

# **MARINES AT THE CUA VIET**

The Right Flank of the Third Marine Division  
(1967 - 1968)

A monograph by  
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## FORWARD

In June of 1997, my older brother, Seabron Burson Johnson, Jr., a Korean War era Marine artillery officer, and I toured some of the battlefields of our nation's Civil War. We had utilized the Internet and discovered our Great-grandfather, James Madison Martin and his brother, Randolph, had enlisted in the Confederate States Army at the ages of 18 and 16, respectively. Both had traveled from their home in the southwestern corner of their state, Fort Gaines, Georgia, to Macon to enlist in the 10th Georgia Division as cavalrymen. The division was a composite of Alabama and Georgia men and units under the command of young Brigadier General "Fightin" Joe" Wheeler, an Alabamian and graduate of West Point.

Our tour route was simplified as we used a biography of Wheeler's military history, complete with maps covering engagements through Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, North and South Carolina. As we visited each of the battle sites and read of the 10th Georgia's involvement in the bloody encounters, a realization came to both Seabron and myself. I confirmed our mutual feeling when I opined that it was a shame that neither James nor Randolph left a written record of their wartime experiences for their descendants.

Over time, the germ of the idea to leave some record of my own experiences in Vietnam took root. Two casual conversations prompted growth of the idea to create a more formal account.

One of my troops out of my last tour in Vietnam asked if I would assist him in submitting a letter of our experiences. The letter would serve as an enclosure to his application to the Department of Veterans Affairs to support his claim for disability. I drafted a personal account that related to experiences of the unit, Company A, 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, 3rd Marine Division, FMF, and particularly his platoon. As this Marine's company commander, I endeavored to be specific in detailed examples of combat encounters his platoon had experienced. Accuracy was of great importance, as one could not chance a mistake for fear of the possibility of a reviewing board's disallowing the validity of the document in support of his claim. Completed, the letter was forwarded and served to assist the Marine's claim for disability as petitioned.

The realization of having prepared a segment of the history of our battalion's Vietnam service during 1967 and 1968 was obvious in itself. Not until I discussed the brief history with another of my Marines from our company did it take on a greater significance. Michael Silverman, now an executive in marketing and sales, asked if I might share the battalion's history with him. I assured him I could and would personalize it for him to pass on to his family when the inevitable question arose, "What did you do in the war?" Additionally, I indicated I would incorporate maps, photographs, unit citations and any other pertinent documentation available. Upon its completion my wife and I delivered the document to Mike and his lovely wife, Louise, at our next meeting as guests in their Rhode Island home.

The short history prepared for two of my Marines forms the basis of my account of my third tour of duty in Vietnam. Assignments during the period, from April 7, 1967 to March 5, 1968, included Battalion Operations officer (S-3), from April 7, 1967 to September 21, 1967, and Commanding Officer (CO) of Company A (Co. A), September 22, 1967 to March 5, 1968, in the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, 3rd Marine Division, FMF.

While elements of this paper have served two individual's purposes so far, it will now serve as an account of my own observations as a battalion staff officer and company commander of Marines for my descendants. On the encouragement of the fine staff of the US Marine Corps University Research Archives, Gray Research Center, Quantico, Virginia. It will remain on file for access as a reference document if chosen to be so or a record for descendants of the Marines who may desire to have an understanding of their ancestor's experience in combat. Therefore, what follows is not an account that serves a single purpose of one of two veterans of Vietnam but all those who served in the 1st Amphibian Tractor battalion during the time they occupied the position at the Cua Viet and operated beyond the perimeter in defense of that base against the North Vietnamese Army regular forces.

Since I am not a published author or a qualified historian, I wish to leave no doubts in anyone's mind that this paper is just an individual's account of what was seen and conclusions derived thereupon. As such, it is a monograph that is strictly based on one's personal observations, experiences and some verbal accounts shared with other Marines at the time that served in the 1st AmTrac Battalion. Through its flaws and imperfections, a perspective can be drawn

of just how complex and challenging circumstances were met, and, for the most part, overcome by Marines dedicated to uphold precedent standards of performance in combat, the highest being Semper Fidelis.

Just as one Marine meeting another first checks for the other's rank, each renders military greetings appropriately, but ultimately checks the other's badges and decoration above the left breast pocket. Enclosure 1 is offered to the reader of this monograph in greeting. Therein lies the proof through Presidential, Naval, and Marine Unit Commendations as valid proof that the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, a combat support unit, was transformed into a combat unit in 1967 in Vietnam, faced off against regular North Vietnamese units in combat and prevailed to the honor of the traditions of the Corps.

The monograph that follows is an effort to reflect the deeds of a single battalion of marines who did an unusual job and earned the right to call themselves Amphibian Tractor Infantrymen, "Amgrunts."

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### **... at the CUA VIET**

The, 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, 3rd Marine Division, FMF, had been in the Republic of Viet Nam (RVN) for approximately two years (having landed Co. B over Red Beach 2 on July 8, 1965 in Danang, Republic of Vietnam), and operated around Da Nang in support of the regiments and battalions of the 3rd Marine Division as a combat support battalion. Its primary mission was, using organic assault amphibious vehicles (LVT 5A1 family of vehicles) to transport assault forces from ship-to-shore against heavily defended enemy beaches and perform combat support operations as directed once ashore.

In less than two weeks after being assigned to 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion in Da Nang, the battalion headquarters was advised on April 18, 1967 of a pending movement to the north. An advance party consisting of the battalion commander, Lt. Col. Albert R. "Ray" Bowman, USMC, Maj. Poindexter M. Johnson, USMC, and CWO-3 Harry Florence, USMC, flew via helicopter to the Cua Viet River mouth on the South China Sea to conduct a reconnaissance of the location for establishing a battalion base of operations. Shortly thereafter the division passed the order to move from Da Nang without Company A. The battalion headquarters arrived at the Cua Viet on April 25 and was followed by Co. A on April 27.

Company B was already located at the Cua Viet under the competent command of Captain John B. Legge, USMC. Capt. Legge and his Marines had been providing local security for the Naval Support Activity (NSA). The NSA group provided port facilities for offloading supplies and equipment from naval vessels and subsequent movement of these vital five classes of supplies up the Cua Viet River to Dong Ha.

A map of the northeastern sector of South Vietnam below the DMZ identifying major towns and tactical Strong Point Obstacles is provided as Enclosure (2).

Upon arriving at the Cua Viet, Company A occupied the battalion area just south of the Naval Support Activity (NSA), at the mouth of the Cua Viet river and facing west toward the northern most end of the "Street Without Joy," made famous in Bernard Fall's book of the same name. The battalion's position formed a semi-circle with one end on the Cua Viet river west of NSA and arching around to tie in with Company B to Alpha's left flank and Headquarters and Service Company to the left flank (south) of Bravo. The battalion occupied the ground within the perimeter that ran approximately 400 meters south looking west over coils of concertina wire and "tangle foot" strands of razor and barbed wire, interspersed with bunkers and fighting positions. The South China Sea stood behind the battalion and NSA (Naval Support Activity) as their eastern boundary.

The Assistant Operations Officer, CWO-3 Harry Florence, laid out these defensive barriers. Gunner Florence was a veteran of WW II and the Korean Conflict. Steeped in valuable experiences, this war-wise Marine made great contributions to the battalion's successes each day.

In addition to the Battalion units and NSA, Marine engineers and Navy Construction Battalion detachments supported the Cua Viet position. They provided fuel storage, water collection and purification and construction. On the point of land at the confluence of the Cua Viet River and the South China Sea was LVTH-6A1 Platoon, a direct fire and indirect support 105 mm howitzer amphibian battery, the primary source of our direct support artillery.

### **THE MISSION PLUS ADDITIONS**

Initially the battalion's mission was to provide local security to insure the uninterrupted offloading of supplies by NSA from naval amphibious shipping (LST and LCU), for trans-shipment by NSA landing craft, LCM-6, LCM-8 and LCU, up the Cua Viet River to Dong Ha where the 9th Marine Regiment headquarters along with their re-supply and distribution center was located.

The original mission of the battalion would soon undergo an historic change. Local security was to be expanded beyond the battalion perimeter and north shores of the Cua Viet River. The expanded mission would extend the battalion's northern boundary some twelve to fifteen thousand meters to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and move its southern line seven thousand meters below the battalion's compound. The battalion's western operational boundary would be extended approximately five to seven thousand meters from the beaches of the sea inland.

The original battalion organization was that of an amphibian vehicle battalion responsible for transporting infantry from ship to shore during assaults and conducting combat support operations after the initial landing. All this was about to be changed.

Once the battalion had been encamped in its new positions and gotten its defenses in place, it began to expand its patrols during the day and establishing listening posts during the night. Patrols had been limited north of the Cua Viet River as we had been reminded that territory belonged to the 1st ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). All patrols had to be cleared with their liaison officer attached to the advanced 3rd Marine Division headquarters (Bravo Command) at Dong Ha. Many times approval to conduct daylight patrols across the river would arrive days after having been requested.

Refer to Enclosure (2) and note the tactical boundary designating the area east of Highway 1 to be the responsibility of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

The Division's forward command apparently heard our complaints. No doubt the issue was brought to the attention of III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) headquarters in Da Nang. Once a decision was made, General John Chaisson flew in by helicopter and was escorted into the battalion headquarters tent for a briefing from the battalion commanding officer, Lt. Col. Ray Bowman. The general listened attentively until the colonel concluded. He then stood and asked to see the battalion patrol overlays. As the general placed the overlays onto the tactical map of the area, he made a telling remark.

“Colonel Bowman, you will have to operate farther afield to protect the compound from direct assault and from 82 MM mortar fire from reaching the NSA offloading ramp.”

The general then picked up a black grease pencil and began drawing the new boundaries of the battalion's Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR). As he drew the lines he outlined the new additional mission for the battalion to assume immediately. In just a few short minutes the battalion went from being a combat support battalion to that of a combat command with the same responsibilities of that expected of a regular infantry battalion for a TAOR. Later the mission would undergo a minor modification that was not unexpected at the time.

It would be foolhardy for one to say that such an awesome mission had not just been laid on an unsuspecting commander and his staff. There was no doubt that Lt. Col. Bowman was taken aback at Gen. Chaisson's casual sweep of the grease pencil and clear explanation of how the battalion was expected to move out smartly to locate, fix and destroy any Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars in the assigned area of responsibility.

While not showing any signs of unwillingness to assume the mission vigorously, Col. Bowman did appear to be doubtful of adequacy of equipment and additional essential personnel to undertake and accomplish the assigned mission. He voiced these concerns in a most professional manner. Gen. Chaisson deflected these concerns and assured Bowman his considerations could be reviewed and addressed at the battalion's parent division headquarters with that staff.

The new mission literally changed the battalion into an infantry unit. To accomplish this, the two letter companies, CO's A and B had to undergo reorganization and retraining. The H&S Co., to a lesser degree would also incorporate infantry elements, but still existed to support the letter companies administratively and logistically. Areas of Operation (AO) were assigned with Cos. A and B sharing responsibilities north of the Cua Viet River and H&S Co. alternating with Co. B. for that half below the Cua Viet. Assignment of patrol sweeps and search and destroy missions were to be coordinated between the battalion operations shop and each company headquarters. The emphasis of applying a greater degree of command oversight was required by Lt. Col. Bowman and rightfully so. He voiced his concerns regarding the lack of infantry operations training and experience within the letter companies. He insisted on detailed planning before each movement outside the wire and beyond the river before taking to the field. Thorough debriefs were equally insisted upon when units returned to base. At first, the colonel, operations officer (S-3), and assistant S-3 reviewed all pre-operation briefs. Debriefs from squad and platoon size patrols were generally only received by the S-3 and his assistant, Gunner Florence.

At this point it is worthwhile to restate that Gunner Florence was, without a doubt, the most combat experienced Marine officer, having served with infantry and tracked combat vehicles. His briefing and debriefing skills and techniques, down to inspection of each Marine's roles and missions and each item of equipment and munitions, was an education for all in attendance. Gunner Florence's style of delivery was that of a knowledgeable and sincerely concerned but firm and resolute father sending his own sons in harms way. The Marines responded accordingly and hung on each wise suggestion, order and, where necessary, demand. The value of such knowledge and developmental proficiency is not measurable. It is sure to say that the Marine's performance was greatly enhanced by the "Florence Touch." After all, the VC and NVA lost more men than did 1st AmTracs.

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Moving from a dedicated amphibian vehicle mission to a totally new mission required a great deal of retraining. The emphasis required progression in scales of unit sizes and types of operation. A cursory review of one platoon's knowledge and experience revealed that all units would have to begin at the beginning. The battalion did not possess the personnel in senior Non Commissioned Officers (NCO) and officers to establish a duplication of the state side Infantry Training Regiment. Ideally this infantryman's military occupational specialty schooling would have trained our Marines with Infantry skills essential to meet the enemy on a par in combat. That was not to be the case. The Amtrackers, at best, would receive their infantry training on the job under the rules of hard knocks.

It is significant to note at this juncture that no doctrine existed in the Marine Corps that established the policies and procedures for literally grounding one whole amphibian tractor company, Company A, and one-half of another, two tractor platoons of Company B, augmented with H&S Company Marines as directed by the Battalion commander. Additionally, absence of such a doctrine precluded the augmentation of essential combined arms personnel and a multitude of critical equipment. The far reaching ramifications of this reorientation of a tracked vehicle battalion with existing organic personnel shortages, absence of new mission critical equipment, and support personnel became more pronounced when the standard infantry commands are compared with those of the Amtrackers.

## COMPARING THE TWO

Reassignment of a mission by the division did not include the reallocation of equipment to accomplish the infantry type tasks ahead. This fact would have serious consequences in future engagements with the VC guerrillas of South Vietnam and regulars of the NVA streaming down from the North.

The Table of Organization and Equipment for the battalion authorized only those personnel and equipment to conduct tracked vehicle support to infantry units. Now that the battalion was effectively "grounded," it had to be reorganized for retraining and conducting infantry operations. These initial organizational and operational changes meant engaging the enemy while learning small unit tactics with limited firepower, communications, and no tactical support personnel from combined arms firepower commands. For example, the new infantryman (the Amtrackers) carried the 7.62 millimeter (mm), M-14 semi-automatic rifle while regular infantry carried the newer .223mm, M-16. The latter has a larger volume of ammunition in each magazine (30 rounds versus 20 in the M-14), a higher rate of fire, and deadlier velocity and killing impact. All other basic personal equipment was equal to that of regular Marine infantry, such as helmets, clothing, and flack jackets. The hand grenades, smoke and flares were common to both. The regular grunts had the 40mm, M-79 grenade launcher. This allowed the infantryman a stand off from the enemy of up to 450 yards versus heaving a hand grenade 10 to 15 yards with limited accuracy. The regular infantry squad was organized with the M-60 medium assault machinegun. This weapon afforded the infantry units the heavy base of automatic weapons fire from which to maneuver. The new infantry units had no such lightweight, heavy firepower weapon serviced by two men. Instead, they had the .30-caliber machinegun, taken from their AmTracs, which was air cooled and employed by a team of three, gunner, assistant gunner, and one ammunition carrier.

Over time, the new infantry managed to acquire more and more M-60 Machine guns and some M-79 grenade launchers. These weapons were rotated around between the platoons as they took the field on patrols. This practice was continued until more and more of these weapons were equally distributed by late 1968.

Indirect firepower, organic to the infantry, was made possible with 60mm and 81mm mortars. No such weapons were available to the new infantry. Here again the new infantryman was limited in firepower that could reach out

and engage the enemy, thereby delivering killing fire on them, disrupting his formations and slowing his advance, ideally fixing him on less defensible ground.

Heavier indirect firepower was assigned to the Amtrackers in the form of the LVTH-6A1 (How-6), the amphibious vehicle that was mounted with a 105mm howitzer. The How-6 platoon, a six-weapon battery, was capable of delivering both indirect and direct fire support on enemy targets. Normally in the amphibious assault, the "How-6s" were the first assault wave, delivering direct fire onto enemy positions. Once ashore, they took up regular artillery battery firing formations and delivered indirect fire that was adjusted by artillery forward observers (FO), who might be drawn from the How-6 platoon or from the division's artillery regiment. These personnel were not provided along with the new mission assigned to the Amtrackers.

The next level, or priority of artillery support, general support fires, was available from the artillery regiment, 12th Marines. Access to this support would have to go through a Fire Direction Center (FDC) at the battalion. It didn't exist. Here is where the How-6 unit located within the defensive perimeter of the AmTrac battalion and NSA picked up the slack. They became the battalion's Fire Direction Center (FDC) in conjunction with their battery fire control responsibilities. Initially, it was realized that any calls for fire support to operating forces outside the compound area would have to be conducted via radio from the requesting unit to the operations office (S-3), thence via land line for all fire missions that could be fulfilled by the How-6 weapons.

Effectively, the S-3 could run an interim Fire Direction Center. Landlines to the artillery had to be used, as the How-6s did not have sufficient radios to monitor multiple company conduct of fire networks, hence a priority of fires had to be established by the S-3.

This communications network proved to have two significant flaws. The landline from the S-3 to the How-6 platoon fire control center was vulnerable to enemy artillery fire. Early on, the line was cut twice by NVA 130mm artillery fire. Note in Enclosure (3) the firing fans of the enemy artillery reach beyond the mouth of the Cua Viet River. This demanded that radios be used with landlines as backup. To accomplish this, the battalion had to remove vehicle-mounted radios from LVT-P5A1s to be installed in the battalion command bunker and that of the How-6 command bunker. This move not only eliminated the vulnerability of command control over landlines; it increased responsiveness of calls for fire by the How-6 battery to supported units in the field. Effectively, it allowed the S-3 to monitor the calls for fire as they now went direct to the How-6 battery. The S-3's silence constituted consent for the fire mission.

If calls for fire could not be satisfied by Cua Viet sources, the mission was kicked up to the 12th Marines. In this case, the request would go to the Fire Support Coordination Center (FSCC) at the division level. In order to accomplish this, communications equipment in sufficient quantities with the appropriate very high frequencies would have to be distributed throughout the battalion from the platoons up. Within the companies, there was only one PRC 25 per platoon. At a minimum, each new rifle platoon needed a PRC 25 radio as the tactical communications net. This was essential for coordinating within the company during a fight. At the company headquarters, another PRC 25 was necessary as the administrative radio to net with battalion to handle logistics (supply, medical evacuation, and non-tactical traffic).

A most critical minimum requirement in communications was the need for a tactical conduct of fire network capability with which to call the FDC to receive and adjust mortar and/or, artillery fires on a separate conduct of fire net for the platoons and company commander's headquarters group.

The battalion lacked corresponding communications equipment with networks and trained personnel to establish a complete FDC in the battalion and personnel and equipment to interface with the division FSCC for the conduct of combined arms (direct and general support artillery, naval gunfire support and close air support) fire support for fielded platoons and companies. At the company level this was partially remedied by removing vehicle-mounted radios from command tractors (LVT-Command). Mounting these radios in bunkers solved this communications need to a degree, but it did not satisfy the need for backpacked radios required in the field. There were absolutely no backpack radios by which to contact the Direct Air Support Center (DASC) for close air support. In fact, the battalion had no network authorization to call for such support.

The need for radio communications equipment in the Combat Operations Center (COC) went beyond just operational needs for coordinating combined arms fire support. There were logistical and administrative reporting requirements added to the battalion's reports list. In time, almost all these equipment and network needs were filled, however, not all the personnel to operate and maintain the equipment were provided by the division headquarters.

The field operations needs affected the letter companies, Alpha and Bravo, most directly. There was a need for a radio, an operator, and Forward Air Controller. (FAC). At the battalion, no back pack communications equipment with which to interface with air support was authorized nor available. The trained personnel to field and conduct naval gunfire support were equally absent.

All these communications needs were being noted and being made known to not only to Lt. Col. Bowman by his staff but such needs were being sent up to the division headquarters by Capt. Leo R. Jamieson, USMC. As the battalion's Communications Officer, he managed to shift assets and reassign personnel to cover needs from existing assets in a remarkably efficient manner. His persistent and professional approach to the battalion's requirements at the division level progressively filled many of the gaps and brought effective control to the command's overall communications.

### **GLARING TRAINING DEFICIENCIES**

Another key factor not immediately apparent to the officers and most of the battalion SNCOs, was a change in the training policies of the Marine Corps. After it was determined that replacements had not been arriving in country fast enough to replace killed, wounded and men rotating out at the end of tours of duty, a far-reaching decision was made at the Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps level in Washington D.C., that directly impacted the combat effectiveness of the AmTrac Battalion. The Commandant of the Marine Corps approved deletion of Infantry training for all military occupational specialties (MOS) other than infantry at Infantry Training Regiments. This became apparent as Platoon Leaders and Company Commanders found many troops did not understand basic tactical arm and hand signals, small unit formations, fundamentals of other small unit tactics like covering fire with small arms and nothing about techniques and tactics for engaging and assaulting a fortified position. This lack of fundamentals for effective Marine infantry operations of small units had to be taught from scratch. There was not a sufficient amount of time to impress upon every Marine to embed the subject matter so that it became second nature when meeting the enemy. Instead, it was a quick training course and "hit the ground running" in the face of the enemy. Most of the officers and SNCOs knew but did not openly talk about the fact that this form of on the job training (OJT) would result in early and large numbers of casualties. The nuances of being an infantryman would come slowly but progressively with each combat encounter.

[On a personal note, Captain Johnson was the only officer, and for that matter only Marine in the battalion that had served in combat in Vietnam twice before. The first was a short tour with the Marine Advisor Team attached to the 2nd Battalion, Vietnamese Marines, in the Fourth Corps Zone usually referred to as the delta region. The second tour was as a Naval Aerial Observer, in the back seat of a single engine observation aircraft "Bird Dog," the O1-B. This involved controlling close air support missions for ground forces, adjusting artillery and naval gunfire, conducting radio relay communications; message delivery/pickup and hand held aerial photography. These missions were accomplished in support of the Marine helicopter squadron known as "Shufly" in 1963. The Marine squadron supported the Vietnamese ARVN, US Air Force Air Commandos aviation support elements to the ARVN, and US Army Special Forces A and B Teams throughout the First and Second Tactical Corps Zones. Shufly and the Air Force operated from the Da Nang airport. Between the second tour in Vietnam and before joining the Amtrac battalion, Capt. Johnson completed the Amphibious Warfare School at Quantico, Virginia. Effectively, this prepared him to operate an infantry battalion in combat in all respects. And now, the opportunity was at hand. However, the Amphibious Warfare School did not prepare future S-3s to reorganize, retrain and field Marines short-handed on combined arms support in the face of the enemy.]

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Initially, the 3rd Marine Division, parent command of the 1st AmTrac Battalion, was responsible for the lion's share of the American forces operating in the I Corps Tactical Zone. When the 1st Marine Division joined the conflict, the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force Headquarters was superimposed upon the two divisions for command and control over the entire I Corps Zone.

### **RESOLVING SHORTAGES**

Immediately following the battalion CO and S-3 receiving the new mission from General John Chaisson, Col. Bowman promptly broached the shortages and differences in equipment, support personnel, and supplies required to flesh out the battalion by presenting his needs to the division Chief of Staff and division staff officers. The colonel's return to his headquarters was not underscored with favorable results. Almost to the individual division staff officer the colonel was told much the same thing Gen. Chaisson had told him. Very effectively, they had advised the battalion to take advantage of the immediate situation during the apparent lull in enemy activity to reorganize and train. The colonel was somewhat discouraged and had literally returned to the battalion empty handed since he had distributed the multiple lists of personnel and equipment needs to the appropriate division staff.

It could not be determined then nor since whether the reasons for not immediately providing the battalion with equipment and personnel were a result of lack of both from stockpiles of equipment in country and lack of the necessary personnel replacement within the "personnel pipeline." Regardless of the reason the battalion ventured forth with shortages in all categories of personnel and equipment along with low levels of proficiency in their newly assigned mission.

### **REORGANIZATION**

The first company to be grounded and reorganized was Co. A, commanded by a reserve infantry/artillery officer, Capt. Roland Monnette, USMCR. A very energetic and enthusiastic officer, Capt. Monette quickly reorganized his company and set about a thorough training program. In short order, Co. A was conducting extensive local patrols for training as much as for security.

Bravo Company followed suit behind Alpha Company but with one proviso. Col. Bowman had been advised in a later meeting at the division CP to still be prepared to support the division and ARVN in future operations as Amtrackers with vehicles in their traditional mission. So while Co. B trained two platoons as infantry, they still carried the old mission of supporting the division and others with amphibian vehicles in Vietnam as well as tractors in support of Special Landing Forces (SLF) afloat. Therefore, Co. A was to be the battalion's lead infantry company, primarily responsible for all the AO north of the Cua Viet River. This assignment of primary responsibilities down to the companies became less a matter of hard and fast divisions of labors than it appeared on paper. Frequently, the two infantry platoons of Co. B rotated with Co. A north of the Cua Viet. Co. B engaged its fair share of hard fought combat just as did Co. A.

It became patently apparent to all officers and staff of the command that the battalion was now a Combat and Combat Support command. In addition, discussions at the division headquarters placed the emphasis directly on the command as being a combat organization responsible with the missions and roles thereof. While the officers and staff assumed an attitude of "can do," they were not without some doubts and trepidation. It must be remembered that many of the tractor crewmen, SNCOs and officers had supported the infantry in many operations, but as combat support units. While many had learned quite a bit by observation, they had not "carried the weight," as the Australian servicemen say.

### **THE LAY OF THE LAND**

The total AO assigned to the battalion encompassed approximately thirty-two square miles. The terrain beginning at the shoreline of the South China Sea was an ideal beach with a near flat gradient. The beach rose to approximately five feet above mean low tide from 100 yards off shore interspersed over its breadth with dunes running up to ten feet with gaps between these elevations. Behind the berm and broken dunes was a growth of Australian pines mixed

with native coastal brush and ground cover of weeds and some grasses. Beyond the Australian pines the area was completely barren and sandy as a desert. The sand was generally flat, providing very little cover or concealment for movement. The western edge of the desert was somewhat overgrown with native vegetation that followed a north-south creek. The growth on the east and west sides of this creek, dubbed Jones Creek, ranged in width from 3.5 thousand meters wide at the northern end to approximately 500 meters at its narrowest. This growth was thick and rambled in and out of numerous draws that drained into the creek. The dominant terrain feature along this western boundary of the Alpha Company tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) was a large dune running north and south for about three hundred meters. It was approximately 100 meters wide and rose to just 31 meters. This terrain feature would prove to be a valuable observation post in future month.

## **ORGANIZATION AND OPERATIONS**

As an historic note, Co A of 1st Amtrac's had been partially grounded once before during the Korean Conflict. Due to the strong influence of its commander at the time, a Major by the name of Treadwell, and an equally bold stable of platoon commanders, the company developed a reputation, which earned them the title of "Alpha Battalion." In Korea the company was located along the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) in fixed defensive positions. Local patrols using small units were conducted to sweep up line crossers, check civilians behind their positions and generally maintain rear area security. They were not reorganized nor equipped and retrained as infantry to go against main-force North Korean Peoples Army units in set -piece battles.

At the Cua Viet the battalion was beginning to operate successfully within the framework of their multi-faceted mission when Lt. Col. Bowman rotated back to the states and retirement. Lt. Col. Edward Rheb Toner, USMC, a veteran of Korea, and incidentally one of Treadwell's old platoon commanders in "Alpha Battalion" replaced Bowman. Toner had a thorough understanding of what was called for under the existing unique missions. He was a solid Marine, full of energy and determined to do the battalion proud in the eyes of the division. He declared his first priority was to acquire the weapons and communications equipment to do the work at hand. Toner promptly paid the new Deputy Division Commander, General Louis Metzger, an ally of the amtrackers, a visit, his wish list in hand. Unfortunately, he returned to the CP with nothing to show for his efforts except the assurance Metzger would go to work on the needs promptly. After all, that's the best that was expected. Over time General Metzger proved to be the battalion's strongest supporter for acquiring equipment and personnel.

## **IMAGES FROM HISTORY**

A summary analysis at this juncture reveals that while enemy contact was light, strong support for equipping the battalion remained in question. The troops still had minimal hardware assets with which to engage the enemy. History was repeating itself all the way back to Belleau Wood, France. During that battle in World War 1, the Marines literally "fixed bayonets" and fought the Germans face-to-face for every inch of that small hunting preserve. Some fifty years earlier, those Marines crossed open wheat fields under the German's withering heavy artillery and machinegun fire with little, if any supporting artillery. The naval gunfire was completely out of range in the Atlantic Ocean, and Marines had negligible organic close air support capability, a tactic not yet conceived, as we knew it in the sixties. Once again, as the modern day Marines advanced across open desert and paddy areas against increasing numbers of NVA delivering heavy caliber and light assault automatic weapons fires into their advancing assault ranks, history was repeating itself.

More than three decades after serving in Vietnam, my wife and I visited Belleau Wood with its pristine grounds and many thousands of graves arching across the front of the memorial tower. As we walked the road around the battlegrounds to move up into the forested sites of the famous points of the conflicts of hand to hand fighting, striking similarities of this battleground and those of the Cua Viet appeared before me.

The great wheat field before the famous hunting preserve was golden in its maturity, ready for the harvest. The June northeasterly winds sweeping the ripe stalks made the field undulate, giving it the curves and undulation of the water soaked dunes and desert scape of the Cua Viet. While these grain fields afforded Marines concealment against the sweeping German machine guns, the sands of the Cua Viet offered no such meager safety. The sands barely offered any protections over its barren expanse. It, like the wheat fields of Belleau Wood, proved to be almost perfect killing grounds for machine gunners.

The greatest weapon available to the Marines at Belleau Wood and at the Cua Viet was the most fundamental ingredient that spelled success throughout the years intervening since June of 1918. The ingredients were simply, solid training in the fundamentals of being a rifleman, and the tried and true traditions of having the grit to find, close with and destroy the enemy with the weapons at hand, meager though they may be at times.

I recalled while gazing upon the hunting preserve that at the Cua Viet the Amtrackers were not too different in their training than had been their forbearers. General Clifton B. Cates, USMC, was quoted as having related his disappointment in the lack of tactical training for he and his Marines before engaging the Bosch. He cited these regrets after the close of World War II, for he had seen the effectiveness of thorough training for combat in the Pacific campaigns. Obviously, I shared his disdain for lack of adequate training. Such as it was the battalion forged ahead with OJT with enemy forces before them, learning, refining and prevailing.

\* \*\*

Daily short patrols conducted above and below the Cua Viet River took advantage of opportunities to learn the skills of the infantryman. Progressively the enemy was encountered more frequently but the Amtrackers learned and prevailed. After action critiques proved that the troops were rapidly becoming effective combatants against the VC, or Charlie as he was known. This was most apparent as the VC became fewer in numbers and the northern half of the TAOR and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), or Mister Charles, were more frequently engaged.

The diminished numbers of VC engagements were attributed to their losses, but another factor came into play. It was the tactic of the NVA to rule when they "took the field." In short, when the NVA prepared to engage the American and/or South Vietnamese, they relegated the VC to logistic support roles and preparation of defensive positions. Secondly the VC was responsible for munitions and food and water supply as well as handling of dead and wounded. If NVA losses became high, the NVA commanders replaced their losses with Charlie. This left all the NVA units free to engage the enemy; the task they were best suited to perform.

The existence of an active VC element and imminent contact with increasing numbers of NVA was unquestionably in the minds of the battalion command staff and personnel. There was an even more nagging question facing the battalion. The battalion commander and his staff had no idea when or if the requested equipment would arrive. Foremost in their minds was to complete essential training inside the compound and progressively perform OJT at the same time expanding the range of patrols in concert with contacts with the NVA, and sweeps to insure security of the mouth and trace of the river. It was all too clear that short range operations could protect the battalion perimeter from enemy small arms attacks and Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPG), but not enemy mortar fire, especially the 82 and 120mm weapons. The ranges of these weapons dictated pushing the patrols of platoons at a minimum out to at least 4,000 meters and even to the DMZ, some twelve thousand meters north.

In retrospect, it is difficult to recall whether regular infantry battalions operated with such long distance spaces ranging outside the immediate influence and responsive control of their companies and platoons. This does not question the tactic of employing Force Reconnaissance patrols from the division and patrols whose missions were to operate far afield. This far-reaching deployment tactic by the Amtrackers constantly gnawed at the mind of the battalion CO, S-3 and the company commanders. The possibilities for disaster by a platoon being swallowed up by a superior NVA unit were more likely than not to occur. Being nine or ten thousand meters from one's base and commanding 20 to 30 Marines on day and night patrols posed some awesome threats and called for fortitude of the first order by all at hand.

The battalion commander and S-3 did not sit and wait in denial of the inevitable. Early on, a plan was implemented whereby a Reaction Platoon, as a minimal force, was created. The plan dictated that the company with the fielded force would have on standby at least one platoon ready to mount up aboard an LVT and report crossing the Cua Viet

River within ten to fifteen minutes for the run to the engaged unit. The same company was charged with establishing a second force and mounting up for departure within thirty minutes. It would only be launched if deemed necessary by the commander in contact, based on his best judgment of the strength of the opposing force. The specific details of the plan are not essential to this presentation. Suffice it to say that the Reaction Force was so frequently employed that the departure of the force and entry into the Cua Viet River could be accomplished within five minutes. Relief of the engaged force was more difficult and is discussed in detail below.

## **HEAVY GUNS AND ROCKETS**

Beyond the western boundary of the AO, the 9th Marine Regiment and units of the 1st ARVN Division carried the weight, but that was soon to change. The NVA moved 130 mm rockets down below the DMZ and launched simultaneous attacks from a single site against Dong Ha and Cua Viet. In addition, heavy artillery above the DMZ joined in on the duck shoot as we sat in the barrel late on the evening of June 12, 1967. Some 225 rocket and artillery shells rained down in and around the battalion position. Every unit in the perimeter wire was slammed hard. Many of the tents were blown away. Unprotected supplies went up in smoke and shrapnel ripped through the entire area, damaging communications wire, chopping trees down shattering windshields of vehicles, puncturing barrels of petroleum and lubricants. Injuries included one Marine killed and thirty three others wounded.

As an interesting note, the question arose as to the number of rounds that had hit the compound. Nobody had counted while burrowing deeper into crawl spaces and bunkers. One of the radiomen said the count was 225 rounds, and that he was certain of the count. When pressed to prove his point, he departed the COC and returned with his tape recorder.

“You see, sir,” he began to explain to the S-3, Communications Officer, and Battalion CO, “I was just starting to tape a letter to my girl friend when the first round hit. I dove into my little bunker next to the hooch. When the rounds ceased, I came out and found I had left the recorder running all the time. When I played it back with my buddies, we counted an average of 225 rounds.”

Listening to the tape recording of the rockets and artillery exploding once again reinforced the reality that we were in the enemy’s bull’s eye. There was no doubt about it. This was the heaviest bombardment of the battalion since arrival, but it would not be the last. Refer to Enclosure (3) for enemy firing fans.

Following this demonstration, the corporal kept his tape recorder close at hand. Each time the battalion was hit by rockets or artillery fire, he snapped the recorder on and took to his bunker to await the opportunity to give the S-3 the count when the all clear was sounded.

The loss of the first Marine certainly warrants some recognition. A 130mm rocket that overshot the southern boundary of the battalion compound killed the man. The Marine was Sgt. J. L. Kistler, USMC, and a member of the Maintenance Platoon of H&S Co. That evening, Sgt Kistler was the patrol leader of two fire teams of Marines set in for the night in an ambush position along a route suspected of being used by VC traveling between the Street Without Joy and the South China Sea and villages south.

One of the very first 130mm free-launched rockets fired at the Cua Viet compound overshot the position and impacted just a few meters behind Sgt. Kistler who was sitting on the rim of his fox hole. The blast and shrapnel of the exploding rocket instantly killed him.

Within a month from the attack, the battalion commander assembled representatives from among the battalion for an official designation and naming of the battalion position in memory of the young LVT mechanic and patrol leader. The base was designated Camp Kistler.

## **FILLING OUT THE RANKS**

The battalion had been long overdue for many replacements. They had worked short handed since the AmTrac could be operated ashore with only two men as opposed to three if afloat at sea. Personnel began to arrive at the NSA ramp via landing craft from Dong Ha to flesh out platoons long overdue for replacements. Among the officers were several lieutenants fresh from The Basic School and other commands in the states. If my memory serves me correctly, most of the following lieutenants arrived in the same forty-five day period. The list included, but was not limited to:

### Company A

- 1st Lt. Phillip D. Allum
- 2nd Lt. Donald R. Head
- 2nd Lt. Earl "Skip" Kruger
- 2nd Lt. David Rankin
- 2nd Lt. Richard "Rich" Reynolds
- 2nd Lt. Peter Schneider (arrived in late 1967)

### Company B

- 2nd Lt. Thomas Anselmo
- 2nd Lt. Melvin Bailey
- 2nd Lt. Peter (I believe) Kauffman
- 2nd Lt. Craig Noke

Over the approximately ten months remaining on my tour of duty, I observed these young officers to be cut from the same bolt of cloth. They all proved themselves worthy of wearing the title of U. S. Marine. Their readiness to adapt to being infantry platoon commanders versus being AmTrac Platoon Commanders was commendable in spite of the fact they had all just completed the Tracked Vehicle Officer's School at Camp Del Mar, California. As each had previously graduated from that fine institution, The Basic School in Quantico, Virginia, as leaders of Marines, their fundamental knowledge of being ground combat officers was as solid as one could wish. They hit the field at the head of their platoons and soon proved their worth against seasoned NVA commanders and troops. There was one thing these lieutenants were challenged with on their tours as ground combat unit leaders. The challenge was that they had to prove the old Marine adage, "Every Marine A Rifleman." These young officers did not sell the Corps short in that trust bestowed upon them to be leaders under a variety of circumstances and missions.

Over time, it was discovered that the men the officers led were equal to the challenge in spite of limited preparatory skills training. Within the ranks of the enlisted were the first draftees who chose to undergo their tours as Marines. Some had no choice of services, but soon proved to be just as Marine as a volunteer. Some of the most competent troops were draftees with some college education and therefore more mature. Coupled with being "street smart," they made for valuable assets to units in transition. The battalion may not have been receiving desperately needed hardware, but quality Marines were there to carry the mission to the North Vietnamese when they crossed the DMZ.

## **ONCE BEFORE**

The battalion's history of being grounded for infantry operations in two different types of wars warrants some more detailed comparison. During the Korean era, the Amtrackers were deployed along the DMZ in bunkers and trenches across from North Korean forces. Infantry style small unit patrols behind the Marine positions were the order of the day. The purpose was to collect up civilian "line crossers" and small enemies' element infiltrating to disrupt rear area operations. Korean era Amtrackers were assigned to guard supply trains and bridges in rear areas. In the situation facing the Amtrackers in Vietnam, a distinctive difference existed. The DMZ was not manned as it was in Korea with trenches connecting strong points and fortified positions. Marine defenses along the DMZ in Vietnam consisted of "fire bases" constructed like enclaves surrounded with defensive wire, anti-personnel mines, circling trench works and deep bunkers, (see Enclosure 2). Artillery and direct fire crew-served weapons delivered ordinance on the enemy as they operated within the DMZ and beyond. The nearest combat outpost to the 1st AmTracs was Gio Linh. Initially, there were no other combat outposts to the right flank of Gio Lin; just the South China Sea some nine thousand meters to the East. Therefore, the AmTrac Battalion was not confronted with "line

crossers” and small enemy units as in the case of the Korean era. It was soon to find itself meeting and engaging large first-line enemy forces that were completely equipped and supported by adjusted mortars and artillery fires ranging from 82 to 152mm in size.

### **NORTH OF THE CUA VIET**

For the most part, few major encounters of the opposing forces took place below the Cua Viet River inside the battalion’s TAOR. The encounters that did happen involved VC and a few NVA in very small units seldom larger than squads. Most prevalent of the threats in the south TAOR was the existence of booby traps. These took their measure in tolls of wounded among Co. B and H&S Co. personnel.

Progressively, the prototype engagements that prepared the letter company Marines for the larger actions came more frequently with each passing day as they operated north of the Cua Viet. These encounters were characterized by swift, fierce attacks through ambush or chance meeting engagements. Both forces suffered wounded and killed. Due to the swiftness of the encounters and quick disengagements of the smaller NVA forces, neither side could rightfully claim outright victory. After all, these were just fragments of the “protracted war,” which by definition, was a war intended to wear the opposing forces down to such a degree that capitulation through political negotiations would prevail. The will of the Marines never even considered that option. Very simply, they were not politicians seeking to be re-elected back home. And now we know that the NVA had no intentions of coming forward under a white flag. Their motivation was nationalistic drive rooted in Communist dogma, almost to the extent of fanaticism in firefights.

It is not appropriate to infer that Alpha Company was solely responsible for operations above the Cua Viet. It was in fact, a shared effort between both letter companies. The shared responsibilities were effectively that Co. A would be the ground force while Co. B might be the tracked vehicle support. If the situation dictated and roles were reversed, it might well be that a Co. B ground force would require reinforcements during a particularly difficult encounter, and as such, Co. A could be called upon to launch their reaction platoon to assist their fellow Amtrackers.

In due course, the squad patrols expanded into platoon and then company operations. The intensity and ferocity seemed to increase with each encounter. Before long, the battalion’s daily combat engagements began to draw attention at the division level briefings. The “box score” of enemy killed became as impressive as that of better-equipped and more seasoned regular infantry battalions.

### **KEEPING SCORE**

Body counts were a sensitive issue with Lt. Col. Toner. Early in his command, the colonel advised the staff and company commanders that the accepted old method of accounting for enemy KIAs and “probables” would not be tolerated. Soon after this commanders’ meeting, he made himself even clearer. He had a basic rule about body counts. If you reported five NVA as KIA (killed in action), you had better be prepared to load five whole bodies into an AmTrac and ship them back as he might well direct. During the first company sized operation, of Hickory II (14-16 July 1967), Capt. Leo R. Jamieson as CO of Co. A reported a number of NVA KIA and a large quantity of weapons and ammunition captured, including an 85mm recoilless rifle. Lt. Col. Toner said, “Tell Leo to send the whole mess in by tractor.” Within about half an hour, an AmTrac Crew Chief walked into the Battalion Combat Operations Center, saluted to the colonel and reported, “Sir, I’ve delivered the bodies and weapons as ordered.” Capt. Jamieson’s count was correct with all eleven dead NVA down to the last bullet of ammunition as had been reported.

Thereafter, Lt. Col. Toner would periodically order, “Send ‘um in,” and the company commanders would comply. The Battalion CO did not allow any “probable” KIA based on body parts and blood trails.

The word spread throughout not only the battalion but up to the division’s G-3 about Toner’s realistic “body count” system. Little by little, the 3rd Marine Division slipped away from the “probables” method of counting mystical enemy KIAs. Apparently, the division commander had his strong opinions about probables as well.

The frequency with which the Amtrackers were mentioned in Division briefings drew more and more attention to the Battalion's performance. General Snediker, Commanding General of the 3rd Division, called for the Amtrac CO to brief him personally following the Operation Hickory II engagements. Soon after this briefing, the battalion received a small issue of M-16 rifles, some M-79s and a couple of M-60 machine guns, the first of the slow stream of essential infantry equipment to come. The small dribble of M-16 rifles precluded issuance to the letter companies. They could not be burdened with mixed caliber of ammunition. Therefore, the first rifles went to the headquarters personnel.

General Metzger, the division ADC, kept his promise of support by sending two CH-46 helicopters loaded with a variety of command and control communications equipment and some PRC-25 man-packed radios. Several configurations of antennae sprung up around the battalion COC. One gift was a jeep mounted radio with operator that gave the Bn CO and Comm 'O' secure voice communications. It proved to be extremely helpful in affording the CO and Operations Officer direct voice communications with counterparts and superiors to resolve issues without fear of being listened to by the NVA. Their primary supporters, the Russians, provided their capabilities in receiving and listening in on our voice communications. We knew them to be well equipped and trained in this field.

The battalion was well aware of a stockpile of a variety of equipment stored in country that was reserved for the "MacNamara Line." This was the pie-in-the-sky conceptual plan wherein an "impenetrable" defensive barrier along the trace of the DMZ would deny NVA access to the south. In general, all the outposts would be interlocked with connecting remotely controlled and automated weaponry to cover dead spaces, some reacting to sensory devices forward of the weapon's position. These sensory devices would detect and report movements and an operator would activate the weapon or leave it on automatic function in heavy engagements. Rumor had it that the new comm gear received came from the communications equipment set aside to support the troops maintaining the "Line." The general consensus was that such a line was some technocrat's pipe dream and effectively, worthless. Logic dictated that the battalion knew that the equipment held in reserve for the questionable "MacNamara Line" could be better used for fighting the enemy confronting the Amtrackers. Therefore, such a suggestion offered to Gen. Metzger by the Battalion CO may have prompted some bean counter to relinquish the resources to the battalion. The fact that the equipment did come was sufficiently welcome aside from the presumptions of the politics involved for their release.

## **ORGANIC INDIRECT FIREPOWER**

(By Hook or Crook)

Early in their new role, members of Company A became frustrated with not having organic indirect firepower, specifically, their own mortars. Through hook and crook, the CO, Capt. Roland Monette, scraped up some trading gear and some Vietnamese piastres to bargain with. Monette spotted a 60mm mortar tube at the RVN Naval Junk Fleet compound just up the river from the company's position. In short order a deal was struck for the Indo China vintage tube. There was no base plate, bipod, or sight and aiming stakes in the bargain. Such incidentals afforded the Alpha Company mechanics a welcome project. Within less than a day the tube had a makeshift base plate, a bipod made from a .30 caliber machine gun tripod. Sighting was accomplished by using a set of jury-rigged iron sights which allowed the gunner to aim in on a red and white painted set of bamboo poles circling the firing pit at precise points of the magnetic compass. The firing pit was dug in above the company command bunker where all communications was managed. Therefore, calls for fire could be coordinated to the gun pit via telephone from the company's perimeter bunkers onto probes of the line.

The mortar proved to be untrustworthy for all but short-range use. One evening a sentry walking his post along the beach in the Company B area observed a large group of fishing boats moving toward the shore. When he reported this observation, suspecting an amphibious raid no doubt, Capt. Monette volunteered his services to shed some light onto the situation. He immediately manned the mortar with a crew and sighted in to fire an illumination round. The report of the mortar alerted all hands there was a fire mission underway. Much less than the usual 20 odd seconds flight time quickly passed as the illumination round struck the ridge pole of an H&S Company tent, and sent the round twirling like a baton tossed in the air. It burst into full brightness just ten feet above the surf among the closest fishing boats and continued to burn as it sunk below the waves. The fisherman got the message, veered off and moved farther south to the night of fishing.

The Company A troops did not lose faith in their brave old mortar. On platoon sized operations, they sent the tube and crew in support with full respect for its limitations on range. It would be removed from its position above the company COC, loaded aboard an LVT with an ample load of a variety of ammunition and travel north.

Once when a platoon engaged an NVA combat patrol and found them about evenly matched in force, the platoon commander called for the mortar to be moved up. It was still atop an Amtrac behind the engaged Marine platoon. When the LVT came forward, it drew fire from the NVA like a magnet attracts ferrous filings. Hundreds of AK 47 rounds bounced off the LVT hull. The fire was so heavy no one could remove the mortar. Momentarily the driver turned the vehicle by doing a neutral steer to lessen the fire impacting his side of the vehicle. An observant Marine, Sergeant John C. "Butch" Yates, seized the opportunity and dashed across the open space to the vehicle, climbed aboard from the rear and crawled to within grasping distance of the weapon and flipped it off onto the ground. He then seized a box of ammunition and threw it on the ground. Yates rolled off the Amtrac next to the pile, quickly dragging the tube and box of shells to a covered position. He did not have a base plate or any other hardware to deliver accurate fire. Yates improvised by removing his helmet and placed the ball of the mortar inside the hollow. He could observe the squads in contact with the NVA and from time to time, observed enemy movement. He dropped the first round into the old tube and saw it to be long. The second round landed in the NVA positions. Yates walked the rounds throughout the enemy fighting positions so effectively that their fire dropped to almost nothing. He took advantage of this lull once again crawled atop the LVT and threw off more ammunition for the mortar. Then the NVA tried to flank the Marine platoon. They were not only met with well-aimed rifle fire but accurate 60mm high explosive and white phosphorus (Willie Peter) fire. The combined hail of rifle and mortar fire proved to be too much for the NVA. The enemy survivors of this engagement soon broke off contact and slipped back across the DMZ under the cover of dusk and growing darkness.

Sergeant Yates, a communications specialist by training had proved the fundamental necessity for solid training, determination in the face of the enemy and bold initiative under fire. For his heroic action he was recommended for and received the Silver Star. Soon after his being decorated he was promoted to Staff Sergeant. Staff Sergeant Yates later earned the Navy Cross posthumously for trying to save a crewman trapped in a burning LVT that had hit an anti-tank mine in the midst of a furious firefight. (See Enclosure 4).

As a footnote on the old Indo-China mortar, if one looks closely at the center of the photograph of the officers and SNCOs of Alpha company, the muzzle and part of the makeshift bipod can be seen behind the company sign. It was relegated to a monument status once the company received a modern 60mm. See enclosure (5) of the Alpha company officers and staff posed around the old mortar, and enclosure (6) of the old mortar with (then) company gunnery sergeant, GySgt. Donald Austin, USMC.

It was not until mid-February 1968 that mortars were issued to the battalion. Two 81mm mortars along with an infantry crew arrived for duty to instruct Amgrunts on the weapons. It was found that one of the Amgrunts in H&S company had been a mortar man before re-training to be an Amtracker. He assisted in the training of the Amgrunt mortar men. Following an intensive cycle, the infantry mortar men gave our men the blessing and departed to return to their old unit. The 81s remained at the battalion CP. They were never deployed to the field with the Amgrunt ground elements.

The regular infantry mortar men are worthy of a note of confidence. Upon their arrival certain observations led us to a good measure of appreciation for these Marines. While talking to them about their weapons, it was learned they had just departed from their 9th Marines unit, having been pulled out after a heavy battle around Cam Lo. The squad leader wore large bandages on his hands, wrists and forearms, as did his crews. On inquiring my suspicions were confirmed. The squad leader explained that the enemy assaulted on one flank of the battalion's position and got so close they could see the NVA soldiers working through their wire. Their position was so close to the riflemen's fighting positions, they had to grasp the overheated mortar tubes in their high angle positions to keep them from falling backwards from recoils. Also, he added, "We were firing the tubes using Kentucky windage directly onto them. There was no use using sights and aiming stakes. They were so close."



## ORIGIN OF AMGRUNT

The 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion reputation as a true fighting force was growing on both sides of the DMZ. Shortly after the battalion arrived at Cua Viet and following a casual reference to a radio program by Hanoi Hanna, Capt. Monette jokingly transferred Hanna's reference to the battalion from the Amtrucks to Monette's version of Amgrunts. Capt. Monette even designed the appropriate military unit map symbol for the nickname. He drew a rectangle on a 5 inch by 7 inch file card, drew the oblong circle representing the tracked vehicle unit inside the box, added a wavy line horizontally through the track symbol and thereby designating it to be an amphibious tracked vehicle unit and then placed the infantry symbol of the crossed straps or "X" from corner to corner over all the other symbols. This symbol, he declared represented the "Amphibian Tractor Infantrymen" unit. With the addition of the battalion strength symbol of two vertical lines atop the box, Monette declared it to represent the Amgrunt Battalion. The card with symbol was promptly stapled to the entryway tent pole of the battalion headquarters tent for all to see and enjoy.

While the name "Amgrunt" began as an internal jocular nickname, it soon grew into a common reference by troops and officers alike in a more serious vein. Marines of Company A began to refer to themselves as the "Alpha Amgrunts." The nickname created a low-grade infection of some pride among the battalion personnel. Soon the term was being used in briefings at division to distinguish among the various units fighting in the northern I Corps Zone.

After Lt. Col. Toner replaced Lt. Col. Bowman, the former would chortle about the division CG questioning him about "how his Amgrunts were doing." This was a significant measure of recognition by the division Commanding General. Soon others at the division began referring to the battalion by their new name. That was a certain measure of the pride in which many Marines took in the earned reputation of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion.

Hanoi Hannah never got it right, or more correctly, she never changed from the origins of her nickname "Amtrucks." This nickname actually came from references she made about one of the first Marine Corps ground units to arrive in Vietnam. This unit was the Amphibian Truck Company from the 3rd Amphibian Tractor Battalion of the 1st Marine Division. They were sent to Vietnam in early 1961 under the command of 1st Lt. Ron Smaldone, USMCR, to train ARVN on the DUKWs, a World War II vehicle. The training completed, Lt. Smaldone and his truckers returned to Camp Del Mar. The equipment was left for the South Vietnamese.

When Hanoi Hannah announced their arrival she correctly abbreviated the amphibious trucks as Amtrucks. She was not correctly advised of the differences between an amphibious truck and an LVT-P5A1.

## A STEADY TRICKLE

As the Battalion continued in combat with the NVA, equipment and personnel needs became more noticeable at the Division. More and more hardware began arriving at the battalion. Munitions of the variety afforded regular infantry arrived from Dong Ha and Da Nang. Of particular note were the most useful Night Observation Devices (NOD). This came in two sizes, the Super NOD and the rifle mountable Starlight Scope. The battalion promptly put these to maximum use along the perimeter and on night patrols and ambushes.

Certain daily reports required by division headquarters were so long they were not transmittable in coded format by telegraph. Consequently, the report had to be prepared in plain text and delivered by a Marine aboard a helicopter or carried up the Cua Viet River aboard a Mike boat, thence to the 9th or 12th Marines communications center for transmission to division. Enough complaints were raised from the Regimental Comm Os to division that action was taken. A CH 46 helicopter arrived one day with boxes and cases of radios, power supplies and personnel to satisfy all of the battalion's secure communications requirements. This second flight of gifts rounded out the battalion's communications needs as it contained additional PRC-25 radios. Now the company COs had radios to utilize for dedicated conduct of fire networks.

## COMPANY SIZED OPERATIONS

Personnel rotated out to the states for re-assignment as well as being rotated out as casualties. The division did respond in stages and new personnel arrived with regularity. When Capt. Monette rotated out: his replacement, Capt. Leo R. Jamieson, initially the battalion's communications officer took command of Company A. These two Marine officers had much in common. Both were Alabamians. Jamieson, like Monette, was an infantry officer. Both were sharp intellectually and quick to respond to any situation thrown out by the NVA. Jamieson proved to be a very competent commander under fire as well. It was under his leadership that the company developed the greatest degree of confidence and effectiveness to date as demonstrated in combat against main force enemy. During Operation Hickory II, Jamieson led the Alpha Amgrunts in a successful search and destroy mission north of the Cua Viet while linked up with an ARVN battalion. The company killed 54 NVA and captured scores of individual and crew served weapons, as well as many types of ammunition. These kills and captures were the largest counts in the initial stages of the operation for the 3rd Marine Division and ARVN.

The Alpha Amgrunts demonstrated their combat effectiveness far above that of their counterpart infantry in the ARVN. At one point during the operation with that ARVN battalion abreast of Co. A, the force came to a halt to confer on the progression of the attack to the north along Jones Creek toward the DMZ to clear out NVA forces. The two command groups conferred, agreed on proceeding with priority of fires to the most heavily engaged of the two commands and moved back to launch the attack north at a specified time. When the appointed time arrived, the ARVN came under attack by enemy artillery and ground attack, as did Company A. Alpha stemmed the ground attack and as soon as the enemy artillery eased up Capt. Jamieson radioed the Marine ARVN liaison Officer, to move out as had been planned. Being led to understand that the ARVN battalion was on the move to Alpha's left, they went on the offensive. As Alpha began to engage more NVA to their immediate front and left flank, a Company A platoon leader made reference of his observations to Capt. Jamieson that the ARVN were not moving forward but were heading south. Capt. Jamieson sought to contact the ARVN commander and even tried raising the US advisor, to no avail. Halting his advance, Capt. Jamieson reported the incident to the S-3. Soon the AmTrac battalion CO was on the radio to the senior ARVN advisor and coordinating a meeting in the field to bring back on line the ARVN battalion to continue the advance. During the meeting of commanders in the field, no amount of coaxing or threats could right the situation. To add insult to the ARVN commander's loss of face, Capt. Jamieson realigned his Amgrunts and continued alone, successfully defeating the remaining NVA and completing the mission up to the DMZ.

Capt. Jamieson rightfully filed an official report of the ARVN commander's action in the face of the enemy and endangerment of an adjacent unit. The report was severely objected to by the ARVN battalion advisor who filed a counter protest against Capt. Jamieson. Unfortunately the liaison officer was a Marine. Jamieson's complaint stuck and was reported by the 3rd Division command to the 1st ARVN Division Commanding General who took corrective action, the measure of which was not fully disclosed to our commander. Nevertheless, Capt. Jamieson and his Alpha Amgrunts returned to the battalion area with an ample measure of prestige and gratitude from all quarters of the command at the Cua Viet and on up to the 3rd Division level.

## COMBAT COMMENDATIONS

The entire battalion's performance throughout that phase of Operation Hickory II sufficiently impressed the division command that the battalion's first Meritorious Unit Commendation was drafted and forwarded to the Commandant of the Marine Corps for signature. The battalion was to receive other commendations as the Amgrunts continued to perform in such superior style. A Presidential and a Navy unit commendation soon followed. The most rewarding Marine Corps commendation came later but is significant in one aspect from all the others. A review of that commendation reveals an interesting recognition and declaration of exactly who the battalion had become.

In 1969, General Leonard F. Chapman, Commandant of the Marine Corps at the time, included the Amtracker's nickname of Amgrunts (Amphibian Tractor Infantrymen) in a Meritorious Unit Commendation. Being so codified, that made it official for all time. A cursory review of the unit commendations of Marine commands reflects scant reference to a particular unit's favored nickname or moniker. No doubt, the Raiders of World War II might reflect their commander's names as a matter of unit differentiation versus a distinction that reflects particular recognition of fulfilling the old Marine adage, "Every Marine a rifleman." Certain aviation units bore nicknames representing

what they did under their mission, such as “Night Fighters,” and “Eyes of the Division” (VMO-2), or “The walking Dead of 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, for example. It is worthy of note here that the Commandant of the Marine Corps was justifiably impressed with the battalion’s added mission performance as infantrymen that he felt the addition of Amgrunt to their title surely represented noteworthy recognition. Therefore, the Commandant codified the old moniker as an earned title, no longer a joke nor a nickname.

### **INCREASED ENEMY CONTACTS**

The Battalion enjoyed a stand down from infantry operations as the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, Special Landing Force, (SLF 2/3) was landed north of the Cua Viet for operations on or about 19 September 1967. Company A and Company B of the Amgrunts temporarily reverted to supporting regular infantry operations with their tractors. The 2nd Battalion 3rd Marines conducted an extensive search and destroy operation throughout the entire AO north of the Cua Viet. The 2/3 SLF Marines received their first taste of heavy enemy artillery as both direct and indirect fire. The caliber’s ranged from 100mm up to 152mm. Enemy artillery attacks in these calibers were common for the Amgrunts. Fortunately, the sandy terrain along the coast proved to be one of the greatest assets for saving Marines lives.

Initially, it appeared the NVA used fuses that either had quick and delay only. This allowed the incoming rounds to penetrate deeper into the sand. The deadly killing radius of fragments was therefore focused upward in a tighter cone. Had the soil been the hard red clay like that in Dong Ha, the exploding round’s lethal cone would have been flatter, even horizontal in some cases, and thereby more deadly. The absence of the use of super-quick fuses was not to last for long, however.

During the course of acting as the battalion’s liaison officer to 2/3 SLF Capt. Poindexter M. Johnson was advised he would relieve the CO of Company A. Capt. Jamieson had delivered an impressive performance as a combat commander. The company was impressively ready for future engagements with the enemy.

### **UNINVITED GUESTS**

At the landing of the 2/3 SLF, the battalion headquarters at the Cua Viet became inundated with civilian newspaper combat correspondents. Two or three were non-American, and one of these was a French woman that wore a bright red bandana on her head. On first seeing her, the thought passed through the undersigned’s mind that she would surely make a choice of all the NVA snipers as soon as she stuck her head out into the open. Interestingly, it almost became the case.

For some reason, all the reporters were placed on one LVT. As they rolled north past the 2/3 SLF field CP they appeared to be tourist on an outing dressed in casual clothes of blue jeans, shorts, various chambray and “T” shirts. Several had on jungle hats bought from the streets of Saigon and/or Danang. My second thought was that they probably imagined themselves as the main English character in Graham Greene’s novel, *The Silent American*.

They had been cleared to follow a 2/3 company that moved north to the DMZ. When it turned west and parallel to the DMZ the reporters and photographers followed in trace aboard their tractor. When the infantry halted their LVTs to disembark among the rolling dunes, the correspondent’s vehicle had no place to sneak into for cover. The NVA in the DMZ probably could not believe their luck. Instantly, the crack of a recoilless rifle, probably an 85mm, sent its calling card. It impacted just behind the P5. All hands on board let out their whoops, howls and screams for the driver to take cover – anywhere, and quick. The vehicle lurched forward, almost dumping half its passengers off the top. It had hardly moved twenty feet when it struck an anti-tank mine. Now all hands leaped and scurried off the tractor, immediately taking refuge among the dunes from recoilless rifles, AT mines and wild AmTrac drivers.

One among the civilian newsmen was a Marine veteran of WW II and photo correspondent from the Korean Conflict, David Douglas Duncan. As the day drew darker, most of the others had departed to the security of the battalion compound for hot chow, showers and safe bunkers. Duncan remained aboard the damaged tractor. When the crew chief called for assistance of track pins and extra track blocks, he confirmed he had a civilian onboard. A squad of Marines from 2/3 was sent out to protect the LVT until another tractor arrived with parts and mechanical

help. On their return, Mr. Duncan jovially strolled into the 2/3 CP remarking that he had barely beat the returning tractors and Marines. He had walked the seven thousand meters alone, armed only with three cameras and a bag of exposed and unexposed rolls of 35mm film.

It was hard not to remind the famous photographer of the rules of not wandering off without adequate security. He was after all a Marine; having seen lots of combat, and war-wise. He explained he had judged the trip was safe as it had been swept earlier that day. There was no need to argue the possible calamities of infiltrators that could have killed him. Our sweep had been thorough and his logic was reasonably sound.

With the SLF 2/3 mission complete, an informal change of command took place in the commanding officer's hut at Co. A, on September 22, 1967. Shortly thereafter the 2/3 SLF back loaded onto their amphibious shipping. The battalion returned to the field as Amphibian Tractor Infantrymen, Amgrunts.

### **“WERE WE CRAZY?”\***

The frequency with which NVA crossed below the DMZ increased dramatically at the beginning of October 1967. Company A, reinforced by Bravo company, began to encounter larger units. Amtracs operating throughout the company AO struck more and more anti-tank mines. The mobility and maneuverability of the Amgrunts against the NVA prompted their planting of more and more Communist Bloc TM-41 antitank mines, some double stacked to render greater damage to AmTracs. By the end of March 1968 AmTracs had struck more than 150 antitank mines.

The Russian designed anti-tank mines packed enough power to create a variety of immobilizing effects. Initially, the vehicle track would be chopped and generally one or two road wheel assemblies would be damaged. This entailed patching the track by the crew, many times under artillery fire. If the repairs were beyond a crew's capabilities, the damaged vehicle would be dragged back to the battalion maintenance platoon for repairs. In more unfortunate circumstances, the detonation of the anti-tank mine would also puncture the vehicle's lower hull plates, sever the flexible gasoline bladder closest to the entry point of the exploding mine and ignite the fuel. This resulted in severe flash burns to the driver. In almost all cases, the flash burns were so extensive, 50 to 75 percent, death resulted in spite of immediate medical treatment. Partial burns occurred to the lower part of the crew chief that usually stood in his hatch on the crew chief seat.

The threat of deadly burns was so compelling that it was not uncommon to observe two crewmen tossing coins to determine who would be driver north of the Cua Viet.

Most of the fires in the vehicle could be extinguished by releasing the CO2 tanks within the troop compartment, from outside the vehicle, and pull releases in the engine compartment. In this fashion the vehicle was not completely lost, however, many were and became shells for bunkers back at the battalion.

During a battalion reunion in 2002 at Quantico Virginia, one of the Amtrackers was discussing the fear of being “torched.” He related that, “We certainly were crazy. There we were driving those LVTs in and out of mine fields, day in and day out. We didn't even sweep our trails with engineers and mine detectors. Were we or were we not out of our minds?”

Well, that's not exactly true. We did employ engineers to search for and detect mines for removal. There were just so many mines planted, it was almost impossible to find all of them. They were not laid in patterns. Instead, they were randomly planted at likely points between trees where an LVT might pass through a gap, or in a track used for a fast run north. In addition, engineers working in the open with headphones on did not hear the telltale muzzle blasts of the NVA artillery headed their way. The squads protecting them would hear the blasts of the muzzles and scream, “Incoming.” All hands would scurry for cover. Usually only three or four rounds would be fired

How can you argue with such sound logic? We were crazy but we had to utilize mobility in so many instances. It kept the NVA off balance. That in itself made the difference so many times. By being able to deliver reinforcements so quickly, tipping the scales in numbers and arriving so quickly to foil the enemy tactics simply saved Marine's lives. Had we been afoot responding to a call for reinforcements, we would likely have arrived too late and surely would have encountered continuous artillery and mortar fire tracking our every step to the beleaguered Marine position. That would have been crazy – arriving too late.

## EXPANDING THE TAOR

The NVA stepped up their heavy artillery attacks throughout the battalion compound as the winter months descended upon the area. Free-launched rocket attacks of the 130mm variety began to rain down on Cua Viet and Dong Ha in the middle of the night. These weapons had super quick, quick and delay fuses. Their killing zone was truly deadly in the sandy soil. The sounds produced by these huge missiles, as they were launching and roaring through their flight to a target were terrifying. The deep-throated roar that turned into a low musical whoosh left no doubt in anyone's mind that awesome destruction was on the way. These weapons were the same used by the Russian army against the Germans during World War II. The Germans named them "Stalin's Pipe Organs." That low melodious tone still lingers in the minds of all who have experienced it.

To counter this threat towers were built at Dong Ha and Cua Viet to elevated observation of open areas along the DMZ east of Route 1 between the Cua Viet River and DMZ. These towers were manned 24 hours a day and equipped with a coffee table sized compass card and sighting device to acquire a bearing on the rocket launch site. The intersecting magnetic azimuths of the Dong Ha and Cua Viet towers was then reported to division FSCC and counter battery fire was then returned. In one instance, as the first volley of rockets being launched, counter battery fire responded so quickly, the NVA broke off the attack, leaving 38 rockets not launched. Examination of the launch site by a 1st AmTrac patrol revealed the rockets were "free launched." A mound of sand was piled and sloped at the angle that would give the rocket its calculated trajectory to reach the designated target. Obviously, these rockets were not precision fire weapons. They were area fire weapons.

In spite of the towers, the rocket attacks continued. To prevent these attacks, division decided to expand the AO of the Amgrunt battalion farther west. The area where the attacks were coming from fell within the 9th Marines AO. Since they were so heavily committed west of Route 1, an area was carved out and assigned to the Amgrunts to patrol. The area was quickly dubbed the "Rocket Box," by one of the Company A platoon leaders, 2nd Lt. Donald R. Head, USMC, first to take troops into the Rocket Box.

These platoon-sized patrols presented a set of unique challenges. First, this placed a platoon at more than 12,000 meters from the battalion's position at the farthest extreme. Supporting fire from the How-6s was possible as long as the patrol was in the middle to lower portion of the Rocket Box. In a crisis, response time to reinforce the patrol was critical and fraught with potential difficulties. The possibilities for multiple ambushes of a reinforcing unit by land were potentially numerous. The situation never presented itself; however, the threat lingered in the minds of the operations officer and Alpha Company's CO the whole time the patrol operated. The period of operation was for five to seven days. The number of days varied to preclude setting a pattern that might invite ambushes along supply and recovery routes.

Rotating the Rocket Box platoon sized patrols was accomplished either by land or water. Platoons moved up the Cua Viet River on Mike boats to pre-designated drop off points where they met the platoon being relieved that formed a secure bridgehead. The relieved platoon then returned to the NSA ramp. The next relief of a platoon patrol might be by AmTrac over land. Usually a platoon was not moved over land on foot as the effect was to detrimental due to extremely high temperatures or during monsoon season, that could likely result in near hypothermic conditions due to soaking rains and chilling high wind exposure. Many Marines returned to the battalion area during monsoon with blue lips and uncontrollable shivering. The battalion surgeon was not stingy with the Old Overholt.

The effectiveness of the Rocket Box patrols paid off one evening. Shortly after digging in for the night, the 1st Platoon of Company A saw the first rocket launch just beyond the northern boundary of the Box. The platoon commander, 2nd Lt. Dave Rankin, promptly reported the bearing and estimated range to the battalion FDC. No doubt the Dong Ha tower and that of the Cua Viet did the same for shortly shells rained down on the rocket launch site. The NVA broke off the attack instantly. Lt. Dave Rankin called for a check-fire and rapidly moved into the launch site. In the process an NVA was sighted hastily departing the area in the moonlight. Lt. Rankin ran the enemy soldier down and captured him complete with an artillery gunner's quadrant. This was exactly the instrument used to get the correct ramp angle for the trajectory on the launch mounds.

At daylight, the platoon counted 128 unfired rockets. Half of the rockets were pointed at Dong Ha and the others were aimed at the Cua Viet. All these missiles were armed with fuses set for impact explosions ranging from super quick to delay for deep penetration of bunkers. The base of the rockets were wired with igniters to light off the solid propellant, giving the missiles their launching thrust. All this wiring was led back to the gunner's pit where he selected bundled pairs of wires to each of the posts of a "hell box" to deliver the electric charge with a twist of the box's handle. This device was also captured, undamaged.

Closer examination of the base of an unfired rocket revealed the means of stabilization of the missile in flight. The heavy metal base of the projectile, approximately one-inch in thickness, was bored with holes at an angle around the outer edge of the base. The various holes allowed the burning propellant exhaust to create a simultaneous thrust through the central fuse hole of approximately one-inch. The angular holes in the rocket's base allowed the spin or twist in initial flight. Therefore, the spinning projectile gained stabilization as if it had been fired through a rifled barrel. Armed with a known time of flight and a gunner's quadrant, an enemy could select a spot on the ground from a map and from a chart correlating desired distances, select the ramp angle necessary to impact the designated target. This method proved quite successful more than once.

### HILL 31

Enemy activity north of the Cua Viet River, and particularly along the north-south trace of Jones Creek, became so frequent, it was determined by higher powers to develop Hill 31 into a fortified observation post. It was to be constructed with twelve inch by twelve-inch timbers; twelve to twenty feet long that would somewhat resemble a buried log cabin. The construction was to be completed by ARVN engineers and the OP manned by ARVN infantry, a company, with U. S. Army advisors.

The heavy timbers were delivered to the NSA ramp, loaded onto the tops of LVTs and ferried across the river and then farther northwest onto Hill 31 where they were rolled off the vehicle tops onto the ground as designated by ARVN engineers. After the bunker holes were dug with a front loader, the ARVN manhandled the precut timbers into place and completed waterproofing and burial of the structures. This OP became the most easterly of positions held below the DMZ at that time. It was, however, about three thousand meters below Gio Linh which sat on the North-south Route 1 corridor, just meters below the DMZ. Hill 31 OP sat just east of Jones Creek. It straddled the dense jungle growth prevalent along the creek and the low undulating sand dunes of the desert area toward the South China Sea bordered by Australian pines.

The Rocket Box patrols continued. The Hill 31 ARVN troops worked in close coordination with these counter-rocket missions. Their regular patrols off their newly constructed strong point along "Jones Creek," reduced rocket attack activity.

In an ambush conducted by ARVN from Hill 31 along the western banks of Jones Creek, an NVA soldier was killed wearing a strange pack. It was about 30 inches long with padded shoulder straps; a long back pad and a bucket sized open canvas receptacle. The rectangular back pad with the bucket shaped canvas at its base also had a securing strap at its middle. The unusual web gear was a 130mm rocket carrying pack. Closer examination of the pack revealed dried dark red clay. This soil type was extremely scarce in the TAOR of the battalion. The presumption was the weapons were being stored inside the DMZ northeast of Gio Lin and Jones Creek, and were backpacked down several at a time by VC and NVA porters. The ARVN confirmed the ambushed had been sprung on NVA regulars in uniform and VC in civilian clothes as they moved North on a jungle trail along the creek.

The ARVN Company Commander and the US Advisor planned to search for the storage point where the rockets had been dropped off for future use. In just one day an ARVN squad leader reported a find. He noticed a single dying bush sticking up in the center of a sand dune 50 meters from any other vegetation. His squad dug down three feet and discovered 76 rockets complete with fuses set for various impact detonations. In the absence of their advisor, the ARVN called the Amgrunts for Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) assistance. After seeking EO'D help for two hours the CO of Co. A and 2d Lt. Earl "Skip" Kruger with a squad of Marines arrived at the cache site. Using relayed radio instructions from an EOD sergeant who was working an old French minefield near Con Thien, Capt. Johnson and Lt. Kruger set about disarming the rockets for transport back to the battalion headquarters. This was accomplished by resetting each fuse setting back to the safe position with a screwdriver inserted in the arming

screw. The fuse was then removed by turning it counter clockwise by hand or with channel lock pliers. The fuses were set aside gently, at a safe distance from the projectiles. All the rounds and fuses were then loaded aboard the AmTrac and taken to the Battalion to be disarmed. Only the driver rode in the vehicle, as the chances of hitting an anti-tank mine were extremely high.

### CRITICAL AVENUE

At this juncture it is important to point out the tactical significance of the area running along the Cua Viet River and its confluence to the Bo Dai that led to the unloading ramp at the bridge at Dong Ha Combat Base. All supplies traveling up the river was offloaded at this point. At the point where the Cua Viet and Bo Dai met is where the two shores are the closest to the landing craft. Tactically, this was the most ideal point at which to interdict the flow of supplies to the Marines requiring continuous supply while operating west of Route 1. An example of this tactical significance came after the author's tour, but serves as a point of just how critical the area known as the Rocket Box was to the continuous flow of supplies for the Marines.

Following the intense NVA Tet Offensive of late April and early May 1968, and during the height of large force NVA activity, the deadly battle for Dai Do took place. This engagement was fought over the same ground the Rocket Box patrols used for night defensive positions. The equivalent of a NVA division attacked the Headquarters and two companies of 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine. Regiment. When the dust settled three days later 189 Marines out of the original 600 were dead and almost three hundred had been medevac'd. The NVA suffered more than almost 1600 KIA by body count and the remaining members of the 320th NVA Division suffered severe numbers of wounded. Effectively, their losses in KIA and WIA equated to the destruction of a full division.

When the battalion commander, now General William Weise, visited Hanoi in the late 1990s, he was hosted by the former commander of all forces in the northern sector of South Vietnam during the war. This Vietnamese general advised Gen. Weise that the 2nd Battalion 4th Marines had been faced with from six thousand to eight thousand NVA in the Battle of Dai Do.

The "Magnificent Bastards" of 2/4 not only won the battle; they destroyed the 320th Division. Following their withdrawal from the battlefield, the NVA division was never again listed on III MAF or 3rd Marine Division enemy order of battle files as an effective force.

Just a little over three and one-half months earlier, the Amgrunts had met the lead elements of this division infiltrating south to cut the Cua Viet River and continue south to attack Quang Tri and the provincial headquarters. A detailed account of this engagement is provided in another monograph. It warrants separate description due to factors too detailed to be addressed at this time. However, the action of one Marine is worthy of note for his bravery during the battles of the 1968 Tet Offensive. Refer to Enclosure (7) for the Navy Cross Citation awarded posthumously to Corporal Warren Henry Ralya, USMC, for his extraordinary gallantry against NVA in an ambush on his 3rd Platoon of Company A, 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion.

\* \* \*

The above summary covered the broad picture of activities from the time the battalion arrived in the Cua Viet area in May of 1967 until TET in 1968. Aside from the major operations involving Companies A and B, the smaller units of the letter companies carried the "weight" for daily patrolling, sweeps and ambushes. The corporals, sergeants and staff sergeants performed these missions as patrol and ambush leaders, demonstrating their versatility, aggressiveness and devotion to duty. As mentioned earlier, these engagements were small in nature, but were no less vicious in intensity resulting in their own measure of combat casualties.

## BLESSINGS AND BURDENS

At one stage of the battalion's engagements, someone at division level decided to augment the battalion by assigning a regular infantry company to assist the Amgrunts and give the Alpha and Bravo Amgrunts a rest.

The Cua Viet area with its long graceful curving beach extending from above the DMZ south as far as one could see, was deceiving to regular infantry who were accustomed to deep jungles in mountainous terrain. The beaches, like those at China Beach in Danang, backed with whispering Australian pines, cooled by ocean breezes, set the wrong tone for men of combat. A false sense of security in a "tropical paradise" meant certain disaster for susceptible regular Marine infantry.

For the most part, visiting regular infantry were companies that tended toward the tentative and soon found themselves in critical stages of being chewed up by successive attacks on all flanks. The smallest tactical mistake could lead to being capitalized upon by a battle smart NVA unit, resulting in greater losses by the Marines. Increasingly, the less effective companies supporting the battalion became a burden versus a relief force. This is particularly true of one company lacking the experience and determination to measure up through aggressive corrective action when faced with a threatening situation. With all due respect to this regular infantry company, their history of combat in Vietnam was one of some extremely hard fighting that accounted for the loss of a large number of seasoned officers and men. The example cited, therefore, of a tentative company is one that is reformed and quite green. The supposition is that they were sent to do a shakedown of operating together and experience some small unit engagements to wise up and toughen up.

Commanders with less than three months in country and platoons filled with replacements meant trouble. But they had to gain experience somewhere. Most shot up companies had only two officers and both generally had more than ten months remaining on their tours of duty. These regular infantry companies were almost a direct reflection of the Amgrunts when they first took the field as new infantry.

The inexperienced, under-strength company often illustrated tendency not to be as aggressive when initially engaging small NVA patrols. The commander would not, or could not, assess the level of effectiveness of his small unit leaders. Those who made mistakes were not corrected and therefore persisted in making deadly errors. As it turned out, these companies repeatedly got bogged down in engagements that the seasoned Amgrunts would have cleaned up before breakfast then moved on to the big jobs. Once these companies became embroiled and messed up the situation, they would call for reinforcements. They never seemed to know the size of the opposing force. As a consequence, the Alpha Amgrunts would have to go north in full force. No chances were taken with the attacking enemy force and NVA reinforcements so close at hand inside the DMZ.

In the majority of cases, opposition was no more than a platoon of NVA. The battalion came to the realization that the regular infantry was inexperienced and were, hopefully, learning the way of their errors, but at the Amgrunts expense. The Amgrunts grew to hate the emergency calls, but never failed to move out smartly.

In retrospect, it has become apparent that the Alpha Amgrunts had become accustomed to even the slightest innovations of the NVA and were effective in countering their tactics. Familiarity with literally every inch of the ground north of the Cua Viet worked in favor of the Amgrunts. In responding to units in need of being reinforced, the Amgrunts selected secure points along the river, in the dunes or heavy growth areas to debark from amphibians, deploy, and maneuver against NVA. These advantages led to effectively reducing the NVA forces. As the NVA withdrew, the Amgrunts continued pressing the contact until the enemy was destroyed or pushed into the DMZ. In the majority of cases, the relieved force would be replaced with one platoon of Amgrunts to continue the vigil within the area just below the DMZ referred to as "Ocean View."

Enclosure (8) is a photograph taken by Sgt. Alyn G. Brown, USMC, (on December 5, 1967) and a radioman of company A. It shows the 3rd Platoon of Alpha, online and awaiting their platoon leader's command to rise up and move forward. Lt. Richard "Rich" Reynolds, can be seen ahead of the platoon among the scrub on the lower edge of Ocean View, a favorite ambush site of the NVA. In this case, a green infantry force of two platoons allowed the NVA to push them out of their night fighting position to well below Ocean View. Co. A responded to their call, swept up snipers to their south, closed with them after engaging their attackers on their southwestern flank and proceeded through the friendly position against NVA forces. Lt. Reynolds, along with Lt. Donald R. Head, leading



the 4th Platoon were prepared to move on line to sweep out the last of the NVA. As the two platoons rose up and moved forward, NVA mortar fire fell in front among and behind their advance. They moved quickly ahead, killing NVA as they went and passing through the mortars. One Marine was wounded and one Navy Corpsman was killed. The two platoons killed nine NVA and chased the remainder of their platoon back into the DMZ. By the time darkness had begun to fall, the Amgrunts once again recovered the Ocean View defensive position.

### **OCEAN VIEW**

Ocean View was a large area that had been cleared of all trees. Navy EOD Team accomplished the clearing when they placed a “Daisy Cutter” bomb in the midst of the area to be cleared and setting it off from a safe distance. When the smoke and falling Australian pine splinters cleared, the ARVN and their US Army Advisors on Hill 31, to the west could look through the 100 meter clearing and see the South China Sea. At night they could see the waves full of phosphorus breaking along the shoreline through a Super NOD telescope. These observations alerted the Amgrunts of enemy movements along the DMZ and particularly through Ocean View.

The ARVN on Hill 31 enjoyed such a clear view of Ocean View that it afforded their U. S. Army Artillery Scout lieutenant the opportunity for some turkey shoots. On many occasions the lieutenant would monitor the Alpha Amgrunt’s conduct of fire net and when available, offer observed artillery support. We cautioned him not to do any firing unless cleared by the commander in contact. This careful consideration was arrived at as a result of an anxious situation wherein the young Artillery Scout Spotter fired an unauthorized round at men moving in the open west of the Australian pines, thinking they were NVA. They were Marines and were lucky to not be killed by a 155mm incoming round that was approximately 60 meters short of their new position, very hastily dug I might add.

The Army lieutenant’s adjusted fire was most welcome when applied against the retreating NVA who withdrew to their safe zones in the DMZ. They were well aware that the Marines were not allowed to venture into the DMZ. The 175mm rounds could follow them and were found to be most effective.

When interrogating POWs, one vividly described artillery used against them as being “horrible, merciless, deadly and ceaseless.” Truly these were grand complements to any artilleryman.

### **UNSNARLING THE MESS**

The process of reinforcing a unit in heavy contact was compounded by several factors; not the least of which was the driving monsoon rains. New units to the area seemed never to know the enemy dispositions. For all those in the AmTrac battalion knew, and always took for granted was that the unit to be reinforced was surrounded and out numbered.

The terrain was basically flat with the exception of six to ten foot sand dunes along a wide flat beach. Behind these dunes, the Australian pines offered some concealment from NVA artillery observers. Beyond this narrow band of pines was the “desert.” Maneuvering outside the pine strip invited heavy enemy artillery fire. Such a restriction left the Alpha and Bravo Companies with limited maneuver room that afforded good concealment from enemy artillery observers. A company could only move with two platoons across the front with the Headquarters Section immediately behind, and two platoons in trace. This was the standard formation while moving to relieve and reinforce a friendly unit in heavy contact with the NVA. While in this formation, the big “T,” (two platoons in a column in trace), or a “Double T” (a platoon in column behind each platoon on line), afforded quick response to support the forward-deployed platoons to either flank of the front.

This broad front formation also served to sweep up NVA in spider holes that might otherwise be overlooked by the company being in a formation with one platoon forward with squads abreast and the remaining platoons in column (a formation seldom ever used). This lesson was learned early on after several casualties were experienced from sniper attacks from the rear. The sniper was always killed but the loss of valuable Marines could not be afforded due to bypassing enemy positions.

Regardless of the formation assumed, as the Amgrunts closed on the point of engagement to relieve and reinforce the regular Marine infantry, it left the Amgrunts vulnerable to down-range small arms from friendly fire intended for NVA south of their position.

The tactical maneuver required to reinforce a unit in close contact is hairy and complex under the best of conditions. When trying this task in the midst of a heavy firefight and where the unit to be reinforced is badly shot up and disorganized the descriptive "hairy" is inadequate to express the complexity amidst the confusion. Regardless of the number of times some units were bailed out, they seemed never to learn from their errors. Alpha Amgrunts became adept at the maneuver and came to accomplish the complex task quite adroitly. What could not be done was to do it without a high rate of casualties.

Upon critiquing a company commander following a relief operation, it was learned that a group of NVA that had taken up positions south of his company but quickly departed their fighting holes when the Amgrunt relief force debarked from the tops of their LVTs directly adjacent to and behind high sand dunes at the top of the beach. Very probably they feared being cut off from the rear by a fresh force. Inspection of their positions clearly indicated they had oriented their fields of fire to greet the Amgrunts and delay relieving the other Marines. Both commanders agreed the NVA follow up plan. Related to delay of the Amgrunt relief force and to take advantage of a serious lull in relief in order to move NVA reinforcements from within the DMZ into position to over run the regular infantry unit of Marines. This reality called for some new counter moves.

It should also be mentioned that as the Amgrunts moved to reinforce the infantry, a call to the Army Scout Spotter atop Hill 31 was advised of our moves and asked to be watchful of Ocean View. He suggested throwing a few 155mm rounds just inside the DMZ. It is not known if NVA reinforcements were thwarted from moving south by this action. It may have given their commander pause that a US spotter might be adjusting upon them with strong binoculars.

To counter these encirclements the rule became that all units would fire harassing and interdicting (H&I) fires south of their positions throughout the night; particularly on likely areas affording advantage to spring ambushes or where stalling engagements could be effected. Such positions were easily identified, as some elevation of terrain was accessible to the western side of the trees and dunes. Equally so, this afforded the ambush/stalling force an easy withdrawal route. This pushed the withdrawing NVA into the open and subject to Hill 31 observation and observed fires.

Once these likely NVA ambush positions were noted, they were designated by coordinates as well as being assigned target reference numbers and provided to visiting units. The How-6 artillery battery had these coordinates and had registered on them to speed the process of setting up H&I plans.

The NVA took advantage of the range limitations of the battalion's direct support artillery. The How-6 105mm howitzer by design was a high angle fire weapon. When the NVA engaged Alpha units they preferred to do it nose-to-nose with the Marines and as close to the DMZ as possible for two reasons. First, they understood and took advantage of the fact that the How-6 guns were close to their maximum range. This meant our rounds could most likely fall within our own positions during very close contact instead of in the NVA positions. Secondly, they were close to the security of the DMZ to which they could withdraw, and receive support from their 82mm mortars. The NVA 82 mortars were positioned beyond the range of the How-6 guns. The lower edge of the DMZ and Ocean View were well within the firing fan of the enemy mortars. Our backup of general support artillery, adjusted from the OP on Hill 31 was next on our call for fire list. Lacking these sources we relied on air and sea support. This led the Amgrunts to lean upon naval gunfire and close air support, weather permitting for the latter.

### **MAINTAINING STANDOFF DISTANCE**

Continually pressing the NVA against and back into the DMZ by ground operations, indirect weapons, and close air strikes proved to keep the enemy effectiveness against activities at the mouth of the river to a minimum. The advantages that fell to the Alpha and Bravo Amgrunts were that they were accomplishing their mission to the fullest. The NVA were left with a limited movement of action and not at liberty to move to within range of the Naval Support Activity where they could disrupt the flow of supplies to Dong Ha and the Marines fighting to the west.

The criticality of this constant flow of supplies up the Cua Viet hinged on the reality that eighty to ninety percent of all supplies drawn from supply points in Dong Ha came from the sea to Cua Viet and thence to the west via the river. Disrupting this constant flow of critical logistic support could have been accomplished with an enemy 82mm mortar from just 3,000 meters. As it stood, the Amgrunts kept the NVA about 6,500 meters out of range.

At one point the NVA pushed a regular infantry unit so far south before it could be reinforced, that the whole port facility of the NSA loading/unloading ramp was within the firing fan of 82 mortars. Loss of this hard won terrain entailed a major effort to return control to the Amgrunts. As it was, it took both Alpha and Bravo Amgrunts to restore order above the Cua Viet.

Bravo was a perfect dancing partner for Alpha. The union of the two companies was always effected without discord. The two companies functioned smoothly. They never seemed to lose this fluidity of efficient operation in combat. Nevertheless, such operations had their costs in casualties. Following one brutal engagement where several key squad leaders and personnel were lost out of Alpha's 3rd Platoon, led by Lt. Rich Reynolds. The company's executive officer, 1st Lt. Phil Allum, was shot through both legs by a sniper while atop an AmTrac and guiding it forward to evacuate wounded. Alpha supported by Bravo continued to press the NVA and pushed them back into the DMZ, leaving behind eight of the enemy soldiers as KIA.

Repeated high losses while rescuing ineffective visiting units moved the Alpha Amgrunts CO to request a conference with the battalion commander.

On returning to the battalion position from reinforcing a regular infantry unit in contact with the NVA, the Alpha CO received some casualty figures prepared by Company First Sergeant Hayden Metz. These statistics reflected the numbers of wounded by engagements beginning from the dates of receiving the first regular infantry units indicated that almost every man in Alpha had earned a Purple Heart. The most significant fact was that fifty- percent of the Purple Hearts and KIA had occurred in engagements to reinforce visiting regular infantry. Armed with these facts, the Alpha CO discussed retaking full responsibility for the northern AO and using visiting infantry to augment Alpha. The Battalion CO agreed, partly because he realized some of the visiting companies were being sent to the Cua Viet for either R & R or to gain experience before rejoining their parent battalion.

The day following the conference with the Battalion CO, Alpha moved north to relieve the regular infantry unit to return to the rear. The visiting command became reaction forces in support of Alpha Amgrunts thereafter. This role worked better because Alpha was at home fighting in their own front yard and being reinforced, when necessary, by the new guys under Alpha's control. (This practice was continued by Maj. Robert Throm when he took command of Alpha after moving down from the position of battalion executive officer in May or June of 1968.)

The NVA activities intensified once again shortly after Alpha resumed full control of their AO. The exception was that encounters were direct. The company did not have to fight its way through a friendly unit to get to the enemy. Alpha's casualties decreased proportionally somewhat as a result.

### **WEATHER RESTRICTIONS**

Retaking control did not resolve combined arms support problems during times of heavy weather. The monsoon severely limited use of precious helicopter gunship and close air support. When resorting to general support fire alternatives, navel gunfire had to frequently be relied upon as the only guns available besides the How-6 direct support weapons.

Naval gunfire was available for two simple reasons in most cases. Dong Ha based general support batteries of 155mm, 175mm and 8 inch general support weapons could reach targets in support of Marines as far west as the Laotian border. Not all naval weapons at sea, had that range. Secondly, the offshore gun stations were just seaward of the Alpha TAOR. Unfortunately, in most cases the gun-target line was just over the shoulder of Alpha units in most cases. One gun station was just below the DMZ in the South China Sea, however it was susceptible to NVA shore battery fire during periods of clear weather. Only the boldest skippers ventured into this station. The most ideal circumstances were when the ceilings were extremely low, rain was pouring and visibility by NVA artillery observers was restricted.

Calling upon alternative sources of artillery support at the division level was questionable, at best. This circumstance was the result of a "priority of fires" in support of the Marine infantry west of Route One. The guns that could reach us were "general support" artillery. Their fires were constantly filling in for the direct support guns over burdened with mission due to the increasing NVA activity across the northern I Corps Zone.

Short of using general support artillery, the Amgrunts turned to naval guns. Naval gunfire is best employed if the target is well beyond the front line or parallel to the line of engagement. The rolling of a ship sitting or moving slowly on station tends to cause rounds to land long or short more frequently than deflecting to the left or right of the line of fire. Gun station 23 reduced the probability of long and short round, as the gun-target line was usually parallel with the front line of the Amgrunts.

One naval gunfire support fire mission is worthy of repeating, as the circumstances were so unusual. The NVA had waited until the last minute to spring their ambush on the Amgrunts and therefore made the encounter very close. Alpha Amgrunts were having a difficult time of digging a squad or so out of a sand dune complex just south of Ocean View when the Alpha CO was advised by an Amgrunt radio operator that a vessel on station was calling to offer their services. They had been listening to our repeated request for artillery support on the conduct of fire net and recognized our call sign, Badminton Alpha. Immediately the company CO called in a fire mission. There was the usual pause, encountered as the mission was being passed to the guns, but nothing happened.

Losing his patience with the delay, the Alpha CO asked to speak to the vessel's gunnery officer. The response that came back was most unusual for fire control radio procedures.

"Be patient with us, Alpha. We're working on it."

"We're running out of light and need support now," the CO insisted.

"We're going to fire one into that clearing off the beach, so correct us from there, okay," an intense voice said.

"If you can see the slot in the trees, fire away."

Shortly a round burst like a blooming white cloud. It was a white phosphorus shell of about 60mm size, not the five-inch we had expected.

"Was that your "willie peter" round?" the CO asked.

"Roger, roger. Now give us your adjustments."

The CO passed the "shift and drop" to the vessel and promptly sent an observer to the top of a dune to find out what kind of a naval fighting ship was at sea firing a 60mm mortar.

"It's not a destroyer," reported the Marine from the top of the dune. "It looks like a Swift Boat and they are just outside the surf zone from the beach."

Several more rounds applied to the enemy positions resulted in four NVA KIA and small arms captured. The remainder stole away under the cover of dusk and lowering visibility in the driving rain. Their trip through Ocean View back into the DMZ was interrupted by a hail of high explosive and "willie peter" mortar fire from the Swift boat. To add insult to injury, the Swift boat pulled into the surf zone and opened up with their .50 caliber machine guns and then departed seaward. They reported they were out of mortar ammunition and were heading south for re-supply.

The following day, the Alpha CO was in his rear CP when a young lean and tanned individual, wearing a helmet, green "T" shirt, khaki shorts and combat boots, knocked on the screen door of the CO's hatch, he was invited in.

"Sir," he said, "the First Sergeant said I'd have to ask you to get me some ammunition. You see, sir, I shot all of mine up along the north beach yesterday supporting Badmitten Alpha. I don't have any supply authorization yet since I'm the first Coast Guard officer to come in here for re-supply."

The Alpha XO took him to NSA and got him re-supplied from stem to stern, got his men showered and fed and shared some Class 6 supplies with them that evening. The same boat crew supported the Amgrunts a few times again along the beach. They were most useful with illumination over night fighting positions following ambushes on the enemy. Their swivel mounted 60mm mortar allowed the Swift Boat crew to rapidly load rounds and to easily aim their weapon in support of Marines in contact with the enemy. The mortar could be fired by a lever type trigger instead of drop and impact firing of rounds.

## TET 1968 – AN ALL OUT NVA PUSH

As TET drew near in 1968, massive NVA units moved south. Contact reports and sightings of NVA during daylight and darkness streamed into battalion, regiment and the division COC communications centers. The NVA were on the move to the south.

The ARVN force with advisors atop Hill 31, both day and at night, could see Ocean View through binoculars and the SNOD telescope from their OP to the breaking surf along the beach of the South China Sea.

One evening the artillery scout, and artillery advisor, Army Lt. Murkin, with the ARVN unit on Hill 31 alerted the Amgrunt battalion operations officer that a large enemy force was crossing Ocean View. Approximately 300 NVA had moved past Ocean View in less than fifteen minutes. Lt. Murkin explained that he could count the column of three men abreast through the SNOD distinctively as they were silhouetted against the phosphorescent waves breaking on the beach.

The Battalion CO ordered the platoon of just 22 Marines and a lieutenant in night fighting positions to move south. The 12th Marines FSCC in Dong Ha and the division DASC quickly set up a time on target. When the signal came to fire, a combination of bombs from A6 Intruders, 175 mm, 8 inch howitzer, 105 mm and 4.2 inch mortar fire rained down on the selected target area for twelve minutes. At daybreak the following day, the ARVN, closest to the enemy position along with their advisors swarmed over the carnage. ARVN soldiers and advisors picked their way through bodies and body parts in search of vital intelligence information. Lt. Murkin confirmed he was certain valuable information would be found since such a large force moved south behind scouts as if marching in formation along an avenue.

Their column formation was indicative of a tactic of having the NVA scouts engage the Marines below Ocean View and thereby letting the large NVA column continue to the Cua Viet river to cut off supply activities.

“They were almost jogging down the beach while their scouting force moved rapidly through the Australian pines,” the artillery scout recalled.

Lt. Murkin’s perceptions were rewarded after some two hours of searching. A battle plan for the TET Offensive for 1968 was found on the remains of an NVA officer. The advisors called for an Army helicopter and hand carried the captured document to the 1st ARVN Division headquarters in Quang Tri. The facts of this gold mine discovery was only made known to the Amgrunt battalion almost a week later. This knowledge arrived about the same time that increased NVA contacts kicked into high gear--- January 15, 1968.

Marine and Army units across the northern I Corps area began to report increased movements, maneuvering and more frequent contacts. Enemy artillery and mortar attacks were more frequent all along the DMZ combat outpost line. Larger numbers of NVA were being sighted in broad daylight west of Highway 1. Marine Naval Aerial Observers picked up larger units moving in along the Laos/Vietnam border.

The next actions by NVA forces in the use of local VC sent out a loud and clear message to the Amgrunt battalion. It came from a village chief in the river side hamlet of My Loc whom the battalion had courted with many hours of “County Fairs” to assist his people and to win over their favor and thereby keeping the village supportive of American forces. These many hours of battalion medical personnel performing all manner of treatments including localized surgery, extracting teeth, vaccinating children, medicating old ailments, and even some prenatal care, finally paid off one stormy evening.

The village chief, with whom the author had shared many pipe bowls of tobacco with, was brought to the Alpha Amgrunt’s CP on the old fellow’s request. He was blindfolded and bound. The Marine and NSA sentries and interpreter brought him to the company COC and sat him down in front of the author. He was greeted but left blinded and bound for security. In spite of his nervousness, he recognized my voice as well as my brand of tobacco, no doubt, and smiled as he began to disclose his mission.

On being interrogated, he explained he had slipped away from his village in the torrential downpour with a message for our battalion and for his own sake as well as for that of his family. He said he came, as he could not trust anyone else in the village. There were many communist sympathizers among his people. His message was quite simple. Members of an assassination team had slipped into his village very late that night and were awaiting their follow-on element the next night from across the DMZ (the NVA we presumed). He explained that this sort of tactic was well known to all village chiefs in the south. First came the local VC killers who murdered the village chief and his family members, as they knew who they were, he explained. He continued to lay out the scenario, as it would unfold. Following these murders, the populace of My Loc would be pressed into labor gangs to dig fighting positions and build fortifications to generate fear in the villagers and to supplant authority. Those who refused or tried to escape would be killed. Now, not smiling but clearly morose, he was overcome and immediately proceeded to beg that the Marines come into the village to kill the assassins.

The village chief was moved to the battalion COC to tell his story to the Battalion Co and Operations Officer. After he explained the follow on members of the assassination team would be in place the next night, the Bn Co and S-3 directed he be removed while they put their heads together. Within minutes the village chief was returned and told that if he could assure them that a person would be available to point out the location of assassination team members as they slept, the Marines would pay them a visit the following night in a raid. Rather quickly, the details of the rendezvous were worked out with the chief. He promised that the single man he could trust, an undercover National Policeman, would meet the raid unit at a mutually agreed point.

The old chief was returned to the riverbank where his small boat rested. He was happy at the prospect of being rid of the VC and NVA killers and his family's security. He paddled off in the driving rain with a fresh bowl of pipe tobacco burning away, the bowl turned down to keep it safe from the deluge.

(The details of the raids on My Loc to capture the assassins are covered in a separate paper.)

After the raids on My Loc, the warning of the village chief of more NVA coming down the Jones Creek avenue was confirmed by the III MAF intelligence shop. A long-time friend called up from Danang over the secure voice radio system and casually asked for me specifically. He knew I was now the Alpha company commander and fully understood my primary operation area was north of the Cua Viet. He asked a simple question.

“Are you crossing the stream any time over the next two days?”

“It's a great likelihood we will,” I answered. “We are getting some strong indicators of unfriendly visitors from across the DMZ.”

“If you cross the river anytime soon, you had better take all the fire power you can carry,” he warned.

Two days later Alpha company did cross the river on an emergency call to reinforce Ocean View. Subsequent events presented Alpha with the largest enemy force it had ever encountered.

\* \* \*

Increased enemy activity during Tet of 1968, created a shortage of fire support all around. The general support artillery backed and filled holes in direct fire support artillery stretched thin and burning ammunition with multiple calls. Many artillery batteries split their fires to support simultaneous calls for fire from their infantry battalions. Batteries literally split three guns out to fire in one direction as the other three fired in a different direction. Three guns were better than waiting for a full six-pack. This is a good trick if you have a sharp man on the plotting board.

The Amgrunts were still in a state of “fix bayonets” due to the severe shortage of adequate fire support. Organic mortars, 60mm, weaponry and complete complement of communications equipment and personnel to directly call on combined arms fire support had not arrived by January 1968, to fill out the TO&E (Table of Organization and Equipment) for fighting as a Marine infantry company before the onset of Tet. The effect of these shortages soon culminated in heavy losses as large main force NVA crossed the DMZ. This force set about attacking the Amgrunts to take control of the Cua Viet River and cut the flow of supplies to all Marines and Army west of Route One in the Northern I Corps Combat Zone.

Two exceptionally ferocious encounters between the Amgrunt Battalion and NVA units resulted in such significant losses in each encounter, which the Division Commander ordered in the Special Landing Forces (SLF) in each instance from amphibious shipping. The 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines under the command of Lt. Col. Robert Macquan (if my memory serves me correctly), and later a battalion of the 3rd regiment met these major-force-sized units with considerable success. In both cases, the two SLF battalions racked up huge body counts of dead NVA. These relief measures not only pointed out the effective flexibility of amphibious forces in determining the outcome of engagements, but also emphasized the vulnerability of the Amgrunts. The Amgrunts were an effective patrol force in locating and countering small NVA units at strengths of company size and smaller. When the NVA appeared in battalion and regimental or division strength, the SLF had to be called in. A platoon commander in Alpha likened the Amgrunt mission to that of being the fish bait on the hook. Whatever the circumstance or attraction to draw the NVA out, it worked to the benefit of the Marines.

During a critical phase of the NVA assault on river supply traffic going to Dong Ha, the Marine SLF that had relieved the Amgrunts from engaging an NVA regiment and called for a helping hand as the NSA boats could not move close enough to re-supply them along the North shore of the Cua Viet. Intense enemy artillery fire as well as showers of RPGs had thwarted resupply over land using LVTs. It was reported that NVA holed up in concrete houses, and particularly a school house and village public house on the market square of Ma Xi Thi East, could not be dislodged. The SLF had left their bunker buster weapons at the Cua Viet and used the personnel to fill in depleted ranks. The AmTrac Battalion CO directed Alpha Amgrunts to answer the call.

The Alpha company armorer, Staff Sergeant William "Moe" Moeller was assigned the task. Moeller's reputation as an all weapons expert was well known in the battalion. When the situation was explained, Sgt "Moe" rounded up an unmanned 106-mm recoilless rifle, assorted ammunition, and commandeered a Mike 6 boat. After reinforcing the boat with CONEX boxes and sandbags on which to mount the 106, he shoved off up river. The Mike boat drew small arms fire from every building at the center of the village at the mouth of Jones Creek. Fortunately the boat had stood off far enough to make RPG-7 rockets fall short. These gunners were dug in too low in the buildings to get enough elevation for accuracy. Most of these rounds slapped the water 50 to 75 meters short of their mark. That was a serious mistake as Sgt. "Moe" registered all the flashes and pale puffs of rocket propellant. When the Coxswain swung the boat around on the return leg, Sgt "Moe" popped a .50 caliber spotter round at the first structure and lay in a High explosive plastic round. The building disappeared in a cloud of fire and smoke, and so did the next and the next. Unfortunately, a High explosive anti-tank round was fed into the breach by Sgt. "Moe's" loader. It punched through the next building and exploded behind the structure. A 12.5mm machinegun had been moved into place. It could easily reach the Mike boat with a high volume of fire. Their mistake was, the Marines ashore had observed the move and alerted Sgt "Moe". Sgt "Moe" calmly directed the rookie loader to keep feeding him high explosive plastic rounds. Another .50 caliber spotting round streaked across the river to confirm his range. It was followed by the plastic explosive. The front and back walls of the schoolhouse were turned into pebbles. When NVA crawled out of their holes at the base of the walls, the Marines ashore killed them instantly. The remaining hard structure standing was the public house. Sgt "Moe" leveled it with two more plastic rounds. He had one high explosive anti-tank round left as he withdrew for more ammo.

Sgt "Moe" was met at the NSA ramp with a truck loaded with ammo and a working party to re-supply him. When the author listened to Moeller's account he noted Sgt. "Moe" was yelling as if he could not be heard. When asked a question he did not reply. He just looked quizzical, then in his slow Carolinian drawl said, "Damn sir, I'm as deaf as a dead cat. Sorry about that." The roar of the many 106 rounds had temporarily deafened Sgt. "Moe", and it was so for the next two days.

## **BUSINESS AS USUAL**

When the SLF departed the Amgrunt Battalion returned to its normal operations of ambushes, sweeps and patrols up to the DMZ and throughout the Rocket Box and southern TAOR. In spite of being short on fire support and with fading number of troops, the companies continued operations without diminished spirits.

A normal strength regular infantry platoon consisted of 48 Marines. Each of the four Amgrunt platoons averaged 20 to 30 men. This made them just strong enough to field two to three 10-man squads versus four squads of twelve. Fighting at half strength meant being on a par with a basic NVA platoon. The most telling comparison between the

two combatant's effectiveness in firepower and numbers of men was heavily weighted on supporting arms weapons. The outcome of short but vicious fights was the factor of an equality of firepower. As the NVA came south in greater numbers, their unit strengths not only increased so did their organic firepower. They're supporting arms improved through use of forward observers and their man-pack radios linking them to artillery positions north of the DMZ. The organic weapons of the NVA were much greater than the Amgrunts and thus accounted for rapidly increased numbers of KIAs and WIAs in Marine ranks. The NVA inclusion of forward observers (FO) added to their greater killing power and noticeable ability to maneuver against the pinned down Marines. A commander's frustrations mounted during monsoon season and reduced visibility when supporting arms of air platforms were restricted and general support artillery was not available due to priority of fires allocations placing them beyond reach of the Amgrunts in the pecking order.

During the first eight and one-half months of the battalion's engagements with the NVA, the Marines were armed with the M-14 rifle. The M-14 was a magazine loaded semi-automatic or automatic when a selector switch function was engaged. The NVA had the tried and true AK-47, also magazine fed, with a selection of rates of fire and about 12 to 14 more rounds in a magazine. When close in fighting took place, (which was 90 percent of the time), the NVA had the advantage. NVA troops usually carried four magazines loaded with at least 30 rounds in each. The Amgrunts were limited to two magazines each holding only 15 to 17 rounds. To hold the full 20 rounds caused a weakening of the spring in the magazine. This resulted in malfunctions of the magazine failing to properly feed with the bolt striking a round that was partially fed into the chamber and bending it. These type jams were deadly malfunctions.

Each Marine carried only two magazines because of a shortage of the items in supply and because so many had the faulty springs. When they failed, Marines would bring them back to the company armorer to exchange for rebuilt ones. In many cases they had to be discarded. Trustworthy magazines were literally cherished. To insure they would last, Marines did not fully load them with the complement of 20 rounds for fear it might cause the springs to weaken.

The NVA frequently carried medium and even heavy machineguns and a complement of RPGs and snipers in their ranks. The Amgrunts had one, then later two, grenade launchers. There were not enough snipers in the 3rd Division to farm out to units such as the Amgrunts until after Tet 1968.

Six months earlier, Company A had met an enemy with automatic small arms and light machineguns. In addition, rocket propelled grenade launchers; the RPG-4s or RPG-7s used for bunker busting and anti-tank attacks were normal. During the period of Tet 1968, it was common to engage enemy armed with heavy machineguns, heavy mortars, recoilless rifles up to 85mm, and in one case, a flame-thrower. Going against this well armed force were Marines armed with M-14 rifles, a couple of M-79s and a mix of M-60 and .30 caliber Mugs. Company A still had its old Indo-China vintage 60mm mortar as organic fire support, limited as it was in its range due to excessive wear from too many rounds having been fired from it.

In spite of this imbalance in organic firepower, the tried and true fundamentals of using a base of fire, maneuver, and aggressively closing with the enemy for the kill, proved to pay off in the end. There was, however, a price to pay. The most valuable commodity of combat was the Marine, the most precious asset without which no victories could be reaped. Each loss took a heavy toll on the over burdened but determined platoons.

From a personal viewpoint, the author finds it to be remarkable how the Marines continued in the face of such challenging conditions. While I am prone to marvel at their steadfast will and determination to deliver performances equal to their legendary forbears of Belleau Wood, Iwo Jima and the Chosin, I know I should not be surprised. They all became products of the finest centers dedicated to molding humans into warriors, the Marine Corps Recruit Depots. Imbued with all the basics and will to carry on war fighting traditions of the Corps, they upheld the motto "Semper Fidelis" for country, Corps and their fellow Marines. More specifically, the men of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion proved to their own satisfaction that every Marine Amtrucker was a rifleman. In so doing, they justifiably earned the name of Amphibian Tractor Infantrymen... the Amgrunts.



## SCANT PUBLIC RECOGNITION BACK HOME

In the minds of the fighting personnel, appreciation for servicemen and women's sacrifices during the Vietnam era was generally negative back home the troops read the newspapers while on R&R in Hong Kong and Australia, among other places. They knew only too well how unappreciative the civilian populace was. It was apparent to the troops that the key detractors of their efforts were the media and universities in the states. Returning home to such an environment was not an event to look forward to. Facing blatant and abusive rejection posed a difficult prospect for warriors who had "done the job." They immediately found themselves castigated for the war in the first place and for whatever else could be pinned on them by tormentors in the colleges and media. They were worthy of better treatment for having fought in such a deadly "unpopular" war. Logic would tell you that college professors, educated students and a sophisticated media of television and print, in America should be capable of understanding that a soldier in war fights on orders from his superiors. The fact is the professors, students and media lacked the intellect to apply objectivity with reason. They all seemed to have an agenda to create havoc across the nation and influence a political decision regardless of the consequences and possible adverse outcome on the fighting front. And all the time, the troops knew exactly why the university professors of the far left politically, played on the fears of the male student's, so frightfully scared of being drafted.

Marines returning to the States wrote their buddies in Vietnam to describe how shabbily the "ignorant bastards" in the civilian world treated them. Scores regretted going home. Many became expatriates to avoid the scorn of a thankless nation. Many bypassed taking advantage of their GI educational benefits, thereby precluding abuses by students and professors.

Years later, while discussing such abominable treatment of returning troops, the author likened such treatment to a situation in a family that goes something like this:

Johnny comes home one day with a note from the Principal that says he has been involved in a fight and it must not happen again. When his Mother reads it she assures Johnny that his Dad will have a serious talk with him about that black eye.

Dad comes in, gets his marching orders from the wife and goes to Johnny's room. When he sees his son with a huge shiner and bruises about his head and neck, he becomes extremely angry.

He tells his son to go back to school the next day and beat the hell out of the guy that closed his eye. "And if you don't whip his ass, I'll whip yours."

When Johnny comes home the next day early because he has been expelled, with a busted lip bending his smile out of shape and a note tucked in his shirt pocket from the Principal demanding the parents attend a meeting about Johnny's violence in school, Johnny receives his reward. His Mother beats the tar out of him.

The parallels between this story and that of Johnny when he comes home from fighting in Vietnam are all too true. In both cases Johnny is damned if he does and damned if he does not. A confused and emotionally stressed Johnny presents the opportunity for a state of mental anguish and troublesome behavior in an effort to retaliate for having been betrayed for doing what he was ordered to do by proper authority. Many of these problems went unresolved in spiraling physical and mental deterioration spurred on by drugs and heavy drinking. Some coped on their own while others recovered under treatment through Veterans Affairs counseling sessions. Too many committed suicide, unable to resolve their problem alone by being incapable of simply asking for help.

All the anguish of our Johnny's was not just the result of having been rejected by stateside citizens. Veterans of close combat all vividly recall the finality of fighting at such close quarters. The images of dead buddies, mangled corpses of their fellow Marine friends on the ground they so tenaciously fought to hold and then turn over to occupy another strategically important piece of terrain, just to repeat the seemingly senseless process over and over again, lingers for a lifetime. The images and horrors combined with abject rejection by an ungrateful populace were for many, unbearable. Too many of these close combat veterans returned home and became the KIAs whose names did not make it onto the Vietnam Memorial wall.

Criticism of Vietnam veterans was not limited to the civilian community. As a personal example, during a casual conversation with a member of another military service, I related my feelings about the resilience and bravery of Marines under my command in Vietnam. As I explained, they fought so steadily with so little under such adverse conditions and seldom complained. This young untested officer was quick to challenge my conclusions.

“Well,” he said, “it’s not like they had it on Iwo Jima or coming out of the Chosin.” My response was short and simple. “You’re right. It wasn’t Iwo or the Chosin, but within a 50 meter radius in the middle of a bloody ambush and being repeatedly wounded, that’s hell enough no matter where or how big the battle or war you’re trapped in.”

## CONCLUSIONS

It was my personal privilege and honor to serve with a fine battalion of Marines in a gruesome unforgiving clash of determined opponents who were willing to fight to the death. For principles that each believed in deeply.

It was my great honor to be the commander of a company of Marines who, in spite of shortages of many essential personnel and much equipment, overcame limitations from their own division level support system of self imposed constraints.

These Marines accomplished great deeds and prevailed in the face of seasoned first line enemy forces and proved themselves worthy of the title of Amgrunt: more than just a combat Marine. While their stateside people did not hold them in high esteem, there is no doubt they earned the respect of the North Vietnamese.

Lack of doctrine for grounding a combat support battalion and assigning it an infantry mission was born out of poor foresight and failure to assess enemy potential. This enemy potential had been spelled out in volumes hatched from experiences of mistakes by the French in the late 1940s through the 1950s. One can only presume the military strategists projected follow-on wars based on the Korean conflict. In the case of 1st AmTracs, they were placed on the line to stop the enemy from infiltrating south, just as they had been in Korea, without benefit of the differences in weapons, training, combined arms support, equipment needs and limitations and extreme differences of terrain and weather. All these shortcomings spelled favorable conditions for the enemy and costly gross oversights by commanders and strategic planners.

When military historians dig through the records of commands of the Vietnam era, they will immediately migrate to the infantry and aviation commands to analyze and interpret their actions for establishing findings upon which to embed their benchmark conclusions. These historians have not learned that the Vietnam War was one where all combatants were open to direct engagements to one degree or another. It is the uniqueness of these lesser units, engaged in mortal combat, devoid of ample training, firepower and short-handed, who created their own doctrine to engage and defeat the enemy. Here is where the richer stories to be told rest.

Poor prior planning, lack of training, troops being ill equipped and being shabbily supported equates to almost certain failure in combat. These considerations may be universal for most fighting forces. The exception was 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion. It rose above these inadequacies imposed by senior levels of command, prevailed against excellent enemy forces and earned commendations commensurate to the accomplishments.

The Marine Corps historians completely overlooked the accomplishments of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion in spite of the most obvious proclamations by the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Leonard F. Chapman, USMC. By his pen he awarded two Meritorious Unit Commendations for services as infantry against VC and NVA, not as Amtrackers. The historical volume of “Marines in Vietnam” does not make reference to these unique commendations.

In the context of the code of the warriors, more honors, even in its most brutal stages, were demonstrated between the two combatants than was extended by the U. S. populace for the efforts of their own service personnel

While Hanoi Hanna frequently referred to how the NVA troops would descend upon the Amgrunts and annihilate them for all the evil supposedly done in the South. Her threats buoyed the spirits of Marines. It was particularly gratifying to hear them scoff at Hanna’s predictions as they dispatched the NVA to their everlasting judgment.

The Amgrunts were a hell of a fighting force, capable of doing a “Tractor Rat’s” job and an infantryman’s as well.

Contrary to the “popular opinion of the counter-culture movement” on college campuses and throughout the media and U.S. Congress at the time, the military in Vietnam did not lose the war. Those worthy warriors won their battles in spite of the lack of moral support from an unworthy horde of citizens.

The “counter-culture,” media, college professors, and politicians gave all those hard won battles away. They were the Americans who lost the Vietnam War, not the US fighting men.

The cumulative losses to this nation’s growth from educational benefits avoided by Vietnam veterans have never been quantified through survey and analysis. One can only speculate the setbacks when compared to advancements derived from veterans out of World War II and the Korean Conflict. As compared to what might have been with Vietnam veterans, but who among academia, the Department of Education or others knows or even cares?

Poindexter M. Johnson  
Lieutenant Colonel, USMC (Ret.)  
April 7, 2003

## **Enclosure 1.**

Battalion Unit Commendations/Awards: The commendations/awards include the Presidential Unit Commendation, Navy Unit Commendation and two Marine Unit Commendations. Each commendation is attached. Note that these unit commendations are somewhat overlapping. Two of the commendations reflect meritorious performance of the mission of Amtrackers and being Amgrunts as well, thereby demonstrating the battalion carrying two primary missions in combat. Both MUCs relate to the battalion's performance as infantry only.

### **Presidential Unit Citation**

8 March 1965 - 15 September 1967

### **Navy Unit Commendation**

23 January 1968 - 16 April 1968

### **Navy Unit Commendation**

30 April 1968 - 16 May 1968

### **Meritorious Unit Commendation**

5 November 1967 - 27 January 1968

### **Meritorious Unit Commendation**

26 August 1968 - 9 December 1968

### **Republic Of Vietnam Armed Forces Meritorious Unit Citation**

8 March 1965 - 20 September 1969

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the  
**PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION**

to the

**THIRD MARINE DIVISION (REINFORCED)**

for service as set forth in the following

**CITATION:**

For extraordinary heroism and outstanding performance of duty in action against the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong forces in the Republic of Vietnam from 8 March 1965 to 15 September 1967. Throughout this period, the Third Marine Division (Reinforced), operating in the five northernmost provinces of the Republic of Vietnam, successfully executed its three-fold mission of occupying and defending key terrain, seeking out and destroying the enemy, and conducting an intensive pacification program. Operating in an area bordered by over 200 miles of South China Sea coastline, the mountainous Laotian border and the demilitarized Zone, the Third Marine Division (Reinforced) successfully executed eighty major combat operations, carrying the battle to the enemy, destroying many of his forces, and capturing thousands of tons of weapons and materiel. In addition to these major operations, more than 125,000 offensive counter guerrilla actions, ranging from squad patrols and ambushes to company-sized search and destroy operations, were conducted in both the coastal rice lands and the mountainous jungle inland. These bitterly contested actions routed the enemy from his well-entrenched positions, denied him access to his source of food, restricted his freedom of movement, and removed his influence from the heavily populated areas. In numerous operations, the Third Marine Division (Reinforced) demonstrated the great efficacy of combined operations with units of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. In July 1966, the Third Marine Division (Reinforced) moved to the north to counter major elements of the North Vietnamese Army moving across the Demilitarized Zone. Imbued with an unrelenting combat spirit and initiative and undeterred by heavy hostile artillery and mortar fire, extremely difficult terrain, incessant heat and monsoon rains, the Third Marine Division (Reinforced), employing courageous ground, heliborne and amphibious assaults, complemented by intense and accurate air, artillery and naval gunfire support, inflicted great losses on the enemy and denied him the political and military victory he sought to achieve at any cost. The outstanding courage, resourcefulness and aggressive fighting spirit of the officers and men of the Third Marine Division (Reinforced) in battle after battle against a well-equipped and well-trained enemy, often numerically superior in strength, and the great humanitarianism constantly shown to the peoples of the Republic of Vietnam, reflected great credit upon the Marine Corps and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

ADDENDUM PAGE TO THE CITATION OF THE PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION TO THE THIRD MARINE DIVISION (REINFORCED), 8Mar65 to 15Sep67.

UNITS ENTITLED TO THE AWARD AND THE INCLUSIVE DATES OF AWARD

UNITS	INCLUSIVE DATES		
Headquarters Battalion	6May65	-	15Sep67
Third Marines, Headquarters Company	12Apr65	-	15Sep67
First Battalion, Third Marines	8Mar65	-	31Aug65
	18Nov65	-	13Feb67
SLF	4Apr67	-	ONLY
Second Battalion, Third Marines	10Apr65	-	18Nov65
	22Dec65	-	27Feb66
	27Feb66	-	9Mar67
SLF	14Apr67	-	15Sep67
Third Battalion, Third Marines	12May65	-	30Aug66
	27Oct66	-	15Sep67
Fourth Marines, Headquarters Company	7May65	-	15Sep67
First Battalion, Fourth Marines	7May65	-	15Dec66
	24Jan67	-	1Apr67
SLF	2Apr67	-	15Sep67
Second Battalion, Fourth Marines	7May65	-	27Oct66
	5Jan67	-	15Sep67
Third Battalion, Fourth Marines	14Apr65	-	23Dec65
	18Mar66	-	1Apr67
	15May67	-	15Sep67
Ninth Marines, Headquarters Company	6Jul65	-	15Sep67
First Battalion, Ninth Marines	17Jun65	-	29Sep66
	8Dec66	-	24Jan67
SLF	5Feb67	-	15Sep67
Second Battalion, Ninth Marines	6Jul65	-	15Sep67
Third Battalion, Ninth Marines	8Mar65	-	12Jun65
	15Aug65	-	7Jan67
	1Mar67	-	15Sep67
Twelfth Marines, Headquarters Battery	12Jul65	-	15Sep67
First Battalion, Twelfth Marines	10Apr65	-	15Sep67
Second Battalion, Twelfth Marines	12Jul65	-	15Sep67
Third Battalion, Twelfth Marines	7May65	-	15Sep67
Fourth Battalion, Twelfth Marines	12Jul65	-	15Sep67
Third Engineer Battalion	23Jun65	-	15Sep67
Third Motor Transport Battalion	23Jun65	-	15Sep67
Third Reconnaissance Battalion	7May65	-	15Sep67
Third Medical Battalion	23Jun65	-	15Sep67
Third Shore Party Battalion	15Jul65	-	15Sep67
Third Tank Battalion	12Jul65	-	15Sep67

Third Anti-Tank Battalion	12Jul65	-	15Sep67
Third Dental Company	29Jun65	-	15Sep67
First Marines, Headquarters Company	17Jan66	-	27Mar66
First Battalion, First Marines	28Aug65	-	9Oct66
Second Battalion, First Marines	10Dec65	-	9Oct66
Third Battalion, First Marines	28Jan66	-	9Oct66
First Force Reconnaissance Company	8Mar65	-	27Apr66
	11May66	-	16Nov66
M Battery, Fourth Battalion, 11 <sup>th</sup> Marines	14Aug65	-	27Mar66
Second Battalion, Fifth Marines (-)	1Oct66	-	22Nov66
26 <sup>th</sup> Marines (Fwd)	25Apr66	-	15Apr67
First Battalion, 26 <sup>th</sup> Marines	28Sep66	-	15Sep67
(SLF)	2Aug66	-	27Sep66
Second Battalion, 26 <sup>th</sup> Marines	26Aug66	-	15Sep67
Third Battalion, 26 <sup>th</sup> Marines	9Dec66	-	15Sep67
(SLF)	5Oct66	-	8Dec66
First Battalion, 13 <sup>th</sup> Marines	23Jul67	-	15Sep67
Battery A, 4 <sup>th</sup> Battalion, 13 <sup>th</sup> Marines	2May67	-	15Sep67
Battery K, 4 <sup>th</sup> Battalion, 13 <sup>th</sup> Marines	28Apr67	-	15Sep67
1 <sup>st</sup> Amphibian Tractor Battalion			
Headquarters & Service Company, 1 <sup>st</sup> AmTrac Battalion	15Jul65	-	15Sep67
Company A, 1 <sup>st</sup> Amphibian Tractor Battalion	15Jul65	-	15Sep67
Company B, 1 <sup>st</sup> Amphibian Tractor Battalion	15Jul65	-	15Sep67
LVTH Platoon, 1 <sup>st</sup> Amphibian Tractor Battalion	15Jul65	-	15Sep67
2d Topographical Company	1Apr65	-	15Sep67
3d Force Reconnaissance Company	25Apr67	-	15Sep67
1 <sup>st</sup> Provisional 155mm Gun Battery (SP) (Formed in Country)	6Jan67	-	15Sep67
2 <sup>nd</sup> Provisional 155mm Gun Battery (SP) (Formed in Country)	7Jan67	-	15Sep67
1 <sup>st</sup> 8" Howitzer Battery (SP)	12Jul65	-	15Sep67
1 <sup>st</sup> Searchlight Battery	26Jun67	-	15Sep67
1 <sup>st</sup> Field Artillery Group	29Nov66	-	15Sep67
1 <sup>st</sup> Platoon, 5 <sup>th</sup> 155mm Gun Battery	23Jul67	-	15Sep67
1 <sup>st</sup> Counterintelligence Team	8Mar65	-	31Oct66
1 <sup>st</sup> Special Security Communications Team	6May65	-	15Sep67
3d Interrogator Translator Team	1Apr66	-	15Sep67
9 <sup>th</sup> Interpreter Team	21Jul67	-	15Sep67
7 <sup>th</sup> Interrogator Translator Team	17Apr66	-	15Sep67
17 <sup>th</sup> Interrogator Translator Team	21Aug67	-	15Sep67
11 <sup>th</sup> Interpreter Team	21Aug67	-	15Sep67
1 <sup>st</sup> Platoon, 1 <sup>st</sup> Armored Amphibian Tractor Company	8Nov66	-	15Sep67
3d Counterintelligence Team	8Mar65	-	31Oct66
1 <sup>st</sup> 155mm Gun Battery (SP)	1Mar66	-	15Sep67
3d 155mm Gun Battery (SP)	4Aug66	-	15Sep67
Detachment, 15 <sup>th</sup> Counterintelligence Team	22Nov66	-	15Sep67
1 <sup>st</sup> Clearance Platoon, Company D, 5 <sup>th</sup> Medical Battalion	6Jun66	-	15Sep67

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in presenting the  
**NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION**  
to the  
**BATTALION LANDING TEAM**  
**THIRD BATTALION, FIRST MARINES**  
for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For exceptionally meritorious service in the northern I Corps Area, Republic of Vietnam from 23 January to 16 April 1968. Acting on the knowledge that elements of the 803d North Vietnamese Army Regiment had been successfully interdicting traffic along the Cua Viet River, thereby threatening the vital supply link between the sea and Dong Ha combat base, the Battalion Landing Team was assigned the mission of engaging and destroying this enemy force and of keeping the river open to friendly traffic. On the evening of 23 January 1968, operations against the enemy commenced with a combined heliborne and amphibious landing. For the next eleven days the Battalion Landing Team was heavily engaged with the formidable enemy on the north bank of the river. Five major attacks were conducted against the North Vietnamese Army forces which were firmly entrenched in intricate, mutually supporting, heavily fortified positions. Maintaining continuous contact with the enemy day and night, the Battalion Landing Team systematically reduced the fortified position to rubble, seized the villages, and inflicted grievous losses upon him when he was forced to retreat. The enemy forces on the northern bank of the Cua Viet routed, the Marines crossed to the southern side, and on 16 February commenced a search and clear operation which yielded stores of enemy supplies and equipment in a series of engagements which also netted a high toll of enemy dead. Crossing back to the north bank on 1 March, the Battalion Landing Team assaulted the village of Mai Xa Thi (West) and was met with extremely heavy resistance. Forced to attack across a creek in the most difficult of terrain, the Marines fought, faced with blistering enemy fire, to secure a beachhead on the opposite side. The vital life-line of communication, the Cua Viet River, was once again secured enabling supplies to reach the beleaguered forces on the Demilitarized Zone as far west as Khe Sanh. On 5 March the Battalion Landing Team was diverted from the Cua Viet area and moved by helicopter to Camp Carroll with the mission of providing security for the Camp and the two key bridges along Route 9. Through aggressive patrolling and detailed sweeps, the enemy was denied freedom of movement in the area and Route 9 was kept open for the vital supply convoys moving from Dong Ha to the "Rockpile", Ca Lu, and Khe Sanh. Continuously in contact with enemy forces during the entire period, the Battalion Landing Team participated in Operations BADGER CATCH, SALINE, NAPOLEAN SALINE and CHARLTON. By their effective teamwork, aggressive fighting spirit and individual acts of heroism and daring, the men of the Battalion Landing Team and supporting Marine aviation units achieved significant results. Their courage, professional skill and devotion to duty were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.



All personnel attached to and serving with the following units of Battalion Landing Team, Third Battalion, First Marines during the period 23 January to 16 April 1968 or and part thereof are hereby authorized to wear the NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION Ribbon.

Headquarters and Service Company

Companies I, K, L and M

Battery C (-) (Rein), 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 11<sup>th</sup> Marines

Mortar Battery, 2d Battalion, 11<sup>th</sup> Marines

3d Platoon (Rein), Company C, 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion

4<sup>th</sup> Platoon, Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Amphibious Tractor Battalion

(27Jan – 5Mar68) (Operation SALINE/NAPOLEON-SALINE)

Detachment, 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, Company A, 1<sup>st</sup> Amphibious Tractor Battalion

(14-18Feb68) (Operation SALINE)

Detachment, 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Amphibious Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Amphibious Tractor Battalion

(31Jan68) (Operation SALINE)

(29Feb – 1Mar68) (Operation NAPOLEON-SALINE)

Detachment, 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, Headquarters and Service Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Amphibious Tractor Battalion

(29Feb – 1Mar68) (Operation NAPOLEON-SALINE)

Detachment, 4th Platoon, Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Amphibious Tractor Battalion

(14-18Feb68) (25-26Feb68) (Operation SALINE)

4<sup>th</sup> Platoon (Rein), Company B, 3d Amphibious Tractor Battalion

3d Platoon, Company C, 5<sup>th</sup> Anti Tank Battalion

1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, Company A, 5<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion

(27Jan – 5Mar68) (Operation SALINE/NAPOLEON-SALINE)

1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, (Rein), Company D, 1<sup>st</sup> Reconnaissance Battalion

1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, (Rein), Company A, 1<sup>st</sup> Motor Transport Battalion

2d Platoon (Rein), Company C, 1<sup>st</sup> Medical Battalion

3d Platoon (-) (Rein), Company A, 1<sup>st</sup> Engineer Battalion

Detachment, Postal, Disbursing, Radio Relay, Headquarters Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division

Detachment, Company A, 1<sup>st</sup> Shore Party Battalion

Detachment, Dental Company, 9<sup>th</sup> Marine Amphibious Brigade

Detachment, Logistics Support Unit, Force Logistics Command

Detachment, (Naval Gunfire Liaison Team) Headquarters Battery, 11<sup>th</sup> Marines

SLF Bravo (Attached Command Group 79.5)

Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron-165

U.S NAVY SUPPORTING UNIT

Detachment, NSAD, Cua Viet

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in presenting the  
**NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION**  
To  
**THIRD MARINE REGIMENT,**  
**THIRD MARINE DIVISION (REIN), FMF**  
for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For exceptionally meritorious and heroic achievement during the period 30 April to 16 May 1968 while engaged in combat against enemy forces on the southeastern Cam Lo District, Quang Tri Province, Republic of Vietnam. Initiating counteraction against a numerically superior enemy force in the vicinity of Dai Do and along the strategically critical Thach Han River, the Third Marine Regiment demonstrated an outstandingly high degree of combat readiness and aggressiveness during a series of fiercely fought and bitterly opposed combat actions. In the face of heavy enemy small arms, mortar, and artillery fire, the Third Marine Regiment moved relentlessly forward and surmounted every obstacle to inflict over 1500 casualties upon the enemy and capture large quantities of weapons and ammunition. The success achieved by the regiment and its attached Army and Air Force units precluded the closing the Thach Han River – a communication and resupply route essential to units in the Northern I Corps area – and prevented the enemy from attacking and isolating the cities of Dong Ha and Quang Tri and their respective military complexes. By their valiant fighting spirit, efficient teamwork, professionalism, and dedication, the officers and men of the Third Marine Regiment and attached units achieved a resounding victory over the enemy and contributed essentially to United States efforts in Southeast Asia. Their inspiring performance reflected great credit upon themselves and the Marine Corps, and was in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Armed Forces.

Secretary of the Navy

ADDENDUM PAGE TO THE CITATION OF THE NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION TO THIRD MARINE REGIMENT (-) (Reinforced), THIRD MARINE DIVISION (Reinforced), 30Apr68 to 16May68.

UNITS	INCLUSIVE DATES		
FIRST BATTALION, THIRD MARINES	30Apr68	-	16May68
COMPANY I, THIRD BATTALION, FOURTH MARINES	5May68	-	8May68
COMPANY M, THIRD BATTALION, FOURTH MARINES	5May68	-	8May68
<b>FIRST AMPHIBIOUS TRACTOR BATTALION</b>			
<b>HEADQUARTERS AND SERVICE COMPANY (Reinforced)</b>	30Apr68	-	16May68
<b>COMPANY A</b>	30Apr68	-	16May68
<b>COMPANY B</b> (LESS Detachment, Company B, receiving MUC for the period 16Sept67 – 1Sep68 in support of Third Amphibious Tractor Battalion)	30Apr68	-	16May68
<b>ATTACHED AND SUPPORTING UNITS</b>	30Apr68	-	16May68
<b>BATTERY I, THIRD BATTALION, 12<sup>th</sup> MARINES</b>	30Apr68	-	16May68
<b>BATTERY C, FIRST BATTALION, 11<sup>th</sup> MARINES</b>	30Apr68	-	16May68
<b>FIRST PLATOON, FIRST ARMORED AMPHIBIOUS COMPANY</b>	30Apr68	-	16May68
<b>BATTERY W (-), FIRST BATTALION, 11<sup>th</sup> MARINES</b>	30Apr68	-	16May68
<b>BATTERY W, THRID BATTALION, 12<sup>th</sup> MARINES</b>	30Apr68	-	16May68
<b>COMPANY B, THRID ENGINEER BATTALION</b>	30Apr68	-	16May68
<b>OTTER PLATOON, HEADQUARTERS AND SERVICE COMPANY, THIRD MOTOR TRANSPORT BATTALION</b>	30Apr68	-	16May68
<b>FIRST PLATOON, COMPANY A, THIRD MOTOR TRANSPORT BATTALION</b>	30Apr68	-	16May68

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in presenting the  
**MERITORIOUS UNIT COMMENDATION**  
To  
**FIRST AMPHIBIAN TRACTOR BATTALION**  
**THIRD MARINE DIVISION (REINFORCED) FLEET MARINE FORCE**  
for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For exceptionally meritorious service in close combat against North Vietnamese Army and insurgent Communist (Viet Cong) forces in Quang Tri Province, Republic of Vietnam, from 5 November 1967 to 27 January 1968. Admirably fulfilling the mission of an infantry battalion while simultaneously performing the inherent mission of an amphibian tractor battalion, the First Amphibian Tractor Battalion aggressively closed with, engaged, and defeated major enemy forces in the barren coastal plains of the Gulf of Tonkin. Relentlessly conducting thorough reconnaissance in force operations against a well trained, well equipped, and fiercely determined enemy, the First Amphibian Tractor Battalion drove him from his staging areas in proximity to the vital Cua Viet Port Facility and waterway and doggedly pursued him to the Demilitarized Zone. Attacking vigorously across open, sandy terrain against well prepared and heavily fortified positions occupied by a tenacious enemy who was continually supported by heavy artillery from North Vietnam, the battalion accounted for numerous enemy casualties and captured or destroyed large quantities of arms and equipment. By virtue of their consistently effective teamwork, aggressive fighting spirit, and frequent act of heroism and daring, the men of the First Amphibian Tractor Battalion and their supporting units achieved superior results in armed conflict with the enemy. Their courage, professional competence and devotion to duty were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

All personnel attached to and serving with the following attached and direct support units of the First Amphibian Tractor Battalion, during the periods as set forth below are authorized to wear the MERITORIOUS UNIT COMMENDATION Ribbon

5 November 1967 to 27 January 1968

2d Platoon, 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Amphibian Tractor Company

2d section, 3d Bulk Fuel Company

Detachment, 11<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion (Mine Sweep)

Detachment, Company C, 3d Engineer Battalion (Water Point)

Detachment, Headquarters Company, Headquarters Battalion (PX Personnel)

Detachment, Radio Relay Section, Headquarters Battalion, 3d Marine Division

Detachment, 3d Engineer Battalion (C-4 Water Point)

Detachment, 3d Dental Company

Detachment, Target Acquisition Battery, 2n Battalion, 26<sup>th</sup> Artillery, U.S. Army

Subteam, 15<sup>th</sup> Combat Intelligence Team

Subteam, 7<sup>th</sup> Interrogation Translation Team

(6 November 1967 to 16 December 1967)

Company F, 2d Battalion, 4<sup>th</sup> Marines (Reinforced)

(16 November 1967 to 27 January 1968)

Section W Battery, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 12<sup>th</sup> Marines

(16 November 1967 to 27 January 1968)

Company C, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 3d Marines (Reinforced)

(17 December 1967 to 27 January 1968)

Section Company A, 3d Tank Battalion

(20-31 December 1967)

Company A, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 3d Marines (Reinforced)

(20-27 January 1968)

1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Amphibian Company

For the Secretary of the Navy,  
Commandant of the Marine Corps.

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in presenting the  
**MERITORIOUS UNIT COMMENDATION**  
To  
**FIRST AMPHIBIAN TRACTOR BATTALION**  
**THIRD MARINE DIVISION (REINFORCED), FLEET MARINE FORCE**  
for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For meritorious service in close combat against the North Vietnamese Army and insurgent communist (Viet Cong) forces in Quang Tri Province, Republic of Vietnam, from 26 August to 9 December 1968. When the First Marine Regiment was deployed from the Napoleon/Saline II Tactical Area of Responsibility, the operational control of the area was assigned to the First Amphibian Tractor Battalion because of its versatility and competency. This assigned area of approximately thirty-two square miles encompassed some fourteen miles of river and waterways, eighteen miles of desert, and additional broken land ideally suited for harboring enemy ambush and sapper units. By conducting 543 day patrols and 675 night patrols, the battalion was instrumental in killing 3,476 of the enemy and capturing 613 individual weapons as well as 19 crew-served weapons. In addition to performing duties of an infantry unit, the battalion carried out an intensive and conclusive combined action program which resulted in a highly proficient integrated Marine and Popular Force provisional rifle company. The "can do" attitude of the officers and men of the First Amphibian Tractor Battalion earned them the name "AmGrunts" (Amphibian Tractor Infantrymen). Through effective teamwork, aggressive fighting spirit, and the many individual acts of bravery, the First Amphibian Tractor Battalion, together with supporting Marine and Army units, dealt the enemy a severe blow, and in so doing demonstrated those qualities of valor and professional skill which were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

For the Secretary of the Navy,  
Commandant of the Marine Corps

ADDENDUM PAGE TO THE CITATION OF THE MERITORIOUS UNIT  
 COMMENDATION TO FIRST AMPHIBIOUS TRACTOR BATTALION, THIRD MARINE  
 DIVISION, 26Aug68 – 9Dec68.

UNITS ENTITLED TO THE AWARD AND THE INCLUSIVE DATES OF AWARD

ATTACHED AND SUPPORTING UNITS

UNITS	INCLUSIVE DATES		
COMPANY C, THIRD TANK BATTALION (Less the 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2d Platoons (-))	26Aug68	-	4N
FIRST PLATOON, COMPANY C, THIRD TANK BATTALION	26Aug68	-	9I
SECOND PLATOON (-), COMPANY C, THIRD TANK BATTALION	1Dec68	-	9I
FOURTH PLATOON, ANTITANKS, THIRD TANK BATTALION	26Aug68	-	7T
SECOND PLATOON, FIRST ARMORED AMPHIBIOUS TRACTOR COMPANY	17Sep68	-	9I
DETACHMENT, THIRD DENTAL COMPANY	26Aug68	-	9I
DETACHMENT, THIRD FORCE RECONNAISSANCE	1Sep68	-	31
DETACHMENT, THIRD TRCONNAISSANCE BATTALION	1Oct68	-	9I
BLT, SECOND BATTALION, 26 <sup>TH</sup> MARINE REGIMENT (Less COMPANY G)	16Oct68	-	18
COMPANY G, SECOND BATTALION, 26 <sup>TH</sup> MARINE REGIMENT	26Aug68	-	18
COMPANY H, SECOND BATTALION, NINTH MARINE REGIMENT	21Oct68	-	24
DETACHMENT, HEADQUARTERS BATTERY, (Naval Gunfire), 12 <sup>th</sup> MARINE REGIMENT	1Oct68	-	9I
U.S. Army Units			
DETACHMENT, BATTERY F, 26 <sup>TH</sup> FIELD ARTILLERY	1Nov68	-	9I
COMPANY A, FIRST BATTALION, 61 <sup>ST</sup> INFANTRY	20Nov68	-	23I

REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM ARMED FORCES MERITORIOUS UNIT CITATION  
(GALLANTRY CROSS) 8Mar65 – 20Sep69

All personnel attached to the following units, during the period shown are authorized to wear the Ribbon Bar Gallantry Medal Color, with Palm and Gold Frame.

UNITS	INCLUSIVE DATES		
Marine Aerial Refueler/Transportation Squadron 152	1Jan65	-	20Sep69
Marine Air Base Squadron 11, 1stMAW	10Jul65	-	20Sep69
Marine Air Base Squadron 12, 1stMAW	11May65	-	20Sep69
Marine Air Base Squadron 13, 1stMAW	4Sep66	-	31Dec68
Marine Air Base Squadron 16, 1stMAW	14Mar65	-	20Sep69
Marine Air Base Squadron 36, 1stMAW	1Sep65	-	20Sep69
Marine Air Control Group 18	1Sep67	-	20Sep69
Marine Air Control Squadron 4,	3Jun67	-	20Sep69
Marine Air Control Squadron 7, 1stMAW	14Sep65	-	19Jul67
Marine Air Control Squadron 9, 1stMAW	9Jul65	-	14Sep65
Marine Air Group 11, 1stMAW	7Jul65	-	20Sep69
Marine Air Group 12, 1stMAW	16May65	-	20Sep69
Marine Air Group 13, 1stMAW	30Sep66	-	31Dec68
Marine Air Group 16, 1stMAW	9Mar65	-	20Sep69
Marine Air Group 36, 1stMAW	1Sep65	-	20Sep69
Marine Air Support Squadron 2, 1stMAW	16Sep65	-	20Sep69
Marine Air Support Squadron 3, 1stMAW	3Oct65	-	20Sep69
Marine Airwing Combat Squadron 1	1Sep67	-	20Sep69
Marine Airwing Fighter Squadron 1	1Sep67	-	20Sep69
Marine All Weather Attack Squadron 212	7May65	-	26Nov65
Marine All Weather Attack Squadron 232	15Nov66	-	20Sep69
Marine All Weather Attack Squadron 235	1Feb66	-	16Nov66
	15Feb67	-	20Sep69
Marine All Weather Attack Squadron 242	1Nov66	-	20Sep69
Marine All Weather Attack Squadron 312	16Apr65	-	20Sep69
Marine All Weather Attack Squadron 533	1Apr67	-	20Sep69
Marine Attack Squadron 121	30Nov66	-	20Sep69
Marine Attack Squadron 211	13Oct65	-	13Jul66
	11Oct66	-	20Sep69
Marine Attack Squadron 214	23Jun65	-	16Feb66
	1May66	-	1Apr67
Marine Attack Squadron 223	15Dec65	-	1Dec66
	1Mar67	-	20Sep69
Marine Attack Squadron 224	4Oct65	-	30Apr66
	13Jul67	-	1Nov67
Marine Attack Squadron 225	16Jun65	-	4Oct65
Marine Attack Squadron 311	16Jun65	-	9Dec65
	15Feb67	-	1Mar67
	4Jun67	-	20Sep69
Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron 1	16Apr65	-	20Sep69
11 <sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion	30Nov66	-	20Sep69
11 <sup>th</sup> Dental Company	28Mar66	-	20Sep69
11 <sup>th</sup> Motor Transportation Battalion	29Dec66	-	20Sep69
Fifth Communications Battalion	12Nov65	-	20Sep69
First Platoon, Fifth 8" Howitzer Battery	19Jul67	-	20Sep69



Fifth 155mm Gun Battery	19Jul67	-	20Sep69
Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 115	9Oct65	-	13Jan66
	11Apr66	-	15Feb67
	15May67	-	20Sep69
Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 122	1Sep67	-	20Sep69
Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 314	14Jan66	-	11Apr66
	1Aug66	-	20Sep69
Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 323	2Dec65	-	1Mar66
	5Jul66	-	15May67
	17Aug67	-	20Sep69
Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 334	30Aug68	-	20Sep69
Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 513	15Jun65	-	15Oct65
Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 531	10Apr65	-	10Jun65
Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 542	10Jul65	-	4Dec65
	1Mar66	-	1Aug66
	10Oct66	-	20Sep69
<a href="#">First Amphibious Tractor Battalion</a>	<a href="#">15Jul65</a>	-	<a href="#">20Sep69</a>
Sub-Unit #1, First Anglico	23Dec65	-	20Sep69
First Anti-Tank Battalion	27Mar66	-	20Sep69
First Armor Amphibious Company	8Nov66	-	20Sep69
First Battalion, First Marines	28Aug65	-	20Sep69
First Battalion, Third Marines	8Mar65	-	31Aug65
	18Nov65	-	13Feb67
	4Apr67	-	20Sep69
First Battalion, Fourth Marines	7May65	-	15Dec66
	24Jan67	-	20Sep69
First Battalion, Fifth Marines	27Feb66	-	20Sep69
First Battalion, Seventh Marines	14Aug65	-	20Sep69
First Battalion, Ninth Marines	17Jun65	-	29Sep66
	8Dec66	-	24Jan67
	5Feb67	-	20Sep69
First Battalion, 11 <sup>th</sup> Marines	16Jan66	-	20Sep69
First Battalion, 12 <sup>th</sup> Marines	10Apr65	-	20Sep69
First Battalion, 26 <sup>th</sup> Marines	2Aug66	-	20Sep69
First Battalion, 27 <sup>th</sup> Marines	23Feb68	-	20Sep69
First Bridge Company	23Aug65	-	20Sep69
First Civil Affairs Group	1Aug65	-	20Sep69
First 8" Howitzer Battery	12Jul65	-	20Sep69
First Engineer Battalion	17Jan66	-	20Sep69
First Force Reconnaissance Battalion	25Oct65	-	20Sep69
First Hospital Company	7Mar66	-	20Sep69
First Medical Battalion	20Mar66	-	20Sep69
First Military Police Battalion	28May66	-	20Sep69
First Motor Transportation Battalion	3Apr66	-	20Sep69

**Enclosure 2.**

Enclosure 2 is not provided here.

It can be viewed with the original at the Marine Corps University archives.

**Enclosure 3.**

Enclosure 3 is not provided here.

It can be viewed with the original at the Marine Corps University archives.

## Enclosure 4

Second Lieutenant John Charles (Butch) Yates, USMC, won the Silver Star as a Sergeant (E-5), shortly thereafter he was selected and promoted to Staff Sergeant (E-6). His outstanding performance throughout his career and particularly in Vietnam prompted his accelerated promotion to Second Lieutenant. At the time of his promotion, and winning of the Navy Cross, both being awarded posthumously, he was designated the rank of Second Lieutenant, which his Navy Cross citation reflects.

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UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS  
HEADQUARTERS, FLEET MARINE FORCE, PACIFIC  
FPO, SAN FRANCISCO 96610

In the name of the President of the United States, the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force,  
Pacific takes pleasure in presenting the SILVER STAR MEDAL to

SERGEANT JOHN CHARLES YATES

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

for service as set forth in the following:

### CITATION:

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as a Radio Operator with Company A, First Amphibian Tractor Battalion, Third Marine Division in connection with operations against insurgent communist (Viet Cong) forces in the Republic of Vietnam. On 14 July 1967 during Operation Hickory II, Company A was advancing toward Hill 31 in Quang Tri Province when it came under intense enemy small arms, mortar and recoilless rifle fire from enemy positions in a tree line only thirty meters to its front. Under the initial barrage of enemy fire, Sergeant YATES and the command group were forced to disembark their amphibian tractor and move to a covered position. As enemy fire increased, the company moved back leaving the command tractor in front of company lines. Realizing the seriousness of the situation, Sergeant YATES gave his radio to a companion and, braving heavy machine gun fire, ran twenty meters to the damaged command tractor. With complete disregard for his own safety, he fearlessly climbed to the top of the vehicle and manned the machine gun. Subsequently forced to abandon his position because of the intense enemy fire, Sergeant Yates threw a 60 mm mortar tube to the ground, obtained four boxes of ammunition and disembarked the beleaguered vehicle. Retrieving the mortar, he returned across the exposed area to his former position, held the weapon in his bare hands and commenced to direct accurate suppressive fire against the enemy. When the mortar became hot, he wrapped a cloth around it and continued to fire at the enemy, pinning them down until their positions were destroyed by an air strike. His daring actions in the face of extreme danger inspired all who observed him and were instrumental in saving many Marines from death or serious injury. By his courage, bold initiative and selfless devotion to duty, Sergeant YATES upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service."

FOR THE PRESIDENT

V. H. KRULAK  
LIEUTENANT GENERAL, U. S. MARINE CORPS  
COMMANDING

TEMPORARY CITATION

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS  
HEADQUARTERS, FLEET MARINE FORCE, PACIFIC  
FPO, SAN FRANCISCO 96610

In the name of the President of the United States, the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force,  
Pacific takes pleasure in presenting the NAVY CROSS MEDAL to

SECOND LIEUTENANT JOHN CHARLES YATES

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

for service as set forth in the following:

CITATION:

For extraordinary heroism while serving as the Communications Chief of Company B, First Amphibian Tractor Battalion, Third Marine Division in connection with operations against the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam. On the morning of 17 October 1968, Second Lieutenant Yates, then a Staff Sergeant, was participating in the transportation of Marines by amphibian tractor during operations north of the Cua Viet River in Quang Tri Province.

When informed that one of the vehicles had detonated a hostile antitank mine, immobilizing the tractor and trapping the driver inside, he unhesitatingly ran to the disabled and flaming vehicle. Undaunted by the danger of potential explosions from fire he observed within the tractor, he completely disregarded his own safety as he fearlessly climbed on top of the vehicle.

While he was preparing to enter the tractor through the crew chief's hatch to rescue the driver, the fuel cells within the vehicle exploded and fatally injured Second Lieutenant Yates. By his courage, bold initiative and unwavering devotion to duty, Second Lieutenant Yates inspired all who observed him and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service.

He gallantly gave his life in the service of his country.

FOR THE PRESIDENT

V. H. KRULAK  
LIEUTENANT GENERAL, U. S. MARINE CORPS  
COMMANDING

TEMPORARY CITATION

### Enclosure 5.

Officers and SNCOs of A Company 1967.

Note the "Indo-China Mortar" at the center of the group. Its muzzle and makeshift bipod constructed from a .30 caliber machine gun tripod are easily identified. This is the same weapon SSgt John C. "Butch" Yates, USMC, used while earning his Silver Star. The author took the photo in front of the commanding officer's hut (left), and the First Sergeant/company office hut.



### Enclosure 6.

Another photo of the Indo-China mortar in front of the Alpha Company headquarters with (then) Gunnery Sergeant Donald Austin, USMC, company gunnery sergeant.



## Enclosure 7

Corporal Warren Henry "Hank" Ralya, USMC, winner of the Navy Cross on January 20, 1968. Cpl. Ralya was a member of the 3rd Platoon, Company A. At the time of his last engagement he was a grenadier. When his platoon was ambushed, he single-handedly attacked various enemy positions and moved on to engage and destroy a machine gun position. Having received three wounds in his actions and out of M79 grenades took up hand grenades and crawling forward was fatally wounded and succumbed to his multiple bullet wounds.

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UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS  
HEADQUARTERS, FLEET MARINE FORCE, PACIFIC  
FPO, SAN FRANCISCO 96610

In the name of the President of the United States, the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force,  
Pacific takes pleasure in presenting the NAVY CROSS MEDAL to

CORPORAL WARREN HENRY RALYA

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

for service as set forth in the following:

### CITATION:

For extraordinary heroism while serving as a Crew Chief with Company First Amphibian Tractor Battalion Third, Marine Division (Reinforced), in the Republic of Vietnam on 20 January 1968.

Company A was participating in blocking operations in conjunction with the Junk Fleet and Vietnamese Popular Forces units along the Cua Viet River near the village of My Loc in Quang Tri Province. As Corporal Ralya's platoon was moving into its blocking position, it suddenly came under intense small-arms and automatic weapons fire and antitank grenade attack from a company-sized North Vietnamese Army ambush force, disabling the platoon's tractor and wounding several Marines.

Immediately assessing the situation, Corporal Ralya, heedless of his own safety, unhesitatingly left the relative security of the amphibian tractor and advanced to the open ground on one side of the vehicle and courageously remained exposed to the intense hostile fires while he delivered accurate M-79 grenade fire against the enemy, destroying two automatic weapons positions.

Displaying exceptional combat skill and initiative he fearlessly moved to an open area in front of the tractor where his accurate fire destroyed the North Vietnamese antitank grenade launcher that had damaged his vehicle. With the amphibian tractor affording the only protection in the immediate area, he steadfastly remained in his exposed situation and delivered highly effective covering fire that enabled the wounded to be moved to safety behind the vehicle.

Ignoring a painful injury and refusing to move to the protection of the vehicle, Corporal Ralya continued to fire his weapon until he was wounded a second time and knocked to the ground by the intense North Vietnamese fire. He had risen from the ground and continued to place accurate fire toward the enemy when he was hit for the third time. Refusing medical attention, he handed his weapon to another Marine and, armed with hand grenades, began to crawl toward the enemy positions.

He had traveled only a short distance when he succumbed to his wounds. His determined fighting spirit, strong initiative and devotion to duty at great personal risk contributed substantially to the saving of his fellow Marines from further injury and possible death and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

He gallantly gave his life for his country.

FOR THE PRESIDENT

V. H. KRULAK  
LIEUTENANT GENERAL, U. S. MARINE CORPS  
COMMANDING

## **Enclosure 8.**

The 3rd Platoon, Company A, 1st AmTracs, rising up to move forward against NVA positions in the Ocean View area. This action was for the recovery of the dune complex below the DMZ just inside the Ocean View area. This area had been lost to the NVA by a visiting regular Marine company. Its control was critical to security of the northeastern corner of the Amgrunt's TAOR. The action took place on December 5, 1967.



## **Additional Information**

The Detailed Accounts of the engagement between the Amgrunts and lead elements of the 320th NVA Division mentioned in this monograph can be found on [www.amtrac.org](http://www.amtrac.org). The title of the account is "TET 1968".

Additionally, the detailed account of the raids on My Loc to capture the assassins is covered in "The Village Chief and the Assassins" which is also located on [www.amtrac.org](http://www.amtrac.org).