



## Vietnam 1965

# "The Dirtiest War Americans Ever Had to Fight"

By R.R. Keene

Vietnam sucked up troops like a sponge. There were warnings everywhere: combat caveats in the village cane breaks where punji stakes pointed upward hidden just off trails with spider traps and tunnels. More warnings to beware were visible in the faces of the lean and hungry women and children and in the eyes of doubting Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers. The constant oppressive heat seemed to burn through the uniforms, leaving scorches from rifle barrels and eyes red from the red laterite dust.

Other warnings were etched into the gravestones of French Marines and soldiers in a small cemetery on the Tiensha Peninsula at the foot of Monkey Mountain. Visible for miles atop the 1,627-foot *Col des Nuages* (Pass of the Clouds), Hai Van Pass was crowned with a monolithic and indestructible French bunker built in 1826. It will stand for eternity, but guards nothing. Empty, but for the windblown cries from spirits of the lost looking down on Da Nang.

No, Vietnam didn't seem right from the start. Poets among the ranks took to

quoting a paraphrased verse from Rudyard Kipling's "The Naulahka":

*"It is not good for the Christian's health  
To hustle the Asian brown;  
For the Christian riles, and the Asian  
smiles.*

*And he weareth the Christian down.  
And the end of the fight is a tombstone  
white,  
With the name of the late deceased;  
And the epitaph drear: "A fool lies here,  
Who tried to hustle the East."*

It was fast becoming a war for cynics. But first, the Marines gave it their best shot.

It was a different Marine Corps then. Although young in years, the vast majority of leathernecks were anything but kids. They were well-trained professionals who answered the crisis "hot line" for any number of flare-ups around the globe. With rifles at high port, they had crossed the beaches only to be greeted by Bob Hope as they entered the troubled city of Beirut, Lebanon, in 1958. In 1962 they had called Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro's nuclear missile bluff from behind machine guns positioned along the fence line at Guantanamo Bay and sortied into

Laos quieting the Pathet Lao. They occupied and restored order in 1965 on the island of Hispaniola's Dominican Republic.

They were mentored by salty veterans of World War II and Korea and a few tenacious old bulldogs from places mentioned in the "Small Wars Manual." And they mercilessly drilled the nomenclature of every small-arms in the Corps' inventory into every leatherneck until they could expertly field-strip and employ each weapon. They could run field tactics in their sleep having gone through them on practice landings in the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the shores of Far East lands and Southeast Asia. Perhaps, most importantly, they had been bonded as cohesive units who saw themselves as "the meanest 'muthas' in the valley." Now, those tough-talking, walk the walk "muthas" were becoming "old Asia hands" facing guerrilla tactics and fighting elusive insurgents in Southeast Asia where Zippo lighters were used for more than lighting cigarettes. Counterinsurgency was back in vogue.

And the Marines found it enormously frustrating.

One problem they had never dealt with was that Vietnam had become the first televised war, and the media found it relatively easy to cover action from the American side and almost impossible to embed and report uncensored from the communist side. Throughout the conflict, war crimes and atrocities perpetrated by the Vietnamese communists were not reported.

On the other hand, historian J. Robert Moskin in his "The U.S. Marine Corps Story" writes: "The Marines were involved in their first charges of atrocities in Vietnam on August 3 when men of 1st Battalion, 9th Marines destroyed most of the houses in the village of Cam Ne, six miles southwest of Da Nang. CBS television pictures of Marines burning one house with a cigarette lighter and Morley Safer's report horrified Americans back home. Keyes Beech of the *Chicago Daily News* reported that the Marines 'have killed or wounded Vietnamese civilians and burned dozens of homes in the dirtiest war Americans ever had to fight.'

The Marine Corps took exception to the



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In 1965, leathernecks participated in combat operations such as Starlite, Piranha, Blue Marlin and Harvest Moon. M60 machine-gunners from Co G, 2d Bn, 9th Marines finished out the year providing covering fire for leathernecks in the field during Operation Harvest Moon.

Although young in years, these Marines were well-trained professionals who ran through and to the sound of VC gunfire during Operation Harvest Moon. (USMC photo)



report. "U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965," by Jack Shulimson and Major Charles M. Johnson, USMC, states that the Corps argued that "Cam Ne was a fortified Viet Cong village and that ... Marines had received small arms fire, including automatic weapons." The *Marine Corps Gazette* perhaps best stated the Marine Corps position: "War is a stupid and brutalizing affair. This type of war perhaps more than others. But this does not mean that those who are fighting it are either stupid or brutal. It does mean that the whole story should be told. Not just a part of it."

As early as July, Major General Lewis W. Walt, Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force, had issued a directive to keep casualties to a minimum. "The injury or killing of hapless civilians inevitably contributes to the Communist cause, and each incident ... will be used against us with telling effect," he stated.

Shulimson and Johnson write: "But the general made it clear that this order was not to infringe upon 'the inherent right of an individual to defend himself from hostile attack.' Rather, the emphasis was on discretion by the Marines to employ

the necessary force to accomplish their mission."

Earlier, on June 26, Army General William C. Westmoreland, Commanding General, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, received authority to commit his American forces to battle when he decided they were needed. By then, there were more than 190,000 Marines on active duty and 18,156 of them were in Vietnam.

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Moskin writes: "The authorized strength of the Marine Corps was increased in August from 193,000 to 223,000 men. [Training at the Marine Corps Recruit Depots was shortened from 10 weeks to nine weeks.] And a decision was made not to call up American armed forces' reserves. Instead, voluntary enlistments

were stepped up and the draft was doubled from 17,000 to 35,000 a month. That crucial decision would intensify opposition to the war in the United States during the years ahead."

The authority to allow American forces to go on the offensive included a series of U.S. Marine amphibious and anti-infiltration raids called Dagger Thrust south of I Corps along the Vietnamese coast:

According to Shulimson and Johnson, "Quick thrusts by the SLF [Special Landing Force] into suspected enemy concentration points followed by immediate retraction of the landing force" was the responsibility of Marines of Battalion Landing Team 2d Bn, First Marine Regiment. The infantry battalion was supported by the UH-34s of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron (HMM) 163 launching off the amphibious assault ship USS *Iwo Jima* (LPH-2) and later USS *Valley Forge* (LPH-8) with BLT 2/1 and helicopters from HMM-361. The raids were disappointing. "[They] failed to achieve their overall objective, the quick exploitation of intelligence and resulting contact with large enemy formations."

Back at Chu Lai, leathernecks with Ma-



**Above:** Early on, it became a given that the UH-34 Seahorse would be an aviation workhorse for Marines in Vietnam. Here, leathernecks of 3/9 guide in resupplies. (Photo by Cpl Dahl, USMC)

**Right:** Preparing to launch with 250-pound bombs in support of Operation Piranha, the "Vagabonds" of Marine Attack Squadron 225 were one of the first A-4C Skyhawk squadrons to fly out of Chu Lai. "A pearl of the Orient," joked air wing Marine Thomas Ryan.

rine Aircraft Group (MAG) 12 were kept busy putting their Douglas A-4 Skyhawks on close air support missions not far from the short airfield with a surface of aluminum matting. At night on the beach, air wing Marines could look across the South China Sea and see tracer rounds from fireights arc across nearby Batangan Peninsula. During the day they could actually see their A-4 attack aircraft using 20 mm cannon on strafing runs. It looked impressive, but accounts from the infantrymen of 7th Marines, according to historian J. Robert Moskin in his "The U.S. Marine Corps Story," "were not so spectacular."

The peninsula was contoured with hedgerows that concealed well-constructed caves hiding Viet Cong and civilians.



Marines of B/1/7 cautiously came upon a large cave where four VC surrendered. On closer examination, the cave proved to be a VC field hospital and Marines drew enemy fire from inside. The inhabitants declined all offers of surrender. Marine engineers detonated charges. Once the dust settled, infantrymen found medical supplies, small arms and ammunition amid 66 enemy dead. Much to their chagrin, the Marines realized the cave also was lacking oxygen. One Marine

lieutenant died from asphyxiation.

The pursuit of the 1st VC Regiment, which started with Operation Starlite followed by Operation Piranha, would have to be continued as local intelligence reports said the VC had withdrawn from the peninsula 24 hours before Operation Piranha launched.

Operation Piranha killed 178 VC. Twenty weapons were captured and 360 enemy and suspected enemy were detained. Allied losses included two Marines

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and five ARVN. Thirteen Marines and 33 Vietnamese were wounded.

Although the enemy seemed reluctant at times to stand and do battle, they did create havoc by using classic guerrilla tactics of striking weak spots and keeping regular forces on the move. The Lien Chieu Esso gas storage terminal, which still stands at the foot of the Hai Van Peninsula on the northwestern edge of Da Nang Harbor, was attacked despite being defended by Vietnamese Regional Forces, and nearly 2 million gallons of fuel were lost.

Across the bay, 9th Marines cleared and occupied the Tien Sha Peninsula for 8 miles along the coastline from Monkey Mountain to the north and Marble Mountain to the south. It is a beautiful stretch of beach with excellent diving and five-star hotels today. Then it was known as China Beach. U.S. Navy Seabees started work on a new facility for MAG-16 helicopters just north of Marble Mountain to relieve congestion at the main air base.

It was after midnight July 1 when an 85-man demolition team infiltrated Da Nang airfield. Marine sentries were alert and popped a flare. The communists threw a grenade, and the shooting started. The infiltrators used satchel charges to destroy an Air Force Corvair F-102 and two C-130s and damaged three other planes. They killed one airman and wounded three Marines.

In October the Marine Corps Air Facility at Marble Mountain was attacked via boat. According to Moskin: "A handful got through and destroyed 19 helicopters and damaged 35 more and wrecked the nearly completed naval hospital across the road. Three Americans were killed and 91 wounded." While that was going on, 20 VC sappers carrying satchel charges slipped under the wire at Chu Lai. They worked their way through the sand dunes and hit the air strip destroying two and damaging six A-4 Skyhawks.

On Nov. 22, 3/7 was helo-lifted into Thach Tru, a village on Highway 1 in southern I Corps just north of Due Pho, to reinforce a Vietnamese ranger battalion that had hooked into a large, well-armed and disciplined communist force. They were regular infantry: the 18th Regiment



**Above:** Marine 105 mm howitzers provided an umbrella of steel around the perimeter of Da Nang Air Base. This firing position, similar to others, is protected by earthen works supported by sandbags and nets overhead for camouflage. (Photo by SSgt Batchelor, USMC)

**Below:** Leathernecks of G/2/9 come under attack at Hill 251 in December 1965 during Operation Harvest Moon. (Photo by Cpl Dahl, USMC)



of the Peoples' Army of North Vietnam. The war had kicked up another notch.

By December, U.S. Air Force B-52 bombers were flying strike missions for Marine ground forces during Operation Harvest Moon near Heip Duc in the Que Son Valley. Later called the Arizona Territory, it was behind the mountains seen from the coast. Route 534, sometimes called "the old French road," was the rugged artery that fed into what became

a dark part of the history of the Vietnam War saga in that it seemed to demand blood from the combatants who used it as fields of fire throughout the war.

Author Lieutenant Colonel Otto J. Lehrack, USMC (Ret) writes in his book, "Road of 10,000 Pains": "In late 1965, advance elements of the 2nd NVA Division began infiltrating the valley. These men returned to a region that welcomed them. The French plundered the Que Son



CH HENDERSON/USMC

**In spite of the heat, not many Marines liked river crossings as it got everything wet and exposed the men to leeches and left them in the open. It was November 1965 when L/3/3 forged this river to make a sweep on a village during the second phase of Operation Blue Marlin.**

Valley in their time, and, after the French departed, absentee landlords with influence in Saigon took over most of the land. The average peasant here cared no more for the ideological message of the north than for the south. However, the Communist proselytizers offered not Communist theory but a brand of nationalism that promised land and peace. They tarred the Americans with the same colonial brush with which they had painted the French in the earlier war. Their message was that the Saigon government was a puppet regime, answering the manipulations of its American master.

"For many in the Que Son Valley this was an easy sell. All the Americans offered them was democracy, whatever that was; there was no evidence that democracy would fill their rice bowls."

Paving the way for the North Vietnamese coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, 1st VC Regiment units harassed South Vietnamese government garrisons. Two ARVN battalion relief columns were shot to pieces. The VC did their usual fade and rematerialized to ambush 2/7 near Ky Phu to the east near Highway 1. It was a mistake and it cost them: The 80th VC BN left 105 dead in the field.

Colonel Harvey C. "Barney" Barnum Jr., USMC (Ret) was then and is now a good guy, but you don't want to mess with him. Not a big fellow, he was more than big enough on Dec. 18, 1965. A first lieutenant with only 14 days in country, Barnum was a forward artillery observer attached to H/2/9 near Ky Phu when it came under a hail of very accurate enemy fire. They were pinned down more than

500 yards from the battalion and taking casualties.

According to his Medal of Honor citation: "Barnum made a hazardous reconnaissance of the area seeking targets for his artillery." He found the company commander, Captain Paul Gromley, dying not far from his dead radioman. Barnum saw the corpsman get hit three times and moved to rescue him. He did what he could for the dying commander and then stripped the radio from its previous owner and strapped it to himself.

He told *Vietnam* magazine in a 2006 interview: "It was then I realized that I was the highest-ranking officer present. Everybody was looking at me, and I could see in their eyes they were saying, 'Hey, lieutenant, what do we do now?'"

Barnum took command of the rifle company amid scathing and heavy fire, rallied the men, and led a counterattack directing accurate counterfire onto VC positions. He called in helicopters to evacuate the wounded and then led a final push that seized the battalion's objective. President Lyndon B. Johnson presented Barnum with the Medal of Honor.

According to Allan R. Millett, in "Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps," "The commitment of American ground troops to Vietnam set off a strategy debate in April-July 1965 that fixed American operational concepts for the next three years. The result of this debate was simple: President Johnson accepted the recommendations of General Westmoreland (supported by the JCS) that American ground troops be enlarged to more than 200,000 men and begin offensive operations to deny the enemy victory in 1965 and defeat him in the battlefield by 1968. ... Instead the Marine Corps position, articulated by CG, FMF Pacific [Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force Pacific] Victor H. Krulak, was that an enclave, pacification strategy offered the best long-term chance of victory. [Lieutenant General] Krulak, Major General Lewis W. Walt and [Commander-in-Chief, Pacific] Admiral Ulysses S.G. Sharp agreed that American troops should pursue a hold-and-pacify strategy from the coastal enclaves. ..."

"Krulak thought that Westmoreland's failure to establish a combined U.S.-ARVN command made success in the field impossible. Krulak did not believe, moreover, that the cultural differences between the Americans and Vietnamese peasantry were so great that pacification was impossible as long as the United States insisted upon land reform, economic development, physical security, and grassroots village democracy. ... Krulak argued for a 'spreading ink blot' system

of rural pacification rather than 'search and destroy' operations in Vietnam's backlands." He argued that the war was among the people and not in the mountains.

The 1940s Marine Corps "Small Wars Manual" says: "In small wars, tolerance, sympathy, and kindness should be the keynote of relationship with the mass of the population . . . The purpose should always be to restore government . . . and to establish peace, order, and security." MajGen Walt had not only read the book, but he was a veteran of the "Banana Wars" in the Caribbean that spawned it and as a young officer learned the fundamentals of fighting there.

"The Third Marines had already begun a 'pacification' program intended to liberate hamlets and villages from Viet Cong domination, provide them with security and encourage acceptance of government control. The first such Marine effort was at the hamlet of Le My, eight miles northwest of the Da Nang air base; it became a Marine civic action showplace. The program worked well enough in thinly populated areas but was less successful in the 9th Marines' densely populated zone south of the air base, where the Viet Cong were stronger," writes Moskin.

The Marines also protected the rice harvest with patrols and night ambushes. They encouraged the Popular Forces (PF) militia to provide the villages with security, but the PFs themselves were not trained or equipped to do the job. Combined action companies with a squad

of Marines and a corpsman paired up with a PF platoon. The first of these units was established at Phu Bai with 3/4—partly as an expedient way to stretch the thinly spread battalion there.

The Combined Action Group leader was Col John E. Greenwood who later would become the editor of the *Marine Corps Gazette*. According to Shulimson and Johnson, Greenwood "cautioned that

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the relationship between Marine Corps counterinsurgency theory and the earlier Marine experience in the Caribbean can be overdrawn." Greenwood said that during the President John F. Kennedy era, "guerrilla warfare expertise" was one of the "popular 'in' topics," and "hundreds of Marine officers," including himself, "attended Army schools and studied the doctrine developed and articulated by the British and the U.S. Army." He made the point that for officers of his generation, as opposed to the senior commanders such as General Walt, "Our insights in war of this

kind came from this nearly contemporary effort, not from Marine Corps experience 30 years previous."

No matter what everyone else thought, the Marines knew it was not to be a conventional war; far from it. LtGen Krulak warned in a December 1965 interview: "The conflict between the North Vietnamese and the hardcore VC on the one hand and the U.S. on the other hand could move to another planet today and we would still not have won the war. On the other hand if the subversion and guerrilla efforts were to disappear, the war would soon collapse as the Viet Cong would be denied food, sanctuary, and intelligence."

Millett lists numerous programs: The Marines turned out in villages for Medical Combined Action Programs that offered medical treatment and sanitation to villagers. They built schools and orphanages, dug wells, opened markets, supplied hospitals and distributed food. "To supplement the supplies provided by American civil agencies and Government of Vietnam sources, the Marines dug into their own pockets and organized a special action fund supported by Marine Reservists and administered by CARE," according to Millett. CARE (Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere) was a major international humanitarian agency.

Still, according to Millett, "Winning hearts and minds" gave civic action a high-minded tone.



CPL D. H. BURKE/USMC



1ST BATT/USMC

**Above left:** Returning from a patrol, PFC Charles A. Morley with Headquarters and Service Co, 3/9 came across a little girl in need of medical care and carried her to a corpsman who was able to get her the assistance she needed.

**Above right:** Helping with the September rice harvest was as important as clearing villages of VC, and 1/9 lent a hand. Capt R.P. Brooks helps a woman gather a bundle of rice into a shock to be transported to a central gathering point. Cpl Donald H. White provides security.