



3rd Marine Division

OPERATION NAPOLEON / SALINE

The Battle for Dong Ha

By Bruce L. Hodgman

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Introduction

“You can kill ten of my men for everyone I kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.” — Ho Chi Minh

Those that do historical research for a living tell me that it's important for the reader of your work to develop an author relationship that provides your readers with the chance to get a sense of who you are and why you have the authority/expertise to write about a particular topic.

Like others before me, I was there and fought in these battles. My name is Bruce Hodgman and I was a Squad Leader, 3rd Platoon, Charlie Company, 1st Battalion 3rd Marine Regiment during the period of this remembrance. Additionally, I am a member of the *3rd Marine Division Association*, and Chapter 385, *Military Order of the Purple Heart*. I participated in 27 combat operations with 1st Battalion 3rd Marines.

I joined the Marines on February 3, 1967 under the “Buddy Program” with a childhood friend from Riverside, CA. We were both in college at the time and under “student double probation” as we lived in an Off-Campus “Party” Fraternity as Freshmen meaning we were in trouble.

After the Dean of Students gave us our ultimatum – we had missed a lot of classes – we headed over to the local Post Office to enlist in the Navy, or Air Force, but NOT Army or the Marines – I was no hero and did not want to go to Vietnam as an infantry replacement. I come from a Navy family with three generations serving since World War 1.

Unfortunately, the military services were all closed for lunch except the Marines. And this Marine recruiter was good – very good. He looked just like the one in the poster on the Post Office door or you see in the John Wayne movies of old.

Since we were going to lose our college deferments and get drafted because of the school probation, we decided to enlist and find a “safe” job. We opted for four-year enlistments to get a specific engineering school assignment as a Heavy Equipment Operator at Port Hueneme, CA.

However, this proved to be a “failure to communicate of the correct priorities of the Marine Corp” when we reported into Bootcamp in San Diego, CA. The Marines thought we would make a fine rifleman replacement to offset battle losses in Vietnam. I said to myself “Nuts. My family is going to freak.” They did but I survived my Dad and the war. After Vietnam, I was assigned to Alpha Company, 3rd Recon at Camp Pendleton for 2 ½ years until taking an early out to return to college.

Why this story and period of time specifically? The media and other authors have written many books, documentaries or research papers about the Khe Sanh, Saigon and Hue battles but only a few about the Battle for Dong Ha. These excellent works on Dong Ha are always a personal

experience effort and focus on an immediate level of one key battle such as Dai Do. I recommend 1) *The Magnificent Bastards – The Joint Army-Marine Defense of Dong Ha 1968* by Keith Nolan and 2) *Vietnam: A History* by Stanley Karnow 2007. Number 1 is an excellent account of the platoon/company battles with some big picture perspective while Number 2 identifies some of the problems we faced in Vietnam. Of course, the best *historical* sources are the 823-page *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: 1968 The Defining Year*, By Jack Shulimson, and the Unit Command Chronologies.

However, I wanted to write about the big picture of this time period in condensed format and as some of the units involved – Marine, Navy and Army – that really distinguished themselves and got little attention. This was a team event when all the arms of all services played a part. Not to take way from the heroic feats of 2/4, 1/3 or 1st Amtrac but to give the reader a new perspective of this time period. The decision to write this is a little complicated but it has been a rewarding experience. It started years ago as part of my PTSD treatment and eventually it evolved into a true historical interest in writing about this time period.

All though there have been times that I have fought it, I am a Marine and will always be a Marine. And to Bill Burgoon, and Ivan Hiestand, 2nd Platoon, 1st Battalion 3rd Regiment (RIP) and those that were there with me, I say... *SEMPER FI*.

Bruce Hodgman



Dedication

This remembrance is dedicated to all the men and women that participated in the Battle for Dong Ha and the destruction of the 320th NVA Division from April 1, 1968 until December 9, 1968 when *Operation Napoleon/Saline* ended resulting in a reported 3,495 enemy killed with 353 Marines killed and 1,959 wounded. The *true* number of enemy dead and wounded will never be known.

While the Battle for Dong Ha was in the 3rd Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division “Napoleon/Saline” TAOR, nearly all United States armed forces fought in this battle and are due their recognition of their heroism, tenacity and valor exhibited during this period. They all contributed to the thorough destruction of enemy forces during the Battle for Dong Ha.

The following combat units are recognized in this historical remembrance:

III Marine Aviation Force, FMFP

1st Marine Aircraft Wing

III Marine Amphibious Force, FMFP

Task Group 70.8 (Gun Line) Cruiser-Destroyer Group: *USS Boston* CAG 1, *USS Campbell* SPT 32, *USS Benner* DD 807, *USS Providence* CLG 6, *USS Turner Joy* DD 951, *USS St. Paul* CA 73, *USS Uhlmann* DD 687, *USS Edson* DD 946, *USS Ingersoll* DD 652, *RANS Hobart* DD 39, *USS Lind* DD 703, *USS Isbell* DD 869, *USS Hanson* DD 832, *USS Blandy* DD 943, *USS Waddell* DDG 24, *USS Towers* DDG 9, *USS Eversole* DD 789, *USS Davis* DD 937, *USS Purvis* DD 709, *USS Towers* DDG 9, *USS Anderson* DD 786, *RANS Canberra* CA 70, *USS Waddell* DDG 24, *USS Mason*, and *USS New Jersey*¹ BB 62

Task Force 79.4

9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, FMFP

Special Landing Force ALPHA

USS Cleveland LSD-7, *USS Comstock* LSD-19, *USS Wexford County* LST 1168, *USS Iwo Jima* LPH 2 with HMM-361 or HMM-362, *USS Valley Forge* LPH 8 with HMM-164, *USS Navarro* APA 215, *USS Alamo* LSD 33, *USS Whetstone* LSD 27, *USS Vernon Comity* LST 1161, *USS Repose* AH 16 or *USS Sanctuary* AH 17

Battalion Landing Team - 2nd Battalion 4th Marines

1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion (-)

¹ The *USS New Jersey* fired gun support in Napoleon/Saline TAOR at hardened NVA bunkers on 1 Dec 1968, NVA assembly area on 2 Dec 1968, CD site on 5 Dec 1968 and Infiltration Routes on 6 Dec 1968. All targets were totally destroyed. Many of the ships in the Gun Line participated in *Operation Thor* the joint mission to attack and destroy NVA long-range artillery located in the Demilitarized Zone, coastal artillery batteries, antiaircraft/SAM positions, staging areas for infiltration, supplies and transport, that took place July 1 - 7, 1968 at Cap Mui Lay. US Navy fired 17,922 rounds of 8- and 5-inch shells, local Firebases fired 24,243 rounds of 105, 155, 175 mm and 8-inch shells, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing flew 1,616 sorties, and finally the USAF B-52's flew 216 sorties with 2000-pound bombs. Source: *National Archives – Combat Naval Gunfire Support during the Vietnam War April 68 to Dec 68*. Retrieved. (Public Domain) and COMUSMACV messages from 6 June to 7 July 1968 titled “OPERATION THOR.” According to the reports and damage assessment, 81% of the complex was destroyed and the remainder damaged. 467 secondary explosions were observed of underground ammunition or fuel storage.

3rd Engineer Battalion (-)
3rd Motor Transport Battalion (-)
3rd Reconnaissance Battalion (-)
3rd Shore Party Battalion (-)
Logistical Support Unit
Clearing Platoon

Task Force 116 – River Patrol Force

Task Force Clearwater (OPCON) CAMP KISTLER

Dong Ha/Cua Viet Security Group *USS Caroline County LST 525, USS Snohomish County*

LST 1126, USS Coconino County LST 603

River Assault Division 112

Coastal Group 11

3rd Marine Division (Reinforced)

3rd Marine Regiment

1st Battalion

3rd Battalion

4th Marine Regiment

1st Battalion

9th Marine Regiment

1st Battalion

2nd Battalion

3rd Battalion

3rd Medical Battalion

1st Hospital Company (OPCON)

D Company

3rd Dental Company

1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion (-) (OPCON)

1st Armored Amphibian Company

12th Marines² including 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Battalions, 1st 8-Inch Howitzer Battery, 5th 155 Gun Battery, 1st 155 Gun Battery

Headquarters Battalion

3rd Engineer Battalion

3rd Motor Transport Battalion

3rd Recon Battalion

3rd Tank Battalion

3rd Shore Party Battalion

1st Search Light Battery

1st Battalion 13th Marines (OPCON)

9th Motor Transport Battalion (OPCON)

11th Engineer Battalion (OPCON)

1st Air-Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (ANGLICO) Sub Unit One (OPCON)

US Army

Battery D, 1st Battalion, 44th Air Defense Artillery Regiment (OPCON - Dusters)

“Americus” 23rd Division (Camp Evans)

196th Light Infantry Brigade

3rd Battalion 21st Infantry Regiment (OPCON)

1st Air Cav Division (Camp Evans)

2nd Brigade

1st Battalion 5th Cav Regiment (OPCON)

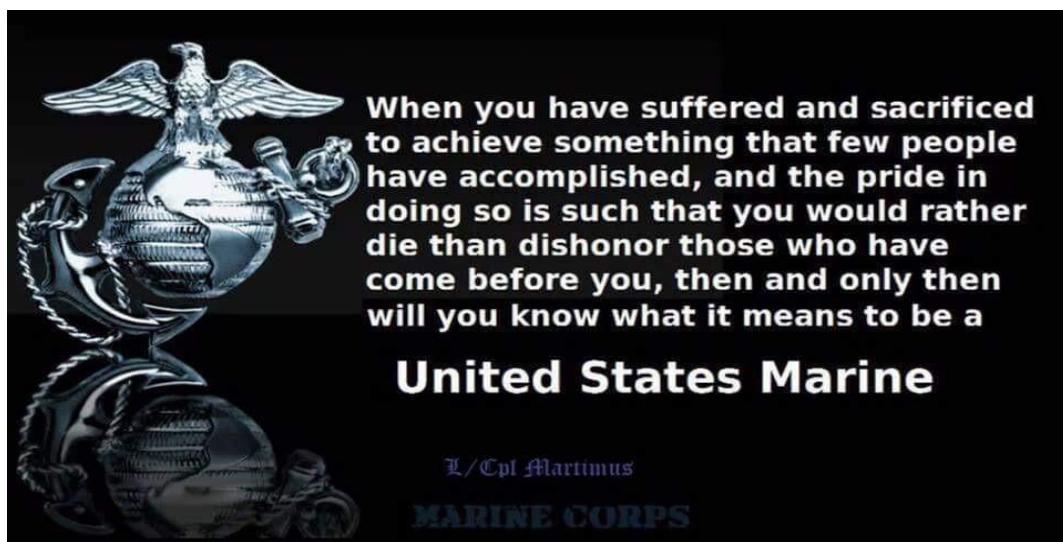
² In January 1968, the 12th Marines had become the largest de-facto regiment in Marine Corps history with eleven battalions, including three Army battalions, under the operational control of the 12th Regimental headquarters.

2nd Battalion 5th Cav Regiment (OPCON)
108th Field Artillery Group (OPCON to 12th Marines)
1st Battalion 40th Artillery
2nd Battalion 94th Artillery
Provisional Artillery Group
2nd Target Acquisition Battery (FADAC)
8th Battalion 4th Artillery

Plus, the numerous smaller or additional units that are either assigned or supported the 3rd Marine Division during this period. The source for this list was primarily US Navy, Coast Guard, Army and Marine Corp historical records. However, in some cases, records were not available for all units or ships. For this I apologize if your unit or ship was omitted.

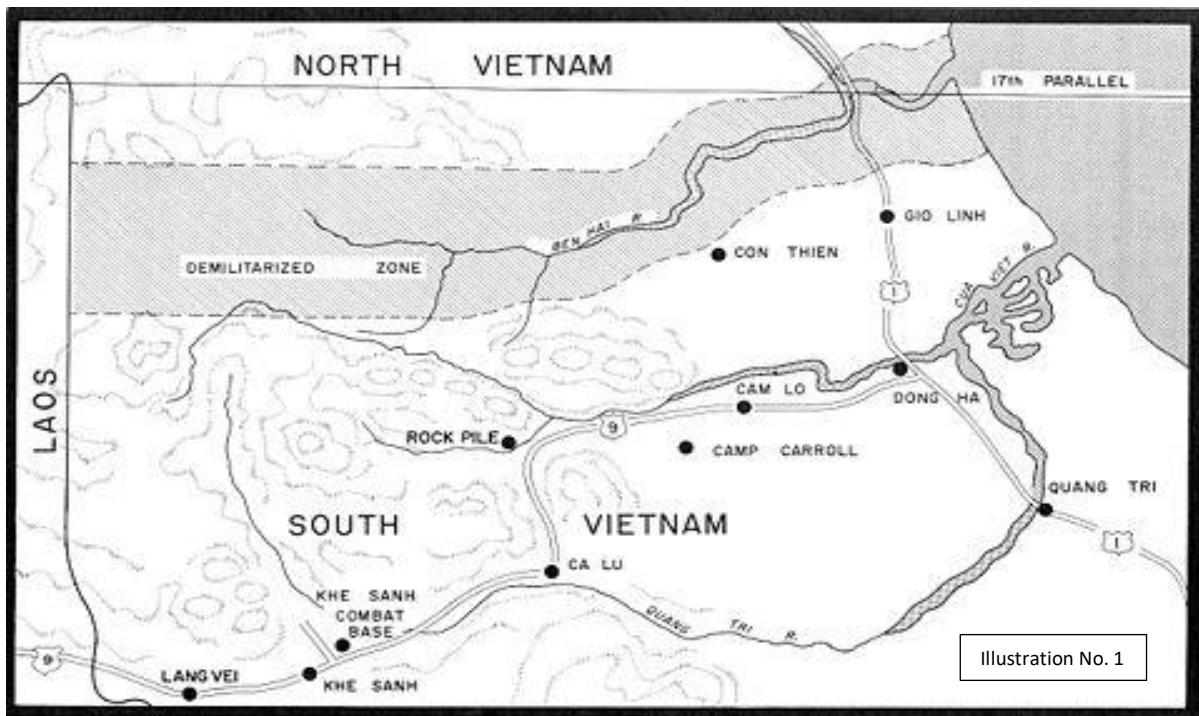
Some Marine units were organic or OPCON to 3rd Marine Division but did not directly participate in Operation Napoleon/Saline such as 1st and 26th Marine Regiments as they had different taskings or assigned to different TAOR's. These units are not included in the remembrance for this period.

Finally, to all that served with 3rd Marine Division, thank you, and to Bill Burgoon and Ivan Hiestand 2nd Platoon, Charlie Company, 1st Battalion 3rd Marines, rest in peace. You were both right – I am the last Amigo.



Prologue

In late January, 1968, during the lunar new year (or “Tet”) holiday in South Vietnam, North Vietnamese (NVA) and communist Viet Cong (VC) forces launched a coordinated three-phase attack against a number of targets in South Vietnam. The 3rd Marine Division was in the forefront of deflecting this attack and sustained heavy losses before finally repelling the communist assault in I Corp.



North Vietnam’s Tet Offensive was a tactical loss on the battlefield but it was a stunning propaganda victory for the communists. In fact, it is often credited with turning the war in their favor.³ The South Vietnamese began to lose influence as VC guerrillas infiltrated rural areas formerly held by the South Vietnamese government and turned the war in the public opinion arena in America.

The Tet Offensive, or officially called “*The General Offensive and Uprising of Tet Mau*” by North Vietnam was a major escalation and one of the largest military campaigns of the Vietnam War. It was launched on January 30, 1968 by NVA and VC forces against the forces of the South Vietnamese Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), the United States Armed Forces and our allies.

³ National Geographic, *This Day in History*, The Tet Offensive, and Office of the Historian, State Department, *U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War: The Tet Offensive 1968 – Milestones 1961-1968*

It was a campaign of surprise attacks against military and civilian command and control centers throughout South Vietnam.⁴ The name of the offensive comes from the Tet holiday, the Vietnamese New Year, when the first major attacks took place.⁵

The offensive was launched prematurely in the late-night hours of 30 January in the I and II Corps Tactical Zones of South Vietnam. These early attacks allowed NVA forces time to prepare defensive measures and hide secret movement of troops into strategic assigned locations in preparation of their assigned specific Tet responsibilities. This was a key component of their strategy as they knew they could not make a difference on the battlefield unless they had extensive prepared defensive positions to offset the massive tactical firepower the U.S. forces possessed. Strong defensive positions were critical to their big unit strategy.

PHASE I of the assault began on January 21, 1968, when NVA forces began a massive artillery bombardment of the U.S. Marine garrison at Khe Sanh, located on the principal road from northern South Vietnam into Laos. As U.S. commanders focused their attention on the defense of Khe Sanh, North Vietnam released 70,000 troops to begin their true objective: the Tet Offensive. This movement was not a large column of men heading south but rather well hidden, unused trails of small camouflaged formations in company and battalion strength.

This was the primary assault where NVA forces would simultaneously attack a number of targets, mostly populated areas and places with heavy U.S. troop presence. The strikes on the major cities of Hue and Saigon had a strong psychological impact, as they showed that the NVA troops were not as weak as the Johnson Administration had previously claimed.⁶

Many feel the attack on Khe Sanh was a diversionary attack to draw attention away from other areas including building the defensive positions near Dong Ha. North Vietnam was looking for a victory reminiscent of the 1954 Battle of Dien Bien Phu, where the last vestiges of French colonialism were dealt a blow by the Vietminh. Accordingly, Khe Sanh was a strategic ploy to divert U.S. troops and material to the fringes of the country in preparation for the Tet Offensive in 1968.⁷

The US commanders during the battle maintained that the *true* intention of Tet was to *distract* forces from *Khe Sanh*. Regardless, the effect was to do both – distraction that allowed

⁴ There are two interpretations of the offensive's goals have continued to dominate Western historical debate. The first maintained that the political consequences of the winter-spring offensive were an intended rather than an unintended consequence. This view was supported by William Westmoreland and his friend Jamie Salt in *A Soldier Reports*, Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1976, p. 322.

⁵ *U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War: The Tet Offensive, 1968*, United States Department of State. Retrieved December 29, 2014.

⁶ Office of the Historian, U.S. Dept of State, Milestones: 1961-1968 "U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War -The Tet Offensive 1968" Page 1

⁷ "Tet Offensive". www.u-s-history.com. Retrieved March 3, 2019

infiltration of large NVA combat units from North Vietnam and focus of U.S. commanders on defending Khe Sanh Combat Base.⁸ A win-win for NVA commanders.

PHASE II of the Tet Offensive of 1968 was also known as the May Offensive or Mini-Tet. The attack was launched against targets throughout South Vietnam, including Saigon from 29 April to 30 May 1968. In I Corp, the Phase II events started on 29 April 1968, when the NVA sappers struck ARVN forces north of Dong Ha.

Most discussed were the battles near Saigon, additional battles near Hue in late April 1968, and other attacks in the Central Highlands. The May Offensive was considered much bloodier than the initial phase of the Tet Offensive with May 1968 being the bloodiest month, in terms of American casualties, of the entire war.

Phase III of the Tet Offensive of 1968 was launched from 17 August to 27 September 1968. The offensive was divided into two waves of attacks from 17 to 31 August 1968 and from 11 to 27 September of 1968. The most famous battles during this phase of the Tet Offensive were, of course, the battles for Khe Sanh in I Corp and Hue in II Corp, site of early Tet battles. Both events received widespread media coverage.

Because of news coverage in America, some events during Tet never got the credit they richly deserved. This historical brief will focus on one of those forgotten battles – the Battle for Dong Ha and the role that 3rd Marine Division played.

⁸ General Westmoreland believed the enemy's more logical targets to be the DMZ and Khe Sanh, *while staging diversionary attacks elsewhere*. He thought the Communist objectives to be the seizure of the two northern provinces of South Vietnam and to make Khe Sanh the American "Dien Bien Phu." Dong Ha attack would be a diversion from the Khe Sanh battle.

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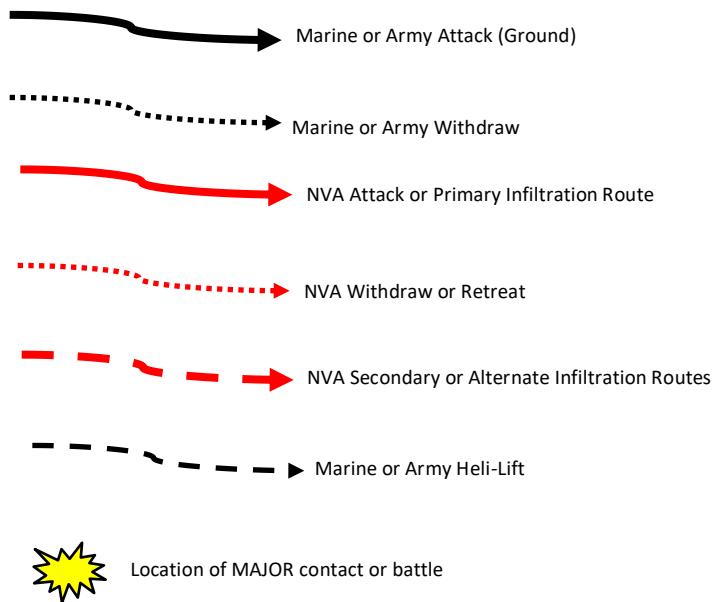
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Map Legend

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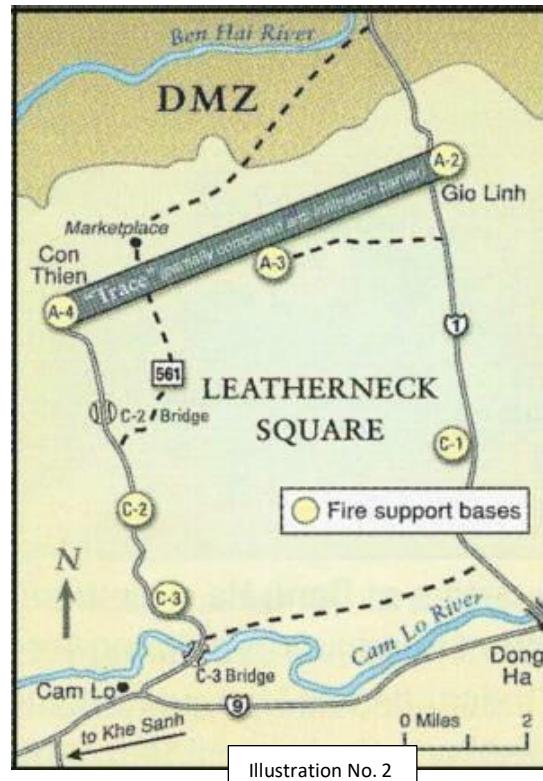
PART 1: OPENING MOVES

The Battle for Dong Ha – 28 April through 31 May 1968

In early May 1968, I Corps – Quang Tri Province was a hotly contested area in Vietnam. Most activity being in “Leatherneck Square” in the southeast corner of I Corp especially near the villages north of Dong Ha.

Special Landing Force ALPHA (III MAF) and 3rd Marine Division Intelligence⁹ surmised that the NVA forces would sweep down the east coast of Vietnam. Their plan was to cut off the ports and roads, capture the strategically important bridge at Dong Ha, tie up forces in the north and control the Cua Viet and Bo Dieu Rivers as their part of the General Tet Offensive that started in February 1968 in I Corp.

This NVA offensive, if successful, would choke the American supply routes to all combat bases in I Corp. In April 1968, Cua Viet Naval Port Facility handled over 63,000 tons of supplies that were later shipped up the Cua Viet River to Dong Ha or Quang Tri.¹⁰



From Dong Ha, supplies were then shipped by smaller river transport, truck or air to all Marine or Army locations in I Corp using primarily Navy assets by barge¹¹ on

⁹ III MAF or 3rd Marine Amphibious Force Forward was headquartered in Danang, Vietnam and responsible for all Marines in the I Corp area of Vietnam during the war. In mid-January 1968, III MAF was in actuality a small field army, consisting of what amounted to two Army divisions, two reinforced Marine Divisions, a Marine aircraft wing, and supporting forces, numbering well over 100,000 troops. The unit was originally 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force but changed to III MAF in 1965. Source: *The US Marine Corps in Vietnam War – III Marine Amphibious Force 1965 to 1975*, by Ed Gilbert and Dr. Duncan Anderson 2006.

¹⁰ Shulimson, Jack (1997). *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: 1968 The Defining Year*. History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps. p. 37. ISBN 0-16-049125-8.

¹¹ The primary vessel to move the supplies to all Combat Bases from the Cua Viet Port Facility was the LCU – Landing Craft Utility and used by amphibious forces to transport equipment and troops to (Cont. next page)

the Cam Lo and Bo Dieu Rivers running east towards Cam Lo and Dong Ha, and the Thach Han running south towards Quang Tri and Ca Lu. The Cua Viet was a very important asset to the Marine and Army units in I Corp.

Just 13 kilometers south of the Demilitarized Zone and west of the Gulf of Tonkin, this Cua Viet River Complex was perhaps the most strategically valuable real estate and water ways in South Vietnam. However, the Marines had almost no inkling of the large buildup in the area north of Dong Ha until contact with BLT 2/4. Up to this time, the Marines and 2nd ARVN Regiment had encountered mostly small groups in squad or platoon formations, and an occasional company-size unit near Dong Ha.¹² The most recent actions provided some evidence that the enemy was perhaps making his main effort to the northwest closer to Con Thien. Additionally, mining of the Cua Viet River was commonly done by NVA mine-specialists using large floating or submerged anti-ship mines to disrupt supply deliveries and had recently increased.

This Cua Viet region was under the command of the 3rd Marine Division, led by Maj. Gen. Rathvon McClure Tompkins, while Colonel Milton Hull headed the Division's 3rd Marine Regiment. The main combat units in 3rd Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division as of April 28, 1968 were:¹³

- 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines (3/9 – OPCON from 9th Marines)
- 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion (OPCON – from 3rd MD and operating on the Cua Viet River from Camp Kistler)
- BLT 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines (2/4 – OPCON from SLF Alpha, 9th MAB/TF 79.4) plus support units OPCON from 3rd Marine Division¹⁴

Logistic Support Areas (LSA). There were other types such as Otters or LVTP-5 but the primary vessel was the LCU. They are capable of transporting tracked or wheeled vehicles, large quantities of supplies and troops from amphibious assault ships to beachheads or piers. Supplies were then transported by LCM-8, LVTP-5, Multi-Purpose Barges, and Otters to their final destination points. Source: US Navy Historical Branch (Public Domain)

¹² On 10 March the base was hit by NVA artillery, destroying 150 tons of ammunition, damaging numerous buildings and killing 1 American. On 11 April, 1968, NVA artillery hit the base's fuel farm destroying 40,000 gallons of petroleum. The base was hit twice in June 1968 destroying more fuel and the main ammo dump.

¹³ *Command Chronology* for 1/3 and BLT 2/4 April 1968

¹⁴ On April 30, 1968, BLT 2/4 in addition to its organic rifle companies had two dedicated batteries from 12th Marines, platoon of tanks from 5th Tank Bn, a platoon of ONTOS from 5th Anti-Tank Bn, a platoon of LVTP-5's from 1st Amtrac Bn, a platoon each from 3rd Engineers, 3rd Motor Transport, 3rd SP Bn, and 3rd Recon Bn. In addition to these combat units, BLT 2/4 Logistical Support Unit, Clearing Platoon, and Vietnamese Popular Forces as Scouts and interpreters. BLT force was formidable when assembled intact – March 31, 1968 totaled 1,781 men, however, 3rd Marine Division reported BLT 2/4 at less than half-strength with 596 men on April 30, 1968. Source: 2/4 *Command Chronology March and April 1968*.

- 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines (1/3 – ORGANIC)

A Marine **SPECIAL LANDING FORCE** (SLF is now called a *Marine Expeditionary Unit* or MEU in today's Marine Corp) is a Marine amphibious unit and part of a Navy Task Force (9th Marine Amphibious Brigade or MAB, FMFP) in 1968.¹⁵ SLF force is a highly-mobile, quick reaction force, deployed and ready for immediate combat in response to any crisis. SLF was generally committed to battle when things got "critical." In April 1968, BLT 2/4 was committed to *Napoleon/Saline* TAOR as 3rd Marine Regiment, who was responsible for the TAOR, was spread thin and had to task its mobile reaction force to a specific task.

Each Navy Task Force had dedicated air (base and or ship) and shore bombardment ships¹⁶ to provide naval gunfire support and close air support to the ground units. In some cases, an Iowa-class battleship might be off shore with 16-inch guns.¹⁷

A SLF unit is normally composed of a reinforced Marine infantry battalion designated as a **Battalion Landing Team**¹⁸ or BLT as the primary ground combat element. A BLT in 1968 was supported by a helicopter assault squadron, a combat logistics unit, supporting engineer, tank and amphibious track (Amtrac) units, and a command element that serves as the BLT headquarters group.

BLT troop strength, reinforced with support units, varied in 1968 but generally between 1,000 and 1,200 troops stripped for assault and up to 2,000 men when the BLT is reinforced with all designated support units and deployed forward.¹⁹ A

¹⁵ 9th MAB was headquartered in Okinawa and reports SLF A (BLT 2/4 Reinforced) with a strength of 1,912 men. SLF-A and B units were routinely sent to 9th MAB for refit or exchange for units finishing refit in Okinawa.

¹⁶ The Gun Line typically had one cruiser, four destroyers, one inshore fire support ship (IFS), and two medium rocket landing ships comprised Task Force 70.8 (Cruiser-Destroyer Group). However, the number varied and totaled as many as two cruisers, 18 destroyers, and two rocket ships during the heavy combat in 1968. Naval gunfire ships in support of 3rd Marine Division fired 5- and 8-inch shells. Retrieved Naval History and Heritage Command, *Chapter 3: The Years of Combat – 1965-1968*, 2004.

¹⁷ The USS New Jersey joined the US Navy Gun Line off the DMZ coast on September 25, 1967 through April 1, 1968 and rejoined the Gun Line of 1 Dec 1968. During her tour in Vietnam, she fired 5,688 rounds of 16-inch and 14,891 5-inch shells in support of troops from Danang to the DMZ. Sources: *An Analysis of the Special Landing Force during the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1969*, Major Edward T. Nevgloski, Sr., USMC, AY 07-08, Page 1 and "*1969 Narrative History of USS New Jersey (BB-62)*". USS New Jersey Veteran's, INC. Retrieved 31 May 2005.

¹⁸ *U.S. Marines in Vietnam – The Landing and Buildup, 1965*, Shulimson and Johnson, 1978, Page 3 footnotes and Appendix A.

¹⁹ In January 1968, BLT 1/3 had a USMC/USN strength of 1,503 enlisted ranks and 73 officers. Source: *Official Command Chronology*, January 1968, Page 3. This number was the official "Average Monthly (Cont. Next Page)

BLT is commanded by a Lt Colonel from the Marine battalion ground force, and is deployed from amphibious assault ships such as a LPH or LPD – Landing Platform Helicopter and Landing Platform Dock.²⁰

In 1968, BLT duty was considered a “meat grinder duty” by many Marine battalion commanders and usually required Marine infantry battalions to swap out after short periods of time to refit, re-gear and receive replacements for combat losses. Many during this period felt only the most experienced battalions were used as BLT units but historical records show most Marine battalions did BLT duty at one time or another.

In early March 1968, 2/4 had taken over BLT duties with SLF ALPHA from 1/3 and 1/3 was sent to Dong Ha for replenishment along with new responsibilities south of the Cua Viet.²¹ This put four experienced Marine battalions to defend Dong Ha and the Cua Viet River Complex. The 2nd ARVN Regiment²² was to the west, as part of the 1st ARVN Division assigned *Tactical Area of Responsibility* (TAOR).²³ Many Marine commanders felt the 2nd ARVN Regiment as “unreliable” as they let the 320th infiltrate on their watch.²⁴

Strength” and does not take into consideration gains or losses from rotation, combat, injuries or other personnel actions – just a running average. BLT 2/4 Command Chronology for April and May 1968 was not available from National Archives. However, author Keith Nolan states 2/4’s strength at Dai Do just before being relieved on May 2, 1968 by 1/3 was 196 men in his book “The Magnificent Bastards.”

²⁰ *U.S. Marines in Vietnam – The Defining Year 1968*, “The Puzzling War”, Chapter 1, page 2

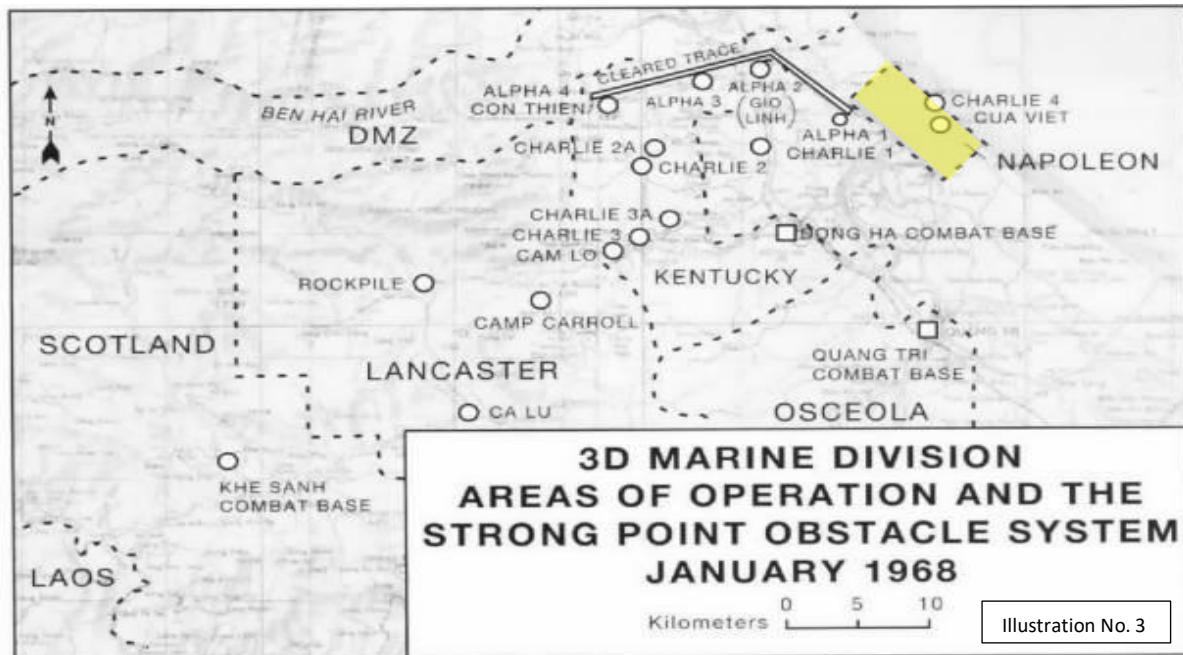
²¹ 1/3, after turn over BLT duties to 2/4, were assigned the responsibility of protecting the south side of the Cua Viet River to ensure uninterrupted traffic using Company and Platoon search and destroy operations. BLT 2/4 would operate north of the river. Source: 1/3 and BLT 2/4 Command Chronologies March 1968.

²² An ARVN battalion numbered between 200 and 400 men, less than half of the 1,000-man Marine battalion. The 2nd ARVN Regiment was headquartered at Dong Ha with its four battalions deployed north along Route 1 about 5 clicks north of the Dong Ha bridge. Dong Ha was the forward combat base for 3rd Marine Division.

²³ *Evolution of US Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946 to 1976*, by Major Robert A. Doughty, Leavenworth Papers, Combat Studies Institute. Clear and hold is a counter-insurgency strategy in which military personnel clear an area or TAOR of guerrillas or other insurgents, and then keep the area clear of insurgents while winning the support of the populace for the government and its policies. As defined by the United States Army, “clear and hold” contains three elements: civil-military operations, combat operations, and information warfare. Only highly strategic areas are initially chosen for “clear and hold” operations; once they are secure, the operation gradually spreads to less strategic areas until the desired geographic unit (county, province, or nation) is under control. Once an area has been cleared, local police (rather than military) authority is re-established, and government authority re-asserted. To affect the Clear and Hold strategy, “areas of operation” or TAOR sectors were established. *U.S. Army, Counterinsurgency Operations, 2004*, p. 3–13

²⁴ *The Battle for Dong Ha, Vietnam, April 30-May 2, 1968: Dai Do Revisited*, by Lt Col Jack Deichman (USMC Retired) Retrieved November 7, 2014 via the web (Public Domain)

It is important to note that I Corp had numerous TAOR's under different names. As units were moved in and out of the TAOR, they were OPCON (Operational Control) to the command that was responsible for that TAOR. In this case TAOR **Napoleon** was the responsibility of 3rd Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division.



In November 1967 the Cua Viet area was split off from the Kingfisher TAOR to form the new TAOR Napoleon. The new Napoleon area of operations formed a small rectangle covering the area 3 miles above and 2 miles below the Cua Viet River extending 2 miles inland from the coast.

The main positions within this area were the Cua Viet Naval Base and Strongpoint C-1, Strongpoint C-4 and A-1 Fire Support Base (FSB) but Dong Ha and Cam Lo were located in the Kentucky TAOR. Napoleon was considered a "quiet" TAOR with generally platoon and company enemy activity – not a full reinforced NVA Division.²⁵

²⁵ Prior to 1968, Marines generally chased Viet Cong in black pajamas and sandals in 1 Corp TAOR's and an occasional NVA regular unit. But with the advent of Tet, we faced a new enemy – NVA regulars in large unit formations. The NVA were well trained, superbly equipped, had good officers, and had artillery support. They didn't hide like the VC. When they attacked, they attacked in force and did not play hide and seek games. These were NVA regulars and even had tanks. **PERSONAL NOTE:** In May 1968, while policing the Dai Do battlefield with Charlie 1/3, I found a brown knit cap with a Red Star in the center. Turned out to be a Chinese advisor cap that was either lost or he was wounded and dropped it. Really valued that souvenir but Capt. Dockendorff C.O. Charlie 1/3 claimed my prize as "important intelligence information" and I had to give it up. I was not a happy camper as I still believe even to today that ended up in someone's souvenir collection.

Marine regiments were being used more and more like “brigades” (i.e., Marine Amphibious Brigade or MAB), in that infantry battalions were moved in and out from under their operational control or OPCON, both to meet the exigencies of the tactical situation and the demands of the schedule which rotated battalion landing teams out of the country for refitting and service with the Seventh Fleet as Special Landing Forces.

This practice was more or less parallel to the practice of moving tactical squadrons back and forth among Marine aircraft groups. It demonstrated the interchangeable nature of Marine battalions and gave the division commanding general great flexibility in shifting their combat strength.²⁶

Most infantry regimental commanders, while recognizing the need for and advantages of this system, nevertheless preferred to have their own organic battalions. Command lines were much more clear-cut; the distinctions between operational control and administrative command were avoided.

Tactical integrity was preserved and efficiency and effectiveness tended to be greater. One regimental commander estimated that it took about two weeks of working with a new battalion as a minimum to iron out problems of procedures and communications.

This practice continues today but much of the communication and control issues have been resolved during the years since Vietnam.

PART 2: PREPARATIONS

The NVA Deploy

III MAF and MACV²⁷ Intelligence had limited influence on a small unit commander at the Platoon or Company level. These sources were considered “big picture” sources and Marine small-unit commanders’ level valued local intelligence above

²⁶ *US Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968*, PCN 19000313800_1, page 20.

²⁷ MACV or Military Assistance Command Vietnam

all that is specific to their immediate mission. The only time they got a hint of the “bigger picture” was in preparation for a battalion sized or larger operation.

There were three things Marine field-grade commanders wanted in intelligence: 1) **Accuracy**, as the must have confidence as rationalizing and crystal ball gazing can lead to disaster, 2) **Adequacy**, as it is not enough to know location and strength, and 3) **Usability**, as it must be at the lowest classification so it can be disseminated easily, concise, easily understood, and limited to the essentials. A Company Commander taking his command through the infamous “Street Without Joy” cares not about a coup in Saigon or bombardment of Khe Sanh.

A good combat intelligence briefing must avoid preconceived ideas when it comes to estimating the enemy. In Vietnam, it was necessary to discard temporarily many of the conceptions that traditional military education and experiences had engendered. The North Vietnam commander’s school was “the bush” – to quote General Giap – and his strategy, tactics, and organization fitted a revised Maoist view of protracted war. For this reason, military intelligence in Vietnam had to adapt if it was to be successful against this enemy.²⁸

What made the initial shock of the Tet Offensive to 3rd Marine Division and III MAF intelligence officers was all previous Tet holidays, ceasefires were generally accepted, to observe this religious holiday in Vietnam. Accordingly, some commands were slow to believe in the size of the attacks often thinking this was the typical enemy activity in 3rd Marine Division TAOR.²⁹

To counter this threat, Marine Lt Gen. Robert E. Cushman, Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force, prepared to reinforce the Marines in **I Corps** Tactical Zone (ICTZ) - the five northern provinces in South Vietnam. Although 1967 ended and 1968 began with the usual holiday truces between the opposing forces (more honored in the breach than in the observance), the Marines girded themselves for

²⁸ What made the initial shock of the Tet Offensive to 3rd Marine Division and III MAF intelligence officers was all previous Tet holidays, ceasefires were generally accepted, to observe this religious holiday in Vietnam. If anything, their eyes were on Khe Sanh or Hue which was receiving major media coverage, and not Dong Ha. Some thought the attack on Dong Ha was a diversion. Accordingly, some commands were slow to believe in the size of the attacks against Dong Ha and whatever was reported was the typical enemy small unit activity in 3rd Marine Division TAOR. Source: *The War in the Northern Provinces, 1966–1968*, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D .C., Dept of the Army, 1975), by Pearson.

²⁹ Source: *The War in the Northern Provinces, 1966–1968*, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D .C. Dept of the Army, 1975), by Pearson.

future heavy fighting.³⁰

While Marine Commanders focused on Khe Sanh, Gen. Giap had earlier ordered extensive defensive positions built north of Dong Ha as an operating base to close all supply traffic on the Cua Viet.

In late March or early April 1968, Gen. Giap ordered all assigned Tet NVA and VC troops to begin diversionary attacks, close Route 9 (i.e., cut off western reinforcement routes) and infiltrate into previously prepared defensive positions north of Dong Ha using small, concealable formations as not to attract attention with the intention of closing the Cua Viet River Complex.³¹

Intelligence comes in many forms and at Dong Ha, especially Dai Do, the only form that was available and reliable was what the combat troops were able to muster up. This proved to be a severe disadvantage to all in the chain of command. Not only was the disposition of enemy forces unclear but their intentions and strategy were also unknown.

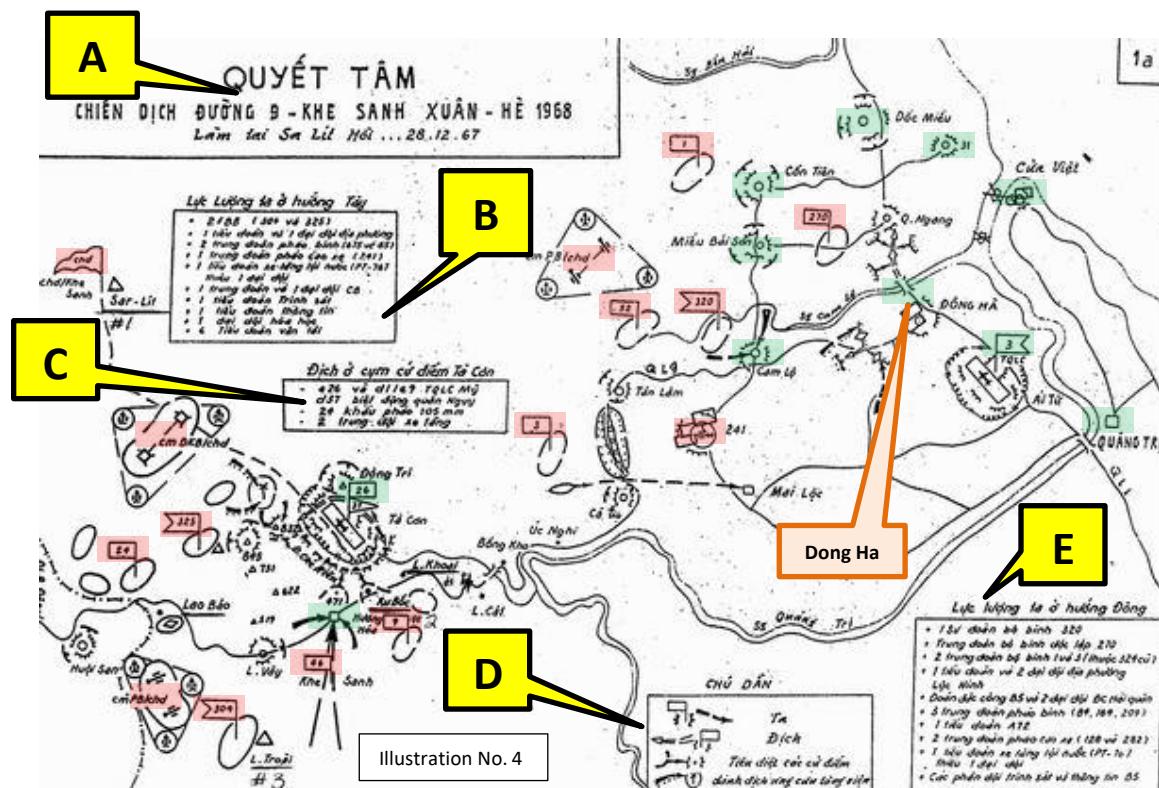
It is unclear if Major General Mc Tompkins had good intelligence concerning Dai Do but even if he did, he may have decided that it was not reliable enough and kept his focus initially on the western areas toward Khe Sanh because that is where the eyes of III MAF and MACV were pointed.

³⁰ *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968*, by Shulimson, Blasiol, Smith, and Dawson, History & Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington, D.C. 1997 page 18. (Public Domain)

³¹ The official Marine estimate of situation including order of battle dated January 1968 fails to mention Dong Ha and the closing of the Cua Viet as an enemy option. They saw Khe Sanh and or a divisional-strength attack against Quang Tri. Source: "Estimate of the Enemy Situation, DMZ Area, Vietnam, 1 January 1968."

NVA Troop Dispositions – DMZ Area (Khe Sanh to the Cua Viet)

TRANSLATION PROVIDED



Translations:

A: “ROUTE 9 – KHE SANH OPERATION (SPRING - SUMMER 1968) (Made at Sa Lit Hoi, Dec 28, 1967)”

B: “Our forces at the West:”

- 2 f (???) Infantry (304th and 325th)
- 1 battalion and 1 company of local force
- 2 Artillery regiments (675th and 45th)
- 1 Anti-Aircraft Artillery regiment (241th)
- 1 Armor/Tank battalion (PT -76) without 1 company.
- 1 Engineer regiment and 1 Engineer company
- 1 Scouting/Intelligence battalion
- 1 Signal battalion

- 1 Chemical company
- 6 Transportation battalions

[Note: On the flag to the left of this box is the letters "chd", this could stand for "chi huy dai" = The Headquarter. The letters "chd" show up on three other locations on the map where NVA flag positions are located.]

C: "Enemy at Ta Con Bases:"

- C26 and D11C9 American Marine
- D37 Vietnamese Ranger
- 24 of 105 mm cannons.
- 2 Armor/Tank platoons

D: "Our forces."

- Enemy.
- Destroy those bases.
- Attack the reinforcement of the enemy

E: "Our force at the East:"

- 320th Infantry Division
- 270th Infantry Independent Regiment
- 2 Infantry Regiments : 1st & 3rd (*part of the former 324th Division*)
- 1 battalion and 2 companies of Loc Ninh local force.
- The "special force" B5³² and 2 companies of Naval "special force"
- 3 Artillery Regiments (84th, 164th, and 209th).
- 1 battalion A72
- 2 Anti-aircraft Artillery Regiments (128th and 282nd)
- 1 Armor/Tank battalion (PT - 70) without 1 company.
- The Scouting/Intelligence groups and the Signal groups of B5.

³² B5-T8 Front Headquarters sapper units located just north of the DMZ in North Vietnam directly above Con Thien or assigned to 320th Division with a special, specific unknown mission such as river assault or river mines. Source: *U.S. Marines in Vietnam – The Defining Year 1968*, Shulimson, Smith and Dawson, 1997, Page 32 through 33.

Infiltration Routes

In the spring of 1968, the 320th NVA Division and support units traveled south using a rarely considered infiltration route³³ from the DMZ into their assigned area of responsibility – the un-named stream running north-south from the Cua Viet near Mai Xa Chanh turning north to an area west of Gio Linh.³⁴

Prior NVA movements³⁵ have used the eastern side of Route 1 to the west but 2nd ARVN Regiment, 1st ARVN Division was in a blocking positions 5 clicks north of Dong Ha Bridge with two battalions on each side of the road near Truc Khe.³⁶

This wide stream would later be called “Jones Creek”³⁷ and this troop movement route was part of the 320th assigned route for Phase 2 of the *General Offensive and Uprising of Tet Mau Than 1968*. Two reinforced Regiments would capture Dong Ha thereby closing the supply lanes on the Cua Viet and another would stop any reinforcements moving down Route 9 from the west.³⁸

³³ U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968, by Shulimson, Blasiol, Smith, and Dawson, History & Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington, D.C. 1997 page 18. (Public Domain)

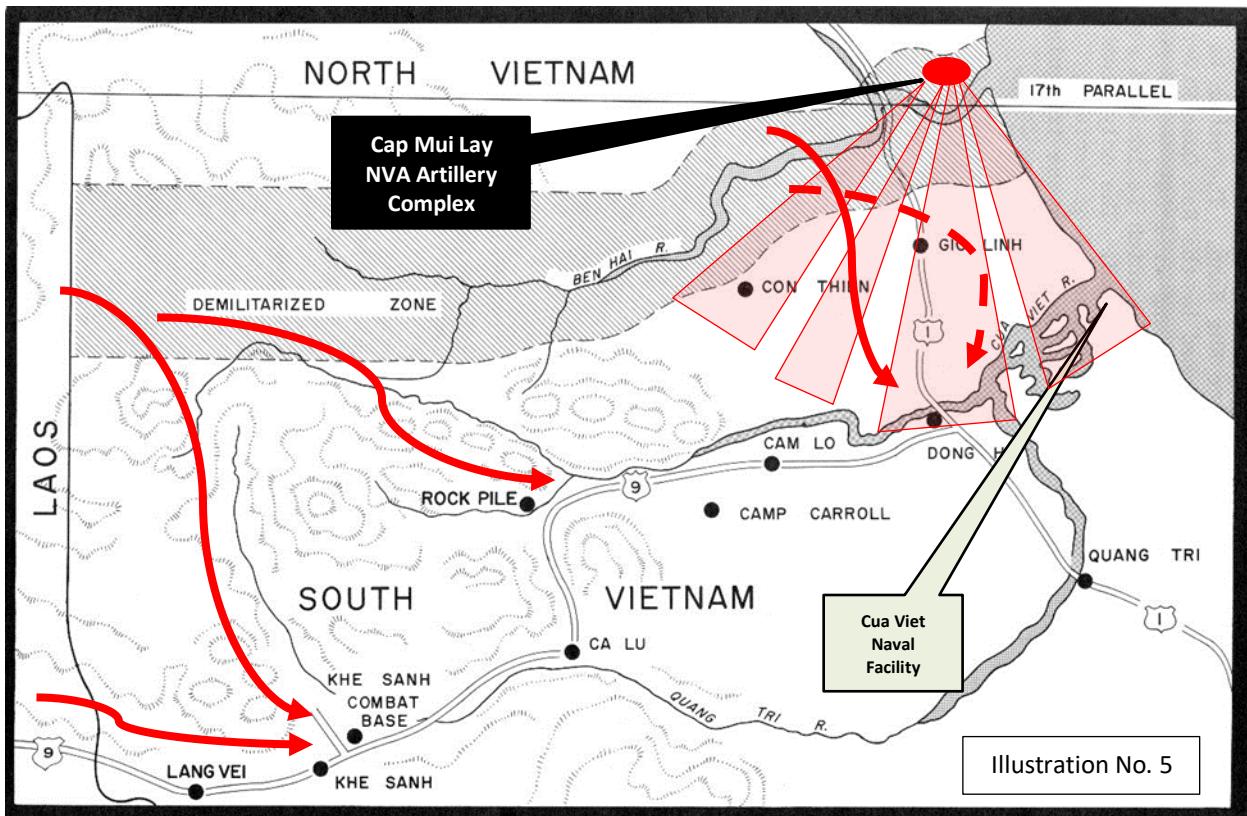
³⁴ The Cua Viet just above Dong Ha becomes the Bo Dieu. On some maps it is also shown as the Mieu Giang. The Bo Dieu River is a continuation of the Cam Lo and Mieu Gang flows east from Dong Ha which empties into the Cua Viet which in turn flows into the Gulf of Tonkin.

³⁵ Primary nightly infiltration routes under US watch were the coastal route through the sand dunes, Route 1, and the mountainous area in the east from the DMZ through Khe Sanh to the Cam Lo River Valley.

³⁶ Lieutenant Colonel Weise observed, "Nhi Ha had always been a key staging area for NVA infiltration south along 'Jones Creek'." Actually, the mountainous areas west of Khe Sanh, the western side of Route 1 or near the coast were used more often because the NVA saw Route 1 under constant observation. The NVA map clearly shows all forces west of Route 1 and only ONE unit, the 270th Ind. Regiment southwest of Con Tien and all others farther west. There are no units in the east of Route 1 and Dong Ha.

³⁷ This stream, unnamed on the maps but called “Jones Creek” by the Marines, ran south from the DMZ into the Cua Viet. Bordering both “Jones Creek” and especially the Cua Viet were extensive paddy areas that supported rice farming. The rice growers lived in hamlets on the banks of the Cua Viet or the adjacent area just above it. Because of the war, many of these hamlets were now abandoned and used by the NVA for defensive fortifications.

³⁸ US Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968: Shulimson, Smith and Dawson, page 294 (Public Domain)



Defensive Preparations

Once the 270th Independent Regiment arrived north of Dong Ha, they constructed well-prepared defensive positions in secrecy at the abandoned villages in the Dai Do and Truc Kinh areas. These were protected by barbed wire, booby-traps, antitank and personnel mines, had mutually supporting fire lanes with clear lines of fire, and took advantage of the terrain, especially the hedgerows or tree lines, on the perimeter of many of the hamlets near Dai Do and Truc Kinh.³⁹ This was all done according to a very careful plan so that when the 320th arrived, all it had to do was man their defensive positions.

These defensive positions had interconnecting tunnels under each hedgerow, reinforced the tough overhead root system and cut and camouflaged ground level firing apertures for rifles, 7.62 mm machine guns, 12.7 mm AA guns, 73 mm SPG9m recoilless rifles, and RPGs. Their heavy mortar positions and AA guns were located inside reinforced mortar pits in houses, out buildings, pig sties, or

³⁹ Lt Col Weise believed the fortifications were built by local population and overseen by officers of the 320th.

haystacks. The beauty of this defense set-up was numerous interconnecting trenches and tunnels that allows the defender to quickly move troops to reinforce or attack while not exposing themselves. Further, they were capable of withstanding air strikes, artillery and naval gunfire and the camouflage was exceptional.

While this was not necessarily a new tactic, it was a change from earlier battles in I Corps. The attacks near Khe Sanh or other bases in was just that – an attack in the traditional sense and commanders relied on lots of firepower to defeat it. The 320th had a new tactic for Marines which was to force contact then fight a defensive battle from well prepared positions attempting to offset Marine superior fire power as they knew the Marines would be the aggressor. Unlike an ambush, they did not run after making contact.

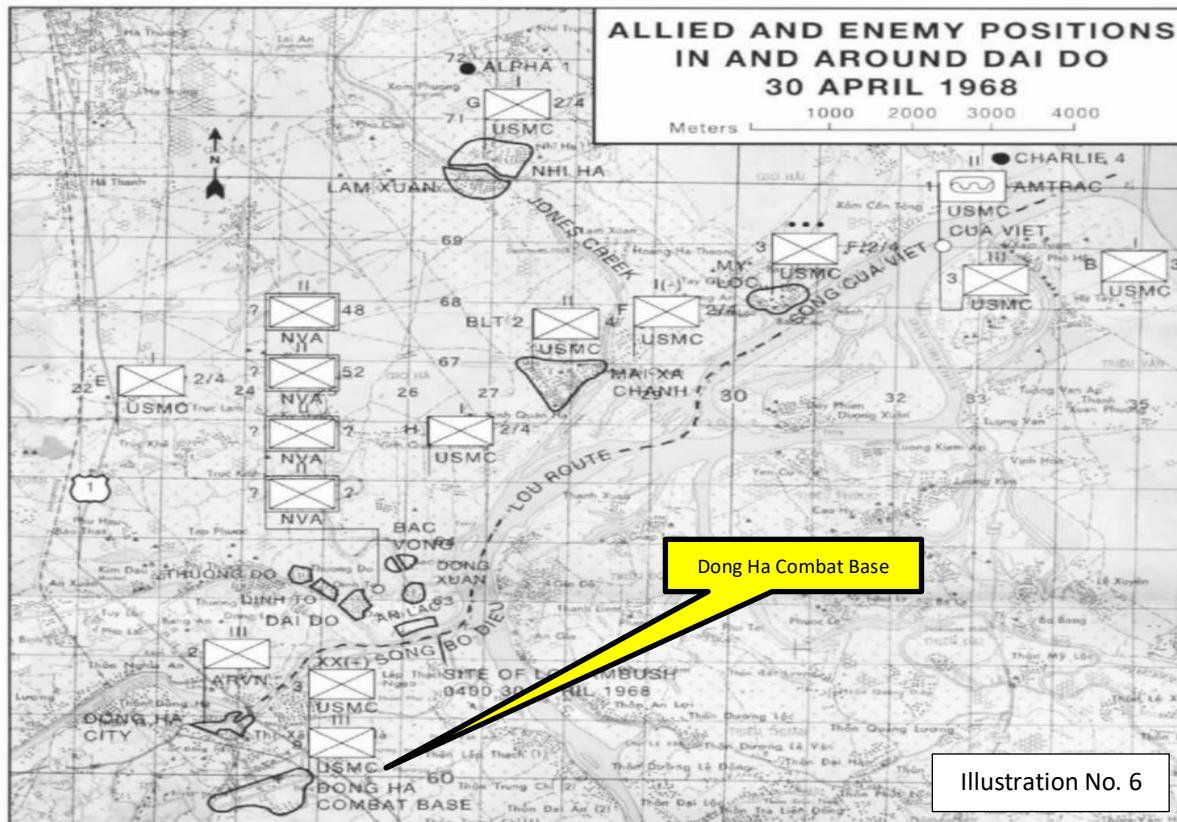
There is no question that North Vietnam could not hold Dong Ha and effectively sever the life line of the Cua Viet for any appreciable amount of time. However, the publicity of closing the river complex or holding Dong Ha for *any* amount of time would have met their national strategic publicity goals that would flood American TV's.

PART 3: First Phase – 29 April through 1700 hrs 3 May: The Battle for Dai Do

Operation Napoleon/Saline began on January 20, 1968, and would last through December 9, 1968. The essential 32 days of Operation Napoleon/Saline was the Battle of Dong Ha from April 29th through the end of May, 1968 while the Battle for Dai Do, which was a critical part of the operation, was from April 30th through May 3rd 1968.

Enemy Order of Battle

In April 1968, there were *elements* of five NVA Divisions in I Corps – 304, 320, 324, 325 and 341st NVA Divisions each with 3 regiments. While this sounds impressive, all, except the 320th Division, were at partial strength, missing regiments in refit or in general reserve just north of the DMZ in North Vietnam. Their January campaign against Khe Sanh and Quang Tri had been costly.



NVA leaders expected to launch the II Phase of the general offensive about 3 weeks after the first using 15,000 fresh soldiers that would infiltrate during the intervening period to replenish the losses sustained during the January 1968 attacks. A portion of this 15,000 was earmarked for the formations near the DMZ. The 66th Regiment, 304th Division⁴⁰, was available west of Khe Sanh but the 9th and 57th Regiments, 304th both badly mauled in earlier battles were sent to Laos for refit. The 29th and 95th Regiments, 325th Division⁴¹ along with the 66th Regiment were to attack Khe Sanh while the 101st Regiment, 325th Division was also going through refit north of the DMZ.

Just due north of Con Thien was the 90th and 803rd Regiments, 324th Division. These regiments were badly mauled and awaiting replenishment but still could provide one or two battalions for other operations. The 812th and 90th Regiments, 324th Division⁴² would be south of Cua Viet River between Dong Ha and Quang Tri. The 812th was reinforced by the 10th Sapper Battalion.

The 341st Division appears in early intelligence estimates but did not partake in the Battle for Dong Ha as the Division was undergoing major refit. Early estimates had the Division Headquarters in North Vietnam above the DMZ with three Regiments – 31st, 32nd, and 33rd.⁴³

In addition, there were seven other NVA independent regiments or battalions in northern I Corp in various states of readiness and strength. It is not known how or if these units other than the 270th Independent Regiment played a significant or any role in the Battle for Dong Ha. Some were thought to be severely understrength, transitioning back to North Vietnam or Laos Base Camps for major refits, or special-use units such as construction or transportation.

⁴⁰ The 304th (Glory) Division was formed in 1951 and was known as one of the first “Steel and Iron” divisions of the army. It had participated in the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and was considered an elite “home-guard” unit. Troop strength in late January 1968 was 9,800.

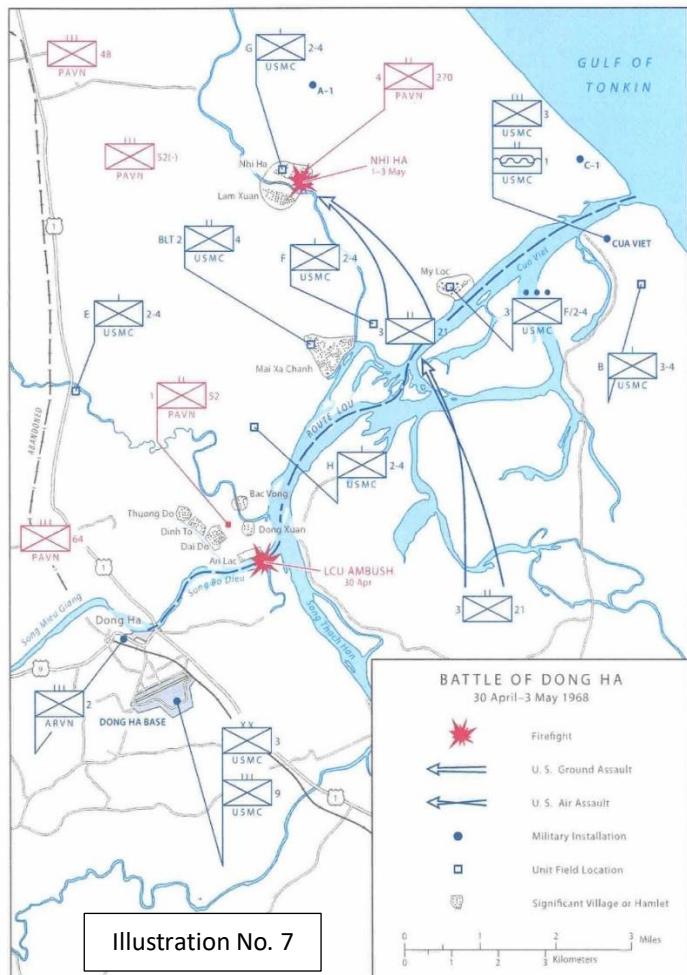
⁴¹ Also known as the 325C Division or 325th (Gold Star) Division. It is thought the letter behind the numerical identification of their divisions relate to the number of times the unit has been reorganized or refit. Source: *Victory in Vietnam: A History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*. Military History Institute of Vietnam (2002). However, 3rd Marine Division Intelligence thought the letter was to “frustrate our intelligence collection efforts against them much like a criminal uses aliases to elude police.” Source: Major Gary E. Todd. (Author Note: Major Todd assessment appears more valid as later PAVN documents available today show no letters used in identifying their divisions.)

⁴² Also known as the 324B Division.

⁴³ Other sources show the Division with 226th and 270th Regiments in 1975 but these are unconfirmed. From other enemy estimates it appears NVA Divisions do not have dedicated organic regiments.

Knowing the Americans would attack immediately when the battle starts, the NVA support units built strong defensive positions in secrecy when they reached their first objective.⁴⁴

Contact



The opening contact with the 320th NVA Division⁴⁵ came early on 29 April. The 320th was comprised of the 48th, 52nd, 64th Regiments – about 9,000 combat troops. The morale of these troops was exceptionally high, well trained, had excellent officers, equipped with new weapons, and Chinese or Soviet made gear.

Reinforcing in support of the 320th were the 270th Independent NVA Regiment (700 men) acting initially as a construction unit, 3rd Bn 27th Independent Regiment (350 men) and K400 LF Company of approximately 60 scouts.

Not all of this force was in place when the battle started as many were probably in transit but a

review of intelligence briefs reflects the presence of at least four NVA battalions from the 48th and 52nd Regiments in the immediate area when the Battle of Dai

⁴⁴ PERSONAL NOTE: *I saw firsthand the fortifications they built at Thuong Do, Dai Do, Som Soi and Truc Kinh. I was amazed not only on the construction and tunnel system but their camouflaging abilities. They even camouflaged the dirt they excavated.*

⁴⁵ The 320th was called the “Delta Division” and was created in 1951. This NVA division was one of the six original “Steel and Iron” NVA divisions and considered an elite combat unit for its leadership, training and equipment. The Division had numerous battle stars including the infamous Dien Bien Phu in which the French Army was routed in 1954.

Do started and the remaining battalions in reserve in Truc Khe and Truc Kinh. The 64th appears to have been tasked with closing Route 9 to the east.

There were other NVA formations in the area just north of Dai Do including Ky Lam, and northwest near Nhi Ha next to Jones Creek.⁴⁶ The Nhi Ha forces were considered “in transit” and those north of Dai Do was the 270th Independent NVA Regiment and other small units that had been involved in construction roles.⁴⁷

III MAF enemy order of battle on 1 April 1968 identified two NVA units in movement – 52nd Regiment, 320th Division and part of the 325C Division. The 52nd Regiment was shifting to unknown positions “north of Dong Ha” with the Dong Ha Combat Base as a target. Part of the 325C Division (29th and 95th Regiments) was heading to base camps in Laos for refit after suffering a severe mauling during the Battle of Khe Sanh. The only combat unit in the area was the 304th Division. The confirmed enemy strength of all units at month-end in the DMZ/Quang Tri area was estimated at 24,865 troops.

By the end of the month, revised enemy order of battle shows the 29th Regiment, 325C Division in the DMZ south of the Ben Hai River and west of the Rockpile, and 95th Regiment, 325C Division farther west towards the Laotian border. The 90th Regiment, 324th Division in northwest of Con Thien/A-4 and the 812th Regiment, 324th Division northwest of Cam Lo.

The NVA 304th Division was demonstrating west of Leatherneck Square near Khe Sanh with orders to support the closing of Route 9 between Khe Sanh and Ca Lu Combat Bases. In January-February 1968, two regiments of the NVA 324th Division (808th and 814th) reinforced with a 122 mm rocket battalion – about 2,500 men – hit the ARVN units near Quang Tri City tying up US and ARVN units from the main focus – distract from the Cua Viet area allowing the 320th to move unnoticed into their assigned areas. The 808th and 814th Regiments were badly

⁴⁶ The 320th began the transit with all 9 organic battalions plus a headquarters and logistical units.

⁴⁷ The CIA stated in response to uncommitted NVA forces “Furthermore, substantial forces are concentrated in the DMZ, particularly around Khe Sanh and are likely to be employed in any renewal of widespread ground attacks against urban centers. These probably should not be included in forces considered available for this purpose. On the other hand, many units identified in the “first wave” are still combat effective and should be included. In sum, about half the 115,000-plus regular force [NVA] regular force OB [Order of Battle] and the bulk of the 71,000-man guerrilla force are probably available for further country-wide attacks.” Source: Communist Forces used in the Tet Offensive, By Central Intelligence Agency (Declassified) 21 February 1968 Briefing, Page 6 (Public Domain)

mauled by the end February but remnants were still operating in the area by the end of April.

Just north of Dong Ha, the NVA amassed a considerable amount of large caliber artillery in the Cap Mui Lay area north of the DMZ.⁴⁸ The guns were assembled into two major groupings, the North Vietnamese artillery belt extended westward some 15 kilometers from the Cap Mui Lay coastal region to a finger lake area just above the Ben Hai River north of Cua Tung.⁴⁹

Each artillery, rocket, and AA site were carefully camouflaged to hide from overhead aerial observation. Below each site was a massive underground reinforced tunnel system for troops, ammunition storage, and other logistics dug into the limestone of the Cape. The area was fed by two small gauge railroad tracks.⁵⁰

The belt contained about 130 interconnected artillery sites with each site capable of holding one to four artillery pieces with a range of 40 km. These formations had little difficulty in targeting Dong Ha or Cua Viet Naval Facility.⁵¹

The NVA reinforced their artillery with a sizable antiaircraft concentration including nine SAM sites and a mix of heavy AA and antiaircraft guns up to 57 mm. The NVA impeded American air strikes against the gun positions and hampered air observation for effective counter-battery target acquisition. III MAF believed the NVA moved their artillery pieces almost nightly from position to position, playing a kind of "moving shell game" with American intelligence officers.⁵²

⁴⁸ See the map on page 25.

⁴⁹ The NVA had long-range, flat trajectory 122-mm and 130-mm guns and 152-mm gun howitzers were well-suited for the low, flat country along the eastern end of the DMZ. Source: (Major General David E. Ott, Field Artillery, 1954-1973, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC,

⁵⁰ The NVA did not fear counterbattery fire or airstrikes but did fear two things – B-52 air strikes with 2,000-pound bombs and flooding as the massive limestone tunnel system was prone to flooding from bomb strikes caved in barriers and dams from the numerous lakes and underground streams in the area. Today, the Vinh Moc Tunnels are a tourist attraction.

⁵¹ **PERSONAL NOTE:** *Most US Marines, including myself, feared artillery and rockets attacks more than actual hand-to-hand combat with the enemy. This was probably true of Marines in prior generations. When we came to relieve BLT 2/4, we came under artillery fire when we departed the LZ to move towards our first objective. Their accuracy was very poor as the rounds fell short by 300 yards.*

⁵² *US Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968*: Shulimson, Smith and Dawson, page 34 (Public Domain)

Available Forces

Dong Ha lay just below where three ongoing 3rd Marine Division operations converged. To the west of Route 1, the 9th Marine Regiment conducted **Operation Kentucky** with three battalions: 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines.

The 3rd Marine Regiment, to the east of Route 1, was responsible for the **Napoleon/Saline** sector, also with three battalions under its operational control: 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines, 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion⁵³, and BLT 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines.

Between the two Marine regiments of 3rd Marine Division sat the 2nd ARVN Regiment with four battalions⁵⁴ that as holding the area along both sides of Route 1, from Dong Ha to the Demilitarized Zone. This sector included both the A-1, A-2 (Gio Linh) and the C-1 and C-2 **Dyemarker**⁵⁵ positions, and much of the Leatherneck Square sector east of Route 1 to Jones Creek, the tributary of the Ben Hai that ran north and south, and emptied into the Cua Viet.

The North Vietnamese were well aware of the unit boundaries, which only

⁵³ Members of the battalion became known as "Am Grunts" because of the infantry role and mission assigned to them. The 1st Amtrac Battalion was a formidable mobile amphibian force with an infantry company OPCON from a Marine regiment. The battalion commander had at his disposal 64 troop-carrying LVTP-5s (landing vehicle tracked, personnel), 6 command and control tractors, 4 LVTEs (landing vehicle tracked, engineer) used for mine clearing, and 2 LVTR-Is (landing vehicle tracked, retriever) for repair purposes. These lightly armored amphibian tractors afforded mobility both on land and water. Plus, a platoon of six LVTH-6s (an amphibian tractor with a turret-mounted 105 mm howitzer) from the 1st Armored Amphibian Company, attached to the 2nd Battalion, 12th Marines, provided direct fire support. Within minutes, the Marines could reinforce any trouble spot within the TAORR and the perfect formation for the Cua Viet River Complex and the sand dunes north of the base on the coast.

⁵⁴ An ARVN battalion numbered between 200 and 400 men, less than half of the 1,000-man Marine battalion.

⁵⁵ **Project Dye Marker** (also called the McNamara Line) was a cover name for an electronic anti-infiltration barrier system with a strong point/obstacle component. It was partially constructed by the American forces in 1967-1968 in South Vietnam along the eastern portion of the demilitarized zone. Some stretches of the defensive line were manned and equipped with the bunkers, outposts, reinforcing and fire support bases, surrounded by concertina wire. Other parts were under constant radar, motion and acoustic surveillance, and secured by trip wires, mine fields, and barbed-wire entanglements. The area that was cleared was called "The Trace." Many believe the area received widespread use of Agent Orange to defoliate trees and shrubs and kill food crops that were providing cover and food to infiltrating NVA forces. The Project was a failure as the NVA just walked around it. **SOURCE:** Drea, Edward J. McNamara, Clifford, and the *Burdens of Vietnam, 1965-1969*. Archived 2013-10-29 at the Wayback Machine Washington, D.C.: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011. (Public Domain)

changed occasionally after some cumbersome negotiations, and were not slow to make use of the allied dispositions for their own advantage.

3rd Marine Regiment units in the ***Napoleon-Saline*** sector had available artillery support from nearby Fire Support Bases, naval gun fire, and substantial US Navy and Marine air power.⁵⁶

In addition to Marine and Army ground forces, US Commanders had access to Naval assets from ***Task Force Clearwater*** which operated on the Cua Viet as part of the “Brown Water Navy.” On February 24, 1968, the US Navy established ***Task Force Clearwater*** composed of 20 PBRs⁵⁷ and Swiftboats⁵⁸ plus assorted support ships (LCU, LCM, YFU, Minesweepers, and Armored Monitors⁵⁹) to keep the vital Cua Viet River Complex open.

Task Force Clearwater began escorting river supply convoys with patrol boats, helicopter gunships, and OPCON ground troops, which act as reaction forces during ambushes.⁶⁰

The Marine units in I Corp relied on for medical support from the 3rd Medical Battalion. This battalion ran the intermediate medical facilities at Dong Ha, Phu Bai, and Da Nang, and was reinforced by the 1st Hospital Company. Finally, in early 1968, two Navy hospital ships – the Repose (AH 16) and the Sanctuary (AH 17) – remained off the coast each with a capacity of 350 beds that could be doubled if needed, and within a 30-minute helicopter flight from shore.⁶¹

⁵⁶ During the Tet Offensive, sometimes four and even five carriers operated from Yankee Station, including USS Ticonderoga, USS Ranger, USS Kitty Hawk, USS Coral Sea, and later USS Enterprise. Source: H-017-1: U.S. Navy Operations in Vietnam, 1968 (Public Domain)

⁵⁷ Patrol Boat, Riverine, or PBR, is the United States Navy designation for a small rigid-hulled patrol boat with speeds up to 28 knots and carried twin 50 cal M2 machine guns in a forward, rotating shielded tub, another in the rear and two M60 light machine guns on each side. Some versions also had an 81 mm mortar.

⁵⁸ Patrol Craft Fast (PCF), also known as “Swift Boats”, were all-aluminum, 50-foot long, shallow-draft vessels with two .50 caliber M2 Browning machine guns in a turret above the pilot house, an over-and-under .50-caliber machine gun and an 81 mm mortar mounted on the rear deck.

⁵⁹ Largest of all riverine warships, the Monitors were slow, armored and carried a big punch: 105 mm howitzer and 81 mm mortar in addition to heavy machine guns. After Dia Do, the slow monitors were sent south.

⁶⁰ *The War in the Northern Provinces, 1966–1968, Vietnam Studies* by Willard Pearson (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1975), 57–65 (note that “Huong River” is another name for the Perfume River)

⁶¹ The survival rate in Vietnam was around 75 percent. The use of helicopters allowed evacuation to a forward medical hospital in less than 30 minutes. In comparison, the average medical evacuation time in Korea was 4-6 hours.

As part of the assaults on Khe Sanh and Hue, enemy forces begin attacking allied shipping on the Cua Viet and Perfume Rivers. These waterways are crucial supply and communication links for northern I Corps. **Task Force Clearwater**, an improvised brown water fleet that would prove essential for the successful defense of the Cua Viet and demonstrate the vital importance of inland naval power.

Ambush of Robbie

East of Khe Sanh, the 3rd Marine Division was strung out in a series of outposts and bases that allowed protection for Route 9, the important Cam Lo River Valley which extended to Dong Ha, and the coastal plain with the critical Cua Viet River Complex that supplied the bases at Dong Ha and Quang Tri.

On 1 March, the 320th NVA Division headquarters west of Con Thien issued orders for two of its three organic regiments to begin assembling and move into position using the “Jones Creek” infiltration route to the Dong Ha⁶² area. In addition, the 270th Independent Regiment and 3rd Battalion 27th Independent Regiment already in the Dong Ha area would finish the fortification complexes north of Dong Ha by 1 May then guard the 320th eastern flank.

In the west, the 64th Regiment, 320th Division took the traditional infiltration route into the hills above the Cam Lo Valley with instructions to stop any Marine reinforcements from reaching the Dong Ha area.

On 29 April, enemy NVA sappers⁶³ blew a culvert on Route 1 near the hamlet of An Binh, about four miles north of Dong Ha. Lieutenant Colonel Vu Van Giai, the 2nd ARVN commander ordered two battalions of the 2nd Regiment, 1st ARVN Infantry Division to investigate and bumped into the 320th seven kilometers north of Dong Ha. As the fight raged on and it began to look as if the ARVN were beaten

⁶² There are different names for US defensive positions. A **main base** or “base camp” was a large, permanent fortified area with a full airfield – such as *Da Nang*. A **combat base**, **forward operating base (FOB)** or **permanent LZ** was smaller than a main base but still a major permanent fortification including an airstrip – such as *Dong Ha*. A **Fire Support Base** was smaller than an FOB and also had fairly permanent fortifications but with a LZ for helicopters rather than fixed wing aircraft – such as the *A* and *C* fire support bases near the DMZ. Source: *Vietnam Firebases 1965-73* by Randy E. M. Foster and illustrations by Peter Dennis, 2007 (Use authorized for research).

⁶³ Surprise attacks by elite NVA units known as “sappers” were one of the most serious—and feared—threats to Americans in Vietnam. NVA sappers were some of the most trained, equipped and dedicated of all NVA forces. In Laos near the DMZ, the 429th Sapper Group trained those chosen to join these elite troops.

and falling back to C-1, General Tompkins dispatched part of his division reserve – **Task Force “Robbie”** – from Cam Lo, ten kilometers to the west, to help them.

3rd Marine Division wanted **Task Force Robbie** to hook up with the embattled ARVN units by taking Route 8B east from Firebase C-3 to the railroad tracks running parallel to Highway 1. Route 8B was an unused dirt road that ran across open flat ground interspersed with dry rice paddies, hedgerows and patches of tall elephant grass. Halfway between C-3 and the ARVN location was Cam Vu.

Task Force Robbie consisting of Delta Company from 1/9 and reinforced by Company A, 1st Tank Battalion. **Task Force Robbie** was the 3rd Division's small armored reserve force, called after the nickname of its commander, Col. Clifford J. Robichaud and based at Fire Support Base C-3 near Cam Lo village which is about 6 miles west of Dong Ha.

Formed in February 1968 as an armored infantry “reaction force” that could be sent to bolster other units that needed support in a battle. Cam Lo Firebase C-3 was positioned near the intersection of two main roads, Highway 9 and Route 561.

Task Force Robbie departs from C-3 Combat Base with a platoon of M48A3 Patton tanks, two M67A2 Flamethrower “Zippo” tanks⁶⁴, M50A1 106 mm Ontos, M42 40 mm Army Duster⁶⁵, and a M45 wheeled Quad-50 cal from 3rd Tank Battalion, platoon of engineers, and D Company, 1/9 riding on the Tanks – 140 men – to help ARVN's deployed north of Dong Ha.

At Cam Vu on Route 88, a secondary route running parallel and 3,000 meters north of Route 9, about 5,000 meters west of An Binh, **Task Force Robbie** ran into a North Vietnamese blocking force waiting for them. They made it just three

⁶⁴ The Flame Thrower Tank M67 (also known as M67 "Zippo", nicknamed after a popular brand of cigarette lighter) is an American medium flame tank that was briefly used by the U.S. Army, and later by the U.S. Marine Corps during the Vietnam War. It was the last flamethrower tank used in American military service. Source: *U.S. Army Flamethrower Vehicles - 2008* by John Ringquist. Archived from the original (PDF) on 4 April 2018. Retrieved.

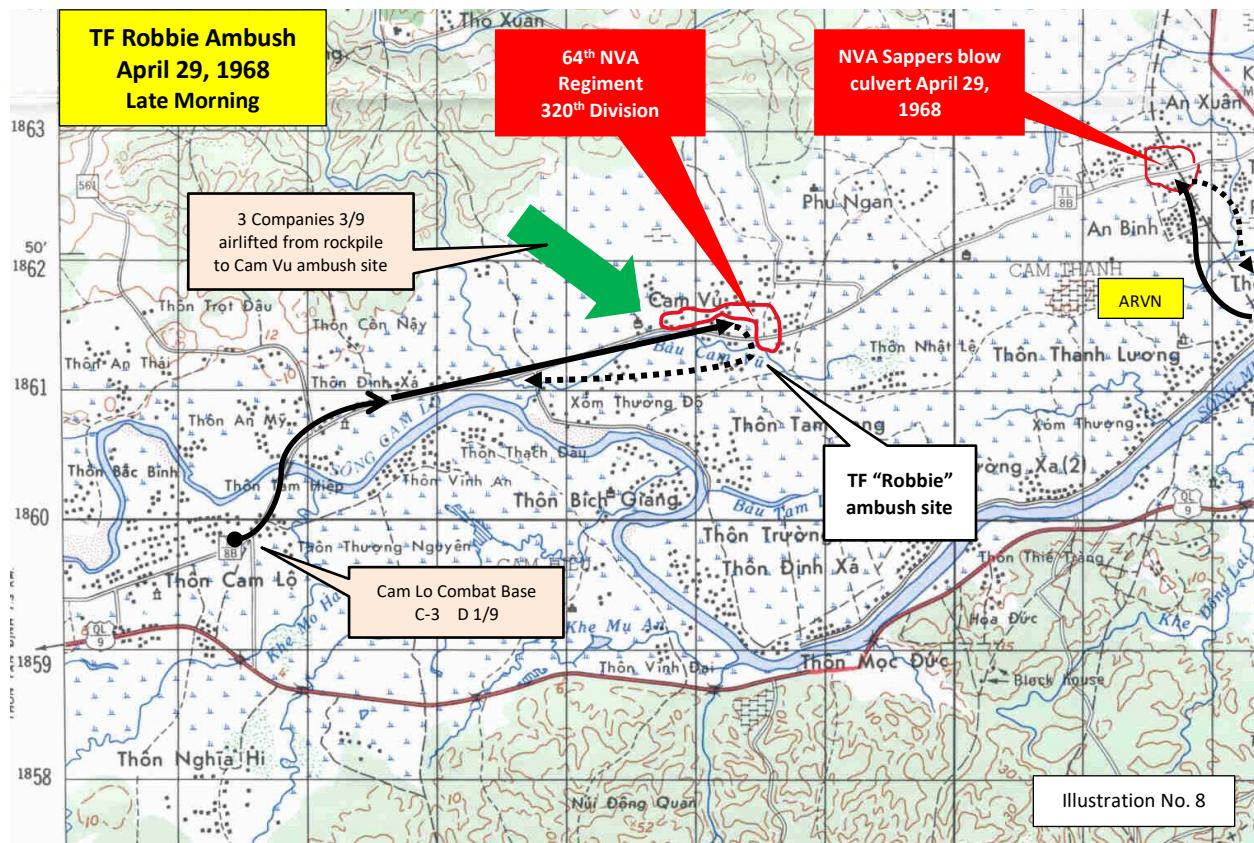
⁶⁵ The M42 Dual 40 mm Self-Propelled Anti-Aircraft Gun, or "Duster," is an American armored light air-defense gun built for the United States Army from 1952 and in service until 1988. It was an excellent anti-personnel direct fire gun used in Vietnam. Its 40 mm guns proved very effective against massed infantry attacks as the Duster's 40 mm shell had a terrific blast and fragmentation effect. The Duster came from Battery D, 1st Battalion, 44th Air Defense Artillery Regiment (US Army).

kilometers east of Cam Lo before being ambushed by the 64th NVA Regiment near Cam Vu with the battle lasting over 7 hours.

The members of the task force expected the road to be mined, but they had not received any intelligence indicating that NVA troops would stand in their way and many thought they were going for a walk in the sun.

The ambush location was just west of the Cam Vu village. The area had waist high thick grass, on a level plain with the TF in column formation on the road and a deserted small village with 8-10 grass hoochies further down the road. **Task Force Robbie** had walked into a classic “L” shaped ambush. The 64th NVA Regiment had constructed an improved, high-density anti-tank minefield in closing the road and fortified the village abandoned hoochies with NVA firing fortifications.

After losing eleven dead, twenty-nine wounded, four tanks damaged, Task Force Robbie limped back to Cam Lo Combat Base C-3 and arrives 1115 PM after being extracted by three companies from 3/9 which had been Heli lifted by CH-53a's from the Rock Pile to the ambush site.



Once clear of the ambush site, the relief force ran into major NVA positions including reinforced concrete pillboxes hidden inside the grass huts. This was the second time the 320th Division caught the Marines in an ambush.⁶⁶

The day after the ambush, 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines, airlifted into C-3 to replace the 1st Battalion's Company D. On April 30, the 3rd Battalion attacked the NVA near Cam Vu with tanks and three full companies, rather than the single company that had fought there the night before. In several battles over the next few days, the 3rd Battalion drove the NVA from the field. The 3rd Battalion's casualties from April 30 to May 3 totaled 42 killed and more than 70 wounded.

After the NVA ambush halted Task Force Robbie's march to the embattled ARVN units, the two ARVN battalions broke contact with the NVA and retreated back to Dong Ha.

⁶⁶ In January 1968, the 320th played a supporting role in the Battle of Khe Sanh, largely tasked with keeping Route 9 from Ca Lu to the Khe Sanh Combat Base closed when elements of the 320th ambushed a Marine convoy between Dong Ha and Camp Carroll and then ambushed the relief force from the 2nd Battalion 9th Marines.

BLT 2nd Battalion 4th Marines

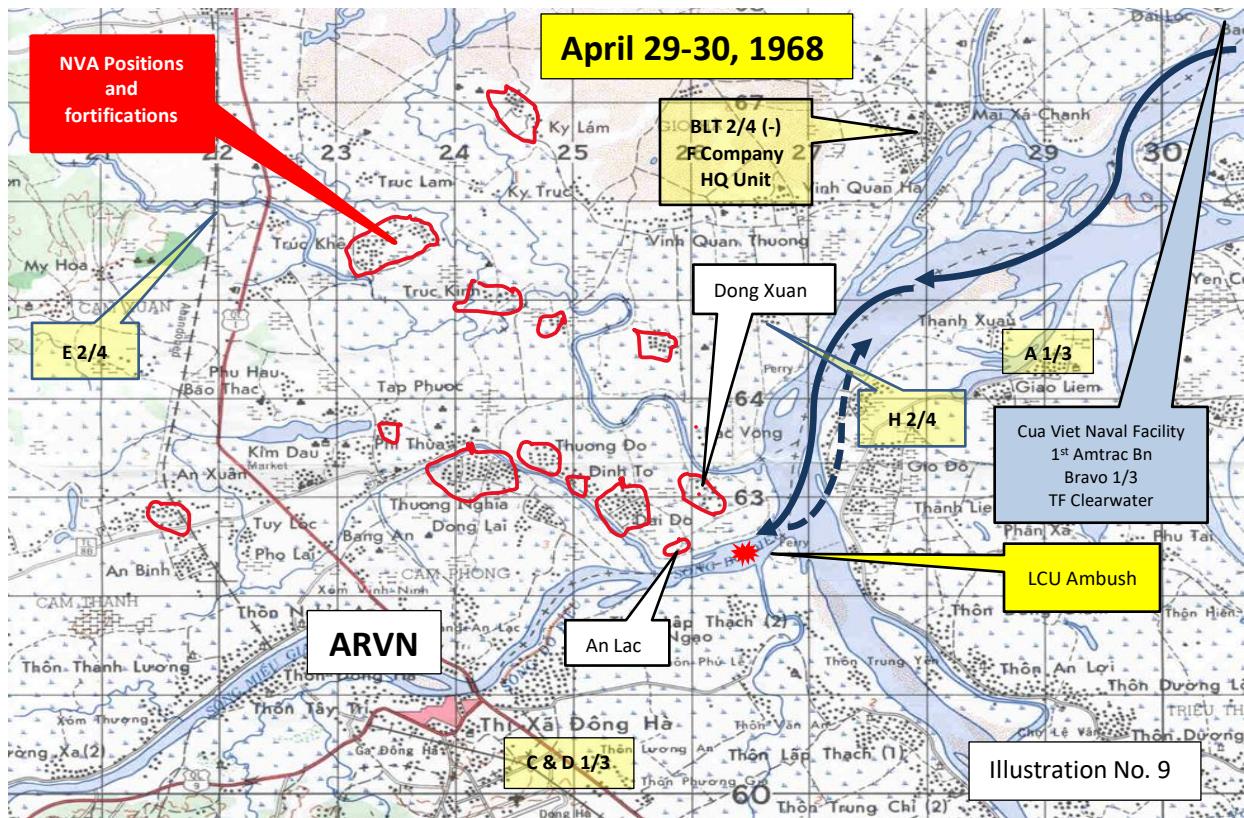
Colonel Milton A. Hull, 3rd Marine Regiment commander, had three battalions in the area to support 3/9: 1st Amphibious Tractor Battalion, which operated out of a base on the mouth of the Cua Viet and the inland waterways, 1/3 which was operating south of the river and located at Dong ha and BLT 2/4 (Special Landing Force ALPHA), which operated north of the Cua Viet between the 1st Amphibious Tractor Battalion and the 2nd ARVN Regiment to the west. 2/4 took over BLT duty on 3 March from 1/3.

To backstop the ARVN still engaged along Route 1, Tompkins ordered the 3rd Marines to send a rifle company (Charlie Co, 1st Bn 3rd Marines) to guard a critical bridge over the Bo Dieu River on Route 1 near Dong Ha.

On 28 April, Colonel Hull ordered Lt. Col. William Weise, Commanding Officer of BLT 2/4 to have a company move to an area north of the Dong Ha Bridge. Col. Weise ordered Capt. James E. Livingston to take his Company E, 2/4, to the bridge from its position in Nhi Ha, a small deserted hamlet about four kilometers north of the Cua Viet. Livingston and his men were carried by UH-34 helicopters from HMM-361 (USS IWO JIMA) to their new position north of the bridge on the afternoon of 29 April.⁶⁷

Early the next morning, Company H, 2/4, while on routine patrol, was surprised to find NVA in the village of Dong Huan, a small hamlet set on an unnamed tributary of the Cua Viet where it turned south, and less than one kilometer above the Bo Dieu River. The NVA were already much farther south than was originally thought. A brief fire-fight erupted, with both sides exchanging short bursts of fire.

⁶⁷ There is some question whether Company E actually deployed near the Dong Ha Bridge or to another smaller bridge spanning Route 1 another 5,000 meters north of the Dong Ha Bridge. Brigadier General William Weise insists that it is the latter bridge and the BLT 2/4 Combat After Action Report is in error on this matter. Source: BGen William Weise interview, 21 Feb 83 (Oral History College, MCHC). (Public Domain)



Then, as the Marines watched, a NVA unit fired a 73 mm SPG-9M “Kopye” tri-pod mounted recoilless rifle from Dong Xuan about 500 yards away at two U.S. Navy Utility Landing Craft (LCUs) moving on the Bo Dieu (aka Song Mieu Giang River). The SPG9M can penetrate 300 mm of armor at close distance.

An instant later, the lead LCU is rocked as two shells ripped through its thin sides. The boats whipped into a U-turn and sped back to Dong Ha being covered by gunfire from PBR's (Patrol Boat, Riverine) from **Task Force Clearwater**. Along with ferrying men and supplies to the Marines during the Battle for Dai Do, **Task Force Clearwater** provided direct fire support and in the early hours, medivac duties.⁶⁸

As soon as he got this news of the NVA contact with Company H, 2/4 battalion commander Lt. Col. William Weise ordered Company H to attack Dong Huan from its position in the hamlet of Bac Vong to the north. At about the same time, the U.S. Navy halted all further river traffic between Camp Kistler, Dong Ha, and

⁶⁸ Task Force Clearwater suffered 15 sailors killed in action and 22 wounded during the Battle for Dong Ha.

Quang Tri City. The 320th had achieved its objective with just a few well-placed shots from a 73 mm recoilless rifle!

The little peninsula between the Bo Dieu and the unnamed tributary to the north contained five hamlets laid out along an extended “V”. At the upper end of the right arm was Dong Huan. Roughly five hundred meters south, at the tip of the V and on the north bank of the Bo Dieu, sat the small village of An Lac⁶⁹ on the riverbank.

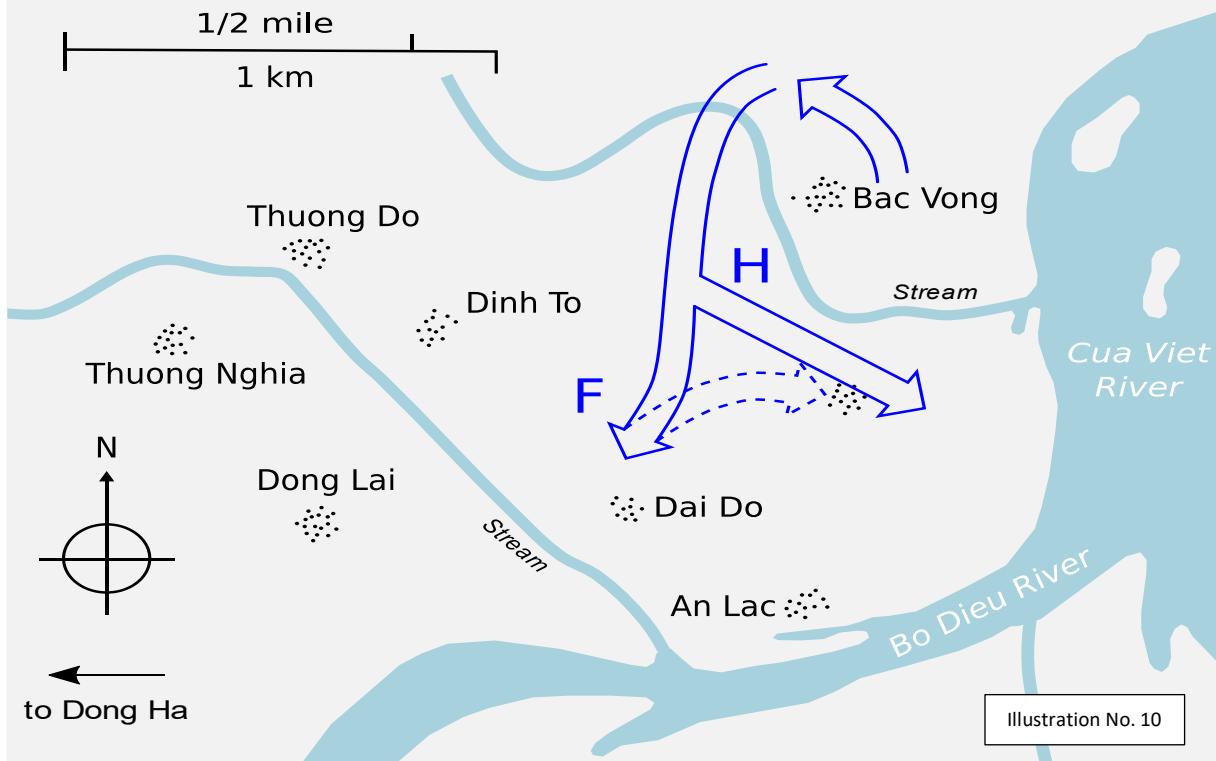
Five hundred meters up the left arm was the largest of the five hamlets, Dai Do. A few hundred meters farther northwest was Dinh To, and just past that hamlet was Thuong Do. Dong Ha was 1,000 meters southwest of Dai Do.

⁶⁹ There has been some confusion among historians concerning the name of the village of *An Lac*. There are no existing maps that survived this period that clearly shows this small village, if called that, as *An Lac* village is just too small. Further, it is common to see spelling errors in Command Chronology Reports during this period of locations and in some cases the village is called *An Loc*. There is another village due north of Dong Ha called Lang *An Lac*. The official record that most historians rely on is *US Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968* by Jack Shulimson, Lt Col L. A. Blasiol, Charles Smith and Captain David Dawson, page 297, which shows the spelling as *An Loc*. The author believes *An Lac* is correct.

BLT 2/4 Attacks

Given the NVA's propensity for setting up situations where they were dug in and their foe was in the open, Weise realized that he had to secure Dai Do, directly to the west. He thus ordered Company F to maneuver on Company H's right flank. Its objective was a cemetery just to the east of Dai Do.

Battle of Dai Do: Morning of April 30, 1968. Attacks by companies H and F.



Even though Company F hadn't yet moved into position, Company H nonetheless launched its attack at about 1400 on 30 April. As the last pair of F-4 Phantom jets unleashed their five-hundred-pound bombs and napalm canisters on Dong Huan, and the supporting artillery fired its final salvo, the company arose and, advancing on line, headed for the hamlet.

Enemy resistance was immediate, fierce, and at close range. Advancing through thick vegetation crisscrossed by hedges more than three meters high, the Marines

were fired on by NVA from only two meters away. The crackling of AK-47s built slowly to a crescendo as enemy soldiers recovered from the bombardment.

Popping up from spider holes hidden in the hedgerows, the NVA fired left and right. Hand-to-hand fighting erupted as NVA soldiers grappled with surprised Marines. Grenades tossed by both sides exploded in thundering crashes, felling Marines and killing NVA trapped in their holes. In the opening minutes of the attack the company commander, Capt. James L. Williams, went down with shrapnel wounds. As he lay bleeding in the dirt, his executive officer quickly assumed command.

Despite the heavy resistance, Company H pressed on. The fighting was at close quarters and deadly, but by 1430 the Marines had advanced through Dong Huan. Exhausted but pumped with adrenaline, they gazed across open paddies at An Lac to the south and Dai Do to the west. With some thirty dead NVA behind them, Lieutenant Colonel Weise gave Company H permission to return to its jumping-off point at Bac Vong. There the Marines set up a night defensive position and evacuated their casualties.

At about the same time that Company H reached Dong Huan, Company F finally started moving toward Dai Do. The company commander, Capt. James Butler, had been delayed because he'd been trying to get a smoke screen laid around Dai Do. Because Company H had priority on the available artillery, his company would have to move across the five hundred meters of open ground completely exposed.

Riding atop four Amtracs, the Marines were hit as they neared the hamlet. At about 1430 RPGs flashed out from Dai Do, crashing into the Amtrac's, their explosions spilling Marines into the tall grass. This first barrage of RPGs damaged two Amtracs and caused a number of casualties. After finally getting some artillery to fire on the hamlet, Butler sent two platoons forward.

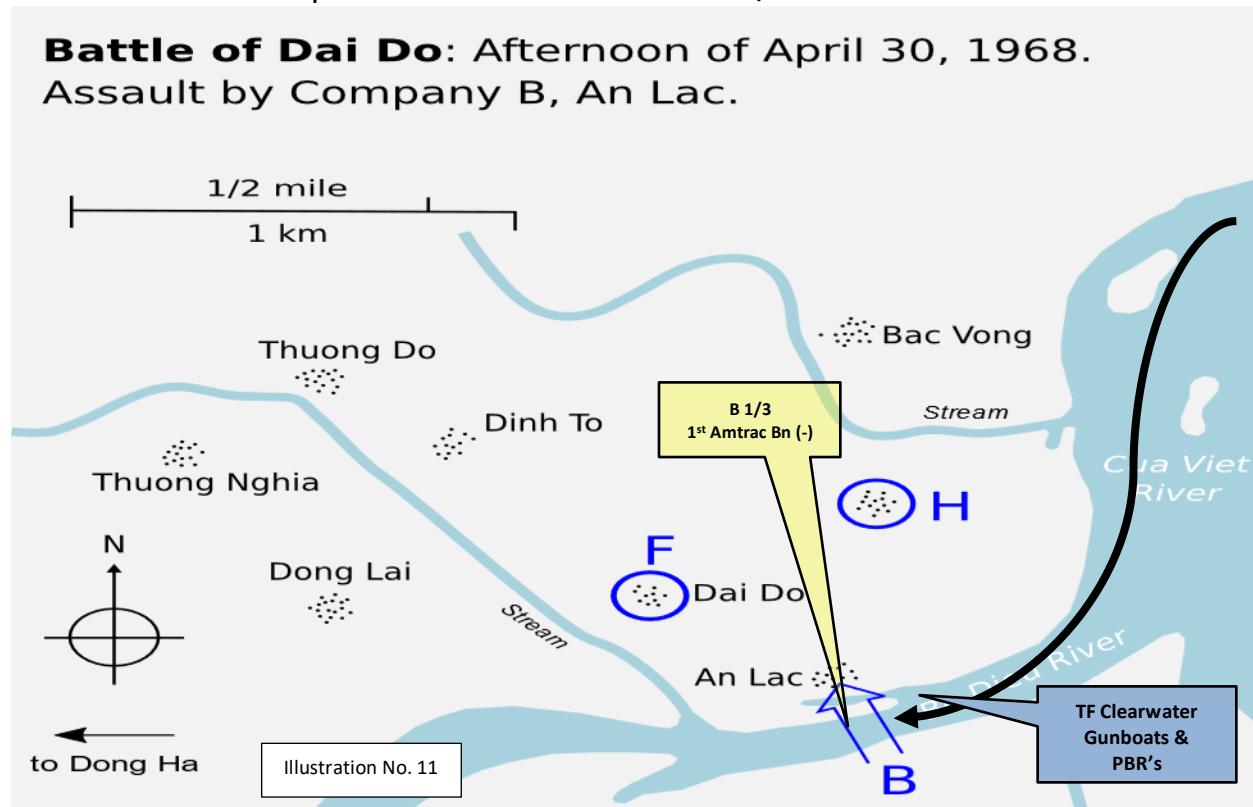
As they neared the first hedgerow, located about one hundred meters east of Dai Do, the enemy infantry let loose. The sudden roar of AK-47 and machine gun fire drowned out the artillery explosions. The deadly sheet of automatic weapons fire dropped men all along the line. Those who could help the wounded pull back to the rest of the company, now clustered around the Amtrac's.

After another artillery barrage tore into the hamlet, Company F's Marines rushed forward again. This time their tenacity allowed them to secure a tenuous toehold in northwest Dai Do. Determined to maintain that position, Weise wanted Company G to reinforce Company F. Colonel Hull told him there weren't enough helicopters available to transport them in time. Weise then appealed for the return of Company E from division control. Hull responded that not only was he working on that, he was also giving Weise Company B, 1st Battalion 3rd Marines. Weise ordered Company B to attack and secure An Lac.

Bravo Company 1/3 Attacks

From its position south of the Cua Viet near Camp Kistler, Company B, 1/3, boarded Amtrac's for the trip down the river. Marines usually avoided riding inside the LVTP-5 Amphibian Tractor because its highly volatile gasoline fuel tanks were located beneath the troop compartment. It was feared that there would be little chance of escape if the Amtrac struck a land/sea mine or RPG.

Battle of Dai Do: Afternoon of April 30, 1968. Assault by Company B, An Lac.



About 1615, the tracks from 1st Amtrac Battalion (-) carrying Bravo Company neared the beaches fronting An Lac along the Bo Dieu River in-line just south of

Dai Do. In a scene resembling a World War II island beachhead assault, a withering hail of enemy fire, including accurate RPG fire and 73 mm recoilless rifles, raked Company B as its members jumped off the Amtrac's as they stormed the river embankment.

The company commander 1st Lt George Norris died in a flurry of AK-47 fire just minutes after stepping ashore destroying two amtrac's. A platoon leader and platoon sergeant died, too. In the first five minutes ashore, seven Marines were killed and fourteen were seriously wounded, including the company gunnery sergeant. Weise had had no idea that the NVA had that much strength in An Lac.

Using Marine F-4 Phantoms from 1st MAW, naval gunfire from Naval Task Group 79.4 (SLF Alpha), heavy mortar fire from **TF Clearwater** monitors and gun boats, plus artillery from various FSB, Weise pounded An Lac for the next thirty minutes. Only then could Company B, with just one surviving officer, secure its beachhead and set up defensive positions. Weise then ordered the company to dig in for the night, evacuate its wounded, and carry out a re-supply.

In the meantime, Captain Butler, concerned about a counterattack against his company's weak positions in Dai Do, radioed Weise to request permission to pull back and link up with Company H for the night. Although Weise hated to give up hard-won ground, he gave his okay. It took until dark to complete the retrograde movement, but Company F finally straggled into Dong Huan with just fifty-five effectives. Together with Company H, they spent the night of 30 April-1 May secure behind a wall of artillery and mortar fire. Company B, 1/3 spent a similar night at An Lac.

Because of the beating that Company B, 1/3 had taken earlier that day, Lt Colonel Weise decided to commit his Company G to the fight. From its position ten kilometers northeast of the battleground, Company G was ordered to proceed immediately to An Lac via rivercraft, move through Company B, and attack Dai Do in the predawn darkness.

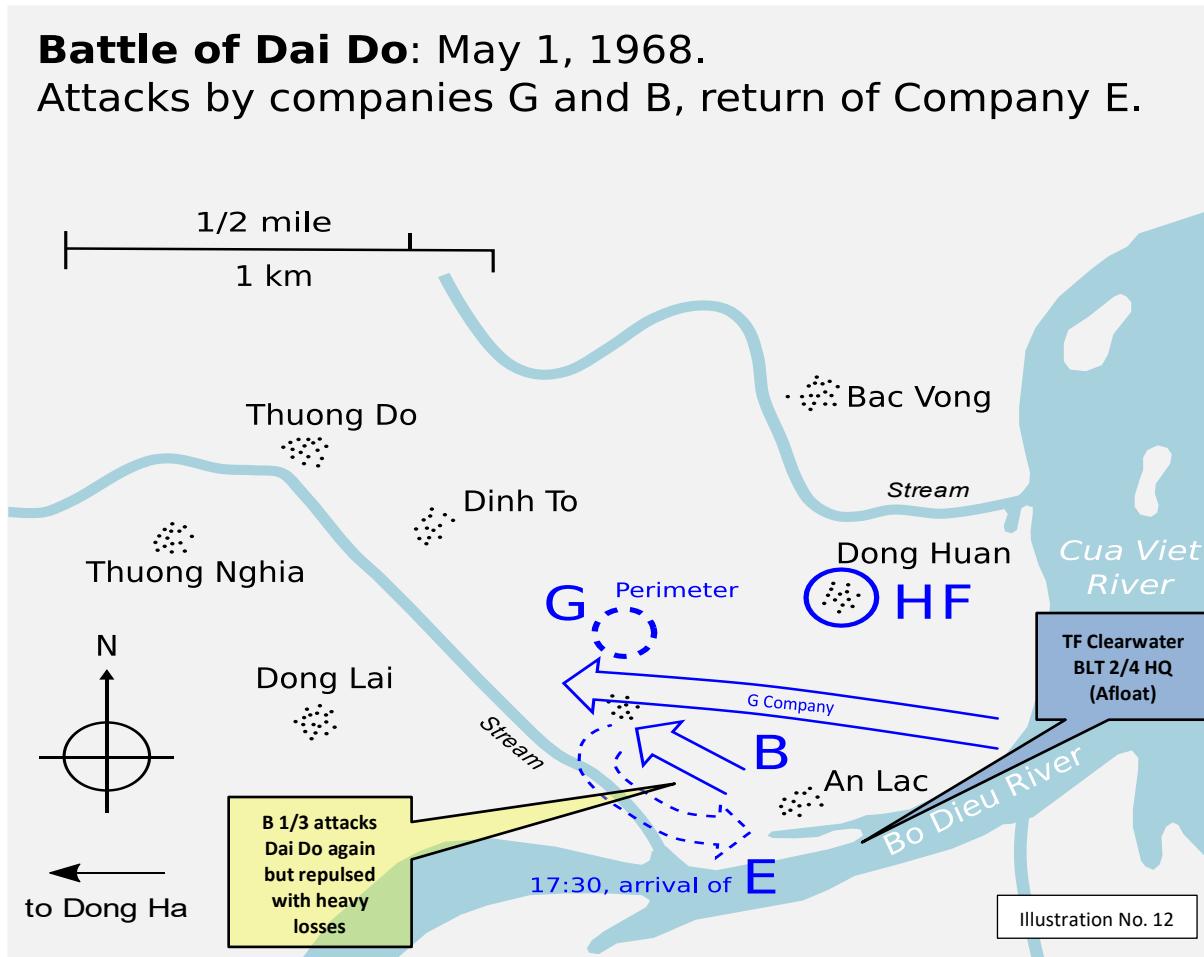
Near the mouth of the Cua Viet, the *USS Iwo Jima* and *USS Cleveland* were designated as the PCRS's (Primary Casualty Receiving Ships) with *USS Valley Forge* and *USS Repose* in support in case Iwo Jima's medical facilities were overwhelmed. The medical staff of Company D, 3rd Medical Battalion in Dong Ha

coordinated medivacs to various commands and PCRS ships. By midnight, all were running at capacity.

Adequate transportation still could not be secured, so Company G did not arrive at An Lac until about 0945 on 1 May. When all its men were ashore, Weise ordered the company commander, Capt. Jay R. Vargas, to move his Marines around Company B 1/3 to the right, then attack northwest toward Dai Do across seven hundred meters of open ground. Companies F and H would support Vargas from Dong Huan as he drove into the hamlet.

F & H 2/4 Second Attack

While Vargas prepared his company for the attack, Dai Do was pounded with napalm and bombs from Marine Phantoms and Sky Hawks. At the same time, NVA heavy artillery batteries north of the DMZ were blasting Dong Huan and An Lac. The noise was tremendous with all the explosions and the screams of low-flying jets. Men had to shout at one another to be heard above the din.



Supported by two tanks, Company G jumped off at about 1300. Advancing with two platoons forward, the company made it about one third of the way across the open ground before the NVA opened fire. The 3rd Platoon, on the left, was particularly hard hit. A 12.7 mm heavy machine gun played havoc with the advancing Marines. Its deadly rounds cut men down like an invisible scythe. Just then, enemy mortar and heavy artillery rounds from the DMZ tore into the area,

throwing towering geysers of dirt skyward. Ignoring the lethal danger, Vargas boldly ran to the stalled platoon. Under his urging the advance resumed. By 1500 Company G was in Dai Do.

Heavy, close-quarters fighting raged as the Marines moved through the hamlet. Enemy soldiers seemed to be everywhere, popping up from spider holes, from under haystacks, from trench lines behind hedgerows, and from inside the abandoned huts. But Vargas's men routed them out one by one with ruthless efficiency.

Company G had just barely reached the far side of Dai Do when the NVA counterattacked. Aerial observers excitedly reported scores and scores of enemy soldiers pouring out of Dinh To and headed right toward Dai Do. Though supporting fire blasted the enemy formations, by 1630 they were seriously pressing Vargas's company. He had no choice as he ordered a withdrawal. As the Marines retreated, they couldn't believe what they were experiencing. The NVA were so close that they were being killed at pistol range and in hand-to-hand combat. Some North Vietnamese soldiers were so pumped up that they actually ran right past the withdrawing Americans.

Vargas and about forty-five of his men dropped into a deep drainage ditch that ran along Dai Do's northeastern edge. The heavy volume of fire that the small but determined force put out finally halted the enemy's momentum. At the same time the forward artillery controllers were on their radios desperately calling for more supporting fire. Within minutes their pleas were answered. The Marine 105 mm shells were soon crashing down less than fifty meters from the ditch.

Now, greatly concerned for Company G's survival, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Company B 1/3, again into the fight. Mounted again on the vulnerable Amtrac's, what remained of the battered company started for Dai Do about 1730. At the same time, Company E 2/4, was finally released from division control. Captain Livingston immediately started his men on the two-kilometer movement to An Lac. Along the way marauding bands of NVA repeatedly fired on them, killing several Marines. But by 1900, Company E was in An Lac.

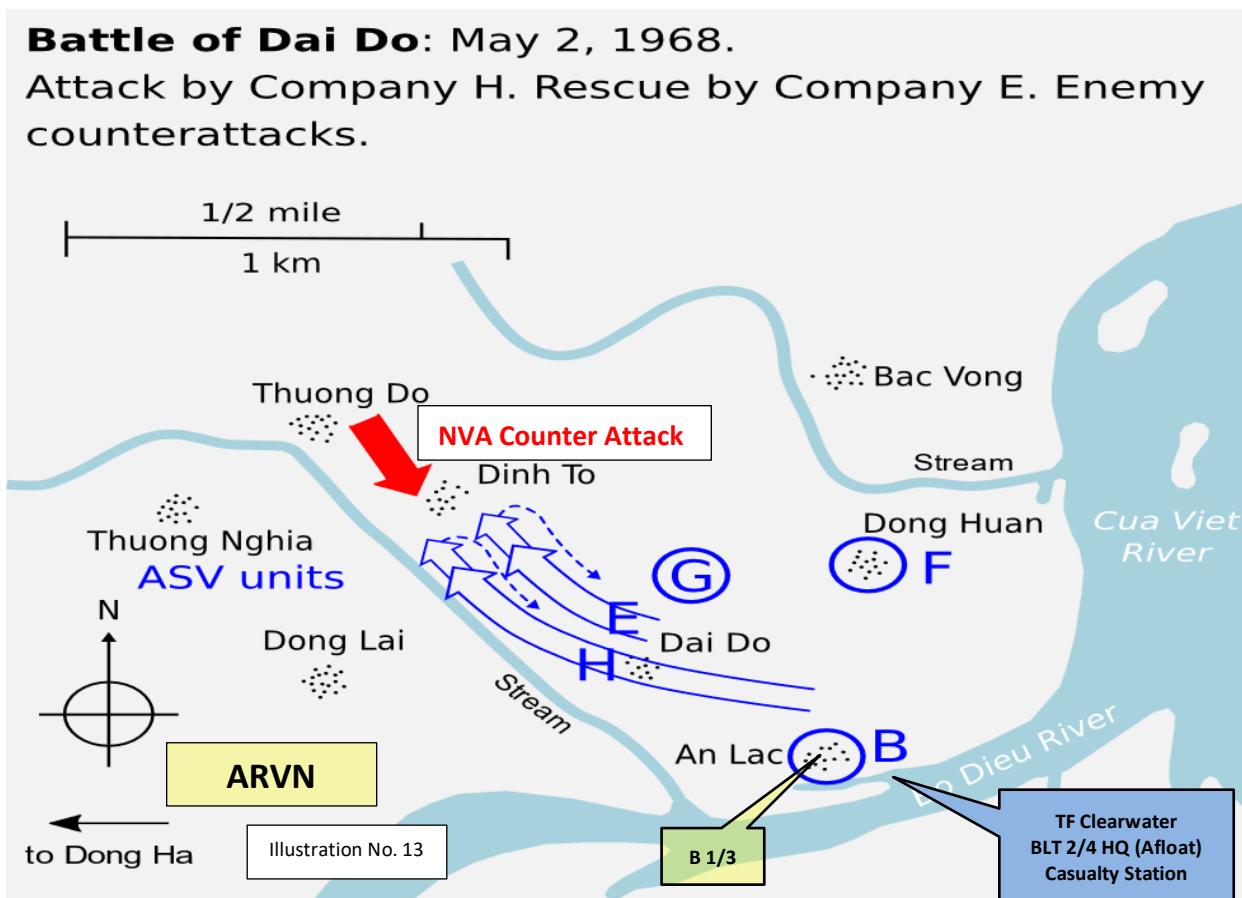
At 1745, while still less than halfway to Dai Do, Company B 1/3 was again blasted off its amtrac's by RPGs and heavy automatic weapons fire. Among those

grievously wounded was the new company commander, who'd taken command but a few hours earlier. Unable to proceed, with tracer rounds snapping just inches over their heads, the survivors of Company B began pulling back to An Lac. They dragged their wounded with them; the dead stayed in the field. Four hundred meters to the north, Captain Vargas and his forty-five surviving Marines dug in for the night. Besides their own weapons, they had the support of artillery to hold the determined 320th Division at bay.

Before first light on 2 May, Company E was up and ready to go. Captain Livingston ordered, "Fix bayonets." It was very satisfying to him to hear the distinct click of the edged weapons locking into place on 73 rifles. Because of a communication problem, Company E moved toward Dai Do without the benefit of a rolling barrage of artillery to keep down the enemy's heads.

Battle of Dai Do: May 2, 1968.

Attack by Company H. Rescue by Company E. Enemy counterattacks.



Still, only occasional pops from a sniper's rifle interrupted the advance. Then, in a blur of confusion, the NVA let loose with everything they had when the Marines

were just 150 meters short of the hamlet. From the hedgerows along Dai Do's south edge, small arms, automatic rifle, and RPG fire slammed into Company E.

Livingston and his command group dove behind one of numerous burial mounds dotting the open area. Eighteen RPG's exploded around them in the next few minutes. Company E was pinned down.

From his position on the northeast edge of Dai Do, Captain Vargas tried to relieve the pressure on Company E by leading his forty-five men in an attack through the hamlet. Soon, the NVA shifted their fire to meet this new threat. With less fire coming his way, Captain Livingston then rallied his men and led them forward to the hamlet's edge.

Dead NVA littered the ground everywhere, but there were plenty of live ones left and they weren't giving up easily. Marines used grenades and M79 grenade launchers to clear enemy positions. The fighting was brutal but the Marines pressed forward, meter by bloody meter.

At 0914 Captain Vargas advised Lieutenant Colonel Weise that he had linked up with Livingston. They were digging in on Dai Do's northwestern edge. Before Weise could respond, NVA mortar shells fired from Dinh To, began dropping among the Marines. During the fifteen-minute barrage, Weise was ordered by Colonel Hull to continue the ground attack into Dinh To. Weise was incredulous but had no choice. Realizing that Companies E and G were in no shape to launch another full-scale attack, Lieutenant Colonel Weise turned to Company H.

Just before 1000, Company H left its positions in Dong Huan and moved through Dai Do's western edge. Using fire and maneuver tactics, two of its platoons made it into Dinh To under relatively light enemy fire. As the two platoons started through the hamlet, the NVA suddenly counterattacked. Within minutes Company H was in serious trouble.

Seconds later Captain Livingston, who'd been monitoring Company H's progress on the radio, called Weise: "*I'm going to help Hotel. They're really fixing to get in trouble. I'll go get 'em.*" Without waiting for a response, Captain Livingston took the seventy able-bodied men left in his company on the attack. Charging through the enemy fire, Livingston led his men right through clusters of NVA by passing by

Company H. They were killing the enemy on the run. Some NVA fled, actually trotting along with Livingston's Marines before they were shot down.

Once Company E tied in with Company H, the two companies resumed the attack on Dinh To. Initially, they made good progress, but then the NVA counterattacked yet again in force. A sudden increase in enemy fire signaled their intention. From as close as twenty-five meters the NVA cut loose with an awesome display of firepower.

The noise rose to an ear-shattering roar as weapons of every caliber spewed hot lead. Under tremendous pressure the Marines were forced back. Bravely defying the enemy's onslaught, Livingston stood in the open, firing a rifle at the crew with a heavy 12.7 mm AA machine gun.

The NVA got lucky before Livingston did. A heavy slug from the automatic weapon tore into his thigh, sending him sprawling. As two other wounded men helped him to safety, he turned over command of Company E to the only surviving officer – a brand new 2nd lieutenant. The two battered companies retreated all the way back to Dai Do. There they evacuated their seriously wounded and loaded up on more ammo.

At this time Lieutenant Colonel Weise arrived in Dai Do with more orders from Colonel Hull. Impossible as it seemed, 2/4 was to immediately launch yet another attack into Dinh To. Calling upon what remained of Companies F and G, Weise ordered them to clear Dinh To. The renewed assault kicked off at 1550. It was a bloody failure.

Through a misunderstanding of orders, Company F did not provide Vargas's company with adequate support. Rather than advance in trail behind Company G, from where it could pass through Vargas's company to exploit any weak spots, Company F moved on their right flank, in the open fields east of the hamlet. As a result, the entrenched NVA easily flanked the two companies through its tunnel and trench system.

Then, at 1645 the NVA, displaying incredible reserve strength, counterattacked once again in force. To the shock of the Marines, the NVA seemed to be everywhere. Dozens and dozens of enemy soldiers poured out of the nearby

brush and trenches. Wearing pith helmets, web gear and firing their AK-47s from their hips, they raced forward. Vargas's depleted platoons retreated right past the ditch he was using as a command post.

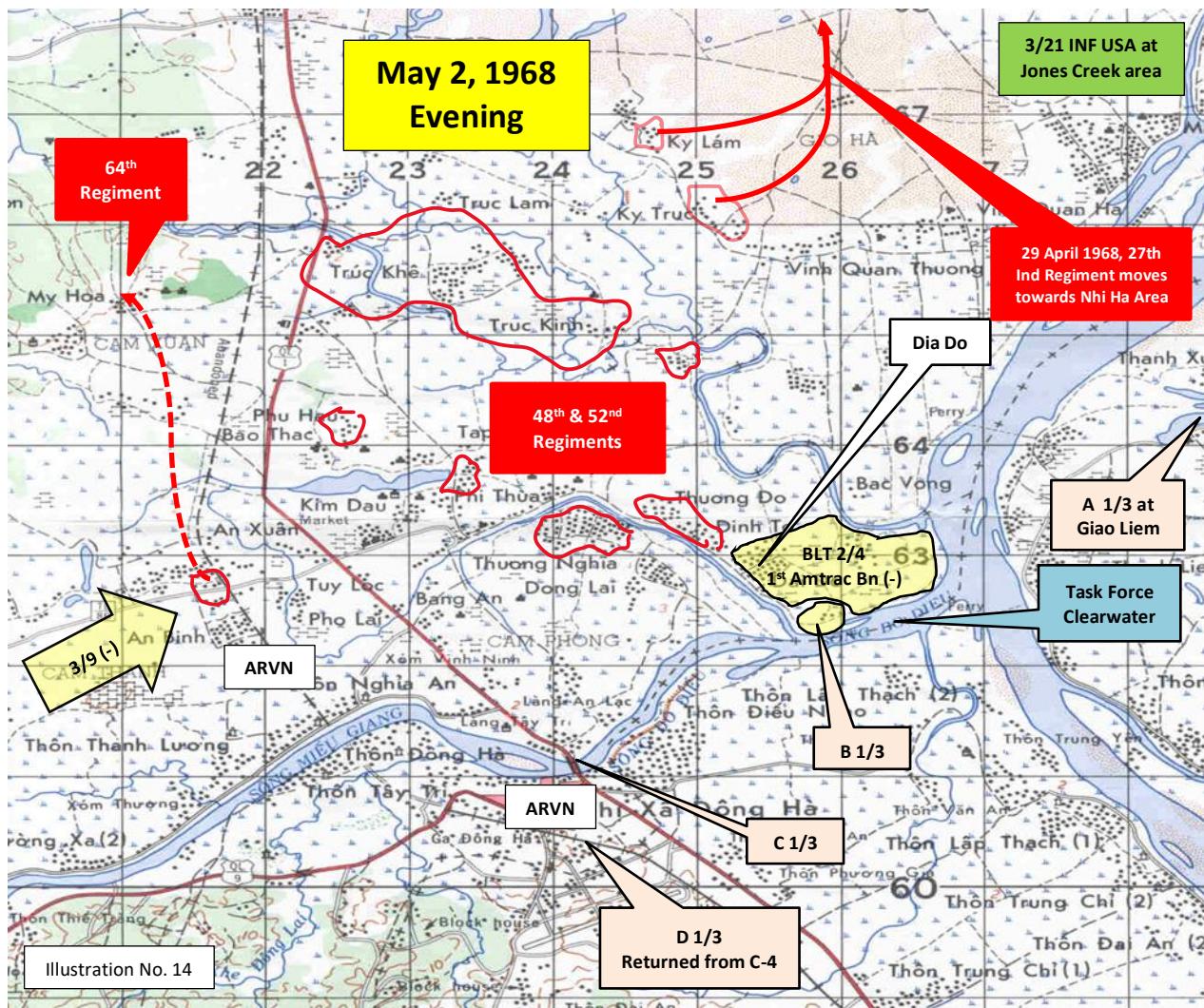
Lieutenant Colonel Weise and his command group, who had joined Vargas just a few minutes earlier, fought as riflemen. Weise blazed away with an M16, picking off enemy soldiers as easily as hitting targets on a firing range. Then, the attacking enemy soldiers were alongside the ditch. In rapid succession Weise was hit by enemy rifle fire, and the battalion sergeant major was killed by the shrapnel from an exploding RPG.

Intent on saving his commander, Captain Vargas valiantly risked his own life to carry Weise rearward to an evacuation point. Vargas then returned to his embattled company. Using an AK-47, he fired away at the enemy while he helped the wounded rearward. An RPG explosion knocked him down as it tore a chunk of flesh from his leg. Still, he fought on and got his casualties headed to safety. All around him Marines and North Vietnamese soldiers grappled in death struggles. Vargas himself killed an enemy soldier with his knife.

Despite these heroics, the Marines were forced back. By 1800 Companies F and G were in Dai Do. All four companies of 2/4 dug in there for the night. The Marines spent a nervous night as the NVA probed their positions throughout the dark hours. More than a dozen enemy soldiers were killed as they sneaked forward to try to throw grenades into the friendly positions.

It had been a brutal three-day fight for 2/4. At the end of 2 May, Company E had forty-five men left, Company F fifty-two, Company G thirty-five, and Company H sixty-four. 2nd Battalion 4th Marines needed relief and quickly.

With the piecemealing of his forces into the battle, Lt Col Weise later declared that "*I felt an hour late and a dime short*" throughout the fight. From the perspective of General Tompkins at the 3rd Marine Division command post, he could not be sure that the main thrust of the enemy was in the Dai Do Sector and the attacks were a diversion.



While the Dai Do sector may have been the site of the heaviest fighting during this period, the NVA had not limited its efforts only to this area. Throughout the three-day period, from 30 April through 2 May, the 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines near Cam Phu continued to have sporadic contact with scattered units of the 64th Regiment, 320th NVA Division east of the site of the ambush of **Task Force Robbie**.

In the center, 2nd ARVN Regiment was reporting continuous contact with NVA regulars near An Binh. To the northeast, the Army's 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry ran into intense combat in the Nghi Ha sector along Jones Creek.

The departure of BLT 2/4 from the Nghi Ha and the Lam Xuan village complexes on the night of 30 April – 1 May, left the entire Jones Creek area open to the NVA 270th Independent Regiment. With the assignment of the 3rd Battalion 21st

Infantry Regiment, 196th Light Infantry Brigade to the operational control of the 3rd Marine Regiment on the evening of 1 May to fill that gap allowed the 3/21 to reenter the Jones Creek area the following morning.

South of Dong Ha, elements of the 808th and 814th NVA Regiments made contact with 1/3 and the 1st ARVN Regiment but they did not press any attacks. The rest of the sector was considered quiet with occasional sniper fire and small unit activity.

The evening of May 2nd, Colonel Hull ordered the rest of 1/3 commanded by the highly experienced Lieutenant Colonel Charles V. Jarman to assemble his battalion including Charlie Company 1/3 from bridge duty to land at a new LZ south of Thuong Do on the afternoon of 3 May to relieve the battered 2nd Battalion 4th Marines.

Lt Col Jarman, a WW2 and Korean War mustang with considerable combat experience, ordered A Company to protect Dong Ha from the south until relieved by ARVN forces. Next, he tasked C and D Companies 1/3, after securing the LZ, to renew the attack through Thuong Do, with the final objective of Truc Kinh via Som Soi. B Company would follow in trace.

The landing at the LZ went off as planned with only inaccurate AA fire from positions farther north of the LZ. By 1500, the two companies of 1/3 had entered Thuong Do. Although they encountered stubborn rear-guard resistance and snipers, it was apparent that the NVA had pulled out of Thuong Do and villages west of this position the night before.⁷⁰

By 1800, 1/3 had swept through Thuong Do, Thuang Nghia and Phi Thua. The 320th broke contact heading north towards Truc Kinh. That evening, BLT 2/4 OPCON two companies to follow 1/3 in trace to police the battlefield and collect the dead.

⁷⁰ **PERSONAL NOTE:** *As we advanced in line abreast, we received heavy but inaccurate machine gun fire from in front of Charlie Company. We hit the deck and called up our FO that provided well aimed artillery fire that quickly silenced the machine gun and allowed us to get up and continue forward. We were being sniped at but they would just pop up loose a few rounds then disappear. There was no massive NVA fire power that 2/4 and Bravo Company had experienced. This clearly indicated the NVA had pulled out. It would take a lot of time to clear all the tunnels and fortifications before the area was considered secure.*

With BLT 2/4 holding at Dai Do, only the A Company, 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines remained in the **Napoleon/Saline** sector, safeguarding the *southern* banks of the Cua Viet. With the commitment of 1/3, the area south of Dong Ha could not be covered by forces located in Quang Tri and A 1/3 manned the perimeter at Gioa Liem.

General Tompkins requested a battalion from the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, to fill any gaps in the division's defenses. At 0900, 1 May, the 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry arrived by helicopter in a landing zone just north of Dong Ha at Lang Tay. Later that day, General Tompkins turned over operational control of the Army battalion to the 3rd Marines to insert into the Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan area to stop any additional forces joining the fray north of Dong Ha.

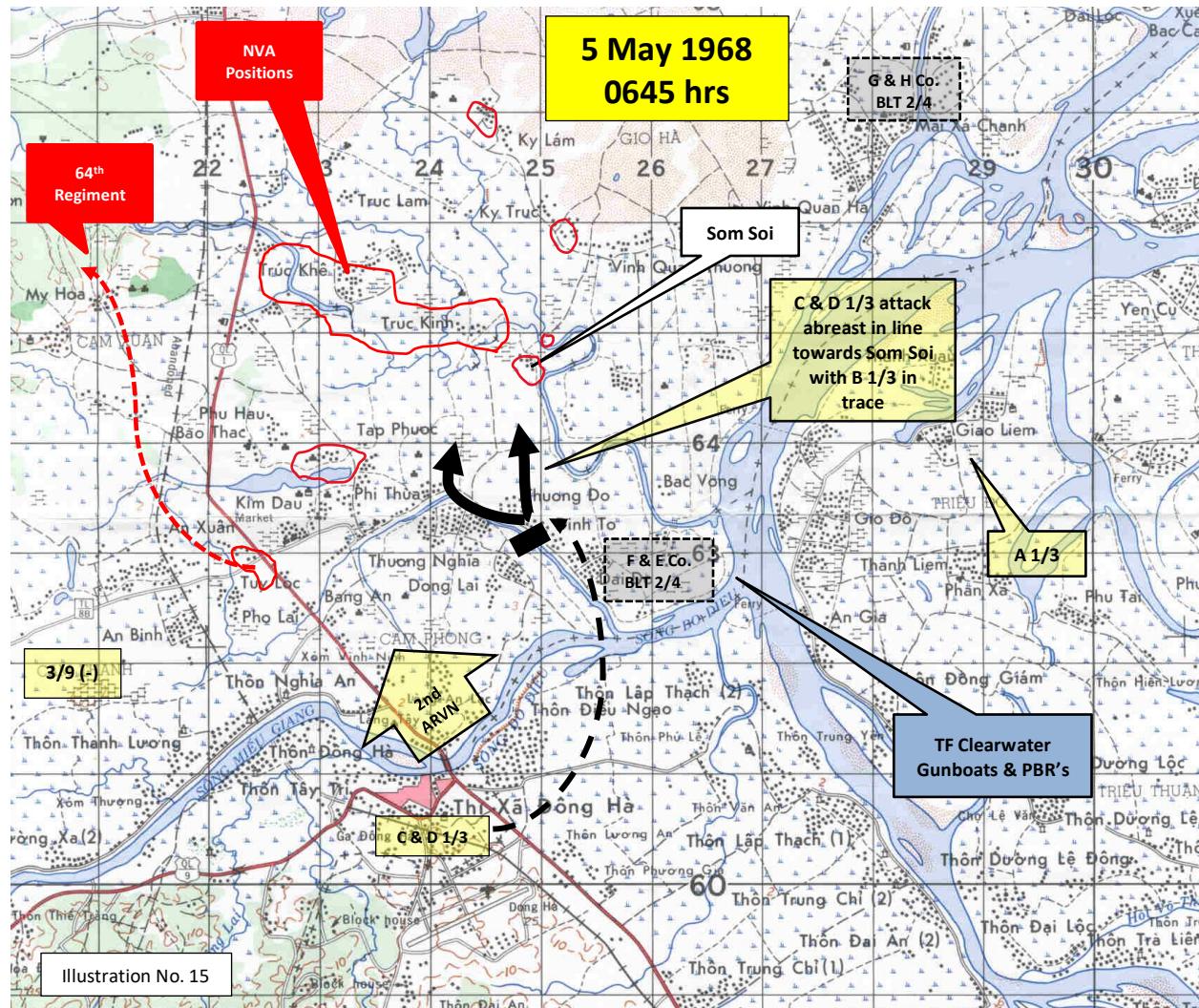
The night of 2-3 May, 1968, 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines takes over responsibility for Dai Do sector from BLT 2/4 and Lt Col Jarman assumes command of the battlefield. This allows BLT 2/4 to refit and receive replacements. BLT 2/4 OPCON two companies to 1/3 to assist in collecting the dead, wounded and to clear the tunnels and fortifications⁷¹ and two moved backed to their base at Mai Xa Chanh.

⁷¹ Several of the 2/4 Marine dead had their hands tied behind their back and we believed that these Marines were captured and subsequently executed by the NVA when the battle appeared to be going against them. SOURCE: Col. C.V. Jarman December 12, 1994. **PERSONAL NOTE:** *My platoon was on the far right as we swept through the battle field and I came across a 2/4 Marine sitting on a trail holding an AK-47 without a magazine or helmet staring into a bush in front of him and to his right were two dead Marines hunched over a jammed M60. I said "Are you okay buddy?" He replied in a low voice "There are thousands of them. Get down." There was a pause and he asked me how many was with me and I replied a "whole battalion." I called out "Corpsman Up" and a corpsman arrived to take control after I removed the AK-47. When they got to him, he started to cry and shake. I moved my squad on as this was affecting them – half were green replacements – after our LT told me to "Get moving!"*

1/3 Marines Attack

1st Battalion 3rd Marines was at full strength as it had finished its refit or received all its replacements except for Bravo Company which was still looking for replacements. Alpha Company was guarding the southern sector of Dong Ha at Giao Liem.

On the morning of 5 May 1968, 1st Battalion 3rd Marines (C and D Companies advancing with B Company in trace) were to pass through the lines of 2nd Bn 4th Marines near Thuong Do and Xonsoi. In the meantime, the fighting had shifted north to a pursuit operation as it appeared the 64th Regiment was in full retreat northward towards the My Hoa area but leaving a rear guard. G-3 intelligence guessed the remaining regiments of the 320th would retreat back through their original infiltration route along Jones Creek if they could not defend the Truc Kinh/Truc Khe defensive area.



After a short hiatus in the Dai Do area helping 2/4 remove the dead, on the morning of 5 May, Lt Col Jarman's 1st Battalion 3rd Marines attacked Truc Kinh, a distance of 1,200 meters to the northwest.

The Attack on Truc Kinh – 5 May 1968

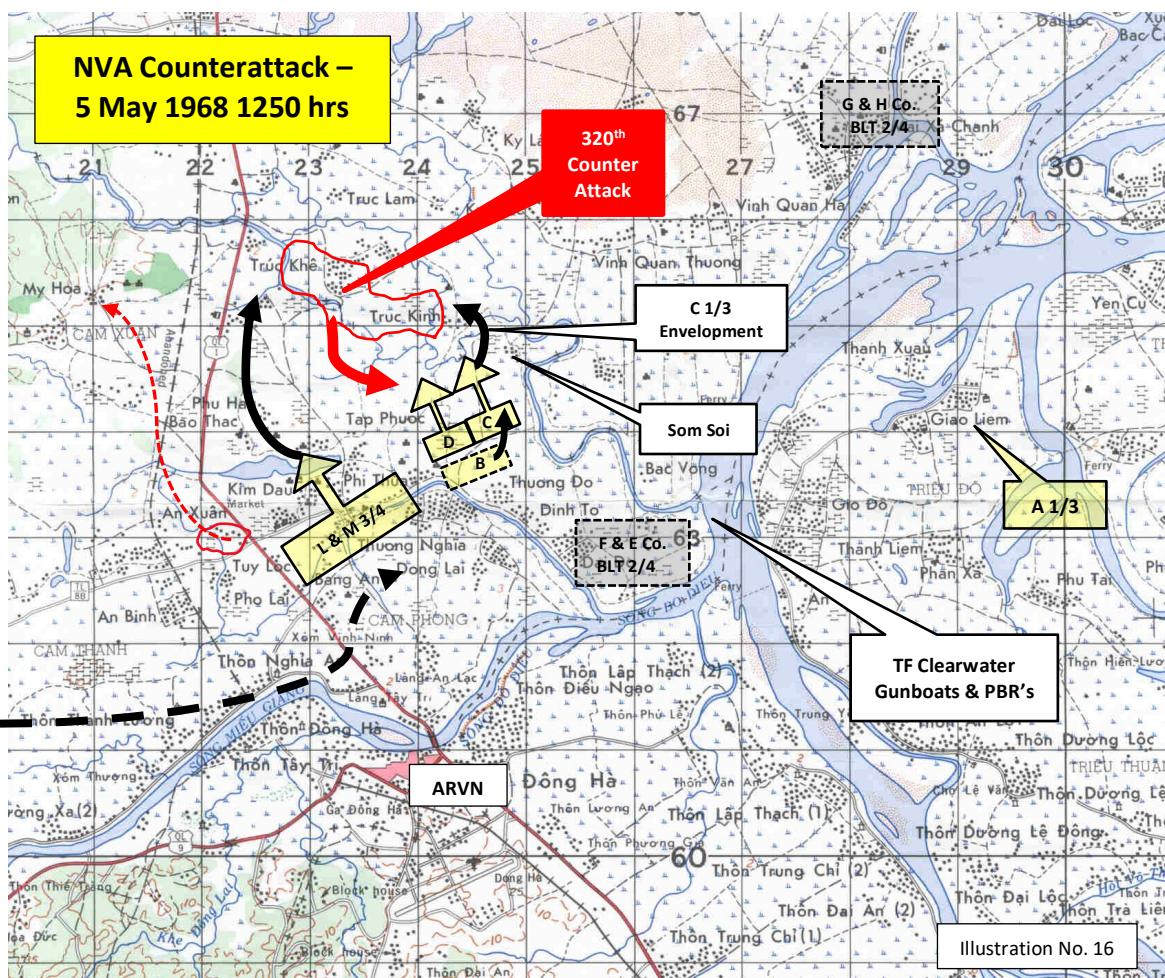
The 2nd ARVN Regiment was to protect the 1/3 western flank east of Route 1 to prevent flanking as the Marines attacked Truc Kinh. Many in 1/3 had suspect if this support would be there when needed. The first objective would be the small village of Som Soi.

With C and D Companies on line abreast and in the lead, B Company following in trace, the Marine battalion reached the edge of its first objective, the hamlet of Som Soi, about 300 meters southeast of Truc Kinh, encountering only token resistance. Within a short time, however, about 1130, the Marine battalion came under heavy fire from Truc Kinh. Calling in artillery and fixed-wing airstrikes against Truc Kinh, the battalion fought its way through Som Soi.

At this point, about 1250 on the 5th, the North Vietnamese launched a strong counterattack from Truc Kinh with Company D on the eastern flank bearing the brunt of the assault. Lt Colonel Jarman then ordered Company C to swing around to the right to contain the enemy attack while Company B screened the movement and slid into positions vacated by Charlie Company.⁷² This maneuver, however, exposed the battalion's western flank since the 2nd ARVN Regiment's attack towards Kim Dau had already stalled and the South Vietnamese were in no position to support the Marines.

⁷² **PERSONAL NOTE:** *3rd Platoon, Charlie Company 1/3 was on the eastern side of the envelopment movement in the lead of the three platoons. Our Company Commander ordered a squad from 3rd Platoon to screen our far-eastern flank. There was a tree line with a small stream and hoochies on the east bank about 600 meters from our departure point. In front of this was 12 large round burial mounds about 6 feet tall. My squad was selected and we ran for the mounds. We were taking inaccurate fire from the tree line but could not see any enemy troops. I called up for a MG team and placed them behind a mound. Next, I placed two men behind other mounds left and right of the MG team and gave all to light up the bamboo tree line and hoochies with suppression fire. For the next 30 minutes, we poured ammo into an unknown enemy but the incoming fire stopped until Col. Hull's chopper started hovering overhead and then all hell broke loose with 12.7 mm AA fire. Col. Hull left in a hurry and the incoming fire stopped. I spotted an enemy force of about 30 men running in the distance and called in artillery. After adjusting, I yelled "Fire for Effect!" When we finally ran out of ammo, our Skipper called us back and said to tell your squad that they earned a "Well Done" from the Regimental Commander.*

At 1300, an aerial observer radioed 1/3 that "500 Charlies were preparing to flank your position." Colonel Hull, the 3rd Marines commander, upon learning of the situation, immediately requested reinforcements from 3rd Marine Division and they released Companies L and M, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines to the operational control of the 3rd Marines.



Marine helicopters brought the two companies into a hot landing zone west of Thuong Do. Despite the loss of one helicopter from AA fire from Truc Kinh, the two 4th Marines companies quickly advanced to the northwest to provide protection for Jarman's western flank.

After consolidating his positions in a defensive perimeter established by Companies L and M in a tree line, about 1,000 meters to the south of Truc Khe, Lt

Col Jarman described the intense combat situation "relatively routine" as Marine air, naval and artillery continued to pound the enemy. The 320th brought heavy fire upon Marine positions but by 1800, the 320th broke contact – they had enough.

Most of the North Vietnamese had fled except for the dead from the previous battle, three NVA soldiers who surrendered to the Marines of 1/3, and a determined rear guard that fought a delaying action as the 48th and 52nd Regiment survivors headed northeast towards Ky Lam and their original infiltration routes along Jones Creek.

In the two-day Battle for Truc Kinh, the 1/3 and 3/4 Marines reported 173 of the enemy dead, captured 3 prisoners, and recovered 75 rifles and 19 crew-served weapons. The Marines sustained casualties of 15 dead and 71 wounded.

On the morning of the 6th, C and D Companies 1/3 again reoccupied Som Soi meeting minor resistance. While D Company provided protective fire, C Company entered Truc Kinh from the right and L and M Companies 3/4 took Truc Khe to the northwest. Other than snipers, the enemy had fled.

The remainder of the day and into the 7th, the Marines policed the battle area and received replenishment.

Credit must be given to the 12th Marines as they supported all of these operations from firing positions at Dong Ha, Camp Carroll, Gio Linh, Cam Lo, Khe Sanh, and Quang Tri during 1968.⁷³

With our tactical strategy of overwhelming firepower on the enemy when engaged, Marine and Army (12th Marines had Army artillery battalions OPCON to them⁷⁴) was essentially our big fist along with air support and naval gun fire from 1st Marine Air Wing and the Navy Gun Line respectively. After the enemy had

⁷³ **PERSONAL NOTE:** *My first-hand witness of the amount of artillery, air strikes and naval gunfire that fell on Truc Kinh and Truc Khe left me awe struck. I said to others that I did not believe anyone could survive that awesome display of power. When we finally got into Truc Kinh, we saw the same types of fortifications and tunnel system as was seen in Dai Do area.*

⁷⁴ US Army artillery unit OPCON to 12th Marines was the 108th Field Artillery Group which included 1st Battalion 40th Artillery, 2nd Battalion 94th Artillery, Provisional Artillery Group, 2nd Target Acquisition Battery (FADAC), and 8th Battalion 4th Artillery.

been hammered and targets softened did Marine commanders send in the infantry.

By the end of ***Operation Napoleon/Saline*** in December 1968, 12th Marines controlled 22 firing units situated on 21 locations throughout the Quang Tri Province. With expanded aerial reconnaissance and observation assets, 12th Marine targeting abilities continued to grow in 1969.

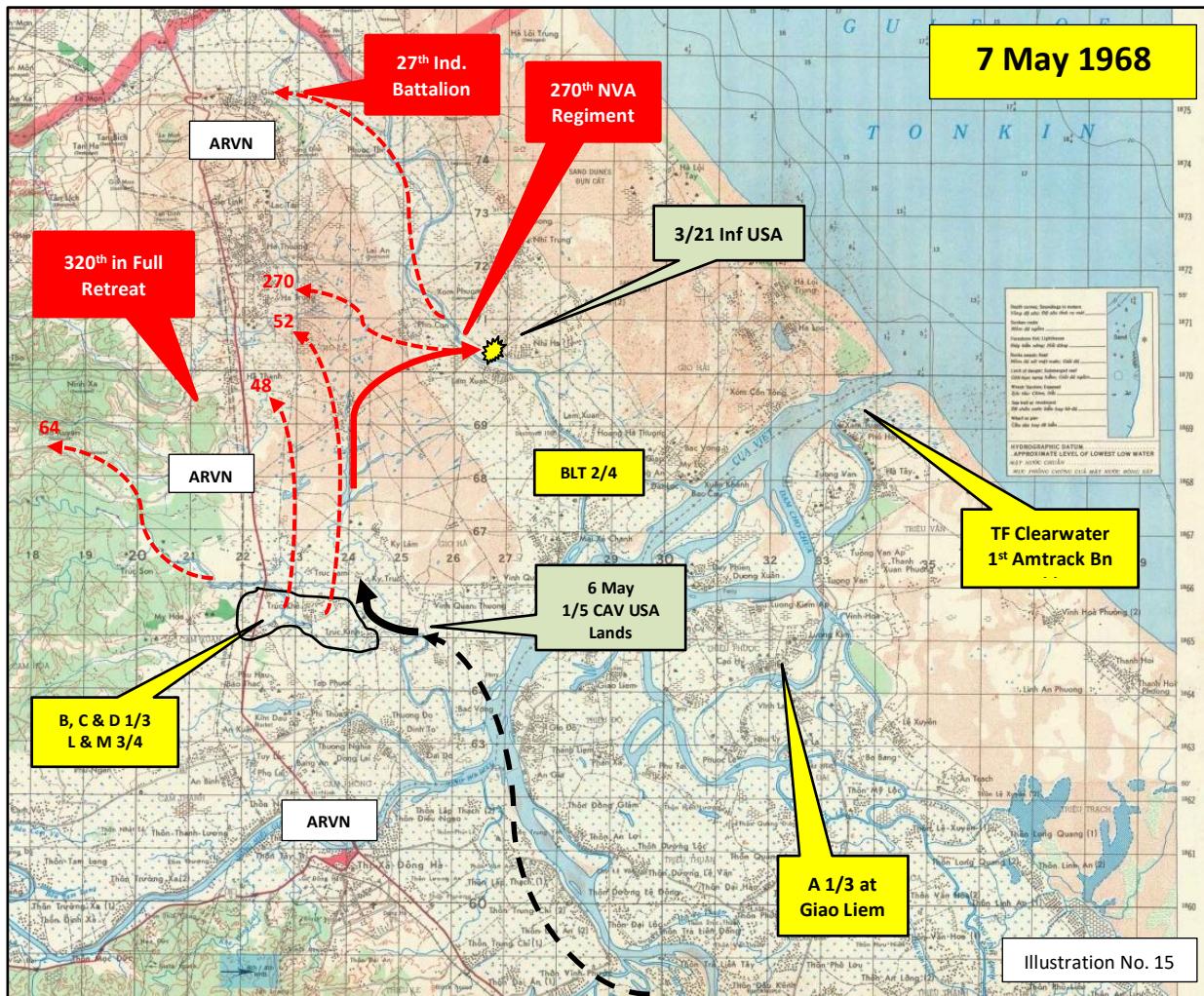
For the period of March through June 1968, 3rd Marine Division reported 44,118 tons of B-52 airstrikes, 43,706 **tons** from airstrikes, 885,123 rounds of artillery, and 189,927 naval gunfire rounds. These are staggering numbers.

The NVA also had a “big fist” at Cap Mui Lay in the eastern DMZ area until neutralized during ***OPERATION THOR*** in July 1968. The NVA gunners had the benefit of the excellent military maps they had appropriated from the French and that “any point that they wanted to hit, they could.”⁷⁵ 3rd Marine Division losses due to indirect fire is a testament to their effectiveness.

⁷⁵ Source: Col Edwin S. Schick, Jr., 12th Marines commander, from taped comments on draft chapter, [1994]

PART 4: Second Phase – Pursuit of the 320th NVA Division: 7 May through 8 December 1968

While Lt Col Jarman's command enjoyed a relatively uneventful day on the 7th, about five miles to the northeast, the U.S. Army 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry's Nhi Ha sector again became active. The North Vietnamese ambushed the battalion's Company A which was conducting a sweep operation northwest of Nhi Ha.



Before the Army unit could disengage under cover of air and artillery support and return to Nhi Ha, it lost 5 men dead and 17 wounded. Company A reported another 14 soldiers missing. Two of the missing returned to the company's lines that evening, and the battalion recovered the bodies of 11 of the others. One soldier remained on the rolls as missing in action.

With the continuing contact with elements of the 320th by the Army battalion in the Nhi Ha area and by the ARVN 2nd Regiment, whose 4th Battalion on 6 May engaged a North Vietnamese unit just east of Route 1, Major General Tompkins decided to insert the two battalions from the 1st Air Cavalry Division – 2nd Brigade into the fight to exploit the situation.

Earlier he had asked General William B. Rosson⁷⁶ for and received permission to redeploy the brigade if needed from the Scotland II TAO near Khe Sanh into the Dong Ha sector. With few other reserves available to him, the Air Cavalry brigade provided Tompkins, not only additional troops, but a force, with sufficient helicopters, "ideally configured for pursuit operations against a retreating enemy force operating in small formations" and to "patrol large areas effectively and move forces quickly to exploit sightings and contacts."

At 1715 on 6 May, the first battalion of the brigade, the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, under Lieutenant Colonel C. E. Jordan, landed in a landing zone about 300 meters east of the 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines in Truc Kinh. Temporarily, General Tompkins placed the Cavalry battalion under the operational control of Colonel Hull of the 3rd Marines. From 7-8 May, the 1st Cavalry battalion made a careful sweep northwest towards Truc Lam.

At Truc Kinh, Lt Colonel Jarman's Marines (L & M 3/4 and B, C & D 1/3) continued to patrol the area, finding more enemy dead and capturing three more prisoners. On the morning of the 9th the 2nd Brigade of the Air Cavalry under Army Colonel Robert N. McKinnon, with the 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry, arrived and took over the sector.

The 3rd Marines relinquished operational control of the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry to 2nd Brigade of the Air Cavalry, and Lt Colonel Jarman's 1/3 returned to its former operational area south of the Cua Viet River at Giao Liem and L & M 3/4 returned to 4th Marines near the Rock Pile.

On the morning of the 9th, the 2nd Brigade then began ***Operation CONCORDIA SQUARE***⁷⁷ in an area of operations carved out of that of the 2nd ARVN Regiment,

⁷⁶ Commanding General, Provisional Corps, US Army for the U.S. MACV and later Deputy Commander MACV.

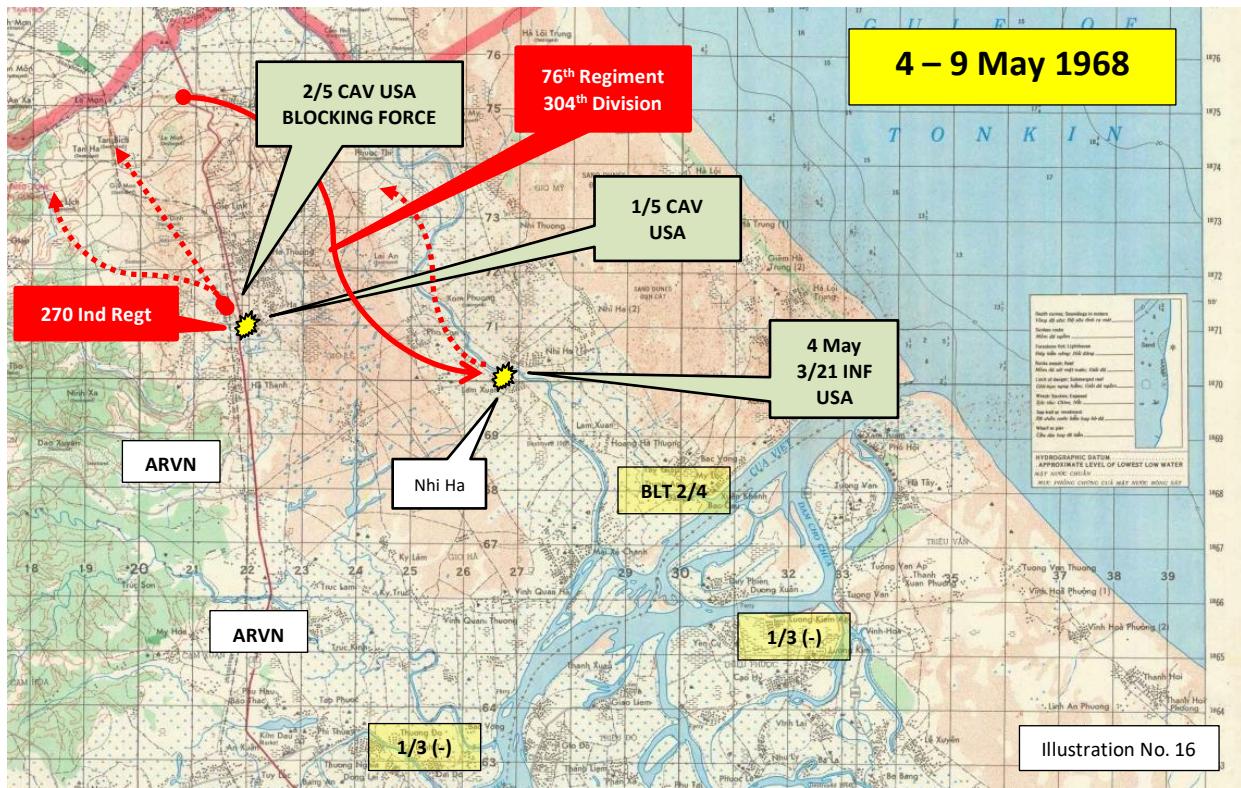
⁷⁷ Operation CONCORDIA SQUARE was a US Army mobile Air Cav operation by 1st Air Cavalry Division, 2nd Brigade, 5th Cavalry Regiment in pursuit of the 320th NVA Division units fleeing the Dong Ha and Nhi Ha (Cont. Next Page)

sandwiched between the ARVN on the west and the 3rd Marines in Operation Napoleon/Saline to the east. Its heaviest action of the operation actually occurred on that very day. About 5,000 meters southeast of Gio Linh, about 0800, a North Vietnamese force believed to be the 270th Independent Regiment heavily engaged two companies of the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, cutting off one and preventing the other from coming to its assistance.

The brigade quickly deployed units of its 2nd Battalion into blocking positions north of the action and ordered the remaining two companies of the 1st Battalion to relieve the embattled companies. In the fast-moving action supported by Marine fixed-wing aircraft and helicopter gunships, enemy gunners shot down one UH-1H helicopter, the Army version of the Bell "Huey," and hit eight others. By 1300, the North Vietnamese had disengaged leaving behind an estimated 80 enemy dead. The Army troopers sustained casualties of 16 dead and 52 wounded.

Except for scattered action in Concordia Square, and one large engagement on 10 May north of Nhi Ha involving the 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry, the 320th NVA Division was no longer engaging the American or ARVN forces.

area. Use of Air Cav mobile assets were essential in attempting to trap NVA units before they gained access to safe areas in Laos or North Vietnam.



In the action on the 10th, Company C, 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry in predawn darkness spotted about 300 enemy troops moving toward its positions from the 76th Regiment, 304th NVA Division, that had marched south from the DMZ during the night of May 9-10 to attack Nhi Ha. The Company pulled back all of its night patrols and called in continuous illumination and artillery upon the NVA. The enemy answered with artillery from north of the DMZ and heavy mortars, and then about 0600 launched a ground assault against the entire battalion front.

With the support of fixed-wing aircraft, helicopter gunships, artillery, and naval gunfire, the Army troops broke the back of the enemy attack in a one-sided battle. By 1500, all enemy resistance had ended. The 3rd Battalion suffered only 1 soldier dead and 16 wounded. It reported killing 159 of the enemy, took 2 prisoners, and recovered 55 rifles and 18 crew-served weapons.⁷⁸ After the one assault on Nhi Ha on the 10th, rather than attempting to infiltrate south to close the Cua Viet and possibly attack Dong Ha, the 76th Regiment was now breaking

⁷⁸ Source: *US Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968*: Shulimson, Smith and Dawson, page 306 (Public Domain)

into small groups who were trying their best to make their way north into the Demilitarized Zone.

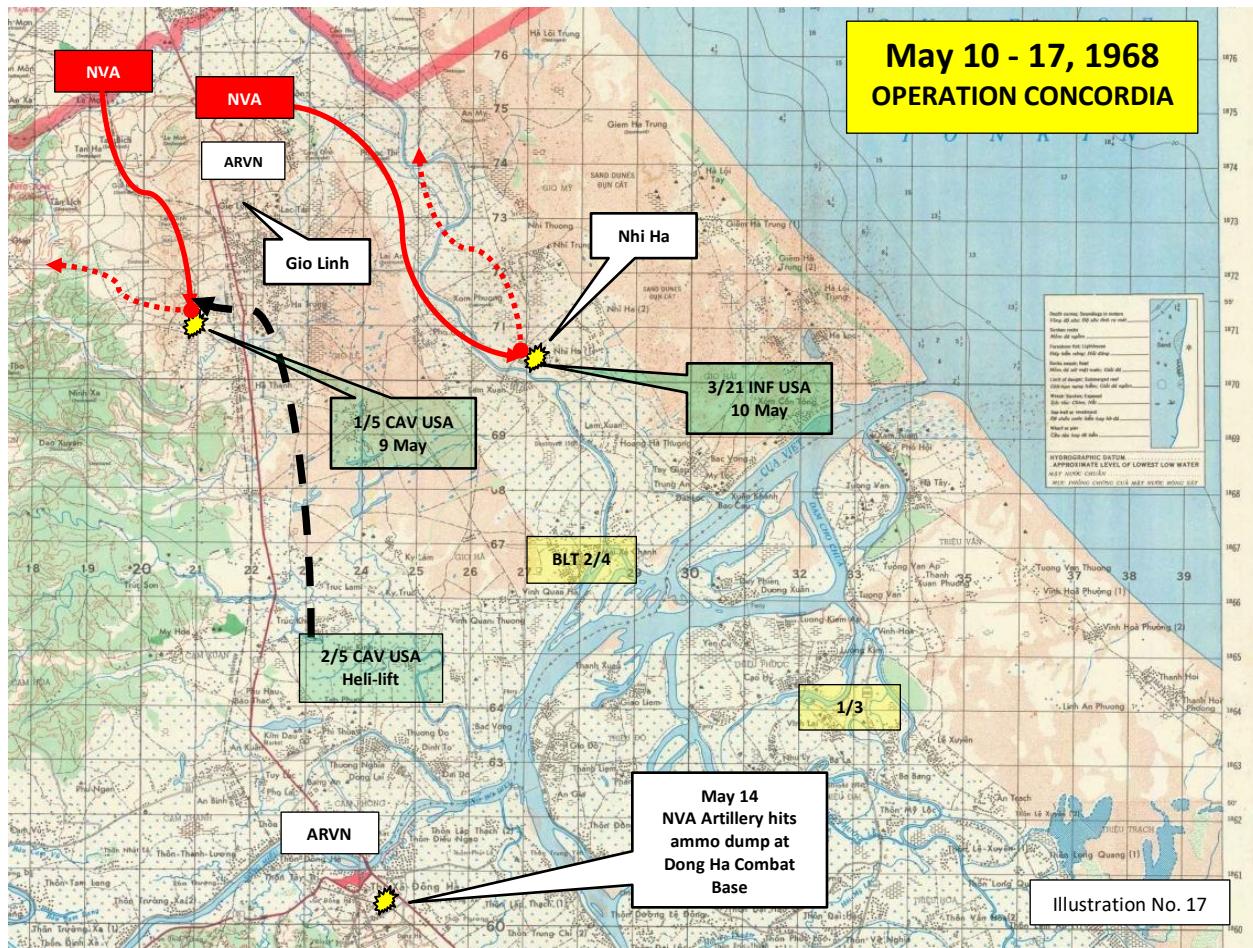
Operation Concordia Square ended on 17 May. From 9-17 May, the 2nd Air Cavalry Brigade reported enemy casualties of 349 dead while sustaining 28 killed and 117 wounded. Both the Air Cavalry Brigade and the *America's* 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry returned to their base camp at Camp Evans. The enemy offensive had petered out.

With the extensive bloodletting, Major General Tompkins "had good reason to believe . . . that the 320th NVA Division would not pose a serious threat to the allied positions along the DMZ for some time to come" and the 320th was *finished*.⁷⁹ General Tompkins also had received word that he was about to relinquish his command.

A Ghost Reappears

Contrary to General Tompkins' expectations, the 320th was to come south again and the results were to be much the same, but even more one-sided than the previous attempt. Within the brief interlude between the two enemy thrusts, the enemy had been relatively quiescent except for an artillery attack on the 3rd Marine Division base area at Dong Ha.

⁷⁹ Ibid. ; MACV Comd Hist 1968, pp . 13—7, 20—3, 781—2, 788 .

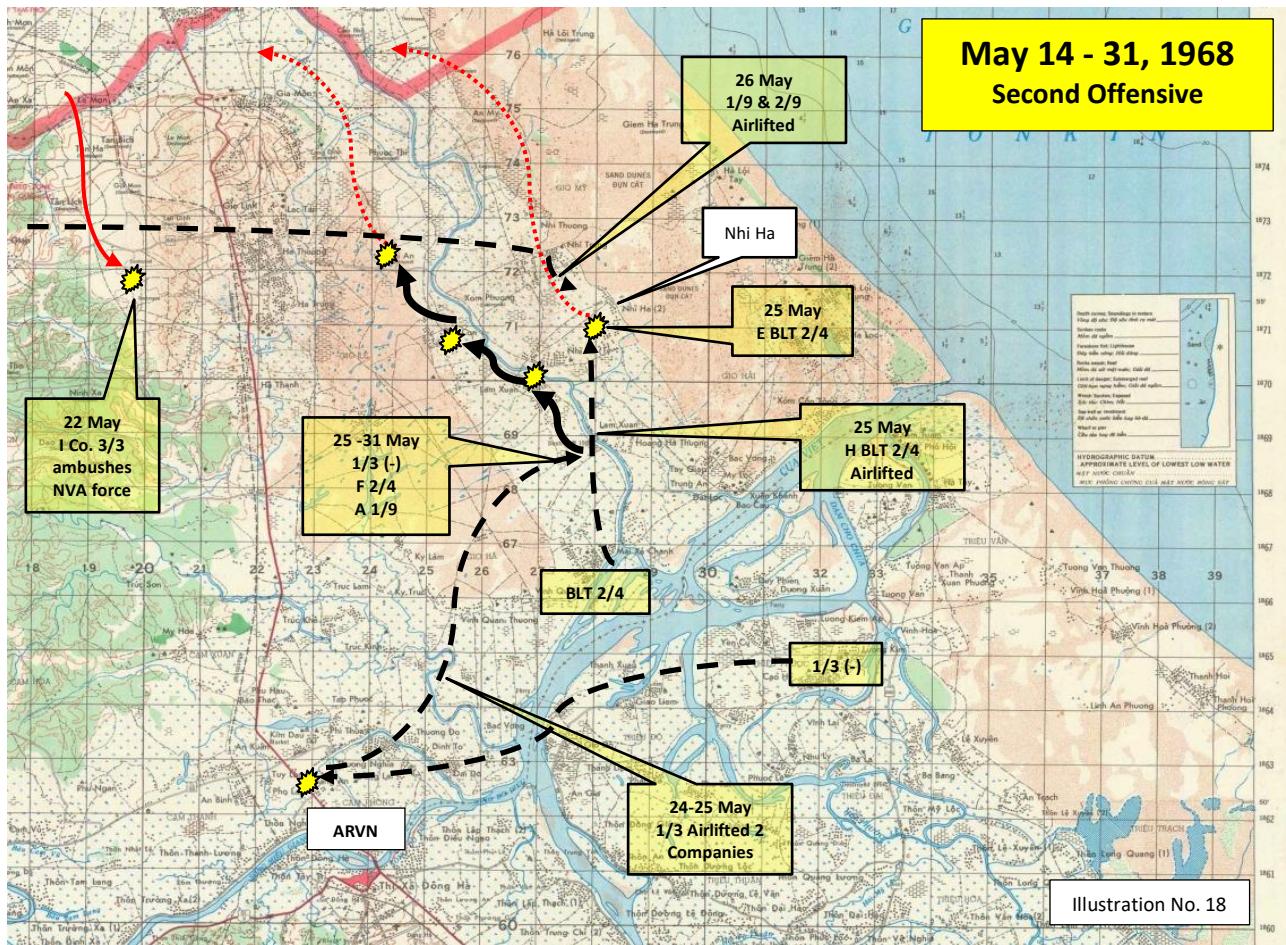


On 14 May, a North Vietnamese artillery barrage exploded about 110 tons of ammunition, killing 1 Marine and wounding 15 at the Dong Ha Combat Base. The division's Kentucky and Napoleon/Saline sectors, however, remained relatively inactive through 21 May.

On 21 May, 1/3 Marines and **Task Force Clearwater** seized two NVA resupply sampans half way between Dong Ha and Cua Viet.

On 25 May, the flats above Dong Ha in both the 2nd ARVN regimental sector and the Napoleon/Saline area again became the centers of action. That morning Company E, BLT 2/4 encountered an NVA force in about battalion strength near Nhi Ha, while the ARVN about 2,000 meters above Dong Ha ran into a similarly sized force. Once more the Marines rapidly reinforced both over land and by helicopter-borne forces.

Also, on 25 May, 1st Battalion 3rd Marines split off two companies from 1/3 to search and destroy the Thanh Hoi area. The rest of the battalion joined these two companies along with two OPCON companies from 2nd Bn 4th Marines (F Company) and 1st Bn 9th Marines (A Company).



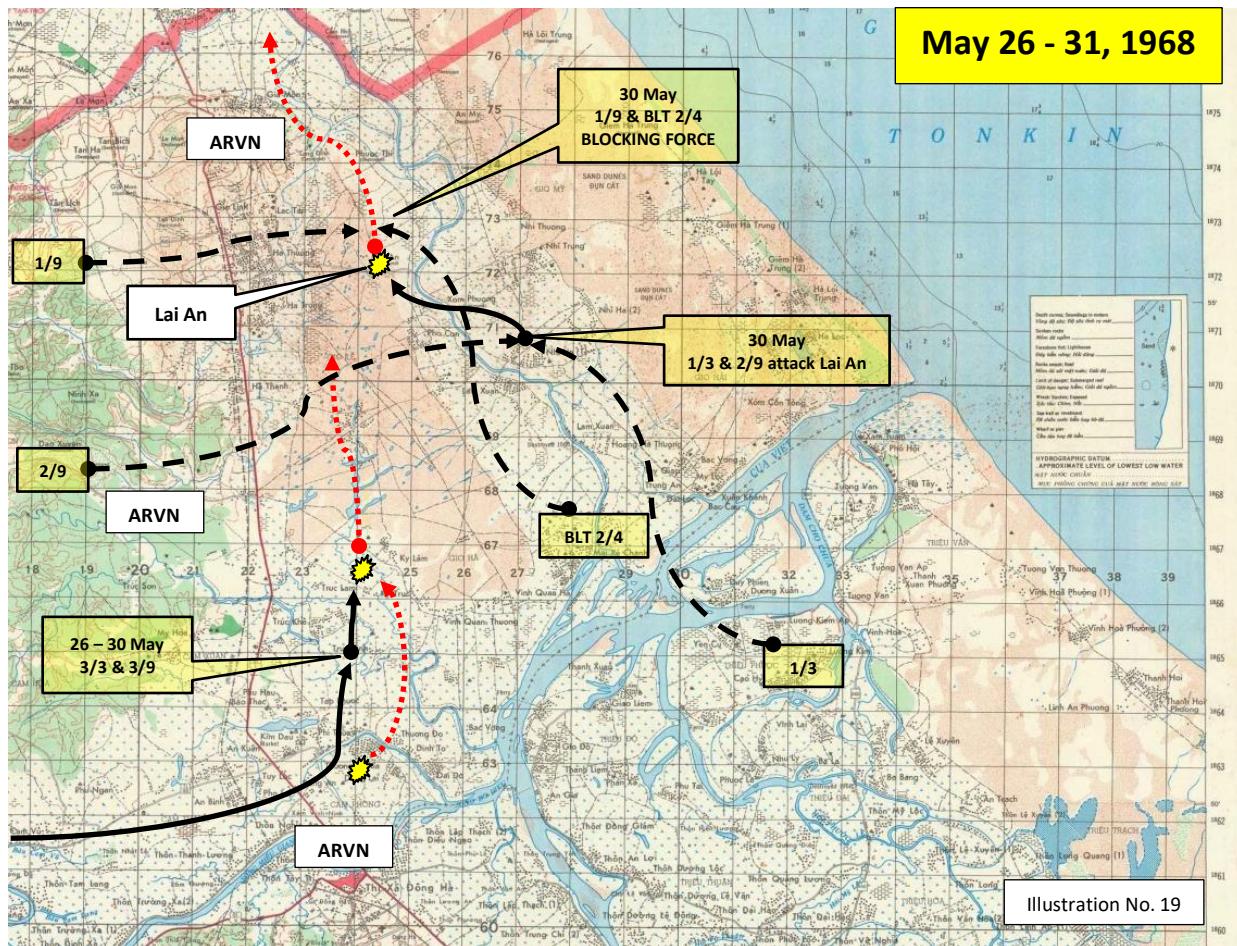
This force conducted company and battalion sized Search and Destroy missions in the area of Lam Xuan, Pho Con and Lai An and again made contact with the 320th remnants attempting to flee north along the west side of Jones Creek.

In the Nhi Ha sector, Colonel Hull, the 3rd Marine commander, ordered the heli-lift of Company H BLT 2/4 into blocking positions to the south while Company E attacked the hamlet from the north under a rolling barrage. In fighting that lasted all day, the two Marine companies together with supporting artillery and air reported killing 238 of the enemy. Marine casualties were also heavy, 18 dead and 33 wounded and evacuated. To the southwest, the 2nd ARVN Regiment in

their contact, near Thuong Nghia, just west of the former Dai Do perimeter, repulsed the enemy attack, and claimed killing 122 of the enemy.

On the 26th concerned that the 320th NVA Division was again attempting to cut the Cua Viet or even strike at Dong Ha itself, General Davis attempted to cordon off the North Vietnamese unit.

He ordered the heli-lift of the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 9th Marines into blocking positions west of Nhi Ha and placed the two battalions under the operational control of the 3rd Marines. At the same time, he ordered Colonel Smith, the 9th Marines commander, to move the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines (OPCON) and the 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines overland to exploit the ARVN contact near Thuong Nghia.



In the southern cordon on the 26th, the two Marine battalions (3/3 and 3/9) formed blocking positions about 3,000 meters north of Thuong Nghia. The 3rd

Battalion, 9th Marines, in the vicinity of Truc Kinh, twice encountered resistance from North Vietnamese in entrenched defenses.

In the first clash, about 1300 hrs, the battalion ran into a force of about 100 enemy troops. After first contact, the Marines pulled back "to allow heavy pounding of enemy positions by air and artillery." The battalion sustained casualties of 10 Marines dead and 12 wounded. At the same time, it captured 5 prisoners and reported killing 56 of the enemy.

In the second action later that afternoon, about 1630, Company K, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines outside of Truc Kinh came under intensive small arms and automatic weapons fire. Tanks attached to the infantry attempted to reinforce the company, but became bogged down in the rice paddies. An aerial observer called in close air support so that the company could withdraw before last light. Company I protected Company K's left flank, recalled that during this action, they "saw a long column of troops moving out of a small hamlet located 200 yards to our left front."

Apparently, the enemy was attempting to reinforce their units engaging Company K. With assurances that the column was NVA, Company I opened fire with devastating effect described "as target practice ... In the course of ten or fifteen minutes the entire column was destroyed." Still the 3rd Battalion had not gone unscathed, Company K sustained 23 wounded and reported 5 missing in action. During the same day, the ARVN unit about 1,000 meters to the north of Thuong Nghia claimed to have killed 110 of the enemy while suffering casualties of 2 dead and 7 wounded.

On the 27th, the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines, reinforced by the 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines, took its objectives, meeting only scattered enemy resistance. In Truc Kinh, the Marines recovered the bodies of the five men from Company K reported missing the day before. Throughout the day, the Marine units in the southern cordon killed about 28 of the enemy while sustaining only four wounded.

For the next two days, the Marines in the two battalions together with the ARVN maintained the cordon subjecting the North Vietnamese units between them to "massive fixed-wing and general support ordnance . . ." Finally, on the 30 May,

enemy resistance broke and the two battalions "swept through the area," taking 18 prisoners and recovering weapons.

For the days of the cordon, 26-30 May, the 9th Marines reported that the two battalions killed a total of 161 of the enemy, captured 26 prisoners, and retrieved over 100 enemy weapons, including 29 crew-served heavy AA weapons. Marine casualties were also heavy, 41 dead and 119 wounded.

The ARVN during their participation in the southern cordon operation claimed to have killed 384 of the enemy and sustained 19 killed and 45 wounded.

During the same period, the Marines in the northern cordon sector around Nhi Ha encircled a North Vietnamese battalion in the hamlet of Lai An, about 2,500 meters northwest of Nhi Ha. While BLT 2/4 and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines established blocking positions, the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines reinforced by the 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines attacked Lai An. Using 11 companies to form the cordon, the Marines finally secured the hamlet on 30 May.

Again, the price was high. In the taking of Lai An, the Marines sustained casualties of over 20 dead and 200 wounded. From 27-30 May, the 3rd Marines reported the finding of 90 bodies and the capture of 8 prisoners in the fight for Lai An.

The "second" battle for Dong Ha was over. Once more the 320th NVA Division had taken heavy casualties and retreated north of the DMZ. In the two phases of the second offensive, the 3rd Marine Division reported confirmed killing over 770 of the enemy. Combined with the number estimated confirmed killed by the ARVN, the enemy division would have lost more than 1,000 dead from the period 22 May to the end of the month, not including the 61 prisoners captured by the allies. Allied casualties during this period including 112 dead totaled 558.

Thus, in the two offensives mounted by the 320th NVA Division, the North Vietnamese had lost over confirmed 3,000 troops. While American casualties had been heavy, their total of dead and wounded was about half of the reported number of North Vietnamese killed not even counting the number of wounded. What was even more apparent was that the second offensive was even more futile than the first.

While the North Vietnamese may have sustained fewer casualties in the second offensive, they also fought much the next two months. According to the 3rd Marines, the enemy troops in the later encounters showed poorer discipline and while well-equipped were less experienced and more willing to surrender.

The final straw was when the major remnants of the 320th (primarily the 64th Regiment) crossed into the DMZ between Con Thien FSB and Gio Linh Combat Base and were caught out in the open where they suffered heavy causalities from artillery and air attacks. While no exact count of casualties is available, conservative battle estimates indicate the 64th lost more than two thirds killed and wounded for the period of 27 April to 31 May, 1968.

It was clear to all ground commanders that the fortifications at Cam Vu, Nhi Ha, Truc Khe, Truc Kinh and Dai Do areas needed to be completely destroyed using heavy earth moving equipment as the enemy slips back in after we depart the battlefield.

On the 31st of May, 1968, the Battle of Dong Ha was officially ended.

PART 5: Aftermath

For its part, the 3rd Marine Division made several changes in the way it was fighting the DMZ war. Immediately upon taking command of the division, General Davis issued a directive to reduce the number of units manning the strongpoints.

In Gen Davis' words, "battalion positions . . . immediately . . .(became) company positions." For example, in the 9th Marines sector, one battalion was responsible for all the strongpoints with one company positioned at each. The other three battalions were "swing units" to reinforce a developing battle using helicopter assault and cordon tactics.

Although nearly destroyed, the 320th NVA Division was not done. Pursued by Marine and Army units, the NVA stood and fought bitter battles as they retraced their infiltration route steps heading north to the DMZ. Further, they were many in the MACV that believed 3rd Marine Division let the 320th "get away."⁸⁰

On May 25th, remnants of the 320th NVA Division re-crossed the DMZ into North Vietnam to lick its wounds. A reconstituted 64th NVA Regiment did return to the Cam Lo area in August 1968 but was again repulsed.

The operation against the 64th NVA Regiment concluded on October 26th with 200 Marines wounded or KIA and over 1,500 NVA confirmed killed. The 64th Regiment was considered destroyed and few survivors returned to their base camps in Laos. In addition, there was feeling of ill will between 3rd Marines and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in not providing them with enough helicopters.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson on Westmoreland's staff, said it was his opinion that the 3rd Marine Division earlier in May at Dai Do and afterwards had "missed a great opportunity" and allowed the North Vietnamese to "get away." Further, Gen. Maj Gen. Davis, new commander of 3rd Marine Division, believed that the 3rd Marine Division had become "tied down to its fixed positions and too defense-minded." Source: Page 308, *US Marines in Vietnam – The Defining Year 1968* by Shulimson, Blasiol, Smith and Dawson 1997.

⁸¹ The Marine Corps viewed the rotary aircraft as a boat and a means to land troops from ship to shore to exploit the situation beyond the beach in an amphibious landing. On the other hand, the Army looked at the helicopter as a horse, as cavalry, and a means of outmaneuvering and outflanking an enemy. Because of the limitations of room on board ship, the Marine Corps depended on fewer, but larger helicopters, the UH-34 or CH-46, to carry the assault force ashore. Source: *Chapter 25 US Marines in Vietnam – The Defining Year 1968* by Shulimson, Blasiol, Smith and Dawson 1997.

However, the author does not agree with the premise of others during this period that 3rd Marine Division allowed the 320th NVA Division to *slip away* nor were we fixed on defensive fortifications.⁸² We lacked the helicopter capacity to move so many troops in a pursuit operation to trap all 320th NVA Division remnants. This is why we called for help in May 1968 and the US Army provided its airmobile assets ideally suited to pursuit.

In my opinion, Marine operational structure in 1968 was beachhead assault by sea and air then move as a ground force – same as today. Mass transportation has to come from the US Army that has the budget and manpower to make this a viable strategy in ground warfare. Marine Aviation can assist but it cannot move a whole regiment of infantry and supporting arms to distant battlefield without help.

The enemy prepared fortifications used during the Battle for Dong Ha were never destroyed.

The 320th NVA Division

The 320th NVA Division, including its organic regiments, was then sent to Laos for a major refit and eventually joined NVA B-70 Corps with the 304th and 308th Division in southern Laos in November 1968. The 320th never completed refitting in 1968 – or return to combat as an operational division until 1972.

BLT 2nd Battalion 4th Marines was credited with 537 enemy dead and suffered 81 dead and 397 wounded during the Battle for Dai Do. For that, they had prevented the 320th NVA Division from attacking the Dong Ha combat base and severing the Cua Viet lifeline. For their incredible heroism during this violent three-day fight, Captains Vargas and Livingston were awarded the Medal of Honor. Lieutenant Colonel Weise received a Navy Cross.

1st Battalion 3rd Marines was credited with 421 enemy dead and suffered 48 dead and 223 wounded during the Battle for Dai Do and Truc Kinh. The battalion awarded 1 Navy Cross, 1 Silver Star, 6 Bronze Star Medals, 258 Purple Heart

⁸² Of course, I have the advantage of hindsight and excellent resource materials.

Medals, 2 Navy Commendation Medals, 2 Navy Achievement Medals and 23 Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry (Individual Awards).

1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion suffered 8 killed and 45 wounded during the period 30 April to 9 Dec 1968 according to the official Command Chronology reports. NVA artillery attacks on the base at Camp Kistler was so constant, the Navy personnel from **Task Force Clearwater** were eager to go on river patrol or move supplies via LCU's just to get away from the constant bombardment of the base – patrol work was “safe” duty. “*The men at Cua Viet lived little better than moles in heavily bunkered huts burrowed down among the sand dunes.*”⁸³

2nd Battalion 4th Marines and 1st Battalion 3rd Marines received **Presidential Unit Citations** along with Meritorious and Navy Unit Awards for their actions during the Battle of Dong Ha. The “AmGrunts” of 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion⁸⁴ received a Navy Unit Commendation from 30 April 1968 through 16 May 1968 and Meritorious Unit Commendation from 26 August 1968 through 9 December 1968.

3rd Battalion 12th Marines received the Navy Unit Commendation for Tet in 1968 including a Vietnam Service Streamer with two Silver and One Bronze Stars. The 1st Battalion 12th Marines also received a Vietnam Service Streamer with two Silver Stars.

River Patrol Force (Task Force 116) **Task Force Clearwater** Dong Ha/Cua Viet Security Force records were not available.

In addition, the following US Navy and Marine units or ships received **Presidential Unit Citations** during the Battle for Dong Ha:

USS Kitty Hawk CVA-63 and Air Wing 11 (Air Support)

⁸³ The base at Cua Viet was so bad when compared to other Brown Water bases in Vietnam, US Navy Commanders decided to swap out naval personnel after a six-month tour of duty. The program was never put into place.

Source: *US Marines in Vietnam – The Defining Year 1968* by Shulimson, Blasiol, Smith and Dawson 1997.

⁸⁴ 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion in 1968 had to be one of the most unique Marine battalions of the time in terms of personnel and equipment structure. In addition to its normal complement of personnel and equipment, the battalion had attached to it: Marine combat engineers, Marine infantry and tanks, and reconnaissance elements as well as Army armored personnel, and South Vietnamese Popular Force troops. Members of the battalion became known as “Am Grunts” because of the infantry role and missions assigned to them. Source: *US Marines in Vietnam – The Defining Year 1968* by Shulimson, Blasiol, Smith and Dawson 1997.

1st Marine Aircraft Wing (Air Support)

The 320th NVA Division was effectively removed from the battlefield for six years.

The Butcher's Bill⁸⁵

In 1968, the Marine Corps lost 5,063 killed or missing and 29,320 wounded, more than a third of all casualties during the entire war. Over half of all casualties had less than one year of service in the Marines. 0311 Infantrymen accounted for over four-fifths of all casualties.

The first six months of 1968 proved the costliest of the Vietnam war for the Marine Corps, accounting for almost one quarter of all Marine deaths during the Vietnam War. In these six months, 3,339 Marines died and compare this to the 3,803 Marines killed in all of 1967.

During this period, the 3rd Marine Division averaged around 220 Marines killed and over 1,250 wounded a month, while the 1st Marine Division suffered about 190 Marines killed and 1,450 wounded each month. The casualty rate of the 3rd Division remained fairly steady, with a bad month in March, while the 1st Division suffered almost half of its casualties in February and May.

It is worth noting the 3rd Marine Division was tied to the DMZ and faced well-trained and equipped NVA regulars supported by heavy artillery. In contrast, the 1st Marine Division fought a pacification/guerilla war against the Viet Cong in the heavily populated coastal areas around Da Nang. 47% of all 3rd Marine Division causalities was from mortars, artillery or rockets and 18% from mines or boobytraps. While the 1st Division experienced the reverse – 18% from indirect fire and 51% from mines and boobytraps.

The high casualty rate concerned General Cushman, who sent a message on 20 May 1968, telling the commanders of the 1st and 3rd Divisions that "we are suffering too many Marine casualties—particularly KIA ." General Cushman attributed these excessive casualties to a misplaced reliance on "do or die

⁸⁵ The Butcher's Bill is a reference to the cost or count of soldier causalities after a battle. The term has been used for hundreds of years around the world including the United States Military.

assaults" more appropriate for amphibious attacks. He provided a list of tactical principles to reduce casualties, emphasizing firepower and supporting arms. Division commanders were directed to school their officers from the division to the company level in these principles.

While privates, privates first class, and lance corporals made up just above half of the total Marine Corps, they accounted for almost three-quarters of the rest of the year casualties. Their average age was about 20 years six months.

The Vietnam War cost \$168 billion or \$1 trillion in today's dollars. That included \$111 billion in military operations and \$28.5 billion in aid to South Vietnam. According to Indochina Newsletter of Asia Resource Center, the United States spent an additional \$350 billion to \$900 billion in veterans' benefits and interest.

The Vietnam War claimed 14,844 Marines.⁸⁶

Of the 2,709,918 Americans who served in Vietnam on land or air, less than 850,000 are estimated to be alive today, with the youngest American Vietnam veteran's age approximated to be 65 years old. There are about 164,000 Americans who served at sea in Vietnam waters are alive today.⁸⁷

The NVA's own official records of their losses across all three offensives in 1968 was 45,267 killed and 65,912 wounded but this figure is for NVA regulars only and does not include those in support roles, Viet Cong, or Viet Cong sympathizers. The failure to spark a general uprising and the lack of defections among the ARVN

⁸⁶ The Marine Corps Inpatient Medical Data File was searched for all hospital admissions during Vietnam which were identified as a battle wound or injury. The records of 78,756 Marines who were wounded or injured in combat in Vietnam were identified. These individuals accounted for 120,017 battle-related diagnoses of accidents, poisonings and violence. Most of the wounded Marines were young (under the age of 25), junior enlisted infantrymen with one year or less of service. The First and Third Marine Divisions accounted for the majority of casualties. Multiple open wounds and open wounds of the lower limbs were the most common primary diagnoses, bullets, mines, and booby traps were responsible for more than half of the wounds and injuries. Most casualties were treated at a naval hospital, hospital ship, dispensary, or the Naval Support Activity in Da Nang. Marine battalion aid stations and field hospitals accounted for the second largest percentage of casualties treated. ***The mortality rate of wounded patients was much lower than has been reported for Army casualties in Vietnam or casualties in previous conflicts.*** Source: *COMBAT CASUALTIES AMONG U.S. MARINE CORPS PERSONNEL IN VIETNAM: 1964-1972*, by L. A. Palinkas PhD and P. Coben, Naval Medical Research & Development Command, Maryland, Report No. 85-11 (Public Domain – US Government)

⁸⁷ There are great discrepancies in these numbers from varying sources. However, the best source is, in my opinion, is the VA. Source: *National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics* (Retrieved) US Department of Veteran Affairs.

units meant both war goals of Hanoi had fallen flat at enormous costs including closing the Cua Viet River Complex. The Cua Viet was closed for a few hours but **TF Clearwater** beefed up their convoys to the Marine bases and POL was flowing again.

The most immediate effect of the Vietnam War was the staggering death toll. The war killed an estimated 2 million Vietnamese civilians, 1.1 million North Vietnamese troops and 200,000 South Vietnamese. Those wounded in combat numbered hundreds of thousands if not millions more. The massive U.S. bombing of both North and South Vietnam left the country in ruins, and the U.S. Government's use of Agent Orange not only devastated Vietnam's natural environment but also caused widespread health problems that have persisted for decades and will continue to in the future.

During the Vietnam War, the 3rd Marine Division suffered 6,869 men killed in action. The division departed South Vietnam in November 1969 with more than 20 Marines having received the Medal of Honor and moved to Camp Courtney, Okinawa, where it is presently located.

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Medical Research & Development Command, Maryland, Report No. 85-11 (Public Domain – US Government)

Appendix A

Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations

A-1—A-5—Designations for Strong Points which form the *Dyemarker* barrier.

A4—Douglas Skyhawk, a single-seat, jet attack aircraft in-service on-board carriers of the U.S. Navy and with land-based Marine attack squadrons.

A6A—Grumman Intruder, a twin-jet, twin-seat, attack aircraft specifically designed to deliver weapons on targets completely obscured by weather or darkness.

AAR—After Action Report.

ADC—Assistant Division Commander.

AGC—Amphibious command ship. The current designation is LCC.

AK-47—Russian-designed Kalashnikov gas-operated 7.62 mm automatic rifle, with an effective range of 400 meters. It was the standard rifle of the NVA.

ALO—Air Liaison Officer, an officer (aviator/pilot) attached to a ground unit who functions as the primary advisor to the ground commander on air operation matters.

AMERICAL—The U.S. Army's 23rd Infantry Division.

AmTrac—Amphibian Tractor.

AO—Air Observer, an individual whose primary mission is to observe or to take photographs from an aircraft in order to adjust artillery fire or obtain military information.

Arclight—The codename for B-52 bombing missions in South Vietnam.

ARG—Amphibious Ready Group.

Arty—Artillery.

ARVN—Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam).

B-40 rockets—Communist rocket-propelled grenade.

B52—Boeing Stratofortress, U.S. Air Force eight-engine, sweptwing, heavy jet bomber.

BB—Navy Battleship.

Bde—Brigade.

BGen—Brigadier General.

BLT—Battalion Landing Team.

Bn—Battalion.

Btry—Battery.

C-1—C-3—Designations for base areas which support the *Dyemarker* barrier.

C130—Lockheed Hercules, a four-engine turboprop transport aircraft.

CAAR—Combat After Action Report.

Capt—Captain.

CAS—Close Air Support.

CBU—Cluster Bomb Unit.

Cdr—Commander.

CG—Commanding General.

CH-46—Boeing Vertol Sea Knight, a twin-engine, tandem-rotor transport helicopter, designed to carry a four-man crew and 17 combat-loaded troops.

CH-53—Sikorsky Sea Stallion, a single-rotor, heavy transport helicopter powered by two shaft-turbine engines with an average payload of 12,800 pounds. Carries crew of three and 38 combat-loaded troops.

CinCPac—Commander in Chief, Pacific.

Claymore—A U.S. directional antipersonnel mine.

CMC—Commandant of the Marine Corps.

CO—Commanding Officer .	Gen—General .
Co—Company .	Grenade Launcher, M79—U.S.-built, single-shot, breech-loaded shoulder weapon which fires 40 mm projectiles and weighs approximately 6 .5 pounds when loaded; it has a sustained rate of aimed fire of five-seven rounds per minute and an effective range of 375 meters.
COB—Combat Operations Base .	
Col—Colonel .	
ComdC—Command Chronology .	
ComdHist—Command History.	
ComUSMACV—Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.	
CP—Command Post.	Gun, 175 mm, M107—U .S .-built, self-propelled gun which weighs 62,000 pounds and fires a 147-pound projectile to a maximum range of 32,800 meters. Maximum rate of fire is one round every two minutes.
Cpl—Corporal .	
C/S—Chief of Staff.	GySgt—Gunnery Sergeant
CTZ—Corps Tactical Zone .	H&I fires—Harassing and Interdiction fires .
DD—Navy destroyer .	H&S Co—Headquarters and Service Company.
Div—Division .	HE—High Explosive .
DMZ—Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Vietnam.	H—Hour—The specific hour an operation begins.
DOD—Department of Defense .	HLZ—Helicopter Landing Zone .
DOIC—District Operations and Intelligence Center	HMH—Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron.
DPP—Data Processing Platoon .	HML—Marine Light Helicopter Squadron.
Duel Blade—The final codename for the DMZ barrier	HMM—Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron.
Duster—The nickname for the U.S. Army 's tracked vehicle, the M—42 which mounted dual 40 mm automatic weapons.	Howitzer, 8-inch (M55)—U .S .-built, self-propelled, heavy-artillery piece with a maximum range of 16,900 meters and a rate of fire of one round every two minutes.
Dyemarker—Codename for the Strong Point/Obstacle System (also known as the "McNamara Line") which was constructed south of the DMZ and intended to limit infiltration from North Vietnam.	Howitzer, 105 mm, M101A1—U .S .-built, cowled, general purpose light artillery piece with a maximum range of 11,000 meters and maximum rate of fire of four rounds per minute.
Engr—Engineer.	Howitzer, 155 mm, M114A towed and M109 self-propelled medium artillery with a maximum range of 15,080 meters and a maximum rate of fire of three rounds per minute. Marines employed both models in Vietnam.
EOD—Explosive Ordnance Device .	Howtar—A 4.2 (107 mm) mortar tube mounted on a 75 mm pack howitzer frame .
F—4B—McDonnell Phantom II, a twin-engine, two-seat, long-range, all-weather jet interceptor and attack bomber.	HQ or Hq—Headquarters.
FAC(A)—Forward Air Controller (Airborne).	
FAG—Field Artillery Group.	
FDC—Fire Direction Center.	
FMFP—Fleet Marine Force, Pacific.	
FO—Forward Observer.	
FOB—Forward Operating Base.	
FSB—Fire Support Base .	
Fwd—Forward .	
FWMF—Free World Military Force .	

"Huey"—Popular name for UH-1 series of helicopters used by the US Army.

I Corps—The military and administrative subdivision which included the five northern provinces of South Vietnam.

Intel—Intelligence .

Intvw—Interview.

KIA—Killed in Action .

Kit Carson Scout—Viet Cong defectors recruited by Marines to serve as scouts, interpreters, and intelligence agents.

LAAW—Light Anti-Armor Weapon

LCM—Landing Craft Mechanized, designed to land tanks, trucks, and trailers directly onto the beach.

LCpl—Lance Corporal .

LCU—Landing Craft Utility.

LOC—Lines of Communication .

LOH—Light Observation Helicopter.

LP—Listening Post.

LPD—Amphibious transport, dock, a ship designed to transport and land troops, equipment, and supplies by means of embarked landing craft, amphibious vehicles, and helicopters. It had both a submersible well deck and a helicopter landing deck.

LPH—Amphibious assault ship, a ship designed or modified to transport and land troops, equipment, and supplies by means of embarked helicopters .

LSA—Logistic Support Area .

LSD—Landing Ship, Dock, a landing ship designed to combat load, transport, and launch amphibious crafts or vehicles together with crews and embarked personnel, and to provide limited docking and repair services to small ships and crafts. It lacks the helicopter landing deck of the LPD.

LST—Landing Ship, Tank, landing ship designed to transport heavy vehicles and to land them on a beach.

Lt—Lieutenant.

LtCol—Lieutenant Colonel.

LtGen—Lieutenant General.

LVTE—Landing Vehicle, Tracked, Engineer, a lightly armored amphibian vehicle designed for minefield and obstacle clearance.

LVTH—Landing Vehicle, Tracked, Howitzer, a lightly armored, self-propelled, amphibious 105 mm howitzer. It resembles an LVTP with a turret for the howitzer.

LVTP—Landing Vehicle, Tracked, Personnel, an amphibian vehicle used to land and/or transport personnel.

LZ—Landing Zone.

MAB—Marine Amphibious Brigade.

Machine gun, .50-caliber—U .S.-built, belt-fed, recoil-operated, air cooled automatic weapon, which weighs approximately 80 pounds without mount or ammunition; it has a sustained rate of fire of 100 rounds per minute and an effective range of 1,450 meters.

Machine gun, M60—U.S. built, belt-fed, gas-operated, air-cooled, 7.62 mm automatic weapon, which weighs approximately 20 pounds without mount or ammunition; it has a sustained rate of fire of 100 rounds per minute and an effective range of 1,000 meters.

MACV—Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.

MAF—Marine Amphibious Force.

MAG—Marine Aircraft Group.

Maj—Major.

MajGen—Major General.

MarDiv—Marine Division.

Marines—Designates a Marine regiment, e.g ., 3rd Marines.

Marine Amphibious Unit.

MAW—Marine Aircraft Wing.

MEB—Marine Expeditionary Brigade.

MedEvac—Medical Evacuation.

MEF—Marine Expeditionary Force.

MGySgt—Master Gunnery Sergeant.

MIA—Missing in Action.

Mortar, 4 .2-inch, M30—U.S. built, rifled, muzzle-loaded, drop-fired weapon consisting of tube, base-plate; weapon weighs 330 pounds and has maximum range of 4,020 meters. Rate of fire is 20 rounds per minute.

Mortar, 60 mm, M19—U.S. built, smooth-bore, muzzle-loaded weapon, which weighs 45.2 pounds when assembled; it has a maximum rate of fire of 30 rounds per minute and sustained rate of fire of 18 rounds per minute; the effective range is 2,000 meters .

Mortar, 81 mm, M29—U.S.-built, smooth-bore, muzzle-loaded, which weighs approximately 115 pounds when assembled; it has a sustained rate of fire of two rounds per minute and an effective range of 2,300—3,650 meters, depending upon ammunition used .

Mortar, 82 mm—Soviet-built, smooth-bore, mortar, single-shot, high angle of fire weapon which weighs approximately 123 pounds; it has a maximum rate of fire of 25 rounds per minute and a maximum range of 3,040 meters.

Mortar, 120 mm—Soviet- or Chinese Communist-built, smooth bore, drop or trigger fired, mortar which weighs approximately 600 pounds; it has a maximum rate of fire of 15 rounds per minute and a maximum range of 5,700 meters.

MSgt—Master Sergeant.

NGLO—Naval Gunfire Liaison Officer .

NSD—Naval Supply Depot .

NVA—North Vietnamese Army, often used colloquially to refer to a North Vietnamese soldier.

Ontos—U.S. built, lightly armored, tracked antitank vehicle armed with six coaxially-mounted 106 mm recoilless rifles.

OpCon—Operational Control, the authority granted to a commander to direct forces

assigned for specific missions or tasks which are usually limited by function, time, or location.

OP—Outpost or observation point.

OPlan—Operation Plan, a plan for a single or series of connected operations to be carried out simultaneously or in succession; it is the form of directive employed by higher authority to permit subordinate commanders to prepare supporting plans and orders.

PF—Popular Force, Vietnamese militia who were usually employed in the defense of their own communities.

PFC—Private First Class.

POL—Petroleum, Oil and Lubricants.

PRC—25—Standard radio used by Marine ground units in Vietnam that allowed for voice communication for distances up to 25 miles.

Pvt—Private.

R&R—Rest and Recreation.

Recoilless rifle, 106 mm, M401A1—U.S. built, single-shot, recoilless, breech-loaded weapon which weighs 438 pounds when assembled and mounted for firing; it has a sustained rate of fire of six rounds per minute and an effective range of 1,365 meters.

Regt—Regiment .

Rein—Reinforced .

Rifle, M14—Gas-operated, magazine-fed, air-cooled, semi-automatic, 7 .62 mm caliber shoulder weapon, which weighs 12 pounds with a full 20-round magazine; it has a sustained rate of fire of 30 rounds per minute and an effective range of 460 meters.

Rifle, M16—Gas-operated, magazine-fed, air-cooled, automatic, 5.56 mm caliber shoulder weapon, which weighs 3.1 pounds with a 20-round magazine; it has a sustained rate of fire of 12—15 round s

per minute and an effective range of 460 meters.

RLT—Regimental Landing Team

ROE—Rules of Engagement

Rough Rider—Organized vehicle convoys, often escorted by helicopters and armored vehicles, using Vietnam's roads to supply Marine bases.

RPG—Rocket-Propelled Grenade.

RVN—Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam).

SAM—Surface to Air Missile.

Seventh Fleet—The U.S. fleet assigned to the Pacific.

SFD—Surprise Firing Device, a euphemism for a boobytrap

SitRep—Situation Report

Sgt—Sergeant

SgtMaj—Sergeant Major.

SKS—Russian-designed Simonov gas-operated 7.62 mm semiautomatic rifle.

SLAM—Seek, Locate, Annihilate and Monitor.

SLF—Special Landing Force.

SOP—Standing Operating Procedure, set of instructions laying out standardized procedures.

Sortie—An operational flight by one aircraft

Sparrow Hawk—A small rapid-reaction force on standby, ready for insertion by helicopter for reinforcement of units in contact with the enemy.

SSgt—Staff Sergeant.

Tank, M48A3—U.S. built 50.7-ton tank with a crew of four; primary armament is turret-mounted 90 mm gun with one .30-caliber and one .50-caliber machine gun; has maximum road speed of 32 miles per hour and an average range of 195 miles.

TAOR—Tactical Area of Responsibility, a defined area of land for which responsibility is specifically assigned to the commander of the area as a measure for control of assigned forces and coordination of support. Also called a TAO or Tactical Area of Operations.

T/E—Table of Equipment.

Tet—The Vietnamese Lunar New Year

TF—Task Force

TG—Task Group

T/O—Table of Organization

TO&E—Table of Organization and Equipment

UH-34D—Sikorsky Sea Horse, a single-engine medium transport helicopter with a crew of three, carries eight to 12 combat soldiers, depending upon weather conditions.

USA—U.S. Army

USAF—U.S. Air Force

USMC—U.S. Marine Corps

USN—U.S. Navy

VC—Viet Cong, a term used to refer to the Communist guerrillas in South Vietnam; a contraction of the Vietnamese phrase meaning "Vietnamese Communists."

VMA—Marine Attack Squadron.

VMA(AW)—Marine All-Weather Fighter Squadron.

VMFA—Marine Fighter Attack Squadron.

VMF(AW)—Marine Fighter Squadron (All-Weather).

VT—Variable timed electronic fuse for an artillery shell which causes airburst over the target area.

WIA—Wounded in Action.

Appendix B

Selected Bibliography

Books, Periodicals, Documents, Official Command Chronologies (Declassified) and Other Sources

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Appendix C

1968 Chronology

January 1968	III MAF begins the year with operational control of the 1st Marine Division, 3 rd Marine Division, 1st Marine Air Wing, and Marine Force Logistic Command. 270th NVA Independent Regiment and 3rd Battalion 27th Independent Regiment begin transit towards the Dong Ha area to finish the fortification complex in the Truc Kinh and Dai Do areas by 1 May then guard the 320th NVA Division eastern left flank near Jones Creek when it arrives. Large camouflaged artillery pits, AA sites and SAM fortifications are constructed just north of the DMZ in the Cap Mui Lay coastal area in North Vietnam. The Cap Mui Lay sector encompasses the southern edge of the DMZ, north some 14 kilometers to Cap Mui Lay, and extended from the South China Sea westward to a point approximately 25 kilometers inland.
1 January	DMZ Front Headquarters begins issuing movement orders to subordinate commands including all three regiments of the 320 th NVA Division in preparation for the Tet Offensive. Some units, including the 320 th , are instructed to make extra effort to ensure their movement is not observed by using additional camouflage and rarely used infiltration routes.
31 January	The NVA opens its Tet offensive throughout South Vietnam with attacks against 39 provincial capitals and major cities including Saigon and Hue.
24 February	The US Navy established TF Clearwater to help keep the vital Cua Viet River Complex open by providing gun boats and barges to move cargo from the Cua Viet Port Authority to Dong Ha and Quang Tri.
February 1968	February Operation Kentucky results in 398 reported enemy casualties with 90 Marines killed and 277 wounded. NVA hit Dong Ha Combat Base with over 400 large caliber artillery, 130 mm rockets and mortar rounds resulting in 1 Marine killed and several wounded, two Army observation aircraft were destroyed as well as ammunition and diesel storage facilities.
1 March	NVA DMZ Front Headquarters orders all units (about 21,000 troops) with assigned Tet tasks to infiltrate into assigned sectors. The 320 th NVA Division Regiments begin their march with the 64th moving towards Cam Lo to close traffic on Route 9 and the 48th and 52nd Regiments towards Dong Ha.
10 March	Cua Viet Naval Facility was hit by NVA large caliber artillery, destroying 150 tons of ammunition, damaging numerous buildings and killing 1 American.
March 1968	Operation Kentucky ends with 413 enemy casualties and 38 Marines killed and 217 wounded. 2/4 takes over BLT duties with SLF ALPHA from 1/3 and 1/3 was sent to Dong Ha for replenishment along with new responsibilities south of the Cua Viet.
11 April	Again, large caliber NVA artillery hit Cua Viet Naval Facility's fuel farm destroying 40,000 gallons of petroleum. The base was hit twice in June 1968 destroying more fuel and the main ammo dump.
27 April	The Navy's Task Force Clearwater warns III MAF that the NVA were preparing to sever the Cua Viet waterway.
29 April	The Battle for Dong Ha begins. The 64 th NVA Regiment destroys culvert near An Binh. ARVN's deploy two battalions from 2 nd Regiment at Dong Ha to block the 64 th .

	D 1/9 airlifted to Cam Lo from Khe Sanh to man base defenses. Early AM, Task Force Robbie departs from Cam Lo Combat Base with a platoon of tanks, and other vehicles, engineers, and D Company, 1/9 riding on the Tanks – 140 men – to help ARVN's deployed north of Dong Ha. About 1115 PM, they withdraw and arrive back at C-3 with 11 Marines killed and 28 wounded. ARVN's withdraw to Dong Ha.
30 April – 2 May	NVA units are engaged in the area of Dai Do by BLT 2/4 and 1/3. Heavy fighting in this area continues until 3 May. 3/9 airlifted to TF Robbie ambush site and drive the two NVA companies from 64 th Regiment north into mountains.
2 May	The night of 2-3 May, 1968, 1/3 takes over Dai Do sector from BLT 2/4 allowing them to refit and receive replacements. BLT 2/4 OPCON two companies to 1/3.
30 April to 4 May	Marine, Navy, Army, and ARVN units succeed in thwarting a possible enemy assault on Dong Ha. The NVA suffered a reported 1,547 casualties while the allies sustained casualties of nearly 300 dead and 1,000 wounded.
5 May	1/3 lands near Thuong Do and passes through 2/4 and attacks towards attacks towards Som Soi. 320 th NVA Division counterattacks but is caught out in the open and retreats back towards Truc Kinh. L & M ¾ arrive to attack via western flank towards Truc Khe. After consolidation, Marines take Truc Khe and Truc Kinh as the NVA flee northwards.
5 – 7 May	Marines police battlefields
7 May	270 th NVA Ind. Regiment attacks 3/21 USA near Nhi Ha. Gen. Tompkins asks for help from US Army for mobile assets to trap 320 th NVA Division. 1/5 CAV arrives and sweeps towards 1/3 at Truc Lam.
9 May	2 nd Brigade, 1 st Air Cav Division arrives and takes over the sector above Dong Ha. 3/4 heli-lifted back to the Rock Pile and 1/3 returns to Gioa Leim south of the Cua Viet river. Operation CONCORDIA Square begins. 1/5 CAV meets 270 th NVA Regiment 5 clicks south of Gio Linh. 2/5 CAV inserted as a blocking force to trap 270 th NVA Regiment.
9-10 May	76 th Regiment 304 th NVA Division attacks near Nhi Ha against 3/21 USA.
14 May	NVA large caliber artillery destroys 150 tons of munitions in Dong Ha ammunition dump in a massive explosion.
17 May	Operation CONCORDIA Square ended on 17 May. From 9-17 May, the 2nd Air Cavalry Brigade reported enemy casualties of 349 dead while sustaining 28 killed and 117 wounded. Both the Air Cavalry Brigade and the Americal's 3 rd Battalion, 21 st Infantry returned to their base camp at Camp Evans.
21 May	1/3 and TF Clearwater seized two NVA resupply sampans half way between Dong Ha and Cua Viet.
22 May	I Co. 3/3 ambushes large NVA force south of Gio Linh.
25 May	ARVN engage NVA units just above Dong Ha. BLT 2/4 engage NVA near Nhi Ha. 1/3 heli-lifted to Dong Ha then on to Nhi Ha area. BLT 2/4 OPCON two companies to 1/3 and another from 1/9. They sweep northward through the westside of Jones Creek towards Lai an. NVA retreat towards the DMZ.
26 May	1/9 and 2/9 heli-lifted into blocking positions west of Nhi Ha.
26-30 May	3/3 and 3/9 travel overland and engage NVA again at Truc Kinh and Truc Lam. NVA retreat northward. 64 th NVA Regiment caught out in the open near DMZ and smashed by artillery and air strikes.
31 May	Battle of Dong Ha was officially ended.
27 June	Marine troops begin to dismantle and withdraw from Khe Sanh.

1 July	Operation Thor begins in the eastern part of the DMZ. Planes from the Air Force, the Navy, and the Marine Corps, as well as artillery from Army and Marine artillery batteries plus naval gunfire from cruisers and destroyers off the coast pound NVA artillery installations in Cap Mui Lay area. 179 artillery positions, 789 anti-aircraft sites, 143 bunkers and 26 storage areas were destroyed.
87 Aug - 26 Oct	Reconstituted 64 th NVA Regiment returns to the Cam Lo area, repulsed and retreats back into the mountains north of the Cam Lo Valley towards their base camps in Laos.
9 December	Operation Napoleon/Saline ends, resulting in a reported 3,495 enemy casualties with 353 Marines killed and 1,959 wounded.
Dec	320 th NVA Division reassembles survivors in special base camp in Laos and reassigned to the NVA B-70 Reserve Corps. 320 th remains inactive for six years.