



Battle of Chu Lai

The Main Force Viet Cong were poised for an attack on Chu Lai in August 1965, but their plans were foiled in a "spoiling attack" by Marines in what would be the first major U.S. battle of the Vietnam War.

by Al Hemingway

Gen. Lewis W. "Silent Lew" Walt, commanding general of the III MAF (Marine Amphibious Force), was in a quandary. Intelligence revealed that the 1st VC (Viet Cong) Regiment was massing for an assault on the airfield at Chu Lai, South Vietnam. Chu Lai, situated on the coast, was located in the southern I Corps region of the country.

Walt discussed his options with his staff and finally decided to strike the enemy in their stronghold on the Van Tuong Peninsula, approximately nine miles south of Chu Lai itself. It was a daring plan since it would leave the airstrip defenses weakened. Walt, however, felt the gamble was worth it.

Starlite is Born

Col. Oscar Peatross, 7th Marine Regiment commander, was in charge of the operation, which was dubbed *Starlite*.

He opted for a two-pronged strike at the VC. He selected the 3rd Bn., 3rd Marines, for the amphibious assault and 2nd Bn., 4th Marines, for the helicopter strike. "The proposed battleground was mostly rolling country," Peatross later wrote, "about three-quarters cultivated, and elsewhere there was thick scrub [spread] from six to 100 feet ... and there were few rice paddies. The beaches were sandy, with dunes in some places as far inland as 200 yards."

The 3rd would come ashore on Green Beach just north of the village of An Cuong No. 1; the 4th would be choppered into three landing zones (LZs) named Red, White and Blue.



Terrifying Moments

Just after 6 a.m. on Aug. 18, 1965, K Btry., 4th Bn., 12th Marines, fired the opening salvo of the battle for Chu Lai. As the 155mm shells pounded VC positions, the destroyers *USS Orleck* and *Prichett*, and the heavy cruiser *USS Galveston*, let loose a barrage on the enemy. In addition, fighter aircraft from Marine Air Groups (MAG) 11 and 12 dropped 18 tons of ordnance to soften the enemy's bulwarks.

After the preparatory bombardment, the 3rd Bn., 3rd Marines, made its way ashore and quickly moved inland. As the village of An Cuong 1 was secured, I Company set out to take An Cuong 2 and link up with the 2nd Bn., 4th Marines.

The "Magnificent Bastards" of the 2nd Battalion would find the going much tougher than originally thought. E Company soon found itself fighting a well-entrenched enemy on a ridge line near the LZ. A forward observer spotted more than 100 VC moving into the open.

He quickly called for a 107mm "Howtar"—a 4.2-inch mortar mounted on a 75mm howitzer frame. The unique weapon was swung into action and within minutes more than 90 VC soldiers were killed.

Meanwhile, UH-34Ds from Helicopter Marine Medium (HMM) Squadrons 261 and 361 began touching down on LZ Blue. As H Company Marines leaped from the aircraft, the enemy hit them with withering fire from atop Hill 43, a small knoll southeast of the LZ.

The first few moments were terrifying. A helicopter door



NATIONAL ARCHIVES PHOTO

Marines of E Co., 2nd Bn., 4th Marines, move out of the landing zone near An Cuong on Aug. 15, 1965. The Battle of Chu Lai was the centerpiece of *Operation Starlite*.

gunner had his jaw torn apart from enemy fire. One Marine was struck in the throat. Another stumbled and fell with a huge wound in his stomach. "You just have to close your eyes and drop down to the deck," said Capt. Howard Henry, a chopper pilot with HMM-363.

'All Hell Broke Loose'

Unknown to the Marines, H Company had landed atop the headquarters of the 60th VC Battalion. 1st Lt. Homer Jenkins, company commander, quickly organized his men to assault Hill 43 and eliminate the threat. Skyhawks and Phantoms from Fighter Squadrons 513 and 342 hammered the hilltop as the infantrymen pushed forward. Assisted by M-48 tanks, the Marines soon dislodged the VC from Hill 43.

While Hill 43 was being cleared, I Co., 3rd Bn., was inching its way toward An Cuong 2. The hamlet consisted of 25-30 huts, fighting holes and camouflaged trench lines connected by a sys-

temously into the village, a grenade killed Capt. Bruce Webb, the company commander, instantly. He was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross for his extraordinary heroism that day.

"I was there when Capt. Webb got killed," said Sgt. Dwight Layman. "A gook threw a grenade into the command group. It also killed the radio operator. I immediately grabbed an incendiary grenade and tossed it into the spider hole and fried him. I was setting up LZs for the choppers to evacuate the wounded when a round caught me in the back of the neck and went out through my shoulder. That was it for me. My part in *Starlite* was over."

But before the riflemen could secure An Cuong 2, they were told to reinforce K Company, which was engaged in a heavy firefight about 2,000 meters to the northeast.

H Company was moving on An Cuong 2 to meet up with I Company. As they approached the tiny village of Nam Yen 3, it was decided to bypass it and keep going. Without warning, the company was struck with intense automatic weapons fire. An open area between the villages was strewn with spider holes and machine gun nests hidden in grass huts.

"As we came nearer, snipers opened up and then all of a sudden all hell broke loose," remarked Sgt. Victor Nunez of Weapons Platoon. "It seemed a whole damned division of VC was out there waiting for us. Those bastards had us zeroed in [with] machine guns, mortars, recoilless rifles and rocket-propelled grenades. I saw a lot of our guys get hit ... our company Gunny was killed also."

Pfc. Paul Meeters was serving with the Anti-Tank Plt., H & S Co., 3rd Bn., 7th Marines, when he was called off a helicopter carrier to engage the enemy. He remembers "almost buying the farm" at Van Tang. "We went into the village and received fire from the huts, but as we cleared each hut, fire came from behind us. We later learned the ville was honeycombed with tunnels."

Fierce Fighting

As medevac choppers tried desperately to land, Lance Cpl. Joe Paul, a "baby-

and the enemy. As he laid down covering fire, wounded Marines were placed aboard the aircraft for evacuation. Unfortunately, Paul was struck several times and died. He was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously.

The fighting was fierce. Lance Cpl. Ernie Wallace saw enemy soldiers hidden behind hedgerows. He screamed: "Start killing trees!" He began delivering accurate fire at the treeline nearby, killing some 25 VC in the process. His keen observation saved the lives of his fellow Marines. He, too, was awarded a Navy Cross.

Cpl. Robert O'Malley of I Company eliminated an enemy position and was a source of inspiration to his fellow Leathernecks. Although wounded three times, he would not permit himself to be evacuated until all of his squad was aboard the helicopter. He and Paul were the first Marines to be awarded the Medal of Honor for Vietnam.

Squeezing the Vice

Soon, elements from the 3rd Bn., 7th Marines, were landing to reinforce the assault battalions. As the additional rifle companies came ashore, the enemy quickly departed the area. *Starlite*, though, would last another five days as the riflemen combed the area, eliminating VC spider holes they encountered. The Marine units pushed eastward to "squeeze the vise" around the VC and drive them toward the sea.

In the end, 614 VC were confirmed killed. The Marines also took nine prisoners and confiscated 109 assorted weapons. The Leathernecks sustained 45 dead and 203 wounded.

By all counts, *Starlite* was a success. The Marines had thwarted a major attack against Chu Lai. But despite their battering, the tenacious 1st VC Regiment would return to fight another day. ☪

AL HEMINGWAY, a Marine Vietnam vet, has written extensively on the war.

NOTE: This is the first article in VFW's Vietnam War series. Personal accounts from the battles requested in the June/July 2003 issue, p. 8, are still needed for upcoming stories.