



THE EXPANDING WAR IN QUANG NAM PROVINCE & THE DA NANG TAOR 3rd Platoon at Marble Mountain – 1966



3rd Platoon Flight Line –Photo Courtesy Len Brand

Life for a ‘peter pilot’ in the 3rd Platoon could very often be filled with the routine and almost boring things, WO Norm MacPhee describes so eloquently:

“My day went like this, 6 days a week—

- Awoke around 6 AM, showered, shaved, etc..
- Looked at the mission assigned for AM
- Got a mission brief, ate 4 salt pills, drank lots of water (ate nothing else in am) gathered up my weapon and flak jacket, boarded the aircraft and flew for 3.5 hours.
- Returned, filled out my mission report, ate a box of C rations, more salt pills, more water.
- Another mission assigned, another brief, flew 3.5 hours, debriefed, cleaned my weapon, more C rations and hit the sack.
- There was practically no time for shooting the bull with others.

The 7th day was a day off and I used it for a PX run, writing and reading letters, etc., the back to the schedule.

There were some side duties that were just never assigned to the Warrant Officers. Like, flying a bird to Phu Bai for maintenance. Seems as though the officers kept that for themselves, I guess, for a day off and to gather around the flag. I was never assigned such a mission and I don't think WOs Medley and Santos, the other warrants in the platoon, were either.

My room-mate, Lieutenant 'Lem' Brinkley went north permanently early in his time to be the Aircraft Maintenance and Supply Officer there, and I had no buddy to talk with, but I would not have had much time to do so anyway; rehashing missions was not high on the list, since we already went through de-brief and reporting. I was pooped, lost 35 pounds in Vietnam and my wife barely recognized me when I got back.

Photos Courtesy of Norm MacPhee:



Lt. Brinkley-First
roommate
Ready for a mission

Lieutenant Brinkley



WO MacPhee With His ARVN Observers

Let me say a few good things about administration here: I was not trained to understand what all went on in a unit, just aviation—there was ALWAYS plenty of food, clean water, a place to sleep, map supplies, and a great relationship with the Marines, Special Forces and ARVN. I have no complaints at all about how the platoon operated. The enlisted folks were the best possible.

When it came time for R&R everyone got their first choice. On your day off (there were usually two pilots off at once), there was a jeep to use to drive the 10 miles to the PX. Mail arrived regularly, hooch maids kept our clothes washed, boots shined and hooch clean.



Hooch Maid for 3rd Platoon

Beginning in April after the quelling of the populist insurgency, Marines forces were then in a position to begin moving from a defensive posture in the TAOR to effective offensive actions that would culminate in a series of operations, which included the Ky Lam Campaign, Operation Liberty and finally Operation Macon that ran through to October of 1966.

Army reconnaissance and surveillance played a vital role in assisting Marine ground forces to accomplish their mission. Observing and reporting enemy activities also frequently led to engaging with artillery and air strikes.

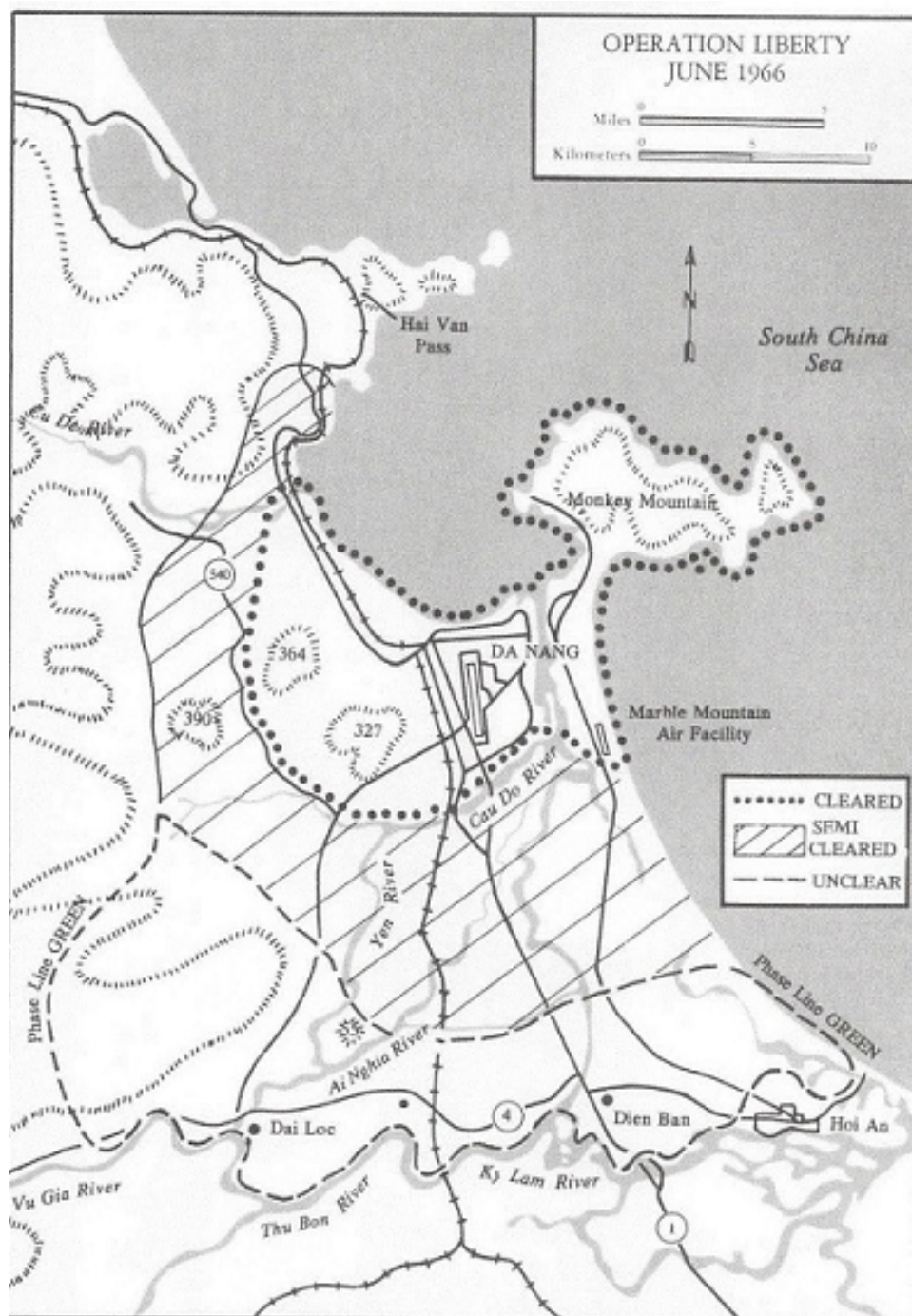
The Ky Lam Campaign, named after the river, was to be a three-phased campaign. At the end of May 1966, forward battalions were to reach Phase Line Brown, a line which extended from below Dai Loc in the west and followed the La Tho-Thanh Quit Rivers eastward, with the exception of a 2000 meter-wide horseshoe-shaped salient extending south 5000 meters along both sides of Route 1 to just above Dien Ban. In June, the regiment was to begin the second phase of the operation, securing all of Route 4 west to Route 1 and extending the Marine's lines down to the Ky Lam. During July, the 9th Marines, in the final phase of the campaign, was to advance southward in the region east of Route 1 and incorporate the city of Hoi An in its area of responsibility.

During the month of May for the Ky Lam Campaign, the Marines had four infantry battalions under operational control. These were the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and all three 9th Marines battalions, plus the 3d Marines battalion in An Hoa.

On the morning of 12 May, a patrol unexpectedly came upon the enemy. The 14-man patrol squad had left the company CP at 0630, moving east. One hour later, the patrol reported that it had come under small arms fire and captured a VC suspect. Encountering no further resistance, the Marines continued their patrol. At 0830, the squad leader radioed back that a water buffalo was in its path and were ordered to avoid the animal, but "if threatened by it, they were given permission to shoot." In the squad's next report, about 30 minutes later, the Marines stated that they had wounded the buffalo and were giving chase to finish it off. Fifteen minutes after that, the patrol reported harassing fire and seeing Viet Cong fleeing to the east "and that the patrol was giving physical pursuit." The patrol leader asked for supporting mortar fire. Company B's mortar section fired an 81mm ranging round, but the patrol was unable to observe its impact. Fearing that they might hit their own men the mortars were ordered to cease firing. About that time, the company sent out a second squad to follow the route of the first patrol. The second squad came under small arms and mortar fire itself. The Marines countered with mortar fire from the companies base area, which silenced the enemy's weapons. About 1030, the squad leader reported hearing a 'heavy volume of small arms fire, mortars, M79s, and hand grenades due east of their position,' near the village of Do Nam. Believing that he had found the missing Marines, he asked for an aerial observer.

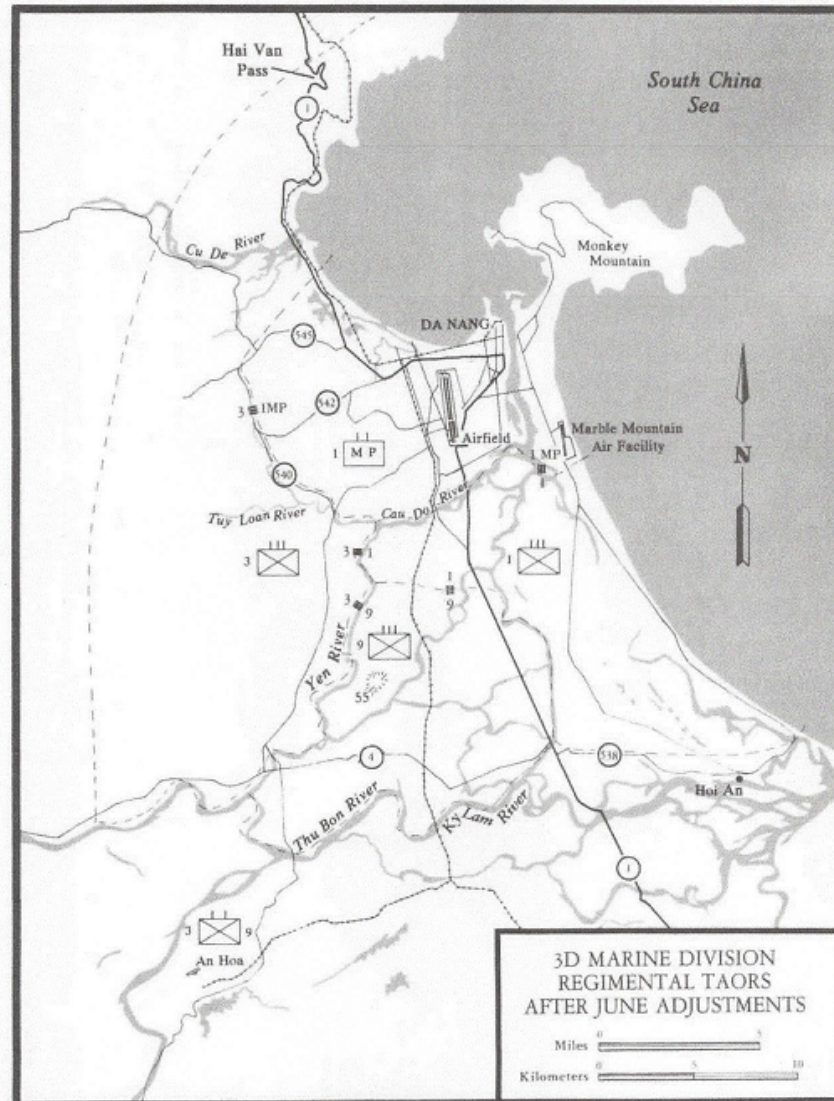
Although no Marine observation aircraft was available, "an Army AO (aerial observer) happened into the area and reported an apparent firefight" in the vicinity of the action recently reported by the second squad. The Army aircraft dropped a red smoke grenade in the village of Do Nam and fired four rockets into a trench line in front of the Marines. Making another pass, the Army AO threw out two messages to the Marines below, informing them that there were 20 VC in the trench line.

By 7 June Operation Liberty began with heavy preparatory artillery fires. General Kyle would expect to have three Marine infantry regiments consisting of eight battalions at Da Nang. He planned to reduce the extensive 9th Marines TAOR by assigning the 1st Marines to the eastern flank while the 3rd Marines took over part of the 9th Marines TAOR west of the Yen River. In effect, General Kyle visualized a shoulder-to-shoulder advance to the Ky Lam. The operation code named *Liberty* was scheduled to begin on 7 June, with the 9th Marines bearing the brunt of the campaign in its initial stages. On 13 June, WO Don Medley and his Marine AO, MAJ Charley Hammel were shot down by enemy gun fire, with Don being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his heroic actions in saving his Marine.

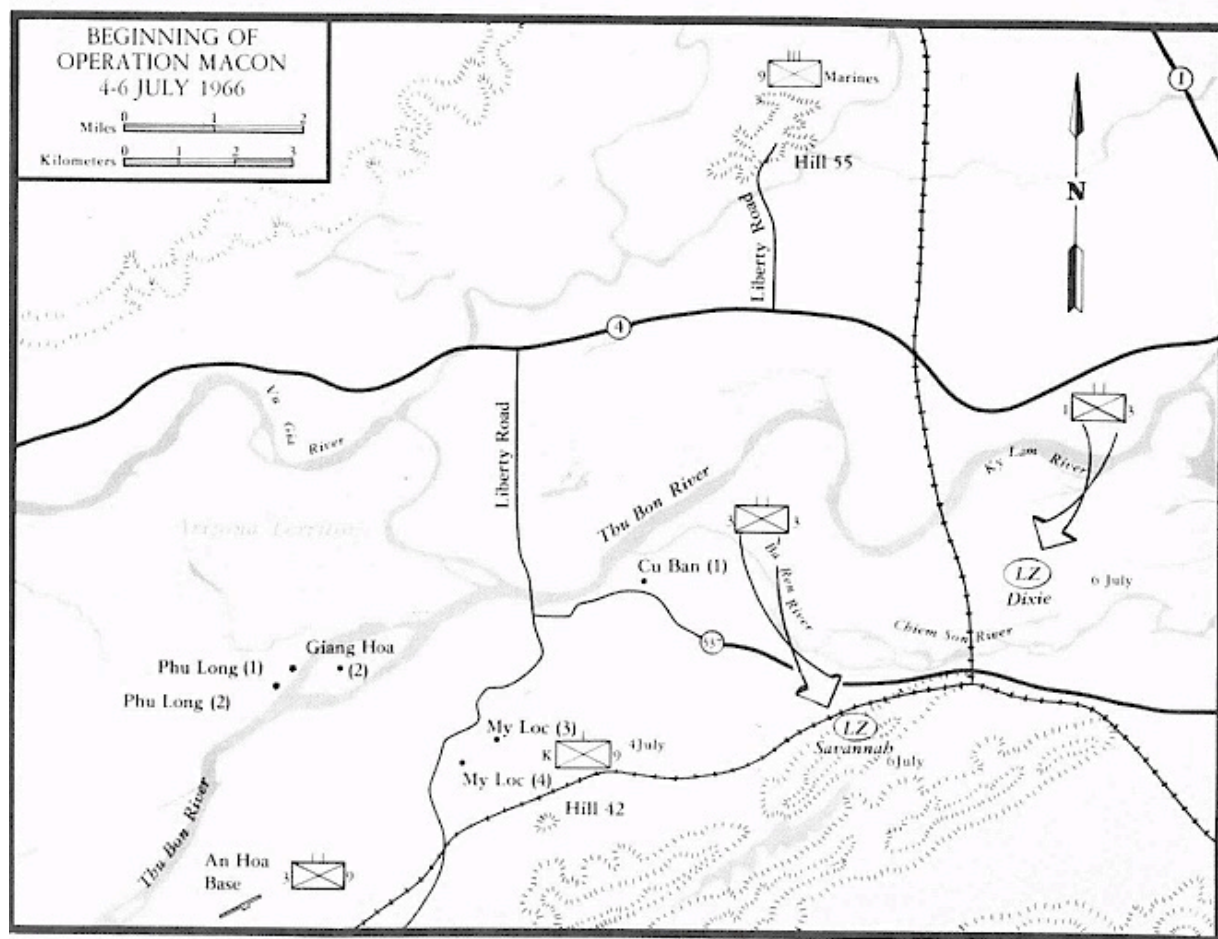


Operation Liberty

By 15 June, the division completed its planned realignment of regiments in the TAOR. Colonel Mitchell assumed operational control of his two 1st Marines battalions and took over responsibility for the division's eastern flank from the 9th Marines. With a corresponding reduction in the western sector, the 9th Marines' TOAR now consisted of only 134 square miles, the regiment having given away nearly 100 square miles in the exchange. With the adjustment of forces and sectors, the 3d Marine Division continued its "scrubbing" actions in Operation Liberty. By the end of June the three regiments, the 1st, 3rd, and 9th Marines had reached their objective of Phase Line Green at the Ky Lam and Thu Bon Rivers.



On 4 July, the 3d Engineer Battalion completed the first leg of a road, appropriately named "The Liberty Road," which ran from the 9th Marines CP on Hill 55 south to Route 4, a distance of roughly 3,500 meters. During their southward push, the Marines forced the enemy R-20 Doc Lap Battalion, which by now had re-infiltrated north of the Thu Bon and Ky Lam Rivers during the spring political crisis, to withdraw again to south of the two rivers. On 1 July a captured squad leader from the 1st Company, R-20 Battalion, who during interrogation described that the battalion mission was to prepare defensive positions and counter any Marine attempt to cross the Ky Lam and Thu Bon line. Despite the intelligence that the Marines had obtained, the Viet Cong initiated the action on 4 July, the same day the Marine opened the Liberty Road. By 5 July, Operation Macon was initiated. The Liberty Road was critical to the success of a planned industrial complex at An Hoa and with Prime Minister Ky's interest, General William Westmoreland made a special trip to the airbase to ensure that everything was being done to ensure the security in the area and the completion of the road.



Operation Macon July Thru October 1966

On the opening day of Operation Macon, the 220th Aviation Company, routinely called upon for supporting actions within the Da Nang TAOR, was once again called upon to assist our Marine brothers. The Marines of Kilo Company were fighting hard but were caught out in the open in a rice paddy, with only a small dike between them and the enemy. While the Artillery FO was contacted and help from the 12th Marines was procured, Capt James "Jim" Tully, Division AO attached to VMO-2 (call sign Deadlock), left Da Nang in an Army O-1 of the 3rd Platoon of the 220th Aviation Company. The pilot was Warrant Officer Norman MacPhee.

When they came over the ambush area Jim Tully took control of the Medevac mission with helicopters from HMM-164, call sign North-Brook 3-1 and a UH-1E from Deadlock (VMO-2), which was used as an Air Control bird (AC). The LZ was too hot to enter as the AC came under heavy fire. Deadlock's UH-1E attacked the enemy with machine gun fire. The pilot of the UH-1E also offered to work TAC for the incoming jets and called for help from VMO-2, and they sent out another UH-1E. An additional Deadlock Huey that had just completed a Medevac escort also went to the rescue. Meanwhile Capt. J.M. Tully was directing a flight of F-8s onto an enemy location north of My Loc (4). The jets hit 40% of the enemy area during this strike.

As Operation Macon was beginning to wind down in September, things sporadically heated up and by early September WO Norm MacPhee and Capt Tully were once again in the news. An *Army Reporter* news article describes the action as the pilot and AO faced off with the enemy:

‘Harmless’ Birdog Guides Marines To VC Target’

The Army Reporter

September 10, 1966

Nha Trang, (17th AVN-IO)

Viet Cong machine guns spit a deadly stream of tracers past the little airplane. Twice, mortar rounds with time fuses exploded at its flight altitude. But two Americans in their harmless looking O-1 Birdog had bigger guns to aim, and they droned on at 90 mph through the worst the enemy could offer.

Warrant Officer Norman MacPhee, a spotter plane pilot for the 17th Combat Aviation Groups 220th Reconnaissance Company, had just lifted off the runway at Da Nang that day when a radio call pre-empted his routine recon mission. He and his Marine Corps observer, Capt James Tully, were to assist a Marine rifle company then under heavy enemy fire 20 miles to the southwest. Arriving over the battle area, the pair saw mortar rounds being fired on the US positions. They checked the scene and found VC on three sides of the friendly force. Tully called artillery to pound one enemy position while MacPhee summoned airstrikes. With the artillery suppressing enemy fire, two helicopters slipped in to resupply the company with ammunition and evacuate three wounded Marines.

As the copters cleared the area, fighter-bombers arrived on station. MacPhee fired rockets to mark the area of heaviest VC activity, and controlled the strike until the jets had expended their deadly cargo. Ordering more strike aircraft, the pilot continued to circle and spotted 100 Cong bringing up heavy weapons through an assault trench. Tully called in armed UH-1B helicopters to hammer the trench line and clear the area. The chopper strike was followed by another jet strike on the positions not yet neutralized. Later as the VC withdrew, 78 enemy bodies were counted in the wake of the aerial shelling. (End Of News Clip)

As Operation Macon wore on, pressure continued to be applied by the enemy. As usual, it would be another one of those routine reconnaissance flights that would evolve into a high intensity mission. So it was with Capt. James Tully, as Norm recalls another fateful mission that they were involved with during Macon. Norm describes the mission as such:

“Captain Tully, with whom I flew a lot, and I were on a normal recon mission in Quang Nam Special Sector (my primary area) when we got the call to proceed to the vicinity of N/S coordinates 495 and E/W 915, South of the Hoi Ann River and maybe 6 miles east of the Vietnamese training base at the Coal Mine. This is about 30 miles southwest of Da Nang. When we arrived on station there were two Marine CH-34 helicopters on the ground, having loaded three Marine casualties—wounded only, no KIA. We estimated the size of this group of Marines to be two large squads, and they were in a large open area of dry rice paddies. There was a north-south tree line 200-250 meters to their west, a small group of trees a similar distance to the south and a partially treed hill about 400 meters to the northeast, in very flat country with a high ridge to the south, perhaps a mile to 1.5 miles south, running east to west.

I saw enemy tracer fire coming from the group of trees to the south and directed at the Marine choppers. I switched to guard frequency and called, “Marine Choppers SW of Da Nang, clear the zone, you are receiving fire from the south.” They immediately “pulled pitch” and left to go back to the base at “Hill 55” north of the Hoi An River. I called “Landshark” to request an strike mission, and about a minute later I could see them departing Chu Lai to the southeast.

One error in the article was the account of Tully firing artillery. This would have been the case if we had any, but we were outside the Hill 55 circle; thus, we only had air missions available. These guys were sent out here as

bait, no doubt. I ran the first strike on the trees to the south and obliterated it and anyone there, as Captain Tully and I could not see any other enemy.

We always split the duties, with Tully firing artillery and communicating with the ground troops while I flew and ran air strikes. I ran two strikes on the hill to the northeast and called Landshark to stop the strikes coming until we located more bad guys, having used twelve strike aircraft so far.

We were about half way through our mission when we got this call, so we did not have a lot of fuel left. I decided to wait 10 minutes before calling for “relief on station.” I was following Platoon procedure of flying at 1500’ which we did once enemy was encountered....recon at 800’. I decided to make one low pass from east to west, to over flying the Marines, then jump over the tree line to the west. Captain Tully was looking north and I to the south, and just after passing over the tree line I saw a face look up at me from a line of bushes. It turned out this was not a line of bushes, but rather lots of enemy with bushes in their helmets.

I continued west as if we had not seen them and got ready to call “Landshark” again, when up the coast came the first armed choppers I had ever seen. I think it was the 101st Airborne relocating north to near the DMZ. They came up on guard and asked if we needed any help; they had a full load of rockets and machine guns. I indicated “yes” and the first two saw the enemy and rolled in and began to fire.

Jim Tully comes up and says, “Check Fire, Check Fire, we have Marines very close to that location.” Sure enough, a SECOND GROUP of Marines were located just south and west from the trench line containing the enemy. WE DID NOT KNOW THEY WERE THERE AND STILL COULD NOT SEE THEM!

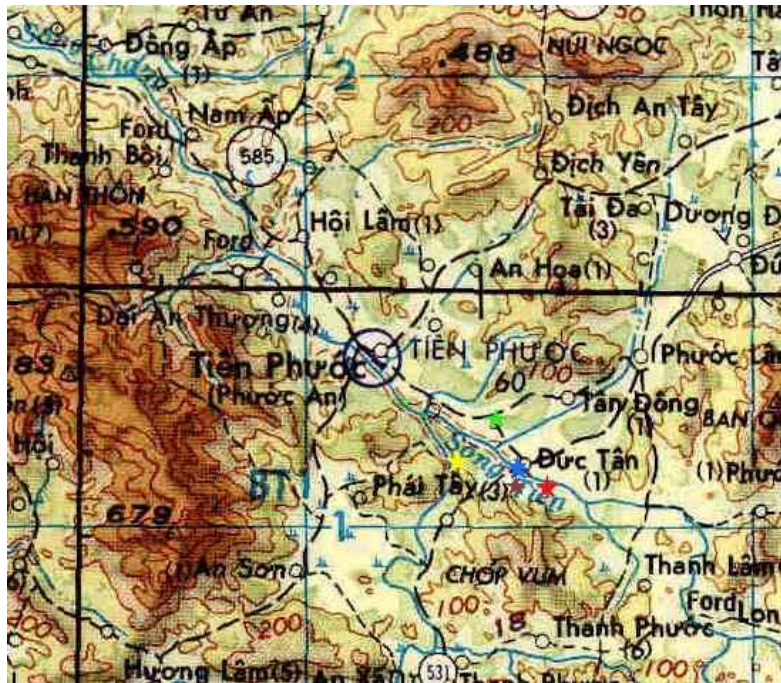
We requested them to pop smoke and then move west 200 meters, setting up their “guns” pointing back to the trench line. The choppers, six of them, obliterated the trench line and all within. I was now very low on fuel and started back toward Da Nang, one tank empty and the other bouncing, and called for relief on station and met the relief bird about half way back. The remaining armed choppers hung out until relief arrived. No more enemy was located.

When we landed at Marble Mountain and the tail came down the engine quit—*never again did I fly that low on fuel.*

Two special things happened regarding this mission. Early after our arrival there were three separate explosions at our altitude to the west of where we were flying at the time—quite a ways off—as I pointed them out to Tully. He thought they were about the size of mortar rounds, so when we got back I reported this to G-2 during debrief. A second thing happened about a week later—two cases of beer arrived for the “Army Guy” that helped out this unit. Only time that happened; I did not drink beer, or anything else before flying, so the EM made out on that one.

This is one of the missions I remember as if it was yesterday. There were maybe 10-12 like that but don’t know why some stick and others do not.

I am surprised to hear “Operation Macon.” I remember that name from some time over there, but cannot remember when. Now, Captain Jim Tully and I flew lots of missions together. This will surprise you—I NEVER heard his call sign with the ground units before. I had my switches, always, to listen on UHF and one FM. He used the other to communicate with the ground, so, I NEVER heard him at all. Things became too confusing with three radios. He listened to his FM and UHF so he could keep track of the strike aircraft; when he fired artillery he used ‘my’ FM, so I could listen as well and stay out of the gun-target line, keeping him so he could see impact so as to adjust. The Marine 8 inch battery at Hill 55 was so accurate that many missions were one round!!! There were many mornings that we were the first mission out, so we adjusted the artillery then and never took more than three rounds, two of them VT fused—very, very accurate guns.”



On another mission with Captain Tully, Warrant Officer MacPhee describes the adjustments that they were required to make to accommodate the variances in terrain (seen above). Responsibilities as pilot and observer continually shifted as they probed for the enemy in the vicinity of the Tien Phuc Special Forces Camp:

“We were assigned to recon a triple-canopy jungle mountain area south of Da Nang, North East of the Special Forces Camp Tien Phuc and east of Tam Key. A jungle area is very difficult to recon with the tree cover, and we could see nothing from 800 feet above ground level, so we decided to make several low-altitude runs, contouring around the mountain at 50-100 feet. The pilot had only to fly when this low, so only the observer could try to look between the trees. “Wow,” I said to Tully. “Did you see that!!!” He said, “No,” and I replied, “We just flew under a wire.” There should be no wires out in that area so I kept flying as if we had not seen it. We climbed back to altitude so I could plot the ends of the cable. It was several hundred meters long.

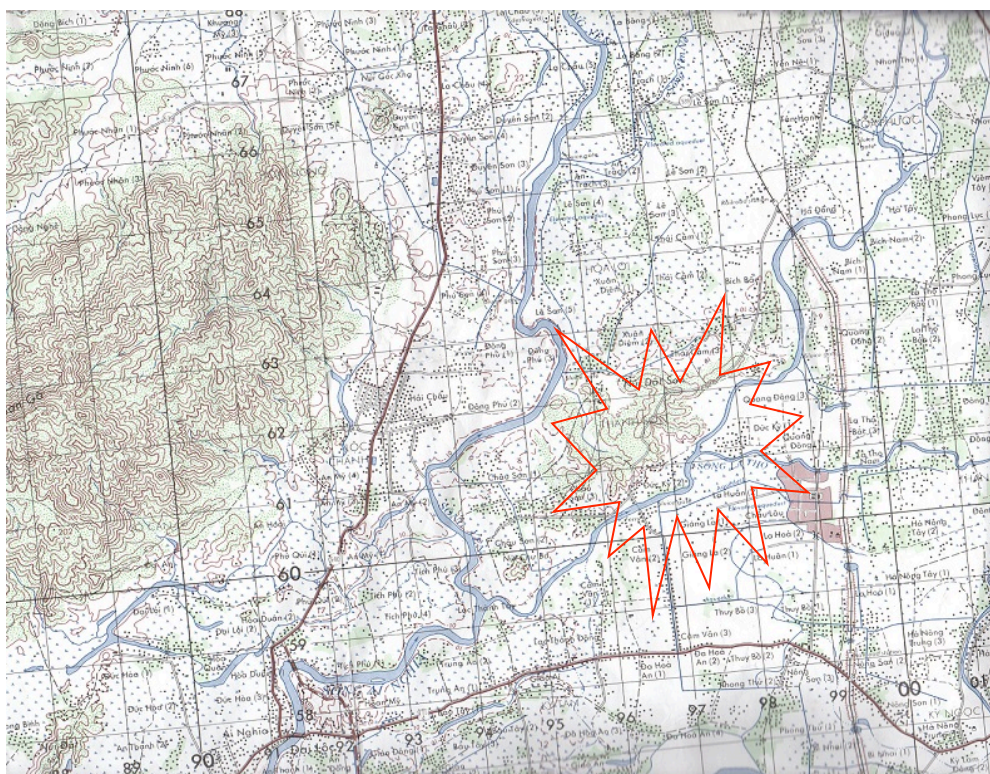
I climbed to a higher altitude where we could reach the G-2 air back in Da Nang. We carried a code book called an SOI and I encoded the message that follows: *Catkiller found long wire, cable ends are as follows (with the two sets of coordinates)*, which we sent to the air intelligence section. They immediately came back and said, “Clear the area, we are going to divert an *Arc Light* on this target.”

Wow! An Arc Light was a B-52 strike, and they were devastating, to say the least. You did not want to be nearby. About 20 minutes later the strike occurred. Later, we heard reports from G-2 that this was a regimental NVA HQ and that major damage was done to the entire unit, *all because of the wire.*”



Catkiller pilots and observers had a unique visual advantage to what was happening on the ground, and in some respects despite their lofty perch, they were at times forced to let events play out despite their vantage point and counsel. The CH-46 Sea Knights were an effective troop carrier; however, they could often become a large target for the enemy to engage. Norm was to describe Jim's and his mission this day as the "My worst day of the war:"

"The CH-46 mission, like many others, began with an *"any Catkiller, any Catkiller"* call on the Marine net. I knew my back-seater was Jim Tully, since we flew together so much. I had only about an hour and a half fuel left when we got the call (after asking the Marine radio operator for a 10-second hold on his mike so I could FM home on his location), I called Marble Mountain to stand by for on-site relief in about 45 minutes. We were called to an area southwest of Da Nang (N/S 60-63 and E/W 94-98). I do not have a date, but this would have been late in my stay with the Catkillers.



When we arrived, we discovered that what they were asking for was overhead cover, not specific action. There was a large Marine contingent sweeping up from the south, between the Song Yen River and the Song La Tho River. There were also two Marine tanks on the west side of the Song Yen River, which would act as a partial blocking force if the enemy tried to escape to the north. As we arrived on station, the tank crews were outside on their tanks, unaware that that less than 100 meters away the enemy were escaping up a trench line along the east side of the river, northbound. The tanks were on the west bank oblivious to the NVA. I got their frequency from Captain Tully and told them to mount up and close up and fire a couple of rounds into the bank on the far side of the river, which they did. Then they could see the trench line and no more bad guys got out that way.

On the main radio net we found out that the Marines were going to insert a blocking force to the north and east of the sweep, a good idea—because then no NVA could get out. However, they had picked an awful location for an LZ. Anyone with a machine gun within 400 meters would have them dead to rights.

There was a significant hill just to the east, and I got on the net and explained this to those in charge at Hill 55, suggesting a new LZ 300 meters east on the high ground (a better spot anyway) and that we had been

trained to lead in a landing force and would pop smoke in the LZ, if they would follow us in. That suggestion was overturned by the unit's commander and they radioed back with, "the LZ will not change." Ten minutes later, two CH-46 aircraft lifted off Hill 55 and head north, make a turn, and at about 800 feet start down to the LZ. Just as I feared, a machine gun opened up, and the first CH-46 fire-balled, a big explosion that killed all onboard. The second aircraft continued on, and its engine on the right side started to burn and the decent angle steepened. Fully loaded, Marines start jumping out of the aircraft at about 400 feet, but only the last two survived, a radioman and a machine gunner. The gunner had two broken legs.

The CH-46 bounced once in the LZ, and without a load was able to limp back to Hill 55. Next, two things that occurred in quick succession: a voice came up on the main radio net, call sign something like *Black Jack*, which was the Marine General who had been watching the action through a telescope from a hilltop location west of Da Nang. He relieved the commander at Hill 55, on the spot, and told him to be on the next chopper north and to turn command over to his deputy. This was really a disastrous decision by that commander. We lost a lot of good men and this was my worst day in Vietnam, bar none.

Meanwhile the radio operator was pleading over the radio to be extracted—this was not going to happen—so with command presence Jim Tully slowly talked him into dragging the machine gunner with the broken legs to a small knoll nearby, setting him up with his machine gun, then policing up more ammo from those that were killed in the jump. He succeeded in doing this and those two guys were an effective blocking force.

The sweep netted over 800 NVA killed. Just after the shoot down of the second aircraft, I saw an NVA machine gunner get up and run to the west to join his buddies. While we were not supposed to do this, I rolled in on him and fired a rocket from, maybe 200 feet. It went between his shoulder blades and blew up in front of him. The explosion was so close that a couple of pieces of the rocket were embedded in the aircraft. This was the only time I knew for certain that my rockets killed anyone. There may have been more, but from 1500 feet where we usually fired it was hard to tell.

Low on fuel, I called for relief on station. The relief ran air strikes for a couple of hours and it was not a good day for the NVA, Marines either, for sure. Again, this was my worst day in the war. I couldn't sleep that night thinking of what I could have done to change that outcome. I still wonder about that...."

Operation Macon began when two VC companies ambushed one Marine company on a routine search and clear mission northwest of An Hoa. There were three phases to the operation, which finally concluded on 27 October. The ending of which had very little meaning for the 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines. Although the 3rd Marines were to move north on 10 October, the 9th Marines remained behind and the 3rd Battalion continued to operate in the An Hoa region providing security for the Liberty Road. Behind the Marine Infantry, engineers and Seabees entered An Hoa and joined with the Vietnamese to finish construction of the Industrial Complex.

NOTE: While Captain Jim Tully was well known as an Aerial Observer in Da Nang, it has only recently become known that he also was well known in other endeavors in his service in the United States Marine Corps. See and read the many accolades and awards that were earned and bestowed upon this great USMC veteran. Lieutenant Colonel James Tully is honored, indeed, by being a member of our 'Ghostly Assemblage' in Arlington National Cemetery.



Abstract:

In Memoriam 2010
Lt Col. James M. Tully
Special Assignment



James Tully, Servant of a Great Nation passed away February 11, 2010.

Born in Lancaster, PA April 3, 1934 and a native of the Woodlawn neighborhood of Bronx, New York, NY enlisted in the Marine Corps, in August 1951, with action in Korea. He was wounded May 1953. After recovering from his wounds, he left active service to attend Iona College, New York and served as a NYC police officer decorated many times for bravery and meritorious duty.

In 1959 he returned to the Marine Corps as an Officer and on August 31, 1978 retired as the most decorated Marine infantryman in the history of the Corps (Navy News Release 9/10/72, B. Gen. Adolph Schwenk)...

[Lt Col James Tully] served at Pensacola and as company commander; then as executive officer and commanding officer of the Marine Detachment, *USS Little Rock (CLG-4)*; 1965 Army Airborne Course, Fort Benning, GA; Nov 1965. Upon arrival in Vietnam he was again assigned as company commander and was wounded on two occasions during April 1966. For the final six months of his tour he served as aerial observer/forward air controller completing over two hundred missions. In spite of his active combat environment he managed to start a program to provide food, clothing and medical supplies for poor and orphaned Vietnamese children which received national attention.

Collecting, tons of material for the under privileged, he was personally thanked by the President of the Republic of Vietnam for his extraordinary efforts; Dec 1966 Follow on Vietnam tour; Dec 1967.

Note:

This tribute to Jim includes the listing of his many awards, which may be found at the 2nd attached link...

Source 1 (**non-working** file removed by corpsstories.com: (inmemoriam-Gallery10-06-Tully.htm)

Source 2: http://shirokov.mcrf.ru/pub/USMC/Leatherneck/leatherneck_2010_07.pdf

History of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, 3rd Marine Division – “The Walking Dead”, Sergeant Thomas J. Holmes & Sergeant Major Larry E. Gugle, USMC (<http://azlegion.org/wp-content/pdf/Some%20Marine%20Corps%20History.pdf>)

US Marines In Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966 – Jack Shulimson, Washington: History and Museums Division, Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 1982



Captain James Tully (Center Behind Bar, Tully photos courtesy of Suzanne V. Tully)



WO Norm MacPhee

NOTE: *This entry honoring the service of James M. Tully and Norman S. MacPhee was a joint effort by Dennis Currie, Assistant Editor, and Gene Wilson, Historian Emeritus. Copyright 2015, www.catkillers.org All Rights Reserved.*