

# Battle for Dong Ha

The opening contact with the 320th NVA Division came early on 29 April. Two battalions of the 2d Regiment, 1st ARVN Infantry Division bumped into the NVA seven kilometers north of Dong Ha. As the fight raged on and it began to look as if the ARVN were beaten, General Tompkins dispatched part of his division reserve from Cam Lo, ten kilometers to the west, to help them. Task Force Robbie, consisting of a rifle company from 1/9 and a tank company from the 3d Tank Battalion, made it just three kilometers east of Cam Lo before being ambushed by a strong NVA force. After losing eleven dead, twenty-nine wounded, and four tanks, T F Robbie limped back to Cam Lo.

Surprised at the viciousness of the ambush, General Tompkins ordered 3/9 to counterattack the next day, 30 April. To backstop the ARVN still engaged along Route 1, Tompkins ordered the 3d Marines to send a rifle company to guard a bridge on Route 1 a few kilometers north of Dong Ha.

Colonel Milton A. Hull, 3d Marines commander, currently had three battalions opconned to his regiment: the [1st Amphibious Tractor Battalion](#), which operated just inland of the South China Sea on the north side of the Cua Viet; 1/3, which was operating south of the river; and BLT 2/4, SLF Alpha, which operated north of the Cua Viet between the [1st Amphibious Tractors](#) and the 2d ARVN Regiment to the west. Colonel Hull ordered Capt. James E. Livingston to take his Company E, 2/4, to the bridge from its position in Nhi Ha, a deserted hamlet about four kilometers north of the Cua Viet. Livingston and his men were carried by UH-34 helicopters to their new position north of the bridge on the afternoon of 29 April.

Early the next morning, Company H, 2/4, while on routine patrol, was surprised to find NVA in the village of Dong Huan, a small hamlet set on an unnamed tributary of the Cua Viet where it turned south, and less than one kilometer above the Bo Dieu. The NVA were already much farther south than was originally thought. A brief fire-fight erupted, with both sides exchanging short bursts of fire. Then, as the Marines watched, other NVA fired a 57mm recoilless rifle at two U.S. Navy utility landing craft (LCUs) moving on the Bo Dieu. An instant later, the lead boat rocked as two shells ripped through its thin sides. The boats whipped into a U-turn and sped back to Dong Ha.

As soon as he got this news, battalion commander Lt. Col. William Weise ordered Company H to attack Dong Huan from its position in the hamlet of Bac Vong to the north. At about the same time, the U.S. Navy halted all further river traffic between [Camp Kistler](#), Dong Ha, and Quang Tri City. The enemy had achieved his objective with just a few well-placed shots.

The little peninsula between the Bo Dieu and the unnamed tributary to the north contained five hamlets laid out along an extended V. At the upper end of the right arm was Dong Huan. Roughly five hundred meters south, at the tip of the V and on the north bank of the Bo Dieu, sat, An Lac. Five hundred meters up the left arm was the largest of the five hamlets, Dai Do. A few hundred meters farther northwest was Dinh To, and just past that hamlet was Thuong Do.

Given the NVA's propensity for setting up situations where they were dug in and their foe was in the open, Weise realized that he had to secure Dai Do, directly to the west. He thus ordered Company F to maneuver on Company H's right flank. Its objective was a cemetery just to the east of Dai Do.

Even though Company F hadn't yet moved into position, Company H nonetheless launched its attack at about 1400 on 30 April. As the last pair of F-4 Phantom jets unleashed their five-hundred pound bombs and napalm canisters on Dong Huan, and the supporting artillery fired its final salvo, the company arose and, advancing on line, headed for the hamlet.

Enemy resistance was immediate, fierce, and at close range. Advancing through thick vegetation crisscrossed by hedges more than three meters high, the Marines were fired on by NVA from only two meters away. The cracking of AK-47s built slowly to a crescendo as enemy soldiers recovered from the bombardment. Popping up from spider holes hidden in the hedgerows, the NVA fired left and right. Hand-to-hand fighting erupted as NVA soldiers grappled with surprised Marines. Grenades tossed by both sides exploded in thundering crashes, felling Marines and killing NVA trapped in their holes. In the opening minutes of the attack the company commander, Capt. James L. Williams, went down with shrapnel wounds. As he lay bleeding in the dirt, his executive officer quickly assumed command.

Despite the heavy resistance, Company H pressed on. The fighting was at close quarters and deadly, but by 1430 the Marines had advanced through Dong Huan. Exhausted but pumped with adrenaline, they gazed across open paddies at An Lac to the south and Dai Do to the west. With some thirty dead NVA behind them, Lieutenant Colonel Weise gave Company H permission to return to its jumping-off point. There the Marines set up a night defensive position and evacuated their casualties.

At about the same time that Company H reached Dong Huan, Company F finally started moving toward Dai Do. The company commander, Capt. James Butler, had been delayed because he'd been trying to get a smoke screen laid around Dai Do. Because Company H had priority on the available artillery, his company would have to move across the five hundred meters of open ground completely exposed. Riding atop four [amtracs](#), the Marines were hit as they neared the hamlet. At about 1430 RPGs flashed out from Dai Do, crashing into the amtracs, their explosions spilling Marines into the tall grass. This first barrage of RPGs damaged two [amtracs](#) and caused a number of casualties. After finally getting some artillery to fire on the hamlet, Butler sent two platoons forward. As they neared the first hedgerow, located about one hundred meters east of Dai Do, the enemy infantry let loose. The sudden roar of AK-47 fire drowned out the artillery explosions. The deadly sheet of automatic weapons fire dropped men all along the line. Those who could helped the wounded pull back to the rest of the company, now clustered around the [amtracs](#).

After another artillery barrage tore into the hamlet, Company F's Marines rushed forward again. This time their tenacity allowed them to secure a tenuous toehold in northwest Dai Do. Determined to maintain that position, Weise wanted Company G to reinforce Company F. Colonel Hull told him there weren't enough helicopters available to transport them in time. Weise then appealed for the return of Company E from division control. Hull responded that not only was he working on that, he was also giving Weise Company B, 1/3. Weise ordered Company B to attack and secure An Lac.

From its position south of the Cua Viet near [Camp Kistler](#), Company B, 1/3, boarded [amtracs](#) for the trip up the river. At about 1615 the vessels neared the beaches fronting An Lac along the Bo Dieu. In a scene resembling a World War II island beachhead assault, a withering hail of enemy fire raked Company B as its members poured out of the [amtracs](#). The company commander died in a flurry of AK-47 fire just minutes after stepping ashore. A platoon leader and platoon sergeant died, too. In the first five minutes ashore, seven Marines were killed and fourteen were seriously wounded, including the company gunnery sergeant. Weise had had no idea that the NVA had that much strength in An Lac.

Using F-4 Phantoms from both the Marine Corps and Air Force, naval gunfire, and artillery, Weise pounded An Lac for the next thirty minutes. Only then could Company B, with just one surviving officer, secure its beachhead. Weise then ordered the company to dig in for the night, evacuate its wounded, and carry out a re-supply.

In the meantime, Captain Butler, concerned about a counterattack against his company's weak positions in Dai Do, radioed Weise to request permission to pull back and link up with Company H for the night. Although Weise hated to give up hard-won ground, he gave his okay. It took until dark to complete the retrograde movement, but Company F finally straggled into Dong Huan with just fifty-five effectives. Together with Company H, they spent the night of 30 April-1 May secure behind a wall of artillery and mortar fire. Company B, 1/3, spent a similar night at An Lac.

Because of the beating that Company B, 1/3, had taken that day, Lieutenant Colonel Weise decided to commit his Company G to the fight. From its position ten kilometers northeast of the battleground, Company G was ordered to proceed immediately to An Lac, move through Company B, and attack Dai Do in the predawn darkness.

Adequate transportation still could not be secured, so Company G did not arrive at An Lac until about 0945 on 1 May. When all its men were ashore, Weise ordered the company commander, Capt. Jay R. Vargas, to move his Marines around Company B to the right, then attack northwest toward Dai Do across seven hundred meters of open ground. Companies F and H would support Vargas from Dong Huan as he drove into the hamlet.

While Vargas prepared his company for the attack, Dai Do was pounded with napalm and bombs from Marine Phantoms and Sky-hawks. At the same time, NVA artillery batteries north of the DMZ were blasting Dong Huan and An Lac. The noise was tremendous with all the explosions and the screams of low-flying jets. Men had to shout at one another to be heard above the din.

Supported by two tanks, Company G jumped off at about 1300. Advancing with two platoons forward, the company made it about one third of the way across the open ground before the NVA opened fire. The 3d Platoon, on the left, was particularly hard hit. A 12.7mm machine gun played havoc with the advancing Marines. Its deadly rounds cut men down like an invisible scythe. Just then, enemy mortar and artillery rounds tore into the area, throwing towering geysers of dirt skyward. Ignoring the lethal danger, Vargas boldly ran to the stalled platoon. Under his urging the advance resumed. By 1500 Company G was in Dai Do.

Heavy, close-quarters fighting raged as the Marines moved through the hamlet. Enemy soldiers seemed to be everywhere, popping up from spider holes, from under haystacks, from trench lines behind hedgerows, and from inside the abandoned huts. But Vargas's men routed them out one by one with ruthless efficiency.

Company G had just barely reached the far side of Dai Do when the NVA counterattacked. Aerial observers excitedly reported scores of enemy soldiers pouring out of Dinh To and headed right toward Dai Do. Though supporting fire blasted the enemy formations, by 1630 they were seriously pressing Vargas's company. He had no choice. He ordered a withdrawal. As the Marines retreated they couldn't believe what they were experiencing. The NVA were so close that they were being killed at pistol range and in hand-to-hand combat. Some North Vietnamese soldiers were so pumped up that they actually ran right past the withdrawing Americans.

Vargas and about forty-five of his men dropped into a deep drainage ditch that ran along Dai Do's northeastern edge. The heavy volume of fire that the small but determined force put out finally halted the enemy's momentum. At the same time the forward artillery controllers were on their radios desperately calling for more supporting fire. Within minutes their pleas were answered. The heavy 105mm shells were soon crashing down less than fifty meters from the ditch.

Now, greatly concerned for Company G's survival, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Company B, 1/3, into the fight. Mounted on [amtracs](#), what remained of the battered company started for Dai Do about 1730. At the same time, Company E, 2/4, was finally released from division control. Captain Livingston immediately started his men on the two-kilometer march to An Lac. Along the way marauding bands of NVA scouts repeatedly fired on them, killing several Marines. But by 1900, Company E was in An Lac.

At 1745, while still less than halfway to Dai Do, Company B was blasted off its [amtrac](#) by RPGs and automatic weapons fire. Among those grievously wounded was the new company commander, who'd taken command but a few hours earlier. Unable to proceed, with tracer rounds snapping just inches over their heads, the survivors of Company B began pulling back to An Lac. They dragged their wounded with them; the dead stayed in the field. Four hundred meters to the north, Captain Vargas and his forty-five surviving Marines dug in for the night. Besides their own weapons, they had the support of artillery to hold the determined NVA at bay.

Before first light on 2 May, Company E was up and ready to go. Captain Livingston ordered, "Fix bayonets." It was very satisfying to him to hear the distinct click of the edged weapons locking into place on 150 rifles. Because of a communication problem, Company E moved toward Dai Do without the benefit of a rolling barrage of artillery to keep down the enemy's heads. Still, only occasional pops from a sniper's rifle interrupted the advance. Then, in a blur of confusion, the NVA let loose with everything they had when the Marines were just 150 meters short of the hamlet. From the hedgerows along Dai Do's south edge, small arms, automatic rifle, and RPG fire slammed into Company E. Livingston and his command group dove behind one of numerous burial mounds dotting the open area. Eighteen RPG's exploded around them in the next few minutes. Company E was pinned down.

From his position on the northeast edge of Dai Do, Captain Vargas tried to relieve the pressure on Company E by leading his forty-five men in an attack through the hamlet. Soon, the NVA shifted their fire to meet this new threat. With less fire coming his way, Captain Livingston then rallied his men and led them forward to the hamlet's edge. Dead NVA littered the ground everywhere, but there were plenty of live ones left and they weren't giving up easily. Marines used grenades and M79 grenade launchers to clear enemy positions. The fighting was brutal but the Marines pressed forward, meter by bloody meter.

At 0914 Captain Vargas advised Lieutenant Colonel Weise that he had linked up with Livingston. They were digging in on Dai Do's northwestern edge. Before Weise could respond, NVA mortar shells fired from Dinh To began dropping among the Marines. During the fifteen-minute barrage, Weise was ordered by Colonel Hull to continue the ground attack into Dinh To. Weise was incredulous but had no choice. Realizing that Companies E and G were in no shape to launch another full-scale attack, Lieutenant Colonel Weise turned to Company H.

Just before 1000, Company H left its positions in Dong Huan and moved through Dai Do's western edge. Using fire and maneuver tactics, two of its platoons made it into Dinh To under relatively light enemy fire. As the two platoons started through the hamlet, the NVA suddenly counterattacked. Within minutes Company H was in serious trouble.

Seconds later Captain Livingston, who'd been monitoring Company H's progress on the radio, called Weise: "I'm going to help Hotel. They're really fixing to get in trouble. I'll go get 'em." Without waiting for a response, Captain Livingston took the seventy able-bodied men left in his company on the attack. Charging through the enemy fire, Livingston led his men right through clusters of NVA by passed by Company H. They were killing the enemy on the run. Some NVA fled, actually trotting along with Livingston's Marines before they were shot down.

Once Company E tied in with Company H, the two companies resumed the attack on Dinh To. Initially, they made good progress, but then the NVA counterattacked yet again. A sudden increase in enemy fire signaled their intention. From as close as twenty-five meters the NVA cut loose with an awesome display of firepower. The noise rose to an ear-shattering roar as weapons of every caliber spewed hot lead. Under tremendous pressure the Marines were forced back. Bravely defying the enemy's onslaught, Livingston stood in the open, firing a rifle at the crew with a 12.7mm machine gun. The NVA got lucky before Livingston did. A heavy slug from the automatic weapon tore into his thigh, sending him sprawling. As two other wounded men helped him to safety, he turned over command of Company E to a rookie lieutenant.

The two battered companies retreated all the way back to Dai Do. There they evacuated their seriously wounded and loaded up on more ammo.

At this time Lieutenant Colonel Weise arrived in Dai Do with more orders from Colonel Hull. Impossible as it seemed, 2/4 was to immediately launch yet another attack into Dinh To. Calling upon what remained of Companies F and G, Weise ordered them to clear Dinh To. The renewed assault kicked off at 1550. It was a bloody failure.

Through a misunderstanding of orders, Company F did not provide Vargas's company with adequate support. Rather than advance in trail behind Company G, from where it could pass through Vargas's company to exploit any weak spots, Company F moved on their right flank, in the open fields east of the hamlet. As a result, the entrenched NVA easily flanked the two companies. Then, at 1645 the NVA, displaying incredible reserve strength, counterattacked once again.

To the shock of the Marines, the NVA seemed to be everywhere. Dozens of enemy soldiers poured out of the nearby brush. Wearing pith helmets and firing their AK-47s from their hips, they raced forward. Vargas's depleted platoons retreated right past the ditch he was using as a command post. Lieutenant Colonel Weise and his command group, who'd joined Vargas just a few minutes earlier, fought as riflemen. Weise blazed away with an M16, picking off enemy soldiers as easily as hitting targets on a firing range. Then, the attacking enemy soldiers were alongside the ditch. In rapid succession Weise was hit by enemy rifle fire, and the battalion sergeant major was killed by the shrapnel from an exploding RPG.

Intent on saving his commander, Captain Vargas valiantly risked his own life to carry Weise rearward to an evacuation point. Vargas then returned to his embattled company. Using an AK-47, he fired away at the enemy while he helped the wounded rearward. An RPG explosion knocked him down as it tore a chunk of flesh from his leg. Still, he fought on and got his casualties headed to safety. All around him Marines and North Vietnamese soldiers grappled in death struggles. Vargas himself killed an enemy soldier with his knife.

Despite these heroics, the Marines were forced back. By 1800 Companies F and G were in Dai Do. All four companies of 2/4 dug in there for the night. The Marines spent a nervous night as the NVA probed their positions throughout the dark hours. More than a dozen enemy soldiers were killed as they sneaked forward to try to throw grenades into the friendly positions.

It had been a brutal three-day fight for 2/4. At the end of 2 May, Company E had forty-five men left, Company F fifty-two, Company G thirty-five, and Company H sixty-four.

That night, Colonel Hull ordered the rest of 1/3 to land at An Lac on the afternoon of 3 May. They would then renew the attack through Dinh To and into Thuong Do, the next village north.

The new attack went off as planned. By 1500 two companies of 1/3 had entered Dinh To. Although they encountered some resistance, it was apparent that the NVA had pulled out the night before. By 1800, 1/3 had swept through Thuong Do. All that remained was to tally up the losses.

The BLT 2/4 was credited with 537 enemy dead. The battalion suffered 81 dead and 397 wounded. For that, they had prevented the 320th NVA Division from attacking the Dong Ha combat base.

For their incredible heroism during this violent three-day fight, Captains Vargas and Livingston were awarded the Medal of Honor. Lieutenant Colonel Weise received a Navy Cross.

Though battered, the 320th NVA Division was not down. Pursued by 1/3, on 5 May, the NVA stood and fought at Som Soi, one kilo meter north of Thuong Do. The Marines lost fifteen killed and sixty-four wounded before the NVA broke contact. The next day the division recrossed the DMZ into North Vietnam to lick its wounds.

Information for operations on this page from book Titled  
"Semper Fi Vietnam, from DaNang to the DMZ  
Marine Corps Campaigns, 1965-1975"  
By Edward F. Murphy

For more on this battle, read;  
"The Magnificent Bastards"  
By Keith William Nolan