

SOUTH VIET NAM

The Face of Victory

Aug. 27, 1965



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A new generation of Americans tasted major combat last week and passed the test. At daybreak one morning, three battalions of the 3rd Marine Division attacked some 2,000 crack Viet Cong troops holed up on a small neck of land just south of the Marine airbase at Chu Lai. By week's end the U.S. had fought its first large-scale battle since Korea and had won decisively. Smashed with the Viet Cong was the myth that the Red foe is invincible in the tangled underbrush of his home land; smashed also was the myth that the U.S. can't fight on land in Asia.

For weeks the marines had been receiving reports that the Viet Cong were preparing the peninsula as a staging area for an attack on the Chu Lai airbase. Marine patrols had been sent out on almost daily probes around the peninsula's five coastal villages, all named Van Tuong, and last week a recon company brought back word that a large new force of V.C. had just arrived from the south. Within 24 hours, "Operation Starlight" had begun.

Backs to the Sea. The marines' object was to trap the enemy between the river (see map) and the sea, and they used every trick in the book to pull it off. One company of leather necks crossed the river in LTVs to form a blocking force from the north. Two more companies made an amphibious landing on the peninsula's southern most coast, blocking off the south. At the same

time, three other companies were landed by helicopter in paddy-fields at the back of the peninsula to the west. With their backs to the sea, the Viet Cong were trapped.

Offshore stood the helicopter carrier Iwo Jima and the attack-transport Talladega, each carrying additional marines, plus two destroyers and the missile light cruiser Galveston, whose six-inch guns provided heavy artillery support. From the air, two squadrons of Phantom II jets and five squadrons of Skyhawks dropped tons of napalm and bombs on Viet Cong positions. It was a devastating punch, involving more than 5,000 U.S. ground troops; every one of them was needed, for the V.C. were tough and well dug in. "It was almost like Normandy," said one Marine commander. "They fought us from hedgerow to hedgerow. They weren't about to give up."

Call from Bull. Heaviest fighting began in the west, where Echo, Gulf and Hotel Companies of the 4th Marine Regiment's 2nd Battalion landed in helicopters and were immediately pinned down by automatic-weapons fire from a low ridge ahead of them. After two hours, Marine jets swooped in with rockets, and the battalion's tough commander, Lieut. Colonel Joseph ("Bull") Fisher, led a walking skirmish line up the ridge, with every third man firing from the hip. "Come on, you marines," yelled Bull Fisher as enemy bullets zipped past, "those ain't pinball machines firing at you."

Another company was choppered in to join the attack, and the V.C. pulled back and zeroed in their mortars on the ridge line. The first incoming round landed precisely on a marine's head, blowing him to pieces. Pinned down again, Bull called for a napalm strike. It turned the Viet Cong into charcoal sticks,

and suddenly enemy firing ceased. A medical-evacuation helicopter landed on top of the ridge and took away the wounded.

Walking Bushes. But the worst was still to come. Less than a mile ahead, directly in the path of Hotel Company, lay the Viet Cong regimental headquarters, just outside the Van Tuong village complex. As the Americans most of them under 20—advanced, they ran into an almost endless tangle of V.C. entrenchments: blockhouses, concrete bunkers, fortified hedgerows and tunnels. "They were all over the place," said one squad leader, "but we couldn't see them due to their camouflage. They had full-sized bushes tied to their backs."

When Hotel Company called up tanks, the V.C. knocked them out with .75-mm. recoilless rifles. An armored supply column got lost, found itself deep in enemy territory. Suddenly, from all sides of the column came mortar and heavy-artillery fire. Three shells hit the leading tank, and when its driver tried to squeeze out an escape hatch, he was riddled with bullets. Three Amtrak's backed into a deep paddy and bogged down; a fourth was knocked out when a V.C. dropped a grenade down its hatch. "O.K., men, we're marines, let's do the job," shouted one young corporal, but as he climbed out of his Amtrak to lead a counterattack, a bullet hit him between the eyes. The remaining marines finally made a stand inside two of the lumbering troop carriers; taking turns sharp shooting from their peepholes and splashing water on each other to relieve the sweltering heat.

By mid-afternoon a battalion of reinforcements from the two Jima was helicoptered in to join the Hotel Company assault, and more marines came ashore from the

Talladega at dusk. Still the Viet Cong clung to their positions.

Lit by the bitter, bright light of flares fired from the U.S. warships offshore, the battle for Van Tuong continued all through the night. One V.C. company tried to scramble down the cliffs and escape by sea, only to be blown to pieces by the Galveston's guns. Another company tried to break through to the west and was burned to ash by napalm. Finally, shortly after dawn, the leathernecks smashed the Van Tuong stronghold and slogged ahead toward their final goal, the beaches at the eastern end of the peninsula.

Smoking Scars. By mid-afternoon of the second day, all Viet Cong resistance had ceased. Boots, equipment and weapons were scattered haphazardly across the fields, and great black scars in the earth still smoked from napalm. The bodies of the enemy hung in pieces from trees and hedgerows or lay charred in their tunnels and caves. By week's end the marines had counted 567 Viet Cong dead, believed hundreds more were entombed in tunnels sealed with flame and explosives. U.S. Air Force planes killed an estimated 55 others when they attacked a band of 400 V.C. trying to sneak away from the peninsula.

The marines' death toll, although the heaviest yet suffered by any U.S. unit in Viet Nam, was less than 1% of the attacking forces. In all, some 50 marines were killed in the battle for Van Tuong, and another 150 wounded. And, reported one marine commander, "nearly 75% of them were shot in the back" from hidden V.C. positions they had passed without seeing.

The battle left the Americans with much to be encouraged about. In the past two weeks, the V.C. had suffered the most staggering casualty toll since they started the war: more than 2,100 dead, another 200 captured and an estimated 3,600 wounded. Moreover, Operation Starlight proved that by combining accurate intelligence reports, fast planning and careful selection of where and when to

fight, the U.S. can more than hold its own in Viet Nam.

The World Trap of the Harvest Moon

Dec. 17, 1965



The elusive enemy in Viet Nam rarely shows himself in force except to spring an ambush. So last week, in the largest joint Vietnamese-U.S. Marine operation of the war, the allies purposefully set out to be ambushed—and thereby lure the Communist ambushers into a giant ambush of allied design. The prey: some 3,700 veteran Viet Cong troops who have been roaming at will up and down the province of Quang Tin between the coastal Marine enclaves at Danang and Chu Lai. The province, for more than a year a hardcore Communist stronghold beyond the reach of government troops, is a paddy-checked producer of rice used to feed enemy troops. It is harvest time. And Viet Cong control of the region has made Route One—the natural north-south highway between Danang and Chu Lai—too hazardous for allied use.

"Operation Harvest Moon's" plan was simple enough. Vietnamese troops were to move deep into Quang Tin as bait. When the Viet Cong struck, waiting U.S. Marine units at Danang, Chu Lai and aboard the aircraft carrier Iwo Jima would helilift in to the rescue, surround, and hopefully wipe out the Viet Cong attackers.

Narrowing Horseshoe. The first part of the plan worked, but at fearful cost. The initial force, a battalion of Vietnamese rangers, was barely 15 miles west of the district town of Tarn Ky when a

regiment of V.C.s buried deep in bunkers and armed with .50-cal. machine guns and 81-mm mortars let loose at point-blank range. The battalion's two lead companies were virtually wiped out. The Marines dashed to positions south and west of the Viet Cong, while other South Vietnamese troops took up blocking positions. The enemy turned the flank of one Vietnamese infantry battalion and, coming up by surprise from behind, decimated the force. Meanwhile the Marines, working methodically through villages and scrub forest, tried to close the trap, while allied planes flew some 200 sorties and artillery pounded the Viet Cong. By week's end, some 6,500 allied troops, including three Marine and five Vietnamese battalions, had more than 3,000 Viet Cong squeezed into a nine-square-mile horseshoe.

Down in the Mekong Delta, South Vietnamese infantrymen flushed another hidden hard-core Viet Cong unit into fierce fighting scarcely 40 miles southwest of Saigon. The Communists blasted back with machine guns and 57-mm recoilless rifles. Saigon soon concluded that it had a veteran Viet Cong battalion at bay, ordered in the largest number of Vietnamese troops to be used in a single battle in the long war to try to encircle and crush the Reds.

Twelve-Hour Truce? While the fighting raged in the south, the U.S. mulled over a Viet Cong offer, broadcast over the enemy's clandestine radio, of a twelve-hour truce starting Christmas Eve. It might well be a trap: last year the Communists used a Christmas lull to take more strategic positions and to blow up a U.S. billet in downtown Saigon, killing two and wounding 107.