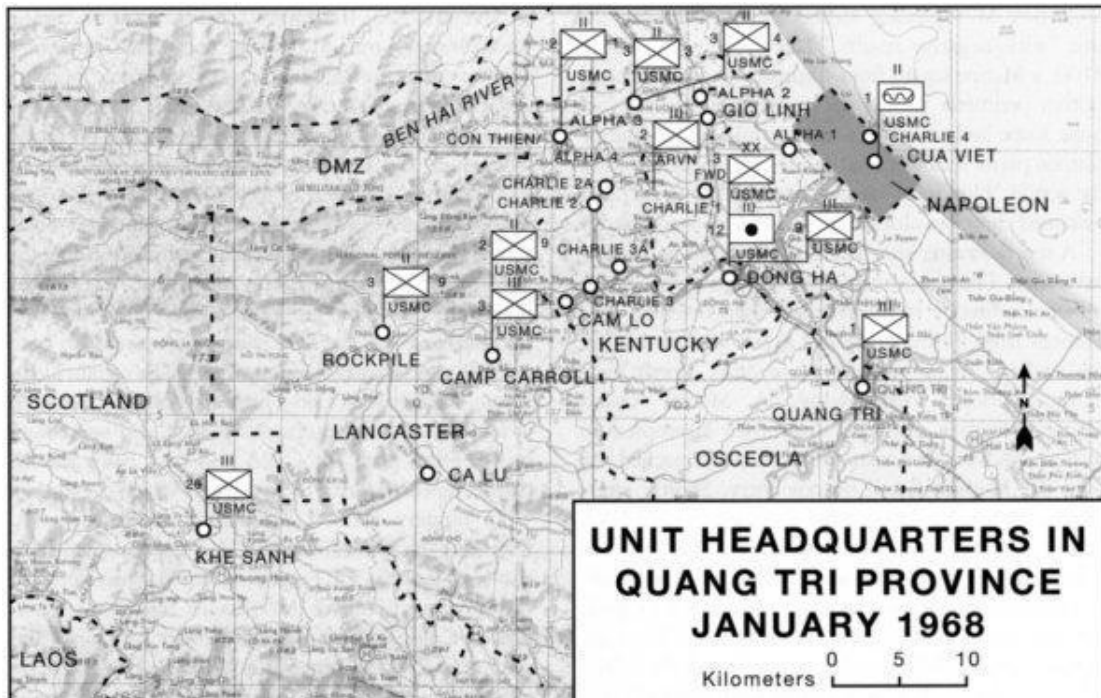


According to the FMFPAC staff, the North Vietnamese Army was "one of the best in Southeast Asia . . ." The NVA adapted well to the DMZ situation where they knew the exact location of the American positions and were generally more familiar with the terrain than the Marines. Although limited for the most part to movement by foot, the North Vietnamese soldier also gained a singular leverage from this apparent liability. As the Marine report noted, "This is certainly a slow mode, but due to this circumstance he [the NVA soldier] is restricted only from those areas which are virtually impassable to foot movement." Acknowledging the relative high morale and dedication of the North Vietnamese Army, the FMFPAC staff writers observed that one of the enemy's major attributes was that he viewed "the present conflict as one which has existed for two generations, and he has no great expectations that it will end soon, thus all of his actions are tempered by patience."¹⁷ (page 36)



Operation Lancaster and Heavy Fighting in Mid-January

The Lancaster area of operations contained the key Marine bases of Camp Carroll, an important artillery position, the Rockpile, and Ca Lu. The Rockpile, a 700-foot sheer cliff outcropping, dominated the nearby terrain. Perched on its top, Marine observers had a clear view of the most likely approaches into the Cam Lo River Valley and of Route 9, the two most strategic east-west arteries in the DMZ sector. About 12,000 meters below the Rockpile and part of the Dyemarker system was Ca Lu, in effect the southern terminal of Route 9 since the North Vietnamese had effectively cut the road between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh, about 20,000 meters to the west. An obvious way station for any relief effort of Khe Sanh, Ca Lu, at the junction of the Quang Tri River and Route 9, also provided the Marines an outpost to warn of enemy infiltration into the Lancaster area from the west, southwest, and from the Ba Long Valley to the southeast. Similar to much of the terrain in the DMZ area, the Lancaster area of operations consisted of rolling hills rising into jungle-covered mountains of 700-800 feet with tree canopies reaching up to heights of 20 to 60 feet. Fifteen-foot elephant grass and dense brush vegetation restricted movement even in the relatively low regions. (pages 52-54)

The Marines worried most about their relatively exposed position at Ca Lu. There, the isolated garrison numbered about 625 Army, Navy, and Marine personnel including the Marine infantry company. Navy Seabees and Marine engineers had nearly completed the permanent facilities

required for the Dyemarker project. While not directly attacking the Marine outpost, the North Vietnamese had mined Route 9 occasionally in December and ambushed one Marine convoy on a return trip from Ca Lu to the Rockpile. Despite a relative lull during the first two weeks of January, Marine intelligence indicated that North Vietnamese forces were on the move.⁸⁰

A division "Stingray" reconnaissance team operating in the general area of the Ca Lu base soon confirmed the presence of enemy troops in the general area.* On 12 January, about 1415 in the afternoon, Reconnaissance Team 2C3, using the codename "Blue Plate" and operating in the mountains about 4,000 meters southwest of Ca Lu below the Quang Tri River, radioed back that it was being followed by five NVA "wearing black pjs and carrying automatic weapons." The "Blue Plate" Marines fired upon the enemy but missed. For a time all was quiet and the Marines continued upon their way. About two hours later, the Marines came back on the air to report that they were surrounded by about 30 North Vietnamese troops armed with AK-47s. Marine gunships appeared overhead and provided covering fire while another helicopter extracted the Marine team. The reconnaissance Marines sustained only one casualty, one wounded man.⁸¹

The incident on the 12th was only a harbinger of what was to come. On the following day, the North Vietnamese sprang an ambush on an engineer convoy bringing Dyemarker supplies and equipment to Ca Lu. Under an overcast sky and a slight drizzle, about 1120 on the morning of the 13th, the 20-vehicle convoy departed the Rockpile area. Marine artillery had already fired 15-minute preparation fires at suspected ambush sites. With two tanks in the lead, the convoy consisted of 10 six by six trucks interspersed with two more tanks in the center of the column, four "low boy" tractor trailers, and two of the Army "dusters" bringing up the rear. The vehicles carried about 200 men including engineers, drivers, the M42 crews, support personnel, and Company I, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines.⁸²

About 1150, approximately 3,000 meters above the Ca Lu, enemy gunners took the convoy under fire with rocket-propelled grenades, small-arms fire, and mortars. At the same time, the NVA ambushers detonated a command mine which set two trucks on fire, one a "low boy" and the other carrying 81mm mortar ammunition. The truck with the mortars exploded which forced the rear section of the convoy to come to a complete halt. The infantry from Company I hastily dismounted from their trucks to engage the enemy, only for many of the troops to trigger several "surprise firing devices" and mines skillfully hidden along both sides of the road.

Lieutenant Colonel Cook recalled several years later that before the convoy had started out he and his sergeant major had moved to an outpost on a hill top just west of Route 9. From there, he remained in radio contact with both his command post and the convoy and could observe the vehicles as they moved south toward Ca Lu. When he saw the convoy stopped after the initial burst of fire, he directed "the lead element to continue on to Ca Lu and return with reinforcements." He then joined the stalled troops. According to Cook, from the site of the ambush, he "called and directed artillery fire through his COC [Combat Operations Center] on enemy escape and reinforcing routes both east and west of Route 9."

In the meantime, Company L, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines boarded at Ca Lu the lead trucks to relieve the embattled column. At the ambush site, about 1215, an aerial observer using the call sign "American Beauty" arrived overhead to assist in calling in supporting fires. The leaden skies precluded the use of Marine fixed-wing jets, but two helicopter gunships strafed the enemy firing positions. Marine artillery fired over 700 rounds including 54 155mm howitzer shells in support of the convoy after the initial contact.

With the arrival of Company L and the continuing artillery bombardment, the Marines disengaged

under occasional enemy sniper fire and completed the trip to Ca Lu, arriving there about 1510. The convoy made the return trip to the Rockpile area late that afternoon without incident. The costs, however, had been high. American dead and wounded totaled 19 killed and over 70 wounded. Most of the casualties were sustained by Company I in the first moments of the ambush. The Marines accounted for 10 enemy dead and captured one prisoner. Marine intelligence officers estimated that a North Vietnamese company participated in the attack.* (page 55)

Along with Lima Company, three Marines from Delta Company, 9th Engineers rushed to the ambush site on an EIMCO bulldozer: Cpl Mike Pehrson, from Sacramento, California; LCpl Tim Eads from Miami, Ohio and LCpl John Dixon from Detroit, Michigan. Their objective was to clear the burning trucks off of the road so that the remaining trucks could get through. Both Cpl Pehrson and LCpl Eads were awarded Bronze Stars for their heroism. LCpl Dixon told me that, even though the enemy fire was heavy, LCpl Eads repeatedly stopped so that dead or wounded Marines could be moved out of the way. Cpl Pehrson coordinated with the convoy commander to extract the wounded and clear the road. One of the dead was LCpl Bob Molossi from San Francisco, Ca and one of the wounded was 1st Lt Richard Matteson, both members of 9th Engineers.

Delta Company finished the firebase at Ca Lu on January 19, 1968, the main body of the Company departed for Dong Ha by air at that time. A contingent of 16 Engineers, led by 1st Lt J. P. Brady, Jr. remained. Calling ourselves the "Ca Lu 16", we cleaned up the company area, buried all the remaining fuel, and dug slit trenches to hide the four bulldozers below ground. A group us, headed by Cpl Norman Ryan, left by truck shortly thereafter with the light equipment. TET was in full swing by then and every truck capable of hauling heavy equipment in Quang Tri Providence was out of commission. The few engineers that remained stood-by to help in any way possible.

The ground shook day and night from the B-52s' "rolling thunder". The artillery from Camp Carroll sounded like freight trains passing overhead. We were lucky the NVA never turned their attention to us the way they did the Marines at Khe Sanh.

After a couple of weeks, the Commander of the 3/9 at Ca Lu ordered us to leave. The CH-46 was so loaded that LCpl Paul Kozak and I had to ride on the rear tailgate. We were stranded in Dong Ha until the end of February. We re-joined Delta Company in March 1968 at Hill 63, 20 miles below Da Nang.

The memory of LCpl Bob Molossi has been with me and my fellow Marines of 9th Engineers for over forty years. He was the first Marine I served with to die in combat and his memory will always be with me. Semper Fi, Bob.



3rd Platoon pinned down. Mickey Ryan



Destroyed Truck



The following pictures were taken with the camera brought to the scene by LCpl Dixon.





LCpl John Dixon

LCpl Tim Eads



Cpl Mike Pehrson
(Photo by Cpl Mike Cummings at Ca Lu)

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF

Pfc Charles S. Sickler, Ewan, NJ, C Co, 3rd Shore Party Bn

LCpl Robert J. Molossi, Daly City, CA, D Co, 9th Eng Bn

2nd Lt Michael T. George, Erie, PA, H&S Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines

LCpl Arthur Bustamante, San Fernando, CA, H&S Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines

HN Dennis K. Rice, Phoenix, AZ, H&S Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines

1stLt Alfred B. Russ, Peterborough, NH, I Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines

Cpl Robert A. Jackson, Providence, RI, I Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines

Cpl Lewis J. Parker, Gates, NC, I Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines

LCpl Edward Sanchez, Jr., Los Angeles, CA, I Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines Pfc

Rudolph J. Bielek, North Braddock, PA, I Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines Pfc Ernest

Howard, Memphis, TN, I Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines

Pfc Bruce A. Morrison, Proctor, VT, I Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines

Pfc William O. Saunders, Jr., Tulare, CA, I Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines

LCpl Jackie R. Mc Elwee, Sidney, IL, L Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines

Pfc Mark A. Lamprecht, Douglas, AZ, L Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines

Pfc Harold L. Schreckengost, Rural Valley, PA, L Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines

Pfc Gerald A. Hiukka, Albany, OR, M Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines

Pfc Eugene Law, Linden, NJ, M Co, 3rd Bn, 9th Marines

LCpl David G. Stewart, Memphis, TN, Trans Co, 9th Motor Trans Bn

SEMPER FI

