



Marines are different from other men-at-arms, which is why some of the dust from Dewey Canyon joined the soil at Parris Island, where for many Marines the difference begins.

Col Barrow salutes departure of Ninth Marines from Vietnam. Two months earlier he commanded the regiment at Dewey Canyon.

Operation Dewey Canyon

by MajGen Robert H. Barrow

The following remarks were made in 1974 at a reunion commemorating the fifth anniversary of Dewey Canyon. MajGen Barrow was then Commanding General at Parris Island.

As I began the preparation of my remarks for this occasion, I broke out one of my old maps of the Dewey Canyon area of operations. Apparently folded away in haste, it yielded a considerable amount of dust, much of which clung to my hands as only Vietnam dust can do. I did not at once try to brush it away—this dust of Dewey Canyon. I stared at it for some time and thought about those 130 young Americans who fell in the dust of Dewey Canyon, never to rise. I thought of the 932 other gallant Americans who spilled their blood on that dust. I thought of us, of those who surely will never see that dust again, and I thought of those on whom the dust clings now.

I thought long of Dewey Canyon and of the brave men who fought in that extraordinary battle, regarded by many as the most unusual, challenging, and successful large-scale operation of the Vietnam War.

Finally, when I arose and washed that clinging dust from my hands, I reflected that it was most fitting that it would join the soil of Parris Island—where Marines are made, where much of the success of Dewey Canyon was rooted.

I thought long about that too—how Marines are different from other men-at-arms and how that difference endured and prevailed in Dewey Canyon. And so, there is a little bit of the dust of Dewey Canyon at Parris Island, where for

many Marines the difference begins.

Five years have passed since the 9th Marines and those units and detachments which reinforced it or supported it entered that area of the Annamite Mountain Range where the Da Krong and A Shau Valleys almost meet, separated by a mountainous complex towered over by Tiger Mountain, 4,029 feet high. A strange, forbidding, but even beautiful area—a political divide separating South Vietnam and Laos and a geographical divide separating two watersheds. The Da Krong, part of one watershed, in the beginning flows east to west, then north to a point near Khe Sanh where it joins the Quang Tri in its flow eastward to the Gulf of Tonkin. Several small tributaries of the Rao Lao, part of the other watershed, flow generally south to the Rao Lao which flows generally southwest to join other rivers ultimately flowing into the Mekong, which there forms the boundary between Laos and Thailand.

Yes, five years have passed since we fought in that place. Plenty of time to give rise to a number of questions concerning Dewey Canyon, some of which I will attempt to answer tonight.

What did Dewey Canyon accomplish? Our Presidential Unit Citation states that "The North Vietnamese Army Spring Offensive in the I Corps Tactical Zone was preempted." Note that the citation doesn't say that an attack



Marines of 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines move up battle-scarred slope in northern A Shau Valley.

against Hue or an attack in the northern part of the I Corps Tactical Zone was preempted, but rather that the "Spring Offensive in I Corps Tactical Zone" was preempted. We know that the North Vietnamese Army mounted a major offensive every spring. None was launched in the spring of 1969—proof indeed that Dewey Canyon succeeded in destroying that capability. If Dewey Canyon had not been undertaken, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces would have had to fight the enemy at a time and place of his choosing. The punishment inflicted on the enemy on the battlefield was spectacular and we know the measure of that. What this action prevented the enemy from doing is not measurable, but it is reasonable to assume that anyone close to the Vietnam War would understand fully the meaning of "Spring Offensive Preempted."

What can professional military men learn from Dewey Canyon?

Nothing that you shouldn't already know, especially if you read military history. In the long history of warfare there have been many other actions as exceptional as Dewey Canyon. All such uncommon events have had in common—opportunity seized, extreme conditions of combat, capable and brave men, and success.

As to lessons learned, Dewey Canyon may not be a useful guide for the future. Warfare changes as weapons, equipment, tactics, place,

and participants change. The lessons learned from an earlier experience may not bring about or even support change, or even be able to provide the wherewithal to keep up with changes when they occur.

Dewey Canyon was a dramatic action. In 1862 Jeb Stuart, with 1,200 men, rode around McClellan and his 100,000. That was a dramatic action, but it didn't lead to everyone becoming mounted and riding around the enemy. And surely, military men shouldn't have to *learn* about boldness and audacity from Jeb Stuart.

Lieutenant Colonel Ray Davis and the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines' famous linkup with Fox Company in the enemy-infested snow of North Korea was a dramatic action. This didn't lead to others becoming expert in surviving and fighting in bitter cold and snow. And surely, military men shouldn't have to *learn* about endurance, determination, and raw courage from Ray Davis, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, and Fox Company.

However, those who persist in studying Dewey Canyon should look especially to the nature of the men who participated in that operation. Inspiration will reward them for the effort. For those of you who fought in Dewey Canyon, glory is your recompense. As far as I am concerned, we need do no more with Dewey Canyon than that which we are doing tonight—

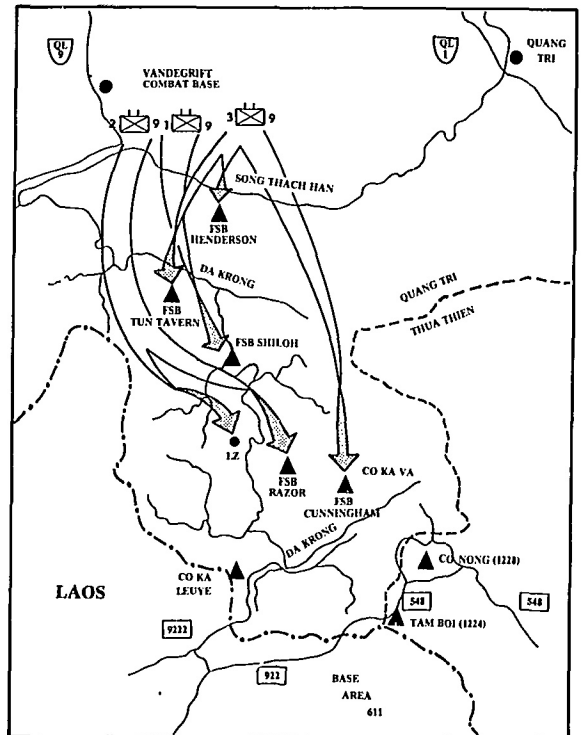
recall it and honor it.

From those who were not a part of it, the question is often raised: "What were the conditions of combat in Dewey Canyon?" In a word, they were extreme, and in large part they account for the unusualness of the operation. The greater the obstacles and adversities in an operation, the more spectacular the success. That was Dewey Canyon. For a brief moment let us review some of the difficulties which had to be overcome:

• **Location.**—This I have already touched on. The problem here, which was largely a factor of time and space, can best be understood if I remind you that the geographic center of our activity was in excess of 30 airline miles from Vandegrift Combat Base, Dong Ha, and Hue. I need not dwell on the effects of this great distance on such matters as reinforcement, resupply, medical evacuation, and radio communications. We were certainly in no position to receive assistance from the traditional "adjacent unit." We were totally dependent on helicopters and they, in turn, on good weather. Our proximity to Laos presented us with certain constraints and the enemy with sanctuary, two conditions which posed a continuous problem of potentially great magnitude.

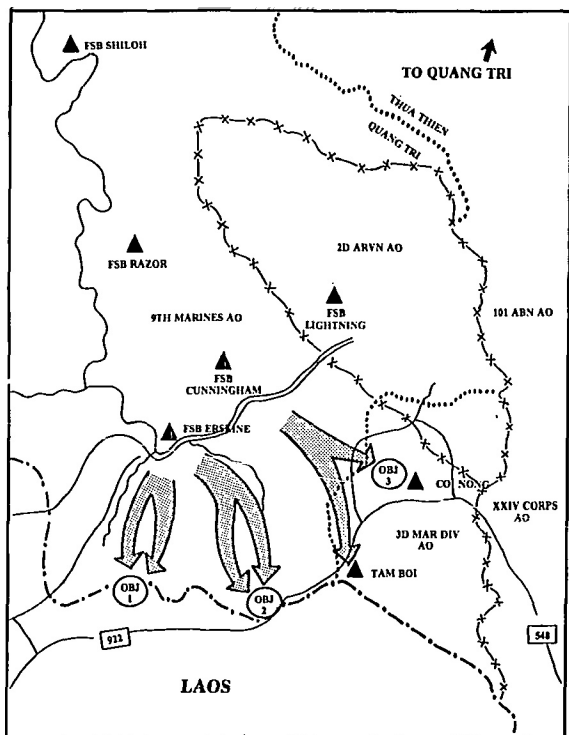
• **Terrain.**—The rugged, often jungle-covered mountains in the area described in general earlier presented as inhospitable and formidable a battleground as any—anywhere, anytime. Furthermore, it was ground defended by a determined enemy. Perhaps I can partially describe the setting, the individual physical difficulties, and the problems of attack by reminding you that during the phase of movement to and attack on our final objectives, attacking forces fought upward from elevations of approximately 600 feet in the upper Da Krong Valley to heights in excess of 3,600 feet in the area of our final objectives, a horizontal distance which averaged about 4 miles.

• **Weather.**—Weather was the factor of greatest influence during Dewey Canyon. It was completely unpredictable from day-to-day and within a day. Extremely thick and low cloud cover and ground fog were common conditions. Weather affected fixed-wing air support, medical evacuation, replacements and reinforcements, and, of course, resupply. I remind you that we had one 10-day period in which no resupply occurred. There were several 3- and 4-day periods of weather that precluded helicopter operations and numerous 1-day and ½-day periods of such weather. I would estimate that we experienced such unfavorable



weather over 50 percent of the time. The bad weather was in all respects a second enemy for it repeatedly severed our long and tenuous line of communication. The inability to resupply led to short rations and for some units no rations for a day or two. Infantry ammunition, radio batteries, and water were a constant resupply problem. On several occasions, the on-position artillery ammunition levels were critically low, requiring rigid restrictions on artillery fire. Unfavorable weather at times stalled or slowed the momentum of our attack and robbed us of our options. Meanwhile, under such circumstances the enemy skillfully improved his defenses, repositioned his artillery, reinforced his forces, and probably took heart from our misfortune. On a day-to-day basis, commanders at all levels were required to weigh carefully the affects of weather on their operations, reducing or increasing the intensity of such operations as the weather dictated. To really understand the role played by that enemy, weather, one would have had to have been there.

• **Enemy.**—It is our best estimate that enemy opposition in Dewey Canyon consisted of ma-



for elements of two infantry regiments, an artillery regiment (including one antiaircraft artillery battalion), and a regiment of rear services and transportation forces. His defense was well organized and formidable. His resistance was determined. He reinforced areas under attack. He frequently counterattacked with small units. He launched sapper and conventional attacks against some of our fire support bases. He made extensive use of his artillery, rockets, and mortars. He was well supplied. He was favored by weather and terrain. If for no other reason, his enormous stockpiles of weapons and supply gave him good reason to stand and fight. He was strong and he fought hard.

But now, the most important question of all—What made this spectacular success possible? My answer is in six parts:

First: Unit integrity.—In July 1968, unit integrity was restored in the 3rd Marine Division. Regimental size forces no longer consisted of a regimental operational headquarters and several unrelated and ever-changing infantry battalions. The 9th Marines became just that—the 9th Marines—and wherever we operated we

could always count on the support of the 2d Battalion, 12 Marines; “C” Company, 3rd Engineer Battalion; as well as other regular members of our team. Unit cohesion, teamwork, cooperation, and esprit flourished. We all became well acquainted.

Second: Experience.—We were experienced, which relates in part to the matter of unit integrity. As a team we had for many months operated almost exclusively in the rugged mountains of Quang Tri Province. As a consequence, we were mentally and physically prepared for the rigors of Dewey Canyon and brought to that operation numerous techniques and skills in the conduct of mountain warfare, including those related to helicopterborne operations and employment of the fire support base concept. We had learned to be quick, in planning and execution. I remind you that Dewey Canyon was planned, including command reconnaissances and support arrangements, and launched in five days. The force that entered Dewey Canyon was about as ready as any force could possibly be.

Third: The objective.—The basic purpose of Dewey Canyon, the objective, was well conceived. Success in war must have opportunity and more often than not the best opportunities are made. Dewey Canyon was conceived and launched pursuant to the objective well established in the 3rd Marine Division, that the enemy would be attacked wherever and whenever he appeared. We observed a simple truth—carry the attack to the enemy.

Fourth: Support.—I don’t draw any fine distinction between those supported and those supporting. If you had anything to do with supporting the operation, you were a part of it. The support of Dewey Canyon from within and from without was magnificent. Time and my words are inadequate to describe this support. Our division and corps commanders encouraged us, expressed their confidence in us, and inspired us by their presence. The artillery, in a word, was superb. Helicopter support from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and the 101st Airborne Division was outstanding. Fixed-wing aircraft support and the B-52s made a great contribution. Those responsible for resupply, reconnaissance teams, airborne observers, engineers, communications personnel, medical teams, intelligence personnel—these and other detachments and individuals performed superbly.

Fifth: Superb execution.—Dewey Canyon was extremely well executed. In my judgment, it was virtually flawless. Throughout, you

grasped the essentials of the problem, decided quickly and properly the actions to be taken, adapted your skill to the realities and opportunities of the moment and pressed on to decisive results.

In the planning and execution of an operation no one really ponders over the principles of war. In my opinion, the principles of war are a combination of common sense and military knowledge, instinctively applied during an operation. Their real value lies in the critique of an operation, as a measure of how it was conducted. Some battles have been won in spite of one or more principles having been transgressed, others have been lost in spite of all principles having been observed. In Dewey Canyon, all of the generally accepted nine principles of war were observed. A very quick review will give you a measure of how well you performed:

The Objective: This has already been discussed and needs no analysis. We set out to find him, fix him, and fight him; we adhered to that objective only and pursued it with great determination. The essential objective of any force is to take the offensive to the enemy. This we did.

The Offensive: No decisive results can be expected without taking to the offensive. In Dewey Canyon the offensive was applied in two ways—one, the act of launching an operation 30 miles into the heart of enemy territory; the other, the day-to-day offensive actions taken against him once we established ourselves in the area.

Surprise: It appears that the enemy had deceived himself into believing that U.S. forces would not be so bold as to enter that remote area of Dewey Canyon. We didn't deceive him, he deceived himself, as his actions revealed. Surprise is often the child of audacity, and together they often achieve what ordinary means fail to achieve. That we did what we did was a complete surprise to the enemy, a fact borne out by the enormous quantities of ammunition, weapons, and supplies captured or destroyed.

Mass: Under circumstances which offered temptations to do otherwise, we concentrated our forces at the decisive place. To this we added maximum supporting fires, another element of mass. Altogether, at the point of decision, we were superior.

Economy of Force: Our force was perfectly proportional to the mission to be accomplished. You don't use a pocket knife to cut down a tree or a sledge hammer

to crack pecans. We didn't need more force for our task and no force was wasted. Forces were phased into the battle over a considerable period of time, always precisely where and when needed. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the division's enormous area of responsibility minimum force was employed commensurate with the absolutely minimum requirements. That too was economy of force. Incidentally, the commitment of the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines (-) to the operation is an example of



4.2-inch mortars support 9th Marines.

economy of force.

Mobility: Mobility does not necessarily mean speed, although quickness was a hallmark of our force. We had learned not to be ponderous. Mobility is not something tied to machines; however, helicopters did give us much of our mobility and at the outset maximized the potential for audacity. Mobility is most often what a force does on foot, and in this you were magnificent. Finally, to me, flexibility is a part of mobility. Most assuredly you were flexible, changing your plans and execution accord-

ing to circumstances.

Security: Dewey Canyon has been described as a hazardous undertaking. Few challenges are without danger; however, the description, "hazardous undertaking" implies excessive risk. This in turn suggests some possibility of failure—something that never entered your mind, for you were positive thinkers and you were positive doers. Yes, much of our security in Dewey Canyon rested on your initiative and spirit of confidence.

Simplicity: Some of the simplest things in life are the most difficult. Therefore, we should not draw any wrong conclusions



about difficulties and simplicity in Dewey Canyon. It was a difficult operation, but simplicity applied to our objectives, scheme of maneuver, the entire execution.

Unity of Effort or Cooperation: This needs no elaboration. In a word—we were as one.

Sixth: Extraordinary men.—And now a final answer to the question "What made this spectacular success possible?" This extraordinary operation was made possible by extraordinary men. If you haven't guessed it already, that is the central theme of my remarks.

In May 1863, General John B. Hood wrote to General Lee expressing the belief that the

Army was capable of even greater feats than it had performed. Lee answered:

I agree with you in believing that our army would be invincible if it could be properly organized and officered. There never were such men in an army before. They will go anywhere and do anything if properly led. But there is the difficulty—proper commanders—where can they be obtained?

With respect to the men in Dewey Canyon, I echo General Lee's estimate—"Never were such men in an army before . . . They will go anywhere and do anything." With respect to the commanders, officers, and I add, staff noncommissioned officers, I do not echo his lament. We had them. You were outstanding. But, of course, you had always been outstanding. That is how you remained in our force or got there in the first place.

What did these men bring to Dewey Canyon? Heart! I am reminded of an old saying, attributed to Marshall Saxe: "The human heart is the starting point in all matters pertaining to war."

Heart—the whole personality—emotional functions such as enthusiasm, character, spirit, sensibility, temperament, and courage.

The more difficult a situation, the more difficult are the decisions to be made, and the greater the need for decisiveness. You were decisive. Your heart was in it!

You were undaunted by adversity. You kept your heart when lesser men would have lost theirs.

You met the unexpected with prompt and proper action. You always did what had to be done. You keep the initiative, because your heart was in it!

In Dewey Canyon there was an equality of existence among the leaders and those led. You shared the common dangers. Your heart was in it!

With calmness and fortitude you met every challenge, every danger. You had great courage. Your heart was in it!

I never issued an order that was not willingly, enthusiastically, and completely obeyed. You were dependable. You were *Semper Fidelis*—"Always Faithful"—To Corps, Country and those about you. Your heart was in it!

There is heart in a military force too, as there is in the men of that force—the former being the sum of the latter. That force which fought so valiantly and long in Dewey Canyon had a heart for combat unsurpassed by any other force—anywhere, anytime.

I thank you—and God Bless You! USMC