

The frustration of the rocket belt

Keene, R R
Leatherneck; Mar 2000; 83, 3; Marine Corps Gazette & Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines
pg. 34

Former Marine Erkki "Eric" Nevatie, created this canvas painting, "The Patrol." It depicts operations in the Rocket Belt where rockets such as these (pictured below) were captured. (USMC photo)

Counting the dead,
counting the wounded
and counting the days....

The Frustration of the

Retired Marine Colonel Roger H. Barnard, who had returned to Vietnam in September 1999 with Military Historical Tours, squinted to cut the glare of sun on the sandbanks of the Thu Bon River.

Up to two years ago, one could see the water-logged pilings of the old Liberty Bridge. Now, there were only sampans riding precariously low in the river, weighted to their gunnels with grain. Col Barnard's memory, with a little effort, reconstructed most of the missing and changed landscape. His memories also added shades of the people who had been there.

It was 1967, and then-Lieutenant Colonel Barnard, at age 37, was considered an old man by the 18- to 21-year-old leathernecks of 3d Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment, which he commanded. Like most Marine officers, the regimen of the Corps had kept Barnard lean, sinewy and physically young. The native of Lincoln, Neb., had enlisted in 1948 and found the Corps so much to his liking that he eventually earned a commission. He was also

a combat veteran of the Korean War

where, 16 years earlier as a platoon commander, he had led Marines under fire. Consequently, the ugliness of war was not new to him.

Still, many things about this war were different, and he was not prepared for the emotion of seeing his first dead Marine in Vietnam.

"I remember the anger. He had been killed by a mine," said Barnard. "From then on when I saw enemy dead, I recall saying to myself, 'I do not feel sorry for you.'" He recalled thinking briefly that it probably would be best if everything that could help the communists was destroyed.

Viet Cong tactics against their own countrymen and women also fostered similar hate.

In two savage attacks against district headquarters and refugee settlements at Duc Duc and Dai Loc, the VC murdered 34 unarmed civilians. Another 51 were never seen again.

The Marines reciprocated by launching a series of operations to drive the communists from the Rocket Belt. The most significant turned out to be Operation Foster conducted by LtCol

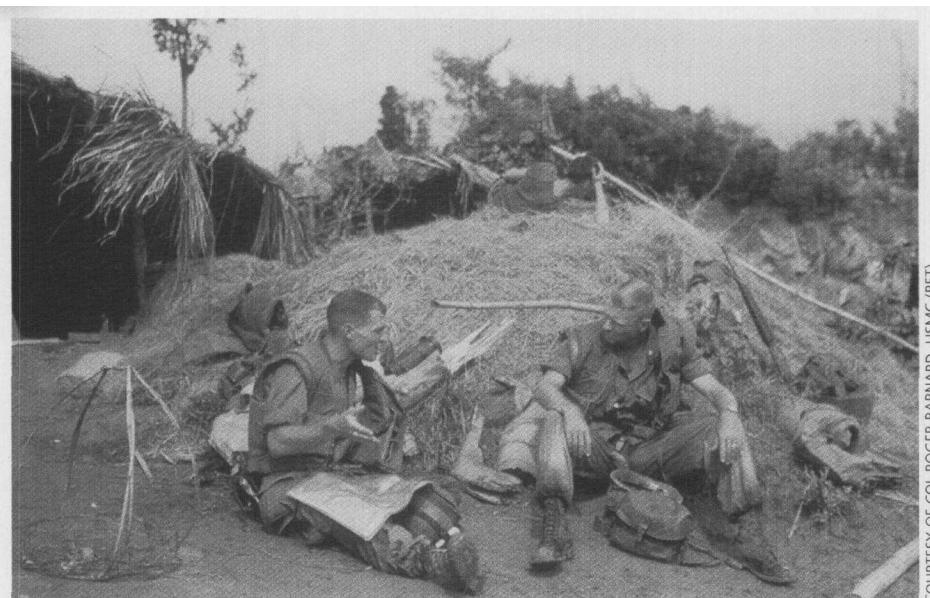
Barnard's battalion. Foster was essentially a search and destroy mission into the river complex of the Dai Loc District and the flatlands and foothills north and east of An Hoa. Intelligence placed two battalions and a company of VC in these areas, and the Marines went to destroy them.

Operation Foster began at 0900, 13 November. Barnard's Marines jumped out of their helicopters and faded into the countryside northeast of An Hoa at a small island the Marines called "the football" near Dai Loc. They caught a few VC by surprise, mostly small bands trying too late to make good an escape.

Once the first few flushed, Marine reconnaissance and aerial observers spotted more. It became easier to call for artillery or air strikes than to pursue so many fleeing VC. Besides, Barnard's leathernecks had hit a jackpot of communist caches. They destroyed some 6,000 buildings, bunkers, tunnels and shelters, and captured 87 tons of rice. The Marine air-ground combination had killed 125 VC and captured eight. They also evacuated more than 11,500 refugees from the communist-dominated area.

"We evacuated the refugees and put them up in squad tents on Hill 37," said

By
R. R. Keene



COURTESY OF COL ROGER BARNARD, USMC (RET)

Much of the work to disrupt communist rocket attacks fell to LtCol Roger Barnard's 3d Bn, 7th Marines. During Operation Foster in 1967, Barnard (right) conferred with one of his company commanders, Capt Jack Baggette of India Co.

Barnard. "Marines cooked rice 24 hours a day. I don't know how much good it did to move them. We would haul them out, feed them and they'd slip back to their homes. I remember one old woman who was evacuated three or four times."

According to reports, it "annoyed the local communist leaders." They had lost their labor force. As the Marines challenged their hold on the people, communist terror attacks increased. As 1967 ended, it was obvious to everyone, especially the communists, that unless something was done to reverse the situation, they would lose control of the Que Son Basin.

Operation Foster and a companion operation, Badger Hunt, had cost the Marines too. Twenty-five had been killed and 136 wounded.

Barnard took stock: "I guess I shouldn't have been, but I was surprised at how good and dedicated the Marines were,

Holed-up in a shot-up hooch, LtCol Barnard listened as his operations officer, Maj Werner McIver, worked radio communications. (Photo courtesy of Col Roger Barnard, USMC (Ret))



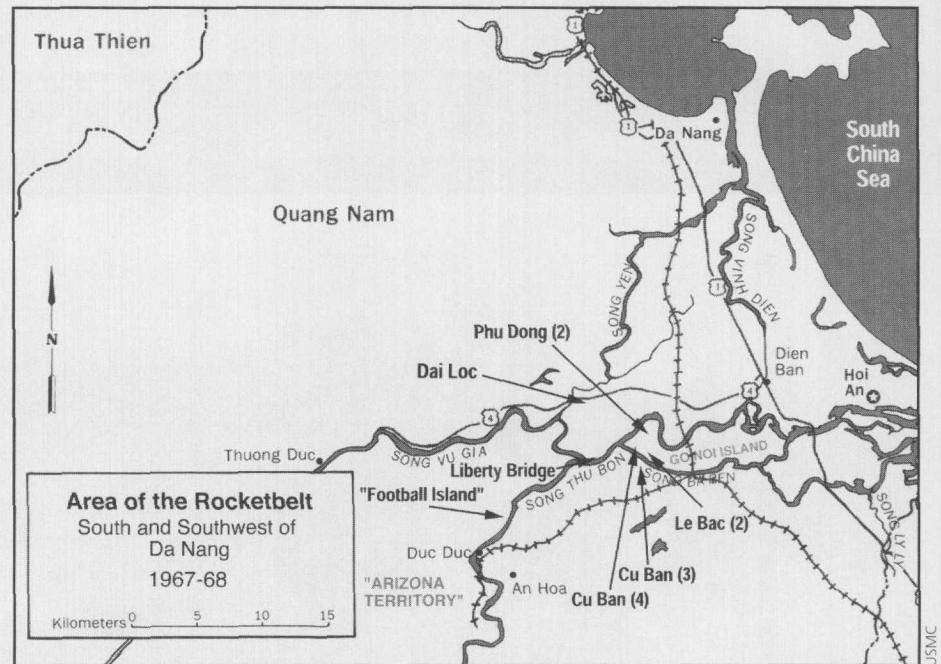
especially against such an elusive enemy."

Barnard's confidence in the discipline of the Marines and their training was reinforced. "Initially, I thought, 'I didn't train these guys. How do I know if they know such things as how to move tactically, or if they know anything more than the basics?' Then I realized you had to have confidence that other Marines had done their jobs and that each man was properly trained."

He was also fortunate in his officers. "My executive officer was Major Bob Woeckener. He knew the book. He knew how to handle people. He was good!"

Barnard's company commanders were also good, and Company L's Captain Carl Shaver was the best in the battalion. "I didn't have to teach him anything. He came up with the ideas. In one operation near Hill 52, the night was so black that Capt Shaver used a large ball of knotted string to measure distance and guide his men. Morale in his company was so high, his men used to joke about leaving the Corps and together hire out as mercenaries."

Barnard also had learned that even a battalion commander does not know the "big picture" and that things often seem "nonsensical."



"The local population, which had no males in the daytime, was friendly, but then, they were friendly to everyone carrying weapons." Also, "black markings on the overlays of maps made the brass at division happy. The blacker the overlay the better."

Barnard recalled: "In January 1968,

we noticed an increase in enemy patrols headed toward Da Nang. The number of enemy killed in ambushes rose. We now know they were staging for Tet [the Vietnamese Lunar New Year]."

Barnard was ordered to evacuate a company off Hill 52 and consolidate his forces. "We pulled out at night and de-

nated everything we couldn't carry."

With Tet, the communists hit. "At night, we watched the rockets headed for Da Nang and later learned about the attack on Hue in Northern I Corps. Marines who had been heloed to nearby Charlie Ridge saw a column of VC or North Vietnamese Army and called mortar fire on them."

Da Nang wasn't the only communist target in the area. Closer to Barnard's position, the 2d NVA Div moved the Da Nang-based R-20 VC Bn along with the 1st VC and the 3d NVA regiments toward Go Noi Island. Elements of the 368B NVA Rocket Artillery Regt dug firing positions to the west and north of 7th Marines. The 402d Sapper and V25 VC battalions, with other local forces, girded for combat.

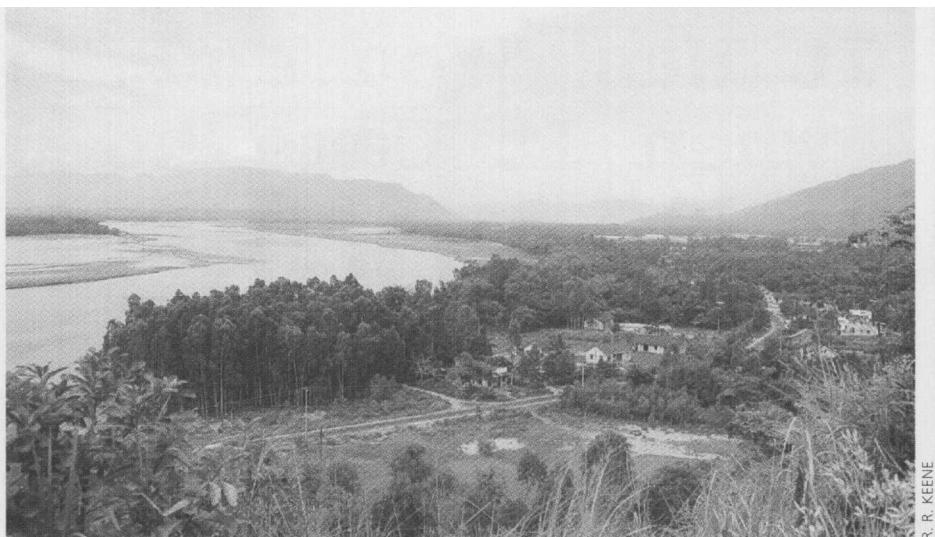
In the Rocket Belt, the fighting continued after the Tet assaults with all their fury ended. Tactically, the Tet offensive was a defeat for the communists. Back in the States, however, television pictures of communists in South Vietnam's major cities were a harbinger of the end of American involvement. On 31 March 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced a partial halt in the bombing of North Vietnam and then sent an additional 13,500 troops to South Vietnam. (Marine Corps force levels would reach 89,000.) President Johnson then declared he would not seek reelection due to the war and public unrest at home.

By April, operations conducted by 7th Marines centered 12 miles south of Da Nang on an island formed by the channels of the Thu Bon, Ky Lam and Ba Ren rivers known as Go Noi.

"Typical operations would last about five days," explained Barnard. "Intel would tell us where we were going. We'd go in with flak vests, helmets, carrying gas masks, two canteens each and one day of rations. Riflemen carried a standard load of ammunition, which included two bandoleers plus what was on our belts."

Barnard's command group was basically standard. Attached were artillery and air liaison officers.

"We also had a couple of Kit Carson Scouts [former VC who had volunteered to serve as guides]," Barnard said. "We'd move and search by day, resupply before dusk and set in for the night. On the small-unit level, enemy intelligence was very good because there was always at



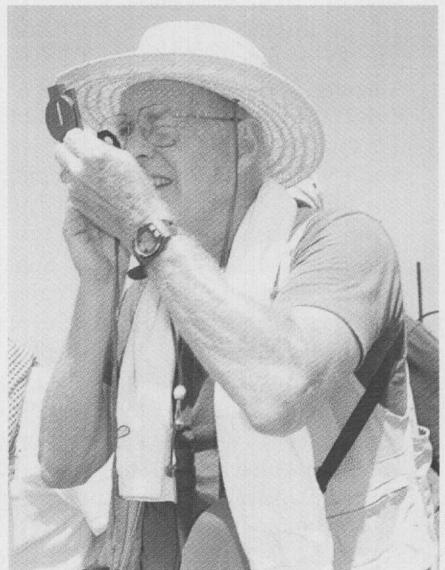
Above: Looking west toward the Que Son Mountains, the Rocket Belt, today, is peaceful and a productive part of the Vietnamese economy.

Right: Roger Barnard, now retired, returned to Vietnam in September 1999 and used a compass to reorient himself and locate old battle sites.

least one little guy in the village who was VC, and they always knew we were coming."

Even then, the Marines managed to find the enemy or the enemy found the Marines. Either way, it meant violent contact. Operation Jasper Square, conducted on western Go Noi from 10-14 April, killed 54 communists. The communists killed six Marines and wounded 30.

Meanwhile, leatherneck reconnaissance teams reported that the communists continued to improve their trails through Charlie Ridge into Happy Valley and also improved trails into Arizona Territory and Go Noi Island. The recon teams also directed artillery and air onto the enemy forces. On the morning of 7 April, a patrol spotted some 200 NVA in "the Arizona" wearing green utilities, helmets and flak jackets—communist infantry. The teams radioed for helicopter gunships and an artillery fire mission which killed 51 NVA regulars. Later, in nine sightings, they counted another 170 enemy troops. Even though they were responsible for killing an estimated 70 NVA regulars, reconnaissance teams continued to observe enemy movement and reported 17 sightings

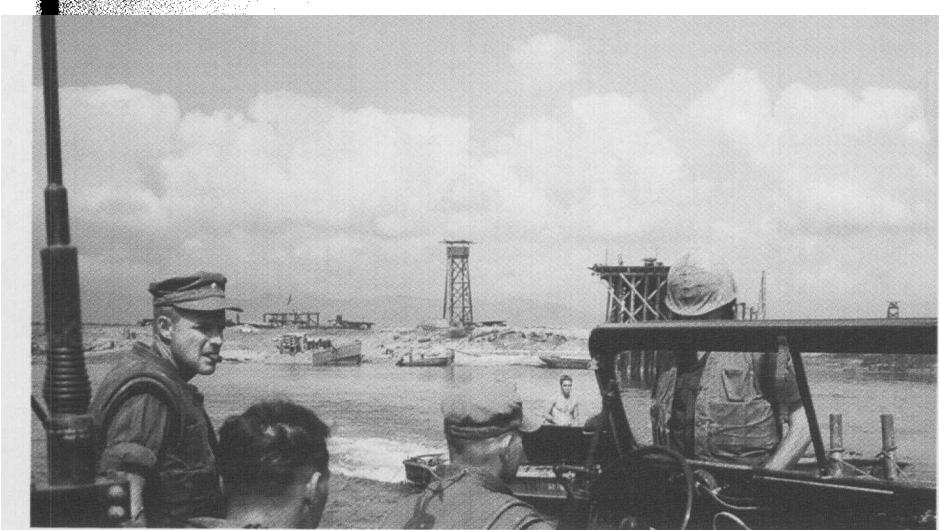


throughout the month with an estimated 370 enemy moving through the Thu Bon and Vu Gai river valleys. Although Marine supporting arms claimed to kill a reported 191, doubtless many infiltrators down the trails went undetected.

It was obvious that well-equipped NVA regulars were moving in force into the western and southern approaches to Da Nang. A series of preemptive strikes was ordered. These operations, according to one commander, reflected a III Marine Amphibious Force "change of emphasis ... to go after the enemy in his base camps rather than attempt to interdict him by patrols."

One of these preemptive operations, Allen Brook, began 4 May. By coincidence, the communists had launched a

[continued on page 40]



COURTESY OF COL ROGER BARNARD, USMC (RET)

Crossing the Song Thu Bon, a northbound party of Marines used a pontoon boat to ferry their jeep near the site of Liberty Bridge, which was burned in 1968.

ROCKET BELT

[continued from page 37]

major offensive the day prior, sending 119 rocket and mortar attacks on towns and cities throughout South Vietnam. Allen Brook was focused on Go Noi Island, which had become home to three VC battalions and was the center of communist operations in Quang Nam Province.

LtCol Charles E. Mueller's 2/7 marched two companies across Liberty Bridge at 0500 and into "Indian territory." Companies E and G, supported by a platoon of tanks, rumbled eastward toward rusting railroad tracks, which in less sanguinary times were part of the National Railway. They saw no bad guys but evacuated 220 civilians, mostly the elderly and children, to the district capital of Dai Loc, while noting the absence of draft-age young men.

It was dangerous terrain, as 2/7 learned over the next few days. The terrain was flat, with natural fields of fire that favored VC familiar with the locale or NVA camouflaged and entrenched in some nondescript ville.

Initially, things went as planned. In the first four days of Allen Brook, Col Reverdy M. Hall, 7th Marines commander, reported his leathernecks had killed 88 communists at a cost of nine Marines killed and 57 wounded.

At 1820, 9 May, leathernecks on a sweep just west of the railroad tracks found themselves amid a salvo of exploding mortar rounds. They were forced

to seek cover from a fusillade of small arms and machine-gun fire from the hamlet of Xuan Dai (2). In a matter of seconds, one Marine was dead and 11 writhed in pain from their wounds. They wasted no time pulling back and calling for "arty" and air strikes.

They got air strikes and, with the sound of explosions still echoing and napalm fires still burning, the Marines clambered over the tracks and into Xuan Dai (2). Thirty minutes after the initial communist mortar round exploded, the hamlet was theirs. The communists had no time to carry off their dead. Eighty enemy corpses were sprawled throughout Xuan Dai (2).

On 13 May, the United States, North Vietnam and South Vietnam began peace talks in Paris. In I Corps, Marine commanders reoriented Allen Brook from east to west in an effort to trap 2d NVA Div units believed to again be on Go Noi. Company I of 3d Bn, 27th Marines reinforced 2/7. Helicopters landed on the Que Son Mountains to the south overlooking Go Noi, and I/3/27 leathernecks stormed out with weapons at the ready. "India" Co made for its blocking positions near the Ba Ren River where it was joined by other Marine companies advancing west. It was a quick sweep marked by "harassing small arms and mortar fires and fluid guerrilla tactics."

On 15 May, at 1400, all four companies of 2/7 with the attached tanks arrived back at Liberty Bridge. Allen Brook appeared to be over.

At 1800, on 15 May, Echo Co made little effort to conceal the fact that it was leaving by helicopters. The command group of 2/7 left similarly. Barnard then assumed command of the remaining forces in Allen Brook. Indeed, units still in Allen Brook moved out of Goi Noi and back across the Liberty Bridge.

It was a well-executed ruse. They waited until after midnight on the 15th/16th. Barnard, sans his own battalion, took his command group with A/1/7, G/2/7 and I/3/27 and "moved in single file under cover of darkness." They reached the line of departure a few thousand yards northeast of Liberty Bridge prior to dawn.

Barnard credits Hall with the ruse: "Colonel Hall was convinced that after a week of 2/7 stirring up the AO [Area of Operations], we could fool the enemy into believing the Marines had had enough."

Barnard's objective "was a suspected NVA installation. ... We had reason to believe they did not know we were there. ..." The plan was to move south "to search for, fix and destroy the enemy." The leathernecks advanced with two companies on line and one in reserve "hoping to execute a major surprise."

Day broke hot and heavy on 16 May when the leathernecks "surprised" the NVA in the hamlet of Phu Dong (2), 4,000 meters west of Xuan Dai.

"We hit a hornet's nest," said Barnard, recalling that it was "like being in the butts at the rifle range."

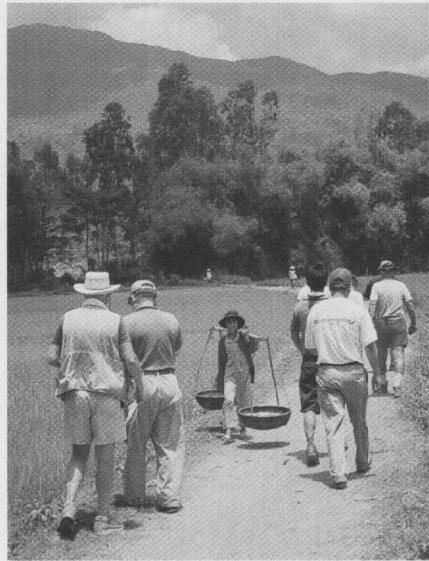
As Barnard's men tried to flank the communists, it became obvious to him that, "We needed more resources than we had for the situation." Marines popped out mortar rounds, and lanyards were pulled—sending artillery rounds downrange. But the NVA were stubborn and well-protected. It took heavy bombardment and 50 strikes by Marine air to "carry the day."

It was early evening before the NVA's stubborn defense began to soften. Afraid of being encircled, the enemy started from their trenches. Both sides had slugged it out continuously for the whole day, and like two punch-drunk fighters, they were no longer concerned about intangibles such as victory. They were only glad it was over. The NVA, having little choice, left more than 130 dead on the field. The Marines grieved for their 25 dead and 38 wounded.



One of the dead was Second Lieutenant Paul F. Cobb, a platoon leader with Alpha Co. Earlier, Barnard had called for a platoon from reserve. Alpha Co sent Cobb's platoon. Barnard gave him his orders, and although he had "never met Cobb eye to eye," Barnard had watched him leave that morning. Twenty minutes later they carried him back with a machine-gun bullet in the stomach. Cobb's platoon was the tip of the stick that punctured the "hornet's nest." They caught and took it all: small arms, automatic weapons fire, grenades going off, mortar rounds crashing on them and B-40 rockets exploding. Cobb had performed well, crawling under and through the fire, all the while shouting directions to his platoon who followed. Even when wounded, Cobb kept moving. They crawled right up to the well-emplaced gun position and went bare knuckle, hand to hand, with the tough little men inside. They "whupped 'em," then killed them, but not before someone gut-shot the lieutenant.

When the Golf Co point men were gunned down, U.S. Navy Hospitalman 3d Class Robert M. Casey went forward under fire to tend the wounded and was wounded himself. Undaunted, Casey treated one man and then moved on to another as bullets and grenades went off around him. The NVA fire was too intense, and Casey was wounded twice more. He stubbornly refused to be evacuated, and Marines forcibly hauled



Casey out of the line of fire. Among the wounded, he provided instructions to others applying battle dressings. Hearing another wounded Marine yell for aid, Casey crawled to the man and was killed while treating him.

Both Cobb and Casey were posthumously awarded the Navy Cross.

Barnard remembers asking himself the same question Marine commanders have always asked: "My God! Where do these kids come from?"

Despite their losses, Hall believed that his plan had been a success. Barnard's men had uncovered the NVA units in the Go Noi and hit them before they were able to mass their forces. Barnard later

Above: When this photo was taken in 1997, the pilings were all that was left of Liberty Bridge. Today, they are completely gone, and a new bridge is being built farther west. (Photo by R.R. Keene)

Left: Former Marines visiting Vietnam with Military Historical Tours in September 1999 walked toward Hill 25. "Charlie Ridge" of the Que Son Mountains is in the background.

wrote: "When all enemy resistance ceased and the dust had settled, it was clear we had ... achieved a significant victory." The Marines had taken a reinforced NVA regimental headquarters, which was also a major staging area for supplies. Barnard recalled that the captured supplies (which included new weapons and new gas masks) were so extensive that the battalion had no means to move them to the rear. "We stacked everything we couldn't move into a pile. Two Marines remained behind and blew [up] everything in place." Helicopters took out the casualties, and the battalion "received water and ammo resupply" before advancing southward the next morning.

As the sun rose, the battalion was on the move in a column of companies. I/3/27 was in the lead, followed by Alpha Company and Golf Company of the 7th Marines. The battalion's command group followed in trace of the lead company.

Being in "open country, without a



A typical stream-crossing in the Rocket Belt. It was February 1968, and 3/7 with LtCol Roger Barnard, facing the camera in the foreground, went to provide security for a downed CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter. (Photo courtesy of Col Roger Barnard, USMC (Ret))

defined objective," made Barnard anxious. If the lead company made contact, he planned to use Alpha Co as a maneuver unit and Golf Co in reserve. As it turned out, he would need every man he had. Later that morning, India Co, marching under what was already a burning sun, neared the hamlet of Le Nam (1) just north of Route 537. The company came upon a parched river bed with an inviting, heavily shaded picturesque tree line sitting on the northern bank. The Marines realized too late that it was too perfect and too quiet. The NVA had been waiting behind "elaborate defenses" and sprang an ambush with the distinct pop of AK-47 fire and the "krumph" of exploding mortar rounds.

India Co answered with bursts from their M16s and hand grenades. The air waves crackled with radio traffic. Barnard ordered Alpha Co westward in a flanking movement across terrain which, although flat, was also thick with tall elephant grass. It was going to take Alpha Co a while to put fire on those ambushing India Co. Meanwhile, Barnard, with radio to his ear, listened to reports from India Co. "They were not good."

He ordered Golf Co up. Almost imme-

dately, they were met with a wall of fire and stalled. Calls from India Co were getting desperate. Although frustrated, it was not a time for a battalion commander to lose his calm. Barnard had his artillery and air officers "calling mission after mission."

Enter LtCol Tullis J. Woodham Jr. His battalion, 3/27, although understrength with only two companies (Kilo and Lima), was under the operational control of 7th Marines. Col Hall had put Woodham's battalion on alert for Allen Brook. Hall then radioed Barnard telling him to hold on, saying 3/27 would make a helicopter assault to the south to relieve the pressure on his battalion.

It was 1500 on 17 May when the helicopters flared onto the flats which served as a landing zone at An Tam (1), nearly 1,000 meters southeast of Le Nam (1). The zone was hot. As the birds disgorged leathernecks of 3/27, mortar bursts and long-range weapons fire impacted around them. Woodham's two companies immediately attacked northward to link with 3/7 and the embattled India Co. It was tough going. Temperatures soaring from 110 to 120 degrees were as much the enemy as the NVA.

Under an umbrella of air and artillery support, it was riflemen from Kilo 3/27 who broke through and finally linked with India Co. As darkness approached, NVA resistance ceased.

The heavy fighting for Le Nam (1) had resulted in 39 Marines dead and 105 wounded as opposed to 81 North Vietnamese dead. India's losses were grievous: 15 KIA, which included the company commander, Capt Thomas H. Ralph, as well as two of his platoon leaders. Fifty others were wounded.

But for the actions of Private First Class Robert C. Burke, India's casualties might have been more disastrous. Burke grabbed up his M60 machine gun and belts of ammunition. He unleashed "a series of one-man assaults." Under his covering fire, members of India Co pulled their wounded to safety. Burke continued to fire his gun and moved forward toward enemy gunners at Le Nam (1) until they cut him down. PFC Burke was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

During the night of 17 May, the two Marine battalions remained in separate positions but maintained radio contact. LtCol Barnard had moved near Cu Ban (4)

about 1,000 meters to the northwest of Le Nam (1), while LtCol Woodham retained his command group at An Tam (1). Barnard returned operational control of a badly shaken India Co to Woodham. At dawn on 18 May, this portion of Operation Allen Brook was over for Barnard and 3/7.

It was far from over for Woodham, whose Marines would fight two bloody battles at Le Bac (2) about 300 meters to the north.

For the Marines in the Rocket Belt, Operation Allen Brook continued in nothing-villes with meaningless names: Cu Ban, Phu Dong and Le Bac. Always, it was the same kind of maddening warfare: out at dawn, moving in the unrelenting heat, the sudden chatter of small-arms fire, krump of mortars and grenades, calls for corpsmen, air and artillery, over at dusk, counting the dead and wounded and counting the days until one's 13-month tour of duty ended.

Barnard's tour in Vietnam with 3/7 still had five days to go on Sunday, 27 July, when Kilo Co walked into a classic L-shaped ambush. They had been working villes along the rice paddies a little northeast of Go Noi.

"The company commander was a first lieutenant serving as interim company commander. I don't know why he didn't prep the tree line with mortars or artillery fire," said Barnard. "But, he didn't."

Kilo Co took brutal fire, and Marines were down and bleeding in the open rice field. The CO had lost an arm and was becoming incoherent. "I couldn't get answers from him on the radio. He kept saying, 'I don't know, I can't write,' " said Barnard.

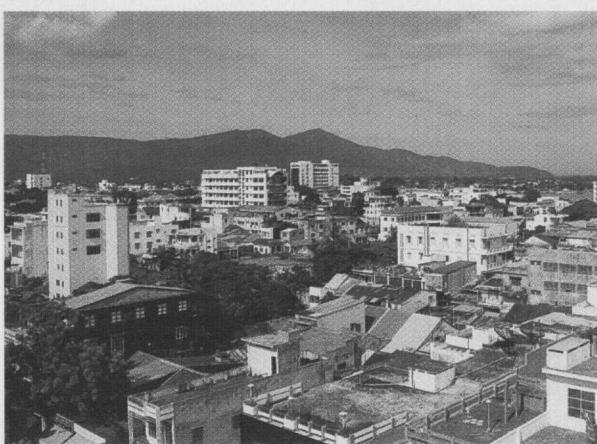
Up shot the company corpsman, HM3 Wayne M. Caron, in an attempt to reach the wounded trapped in the open. The first round hit him in the arm, and the force knocked Caron to the ground. He rose up, reached, and, with a doctor's precision, calmly patched a Marine who had been terribly wounded. The corpsman's action undoubtedly saved the man's life. The second round took a leg out from under him, and Caron crawled through bullet-splattered dirt to treat another injured man. When the third round hit him, Caron was making his way to yet another Marine. The fourth round that hit him was a rocket.

"He left a widow and son whom he'd never seen in Massachusetts," said



R. R. KEENE

Above: Today, the Da Nang Airport Terminal occupies the same location that the 15th Aerial Port occupied in 1968. Hill 327 is visible in the background.



R. R. KEENE

Barnard. "They received his Medal of Honor."

This last fire fight was a bitter note for Barnard to end his tour. He felt, in some ways, responsible. "They could have, and probably wanted to, relieve me." But, Major General Carl A. Youngdale, who had assumed command of the First Marine Division, showed up at a helo pad and "presented me with a Silver Star for Allen Brook."

Looking back more than three decades, Barnard now had a better idea of what the big picture looked like. "It was very sobering to be able to walk the battlefield again. I keep wondering what I could have done differently back then to have accomplished the mission but with fewer casualties. The answer is probably not much."

Operation Allen Brook only temporarily disrupted the communists, forcing them to scale back their planned attack on Da Nang.

When Allen Brook officially ended on 23 August, it had claimed more than 1,000 reported enemy casualties with 172 Marines killed and 1,124 wounded. That night, the communists mounted their third major offensive by firing on 27 different allied installations and cities. The major thrust of their effort was the city of Da Nang. In terms of damage, psychological blows and regaining control of the countryside, the communists fell far short of their objectives.

Barnard recalled leaving country. "Back then we left Vietnam not as a unit but as individuals. When my plane lifted off from Da Nang, I was able to look down toward Dai Loc. I had a feeling of guilt because I was leaving my guys, and the job was not yet done."

Below him, the war in the Rocket Belt continued.

