

Operation Hickory II

Part A — The Plan and the View from the Top

(July 14 - July 15, 1967)

To exploit Operation Buffalo, COMUSMACV (i.e., Gen. Westmoreland) directed that another sweep be made of the northern area of Quang Tri Province south of the Ben Hai River. Similar in concept to the first Operation Hickory, Hickory II was intended to destroy enemy fortifications and mortar and artillery positions in the southern half of the DMZ and clear enemy force concentrations from the southern edge of the DMZ down to the Cam Lo, Bo Dieu and Cua Viet Rivers. An air offensive to take out artillery and anti-aircraft weapons and positions as far north as 27 kilometers north of the DMZ (the maximum range of 130mm artillery) was planned to prepare the area for the ground operation.

The plan also envisioned both an amphibious feint off of the southern DMZ by the Amphibious Ready Group (with 1st Amtracs supplying an LVT platoon for the amphibious feint to Combined Task Force 76 — from 0800 on July 13 to 1800 on July 14) and a helicopter landing feint from Camp Carroll to the vicinity of Dong Ha Mountain (waves of 5 or 6 helicopters would simulate 60-man lifts to the area). The 3rd Recon Battalion would conduct extensive patrolling throughout the southern half of the DMZ.

Hickory II commenced at 0900 on July 14th. The operation employed 8 infantry battalions from the 3rd Marine Division: SLF Bravo (BLT 2/3) served as a western screening and blocking force for 3 infantry battalions of the 9th Marines (1/9, 2/9 and 1/4 attached) and the other two battalions of the 3rd Marines (1/3, 3/3). These forces drove north from Con Thien, Cam Lo, Camp Carroll, and Thon Son Lam to the DMZ, leaving two battalions to the north of Con Thien as a blocking force, then wheeled and attacked south along a corridor to the east of Con Thien all the way down to the Cam Lo River where 3/4 and 3/9 (the Division Reserve) served as a blocking force. To the east of the infantry battalions, the 2nd Regiment of the 1st ARVN Division attacked north along Route 1 with 3 infantry battalions (1/2, 2/2, 4/2) and one APC Troop advancing to the southern boundary of the DMZ, turning south and attacking on both sides of Route 1 toward blocking positions NE and NW of Dong Ha.

To the east of the ARVNs, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion (operating as mechanized “AmGrunts”) swept north up to (but not entering) the DMZ, then southwest along the DMZ and finally south towards Hill 31 (which later became the A-1 Strong Point as part of “McNamara’s Line”) near the rivulet called “Jones Creek” that connected the Ben Hai and Cua Viet Rivers. (Jones Creek served as the western boundary for the northern half of 1st Amtracs’ TAOR during 1967.) Although the helicopter feint planned for the operation clearly took place, it isn’t clear whether the amphibious feint towards the southern DMZ boundary ever occurred. [Perhaps a reader who participated in this part of Hickory II could speak to the question.]

The operation is depicted graphically in the July ’67 FMFPAC monthly operations summary.



While there was virtually no direct enemy contact with the 8 infantry battalions, these forces suffered a number of casualties, mostly from mines and other explosive devices and the occasional incoming artillery rounds. 2/3 had 1 WIA; 3/3 had 1 KIA and 2 WIA; 3/9 had 4 WIA; 3/4 had 2 WIA; and 1/4 had 1 KIA and 16 WIA. Combined, this force accounted for 1 NVA KIA (a body that was found during the sweep north), while one of the platoons from the 3rd Recon Bn accounted for 2 NVA KIA during their operations in the southern half of the DMZ.

While the FMFPAC summary of operations for July does pay lip service to one of the extended enemy contacts with 1st Amtracs, the 3rd Marine Division July '67 Command Chronology discussion of Hickory II does the Battalion's contribution more justice:

HICKORY II. This operation commenced 140900 July 67 as the successor to Operation BUFFALO. The composition of forces was the same as in Operation BUFFALO with the addition of 1st Bn 4th Mar (-), opcon to 9th Marines. The operations were conducted in a northerly direction from the main combat base areas, Thon Son Lam, Camp Carroll, Cam Lo and Con Thien. The axis of advance carried the units through the same areas the enemy defended during Operation BUFFALO. The enemy employed a proliferation of explosive in the area which accounted for the preponderance of friendly casualties in the 3d and 9th Marines AOR. These units continued to discover extensive bunker and trenchline complexes indicating the extent of NVA infiltration in northern Quang Tri Province. There were no significant contacts with NVA forces in this area. As part of this operation 1st Amtrac Bn, adopting an infantry role, conducted a search and destroy operation in the northern portion of their TAOR. This unit had the heaviest contact with NVA/VC forces, encountering heavy small arms, mortar and artillery fires. During this action 1st Amtrac Bn linked up with flanking units of 1st ARVN Division to sweep through a village complex. 1st Amtrac Bn accounted for 54 of the 57 confirmed NVA/VC killed during Operation HICKORY II. On 16 July BLT 2/3 commenced backloading to resume SLF mission. HICKORY II terminated 161600H July. Cumulative friendly casualties: 4 KIA and 97 WIA. [Note that the figure was subsequently revised to 99 WIA.] Marines' efforts.

1st Amtracs also suffered the bulk of the casualties, with 2 KIA and 74 WIA. The KIA were PFC J. H. Spencer and PFC D. A. Ritzchke. Similarly, the Battalion accounted for nearly all of the crew-served and individual weapons captured during the operation. The final official statistics for Hickory II also demonstrate the extensive use made of supporting arms: artillery, naval gun fire, and close or directed air support. Although the attached monthly statistics don't include the figures for artillery support other than naval gun fire, individual SitReps from 3rd Marine Division records show that the air strikes dropped 300 tons of ordnance during Hickory II and Marine artillery units supported the Operation with 1,764 missions firing nearly 14,000 rounds. The US Army 175mm gun unit added 27 missions and 91 rounds to the Marines' efforts.

INCL DATES	OPERATION NAME	SIZE	TYPE	COMPS/AREA COORDINATE	TACTICAL CDRS	USMC	AVN	OTHER																			
14 JUL	HICKORY II	REGT	SEARCH	I CORPS	CC 3D MAR	1/9, 2/9																					
14 JUL			ANC	QUANG TRI	DIW	5/4, 7/9																					
			DESTROY	VO 2040		3/3 1/3																					
	FINAL REPT					1/4																					
						3/4																					
FRIENDLY CASUALTIES				ENEMY CASUALTIES				AIR LIFTED				ATTACH UNITS															
KIA	WIA	NEA	MEL	NEA	SEA	PU	PU	NET	GVN	AVN	USMC	AVN	HELICOPTERS	TONS	USMC	AVN	USMC	AVN									
4	97			57	23						36	3	213	135	7	43	101	9									
NAVAL GUNS				155 GUN				105 H				107 HT				8 H				175 GUN				DN DAYS REPORTED			
MIS				MIS				MIS				MIS				MIS				MIS				34			
30				30				30				30				30				30				30			

Final Installment:

PART B will cover Operation Hickory II from start to finish based on the recollections of the participants — the troops on the ground.

Note: The 3rd Marine Division Command Chronology for July '67 indicates that plans were prepared for a third Operation Hickory, but there is no record that this operation ever took place.

Sources: (USMC Historical Division, Archives Section Vietnam CDs)

1st Amtracs Command Chronology, July 1967 BVNCD-009,
FMFPAC Operation of Marine Forces Vietnam, July 1967, VNCD-001,
OpFiles - Operation Hickory II, VNCD-064
3rd MarDiv Command Chronology July 1967- VNCD-028 and 029
3rd MarDiv Unit Journal July 1967- VNCD-029

Summarized from source materials by Hugh Connelly.

