

14 days at Nhi Ha

Sent north to help the Marines, the Army's 3rd Battalion,
21st Infantry, fought a nightmarish battle in the shadow of the DMZ.

By Keith William Nolan

The assault unfolded quietly at first, but the grunts of the lead company were extremely uneasy as they advanced across the sandy, scrubby fields, the sky clear and hot above them. For one thing, there was scant cover. The terrain was flat and open, interrupted only by dunes and low-lying hedgerows and treelines. In addition, enemy units were suspected of having recently moved into the area. The ground was littered with shell casings and discarded equipment from previous engagements.

The lead company seized the deserted hamlet that was its first objective without incident, then switched point platoons on a share-the-risk principle before pressing on toward the village of Nhi Ha. The platoon leader who had taken the first objective noticed to his surprise that the lieutenant of the platoon replacing his up front was personally on point, his weapon slung around his neck and held ready at his waist. "You're not supposed to be walking point!" the surprised platoon leader called out to his fellow lieutenant. As the pointman continued on, he replied, "These guys are draggin' ass, and I'm going to show 'em how to do it."

Less than two hours later, that lieutenant and the two grunts who had joined him on point were the first to be killed when gunfire erupted among the hedgerows and shell-pocked hooches of Nhi Ha. The ensuing battle would prove one of the most prolonged and costly of the war.

The operation began late on May 1, 1968, when Lt. Col. William P. Snyder was instructed to place his command—the 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry (3/21) "Gimlets" of the Army's Americal Division—under the operational control of the 3rd Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division, on the eastern side of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Snyder was briefed by the regimental commander, Colonel Milton A. Hull, in the 3rd Marine command post (CP). Hull explained that most of the 3rd Marine Division was then battling to contain a three-day-old North Vietnamese Army (NVA) offensive that threatened the Cua Viet and Bo Dieu rivers, on which the Navy ran supplies to the helicopter-poor Marines. Casualties were heavy as the Marines reduced the enemy positions north of the adjoining rivers, and it was feared that the NVA might send fresh units across the DMZ, bypass the units already engaged, cross the Bo Dieu, and attempt to take the 3rd Marine Division CP at the Dong Ha combat base.

Stretched thin, its reserve already committed, the 3rd Marine Division needed help. Hull wanted Colonel Snyder's 3/21 to screen the right flank of the Marines and prevent NVA infiltration of the battle area from that direction. Snyder was to set up his CP in the hamlet of Mai Xa Chanh East, nine kilometers below the DMZ on the bank at the juncture of the Cua Viet River and a narrow tributary nicknamed "Jones' Creek." Jones' Creek ran south in snakelike contours from the DMZ and emptied into the east-west Cua Viet at a point about seven kilometers inland from the Gulf of Tonkin. Mai Xa Chanh East was nominally secured by the rear elements of one of the Marine battalions committed to the defense of the base at Dong Ha, which was 10 kilometers to the southwest.

Jones' Creek was a known infiltration route. With that in mind, Hull wanted Snyder to seize and hold Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan West, which hugged Jones' Creek above Mai Xa Chanh East. "Don't be surprised if the NVA are back in there," Hull warned Snyder, explaining that the Marines had recently abandoned positions in the two hamlets to meet the threat to the west. "Expect them to be in there."



It was almost midnight when Snyder rejoined his battalion, which had helicoptered into Mai Xa Chanh East at dusk. Illumination rounds were going up over various Marine firefights in the area as Snyder, a soft-spoken West Pointer, pointed across the lit-up paddies and explained the operation to his company commanders. Following preparatory fires from Marine artillery, the 3/21 (less Company D, which would remain in reserve) was to attack on two axes in the morning, using Jones' Creek as a guide and dividing line. Company B was to advance up the west side of the tributary to a graveyard opposite Lam Xuan East, which was about two kilometers north of Mai Xa Chanh East, and then provide fire support for Company C's attack. Preparatory fire would then be shifted onto Nhi Ha, another two kilometers upstream, which Company C would seize in turn—with Company A following close behind. Company B would simultaneously secure Lam Xuan West. Jones' Creek hooked almost due west in this area, so that Nhi Ha sat on its north bank, directly across from Lam Xuan West on its south bank. There was a footbridge connecting the two hamlets, but the villagers who had built it had previously been evacuated. All civilians had left the area.

The attack kicked off as planned on the morning of May 2 and progressed smoothly until 1 p.m., by which time Company C had pushed halfway through Nhi Ha. The long, narrow hamlet, defined by an outer wall of thick vegetation, was relatively open in its interior and was dotted with huts that were mostly demolished.

Nhi Ha was cut in half by two strips of hedgerows with a large field between them. Approaching this field from the east, the Company C grunts could not see the NVA dug in and waiting behind the hedgerow on the western side. It was later determined that elements of the 4th Battalion, 270th Independent NVA Regiment, had slipped down Jones' Creek into Nhi Ha.

The initial shockwave of enemy fire devastated Company C. On the right flank, 1st Lt. Edward F. Guthrie, the platoon leader who had walked point to Nhi Ha, was shot in the head and killed before he knew what was happening. Guthrie's platoon sergeant was mortally wounded, and the survivors—leaderless, and with eight platoon members dead or dying—huddled behind cover. Most did not rise up to return fire. Here and there, singly and in pairs, some gutsy grunts did pop up from behind the rubble of cement walls to provide cover fire for the even fewer grunts who were pulling back the wounded and the dead.

The situation was almost as bad for the platoon on the left flank, which had three men killed and several more wounded. The platoon leader, a sergeant first class, was pinned down and unable or unwilling to participate in the firefight. Spread across the open ground in scattered bunches wherever they could find cover, most of the grunts kept their heads down.

The company executive officer, then serving as the acting commander of Company C, also folded up. He spent the firefight sitting behind the village well in shock. This lieutenant had been highly decorated for other actions, but this was one firefight too many for him. He simply mumbled into his radio that they needed help.

The enemy had complete fire superiority. About the only men in the left-flank platoon seriously engaging the NVA at that point were Staff Sgt. James M. Goad, the platoon sergeant, and Sergeant Roger W. Starr, a machine-gun squad leader who had rushed forward with an M-60 to join Goad at the mound from which he was firing. They took turns coming up to their knees to fire. Goad had his M-16 on automatic, and Starr directed his quick, jack-in-the-box M-60 bursts at an NVA machine gun he could hear firing in the hedgerow ahead of them. Trying to keep low, he blasted the top of his own mound with each burst before getting the weapon all the way up. Enemy fire splattered the mound, too, and at one point Starr was hit across his upper left arm by something hot and sharp that tore and bloodied his sleeve. He didn't know if the graze was from a bullet or a shard from a bullet-shattered rock.

The NVA in Nhi Ha also fired on Company B, which had reached Lam Xuan West. One GI was killed and several seriously wounded as the company hunkered behind a berm at the edge of Jones' Creek, placing suppressive fire across the tributary in an effort to assist Company C.

Enemy artillery fire began slamming into Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan West from the DMZ as well, inflicting further casualties. Meanwhile, Company C was getting its act together. The company's forward observer, 2nd Lt. John R. Jaquez, did an excellent job of calling in artillery, while 1st Lt. Roger D. Hieb, whose platoon had secured the rear of the village and repelled a flanking attack from the right, ran from position to position, organizing efforts to get the casualties back from up front. Except for three dead soldiers who lay in the worst of the cross-fire, all casualties were recovered, often at great risk.

It was time to get out. Colonel Snyder left Company B in Lam Xuan West, but with the assistance and fire support of Companies A and D, the battered remnants of Company C withdrew behind a wall of artillery fire. The three companies established a joint position in a small, deserted hamlet 600 meters east of Nhi Ha.

Snyder pounded Nhi Ha all night with artillery, and before the attack resumed on May 3, he requested airstrikes to further soften up the target. The NVA clung to their entrenchments, however. When Companies A and D moved in from the east, the firefight began anew, with the enemy firing automatic weapons, light machine guns, and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) from the hedgerow on the west side of the field in the middle of the village. NVA mortar crews added to the cacophony.

In response, the lead platoons hunkered down in an irrigation ditch running behind the hedgerow on their side of the field and started pouring fire back across the clearing. Whenever smoke or dust rose from one of the otherwise invisible enemy positions, the target was pounded by M-60s and M-79 grenade launchers. The artillery fire was resumed, and in between salvos, jets placed high-drag bombs and napalm canisters all along the enemy entrenchments. Smoking bomb fragments thudded down on both sides of the battlefield.

It was not enough. The enemy continued to hang on, and after six hours of stalemate, Snyder ordered Companies A and D, which had suffered two dead and 22 wounded, to break contact and return to the joint perimeter east of Nhi Ha.

During the airstrikes that were called in to cover the withdrawal, the NVA used their AK-47s in mass, producing a screen of fire that the jets had to fly through. Coming in low despite the groundfire, a single-seat Marine Vought A-7 Corsair took numerous hits and was unable to pull up. The aircraft landed hard, bounced once and then turned into a ball of fire that consumed the pilot as the plane pitched nose-first into the ground. It was a horrifying, demoralizing sight to the grunts, who were

incredulous at the bravery of those enemy foot soldiers who had blasted a jet from the sky.

Snyder was joined at his CP at this time by his best company commander—super aggressive Captain Dennis A. Leach of Company C. Leach, a West Point graduate, had been in the battalion rear when the battle began, preparing for an R&R leave, which he canceled when he heard about the initial NVA ambush. Snyder told Leach to organize the three companies in the joint perimeter into a task force under his control and to take Nhi Ha.

Captain Leach went into the assault on May 4 with Company C on the right flank and Company D on the left. Both companies tried to outflank the contested clearing but were stopped cold by unrelenting enemy fire. Two soldiers were killed, 13 wounded, and a resupply Huey was shot down. Leach brought in massive amounts of artillery and air support. “With all that stuff rolling in, your ears hurt,” remembered Pfc Gregory B. Harp of Company C, who, like every other grunt, had grabbed some cover from which he pumped fire across that clearing, going through approximately 75 20-round M-16 magazines. “The receiver group on my rifle got so hot I could hardly hold the damn thing,” recalled Harp. “The whole palm of my hand was blistered. The barrel was pouring off white smoke, and I used three bottles of gun oil to keep the bolt from freezing up.”

Harp was in position with a Private Pope, whose M-60 machine gun consumed ammo with equal vigor. Harp ran back several times during the firefight to grab M-16 bandoleers for himself and extra machine-gun ammo belts for Pope. “Pope’s gun literally glowed red,” Harp said. The air was hot and dusty, acrid with gunpowder. The heat was sweltering. “All that kept me going was on one of my trips to the CP for ammo I fell in a shell hole with a little green water,” he continued. “I stuck my canteen down in the sandy mud and got about one third of a canteen of something that was mostly water. Put six iodine tablets in it, shook it up, and tried to chug-a-lug it as fast as I could in the hopes that I wouldn’t taste it too much.”

The stalemate was finally broken on May 5, when the Air Force hit Nhi Ha with 2,000-pound fuse-delay bombs that plunged beneath the surface of the ground before exploding with great clouds of smoke and earth, sending out shock waves like an earthquake. When Leach’s task force swept in hard on the heels of the last explosion, they found numerous dead enemy soldiers in the debris, including some who were propped up in their caved-in trenches with their heads missing. There were no live NVA troops left in the village of Nhi Ha.

Captain Leach dug into the western side of Nhi Ha with Companies A and C, while Company D moved back to Lam Xuan East to serve as the battalion reserve. The NVA attacked Leach’s perimeter before dawn on May 6. “Hey, we can finally see the SOB’s,” exulted Sergeant Starr as he fired his M-16, dropping several enemy soldiers who were fully exposed in the flare-lit paddies as they tried to dart forward. Starr ended up with a red-hot fragment in his right eye; he was one of only three friendly soldiers wounded during that attack.

The NVA left 34 bodies around the perimeter. The last enemy soldiers to be killed were trapped in bomb craters and behind burial mounds when the sun came up. They refused to surrender. “It was a damn turkey shoot,” recalled Leach, who moved one platoon outside his lines to keep the enemy pinned while the grunts on the perimeter continued to pick them off. “They fought to the last man. That took a lot of guts.”

During the early afternoon, Snyder ordered Company A to conduct a reconnaissance in force to Xom Phuong, a small hamlet one kilometer northwest of Nhi Ha that hugged the same east bank of Jones’ Creek. The NVA attack had probably originated in Xom Phuong, and the Company A grunts were

exceptionally nervous as they advanced across open fields toward the objective with two platoons in the assault and one following in reserve.

First contact with the enemy was made when a lone enemy soldier was spotted racing away from the assault line and toward the cemetery on the southern fringe of Xom Phuong. The right-flank platoon, under 2nd Lt. William B. Kimball, eliminated the enemy soldier, and both platoons advanced rapidly toward the cover of the cemetery, convinced the enemy was about to open fire from Xom Phuong.

The running NVA soldier had been a lure, however. The enemy was in the cemetery, and a machine gun suddenly opened fire on Kimball's platoon from a bunker dug into one of the burial mounds. The grunts returned fire from behind a paddy dike, placing rounds from two light anti-tank weapons directly into the firing port of the bunker. The NVA ceased fire, and a wounded enemy soldier climbed from the smoking bunker and staggered back toward the treeline that shielded Xom Phuong.

With Lieutenant Kimball's platoon continuing to fire on the position in case there were more NVA inside, Company A's commander ordered the left-flank platoon to envelop the bunker from that side. Leading the way, platoon leader 2nd Lt. Terry D. Smith sprinted toward the burial mounds, only to take a massive bullet wound in his right thigh, which spun him around and knocked him down. Crawling on into the cemetery, Smith was still trying to determine the extent of his injuries when an NVA gun crew, undetected until then, opened fire across his platoon's front from the mound to his left. The firing hole was concealed by a big, weather-beaten rice pan that lay halfway up the forward slope of the mound.

From the right-flank platoon, one grunt rushed the bunker with a grenade in his hand. The gung-ho trooper, who was apparently confused about where the firing hole was, jumped right in front of the rice pan and was immediately blown backward, mortally wounded by a burst across his stomach. Lieutenant Smith, enraged, pulled a grenade of his own from his web gear, crawled to the side of the burial mound, and threw it through the firing port. He quickly rolled away. There was a muffled explosion. Smith followed up with a second grenade, and with the bunker silenced, he urgently motioned his lead squad leader to move up to his position so that the entire squad could begin the flanking maneuver to the right.

Smith thought the squad would crawl up to him. In the confusion, however, the squad launched an on-line assault. Smith watched in horrified shock as the NVA opened fire from other camouflaged positions among the burial mounds, mowing down the entire squad. Most were wounded, but the squad leader and three grunts were killed or mortally wounded in the sudden explosion of fire. With the assault platoons fully engaged with the enemy to their front, a second NVA unit suddenly emerged from the treeline that ran down the right flank of the battlefield. The enemy soldiers, wearing web gear and green fatigues, some of them with steel helmets, advanced at a trot in a well-spaced skirmish line.

"Are those ARVN?" a grunt shouted, referring to their allies, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

"Those are damn NVA!" someone else bellowed as the soldiers on the right started opening fire with AK-47s.

The result was pandemonium. The Company A commander ordered the right-flank platoon to pull back toward his CP, and panicked grunts took off in that direction, taking casualties as they ran. In the fury of the moment, Sergeant James L. Stone, a squad leader who had lost contact with his squad, squared his M-16 sights on the chest of an NVA who was standing less than 10 meters in front of his

paddy dike, checking out a dead GI. Stone dropped the enemy soldier with one shot, but as soon as he fired, a second NVA popped up. Stone eliminated him too, along with a third enemy soldier who also stood up, weapon at the ready, looking for the source of the fire. Two more NVA spotted Stone and charged, firing as they ran. Dirt sprayed across his face from rounds striking his dike. With no choice but to return fire, Stone did just that, hitting one of the two enemy soldiers and convincing the other to take cover. Stone then turned around and took off himself.

Lieutenant Kimball and his radioman were killed as they tried to call down artillery fire on the enemy assault. The NVA swarming through the right-flank platoon came on toward Smith's platoon on the left, shouting and popping up to fire AK-47 bursts to cover one another as they advanced from crater to crater.

Lieutenant Smith had already been wounded again by mortar fire and was out of action. The leaderless left-flank platoon came unglued. Clambering over a raised footpath that offered some cover, Sergeant Bernard J. Bulte swung his M-16 back the way he had come—and was horrified to see “Doc” Richards, the medic of the right-flank platoon, lying out in the open with a mangled leg. Richards was shrieking for help, and Bulte, dropping all his gear except his M-16 and an ammo bandoleer, weaved his way toward him in a low crouch. Bulte tried to carry Richards back by his pistol belt, but was too exhausted to go far. He dropped the medic, telling him that he was going to run back and round up some help.

Bulte wasn't sure if he could really make it back again, and Richards, seeing the doubt in his eyes, pleaded with Bulte not to leave him. Bulte, feeling guilty, promised that he would come back, and when he got back to the raised footpath he argued with the grunts there, “C'mon, we can get this guy out of there!” Specialist 4 W.R. May and Pfc J.W. Bell agreed to give it a try, and when there was a lull in the NVA fire, they made their move. On the way back, Bell brought up the rear, laying down covering fire, while Bulte and May dragged Richards by his arms and legs, his nearly severed leg bouncing on the ground as they moved as fast as they could. Richards screamed in agony, but he survived.

Instead of moving forward with his reserve platoon, Company A's commander, who was later relieved for incompetence, ordered a withdrawal to Nhi Ha. “Men were left on the battlefield wounded and crying,” one anguished GI wrote home. Nineteen wounded men were brought out during the ragged retreat, but Company A's 12 dead included some grunts who, suffering from immobilizing wounds, died during the night, alone and abandoned in the paddies of Xom Phuong.

Specialist 4 Bill A. Baird, who had fired his M-16 until it jammed, despite crippling leg and back wounds, was captured as the NVA policed the battlefield. The startled NVA soldier who nearly tripped over Baird in the dark swung up his AK-47 and tried to shoot him in the head. Luckily, the round only clipped Baird's ear, and when the NVA realized that the wounded soldier posed no threat, they secured a bandage around his head, rolled him into a poncho, and turned him over to another group of enemy soldiers, who started toward the DMZ. Baird would not see his home again for five years.

There was a final drama to be played out as the NVA offensive finally ran out of steam all along the Army -Marine front around the Dong Ha combat base. Following intermittent shelling of Captain Leach's task force (Leach was wounded in the head, but refused to be medevaced), the 76th Regiment, 304th NVA Division, marched south from the DMZ during the night of May 9-10 to overrun Nhi Ha. The NVA, however, exposed by the illumination rounds bursting overhead, were punished

mercilessly with massed artillery fire as they tried to slip down the brushy banks of Jones' Creek and assume attack positions around Nhi Ha.

Gunships added to the slaughter, and wounded and dying enemy soldiers could be heard screaming through the night. The attack fell behind schedule, and it was almost daylight before the NVA shelled Nhi Ha and then launched their ground attack. When the enemy soldiers began darting in, the well-entrenched grunts of Companies A and C greeted them with small-arms and machine-gun fire, as well as with Claymore mines and grenade-launcher fire. The enemy soldiers never had a chance, and they died in heaps, with tracers snapping all around them and artillery and mortar fire showering them with dirt and debris.

Firing RPGs, the NVA managed to kill one Company A soldier who was pulling back from a listening post, and 30 grunts were wounded inside the perimeter at Nhi Ha. Two Marine tanks attached to Company C were also knocked out by RPGs.

The enemy did not retreat at sunrise but continued to fire ineffectually on the bunker line from scattered positions behind nearby burial mounds. Leach organized a Marine airstrike on the die-hards, and only then did they begin straggling away. The 3/21 and supporting arms were credited with 579 NVA kills during the entire battle, most of them from the misguided night attack. Dead enemy soldiers ringed the perimeter. The smell became horrendous as the mangled bodies, each of them carpeted with flies, began to decompose in the days following the attack.

Nhi Ha continued to be probed and shelled during the remainder of the operation, adding a few extra casualty numbers to the 3/21's total of 29 killed, 130 wounded and one captured near the DMZ. "And to think that I used to pity the Marines," one grunt wrote home.

On May 15, 1968, Leach's task force was relieved by the Marines. As Company A marched rearward, a trash fire was burning inside a crater on the bunker line. Captured enemy munitions had been piled nearby, and somehow a satchel charge ended up in the blaze. The explosion set off the rest of the NVA ammunition in a huge fireball. Thinking they were being shelled again, Sergeant Stone, heading back across the paddy in his file, noted that he "turned around and looked back, and here's all this smoke and stuff going up. That was my last look at Nhi Ha. We kept right on going."

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