

The Battle for Con Thien

Submitted by James P. Coan

During the fall of 1967, the U.S. Marine firebase at Con Thien came under fierce bombardment by North Vietnamese Army units firing from caves and camouflaged positions within and north of the Demilitarized Zone separating North from South Vietnam. Con Thien, which translated means "the place of angels" in Vietnamese, is a piece of high ground indicated on military maps as being 158 meters in elevation. It is the highest hill between the Ben Hai River to the North and the Cam Lo River to the South. Whoever held Con Thien had a commanding view of the terrain for a dozen miles in all directions. It was a superb observation post.

The Hill, as Con Thien was called by the Marines, was first occupied by U. S. Army Special Forces and a small Vietnamese unit operating out of the ruins of a former French-constructed fort. In February, 1967, the North Vietnamese began shelling Con Thien with their artillery. In May, the Hill was turned over to the U. S. Marines, who launched numerous operations from there up into the southern half of the DMZ all the way to the Ben Hai River.

During the night of 8 May, a ground assault was launched by the NVA with the intent of overrunning the Marines dug in on Con Thien. The enemy lost 197 confirmed dead in that futile attack. Marine losses were 49 killed and over 100 wounded. The Marines resolved to fortify Con Thien's defenses in the event the enemy decided to attempt another such attack.

A massive operation in mid-1967 called Operation Hickory relocated all indigenous persons from the DMZ and Con Thien/Gio Linh areas south to the Cam Lo River, 10 miles away. This, in essence, created a free-fire zone called Leatherneck Square, which was anchored at each corner by Con Thien and Gio Linh to the north and Cam Lo and Dong Ha to the south. Anyone seen in the area that was not American military was assumed to be the enemy. The Marine Corps mission was to conduct counter-infiltration operations to deny this area to the enemy.

A key anchor in the anti-infiltration scheme known as McNamara's Wall, Con Thien was designated A-4. The *trace*, which was a bulldozed strip of terrain 600 yards wide, stretched from Con Thien to Gio Linh, 10 kilometers to the east. This cleared strip was intended to be sewn with anti-personnel mines and hi-tech listening devices as part of an overall system of interlocking firebases to deny the enemy a key infiltration route into the South through the Eastern DMZ.

All throughout that hot, dry summer, fierce battles occurred between the NVA and U. S. Marines in the vicinity of Con Thien. During Operation Buffalo in July, a company of U. S. Marines patrolling 2,000 meters northeast

of Con Thien in the Marketplace area, was ambushed by a multi-battalion NVA force, many wearing USMC uniforms and helmets. Only 27 Marines from Bravo Company, 1/9, walked away unscathed.

On 3 September, free elections were held for the first time throughout South Vietnam. From that day forth, a fierce enemy bombardment rained down upon The Hill's defenders. That marked the beginning of North Vietnam's campaign to besiege Con Thien and force an American withdrawal.

The next day, 4 September, Company I from 3d Bn., 4th Marines, encountered an NVA company south of Con Thien. Supported by tanks, the Marines routed the NVA who lost 37 killed.

On 7 September, Company I from 3d Bn., 26th Marines battled a large enemy force two miles south of Con Thien. Company K came to the rescue with tanks and, in the ensuing five-hour battle at the churchyard, 51 NVA soldiers were lost. 3/26 lost 20 Marines and corpsmen killed and 70 wounded.

Again on 10 September, 3/26 fought another battle in the same area with two battalions from the 812th NVA Regiment. The NVA made a rare frontal assault into the Marine lines in broad daylight. Heavy casualties were suffered by both sides. Marine losses were 34 KIA and 192 wounded, plus two tanks were destroyed. NVA dead totalled 144. 3/26 had suffered 40% casualties in those two battles.

During the night of 12 September, a reinforced NVA company probed Con Thien's northern perimeter, but were turned back with significant losses before they could penetrate the lines held by the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. Our intelligence indicated this was the prelude to a major effort to overrun Con Thien. Two additional Marine battalions, 2/9 and 2/4, were brought in to support the Marines holding Con Thien by securing their flanks.

The 1600 Marines at Con Thien faced an estimated 30,000 NVA troops hidden in the DMZ awaiting the signal to attack. Holding them at bay were the supporting arms on Con Thien, including a 105mm artillery battery, a 4.2" mortar battery, a platoon of five M-48A3 tanks*, a platoon of Ontos (small tracked vehicles, each mounting six 106mm recoilless rifles), a section of Army twin-40mm "Dusters", and a section of truck-mounted quad-50 machine guns (U. S. Army). In the event of a major attack, the concentrated firepower from other artillery firebases in the vicinity such as C-2, Cam Lo, Dong Ha, and Camp Carroll would be brought to bear. Also, a sizeable armada of B-52 bombers and other assorted U. S. Navy, Marine and Air Force fighter planes were poised to render around the clock air support if needed. A major ground assault never materialized, but the daily shelling continued without letup throughout September into the middle of October.

The main supply route from Dong Ha to Con Thien was washed out by a mid-September monsoon deluge. This made re-supply by helicopter the only possibility. Made miserable by the early monsoon rains, the mud-caked defenders of Con Thien persevered in their rat-infested bunkers and water-logged trenches, always alert for the dreaded cries of "incoming!" Hundreds of incoming rounds of assorted types and calibers blasted the Marines daily.

The worst day was September 25th, when over 1,000 rounds of incoming hit Con Thien. But, the beleaguered Marines fought back with a vengeance with the aid of supporting arms such as artillery, mortars, and air strikes at known or suspected NVA positions.

The siege appeared to lift in early October when the amount of incoming diminished sharply. The surviving Marines from 3/9 rotated off The Hill and were replaced by the 1st Bn., 9th Marines. Twenty-seven Marines were killed and over 600 were wounded by incoming during the 34-day siege. It was not the type of battle U. S. Marines were trained to fight. Highly trained and aggressive assault troops, the Marines were not accustomed to sitting in a defensive position, being shelled daily, awaiting an enemy attack. However, the Marines accomplished their mission, refusing to pull back from Con Thien, thus denying the NVA possession of the finest natural observation post along the entire length of the Eastern DMZ.

**The author, James P. Coan, was the USMC tank platoon commander at Con Thien during the 34-day siege. He spent a total of seven months operating out of Con Thien during his 1967-68 tour of duty in Vietnam. He and nine other members of his five-tank platoon received Purple Heart Medals for wounds received at Con Thien.*

Recommended for Further Study

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Semper fi!
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