

EXCERPTED FROM

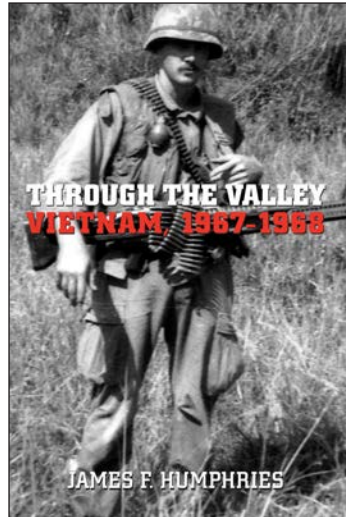
Through the Valley: Vietnam, 1967-1968

James F. Humphries

Copyright © 1999

ISBNs: 978-1-55587-821-4 hc

978-1-62637-975-6 pb



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Suite 314

Boulder, CO 80301 USA

telephone 303.444.6684

fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the
Lynne Rienner Publishers website
www.rienner.com

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
Prologue: Hill 104, West of Tam Ky	1
1 Task Force Oregon	3
2 The Assassins	9
3 Green Seeds	21
4 The Hiep Duc Valley	29
5 The 1st VC Main Force Regiment	39
6 Twister Charlie	51
7 A Real Hero	57
8 An Encounter at Dusk	65
9 The Longest Night	79
10 Oscar, Herman, and Lise	91
11 Phu Binh	99
12 Harker	107
13 In the Enemy's Camp	119
14 A Day with No Sun	127
15 Final Shots	137
16 Meeting Delta	145
17 Cedar Mountain Six	153

18	The 3d NVA Regiment	161
19	Helix One-One	173
20	11 March	177
21	Stay-Behinds	193
22	Specter	199
23	Fire Support Base Belcher	211
24	The Third Marines	219
25	Nhi Ha Village	231
26	The Second Day	243
27	4 May	251
28	Lam Xuan (East)	259
29	Xom Phoung	263
30	Home to the Que Son Valley	281
31	Hill 406	293
32	The Final Objective: Hill 104	307
	Epilogue	315
	<i>Glossary</i>	319
	<i>Bibliography</i>	323
	<i>Index</i>	329
	<i>About the Book</i>	335

Task Force Oregon

July 1967

It was the middle of the afternoon and bubbling hot when I walked down the ramp of the C-130 and caught my first glimpse of Chu Lai Base. A tiny white building just off the tarmac read, "Airfield Operations. Welcome to Task Force Oregon." I entered the cramped operations shack and told a sergeant inside that I needed transportation to the task force G-1 section, my place of assignment. I had come to Vietnam with plans of commanding a rifle company, and a job on a division staff was the last thing that I wanted or expected.

The howls of bomb-laden Marine F-4B Phantoms taking off reverberated through the shack's thin walls, making normal conversation impossible. I went outside and walked over to the roofless square of pavement that served as the base passenger terminal and stood in the center of the black-top to look over my new home.

Lt. Gen. Victor H. Krulak was the commanding general, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific when the 3d Marine Expeditionary Brigade had landed on the shores of Dung Quat Bay in May 1965 and had established an airfield. Tradition holds that the name Chu Lai was an alteration into Vietnamese from the Chinese characters meaning Krulak. The peninsula on which the base stood was on the border of Quang Ngai and Quang Tin provinces and home to a few fishing villages and a healthy number of Vietcong before the marines came. Its location in hostile territory made it a suitable site for U.S. Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor's short-lived, unsuccessful strategy of securing enclaves around crucial coastal areas.¹

The land surrounding the runway was barren and nearly flat, but from my vantage point the terrain beyond the base appeared sharply different. A cluster of steep, granite-faced hills hulked several kilometers southwest of the base. There was nothing magnificent about the mounds of jungle and rock, but I would soon learn to associate the hills with Chu Lai. In Vietnam

the sight of a familiar landmark, regardless how insignificant, provided a feeling of permanence where there was generally none.

A three-quarter-ton truck arrived, and I tossed my gear into the back and climbed into the cab. We followed a dusty graveled road that took us east, across a part of the runway, past a white sandy beach, and up a short hill. After we had crested the hill the driver took a right turn into the task force headquarters area. The hut that housed the G-1 section was about 100 meters from there.

Task Force Oregon was the predecessor of the 23d Infantry Division (Americal) and had come into being in April to reinforce the III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) in the I Corps Tactical Zone. Pronounced, "Eye Corps," the zone had been the marines' bailiwick since their arrival in Vietnam. By 1967, the 1st and 3d Marine Divisions that constituted III MAF's combat power found themselves tied down to protecting large installations while battling an ever-swelling number of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces. The situation at best was a holding action.²

Of great concern to Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command (MACV), was the NVA buildup along South Vietnam's demilitarized zone (DMZ). The scene of bitter fighting between the marines and NVA during the summer and fall of 1966, marines and South Vietnamese troops found themselves facing yet another enemy buildup there in early 1967. The newest threat persuaded Westmoreland to develop contingency plans for the activation and deployment of a U.S. Army division-size task force into I Corps and place it under the control of III MAF. NVA attacks on marine units near the DMZ in March and April propelled those plans into action.³

The architect and commander of the task force was Westmoreland's chief of staff, Maj. Gen. William B. Rosson, who named the task force after his native Oregon. Rosson built the provisional division by "borrowing" units and personnel from the whole of Vietnam, bringing them to Chu Lai and fitting them together to form a provisional headquarters and a support command. The combat strength of the task force came from three veteran infantry brigades and a cavalry squadron drawn from quieter sectors of the country: the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division; the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division; the 196th Light Infantry Brigade (LIB); and the 2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. Aviation, engineers, signal, and artillery units rounded out the troop list and provided the task force with the capabilities of an infantry division.⁴

The arrival of Task Force Oregon freed III MAF to shift the 1st Marine Division from southern I Corps to Da Nang and allowed the 3d Marine Division to intensify its own strength around the DMZ. The three new brigades also allowed III MAF to expand its operations in southern I Corps. After relieving units of the 7th Marines around Chu Lai on 12 April, the 196th LIB took to the field on Operation Lawrence, the first U.S. Army

operation conducted in I Corps. The area around Duc Pho was the task force's main effort, and it was there that the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division initiated Operation Baker in mid-April. On 11 May, four days after coming under the operational control of the task force, the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division kicked off Operation Malheur I. The holding action was over.⁵

Capt. Cecil Harris, his balding head beaded with sweat, was on the telephone and furiously scribbling notes on a yellow legal pad when I walked into the G-1 section. While I was waiting for him to finish his conversation, I checked the branch insignia on his collar and noted that he wore the caduceus of the Medical Service Corps. There were no airborne wings on his chest, a discouraging sign to me. In those days I held a very narrow view of officers in the medical service corps and the other combat support branches—particularly those who were not airborne qualified. I soon found out that Harris was a total professional and serious about his job.

From Cecil Harris I learned that I was going to be the task force assistance in kind (AIK) pay officer and responsible for paying the Vietnamese laborers. The news upset me no end: I had volunteered for Vietnam to command a rifle company and I recall telling Harris, "I'm in the infantry, not the goddamned Finance Corps."

Cecil looked at me for a minute and said, "Oh, O.K., I get it. You just wanna get out into the bush and kill some of those Vietcong."

"Well, I sure as hell didn't come over here to pay the sonofabitches." My answer caused Harris to smile for the first time. I think that conversation was the beginning of a friendship that has lasted since then.

The G-1 was Lt. Col. Bill Walby, and I met him early the next morning. This veteran of World War II had a quick smile, but his cordial disposition cloaked a hard core. He knew the army and soldiers. After he had explained my job to me, I told him that I had come to Vietnam to serve with a combat unit, not in a staff job.

I remember that when I had finished Colonel Walby smiled, placing his elbows on the desk and touching the tips of his fingers together. "Humphries, you can't build a career in the army just running the hills. When the time comes, I'll see that you go to a rifle battalion. But, until that time, you'll have to work for me." Colonel Walby was a man of his word.

The job as AIK officer kept me busy. The developing task force had a heavy demand for indigenous labor and employed over nine hundred laborers daily at a cost of 800,000 Vietnamese piasters a month. To maintain a steady labor pool meant keeping them paid and that required flying to Saigon every other week to draw piasters. The money filled four duffel bags and required someone from the G-1 to accompany me to help handle the bags and secure the cash.⁶

In September Task Force (TF) Oregon officially became the 23d

Infantry Division (Americal). The division's resurrection in Vietnam marked its second activation on the field of battle. Created the first time during World War II on the Pacific island of New Caledonia as the Americal Division, its name came from combining "American troops on New Caledonia." Instead of forming the Americal with its wartime regiments, two new infantry brigades, the 198th due to arrive in October, and the 11th scheduled to come in December, would soon join the 196th Light Infantry Brigade (Separate) and replace the divisional brigades. Of the three infantry brigades that formed TF Oregon in the spring of 1967, the 196th LIB, nicknamed the Chargers, would be the only one to become part of the Americal Division.⁷

All of the activity made me feel that the war was passing me by. Colonel Walby must have sensed it because, in early October, he called me into his office and told me that a rifle company commander was needed out in the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment. Then he casually added that I could go out for an interview—if I really wanted to go. I tore out of his office and quickly made an appointment with the battalion commander.

The 21st Infantry, nicknamed the Gimlets, traced its lineage back to the U.S. Civil War. It had been the first regiment to fight in Korea. The 3d Battalion was one of three infantry battalions in the 196th LIB and was operating in the heavily populated flatlands and low hills southwest of Chu Lai in area of operation Tiger. I met the battalion commander at the unit's base camp and spent several hours tagging along with him while he made rounds of the units. Company A was conducting a sweep, and our presence gave the battalion commander an opportunity to ask me a spate of questions about unit tactics. Not all my answers subscribed to his tactical theories, but they must have been satisfactory because he accepted me.

In the middle of October Walby released me from the G-1, and I reported in to the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry to assume command of the battalion's Company C.

Notes

1. Richard Tregaskis, *Southeast Asia: Building the Bases* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), pp. 99; Lt. Gen. Philip B. Davis, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946–1975* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1988), pp. 345, 347.

2. Maj. Gary L. Tefler and Lt. Col. Lante Rogers. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1984), p. 75.

3. Lt. Gen. Willard Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces: 1966–1968* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, U.S. Army, 1975), pp. 12–13; Davis, *Vietnam at War*, p. 429.

4. Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces*, p. 14.

5. Tefler and Rogers, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 79; Americal Division:

Operational Report Lessons Learned, Period Ending 31 January 1968. 30 April 1968; David Burns Sigler, *Vietnam Battle Chronology: U.S. Army and Marine Combat Operations, 1965–1973* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 1992), p. 41.

6. Task Force OREGON (Americal Division): Operational Report Lessons Learned, Period Ending 31 July 1967. 14 February 1968.

7. Capt. Francis D. Cronin, *Under the Southern Cross: The Saga of the Americal Division* (Washington, D.C.: Combat Forces Press, 1951), p. 29.