

# The Cua Viet is Threatened

## The Enemy Offensive in the DMZ and Southern Quang Tri, 20 January-8 February 1968

Beginning on 20 January, the North Vietnamese intensified their efforts in the north from Khe Sanh to the Cua Viet. While most public and media attention was focused upon the Khe Sanh base, the Marine command could not ignore its northern logistical lifeline from the Cua Viet Port Facility to Dong Ha along the Cua Viet River channel. From Dong Ha, Route 9 connected the isolated Marine bases at Cam Lo, Camp Carroll, the Rockpile, and Ca Lu. The continued presence of large North Vietnamese forces along the eastern DMZ as well as the buildup of forces in the west around Khe Sanh limited the ability of the 3d Marine Division to concentrate its forces in any one area. Even with the arrival of the additional Army forces in the north, the division was still spread out from its Quang Tri base in the south, to Khe Sanh in the west, and to the Cua Viet in the east.

Almost simultaneously with attacks on Khe Sanh, the North Vietnamese appeared to be making a determined attempt to halt the river traffic on the Cua Viet. On 20 January, enemy gunners positioned on the northern bank of the river forced the temporary closing of the Cua Viet. Up to this point, Lieutenant Colonel Edward R. Toner's 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion with an infantry company, Company C, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, attached to his command in Operation Napoleon, largely had responsibility for the security of the river. The battalion was becoming more and more hard pressed to carry out this mission.

Only the previous morning, 19 January, a platoon from Company C, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, patrolling the sand dunes along the coast north of the A-1 Strong point, and about 5,000 meters above the Cua Viet, ran into a company from the enemy K-400 Main Force Battalion. Corporal Ronald R. Asher, the acting weapons platoon sergeant, remembered that he and two of his machine gun teams accompanied the platoon. According to Asher, the "lead squad walked into the NVA positions" and that "within seconds the sound of AK's, M16s, . . . and the unmistakable cough of one of my guns was earth shattering." For a few chaotic hours, the platoon took cover as best it could and attempted to recover its casualties. Corporal Asher recalled that he and another squad leader assumed control of the platoon as both the platoon leader and sergeant were incapacitated.

By late afternoon, Lieutenant Colonel Toner had reinforced the platoon with the rest of Company C supported by tanks and LVTs. Both sides used rifles, automatic weapons, grenades, mortars, and artillery fire in a hard-fought engagement that lasted much of the day. Enemy artillery from north of the Demilitarized Zone fired some 70 130mm rounds into the Marine positions. Still the enemy supporting arms were no match for the firepower that the Americans threw into the battle including air, naval gunfire, conventional artillery, and tank direct fire. By 1500, both sides had disengaged. The Marines losses were 3 dead and 33 wounded, 31 of whom had to be evacuated. According to Marine accounts, they killed 23 of the enemy and recovered six weapons including two light machine guns.

On the following day, the 20th, the enemy not only fired at two Navy craft, but earlier that morning also engaged a South Vietnamese Navy Coastal Patrol Force junk on patrol in the Cua Viet. The 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, conducting a two-company operation nearby in conjunction with the 2d ARVN Regiment, ran up against an even stronger enemy force, approximately a battalion in size, than it had the previous day. This time the battalion had established blocking positions just northwest of the hamlet of My Loc on the northern bank of the Cua Viet. Starting as a small platoon action, the action

soon evolved into a full scale battle employing all supporting arms. The enemy subjected the Marines to an artillery bombardment of about 50 130mm rounds that lasted for about a half hour to cover its withdrawal that afternoon. According to Marine officers, the North Vietnamese artillery used forward observers to adjust its fire. Two of the LVTs in the course of the battle sustained damage, one detonated an explosive device and the other was struck by three rocket propelled grenades. The Marine tractor battalion in this fray suffered casualties of 13 dead and 48 wounded and reported a body count of 20 dead North Vietnamese. In the same fighting, the ARVN claimed to have killed an additional 20 and captured 2 prisoners.

The situation on the Cua Viet was becoming untenable. In the early morning hours of 21 January around 0200, a Company C, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines outpost spotted an enemy platoon attempting to dig in along the sand dunes very near the scene of the fighting on the 19th. The Marines called in artillery throughout the night and at 0930 Marine fixed-wing aircraft flew three attack sorties against the enemy troops. According to the Marine account, the enemy wore “green uniforms similar to those of previous contact. . . .” The NVA then withdrew to the north under Marine rifle fire and grenades, but left nine bodies behind. About an hour later, a Navy landing craft (LCM) on the Cua Viet triggered another mine which exploded behind it. The vessel remained afloat, but the explosion knocked out both of its engines. Another LCM which came out to tow the helpless craft back to port came under fire from the northern bank. After all the LCMs had returned safely to the Cua Viet Port Facility, the naval commander of the base announced “All USN river traffic secured.

While the river traffic once again resumed the following day, 22 January was almost a repeat of the 21st. In the early morning hours of the 22d, an American naval gun spotter assigned to the 2d ARVN Regiment A-1 outpost observed about 300 to 500 North Vietnamese troops through his starlight scope moving south in the same general area where Company C had its previous clashes with the enemy. Pulling back a Company C ambush patrol, the American command threw in the entire spectrum of supporting arms including 105mm howitzers, 8-inch guns, Marine fixed-wing TPQ (radar-controlled) aircraft strikes, and an AC-130 “Spooky” minigun strafing run. A later ARVN battle damage assessment of the evidence, including blood stains, freshly dug graves, abandoned web equipment and documents, suggested that the enemy may have sustained as many as 100 casualties. Further south, however, on the Cua Viet the Navy reported another mining incident. This time, a Navy LCU struck two mines and had to be towed back to port. Again the Cua Viet Facility commander closed the river until the next day when a Navy and Marine underwater demolition team from Dong Ha would sweep the river.

This last was too much for General Cushman at III MAF. He radioed Major General Tompkins, the 3d Marine Division commander, that the “interruption to Cua Viet LOC [line of communications] unacceptable.” The III MAF commander observed that command detonated mines and ground fire against shipping on the Cua Viet could only be undertaken from the river banks. He ordered Tompkins to clear banks “at once” and to coordinate his actions with the 1st ARVN Division. Cushman advised the 3d Marine Division commander that he might want to use Special Landing Force (SLF) Bravo, specifically Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 3/1, for this purpose in the sector for a few days.

The employment of BLT 3/1 in the coastal sector of the DMZ was not a new idea. As early as 5 January 1968, General Cushman had notified the 3d Division commander of an SLF operation to be called Badger Catch/Saline to be carried out in the Cua Viet area from 7 February through 22 February. Tompkins was to insure coordination with the local ARVN commander. On 15 January, Vice Admiral William F. Bringle, the commander of the Seventh Fleet, issued for planning purposes an

initiating directive for Operation Badger Catch. He mentioned only that the operation would take place in Quang Tri Province and at a date “to be determined dependent upon tactical situation.

Two days later, on 17 January, General Cushman appeared to change the original mission for the SLF in northern Quang Tri. In a message to General Tompkins, Cushman suggested that the latter should carry out coordinated preemptive attacks in conjunction with the 1st ARVN Division in the general DMZ area. He remarked that he intended “to assign elements of SLF Bravo . . . your opcon on request for immediate employment in support of these operations.” The closing of the Cua Viet, however, apparently caused the III MAF commander once more to change his mind. In a later message on 22 January, Cushman told Tompkins to use the SLF in the Cua Viet for a few days. Later that day, General Cushman informed General Westmoreland, the MACV commander, that BLT 3/1 would make an amphibious landing in the Cua Viet sector on the 23d and assist in the clearing of the river. After the completion of that mission, the battalion would then go to Camp Carroll to take part in the planned preemptive offensive to destroy enemy forces that posed a threat to the Camp Carroll and Rockpile sites.

At a planning session at the 3d Marine Division headquarters on 23 January, SLF and division staff officers first selected 0800 the next morning as the time for the landing. With the continued enemy harassment of allied shipping in the Cua Viet channel, General Tompkins and the amphibious commanders decided, however, to push forward H-hour to the early evening of the 23d. Around 1900, Lieutenant Colonel Max McQuown’s BLT 3/1 started coming ashore and by 2130 McQuown had established his command post temporarily at Blue Beach, on the northern bank of the mouth of the Cua Viet.

Operation Badger Catch was part of a concerted effort that General Tompkins had started at noon on the 23d to make the Cua Viet reasonably safe for LCU and LCM traffic. At that time, he placed armed guards on all boats, provided continuous HU-1E gunship cover, and placed division “Sparrow Hawk” infantry squads on call for immediate insertion into the region. The mission of the BLT was to eliminate all enemy forces in the immediate vicinity of the northern bank of the Cua Viet and to prevent any new North Vietnamese forces from entering this area. Its area of operations extended some 3,000 to 4,000 meters above the Cua Viet and about 5,000 to 7,000 meters inland. The 1st ARVN Division was to clear the area south of the river and provide blocking positions for McQuown’s battalion to the west.”

The clearing of the Cua Viet proved to be a harder nut to crack than the planners at III MAF and the 3d Marine Division first contemplated. As an indicator of what was to follow, on the morning of the 24th, the North Vietnamese used a command detonated mine to sink a Navy LCM in the river channel. At that point, General Cushman asked the Navy Amphibious Ready Group commander for the SLF Bravo helicopter squadron, HMM-165, to lift elements of BLT 3/1 to an island in the river channel that the North Vietnamese were using as a firing and command site to disrupt the boat traffic on the Cua Viet.\*

\* At this point. Operation Badger Catch was an SLF operation and the SLF battalion and squadron still came under the Navy amphibious ready group commander. Until the amphibious commander officially gave up control of his forces ashore to III MAF or his representative, he still nominally retained control of the SLF units.

Although Badger Catch was to last only a few days, BLT 3/1 would remain in the Cua Viet sector with the same mission for over a month. For Lieutenant Colonel McQuown and his battalion it was a time to vindicate themselves after their somewhat uneven performance in their first SLF operation, Badger Tooth, at the end of December.

Changes were occurring elsewhere in the 3d Marine Division area of operations as well during this period. As part of the Checkers plan to concentrate the 3d Marine Division in Quang Tri Province, Colonel Joseph E. Lo Prete's 3d Marines took over the Operation Osceola sector centered around the relatively new Quang Tri complex from the 1st Marines. The 1st Marines moved to Camp Evans and the 4th Marines assumed responsibility for the Lancaster area at Camp Carroll. At 0930 on the morning of 20 January, Colonel Lo Prete moved into his new command post at La Vang, about 4,000 meters below Quang Tri City and south of the Thach Han River, and immediately began Operation Osceola II with the same forces that were in Osceola I.

For all practical purposes, the mission and concept of operations for Osceola II were the same as those for Osceola I. The 3d Marines was to protect the Quang Tri base from enemy attack and to prevent NVA units from Base Area 101 in the far reaches of the Hai Lang Forest Preserve from reaching the coast. Lieutenant Colonel Richard W. Goodale's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, located at Ai Tu, above the Thach Han and about 3,000 meters northwest of Quang Tri City, was responsible for the defense of the northern sector which included the airfield and the approaches to the base from the west. Collocated at La Vang with the 3d Marines was Lieutenant Colonel Marcus J. Gravel's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. Gravel's battalion covered the southern and southwestern approaches into the Quang Tri coastal region. The 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, with two 105mm batteries, one at Ai Tu and the other at La Vang, and one provisional 155mm howitzer battery, also at La Vang, provided the artillery support. Company C, 3d Tank Battalion, and an Army "Duster" battery, Battery A, 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery, equipped with M42s armed with twin 40mm antiaircraft guns were also at La Vang under the operational control of the 3d Marines and ready to assist the infantry. Elements of the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion screened the approaches to the west.

With only two battalions available to him, Lo Prete barely had sufficient forces to protect the immediate Quang Tri base area let alone carry out mobile operations in the extensive southwestern area of operations toward Base Area 101. Although the 1st ARVN Regiment maintained forces to the east and north of the Marine regiment, the North Vietnamese had already infiltrated at least two battalions of the 812th NVA Regiment into the coastal region east of Route 1 and Quang Tri City. The NVA Quyet Thaing Artillery Regiment equipped with 82mm mortars and rockets was deployed to the southwest and west of the Marines. To the west. Marine reconnaissance "Stingray" patrols made continual sightings of small groups of enemy soldiers moving eastward towards the coast.

For the most part, the enemy largely bypassed the Marine positions and confined his attacks on the Marine base areas and the Quang Tri airfield to harassing sniper fire, occasional mortar shelling, and rocket bombardment. On two occasions, 24 and 31 January, enemy 122mm rockets and 60mm and 82mm mortar rounds hit the Quang Tri airfield but caused relatively little damage. Through January, the Marines sustained casualties of 2 dead and 32 wounded and killed 8 of the enemy and took 1 prisoner. They also recovered six weapons.

With the North Vietnamese attacks on Khe Sanh and the Cua Viet, both Generals Westmoreland and Cushman recognized the need for additional forces in Quang Tri Province. Westmoreland's decision to reinforce Marine forces in the north with the 1st Air Cavalry Division provided General Cushman, the III MAF commander, with additional options." On 22 January, after a conference with both

General Westmoreland, and the MACV deputy commander, General Creighton W. Abrams, Cushman outlined his plans for the Army division. He planned to assign Major General John J. Tolson, the 1st Cavalry Commander, an extensive area of operations that would

\* Colonel Max McQuown wrote that in contrast to Operation Badger Tooth, Operation Badger Catch was the “proper, profitable use of a potent fighting force. Inirially, BLT 3/1 operated within an Amphibious Objective Area with all elements of the BLT ashore or on-call.” Most importantly, he had “firm intelligence about the enemy in the area.” Col Max McQuown, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM - THE DEFINING YEAR - 1968

By

Jack Shulimson

Lieutenant Colonel Leonard A. Blasiol, U.S. Marine Corps

Charles R. Smith

and Captain David A. Dawson, U.S. Marine Corps

HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION

HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS

WASHINGTON, D.C.1997