

TET 1968

By

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Tet of 1968 by US media standards in Saigon, South Vietnam began around the last days of January. Their date coincides with the attacks on the capital city by Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers in civilian clothes. That's when the reporters became such open game for enemy snipers, sappers and assault squads. Their date does not jive with that of the Marines'. Significant enemy activity had been taking place since mid-January all across the northern I Corps Combat Zone. The central and southern regions of the Zone also rapidly heated up. Danang came under rocket and mortar attack and infiltration by large VC and NVA forces. These coordinated enemy attacks placed direct pressure on US and South Vietnamese forces within and around the city. The religious and educational center, Hue City and the Citadel was assaulted and occupied by approximately 4,500 enemy. The provincial capital of Quang Tri was overrun and captured by first line NVA, driving many civilians out and displacing almost all American advisors except for the headquarters group who held their ground valiantly. Not a single command in the provincial capital was spared from direct or indirect attacks. Surprisingly, the little position of Camp Kistler, headquarters of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion (1st Amtrac Bn) and the Naval Support Activity (NSA) at the Cua Viet Port Facility did not receive a ground attack, nor notice any increases in artillery or rocket attacks until January 20th. Camp Kistler was the northern most US base on the South China Sea coast just below the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). To say it was vulnerable to enemy attacks was a gross understatement. It suffered numerable artillery, rocket and mortar attacks, but never a ground attack, not even a single probe of the perimeter wire during the time this author was at the base.

Tet 1968 began for the Amgrunts of 1st Amtrac Bn on the morning of the 20th when they crossed the Cua Viet River to conduct a company sized sweep to the north behind a security patrol dug in just below the DMZ. If my memory serves me correctly, this unit was part of Co. C, 1st Battalion 3rd Marine Regiment. During the previous evening this patrol had reported enemy having moved behind them. This was not an unusual tactic by the NVA. They commonly moved behind the platoons positioned up north to ambush them or their relief force. Since Charlie Company of 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines made this report, we felt certain the observation was valid. This influenced the author to take the full company based on two other factors.

The evening before, a close Marine Corps friend had contacted me via secure voice radio from Danang and warned me that large forces would be coming into our area, "take all the firepower you can carry when you cross the stream (Cua Viet River), old

friend.” Secondly, an assassination team had been thwarted in their attempt to take control of My Loc, a small village inland from the mouth of the river. The VC assassination team had planned to take control of the village by killing off the chief and his family. Such terrorist tactics by local VC commonly alerted allied forces that major moves were afoot by NVA.

The decision to take the entire company north to sweep behind C/1/3 proved to be a sound one. Unfortunately, the author’s judgement was better than his luck. The next three days would prove to be most challenging and most unlucky.

Once the company was across the river, it quickly deployed into a commonly used formation with two platoons abreast facing north. The company headquarters element was positioned well up front and centered between the two lead platoons. The third and fourth platoons each followed in trace in columns of squads behind each lead platoon. The lead platoons had long since learned not to expose themselves outside the Australian pine strip (approximately 100 to 200 yards in width), to preclude drawing heavy artillery fire from beyond the DMZ. The following platoons were positioned to react to either flank of the platoon they followed. The headquarters needed to be well forward in order to observe contacts instantly. It had also been learned early on that the NVA did not develop their ambush positions in depth. They relied upon the shock of the ambush to make the Marines hit the dirt and decide what to do before moving forward. This allowed the NVA force to gain and maintain fire superiority across the prone Marines. The tactic of never leaving your feet was difficult to do but it soon proved to be the fastest means of breaking up the ambush. Men on their feet could match the enemy fire and close with and be into the ambush fighting positions very rapidly. A squad or even a fireteam inside the NVA positions completely disrupted their basic plan, caused them to abandon fighting positions and escape capture from being out flanked. Out in the open and exposed, the NVA became easier targets and the ambushes ended more rapidly.

One can not definitively quantify the numbers of casualties saved versus lost by employing one tactic versus the other. Suffice it to say that the longer an ambush drags out, the greater the wounded and killed as a general rule. The key was found to be, break the ambush quickly as and kill as many of them as possible.

Sweeping north behind Charlie 1/3 was slow and nerve grinding. The whole process took approximately three hours. No enemy were encountered, however, many signs of enemy movement were noted. This time, it appeared the enemy had continued south under cover of darkness. There were strong indicators that the enemy had moved south to possibly occupy killing grounds around the villages of My Loc and Ma XI Thi East and West. This complex of villages was favorites among the NVA for disrupting supply vessels from transiting the river to Dong Ha. Ninety percent of all supplies supporting Marine operations west and north of Dong Ha arrived at the Cua Viet Port Facility and passed by the villages and hamlets of the Cua Viet. Cutting the river at My Loc disrupted that vital flow of essential war fighting goods just as certainly and as critically as cutting a main artery in the human body. Such a severe wound to that critical supply line had to be rapidly repaired at whatever cost to insure the continuous flow of the tons of munitions, food, equipment, medical supplies, repair parts, etc., so vital to combat operations.

Early on, it had been determined by Charlie 1/3's parent command that they should be reunited. Company "A" had been designated to relieve them for their return to the Cua Viet. Charlie 1/3 had occupied positions just south of Ocean View below the DMZ. A platoon of Company "A" was occupying these old positions as C/1/3 departed aboard LVTs heading south. Little more than thirty minutes had passed before a call came in from the 1st Amtrac battalion operations officer, Major Walter J. Donovan, USMC. In brief, he advised me of an alteration in our company mission. It appeared the prediction of my old friend in the III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) intelligence office was dead on target.

Donovan explained that Company "A" should move as rapidly as possible to a location east of My Loc to establish a blocking position. He gave me the coordinates encrypted and I recognized the location to be a high sand dune that overlooked the eastern boundary of My Loc. It also afforded a clear view of the desert to the north of the village, its graveyard and beyond to the northwest. The Cua Viet River to the south and southwest were also clearly observed from this terrain as I recalled. I had passed over and around this feature many times on sweeps.

The S-3 further advised me that Company "A" would be blocking for an ARVN battalion supported by US advisors. The ARVN had been given the mission to enter Ma XI Thai west and push east until reaching Jones Creek thence into the Co. "A" blocking position. This north-south oriented tributary of the Cua Viet River was named Jones Creek because the Vietnamese name was so difficult to pronounce. It formed the western boundary of the Amtrac battalion's TAOR above the Cua Viet River.

Since the S-3 alert to assume a new mission had not come forty or so minutes earlier, all the LVTs had moved south to the battalion's position. They were also directed to turn around immediately and to return to move Alpha Company to its blocking position.

It is important to note at this point that several critical facts were not made known to me as the company commander. These facts, had they been known, would have influenced my decision making process quite differently. One must recall that I was also previously advised by hard radio intercept intelligence of imminent attacks from Large NVA units. In addition, I had seen signs of NVA units having bypassed Charlie 1/3 on their way south. The S-3 fragmentation order did not provide a sufficient basis of facts to prompt grave caution nor did it provide intelligence that was likely known by he and the ARVN and their advisors. It was left to me to assume the worst and prepare for such eventualities based on deductions of my own. Urgency was indicated when the S-3 advised me the LVTs had been ordered to return to pick me up to quickly take the block. I had advised my own tractor crew chiefs earlier to return to my position for the rapid lift to My Loc. No doubt, the S-3 was working with the dribs and drabs of intelligence he could garner from sources. One of these sources was the fleet of landing craft used to haul supplies up river to Dong Ha.

Navy landing craft operators and Junk Fleet Advisors reported swarms of civilians crossing the river from north to south just before sunrise. Their reports of unusual activity and light small arms fire in the aforementioned villages was the extent of

any indication of enemy infiltration. It is not known whether any intelligence reports or alerts came to the battalion headquarters to warn of heavy NVA infiltration into the villages. The Vietnamese Navy Junk Fleet did report a confirmation of enemy activity in the villages. This became known to them from the large numbers of villagers they questioned as they fled across the river to the south in boats to the safety of the Junk Fleet base. At the time of these activities, none of this information did the author, who was preparing his platoon commanders with a briefing alongside a high sand dune that faced the South China Sea, know being made.

The 4th Platoon being led by the company executive officer was now holding the old Charlie 1/3 position at Ocean View. I immediately briefed him to assume the company reserve role. He was directed to move to the south on the third trip of the LVTs should the tactical situation dictate. No sooner had this transmission been completed than the S-3 came up on my net to advise me of developing events.

Donovan advised me that he was sending the battalion scouts across the Cua Viet to conduct a reconnaissance on My Loc. He justified this by Junk Fleet Advisor reports of an enemy force being present in the village. At the time I thought, "So what's new."

I asked that the reconn squad be told to come up on my tactical net so that we might be able to coordinate on their findings. I received a "Roger." With this I proceeded to move the platoon leaders into a huddle. With each of them using their maps, I drew them into a semi-circle and gave them a five-paragraph order for the mission. I reviewed the "mission" with them by drawing a sketch of the objective in the sand and specifying the sequence of the platoons taking their positions starting from the bank of the north shore of the Cua Viet. First platoon would be positioned with their left flank on the river. Second and third platoons would be to the right in a straight front using the high dune where they were to dig in to establish the block. It was a simple plan and no confusion was indicated when questions were called for.

Two LVTs could be seen coming up the South China Sea beach line. A radioman confirmed their movement to our position. At the same time, my tactical net operator advised me of another call from the s-3. Donovan replied immediately to my "Alpha 6" and inquired of my Progress in moving south. The quickness of his return call to question my movement sounded like either he or the battalion commander were concerned but no clear indication was present in his voice. I assured him we would be moving south as soon as the LVTs arrived, and they were in sight. I queried him about the reconn squad coming up on my radio frequency. He put me on hold while he checked. His response when he came back was surprising and short.

"Alpha 6, they have no radio."

I immediately questioned this transmission but got no satisfactory reply. I could not imagine a reconn patrol going out to observe reported enemy activity without a radio. I questioned the reply further but was still given, "No radio," by Donovan. This meant I had a squad of Marines snooping and pooping an enemy in my TAOR and were unable to report their findings to me or the battalion S-3. In effect, they were worthless for intelligence until Company "A" made physical contact with them. At that point their

findings might be of no use in plans to effectively engaging an enemy in prepared positions.

When the LVTs arrived there were only two instead of the four needed to move the whole company. I immediately called Donovan to advise him that two more tractors were needed. Ignoring this request he directed me to hastily send a relief platoon to the Cua Viet River west of the original objective as soon as possible. He explained that the Junk Fleet Advisor was hold up on the riverbank. He was under heavy fire from the VC in the village of My Loc and that he was seriously wounded. The advisor was desperate for assistance as he feared being taken prisoner or worse.

The two LVTs arrived at this point so I loaded up the 1st Platoon along with part of the 2nd on the first tractor. Since the 2nd Platoon was my largest, the remainder of that platoon would have to join the Headquarters Section on a return trip. The vehicle crew chiefs were instructed to return to our positions to pick up the company headquarters section, remnants of the 2nd Platoon and the 3rd Platoon. In the meantime the 1st and 2nd Platoon commanders were directed to take up their designated positions until I arrived with the rest of the company in trace. The basic mission was still to set up a blocking position. The news of the Junk Fleet Advisor's plight implied a modification to that of just being a blocking forces. The company was expected to take the pressure off the Junk Fleet Advisor by directly engaging the NVA to effect the recovery of the wounded advisor. The headquarters section, 2nd Platoon (-) and 3rd Platoon began hiking south at a forced march pace. Within fifteen minutes one of the LVTs was visible as it returned to the north to pick up its second load. It radioed in that the other LVT was being delayed and would follow soon. It appeared 3rd Platoon would have to follow along later since one tractor was too crowded for the remaining Marines.

The third tractor load of Marines had barely begun loading when the 1st Platoon leader came up on the net. His status report, as directed, was an appalling one. He reported a gruesome scene before his location in the blocking position. He said that it appeared that there were six to eight Marines spread out over the open ground between the blocking position and the fringe of vegetation bordering the eastern boundary of My Loc, a distance of about 75 yards. They all appeared to be dead as none of them were moving, nor did they respond to calls from his platoon. Two Marines closest to the village showed evidence of being badly wounded. I knew instantly that this was part of the reconn squad. But where was the remainder of the squad? The answer and its absurdity would come later. Meanwhile, the 1st Platoon Leader reported that the enemy was continuing to fire at the downed reconn Marines and firing was heavy farther up river, probably in the location of the Junk Fleet Advisor. He also indicated some return fire was coming from closer to his position and it was going into the village.

Lieutenant Dave Rankin also indicated he could not see the Junk Fleet Advisor along the river bank as his view was blocked by heavy growth running down to the water. He could hear sporadic shooting somewhere around 100 yards from his position. No doubt it was the VC and NVA taking pot shots at the advisor on the beach. It was the practice of the VC to continue inflicting multiple wounds of their enemy once they

knocked them down. It was an unmerciful treatment of another man and was not taken lightly by enraged Marines on the kill.

The headquarters group had been taking this bad scene in over the radio while enroute to the objective. Our tractor had gotten underway well ahead of the larger body of the 3rd platoon still waiting for transportation. An estimate was that it would put the headquarters group to arrive at their dismount point about ten minutes ahead of the 3rd Platoon's expected arrival. The last LVTs were spotted coming up the beach for 3rd Platoon shortly after the third load of the company headed south.

While dismounting behind the dune, 2nd Platoon under the leadership of Lt. Earl "Skip" Kruger reported taking small arms and machinegun fire from My Loc. Kruger also indicated some of the Marines pinned down to his front were alive and signaling for help.

The reports of the two platoon leaders demanded that immediate action to relieve the pinned down recon Marines had to be taken. I had enough confidence in these two officers to order them to prepare to conduct a coordinated assault with the 1st Platoon on the river bank being supported by 2nd Platoon (-) providing suppressive fire. I advised them to execute on my command and just behind artillery fire on the eastern edge My Loc. This was the location of the enemy positions as reported by Rankin and Kruger.

My call for fire support was halted by the s-3. I asked for a reason to deny artillery support. At first I did not quite believe my ears over the roar of the LVT's engine exhaust. I was told that the fire support request was denied as "friendlies" were inside the village. In short, if there were to be an assault to relieve the pinned down Marines, it would have to be accomplished with rifles and hand grenades. To say that I was stunned at receiving a check fire in the midst of a blazing firefight is an understatement.

Just as I arrived at the location behind the 2nd Platoon on the blocking position, Rankin reported several Marines moving safely into his position on the riverbank. Rankin confirmed they were part of the battalion recon unit. Kruger was hopping to rescue the downed Marines to his front.

I advised Rankin and Kruger there would be no artillery prep fires. I told them to follow the original plan with 1st Platoon advancing on the left with 2nd Platoon giving suppressive fire. I warned Rankin to give it the old squad leap frogging approach with each supporting the other. He gave me a "Roger, roger." Soon Rankin called Kruger to give him the support and firing came down from the assembled line of Marines as Rankin and his Marines leaped forward. Within just four or five minutes Rankin's fire slowed and the remnants of Kruger's platoon fell into line. Now Rankin swung his platoon to the right and covered Kruger as he pushed off the dune and crossed the open space east of My Loc. Enemy fire picked up along the 2nd Platoon's front and a Marine dropped here and there only to fall into the scramble of those of the reconnaissance squad pinned down earlier.

From my OP it was only too clear that the 2nd Platoon did not fair as well as 1st platoon. It looked like six Marines fell to the small arms and machinegun fire. Kruger's platoon did make the fringe of the village and engaged the enemy directly. He reported that while some of the NVA held their positions some came out and engaged the 2nd Platoon in hand-to-hand combat.

[The insertion of a qualifying statement is in order at this point. As any good 2nd Lieutenant would tell you, it is very unwise and unprofessional for a commander of Marines to ask them to assault an enemy position in broad open daylight without benefit of supporting suppressive artillery or CAS being first applied sufficiently to destroy or at least severely weaken that enemy.)

Once I had confirmed recovery of the other half of the reconn squad by Rankin's platoon, to the S-3, and returned to my OP, I requested artillery again to bring fire to bear on the enemy. The S-3 interjected another "check fire" immediately. I demanded an explanation for his denying me supporting fires. He advised me that "friendlies" were still in the village. Again I argued Marines were pinned down to my front, an American advisor was pinned down to my left front and it was very likely that with no support fires their relief could not be accomplished without taking more casualties. At this point, the battalion commander interjected and told me to do what had to be done but without artillery prep fires or CAS.

During all this session of exchanges I was not aware that the 3rd Platoon had not come onto line at the blocking position.

In spite of being denied prep fires for the continuing engagement, 1st and 2nd Platoons had made the village. 1st Platoon had had a light engagement but 2nd had become more embroiled with enemy in fighting positions and machinegun nests. At one point the center of 2nd Platoon where Kruger led from, engaged uniformed soldiers. Kruger later told me while he had been expecting VC in their usual civilian attire; he recognized these to be NVA soldiers. They also had to be dug out of their positions. Kruger found himself emptying his .45 on two NVA. When his radioman fell behind him, he found himself facing an NVA. Before the NVA could turn on him, Kruger tackled him, knocked his weapon loose and choked the little man into unconsciousness. He gave him the coup de grace with the butt of the man's own AK-47 before discovering it to be empty.

Far off to my right front and almost beyond my field of vision I heard heavy small arms, machinegun and mortar fire. I contacted the S-3 after checking my watch to ask if the ARVN battalion had kicked off thirty minutes early. The response was "Negative" from the S-3, and then a frantic call came in from 3rd Platoon's radio operator, Cpl. Dan Reeves. The garbled call from Reeves made me realize that 3rd Platoon had not taken up their designated position in the block. I moved to the north face of the dune and saw no Marines. From this vantagepoint I could look west and saw not one but two tractors about 300 yards away and could see the 82 mm mortar rounds impacting around the vehicles. The small arms fire and machineguns were exchanging fire from both sides. Lieutenant Richard "Rich" Reynolds had grossly overshoot his designated position and had apparently been ambushed. Reeves soon confirmed this as he lay atop an LVT as I

observed through my binoculars. Reeves was obvious by the radio on his back. He had some protection behind the pile of sandbags around the .30 caliber machinegun position on the LVTs top.

Reeves had been wounded twice. Once from small arms and another from fragments. The fragments had splintered off a projectile and struck him in the throat. This explained why his words seemed to be garbled. Progressively he was having difficulty forming his words. I presumed he was spitting blood as he coughed as he spoke. In spite of his wounds, Reeves was clear-headed and in control of himself.

Reeves gave me a clear assessment of the crisis. He said that for some reason the platoon went right past the blocking position and continued to do so until the top of the two tractors were raked with enemy gunfire. (In retrospect, I have realized that Reynolds may have had Reeves with him for my mission briefing while at Ocean View. That would explain Reeves' knowing where the blocking position was designated.)

Reeves knew that the platoon leader was severely wounded, maybe even dead. Apparently Lt. Reynolds did not see the rest of the company as it had come off the positions on the dune line east of My Loc and had actually attacked into the village.

Reeves further told me that the platoon sergeant, Gunny Buell Thompson was trying to organize the remaining Marines into fighting positions, but the enemy fire coming in was so intense that it was difficult to even move around. He was not certain how many Marines were WIA or KIA. He could only guess that there was less than half the platoon capable of putting up a good defense. The platoon had been at strength of 30 when it departed the DMZ less than 30 minutes earlier.

The platoon had overshot their assigned position by roughly 300 meters. It was inconceivable as to how such a gross error could have happened. Two platoon leaders got it correct and one missed it completely. Thirty-five years later I discovered how the mistake might have come to pass. During a reunion of the Amgrunts at Quantico, Virginia, 1st S^{gt} Buell "Tom" Thompson asked me if we could have the talk I had promised him on January 23, 1968. His question brought to mind that he and I had discussed having a serious talk the day the Special Landing Force of 3rd Battalion 1st Marines had relieved us in contact with the NVA. As Thompson and I moved away from the others at the reunion, I asked him what he might have thought of the cause for Reynolds to miss the assigned position. In general terms Thompson told me that he hoped I recalled just how single-minded Reynolds had been. I assured him I was aware Reynolds was headstrong and had to be closely directed because of his thinking that he knew better than most others did. Thompson said Reynolds was very prone to "doing things his way" instead of following directions from above.

Thompson reminded me that he had not been included in my briefing of the mission. He said that Reynolds frequently did not brief him on the missions, nor did he inform the members of the platoon. This really surprised me. It also made sense as to why so many men of the 3rd Platoon who had survived January 20 had questioned me of

the events of that day so closely over the years. For most, all thought that I had ordered the platoon into that ambush position. In each case I advised them that was not the case. One does not separate units by such a large expanse while performing a blocking mission. Also, I would explain, you do not have to physically cover what one can cover by fire. It is not likely the absolute answer to why Reynolds went beyond the designated position will ever be known. The answer to the more important question confronting the survival of the 3rd Platoon at the time developed from an observation by Cpl. Reeves as he lay atop the LVT. He reported that he could see large numbers of NVA coming out from the village and working their way through the dunes and tombs in the cemetery. I realized they were forming to assault the beleaguered Marines. Immediately I called for artillery fire. Once again I got the check fire due to friendlies being in the village. At this point I unleashed a rash of improper language and radio procedure and advised the person that imposed the check fire that the loss of the remaining Marines would be on his head and to hell with Vietnamese "friendlies". I reasoned that surely none of his "friendlies" were among the numerous NVA advancing onto the Alpha 3 Marine's position. The fire mission was cleared promptly and the first round for adjustment crashed into the dunes just past the graveyard. The shot was out of sight from my position so I directed Reeves to pass me the "over" distance. He passed it was 200 meters long. I quickly called for a drop of 200 and this round dropped dead center of the NVA moving toward Reeves. A quick battery one fire for effect went out to the FDC. It seemed like there was an instant response and the rounds rained down onto the NVA. I asked Reeves for an assessment and he indicated only a hand full of NVA continued to come forward. Another fire for effect was ordered. This one did not come in. When I questioned the delay I was informed that a check fire had been called for by the entry of an aircraft into the line of fire. I looked skyward and saw a helicopter traveling from south to north just above the trees. It entered the exact area the artillery rounds would have fallen.

The helo was a slick, not a gun ship. There was a door gunner on either side of the HU1E. The crew of the aircraft began taking NVA under fire as they circled their positions in the cemetery. Cpl. Reeves could not measure the gun ship's effectiveness against the NVA. They were firing back but were not scoring effective hits as the helo continued to circle at about 2,500 feet, just above the maximum ordinate of the enemy weapons. From time to time Reeves could see NVA continuing to advance toward his location. He also reported that the machine gun position that had raked the tops of the LVTs was still active and had the Marines capable of fighting pinned down in the open and flat area of the desert.

While the helicopter worked over the NVA positions, I called for the 4th Platoon under Lt. Donald R. Head to move south. He reported he had been monitoring the fight and had ordered a couple of tracks, one of which he had given to 3rd Platoon and kept the one in case he was called upon as the company reserve. On my order he abandoned the northerly position and mounted up his platoon. Within ten minutes he reported in that he was nearing the opening in the tree line along the beach where he could turn toward the blocking position. I gave him the order to go directly toward the 3rd Platoon position, dismount at least 100 meters away, and using the LVT as a shield, close with the 3rd Platoon.

Head's tractor made his turn and proceeded across the flat sandy terrain but only made it half way.

Lt. Kruger reported in that he had suppressed the NVA in his sector sufficiently to allow he and his men to recover wounded and dead back to the blocking position. His rear guard and Lt. Rankin's men on their right flank were suppressing the light fire he was continuing to receive. Rankin confirmed he had moved all his men back to the high dune of the block.

It appeared the helo did not have radio contact with anyone in our battalion. Apparently, the helo had been reported by the Direct Air Support Center out of Dong Ha as entering our air space. He did not consider it necessary to clear his entry into our air space with our operations center, the supporting unit for the ARVN battalion preparing to go into the assault. It is doubtful he understood the battalion's TAOR boundaries. At that time, his ARVN battalion had not kicked off to assault West Ma Xa Thi. Still, he was operating over our ground instead of covering his own force. The fire support was more than welcome, but his persistent orbit of the area interfered with our delivery of supporting fires being requested by 1st and 2nd Platoons. We could not reach him to ask him to clear the area so we could place heavy blanketing fire upon the creeping progress of the NVA. Shortly the HU1E broke off contact and departed the area toward the west. We adjusted the artillery and again poured it onto the area where they had advanced to in the graves. My adjustments had improved considerably as I had managed to recover the 1st and 2nd Platoons from their entry into My Loc. They had recovered all the wounded and killed of the reconn squad. Additionally, Lt. Rankin advised me that the Junk Fleet advisor had been recovered by his own Vietnamese sailors and was enroute to the NSA port facility ramp for medical aid.

During the course of reports from Rankin I moved from my OP overlooking My Loc and the two platoon's actions and moved beyond the blocking position into the open low sand dunes. This was a distance of about 50 yards. It afforded me a clear view of the 3rd Platoon's location. From here I could observe and adjust the artillery fire.

Cpl. Reeves called for more support. As I raised my glasses to deliver on his request, I saw a heart-stopping sight. Just to the left of the 3rd Platoon's position, a ball of fire erupted and began moving across the open space from the NVA position toward the Marines. "Flame thrower!" I yelled. The men of the Headquarters Section all turned to see the flame increasing, then suddenly arching upward and expending into the air above the position from which it originated. The deadly flame never reached the 3rd Platoon location. One of the Marines had obviously killed the NVA operator just as he rose to fire. (Following the operation, one of the 3rd Platoon men, Robert "Cookie" Cook, was debriefed and made a recording for the division oral history program. In this interview he related he had fired the shot that killed the flame thrower operator. He thought this to be a very good shot as somehow he had lost the rear sight of his M-14 rifle in the firefight.)

The requested artillery fire I had asked for prior to the HU1E's interfering was delivered. I had made one more adjustment of fire when I heard large caliber guns firing

from above the DMZ. These distinctive muzzle reports were so embedded in the consciousness of all Marines at the Cua Viet; there was never a question on one's immediate response to assure safety.

Since all members had dug foxholes at this new position, we all went to ground instinctively like prairie dogs at the first sound of possible danger. Less than 30 seconds later four very large caliber rounds, probably 152mm size, impacted smack in our positions. They definitely had our range without adjustments. This FO was good. A quick head check indicated no casualties. Most were spitting out dust and smoke and probably had buzzing in their ears, but no shrapnel had hit anyone. The magic of the sand was with us.

As the dust and sand rained down from the enemy artillery impacting my CP location I looked north to see Lt. Head's tractor suddenly stop and rise up off the ground. The vehicle had struck a large mine. It was probably a double stacked set of TM-41 mines. Its force was so great that it lifted the front of the LVT up at least 40 degrees off the ground. Marines could not hold on and tumbled off onto the sand. For several minutes Head could not be contacted. Finally, he reported in and advised me he had nine wounded, one of which was his platoon sergeant. He further indicated he was reorganizing and would continue on foot, "... as soon as I can bandage my knee."

This was the third LVT Lt. Head had been aboard that had struck antitank mines. In the first two cases, he had received injuries to his right knee when the joint had been jammed so badly he had been placed on light duty. He indicated he was ready as he had fashioned a figure eight bandage brace from his jungle utilities pant leg he had cut off. He formed up his men and hastily hobbled forward across the open desert, .45 automatic in hand.

The NVA artillery FO repeated two more barrages on the headquarters group and then switched to the 3rd Platoon position. This prompted me to get on the horn to the DASC. I requested immediate support of a NAO (Tactical) in an O1-B Bird Dog to our area to conduct some counter-battery fire on the big guns above the DMZ. I was assured that a bird in the area would be dispatched very soon. Within five minutes I received a call from the NAO as he reported in to give support.

This NAO's voice sounded very familiar. When I asked if his first and last initials were "CR" he affirmed with "Roger, roger. Who's asking?"

I replied with "Marty J."

"Hey Poindexter. What can I do for you today?"

After I gave Capt. Charles Ramsey the lay of the situation, he and his pilot moved toward the north to see if they could locate the enemy artillery based on the bearing I had given. (Lt. Chuck Ramsey had been one of the instructors that had taken myself and three others through the division Naval Aerial Observer school in Marine Observation Squadron-2 at the Futenma Air Facility on Okinawa back in 1963. He had taught aerial navigation. Shortly after that school I moved to Danang for duty with "Shufly," the Marine helicopter support unit operating throughout 1st and 2nd Corps Combat Zones.

These support operations by Shufly rendered helicopter lift support and observation/fire support to the ARVN, US Army Special Forces and US Air Force Air Commandos.) Later in the day I gave my air radioman the word to contact the NAO to pull him back south to observe the village and areas north. The radioman indicated no response. He also mentioned that he had seen the aircraft had passed behind a hill above the DMZ but it had not come back up. Two weeks I learned from a watch officer in the DASC that they had indeed lost that aircraft and the pilot and NAO. Both were presumed dead.

Head and his battered platoon hustled right along until they were within 150 yards of the 3rd. That's when the NVA FO picked them up in his field of vision through his binoculars. He shifted to engage the 4th Platoon. Head heard the reports of the enemy artillery and hastened his men to close with the 3rd Platoon's position. The 152mm rounds fell about 50 yards behind the 4th Platoon. Before the FO could shift and bring fire onto Heads men, they closed the gap and took refuge between the rock and the hard spot. All the time they advanced the NVA ahead of them delivered rifle and machine gun fire around them. They now had the NVA infantry to their front and the NVA artillery to their back.

Belatedly I reported having committed my reserve and the status of my company to the battalion headquarters. The 1st and 2nd Platoons had given me a head count of dead and wounded that had departed aboard an LVT sent out by the company 1st Sgt. None of the 3rd's wounded could be moved out of harms way as the small arms and artillery were too heavy to land any helos. The LVTs were inoperable due to having been struck by RPG-7s. They only served as refuge for wounded from direct small arms fire.

Lt. Head reorganized the remainder of 3rd Platoon into his 4th and relieved Gunny Thompson for a break in leading his small band. Head then assessed the defenses and prepared his men to load up and prepare to move to more defensible terrain by taking that terrain away from the NVA. He called in artillery fire extremely close and softened up the objective. His own artillery shrapnel splattered and pinged off the LVTs behind the Marines on line to assault. At his command, the composite platoon rose up before the dust and smoke cleared and assaulted the enemy. They destroyed the NVA positions with rifles, hand grenades and M-79 grenades.

My Situation Report on Company "A's" status after the fighting in My Loc, relieving the reconn squad and the Junk Fleet group along with the 3rd and 4th Platoon fights triggered the battalion commander to activate Company "B" to launch two platoons under their company commander, Major Joe Burger. I was alerted of this decision at about the time they cleared the gap in the trees along the beach and approached my position. Meanwhile, Head and his composite platoon were working over small pockets of NVA in the dunes and gravesites.

Burger gave me the courtesy of reinforcing Head and remaining under my control as he said, "I'll go help Alpha 4. You continue to run the show. You are doing pretty well and I see no reason to change now." It was quite a complement from a fine Marine and son of another fine Marine.

Burger with two platoons closed in on the point of heaviest engagement and relieved Head for the cleanup. Burger's Marines took several casualties during the cleaning up. One casualty was most unusual. A platoon leader by the name of Kaufman advancing on the enemy turned his head to give a command and just as he opened his mouth a bullet passed between his lips, impacted his teeth on the left lower mandible and blew out the side of his face. A year and a half later I met Kaufman at Henderson Hall in Arlington, Virginia. He had survived and had undergone many surgeries to reconstruct his jaw and graft on a damaged face. It was at this meeting I had heard his entire story.

As Burger was directing the cleanup of the NVA, he initiated medical evacuation of all the WIAs. Head was directed to prepare the wounded for evacuation while Burger kept the NVA busy. For the third time that day Head earned his combat pay. The Corpsmen had sorted out the KIAs and done their identification of the critically wounded from the routine medical evacuees.

Head called for "med-evac" support and within about 15 minutes two helos appeared over the area. The criticals had been carried out to the selected landing zone (LZ) and placed in a shallow wash that was protected from grazing fire. Head and his radio operator rose up and walked out into clear view. I could see him talking on the handset and then signaling with an outstretched arm to identify himself to the helo pilots. I switched to the med-evac channel just as one pilot asked if the LZ was hot. Head answered that it was not and for them to come on in and to land to the east of him east and facing him. The position selected would put the choppers just alongside where the six criticals were resting with Corpsmen and three other Marines. The birds made their approach from over the sea, skimming the tall Australian pines and the desert toward Head and his radioman. Suddenly a pilot said, "Did you say this zone was not hot?" Head responded, "Come on in." They continued to descend and just as they hit their skids to sand, the Corpsmen and Marines began shuttling the critically wounded aboard the two helos. As the helos began lifting off, the lead bird's pilot yelled out, "God dammit!" That zone is definitely hot. I just lost my windscreen from small arms. Damn it, you lied to me." Head's response was, "Well Marine, you've earned your flight and combat pay for the day now haven't you?" The pilot continued to rave to no effect on the Marines on the ground.

The non-critically wounded were loaded aboard one of the Company "B" LVTs and transported back to the battalion aid station for treatment and evacuation.

Burger closed up the enemy position, eliminating the last few NVA and reported the position secure. We agreed the area secure and began recovering the two damaged LVTs. Somehow, one of the Bravo men got the second LVT running again and hooked onto the vehicle that led them across the desert. The long slow recovery began to return the damaged LVT back to the battalion maintenance area below the river.

Major Burger recovered to my OP gave KIA counts and me quick debrief of his wounded. I asked to keep one of his platoons and was graciously granted my wish. Since his Lt. Kaufman had been wounded and evacuated, he left me Lt. Tom Anselmo and his men. Anselmo was wounded the following day and medevac with a head wound.

On the second night in our blocking position the ARVN battalion had made it through West and East Ma Xa Thi but could not crack the enemy defenses of the western side of My Loc. That area had the heaviest positions as it contained most of the concrete block structures and the concentration of the village structures. It likened to a rabbit warren. We later engaged this area from the river and dealt it a crippling blow with 106 mm recoilless rifles delivering high explosive plastic rounds. The rounds literally leveled all the structures, leaving no where for NVA to hide. These actions were in support of 3/1, the battalion that relieved Company "A" and "B" from their blocking mission. They landed around 0100 on the morning of the fourth day just north of the graveyard of My Loc, engaging an NVA force moving down from the DMZ. The NVA were obviously on a mission to reinforce the engaged NVA inside My Loc. They were thwarted by the swift and clever action of one of 3/1s companies.

After landing above the graveyard, a company of Marines quickly moved to a knoll of sand dunes north of the graves and ran into NVA scouts. They drove off the scouts and proceeded to dig in and strung wire around the hasty defenses. The Marines considered that the NVA would quickly consolidate and prepare an assault to catch their enemy within a lightly defended position. The company commander cleared his plan with his battalion commander and shortly after dark executed a silent withdrawal back into the battalion lines. The old defensive position was targeted for an on-call Time On Target (TOT) of about 4 batteries of artillery out of the Cua Viet base and Dong Ha as well as Naval Gun Fire from gun station 23 at sea. As suspected, the NVA commander executed a hasty assault lead with sappers, mortar fires and assault troops. The TOT was fired onto the point of the assault and beyond over two hundred meters like a broom sweeping trash back and forth. The following day the Marine company moved into and finalized the clean up of the NVA battalion of what few die-hards remained.

This was not the end of Tet for the Amgrunt Battalion. Some of the toughest fighting continued into May of 1968 and even into the very last days of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion's last days in country . . . at the Cua Viet.

Poindexter M. Johnson