

The First Operation Hickory

(Operation Hickory-Belt Tight-Beau Charger-Lam Son 54)

The 1st Amtrac Bn had barely set up their tents at Cua Viet when the first-ever major offensive operation by Marines into the southern half of the DMZ was launched on May 18, 1967. The 2nd and 3rd Platoons of Co. B, along with elements of Co. A, provided direct support to the amphibious assault force in the Beau Charger (BLT 1/3) portion of this operation. The 4th Platoon of Company B was busy getting constantly bombarded at Con Thien, then later at Gio Linh, during the month of May.

After sustained intensive enemy attacks on Khe Sanh in late April/early May and, then, on Con Thien during the first two weeks of May (both of which were successfully rebuffed) and a doubling of the previous month's rate of enemy artillery, rocket and mortar fire into the northern Quang Tri province, authority was granted on May 8th for friendly forces to enter the southern half of the DMZ (below the Ben Hai River). To exploit this new authority and with intelligence indicating a large scale enemy attack in northern Quang Tri province planned for either May 19th (HoChi Minh's birthday) or prior to the scheduled cease fire for Buddha's birthday (May 23rd), III MAF developed an operation plan for a coordinated effort to destroy enemy units, positions and supplies. The operation plan also called for the relocation of 10,000 non-combatants living in the buffer zone, turning most of the area north of Cua Viet into a free-fire zone.

The first Operation Hickory was a combined 3rd MarDiv infantry, 1st ARVN Div, and Special Landing Forces A and B (offshore with the 7th Fleet) operation during the 2nd half of May in 1967.



Officially referred to by 4 separate names:

Lam Son 54 — 1st ARVN Div (5 Bns);

Hickory—3rd MarDiv Infantry (6 Bns: 1/4, 3/4, 2/26, 1/9, 2/9, 3/9);

Beau Charger — SLF-A (BLT 1/3);

Belt Tight — SLF-B (BLT 2/3),



Operation Hickory (in the broader sense) covered the entire eastern half of the DMZ - from west of Con Thien to the South China Sea - and extended southward to Route 9 midway between Cam Lo and Camp Carroll on the west and the 1st Amtrac Bn CP at the mouth of the Cua Viet River on the eastern coast.

The concept of the operation (to be employed again to a large extent in Hickory II) was to advance very quickly to the Ben Hai River, then wheel and attack southward. Hickory was the western portion of the operation (with Belt Tight handling the northeast quadrant of this area), Lam Son 54 handled the area in the middle, east of Hickory and west of Beau Charger, the latter of which covered the coastal plains portion (that 1st Amtracs would handle in Hickory II).

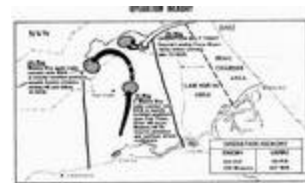
At 0500 on May 18th, five ARVN battalions launched Lam Son 54 by racing up Route 1 into the DMZ to the Ben Hai. Two battalions wheeled east and 3 airborne battalions wheeled west and they all swept southward. (The ARVN acquitted themselves well, accounting for 342 NVA KIA at a cost of 21 ARVN KIA and 116 WIA.)



Beau Charger kicked off 3 hours after the start of Lam Son 54, with a combined amphibious assault by surface craft and helicopters into the coastal section of the DMZ along the southern banks of the Ben Hai. They attacked westward along the southern half of the DMZ and then drove southward to the Cua Viet River adjacent to the 1st ARVNs who operated on their western flank. Most enemy contact in the Beau Charger area occurred within the DMZ along the southern banks of the Ben Hai, accounting for 61 out of a total of 83 NVA KIA for the Beau Charger portion of the operation. The drive south had little contact.



The Hickory portion of the combined operation began at 1100 on May 18th, with 2/9 and 2/26 attempting to advance northward from positions near Con Thien. They both quickly ran into well-fortified enemy positions estimated at 2 battalions in strength. At 1130 on the 18th 3/4 was lifted by chopper from Dong Ha into the DMZ near the Ben Hai northwest of Con Thien. (3 days before, 3/4 was based in Okinawa, having just been being airlifted to Dong Ha on the 15th and 16th of May.) As 2/9 and 2/26 fought the entrenched enemy for the next two days, 3/4 moved southeast towards the rear of the 2 enemy battalions. However, the NVA broke contact and fled northeast before 3/4 was able to reach its blocking position. After making contact with 2/26, the two battalions conducted operations in the DMZ and came across a series of well-fortified bunkers occupied by a reinforced NVA company. This engagement accounted for 41 NVA KIA before the enemy broke contact. The drive south resulted in sporadic contact over the next several days.



SLF-B (2/3) (Belt Tight) was choppered into the DMZ to the northeast of 3/4's position on May 20, with heavy enemy contact resulting in 73 NVA KIA during the first 48 hours.

Although enemy contact was less than expected in the drive south by all units other than the 1st ARVN Div., the combined USMC operations of the first Hickory resulted in 445 NVA KIA confirmed and 528 probable KIAs. The ARVN units added another 342 NVA KIA to these totals. Numerous enemy weapons and supplies were captured and numerous fortifications destroyed. Close to 13,000 non-combatants were relocated to the Cam Lo area. The costs were not low, with 21 ARVN KIA (116 WIA) and 142 USMC KIA. (896 WIA).

Next Installment:

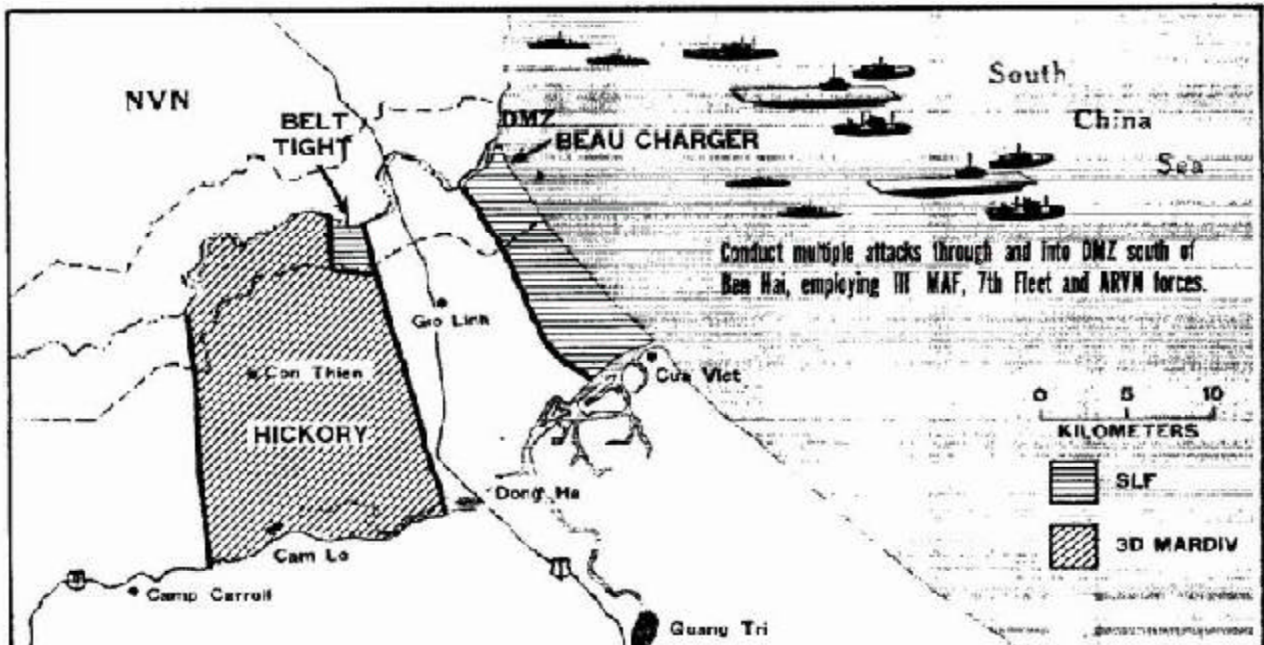
The next installment will cover Operation Buffalo, the immediate predecessor and raison d'etre for Hickory II.

Note: An interesting footnote to this operation is the request by the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet to conduct an amphibious demonstration (a feint) off the beaches of North Vietnam 10 kilometers north of the DMZ. Originally included as part of the operational plan, the Joint Chiefs of Staff denied authorization on May 16th.

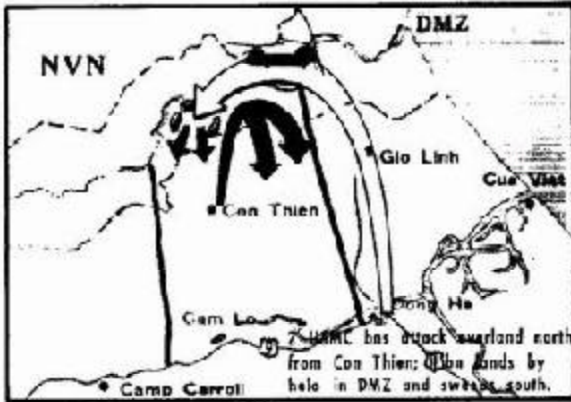
Sources: (USMC Historical Division, Archives Section Vietnam CDs)
1st Amtracs Command Chronology: VNCD-009,
FMFPAC, Operation of Marine Forces Vietnam, May 1967, VNCD-029,
OpFiles — Hickory, VNCD-064

Summarized from source materials by Hugh Connelly.

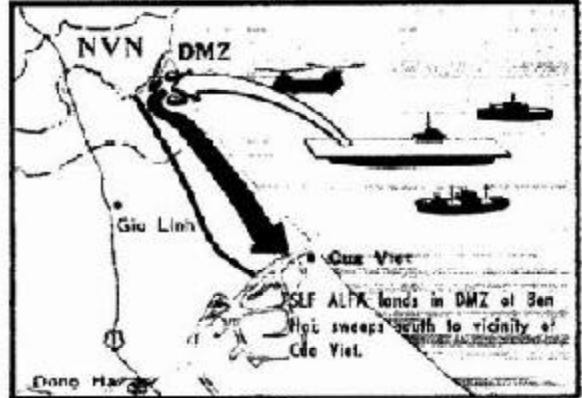
COMBINED OPERATIONS IN THE DMZ 18-26 MAY The Concept



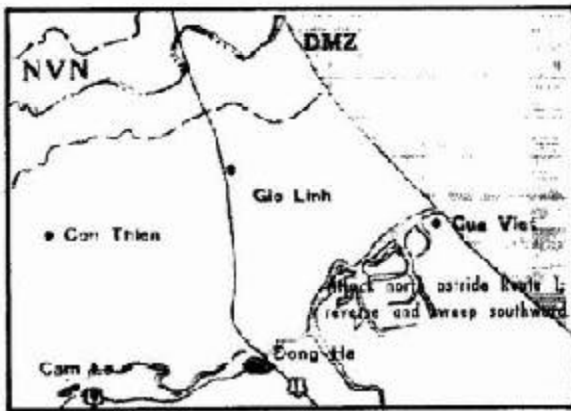
OPERATION HICKORY PLAN



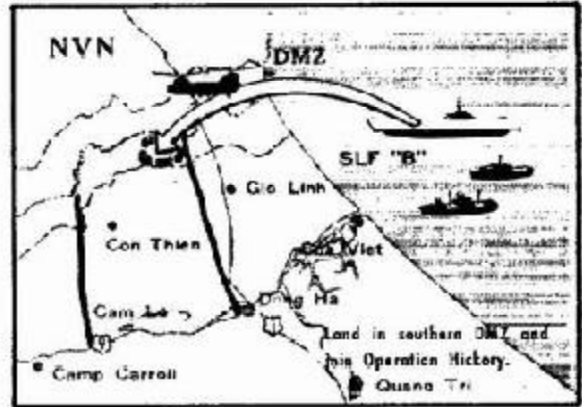
OPERATION BEAU CHARGER PLAN



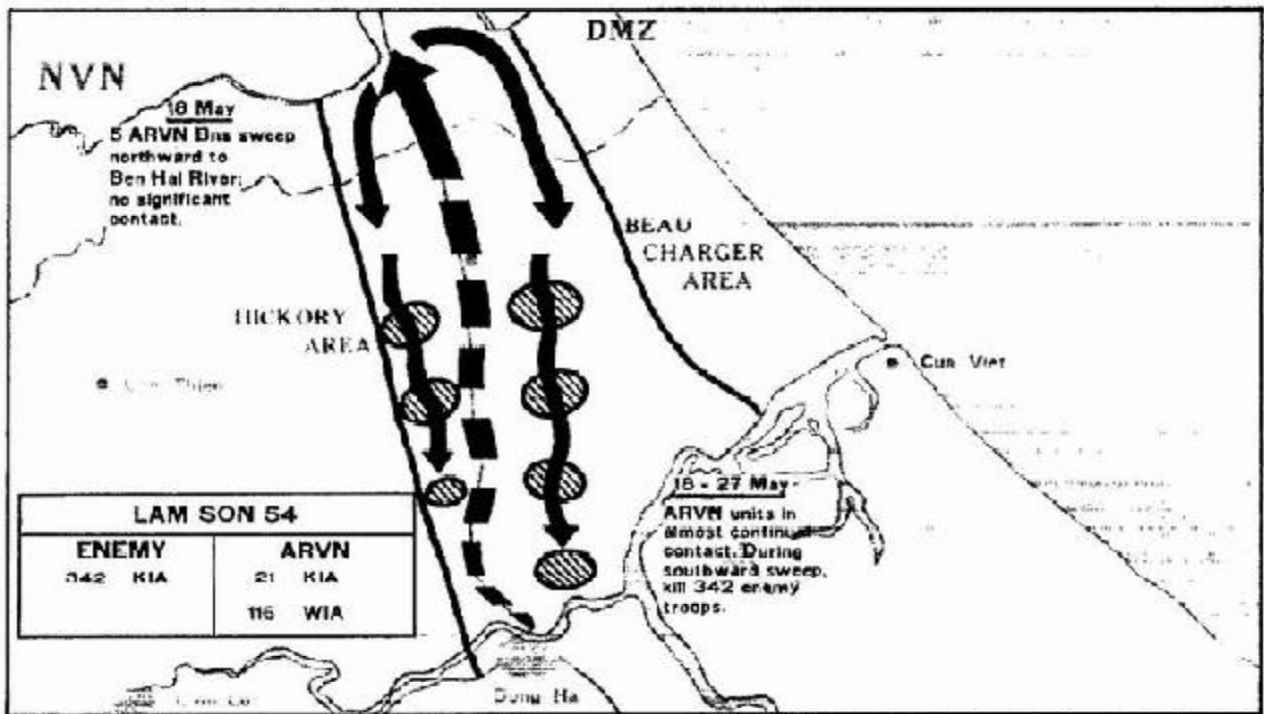
OPERATION LAM SON 54 PLAN



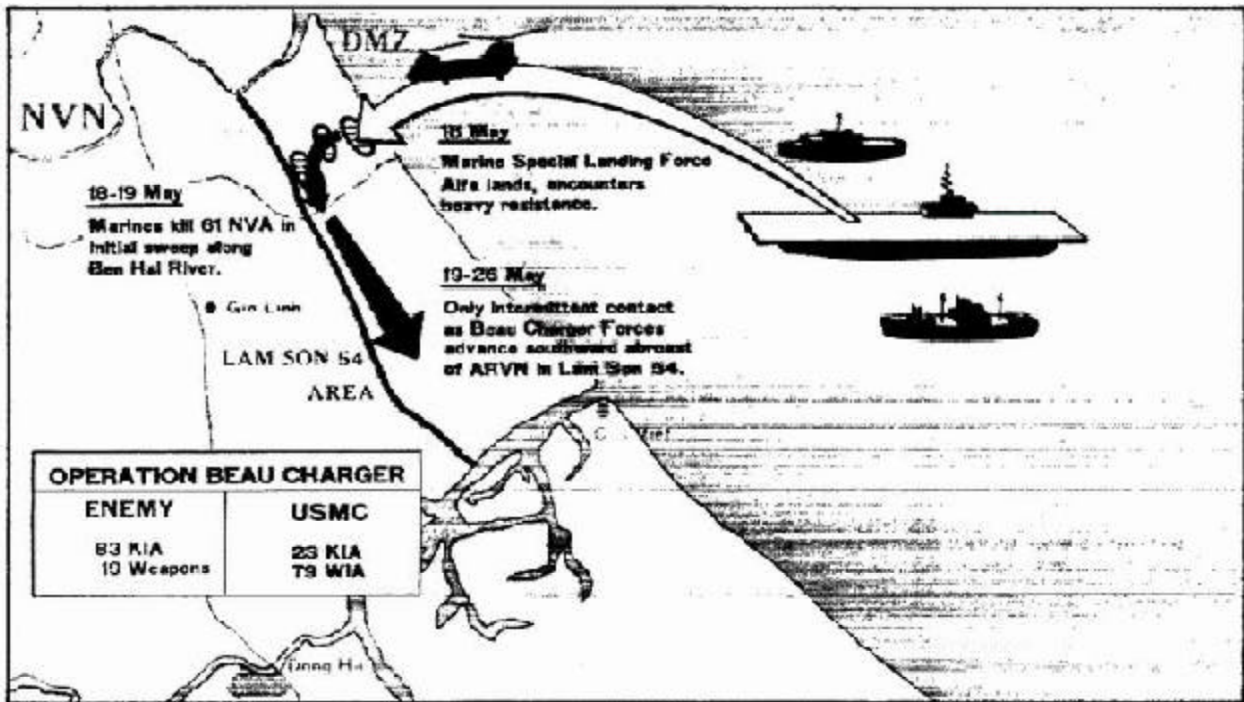
OPERATION BELT TIGHT PLAN



OPERATION LAM SON 54



OPERATION BEAU CHARGER



OPERATION HICKORY

