

Operation Fortress Sentry

From the book "War Without Heroes"

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Cua Viet

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MACV Communique

Operation FORTRESS SENTRY commenced on 17 September with an early morning amphibious-heliborne assault in northern Quang Tri Province. The search-and-destroy operation is being conducted by a 3rd Marines Battalion Landing Team from the U.S. Navy's 7th Fleet Special Landing Force. The area is along the coastal plain just below the DMZ, 10 km (6 miles) northeast of Dong Ha. There have been no significant enemy contacts reported in the operation.

Five lines of copy in a twelve-page press handout-and surely ignored by nearly all the foreign correspondents assigned to Viet-Nam - the communique was just a droplet in the flood of words surging from the war. As news, Fortress Sentry produce nothing meriting a headline anywhere. Even those thousand odd Marines committed to the operation would have agreed. Was it their eleventh-or ninth-such mission since the Special Landing Force began striking from the Gulf of Tonkin, the previous May? Few remembered or kept score, or knew its code name. September 17-D-Day for Fortress Sentry-would probably be remembered by the Marines as being different from other landings only because it ran afoul of the first great autumnal monsoon storm of the year-in no press release.

Twenty-knot winds lifted a midnight sea full against the Marines' amphibious assault ship, the USS Tripoli, smashing landing craft and landing timetable alike. Escort tanks and amphibious tractors had been scheduled to race five miles north, under predawn protective darkness, from the estuary of the Cua Viet River to the Demilitarized Zone-straight toward the snouts of enemy artillery hidden in caves just across the frontier. It was noon before the armored task force finally spun around to a clanking halt on the edge of that unmarked, cloudburst-veiled, international no-man's-land, now known everywhere as the DMZ. But the Marines were lucky: enemy artillery fire control was also momentarily thrown off balance by the storm, and out of radio contact with their forward observers stationed among the dunes south of the DMZ. It was to be a reprieve of short duration.

Fortress Sentry was scheduled with the hope of duplicating the success of another sweep ten days earlier through the same dunes, when eighty-seven Soviet-made 122-millimeter rockets were captured-cradled comfortably in their simple sand-scooped launching ramps and aimed at the Marines' forward positions in Cua Viet and Dong Ha, a few miles to the south. No official communique had trumpeted the Marines' rocket coup. And even now, not a word suggested that there might be any mission other than search and destroy assigned to Fortress Sentry.

The primary objective of the operation was to overrun and then secure a sandpatch of high ground abutting the DMZ itself - the northernmost position to be staked out on the Tonkin Gulf.

The ultrasecret mission of the Fortress Sentry Marines' strike was to establish what was intended to be the easternmost fire outpost anchoring the optimistically conceived but ill-fated electronic "McNamara Line," soon abandoned, rusting, deep in the DMZ rain forest.

Except for flash storms which turned a gray day into near-night and the operations officers' ornately colored maps into scraps of meaningless paper, and the scrub-foliaged dunes into deadly tractor-miring swamps, the opening twenty-four hours of Fortress Sentry rumbled by with very little to distinguish them from many other hours of many other days, of many months already spent by the same Marines in that far-from-home land to which they had been shipped for combat duty. It was, as described by the major commanding the amtrac assault force, "just an ordinary day. "



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-such mission since they began
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September 17-D-Day-would probably
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Most of the men just
bent their heads against
the wind and rain, and
waited.

Fortress Sentry's brass was reluctant to cancel the operation even after the monsoon hit. They were gambling on a few knots of wind dropping off when the assault craft were launched-and won. Though late, the last Marine was safely on Red Beach before noon.

By nightfall, the seas were eight feet high and tossing landing craft sideways on the river bank-which was Red Beach-and -had turned the Cua Viet estuary into a seething nightmare. But by then the operation could be supported by everything brought ashore with the Marines themselves. Helicopters appeared through the downpour, barely skimming the dunes, keeping the amtracs under observation as much as possible while supplying eyes for naval gunfire support, if needed-which would be soon.

Later, a Saigon press communique described the Marines as having "stormed ashore" at Cua Viet to get on Red Beach. Actually, it was a most casual affair, with the troopers probing for shallow bottom while risking as little salt-water damage as possible to their gear.

A couple of Vietnamese net fishermen stoically watched the show standing in tidal pools along the north bank of the Cua Viet River, five miles south of the DMZ and Ben Hai River (dividing South from North Viet-Nam), where enemy gunners in camouflaged caves would have had a turkey shoot had the storm lifted. Instead, twenty inches of rain flooded the beachhead area within twenty-four hours.



Amtracs of Foxtrot Company, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines, roared north from their Cua Viet River beachhead with one tread in the Tonkin Gulf surf and the other on the sand, hoping to avoid enemy mines. And as they disappeared, then reappeared, in the monsoon mists, the Marine-encrusted caravan seemed reminiscent of those earlier western stagecoaches and the way they must have looked when headed out, at full gallop, through Indian country.



Captain Reginald G. Ponsford III, commanding officer of Foxtrot Company, 2/3 Marines, led the point assault force to the DMZ, then veered inland and again to the beach, finally returning to Cua Viet—a typical search-and-destroy mission for his amtracmen. Broken-nosed, icy-eyed, shaven head and a heavyweight wrestler’s build—with fading tattoos—Captain Ponsford of El Paso, Texas, personified all that one might have hoped to find in a Marine officer to accompany when participating in such a mission.



Earlier, aboard the USS Tripoli the night before the landing, when told of the operation’s picture possibilities, he had stood, shoulders sloping down, hands motionless at his sides, feet braced slightly apart and seemingly riveted into the ship’s deck to hold him steady against the roll. He just nodded—listening without the slightest change of expression. It was as though he had answered: “Well, okay. ..that’s another profession. I have mine. “ But he offered the hitchhiking camera a ride atop his amtrac during the bone-wracking sprint to the DMZ.

Even though Captain Ponsford had hit the same area only ten days earlier—when it was ideal amtrac country—the storm had now changed everything, even grounding the observation helicopters. A second amtrac swung alongside Ponsford’s, while he and its commander tried to decide just where the hell they were in that godforsaken bit of sodden wilderness—with General Giap’s gunners waiting to welcome them up the beach.



Churning inland across the dunes, Captain Ponsford scouted a path—often afoot—as he moved his amtracs forward. By this time the land was disappearing under rapidly rising water which turned every ravine between the dunes into a river, and the flatlands into a vast marsh. Amtracs began getting stuck. There was no swinging around them without facing the immediate danger of striking mines, known to be sown throughout the area. Except for the monsoon-bred lakes appearing suddenly from nowhere, the DMZ could have been mistaken for a North African desert. And the dunes and sparse foliage and hearily endless sweep of tank-torn sand would have offered Montgomery and Rommel familiar challenges, as each fought to ensnare the other.

The land, here, was a bleak quagmire, seemingly waiting to suck the treads right off amphibious tractors-those not already bogged down and dead in flash-flood potholes. For many of the Marines-riflemen, machine gunners and all of the others riding on top of the amtracs with nothing to do but crouch low upon the steel shell and wait for the armored caravan to roll again-for those men each delay was cruel torture. They knew that every nearby sand dune, or wisp of brush, or rain-veiled hillock might easily be the place chosen by a Vietcong forward observer to lie motionless for hours beside his radio, waiting to whisper cryptic target coordinates back to those other patient rocket and artillerymen, north of the DMZ.



One delay led to another. There was no sign of close air support moving in to provide, cover, or to keep the enemy gunners back inside their caves along the Ben Hai River, just beyond the DMZ. Captain Ponsford became ever more wary and apprehensive. He stood bareheaded atop his amtrac and warned of the danger of imminent artillery attack-that each man must be prepared to take instant protective measures, especially abandoning the amtracs, which were primary targets. There would be little time !



Even at that moment the shells were coming in.....



The first salvo fell around the lead tank-a second salvo then geysered alongside the amtracs. And it began pouring again as the Marines dived for cover in the surrounding dunes. Crewmen of the mired amtrac stayed to free it, to open the way for all of the others to escape to the beach.

Enemy machine gunners farther back along the column brought those men under harassing fire. Someone, in almost innocent outrage, yelled : “Those bastards have an FO in this place! ” - as his heels disappeared over a nearby dune... “FO”, for “forward observer”, and he was good.

The rain added a mood of blurred surrealism to the artillery attack, exaggerating an acute feeling of how slowly everyone moved - even though racing - while dodging around the casual figure of Captain Ponsford, who stood facing the flow of his running Marines, guiding them to shelter.

The stuck amtrac was finally freed. Its helmetless wildman marvelous gunner bellowed above explosions and monsoon wind at the other driver to cut his engine, remove towline-roll !



Captain Ponsford, even with his amtracs moving again, desperately tried calling for naval shelling of the enemy gunners, but his radio was half-dead in the rain. He was sure the momentary lull in the attack was exactly that : the hidden PO was sending new coordinates to his fire control officer, or he was himself also fighting a broken-down radio. Ponsford's radioman watched his captain with almost stricken eyes, unmoving, but adoring, as though, for that moment, Captain Reginald Ponsford III was very nearly his god, in control of all their destinies.

No sooner had the amtrac column begun advancing cautiously, than artillery air-bursts exploded overhead. Captain Ponsford had guessed enemy tactics. And, again on the radio, he tried to direct counterbattery fire, making the best of his rather awkward role of being the center of the enemy target. His Marines clawed futilely at the steel roof of their amtrac digging imaginary foxholes? then lay still, flattened and waiting-everything else was too late. Direct hits, or detonating land mines, could have incinerated them had they sought protection inside. Air-bursts caught amtracs farther back in the column, spraying shrapnel down upon the men. There were casualties. And, as during the earlier attack, concealed machine gunners took the pinned-down Marines under fire, sending everyone diving for battle positions behind ancient Vietnamese tombstones and graveyard walls, scattered among the surrounding dunes. After a naked fifteen minutes of air-bursts, rockets and light machine-gun fire, two helicopters finally reached the column, darting under the storm clouds. Muffled but massive explosions rumbled down from the north-naval gunfire. The Marines remounted their amtracs to move away from that desolate place.



Later, it was discovered that the monsoon storm had even left its marks upon the negatives taken that day. Fearsome streaks ripped through every picture made when the amtracs were being showered by air-bursts: apparently the column was at the epicenter of the tempest. Static electricity crackled everywhere, especially inside the camera.



A shuddering blast carried over the engines-another amtrac farther down the line had struck a mine: the whole column was again immobilized until the lead tractor could work its way around the flaming wreck, while demolition experts cleared the path, wary of stepping upon other mines.

The amtrac driver was lucky: first-degree burns and one broken leg. Still, he was the first man off and vaulting into the sand dunes after the explosion. Four other amtracs struck mines during that long, twenty-four-hour, violence-filled day. More than forty Marines were wounded in the blasts and, in some cases, fires when fuel tanks exploded. Generally, it was the drivers who were worst injured, the other men being semiprotected by sandbags on the tractor decks- and the fact that everyone but the driver and copilot rode on the roof.

The sheer desolation of the dunelands in that coastal area south of the DMZ was appalling: only gray fiddler crabs scurried across the sand, while an occasional, thin, low-flying wedge of ducks veered sharply away from the Marines atop their lurching vehicles. A single pheasant boomed aloft, then beat its way north, toward the DMZ. One bent-over farm couple was sighted working a pathetic, stamp-sized rice paddy in the far distance. Few Marines troubled even to look at them. It was a place filled with Nature's sad song of hopeless earth and brackish water, where man was a stranger-alone.



The Marines had eyes only for food - they had seen other amtracs burning many times before.

An old hand from the Korean War , Major Wendell Beard, shepherded the entire task force. He lived comfortably atop his monstrous amtrac, where he also held court much like an Arab sheikh- regally ignoring the monsoon cloudbursts raging across his local desert domain. The Major had left the Marines for one season to play professional football as “Moose” Beard of the Washington Redskins, but then he returned home to the drab-green uniform after “some really big guys worked on me-taking out two ribs.” Major Beard stood six feet four and weighed about two hundred and thirty pounds-totally unflappable, confident of his Marines, a natural commander .

When Colonel Ronald Mason, operations officer of the landing force from the Tripoli, helicoptered in to check on the column, he arrived without helmet or battle gear-evidence of another world only minutes away. Major Beard welcomed him with casual surprise, especially after learning of headquarters' concern that enemy fire might make him abandon his mission. Moose Beard grunted, with a contemptuous thumb poked back over one shoulder toward the nearby DMZ. .. followed by a massive finger rammed at his beloved amtrac: “Those clowns ? Send hot chow. We're staying here! “



“Who”'s worried. ..



...it's just an ordinary day.”

After his visitor had flown away, and after his Marines had dug tight necklaces of already swamped foxholes around their amtracs to protect them through the night-while the monsoon pummeled his men and their weapons and every other living thing and all of the ghastly land around them with cloudburst that followed cloudburst - Major Wendell Beard sat atop his amtrac with his drenched cigarette, fully aware of the price paid for that day-that ordinary day-by his men now lying motionless in hospital beds back aboard the Tripoli.

One young Marine rifleman, hit by an artillery air-burst, was placed on the ship's operating table within thirty minutes after being wounded. Had the delay been longer, he would not have survived. His chances of recovery were only fifty-fifty at the end of the second day. Shrapnel had entered his lower back, left of the spine, but there was no apparent paralysis. Two lumbar vertebrae were destroyed. His left kidney was fragmented, removed. His spleen was fragmented, removed; as were sections of both his large and small intestines. Shrapnel had punctured his chest diaphragm, but it was repaired. Hospital orderlies would be standing watch twenty-four hours a day over the Marine until he recovered. ..or until he died.



Lance Corporal Doyle Bell; 19; one year in the Marines; veteran of fourteen attack missions in six months with his battalion; radioman for Captain Reginald Ponsford, Foxtrot Company commander who spearheaded the push from Cua Viet to the DMZ for Fortress Sentry:

They had boarded a landing craft at 0300 and headed for Red Beach on a raging, storm-blackened sea with heavy rain cutting visibility almost to zero. Halfway to shore-somewhere around a thousand yards out among the whitecaps-a giant wave smashed against their bow and Corporal Bell fell overboard, weighted with rifle, ammo and his heavy radio pack. Captain Ponsford ripped off his own gear and dived from the stern. Reversing his engines, the pilot had tried to keep the Captain in sight, but he was instantly lost.

Captain Ponsford swam back and down, somehow found Bell, locked a hand on the top of his head and dragged him to the surface, where, by chance, both were then picked up in the spotlights of the landing craft. Once ashore, Bell was rushed to the Tripoli, nearly dead. Captain Ponsford went on to lead his original mission, with only chapped and salt-blistered hands revealing his predawn swim.

Recovering consciousness, before learning who saved him, Corporal Bell whispered one request of the doctor : "Sir, may I ask a question. .. did they find my radio?"