

It Was "You and Me, Lord" When It Came to Operations in the ROCKET BELT

By R. R. Keene

The Rocket Belt. There may be hotter spots in Vietnam, but only a few. Standing under the midday sun, one can feel the runway at the old An Hoa combat base decompose.

The heat rises off the cracked cement, burns through leather-soled boots and, all too often, reaches unbelievable temperatures of 120 degrees plus.

In the distance are places and names once common to leathernecks of the First Marine Division and supporting units: Antenna Valley, Arizona Territory, Happy Valley, Charlie Ridge, the Que Son Mountains and Go Noi Island. It was in this area south and southwest of Da Nang that the flood of North Vietnamese soldiers and supplies fanned out from their epic trek down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

U.S. Marine veterans of that war who revisited the area recently had come to remember. Some remembered mid-June of 1967 when Seventh Marine Regiment conducted Operation Arizona, which moved 1,650 refugees to camps at Duc Duc, near An Hoa. By early summer of 1967, the 2d North Vietnamese Army Division and Viet Cong poured replacements into what they referred to as the Thu Bon area between Da Nang and An Hoa. Their mission was to gain control of the heavily populated Que Son Valley, particularly the Que Son Basin and the rice-rich, 12-kilometer-long, Go Noi Island.

The communists rightly saw the massive base at Da Nang as a threat and, therefore, an objective. Da Nang had, since 1965, been the bastion of the U.S. Marine presence in South Vietnam, headquarters of the III Marine Amphibious Force, 1stMarDiv, First Marine Aircraft Wing and Force Logistics Command. The air base housed tactical squadrons of the U.S. and Vietnamese Air Forces. The city and surrounding suburbs were home to 300,000 civilians.

Attacks on Da Nang were considered great psychological blows against the American forces. Such attacks were also dangerous for the communists. They had lobbed their first rockets at the base in February 1967. The Marines had immediately intensified their patrols and ambushes within what leathernecks referred to as the "Rocket Belt," from which, on any given day, as many as 800 rockets would rain down on U.S. positions.

By summer, the communists' confidence received a boost. They had gained their edge in the form of Soviet-made 122 mm rockets hauled with care on the backs of conscripts down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The 122 mm rocket was a high trajectory weapon. A well-trained crew could set up almost anywhere and in less than 30 minutes send rounds onto "the American imperialist and their puppet government forces" 12,000 meters away (2,000 meters farther than the 140 mm rockets the communists had been using). It extended the Rocket Belt and put the crews safely beyond the Marine patrols.

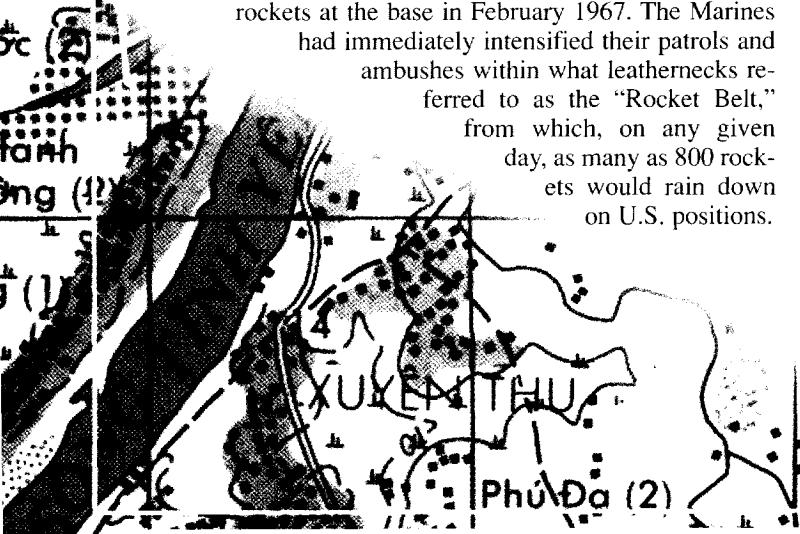
On 14 July the communists struck, as usual, at night. Those close to the impact areas heard the fearful sound similar to a freight train-pulling-boxcars coming from the southwest out of Happy Valley. As warning sirens wailed, Da Nang's residents scrambled for cover. The lights of the city went out, but the explosions and resulting fires cast a surreal and terrible light. Within five minutes, 50 explosions rocked the base. Ten aircraft exploded and burned in their revetments; another 40 were damaged. Thirteen barracks were destroyed. From the city's southwest, a white ball flashed as the bomb dump went up. It looked almost nuclear as it expanded, sending a shock wave throughout all Da Nang.

While those in Da Nang hunkered down in their bunkers, Viet Cong forces capitalized on the confusion and struck to the south, lobbing mortar rounds into the U.S. advisor's compound at the coastal town of Hoi An. At the same time, two platoons of VC wearing South Vietnamese Army uniforms stormed the Quang Nam Province bastille, releasing 1,196 military and political prisoners.

The attack forced immediate adjustments to III MAF's defense of the air base. Commanders expanded patrolling the width of the Rocket Belt to include the maximum ranges of both 140 mm and 122 mm rockets.

Patrols on the ground and in the air increased. Water traffic became subject to curfew. Reconnaissance Marines found themselves on more and deeper intelligence-gathering missions along approach routes outside the Belt. More than 90 percent of the 1stMarDiv's psychological warfare efforts were concentrated in the Rocket Belt.

For the Marines operating in the Rocket Belt, the war was particularly frustrating. They were the spectrum of American youth—from "redneck" farmers to streetwise kids. Unlike the soldiers who they often barked at, they did a 13-month vice one-year tour of duty. The Marines barked at the "doggies" partly because the soldiers were equipped better. Marines still wore the old belt suspender straps, sateen utilities and leather boots, and they had only recently transitioned, in a combat zone, from the M14 to M16A1 rifles.



The Marines copped an attitude of meanness after subsisting on C-rations from cans containing grease-coated ham and "muthas," a lack of beer, and too much warm Kool-Aid. They were forced to throw away their jungle-rotted skivvies, check for immersion foot and rub insect repellent on their bone-deep sunburns scabbed with insect bites—all before lighting up a menthol cigarette.

Each patrol contended with the probability of encountering mines and booby traps, not to mention the possibility of coping with rabies in the animals, venom in the snakes, malaria in the mosquitoes, leeches in the water, liver flukes in the wells and tuberculosis in the "villes" or villages. And, there was the always-oppressive heat. Metal rifle barrels exposed to the sun could cause a first-degree burn. When explosives didn't kill or maim, the heat drained and dehydrated men in the sun. Heat casualties were casualties nonetheless, to be treated and evacuated.

Those who remained learned to live with gnawing and continuous fear. While the fear seldom paralyzed them, neither did it ever completely go away. Daily, the Marines slipped into web gear and flak jackets soaked in the stale stench of their own sweat. On their faded camouflage helmet covers, many wrote their own epitaphs and scrawled them in dark black U.S. Government ink. While not original, those expressions were signs of the times: "We try harder," "I'm serving my time in Hell," "Stop! Don't shoot. I'm short," and "You and me, Lord!"

They feared because so-called secure areas were never entirely secure. Patrols through the villes and hamlets often ended with explosions. Mines and booby traps accounted for more than half of the division's casualties in the first six months of 1967.

One Marine officer described typical villages: "In each instance, the village had a wire fence around the perimeter ... concealed in bamboo tree lines or camouflaged with bamboo and shrubs. Behind these fences, the enemy had dug a communication trench ... four to six feet deep with firing positions and deep caves for protection against artillery and air attack. Spider holes, caves and bunkers were found in depth through the village.

Fortifications were carefully located to achieve an interlocking and mutually supporting series of defensive positions.

The [villages] were located such that attacking infantry had to cross stream barriers [to reach] the defensive positions. As attacking troops emerged from the streambeds, they found themselves within close range [50 to 100 meters] of the enemy defenses with open rice paddies in-between. [Villages] were situated on the side of the valley adjacent to high ground so the enemy had ready routes of egress into the mountains. ... When Marine units attacked in the afternoon, the enemy defended with vigor. When Marine units delayed an attack until dawn and conducted heavy preparation by air and artillery, the NVA made their escape."

There were no easy solutions in the Rocket Belt, and rocket attacks continued.

