IN PERSISTENT BATTLE

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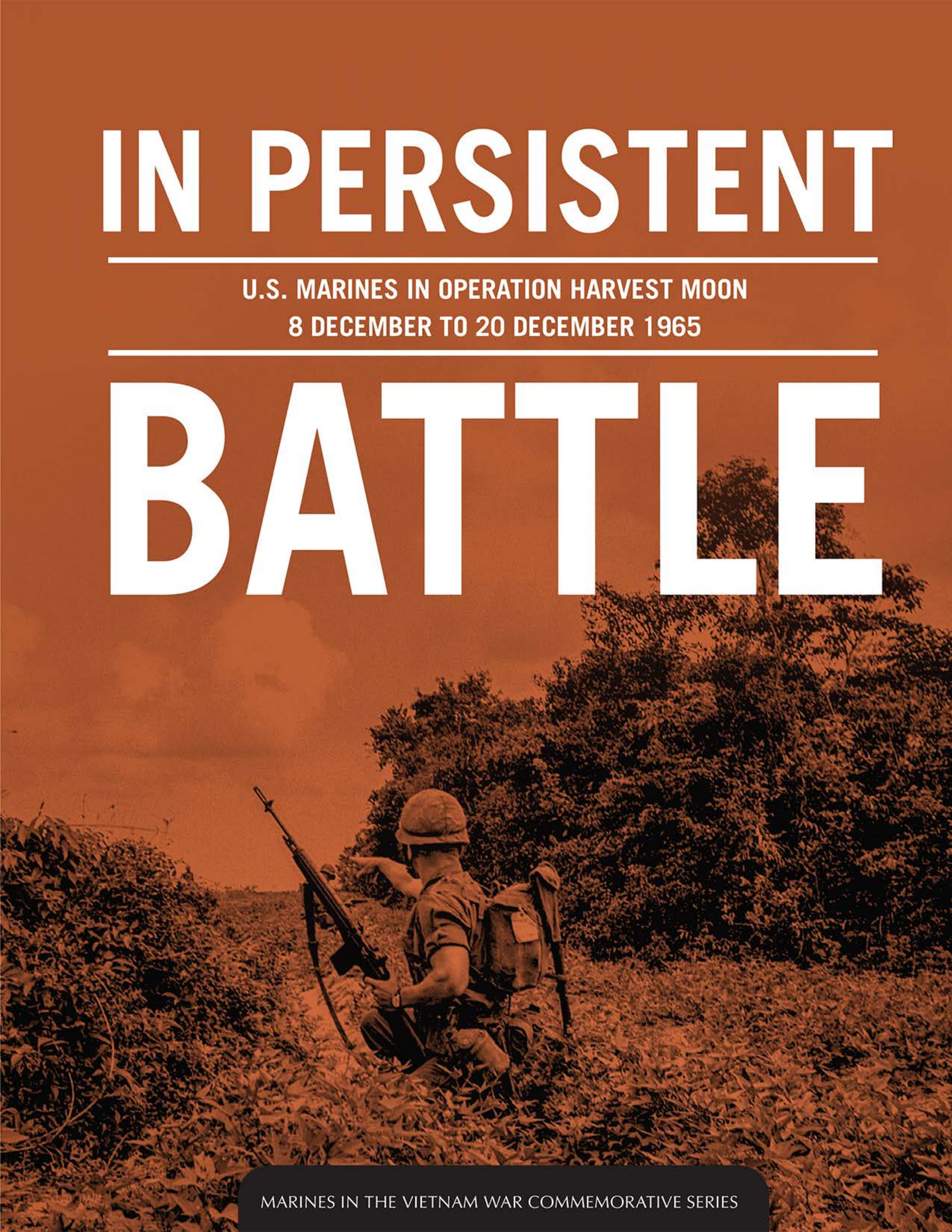
8 DECEMBER TO 20 DECEMBER 1965



MARINES IN THE VIETNAM WAR COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

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8 DECEMBER TO 20 DECEMBER 1965

NICHOLAS J. SCHLOSSER, PHD

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The U.S. Marine Corps' war in Vietnam was a mixture of large-scale conventional battles against main Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units and smaller pacification operations designed to secure the South Vietnamese population from Communist insurgents. During the latter half of 1965, Marine forces fought repeated engagements against large Viet Cong units, most notably the *1st Viet Cong Regiment*. The first battle, a fight in August to secure the area around Chu Lai called Operation Starlite, inflicted significant casualties upon this force. However, within just a few months, the Communist unit reconstituted itself, forcing the Marines to launch another operation to destroy the formation in December. The Marines codenamed this action Operation Harvest Moon.

Operation Harvest Moon has largely been overlooked in histories of the Vietnam War. While Operation Starlite was considered a major success and a clear demonstration of the superiority of America's conventional military forces compared to the Viet Cong, Harvest Moon was less decisive. The following year, the Marine Corps' attention also began to shift north toward the demilitarized zone (DMZ) as more regular North Vietnamese combat forces put pressure on the Marines' area of operations. Consequently, the battle was overshadowed by larger engagements.

Nevertheless, the operation was important for a number of reasons. Harvest Moon was the Marines' last large-scale, conventional operation of 1965 in Vietnam. Fought in the valleys and hills between the city of Tam Ky and the inland outpost of Hiep Duc, it was the largest combined operation between Marine units and the South Vietnamese military to that date. Perhaps most importantly, the battle demonstrated many of the frustrations and problems faced by all the American forces in South Vietnam as they tried to defeat the Viet Cong-led insurgency. The disparity in the fighting abilities between the Marines and South Vietnamese Army units hindered combat effectiveness. The lack of coordination between the two forces, and between the Marine Corps and U.S. Air Force, also led to heavy losses on the allied side. Enjoying logistical support from North Vietnam, the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* was able to defeat South Vietnamese forces while largely evading American units.

The battle revealed a number of problems in how Marines coordinated counterguerrilla operations and used helicopters to lift formations into combat zones. In the course of the operation, the commanding general was relieved due to his inability to provide clear direction to his units. Although the Marine forces involved in Operation Harvest Moon were able to exact a heavy price from their Viet Cong adversaries,

nevertheless, the main enemy units were able to retreat and regroup, leaving the valley far from secure. Marines would return to the valley complex two months later to fight the same Viet Cong unit. Thus, although the engagement did not produce the seemingly decisive result of Starlite or later battles like Hue City, Harvest Moon was arguably more representative of the American experience in Vietnam as a whole.

The United States Marine Corps in Vietnam: 1965

The first deployment of large Marine units to South Vietnam arrived on 8 March 1965. On that day, the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB) landed to provide security for the air base at Da Nang. As more units arrived to reinforce the brigade, and as their mission expanded to conducting counterinsurgency operations in the countryside outside of Da Nang, the 9th MEB's headquarters was deactivated and replaced by the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), commanded by Major General Lewis W. Walt. By mid-1965, the large air-ground task force included a reinforced division (3d Marine Division [3d MarDiv], plus regiments from the 1st MarDiv) and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW).

III MAF's mission in South Vietnam was multifaceted, but ill-defined. Initially, the U.S. commander in South Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland, USA (commander of United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, or USMACV), had intended the main mission for the Americans to be security. However, within days of the landing, President Lyndon B. Johnson demanded that Westmoreland initiate more aggressive operations designed with the express purpose of attacking and killing Viet Cong forces. He renewed these orders throughout the subsequent months. "At the present time," said Johnson, "we are limited as to what we can do in [North Vietnam], but we have almost free rein in [South Vietnam], and I want to kill more Viet Cong." At the end of July, Johnson announced that he would expand the size of the American expeditionary force in South Vietnam to 125,000 men.

The Viet Cong had conducted an aggressive and persistent insurgency against the government of South Vietnam since 1960. Initially, the southern republic, led by Ngo Dinh Diem, was able to hold its own against the aggressive insurgency, although it was never able to gain a clear advantage and was weakened by internal conflicts. Diem's corrupt, nepotistic, and heavy-handed governing style alienated significant constituencies within South Vietnam's population and led to mass protests against his regime during 1963. Convinced that Diem's unpopularity made him more of a liability than an ally in the fight against the Communists in South Vietnam, the John F. Kennedy administration backed a coup d'état launched by South Vietnamese military leaders that led to Diem's overthrow and assassination and to the creation of a military junta to govern the fragile state.

The collapse of Diem's regime did little to abate South Vietnam's problems. Between 1963 and 1965, the South Vietnamese government was continuously shaken by successive coups, as different factions within the military deposed the other. Largely because of its heavily politicized nature and rampant cronyism, the South Vietnamese Army was sorely deficient as a combat force. The Viet Cong were able to exploit the seemingly endemic weaknesses of the South Vietnamese state. Enjoying ample logistical support from North Vietnam, which ferried supplies south through Laos and Cambodia, the Viet Cong operated throughout South Vietnam's countryside with relative freedom. While the U.S. Air Force and South Vietnamese Air Force had carried out interdiction campaigns against these supply routes, they were limited and did little to hinder the flow of personnel and materiel into the Viet Cong's hands. The Viet Cong also enjoyed significant influence throughout South Vietnamese villages, using a mix of persuasion and terror to turn the population against the increasingly corrupt and unstable government in Saigon.

Since 1964, the Johnson administration had carried out an intermittent bombing offensive against North Vietnam in the hope that graduated pressure would convince Hanoi to cease its support of the southern insurgency. Following Viet Cong attacks in late 1964 and early 1965 against American installations in South Vietnam, the administration decided to dramatically escalate the bombing effort, and in February began Operation Rolling Thunder.* The need to secure the air bases used for this large-scale campaign necessitated an infusion of conventional American combat forces.

*From March 1965 to December 1968, Operation Rolling Thunder represented one of the largest sustained air attacks on North Vietnamese territory.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A183819

Marines of the 9th MEB wade ashore at Da Nang on 8 March 1965. By December 1965, this small Marine contingent would mushroom into a Marine amphibious force comprised of two divisions and an aircraft wing.

At the same time that the United States was taking more aggressive action against North Vietnam, General Westmoreland grew increasingly concerned about the survivability of South Vietnam. The ineptitude of the South Vietnamese forces convinced the USMACV commander that substantial American ground forces would need to take the field to engage and destroy the Viet Cong formations operating throughout the South Vietnamese countryside. These concerns, coupled with the president's demand that Americans do what they could to rack up a high body count of Viet Cong fighters, transformed America's commitment to South Vietnam in a radical and rapid way over the course of 1965.

Westmoreland confronted a complex enemy force. On the one hand, there were the guerrilla units operating throughout the South Vietnamese villages. These forces operated amongst the populace and utilized irregular tactics, such as booby traps and terrorist actions, to turn individuals away from the government and to weaken the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese Army. It is these forces that most often come to mind when one thinks of the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, Vietnam's Communists had used these types of forces out of necessity, as their resources and personnel were limited. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese preferred using organized, conventional arms when

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A188991

In this photo from 1967, Gen Wallace M. Greene Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, and LtGen Robert E. Cushman Jr., commander III MAF, meet with USMACV commander Gen William C. Westmoreland, USA. Westmoreland and the Marines in I Corps often disagreed on the best way to defeat the Viet Cong insurgency.

they could, and by 1965, there were numerous large-scale formations of Viet Cong, known as main Viet Cong or main force Viet Cong, operating throughout the South Vietnamese countryside. These units were made up of both Viet Cong fighters and North Vietnamese soldiers who had infiltrated into the south.

It was the main force Viet Cong that most concerned Westmoreland. From the moment the first U.S. conventional units landed in Vietnam, there was debate between Westmoreland and some senior officers in the Marine Corps as to where the center of gravity of the Viet Cong insurgency actually lay. Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac) commander Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak believed that the key to winning the war was pacifying and securing the coastal population centers village by village.* This methodical approach would ultimately isolate the Viet Cong from the people, robbing the insurgents of intelligence, supplies, and safe havens. Krulak contended the Viet Cong would ultimately be forced to abandon their infiltration efforts and cede control to the South Vietnamese government.

From Westmoreland's perspective as the overall commander of U.S. forces, controlling the population centers would mean little if the main force Viet Cong was permitted to maneuver throughout the highlands away from the coast unimpeded. Westmoreland calculated that he was facing a dual threat and that one was far more pressing than the other. As historian Dale Andrade comments:

> By way of analogy, he referred to them as "bully boys with crowbars" who were trying to tear down the house that was South Vietnam. The guerrillas and political cadre—which he called "termites"—could also destroy everything, but it would take them much longer to do it. So his attention turned first to the "bully boys," whom he wanted to drive away from the "house."

*Pacification was a program set in place by the South Vietnamese government and the United States to suppress the insurgency by way of an agency composed of both military and civilian personnel, such as Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS). However, *pacification* was an imprecise term and there was never an agreement by Americans in Vietnam on what it was or how it might be achieved.

U.S. Army, Command and General Staff College, Combined Arms Research Library, Center for Military History, Vietnam Studies

Soldiers of the Peoples Army of Vietnam (North Vietnamese Army) around 1966. The main Viet Cong units the Marines in South Vietnam faced were often augmented with regulars from the north.

Westmoreland thus concluded that the only way to secure South Vietnam was to destroy the main Viet Cong force and cut off its supply lines from the north. As his authority was limited only to South Vietnam, Westmoreland could do little to solve the latter problem. He could devise a strategy for addressing the second challenge, however. The sudden infusion of conventional American forces provided an appropriate means for defeating the more conventional Viet Cong units and North Vietnamese combat forces. The task of pacification would be left to the South Vietnamese Army, while the mission of locating and destroying the main Viet Cong units would fall to the U.S. forces.

Although Marines, such as Krulak, believed that substantial attention needed to be paid to pacification, III MAF was largely equipped and organized to conduct the large-scale conventional operations envisioned by General Westmoreland. Even Westmoreland was struck by the large amount of artillery and tanks the Marines brought ashore when the 9th MEB landed, as he believed such equipment would make little impact on the counterinsurgency effort. Commandant of the Marine Corps General Wallace M. Greene Jr. characterized the pacification mission as secondary and a diversion of Marine forces. Many senior Army and Marine commanders alike believed the best use of III MAF's Marines was in the conventional war against the main Viet Cong formations.

Just as strategic disagreements existed between United States military commanders in Vietnam, so too did tensions exist between the political and military officials in the Viet Cong and in North Vietnam. The primary dispute concerned just how the Democratic Republic of Vietnam could best assist the insurgency in the south. While some advocated a more hands-off approach that focused on providing advisory and logistical assistance, others such as Central Committee First Secretary Le Duan believed that the northern Communist state needed to make a substantial commitment of combat units to the struggle in the south. They believed the key to winning what they referred to as the United States' "special war" (the phase of the conflict in which the Americans served in an advisory capacity) was intended to destroy the South Vietnamese Army using large formations of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese military forces. In early 1965, General Nguyen Chi Thanh, the party secretary for the North Vietnamese political office in South Vietnam (the Central Office for South Vietnam or COSVN), called for an aggressive and substantial expansion of conventional combat power. General Thanh concluded that "We must be prepared to defeat the enemy's 'special war,' but if we want to defeat this type of war we must commit regular main force units to the battle, and we must begin to build main force fists powerful enough to break the backbone of the enemy's 'special war'—the puppet government's regular army units."

The expansion of American combat forces beginning in March 1965 derailed the North Vietnamese hope of preventing the escalation of the "special war" into a "limited war," which would entail combat against large American units. The People's Army of Vietnam's official history states that the North Vietnamese forces "now faced a new battle opponent: the American expeditionary army, an aggressor army that possessed modern equipment, heavy firepower, and incredible mobility." The Communist forces concluded that the best way forward was to crush the Americans in open battle and thwart their attempt to mount a counteroffensive the next year.

Both sides of the war in I Corps found the opportunity to wage a big-unit battle in the summer of 1965. During

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185824

Marines of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, patrol and search a small village during Operation Starlite. Fought at the end of August 1965, the operation was the first major battle between Marines and the main force Viet Cong.

July 1965, the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* began to build up its strength in what the North Vietnamese designated Military Region 5, the area of northern South Vietnam in which the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) I Corps and III MAF operated. The regiment was an effective, experienced combat force that had achieved a series of victories against ARVN units throughout the area. In May, it successfully overran a South Vietnamese outpost at Ba Gia south of Chu Lai. In July, the regiment attacked the same position again, inflicting 130 casualties. Westmoreland subsequently ordered General Walt to sortie his Marines out of III MAF's coastal bases, locate the regiment, and destroy it.

Between 18 and 24 August 1965, the 7th Marines conducted Operation Starlite, a search-and-destroy operation that bludgeoned the Viet Cong force. The operation combined a battalion-size helicopter assault and the landing of a battalion from the sea. It was indicative of the Marines' preference to utilize their amphibious shipping assets and capabilities, rather than extend their lines of communications into the South Vietnamese highlands. By airlifting the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, west of the Phuoc Thuan Peninsula and then landing the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, south of the peninsula with landing craft, the Marines were able to entrap the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* around the town of Van Tuong, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy formation in the process. The Marines also were able to call in more than 1,500 rounds of naval gunfire. Coupled to the more than 5,000 rounds expended by the Starlite force's artillery support and the 65 tons of bombs, 4 tons of napalm, 523 rockets, and 6,000 rounds of ammunition from the aircraft of the 1st MAW, the battle also exemplified the Corps' utilization of massive firepower to strike the Viet Cong unit.

American intelligence estimated that between 614 and 1,430 Viet Cong soldiers were killed in action during the engagement. The Marine forces suffered 51 killed and 203 wounded. Assuming that contemporary intelligence estimates of the *1st Viet Cong Regiment's* strength of 2,000 were accurate, a casualty rate of 30–71 percent was seemingly decisive. In September, Krulak presented General Greene with an optimistic assessment of the battle, believing that

the losses were so significant that the Viet Cong would likely cease attempting to confront Marines in conventional engagements.

The *1st Viet Cong Regiment* Returns

Ultimately, the *1st Viet Cong Regiment's* defeat at Chu Lai in August was less decisive than it seemed. The regiment proved to be an elusive, resilient, and resourceful combat formation, demonstrating an ability to sustain incredible casualties and still rebuild itself. It was aided in this regard by ample reinforcements of North Vietnamese regular combat troops infiltrating into South Vietnam. In September, the Communist's COSVN began to beef up its conventional forces in the south, creating five infantry divisions and one artillery division. In October, the office stood up the *2d Infantry Division*, consisting of the aforementioned *1st Viet Cong Regiment* and the North Vietnamese *21st Regiment*. By the fall of 1965, and infused with North Vietnamese regulars, the Viet Cong regiment had recovered its strength.

While Starlite may have taught the Viet Cong the dangers of openly fighting the Marines, it did not dissuade them from actively seeking battle with South Vietnamese forces.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A421698

A bomb-laden McDonnell F-4B Phantom II from Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 115 takes off to perform a strike against Viet Cong targets in 1967. Phantoms, such as the one pictured here, provided critical close air support throughout Operation Harvest Moon.

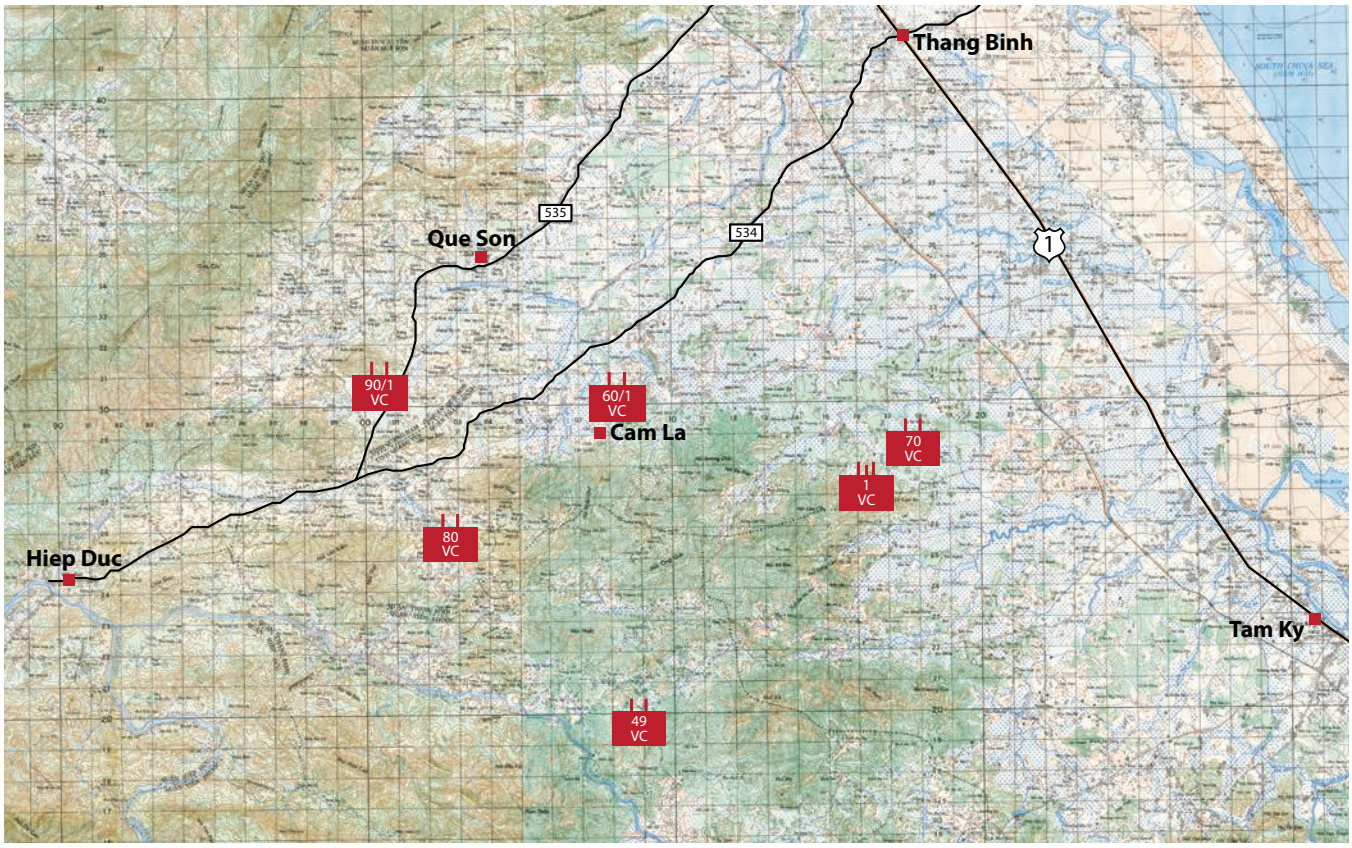
On 17 November 1965, three of its battalions overran and seized the South Vietnamese outpost of Hiep Duc, about 40 kilometers west from the city of Tam Ky. The base sat on a strategic crossroads where the western highland region known as the Nui Loc Son Basin became the Que Son Valley. The outpost was a gateway for the Communist forces moving from the western mountains into the coastal planes. During the monsoon seasons, Viet Cong formations and supplies could advance through the region without threat of detection. The loss of Hiep Duc consequently gave Communist forces the opportunity to move about the countryside unimpeded. The outpost's strategic importance necessitated a South Vietnamese and American recovery effort.

The counteroffensive entailed airlifting two battalions of South Vietnamese troops into Hiep Duc using Marine Sikorsky UH-34D Seahorse helicopters from Marine Aircraft Groups 16 and 36 (MAG-16 and MAG-36). The groups' commander, Colonel Thomas J. O'Connor, recalled the grisly sight as he orbited the outpost:

> The area was ominously quiet. We didn't see a living soul. There was much evidence of the fight the day before. The typical triangular-shaped French fortification in the village had been penetrated in several places. There were several corpses hanging on barbed wire around a few of the outposts across the Song Thu Bong.

As Marine helicopter pilots would soon discover throughout operations in the Que Son Valley complex, the Viet Cong were skilled at hiding their presence from Marine reconnaissance flights. When the relief force began to land, they immediately encountered fierce resistance from Communist fighters on the ground. Although he was able to land a company, Colonel O'Connor was forced to hold off further landings until fixed-wing aircraft from MAG-11 in their McDonnell Douglas F-4B Phantoms and MAG-12 in their Douglas A-4 Skyhawks could soften up the landing zones. Just as the South Vietnamese troops already on the ground were about to be surrounded, O'Connor was able to insert the remainder of the two battalions.

Several days of difficult fighting followed, but on 19 November, the South Vietnamese successfully retook the outpost, losing 33 killed and 73 wounded in action. However,



Map adapted by History Division

Operation Harvest Moon's area of operations and suspected Viet Cong positions in early December 1965.

a few days later, the *18th North Vietnamese Regiment* and *45th Viet Cong Heavy Weapons Battalion* struck the South Vietnamese outpost of Thach Tru. With their forces stretched to the limit, I Corps commander General Nguyen Chanh Thi and General Walt chose to abandon Hiep Duc and use their available forces to reinforce the defense of Thach Tru.

The need to withdraw from Hiep Duc was a symptom of the general problem faced by U.S. and South Vietnamese commanders as they struggled to neutralize Viet Cong activity. American forces were stretched thin as they worked to balance the task of pacifying South Vietnam's population centers, secure the countryside, and destroy the main force Viet Cong. Using the monsoon season to their advantage, North Vietnamese and main Viet Cong formations were able to infiltrate South Vietnam at a time when U.S. air power was severely constrained by the weather. The Viet Cong were thus able to attack a variety of targets simultaneously, forcing III MAF and I Corps to spread their units throughout the region and limit their ability to concentrate forces and hold significant amounts of territory. It was a microcosm of the dilemma facing General Westmoreland throughout the country: how to counteract the Communists' vast numbers with USMACV's limited forces.

The loss of Hiep Duc prompted the USMACV to order III MAF to plan and carry out a spoiling attack in the Que Son Valley against the *1st Viet Cong Regiment*. The operation was code-named Harvest Moon—a large-scale ambush using battalions from the Marine Corps and South Vietnamese Army. Its primary objectives were to prevent the Communists from taking Que Son, to allow the South Vietnamese to reestablish their lines of communications in the valley, and to wear down the Viet Cong forces in the region. If the Americans and South Vietnamese did not have the numbers to retake the outpost, General Westmoreland believed they could nevertheless rely on their maneuverability and firepower to conduct a search-and-destroy sweep that

would disrupt Communist plans in the valley complex itself. The target would be the Communist combat forces rather than South Vietnamese territory.

The location where Harvest Moon would take place was shaped like a rough triangle. The eastern boundary was formed by Route 1, the principal north-south artery linking the urban areas along I Corps' coast. The north point of this side of the triangle was the town of Thang Binh, the site of the South Vietnamese command post. Almost two kilometers to the north was Task Force Delta's logistic support area. The southern point, a little more than 17 kilometers south, was Tam Ky. The second side of the triangle was formed by Routes 535 and 534. The two parallel roads proceeded roughly west-southwest from Route 1. The northern route, 535, passed through Que Son and merged with 534 about nine and a half kilometers east of Hiep Duc. The third side of the triangle was formed by the Khang River and Route 586. The Khang flowed from Hiep Duc in a southeasterly direction. About 22.5 kilometers east of Hiep Duc began Route 586, a 12.9-kilometer thoroughfare connecting Route 1 with the interior, hilly countryside drained by the Khang and Thu Bon Rivers.

The area within this triangle was a valley complex of rice paddies framed by craggy mountains. The hills ranged from 200 to 500 meters in height. While some of the country hosted terraced paddies, for the most part, the high ground was defined by tangled, thick brush and rain forest. Larger hills, those ranging between 400 and 500 feet, were covered with tall trees that reached a height of 100 feet. The high points were grouped in three prominent areas, and together they carved the Que Son Valley into narrow channels. The first mass commanded the approach southwest along Route 534. The second stood along the west part of the valley and created a narrow canal between Hiep Duc and the wider valley beyond to the east. The southern part of the valley was pockmarked with another ring of hills.

Most of the villages in the area could be found huddled along the base of the mountains. The hamlets, along with cane stands, hedgerows, and pine stands, afforded Viet Cong units ample cover and the ability to maneuver throughout the valley undetected. Rivers, streams, and rough terrain combed by the Viet Cong created obstacles like cut roads and destroyed bridges and obstructed approaches into the complex. The Viet Cong forces operating in the area made extensive use of these features, along with a network of man-made and natural caves and tunnels. They also made use of underground rooms for protection, storage, and living quarters. Rooms ranged in size from 10 x 10 x 15 feet to 30 x 30 x 10 feet.

December also fell in the middle of the northeast monsoon season, meaning that rain and low cloud cover would be a constant hindrance to visibility and air operations. Of the 11 days of the operation, 9 of them were marked by either bad or marginal weather. During even marginal weather, cloud ceilings were no higher than 1,200 feet and visibility no greater than one to three miles.

Although intelligence reports confirmed the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* was operating in the Que Son Valley area, there were still unanswered questions regarding the size and makeup of the formation. Harvest Moon's intelligence summary indicated that the "VC [Viet Cong] have considered this area as being relatively secure." The total strength of the enemy regiment was estimated at between 1,800 and 2,150 personnel. The force consisted of four battalions: the *40th*, *45th*, *60th*, and *90th*. The *40th* and *45th Viet Cong Battalions* were estimated to be 200–350 strong each, while the *90th* was believed to consist of 400 Viet Cong fighters. There also were a number of other Viet Cong units reported in the area, including the 500-strong *Chu Dong Battalion* and three other battalions of varying strength: the *49th* (350 personnel), *70th* (500 personnel), and *80th* (400 personnel). An unidentified battalion also was reported in the valley, though intelligence reports surmised that this was in fact the *1st Viet Cong Regiment's 60th Battalion*. In all, Americans estimated Viet Cong strength was about 4,700 fighters dispersed throughout the valley, with the bulk of forces occupying positions south of Route 534.

The Viet Cong forces in the valley were a mixture of conventional main forces and guerrilla units. The Viet Cong fighters were observed wearing diverse fighting garb, including black pajama-style uniforms, khaki uniforms, and steel helmets. Their arsenal of weaponry was extensive, and throughout the battle, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces encountered fire from North Vietnamese-built K44 sniper rifles and Chinese carbines. They were also armed with an extensive range of American-built arms, presumably

captured from the South Vietnamese, including M1 Garand rifles, Thompson submachine guns, and M1918 Browning Automatic Rifles. The Communist forces also used 60mm and 81mm mortars, 57mm recoilless rifles, hand grenades, 12.7mm machine guns, and an array of booby traps.

Brigadier General Melvin D. Henderson completed his planning work with Brigadier General Hoang Xuan Lam, commanding general of the 2d ARVN Division, on 7 December 1965. The operational order was subsequently distributed to all relevant commands. D-Day was designated as 8 December 1965. Harvest Moon involved two multi-battalion formations: the 2d ARVN Division's 5th Regiment and a provisional Marine force designated Task Force Delta. Task Force Delta, commanded by General Henderson, was comprised of Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines; Lieutenant Colonel Joshua W. Dorsey III's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines; and a provisional artillery battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Joris J. Snyder. Smaller supporting units included a logistical support unit commanded by Major Daryl E. Benstead; Company C, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion; Company C, 3d Engineer Battalion; and the 3d Motor Transport Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Robert T. Hanifin Jr.'s Battalion Landing Team 2d Battalion, 1st Marines (BLT 2/1), the ground combat element of the Special Landing Force (SLF) of the Seventh Fleet, would serve as a floating reserve.

On D-Day, the 5th ARVN Regiment would move from Thang Binh southwest into the Que Son Valley toward Hiep Duc. Planners anticipated the large ARVN formation would draw out the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* and bring it to battle. On 9 December, Task Force Delta would land two battalions behind the Viet Cong forces: 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, from Tam Ky and 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, from Huong Xuan to the north. The ARVN regiment would subsequently serve as the anvil on which Task Force Delta would hammer the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* from behind. Lieutenant Colonel Ralph E. Sullivan, Task Force Delta's operations officer, was quite blunt when describing the role of the ARVN force: "It is unstated, but they were the bait."

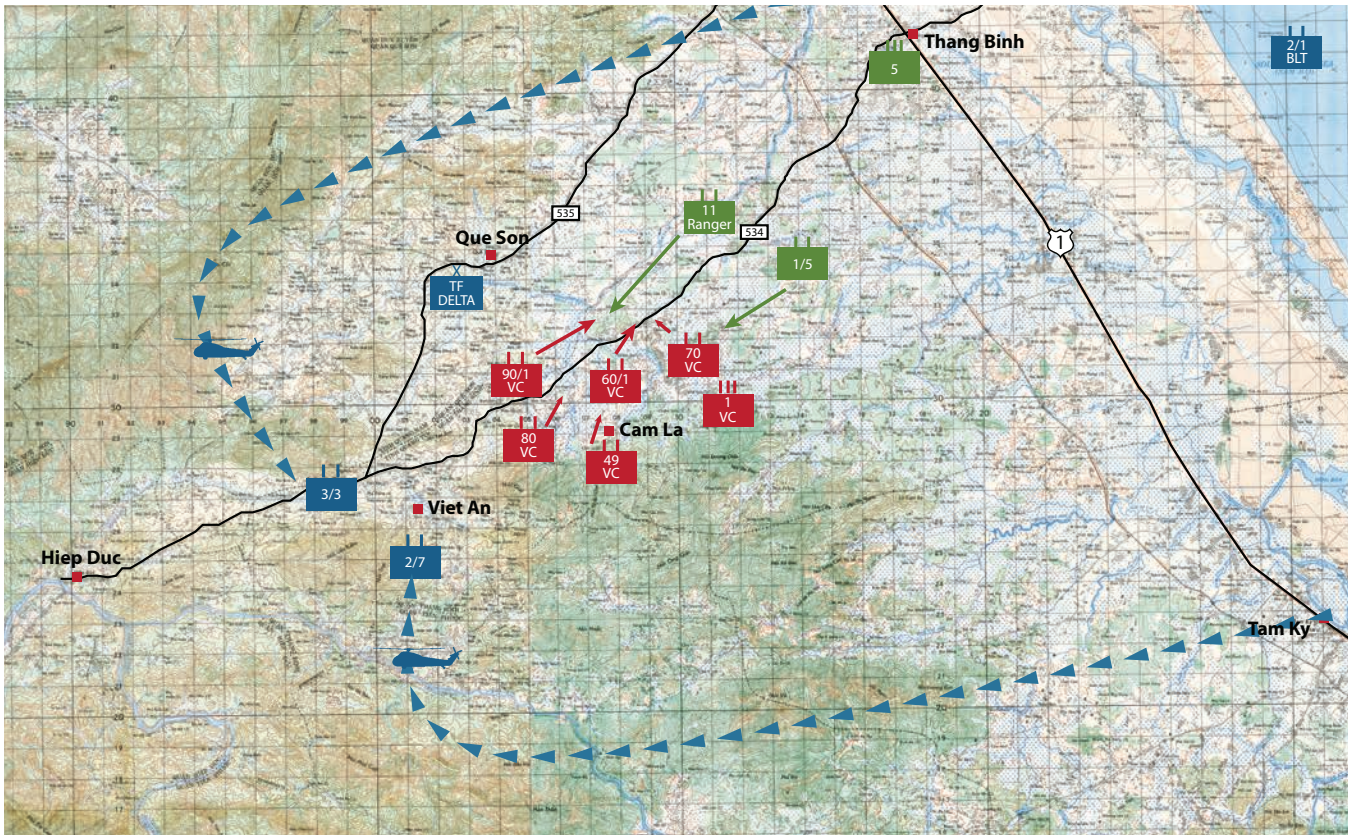
Task Force Delta would rely on the 1st MAW's fleet of UH-34D medium utility helicopters to bring its units together. Airlifting two battalions into the heavily populated, rice paddy-strewn Que Son Valley was difficult enough.

Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

BGen Melvin D. Henderson, Task Force Delta's first commander. Gen Henderson was an experienced veteran who had seen combat in some of the harshest battles of World War II.

While the 3d MarDiv had conducted helicopter assaults before, notably during Operation Starlite, those operations were usually near the coast and carried out in coordination with a seaborne amphibious landing. Harvest Moon would take place much farther inland (about 32 kilometers from the coast) in territory that had been overrun by Viet Cong units. There were only a few areas in the region to land the number of helicopters needed to lift a whole battalion at a safe distance from villages and hills potentially teeming with Viet Cong units.

Fire support for both ARVN and Marine forces would come from Task Force Delta's provisional artillery battalion. Batteries would be set up throughout the perimeter enclosing the area of operations. Four 155mm howitzers from Battery M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines, would be positioned near the ARVN command post to the north. Six 155mm pieces from Battery L, 4th Battalion, 12th Marines, would be located farther south along Route 1. Six smaller 105mm howitzers from Battery A, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, were



Map adapted by History Division

The Operation Harvest Moon plan of operations, 8–10 December 1965.

positioned at Que Son itself. Company F, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, would contribute another six 105mm pieces. Always operating within range of these batteries, the ARVN and Task Force Delta forces could draw on ample artillery support throughout the battlefield. The allied forces would also be able to draw on close air support from 1st MAW. Supplies would be shipped in via Route 1 to a logistical support area at Thang Binh, north of the area of operations. Helicopters would then lift provisions into the battlefield as necessary. A company of the 3d Engineer Battalion would work to keep the route open throughout the operation.

As noted, Task Force Delta was given the option of using the SLF as a tactical reserve. However, this option presented a number of problems in its own right. The ground component of the force, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's BLT 2/1, had already conducted five amphibious raids against Viet Cong forces along the South Vietnamese coast between September and December. Having seen considerable action, the SLF began to redeploy out of theater on 6 December. The majority of the landing team (the command group, Companies F and G, and attached artillery, armor, and amtrac units) aboard the USS *Valley Forge* (LPH 8) and USS *Monticello* (LSD 35) steamed to Okinawa, Japan, while the remainder of the team (Companies E and H), aboard the USS *Montrose* (APA 212), took a detour to Manila, the Philippines, to pick up landing craft. In the middle of the night on 6 December, the SLF received word from General Walt that it would be needed for Operation Harvest Moon. The *Valley Forge* and *Monticello* sped back to the South Vietnamese coast and were ready for operations by the morning of 8 December. Unfortunately, the *Montrose* was already well on its way to the Philippines when it received the recall order, meaning that it would not arrive in time for D-Day. BLT 2/1 would consequently go into battle without two of its rifle companies, a significant portion of its combat strength.

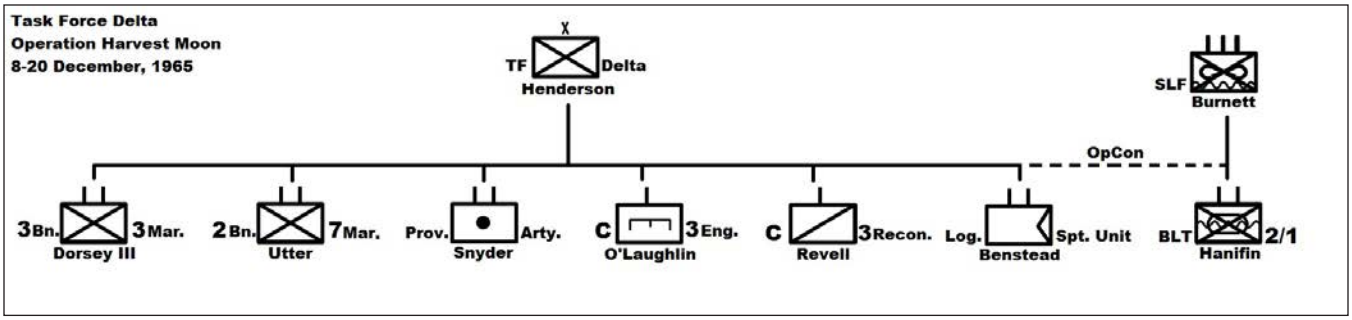
From the start, and in the words of a Headquarters Pacific Air Forces study, the plan left "much to be desired." The operation order sacrificed detail in favor of concision.

Naval History and Heritage Command, No. NH 96946

The Essex-class USS *Valley Forge* (LPH 8). Converted carriers such as *Valley Forge* and purpose-built helicopter carriers such as the USS *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2) granted Marines the capability of launching vertical assaults from sea-based positions.

Nevertheless, it was a complex design requiring coordination between a wide range of command levels. Most importantly, it would necessitate close cooperation between ground and air units. In general, three basic, interrelated problems undermined the operation: the ad hoc, provisional nature of Task Force Delta; an overwhelming concern about secrecy on the part of its planners that hindered clear communication between subordinate units; and the South Vietnamese military's weaknesses as a combat force.

Rather than form Task Force Delta around the headquarters of one of his regiments, General Walt cobbled together an ad hoc organization comprised of disparate battalions and various elements of his own headquarters. Colonel Oscar F. Peatross, commanding officer of the 7th Marines, recalled that "most of the members of the [Task Force] Delta staff had just come into Vietnam." He went on to note that "Although individuals were extremely competent, there seemed to me to be too many new comers [*sic*] to start right out in a combined operation with the ARVN." A board of investigation convened by General Walt shortly after the engagement concluded that this approach had led to undue confusion and recommended that "consideration should be given to using a regimental staff in operations such as 'Harvest Moon' in lieu of forming an ad hoc staff for the purpose."



Task Force Delta's two battalions were not only from different regiments but from different divisions; 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, came from the 3d MarDiv while 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, was a formation of the 1st MarDiv. The 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, was a composite force made up of the battalion's Headquarters and Service Company, its Company L, and Companies E and G from 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, and Company G from 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. The force's provisional artillery battalion was also task organized and consisted of batteries from both the 11th Marines and the 12th Marines. At the time the operation was set to begin, all of these units would be separated geographically; the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, was north at Da Nang, and the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, was south at Chu Lai. They would not converge until at least two days after the operation was set to begin. Face-to-face communication between the battalion commanders during the planning phase of the operation was thus impossible.

The man tasked with commanding this composite force, General Henderson, was a seasoned Marine who had taken part in some of the toughest fights of World War II, including Saipan and Iwo Jima. He earned a Bronze Star with combat "V" for his service as the executive officer of the 4th Engineer Battalion during the Battle of Iwo Jima. In many ways, he was well suited to head the complex operation. His career highlights included command of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines (1952), the 6th Marines (1958–61), and lengthy tours in numerous logistics billets with the 2d MarDiv and at Headquarters Marine Corps. Before deploying to Okinawa in 1965 for service with the 3d MarDiv, he had been the assistant chief of staff, G-4 at Headquarters Marine Corps. Following that tour, Lieutenant General Leonard F. Chapman Jr., chief of staff to the Commandant, stated that Henderson was "fully capable of handling any assignment, command or staff, with distinction."

Arriving at the 3d MarDiv in the summer of 1965, General Henderson undertook a range of duties. As the commanding general, 3d MarDiv (Rear), he oversaw the rapid transfer of the division's headquarters and units from Okinawa to III MAF in South Vietnam. During this period, Henderson also served as the commanding general for Fleet Marine Force, Seventh Fleet, overseeing the constitution of the SLF as a floating reserve for III MAF. In August, with the majority of 3d MarDiv now in South Vietnam, Henderson joined his division at Da Nang where he served as one of that formation's two assistant division commanders. Consequently, although his experience was primarily that of an engineer and logistician, Henderson was not a stranger to combat and had experience commanding large formations. He also was experienced working with the SLF. He enjoyed the confidence of his superiors, and just a few months before the operation, General Walt wrote that Henderson was a "very energetic, hard-driving, 'can do' type of officer who would be a credit to any organization. I consider him to have high potential for more responsible assignments."

What Henderson lacked, however, was any experience commanding large units in combat. Of course, the same could be said for many of the senior Marines with III MAF at this early stage in the Vietnam War. Operation Harvest Moon was the first time Henderson led a multibattalion force into battle. His headquarters was cobbled together from 3d MarDiv headquarters personnel, meaning that few of the principal planning officers had much experience working with one another. While this was certainly not unprecedented, it was a severe hindrance in light of the operation's complexities and potential friction.

General Walt would be an imposing presence throughout the course of the operation. A bullnecked bear of a man, Walt was a seasoned combat veteran whose courage and determination earned him two Navy Crosses, the Silver Star with combat "V," the Bronze Star with combat "V," and a Purple Heart on the battlefields of World War II and Korea. His service in World War II brought him to some of the bloodiest battlefields of the Pacific war, and included Guadalcanal, Cape Gloucester, and Peleliu. An infantryman to the core, he preferred to command from the front and get his hands dirty, a practice that earned him the reputation of being a "three-star grunt." Although intended as a term of endearment, it also conveyed Walt's tendency to hover over subordinates.

Operation Harvest Moon's organizational and command problems were exacerbated by an overriding concern with security and secrecy. In general, secrecy was a prevailing concern that underscored the Harvest Moon planning process. The only instructions to the force afloat in the order dated 7 December was that control of the unit would fall to Task Force Delta once the landing force arrived in the objective area. The battalion landing team was expected to be "prepared to land by helicopter to reinforce, block, counterattack or exploit gains by Task Force Delta." Ironically, the order submitted to the Special Landing Force on 9 December was even less precise, stating that the force should be "prepared to land by helo in designated [landing zone]'s and carry out missions as assigned by [Task Force] Delta." The lack of information critically hindered the SLF's ability to prepare for its deployment. The aforementioned board investigating the battle noted:

> since no coordinated planning or briefing was conducted by principal units concerned with the helo assault of [2d Battalion, 1st Marines] the key decision-making personnel were not in possession of sufficient information to make sound decisions nor the means to disseminate their decisions once they were made to all who needed to know.

The 7th Marines commander, Colonel Peatross, later noted "There was entirely too much secrecy during the planning, secrecy to the extent that units involved [*sic*] supply and similar support were unaware of their role unless they found out by accident." For example, part of the logistics plan for Harvest Moon involved moving a convoy of 200 trucks from Da Nang down Route 1 to the logistic support area at Thang Binh, where it would unload, and then continue to Chu Lai. At Chu Lai, the trucks would reload with rations and ammunition and then move back up Route 1 to Thang Binh. The only Marine force available to provide escort duties for the convoy at Chu Lai was the 7th Marines (less its 2d Battalion, which was part of Task Force Delta). Peatross only learned of these convoys from 2d Battalion, 7th Marines' commander Lieutenant Colonel Utter. Despite the fact that there had never been a convoy run between Da Nang and Chu Lai at that point, the logistics commander at Chu Lai was left

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A186279

III MAF and 3d MarDiv commander MajGen Lewis W. Walt (center) confers with Capt Richard E. Theer (far right), the commander of Company B, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, during Operation Harvest Moon. This photo was taken near Hill 407.

ignorant of the role his post would be playing in the coming operation. Peatross believed the lapses could be "attributed only to the lack of experience in Vietnam of the Harvest Moon planners."

The drive for secrecy stemmed, in large part, from concerns that the South Vietnamese Army had been infiltrated by Viet Cong spies. The operation's planners denied the 2d ARVN division air liaison officer access to their sessions. The 5th ARVN Regiment commander was initially told that his force would be conducting a "routine 'sweep and clear' along highway 1 to the vicinity of Ky Lam." He was only briefed on his true mission on 7 December, one day prior to D-Day. Remarking on the high level of secrecy, Colonel Sullivan, noted:

> General Thi warned us on 4 December not to discuss this operation with any of the ARVN except for a select few in his own Headquarters and that of General Lam's. The fact that at 1330, 8 December the 11th ARVN Ranger Battalion walked into a *prepared* ambush is prima facie evidence that if Col Khoah [*sic*] was kept in the dark, the commander of the 1st VC [Viet Cong] Regiment was not.

These concerns about spies working inside ARVN forces were indicative of a general lack of faith in the South Vietnamese military as a whole by III MAF's commanders. The working relationships between the commanders of III MAF and the ARVN I Corps were less than harmonious. Although personally cordial with one another, General Walt had a low regard for the fighting ability of General Thi's South Vietnamese forces. Harvest Moon also was not the first time Walt had chosen to leave his ARVN counterparts in the dark about a major operation. The previous August, Walt only informed General Thi and the commander of the 2d ARVN division when he decided to carry out Operation Starlite, keeping details of the operation from the rest of I Corps. Walt would later justify this decision, telling General Westmoreland, "I am further inclined to believe that the pique and sensitivities of the Saigon generals, while certainly a political factor in our relationships with the [government of Vietnam], should not disproportionately influence the conduct of the battle when significant numbers of U.S. lives are concerned, and, when the

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A183734-B

From left: BGen Hoang Xuan Lam (commander 2d ARVN Division), MajGen Nguyen Chanh Thi (commander I Corps), and BGen Frederick J. Karch (commander 9th MEB) confer shortly after the landing of Marines at Da Nang on 8 March 1965. Lam and Thi were the principal commanders of ARVN forces during Operation Harvest Moon.

responsibility of the U.S. commander determines that a larger measure of success can be achieved by unilateral operations."

In general, Marine leaders found the commanders of the regular South Vietnamese forces unreliable and overly politicized. General Thi, for example, had participated in a range of attempted coups against the South Vietnamese government and was effectively a warlord of South Vietnam's five northern provinces. To be sure, the lack of regard was mutual, as General Thi consistently underrated the Marines' abilities to conduct effective counterinsurgency operations, as seen in his efforts during the spring of 1965 to keep III MAF's area of operations isolated to Da Nang.

Yet, for all of the ARVN's deficiencies as a combat force, the success of Harvest Moon depended largely on the effectiveness of Brigadier General Hoang Xuan Lam's 2d ARVN Division on the battlefield. Task Force Delta's operations officer, Colonel Sullivan, noted that "The major implication of the concept was that the 5th ARVN Regiment was to make and hold contact with the 1st VC [Viet Cong] Regiment after luring them out of the hills." If the ARVN could not fix the *1st Viet Cong Regiment*, then the Viet Cong forces would be afforded complete freedom of maneuver throughout the area of operations, allowing them to refuse battle

with the reinforcing Marines, escape without suffering any substantial casualties, and continue to hold Hiep Duc and the entry point to the Nui Loc Son Basin.

D-Day and the Ambush of the 5th ARVN Regiment

At 0830 on 8 December 1965, the 5th ARVN Regiment departed Thang Binh and proceeded southwest along Route 534 toward Hiep Duc. The force comprised two battalions: the 1st Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment, and the 11th Ranger Battalion. As with other ARVN formations, it included American advisors serving alongside South Vietnamese soldiers. The 11th Ranger Battalion also included a four-man artillery forward observer team from Battery C, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines.

At 1000 that morning, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, began its motor march from Chu Lai to Tam Ky. At around the same time, the SLF's commanders—Colonel John R. Burnett, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin, and Lieutenant Colonel Mervin B. Porter (commander of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 261 [HMM-261], the SLF's aviation component)—departed USS *Valley Forge* and arrived at III MAF's headquarters in Da Nang to receive orders. The *Valley Forge* had just arrived off the coast of Chu Lai that morning. Although Henderson and Walt furnished the SLF commander with the Harvest Moon operation order, questions remained as to what its actual mission was to be as the order did not specify, and Burnett was simply told to "Be prepared to land . . . it looks like we may use you this time." Burnett was then told to assign a liaison officer to Task Force Delta headquarters and returned with Porter and Hanifin to *Valley Forge* where they awaited their orders.

The 5th ARVN Regiment continued its advance toward Hiep Duc when, at 1330, its advance was disrupted when the *70th Viet Cong Battalion* launched a sudden attack against the 11th Ranger Battalion. The ambush took place about five and a half kilometers east of Que Son, in the vicinity of a mountain designated Hill 43. As a formation fight under the operational control of the *1st Viet Cong Regiment*, the Viet Cong battalion attacked from the northwest and southwest, mauling the ranger battalion in a devastating engagement. In less than 15 minutes, the ARVN force was reduced in strength by nearly one-third. A U.S. Air Force report on the engagement quoted one advisor serving with the ranger battalion:

"They hit us with rockets, mortars, machine guns, small arms, everything. They attacked in mass and hit us from all sides. It was not an ambush as you think of an ambush. They were strategically positioned."

The battered 11th Ranger Battalion had no choice but to abandon its position, and withdrew 1,200 meters north. The 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment, attempted to assist with supporting fires, but was held back by Viet Cong mortar fire. At 1434, helicopters from HMM-161 carrying elements of the 1st Battalion, 6th ARVN Regiment, lifted off from Tam Ky to reinforce the battered South Vietnamese ranger unit. Providing prompt close air support to the strikes proved difficult. The Marine forward observer team attached to the unit was missing in action (three were dead), and contact was lost between the airborne and ground direct air support centers. An Air Force forward air controller took over command of

Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck*

Operation Harvest Moon lasted 11 days, and 9 of those days were marked by bad or marginal weather. This photo of Task Force Delta Marines taken during the operation illustrates the persistent mist that clung to the landscape throughout the battle.

airborne operations in the area and subsequently directed 47 Air Force and Marine sorties. However, these were against preplanned targets and the strikes actually prevented the 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment's forces from relieving the 11th Ranger Battalion. The Viet Cong broke contact at 1445 and headed north, leaving the ARVN forces to regroup, stabilize their lines for the night, and recover casualties.

Harvest Moon had almost been derailed before it had even begun. Initially conceived as an ambush, Operation Harvest Moon had become a rescue operation. Colonel Sullivan, Task Force Delta's operations officer, recalled that after the failure of the 5th ARVN Regiment, "any reasonable chance of [Task Force] Delta achieving its objective was emasculated." The rapid collapse of the 11th Ranger Battalion had allowed the Viet Cong to retain control of the area around Que Son and necessitated the airlifting of reinforcements. Unfortunately, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, was still moving to Tam Ky at the exact time the Viet Cong struck, and would not arrive at the city until 1515 that afternoon. The 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, was still in Da Nang. Henderson, thus, was limited in the reinforcements he could provide. Along with the 1st Battalion, 6th ARVN Regiment, he also ordered Battery M, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, to move its 155mm towed howitzers farther south to Thang Binh and used helicopters to lift two ARVN 105mm howitzers to Que Son.

At 0500 the next day, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, departed Da Nang and proceeded south to the logistic support area along Route 1. Unfortunately, Henderson's Marines were still too far away to aid the 5th ARVN Regiment when it was attacked a second time at 0645, this time by the *60th* and *80th Viet Cong Battalions*. The regiment's commander was killed in the engagement, and at 0702, the ARVN perimeter was broken and overrun. South Vietnamese forces retreated in disorder 6,000 meters east. An Air Force Cessna O-1F Bird Dog observation plane ensured that the rout did not become a massacre, directing the retreating South Vietnamese forces away from ambushes and toward the position of the 1st Battalion, 6th Regiment. The retreat was nevertheless disorderly, and at one point, the O-1F spotted the remnants of the regiment (50 men led by a corporal) retreating directly toward a Viet Cong position. The Air Force forward air controller aboard the Bird Dog then directed close air support strikes from Marine aircraft and an Air Force Douglas AC-47 Spooky gunship, which inflicted heavy casualties on the Viet Cong forces. A second enemy attack against the 1st Battalion, 6th ARVN Regiment, was less successful, and the Viet Cong were unable to dislodge that particular formation from its position. At noon, the 1st Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment's American advisor led the battered battalion's survivors up Hill 43.

The situation for ARVN forces was dire. Two of the three battalions committed by the ARVN I Corps had been

shattered by well-executed Viet Cong ambushes. The regimental headquarters had been destroyed. General Henderson did not learn about the second ambush until 0800, shortly after arriving at the ARVN command post at Thang Binh. He boarded a helicopter and proceeded to Tam Ky, where he personally ordered Lieutenant Colonel Utter to insert his 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, behind the Viet Cong positions and rescue the remnants of the 1st Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment. At 1000, HMM-161 and HMM-361 began transporting the Marine battalion west to a landing zone designated Spruce, southwest of Que Son and about 8.8 kilometers west of the ARVN position. The initial elements of the battalion began arriving at the zone at 1040, and the airlift of the unit was completed by 1330. Over the course of the next six hours, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines' rifle companies secured the landing zone and then advanced about 4,000 meters east, where the unit successfully secured a mass of hills by 1645.

As 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, entered the battlefield, Henderson established a command post in Que Son. Once there, he ordered 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, to find and relieve the 5th ARVN Regiment. The unit, which had been en route via a motor march from Da Nang since 0500, arrived at the logistic support area at 1030. At 1400, HMM-261 began airlifting the battalion to a landing zone 2,500 meters southeast of Hill 43. The initial elements, made up of the battalion headquarters, Company L, and two platoons from Company E, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, landed and began to move west at 1500. Upon landing, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, made contact with elements of the 1st Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment, southeast of Hill 43.

While the battalion continued advancing, its Company L pivoted north across an open rice paddy and made its way toward the high ground. At 1700, just as the company was shifting direction north, Viet Cong forces opened fire on the company's rear, with 100 fighters striking from the north, 50 from northwest, and another 50 from the west. Staff Sergeant Robert F. Moe, the leader of 3d Platoon, recalled that "We had moved within a thousand meters of our actual objective and it seemed like the whole area just erupted with Viet Cong fire. They had us with machine gun fire, automatic weapons fire, and hit us with 60[mm] mortars and 81[mm] mortars, which was quite effective and quite accurate, on our company." With his Marines taking fire from three sides, Moe was determined to get his platoon out of the open rice paddy in which they were pinned down and up to nearby high ground. Luckily, despite being caught by surprise, the Marines of Company L quickly began to lay down effective counterfire. As Moe recollected, "They caught us more or less in a . . . what we considered at the time and what I still consider now as a disorganized ambush. With their effective fire and the volume of firepower that they had, they could have done a whole lot more damage to us had they been a little more organized." The Marines of 2d Platoon served as a base of fire for 3d Platoon's assault, with the company's 60mm mortars striking the Viet Cong force to the north.

With two squads, Moe attacked a Viet Cong force numbering about 100 personnel. "With full knowledge of the hazards involved and with complete disregard for his own safety, he repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire while directing his platoon to a favorable position for the assault on the hill." Maneuvering his platoon to high ground, Sergeant Moe was able to establish a strong firing position. Moe's actions, which thwarted the Viet Cong's effort to eliminate both Company L and what remained of the 1st Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment, earned him the Navy Cross.

The fighting lasted for an hour and a half. As the 3d Platoon took the nearby hill, Marine helicopters arrived to begin evacuating casualties. Concerned about the potential threats below, the airborne tactical air coordinator from Marine Observation Squadron 2, Major Donald J. Reilly, flew his Bell UH-1E Iroquois to Company L's position, but ordered his wingman to remain aloft. Under cover of darkness, with almost no visibility, Reilly relied on the Marines on the ground using flashlights for direction. He was greeted with heavy small-arms fire, but nevertheless pressed on. He was then struck by a bullet and lost control of his aircraft. The "Huey" plummeted 50 feet and crashed into the battalion's position. Although his three crewmembers survived, Reilly suffered mortal wounds in the crash. He posthumously received the Navy Cross for his efforts to try and evacuate Marines in difficult circumstances.

The battle ended at 1830, with the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, suffering 11 killed in action and 17 wounded in action. Additionally, 75 Viet Cong fighters were killed in action through a combination of Company L's counterattack,

The III Marine Amphibious Force and the Marine Air-Ground Task Force

The Vietnam War was the first major American conflict that saw the deployment of a formally organized Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF). The Marine Corps had been working to integrate its air and ground units as standing task forces since the 1950s. In principle, the MAGTF was meant to function as a cohesive, well-integrated team. The concept could be traced back to the small wars of the 1920s, where Marines on the ground relied on aviation assets for supply, lift, and close air support as they fought guerrilla forces in the jungles of Nicaragua. The use of Marine fighter-bombers to provide effective, timely close air support to ground forces during World War II and the Korean War further entrenched aviation forces as fundamental supporting arms. Following World War II, Marine planners also began to experiment using helicopters as a means to airlift assault waves during an amphibious landing. By the early 1950s, the belief that aviation played a significant, integral role on the amphibious battlefield had become accepted doctrine.

The MAGTFs were designed to be elastic and adaptable. They all consisted of four basic elements: command, ground combat, aviation combat, and combat support. The smallest task force—the Marine expeditionary unit (MEU)—entailed a battalion, a helicopter squadron, and supporting logistic elements. The larger Marine expeditionary brigade (MEB) combined a regiment and an air group, along with logistical support. The largest organized task force—the Marine expeditionary force (MEF)—coupled a division, an air wing, and logistical elements. In 1965, the Marine Corps fielded three expeditionary forces, or MEFs: the I and III MEFs in the Pacific and the II MEF in the Atlantic. Since they could be easily expanded in size and had organic aviation and logistic capabilities, MAGTFs were particularly useful as a quick reaction force.

Since the late 1950s, the United States had recognized the possibility that it might have to expand its involvement in South Vietnam. Operation Plan 32, drafted in 1959, slated a MEB for deployment to Da Nang should such a need arise.* In 1965, the commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), General William C. Westmoreland, called for a substantial expansion of U.S. forces in South Vietnam to protect major facilities. The 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB) landed in March 1965. The rapid expansion of Marine units into the country necessitated the replacement of 9th MEB with the III MEF. In response to General Westmoreland's concern that the Vietnamese would associate the term "expeditionary" with the French Far East Expeditionary Corps (France's main combat force in the Indochina War of 1945–54), the Marines dutifully changed the unit's name to III Marine Amphibious Force, or III MAF.

Commanded by Major General Lewis W. Walt in December 1965, III MAF consisted of the 3d Marine Division, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and a force logistic support group. The division was reinforced with its normal complement and expanded with the 7th Marines, two battalions from the 1st Marines, and a battalion from the 11th Marines. The division was concentrated in two major areas: around Da Nang and around Chu Lai to the south.

*Operation Plan 32 represented a four-phase war plan for Indochina. Phase one focused on existing levels of terrorism and hostilities; phase two on a full-scale armed insurgency; phase three on the invasion of regular North Vietnamese units; and phase four on reinforcement by Communist China.

artillery fire, and close air support from the 1st MAW. The battalion established a perimeter defense on the high ground seized by Company L for the night and prepared to continue its march to Hill 43 the next morning.

With his two battalions committed to battle, Henderson now faced a range of decisions as he worked to recover the battered ARVN units and take the battle to the Viet Cong. Unfortunately, beginning that afternoon, he became overly concerned with the security of his headquarters, leading to a critical collapse of Task Force Delta's command-and-control functions. Between 1530 on 9 December and 0930 the next morning, General Henderson ordered his command post disassembled and moved three different times. In the course of these efforts, he also continued to make critical decisions, most importantly calling for the commitment of the SLF on the morning of 10 December. By the evening of 9 December, Operation Harvest Moon, a complex operation to begin with, had already encountered a number of serious setbacks due to the Viet Cong's attack on the 5th ARVN Regiment and on 3d Battalion, 3d Marines.

Task Force Delta had begun the process of moving its headquarters to Que Son during the morning of 9 December. It had completed the effort by 1045, setting up shop in a building inside the village. Meanwhile, the task force's provisional artillery battalion established a perimeter 300 meters south of the village, setting up 105mm howitzers from Battery F, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines. That afternoon, General Henderson ordered his executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel William F. Doehler, to move the Task Force Delta command post to inside the artillery perimeter due to concerns about the command post's security. Doehler recalled a few weeks later, "Apparently the Commanding General of the Task Force felt that or was concerned about the position of the Command Post and the possibility of it being overrun by VC [Viet Cong] elements which may have been in the area."

Since Colonel Doehler had chosen the command post site himself, he was unsure why General Henderson was so concerned. "I considered the village because of the ARVN elements and the fact that it had not been hit in over nine months or a year and had never been actually attacked, relatively secure. And to my knowledge there were no intelligence estimates or information that would have indicated that the village was in danger." To be sure, Henderson's concerns were not wholly unfounded. The *70th Viet Cong Battalion's* surprise attack on the 11th ARVN Ranger Battalion demonstrated that the Viet Cong units were closer to Que Son than Task Force Delta had believed. The command post also received fire from what Doehler's staff surmised "may have been a 81[mm mortar]," though the executive officer believed there was just as much likelihood that the mortar fire was an accidental discharge from friendly forces.

Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck*

A Marine rifleman of Task Force Delta at the ready with the standard infantry arm of the period—the M14 selective fire semiautomatic rifle.

Task Force Delta began displacing its command post that evening at 1700. Fortunately, the headquarters had the staff and equipment to establish rear and forward command posts, ensuring continuity between the old position in Que Son and the new one to the south. However, since Doehler

Staff Sergeant Robert F. Moe

Navy Cross Citation

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Staff Sergeant Robert F. Moe (MCSN: 1096741), United States Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism as Platoon Commander, Third Platoon, Company L, Third Battalion, Third Marines, THIRD Marine Division (Reinforced), Fleet Marine Force, in the Republic of Vietnam on 9 December 1965. The company was engaged in an operation to rescue the remnants of an Army of the Republic of Vietnam regiment which was overrun by the Viet Cong in Quang Tin Province. As it came under heavy small arms, automatic weapons, and accurate mortar fire on three sides from a numerically superior Viet Cong force of battalion size, Sergeant Moe, without hesitation, assaulted the objective, which contained approximately 100 Viet Cong. With full knowledge of the hazards involved and with complete disregard for his own safety, he repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire while directing his platoon to a favorable position for the assault on the hill. Sergeant Moe secured the objective within thirty minutes of the battle, which lasted one hour and thirty-five minutes. In the face of continuing heavy enemy fire he led his platoon to a position where it could bring fire to bear on the enemy's flank. As a result of his professional abilities and stirring leadership, he penetrated and eliminated the enemy, who were in a position to attack the remaining forty or forty-five Vietnamese troops on Hill No. 43 approximately 300 meters north. By his daring actions and loyal devotion to duty in the face of personal risk, Sergeant Moe reflected great credit upon himself and the Marine Corps and upheld the finest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

Major Donald J. Reilly

Navy Cross Citation

The President of the United States of America takes pride in presenting the Navy Cross (Posthumously) to Major Donald Joseph Reilly (MCSN: 0-61230), United States Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism as a Helicopter Pilot in Marine Observation Squadron TWO (VMO-2), Marine Aircraft Group SIXTEEN, First Marine Aircraft Wing, in the Republic of Vietnam on 9 December 1965. With his squadron engaged in air support operations for Task Force Delta in Quang Tin Province, Major Reilly was designated as Tactical Aircraft Coordinator (Airborne). Reporting on station about 1800, he immediately answered an emergency request for support from a Marine company which was part of a mobile alert force that had been helicopter-lifted into a hostile area where it was heavily engaged by the Viet Cong using mortars, automatic weapons, and small arms. Although exposed to hostile rifle and machine-gun fire, he, with selfless determination and skill, fearlessly delivered devastating fire from low altitudes upon the Viet Cong who were encircling the company. Later, in response to a request for evacuation of eleven of the company wounded, he prepared to land. In darkness and under a 1200 foot overcast with three miles visibility he arranged for the company to guide him on the final approach with a flashlight. Directing his wingman to remain aloft and assist only if he were successful, he turned off aircraft lights and resolutely commenced his approach. Although encountering intense small-arms fire, he pressed on with determination and while slowing for landing, received a severe bullet wound. His copilot was unable to take over in time and the aircraft crashed on landing in the friendly zone. No further evacuations could be attempted due to enemy resistance until several hours later that night and by that time Major Reilly had succumbed to his grievous wound. His self-sacrificing action in the face of overwhelming odds sustained and enhanced the finest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life in the cause of freedom.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A187927

A 12th Marines' 105mm howitzer fires at Communist targets along the DMZ in 1966. Task Force Delta's provisional artillery battalion provided timely and effective fire support throughout Operation Harvest Moon.

had assumed Task Force Delta would be using buildings in Que Son to house the unit's command post, the task force lacked an adequate number of tents to set up a new post at the artillery perimeter. In the new location, the intelligence and operations staff shared cramped space in the communication officer's tent. "It was very crowded and very limited," Task Force Delta's operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, noted afterward. The task force communications officer, Major Fred E. Clark Jr., stated that the displacement "was accomplished amid considerable confusion."

Adding to this confusion was the marginal radio communications between Task Force Delta and the 3d MarDiv's headquarters. From the start of Operation Harvest Moon, Task Force Delta had to deal with problems with its radio sets. The headquarters had brought AN/PRC-47 battery-operated units to allow it to facilitate long-range communications over the mountainous terrain (something that FM equipment could not do). However, even with these units, Task Force Delta found it was difficult to conduct clear communications with either Da Nang or the logistic support area. Major Clark noted that communications were "marginal," and recalled that the connection with the division was garbled and drowned out by static. However, at 2200, Henderson ordered the command post's batteries shut down for security reasons, preventing any repair work from being done and leaving the radios inoperable.

While moving the command post to the artillery perimeter was a challenge, the Task Force Delta staff accomplished

it by that evening. Though it was crowded, and a steady rain exacerbated the lack of enough tents for the staff, the post functioned and the commanding general was able to maintain contact with his battalions to the south.

General Henderson Commits the Special Landing Force

As Henderson was moving his command post, the decision was made to commit the Special Landing Force. It is difficult to ascertain exactly who—General Walt or General Henderson—made the decision. Since Henderson's headquarters was in a constant state of flux, the SLF received all its notices regarding the landing from surrogates within Task Force Delta and III MAF. The plan was to use the SLF's battalion landing team as a blocking force. As of the night of 9 December, Task Force Delta's two battalions were rapidly converging on the 5th ARVN Regiment's initial objectives along Route 534. Landing south of the route, the SLF was intended to prevent Viet Cong fighters in that area from withdrawing south. It was a complex maneuver requiring good air-ground coordination.

However, the constant movement of the task force command post meant that the SLF received no clear directions during the critical hours before landing. BLT 2/1's staff did not receive detailed plans until 1330 on 9 December. At 1400, the SLF's operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas E. Gleason, left the *Valley Forge* for the Task Force Delta command post to report as the SLF liaison officer to Henderson's headquarters. That afternoon, Henderson told Lieutenant Colonel William R. Quinn, his air officer, that he would "probably" commit BLT 2/1 to the battle sometime the next day. However, it was Lieutenant Colonel Doehler and General Walt who briefed Gleason on the plan at around 1615.

Walt wanted two companies to land at first light at a site about 1.6 kilometers south of Route 534 between the positions of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, and 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Upon hearing this plan, Gleason reminded Walt that the SLF was reduced by two companies. The III MAF commander recognized this shortcoming, but nevertheless reiterated that he wanted all available elements of the battalion landing team committed to the engagement. At 1800, Gleason ordered one of his subordinates to return to the *Valley Forge* to inform Colonel Burnett of the imminent landing. As soon as he heard the plan, BLT 2/1's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin, was so surprised that Walt wanted to commit the reduced battalion that he ordered a flash message be sent to III MAF asking for detailed instructions and to confirm the commanding general's orders. However, radio problems disrupted all direct communications between *Valley Forge* and Da Nang. Hanifin would not receive an official answer from III MAF headquarters until the afternoon of the next day, at which point his battalion had already been committed to the battle.

Confusion remained aboard *Valley Forge* that evening. Colonel Hanifin knew he would be taking his battalion into a landing site somewhere south of Route 534 sometime after first light. However, neither he nor SLF commander Burnett had any information regarding the exact time, the exact coordinates for the landing zone, or the enemy situation. The battalion intelligence officer, Captain Ray E. Lavan Jr. recalled, "We still had no idea when, where, or how we would be committed."

As the SLF was trying to figure out the specific details of its mission, General Walt ordered III MAF's operations officer, Colonel Edwin H. Simmons, to draft a message for the Combined Task Force 76, informing it to prepare to land the SLF. The communiqué was vague, typical of the information being transferred between the SLF and III MAF that day, though it did indicate that the landing needed to take place at some time *before* 0800 the next morning. The exact time and place would be dictated by General Henderson. It is not known whether Simmons was aware Henderson was in the process of shutting down his command post as he drafted the message. The SLF would not receive this order until 0600 the next morning, when Colonel Burnett met with Walt and Simmons in person.

As the SLF struggled to get answers from III MAF, Task Force Delta's operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, was growing concerned about the cramped conditions at the task force command post outside of Que Son. At 0100, he told General Henderson that he believed the post should return to its original site inside the village:

> The absence of adequate blackout working space and crowded condition of the ground itself militated

Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck*

An elevator aboard USS *Valley Forge* (LPH 8) brings Marines of BLT 2/1 to the flight deck, where they will board UH-34s (background, left) and then be lifted into battle during Operation Harvest Moon. Note the haze and rain-soaked deck.

> against the [command post] remaining there. We knew that an infantry company was to be committed in the morning for the defense of the artillery position and I recommended that we move back to the Que Son village area itself, the next morning, lift in the 2d battery of 105[mm howitzer]'s and wrap the infantry company around the entire position.

A move back to Que Son, Sullivan further argued, would also strengthen Task Force Delta's command-and-control functions, as the village post was closer to the task force's maneuvering elements. Henderson and Sullivan discussed the matter for about an hour. At 0200, the Task Force Delta commander decided to move the command post yet again. However, this time it would be more than nine kilometers northeast to the logistic support area. Rather than bring his headquarters closer to his two maneuver battalions, he would be moving the post even farther away.

It is difficult to know exactly what General Henderson's reasons were for moving his command post a third time in less than 12 hours. Unlike most of his staff, he was neither deposed nor questioned by the board of investigation convened to examine the landing of BLT 2/1. At 0430, Sullivan informed Lieutenant Colonel Doehler of the general's decision. This sparked a heated discussion between Doehler and Henderson. Doehler noted that to his "recollection the staff was unanimously opposed to such a move and a strong recommendation was made to the Commanding General

Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck*

Marines of Task Force Delta board a UH-34 helicopter. The UH-34 was the workhorse of the Corps' rotary-wing force. It lifted in Marines and supplies and evacuated casualties from the battlefield.

that [Task Force Delta command post] remain at Que Son." Sullivan concurred, remembering that "to the best of my knowledge, each expressed as a group and individually the inappropriateness of returning to the [logistic support area]." After intense argument, Doehler took Henderson aside and spoke for half an hour. Although the exact content of the conversation is unknown, Henderson's decision held, and the staff immediately made preparations to move the Task Force Delta command post once more. The drawbacks of the displacement were many, but perhaps the most significant was that it would mean a loss of command-and-control functions just as the SLF was preparing to make its assault. As of 0530, BLT 2/1 still had no idea when the landing hour (or L-Hour) would be or the exact location of its landing zone. Task Force Delta had not even conducted aerial reconnaissance to locate a suitable place for the landing.

The morning of 10 December saw a flurry of activity as the SLF prepared to join the battle. At 0600, Colonel Burnett boarded a helicopter and left the *Valley Forge* to meet with General Henderson. Likely due to the communications problems, he assumed the Task Force Delta commander was at the logistic support area, not Que Son. There he found General Walt and Colonel Simmons instead. It was only then that Simmons learned that Burnett had not yet received the landing order he had drafted the previous evening. Unable to reach General Henderson by radio, Simmons, Burnett, and several SLF staff officers boarded a pair of helicopters and headed south to Que Son to find Henderson.

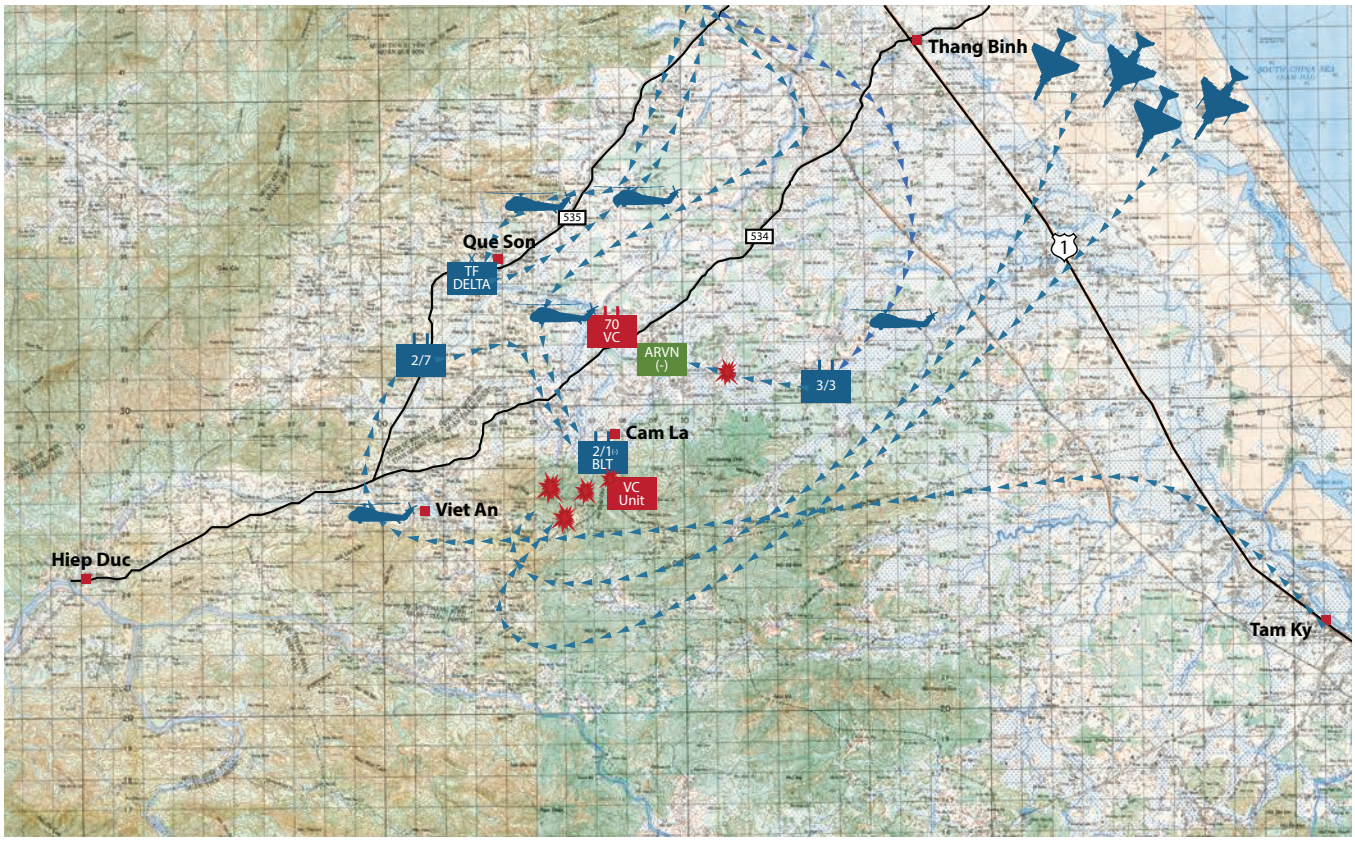
Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck*

Bell UH-1E Hueys, such as the one pictured here, served as observation aircraft, transports, and gunships during Operation Harvest Moon.

He was not there either. Ironically, Henderson actually was en route to the logistic support area. Simmons and Burnett then flew back to that site, where they finally found the Task Force Delta commander.

With the principal officers finally in one place, Simmons, Burnett, Henderson, and members of the Task Force Delta and SLF staffs departed the support area in two UH-1Es and headed south to scout prospective landing zones for BLT 2/1. There is some disagreement between the participants of this flight regarding how long it took and at what altitude. Burnett believed it lasted from 30 to 40 minutes and was at an altitude of between 200 and 900 feet. Simmons stated the flight was 20 minutes and was "as low as 500 ft," though he acknowledged he did not look at the altimeter. Meanwhile, the flight's lead pilot, Major James E. Gillis, testified that he flew at an altitude of between 1,000 and 2,000 feet, and stated that "BGen Henderson indicated that he did not want to get too low or to remain in the area for an excessive period of time." Gillis estimated they orbited the area for about 10 minutes, at some point between 0900 and 0930. As the lead pilot, Gillis was likely one of only four Marines (his copilot and the pilot and copilot of the second Huey being the others) who would have been monitoring the altimeter and fuel gauge of his aircraft constantly, giving greater credence to his account of the events.

The length and altitude of the flight is important in light of subsequent events. Considering the heavy cloud cover, it is difficult to imagine the staff officers aboard the Hueys gaining much solid intelligence on ground conditions at 2,000 or even 1,000 feet. As noted above, a Task Force Delta after action report stated that, even in marginal conditions, visibility was difficult above 1,200 feet. The flight focused on a region between Route 534 and two prominent hills to the south, designated Hills 403 and 407, respectively. The



Map adapted by History Division

The ambush of the 5th ARVN Regiment and the insertion of BLT 2/1, 9–10 December 1965.

scouting party settled on an island amidst a sea of rice paddies a little more than three kilometers south of Route 534, just north of Hill 407. The total area was about 200 x 200 meters. Simmons noted, "No unusual activity was observed. There were some figures, presumably farmers, working in the rice paddies. They were dressed in usual peasant costume, chiefly black pajamas and conical straw hats. To the best of my knowledge we did not draw any enemy fire." Burnett was less confident with the zone, however, recalling with frustration that "I had no information on the enemy situation nor of the specific mission of BLT 2/1 at this time."

Upon returning to the logistic support area, Henderson ordered Burnett to land BLT 2/1 at the zone north of Hill 407 at 1010. The battalion's mission "would be to seize the [landing zone], organize a defensive blocking position, and to be prepared to move in the direction of BLT 2/7 or BLT 3/3." When Henderson informed his air officer, Lieutenant Colonel Quinn, of the planned landing time, Quinn balked, given "that it would be very difficult to have one that early. It wouldn't give us sufficient time. I told him that we needed a minimum of two hours to get the airplanes on station." Henderson responded that the landing team needed to be brought in as soon as possible to relieve the ARVN units. He relented somewhat, however, and pushed the landing hour to 1030.

Quinn approached Major Robert D. Purcell, the operations officer of Marine Observation Squadron 6, who had taken a section of aircraft to the logistic support area from Da Nang that morning to serve as a tactical air control system. It was slightly after 1000, and Purcell had only been at the support area 10 minutes, when Quinn informed him that he would be serving as the tactical air coordinator (airborne) for the landing of BLT 2/1. Purcell was taken aback by the timing:

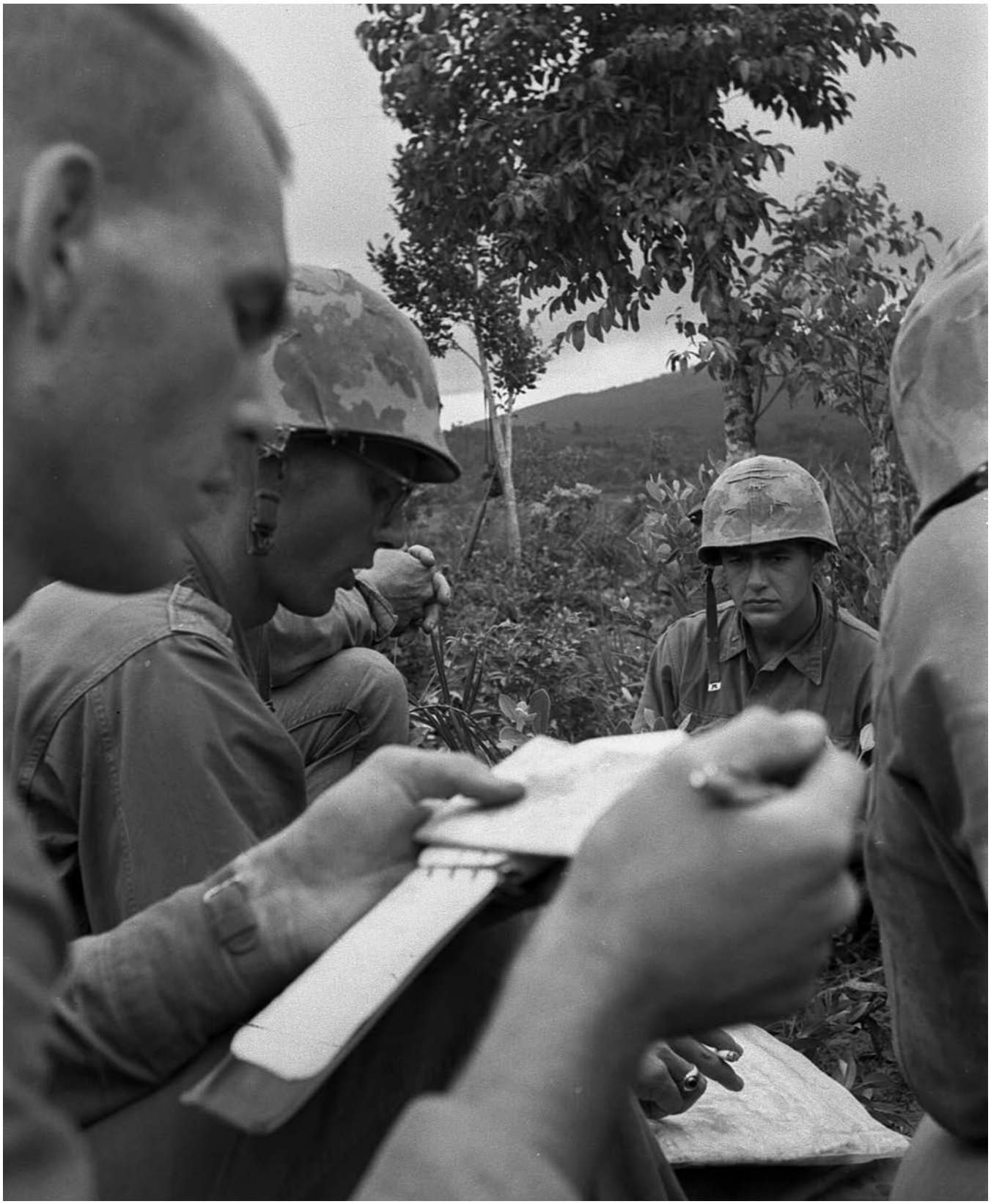


Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck*

Platoon leaders of Company G, BLT 2/1, are briefed before moving out to seize a hill during Operation Harvest Moon.

> I recalled remarking to the Colonel, "it is slightly after ten o'clock now, how much prep is to be given to this thing?" [*sic*] He said about twenty minutes. I said that we can't possibly get down there to the Landing Zone which I had not seen, recon the thing, check it out, and bring aircraft in at 1030.

Tasked with organizing the landing of two companies in less than 30 minutes, Purcell worked to gather as much information as he could.

Unfortunately, Quinn was unable to provide many crucial details. How many aircraft did they have for landing zone prep? What were their call signs? How many troops would be coming to land? What was the call sign of the lead helicopter? How many helicopters would actually be landing? Quinn was unable to supply any of these answers, and told Purcell to acquire the information from the direct air support center (DASC) once he was airborne. All Purcell knew was the landing zone coordinates and that the landing would take place at 1030. And it was already 1005.

Major Purcell's flight of UH-1Es took off and immediately contacted the airborne DASC. Despite Quinn's assurance, it was unable to provide him with any more information. As Purcell left, the operations officer for the 1st MAW, Colonel Michael R. Yunck, arrived at the logistic support area, where he informed Quinn that adequate strike aircraft were not on station to prepare the landing zone. Quinn told Yunck that the landing was going to take place regardless, and the wing operations officer took to the air with the intent of assisting Major Purcell as the airborne tactical air coordinator.

Meanwhile, the Task Force Delta command post was in the process of being taken down and moved to the logistic support area. Despite ordering an L-Hour of 1030, General Henderson's headquarters lacked "control and communications during its displacement to the [logistic support area] between 0830 and 1130, 10 December 1965." Lieutenant Colonel Doehler spent the morning monitoring the movement as helicopters ferried equipment and personnel from Que Son to the north. At 0920, Doehler took a flight to the support area where he was approached by General Walt, who immediately asked what was going on. Although about two-thirds of the command post had been set up at the new location, Walt ordered Doehler to move the post back to Que Son. It would be the fourth time the post moved in a day and was the first indication that the III MAF commander was beginning to lose faith in his subordinate's ability to lead Task Force Delta.

At 0930, Colonel Burnett arrived aboard *Valley Forge* and gave Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin the order to land his battalion at the coordinates near Hill 407. As noted, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines' Companies E and H were still out of range aboard USS *Montrose*. However, the landing team also would go into battle without most of its attached units: its tanks, artillery, and Ontos. The SLF helicopter commander, Lieutenant Colonel Porter, immediately asked for information on escort aircraft and approach lanes. Neither Hanifin nor Burnett knew any details. At 1012, the first wave of BLT 2/1 lifted off from *Valley Forge*. Twenty-two UH-34Ds carried two platoons and the command element from Company F, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, escorted by UH-1Es.

Just as the assault force lifted off, Colonel Yunck contacted the DASC and requested preparatory airstrikes to soften up the landing zone. When the DASC sent in the request, the response came back that it would be at least an hour before the aircraft could arrive on station, as they still had to have their ordnance loaded. With the lead elements of BLT 2/1 already inbound, Colonel Quinn decided he needed to delay the landing. He called the DASC and ordered them to direct the SLF's UH-34Ds and UH-1Es to reroute their approach and head to the logistic support area. There they could wait until the adequate landing zone preparatory strikes could take place. The DASC quickly responded, and by 1025, the helicopters had landed at the logistic support area. They waited aboard their helicopters for more than 30 minutes.

Colonel Yunck had effectively taken control of the landing operation. He did not really have much of a choice. Regardless of Henderson's initial orders, a helicopter assault could not be successfully carried out by 1030. The Task Force Delta command post was in transit yet again, and Yunck could not reach either Henderson or Doehler. BLT 2/1's Company F, thus, had to wait as F-4B Phantoms from MAG-11 and Douglas A-4 Skyhawks from MAG-12 arrived on station at around 1100 and began strafing runs across the prospective landing zone.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A801157

A Douglas A-4 Skyhawk from Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 225 taxies on the runway during Operation Piranha in September 1965. Skyhawks provided close air support to Marines and South Vietnamese soldiers throughout Operation Harvest Moon.

Colonel Yunck surveyed the prospective landing zone as the airstrikes began. He quickly spotted a small hamlet near the zone, and both he and his fellow pilots could see women and children throughout the town's streets and in the adjoining fields. Apparently, it had been missed during that morning's reconnaissance flights. Fearing civilians would be killed in the bombing and assault, Yunck ordered the strikes shifted to the south and west of the zone. The colonel now faced another crucial decision. The presence of a large civilian population alongside the site of a prospective helicopter assault carried with it a range of risks. The likelihood of civilian casualties was great. Where there were civilians, there also were potentially Viet Cong infiltrators who could easily strike the landing Marines with automatic weapons and mortars. In light of both these dangers, Yunck made the unilateral decision to designate an area of muddy rice paddies and dikes 600 meters west of the original zone as the new landing area.

There was some disagreement between Yunck and his subordinates about why the zone needed to be moved. When asked why Yunck changed the landing zone, his pilot, Major Edward L. Kuykendall, reported "there wasn't any indication of people being close, it was a very large rice paddy here. The main reason, generally speaking was to get away from this village and the tree tops." Kuykendall's observation underlined that, between Hill 407, the rice paddies, and villages, there were few optimal areas around Hill 407 to carry out

a helicopter assault of any significant size. To land in such a small area, the UH-34s were required to bunch up tight in an area measuring 150 x 50 meters. Strictly speaking, Colonel Yunck's decisions should have been referred back to the Task Force Delta commander. However, the board of inquiry investigating the landing recognized that "time was short and communications would not have permitted it anyhow." Satisfied that the area was quiet, Yunck ordered the strike aircraft to break off their attacks, marked the new alternate zone with yellow smoke, and gave the all clear for the landing.

The first wave of BLT 2/1 left the logistic support area a little after 1100 and proceeded to the landing zone. As the helicopters approached the new target, the Marines on board immediately realized they were in for a fight. "We were receiving fire on our approach and one airplane was hit as we approached and everybody pushed in there pretty fast. We took some VC [Viet Cong] under fire," Colonel Porter reported. He also remembered seeing rifle-bearing Viet Cong running parallel to the helicopters as they descended. Just as the assault began, Colonel Yunck was struck in the leg by Communist fire, and Major Purcell took over as the tactical air officer. Yunck's wound was serious, and ultimately he would have to have his leg amputated five inches below the knee. The most senior Marine on the battlefield had been knocked out of the fight.

The intensity of the Viet Cong response to the landing was evidence that the preparatory bombardment had failed to effectively neutralize enemy activity in the zone. Unlike the U.S. Army, which relied on heavily armed helicopter gunships to escort utility and transport helicopters, the Marine Corps stipulated that fixed-wing aircraft were better suited for this purpose. Doctrinally, a helicopter landing zone was treated much as a landing beach: a large area to be saturated with preparatory bombardment from bombs, rockets, and missiles launched from fixed-winged airframes. Consequently, planners felt that dedicated helicopter gunships were redundant. Marines with experience in Vietnam had been questioning Headquarters Marine Corps' reluctance to develop gunships since the early days of the Service's involvement in Southeast Asia. The jungle terrain, the Viet Cong's generally elusive character, and the large number of villages dotting the countryside led many Marines in Vietnam to suggest using helicopters for both landing zone preparation and close air support. Since helicopters could move slower and hover, their pilots could deliver fires with greater precision and gain a better sense of where civilians and enemy forces were located on the battlefield. The ambush of BLT 2/1's Company F demonstrated that the Viet Cong were fully capable of evading the devastating bombardment delivered by the Marine Corps' F-4Bs and A-4s.

Company F's Marines disembarked under heavy fire. The battalion's artillery liaison officer, Captain Robert C. Gregor, described the landing: "As we came in for the landing, both gunners in my plane opened fire and appeared to be firing in every direction. As soon as the helicopter touched down, I jumped out and ran across one rice paddy and hit the ground, taking cover in the next." The fire emanated from between 300 and 500 meters to the south and east at the tree line that circled the base of Hill 407. Within a matter of minutes, both platoon commanders and Company F's commanding officer, Captain James E. Page, were wounded in action. Page's wounds were so severe that he was pronounced dead on the field of battle (though he would ultimately survive his injuries). Captain Ray E. Lavan Jr., the battalion's intelligence officer, observed, "We immediately took cover behind rice paddy dikes. At this time we noticed that there were about 100 Marines scattered over the rice paddy and pinned down as we were, at this time. We guessed that these Marines were the first wave of 'F' Company."

Ten minutes after successfully pinning Company F with rifle fire, the Viet Cong began laying down mortar rounds. Within half an hour, the two platoons of Company F suffered approximately 35 casualties: 8–9 killed in action and 24–25 wounded in action. Colonel Hanifin recounted that "After that they were pretty well pinned down and they kept down. They were unable to advance or withdraw, either way, they were right in the low ground in the paddies and they couldn't get over the dykes on the other sides." Casualties and heavy enemy fire precluded any type of advance or withdrawal. Captain Lavan, who had assumed command of the company, decided to hold out where they were and await orders from the battalion commander. He redeployed his scattered platoons to strengthen their defensive positions and ensured the company's one remaining machine gun was put into action. The company also began firing its 3.5-inch rockets at Viet Cong machine gun positions. Fortunately, the company's

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A193985

Members of Company H, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, watch an airstrike against a Viet Cong position as they prepare to move out.

forward air controller also was able to maintain contact with the tactical air coordinator, ensuring that 1st MAW's A-4s and F-4s could provide air support.

Waiting aboard the *Valley Forge*, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin had no idea what was happening to Company F. Not knowing that the assault force had been rerouted to the logistic support area, he assumed the landing had taken place on schedule at 1030. It was now well past 1100, and he was thus left to wonder why it was taking the helicopters so long to get back. He would be unable to send in the second wave until they did. As the aircraft finally began to return to the *Valley Forge*, Hanifin listened to the radio chatter between the helicopter pilots. It was only then that he learned Company F was "being shot up" and receiving mortar fire. Hanifin realized that, if he did not send in his follow-on forces immediately, his battalion would be "chewed up" wave by wave. He assembled his command group and two more platoons and departed the *Valley Forge* at 1145.

But where would the second wave land? Any additional landings in the vicinity of Company F would have been "disastrous" and meant "almost certain suicide" for the follow-on force. Continuing to perform the duties of the airborne tactical air coordinator, Major Purcell chose to move the new landing zone to where he had observed elements of 2d Battalion, 7th Marines.* Throughout the morning, that battalion continued its advance east. By about 1100, it had swept most of the area north of BLT 2/1's position. Finding the best high ground outside Viet Cong mortar range, Purcell marked the area with smoke and informed the incoming UH-34Ds of the new site.

Upon spotting the next assault force, the Viet Cong opened fire. Hanifin remembered: "On the way in I was looking out the window of the helicopter, I'd put one of the helmets on, we were getting mortar fire, and I saw the landing zone, went on by the landing zone, did a 180 and started heading east again, and then dropped in." The entire wave did not land. "I couldn't figure out where the other ones went,"

*Purcell recounted, "I believed, and still believe, that any further landings in the LZ [landing zone] chosen would have been disastrous."

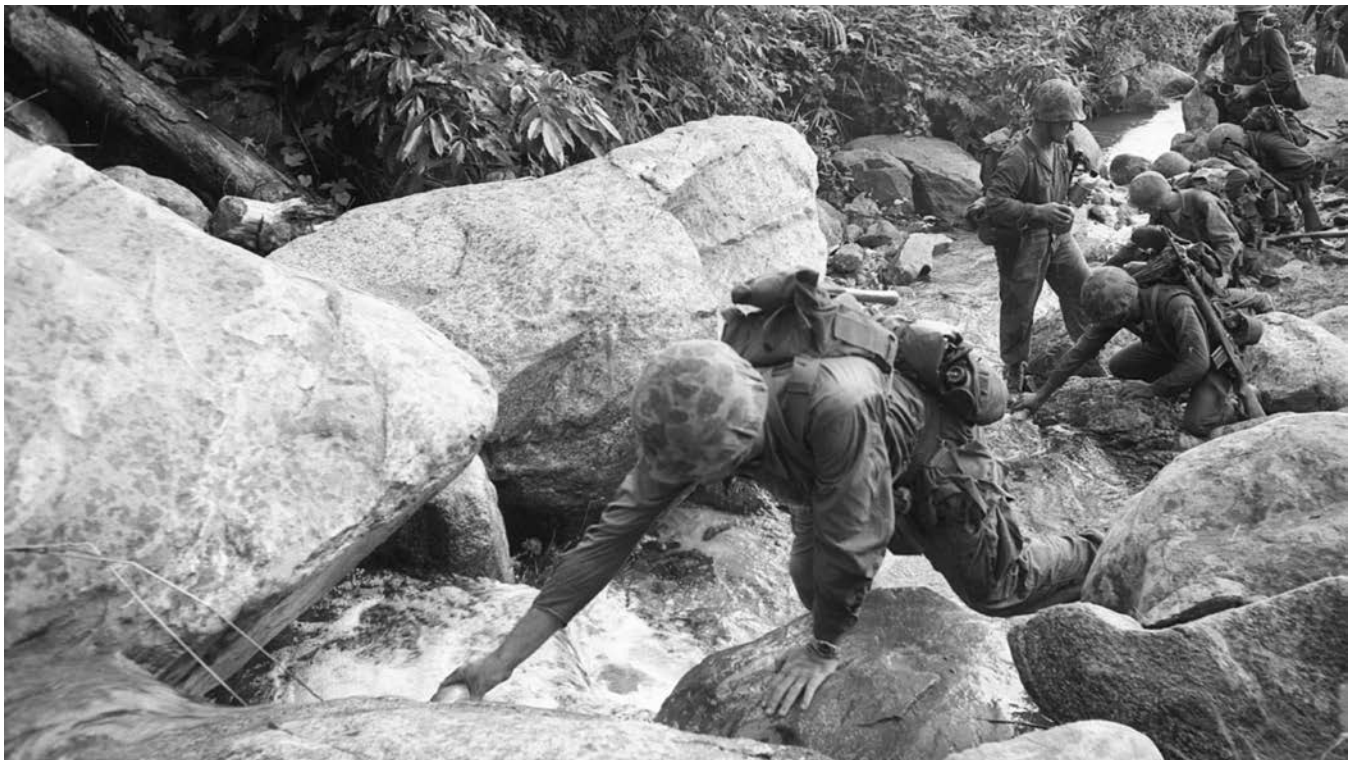


Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck*

The Operation Harvest Moon battlespace was riddled with obstacles and difficult paths, including muddy trails, paddy dikes, and boulders.

Hanifin reported. As he disembarked, he spotted Marines, but did not recognize any of them. He had landed in the middle of Company E, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, about 2,500 meters from his own Company F. Hanifin immediately tried to raise the beleaguered company on the wireless, only to find his transmissions were being jammed inadvertently by Marine aircraft radio transmissions. Despite the fact that the Harvest Moon operation order had included a detailed communications annex to specify which frequencies would be assigned to each unit, the aviation assets in the area used frequencies not designated in the order. The helicopters orbiting the battlefield also were broadcasting with such power that they were causing interference in communications on the ground. The battalion radio officer, Captain Harold D. Read, frantically ran the dial through various FM frequencies to try and find a clear channel with which Hanifin could communicate.

Luckily, Company F's forward air controller was uninjured and able to reach Hanifin, as he was keyed into the same frequency as the aircraft. Company F's gunnery sergeant, Joseph Thurmond, was then able to provide Hanifin with the first clear briefing on the status of the company since it had departed two hours earlier:

> They were pinned down in a rice paddy about 1,200 meters west and south of their designated helicopter landing zone. They had approximately eleven (11) KIA's [killed in action] and between 30–40 WIA's [wounded in action]. The time was about 1230, on 10 December 1965. The Company Commander had also been seriously wounded.

Upon hearing the report, Hanifin sent a message to Task Force Delta headquarters informing them that he would begin assembling the disparate elements of the second wave and then move to relieve Company F.

The Relief of General Henderson and Operations to Rescue Company F

It is not clear if Hanifin was aware that when he sent his intentions to Task Force Delta's command post, he was not

actually sending them to General Henderson. At about the same time that the first wave of BLT 2/1 was leaving the logistic support area for the landing zone at Hill 407 (around 1100), Henderson was engaged in a private discussion with General Walt at Que Son. The conversation lasted about 30 minutes. After the conversation, Walt approached Lieutenant Colonel Doehler, informed him that Henderson was no longer in command of Task Force Delta, and ordered Doehler to take over. Doehler's first task was "to untangle the situation and get the battalions as close together as possible in a mutually supporting position by dark and prepare to continue the attack on the following day." Having spent the entire morning transferring the task force command post between three different locations, Doehler had little sense of what the situation was on the actual battlefield. He immediately boarded a helicopter and flew south to find Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin.

General Henderson's failure to carry out effective command and control of Task Force Delta led to considerable confusion on the Harvest Moon battlefield. This confusion partially drew Company F, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, into an ambush at Hill 407 by Viet Cong units. Nevertheless, the official records and histories do not include much specific information regarding Walt's decision to relieve General Henderson. The Marine Corps History Division's official history states simply, "As darkness fell on the battlefield that day, General Walt relieved General Henderson." Aside from giving the incorrect time of day when the relief occurred, the historical record provides the barest narrative of the events, giving little detail regarding the breakdown of communications that ultimately led to the landing of Company F, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, into the midst of a Viet Cong force. Even the statements and testimony taken by the board of inquiry assembled by General Walt to investigate the landing skirted the issue. In a memorandum sent to General Greene, General Walt informed the Commandant of the Marine Corps that

> Since it is neither desired nor intended that this report be used as a basis for official criticism of any individual as such, and the procedure adopted (JAG [Judge Advocate General] Manual technique) was merely a means to attain the ultimate objective of obtaining information on which to base improvement, designation of parties at this time is neither appropriate or desirable, even though candid comment on individual action is necessary to lay bare the mistakes committed.

Henderson's decision to move the Task Force Delta command post three times contributed to a general collapse of command and communications. His operations officer, Colonel Sullivan, noted later that "What these movements did to staff cohesion, and the resultant all but total lack of support for and control of three Marine battalions, one of which being in a desparate [*sic*] fight ([BLT] 2/1), is best left to the imagination." As discussed above, it is not entirely clear why Henderson ordered the command post moved. His staff members unanimously opposed the decision, but the commanding general was nevertheless convinced that Que Son was not a secure position, despite a lack of evidence to support that conviction.

A reporter asked General Walt about the relief two days later in a press conference. Walt explained that Henderson "was sick when this operation started. I finally forced him to retire because of his personal health." Perhaps anticipating a follow-up inquiring why he placed the seemingly sick Henderson in command in the first place, Walt went on to point out that "I have two assistant division commanders, General Henderson and General [Jonas M.] Platt, and when he took ill, I put Platt in his place. Henderson had it first because he was senior of the two." In light of Walt's claim, it is notable that at no time during the board's proceedings was Henderson's health mentioned or given as a reason to explain his decision making as the commander of Task Force Delta.

That mistakes were made is clear from the board of inquiry's records, though all of them cannot be laid at General Henderson's feet. The continuous transfer of the command post largely exacerbated problems endemic to Harvest Moon's planning and execution. It was an operational plan that had friction embedded in its DNA. The decision to commit BLT 2/1 to the battle seemed to be made with little thought or consideration to the complexities of conducting helicopter assault operations. It is important to note here that the order to land the team came from both Walt and Henderson. Tasked with serving as the airborne tactical air coordinator, Major Purcell was unable to acquire

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A186243

LtCol Joshua W. Dorsey III (left), commander of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, confers with Task Force Delta commander BGen Jonas M. Platt (right) just before the battalion moves into the Phouc Ha Valley.

basic information about the mission, including the number of inbound helicopters, the number of Marines, and the relevant call signs and radio frequencies. Notably, Henderson made the decision to land the battalion landing team without even considering how much time was needed to prepare the landing zone with air strikes. There was even a lack of familiarity with these missions as demonstrated by staff officers of the Special Landing Force itself. When asked how much space was needed to land 20 helicopters, the SLF's operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Gleason, confessed that he did not know.

Walt also potentially exacerbated the command problems by relieving Henderson when he did. The need to replace the Task Force Delta commander was likely self-evident to Walt and to the task force staff, who had been unanimous in opposing the decision to move the command post. Walt personally countermanded the final movement of the post to the logistic support area. By the morning of 10 December, it is likely that Henderson had lost the confidence of both his commander and his subordinate staff. It is unclear whether he needed to be relieved at the very moment BLT 2/1 was landing its lead elements and engaging the enemy, however. The board of inquiry observed that "the replacement of the Commanding General, Task Force Delta and the wounding of the [tactical air coordinator (airborne)] who was the Wing G-3 occurred almost simultaneously with the landing of Company 'F' and each undoubtedly had an affect on events during the next few hours." The board did not go any further than this in its analysis of the consequences of Henderson's relief.

The lack of coordination between air and ground elements was another problem that could not be laid entirely at General Henderson's feet. From the moment the 5th ARVN Regiment was ambushed by Viet Cong forces, there was little harmony between the Marine and Air Force air officers regarding the direction of close air support. In one particularly self-aggrandizing assessment, an Air Force report declared: "U.S. Air Force forward air controllers, who were denied access to planning for the operation, saved the day when they took over air strikes and led retreating ARVN units to safety on the 8th and 9th of December." Nevertheless, the report did highlight issues recorded by Marine sources, notably the failure of the aviation elements to coordinate radio frequencies with ground forces, blocking the efforts of the battalion landing team's commander to communicate with his companies and with his headquarters.

When General Walt relieved General Henderson of command, all three of Task Force Delta's battalions were engaged with Viet Cong forces. One of those units, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, was scattered and one of its companies was pinned down at the base of Hill 407. The men from 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, had been advancing west all morning. At 0930, the battalion reached Hill 43. There, they encountered about 40 ARVN soldiers, survivors of the previous days' battles against the Viet Cong. As the Marines searched the area for any dead and wounded still on the hill, they found the body of the 5th ARVN Regiment's commander. As helicopters lifted the bodies of the dead and wounded from Hill 43, the battalion continued its march west toward Hill 63 that, incidentally, was one of the 5th ARVN Regiment's original objectives before it was attacked two days earlier.

Colonel Doehler decided to consolidate the three battalions around Hill 63. He ordered 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, to send its Companies E and G southeast to reinforce BLT 2/1's scattered companies around Hill 407. The situation at the hill showed no sign of improvement for the besieged Company F. At 1300, the company's second-in-command,

Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck*

A Task Force Delta Marine, looking out across one of the numerous valleys that dotted the Harvest Moon area of operations, watches smoke rise following an airstrike against Viet Cong positions.

First Lieutenant Barry N. Beck, who had landed with the second wave, was able to contact his unit. "The radio operator informed me that the company commander had been wounded, along with the first and second platoon commanders. He stated that the first platoon had absorbed 'heavy casualties' but could not give an accurate count. I received the picture from the radio operator that the company was stretched out in the paddies in small groups and that things were badly disorganized." Hanifin's Marines came under "extremely heavy fire" from the base of Hill 407 as they advanced toward the high ground.

At 1415, Brigadier General Platt, the 3d MarDiv's second assistant division commander, arrived to assume command of Task Force Delta from Lieutenant Colonel Doehler. Like Henderson, Platt was a seasoned combat veteran. Serving with distinction during such battles as Peleliu and Okinawa, he was a recipient of the Navy Commendation Medal with combat "V," the Bronze Star with combat "V," and the Purple Heart. He also earned a Legion of Merit with combat "V" during the Korean War, where he led the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. Before arriving in Vietnam in November 1965, he had been the commanding officer of The Basic School at Quantico, Virginia.

Platt continued Doehler's efforts to relieve the pressure on Company F. He attached Company E, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, to BLT 2/1, giving Colonel Hanifin two companies with which to recover Company F. Under ample air cover, the battalion landing team's Companies G and E, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, proceeded south toward Cam La, with Company G on the left and Company E on the right. Their

Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck*

Task Force Delta Marines ascend a terraced rice paddy during Operation Harvest Moon.

goal was to wedge between the Viet Cong forces at Hill 407 and Company F.

Unfortunately, the advance of the two companies was badly coordinated. In the face of heavy enemy fire, Company G fell back, and a fissure formed between the two rifle companies. The Viet Cong forces immediately exploited the breach and assaulted Company E with withering enfilade fire. In the words of one 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, veteran, "Company E was shredded and mercilessly battered. Wounded and dying Marines were scattered over a wide area, and further movement became virtually impossible as more and more wounded men were immobilized and needed protection." In spite of the heavy casualties, Company E continued to inch forward, carrying their casualties with them. They eventually closed with the Viet Cong forces and became locked in a close-quarters, hand-to-hand struggle. The fight did have the unintended effect of drawing the Viet Cong away from Company F, and Hanifin was able to extricate the frayed company and its casualties. By 1730, the three companies linked up and prepared defensive positions for the night. At 1800, helicopters arrived to begin medical evacuations of the wounded Marines.

Unfortunately, small-arms fire from Hill 407 remained a threat, and the Marines had to wait for nightfall before moving most of the wounded to the battalion's command post. BLT 2/1's Companies G and F and 2d Battalion, 7th Marines' Companies E and G, which also were placed under Hanifin's command, waited tensely through the night as enemy 12.7mm automatic weapons fire and a driving rain prevented the evacuation of the wounded. The remainder

of the battalion's casualties would not be helilifted until the early morning hours, beginning at around 0400. For the battalion landing team, the cost of relieving Company F had been substantial. In total, Company F had suffered 10 killed in action and 22 wounded in action. Company E, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, suffered 8 killed in action, and 31 wounded in action. Accentuating the sacrifice by those Marines was the relatively low casualties suffered by the defending Viet Cong.

For Marines, 10 December proved to be the costliest day during Harvest Moon. It also saw the collapse of cooperation between U.S. Marines and ARVN forces. By midday, as BLT 2/1 was making its landing, the last of the ARVN survivors were evacuated. Bitter at what he perceived to be the Marines' slow response to relieve his unit, I Corps commander General Thi withdrew his remaining units from the combined operation. The South Vietnamese forces would subsequently operate independently from Task Force Delta. The ARVN commanders declared that they would rely on the U.S. and South Vietnamese Air Forces alone for close air support and subsequently divided the area of operations into two areas of responsibility. Henceforth, the Marines would be responsible for the area south of Que Son, while the ARVN forces would move east and north of the outpost. The original operational scheme, by which the South Vietnamese forces would work in coordination with the Americans to trap the Viet Cong, was abandoned. Harvest Moon became a basic search-and-destroy effort with Marines and ARVN soldiers operating independently of one another.

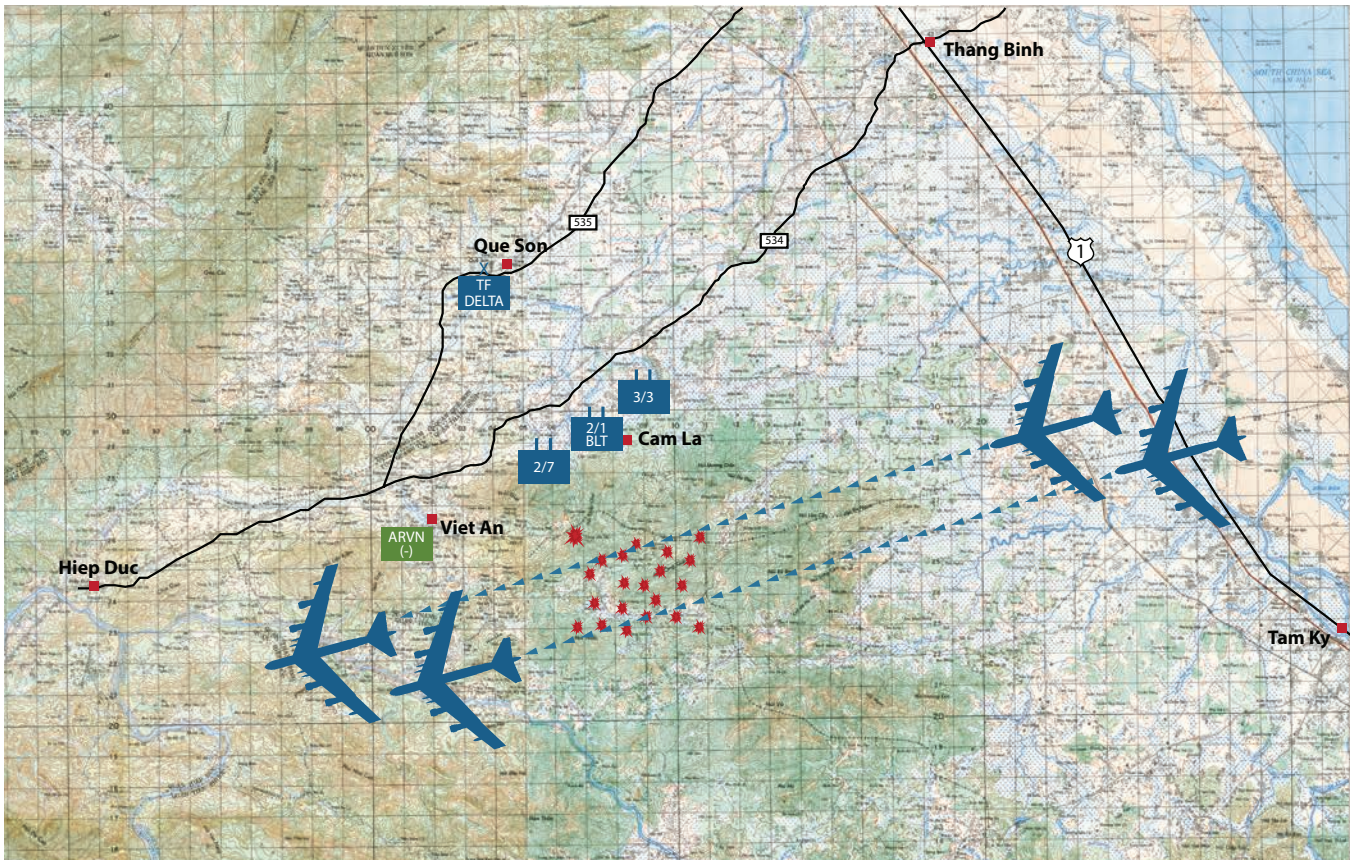
As day broke on 11 December, Brigadier General Platt boarded a Huey helicopter and took to the air to ascertain the situation around Hill 407. He found no indication of any Viet Cong activity in the area, and concluded that the outpost had been abandoned. At 0800, he met with Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin and ordered him to take his battalion landing team toward the high ground northeast of Hill 407 and prepare to attack southwest along the hill's eastern slope. The battalion moved out at 1030. Two hours later, it was joined by its remaining two companies, which would be arriving off the coast aboard USS *Montrose* that evening.

As BLT 2/1 moved south, Colonel Utter's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, ascended Hill 407 and seized and secured the summit at 1600, discovering that the Viet Cong had indeed withdrawn. As 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, patrolled east and west of Hill 63, it encountered little Viet Cong activity, but did uncover an abandoned network of caves and tunnels west of the hill. With the region around Que Son and the highways leading to it secured by three Marine battalions, Platt deduced that the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* had withdrawn into the Phuoc Ha Valley to the south.

Operation Harvest Moon Moves South

The Phuoc Ha Valley was a forbidding complex of hills that had long been a center of Viet Cong operations. With rougher terrain than the flatter Que Son Valley to the north, any operations Platt hoped to conduct looking for the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* would necessitate heavy use of helicopters to transport Marines and supplies. The problems that had occurred with the landing of BLT 2/1 could very well have been on General Platt's mind when Brigadier General William E. DePuy, USA, visited the Task Force Delta headquarters and suggested Platt utilize Air Force Boeing B-52F Stratofortresses to soften up the valley. Serving as tactical support aircraft under the codename Arc Light, each B-52 was capable of carrying an immense payload of 60,000 pounds of bombs. An Arc Light strike through the valley would have a devastating effect and potentially destroy Viet Cong positions in preparation for the Marine assault south.

Platt agreed, and on the morning of 12 December, Stratofortresses struck the Phuoc Ha Valley. The B-52 strikes were a physically and psychologically shattering experience for those Viet Cong fighters who survived them. Flying at 50,000 feet, the massive bombers could neither be heard nor seen from the ground. Save for surface-to-air missiles, they also were out of range from any kind of ordnance fired from the ground. Thus, the first physical sign of a B-52's arrival was often the explosions of the plane's 500-pound bombs. A Viet Cong veteran, Truong Nhu Tang, recalled that "The first few times I experienced a B-52 attack it seemed, as I strained to press myself into the bunker floor, that I had been caught in the Apocalypse." He noted that from "a kilometer away, the sonic roar of the B-52 explosions tore eardrums, leaving many of the jungle dwellers permanently deaf. From a kilometer, the shock waves knocked their victims senseless. Any hit within a half kilometer would collapse the walls of an unreinforced bunker, burying alive the people cowering



Map adapted by History Division

B-52 Arc Light strikes against the Phouc Ha Valley, 12–13 December 1965.

inside." The strike would transform the Vietnamese countryside into a cratered wasteland. "It was as if an enormous scythe had swept through the jungle, felling the giant teak and go trees like grass in its way, shredding them into billions of scattered splinters."

The strikes could be just as unnerving to the Americans. Sergeant Rick A. Lee, a fireteam leader with Company G, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, remembered that "it was still raining, you couldn't see more than, at times, you couldn't see more than four–five hundred yards in front of you, you couldn't see the B-52s, you couldn't hear them. But we, sometimes, when we were sitting on a hill, we could see the bombs bursting, not more than a quarter mile away from us." According to one account, the commander of Company F, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, Captain James N. Nolan, was unaware of what the code name Arc Light even stood for. He learned soon enough when he was shaken awake by a series of violent explosions during a raid. The concussive effect of the explosions of hundreds of 500-pound bombs was amplified further by the thick, low cloud cover.

The B-52s conducted two days of strikes. With the bombardment completed, General Platt set about deploying Task Force Delta into the valley. He divided his force in two. First, he sent the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, southeast to the Khang River, deep into the valley. The battalion would then advance east, back to Tam Ky. The 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, and BLT 2/1 would advance along the northern part of the valley, east and northwest. The three battalions' mission was to seek out Viet Cong forces and hopefully compel those forces to expose themselves to attack.

It would be a difficult march for all the Marines involved. The grim weather conditions showed no signs of abating. A stubborn mist was frequently punctuated with heavy and persistent rainfall. Everything was wet. Sergeant Lee recalled

Official U.S. Air Force photo 94836

An Air Force Boeing B-52 Stratofortress takes off from its base in Guam for an air strike against Viet Cong forces in August 1965. Originally designed as a nuclear bomber, the B-52's range, high service ceiling, and ability to carry massive payloads made it a devastatingly powerful conventional bomber.

Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck*

This image illustrates the difficult terrain of the Que Son Valley complex. Two Marines move through a village, waist deep in a flooded rice paddy.

that "Sometimes at night, we slept in six inches of water." The rough terrain meant that most of the advance east would have to be carried out on foot along narrow, muddy trails, damp paddies, and treacherous boulders. The rice paddies and rain-saturated terrain made immersion foot, also known as trench foot, a grim and persistent threat to the combat effectiveness of the Marine units. All three battalions participating in Operation Harvest Moon had been in South Vietnam for at least six months and many of their Marines were walking in well worn, sodden field boots that rotted quickly, chafed the feet when wet, and needed to be replaced fairly often. Task Force Delta supplied its Marines with thousands of pairs of socks to try and combat the immersion foot problem. Wherever possible, the Marines also built fires to dry their sopping feet. Staff Sergeant Moe of Company L, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, remembered that "We had to, every chance we got, we had to more or less stay on the trooper and make him get his boots off and get his feet out in the air for as little a time, or as much time, as he could."

Nevertheless, lacking the protection of adequate footwear meant that the feet of many Marines became soaked, dirty, and susceptible to infection. An ample supply of socks was often not enough. As Moe noted, "you put them on your feet dry, or partially dry, and five minutes later they're just as wet as the pair you took off." Sergeant Lee, a fireteam leader with Company G, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, also commented on the perennial challenge of staying dry, as his unit "couldn't keep our socks dry, couldn't keep our gear dry, it was hard to keep our [ammunition] magazines clean, hard to keep your rifle clean, we used many cans of oil. I wished I'd put more socks in my pack."

Symptoms of the condition included numbness, swelling, and the cracking of skin around the toes and on the soles. "Once you get immersion foot," noted Sergeant Lee, "your feet swell up, they turn bloody and blistery, just like you burned it with a cigarette lighter." At its worst, the malady led to gangrene and necrosis and the effective disintegration of the foot. In the most severe case, a Marine could not walk, necessitating an airlift for immediate medical attention.

On 13 December (the second day of B-52 strikes), General Platt replaced the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines' battered Company E with Company H from 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. Its ranks somewhat replenished, Colonel Utter's battalion then moved west along a dirt road to secure the

Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck*

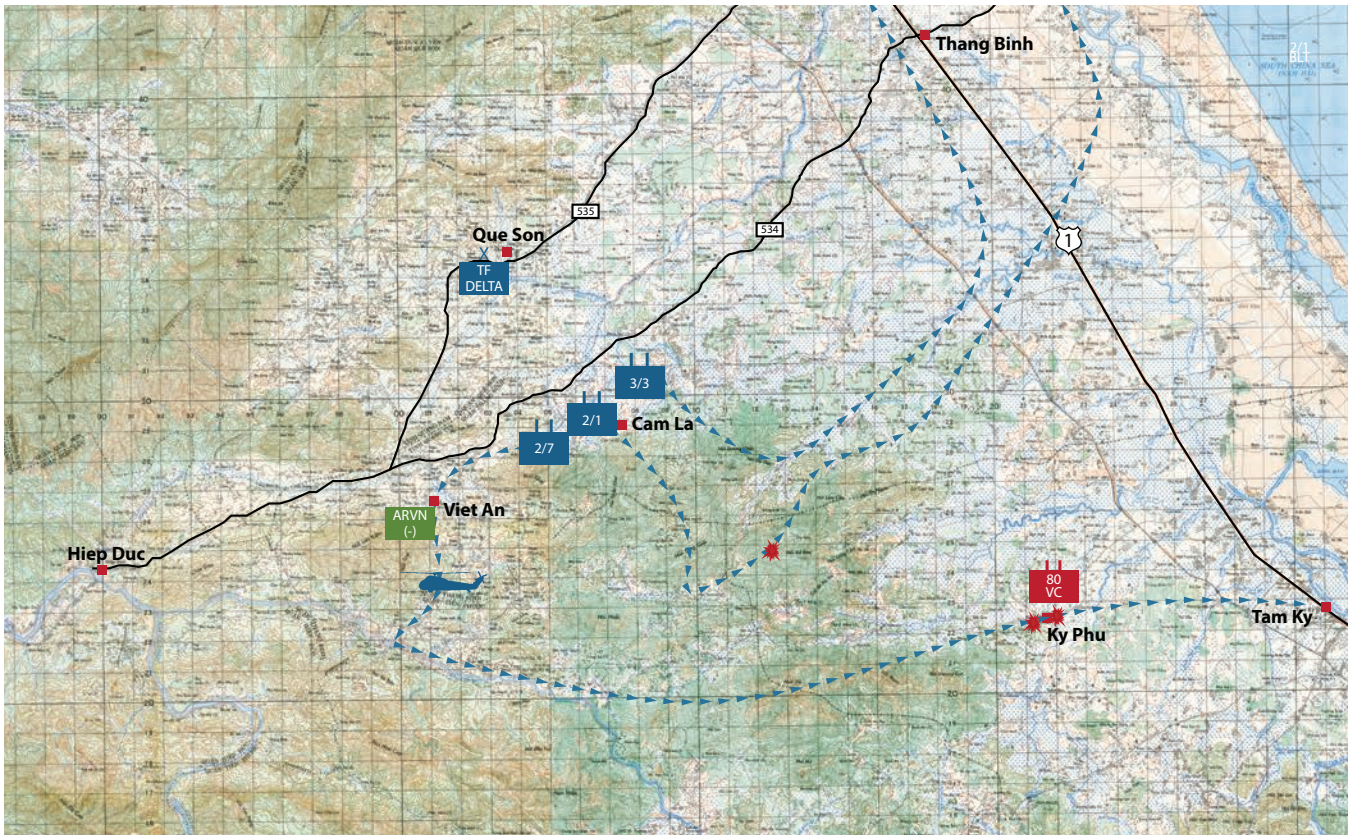
A Marine suffering from immersion foot is carried away from a helicopter aboard the USS *Valley Forge*. In the most severe cases, Marines suffering from the ailment could not walk or even stand and needed to be transported out of the battle zone.

South Vietnamese outpost at Viet An, with two companies seizing the high ground to the north (Company F) and east (Company G) and another (Company H) occupying the town itself that evening. Company H, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, maintained its positions on Hill 407. With the outpost secured, the battalion was resupplied, acquired intelligence on Viet Cong activity to the south, and helped evacuate dead and wounded South Vietnamese soldiers.

The next day, the reduced 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, conducted a helicopter lift south to the Khang River. Company F and Company G carried out the initial landing shortly before noon, following air strikes on the landing zone. As they landed, the Marines faced intermittent 12.7mm machine-gun fire from fleeing Viet Cong. The rifle companies quickly secured the landing zone and were soon joined by Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. The battalion then established defensive positions along high ground overlooking a ferry crossing along the river they suspected was used by the Viet Cong.

As the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, moved deep into the Phuoc Ha Valley, Task Force Delta's other two battalions began to move south and east. BLT 2/1 had been conducting a general patrol south along the eastern slopes of Hill 407 since 12 December. The unit temporarily paused its movement for two days to avoid accidentally entering the blast radius of the B-52's strikes on 12 and 13 December. With the exception of the eight Viet Cong fighters dressed as women apprehended on 13 December, the battalion encountered little enemy activity on these days.

Meanwhile, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, maintained its general advance southeast into the valley's northern area as it assessed the damage inflicted by the B-52 attack. On 13 December, the battalion discovered ample evidence of just how well provisioned and secure the Viet Cong forces had



Map adapted by History Division

Task Force Delta operations in the Phouc Ha Valley, 13–20 December 1965.

been during the operation, uncovering abandoned caves stuffed with cots, blankets, medical supplies, uniforms, batteries, and sewing kits. It was another reminder that the Marines operating in the Phuoc Ha Valley faced an enemy who knew the terrain better than they did, and thus could retain a significant advantage in terms of where and when to strike. Underscoring this point was the simple fact that the Communist fighters were usually able to sleep with a dry roof over their heads, whereas the Marines were forced to endure the monsoon season day and night in muddy foxholes.

Over the course of the next three days, Task Force Delta continued its eastward advance. The Marines of 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, moved east from the Viet Cong ferry crossing over the Khang River and continued in that direction along the river's northern bank, uncovering a Communist medical aid station along the way. Battalion Landing Team 2/1 reached the southern boundary of the area that had been devastated by the Arc Light strikes two days earlier on 15 December and then pivoted to the northeast with the intent of joining the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. As it crossed a ridge of hills separating the two formations, it encountered a force of about 40–50 Viet Cong at 1130 on 16 December. The adversaries exchanged fire for several hours before the Viet Cong broke contact and left the battlefield. During the next two days, the battalion continued its patrol and finally exited the valley complex on 18 December, where its tired companies were lifted by helicopter to Phu Bai. The companies of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, left the complex between 17 and 18 December and proceeded via helicopter to the logistic support area during the next two days.

The 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, faced a more difficult march. As the battalion moved out from the ferry crossing site on 15 December, it did not initially encounter significant enemy activity. On 18 December, the battalion continued its march with the aim of reaching the town of Thon Hai

by nightfall. As it advanced, the battalion passed through the village of Ky Phu, a little more than eight kilometers west of Tam Ky. The town was eerily quiet. Major Alvin J. Doublet, the battalion operations officer, described the town as being "particularly devoid of civilian activity." A fireteam leader recalled that there were no men to be found and women were seen huddling in corners, clutching their children.

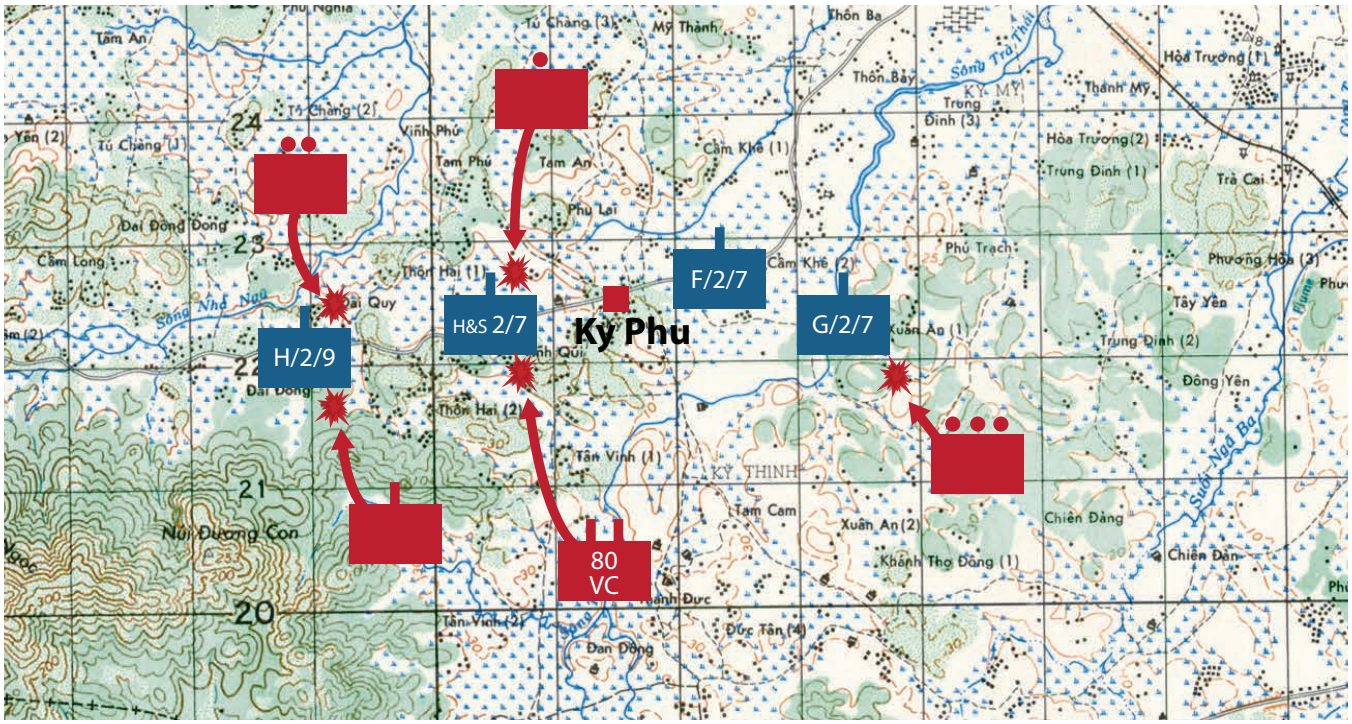
While 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, had received harassing sniper fire throughout the day, Colonel Utter did not believe this was the precursor to a major attack. The anxious civilians of Ky Phu could have been just as nervous about the advancing Marine column as they were about Viet Cong activity in the area. Utter also was confident that his patrols, roving between 500 and 700 meters along his advance guard's flank, would spot any possible ambushes. The battalion was hardly in the best state to confront such an assault. It had been moving on foot for about 32 kilometers along a dirt road that was barely worth the name; it was, in fact, a narrow paddy dike. As with so much of the terrain covered by the Marines participating in Harvest Moon, the area was damp and muddy. "There were a considerable number of rice paddies and almost all the terrain was flooded due to the heavy rains that we had had," the battalion's operations officer, Major Doublet, remembered. More than 50 of the battalion's Marines suffering from immersion foot had to be lifted out of the area by helicopters the day prior.

The unit's three companies advanced in a column. Company G was on point, followed by Company F. The two lead companies advanced in a "V" formation, and were followed by the Headquarters and Service Company. Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, formed the rear of the column. The area around Ky Phu was largely made up of rice paddies interspersed with small villages and hedgerows. To the south ran a low ridge no higher than 30 meters that commanded the western approach to the small market town. The battalion passed through the village with little incident save the aforementioned sniper fire. By 1330, roughly half of the battalion had left the village when Companies F and G came under heavy fire from machine guns and recoilless rifles. Utter continued to believe that the attack was only harassing fire, and subsequently ordered Company G to turn south and use the battalion's 81mm mortars to clear the road. He then ordered Company F to displace Company G as 2d Battalion, 7th Marines' advance guard. However, as Major Doublet noted, it was becoming "obvious that Company G's action was something bigger than snipers as they now reported receiving mortar fire themselves."

Utter's miscalculation placed his already-frayed battalion at considerable risk. The attacks were not merely harassing actions, but were actually part of a large-scale ambush staged by the *80th Viet Cong Battalion* designed to take out the entire Marine unit. As they moved ahead beyond Ky Phu, a gap emerged between the two advance companies and the lightly armed Headquarters and Service Company. Two Communist companies then struck from both north and south of the road through the town. They aimed to exploit the gap, split the battalion in two, and roll up each half. Thanks to the actions of a number of Marines, and the perseverance and fighting skill of the entire battalion, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, not only survived the ambush but inflicted massive casualties against the enemy formation.

Utter, who was with Company F, lost contact with the rest of his battalion when his radio operators were killed. The commander of the battalion's Headquarters and Service Company, Lieutenant Nicholas H. Grosz Jr., described the intensity of the Communist fire: "For the first couple of hours there we were pinned down, we could hardly even move. Most of the casualties of the people that I took were in the head and the shoulders, just from firing back over the rice paddies." In an ironic turn of events, the muddy terrain that had been such a thorn in the side of Task Force Delta since Harvest Moon actually helped the Marines in this particular firefight. As the Communist mortars landed on both sides of the Headquarters and Service Company, the ground absorbed much of the explosion, leaving the remainder to explode directly into the air. "So I didn't take as many casualties as I would of if it was during the dry season," Grosz noted.

The gap between Headquarters and Service Company and Company F was widening to such a degree that a small number of Viet Cong forces were able to advance into the opening and set up a 12.7mm machine gun position with which to rake the beleaguered company with enfilade fire. At some spots, hand-to-hand fighting took place and pistol fire was exchanged. Discerning the perilous situation, Grosz ordered runners to make contact with Utter and Company



Map adapted by History Division

The ambush of 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, at Ky Phu, 18 December 1965.

F and get the company to come back to close the gap. The withering gauntlet of Communist fire made this task deadly: the first two messengers were both killed as they desperately tried to dodge Viet Cong fire, "shot to rags and riddled by the heavy machine-gun and AK-47 fire pouring down the trail." Grosz then took it upon himself to make contact, evading heavy enemy fire. His clothing and canteen were both punctured. Fortunately, he was able to reach the company commander, who immediately moved his command to the west. Grosz's day was far from over. Returning to his company with the lead elements of Company F, where they engaged about 10 Viet Cong fighters who had crossed the road, he began to evacuate wounded Marines, rallied his men, and, using a grenade launcher, covered the withdrawal of those wounded who could still move without assistance. His valiant actions earned him the Navy Cross.

Upon receiving Utter's orders, Company F quickly turned around and headed back to Ky Phu. Using the battalion's tactical net, Utter was able to relay a request for supporting fire to Task Force Delta's provisional artillery units. Battery M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines' 155mm howitzers opened fire on the Viet Cong forces south of the battalion, allowing the Marines to regain the initiative. The arrival of Company F also broke the Viet Cong efforts to set up a machine gun position inside the battalion's area. The company then set up one rifle platoon to serve as a base of fire facing south and then deployed its remaining platoons to the right of the Viet Cong position. The platoons inflicted heavy casualties. Headquarters and Service Company Marines armed with flamethrowers also contributed to defeating the ambush, destroying two machine gun positions.

As the battle around Ky Phu slowly turned in the Marines' favor, the battalion's rear came under heavy fire when Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, was ambushed. During the initial assault, the company's commander, Captain Paul L. Gormley Jr., and radio operator, Lance Corporal Robert J. Wilkins, were both killed by a 57mm recoilless rifle. Command of the company fell to an artillery observer from 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, who had been with the unit for only about a week, First Lieutenant Harvey C. Barnum. Recounting the event, Barnum stated: "I ran 50 yards, picked [the company commander] up and brought him back to a covered

First Lieutenant Nicholas H. Grosz Jr.

Navy Cross Citation

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to First Lieutenant Nicholas H. Grosz, Jr. (MCSN: 0-85461), United States Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism as Commanding Officer of Headquarters and Service Company, Second Battalion, Seventh Marines, FIRST Marine Division (Reinforced), Fleet Marine Force, in the Republic of Vietnam on 18 December 1965, during Operation HARVEST MOON in Quang Tin Province near the hamlet of Ky Phy. When savage small arms, automatic weapons and mortar fire pinned his company down in a muddy and exposed rice paddy area, Lieutenant Grosz immediately informed his battalion of the seriousness of the situation and summoned help. Completely ignoring his own personal safety, he repeatedly ran the gauntlet of intense enemy fire to personally evacuate four wounded Marines. He returned to his men and gave them encouragement as he rallied them and directed their fire toward Viet Cong positions. In order to permit a few of the lesser wounded to make their way to relative safety while a rifle company was coming to the rescue, he personally engaged automatic weapons with a grenade launcher while enemy rounds were striking his pack and equipment. After returning to retrieve weapons and sundry abandoned gear, and to make certain that none of his men were left behind, he finally made his way to the main battle position and organized his company to support the battalion in its subsequent attack and mopping up operations. By his daring actions, indomitable fighting spirit, and loyal devotion to duty in the face of great personal danger, Lieutenant Grosz reflected distinct credit upon himself and the Marine Corps and upheld the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

position, and he died in my arms. At that time I went from being a forward observer to being the company commander."

Barnum faced multiple challenges: he needed to restore command and control over Company H, secure and evacuate the dead and wounded, and break out of the ambush so that he could join his company up with the rest of 2d Battalion, 7th Marines. To establish command over the unit, he ran to the company's fallen radio operator and strapped the AN/PRC-25 radio to his back. The radio's long antennae ascended into the air, making Barnum a prime target for snipers. Nevertheless, recognizing the necessity of maintaining clear communications with the battalion and any incoming air support, Barnum took the risk and was able to make contact with Colonel Utter. Utter ordered Barnum to regroup with 2d Battalion, 7th Marines. Barnum responded that he would need to evacuate the wounded before making a breakout.

Over the course of the next four hours, Barnum's company held off the Viet Cong forces as they worked to secure a landing zone from which wounded Marines could be evacuated from the battlefield. In the words of one of his platoon sergeants, Staff Sergeant Gene Stenton, Barnum was "calm, cool, collected" throughout the engagement as he worked to bring order to the chaotic situation. Three UH-1E Iroquois soon arrived to provide close air support. With a 3.5mm rocket launcher, Barnum fired white phosphorus projectiles to light up prospective targets. When "the 3.5 ran out of ammunition, I stood up there and was pointing with my arms outstretched at the targets, and the chopper pilots flew down the axis of my arms at the targets."

As the company focused on engaging the ambush south of the road, a Company H platoon secured a landing zone to the north. Two UH-34 Seahorses then began the task of evacuating the wounded. The fighting lasted for six to seven hours. With the company's wounded lifted out of the battlespace by helicopter, but with ammunition desperately low, Barnum began the difficult process of fighting eastward to rejoin the rest of 2d Battalion, 7th Marines. Using fireteam rushes and close air support from helicopters, Company H broke through one squad at a time. By that evening, the entire company—living, wounded, and dead—had regrouped with its battalion. That night, Barnum sat down to take

Captain Harvey C. Barnum

Harvey Curtiss Barnum was born on 21 July 1940 in Cheshire, Connecticut. After high school, Barnum attended Saint Anselm College in New Hampshire, where he joined the Platoon Leaders Class, one of the Marine Corps' officer commissioning programs. He graduated in 1962 as a newly commissioned second lieutenant in the Marine Corps Reserve. In 1965, Barnum accepted appointment to the Regular Marine Corps and was stationed at U.S. Naval Base Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, where he then volunteered for temporary duty in Vietnam. Now a first lieutenant, he joined Company H, 2d Battalion, just two weeks prior to Operation Harvest Moon.

Medal of Honor Citation

The President of the United States of America, in the name of Congress, takes pleasure in presenting the Medal of Honor to Captain Harvey Curtiss "Barney" Barnum (MCSN: 0-84262), United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty on 18 December 1965, while serving with the Company H, Second Battalion, Ninth Marines, THIRD Marine Division (Reinforced), Fleet Marine Force in action outside the village of Ky Phu, Quang Tin Province, Republic of Vietnam. When the company was suddenly pinned down by a hail of extremely accurate enemy fire and was quickly separated from the remainder of the battalion by over 500 meters of open and fire-swept ground, and casualties mounted rapidly. Lieutenant Barnum quickly made a hazardous reconnaissance of the area, seeking targets for his artillery. Finding the rifle company commander mortally wounded and the radio operator killed, he, with complete disregard for his safety, gave aid to the dying commander, then removed the radio from the dead operator and strapped it to himself. He immediately assumed command of the rifle company, and moving at once into the midst of the heavy fire, rallying and giving encouragement to all units, reorganized them to replace the loss of key personnel and led their attack on enemy positions from which deadly fire continued to come. His sound and swift decisions and his obvious calm served to stabilize the badly decimated units and his gallant example as he stood exposed repeatedly to point out targets served as an inspiration to all. Provided with two armed helicopters, he moved fearlessly through enemy fire to control the air attack against the firmly entrenched enemy while skillfully directing one platoon in a successful counterattack on the key enemy positions. Having thus cleared a small area, he requested and directed the landing of two transport helicopters for the evacuation of the dead and wounded. He then assisted in the mopping up and final seizure of the battalion's objective. His gallant initiative and heroic conduct reflected great credit upon himself and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

account of the unit's wounded: "That was the hard part—I didn't know those gallant warriors. It was very emotional that night, sitting with the company gunny, looking at the dog tags and reading supplies. None of the dead and wounded names registered with me."

Total casualties for the battalion were 14 killed in action and 73 wounded in action. Headquarters and Service Company suffered seven Marines killed in action. Company F lost three Marines, and Companies G and H each lost two Marines. Nine of the casualties were radio operators, who along with platoon and company commanders were usually the first targets during the Viet Cong ambushes. The bodies of 104 Viet Cong fighters were found on the battlefield, killed by both 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, and supporting artillery fire.

The action at Ky Phu was the last major engagement of Operation Harvest Moon. Over the course of the next two days, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, continued its march east back to Tam Ky. At the same time that the Marines were vacating the valley complex, the ARVN forces garrisoning Hiep Duc also withdrew their forces. On 17 December, the 3d Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment, local officials, and 100–150 refugees made their way east to Viet An. By 18 December, they arrived at Que Son. By 19 December, all three of Task Force Delta's Marine battalions had completed their movements out of the Harvest Moon area of operations. The operation officially came to an end on 20 December 1965.

The Marine Corps concluded that at least 407 Viet Cong were killed during Operation Harvest Moon. The South Vietnamese Army's losses were 108 killed in action and Marine losses were 56 killed in action.* Most of the South Vietnamese losses occurred during the early phases of the operation, during the ambush of the 5th ARVN Regiment and its attached units on 8–9 December. Most Marine losses were suffered on 10 December, during the ambush of BLT 2/1's Company F and the subsequent efforts by Company E, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, to relieve that formation. The ambush of 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, on 18 December at Ky Phu also was a costly engagement. It was a marked contrast with III MAF's previous duel with the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* during Operation Starlite. During that engagement, III MAF inflicted more than twice as many casualties at a loss of 51 Marines. This time, however, the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* had learned from its mistakes. By drawing the Marines inland, away from the sea, the Communists were able to engage the Marines where and when they chose, while also limiting the impact the Marines' amphibious capabilities could bring to the battle.

Conclusion

Contemporary observers in the United States were quick to declare Operation Harvest Moon a success. An article by Sergeant Frank Beardsley published in *Leatherneck* a year after the operation read:

> The Marines on Operation Harvest Moon set out to do a job—to kill as many Viet Cong as possible, to drive the survivors out of their valley stronghold and to prevent the Communist attack on the Que Son outpost. The South Vietnamese flag still flies over Que Son, and more than 1,000 Communist troops will never lift another weapon. Their surviving comrades were driven away from an area they had considered theirs for years. The Marines had done the harvesting.

Both the Marine Corps History Division's account and the FMFPac's own history of the operation also were positive, stressing the significant numbers of Viet Cong forces killed or wounded in the operation compared to the Marine Corps forces.

An assessment produced by FMFPac Headquarters also was positive, if less triumphalist. It declared that "In this operation, Marine Corps doctrine of long standing was tried and again proven valid." Examples included: "The timely amphibious landing of a Marine battalion blocked enemy elements from escaping a trap formed by units ashore, thus validating the amphibious 'force-in-readiness' concept developed by the Marine Corps," and "The value of immediate

*Marine casualty figures for Operation Harvest Moon vary across sources. Jack Shulimson and Maj Charles M. Johnson in *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965*, state that 45 Marines were killed in action and 218 were wounded. FMFPac's history, *Operations of the U.S. Marine Forces*, states 45 were killed in action, 26 died of wounds, and 218 were wounded in action. Added up, this produces a total killed in action figure of 71. This figure was listed in a summary of operations included with *Force Requirements and Long Range Estimates for I Corps Republic of Vietnam*, a Headquarters Marine Corps planning document produced in 1966. However, a survey of those listed as killed in action on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, indicates the number of killed in action was likely smaller, with 56 Marines confirmed as having been killed in action or dying of wounds suffered during the operation.

availability of the close air support organic to the Marines was again demonstrated. HARVEST MOON was an air-ground team success."

A close inspection of the events of the battle would have shown both assertions needed to be qualified. The landing of BLT 2/1, while timely, was carried out amidst much confusion and did not succeed in preventing Viet Cong forces from "escaping a trap" and withdrawing south. Indeed, had the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* actually been trapped, as the official history claimed, then Task Force Delta would not have needed two days of B-52 raids to soften up the area in which the Viet Cong units were believed to be operating. Furthermore, the lack of coordination between ground forces and both rotary-wing and fixed-wing forces throughout the battle were hardly the strongest evidence that the operation was "an air-ground success." Recognizing these problems, 1st MAW worked to ensure greater coordination in the future by making sure that a senior aviator would be assigned to any provisional headquarters tasked with planning an operation on the scale and complexity of Harvest Moon.

Privately, Marine leaders were more considered in their assessment of the operation. The opening phase of the engagement had been a muddle. A board of inquiry was convened by General Walt to examine why the landing of BLT 2/1 had been carried out in such a confused manner. The board drew a number of conclusions, most of which focused on the lack of clear communications between Task Force Delta's commanding general and the landing forces. This lack of communication was both caused and exacerbated by General Henderson's decision to move his command post multiple times during the opening days of Harvest Moon. The board, perhaps recognizing that Henderson would never be given another combat command, decided that further disciplinary action and censure were unnecessary. Henderson was transferred to Okinawa, where he served as the commander of FMFPac (Forward) before retiring from the Marine Corps in the spring of 1966.

A consequence of the decision to let the matter of Henderson's relief rest was that Operation Harvest Moon's failures were largely overlooked in subsequent official histories. The official accounts, most notably the one found in *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup*, *1965*, excessively utilize the passive voice to chronicle the events of the engagement, clouding who exactly was responsible for what during the opening days of the battle. Henderson's decision to move his command post, the lack of clear command and control, and the absence of communication between Marines and Vietnamese and between Marines and airmen were left out. As a result, readers had no explanation for why General Walt seemingly, and without warrant, relieved the commanding general.

The plan as a whole was faulty. The operation's planners laid out an elaborate set piece battle that assumed the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* would be unable to figure out what Task Force Delta was trying to do: force a large-scale confrontation in which the Marines could exploit their advantages in firepower and mobility to decimate the regiment just as they had during Starlite.* The operation lacked a mechanism for addressing the likely possibility that the Viet Cong would not give battle. Thus, as soon as the Viet Cong sprung their own trap and attacked the ARVN battalions entering the Que Son Valley, Harvest Moon immediately transformed from an elaborate ambush to a large-scale rescue operation as the Marines entered the valley to recover the shattered South Vietnamese units. Subsequently, the engagement became a series of patrols as the Marines of Task Force Delta searched for the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* in an effort to engage the unit. The Communists were able to effectively utilize large, conventional forces without necessarily having to use those units in a set piece battle.

Despite the fact that this constituted the largest allied operation in I Corps to this point, planning between Marine Corps and South Vietnamese forces was superficial. Most problematic was the vast divide between the combat effectiveness of the 5th ARVN Regiment and Task Force Delta Marines. Throughout 1965, Walt held a fairly dim view of the South Vietnamese Army's abilities. This was surely confirmed by the inability of the 5th ARVN Regiment to conduct independent operations in the Que Son Valley. From the perspective of the South Vietnamese commanders, the lack of speed with which Task Force Delta entered the Que Son Valley to relieve the beleaguered ARVN units was a sign that the Americans were not concerned with the heavy

*A set piece battle is fought by forces that have some knowledge of each other's strengths and dispositions, are reasonably familiar with the terrain, and have had time to develop a battle plan.

Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck*

Task Force Delta Marines advance along a narrow dike during Operation Harvest Moon.

South Vietnamese losses. By the third day of the battle, the South Vietnamese decided to operate independently from the Marines for the remainder of the engagement.

Task Force Delta and III MAF also failed to coordinate adequately with the 2d Air Division and other U.S. Air Force units in the area. Alongside the reasons for General Henderson's relief, the complete lack of acknowledgment that Air Force forward air controllers and direct air support centers helped coordinate support throughout the early phase of Harvest Moon is the most glaring omission from the Marine Corps' official accounts of the engagement. Nevertheless, Air Force observation craft and bombers played an instrumental role in allowing the remnants of the 1st Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment, and the 11th ARVN Ranger Battalion to escape capture or death.

In their own way, the Air Force's accounts of the engagement were just as obfuscating as the Marines', with authors claiming that Air Force personnel saved the allied forces from a "potentially disastrous situation." Even so, the official report touches on a significant point when it records that "Shortly after Harvest Moon, General Westmoreland, COMUSMACV [commander U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam], requested that the 2d Air Division examine the possible advantage of placing Marine tactical air under the direction of the 2d Air Division." Harvest Moon sparked a controversy that would plague inter-Service relations well into 1968, with the Marine Corps and Air Force fighting a heated feud over the issue of a "single manager" for air operations in South Vietnam.

To be sure, there was much about which the commanders of III MAF could feel positive with regards to Harvest Moon. Once it came under the command of Brigadier General Platt, Task Force Delta proved to be a highly mobile combat force capable of operating deep in Viet Cong territory. As in previous operations, the Marines consistently demonstrated their tactical superiority over their Viet Cong opponents. Engagements—such as the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, fight at Hill 54 on 9 December 1965 and the 18 December 1965 ambush of 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, at Ky Phu—testified to the superior skill of Marine small unit leaders. Although often caught by surprise by the Viet Cong, Marine riflemen were still able to counter their enemies with superior organization and firepower, leading to substantial losses for the Communist attackers. The landing of BLT 2/1 on 10 December 1965 demonstrated the ability of Marine air officers to think on their feet in the midst of a deteriorating situation. The 1st MAW was also able to provide effective close air support when both the weather and lines of communication were clear. Injured Marines also could depend on the wing's helicopters to ferry them out of the battle zone. Fire support from the task force's provisional artillery battalion also was effective throughout the operation.

In many ways, Operation Harvest Moon encapsulated the basic problems and difficulties faced by III MAF as it tried to defeat the Viet Cong insurgency in the I Corps zone. Emboldened by the smashing victory of Operation Starlite, III MAF's planners had hoped to draw the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* into another engagement in which it could wear the Viet Cong down. The results were hardly as decisive, however. Following Starlite, many officers in III MAF, FMFPac, and Headquarters Marine Corps were hopeful that a pivotal blow against the Viet Cong was imminent. Harvest Moon was a reminder that the war for I Corps actually was going to be a long and hard one.

Sources

This account of Operation Harvest Moon is based on documentary sources from the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, MD; the Alfred M. Gray Marine Corps Research Center in Quantico, VA; the Virtual Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University in Lubbock; and numerous secondary sources. Of particular value was the descriptively titled "Record of Proceedings of a Board of Investigation Convened at Da Nang Vietnam, by Order of Commanding General III Marine Amphibious Force and Naval Component Command, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, to Inquire into the Circumstances Surrounding the Landing of Battalion Landing Team 2/1 in the Vicinity of BT 074216 and BT 045298 on or About 1030, 10 December 1965, Ordered on 21 December 1965, (convened on 23 December 1965)." This document entails several hundred pages worth of testimony and depositions from Operation Harvest Moon participants as the board of inquiry sought to determine the source of the command-and-control problems that occurred when BLT 2/1 landed south of Que Son on 10 December 1965. Until recently, this document was classified and contained within the personal papers of Gen Wallace M. Greene Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps from 1963 to 1967. The recent declassification of those papers affords us the opportunity to reassess Harvest Moon.

The author also drew on the command chronologies of the most significant units that participated in the operation: III Marine Amphibious Force; 3d Marine Division; 1st Marine Aircraft Wing; the Special Landing Force; 2d Battalion, 7th Marines; 3d Battalion, 3d Marines; and 2d Battalion, 1st Marines. These are all available, either online or onsite, at the National Archives in College Park. A number of important reports produced in the wake of Operation Harvest Moon also were helpful in constructing the narrative. These include "Operation Harvest Moon, Hq PACAF Tactical Evaluation Center, Project CHECO (Contemporary Historical Evaluation of Combat Operations) Southeast Asia Report," 3 March 1965; "After Action Report Operation Harvest Moon [Task Force Delta]," 28 December 1965; and "Lessons Learned 54: The Battle of Ky Phu, Headquarters United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam," 27 January 1966. All of these are available online at the Vietnam Virtual Archive at Texas Tech University.

A number of official histories also proved helpful. Two were produced by the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific: *Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Vietnam, 1965*, and the *U.S. Marine Forces in Vietnam, March 1965–September 1967*: *Historical Summary*, and copies can be found at the Marine Corps History Division, Historical Reference Branch, in Quantico. The History Division's *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup*, *1965* by Jack Shulimson and Maj Charles M. Johnson features a detailed account of the battle. Merle L. Pribbenow's translation of the People's Army of Vietnam's official account of the war, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam*, *1954–1975*, published by the University Press of Kansas covered the Viet Cong's side of the engagement. Several memoirs were also useful: Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (1991); LtCol Alex Lee's *Utter's Battalion: 2/7 Marines in Vietnam*, *1965–66* (2000); and Truong Nhu Tang, with David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, *A Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath* (1985).

Finally, the author is indebted to the numerous historians and researchers who have contributed scholarly works on the Vietnam War. These proved invaluable for establishing the strategic context of the operations conducted in December 1965 and include: John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War*, *1945–1975* (2009); Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War*, *1954–1965* (2006); Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (2013); Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (1991); and Warren Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big-Unit War against the U.S.*, *1965–1966* (2011).

Acronyms and Abbreviations

APA ..... Attack Transport
ARVN ..... Army of the Republic of Vietnam
BLT ..... Battalion Landing Team
COSVN ..... Central Office for South Vietnam
DASC ..... Direct air support center
DMZ ..... demilitarized zone
FMFPac ..... Fleet Marine Force Pacific
JAG ..... Judge Advocate General
KIA ..... Killed in Action
LPH ..... Landing Platform Helicopter (Helicopter Carrier)
LSD ..... Landing Ship Dock
MAF ..... Marine Amphibious Force
MAG ..... Marine Aircraft Group
MarDiv ..... Marine Division
MAW ..... Marine Aircraft Wing
MEB ..... Marine Expeditionary Brigade
HMM ..... Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron
NVA ..... North Vietnamese Army
PAVN ..... People's Army of Vietnam
RVN ..... Republic of Vietnam
SLF ..... Special Landing Force
USMACV ..... U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
VC ..... Viet Cong
WIA ..... Wounded in Action

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Photograph courtesy of the author

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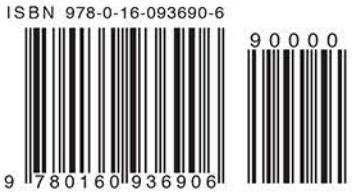
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