

1st Amtracs at Cua Viet

In the DMZ, the 3d Marine Division maintained three distinct tactical areas designated by operational codenames. Napoleon, Kentucky, and Lancaster. Lieutenant Colonel Edward R. Toner's 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion was responsible for the Napoleon Area of Operations, extending some three miles above and two miles below the Cua Viet waterway and two miles inland from the coast. The battalion's mission was to safeguard the vital Cua Viet Port Facility and companion logistic support facility as well as protect the river supply route to Dong Ha.



Navy LSTs (landing ship, tank) and smaller seagoing vessels could be unloaded at the Cua Viet Port Facility in the DMZ Sector, and transhipped to the main Marine base upriver at Dong Ha.
Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801124

With the establishment at the mouth of the Cua Viet of an LST (landing ship, tank) ramp in March 1967, ships' cargoes could be unloaded onto LCUs (landing craft, utility) and LCMs (landing craft, mechanized) for the trip upriver to Dong Ha. As Marine forces and facilities expanded in northern Quang Tri, the Cua Viet supply channel became even more crucial to the Marine command. By the end of the year, the Navy Cua Viet Port Facility could accommodate two LSTs, three LCUs, and three LCMs, and move 940 short tons daily through to Dong Ha.

The 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion had transferred from the Da Nang TAOR to its new command post at the Cua Viet Port Facility at the end of April 1967 to provide general support for the 3d Marine Division. At the same time, the commanding officer of the amphibian tractor battalion became the Cua Viet installation coordinator and responsible for both the defense and administration of the Cua Viet area. In November, the 3d Marine Division divided Operation Kingfisher, the codename for the division campaign in the DMZ eastern sector, into the three operations of Lancaster, Kentucky, and Napoleon. In Operation Napoleon, Lieutenant Colonel Toner remained responsible for roughly the same area that the "Amtrackers" had been operating all along.

The battalion had the additional duty to construct the C-4 Combat Operating Base, about 2,000 meters north of the Cua Viet, and to assist the adjoining ARVN 2d Regiment to build the A-1 Strong Point, another 3,000 meters to the northwest. The A-1 and C-4 positions marked the eastern terminus of the barrier. While helping with the work on the barrier in December, Toner's Marines on the 11th engaged in some of the heaviest fighting of the month. In the sand dunes and scrub pine growth near the fishing village of Ha Loi Toi just north of C-4, the battalion in a daylong battle killed 54 of the enemy at a cost of 20 wounded Marines. Five days later the Cua Viet Facility came under artillery and rocket attack which resulted in 5 Marines killed and 31 wounded. Through the end of 1967,

according to Marine statistics, Operation Napoleon accounted for 87 enemy dead and the capture of 2 prisoners at a loss of 10 Marine dead and 48 wounded and evacuated.

In January 1968, Lieutenant Colonel Toner's battalion consisted of his Headquarters and Support Company, Companies A and B, and an attached infantry company, Company C, from the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines. A platoon of six LVTH-6s (an amphibian tractor with a turret-mounted 105mm howitzer) from the 1st Armored Amphibian Company, attached to the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, provided artillery support. A mortar section of three 4.2 mortars from the 12th Marines reinforced the fires of the howitzers.

With its flat sandy coastal plain and the Cua Viet waterway, the Napoleon area of operations was ideal terrain for Toner's battalion. The battalion commander had at his disposal 64 troop-carrying LVTP-5s (landing vehicle tracked, personnel), 6 command and control tractors, 4 LVTEs (landing vehicle tracked, engineer) used for mine clearing, and 2 LVTR-ls (landing vehicle tracked, retriever) for repair purposes. These lightly armored amphibian tractors afforded mobility both on land and water. Within minutes, the Marines could reinforce any trouble spot within the TAOR.

Early January was a relatively quiet period for the amtrac Marines. They busied themselves with civic action in the nearby fishing village of Gia Hai, working on C-4, and building revetments for the tractors. Marine Sergeant Ron Asher with the attached Company C, 3d Marines at C-4 wrote his mother in December 1967 that he spent most of his "down time" from patrols filling sandbags, and getting the amtracs and tanks dug in.

During a visit to the battalion on Christmas Day, General Westmoreland had expressed his dissatisfaction about the lack of protection for the amphibian vehicles. In relaying this concern to Lieutenant Colonel Toner, the 3d Division commander, General Tompkins, suggested that the battalion use steel revetments combined with oil drums and ammunition boxes filled with sand to safeguard the LVTs.

It was not until mid-month that the North Vietnamese made any serious attempt to probe anew the Marine positions in Napoleon. On 14 January, a Marine patrol, about 2,500 meters south of the Cua Viet near the coast, came across a design drawn in the sand, consisting of four circles with a huge arrow in the combat operating base. The remaining rifle company of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, Company M, attached to the 12th Marines, guarded the provisional Marine artillery battalion situated at the Gio Linh fire support base, south of the ARVN in the A-2 Strong Point."

A later successor to Lieutenant Colonel Toner as battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Walter W. Damewood, observed, that the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion in 1968 "had to be one of the most unique Marine battalions of the time in terms of personnel and equipment structure." He noted that in addition to its normal complement of personnel and equipment, the battalion had attached to it: Marine combat engineers, Marine infantry and tanks, and reconnaissance elements as well as Army armored personnel, and South Vietnamese Popular Force troops. He noted that the members of the battalion became known as "Am Grunts" because of the infantry role and mission assigned to them.

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