

LZ Margo . . . The Dead Went Last

By Major General Jarvis D. Lynch, U.S. Marine Corps (Retired)

“They were typical grunts and corpsmen—normally unwashed, usually underfed, always overloaded and more often than not, tired . . .” A battalion operations officer reflects on one day in a very long war.

The 2d Battalion, 26th Marines rarely appears in the Marine Corps’ illustrious combat history. The battalion saw only brief service during World War II . . . long enough to land in the assault wave at Iwo Jima. Later, during the Vietnam War, it reappeared for a few years before its colors once again were returned to the museum curators.

Its daily Vietnam experience was usually far less stressful than the Iwo Jima operation but Vietnam had its days—and when it did, the late 1960s Marine of 2/26 experienced the horrors of war at the same levels of intensity faced by the generation that fought its way up the black ash terraces beneath Mount Suribachi. This is the story of one of those days: 16 September 1968.

Late 1968 found the 3d Marine Division serving in the extreme north of I Corps, the northernmost corps area in what was then the Republic of Vietnam, controlling ten infantry battalions: those of its organic 3d, 4th, and 9th Marine Regiments, plus 2/26. The division’s operational concept—an effective one—was as easy to understand as it was difficult to execute. Relying on few fixed defensive positions and even fewer infantry units to defend them, the defense was offense. Battalions stayed in the bush for weeks on end covering North Vietnamese Army (NVA) infiltration routes and, in general, looking for trouble. They moved constantly, on foot or by helicopter, and when they encountered an NVA unit all hell broke loose until it was destroyed.

Our battalion—I was the operations officer—celebrated the Fourth of July in an area near the coast called Leatherneck Square, where it was responsible for defending the square’s northern and western sides. In late July, the

battalion was reinforced to conduct amphibious assault operations and designated Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 2/26.

After training with the reinforcements, BLT 2/26 embarked in the ships of Amphibious Ready Group Alfa, including the famous World War II *Essex*-class carrier *Princeton* (LPH-5), now an amphibious assault ship. Initially, there was talk of landings just south of the Ben Hai river inside the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), but the pattern of NVA operations had shifted westward and the amphibious talk died out. An early-September landing well inland marked a temporary end to our amphibious experience and the beginning of service as one of the division’s maneuver battalions. Despite the change in mission, the battalion kept its reinforcements—among them a tank platoon, a 105-mm. artillery battery, and a 4.2-inch mortar battery.

Operational control shifted to the 3d Marines, headquartered at Camp Carroll, but several days of aggressive patrolling yielded no enemy contacts. About 7 September, the BLT’s field elements were trucked to Camp Carroll and staged for two contingencies: a helicopter assault into Landing Zone (LZ) Margo, a barren hilltop just south of the DMZ, roughly 17 kilometers west-northwest of Camp Carroll—or a shift of operational control to the 4th Marines and a return to Khe Sanh, where the battalion had served throughout the early-1968 siege.

To the relief of those who had served at Khe Sanh, the Margo operation prevailed—an assault into the LZ followed by movement north to the high ground on the southern border of the DMZ, where the battalion was to turn east and sweep the high ground. The orders emphasized the need to take prisoners.



DAVID DOUGLAS DUNCAN

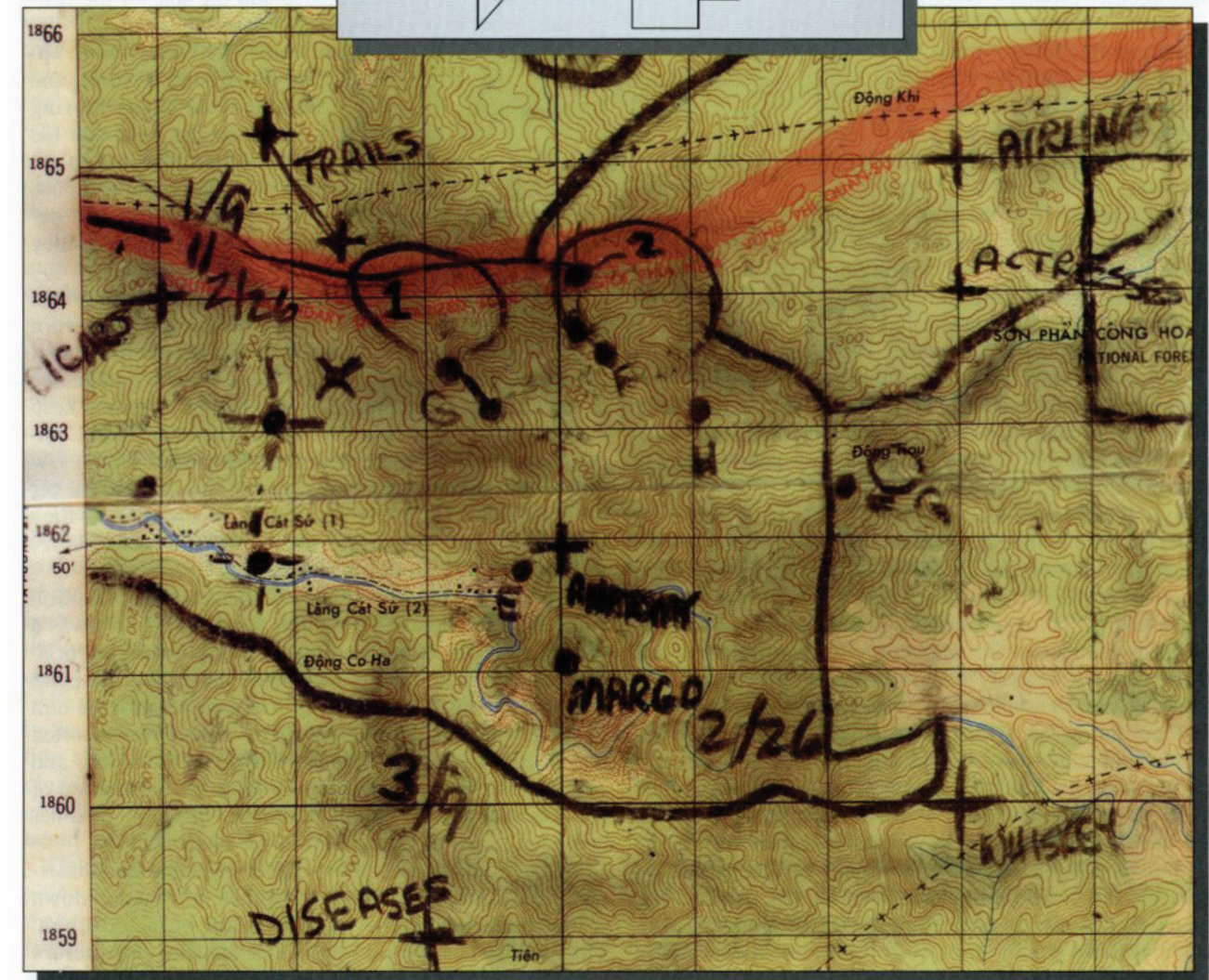
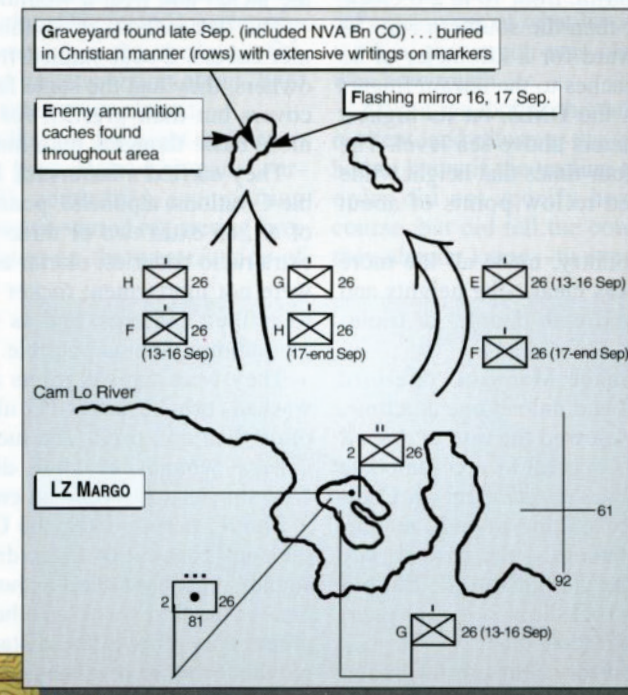
A typhoon brushed the coast and although the tree-covered mountains inland showed no outward sign of the rains, movement became impossible. The war ground to a halt. Finally, the weather began clearing and, on 12 September, the commanding officer of the supporting helicopter squadron flew in for the Zippo brief—a planning and coordination meeting attended by the battalion and squadron commanders plus their staffs.

Zippos were businesslike affairs. Lives were at stake and the assaulting battalion and supporting squadron had to reach complete agreement and understanding. On the plus side, Margo was easy to find because of its location on the north side of the Cam Lo River inside a distinctive kilometer-wide and more-than-kilometer-deep

U-shaped bend. Unfortunately, this plus was offset by several minuses—most of which stemmed from the tiresome but necessary subject of terrain.

Margo, which resembled a broken bowl, was smaller than the maps indicated. Using north as 12 o’clock, the rim from about 5 to 10 o’clock was the dominant piece of ground within the LZ. The southern side of the rim dropped sharply to the Cam Lo River, actually more stream than river at this point, while the interior slope provided good observation over the land-

Landing Zone Margo, once a fire support base, was under observation by NVA mortar crews. The 61 east-west grid line ran right through it.



ing zone and north toward the DMZ. A spring near the center of the zone fed a stream that had cut a deep draw, which meandered eastward and exited Margo between 2 and 4 o'clock. Margo's northern rim, from 10 to 2 o'clock, varied in height but was lower than the southern rim. Its exterior sloped sharply downward for a kilometer or so before reaching the steep approaches to the terrain fingers that led to the high ground in the DMZ. At its highest point, Margo was about 150 meters above sea level. The hills to the north were three to four times that height while the intervening terrain dropped to low points of about 50 meters.

It was rugged, forbidding country, made all the more so because—although Margo was clear—the heights and intervening valleys were covered with double- or triple-canopy forest.

The terrain inside the LZ made Margo a "one-bird zone,"—helicopters had to land and unload one at a time. This was hardly unusual, but it slowed the rate of assault dramatically. Margo also was too small to accommodate the entire BLT. Since the intent was to retain only G Company, the BLT command group, and the 81-mm. mortar, engineer, and reconnaissance platoons in the zone for any length of time (a few days), the size of the LZ did not seem to be a major factor. Its rock-hard soil, however, was another problem. Digging in took time.

Finally, there was Margo's history. For a brief period some months before, it had been used as an artillery fire support base—and the North Vietnamese were known to keep such positions under observation.

The terrain and history summed to the point that BLT 2/26 was landing, one aircraft at a time, into a zone that was:

- ▶ Too small to hold the entire BLT
 - ▶ Dominated by high ground to the north
 - ▶ Probably the subject of continuing NVA attention, at least to the point of registering mortar fires
- Not good . . . but not unusual.

Friday the 13th of September 1968, a date not lost on many of the Marines, marked the beginning of several days of cloudless skies and comfortable temperatures. By 0700, a thousand or so Marines and corpsmen were waiting quietly in the Camp Carroll pick-up zone smoking, talking, thinking, and maybe, especially in Golf Company—which was landing first—praying. They were grunts, a term coined in Vietnam. While it may have been a derisive term originally, the sting was long gone. With a certain pride, it is what they called themselves.

Believing that the chances of infection dramatically increased with the amount of clothing worn when wounded, they were deliberately underdressed. Boots, socks, and trousers were the standard; no underwear and, quite often, no shirt during the day. Their faded helmet covers sported an elastic band around the outside intended to hold camouflage material when the wearer sought invisibility in the bush. More often, it held either a main battle dressing for use if the wearer's luck turned bad or, in the case of optimists, a bottle of mosquito repellent. The graffiti on most of the covers addressed a variety of subjects but many tended toward the religious. David Douglas Duncan's striking photographs of 26th Regiment Marines at Khe Sanh captured the phenomenon.

They all wore flak jackets, never zipped because shell or grenade fragments taken in the wrong place could jam the zipper, making it difficult for the corpsmen to remove the jacket and treat a wounded man in the field.

The flak jackets, if anything, were dirtier than the helmet covers. Sweat-stained from long wear by a series of owners, they had the same faded color as the camouflage covers but their graffiti, for whatever reason, tended to more basic thoughts than those found on the helmets.

They carried a haversack holding a box of the venerable C-rations, a poncho, poncho liner, and most important of all, an extra two or three pairs of socks. They carried extra radio batteries; mortar ammunition, even though they were not mortar men; rocket launchers; grenades; at least four filled canteens; and as much extra rifle or machine gun ammunition as possible.

They were typical grunts and corpsmen, normally unwashed, usually underfed, always overloaded and, more often than not, tired. The lucky ones, those who avoided disease, wounds, or death, did not enjoy a hot meal or a cold shower for weeks on end.

Shortly before 0800, the CH-46s began landing in the pick-up zone with their distinctive whomping blade sound—unforgettable for those who rode them into combat. As the first wave launched, the sounds of the artillery preparatory fires in the distance and the roar of the fast-movers orbiting overhead helped ease the tension.

The actual landing was anti-climactic. There was no opposition, but it still took a long time. Echo, Foxtrot, and Hotel companies quickly assembled and began moving north. Echo struck out for a finger on the right that led to the high ground while Foxtrot and Hotel headed up another finger on the left. Golf Company, the command post, the 81-mm. mortar platoon, and others established defensive positions in the LZ and began digging in. Friday the 13th passed quietly.

On Saturday, 14 September, the companies continued moving north at first light. While there were well-worn trails in the area and occasional sounds of movement ahead, there were no contacts. Even so, the companies called artillery and mortar fires on possible targets to keep the fire-support system active. About mid-day, Hotel Company's point, leading the movement up the left finger, saw movement ahead and signaled the company to move off the trail and wait. Their patience was rewarded as they watched a North Vietnamese soldier, weapon at sling arms, striding down the trail toward them.

The entire point was in an excellent ambush position and easily could have killed him. That they didn't was a testimony to discipline and the emphasis on taking prisoners. Waiting until the NVA soldier had passed, the point man re-entered the trail and, in Vietnamese, ordered him to halt—which he did promptly. The capture was reported to the company commander, relayed to battalion, and within a matter of minutes the 3d Marines had learned of the potential guest speaker. Within the hour, the prisoner had been flown to Camp Carroll for interrogation.

Throughout the war, most higher headquarters consistently failed to pass timely intelligence information down to the battalion level where it could be acted upon. The 3d Marines did not make that mistake. Just before sundown, 2/26 learned that the prisoner had intended to

surrender because he had been at Khe Sahn when the Marines first arrived. Stating that he "had a love of life," he added that he wanted no more of anything remotely resembling that battle, a confrontation that clearly had a psychological hold on both sides. Of greater interest was his disclosure that the lead company on the northwest finger—Hotel Company—would be attacked at about 2000 that evening. All three companies were alerted.

Echo, Foxtrot, and Hotel halted for the night and began registering artillery defensive fires. Hotel Company's artillery forward observer (FO), controlling a supporting 155-mm. howitzer battery, had just started registering fires to cover a listening post located on the western side of the finger when the Marines manning the post reported hearing movement through the draw to their direct front. Since the registration rounds were on the way, they could only wait. Seconds later, as the roar of the explosions died away, the listening post reported screams and other sounds of panic. The FO immediately called "Fire for effect" and swept the draw with 155-mm. rounds. Other than moans and the sound of some movement in the draw, the remainder of the night was quiet.

15 September dawned clear and cloudless. Visibility was so good that Marines could watch outgoing 81-mm. mortar rounds until they reached their apogee. Again keeping the mortar and artillery fire-support systems active, E, F, and H companies resumed their slow and careful climb toward the high ground. Signs of enemy presence were plentiful but there was no contact.

The trouble started at noon, when a radio message from the 3d Marines ordered the BLT to pull its companies back to the LZ and prepare to shift to the operational control of the 9th Marines. The message was cryptic—it had to be because none of the radio transmissions with any of the battalions in the 3d Marine Division's area were secure. The encryption equipment of the day was too heavy to be carried in the field and, in any case, seldom worked in the heat and humidity of the bush. Problems with getting shackle sheets (code) down to company level precluded the use of even that decades-old means of encryption. Everyone assumed that the North Vietnamese heard most of the radio traffic.

Communications security problems notwithstanding, the order was received with incredulity. There was little doubt that the NVA would follow the companies back to the landing zone and less doubt that mortar and perhaps infantry attacks would follow. The three rifle companies

were told to halt and then to begin moving south to Margo; meanwhile, the order was strenuously argued. The regimental commander made it clear that the order stood—but it was clear that he agreed with the battalion's tactical assessment of what lay in store. Obedience would have a price, that much was obvious. What was not obvious was how much.

After a few hours, the three companies were told to halt, reorient, and return to the original northward advance. We had to know if the trailing-enemy theory was correct. The order did not specify how long to follow the reverse course, but did tell the company commanders something they already knew—to expect contact. It came quickly on

both ridges as small NVA units were surprised to find the Marines heading north again. Breaking contact, the companies once more turned south toward Margo. So far as 2/26 was concerned, the point had been proven. We reported this to the 3d Marines and forcefully recommended cancellation of the withdrawal order.

The reply was more enlightening than helpful. The battalion was told that its arguing and temporary resumption of the offensive had caused some difficulties (it wasn't phrased quite that way) and that there would be a 24-hour postponement. Further, however, the entire battalion was to concentrate in LZ Margo south of the 61 grid line—an east-west

map line that split the LZ—by a specified time early the next afternoon, 16 September. In the interim, the BLT was authorized to do whatever it thought best to prepare for the return to the LZ. The maneuver companies were turned north again; within minutes, they bumped into NVA troops following them down the ridge lines.

The enlightening section of the order was the part about moving south of the 61 grid line. It made no sense because the area remaining in the LZ south of the grid line was too small to accommodate the BLT in anything resembling tactical positions. Even worse, it did not permit a tactical defense of the LZ, especially against infantry attacks coming from the most logical direction—north. It was apparent that the order had emanated from a headquarters other than regiment or division, neither of which would have displayed that level of tactical ignorance. This, and the urgency associated with the 61 grid-line provision, led to the conclusion that an Arc Light—a high-altitude B-52 area bombing mission—was imminent.



The battalion's call sign was John Brown. This photo was taken on board the USS *Princeton* in early September as John Brown Three (the author, left) and John Brown One Four (Captain Ken Dewey, the ALO)—were standing by to go ashore.

To those steeped in the traditions of obedience to orders, it might seem strange, but the BLT now confronted a dilemma. If its tactical assessment was correct, the order returning the maneuver units to the LZ would result in some form of NVA attack; if, on the other hand, the Arc Light guess was right, there were other problems. The timing and target area were unknowns and, for security, would remain unknowns at the battalion level. Further, the tactically inane directive to move south of the 61 grid line indicated that the Arc Light was going in north of Margo—but close.

The dilemma was simple and stark: Comply with the order and risk NVA action—or move the companies toward Margo, retaining some semblance of tactical deployment north of the LZ, and risk the Arc Light. To those who have seen a proper Arc Light, the choice was easy. The companies were directed to hold in place and begin moving south to the LZ early the next morning. But as a concession to common sense, that portion of the order regarding the 61 grid line was interpreted rather loosely. We would defend Margo.

The weather on 16 September matched the brilliance of the days gone by. Today, the Vietnamese Bureau of

ably without effect. At the same time, there was a minor flurry of activity as the BLT shifted to the operational control of the 9th Marines and radio frequencies were changed and tested. That done, the chatter of the troops and clanging of their entrenching tools were the only sounds disturbing the quiet.

At 1500, Captain Ken Dewey, an F-4 pilot serving as the battalion's air liaison officer, was looking north toward the left of the two hills that had been the original objectives when suddenly a mirror started flashing—followed immediately by the soft “thunking” sound of mortars firing in the distance. Within seconds, Margo was blanketed with exploding 82-mm. rounds from several points on the compass, especially the northern arc. The battalion began its “time on the cross”—as the French put it in an earlier Indochina War.

The noise was deafening. Each explosion filled the surrounding air with black, stinking, greasy-tasting smoke. The mortarmen poured it on until 200 to 300 rounds had pummeled the Marines and corpsmen, a good percentage of whom had no protection beyond that of shallow fighting holes. As the fire eased, the LZ sprang to life and First Lieutenant Al Green's 81-mm. mortar platoon began counterbattery fires, an action that won them concentrated NVA attention.

Battalion machine gunners on Margo's southern rim saw some enemy mortarmen and began to engage at long range—attracting in turn their share of incoming. The exchange continued for a few more minutes until the mirror on the high ground flashed again. The incoming barrage slowed, then stopped—but the noise in the zone grew to deafening proportions as hundreds of rifles went into action. At first, it seemed as if the frustrated Marine riflemen were wasting ammunition on the out-of-range NVA mortarmen, but a radio query to First Lieutenant Bob Riordan, the Golf Company commander, revealed that from his position on the southern rim, North Vietnamese soldiers could be seen moving uphill to assault the LZ's northern side.

Then the rifle fire stopped abruptly and, within seconds, the southern rim and center of the LZ were alive with Marines running to the northern side. Their fires had been masked by those manning the northern slope defenses and they were leaving their own positions to get into the fight. The enemy never had a chance. The NVA commander who ordered the assault probably had fewer troops than he thought as a result of the previous contacts. In any case, the reaction of the defenders was too violent. No more than 20 minutes had elapsed. The cost to BLT 2/26 was more than 150 dead and wounded. The cost to the enemy was unknown.

At 1700, the mirror flashed again and the mortars went to work. Once more, rounds rained down on Margo—fewer this time and without an infantry attack—but the BLT's casualty list grew longer.

For the first time since the attacks began, medical evacuation of the wounded now seemed possible. It was likely



First Lieutenant Al Green (left) and Corporal Tony Olivadessa two months after LZ Margo. Green's 81-mm. platoon was hard hit by the NVA mortars; Olivadessa had been wounded at Khe Sanh.

Tourism would be touting the weather; on that day in 1968, however, it turned into a scene from hell.

Occasionally stopping to engage the NVA units following them, the three rifle companies slowly made their way back to Margo. Echo Company came in last. Commanded by Captain John Cregan, now a Roman Catholic priest, the company began the climb up Margo's northern slope about and by 1430 or so was beginning to take up its assigned defensive positions on the northern perimeter. Even after ignoring the order to stay south of the 61 grid line, there were too many troops in too small an area—and they had to contend with Margo's hard ground. Digging in took more time.

Early in the afternoon, there were ominous sightings of North Vietnamese soldiers with mortars fording the Cam Lo River west of Margo. Artillery fire was called, prob-

that the NVA had expended most or all of their mortar ammunition and would not interfere with the helicopter evacuation.

The casualties had been separated by category . . . emergency, priority, routine . . . and the “permanent routine,” a euphemism for the dead that had crept into the radio operators' lexicon. We hoped to MedEvac at least the emergency and priority wounded before nightfall. Several CH-46As and gun ships arrived about 1830 and the laborious process of loading the casualties, one at a time, began as soon as the lead bird touched down.

As always, the strength and example can be found in the casualties. I saw Staff Sergeant Doner from the reconnaissance platoon, covered with blood, as he was being escorted to the medevac staging area. He was refusing to leave, insisting that he was okay. I told him that he would leave.

Late the afternoon of 16 September, I watched as an uninjured Marine rapidly searched the rows of wounded, clearly looking for a friend. Suddenly, a large arm reached out and waved. “There you are,” said the first as he took the wounded man's hand and squatted down to talk. They held hands quietly until the medevac helicopters arrived.

The wounded Marine had been hit badly. I do not know if he survived. Nor do I know if his friend survived our subsequent encounters with the NVA. What I do know is that the wounded Marine was black and his buddy white. I remember thinking at the time how much better a people we would be if we were all like those two.

Recently, we have been told that the best and brightest did not go to Vietnam. When I heard that, I thought of those two Marines so long ago, the hardships they endured, and their obvious respect for each other. Maybe they were not the brightest. They were the best.

Realizing that there would be no other MedEvacs from Margo that night, the last pilot insisted on overloading his aircraft with wounded. Over his objections, the loading stopped and the pilot was told to launch. He must have been good. If not good, he was lucky. The overloaded -46 resembled a giant praying mantis as it struggled into the air, tail down, nose swinging back and forth in a wide arc, as though searching for escape from a trap. Finally, he nursed it a few feet higher, leveled, and began slipping sideways, just above the trees, down the slope that formed Margo's northern rim. Again, the LZ filled with Marines running north; convinced that the -46 was about to crash, they were moving to assist survivors.

The helicopter disappeared from view behind the trees and, an eternity later, came back into view, this time in full flight, nose-high on a southerly course, jettisoning fuel to lighten the load and clear the ridge to Margo's east. All movement stopped as everyone in the LZ watched the miracle claw its way over the ridge line, taking the wounded to safety.

Quiet settled over Margo. As the troops returned to their positions, the silence was broken by a single “thunk” off to the north. This time there was only one round, but it landed precisely where the MedEvac birds had loaded. It was “Charlie,” saying that he knew what had been done and could have stopped it anytime. He also was saying that he was a “pro” We knew that already.

The XXIV Corps Commanding General visited Margo the following morning. His worries about morale evaporated as he watched Marines improving their defensive positions. He then looked toward a large group of wounded waiting to be evacuated. In response to a question, he was told that they were the routine MedEvacs. Behind them were rows of poncho-covered objects. He looked at them, saying nothing, knowing what they were. Finally, a Marine broke the spell. “The dead go last, sir.”

Epilogue

The Arc Light went in five or six kilometers north of Margo on the afternoon of 16 September. Maybe too much had happened or maybe there was an unusually high number of duds. Regardless, it was unimpressive. Paradoxically, it hurt 2/26 more than it hurt the enemy.

Early on 17 September, Golf, Foxtrot, and Hotel Companies returned to the familiar trails, attacking north. Echo Company, having lost nearly 70 Marines in the mortar and infantry attacks, remained behind. The LZ was mortared twice that day but there were few casualties. Margo's final toll probably will never be known exactly. We evacuated more than 200 dead and wounded, some of whom doubtless died later. Before we left, we filled 18 helicopter external nets with packs, weapons, and other equipment no longer needed.

Eventually, after another long period of torrential rains, the attacking companies reached the high ground, where Golf found a graveyard—18 graves with markers aligned in rows—near where the mirror had flashed before the mortar attack. They excavated a few to confirm that it was a graveyard. They also traced the extensive writings on the markers and sent them to the rear for translation. The writings turned out to be a history of each of the casualties. We learned that we had gotten the NVA battalion commanding officer and much of his staff. The CO had been a soldier since joining the Viet Minh in the late 1940s; he was a professional. I think that whoever ordered all of the writing put on the markers did so, at least in part, so that we would not dig up their dead.

We stood by to attack to the west. It never happened. Near the end of September, the BLT moved by helicopter into another one-bird zone, this one in the DMZ just south of the Ben Hai River, nearly 15 kilometers north and east of Margo. In a series of assaults, BLT 2/26 routed an enemy force defending a headquarters complex and artillery positions. During the last assault, Marines of Echo and Hotel Companies were treated to the rare sight of North Vietnamese troops fleeing in panic.

The Marines and corpsmen of 2/26 formed a typical grunt battalion. They fought a dirty, unpopular war and they did it well. They never said that they were the best. All they said was that, if they met somebody better, they hoped he was on their side.

Major General Lynch, an infantry officer, was the operations officer (S-3) for BLT 2/26 during the action at Landing Zone Margo. He commanded the Marine Corps Recruit Depot and Eastern Recruiting Region, Parris Island, South Carolina, prior to his retirement in 1991. He is the Southwest Florida Area Coordinator for the State Comptroller.

Remembering Margo

By Marine Gunner James F. Doner, U.S. Marine Corps (Retired)

I got back to Vietnam in December 1967 and was assigned to the 3rd Force Reconnaissance Company, at Dong Ha.

I started as a platoon sergeant but rapidly became the platoon commander. The experienced staff non-commissioned officers conducted all the training. During the 1968 Tet Offensive, I showed my young Marines their first North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldier—and that the NVA were not invincible.

We had lots of leeway. All this was a long time before Margo, but it explains the special bond that I had with the platoon.

We were selected to go afloat with 2/26—I wondered if I would keep the platoon. I begged, borrowed, and stole new equipment at Quang Tri. We got a lot of help from First Lieutenant Carl Myllymaki III—killed 2 October 1968, the day before he was to go home.

Some of our original Marines were getting short, so we got less-experienced replacements—and then I turned over

the platoon to Lieutenant Pat McDonald. He had grown up in Queens, New York, and I had grown up in Brooklyn. We could have used more time to train but that was not to be. We landed north of the Cua Viet river after the big fight at Dai Do, trying to develop the same kind of action to no avail.

We silently bumped out in front on point or on the side as flank security. We ran some ambushes but I don't recall any small-arms action until we made contact with some

NVA in a trash dump; and they paid dearly for their peanut butter.

We were almost the last to go into Margo. Major Lynch wanted us to run a patrol down the creek bed east of Margo, cross it, and set up an observation post on the top of a little knob overlooking the creek. The crossing turned out to be too risky for some of the newer Marines. We couldn't get across, and I missed being in command—



Staff Sergeant Doner (standing, with arms crossed) and some of his Marines at Quang Tri in 1968 before going into LZ Margo. Corporal Cox, the point man, is front row, center.

I was very full of myself as a staff sergeant. We were in a 360° defense and the Lieutenant and I were talking when someone heard or saw some movement.

Using binoculars, I saw heavily camouflaged troops moving 200-300 yards south of us on our side of the creek; battalion called us in. The rumor was that we were going to get an Arc Light—a B-52 strike—on a bunker complex north of the LZ. We began to relax. We were setting up on the forward

slope of a hill east of the LZ when we learned that the Arc Light was on; the battalion was moving south of the 61 grid line to get clear. I decided we would dig in.

Echo Company was coming in up the steep slope from a stream north of the LZ. Lieutenant Mac and I were discussing the next day's operations when something exploded at the base of our hill. I hadn't heard any tubes firing because a CH-46 resupply was in progress and the LZ was noisy, but I knew what it was. Mac did too. "Haven't you ever been mortared before?" We laughed. Then we realized it was a correction round and broke for the CP.

A little second lieutenant brought me up short. "Well, Sergeant," he said, "if you think we're receiving mortar fire, work up a fire mission." Back down the hill, I estimated the range and, with my map in my hand and jugglin' in my mind the elements of a call for fire and a grid coordinate, I moved to where I could see Lieutenant Green and his 81s, set up on the south side of the LZ. I yelled "Fire mission." Green was up using a

megaphone—which he had liberated from the ship—and the troops were moving in the gun pits when I heard the NVA mortars. "Oh, Mother of God, they've got about 20 rounds in the air," I thought; there was a distinct break and it started again: "Bloop, bloop, bloop..."—the second volley was on the way before the first impacted.

I stood there with my mouth open. The first rounds hit the 81s and blew hell out of them. The NVA knew exactly what they were

doing. It was like the movies—people were flying through the air, mortar tubes were flying, the base plates were flying.

Whenever we were in contact, I seemed to move in slow motion, but I could see what had to be done. I turned to Corporal Cox—a tall, raw-boned, smart point man who had been with us for nine months—and said, "Cox, get the gun." Recon did not rate machine guns... but pure recon had not been the name of the game for months: the game was contact. In essence, we had been running long-range combat patrols, and we had "requisitioned" some firepower from an Army unit that was a bit lackadaisical about weapons security. My Marines knew that I wanted a collapsing-stock M16. They brought me one—plus a lot more, including an M60 machine gun. We put it all to good use.

Lance Corporal Locke, a former infantry machine gunner, had volunteered to carry the gun. He carried it—loaded with 100 rounds—plus his own gear, plus 200 rounds in each one of the pockets of his ARVN rucksack. He was a horse. Platoon members carried another 100 rounds in their rucksacks. None of that crossed-bandoleer stuff, which is a sure sign of an undisciplined unit. We practiced throwing ammunition to the gunner while prone—we never stood up.

Years later, I learned that when Cox asked for the gun, Locke said, "No way. He must mean he wants me." It was taking too long and I came up the hill. All this time, the NVA were mortaring the perimeter and working over Echo Company as it climbed the hill. Rounds were going off right in the middle of them—impacts on their helmets, their bodies, their flak jackets. It was gruesome. I grabbed Locke and ran him down to where we could get plunging fire on the reverse slope of the hill to our north.

I could see in my mind's eye where the mortars had to be—in a linear position, along the reverse slope, and most likely staggered. I watched the tracers—we were having some effect but we didn't have

enough elevation on the gun. I grabbed the bipod legs and lifted the gun over my head. Locke sat and leaned back to sight while I moved the barrel where I wanted the fire to go, and told him "12-round bursts, 12-round bursts!" Whether the NVA didn't like it, or it was just our turn, they stopped firing on the LZ and corrected over to us with about 25 rounds that knocked the hell out the platoon and blew Locke and me down.

I woke up lying on my back. I had two arms and two legs and I could see—I felt I was ahead of the game until I saw blood pumping out of my biceps and I remembered the training film about arterial bleeding. Locke was unconscious when I rolled him over—the rounds had shredded his face. The gun was down in the mud and twisted. Then the mortars shifted back to the LZ and Echo Company. One of my kids saw me bleeding and yelled for a corpsman.

My own corpsman—a super new guy named David Eisenbraun, from Youngstown, Ohio—was at that moment giving his last. He was bandaging a Marine when he succumbed to his own wounds and died. Somehow another corpsman pulled me in a hole on top of Lieutenant Mac, knelt on my chest, and whipped out his tourniquet. I asked him to skip it because I was afraid I would lose my arm. He agreed to try a pressure bandage but said that if it didn't work he was going to use the tourniquet. He put the bandage on and pulled it tight, tied it off, and a miracle happened—it clotted. He put more bandages on top of the first one. I never got to thank him—he just disappeared.

The mortars stopped as abruptly as they had started. Lieutenant Mac and I looked at what we had left. It was just terrible. The corpsman wanted me to go to the aid station; as I struggled up, I heard a Staff NCO whom I knew screaming—he finally died.

I was bleeding from head to foot. I had fragments everywhere. The medical people only went after the really big chunks and took them out. When I have a chest X-ray I

wait for the reaction because they go nuts when they see the shrapnel—one piece resting on my larynx, another piece high in the chest, a couple down low in the chest, some down over my gut.

They were pulling guys into this makeshift field hospital on the reverse slope—I saw Major Lynch near there, on the radio running the CP. I had stopped bleeding and no one was paying any attention to me. I went back to the platoon and told what was left of the team leaders what needed to be done. They were in tears. We were feeling sorry for ourselves when here came some NVA, in a skirmish line, climbing out of the woods at the base of the hill!

The troops got on line and we threw some grenades at them. They didn't seem as zealous as the guys we faced in 1966. In any event, they turned around and faded back into the trees. I don't remember if we ever got a body count.

In the aftermath, Lieutenant Mac and I got back together. We discussed the platoon, said a few things that needed to be said to one another, and he walked me down to the LZ. We stood there among the wreckage—the LZ was pock-marked by mortar fire and strewn with bodies and equipment. I'll never forget the casualties lying wrapped in ponchos with boots sticking out. When we were forming, one of the Marines told me that he volunteered because it was a small unit and he wouldn't have to see bodies stacked. I remembered this and yelled not to put them on top of one another.

Lieutenant Mac and I shared a can of beer that appeared somehow. I told a distraught Marine, "Marines don't cry," and got on the last helicopter. Two hours later, they repaired my arterial tear on the USS *Repose* and stitched me up.

But I have never been repaired, and I still think about what happened that day. Marines do cry.

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