

The 9th Moves Out

Story and photos by SSgt Bob Bowen, USMC

Utah Mesa, a joint U.S. Marine, U.S. Army and South Vietnamese Army operation, was in its fourth day when a rumor that the 9th Marine Regiment was leaving Vietnam began stirring up interest in “Alpha” Company, 1/9.

“No one believed it,” said Private First Class Jim Brondyke of San Jose, Calif., “but then a few days later we were told officially that we were going to leave Vietnam and go to Okinawa. You should have seen the morale boost! We could have humped another 30 miles.”

Before Utah Mesa ended July 9, the 9th Marines got their chance to hike “another 30 miles.” The Marines also got a crack at the enemy. When the final tabulation was made, 309 NVA had been killed by the combined force, seven had been captured and 114 individual and 31 crew-served weapons had been taken out of enemy hands.

Defeating the enemy on his own ground was nothing new to the 9th Marines. The regiment participated in 37 large-scale combat operations during its four years and four months in Vietnam, beginning with the arrival of Battalion Landing Team 3/9 on March 8, 1965.

The landing at Red Beach, just north of Da Nang, marked the beginning of active participation in the war on the part of the United States. Prior to that time our efforts had been strictly in an advisory capacity.

Colonel Frank E. Garretson, when he was commanding officer of the regiment, brought the unit’s colors to Vietnam on July 4, 1965, and by Aug. 15, the entire regiment had arrived in country and was actively engaged in routing out the Viet Cong (VC) infrastructure in the 27 villages and 150 hamlets surrounding Da Nang.

It was not an easy task.

One can remember the constant patrolling through the countryside. The ever-present fear of mines and boobytraps and the constant threat of falling into punji pits, those holes in the ground in which the Viet Cong planted sharpened bamboo stakes.

The civilians, heavily taxed by the VC, were kept in line by frequent acts of terrorism which often resulted in the deaths of the village chief and his family.



Cpl Michael T. Neel left Vietnam with his rifle in one hand and an American flag in the other.

Step by painful step, the Marines won the support of the civilian population, estimated at more than 88,000, and began making headway in helping rid the 257 square miles around Da Nang of the VC.

Operations against guerrilla forces were more or less ad lib in those early days of

the war. There were few books to go by. Actually, the Marines were writing the books as they went along. The 9th Marines added many chapters to that book.

They devised a technique to protect the rice harvest and called it “Operation Golden Fleece.” The first was conducted south of Da Nang in September 1965, and proved successful from both military and political standpoints.

The Marines conducted extensive search and clear operations in the vicinity of the harvest, protecting those gathering the rice, both at work in the field and in their villages. By doing so, the enemy was denied his two main sources of survival—support from the people and food to live on.

A second military innovation attributed to the 9th Marines was the county fairs which employed the first cordons used in Vietnam. The Marines would encircle a village and then, with the assistance of South Vietnamese military personnel, go into the village and identify Viet Cong agents who might be disguised as civilians.

All military activity taking place during the operations was accompanied by strong civic action projects in which the civilians were given food, clothing and medical care.

Throughout this period, from 1965 to early 1967, the 9th Marines conducted a strong military campaign on one hand and an equally strong civic action program on the other.

“One is no good without the other,” General Lewis W. Walt, then commanding general of III MAF, told his forces in I Corps. “We have to employ both military tactics and civic action to win here.”

In April 1967, the 9th Marines left Da Nang and moved north along with other units of the 3rd Marine Division, leaving the 1st Marine Division (1st, 5th and 7th Regiments) to keep watch over Da Nang and the surrounding area.

Based at Dong Ha, the 9th Marines were to find few VC with whom to do battle. This was North Vietnamese Army (NVA) territory and from the time of their arrival until they pulled out, the Ninth Marines were to see the NVA almost daily.

Anti-guerrilla tactics had been the order of the day around Da Nang, but this was seldom the case up near the Demilitarized



The 9th Marines left Vietnam in increments. Initially, 1st Bn pulled out, followed by the 2nd and 3rd Bns and supporting units.

Zone. Massive battles, some lasting as long as three months, found the “Striking 9th” switching from unconventional to conventional warfare.

In 1967, the 9th Marines participated in some of the most bitter fighting of the war. Shortly after arriving at Dong Ha, the regiment conducted Operation Buffalo near Con Thien and killed 991 of the enemy while under an almost constant enemy artillery and rocket barrage.

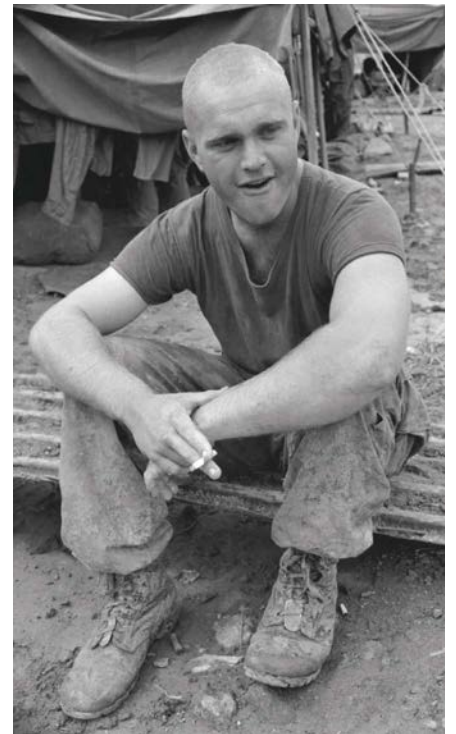
Later that same year, in September, the enemy launched a 12-day attack against Con Thien. The 9th Marines, who were manning the perimeter, turned back several NVA assaults, and with the aid of Allied air and artillery, prevented the

enemy from taking the strategic U.S. artillery base.

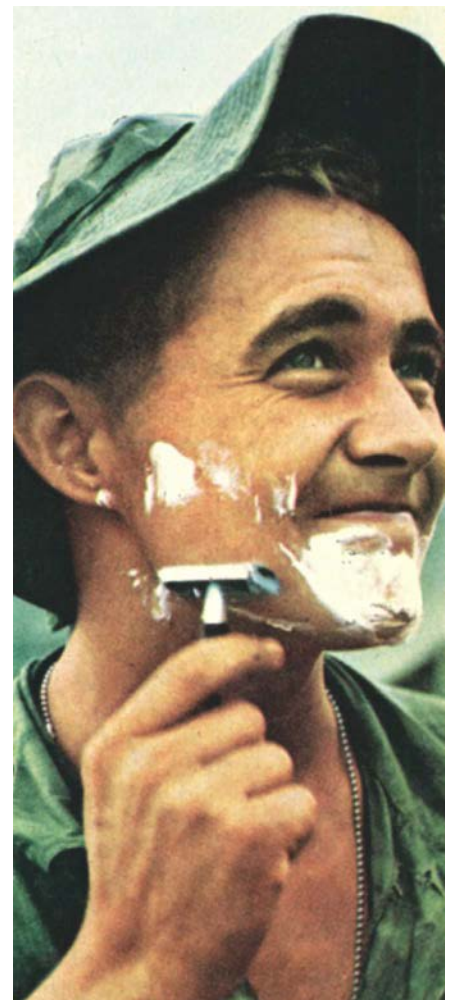
January was just beginning to roll into February 1968 when the 9th Marines again made the headlines. The 1st Battalion combined forces with the 26th Marines and kept a firm grip on the defenses at Khe Sanh for almost three months despite enemy shellings which averaged some 1,000 artillery rounds a day.

The enemy was forced to retire in early April after losing more than 1,000 men and a good deal of face. The defending forces were presented the Presidential Unit Citation for that action.

Summer 1968 found the 9th Marines around Vandegrift Combat Base and the



Above: PFC Jim Brondyke said, “We could have humped another 30 miles.”



PFC William L. Myers experienced his last close shave in Vietnam prior to boarding a ship bound for Okinawa.



Groups of South Vietnamese, both military and civilian, were on hand to bid goodbye to the 9th Marines as they prepared to leave Vietnam.

Rockpile where they met daily opposition from the communist North Vietnamese. Large caches of weapons and supplies were found in July and August during Operations Lancaster II, and more than 1,000 enemy were killed.

Following these two operations which ended around the middle of September, the 9th Marines had little contact with the well-trained NVA until January 1969. The enemy had taken a terrific shellacking from the 9th Marines and other Allied units in northern I Corps, and he had retreated to the relative safety of neighboring Laos and the DMZ to regroup and lick his wounds.

In January, intelligence reports indicated

the enemy was massing huge forces in the Ashau Valley south of Vandegrift Combat Base. The 9th Marines were given the task of kicking the enemy out of the valley and Operation Dewey Canyon was launched.

When the 56-day operation ended March 18, more than 1,600 of the enemy were dead and 215 crew-served weapons had been captured, including 12 Russian-manufactured 122 mm field guns. It was the largest arms and ammunition cache of the war with more than 500 tons of enemy munitions and weapons captured and destroyed.

South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu sent a letter to Gen Creighton W. Abrams, commander of all U.S. Forces in Vietnam, commending the 9th Marines and a battalion of the 3rd Marines for their efforts during Dewey Canyon.

“... As a matter of course, no victories

are without costs,” President Thieu wrote. “And in the above operation (Dewey Canyon), the First, Second, and Third Battalions of the Ninth Regiment and the Second Battalion of the Third Regiment, USMC, had to deplore 121 killed and 803 wounded in action. To the families of the fallen heroes and to the wounded troops, I should like to ask you to extend my most heartfelt sense of gratitude for their incomparable contribution to the cause of Peace and Liberty in Vietnam.”

Operations Apache Snow, Cameron Falls and Utah Mesa were next on the agenda for the 9th Marines and it was while engaging the enemy on Utah Mesa that the “Striking 9th” learned it was leaving the war.

Identification of units being withdrawn from Vietnam followed soon after President Nixon’s announcement on Midway Island, June 8, that he was pulling 25,000



Above: SSgt Harold Nelson conducted a class on shipboard routine before the Marines left Vandegrift Combat Base. They would attend many lectures during the next few weeks.



A group of high school girls from Da Nang presented traditional neck ribbons to members of the 9th Marines during a farewell ceremony.

U.S. fighting men out of the war. The President had made that decision after conferences with President Thieu and senior American military men in Vietnam.

The 9th Marines pulled back to Vandegrift Combat Base when Operation Utah Mesa ended and started making preparations to leave.

“It’ll be nice to sleep in a bed again and have a roof over my head,” said Lance Corporal Jim Lillibridge, an assistant machine gunner with Alpha Co, 1/9, while he and his buddies were sorting out their personal belongings and taking inventory of their military gear. “Not having to wallow in the mud and hump mountains is going to take getting used to though.”

During those last few days at Vandegrift, the enemy made life as miserable as possible for the Okinawa-bound Marines. For two days in a row the NVA threw rockets

into the camp, forcing the Marines to think more about leaving Vietnam alive than just leaving Vietnam.

“I don’t know what size rockets they were,” said First Lieutenant John L. Gowger, commanding officer of Foxtrot Co, 2/9. “I didn’t get out of the bunker to see.”

The 9th left Vietnam in increments. The 1st Battalion pulled out first, followed by the 2nd and 3d Bns. The men were flown to Da Nang in C-130 transport planes and trucked to the Navy’s deep water pier at the base of Monkey Mountain where ceremonies were held before boarding USS *Paul Revere* (APA-248) for the voyage to Okinawa.

The 9th Marines didn’t leave alone. They took all supporting units which included D Battery and a 4.2 mortar battery from 2/12; Co C, 3d Tank Bn; Companies C and D, 11th Engineer Bn; Companies A and C, 3d Motor Transport Bn; and Co C, 3d Shore Party Bn.

Some of the Marines had been in Vietnam less than a month. Some had no combat time at all, while others were on their second or third tours in Vietnam. Most were happy about leaving, but there were a few who wanted to stay.

“Sure, I’d like to stay here,” said Corporal Gary D. Boocks, a fire team leader



Above: For the 9th Marines, it was all over—temporarily, at least. They were crowded, but they could relax.

with Hotel Co, 2/9. “There are quite a few of us who’d rather stay.”

“I’m glad to be leaving,” commented PFC Eddie Oliveras, a mortarman with the same company, “but I wouldn’t mind coming back. It’s part of my job.”

LCpl Luther L. Sherrrod, a fire team leader with Echo Co, 2/9, said, “I don’t guess anyone really wants to come over here and fight, but it’s our job and when you see a buddy get killed ... that’s when you do want to fight.”

At least one Marine, PFC William L. Myers, had a different reason for wanting to stay. The Hotel Co, 2/9, mortarman said, “In ’Nam you don’t have to worry about stamps. Back in the world I was always forgetting to put stamps on my letters. Over here our mail goes free.”

Whether they wanted to go or not, they did, and when Col Edward F. Danowitz took the “Striking 9th” to Okinawa, one could only wonder what future months held in store for the remaining American forces in Vietnam. The 9th Marines landed first and they left first, and the destiny of other American units in Vietnam would depend, to a great degree, on efforts at the Paris Peace Talks.

One could only look to the future and hope. 🇺🇸



Members of Co C removed the live ammunition from their magazines prior to boarding USS *Paul Revere*.