

## APLACEOFANGELS

*For the Marines manning that outpost just south of the DMZ, Con Thien was hell on earth when the NVA attacked.*

**By AI Hemingway**

A mud-covered hill, 158 meters in height, anchoring the northeast corner of Leatherneck Square, the quadrilateral of Marine combat bases – Gio Linh, Dong Ha, Cam Lo and Con Thien – South of the DMZ (demilitarized zone), Con Thien loosely translated means “place of angels” or “hill of angels.” But no angels were in evidence there during the terrible summer and fall of 1967 when the base came under heavy ground and artillery attack by the invading North Vietnamese Army (NVA).

Situated less than two miles from the DMZ, elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 4<sup>th</sup> Marines, nervously eyed the hostile terrain in front of their perimeter at Con Thien. The date was May 8, 1967.

At approximately 0300, the all-too-familiar sound of a flare popping broke the eerie silence. Soon, the surrounding landscape was bathed in an artificial light, giving the battlefield a surrealistic touch.

Suddenly, the deafening roar of rockets stabbed the night air, and the Marines dove for any available cover to escape injury. As the artillery fell, NVA units jockeyed to prepare a ground assault on the compound. Armed with flamethrowers and using Bangalore torpedoes, two NVA battalions managed to breach the wire. It was the first reported use of flamethrowers by the enemy since American troops had engaged NVA regulars. Company D was hit extremely hard and the leathernecks were engaged in hand-to-hand fighting as a platoon from the 11<sup>th</sup> Engineers raced into the line to plug the gap. After desperate fighting that lasted until dawn, the defenders were able to repel the attackers.

During the firefight, Lance Cpl. Michael P. Finley, a grenadier with Company A, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 4<sup>th</sup> Marines, vaulted from his position and accurately lobbed two rounds from his M-79 “blooper,” destroying an enemy machine-gun emplacement. Despite being wounded, he dashed to another Marine’s aid. After finishing with him, he raced to administer medical treatment to his mortally wounded squad leader. Killed in the attempt, he was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross, the nation’s second-highest medal for bravery.

When the attack ended, 44 Marines had been killed and 110 wounded. The NVA lost 197 killed and 8 captured. Why had the enemy pressed so hard at Con Thien – an undersized knoll a “stone’s throw” from the DMZ? What was so important there?

Burdened with construction of the strongpoint obstacle system, pejoratively called “McNamara’s Line” by the Marines, Con Thien overlooked enemy supply routes from the north and its capture would constitute an enemy foothold in Quang Tri province. As Colonel Richard B. Smith, commanding officer of the 9<sup>th</sup> Marines, put it: “Con Thien was clearly visible from the 9<sup>th</sup> Marines Headquarter on the high ground at Dong Ha 10 miles away, so good line-of-sight communications were enjoyed. Although Con Thien was only 160 meters high, it tenants had dominant observation over the entire area. If the enemy occupied it they would be looking down our throats.”

And the NVA wanted to be the new tenants. Consequently, several attempts would be made to seize Con Thien. Until mid -1967, the northern section of the DMZ had been a safe haven for the Communists. Here, they reorganized and prepared their plans for future assaults in Northern I Corps, including the strong point of Con Thien. The first of these thrusts was in the spring of 1967, as recorded above, and coincided with the anniversary of the battle of Dien Bien Phu. The second would be made in the summer, when the NVA utilized heavy artillery, for the first time, in support of ground units. The third would be made, during the months of September and October; the enemy fired punishing artillery barrages on the occupants of Con Thien.

After the May 8 offensive on Con Thien, Washington directed the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) to enter the southern portion of the DMZ. Previous to this, the NVA was using this area as a sanctuary and U.S. Forces were expressly prohibited from penetrating this region. Code -named Operation Hickory for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division, Lam Son 54 for the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) Division, Beau Charger for Special Landing Force (SLF) Alpha, and Belt Tight for SLF Bravo, the Allies wasted no time in making contact with the enemy.

The Operation Hickory phase of the three -pronged advance into the DMZ began on May 18. By late morning, Lt. Col. Charles R. Figard's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 26<sup>th</sup> Marines, ran head-on into two NVA battalions. Fighting from well -camouflaged bunker complexes, the enemy delivered a hail of automatic weapons fire upon the leathernecks' right flank.

Realizing his squad was unable to maneuver, Corporal Richard E. Moffit of Company G lunged forward at the hedge -row where the shooting was coming from and let loose a steady stream of rifle fire. On cether, he killed two NVA soldiers manning the trench. The following day, the intrepid Moffit braved another enemy machine -gun nest. Again, he rushed the fortification, this time hurling fragmentation grenades. He would miraculously survive to be awarded the Navy Cross for his actions.

During the intense combat, Lt. Col. Figard and his operations officer were hit by mortar fire. Soon, Lt. Col. John J. Peeler's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Marines, was also heavily committed.

Meanwhile, Operation Lam Son 54 was initiated by two ARVN battalions from the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division. Making no contact, the South Vietnamese units proceeded to the Ben Hai River, located in the center of the DMZ itself, and started sweeping southward. While these two battalions were advancing on the east side of Highway 1, three ARVN airborne battalions did so on the west. On May 19, the 31<sup>st</sup> and 812<sup>th</sup> NVA regiments met the ARVN multi-battalion sweep and fighting ensued that would continue for more than a week. The ARVN, while losing 22 killed and 122 wounded, dealt the Communists a greater blow: 342 dead, 30 enemy soldiers captured and 51 assorted weapons seized.

Beau Charger was another story. Company A, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines, the assault element for SLF Alpha, was greeted with a hot reception at its destination, Landing Zone (LZ) Goose. As the fifteen UH -34s ("Sea Horses" from Squadron HMM - 263) prepared to land, enemy machine -gun fire blasted the vulnerable choppers.

The lead helicopter, flown by squadron commander Lt. Col. Edward K. Kirby, was struck by a broadside as it hovered less than 50 feet off the ground. The initial burst rendered the chopper's radio inoperable and injured the copilot, crew chief, door gunner and three Marines from 1/3. Another leatherneck was killed outright and tumbled from the "bird." Upon hearing of the "hot LZ," SLF commander Colonel James A. Gallo, Jr.,

scrubbed all further helicopter assaults into Goose and opted instead to disembark his Marines at LZ Owl, 800 meters to the south.

However, A1/3, already on the ground, was isolated. With the enemy so intertwined with the Marines, urgent requests for naval gunfire from warships just offshore had to be aborted. By 1000, other units, plus a force of M109 tanks, reached the trapped men at LZ Goose. The infantrymen met the enemy in hand-to-hand combat as fixed-wing aircraft hammered NVA trenches. After 11 jets pounded the positions, Companies A and B of 1/3 jumped off to continue the planned attack.

While attacking the enemy's bulwarks, Corporal Russell F. Keck, a machine gun squad leader with Alpha Company, dispersed his gun to deliver accurate fire upon the trenchline. Coming under a heavy barrage, Keck ordered the automatic weapons moved to another location to prevent their being destroyed. Although wounded, Keck remained in his position to administer covering fire for another Marine, knowing this action would surely result in his death. Corporal Keck received the Navy Cross posthumously.

All told, the various operations carried out in the southern portion of the DMZ by the Marine and ARVN units snagged 789 enemy killed, 37 captured, and 187 weapons confiscated. Allied casualties would attest to the intensity of fighting as 142 Marines and 22 ARVN soldiers were killed, and 896 and 122 respectively, were wounded.

But the Marines were not idle either. In July the leathernecks counterattacked with another multibattalion operation code-named ***Buffalo***.

On July 2, Lt. Col. Richard J. "Spike" Schening's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, sardonically referred to as ***"The Walking Dead,"*** lived up to their reputation when Company B walked into a large NVA ambush about a mile or so east of Con Thien.

Pressing forward along route 561, nothing more than a 10-foot-wide cart path, the leathernecks met a determined enemy force deeply entrenched along the road's waist-high hedgerows. Hit on both flanks, and blasted with mortars and artillery, the company was cut to pieces. The NVA set the dense hedgerows ablaze with flamethrowers on each side of the road, trapping the Marines between them. In fleeing the inferno, numerous men were cut down by the enfilading fire.

Among the casualties was the company commander, Captain Sterling K. Coates, his radio operator, several platoon leaders and the artillery forward observer. The forward air observer, the next senior officer present, assumed command of the beleaguered unit. Soon, airstrikes hammered Communist positions, which enabled the scattered platoon to regroup and form a perimeter defense. Napalm fell within 20 yards of the company's lines.

Meanwhile, the 1/9 command post (CP) at Con Thien was monitoring the action. As reports trickled in, and the enemy strength was determined to be greater than a battalion, Schening quickly ordered Company Cat Dong Ha "Choppered" into assist Company B. To augment this, he also dispatched a platoon from Company D, with four tanks, to relieve the battered Marines of Bravo 1/9.

Upon reaching the ambush site, Captain Henry J. McDuffie, 1/9's operations officer, asked Staff Sgt. Leon R. Burns whether the remainder of the company was. Burns answered, "Sir, this is the company, or what's left of it."

While extracting the besieged infantrymen, enemy shells rained down upon the LZ. Corpsmen and stretcher-bearers became casualties as the battle-weary troops made

their way back to Con Thien. As the shocked and dazed wounded were placed aboard medevac helicopters, NVA artillery continued to blast the area.

The Communists used their artillery fire extensively throughout the battle, unleashing 1,065 rounds at Gio Lin and Con Thien. However, the bulk of the barrage, 700 rounds, was dropped upon 1/9.

By late afternoon, Schening's Marines were exhausted. Meanwhile, Company A was also heavily engaged as the Marines beat back a large contingent of enemy soldiers that had come to within 50 meters of its lines. Only 27 leathernecks walked out of the action from Bravo Company. Staff Sergeant Burns was presented with the Navy Cross for moving "through the intense fire, with completed disregard for his own safety, to call in and adjust a strike against the numerically superior enemy force. After the fulfillment of this mission, he led his men in a withdrawal along the highway. As the column moved along the highway, they were taken under devastating enemy mortar and artillery fire. Again exhibiting fearless leadership, he moved up and down the column encouraging his men and directing them into fighting holes to organize a defense position and personally carried two Marines to the landing zone."

It had been a terrible experience for The Walking Dead battalion. By the end of Buffalo, 84 Marines were killed, 190 wounded and 9 were listed as missing from 1/9.

Colonel George E. Jerue, CO of the regiment, immediately sent Major Willard J. Woodring's 3/9 into Con Thien, just north of "the trace," a 200-meter area cleared by the 11<sup>th</sup> Engineers that would subsequently be enlarged to 600 meters.

On the morning of July 3 Air Force observer fortuitously spotted 100 NVA soldiers north of Con Thien combat base. Echo Battery, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 12<sup>th</sup> Marines, the artillery arm of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division, opened fire, killing 75 of the enemy.

While this was going on, fixed-wing fighter and fighter-bombers sorties continually saturated the Lang Son area, approximately 4,000 meters northeast of Con Thien, to prepare for an attack the following day. To bolster the assault elements, 1.3, from SLF Alpha, landed and tied in with 3/9's right flank.

On Independence Day, July 4, the Marines moved back into the terrain that had been so difficult for 1/9 on July 2. The NVA fought back viciously. By day's end, 2/3 from SLF Bravo was heli-lifted into LZ Canary, just north of Cam Lo. The battalion hastily advanced in a northwesterly direction to link up with the other units before nightfall.

The next several days witnessed the combat heighten in fury as additional enemy units began crossing the Ben Hai River into Northern I Corps near Con Thien.

One air observer transmitted an urgent message to Captain Burrell H. Landes, Jr., CO of Bravo 1/3, saying he had seen a "large enemy force approaching [his] position." When Landes asked the size of the NVA formation, the AO replied, "I'd hate to tell you, I'd hate to tell you." The enemy force, numbering about 400, was marching directly for the Marine lines. As they neared, 500-600 artillery shells slammed into 3/9's area, while 1,000 impacted in 1/3's position.

Captain Albert Slater's Alpha Company, 1/9, under operational control of 3/9, waited until the Communists were 150 meters from his perimeter before giving the order to commence firing. Slater remembered: "... the NVA alerted their unit with a bugle call... Their initial reaction was [one] of confusion and they scattered. They quickly organized and probed at every flank of the 360-degree perimeter. Concealed prepared

positions and fire discipline never allowed the NVA to determine what size of unit they were dealing with... heavy accurate artillery was walked to within 75 meters of the perimeter. The few NVA that penetrated the perimeter were killed and all lines held."

All through the hellish night, the battle raged. Intelligence confirmed that the leathernecks were facing the elite 90<sup>th</sup> NVA Regiment. Sappers crept close enough to Marine lines to hurl hand grenades and blocks of TNT. In one instance, three enemy grenades were tossed at Lance Cpl. James Stuckey's position. The fire team leader picked up each projectile and threw it at the enemy. Unfortunately, the last grenade exploded, leaving only a stump where a hand had once been. Stuckey remained with his fire team and refused medical aid. He received the Navy Cross as a result.

With the assistance of artillery helicopter gunships, naval gun fire and flareships, the NVA assault was repulsed. By early next morning, the 90<sup>th</sup> NVA Regiment was withdrawing back across the DMZ. **Operation Buffalo ceased on July 14.** NVA killed were replaced at nearly 1,300, with two soldiers captured. The Marines sustained 159 killed and 345 wounded.

Artillery and air support of the various services had saved the day. More than 1,000 tons of ordnance was dropped by aircraft, more than 40,000 artillery shells were expended by both Army and Marine howitzers, and warships off shore used 1,500 8-inch and 8-inch rounds. These tremendous barrages from land, sea and air caused the destruction of 164 enemy bunkers, 15 rocket and artillery emplacements, and 46 secondary explosions. However, NVA artillery, hidden deep within the safe haven of the DMZ, was also painfully accurate. Half the Marine dead came as a result of the enemy's guns. Bases such as Con Thien were vulnerable. On July 7, the CP of 1/9 was hit by a 152mm shell. Eleven Marines were killed instantly, with Lt. Col. Schening, the battalion commander, receiving wounds.

Another frightening turn was noted during Operation Buffalo: the use of surface to-air missiles (SAMs). One A-4 aircraft was downed on July 6 while it was providing close air support for 1/3.

The area encompassing the Con Thien combat base was indeed hotly contested ground during the long, grueling summer of 1967. With the completion of Buffalo, the Marines were at least able to keep the enemy at arm's length. However, Hanoi's planners were not about to abandon their scheme to strike at Con Thien again. Far from it. Even as the leathernecks were digging in, another offensive was being formalized for the fall. And this time, long-range artillery was to play an even greater part in the attack. Again the Marines moved first, launching a new operation, Kingfisher, as the fighting around Con Thien persisted. On September 4, Captain Richard K. Young's India Company from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 4<sup>th</sup> Marines, met a sizable NVA force while patrolling. Six Marines were killed and 47 wounded when the firefight ended. On September 7, Kilo Company, 3/4, was ambushed while sweeping the terrain around Con Thien. A heavy artillery barrage was "walked" through the infantrymen as they sat during a break in their patrolling. As the Marines attempted to make their way back to the relative safety of the combat base, the enemy caught them in a vicious crossfire, nearly wiping out Kilo Company's mortar team.

After 3/4's stint, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 26<sup>th</sup> Marines, took up positions in and around the combat base. On September 10, while humping the hills four miles southwest of Con Thien, companies Land L, 3/26, were attacked by a major NVA force—the 812<sup>th</sup> NVA

Regiment. They had unwittingly caused the NVA to prematurely launch their intended attack upon the base. Soon, Mike and Kilo companies were also hit. The enemy was wearing U.S. Marine Corps flak jackets and helmets to confuse the troops.

The NVA pressed the Marines with savage frontal assaults. As darkness descended, jets few sorties of "snake and nape" to crush the enemy. Just as a Marine tank let loose from its .50-caliber machine gun to defend the perimeter, a volley of B-40 rockets smashed into the tracked vehicle, rendering it useless. The enemy did the same to the "zippo," or flametank. All night the machines burned, as the scorching heat "cooked off" .50-caliber rounds stored within the vehicles.

The following day, 140 enemy bodies were strewn about the battlefield. Marine losses were 34 killed and 192 wounded. However, the fighting at Con Thien was not finished. The NVA would now turn to their long-range artillery.

During the month of September, the NVA launched its greatest bombardment of the war to date upon Con Thien. Approximately 100 guns and howitzers, 130mm and 152mm "bunker crackers" with reaches of more than 15 miles, plus light and heavy mortars, were poised to pummel the small outpost. The Communists would fire several rounds, and then quickly move the tubes to other positions. The constant salvos aimed at Con Thien transformed it into a crater-riddled landscape that reminded many of scenes from World War I.

Monsoon rains added to the misery. During the sweltering 100-degree-plus days in the summer, the red dust, indigenous to Con Thien, clogged men's nostrils and throats. Now, with the arrival of the torrential downpours, the reddish dust became quagmires of knee-deep mud that could "suck a Marine's boot socks off." However, the oozing mire did possess one advantage. When enemy shells buried into the mud, less shrapnel would be dispersed.

Marines tried desperately to keep themselves clean, but due to the random artillery barrages, it was risky. To show yourself could mean death. When the rains came, the infantrymen used their ponchos like funnels to catch water so they could have some of the precious liquid to wash their faces, hands and feet. Jungle utilities would literally rot off. Immersion foot, commonly called "junglerot," was common.

Rounds cascaded upon Con Thien. The amount varied anywhere from 200 to 300 every day. On September 25, 1,200 shells roared into the base. The period of September 19-27 saw the worst of it: 3,077. Neuropsychiatric, or "shell shock," victims, unusual in Vietnam, started to manifest themselves. Because of this, fresh Marine battalions were alternated between Con Thien every 30 days. Numerous close calls were recorded—as in the case of Lance Cpl. Charles Santo of Kilo 3/4, who had laughed when his mother told him in a letter she was praying for his safety. While shaving one morning in his bunker, a 120mm rocket crashed atop the fortification, immersing the small enclosure with dust and shrapnel. Fortunately for the Marine, he emerged unhurt, with the exception of being covered with shaving cream after a piece of shrapnel had punctured the can.

In addition to the incessant shelling, an estimated 30,000 to 35,000 NVA regulars, supplemented by main-force Viet Cong units, surrounded Con Thien. In all, the 1,600 Marine defenders had to rely on their air, artillery and naval support to hold off this determined foe. A protective screen was literally formed around the besieged outpost, exploiting every means possible to prevent Con Thien from being overrun. The B-52's, of BUF's (Big Ugly Fellows), engulfed the area around Con Thien with thousands of

bombs. These "arc light raids" evoked loud cheers from the dirty, bearded Marines occupying the base. As one sergeant remarked: "Sometimes it's hours before the NVA can get their stuff together again for another barrage on us. And then, other times, the B-52s aren't even out of sight before the garbage starts coming in again."

Major John Warrender, operations officer for Marine Squadron VMA-311, stated, "My squadron [A4E Skyhawks] flew more than 500 sorties in the DMZ area around Con Thien." Targets included dug-in gun emplacements, paved roads, supply areas and convoys, which included destroyers and "truck-towed SAM missiles."

Enemy snipers breaching the wire were another danger. In addition to the crew-served weapons ringing the perimeter, 55-gallon drums of napalm were set at strategic places around the concertina and could be triggered by telephone wire and PRC-25 radio batteries. All a Marine in the sandbagged trench had to do was insert wire into the battery holes and then the napalm would ignite with a resounding explosion. It was crude, to be sure, but very effective.

One shrewd tactic used by the NVA was the "diversion by fire" technique. The enemy would pour automatic weapons fire on a Marine position and the leathernecks would respond. Then the infiltrators would move their fire several hundred yards either to the left or right, catching the infantrymen off guard. To counter this, the Marines devised what was termed "mad minutes." At any time, day or night, 106 recoilless rifles, 90mm tank guns and heavy machine guns would suddenly saturate any given area in the base with field fire. Certain sectors were selected at random utilizing these flat trajectory weapons to hinder the enemy's probing efforts. It was very effective.

Despite these measures, the casualties mounted. While covering the action, famed UPI photographer Dana Stone narrowly escaped injury when artillery shells whistled in. Another photographer, Henri Huet from the Associated Press, was pierced by shrapnel in both legs. Seven Marines died and 23 were wounded in that shelling. Several leathernecks awaiting medical evacuation were wounded three more times before a chopper could take them to the 3rd Marine Division hospital at Phu Bai.

Finally, by the end of September, the Communist artillery abated, and on **October 4, 1967**, MACV stated that the siege of Con Thien was over. "McNamara's Line" was put into position in the Con Thien area at great cost of men and materiel.

After the 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines, were relieved from the combat base, Lt. Col. Gorton Cook, CO, said it was like spending "time in the barrel." Other Marines had a more ominous reference to Con Thien—they called it "the meat grinder." Whichever name was used, Con Thien was certainly no "place of angels."

## NO FOXHOLE AT THEISTS

Incoming! Tom in combat, this warning means just seconds to find any obtainable shelter before enemy shells land. And for the Marines manning the desolate outpost at Con Thien, those seconds meant the difference between life and death.

There is nothing more terrifying than to experience the feeling of sheer helplessness during an artillery barrage. There is something impersonal about the deadly whine of the mortar fragments as they sear and hurtle out to victim's aim. These thunderous projectiles would hurl white-hot shrapnel everywhere, both large and small, ripping, tearing and slicing human flesh. Prolonged shelling of this nature can also be psychologically detrimental.

“I can’t stand that artillery, ” one shaken Marine confessed. “there’s no warning, no rhyme or reason to who gets hit and who doesn’t.”

While traveling between companies to hold religious services, Navy Lieutenant Leo Stanis, chaplain for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 4<sup>th</sup> Marines, had a rule. He never said Mass for more than 25 individuals at a time. He would state from the outset: “Men, before we start, look around you. In case we receive incoming, we don’t all want to jump into the same hole. Let us pray ...”

It is during these terrifying moments in combat that the old adage applies: “There are no atheists in a foxhole. ” And also when the comforting words of men like Leo Stanis are most needed. “Incoming at Con Thien many times makes us feel that the earth is removed and that the mountains are carried into the ocean, ” the chaplain said.

Marines there found solace in Stanis’ words. Anywhere he opened his Bible on “the hill of angels, ” that spot became his altar. And any time a Marine feared for his life, he was there to alleviate his dismay. He was truly a man of compassion.