanks, amtracs, and Ontos, fought past the first position, and continued south; the Ontos fired 106mm M546 antipersonnel "beehive" rounds that spewed 8,000 flechettes along a cone 300m long and with a radius of roughly 100m. The newly established 803 (NVA) Regiment comprised hardened, aggressive soldiers, which were organized under Military Zone 4 south of the DMZ encompassing Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên provinces, one of eight such regions the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense had created across the country.

The employment of RPG-2's [from which the North Vietnamese B-40 was derived] by the NVA/VC is of special note. It was found in the Con Thien area that RPG-2 rounds have been command-detonated from ground-mounted

## James M. Lynch

Marine Sergeant James M. Lynch was born on November 10, 1942, in Cheltenham, Pennsylvania, a Philadelphia suburb. He joined the Marines soon after graduating high school in July 1960, and re-enlisted in late 1965 following a four-year service stint. During a voluntary extension of his tour in Vietnam, Lynch commanded an M50A1 Ontos from 3rd Platoon, Charlie Company, 3rd Antitank Battalion in Operation *Kingfisher*. Although intended for antitank duties, the dearth of targets meant the vehicle was repurposed, providing valuable infantry support. Its complement of M546 antipersonnel “beehive” rounds proved especially destructive, and excellent at both clearing heavy foliage, and killing those seeking concealment. The projectiles could be Muzzle Activating, and detonate around 75m from the barrel, or via a fuse set to explode up to some 3,300m. As four of the Ontos’ six 106mm recoilless rifles had a mated .50-caliber spotting rifle, these were used for initial targeting as their round’s flight path matched that of the main guns. Having visually followed the smaller projectile via its tracer and its impact-inducing smoke puff, if on target the 106mm guns would subsequently be fired. During 2/9 Marines’ extraction on July 29, 1967, Sergeant Lynch was killed by rocket and mortar fire.



James M. Lynch. (Public domain)

bamboo tubes. Also, the NVA/VC units are placing a great premium on anti-tank tactics, which is evidenced by individual tanks having received as many as 10 RPG-2 hits in rapid succession. (Headquarters, 3rd Tank Battalion)

As Hotel Company moved south, its commander called in artillery support to lessen heavy NVA fire and mortars from the bunkers and spider holes that had been burrowed into the surrounding foliage. With aircraft in the area, “Sav-a-Plane” was in effect, and the request was denied, as jets had just left Đà Nẵng and would arrive on-scene soon. As a III MAF measure to reduce incoming-round impacts – something that almost never happened – the FAC pilot would radio nearby or inbound aircraft of active artillery and naval gunfire zones and times, while air sentries at batteries, and artillery liaisons provided ground support. As a substitute, Hotel Company’s commander ordered two Ontos from the column’s rear to fire on the clearing’s eastern treeline, and together they delivered a dozen 106mm rounds, after which a crewman had to exit the vehicle’s relative safety to reload. Suddenly, a B-40 struck one vehicle, killing two crewmen, and the second Ontos responded with suppressing fire that enabled the pair to continue on. Two nearby M48A3 crews had witnessed the event, and lingered to fire a few rounds before pulling back down the road, and watching for new adversaries.

To facilitate Hotel Company’s effort of “fighting in another direction,” its commander ordered a platoon to flank the troublesome bunkers along the

road's eastern edge. Having rebuffed any protests that the enemy would subsequently infiltrate their positions from behind, unfolding events proved the caution justified, as NVA soldiers occupied the Marines' exposed right, and used a machine gun to fire down the road. Having been ordered to establish a landing zone to evacuate Echo and H&S companies' wounded, as armored vehicles carried them to the potential location, the NVA forces tried to directly counter the effort with machine guns and B-40s, while mortars struck across the area. During the day's fighting, the Marines had suffered seven killed and 31 wounded. With an RPG having struck and set fire to one of the tanks, a corporal crawled from the vehicle, and used his M79 grenade launcher to silence a nearby 12.7mm machine gun. During the chaotic, painstakingly slow move to exit the woods, a gap developed between H&S Company and Foxtrot Company; the latter loaded casualties on the tanks and attacked to reestablish contact, at a cost of a further two US dead and 12 wounded by mortar fire.

As F-4 Phantom II aircraft finally arrived on the scene around midday, NVA soldiers left their defensive positions with fearful yells, and rushed into more open terrain to close with the Marines, and hopefully avoid incineration and asphyxiation. As the aircraft initiated their attack runs to drop silver napalm canisters east and west of the road, some Marines indicated that "friendlies" were in the targeted areas. Others, realizing that the figures in flak jackets and carrying M16s were actually enemy soldiers, began firing on the scrambling targets. Echo Company cut several down, while accompanying engineers knocked out a 12.7mm machine-gun position just off the road, killing seven NVA soldiers, before destroying the weapon and its ammunition. Golf Company remained at the column's rear, where it continued to withdraw while keeping the oncoming enemy at bay, eventually killing more than a dozen and wounding ten; an attached scout-sniper team killed 15 more.

At around 1400hrs, as Echo Company rounded a bend, it emerged in the southernmost and final NVA ambush site, which – along with two RPG strikes against an M48A3 that resulted in a turret penetration that wounded three crewmen – slowed the Marines' escape. NVA mortar rounds continued to fall as the Marines steadily gained fire superiority. With Command Group "A" and 2nd Platoon, Echo Company having extracted themselves from the cauldron soon after, at 1830hrs they linked up with Mike Company, 3/4 Marines, which had been notified about the situation and had moved up from Cồn Tiên to assist. At 1900hrs a B-40 RPG struck another M48A3, damaging its hydraulics and crippling turret power. Cut off and unable to move, two squads from Echo Company weathered heavy NVA automatic and rifle fire that eventually killed two Marines and wounded nine. Mike Company, 3/4 Marines moved north and got them out of the fray later that night.

With darkness approaching, and having to take care of numerous combat and heat-related wounded, at 1930hrs Hotel Company turned back to establish a defensive position on the high ground bordering the nearby clearing through which Provincial Route 606 passed, and join two squads from Golf Company and H&S Company, the latter comprising all the Naval personnel within the expedition. Having been with Command Group "A," Kent had taken operational control of Mike Company, 3/4 Marines and had

accompanied it to the north, where it managed to link up with Echo Company's two wayward squads around that time, before the two groups established a good defensive position for the night. To the south, the bulk of Echo Company organized its defenses and called in medevac helicopters for the casualties. Golf Company became isolated by 1,000m of jungle from the main body after dark, and due to caring for casualties, established its own defensive perimeter at 2100hrs.

Fortunately for the Marines, the NVA personnel were already disengaging and taking their dead and wounded with them, in part to hinder an accurate American body count. Established just south of the Bến Hải River, 324B (NVA) Division's 19B Surgery Station, under Doctor Nguyễn Bá Đạt, received and classified many of the wounded, with those needing surgery being moved to 19A Surgery Station on the river's north side. As one NVA veteran recalled:

... the men in the units always made efforts to remove their wounded and dead comrades from the battlefield for medical care and burial. But in some cases they were unable ... because of enemy air attacks after the ground attacks were over. In such cases, the men had to concentrate their efforts on removing the wounded, and of course the dead were left behind. (PFC Nguyễn Ngọc Dung, 1/16 (NVA) Regiment)

After dark, Kent initially informed the men of Echo Company that they would go back in the next morning, much to everyone's satisfaction, but on further thought decided not to wait. Having taken operational control of a company from 3/4 Marines and a section of tanks, the group soon headed north to attempt to link up with Hotel Company and the rest of the battalion. As Kent's force arrived along the DMZ's southern edge, NVA soldiers in the area disengaged, and quickly withdrew northward, seemingly satisfied with the damage they had inflicted. Golf and Foxtrot companies reported hearing shouting to their west, and called in artillery missions. In addition to making menacing catcalls and verbal taunts, NVA soldiers tortured and killed several captured and wounded Marines, in an effort to bait the Americans into trying to help their injured comrades. While most of 803 (NVA) Regiment began to pull back, at around 0330hrs an enemy sapper rushed into Foxtrot Company's perimeter to throw a satchel charge and fire his AK-47, managing to kill one Marine and wound three before the defenders killed him.

At dawn on July 30, Mike Company moved north and linked with the remainder of 2/9 Marines. CH-34s and the heavy-lift CH-46 helicopters arrived to medevac out all the casualties at Golf Company's position, with the remainder being taken out by 0900hrs. With 3/4 Marines providing a protective screen, the rest of 2/9 Marines left the DMZ by 1150hrs, having suffered 23 killed and 251 wounded (45 heat-related), with 191 medevaced out. Two tanks and two Ontos were also lost. Throughout the three ambush sites, 32 NVA bodies were found, but the Americans believed as many as 175 enemy deaths were likely due to air strikes. In spite of poor 3rd Marine Division decision-making and incomplete preliminary reconnaissance, accurate supporting-arms fire represented a major factor in preventing 2/9 Marines' destruction, and by noon the last of the US personnel left the DMZ.



A captured American 81mm high-explosive M43A1 mortar round that has been repurposed as a VC booby trap. Should an unsuspecting individual trip the wire it tugged the pull ring on the 121mm-long M60 weatherproof fuse igniter, which produced a small explosion sufficient to disconnect the anchoring wires to the projectile. Freed from its anchor, the M43A1 would drop to the ground, which triggered its M45 point-detonating fuse, and detonated the round's .5kg of Composition B (RDX and TNT) explosive. Similar traps used unexploded artillery rounds, hand grenades, and even containers filled with an ammonium nitrate and diesel fuel explosive concoction. To help prevent friendly casualties, warning signs that were made to blend into the surroundings were commonly placed nearby, including broken sticks in a directional pattern or an angled broken bamboo shaft pointing toward the device. (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)

# Huế, New City

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January 31–February 7, 1968

## BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

Since 1964, General Nguyễn Chí Thanh had led the elusive Central Office for South Vietnam, Hanoi's political and military headquarters below the DMZ. After nearly three years of orchestrating a largely successful insurgency against

Similar to a lessons-learned discussion, NVA soldiers regularly participated in "criticism/self-criticism" sessions to monitor each other, improve their tactics and techniques, convey information, and foster small group unity. As one veteran recalled: "I fought very enthusiastically for a year because I fully understood the revolutionary line of the party ... I have always believed that the Liberation Front and our Army have been fighting for the just cause, and sooner or later the people who fight for the just cause will win the war" (Private Nguyễn Văn An, 520 (NVA) Battalion). (Public domain)





To fight effectively in an enclosed, urban environment, the foot-bound Marines – such as those of Hotel Company, 2/5 Marines, shown here – would have to rely upon a mix of weapons, which in addition to their M16s and M60s, included 3.5in bazookas, M72 Light Antitank Weapons (LAW), 81mm mortars, and M79 grenade launchers. With movement along streets and other open areas dangerous during combat, especially in an urban environment such as Huế, both sides would blast holes through walls to advance from concealed or unexpected directions. Often satchel charges or bazooka rounds were sufficient, although accompanying M50A1 Ontos provided valuable service by concentrating 106mm recoilless-rifle fire against a target that would also likely be hit by smoke or tear gas to blind or incapacitate the NVA defenders. As such funneling routes were prime targets for affixing booby traps, vigilance and caution were key to minimizing casualties. (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)

ARVN forces, he felt the opportunity had come to initiate an offensive across the entire country that if successful would provide a foundation upon which to achieve ultimate victory. When he died suddenly on July 7, 1967, likeminded hard-line leaders in the North Vietnamese Politburo, led by Lê Duẩn, favored seeing the plan to fruition. In an atmosphere where any resistance to such policies could be construed as treasonous, more moderate leaders, such as Giáp and Hô, found little support for their “North first” mentality that emphasized solidifying a viable Socialist base in the north, and continuing the guerrilla campaign in the South, before attempting any national reunification. With the plan designed as a multiphase endeavor, NVA forces would first launch a series of probing attacks south of the DMZ to test enemy defenses, and hinder observation. Numerous VC assaults against important South Vietnamese urban centers and other high-value targets was anticipated to subsequently trigger a civilian liberation uprising. Once the South Vietnamese Government was overwhelmed and overthrown, the American presence would be vulnerable to a “second wave” of propaganda, and asymmetric and conventional combat

The US military commonly used Napalm B in Vietnam to destroy forests, fortified positions, and vehicle convoys, and the enemy that used them for cover. Burning at up to 2,760 degrees Celsius, the sticky gasoline, benzene, and polystyrene mix produced terrible burns, and asphyxiating carbon monoxide. By late 1967, the highly touted American strategic bombing campaign had failed to halt NVA infiltration south, and with Johnson pressuring him to devise a solution, Westmoreland endeavored to outmaneuver and destroy large numbers of the enemy using overwhelming firepower around Khe Sanh, and points west, to cut the Hồ Chí Minh Trail physically. (USAF)



Considering the VC attempted to blend with the local population, distinguishing a combatant from a civilian proved a difficult and frustrating endeavor for the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies. In contrast to the MACV commander's operational approach, Lieutenant General Cushman viewed the VC as North Vietnam's operational center of gravity, and identified South Vietnamese support of the Communists as the critical vulnerability to attack. By focusing on proven small-unit pacification efforts in the villages, he believed that only South Vietnamese civilians could most effectively resist and expel Communist elements, and provide a long-term security and stability solution. The Marines' pacification efforts would prove more successful than the more confrontational and destructive Westmoreland approach, in that the former minimized collateral damage that turned non-combatants against the American cause. (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)



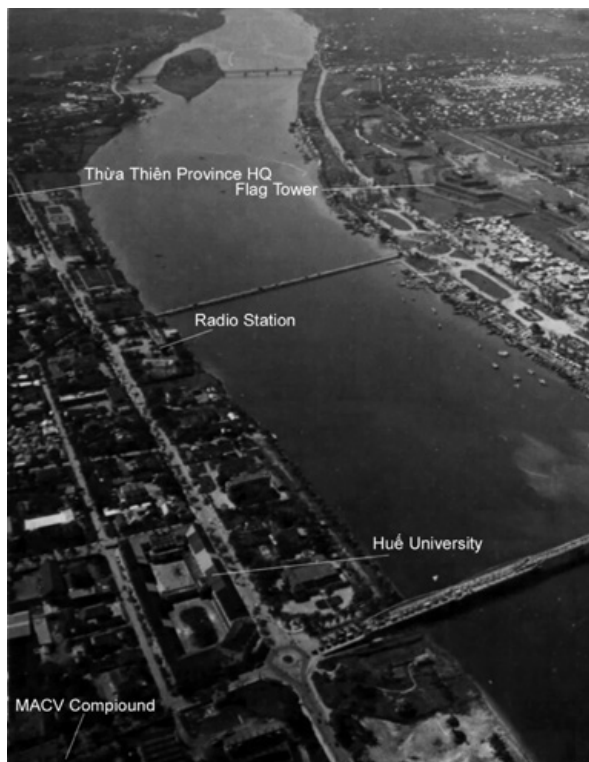
to manipulate public opinion and defeat any remaining isolated, demoralized enemy forces, per Mao's final "general offensive" warfare phase. Aware that much of the American public was against the conflict, and that 1968 was an election year in the United States, Hanoi felt the offensive was worth the risk – especially if the Johnson Administration could be discredited and further turn the American public against the fight. Should Hanoi's offensive fail, such an opportunity might not present itself again for several years.

During October 1967, the initial North Vietnamese actions began with a series of small attacks in remote areas along the DMZ to draw US attention away from what would soon be VC-targeted areas in the South. Recent increases in cross-border infiltrations had given credence to what the US command in Saigon viewed as a precursor to a major North Vietnamese offensive in early 1968, but details remained scarce or inaccurate. As the DMZ area was expected to be the enemy focus, American and ARVN forces gravitated to the region, much as Hanoi had anticipated. In the days leading to the offensive, those about to receive the onslaught were relatively lax, as despite warnings, in late January more than half of the ARVN forces were on leave due to the upcoming *Tết Nguyên Đán* Lunar New Year celebrations. At the nation's most important annual holiday, thousands had congregated around the city of Huế in anticipation of its prominent festivities, especially as a ceasefire was to be in effect between January 27 and February 3, 1968.

Located roughly 90km southeast of the DMZ, Huế was located within I Corps' area of operations, which was headquartered in nearby Đà Nẵng. With III MAF occupying the two northernmost provinces – Quảng Trị, buttressing North Vietnam, and Thừa Thiên – Major General Donn J. Robertson's 1st Marine Division was responsible for a sector that overlapped both cities. To best control such a large region, Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, Jr. – commander of III MAF from June 1967 – divided his command; 1st Marine

Division's (Forward) Headquarters was commanded by the assistant division commander, Brigadier General Foster C. LaHue. As "Task Force X-Ray" it was tasked with protecting Phú Bài, some 12km south of Huế, screening its western approaches, and keeping Highway 1 open. To accomplish the task, 1/1 Marines and 2/5 Marines were immediately available; although US morale was high, few had an idea of the overall situation in which they would soon enter. At present, the most recent US intelligence indicated that 6 (NVA) Regiment's headquarters as well as 804 Battalion were some 20km to the west of Huế, while 806 Battalion and 802 Battalion were 35km to the northeast and 20km to the south, respectively. 1st ARVN Division dismissed any notion that the enemy could mount a division-sized attack against the city.

With the North's initial operational phase having been largely successful, during the follow-up stage, the Communists were well informed of US and ARVN military dispositions, as they unleashed some 74,000 mostly VC combatants across South Vietnam. In the hours preceding the attack on Huế, some 7,500 North Vietnamese soldiers from 4 and 6 (NVA) regiments moved toward their respective assembly positions to the target's south and northwest, having been relatively unmolested during their travels. At 1800hrs on January 30, 4 (NVA) Regiment left the cover of the jungle and proceeded in orderly columns toward its nearby objective, taking a brief hilltop stop two hours later to eat dumplings, cake, and other items usually reserved for special occasions. Soon after, 4 (NVA) Regiment – comprising 804 Battalion along with 815 and 818 (NVA) battalions, labeled K4B and K4C (NVA) battalions in an apparent effort to confuse US intelligence – advanced toward the New City, a more contemporary urban area, with numerous French-style residences; it had been the former colonial authority's provincial capital, bounded by the Perfume River and Phú Cầm Canal. To its north, 6 (NVA) Regiment – comprising 800 Battalion, 802 Battalion, 806 Battalion, 12 and Huế City Sapper battalions, and 35 Rocket Launcher Battalion – headed for the older Annamese Imperial Citadel zone, with 802 Battalion making for 1st ARVN Division's headquarters, and 800 Battalion occupying the residential areas within the fortress's walls. The remainder of 6 (NVA) Regiment worked to cut off Huế from ARVN reinforcement, and secure the Tây Lộc airfield and Imperial Palace. Accompanying VC fighters carried lists of "enemies of the people," such as government officials, intellectuals, soldiers, and their families, with the intent of eliminating them. Considering the city was a major transportation hub, should the NVA and VC capture it, they would sever a vital logistics route between the DMZ and much of South Vietnam.



An aerial view of Huế taken on January 25, 1968, looking to the southwest and showing the Nguyễn Hoàng Bridge (bottom), a pontoon bridge, and the Bạch Hổ Railroad Bridge. The Citadel's southwestern corner can be seen at the upper right. (Marine Corps)

## 2/5 Marines and 4 (NVA) Regiment in Huế, January 31–February 7, 1968

### MAP KEY

**1 Morning, January 31:** With NVA and VC forces having launched an attack on Huế at 0330hrs on January 31, within a few hours Alpha Company, 1/1 Marines is dispatched from the Phú Bài area to assist the defense at the MACV compound. Although the Marines are able to cross the Phú Cẩm Canal at the An Cựu Bridge, resistance from 4 (NVA) Regiment elements halts further American progress. At 1030hrs the addition of Golf Company, 2/5 Marines provides the necessary impetus, and within a few hours, the two US formations arrive at the hard-pressed facility.

**2 1610hrs, January 31:** Golf Company, 2/5 Marines secures the Nguyễn Hoàng Bridge over the Perfume River and advances to the Citadel's Thượng Tứ Gate, one of ten such entrances through the fortress's surrounding wall.

**3 2000hrs, January 31:** Having reached the MACV compound at 1445hrs, Alpha and Golf companies begin to secure the surrounding area near the Perfume River.

**4 0700hrs, February 1:** to clear New City, platoons from Golf Company, 2/5 Marines advance southwest along Le Loi Street. After only a block, heavy US fire from the buildings near the city's University forces an NVA withdrawal, which the recently arriving Foxtrot Company, 2/5 Marines helps support.

**5 Night of February 1/2:** With US reinforcements having begun to arrive in the New City on January 31, NVA sappers trigger charges on the Bạch Hổ Railroad Bridge that drop it into the Perfume River.

**6 0855hrs, February 5:** Golf and Foxtrot companies from 2/5 Marines respectively secure the Cercle Sportif Club and University Library, and continue forward, capturing the Public

Health building complex. After fighting through 804 Battalion, 4 (NVA) Regiment and its stiff defense of the facility, the Marines will finally secure the Public Health building complex by 1630hrs.

**7 0950hrs, February 6:** With heavy enemy fire halting Hotel Company before the Provisional Headquarters building, the latter brings up M48A3 Patton tanks, recoilless rifles, and M50A1 Ontos for support. In what is becoming a popular tactic, the Marines incorporate E8 CS (tear gas) to hinder enemy resistance, as the North Vietnamese lack gas masks. Attacking the prison at 1415hrs, Golf Company personnel use satchel charges to blow a hole in three of the complex's encompassing walls before moving in to secure the facility.

**8 February 6:** As 2/5 Marines' Foxtrot, Golf, and Hotel companies approach their Phú Cẩm Canal objective, they secure the Provincial Headquarters using a combination of multiple arms types. With their backs against the waterway, the soldiers of 4 (NVA) Regiment struggle to maintain effective resistance.

**9 February 7:** After several days of slogging through house-to-house fighting, 2/5 Marines, and 1/1 Marines on their left steadily push tenacious NVA and VC forces defenders back to the southwest. Eventually, 4 (NVA) Regiment succumbs to the inevitable and withdraws over the Phú Cẩm Canal via five bridges that remain intact.

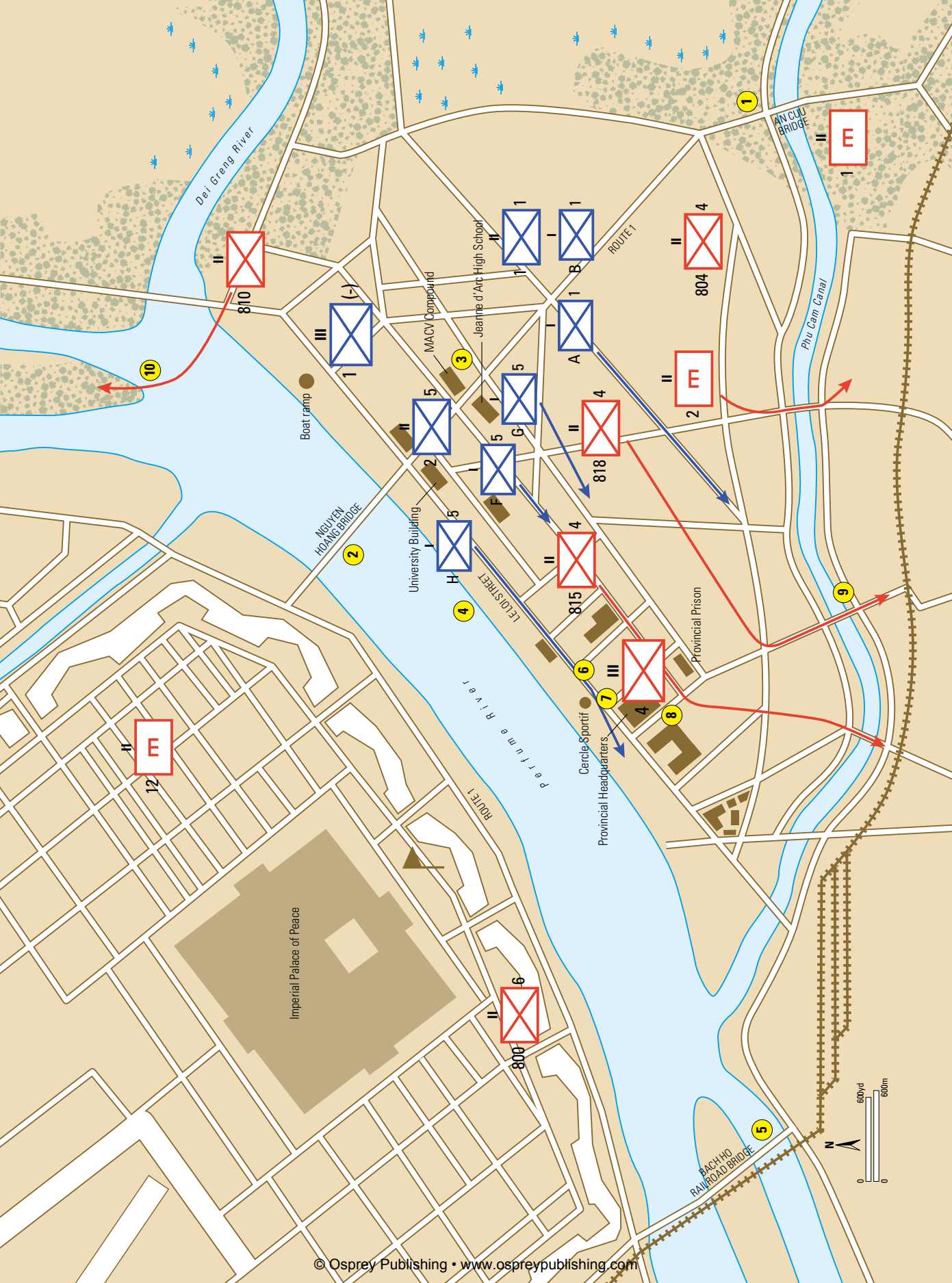
**10 February 7:** With little reason to remain in the New City once the remainder of 4 (NVA) Regiment abandoned the area, 810 (NVA) Battalion similarly departs, crossing the Perfume River just northeast of the MACV compound.

## Battlefield environment

With monsoon season affecting Vietnam's central coast from September to February, rain, and fog were common during the Huế fighting, where temperatures often dipped to 50 degrees Fahrenheit (10 degrees Celsius) – noticeably colder than normal. As with any urban environment large numbers of civilians were trapped and subjected to violence from both sides, whether intended or not, and many fought under this disguise, which hindered friend-or-foe identification. Multistory buildings, often culturally significant, provided a vertical element to the fighting, and rubble generally imparted a greater force multiplier than an intact wall. In such close-order fighting, booby traps were a particular hazard, as were snipers and grenades. Higher-echelon command and control were degraded due to numerous physical barriers that broke an attacking force into several groups that could not be mutually supporting, or would become isolated during the chaos of battle.

Considering the generally poor ARVN performance over the last few years, the friction between them and the Marines would complicate Allied operations throughout the fighting in Huế; forces in the MACV compound would be intended to

clear snipers and sporadic resistance, while caring for the civilian refugees, most of whom had a healthy distrust of both sides. Although terrified, most of Huế's citizens would initially remain locked in their homes, but as the fighting spread, thousands would gravitate to the MACV compound, the nearby Catholic church, and the University. Many fled south along Highway 1, which served to clog the congested route for military traffic. Since the Vietnamese avoided touching the deceased, the Marines used enemy prisoners to bury the numerous bodies. The suffering brought on by a lack of food, medical care, and sanitation was made worse, as refugees and ARVN personnel looted much of the emergency supplies from Đà Nẵng. Although some Marines participated, something 1/1 Marines commander Lieutenant Colonel Marcus J. Gravel felt the media would inflate, he made it known that any ARVN soldier seen looting would be summarily shot. Unlike during previous American overseas conflicts, international media personnel moved throughout the city, and alongside Marine units, to film, interview, and report from the front lines to an increasingly polarized homeland.



Deigreng River

1

ANCUO BRIDGE

E

810

II

10

Boat ramp

1

III

MACY Compound

3

Jeanne d'Arc High School

1

1

B

I

A

804

II

4

2

II

E

818

II

4

NOUYEN HOANG BRIDGE

2

University Building

2

II

5

H

I

5

4

F

5

G

5

I

5

II

4

II

4

815

II

4

II

4

6

III

4

7

4

8

III

4

8

Provincial Prison

9

ROUTE 1

LEO STREET

Perfume River

ROUTE 1

Cercle Sportif

Provincial Headquarters

12

E

II

12

Imperial Palace of Peace

800

II

6

RACH HO RAILROAD BRIDGE

5

N

0 600yd  
0 600m

## INTO COMBAT

At 0115hrs on January 31, 6 (NVA) Regiment and 12 (NVA) Sapper Battalion were poised to conduct simultaneous attacks; 45 minutes later, the former linked up with its guides. At about 0210hrs, 6 (NVA) Regiment seized a bridgehead into the Annamese Imperial Citadel, some 8km square. At the designated 0330hrs G-Hour, 122mm rockets were fired into the city, signaling the attack.

In response to the Tết truce being violated, and North Vietnamese attacks at Đà Nẵng and elsewhere in southern I Corps, Brigadier General Ngô Quang Trưởng, 1st ARVN Division commander, canceled all leave and ordered his units on full alert. With most away and unable to immediately rejoin their units, only some division staff, administrative, and reconnaissance personnel were available, along with Ngô Quang Trưởng's personal "Black Panther" Company within the walled, self-contained Mang Cá military compound in the city's northeast corner. In the New City's east, 804 Battalion focused on the MACV compound, repurposed from a former old Communist soldiers' home where the American advisory staff to 1st ARVN Division resided.

By 0800hrs, 4 (NVA) Regiment had also entered the walled fortress, and raised the VC flag over the Imperial Palace. Although NVA and VC forces captured or killed isolated pockets of enemy combatants throughout the city, 1st ARVN Division held firm. Over the next few hours, Communist forces secured the entire city, save 1st ARVN Division's headquarters and the MACV compound, but the attackers soon cut the wire communication link between the two.

With the situation in the city becoming evident, General Hoàng Xuân Lâm, I Corps commander, agreed with Cushman that 1st ARVN Division would assume responsibility for the Citadel, while TF X-Ray would retake the New City. LaHue ordered Lieutenant Colonel Marcus J. Gravel's 1/1 Marines in southern Huế to advance to the Provincial Headquarters building and adjacent prison, but inadequate intelligence led to just Alpha Company being dispatched to relieve the besieged American and South Vietnamese personnel. Moving north from Phú Bài along Highway 1, the company merged with four M48A3 tanks en route to the city. Since the VC forces were unsuccessful in their initial attempts to destroy the An Cựu Bridge, the Marines managed to cross the Phụ Cầm Canal before being attacked and pinned down just short of the MACV compound. At 1030hrs LaHue attached Captain Chuck Meadows' Golf Company, 2/5 Marines to Gravel's force, and sent him to Huế as well. With both companies now operating together, they were able to reestablish movement; they reached the MACV compound at 1445hrs, where they immediately took up positions, as well as the Navy's boat ramp on the Perfume River. With the Marines having secured the Nguyễn Hoàng Bridge's southern end, III MAF directed LaHue to have Alpha and Golf companies cross the waterway and make contact with 1st ARVN Division's headquarters.

Although circumstances on the ground were considerably at odds with higher-command assessments, Gravel sent Golf Company to secure the Nguyễn Hoàng Bridge; the Americans set off at 1610hrs. As 2nd Platoon reached the halfway point, NVA soldiers from 800 Battalion opened fire from the far bank. The Marines responded with small-arms and M60 fire, before one US infantryman rushed the NVA position, and eliminated it with grenades. While Golf Company's 2nd Platoon managed to advance as far as the Citadel's Thượng Tứ Gate, additional elements of 6 (NVA) Regiment



Personnel of Alpha Company, 1/1 Marines manhandle a 106mm recoilless rifle during the Huế fighting on February 9, 1968. Although the Headquarters & Service Company was tasked with operating the 106mm M40 recoilless rifle, as the caption states "Alpha Company, 1/1 Marines" they are likely assisting in moving the 209.5kg weapon. Technically a 105mm piece, its 106mm designation was used to avoid confusion with incorrect 105mm ammunition. The long tube above the barrel is an M8 .50-caliber spotting rifle, which provided targeting for the recoilless rifle as it shared a common trajectory. Although mounted on the M50A1 Ontos, and M274 "Mechanized Mule," it occasionally needed to be repositioned by hand, where its tripod's caster wheel reduced the need to carry the weapon outright. As a relatively lightweight rifle compared to the firepower it provided, it was a valuable asset in close urban fighting. (Sergeant Atwell (Marine Corps))

forced them back to the south bank, as well as Golf Company's 1st Platoon. After a two-hour fight, Golf Company was back at the MACV compound. Although NVA and VC forces would strike 36 provincial capitals, five autonomous cities, 64 district capitals, and over 50 hamlets across South Vietnam during January 31 and February 1, even at this early stage, the Central Office for South Vietnam's assessment of its Tết Offensive indicated to the Communist leadership that not every goal would be attained.

Still ignorant of the overall situation, LaHue ordered Gravel to secure the Provincial Prison, and at 0700hrs on February 1, 1st Platoon, Golf Company set off with two supporting M48A3s for the six-block trip down Le Loi Street, which ran parallel along the Perfume River. With the Americans having advanced just one block, elements from 804 Battalion halted the US probe with voluminous small-arms, sniper, and mortar fire, and even used a 57mm recoilless rifle to disable one of the accompanying American tanks. 2nd Platoon headed south to rescue two State Department officials, while 3rd Platoon was to provide convoy security for medevac, and to provide intelligence on the fighting, and the city's defenses.

Although poor weather hampered American air support, during the afternoon, Foxtrot Company, 2/5 Marines conducted a heliborne movement with CH-46s into the landing zone adjacent to the MACV compound. Like Golf Company, Foxtrot Company had two 81mm mortars and two 106mm recoilless rifles; it expected a short fight, and arrived without packs. 2nd Platoon, Foxtrot Company soon moved to relieve 1st Platoon, Golf Company when the latter came under enemy fire from windows and rooftops, much of it with green tracers, and Foxtrot Company's 3rd Platoon was ordered to help Golf Company men withdraw. Although both the NVA and Marines were out of their element in an urban environment, each improvised where they could, and resolved to fight tenaciously to accomplish their respective goals.

Although the M50A1 Ontos was intended as a self-propelled antitank vehicle, the absence of such targets in Vietnam meant they were more often used to provide infantry support. Once the vehicle fired, a crewman needed to exit to reload the 106mm recoilless guns. (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)



During the night of February 1/2 the NVA dropped the Bạch Hổ Railroad Bridge, but the Highway 1 crossing remained intact, and American forces and supplies were subsequently streaming across.

On February 2, Hotel Company, 2/5 Marines drove into Huế under fire, and joined the forces in and around the MACV compound in what had been a piecemeal commitment of American forces to the city. Three of the battalion's four rifle companies were now engaged, with Echo Company, reinforced with two 81mm mortars, held back to guard the An Cựu Bridge. Golf Company seized the University Building, and at 1545hrs, Foxtrot and Hotel companies attacked the Treasury and Public Health buildings, respectively. Intense small-arms and four B-40 rocket rounds struck the former from the front, as additional fire poured into the unit's left from the Le Loi Primary School. While Foxtrot Company fought through 20 rounds of 60mm mortar fire during the afternoon, two more B-40 projectiles struck and immobilized two supporting tanks. At 1758hrs 1st Platoon, Hotel Company reached its objective, with help from a 106mm recoilless-rifle crew, and supporting M48A3s firing 20 90mm rounds into the stubborn defenders, which 15 minutes later also helped repulse a NVA counterattack on the University. That evening, Foxtrot Company's 1st and 3rd platoons moved against enemy positions near the MACV compound; with the enemy fire remaining heavy, at 1956hrs, Foxtrot Company moved back to its original position, and along with its accompanying units established defensive positions in which to prepare for more fighting the following day.

During the morning of February 3, Lieutenant Colonel Ernest Cheatham, Jr., was ordered to move a convoy to Huế and assume command of Gravel's three companies. Although Cheatham was an experienced, creative commander, his knowledge of street fighting, like everyone else's, was minimal. Rounding up two field manuals that addressed the issue, he found that they stressed isolating the battlefield, seizing footholds, and conducting

systematic clearing operations – an approach he would use to good effect. The new commander of 1st Marine Regiment, Colonel Stanley S. Hughes, whom LaHue tasked with overall command of the Marines in Huế, accompanied the convoy. Racing through an ambush and into the MACV compound, Hughes established his command post, took over from Gravel, and began issuing orders despite the continuing dearth of accurate intelligence. Having brought the remaining six 106mm recoilless rifles, gas shells, C-4 plastic explosives, 3.5in rockets, and a flamethrower, Cheatham was finally to clear the New City by advancing west from the compound, generally along Le Loi Street and parallel to the Perfume River to where it met the Phú Cầm Canal.

There was fighting going on all sides. There was no front line and the NVA were in every house and building. My crew would fire their M16s for cover fire, so we could get one or two rounds off. I want to tell how brave the men of 2/5 were in combat at Hue City, but it would take too long. We would go on 4 to 6 fire missions a day. The one thing about a 106[mm] recoilless rifle is the backblast is almost as bad as the round you were shooting [and it] would also give the NVA a good idea where you are, so you fire and move fast. We had a driver of the mule [Lance Corporal William W. Hook] get shot and killed by a sniper getting the gun out in [the] street. The fighting was house to house and street by street. (Corporal John Iannone, Hotel Company, 2/5 Marines)

Having been halted the day before, 2/5 Marines now prepared to counterattack, in what promised to be a painstaking process of clearing individual buildings defended by a determined enemy. Foxtrot Company soon set off, with Hotel Company to its north and Golf Company as a reserve. With as little urban fighting experience as their adversary, the Marines pushed forward into an environment that comprised numerous prepared kill zones, fire from various elevations, and confined interbuilding actions that frequently involved close combat, and adapted tactics by trial and error to attain their objectives, as they moved through a lingering drizzle and fog. To advance, small infantry teams worked with tanks and 106mm recoilless rifles to blast routes through walls and buildings, while self-propelled M42 Dusters employed repurposed 40mm antiaircraft rounds that were devastating against soft targets. Unable to prevent the enemy's steady progress to the southwest, NVA and VC soldiers often resorted to using noncombatants as shields, or forcibly occupied structures to dissuade an attack. Restrictive American rules of engagement negated aircraft, naval, and artillery support, although ARVN forces operated without such constraints and regularly called in A-1 Skyraider aircraft to attack targets within the Citadel, as well as 8in howitzers and offshore gunfire. NVA and VC attacks were similarly unbounded, although they mostly lacked such assets.

Led by Captain George R. "Ron" Christmas, Hotel Company crossed Lý Thường Kiệt Street from the University Building at 0700hrs on February 4 and blasted openings in building walls into the Public Health building complex. Over the last few days, 4 (NVA) Regiment's 815 and 818 battalions, and 2 Sapper Battalion had conducted a tenacious fight against 2/5 Marines, although the NVA soldiers were steadily pushed back toward the Phú Cầm Canal. Along the American left, 1/1 Marines was preparing to assault the



An M29 81mm mortar pictured at Khe Sanh later in 1968. The after-action report prepared by 2/9 Marines in the wake of the Huế fighting stated: "Because of inclimate [sic] weather and the close proximity of forward units to the enemy, air and artillery support could not be employed for any immediate tactical advantages. The situation caused an ever increasing dependence on weapons organic to the infantry battalion. The 81mm mortar, 106mm recoilless rifle and 3.5 rocket launcher proved invaluable in house to house combat." (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)

Jeanne d'Arc High School, which was just across Highway 1 from the MACV compound, while other battalion administrative and maintenance personnel covered the rear. NVA soldiers in the Le Loi Primary School resisted the enemy assault with automatic weapons, while snipers provided support from nearby buildings. Marine squads rushed forward, and managed to support Captain Michael P. Downs' Foxtrot Company during its assault on the Treasury building, which began at 1030hrs. Again, direct-fire 106mm recoilless rifles mounted on M274 "Mechanical Mules" added a powerful US asset in the restricted-effort urban environment, and could blow a hole 4m square in walls or buildings. One of the most successful tactics involved throwing smoke, checking the target via .50-caliber tracer, and firing the weapon; with the detonation and resulting debris, the Marines would advance across an open area to the next protective structure.

Before moving on to our objective we met with the platoon leader to discuss our job and how to carry it out. Everybody was invited to give his opinion. Through this meeting the platoon leader learned what would be best to do. The procedure was also applied at squad and cell levels. (Private Nguyễn Văn An, 520 (NVA) Battalion)

At 1141hrs, Hotel Company moved aggressively to recapture the Public Health building, with support from rocket-launcher, M72, M79, and M60 fire. Twenty minutes later, two RPGs and small-arms fire from the Treasury building hit Foxtrot Company, which returned it in kind, along with four E8 CS (tear gas) launchers, each of which could fire up to 64 CS rounds in batches of 16, and seized the building under its protective cover at 1345hrs. As Hotel and Golf companies continued to make grinding progress, an NVA warrant officer surrendered. The remaining defenders continued to resist; as the Americans forced the shelter door, a Marine launched an M72 projectile into the opening, which caused secondary explosions that killed nearly two-dozen enemy defenders.

Golf Company, 2/5 Marines advanced along the right down Le Loi Street, while a block to its left Hotel Company similarly slogged ahead. Major Ralph J. Salvati, 2/5 Marines' executive officer, acquired a number of E8 CS launchers, and distributed these to the fighting companies. By using such non-lethal weapons, the Marines could better engage and eject enemy forces from buildings, while keeping civilian casualties relatively low. Under Salvati's direction a 106mm recoilless rifle was lugged up a staircase to a classroom overlooking the Treasury building to engage an enemy machine-gun position that was giving the Marines trouble. One round devastated the position, but even with improvising a lanyard to minimize the backblast in an enclosed room, part of the building still collapsed upon firing. Led by 3rd Platoon, the Marines methodically cleared the targeted building, which was made easier as the defenders lacked gas masks, before moving on to the university, the Public Health building complex, and the Jeanne d'Arc High School. To the southeast, NVA sappers belatedly detonated explosives on the An Cựu Bridge during the night of February 4/5, which forced the Marines to use the river and ramp for Landing Craft, Utility ships just north of the MACV compound. On February 7, the sappers would do the same to part of the Nguyễn Hoàng Bridge.

At 0532hrs on February 5, the Marines followed up on the previous day's success, and 2/5 Marines now easily seized the university library at 0855hrs.

Advancing against strong resistance, Foxtrot Company secured the left flank, while Hotel and Golf companies, with artillery support, battled forward to take the city's well-defended Public Health building complex after lunch, and capture 30 NVA soldiers. At 1251hrs, Foxtrot Company brought up an M50A1 Ontos to add firepower to their effort to neutralize enemy fire, and eventually seize the position. One Ontos crewman recalled:

The NVA fought with every thing they had, and I'm glad they didn't bring more to the fight. We lost a lot of good Marines and we inflicted great damage on the NVA. We found one NVA soldier tied to his machine gun. Getting around was sometimes difficult, and we started working with a tank and infantry, but the streets were very narrow, so we worked just with the infantry. We had to be very concerned with our back blast, as it had a killing range of 150 ft [46m]. The infantry wanted to stay behind our Ontos, but we couldn't fire with them behind us. As far as cover, we had to stay with the infantry and take what we got, which were lots of RPG's and snipers. We did relocate to re-load when we could, being shorthanded, on loader the OC [Officer Commanding] would get out and reload. Having six 106mm recoilless rifles helped, and after we fired 2 or 3 rounds we didn't get much return fire. There was no place safe in Hue. We were taught not to dismount the Ontos. When a fellow platoon crew did so on Feb 25 they were both shot to death. (Private Walter Brock, 1st Antitank Battalion)

At 0950hrs on February 6, Hotel Company was temporarily halted as it attempted to capture the Provincial Headquarters building, which required tanks, 106mm recoilless rifles, and an Ontos be brought up to eliminate the holdup. One tank received two B-40 rockets that caused minor damage, while against steady fire from the front and flanks, the Marines relied on the now customary combination of CS gas, 81mm mortars, and other fire to silence the enemy position. At 1415hrs, Fox and Golf companies secured the prison, and ten minutes later, Hotel Company tried to use CS gas on the Provincial Headquarters building, but windy conditions confounded the effort, and Captain Christmas ordered 1st Platoon to attack. Moving to the outer wall as protection from enemy fire from the building, the Marines wore gas masks to retain combat effectiveness. When an M48A3 came up as support, Christmas used its phone to direct 90mm fire into the targeted structure, along with 81mm mortar rounds and additional tear-gas grenades. Having blown a hole in the surrounding wall, 1st Platoon charged across the open courtyard, and



February 28, 1968: Looking south along the multispans bowstring girder Nguyễn Hoàng Bridge, part of Highway 1. Marines attempted to cross to the Citadel's Thượng Tứ Gate, when heavy NVA fire forced them back to the southern bank. On February 7, enemy sappers triggered explosives that dropped a span into the Perfume River. Note the pontoon foot bridge at left. (Cummins (Marine Corps))





## Street fighting in Huế City



**USMC view:** In an attempt to eject NVA forces from Huế City south of the Perfume River in early February 1968, US Marines frequently had to fight in a confined, confused urban environment. With the fighting to date in South Vietnam having occurred predominantly in rural areas, the Marines had to relearn many of the city-clearing lessons learned by US servicemen during World War II,

such as at Aachen, Aschaffenburg, and Manila. Shown here on February 6, personnel of 2/5 Marines use M16s, with M60 support, to engage enemy forces near the Phú Cẩm Canal. With roads lacking sufficient cover, the Americans found blasting holes through building walls was often the best way to advance.



**NVA view:** As part of 4 (NVA) Regiment's defense of Huế's "New City" district, a determined 804 Battalion tried to block 2/5 Marines' southwestern advance toward the Phú Cẩm Canal on February 6. Equally unaccustomed to urban fighting as their adversary, the defenders relied on

Type 56 assault rifles, RPD light machine guns, snipers, and RPGs, and commonly defended from multiple stories and directions. To further complicate Marine efforts that were already limited by restricted fire options, NVA forces often placed civilians throughout structures.

repeated the breaching on the Provincial Headquarters building's front door, before throwing in grenades and spraying the interior with M16 fire. With the rest of the company following behind, the Marines finally secured the building. Having done the majority of the fighting, at 1600hrs Marines took down the NVA flag and replaced it with an American one, in breach of protocol that required the ARVN standard occupy the top position.

I was there when we took down their Yellow and Red Flag and I was there with the SGT of Hotel 2/5 when he put our stars and stripes up. It was [a] big thing for us. The 4th NVA Regiment was good [and] we did the best we could! I think now how lucky I was to live through it, but I still to this day do not know how.  
(Corporal John Iannone, Hotel Company, 2/5 Marines)

During a week of heavy fighting, the Marines had essentially destroyed 4 (NVA) Regiment, and ejected most of the enemy from the New City. An estimated 1,053 NVA soldiers were killed. With Phase I completed, Phase II would now begin with the objective of capturing the Citadel, as 1/5 Marines was subsequently ordered to cross the Perfume River to assist the stubborn but hard-pressed 1st ARVN Division elements. As it fought an equally dogged battle for the Citadel, 2/5 Marines mopped up scattered enemy resistance in the area they had recently captured, during which the Americans also uncovered mass graves of executed South Vietnamese civilians. With a full two weeks to prepare prior to the Marines' arrival, the Communists had created hundreds of well-fortified and –camouflaged, mutually supporting positions throughout the fortress's dense confines. As on the south side, NVA sniper fire proved very effective; in response to calls for an easing of the restrictive rules of engagement, on February 3, the use of 5in and 6in naval guns plus 8in and 155mm artillery was permitted by senior South Vietnamese commanders. This fire did considerable damage to 80 percent of the buildings and structures of the historically, culturally, and spiritually significant city; this was well publicized, and proved detrimental to the already faltering public support for the conflict.

Following two more weeks of bitter fighting, 1/5 Marines finally secured the northeast wall of the Citadel on February 21, with minimal ARVN support. Two days later, 6 (NVA) Regiment ordered a withdrawal, and the Marines followed up to secure the northeast wall and eliminate any lingering resistance in the Imperial Palace. In a public-relations move, the ARVN's elite "Black Panther" Company was given the opportunity to make the final assault in Huế; after the ARVN soldiers encountered little resistance, the VC flag was replaced with that of South Vietnam. On February 26, final mop-up operations commenced, and on the following day the fight for Huế effectively ended; it had been the longest and bloodiest struggle of the Tết Offensive, in which 10,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, and 116,000 civilians were made homeless refugees. To accomplish Huế's recapture, the Marines suffered 142 killed and 857 wounded, with North Vietnamese casualties ranging between 1,042–2,400 killed plus 3,000 wounded (according to NVA estimates), and 5,113 killed (according to American estimates). Some 5,800 civilians died, with the VC having executed at least 1,200 of these; they were then buried around the city in 18 mass graves.

# Analysis

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In 1967–68, the USMC and the NVA both endeavored to translate strategic-level objectives into operational and tactical solutions to accomplish a variety of combat, economic, and political goals, as part of their respective efforts to block a Communist takeover in South Vietnam, and to unify the country. How each accomplished this depended on an equally varied mix of variables, including politically imposed constraints, cultural mindsets, intelligence gathering, technological sophistication, manufacturing output, and an ability to create, train, and maintain units in the field.

In particular, skilled, effective leadership could impart stability to a chaotic operating arena in which the friction of war wrought havoc with the best-laid plans. An operational commander needed to maneuver to isolate his adversary from his support base by locating and interdicting enemy lines of communication and main supply routes, and to commit appropriate forces that were effectively trained, equipped, organized, and motivated for the particular circumstances and environment. He also needed to exploit an intelligence-gathering framework that included recruiting and cultivating local informants. The three actions examined in this study offer useful insights into how the two sides sought to achieve victory, and why their efforts met with success or failure on the battlefield.

## **LESSONS LEARNED: USMC**

During the early Marine involvement in Vietnam, combat operations focused on providing security for their large logistics and air base at the coastal port of Đà Nẵng. As the Marines pushed beyond this limited area of operations, and into the countryside, their tactics transitioned to denying the enemy access to the general population, and preventing the NVA and VC from effectively recruiting and supplying their forces in the field. As the Marines



As a relatively light machine gun, the gas-operated, air-cooled M60 could be fired from several positions depending on the battlefield situation, and although its recoil decreased with successive rounds, accuracy would certainly suffer when firing while standing. Operated by a two-man team, it provided a Marine squad with a considerable firepower base, with a 600 rounds-per-minute rate of fire and a 1,200m maximum range. The weapon used several types of ammunition, including the M80 Ball, which was typically used with M62 tracer rounds at a respective 4:1 ratio, M61 armor-piercing, M63 Dummy, and M82 Blanks. Shown here in December 1967, this machine-gunner sports an M1911 hip holster, and an M1955 flak jacket. (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)

built up more permanent positions along the DMZ, they had to contend with NVA infiltration into, and VC activity throughout South Vietnam's northern provinces. Often enemy artillery and mortars fired into these bordering combat bases' fire, which being located in North Vietnam meant retaliatory fire was generally prohibited due to political constraints that sought to prevent the war's expansion.

As the Marines viewed the battle space as a single entity, in which ground, naval, and aerial assets were considered parts of a whole combat arena, everyone was expected to fight, regardless of rank or role. The Hill Fights in early 1967 reflected part of this doctrine of integration designed to best attain a goal and minimize casualties and material, as evidenced by the use of tactical air support and artillery. Although the Marines continued to work with the local population, many opportunities for gaining additional information were either underutilized or ignored. This included the KSCB commander, Lieutenant Colonel James H. Reeder's delay in accurately discerning enemy movement and intentions, and eliminating the threat.

Tasked with conducting a foray into the DMZ per the *Kingfisher* operation, Marine reconnaissance, again, missed a key piece of intelligence; had the bridge just northeast of Thon Cẩm Sơn been detected prior to the mission's planning, US forces would likely not have been funneled into a nearly impossible tactical situation. Instead, the participating Marines uncovered the obstruction mid-mission, and were forced to disregard their sensible policy of not returning the way they had come. During the Marines' subsequent extraction along a narrow, constricted road, the anticipated NVA ambush forced the Americans to integrate with their accompanying armored vehicles, improvise, and weather physical, as well as psychological trauma.

With the majority of combat in Vietnam relegated to rural environments, the urban fighting in Huế represented a new arena in which to fight, adapt, and survive. Much as with *Kingfisher*, the confined nature of street fighting limited the effectiveness of supporting armor, which was also subjected to



During a break in the Hué fighting, a Marine Ontos crewmember rests on his vehicle, his M16A1 at the ready. While combatants could function for a few days with fragmented sleep, productivity, attention, anticipation, and command and control progressively suffered, commensurate with decreased prefrontal cortex and thalamus brain activity. Considering the Ontos' relatively thin armor, spare track sections, wheels, sandbags, and equipment were often positioned to increase its effective thickness. The transmission hatch at the Marine's right foot was part of a larger grill that also contained the engine's access panel. At the vehicle's rear, two doors provided access to the central compartment, where four rounds for the six M40A1C guns were stored, with eight more behind a folding compartment underneath. (Lance Corporal Messenger (Marine Corps))

framework that reflected the World War II German *Auftragstaktik* concept of mission-oriented directives served to promote individual, on-the-spot initiative and teamwork to successfully complete a mission. As the Marines tended to receive far less material and support than other American services, they were better able to improvise a battlefield solution from what material was available, and avoid unnecessary waste. Instead of the Army's attritional approach that was designed to engage and push an enemy force from a targeted combat zone, and reduce them through attrition faster than they could replace losses, the Marines relied on the Corps' experience with insurgent fighting, that promoted a greater degree of civilian and ARVN cooperation, and helped solidify an effective doctrine that could be applied as necessary to achieve success.

## LESSONS LEARNED: NVA

By resorting to irregular tactics, avoiding a confrontation until in a superior position, and maintaining a minimal supply trail, the NVA was able to initiate combat in over 80 percent of engagements, according to American statistics. To maintain freedom of maneuver, units tended to move at least once per week to hinder enemy intelligence-gathering, find new food sources, and solidify zones of civilian control. By taking advantage of an ever-improving Hô Chí Minh Trail, the North was able to provide a relatively safe and reliable stream of men and material south, and outside of their enemy's official ability to respond. While NVA preparation seemed inferior to Western standards, it proved sufficient for the tasks North Vietnam's soldiers were expected to undertake.

Having participated in heavy fighting in the hills northwest of KSCB, by early May 1967 forward elements from 304 (NVA) and 325C (NVA) divisions were forced to withdraw from the targeted area, and many of the Marines were reallocated to other sectors along the DMZ. Although the NVA effort to secure valuable terrain that provided cover and enabled direct observation of the facility had failed, senior commanders maintained their original commitment, and began reorganizing for an even more powerful offensive to eliminate the base. By establishing a series of concealed, often interconnected

close-range antitank weapons. In an effort to preserve culturally significant buildings, the Marines on the ground worked largely independently of air and artillery support. To best make progress the extensive use of smoke and tear gas obscured observation and degraded NVA combat effectiveness, as they lacked protective masks. Ultimately, the Marines were able to exploit what tanks, Ontos, demolitions, and other assets were available to push enemy forces from Hué south of the Perfume River within a week.

In each action, US Marines' insistence on a decentralized command-and-control



Always looking to innovate to gain a tactical advantage, these NVA soldiers, photographed near Cao Lanh in the Mekong Delta during 1973, use inflated bags to keep their rifle barrels out of the water, and to act as a makeshift firing platform if needed. They remain close to the heavily forested riverbank to gain concealment, especially from enemy aircraft. Note the nearest soldier is missing the badge on his sun helmet. (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)

bunkers throughout the battlezone, the NVA could relocate to threatened areas, which needed little or no modification for defense. Forced to pry them out, the US forces employed considerable ordnance, artillery, and casualties in the effort.

As the NVA and VC worked to bolster their positions along the DMZ for eventual use during the planned Tết Offensive in January 1968, one formation, 803 (NVA) Regiment, was presented with an excellent opportunity to inflict considerable casualties on 1/9 Marines, in what was an ill-conceived American reconnaissance-in-force along the Bến Hải River. Able to establish three defensive positions along which their adversary would have to pass, NVA soldiers applied ambush, subterfuge, and close-in fighting to exploit both sides of the Marines' exposed extraction route. Although 3/4 Marines arrived before the NVA were able to further capitalize on their success, the latter simply recrossed the waterway, and moved back into the relative safety of North Vietnamese territory.

During the opening stages of the Tết Offensive, NVA and VC forces captured the city of Hu , as a prelude to eliminating military, as well as civilian resistance. Although as ill-prepared for urban combat as the US Marines that attempted to take back this political, cultural, and logistical asset, the latter proved better able to adapt to the fighting, and leverage assets such as smoke and tear gas, to which the NVA defenders had no solution, being without gas masks. While conducting an aggressive defense, NVA forces were steadily evicted over the next several weeks, in what was an operational failure.

Despite this, and though lacking modern military assets in large amounts, NVA morale and motivation remained high, due to tight oversight, political indoctrination, frequent criticism/self-criticism sessions, and a belief in the cause. Leadership tended to be shrewd and ruthless in accomplishing its military and political goals. NVA soldiers tended to have absorbed and assimilated the constant stream of ideological rhetoric to the point of it being their conviction and opinion, and were able to learn, adapt, and apply lessons learned in combat.

# Aftermath

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Photographed in 1969, this Marine performs sentry duty. While Marine tactics proved largely successful in fighting their NVA adversary, and keeping enemy forces from the civilian population, by 1969 the aftereffects of the Tét Offensive – while an operational failure – inadvertently produced a North Vietnamese strategic victory, with US President Richard M. Nixon (in office 1969–74) actively working to allocate the combat role exclusively to the South Vietnamese. As this Vietnamization of the war expanded, the Marines' role in-country diminished, until III MAF's departure in 1971. (Tom Laemlein / Armor Plate Press)



Instead of embracing counterinsurgency, as Kennedy, and others with experience and expertise in the matter, had promoted, Westmoreland opted for large-scale “search and destroy” operations that utilized body counts as a measure of success. As these included considerable artillery and air-strike support, such heavy-handed tactics caused high civilian casualties, and undermined “hearts and minds” campaigns designed to win over the local population. By not offering adequate protection from both themselves and the enemy, the US military frequently exposed non-combatants to being caught between a seemingly uncaring foreign invader on the one hand, and Communist forces that exploited them to fill their ranks and stomachs. Once such operations were completed, American forces would generally leave the area, which allowed a temporarily defeated enemy to return and continue their efforts at indoctrinating the local population, and regaining their strength.

Perhaps the most significant and innovative Marine Corps innovation during the conflict was the Combined Action Program. Such groupings proved well suited to an unconventional battlefield, as they merged a Marine detachment with local Vietnamese forces and positioned them in the surrounding hamlets. The resulting amicable relationship with locals promoted trust, provided hamlet security, helped restore political authority, and helped win the fight for “hearts and minds,” which, in turn, hampered enemy strength and influence. Starting with some 37 percent of Marines interviewed in 1966 expressing “like” of the local Vietnamese people compared to 35 percent reciprocally indicating a “dislike,” after just two years of integrated service, these figures had changed to 59 percent “like” and just 17 percent “dislike.” Additional research in 1967 concluded that of two regiments studied, it was found that Vietnamese assistance (which included providing warnings of enemy attack, turn-in of enemy weapons, enemy mine and booby-trap positions, and enemy movements) was exceedingly higher in the culturally trained regiment. Thus, the actions of



the CAPs were divorced from the methods of the high-tech conflict; they conformed to an unconventional manner that gained success against an enemy that seldom waged conventional war. Although the CAPs prescribed to this with proven success, the program was never fully embraced by many of the senior leaders who followed conventional warfare traditions.

As per Mao's three principles of warfare, Hanoi was ultimately focused on developing sufficient strength to conduct a conventional fight to "liberate" the South, and unify the country. Such endeavors, however, would not always be successful, as demonstrated by the Tết Offensive in early 1968, when the plans made by Giáp and Thanh grossly overestimated the South's desire for revolution, to the VC's, and the North's detriment. Throughout 1967/68, the NVA was forced to conduct a second stage of warfare. Having organized, consolidated their fighting forces, and created a sufficient logistical network in which to support them, both inside and outside of the official battlezone, North Vietnamese senior leadership moved to progressively expand on these successes by attacking isolated facilities to inflict casualties and secure food and weapons, and South Vietnamese popular support. Once sufficiently strong, and, with widespread civilian support, North Vietnamese forces would transition to a conventional war to "liberate" the country, in concert with a South Vietnamese civilian uprising.



On February 8, 1971, South Vietnam launched Operation *Lam Son 719* into neighboring Laos to interdict the Hồ Chí Minh Trail between Khe Sanh and Xépôn. With US forces steadily working toward a complete withdrawal from the conflict, they continued to provide logistical and air support to the ARVN, in the hopes of bolstering the South Vietnamese forces' fighting capabilities and morale. Having encountered a much larger enemy force of some three divisions, the South Vietnamese offensive soon floundered. On March 14, 1971, III MAF withdrew from South Vietnam. Shown here on March 1, 1971, NVA soldiers assault 3rd (ARVN) Airborne Brigade elements in Forward Support Base 31, roughly 25km east of Xépôn. The nearest soldier carries either a Soviet SKS semiautomatic carbine or the Chinese Type 56 copy. Note the extended bayonet. (Photo by Keystone/Getty Images)

Having fought a conventional war that overran much of South Vietnam, NVA soldiers celebrate the capture of Saigon on April 30, 1975. The forward soldier carries a B-40 (RPG-2), while those behind have Type 56 (or AK-47) automatic rifles; note the lack of rank insignia. In 1973 a ceasefire was called, and two years after that North Vietnamese forces successfully completed their third, and final combat phase – conventional warfare. With ARVN forces suddenly routed, North Vietnamese forces steadily overran most of the South. On April 30, 1975, Communist forces captured the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon to effectively reunify the nation, and end more than 30 years of fighting. (Photo by Herve GLOAGUEN/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

# UNIT ORGANIZATIONS

## USMC rifle battalion

As a USMC division's primary tactical field component, the rifle battalion was organized, armed, and equipped to fight independently. Typically commanded by a lieutenant colonel, the unit had an official strength of 1,249, and a mix of subordinate units to accomplish a variety of offensive and defensive actions. These included an H&S Company, under which were Medical, Administrative, Assault (3.5in M20A1B1 "Super Bazookas"), Antitank (106mm M67 recoilless rifles), Supply, Transportation, and Mortar (81mm M29) platoons. The remaining "square" of four rifle companies each comprised a weapons platoon, with three rifle platoons. The weapons platoon – fielding 60mm M19 mortars, 3.5in M20A1B1 bazookas, and M60 GPMGs – was organized as three eight-man squads, each with two M60 machine-gun operators, a pair of assistants, and ammunition carriers; these could be employed as rifle-platoon support, or centrally coordinated. Few mortars were carried in the field, and the bazookas were generally only used in certain circumstances, such as against a bunker or built-up position. The M72 shoulder-fired light antitank weapon (LAW) provided a less encumbering solution for the latter, and the spent firing container could be discarded. The rifle platoon comprised an HQ and three 14-man squads under a squad leader, a grenadier, and three fire teams. Within these four-man units, a team leader coordinated the actions of an automatic rifleman, and two scout riflemen. The combination of automatic rifles, light machine guns, and rocket launchers provided the basic Marine units with a variety of immediately available firepower options.

## NVA battalion

Where the USMC rifle battalion had a "squared" composition, NVA infantry battalions and subordinate formations were structured as a "triangle," commonly called a "system of three." Under a major (*thiếu tá*), the unit had an official strength of 500 soldiers, but this was seldom achieved in the field. Each battalion headquarters was partnered with a political staff, and oversaw three rifle companies. Each comprised a headquarters and three infantry platoons. NVA rifle companies also included a Weapons Platoon (7.62mm submachine guns, 60mm Type 31 mortars), a Combat Support Company (82mm Type 67 mortars, 12.7mm machine guns, 57mm Type 36 recoilless rifles), and Engineer, Reconnaissance, and Signals platoons. The infantry platoon fielded three squads armed with 7.62mm light machine guns and RPG-2s or RPG-7s, with each of these made up of three three-man cells. As NVA infantry battalions lacked their adversary's large, well-established logistic system, small arms and RPGs predominated in practice.

Refugees pass M48A3 tanks in Huế on February 3, 1968. Tanks provided the Americans with welcome support, but the constrained streets hampered movement, and the close fighting distances made them vulnerable to enemy antitank weapons. (Sergeant W.F. Dickman (Marine Corps))



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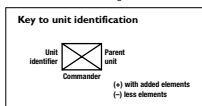
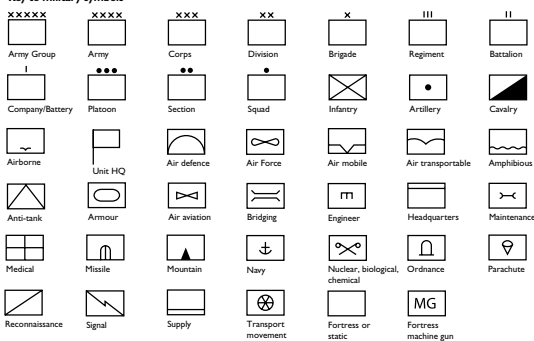
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**Key to military symbols**



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**Editor's note**

Corps and divisions are written respectively as, e.g., I Corps (roman numerals), and 341 (NVA) Division (ordinal) – or 325C (NVA) Division, if the iteration letter is present. NVA designations are partially anglicized to provide additional clarity; for example, Sư đoàn 341 (Division 341) is shown as 341 (NVA) Division. Metric measurements are used throughout this book; where US forces used US customary measurements at the time, the original figure is given along with a conversion. For ease of comparison please refer to the following conversion table:

- 1km = 0.62 miles
- 1m = 1.09yd
- 1m = 3.28ft
- 1m = 39.37in
- 1cm = 0.39in
- 1mm = 0.04in
- 1kg = 2.20lb

**Rank equivalents**

<b>USMC</b>	<b>NVA</b>
n/a	Đại tướng (Senior General)
General	Thượng tướng (Colonel General)
Lieutenant General	Trung tướng (Lieutenant General)
Major General	Thiếu tướng (Major General)
Brigadier General	n/a
Colonel	Đại tá (Senior Colonel)
Lieutenant Colonel	Thượng tá (Colonel)
Major	Thiếu tá (Major)
n/a	Đại úy cao (Senior Captain)
Captain	Đại úy (Captain)
First Lieutenant	Thượng úy (Senior Lieutenant)
Second Lieutenant	Trung úy (Second Lieutenant)
n/a	Chuẩn úy (Aspirant – eligible NCO)
Sergeant Major/ Master Gunnery Sergeant	Trung sĩ cấp liệu (Senior Sergeant)
First Sergeant	n/a
Master Sergeant	n/a
Gunnery Sergeant	n/a
Sergeant	Trung sĩ (Sergeant)
Corporal	Hạ sĩ (Corporal)
Lance Corporal	n/a
Private First Class (PFC)	Binh nhất (Private First Class)
Private	Binh nhì (Private Second Class)