



*Air-Land Perspectives:*¹

Bird Dog Brings In Jets For Marines At Con Thien

The Army Reporter

[1st Aviation Brigade Information Office]

21 October 1967

Da Nang, (1st AVN-IO)

An Army Bird Dog flew through intensive small arms and machine gun fire to call in fire support for two hard-pressed Marine rifle companies east of Con Thien recently.

When a Marine spotter aircraft ran low on fuel and had to depart its station, Army Captain Charles Deibert [*surname spelling corrected; his full name is Charles Larry Deibert and more commonly referred to as, "Larry."*] was given the airstrike mission. He quickly brought his aircraft from the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company, 212th Combat Support Aviation Battalion into position. Below, the two Marine companies taking part in Operation Kingfisher had just broken contact with two North Vietnamese Army (NVA) battalions. They were trying to regroup and link up under heavy mortar fire as the 1st Aviation Brigade plane arrived.

"I had a good idea where the NVA mortars were, so I flew over the area to take a look," Deibert related. As he flew over the heavily wooded position, two NVA soldiers were spotted ducking back into the trees. A closer look revealed five enemy mortars firing at the Marines.

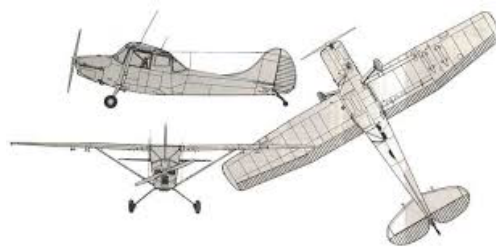
The artillery observer in Deibert's plane called in Marine jet fighters to blast the enemy positions. "I knew right away we'd gotten at least three of them," Deibert said. The Bird Dog crew later counted nine NVA bodies. Pieces of at least three mortars were visible in the woods.

The Army airplane then directed Marine medevac and resupply helicopters into the Marine ground positions. Enemy fire was still intense. While circling the area, the crew noticed about nine heavily camouflaged NVA soldiers maneuvering towards one company's flank. When the aircraft turned to mark their location and take a closer look, the NVA soldiers ran and merged into the foliage of the nearby tree line. The pilot called in marine Huey gunships to attack the tree line. "When we rolled in," continued Deibert, "the tree line began to disappear; there must have been 45 to 60 NVA crouching in a row to look like a tree line."

The Marine helicopters stopped the enemy flanking movement, and three flights of jets were directed to complete the job. "Next I saw some movement out of the corner of my eye," Deibert said, as he looked again and spotted about 45 more NVA. "They were in four groups," he said, "like a platoon in four squads advancing towards the flank of the other Marine Company. Deibert advised the ground command to speed up his medevac and watch his flank. Then he called in three more flights of fighters, which accounted for eight more enemy killed.



"Bird Dog"



"Bird dog (Aircraft)"

"How much easier it is to be critical than to be correct."

Benjamin Disraeli

*** End of Army Reporter article ***

Operation Kingfisher



A Show of Force

28-30 July 1967

Written by Jack T. Hartzel 0331

Echo Company, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines (2/9) , 1967-68

Article For **Vietnam Magazine**

<http://mcvthf.org/VPAKingfisher.htm>

Up to this point in the war, the DMZ had been largely off limits to U.S. ground forces because of the political sensitivity back home. Operation Kingfisher an operation that would take us all the way to the Ben Hai River would be a major change in thinking for the Third Marine Division. However, Division Command decided that the Operation would go forward.

The NVA had to know something was going on by the buildup of men and equipment at Con Thien. The NVA weren't sure what was going on so they just blended into the woodwork and waited.

We were a reinforced battalion with a platoon of tanks, three Ontos, and three LVTE's. The brass billed Operation Kingfisher as a "spoiling attack" into the DMZ. Our leaders thought we would just march up to the Ben Hai River, flex our muscles, and return to the south--no problem! It is rumored that LBJ and his cronies sent us up there to show the American public that we could, hopefully bolstering his failing administration. The NVA had other ideas.

We started the day going north on Route 606, heading toward the Ben Hai River. All the "salts" were scared shitless---and that was saying something because almost everyone had a case of dysentery. We knew this was Charlie's home area and that we would probably be in deep shit sometime in the near future. The company I was in (Echo) and Golf Company were on the flanks; the main body of the Operation and the tanks, Ontos, and LVTE's were on the road. Hotel Company was held back waiting until the rest of us were almost to the river.

We hardly made any enemy contact on the way up to the Ben Hai River. The only contact I remember is an NVA soldier shot a lieutenant in the helmet. The lieutenant was lucky; it only knocked him out. An M-60 gunner blew the NVA away. Near the battalion commander's CP, we discovered an NVA field hospital that had been hastily evacuated as we approached. That really made us edgy. We knew that on the other side of the river, were all the gooks in the world. We also knew that they would not let us this far north without hitting us.

The terrain was thick and very hard to move through and that made us move more toward the road---just what Charlie wanted. The enemy knew that we had to leave by the same road we came in on. They were containing us, making us bunch up, just what they tell you not to do in training. We found out later that the NVA were already moving units into positions already dug in and they were waiting for us.

When we had almost reached the river, A-4's laid down a smokescreen to the west between the high ground and us. Hotel Company was then Helo-lifted into a zone at the river. My battalion commander said it looked like something from Quantico it was so perfect. We set up defensive positions and dug in the best we could. I had my machine gun facing south, the way we would be leaving.

A couple of hours after dark a few other Marines and I began hearing noises, talking and digging. That's right---digging! We didn't sleep a wink all night. I reported the sounds to our platoon leader. He came and sat in our hole, and he listened for himself. I think he was scared too. He reported the noises to our company commander. After all, we had to walk down that road the next day.

We heard on the radio that Hotel Company was hearing loud truck noises and hollering from across the river at suspected crossing sites and on Hill 73. There were no confirmed sightings though. Artillery was fired at suspected sites; damage was unknown.

Our battalion CO received a radio message from the Ninth Marine Regimental CO stating that five NVA battalions were en route to engage us and to get the hell out of there. Our CO told him we had gotten in here—we would sure as hell get out.

The next morning at first light the engineers in Golf Company's area checked out the stream crossing on the road parallel to the Ben Hai river heading northeast the direction we intended to go. The engineers determined that the M-48 tanks would bog down, which could mean trouble with Charlie so close. Our CO called Ninth Marines Headquarters and informed them that we would be heading out on Route 606. The NVA were concentrated along the river road anticipating that our tanks would bog down and that they would crush us.

We made a break for it around 10:00 am when we broke through the mines on Route 606 and started south. The NVA pressed and they never broke contact with Golf Company. Hotel Company was supposed to be rear guard, but Golf Company never broke free their contact with the NVA. Hotel Company was ordered into the line of March. My Company Echo took point; I believe second platoon was point platoon. It took us a long time to move hardly any distance. The terrain was thick and the number of men and the amount of equipment moving down that little dirt road made our progress very slow.

After we had been moving for about an hour or so, we heard a loud explosion. Marines screamed in pain, and every corpsman in the area was there. The NVA had buried a 250-pound B-52 dud in the road and an NVA soldier leaning up against a tree had detonated it. He was killed by the blast and he took a squad of Marines with him. That must have been the digging we heard!

Cpl. Bill Underwood a squad leader in 3rd platoon Echo Co. said he was standing next to a tank talking to a Marine and decided to go back to his squad. When he returned to his squad he heard a loud explosion and turned around and the Marine he had been talking to was gone, he was damn near vaporized. He said all that was left of that Marine he put in a poncho and put the poncho on the tank.

We walked past the place where the bomb went off. There were entrails in trees. There were heads and legs and arms, and feet still in boots! There were Marines all over the place, picking up body parts. I guess somebody got the job of figuring out whose parts were whose. It was not something a young man who had just turned 20 years old wanted to see.

The history books say five Marines wounded. That is bull! I was there! There were dead Marines all over.

Just a short distance from the first explosion the engineers found another bomb, also command detonated. The engineers detonated this one saving a lot of lives. The moment the second bomb went off, the NVA hit us with machine guns, rifles and mortars. They dropped the mortars right on the road, making us dive to the sides of the road to avoid being hit with

shrapnel. A lot of Marines were stabbed by Punji stakes placed by the NVA. Some other Marines were killed or wounded by booby traps rigged on the roadside.

From then on it became a running battle south with them trying to break us up and close their horseshoe ambush. There were NVA on both sides of the road. I said to my A-gunner, "I saw a bush move." He said, "You're scared, and you're seeing things." I shot the bush; it fell over dead!

From that point on, nothing was sacred. We riddled every bush, every tree, or anything that might have an NVA in it with bullets. Anything and everything was fair game. I walked faster than I'd ever walked before. There's an old saying among Marines: "Marines never retreat, they advance in an opposite direction". Bullshit! We were retreating, getting the hell out of there!

We started to notice troops off to our right and left. I recall someone saying, "Friendlies on the right, Friendlies on the left." I remember someone else saying, "There are no Friendlies on the right or left." We had no flankers out. At least a company of our men opened up on the NVA, who were wearing U.S. flak jackets, jungle utilities, and helmets, and carrying M-16 rifles. I think we killed between eight and ten NVA. It's hard to count or remember when you're firing and moving. It's not as though we could stop and take a careful body count.

I really believe that if we had not had the spotter plane calling in air strikes, I wouldn't be here today writing this. The NVA were smart and they knew the only way to survive our supporting arms was to stay as close to us as possible. That meant that when the spotter plane called in the Phantom Jets, the napalm was dropped so close to us we could have roasted hot dogs. The Phantom pilots were good; they came so close to the tops of the trees that we could see the pilots waving at us. One of my best friends and Air Wing Marine (Wing Wiper☺) John Caruso told me that he and his Bro's used to clean tree branches out of the landing gear of the Phantom Jets.... That's Close!

We saw NVA on fire, running out of their bunkers. That was a hell of a way to die. I will never forget two smells—the smell of burning flesh, and the smell of death.

We started to round a bend in the road, and an NVA let loose with an RPG and disabled the lead tank. Soon after that tank took a round in the turret, an Ontos was also hit with an RPG. Another Ontos came up to aid the first Ontos and tank. It opened up with its machine gun, and suppressed the NVA fire long enough to get the wounded loaded and to get the hell out of there.

I remember that after that, track vehicles were flying down that road. They almost ran over my A-gunner and I just as we hit the dirt from another mortar barrage. Thank God we were young and could move, or we would have been "road pizza." The Corps values the tanks and the Ontos more than they value us grunts. That really sucked. Steel over lives, Weird way of thinking.

Instead of the tanks' reinforcing us and giving us support, they turned into our liability. We had to protect them from the RPG crews, and we used them as ambulances to transport dead and wounded. We lost two tanks and two Ontos.

In the official history of the Operation, there is only mention of three crewmen in each tank crew being wounded. That, Too, Is Bull. I personally pulled a dead Marine out of his tank. He was blown nearly in half. An RPG round went through the tank, through the Marine, and bounced around inside the tank. It made a really nasty mess! I remember that well, because it was 100 degrees or better, and he had been in the tank for about eight hours. He had swollen up to double his size, rigor mortis had begun, and he had turned black.

I helped carry a lot of dead and wounded to CH- 34's and 46s. I recall thinking how bad it had to be if we were using 46s to transport dead and wounded. CH-46s were big and could carry a lot of cargo.

Most of my company got out of the ambush, but we left two squads in there. That night after we set in, our Colonel informed us that in the morning we would be going back in and getting our guys. We liked hearing that; Marines don't leave anybody behind.

Being the kind of CO he was, and not wanting to wait, our CO decided to try to link up with Hotel Company and the rest of the battalion that night. He took operational control of a company from Third Battalion, Fourth Marines, and a section of tanks. Once Marines started back in the NVA realized they could not defeat us in detail and they broke free and ran. They had already done enough damage as it was.

The linkup was delayed until daybreak in the interest of avoiding a mistake. We could hear an Echo Company platoon leader, a lieutenant on his radio who was caught inside the ambush telling us not to resupply them anymore. His Marines were fighting so fierce he said, "They'll go to Hanoi." They were just doing what they had to do to survive.

The next morning at daylight we moved out heading north tracing our route from the day before. When we finally rejoined the rest of our Battalion the NVA had vacated the area. The lieutenant whom we had heard on the radio and several of his men had been caught in the open and were captured. The NVA hog-tied them with comm. wire and bayoneted them and eventually murdered them in their attempt to draw Corpsman and Marines into their killing zone. We had heard their screams the night before but passed them off as an NVA trick. All the time it was our own men being tortured to death.

Most of the dead had died the day before. Others died from lack of medical treatment because there was no medevac the night before. We medevac'd the rest of the dead and wounded and were out of the DMZ by around 12:00. We had Third Battalion Fourth Marines watch our back until we were clear of the area.

This "Show of Force" cost the lives of 23 Marines and wounded 251 others. Of the wounded 191 had to be medevac'd. I believe Marines died and were wounded because of poor reconnaissance and overzealous commanders. I do not mean to say that my Commander

made poor decisions—I mean that poor decisions were made in the planning stages at Third Marine Headquarters. I again say that if it had not been for our supporting arms and their pinpoint accuracy on targets my unit Second Battalion Ninth Marines might have been annihilated.

The NVA had everything in place that day to achieve that end. I believe someone was watching over us that day!

1. These two articles regarding air and land perspectives during the same engagement were transcribed and prepared by Dennis Currie, Assistant Editor, Catkillers.org, from original material supplied by SP5 Steve Badger, Catkiller Crew Chief.