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UH-34s fly over Chu Lai on their way to a vertical assault during Operation Texas. (USMC photo)

# Remembering Operation Texas

By Dan Bisher

**C**lose quarters combat resulted when 157 Marines of Company E, 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, the “Magnificent Bastards,” assaulted elements of the 1st Viet Cong Regiment and the 21st North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Regiment in the small hamlet of Phuong Dinh. Operation Texas, as part of Task Force Delta, started on the morning of March 21, 1966, near An Hoa, located about 6 kilometers south of the Chu Lai tactical area of responsibility (TAOR).

I was a lance corporal when I rode into this battle, serving as a 3rd Marine Division combat correspondent accompanying the lead elements of Company F, 2/4, aboard a MAG-36 UH-34 helicopter. Corporal Ken Henderson, a 3rdMarDiv photographer, rode with me. During our descent to the landing zone (LZ), Henderson looked like he wanted to upchuck. We were one scared fighter, writer and photo team.

Operation Texas is not listed as a great battle in the history of the United States

Marine Corps. Nonetheless, this search-and-destroy operation was a hard-fought engagement conducted with limited resources by undermanned units attacking a hardened, reinforced and entrenched enemy.

**A VMO-6 pilot radioed LtCol Kelley saying, “My God! I can’t believe it! They’re erupting from the ground! There are hundreds of them!”**

Lieutenant Colonel Paul “P.X.” Kelley, the 2/4 battalion commander—later 28th Commandant of the Marine Corps—noted in his foreword to the book “Images from the Otherland” by Kenneth P. Sympton, “Because of its relatively short duration, Operation Texas has never been given its rightful place in history. For those who were there on March 21, 1966, however, it is a day they shall always remember.

In the words of Major Ernie DeFazio, who was my executive officer at the time and who had landed on the beach at Iwo Jima as a young enlisted Marine over two decades before, “Texas was the longest and toughest day of my life.” I echo those thoughts, and my memory of that terrible, bloody encounter remains vivid.”

On March 19, 1966, the NVA 1st Regiment besieged South Vietnamese Regional Forces at the village of An Hoa. Intelligence reports suggested the enemy had been planning to attack an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) outpost in the Tra Bong Valley south of Chu Lai. Apparently, this attack and the gathered intelligence triggered Operation Texas. I do not know how or why the operation earned the name “Texas,” but the same action in nearby terrain was dubbed Operation Oregon by two rifle companies from 1st Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, which encountered heavy opposition, and Operation Kings by two battalions of the 9th Marine Regiment that initially saw light contact, according to official situa-





USMC

tion reports. The ARVN named the operation Lien Ket-26. These were different operational tags but essentially described the same battle.

When the UH-34s offloaded Co F, which landed first in an open field at about 11:15 a.m. on March 21, 1968, Marines scurried for cover. According to an after-action report that was printed in "U.S. Marines in Vietnam, An Expanding War 1968," "The entrenched enemy counterattacked by lobbing mortar shells into 2/4's position, along with a barrage of fire from AK-47s and 51-caliber machine-gun fire. Meanwhile, jets from MAG-12 along with armed UH-1E helicopters from VMO-6 provided suppressive fire for 'Fox' Company. After beating back attacks on the Landing Zone, Fox Company secured and held their perimeter."

Shortly after Co F's initial insertion, 2/4's battalion command group, Co E, and Co D, 1/4 (attached to 2/4), joined Co F on the ground. Co E moved out toward a tree line at the edge of the hamlet and attacked towards the east. Henderson and I hooked up with the battalion command group. We received orders to dig in and to make our fighting holes as deep as possible.

Following Co E's attack, according to official after-action reports, a VMO-6 pilot radioed LtCol Kelley saying, "My God! I can't believe it! They're erupting from the ground! There are hundreds of them!"



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**MajGen Wood B. Kyle, 3rdMarDiv commander, left, walks with LtCol Paul X. Kelley, CO, 2nd Bn, 4th Marine Regiment, following action during Operation Texas.**

Kelley repeated approximately those same words to those of us huddled in the command group. At about the same time, Co E slammed into heavily manned enemy positions being defended with automatic weapons, including big caliber machine guns at both ends of a long, deep trench.

The combined elements of VC and NVA waited for just the right moment before they opened fire, unleashing deadly enfilade up and down the line of attacking Marines. The right words for this action, an often-heard cliché about battles, were "all hell broke loose." Both sides threw





Marines from Co F, 2/4 secure the remains of Phuong Dinh following combat operations. (Photo by Cpl Ken Henderson, USMC)

grenades at close range across the trench line.

After moving a few meters away from the command group in order to get a better view of the action, I took cover behind a large pile of dirt located about 50 to 75 meters from the tree line. I do not know why that pile existed in an open field, but I thanked our creator while 7.62 rounds whistled around both sides. I tried to pull my helmet over my head and down to my boot tops. I could not do it, so I dug a deeper hole. Armed with only a model 1911 military issue .45-caliber pistol, I longed for my M14 that I had left back in our tent at Chu Lai. I felt naked and entirely vulnerable. Looking up into a beautiful azure sky on a cloudless day, I wished desperately that I could be somewhere else. The remainder of Co E established a heavy base of covering fire. One platoon fought its way through the hamlet's outer defensive perimeters. To the horror of the Marines, they discovered three additional interior defensive perimeters and mutually supporting bunkers with three strands of tactical communications wire. One group of Marines became trapped in or alongside the trench. They could not retreat backward to the open field from where they had initiated their attack. The



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Maj Sam Adams, 2/4's operations officer, holds one of the enemy's crudely constructed boobytrap holders.

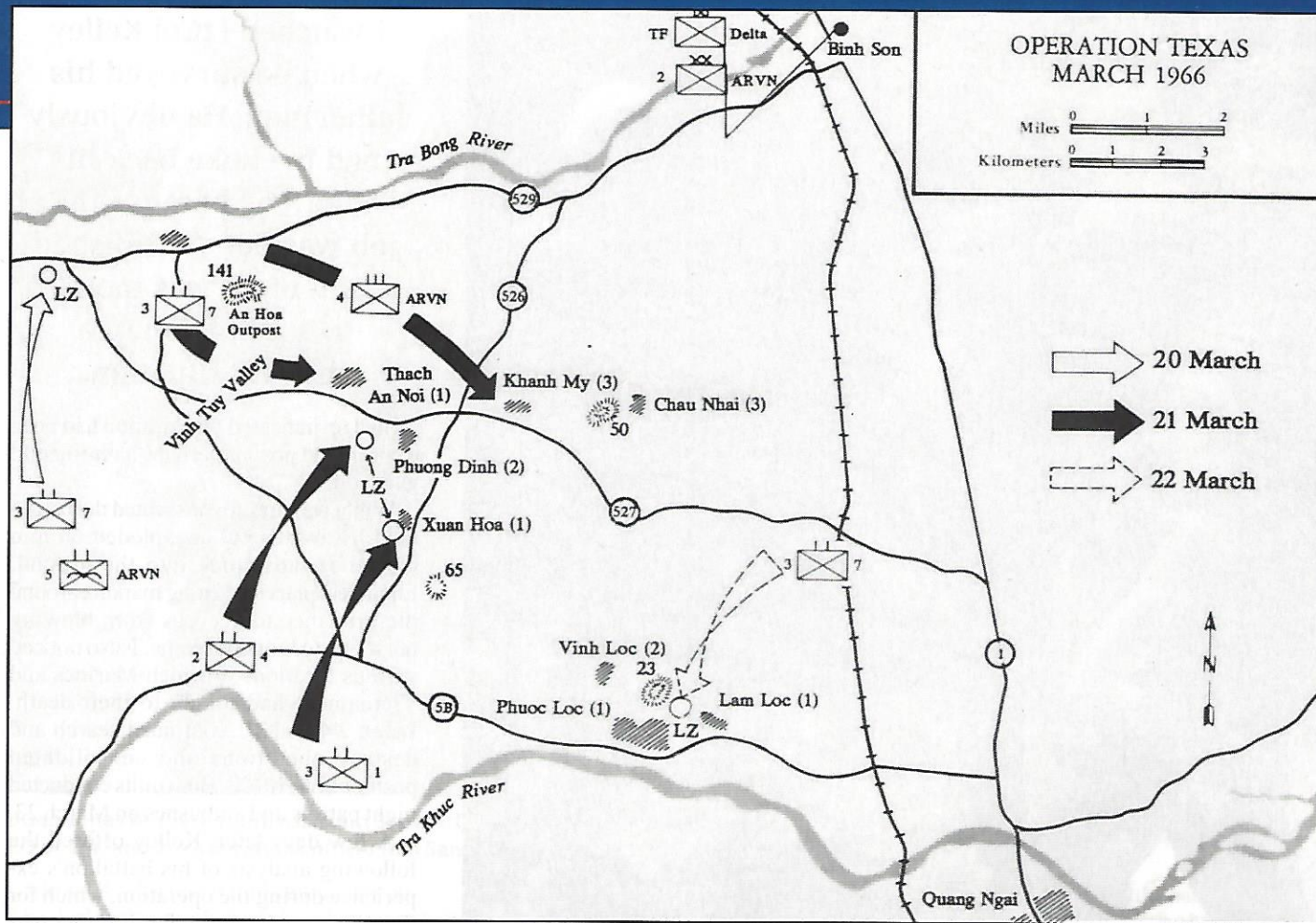
opponents were definitely not a bunch of part-time black-pajama VC. The Marines of 2/4 faced organized hard-core adversaries willing to fight to their deaths.

A loud, chaotic firefight continued along the trench and in the wood line at the southwest edge of the hamlet. We could hear orders being loudly shouted, both in English and in Vietnamese along with the painful cries of the wounded.

Running low on ammo, Kelley ordered Co E to withdraw to a covered position near the line of departure. Then he ordered Co D, 1/4 into the fray to relieve the pressure on Co E. Co D also ran headlong into extreme enemy resistance and could not advance, but the Marines provided sufficient supporting fire upon the enemy to provide a small measure of relief to Co E.

Commenting on the situation, Kelley later wrote in an after-action report, "Since ammunition was running low, I ordered Company E to withdraw to a covered position near the line of departure so that more artillery and air could be delivered on the target. At the same time, I ordered Company D (1st Battalion) to establish a base of fire to relieve the pressure on Company E. Company D also ran into heavy enemy resistance and was unable to advance, but the company was able to place





enough fire upon the enemy to afford some relief for Company E.”

Dug in on a modest rise about 50 meters west of the engaged units, Kelley and his command group came under a crossfire that killed or wounded 14 Marines. Kelley correctly assessed the situation as critical. To regain the initiative, he radioed for air strikes and artillery in a coordinated, all-out effort to support the besieged battalion. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) Tactical Air Control Center (TACC) reported it had diverted all Marine fighters and bombers to the operation. At the same time, artillery support for Operation Texas, according to “U.S. Marines in Vietnam, An Expanding War 1968,” was provided by the 3rd Battalion, 11th Marine Regiment commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Paul B. Watson Jr. Watson quickly assessed 2/4’s critical situation and added two new batteries, one 105 mm howitzer and one 155 mm howitzer to his group.

During an hour and a half continuous firing mission, 3/11 fired 1,346 rounds into the enemy positions at Phuong Dinh hamlet. When breaks in artillery fire occurred, A-4 Skyhawks and F-4 Phantoms flew 51 strikes against the enemy positions. Because the situation had become critical, pilots dropped napalm can-

isters exceedingly close to the front lines.

When the attacking aircraft swooped in to drop ordnance, I felt the ground shake. When the napalm ignited, intense heat rose from the jungle surrounding the hamlet and swept over our position. On top of that, I had to keep my entire body glued to the bottom of my fighting

**The enemy in well-constructed bunkers and 20-foot deep tunnels were not decimated by the preparatory attacks. Those tough enemy soldiers had to be rooted out.**

hole while pieces of shrapnel made nauseatingly awful sounds sizzling over my head. Now and then, a small, hot piece of bent and jagged metal fell into my hole. The Marines of 2/4 were having a bad day, but air and artillery had come to our rescue, even though it came in too close for anyone’s comfort.

Despite many air strikes with bombs,

napalm and accurate artillery fire, the results indicated that the enemy in well-constructed bunkers and 20-foot deep tunnels were not decimated by the preparatory attacks. Those tough enemy soldiers had to be rooted out and killed in close quarters by Marine infantry.

During this action, I witnessed .51-caliber rounds slam into an incoming UH-34 from HMM-163, causing it to fall out of the sky nose-down. The aircraft hit a paddy dike, flipped over and burst into flames. I later found out that a crew of three and seven Marine passengers died in the crash. I vaguely remember that the aircraft’s M60 machine gunner somehow survived, but was in critical condition. Suffering severe injuries, the pilot later died as well.

At some point during the firefight, I peered over the edge of my hole and saw two enemy soldiers running from the southwest tree line into the embattled trench line. Again, I wished I had brought my M14 rifle. They were totally out of range of my .45, which at that distance was no more than a popgun. My photographer, Ken Henderson, yelled at me, “Keep your head down, Bisher or dammit you’re gonna get zapped!” Ken had been with one of our close friends, a fellow





LCPL DAN BISHOP, USMC

The command group with LtCol Paul X. Kelley, left, contemplates assaulting VC/NVA defensive positions during Operation Texas.

combat correspondent, who had taken a bullet to his head while attempting to save a wounded Marine during an earlier operation named Utah.

With a slight lull in the battle, we carried wounded and dead Marines to incoming choppers while AK-47 rounds kicked up the dirt near our rapidly moving feet. I distinctly remember looking at the poncho-covered bodies of some of our Marines killed in action (KIA), including one who wore the chevrons of a gunnery sergeant. I watched LtCol Kelley when he surveyed his fallen men. He obviously had to choke back his emotions because the job was not yet finished and there was more to accomplish in a mop-up situation.

Then, late in the afternoon of the 22nd, 2/4 Marines took Phuong Dinh and began

searching the hamlet and destroying the enemy's remaining defensive positions. More than 100 fresh graves were uncovered. After searching the village, Kelley reported finding 168 enemy bodies, many in khaki uniforms, some wearing accouterments that marked them as high-ranking officers. Digging up those graves was a macabre experience that no one who was there would hope to remember. We found two ammo caches with 107 rounds of 60 mm mortar, 60 rounds of 82 mm mortars, lots of small arms ammo, grenades and many military-type documents. The small village contained elaborate honeycombed trench works with heavily constructed and well-positioned gun emplacements, tunnels and individual fighting holes. Everything the Marines

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turned up indicated this location had been a command post or perhaps a regimental garrison.

While we carefully inspected the battlefield, I saw several unexploded 60 mm mortar rounds stuck into the ground. Engineers placed warning markers around the ordnance to keep us from blowing ourselves to kingdom come. I also noticed various locations in which Marines and Vietnamese had fought to their death. Later, 2/4 and 3/1 continued search and destroy operations and consolidated positions on Hill 23. Both units conducted night patrols and ambushes on March 23.

A few days later, Kelley offered the following analysis of his battalion's experience during the operation, which for the most part, held true for the other participating Marine battalions: "The overriding problem in Operation Texas was one which had plagued the Marine Corps for many years—how to inflict maximum loss on a determined, well-entrenched enemy with complex defensive positions at a minimum loss to one's own forces. In the case of Phuong Dinh, over 2,500 rounds of artillery and innumerable air strikes with napalm and heavy airstrikes were called. The net results, however, indicated that the enemy in well-constructed bunkers in holes with overhead cover, and 20 feet deep tunnels was not appreciably hurt by our preparatory fires and had to be killed in his positions by infantry action at close quarters."

During 2/4's search of Phuong Dinh, on March 22, Major General Wood B. Kyle, 3rdMarDiv commander, visited the battle site. My contributions to the effort were slight and unimportant, but I did write an article about the operation for the publication *Stars and Stripes*.

Combat operations ended on March 24. Shortly after, Henderson and I joined 2/4 and the rest of the 4th Marine Regiment and embarked aboard USS *Paul Revere* (APA-248) leaving Chu Lai where the battalion had spent about a year to relocate north to the Hue/Phu Bai area as part of a planned movement of forces





LCPL DAN BISHER, USMC

**BGen Jonas M. Platt, right, assistant 3rd MarDiv commander and commander of Task Force Delta, confers with LtCol Kelley, center, CO of 2/4, and 2/4 operations officer Maj Sam Adams.**

within III Marine Amphibious Force. The 1stMarDiv had recently taken over the Chu Lai TAOR and that spread the 3rdMarDiv between Da Nang and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

During Operation Texas, the U.S. suffered 99 KIA and 212 wounded in action spread among the participating units. The

VC/NVA lost an estimated 280 to 405 KIA. Henderson and I escaped without physical injuries. Back in the rear with the gear, Henderson developed and printed unforgettable shots of the action.

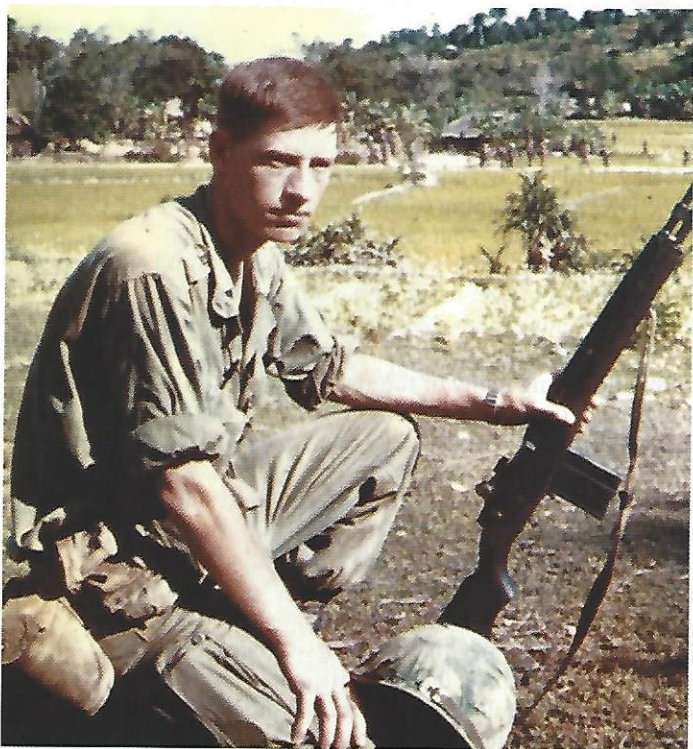
I completed my active duty with the rank of sergeant stationed at the Marine Corps Supply Center in Barstow, Calif.,

where I helped publish the base newspaper. I lost track of Henderson, but we found each other more than 40 years later via the internet. We never discussed Texas.

In August of 2016, I talked over the telephone with General Kelley who lives near Washington, D.C. We were able to get together for lunch when I visited the area and we talked for nearly an hour about Operation Texas. Gen Kelley said to me that he would never forget the Marines who did not make it out of that battle, some of whom were his good friends. I distinctly heard the heartfelt emotion in his voice and deeply felt that hot, dirty, bloody March day long ago in a faraway place.

A combined allied force of the 5th ARVN Airborne Brigade, 2/4, 3/4, 3/1, 3/7, and elements of 1/4 eventually overcame a determined and well-armed enemy. The cost of that action is etched in the names on the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. The officers, NCOs and the 2/4 Marines of Companies E, F, and H that fought in Operation Texas are forever etched into my memory and will be until the day I draw my last breath.

*Author's bio: Dan Bisher served four years active duty in the U.S. Marine Corps, including a 1965-1966 tour in Vietnam as a combat correspondent assigned to the 3rdMarDiv. This is his first story in Leatherneck since 1966.*



**Following combat operations during Operation Texas, LCpl Dan Bisher's exhaustion is evident.**

CPL KEN HENDERSON, USMC